

**Sharon D. Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1990, 206 pp., \$12.00, ISBN 0-8006-2339-8.**

Books which begin with a question get my attention. A book which begins with two questions causes me to slow down, do a double take, and invariably I sense (if not emit) a deep "hmmm" in my intellect and in my soul. My next move, however unfair to the intent of the author, is to image and then state the posed question into an assertion.

In seeking to find the assertion from the question, I capture a dialogue with the thinker which initiates a series of questions in turn. What words do you choose? Why do you begin with a question? What are the images and socio-political perspectives inherent in the question, and how do these remain or change when question moves to assertion? What theo-ethical issues, images, and panoramas does the above question evoke from me as a womanist ethicist and sometime social theorist? If the dialogue is rich, then I want the writer to lead me on an intellectual and soulful journey in the pages that follow. I remain engaged and circumspect, perhaps another way of talking about a hermeneutic of suspicion.

Let me turn the questions that begin Sharon Welch's *A Feminist Ethic of Risk* into statements. We must work for social transformation in the face of seemingly insurmountable suffering and evil. We must sustain energy, hope, and commitment in the face of an unrelenting succession of social and political crises. The word in each assertion I weighed before using was "must." "Must" signals few reasonable options. There is no longer the leisure to assume that we have an-

other way out or a variety of ways to respond if we hold before us a deep respect and reference for life in the past, the present, and the future.

As I surveyed my reality in Kansas City: a climbing death toll each year (in which the majority are young African-American men and boys), a public housing authority in complete pandemonium (with *empty* units, unrepaired units, crime levels skyrocketing, and an administration based on *noblesse oblige*), term limitations which meant a "new" city council at a time of tremendous fiscal concern *and* the vote on term limitations followed Black/white lines, (Blacks against and whites for) a curfew for youths sixteen years old and under, white men whom I do not know asking me what I thought of Clarence Thomas and Anita Hill—in the whirlpool at the YMCA, an exponential rise of AIDS and HIV infections in Kansas City, a conservative white press, and an even more conservative Black press—*must* seemed to be the only fitting auxiliary verb.

Having found myself engaged by Welch's questions, now assertions from my own social location, I am ready to consider her major concepts. She raises three frameworks to consider a response to social transformation which does not abdicate the fact that as sensate creatures many of us will not participate in a revolution that has no music, humor or celebration. These frameworks are an ethic of risk, an ethic of control, and a theology of immanence.

I find Welch's contrasting of an ethic of risk and an ethic of control helpful. She is clear that cynicism and despair are far from universal; they come from the ground of privilege and an ideal of omnipotence. Her analysis of why middle-class activism slides into such

cynicism and despair when defeat comes to the door poses serious questions for the African-American middle class and the Black Church. Having grown up middle class and still deeply entrenched in Black middle-class values and mind sets, Welch's contrast give me new handles on the declining state of affairs in the African-American Community. There is a troubling mood of "me and mine first" that is emerging in my Community. The only effective *communal* responses to this blight come from a prophetic and Black church and from effective community organizations willing to articulate and rearticulate a construction of responsible action.

Taking another look at our culture's definition of the good, our understanding of responsible action, and our drive for security be it national or local does, I think, become enhanced when casting this under the heading of control.

Her pithy questioning of the nature of reason, deadly rationality, and control is much needed in contemporary ethical discourse. What reason, rationality, and control do in our culture is desensitize the emotions and hold them suspect. Welch seeks a bold course—to think critically from emotions and interests as immediate to our analytical perspectives. The control-laden response that we must be objective is challenged and challenged well by Welch. The folly of objectivity is that it *presumes* self-consciousness and then tours an Archimedean veranda which is laden with unacknowledged subjective judgements and, therefore, precarious ground to construct a rigorous social ethic—womanist or otherwise.

What I find in Welch's work is the prospect of an

exacting ethic which maintains reason, rationality, and emotion as methodological principals. Rather than participate in one of the many offsprings of deadly dualism, Welch argues a communicative ethics based on concrete other living in their own particularity and not some new (or old) version of the U.S. melting pot of ethical discourse. Embracing conflict as natural, if not normal, communicative ethics rejects a generalized other which often is a code phrase for the obscene vapidness of "but we're all the same underneath our skin." We are not. The structures of race, ethnicity, gender, economics, and culture assure that we can never be the same. To move toward a generalized other which robs us of diversity and genuine moral discourse is a journey Welch seeks to question, denounce, and disrupt.

Welch's contrast of an epistemology of solidarity versus one of consensus is significant. This contrast challenges much of what I read and reject as implicit in feminist ethics. Consensus is certainly part of the African heritage of African Americans. The ability to decide in unison is modelled in tribal rituals and decision-making. However, such consensus is only possible when there is a common discourse and value system driving the community of moral action and reflection. There must be a deep knowing and respect for the concrete other. A desire to understand and live out embodied particularity rather than use it as an innovative, ingenious, en vogue postmodern category. Witherless anarchy, ineffectual action, and "all talk/and no do" are low lights of much of what has emerged because of this incomplete praxeological framework. Sometimes utopian notions are beneficial; sometimes

they are death-dealing. Such is the sinister legacy of an ethic of control.

After considering Welch's goals, I consider her methodological constructs of the argument. It is here the dialogue turns into a debate. The linkages between an ethic or risk based on the writings of African-American Women and a theology of resistance and hope based on postmodern or poststructuralist theory are not clearly drawn and are tenuous.

I admit to a certain amount of wariness of postmodernism and poststructuralism. As I review the literature, not only is there lack of adequate awareness and articulation of feminism, but a yawning chasm of acceptable comprehension of Black experience and writings and little mention of African-American women writers, critics, theorists, or just plain folk. Although I believe that Welch's work is an important and much needed critique of this kind of deficient theorizing, I also want her to go further. There remains a discomfiting distance between the concrete abstractions of lives experience found in Black-Women's novels (as they move *between* realism, neorealism, modernism, postmodernism-fabulation<sup>1</sup>) and the abstract theories of Habermas, Foucault, and feminist discourse.

One possible way, and the one that I have found constructive in my own work as a womanist ethicist, is to consider the contextualization and the impact of historicity on Black-Women writers as they do what they do. Toni Cade Bambara, Paule Marshall, Toni

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<sup>1</sup>Bernard W. Bell, *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1987), 284. Fabulation is "experimenting with different combinations of myth, ritual, parable, fable, legend, allegory and satire in a postmodern mode of romance."

Morrison, and Mildred Taylor do their work out of the larger culture of the United States as a world military, economic, political, and cultural power. Each is also working in an era in which Africa and Asia have asserted their political independence and is in the first steps of decolonization.

However as literary inheritors, they are on a historical continuum which stretches from Lucy Terry and Phillis Wheatley in the eighteenth century to the nineteenth-century slave narratives, autobiographies, biographies, and the first novels by Black women (Amelia Johnson, *Clarence and Clorine; or In God's Way* (1891) and Frances E. W. Harper, *Iola LeRoy; or Shadows Uplifted* (1892). They follow in the pathways blazed by Anna Julia Cooper and Ida B. Wells-Barnett in the early twentieth century. They move in the same stream of Black history and consciousness as Jessie Redmond Fauset, Nella Larsen, and Zora Neale Hurston. The four writers are indebted to the stark realism of Ann Petry, the lyricism of Gwendolyn Brooks, the clarity of identity found in Margaret Walker.

Given the range of publication dates (Marshall - 1969, Morrison - 1970, Bambara - 1981, Taylor - 1983), these writers are touched by the Black Power Movement. The Movement was many things. Key was modernism with its universalizing tendencies, stifled critique of patriarchy as a master narrative, and goals which often degenerated into an elevation of Black Men at the expense of Black Women and children and culture.

An important piece which cannot be lost is that each of these writers moves between modernism and postmodern in their constructions. For instance, Bambara's work reflects the modernist influence as the

short stories form multiple fragments and figures into a literary whole. At the same time, this can be a postmodern narrative in that there is such profundity of disconnected details that it challenges interpretation and questions a world where meaning is clear or perhaps even germane. What I argue for, then, is that postmodernism is only one impetus in the African-American woman's novel. Elements of modernity and history must be incorporated into hermeneutical insights whose goal is to develop an ethic or a theology.

This said, I do believe that postmodernism is helpful in its turn to the politics of difference, its recognition of heterogeneity, its focus on the decentered subject, and its tough reliance on otherness. But there remains little conversation between postmodern theory and writing and the lives of those who are the victims of the master narratives. What I yearned for in Welch's work was more of this needed conversation. There remains, for me, too much of a gap between the insights she draws from an ethic of risk based on Marshall, Morrison, Taylor, and Bambara and a theology of resistance and hope based on dangerous memories drawn from, but expanding on Culpepper, Daly, Taylor (Mark C.), Feuerbach, and Foucault.

Perhaps the greatest postmodern discomfort I have centers on identity and its critique. I agree with bell hooks that this can be problematic if not dangerous. How do African-American Women and Men maintain an authentic search for identity in a culture of despair, domination, and pervasive white supremacy? As an assertion, it is difficult for decentered peoples to find their centers in a culture and socio-economic and political system and structure which understands power only in terms of the hegemony of white racism

and other forms of oppression.

The four writers Welch references to focus on an ethic of risk are also working out of cultural conditionings which must be recognized. One of these is this search for identity. Welch is well aware of and respectful of the fact that "We can learn from and with each other while still remembering that we cannot speak for other women" (page 16). She is clear that reading these writers as representative "testament" raises many critical methodological problems. These problems are real and I believe that Welch addresses them with conviction. Welch reads this material through the lenses of feminist-literary criticism and the critical theory of Michelle Foucault. Further, she places the writers in the genre of resistance literature and also makes use of African-American critics of this literature to approach the author on her own terms.

Though helpful, this analysis does not encompass the magnitude of the politics of identity. An approach that tends to focus the African-American novel (and particularly the writings of African-American Women) on issues of economics, politics, psychology, or linguistics is unfinished. Black-women writers thrive and survive on complexity, analysis, paradox, ambivalence, emotion, and creativity. To use the writings of African-American women is to make a methodological commitment to socio-political, socio-cultural, socio-economic, socio-psychological frameworks of interpretation. Focusing on their work as representative of a specific genre will often miss the mark of what is at stake for the novelist and her community.

Given that Welch draws out three aspects of ordinary communal resistance to structural evil: abiding



love for other folk, risk-taking, and ancestral/folk wisdom, I am not at all sure how this connects with a theology of immanence which should be coherent with the socio-political/cultural/economic/psychological world views of African-American women writers and an ethic of risk. Missing is a rigorous theoretical interpretation of their work based on Black religious experience and values. Not present is an extended discussion of the dialectical character of stories written by African-American women writers. It is not unusual to find the universal moving with the particular—absolute values in deep meditation with indigenous mortalities, and a historical postulates in a thorny historicity.

I am reminded of Katie Cannon's ethnic of dobedobedo—in other words, basing one's ethnic on the question of What ought I do? or What ought I be? is unproductive if the goal is personal and social transformation. Rather, both questions are intrinsic to substantive ethical reflection from a womanist Christian perspective. Focusing on a theology of immanence, while rejecting a theology of transcendence, is not a part of the womanist walk to date.

Black-women writers on the contemporary scene are fabulators. They combine fable, legend, slave narrative, romance, fantasy, satire, and protest. Of these shifting styles, resistance is one theme, but not the only theme. When considering Black-women's writings as a body of work, there is a critical edge regarding religion. The traditional death-dealing images of sacrifice, suffering, omnipotence, and salvation are considered with utmost circumspection. But this critique cannot be immediately or accurately translated

into an immanent theology.

Welch is right on the mark as she notes the key points of Alice Walker's trenchant essay, "Only Justice Can Stop A Curse":<sup>2</sup> love of life, hopefulness, work for justice, love courage, rage. All this in response to the nuclear threat which entices Walker toward cynicism and revenge. But there is an important element of the essay that cannot be left out. Walker begins the essay with a curse prayer recovered by Zora Neale Hurston. The prayer begins, "To the Man God: O Great One . . ."<sup>3</sup> It is a prayer of rage, of marking each injustice, of pain, of revenge. What I see going on in Walker and in other Black-Women writers is an ongoing debate *about* the nature of transcendence and the nature of immanence. Both are held up for consideration. More often than not, the implicit and explicit resolution involves holding both in the same frame, but radically the traditional images of each.

Welch's theology of immanence has pithy and probing elements, but it does not flow clearly from the kind of ethic of risk she has given us from these representative Black-Women authors. Is there a bridge for us at this point?

Sharon Welch's book is proactive. It is insightful. It is powerful. I find the dialogue and the debate lively, and this resource will continue in my work and teaching. Welch has sown many seeds in this book. Frankly, I'd rather deal with too much harvest than not enough. She challenges us to find a way to get all

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<sup>2</sup>Alice Walker, "Only Justice Can Stop a Curse," in *Reweaving the Web of Life*, ed. Pam McAllister (Philadelphia: New Society Publishers, 1982), [262]-265.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*, 263.

the crops in before winter comes and it *is* too late.

**Emilie M. Townes**  
Assistant Professor of Christian  
Social Ethics  
Saint Paul School of Theology  
Kansas City, Missouri



**Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response*, Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989, 264 pp., \$21.95, ISBN 1-555-40303-4.**

Six years after publication, this book continues to impact new missiological understandings of the relationship between theology, contextualization and hermeneutical integrity within the North-American context. The challenge Jacquelyn Grant presents to the contemporary church cannot be circumvented if one is to be a serious theologian today, whether in the academic setting, the congregational pastorate, or engaged in the local (or global) mission of the Church. Whereas the universal Church is called to be faithful, the church in a particular context will express this faithfulness in a different way. Faithfulness must be contextualized if it is to take seriously the call to accountability (to self and others) and to action (mission) as an integral part of God's plan to bring about God's kingdom. For Grant, this is accomplished through the use of a contextualized hermeneutics that takes as its point of departure the thesis that "Black women representing an embodiment of this triply oppressive reality possess the potential for a holistic analysis that can provide for the development of holistic theological and christological construction which are wholly rather than partially liberating" (page 3).

In the stream of many contemporary liberation theologies, Grant embraces a paradigmatic shift from the classical science of biblical interpretation, one that emphasizes doing theology from the perspective of the marginalized. Therefore, by utilizing the religious experience of Black Women represented and expressed

through both the cultural and historical backgrounds of a postmodern world view that seeks to express meaning and purpose, Grant's evaluative experience of theological reality leads to a new exegetical interpretation which challenges prevailing dominant approaches of feminist Christology (page 1).

This book reflects the importance and implications of the historical reality of Jesus, called the Christ, not only for the respective communities presented in the analysis, but also for the future of inter-cultural and cross-cultural dialogues. The titles of the seven chapters display the heart of Grant's arguments: (1) Women's Experience as the Context and a Source for Doing Theology; (2) Feminist Christology: The Problem Stated; (3) Biblical Feminist Christology: Jesus, the Feminist; (4) Liberation Feminist Christology: Jesus, the Liberator; (5) The Rejectionist Feminist Perspective in Christology; (6) An Analysis of Feminist Christology; and (7) Women's Experience Revisited: The Challenge of the Darker Sister.

In the introduction, Grant clearly sets forth her methodology which she proceeds to explore and demonstrate by first identifying the problems related to classical christology, and then by engaging the perspective of three broad groups of Christian feminists—the Biblical feminist (chapter 3), the liberation feminist (chapter 4), and the rejectionalist feminist (chapter 5). Grant argues that none of these perspectives is adequate "because they do not transcend their own criticisms of other christologies" (page 5). She does suggest that we must "focus on the realities of the experiences of Black Women as the evaluative criterion for testing limitations of feminist perspectives in theology and Christology" (page 6). Grant rightly contends that while

these dominant feminist perspectives concentrated on gender efforts toward eliminating unjust biases of theological analysis, their interpretations were lacking in terms of holistic examination of the socio-political ramifications of exegesis.

According to the author, this is a clear indication of why coming to terms with womanist theology is so critical for the Black Church as it seeks to be faithful in midst of the oppressive environments within the western world. Grant's use of a model of contextualization can be described as a synthetic model, which makes an effort to engage in authentic conversation and dialogue in such a way that one's own culture and identity can emerge in the process. However, while no model is perfect, what Grant proposes is one that allows fidelity to the gospel, culture, personal experience and social change. This is evident in her analysis indicating the reasons for which feminist theology, which makes some of the same mistakes as classical theologies, is so difficult for women of color to embrace as a distinctive discipline. This theme continues in arguments in Grant's other writings.

Grant's approach to theology takes us to a critical stance which moves beyond merely parroting the views of the prominent present-day feminists. Grant's well-documented study demonstrates the interaction and differentiations between feminist and womanist theologies. She challenges us to look at class, gender and ethnicity and the multi-dimensional nature of true liberation. The implication for missions is enormous as well as theological and institutional mores and norms that influence and shape our understanding of the basic functions of Christian proclamation, dialogue, witness, service, worship and nurture.

This brief review cannot describe the book's many contributions. Perhaps the most significant contribution Grant offers in a postmodern world is that by taking seriously Black Women's experience as the primary source for contextualizing biblical theology, the importance and universality of the spiritual dimensions of human beings are evidenced. Its potential for helping to revitalize Christianity within the Black Church and Community both locally and globally throughout the Diaspora is authenticating and enriching. For persons interested in assisting Black People to think more systematically about God, the implications of such a study and its meaning for present-day womanist theologians, both male and female, are significant.

In conclusion, Grant has made a significant contribution to theological re-contextulization. This study remains a valuable and balanced reflection on scholarship concerning Black and womens' religious and social thought. I recommend it highly and enthusiastically as we seek to engage in global conversations regarding relevant Christologies.

**Marsha Snulligan-Haney**

Assistant Professor of Missiology  
and Religions of the World

Interdenominational Theological Center  
Atlanta, Georgia





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