

A CRITICAL RESPONSE TO D'ANGELO'S CHRISTOLOGY, WITH A PROLEGOMENON TO A WOMANIST CHRISTOLOGICAL RECONSTRUCTION

Let me begin by acknowledging the privileged status of the critical reviewer. It is much easier to critique someone's work than to engage in the serious work of reinterpretation and construction. After critically reading two of Mary Rose D'Angelo's essays—"Remembering Jesus: Women, Prophecy, and Resistance in the Memory of the Early Churches"¹ and her CTSA essay "The Concrete Foundation of Christianity: Re-Membering Jesus"—I acknowledge that she has written two responsible and scholarly essays which are well researched and give evidence of her deep critical and creative thought. Their originality is provocative and makes one reexamine one's own assumptions and christological positions. In both essays she attempts to "re-member" Jesus in the prophetic reign-of-God movement in such a way as to assist Christian women to claim their power of self-determination and liberation from all that oppresses. She critiques those male supremacist ideological interpretations of Jesus which negatively impact the lives of contemporary women. For the purposes of this seminar I will first identify points of general agreement which I find necessary to modify to some extent. Second, I will indicate areas of disagreement and raise questions for consideration from my perspective as a systematic theologian. Third, I will make some general critical observations. Finally, I will identify briefly the experiential elements for a responsible womanist Christology.

AREAS OF GENERAL AGREEMENT

A careful reading of Mary Rose D'Angelo's two essays has led me to agree with four of her working assumptions with some modification.

First, her view that some of the traditional interpretations of Jesus have led to the marginalization and abuse of women, Jews, and indigenous people as well as the exclusion of women from the liturgical and decision-making ministries within the Church can be historically verified. However, I would not so quickly dismiss the christological interpretation of Metz and liberation theologies that reveal the fact that Jesus has also been the source of "resistance and liberation."² Both the civil rights movement in the United States and the liberation movements

¹*Horizons* 19 (1992) 199-218.

²*Ibid.*, 199.

in Latin America and South Africa were led by Christians inspired by their understanding and interpretation of the liberative action of God in the Old and New Testaments. The civil rights movement in the United States continues to be a liberation struggle for basic human rights. This twentieth-century movement was rooted in and initiated by male and female members of the black Christian churches who chose Martin Luther King, Jr., a Christian systematic theologian, to be the articulator of their motives and goals. King's reading and interpretation of the Gospels was one significant source of his commitment to have black people recognized as God's people and as full human beings entitled to their rights and responsibilities as Christians and citizens of the United States (see his "I Have a Dream" and his sermons in *The Strength to Love*).³ The Medellín and Puebla documents reveal the Christian motivation of Catholic men's and women's (lay and religious) engagement in transformation of the inherently oppressive structures of a class-divided society.⁴ The liberation movements in the United States, in Latin America, and in South Africa are all fundamentally struggles for the recognition of the full humanity, identity, and human rights of oppressed peoples as "children" of God with all the rights and freedoms of members of their respective nations.

Second, D'Angelo offers a helpful caution that feminists should not limit their christological inquiry to one key question or to Spirit Christology exclusively. Many have limited their inquiry to responding to Rosemary Radford Ruether's earliest work "Can a Male Savior Save Women?"⁵ Ruether's question remains key to a feminist reconstruction of Christology but it should never be understood as the only question necessary. Feminist, womanist, mujerista, and other Christologies which arise from the diverse experiences of women give rise to an unlimited set of questions as women seek to understand and interpret their life and ground their prayer and action in their belief and encounter with the God of Jesus Christ. Similarly, an exclusive turn to Spirit Christologies seems to deny the limits of this interpretive perspective. I share D'Angelo's concern that Spirit Christologies taken by themselves can support the avoidance of questions regarding the significance of history, human sexuality, and the human body in the process of salvation. Spirit Christologies and prophetic liberation Christologies must be combined to render a more accurate interpretation of Jesus' meaning and mission.

Third, D'Angelo's methodological considerations point to the limits and goals of some uses of the historical method. She poignantly underscores the idea that "re-membering" is a life-engendering process. Through re-membering of

³See *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, ed. James M. Washington (New York: Harper Collins, 1991) 217-20, 491-517.

⁴"Message to the Peoples of Latin America," in *Third General Conference of Latin American Bishops: Evangelization at Present and in the Future of Latin America—Conclusions* (Washington DC: National Conference of Catholic Bishops, 1979) 30-35.

⁵In her *To Change the World: Christology and Cultural Criticism* (New York: Crossroad, 1981) 45-56.

Jesus recorded in the Scriptures, we are encountering the "living Jesus" the author encountered, i.e., the Jesus who had a constructive impact upon the life and direction of the community. The evangelists wrote the Gospels not as a matter of past history but as a subject of present and future hope. The remembering of Jesus viewed through the prism of the communities for which the evangelists wrote led to new words and new insights about God's relationship with the community. Jesus' death, the resurrection faith, and the fall of Jerusalem led to new questions. So, too, the events of our times lead to new questions and therefore to new understandings about Jesus. While it will always be necessary to rethink the context of Jesus' life, D'Angelo cautions feminist theologians about reading their own situation (such as the contemporary situation of women's conflict with Church authorities) into the biblical text without a sufficient historical analysis of the texts.

Fourth, D'Angelo's contextualization of the Jewish nation as a nation under Roman captivity is validated by historical references contemporaneous with Jesus' times. However, in her correct intention of challenging a biblical interpretation which is anti-Semitic, it seems she negates the power of oppressed people. Even though they were a people under Roman captivity, the Jews constructed and ruled their own society with their own religious and cultural customs and laws. Most contemporary systematic theologians conclude that Jesus' death was indeed the result of Jewish and Roman collaboration mediated by the Sanhedrin.⁶ The Romans held the ultimate power, but the Jewish leaders who were members of the Sanhedrin handed Jesus over to these Roman authorities. This collaboration, however, still should not be used as a basis for anti-Semitism. The apostles and disciples who were faithful to Jesus as well as those who betrayed him were

⁶See Walter Kasper, *Jesus the Christ* (New York: Burns & Oates, Paulist Press, 1985) 113-14; Edward Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology* (New York: Crossroad, 1991) 300; Leonardo Boff, *Passion of Christ, Passion of the World* (New York: Orbis, 1987) 36-43; and Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974) 149; 112-53. All these systematic theologians historically attribute the death to the collaboration of Jewish and Roman officials. Theologically, however, they acknowledge the role of Jesus in accepting his death as a consequence of his living his life in accord with the mission given him by God his Father. Elizabeth Johnson, a systematic theologian (*Considering Jesus* [New York: Crossroad, 1991]), and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, a New Testament scholar (*In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* [New York: Crossroad, 1983]), are mute on the question of who participated in the decision to crucify Jesus. Biblical scholar John Dominic Crossan (*The Historical Jesus: The Life of a Mediterranean Jewish Peasant* [San Francisco: Harper, 1990]) would agree with D'Angelo that Pontius Pilate was the Roman official who ordered the crucifixion, but in *The Historical Jesus* Crossan is mute on the role of the Sanhedrin. Patristic scholar and theologian Rosemary Ruether (*To Change the World*, n. 5, above) discusses the anti-Semitic heritage of Christian interpretation (pp. 31-43) but does not address this particular issue of the death of Jesus. This is obviously an area for more extensive research and collaboration among biblical and systematic theologians.

Jews. It was not, however, their "Jewishness" or "non-Jewishness" that was the term of betrayal, but the human will to maintain dominative power and control over those who threatened the status quo.

AREAS OF DISAGREEMENT

While I agree with the historical and socioanalytical assumptions that motivate D'Angelo's work, I have serious questions about her interpretation of "the reign of God," of Jesus as the eschatological prophet, and of the significance of Jesus' use of the term *abba* as it impacts the question of the divine nature of Jesus. D'Angelo develops her arguments employing dichotomous logic, and therefore tends not only to refocus but to underestimate the unique power and significance of Jesus of Nazareth in relation to the "reign-of-God movement" and his role as eschatological prophet.

D'Angelo's shifting of the focus from the "Jesus movement" to the "reign-of-God movement" de-emphasizes the significance of Jesus as the eschatological prophet. Accordingly, Jesus is viewed as one among many prophets who share in the proclamation of the reign of God. Thus, contrary to many systematic theologians, D'Angelo seems to be denying that the reign of God was initiated and embodied in Jesus. To D'Angelo the reign of God was initiated by the men and women who comprised the community of the "reign-of-God movement."

Many contemporary Christologies point to Jesus as the eschatological prophet, a claim that supports the view that the reign of God was initiated in and through Jesus.⁷ D'Angelo's shift to the movement as the locus of the community embodying the reign of God need not involve a total contradiction of Jesus' unique role as eschatological prophet as long as one understands that the Jesus movement was a significant development in the "reign-of-God movements." These movements believed that in and through Jesus the reign of God was initiated, though not fully realized, in a unique way. (Christians today are still awaiting the full realization of the "reign of God," and some ecclesialogists note that the Church's mission as a continuation of the mission of Jesus must include the continuation of the proclamation of the "reign," which the Church itself embodies, although imperfectly.)

D'Angelo's treatment of *abba* (which is popularly translated as an intimate term for "father") seems to be arguing against the interpretation of that phrase as indicative of a unique relationship of Jesus with God the Father. D'Angelo suggests that the term was used not to signify a special relationship to the Father

⁷See, e.g., Kasper, *Jesus the Christ*, 69-70; Schillebeeckx, *Jesus: An Experiment in Christology*, 550-53; and Jon Sobrino, *Christology at the Crossroads* (New York: Orbis, 1979) 41-78.

but as a sign of the contradiction of Roman imperialist patriarchy.⁸ Given the multivalent nature of terms, could not both interpretations be true?

As I read Mary D'Angelo's reinterpretation of the prophetic role of Jesus there was some uneasiness. Yes, Jesus was a part of a movement; yes, others did perform healing miracles and exorcisms. In fact, according to the biblical record, during his lifetime Jesus instructed and empowered others to preach and to heal (see Matt 10:1ff.). A close examination of the scriptural validation of D'Angelo's assertions leads me to ask two questions. First, what is D'Angelo's understanding of prophecy and revelation? Second, to what extent does she think her positive and necessary reinterpretation of the value of women in the Gospels leads to an ideological distortion similar to that which has marred earlier interpretation? At times her conclusions seem to go further than evidence or implication allow (e.g., her comparison of the anointing of Jesus by the woman with that of David by Samuel are insightful, but the anointing of kings was not the central action of prophets). Further, nowhere in Mark 14:1-11 can I find any evidence of the woman "commissioning" Jesus.

Further, does participation in an encounter always signify absolute equality? D'Angelo uses several scriptural passages to illustrate that Jesus "gets messages as well as proclaims the message."⁹ She suggests that those who give Jesus messages and participate in his miraculous healings are themselves prophets and miracle workers. My review of these passages validates her observation of the participatory nature of the healings as well as her notion that the effectiveness of miracles is dependent on the "faith of the people." But does the participatory nature of the cure indicate an equality of role? Does participation in a prophetic movement or act necessarily indicate that all who acknowledge or benefit from the prophetic insight or action of another are themselves prophets?

While I would agree that the Samaritan woman is a vital participant in Jesus' ministry of proclaiming the reign of God to her neighbors and as such was empowered by the Spirit, the scriptural evidence does not support the interpretation that she did so without a commission (John 4:16: "Go call your husband and come hither"). Nor does the scriptural account support the interpretation that "Martha and Mary seem to set Jesus up for a miracle they do not quite expect." Quite the contrary, John 11:1-22 suggests that Martha had an undaunting expectation that Jesus could reverse the tragic situation: "Even now I am sure that God will give you whatever you ask of him" (v. 22).

⁸D'Angelo, "Remembering Jesus," 216-17; and "The Concrete Foundation of Christianity," 15.

⁹"Remembering Jesus," 208; "The Concrete Foundation of Christianity," 11.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

In trying to revalue the role and responsibility of women, D'Angelo seems to be following the path of Pelagius, who asserted that human beings could observe the moral law and therefore obtain salvation by independent human acts of the will. In this case, D'Angelo seems to imply that women must liberate (or save) themselves independently of Jesus' salvific action. Her thinking reminds me of Fierbacht, Marx, and other philosophers who tried to liberate people from their false notions of God in order to enable and encourage them to assume responsibility for their own historical lives. The well-intentioned critical thinking of these philosophers led to the denial of the existence of God. To assert the power of human beings, it seemed necessary to deny the power of God. Is such either/or dichotomous logic about the power of God and the power of human beings necessary? In her efforts to reinterpret the notion of Jesus as prophet, D'Angelo almost seems to deny the uniqueness, divinity, and power of Jesus in her attempt to affirm the dignity, giftedness, and power of women. My study of the theology of grace moves me to uphold D'Angelo's implicit attempt to affirm the graced nature of all human beings, including women (*pace* Rahner). Grace is God's self-gift. However, as instances of created grace, we are not equal to uncreated Grace. Those of us called to be one *with* God are not gods. The fulfillment of our human existence is to be fully human, that is, to recognize our origin and end in God, the divine Other.

Attempts to critique the limits of patriarchal Christology do not have to lead to rejection of the unique nature and role of Christ or of Christianity, on the grounds that we have inherited a flawed interpretation of both. Kelly Brown Douglas, a womanist systematic theologian, reflecting on black religion, suggests that a "religiocultural analysis" reveals that "there are enslaving and divisive aspects of Black religion and culture that must be repudiated . . . [and] that there are sustaining and liberating aspects that must be confirmed."¹⁰ In a similar manner I would assert that there are enslaving and divisive interpretations of Jesus Christ which must be repudiated, but not at the expense of denying the uniqueness, divinity, and exemplary humanity of Jesus. Christian women were led to their critique of the prevailing ideological white-male theological interpretations of the Bible precisely because of the unjust and oppressive devaluing of the human experience of women in a patriarchal society. Their rereading of the biblical texts using the methods of historical and literary criticism led to a rediscovery of Jesus of Nazareth who related to women in ways that directly challenged the patriarchal status quo.

Evaluating D'Angelo's work from the critical categories of feminist theology constructed by Jacquelyn Grant places her work within the category of "liberation

¹⁰*The Black Christ* (New York: Orbis, 1994) 105.

feminists" who read "the Bible out of women's experience, and women's experience critiques the Bible in the sense that it is possible to elevate the internal critique present in the Bible itself using women's experience as authoritative (normative)."¹¹ However, there are elements of both of D'Angelo's essays that suggest she may be in transition toward becoming a "rejectionist feminist" in whose view women's experience and not the Bible is solely authoritative.¹² Occasionally D'Angelo falls into the trap of interpreting the Scriptures from her historical stance without sufficient validation from the fruits of historical or literary criticism, which can help us gain a fuller understanding of the historical significance and meaning of the biblical texts.

Despite disagreements with some of D'Angelo's analysis, creative "re-membering," reinterpretation, and construction, her very provocative writings force scholars to rethink their own interpretation of Jesus and of Jesus' relationship to the members of his movement. It also forces us to rethink and to reexamine the underlying assumptions and contexts of previous and contemporary Christologies in relation to their understanding of the Gospels, and the role of Jesus Christ as they impact the process of the liberation of women and other oppressed peoples.

TOWARDS A RESPONSIBLE CONSTRUCTION OF A SAVING CHRISTOLOGY FROM A WOMANIST PERSPECTIVE¹³

Just as christological interpretations that enslave, divide, and dehumanize women by falsely elevating "maleness" must be repudiated, so, too, christological interpretations that enslave, divide, and dehumanize other oppressed groups by elevating "white people" over "nonwhite peoples" or elevating "the rich" over "the poor" must be repudiated. Such ideological interpretations of Jesus deny the basic equality and value of all human beings and the universal significance of Jesus' redemptive life, death, and resurrection. As one reinterprets the history and significance of Jesus from a womanist perspective, a central question arises: How has Jesus been and how does Jesus continue to be "the answer" to the existential, familial, and communitarian questions of women who are subject to the triple oppression of race, gender, and class, particularly black women?

¹¹Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus* (Atlanta: Scholar's Press, 1989) 177ff. See pp. 115-50 for a fuller exploration of this category.

¹²See *ibid.*, 177, and also 151-94.

¹³The term "womanist" is being used by some black feminist theologians who are committed to reinterpreting or reconstructing the Christian traditions from the worldview or perspective of oppressed women who suffer the integral triple oppression of race, gender, and class. This theology is distinct from a feminist theology whose critique is based primarily or solely on gender oppression and therefore sees the patriarchal construction of reality as the dominant problematic. Womanist theology finds the racist, patriarchal, and class construction of reality as an integral whole that denies the full humanity and dignity of poor and rich men, women, and children of color.

Womanist theology, like all theology, begins with experience. Although both black and white women experience oppression due to the patriarchal structures of church and society, some white women with some white men participate in and/or benefit from the racist and class oppression of their sisters who are poor and/or nonwhite. D'Angelo's assumption that white feminists "must live out of the future and present"¹⁴ could assist them in ignoring their complicity in the oppression of their black sisters by black and white men and white women. Despite the consistency of the patterns of oppression, the blindness of white women to the particularity of black and other nonwhite women's oppression becomes a stumbling block for any real common struggle for liberation of white women with black, Hispanic, Asian, and Native women throughout the world.

As Delores Williams has illustrated well in her interpretation of the biblical story of Sarah and Hagar, Sarah perceived her well-being as directly related to Hagar's subjugation. Hagar served as Sarah's substitute both as servant and child-bearer. Ultimately, however, Hagar was seen as a threat to Sarah's relationship to Abraham. Sarah thus demanded that Hagar be sent into the wilderness with little or no provisions. In short, anticipating the loss of her special role, power, and position of prestige, Sarah demanded Hagar's death.¹⁵

In a similar vein, Jackie Grant's article "The Sin of Servanthood" underscores that black women have been the servants of servants.¹⁶ While white women have been relegated in the white patriarchal society to subservient positions in society, many black women have been relegated to slave-like positions, having no rights or privileges. Working-class black women have been relegated to slave-like service to white men and women and to black men. They have been consigned to positions that deny the value of their personhood and make them invisible. They perform domestic duties in private homes and hotels and secretarial, food, and janitorial services in corporate offices, educational, and ecclesiastical institutions. They are often victims of all sorts of dehumanizing sexual exploitation, including prostitution.

The denial of personhood to black and nonwhite oppressed women by systematic patterns of marginalization and invisibility is not totally assuaged even when they move beyond the domestic or support-service levels. In the world of white corporations and other institutions, professional black women and men are exploited for their ideas and expertise while being restricted by invisible ceilings to secondary positions of advisors, assistants, vice presidents, or members of "team" projects led by white men and women who are sometimes less knowledgeable or talented than themselves.

¹⁴"Remembering Jesus," 201.

¹⁵Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (New York: Orbis, 1993) 15-33.

¹⁶Jacqueline Grant, "The Sin of Servanthood and the Deliverance of Discipleship," in *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering* (New York: Orbis, 1993) 199-218, esp. 200.

As the works of Williams and Grant illustrate, black women, men, and children are confronted with a denial of their basic humanity as they are devalued in both Church and society. Black women, men, and children are confronted by others defining them as permanent servants or surrogates. Black women are generally relegated by some members of the dominant culture to the role of objects to be used as extensions of themselves rather than as subjects of their own and their family's and community's life as they attempt to contribute to and participate in human community building.

A reinterpretation or reconstruction or Christology from a womanist perspective must involve several elements. It must

1. render a serious response to the reality of the denial of the full humanity of black women, men, and children. This reinterpretation must begin by examining how black men and women have understood Jesus as they survived white male and female supremacist ideology manifested in slavery, domestication, lynching, segregation, and racial alienation within society;
2. elaborate how the black community in general and black women in particular have experienced Jesus as sustainer, liberator, and prophet of a new social order;¹⁷
3. articulate how the contemporary black community steeped in the existential and common sufferings of skin-color racism, poverty, and the threat of death by violence from within and without, is simultaneously a prophetic witness to God's call to justice and right relationships. It must give an account of how it is that those whose personhood is denied by the rejection, marginalization, and devaluation of their experience are nevertheless empowered by the Spirit of the risen Christ to challenge and enrich others with their witness of love, hope, joy, and discipleship; and
4. demonstrate the interpretation of the Gospel of Jesus Christ which is salvific for black women and their families; in short, a black womanist Christology must reveal how black women, men, and children encounter, embody, and manifest the living presence of the risen Christ in the Gospel and in their life experiences.

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¹⁷Kelly Brown Douglas calls for this elaboration in her *The Black Christ*: see chap. 5, "A Womanist Approach to the Black Christ," esp. 107.