

WOMEN'S SEMINAR IN CONSTRUCTIVE THEOLOGY

In keeping with our effort to better understand the processes and methods women today are using to pursue the constructive task of theology, the seminar invited Dr. Jacquelyn Grant from the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta to be our guest. Grant has been engaged in developing a black womanist Christology, and she shared a part of that project with us. The following offers a sense of that work generated both by her presentation and the discussion.

At the outset Grant located her work within her own early insights that while black theology dealt with racism, it needed also to deal with sexism, and that feminist theology, which dealt with sexism, did not reflect the combination of sexism with racism and economic exploitation that black women experience, because it was formulated within the experiential world of white women. When Grant began to explore the narratives of slave women and their relations to their white mistresses, and subsequently the stories of black domestic servants to the white women who employed them, she found in them the appropriate complexity of issues. Here she recognized a hermeneutical key with which to analyze the difference between the experience of black and white women that could be fruitful in relation to the interpretation of Jesus.

One frequent name for Jesus in dominant and feminist theologies is servant. The experience of the severe oppression of black women both as slaves and as domestic servants precludes for Grant any valid contemporary (although not historical) retrieval of the servant metaphor for Jesus. She is particularly adamant about this even for the most cautious feminist retrievals of this name for Jesus. Use of this name betrays a failure to recognize the extent of the exploitative mistress/servant relations between white and black women. This analysis pushes feminist critiques beyond their own boundaries. Further, she finds in this womanist hermeneutic a liberation of Jesus from oppressive naming, including by feminists. She contends that such analysis will continue to liberate the symbols for Jesus, and clear the ground for more adequate names. She is not yet certain about what names will prove most helpful; she intends to continue to explore the narratives of her people with this concern in view.

The discussion raised the question of the function of double and triple consciousness both as a tool for survival and as a hermeneutic. Because the oppressed must understand herself and her oppressor(s) in order to survive and to maintain self-respect, this multilayered consciousness provides a key tool for critical analysis. We need to know more about how this consciousness is formed and how it operates. The conversation also pointed up the need to know more about the role of Jesus in the communities of black women where they have found their strength in him. In all, the seminar initiated a conversation that must be pursued in order that we all might interpret the Gospel with deeper faithfulness.

ANN O'HARA GRAFF
Loyola University, Chicago