

AN IRRESISTIBLE POWER NOT OURSELVES

By Karen Baker-Fletcher

Two women, both mothers, walk under one sun along the North Shore, where they visit two adjoining beaches along the peninsula with their daughters and spouses. One woman and her family is ivory merging to tan under the new summer sun. One woman and her family is pecan turning to deep cinnamon.¹

The two women visit Mica Beach first. Mica beach is so named because it is covered with granular, glittering specks of mica. The women wade into the warm water with their daughters. The mica glitters on the ocean floor like gold. The girls pretend to be mermaids.

The mothers and daughters laugh, turning to look at the golden trail of spray they make behind them as they splash forward. One father comes to join them. They all pretend to be trees, letting their feet sink into the warm, gold, wet sand. Ready to become mermaids again, the young girls swim on knees and elbows back to the shore.

On the shore up by the rocks, the beach is black and mucky. The girls fill sandpails with the muck to make cake. They run away from the rocks closer to the water to gather reddish brown sea straw which they use as cinnamon to spice their cake. They mix the cinnamon into the cake, one brown girl, one ivory girl.

The tide comes in. The women, familiar with the tides, go across the road, walk past the wild roses, and down a slope to Sandy Beach where the water is more shallow. Sandy Beach is covered with cream colored sand. Here

¹A day spent on the North Shore of Massachusetts when the Baker-Fletcher family (Karen, Garth, and Kristen) visited their friends Sharon Welch, Pack Matthews, and their daughters Hannah and Zoe, June 1991. Sharon, Pack, Garth, and I, agree that within cross-racial, cross-cultural relationships, as well as in cross-gender and cross-class relations, continuous sensitivity to the problems of unjust attitudes and practices regarding similarity and difference are vital to the life of a friendship.

*Karen Baker-Fletcher is Assistant Professor of Theology and Culture at Christian Theological Seminary. She delivered this paper as her installation address, January 30, 1992.

the ocean floor is covered with pebbles. The women recline on the beach to talk, while the children look for rocks and crabs with their fathers in the water. The women share thoughts about children, women's bodies, social concerns, religion, and literature. All is harmonious. All is just. Womanist and feminist friends, black and white, Mica Beach and Sandy Beach, all under one sun.²

Such idyllic moments make life worth the living and give hope in ultimate possibilities for freedom, unity, and justice. But such moments, though endowed with great spiritual power and meaning, do not radically free us from the realities of social injustice. However, the sense of balance and harmony in such moments influences the way we imagine a just society or the Reign of God.

Reinhold Niebuhr reminds us of how difficult such moments of justice and harmony are to attain, of how tenuous and fragile they are. In *Moral Man and Immoral Society* he argued that we are far more moral and just in our intimate, individual relations than we are as a society, a nation, or a social class. The ideals we espouse and even practice as individuals are preempted by the problem of collective egoism in nations and classes. As individuals, Niebuhr observed, we believe that we ought to "love and serve each other and establish justice" between each other. "As racial, economic and national groups" we take for ourselves "whatever our power can command."³

For Niebuhr, the Kingdom, or the Reign, of God is a regulating ideal, never completely realized in this life--and yet we strive toward our visions of the impossible, which says something about the power of the Reign of God. By

²The harmony, freedom, and delight of such friendship are fruits of divine grace, which directs us toward unity, and of solidarity. Solidarity working together with grace is as important for friendship as it is for social justice. Such friendship is a form of resistance because it struggles against conventional stereotypes of race and gender relations. The purpose of such friendship is the sheer joy of unity. Resistance and solidarity are means to such unity, directed by grace. For Welch's views on "solidarity" and "resistance" see Sharon Welch, *Communities of Solidarity and Resistance*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1984). Welch is a Post-Christian. Here I interpret our friendship from a Christian perspective on solidarity and resistance in relation to divine grace. Another example of the academic fruits of our friendship is in the use of womanist literature in Sharon Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1990).

³Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1932; 1960), p. 9.

grace, faith, and resolute belief we continue to hope in impossible possibilities.⁴

The ideals that women and men sometimes approximate in individual relationships and in intimate religious communities are hard to come by in the larger society. Among individuals, some degree of harmony may be attained. Within the institutions that make up our larger, complex society, discordancy and conflict remain rampant. White women face gender and class discrimination while having relatively greater access to political, economic agency than their sisters of color. Women of color face a triple jeopardy of racism, classism, and sexism. They fight somewhat similar and then again somewhat different battles for social justice from their white sisters. Moreover, they engage in cultural practices and symbolizing activities of varying degrees of similarity and difference. Thus women of color have found it necessary to create forms of Christian thought and practice that speak to and emerge directly from their social, historical, and cultural contexts.

Womanist, Mujerista, and Asian women's theologies for example, have emerged in the last decade partly in response to the problem of marginalization of women of color in women's organizations. Women theologians of color emphasize that ongoing conversation between women of diverse contexts, as well as conversation between women and men, is necessary if we are to move more fully toward freedom, justice, and full humanity.

Maria Isasi Diaz explains that Mujerista theology is "Hispanic women's theology . . . born of the intersection of feminism, Hispanic culture, and the struggle for liberation. It is a communal theology . . . and honors the distinctiveness of Hispanic women's culture and history."⁵ Marianne Katoppo

⁴See Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, p. 81.

⁵Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, "The Bible and Mujerista Theology," in Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite and Mary Potter Engle, *Lift Every Voice*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1990), pp. 261-262. See also Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz, "Solidarity: Love of Neighbor in the 1980s," in Thistlethwaite, *Lift Every Voice*, pp. 31-40 and Ada Maria Isasi-Diaz and Yolanda Tarango, *Hispanic Women: Prophetic Voice in the Church*, (New York: Harper & Row, 1988. In *Hispanic Women: Prophetic Voice in the Church*, Isasi-Diaz explains that "Hispanic Women's Liberation Theology", which she later develops as Mujerista Theology, brings together feminist theology, cultural theology, and liberation theology. She expounds that it is "cultural theology because 'theology is the product of culture'....We struggle to maintain the values of our culture as an intrinsic element of our self-identity and of our struggle"

writes that "In Asia's struggle for a full humanity, women are especially concerned with moving towards a relevant theology." She refers to an "Asian women's theology," because the term "feminist" has become "too loaded." Asian women must cease being imitative of European theologies, she argues.⁶

The struggle for fullness of humanity, justice, and harmony challenges theology today to recognize the extent to which the contexts we live and breathe in influence the kind of theology we construct. C. S. Song suggests that we project the revelation of God's "saving love and power" into "sharper relief" onto the "theological canvas" out of our own contexts--"the totality of life and history of which" we "are an inalienable part . . ."⁷ But if we live, think, feel, and act in a diversity of contexts, how do we find what Henry James Young calls unity in the midst of diversity?⁸ How do we move from a norm of conflict and injustice, to an ideal of freedom, harmony, and justice? If we presuppose that God is a God of freedom and justice, how do we fully participate in God's freeing, just, activity? What kind of theology can give adequate direction for such participation in God's freeing activity?

(p. xii).

⁶Marianne Katoppo, *Compassionate and Free: An Asian Woman's Theology*, (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1979. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1980.) C. S. Song, "Context and Revelation with One Stroke of an Asian Brush," in Thistlethwaite, *Lift Every Voice*, p.74.

⁷C. S. Song, "Context and Revelation with One Stroke of an Asian Brush," Thistlethwaite, *Lift Every Voice*, pp. 62-75.

⁸ Henry James Young argues that "true pluralism uses the principle of unity in diversity to characterize the nature of being." He sees Whitehead's metaphysics as successful on this point. Although the word "unity" is problematic for many women since it historically has resulted in a devaluation of the wholeness of women outside of a male-female relationship I use the term to suggest unified effort and solidarity in the midst of diversity. I agree with Young that Whitehead's metaphysics is successful in its construction of a philosophy that values difference and diversity. I further agree with Young that much of Process thought resonates with African ideas of the sacred. Moreover, I find that the word "unity" can be inclusive of both harmony and dissonance, both of which are necessary as a diversity of theological voices move toward genuine conversation and social justice. See Henry James Young, *Hope in Process: A Theology of Social Pluralism*, (Minneapolis: Fortress-Augsburg, 1990), 40-45.

My scholarly endeavours involve articulating the relationship between theology and culture. As I understand it, in our pluralistic world, we are increasingly aware of the ways in which the cultural, social, and historical contexts we live in shape our theological understanding. As the work of Constructive Theologian Gordon Kaufman suggests, theology, our reflective language about God, is a cultural construction. All of our God-talk is dependent on language. Language, the words we use to talk about God, are a product of human culture.⁹ Moreover, much of theological language is a very particular kind of language. It is specifically constructed to talk about God reflectively, often systematically. Theology is God-talk. But different cultures emphasize different kinds of words about God as symbolically representative of God. Thus, whereas in Western culture, one might speak of God as the "bread of life," Asians might find it appropriate to speak of God as the "rice of life," because rice in that culture is a more basic food staple than bread and is laden with greater symbolic meaning and value.¹⁰

There is a growing tendency to reduce the meaning of culture to indicate cultures other than Western cultures. We too often confuse the term "culture" with ethnicity, nationality, or race. Such an understanding of "culture" is incorrect. Culture is concerned with an entire complex of human creativity in relation to nature, the body, and the whole of one's environmental context. It refers to the way human beings make meaning of their world.

The anthropologist Clifford Geertz defines the concept of culture as "essentially a semiotic one." He describes human being as "suspended in webs of significance" that we ourselves have spun. He takes culture "to be those webs, and the analysis of it . . . an interpretive one in search of meaning . . ."¹¹

⁹I am indebted here to Gordon Kaufman's work on theology as an imaginative construction that takes place within human culture. See Gordon Kaufman, *An Essay on Theological Method*, (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1975; 1979) and *The Theological Imagination: Constructing the concept of God*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981). By "imagination" Kaufman does not mean fantasy or illusion, but rather logical reasoning that is creative, constructive.

¹⁰See Masao Takenaka, *God is Rice: Asian Culture and Christian Faith*, (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1986).

¹¹Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1973), pp. 49-51.

For Geertz, some things are controlled intrinsically. He explains, for example, that "we need no more cultural guidance to learn how to breathe than a fish needs to learn how to swim." Other things are cultural. Geertz puts it this way: "Our capacity to speak is surely innate; our capacity to speak English is surely cultural . . ." But between our capacity to speak and the behavior of speaking in English in a certain tone of voice, with certain gestures, Geertz explains, "lies a complex set of significant symbols." These symbols transform our genetic capacity for speech into cultural activity.¹²

Geertz is an anthropologist. I am a theologian. As a theologian, I presuppose that it is God who endows human being with the genetic capacity for speech, for forming social groups, for creating literature, for creating belief systems, etc. Our creative, symbolizing, meaning-making activity, however, takes place within the limits of God's created order.

Theology is concerned with the nature of God--that which is eternal and ultimate, and gives adequate orientation for life¹³--in relation to creation. Moreover, it is concerned with God's activity and creativity in relation to human activity and creativity. The study of culture from a theological perspective recognizes the limitations of human creativity in relation to God's eternal creative activity. God's creativity is infinite and good. Human creativity is finite and, as Paul Tillich suggests, it is plagued by an ambiguity of good and evil.¹⁴ It is not good in and of itself. In fact, the current environmental crisis reminds us that all too often what we think of as creative has destructive effects just as what we often think of as freeing has binding effects. Only as we participate in God's creative and freeing activity are infinite possibilities and movement toward perfection open to us.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³I am influenced by Kaufman's definition of God as that which ultimately concerns us and gives adequate orientation for life. See Gordon Kaufman, *An Essay on Theological Method*. This understanding of "ultimate concern" is different from Paul Tillich's concept of "ultimate concern" in *Systematic Theology: Vols. I-III*. Both Tillich and Kaufman articulate an analysis of theology in relation to culture. Kaufman, however, questions revelation as a starting point, arguing that even revelation is mediated by culture. Since all of our articulations of revelation are mediated by language, a cultural product, we cannot turn to revelation as the starting point for theological construction.

¹⁴See Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology, Vol. I*, 255-256 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951).

A theology of culture recognizes the interrelatedness of religion and culture. Culture is a lens or vehicle through which we interpret God, Christ, and the world. Today, womanist, feminist, mujerista, black, and Third World theologians are concerned with the difference culture makes in the way we symbolize God, Christ, and the world. Specifically, they are concerned with the ways in which context shapes one's theological construction.

Womanist Theology

My specific area of interest in theology and culture is womanist theology. Womanist theology is written in a North American context. It offers a unique contribution in its African and female perspectives. Black women in North America, like black men, to use the words of W. E. B. DuBois, are characterized "by a double consciousness."¹⁵ In short, black women and men belong to two cultures. Their heritage is both African and American. Moreover, in regard to social issues, black women in America confront not only classism and racism, but sexism. For those who remain uninformed, let me respond to the question: What is a womanist and what is womanist theology?

Alice Walker authored a four-part definition of "womanist" in her book, *In Search of our Mothers' Gardens* in 1983. A "womanist" is a black feminist or feminist of color. The word "womanist" comes from "womanish," a term from black folk culture. A womanist is serious, responsible, and courageous in the midst of unjust circumstances. She loves women's culture and she loves the Spirit.

Black women religious scholars and clergy quickly chose the term to describe their activity, thought, and personhood. The term had great appeal because it emerged directly from black women's social, cultural, historical context. Black women clergy and religious scholars define "womanism" in a variety of ways.

Cheryl Townsend Gilkes writes of the "holy boldness" of black women evangelists, teachers, and preachers as representative of what Walker calls "loving the Spirit." Katie Cannon refers to black women's virtues of "quiet grace," "invisible dignity," and "unshouted courage" as womanist virtues. Jacquelyn Grant emphasizes the significance of a wholistic Christology that is

¹⁵See W. E. B. Dubois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, (New York: The New American Library, 1969), p. 45.

concerned with salvation for both men and women. Renita Weems emphasizes a womanist biblical interpretation of sisterhood and community.¹⁶

Alice Walker is concerned with culture both as it relates to human being and to nature. She writes a great deal about black women's cultivation of and existence on the land. She calls to mind the work of Asian theologian Masao Takenaka, who writes that ". . . culture is related to the cultivation of the land as well as of the human personality. It involves the cultivation of one's whole body to enter into the proper relationship with an ultimate power."¹⁷ Similarly, womanist theologians must further develop Walker's wholistic vision of black women's culture in relation to God and the environment.

Finally, womanism is concerned with the power of women's voices. It challenges the silencing of women's voices and the exclusion of women's voices from various realms of public discourse. My womanist research has uncovered the important contribution of Anna Julia Cooper toward developing a concept of the power of women's voices.

Anna Julia Cooper was a black feminist, scholar and educator in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. She graduated from Oberlin College with Mary Church Terrell in 1884 and was the first black woman to receive a doctorate from the Sorbonne. She argued that "tis woman's strongest vindication for speaking that the world needs to hear her voice."¹⁸ For Cooper, the world's vision was incomplete without women's voices.

¹⁶Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, Katie Cannon, Jacquelyn Grant, and Renita Weems are religious scholars in the fields of Sociology of Religion, Christian Ethics, Systematic Theology, and Biblical Studies, respectively. They are also ordained clergy. See Gilkes, "The Role of Women in the Sanctified Church;" Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*; Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus*; and Renita Weems, *Just A Sister Away* for more information on their work.

¹⁷See Takenaka, *God is Rice*, p. 72. Culture, for Takenaka, is concerned with with the cultivation of nature and person. Religion cultivates human beings towards an ultimate concern. He builds on Tillich's idea that "religion is the substance of culture, and culture, the form of religion," from an Asian perspective.

¹⁸See Anna Julia Cooper, *Woman Versus the Indian*, in *A Voice From the South*, (Washington, D. D.: Privately Printed, 1892); Reprint, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 121. An earnest scholar all her life, Cooper received her doctorate from the Sorbonne in 1925.

For Cooper, the power of voice was an essential aspect of inherent human worth and dignity. She referred to a "Singing Something" within human being which can be traced back to the very being of God.¹⁹ To be created in this Singing Something is to be created in the likeness of God.

God acts as a liberating voice and as the author of reform within human being. Cooper refuted the notion that "freedom," "equality," and "democratic principles" are the cultural product of Nordic cultures. She argued that the origin of principles like "freedom" and "equality" is in God, not in human being.²⁰ This is evident in the Singing Something that rises up in human beings around the world and across the centuries to challenge the evil of brute domination of one race, gender, culture, or nation over and against another.

Humankind's creation in the likeness of God is more than imagistic. It is vocal, musical, and auditory. We have the capacity not only to reflect God's image, but to prophetically echo God's voice. We participate in God's speech. God's speech is freeing, liberating, emancipating.

Cooper cited religious belief as releasing the power of voice. She described religious belief as "a live coal from the altar which at once unseals the lips of the dumb."²¹ For Cooper, with belief in the power of religion "all things are possible."²² She explained that, Jesus "believed in the infinite possibilities of an individual soul."²³

To participate in such infinite possibilities is to participate in God's continuous movement toward freedom, which in Cooper's view is "not the cause of a race or a sect, a party or a class," but the "cause of humankind, the very birthright of humanity."²⁴ For Cooper, humankind is ontologically and universally free. Moreover, our participation in the movement toward freedom is moved forward by a power that is greater than ourselves.

"Not unfrequently has it happened," Cooper wrote, "that the impetus of a mighty thought wave has done the execution meant by its Creator in spite of

¹⁹See *Equality of Races and the Democratic Movement*, (Washington D. C.: Privately Printed, 1945), pp. 4-5.

²⁰Ibid.

²¹Cooper, "The Gain from a Belief," in *A Voice From the South*, p. 302.

²²Ibid., 298-302.

²³Ibid.

²⁴Ibid., 120-121.

the weak and distorted perception of its human embodiment." "Reformers," Cooper wrote, "think God's thought after him"[sic].²⁵ "...while fighting consciously for only a narrow gateway for themselves," she asserted, they have been "driven forward by that irresistible 'Power not ourselves which makes for righteousness' to open a high road for humanity."²⁶

We cannot reduce the inherent urge for freedom to human agency. The urge for freedom comes from a power not ourselves. God's power within human being urges us to rise up, come to voice, and proclaim God's intention of freedom. God's power is the impetus for "insurrection of the human mind against all domination."²⁷

By faith in the power of God, as represented by Jesus Christ, we continue to pursue impossible possibilities. Like Niebuhr's Kingdom of God, Cooper's ideals of equality and freedom are best conceived as regulating ideals. Their source is the eternal Creator of all life.

I agree with Cooper that ontologically we are created in freedom and equality. Going beyond Cooper, I contend that human freedom like all human activity, is limited in relation to the freeing activity of God, which is freedom itself. As we participate in God's creative activity, however, we also participate in God's infinite possibilities. Such an idea resonates with Process Theology's suggestion that God's power lures all creation to infinite possibilities.²⁸

Our specific symbolizations of freedom and justice are shaped by the cultural contexts from which our symbolizations of freedom and justice emerge. Our understanding of the urge toward freedom and our participation in God's freeing, creative activity is wrought with imperfection and limitations. But there is also something about these ideals that is greater than our symbolizations of them. The source of freedom and justice is God God-self. God God-self is an irresistible power not ourselves. Hope in this ultimate, irresistible source of freedom and justice makes us able to continue to strive toward infinite visions of freedom and justice. This irresistible power is

²⁵*Ibid.*, "Woman Versus the Indian," 118-119.

²⁶*Ibid.*

²⁷*Ibid.*

²⁸I am influenced here by the teachings of John Cobb and his interpretation of Alfred North Whitehead in the Theology Colloquium at Harvard Divinity School, Spring 1987. See Alfred N. Whitehead, *Process and reality: Corrected Edition*, (New York: The Free Press, 1978)pp. 85-86, 104, 185-186 and John B. Cobb, Jr., *Process Theology and political Theology*, (Manchester, England and Philadelphia: Manchester Press and Westminster Press, 1982), p.79 .

something inherent within human being and all of creation and all that is. Yet it transcends the limits of the created order we are a part of.

A theology that gives adequate direction for participation in God's freeing activity points to this irresistible power. Moreover, it recognizes that we live in a pluralistic world, where we participate in an ongoing process of constructing a multiplicity of theologies. All theologies are cultural constructions and are limited in their perception of truth.²⁹ Where do we find unity in such diversity?³⁰ How do we attain harmony in the midst of dissonance? By recognizing that our perception of truth is an ongoing process. We require a multiplicity of theologies to correct our misperceptions of truth as we strive to move toward fuller participation in God's freeing activity. We must understand that unity can not be attained without both dissonance and harmony.

Dissonance is a necessary aspect of the movement toward unity. The dissonance of new, different voices and ideas pricks our consciousness to perceive reality anew. We find harmony in those moments where there is a resolution in our conversations and our perception of truth. But both dissonance and harmony are merely necessary moments in an ongoing process toward the fullness of salvation, completeness, and wholeness for all of creation. We move continuously in a process of self-correcting, perfecting activity by grace and by faith in God.

²⁹In am influenced here by Richard R. Niebuhr's Symbol Theory, expounded in Class Lectures, *Symbolizations of Christ*, Fall 1988. Niebuhr argues that we require a multiplicity of symbolizations of God and Christ. For Niebuhr, we engage in an ongoing process of symbolizing activity. Each symbolization of God or Christ involves some perception of truth, but each symbolization also involves yet another misperception about the truth of God and Christ. Therefore, we require a multiplicity of symbolizations, because each symbolization of God or Christ corrects the misperception involved in prior or simultaneous symbolizations.

³⁰See Henry James Young, for a discussion of unity in diversity.



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