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Seeking to Understand Oppression

Following foundational issues, the topic to which the next largest group of papers given at the annual meetings of the Society has been devoted has been arbitrary group-related injustice. While the term "oppression" would not have been used in the early years of the Society's history, attention to the conditions it describes was never entirely missing. Under this heading are included papers dealing with the Black agenda, the women's movement, and the plight of several other disadvantaged, disenfranchised, or dispossessed peoples with which liberation thinking has been concerned. Some distinct changes in the way issues are canvassed are evident in the story to be told in this chapter, but the continuity of the problem is clear.

From Race Relations to the Black Agenda

At the founding meeting in 1959, a panel of seven, about half of it consisting of members of the Society and half of it guests, discussed "The Moderate's Strategy in Race Relations." The anachronistic quality of that title is something of a clue to the considerable change that has occurred in the last quarter century in the way such matters are discussed. The fact that all the members of the panel--Robert R. Brown, E. Clinton Gardner, Brooks Hays, Daniel O. Hill, W. Astor Kirk, Guy H. Ranson, and Will D. Campbell--were male, and all but one was white, did not seem as shocking to the Society in those days as it would today. Our consciousness about instances of oppression has been modified in important ways during the life of the Society even though the tragic realities have probably not abated very much.

Nothing in the records reveals what was said at the 1959 panel, though Will D. Campbell may have left a clue to the kind of thinking prevalent at the time in an article he published shortly after participating, under the title "The Role of Religious Organizations in the Desegregation Controversy" (*Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, [January 1961]: 187-196).

It was to be four years before the Society addressed this issue again, and the files are equally barren about what was actually said when the discussion resumed. In 1963 Henry Clark presented a paper, "New Configurations in Minority Group Social Action." Clark had been thinking much about this subject and would soon write two articles about it, undoubtedly reflecting to some extent the thinking he presented at the Society's meetings. ("Reflections on the Negro Revolt," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 19 (January, 1964): 107-22; and, "Thinking About the Unthinkable in Race Relations," *Social Action* 30 (May 1964): 17-22). A year later Donovan E. Smucker gave a paper entitled "The Negro Revolt in Chicago: A Study of Confrontation in the Power Structure." In 1965 Joseph Washington and Benjamin Payton jointly led a session on "New Frontiers in Race Relations." Payton's thinking at the time may be reflected in articles entitled "Civil Rights and the Future of American Cities," *Social Action* (December 1966): 5-11; and "New Trends in Civil Rights," *Christianity and Crisis*, 25 (December 13, 1965): 268-71.

The files get better starting with the 1968 meeting and the analysis of the problem becomes more pointed in Joseph Washington's "Ethical Effectiveness in Achieving Civil Rights." Washington contended that the white majority had long possessed the power to see that the Black minority be accorded its full civil rights and that the white majority had failed to effect any systemic change. Only when the bus boycott of 1955 forced the issue was progress begun. Washington detailed the reasons (or rationalizations) why the white majority does not voluntarily move toward ethical effectiveness in civil rights. He cited the fact that intellectual whites disagree on both the nature of the problem and on the objectives to be achieved. He showed the insufficiency of several proposed solutions generally offered by white thinkers. He called for the mobilization of white consciousness in a massive effort to repudiate the myths and break the structures that support a segregated social system. He pointed out that if there is no breakthrough on this, although some legal victories for desegregation may be technically won, the conditions in which "great expectations continually meet great disappointments" will continue with disastrous consequences.

When Preston Williams received the program for the 1969 meeting he circulated a memo to members of the Society charging, in essence, that the very blockages which Washington had identified in the life of the country-as-a-whole were operative within the life of the ASCE itself. Williams charged that the Society had failed to take account of the Black revolution and had not paid enough

attention to the significance of the Black Church in American life. Williams's memo produced consequences in the program planning for 1970 and for the attention subsequently paid to Black concerns in the ongoing programs of the Society. While the 1969 meeting had already been arranged and hence could not be very well changed, the Board of Directors, acting in response to Williams's criticisms, initiated moves to meet at a Black seminary in 1970, to give major program attention to ethical issues in the racial crisis, to incorporate members of the Black community in planning the number of Black members of the efforts to increase the number of Black members of the Society. It is this response that may account for the fact that the number of papers discussed in this chapter--the great majority of which are concerned with the Black agenda--constitutes approximately a fifth of the total substance of the Society's program in the first twenty-five years of its history.

The 1969 program provided for the Sunday morning plenary session to be devoted to an address on "The Ethics of Power and the Black Revolution" by Nathan Wright, Jr., Executive Director of the Department of Urban Work, Episcopal Diocese of Newark. Drawing upon both Aristotle and Stokely Carmichael, Wright showed how central human fulfillment is to ethical well-being. He outlined how American institutions (which he characterized as relief-oriented rather than fulfillment-oriented) seek to pacify the dissident spirit rather than to change the mores of society so as to enable growth. Even the kindly disposed and socially minded get caught in this syndrome, which basically prevents human beings, particularly those who are powerless, from becoming what they could be. Wright indicated the educational system for failing to empower minorities and suggested that the educational system falls at this point because the society does not feel it needs the participation of the dispossessed.

Exploring Blackness as self-awareness, Wright showed how he came to appreciate its importance while studying the Church Fathers in order to write a book on worship, and declared, "One historic role of the oppressed has been to reclaim and re-humanize the society which has occasioned their oppression." Wright identified himself as a conservative Republican, reported that Richard Nixon responded favorably to these ideas, and stressed how this agenda could be carried out in regenerative ways, combining elements of both the saintly and the prophetic roles. This address gave a moderate foretaste of the themes that would be central to the program the following year.

No program of the Society has ever been more completely

devoted to a single theme than that at the 1970 meeting, which was held at the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta. Except for the presidential address, which has been noted in connection with Foundational issues, and one of two papers on the Problem of Violence that was weighted heavily to War/Peace issues, all of the papers at the 1970 meeting were focused on what came to be called the Black agenda. A workshop on training agents for social change was concerned with teaching techniques and will be reported under that category, though it is fair to obviously pertinent to the Black issue. It is fair to suggest, therefore, that the call to concentrate a meeting entirely on the matters raised by Williams in his memo was complied with in spirit.

The papers and their authors in 1970 were, in order of their place on the program.

- "Malcolm X and Christianity," by Lawrence Lucas
- "Martin Luther King: A Christian Ethical Assessment," by James T. Laney
- "A Theology of Black Power," by James Cone
- "Styles of Black Ethics,"* by Preston Williams
- "Economic Power and the Black Community"*
- by Benjamin Payton and J. Phillip Wogaman
- "Violence and Non-Violence"* by James Lawson

(Of these papers those marked with an asterisk are in the archives. The material in two of them has been incorporated into publications. James Cone's paper was the basis of the first chapter of his book, *A Black Theology of Liberation* [Lippincott, 1970]; Preston Williams' paper is reflected to a significant extent in "Ethics and Ethos in the Black Experience," *Christianity and Crisis* 33 [May 31, 1971]: 104-109. The papers by J. Phillip Wogaman and James Lawson were among those distributed to the members).
 The Sunday morning plenary session was addressed by C. Eric Lincoln, whose topic was not announced. However, copies of his "How, Now, America?" from *Christianity and Crisis* 28 (April 1, 1968): 56-9, were made available to members in mimeograph form. A presentation by Al Denman, entitled, "Compensatory Justice," was not a paper at all, but a slide presentation showing that the claims of Blacks and native Americans for reparations for past discriminatory acts has substantial support in American tort law. Another interesting part of the program was a meeting arranged by Professor Jonathan Jackson with members of the student body of Clark College who told it "Like It Is." Two panels were also included in the 1970 meeting. One on "Black Caucasians" was brought together Negali R. Riley

of the United Methodist Church, Gayraud Wilmore of the United Presbyterian Church, and Brother Joseph Davis of the Black Catholic Caucus. In the other panel, Max Stackhouse and Charles Powers each discussed "The Black Manifesto." Stackhouse had made his position known in "Reparations: A Call to Repentance," which appeared just before the meeting in *The Lutheran Quarterly* 21 (November 1969): 358-80.

It is hard to capture with these bibliographical details the exciting and sometimes tense atmosphere of this meeting. Its impact was heightened by its location, the newness for many of the ideas that were asserted, the cumulative affect of having a single theme to the agenda, and the events in the life of the country that had preceded it for several years. As we have seen in Chapter Three, this meeting prompted the formation of the Task Force on White Racism, which had as its purpose the deliberate exploration of these issues on a continuing basis. In the remaining thirteen years of the Society's first quarter century there have only been two years without a treatment of Black related issues, and in most years there have been two or more presentations on this subject.

The papers that have explored these matters in subsequent years have had a variety of orientations. Some have further explored the element of power in the relationships of minorities to the majority and the problems of whites in responding to a situation for which they bear a significant burden of guilt. Just one year after the Atlanta meeting, Herbert O. Edwards presented "Christian Ethics and Racism: Examination of the Thought of Reinhold Niebuhr, John C. Bennett, and Paul Ramsey." In 1972, Robert Terry, under the intriguing title, "Active New Whiteness: Lighting a Damp Log," suggested that the shapers and formers of racial practices in American life were, for the most part, self-professed liberals on the racial question. "Racism," Terry pointed out, "...is not just one problem among many in America, but a presupposition of the cultural, institutional, and power realities in which much American policy is made and remade." Terry showed the bankruptcy of white liberalism in dealing with racism--in an analysis quite parallel to that made by Joseph Washington in the paper he presented at the 1968 meeting. This same meeting heard Charles S. Brown present a paper on "Strategies of Power in Racial Encounters."

In 1974, Theodore R. Weber delivered a paper entitled "Racism: Collective Guilt and Individual Responsibility," an adapted version of which was published under the title, "Guilt: Yours, Ours, and Theirs," in *Worldview* 18 (February 1975): 15-22. Weber utilized H. R. Niebuhr's distinctions between external and internal history to deal with the

strange fact that while many persons are not deliberately and culpably involved in racism in the usual moral sense, they do feel a sense of guilt for its perpetration and perpetation. Any effort to create a new history, suggested Weber, needs to analyze and deal with this experience of guilt and its consequences for people's behavior.

The 1976 presidential address by Preston Williams, which was not (as most such addresses) published in *The Selected Papers*, dealt with the problems of racism, as did a paper by J. Deotis Roberts on "Civil Rights: The Unfinished Agenda."

In 1981 Alan T. Davis examined "Anglo-Saxonism: The Ethics of a Race Myth." An article with a similar title has been published as "The Aryan Myth: Its Religious Significance," in *Studies in Religion/Sciences Religieuses* 10 (1981): 346-351. Davis showed how the racism of the nineteenth century was promulgated largely with purported scientific backing, and warned that it may return in such a guise if we are not on guard. In 1983 Preston Williams looked at "Impartiality and Racism."

Three papers, the first in 1974, the second in 1976, and the third in 1980, have described concrete action programs designed to deal with racism. In the first of these, Joseph Hough and Daniel Rhoades spoke about "Project Understanding: An Evaluation of a Program to Combat Racism, 1969." In the second, Jane Cary Peck told about "Successful Social Change in School Desegregation: A Model and Case Study." Her report is printed in *The Selected Papers for 1976*. In the third, Alan B. Anderson and George Pickering described "The Issue of the Color Line: A View from Chicago,"--a report on Martin Luther King, Jr.'s move to Chicago to build a northern base and confront housing segregation. They spoke about the roles of James Bevel and William H. Moyer in the movement there. The account of the agreement worked out between King and Mayor Richard Daley is given and the reasons explained as to why it failed to produce the desired goal of open housing. In the authors' judgment the consequent sense of frustration was a key element in nudging the civil rights movement toward the embrace of Black power.

The life and work of Martin Luther King, Jr. has been the subject of three other papers. In 1970, Erwin Smith spoke about "The Ethics and Promise of Martin Luther King, Jr." The same year, Charles Teel gave "King's Disobedient Clergy: A Theological-Ethical Profile," and in 1982 John H. Cartwright, speaking in honor of King and in a plea to make his birthday a national holiday, suggested that King has too long been treated (somewhat patronizingly) more as a Baptist preacher than as a constructive theologian. While

Cartwright suggested that truly serious work on King's thinking remains to be done, his systematic ethic would come to be interpreted as an ethic of *humanitas*. Cartwright maintained that King's approach was premised upon a belief in the solidarity of the human race that made the preservation of "the other" the first moral law. This view of *humanitas* implies Christian vocation and commitment, and contends that the means for achieving moral ends must be essentially benevolent. In brief, King held that created relatedness is the basis for community and that justice and love must be interrelated. Enoch Oglesby and Peter Paris responded to this presentation at the opening plenary session.

In addition to the papers about racism, Black Identity, and related issues, the programs have also included some sessions devoted to the Black religious experience in both its American and its African settings. In 1973 James Cone examined "Ethical Motifs in Black Religion in America," and in 1980 Peter Paris gave a paper on "The Social Teachings of the Black Churches." The paper by Paris is included in *The Selected Papers*. Paris also published an article "The Social Teaching of the Black Churches: A Prolegomena," in *The AME Zion Quarterly Review* 92 (January 1981): 2-12.

J. Deotis Roberts delivered a paper in 1971 entitled "African Religion and African Social Consciousness," a version of which is published under an almost identical title in *The Journal of Religious Thought* 29 (1972): 43-56. In 1973 John Mbiti was a guest of the Society and spoke about "Ethical Motifs in Black Religion in Africa." Of similar interest is the article by Mbiti, E. Schweitzer, et. al. on "Faith, Hope, and Love in the African Independent Church Movement: An Ecumenical Discussion," *Study Encounter* 10 (SE/63 '74): 1-19. In 1979 Norman E. Thomas spoke on the subject "Church Leaders in the Zimbabwean Liberation Struggle." Related material can be found in an article "The Ethics of Bishop Abel Muzorewa," in *Religion in Life* 49 (Summer 1980): 178-194. The same year Heidi Hadsell gave a paper "Prophetic Leadership: the Moral Rhetoric of Nyerere." In 1982 Richard Tholin did an analysis of "U.S. Churches and Liberation in Africa: Angola 1961-1981," and a year later Robert W. Bertram considered "'Confession' Against Apartheid: Where Faith is Ethos." Bertram's paper described the predicament of those Christians in South Africa for whom opposition to the racial system has become a matter of fundamental belief.

It is clear that the Society has built up some momentum in the consideration of Black related issues---a momentum for which there is a continuing need.

The Treatment of Women's Concerns

The Society was much slower to give attention to Women's concerns in its programs than it was to give attention to the Black agenda. Indeed it was not until 1972 that a paper appeared on the program which dealt directly with women's liberation. In that year Penelope Washburn gave "An Ethical Overview of Women's Liberation." Beverly Harrison followed in 1974 with "Some Ethical Issues in the Women's Movement"--a paper which is in the archives. Harrison focused attention on the importance of the feminist movement for the modern socio-ethical situation. She indicated how the thrust of any new movement is often directed at gaining a position within the arena of moral discourse. The primacy given this thrust may simply override any attempt on its part to legitimate arguments according to established ways of thinking and acting. To expect new movements to legitimate their arguments in that way is to make them submit to the very framework of discourse that precludes them and their concerns. Accordingly, for the women's movement, as for similar liberation movements, the point of reference must be futuristic (or, "u-topic" in the literal meaning of that term). Harrison also pointed to the contradictions involved in any view of compassion or personal sensitivity that is not rooted in full and complete solidarity and mutuality between all groups. From 1930 to 1960, argued Harrison, even though women in general may have gained some personal freedom, as a group they actually lost ground in the public arena. Some women did struggle mightily against social side-effects of the Industrial Revolution, working with energy, devotion, and imagination in areas of public education, health care, and social service, but were excluded even more than they had been in the nineteenth century from participation and influence in the public sphere. The resulting dichotomy between private and public value systems adversely affects both men and women and should be of concern to both. Harrison suggested that the feminist consciousness can be a resource for the social deliverance of this society---but not by itself the vehicle for that deliverance. The women's movement is a resource for challenging the subtle and better nuanced forms of oppression that threaten human fullness in covertly orchestrated and gently mechanized ways rather than (as in nihilistic tyranny) in blatant and violent ways. Concluding, Harrison observed that much depends on whether a new reading of freedom enables those who have been oppressed (even in subtle ways) to demystify their condition, and whether the radical nature of freedom can recapture the lost connectedness of interpersonal relationships that are destroyed so readily

in an objectivized world of technicism and manipulative politics.

It was four years before the programs again devoted attention to women's concerns. At that time Jane Gary Peck convened a panel on "Rights, Justice, and Power in Feminist Perspectives." Another gap then occurred, also four years long, before the 1982 presidential address of Daniel C. Maguire and a paper by James S. Allen both addressed these issues at the same meeting. Maguire's address, which was printed in *The Annual* (but first appeared in *Christianity and Crisis* 42 (March 15, 1982): 59-67) described three kinds of sexism: 1) the blatant bias that openly asserts male superiority; 2) an insidious assumption that the female is an important corrective of masculine arrogance--but hardly a viable mode for the conduct of affairs in a "real" world; and, 3) a benign acceptance of feminism as a valid agenda for women. Noting that male dominance has brought the warring instinct into prominence in our culture, Maguire suggested five tendencies that preserve the "macho-male blight": 1) a proneness to violent modes of power; 2) a hierarchical proclivity that is antithetical to community; 3) a tendency to abstraction that makes it possible to hate enemies and to neglect present human needs while pursuing futuristic goals; and, 4) a consequentialism which easily becomes "bottom line" thinking; and 5) a hatred which expresses itself in the systemic exclusion of women from many desirable roles.

Observing the extent to which Christian ethics has for the most part been male-dominated and the tendencies to abstract intellectualizing that have consequently become central to the discipline, Maguire suggested that something very profound--which he called feminization--is occurring in our culture. This is infiltrating the affective, subliminal, and genetic regions of understanding with elements of healing appreciation. This will serve theology well, since in the past the mystical element has been a part of theology at its profoundest. Faith is a child of affection--as Thomas Aquinas knew so well. The use of male language for God, for which Maguire found no warrant other than a false ontology and a false cosmology based on masculinity, becomes the final symbol of the problem. It makes power more crucial than love in thinking about the attributes of ultimacy. "When a healed masculine and feminine blend into a more genuine humanity," concluded Maguire, "we [and our discipline] will be better."

In his paper, James Allen indicated the basic hostility among many church groups, especially the Orthodox, Roman Catholic, and the Mormon Churches, and among the new religious right, to the challenges which the women's

movement is making. He urged mainline Protestants to think clearly to a position of support for the objectives of the women's movement in relation to the functions of the family, the role of the reproductive process, and the nature of work.

In 1983, Lisa Sowle Cahill looked at the terms "'Male' and 'Female' in Normative Ethics." In a long paper, she examined both the Genesis creation stories and the results of empirical investigation to see that "sexual differentiation as male and female is good, is part of humanity as created (human 'nature'), and is not incompatible with the inclusion of both male and female in what is meant by 'image of God.'" The paper by Professor Schüssler Florenza, which was discussed in the last chapter, was also a contribution to the same agenda.

Despite the high quality of these individual contributions, it does not seem that the women's issue has as yet been canvassed in the programs of the Society as fully as it needs to be. The extent to which thinking about these issues can lead to a broad new way of thinking about ethics was well demonstrated by the 1983 presidential address of Beverly Harrison. Harrison identified the fundamental theological hermeneutic underlying various liberation theologies and showed how they gained methodological distinctiveness by recognizing that our knowledge of God is grounded in the concrete struggle of persons to realize right relationships with each other in communitarian social conditions. While she acknowledged other widely held criticisms of liberation theology and its approach to ethics, she focused on the defense of its substantive theological claim that a praxis of right-making relationships is a pre-condition for ethical discernment in theology. She identified the conception of persons and politics implicit in the liberation paradigm, contrasting it with elements in the reigning liberal outlook. In conclusion she invoked a feminist analysis of physical embodiment as the specific linkage between our longing for justice and the conditions for realizing mutuality, or love.

These several efforts to bring women's concerns to the attention of the Society warrant the expectation and hope that the future will find a great deal more attention being given to these concerns.

The Self-Identity and Liberation of Other Groups

This subsection may be something of a potpourri, for the themes of oppression, liberation, and group identity as a foundation for ethical reflection move into many by-ways. One way they seem not to have moved in the programs of the Society, however, is into attention to gay rights. Except

for one paper, more germane to sexual morality than to gay liberation, that issue has not been the focus of concern for any paper given at the Society.

Ethnic identity was given attention in a 1972 panel consisting of Geno Baroni, Joseph N. Davis, Gabriel Fackre, and Michael Novak on the subject "Ethnic Values and Social Change." Gabriel Fackre's ideas on this occasion were later incorporated into an article, "Archie Bunker: Visions and Realities," published in *The Christian Century* 89 (July 19, 1972): 772-4. In that article Fackre showed that Archie is human too, and is striving for a chance to shape his own future as much as those members of minorities that are vocal about oppression. Archie's striving often takes the form of a rising anger against technological dehumanization and may in time make common cause with others striving to be free--those very others with whom Archie now seems to want nothing to do. Michael Novak's ideas were later incorporated into an article, "How American Are You If Your Grandparents Came From Slovakia in 1888?", which was published in *Soundings* LXVI (Spring 1983): 1-20. Novak, citing Geno Baroni's work, showed that both Black and white minorities have been defrauded by society and hence each has more to gain from cooperation with the other than from hostility and antagonism.

In 1977 Terence Anderson delivered a paper, "Issues of Justice in Native American Land Claims," which seems to be the only attention paid in the programs to the problems of this group.

Concern about human rights is integrally related to the focus of this chapter, but it is so often created in the context of international affairs that we will place the main discussion of it in the next chapter. But we will note that Sister Isabel Letelier's address to the Sunday morning plenary session at the 1981 meeting on the subject "Ethics and Politics of Liberation: An Agenda for the Eighties" focused in that direction. Her paper, which was delivered just two days before the inauguration of Ronald Reagan, foretold with great accuracy the changes that were to come in U.S. policy toward Latin and Central America. It indicated how United States support for military regimes of an intensely repressive quality (simply because they oppose "the cancer of Communism") creates liberation movements throughout the region that are opposed to all violence, systemic as well as overt, that of the United States as well as that of Russia. She pled with members of the Society to understand the struggle of these groups. It is surprising how few papers have considered liberation theology in the South American context. In 1979, Carol Robb looked at the "Ethical Procedures of Gutierrez

and Alves," and her paper was published in *The Selected Papers*. She entered the debate between those who see Christian social ethics as a truly interdisciplinary undertaking and those who see it as involving a more explicitly philosophical exploration of moral discourse. Turning to the work of two South American liberation theologians, she noted that, while both acknowledge the importance of their historical standing ground for doing ethics, they differ in methodology and conclusions. According to Robb, Alves contends that human fulfillment as the goal of orthopraxis must at this point remain undefined, while Gutierrez believes that "the criteria for liberation can only be defined in the context of a world-wide class analysis." Gutierrez is willing to postulate a greater place for middle axioms than Alves. A paper like that of Robb indicates how much we need more solid analysis of liberation theology with the tools that are possessed by the Society's membership.

The discussion of liberation has, as we have seen, brought up issues that are germane to international affairs, foreign policy, and questions of war and peace. Papers dealing with those categories constitute the next largest genre of material from the programs and will be discussed in the next chapter.