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Review

Monica A. Coleman,

Making a Way Out of No Way: A Womanist Theology

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Looking for a groundbreaking theological text that is mentally challenging, relevant to today's ever-changing world context, and downright blissful to read? I have the perfect book for you. I would liken it to three theological wine coolers. It gives you just enough of a buzz to trigger imaginations of a world that perpetually actualizes justice while keeping you sober enough to do something about making that vision a reality. This is what Monica A. Coleman does in *Making a Way Out of No Way: A Womanist Theology*. With an elegant synthesis of Whiteheadian process thought, African traditional religions, and the experience of black women,

Coleman articulates an ever-evolving framework that can both hold them in fruitful tension and apply them as resources to the liberation of both black women and the world. It is a must read for anyone interested in a process theological response to the modern and postmodern challenges the current world situation poses to the womanist project.

Much of womanist theological scholarship has focused on explicitly Christian motifs and has accepted without challenge attributes of models of God embedded in the Christian tradition that prove oppressive to black women in particular and people of color in general. This is a critical weakness of black and womanist theological thought pointed out by several philosophically and progressively minded American theologians of African descent such as Henry Young, Theodore Walker, Anthony B. Pinn, Elonda Clay, and others. When dealing with the religious and existential experiences of women of color, can we address and/or represent them solely in Christian terms and Christian-influenced classical metaphysical understandings of the divine? In other words, are we limiting the potent transformative potential of womanist theological thought when we confine its scope to so narrow a playing field? Monica A. Coleman's response to this question is an ear-shattering "Yes!"

In *Making a Way Out of No Way*, Coleman redraws the borders of womanism, etching out a more inclusive framework for what she calls a "postmodern womanist theology." For Coleman, a postmodern womanist theology accounts for the diversity of black women's experience in ways that classical womanist thought could not in that it acknowledges the harsh reality of oppressive situations while affirming the agency that black women possess to positively renew these vicious travesties by a novel interpretation of them for the future. A postmodern womanist theology is also a resource that not only transforms the oppressed, but also is salvific for the oppressor, whether human or systemic. When black women improve their individual and collective situations by drawing from several facets of their rich past and present ranging from African traditional religions to black women's science fiction, Coleman argues that womanist theological

thought has postmodern potential. That is, postmodern womanist theology gives black women an invaluable theoretical and practical resource to adequately and accurately represent the wide spectrum of difference among them. Readers familiar with Coleman's 2006 critique of womanism in the article "Must I Be a Womanist?" will appreciate her at length analysis of these issues and more in *Making a Way Out of No Way: A Womanist Theology*. Of course, the book achieves a depth impossible to attain in the limited space in *The Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion*, the publisher of Coleman's feather-ruffling article that started it all.

Coleman is known for her narrative/theoretical approach to theological inquiry, and sprinkles this potent method throughout the text. Her introduction to *Making a Way Out of No Way* tells the story of Lisa, a young woman in the thick of an abusive heterosexual relationship. Coleman uses this story to create one of several archetypal examples of the challenges that a postmodern womanist theology must address. Some of these archetypal human examples cited by Coleman are postmodern womanist theology in praxis, such as Atlanta's Rev. Dr. Kathie Elaine Martin, the head of GSN (God, Self and Neighbor) ministries. Dr. Martin's church was created specifically for those of LGBT orientation in response to Christian communities that oppress through the privileging of heterosexuality. Coleman skillfully uses human examples of postmodern womanist theology to illustrate both the issues it needs to address and how it contributes to the furthering of justice in not just the experience of black women, but potentially in the experience of all. She fulfills the Whiteheadian "airplane" concept of observation in the opposite direction with her human examples. While Whitehead began with a generalization and applied it to a particular instance, Coleman "unbraids" the specific experiences and liberating actions of the women she discusses, revealing the universal application in a postmodern womanist theology.

One of the major strengths of *Making a Way Out of No Way* is its practical juxtaposition and marriage of process philosophy/theology with womanist theology and the experience of

black women. Throughout the text, Coleman makes a strong case for the inclusion of process thought in postmodern womanist strategies. She postulates process thought as a philosophy that holds that the events of the past partially determine the situations of the present and the possibilities of the future. Process themes run throughout the text without the complex metaphysical and mathematical coverings they are infamous for. Rather, Coleman spends more time in *demonstration* of process thought than in *explanation* of it. However, she outlines process philosophy/theology in enough detail in chapters two and three, demonstrating both the intrinsic kernel of liberation embedded in its model of God and its emphasis on the co-creation between God and the world that brings about the “creative transformation” of evil into beauty. Coleman, building on John Cobb’s concept of “creative transformation,” defines it as human responses to God that free humanity and earth from forces that wreak destruction on them both. She also strategically uses process theology to introduce religious pluralism to her postmodern womanist theology. Coleman, again drawing from Cobb, posits Jesus as one example of the incarnation of God, while understanding incarnation as universal. In other words, “Christ” is the *idea* of “creative transformation,” and this *idea* can take many forms, as it does in other religions and philosophies. After setting this framework, Coleman goes on to discuss in further detail the non-Christian resources she gave credence to and mentions briefly in earlier parts of the text.

The postmodern womanist theology that Coleman asserts in this text depends upon the existence of an open channel from the past to the future. Womanist strategies of world renewal negotiating the events of the past with positive potential futures exist in the present, available for black women to use to actualize liberation. In the first chapter of the text, Coleman is in conversation with the theologies of womanist scholars Jacqueline Grant, Kelly Brown Douglas, Delores Williams, JoAnne Marie Terrell, and Karen Baker-Fletcher, and praises them for their various applications of Christian theological motifs to the progressive liberation of black women. However, Coleman departs from their predominately Christocentric notions of the divine,

arguing that they fail to make a distinction between the person of “Jesus” and “God.” Hence, she uncovers a two-fold danger in womanist constructions of how the divine influences the world: womanist thought not only assumes without virtually any challenge a high-Christology but also implicitly holds that all black women adhere to and can be described within the language and praxis of Christian ontology. Coleman states that a postmodern womanist theology must not require belief in the person of Jesus Christ or Christianity, but must be inclusive of various religious traditions and methods of liberation in which black women participate as equal and fellow proprietors of freedom and justice. She achieves a working example of this inclusion of non-Christian religious schemas in her turn to African traditional religions, emphasizing their ability to adapt to their context (such as their syncretism of the religious worldviews of the oppressors of their practitioners with their own as displayed in Santeria and other African diasporic religious traditions) and serve as a means of holistic life-sustenance.

Coleman also proposes a Whiteheadian account of spirit possession as found in African religions, and says that a postmodern womanist theology must account for it. She views spirit possession as the persuasive influence deceased human entities have on living entities. A postmodern womanist theology must allow for the possibility that the ancestors in some form still exist in some place, the ability of the ancestors to act in the present, a means for the ancestors to return to this world, and strategies for the present to access their influence. Coleman connects ancestral immortality as played out in African traditional religions such as that of the Yoruba to process theology through Suchocki’s idea of *imagination*. Just as Suchocki holds that humans determine elements of their future by envisioning and enacting their agency in it, Coleman asserts that the ancestors do the same. As we render the ancestors immortal by remembering and utilizing their lives and their contributions to peace and justice in our transformation of present existential dilemmas, we are using the strategies of postmodern womanist theology to perpetually call our world forward to stages of harmony more intense than

those preceding it. Through the postmodern womanist strategy of world transformation by spirit possession, black women consciously understand their past as their present, and are careful to wisely use the past as a resource for determining their future.

Coleman ties her postmodern womanist theology together by establishing the participation of individuals in life-giving and life-sustaining collectives as an essential element of the transformation of the world into further stages of justice. The final chapter of *Making a Way Out of No Way* shows Coleman asserting that postmodern womanist theology is a communal theology. It has the potential to create alternative communities that fight for holistic justice as it assembles these communities around a common ethic. Such a communal theology transcends those to whom it directly applies and encompasses the larger societies plagued with injustices. Though a postmodern womanist theology can start with black women, it has achieved its theoretical vision when it ends with the creative transformation of the whole world.

Coleman also uses communal theology to showcase another dimension of postmodern womanist theology: the use of the not explicitly religious. For this purpose, she cites black women's science fiction, holding that it provides a working image of how black women view and implement ideas of God, the world, and themselves. She explicitly uses Octavia Butler's book *Parable of the Sower*, focusing on its black American teenage protagonist Lauren Oya Olamina's leading of a group of people through an "apocalyptic" social landscape on the west coast of the United States between 2024 and 2027. Coleman points out that Lauren's strategies make possible a community among her followers that foster their holistic well being through a remembrance of their ancestors, a syncretistic ritual that inspires them to utilize the storehouse of the past to actualize possibilities for futures of peace and justice. Coleman connects Lauren's function in *Parable of the Sower* in particular and black women's science fiction in general to process philosophy/theology in that both are speculative frameworks that forecast a better world community that does not yet exist. While the past is packed with wonderful emissions of the

world, it also holds the catastrophic history of humanity. When postmodern womanist theology in the form of black women's science fiction transforms the oppressive, disjunctive situations of black women of the past into the fruitful, liberating, and perpetually progressive relationality of all in the present, a way is made out of no way.

Making a Way Out of No Way: A Womanist Theology is a work of genius by scholar who has shown through this text that she has much more to contribute to the burgeoning conversation between process thought and womanism. The beauty of the book is that its articulations of postmodern liberation strategies have the dexterity of working within or without religious settings. In this spirit of continuous expansion, our author has successfully set up a theological schematic that postulates the freedom of black women as a reality involving and contingent upon the liberation of all. If Coleman's postmodern thought as presented in *Making a Way Out of No Way* is any indication of the future of womanist theology, the discipline has its brightest days ahead of it.