

THE WHITLEY LECTURE  
2006

BEING HUMAN

A Black British Christian  
Woman's Perspective

Kate Coleman

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## Whitley Publications

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# The Whitley Lecture

The Whitley Lectureship was first established in 1949, in honour of W.T. Whitley (1861-1947), arguably the first systematic modern Baptist historian. Whitley was a notable scholar and servant of the Church of Christ. He had pastorates in England and Australia. He served the denomination in both countries in many ways, including pursuing historical studies.

Whitley was a key figure in the formation of the Baptist Historical Society (1908). He edited its journal which soon gained an international reputation for the quality of its contents. Altogether he made a particularly remarkable contribution to Baptist life and self-understanding, providing an inspiring model of how a pastor-scholar might enrich the life and faith of others.

The establishment of the Lectureship in his name was intended to be an encouragement to research by Baptist scholars into aspects of Christian life and thought and to enable the results of such research to be published and available to the denomination and beyond.

The Whitley Lectureship's Management Committee is composed of representatives of the Baptist Colleges, the Baptist Union of Great Britain, the Baptist Missionary Society, the Baptist Ministers Fellowship and the Baptist Historical Society.

Through the years the encouragement towards scholarship has taken different forms, from the full support of the writing of lectures for publication by a designated Whitley Lecturer to the making available of smaller grants to those working at particular research interests.

In 1996 the Management Committee of the Whitley Lectureship began a new initiative in keeping with the original purpose. It was agreed to appoint each year a Lecturer to write and deliver a lecture as a contribution to scholarly Baptist thought. Each lecture will be published.

By happy coincidence, this year's lecturer, the Revd Kate Coleman, was elected Vice-President of the Baptist Union at the 2005 Baptist Assembly. We are delighted that in what must be an

exceptionally demanding year, she has been able to fulfil her commitment to us.

Kate is the senior pastor at the Regeneration Centre, an innovative local church plant based on cell church principles in Birmingham. Her Christian experience stems back to her childhood and her Church of England upbringing. Kate made her personal 'commitment' to faith in Jesus (and subsequent baptism) while at university in her late teens. Surprisingly (for Kate anyway!) this took place during a Christian Rock Concert, which she describes as being a 'Damascus Road' experience.

By her early twenties Kate was leading a local Baptist church in Central London. She served there for thirteen years before moving to Birmingham. During this time she both mentored and supported local church pastors and churches, in the UK and overseas, and continues to do so. She is a popular Bible teacher, with both national and international experience, and is regularly invited to address topics as diverse as spiritual warfare and the black presence in the Bible. Kate has served on the Baptist Union National Strategy Forum and advised on racial justice matters within the BU and beyond. She has authored a number of journal articles and has contributed to various publications including *Sisters with Power* and *Preaching with Power*. Until recently she was a member of the editorial committee for 'Black Theology an International Journal' and has just completed her PhD entitled 'Exploring Metissage: A Theological Anthropology of Black Christian Women's Subjectivities in Postcolonial Britain' at the University of Birmingham. She is passionate about 'prayerfully staying focused', in the areas of leadership, mission and diversity.

In this year's lecture, she explores what it means to be human in the light of the experiences of black women in Britain. She believes that this perspective helps us to think about ourselves and others in the world of today, and enables us to look at the Biblical accounts of Creation and the Fall in fresh and relevant ways.

Peter Shepherd  
Secretary, Whitley Lectureship Management Committee

## SYNOPSIS

Anthropological questions regarding 'what it means to be human' have become the key themes of the twenty-first century. What follows is the development of a Christian anthropology based upon the epistemological exigencies of black women. This paper challenges both the dominant discourse in its attempts to universalise its own knowledge claims and also postmodernist attempts to account for difference. I argue that anthropological reflections based upon the referential knowledge claims of black women highlight themes of diversity in the creation narratives, together with 'the difference that sin makes'. The failure of both the dominant discourse and postmodernism to account properly for the material effects of the fall as outlined in Genesis 3, result in the former effectively ignoring the hegemony in human relations, while the latter reduces the value of diversity and postmodernism to a mere 'celebration of difference'.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My special thanks go to all black British Christian women leaders everywhere and to all those who have helped us to become what we are. Your lives and testimonies have been a constant source of inspiration, without you what follows would never have been written.

Thanks also to my prayer partners and to members of my church, The Regeneration Centre, who have consistently supported me with remarkable levels of prayerful, holistic and spiritual consideration and care. In particular, I wish to mention my sister, Grace Owen, and my assistant pastor, the Revd Cham Kaur-Mann: like Aaron and Hur you lifted my arms when my need has been greatest.

In addition I acknowledge *Gye Nyame* (this roughly corresponds to the Ghanaian Adinkra symbol, meaning 'Except God'), my source and resource.

## THE WHITLEY LECTURE 2006

# BEING HUMAN

## A Black British Christian Woman's Perspective

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# BEING HUMAN

## A BLACK BRITISH CHRISTIAN WOMAN'S PERSPECTIVE

### *INTRODUCTION*

The value and significance of engaging in the study of theological anthropology was evocatively brought home to me when reminded of an old joke told during my primary school days. Unfortunately and tragically, I failed to grasp its true meaning until my adult years. It begins, 'I saw God last night', to which the response is made, 'really what was he like?' The punch line then follows, 'Well, God is a woman and she's black.'

The power behind this assertion lies in the supposed absurdity of the twin themes of womanhood and blackness having the capability of representing or reflecting the true nature of God. The irony of such a statement is not lost on many black women; it is certainly not lost on me.

The demand for liberation amongst feminists, black nationalists, postcolonialists and womanists is often misunderstood. In summarising how the pursuit of feminist goals are frequently misconstrued, Loren Wilkinson asserts:

People who still speak dismissively of feminism are likely to do so on the assumption that feminism is primarily about power.<sup>1</sup>

However, the concerns raised by such collectivities are far more fundamental in nature and are ultimately related to underlying assumptions regarding the validity of their distinctive human representations. With regard to feminism Wilkinson asserts:

Underlying all these specific exclusions have been assumptions about the nature of women. So the deepest feminist cry has been not 'I want to have power' but 'I want to be human'.<sup>2</sup>

Subsequently anthropological questions regarding 'what it means to be human', have become the key themes of the twenty-first century. We cannot approach such questions flippantly or without considering how the image of God is reflected and represented through those who are frequently 'dehumanised'.

Much of the material in this paper is included in my thesis entitled, 'Exploring Metissage: A Theological Anthropology of Black Christian Women's Subjectivities in Postcolonial Britain'. The latter is obviously a much larger document than this one and I do not intend to address its central theme here. However, I will attempt to reconstruct the basis of some of my preliminary thoughts presented in my thesis as they relate to the subject matter of this lecture.

In the course of this paper I first intend to address the relationship between theological values and social location. These are a predominant feature of black feminist, womanist and postcolonial theologies and effectively counter the totalising tendencies of dominant

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1 Loren Wilkinson, ' "Post-Christian" Feminism and the Fatherhood of God' in Maxine Hancock (ed.), *Christian Perspectives on Gender, Sexuality, and Community* (Vancouver, British Columbia: Regent College Publishing, 2003), p.103.

2 Loren Wilkinson, in Hancock, p.103.

theologies. Second, I compare biblical, *yadar*, knowledge with the relational expressivity of black women's ways of knowing, thereby demonstrating its correspondence with the epistemological exigencies of black women and therefore fecund with theological possibility. Third, I explore hermeneutical strategies appropriate for the explication of a Christian anthropology informed by black women's cultural expressions. Fourth, I apply the concept of relationality inherent within *yadar* and our epistemologies, to the biblical conception of *imago dei* in Genesis 1 and 2. Through analysing the story of creation, I demonstrate the significance of the themes of relationality, truth and difference to anthropological formulations. The knowledge inherent within the creation of humanity is subsequently posited in the terms *differentiation*, *distinctiveness* and *identity*. Such themes are interrelated and interdependent and affirm our demands as black British Christian women for a distinct epistemological formulation that takes account of the 'difference' in our humanity without rejecting commonalities. Fifth, I demonstrate how differentiation, distinctiveness and identity are pervasively textured by the entry of sin into the world inherent within the notion of 'the fall'. Subsequently, I conclude that the theorisation of any theological anthropology demands that attention is given to hegemonic and ultimately destructive tendencies.

### *THEOLOGICAL VALUES AND THE SOCIOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE*

Although the primary considerations of this paper are theological, what it means to be made in the image of God (*imago dei*<sup>3</sup>) cannot be considered apart from my social condition as a black British Christian woman. Indeed, the degree to which the expression of the *imago dei* is hindered or facilitated in the lives of black women like myself is largely determined by socio-historical factors. Black theologian James Cone contends that 'thought is not pure and autonomous; it is an expression

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3 *'Imago dei'* is the Latin term most commonly used by theologians to refer to the 'image of God'.

of life. Accordingly, the consideration of any system of ideas is not complete without an investigation of the social context in which the system arose'.<sup>4</sup> The theological devices employed by black women to transcend socio-political limitations are also textured by their socio-historical realities. Cone renders it appositely:

Although God, the subject of theology, is eternal, theology itself, like those who articulate it, is limited by history and time [Our image of God] is finite image, limited by the temporality and particularity of our existence. Theology is not universal language; it is interested language and thus always a reflection of the goals and aspirations of a particular people in a definite social setting.<sup>5</sup>

Feminist Biblical interpreters have also long recognised the impact that social context has upon the specific process of biblical hermeneutics. Anne M. Clifford states categorically:

That social location influenced the lives of people recorded in the Bible and the lives of its authors is a statement of the obvious. Consequently, social location cannot but influence the interpreters of the Bible.<sup>6</sup>

Further, Clifford argues that her preference for feminist thought in theological reflection is rooted in the social realities of diverse women everywhere. She writes:

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- 4 James H. Cone, 'Biblical Revelation and Social Existence', in James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Theology: A Documentary History Volume One: 1966-1979* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1993), p.159..
  - 5 James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1997), p.36.
  - 6 Anne M. Clifford, *Introducing Feminist Theology* (London and New York: Orbis Books, 2001), p.78.

Attention to the difference that social location makes in women's lives, is the road of choice because the majority of Christian feminist theologians find clear links between their beliefs about the mission and message of Jesus and the difference that social location makes where the injustices of gender discrimination, racial prejudice, and colonial oppression are concerned.<sup>7</sup>

I fully concur with such perspectives. Subsequently questions regarding the nature and value of epistemology (the theory of knowledge), and ontology (the theory of being and reality) are pivotal to this theological project. Indeed such issues have become central features in contemporary discussions surrounding womanist, feminist and postcolonial theories. The need to underline the value and diversity of epistemological claims is therefore crucial to the development of an anthropology that is both socially located and based upon theological inquiry.

As a black British Christian woman leader I experience difference for a number of reasons, namely ethnicity, gender, class, sexuality, community, faith and leadership and I assert difference for reasons of identity and marginality. In my theological discourse, it is my encounter with God, in common with black British Christian women, which empowers me to transform oppressive socio-political forces into life-affirming experiences.

### *IMAGO DEI AND EPISTEMOLOGY*

Debates surrounding the nature and meaning of *imago dei* (image of God), have previously dominated the fields of biblical studies and wider theological discussion. Epistemological questions are rooted in the theology and anthropology of what it means to know God, be known by God, to know others and to know oneself. As a black Christian woman,

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7 Anne M. Clifford, *Introducing Feminist Theology*, p.3.

I affirm what it means to be made in the image of God, by delineating and valorizing my own means of knowledge production and application. I affirm this by giving voice to my own peculiar concerns for self-identity, affirmation and survival, thus making epistemological issues of fundamental importance to the anthropological debate.

### **Black Women's Epistemological Paradigms**

Since it is crucial to my task to elucidate black Christian women's epistemological sensibilities, I will begin by exploring the current developments in black women's epistemological paradigms arising from and leading to their methodological considerations.

In her study on black feminist thought, Patricia Hill Collins proposes the following epistemological framework. She asserts that:

Despite varying histories, black societies reflect elements of a core and shared value system that existed prior to and independently of racial oppression, moreover as a result of colonialism, imperialism, slavery, apartheid, and other systems of racial domination, Black people share a common experience of oppression.<sup>8</sup>

The framework established by Collins reflects elements of both Afrocentric and feminist standpoints, whilst also expressing features that are wholly unique to African-American women. The resulting approach incorporates the core values of emotion, ethics and reason; whereby dialogue, traditional wisdom, concrete experience, community connectedness and interaction are cited as means by which knowledge is generated and truth claims are made.<sup>9</sup> Collins notes, 'Feminist scholars

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8 Patricia Hill Collins, 'Towards an Afrocentric Feminist Epistemology', in Sandra Kemp and Judith Squires (eds), *Feminisms* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

9 Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), pp.201-238.

contend that men and women are socialized to seek different types of autonomy - the former based on separation, the latter seeking connectedness - and that this variation in types of autonomy parallels the characteristic differences between male and female ways of knowing'.<sup>10</sup> Paul Gilroy provides a valuable critique of the earlier work of Patricia Hill Collins by challenging her tendency to overstate the internal coherence of the experience of black women, ultimately constructing a global 'black woman'. In addition, he notes the absence of an adequate class critique of black women's experiences.<sup>11</sup> Such a critique is crucial, particularly within the British context. Gilroy also emphasises the need to recognize the complexity and plasticity of 'black Atlantic'<sup>12</sup> populations, particularly in the European context. He writes:

Though African linguistic tropes and political and philosophical themes are still visible for those who wish to see them, they have often been transformed and adapted by their New World location to a new point where the dangerous issues of purified essences and simple origins lose all meaning.<sup>13</sup>

Musimbi R.A. Kanyoro, reflecting on the lives of women from her rural community of Bware, in Western Kenya, writes:

Women in their search for affirmation have often underlined the principles of equality and reciprocity. Words such as

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10 See Collins, 'Toward an Afrocentric Feminist Epistemology' in Kemp and Squires.

11 Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London and New York: Verso, 1993), pp.51-53.

12 This is Gilroy's term for the African diasporan community.

13 Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, p.48.

‘partnership’, ‘community’ and ‘togetherness’ are key to women’s conversations.<sup>14</sup>

Research undertaken among female industrial workers in Kingston, Jamaica, by African-American anthropologist A. Lynn Bolles concurs with Kanyoro and appeals to the ‘tenets of’ core black culture.<sup>15</sup> These themes resonate with her chosen methodology of ‘Native Anthropology’. Bolles employs the ideology developed by the blind black anthropologist John Gwaltney, known as ‘Native Anthropology’. Gwaltney describes this as a form of responsible research where there are ‘equal relations on many levels between researcher and respondent (community or culture) based on mutual respect’.<sup>16</sup> Bolles discovered that such a mode of inquiry was ethically sensitive to participants. The core values guiding her work amongst black women, include the notion of ‘setting the story straight, common courtesy, reciprocity, intra-communal style and status, and a sense of nationhood’.<sup>17</sup> According to Filomena Chioma Steady similar values must be taken into account when developing a framework for the study of women in Africa and the Diaspora. She writes that such concepts must stress:

Human totality, parallel autonomy, cooperation, self-reliance, adaptation, survival and liberation.<sup>18</sup>

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14 Musimbi R.A. Kanyoro, *Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics: An African Perspective* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2002), p.75.

15 A. Lynn Bolles, ‘Anthropological Research Methods For The Study Of Women In The Caribbean’, in Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, Sharon Harley and Andrea Benton Rushing (eds), *Women in Africa and the African Diaspora* (Washington: Howard University Press, 1989), p.71.

16 Bolles, ‘Anthropological Research Methods’, p.66, 70.

17 Bolles, ‘Anthropological Research Methods’, p.71.

18 Filomena Chioma Steady, ‘African Feminism: A Worldwide Perspective’, in Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, Sharon Harley and Andrea Benton Rushing (eds), *Women in Africa and the African Diaspora* (Washington: Howard University Press, 1989) p.20.



Rosalyn Terborg-Penn concurs that, historically, women of the African Diaspora have resisted oppressive forces through networking strategies. Analysing nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century patterns of enslaved women's behaviours, in both the United States and the Virgin Islands, she concludes that African Feminism, with its emphasis on interaction, supplies the historical researcher with a valuable theoretical method.<sup>19</sup>

Black women's studies also provide a rich source of material for the exploration of black women's epistemologies. Information is often collated with an attitude that values the contributions made by women. In addition, black women's literature provides a rich source of material for scholarly research.<sup>20</sup>

The observations of feminist, black men, black feminist and womanist scholars provide black women scholars with helpful guidelines within which relevant epistemological frameworks can be elucidated.

\* \* \* \* \*

The preceding survey demonstrates that the empirical research undertaken by black women identifies methodological tools that are based upon relational approaches that encourage black women's knowledge production. Such epistemologies advocate the associative and

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19 Rosalyn Terborg-Penn, 'African Feminism: A Theoretical Approach to the History of Women in the African Diaspora', in Terborg-Penn, Harley and Rushing (eds), *Women in Africa*.

20 See Alice Walker and Katie G. Cannon's use of the writing of Zora Neale Hurston in their respective works, *In Search of Other Women's Gardens: Womanist Prose* (London: The Women's Press, 1984), and *Black Womanist Ethics* (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1988). See also Beverly Guy-Sheftall, 'Triumph and Tribulation: Defining Black Womanhood, 1920-1957', in Beverly Guy-Sheftall (ed.), *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African American-Feminist Thought* (New York: The New Press, 1995), pp.77-78.

concrete elements of human knowledge expression. In addition, these methodologies are avowedly emancipatory in their focus with perspectives firmly rooted in holism.

I will now attempt to connect these socially located epistemologies to biblical conceptions. The hermeneutical link between the existential experiences of black British Christian women and the biblical text is provided by our faith claims.

### **A Biblical Approach to the Epistemological Question: ‘Yadar’**

Traditionally, for black British Christian women, like myself, identity formation has included encounters with God through the Biblical testimony. African theologian Mercy Amba Oduyoye asserts:

All Africans who theologize do so from some common roots or sources. First of course is the Bible. Even for those who cannot read, they have it read to them Africans identify with much in the Bible, and therefore much in the Bible remains in their memory and becomes the basis for their reflections about God.<sup>21</sup>

Therefore, biblical themes that promote the dialectic between black women’s concepts of knowledge and the biblical ideologies of humanity and knowledge (*yadar*) are significant to this argument. However, Christian sources such as the bible have also proven to be problematic for black Christian women.

#### *Critiquing the use of the Bible in Black Women’s Theology*

The Bible is, and continues to be, a site of struggle for black feminist and womanist theologians. Historically, the bible has been employed as a tool of oppression and imperialism, both as a result of intrinsic

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21 Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflections on Christianity in Africa* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 1993), p.51.

ideologies and because of imperialist co-options. However, for black Christian women, the biblical text is a primary source of our own self-understandings. When asked to comment on the formative experiences of our lives, the bible features prominently in our reflections. Black women in particular, have located and identified its message to be a source of liberation that has proven to be redemptive. With regard to African-American women in particular, Renita Weems explicates:

Where the Bible has been able to capture the imagination of African American women, it has been and continues to be able to do so because significant portions speak to the deepest aspirations of oppressed people for freedom, dignity, justice, and vindication.<sup>22</sup>

African feminist theologian Musimbi Kanyoro, acknowledges the centrality of the bible in black women's theologising, but also asserts emphatically that the bible should not be the hermeneutical starting point of African feminist theology. Instead she posits cultural hermeneutics as a reading strategy, where the primary starting point becomes the history, culture, and ideologies of subjugated black women.<sup>23</sup> However, Renita Weems recognises the inherent dangers of employing the bible as a tool for liberating black women. She asserts:

Whatever hints of the values and struggles of the oppressed in the Bible that one happens upon, they are, in the end, conveyed to the reader through the perspective of the dominant group. While there is admittedly remarkable variety in their perspectives, the voices that came to dominate and be

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22 Renita J. Weems, 'Reading her way through the struggle', in Norman K. Gottwald and Richard A. Horsley (eds), *The Bible and Liberation: Political and Social Hermeneutics* (London; Maryknoll, New York: SPCK and Orbis Books, 1993), p.40.

23 Kanyoro, *Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics: An African Perspective*, p.10.

embedded in the Bible are for the most part male, elitist, patriarchal, and legitimated.<sup>24</sup>

The approaches of black women to the Bible are varied and diverse. The precise relationship between the bible and the black community in theologising remains a contested terrain. Although black women employ multiple strategies, they have identified a unique and separate trajectory, which is distinct from much Eurocentric biblical scholarship. While some employ the notion of 'the Word of God' as a hermeneutical starting point, black women may equally express a hermeneutic of suspicion. Black women's appropriation of the bible is thus characterised by a predilection for comparative studies, thereby allowing personal experience and the bible to interact with and mutually illuminate each other. Within this approach black women are able to fully utilize the vast array of critical methods available to biblical scholars, for example, historical-critical, sociological, literary approaches, including reader-response models.

*'Yadar'*

Biblical conceptions of knowledge are primarily rooted in God's own self-revelation. In addition, they differ profoundly from dominant Eurocentric philosophical conceptions and formulations:

To know is not primarily to be intellectually informed about some abstract principle, but it is to apprehend and experience reality. Knowledge is not the possession of information, but rather its exercise or actualisation.<sup>25</sup>

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24 Weems, 'Reading her way through the struggle', p.45

25 Walter A. Elwell (ed.), Section entitled 'Know, Knowledge. The Old Testament', *Baker Theological Dictionary of the Bible* (Michigan: Baker Books, 1996), p.457.

The Hebrew root *yadar*, translated as ‘know’ and ‘knowledge’, refers to the most intimate expressions of personal relationship in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>26</sup> The meaning of *yadar* is far more extensive than Eurocentric interpretations of ‘knowledge’, which have traditionally been rooted in abstract and philosophical, objectified and intellectualised information. In the Hebrew Scriptures, *yadar* is most frequently rendered in its verb form and as such denotes the act of perceiving, learning, understanding, willing, performing and experiencing. To know another, therefore, is to engage in the construction of beliefs about them through tacit engagement and concrete acts of responsiveness. *Yadar* is not an individualistic expression of personhood, it presents authentic knowledge as the experience of interaction, interconnectedness and interrelatedness.

The ideology behind *yadar*, of knowledge as a dynamic continuum, is repeated throughout the Old and New Testament. It is first introduced in Genesis 4:1 where Adam is said to have ‘had knowledge’ of Eve. With particular regard to Christian education and teaching practices, Donald Oppewal explicates the theme of sexual ‘knowledge’ in the relations between Abraham and Sarah, simultaneously shedding light upon the broader meaning of ‘knowledge’ in the Hebrew Scriptures:

When Abraham knew Sarah and she conceived and bore a son, it is not merely a euphemism for sexual intercourse, but a Biblical paradigm of all knowing. It captures the concept of interaction as that which constitutes knowing, in this case a person. It is in the give and take, in the mental acts of classifying Sarah as female and wife and the physical act of sex, that he knew her. Without the act of intercourse (itself a

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26 Phyllis A. Bird, ‘Theological Anthropology in the Hebrew Bible’, in Leo G. Perdue (ed.), *The Blackwell Companion to the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001).

term from Latin suggesting two-way action) the knowing is that of spectator, not participant.<sup>27</sup>

In addition, Thomas H. Groome explicates that the past participle of *yadar* is utilised to define the 'knowledge' of a good friend or confidant (see Psalm 31:11 ff; 55:13ff; 88:8ff).<sup>28</sup> Liberation motifs exemplified by the biblical exodus demonstrate how a true knowledge of God is viewed as interrelational. The mighty acts of God alone are presented as insufficient for bringing about justice and freedom for God's people. Instead, human responsiveness to the divine project, based upon social interaction amongst God's people and religious fellowship with God, both prove indispensable to the activity of political and spiritual liberation.

Job's declaration, 'I know that my Redeemer lives' (Job 19:25, New International Version, NIV), does not emerge as a consequence of abstract conceptualizing about God. Instead, this declaration arises from a concrete and holistic engagement with God, during a period of personal struggle and sorrow, while Job waits for deliverance from God.

Although the experience of black women is not identical to the Hebrew experience presented in the Old Testament Scriptures, black women do identify with many of the biblical themes that give voice to our desire for liberation from material, spiritual and psychological bondage.

In I Samuel 3:7 the assertion that 'Samuel did not yet know the Lord' (NIV) is not a reference to his lack of intellectual deliberations regarding God. Samuel's training in the temple began while he was still a child, after being introduced there by his mother Hannah, and would have included instruction in the 'things of God' by his mentor Eli, the priest. The knowledge referred to here was made possible through personal interaction with God, for example Samuel's encounter with

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27 Donald Oppewal, 'Biblical Knowing and Teaching', a *Calvin College Monograph*, 1985, p.5.

28 Thomas H. Groome, *Christian Religious Education: Sharing our Story and Vision* (San Francisco, Cambridge: Harper and Row, 1980), p.139.

God, followed by his tangible response to God's calling at night. *Yadar* thus encompasses the arena of religious and extrasensory knowledge, gained through direct interaction with the intangible, but no less real, aspects of faith in an immanent God. This type of 'mystical' knowledge is unobservable and subjectively experienced and is sometimes referred to as intuitive knowledge. Commenting on the degree of respect that this form of knowledge is afforded in African societies, Kwame Gyekye writes:

Paranormal or extrasensory cognition is another mode of knowing recognized in African cultures. In African communities it is commonly believed that some individuals are born with extrasensory abilities with which they can communicate with supernatural beings or acquire knowledge in ways different from the normal.<sup>29</sup>

Emilie Townes also attests to the interactive nature of mystical knowledge, she asserts:

In parts of the African-American faith tradition, being haunted is not considered bad or negative. It simply means that God is trying 'to get a word through' to you, and one needs to be still to listen.<sup>30</sup>

Reflecting on applications of *yadar* in Christian religious education, Thomas Groome comments that:

The Hebrew Scriptures speak about 'knowing the Lord' as an activity in which God takes the initiative and this initiative is

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29 Kwame Gyekye, *African Cultural Values: An Introduction* (Accra, Ghana: Sankofa Publishing Company, 1998), p.139.

30 Emilie M. Townes, *Embracing the Spirit: Womanist Perspectives on Hope, Salvation and Transformation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1997), p.xii.

always encountered in lived experience in events, in relationships, in creation and so on.<sup>31</sup>

For example, a fool in biblical ideology is presented as someone who lacks knowledge, not as a result of ignorance or the lack of intellectual capability, but because they have failed to enact God's will. Jeremiah 22:15-16 (NIV) captures this sensibility well:

Does it make you a king  
to have more and more cedar?  
Did not your father have food and drink?  
He did what was right and just,  
so all went well with him.  
He defended the cause of the poor and  
needy,  
and so all went well.  
Is that not what it means to know me?"  
declares the LORD.

Therefore acting in the context of relationship is conflated with the idea of knowing in biblical thought.

According to the psalmist, all creation is a source of revelation knowledge, 'the heavens declare the glory of God and the firmament shows his handiwork' (Psalm 19:1-6 NIV) and can be appropriated through interaction with creation. According to Romans 1:18-21, this revelation or 'knowledge' is available to all. But some 'suppress the truth by their wickedness', in other words, knowledge of the truth can be suppressed through inappropriate interaction, even though 'what may be known about God is plain to them' (Romans 1:18 and 19). Experience and response are the means through which knowledge of God or anyone is appropriated. Therefore, knowledge is not to be viewed as a fixed possession but as something capable of both development and

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31 Groome, *Christian Religious Education*, p.141.



maturation. African thought also views knowledge as limitless, 'in the sense that it grows continuously'.<sup>32</sup>

In the New Testament and the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the Greek word substituted for *yadar* is *ginoskein*. *Ginoskein* arises directly from Greek ideology and concepts; as such it expresses specifically intellectualized and objectified ways of knowing.<sup>33</sup> However, the particularity of biblical thought is best explicated through a consideration of the context of a word, rather than upon a singular consideration of its etymology. In this way it can be demonstrated that the meaning of 'knowledge' in the New Testament is clearly related to its Old Testament ascription. *Ginoskein* continues to describe intimate relations, such as sexual knowledge in the New Testament, Matthew 1:25 and Luke 1:34. In addition, the apostle Paul describes true knowledge of God and Christ, as emanating from experienced relationship finding its expression in love (see 1 Corinthians 8:1 ff). In the New Testament, to 'know the Lord' means to love, obey and believe, 'whoever loves God must also love his brother' (1 John 4:21 NIV). For James, a holistic view of knowing is expressive of true faith 'made complete' through action, 'As the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without deeds is dead' (James 3:26 NIV). When referring to truth and knowledge, Jesus spoke of 'doing the truth', 'living in the truth', 'abiding in' and thus 'being in the truth'.<sup>34</sup> The Bible does not refer to knowledge as a product of certain mental acts following accepted rules of logic. To know, is not simply to take cognisance but to permit influence and a transforming effect. Biblical forms of knowledge are thus interactive and experiential. In biblical thought, knowing is an action between the knower and the known. This interaction is named by some theologians as co-relational,

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32 Gyekye, *African Cultural Values*, p.141.

33 Groome, *Christian Religious Education*, p.141.

34 See Philip Holtrop, 'A Strange Language: Toward a Biblical Conception of Truth', *The Reformed Journal*, February 1977, pp.9-13.

in which the knower is in the truth, participating in it and walking in it.<sup>35</sup> Others have called it a *praxis* theory of knowing, emphasizing the action or practice component as a necessary supplement to thinking. A praxis way of knowing emerges out of a reflective engagement in a social situation.<sup>36</sup> Liberation theologies and the theologies of black women, both declare and affirm a praxis orientation. Mercy Amba Oduyoye asserts that:

Indeed most of the time the impulse to theologise is generated by experience or praxis. African women's theology does not end in documents, for the divorce of theology and ethics does not make for commitment and responsible living.<sup>37</sup>

For such theologians, the only authentic validation for the pursuit of knowledge is in its pragmatic application to the task of problem solving and concurs with biblical formulations of knowledge articulated as information to be acted upon. For the Hebrew people, lived experiences were ultimately informed by God's acts in their prehistory, and also as insight gained in the course of their socio-historical concrete experiences:

Lived experience (the kind real persons have), feminists argue, is always situated; particular and concrete, never abstract nor easily (if at all) universalizable. The impact lived experiences have on the process of coming to know; on one's access to knowledge legitimated by the political system or the academy; on the uses to which one's own and others' knowing

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35 Steve Prediger, *Truth and Knowledge in G.C. Berkouwer: The Contours of His Epistemology* (Toronto, Ontario: Institute for Christian Studies, 1982).

36 Groome, *Christian Religious Education*, especially Chapter Eight, 'In Search of a 'way of knowing' for Christian Religious Education', p.153.

37 Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Introductions in Feminist Theology 6: Introducing African Women's Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), p.18.

is put varies greatly, and accounts of knowing, feminists argue, should study rather than assume it.<sup>38</sup>

As I have demonstrated, feminists and black women globally, also assert that epistemology is above all experientially derived and appropriated.<sup>39</sup> Socio-political, historical, cultural and spiritual experiences inform the knowledge claims of black women and contribute to who we are in the image of God.

My particular contribution as a black woman to the epistemological debate, particularly with regard to what it means to be *imago dei*, is further aided by engaging dialogically with the biblical theme of creation. I will now demonstrate how the themes outlined in our epistemologies (as black women), are echoed in the conditions of the *imago dei* itself.

### *IMAGO DEI AND GENESIS 1-3*

No single biblical text has been more important in the understanding of theological anthropology than the first three chapters of Genesis, particularly Genesis 1:26-28 (NIV):

Then God said, 'Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness; and let them have dominion over the fish of the sea, and over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, and over all the wild animals of the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps upon the earth.' So God created humankind in his image, in the image of God he created them, male and female he created them. God blessed

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38 Mary M. Solberg, *Compelling Knowledge: A feminist proposal for an epistemology of the Cross* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1997), p.36.

39 Dider N. Kaphagawani and Jeanette G. Malherbe, 'African Epistemology', in P.H. Coetzee and A.P.J. Roux (eds), *The African Philosophy Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998).

them and said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth.'

The narrative does not purport to be a literal history of origins or a scientific explanation of what is. Rather, the creation narrative confronts humanity, primarily with questions of meaning in relation to God, each other and nature.

### **Reading Strategies**

Those engaged in the task of interpretation, acknowledge that reading strategies, rather than texts themselves, tend to be considered authoritative. Brad R. Braxton summarises this theme succinctly:

The text is plural, but the achievement of plurality of meaning is not so much an accomplishment of the text. Rather, this plurality is the accomplishment of the various reading communities engaging with texts.<sup>40</sup>

The predominance and legacy of Western reading conventions can thus be partially explained by the pervasive impact and influence of colonial categories. Sugirtharajah reminds us that:

Colonial reading can be summed up as informed by theories concerning the innate superiority of Western culture, the Western male as subject, and the natives, heathens, women, blacks, indigenous people, as the Other, needing to be

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40 Brad R. Buxton, *No Longer Slaves: Galatians and African American Experience* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 2002), p.30.

controlled and subjugated. It is based on the desire for power/domination.<sup>41</sup>

Questions regarding the nature of gender relationships and the socially and ethnically diverse nature of Israelite community and surrounding societies, may have contributed to the production of Genesis 2 and 3. However, these questions do not necessarily provide an impetus for societal change. Such questions may be partially responsible for reasons why traditional interpretations have not adequately accounted for difference as an expression of knowledge and truth within this biblical text, where 'Truth is a question not only of what is but of what ought to be'.<sup>42</sup>

I apply a literary interpretative framework to my biblical exegesis. Such an approach allows for greater connections to be made between the biblical past and contemporary conditions. Traditionally, literary frameworks have been concerned with exploring the experiences of ancient and modern readers, whereas historical frameworks have been more interested in ascertaining the intentions and aims of authors of ancient texts. The latter approach has dominated the field of Western biblical studies since the enlightenment era and has largely been shaped by the questions and concerns of this period. Renita Weems explicates further:

Strongly influenced by eighteenth and nineteenth-century European historiographic debates, the notion that a text can be properly understood only after one has thoroughly assessed its historical context originally emerged as a challenge to what was, at the time, the doctrinal way of reading. On the one hand, the value of the historical-critical technique was to reclaim the autonomy of a historical work by attempting to protect the text for as long as possible from the biases of the

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41 R.S. Sugirtharajah, 'Biblical Studies after the Empire: From a Colonial to a Postcolonial Mode of Interpretation', in R.S. Sugirtharajah (ed.), *The Postcolonial Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), p.15.

42 Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, p.38.

reader, so that the work might be appreciated within its own context. On the other hand, the negative result, especially as it has become evident in the way this position has been used by those in power, has been to undermine marginalized reading communities by insisting that their questions and experiences are superfluous to Scripture and their interpretations illegitimate, because of their failure to remain objective.<sup>43</sup>

Generally, literary theory suggests that meaning is not the sole property of the text, simply waiting to be discovered by means of the appropriate intellectual tools. Meaning, rather, is a product created from the encounter between text and reader. Thus, in specifically reader-response theory, the emphasis lies on the subjective experiences of the reader. The reader is also perceived as belonging to a wider reading community. Braxton notes:

Reader-response theory asserts that even if one reads a text in private (e.g., in a room by oneself), one would not be engaging in a private reading, for all readers are members of interpretive communities.<sup>44</sup>

A focus on readers in the creation of meaning entails the relative decline of the importance of the author as sole arbiter of what the text really means. Reading strategies are similarly diverse. In outlining the history of biblical studies in the west, Sugirtharajah posits seven reading strategies that elucidate the various, but overlapping stages of biblical

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43 Weems, 'Reading her way through the struggle', in Gottwald and Horsley, p.37.

44 Braxton, *No Longer Slaves: Galatians and African American Experience*, p.30.

interpretation since the Enlightenment: dissident, resistant, heritagist, nationalist, liberationist, dissentient and postcolonial readings.<sup>45</sup>

Notions of difference and knowledge are a central feature of the narrative when addressed through the general rubric of black women's epistemological concerns. Such an interpretative framework is specifically concerned with how our unique subjectivities as black British Christian women in church leadership shape the task of biblical interpretation. By making this assertion, I anticipate that such a hermeneutic may also prove attractive to black and other marginalized people, regardless of their religious affiliation, gender, country of residence and leadership status.

In utilising this hermeneutic, I have drawn on historical-critical studies without being limited by the various formulations of authorial intent and original audience reception. and RicRather than defining my reading strategy, historical-critical methods are secondary to my exegetical approach. This allows the subjective experiences of the reading community of black women to become the determining source and norm in my hermeneutical process. Biblical theologians Robert Morgan and John Barton in their book *Biblical Interpretation* affirm the value of such an approach:

A literary framework, which includes the results of historical and linguistic research, is today more promising for the study of religion and for theology than the historical framework (which includes literary study) that has dominated New Testament studies since the 1830s Where the aims of biblical interpretation are religious or theological, it is necessary to

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45 See chapter 2 of R.S. Sugirtharajah, *Postcolonial Criticism and Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002). He argues that until postcolonial biblical criticism, biblical scholarship has never escaped the Christendom model governed by the mission motif of the colonial era. See also Part 1 entitled 'Readings for Liberation', in Norman K. Gottwald and Richard A. Horsley (eds), *The Bible and Liberation: Political and Social Hermeneutics* (London; Maryknoll, New York: SPCK and Orbis Books, 1993).

consider exactly how historical study is important for this, and to recognize its proper place, which may be a subordinate one.<sup>46</sup>

Foregrounding Phyllis Trible's literary analysis, feminist theologian Ann Clifford elucidates the variety of analytical strategies that may be usefully employed to facilitate the feminist theologian's desire to undermine patriarchal interpretations of the Genesis 1-3 text. With particular reference to the relative usefulness of historical-critical approaches, she writes:

Scholars who use historical-critical methods of biblical interpretation agree that Gen. 2:4b-3:24 is a very ancient text part of a tradition that can possibly be traced to the time of Kings David or Solomon (ca. 1000-950 B.C.E.). The narrative is at one and the same time a story of creation and an explanatory myth, or etiology, responding to questions such as why people get married, why women have pain at childbirth, and why serpents lack legs. Knowing the probable historical context in which this text was written and the type of literature it represents is a helpful corrective to simplistic literal interpretations, but this information does not take one very far in remedying the many faulty interpretations of Genesis 2-3 that Trible has highlighted.<sup>47</sup>

By adopting a variety of reading strategies, submerged biblical voices and histories can be unearthed. Subjugated voices ultimately undermine the hegemony of the traditional self-appointed 'guardians' of ancient biblical texts, while affirming previously excluded interpreters.<sup>48</sup>

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46 Robert Morgan and John Barton, *Biblical Interpretation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988), pp.286-287.

47 Clifford, *Introducing Feminist Theology*, p.67.

48 Richard A. Horsley, 'Submerged Biblical Histories and Imperial Biblical Studies', in Sugirtharajah, *The Post Colonial Bible*, p.153.



The values, purposes, and goals that hold forth in a reading community will determine not only what a reader identifies as meaning in literature but even what a reader considers to be literature in the first place.<sup>49</sup>

For black British Christian women leaders, difference in the text is related to self-expression and identity, whereas the theme of sameness, powerfully evokes the ideology of equality.

### Rereading Genesis 1-3

The introduction of humankind within the context of the creative process is salutary. Significantly it occurs within a cosmological framework, where the theme of knowledge as interactivity and connection is revealed as being ideologically and pervasively represented, throughout the whole creative process. The creation narratives bear witness to God as the one creating and communicating. Therefore to be made in the image of God is to be created with knowledge claims as inherent expressions of human nature. Indeed, knowledge as interactive experience and concrete engagement is an integral aspect of the human condition. In the words of ecowomanist theologian Karen Baker-Fletcher:

Dust is a metaphor for our bodily and elemental connection to the earth. Dust includes within it water, sun, and air, which enhance the vitality of its bodiliness and ability to increase life abundantly. So dustiness refers to human connectedness with the rest of creation.<sup>50</sup>

Such assertions are also affirmed by white feminist theologians as demonstrative of specifically female associative ways of knowing. Loren

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49 Braxton, *No Longer Slaves*, p.30.

50 Karen Baker-Fletcher and Garth Kasimu Baker-Fletcher, *My Sister, My Brother: Womanist and Xodus God-Talk* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1997), p.86.

Wilkinson explicates the significance that feminists attach to these ways of knowing:

Feminism argues that much of our alienation from the earth is the result of the dominance of masculine ideas of exploitation. (Common phrases like 'rape of the land' and 'virgin forest' support the claim.)<sup>51</sup>

Humanity is manifestly a part of the whole of God's natural order, created with an innate relatedness and connectedness. Humanity is 'fully dust'. The relationship between the *human*<sup>52</sup> and all God's creation is thus firmly established. Themes of knowing, differentiation, distinctiveness and diversity are further illustrated by the *human's* acknowledgement of the unique distinctions of all the animals as expressed through the rite of naming.

### *Naming*

In Hebrew society, as in many African societies, naming is less an imposition of identity than an act of incorporation. It is a recognition of individuality, defining the child's personality, affirming her or his destiny and establishing her or his status in the family. Within these contexts a name shapes one's self-understanding, providing descriptive information about the circumstances of birth or traits emerging in the character of the child, 'proper naming not only acknowledged the child's

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51 Loren Wilkinson in Maxine Hancock (ed.), p.105.

52 I am italicising this phrase in recognition that it is one of a number of plausible translations of *ha'adam* including 'earthling', 'earth creature' and 'human'. It is the latter that is preferred here. See Ronald A. Simkins' discussion in 'Gender Construction in the Yahwist Creation Myth', pp.32-52 in Athalya Brenner (ed.), *A Feminist Companion to the Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), p.40 footnotes.

destiny but also empowered the child to actualize it'.<sup>53</sup> The 'first' *human* 'is neither a particular male person nor a typical human person, but is a combination of dust and the breath of God!'<sup>54</sup> As such, both male and female are represented in the act of naming. However, whereas the animals are named by the human, depicting an act of sovereignty, it is differentiated Adam, who comes to recognize and define, in terms of her being, the differentiated woman. He declares twofold, 'She shall be called "woman" for she was taken out of man' (Genesis 2:23 NIV). This personal identity development is enabled primarily through interaction with the opposite sex. Woman is not 'named' Eve, until after the fall in Genesis 3. At this point, the act of naming essentially establishes her role (as opposed to her being) and future reality, and she does become 'the mother of all the living' (Genesis 3:20 NIV).

Lisa Isherwood and Dorothea McEwan expose the critical ability of naming to regenerate the conditions of human lives, 'The power of naming has been acknowledged as crucial by feminists since it not only expresses and shapes our experience but also gives us the power to transform our reality.'<sup>55</sup>

Through naming, the *human* demonstrates an intimate and familiar 'knowledge' of the reconstituted dust.

*Human* acts of naming in Genesis 2 are also reminiscent of God's own act of differentiating and naming the heavens, earth, seas, day and night. In so doing God gives expression to their distinctive roles and specific attributes. In Genesis 1 the world is created through speaking and naming. God's words are both creative and reflective, in that they reveal something of the divine nature. The cosmos subsequently emerges in precipitative fashion from a context described as 'mingled' and chaotic. Each act of creation leads to a 'search' for

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53 Quoted in Peter J. Paris, *The Spirituality of African Peoples: The Search for a Common Moral Discourse* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), p.103.

54 Clifford, *Introducing Feminist Theology*, p.68.

55 Lisa Isherwood and Dorothy McEwan, *Introducing Feminist Theology* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), p.110.

creative difference and distinction. God as creator promotes the themes of differentiation, distinctiveness and identity, ultimately leading to an orchestrated harmony, depicted as the very opposite of pre-existent chaos. As expressed by Mercy Amba Oduoye, 'In Genesis, God "delivers" the universe from chaos'.<sup>56</sup> Within the creation discourse, words are both rooted and expressive of materiality. They 'bring life into being,' thereby reflecting the emphasis among black feminists and womanists that words should avoid abstraction through a declaration of the identity of the speaker. Indeed, reference to personal journeys and material interests feature prominently in the theological constructions emanating from within marginalized communities. The following words of womanist theologian Delores Williams thus underscores the significance of personal history and social location in the task of theological reflection.

I have come to believe that theologians, in their attempt to talk to and about religious communities, ought to give readers some sense of their autobiographies. This can help an audience discern what leads the theologian to do the kind of theology she does. What has been the character of her faith journey? What lessons has this journey taught? What kind of faith inspires her to continue writing and rewriting, living and reliving theology in a highly secular white-and-black world paying little or no attention to what theologians are saying?<sup>57</sup>

As such, black women theologians align themselves not simply with good theory, but with discourses that are life affirming, diverse, flexible, inclusive and above all 'good for one's health'.<sup>58</sup> In contrast, however, Eurocentric interpretations of this process emphasize themes

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56 Oduoye, *Hearing and Knowing*, p.90.

57 Dolores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1994), p.ix.

58 See Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983).

of division and separation with tacit endorsement of preference, competition and favouritism.

The themes of differentiation, distinctiveness and diversity introduced earlier are intended to convey mutual interdependence and interrelatedness. As Mercy Amba Oduyoye elucidates, 'Feminist theologians have been critical of the dualistic and hierarchical modes of conceiving and organizing the human community and of its various levels of interaction.'<sup>59</sup>

Hermeneutics that foreground black women's epistemological concerns result in an *imago dei* in which emphasis is placed on notions of differentiation, distinctiveness and diversity.

### *Differentiation, Distinctiveness and Diversity*

Each dust creature (animal), including the *human* and green plants, are created as diverse and productive, with the potential to diversify further and with an inherent ability to 'reproduce after their own kind'. Jung Young Lee affirms, "As we notice, the repetition of 'of every kind' suggests the importance of variety in the creative process'.<sup>60</sup>

Not only is ecological diversity lauded but so too is male/female and ethnic diversity. All differentiation, distinctiveness and diversity, as identity, are viewed as positive attributes of creation, a feature that God declares 'very good'. Diversity through identity is affirmed, as is the assumption that differentiation, distinctiveness and diversity are representative aspects of the glory of God in creation. The *human* at the outset, is created in the image of God, however, while humanity is undifferentiated, humanity is depicted as alive but incomplete. The only creature declared 'not good' in all creation is the *human* creature, who only discovers full humanness once there is interaction with one another, as male and female. It is here that the reader is led to conclude that the very nature of humanity includes the notion of multiplicity and that both

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59 Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing*, p.136.

60 Jung Young Lee, *Marginality: The Key to Multicultural Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), p.104.

male *and* female expressions are required for human totality. Male and female are intimately connected to all that precedes them in creation and there is no implied inferiority between each other or the rest of creation. Indeed, an expectation of diversity and mutuality is an innate attribute of their production and productivity. God's role as creator becomes a clear and powerful expression of the divine purpose for creation, human society and present-day human activity. Ethnic diversity, in addition to gender differentiation, clearly plays a vital role in nurturing authentic expressions of humanity.

Human relations with God are also presented as interactive and interdependent. Humanity is intimately related to the creator by virtue of the fact that humanity is created in the 'image' of God; thus the divine is expressed both as diversity and plurality. Representative of a collective, God is described as '*elohim*'<sup>61</sup> in the creation narrative. Jung Young Lee asserts 'we can restate Genesis 1:26 as, "let us make humankind in every variety after our likeness"'.<sup>62</sup> The likeness of God is here, represented *within* individuality and communality, expressivity is thus a multifarious creative aspect of human existence.

Diversity then, is more than notion, for it is predicated upon the very circumstances of creation and expressed within the parochial, national and international conditions of human experience. Yet diversity is not the only issue of concern here, interrelation and *saming*<sup>63</sup> is also signified within the *imago dei* for black British Christian women.

### *Saming*

The *human* experiences a *saming* with the created order that is rooted in materiality, for both are made from the same substance. There is

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61 See Phyllis A. Bird, 'Theological Anthropology in the Hebrew Bible', in Leo G. Perdue (ed.), where she writes that 'the image expresses a notion of correlation or correspondence', p.266.

62 Lee, *Marginality*, p.104.

63 I use this term to press the notion of similarity and shared features within creation, God and between the genders in human experience.

mutuality. In addition, the *human* experiences a *saming* with God. This is revealed through the divine prerogative and notion of *imago dei*, that is, they are made in the image of God. Humanity also experiences a *saming* by virtue of their differentiation, all things express multiplicity and variety. These shared features with creation, God and others are often expressed in human relations in unexpected and diverse ways. Emmanuel Lartey expands upon this theme with regard to human relations:

I have found difference where ethnicity, race, class and gender might have suggested otherwise. I have also found similarity where every possible cultural indicator might have pointed in the opposite direction.<sup>64</sup>

Interconnectedness is further expressed through the notion of relationality.

### *Relationality*

Human life in the creation account is 'shaped' not just through a spoken word, but also through the moulding of the *human* from dust, thereby expressing the tactile relation of potter to clay. The allusion to experiential knowledge and interactive participation is further emphasized in the act of 'breathing' life into the human's nostrils. Kidner writes that 'breathed is warmly personal, with the face-to-face intimacy of a kiss'.<sup>65</sup> God further accentuates the sense of interaction and experiential knowledge by 'walking' where the *human* walks, in the garden.

Human beings are presented as being relational as they interact with diversity in humanity and also with the created order in

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64 Emmanuel Lartey, *In Living Colour: An Intercultural Approach to Pastoral Care and Counselling* (London: Cassell, 1997), p.37.

65 Derek Kidner, *Genesis: Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries* (Leicester, England, and Illinois: Intervarsity Press, 1967), p.60.

God-pleasing ways. In addition they are shown to engage with diversity in God. Humanity and creation are thus presented as differentiated, distinctive and diverse, that is, having identity.

To the extent that all humans have the capacity to know, epistemology, as knowledge, is presented as universal, an attribute of all regardless of culture, gender or geography. In the Genesis account, humankind is more than simply acted upon in relational ways, humanity also acts upon the world relationally and in ways that have psychosocial, cultural and political implications. In other words, difference is rooted in materiality and 'knowledge' is derived directly from these interactions. The means of acquiring knowledge are seen to be basically the same for all humanity, even where they fail to declare it. Differentiation, distinctiveness and diversity in creation suggest that different ethnic groups may put their acquired knowledge to different uses and develop unique approaches to its analysis and expression. Difference, expressed epistemologically, is thus a creative gift, designed to promote holism rather than homogeneity, where each expression of God's creative activity, brings back to God some distinctive feature of God's own glory. This is an aspect of human sensibility that is both proposed and endorsed by God. Musimbi Kanyoro explains how such an understanding actually promotes the idea of multiple theologies. She writes:

This understanding of plurality anticipates that there will be many theologies just as there are many styles of cooking!<sup>66</sup>

John Parrat explicates that such theological diversity has holistic power in the arena of human expression:

There must therefore of necessity be a diversity of theologies, and our unity arises because ultimately we all are reflecting on the one divine activity to set man free from all that enslaves him. There must be a plurality of theologies because we don't

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66 Kanyoro, *Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics*, p.75.



all apprehend the transcendent in exactly the same way nor can we be expected to express our experience in the same way.<sup>67</sup>

This underlines the creative intent that difference exists for complementarity rather than competition and exploitation.

The personal relationship between God, humanity and creation is further emphasized in Genesis 1:28. God's divine purpose for creation is to be promoted by humanity in co-operation with the divine image within human beings. It is clear from God's creative acts that God's intention is to make humanity responsible for bringing about a flourishing creation in all its diversity. God declares this as 'very good'. Humanity's ability to obey God's command in tending the garden and humanity's own creative space is also born of a 'knowing', that is, an ability to interpret interactions with a differentiated, distinctive and diverse created order in ways that lead both to its maintenance and cultivation. In other words, the *human's* concerns are to be cosmocentric. Garth Baker-Fletcher elucidates this theme:

A cosmocentric decision looks toward the entire relationship of the *community* of LIFE rather than toward the private good of an individual human being. To privatize moral choice and decision making would be to violate the fundamental ontology of community that obtains in a wide host of African cultures.<sup>68</sup>

Black women insist that to endorse relationships of mutual support and affirmation within difference, is to affirm God's justice and God's original project of differentiation, distinctiveness and diversity. It is to explore and release difference, as opposed to resisting and opposing it. It is also a challenge to differences, that post 'fall', have become demonized, having transgressed God's creative and redemptive

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67 John Parrat, *A Reader in African Christian Theology* (London: SPCK, 1997), p.41.

68 Baker-Fletcher and Baker-Fletcher, *My Sister, My Brother*, p.137.

parameters for humanity. Taking an inclusive view of creation's differences, is in itself redemptive and is an attempt to restore the intended harmony and creative interrelatedness of God's original design. It is to engage in creative acts of revolution that lead to psychosocial healing and liberative praxis in discrete communities. Karen Baker Fletcher adds:

We are people of dust and spirit. The problem is, we too easily disconnect ourselves from the land and the Spirit. We too easily disconnect our children from the land and the Spirit when we forget our integrated relationship with both. Such disremembering leads to callous relationship with the earth and one another.<sup>69</sup>

Consequently, there is a difference that invalidates God's creative purposes, it is the difference that sin makes. I will explore this theme in the following section.

### *THE DIFFERENCE THAT SIN MAKES*

#### **The 'Fall'**

Perhaps chapter 3 of Genesis was added because people recognized that the partnership, the mutually corresponding companionship, expressed in the final verses of chapter 2, was not their lived reality.<sup>70</sup>

The precise nature and cause of the 'fall' of humanity continues to be highly contested and is not of primary concern here. However, it is

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69 Karen Baker-Fletcher, *Sisters of Dust, Sisters of Spirit: Womanist Wordings on God and Creation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998), pp.16-17.

70 Clifford, *Introducing Feminist Theology*, p.69.

important to note that it is expressly related to a pursuit of what is described as 'the knowledge of good and evil'. The nature of this particular knowledge remains unclear, although in the context of the proliferation of associative forms of knowledge described in the earlier chapters of Genesis 1 and 2, it is clearly distinct from what has preceded it and is profoundly virulent. Various suggestions have been proposed, including the idea that the knowledge in question was of a sexual nature, a failure in moral discernment, a desire for omniscience or simply a description of the consequences of partaking in the fruit. Thus far in the creation text, biblical knowledge, which is also expressed through interrelatedness, '*yadar*',<sup>71</sup> has been affirmed and promoted. Elsewhere in the Hebrew Scriptures, especially the wisdom literature, insight and knowledge are promoted as the noblest pursuit of the godly. Proverbs 8:8-12 (NIV):

- 8 All the words of my mouth are just;  
none of them is crooked or perverse.
- 9 To the discerning all of them are right;  
they are faultless to those who have  
knowledge.
- 10 Choose my instruction instead of silver,  
knowledge rather than choice gold,
- 11 for wisdom is more precious than rubies,  
and nothing you desire can compare with  
her.
- 12 'I, wisdom, dwell together with prudence;  
I possess knowledge and discretion.'

The prevalence of knowledge as a positive biblical theme has led theologians such as Gordon J. Wenham to validate the proposal posited by Cassuto, Westermann and Vawter, that the nature of the knowledge

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71 *Yadar* is not an individualistic expression of personhood, rather it presents authentic knowledge as arising from the experience of interconnectedness and interrelatedness. See Thomas H. Groome, *Christian Religious Education*, p.139.

offered by the tree amounted to insight rightfully belonging to God alone (Deuteronomy 29:29; Job 15:7-9, 40; Proverbs 30:1-4). This suggestion is presented as the most likely reason for the corruption in humanity<sup>72</sup> and may indeed be the most convincing. However, the precise nature of the knowledge inappropriately engaged is never specifically divulged, although its results are clearly in evidence. Such debates underline how a preoccupation with the search for causes within Western biblical scholarship can often obscure far more important considerations of how subsequently dominant epistemologies continue to tangibly (sometimes bloodily) and pervasively resist and subordinate 'other' epistemologies. James Cone states, 'What difference does it make if one should "prove" a philosophical point, if that point has nothing to do with spreading freedom throughout the land?'<sup>73</sup> Clearly, it is not the pursuit of knowledge *per se*, that proves problematic within the biblical narrative, but the purposes to which knowledge can be applied. Eating from the tree of 'the knowledge of good and evil' is prohibited not as a result of any inherent property of the tree but because the act entails an aberrant application of existing knowledge that begins with an attempt to overthrow God and which inevitably leads to the overthrow of human beings and ultimately of the whole created order. Such a disposition results in a distortion of the divine intent and the promulgation of sinful forms of differentiation that ultimately serve destructive interests.

In addition, within the paradigm of the 'fall', diversity expressed through kinship and ethnicity, is presented as problematic and becomes an 'issue' requiring control and resolution. It is subsequently expressed in the binary oppositions of superiority and inferiority. For example, Musimba R.A. Kanyoro writes:

The white settlers in South Africa interpreted the cultural uniqueness of Africans as saying that cultures must develop

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72 See Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15: Word Biblical Commentary* (England: Word Publishing, 1991), p.63.

73 Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, p.46.

separately and they introduced the evil system of apartheid whose demolition is marked by the blood of many people.<sup>74</sup>

What has often been overlooked in Western scholarship is the situated nature of epistemological claims and how these remain implicated in concrete displays of power and powerlessness. Linda Thomas comments with regard to North American society:

Amassing knowledge is the process of becoming persons who know the things that are essential for living. And for white patriarchal culture in the North American context, it is knowing how to dominate. For most people of color in the United States, it is knowing how to survive in the white culture.<sup>75</sup>

Such an ideology of domination on the basis of difference is a perversion of God's creative intention, which emphasizes equality and mutuality within difference. Jung Young Lee writes:

If racial and gender difference is the basis of creative order, the denial of such difference is the most serious sin of humanity. This denial is ontic sin, because it repudiates the very design of God's creation.<sup>76</sup>

Whatever its cause, the fall represents a lost opportunity to cooperate with both 'dustiness' and the divine image within humanity. This image evokes dignity, while simultaneously exercising responsibility for differentiation, distinctiveness and diversity. Instead of 'difference' being perceived as a blessing, the corruption of humanity leads to the appropriation of detrimental forms of 'knowledge', that seek to overthrow God, others and the created order. Consequently the effects

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74 Kanyoro, *Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics*, p.25.

75 Linda E. Thomas, *Living Stones in the Household of God: The Legacy and Future of Black Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2004), p.43.

76 Lee, *Marginality*, p.107.

continue to be both destructive and pervasive. Theologian Loren Wilkinson further elucidates on feminist interpretations of the dehumanizing aspects of societies:

Feminists argue that all the main aspects of the modern way of knowing - fragmentation, detachment, mechanism - are the result of masculine (and ultimately patriarchal) attitudes. Men are more inclined to distance themselves from their bodies; hence from the earth, and to promote a 'spirituality' of dominion. Men are thus more likely to describe the world and themselves in terms of a detached analysis, not 'holistically'; men are more likely to image the world as a machine; women, as an organism, a growing thing, a womb.<sup>77</sup>

Feminist theologians also point to the rupture, which exists between men and women. 'Women were seen as belonging to men, not fully human, objects without rights, a view which gained currency in almost all societies in antiquity.'<sup>78</sup> Post 'fall', living with multiplicity becomes divisive and 'alien', not of the earth/dust. Epistemological claims inappropriately and sinfully expressed are subsequently exalted, suppressed or oppressed. Historically, both colonial and post-colonial British society has embraced a false sense of superiority, often severing meaningful interactions with others, as difference is not endorsed, 'celebrated' or given proper recognition. The failure to perceive, experience or validate epistemological alternatives, vastly limits the human ability to experience communion with God, as God's intention in creation and recreation expressed through passages such as 2 Corinthians 5:17,<sup>79</sup> is being ignored. Black feminist and womanist theologians, who affirm the validity of multiple theological formulations do not underestimate the dangers of holding such positions. African feminist theologian Musimba R.A. Kanyoro clearly advocates:

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77 Wilkinson in Maxine Hancock (ed.), p.103-104.

78 Isherwood and McEwan, *Introducing Feminist Theology*, p.54.

79 2 Cor.5.17: 'Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!' NIV.

Women theologians have come to accept that truth is not the possession of any one person or tradition. Women the world over, using the tools of feminist theology, are struggling to admit and affirm difference.<sup>80</sup>

The notion embraced by feminists and black women theologians that all knowledge claims are contextually located has clearly proven redemptive for many. However, this does not mean that they abandon all universal claims whilst emphasizing self-referential vernacular theologies, as do postmodernist approaches to the affirmation of difference.

### **Les Liaisons Dangereuses: Postmodern Approaches to Difference**

In its concern to herald difference, some postmodernisms work primarily with concepts of individual identity and ethnicity, seeking to unveil differences, as yet unnoticed that exist amongst individuals. Postcolonial, black feminist and womanist scholars on the other hand, begin their analysis of difference in materiality, with reference to the structures of exploitation and, at times global inequity. They not only argue that their different experiences require appreciation and acknowledgement, but that their 'difference' offers a challenge to universalizing and hegemonic practices:

It is not the case that all we have to do is declare our limitedness and situatedness and leave space for others to offer their own equally limited and situated perspectives. This might be better than making sweeping generalizations, but it is not enough, for it basically leaves my perspective intact and unthreatened, though more limited in applicability than before. I have to ask what it means for my understanding of my own experience; how the two are related. I have to recognise not just that their experience is different, mediated by and

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80 Kanyoro, *Introducing Feminist Cultural Hermeneutics: An African Perspective*, p.76.

structured by racism for instance, but that mine is too, in connected and different ways, and that my understanding of my own experiences may not be adequate or sufficient; I may indeed be wrong about them.<sup>81</sup>

By focusing entirely on difference as perspective and ethnic location, it could be argued that a postmodern acknowledgement of difference has failed to confront very real differences of power. Within some postmodernisms, the nature of experience means that power is no longer recognised as being exercised by any particular person or group(s), instead it is viewed as being highly dispersed and fragmented, with particular individuals experiencing power in an uneven manner. Therefore, postmodernist theories have met with significant suspicion amongst postcolonial, black feminist and womanist activists. Anna Yeatman expresses a core perception:

From the standpoint of those who are contesting their status as other, postmodernism appears as the efforts of the modern imperial, patriarchal master subject to manage the extent and direction of the crisis for his authority.<sup>82</sup>

The deconstructed philosophical 'subject' traversed by 'polysexual signatures', will not differ from its former theoretical incarnation, if it once more effaces difference by camouflaging the reality that black men and women, post-colonials and colonialists have all belonged to various social and intellectual traditions in different ways. Therefore, as postcolonials, black feminists and womanists renounce the hegemonising tendency to obscure difference, they are not renouncing the same project as postmodernists concerned to promote

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81 Susan Strickland, 'Feminism, Postmodernism and Difference', in Kathleen Lennon and Margaret Whitford (eds), *Knowing the Difference: Feminist Perspectives in Epistemology* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p.268.

82 Anna Yeatman, 'Postmodern Epistemological Politics and Social Science' in Lennon and Whitford (eds), *Knowing the Difference*, p.187.



difference. The emphasis on difference in postmodernism, then, is not necessarily commensurate with a renewed interest in postcolonial, black feminist or womanist concerns. Stuart Hall refers to this as 'postmodernism's deep and ambivalent fascination with difference'.<sup>83</sup> Neither is it concerned with a renewed interest in an active engagement of individuals or groups that are 'different'. Some postmodernisms, it could be argued, have developed a preoccupation with the simple 'celebration of difference' and particularity for its own sake. In addition, they have promoted the notion that the concern with difference is equitable, neutral and non-partial. Therefore, postmodern attempts to communicate difference may simply be an alternative way of preserving the very privilege that they purport to challenge. For example, the postmodern emphasis on polyvocality, effectively empowers anyone to speak either 'like' the subordinated or 'for' the subordinated. However, this approach conveniently overlooks the fact that to speak 'like' someone is not the same as speaking 'as' someone. 'The postmodern insight that difference is "constructed" has to be balanced against the realization that it is also lived'.<sup>84</sup> Anna Yeatman notes:

Feminist and postcolonial intellectuals enjoin a politics of representation. Central to this politics is a twofold strategic question: Whose representations prevail? Whose voice is deprived so that they may prevail? This is a politics of representation which insists on the material effects of the discursive power and which contextualises the institutional politics of the western university within the world historical

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83 See Stuart Hall, 'What is this "Black" in Black Popular Culture?' in Gina Dent (ed.), *Black Popular Culture: A Project by Michele Wallace* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1992), p.23.

84 Jill Marsden, 'Strange Alliances: Feminism, Post-Structuralism and the Possibility of Affirmation' in *Women a Cultural Review*, Volume 4 Number 2 (Autumn 1993), p.198.

dynamics of Western capitalist - patriarchal - imperial domination and its contestation.<sup>85</sup>

Therefore it becomes increasingly apparent that within postmodernist discourses, all voices are not necessarily guaranteed equal representation. Feminists, such as Patricia Waugh, express this point:

For feminists, therefore, the goals of agency, personal autonomy, self-expression and self-determination, can neither be taken for granted nor written off as exhausted. They are ideals which feminism has helped to reformulate, modify and challenge.<sup>86</sup>

Identity is therefore a priority. Different voices and not simply different discourses, are necessary for the overthrow of structures of domination. In theological terms, it is the recognition that epistemology requires more than just a rational component, it also has an ethical dimension and a moral commitment which is personal, not just philosophical. In a climate of socio-political hegemony, epistemological assertions have wider implications than mere self-identification. Indeed self-designations are revolutionary acts that destabilize dominant discourses, whilst reconstructing life affirming ones. For black British Christian women, self-identifying is therefore a survivalist mechanism. Difference must be asserted, although not exalted, as a means of highlighting that which makes us both different and the same as other groups.

Such arguments call for an understanding of epistemological proposals as significant 'midrash' (interpretive tools) that can be

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85 Anna Yeatman, *Postmodern Revisionings of the Political* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994) quoted in Ann Brooks, *Postfeminisms: Feminism, Cultural Theory and Cultural Forms* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p.112.

86 Patricia Waugh, 'Modernism, Postmodernism, Gender: The view from Feminism' in Sandra Kemp and Judith Squires (eds), *Feminisms* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p.209.

deployed historically and contingently, without recourse to canonization.<sup>87</sup>

Feminist and black women scholars recognize that epistemological concerns are profoundly political and have potential to heal or destroy human relations, Mary Solberg explicates:

Bodies of knowledge and practice (like science) affect self-identity and relationships by shaping them, explaining them, justifying them, institutionalizing them and perpetuating them."<sup>88</sup>

Subsequently Musa W. Dube argues that black feminist and postcolonial readings in the arena of biblical studies cannot be abandoned to the totalising and universalising tendencies of Western scholarship, but must also be capable of engendering global political responses:

Here the issues of particularity and universality stand in sharp tension and beg for attention. While universal interpretations have fostered imperial domination, withdrawal to particularist interpretations is not necessarily the answer. The paradigm of universal interpretation has had a long historical establishment, and it is supported by firmly established Western institutions such that to simply withdraw to particularist interpretation is to leave the oppressive universal paradigm in place. Furthermore, the current imperialism of the multinational media and the financial institutions, which distribute Western material and cultural goods more

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87 The idea of epistemologies as interpretative tools allows theological discussion to take cognizance of socio-cultural and gendered expressivity as valid theological approaches and to 'visibly' ground theological assertions and knowledge claims. See William J. Abraham, *Canon and Criterion in Christian Theology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p.475.

88 Mary M. Solberg, *Compelling Knowledge: A feminist proposal for an epistemology of the Cross*, p.37.

effectively than ever before in history, makes it unethical for biblical interpreters to ignore the increasing reality of universality.<sup>89</sup>

To abandon exercises that call for the discrimination of, so called, 'historically contingent' discourses is a failure to seek out relevant commonalities and similarities and to critique destructive and reified theological expressions. For example, Western biblical theologians have tended to focus on biblical principles, which have reflected the pre-eminent values of Western life such as monotheism, dualism, chosenness, and evangelization of the world, and the ways in which these have shaped the current economic, political, and cultural issues of the North and South. By contrast, black feminists and other postcolonial writers have been able to focus on how the meaning of biblical texts shape international and specifically gendered relations of the postcolonial world.<sup>90</sup> Such global rhetoric cannot easily be co-opted, as it requires these very theologians to be cognisant of the ethical obligations that imperial history places upon black feminist and postcolonial theological articulations. Thus, a universalising perspective is important within the theological enterprise, as a counter to the totalising tendencies of Eurocentric theologising.

### **Re-creation**

Patterns of domination trap people in dehumanizing structures. As such, redemptive acts must be concerned with the restoration of right relationship between peoples across the lines of gender, ethnicity, class and culture. Returning to the biblical witness, the assertion of Galatians 3:28 that 'there is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor

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89 Musa W. Dube, *Postcolonial Feminist Interpretation of the Bible* (St Louis Missouri: Chalice Press, 2000), p.18.

90 See Randall C. Bailey and Jacquelyn Grant (eds), *The Recovery of the Black Presence: An Interdisciplinary Exploration* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995).

female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus'<sup>91</sup>, serves as a reminder that knowledge claims are equalized only as they are named and addressed in light of their socio-political locations. The stranger, the widow, the orphan, the poor and the marginalized must be named and their subordinated humanity asserted and affirmed. Equally, oppressors must also be named and held accountable. The failure to account for the materiality of sinful activity in the process of theorizing difference, maintains destructive power relations intact and undisturbed.

James Cone explicates that the undeclared self-interests of white theologians usually dictate what is considered a valid engagement with issues of theological relativity. For example, relevant questions are restricted to the issue of faith only as it pertains to European histories. Cone is apposite, 'It is not that the problem of faith and history is unimportant. Rather, its importance, as defined by white theologians, is limited to their social interests.'<sup>92</sup>

The promise of re-creation is therefore paramount, as it signals the ability of both oppressed and oppressor to break free from the bondage of 'fallen' epistemological expressions that are destructive or self-negating. Citing examples of white abolitionists who openly opposed slavery in spite of their social conditioning, Cone writes:

They are concrete examples that social existence is not mechanical and deterministic. The gospel grants people the freedom to transcend their cultural history and to affirm a dimension of universality common to all peoples.<sup>93</sup>

For black women in particular, being human in a world characterized by multiple inequities, is to present an epistemological challenge to demonized epistemologies. It is also a challenge to realign fallen and oppressive aspects of humanity with the divine image. Epistemological claims and content can therefore provide a basis both

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91 Galatians 3:28, NIV.

92 Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, p.42.

93 Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, p.45.

for the development of an ethic of self-empowerment for black British Christian women and as a strategy for developing our self-understanding. In addition, it provides corrective challenges to dominant groups and discourses that characteristically and persistently marginalize black British Christian women. With regard to the necessity of transforming dominant epistemological frameworks, Linda Thomas asserts:

Inclusive construction of knowledge denotes exploring sources that culturally may be vastly different from our own epistemological points of departure. It may be knowledge based on human experience as well as theory, and it decidedly involves inclusion of ideas, theories, orientations, experiences, and worldviews of persons and groups who have previously been excluded. When such views are included, we infuse the Eurocentric and male construction of knowledge with other vitally important constructions. The normative Eurocentric male construction of knowledge, while construed to be universal, is but one perspective now undergoing supplementation and correction.<sup>94</sup>

Such an adjustment is highlighted in the work of African social historian, Ifi Amadiume. She argues that inattention to alternative epistemological paradigms has led to an uncritical use of European language and meaning in the interpretation of African knowledge. The latter has further resulted in distorted depictions of African history and culture and to wholesale misrepresentations of the continent. With regard to the specific misconceptions surrounding the nature of African societies, Amadiume writes:

The ethnocentrism of European scholars has directly influenced the classification and definition of these societies, seeing them as 'lacking something', such as rulers, states,

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94 Thomas, *Living Stones in the Household of God: The legacy and future of Black theology*, pp.44-45.

order, a head. These societies have consequently been described as tribes without rulers, stateless or non-state societies, organized anarchy, and acephalous societies.<sup>95</sup>

Therefore, a failure by Christ's followers to acknowledge the validity of knowledge claims, emerging from marginalized communities, is tantamount to a failure to act redemptively. Linda Thomas states:

Reconstructing knowledge means tearing down myths that have paralyzed communities, and re-creating truths that have been buried in annals containing vast sources of knowledge.<sup>96</sup>

For marginalized groups such as black British Christian women, the call to psychosocial readjustment applies to internal realities as well as to the external. The process incorporates a psychosocial and sociopolitical event, which refutes self-destructive internal scripts, even while the search continues for life-affirming constructs. Thus, knowledge must be avowedly praxis-oriented, a factor already well attested to amongst black male and female theologians. African theologian Emmanuel Lartey writes that:

Liberation Theologians would argue that much more may be learnt from actual involvement in action than from theory alone. As such, a critical and dialectical relationship is sought between action and reflection.<sup>97</sup>

A theology that fails to call for change in the socio-political realities of the marginalized, such as black British women, or fails to attend to the issues of freedom from oppressions, equality and recognition as fully accepted participants in British life, is at best inadequate and at worst demonic.

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95 Ifi Amadiume, *Reinventing Africa: Matriarchy, Religion and Culture* (Zed Books, London and New York, 1997), p.16.

96 Thomas, *Living Stones in the Household of God*, p.44.

97 Lartey, *In Living Colour*, p.123.

Any articulation of theological anthropology must also be capable of engaging seriously with the religious and cultural pluralism which has always characterized the British milieu and which is an increasingly inescapable part of it. In addition, any such expression must be prepared to address pertinent socio-political and cultural exigencies. Audre Lorde brings clarity to the theoretical task, in relation to the assertion of difference specifically among women.

Advocating the mere tolerance of difference between women is the grossest reformism. It is a total denial of the creative function of difference in our lives. Difference must not be merely tolerated, but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark a dialectic. Only then does the necessity for interdependency become unthreatening. Only within that interdependency of different strengths, acknowledged and equal, can the power to seek new ways of being in the world generate, as well as the courage and sustenance to act where there are no charters.<sup>98</sup>

Difference must not simply be celebrated, but received and affirmed as vital to human progress.

### CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have sought to present the ways in which black British Christian women demonstrate our humanity and *imago dei* through our relational appropriation of knowledge. Black women theorists seek to explicate that knowledge emerges as a consequence of interactions in community and nature. By contrast, Eurocentric male knowledge privatises this aspect of knowing, by submerging it. Kwame Gyekye, writing from within the African context on the cultural values of African peoples, affirms that for both male and female:

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98 Lorde, Audre, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (New York: The Crossing Press, 1984).



In cultures of the African people sociality is considered basic to human nature and most adequately expressed in the community life. The community is regarded as a framework for realizing the potential of every individual. Emphasis is therefore placed on such communal values as solidarity, co-operation, mutual helpfulness, interdependence, and reciprocal obligations.<sup>99</sup>

The exploration of biblical anthropology and the perception of 'knowledge' as *yadar*, further affirms the need for a Christian anthropology that corresponds to the terms of the knowing subject. Therefore for black British Christian women, *yadar* is an ideology fecund with anthropological possibilities. Thomas H. Groome, quotes Bultmann when he writes, 'The Old Testament both perceives and asserts the significance and claim of the knowing subject'.<sup>100</sup> Furthermore, the biblical paradigm of *yadar*, suggests that concrete experience textures all knowledge claims, and therefore identity.

I have sought to demonstrate that the notion of *imago dei* as differentiation, distinctiveness and diversity is based in the materiality of both creation and 'fall'. Subsequently, due to the 'fall', attempts to theorize epistemological differences must take cognisance of the uses that knowledge can be put to and they must challenge demonized epistemological constructions that support dominant and destructive theological formulations. Instead, liberative socio-political commitments must provide the main impetus in the development of our theoretical formulations. Such a commitment empowers black British Christian women to reject the dehumanizing caricatures of ourselves which are prevalent within the British context that we inhabit.

By acknowledging the uniqueness of our human expression we affirm that we have been created in the image of God. Knowing what is different liberates us to be ourselves and to challenge all knowledge

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99 Gyekye, *African Cultural Values*, p.51.

100 Groome, *Christian Religious Education*, p.141.

claims that seek to oppress, suppress and subsume us. In addition it enables us to love, without constraint, the One who made us. Karen Baker-Fletcher writes:

To love ourselves, body and soul, to the fullest requires loving God, who is revealed in the earth and in our own dusty, earthly bodies. By loving one another, indeed every sentient being, we love God.<sup>101</sup>

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101 Baker-Fletcher, *Sisters of Dust, Sisters of Spirit*, p.17.

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As President of the Baptist Union of Great Britain 2006-7, her theme is 'Stay Focused!' Kate is passionate about 'prayerfully staying focused' in leadership, mission and diversity. 'Jesus himself modelled these themes, they are therefore vital to our Christian reflection and engagement'.