

**Marcia Y. Riggs and James Samuel Logan, eds**

*Ethics That Matters: African, Caribbean, and African-American Sources* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), pp. xi + 272, ISBN 978-0-8006-1976-3 (pbk). £23.99.

This text introduces and exemplifies contemporary social ethics through an impressive collection of fifteen essays from model scholars, including Katie Cannon, James Cone, Dwight Hopkins, Anthony Pinn, Emilie Townes, and Traci West. The book is designed and succeeds as a useful text for advanced undergraduate and graduate level courses in Christian social ethics. The entries are concise, averaging fourteen pages, and are arranged thematically in four parts: moral dilemmas, moral community, moral discourse and moral vision. With the student in mind, the editors have included at the end of each part a list of key concepts, discussion questions and suggested resources for further study.

There are two operative presuppositions at work in this volume. First, what 'matters' is the direct ethical confrontation of challenges to survival, such as poverty, violence, and environmental degradation. Second, in the course of confronting these kinds of issues, social ethicists do not have the privilege of a neutral or objective perspective and so must attend responsibly to their diverse sources of knowledge and insight as contextual, historical, and particular. The normative claims that emerge from such work and drawing on these sources are universally relevant but, as the editors point out, cannot be 'universalized for all time' (p. 2). The particular contexts and histories out of which this collection emerges are the African, Caribbean and African-American. The specific challenge to which this book contributes mightily is the first step in a mutually critical and constructive dialogue across socio-cultural divides: the cultivation of an understanding of the perspective, insights, and normative claims that emerge from the contexts that these diverse authors represent.

The arrangement and ordering of the text are well-suited to the task. The four essays on moral dilemmas (part one) serve to create, through concrete and particular reflections, the discursive and imaginative space where new insights and articulations about the rupture, creation, and evolution of 'community' (part two) can find purchase. An analysis and description of the moral language and practices (part three) that emerge from this particular communal history reveal and provide resources to combat its especially racial and violent aspects. The knowledge, wisdom, and insight cultivated to this point are gathered up and put to work in the development of broad and constructive visions (part four) that include normative prescriptions of universal relevance.

Among the highlights of the opening section on 'Moral Dilemmas' is Pinn's constructive critique and augmentation of Peter Paris' work on spirituality and embodiment. He convincingly argues that the material embodiments of the

African diaspora are not merely the incidental content of spirituality but its very form. He goes on to highlight the ways in which this focus on embodiment enables a more authentic 'cartography of spirituality' (p. 19).

In the second part on 'Moral Community' one finds superb introductory essays on the experience of race in the United States that serve as surveys of the racial terrain. Cone's essay treats the experience of race in a more general sense and concludes with an exhortation to specific and constructive forms of dialogue among those with different racial experiences. Hopkins employs his very public experiences during the first presidential campaign of Barack Obama as an entry and exit point for describing the emergence and contours of black liberation theology.

The third part concerns 'Moral Discourse' and also is focused on the United States. Baldwin challenges the reader to critique constructively the discursive contributions of church communities to the broader social concern for racial justice by way comparison to the prophetic ecclesiology of Martin Luther King, Jr. Walton joins Baldwin in exhorting churches to take up the prophetic voice but focuses especially on the need to critique those Christian voices that are pressed into service in support of the very policies and practices that King abhorred, including the likes of Jerry Falwell. West brings into view the presence of gender violence overlaid with racial difference, providing a trenchant analysis and critique of the disconnect between our culture's professed rejection of gender violence and yet its inability to institutionalize that commitment.

Each contributor to the final part on 'Moral Vision' emphasizes what Anderson implies in his title: 'in the absence of giants,' especially, it falls to each of us to find creative ways to embody and practice justice. Townes, for example, in dialogue with the work of Zora Neale Hurston, brings into view the resources for this that can be found in the folklore traditions and challenges scholars to move in the direction of dialogical research on these matters alongside everyday folks.

Creative and constructive insights suffuse this well-edited volume. A few essays are dense and presuppose a good deal of historical and theological knowledge. Most, however, well introduce their topics and terms while also including the detail necessary to convey a realistic and complex understanding. I recommend for others, and plan to use myself, this flexible text in courses on theology and social ethics.

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***Ethics That Matters: African, Caribbean, and African American Sources*, Marcia Y. Riggs and James Samuel Logan, eds.** Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012. Pp. xi + 262. Paperback. \$29.00. ISBN 9780800619763. Reviewed by: Teresa Smallwood, Chicago Theological Seminary, PhD student.

African American scholars survey the landscape in ethics, theology, religion and Bible in this edited volume to illuminate the many hermeneutical strategies for establishing radical reorientation of ethical polemics relevant to Christian social ethics. This volume mines the length and breath of ethical issues germane to post-modern ethical thought. It offers a decided contribution to the corpus of African American theological scholarship as well. Consistent with its mandate each essay explores some of the issues of concern to African American scholars with research interests in philosophical history, liberation theology, womanist ethics, law, African and African American spirituality, social media, televangelism, missiology, intersectionality, ecology, religious studies, Christian nationalism and gender studies.

The volume is divided into four significant areas of inquiry into morality. Each essay is grouped in one of the four foci: moral dilemmas, moral community, moral discourse and moral vision. At the end of each section of the volume is an extremely helpful and strategically focused list of bibliographic sources that will serve as a further research guide for those seeking to delve deeper into the general canopy of the moralism treated in the respective groupings. Additionally the volume provides an extensive notes section at the end of the volume where phenomenal reference information for each essay is displayed.

The editors present a comprehensive introduction of the volume in which a short summary of each essay describes how the work fits into the larger narrative of ethical concerns. In each essay the author situates the dialog around an identified moral concern. For instance, under the rubric of moral dilemma, Katie Cannon examines missiology in the hinterlands of Nigeria and discovers three examples of responsible mission work in which the goal of missions was to empower the indigenous population through an authentic Christian witness. Her examples demonstrate the value of an ethical approach to missions in which the dignity and moral wealth of the people is given preeminence in the exercise of social justice. Through her three-pronged hermeneutic of proclamation, enculturation and liberation, Cannon contrasts the missionary work of her three figures with that of missionaries more closely aligned with empire-oriented constructs that exploit African indigenous peoples and injure native cultural practices. Noel Erskine's essay analyzes the inception of Rastafari religion, which he contends originated in the Great Revival Church of the 1860s. Erskine contends the Rastafari religion broke with its more gender inclusive beginnings and instituted foundational beliefs that are tauntingly patriarchal and consumed with gender inequality.

As well, the section on moral dilemmas treats the subject of morality from the vantage point of intercontinental mapping of black bodies in the African Diaspora.

Anthony Pinn conducts a comparative analysis of Peter Paris' phenomenological approach in assessing the spirituality of African peoples in the Atlantic slave trade as juxtaposed with his own multidimensional mapping of the metaphorical body as trope to trace the spirituality and connectivity of Africans throughout the Diaspora both in "theistic" and "non-theistic" (14) based orientations as a "cartography of spirituality." (19)

The section on moral community expands the conversation of relevant ethics to law, theology and media. Riggins Earl, Jr. makes the case for how the U.S. Constitution has served a dual role within the black community as both a conduit for oppression and a standard-bearer for liberation. James Cone offers a plethora of sources for engaging critical race theory in theological conventions. Cone challenges theological thinkers to break out of their silence on pivotal issues, listen meaningfully and engage the transformative work of dismantling white supremacy. Dwight Hopkins painstakingly reveals the liminal content of The Rev. Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr.'s black liberation theology as he reflects upon the political wedge driven between Wright and then Presidential contender, Barack Obama, in Obama's 2008 bid for the White House. Hopkins weaves African American religious and social history into the mix as he demystifies Wright and his rhetorical genius while commenting on the role of raced-based animus in the reporting on Wright during this incendiary portion of the campaign. This essay is reminiscent of an old television broadcaster from my childhood, Paul Harvey. Hopkins tells "The Rest of the Story."

The section on moral discourse features a critique of the black church in the work of social justice. Jonathan Walton exposes the antics of the Christian broadcasters who promote Christian Nationalism. He argues that this medium continues to re-inscribe a Christian nationalist worldview upon blacks by propagating a patriotic message through black preachers such as mega-church pastor, Eddie Long. Rosetta Ross suggests that by appealing to the legacy of critical thinkers who served as activists such as Septima Clark blacks have a roadmap for navigating the tensions between religion and politics. Traci West focuses upon gender violence in her exposé as she plumbs the line between moral language and moral practice. She argues that the black community must find ways to translate its anti-violence rhetoric into public practice.

The final section turns attention to moral vision. Melanie Harris introduces the term "ecowomanism" to encompass theological engagement with environmental ethics. According to Harris the way forward for communal thriving is the visionary application of survival tactics that embrace the welfare of our natural environment. Victor Anderson, through the lens of H. Richard Niebuhr expounds upon the theological concept of public theology to acknowledge the extinction of the theological giants such as the pragmatist, John Dewey, the social gospel proponent, Walter Rauschenbusch, or the pastor and orator, Martin Luther King, Jr. Anderson opines that the "faithful ordinary" will assume the role of leadership within the "local publics" to fuel the drive of public theology for a more accessible democracy. Emilie Townes consults the folklore of Zora Neal Hurston as a framework for ethical

vision. She favors this approach as an implement of religion and theology entering the conversation of lived experiences so that the stories of ordinary people become a source for ethical scholarship.

At the conclusion of this comprehensive volume the editors in an afterword pay tribute to Dr. Peter J. Paris, his life and legacy, in part, as follows:

We are reminded by Dr. Paris that God's creation is a moral community that is local and global, human and nonhuman, and we are called to 'do justice, love mercy and walk humbly with our God.' (241)

Christian social ethics owes a debt of gratitude to Dr. Paris, and this dedication is a fitting tribute to his contribution. His work covers all of the major themes of this volume and serves as a model for excellence in theo-ethical scholarship.

This brief synopsis of this edited volume does not do justice to the enormous contribution it makes to the field of theological ethics. There is a tremendous repository of material within this binding fruitful for capacious learning. Students and scholars alike will find this work invaluable in establishing the parameters of theological ethics for the 21<sup>st</sup> century and beyond.

While I have not addressed each of the essays individually, in this writing, each was carefully read in order to assess the volume's capacity to span the horizon of relevance for Christian social ethics in the postmodern era. I find that it does so with few exceptions. First, the lack of definition of "morality" given the characterization, throughout the volume, of morality as a standard, however movable, is a clear deficiency. Until the afterword, the effort to define this concept of morality as a theological term was noticeably absent. Even there, the reference to "God's creation" as a presumed quotation of Dr. Paris leaves the concept understated. This is important because from the perspective of scholarship the Kantian understanding of morality differs greatly from the Hegelian, so forth and so on. Depending upon whose concept of morality a perspective takes, the outcomes may differ. Consequently, efforts to normalize and universalize ethical standards could sediment the prescriptions in these essays, in ways unintended and with very different meanings. Should the student, for instance, wish to adopt the wholesale reliance upon this term as used in this volume; it is unclear which strand of moral authority holds sway. Moreover, the term "moral" and the term "ethics" seem at times to be interchangeable and it is unclear whether that is intentional.

The term "social justice" is equally nebulous in this volume. At the outset the editors held that these "essays are sources for a social ethics that complexifies the meaning of and quest for social justice in the 21<sup>st</sup> century." (2) I agree. However, they further amplify that "social justice is not an abstract ethical ideal or philosophical concept; rather, what we mean by social justice emerges from the lived experiences – historical and contemporary – of particular peoples engaged in struggles to have

meaningful and productive lives.”(2) I am left wondering if “social justice” is a fluid term that moves into a Derridian “(im)possibility?” Or, perhaps social justice is calculable depending upon social location. If that is the case, the notion of Anderson’s “faithful ordinary” becomes a volatile proposition. By that I mean, if you live in the poorer neighborhoods of America, your “faithful ordinary” may just be gang members. If justice, or social justice is meant to be a movable concept for a future-to-come as Derrida suggests, hope for tomorrow becomes the eschatological claim. However, the “here and now” is left with little direction. As such, while I see the merit in nuancing spirituality from perspectives that extend beyond the monolithic Christian concepts or understanding the religious pluralism of the Ifa people, the more immediate concerns for social justice that necessarily must be a part of this equation seem to pale by comparison. Consequently, black-on-black crime reported in the media daily in the Southside of Chicago where I live receives little attention.

Next, in terms of relevance, I found the narrow treatment of sexuality to be problematic. Clearly, as a marker for how ethical and moral considerations bear upon the social life of the Christian community, this is a topic that should be first and foremost in the scholarship of “the nation’s foremost African American religious scholars” writing in a volume that claims to address “ethics that matters.” Moreover, the twin concepts of disproportionate incarceration of black bodies and the prison industrial complex as a mechanism of American capitalism should have been within the concentrated effort of this volume. Admittedly the discussion of race and racism approaches the topic of mass incarceration indirectly; but, it is inadequate to rely solely upon that in order to responsibly attend to the implications ethically of what is unfolding in communities all across America with respect to unemployment, underemployment, disproportionate wages, access to education and access to healthcare. Further, there is only passing mention of the marriage equality debate, which seems to dominate many theo-ethical discussions in popular media.

Naturally the move to futurity in the piece on “ecofeminism” is exciting, however, the underdevelopment of a thematic approach to environmental concerns as principled upon environmental racism missed an opportunity to amplify this as a significant challenge to many African American communities where trash dumping sites, chemical plants, nuclear plants and other waste sites are frequently strategically located.

My critical reflection notwithstanding, this volume does in fact represent African American theological ethics at its finest. Additionally, it must be acknowledged that each of the contributors to this edited volume have addressed in other works many of the matters I point out in my critical review.

The ultimate refinement of a work of this nature is the intimate grounding it gives one who desires to master that level of scholarship in the future. This volume inspires dedicated research. James Cone named works that he relied upon over several decades. From that example, I know the value of reading everything. His

sources are multidisciplinary, theoretical and historical. His interpretative style sparks further inquisition. Moreover, Victor Anderson's essay proves the importance of a thorough understanding of 20<sup>th</sup> century theology as an ethicist. While I query why Anderson chose H. Richard Niebuhr over Paul Tillich as his exemplar, since he never gives an explanation, the fact remains one must know the work in order to make the kind of ethical declarations made in his essay. For instance, one could argue regarding H. Richard Niebuhr, as does David Trimiew that:

What ethical responsibility lacked in Richard's time is an understanding of both the moral competency of the oppressed to fight for the liberation of all and the under appreciation of the moral requirement of empowered selves not to simply desist from supporting systems of oppression but also to join in the struggle to dismantle oppression and to establish reparative, compensatory, and commutative justice.<sup>i</sup>

Trimiew suggests that H. Richard Niebuhr was a "giant" in an era that simply did not understand the plight of black America. His contention that complicity was not absolved by mere disengagement in oppressive actions but rather required a commitment to deconstruct those oppressive systems is an astute assessment. It is helpful to bring the perspective of this theological giant into clearer focus. Nevertheless, the contribution of H. Richard Niebuhr to the corpus of theological reasoning is pivotal in understanding Anderson's ethical move.

Anderson makes the case for an American public theology that is relevant for the times in which we live. It is a brilliant ethical move because if public theology is to have any power in this present moment, it will come from those who "let their little light shine." That point was never so profound as when the nation watched the story unfold of Antoinette Tuff whose bold witness became the anchor that steadied the drowning ship in suburban Atlanta a few weeks ago. Tuff is the black Christian woman who brokered an impasse with a would-be gunman who had entered the elementary school where she worked ready to fire upon innocent children and adults. Tuff talked the man down and the matter could be contained without injury to a single person. The Dekalb County Police chief told CNN "you just don't see that type of interaction in these types of situations very, very often at all."<sup>ii</sup> Antoinette Tuff is one of the "faithful ordinary" about which Anderson writes.

It is evident from this volume that African American Christian social ethics seeks to annul Trimiew's critique in the postmodern era. This volume extols the role of the African American theo-ethicist especially as one who identifies the pressure points for personifying the Christian faith in the everyday struggles of life for the faithful. It calls forth the prophetic to steer the people back toward righteous indignation in well-known as well as emerging areas in ways that may significantly alter current scholarship as in the essay by Anthony Pinn. It points to other literary genres as a

means to forge new directions or carve out new fields of inquiry as in the essay by Emilie Townes.

In the final analysis my questions are as follows:

- Is there an epistemological problem with the terms “morality” and “social justice” as claimed in this volume?
- What new self-understanding comes to me as a PhD student concentrating in theology, ethics and human sciences from these essays?
- When and where do I enter the conversation?

These three questions mark the circuitous route by which I take the baton passed to me in this volume. I am compelled to critically think about the relationship between morality and social justice, hermeneutics and philosophy, ethics and theology as well as methodology and pedagogy. It is apparent to me that there remains much work to do. The profession is alive and well after the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, but we need more laborers.

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<sup>i</sup> “H. Richard Niebuhr on Responsibility” by David Trimiew pp. 129-136 in *Beyond The Pale: Reading Ethics From the Margins*, Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas and Miguel A. De La Torre eds., (KY: Westminster John Knox Press), 2011, 135.

<sup>ii</sup> Retrieved from <http://www.cnn.com/2013/08/22/us/georgia-school-shooting-hero/index.html> on September 26, 2013 at 2:03 pm CST.