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Where I Live Is How I Work

James N. Poling[1,2]

Pastoral and practical theology have been criticized for psychologizing and individualizing religious experience and thus reinforcing the gender, race and class biases of theology. This article suggests some ways scholars in this field should attend more carefully to social analysis. I owe much of my understanding of social analysis to my colleague, Toinette Eugene, womanist scholar, whose articles on appropriation and reciprocity were published as "On 'Difference' and the Dream of Pluralist Feminism," and "To Be of Use" (Eugene, 1992).

All scholars of the church write out of particular situations that define their interests and purposes. For example, in the current debate over homosexuality and ordination, the heterosexual majority hopes to consolidate its power and control in the church by eliminating the enormous gay and lesbian creativity currently being expressed in every field today. All of us have interests, whether acknowledged or not, that determine the various positions we put forth for consideration by others. If the ideas we articulate become normative, then our economic and social status in the church will be improved.

However, the demands of truth and justice mean that we must acknowledge our motives and desires so they can be accurately evaluated by others. In this short paper, originally written for the American Academy of Religion, I try to acknowledge some of the tensions between my conscious moral principles and my implicit social and material interests in the hope that all of us can engage in this level of discussion as practical theologians.

The conscious moral foundation of my research can be expressed in the following two principles. The first principle is our need to recognize

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the moral claim of oppressed groups in the world who are becoming the subjects of history and are rejecting objectification by the dominant power structure. Women, persons of color, the poor, gays and lesbians, and others are seizing the *kairos* to make history, not just be the objects of history. For example, "The Central American Kairos means recognizing the poor people's dignity, recognizing their right to be protagonists in their own liberation, to be protagonists of a project of liberation for everybody, but especially for the most oppressed: women, Indians, Afroamericans..." (Kairos, 1988). What does it mean for me to do theological research as a member of the dominant oppressor class in the world when "the poor [are breaking] into history as peoples who become the subjects of their own liberation processes" (Kairos, 1988).

The second principle is the moral imperative of using gender, race and class analyses as methodological principles and not only as content areas. In my last project, *The Abuse of Power* (Poling, 1991), my main focus was on women as subjects, and I attempted to use gender as a methodological principle. My goal in the next project is to use both gender and race as theoretical and methodological principles. To quote my colleague, Dr. Evelyn Kirkley (1993), "I am part of a...generation [of religious scholars]...who seek not only to reclaim the stories of the [oppressed voices of the poor, people of color, gay men and lesbians and women], but to incorporate them into the theoretical and methodological frameworks of [my research]....What are the theoretical and methodological implications of doing [theology] as if race, gender and sexuality not only exist[ed], but matter[ed]?"

If these are my moral and theological commitments, what does it mean to do such research as a member of the dominant oppressor class at a time when the power of my social class is being challenged? How do I know whether my research is a genuine partnership for social transformation across the lines of class and power, or whether I covertly serve the interests of the class to which I belong? The authors of *God's Fierce Whimsy* (1985, pp. 23-27) list four conditions of praxis: 1) accountability; 2) collaboration; 3) beginning with our own lives-in-relation; 4) diversity of cultures; 5) shared commitment. I have faced some of the following issues in my work as a scholar for the church and the academy.

1. *My Own Life-In-Relation*. What is my social location? What are the power structures that define my social existence?

> One does not make or remake anything alone; one cannot ignore the relations one has. To know one's self and one's situation is to know one's company (or lack of it), is to know oneself with or against others. (Eugene, 1992, p. 91)

My job description at the seminary where I work is 30% teaching, 30% church and community work, 40% research and writing. If I follow

this plan exactly, I will spend most of my time with middle-class, white folks with college and graduate degrees who are professionals in teaching, medicine, law, mental health and ministry. My job is to educate leadership so that the middle-class, mainline churches will thrive, to lead workshops to help church leaders solve church problems, and to write articles and books that help keep the church and academy be conversant with problems such as family life and violence. I also must succeed in professional and academic groups made up of highly educated intellectuals and specialists in seminaries and universities. There are dangers from two sides. Several years ago a student greeted me in the hallway by saying, "There goes that professor who writes books no one can read." This is the church saying that my research in practical theology cannot be understood (Poling and Miller, 1985; Poling and Mudge, 1987). But recently a colleague at the seminary said to me, "We can't organize our program around one professor who has a faddish book." What he meant was that my research about family violence is not academically respectable. These statements are hints about the boundaries of my job description. My teaching, workshops and articles must be accessible to the church, and they must be competent in scholarly circles. Failure to come up to both standards elicits deviancy-control. And neither standard supports genuine community or solidarity with oppressed groups.

2. *Accountability For Justice*. How am I accountable to groups outside my own social location — gender, race, class, sexuality?

In discussing these questions, Barbara Smith challenges feminist and womanist scholars in language that should be directed at male scholars as well.

> The grassroots/community women's movement has given women's studies its life. How do we relate to it? How do we bring our gifts and our educational privilege back to it? Do we realize how very much there is to learn in doing this essential work? Ask yourself what the women's movement is working on in your...city. Are you a part of it? Ask yourself which women are living in the worst conditions in your town and how your work positively affects and directly touches their lives. If it doesn't, why not? (Eugene, 1992, p. 94)

You can see the problem immediately. My social location in a theological school supported by the church creates an accountability structure in one direction: toward a middle-class, white, educated, religious and academic patriarchal constituency. My conscious moral commitments require accountability to groups that are not represented in the power structures of my present social location. I have made an effort to correct the systematic ideological, economic, and religious distortions of my social location in several ways. I attend monthly meetings of mental health professionals who are in solidarity with survivors of sexual abuse (95% women). I provide

psychotherapy for several poor clients through the County Department of Social Services. I am in psychotherapy with a woman and in supervision with a woman. Both have power to challenge me and do. I am part of informal networks of womanist and feminist scholars in Rochester and across the country with whom I consult and submit my written work, most of the time before publication. I have several male African American colleagues with whom I consult. I have a colleague in Nicaragua with whom I have an agreement that she will read my next manuscript. I use literature by feminist, womanist, and Black theologians on a regular basis.

Part of the problem with this arrangement is that my accountability to groups of oppressed peoples is primarily intellectual and emotional and thus voluntary, while my accountability to my own social class is material and mandatory, which, according to Itumeleng Mosala, is untenable. He points to the danger for all intellectuals whose material connection is to the dominant institutions. "While they oppose the racial exclusiveness of social privileges and how these are legitimated by the existing white theology, they are uncritical of their own structural lines to the societal institutions that produce these privileges" (1989, p 14).

3. *Appropriation*. Whose traditions am I appropriating; what am I using them for; who benefits; who has power to challenge me?

Maria Lugones identifies the power differentials that are exercised when scholars quote one another.

> Why does the author just leave us to write another paper on the subject, but one that is dependent on [ours] even though she does not really acknowledge us? Why does she think she is justified in doing that? Why doesn't she realize that what she is doing is exercising authority, and that the authority she would exercise, if we are not careful, is authority over us? (Eugene, 1992, p. 96)

My library is filled with books by bell hooks, Cornel West, Delores Williams, Gerda Lerner, Itumeleng Mosala, Ernesto Cardinal, Toni Morrison, Leonardo Boff, books of the Slave narratives, and so on. When I attend the American Academy of Religion, my favorite sessions are the Womanist sessions, and the Women and Religion discussions. I have collected moving stories from three trips to Nicaragua, and from classes with African-American ministers who have not attended college. I am always combing for new stories, new theologies, new ideology critiques. And what do I do with this material? I write articles for *The Journal of Pastoral Care* and *Pastoral Psychology* whose constituency is 75% male and 90% white, or I write books for Abingdon Press or Fortress Press, primarily for white, middle-class readers. I am gratified that my recent book is popular with women in the church and the academy and with survivors of sexual abuse, though my earlier book on practical theology is mainly appreciated by white men who teach in seminaries. I hope to be competent and a little controversial in my views so that I get the attention I need to build my reputation as a courageous spirit facing the hard issues. But I am seldom as honest about my social location as I am in this paper. If one follows the trajectory of my research, it starts with the witness of faith in the midst of intense suffering by women, African Americans and Nicaraguans. I become emotionally involved with these stories until I am able to use their insights in my teaching and publications. Middle-class people in church and academy find my ideas interesting and use these ideas in their conversations and ministries in the community. The source of a lot of my creativity is found in communities of resistance. But the beneficiaries are the middle-class white people against whom these communities resist. And who has the power to hold me accountable for my work? Psychologically, I try to identify with oppressed groups, but materially I am bonded to the oppressor groups. The white church and academy pay my salary, send me on sabbaticals, and read my books. This is the classic story of appropriation, but do I own my role in this process of appropriation? As Eugene asks (1992, p. 98), what would true reciprocity entail?

4. *Who benefits from my work*? What are the intellectual and material benefits of my work? Who gets these benefits?

> The answer to my question about the options for dealing with the problem of difference lies in the emphasis and the kinds of work that will lift oppression not only from women, but from all oppressed people: poor and working class people, people of color in this country and in the colonized Third World. If lifting this oppression is not a priority, then it is problematic whether we are really and authentically able to discuss appropriation and reciprocity in our work. (Eugene, 1992, p. 94)

I have been troubled by my recent reading in 18th and 19th century historical research about the slavery debates. Historians are beginning to understand the two positions — abolition and pro-slavery — as interdependent: that is, they each needed the other in order to maintain their status and keep the nation as it was. Without this debate, slavery might not have survived for 350 years. The role of the conservatives was obvious: to defend slavery and destroy the arguments against slavery that came from their enemies. The role of the liberals was less obvious. In spite of the fact that they justified their rhetoric as anti-slavery, liberals actually anticipated and identified the intellectual problems that threatened slavery as an institution. For example, the liberals argued that since Africans were human beings, they should be evangelized into the Christian faith so they could benefit from its civilizing influence. In response, the conservatives argued that even if Africans were human beings, they were inferior, and if they were baptized as Christians, their natural and happy state was slavery. The liberals generally agreed that Africans were inferior to Euro-Americans and that the races were better off segregated. One of their "solutions to the

African problem" was colonization of the slaves back to Africa so that their Christian faith would bring the values of civilization to Africa (Frederickson, 1971, p. 51). White supremacy was developed as a self-conscious ideology through the debate between liberals and conservatives which created the foundation for modern racist oppression. Therefore, liberals who opposed slavery were crucial in the formation of white supremacy as a modern ideology. A contemporary equivalent is the 1965 Moynihan Report on the Black family (Rainwater and Yancey, 1967) which argued from a liberal perspective that the current problems in the Black community were caused by the breakdown of the family rather than economic exploitation and white racism. This provided the intellectual foundation for conservative attacks on Black communities in the 1980's (Davis, 1990).

Who benefits from the theoretical work of white male intellectuals like me? I fancy that I am working for change in our society in which all groups can live together in harmony and diversity. But what if I am part of the intellectual vanguard whose job is to identify the dangers and contradictions of the dominant ideology before it collapses? My job is to go as far as possible into the wilderness without losing my material connections, and then report back on what I have seen and heard. Then others can develop the weapons and strategies that help our social class survive. This military image is a deliberate analogy. Scouts are paid by the conquering army to warn the main body of upcoming problems and dangers. Sometimes the scouts get romantic about their experience and forget which side they are on. The 1993 movie, "Dances with Wolves" is an example of such forgetting. Perhaps those of us doing research on oppression are working for the dominant class in spite of our conscious moral commitments. One of the terms from critical theory for this process is "co-optation."

> One of the most powerful themes of this new historicism has been the idea that societies exert control over their subjects not just by imposing constraints on them but by predetermining the ways they attempt to rebel against those constraints, by co-opting their strategies of dissent. (Veeser, 1989, p. 168)

To push this analogy further we should ask about the material benefits of research. If I am successful in appropriating ideas from oppressed groups and using the stories, symbols, and arguments to challenge the dominant group of which I am a part, who benefits materially? First of all, I benefit. I have just experienced such a benefit. As a result of my recent book, I was promoted, and the type of invitations and workshops I am invited to do are more lucrative and more interesting. While I have shared a certain percentage of my increase with people and agencies that focus directly on the needs of the oppressed, my own gain is great. My social status and marketability have gone up. The opportunities are more interesting. Second, my seminary has benefitted. The ability of my school to recruit students, to raise money, and to have credibility has been maintained and perhaps even enhanced. My critic is correct in suggesting that one book of one professor does not make the reputation of an institution, but it does help. But does my personal success benefit anyone from an oppressed group? Perhaps it does, and there are some signs here and there that it might. Because of my moral commitments, I am most gratified when someone from an oppressed group gives me encouragement. But it is very interesting that the benefits to me, to my seminary, and to my social class are material and clear, while the benefits to those who are oppressed are more difficult to identify and evaluate.

5. *What kind of structures, relationships, cultural locations do I need to keep me honest and accountable on these questions*? I assume the possibility of coalitions, partnerships, friendships across social lines.

Eugene (1992) ends her paper on appropriation among women with a hope and a warning:

> I cherish the dream work that allows shamans and sheroes and sisters of every race and class and culture to sit down with one another around the table of professionalism in the world of academe and around the table of solidarity with the oppressed. I have a dream that the tables can overlap, that they must overlap — that the table of professionalism and the nourishment of academe must serve and become a table of solidarity and community for all those who are oppressed through lack of knowledge, or lack of empowerment in mind and in body. (p. 98)

I want to be a part of this dream. However, Eugene also warns that

> existing power inequities among groups must be addressed . . . . The presence of subjugated knowledges means that groups are not yet equal in making their standpoints known, either to themselves or to others. 'Decentering' the dominant group is essential. While it is unlikely the oppressor will relinquish privilege without a struggle, still the vision of appropriation and reciprocity in our common work remains. (pp. 97-98)

What would the fulfillment of such a dream require? a) conferences in which honest analyses of the power differences between all groups can be discussed without penalty; b) shared control of conferences so that sexism, racism, classism and homophobia can be challenged and disciplined; c) shared control of boards of publications who decide the direction of research itself; and d) shared control of the church and academic institutions by pluralistic boards, administrations, faculty, students, staff, etc. Until these goals are reached, we must create informal structures of accountability and power between us.

I believe that discussions such as this one are crucial steps in the creation of partnerships that are characterized by analysis of power relationships and a moral commitment to genuine reciprocity. May God bless us when we do this kind of work and may peace and justice come for the poor.

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