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# The Image of God Considering Holy Solidarity: Teaching Theological Intersectionality

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## Introduction: Defining Womanist Pedagogy

**W**omanist pedagogy begins with the professor clearly stating and embodying the subjectivities that she brings into a classroom. In Anthropology, this is called reflexivity -- having an awareness of the lens we embody when teaching. The Womanist scholar is aware of her subjectivity-reflexivity as part of her ongoing commitment to excellence in teaching. Thus, she is conscious that the epistemology one has inherently frames the way one thinks and teaches in an embodied fashion -- thus, mind and body are kept together rather than separated as is often done in the Western academy. Womanist pedagogy is then a way of thinking about the sociology of knowledge of the professor and the students, and also encourages the students to unpack said sociologies of knowledge for the scholars they read.

The Womanist scholar is adamant about having a culturally diverse bibliography from a global perspective, and from voices that are typically marginalized. The method she uses for teaching is intentionally steered toward having voices that represent all students in a classroom. For example, if there are students from India in my class, I seek to have scholars from India in the bibliography for the students to read. There is, therefore, a dogged pursuit of not only non-western sources, but of sources from minoritized individuals. A Womanist pedagogical method is nonbinary, nonlinear, and not limited to the acquisition of knowledge for knowledge's sake but bringing forth sources for students to be able to transform knowledge they are producing.

The present article demonstrates applied Womanist pedagogy as defined above in relation to theological intersectionality.<sup>1</sup> I presented the topic of theological intersectionality to the Lutheran School of Theology in St. Louis in July 2021. I situated the theme of theological intersectionality within Holy Solidarity, in order to show how the Triune God who made all individuals in God's image is in solidarity with those on the margins of society. In the present article, then, I am interweaving my reflections on teaching this subject with the original lecture I presented. The sections in italic

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throughout the article are these teaching reflections.

## Teaching Theological Intersectionality

Holy Solidarity begins with Intersectionality. "Intersectionality" means addressing overlapping oppressions of people who carry attributes of God that are stigmatized by the dominant society. For example, Intersectionality would address the multiple oppressions faced by a Queer, disabled, Latina woman, or a straight, White man who is physically disabled and living in poverty. Society discriminates against such people because they are outside what is considered "perfect" and "normal."

### *Reflection*

*At this point, I introduced a video from Kimberly Crenshaw. It was important to show my audience an accessible explanation of Intersectionality from the person who founded this term. I then connected the concept of Intersectionality with my own subjectivity as a Black woman, using the example of Emma DeGraffenreid (whose case Crenshaw cites in her 1989 article) as a comparison, and using theological anthropology as the connecting thread of my remarks.*

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1. Despite the term "Intersectionality" being in use for just over three decades, accounts of theological intersectionality are sparse. Cf. Edward Donalson, III, *The #BlackLivesMatter Movement: Toward an Intersectional Theology* (Eugene: Cascade, 2021), and Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Susan M. Shaw, *Intersectional Theology: An Introductory Guide* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2018).

## Kimberley Crenshaw TED talk: Framing the Problem Intersectionality Video #1 (5:57)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JRci2V8PxW4&feature=youtu.be>

Theological Intersectionality is based on theological anthropology, and that means that as a Black woman, I am made in God's image just as Emma DeGraffenreid is. Theological Anthropology leads to Theological Intersectionality because I was neither born Black first and a woman second, nor a woman first and Black second. Rather, I was born as a woman who is Black, and a Black person who is a woman. I do not have to separate myself because God created me as a whole person. What Emma DeGraffenreid's case teaches us is that while the law may not protect Black women against discrimination (that is, the law may not see us as whole humans rather than as bifurcated -- two separate units where we must choose whether we are Black or women). We are knitted together in our mother's wombs and cannot be unyoked or disassembled like a car. Forcing this choice means we must use dominant frames. In other words, when Black women are arguing about an incidence of discrimination, they must choose to be Black or to be a woman because normativity is based on a binary system; an either/or rather than a both/and.

Conversely, the triune God represents diversity in unity. And because I am made in God's image, there is unity in my diversity, as it was with Emma DeGraffenreid. God protects me, even if the laws in this country do not. The problem is that my existential existence means that my everyday life is negatively impacted by how the historically dominant culture encounters me. I cannot be lifted out of this everyday existence and that is the theological problem -- how to love myself within a society that divides me and others who have attributes that are multi-unital.

### Reflection

*Having clarified the concept and introduced the participants to Kimberley Crenshaw, it was now time to turn to the theological portion of the presentation. I wanted to describe how the Bible could be used as a source for constructing theological intersectionality, as well as to encourage the participants to reflect on their own stories of oppression/exclusion in relation to the chosen biblical text. My choice of going to the Bible for constructing theological intersectionality relates to Katie Cannon's claim of the authority the Bible has for Black women. Cannon writes, "In essence, the Bible is the highest source of authority for most Black women...Jesus provides the necessary soul for liberation."<sup>2</sup> I focused particularly on Acts 9:1-9 because I wanted to show how oppressors and the oppressed have hope in the Triune God's future, to say something about the Johari window. I used The Message translation for its accessibility and understandability.*

2. Katie Cannon, "The Emergence of Black Feminist Consciousness" in *Katie's Canon: Womanist and the Soul of the Black Community* (New York: Continuum, 1998), 47-56.

We begin with God, who made all human beings in God's image. Therefore, all of us are different, yet we are all still made in the image of the Divine. We can then ask what this diversity means about God's Triune Life, particularly related to the notion of unity amid diversity.

Let's turn to a biblical text, Acts 9:1-9, to show the importance of intersectionality for theology today, and how this approach relates to God's diverse Triune life.

Meanwhile Saul, still breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord, went to the high priest<sup>2</sup> and asked him for letters to the synagogues at Damascus, so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men, or women, he might bring them bound to Jerusalem.<sup>3</sup> Now as he was going along and approaching Damascus, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him.<sup>4</sup> He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?'<sup>5</sup> He asked, 'Who are you, Lord?' The reply came, 'I am Jesus, whom you are persecuting.'<sup>6</sup> But get up and enter the city, and you will be told what you are to do.<sup>7</sup> The men who were traveling with him stood speechless because they heard the voice but saw no one.<sup>8</sup> Saul got up from the ground, and though his eyes were open, he could see nothing; so, they led him by the hand and brought him into Damascus.<sup>9</sup> For three days he was without sight, and neither ate nor drank.<sup>3</sup>

As you can see in this passage, Saul has been struck blind. Each of the men who is there has a past they know about, and God does too. This awareness is analogous to the Johari window, a system of seeing what is known and not known about ourselves and others. Part of the strength we can take from God's ways in Acts 9:1-9 is that even when systems try to exclude us, Holy Solidarity is doctrinal. We begin with God, who made all human beings in God's image. Therefore, all of us are different, yet we are all still made in the image of the Divine. We can then ask what this diversity means about God's Triune Life, particularly related to the notion of unity amid diversity.

Saul believes he has the authority to make the decisions of

3. Scripture quotation from *The Message*. Copyright by Eugene H. Peterson 1993, 1994, 1995. Used by permission of NavPress Publishing Group.



Henry Tanner, "The Thankful Poor" 1894

who belongs to the Way -- that is the early Christian church -- and who doesn't. He takes it upon himself to marginalize and/or have these people killed. From biblical times until today, religious fundamentalists and lawmakers join forces to institute laws and regulations to further marginalize the Other. Saul was one such religious fundamentalist who asked Rome for the authority to persecute "people of the Way," meaning that they were othered. Our spiritual ancestors were murdered because of their minoritized status with dominant power holders of their day. In this passage, God intervened, making Saul blind for three days, whereupon Saul came to terms with himself, and hence he repented.

This passage relates to my thinking on intersectionality because it demonstrates to those who live with oppression that God sees them, and God sees those who are perpetrators of the oppression. God has the final word because God can turn situations around that are so unbearable to live with, coming from and actively "sourced" by those with power to seek out those who are vulnerable because of their ascribed attributes -- that is, those attributes God carries, but that dominant culture dislikes. There will be justification, just as Jesus was resurrected, because God sees the

uninterrupted perils that marginalized people live with. That is the reason for hope coming from the triune God. The narrative of Saul becoming Paul also gives hope, because it provides evidence that, when those with power suffer, they, too can feel the suffering the oppressed have in their daily lives. Thus, Saul becoming Paul is a lesson for the perpetrator, as well as the oppressed, about the power and authority of God.

### *Reflection*

*In teaching, we need to enter a classroom attempting to engage a variety of sensory modalities. One could therefore use a piece of music, a painting, or a film related to the particular themes one is addressing. For the topic of theological intersectionality, Henry Tanner's 1894 painting "The Thankful Poor" is a helpful visual aid.<sup>4</sup>*

*I then asked the participants to get into small groups and enact the passage I presented to them. My rationale for doing so is the belief that*

4. Visual found at: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Paintings\\_by\\_Henry\\_Ossawa\\_Tanner#/media/File:The\\_Thankful\\_Poor,\\_1894.\\_Henry\\_Ossawa\\_Tanner.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Paintings_by_Henry_Ossawa_Tanner#/media/File:The_Thankful_Poor,_1894._Henry_Ossawa_Tanner.jpg)

when we enact the Scripture stories, our bodies encounter the Scripture through our senses, not just by hearing or cognitive recognition of the stories. Like visual art, then, Scriptural enactment engages multisensory approaches to teaching, in order that theology might become a lived and embodied endeavor.<sup>5</sup> After the enactment, I asked the class to reflect and share a time they have minimized or excluded someone. The goal here was to set up the notion of intersectional analysis as being pertinent to all people.

I would now like to do an exercise with you based on this scripture. You will be put into small groups; I would like you to think about acting out the scripture for your congregation. How would you do that? What role would you pick? After you do that, I'd like you to think about a time that you, like Saul, minimized people, and what that looked like? It might be how you have seen others minimized rather than how you have done the minimizing.

### Reflection

*It was then time for an additional video on Intersectionality, in order to show the multiple variations of this dynamic concept. The purpose was to encourage the participants to think of who Christians should be in solidarity with, in terms of resisting the temptation to name other people's traits outside of dominant society as "shortcomings," when, from a theological view, they are reflections of God.*

### What is Intersectionality? Intersectionality Video #2 (3:53)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3qhadch9oDo>

Intersectionality complexifies who we are in solidarity with because we take into consideration the things that our society has named as "shortcomings," even though they are reflections of God. For instance, when we say other individuals with a disability "are not proficient" in something, we are saying God is deficient because that person is made in God's image. Intersectionality thus brings together a diverse collection of human attributes that society has named as "Other," deciding which people do not fit in, and shows the power of overlapping oppressions, as society tries to be God and to exclude those who are deemed as Other, even to the point of killing people. This is what happens with some forms of policing, the Native American children in Canada and the United States who did not fit into white Roman Catholic culture, 21-year-old Robert Aaron Long's murder of Delaina Ashley Yaun, Xiaojie Tan, Daoyou Feng, Suncha Kim, Soon Chung Park, Hyun Jung Grant, and Yong Ae Yue in Acworth, Ga., Derek Chauvin's murder of George Floyd, and even Matthew Shepard's murder in 1998.

Related to the examples I have just given; I am waiting for God to act in a similar way as God did to Saul in Acts 9 for those

5. Cf. Holly J. Inglis, Kathy L. Dawson, and Rodger Y. Nishioka, *Sticky Learning: How Neuroscience Supports Teaching That's Remembered* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2014), Traci Lengel and Michael S. Kuczala, *The Kinesthetic Classroom: Teaching and Learning through Movement*, 1st ed. (Thousand Oaks: Corwin Press, 2010), and Laura U. Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

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of us who live with the consequences of overlapping oppressions. Dominant systems (white culture, heterosexism, ableism, cissexism, etc.) take our attributes given by God and say we are deficient. But being different is not being deficient. For instance, the example of Trayvon Martin in Kelly Brown Douglas's book *Stand your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* is apt. Douglas draws a relationship between the murder of Trayvon Martin by police officers and the crucifixion of the innocent Jesus. Trayvon Martin was deemed deficient because of his skin color -- he was Black. He was suspected of trespassing in a gated community, when, in fact, he lived there with his father. Therefore, he was innocent of any wrongdoing. Jesus of Nazareth was executed as a blasphemer for proclaiming the kin-dom of God over and against the Roman Empire. Douglas's thesis allows for both a new reading of the central Christian narrative of Christ crucified revealing God, and to show how Trayvon Martin also reveals God as a young Black teenager; thus, in the opposite of where dominant white culture expects to find God.

### Reflection

*The last video I showed was an example of a film that addresses intersectional oppressions. I hoped the participants would understand the multifaceted oppressions faced by minoritized individuals, as well as to show an example of how the concept of intersectionality is being addressed in the film industry.*

### "Pride" Trailer Intersectionality Video #3 (2:30)

Pride Official Trailer #1 (2014) - Bill Nighy, Andrew Scott Historical Comedy HD

The people who "get" intersectionality most are those who have had an attribute that has been minoritized, where they have been hurt, or where they cannot live as their full selves. People who have privilege—who believe God looks like them, and only them (i.e., their dominant feature(s))—do not understand the importance of intersectionality for theology and do not realize how harmful it is to deny the image of God in all people. People thus usually do not think theologically about matters they are not experiencing

themselves, but that harm other people. Learning to do so is thus a matter of intentional integration of theological reflection about our minoritized siblings, rather than only thinking of things that might affect historically dominant people on an individual level.

### **Reflection**

*The final part of my lecture was a constructive theological take on intersectionality, based on the doctrine of the Trinity, and the imago Dei. The connection between intersectionality and theological anthropology was in the background of this concluding meditation, to show theologially how a denial of intersectional oppression distorts the image of God.*

Having noted a deficiency of theological thinking in relation to intersectionality, I shall now attempt to briefly construct what Trinitarian theology might look like in relation to Intersectionality. This proposal relies on what we have seen in Acts 9:1-9 and presents the Trinitarian *imago Dei* as the theological root for incorporating intersectionality into church doctrine and practice through the proclaimed Word of the Gospel.

Human beings are made in God's trinitarian image (Gen 1:26-28). However, the diversity of this trinitarian image has been distorted through the power of systemic sin operating through the historically dominant culture. This dominant culture denies the diversity of the Trinitarian *imago Dei*, saying one group of people are above and/or better than another. The preached Word is an eschatological inbreaking of the reign of God, wherein the full diversity of God's creation is proclaimed. The old has passed away, and the New has come (2 Cor 5:17). The proclaimed inbreaking of the kin-dom comes as an address that strikes the hearer of the Word the way Saul was struck blind by God. In this proclaimed Word, the question "Saul, Saul, why are you persecuting me" (Acts 9:4) now becomes, "Church and/or dominant culture, why do you exclude, oppress, marginalize, kill, and distort the full beautiful diversity of those created in my image?" This Word announcing that the old has passed and the new has come turns Saul into Paul, and leads to justice for the victims of oppression, and the full humanity of the perpetrators of the exclusions resulting from

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buying into the false word of white supremacy.

### **Conclusions**

Intersectionality is a challenging concept for people to grasp. The central point about Intersectionality is that it addresses overlapping oppressions causing trauma to one's body, as a result of powerful systems as searing forces putting people in a constant reactionary stance. One must do a power analysis to fully engage the concept, which was not possible in the class session I taught. Therefore, with limited time, I sought to present an accessible overview of a concept that is best lived, rather than described in and/or limited to academic texts. The goal here was to present the class with a jumping-off point for further integration of theological intersectionality into their daily lives. Multi-sensory teaching was employed, in order that the Scripture story from the Book of Acts might come alive for the participants, and that they might see the connections between the story of Saul becoming Paul, learning to overcome exclusionary behaviors toward individuals who are marginalized by dominant society. Finally, the theological reflection offered here proposed a way to begin the integration of intersectionality with constructive theology, rooted in theological anthropology, with the notion that all people are created in God's divine image. We give thanks to Kimberly Crenshaw for coining the term "Intersectionality." Her work enables us to identify in a text -- and in ourselves -- the problem of excluding those who are different, to move beyond said exclusion, and to embrace the fullness of God's diverse creation.