

The Virtue of Unctuousness?

Toward the Moral Agency of Women in Patriarchal Normative Contexts

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ABSTRACT

In her seminal work *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community*, Katie Geneva Cannon states that a womanist ethics of liberation advocates that “God’s sustaining presence is known in the resistance to evil.” However, as she points out, when the value system of the dominant group is justified and understood as being beneficial to the oppressed, anyone who resists the dominant group is branded as bad, insincere, false, or deviant. Considering Cannon’s observation, it stands to reason that in contexts where patriarchy is understood as normative and benevolent towards women, resisting oppression is not perceived as legitimate or transformative. Thus, a vision for a just, transformative society entails challenging the norms that serve to justify, uphold and maintain oppression. To this end Cannon identifies unctuousness as a primary ethical principle or action guide in contexts of formidable oppression – especially for Black women for whom the social realities of race, sex, gender, and class are debilitating. In her writings, teaching, mentoring, and in personal and professional interactions, Cannon herself embodies the creative tension and balance between resistance and endurance – values which undergird the virtue of unctuousness. In this paper I employ the ethical principle of unctuousness to interrogate the phenomenon of violence perpetrated against women in South Africa as a manifestation of patriarchal normativity. To develop this argument, I will describe patriarchal normativity as the genesis of the problem that serves to mute, silence, exclude, marginalize, exploit and violate women’s dignity and women’s bodies. I will then consider the virtue of unctuousness as a possible liberative ethical response to patriarchal normativity. In the final section I will illuminate how the virtue of unctuousness might be employed in previously male dominated ecclesial spaces.

Violence Against Women: A Brief Introduction from a Feminist Theo-ethical Perspective

These acts of violence have made us doubt the very foundation of our democratic society, our commitment to human rights and human dignity, to equality, to peace and to justice.¹ – *Cyril Ramaphosa*.

1 South African Government, “President Cyril Ramaphosa: Address to the nation on public and gender-based violence,” Speeches, accessed September 30, 2019, [<https://www.gov.za/speeches/president-cyril-ramaphosa-address-nation-public-and-gender-based-violence-5-sep-2019-0000>].
