

ETHICS OF UNIVERSAL WHOLENESS: AN ASSESSMENT OF THE WORK OF PRESTON N. WILLIAMS

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Although the name Preston Williams has been part of my "ethical vocabulary" for some years, I admit that until recently I had little occasion to read extensively his writings and ethical reflections on the shape of American life. The challenge of this paper is just that: to read and to reflect critically and analytically on the work of Preston N. Williams, Houghton Professor of Theology and Social Change at Harvard University. What follows only partially represents the fullness of his ethics. Our intentions are modest. They are based on research on a selection of Dr. Williams' papers examining the elements of the Black experience, culture, and institutions in America. The structure of this analysis unfolds thus: identification of Williams' starting point for a social ethics; enumeration of several anthropological and theological assumptions embodied in his ethics; examination of sources for those norms functioning as authorities in his ethics; isolation of the central hermeneutical principle around which his ethics unfolds; and, an assessment of significant elements of Williams' ethical methodology.

In his present association with Harvard University and in his previous positions as associate professor of Social Ethics at Boston University and director of Harvard's W.E.B. DuBois Institute, Professor Williams has maintained a critical scholarly balance in his ethical reflections on the roles, functions, and contributions of the Black community in American society. His systematic analysis of social policy in American life coupled with his searing critique of racism in American society, is informed by his early life in South Carolina, his educational experiences at Johnson C. Smith Theological Seminary, and graduate study at Harvard University. Furthermore, his identification with the Christian tradition is vouchsafed in his ordination into the clergy of the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America and his professional service as chaplain at North Carolina Central University and Pennsylvania State University. His writings are published in numerous scholarly journals.

IDENTIFYING A STARTING POINT

At least two starting points may be identified for the enterprise of social ethics: one lodges primacy of moral analysis in some theological

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or philosophical *a priori* to be applied to particular situations on the basis of rules of logic and the moral actor's perception of applicability of those rules in given circumstances; the other accepts as primary in the task of ethical reasoning an assessment of human experience to which then the ethicist brings normative claims of a valuing tradition. Such a tradition may be religious, i.e. Jewish, Christian, Islamic, etc., and is seen as ultimately authoritative for the faith community.

Preston Williams chooses to identify with the second of these alternatives as he develops the starting point of his social ethics. For him Christian social ethics begins with the task of *social analysis*. The ethicist seeks to understand the social context of human life, human struggle, human interaction, suffering, and oppression. "Christian social ethics is not simply speculation about the future state of society or the problems and concerns of the powerful and privileged of society. . . It is also critical reflection upon the past with an eye toward correcting the sins of the present."¹ Within the Christian community, the starting point of social ethics for Williams is the life and experience of the members of that community, their past, their present, and visions of their future. Throughout his writings, Dr. Williams appropriates this methodological consideration: social ethics begins with social analysis. The substance of this analysis focuses on the phenomenon of *racism* in American culture. The dynamic of Black experience is a will to endure within a social, cultural, and political environment which consistently denies Blacks, both as individuals and as a group, full status as human beings. His analysis of this aspect about social context leads to extensive research and reflection on the denial to Blacks of America of the appropriate economic, political, educational, and cultural accesses such full status entails. Structures of racism manifest themselves in the social systems of this culture and form the dominant hermeneutical and axiological reference point for the development of Dr. Williams' social ethics. This ethicist perceives the significance of racism in America as "a major national sin of the American people, distorting their thought forms and social attitudes."²

The starting point of social ethics for Preston Williams lies within this experience of social life, American life, this cultural setting dominated by white racist values, power structures, and attitudes. Starting points are important in ordering an understanding of an ethicist's task. It is with the Black experience that Dr. Williams begins. But starting

¹Preston Williams, "The Ethical Aspect of the 'Black Church/Black Theology' Phenomenon" in *Journal of Religious Thought*, Volume XXVI, No. 2, 1969, p. 43.

²Preston Williams, "The Social Gospel and Race Relations: A Case Study of a Social Movement" in *Toward a Discipline of Social Ethics: Essays in Honor of Walter George Muelder*, Paul Deats, Jr., ed. (Boston: Boston University Press, 1972), p. 232.

points do not reveal the fullness of an ethical system. To perceive the implicit direction of Williams' ethical thought we examine the anthropological and theological presuppositions operating in that system. So in this basic level of ethical formulation Preston Williams begins to reveal his stance as a Christian social ethicist.

ANTHROPOLOGICAL AND THEOLOGICAL ASSUMPTIONS

The human family, though unified in biology and physical space, is fractured as a result of differentials of status, roles, opportunities and social space created by the structures of racism. "We are separated brethren," writes Williams in a description of the Black Theology and Black Church movements.³ The implications of a unified concept of *humanity as family* remain frustrated by the social divisiveness of racism. Racism divides the human family. This continuing analysis of racism assumes a central focus in Williams' catalogue of human experience and social relationships, especially Black experience in America.

The history of Blacks in America epitomizes the conflict between an inclusive theory of justice and the reality of white political power. "The Black experience has taught Blacks that they can place little trust in the concepts of justice, equality or love. They know that when these phrases are uttered by white lips they are meant to apply only to white persons."⁴ This overwhelming fact notwithstanding, Williams still affirms the primacy of *human community* as a model for understanding the nature of man. Human community, at its best, becomes an inclusive community, culturally pluralistic, racially diverse, richly heterogeneous. "I demand that my history also be saved. I demand pluralistic communities and a pluralistic world."⁵ The anthropological assumptions of Dr. Williams' social ethics are inclusive, communitarian, and pluralistic. He is guided by a vision of wholeness for the human family in all its ethnic richness.

Williams locates himself confessionally within the Christian tradition. The shape of ultimate reality appropriated from this tradition is that of a non-exclusive God. He will have nothing to do with the tribal gods of limited groups—classes, institutions, professions, or races. The God of Preston Williams is the Judaic and Christian God of Hebrew and Christian scriptures whose worship is best expressed socially in the appropriation of justice through interpersonal and social systems relationships. "The scripture presses, however, for justice beyond

³Williams, "The Ethical Aspects of the 'Black Church/Black Theology'", p. 43.

⁴Preston Williams, "Ethics and Ethos in the Black Experience" in *Christianity and Crisis*, May 31, 1971, p. 106.

⁵Preston Williams, "James Cone and the Problem of a Black Ethic" in *Harvard Theological Review*, Volume 65, 1972, p. 491.

measure, to persons. It sees in the other, the black American, the face of the Christ who claims from the discipline, the white American, his all."⁶ Racism, thus viewed, is personal and social sin. Justice is distributive and inclusive in complexion.

Racism is white society's sin against the inclusive God. In this framework, racism is not simply a sociologically descriptive term. Racism is a theological affront to the Christian community *because* it conceals God from that human community. Racism frustrates God's intentions for human community by drawing exclusive barriers around groups and labelling them as step-children in the human family. Racism is sin as concealment.⁷ Williams illuminates this observation in a discussion of integration. As a social ideal integration strips away the cover of historical contradiction and social betrayal from the originating ideals of the American experiment. The Constitution, the Declaration of Independence, and the Bill of Rights stand as inclusive instruments of human community.⁸ The implications of this theological assumption are clear: one who conceals God distorts self and relations with others. Such are the theological fruits of the social sin of racism as concealment.

Williams leaves to others the explication of hope and grace as theological categories. As best we can draw from his writings, these elements find expression in concrete historical acts and relationships. The civil rights movement, the militant Black Church and Black Theology movement stand as important contemporary signals of hope resident in the midst of racist America. The fact of national Black leadership in American society symbolizes that dimension of hope within the context of sound change. The Black community holds for all humanity elements of grace's concretization in history. Thus, the Black community functions eschatologically for the human community as a sign of hope. The Black community points historically and symbolically to the inclusiveness of God's universal kingdom.

SOURCES OF ETHICAL NORMS

From whence comes the authority of norms and values in Preston Williams' ethics? In responding to this query it is possible to identify at least two principal sources of normative constructions. One is general in nature and finds embodiment in the institutions of Western culture; the other is more communally bound but addresses itself to the

⁶Preston Williams, "James Cone and the Problem of a Black Ethic" in *Harvard Theological Review*, Volume 65, 1972, p. 491.

⁷Frederick Herzog, *Liberation Theology* (New York: Seabury Press, 1972), pp. 33-34.

⁸Williams, "Ethics and Ethos in the Black Experience," p. 107.

claims of universalism. The former is that body of thought and tradition understood under the generic caption *natural law*. By this we understand that tradition or organization in human affairs identifying the ideal state of social relations in egalitarian terms and prefigured in the structure of the universe. Walter G. Muelder, social ethicist and colleague of Williams at Boston University, writes:

Civil society also is grounded in natural law, for man's instinct moves him to live in civil society and isolated he cannot provide for himself. Since every civilized community must have a ruling authority, and this authority has its source in nature, all public power proceeds from God. Rulers possess authority solely for the welfare of the state.⁹

The contemporary expression of this tradition for Williams is the political and social philosophy underpinning the originating documents of the American Republic. With respect to the application of this tradition to the social ideal of a synergistic, pluralistic, and integrated society Williams concludes:

The most important factor in integration is the *ideals* present in original dreams of America and the Christian faith—the philosophies were better than the men or the laws. In spite of the personal views of the Founding Fathers and their unwillingness to condemn slavery in the Declaration of Independence, that document does contain the phrase “all men are created equal and endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights.” . . . Once given life, these ideas have been independent of the control of white groups and persons.¹⁰

Throughout his writings Williams employs the normative source of natural law egalitarianism as one authoritative source for his ethics. Williams' development of this normative construct for social ethical reflection and analysis grows from a positive assessment of the work of James Luther Adams. Adams views natural law as the basis for developing universalistic social norms and criteria for justice in society and writes:

In the main the tendency of integration (of Natural Law) has been in the direction of emphasizing the singleness of humanity and the universality of truly ethical standards.¹¹

⁹Walter G. Muelder, *Moral Law in Christian Social Ethics* (Richmond: John Knox Press, 1966), p. 135.

¹⁰Williams, “Ethics and Ethos,” p. 106.

¹¹James Luther Adams, “The Law of Nature: Some General Considerations” in *Journal of Religion*, Volume XXV, no. 2, April 1945, p. 89; we see a positive relationship between Adams' development of criteria for justice and Williams' development of criteria for decisionmaking in the black community; cf. Williams, “Criteria for Decision-Making for Social Ethics in the Black Community” in *The Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center*, Volume I, No. 1, Fall 1973, pp. 65-79.

This emphasis on universality functions, as we outline below, in Williams' thought as a critical normative and integrative ethical principle.

Of equal importance in his ethics is the *biblical source* of normative principle. Bible transcends ethnicity in the American context. Herein Williams locates the substance of social justice. This element of normative thinking can best be illustrated with statements drawn from his dialogue with James Cone in a paper entitled "James Cone and the problem of a Black Ethic." He writes:

Having been treated as beast and chattel, they (Blacks) demand now that the whites perceive in them the person of Christ and fulfill the injunctions of the gospel. . . .

The scripture presses, however, for justice beyond measure, to persons. . . .

and

The Christian affirmation that blacks and whites are equally the sons of God and must act toward each other as toward the Christ serves as a ground for reparations because white Christians have seldom so acted and should desire to atone for their sins of omission and commission.¹²

Here we see elements of biblical sources for normative structures of justice combine with natural law tradition as embodied culturally and politically in the tradition of the American Republic. These two sources for normative authority ground Williams' social ethical reflection. They provide as well cogent rationale for his judicious critique of American racism. This critique of racism reveals the degree to which American society has strayed from its normative roots.

IDENTIFYING A HERMENEUTIC PRINCIPLE OR OPERATIONAL NORM

How does one bring together the elements of Williams' social ethics in order to understand his principal critique of social relationship and institutions in the American setting? To respond to such a question is to undertake the task of "teasing out" from Williams' ethical analysis that guiding principle or operational norm against which we must test the adequacy of his social analysis and his ethical prescriptions. That hermeneutical principle lies beyond the particularity of Black awareness or white consciousness, beyond the communally protected norms of white racism or the inspirational aspects of Black Power. Throughout his writings Williams makes claims for the *universality of the human experience* as that element rendering critique of existing forms of social relationships valid. Thus Williams may consistently claim that

¹²Williams, "James Cone and the Problem of a Black Ethic," p. 491.

human dignity must be established in opposition to a racist national ethos, an intricate network of social institutions defined by racist norms, and a process of socialization that says white is superior and Black is inferior.¹³

For Williams, the ethical bottom line is "human dignity" or humanness, the bedrock of inclusiveness. It is not some communally bound facet of ethnic awareness or sub-community distinctiveness. In the presence of such a universal, both Black and white persons may evaluate systems and structures which compromise and subvert human dignity.

As he asserts the primacy of universal humanness Williams raises an important procedural issue. How can experience, be it Black experience or white experience, each radically particular in nature, become the basis for generalization about the human predicament? Considering the implicit problem in this issue, Williams invites American Blacks and whites to consider the universality of human ideals embodied in both the enlightened tradition of egalitarian inclusiveness (natural law) and the biblical witness of prophetic religion (scripture). Thus, the particularity of faith as expressed in any given religious community leads to the possibility of generalizing and universalizing those elements of that faith which commend inclusiveness as a norm for social organization. It is the particularity of the Christian tradition which calls into question other particularisms whose exercise frustrates universality as an ethical norm.¹⁴

Williams develops this general hermeneutic for social ethics in a discussion of criteria for evaluating adequacy in social ethics within the Black community. Here again the element of universality assumes primacy among several corollary criteria. After W.E.B. Dubois, Williams notes that "universalism is one of the gifts of black folks to America and the world."¹⁵ Were we developing this description of Dr. Williams' ethics for implimentation within the Black community, it would be useful to examine in detail the other criteria he establishes for decisionmaking within the Black context. Such is not our purpose at this time, and we shall simply identify those additional criteria as presented in an article entitled "Criteria for Decision-Making for Social Ethics in the Black Community." Alongside universalism stand "enlightened self interest, tolerance, freedom of choice, mutuality, distinction between what the community has a right to claim and

¹³Williams, "Ethics and Ethos," p. 106.

¹⁴Williams, "Particularity of Christianity."

¹⁵Williams, "Criteria for Decision-Making for Social Ethics in the Black Community," p. 64.

the form associated with implementation of that claim, and enlargement of justice,"¹⁶ Such as set of criteria function to support the initial and principal claim of universality as the basic hermeneutical constituent.

The Black experience commends universalism to the larger human community as a legitimate test for adequacy of social policy in relation to community welfare and the assurance of humanness in public life. We see this norm appropriated in the struggle against slavery wherein Blacks sought not to enslave their former oppressors but sought a society structured so as to insure full participation for all. In the struggle for full civil rights and social participation in American society Blacks, this century, sought to disenfranchise no one but to extend the franchise and the responsibilities of citizenship to all within the society. Black response to enslavement, oppression, disenfranchisement, discrimination, and other forms of racist social structure has traditionally been a call toward inclusive and open community structures. In general Black response to white racism has not involved a *quid pro quo* retaliation toward past and present injustice. On the contrary the protest movement of the fifties and sixties clearly strove to enlarge the functional community toward the ideal of sound inclusiveness. Again the universal dimension of social ethical consciousness becomes apparent as Dr. Williams writes:

Suffice it to say that most black visions of a racially and socially just community stem from the desire on the part of blacks to be counted as equal, fully person, and citizen, in the human family *and to have all others similarly counted.*¹⁷

Universalism functions in the ethics of Preston Williams, as in the ethical sensitivity of the Black community generally, as the hermeneutical norm for the critique of decision and policy.

ETHICAL METHODOLOGY

It is possible to identify three constituent elements of ethical method which enable Williams to achieve a consistent application of the starting point, grounding assumptions, sources of authority, and integrative hermeneutic he has chosen for his ethics. It is at the methodological level of ethical reflection that these critical aspects of ethical reflection in any system either hang together or disintegrate. In this respect Williams presents a sensitive appreciation for the intricacies of methodology as one of the components of ethical

¹⁶*Ibid.*, p. 66.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, p. 67, emphasis mine.

reflection. First, he develops a social ethics based in serious historical awareness as well as more immediate contextual demands. Therefore, in his analyses of the structures of racism in American culture and life, he carefully develops a body of sound research data on which to base a more contextual or contemporary analysis of the phenomenon. Historical analysis illuminates the critique of contemporaneous racist forms. Williams employs the historical in service to the contextual.

Second, drawing on the insights of Reinhold Niebuhr's *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, Williams outlines an ethical method considerate both of the *personal and relational* aspects of ethical reflection and of the *political and structural* dimensions of social ethics as well. Love and justice do not compete for attention as elements of his social ethics but stand as complementary and constituent components of any responsible ethics. Williams notes:

Relations between Blacks and Whites are not simply relations among individuals. They are relations among groups and as such involve coercion, force, and social conflict. Love and goodwill must be present, but alone they cannot do the job. A social ethic thus will always have present in it political as well as ethical considerations. Nevertheless a social ethic seeks to create a good society and this means that good must reside *not only* in isolated individuals but in institutions and in organizations of men.¹⁸

Third, Williams accepts as methodologically essential the theological tradition of the Judeo-Christian community. In his most critical assessment of the Black liberation theology of James Cone, Williams provides an important insight into his understanding of methodological considerations for theological social ethics. By accepting James Gustafson's approach to theological ethics as derivative of theological and historical tradition in the Christian community, Williams clearly rejects subjectivism as a normative element in his ethical method. This emphasis on reason adds credence to the serious attention he devotes to detailed historical and sociological analysis surrounding and supporting his ethical critique of racism.

SUMMARY

We note that although the focus of Preston Williams' social ethics seems to be contextually bound by the issue of racism in American culture, the substance of that ethics is the universal human family. Critique of structures in that family which keep its members

¹⁸Williams, "Ethical Aspects of the 'Black Church/Black Theology Phenomenon,'" p. 40.

separated, dehumanized, socially and politically disenfranchised, or otherwise rendered less than full participants in the family life, becomes the legitimate focus of social reflection in the Christian tradition. Preston Williams' ethics demands a wholistic integration of human elements of personality and society. His ethics presses for that rich diversity of cultural and historical awareness benefiting from all traditions in the canopy of human historical experience. The social ethics of Preston Williams presses toward an ethics of human wholeness and fulfillment in open community.

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