The Ground and Educational Ministry of Ethics: A (Darkly Hued) Anabaptist Perspective

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Ethics on Planet Earth and in the Classroom

Ethics begins with human birth into an un/known geo-historical world. Any particular human birth world is governed by an underlying ethos or distinctive world view, which (for better, worse, and all points in between) grounds ascribed cultural narratives that feature racial-ethnic-gender-communal-trans/national identities, as well as principles, virtues, values, customs, and common practices that bind human associations in the natural and, for most people, spiritual world(s). Indeed, I set the classroom stage for the teaching of ethics by helping students to understand that complex and subtle social-cultural histories, stories, and ideological understandings always undergird families, communities, societies, and nations. All these domains of human life work in interactive union to shape and reshape the individuals who inhabit these intersectional spheres of human life, which are persistently engaged from within and from without.

Within one's birth-world and beyond it there are universal truths that ground all ethics, namely, the basic human quest to grapple with the contingencies, complexities, tragedies, and promises of natural, temporal, life. In this regard ethics—the art and/or science of continuous moral inquiry, reasoning, and action—routinely meets us in our common desire for safety, security, and protection; in our desire for associations with, and belonging to, those things that give life ultimate meaning and purpose; and in our desire to have our human dignity valued, affirmed, and respected by others.

It is in the context of such universal observations and concerns that I contend in my religion classrooms that ethics, as noted by Dietrich Bonhoeffer is very much, "a matter of history" and "a child of the earth."[1]

[1] A rendering of Bonhoeffer's fuller thought concerning the datum of ethics reads as follows: "Ethics is a matter of blood and a matter of history. It did not simply descend to earth from heaven. Rather, it is a child of the earth, and for that reason its face changes with history as

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Or to put it as many liberation theologians, feminists, womanists, and queer theorists have contended, religious and theological ethics are always informed by historical traditions forged in particular times and places. This notion goes back at least as far as the teleological virtue ethics of Aristotle, who maintained that moral reasoning begins with what is known to us —that is, what is sufficiently self-evident requiring no "reason why," the portion of knowledge about the world that is "without qualification."[2] This point about the earthbound quality of all ethical understanding, whether "meta-ethics," "normative ethics," or "applied ethics," suggests that no ethical system, theory, philosophy, or theology is devoid of a necessary historical ground that roots it in temporal time and geographic place. In this regard, I often draw on the contention of the great African American public intellectual, James Baldwin, who noted that

> . . . the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally present in all that we do. It could scarcely be otherwise, since it is to history that we owe our frames of reference, our identities, and our aspirations.[3]

So it is in the particular context of the wisdom of Black American history and intellectual genius, Christian liberation, Anabaptist ethics of various sorts, and ancient virtue ethics that my teaching of ethics finds its datum as it expands out to encounter and engage a rich variety of other moral traditions of struggle and hope in a cosmopolitan society and world. The ethical ground of my classroom teaching understands that an Aristotelian *politics* (the science of the whole) informs, and is informed by, *ethics* (the science of the part).

While my philosophy of teaching ethics is always in a state of becoming, a foundational understanding I carry into the classroom is that

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well as with the renewal of blood, with the transition between generations. There is a German ethic as well as a French ethic and an American ethic. None is more or less ethical than the other, for all remain bound to history…." See *Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, Volume 10: Barcelona, Berlin, New York 1928–1931*, ed. Clifford J. Green (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2008), 360.

[2] Aristotle, Nicomachean Ethics, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), 1095b.

[3] James Baldwin, "The White Man's Guilt," *Ebony,* August 1965, 47.

teaching is a political activity. By "political" I mean that teaching is a power-activity that contributes to ways in which we employ our various forms of agency to organize our common lives together in the natural-spiritual world. What goes on in classrooms is both a reflection of, and a contributor to, the politics of living that is happening in families, communities, the wider society, and the world. Hence, as a politics, teaching is an activity related to the pursuit of power/influence, status, recognition, belonging, and control (often involving a variety of methods, strategies, maneuvers, and intrigues).

Given my view that any vocation, including teaching, ought to serve as a foreshadowing of the better moral world that people of goodwill seek to create, I tend to employ a collaborative, interactive, and dialogical seminar style of learning, with inclusive language as a communicative foundation. Even with this pedagogical foundation, it is still important that the art of lecturing be employed in order to lift out salient themes that might not appear so obvious in the texts or other materials under consideration.

As a teacher interested in religious, social, and philosophical ethics, as well as in constructive theologies, cultural criticism, and the role of religion in public life, I hope to help place students' (and my own) constructive/normative assertions and moral commitments in conversation with various contemporary and historical ideas, figures, and social movements. I wish to assist students in developing their capacity to engage difficult moral problems in more complicated and subtle ways. As they discuss strong and opposing views about some of the most provocative ethical issues of our time, I try to foster an atmosphere where all members of the class can feel relatively comfortable expressing their views. Here it is important that all are treated with dignity and respect, as arguments that some will surely find objectionable will require that others be intellectually, morally, and psychologically vulnerable to views other than their own. Of course having said this—and with the best of intentions—liberal arts instructors like me will sometimes find themselves participating in the arduous task of discerning when a student's (or my own) opinion or position crosses the line, and then regulating accordingly. This is always dicey terrain both inside and outside the classroom.

Race, Mass Incarceration, and the Black Body:
Teaching as Ethical Ministry

I offer two specific case examples of the trajectory of my classroom teaching in light of my contextual ethos in the United States and at Earlham College, a Quaker liberal arts college. The social consequences of mass incarceration in the United States have been substantial. The complex intersections of bureaucratic, political, economic, and media-driven forces that fuel excessive spending, bodily confinement, community supervision, and surveillance as means of domestic crime control and corporate profit have compromised the societal good in the US. In her widely read and debated text, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in an Age of Colorblindness*, Michelle Alexander correctly notes that the entire collection of institutions and practices comprising the criminal justice system is not an independent system. Rather, the criminal justice system is "a *gateway* into a much larger system of racial stigmatization and permanent marginalization." She goes on to contend that "This larger system, referred to . . . as mass incarceration, is a system that locks people not only behind actual bars in actual prisons, but also behind virtual bars and virtual walls—walls that are invisible to the naked eye but function nearly as effectively as Jim Crow laws once did at locking people of color into permanent second class citizenship."[4] Indeed, "The term *mass incarceration* refers not only to the criminal justice system but also to the larger web of laws, rules, policies, and customs that control those labeled as criminals both in and out of prison."[5] There is no doubt that the new Jim Crow, this new insidious caste system, has seriously exacerbated the destabilization of Black communities. With regard to the collateral social consequences of mass incarceration, Black communities experience a quite disproportionate brunt of the nation's commitment to the new Jim Crow.

As a religion professor and director of a Program in African and African American Studies at a peace church liberal arts college, I view my

[4] "Jim Crow," the term commonly used for the systems of forced Black segregation and disenfranchisement in the Southern states from roughly 1865 to 1965, is inclusive of state and local laws, customs, and common social practices that restricted voting rights and relegated Black citizens to inferior public accommodations, housing, schooling, employment opportunities, and other markers of full and complete citizenship.

[5] Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2010), 12-13.

teaching and scholarship as a Christian ministry against this state of affairs. My teaching of ethics concerned with race, mass incarceration, and the Black body can be seen in two courses I conduct as an expression of my vocational ministry: Criminal Justice and Moral Vision, and Religion and Culture of Hip Hop. After commenting on the socio-religious trajectories of these courses, I will offer something of the theo-ethical thinking and attitude that informs, and is informed by, my ministry of teaching.

In Criminal Justice and Moral Vision, my students and I work to articulate various religious and other moral visions that might serve as resources, inspiration, or foundations that might inform confrontations with the nation's new Jim Crow. From the start, I want students to understand the social context in which the course exists. I want them to know that I recognize that Black males are not the only group disproportionately targeted by US criminal justice systems. Indeed, Angela Davis's observation that the prison-industrial complex "trains its sights on black women and other men [and women] of color, as well as on poor white people," cannot be ignored.[6] I do think, however, that some initial focus on Black men, and on Black communities in general, is appropriate because they represent the nerve-center (the ground zero) of debates over race, mass incarceration, and the Black body.

To say that a focus on Black people is to focus on the nerve-center of the debate over mass incarceration is simply to say that no other large community of US residents shares the same burden of disproportionate confinement and overall criminal corrections sanction, supervision, surveillance, and death. With the possible exception of the one or two percent or so of Native Americans, the prominence and urgency of a focus on Black "affirmative action" in the nation's carceral matrix is difficult to overstate. African American males make up less than 7 percent of the US population, yet they compose (perhaps conservatively) approximately 37.5 percent (750,000) of the of the nation's jail and prison inmates. Taken together, African American males and females represent (nearly) half the nation's inmates.[7]

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[6] Angela Y. Davis, "Race, Gender, and Prison History: From the Convict Lease System to the Supermax Prison," in *Prison Masculinities,* ed. Don Sabo, Terry A. Kupers, and Willie London (Philadelphia: Temple Univ. Press, 2001), 35.

[7] If Joseph Ryan is correct, by April 1999 Black people accounted for 65 percent of US inmates.

More than 600,000 Black males between the ages of 20 and 39 are being imprisoned, a devastatingly high number.[8] More Black male bodies occupy prisons and jails than are in higher education: "for every black male who graduates from college, one hundred others are in prison or jail."[9] Unfortunately, since the commencement of the 1980s "war on drugs," "the same disproportionate pattern is occurring with African-American females, whose rate of inmate growth has now surpassed that of males."[10] With the staggering increase in the confinement of Black female bodies since the 1980s, we see a significant expansion of the historical psychosexual and fetishized surveillance of the Black female body, along with the much higher rates of criminalization of their bodies.

The highly racialized state of the new Jim Crow expresses significant underlying anxieties within the body politic; these racial anxieties get expressed in the disproportionate stopping and frisking, sanctioning, and killing of the Black body.

One of the dimensions of what I am saying is episodically evidenced in the paramilitarized police terror, supervision, and surveillance of individual Black bodies and whole communities, as in Ferguson, Missouri, and in West Philadelphia, where in 1985 some sixty blocks were destroyed when a helicopter primed for war dropped a military explosive on the MOVE family headquarters, killing eleven adults and children during a standoff with police. Militarized police forces become increasingly frequent, as the armed forces turn over more and more of their weapons of war over to domestic police forces. The specter of hyper-paramilitarized policing in Black communities is evidence of a hegemonic order (both overt and covert), which routinely manages and punishes the perceived threats that frequently get mapped onto Black bodies.

See Joseph Ryan, "Black Prison Population Approaches One Million," *Socialist Action,* April 1999, www.socialistaction.org/news/199904/prison.html.

[8] James Lanier has reported that, as of July 2003, more than 596,400 Black males between the ages 20 and 39 were incarcerated. See James R. Lanier, "The Harmful Impact of the Criminal Justice System and War on Drugs on the African-American Family," *National Urban League Annual Report 2003*, 4, nul.iamempowered.com/files/report_attachments/2003AnnualRpt.pdf.

[9] Lanier, "The Harmful Impact."

[10] Ibid.

Leading up to this state of affairs is a long religious and racial history that has psycho-sexually degraded and criminalized Black bodies. From slavery, to the narratives of Jim and Jane Crow, to today's new Jim Crow, Black people have lived as a pariah people both resisting and conforming to anti-Black racism, which today is a constant feature of mass incarceration. The racial ethos governing Black bodies gets created and recreated by the routine discriminatory actions of individuals and systemic institutions under the influence of excessive national anxiety, fear, hate, vindictiveness, cynicism, ignorance, latent and overt feelings of White cultural superiority, and the desire to control and manage the surplus populations needed to secure cheap labor and high profits in an advanced capitalistic society.

With respect to the policing of Black bodies, I suggest to students in the Criminal Justice course that, among many other things, military-style policing and surveillance in Black communities functions as if these communities were a caste of domestic enemy combatants.

In the Religion and Culture of Hip Hop course, my students and I work to get at the moral significance of Hip Hop as a religious and cultural force adequate to mount a fight against the new Jim Crow. Viewing Hip Hop as a religious and wider cultural phenomenon, this course examines its synchronistic embrace and employment of traditional (sometimes transcendent) religious symbols, myths, and rituals. The course also explores the possibility that Hip Hop itself has become a "religion" to which many young and middle-aged people give their faith and fidelity as they pursue various desires for identity, justice, love, peace, and freedom. As is true with any religion, life philosophy, or other foundational commitment, my students come to understand that Hip Hop as a cultural force, just like religious institutions, has its "ever-changing mixtures of life-giving and malignant tendencies."[11]

The ministry of this course aims, to a significant extent, to get a deeper understanding of the population of young people whose embrace of Hip Hop culture might provide moral resources or foundations for seeking bodily, communal, and spiritual identity and justice against mass incarceration. We examine Hip Hop because it now finds social-political expression and

[11] Jeffrey Stout, "Rorty on Religion and Politics," in *The Philosophy of Richard Rorty*, ed. Randall E. Auxier and Lewis E. Hahn (Chicago: Open Court Publishing Co., 2010), 524.

cultural-stylistic form in most arenas of American life. Bringing to bear written texts, music, film, and other media sources, the course examines this phenomenon as a significant religious and cultural force for social change. Issues explored include Hip Hop's syncretism of religious symbols and sensibilities, its racial, ethnic, sex-gendered, and class dynamics, and its language and aesthetics.

A critical underlying viewpoint of this course is that popular culture, delivered in myriad forms like Twitter, Vine, Skype, Facebook, 24-hour television coverage, texting, Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube, LinkedIn, OrKut, Ning, Pinterest, myLife, LiveJournal, Yik Yak, and so on, has become the primary pedagogical medium for masses of people who want to understand and interact with the moral realities of life. Popular culture is the site of a whole lot of moral education and miseducation; this is especially true for those born in the generation of students currently occupying today's classrooms.

Finally, a word regarding the question of how my teaching informs, and gets informed by, my commitments to a Christian "theo-ethical" praxis that responds to the new Jim Crow. It is critical that any Christian contemplating the radical, countercultural, nature of Christian justice and love faces the realities and memories of the new Jim Crow dead on. We Christians, who are all too human, with trembling rage, fear, and anxiety, must stare into the pale dead face of our misery and anger on account of Ferguson, New York, Oakland, Cleveland, Beavercreek, Baltimore, Chicago, Baton Rouge, Falcon Heights, Tulsa, the Middle Passage, Slavery, and the entire New Jim Crow with the memory of an executed-yet-living God to guide us while living at the crossroads of Good Friday and Easter. A theo-ethical approach of difficult Christian love will also mean confronting the understandable and all-too-human Black bloodthirst for retribution as tragically expressed in the executions of New York City police officers Wenjian Lu and Rafael Ramos (by Ismaaiyl Brinsley), and the White Texas cop Darren Goforth, who was shot 15 times in the head and back by Shannon Miles. Peaceable Christian justice and reconciliation does not turn its back on any of this.

I tell my class that my Christian participation in a politics of radical human intimacy must lead me toward undoing practices and consequences associated with the systemic police violence visited among our communities

every day. I tell students that even peaceable Christians, in this moment, need a politics of pissed-off Christian intimacy that understands God's love of all creation to be the story in view of which they pursue reconciling justice and love in real time. Without getting into the thick systematic theology that arises from and informs my thoughts here, my attitude these days affirms a radical perusal of (not so fast) forgiveness and reconciliation in a manner that loses my civility, while embracing reconciling grace as the measure of supreme Christian love. A tricky moral balancing act, indeed.

In this regard, we Christians need to get a deeper understanding of what the cost of standing with the oppressed and marginalized really entails in contemporary US society. A theo-ethical response to the present situation will require that more of us commit to a much better understanding of the ordinary activists of the Hip Hop generation who insist on prominent roles in leading the struggle against the New Jim Crow. This will no doubt be very difficult for some seasoned adult Christian activists of an older generation. That youths and young adults are playing a prominent role against dimensions of mass incarceration can be seen when social media like Vine, Instagram, Facebook, and especially Black Twitter (with hashtags like #iftheyshotmedown," #IfTheyGunnedMeDown, #BlackLivesMatter," and #SayHerName) are employed to mobilize cross-racial and ethnic coalitional masses of young people onto the streets of many American cities.

Christian ethicists of every age in North America need to figure out what to make of the Hip Hop generation in times such as these, a time when J. Cole mobilizes Black young people with his tribute to Michael Brown called "Be Free," a half-century after "We Shall Overcome" first hit the blood-soaked streets of protest, justice, and freedom. This is the same J. Cole whose new, already best-selling album, *2014 Forrest Hills Drive*, contains the track "G.O.M.D." (Get off My Dick). Increased, uncomfortable, and hopeful Christian companionship with the Black youthful generation, who bear the brunt of excessive punitive policing, community supervision, correctional confinement, and death within the new Jim Crow, signals the risks of faith that requires Anabaptists getting our Christian convictions about peace and reconciliation fucked up in the name of Jesus Christ. Indeed, my contribution to the teaching and articulation of Christian ethics has now become a costly, unsanitized, and often raggedy theo-ethical approach that dances toward

justice and love in this particular place and circumstance of time.

Grounding moral confrontations with the new Jim Crow in the classroom, I ask students to consider, discuss, debate, evaluate, and critique the professor's commitment to the moral clues that present themselves in the Christian God's self-unveiling as the lowly-born, tortured, spat upon, beaten, crucified, and risen Jesus Christ of Nazareth. I argue with them and they argue back that the way of this humiliated Jesus has been demonstrated in a Gospel tradition which aims at the restoration of justice, love, and grace in human relationships. Jesus sets us ablaze with active hope for justice and love, for friend and foe alike. The grace modeled for Christians in the Jesus tradition is a profound justice and love for others that speaks of our primal interrelatedness, our radical mutuality for the cause of difficult, costly, and reconciling liberation from the new Jim Crow.

Black and Anabaptist Virtue Ethics in the Classroom

My teaching of theological (and more broadly religious and philosophical) ethics in relation to my teaching about mass incarceration, as well as across other interdisciplinary courses, is grounded in my constructivist membership in a historically forged American Blackness and with my membership in the Mennonite Church USA. My more than decade-long vocation as professor and program director at a Quaker institution has been undergirded by a committed Anabaptist Mennonite faith perspective, and a cultural-political praxis that seeks to correspond with an active hope and vision for a reconciled society and world within an *eventually* just and peaceable Christian framework of love. It is with humility and respect that I affirm the difficult and hope-inspired work of Jesus Christ in space and time. As I see it, Anabaptist Mennonite faith, hope, and love work in the service of engaging partnerships of often costly grace, and peaceable reconciliation among a complex diversity of conceptions of happiness, which my students are more than happy to school me on. Indeed, my teaching is inextricably connected to what I hope are love-inspired relationships with the wider organic and inorganic world.

I deeply believe that the pursuit of Christ-centered love in the classroom, even when not specifically articulated, foretells, for me as a Black and Christian professor, a vision of ever-closer reconciliation with the Christian God. Such

reconciliation, at once unspeakably difficult and beautifully sublime, must commit itself to critical conversations and partnerships with interlocutors across the liberal arts disciplines and university professions, in churches and other places of worship, and in the wider society and world. Many interlocutors will no doubt have commitments to religious, philosophical, theoretical, and other foundations of truth and justice very different than those of Christians, whose reconciliation even among ourselves continues to be in a state of becoming.

At the heart of my teaching ethics is a difficult, joyous, and ongoing embodiment of the theological virtues of faith, hope, and love—as well as the cardinal virtues of classical antiquity, derived from Plato and adopted by Christian tradition: practical wisdom, courage, temperance, and justice. Always attending to the development of Christian character, or "excellence" in community, my teaching is meant to express a moral commitment to the temporal-systemic reconciliation of that which is conflicted, alienated, or estranged. Foundationally, Christian love (principally *philia*, *eros*, and *agape* as the ultimate scriptural forms) lies at the heart of present and eschatological Christian reconciliation with the God who offers into human history the "politics of Jesus" as a supreme yet historically contested gift. Trying to live out a politics of what I imagine to be a "hold-up-not-so-fast" reconciliation has been the aim of my work as I teach against, for example, highly racialized mass incarceration and paramilitary policing at home, and against the Israeli occupation of Palestine abroad.

I wish for my students to absorb well the domestic realities of life's complex material and moral estrangements, as well as signs of a better hope, which lie both within and beyond the immediacy of the professor's or student's particular narratives of life: we must pay moral attention to clean water; adult literacy; corporate degradation of weeping mountains stripped for profit around the world; monstrous narratives of genocide that routinely accompany human history; gang violence, brutal policing, imprisonment culture; First Nations rights; exploited-yet-dignity-inspired migrant farm workers of North America; courageous survivors of devastating natural disasters worsened by the weight of racial and ethnic xenophobia; and gross indignities of a domestic and world-wide slave trade that ensnares predominantly women and girls in numbers too great to count.

I try to tell students that a critical and necessary domestic focus on reconciling moral hope ought not to preclude paying active attention alongside others to the confounding levels of human alienation, neglect, and hostility beyond North America. Moral attention must be given to the Middle East, Sub-Saharan Africa, the wide expanses of Asia, Eastern and Western Europe, Central and South America, the Caribbean, and even, perhaps, to J.R. Tolkien's fictitious and factious "Middle Earth" representing the elusiveness of creaturely reconciliation on grounds that are sexed, gendered, racial, tribal, greed-laden, religious, and otherwise. I invite students to give their ethical lives to the service of the elusive moral good, right, and fitting, whether they are ultimately committed to the Christian Christ, the Muslim Allah, the Jewish Adonai, Buddhism, Hinduism, atheistic or agnostic human reason, scientific truth, Voodoo, Obeah, Santeria, Jainism, Daoism, Deism, or any other spiritual or secular ethical foundation or admixture thereof to which they offer up their faith and fidelity.

From wherever my students' (and my own) moral foundations emerge, a robust dialogue concerning the life-affirming, versus death-dealing, elements of life together is routinely present. Indeed, my vocation of teaching ethics and scholarship at a Quaker college has been deeply inspired by a reconciling, interrogating, and unyielding embrace of Christian faith, which actively lives (once again) at the intersection of Good Friday and Easter.

I suspect that living at such an intersection reflects the peacable ethical teaching of Anabaptist Christians, whose call is to foster human interconnectedness, belonging, celebration, and joy in a manner that affirms the Gospel in both our particular societies and the wider world. This is to say—drawing on Menno Simons, Allen Boesak, and Karl Barth, respectively—that teaching ethics signifies the profound Christian confession that "true evangelical faith cannot lie dormant: It clothes the naked; it feeds the hungry; It comforts the sorrowful; It shelters the destitute; it binds up that which is wounded; It fights poverty, seeks justice, [respects and preserves the natural world] and foretells [of] peace."[12] Such reconciling faith must never be "an

[12] Quoted with some paraphrasing and addition from Menno Simons, *The Complete Writings of Menno Simons*, ed. C. J. Wenger (Scottdale, PA: Herald Press, 1956), 307, and Allen Boesak, in Bob Goudzwaard and Harry de Lange, *Beyond Poverty and Influence: Toward an Economy*

escape into the safe heights of pure ideas" (theological or otherwise). The pursuit of such reconciliation is "an entry into the need[s] of the present, sharing in its suffering, its activity, and its hope."[13]

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of Care (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 72. The original Boesak source, "God van de armen" ["God of the Poor"], is in *Met de Moed der Hoop, Opstellen Aangeboden aan dr. C. F. Beyers Naudé* [*Encouraged by Hope: Essays Dedicated to Dr. C. F. Beyers Naudé*] (Baarn, The Netherlands: Baarn, Bosch en Keuning, 1985), 73.

[13] Quoted with some paraphrasing and addition from Eberhard Busch, *Karl Barth: His Life from Letters and Autobiographical Texts*, trans. John Bowden (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1994), 100.