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## Lucille Clifton's Mercy

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Lucille Clifton's *Mercy* (2004):

**"what is not lost/ is paradise"**

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English

The Presidential Seminar on the Catholic Intellectual Tradition

Sacred Heart University

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## Foreword

This chapter - - Lucille Clifton's *Mercy* (2004): "**what is not lost/ is paradise**" - - has been greatly enhanced by the leaders of the Sacred Heart University's Presidential Seminar on the Catholic Intellectual Tradition, led by Dr. Anthony J. Cernera, President, Dr. Thomas Forget, Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs, and Sister Marie Julianne Farrington, Special Assistant to the President. This paper has benefited also from the scholarship of several guest speakers. The participants provided a lively and intelligent exchange of ideas.

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Lucille Clifton's *Mercy* (2004):

**"what is not lost/ is paradise"**

In *good woman: poems and memoir* (1969-1980), Lucille Clifton begins to develop a rhetoric of spirituality that informs her subsequent volumes of verse: *next* (1987); *quilting poems* (1991); *the book of light* (1993); *the terrible stories* (1996); *blessing the boats* (2000); and *voices* (2008).

Discernible in the poetic output of this formidable African American poet is a knowledge of different spiritual traditions (Western, African, Asian) which is substantiated by an intimate understanding of Scripture and is indelibly marked by an inextricable affiliation to African American spiritual traditions. **Clifton interweaves these thematic threads interweave** a new spiritual quest, the search for spiritual realities. Notable in Clifton's search is the influence of two major narratives: the "mundane story" and the "sacred story" which are an integral part of African American spiritual traditions as fully discussed by Theophus Smith in "The Spirituality of Afro-American Traditions" (372). The quest in Clifton's poetry, moreover, is both private and collective. This creative tension "between the individual and the collective voice in African American poetry is exemplified by [Langston] Hughes' poetry and perfected by Clifton" according to Bonnie Raub in "'The Light that Insists on Itself in the World': Lucille Clifton and African American Consciousness" (356). As a poet, Clifton is often besieged by both a degree of certainty and uncertainty. In the early poem, **"confession"** (in *good woman* 220), Clifton asks a penetrating question that is asked by the spiritual quester at the beginning of the search:

Father

What are the actual certainties?

Your mother speaks of love. (20-22)

Both early and recent scholars have pointed to Clifton's spirituality as it transpires in the body of her work. Bonnie Raub in the essay mentioned above refers to the similarities between Walt Whitman and Lucille Clifton, a connection made often among scholars, by stating: "Cheryl Wall observes that Whitman and Clifton share aesthetic, political, and spiritual affinities. For both, the poetry of the Bible, colloquial speech, and popular music are key poetic referents (356). Raub continues to write that "Audrey McCluskey compares several similarities between Emily Dickinson's and Gwendolyn Brooks' styles to Clifton's and "identifies the fact that Clifton and Brooks share a "racial and spiritual legacy" (356-57).

In a "report from the angel of eden" (*Blessing the Boats*, 32) the angel wonders "what now becomes what now/ of Paradise" (32-33), now that Adam and Eve have been expelled from the garden. In *Mercy*, Clifton situates herself and the reader amid the terror of September 11, 2001, and excavates from this horrific tragedy a sign of redemptive liberation. Paradise was not destroyed after the expulsion from Eden: "what is not lost/ is paradise" ("Monday sundown 9/17/01" 7-8, 49). Clifton's most sensitive readers also point to the affirmative tone of her poetry which sustains and uplifts what otherwise might be a nihilistic view of life. Most recently, this dominant characteristic in Clifton's poetry received focus by Tiffany Eberle Kriner in her essay "Conjuring Hope in a Body: Lucille Clifton's Eschatology" (2005). Eberle points out that the modus operandi of Clifton's "Eschatological Project" (187) consists of three parts: "Prophecy and Conjure" (187); "Self and Other" (194); and "Conjuring in the Bible" (198). "Clifton's poetry," she states: "in its pervasive awareness of future possibility and of other people, prophecies and conjures the self, the body, and the Bible. In so doing, it seeks to move actively toward the future and the other [as] it seeks to show and to provide the hope that her world desperately needs" (204).



In another recent essay "Grace and Ethics in Contemporary American Poetry: Resituating the Other, the World, and Self" (2000), Jeannine Thyreen-Mizingou sheds light on Clifton's poetry.

Whereas Eberle Kriner had grounded her analysis of Jurgen Moltmann's *Theology of Hope* (1993), Thyreen-Mizingou situates Clifton's poetry within the illuminating work of Emmanuel Levinas (phenomenologist, deconstructionist, and Jewish midrash exegete) and the modern Catholic theologian Karl Rahner because "a graphing of Rahner's grace and Levinas' ethics demand a transrational understanding that can best be articulated in poetic language" (68).

Exploring selected poems by Wendell Berry, Lucille Clifton, Robert Lax, Denise Levertov, and Richard Wilbur, Thyreen-Mizingou develops a working paradigm "to locate grace and ethics" (68) in contemporary American poetry. The urgency that underscores her five-part paradigm is the desire to find an alternative to traditional theology, one that emerges from the poetry which "engages the spiritual and ethical as inseparable" (70). Clifton's poetry concretizes a large part of Thyreen-Mizingou's fivefold paradigm, especially the quest "to find grace incarnated in history" (68). According to Rahner, "grace enters daily experience as a reality given by God; our history and God are intertwined in Jesus Christ" (86). The subtext of this poetry is a "suspicion towards metanarratives, where narratives (type of religious nature included) are situated as a part of plural discourse as opposed to monistic impulses" (68). The work of Levinas and Rahner leads Thyreen-Mizingou to articulate and construct the following paradigm with which to guide analysis and interpretation of this strain of contemporary American poetry by poets who are cognizant of "'God's prevenient grace'" (Kelly 104). The following paradigm enables the reader

(1) to undo dualistic thinking by way of politics of grace and ethics;

(2) to shift a religious focus from the afterlife to environmental

- ethics, responsibility of the other, and grace;
- (3) to answer accusations of God's nonintervention with an indictment of humanity's failure to respond to grace;
- (4) to find grace incarnated in history; and
- (5) to affirm the commonality and particularity of grace. (68)

Clifton's poetics emanates a significant degree of congruence between modern interpretations of spirituality and postmodern theoretical conversations about spirituality. In nearly forty years, Lucille Clifton has developed a poetics of spiritual realism that bespeaks of spiritual liberation which is based on the Incarnation. Clifton's poetic output, on one level, is an expression of that desire to understand what appears to be the silence and absence of God in a modern and postmodern world. In the process, Clifton "makes possible a rediscovery of history and presence" states Thomas J. J. Altizer in "History as Apocalypse" (156).

This dynamic confluence between theology and art has been noted recently by Michael K. Chung in "The Artist and Karl Rahner in Dialogue." Chung reveals that his ongoing conversation is motivated by the following perception: "I have always perceived that there exists, in the arts, a distinctively spiritual component" (1). "People through the ages," he continues, "have experienced, through the arts, encounters ranging from simple affirmations of what is good to what can be described as Divine encounter" (1).

As both an artist and a Christian, Chung is fascinated by aspects of Karl Rahner's theology. He states that it is the realization and receptivity of God's revelation that "causes Rahner to consider that 'God is the Holy Mystery who is the ground and the horizon of human subjectivity'" (5).

[Here Chung is quoting Veli-Matti Karkainen's *An Introduction to the Theology of Religions* (2003) ]. Chung also asserts that power such as an "apprehension" transcends "denominational or cultural divisions" (5). Essentially, Chung states that "Rahner views God as having revealed himself in profoundly deep and explicit terms within the common human experience" (4) Veli-Matti Karkainen, according to Chung "wonderfully articulates this far-reaching notion" by referring to "Rahner's own words" that "'the human person, therefore, is 'the event of a free, unmerited and forgiving, and absolute self-communication of God.' God's self-communication means that God makes his very own self the *innermost* constitutive element of the human person'" (4). Consequently, God's revelation is limitless: the degree of limitation for this "apprehension" (5) thus depends on the individual's capacity to apprehend a given encounter.

Chung posits that, according to Rahner, "we are, therefore, not merely recipients of grace *a posteriori* in terms of a visible faith but also exist with an inherent component of grace *a priori* in existential terms" (5).

Chung makes further connections between the artist and theologian by stating that it is imperative to recognize that God's revelation rests "on our will and attitude to apprehend in light of our own individual experiences and contexts" (7). When we begin to see the world through "Rahner's lens, we can easily relate art as reflecting the incarnation of God in our essential being"(8). Chung is convinced that it is important "to recognize art as the embodiment of the human experiences" (8). Chung conclusively quotes Trevor Hart who states the following in *Beholding the Glory: Incarnation through the Arts* (2001), edited by Jeremy Begbie: "'The claim made here, then is simply that in those dimensions of our existence, in the world which we recognize as "artistic" there are elements which may serve for us [as] parables, casting light



upon the remarkable claims of faith that in Jesus God has taken flesh and entered the stream of history as one of us” (8). These words relate to a central tenet of Rahner’s theology which in Chung’s words “reflects on the universality of the human experience in reference to Rahner’s beautiful concept of God as having self-communicated all essential self-revelation across a universal plane” (8-9).

In her thirteenth book of published poetry – *Mercy* (2004), Lucille Clifton encapsulates many of these major concepts which have evolved in nearly four decades of poetry making. *Mercy* demonstrates Clifton’s consistent and persistent adaptation of various spiritual traditions to arrive at a vision of interconnectedness between the ordinary and extraordinary in everyday life. It is this pervasive interrelatedness between ordinary events as enveloped in the extraordinary in Clifton’s poetry that finds an objective correlative in Rahner’s “theological investigations.” Numerous of **Rahner’s scholars** reference as important his experiential, existential, transcendental theology. Jeffrey B. Kelly, writer and editor of *Karl Rahner: Theologian of the Graced Search for Meaning* (1992), emphasizes that Rahner is a theologian of everyday existence and ordinary events. Kelly writes that when Rahner was asked “what his greatest religious experience was, Rahner replied, ‘Immersion in the incomprehensibility of God and the death of Christ,’ while quickly adding that this occurred not in prayer and meditation but in life, in the ordinary things” (24).

Unique in *Mercy* is an extended meditation that is grounded and emerges from the devastating events of September 11, 2001. Clifton’s poignant expression of spiritual realism in *Mercy* is informed by several components of her poetics: the prophetic, as perceived in the group of

poems entitled "**last words**"; the conflated lyric-narrative moments in "**stories**"; the elegiac as immemorialized in "**september song a poem in 7 days**"; and the eschatological, notably in the twenty three poems that comprise "**the message from The Ones (received in the late 70s)**."

The most moving section of this superb volume of poetry is the lyrical sequence that emerges as her most penetrating "sorrow song" to date – "**september song**." Compassion for the other underscores the significance of human and divine mercy. Amid the terror, Clifton is able to envision that "**what is not lost/ is paradise**" in "**Monday sundown 9/17/01**" (7-8). This poetic affirmation aligns itself with Rahner's concept of history as "God's universal salvific revelation" (Kelly 21) as apprehended by the poetic imagination. In a most revealing and personal section of his text, Kelly states that in 1970, Rahner "would write a passage that poetically describes God's involvement in history as a liturgy that celebrates both human freedom and divine concern: 'The world and its history is the terrible and sublime liturgy, breathing death and sacrifice, that God celebrates for God's self and allows to be held throughout the free history of people, a history which God sustains through the sovereign disposition of God's grace'" (Kelly 21).

Lucille Clifton's poetic output is further illuminated when read from the groundbreaking perspective developed by Theophus Smith, first, in "The Spirituality of Afro-American Traditions" (1991) and later in *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Transformations of Black America* (1994). Smith's paradigm is grounded on E.W.B. DuBois' theory of the "double-consciousness" which he extends to include "a ritualized intersection between the material world and [the] ancestrally mediated world of spirits" (*Conjuring Culture* ix). The Bible, Smith insists is the medium for such mediation, stating that the Bible is "formulary – a book of ritual prescriptions

for revisioning and, therein, transforming history and culture" (3). "Conjuring" is understood to signify as transforming reality, as one of the many "cognitive systems for mapping and managing the world in the form of signs" (4). It is one of Clifton's poetic techniques to "summon up an image of the imagination" and "of healing" [to conjure, thus is seen as "*pharmacopoeic* of practices (5)]. A whole cornucopia of rhetorical devices emerge from this perspective and these are evident in Clifton's poetics of spiritual realism – "the transhistorical, the ritual positioning, the parabolic, sermonic and invocational (eulogy)" (30) are often visible in her unique linkage between the "earthy and ethnic metaphor" (30). In African American spiritual/literary traditions, the historical is often transformed into a figural situation to represent or signify Black experience (30-100).

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It is the mastery of this matrix of "transformative strategies" (106), derived from the Bible as the "efficacious source of curative transformations" (106), that distinguishes Clifton's poetics and that renders "**september song**" a transformative experience, one that leads poet and reader from terror to hope, from sorrow to affirmation. What catapults the poet and reader toward this pattern of transformation is yet another rhetorical device, a dynamic strategy identified by Lucius Outlaw as 'symbolic reversal' **which Smith thinks that it accounts** for effecting a "transformation of consciousness, leading to authentic existence" (112). Quoting Outlaw, Smith describes the workings of this trope as follows: "'symbolic reversal' a 'reversal of symbolism' [occurs] 'whereby one moves on the level of symbolic meaning...from imposed determination of one's (a people's) existence to those generated by oneself (by the people themselves) in the process of living...that existence in its authenticity'" (192). Even though such a technique was highly discouraged, according to Smith, and marginalized by the missionary movement which negated the power of conjure, it was not destroyed. Its signs are visible in the African-American



sermonic tradition and in the literary and critical tradition of “signifying,” noted in the brilliant work of Henry Louis Gates, Jr., specifically *The Signifying Monkey* (1988).

From the African American sermonic also emerges yet another important characteristic of Clifton’s spiritual realism – the lack of discrimination between the sacred and the mundane. Smith, here quoting Lenore Bennett, states that early “‘black folk tradition...does not differentiate reality into sacred and secular strains.’ The tradition and [African American] who bears that tradition cannot be understood without holding these two contradictory and yet complementary strains – sacred and secular – together in his mind (122). Smith insists that this synthesis is the “essential genius of the [African American] tradition which did not recognize the Platonic-Puritan dichotomies of good-bad, white-black, good-evil, body-spirit (122). “The cosmological imperative” is to “see the world both visible and invisible as a unified whole,” uniting “‘disparate realms’” (141). It is “both/and,” not “either/or” (143).

In *Conjuring Culture*, Smith’s discussion of pacifism as embodied in the work and lives of Ghandi and Martin Luther King, Jr., further illuminates Clifton’s poetry. The history of pacifism in African American spiritual and political traditions which lead to the nonviolence activism of the Civil Rights Movement also sustains Clifton’s poetics. The schema of nonviolent active resistance resides in what Robert Schreiter (also quoted by Smith) states that it is a “power simultaneously to overturn ethnic victimization and transform the victimizer—for its power into realize what he called ‘the beloved community’” (183). Martin Luther King, Jr., moreover, was vastly influential in transforming the Bible for African Americans from a “toxic to an antidotal text” (218). He brilliantly made individuals see that apocalyptic violence is attributed to human hatred “not to a vengeful God” (228).

Insightful have been Clifton's own words on spirituality in a few substantive and eloquent interviews. Notable among these are Michael S. Glaser's "I'd Like Not to be a Stranger in the World: A Conversation/Interview with Lucille Clifton" (2000), Charles H. Rowell's "Interview with Lucille Clifton" (1999), and Hilary Holladay's "Lucille Talks about Lucille" An Interview" which constitutes the concluding chapter of *Wild Blessings* (2004), the first full-length critical study on Clifton's poetry, published before *Mercy*. In *Wild Blessings*, Holladay includes a chapter entitled "The Biblical Poems" and another on "Diabolic Dialogism in 'brothers'" and points out that Clifton is "a spiritually questing poet" (103) ["**brothers**" is an eight-part sequence told from Lucifer's point-of-view and found in Clifton's *the book of light* (1993)].

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Holladay notes that Clifton often has reiterated that she is spiritual but not a professed Christian. Clifton's poetry, according to Holladay, is not only "an effective synthesis of medium and message but also of fusion of the literary and the sacred and of the canonical and the radical" (104). Pertaining to the "Biblical Poems," Holladay observes that experientially, "a lyric poem is an epiphany in verse, a luminous moment" (119). Making good use of J.L. Greene's *Blacks in Eden* (1996), Holladay, as Smith has pointed out, demonstrates the importance of Biblical figuralism in Clifton's poetry, stating "that a radical refashioning of this myth is integral to African American literature" (127).

In her review of Holladay's *Wild Blessings*, Cheryl A. Wall in "Lucille Clifton: Defining What American Poetry Is" (2005) notes that Clifton is "a visionary poet as well as a socially conscious one" (541). According to Wall, Holladay addresses the "'gaps'" or "'the white spaces around lines in a poem, the lacunas that make the written words stand out'" (543) which will enable subsequent critics to understand more of the form and the line, the discipline and the order, that



constitute Lucille Clifton's contribution to American poetry" (543). Clifton's approximation to concrete poetry is conducive to its meditative quality. Wall's remarks address the often minimal and superficial critical response to Clifton's poetry, noting that "the thinness of the critical response to her work contrasts sharply to the robust popularity of her readings" (542). Wall states what many of Clifton's readers have expressed that "critics have shied away from Clifton's poetry in part because it seems too simple to require or reward analysis" (543). What Wall writes is ironically true: "to a significant degree, Clifton is excluded from the formal study of poetry even though follower of poetry, even though followers of poetry eagerly embrace her work. They respond to its capacious spirit – its exuberant and elegiac reflection – and its language that captures the sound of colloquial speech in taut poetic lines" (542). What is not noted is that "Clifton's aesthetic is complex, but it is also subtle" (543).

Recently as noted above, a few critics have begun to discuss the "complex" and "subtle" nature of Clifton's poetry because they have discovered that the thematic cannot be separated from Clifton's poetic style—the literariness of her poetry. Peggy Rosenthal in "In the Beginning" (2002), states that "the lack of capitalization and punctuation, brevity, sparseness, and the seemingly surface simplicity function as do the waters of a reflecting pool, sustaining a lucidity that is conducive to reflection and meditation" (1). Specifically, Rosenthal focuses on two Biblical poems – "**adam and eve**" and "**cain**" (both from *good woman*), yet her analyses apply to most, is not all, of Clifton's poetic output. The parity of the poems gives prominence to "its spaces" which "take on substance [and] become a shaping presence as much as the words themselves" (1). From the early sequence "**some jesu**," "**adam and eve**" consists of five lines:

the names

of things

bloom in my both  
 my body opens  
 into brothers (91)

The lack of capitalization establishes the Adamic and human creativity as second to the Creator, whereas the lack of punctuation and word building simulate the energy of creation and the blooming in the garden of Eden. Clifton wants the reader to participate in creation and to perceive it as the critic Kenneth Burke in *The Rhetoric of Religion* (1961) “as a unifying principle”; that is, to experience “the vision of an original Edenic one-ness, with endless varieties of action and passion...” (v). “The stanza,” Rosenthal states, “enacts its own creation process.... Here is an image of humanity so in harmony with the rest of creation that our power over it is as a blooming in our mouth” (1). “With no period to block the end of the sentence,” Rosenthal points out that ‘my mouth’ seems to transmute – in the space between the stanzas – into ‘my body,’ which ‘opens’ like another blooming” (1-2). Nor is Rosenthal less astute in regard to the poem’s metaphorical significance: “Clifton has chosen a minimalist mode that clears out human society’s clutter, the mess we’ve made by identifying ourselves in contending genders, ethnicities, and nations” (2). The poem’s brevity, Rosenthal concludes, provides “a visual shape which we can take in at a glance: ‘**adam and eve**’ looks like a single deep breath. Stanza one expands as an inhalation, stanza two exhales, so that the whole is a breath of creative life that is the poem’s very being, its meaning” (2).

*Mercy* is also prophetic as noted in the brief review by Kelly Norman Ellis in “Where Voices Congregate” (2005): “Lucille Clifton’s prophetic *Mercy* reads like an oracle’s diary” (4). She “consistently marries sound and sense seamlessly” and “in the four sections of *Mercy*, Clifton gives us notes into her survival of cancer, tender musings on her mother’s life and death, and

collective and personal mournings following September 11, 2001...the last section..renders the terrible beauty of one who has been given the awesome responsibility of listening to the voices of spirits (5). Also, Laura Sheahen in "Chasing the Sacred: Poetry of the Spirit" (2006) , in identifying "the religious poets in America today," briefly focuses on *good woman* (1987) and *blessing the boats* (2000) and isolates Clifton's "remarkable--and wholly original religious sensibility that is often overlooked" (24) She especially points to her "Genesis- inspired poems" (24).

That the power to create is stronger than the power to destroy is of importance in *Mercy*. Written on Rosh-Hashanah, "**7 Monday sundown 9/17/2001**" (p. 49) suffuses the beliefs of two world religions, the crucifixion, and the natural daily cycle with its message of renewal which Clifton perceives as synonymous to celebration of rebirth which substantiates that "**what is not lost/ is paradise**" [.] The workings of "symbolic reversal" add to the power of these last two lines. Expulsion from Eden does not signify that paradise was destroyed or lost. It is the dynamism of "symbolic reversal" that renders the profundity of each of the following lyrics of this memorable and sorrowful sequence, probably the best poem to date to immortalize this tragedy. Violence is inherent in creation, in creativity, and, by extension, in the world of the imagination as in the parabolic and apocalyptic "**september song a poem in 7 days.**"

The first lyric of this sequence "**1 tuesday 9/11/01**" (43) is national warning and an urgent wake up call for those who refuse to see that violence and terrorism are pervasive. The enormity of this death-in-life catastrophe has been experienced by millions of people who live "otherwheres" (5) in

israel ireland palestine

but God has blessed America

we sing[.] (5-6)

The calamity has provided America a propitious opportunity to apprehend that the meaning of  
this divine blessing is

to learn that no one is exempt

the world is one all fear

is one all life all death

all one [.] (10-13)

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In "2 wednesday 9/12/2001," Clifton is moved to confront the terror and the terrorists and

articulates the nature of the fanaticism that drives them and the racism that they foster upon  
themselves, their ethnicity, and religion. Fear of apocalyptic destruction defines this elegy.

Hers is a sermonic exhortation, urging her fellow Americans that

this is not the time

i think

to note the terrorist

inside

who threw the brick

into the mosque

this is not the time

to note

the ones who cursed



Gods other name (1-10)

Thoughtfulness. Understanding. Mercy. These are the agents that can conquer the desperation of terrorists and bring to a halt the dire consequences of revenge which is often founded on a misunderstanding of patriotism and religion that ushers forth further bloodshed, not peace.

These lines poignantly resonate because Clifton here articulates and champions a major theme of African American literature – the ideals of American democracy as embodied in religious and political freedom. Blindness and ignorance will blight the handmaidens of American democracy: religious freedom of worship and political independence. Vengeance against “arab children’s blood” (13) all over America’s streets would destroy the blessing of freedom to be an American:

---

and this is not the time

i think

to ask who is allowed to be

american        America

all of us gathered under one flag

praying together safely

warmed by the single love

of the many tongued God [.] (14-21)

It seems to me that this last line provides a new and powerful metaphor for contemporary American culture – one that is constituted “of the many tongued God.” The spiritual openness of this lyric closely approximates Rahner’s description of a “socially embodied faith of people whose reconciliation with God is a paradigm for the reconciliation of all peoples to God” (Kelly 21).



The depth of the lyrical/epiphanic and narrative/heroic moment of historical magnitude in “**3 thursday 9/13/01**” can only be understood in reference to Rahner’s “transcendental Christology” (Kelly 48-49) where the heroic fire fighters attain Old Testament glory; they have earned their political and sacred badges of courage:

the firemen  
ascend  
like jacob’s ladder  
into the mouth of  
history [...] (1-5)

---

The experience is transcended: the historical is permanent; concrete, internal and external;

secular and sacred. The inferno of 9/11/01 has been transformed into an ascent toward another state of existence. That this lyrical and epic moment, a technique perfected by Clifton, is shared by a multitude demonstrates that Clifton’s rhetoric of spiritual realism closely aligns itself to Rahner’s theological views. Geoffrey B. Kelly states that “Rahner contested that the kingdom of God was coming to be not only in the church but in the world itself” (21). In his later work, he states that Rahner’s “attitude toward mission and church structure *in* the world” (21) is further developed.

In “**4 friday 9/14/01**,” Clifton responds to American’s rhetorical outcry, “why us”? The poet thinks of herself as qualified to respond because as an African American, being but one generation removed from slavery in America, she understands the legacy of fear and terror. Clifton’s empathy toward the horrors of the Middle Passage and slavery is as insurmountable as the empathy that is exhibited by all African American writers:

some of us know

we have never felt safe

all of us    americans

weeping

as some of us have wept

before

it is treason to remember

---

what we have done

to deserve such villainy

nothing we assure ourselves

nothing[.]    (9-11)

In this expression of tearful sorrow, the poet remembers for Americans the suffering endured by African in the Middle Passage and African Americans during slavery lynching, Jim Crow, and other atrocities that followed. A poet who in the line of Blake laments the loss of innocence, nonetheless, repudiates false innocence which acts to add fuel for hatred and provokes additional acts of terror.

From visionary affirmation of the belief "of God's involvement in history" (Kelly 21) and to the need for "the interdependence of all human beings on all others" (Kelly 2a), Clifton in "5 saturday 9/15/01" also approximates Rahner's theological perspective that Christ must be the

summative representative as is parabolically revealed in the Gospels, especially in the miraculous and portentous significance of the Crucifixion:

i know a man who perished for his faith.  
 others called him infidel, chased him down  
 and beat him like a dog. after he died  
 the world was filled with miracles.  
 people forgot he was a jew and loved him.  
 who can know what is intended?      who can understand  
 the gods?      (1-7)

---

The poetic and prosaic/narrative parabolic style of this lyric bespeaks of the strength and depth of the poet's spiritual reality. The first line is one of indisputable truth for Christians. That Christ was called an "infidel" raises the emotional overload that extremists have been able to attain in their accusations toward anyone outside Islam. The suffering endured by Christ, by African Americans, and the Jews during the Holocaust cannot be forgotten. Here Clifton evokes an essential element in Rahner's theology that even though human history has shown itself to be repeatable, the "unspeakable history of the freedom of God and of humanity in an unrepeatable dialogue" will only take place in the divine future "(Kelly 29). Kelly explains that "because the unity of this history still lay at that imperfect unrealized state, shrouded in the mystery of one's own freedom as well as in the freedom of God, Rahner insisted that a person's future was destined to remain unforeseeable and, thereby, radically open to God and faith" (22). Although risky, "such openness and making choices in congruence with the gospel were for Rahner ways in which individuals 'realize what it means to be human and to be related to God'" (Kelly 29). In this elegiac sequence, Clifton's personal history and the history of African Americans and of the

world converge in portraying human beings as suffering people. September 11, 2001, as Clifton expresses in her poetry and viewing the tragedy from Rahner's lens, bring to mind what the theologian calls "a sense of the Cross of Christ and its stark reminder of the inevitable sorrows and unforeseen failures that bedevil human history" (Kelly 29).

Birth follows in "**6 sunday morning 9/16/01**," and it is similar in its joyous tone to an earlier poem "**God send easter**" (77) in *good woman* (1969-1980). She rejoices at the birth of her "new granddaughter" (9), albeit "born into a violent world/ as if nothing had happened" (10-11). Rocked by drastic contradictory forces within and without, she is, nonetheless, "consumed with love" (17), not only for the new baby but "for all of it:

the everydayness of bravery

of hate of fear of tragedy

of death and birth and hope

true as this river

and especially with love

bailey frederica Clifton goin

for you[.] (14-20)

The innocence of this birth is reflected in the unperturbed flow of "st. marys river" (1) which "flows/ as if nothing has happened" (1-2) also runs by the house Clifton resides in outside Baltimore, Maryland. A sense of renewal is also ushered by Rosh Hashanah, celebrated in "**7 monday sundown 9/17/01**." Lucille Clifton's *Mercy* is sustaining because she understands that



the spiritual quest must be renewed, “must be undertaken anew” (13) states Elizabeth Johnson in *Quest for the Living God* especially during personal, natural and the experience of God,” she continues, “is always mediated, that is, made concretely available through specific channels in history” (13). The poet, confronted with the tragedy of 9/11, is cognizant of the spiritual reality that “when circumstances change, the experience of the divine undergoes a shift (13). Clifton is open to this change, recognizing its momentous significance: “images, intellectual constructs, and rituals that mediated a sense of God in one age often do not make sense in the next with its change of perceptions, values, and lifestyles” (13).

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For African Americans such moments of great spiritual renewal have been marked by poignant and encompassing historical realities – The Middle Passage, slavery, lynching, and racism. Clifton’s *Mercy* demonstrates that the spiritual path “always winds through the historical circumstance of people’s times and place” (29). Karl Rahner substantiates this perception of “spiritual and divine realities” (Kelly 148) when he states individuals “can never abstract from what they are, from their ever-new, changing historical reality. For it is not just their unchangeable metaphysical ‘entity’ which they have to insert into the economy of God’s message, but their concrete, historical, ‘contingent’ reality, their ‘existence’ with all it includes” (Kelly 149). After the horror of WWII, Karl Rahner responded to a devastated European population. He situated himself within the moral and spiritual abyss. Johnson states: “holding himself accountable to everyday believers, he focused particularly on those beset by doubts engendered by the precarious existence of Christian faith in the secularized, scientific, industrial societies of modern Europe. He made their doubts his own and responded to them with the full force of his penetrating grasp of the resources of the Christian tradition” (Johnson 30-31).



Lucille Clifton is familiar with “unspeakable things unspoken spoken” (Toni Morrison), which Johnson identifies as “unspeakable suffering” (49). Just as Karl Rahner addresses the suffering of modern Europe after WWII and beyond, Lucille Clifton’s *Mercy* helps readers to think about “God in the midst of such utter breakdown” (53). Thus, a revised concept of God emerges after 9/11 as it did for Africans and African-Americans after their suffering as articulated in the spirituals, gospel, and slave narratives. Lucille Clifton’s “sorrow songs” in *Mercy* are poems that show the mercy of God in light of the radical historical moment in American history.

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