

BLACK CATHOLIC THEOLOGY: METHODOLOGY

SOME REFLECTIONS ON METHOD IN SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY: UNDERSTANDING, METHOD, THE CULTURAL MATRIX, AND FOUNDATIONS

Shawn Copeland began her paper by identifying her intellectual context as the serious impasse facing black theology in the United States based on the ambiguity of African-American theologians regarding method, foundation, and the role of social analysis in theology as well as the relationship of the human and social sciences to theology. Drawing critically and creatively from some of Bernard Lonergan's theological proposals and the insightful analyses of the work of many contemporary African-American and Second and Third World scholars, particularly Cornel West, Copeland contended that theology is required to render a "radical critique of the social surd that is capitalist civilization—a critique of those meanings, values, structures, institutions which are bent to the oppression of peoples of color, to white supremacy, to the degradation and suppression of women, to social and economic exploitation, and to global imperialism."

Accordingly, Copeland asserted that a black Catholic theology must engage a method which is politically responsible. Such a theological method is a "mode of interiority" focused on the search for personal and social authenticity. Such an explicitly conscious method must operate under a set of self-critical directives. Shawn outlined a basic sketch of seven such directives. In brief she stated that a politically responsible methodical theology

1. will address confusion of political thought on the meaning of good, without dodging the basic questions that crop up in knowing what good is. . . .
2. provide[s] a heuristic for the analysis of society and of history that both accounts for and evaluates progress and decline. . . .
3. calls for the identification of the perspective of the theologian, e.g., black, feminist, "third world," womanist, white male . . . [and] the objectification of the foundation reality of who the theologian is in terms of religious, moral, and intellectual conversion. . . . [Thus it] supplies an explanatory account both of the differentiation of consciousness of the theologian and an account of the theologian's failure to submit to religious, moral, and intellectual conversion. . . .
4. recognizes the need for a more adequate answer to the question, What does it mean to be a human person in the context of modernity's turn away from the human person as social and political by nature? . . .
5. grasps philosophy not as a theory in the manner of science or a technical form of common sense, but as performative. The proper data for philosophy is given in the objectification of the theological subject's intentional consciousness and its primary function to promote the subject to self-appropriation. . . .

6. in its effort to participate in healing and creating in history . . . will not ignore the critical historical study of political philosophy. . . . Such a historical study (a) enlarges the theoretical horizon . . . (b) illuminates the theology's critique of social theories uncovering their patterns of coercion and domination, and (c) supports that theology's opposition not only to totalitarian and utopian schemes, but to the acquisitive individualism of the market economy as well. . . .
7. is never a substitute for empirical human science . . . [but] it probes the relationship between the natural and supernatural ends of human living, brings out the continuity of those ends, and adverts explicitly to the concrete meanings and manifestations of the working grace within the cultural matrix.

Adhering to these sevenfold assumptions, black theology "must collaborate actively with the human and social sciences in efforts to apprehend, understand, and diagnose the black human condition" in all its diverse cultural and class complexity. Black theology assumes that black people are human persons "capable of understanding, of conscious and intentional decision making, of transformed and responsible living, of converted relationships." Marred, like all human beings, by the reality of original and personal sin, black men and women must be recognized as authentic subjects engaged in the human processes of religious, moral, and intellectual conversion. The theologian wrestles with the same questions as the social scientist but moves theologians and social scientists to assume responsibility for "creative healing solutions to those problems even when the situation seems most opaque."

In response, Diana Hayes agreed that much of black theology seems moribund and suggested that this is so because in its shift to the academy, some black Protestant theology has lost contact with the people. She questioned Shawn Copeland about the practical application of a politically responsible black theology in terms of the theologian's community of accountability and the relationship between "knowing," that is, analysis, and "doing" or action.

Cyprian Davis responded by raising questions about the use of scripture, and the term "Eurocentrism" in published black theology. He suggested that a more comprehensive perusal of scripture will augment the exclusive use of the Exodus paradigm in black theology. While liberation is a clear and persistent theme, there are other themes which must be explored as illuminating the black human condition; for example, the Ethiopian Eunuch of Acts witnesses Christ with joy after imaging Jesus as the Suffering Servant of Isaiah. The image of Jesus as the self-emptying slave gives a "richer meaning to the history of slavery and servitude." Both these themes have historically enriched and strengthened the self-understanding of blacks as they have related to God.

Referring to the use of the term "Eurocentrism," Davis reminded the participants that this term is a contemporary construction which refers only to a mental and intellectual phenomenon which arose after the Renaissance and Reformation. The early and medieval Church found her center in the Mediterranean world. St. Ephrem was Syrian not European. Neither was Origen, nor St. Gregory of Nyssa. St. Thomas Aquinas discovered Aristotle, thanks to the Arab philosophers in Spain. Augustine was not a Eurocentric theologian. Davis cautioned that contemporary black theologians must be historically conscious and knowledgeable of historical thought prior to the Reformation.

The discussion that followed the presentation and responses focused on the person-community dialectic in Lonergan's thought and its implication for black theology and the need for black theology and other theologies arising from oppressed cultures and peoples to impact and inform one another and the theologies arising from dominant cultures. It was suggested that the workshop on black theology continue precisely to provide a locus for such critical dialogue between black Catholic theology and other theologies. The nineteen participants were thanked for their lively and critical discussion.

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