

## BLACK CATHOLIC THEOLOGY

### RIVERS OF NIHILISM, STREAMS OF HOPE: THEOLOGICAL RESPONSES TO CORNEL WEST'S *RACE MATTERS*

The Black Catholic Theology Group convened to critically reflect upon the increasing phenomenon of nihilism within the Black Community as reported in the writings of Cornel West's *Race Matters*. Participants included Carmichael Peters (Graduate Theological Union, Berkeley), Brian Massingale (St. Francis Seminary, Milwaukee), Barbara H. Andolsen (Monmouth College, New Jersey), and Jean Pierre Ruiz (St. John's University, New York).

Brian Massingale began by noting that this work of West is from the perspective of "black subjectivity and agency" which assumes the equal identity and the fundamental humanity of African peoples. Second, he identified three aspects of West's thought: the manner in which he is rooted in and yet expands the normative principle of black Christianity; the poverty of public discourse on race and its present implications; and the phenomenon of nihilism and the possibility of hope. Massingale's reading of West first focused on the black Christian principle of "moral universalism, i.e., an all inclusive vision of freedom and justice for all" as a norm for the prophetic critique of African American internal affairs. From this principle West advocated a nonracist, nonsexist, nonhomophobic appropriation of the Christian faith. The tendency of perceiving Blacks as a "problem people" rather than as "fellow American citizens with problems" has led to a lack of public discourse on race as an American problem. Current discussions of affirmative action reflect this erroneous approach. Finally, Massingale turned to the subject of nihilism within the African-American community. Massingale clearly asserted that nihilism is not an intrinsic characteristic of black people but the result of the "relentless white supremacist attack upon and denial of black intelligence, beauty, ability and character—abetted by the collapse of the traditional buffers to these attacks (e.g., black churches, schools, and families), the triumph of market values and the current crises in black leadership)." Oscillating between affirming and challenging the accuracy of West's report of increasing "nihilism" (is it a case of overstatement?) among black people, Massingale suggested that West's notions of the sources and meaning of hope are inadequate to ground the notion of an ethically responsible hope.

According to Massingale, three conditions are necessary for an ethically responsible hope: (1) Hope demands a genuine ambiguity, where there is at least

some possibility for substantial change. (2) Hope presupposes a situation in which human activity can make a difference concerning the realization of the desired outcome. (3) The desired future must be rooted in the reality of the past and/or present. Continuing his discussion of hope Massingale reminded the assembly that hope always transcends the immediate empirical evidence; it is not capable of a fully rationale articulation. Religious hope places human hope in an ultimate perspective, rooting it in the transcendent and the divine. Because of the divine root of hope it is clear that human activity can delay but cannot deny the fruition of God's reign. This reality enables one to risk ultimate failure—even death—because in the religious perspective death is not “final.”

Christian ethicists and theologians must move hope from the margins to the center of our concerns as a prerequisite for the theological grounding of an authentic emergence of a society of justice and inclusion, because “without hope, justice will not prevail.”

Barbara H. Andolsen responded to Cornel West's assertion of the increasing phenomenon of nihilism understood “as the lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, and (most important) loveliness” by critically analyzing the economic roots of the “eclipse of hope, the collapse of meaning and the disregard for human (especially black) life and property in much of black America.” Andolsen agreed with West's examination of economic trends from “the predicaments and prospects for all black people, especially the grossly disadvantaged ones.” She disagreed with Cone's identification that the “mechanization of Southern agriculture” was the source of the most crucial transformation of the U.S. economy (West, 54). She suggests that the computer/telecommunications revolution will have an even more devastating impact on both black men and women who will be pushed out of the black middle class “by corporate restructuring and technological transformation.” She noted the displacement of black women in the “clerical, retail, and human service jobs” which are being eliminated by technology. Of great concern is the possible reversal of affirmative action which was the collaborative fruit of the civil rights struggle of the 1960s. The civil rights struggle united persons of color with white women and white men of conscience, although affirmative action most benefitted white women.

Andolsen concluded by asking where the “conversations about race and sex” which West called for could take place. This conversation is a most necessary one in the context of the antifemale tone of both “gansta rap” and “white rock” music. Andolsen attempted to focus the group's attention on the destruction and threat of the current racial and economic climate on the most vulnerable within our society: poor black children, particularly black males. She challenged the participants by raising what from her feminist ethical perspective is the central ethical question facing white America: “How can white persons demonstrate throughout our society—in our media, advertising, and so forth—the fundamental worth of *everybody*?”

Jean-Pierre Ruiz, joined in the dialogue from his perspective as a “Hispanic-American biblical scholar.” After recalling West's definition of nihilism, he

focused on West's question raised in the book *Breaking Bread: Insurgent Black Intellectual Life* by asking, "What are some of the sources that would allow us to fight against the seemingly absurd character of existence?" Ruiz interpreted this question as one which asks for sources of hope in a context of nihilism. He responded by suggesting that the Christian stories and narratives still provide a "way to demand that service and sacrifice, care and love sit at the center of what it is to be human."<sup>1</sup> Ruiz led the group in an interpretation of three prophetic biblical narratives: (1) Elijah's contest with the Baal Prophets on Mount Carmel (1 Kings 18); (2) Jeremiah, Hananiah, and the confrontation over the yoke (Jer 27-28); and (3) the two prophetic witnesses in the holy city (Rev 1). In the first text we are left with the problematic of Elijah being triumphant by ordering the murder by sword of those "false prophets" who opposed him. The execution of his enemies was justified according to the text because of the sign from Elijah's God who consumed his sacrificial bull in fire. Ruiz asked "How could the God of Life accept the sacrificed bull and the blood of Elijah's human victims?" In the second text, Hananiah, the prophet of false hope who tells the people what they want to hear, "dies withering away because of false words of hope which cannot sustain life," while the true prophet Jeremiah lives his life beset by opposition and denunciation. In the third text, the prophets "die because of their testimony, and the tragic impact of their death is not softened by their resurrection." Their deaths are in fact celebrated by those who rejoice that their voices have been stilled.

What does the prophetic tradition have to say about nihilism and despair? Ruiz suggests that the prophetic tradition underscores the fact that "meaning is a matter of life and death. Truth often torments its hearers, but consciousness of that pain cannot keep the prophet from speaking the truth." The biblical tradition suggests that prophets must rise up in the midst of nihilism and out of the integrity and texture of their lives call our people in our cities and nation to conversion. Though prophecy is a risky business which has led and may lead to a martyrdom which will be celebrated by those who resist the truth-tellers because they disturb the status quo, "The truth must be allowed to speak for itself, even, if necessary when it arise only faintly from the din of competing voices."

The sixty participants discussed these papers as provocative challenges to the silence of our theology on issues of racism, affirmative action, and unemployment. These issues were seen as destructive of black hope and black life, and therefore as threats to all life. All three presenters rooted their theologies and critiques in the social-cultural realities of those who are abandoned by a society that rushes toward personal and material fulfillment. Such a society resists the call to a life rooted in hope and born of the truth of a loving and caring God who

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<sup>1</sup>Bell Hooks and Cornel West, *Breaking Bread: Insurgent Black Intellectual Life* (Boston: South End Press, 1991) 52.

calls us to a radical love and justice for all, including black people and those who are marginalized by racism, sexism, and classism.

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## CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

### THE EVIL OF VIOLENCE

Presenters: William P. George, Rosary College  
M. Cathleen Kaveny, University of Notre Dame

The two presenters each read a brief paper. In his paper, "Gun Violence in the United States: A Catholic Moral Perspective," George asked what the Catholic moral tradition might make of the common retort: "Guns don't kill people. People kill people." The slogan implicitly severs moral agency and intentionality from moral environment and effect, thus muting questions about the sort of social environment we create through the proliferation of guns. The slogan's emphasis on individual choice and presumed good intention also obscures the intentionality built into technology. In a sense, guns do what they are designed to do. The good or evil intentions of the user aside, empirical evidence connects gun violence to massive bodily harm, often death. The slogan, however, treats guns as though the damage they do is extrinsic to their design. It treats guns more like breadknives than weapons.

George called for a creative retrieval of several elements in the Catholic moral tradition, most notably "material sin" and the "occasion of sin." A focus on "material sin" encourages a description of certain actions and patterns of behavior with such thickness that material sin might be raised to the level of "formal sin." We have seen such a transformation in our awareness of the sinfulness of slavery. The Hill-Thomas hearings brought the material sin of sexual harassment to the level of full moral consciousness. There can be a comparable examination of gun violence. "Occasion of sin" implies that, while environment is not morally determinative, certain identifiable environments greatly increase the probability that a moral subject will be drawn into a vortex of wrongdoing. This makes empirical analysis of the use of guns in our culture morally signifi-