

## BLACK CATHOLIC THEOLOGY

- Topic:** Anger for the Sake of Justice:  
Theological Reflections on Black Rage
- Convener:** Bryan N. Massingale, Saint Francis Seminary, Milwaukee
- Moderator:** Jamie T. Phelps, Catholic Theological Union
- Presenters:** M. Shawn Copeland, Marquette University  
Bryan N. Massingale, Saint Francis Seminary, Milwaukee  
Carmichael Peters, Pacific School of Theology, Berkeley

Cornel West recently observed, "Although black culture is in no way reducible to or identical with black rage, it is inseparable from black rage."<sup>1</sup> Hence, the Black Catholic Theology Group convened to engage in a theological examination of black rage as a component of black culture. What is the theological significance of black rage, and what are its challenges to the "craft of theology" and its practitioners?

Carmichael Peters offered a phenomenological reflection upon black rage. He raised the issue of what black rage signifies as a response to black people's "being in the world." Their "world," Peters contended, is permeated with the ideology of white supremacy, that is, a world which in fundamental ways assaults the humanity of black existence. Because they live in a world decisively shaped by a symbolic system in which "black" is the very embodiment of baseness, evil, danger, and repulsion, African Americans face the daunting challenge of being black and human in a world that is hostile to their humanity precisely because being black is deemed an illegitimate mode of being human.

It is in this context that Peters defends black rage as a "rightly oriented" mode of being in the midst of such a distorted world. Rejecting those views of black rage which see it solely as pathological and/or criminal, Peters offered a different view, seeing rage as a sign of protest against the constricting possibilities offered by the dominant world, and a claiming of an authentic subjectivity in which one is free to be the "fundamentally bottomless question" which all human beings by nature are. Black rage, then, can be world changing and a catalyst for the creation of the beloved community.

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<sup>1</sup>Cornel West, "Black Strivings in a Twilight Civilization," in Henry Louis Gates and Cornel West, *The Future of the Race* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996) 94.

Shawn Copeland's contribution was rooted in the discipline of theological anthropology. She maintained that an in-depth encounter with black human being (or black being human) profoundly challenges theological anthropology to account for a way of being human conditioned by the "crushing ordinariness" of racism and the "daily demanding drain" of being considered "a problem" by the wider society. Given such a situation, Copeland presumed the legitimacy of rage as a constitutive part of the black human condition.

She then sketched an outline of a Christian anthropology which accounts for black rage and encourages the advent of the Spirit. Starting from what she called a "metaphysics" of black rage, utilizing both Bernard Lonergan and the traditional categories of potency, act, and form, she showed how rage results from the frustration of development/integration, the repression of freedom and human action, and the negation of personhood and orientation. Yet she avowed that frustration, repression, and negation need not lead only to despair and death. Rather, transformed by the advent of the Spirit, black rage is an avenue for experiencing faith, hope, and charity.

Bryan Massingale contributed an "ethics of black rage" to this discussion. Agreeing that black rage is an intelligible response to living in an ethos of white supremacist assaults upon black character, ability, talent, and intelligence, he noted that black rage is not a univocal reality. He then delineated three forms of black rage: "pathological" (that is, a rage which explodes in murderous fury directed at either whites or one's fellow blacks); "narcissistic" (a smoldering sense of betrayal on the part of middle-class African Americans, engendered by continued racial ostracism despite a record of accomplishment); and "constructive" (that is, a rage that is the catalyst for courageous action and commitment to justice).

Massingale then examined the Christian ethical tradition, seeking within it a basis for a principled assessment of black rage which would not eviscerate it as a force for social transformation. Highlighting the teaching of Thomas Aquinas on anger, Massingale emphasized Thomas' insights concerning the moral necessity of anger in the presence of injustice and the crucial role of anger in prompting the will to accomplish justice. Massingale then concluded by noting that in light of this Thomistic perspective, black rage is not only ethically legitimate for African Americans; white Americans are also challenged to cultivate their own rage at injustice. It is incumbent upon all Christians to be angry about the enduring evil of racism, and actively committed to its abolition and the establishment of the beloved community.

Following these presentations, a spirited and prolonged discussion occurred among the forty-five participants present. Among the points raised were: the traditional (mis)use of certain Scripture passages to proscribe anger as an appropriate response to injustice; the need for white Americans to listen to the anger of blacks; the difficulty of teaching about racism in theology courses; the vexing question of who determines the criteria for legitimate rage, and the

underlying issue of power in the determination of ethics; and rap music as a medium for the expression of black rage.

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### CHRISTOLOGY

- Topic: The Historical Jesus as Savior: A Dialogue with Crossan and Borg  
Convener: Thomas H. West, College of St. Catherine  
Moderator: Mark Napack, Catholic University of America  
Presenter: Michael O'Keefe, Mercyhurst College

Michael O'Keefe first laid out Crossan's three-part method: (1) a social anthropology that places Jesus in the peasant class; (2) historical research that sees Jesus as a Jewish peasant suffering under Roman and Jewish oppression; (3) a literary analysis that regards canonical and noncanonical texts as equal but which gives priority to the oldest texts. O'Keefe notes the danger in the first two parts of reducing Jesus to a type and thereby failing to see his uniqueness. With respect to the third part, theologians may be uneasy with giving equality to non-canonical sources but O'Keefe urges that they be open.

O'Keefe judges Borg's method as generally similar to that of Crossan's, but highlights one substantial difference. Drawing from Winston Smith's idea of the "primordial truth," Borg claims to see in Jesus a recovery of the experience of "spirit," which he understands very generally as the experience of the transcendent. Jesus mediates the presence of God. And thus Borg's perspective becomes explicitly theological, even though he does not use the word "spirit" in the Christian sense of "Holy Spirit." Besides being a "spirit-person," Jesus according to Borg is sage, a reformer of Jewish life (though not in the narrowly political sense), and a nonapocalyptic prophet. Like Crossan's Jesus, Borg's Jesus is decidedly this-worldly; indeed, both suggest that Jesus was agnostic about the next life.

O'Keefe does not deny that there is an implicit theology in Crossan's portrait of Jesus. After all, Crossan's Jesus had a fundamental experience of God which empowered him to be such an insightful and disturbing presence. But Crossan makes these theological implications less explicit than does Borg. He thus relies primarily on nontheological methods and sources in his depiction of Jesus as a