

CONTINUING GROUPS

NORTH AMERICAN CONTEXTUAL THEOLOGY

Topic: Theological Anthropology from the Margins

Part I. Race, Racism, and Culture

Moderator: Robert Lassalle-Klein, Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley

Presenters: Jamie T. Phelps, O.P., Catholic Theological Union, Chicago

Orlando Espin, University of San Diego

The North American Contextual Theology continuing group treated the themes "race, racism, and culture" as the first part of a three-part collaboration on the theme "theological anthropology from the margins." The Hispanic/Latino Theology group then followed with the theme "gender and class." And the Black Catholic Theology group hosted a concluding panel in which all the presenters responded to questions and engaged in a lively fruitful exchange on the overall theme of the convention considered "from the margins." Robert Lassalle-Klein moderated this first session attended by between thirty-five and forty people.

Jamie Phelps from Catholic Theological Union spoke first, addressing the issue of contemporary manifestations of racism in Church and society. Professor Phelps argued four points about the theory of race and racism. First, race is a social construction which is the product of unvalidated, liberal philosophical, scientific and religious theories. Second, racism is a reality which has served to justify the oppression of peoples and nations based on the false premise of race. Third, Church and society have promulgated universality as an ideal for human community and taught that our Church, like God's grace, is inclusive and available to all. However, its discriminatory and racist practices have seemed to contradict these ideals and teachings.

Here, Phelps argued, racism contradicts what may be considered an essential aspect of the Church's doctrines of creation, God, eschatology, and the Church. This is the notion that all human persons are divinely created "in the image of God" and are ultimately destined for reunion with the Triune God for all eternity. As such, human persons are called to live in harmonious community (communion) with one another in much the same way as the one God, understood as "a community of three persons."¹ In Catholic doctrine, Jesus Christ is seen as the

¹Joseph Bracken, *What Are They Saying about the Trinity?* (New York: Paulist, 1979) 69.

embodied reality of our origin and destiny, the revelation of a realized eschatology in which the divine and human already exist in communion. Yet, Phelps argues that racism contradicts these teachings.

Fourth, Professor Phelps suggested that a close examination of the philosophical underpinnings of the aforementioned universalist theological language, reveals similar contradictions. Quoting David Goldberg, Phelps notes, "The more explicitly universal modernity's commitments [become], the more open it is to and the more determined it is by . . . racial specificity and racist exclusivity." Indeed, "As modernity committed itself progressively to idealized principles of liberty, equality, and fraternity, [and] . . . the moral irrelevance of race, there was a multiplication of racial identities and the . . . exclusions they prompted and rationalized, enabled and sustained."²

Professor Phelps then turned to an essay by Cornel West entitled, "The Genealogy of Modern Racism." She endorsed West's argument that "'white supremacy' (a.k.a. racism) was an integral part of the development of modernity." More specifically, "The creative fusion of scientific investigation, Cartesian epistemology, and classical ideals produced forms of rationality, scientificity and objectivity which, though efficacious in the quest of truth and knowledge, prohibited the intelligibility and legitimacy of the idea of black equality, beauty, culture, and intellectual capacity. In fact, to 'think' such an idea was deemed irrational, barbaric, or mad."³

Phelps then formulated two questions which she believes the Afro-American experience poses to Catholic theological anthropologies. First, Catholic theological writings typically embrace inclusive anthropologies, yet remain silent about the issue of race. Does this indicate that our theology, like our philosophy, is too often constructed within the realm of a rational ideal which eschews the reality and particularity of history? And second, how have Blacks and other oppressed peoples of color reinterpreted the theological doctrines and beliefs taught within our Church? Phelps argues that by posing the question this way, the marginalization and devaluation experienced by Afro-Americans becomes generative for faith and action for social justice, rather than simply self-alienation and self-destruction.

Orlando Espín from the University of San Diego spoke second, addressing the topic of culture and its relevance to the theme of cultural anthropology from the margins. Professor Espín argued, first, that Christians have always lived in specific historical, geographical, and cultural milieux. Second, he suggested that one cannot be human without being cultural. Indeed, nothing which is human in theological anthropology is acultural. Third, though what is God's is trans-

²David Goldberg, *Racist Culture: Philosophy and the Politics of Meaning* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1993) 3.

³Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance! An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1982) 48.

cultural, it is always mediated through a specific culture. Fourth, no culture can ever legitimately claim to be better suited than another to embody Christianity or to mediate the experience of God. And fifth, trampling on a culture and the way of being human it embodies, can be trampling on grace.

Espín then turned his attention to the specific contributions of U.S. Hispanic-Latinos to the theme of theological anthropology. After summarizing demographic data which establish Latinos as among the poorest of Americans, he argued the theological importance of *lo cotidiano*, or the everyday lived life of U.S. Hispanics. Professor Espín described it in terms of the "micro" dimension of human reality and experience. Quoting Pilar Aquino, he suggested that people develop their interpretive categories "from within" their cultural experiences. Thus, he argued, U.S. Hispanic theology has realized that their subjects experience grace through *lo cotidiano*.

This also implies that for Hispanics all theological anthropology must go in and through Hispanic-Latino popular religion. However, Professor Espín argued, the doctrine of sin should help theologians avoid romanticizing popular culture and religion. He reasoned that for humans to experience grace, they must experience it "as" humans. And sin touches all human activity. Thus sin must also touch the same *lo cotidiano* where U.S. Hispanics experience grace. He offered the powerful example of mature or older Hispanic women who play such a crucial role as bearers of U.S. Hispanic popular Catholicism. Many have noted that this role is often played out in the context of their veneration of Our Lady of Guadalupe or other Marian devotions. He argued that just as theologians may study such devotions as mediations of grace, so they should be studied as mediations of sin. Indeed, "these women can also pass on degrading attitudes; help to perpetuate domestic violence; encourage patience and endurance at the expense of justice and truth." Thus, Professor Espín argued, *lo cotidiano* and Latino popular religion should be defended and studied as an important aspect of theological anthropology. But they must not be romanticized, or uncritically imported into theological anthropology, even one which develops its categories "from the margins."

ROBERT LASSALLE-KLEIN

Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley
Berkeley, California