

WHITE PRIVILEGE AND RACISM

- Topic: Coming to Terms with White Privilege and Racism:
An Imperative for White Theologians
- Convener: Margaret Eletta Guider, Weston Jesuit School of Theology
- Moderator: Anne E. Patrick, Carleton College
- Presenters: Mary Hobgood, College of the Holy Cross
William R. O'Neill, Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley

This session was designed to facilitate ongoing critical reflection on the reasons why dialogue on racism and white privilege is a moral imperative for white Roman Catholic theologians. The session provided an opportunity for further analysis and discussion of specific issues and concerns raised by M. Guider and B. Massingale during their plenary session at the 2001 CTSA convention. It was attended by participants from the United States as well as Taiwan, Brazil and Belgium.

Using the first two chapters of *Dismantling Privilege* as a point of reference, M. Hobgood began her presentation by describing white racism as a "culturally induced feeling disorder" indicative of the self-alienation and disability of whites to be self-loving, "to feel our own flesh, fully alive and radically dependent." She argued that the structures supporting racism and white privilege will not change until the fear, shame, disassociation and projected hatred of white embodiment, understood as the bodily experience of pleasure, interdependence, weakness, diminishment and death, are mitigated by a self-acceptance of the vulnerability and vitality of being human. In positing that the roots of white self-alienation are both economic and erotic, she noted that race analysis also must include class and gender analysis. Turning to the seventeenth-century history of poor white emigrants from England and Ireland, she located the origins of the "invention of the white race," along with the racist underpinnings of white privilege, as an ongoing strategy for controlling anger and managing frustration, historically used by white bond laborers and currently used by the lower working class of downwardly mobile whites, especially men. Comparing the behaviors of the body-rejecting tendencies of white privilege and the erotic-phobic projections of white racism to behaviors associated with autism and schizophrenia, she noted the need for white theologians to bring the resources of theology to critical reflection on three concerns regarding the social dynamics of embodiment and relationships: (1) the moral compass that is damaged by stress, trauma and abuse, (2) the sensory and emotional numbness that is both the cause and effect of sexual violence, and (3) the moral inability to have the emotions necessary for compassion. In conversation after the session, some participants noted the relevance of Hobgood's thesis for understanding racism as well as the immediate ecclesiastical crisis of the sexual abuse of children and related issues of denial, concealment and scapegoating.

William O'Neill addressed the responsibility of the white theologian to recognize the systematic character of racism as manifested in theological reflection and moral reasoning that is predicated on distorted perceptions and the universalizing tendency to take *whiteness* for granted. In "beginning to begin to understand the epistemic privilege" of those who are oppressed, excluded and made poor, *listening* on the part of theologians does not necessarily mean *understanding*. O'Neill reflected theologically on this point by identifying challenges and opportunities that have shaped his life, ministry and relationships as a Jesuit priest and theologian serving a black Catholic parish community. Drawing upon his experiences and insights, O'Neill made a number of observations. He noted that learning to see and listen to the black Church requires humility *and* repentance as well as a prophetic stance that involves a triple hermeneutic. He also emphasized that appreciation and deep respect for the cultural-linguistic resources of black theology involves more than cognition. Finally, he stressed that accountability to the black church on the part of the white theologian/minister involves a willingness to be tutored in the process of becoming responsible to and for a truly Catholic church as well as a willingness and commitment to rend the veil of racism. Using the imagery of the Body of Christ as a means for intuiting, discerning and affirming that "there is plenty good room for all," O'Neill briefly explored some of the ethical and theological implications of his insights for the church and society.

Thaddeus J. Posey and Edward Vacek posed challenging questions to the presenters. These questions addressed two very important concerns: (1) the very real limitations of viewing white racism exclusively through the lens of white and black relations in the United States, and (2) the ambiguities inherent in seemingly opposite strategies for redressing racism and white privilege. To be more precise, when Hobgood proposes that whites address racism by attending to their own experiences and issues of projected self-hatred, she does so by appealing to a *self-centered* concept of *authentic self-interest* as a primary reason for dismantling white privilege. O'Neill, for his part, proposes an *other-centered* strategy that begins by encouraging white Catholic theologians to attend to black experience by listening to the stories of black Catholics, by worshiping the black face of Jesus, and by acknowledging black Catholic history as the *locus theologicus* for understanding the complex unity of difference. These two important observations, along with thoughtful responses on the part of the presenters, contributed to a very thought-provoking dialogue which engaged the voices and opinions of a number of participants. It was observed that these types of discussions are difficult. To participate requires a willingness to approach, rather than avoid and evade, the discomfort, frustration, awkwardness, unmasking, exposure, misunderstanding, and vulnerability that forthright dialogue about the realities of racism and strategies for advancing racial justice inevitably elicits. The session accomplished its objective of creating a space for critical and constructive dialogue on a sign of the times that is a constitutive element of our vocational *mandatum* as Roman Catholic theologians, namely, responsibility for

contributing to the dismantling of the structures of racism in the church and in society for the sake of Gospel.

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THEOLOGY AND SUFFERING

Topic: Reading Texts of Terror: Narrative Redemptions of Suffering
 Convener: Bruce T. Morrill, Boston College
 Presenter: Bruce T. Morrill
 Respondent: Terry Veling, St. Thomas University

Morrill presented a lengthy study of how the solidarity envisioned by Christian tradition, as advanced by the Second Vatican Council and the ongoing renewal of the Church's liturgy, takes practical shape today through one particular activity, namely reading the written text. Morrill's concern is with how the contemporary, well-educated, socially secure North Atlantic believer is able to read texts that testify to horrific human suffering—specifically, the Guatemalan narrative, *I, Rigoberta Menchú* and, more briefly, the Passion Narratives—so as not to be immobilized by their terror but, rather, to be moved with a desire to encounter God in the suffering humanity therein. The Nobel laureate Menchú's story and the Passion Narratives each bear both mystical and political dimensions, even though the former might be thought of more in political terms and the latter, the mystical. A further similarity between these texts, Morrill has come to recognize, is the way in which the modern academy has scrutinized their veracity. Menchú's testimonial and the accounts of Jesus' abduction and execution are both stories in which the words and events occurring to an individual "speak" for a much larger body of people, compressing multiple characters and events into singular accounts that are held together by an array of traditional images.

In 1998 a North American anthropologist, as well as investigative reporters from the *New York Times*, published studies concluding that Menchú's narration of the hardship of the Mayan people could not be the eyewitness account she claimed it to be. The issues raised at that time and since by literary scholars, anthropologists and historians are not unlike those of the contemporary scholarly, ecclesial, and pastoral debates concerning biblical scholarship: questions of historical fact, narrative integrity, collective identity, the literary nature of realism, representation, symbol and myth. Pervading all these issues, whether concerning the Bible or contemporary Latin American testimonials, is the question of truth itself, a problem that can only be entertained and discussed by differing parties if they recognize that the very notion of truth bears with it some