

WHITE PRIVILEGE AND RACISM

Topic: The Narrative Bodiliness of White Theologians
Convener: Laurie Cassidy, Trinity College, Connecticut
Moderator: Alex Mikulich, St. Joseph College, Connecticut
Presenters: Charles Curran, Southern Methodist University
Roger Haight, Union Theological Seminary, New York
Respondent: Margaret E. Guider, Weston Jesuit School of Theology

In response to the convention's theme the session was designed to reflect upon how white embodiment impacts the development of Catholic theology and ethics.

Charles Curran presented a courageous and honest autobiographical reflection on his own narrative as a senior, white, Catholic, moral theologian. He admitted to devoting very little attention to the whole reality of racism in his work. "Even the few comments I made have come back to haunt me." Curran explained that only recently had his eyes been opened to the reality of white privilege. He has become educated to see himself as a white male and white male privilege "as the problem and the need to do something about it." Curran argued that because white privilege is an invisible and systemic reality, the only way to confront it is through personal, intellectual, and spiritual conversion.

Roger Haight proposed the idea of "dismantling white privilege" as a dysfunctional rhetoric in the effort to improve race relations in the United States. In the logic of a "negative contrast experience," a positivity must appear to engender a positive action to negate the negative situation. Haight argued that in this framework, although the concept of white privilege may be accurate and helpful in uncovering hidden aspects of racism, it is not a dialectically positive concept relative to racism but precisely a further analysis of racism itself. As a positive notion in dialectical tension with racism, a concept of "racial solidarity" corresponds with basic Christian premises and ideals, with common values in American society, law, culture, and with common human ideals in an increasingly globalized world culture. The concept of "racial solidarity" evokes the utopic dream of Martin Luther King Jr. which also engaged whites.

Margaret Guider began her response entitled "Taking the Pulse of the Wound," by acknowledging Curran and Haight as esteemed mentors for a generation of men and women theologians coming from diverse racial, cultural and religious backgrounds. In addition, as two of the most well-known theologians in the United States who have both been directly affected by decisions of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Guider recognized the integrity, conviction, and wisdom that characterized not only their lives and work but their response to the session's purpose. "The theological significance and ecclesial relevance of this session can be found in the combined efforts of these two theologians to give voice, visibility, and value to the subject at hand."

In regard to the two presentations, Guider suggested a dialectical template for understanding the dynamic interaction between efforts to redress racial privilege

and advance racial solidarity that build on experience. She observed that striving for racial solidarity is hard work, so is dismantling white privilege because the dialectic is not only between whites and blacks and people of all races and the blending of those races, the dialectic is also between whites and whites. Guider argued that the intraracial dialectic is a prophetic act of denunciation that makes the invisibility of white privilege visible. Guider observed that if racial solidarity is the goal, whites will be well served by reading the speeches and letters of Martin Luther King, Jr. and the autobiography of Malcolm X, as well as John Howard Griffin's *Black Like Me* or Thomas Merton's "Letters to a White Liberal" in *Seeds of Destruction*. Guider claimed that in the absence of intraracial dialogue on racism and white privilege in which whites seriously and tenaciously engages one another, racism will not be redressed. In the days of the Civil Rights Movement, interracial solidarity and resistance to racism through intraracial consciousness raising were necessary. In light of this history, Guider asked, "realistically speaking, can it be any different today?"

In the discussion that followed, Rosemary Radford Ruether challenged the presenters to take into account how American history conditions any consideration of white privilege. Anne Patrick and Dawn Nothwehr both commented upon the arduous struggle of solidarity. Nothwehr claimed that solidarity is the result of a long process of conversion. In response to a question posed about the appropriateness of whites attending black Catholic parishes, M. Shawn Copeland commented that whites and blacks have different tasks in the work of dismantling white privilege and confronting racism. Bryan Massingale followed Copeland's observation with the concern that there can be a leap too quickly to racial solidarity without contending with the full negativity of white privilege.

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