

## BLACK CATHOLIC THEOLOGY GROUP

- Topic: The Black Subject in the Post-Modern World:  
Africana Theologies in Dialogue
- Convener: Jamie T. Phelps, Xavier University of Louisiana
- Moderator: Jamie T. Phelps, Xavier University of Louisiana
- Presenters: M. Shawn Copeland, Boston College  
Paulinus Odozor, University of Notre Dame
- Respondents: Elochukwu (Eugene) Uzuku, Milltown Institute, Dublin, Ireland  
Jessica Wormley Murdoch, University of Notre Dame

M. Shawn Copeland's and Paulinus Odozor's papers explored the meaning of the Black subject in African and African Diasporic communities in light of the European intellectual shift from modernity to postmodernism. Both Copeland and Odozor noted that modernity's "turn to the subject" coincided with a dynamics of domination and oppression (slavery and colonialism) through which human's "being-in-the-world" was rendered identical with white male bourgeois European being in the world. Both presenters understood the necessity of African and African diasporic theologies to attending to and affirming the humanity of Black subjects who were historically "repressed and pushed to modernity's periphery in all their particularities of race, gender, religion, culture, history and sexual orientation."

Copeland's paper began by pointing out the cognitive and moral advantages and disadvantages of postmodernism. Then, by referencing African American aesthetic sources, jazz and fiction, in particular, the lyrics to Andy Razaf's "What Did I Do to Be so Black and Blue?" and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, Copeland critically explored the rejection of ontologized notions of race while surfacing metaphysical questions of identity and being. Through a thought-experiment (race rendered invisible when talking using the internet, race made visible in walking through an airport) and drawing on the works of cultural critics bell hooks and Victor Anderson, she illustrated the social construction of race and postmodern strategies in sorting out multiple expressions of Black identity. Copeland concluded by querying the post-postmodern potential of jazz to transcend limitations of postmodernism and to affirm "black humanity as common humanity" and Black subjects as participants in "creating a new pattern of human living" embodying an ethics of responsibility, community, personal agency and action.

Odozor first reviewed the diverse interpretations and critique of postmodernism, then reflected upon the construction of the African subject, i.e. "the person who is theologized, philosophized and theorized from an African perspective." Next, he argued that the African situation and the postmodern situation differ in many ways but are drawn together by the phenomenon of globalization. He concluded by identifying the challenges African theologians must address in its dialogue with the African subject.

Odozor identified the three major complex historical factors that have shaped the contemporary African context and consciousness of the African subject namely,

colonization, missionary evangelization and slavery. Despite these realities of cultural and ecclesial imperialism and slavery, the African subject has not been totally assimilated by the Western postmodern subject. The African subject continues to embrace the reality of transcendence and to affirm the importance of memory, human connections in the world, depth and feelings.

African theology starting with the experience of the African subject has two distinct challenges. On the one hand, African theology is challenged to speak to the meaning of God's self gift of grace in Christ for the negative context and consciousness of the African subject who is "colonized, hungry, sick and betrayed by political leaders, and hurt and hunted by memories of past atrocities on her people." On the other hand, African theology is challenged to capture the African subject's experiences of the "joy of being a Christian," as they embody "the sense of transcendence and the community loving other."

Responding to Copeland's work, Elochukwu (Eugene) Uzuku first noted the distinct ways in which racialization dominates the view of humans in the United States. Next he celebrates Copeland's use of the aesthetics of jazz and black literature as source materials for the Black subject's participation in the process of constructing a self-identity. He notes the "natural connection between Africans living in the homelands and the African Diaspora." The issues of identity construction, overcoming invisibility and creating new patterns of Human living are shared tasks that are being addressed in both African and African diasporic contexts. The search for African self-identity expressed in the Nigerian novels by Chinua Achebe as he seeks "his identity and that of his people in a world profoundly destabilized by slavery and colonization." parallels the search for identity and the struggle against invisibility, expressed in jazz and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, The emergence of "a galaxy of prophets and founders of churches" are also an aspect of this search. An essential ingredient of African and African American life that has contributed and continues to contribute to our ability to continue living, namely implied but omitted in Copeland's paper is the reality of African and African American humor. "Africans survive today because of their sense of humor—an incorrigible faith in life even in the face of unbearable nature disasters, violent conflicts and wars."

Jessica Wormley Murdoch, engaging both Copeland's and Odozor's presentations, affirmed the latter's assertion that "that there is no easy association of black subjectivity and postmodernity." She reminded us that postmodern conceptions of fragmentation signal the so called "death of transcendence, of history and the world." She notes that Derrida's "principle of dedoublement" completely "guttled self-identity, self-presence, and the historicity of the world of any sense at all. If there is no subject there is no agency, if there is no history there is no progress or goal, and if there is no world there is no stage for activism." Further in postmodernity's discourse relative to the other the black subject "appears only when Western philosophy calls upon us. . . . Black subjects as invisible men and women are simply the projective idols of the Western mind: that is reflective, but not substantive. Murdoch concludes, "The problem with postmodernity, from the point of

view of the black subject is that, left unchecked, it completely destroys the discursive space for black theological thought and makes any attempt to name their subjectivity illegitimate. . . . Nevertheless postmodern discourse has been fruitful for black theology in terms of its elucidation of structures of power. Nevertheless, we would do well to establish certain internal theological criteria for the appropriation of philosophy in order that we may continue to speak and to name our own reality.”

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