

WHITE PRIVILEGE AND RACISM

Topic: Bishops and the Social Sin of White Privilege and Racism
Conveners: Laurie Cassidy, Marywood University, Pennsylvania
Alex Mikulich, Saint Joseph College, Connecticut
Presenters: Barbara Andolsen, Monmouth University
Roger Haight, Union Theological Seminary
Margaret Pfeil, University of Notre Dame
Charles Curran, Southern Methodist University

The session celebrated publication of *Interrupting White Privilege: Catholic Theologians Break the Silence* (Orbis, April 2007). Laurie Cassidy began by expressing gratitude to the “cloud of witnesses” who made *Interrupting White Privilege* possible and to whom we are responsible to extend a complex, in-depth analysis of the matrix of domination.

Barbara Andolsen argued that moral theologians must analyze the evolving contours of racism as a social sin. She indicated, for example, that the large influx of immigrants from Africa to the United States throughout the 1990s might undercut usual moral approaches to retributive justice as a norm when discussing topics like affirmative action. She cautioned that white, non-Hispanic Catholics might use the very real need for attention to the social challenges facing the growing number of U.S. Hispanic Catholics as an excuse to turn away from hard questions about race in the Catholic church—a church where white racism, in part, has kept the number of Black Catholics low.

Roger Haight urged a possible new initiative that did not talk about solidarity but represented it in coauthored projects by white and black theologians. Haight shared the example of how his own theology of the cross was thoroughly white and would need to engage the significantly different theology of the cross of James Cone. He concluded that a coauthored theology would keep pressure on contemporary structural racism “while addressing its new stealthy corruption of American consciousness.”

Margaret Pfeil turned attention to the failure of Catholic social teaching texts to attend to power dynamics in social and ecclesial contexts as an integral part of social analysis. For example, Cardinal George’s 2001 pastoral letter *Dwell in My Love* refers only to empowerment by the Holy Spirit. Although Bishop Melczek’s 2003 pastoral letter *Created in God’s Image* did offer an extended analysis of power, he did not mention the long-term task of redressing raced-based power disparities when he addressed the White Privilege conference at the University of Notre Dame last year (see <http://www.nd.edu/~wpconf/>). She suggested a new bottom-up ecclesiology that stresses the need of lay white Catholics to engage the reality of systemic, raced-based disparities of power and take direct action to transform underlying sinful structures. Bishop Melczek’s experience of contending with his priests resisting the diocesan racial justice process reveals how hierarchical power too often becomes expressed as dominative power. The fact that the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops balked at issuing a new pastoral letter on racism that explicitly address white privilege represents a sobering sign of the times. She concluded by quoting *Dwell in My Love*: “We cannot be leavens of love

and justice in a society fighting racism if we are captured by the sin of racism in the Church” (p. 3).

Charles Curran addressed institutional, personal, and public dimensions of white privilege and racism. He began by noting how Southern Methodist University is woefully underrepresented by African-American professors on the faculty. While he has written about his own privilege of late—something he did not do five years ago—he recently recognized that he has not integrated discussion of white privilege into his classroom and needs to do so in all his courses, including bioethics. Although the record of the Catholic Church on racism is shockingly bad, Curran suggested that theologians have much to learn from how U.S. Catholic bishops have addressed racism. He emphasized the need for mutual learning and teaching.

Camilia McFearson, a Canadian citizen with roots in India, started audience discussion by describing how she was profiled as a Muslim of “high risk” to U.S. Homeland Security. Several participants discussed dynamics between Hispanics and Blacks in the United States. Dawn Nothwehr raised a question about how intraracial hierarchies appear in the U.S. as people arrive in America. Brian Massingale emphasized how no “master” hermeneutic exists to address these dynamics and that we must become actively engaged in conflicts with power in order to develop an adequate social analysis. David Hollenbach presented Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice as evidence of how the dominant ideology is not simply represented by whites. Massingale responded by citing the history of white supremacy since slavery which includes African Americans adopting the master’s ideology as only one form of internalized oppression. Marquerite Spencer underscored how the legal system represents white privilege. Alex Mikulich highlighted how the new CTSA structure does not explicitly address white privilege, and that the majority of white CTSA members have yet to address their privilege as a constitutive dimension of the theological vocation. M. Shawn Copeland concluded the session by thanking Barbara Andolsen for her seminal work that addressed white feminism in relationship to racism twenty-one years ago.

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