

BLACK CATHOLIC THEOLOGY—CONSULTATION

Topic: Amazing Grace: Structures of Grace in the Black World
Convener: Kathleen Dorsey Bellow, Xavier University of Louisiana
Moderator: SimonMary Asele Ahiokhai, University of Portland
Presenters: John Segun Odeyemi, Veritas-Dominican University
M. Shawn Copeland, Boston College
Joseph S. Flipper, Bellarmine University

The first paper was titled “Sacred Places of the World as Places of Grace: Parallels between Yoruba Religious Cosmology and the Christ Event.” In it, John Segun Odeyemi demonstrated a comparative theological analysis of the similarities between Christianity and Yoruba Religion on themes such as the notions of God, ancestors/saints, prayers and sacrifice, and heaven and hell. In his presentation, Odeyemi argued for the expressions of grace in the world and showed how that world is inhabited by everyone, including blacks and practitioners of other religions. Drawing from the documents of the Second Vatican Council, Odeyemi argued for a careful reading of the signs of the times to ensure that theologians and Christians in general appreciate the workings of God’s grace in the religious world of those who embrace Yoruba Religion. Old arguments that present indigenous religions should be abandoned in fidelity to the spirit of the Council. Odeyemi concluded that these parallels prove that religious beliefs are primordial and ontological to all peoples of all times, only now revealed in Jesus Christ.

The second paper was presented by M. Shawn Copeland. The title of her paper was “The Grace James Hal Cone was and Remains.” Reflecting on the theological insights of James Hal Cone, Copeland stressed the prophetic witness of Cone in being the bearer of God’s transformative grace in the world where violence against black bodies continues to be the norm. Reminding the audience, Copeland pointed to the vision of Cone that “good theology is not abstract but concrete, not neutral but committed. . .because the poor were created for freedom and not for poverty” (Cone 1969, xiv). Copeland stressed the point of the content of Cone’s black theology as graced theology because it is *interruptive*, as is God’s grace, of the dehumanizing status quo of our sinful world. Copeland concluded her presentation by inviting theologians to embrace the *interruptive* grace of God found in black theology as did Cone, who chose to respond to the divine invitation of being a medium for God’s transformation of the world via his theological reflections and life experiences.

The third paper was titled “World in the Debate over African Theology.” In his presentation, Joseph S. Flipper called attention to the binary approach of the discussion of this year’s conference that seems to position grace and the world as two opposing themes in need of reconciliation. He argued for a focus on the world as the content and place where grace operates and sacramentalizes itself. Furthermore, Flipper defended the call to resist binary ways of doing theology by reflecting on the theological debates that occurred between a Belgian theologian, Alfred Vanneste and a Congolese theologian, Tharcisse Tshibangu in the 1960s. The focus of the debate was not to describe two separate theological worlds; it was to provide two perspectives on one world.

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Flipper concluded his presentation by arguing that modern theological debates are, at best, attempts to make sense of what it means to be universal in an era when the colonial agenda has been delegitimized and has no merit in healthy theological discourses.

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