

A RESPONSE TO M. SHAWN COPELAND

Professor Copeland has shared a special gift with us today. She has merged podium, lectern, and pulpit in addressing us compellingly, teaching us clearly, and proclaiming to us passionately the gospel of Jesus Christ. Her paper presents as a tapestry whose strands have been drawn from contemporary narrative, critical cultural analysis, and the Christian biblical and theological tradition, reread from the vantage point of a woman *not* lost to history, a woman with a name and place, *Fatima Yusif*, age 28, a Somali woman who lives in Italy. This tapestry is such that we are left sitting uncomfortably in our chairs of western knowledge and privilege as we take it in. At the same time, taking it in also moves us, *contemplatively* and *actively*, to stand up, turn away from the darkness of modernity, and walk forward together into a more inclusive embrace of our present and future as theologians of the church. Where we are and where our work is in this tapestry are perhaps the most haunting questions we have to answer.

I have structured my response to Professor Copeland's paper into three parts. I will attend first to some of its literary features, narratives and images which I have found to be both dramatic and subtle in their power to provoke, like parables. Secondly, I will consider the paper's thesis and argument, which I shall identify as a *critical theological modernism*. Thirdly, I will offer some extending comments and pose some questions, in the hope of stimulating further thought and conversation among us.

ATTENDING TO THE NARRATIVES AND IMAGES

Professor Copeland galvanizes us through her assertion of a strong and oppositional contrast: the abstract and totalizing image of the white, male, bourgeois, European of modernity, on the one hand, and the concrete and particular image of the exploited, despised, poor woman of color, on the other. The former is "inside," having flooded the space of *humanum* and absorbed it fully as his own. From his position, he has spawned centuries of conquest, death, and degradation. The latter is "outside," lying on the edge of the road and giving birth, alone. From her position, she has no assurance that either she or her child will survive.

Overshadowing this stark contrast is the presence of a third: a man of color, a Middle-Eastern, Aramaic-speaking Jew, who by reason of his particular experience of suffering, death, and resurrection and by his enduring proclamation, is present across time. His appearance in the paper is both comforting and interruptive. He makes the poor woman's despised flesh his own, Professor Copeland tells us, and the lingering effects of his proclamation in us make us see that the exclusion of the woman and her son from humanity is wrong, is not of God. The isolation, fear, and fragmentation in the roadside scene has burst all bonds. Even

the most basic of human connections, to lift up the mother and child in care, is missing. Blotted out by bias, erased by estrangement, the total absence of human compassion in this narrative is shocking; but so is the assertion of the presence of God in it. The Christ figure in Professor Copeland's narrative, the larger one surrounding the story of Fatima Yusif, proclaims again that it is time to recover the *humanum* and flood it anew, not with one face but with many, with Fatima's and others like her, in accordance with the heart of God.

The traces of this Christ proclamation in us are also why certain other images in the paper also bear revelatory power.

- Fatima Yusif, a Somali woman, gave birth, unassisted, to a boy named *Davide*. She was by the side of the road.
- There were passersby.
- There was a crowd that stood by and jeered.
- There were onlookers who leered, as if at the cinema.
- There was a boy who sniggered at "the negress".
- The mother and child were lying there by the roadside.
- She had crossed borders.
- She had been thrown into a white world.
- "An obscure and disturbing light has been thrown on the real level of civilization in our country," said the politician.
- "Lo cotidiano."
- Shouldering.

We can find ourselves there through these images, and not far away from any of them are other narratives: the Samaritan story; the tales around Jesus' birth; the stories of the women, the beggars, the blind ones looking for help on the roads of Galilee; the passion and death stories. Must not a rereading of these narratives occur through interface with Fatima Yusif so that we are brought again into the full reaches of our discipleship and into a courageous rewriting and reacting of our theology? This is what Professor Copeland calls for, I believe, through the literary characteristics of her text. At one and the same time, they associate us with complicity and also with responsibility for a fuller, flourishing humanity.

REFLECTIONS ON THE ANALYSIS OF MODERNITY

Professor Copeland supports the insights that emerge from the narrative components of her paper through explicit claims and careful analysis. She subscribes to the critiques of modernity that have accumulated and complexified over the last forty years or so in various political and liberation theologies, but she is not a "postmodernist." She stays attached to the universal of a common human nature. She retains notions of freedom, hope, and progress, though she reinterprets them. Her approach is not to reject the universal, our common human nature, just because in fact it has for so long been identified with the "white, male, bourgeois European." Her approach instead is to reject modernity's dominant discourse, its "no" to all the others, which has rendered them the dispensable, forgotten, or subordinate objects of history. Professor Copeland says "no"

to the "no" of modernity and reasserts the "others," in all their differences, as the inhabitants of *humanum*.

She roots her claims in political and liberation theologies, especially in their later versions where critical social theory has undergone deeper assessment as it has been interfaced with race, class, sex, colonial, and now increasingly ecological discourse. She appeals too, as they do (with the possible exceptions of ecological and some postcolonial discourses), to the cross of Christ as "dangerous memory." To remember the cross of Christ is to remember that God is in solidarity with the suffering poor. As the subjects of God's preferential love, their dignity as human beings is asserted. But God also stands in judgment, through the cross, against the denial and repression of their full human flourishing.

Professor Copeland thus proposes a dethroning of the habitual subject of theological anthropology, the normatively white male (and white female who, though *other*, is 'less so' than 'other' *others*). She wants to replace too the various historical versions of explaining the male-female relationship (androgyny, unisex, complementarity). Her anthropological subject is the exploited, despised, poor woman of color. This position of course makes all the rest of us the *others*, or more *other* than we already are. More likely than not, at this point and for all sorts of reasons, some of us in this room are probably suspecting Professor Copeland of substituting yet another hegemony for the one she wants to dethrone. Isn't she just setting up another structure of oppression? Well if she is, for one thing, it seems that she has God on her side; for another, it will be some time yet before a new era of oppression could possibly set in, since these persons whom she wants to place at the center of the *humanum* do not yet have much by way of any human agency.

No, Professor Copeland's proposal is a genuine alternative. She sees a new "we" aborning; one that is *not yet*, but whose *time* has come; one that "is oriented by the radical demands of the incarnation of God." This "we," yet to flood the *humanum*, is a challenging moral task: it shall be a community of persons who acknowledge that they are:

1. creatures made by God;
2. *persons-in-community*, living in dynamic, just relationships with others;
3. incarnate spirits, that is, embodied differently in sex and race;
4. capable of working out essential freedom and responsibility;
5. social beings;
6. unafraid of difference and interdependence;
7. willing to struggle daily against "bad faith" and *ressentiment*.

In this description, we recognize some elements of Christian humanism, as it was called in the 1940s and 1950s, a product of Catholic social teaching and European personalist philosophy. But notice the new features added by Professor Copeland: embodied differently in race and sex, unafraid of difference and interdependence, and commitment to struggle daily against "bad faith" and *ressentiment*. These features "color" this theological inheritance differently and thus situate the project of building up the *humanum* differently than the earlier, white, male, European understanding of Christian humanism, however well intentioned and thought-to-have-been benign that it was. Differences are not to be collapsed,

absorbed, or ignored. They are blessed givens of God, grounded ultimately in the Trinity as set out by Professor Copeland's historical, materialist reading of the Mystical Body as "the body of broken bones."

But there must be bridges among the differences, bridges that are *accessible* and also *used*. We need to be able to "cross borders" into each others' worlds. We need to be able to *walk* into each others' worlds, not be "thrown" into them. The path for realizing this new "we," Professor Copeland says, is "solidarity," and the way of walking on this path is through "shouldering." She advances the notion of solidarity beyond its common sense meaning of "identification among members of the same group (e.g., nation, class, gender, race)." "Solidarity," she says, "concerns the empathetic Incarnation of Christian love. It is an intentional, moral and ethical task." Thus, it is both an attitude and a praxis. As attitude, it is demanding enough, for it requires a moral development and personal maturity of some measure, so as to be able

- to *recognize* the humanity of the 'other' as humanity;
- to have *regard* for the 'other' in her (and his) own 'otherness';
- to have *receptivity* and to engage in it mutually;
- to take on *obligation* with and to the 'other'.

As praxis, solidarity means "to shoulder our responsibility to the past in the here-and-now in memory of the Crucified Christ and all the victims of past history." It is to mend and renew relationships and to build and cross bridges in order to establish new ones, all the while respecting difference radically so that the subtle forms of controlling hegemony do not creep in again.

SOME EXTENDING REFLECTIONS AND QUESTIONS

Professor Copeland's thesis, with its supporting narratives and analyses, has led me to some places in my mind and heart where the beginnings of further conversations with her are taking root. Here are a few of those places and a flavor for "the flow of the talk," as the Irish would put it, that we might have.

(1) Fatima Yusuf, as the real and also paradigmatic exploited, despised, poor woman of color, appeared to me to be a genuine victim, a woman robbed of all vestiges of human being and agency (although she did say, "I will remember those faces as long as I live"). Contemporary discourse among feminist theorists and theologians of color, however, often places emphasis on the power among the poor to act, from the heart of "the struggle." How do you see the relationship of victim and agency and what does the agency of the poor mean for the type of "agency" we associate with modernity?

(2) Even though I am in agreement with your thesis and supporting analysis, especially in your retaining the "universal" claim of a common *humanum*, I also find myself responsive to certain aspects of current feminist poststructuralist and postcolonial discussions on the drawbacks of universalist claims, namely, how difficult it is to really liberate them from the reigning image and discourse of the masters, and thus, even if unwittingly, continue to propagate the exploitation, marginalization, or subordination of the others. How does this contemporary

feminist discussion factor into your work? What are the strategies for keeping the "traditional" subject of the *humanum* truly destabilized so as to have room to build up the new "we" of recognized, non subordinated, difference?

(3) Contemporary feminist theory and theology is also speaking of "multiplicative identities" in men and women today, coming about by an unprecedented rate of change which is increasing geographical, technological, and class movement. How does this new social reality advance or hinder a praxis of solidarity?

(4) In light of this decade's rapidly spreading, global, economic neoliberalism, propagated now as well by Asian and South American men, and some women, what are the concrete social and political practices that we must do and teach today in order to incarnate the Christian praxis of solidarity? What is the nature of our political commitment concretely as theologians.

(5) What are the links to be made between your narrative and analysis of *humanum* and the earth story and analysis of *natura*, as they are unfolding in contemporary physics and ecology? What does such a conversation mean for our praxis of solidarity?

(6) What does your analysis mean for interpreting anew some of the classic theological themes associated with theological anthropology. For instance:

- What is the origin of human hubris and the will to power when we are in fact made in God's image? Is God present at all in the white, male, bourgeois European? Is God present in evil? What does it mean to say today that we are made in God's image? What shall we yet see, hear, touch, feel, and think of God as we rewrite and react our theological anthropology from difference?
- Besides invoking the "the embracing and adopting Father" and the *memoria passionis Christi*, as you have in your paper, do we not also need to call on the sustaining and courageous Mother and the Holy Spirit of God so as to break old patterns and to stock our imaginations with new ways of seeing and acting in order to create the new *humanum*?

(7) Finally, being intentionally enigmatic, I want to say: "Fatima Yusuf. Maybe she is a Muslim or a Jew or a Coptic Christian." Her name is very post-modern; it both identifies and hides. A lot of work on theological anthropology lies ahead of us as we Christians walk about in the postmodern world, now dawning with both threat and promise.

In closing, let me say that your address has been inspiring and challenging. To your metaphors of "shouldering" and "lo cotidiano," I would like to add another, "tilling." I thank you for the soil you have tilled in and around us today. I think you have made room for the unfailing underground spring of God to reach us more readily and to refresh us for our walk together, and differently, on the road of solidarity.

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