

BLACK CATHOLIC THEOLOGY

- Topic: The Catholic Reception of Black Theology
Conveners: M. Shawn Copeland, Marquette University
Michael Fahey, editor, *Theological Studies*
Moderator: Jamie T. Phelps, OP, Loyola University of Chicago
Presenters: James H. Cone, Union Theological Seminary, New York
M. Shawn Copeland, Marquette University
Respondents: Miguel Diaz, St. Vincent de Paul Regional Seminary
Michael Fahey, editor, *Theological Studies*
Elizabeth Johnson, Fordham University

The workshop topic, "The Catholic Reception of Black Theology," advanced a conversation begun in the December 2000 issue of *Theological Studies* by focusing on the impact of white racist supremacy in Church and society. The workshop contributed to the convention's theme by calling attention to the impact of blatant and subtle racism in the *missio ad gentes*.

James H. Cone, who is recognized as the "father" of black theology, reproached the silence of white Catholic and Protestant theologians before white racist supremacy in seminaries, in churches, and in every segment of U. S. society. This "conspicuous silence" before the "nation's original sins" of genocide, enslavement, and segregation, with few exceptions, he maintained, has endured for more than three hundred years. Rather than confront the structural and moral evil that white racist supremacy is, white Catholic and Protestant theologians indulged in racial privilege and turned their attention to the study of European thinkers such as Rahner and Barth and to such topics as antifoundationalism and postmodernity. Cone insisted upon the incompatibility of white racist supremacy and authentic Christian identity. It is impossible, he declared, to be a follower of Jesus and not to fight white racist supremacy; it is impossible to be both racist and Christian at the same time. Cone acknowledged that with the advent of black Catholic theological work, black theology is no longer Protestant. However, he charged black Catholic theologians to critically engage the meaning of Christian faith in the face of white racist supremacy. Without such intellectual wrestling, Cone declared, no constructive theology is likely.

Building upon Michael Omi and Howard Winant's notion of racial formation, M. Shawn Copeland underscored the complex social process that organizes and rules human bodies and identified several ways by which the ideology of white racist supremacy in the U.S. has been mediated, structured, and symbolically expressed. Copeland also called attention to those 'other others,' women, men, children who have been and remain the object of racist immigration policies, repressive government tactics, restricted naturalization, economic exploitation, racially motivated violence, illegal internment and deportation. She proposed three challenges to theologians in the U.S.: first, to mount a critique of white racist supremacy and to integrate that critique into Catholic social teaching;

second, to develop or to agitate for the development of a discourse that counters the current regressive and reactionary usage of notions of liberty, justice, and equality; and third, to embrace disciplines of prayer, fasting, and Christian hope in order to deepen collaboration among theologians in bringing about a different kind of social situation in the here and now. Copeland concluded with a call to solidarity between African American Catholic and Latino Catholic theologians. This call to solidarity neither precludes nor excludes women and men who are not black or Latino or Catholic from working with them, but rather exposes the manipulative strategies of the dominant culture that pit African American and Latino Catholics against one another.

In his response, Miguel Diaz offered examples of his own everyday encounters with cultural and racial stereotyping, the displacement of an image of Guadalupe in favor an image of a white Madonna in a parish and racist interpretations of the situation of Elian Gonzalez. Diaz invited theologians of Caribbean descent to reflect more seriously on their African ancestry. He repeated both Cone's insistence on the struggle of Christian faith against white racist supremacy and Copeland's call for solidarity between Blacks and Latinos.

Michael Fahey reiterated the connection between the workshop theme and that of the December 2000 issue of *Theological Studies* which attempted to place black theology on the Catholic theological agenda in an unprecedented way. Fahey adverted to the historical and theological context of the issue, pointing out the journal's strategic contribution in providing space for new theological initiatives, including the 1975 issue devoted to women and emergent feminist theology, and he anticipated a future issue on Hispanic/Latino theology.

Elizabeth Johnson set out three pertinent issues in relation to racism and the vocation of the theologian and the emergence of black Catholic theology. First, Johnson stated that white Catholic theologians need to grasp the concrete and insidious evil that racism is. Second, she urged Catholic white theologians to begin to explore the ways in which white privilege is structured and functions on macro- and microlevels in society and Church. Such critical examination, she asserted, needs to be accompanied by concrete manifestations of intellectual, moral, and religious conversion. Third, Johnson challenged black Catholic theologians to increased and sustained constructive work; such work, she concluded, represents a cause for hope.

The discussion raised the following issues: the necessity of a hermeneutics of suspicion and rigorous dialogue in theology in order to resist any tendency toward ideology; the need to interrogate white privilege and its intentional and unintentional functions in the oppression of people of color; and the cultural struggle for theology in a variety of situations in North America, particularly in Quebec.

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