

ANTHROPOLOGY—TOPIC SESSION

Topic: Engaging Whiteness
Convener: Karen Teel, University of San Diego
Moderator: Nichole Flores, Saint Anselm College
Presenters: Katie Grimes, Villanova University
Elisabeth T. Vasko, Duquesne University
Andrew Prevot, Boston College

Taken collectively, neither white Catholics nor the Church as an institution have ever offered anything approaching an adequate resistance to white supremacy in the United States. Instead, they have colluded in it. Given this failure, much constructive work is needed to render the Church and Catholic theology capable of contributing substantially to the work of dismantling white supremacy. Building on the efforts of thinkers who have begun this struggle, the panelists critiqued the Church's historical and continuing sacramental participation in slavery, segregation, and racism (Grimes); explored the possibility of lament as liturgical and spiritual practice (Vasko); and suggested a starting framework for more effective theologizing (Prevot). The presenters offered no easy solutions, nor did they soften their critique by dwelling on how far we have come. Instead, they worked to expose and honestly confront the ongoing problem.

In "Breaking the Body of Christ: The Sacraments in a Habitat of White Supremacy," Katie Grimes argued that throughout its history, the U. S. Catholic Church has functioned overwhelmingly in harmony with the "habitat of white supremacy" that characterizes the society in which it has developed. Far from providing a refuge from the cruelties of the world—e.g., not only individual Catholics but also the Church itself owned slaves—the Church's holiest rites have mirrored and colluded with the practices of slavery, segregation, and racism. Grimes contended that the celebration of the sacraments has often reproduced and bolstered white supremacy. During slavery, for example, baptism for slaves often included an admonishment to obey their masters. The sacrament had different effects for white people and people of color: Christian faith meant freedom for Europeans but not for Africans. She concluded that since even now white Catholics tend to segregate themselves from people of color, in practicing their faith and in other ways, baptism is still functioning as a habit of white supremacy. Drawing on the thought of Louis-Marie Chauvet, Grimes warned that "racial unity functions not just as the effect of these sacraments but also as their necessary component"; that the sacraments cannot work in a habitat of white supremacy; and that white Catholic complicity in *de facto* segregation in schools and neighborhoods "impair[s] the ability of the Church to be the body of Christ in history."

Given the intractability of white supremacy and racism, Elisabeth T. Vasko asked, "What are white Catholics supposed to do?" Her paper, entitled "Confessing Whiteness? Re-thinking Sin-Talk in the Context of White Supremacy," detailed the problems that arise when white people try to talk their way out of racism. Using Sara Ahmed's "Declarations of Whiteness: The Non-Performativity of Anti-Racism," Vasko showed that verbally acknowledging and disavowing racism accomplishes nothing, and that it can instead promote apathy and continued complicity. In the same

way, she maintained, sin-talk can “obfuscate participation in social evils” such as racism; to be effective, sin-talk needs to be “filtered through the language of lament.” Following Bryan Massingale and Denise Ackermann, Vasko described lamentation as a process that gives voice to pain, especially the pain of people who have been oppressed. Hearing this lamentation is a necessary step that cannot be rushed, however uncomfortable it may be. Vasko advocated for the return of lament to Catholic liturgical life and cautioned white Catholics that the hurt is so deep that even once they commit themselves to listening to the pain racism has caused and begin to express their grief and repentance, forgiveness may well be denied them.

In “Beyond White Privilege: Toward an Uncensored, Subaltern, and Aporetic Theological Response to the Crises of Race and Racism,” Andrew Prevot shifted the conversation to theological discourse itself. He noted seven important gains attributable to the phrase “white privilege”: it shows that whites still have racial advantages, and that racism is social; it engages well-intentioned whites; it makes whiteness visible; it challenges the meritocracy myth; it is verifiable through social science research; and it can implicate the church in the white supremacist system. Prevot then noted four major problems with the phrase, which corresponded to the terms in his title. First, white privilege rhetoric “is not honest enough about the pain”; in contrast, theology needs an “uncensored” approach of expressing and listening to lamentation (to use Vasko’s term). In place of “white privilege,” “white harm” may be more adequate. Second, discussing white privilege centers white voices and marginalizes voices of color; theology must reverse this trend. Third, “aporetic” refers to the need for constant vigilance in engaging the concept of “race,” which can advance or impede antiracist efforts, depending on the circumstances. Fourth, “white privilege” is not a properly theological category. Prevot hopes that his previous three points can push theologians “toward humble self-knowledge before God.”

In the energetic and far-ranging discussion, panelists and audience members clarified terms, debated strategies for tackling the problem of whiteness, identified cognate issues, and considered the need for white people to learn their histories and do their own “cultural work.”

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