

RACISM AND RACIALISM: THEOLOGY AND THE POLITICS OF SURVIVAL

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The workshop on black Catholic theology provides "an opportunity for members of the CTSA to engage in critical dialogue with theological scholarship rooted in the context of diverse black Catholic cultures."¹ Topics of the workshop for the past three years have focused on critical intellectual appreciation and reflection on inculturation, theological method, social analysis, and responsible concrete transformative Christian praxis in Church and society. At the 1990 workshop, Edward K. Braxton presented a discussion on recent critical historical scholarship on African American culture. At the 1991 workshop, M. Shawn Copeland put forward a program for launching a politically responsible methodical black Catholic theology.² In the 1992 workshop, Phillip Linden's paper continued this investigation, probing the function of race and racialism in the United States and exploring its meaning for political theology. This line of inquiry conjoins cultural and social analysis, and the topic for the 1993 workshop is projected to further this investigation with a paper by Diana Hayes on womanist perspectives in a Catholic context.

What follows is a summary of the major points of Prof. Linden's paper, "Racism and Racialism: Theology and the Politics of Survival."³ Linden situates this essay in five successive and interactive contexts: *first*, the prophetic responsibilities of a political theology; *second*, the failure of "immigrant ecclesiology" in the United States to face its own legacy of slavery, religious persecution, and political and economic discrimination and to admit its "support of status quo values"; *third*, the crisis of the political, economic, and cultural situation of the United States, particularly vis-à-vis the "creation of a new world order" and the "political conflicts of South Central Los Angeles"; *fourth*, the dominance of science and technology and the increasing role of "managerial skills for wide-

¹Jamie T. Phelps, "Memorandum to CTSA Board of Directors," 11 June 1992, p. 3.

²Jamie Phelps, "Workshop on Black Catholic Theology: Methodology," *CTSA Proceedings* 46 (1991) 145-47.

³Phillip J. Linden, Jr., "Racism and Racialism: Theology and the Politics of Survival," A paper prepared for the Black Catholic Theology Workshop, the Catholic Theological Society of America, 12 June 1992.

scale control"; and *fifth*, the phenomenon of "despiritualization [which] encourages the undermining of the human spirit marked by altered states of awareness and of existence through the use of drugs and sexuality with impunity."¹

Linden works out a method and political theory by which to distinguish racism from racialism and clarify the latter's role in the politics of survival by drawing on the conceptual framework provided by the work of Paul Ricoeur.² Linden begins with a clarification of the terms of the discussion.

First, the concept of *race* anthropologically refers to the major division of humanity with distinctive, hereditarily transmissible physical characteristics, e.g., Negroid, Mongoloid, Caucasoid.

Second, *racism* is the doctrine that the race or physical type generates culture. In its extreme form, racism preaches the inherent superiority of certain races and stirs up prejudice and hatred for races said to be inferior. Gobineau and Houston Stewart Chamberlain helped to popularize racist ideas during the 19th century. White racist doctrines are still the tools of demagogues, whereas serious anthropologists no longer subscribe to them.

Finally, *racialism* strictly speaking is the distinctive doctrine, practice, attitudes, and conduct centered on racial differences or which arise between races because of differences. Maybe the best definition for racialism can be found in the words of Willie Williams, Police Chief of Philadelphia and soon to be the Police Chief of Los Angeles in an interview on the Today Show after the political conflict in South Central L.A. (Thursday, April 30, 1992): "Race is a part of everything we do in America, regardless what our ethnicity is." Thus, race has a significant role in the life of all Americans and how they think about themselves, how they think about others, and how they think about their history. It refers to both the perpetrator of and the victim of racism.³

Linden maintains that Ricoeurian theory is eminently suited to dealing with the problem of race because it allows for a critical dialogue between "two competing ideas or concepts in a dynamic search for . . . meaning and truth that would be impossible if [these ideas] stood alone." Moreover, Ricoeurian theory expands the task of hermeneutics, i.e., textual interpretation, "to get beyond the text and to deal with action within the context of a community, of a culture."⁴ Linden went on to sketch his interpretation and use of Ricoeurian theory, describing notions crucial to political and social transformation—imagination, ideology, utopia, and power.

In her *formal response*, Prof. Phelps underscored the positive functions of utopia in the context of social transformation. Without a vision of the possibility of a new reality, there can be no social progress. Professor Copeland commented

¹Ibid., 2-4.

²Ibid., 5.

³Ibid.

⁴Ibid., 6.

on Linden's use of the term *racialism* which is generally employed in the European context, and his use of the notion of ideology.

The workshop continues to draw a multi-cultural, multi-racial, and international group (there were representatives from Canada, Germany, and Nigeria). The *topics* considered by the twenty-five participants, some of whom have been attending the workshop for the past two years, included: the concrete political, economic, and social ramifications of "despiritualization"; the political conflicts in South Central Los Angeles; the function of ideology in social legitimation and social integration; the effects of the "new world order" on the economically poor around the globe; and the perduring character of white racism as a global phenomenon.

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