

CONVERSION TO ANTI-RACISM—SELECTED SESSION

Topic: Conversion from White Complicity to Anti-Racist Spiritual Practices

Convener: Jennifer Reed-Bouley, College of Saint Mary

Moderator: Karen Teel, University of San Diego

Presenters: Alex Mikulich, Loyola University New Orleans

Laurie Cassidy, Marywood University

Jennifer Reed-Bouley, College of Saint Mary

The dominant North American social order often includes spiritual practices that define the subjectivity of white people in ways that reinscribe the racial status quo, perpetuating discrimination suffered by people of color. This panel explicated the process of conversion from white complicity to spiritual practices of white anti-racism, demonstrating that development of an anti-racist white identity is fundamentally a spiritual journey of conversion.

In his paper, “The Gift of W.E.B. Du Bois and Double-Consciousness,” Alex Mikulich began the discussion by examining W.E.B. Du Bois’s method of double-consciousness as a practical theology of white conversion. Although not widely recognized in academic theology, Du Bois’s lifework suggests a practical theology and spirituality. Du Bois’s double-consciousness presents a way for whites to begin to reflect critically about white subjectivity and participation in “white habitus,” the way whites culturally and structurally inhabit the world as possession and internalize racial superiority. White engagement of Du Bois’s double-consciousness further suggests a self-critical and compassionate asceticism that is a condition for the possibility of whites entering authentic relationship with people of color. An asceticism grounded in double-consciousness suggests a conversion of prayer, fasting, social analysis, and political activism whereby whites may begin to develop the capacity to subvert privilege and complicity in white habitus and become open to the possibility of authentic relationships with people of color.

For Christians, the socialization that makes whiteness and its privileges invisible is not only an epistemological problem but also a spiritual one. The inability to have access to critical self-awareness calls into question the capacity for conversion to anti-racist practices. Laurie Cassidy’s paper, “Unseating the god of Whiteness: Apophatic Prayer and Conversion from White Racial Identity,” explored how images of God reinforce whiteness in the prayer of white Christians. African American theologians have written extensively on how racism determines the doctrine of God and Christology, but few white theologians have addressed how white privilege determines white Christians’ image of God. She demonstrated historically and theologically that whiteness is fundamentally idolatry. Drawing upon Carmelite spirituality and scholarship on contemplative prayer, Cassidy explored how apophatic prayer practices decenter the white self and its implicit but unexamined foundation in the god of whiteness. She argued that apophatic prayer practices create the possibility for conversion from the invisibility of white privilege because in this prayer God is not merely an object of consciousness but rather God is free to draw near in love

beyond human comprehension. This stance may open white Christians to the conversion Lonergan describes as a seismic shift in worldview and consciousness.

Jennifer Reed-Bouley provided an example of how such a shift in consciousness affects theological method. In “Conversion from White Complicity to Anti-Racist Spiritual Practices through Ethnography,” she responded to Bryan Massingale's proposal that the process of white conversion must move beyond moral persuasion to encouragement of liberating awareness. Massingale's proposal implies that intellectual and spiritual conversions require being accountable to and learning from people whose voices are regularly silenced and marginalized. Reed-Bouley outlined her use of the method of critical theological ethnography as a way for a white theologian to structure research that moves from white complicity to anti-racist theological method. Her research entailed interviewing fifteen Black Catholics who do not identify themselves as part of the theological guild about their Catholic faith and experiences in the Church. Thematic analysis (with illustrative quotations provided on a handout) revealed that participants experience the Church simultaneously as both a loving home and a significant source of racial suffering, and that participants regularly forgive racism by working collaboratively with others to transform Church and society and by protecting themselves from racism's corrosive effects. She concluded by explaining a self-correcting process within ethnography that facilitated her gaining a more authentic understanding of what participants meant when they talked about racial forgiveness.

Karen Teel moderated the session by asking participants to jot down ideas and questions for discussion after each panelist's presentation. After the presentations, the community engaged in a rich discussion that considered connections among the three papers, further questions for consideration, and implications of anti-racist theological method as a way of conversion.

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