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Review of M. Shawn Copeland’s, “Racism and the Vocation of the Christian Theologian.” *Spiritus* 2.1 (2002) 14-29.

by Marguerite Spencer

In a time in which Clarence Thomas and David Duke triumph and cultural life is bereft of essential humanness, M. Shawn Copeland asks what contribution theology can make in addressing oppressive structures and repairing our spiritual life. In her article “Racism and the Vocation of the Christian Theologian,” she asks how theologians are to speak in our times. Fashioned as a calling, theologians must confront their theological responsibility and the world’s “encrusted social sin” at the border of ethnic and racial violence (16).

Copeland takes time to explain the structural nature of race and racism that normalizes white supremacy, compromising the transmission of culture (e.g., education) and participation in the common human good (e.g., work and politics). The large-scale process of racial formation leads conservatives to promote colorblindness and liberals to focus on the historical role of government in crafting segregation and other patterns of inequality (17). On a micro-level, racial formation permeates everyday lived experience. We *see* race, we interpret it, we lump together racial-cultural groups, and we act in accord with stereotypes. Copeland likens this biased common sense to Bernard Lonergan’s technical denotation of *bias* as a more or less conscious choice to be incorrect or to repress correcting insights (18). Racial arrogance and xenophobia generate irrational fears and deform our institutions and patriotism (19).

Copeland’s most fascinating exploration is how racism spawns “a spoiling malaise of the spirit” that twists and distorts spirituality (17). Our indifference and arrogance at the suffering and death of third world persons of color stifles our realization of a common human good. We live in the white, heterosexist male “master’s house,” Copeland writes, that distorts our love. Rather than love of God, we choose money and the love of whiteness; rather than relationships we choose connections of power, prestige, and privilege and rather than individuality, we choose conformity. In essence, we compromise our very being, numbing our basic sensibility of compassion and gentleness (20-21).

Copeland calls on theologians to contribute rigorously to their academic discipline, while forgoing academic careerism in the promulgation of the “the mystery of salvation (21).” Theological witness, she argues, requires a grasp of our nation’s social and cultural context through a reading of the signs of the times (and of the historical construction of race, I would argue). The Spirit guides the theologian in determining the place in which the truth of the Reign of God is most accessible – a place of solidarity with society’s

despised and oppressed. Copeland is adamant that “telling the truth about white racist supremacy is a theological obligation, no matter how cauterizing those truths may be (22).” She notes the “irruption of racism” during the past two decades, including the Charles Stuart scapegoating of a black man and the Rodney King beating (23). However much Copeland talks about structures, she exclusively focuses here on individual racist acts and actors. It would strengthen her argument if she including examples of institutional and systemic forms of racism, such as the ghettoization of nonwhites or the disparities in the health care system, as part of what Malcolm X called the American nightmare for people of color.

Copeland completes her article by laying out three theological responses to the signs of the times. First, theologians should give critical scholarly attention to the extent of white privilege. Second, they should refine their sensitivity to American public discourse about liberty, justice, and equality that ignores our nation’s persistent segregation and racialized capitalism. Theologians must agitate for and support social scientists in the fashioning of a counter-discourse, the content of which Copeland does not enumerate, but which at least criticizes the acquisitive market and cultural “(dis)values” that devour spirits and lives. Lastly, Copeland calls Catholic (and I would argue all) theologians to renew scholarly attention to the principles of Catholic social teaching. Drawing upon this body of thought, including the Catholic Bishops’ 1979 pastoral letter on racism, theologians can expose the ways in which racism divides the human family, blots out the image of God among us, violates the dignity of the oppressed, and denies the reconciling work of Christ (25). Catholic theologians must also explore principles of social teaching outside their tradition.

Drawing upon Gustavo Gutiérrez, Copeland argues that in order for the theologian to pursue authentically these tasks, they must allow their work to flow from a life of Christian faith. Prophetic praxis desires, advocates for, and commits to the reign of God, not the systems or structures of this world. The prayer that animates spirituality is a mode of being that draws Christians into a love with God, transforming not only them but society as well (26). The contribution theologians make to the dismantling of white supremacy and establishing the reign of God, Copeland concludes, is contingent on the performance of the intellectual, spiritual, moral and social responsibilities of their vocation.

Copeland provides theologians helpful insight into the spiritual harms of racism and a firm charge to attend to white privilege in their work, including the enrichment of public discourse. It is important that she explains the notion of social sin and its structural manifestations; however, she fails to call theologians to transform these structures, a fault that she misses when drawing upon Catholic social teachings. As Bryan Massingale has pointed out, most of the bishops’ statements on racism fail to examine the underlying cultural beliefs that facilitate and legitimate racial bias, the ways in which racism is systemic and structural, and the means by which social groups with unequal power

perpetuate a dominant, white culture.¹ A more critical approach would provide theologians with more effective tools when calling for the transformation of culture on theological grounds. Nonetheless, I would recommend this as an introductory piece for theologians, but would employ Massingale's as a follow-up.

Substantive Questions for Discussion:

1. We have focused before on the sin of racism. Copeland brings a depth to that discussion by talking about its spiritual consequences, which shift our center from the love of God to the love of power and privilege. How could we flesh this out more? E.g., Eli Wiesel speaks about indifference as the opposite of love.
2. When forming our faith and prayer life, what works could we draw on from the Catholic tradition that would prepare us for structural change? Ignatian spirituality etc..? Outside the tradition?
3. I criticize Copeland for failing to call on theologians to transform racialized structures. What would such a call entail?

¹ "James Cone and Recent Catholic Episcopal Teaching on Racism," *Theological Studies* 61 (2000) 700-730 at 706.