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Review of Peter Kwan's, "Whiteness Unveiled: Implications for a Collaborative Anti-Subordination Strategy." *White Privilege: Implications for the Catholic University, the Church and Theology*, March 26-28, 2006, University of Notre Dame. Bryan Massingale's *Response*.

by Marguerite Spencer

Presenting at the March, 2006 Notre Dame conference on the implications of white privilege for the Catholic university, church and theology, Kwan addresses the ways in which race and racial oppression interlock with other modes of oppression such as gender, sexuality, sexual orientation and class. He begins by telling a story of an all-American athlete whose coach at Penn State pressured her about her sexual orientation and eventually terminated her. She was not a lesbian, but his complaint was that she looked too masculine. Kwan consciously leaves out racial identity when telling the story and asks his audience to imagine her race. Why would some think she is black? Because she was tall, a star, masculine? Kwan uses this exercise to make the claim that racial identity seldom operates in isolation – the athlete's blackness called into question her femininity and sexual orientation.

The mutual dependence of these modes of oppression is not restricted to the experience of blacks. Kwan writes about the passive, desexualization of Asians. The historical construction of Asian as the exotic "other" impacted the prostitution industry, the consumption of the Asian female's body, and the commodification of Asian sexuality. White consumers were saviors, not exploiters. Kwan argues that, "[i]n order for the dominant race to bear the moral pain of doing the inhuman to fellow humans, their victims must firstly be dehumanized." Racial privilege alone is insufficient to do this job.

Kwan provides another example of interlocking oppression in Emmett Till, whose body was exhumed two years ago. The media picked up his story, exposing a new generation to the horrific lynching he took for daring to whistle at a white woman in a grocery store. Kwan argues that white women's sexuality was a privilege reserved for white men. Moreover, whites feared and fetishized black hyper-masculinity and hyper-sexuality. He reminds us that lynching was a crime reserved for those who transgressed the racial-sexual taboo, often involving castration. It was the most brutal form of violence against Blacks and it makes clear the connection between race, sexuality, and sexual boundaries. Kwan describes lynching as the "white howl of dominance" that instilled a sense of fear among the Black community and a sense of unity among the white community.

Although whites subordinate non-whites through lynching and more contemporary means, Kwan argues, the subordinating is most efficient when it is self-reinforcing. All forms of social communication teach non-whites that they are weak, of low worth, and not part of the norm, he claims. Because of this, whites need do very little to preserve their power and privilege, while the “other” suffers from a negative sense of self and of dislocation.

Kwan concludes by reiterating that race and racism are deeply embedded in American culture and society precisely because they consist of many vectors of subjugation, including gender and sexuality. To destabilize white privilege we cannot regard race as a single dimension problem. The Catholic Church and university, he argues, “cannot hold onto male privilege and heteronormativity while simultaneously claiming that they are genuine about doing the activism needed to eradicate racism and white privilege.”

Bryan Massingale’s *Response*

Massingale expresses gratitude toward Kwan for pointing out the intersectionality of race and other categories. While many of us recognize the interwoven nature of privilege, we resist the practical implications. One reason may stem from a fear that joining a coalition of differing identities may mean our own interests will not be fully met. More likely, we resist this insight because it forces a confrontation with human sexuality in general and homosexuality in particular. “White privilege,” he argues “works through the instrumentality of the body.” Our sexuality is raced. It is vital to understand this, even though sexual issues are contentious in the Catholic Church. It is also vital to understand and collaborate against overlapping systems of subordination.

First, Massingale shows significant agreement with Kwan’s position of the futility of addressing oppression without intersectionality. There is no hierarchy of oppression, according to black lesbian, activist, feminist, socialist, poet Audrey Borg. In commenting on the compounded nature of powerlessness, she often finds herself an outsider in a group that some consider as deviant. Within the lesbian community, she is black and vice versa within the black community. However, she notes that any attack against blacks is an attack on homosexuals, since many blacks identify as both. She cannot afford the luxury of fighting only one form of oppression. All groups are due freedom from oppression. Because there are no single-issue fights, we cannot compartmentalize our lives, our concerns, and our activism. Collaborations are necessary. If we are to liberate communities of color (and whites as well), Massingale asserts, we must attend to the liberation of the whole community. In Christian theology, Alice Walker inspired womanist scholars to express this inclusive position most fully.

Second, Massingale seeks to further the conversation by building upon Kwan’s deeper and more problematic challenge, calling all those not directly and immediately impacted to attend to the intersectionality of privileges. Not doing so

compromises the integrity of one's commitment to justice, including the commitment of the Catholic university, the Church and theology. Failing to address male privilege and heteronormativity is a failure to fight multiple forms of privilege and is disingenuous and hypocritical. So what are the Catholic publics to make of this challenge? In answering this question, Massingale finds resonance between Kwan and Lonergan on the integral nature of the conversion experience. According to Lonergan, conversion is the foundation of all authentic theological activity. It is a shift in paradigm of understanding, interpreting and acting on society. When converted, we experience a new field of vision, a new horizon, new interests and scale of knowledge. What is unnoticed becomes vivid and present; what was heresy is now truth; what is certain becomes doubtful; and what is unthinkable is now real. Conversion can be subtle or gradual and agonizing, and results in a transformation of self, culture, and world. Lonergan identifies three related modalities of self-transcendence: moral, intellectual, and religious. He observes that a failure to advance in one area can undermine progress in others. Donald Gelpi goes even further, arguing that any conversion at any one level unaccompanied by conversion at other levels is inauthentic. This lack of integrity leads to inconsistent, contradictory behaviors that erode any initial conversion.

Massingale argues that these insights provide a context for appreciating Kwan's challenge. Discordance between modalities of self-transcendence cripples our efforts to address the compound and systemic nature of privilege and the intersectionality of oppression. For example, unconverted critical readers of scripture often become biblical literalists on homosexuality. By engaging the forces of oppression in a piecemeal way, we risk intellectual inadequacy and hypocrisy. The integrity of our belief and commitment is at stake.

Massingale next considers the difficulty behind forging collaborative anti-subordination strategies. Members of oppressed groups wish to hold on to whatever privilege they might have, rather than forming alliances across groups. In our nation's past and even today working class whites have resisted collaborative opportunities with blacks. Kelly Brown Douglas describes how homophobia in black communities allows blacks – especially black women – to protect heterosexual privilege.

Finally, Massingale raises the key question that conference participants only hinted: what is the goal of our struggle against white privilege. What do we stand for? Are our collaborative efforts a mere capitulation to political correctness, particularly when imposed upon the Christian tradition? If we can't answer these questions, Massingale argues, it will be difficult to articulate strategies. For him, justice strives for King's beloved community, an inclusive community of equals, where differences are cause of celebration, not fear. Such a community shows deep forms of respect and equitable power sharing, embracing the other, not just tolerating him or her. As part of the struggle against one form of oppression we need to struggle against all others, he argues. Quoting King, "Justice is

indivisible...Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” Massingale raises up Coretta Scott King, whose work against sexism and homophobia through the King Center in Atlanta is central to the beloved community. For the Christian, the beloved community is none other than the social and political realization of the reign of God.

Massingale concludes by proposing that the hermeneutical key for understanding Jesus’ ministry open is his inclusive and scandalous table fellowship with the despised and outcast. His open commensality demonstrates that human definitions and exclusions are insignificant in the eyes of God. Massingale wonders what liberation theology would look like if Jesus’ commensality were the point of departure in place of the Exodus. He argues that we must articulate his vision in our times and ground our collaborative strategy in it.

Massingale finds time after his response to provide a postscript on Christian blasphemy. The stigma of Aids is often based on religious beliefs, ostracizing victims in name of God. As believers, the practical implication of Jesus’ table fellowship demands that we unmask this abuse of God and God’s authority as idolatry. This stigmatization is also a blasphemy against God, taking God’s name in vain and making God an accomplice and witness to human evil. Massingale asks the obvious question: How do we know the right use of God from the improper use? By our fruits we shall know, he replies. He forcefully asserts that whenever church doctrine results in the destruction of bodies, minds, spirits; or denies the dignity and equality of persons; or supports the marginalization or exclusion of a community, it is not and cannot be from God. This inclusivity, Massingale insists, must be the theological foundation for our collaborative anti-subordination strategy.

Substantive Questions for Discussion:

1. How might the Catholic University be a model for the Church in addressing the intersectionality of oppressions? E.g., How does it minister to non-majority students and groups? How does it fail in this ministry?
2. How can the theology of the body serve the Church in addressing the intersectionality of oppression? How does it hinder it? More broadly, can theological anthropology be the basis of an appreciation of our fluid and multiple selves?
3. What models of collaboration, whether religiously based or otherwise, might serve the Catholic University, Church and theologians in their fight against compounded oppression? In meeting Lonergan’s call for integrated conversion?
4. How should theologians respond to Massingale’s call for the beloved community and the challenge his hermeneutical key poses?