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Review of Bryan N. Massingale's, "James Cone and Recent Catholic Episcopal Teaching on Racism," *Theological Studies* 61 (2000) 700-730.

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In his essay "James Cone and Recent Catholic Episcopal Teaching on Racism," Bryan N. Massingale takes up James Cone's theological challenge to the American Catholic Church to address the critical faults and deficits in its reflection on racism and, therefore, its conception of justice (700). The U.S. Bishops' 1979 pastoral letter on racism, *Brothers and Sisters to Us*, was largely forgotten by all but a few, and little has been done since to educate Catholics about racism but for statements issued by individual bishops (701). Massingale sets out to survey those statements published in the official weekly *Origins* between 1990-2000. He then offers critical observations about them in light of Cone's theological perspectives, and provides constructive proposals to guide future Catholic theological reflection on racism (702).

Massingale locates 21 documents of varying length, five of which were issued by Cardinal Roger Mahony, the archbishop of Los Angeles. Some bishops wrote in response to a specific instance of racial injustice such as a Ku Klux Klan rally, while others wrote for a Martin Luther King Jr. holiday or with no particular social catalyst in mind (703). Massingale first examines how the bishops understood and employed the term racism, which influences decisively their theological interpretation and ethical guidance. The presence of only a few clear articulations surprises Massingale. Many bishops understand racism as thoughts and actions that proceed from a relatively conscious conviction of superiority. Others offer a more nuance definition that differentiates between individual, interpersonal or cultural, and institutional manifestations (704). However, regardless of this variation, the bishops focus primarily on the voluntary, conscious, and deliberate acts of individuals such as discrimination in housing, cross burnings and attitudes of greed etc...They 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 (706).

Massingale argues that these definitions color the bishops' theological and ethical reflections on racism. While there is unanimity across statements that all Catholics have a moral obligation to eliminate racism, the appeal is primarily through moral exhortations based on faith convictions that the bishops assume are intuitively obvious and morally accepted (707). In particular, the doctrine of creation holds all humans as worthy of dignity and in unity with the human family.

The Incarnation holds that all are brothers and sister to Christ through his redemptive act. A few bishops appeal to the Pentecost as a call to celebrate diversity and the Parable of the Good Samaritan as a demand to minister to the ostracized (708). To all the bishops, racism are a personal sin against “fraternal charity” that requires individual conversion, only a few, including Mahony and Thomas Daily, treat structural sinfulness (709).

This understanding of the sin of racism also colors the bishops’ suggested strategies to eradicate it. Almost all recommend self-examination to avoid racist behaviors and racial discrimination and to cultivate racial tolerance and interracial friendships (711). Although there are a couple of bishops that vaguely call for increased awareness of institutional racism, the basic summons, argues Massingale, is to treat the racial other with civility and respect. There are two alternative approaches, however. Bishop Daily of Brooklyn, N.Y., notes that the “traditional notions of sin” that focus on personal wrongs fail to account for our experience of social evils, which are located, sometimes invisibly, in structures that remain operative by both voluntary and involuntary processes (712). We become aware of social or structural sins through moments of interruption that cause us to see the damage that they do. Mahony also employs the concepts of structural and systemic sin, drawing upon principles of catholic social thought, which include solidarity and the preferential option for the poor. He agrees that personal goodwill is not sufficient, arguing for the government to be the preeminent agent of the common good to bring about a more just society (713).

To further this critique, Massingale turns to Cone’s theological perspective, which is grounded in the black experience of surviving with dignity a society that fails to recognize black humanity. For Cone, skin color—not ethnic heritage or economic class—is key to understanding American racism, which results in the rejection, humiliation, and subordination of non-whites (715). White supremacy, argues Cone, is synonymous with racism. As such, systemic racism manifest in covert racial advantage and privilege are more damaging than individual, deliberate racist acts (716). Cone argues that whites are incapable of knowing the destructive but often invisible nature of the social, economic, and political structures that racialize society and produce systemic disadvantage (717). Massingale surmises that Cone would judge the American bishops’ understanding of racism as lacking in the depth needed for accurate theological reflection and pastoral practice (718).

For Cone, the essence of sin is the egotistical and idolatrous desire to become like God and adopt an identity other than that given by God. Racism is the sin of whiteness—the desire to play God in the realm of human affairs by dominating on the basis of color and by defining black humanity in ways beneficial to whites. Slavery is the paradigmatic form of white supremacy, both for its dehumanizing effect on blacks and for its structural and systemic nature. According to Cone, blacks participate in the sin of racism when they acquiesce to white definitions of their humanity, however, their hostility toward whites is not a form of black racism

because blacks are in no position to maintain a situation of social dominance over whites. Massingale argues that Cone would agree with the bishops that racism is a sin but would argue that it is principally a structural and systemic sinfulness that permeates the whole of one's being and humanity (719-20).

Massingale also argues that Cone would take issue with the bishops' overly optimistic use of moral suasion to effect change because of its dim hope for success. Cone even faults himself for his naïve, over-reliant appeal to the conscience of the oppressor in his earlier works. He recommends a more thorough social analysis that accounts for the links between racism, capitalism, and imperialism on the one hand, and theology and the church on the other (721). Appeals to conscience, Cone would say, are futile if consciences have been malformed and blinded by the normalized ideological distortions of our society. Appeals to individuals and weak social analysis also blind us to the need for structural and cultural change (722).

According to Massingale, Cone's most powerful critique is that Catholic theology about racism is paternalistic and is not rooted in the experience of those that suffer – non-whites. It speaks *about* and *for* blacks, rather than encouraging black thought and leadership as essential to the life and work of the church. Massingale derides the church for its "unconscious complicity in the very injustice it seeks to criticize (723)." He fails to find sustained magisterial attention given to racial justice. Moreover, of the 21 statements he examined, only three make reference to the 1984 pastoral letter on evangelization issued by the African American Catholic bishops, *What We Have Seen and Heard*. This blindness marginalizes blacks and renders the Church's fight for racial justice hollow and even hypocritical (724). It is through the efforts of the oppressed community that whites will be freed to convert and cooperate in building a just society. For Cone, solidarity is "becoming one with the unwanted."

Massingale concludes his article by proposing six shifts in U.S. Catholicism to achieve a more adequate ethical method for achieving racial justice. They are (1) a shift from stress on racism to white privilege; (2) a shift from parenthesis to analysis; (3) a shift from personal sin to structures of sin; (4) a shift from decency and respect for the other to "distributive justice"; (5) a shift from moral suasion to liberating awareness; and (6) a shift from unconscious racial supremacy to intentional racial solidarity.

Because Massingale grounds his analysis of and suggested shifts in the Catholic bishops statements in a more structural and systemic approach to racism, he provides an irreplaceable corrective that demands response. His efforts are complicated, however, by the prevalent "colorblind" mindset and legal framework that wishes to ignore racial and ethnic group identities in favor of individual ones. We must strive for universalism in the particular. We are all members of one body. Of course, the body is ill – its sinful structures and systems need healing.

This requires more than the remorse of individuals. It does not appear that the church is willing or able to take the lead.

Substantive Questions for Discussion:

1. How would a womanist add to Cone's critique of the Catholic Church?
2. How can I most effectively bring to the discussion my background in social analysis?
3. What is the best strategy for effecting the shifts Massingale recommends if the church is in denial of its