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**Review of Jon Nilson's, "Confessions of a White Catholic Racist Theologian" in Laurie M. Cassidy and Alex Milkulich, eds., *Interrupting White Privilege: Catholic Theologians Break the Silence* (N.Y.: Orbis, 2007) 15-39.**

**by Marguerite Spencer**

Jon Nilson published his essay, "Confessions of a White Catholic Racist Theologian," in *Interrupting White Privilege: Catholic Theologians Break the Silence*, a "novel Roman Catholic collective and dialogical conversation among theology, spirituality, and social ethics to explicate the theological significance of white privilege and racism (4)." Here Nilson responds to calls by M. Shawn Copeland and James H. Cone to remedy the silence of white Catholic theologians in the face of the evil of racism, a silence Jamie Phelps likens to that of German theologians during the Nazi atrocities (16). Nilson describes this type of racism as one that ignores, marginalizes and dismisses black theology, the body of theological insight and the challenge born of the black struggle for justice. He confesses, therefore, that he is racist. He has rarely read and never cited black theologians, and he has failed to see how they could make him a better ecclesiologist (18). Along with other white theologians, he was saying to black Christians, "Your experience of struggle, suffering, and triumph and your Christian reflections on your experience *do not count* (19)." The result is a truncated Catholic theology that Nilson and the other authors of the essays in this collection seek to remedy.

Nilson approaches this task by insightfully but imperfectly laying out four factors that he believes are chiefly responsible for white Catholic theological racism: the realities of segregation, the ideal of integration, the impact of Vatican II in the U.S., and the style of early black theology (20). By segregation, Nilson refers to spatial isolation, which resulted from and was perpetuated by a gospel that linked neighborhood, family, and parish. In order to support the influx of European Catholics to the Northeast and Midwest, the church maintained parish boundaries that were based in ethnicity. When the "great migration" of blacks from the South occurred, Catholics considered the migrants a mortal threat. Nilson argues that if blacks were allowed to move into the neighborhood, whites would flee, and their church communities and facilities would be lost (21). This prevented most Catholics and Catholic theologians of Nilson's generation from forming friendships with blacks, without which the "other" could not be transformed into the "beloved". Moreover, without blacks correcting them, the civil rights movement and the 1964 Civil Rights Act could lead whites to think that racial justice had been achieved, short of a few "mop-up" battles (22).

In this portion of his argument, Nilson fails to examine the agency of the Catholic theologian in reifying theological and social racism. By this, I do not mean to liken him

or any other theologian to a “bad apple,” for individual racism is not at issue here. Rather, we must concern ourselves with the complicit role we play in the institutions and systems, including the theological, which marginalize non-whites. Why is it we ignore black theology? Is it simply because we have no black friends? Could we not have chosen to make said friends? To live, work or volunteer in black neighborhoods? Are there not many signs that racial justice remains elusive? Does it really take a black person to point out the gross disparities in education, housing, health care, and criminal justice? In other words, Nilson does not explore fully our complicity in keeping blacks at a distance, particularly since theologians are called upon to explore a higher order.

Nilson next explores the ramifications of integration as an “ideal”. The ways in which the church understood integration, he argues, obstructed its progress and even further racism (23). Like many Americans, white Catholics took integration to mean assimilation. They believed that blacks would assimilate into the mainstream as did white immigrant groups. This led many to ignore the distinctive history of black suffering, for fear that emphasizing the distinctiveness of black experience would justify separation of the races (24). Nilson recounts the story of the Federated Colored Catholics, which came into prominence after World War I. The Catholic bishops largely ignored its call for a greater role for blacks in making pastoral plans. The organization split, however, when some felt that blacks could not be leaders and that an organization of black Catholics moved too close to segregation (25). Integration in the wrong hands, concludes Nilson, meant black powerlessness (26). I do believe this distinction between integration and assimilation is elusive to most whites and would agree with Nilson that it prevents white Catholic theologians from perceiving how the status quo marginalizes non-whites. White identity is so invisible and normalized that we have difficulty seeing the disruption of other identities when we call on their holders to assimilate.

Nilson goes on to claim that the preoccupation with interpreting the Second Vatican Council limited the role of white Catholic theologians in the civil rights struggle (26). They were busy developing a new breed of lay Catholic theologians, carving out a place for ourselves and for theology as an academic discipline (27). The Council also fostered an agenda of “inculturation”, which brought Catholics in relationship with “others”, including other religions and even nonbelievers. This issue of identity, argues Nilson, gave Catholics “good reasons to be preoccupied (28).” That they gravitated toward Latin American liberation theology when Cone was writing at the same time as Gutierrez in 1969, Nilson explains away as an affinity towards indigenous fellow Catholics. Here again, however, I would ask Nilson to acknowledge agency. On April 16, 1963, Martin Luther King Jr., wrote his “Letter from Birmingham Jail,” months before the first decree was issued from Vatican II and one to two years before the issuance of the decrees on ecumenism and eastern churches and the declaration on the relationship with non-Christians. Did Catholic theologians also fail to hear Malcolm X, who was speaking forcefully about blackness at the same time? Wasn’t it easier to support calls for equality far from home than in our own backyard?

Finally, Nilson attributes white theological racism to factors within black theology itself. First, the black separatist theme so prevalent in Cone’s early works seemed to “absolve

white theologians here and now” from engaging in a theology of “separate interest” with a “short shelf life.” As segregation died, Catholic theologians might have thought, so would black theology. Few saw it as a systematic account of shared suffering among the oppressed, particularly because of the anger and hostility Cone insisted on using with privileged whites. Second, white academic theologians had a hard time interpreting a theology deliberately drawn from non-traditional sources including sermons, hymns, and narratives (29). White Catholic theologians were also uncomfortable with non-sacramental, Bible-based, free-church traditions that were far from the structure of the church, which deemed itself the one and only true church. Finally, black theology appeared to be fragmented and to fall short of “real”, systematic theology, (a reality that David Tracy describes positively as able to undo our pretense of totality and provide us with glimpses of light and redemption in our desiccated public realm). But white Catholic theologians generally did not share Tracy’s assessment of black theology, largely for the reasons Nilson provides. To his credit, Nilson admits that these reasons function as explanatory not exculpatory. Racism still led, and continues to lead today, to a failure in solidarity, and a failure to engage the empathetic incarnation of the ‘other’ as humanity, as Copeland puts it (31). But is it solipsism to claim as Nilson does that it also threatens the credentials of white Catholic theologians for failing to live up to their vocation?

I am perhaps too hard on Nilson, for he admits that we subvert Vatican II if we exploit it “to buttress our own prejudices and privileges” and “sick middle-class egos,” to use Cone’s words (32). The Council calls us to defend the human person and take on as a Christian community the objective analysis of our nation’s situation (33). This, argues Nilson, is the very work of the theologian. This task can not be effected fully, he continues, if we marginalize black theology and ignore the horrors of racism that still poison our society today. Heeding Cone, Nilson calls on white Catholic theologians to begin the antiracist struggle where they are, fighting white supremacy by supporting black empowerment in the society, church and theology. I argue that this must begin without a more thorough examination of our agency and our willingness to make structural changes in our discipline and in our public and private lives. As Copeland notes, the cost of our religious, moral, and intellectual conversion is steep. I argue that it is even steeper if we consider dismantling privilege, both in the academy and in society.

### **Substantive Questions for Discussion:**

1. Does Nilson’s argument provide excuses for the theological racism of white Catholics or push us forward?
2. How can we change our understanding of the theological task? How can we do so for the sake of the non-white “other” rather than just for our own conversion or credentials?
3. The question of identity is critical. Who are we as Catholics? How do we resist assimilation? What are some theological models for such resistance?