WHITE PRIVILEGE

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This essay, an autobiographical narrative reflecting on my awareness of racism and white privilege in my theological journey, has not been an easy paper to write. In the last few years, I have become somewhat educated about racism and white privilege. I have to face the reality that I barely recognized the problem of racism in my own somewhat extensive writings and was blithely unaware of my own white privilege.

I. Racism

The references to racism in my writings are very few, and there is never any concentrated discussion of the issue. This lack is especially telling in a moral theologian who often dealt with social ethics. Other theologians because of the focus of their discipline might not have the same opportunities to discuss and evaluate racism.

In my 1982 monograph, *American Catholic Social Ethics: Twentieth Century Approaches*, I analyzed and critiqued the writings of five figures in Catholic social ethics. The index has seven references to race discrimination and racism. The two most extended discussions (at best, a few pages each) deal with Paul Hanly Furfey and John A. Ryan. Looking back now on what I wrote then, I am both embarrassed and uncomfortable.

Paul Hanly Furfey, the Catholic University of America sociologist, in the 1930s, developed a Christian personalist approach to ethics based on the Catholic Worker model. The radical Gospel ethic strongly criticizes the social ethos in the United States. Personalist action calls for the twofold strategy of separation and nonparticipation on the one hand and bearing witness on the other. Furfey, in his writings, emphasizes three significant issues—poverty, racism, and war. He strongly condemns Catholic conformity in all these areas. The sociologist, points out the grave evils in racial segregation and discrimination in all

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aspects of life. For Catholics this is a serious moral obligation—a matter of eternal life or death.[1]

I disagreed with Furfey's approach but praised his recognition of the three deep problems facing our country—poverty, race, and war—issues that have remained profoundly important in our society. Catholic liberals tend to overlook these deep problems, "but the radical possesses a methodological approach which makes one sensitive to the real problems facing our society."[2] In later writings, I have addressed issues of poverty and peace, but I have never dealt the same way with racism. I did not follow up on what I had written and recognized in 1982!

The other comments in this book refer to John A. Ryan, the premier Catholic social ethicist in the first half of the twentieth century. In the 1920s, Ryan urged his student, Francis Gilligan, to write a pioneer doctoral dissertation on *The Morality of the Color Line*.[3] But Ryan himself did not discuss racism in any depth, and I criticized negatively two of his comments about racism. With regard to interracial marriages, Ryan mentioned that the Catholic Church prudently urges pastors to conform to such laws and that few if any priests or bishops have been accused of violating these laws. My reaction was, "His comments on the issue were totally conforming without a hint of the prophetic."[4]

I described as "disappointing" a lecture he gave in 1943 at Howard University in Washington. After identifying many of the existing problems of racial discrimination, Ryan called for active leadership and the avoidance of violence, urged patience, and recommended working with people of good will in the white community. His major professional contribution to social ethics was his insistence on the need for government intervention. But there was no mention of law or government intervention in the area of racism.[5] Thus, I criticized Ryan, but I am open to even deeper negative criticism.

Only in the last few years have I become somewhat conscious of my failure to recognize the problems of racism in the United States and in the Catholic Church. My friend and would-be student, Bryan Massingale, correctly pointed out the failure of contemporary Catholic moral theologians, myself included, to deal with the evil of racism.[6]

Massingale has also pointed out two windows of convergence of

[1]Charles E. Curran, *American Catholic Social Ethics: Twentieth Century Approaches* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1982), 149-58.

[2]Ibid., 166.

[3]Francis James Gilligan, *The Morality of the Color Line* (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 1928).

[4]Curran, *American Catholic Social Ethics,* 83.

[5]Ibid.

[6]Bryan Massingale, "The African American Experience and U.S. Roman Catholic

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black theology and racism with Catholic theology—the Catholic recognition of social or structural sin and solidarity with the poor.[7] Margaret Pfeil uses the option for the poor to attack white privilege.[8] I have made many references in my writings to these three aspects but have never connected them with racism beyond an occasional word or phrase. So despite having the tools that should have made me more aware of the problem of racism, I never really addressed racism in my writings.

I could offer many excuses but they would be only excuses. Actually, I did pay a little attention to racism in my classes. In the late 1960s, I worked on occasion with J. Deotis Roberts who was then teaching at Howard University. We were involved in one or two projects together, and he graciously accepted one of my students into his classes at Howard. I assigned his book on liberation and reconciliation in my classes on social and political ethics.[9] A few years later I also used my friend, Dan Maguire's, book, *A New American Justice*.[10] I continued my association with Deotis in both the Society of Christian Ethics and the American Theological Society. Three years ago I was invited to contribute an article to a festschrift in his honor. I was most grateful for the opportunity that provided me the occasion for writing my first article dealing with racism and black theology, which was finally published as late as 2005.[11]

II. White Privilege

Acknowledging my failure as a Catholic theologian to recognize and deal with the problem of racism in society and the church is only the first step toward a recognition of white privilege. Shawn Copeland has rightly challenged us white theologians to recognize the omnipresent reality of white privilege and how it has affected our understanding of and approach to theology. White dominance functions invisibly and

Ethics: 'Strangers and Aliens No Longer?'," in *Black and Catholic: The Challenge and Gift of Black Folks*, ed. Jaime T. Phelps (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1997), 79-101.

[7]Ibid., 94-95.

[8]Margaret Pfeil, "Option for the Poor: Dismantling White Privilege as Part of the Theological Vocation," paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Catholic Theological Society of America, Cincinnati, Ohio, 2003.

[9]J. Deotis Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation: A Black Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971).

[10]Daniel C. Maguire, *A New American Justice: Ending the White Male Monopolies* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1980).

[11]Charles E. Curran, "J. Deotis Roberts and the Roman Catholic Tradition," in *The Quest for Liberation and Reconciliation: Essays in Honor of J. Deotis Roberts*, ed. Michael Battle (Louisville: Westminter/John Knox, 2005), 82-92.

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systemically to confer power and privilege.[12] Only recently have I come to be educated to realize the extent and power of white privilege and my participation in it.

Here too I now realize the inadequacies and errors in some of my earlier approaches. I have tried to be supportive of minority colleagues in theology. At The Catholic University of America, I purposely went out of my way to encourage the African-American women who were working on their doctorates. I often went to sessions of professional societies when African-Americans and other minorities were presenting so that I could show my support for them.

On one occasion at a Call to Action conference, I went to a session given by an African-American woman theologian who was a former student. I was somewhat embarrassed because I embarrassed her. She saw me come in and sit in the last row and almost immediately told her audience that she was nervous because I had come to her session. She graciously thanked me publicly for the support I had already given her from the time that she was in graduate school.

Yes, I supported African-Americans and other minority Catholic theologians, and I was quite satisfied that I was doing what I could for the cause. But only recently have I become aware of the problem with such an approach. "I" was the subject; "they" were the object. "I" was graciously doing what I could to help and support "them."

In reality, the problem was "I" and not "them." I was blithely unaware of how white privilege had shaped my understanding of what was going on. The invisible and systemic nature of white privilege came through in my absolutizing my own limited privileged position and making all others the object of my good will. My perspective was the normative perspective from which all others were to be seen. My white theology was the theological standpoint from which all others were to be judged. I finally realized to some extent that I was the problem.

White privilege is invisible, structural, and systemic. Borrowing the phrase from Bernard Lonergan, Shawn Copeland describes white privilege as biased common sense.[13] Lonergan used the term "scotosis" to describe this reality.[14] There is a need then to shed light on this evil and to overcome its invisibility to the person. White privilege is a structural sin that has to be made visible if it is to be removed. Borrowing from Lonergan and Copeland, there is need for conversion and

[12]M. Shawn Copeland, "Racism and the Vocation of the Christian Theologian," *Spiritus* 2/1 (2002), 15-29.

[13]Ibid.

[14]Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1957), 191-203.

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especially continuing conversion in overcoming white privilege. I have just begun to recognize white privilege as the problem, and I have to strive continually to uncover it in my own life and work. On the basis of what I have read and experienced, there are three types of conversion involved—personal, intellectual, and spiritual.

III. Three Conversions

With regard to the first conversion, Peggy McIntosh's seminal article is an eye-opener on the road to personal conversion.[15] I have to see myself as the oppressor and as the problem. She lists about fifty different ways in which I, as a white person, am privileged because of being white. This privilege exists in practically every aspect of my life. Making matters worse, this privilege comes at the expense of others. I have to become much more aware of the role of white privilege in my daily life brought about by the systemic injustice of racism.

I became somewhat aware of white privilege two years ago when I was teaching a course in moral theology for the Perkins School of Theology at Southern Methodist University in their Houston program. Most of the students were older and second career persons studying for ministry. There were twenty-one students in the class including five African-Americans. In the exams and papers, the African-Americans received the lowest grades. But I also broke the class down into four groups to role-play different cases of quandary ethics. In this role-playing, four of the African-Americans truly excelled. They understood exactly what was involved, went to the heart of the case, and presented the whole issue with intelligence and humor.

The African-American students in this role-playing showed themselves to be just as intelligent, and perhaps even more so, than the others in the class. But they did not have the same skills with regard to reading texts and writing papers. Obviously, they were products of a poor educational system that had never prepared them to read and write that well.

In light of that experience, I reflected on my own privilege with regard to education. I was born to a family that took reading and education seriously. My parents encouraged us to read and to get a good education. I went to good schools and had some excellent teachers. To this day I know well the names of the sisters who taught me in the eight grades of grammar school. As a seminary student and priest, the Catho-

[15]Peggy McIntosh, "White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences through Work in Women's Studies." This paper is available through Wellesley Center for Women on line at www.scwonline.org/author163html.

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lic Church paid for all my college, theology, and doctoral studies. I did not have to work, to take out loans, or to worry in any way about how my expensive education was paid for. This was not all due to white privilege, but it obviously was a privilege that few others have had.

The second conversion is intellectual. Early on I learned from Lonergan the importance of historical consciousness. The person as subject is embedded in one's own cultural and historical environment. No one can claim to be the neutral, objective, value-free knower. Liberationist and feminist theologies made me all the more aware of social location with its limits and biases. I learned about the hermeneutic of suspicion and the need to recognize that the strong and powerful create the structures and institutions of our world. But I did not see black racism and its connection to my white privilege until I was prodded by recent writings. I was trying to help and encourage African-American theologians to do their work. But I never realized how they could and should help me and my theology. My failures here indicate the need for both a stronger moral imagination and for the other conversions to affect the intellectual conversion.

The third conversion is spiritual. In reading the literature I was taken by how many theologians dealing with white privilege emphasize spiritual conversion. At first I was fearful that this was an escape to reduce the invisible, structural, and systemic reality of white privilege to the realm of the spiritual. The flight to the spiritual might be a dodge for avoiding the structural and institutional realities of life.

Yes, the flight to the spiritual can be that but not for one who sees the spiritual as the primary area that affects all other aspects of human existence. In moral theology, I have emphasized the role of a fundamental option that gives direction to all aspects of life. But I have purposely not embraced a transcendental understanding of the fundamental option precisely because in my judgment it does not give enough importance to the historical and the concrete. The spiritual thus influences the other two conversions—the intellectual and the personal.

Here I remembered what I had forgotten for so long. In my praise of Furfey's approach, I pointed out that his Christian perspective clearly recognized the deep problems existing in American society—poverty, race, and nationalistic violence. The spiritual conversion of the radical Furfey made him see what others did not see.

What effect will these beginning conversions have on my doing moral theology? At this stage of my life as a "senior" theologian, I am not going to become an expert on racism and white privilege. The best

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analogy for the future is what I have done with regard to feminist theology. I am not an expert in feminist theology, but I recognize the problem of pervasive patriarchy, the importance of male dialogue with feminism, and have appropriated many of feminism's insights into my own work. I hope to do the same with regard to racism and white privilege.

A spirituality that prays to a God who is black and female can and should help open my eyes to white male privilege.

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