

Marquette University

e-Publications@Marquette

Theology Faculty Research and Publications

Theology, Department of

2012

Response: The Challenge of Idolatry and Ecclesial Identity

Bryan Massingale

Marquette University, bryan.massingale@marquette.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://epublications.marquette.edu/theo_fac



Part of the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Massingale, Bryan, "Response: The Challenge of Idolatry and Ecclesial Identity" (2012). *Theology Faculty Research and Publications*. 259.

https://epublications.marquette.edu/theo_fac/259

Response: The Challenge of Idolatry and Ecclesial Identity

Bryan N. Massingale

I am grateful to the organizers of this conference for including the topic of racial justice at a symposium devoted to ecclesiology. My immense gratitude especially goes to my fellow panelists for both their generous attention to my work and their compelling and thought-provoking insights. I intended *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* to be not only a work that would be of interest to fellow academics but also an act of love for the church and a contribution to its faith and mission.¹ It is humbling to hear my colleagues' responses to my work and to realize that this hope, at least in their estimation, was not in vain. As their contributions illustrate, though my book advances some searing criticisms of Catholic engagement with the evil of racism, these critiques were advanced out of a deeper love for the authentic faith to which this community is an imperfect witness.

The panelists' contributions to this discussion are rewarding and demanding efforts in their own right. Leslie Picca provides an engaging sociological overview that challenges the shallow and inadequate understandings of racism that dominate our social and theological discourses. Her reading confirms the critiques I make of what I call the "commonsense" understanding of racism. Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator's essay vividly illustrates how "race" and racial justice are global phenomena, that is to say, how racial supremacy and exclusion are not matters of concern solely for the United States. These are realities in the universal church that must be addressed for the sake of the church's credibility in mission and integrity in faith.

Time does not permit a detailed response to the insights of these scholars. Instead, my contribution will detail why the issue of racial supremacy is not only a proper subject for a conference dealing with the nature of the church but indeed a critically important one. In doing so, I will further develop the

insights present in my book to address the following question: Why is racial justice and exclusion an ecclesiological concern?

This is not an idle question. When the topic of racial justice is addressed by Christian faith communities in general, and by the Catholic Church in particular, it is most often as a moral issue that poses deep challenges to Christian consciences. That is to say, it is treated solely as an ethical concern and as a summons to moral conversion.²

Seldom do we examine racism as a *theological* concern, that is, as a reality that raises profound challenges not only for the church's credibility as a vehicle for the gospel but more so for its very *integrity*. I contend that the complicity of the church in the social evil of racial injustice decisively compromises its very identity as the body of Christ or the people of God, for the church becomes implicated in the sin of idolatry.

Calling racism a form of "idolatry" is neither hyperbole nor overstatement. Official magisterial documents treat racism as a species of idolatry. The following statement from the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* is especially noteworthy:

Idolatry not only refers to false pagan worship. It remains a constant temptation to faith. Idolatry consists in divinizing what is not God. Man commits idolatry whenever he honors and reveres a creature in the place of God, whether this be gods or demons (for example, satanism), power, pleasure, *race*, ancestors, the state, money, etc. . . . Idolatry rejects the unique Lordship of God; it is therefore incompatible with communion with God.³

Thus, the church's complicity in racial injustice and racial supremacy—that is to say, idolatry—raises troubling questions and concerns that for the sake of its credibility and effectiveness can no longer be evaded.

While some doctrinal statements of the Catholic Church understand racism as a form of idolatry, we need to note that this indictment is not a recent development in Christian thought. It had already been lodged very pointedly by the historic black churches and African American theologians and activists. It is as old as Frederick Douglass's nineteenth-century contrast between the "slave-holding religions of this land" and the "pure, peaceable" Christianity of the black churches and abolitionist assemblies.⁴ The indictment of idolatry with regard to ecclesial complicity in racial injustice was also raised by Martin Luther King, Jr. In his landmark essay, "Letter from Birmingham City Jail," King developed an extended and eloquent response to moderate white Christian leaders who criticized his crusade for racial justice as "unwise," "untimely," and "extremist." He confessed

his deep disappointment “with the white church and its leadership” in a moving and pointed passage:

I have traveled the length and breadth of Alabama, Mississippi and all the other southern states. On sweltering summer days and crisp autumn mornings I have looked at her beautiful churches with their lofty spires pointing heavenward. . . . Over and over again I have found myself asking: “*What kind of people worship here? Who is their God?*” . . . Where were they when Governor Wallace gave his clarion call for defiance and hatred? Where were their voices of support when tired, bruised and weary Negro men and women decided to rise from the dark dungeons of complacency to the bright hills of creative protest?⁵

King refrained from directly stating the obvious conclusion of this line of questions, namely, that the lack of social conscience in the majority of white southern Christians was due to their idolatrous worship of a false god. Yet, while official Catholic teaching and the position statements of several other white Christian bodies now acknowledge racism as a species of idolatry—that is, assigning ultimate significance to and rooting human identity in a human social/cultural construct of skin color—these faith communities typically do not examine either their complicity in this idolatry or how such complicity in the idolatry of whiteness compromises their identity.⁶

Allow me to concretely illustrate how the idolatry of “race”—more specifically, of “whiteness”—functions to determine what is considered “holy” in U.S. and global Catholicism. During Pope Benedict’s 2008 pastoral visit to the United States, he presided at a public mass in Washington, DC. The readings for the day celebrated the rich cultural diversity of the U.S. Catholic Church, including the classic account from the Acts of the Apostles describing how the Spirit’s descent upon the gathered community empowered the world’s peoples to hear the good news in various languages. As the mass continued, after a prayer of the faithful and a presentation of the gifts, marked by diverse languages and spirited gospel and Spanish singing, a noted Catholic commentator on EWTN (the U.S. Catholic cable network that broadcast the mass live) caustically remarked, “We have just been subjected to an over-preening display of multicultural chatter. And now, the Holy Father will begin the sacred part of the Mass.” Note the contrast—indeed the opposition—drawn between “multicultural”—that is, nonwhite—and “sacred.”

Why is this significant? EWTN is a major “media presence” of the Catholic Church and, for many, the public voice of U.S. Catholicism. That such a statement could be aired on a network celebrated for its orthodoxy—and more significantly, that it was not and still has not been officially

repudiated or challenged—does not just illustrate how standing against racism is not a major component of Catholic identity or orthodoxy. It also reveals how influential elites in the church do not consider non-European cultural expressions as really “Catholic”—or even “sacred!” Only “white” or European persons, music, theology, and aesthetics are standard, normative, universal, or “Catholic.” Or, as I phrased this in my book, the pervasive conviction is that “Catholic” equals “white.” “Black” and “nonwhite” cultural products are, at best, ambiguous, defective, or deficient carriers and mediators of the sacred. To put it bluntly and directly, in U.S. and global Catholicism, God can speak unambiguously only in “white.”⁷

I want to underscore that what I am describing is not simply an ethical failure. We are dealing here with something much more troubling than the immoral personal acts of individual sinners. I am pointing, rather, to an operative ecclesial self-understanding, namely, that Catholic equals white/European.⁸

Thus, I contend that U.S. and global Catholicism have been co-opted into an idolatrous belief system that practically maintains that the sacred and the holy can be definitively mediated and unambiguously encountered only through white cultural products. This, I submit, is radically incompatible with Christ’s will for the people who would bear his name and continue his universal salvific mission. The belief that God can be mediated or encountered unambiguously only through white or European cultural products is what I mean by ecclesial complicity in racial supremacy and is the essence of a compromised idolatrous identity.

This is why the issue of racial justice is a theological and, more specifically, an ecclesiological concern. Racism and racial justice raise questions that go to the heart of Christian identity and the integrity of Christian belief. Can the church truly be the body of Christ in anything but the most rhetorical and nonincarnational way if it operationally believes that the divine can be revealed, mediated, or encountered unambiguously only in white/European cultural products? What are the ecclesiological implications of a faith community’s bondage to an idol of whiteness? Or, in the searing questions posed by James Cone, “Can the Church of Jesus Christ be racist and Christian at the same time? Can the Church of Jesus Christ be politically, socially, and economically identified with the structures of oppression and also be a servant of Christ? Can the Church of Jesus Christ fail to make the liberation of the poor the center of its message and work, and still remain faithful to its Lord?”⁹ Or, as I phrase the pressing questions in my book,

What does it mean to “speak the truth” to both church and society, on behalf of all who suffer social oppression, out of a Catholic tradition that is tainted by complicity in and collusion with the social evil of

racism? . . . How does the “virulent residue” of slavery, colonialism, and segregation, such as the continuing stigmata of black inferiority, challenge the integrity of the Catholic faith, the mission of the church, and the identity of its theologians?¹⁰

These are radical and, I must admit, scary questions. Speaking personally, they take me to the limits of my intellectual—and indeed, existential—abilities.¹¹ And I am not sure that I now can give such questions definitive responses. Yet, I am certain that they cannot be avoided or evaded if the church is to be a proactive agent of racial justice or be true to the identity intended for it by its Lord.

In summary, what makes the Catholic Church complicitous in an idolatrous belief system is not the fact that many of its members engage in acts of race-based malice or bigotry. Idolatry, rather, lies in the pervasive belief that European aesthetics, music, theology, and persons—and only these—are standard, normative, universal, and truly “Catholic.” That only these can mediate the divine and carry the holy. That God can only be truly imaged in white. This is, I submit, idolatry, that is “divinizing what is not God.” Thus, future Catholic ecclesiological reflection on race and racism must not only name skin color as a major cause of social stratification and injustice. It must also summon the political courage, intellectual honesty, and existential humility to interrogate the church’s bondage to an alien identity—its compromised identity—more forthrightly.

Notes

¹ Bryan N. Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010).

² However, as I argued in my book, the sad reality is that racial justice is not a major concern of Catholic theology and magisterial teaching.

³ *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*, #2113; emphasis added. Pope Benedict XVI strongly reiterates the *Catechism*’s teaching. In speaking of the “insane racist ideology” at the heart of anti-Semitism, he declares that such a world view is “born of neo-paganism.” Pope Benedict explicitly links false notions of God with racist attacks on human dignity when he states, “The holiness of God was no longer recognized, and consequently, contempt was shown for the sacredness of human life” (“Address of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI: Visit to the Synagogue of Cologne,” [August 19, 2005], http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xiv/speeches/2005/august/documents).

⁴ Frederick Douglass, “American Slavery, American Religion, and the Free Church of Scotland: An Address Delivered in London, England, on May 22, 1846,” <http://www.yale.edu/glc/archive/1077.html>. In an earlier text, Douglass expressed similar ideas in a less-developed, slightly more polemical fashion: “be-

tween the Christianity of this land, and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference—so wide, that to receive the one as good, pure, and holy, is on necessity to reject the other as bad, corrupt, and wicked. To be the friend of one is on necessity to be the enemy of the other. I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ: I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land. Indeed, I can see no reason, but the most deceitful one, for calling the religion of this land Christianity” (Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, written by himself* [New York: Fine Creative Media, (1845) 2003], 100).

⁵ James M. Washington, ed., *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986), 299; emphasis added.

⁶ See, for example, the comprehensive examination of racism as an idolatrous faith developed by the Anglican priest-theologian George D. Kelsey, *Racism and the Christian Understanding of Man* (New York: Charles D. Scribner's and Sons, 1965).

⁷ One could offer more examples of this idolatrous complicity in racial supremacy such as the liturgical guidelines of a major U.S. archdiocese that forbid dancing and clapping in Catholic worship unless the majority of those attending are African American—a concession justified because “they [meaning black people] need this”; the papal masses recently offered in Angola and Benin where African worshipers were admonished that, for the sake of “reverence,” clapping was prohibited during the service; the practice of another U.S. archdiocese that forbade gospel music during a Catholic mass at its cathedral church because “such music is OK for the central city, but not for the mother church of the archdiocese”; and the decor of cathedrals in major African dioceses that is more Irish than that of St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York City. What one sees, then, is that it is neither an isolated nor unusual situation in Catholicism for God and the sacred to be unambiguously mediated only in European/white cultural products.

⁸ I further develop this point in *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*, chap. 2.

⁹ James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1975), 36–37.

¹⁰ Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*, 161.

¹¹ It is my experience that most African American Catholics consistently avoid such questions out of a fear that, if they engage them seriously, they will be compelled to leave the Catholic Church. My consistent response to such fears has been that honoring these questions need not require that one leave the church, but they do demand that one stay in the church in a different way—admittedly, a way that is tenuous, perilous, and largely unmarked.