

1-1-2011

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Published version. "The Systemic Erasure of the Black/Dark-Skinned Body in Catholic Ethics," In *Catholic Theological Ethics Past, Present, and Future: The Trento Conference*. Ed. James F. Keenan. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011: 116-124. [Publisher link](#). © 2011 Orbis Books. Used with permission.

THE SYSTEMIC ERASURE OF THE BLACK/DARK-SKINNED BODY IN CATHOLIC ETHICS

Bryan Massingale

One of the questions I address in my scholarly work is this: *What would Catholic theological ethics look like if it took the "Black Experience" seriously as a dialogue partner?* To raise the question, however, is to signal the reality of absence, erasure, and "missing" voices. The question is necessary only because the "Black Experience"—the collective story of African American survival and achievement in a hostile, exploitative, and racist environment—and the bodies who are the subjects of this experience have been all too often rendered invisible and therefore "missing" in U.S. Catholic ethical reflection.¹

The Historical Omission of Racism and Racial Justice

An example illustrates this invisibility, which, I contend, amounts to a systemic erasure. In 1948, the eminent U.S. moral theologian Gerald Kelly considered the question of whether the Sunday Mass obligation ceased for a Negro who was excluded from the local "white church."² Kelly judged that such racial discrimination was "unjust, impious, and scandalous." He also expressed regret at the harm given to "the Negro's spirit" and sense of church membership. Nonetheless, Kelly concluded that such discrimination within the church "does not of itself excuse him from hearing Mass. That question must be solved on the basis of the difficulty of getting to another church."

He did reiterate that white Catholics were duty bound to extend ordinary courtesy and respect to black people, noting that the refusal to do so was "a sin against charity."³ Note, however, that white Catholics were not duty bound to protest against the social evil of racial segregation itself, whether in society or in the church. Nor was there any expressed obligation for Catholics to engage proactively in the struggle to change this sinful situation. Nor was there but the most fleeting attention given to the perspective of the dark-skinned victim of such ecclesial exclusion.

A review of the two major professional journals of U.S. Catholic theological ethicists—namely, the authoritative "Notes on Moral Theology" published by *Theological Studies* (1940-96) and *The Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* (1946-96)—confirms the stark and glaring omission of the issue of

white racism. U.S. Catholic moral theology's past reveals embarrassing omissions whereby theological ethicists were seemingly oblivious to the major social movements occurring around them (such as the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements of the 1960s). One searches these journals in vain for in-depth analyses or reflections on the reality of racism or race relations. The Civil Rights Movement, the catalyst for some of the most epochal social transformations in U.S. history and a paradigm for many other justice struggles globally, passed unnoticed by U.S. Catholic ethicists who were consumed by other matters—specifically, the controversies surrounding the morality of artificial contraception. Indeed, if one depended solely on these sources for one's knowledge of the period, one would never know of Martin Luther King Jr.'s life, contributions, or even his death because Catholic moralists of that time scarcely averted to him.⁴

Thus, one noted scholar, in reflecting on the omission of racial justice in U.S. Catholic ethical reflection, concluded:

Historically it is impossible to deny that from the end of the Civil War until modern times, an almost universal silence regarding the moral issues involved in segregation blanketed the ecclesiastical scene. The American hierarchy and theologians have remained mute, and this at a time when . . . enforced segregation was growing and extending more and more into all areas of life.⁵

Not Only a "Historical" Omission

The observation that the muting of the Black Experience and the overlooking of ethical attention to the reality of racism is not, unfortunately, a matter of past history has been more recently confirmed. In October of 2008, a conference was held at the Catholic Theological Union and DePaul University in Chicago to explore the task of "Building a Catholic Social Theology for the Americas." As part of the closing panel charged with noting the conference's achievements and remaining tasks, I observed the omission of any consideration of race. For example, although the conference participants examined and lamented the poverty revealed in the United States through the Hurricane Katrina event, they never averted to race as a decisive factor in how this tragedy unfolded.⁶

The assembled scholars also lamented the difficulty of elaborating a common social theology for the Americas—both North and South—given our differing histories and origins. But such an observation ignored our shared history of racism and slavery—undergone by both African and indigenous peoples—which not only marks both of our continents but also has been decisive in the formation of Latino/a identity. *La raza*—the *mestizo/mestizaje* reality of Latin America—would not exist without the racial mixing that stemmed from the deep wounding and often unacknowledged pain of slavery and economic exploitation. Race-based enslavement, colonialism, and conquest are common histories that are foundational not only for the Americas but for Western culture as well. These cannot be

adequately understood without a forthright and in-depth engagement with racial injustice and a naming of white supremacy.

The Erasure of the Black Embodied Voice

Moreover, when the dark bodies of African Americans did appear in Catholic ethical discourse, they were as the objects of white sympathy, charity, and assistance. (I use the word “object” deliberately.) Though the leading moralists of the 1950s agreed that racial segregation was unjust, the solution advocated was to encourage whites to yield or concede rights to blacks, rather than encourage African Americans to press for what was their due.⁷ Catholic moral discourse treated black people as *objects* of white study, analysis, and charity—and rarely deemed them as *subjects* capable of independent action or creative initiative. There was no acknowledgment of black *agency*; black people are usually acted upon and seldom the actors in U.S. Catholic moral discourse.⁸ Their voice and agency are muted, absent, erased—and at the same time opposed, feared, and resisted.⁹ Such practices and attitudes could not but render Catholic ethical reflection in matters of race inadequate and impoverished, if not absolutely erroneous.

This “underside” of history revealed in the erasure and distortion of the Black Experience in Catholic ethical reflection is well expressed by David Tracy:

There is an underside to all the talk about history in modern religion and theology. That underside is revealed in the shocking silence in most theologies of historical consciousness and historicity alike on the evil rampant in history, the sufferings of whole peoples, the destruction of nature itself. . . . [It is] a history without any sense of the radical interruptions of actual history, without a memory of historical suffering, especially the suffering caused by the pervasive systemic unconscious distortions in our history—sexism, racism, classism, antisemitism, homophobia, Eurocentrism.¹⁰

Why the Evasion of the Black Body?

Yet we must deepen our inquiry into this “shocking silence . . . on the suffering of whole peoples,” and particularly of black- and darker-skinned peoples, on the part of Catholic theological ethics by raising the question of *why*. Why, despite the “turn to the subject” and the embrace of historical consciousness, did U.S. Catholic theological ethicists *not* attend to the blatant and endemic racism of American society? Why was the most pressing moral issue of the 1960s artificial contraception and not the Civil Rights Movement or the racial violence of 1967 and 1968 that tore apart that nation’s cities and has enduring consequences today? Why was, and why still is, the “radical interruption” of the black body continually overlooked, ignored, and thus erased?

There are multiple reasons for this state of affairs. M. Shawn Copeland suggests that one reason may be that the black body is what she calls a "structural embarrassment,"¹¹ that is, an uncomfortable reminder of the invisible ghosts of enslavement, colonization, and racial supremacy—that is, the "unjust enrichment" through exploited labor¹²—that haunt and hover over our histories. Another reason for the avoidance of the black body in Catholic theological and ethical discourse is that a forthright engagement with it would bring to the surface the deep complicity and collusion of Western Christianity in the suffering, abuse, and horror that attended European and American colonial expansion.¹³ Yet perhaps the most profound reason for avoiding the black body is that challenging its invisibility would entail making white bodies visible as "white," that is, as sites of conferred racial dominance and privilege.

Marking white theologians as "white" means naming and facing the deforming effects of culture on the consciousness of North American and European theological ethicists. It means facing not only the possibility but indeed the probability that Catholic ethicists of the past (and too often in the present), being (de)formed by the systemic distortion of Western racism, did not and could not have regarded persons of African descent as numbered among the "subjects" to whom they should "turn."¹⁴

This probability is neither idle nor speculative. Social scientists have uncovered the reality of what they call "racially selective sympathy and indifference," that is, "the *unconscious* failure to extend to a minority the same recognition of humanity, and hence the same sympathy and care, given as a matter of course to one's own group."¹⁵ It is important to underscore, however, that this "selective indifference" is not necessarily a matter of conscious decision or intentional willing. It results, rather, from the unnoted effects of socialization in a culture of racism and the corrosive impact of a racialized ethos on one's identity and consciousness.

As the historian Taylor Branch notes, "almost as color defines vision itself, race shapes the culture eye—what we do and do not notice, the reach of empathy and the alignment of response."¹⁶ And because of such social conditioning, certain lives become easier to ignore or, put another way, certain bodies have a higher claim upon a community's energy and concern, even among Catholic theological ethicists.¹⁷

Thus, a forthright engagement with the black body in Catholic theological ethics would demand making white ethicists visible as "white" and confront the challenges this poses for personal integrity in a compromised social system. These challenges are neither uncomplicated nor easily faced.

Systemic Erasure and Compromised Ethical Reflection

However, the "missing" voices of our darker sisters and brothers are significant not only for the personal integrity of Catholic moral theologians but also for

the integrity and adequacy of Catholic ethical reflection. Because of this silencing and invisibility, there are not only voices that have not been heard, there are moral questions that have not been asked by Catholic theological ethicists of previous generations, such as the following: "What does it mean to be a disciple of Jesus in a racist society?"; "In a world where 'black' is an illegitimate or inferior mode of being human, what are the social implications of believing that Black Americans are made in the image of God?"; "How are persons of African descent to live ethically in a society that denies, questions, or attacks our humanity?"; "How do we tell those whom society ignores, fears, and disdains that they are sons and daughters of God?" Not averting to such questions in a society of endemic racism makes one's ethical project not only inadequate and incomplete, it also strains credibility.¹⁸

Moreover, the invisibility of black bodies and darker voices masks methodological deficiencies in Catholic ethical reflection. I highlight, for example, Catholic moral theology's understanding of sin and moral culpability. Its primary focus on obvious acts of conscious and voluntary racial malice blinds us to the deeper and more sinister social evil that afflicts us. The issue is that we are tacitly ensnared in and malformed by a web of evil that we cannot yet even satisfactorily name.

In a recent work, I expressed this concern thus: "Because of the covert nature of racism's transmission, its meanings are internalized without awareness of the source and judged to be . . . normative."¹⁹ That is, one's sense of right and wrong, one's grasp of morality, one's very conscience, become blunted and twisted by one's socialization in a culture of racism. One cannot become aware of the absence or omission of certain voices or perspectives if one believes that such omissions are "normal" and the way things ought to be.

This is not a matter of mere culpable ignorance. Nor do I believe that the issue can be satisfactorily resolved through an appeal to what the tradition calls "invincible ignorance." Such appeals can somewhat deal with individual culpability, but do not attend to the deeper web of injustice that is truly "evil" but for which Catholic theological ethicists have not developed a precise way of naming, nor the church a proper forum for repentance and reconciliation.²⁰

Nor does an appeal to "social" or "structural" sin suffice. For I am trying to call our attention to "the underlying set of cultural meanings . . . that are (re)inscribed in social customs, institutional policies and political processes."²¹ Social or structural sin addresses the latter—that is, how social institutions and structures are the causes of unjust suffering—but not the former, namely, the underlying set of cultural meanings and symbols that social institutions reflect. Culture animates the social order, and our moral theology has not yet developed the tools for examining, much less naming, this layer of human-caused evil. Merely calling the "culture of racism" an accumulation of many acts of personal sin (*pace* the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*) fails to do justice to the enormity of entrenched cultural evil and its deleterious impacts. There is a "radical evil" at work in human history that the predominant understanding of sin as a voluntary and conscious act can neither address nor redress—and indeed compounds.

Thus, the systemic erasure of the black- and darker-skinned body in Catholic theological ethics not only implicates the personal integrity of Catholic ethicists, but also compromises our ability to adequately reflect on the challenges of moral living in a multicultural and multiracial world. Taking the Black Experience and darker bodies as serious dialogue partners is a daunting challenge that promises to have profound, necessary, and yet perhaps unknown effects on the discipline of Catholic theological ethics and its practitioners.

Lament as a Way Forward

What, then, are we to do in the face of the weight of history and the complicity of Catholic theological ethics in the silencing of the suffering of peoples? It is tempting to offer a series of concrete proposals that, if followed, would lead Catholic ethicists into an intellectual “promised land.” But I have become more convinced that racism engages us viscerally at a “gut” level that cannot be addressed solely through rational discussion. I have become more aware of the limits of discursive or intellectual practices alone. Thus, I believe that we Catholic ethicists need to *lament* the ambiguity and distortions of our history and their tragically deforming effects on ourselves. We need to lament, mourn, and grieve our history.²²

The scriptures remind us that lamentation is an expression of complaint, grief, and hope rooted in a “trust against trust” that God hears the cry of the afflicted and will respond compassionately to their need. Lamenting holds together both sorrow and hope in ways that defy easy rational understanding. Laments honestly name and forthrightly acknowledge painfully wrenching circumstances, and yet proclaim that in the midst of the pain there is another word to be heard from God—a message of compassion and deliverance. Lament thus facilitates the emergence of something new, whether a changed consciousness or a renewed engagement with external events. It is indeed a paradox of protest and praise that leads to new life.

For example, consider the African American spiritual “Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen.”²³ Composed by an unknown black enslaved man whose family was rent asunder by being sold to different slave masters, the song piercingly relates that no one could possibly comprehend or “know my sorrow.” Yet, the singer ends his lament on an unexpected, even incomprehensible note: “Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen. Glory Hallelujah!” Through the practice of honest and forthright protest, the singer finds the strength to bear and endure unspeakable loss and harsh circumstances. History afflicts but does not crush him.

I offer such lament as a possibility for Catholic theological ethicists. Lament has the power to challenge the entrenched cultural beliefs that legitimate racial privilege. It engages a level of human consciousness deeper than logical reason. Lamenting can propel us to new levels of truth seeking and risk taking as we grieve our past history and strive to create an ethical discourse that is more reflective of the universality of our Catholic faith.

Nearing the limits of time and space for this reflection, I conclude on this note: The systemic erasure of dark-skinned bodies and the silencing of black voices in our history are not of concern only for an adequate account of the past. For, as the U.S. novelist William Faulkner noted, "The past is not dead, it is not even past."²⁴ Race-based enslavement, conquest, and colonialism are common foundational experiences—the "original sins" that link the Americas, Africa, Europe, and Asia. We cannot, then, give an adequate account of present controversies and moral responsibilities—much less develop a Catholic theological ethics for a world church—if we fail to attend to the voices of the dark bodies that hover over and haunt our histories despite our embarrassed silence and studied neglect.

Notes

1. James Cone, the pioneer of black American liberation theology, defines the "Black Experience" thus: "The black experience [in the United States] is the atmosphere in which blacks live. It is the totality of black existence in a white world . . . in a system of white racism. . . . The black experience, however, is more than simply encountering white insanity. It also means blacks making decisions about themselves. . . . It is the experience of carving out an existence in a society that says that you do not belong." See James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 2nd ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986), 24-25.

2. Readers from outside the U.S. context need to recall that ironclad racial segregation was the official legal and social policy of the United States from 1896 to 1965. Justified under the fiction of providing white and non-white peoples "separate but equal" educational, social, and economic opportunities, this racial segregation was a means of advancing white supremacy in political, social, and economic matters. Such racial exclusion was, unfortunately, a reality in the U.S. Catholic Church as well. Black men and women were all but excluded from participation in the priesthood and religious life. Catholic parishes were often designated as "white only" or "black only"—especially but not solely in the southern United States. For a seminal study detailing the Catholic Church's collusion and complicity in U.S. racialized evil, see Cyprian Davis, *The History of Black Catholics in the United States* (New York: Crossroad, 1992).

3. Gerald Kelly, "Notes on Moral Theology," *Theological Studies* 8 (1947): 112-14. I present this article because it illustrates the standard treatment that racism received when it was considered by U.S. Catholic theological ethicists. One should also appreciate that, while it is easy to be critical and even dismissive of the limitations of this approach, at least the ethicists of the 1940s adverted to the topic. After 1963, the topic of racial justice all but disappears from *Theological Studies'* annual moral survey until the late 1990s.

4. I detail this sad legacy in Bryan Massingale, "The African American Experience and U.S. Roman Catholic Ethics: 'Strangers and Aliens No Longer?'" in *Black and Catholic: The Challenge and Gift of Black Folk: Contributions of African American Experience and World View to Catholic Theology*, ed. Jamie T. Phelps (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1997), 79-101.

5. Joseph T. Leonard, "Current Theological Questions in Race Relations," *Catholic Theological Society of America Proceedings* [hereafter, *CTSA Proceedings*] 19 (1964): 82.

6. For the signal impact of U.S. racism in the response to the plight of Hurricane Katrina's victims, see Bryan Massingale, "The Scandal of Poverty: 'Cultured Indifference'"

and the Option for the Poor Post-Katrina," *Journal of Religion and Society*, Supplement Series 4 (2008): 55-72; and Bryan Massingale, "About Katrina: Catastrophe Exposes U.S. Race Reality," *National Catholic Reporter* 43, no. 18 (2007): 10-13.

7. Citing the eminent U.S. moralist John Ford, "[T]he doctrine of Christ inculcates more insistently that we must *give* rights to commutative justice; nowhere does Christ encourage us to *fight* for what is our due. It would be better for theologians and priests generally to preach to whites that they should give rights due to the Negroes, rather than urge the Negroes to press for the rights that are their due. Otherwise we might be encouraging fights and violence." See C. Luke Salm, "Moral Aspects of Segregation in Education—Digest of the Discussion," *CTSA Proceedings* 13 (1958): 61; emphasis in the original.

8. As noted above, there was very little examination or treatment of the black-led Civil Rights Movement in U.S. Catholic theological ethics. Indeed, in previous work, I detail the suspicion of black initiative and the pervasive white paternalism that typifies the U.S. Catholic engagement with racism. See my *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), chap. 2.

9. John LaFarge, S.J., a preeminent advocate for racial justice in the mid-twentieth century, nonetheless was suspicious of and opposed to African American agency and leadership in the quest for racial justice. See David W. Southern, *John LaFarge and the Limits of Catholic Interracialism 1911-1963* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996).

10. David Tracy, "Evil, Suffering, and Hope: The Search for New Forms of Contemporary Theodicy," *CTSA Proceedings* 50 (1995): 29.

11. M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009), 3.

12. Joe R. Feagin, *Systemic Racism: A Theory of Oppression* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 18.

13. In the U.S. context, Malcolm X is perhaps the sharpest critic of the collusion of Western Christianity in the racial oppression of dark bodies. I treat his thought in "Vox Victimarum Vox Dei: Malcolm X as Neglected 'Classic' for Catholic Theological Reflection," *CTSA Proceedings* 65 (2010): 63-88.

14. Bryan Massingale, "The African American Experience and U.S. Roman Catholic Ethics," 79-101.

15. Charles R. Lawrence III, "The Id, the Ego, and Equal Protection: Reckoning with Unconscious Racism," *Stanford Law Review* 39 (1987): 317-88, at n. 135.

16. Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-63* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1989), cited in Haki R. Madhubuti, *Black Men: Obsolete, Single, Dangerous?* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1990), 264. Madhubuti further declares, "The white response to the majority of the world's people, who are not white, is indeed grounded in race. More than any other factor in the Eurocentric context, *race* defines, categorizes, tracks, destroys and redefines cultures."

17. I explore the realities of "unconscious racism" and "racially selective sympathy and indifference" in my *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*, 26-33. I note, however, yet another reason for the invisibility of the black body as "black" in Catholic moral discourse, namely, the myth of—or even aspiration to—so called "colorblindness." As the celebrated novelist Toni Morrison explains in another context, "One likely reason for the paucity of critical materials on this large and compelling subject is that, in matters of race, silence and evasion have historically ruled literary discourse. . . . It is further complicated by the fact that the habit of ignoring race is understood to be a graceful, even generous, liberal

gesture. To notice it is to recognize an already discredited difference. To enforce invisibility through silence is to allow the black body a shadowless participation in the dominant cultural body." See Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (New York: Vintage Books, 1993). This official "color blindness" marks the public policies of many countries, including France and Uruguay, where race-based social and economic disparities among social groups are officially "erased" through a refusal to collect the data that would reveal them. The problem with "color blindness," no matter how well intentioned, is that in a sociocultural context where skin-color difference plays a significant and even decisive role, not to attend to this difference in practice preserves and defends entrenched social privilege.

18. Bryan Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*, 160-61.

19. Bryan Massingale, "Author's Response: Review Symposium on *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*," *Horizons* 37 (2010): 138-42.

20. David Tracy, for example, states that naming social evils such as racism as "sin" may not be doing justice to the depth and pervasiveness of the evil we confront through an encounter with the systemically silenced and erased. Rather, we need a more radical doctrine of sin—and grace—to do justice to the enormity of entrenched evil present in our history and in the present. See his discussion in *Plurality and Ambiguity: Hermeneutics, Religion, and Hope* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 74-75.

21. Laurie Cassidy, "Review Symposium: *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*," *Horizons* 37 (2010): 127-28.

22. I treat the practice of lament and its significance for racial-justice praxis in more detail in *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*, 104-14. The reader is directed there for a more in-depth discussion.

23. Bruno Chenu, *The Trouble I've Seen: The Big Book of Negro Spirituals*, trans. Eugene V. Leplante (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 2003), 265; and John Lovell Jr., *Black Song: The Forge and the Flame* (New York: Paragon, 1972), 122.

24. Cited in Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, 36.