Race in the Classroom #3: Bringing in Race in a Catholic Intellectual Tradition Course

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Having practiced on my first-year students for a few years [Race in the Classroom #1   Race in the Classroom #2], I felt brave enough to add several readings on race at once to my junior level course, Is God Dead? It was a good time to do it because I was revising the course anyway, converting it from a philosophy elective into a Catholic intellectual tradition course, fulfilling a gen ed requirement here at my small and mostly white Catholic college in the Northeast (I'm white too).

In revising, I had to go outside traditional philosophy – the standard philosophy of religion course reader has *no* readings on race or on Catholicism. I ignored the fact that I'm a philosopher and looked for resources in theology instead. I soon stumbled into Black theology. Then I used Google. A lot.

I've included race in two units on my syllabus so far:

1.Re-imagining God: Metaphors for the 21st Century

I revised my old unit on metaphors about God into *Re-imagining God: Metaphors for the 21st Century*. We discuss the role of metaphor; we ask whether literal descriptions of God are possible; we consider better and worse metaphors. I added several readings on how images

depicting God and Jesus as white men dominate religious art, asking if and how that matters and why it may be important to depict them as people of color and/or as women. We look at how this issue came up in the civil rights movement and how it has reemerged more recently.

This unit quickly became one of the strongest parts of the class. The students like it because it is relevant and has pictures. I like it because invites reflection in three areas that are crucial to my course goals:

- **Self**: Students quickly notice that even though they believe that God has no body, they find images of God as anything other than a white man jarring. What does that mean, how does this automatic association of power and white men affect their actions and attitudes, and what can we do about it?
- **Society**: These images include some and exclude others, and they both reflect and reinforce existing power structures. How does that power structure affect people's lives inside organized religion, and how can we make things better? Should we insist on diverse images in our churches?
- **Relationship with God**. Our initial reactions in encountering a nontraditional picture God highlights our tendency towards idolatry. We constantly confuse our image of God with God. Since the images fall short and can have such a negative social impact, would we be better off without images of God? Maybe Jews and Muslims are onto something here?

This semester, my class added another question: Are we obsessing too much about images? The students pointed to a religious and a social danger:

- If we focus too much on what Jesus looked like, we may neglect his message.
- If we worry too much about visual representation, we may settle for symbolic change.

2.Black suffering

A work in progress: I'm adding readings on black suffering to the *Problem of Suffering* unit. William Jones argues that given how much and how disproportionately blacks have suffered, it's reasonable to conclude that God is a white racist. James Cone disagrees.

I haven't taught this unit yet. But I will!

3.Learning more myself without going crazy

The voice in my head saying that I don't know enough to teach this stuff is still there, but I'm resolutely ignoring it and teaching anyway, remembering that my students know a lot less about it than I do. I'm also educating myself one small step at a time. I read a couple of articles on Black liberation theology over the summer so that I would at least know more than what's in the Wikipedia entry. Last spring, I stuck to Wikipedia. It worked.

I still know much less than I'd like. I want a better idea of how we ended up with our current

images of Jesus. (I get why he is white, but why the long hair?) I'd like to understand how white mainstream theologians responded to black liberation theology. And I'd like a better sense of the Catholic church's position and record on race. But I didn't figure any of that out over the summer. I needed to rest, and I had other responsibilities too. Next time!

Resources

Metaphors for the 21ˢᵗ Century

- Braxton, Edward K. "The Racial Divide in the United States: A Reflection for the World Day of Peace 2015."
- Cleage, Albert B., Jr. *The Black Messiah*. Reprinted in *Black Theology: A Documentary History, Volume I, 1966-1979*. Edited by James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore. New York: Orbis Books, 1993. (Selections)
- Douglas, Kelly Brown. *The Black Christ.* Maryknoll, New York: Orbis, 2019. (Selections on Cleage)
- Massingale, Bryan N. "The Challenge of Idolatry for LGBTI Ministry." *DignityUSA.org*, 2019.
- NCR editorial staff. "Why white Jesus is a problem." *National Catholic Reporter,* June 30, 2020.
- Rosales, Harmonia. *The Creation of God* (a recreation of Michelangelo's *Creation of Adam*). *Los Angeles Academy of Figurative Art*, 2018.
- Schaeffer, Pamela, and John L. Allen Jr. "Jesus 2000." *National Catholic Reporter*, 1999.

The Problem of Suffering

- William R. Jones. *Is God a White Racist? A Preamble to Black Theology.* New York: Anchor Press, 1973.
- Cone, James H. *God of the Oppressed.* New York: Seabury, 1975. (Selections)

Standard Philosophy of Religion course reader

- Pojman, Louis, and Rea, Michael. *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology.* 7ᵗʰ edition. Stamford, CT : Cengage Learning, 2015.

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