Blind Spots, White Supremacy, and Conversion

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“We will have to repent in this generation not merely for the hateful words and actions of the bad people but for the appalling silence of the good people.”

-Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. “Letter from Birmingham Jail”

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What are the biggest blind spots related to racism for white well-meaning Catholics?

In this paper I will critically respond to two pastoral letters written in response to racism in the United States - the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King’s “Letter from Birmingham Jail” written in 1963, and the 2018 letter from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops entitled “Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call of Love.” I am writing from the perspective of a white cis-gendered woman, Roman Catholic student of theology, and a U.S. citizen.

Blind Spots and Stumbling Blocks: Well-intentioned White People and Churches

Fifty-seven years ago, the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. sat in solitary confinement in a jail cell in Birmingham, Alabama, and prophetically responded to his “[f]ellow clergymen” who had publicly criticized King’s work and labeled him an outsider and extremist. King’s inspired letter is a seminal civil rights text as well as a profound theological statement. King’s purpose is clear, he seeks justice and peace for all humanity. In doing so, King expansively imagines the reign of God of love and kinship and exemplifies the works necessary to create this world. King responds to his critics with their own language, citing support from some of the greatest philosophers, theologians, politicians, and prophets in

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3 King, “Letter,” 773. King uses the term “brotherhood” in his text. I have replaced brotherhood with kinship throughout this paper.
history, explaining why his fellow clergymen are fundamentally wrong. Unfortunately, our social, political, and religious systems are still wrong in many of the same ways, and we all still have so much work to do to create King’s vision. King’s text is as relevant now as it was more than 50 years ago.

King’s letter provides an insider’s view of the realities of racism in the U.S. King explains his first-hand experience with racism and tells us of “vicious mobs [that] lynch. . .mothers and fathers at will and drown. . .sisters and brothers at whim; . .hate filled policemen [who] curse, kick and even kill. . .black brothers and sisters.” He explains the reality of this life in gripping detail and helps us gain not only an intellectual understanding, but also a visceral reaction to the atrocities that result from the sin of racism. Despite this physical and psychological violence, King makes the case for his commitment to nonviolence and educates his readers on the intricacies of a well-organized nonviolent campaign. He establishes the importance of the work that he and his colleagues are doing and the necessity of direct action, having thoroughly exhausted all other means to affect change.

King’s letter is important for myriad reasons, but for the well-intentioned white moderate and white church, his letter was then, and remains still, essential in identifying the blind spots that are the greatest stumbling blocks in the battle against racism in the United States. Further, as a direct testimony from someone intimately familiar with racism, King’s words are the witness that the white members of the Catholic Church must hear and absorb in order to achieve necessary conversion.

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King writes of his “deep disappointment” with white moderates and the white church.

To the surprise of many a well-intentioned white moderate, King does not name the “White Citizen’s Councilor or the Klu Klux Klanner”\(^5\) as the biggest “stumbling block” in the way of racial equality in the U.S. Rather, King identifies

the white moderate, who is more devoted to ‘order’ than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice.\(^6\)

In other words, the biggest stumbling block to King’s vision of a reign of love aren’t those who stand in direct opposition to that vision, but those who choose comfort over the tension required for change and justice. Similarly, King calls out the “white ministers, priests and rabbis” who he thought would have been his strongest supporters, but who instead “remained silent and secure behind stained-glass windows.”\(^7\)

Throughout King’s letter he focuses on the transformative power of tension. King tells us that nonviolent annoyances are essential to create tension.\(^8\) He says that “constructive, nonviolent tension. . .is necessary for growth. . .[to] help [humans] rise from the dark depths of prejudice and racism to the majestic heights of understanding and [kinship].”\(^9\) It is this tension that creates conversion and ultimately positive peace. It is this tension that creates metanoia.

King recognizes the danger in taking up his cause and persisting in the midst of tension. Part of the campaign he describes includes trainings on nonviolence and repeatedly asking participants if they can accept the difficult and dangerous consequences they were likely to face, including

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7 King, “Letter,” 772.
8 King, “Letter,” 768.
violence and jail.\textsuperscript{10} King understands the strength and fortitude it takes to persist in tension
and fight for justice.

King describes a theology of accompaniment, providing a poignant glimpse of the
African American human experience, written by someone with firsthand knowledge and an
ability to amplify the voices of those on the margins. King assures his reader that his deepest
motivation is love and “there can be no deep disappointment where there is not deep love.”\textsuperscript{11}

\textbf{The Catholic bishop’s letter: selective silence, comfort, fear, and conversion}

Fifty-five years after King’s letter, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops
published their anxiously awaited “Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love.”\textsuperscript{12} The
30-page letter was the first time the bishops had collectively addressed racism in 40 years and
the fourth time in the past 60 years that the bishops had written collectively to “express their
pastoral concern”\textsuperscript{13} about racism. The bishops’ letter is ambitious, well intentioned, and goes
far beyond previous statements made regarding racism or the need for action by all U.S.
Catholics and the institution of the U.S. Catholic Church. Despite this, I will argue that the
bishops fail to understand King’s message. They are selectively silent with respect to racism,
their message is motivated by fear, and they fail to grasp the necessary difficulty of conversion.

Racism is initially defined by the bishops as when “a person” believes that their race is
superior and judges people of other races as inferior.\textsuperscript{14} The bishops note that this is a sin
because it violates justice and fails to recognize an individual’s human dignity or that individual

\textsuperscript{10} King, “Letter,” 768.
\textsuperscript{11} King, “Letter,” 772.
\textsuperscript{12} United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call of Love” (November 2018).
\textsuperscript{13} USCCB, “Open,” 6.
\textsuperscript{14} USCCB, “Open,” 3.
as the “neighbors Christ calls us to love (Mt. 22:39).” Later in the letter, the bishops introduce some nuance to their definition of racism, noting that “remain[ing] silent and fail[ing] to act against racial injustice” constitutes a sin of omission.¹⁵ The bishops recognize the ills of racism and the need for change and action.

Much of the bishops’ writing reminds the reader of the reality of God’s love and our call as Christians to love our neighbors. The image of God they portray is loving, forgiving, good, and redemptive. Like King, they speak to the necessity of “a genuine conversion of heart. . .that will compel change, and the reform of our institutions and society.”¹⁶ Rather than accompaniment in the reality of racism, the bishops favor empathy gained by listening to “the tragic stories that are deeply imprinted on the lives of our brothers and sisters”¹⁷ to create justice. Again, the bishops’ intention is well taken.

It is disappointing then when their description of those “tragic stories” proves to be so intentionally incomplete. The bishops spend several pages providing brief and, at times, questionable histories of Native Americans, Hispanic Americans, and African Americans, the racism that these groups have faced, and the church’s complicity in such racism. Unlike King’s letter, these stories are written by outsiders, white men,¹⁸ who have selected certain accounts and statistics from books and Pew Research Data. For example, one self-serving portrayal is the Catholic missions “as a barrier to the abuse of indigenous people and. . .a form of protection.”¹⁹ As we all know, historical accounts tell a drastically different story, referencing the “cultural

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genocide” of the missions that often physically punished Native Americans and “held [them] captive. . . forbidden to leave and forced to do labor.” Likewise, the bishops’ account makes no mention of the racism that Latinx Catholics have faced within the U.S. Catholic Church, including lack of representing in diocese management and worshipping in “separate and unequal settings.” The only individual story included in the letter is of August Tolton, an African American Catholic priest who worked “toward racial reconciliation” and who addressed the first Catholic Colored Congress more than 100 years ago to tell them of how the Church “had taught him to always ‘pray and forgive [his] persecutors.’” These selective and whitewashed stories do not accurately portray racism or the Catholic Church’s involvement in racism.

From this questionable perspective, it is little wonder that the bishops’ call to action is incomplete and underwhelming. Their letter includes a wide variety of suggestions and mandates to promote racial understanding, from visiting museums, to evaluating curricula, to creating plans to provide opportunities for historically excluded individuals. The bishops ask for personal reflection and change and structural evaluation, planning, and instruction.

My greatest concern with the bishops’ letter is not in what it says, but the manner in which things are said, and more distressing, what they choose not to say. The letter fails to capture the nuance and complexity of racism in the United States and fails to give “name” to the sinner. The language of the letter is couched in a way that seemingly avoids any discomfort

or tension for white readers. Daniel Horan finds this avoidance of the “discomfort required to seriously consider social injustice [as] an abdication of pastoral responsibility.”24 As theologian Bryan Massingale posits, “[s]ilence for the sake of making white people comfortable is a luxury we can no longer afford.”25

The bishops often minimize the church’s involvement with racism with qualifying words and insincere astonishment. They admit that “even churches” can be complicit in racism when they “remain silent and fail to act against racial injustice when encountered.”26 We already know from Dr. King that churches are especially complicit in silence.

Perhaps the bishops’ letter is just too long, covering some of the contours without ever arriving at the crux. Why would the bishops write this way? Theologians Jon Nilson and Karen Teel suggest they did so out of fear. Nilson relies on James Baldwin’s assessment that “the psychic reality behind white supremacy is fear.” Nilson argues that the “Catholic Church’s attempts to address racism must address this fear.”27 Theologian Karen Teel agrees that this “white fear” must be confronted in order to “break through. . .collective paralysis,” 28 in order to change the status quo.

Acting out of fear is actually the opposite of love; if fear is the motivator, the bishops are not acting out of love. This fear is most evident by what is not named in the bishops’ letter.

After 30 pages of text, there is no named culprit in this discussion of racism – the bishops fail to

27 Karen Teel, “Can We Hear Him Now? James Cone’s Enduring Challenge to White Theologians,” Theological Studies 81, no. 3 (Sept. 2020), 590.
28 Teel, “Can We Hear,” 590.
name the elephant in the room – white supremacy and white privilege. The bishops do not address the “truth that racism is a white problem because in this society whites hold the power,” and that systemic racism actually “benefits white folks to the disadvantage of people of color.” And here again is a stumbling block. As King understood, “it is an historical fact that privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily.” Like the white churches of King’s time, this letter demonstrates a dangerously “shallow understanding” of racism in the United States.

Near the end of the letter, the bishops “ask for forgiveness” for acts of racism committed by the Catholic Church and encourage Catholics to “form relationships with those we might regularly try to avoid.” Theologian Bryan Massingale’s writings on race four years prior to the bishops’ letter indicate that this is far from enough and misses the point. He says that

reconciliation is neither a matter of establishing friendly and inclusive relationships between individuals, nor does it entail only personal repentance from past acts of racial animus. Rather, racial reconciliation requires challenging and severing the cultural nexus between skin color and race-based systemic advantage and privilege. . .Racial reconciliation, if its goal is the establishment of just relationship between unequal social groups, demands the elimination of the stigma and privilege associated with race.

As an initial step the bishops must acknowledge and name this privilege and stigma.

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29 Horan, “Bishops.”
30 Horan, “Bishops.”
31 King, “Letter,” 768.
Throughout the letter, racism is discussed from a distance, these men are outsiders, and they are addressing outsiders. Prominent theologian James H. Cone knew that most white people did not “understand the oppression of [B]lack people. He knew this because ‘to know oppression is to refuse to put up with it’ and by and large, whites . . . were not engaged in focused activity calculated to overthrow white supremacy.” How can the bishops succeed in overthrowing something when they can’t even name it?

As theologian M. Shawn Copeland recognizes, racism is not limited to a prejudice or a personal bias, it is not a problem that can be quickly fixed but rather is a “complex and opportunistic social phenomenon that distorts everyday human living.” It distorts our reality and requires a change to how we exist as humans in the world. It raises questions about the way we imagine God. Racism affects our theology. A serious discussion about racism requires us to “expose the church’s racialized history of exclusions and rejections.” Tackling white supremacy and white privilege will take serious work.

Such self-reflection and such dialogue are difficult and tension filled, but, as theologians, including Martin Luther King, Jr., James Cone, M. Shawn Copeland, Bryan Massingale and others, understand “nothing less than conversion is needed for white theologians [and the white church] to confront the problem of white supremacy.” It is the tension and discomfort that lead to conversion. Beyond referencing the word “conversion” in the bishops’ letter, very little time is spent in unpacking what conversion really means or entails in this context.

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36 Teel, “Can We Hear,” 593.
38 Copeland, “Critical,” 86.
39 Teel, “Can We Hear,” 583.
However, it is clear from Copeland’s description that the conversion that results from resisting racism will not be accomplished by visiting museums or changing a parish’s hiring practices. Rather, resisting racism must create a “change in our attentiveness, in our questions, in our reflection, in our judgments, in our decisions, in our choices, in our living, in our loving.” Conversion will change everything once we can attain it, but we can only do so through the embrace of King’s “tension.”

The call for theologians to help

The bishops “call on theologians” to help address issues of racism in the church is problematic. First, like the bishops themselves, not all theologians are well positioned to address this problem. As James H. Cone recognized, much of current theology “is the product of white ethnic values of Europe and America.” Bryan Massingale further identifies that “what makes [the US Catholic Church] ‘white‘ and ‘racist‘ is the pervasive belief that European aesthetics, music, theology, and person – and only these – are standard, normative, universal and truly ‘Catholic.’” On the other hand, the bishops fail to acknowledge the work that theologians of color have been doing in this area for decades. The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is mentioned by name in the letter, but is only credited with fostering “ecumenical and interreligious cooperation.” Massingale expresses frustration with such willful failure to learn as he “ponder[s] the futility of speaking out, yet again, trying to think of how to say what has been said, what [he has] said, so often before.” Cone “continuously challenged white

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40 Copeland, “Critical,” 89.  
42 Teel, “Can We Hear,” 594.  
45 Massingale, “Assumptions.”
Christians to confront the sin of white supremacy,” but few heard him. The bishops have resources from theologians who have spent their lives focusing on the very issue they are now addressing.

**One more blind spot: sexism**

Of course, it will be hard for the church to fully come to grips with racism if it continues its long tradition of sexism. Copeland identifies the “profound nexus between race and gender . . . [and the fact that] they mutually and reciprocally influence the fates of social groups.”

Racism joins “feeling or attitudes to the putative exercise of legitimate power in society. . . racism [is]. . . institutionalized.” Sexism is institutionalized in Catholicism because all legitimate power rests with men. True conversion will require the upending of this institutionalized power. Just as racism makes people feel less than, the Church continues to perpetuate “perceptions that [women] do not fully bear the image of God, that they embody less intelligence, beauty, and goodness,” and until the Church can do that for all people it continues to miss the mark.

Both King and Massingale recognize that conversion is the only path forward for the Church. Indeed, “at stake is not mere moral credibility but the very integrity and authenticity of the faith itself.” Systemic racism and segregation are antithetical to who we are as Catholics and put the future of our Church and our faith at risk. The U.S. Catholic Bishops seem to have a

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46 Teel, “Can We Hear,” 582.
48 Copeland, “Critical,” 86.
cursory understanding of this reality, but must further challenge themselves and all white Catholics to uncover King’s transformative tension, to

“[s]tay in the discomfort, the anxiety, the guilt, the shame the anger. Because only when a critical mass of white folks are outraged, grieved and pained over the status quo – only when white people become upset enough to declare, ‘This cannot and will not be!’ – only then will real change begin to become a possibility.”

Only then will conversion begin.

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51 Massingale, “Assumptions.”
Bibliography


