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Source: *American Catholic Studies*, Fall 2016, Vol. 127, No. 3 (Fall 2016), pp. 6-8

Published by: American Catholic Historical Society

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44195851>

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## ***Anti-Blackness and White Supremacy in the Making of American Catholicism***

M. Shawn Copeland<sup>12</sup>

*And if anyone asks, "What are these wounds?"  
The answer will be:  
"The wounds I received in [my own] house [from] my friends."  
– after Zechariah 13:6*

Critical and sustained interrogation of the social construction of race and white supremacy with their deforming impact on individual, institutional, as well as spiritual and sacramental domains remains a most underdeveloped topic in American Catholic studies. As an African American Catholic and a theologian, this neglect and indifference wounds my heart and insults my intellect. Thus, the epigraph of this essay expresses my emotional, spiritual, and intellectual experience of black Catholic life. In what follows, I put forward theses for comprehending, analyzing, and evaluating the relation of American Catholicism to anti-blackness and white supremacy.

1. Catholic sanctioning of the colonization *of* and trade *in* flesh reverberates with acute and painful irony. At the center of Catholic thinking (read: theology) and practice (read: worship) lies broken and bruised flesh. The doctrine of incarnation "mobilizes" the notions of nature, essence (*ousia*), *homoousios*, *hypostasis* to mediate the most profound, daring, and dangerous mystery of Christian faith: the Word of God became flesh.<sup>13</sup> At a particular time in the course of human history in a particular geographic place in the person of the Jew Jesus of Nazareth, God became flesh, lived *with* us and *for* us.
2. Despite its reverence for Being *and* beings; despite its intense sacramental, and, therefore symbolic character; despite its intimate knowledge of, irrevocable and essential relation to flesh –

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13. Cf. Jean-Luc Nancy, *Dis-Enclosure: The Deconstruction of Christianity*, trans. Bettina Bergo, Gabriel Maleufaut, and Michael B. Smith (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 37.

racialization of flesh has shaped Christianity, and thus Roman Catholicism, almost from its origins: women, Jews, people of color (especially, indigenous and black peoples) have undergone metaphysical violence.<sup>14</sup> In the Americas, this effort to master beings by force nearly exterminated indigenous peoples and dehumanized Africans. In the highly profitable commodification of flesh, this specious union of colonial and ecclesiastical power decidedly abused religion and the religious.

3. This racialization and commodification of flesh were so attached to the black body that the very meaning of being human "was defined continually against black people and blackness."<sup>15</sup> This definition, in turn, spawned subtle and perverse "anti-black logics"<sup>16</sup> that took root in cognition, language, meanings, and values, thereby reshaping nearly all practices of human encounter and engagement. Fatally, these anti-black logics have proved resistant to intelligibility and to critique. Thus, the normative denotation of who was (and is) human referred exclusively to white human beings, although this was expressed concretely as white males.
4. These anti-black logics were so pervasive and so restrictive, so precise and so pleasurable<sup>17</sup> that they overrode the exercise of potentially legitimate authority, seized, and displaced Divine Authority, thereby, totalizing and fetishizing whiteness and white human beings. In this process, anti-black logics repressed the demands of conscience, obscured morality, and eclipsed ethics to induce authority and authorities to kneel before the racialized idol of whiteness. In an even more perilous, totalizing move, these authorities attempted to bleach and domesticate the Divine, to make over the Divine in their image and likeness. Thus, in adhering to the culture and customs of anti-blackness, ecclesial authorities, both episcopal and parochial, bound themselves to the idolatry of whiteness. These men abrogated to themselves interpretative and judicial power to justify geographic and spatial sequestering or segregation of black flesh and bodies. Their accommodation to anti-

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14. Gianni Vattimo's phrase 'a violence of metaphysics' refers to the "attempt to master the real by force," (64) in "Towards an Ontology of Decline," in *Reading Metaphysics: The New Italian Philosophy*, ed. Giovanni Borradori (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1988).

15. Rinaldo Walcott, "The Problem of the Human: Black Ontologies and 'the Coloniality of Our Being,'" 93, in *Postcoloniality – Decoloniality – Black Critique: Joints and Fissures*, eds. Sabine Broeck and Carsten Junker (Frankfurt/New York: Campus Verlag, 2014).

16. Ibid.

17. Anthony Paul Farley, "The Black Body as Fetish Object," *Oregon Law Review* 97 (1997): 461-535.

black logics included the establishment of segregated parishes, schools, and, in some cases, cemeteries; the denial, exclusion, and prohibition of black bodies from religious vows and from priesthood; and the proscription of black religious expression, culture, and spirituality.<sup>18</sup> Their accommodation to anti-black logics not only contested Catholic teaching regarding the *imago dei*, that all human beings participate in the divine likeness, not only defied the effect of Baptism, but interrupted the power of Eucharist to collapse barriers of space and relation.<sup>19</sup>

5. The indifference of Catholic authorities to the care of black bodies and (black) souls neither prevented black human beings from communicating with the Divine, nor drove them from that church which constitutes for them the singular way the Divine Three give their own self and life for the liberation of all. Since the Stono Rebellion<sup>20</sup> and, even, perhaps prior to it, God's black human creatures have improvised authenticity of life and worship in struggle, in ways that were and are spiritually defiant, intellectually imaginative, culturally creative, socially interdependent – in *uncommon faithfulness*.<sup>21</sup>

In subtle and in crude ways, American Catholicism has and continues to demonstrate contempt for black human creatures who share in the glory, beauty, and image of the Divine. Such contempt veers toward contempt of the Divine, toward blasphemy through enacting, even passively, a metaphysical violence. And such contempt toward being could set American Catholicism on the path of idolatry.

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18. See Cyprian Davis, *The History of Black Catholics in the United States* (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 1990); Bryan N. Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010).

19. William T. Cavanaugh, "The World in a Wafer: A Geography of the Eucharist as Resistance to Globalization," *Modern Theology* (April 1999): 194.

20. John Thornton, "African Dimensions of the Stono Rebellion," *The American Historical Review* (October 1991): 1101-1113. Thornton argues the participation of black Catholic slaves in this rebellion.

21. See Jamie T. Phelps, *Black and Catholic: The Challenge and Gift of Black Folk: Contributions of African American Experience and Thought to Catholic Theology* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1997); Diana Hayes and Cyprian Davis, eds., *Taking Down Our Harps: Black Catholics in the United States* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998); M. Shawn Copeland, LaReine-Marie Mosely, and Albert Raboteau, eds., *Uncommon Faithfulness: The Black Catholic Experience* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2009).