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# Framing Racism Post Vatican II: Critical Race Theory and the Catholic Intellectual Tradition

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Framing Racism Post Vatican II: Critical Race Theory and the Catholic Intellectual  
Tradition  
Amanda Moras

**Abstract:**

Over the past century, the Catholic Church as an institutional entity has had a complex, and often contentious, relationship to racial politics. Given its history in colonialism, role in domestic slavery and the widely publicized complicity during the Holocaust, racism is something that has deep seated roots within the Church hierarchy.

That said, over the past fifty years, the Catholic Church, both internationally and in the U.S., has begun to confront racism as a moral issue. Bishops and other church leaders articulated Catholic teachings that rejected racial prejudice and promoted racial justice (McGreevey). This culminated in the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) as some church leaders took active roles within the Civil Rights movements, a move that at times resulted in conflicts between white ethnic parishes in the U.S. and the Church.

Given the Catholic Church's focus on social justice, the focus on racial violence and oppression is both obvious and necessary. Racial violence is a reality that the Catholic Church (and its intellectual community) has continuously grappled with, especially in recent years as the church has taken a public stand against institutional racism and racial violence.

The Church's attention to global racism and its recent move towards reconciliation for its own role in racism and racial violence (including for instance the Committee for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, and the Churches request for reconciliation) brings up critical questions regarding the Church as an anti-racist entity. Using the lens of Critical Race theory, this paper explores the implications of a post Vatican II Church for domestic racial violence and oppression in the U.S. and assesses the current state of racial politics within the U.S. Catholic Church in light of what many refer to as a conservative push back to a pre-Vatican II church.

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2. Theoretical Framework:
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  - b. 25 Years later: Looking Back
    - i. Disconnect to practice
    - ii. Racial attitudes of Catholics
    - iii. Racial hierarchy and contemporary Catholic Church
4. Black Liberation Theology: An Intervention?
  - a. History
  - b. Exclusion of Black Catholics
  - c. White Privilege and Catholicism
5. Anti-Racism and the contemporary Catholic Church
  - a. Where are they now?
  - b. Politicizing race
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  - c. Intersectionality
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## Framing Racism Post Vatican II: Critical Race Theory and the Catholic Intellectual Tradition

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### Racial discourse and the Catholic Church:

- 1958: Discrimination and the Christian conscience: statement of the bishops of the United States
- Vatican II
  - Tension between laity and religious leaders
- 1968: Statement on national race crisis
- 1979: *Brothers and Sisters to Us*

### Critical Race Theory

- Institutional Discourse
  - Institutions as raced and gendered
  - Institutional discourse
- Critical Race Theory
  - Racism as institutionalized
  - Racial Hierarchy and Privilege

### 1979: *Brothers and Sisters to Us*, USCCB

- **Racism is a sin: a sin that divides the human family, blots out the image of God among specific members of that family, and violates the fundamental human dignity of those called to be children of the same Father.** Racism is the sin that says some human beings are inherently superior and others essentially inferior because of races. It is the sin that makes racial characteristics the determining factor for the exercise of human rights (U.S. Catholic Bishops Pastoral Letter on Racism, 1979).

This new economic crisis reveals an unresolved racism that permeates our society's structures and resides in the hearts of many among the majority. Because it is less blatant, this subtle form of racism is in some respects even more dangerous -- harder to combat and easier to ignore. Major segments of the population are being pushed to the margins of society in our nation. As economic pressures tighten, those people who are often black, Hispanic, Native American and Asian -- and always poor -- slip further into the unending cycle of poverty, deprivation, ignorance, disease, and crime. Racial identity is for them an iron curtain barring the way to a decent life and livelihood. The economic pressures exacerbate racism, particularly where poor white people are competing with minorities for limited job opportunities. The Church must not be unmindful of these economic pressures. We must be sensitive to the unfortunate and unnecessary racial tension that results from this kind of economic need (U.S. Catholic Bishops Pastoral Letter on Racism, 1979).

The structures of our society are subtly racist, for these structures reflect the values which society upholds. They are geared to the success of the majority and the failure of the minority. Members of both groups give unwitting approval by accepting things as they are. Perhaps no single individual is to blame. The sinfulness is often anonymous but nonetheless real. The sin is social in nature in that each of us, in varying degrees, is responsible. All of us in some measure are accomplices. As our recent pastoral letter on moral values states: "The absence of personal fault for an evil does not absolve one of all responsibility. We must seek to resist and undo injustices we have not ceased, least we become bystanders who tacitly endorse evil and so share in guilt in it" (U.S. Catholic Bishops Pastoral Letter on Racism, 1979).

Finally, racism is sometimes apparent in the growing sentiment that too much is being given to racial minorities by way of affirmative action programs or allocations to redress long-standing imbalances in minority representation and government-funded programs for the disadvantaged. **At times, protestations claiming that all persons should be treated equally reflect the desire to maintain a status quo that favors one race and social group at the expense of the poor and the nonwhite** (U.S. Catholic Bishops Pastoral Letter on Racism, 1979).

### Twenty-Five Years Later: Looking Back

- Speaking out against racism
- Sharing in responsibility and decision making
- Fostering vocations through appreciation of distinct history and cultural traditions of minorities
- Ecumenical cooperation in the pursuit of justice and peace
- Inculturation of the liturgy, pastoral programs and educational initiatives
- Spiritual and financial support of associations of minorities within the church
- The continued expansion of Catholic Schools in the inner cities and other disadvantaged areas

## Black Liberation Theology

- Theological racism
- Professor of Theology, Jamie T. Phelps explains: "It identified and critiqued the structures and patterns of relationships that continues to marginalize, devalue, exploit and otherwise perpetuate the oppression and dehumanization of Black people in the United States as antithetical to the gospel of Jesus Christ."
- James Cone (1969) *Black Theology and Black Power* and (1970) *Black Theology of Liberation*
  - reframed Jesus as a "god of the oppressed".
- Subjugation of Black Liberation Theology
  - Phelps, Cone, Massingale, Nilson, Copeland

## Where are we now?

- Race and politics?
- Intersectionality?