

Mara Brecht  
University of St. Michael's College at the University of Toronto  
mara.brecht@utoronto.ca  
2018 REA Meeting, Nov 2–4

## Catholic Social Learning and Racial Injustice: See–Judge... Act?

See–Judge–Act. If Catholic social thought were a musical genre, this would be the bassline thumping under every rhythm. It is the essence of Catholic social thought. The common denominator. It defines and links Catholic thinkers and their approach to social issues. Thomas Massaro elaborates the three-step process: “Take a careful look at the situation... make an accurate judgement about what is going on... act vigorously.”<sup>1</sup> Of course, each step is complex, resource demanding, and time-consuming and while Catholics have and will debate the particulars, the bassline pounds on.

Students feel the vibrations of See–Judge–Act when Catholic theological educators take up social issues in their classes, and orient themselves to the social issue accordingly, moving along with the rhythm. Yet in the *antiracist* Catholic theological classroom, I contend, See–Judge–Act creates something of a problem, in the form of tension or—if not well-managed—conflict. Where Catholic social thinkers package together reflection, judgment, and action, antiracist educators recommend forestalling the last step—action.

This paper tries listens to classical Catholic social thinking and the latest antiracist pedagogy and tries to show how the two can harmonize if they can recognize that both are building off that shared bassline. Specifically, I focus on the place of “action” in Catholic social thought and antiracist pedagogy, explains how drawing on antiracist pedagogy can generate tension in the Catholic theological classroom.<sup>2</sup> I then propose a way to make this tension productive rather than vicious, specifically through focusing on the formation of (guilty) conscience. I come at this work as a white ally for racial justice. Echoing Paul O. Myhre, being an ally necessitates “willingness to assert that whiteness is a problem within a racism systemic structure.”<sup>3</sup> As an educator, I foreground this assertion in my teaching practices.

## Catholic Social Thought, Catholic Social Learning, and the Call to Action

The Second Vatican Council renewed Catholic social thought (henceforth, CST) for the modern era.<sup>4</sup> *Gaudium et spes*, the Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World,

---

<sup>1</sup> Thomas Massaro, *Living Justice* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 2000), 103.

<sup>2</sup> I am inspired in this work by Karen Teel’s astute observation that theological educators, in particular, need to systematical analyze “specific strategies and experiences” when using antiracist pedagogy in the theological classroom (Karen Teel, “Getting Out of the Left Lane,” *Teaching Theology and Religion* 17 [2014]: 15).

<sup>3</sup> Paul O. Myhre, “Angle of Vision from a Companion/Aly in Teaching for a Culturally Diverse and Racially Just World,” in *Teaching for a Culturally Diverse and Racially Just World*, ed. Eleazar S. Fernandez, (Eugene OR: Cascade Books, 2014), 237

<sup>4</sup> J. Millburn Thompson helpfully distinguishes between Catholic social teaching (or Catholic social doctrine) and Catholic social thought. Catholic social teaching refers to the formal body of teachings issued by the Magisterium on matters of social concern, and is “the province of the hierarchy of the church.” Catholic social thought is broader in both scope and participants. It encompasses “theological and social reflection on social issues that takes place in the church.” Catholic social ethics is “the academic study of morality as it applies to social issues” (J. Millburn, *Introducing Catholic Social Thought* [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2010], 6–7). 6–7).

renews the tradition of CST by bringing “the Gospel and faith in Christ... to bear on what is actually happening in the world.”<sup>5</sup> But *Gaudium et spes* goes beyond creating a new method for CST, as it articulates its foundation in clear, Biblical terms: “God, Who has fatherly concern for everyone, has willed that all men should constitute one family and treat one another in a spirit of brotherhood. For having been created in the image of God, Who ‘from one man has created the whole human race and made them live all over the face of the earth’ (Acts 17:26), all men are called to one and the same goal, namely God Himself.”<sup>6</sup>

CST lays out a number of principles, each tied to the biblically-based and theologically-grounded Catholic tradition.<sup>7</sup> The first principle of CST—“the sanctity of human life and the inherent dignity of the human person”—is born from a foundational and biblically-based faith claim: God creates us. The second principle—the call to family, community, and participation—also springs forth from this theological anthropology. It upholds that “the person is not only sacred but also social,” accentuating that we only “achieve fulfillment in community.” Human dignity and community form CST’s “twin foundations” from which all other principles extend.<sup>8</sup> Created by God, humans endowed with rights which leads to the third principle: Those rights have corresponding responsibilities and duties.

The fourth principle is the dignity of work and rights of workers, because work is a “form of continuing participation in God’s creation.” Fifth, because the Gospel “instructs us to put the needs of the poor and vulnerable first,” CST defends the option for the poor and vulnerable. Humans are created as a family, and we are all “our brothers’ and sisters’ keepers, wherever they live.” The sixth principle therefore is solidarity. The final principle looks beyond the sanctity of *human* life to confirm the significance of all creation. We “show our respect for the Creator by our stewardship of creation.”

As their content makes clear, Catholics are called to live by these principles and, indeed, to proclaim and share them with “new clarity, urgency, and energy.”<sup>9</sup> Catholic educators can use their classrooms as a place to spread the good news about CST and to foster their students’ commitment to the principles. Roger Bergman, a self-described “faith-that-does-justice educator,” outlines “an educational strategy” for “faith that does justice,”<sup>10</sup> by which Bergman means a way of having faith that is justice oriented and focus.

Adding wisdom from Ignatian pedagogy to this mix, Bergman sketches out a learning process that aims to “stimulate a hunger and thirst for justice and therefore a commitment to Catholic social teaching.”<sup>11</sup> He describes his model as a Pedagogical Circle. It involves four necessary “moments”: “(1) encounter with the poor, (2) analysis of their situation and its structural causes, (3) theological reflection (Where is God to be found and what does God call us to do?), and (4) a commitment to intelligent and responsible action.”<sup>12</sup> The overlap with See—

---

<sup>5</sup> Thompson, *Introducing*, 49–50.

<sup>6</sup> Pope Paul VI, “*Gaudium et spes*: Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World,” December 7, 1965, [http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html)

<sup>7</sup> Though scholars vary on the *number* of principles (usually anywhere from two to ten), all capture the same basic ideas. For simplicity’s sake, I follow the pattern offered by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Sharing Catholic Social Teaching,” June 19, 1998, <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catholic-social-teaching/sharing-catholic-social-teaching-challenges-and-directions.cfm>

<sup>8</sup> Thompson, *Introducing*, 49.

<sup>9</sup> USCCB, “Sharing Catholic Social Teaching.”

<sup>10</sup> Roger Bergman, *Catholic Social Learning* (New York: Fordham UP, 2011), xi, 9.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, vii.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 62

Judge–Act is clear: the first moment involves seeing, the second and third entail judgement, and the final moment spurs to action. Bergman notes that the four moments don’t necessarily emerge in “lock-step progress” but—following the first moment of encounter—occur in a kind of a flexible sequence.<sup>13</sup>

By getting students personally invested in the effects of injustice—by making them deeply confront injustice and *really see it*—students will be ready to think critically about injustice, and to respond to it theologically and in action. Bergman’s Catholic social learning paradigm is less about *instruction in CST* and more about *conversion to it*. The circle “works” when it *transforms* students—when they are called to apply and live out the principles of Catholic social teaching.<sup>14</sup>

The question of interest to me is: How does such a paradigm—which is “natural” to Catholic theological thinking—function in an educational setting which is aimed at *racial* justice and which draws on wisdom from antiracist pedagogy?

### Learning with Massingale and His Analysis of the Catholic Response to Racial Injustice

In 1983, James Cone, the “father” of black theology challenged the American Catholic Church to acknowledge its failure to sufficiently deal with racism, and he challenged it to do better.<sup>15</sup> Catholic priest and ethicist Bryan N. Massingale is one voice in Catholic theology who has risen to the challenge, placing racial injustice at the heart of his theological project and calling for the whole Church to seek justice with him. Like his Protestant forefather, Massingale maintains an essential connection between theology and ethics. He invites his audience to reflect theologically and, at the same time, stirs them to action.

Massingale’s *Racial Justice in the Catholic Church* is a landmark text for both black theology and Catholic theology. To black theology, Massingale brings a Catholic perspective.<sup>16</sup> And to Catholic theology, Massingale contributes significantly to breaking a longstanding tradition of silence on racism, his body of work directly responding to Cone’s charge.<sup>17</sup> The book is something of a *pedagogical* landmark as well.

Massingale provides readers with a highly accessible set of concepts to help them understand and analyze racism in contemporary society. His clear terms lays out Catholic teaching on racial injustice, and he carefully walks readers through statements from the U.S. Catholic Bishops that address racism. In my experience, the book functions well as a core text for an introductory level Catholic theology class, as well as an engaging piece of theology for graduate students, and I know other faculty share my experience of the book as a highly effective

---

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 37–38.

<sup>15</sup> Though it would be an overstatement to say black theology began with James Cone, there’s widespread consensus in the Christian theological world that, until Cone, “no scholar had yet conceived of a black theological project in such explicit and urgent terms,” as Andrew Prevot puts it. Cone’s work draws from the wells of black intellectuals, pastors and preachers, and the spiritual traditions of the black Christian community (as well as white European and American theologians and philosophers) to *create* black theology “in its most direct and enduring articulation” (Andrew Prevot 2018, “Theology and Race: Black and Womanist Traditions in the United States,” *Theology* 2, [2018]: 20).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 40

<sup>17</sup> Bryan N. Massingale, “James Cone and Recent Catholic Episcopal Teaching on Racism,” *Theological Studies* 61 (2000): 700.

teaching tool.<sup>18</sup> Massingale serves my thinking not only by standing as a forefather of black Catholic theology whose insights are critical to Catholic racial justice work, but also by providing a paradigm of example the content students in Catholic theological education engage.

Massingale's first chapter sets out to help students "see" the issue of racism rightly. He urges readers to leave behind a "commonsense" notion of racism, which defines racism as conscious and deliberate negative interpersonal acts undertaken on the basis of skin color.<sup>19</sup> He then helps readers shift to a structural and systematic understanding of racism. After that shift, racism is understood to be a "culturally entrenched" phenomenon that "pervades the collective convictions, conventions, and practices of American life."<sup>20</sup> Racism, from this perspective, is a "way of interpreting human color differences" that are so deeply set in American culture as to go unseen by most whites.<sup>21</sup> While racism forms a way of seeing, it also translates into real "economic disadvantage and exploitation" for people of color.<sup>22</sup>

The second chapter of *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* forms the core of the CST-dimension of Massingale's project. There, Massingale takes a closer look at the American bishops' efforts to address racism during the 20th century. Remarkably, the entire body of bishops only produced three letters "solely devoted to racial justice." As Massingale analyzes the letters he both introduces his readers to the contours of CST and evaluates the American Church's response to racism.

The U.S. bishops, Massingale shows, appeal to categories familiar to CST, talking about racial injustice with well-worn terms such as sin and evil. And yet, Massingale is unambiguous in his indictment of the American Church: "The most notable fact concerning the Catholic theological contribution to racial reconciliation is its absence."<sup>23</sup> While there are ample resources in the tradition for rejecting racism, the bishops, in his view, fail to undertake "sustained social analysis of racism," in large part because of an impoverished ability to be self-reflective.<sup>24</sup> They are encouraged toward "an overly optimistic perspective that fails to account for how deeply entrenched racial bias is in American culture."<sup>25</sup>

The problem also lies in a failure to marshal the full power of CST. According to Massingale, the bishops do not address racism as a *structural* reality, an oversight that is inimical to the ontology in which CST is embedded. Namely, CST builds on the conviction that all the world forms a single unit, deeply interconnected and originating from and moving toward a single source, using tools that align with this vision.

One of those tools, social analysis, is a method for studying social systems. This methodological approach looks facts and issues as "interrelated parts of a whole" rather than "isolated problems," and attempts to capture a "sense of the systematic unity of reality."<sup>26</sup> The bishops' problems—the failure to be self-reflective and to undertake serious social analysis—are related to an inability to envision the whole. They don't see properly.

---

<sup>18</sup> See for example, Anna Floerke Scheid and Elisabeth T. Vasko, "Teaching Race: Pedagogical Challenges in Predominantly White Undergraduate Theology Classrooms," *Teaching Theology and Religion* 17 (2014): 27–45.

<sup>19</sup> Bryan N. Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 13–14.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 103.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.

<sup>26</sup> Joe Holland and Peter Henriot, *Social Analysis* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983), 11.

Seeing rightly is at the heart of Massingale’s criticisms of the America Church’s response to racism: The bishops didn’t get the problem right. If the vision is off, so too will be the judgement and action that follow. Bergman accentuates the importance of seeing rightly. He knows well that encounter with the poor—the first moment of the Pedagogical Circle—plays a pivotal role in the success of the Pedagogical Circle. Unless students meaningfully and wholeheartedly encounter the poor, the other moments of the circle either won’t materialize or will, but only palely. What is to ensure that students’ vision of racism is appropriately sharp?<sup>27</sup>

### Antiracist Pedagogy in the Catholic Theological Classroom

For theological educators, antiracist pedagogy is a way to help students sharpen their vision by offering Catholic educators concrete resources to help them fine tune how students experience—or enter into—the first moment of the Pedagogical Circle of “seeing” and “encountering the poor.” Specifically, antiracist pedagogical theory forces the questions: *What* is the object of our seeing? *Who* are the poor that we encounter?

#### *The Approach of Antiracist Pedagogy*

Antiracist pedagogy fits into the broader category of critical multicultural education, a way of approaching education that prioritizes student learning about difference and, most importantly, “the structural roots of inequality.”<sup>28</sup> Robin DiAngelo, a leading scholar in this area, articulates the key tenants of the educational approach: Antiracist pedagogy “seeks to interrupt relations of racial inequality by enabling people to identify, name, and challenge the norms, patterns, traditions, structures and institutions that keep racism and white supremacy in place.”<sup>29</sup>

Antiracist pedagogy assumes that racism is always operative, even when race seems irrelevant to the topic. It’s even there when racial diversity is absent from the educational environment.<sup>30</sup> This assumption is grounded by the key insight of critical race theory, on which antiracist pedagogy builds: Race is *the* central construct for social analysis.<sup>31</sup> All people are socialized to participate in racism in one way or another. Though “whiteness is indeed most

---

<sup>27</sup> Massingale’s first chapter contributes significantly to helping students *see* racism rightly. He adeptly walks students through a way to re-conceptualize racism, and turns their attention to whiteness as the more pressing, real “problem area.”

<sup>28</sup> Julie Kailin, *Antiracist Education* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014). To briefly situate antiracist pedagogy in the wider field further: Multicultural education is an educational approach that “seeks to expose students to various cultures and affirms cultural differences” (Shirley Mthethwa-Sommers, *Narratives of Social Justice Educators* [New York, NY: Springer, 2014], 16). Critical multicultural education goes one step further, holding that examining “one’s own socialized stereotypes and assumptions” is integral to learning about the other (Robin DiAngelo and Ozlem Sensoy, “OK, I Get It! Now Tell Me How to Do It!” *Multicultural Perspectives* 12 [2010]: 99). The distinction between multicultural education and *critical* multicultural education matters because it’s possible to teach about sociocultural or racial diversity without also asking students to consider the role *racism* plays in diversity. Such an approach, for example, would aim to help students accept others “as equals regardless of their skin color” and to celebrate difference as the way to “forge better intergroup relations” (Kim A. Case and Annette Hemmings, “Distancing Strategies,” *Urban Education* 40 [2005]: 622).

<sup>29</sup> Robin DiAngelo, *What Does It Mean to Be White?* (New York: Peter Lang, 2011), 289.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 290.

<sup>31</sup> Gloria Ladson-Billings and William F. Tate, “Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education,” *Teachers College Record* 97 (1995): 50. Critical race theorists attempt to theorize race akin to how gender (by feminists) and class (by Marxists) have been theorized. Building on the intellectual legacy of Carter G. Woodson and W. E. B. DuBois, critical race theorists position race at the center of any social analysis.

prevalent in whites themselves,” people of color can “inhabit whiteness ideology,” as educators Cheryl Matias and Janiece Mackey explain.<sup>32</sup> Antiracist pedagogy is therefore an equal opportunity affair. All educational spaces can benefit from gaining the tools to dismantle racism and all students can learn from exposing whiteness.

To further clarify whiteness, many antiracist theorists speak in the idiom of “white racial frame,” a concept developed by sociologist Joe Feagin, which is broadly consistent with Massingale’s idea of culturally entrenched racism. A frame, according to Feagin, shapes what and how people see. He explains that frames embed “in individual minds (brains), as well as in collective memories and histories, and [help] people make sense out of everyday situations.”<sup>33</sup>

The “white racial frame” positions “white” as the natural and normative way of being—or makes it the “ideal type”—that “in everyday practice are drawn on selectively by individuals acting to impose or maintain racial identity, privilege, and dominance vis-à-vis people of color in recurring interactions.”<sup>34</sup> Antiracist pedagogies strive “to make implicit norms of White talk and White racial ideology explicit.”<sup>35</sup>

The “metalogic” approach, which tries to help (white) students see how whiteness shapes how they think, talk, and see, is a key mechanism of antiracist pedagogy. This is no small feat. It is laborious—and something of a minefield—to expose white students to their own assumptions, assumptions which are so deeply internalized as to be unrecognizable.

Antiracist educators structure learning experiences such that students are able to grasp the concept of the white racial frame, or an equivalent concept. White students learn to apply the concept self-reflectively, so that they can see how whiteness informs their very way of experiencing the world. Students of color too learn to apply the concept as well. Once students can identify whiteness and its function, they can also begin to consider what the implications of having previously *not* known it. If they are white, students can question why they didn’t see their whiteness before.

The epistemology of ignorance, a field that “attempts to explain and account for the fact that substantive practices of ignorance... are structural,” studies how ignorance is essential to holding whiteness in place. The issue here is not just that whites don’t know their whiteness, but rather that they benefit from not knowing it. Barbara Applebaum speaks to this point by saying that white ignorance isn’t a passive lack of knowledge but an active process that begins from “readiness to *deny, ignore, and dismiss*” what victims say about their experiences of racism.<sup>36</sup> White students resist hearing and believing victims of racism, because to hear and believe means they can’t remain blind to their whiteness and its relationship to racism.

Antiracist pedagogy involves more than just exposing this feature of reality, but also is committed to interrogating investments in whiteness. In Karen Teel’s words antiracist pedagogy also “aims to show how benefiting from white supremacy is linked to contributing to it.”<sup>37</sup>

What is especially powerful about antiracist pedagogical theory is that it changes the place where (white) vision rests. Rather than looking *out* onto the world, whites are asked to look

---

<sup>32</sup> Cheryl E. Matias and Janiece Mackey, “Breakin’ Down Whiteness in Antiracist Teaching,” *The Urban Review* 48 (2016): 34.

<sup>33</sup> Joe Feagin, *The White Racial Frame* 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2013), 9.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

<sup>35</sup> Case and Hemmings, “Distancing Strategies,” 623.

<sup>36</sup> Barbara Applebaum, “‘Listening Silence’ and Its Discursive Effects,” *Educational Theory* 66 (2016): 396.

<sup>37</sup> Teel, “Getting Out of the Left Lane,” 15.

into themselves. Rather than encountering the poor *out* there, the white encounter with the poor is in fact an encounter with their own impoverishment, namely an impoverishment of awareness.

### *Cataloguing (White) Student Responses*

Because antiracist pedagogy theory is largely inductive, and grows from educators' teaching experiences, antiracist theorists create a collective catalogue over time of student responses that's helpful for other teachers to anticipate and rightly categorize their students' reactions to antiracist work.

It's difficult to be systematic about all the categories and themes engaged by antiracist educators. The catalogue is ever-expanding, and the interdisciplinary nature of antiracist pedagogy means scholars slice up the pie a little differently.

I propose the heading Fight-or-Flight under which to organize and analyze an array of student responses.

Fight-or-Flight is a physiological, instinctual response humans have to stress. This response is unthinking and preconscious, and understood to be a survival mechanism. Fight-or-Flight works because humans are able to respond efficiently to a perceived threat. We jump out of the way of a falling tree and tackle a charging dog before letting our consciousness gum up the works. Fight-or-Flight keeps us alive, but it's also activated in situations when the stress is not *really* threatening and has been misidentified.

Fighting is not hard to recognize. When fighting, students reject the idea that there is racism, and do so in a variety of ways. They say racism is a thing of the past, and will often emphasize social progress in America,<sup>38</sup> or point out that they don't live in the past and never themselves owned slaves.<sup>39</sup> They claim to live in a post-racial world, that they see people in such a way that skin color actually doesn't register with them.

Some students recognize race-related social problems, but hold people of color culpable for "poverty, lack of education, crimes, and other social problems" rather than attributing these problems to structural racism.<sup>40</sup> Some students accept that racial injustice exists, but make the caveat that whites are victims of racism too, calling so-called reverse racism and invoking affirmative action as generating discrimination against whites.<sup>41</sup>

Students sometimes remove themselves from discussion altogether, fleeing by retreating into silence. While they might see this as a way to just listen or a result of having little to add, silence shuts down dialogue and limits conversation.<sup>42</sup> Alternatively, they'll appeal to unconscious bias, a concept describing the deeply held beliefs people rely on to organize social worlds, to explain away their unwitting racism.<sup>43</sup>

Robin D'Angelo's conceptualization of "white fragility" is especially instructive for "getting inside" the Fight-or-Flight response. White fragility, D'Angelo writes, is a state that triggers white defensiveness, manifested in "the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear,

---

<sup>38</sup> Kathy Hytten and John Warren, "Engaging Whiteness," *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 16 (2003): 77.

<sup>39</sup> Case and Hemmings, "Distancing Strategies," 619.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 620.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 622.

<sup>42</sup> Barbara Applebaum, "'Listening Silence' and Its Discursive Effects," 401; Hytten and Warren, "Engaging Whiteness," 85–86.

<sup>43</sup> Shirley Anne Tate and Damien Page, "Whiteness and Institutional Racism," *Ethics and Education* 13 (2018): 142.

and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation.”<sup>44</sup> Fragility may manifest in tears and displays of anger.<sup>45</sup>

The problem with white fragility—and here’s where the Fight-or-Flight analogy is really helpful—is that it is a way of enacting and protecting whiteness.<sup>46</sup> Before (white) students even realize they’re doing it, they’re slapping their hands on their desks in anger (fighting) or turning on their laptops to completely check out (fleeing). Fighting and fleeing are survival strategies—ways of ensuring that whiteness lives.

## The Call to Action and Catholic Theological Learning

Experienced antiracist educators know that a moment will come when (at least some) students—even those who fought the hardest or fled the fastest—become open to learning about their whiteness, their ignorance to it, and its effects. But they soon run up against a hard edge: *What are we supposed to do? How are we supposed to change? Just tell us what to do!*

Antiracist educators are trepidatious of white students’ “missionary-like zeal for direct and specific action.”<sup>47</sup> Antiracist educators identify a pattern: Students study racism and whiteness for only a few weeks, and “grow impatient” of talking about the problems. They want to move to solutions.<sup>48</sup> They dichotomize critical reflection and “the more important task of doing something.”<sup>49</sup> They get restless, claim that more talk is futile, and demand space to act.

Antiracist educators point out that white students’ zeal and impatience is, at root, generated by the very same fragility that brings about fight-or-flight. Antiracist educators recommend keeping (white) students in the tensive space between resisting (through Fight-or-Flight) and calling for action. In this space, students see that dismantling racism requires *real* change, and not good intentions.<sup>50</sup> At the same time they see that way to real change will be only in and through “dwelling with unease” that is intrinsic to exposing whiteness.<sup>51</sup>

This dwelling puts students in an odd and uncomfortable liminal space as educators push them to understand the problems of racism but at the same time rein them in to ensure that understanding matures and develops, before students rush off to act hastily.

Though fragility is a powerful explanatory factor for students’ charge to justice, but it seems to me there’s an additional dynamic at play. Recall that, on the Catholic social learning model, students’ *readiness* to act, to do, to put something on the line is a marker of success. Transformation is, after all, what the model aims for, and doing justice in the world is not only the call of CST, but also the call of God. Setting up a classroom according to the model of Catholic social learning and teaching students to think through the frame of CST will deliver students to a place where they see action as the necessary (and good) outcome of what they’ve learned.

Massingale offers a reading of racism that runs as follows: God creates people in God’s image. Though all people reflect God and share in the gift of equal dignity, the human family is

---

<sup>44</sup> Robin DiAngelo, “White Fragility,” *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy* 3 (2011): 54.

<sup>45</sup> Cheryl E. Matias, et. al., “The Twin Tales of Whiteness,” *Taboo* (2017): 10.

<sup>46</sup> Barbara Applebaum, “Comforting Discomfort as Complicity,” *Hypatia* 32 (2017): 869.

<sup>47</sup> Hytten and Warren, “Engaging Whiteness,” 75.

<sup>48</sup> DiAngelo, *What Does It Mean to Be White?* 297.

<sup>49</sup> Hytten and Warren, “Engaging Whiteness,” 76.

<sup>50</sup> DiAngelo, *What Does It Mean to Be White?* 296.

<sup>51</sup> Tate and Page, “Whiteness and Institutional Racism,” 153.



also diverse, which is itself an insight into God.<sup>52</sup> The diversity of the human family is understood to be a “divine blessing” and reflect God’s own inner life.<sup>53</sup> Racism creates a system wherein the dignity of some is jeopardized, trod upon, and spurned. Racism defies human dignity and breaches human solidarity.<sup>54</sup>

Note that Massingale offers a CST-grounded account of racial injustice, which emphasizes themes related to theological anthropology and community. This is another way of saying that Massingale looks to the deepest structures of human life to apprehend and explain racism.<sup>55</sup> In my experience, it is *this* move that is precisely what frees (white) students from their instinct to fight or flee. Explaining that racism violates God’s designs for humanity and creation racism powerfully draws (white) students beyond their own fragility, to a place where they aren’t defensive but prepared to accept and resist their complicity in racism. Even for students who understand themselves as “nones” or are actively questioning, this is a compelling line of argument.

To recognize the terrible offense of racism is also to call for a forceful response: In the tradition of CST, the circle among “see–judge–act” must remain unbroken. To this end, Massingale offers specific details of what it takes to ensure solidarity and protect human dignity. He writes that solidarity “entails a constant effort to build a human community where every social group participates in equitably in social life and contributes its genius for the good of all.”<sup>56</sup> Catholics are called to the ongoing work of ensuring all truly belong to the human family, to building a social reality in which human dignity can flourish. For, the Catholic response human dignity, Massingale writes, “is to defend it from all forms of attack and to create the social conditions in which all human persons may flourish.”<sup>57</sup>

Students who learn with Massingale are ready to solve racism, fight injustice, and dismantle whiteness. They are ready to act: to defend human dignity and create social conditions anew. Herein lies the difficulty. How does an educator tell students that racism is a violation of ultimate order and explain that Christian faith depends upon ensuring the stability of that order and, in the very next breath, raise questions to students about their motivations when the commit themselves to action?

Though I’m simplifying the terms, I’ve felt on many occasions that my way of setting up their learning about racial justice puts my students in a theo-ethical bind. At the very least, I haven’t been transparent with them about the bind, nor given them tools to transform it into an experience of *productive tension*.<sup>58</sup> If the educator doesn’t carefully help students navigate this bind—and learn to see it as a tension—students will experience a conflict between CST and the values of antiracist pedagogy.

---

<sup>52</sup> Massingale, *Racial Justice and The Catholic Church*, 135.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>55</sup> Massingale’s account differs from, but does not contradict, the CST-grounded accounts offered by the bishops.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

<sup>58</sup> I anticipate some readers will view my conundrum as just another expression of white fragility, and another strategy to protect whites (myself included) from doing the hard work of dealing with whiteness. Though I’ve made a good faith effort to eliminate blind spots, I admit that this may be a blind spot. Even so, it stands to reason that addressing racism *theologically*, creates new stakes for and different circumstances in which student respond to racism—stakes and circumstances for which antiracist theorists do not typically account. To expose and fill this lacuna is the purpose of this essay.

George Yancy powerfully theorizes the idea of “tarrying” to capture what it’s like to occupy such a space: To tarry is to stay longer than intended, to linger, to hang around. Yancy calls for whites “to tarry with the pain and suffering of black people... to dwell in spaces that make them deeply uncomfortable, to stay with the multiple forms of agony that black people endure from them.”<sup>59</sup> He tells whites to quash the impulses to act, move, or move on, and instead to remain in the “unfinished present.”<sup>60</sup> In short, whites must *just be uncomfortable*.

Applebaum is in agreement with Yancy. She argues that antiracist pedagogy must enable white students to interpret their experiences as whites in new ways, and push white students to stay in the discomfort that arises from their re-interpretative work.<sup>61</sup> This requires a significant conceptual shift around how they think of their relationship to experiences: Rather than *having* experiences—and understanding themselves to be logically prior to events in the world—students are encouraged to see themselves as constituted by experiences.<sup>62</sup> Yancy puts other language to this: Whites realize (painfully) to be a product of a law that is not their own.<sup>63</sup>

It’s only such a shift in identity, DiAngelo theorizes, that will shift how whites orient themselves to action: “How we *view* the world impacts how we *act* in the world, as their vision takes in more complexity, their responses will become more nuanced and complex.”<sup>64</sup> To my view, the vision Yancy, DiAngelo, and Applebaum walk us toward deeply resonates with Christian theological convictions, though it can feel to students that they are being *shut down* rather than *opened up*.

As theological educators grasp for ways to do this work well, they should, I submit, hold tight to modifier defining their work: *theological*. Anthony G. Reddie notes how he begins his antiracist classes with a “deceptively simple inquiry ‘What does it mean to be a human being? What does it mean to be you?’”<sup>65</sup> These theological-anthropological questions, set in relation to a critical analysis of whiteness, can induce students to consider themselves as a site of struggle between socially-given identity and a more complex, theologically-given one.<sup>66</sup> In other words, they can see that their identity is formed not only by a larger social context, but also—and here we go beyond antiracist pedagogy—that they are, at the same time, given and formed by the Creator.

I propose conscience formation as significant—even necessary—complement to antiracist pedagogy in Catholic theological education. Linda Hogan explains that, in the Christian tradition, conscience is conceived of as a site of encounter. There we meet God and “discover ethical values.” Conscience becomes the place from which we “direct our actions.” Conceived as such, our actions are less the result of private, moral choice than they are an

---

<sup>59</sup> George Yancy. *Look a White!* (Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2012), 157

<sup>60</sup> Yancy, *Look a White!* 158.

<sup>61</sup> Barbara Applebaum, “‘Doesn’t My Experience Count?’” *Race Ethnicity and Education* 11 (2008): 410.

<sup>62</sup> Applebaum “‘Doesn’t My Experience Count?’” 410.

<sup>63</sup> Yancy *Look a White!* 167.

<sup>64</sup> DiAngelo, *What Does It Mean to Be White?* 301.

<sup>65</sup> Anthony G. Reddie, “Teaching for Racial Justice: A Participative Approach,” *Teaching Theology and Religion* 13 (2010): 97.

<sup>66</sup> This language plays on a primary scholarly theme (the dialectic of subjectivity) of Anthony Pinn, noted by Reddie, “Teaching for Racial Justice,” 97.

incarnation of God's will.<sup>67</sup> Thinking in these terms releases the pressure that tends to be build up around "act," because acting is effect of an authentic meeting between God and person.

I see Mary E. Hobgood providing a rubric of powerful questions to help students prepare for a daily examination of conscience. We—especially we whites—review our thoughts, words, and deeds by asking these questions:

What kinds of selves are being created? What kind of selves do we want to become? What established practices do we want to resist? What new practices need to be imagined and embraced? What kind of people do we want to be, and how do our cultural and religious structures facilitate or frustrate our capabilities of becoming these particular kinds of persons?

Taking care not to "spiritualize" antiracism, working with students on forming conscience is a way to galvanize them to adopt daily, specific actions that re-create themselves *in accord with* God's creative vision for humanity.

---

<sup>67</sup> Linda Hogan, *Confronting the Truth*, 23–24.

## Bibliography

- Applebaum, Barbara. "Comforting Discomfort as Complicity: White Fragility and the Pursuit of Invulnerability." *Hypatia* 32 (2017): 862–875.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "Doesn't My Experience Count? White Students, the Authority of Experience and Social Justice Pedagogy." *Race Ethnicity and Education* 11 (2010): 405–411.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "'Listening Silence' and Its Discursive Effects" *Educational Theory* 66 (2016): 389–404.
- Bergman, Roger. *Catholic Social Learning: Education the Faith that Does Justice*. New York: Fordham UP, 2011.
- Case, Kim A. and Hemmings, Annette. "Distancing Strategies: White Women Preservice Teachers and Antiracist Curriculum." *Urban Education* 40 (2005): 606–626.
- DiAngelo, Robin. *What Does It Mean to Be White? Developing White Racial Literacy*. New York: Peter Lang, 2012.
- \_\_\_\_\_. "White Fragility." *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy* 3 (2011): 54–70.
- DiAngelo, Robin and Sensoy, Ozlem. "'OK, I Get It! Now Tell Me How to Do It!': Why We Can't Just Tell You How to Do Multicultural Education." *Multicultural Perspectives* 12 (2010): 97–102.
- Feagin, Joe. *The White Racial Frame: Centuries of Racial Framing and Counter-Framing*, 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2013.
- Hess, Mary E. "White Religious Educators Resisting White Fragility: Lessons from Mystics." *Religious Education* 112 (2016): 46–57.
- Hess, Mary E. and Brookfield, Stephen D. "'How can white teachers recognize and challenge racism?' Acknowledging Collusion and Learning an Aggressive Humility." In *Teaching Reflectively in Theological Contexts: Promises and Contradictions*, edited by Mary E. Hess and Stephen D. Brookfield, TK. Malabar, FL: Krieger, 2008.
- Hobgood, Mary E. *Dismantling Privilege: An Ethics of Accountability*, rev. ed. Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2009.
- Holland, Joe and Henroit, Peter. *Social Analysis: Linking Faith and Justice*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983.
- Hyttén, Kathy and Warren, John. "Engaging Whiteness: How Racial Power Gets Reified in Education." *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education* 16 (2003): 65–89.

Kailin, Julie. *Antiracist Education: From Theory to Practice*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2014.

Ladson-Billings, Gloria and Tate, William F. "Toward a Critical Race Theory of Education." *Teachers College Record* 97 (1995): 47–68.

Massaro, Thomas. *Living Justice: Catholic Social Teaching in Action*. New York: Sheed & Ward, 2000.

Massingale, Bryan N. "James Cone and Recent Catholic Episcopal Teaching on Racism." *Theological Studies* 61 (2000): 700–730.

\_\_\_\_\_. *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010.

Matias, Cheryl E. and Mackey, Janiece. "Breakin' Down Whiteness in Antiracist Teaching: Introducing Critical Whiteness Pedagogy." *The Urban Review* 48 (2016): 32–50.

Matias, Cheryl E., Henry, Allisonn, and Darland, Craig. "The Twin Tales of Whiteness: Exploring the Emotional Roller Coaster of Teaching and Learning about Whiteness." *Taboo* (2017): 7–29.

Mthethwa-Sommers, Shirley. *Narratives of Social Justice Educators: Standing Firm*. New York, NY: Springer, 2014.

Myhre, Paul O. "Angle of Vision from a Companion/Aly in Teaching for a Culturally Diverse and Racially Just World." In *Teaching for a Culturally Diverse and Racially Just World*, edited by Eleazar S. Fernandez, 219–238. Eugene OR: Cascade Books, 2014.

Pope Paul VI. "Gaudium et spes: Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World." December 7, 1965.  
[http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist\\_councils/ii\\_vatican\\_council/documents/vat-ii\\_const\\_19651207\\_gaudium-et-spes\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html)

Prevot, Andrew L. "Theology and Race: Black and Womanist Traditions in the United States." *Theology* 2 (2018): 1–79.

Reddie, Anthony G. "Teaching for Racial Justice: A Participative Approach." *Teaching Theology and Religion* 13 (2010): 95–109.

Scheid, Anna Floerke and Vasko, Elisabeth T. "Teaching Race: Pedagogical Challenges in Predominantly White Undergraduate Theology Classrooms." *Teaching Theology and Religion* 17 (2014): 27–45.

Tate, Shirley Anne and Page, Damien. "Whiteness and Institutional Racism: Hiding Behind (Un)Conscious Bias." *Ethics and Education* 13 (2018): 141–155.

Teel, Karen. "Getting Out of the Left Lane. The Possibility of White Anti-Racist Pedagogy." *Teaching Theology and Religion* 17 (2014): 3–26.

Thompson, J. Millburn. *Introducing Catholic Social Thought*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2010.

United States Catholic Council of Bishops, "Sharing Catholic Social Teaching: Challenges and Directions." June 19, 1998. <http://www.usccb.org/beliefs-and-teachings/what-we-believe/catholic-social-teaching/sharing-catholic-social-teaching-challenges-and-directions.cfm>

Yancy, George. *Look a White! Philosophical Essays on Whiteness*. Philadelphia: Temple UP, 2012.