

The Schaff Lectures 2020, Pittsburgh Theological Seminary

Sarah Coakley (University of Cambridge), Sin, Racism and the Challenge of Contemplation

Lecture I: In the Jail: Systemic Racism, Contemplation, and the Problem of 'Seeing'

This first lecture begins with a proposal for the need to draw contemporary problems of 'race'/racism into the field of systematic theology and the theological discussion of sin. It then turns to 'fieldwork' reportage, both to expose and critique the 'whiteness problem' of the reporter, and to reflect creatively on the evidences of young black and Latino men experimenting with contemplative practice in a Boston jail. Their testimony witnesses to the unexpected resistant power of simple, corporate silence in this jail setting, and its mysterious undoing of mandated violence, mutual distrust, and personal self-loathing. 'Darkness', both projected and internal, here meets 'divine darkness', dazzling in its capacity to allure and transform. It is then argued that 'race' has become a 'surd' modern term in the conditions of systemic blindness and blaming which are strangely hidden even from the perpetrators (indeed, monumentally 'hidden' in the enclosures of the prison system). The combination of an Enlightenment background of optimistic liberal improvement on the one hand, and traditional Christian themes of depravity and 'darkness' on the other, make this a toxic mix in which unconscious forces of projection are powerfully at play. A set of questions are then mounted for re-thinking 'race'/racism through the lens of 'dark' contemplative practice: what were the historical conditions in which epistemic darkness became unacceptable nescience (and thus simultaneously a locus of unconscious hostile projection)? And what, conversely, are the contemporary conditions in which the withdrawal (or transformation) of mutual projection, distrust, and violence become even thinkable? It is urged that these questions are irresolvable without profoundly *theological* analysis: it is the deep ambiguity of the Jewish and Christian story of the Fall out of which these paradoxes and projective problems have emerged, yet out of them too (and their resolution in narratives of salvation), that any transformative resolution will be found.

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Introduction: Theological Anthropology, 'Race'/Racism and the Problem of Sin

I Into the Jail: Testimony from the Suffolk County House of Correction

i. The practice of prayer as 'resistance'; ii. Atoning the 'body'; iii. Systemic racism and repressed contemplative 'darkness': a relation?

II Analysis: Theoretical and Theological

i. Contemplation and the hermeneutics of suspicion: silence as false consciousness? ii. contemplation as a 'scene of (erotic) subjection'? iii. contemplation as failure in 'autonomy'?

III Questions to Take Forward: Why 'Sin' is an Irreducible Category, and 'Race'/Racism an Epistemic and Moral Problem inextricably rooted in Sin.

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