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M. Shawn Copeland: Enfleshing Freedom : Body, Race, and Being

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M. Shawn Copeland: *Enfleshing Freedom : Body, Race, and Being*

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Review by Christopher Conway, PhD candidate, Department of Comparative Theology, Boston College

The emergence of contextual and liberation theologies has drawn attention to a problematic orientation in the standard treatment of Christian theological anthropology (the doctrine of the human person). Favoring more abstract and universal conceptions of human personhood over concrete and particular understandings, this methodological approach has often assumed that its universal foundations are in fact entirely universal. Contextual and liberation theologies have offered an important critique challenging this presupposition: noting that the voices of those individuals and communities on the margins and the underside of history routinely have been ignored or suppressed. In neglecting the many manifestations of particularity that these voices represent, the philosophical and theological underpinnings that have shaped theological anthropology—what it means to be human and in right relationship with God, oneself, and one’s neighbor—reflect the questions, concerns, hopes, and yearnings of white, straight, bourgeois males. In this text M. Shawn Copeland offers a different starting place for a critical reflection on theological anthropology: black women and black women’s bodies. Through this prism, Copeland grounds theological anthropology in the body—physical and social, enfleshed, historical, and concrete—and in particular bodies—the bodies of black women. Here, Copeland constructs a theological anthropology born from the dynamic *locus theologicus* that the experiences of black women reveal.

Copeland’s text is a work of re-membering. In placing the bodies of black women at the center of her theological reflection, Copeland requires us to recall and confront those “dangerous memories” of slavery, the lynching tree, and the physical, existential, and sexual violence such systematic objectification wrought on these bodies. This re-membering advances through to the present, challenging theological anthropology to address questions of the body and embodiment in relation to racism, sexism, homophobia, and imperialism. This process concludes with a look towards the future—the already-not yet of Christian eschatology—calling for life in solidarity and communion with one another: a re-membering of the community re-presenting and embodying the mystical body of Christ.

Copeland begins with a succinct overview of critical race theory and provides a grammar for engaging questions of body, race, and being. Beginning with an examination of the influence that prominent Enlightenment thinkers had in shaping white European conceptions of superiority—popular and scientific—over non-white, non-Europeans, the chapter concludes with a meditation on Franz Fanon’s yearning question, “Who can tell me what beauty is?” Copeland’s response that “Beauty is consonant with human performance, habit or virtue, with authentic ethics: Beauty is living up to and living out the love and summons of creation in all our particularity and specificity as God’s human creatures made in God’s own image and likeness,” (18) is the aesthetic affirmation out of which this theological anthropology will emerge.

Centering the first theological movement around the narratives of emancipated slaves, Copeland presents both the radical rejection and realization of personhood in the lived experiences of

enslaved black women. These testimonies recount the objectification, commodification, and violation suffered by black women and inflicted upon their bodies under chattel slavery in the Americas. They bear witness to theological anthropology's silence towards and at times acquiescence with ideologies of oppression. However, they make known also the ways in which these women sought to achieve, exercise and en flesh freedom for themselves, their families, and their communities. This freedom is a freedom arising from an "incarnate spirit refusing to be bound," (46) a freedom for self-love, familial-love, communal-love, and God-love; it is a freedom for the loves that slavery sought to extinguish within these bodies.

The second theological movement focuses on the place of the body within theological anthropology. Noting the ambiguous, often antagonistic relationship Christian theology has had with the body and the ease with which society can devalue particular bodies, Copeland points to the marked body of Jesus, the Word made flesh—particular and "subjugated in empire" (57)—as the imperative for theology to take seriously the body and its markings: race, sex, gender, sexuality, culture, and social order. The Reign of God preached, enacted, and ushered in by Jesus confronts the dehumanizing distortions that the reign of empire and globalization affect upon the markings of those bodies considered other, foreign, and alien. Jesus' ministry was one of inclusion and solidarity with these persons whose bodies were deemed impure and whose markings were seen as improper and dangerous in the eyes of empire and society. To participate in his praxis is not an erasure of difference, but rather a reevaluation of it. Ethically, it is a demand for the Church to embody the mystical body of Christ which incorporates all marked bodies. Theologically, it necessitates making these objectified bodies the subject of theological anthropology.

The final theological movement follows the dialectic method of liberation theology which understands theology to be "critical reflection on Christian praxis in light of the Word."¹ In this method, praxis begets theory which returns to praxis. To be in solidarity with those peoples on the margins and underside of history requires their bodies, experiences, and stories to be the locus of theology. Copeland's text is the product of just such a critical reflection in which black women become the subject of theology. The reflection on the praxis of solidarity in light of the Word made flesh leads to the construction of this work of theology; this new theological anthropology leads us back into a new praxis of discipleship and Eucharistic solidarity which "teaches us to imagine, to hope for, and to create new possibilities" and to "respond in acts of self-sacrifice—committing ourselves to the long labor of creation, the enfleshment of freedom" (128).

Copeland offers here a work that moves theology out beyond the comfy confines of the Ivory Tower and into a world marred by sin, injustice, violence, and oppression. The challenge it presents to conventional conceptions of theological anthropology requires theologians to think anew of what it means to do theology. Likewise, the methodological critique put forth in this text extends beyond the discipline of theology and can and should be put to all the social sciences. It is a most welcomed and needed work in this era of new empire and globalization.

¹ Gutierrez, Gustavo. *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998. p. 13.