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

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ENFLESHING FREEDOM: BODY, RACE, AND BEING by *M. Shawn Copeland*. Pp. xii + 188. Fortress Press, Minneapolis, Minnesota, 2010. \$20.00. ISBN: 978-0-8006-6274-5 (paper).

In M. Shawn Copeland's book, *Enfleshing Freedom*, the doctrine of the human person is explored from a new, refreshing, and eye-opening vantage point. Copeland frames the black female body as centerpiece for this doctrine, and interrogates the scriptural claim of inviolability and sacredness of the human person as applied to non-white, non-heterosexual persons in general, and to black women in particular.

Divided into five chapters with a brief introduction and epilogue, Copeland challenges her readers to consider the myriad ways in which bodies are marked by race, gender, sexuality, age, and class. Invoking the timeless wisdom of fourth century theologian and scholar Gregory of Nyssa, Copeland reminds us that the Body of Christ is represented by *all* members of the human family in every age, every culture, every race. "[T]he flesh of the church is the flesh of Christ in every age, ... is marked (as was his flesh) by race, sex, gender, sexuality, and culture" (p. 81).

Conceived as a work of theological anthropology, Copeland begins in her introduction by asking the question that all anthropologists ask: What does it mean to be human? More specifically, she asks what marks humanity has placed on the bodies of black women in particular. Their blackness and femaleness has de-humanized them in countless ways throughout history. These particular bodies, however, are at the core of fundamental Christian belief. Analogous to the suffering of Jesus, black women's suffering exposes our capacity for inhumanity, juxtaposed against God's capacity for love and compassion. Copeland's insightful discussion of the ways in which slavery, particularly the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, "calibrated values in core institutions" (p. 2), forces the reader to consider how and to what degree it modulates modern values. Indeed, one only need consider the suffering of the victims of Hurricane Katrina to understand.

In Chapter One, Copeland opens what cultural anthropologist Mary Douglas has termed the *social body* – the body as a symbol for one’s level of entitlement (culturally controlled access to life-sustaining goods and services). Race, sex/gender, and sexuality shape – often distort – the entitlement of certain groups, and as a result those belonging to privileged groups possess the socially-sanctioned right to oppress and brutalize the members of less-entitled groups. Copeland then continues with a discussion of the creation of race-ideology, starting with the major thinkers of the European Enlightenment such as Hume, Cuvier, Kant, and Hegel, and their ideas of white European superiority over non-white, non-Europeans. Their racist ideas, their twisted logic of white-black duality (white = good; black = bad) shaped the academy for centuries and continues to do so. And in shaping the academy, they also shaped the social body, thereby creating a new way of viewing skin color as a horizon, i.e., a vantage point from which some are clearly visible and privileged, while others are rendered dangerously invisible. The writings of Franz Fanon, James Baldwin, and Paul Gilroy are among those Copeland uses to describe the social construction of beauty and goodness as the sole purview of whiteness, while within blackness lies ugliness, criminality, and sin – whites fall well within the skin-color, or the *white-bias* horizon. Our very humanity lies within this construction of beauty, with blacks falling outside the boundaries. In our struggle for authenticity, we must reject this warped social construction and see beyond the white-bias horizon.

Opening with Gregory of Nyssa’s statement denouncing the institution of slavery as antithetical to the kingdom of God, Copeland reminds the reader in Chapter Two that the human body – the black body – is a basic human sacrament, and as such is a medium through which selfhood and freedom are realized. She then walks us through a brief history of racialized slavery in the United States, and the way in which enslavement was justified as being for the benefit of blacks. The slave trade was dehumanizing for all involved, not just for the slaves, but of all those touched, black women suffered above all. Copeland uses slave narratives to

illustrate how black women's bodies were used as objects of property, objects of production, objects of reproduction, and objects of sexual violence. She then explores the concept of freedom – freeing the mind, the spirit, and the body. At this point Copeland turns to the fictional world of Toni Morrison to point out the ways in which slavery devalued motherhood and mother-love, and analyzes passages from the novel *Beloved*. This exercise reveals how bodies have been consumed by oppression and world domination, particularly poor black bodies, setting the stage expertly for the next chapter.

Chapter Three is a study of empire – empire as a force for oppression, the “virulent global persistence of racism, xenophobic reactions to ‘illegal’ or undocumented anti-bodies within the body of empire” (p. 57). Copeland characterizes Jesus' experience with empire (i.e., the *Pax Romana*) as one of the commoners, as a refugee. The desire for the Kingdom of God – the *basileia tou theou* – was in opposition to Roman empire and denounced Roman rule as oppressive. To those many thousands of poor, dispossessed commoners, Jesus was emancipator. In this chapter Copeland explores the ways in which Jesus' body is marked – marked by his ethnicity, by his sex and gender, and even by his sexuality. She discusses candidly the ways that Jesus' masculinity opposed socially constructed patterns of masculinity, thereby challenging the status quo. Globalization – the modern form of empire – is confronted here too, particularly the ways in which the new global system has created a hierarchy of race and gender. In this frightening new system, the darker one's skin, the poorer one's health is, the more likely one is to be poor, imprisoned, etc. Copeland confronts the way sex and sexuality are constructed and used in this new empire. The function of sex, she concludes, has been transformed into an action for the explicit use and pleasure of white male heterosexual privilege (p. 74). Copeland leaves no stone unturned here, as she challenges the Church's teachings on sex, homosexuality, and celibacy in a refreshingly straightforward and honest way. The Church's teaching on homosexuality as disorder, she says, is equivalent to its former teaching on blacks as inferior – a daring statement to be sure, and one that could not be more

correct, more authentic, and more true. Finally, she states emphatically: *If Jesus of Nazareth ... cannot be an option for gays and lesbians, then he cannot be an option* (p. 78, emphasis in original).

In Chapter Four Copeland ‘turns the subject.’ She challenges the reader to consider carefully the consequences of giving in to empire thoughtlessly. Under empire, the subject is the conqueror, while the victims of conquest, the enslaved, become the voiceless objects of history. Copeland forces the reader to consider these victims as subjects. She unveils not just the physical marks of empire, but the psychic wounds as well – the internalized oppression, violence, and self-contempt. The centerpiece of this chapter is the story of a Somali woman by the name of Fatima Yusif. Yusif gave birth to a son, alone and unaided, on an Italian roadside in 1992 while onlookers jeered and insulted her. No one, apparently, attempted to help or comfort her. Yusif’s blackness and poverty rendered her a helpless victim – invisible and hypervisible simultaneously. The pornographic gaze Copeland alludes to in Chapter One’s account of Saartjie Baartman in the early nineteenth century applies to the Yusif – these women’s humanity is invisible. The pornographic gaze sees only their exotic inhumanity, the culturally constructed, socially-disentitled object of oppression. Only in solidarity with the poor and oppressed, by sharing their suffering and pain, can there be authentic healing.

In Chapter Five Copeland reveals the sin of racism, both ideology and practice, as in opposition to the message and meaning of the Eucharist. Racism infiltrates social, political, economic, and even religious institutions, thereby poisoning and corrupting all of society, including the racist. Copeland discusses the way that the slave trade wounded the culture of West Africans by casting the victims into a horrifying sort of living death. In this death, the victims became somehow commodified, their spirits transformed and trapped in the commercial goods for which they had been traded in Africa, thus twisting and warping even their concept of the supernatural. In the New World, the victims were stripped of their humanity and subjected to horrors “past telling” in the words of one

former slave (p. 114). Following the Emancipation, the practice of lynching continued the systematic dehumanization of blacks. Copeland expands on the analogy between the Cross and the lynching tree. She finds Eucharistic solidarity to be the answer to the systematic devaluation and dehumanization of black bodies, and black female bodies in particular.

Copeland's *Enfleshing Freedom* is a brilliant, thought-provoking work. She engages very challenging ideas about the meaning of authentic love, solidarity, and the Eucharist. We Catholics, nearly all of us, were raised to think about the Body of Christ symbolically and dispassionately. Catholicism in particular is so rich in symbols and rituals that the real, the concrete can be obscured. Theology so often deals with the disembodied soul, thereby making the physical body barely relevant. Yet Copeland forces us to consider it physically, to realize that the Body of Christ is more than just a metaphor, and we, in fact, *are* that body. As Katie Cannon and Anthony Pinn point out in the *Foreword*, theological inquiry is shaped and enriched by placing the physical body at its center.

Unique, captivating, and dynamic, this reviewer enthusiastically recommends *Enfleshing Freedom* to all theologians who seek authentic truth. Copeland offers a fresh and essential lens through which to view the doctrine of the human body. On a personal level, I found Copeland's work difficult to put down, but also sometimes difficult to continue reading because of the harsh realities revealed therein. The section on lynching was especially difficult to finish. So graphic, so haunting, so ugly a truth – but so very imperative to try to understand and critique. Reminiscent of the *krypteia* of Sparta – the secret practices that Spartans used to terrorize their indigenous slave population, the helots – it was their secrecy that gave the Spartan masters much of their oppressive power. Like all truths, lynching – past and present-day – must be brought out into the light before we can begin to understand, deconstruct, and de-fuse its lingering evil.

Appropriate for graduate students, upper-level college students, and scholars, *Enfleshing Freedom* should be required reading for Theology graduate students, and absolutely needs to grace the libraries of all universities and colleges that boast a Theology, Religious Studies, Africana Studies, Multicultural Studies, Gender Studies, Anthropology, Justice, Philosophy, or Ethics program. It should also be included in the personal libraries of all serious scholars of these disciplines.

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