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Review — Jon Nilson, *Hearing Past the Pain: Why White Catholic Theologians Need Black Theology*

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BOOK REVIEWS

HEARING PAST THE PAIN: WHY WHITE CATHOLIC THEOLOGIANS NEED BLACK THEOLOGY, by *Jon Nilson*. viii, 120 Pp. Paulist Press, New Jersey, 2007. \$16.95 (paper). ISBN 978-0-8091-4508-9.

Nilson's *Hearing Past the Pain* represents a valuable contribution to our understanding of the theological method. By scrutinizing the American Catholic Church's failure to acknowledge the legitimacy of black theology, Nilson concludes that the Church has been tainted with racism, and that: "Black theology is not a luxury or a hobby for white Catholic theologians. It is indispensable to their vocation and identity" (p. 79). Drawing on the work of scholars Bernard Lonergan and David Tracy, Nilson attempts to place racism in its proper cultural context as a destroyer of lives, and as a theological problem in the American Church.

Hearing Past the Pain was inspired by the work of Jamie Phelps. Stunned by Phelps' assertion that: "the silence of U.S. Catholic theologians about racism is parallel to the silence of leading German theologians and intellectuals during the Nazi atrocities and prosecution of the so-called 'final solution' against the Jewish people" (p. 5), Nilson felt compelled to come to terms with racism in the Church. In this work, he engages the scholarship of leading black intellectuals, including James Cone, Cornel West, Gayraud Wilmore, Manning Marable, and Dwight

Hopkins. He also draws heavily on the work of fellow BCTS members Bryan Massingale, Shawn Copeland, Cyprian Davis, and, of course, Jamie Phelps.

Nilson's argument is sound and persuasive. But he does more than just synthesize the work of notable scholars. Rather than trying merely to understand the societal impact of racism in a dispassionate way, Nilson attempts to put himself in the shoes of black theologians and see the world through their eyes. He tries to imagine what his life would be like had he been born black. "If I were black, my vocation as a theologian would be frustrating and painful because my discipline, my country, and my church are largely indifferent to the plight and voice of my people" (p. 20). Having spent his career – indeed, his life – benefiting from white privilege, and having come to expect it so much that, until recently, he was blind to it, Nilson was able to open his eyes to the harsh reality, the corrosive force of racism. His epiphany is analogous to that of Peggy McIntosh and Tim Wise. In Nilson's words, "[R]acism is a theological problem because it creates a sinful cultural matrix. It makes white supremacy and black subordination seem normal" (p. 9). Nilson demonstrates that theology requires an engagement with black and womanist approaches to the discipline. A BCTS member since 2002, his affiliation so affected him that he dedicated *Hearing Past the Pain* to our organization.

Nilson has come a long way from 1995 and the publication of *Nothing Beyond the Necessary: Roman Catholicism and the Ecumenical Future* (Paulist Press), in which he advocated for greater unity in the Church and proposed initiatives to foster unity with other churches.

Nilson's initiatives, however, did not include embracing black theology. Nilson admits now that: "Black theology is very, very, very relevant to the thesis of *NBN*, but I didn't know that at the time" (personal communication). After 13 years, perhaps the time has come for a revised edition of *NBN* that includes black theology.

Hearing Past the Pain is essential for American theologians, students and faculty alike. A superb companion text for a course on African American religion in general, *Hearing Past the Pain* should become a required text in seminaries, graduate theological programs, and university libraries.

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