Reimagining Racial Justice: A Theological and Moral Discourse on the Recent Rise of Anti-Asian American Hate Crimes

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Introduction

The 8th volume of the journal of *Asian American Theological Forum* includes two community-based research articles, navigating personal religious identity and testimony as Asian American parish leaders: David Cho's "Can We Feel Safe Anywhere?: A Pastoral Reflection on the Surge of Anti-Asian Racism in the Age of COVID-19" and Jong Hwa Kim's "The Crisis of Evangelicalism and Public Theology".[1] Both papers touch on the recent rise of anti-Asian American hate crimes as they provide an account of two interrelated issues that continue to shape the development of Asian American ethics and ministry studies: (i) whether there is a distinctive Asian American perspective and (ii) how the racial marginalization of Asian American communities situated in church and society as a whole might inform this perspective. In response, Kim suggests Martin Marty's model of the public church as "a communion of communions" to overcome some of the evangelical church's racist tendencies deeply associated with tribalism and nationalism;[2] and Cho applies Judith Herman's therapeutic approach to embrace both Asian and non-Asian American communities to stand in solidarity and work toward recovery and healing together.[3]

However, on either approach, it remains to be seen what the theological dimension of this racial justice discourse is. To be more specific, how would then theology serve as a distinct discipline that makes a committed practice of (re-) imaging questions with careful thought and dialogue seeking moral clarity of what is true and worthy of love and justice in the midst of the complexity and cross-pressures of reality, leading to and coming out of responsible decisions and a formed way of life or character? To be noted here, the very notion of theology is not univocal and how I understand it will be clarified along the way.

A Racial Justice Primer for Theological Methodology

A first obvious answer is to consider that theology is one source of addressing ethical issues such as racial justice alongside other sources such as social analysis, philosophy, or

[1] For details, see https://aatfweb.org/2021/05/13/can-we-feel-safe-anywhere-a-personal-pastoral-reflection-on-the-surge-of-anti-asian-racism-in-the-age-of-covid-19/ and https://aatfweb.org/2021/05/13/the-crisis-of-evangelicalism-and-public-theology/.

[2] Jong Hwa Kim's understanding of the notion of the public church is from John de Gruchy, "Public Theology as Christian Witness: Exploring the Genre," *International Journal of Public Theology* 1.1 (January 1, 2007): 26-41. Cf. Martin Marty, *The Public Church: Mainline-Evangelical-Catholic* (New York: Crossroad, 1981), 16.

[3] For a similar argument, see Shelly Rambo, "Introduction," in *Post-Traumatic Public Theology*, eds. Stephanie N. Arel and Shelly Rambo (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016): 1-21. Cf. Judith L. Herman, "Recovery from Psychological Trauma," *Psychiatry and Clinical Neurosciences* 52, (1998): S145-S150.

history. Theology here broadly refers both to Scripture and to past and contemporary reflections which have God and the Christian faith as their object. No doubt, in their social teaching on racial justice, Christian communities attribute an important role to theology. One of the commonly recognized approaches in this category is Catholic social teaching (CST), which is sometimes referred to as the social philosophy of the Catholic Church. The aim is to build a discourse with a universal intention while the decree on the formation of priests primarily remains rooted in Sacred Scripture.[4] Starting with *Gaudium et Spes*, the documents of CST offer moral reflections of a theological and scriptural nature. Especially with John Paul II and Benedict XVI, magisterial CST documents explicitly express the centrality of their theological sources in order to shed light on the social, political, and economic challenges of the times, including racism.[5] To be clear, this social teaching is not only the Catholic Church's asset as nearly all branches of Christendom have enthusiastically embraced the vision of social teaching.[6]

Another answer to the question of the theological dimension of the racial justice discourse is to consider how this discourse contributes to theology. Etymologically, "theology" means discourse or reasoning (*logos*) about God (*theos*). Thomas Aquinas called *theologia* a "reasoned mode of understanding according to revelation"; it can be thought of as "an intellectual discipline, i.e., an ordered body of knowledge about God."[7] Because the church, whether the Catholic or the Protestant, has the shared mission to proclaim the Good News of God's salvation in Christ, it must testify, in all that it teaches, social teaching on racism included, the mystery of God and say something about it.[8] There ought to be a theological dimension to the racial justice discourse not only because this discourse uses theology as a source but also because it contributes to theology, to a reasoned discourse about God and about things considered in their relation to God.[9] Promoting the racial justice in this way sheds light on some aspects of the mystery of God in relation to human beings. By addressing the question of the theological dimension of the racial justice in these two ways together, for the rest of this paper, I will introduce moral theological dimensions of racial justice and then enrich the current racial justice discourse by redefining racism and its emerging issues in light of moral theology.

Two Principal Foundations: *Imago Dei* and Solidarity

[4] *Optatam totius*, n. 16.

[5] For CST's discourse on racial justice, see Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, 2009, n. 53; Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, 2007), n. 433; Pontifical Justice and Peace Commission, *The Church and Racism: Toward a More Fraternal Society*, 1989, n. 9; and John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, 1989, No. 38

[6] For various churches' social teachings, see George W. Forell, *Christian Social Teachings: A Reader in Christian Social Ethics from the Bible to the Present* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2013). Forell's selections are ecumenical as they are from Luther and Calvin side by side with selections by Thomas Aquinas and other medieval figures; yet, the work of the Orthodox church is limited.

[7] William J. Hill, O.P., "Theology," in *The New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Joseph A. Komonchak, Mary Collins, and Dermot A. Lane (Wilmington: Michael Glazier, 1987) 1015, 1011.

[8] Cf. Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origin of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010).

[9] This methodological vision is populated by Peter C. Phan, *Christianity with an Asian Face: Asian American Theology in the Making* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2003).

From a moral theological perspective broadly agreed upon by all branches of Christendom, the discourse of racial justice largely shares two principal foundations: (i) the sacredness of human life and the dignity of the human person and (ii) the notion of solidarity.[10]

For the former, humans are created in the image and likeness of God, redeemed by Christ, and destined for Beatitude.[11] All human beings have intrinsic value and dignity because they all are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:27). This does not mean that God is in human form, but that human beings are in the image of God in their intellectual, moral, and spiritual essence. Plainly, in this vision, humans are divine image-bearing creatures as they reflect God's divine nature in their ability to fulfill the unique qualities with which they have been endowed such as reasoning, creativity, and the potential for self-actualization and -transcendence.[12] For example, to be an image bearer of God is to begin to see each and every human person as God's image created for life-giving service, not for harming or taking another divine image-bearing human's life. Having said this, racial justice calls us out of ourselves on behalf of other racial and ethnic groups, because every human person has a dignity and a value that demands our respect. Having said this, racial justice calls us out of ourselves on behalf of other racial and ethnic groups, because every human person has a dignity and a value that demands our respect.

The moral implication herein the book of Genesis is profound in three ways. The first and foremost is that the human person embodies and represents God's presence and dignity in the world. Hence, to see and experience God, we need humbly to look into the face of our neighbor, whoever they are. They are God's image. This also means that if we look at a human being and the first thing which we see is not the image of God, one can say that we do not fully understand humanity. The human person is the face where God is found. This is the reason why Genesis later contends that the one who harms another human being, namely, another divine image-bearing creature, has harmed God (Genesis 9:6). Any violence against certain racial groups must cease. The second implication is that humans are created for a divine purpose, which is to share God's creative work of caring for, enlivening, and managing the world (Genesis 1:28). We all are co-creators with God, given the noble task of extending God's creative rule for a shared world.[13] Accordingly, each of us is a king and priest, not a slave. Hierarchy for race should be abolished. The third and the final is that the entire book of Genesis shares the same recurring message that when God's original intent is sovereign, all human resistances against God's creative rule for a shared world are passed over in silence.

Recall that God created the world and everything in it out of love, declaring His creations and blessing it; and it shows His love for mankind in particular by making us in His image and entrusting us to be caretakers of the world that is His original intent. Likewise, the command to love our neighbors as ourselves is a cornerstone of the Christian tradition and the essence of what it means for a human being to bear the *imago dei* and imitate God. This vision of social charity grounded in the love command relates to the second foundation of racial justice as follows.

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[10] This essay henceforth is modified from a paper presented at Saint Mary's University of Minnesota on Martin Luther King Jr's Day's interdisciplinary panel discussion event on Students as Agents of Change, January 21, 2020.

[11] For further discussion, see John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra*, n. 219; and John Paul II, *Centesimus Annus*, n. 11.

[12] To be precise, from a theological standpoint, we cannot fully discuss the *imago dei* of human nature without the notion of original sin. Augustine attends to human nature, drawn from the theological discourse of sin and imago dei. While human beings are created in the imago dei, they are also tainted by original sin and as such do not emerge into the world in a *tabula rasa* condition.

[13] McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries*, 11. Historically, from the Council of Trent onward, Christian communities have been required to "serve all the souls in its boundaries."

The second foundation of racial justice is a vision of interdependence and solidarity. Solidarity means that all of humanity – indeed, the whole of creation – constitutes a one body, a true fellowship of being. Drawing upon the notion of solidarity, all human beings are one human family despite racial, ethnic, and cultural differences—and thus are interdependent on and responsible for each other. More precisely, as John Paul II notes, "[Solidarity] is not a feeling of a vague compassion, […] [but] it is a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say, to the good of all and of each individual, because we are all really responsible for all."[14] In other words, solidarity is not simply about a feeling toward people in a vanquished society but about "a moral virtue," or a commitment to act out of compassion and thereby achieve the common good in the society.[15] In this way, the virtue of solidarity is also more judiciously understood as that of social charity, especially in racial justice contexts. And interdependence means not only that we need and depend on one another but also that the unity that exists between us is so penetrating and extensive that there is no way any one of us can exist apart from everyone else. It is an existential question, not just discussing social networking, social capital theory, and social needs.

With respect to the foundational scholarship of moral theology on racial justice, I addressed distinctive theological elements, such as an emphasis on establishing a common good to which all have access, that human dignity and rights are reflected in the doctrine of the *imago dei*, and that there be cooperative efforts for racial justice flowing from participation in sacramental life.

The Corporate Nature of The Vice of Anti-Asian American Racism

Taking these theological elements into the moral dimension of the Christian life, we need to commit ourselves to deepening and refining every day and thus fighting all injustices, including racism and other relevant cultural and social discrimination. Now here, though, particularly in the contemporary context of anti-Asian hate violence and its relevant subtle racial discrimination, I would like to bring back an emerging concern raised by Cho and Kim.

In both Cho's and Kim's papers, they argue that existing literature on racism against Asian Americans is inappropriate largely because, in failing to see anti-Asian American violence and its relevant culture and social discrimination as a problem of corporate habituation, it places too much confidence in the power of moral suasion to effect racial justice.[16] They both see that the current discourse in defining racism is problematic; only moral monsters like Adolph Hitler or mass murderers who explicitly intend to be racists like Robert Aaron Long, a suspect of 2021 Atlanta spa shootings, are capable of committing acts of racism.[17] However, that the term racism operates without reference to history or contemporary social reality can distract us from the

[14] John Paul II, *Sollicitudo rei Socialis*, n. 38.

[15] Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (2004), ch. 4. n. 193.

[16] For a similar argument shared in Asian American theologians' work, see Ki Joo Choi, *Disciplined by Race: Theological Ethics and the Problem of Asian American Identity* (Eugene, Wipf and Stock, 2019); Grace Y. Kao and Ahn Ilsup, eds. *Asian American Christian Ethics: Voices, Methods, Issues* (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2015); Cf. For a book review: https://aatfweb.org/2015/10/16/asian-american-christian-ethics-voices-methods-issues/ and Lee Sang Hyun, *From a Liminal Place: An Asian American Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010).

[17] Cf. George M. Fredrickson, *White Supremacy: A Comparative Study of American and South African History* (Oxford University Press, USA, 1982), xii.

collective, habitual, and structural aspects of racial injustice and further twist the fact that one group of people have more power and thus access to social goods than other groups.[18]

In particular, Kim argues that white people, whether they are evangelical Christians or not, may recognize our predominant culture of "white supremacy," but usually fail to understand how racial justice really works as that culture is deeply embedded in the complex reality of politics and history. Cho calls to all marginalized by whiteness and calls forth a new kind of solidarity in both Asian American groups and their allies against our country's entrenched racism and its systemic trauma rooted in the society. However, he also shares his frustration in making the racial justice discourse into "actual" practice as he continuously witnesses a challenge of the reality in which "anti-blackness" feeds off the myth of a "model minority" that homogenizes and distances Asian Americans. Both the "white supremacy" and the "anti-blackness" and their intertwined anti-Asian American racism cannot be overcome by appeals to reason alone. While moral suasion certainly plays a part and it should be respected as an intellectual discourse, its role is a limited one. Because both the church and society's explicit and tacit participation in and performance of racism is the result of corporate habituation, they both most need new habits, not teachings.[19]

In fact, this argument for developing new habits is important in that it may first illuminate the way in which the corporate vice of racism inhabits the corporate body of church and society. There is something to be said about the way that a failure of new habits or virtues formation in people may vitiate a call to virtue in the bodies that they live by. We fail in teaching racial justice in some important ways when we treat it as a set of principles an individual might uphold while the communities or institutions to which they belong violate them without objection. Conceptualizing this country's persistent racial inequality as a problem in this way would best enable us to carve out the imaginative space necessary to recognize the corporate nature of the vice of racism.[20] How would we then fight this corporate vice of anti-Asian American racism?

Living A Virtuous Life

[18] Zeus Leonardo, "The Color of Supremacy: Beyond the Discourse of 'white Privilege'," *Educational Philosophy and Theory* 36, n. 2 (2004): 141-142.

[19] For a similar argument, see Katie Walker Grimes, *Christ Divided: Antiblackness as Corporate Vice* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2017). Grimes is convinced that antiblackness supremacy is a unique species of racial evil and that all non-black people both benefit from and participate in it, even if they are otherwise oppressed or mistreated.

[20] In fact, this argument is nothing novel. Throughout history, the lack of social progression is often cited as an unwillingness of people to change their mindset on the issue in question. However, many people do have a reformed mindset but appear conservative because they do not act on it. They continue to act in ways that confirm the oppression, which only reinforces its presence in society. By blending in with the rest of society, they prevent it from moving forwards. Examples of this dangerous group mindset are seen in both Martin Luther King Jr.'s *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* and Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil*. Both authors speak to the oppression of minorities, black and Jewish populations respectively, that were allowed to continue because people refused to act against the injustice. In the black community, people were oppressed for hundreds of years after the first movements against injustice began. It was not until the late 1950s, when the Civil Rights Movement really gained traction, that people fought against injustice. In the case of the Jewish population, millions of people died because there were few people willing to stand up to Hitler. Near the end, the group grew to become so large and toxic that only a few individuals believed in the cause, but the rest followed anyway out of fear. See Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Classics, 2006); and Martin Luther King Jr., *Letter from A Birmingham Jail* (April 16, 1963).

I have been growing in the conviction that living a virtuous life to fight corporate vice of racism should be included in the discourse of racial justice and thus it must find its sole logic and life in bearing witness to the intrinsic *goodness* of human integral flourishing before God. Living a virtuous life is not merely to apply virtue-rules to a particular situation to determine virtuous action; it is also to form our own character: "a good character then becomes a norm—a paradigm for [just] action."[21] To live a virtuous life for racial justice, then, we need to work hard on ourselves, with the goal of overcoming human tendencies toward corporate vice of racism and its relevant inordinate self-concerns situated in church and society. Plainly, living a virtuous life must never be (i) an attempt to undo the guilt we feel in the face of the evils that harm any human life to which we know we have, whether knowingly or unknowingly, contributed or (ii) an attempt to remake or engineer the human—social, economic, political—condition such that it would be finally redeemed in freedom from ambiguity and evil.[22]

The first must be recognized theologically as an impossible and so tragic task to be rejected: we cannot always atone for the corporate vice of racism in which we have unconsciously and unintentionally participated. Even as we say, "I won't do it" in our present intentions and actions, the past and moral memory reminds us of our guilt. This is the domain of repentance. Second, all of our human actions are limited in bringing a perfect justice to the earth, but we will not fail to be ultimately redemptive; God's grace will complete our work in God's time (καιρός; Mark 1:15). It is a salvific hope. These two claims point to three key dimensions of living a virtuous life: it is fundamental, moral, and eschatological.

First, living a virtuous life is fundamental because it is a decision for humans as divine image-bearing creatures to join God in serving the intrinsic goodness and life of God's creatures and creation even if our action is bound to fail in its immediate analysis. Plainly, our just action, grown out from being a just person, is not solely measured by its possibility of effectiveness but its commitment to goodness for its own sake. For example, if we met an Asian American little girl with COVID-19 that had an overwhelming probability of dying, action should still be taken to enhance and care for the life of this girl. This is clearly not to say that there are not better and worse, more and less effective ways of serving human life in goodness and that we should aim for the former; it is simply to say that our action is not dependent on our measure of its efficiency or result. And it does not matter whether this little girl is a minority in the society she belongs to. It is intrinsic, fundamental, a participation with God's original action in creation.

Second, living a virtuous life involves one in fighting racism at all levels because the virtuous person recognizes the importance of empowering the basic quality of life. This does not involve removing the person's ongoing freedom to make choices about the values that will define his ongoing quality of life. In this sense, the virtuous person recognizes himself to be freely giving a gift that cannot be henceforth engineered or manipulated; his action is good because it empowers other human beings to encounter the moral quality of their ongoing life. For example, if we had the possibility of preventing the aforementioned little girl from dying who, after her health was recovered, proceeded to murder someone for racial violence, that child should still be rescued. Our virtuous action it enables are both moral in this sense. The quality and life of the action is not reducible to the act itself.

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[21] Brain Stiltner, *Toward Thriving Communities: Virtue Ethics as Social Ethics* (Winona: Anselm Academic, 2016), 45.

[22] This does not mean that we should not strive to address evil and ambiguity. In fact, the aforementioned works of Katie Walker Grimesr, Martin Luther King Jr's, and Hannah Arednt are good examples of addressing evil and ambiguity. See supra notes 19 and 20.

Third, living a virtuous life is also eschatological for racial justice because it bears witness to the final victory of goodness and life in God but does not itself seek to ultimately establish it. It is fully aware of (i) the sacredness of human life and the dignity of the human person and (ii) the notion of solidarity. To be clear, it simply makes explicit that this virtuous action fighting the corporate vice of racism is not redemptive but eschatological. It is an act of faith that is pointing to the conviction that life will defeat death in resurrection and good will overcome evil in the end. In this respect, even as one's virtuous action is thoroughly serious, disciplined, and intentional, it recognizes itself to be non-final, penultimate, participative and cooperative rather than sovereign. While life between birth and death remains a redemptive question of faith, and, for Christians, virtuous action for fighting the corporate vice of racial justice is a concrete enactment of the hope that life and goodness in God's faithfulness will triumph.

Conclusion

Living a virtuous life for fighting corporate vice of racism embodies a coherent interpretation of human agency and human existence in the world. It is an account of the human being's freedom and responsibility to make choices and enact a way of being a human person in a human place that either witnesses to goodness and life or surrenders to corporate vice of racism. Plainly, living a virtuous life is not merely an attempt to overcome our guilt in the face of the heart-wrenching devastation of corporate evil. It is also a central dimension of a comprehensive vision of what it means to be flourishing finite human beings – all human beings – in a world created and loved by God.