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White Supremacy, the Election of Donald Trump and the Challenge to Theology

BRYAN MASSINGALE

This article is a transcript of an interview conducted by Susan Ross on 12 January, 2017, with Professor Bryan Massingale. Following the election of Donald Trump to the US Presidency, there was a surge in the number of racial and ethnic attacks on minorities across the country, and an increased concern over the place of minorities in the United States. During the previous two years, a number of shootings of black men and women had attracted much attention and protest, particularly around the Black Lives Matter movement which began after the killing of Michael Brown in the summer of 2014. Massingale is a leading voice among Catholic theologians and has spoken widely on the situation of African-Americans in the US and particularly in the US Catholic Church.

Susan Ross: Welcome, Bryan. During the summer of 2016, I reread your book *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* (Orbis, 2010). At the time, during the U.S. presidential election campaign, I thought the book was prescient in terms of the kind of rhetoric and race dynamics we see now, following the election of Donald Trump. Given what has happened recently, what are your thoughts about the situation, seven years after the book was published?

Bryan Massingale: Others have also said that I called the dynamics pretty accurately. This election was really a ‘culture shock’ election: a segment

of white America was waking up to the fact that we have gone through this tremendous demographic shift. After the last presidential election in 2012, the night that Obama was re-elected, I turned to Fox News [a conservative network in the United States] and Bill O'Reilly, a prominent Fox commentator, lamented the fact that 'we are no longer a white America; the white establishment no longer holds'. And, yes, indeed, that is what has happened: with this demographic shift, a segment of white America is waking up to the fact that they no longer have positions of unquestioned influence, unquestioned privilege, and so what we saw with Trump is a reassertion of this, his playing on those resentments and anxieties, asserting during the campaign 'I'm your last chance!' When he said that, I thought 'Oh, my God! Yes, I'm your last chance.' In my book, I quote a scholar who says that, as America becomes more of this racial hybrid, there will be more fear from a growing beleaguered minority that this country will renege on the promises that made America what it is in order to protect its own privilege. That is exactly what we see in this election: a kind of renegeing or redefinition of what America is. On the part of some Americans, if America can no longer be a place of unquestioned white Christian privilege, then it can't be America. So our willingness, for example, to entertain religious tests, like a Muslim registry, or a religious test for entry into the country, or even Donald Trump's disparaging of a judge because of his Mexican ancestry: all these things which are anathema to what we say America is – my fear is that we are redefining what 'America' is. If it's not a place for unquestioned white male Christian privilege, then we're not willing to say 'it's going to be America'.

SR: What you are saying is that the fear among those who respond this way is that minorities don't have 'real' American values. When it seems, from my perspective, the minorities are the ones that actually do have the 'real' American values. The whole situation is being flipped. So the fear of the majority becoming a minority, which was going to be my second question, is revealing the fear of loss of privilege, the loss of white supremacy.

BM: Right. And what this election is doing is exposing the 'shadow side' of America. Psychologists talk of the 'shadow side' of the person, the unacknowledged part of ourselves, in contrast to our more conscious

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presentation of our image of ourselves. And Trump – what is so fascinating to me is not so much what Trump is in himself but that he represents the ‘shadow side’ of America, this unacknowledged white male Christian supremacy that really has been at the core of American identity. When you look at the Constitution, they were quite explicit – neither one of us could vote at the time the Constitution was written. It has been amended, but even that process of amending is different than a fundamental revisiting. And I think that we have never fundamentally revisited the deep shadow of America. It has always been at war with this conscious face we present as being this defender of democracy, this land of equality and equal opportunity. There has always been this shadow side of America and now we see, as we go through this profound demographic shift, a resurgence of this shadow side, competing with its more publicly articulated sense. With the election of Obama, we thought there was a triumph of this public narrative, but Obama, also paradoxically, created the conditions for the emergence of this shadow side, this reaction that says ‘This is not going to be the America where a black person can lead this country.’ There needs to be a backlash, a reaction.

SR: We, as Americans, are facing a profound demographic shift in who we are. The fear, the need to close borders, the need to register Muslims, wouldn’t happen if the numbers weren’t shifting.

BM: There is a perceived sense of threat. And the tricky thing about this is that the perceived sense of threat creates the conditions for demagoguery. We saw that in the past election too. We saw that with Sarah Palin and some of her rhetoric. Donald Trump has taken the economic anxieties of a certain segment of the population, which are real – income disparity, wealth inequality – but what he has done is to skilfully deflect away from the main cause – Wall Street running amok – and has said that the problem is the immigrants, undeserving black people gaining advantages, Muslims who are dangerous threats, gays and lesbians getting a place that they don’t deserve. He’s taken a real anxiety and displaced it on to these scapegoats who are not the real culprits and has basically given people a narrative, a way of deflecting their righteous anger. But they are not angry at the real causes.

SR: In the immediate aftermath of the election, I was in touch with a niece who lives in Montana, where there is not a lot of racial or ethnic diversity. Her experience is all in Montana; she doesn't have the experiences of diversity that people have in bigger cities like Chicago. She had a micro-premature baby and her reason for voting for Trump was that he said he was pro-life. She asked, how can anyone say that a 28-week foetus is just 'a clump of cells'? That was her only issue. The US Bishops were very much in the background during the election run-up, although there were some very active priests who were quite vocal about pro-life issues. So, when some 60 per cent of white Catholics voted for Trump, how do you see the factors that we have just been discussing such as diversity in relation to the Catholic Church and the bishops? How have they failed to focus our attention on real injustices in our society? Diversity is, in some ways, not everywhere; it is perceived as a threat where it is not.

BM: I have been critical of the bishops in their response, or lack of it, to the Black Lives Matter movement. There are two factors at play in the Black Lives Matter movement and the election. One is that the bishops tend to look at racial issues in terms of race relations, especially individual race relations. In my book, I write that they see racism as involving isolated acts of individuals or isolated incidents of bad behaviour. They don't look at broader, institutionalized patterns of living. Absent a demonstrable 'intent to harm' based on race or ethnicity, the bishops tend to be very quiet on that. They are very clear that these things are wrong, but because they are not as pressing or obvious, they tend to focus most of their moral energy on issues like gender morality, such as abortion or same-sex marriage.

SR: So, to pick up on that, when Hillary Clinton referred to her and others' 'implicit bias' in an election debate, there was a very strong and negative reaction.

BM: That would be something that would not resonate with the bishops' dominant approach on issues of race. The bishops reflect very much a 'manual' understanding of moral theology, where you need to have three conditions for sin: a violation of the law, clear intent to violate the law, and the choice to do this anyway. So implicit bias, unconscious motivation,

which are very much at play in the shootings of black people by police officers, those are not present in their minds, not present in their moral landscapes. So, to give a concrete example of this: the President of the US Catholic Bishops' conference, at their meeting in June 2015, talked about the racial unrest that was going on in relation to the Black Lives Matter protests. He said that Catholics need to do five things: among these five were to pray for peace and justice, to study the word of God in Catholic social teaching, to make parishes more welcoming. The last thing he said was to get to know your police officers and to encourage people to respect legitimate authority. There was no critique of law enforcement, or of policing practices. This is despite the fact that the Department of Justice in the last nine years has conducted over two dozen investigations of police departments and, in their words, found 'a clear pattern or practice of constitutional violations'. These practices would be akin to what we call 'social sin'. But the bishops can't, or don't, articulate that. So there is a theological reason that explains their silence and inability to deal with these broader systemic patterns.

But there is also a less theological reason, and that comes to something I point to in the book: it is that, to them, 'Catholic' means 'white'. And so, the equation, when it comes to Black Lives Matter, goes something like this: police officers are white and Catholic; black protesters are black and not Catholic. So you have a choice between dealing with non-Catholic blacks or siding with your white ethnic police officers: that would be the voice of the bishops. So even though in many cities we have many black police officers, it can't be doubted that Catholics have a strong presence in many police departments. This is very much the case in Chicago, so it is where the bishops' loyalties gravitate towards. And that is a non-theological factor which helps to explain things. So what is going on in the Catholic Church means, despite our rhetoric of Catholicity, that is universalism and inclusion, you have this unacknowledged collusion with white supremacy. I've often thought of the fact that 61 per cent of white Catholics voted for Trump, 81 per cent of white evangelicals voted for Trump, and it made me think of an observation that Malcolm X made, which was that Christianity in America is a religion of white nationalism. And I think that one of the things that we as Catholic theologians have to do is to continue to interrogate our Church's implicit and covert and

unacknowledged collusion with the realities of white supremacy, and globally, too. Colonialism was very much race-based in many ways and the Church's missionary activity has shown the collusion of European missionaries with these racist dynamics. Pope John Paul II, during the Jubilee Year of Reconciliation, led a prayer service at St Peter's where he asked for the forgiveness of the church's collusion in sin. He mentioned 'the Church's agents of individual sin, the members of the Church and their collusion in these realities' but never looked at the systemic realities in the Church itself, such as our catechetical practices. This isn't just the problem of individual missionaries; these are acted out of their understanding of the Catholic and Christian faith. That has never been interrogated, at least officially.

SR: It seems to be so deep-seated; in the USA, after 240 years, we are still unable to deal with this. We are becoming a more diverse country. If by 2042, or whatever the projected date is when the white majority will become a minority, do you see issues getting better or worse? More and more 'minorities' are gaining a greater voice, more power; some Chicago universities have a 'majority minority', in that over half of their student population consists of students of colour, including blacks, Asians, Hispanics, etc. Perhaps as these numbers grow, things will change. Or with the election, I worry about greater conflict. What about theologians and second, what about the Church?

BM: For theologians looking towards the future we need to think in terms of the broader cultural context. Because of the 'browning' of America, the idea is that demography is destiny. Sooner or later, the Church and the nation will have to change. But that is not necessarily the case. We had, for example, in South Africa, a majority black population but a minority white rule. This is also true in the demographics of the Catholic Church globally, in terms of the fact that most of our members live in the southern hemisphere and developing world, but the real power is still very much in the north, in Europe. So, looking at this country, one of the things I'm concerned about is that, as we see in this election, Trump did not win with the majority of the voters; the majority of the electorate did not vote for him. Trump won the presidency; but he did not win the election!

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He won the presidency because of the Electoral College, but he lost the election by 2.8 million votes! That is a pretty strange election to get 2.8 million fewer votes than your opponent, but you still win. That goes to my broader point which is that, increasingly you see in the political parties, at least in this country, that they can only hold power by suppressing the vote, by suppressing people, by gutting the Voting Rights Act, by using restrictive identity laws which are being passed in various places, which are conscious and intentional. In the state of Wisconsin, hunting licences are considered a valid form of ID, but a student ID card from a university is not considered valid. That is clearly intended that a certain segment of the population is being deliberately disenfranchised. My broader point, then, is that demography is not necessarily destiny. There are ways in which a beleaguered section of the population is trying to hold on to power. So what does this mean for theologians? If we say that the role of theology is to reflect on the faith of the Church, on the experience of the people of God, then we have to ask ourselves, who are the faithful upon whose experiences we are reflecting? And the faith of the Church, globally, is no longer a North American-European experience. And in the US, it is no longer an Irish-European immigrant Catholicism. We as theologians, as we reflect on the faith of the people of God, need to be honest about whose faith we are reflecting upon, as the demography of the Church is changing. The challenge is multiple: we can still do this faith reflection, but still ‘minoritize’ that faith experience, for example, by putting it at the end of a Theology course. So we do all the ‘real’, mainstream stuff and, in the last week of the course, we bring the women in, the blacks in, the Asians in, but it’s very deliberate by the way we construct the course and how we teach it, that this is an ‘add-on’; it’s not central to the story.

SR: This is what Jamie Phelps, OP calls ‘adjectival theology’.

BM: So what we need to do as theologians is to continually interrogate ourselves, how we teach, how we write, that these are not just ancillary voices to attend to, but really are part of the mainstream conversation. For the Church, the call is to rediscover and re-appropriate the prophetic dimensions of our faith. And by prophetic, I mean, literally, that the prophets of the Old Testament always stood in a very tense relationship

with the society and the monarchy. It wasn't by accident that prophecy only arose in Israel with the establishment of the monarchy. After the monarchy disappeared, with the Exile, prophecy in many ways really ceased to exist after the return, after Ezekiel and Second Isaiah. I think that we as a Church need to rediscover what it means to be a prophetic people and a prophetic institution-standing in some necessary tension with the rulers of our society, with the impulse of power to be self-serving.

SR: On election day, I spoke with the editor of *Theological Studies*. I was confident of Clinton, but still nervous. And Paul Crowley's [the editor of *Theological Studies*] comment to me was that this could be a kind of 'Bonhoeffer moment', if that were to happen, i.e., if Trump were elected. For people like myself, I can donate to the right causes, but now I realize that I cannot just sit back and expect others to do the work of resistance. My hope is that there are others like myself who will see this event as an indication that we can no longer take for granted the things that we have taken for granted. Our democracy is really quite fragile.

BM: It is a summons for theologians to rediscover the public responsibility of the theologian. We cannot just do theology in the classroom or the journal. When Pope Francis came to the US, PICO [People Improving Communities through Organizing], a network of faith-based organizers, held a march and rally at a conference in Philadelphia. On the eve of Pope Francis's visit to Philadelphia, we had a march through the streets of Philadelphia. We stopped at a police station and prayed for those who were victimized by police violence; we stopped in front of a Burger King and prayed for fast-food workers and their right to a livable minimum wage; we stopped in front of a federal detention centre and prayed for those who are incarcerated for immigration reasons, and as we were marching, there were various chants. One of the chants was: 'Tell me what theology looks like!' and the crowd of marchers responded: 'This is what theology looks like!' And I was with a colleague from LaSalle University, and we were probably the only two 'real' theologians there, and I have never forgotten this. All the people knew the chant. They said: 'this is what theology looks like!' They were marching and their protest cry was over theology: lived, embodied faith in action. And that has haunted me,

in a good way, ever since. And I wondered, what would people in the Catholic Theological Society of America make of this? Would they see this as theology – marching through the streets and praying at these sites? And it is also saying: this is the faith of the people – an interfaith march of over 400 people doing what they are doing in the name of faith and theology. For me as a theologian, hearing them say ‘This is what theology looks like’ – given the events since the election – this is a real prophetic summons from those who are closest to the injustices to us: this is what theology looks like. And are we going to be where theology is? That is the real prophetic call for us as theologians. At the recent Society of Christian Ethics meeting, I was on a panel with my Philadelphia colleague Maureen O’Connell, and we were talking about public order and Black Lives Matter, and we both recalled the moment for the panel. Here we were, marching through the streets, protesting and rallying for justice, and our cry was about theology. Most of the people were not the kind who would be in our classrooms, but they grasped, as Rahner would say, at a pre-conceptual level, what theology is really all about. There is much for theologians to take from this as an examination of conscience, especially as we are thinking about the real fragility of this moment, the real dangers of this moment. This is a crisis moment and things could go any number of ways.