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Speakers discuss images of God

Alice Popovici | May. 6, 2011

From left: Eboni Marshall Turman, St. Joseph Sr. Elizabeth Johnson and M. Shawn Copeland at Fordham University in New York May 2

NEW YORK -- Speaking the evening of May 2 at Fordham University, where she is a professor of theology, St. Joseph Sr. Elizabeth Johnson described a well-known portion of Michelangelo's painting on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, which depicts God as an old, muscular, bearded white man who creates a younger man in his own image.

She said the example illustrates how a society's art, as well as the imagery in its language, reflects people who are at the pinnacle of that society. Just as artists imagine God as an older, white, powerful male, language describes God with the words king, father and lord.

"Why is this the case? Because historically, the public culture of the church was shaped by rulers who were men with power, and the power of naming," Johnson continued. "Why could God not be spoken about with the qualities of someone who is young or black or female, or all three in combination?"

Johnson, an acclaimed theologian and author, spoke at the university during the final lecture of the Union Forum, a semester-long public lecture program organized jointly by Fordham and Union Theological Seminary in New York and titled "Seeking Salvation: Feminist and Womanist Theologies in Contemporary Perspective." She was joined by M. Shawn Copeland, author, theologian and professor at Boston College, and by Eboni Marshall Turman, one of the three professors who teach the course.

The Committee on Doctrine for the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops recently criticized Johnson's 2007 book, Quest for the Living God: Mapping Frontiers in the Theology of God, for undermining the Gospel and failing to uphold authentic Catholic theology. The committee spent a year investigating her book before issuing its judgment. The committee's finding was widely criticized by theologians who faulted its work and the process used to come to its conclusions (Read **more** [1] and **more** [2]).

Fordham associate professor of theology Jeannine Hill Fletcher, who moderated the discussion, estimated that the 250 people, mostly non-students, who had gathered to hear the speakers at Pope Auditorium on Fordham's Lincoln Center campus had come to satisfy hunger for conversation about feminist theology.

Johnson said that early in her career as a professor, while teaching at The Catholic University of America in the 1980s, she had asked herself: "Could I be feminist and Catholic at the same time?" The question led her to research the imagery and language used to describe God, and to analyze what happens if God is described exclusively in male terms and imagery.

"What results, in theological terms, is an idol, a graven image," Johnson said. "The absolute mystery of God, infinitely loving, beyond imagination, is reduced to the fantasy of an infinitely ruling man." But the usage of male imagery is also "debilitating to women's well-being, for it gives rise to the idea that maleness has more in common with God than femaleness does."

To move beyond language that is exclusively male, Johnson said she found a great resource in Thomas Aquinas' three rules that govern language used to describe God. The first rule is that "God is incomprehensible, meaning that the infinitely creating, redeeming and life-giving mystery is so beyond us, and so within us, that the human mind can never fully grasp the divine essence," Johnson said. The second rule says that "no expression for God can be taken literally," and the third says "there must be many names and images for God since no one alone is adequate or absolute."

In these ground rules developed by Aquinas, Johnson said, she saw the freedom "to expand our repertoire of sacred images," so that alongside male images they might include female images, animal images and cosmic images.

"Seeking the female face of God," Johnson continued, "releases divine mystery from its old, patriarchal cage, so that God can be truly God: infinite, incomprehensible source of life who loves and saves the world."

M. Shawn Copeland, discussing her book Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being, unpacked the theological context within which it functions: as a work of theological anthropology, a womanist theology, and a study of the theology of the body.

The fundamental question of the text, which she identified as a Catholic theology, relates theological anthropology to the experience of social suffering. "The oppression that is made to afflict human persons happens in particular social arrangements," she said, "shaped in a progress or decline of historical, religious, cultural and social patterns and institutions."

As a womanist theology, Copeland said the book disentangles and differentiates "black women's bodily experience from that of white women," and in relation to body theology, it discusses the historical and cultural "outsider status" of black women.

"Since the black woman's involuntary arrival in the West, her body has been relegated to the margin, pressed to and beyond the ordinary limit; her body was used as the exotic outer edge against which men, white and black, tested physical and sexual prowess," Copeland continued. "Pressed to the margin, embodying outsider status in religion, culture and society, black women became liminal."

In discussing doctrine, Copeland said the book "strives to show how Jesus' life and ministry contested all forms of hierarchy, privilege and repression, how that life repudiated all the darkness in institutions that would enslave, divide human beings one from another, abuse the poor and confine the rich to gilded cages."

Eboni Marshall Turman touched on the notion of "separate but equal" as it functions within sacred spaces, and "allows for patriarchy in the context of the 21st-century church." In this sense, the church's "contrived articulation of women's equality" enables it to maintain "unjust patriarchal structures and practices," Turman said, "because though equal, women's feminine nature separates them from men."

What Turman said she finds perplexing is how both men and women exercise these types of sexist practices, especially considering that "most of the people in the pews are women." This final remark drew a rousing round of applause.

Brianne Jacobs, 26, who is studying for her doctorate in theology at Fordham, said the evening's three speakers, and their examination of feminism and race within the context of the church, represent for her voices that are at once feminist, Catholic and authoritative.

"I can be a feminist and a Catholic because I'm throwing my lot in with people like Shawn Copeland and Elizabeth Johnson," said Jacobs, who hopes to work as a professor of Catholic ecclesiology after graduation. "When I am spiritually nourished by an authority in the Catholic church, it is their authority that nourishes me, rather than the hierarchy's."

[Alice Popovici is an NCR contributor based in New York City.]

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