

PRAMUK, CHRISTOPHER. *Hope Sings, So Beautiful: Graced Encounters across the Color Line*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2013. xxvi+238 pp. \$19.95 (paper).

In this book about interracial "graced encounters," white Catholic theologian Christopher Pramuk begins by sharing a variety of experiences that have raised his race consciousness and brought him into relationships with persons of color. From the deep impact of learning African American spirituals in college, teaching in a white Catholic school while simultaneously working with a predominantly black Catholic youth choir and bringing the two groups together, along with time spent in Haiti and his adoption of two Haitian children, his experiences clearly display exposure to racial and cultural difference. While exposure to difference is no guarantee of racial transformation, his does not come across as a kind of tourist approach. What is most helpful is Pramuk's resulting recognition of the crucial role of ongoing interracial relationships for changing biased social imagination.

Pramuk explores different avenues into the topic: what he terms academic approaches to race, the state of nonwhites in global reality, and the world of African American spirituals. While it is difficult to identify this book in terms of standard genres in religious studies or theology—it draws a bit on history, fleshes out stories, as well as expressions of music and art—it is fair to say that it attends to a wide variety of contexts still shaped by residuals of racial and ethnic brokenness in order to discern and invoke gracious change.

So-called white color blindness as the posture that does not see race has been criticized for its avoidance of acknowledging white privilege and the need for conversations and relationships that alter our racial inheritances. Whites claim color blindness to pretend that desegregation laws fixed everything. While Pramuk does not employ sociological or psychological research on race relations, his theologically framed proposals and experience of addressing our deep-seated problems resonate with sociological literature, indicating that a change in our deeply ingrained social imagination and relationships is still needed and imperative. He indicates this with his call for the breaking of our silences and the "interruption of the status quo" (2). However, he criticizes the focus on confessing white privilege, and this may be tricky to interpret. While I believe that he supports the crucial need for honest and trustworthy relationships, it is interesting that he offers a brief critique of the white confession that entails acknowledgment and denouncement of white privilege. I take his point to be that respectful relationships are ostensibly diminished by the white confession because it is about taking all the blame. What he promotes instead is dialogue as "mutual vulnerability, self-disclosure, and risk, person to person, across the color line" (4). Thus, his critique of simply an academic focus on critiquing white privilege is ordered toward how we create contexts where ordinary whites can participate with a passion for such engagements. In short, he seems not to be promoting avoidance, but rather the conditions in which significant forms of accountability and enhanced respect can develop, what he calls "graced encounters." Getting these to happen, of course, is itself a huge challenge.

Pramuk's theological approach is fascinating. While theological framing that refuses to employ other academic disciplines to authenticate its claims can be suggestive of a kind of conservative Christianity, that is not at all what Pramuk is about. Indeed, what is really powerful about the book is the way in which its theological framing artfully organizes the chapter topics. Thankfully that framing avoids a rigid account of doctrine to characterize what is theological. Pramuk tells of different social situations in which what he terms "graced encounters" occur between persons of different colors, pointing out the importance of taking context seriously. The situations range from African American, Native American, and Hispanic experiences to the story of a Jewish woman murdered at Auschwitz. Employing a flexible theological logic of sorts, he foregrounds ways in which blindness, challenges, and willingness to change characterize very different situations. Broken relations are to be found all over the world, as he continues to illustrate with stories from a number of global locations. Given what he terms the incarnational vision of "finding God in all things" modeled by Ignatius of Loyola (xxiv), the radical nature of his theological vision is importantly displayed in his finding of God in places outside of Christianity.

Pramuk does an excellent job of expanding images for the divine to reflect racial and gender differences (although not LGBTQ). He is explicitly antiessentialist in his theological approach. He invokes a vision for the church that honors all people, transforms the marginalizing factors that have functioned to exclude and diminish groups, and does so not in terms of a secular inclusionary liberal approach, but as the Christian vocation. More on that distinction would be helpful, given his radical vision of divine presence.

By employing the theological theme of hope to frame the huge topic of ongoing racial brokenness in the United States, the author offers a constructive way to take seriously possibilities for change without romanticizing what has been accomplished—especially in the white world. Appeals to hope can sometimes function to avoid recognizing and naming the inevitable partiality and blindnesses that come with finitude. However, Pramuk connects hope to grace such that actual possibilities for changing the “biased social imagination” (1) are displayed without being oblivious to these limitations. The image of African American woman Ruby Green on the cover is a helpful way to visualize this imagination. Complete avoidance of obliviousness is, of course, impossible, especially when one is a white male, the dominant race and gender. However, it is certainly important to give it a try. Pramuk foregrounds the biblical story of the blind man of Bethsaida, who was still partly blind after Jesus’s initial attempt at healing, to helpfully symbolize the situation of race relations in the United States as an ongoing and complex reality of stumbling, to put it mildly (xvii–xviii). Pramuk’s honesty is quite constructive, or at least appears so to this white reviewer, because from the beginning he acknowledges the particular limitations attached to his own worldviews.

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