

‘Racism, Sin and the Distortion of Perception: Can Contemplation Heal the Racist Gaze?’

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Sarah Coakley (Universities of Cambridge, St Andrews and ACU)

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I This lecture begins with reference to a couple of the tragic and distressing recent police shootings of black people in the United States, and make a specifically *theological* proposal in relation to them: that they involve distortions of *perception* within the conditions of ‘systemic’ racism (so-called), which are themselves hard to explicate without reaching also for the category of *sin*. This is not only because the history of American racism is notoriously entangled with various Christian justifications of it, but also because the more generic human phenomenon of ‘other blame’ (as already classically encoded in the ‘mythic’ story of the Fall in Gen 3) comes with the distinct propensity to perceptual malfunction.

II In the second section, I ask what theological resources we have in the Christian tradition for responding to this deep-seated problem of sin-as-racism - not merely as intellectual or wilful, but specifically as sensual or perceptual. This involves a journey back to the 16th century and to the reforming Carmelite John of the Cross (1542-91) whose remarkable teachings on the sanctifying journey of ‘contemplation’ precisely start with the healing of the *sensual* realm. His teaching suggests that recovery from historic forms of racism, *qua* sin-as-perceptual distortion, involves hard *inner work* spiritually, just as much as it involves obvious public and political and economic forms of change.

III Thirdly, I make a brief comparative foray into recent, secular, *philosophical* investigations of racism in relation to problems of perception. Arguably these important philosophical insights are more sharp analytically than rendering a capacity actually to effect moral change. It follows, in conclusion, that a theological analysis of sin-cum-distorted-perception may remain crucial for projects of perceptual and moral change, not simply in the United States but in any conditions of religious ‘other blame’ which have bedded down long-term into political stasis and confrontation.