From complicity to solidarity

Author pushes back against Christians' 'passive bystand-ing'

Reviewed by JULIE BOURBON

Elisabeth T. Vasko's challenging text, Beyond Apathy: A Theology for Bystanders, makes the case that all Christians, willingly or not, are often a silent party to violence — sexual violence, slut-shaming, gay-bashing, white racism, bullying, and more. As privileged bystanders, she says, we must shed our unethical passivity, acknowledge our complicity, and let our brokenness transform us.

She quotes Dorothy Soile: "I am also responsible for the house which I did not build but in which I live." Or, in Vasko's words, "Though we may not be liable for the creation of structural injustice, we are responsible for its aftermath.

This, then, is Vasko's primary concern, and she makes a compelling case that it should be of fundamental concern to all thoughtful Christians. Unfortunately, the density of her prose may prove a challenge to nonacademic readers looking for guidance in a more easily digestible format.

Vasko draws on feminist, womanist and liberation theologies, and gives credit to theologians of color and to the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender community whose interpretations of the Gospel and accepted social mores are often radically different from those of dominant white, heteronormative culture.

The recognition that such a culture exists and that members thereof profit from it — socially and economically — is Vasko's starting point. Whether they do so consciously or not is ultimately immaterial, although Vasko allows that most of us fall into the unconscious camp. Still, this does not excuse it — nor should it.

"Structural violence creates social injustice. Violence that is rooted in the everyday evils of systemic and institutional oppression is harder to root out because it often escapes recognition," she writes, cutting to the heart of her argument. "Practices of social exclusion, coercion, and intimidation continue to undergird human relationships within personal, social, and institutional spheres. These practices, which often go unnamed, foster unprecedented levels of social privilege for a select few at the expense of many."

The "privileged apathy" or "passive bystand-ing" around which the author frames her text is, she argues, a learned behavior born of conflict avoidance and indifference to suffering other than our own, compounded by social privilege and a concept of "divine perfection that suggests that only God is good enough, powerful enough, and wise enough to offer the remedy."

Not so, says Vasko. What she proposes in response is a "theology of redemption that acknowledges human complexity in sin and, at the same
time, bespeaks of the power of human agency to cooperate with God in the transformation of the world."

She indicts the tradition of Christian atonement theory as being tied to white racial privilege in its "alignment of divinity with maleness, rationality, and whiteness" and a theology to which "Jesus' body is only redemptive when it is dead, lifeless, passive, and submissive." She sees this imagery as justification for "sacrificial scapegoating, a form of victim-blaming."

She also covers white denial of (systemic oppression) and systemic ignorance that allows racial injustice to go unchecked, and calls for those who "systematically privileged" to give up their self-deluding sense of innocence and face their role in perpetuating injustice.

Everything you need for effective Sunday liturgies.

Celebration is the most affordable, comprehensive worship planner for the market. Each monthly issue includes parish formation articles, preaching resources and liturgical planning ideas, delivered six weeks in advance for maximum preparation time. See for yourself why parishes rely on Celebration each week.

Celebration
PUBLICATIONS
Sister publication of the National Catholic Reporter
Preview an issue at CelebrationPublications.org.

Protesters against police violence march toward the White House in Washington April 29.

(Julie Bourbon is editorial director at the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges.)