

**BLACK THEOLOGY AND LONERGAN:  
The Challenge of Authenticity**

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I have been asked to make some observations concerning the implications for Lonergan’s method and account of subjectivity that would result from a consideration of “Black sources” in the craft of theology. But we need to broaden and deepen the question asked. For in order to appreciate what Black Theology asks of Lonergan, we must truly comprehend the deepest challenge posed by Black Theology (and by extension other so-called “contextual” theologies).

Engagement with these theologies is not solely a matter of encountering and incorporating different sources than those usually accepted in theological discourse.<sup>1</sup> For example, it is not merely a matter of teaching an additional unit at the end of the typical theological survey; nor is such engagement adequate if one simply cites the authors associated with Black and other “contextual” theologies in one’s footnotes and/or bibliography. Nor is it a

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<sup>1</sup>For example, James Cone maintains that in addition to Scripture and church tradition, spirituals and gospels, African-derived animal folk tales, the blues, black prayers and sermons, and slave narratives are essential resources for Black Theology. Cf. his *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, [1975] 1997), 17-30; and *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (New York: Seabury Press, 1972).

matter of simply attending to other voices than those commonly found in Catholic or Christian theological discourse, e.g., Malcolm X, Fannie Lou Hamer, and James Baldwin – though that would be a welcome and necessary move.<sup>2</sup>

Rather, the deepest challenge of Black Theology stems from its severe critique – even indictment – of White theology, dominant theologies, or theologies out of a Northern paradigm.<sup>3</sup> This indictment charges that White/Western theology, through its false assertions of universality and normativity, has acted in collusion with forces of social oppression and injustice. That is, Christian (i.e., White) theology and theologians historically have been, and still too often are, accomplices in social evil.<sup>4</sup> To express this indictment in Lonerganian terminology: Christian theology and its scholars, through acts of deliberate commission and blind omission, by their systemic oversights and refusals of unwanted insight, have become forces in social decline and have contributed to the social “surd.”<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>I made this argument at length in my presidential address to the Catholic Theological Society of America in Bryan N. Massingale, “*Vox Victimarum, Vox Dei: Malcolm X as Neglected ‘Classic’ for Catholic Theological Reflection*,” *CTSA Proceedings* 65 (2010) 63-88.

<sup>3</sup>The latter phraseology is that employed by Catholic theological ethicists since their second international gathering in Trento in 2009, and now used by the Catholic Theological Ethics in the World Church project. Cf. <http://www.catholicethics.com/mission> (accessed 20 September 2012), and James F. Keenan (ed.), *Catholic Theological Ethics Past, Present, and Future: The Trento Conference* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011).

<sup>4</sup>That Cone still holds fast to his early and seminal indictments of White theology is evidenced in his recent essays, for example, “White Theology Revisited,” in his *Risks of Faith: The Emergence of a Black Theology of Liberation* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1999), 130-137.

<sup>5</sup>Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1970), 230.

This indictment is specified through Black Theology's highlighting of concerns neglected in Christian theology and, most directly, through its foregrounding of the haunting question of "God" and the consequent challenge of idolatry. The question of God is central to every contextual and liberation theology. Consider for example, the concern signaled by titles such as: *She Who Is*; *Sexism and God-Talk*; *Beyond God the Father*; *Our Idea of God*; *The Idols of Death and the God of Life*; *God of the Poor*; *Our Idea of God*; *God of the Oppressed*; and perhaps most provocatively, *Is God a White Racist?*<sup>6</sup> Black Theology thus strongly resonates with Juan Luis Segundo's trenchant observation, "Our falsified and inauthentic ways of dealing with our fellow human beings are allied to our falsification of the idea of God. Our perverse idea of God and our unjust society are in close and terrible alliance."<sup>7</sup>

Consider, for example, how the indictment of idolatry with regard to ecclesial complicity in racial injustice was raised by Martin Luther King, Jr. In his landmark essay, "Letter from Birmingham City Jail," King developed an extended and eloquent response to moderate white Christian leaders who criticized his crusade for racial justice as "unwise," "untimely," and

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<sup>6</sup>Elizabeth A. Johnson, *She Who Is: The Mystery of God in Feminist Theological Discourse* (New York: Crossroad, 1993); Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1983); Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation* (Boston, MA, Beacon Press, 1973); Pablo Richard, *The Idols of Death and the God of Life: A Theology* (Wipf and Stock Publishers, [1983], 2009); Victorio Araya, *God of the Poor: The Mystery of God in Latin American Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983); Juan Luis Segundo, *Our Idea of God* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1974); James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, [1975] 1997); and William R. Jones, *Is God a White Racist? A Preamble to Black Theology* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, [1973], 1998).

<sup>7</sup>Segundo, *Our Idea of God*, 8.

“extremist.” He confessed his deep disappointment “with the white church and its leadership”

in a moving and pointed passage:

I have traveled the length and breadth of Alabama, Mississippi and all the other southern states. On sweltering summer days and crisp autumn morning I have looked at her beautiful churches with their lofty spires pointing heavenward. . . . Over and over again I have found myself asking: *“What kind of people worship here? Who is their God? . . . Where were they when Governor Wallace gave his clarion call for defiance and hatred? Where were their voices of support when tired, bruised and weary Negro men and women decided to rise from the dark dungeons of complacency to the bright hills of creative protest?”*<sup>8</sup>

King refrained from directly stating the obvious conclusion of his line of questions, namely, that the lack of social conscience in the majority of white Southern Christians was due to their idolatrous worship of a false god.

More pertinent yet is Peter Paris’ observation that the Western Christian tradition is not normative for African American Christian belief or ethical praxis. His exact phrasing bears precise citation:

*The tradition that has always been normative for the black churches and the black community is not the so-called Western Christian tradition per se, although this tradition is an important source for blacks. More accurately, the normative*

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<sup>8</sup>James M. Washington (ed.), *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986), p. 299; emphasis added. Later in his career, King returned to this theme and amplified his earlier suggestion of the relationship between idolatrous faith and racial injustice. In a 1965 interview to *Playboy* magazine, he declared: “Time and again in my travels, as I have seen the outward beauty of white churches, I have had to ask myself, *“What kind of people worship there? Who is their God? Is their God the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, and is their Savior the Savior who hung on the cross at Golgotha? Where were there voices when a black race took upon itself the cross of protest against man’s injustice to man? Where were their voices when defiance and hatred were called for by white men who sat in these very churches?”* (Washington, *A Testament of Hope*, 345; emphasis added).

tradition is that tradition governed by the principle of nonracism which we call the black Christian tradition. The fundamental principle of the black Christian tradition is depicted most adequately in the biblical doctrine of the parenthood of God and the kinship of all peoples. . . . The doctrine of human equality under God is . . . the final authority for all matters pertaining to faith, thought, and practice.<sup>9</sup>

This is a haunting and provocative claim. I am struck by the dichotomy he draws between the “Western Christian tradition” and the “black Christian tradition.” What Paris implies, but does not directly state, is that the Western Christian tradition – presumably because it is *not* governed by the principle of nonracism – is so decisively compromised that it not only is not, but *ought* not be, normative for black Christian believers. The Western Christian tradition remains what he calls “an important source,” yet cannot be normatively decisive for faith, thought and practice. The further implication is that Western Christianity is deeply, even fundamentally, flawed in its understanding of the Christian faith. In other words, he places before us the issue of the integrity of not only particular theologians or even of specific beliefs, tenets or dogmas, but also that of the very faith itself.

Thus the core challenge of Black Theology lies in its indictment of idolatry, that is, the accusation of Western Christianity’s collusion in and complicity with massive social injustice as evidenced through how “God” and “God-talk” have been manipulated by White theology and theologians to rationalize, justify, and sanctify unjust race-based disparities of wealth, power,

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<sup>9</sup>Peter J. Paris, *The Social Teaching of the Black Churches* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985), 10, 14.

and privilege.<sup>10</sup> Indeed, some forms of Black religious thought maintain that Western Christianity is but an expression of the white supremacy endemic to Western culture.<sup>11</sup>

How then, does such a thoroughgoing challenge reformulate Lonergan's account of subjectivity and method? What changes does this radical challenge demand from Lonergan and his disciples if they are to adequately respond to Black Theology? In brief, I believe that effective engagement with Black Theology demands foregrounding and further developing Lonergan's views concerning "major authenticity," that is, the authenticity not of individuals, but of a religious tradition.

Students of Lonergan are, of course, familiar with the central role of authenticity in his cognitional theory of critical realism. "Genuine objectivity is the fruit of authentic subjectivity," is perhaps one of the first maxims learned when encountering his thought.<sup>12</sup> Authenticity is simultaneously a state, a struggle, and a never fully realized goal.<sup>13</sup> It is the result of a continuous striving to live according to the famous "transcendental precepts"; that is, authenticity is the fruit of a never-ending transcendence of the egoism endemic to the human condition through the pursuit of attentiveness, intelligence, reasonableness, and responsibility.<sup>14</sup> Authenticity requires the courage to engage in strenuous diligence, relentless

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<sup>10</sup>Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 45-53.

<sup>11</sup>A major representative of this view would be Malcolm X. His trenchant critiques of Christianity as an arm of white supremacy and colonialism are found throughout the classic text, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (as told to Alex Haley), (New York: Ballantine Books, 1965).

<sup>12</sup>Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 292.

<sup>13</sup>Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 252.

<sup>14</sup>Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 53-55; 265.

self-examination, and ever-deepening and demanding levels of conversion. Indeed, one can understand Lonergan as positing that human authenticity, in the end, is the fruit of human cooperation with divine grace (with allowances for how various religious traditions may conceive of such grace).<sup>15</sup>

What may not be as familiar, though, is Lonergan's incipient distinction between "minor authenticity" and "major authenticity." He writes, "There is the minor authenticity or unauthenticity of the subject with respect to the tradition that nourishes him. There is the major authenticity that justifies or condemns the tradition itself."<sup>16</sup> "Minor authenticity" is the task, goal and struggle of the individual to more and more adequately appropriate the demands and challenges of his/her religious tradition. For example, living according to the transcendental precepts leads one to successfully fulfill the challenge of being a "good Christian." Failure to engage these precepts leads one to both espouse and live out distorted, misguided, false, even sinful appropriations of one's religious heritage.

"Major authenticity" is another matter altogether. What is at stake here is the integrity of the religious tradition itself. Here we are not concerned with the "devaluation, distortion, and corruption" that may occur in individuals through their culpable lack of fulfilling the transcendental precepts, but with how these failures become so "massive" and widespread so

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<sup>15</sup>Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 241.

<sup>16</sup>Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 80. See also *A Third Collection*, 120.

as to infiltrate, undermine and compromise the formation, transmission and/or understanding of the tradition itself such that it eventually becomes decadent.<sup>17</sup>

Sincere and righteous Individuals in the midst of such a decadent and compromised (read, idolatrous) tradition find themselves facing a truly maddening situation. For with the best of intentions in fulfilling the requirements of attention, intelligence, reasonableness and responsibility, they become prisoners of false consciousness, a situation that Black and other liberation theologians call “ideological captivity.”<sup>18</sup> (This is the state of affairs that King previously described when he noted the complacency of white Southerners with injustice because of the worship practices in their churches.)<sup>19</sup> When an unauthentic tradition is taken as normative, Lonergan observes, “the best of intentions combine with a hidden decay,”<sup>20</sup> and the pursuit of personal authenticity becomes seriously imperiled. The goal of personal (that is, minor) authenticity becomes perhaps even vitiated through the authentic appropriation of an unauthentic tradition.

Lonergan thus poignantly describes the challenge that major unauthenticity poses for conscientious believers: “Not only have they to undo their own lapses from righteousness but more grievously *they have to discover what is wrong in the tradition they have inherited and*

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<sup>17</sup>Lonergan, *A Third Collection*, 121.

<sup>18</sup>James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary ed. (New York: Harper and Row, 1989; orig. ed., 1969) 15-16, 23, and 41.

<sup>19</sup>For an in-depth study of the deep and complicated nexus of southern Christianity and white supremacy, see David Chappell’s *A Stone of Hope: Prophetic Religion and the Death of Jim Crow* (University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

<sup>20</sup>Lonergan, *A Third Collection*, 121.



*they have to struggle against the massive undertow it sets up.*<sup>21</sup> In other words, they must contend with what Lonergan calls an “agonizing question,” namely, “how can one tell whether one’s appropriation of religion is genuine or unauthentic and, *more radically, how can one tell one is not appropriating a religious tradition that has become unauthentic.*”<sup>22</sup>

We are now in a position to appreciate both the contribution and challenge of Black Theology to the Lonergan enterprise. Its *contribution* lies in the fact that Black Theology is a concrete instance of “major authenticity,” that is, the effort to question, purify, transform and renew the Christian tradition.<sup>23</sup> The African American theological and faith tradition represents one attempt to struggle against the “massive undertow” of several systemic ideological deformations of the Christian faith.<sup>24</sup> Through its hermeneutics of critique, retrieval and

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<sup>21</sup>Lonergan, *A Third Collection*, 121; emphasis added.

<sup>22</sup>Lonergan, *A Third Collection*, 130; emphasis added. Note how this question is but a specification of the harrowing basic question posed in *Insight*: “How is a mind to become conscious of its own bias when that bias springs from a communal flight from understanding and is supported by the whole texture of a civilization?” (xiv) Or in plainer words, how can we become aware of radical evil when our faith conspires to make us unaware? I note that liberation theologians suggest a strategy of conscientization to deal with such questions, but are not always specific about what this concretely entails.

<sup>23</sup>Daniel Helminiak, “Satan or Saint? Let History Decide,” in John J. McNeill, *Sex As God Intended* (Maple Shade, NJ: Lethe Press, 2008) 243-244. Liberation theologies, then, are understood as exercises or attempts at major authenticity, that is, as herculean strivings to swim against a “massive undertow” and name, expose, challenge, and rectify pervasive distortions and corruptions of a religious tradition.

<sup>24</sup>I say Black Theology is an attempt to contend with multiple ideological deformations, rather than the obvious singular of racism/white supremacy, for Womanist (that is, black feminist) and LGBT black theologians also name their struggles against the undertows of gender supremacy, heterosexism, and class exclusion as integral to their understandings of Black Theology.

reconstruction, it attempts the “undoing” of the tradition’s unauthenticity.<sup>25</sup> If only for this reason, Black and other forms of liberationist theological reflection demand sustained attention from the guild of Lonergan scholars – and the rest of the Christian Church.

Black Theology’s *challenge* to Lonergan’s account of subjectivity is to move beyond a preoccupying concern with the individual’s pursuit of authenticity and further advance his helpful yet undeveloped insights into the quandaries posed by a tradition’s systemic distortion and corruption.<sup>26</sup> What does major authenticity require in the face of the radical evils occasioned by an idolatrous belief system that is complicit with racial and other systemic forms of injustice? The challenge posed by Black Theology to Lonergan’s (and his disciples’) account of subjectivity, in short, is to move the vexing issue of “major authenticity” from the margins of his thought to a central thesis and preoccupation.

What is at stake, then, in the encounter of Lonergan with Black Theology are white theologians’ willingness and ability to first confront Lonergan’s agonizing and more radical question – *how can one tell one is not appropriating a religious tradition that has become unauthentic?* – and then to elevate its challenge to the foreground of both their individual consciousness and the collective craft in which they engage.

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<sup>25</sup>Lonergan, *A Third Collection*, 122. Here Lonergan describes the task that confronts us in the face of major authenticity, namely, “The cure is not in the undoing of the tradition, but the undoing of its unauthenticity.”

<sup>26</sup>For example, in Jon Nilson’s admirable study, *Hearing Past the Pain: Why Catholic Theologians Need Black Theology* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2007), he describes the challenge that faces white theologians’ encounter with Black Theology in terms of their growth in personal authenticity (cf. p. 73). This is true. My analysis, however, contends that this focus is insufficient.