

2012 LONERGAN ON THE EDGE CONFERENCE
MARQUETTE UNIVERSITY

PANEL DISCUSSION: LONERGAN ON BLACK THEOLOGY

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In her invitation to participate in this year's "Lonerган on the Edge Conference," Juliana Vasquez posed three questions for my reflection and response: "What in Lonergan helped you with Womanist Theology? What in Womanist Theology helped you with Lonergan? What might the Lonergan community need to do to respond adequately to Black Liberation Theology now?"¹

To reflect on Lonergan and black theology took me back to a question and a discovery. The question was raised in TH 965 'Method in Theology,' a graduate course that I took with Father Lonergan in Fall 1979. In preparation for the weekly course session, the teaching assistant (during that academic year Daniel Helmeniak) would meet with members of the class a few days prior in order to discuss the assigned chapter, collect, collate, then give our questions to Lonergan. At the course meeting, Lonergan would discuss his responses with us. Although the question was not one I prepared, it has stayed with me:

The empirical notion of culture has given rise to a number of "theologies": black theology, feminist theology, liberation theology, theologies of hope and play. Would you call these theology as *Method* understands theology

¹ E-mail communication from Juliana Vasquez to Nilson, Massingale, and Copeland, May 16, 2012: "What in Lonergan helped you with Womanist Theology and what in Womanist Theology helped you with Lonergan? In part, this is an opportunity for you to wax biographic, if you'd like. We are hoping for some level of critical engagement with the Lonergan community on this point. It would be exciting if we could hear your thoughts on what the Lonergan community might need to do to respond adequately to Black Liberation Theology now."

or are these attempts in the eighth functional specialty of communications?²

I came to Boston College in fall 1977, just a few months after having collaborated with Baptist minister Muhammad Kenyatta (Donald Brooks) in organizing the first national consultation on black theology as staff members of the Black Theology Project (BTP) of Theology in the Americas (TIA).³ Critical reflection on my own cultural, social, and intellectual experience affirmed my understanding that black and/or liberation and/or feminist and/or womanist-theology was *real, credible* theology; still, I was keen to hear Father Lonergan's response. I have not been able to find a written record of his comment, but I remember it as something like this: "*All* theologies are responsible for *all the functional specialties*." Needless to say, I was and remain glad of this affirmation and I took it as a challenge to serious work. My effort to live out the theological vocation as a black Catholic woman has been and is a commitment to the articulation of theology that would be recognized as 'authentically Catholic *and* authentically black' and, thereby, contribute both to Catholic theology, particularly in the United States, and to African American appropriation and instantiation of the Catholic expression of Christian faith.⁴

The discovery was a little book, *Toward an American Theology*, in which Herbert Richardson critiqued our nation's faith in social technology, techniques of psychological

² See, Bernard Lonergan, Archive, 29670DTE070 / A2967Question #5, of Questions raised for December 6, 1979 meeting of the graduate course TH 965 Method in Theology, Lonergan taught in the Department of Theology, Boston College, Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts.

³ Gayraud S. Wilmore, "General Introduction," 9, and Part IV: Black Theology and the Black Church: "Introduction," 253, 254, in *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-1979*, eds., Gayraud S. Wilmore and James H. Cone (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1979); see also, Sergio Torres and John Eagleson, *Theology in the Americas* (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1976).

⁴ See my "Foundations for Catholic Theology in an African American Context," 107-47, 149-158, in *Black and Catholic: The Challenge and Gift of Black Folk: Contributions of African American Experience and Thought to Catholic Theology*, ed., Jamie T. Phelps (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1998).

testing and management, and mass communications.⁵ Richardson brought these characteristics of American life together under the category “sociotechnics.”⁶ He argued, further, the destructive and distorting powers of relativism and secularism pressed against sociotechnics and ought to be met by “faith as the power of reconciliation.”⁷ Now, here is what Richardson wrote that I found exciting and inspiring:

In this context, faith is the commitment of man to oppose the separation of man from man [sic]. It is a commitment to struggle against attacks on the common good, against racialism and segregation, and against the fragmentation of man’s intellectual and spiritual life. Such a conception of faith characterizes the thought of certain creative contemporary theologians. The most important Catholic theologian in this new movement is Bernard Lonergan, who ascribes to faith the specific function of transcending ideologies and separations that impede man’s disposition toward unity. The most important Protestant proponent of a theology of reconciliation is Martin Luther King, who has developed this theological principle into a new method for effecting social change.⁸

I found this exciting because Richardson’s analysis affirmed my deep appreciation of Lonergan’s theological and methodological proposals; I found this inspiring because Richardson’s analysis sharpened my sense of King as a political theologian. I had a rich lode to mine; black and Catholic, it was mine to mine uniquely.

1. What in Lonergan helped me with womanist theology? First, Bernard Lonergan’s reading of the theological situation (i.e., the rise of historical-mindedness and its challenge to a classicist world-view; the breakdown of the classical mediation of meaning and the emergence of modern, now postmodern mediations; challenges

⁵ Herbert W. Richardson, *Toward an American Theology* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1967).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 29

⁸ *Ibid.*, 44.

stemming from the new human sciences and from hermeneutics and critical history)⁹ as well as his methodological proposals¹⁰ offer womanist thinkers and theologians both a critical and valuable analysis of the philosophical and social contexts within which we work and a creative and rigorous method for theologizing.

Womanist theology¹¹ emerges from the disciplined analysis and reflection of (U.S.) women of African descent on the meaning, significance, and role of religion in the compound-complex cultural matrix that is the United States. Differentiated critical delineation and understanding of the biological, psychological, social (i.e., political, economic, technological), aesthetic, communal, and religious experience of black women (as well as children and men) comprise the hermeneutical starting-point of womanist analysis (e.g., theologizing or philosophizing).

Framing womanist work in light of Lonergan's notion of cognitional theory advances an understanding of womanist work as a critical cognitive praxis. Thus, womanists form a serious 'thinking margin' and their critical cognitive praxis exposes and explains the various forms of breakdown and bias (e.g., dramatic, individual, group, or common sense), analyzes the concrete impact of bias on human living, and scours the Scriptures for a saving word. Certainly, such reframing undermines the hegemony of the pseudo-universality of a deracinated male posited as the Western standard of normativity,

⁹ Bernard Lonergan, "Dimensions of Meaning," 232-245, in *Collection: Papers By Bernard Lonergan* 2nd ed., rev. aug., *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, Volume 4, eds. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988); see also, *A Second Collection*, eds., William F. J. Ryan and Bernard J. Tyrrell (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974): "The Transition from a Classicist World-View to Historical-Mindedness," 1-10, "Theology in its New Context," 55-67, "Theology and Man's Future," 135-148, "The Future of Christianity," 149-163, "Philosophy and Theology," 193-208, "Revolution in Catholic Theology," 231-238.

¹⁰ Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972).

¹¹ The phrases 'womanist work' or 'womanist scholarship' function broadly here to include ethics, history, critical biblical studies, comparative theology, pastoral care, etc.

and just as significantly Lonergan's cognitional theory functions as a "radical cognitive therapy"¹² providing womanists with tools to move beyond *mere* description or symbolization of experience and toward self-appropriation as well as performance of Alice Walker's notion of "serious."¹³ This term captures the intentionality and meaning, interdependence and interrelation of being, understanding, and doing in critical cognitive and moral praxis.

Second, Robert Doran's critical appropriation of Lonergan's notion of conversion led him to the notion of psychic conversion.¹⁴ More than ninety years ago, W. E. B. Du Bois eloquently and poignantly anticipated the issue of psychic conversion in the context of the conditions of African American self-transcendence:

The Negro is a sort of seventh son [sic], born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world—a world which yields him [sic] no true self-consciousness, but only lets him [sic] see himself [sic] through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his [sic] twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps its from being torn asunder.¹⁵

¹² Matthew Lamb, *Solidarity with Victims, Toward A Theology of Social Transformation* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1982), 85.

¹³ Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose by Alice Walker* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Publishers, 1983), xi. Here is Walker's definition of the term: "Womanist [from *womanish*. (Opp. of 'girlish,' i.e., frivolous, irresponsible, not serious.) A black feminist or feminist of color. From the black folk expression of mothers to female children, 'You acting *womanish*,' i.e., like a woman. Usually, referring to outrageous, audacious, courageous or *willful* behavior. Wanting to know more and in greater depth than is considered 'good' for one. Interested in grown-up doings. Acting grown up. Being grown up. Interchangeable with another black folk expression: 'You trying to be grown.' Responsible. In charge. *Serious*" (xi-xii).

¹⁴ Doran, *Psychic Conversion and Theological Foundations: Toward a Reorientation of the Human Sciences* (Chico, California: Scholars Press, 1981).

¹⁵ William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folks* (1903; New York: Fawcett Publications, Inc., 1961), 16-17.

Insofar black “psychic sensitivity is victimized by oppression,” chained to survival, and confined to unconcealable otherness, psychic conversion releases, heals, and liberates. Conversion releases the psyche from “distorted and alienated” affective or dramatic or aesthetic patterns of experience. “A true healing of the psyche would dissolve the ... wounds that block sustained self-transcendence.”¹⁶ Doran’s notion of psychic conversion has led me to distinguish the African American condition as a ‘psychic wound,’ a notion that resonates with William Jones’ assessment of that condition as shaped decisively, but not determinatively by the “maldistribution, negative quality, enormity, and transgenerational character” of suffering¹⁷ as well as with Engelbert Mveng’s notion of “anthropological poverty” as characteristic of the condition of black African people “bereft of their identity, their dignity, their freedom, their thought, their history, their language, their faith, their ambitions.”¹⁸ The notion of psychic conversion functions both in naming and evaluating a condition and in elaborating strategies to further the healing of distortions, hatreds, and alienations from one’s own black flesh, black self, and black community.¹⁹ Indeed, insofar as a woman or a man of converted psyche is liberated from the labyrinth of double-ness, she or he is capable to act intentionally and responsibly in the constitution of her or his own personhood, of community, and in the creating and healing of our world.

¹⁶ Doran, *Theology and the Dialectics of History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990), p. 62.

¹⁷ William R. Jones, *Is God A White Racist?: A Preamble to Black Theology* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1973), 21-22.

¹⁸ Engelbert Mveng, “Impoverishment and Liberation,” 154-165, in *Irruption of the Third World: Challenge to Theology*, ed., Virginia Fabella and Sergio Torres (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1983).

¹⁹ These distorted conditions are products and residue of enslavement, of colonialism, and neo-colonialism; their eradication is formidable, especially with the attendant difficulties of achievement on a macro-scale. See, Frantz Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lamm Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967) and Lewis R. Gordon, *Bad Faith and Antiracist Racism* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1995).

2. What in womanist theology helped you with Lonergan? Both womanist theology and black theology open me more broadly and more deeply to the intellectual and theological exigencies posed by African American history and culture. It is unlikely that I would have ignored these crucial studies and their demands, but without sustained contact with the community of black scholars (most of whom are Protestant) my involvement might not have been so thoroughgoing and so serious. In the current Catholic academic context (undergraduate as well as graduate), African American students may find courses that address these area studies (e.g., history, culture, critical race theories, etc.); they need not plow these fields alone.

3. What might the Lonergan community need to do to respond adequately to Black Liberation Theology now? Black theology irrupted in the sixties; as far as I can discern, black theology has never been *formally* on the Lonergan agenda; at the same time, over the past twelve years (white) Catholic theologians have begun to engage black theology, critical race theory, the condition of black human beings in the United States, and black history and culture. In spite of skepticism, internal friction, and out-right rejection from black churches, black scholars, and an (white) academic theological community, black theology has made “remarkable progress in a short time.”²⁰ Twenty or thirty years ago, the Lonergan community could have reminded (white) Catholic theologians, philosophers, and scholars that “a theology is the product not only of a faith but also of a culture;²¹” and that “a multiplicity of cultural traditions” with “the possibility of diverse differentiations of human consciousness” within those traditions could lead to

²⁰ Peter Bascio, *The Failure of White Theology: A Black Theological Perspective* (New York: Peter Lang, 1983), 159.

²¹ Lonergan, *Doctrinal Pluralism*, The 1971 Pere Marquette Lecture (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1971), 32.

a “multiplicity of theologies” that expresses the one, same faith.²² I hope such a reminder would have been graciously welcomed and deeply appreciated by the black theological community, especially since such a reminder might have opened a door to needed conversation.²³ Thus, on the one hand, perhaps, it is almost too late for the Lonergan community to respond. In “Burnt Norton,” T. S. Elliot writes: “*What might have been is an abstraction / Remaining a perpetual possibility / Only in a world of speculation.*”

On the other hand, this conference *is* a most welcome and most deeply appreciated opening; this is a beginning of an “adequate” response, for this venture indicates that the Lonergan community wants to engage in conversation. At the same time, the situation of systematic theology may make such conversation difficult, even as black theology confronts new challenges in its on-going formulation and many priorities press in on all people of good will. More than ever we *all* are in need of a ‘not numerous center,’²⁴ an incarnate instance of intelligence-in-active-collaboration open to attending critically to particularity, to difference, and self-correction.

²² Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 363, 271.

²³ Writing from his Trappist cell, Thomas Merton attempted this; see his pamphlet, *The Black Revolution* (Atlanta: SCLC, ?).

²⁴ Lonergan writes “what will count is a perhaps not numerous center, big enough to be at home in both the old and the new, painstaking enough to work out one by one the transitions to be made, strong enough to refuse half-measures and insist on complete solutions even though it has to wait,” Bernard Lonergan, *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, vol. 4 *Collection*, 2nd rev. ed. edited by Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1988), 245.