

**RESPONSE TO DRs. NILSON, MASSINGALE, AND COPELAND:
2012 LONERGAN ON THE EDGE CONFERENCE**

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First of all, I'd like to thank: the Lonergan Society at Marquette University for hosting this dialogue, especially Juliana Vazquez and Jeremy Blackwood; Father Robert Doran for his perseverance in continuing and extending the legacy of Father Bernard Lonergan; the presenters here this morning—Drs. Copeland, Massingale, and Nilson; and my fellow graduate colleague, David Horstkoetter. Thank you for allowing this non-Lonerganian but potential Lonergan convert to participate in this discussion.

If, as Anselm reminds us, theology is “faith seeking understanding,” then it may be apropos to construe *black* theology as “the efforts by the black community of faith seeking to understand itself, God, and its place in an anti-black world.”¹ Or, as Dwight Hopkins defines black theology: “the interplay between the pain of oppression and the promise of liberation found in the Bible, on one hand, and a similar existence experienced by African Americans and poor people today.”²

Thus, the overarching question being considered this morning is: what has the Athens of Lonergan Studies to do with the Jerusalem of Black Theology? What conversation can be had between a system known for its treatment of *universal* cognition and a system which emphasizes the *particularity* of the experience of the oppressed? Can there be a rapprochement between these two seemingly incommensurable theological

1 See the definition of theology provided by Trevor Hart in *Faith Thinking: The Dynamics of Christian Theology* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2005), 1.

2 Dwight N. Hopkins, *Heart and Head: Black Theology—Past, Present, and Future* (New York: Palgrave, 2002), 7.

systems? The resounding answer from this panel, it would seem, would be a resounding but qualified “Yes!”

For Nilson, the answer can be found in a retrieval of Lonergan’s categories of *bias* and *encounter*. For Lonergan, group bias is based upon an “interference with the development of practical common sense” that is supported by a group-advantaging, intersubjective logic.³ Lonergan writes:

The bias of development involves a distortion. The advantage of one group commonly is disadvantageous to another, and so some part of the energies of all groups is diverted to the supererogatory activity of devising and implementing offensive and defensive mechanisms. Groups differ in their possession of native talent, opportunities, initiative, and resources; those in favored circumstances find success the key to still further success; those unable to make operative the new ideas that are to their advantage fall behind in the process of social development. Society becomes stratified; its flower is far in advance of average attainment; its roots appear to be the survival of the rude achievement of a forgotten age. Classes become distinguished, not merely by social function, but also by social success; and the new differentiation finds expression not only in conceptual labels but also in deep feelings of frustration, resentment, bitterness, and hatred.⁴

How does one become conscious of their bias toward the end of eliminating it? *Encounter*. The pernicious effects of bias can be counterbalanced and overcome by one’s willingness to engage *and be engaged by* others. In his discussion of Dialectic in *Method in Theology*—as Nilson has quoted—Lonergan contends that encounter is: “meeting persons, appreciating the values they represent, criticizing their defects, and allowing one’s living to be challenged at its very roots by their words and by their deeds.”⁵

Lonergan adds:

Moreover, such an encounter is not just an optional addition to interpretation and to history. Interpretation depends on one’s self-understanding; the history one writes depends on one’s horizon; and encounter is the one way in which self-understanding and horizon can be put to the test.⁶

For Dr. Massingale, what is needed is a foregrounding of Lonergan’s notion of “major authenticity,” seeing Black Theology as a significant instantiation of the attempt to criticize the systemic distortions and flaws of one’s religious tradition. Furthermore, Massingale shows us how Lonergan can help explain how an

3 Bernard Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe et al. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1992), 247.

4 Lonergan, *Insight*, 249.

5 Bernard Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1971), 247.

6 Lonergan, *Method*, 247.

inactive complacency is no different from an active complicity (i.e., how remaining silent in the face of injustice is itself an injustice). Combining these insights, one draws the conclusion that in order to avoid being complicit in injustice, one has no choice *but* to critique one's tradition, if for no other reason than to ensure that one has not inherited an unjust tradition. However, engaging *Black* Theology makes this an especially difficult task. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, W.E.B Du Bois posed a question that has become seminal in Black studies. Regarding the existence of blacks in America, Du Bois asks: "What does it mean to be a problem?" In other words, the presence of blacks in America has always created problems for political systems which stressed the value of humanity and equality while simultaneously engaging in slavery and the brutal treatment of black humans. Similarly, the presence of blacks in theology poses problems for religious traditions as well, given the historical partnership between certain conceptions of God and racial injustice. Lewis Gordon explains the problem this way:

The logic is straightforward. A perfect system cannot have imperfections. Since blacks claim to be contradictions of a perfect system, the imperfection must either be an error in reasoning (mere "appearance") or lie in black folks themselves.⁷

Lonergan reminds us that if we're going to authentically encounter blacks as non-problems, then the imperfections must lie in our traditions themselves.

For Dr. Copeland, Lonergan's methodological approach and the notion of "psychic conversion" provide her with the tools to not only offer a disruptive analysis of the black (and especially, the black *female*) condition in the United States, but to provide a pathway toward the healing of the black psychic wound. This is evidenced in Dr. Copeland's recent project *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being*, where she foregrounds the issue of embodiment as an organizing principle for Christian theology, utilizing, again, Lonergan's notion of bias and, at the end of the work, seeing it as a constructive application of Lonergan's method.

⁷ Lewis R. Gordon and Jane Anna Gordon, eds., *Not Only the Master's Tools: African American Studies in Theory and Practice* (Boulder, CO: Paradigm, 2006), 7.

These are valuable insights—there is *much* to be mined here. In the interest of time, however, I would like to engage Dr. Nilson’s treatment of Lonergan’s notion of *bias* and *encounter*, and especially his evocation of James Baldwin in elucidating Lonergan.

The black theologian would certainly find much to affirm in what has been said about Lonergan. For example, the emphasis upon encounter highlights a principle that is essential to black theology (and, in fact, to all liberation theologies): the immersion of people of faith in the lives of the marginalized and the outcast as a prerequisite for liberating theology—an immersion that is not merely an engagement, but a willingness to be transparent and to be engaged.

And yet, the black theologian might issue a challenge: what do you do when a recognition of bias isn’t enough? That there are well-meaning Catholic theologians who are willing to engage and be engaged by black theology is evident (e.g., Dr. Nilson himself, Robert Masson, Joe Feagin). For them—and others—encounter as a way to offset and reduce one’s bias is an imminently-sensible proposal. But isn’t the more fundamental problem the fact that all of this naively assumes a properly-functioning or at least well-intentioned racial epistemology? Isn’t the problem with *racial* bias the fact that its very nature is to hide itself, making it immune to resolution? In other words, black theologians would affirm *encounter* as an answer, but they might question whether theologians *have the capacity* to recognize bias as a problem.

It’s here that we come to what is known as an “epistemology of ignorance.” Charles Mills, in *Racial Contract*, argues that an epistemology of ignorance “prescribes for its signatories an inverted epistemology” comprised of “a particular pattern of localized and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and socially functional), producing the ironic outcome that whites will in general be unable

to understand the world they themselves have made.”⁸ The challenge here is to recast bias not as a “neglectful epistemic practice” (i.e., as a failure) but as a “*substantive* epistemic practice in itself.”⁹

It’s for this reason that Nilson’s appeal to Baldwin was so timely, for Baldwin is the literary par excellence with regard to an epistemology of ignorance. In the opening pages of the explosive *The Fire Next Time*, Baldwin says something that could also rightly (and sadly) be said of Western Christianity:

[T]his is the crime of which I accuse my country and my countrymen and for which neither I nor time nor history will ever forgive them, that they have destroyed and are destroying hundreds of thousands of lives and *do not know it and do not want to know it*.¹⁰

In her book *Revealing Whiteness: The Unconscious Habits of Racial Privilege*, Shannon Sullivan reflects upon Du Bois’ evolution in understanding white bias. She writes:

Du Bois came to realize that the ignorance manifested by white people was much more complex and sinister than he earlier had thought. Rather than an innocuous oversight, it was an active, deliberate achievement that was carefully (though not necessarily consciously) constructed, maintained, and protected. Du Bois eventually saw that to understand the white ignorance of non-white people, one has to hear the active verb “to ignore” at the root of the noun. What had initially seemed to him like an innocent lack of knowledge on white people’s part revealed itself to be a malicious production that masked the ugly Terrible of white exploitative ownership of non-white people and cultures.¹¹

The bias that must be confronted as a theological community, therefore, is not an “innocuous oversight,” but—as Robert Bernasconi phrases it—*the needing not to know and the forgetting what one never knew*.¹² This is, I submit, a possible challenge posed by Black Theology to Lonerganian thought—in the same way that Black Theology challenges the dominant forms of theology to move beyond abstract categories devoid of racial and social content, perhaps Black Theology can expand Lonergan’s thoughts to move beyond a generic conception of *bias* to consider the particularly insidious structures and forms germane to *racial* bias.

8 Charles W. Mills, *Racial Contract* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 18.

9 Linda Martín Alcoff, “Epistemologies of Ignorance: Three Types,” in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, ed. Shannon Sullivan et al. (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007), 39.

10 James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Vintage, 1993), 5. Emphasis added.

11 Shannon Sullivan, *Revealing Whiteness: The Unconscious Habits of Racial Privilege* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006), 20.

12 See Bernasconi’s “On Needing Not to Know and Forgetting What One Never Knew: The Epistemology of Ignorance in Fanon’s Critique of Sartre,” in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, ed. Shannon Sullivan et al. (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2007).

And yet, we find that Lonergan provides us with resources to tackle even this challenge. For, in a book devoted to elucidating the structures of *insight*, Lonergan takes the time to deal with individuals who *don't want* insight; individuals who *don't want* to encounter the Other. In Chapter 6 of *Insight*, Lonergan writes “Just as insight can be desired, so too it can be unwanted.”¹³ He continues:

To exclude an insight is also to exclude the further questions that would arise from it, and the complementary insights that would carry it towards a rounded and balanced viewpoint. To lack that fuller view results in behavior that generates misunderstanding both in ourselves and in others. To suffer such incomprehension favors a withdrawal from the outer drama of human living into the inner drama of fantasy.¹⁴

Notice how Lonergan indicates that the exclusion of insight indicates an inauthentic existence represented by a retreat into the “drama of fantasy.” Notice also how Lonergan’s words cohere with Baldwin’s, who writes:

For the sake of one’s children, in order to minimize the bill that *they* must pay, one must be careful not to take refuge in any delusion—and the value placed on the color of the skin is always and everywhere and forever a delusion.¹⁵

Perhaps, similar to Dr. Massingale’s contention that students of Lonergan might foreground Lonergan’s conception of ‘major authenticity,’ we could press students of Lonergan to emphasize the implications of an unwillingness to know. The challenge to theology would be to remind its practitioners that even as we consider ourselves people of faith who are seeking understanding, perhaps time should be taken to consider the ways in which we are actively *not* understanding.

13 Lonergan, *Insight*, 214.

14 Lonergan, *Insight*, 214.

15 Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 104.