

As I thought about the issues involved in this general topic, one major question constantly hovered in the background of my reflections. That question was, Jon, are you insane?! You are really going to speak of Lonergan in the presence of Bob Doran and Shawn Copeland?! You are going to speak of Black theology in the presence of Shawn Copeland and Bryan Massingale? Finally, I concluded that I was not insane, exactly; foolhardy, yes, but insane, no. Honored to be invited and I hope to learn a lot.

In the summer of 1961, a young white student, Gurdon Brewster, from Union Theological Seminary in New York spent eight weeks in Atlanta, living with Daddy King, Martin Luther King, Jr's father, as an assistant minister in their overwhelmingly African American church. In his account of that experience, *No Turning Back. My Summer with Daddy King*, he tells of his encounter with an elderly member of the church who had slowly lost her sight when she was a child after seeing her uncle lynched.

“Reverend,” she asked, “have you ever gone hungry?”

I was startled by her question. “No, never gone hungry,” I replied.

She slowly nodded her head as if to work with my statement.

“Ever been kicked off the land with a gun to your head and no place to go?”

“No,” I answered. This was followed by another silence, a shorter silence this time.

“You ever slept in the woods in the cold rain because white folks burnt your house down?”

“No,” I answered again.

“Ever wanted to run away to safety but had no place to run to?”

“No.”

She reached out and grabbed my knee, and facing into my face she blurted out, “What then, honey, do you have to sing about? . . . Always wondered what white folk sing about . . . They sing about bein' across the river on the other shore . . . But they left some of us behind. How do you sing about that?” (162-163)

Here Brewster experienced for himself what James Baldwin was saying around the same time:

You [white people] give me this advantage, that whereas you have never had to look at me, because you've sealed me away along with sin and death and all the other things you didn't want to look at, including love, my life was in your hands and I had to look at you. I know more about you, therefore, than you know about me. I've had to spend my life, after all – and all the other Negroes in the country have had to spend their lives – outwitting and watching white people. I had to know what you were doing before you did it.

Now the significance of Brewster's story and the importance of Baldwin's claim become clear when we turn to Bernard Lonergan for guidance on what it means to be a genuine theologian today. For Lonergan, the dirtiest four-letter word in the language begins with "B" - for bias. Bias is the most serious and most intractable obstacle to any understanding and social progress worthy of the name. Right at the beginning of *Insight*, he tells us how hard it is even to detect bias:

No problem is at once more delicate and more profound, more practical and perhaps more pressing. How, indeed, 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? (*Insight*, p. 8-9).

And later in *Method*, he warns that

. . . there is always a great need to eye very critically any religious individual or group [including and especially *theologians*, I would add] and to discern beyond the very real charity they may well have been granted the various types of bias that may distort or block their exercise of it (*Method*, p. 284).

“How, indeed, is a mind to become conscious of its own bias . . . ?” For Lonergan, encounter is the way: “encounter is the one way in which self-understanding and horizon are put to the test” and encounter means “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” (*Method*, p. 247). So it is the old woman in Daddy King’s congregation who showed Brewster the depth of his bias, however well-intentioned he had been, and it is Baldwin who declares the hermeneutical privilege of the black perspective in this our context, *Racist America* (Joe R. Feagin; E. Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists*; Peggy McIntosh, *Knapsack*)

But, in this case, “encounter” need not always be face-to-face – and perhaps it should not be. As Karen Teel points out, we white people cannot put yet *another* burden on our African American friends by asking them to instruct us on the essentials of Black life in the U.S. We can also study, listen, read - and gradually become less and less unconscious of the pervasive and destructive power of white supremacy.

This coming December 1 will be the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of James Baldwin’s death. His works are still in print and, though written in and for a different time in America, they can still sting, scorch, and enthrall this white reader. Let me tell you what I have learned about bias from my encounter with him. On a bleak winter evening, I was reading his essays on a bus to downtown Chicago when I came across his claim that the racial problem is a fundamentally white problem. A “nameless fear that has nothing to do with Negroes”<sup>1</sup> is the basis.

Perhaps the whole root of our trouble, the human trouble, is that we will sacrifice all the beauty of our lives, will imprison ourselves in totems, taboos, blood sacrifices, steeples, mosques, races, armies, flags, nations, in order to deny the fact of death, which is the only fact we have.<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> James Baldwin, *Essays*, 219-221.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 339. The original source of this quote is “Down at the Cross,” which first appeared in *The New Yorker* on November 17, 1962 and was then reprinted in *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Dial Press, 1963). Indeed, “His essays

Somehow, by the gift of the Holy Spirit, I could not forget his words.

And later I discovered a body of research in social psychology, known as Terror Management Theory or TMT, that supports Baldwin's claim. The fear of death can drive people to grab on to and defend some concrete sign of their worth or superiority or exalted status, which mitigates the fear. In "Racist America," "Whiteness" functions in this way. So blacks must be kept in "their" place because "In a way, the Negro tells us where the bottom is; *because he is there*, and *where he is*, beneath us, we know where the limits are and how far we must not fall. We must not fall beneath him."<sup>3</sup>

Baldwin perceived that the need to keep black people down is finally grounded in whites' fear of their own mortality. White supremacists create and maintain the illusion of whiteness not just as skin color but as the standard for humanity at its best. So whiteness confers a "symbolic immortality," an assurance that they belong to something more enduring and worthwhile in which, somehow, they will continue to participate after they die. White supremacy keeps the fear of death from paralyzing them. So it functions as an idol in precisely the way in which theologians like Tillich, Rahner, and Farley describe idolatry: a finite reality is fabricated to take the place of the unnamable, uncontrollable Ultimate within which truly "we live and move and have our being." Theological discussions of idolatry tend toward the general and abstract because the list of what or who might function as idol is well-nigh endless. Baldwin's important contribution is to show how idolatry actually works in racism/white supremacy.

So the idol of whiteness must be unmasked, but this means the courage on the part of each of us to face the certain reality of our own death. But how may this be done when both our culture hides the normativity of whiteness and our churches are so complicit in white supremacy, as Massingale has shown, that they often seem to be chaplains to sick middle class egos, as Cone has said? Where is the plaint of

---

hit hardest when he seeks the origins of America's racial crisis not in the head-on collision of black and white, but in certain corner or the national psyche that we don't like to inspect too closely. . . [as Baldwin says elsewhere], America's failure 'to accept the reality of pain, of anguish, of ambiguity, of death has turned us into a very peculiar and sometimes monstrous people.'" Jeremy McCarter, "James Baldwin: The Fire This Time," *Newsweek*, 16 August 2010, 47.

<sup>3</sup> Essays, 218-219. See also 337.

suffering in white Catholic preaching and hymnody? Where is the lament? Where is the outrage? Where is the cry “How long, O Lord?”

The quickest and surest liberation from bias is encountering the Black and womanist theologies that are born of the suffering-suffused life of black culture and black Christianity. Encounter the womanists in the collection, *A Troubling in my Soul*, Copeland’s *Enfleshing Freedom*. Encounter Massingale’s *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*, especially the last chapter on the vocation of the theologian, black and white – and pair it with Copeland’s essay from *Spiritus* on the same topic. Don’t miss Cone’s *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*.

Then, and only then, can we begin to understand how to live according to the “Law of the Cross” in Racist America: “God wisely decided and lovingly chose to take away the evils of the human race not by an act of power but by transforming those evils into a supreme good through the working of a just and mysterious law of the cross.” (219) Then, as theologians, we are truly prepared to work out the concrete determinations that Lonergan calls for in *Insight*: “So too it may be that the contemporary crisis of human living and human values demands of the theologian . . . a treatise on the concrete universal that is mankind [sic] in the concrete and cumulative consequences of the acceptance or rejection of the message of the Gospel.” (*Insight*, 743 [1958 ed]; quoted in Lamb, 277)

In sum, then, Lonergan makes clear not just the importance but the indispensability of reading Black theology in Racist America. That theology is not, as so many think, an optional theology for a particular people (i.e., African Americans) in particular times and places. Rather, it is necessary to the vocation of the theologian in the US.

Black theology, on the other hand, leads to a more concrete and precise understanding of Lonergan’s contributions to our theologizing by the needed details and specificity to Lonergan’s heuristic structures of authentic subjectivity and social progress.

In other words, Lonergan helps us to understand Black theology and Black theology helps us to understand Lonergan. Both together convince this white

theologian that, unless I continually grapple with the evil of white supremacy, I have no claim to the title of theologian.