

**LONERGAN, MALCOLM X, AND THE LIMITS OF
A CLASSICAL SOCIAL JUSTICE CHRISTOLOGY**

Response to Thomas Hughson
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By this title, I do not intend in any way to signal fundamental disagreement with, and even less a dismissal of, Thomas Hughson's project. He intends, if I understand him correctly, to address a concern that the social mission of the Christian churches suffers from an inadequate theological foundation. This inadequacy stems, at least in part, from a truncated Christology that focuses on the humanity of Jesus. Among the difficulties that Hughson detects is a tendency to regard the human Jesus as a prophetic social reformer who reflects the ideology of political progressivism. Hughson seeks to rectify this difficulty through a retrieval of classical Christology's insistence upon the dual nature of Christ. Chalcedon's insistence that the two natures operate without confusion or separation allows Hughson to focus our attention upon the divinity of Christ without at all compromising the contributions gained from our appreciation of his humanity. This retrieval of divinity, Hughson argues, grounds the social concerns of the church on a surer, more solid dogmatic/faith foundation and allows the believer to more fully appropriate the faith rationales for public witness and engagement while avoiding the pitfalls of either Hauwerwasian withdrawal or vacuous faith.

Such a project makes a valuable and necessary contribution. However, as a social theological ethicist who has a particular concern for the endemic racial injustice that Hughson admirably foregrounds at his essay's beginning, I was yet a little perplexed and troubled. I offer two reasons for my hesitancy, which I hope will contribute toward clarifying the nature and limits of Hughson's proposals.

The first stems from the realization that racism is more than demeaning jokes, harmful slurs, or deliberate acts of malice. In Lonerganian terms, racism is an instance of group bias, rooted in a communal flight from understanding. It is a collective refusal of unwanted insights that would challenge the privileged social status of Whites and entail difficult, demanding structural changes. (As contemporary yet provocative instances of such refusals of unwanted insight and flights from understanding, consider the maddening persistent yet totally false beliefs that President Obama is a Muslim, took his oath of office upon a Koran, or was not born in the United States.)

My concern is that such refusals of unwanted insight are neither accounted for nor adequately addressed through a retrieval of classical Christology. For in the face of privilege and to protect privilege, U.S. Christians tend to adjust their faith to fit their political and/or economic interests, rather than allow their faith to challenge their political beliefs and arrangements.¹

¹So note political scientists Robert D. Putnam and David E. Campbell in "Walking Away from Church," on-line at <http://articles.latimes.com/print/2010/oct/17/opinion/la-oe-1017-putnam-religion-20101017>. Accessed October 20, 2010.

Given this Lonerganian perspective, I doubt that the real reasons for many Christians' privatized faith or refusal of faith-based social justice tenets lie in mere ignorance about the intrinsic link between faith and justice (Hughson himself rightly notes the inefficacy of merely issuing a book such as the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, a document that is thoroughly classical in its Trinitarian anthropology). Instead, I contend such resistance to racial and social justice is more plausibly rooted in a stubborn bias and refusal of unwanted insight that actively and ingeniously evade the Christological challenge Hughson wishes to put forth. Put more directly, perhaps the disconnect between classical Christology and racial justice is due to a refusal of unwanted insight in order to protect and preserve unjust social privilege. White privilege trumps Christian identity.

My second reservation – which may be simply a deepening of the first– stems from the fact that human knowing is not only “biased” or over-sighted, as Lonergan describes, but also “interested.” That is to say, we humans tend to actively shape and “color” our insights and knowledge according to our social interests.

Classical Christological reflection is not immune from this, as Womanist scholars such as Kelly Brown Douglas (*The Black Christ*) and Jacquelyn Grant² (*White Women's Christ and Black*

²Kelly Brown Douglas, *The Black Christ* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994); and Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1989). “To claim that a minister's responsibility is to save souls and not to become involved in social justice issues is consistent with the religion of the White Christ. The White Christ is based upon an understanding of Christianity

Women's Jesus) point out. Malcolm X expresses this insight, and my concern, in a most provocative way when he challenges Christianity's white idol – an idol used exclusively to maintain white social, political, and cultural dominance:

The whole church structure in this country is white nationalism. You go inside a white church, that's what they're preaching, white nationalism. They've got Jesus white, Mary white, God white, everybody white: that's white nationalism.³

The rhetorical flourish should not blind us to the deep import of the critique. Retrieving the divinity of Christ does not serve the cause of justice if the representation of the divine – in this case in exclusively white images – provides a “sacred canopy” for racial (and other) injustices. Malcolm and other Black scholars thus remind us of the uncomfortable truth that even classical/orthodox Christology has served to justify social injustice.

My point is that one's Christology can be thoroughly “orthodox” and “classical” and yet also employed to interested ends. The symbol of God/Christ both socially functions and is societally formed, as Beth Johnson reminds us.⁴ A mere retrieval of classical Christology and the divinity of Christ is inadequate to combat or even detect such ideological uses and abuses.

that minimizes the significance of Jesus' ministry. *The Christian is called to believe that Jesus is God incarnate, not to carry forth Jesus' liberating work*” (Douglas, p. 37; emphasis added).

³Malcolm X, “The Ballot or the Bullet,” speech (April 3, 1964), Cleveland, OH. I cite from a private CD recording of this address.

⁴Elizabeth A. Johnson, “Naming God She: Theological Implications,” *The Boardman Lecture in Christian Ethics* (Oct. 19, 2000), 1.

Perhaps my reservations can be summed up by noting the starting point of “social justice” in this essay. The essay begins with a “dictionary” or abstract definition from the *Compendium* concerned with the “ordered” social functioning of various structures or social relationships. Such a starting point is a nod to Lonergan’s concept of “the good of order.” Yet perhaps Lonergan’s first transcendental precept (“Be Attentive”) – which parallels Jon Sobrino’s injunction of “honesty toward reality”⁵ – may lead us to a different starting point, namely, an awareness of disorder; of human violation, exploitation, and abuse; of the massive scandal of hunger in a world of plenty; of the outrage of millions who die of so-called “eradicated” diseases (that is to say, in the Western world) such as polio, tuberculosis, and malaria.⁶ With such a starting point, which I believe is consistent with the deepest Lonergan’s deepest

⁵Cf. Jon Sobrino, *Where is God? Earthquake, Terrorism, Barbarity, and Hope* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004) Chapter 3.

⁶Cf. Edward Schillebeeckx, *Church: The Human Story of God*: “Earlier forms of ethics, and indeed some contemporary ethics . . . presuppose that “order” is already given and that from this comes a command not to infringe this order. Here there is a degree of optimism about the interpretative power of “universal reason. It is often forgotten that this abstract universal reason . . . is itself also entangled in personal and social sinfulness and the lust for domination. For experience teaches us that even moral reason needs liberation. If we look more closely, *we see that the specific starting point for ethics is not so much “order,” which may not be disturbed, as our indignation at human beings in concrete history who are everywhere injured: at the disorder both in the human heart and in society and its institutions*” (emphasis added).

intuitions (after all, he studied insight precisely because of the propensity of human bias and oversight), I dare to believe and hope that *then* a retrieval of Christ's divinity may become a sharper tool in fashioning the more publicly responsible faith and social justice praxis that both Hughson and I so earnestly desire.

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