

BLACK LIBERATION THEOLOGY AND BLACK CATHOLICS: A CRITICAL CONVERSATION

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[No theology, Black or White, Protestant or Catholic can become Christian theology in North America or the world that does not engage White supremacy in society and the Church. To remain silent about the deadly consequences of White racism in the modern world automatically invalidates any theology's claim to Christian identity.]

A GROUP OF PROGRESSIVE White Catholics invited me in July 1983 to speak at a national conference on "Voices of Justice: The Challenge of Being Catholic and American in the 1980s."¹ I hesitated because most Whites, including liberal Christians, do not want to hear a radical race critique of their religious and secular institutions. They do not mind a mild reprimand as long as Blacks assure them that everything is all right. I could not do that. Blacks and Whites cannot have an honest dialogue about racial reconciliation without an active struggle for racial justice.

I decided to focus my reflections on the failure of White Catholic theologians to address White supremacy as a *theological* problem. I placed the Catholic Church in America in the same boat with its Protestant counterpart. Both are racist institutions whose priests, ministers, and theologians seem to think that White supremacy offers no serious contradiction to their understanding of the Christian faith. While racism is America's most radical and persistent sin, White Catholic and Protestant theologians are virtually silent about its pervasiveness in seminaries, churches, and every segments of the larger society. How people could claim to be *Christian*

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¹ See my "A Frank Challenge to the Catholic Church on Racism" in *The Tablet* 237 (July 30, 1983) 12–13. Also published as "A Theological Challenge to the American Catholic Church" in my *Speaking the Truth: Ecumenism, Liberation, and Black Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986) 50–60.

theologians in 20th-century America and not engage this country's original sin—racism—truly astounds me.

Like White Protestants, White Catholic theologians show no indications that they will end their conspicuous silence in the 21st century. Both are following a White tradition of nearly four centuries of silence. They were silent during 244 years of slavery and a 100 years of legal segregation and “spectacle lynching.” With few exceptions, White theologians were also silent during the 1960s Civil Rights and Black Power Movements. Instead of probing the theological meaning of the Black struggle for justice and White resistance to it, they focused their intellectual energies on the theological alternatives provided by Barth, Bultmann, and Rahner together with an emerging variety of antifoundational postmodernist thinkers.

WHITE SUPREMACY AND BLACK CATHOLICS

I have been writing about this silence for 30 years but White theologians still refuse to talk about White supremacy as a theological problem. They act as if they do not see racial oppression or hear the Black cries for justice. They must think either that racism is not a serious problem or that it is outside of the realm of theological discourse. How can that be since the reality of White supremacy is so obvious and Black protests against it so loud and persistent? If White theologians can see how the failure to engage anti-Semitism, classism, and sexism can destroy the credibility of theological discourse, why are they so blind to the poison of racism that corrupts Christian theological discourse? What is it that renders White Catholic and Protestant theologians silent in regard to racism, even though they have been very outspoken about anti-Semitism and class and gender contradictions in response to radical protest?

While White Catholics have been mute, Black Catholics have a long history of vocal resistance against racism—beginning with the Negro Catholic Congresses in the late-19th century and Federated Colored Catholics in the early-20th. In the late 1960s and early 1970s organized protests among Black priests and sisters began. Black Catholic clergy and scholars made racism in the Church and society the central focus of their pastoral and theological work. “A Statement of the Black Catholic Clergy Caucus” (1968)² and Lawrence Lucas’ *Black Priest/White Church* (1970)³ defined the early militancy of the Black Catholic voice with their blunt

² See “A Statement of the Black Catholic Clergy Caucus, April 18, 1968” in *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966–1979*, ed. Gayraud S. Wilmore and James H. Cone (Maryknoll N.Y.: Orbis, 1979) 322–24.

³ Lawrence Lucas, *Black Priest/White Church: Catholics and Racism* (New York: Random House, 1970).

attack on racism in the Catholic Church. These were followed by the pioneering work of the late Joseph Nearon of John Carroll University and the Black Catholic Theological Symposium, which initiated a collective effort toward the creation of a Black Catholic theology. The proceedings were published in 1978 as *Theology: A Portrait in Black*⁴ The symposium led to the creation of the Institute of Black Catholic Studies at Xavier University in New Orleans. In 1984, Black Bishops issued a pastoral letter on evangelization entitled *What We Have Seen and Heard* (1984), urging Black Catholics “to share the gift of our Blackness with the Church in the United States.”⁵

In the late 1960s, I met Lawrence Lucas in the context of the National Committee of Black Churchmen (NCBC) and was deeply moved by his militant commitment to blackness and his passion for racial justice. Joseph Nearon invited me several times to speak on Black liberation theology at John Carroll University. We spent many hours talking about the need to develop a Black Catholic theology. Moses Anderson (now Bishop) and I had similar conversations during my many visits to Xavier University. I encountered Shawn Copeland, Jamie Phelps, Tionette Eugene, and others in the context of the Black Theology Project of Theology in the Americas (TIA) and the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT). They impressed me most by their intellectual commitment to explore the theological implications of what it means to be both “truly Black and authentically Catholic.” Additional talks with Edward Braxton (now Bishop) and Diana Hayes further revealed the great intellectual promise of Black Catholic theology. I also spoke at several Black Catholic seminars, conferences, and religious gatherings during the 1970s and 1980s in San Francisco, Detroit, New York, and other cities. These events and persons placed me in dialogue with many Black Catholics who revealed significant limits in the Protestant perspectives on the Black Church and Black liberation theology.

In my 1983 talk to progressive Catholics and in *For My People* (1984), I referred to the restrictions the Catholic Church places on Blacks, stifling their theological creativity.

Although black Catholics challenged the racist character of the Catholic Church in the U.S.A., they have not made a significant academic contribution to the field of black theology, and the reasons are partly obvious. The white power structure in the Catholic Church is so restrictive on what blacks can do or say that it is almost

⁴ See *Theology: A Portrait in Black*, ed. Thaddeus J. Posey, Black Catholic Theological Symposium Proceedings 1 (October 12–15, 1978) Baltimore, Maryland.

⁵ See *What We Have Seen and Heard: A Pastoral Letter on Evangelization from the Black Bishops of the United States* [issued September 9, 1984] (Cincinnati, Ohio: St. Anthony Messenger, 1984) 3.

impossible to think creatively. . . . As a black Protestant who looks at the Catholic Church from the outside, the immensity of the task of trying to challenge the tradition of Catholic theology *and* also remain inside the church is so great that it overwhelms me.⁶

It did not take long for several Black Catholic scholars to remind me that they were not overwhelmed. Indeed, since my comments, a determined group of Black Catholic theologians have emerged who, despite the enormity of the challenge, are creating a theological voice that is true to both their racial heritage and religious commitment. Their most important historical contribution is Cyprian Davis's *The History of Black Catholics in the United States* (1990).⁷ In pastoral and constructive theology, *Black and Catholic: The Challenge and the Gift of Black Folk* (1997)⁸ and *Taking Down Our Harps: Black Catholics in the United States* (1998)⁹ are their most significant contributions. Black liberation theology is no longer just Protestant but Catholic too.

Black Catholic theology is good for the continuing development of Black theology. We need a variety of theological voices, representing every segment of Black life. It has never been my intention to limit Black theology to Protestant perspectives. Such a view would be much too limiting. The Black community needs all its intellectual and religious resources—Catholic, Protestant, Islamic, and every other transcendent vision that emerges from the Black struggle for justice. Black Catholics number more than two million in the U.S. and far greater numbers throughout the world. Their theological contribution is critical for the development of an inclusive liberative vision for the African American community. No one can be absolutely sure whose theological viewpoint will be the most liberating. We can only bear witness to “what we have seen and heard” in our efforts to unravel faith's meaning in a world of contradictions. We grow in wisdom and knowledge when we share our perspectives with an openness to learn from one another. I welcome Black Catholic theologians to the conversation about the meaning and future directions of Black liberation theology. If we enter into dialogue with the sincere belief that each has much learn from the other, we will deepen the Black theological vision on both sides.

⁶ James H. Cone, *For My People: Black Theology and the Black Church* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1984) 50–51.

⁷ Cyprian Davis, *The History of Black Catholics in the United States* (New York: Crossroad, 1990).

⁸ *Black and Catholic: The Challenge and Gift of Black Folk*, ed. Jamie T. Phelps (Milwaukee: Marquette University, 1997).

⁹ *Taking Down Our Harps: Black Catholics in the United States*, ed. Diana L. Hayes and Cyprian Davis (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1998).

CRITICAL QUESTIONS

It is, therefore, with genuine humility and an openness to learn from Black Catholic scholars that I venture to raise some critical concerns. They are questions that arise out of my reading and conversations.

Christian and Racist?

(1) Is it possible to be racist and Christian at the same time? As a Black Christian, this is the question I struggle with deeply. That was why I wrote *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969) and *A Black Theology of Liberation* (1970) and all the other books and articles that followed. I am still struggling with the Christian faith, arguing with its interpreters, past and present in White and Black communities. That is the only way I can make it my own. As long as the Christian faith is connected with White supremacy and other horrendous evils, I must struggle with it or reject it as the work of evil White men. If I continue to embrace it, I do so with an uneasy conscience, knowing that nothing about it can be taken for granted. When I think of how many Black people have been enslaved, segregated, and lynched by White Christians, I would have to be stone crazy to affirm that faith without rethinking its meaning. How can slaves affirm the faith of slave masters and still keep their religious sanity? This question is no less valid for Black Catholics than it is for Black Protestants or for oppressed people around the world. When I read Black Catholic theologians, I often feel that they avoid the tough questions that challenge Catholic theology and dogma. It appears that they want to prove their loyalty by not questioning the faith of the Catholic Church. But if Black Catholics stand within the tradition, they have just as much right to question and challenge it as other people. If the Catholic tradition is really inclusive and belongs to Blacks, they must demand that faith give an account of the racism deeply embedded in the Church and its theology.

Black Catholic scholars use their intellectual capital to show that Black Catholicism is not an anomaly but is deeply embedded in both the Catholic tradition and African and African American history and culture. They answer the question whether one can be “truly Black and authentically Catholic” with an unequivocal and emphatic yes! “We are proclaiming to the church and the world at large,” writes theologian Diana Hayes, “that to be Black and Catholic is not a paradox; it is not a conflict, it is not a contradiction. To be Black and Catholic is correct, it is authentic, it is who we are and have always been.”¹⁰ This issue arises because the Catholic Church ignores the cultural gifts of Black folk and the African American

¹⁰ Diana L. Hayes, “We’ve Come This Far by Faith: Black Catholics and Their Church” in *ibid.* 1–14, at 9.

community ignores the Catholic presence in its midst. White Catholics question Black Catholics' commitment to Catholicism and Black Protestants question their commitment to blackness.

While documenting the history and contributions of Black Catholics is an important undertaking for Black self-esteem, it will not necessarily initiate a disciplined and sustained reflection on the meaning of the gospel in a world defined by White supremacy. Theology raises questions about what makes Christianity Christian and what invalidates it. When Black Catholics show that one can be both Black and Catholic, their evidence is primarily historical, not theological. They tell us that Blacks have been in the Roman Catholic Church and the Black community from their beginnings and neither White Catholics nor Black Protestants can exclude them. This is a powerful historical argument that has been persuasively demonstrated by Cyprian Davis's *History of Black Catholics*.

Black liberation theology emerged out of the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements as Black ministers and theologians sought to reconcile blackness with the gospel in a world where the public meaning of Christianity was identified with whiteness. Is Christianity a White religion as Malcolm X claimed and as Black invisibility in White theology suggested? If authentic Christianity is not alien to blackness, how do we demonstrate that theologically in a religious environment where Black is associated with the devil and White with the angels? If the true gospel of Jesus affirms the liberative presence of blackness and identifies whiteness as a symbol of the demonic, what is the theological status of White churches? Can churches and theologies be racist and Christian at the same time? These questions initiated the development of Black liberation theology. An ecumenical group of Black clergy and theologians (including Catholics) explored them in a passionate, sustained, and disciplined manner in the context of the NCBC.

Black caucuses in many Protestant denominations were created when African American clergy and laity sought power in church structures commensurate with their numbers. Their chief concern was whether one could be Black and Methodist, Episcopalian, Lutheran, or Presbyterian. Black caucuses forced White churches to be more inclusive in their denominational operations.

Black Catholics seem to be dealing with the same issue as Black caucuses in Protestant denominations—fighting for appropriate Black representations in every phase of the Catholic Church. I have no objections to this focus. It is a very important justice concern. But I also would like to see Black Catholic theologians critically examine faith issues, especially as they relate to White supremacy in the Catholic Church and American society. Can one be a Christian theologian in America and not engage White supremacy as a theological problem? Can one think correctly about

God and not oppose slavery and segregation in a nation and Church defined by them? If one concludes that it is impossible to be racist and Christian, he or she will be forced to interrogate the meaning of racism in order to oppose this terrible evil. If one concludes that racism is not an issue that involves Christian identity, one will not feel the need to make a theological examination of it.

I urge Black Catholic theologians to offer a critical theological perspective on the Catholic faith and challenge Blacks and Whites to respond to it. They should not let White Catholic theologians ignore Black people's contribution to humanity. *Theological Studies* deserves much credit for devoting this special issue to Black Catholic theology. This is an important beginning but much more is needed. We need to hear not only what Black theologians have to say about Black theology but also what White Catholics have to say about the Black theological critique of White theology.

In 1974, Joseph R. Nearon addressed the Catholic Theological Society of America and bluntly said: "Catholic theology is racist."¹¹ His intention was not to "condemn" but to "awaken."¹² More than 20 years later moral theologian Bryan Massingale of St. Francis Seminary, Milwaukee, reported that Nearon's "wake up call has gone unheeded. . . ."¹³ White Catholic theologians are still sound asleep. In a revealing analysis, Massingale's research shows just how deep the sleep of moral theologians has been regarding racism in the society and the Church.

It seems that there is nothing Black people can say or do that will wake White theologians out of their slumber. But we must keep trying to shake them out of their indifference to "one of the most shameful scandals of modern Christianity."¹⁴ Racism is a profound contradiction of the gospel. No one, absolutely no one can be a representative of Jesus and treat others as subhuman. There can be no compromise on this point. Any theology that does not fight White supremacy with all its intellectual strength cancels its Christian identity. This is where I stand. I invite Black Catholic theologians (and Whites too) to let the world know where they stand theologically. I am sure we could have a very fruitful dialogue.

¹¹ Joseph Nearon, "Preliminary Report: Research Committee for Black Theology" in *Catholic Theological Society of America, Proceedings 29* (1974) 413-17, at 415. Also cited in Bryan Massingale, "The African American Experience and U.S. Roman Catholic Ethics: 'Strangers and Aliens No Longer?'" in *Black and Catholic* 79-101, at 85.

¹² *Ibid.* 415.

¹³ Bryan Massingale, "African American Experience and U.S. Roman Catholic Ethics" 85.

¹⁴ Jerome Le Doux, "Christian Pastoral Theology Looks at the Black Experience" in *Theology: A Portrait in Black* 113-25, at 115.

Black and Catholic

(2) If there is no critical engagement of the meaning of the Christian faith, no constructive theology is likely. Black Catholic theologians say that there is no conflict between being Black and being Catholic. That may be true. But how can they be so sure if they have not gone “beyond the edges of Catholic doctrinal teachings?”¹⁵ Merely rejecting “the imputation of the patently false dichotomy between black and Catholic”¹⁶ and pointing to Blacks who have been Catholics for centuries do not settle the issue theologically. Constructive theology begins with critique, a clearing away of unnecessary theological debris. When the garbage is cleared, one can retrieve the best in one’s tradition and move in new theological directions. Neo-Orthodoxy critiqued liberal theology and affirmed God’s radical transcendence. Third world liberation theologies criticized first world academic theologies and identified social analysis and praxis as the first step in doing theology. Black theology attacked White theology and identified God’s revelation with the liberation of the poor, particularly among Blacks struggling for justice in a land defined by White supremacy. Feminist, womanist, and mujerista theologies condemned patriarchal theologies as misogynistic and dualistic, and affirmed women’s experience as sacred. Gay men and lesbian theologies impugned traditional theologies as antibody and identified God’s presence as erotic power. What theologies are Black Catholics critiquing? What is absent from Catholic theology that they think essential for the right understanding of the Christian faith? What is found in Catholic theology or Black theology that is detrimental to a correct perspective on the faith?

Following the critique, theology moves toward construction, knowing that the new construct will always need to be continually evaluated. When people move into uncharted theological waters, overemphasis and mistakes are to be expected. Critical responses to a new theological proposal come in many forms from people with a variety of motives. Among the responses may be people who label the new theological proposal as heretical—one that appears to be Christian but is not. Others may disagree with certain points of the perspective but will lend support to the major emphasis. Still others will dismiss the new alternative as not worth acknowledging as a serious theological proposal.

It is important for a new theological proposal to welcome critical responses and to engage them, responding to the strengths and weaknesses of

¹⁵ See M. Shawn Copeland, “Method in Emerging Black Catholic Theology” in *Taking Down Our Harps* 120–44, at 133.

¹⁶ See *ibid.* 120.

their critiques. No theology can grow to maturity without creative dialogue and debate. The worse thing that can happen to a new theological perspective is to be ignored. White theology tried to kill Black theology by ignoring it, treating it as a passing fad. It is typical of the dominant group to treat others struggling for recognition as if they don't really count and thus deserve no intellectual acknowledgement. However, Black theology did not disappear because it focused its theological energy on the identity of the faith and the survival and liberation of the Black community.

Black Catholic theologians should not let Black Protestant theologians ignore the Catholic content of their understanding of the Christian faith. Neither Black Protestants nor Black Catholics should assume that White Catholic and Protestant theologians have answered faith's queries emerging out of our history and culture. It is our task to dialogue with each other, as we deepen our conversation with others, knowing that there is something radically wrong with a faith that condones or tolerates White supremacy. We must let White Catholics and Protestants alike know that we are completely united on this point. No compromise is acceptable. We must make our critique of the arrogance of White theology so profoundly clear that no White theologians will feel comfortable without making race criticism an essential component of their understanding of Christian theology.

If Black Catholic theologians do not feel a contradiction between being Black and Catholic there is no need for them to struggle with White theologians' understanding of the Christian faith. They simply accept what Bernard Lonergan or some other White Catholic theologian says about it and give a Black twist to it. Theology arises out of the contradictions between faith and life. If life presents faith with no contradictions, no creative theology will emerge. The deeper the contradiction the more profound the theology that emerges out of it.

The contradictions that Black Catholics seem to express in their writings are not primarily with the Catholic faith but with its practice in ethics, liturgy, and other pastoral aspects. But how can the ethics of the Church be flawed and not its theology? How can people think correctly about God and treat their neighbors as subhuman? How can the worship style be changed without affecting faith's understanding?

Black Protestants and White Catholics create a theological dilemma for Black Catholic theologians. As a minority in both groups, Black Catholics should never feel comfortable with the faith of a community that ignores their history and culture, and with a racial community that does not take seriously their religious heritage. The pull on both sides appears to be in opposite directions. This contradiction demands a radical theological response, critiquing and affirming both sides of the paradox. The theological alternative that emerges from this struggle is not just Black or merely

Catholic or a mixture of the two but a completely fresh theological voice that affirms the humanity of all. I eagerly await the next stage of Black Catholic theology's development.

Whose Separatism?

(3) Why do Black Catholic theologians feel the need to assure White Catholics that in naming themselves *Black* Catholics “we are not repudiating the universal nature and mission of our church?”¹⁷ It never ceases to amaze me when Whites accuse Blacks of separatism because Blacks insist on valuing Black culture in a White society and Church that denigrate it. The people who invented legal segregation in the U.S. accuse the victims of being guilty of the evil that Whites themselves spent 400 years perfecting. I get angry every time I hear Whites accusing Blacks of being anti-universal when no other people in the modern world have been guiltier of that sin than Whites. The sin of separatism is deeply embedded in White culture and White theologians still continue to perpetuate it by rendering Blacks invisible in their discourse.

I also get a little bothered when Blacks respond to the separatism issue as if Whites have a genuine point of concern. Of course, there are Black separatists as despicable as many Whites. The main difference between them is this: Black separatism is a reaction to White separatism, while the latter arises from its own power to dominate. Power breeds separatism, and Blacks do not have much of that, at least not power over Whites.

It is important to note that not all separatism is bad. In a world where oppressed people are trying to survive, separatism may be necessary. Even Martin Luther King, Jr., recognized that point. Speaking to Jews (a people who know something about separatism as a means of survival) in the context of the Black Power movement, King acknowledged the necessity of “temporary segregation.”¹⁸ “There are times when we must see segregation as a temporary way-station to a truly integrated society. . . . We don't want to be integrated *out* of power; we want to be integrated *into* power.”¹⁹

Separatism is always temporary, never permanent, never the goal to be achieved. Our calling as Christians is to create one community—Blacks and Whites, men and women and all other expressions of humanity. The beloved community is the goal of the Christian life. But we cannot get there unless all of humanity is treated with dignity and respect. That includes Black people's history and culture being acknowledged in White Catholic

¹⁷ Ibid. 122.

¹⁸ “Conservation With Martin Luther King,” *Conservative Judaism* 22, no. 3 (Spring 1968) 1–19, at 8.

¹⁹ Ibid. 8, 9.

theology as essential to its understanding of the Christian faith. I have yet to read a White Catholic theologian who regarded Black history and culture as essential to their articulation of the faith.

The same is not true of Black Catholic theologians. White theology is acknowledged. Perhaps too much. That is why the separatism question is so inappropriate. Black Catholic theologians are just coming to voice. They need independence and freedom to speak out of their history and culture without having to answer White theologians' questions about reconciliation.

Loving blackness does not mean the same thing as loving whiteness. Loving whiteness means glorifying White supremacy, and American history is replete with the devastating consequences of that affirmation. Loving blackness means valuing Black history and culture in a White society and church that refuse to acknowledge Black existence as worthy of respect. It means affirming the blackness that Whites rejected as "dirt and filth, evil and sin, guilt and moral degradation, death and the diabolical."²⁰

No Black Catholic theologian should feel the need to reassure White Catholics that Blacks are not separatists. That shoe belongs on the other foot. Whites need to prove to Blacks that they are not separatists, especially regarding the sources and the content of their theology. They need to explain to African Americans why they ignore Black Catholic reflections in their theological discourse. They engage Feminist, Latin American, and other White reflections on God. Why are they silent on Black theological reflections? If one read only White Catholic theologians, one would hardly know that Blacks exist in America or had the capacity for thought about God. White theological reflections are limited to their own culture and history as if they are the only thinkers on the planet. This is clever, hidden separatism.

The Black separatism issue is a White problem, derived from White guilt about the long and violent history of White separatism in the Church and society. Black separatism is almost inconsequential when compared to deadly consequences of White racism. The great danger for Blacks is not their separation from Whites but rather their separation from themselves, their culture and history. We spend much of our lives getting away from each other because our survival and quality of life often depend upon making a successful integration into White controlled institutions and communities. To become successful theologians in the Church and the academy, Blacks must not isolate themselves from the people who wield the power to exclude them from meaningful work. For White theologians to become successful, they do not need Black approval. They do not even have to acknowledge Black people's presence. Whites can be blatant racists and still achieve a degree of success in their Church.

²⁰ Copeland, "Method in Emerging Black Catholic Theology" 121.

What Black Catholics cannot be—and White Catholics are likely to be—are committed separatists. Blacks know they need Whites but Whites do not think they need Blacks or anybody else but themselves. That is why they are usually the first to leave when too many Blacks move into their neighborhood or achieve too much power in a mainstream institution. I am often puzzled why supposedly clear thinking, liberal Whites ask Blacks about separatism when the evidence is so overwhelming that this danger lies with the dominant White community.

No people in America need to learn how to love themselves more than Blacks. The violence we commit against each other is a poignant expression of that fact. We do not kill Whites, except in rare cases and usually by mentally disoriented persons. Blacks kill each other daily at the slightest provocation because we have internalized the hate Whites have toward us. That was why Malcolm said, “the worse crime the White man has committed has been to teach us to hate ourselves.” We must develop a theology that will speak to the problem of Black self-hate and thereby create a religious value system that encourages us to love blackness passionately and without compromise. If White theologians call that separatism, that is because they want to keep White supremacy in place.

Black Experience and Catholic Tradition

(4) What is the starting point of Black Catholic theology? Is it the Black experience or the Catholic tradition? Shawn Copeland puts the matter sharply: “By whose or what authority does black Catholic theology speak?”²¹ Nothing is more important for theology than selecting the sources used for construction and deciding their importance in relation to each other. Black Catholic theologians are clear about the sources of their theological construction. “Black Catholic theology,” writes theologian Jamie Phelps, “has articulated a two source starting point: Black experience and Catholic tradition.”²² They are less clear which of the two has priority.

When Black consciousness burst forth in the Catholic Church during the late 1960s and throughout much of the 1970s and early 1980s, Black Catholics placed Black before Catholic. In 1970 the National Convention of Black Lay Catholics resolved “we are black first and then Catholic.”²³ Theologian Shawn Copeland expressed the same sentiment in 1980: “Since the six tumultuous months in my 23rd year, when I effectively though reluctantly, demonstrated against the insensitivity of certain diocesan de-

²¹ Ibid. 120.

²² Jamie T. Phelps, “The Sources of Theology: African-American Catholic Experience in the United States” in her *Black and Catholic* 159–73, at 164.

²³ See “The Resolutions of the National Convention of Lay Catholics,” *Freeing the Spirit* 1, no. 3 (Summer, 1972) 41–42, at 42.

cisions regarding ministry to black Catholics and . . . was quietly asked out of one religious congregation and welcomed into another, *I have been black first and Catholic second*.”²⁴ Her decision was based on an incontrovertible fact. “No matter what, one can never be excommunicated, transferred, ostracized, bullied, bribed, or cajoled out of black skin. It is irrevocable. It is permanent. It is indelible. And this skin is a horizon, a maximum field of vision from a definite standpoint for understanding and shaping one’s place in the universe.”²⁵

The permanent character of blackness was only one factor that made Black Catholics choose blackness first. The other factor was the overwhelming reality of racism in the Catholic Church. The Black Clergy Caucus expressed the sentiment of most Black Catholics when it described the Catholic Church in the United States as “primarily a white racist institution.”²⁶ Even White U.S. Catholic bishops issued a “Pastoral Letter on Racism” (1979) and declared that “Racism is an evil which endures in our society and in our Church.”²⁷ In spite of their willingness to address overt racism, the Church has yet to critique the institutions and theology that perpetuate it.

More recently, as Black Catholics moved into the mainstream of the theological arena where racism is more hidden, they seem to place Black second and express their fidelity first to the Catholic doctrinal teachings. Responding to J. Deotis Roberts’s support of George Stallings (the Black priest who severed all ties with the Catholic Church) and to my claim that Blacks have little space to be Black in the Catholic Church, Cyprian Davis said that, “neither Cone nor Roberts seems to understand the deep commitment in faith that has made Black Catholics remain rooted in the Catholic Church.”²⁸ I do understand that commitment but my question is whether the Catholic commitment takes priority over the commitment to blackness. If it does, I strongly disagree with it, as would many other Black Protestant theologians.

Davis is right in his contention that Black Catholics are agreed on the faith commitment to Catholicism. If they did not have that faith commitment, they would be in deep trouble with the White religious leaders in the American Catholic Church. Perhaps that is why Shawn Copeland is so emphatic in her claim that “Black Catholic theology is conservative—

²⁴ M. Shawn Copeland, “Black Catholics and Their Church,” *America* 142 (March 29, 1980) 270–71, at 270; emphasis added.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ See “Statement” in Wilmore and Cone, *Black Theology* 322.

²⁷ See *Brothers and Sisters to Us: U.S. Bishops’ Pastoral Letter on Racism in our Day* (Washington: United States Catholic Conference, 1979) 1.

²⁸ Cyprian Davis, “Speaking the Truth: Black Catholics in the United States” in *Taking Down Our Harps* 281–85, at 282.

critically and intentionally so.”²⁹ Quoting John Thiel’s *Imagination and Authority* in the second part of her statement, she also says: “We black Catholic moral and systematic theologians commit ourselves to fidelity to the authority of tradition, and this fidelity includes the responsible exercise of creative and critical mediation. In other words, the practice of black Catholic theology is an act of ‘creative fidelity’ and, as such, it entails intellectual, moral, and religious ‘responsibility to God, to the traditional sources of God’s revelation, and to the historical medium in which they are appropriated by the believing church.’”³⁰ With this statement, it is hard to put Black first as she did in the 1970s and early 1980s.

There is no doubt that being Black is still very important for Davis, Copeland, and other Black Catholic theologians who are creating a distinctive Black voice in Catholic theology. Being “truly Black and authentically Catholic” is a recurring theme in their theological discourse. And they clearly devote more space articulating what it means to be Black than they do to Catholic. One could conclude that makes Black first. But I am not sure about that. Emotionally Black may be first, but theologically, it is second.

Joseph Nearon was well aware of the need to engage the complexity of this issue in “Challenge to Theology: The Situation of American Blacks,” a lecture he presented in 1975 at the annual convention of the Catholic Theological Society of America. “To whom is the black theologian accountable?”³¹ he asked. His answer was clear and challenging. First, “[t]he black theologian is accountable to the black community.”³² And second, “[t]he black theologian, like every theologian, is accountable to God.”³³ What is most revealing was his refusal to grant authority to the White church hierarchy. “Sometimes we make too much of the accountability of the theologian to the church, meaning the official magisterium and too little of his [and her] accountability to God. The words of the Acts of the Apostles ‘. . . whether it is better to obey God or men’ (5:29) apply here.”³⁴

With God and the Black community as the authority of theological discourse, Black theology is free to take risks without having to worry about White theologians passing final judgment on what is Christian or Catholic. It seems that present-day Black Catholic theologians have not explored in depth what Nearon’s early theological explorations initiated.

²⁹ Copeland, “Method in Emerging Black Theology” 133.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Joseph Nearon, “A Challenge to Theology: The Situation of American Blacks,” *Catholic Theological Society of America, Proceedings* 30 (1975) 177–202, at 186.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid. 187.

³⁴ Ibid.

In my perspective on Black liberation theology, there is a dialectical relationship between the Black experience and the Christian tradition. Each interprets and judges the other. While there is a distinction between the two, there is no clear separation between them because they are involved in each other. The tradition connects Black people with the earliest beginnings of Christianity. The Black experience connects Black people with themselves—their history and culture—and rejects any interpretation of the gospel that condones or tolerates Black oppression. No doctrinal teachings of any church will ever make me forget the need for black people to value themselves. As Malcolm X said, “All of us are black first and everything else second.”³⁵

We must not forget that White theologians are clever and, again using Malcolm X’s words, they can “make the victim look like the criminal and the criminal look like the victim.”³⁶ They made Black evil and dirty, and White good and pure when the reverse was closer to the truth. As Reinhold Niebuhr said, referring to the Dutch Church justification of White supremacy in South Africa: “Christian truth may be corrupted to be an instrument of evil.”³⁷ The corruption of Christian truth also happened in the U.S. during slavery and segregation, and it continues to the present day, revealed especially in White theology’s silence about covert racism in the Church and the society.

By placing the Black experience alongside the Christian tradition, we help protect it from being corrupted by sophisticated White theologians. No group has done more in defining the public meaning of the gospel than White scholars. And no group has done more to corrupt its meaning, making Christianity seem compatible with White supremacy. White scholars taught Black theologians. We read their books and listen to their erudite reflections in professional societies. White theologians undoubtedly shape how we think about the Christian faith. If we are not careful, we will be lured into accepting a perspective on the faith that denies our worth and our capacity to think. White theology’s silence on the Black experience and White supremacy is nothing but a denial of our worth as human beings. If we accept their view of the gospel, we are disrespecting ourselves. No one respects a people who do not respect themselves.

The Black experience should be the first and most important source we use to interpret the meaning of the gospel. Since Blacks were at the be-

³⁵ Malcolm X, “God’s Angry Men,” *Westchester Observer*, May 31, 1958.

³⁶ *Malcolm X Speaks: Selected Speeches and Statements*, ed. George Breitman (New York: Grove, 1965) 165.

³⁷ Reinhold Niebuhr, “Editorial Notes,” *Christianity and Crisis* 14, no. 23 (January 19, 1955) 178.

ginning, using the Black experience as a source is like using the Christian tradition to interpret itself. We Black theologians need to make it clear that we reject any view of the gospel that denies our worth as a people. To make our worth the starting point of theology is to begin with God's creation of blackness as good—very good. If the interpreters of the Christian faith deny or ignore this fact, we must fight them with all our theological might and refuse to dignify their discourse with the label Christian.

THE UNFINISHED AGENDA

Black Catholic and Protestant theologians need to make ourselves clear on the relationship between the Black experience and the traditions of our denominations, as we did during the early development of Black liberation theology. At that time, White theologians excluded us from their seminaries and universities, preventing us from acquiring formal theological credentials. We did our theology in the streets and in the midst of the Black struggle for justice. Whites did everything they could to demean our theological efforts and to silence our voice. Each of us has our own horror stories to tell. But we refused to be denied. We did not care what White theologians thought as we searched for a Black voice in theology. We sang our theological songs, preached our theology in sermon, and wrote manifestoes to blackness. We knew in our hearts that we were right and they were in league with the devil.

But today, White theologians have changed their tactics. They smile as if they are our friends, ready to help us in our theological work. They let a few of us matriculate and teach in their schools. I have been at Union Seminary for 31 years. Black faculties are teaching and students are matriculating in many graduate schools. Things have changed. No one can deny that. But things have also remained the same. White supremacy is still just as real and deadly as it ever was. It is dominant in seminaries, universities, and churches, as in other segments of American life. We so-called successful Black theologians must never forget that. When the question is asked, by whose or what authority do we speak, there is only one answer for Black theologians whether Catholic or Protestant. Our authority for our theology should be the God revealed in Black history and culture—that power that can make a way out of no way, the one who brought our grandparents through slavery and segregation so that we could do theology with independence, courage and verve. Our Black ancestors are our authority and not White church hierarchies that condoned or ignored the suffering of our people. There is no way that a White supremacist Church will ever have authority over me. White supremacy is an outrage to the Christian conscience. It should be Black theologians mission to destroy

White supremacy and fight against any theology that supports or tolerate it.

I am deeply grateful to Black Catholics for inviting me to be a part of this conversation. I also hope that my word is received as an effort to make a contribution to the ongoing development of Black Catholic and Protestant theologies. I eagerly await responses from everyone (including White theologians) committed to theology and its work for the Church and for social transformation.