

“Doing Black Catholic Theology: Rhythm, Structure, and Aesthetics”

[in *Chicago Studies* 42: 2 (Summer 2003): 127-141.]

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You must become a blues singer—only you find the rhythm and catch it good and you structure it as you go along—then the song is you.

Romare Bearden

Black Catholic theology in the United States or African American Catholic theology seeks to discern and interpret the Divine presence and action in the world on behalf of God’s very own black creation—women and men who in church and society are shoved to the margins, whose very flesh is despised, whose experience is rendered invisible, whose voices go unheard. Thus, black Catholic theology emerges from the underside of the spiritual, historical, and cultural matrices that are African America and American Catholicism. Systematic, moral, and pastoral or practical theologies coming from this underside, grounded in and responsible to the lived faith experience of black Catholic communities cannot ignore the question of method.

In this article, I pose a comprehensive way or method of doing black Catholic theology that takes inspiration from the epigraph by African American painter and collagist Romare Bearden. His riff on the disciplined life of the artist (and scholar) provides an evocative way of thinking about theological method. Bearden’s point turns

on metaphors and realities that are at home in black culture and in Catholic faith—rhythm, structure, and aesthetics. Accordingly, a method or comprehensive way of doing black Catholic theology (1) finds and catches the rhythms or expressive meanings of the ordinary and depth experience of the black lifeworld; (2) structures or interprets as well as critiques and transforms those meanings in order to (3) nurture black human living that embraces the Gospel, that esteems truth, goodness, and beauty. At the same time, in doing theology something happens to the black Catholic theologian. She or he becomes a blues singer, a woman or man who is willing, as Ralph Ellison once wrote, “to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one’s aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it” [Ellison, 2001: 103]. She or he becomes “a jazz freedom fighter,” a man or woman who attempts, as Cornel West declares, “to galvanize and energize world-weary people” for creative organization, accountable leadership, imaginative and social transformative action.

Finding and Catching the Rhythms

The theologian of the black lifeworld attunes her or his ear to the content and meaning of human experience. The notion of experience is, at once, general, dense, misused, and misunderstood. To reduce experience to subjective emotion saturates the human subject in the psychological and relegates human potential to transitory or passing emotion. To restrict experience to passive reception of sense data out-there-now brackets whole areas of human life that cannot be tested empirically and denies the reality of the spiritual. These meanings limit both our notions of experience and of the human subject.

To bring some precision to our considerations, we can distinguish between the world of immediate experience and the world mediated by meaning. The world of

immediacy belongs, first, to the infant, then, to the child. Sense experience—seeing, hearing, touching, tasting, smelling—sum up and border this world. In contrast, the world mediated by meaning is the world of the adult. This world is not simply given, it must be achieved; it advances and retracts in proportion to our capacities, development, and skills. Through increasingly complex operations and cooperations of language, understanding, meaning, research, and experimentation, we assemble, explain, and hand on a far larger world—the world of history and culture, of scholarship and science, of religious experience, of philosophy and theology [Lonergan, 1972: 28-31, 238-39, 263].

The world mediated by meaning is a complex world and the differences in human development that it reflects stem from differentiations of human consciousness. The notion of differentiation of consciousness adverts to our awareness that human consciousness flows in different and dynamic patterns of experience—the biological, psychological, social, aesthetic (artistic), mystical (religious or worshipful), dramatic, and intellectual [Lonergan, 1992: 196-231]. These patterns may merge and complement one another or they may intrude and clash; they derive from our needs which generate desires which generate interests or purposes.

The implication of these patterns for black Catholic theology concerns its ability to catch the polyrhythms or plural meanings of our community's particular and differentiated realization of human experience, while attending to black participation in all that is essentially human and critiquing any tendencies, behaviors, attitudes, and arrangements that block black human flourishing before God.

All of the patterns supply data for black Catholic theological reflection, but here we concentrate on the social, dramatic, and religious patterns. If black Catholic theology is to provide sound assistance to the humanizing and evangelizing work of the Church in

African American communities and share in the responsibility to articulate a theology of social transformation for our nation, then it must interrogate the social pattern of human experience. This will entail thorough assessment and evaluation of what we in the United States understand by the political—citizenship, institutions of government, justice, and law; the economic—the manner and style in which we generate our standard of living, and the technological—the ways in which we produce those goods and services through which we realize that standard. Such an examination ought to concretely account for the social actions, -habits, and -values of a pluralistic nation and a pluralistic black community; for possibly conflicting meanings and values generated and advanced by this situation. That interrogation also ought to discern and promote those meanings and values most conducive to the common human good.

Analysis of the dramatic pattern of human experience takes up the ways in which we incarnate our story and ourselves as individuals and as a people. This pattern thickens with our history, our practical responses to opportunities presented by human living, our participation in and contributions to the ordering of U. S. society as well as our personal and collective appropriation and integration of psychological and religious experiences. Through our desires and performance, we originate and reproduce, critique and transform the meanings and values that dynamically constitute our culture. Thus, the dramatic pattern of human experience mediates the signifying story capable of forming our moral and ethical character as individuals and as peoples or communities.

Religious experience denotes the depth mode of human experience in which human beings “apprehend and discover the sacredness of the forms of the world” [Long, 1986, 8]. In this mode, the person seeks, apprehends, and loves transcendent reality, for she (or he) already is found, seized, and loved by that reality. Despite the psychic,

religious, cultural, and social trauma of the Middle Passage, legalized chattel slavery and its centuries-old trajectory of social oppression and suffering, religious differentiation of consciousness has served as the primary mediation of African American personal and communal transformation. This ought not to surprise: our African ancestors were religious virtuosos.

African Traditional Religions projected an ethos that enveloped every domain of human life. The whole of the universe radiated the presence and power of the sacred—the supreme Deity, divinities, and spirits. Ordinary as well as extraordinary activities of daily life, human relationships, social interactions, and natural phenomena were suffused with religious meanings. Religion was not confined to creeds or scriptures; rather, the transcendent meaning of life was inscribed on hearts and minds, mediated through oral histories and rituals, embodied in priests, officiating elders and rulers [Mbiti, 1989: 58-73]. Moreover, the Africans had to take into account the ancestors. These honored dead, both those who died long ago and the deceased of more recent memory, remain, even in death, intimately connected to the living. Because, they are believed capable of intervening in daily affairs, bestowing blessing or punishment, the ancestors must be venerated properly and faithfully according to ritual and custom [Idowu, 1975: 184].

Protestant and Catholic Christianity are incriminated in slavery's abuse of black bodies, hearts, and minds, and its use of the Bible to subjugate the enslaved people. That the encounter of black religious consciousness with Judaeo-Christian biblical revelation should result in vibrant, independent, and resilient black Christian consciousness could not have been predicted and certainly could not have been expected. The Christian differentiation of black religious consciousness, then, witnesses to the power of divine revelation and the human surrender to the advent of grace.

Cruelty and legalized resistance prohibited the vast majority of enslaved people from attaining even the most rudimentary skills of literacy. They gained knowledge of the content and message of the Bible through attentive and critical listening at public readings or sermons. Biblical passages and stories were committed to memory and supplied themes and questions for the enslaved people's communal reflection and interpretation. Ironically, illiteracy freed these communities from "allegiance to any official [biblical] text, translation, or interpretation" [Weems, 1991: 61]. Acutely aware of the ambiguity of the Bible, in their discussions, the enslaved people employed a calculus of dignity, survival, and emancipation: Only those stories or passages that affirmed black humanity and dignity, survival and emancipation were deemed as the true word of God. Through this critical communal process, black Christians fashioned an oral text that testified to a Mighty God who breaks through the most terrifying circumstances to offer companionship and protection, who weighs out justice and mercy on their behalf. This God was the one whom they and their descendants loved, felt, and met in person in prayer, vision, revelation, ecstatic shout and dance.

Catholic differentiation of black religious consciousness emerges through appropriation and inculturation. The dynamism of black Catholic religious life and thought can be found in the appropriation and transmission of Tradition and in traditioning. Through the work of vowed women religious and self-less lay men and women, black Catholics have appropriated and handed on the Tradition for nearly two hundred years. Denied a clergy of their own and with little assistance from the hierarchy, black Catholics grappled insightfully with their condition. A stigmatized and despised people who would be church, they took their bearings by the Gospel and empowered themselves as its witnesses. From the faith-filled lives of lay men and women like

Vincent de Paul Davis, Harriet Thompson, and Daniel Rudd as well as vowed women religious like Elizabeth Lange, Henriette Delille, and Juliette Gaudin (Davis, 1990; Deggs, 2001; Morrow, 2002), we can identify seven characteristics of black Catholic religious consciousness in act—oriented by baptismal charism, prayerful, knowledgeable, culturally competent, self-initiating, committed to social justice in the concrete, and collaborative. Traditioning denotes the creative grasp and appropriation of religious symbols, practices, and narratives that come from and mediate the religious experience of the people. For black Catholics this process has meant the retrieval of African aesthetic and religio-cultural mores that meet of the need for community, healing, and religious identity. The most potent illustrations of this mediation are found in contemporary black Catholic popular religious practices of ancestor veneration, pouring libation, and in Marian iconography.

Structuring the Rhythms

What method or methods afford deep and rich understanding of the rhythms or expressive meanings of our community's particularization of religious, social, and dramatic patterns of human experience? What method or methods can be used to interpret these rhythms of black Catholic life? Method in black Catholic theology is not a stand-alone method; rather it draws on a range of intellectual strategies to apprehend, research, and study the black Catholic lifeworld. These include philosophy, critical biblical hermeneutics, historical research and interpretation, history of religions, social analysis, ethnography, cultural analysis, interdisciplinary studies, listening, postmodern and postcolonial studies, and critical theories of society, of race, and of gender. Space does not permit an elaboration of each of these, so I shall focus on critical biblical

hermeneutics, social analysis, cultural analysis, interdisciplinary collaboration, and listening.

Critical Biblical Hermeneutics: The relevance of critical biblical hermeneutics for black Catholic theology derives from the decisive role of the Bible in the formation of black Christian consciousness. But, this role does not straighten the perilous highway of critical thought; rather, it makes use of the Bible by all black theologies susceptible to ideology. Itumeleng Mosala and Robert Allen Warrior were among the first to caution black (and liberation) theologies that their oppositional hermeneutics were not innocent. Even if these theologies exposed imperialism, colonialism, and racist supremacist ideologies latent in the text, without serious self-criticism, their theological claims could taint their commitments to emancipation, liberation, and solidarity [Mosala, 1989; Warrior, 1989].

Critical biblical hermeneutics analyzes biblical texts in order to retrieve the experiences of marginalized people (for example, the poor and women), situate those texts in their ancient life-settings, and interrogate the assumptions, norms, and interpretations whereby the experiences of the poor and women were and are marginalized or erased. This critique exposes the text's kyriarchal objectification of women, the poor and excluded; it valorizes their experience, peels back layers of disregard, locates and listens to their voices. Critical biblical hermeneutics reconstructs and accentuates the experiences of women, the poor and excluded as these seep through in non-dominative narratives, metaphors, stories, and practices. In this way, critical biblical hermeneutics implies that the subjugated knowledges of these 'little ones' direct us toward the in-breaking of the reign of God.

Social Analysis is the effort to obtain a coherent and complex understanding of a social situation through examining the underlying historical and structural relations. This analysis aims to identify origins, causes, interconnections, and consequences of decisions taken in a particular socio-cultural matrix. In addition, it unmask the role that ideology performs in justifying alienations of intelligence and of social community.

Briefly, three tasks characterize this strategy: The first is to develop a general description of the situation, including the intersections of gender, race, culture, and class. Several approaches may be used to collect pertinent information; the most obvious include questionnaires, formal and informal interviews, fieldwork, and research. But, the basic key to analysis is the question—the persistent asking, answering, verifying, generating and following further questions. The second task calls for the interpretation of the data that critical questioning uncovers. This involves discerning and unfolding the meanings of facts and of the arrangements that may form when they coalesce. In this moment of social analysis, declared and undeclared values operative in the situation are identified and named along with institutions or persons or symbols mediating those values. As an intellectual strategy, social analysis collects, interrogates, verifies, and examines the data on a social situation; then, it interprets the meanings and values embedded in the situation; finally, it proposes responses for change. This final step establishes a starting point for decisions and commitments that remain open to ongoing revision and evaluation.

Cultural Analysis: Recently theorists have begun to argue, and quite convincingly so, that mainstream or dominant (white) U.S. culture has been reduced to kitsch [Berman, 2000; Bourdieu, 1998; Haymes, 1995; hooks, 1994; West, 1982]. Acquisitive materialism, mindless individualism, white racist supremacy, and, increasingly,

misogyny fill the vacuum. This bitter mixture congeals as a culture of consumer capitalism; through commoditization, it exploits the new communications technologies to regulate identity formation, rein in opposition, and promote and inscribe its own meanings. Cultural analysis makes explicit just how these meanings and values affect our attempts to live humanly and humanely.

This vapid market culture jeopardizes human be-ing and undermines the capacity of black and other human subjects, particularly the poor and people of color, to challenge and transform the cultural matrix through humanizing action. This means that black Catholic theology must critically interrogate (1) the liberal market's conceptualization of individuality as "freedom from dependence on the wills of the others, and freedom as a function of possession" [Macpherson, 1962: 4]; (2) representations of the poor in a social order that intentionally deflect class differences even as they manipulate and socialize desire; (3) racism, race, and racial formation process in order to bare the "sociohistorical process by which racial categories are created, inhabited, transformed, and destroyed" [Omi and Winant, 1986, 1994: 55-56]; and (4) mainstream white culture's politics of difference with its reproduction of racist stereotypes that racialize blacks and other people of color and deracialize whites and its construction of blacks as exotic or pathological or sexually dangerous and manipulative.

Interdisciplinary Studies and Collaboration: Serious interdisciplinary study and collaboration are hallmarks of black Catholic theological responsibilities. Through research and study, individual theologians rigorously engage disciplines germane to adequate social and cultural analyses. As a group, black Catholic theologians have addressed our commitment to collaboration mainly through participation in the Black Catholic Theological Symposium (BCTS). Founded twenty-five years ago at the creative

instigation of the Reverend Dr. Thaddeus Posey, O.F.M. Cap., from its inception, the BCTS brought together specialists in history, literature, anthropology, psychology, and sociology with pastoral, moral, and systematic theologians. The BCTS owes its present standing as a professional society of black Catholic theologians and scholars in related disciplines to the efforts of Dr. Jamie T. Phelps, O.P., who reconvened the group in 1991. Since that time, the group has met annually for the presentation of scholarly papers and panels, dialogue and exchange. In this way, the BCTS provides necessary critical space for grappling with the theoretic, practical, moral, and pastoral needs of the black Catholic community.

Listening: All too often theology is perceived as distant and aloof from the street and the pew. We theologians are quick to refute this charge, but no more than a few of us journey deep into either. In an effort to address this view among black Catholic laity, Phelps proposed that local black Catholics be invited to share their stories and concerns with us during our annual meeting.

Five years later, a listening session has become a regular feature of the BCTS program. Organized by the on-site BCTS coordinator and held at a black Catholic parish, the session elicits questions and concerns from a group of black Catholics representative of differences in age, occupation, gender, education, social class background, opinion, and types of parish involvement. Attentiveness to the presence and movement of the Spirit, honesty, fruitful silence, and quiet patience shape the session. Theologians and scholars accustomed to highly charged classroom and professional debate sit and listen attentively to black Catholic women and men. Mutual respect and a delight in one another's presence are evident. Since African Americans are a people who know and rejoice in God's love and mercy, these sessions begin and end with prayer, readings from

scripture, and hymn singing. And because African Americans are a hospitable people who know how to celebrate, prayer flows to listening flows to prayer to the table and conviviality.

At the listening session, black Catholic participants pour out hurts and joys, frustrations and accomplishments; they share their dreams for the future growth of the black Catholic community. Such speaking and listening are never easy. It is heartrending for black Catholics to recall and speak aloud memories of rejection and discrimination, disrespect and indifference. Often, these incidents have been repressed and forgiven, but they cannot be forgotten. It is painful for black Catholic theologians and scholars to listen: we are sensitive to the scarcity of our numbers, to our lack of influence in the larger Catholic community, and to our personal and scholarly limitations. The session nurtures black Catholic confidence in the Spirit's movement among us and, therefore, in our exercise of the sensus fidelium. The session spurs us black Catholic theologians to use our God-given gifts for service to our faith, our people, and our Church.

The listening session contributes concretely and, often substantively, to our theological and scholarly agendas. We theologians, in particular, have occasion to remember the importance of the community of faith in theologizing, and we all have an opportunity to interrogate our work from the perspectives of the street and the pew. African American sociologist Patricia Hill Collins has formulated some criteria for adjudicating social theory that we can adapt and translate into the following questions:

Does my theology or scholarship speak the truth to black Catholics about their lives? Do the subjugated knowledges of these black women and men along with

the black poor, excluded, and defenseless children count in my theology or scholarship? What knowledge is discredited? What knowledge affirmed?

Does my theology or scholarship equip people to recognize and resist social oppression and internalized racism, in particular? What is the stance of my work toward freedom? What viable strategies does it propose in bringing about social transformation?

How effectively does my theology or scholarship move people to struggle for self-definition and self-determination? How effectively does my work offer moral authority to these struggles? What vision does my theology or scholarship offer and what is its ethical foundation? What is the relation of my work to the discourses of domination and the struggles for justice? (Hill Collins, 1998: 198-200).

These questions remind us that black Catholic theology must become a critical theory worked out in response to an existing and constantly changing social and cultural matrix. First, black Catholic theology is critical in an epistemological sense: It interrogates and evaluates its own presuppositions, and explicitly acknowledges an integral relation between knowing and doing. Second, as a praxis-based theology it is critical in its dialectical analysis of social (that is, political, economic, and technological) realities and the meanings and values that fund those realities. Thus, black Catholic theology critiques both society and Church, scrutinizing them in the light of the Word of God and the Tradition. Finally, dialectical analysis of the black lifeworld discloses the complex and,

often, conflictual forces, interests, and motives involved in social transformation. Thus, its commitment to particularity frees black Catholic theology to make a concrete option for the despised and marginalized, the poor and excluded throughout our world and to advocate for their liberation and healing.

Aesthetics

To state that aesthetics is one of the chief ends of black Catholic theology identifies the most vital impulse at the heart of African and African-derived cultures—the turn toward the beautiful. Robert Farris Thompson observes flashes of that impulse in “the massive musical and choreographic modalities that connect black persons of the western hemisphere.” But, the parallel “visual and philosophic streams of creativity and imagination” may be less well known (Thompson, 1984: xiii). Among the various cultures of pre-colonial western Africa, the aesthetics of the Yoruba, BaKongo, and Mande peoples were outstanding in sophistication, comprehension, subtlety, and power. Architecture, sculpture, ironwork, carving, liturgical objects, and textiles mediated a vigor and richness that withstood, penetrated, and transformed the Atlantic world. Trace elements of these cultures live on dynamically in African American religious and metaphysical traditions of folk healing and conjure, regard for elders and children, proverbs and vocabulary, linguistic and rhetorical style, artistic sensibilities, funeral rites and awe of the dead, and “supernatural use” of nature (108).

However, the primary and paramount meaning of aesthetics for the Yoruba, BaKongo, and Mande was expressive, that is, a well-lived or virtuous life. These cultures prized moral conduct, wisdom and justice, regard for tradition, generosity, simplicity, and force of character. Individuality was affirmed, but mediated through group affiliation.

These evaluations made no distinctions between sacred and secular; life was a whole. To be sure, it was dense, ambiguous, and multifaceted, but the expectation of poise, beauty, and grace reverberated in every aspect.

African American proverbs—concrete, homely, but explosive—contain soundings from these fragmentary, yet resilient, traditions and imply the effort to recast and cultivate moral and ethical aesthetics. Consider these proverbs of encouragement and instruction: “Stumbling blocks may be carved into stepping stones.” “If you fall, don’t wallow.” “You have to crawl before you walk;” or these proverbs of caution: “What is done in the dark will come to light.” “The more you stir mess, the more it stinks.”

The impact of Judaeo-Christian revelation can be felt in these two consummate proverbs: “God can make a way out of no way” and “God don’t like ugly.” The former confronts obstacles with an active providence and grounds human improvisation in the divine dispensation of power. The later is ethical: Good conduct and proper behavior in our relations with others and with the divine personifies beauty; poor conduct and improper behavior in these relations personifies unsightliness. Since God approves and rewards good conduct, but rejects and punishes evil, “God don’t like ugly.” The proverb does not comment on physical beauty, but on the formation of character. It cautions and encourages an inner beauty that radiates outward in lived generosity, discretion, simplicity, and justice. These proverbs and others like them approximate agent centered or virtue ethics. Should black Catholic theology elaborate the proverbial wisdom of the African American community, it could contribute to the current reconsideration of Aristotle’s ancient question—What is the most choiceworthy way of life, and how can I go about living it? And, black Catholic theology can do more: develop a culturally and religiously grounded ethics that resituates the individual in the context of communal

affiliation; work out an ethics capable of sustaining character development in a market culture tuned to possessing and having, rather than being and doing; articulate an ethics that affirms agency and responsibility.

Conclusion

In this article, I have attempted to pose a method or comprehensive way of doing black Catholic theology that nurtures our desire for God, honors our rich ancestral past, furthers the struggle of black women and men to achieve and realize their humanity, and supports African American Catholics in living out our baptismal calling. This method acknowledges three of the most important among black Catholic theology's varied responsibilities. For, like all theologies, black Catholic theology is called upon to offer an interpretation of central symbols of the Christian tradition; but it seeks to uncover not merely the topical relevance of these symbols, but their essential contribution in wrestling with the experience of black be-ing in the world. At the same time, black Catholic theology must be a critical-pastoral theology as it willingly assumes responsibility for the evangelization and care of hearts and souls and bodies. But, black Catholic theology must also be a practical-political theology. Alert and open to the work of grace in the social order, it bridges putative gaps between orthodoxy and orthopraxis, spirituality and action, the mystical and the social.

Above all, black Catholic theology aims to be a theology that privileges a 'way of life' oriented, at every step, toward the desire for union with God. Animated by a christology grounded in discipleship, it scrutinizes and evaluates all things by their capacity to further (or not) this desire. Like jazzmen and blues women, we black Catholic theologians play in the shadows; moved by desire and delight in the Word, we listen with

attention and reverence to the rhythms that resonate “mid-range between [our] traditions (Ellison, 2001: 7). We work to find and catch those rhythms and to do so well, to interpret them, and to open ourselves to the transformations such work may bring. Thus, black Catholic theology emerges from the underside to assume responsibility to follow and articulate a way of being for God and others in this world and the next.

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