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The Role of the Black Catholic Theologian and Scholar in Today's Context

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Based on her keynote address delivered during the 2009 Annual Meeting at Atlanta University's Lyke Center, Copeland takes a look back at the nearly forty-year history of black theological scholarship, reminding us of the intimate link between culture, history, and the ongoing and critical need for a theology that is authentic and responsive to the needs of the poor and marginalized. She reminds us of the urgency for the pursuit of truth and freedom, especially for black scholars and theologians. However, the quest for authenticity comes with a price.

> *...good theology is not abstract but concrete, not neutral but committed. Why? Because the poor were created for freedom and not for poverty*.[2]

For the first time in the history of the Catholic Church in the United States, there is a cadre of formally educated theological scholars, women and men of African-American descent—canon lawyers, ethicists, moral theologians, historians, religious educators, sociologists and anthropologists of religion, and systematic theologians.[3] The advocacy for such a group, although sunk deep in

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[1] This essay is a revision of the opening address of the 20th annual meeting of the Black Catholic Theological Symposium given in at Lyke House, Atlanta, Georgia, October 8, 2009 and draws on material included in the Parks-King Lecture given at Yale Divinity School, New Haven, Connecticut, on February 24, 2009.

[2] James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power, 2ⁿᵈ Printing* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), "Preface to the 1989 Edition," xiv.

[3] Augustus Tolton generally is acknowledged as the first African American Catholic priest but, prior to his ordination, there were three others: the Healy brothers—James Augustine, Sherwood, and (Jesuit) Patrick. Sons of an enslaved black woman and an Irish Catholic planter, these men had been isolated by their father's money from the most vicious brunt of racism. But, this left them with little

the historic nineteenth century struggle of black Catholics to enjoy and exercise full membership in the church, may be traced as well to the response of black Catholic Blessed Sacrament priest and Scripture scholar Joseph Nearon, S.S.S. At the invitation of officers of the Catholic Theological Society of America (CTSA), Nearon made a study of black theology and prepared a report that pressed the "absolute necessity [of] a corps of competent black Catholic theologians," [4] who would develop a theology accountable to the exigencies of being *black* and *Catholic*.

Yet, a number of external factors and forces shape this scholarly and theological task as well as the context within which it is undertaken. Here, in no particular order, are seven such factors: *First*, most tenured black Catholic theologians began their graduate studies in the late 1970s and early 1980s, just as the discipline faced up to paradigm change in response to historical, social, and pastoral impulses stirred by the Second Vatican Council.[5] In the post-

explicit (black) race identification and consciousness. Sherwood Healy was, more than likely, the first Catholic theologian of African descent. A canon lawyer and theologian, he served as a theological *peritus* or expert to Boston's Bishop John Joseph Williams with whom he reportedly traveled to the Second Plenary Council of Baltimore in 1866 and to the First Vatican Council in Rome in 1870 (Albert S. Foley, S.J., "U. S. Colored Priests: Hundred-Year Survey." *America* 89 [13 June 1953]).

[4] Joseph Nearon, S.S.S., "A Challenge to Theology: The Situation of American Blacks." *CTSA Proceedings* 30 (1975): 177-202, especially, 201, idem., "Preliminary Report: Research Committee for Black Theology," CTSA *Proceedings* 29 (1974): 413-417; idem., "The Question of the Church," 7-14, in *Theology: A Portrait in Black*, ed. Thaddeus Posey OFM (Pittsburgh, PA: Capuchin Press, 1988); also see Preston N. Williams, "Religious and Social Aspects of Roman Catholic and Black American Relationships." CTSA *Proceedings* 28 (1973): 15-30.

[5] Between roughly 1930-1950, academic theologians in Europe, particularly in France, began to find neo-Scholastic theology, which had been regnant since Leo XIII's 1879 promulgation of the encyclical *Aeterni Patris*, incapable of responding to the challenges of encroaching secularization in society. For these theologians, principally the Dominicans of Le Saulchoir and the Jesuits of the Lyon Province, theology necessarily involved a "creative hermeneutical exercise in which the sources of Christian faith were reinterrogated with new questions," Marcellino D'Ambrosio, "Ressourcement Theology, Aggiornamento, and the Hermeneutics of Tradition." Communio Vol. 18 (Winter 1991): 530. *Aeterni Patris* ("On the Restoration of Christian Philosophy") dismissed contemporary developments in

conciliar period, theology has experienced a fundamental shift *from* the preeminence of scholastic metaphysics in systematics and the manual tradition in ethics *to* ideological criticism in the forms of critiques of domination, critical theories of race, critical race theory, cultural theory, postmodernism, postcolonialism. Further, under the press of *historical consciousness,*[6] of *cultural change,*[7] of widespread *social* (i.e., economic, political, technological) *disorder*[8] and of *religious breakdown,*[9] theology has been challenged to reevaluate its presuppositions, tasks, sources, and methods. Political and liberation theologies undertook the critique of domination, focusing on particularity and the differentiated experience of different human beings, experience as a point of departure and uncovering tensions between the particular and the universal, the normative and situational in hermeneutics. Contextual theologies turned their attention to cultural analyses, although at times referring to aspects of the critique of domination. But, since the late 1990s, theology has turned toward a form of *ressourcement* known as radical orthodoxy; its key features include critiques of modern secularism and liberalism, a rejection of analogy.[10]

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philosophy and restored neo-scholasticism as the dialogue partner of theology *via* the study of Thomas Aquinas. For a thorough discussion of the implications of the encyclical for the study of Aquinas, see Gerald A. McCool, *Catholic Theology in the Nineteenth Century: The Quest for a Unitary Method* (New York: Seabury, 1977).

[6] Consider these events, which have pressed upon theologizing, namely—the conquest of the so-called 'new world,' centuries of enslavement, the Shoah, enslavement—and these intellectual forces, namely—the Enlightenment, historical critical method in biblical studies, the emergence of cultural studies, the explosion of knowledge, particularly through the internet.

[7] Consider inculturation, shifting cultural customs in relation to economic upward and geographic mobility, the various waves of feminism, changing sexual mores, ethical problems provoked by unbridled technological and genetic manipulation, etc.

[8] Consider the genocides in Eastern Europe as well as in Africa, the deepening conflict and violence between Israelis and Palestinians, the destruction of the World Trade Towers in New York, the war in Iraq, the war in Afghanistan, etc.

[9] Consider the Protestant-Catholic violence in Northern Ireland, Hindu-Islamic violence in India and Pakistan, intra-ethnic dogmatic violence between Sunni and Shia Muslims.

[10] John Milbank and Catherine Pickstock, ed., *Radical Orthodoxy: A New Theology*, (London: Routledge, 1999).

Second, a theology is not only the product of faith but also of a culture. Catholic theologians are challenged not only to acquire knowledge of the culture(s) in which they live and study, write and teach, but also to acknowledge that there exists a "multiplicity of theologies," which may express the one faith.[11] Diversity and pluralism are obvious, if testy, dimensions of life in the United States, and, these tensions characterize our global church.[12]

Third, Christian social ethicist Peter Paris has observed that with the irruption of black theology, "for the first time in the history of religious academe, African Americans [have] a subject matter and a methodological perspective … peculiarly their own and capable of rigorous academic defense."[13] Yet, that subject matter and perspective has been accorded scant attention in Catholic seminaries, college and university departments of theology.

Fourth, while 'the academy' has become a site of often biting competition for status and prestige, scholars trained in the Humanities are losing this competition to those trained in science, technology, and business.[14] This situation is as disastrous for

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[11] Bernard Lonergan, *Doctrinal Pluralism* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1971); idem., *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 363, 271.

[12] When Pope Paul VI presided over the final session of the Second Vatican Council in 1965, the assembled cardinals and bishops represented and presented, for, perhaps, the first time, a world church. In 1919, the Roman Catholic Church had no bishops of non-European origin, except for the four men belonging to the Indian hierarchy created by Leo XIII in 1896. Both Pius XI and Pius XII were instrumental in widening the racial and cultural diversity of the hierarchy in the twentieth century. The First Synod of African Bishops was held in Rome in 1994, the Second Synod of African Bishops was held in Rome, 4 -25 October 2009.

[13] Peter J. Paris, "Overcoming Alienation in Theological Education," in *Shifting Boundaries: Contextual Approaches to the Structure of Theological Education*, eds. Barbara Wheeler and Edward Farley (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1991), 183.

[14] William M. Chace, "The Decline of the English Department: How It Happened and What Could Be Done to Reverse It." *American Scholar* (Autumn 2009), 32-42. Chace documents these shifts by undergraduates in selection of major courses of study: English from 7.6 percent of all majors to 3.9 percent, Foreign languages and literatures from 2.5 percent to 1.3 percent, Philosophy and religious studies from

science, technology, and business as it is for the Humanities. Human persons are not reducible to atoms or theorems, to statistics or social problems; nor are they reducible to metaphors or attributes, to descriptions or categories. Rather, human persons are instances of the intelligible as intelligent in the world, instances of incarnate moral and ethical choice in a world under the influence of sin, yet standing in relation to a field of supernatural grace.[15]

Fifth, since most black Catholic theologians and scholars have been (and are) trained in European or European-American Catholic educational settings, the exclusion or marginalization of Black Studies in the curriculum may serve to alienate students and faculty of *all* racial-ethnic backgrounds not only from the intellectual fertility of Black Studies but also from the very intellectual ethos of those educational settings. Moreover, for black Catholics, all too often and too easily, such alienation provokes and fuels identity frustration.[16]

Sixth, nearly all black Catholic theologians and scholars teach or work in predominantly white and white Catholic institutions. In this setting, tokenization and trivialization on racial grounds may be all too commonplace. When this is the case, black Catholic theologians and scholars are reduced to a 'colorful' and illustrative slice of social location, while our disciplinary expertise either is diminished and ignored or subordinated to 'racial incidents.' The black theologian and scholar becomes the 'expert' on 'the black experience' for white colleagues. Yet, if we black Catholic historians, moralists and ethicists, doctrinal and systematic theologians, philosophers and administrators fail to take

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0.9 percent to 0.7 percent, History: from 18.5 percent to 10.7 percent, Business from 13.7 percent to 21.9 percent. See also Cornel West, "The Postmodern Crisis of Black Intellectuals," in *Beyond Eurocentrism and Multiculturalism: Prophetic Thought in Postmodern Times*, ed. Cornel West (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 1993), 92-93.

[15] See Bernard Lonergan, *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, Vol. 3, *Insight, A Study of Human Understanding* 5th edition (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1988), 422; idem, "Finality, Love, Marriage," 16-53, in *Collection: Papers by Bernard Lonergan, S. J.,* ed. Frederick E. Crowe (Montreal: Palm Publishers, 1967).

[16] Lonergan, *Insight, A Study of Human Understanding,* 186.

responsibility for rigorous and sustained research, analysis, and reflection on black experience, we shall deprive our people and the whole church of riches.[17]

And, *finally,* anti-black racism remains an inescapable and lived reality in the United States, even an inescapable and lived reality of Catholic life. Racism does not concern attitudes, feelings, or preferences merely. Rather, racism denotes intentional protracted structured, institutionalized oppression of one race or races by some other race or races. In the United States, either directly or indirectly, racism permeates, deforms, and governs every social, cultural, personal, even, religious encounter or exchange between racialized human subjects.

This list of factors or forces is not exhaustive; however, it does provide a starting point for considering the role of the black Catholic theologian and scholar in today's context. Let me frame the remainder of the discussion by adverting to a set of remarks and three conditions: (1) remarks by Pope Benedict XVI in meeting with the academic community of the Czech Republic, (2) the condition of

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[17] For some discussions of the dilemmas, failures, paradoxes, and struggle of the vocation of living the black Catholic scholar—of living a black intellectual life in the United States, see E. Franklin Frazier, "The Failure of the Negro Intellectual." *Negro Digest* (February 1962): 26-36; John Hope Franklin, "The Dilemma of the American Negro Scholar," in *Soon, One Morning, New Writing by American Negroes*, 1940-1962, ed. Herbert Hill (New York: Knopf, 1963), 62-76; Harold Cruse, *The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual: From Its Origins to the Present* (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc., 1967); Ralph Ellison, "The World and the Jug," in *Shadow and Act*, ed. Ralph Ellison (New York: Random House, 1964), 107-143; Vincent Harding, "The Vocation of the Black Scholar and the Struggles of the Black Community," in *Education and Black Struggle: Notes from the Colonized World* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Educational Review, 1974), 3-39; Martin Kilson, "Paradoxes of Blackness: Notes on the Crisis of Black Intellectuals," *Dissent* 33 (1986): 70-78; Michele Wallace, *Invisibility Blues: From Pop to Theory* (New York and London: Verso, 1990); bell hooks and Cornel West, *Breaking Bread: Insurgent Black Intellectual Life* (Boston: South End Press, 1991); Jerry Gafio Watts, *Heroism and Black Intellectual Life* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994); Cornel West, "The Dilemma of Black Intellectual," *Cultural Critique* 1 (Fall 1985): 132-146; idem, *Race Matters* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1994), Bryan N. Massingale, "Cyprian Davis and the Black Catholic Intellectual Vocation," *U. S. Catholic Historian* 28 (1) (Winter 2010): 65-82.

the Church, (3) the condition of black people, and (4) the condition of our country.

Framing The Discussion: Taking Our Bearings

First: During his September 2009 pastoral visit to the Czech Republic, Pope Benedict XVI spoke with members of the academic community—students and professors. The pope identified quite personally with this community and referred to his former member of the professoriate. He presented himself as one who was, "solicitous of the right to academic freedom and the responsibility for the authentic use of reason."[18] Further, the pope observed: "The yearning for freedom and truth is inalienably part of our common humanity. It can never be eliminated; and, as history has shown, it is denied at humanity's own peril."[19] The Czech revolt against totalitarian ideology in 1989 formed the historical, cultural, and political backdrop for his remarks.[20] Benedict decried the fragmentation in contemporary society brought on by "massive growth in information and technology [resulting in the] temptation to detach reason from pursuit of truth," and, thus, surrender to the "lure" of hasty and crude forms of ideology, utilitarianism, relativism, and secularism.[21] Moreover, the pope concluded, commitment to freedom and truth are essential in the "human formation" (*paideia*) of the young, to the cultivation of virtue and its incarnation.[22]

Second: *The Condition of Our Church:* Listen to the words of

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[18] Pope Benedict XVI, "Meeting with Members of the Academic Community, Address by the Holy Father." 27 September 2009, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2009/september/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20090927_mondo-accademico_en.html (accessed July 31, 2010).

[19] Ibid.

[20] This revolt, known as the "Velvet Revolution," refers to the more than six weeks of non-violent demonstrations by citizens of Prague between November 17 and December 29, 1989, which brought down the one-party Communist government.

[21] Pope Benedict XVI, "Meeting with Members of the Academic Community: Address by the Holy Father."

[22] Ibid.

the Marcan Jesus:

> You know that among the Gentiles those whom they
> recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great
> ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but
> whoever wishes to become great among you must be your
> servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be a
> slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served, but
> to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many (Mark 10:
> 42-45).

This familiar passage leapt out from the pages of the final chapter of
*What Would Jesus Deconstruct: The Good News of Postmodernism
for the Church*.[23] In that chapter, John Caputo analyzes two ecclesial
communities—St. Malachy's, a typical Catholic parish in the
Archdiocese of Philadelphia, and Ikon, an experiment in spiritual
community. On the one hand, Ikon is described as "an independent
avant-garde assembly of young laypeople, intellectual, church and
community activists, including non-Christians, who all meet in a
bar" to read and interpret Sacred Scripture often through
dramaturgical performance.[24] St. Malachy's, on the other hand, is

> traditional ministry … rectory … weekly schedule of masses
> and the sacraments, parish committees, a parish school, a
> parish bulletin, and all the usual outer trappings of
> institutional life, with a Cardinal Archbishop overseeing the
> whole operation.[25]

The spiritual and liturgical daring of Ikon may excite and entice, but
St. Malachy's instantiates the condition of our church not only in
the U. S., but also in many places around the globe.

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[23] John Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct? The Good News of
Postmodernism for the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic Press, 2007).
[24] Ibid., 137.
[25] Ibid., 129.

Caputo introduces the condition of the U. S. church through Father John McNamee's book, *The Diary of a City Priest*.[26] Like many of the Catholic parishes left in most inner cities, St. Malachy's sits in the midst of a neighborhood assaulted relentlessly by crime, drugs, squalor, anxiety, fear, and violence. McNamee seems only to want to *accompany* the children, women, and men, who are his parish and to offer them what they need, to nourish them with the bread of eternal life. He charts his spiritual journey and painful discovery of two churches: "the Big, visible one on top," with bishops, power, functional buildings, and money; and the other church, "down in the underbelly of the kingdom of God, in the streets," among the poor and despised, without money and resources because there are few if any Catholics in the parish boundaries.[27] "Two churches," Caputo writes, "the owners of the church, who have all the power, and the working church whose only power is the power of powerlessness that commands our faith."[28]

Beset by spreading scandal, repressed in vision, lost in a labyrinth of power, the Big church crashes against its own Mystery, squandering grace; yet down in the underbelly of the kingdom of God, we had better learn compassion and solidarity, creativity and strategy, humility and courage, prayer and fasting. In other words, we must be "as shrewd as snakes and as innocent as doves" (Matthew 10:16).

Third and *Fourth*: The condition of black people *is* the condition of our country. To put it differently, black people are like the canary used to test the quality of oxygen in a coal mine. The condition of black people serves as an early warning system, alerting the rest of the country to toxic social policies and programs.

In the final textual paragraph of *Where Do We Go From Here:*

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[26] John P. McNamee, *The Diary of a City Priest* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed and Ward, 1993).
[27] Cited in Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?* 117.
[28] John Caputo, *What Would Jesus Deconstruct?*, 120.

Chaos or Community,[29] the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., calls for active, practical commitment to the work of justice in a social order in which black children, women, and men are choked with frustration, hurt, and despair. Although this book was published only a few years following the signing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, King never confused formal legislation with the difficult reality of reform.[30] In *Where Do We Go From Here*, King reconceived and reinterpreted black power, dissected anti-black racism, clarified questions of black identity, class status, responsibility, and demanded government attention to housing and education and "the total, direct and immediate abolition of poverty."[31] King concluded by setting out strategic priorities: "quality education for all [and] a creative link between parents and schools,"[32] expanded employment, "new methods of civic participation in decision-making,"[33] and housing, which "is too important to be left to private enterprise with only minor government effort to shape policy."[34]

More than four decades later, these same issues—education, poverty and unemployment, democratic participation, and housing—remain unresolved.[35] The grave and deteriorated conditions of New Orleans and Detroit make this abundantly clear. The existential, cultural, and social challenges that these cities and their people face and represent plead for a renewed and critical engagement by black theologians and scholars—indeed all theologians and scholars—with the concrete condition of the poor.

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[29] Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967).

[30] Ibid., 5.

[31] Ibid., 166.

[32] Ibid., 195.

[33] Ibid., 200.

[34] Ibid., 202.

[35] During the 2008 presidential campaign, these same issues—education, employment, democratic participation, and housing—proved resonant and compelling. Indeed, in a speech delivered in quest of change, then-candidate Barak Obama in a speech in South Carolina in November 2007 reached back four decades to pull forward that same call to arms, a vision, and hope. See Tim Dickinson, "The Fierce Urgency of Now," *Rolling Stone Magazine*, National Affairs (November 2007).

King put it this way:

> It is time for the Negro haves to join hands with the Negro
> have-nots and, with compassion, journey into that other
> country of hurt and denial. It is time for the Negro middle
> class to rise up from its stool of indifference, to retreat from
> its flight into unreality and to bring its full resources—its
> heart, its mind and its checkbook—to the aid of the less
> fortunate brother. The salvation of the Negro middle class is
> ultimately dependent upon the salvation of the Negro
> masses.[36]

King did not aim "to integrate" blacks into the prevailing values of
American society. Rather, he urged blacks to be "those creative
dissenters who [would] call … the nation to a higher destiny, to a
new plateau of compassion, to a more notable expression of
humanness."[37]

Hurricane Katrina was responsible for the destruction of life
and property along the Gulf Coast of Louisiana, Mississippi, and
Alabama.[38] Hurricane Katrina uncovered the social suffering

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[36] King, *Where Do We Go from Here*, 132.

[37] Ibid., 133.

[38] The geographic area affected covers more than 90,000 miles or roughly the size
of the state of Oregon. Nearly 1.7 million residents lived in areas that flooded
or suffered moderate or catastrophic storm damage. Before Katrina, Mississippi was
ranked the second poorest state in the country, Louisiana third, Alabama sixth.
Michael Eric Dyson writes, "More than 90,000 people in each of the areas
[damaged] by Katrina in Mississippi, Louisiana, and Alabama made less than
$10,000 a year. Before the storm, New Orleans, with a 67.9 % black population,
had more than 103,000 poor people," in *Come Hell or High Water: Hurricane
Katrina and the Color of Disaster* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 5. In other
words, New Orleans had a poverty rate of 23% or 76 % higher than the national
average of 13.1 %. In comparison with 290 other large U. S. counties, the Crescent
City ranked at seventh in poverty. At the time of the hurricane, the median
household income in New Orleans was $31,369, while the national median
household income stood at $44,684. Twenty-nine percent of blacks in New Orleans
lived below the 2005 poverty threshold of $19, 157 for a family of four. New
Orleans out ranked the national average of elders with disabilities at roughly 57 %
[national average: 39.6 %] and Louisiana's black population [31.5] accounted for
69 % of all children in poverty. Before Hurricane Katrina, 44 % of all black men
sixteen and older were jobless (United States Department of Health and Human

endured by the poor and poor black people of New Orleans. To borrow a well-known construct from William Jones, here black social suffering was "maldistributed, negative, enormous, and transgenerational."[39] Black social suffering has and has remained massive, public, publicly inflicted, and publicly prolonged by publicly elected representatives of the Republic. Perhaps, change is on the way.

Hurricane Katrina fractured the social set-up, that is, the historical, religious, cultural, social institutions and patterns of daily living. But the fracture was long in the making, the vulnerability of that set-up may be charged to federal policies, particularly, those policies regarding the racial segregation of public housing.[40] Those who suffered the brutal aftermath of Hurricane Katrina had lived in a toxic concentration of poverty: poor neighborhoods, poor schools, poor paying jobs. Post-industrial urban decline spiced the pot. As David Dante Troutt explains:

> the primary effect of federal housing policy, white flight, urban depopulation, and the rise of low-wage service economy is a deepening isolation and concentration of the urban (particularly black) poor. No longer necessary to a manufacturing sector that generally paid workers well enough to cover mortgages and provide pensions, college tuition, and other facets of middle-class existence, these folk became irrelevant. As their social distance from mainstream life increased with each generation, they grew more culturally distinct (gangster rap); incarceratable (prison industrial complex); unassimilable (Ebonics); pathological (out-of-wedlock birth, infant mortality, and low 'marriageability' rates); labelable ('underclass, 'looters,' 'playas,' 'hoes,' 'pimps'); and detestable.[41]

Services, The 2005 HHS Poverty Guidelines http://aspe.hhs.gov/poverty/05poverty.shtml, 1 April 2007).

[39] William R. Jones, *Is God A White Racist: A Preamble to Black Theology* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1973), 21-22.

[40] David Dane Troutt, "Many Thousand Gone, Again," in *After the Storm: Black Intellectuals Explore the Meaning of Hurricane Katrina*, ed. David Dante Troutt (New York: The New Press, 2006), 8.

[41] Ibid., 7-8.

The social-set up was structured and dependent upon social oppression. The historic social injustice that poor and poor black people suffer was caused not by tyrannical coercion but as Iris Marion Young writes, "by the everyday practices of a well-intentioned liberal society."[42] These practices are embedded in the epistemic, metaphysical, and moral atmosphere in which such structural oppression in a liberal society takes place. Moreover, they are embedded in and maintained by "unquestioned norms, habits, and symbols, in assumptions underlying institutional rules and the collective consequence of following those rules."[43]

More than a century of 'Jim Crow' laws and customs had denied and/or severely circumscribed black access to educational and skill development. This denial and limitation translated into the protection of white labor and increased profits for white capital. Moreover, *de facto* and *de jure* segregation rules, restrictive covenants, prohibitions on home ownership, discrimination in mortgage lending, and political disenfranchisement conspired further to marginalize black people from meaningful engagement in the social order. The poor and poor black people trapped by the waters of Hurricane Katrina already were powerless because of their fragile economic and social status; now they were accorded little or no dignity and respect.

Hurricane Katrina brutally and swiftly dispatched New Orleans, but Detroit has been battling a rising tide of decay for at least four decades, and the past twenty years have been bleak, certainly. Six days after Katrina struck, Detroit was cited as the "nation's poorest city, with about one in three residents living below the federal poverty level."[44] According to U. S. Census Bureau reports, 33.6% of Detroiters had income below the poverty level in

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[42] Iris Marion Young, *Justice and Politics of Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 41.

[43] Ibid.

[44] Patricia Montemurri, Kathleen Gray, and Cecil Angel, "Detroit Tops Nation in Poverty Census," http://www-personal.umich.edu/ ~gmarkus/montemurri.htm (accessed February 22, 2009).

2004 compared with 23% in 2002, and 47.8 % of Detroit children lived below the poverty level in 2004, placing Detroit second in that category behind Atlanta.[45] The middle-class, especially those whom King had called the "Negro haves," had left poor people behind.

Writing for *The New York Times* in December 2008, Mary Chapman recorded Congress' stiff and initial rejection of a loan to the automakers and interviewed city residents. Cindy Williams, a waitress at downtown Detroit's American Coney Island restaurant put it trenchantly: "[T]he Big Three *is* Detroit. If the companies don't get money, Detroit is done for."[46] A white suburban attorney and a black community activist both criticized the initial refusal: Jeffrey Schwartz wondered if the "government is for bankers and Wall Street, and then makes the decision not to support [the automobile] industry." Malik Shabazz declared, "Bail out people, not the banks. Give the banks money? No problem. But the car companies, man, they had to do flips, and they didn't get a dime."[47] *New York Times* columnist Bob Herbert contested the preferential option for Wall Street:

> When the champagne and caviar crowd is in trouble, there is no conceivable limit to the amount of taxpayer money that can be found, and found quickly.
>
> But when it comes to ordinary citizens in dire situations— those being thrown out of work or forced from their homes by foreclosure or driven into bankruptcy because of illness and a lack of adequate health insurance—well, then we have to start pinching pennies.
>
> We can find trillions … for pompous, self-righteous high-rollers who wrecked their companies and the economy. But

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[45] Ibid. That same year the median household income in Detroit was $27,871 and in the state it was $44,905. Governor Jennifer Granholm pressed for an increase in the hourly minimum wage, which lingered at $5.15. Unemployment in the city hovered around 15%. Kurt Metzger, research director of Wayne State University's Center for Urban Studies put the statistics in real numbers: 75,000 to 80,000 people were living in poverty in the Motor City.
[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid.

what about the working poor and the young people who are
being clobbered in this downturn, battered so badly that
they're all but destitute? Can we find any way to help
them?[48]

The social-set up was structured and dependent upon social
oppression. For nearly three decades, Black, Middle Eastern, Polish,
and Appalachian workers were forced to fight their way into the
automobile factories and into the unions. With the exception of the
Ford Motor Company, which used blacks as strikebreakers, only the
labor shortages brought on by the Second World War compelled the
auto manufacturers to hire blacks in large numbers. But, by ensuring
that all superintendents and floor stewards and foremen were white
and that 90% of all skilled tradesmen and apprentices were white,
the manufacturers cultivated and established 'Jim Crow.' Black,
Middle Eastern, and Polish workers were assigned the dirtiest,
noisiest, and most dangerous of the factory's jobs in the foundry,
body shop, and engine assembly areas. This work required the
greatest physical stain as well as regular exposure to poisonous
combinations of chemicals and gases. In the period before the
federal government's creation of OSHA (Occupational Safety and
Health Administration) guidelines, faulty equipment and lax
supervision put these workers at literal risk of the loss of limb and
life. These men and women workers had to contend daily with an
institution that considered them dispensable; they suffered high
rates of hypertension, high blood pressure, and thrombophlebitis.[49]

In one study of the city, *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying*, Dan
Georgakas and Marvin Surkin narrate the push back of poor and
poor black workers against economic and cultural abuse. And the
analyses of James Boggs[50] reflect the thinking of a small group of

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[48] Bob Herbert, "Beyond the Fat Cats," *The New York Times*, 10 November 2008,
http://www.nytimes.com/2008/11/11/opinion/11herbert.html? (accessed February
22, 2009).

[49] Dan Georgakas and Marvin Surkin, *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying: A Study of
Urban Revolution*, 2nd edition (Cambridge, MA: South End Press, 1998), especially
85-106.

[50] James Boggs, *The American Revolution: Pages from a Negro Worker's
Notebook* (1963; New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1968); idem,

factory workers, who advanced a "distinctive Marxian critique of the factory as a form of neo-plantation capitalism" in an effort to stimulate new insights about the situation and generate creative imaginative response.[51] In the summer of 1967, Detroit exploded in violent rebellion: frustrated, angry, even self-aggrieved residents looted and burned stores, small businesses, restaurants, and deteriorating homes. The result was not meaningful social change but intensified social oppression and social suffering as businesses and middle- and upper-middle class families left the city for white suburbs.[52]

The neighborhoods of Detroit have never recovered from the 1967 rebellion; the anger and depression was contagious. The center of the city emptied and grew stagnant: Hotels, apartment buildings, specialty clothiers, department stores, book stores, restaurants, and theatres closed.[53] In the late 1970s and early 1980s the automakers along with key developers and the new black mayor's promises ushered in a $350 million complex known as the Renaissance Center with little regard as to how unemployed and underemployed city residents might sustain luxury apartments, offices, hotels, specialty shops, restaurants, and entertainment facilities. The Renaissance Center was a twist for the worse.

Racism and the Class Struggle: Further Pages from a Black Worker's Notebook (New York and London: Monthly Review Press, 1970).

[51] Georgakas and Surkin, *Detroit: I Do Mind Dying*, 105.

[52] This rebellion left at least 41 people dead, more than 300 injured, 3,000 arrested, and 5,000 homeless. In the core city, 1,300 burned buildings and 2,700 destroyed businesses totaled $500 million dollars in damage.

[53] The most egregious insult to the city was J. L. Hudson's Department store, the tallest in the country and second only to Macy's anchor store in New York in square footage. The store closed its doors in 1983 and the 2.2 million square foot building of 33 levels sat empty for fifteen years, before being imploded in October 1998. Controlled Demolition, Inc. "J.L. Hudson Department Store" http://www.controlled-demolition.com/jl-hudson-department-store (accessed July 31, 2010).

The Role of the Black Theologian and Scholar in *Today's* Context

Reflecting on twenty years of rigorous, passionate, committed theology, James Cone closed the preface of the 1989 edition of his *Black Theology and Black Power*[54] with these words: "good theology is not abstract but concrete, not neutral but committed. Why? Because the poor were created for freedom and not for poverty." The year 2009 marks the fortieth anniversary of *Black Theology and Black Power*. This remarkable work, "written in anger and disgust,"[55] in the turbulent aftermath of the murder of the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., was intensely personal and existential, profoundly polemical and prophetic. Cone patterned his understanding of the role of a black theologian by adverting to Amiri Baraka's (LeRoi Jones) description of the work or role or vocation of "all aspiring black intellectuals."[56] That work, Baraka asserted, is "to report and reflect so precisely the nature of the society, that other[s] will be moved by the exactness of [this] rendering."[57] Arguably, this entails the pull and shock of critical interrogation, understanding, and judgment; moreover, for blacks and for whites, for *all* of us in this society, this 'moving' implies self-reflection, conversion, perhaps, *metanoia*.

Historian and socio-cultural analyst Vincent Harding writes pointedly and movingly of the vocation of the black scholar.[58] Harding lays down a steely challenge regarding the necessity and soul wrenching integrity of the question of vocation. Despite their "more tastefully [and] delicately wrought walls," the academy, he contends, proves itself ultimately deflecting and unsatisfactory. The black scholar finds the exigencies of her or his vocation in the life

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[54] James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: Seabury Press, 1969).

[55] Ibid., 3.

[56] Ibid.

[57] Ibid.

[58] Harding and his political scientist colleague William Strickland proved to be perceptive advisors to the national staff of the National Black Sisters' Conference (NBSC), a national organization of black Catholic vowed religious women, which, at the time, was headquartered in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

and condition of the black community: "It is that community through which vocation, purpose, direction, and life itself are most fully known and lived."[59] The demands of this vocation are, at times, Harding acknowledges, difficult to hear, difficult to admit for our community's history, its colonization, and its rich and jagged culture form:

> an agonizing prism through which to pass the continuous spectrum of our often battered, safety-seeking lives. Nevertheless, if the search for vocation is to be synonymous with the ongoing quest for integrity, we have no other choice. For it is only within the context of the long fight for freedom of the black community that we are ultimately moved towards a true sense of ourselves.[60]

Thus, Harding concludes: "When we ask what it means to be a black scholar to live the truth of black struggle and black hope, it is self-evident that words are not sufficient. Examples are far more to the point."[61] The vocation of the black scholar and theologian involves truth-telling, ideology critique, identifying and confronting all manifestations of crippling self-hatred within, whether within scholars and theologians themselves or within black people. Finally, Harding chides black scholars and theologians to face down personal weakness—not to shirk arduous, unglamorous work, "to be hard" on oneself, to be ruthless with … personal softness, to discipline [the] mind and [one's] schedule."[62]

The vocation of the black Catholic theologian and scholar in today's context is to live a life of critically engaged scholarship, that is, to contest any attempt to domesticate the Gospel, to retrieve the

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[59] Vincent Harding, "The Vocation of the Black Scholar and the Struggles of the Black Community," in *Education and Black Struggle: Notes from the Colonized World*, ed. Institute of the Black World (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Educational Review, 1974): 7.
[60] Ibid.
[61] Ibid., 21.
[62] Ibid., 25.

story of Jesus of Nazareth and clarify it as a 'dangerous memory,'[63] that is, a memory that makes a demand on us, that refuses to succumb to thrall of amnesia, which filters out oppression and social suffering in history and in society. Above all, the vocation of the black scholar and theologian is to tell the truth especially in uncomfortable settings. In poetic injunction, Mari Evans charges black scholars and theologians:

> Speak the truth to the people.
> Talk sense to the people.
> Free them with reason.
> Free them with honesty.
> Free them with Love and Courage and Care
> For their being
> Speak the truth to the people
> To identify the enemy is to free the mind
> Free the mind of the people
> Speak to the mind of the people
> Speak truth.[64]

If black scholars and theologians take up the pursuit of truth and freedom as Pope Benedict XVI urges, then they must make an uncompromising commitment to follow where truth leads and to use freedom responsibly, wisely. If black scholars and theologians take up the pursuit of truth and freedom as Vincent Harding and Mari Evans urge, then they must take themselves and the condition of black people in church and in society seriously. If black scholars and theologians speak and act and live in truth, then they will pay a price. For there is a price to paid in devoting disciplined, serious, and imaginative thinking to the condition of black people, in creating and sustaining programs that support authentic liberation, in speaking truth to all people.

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[63] Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, trans. David Smith (New York: Seabury Press, 1980), 109.
[64] Mari Evans, Excerpt from: "Speak The Truth To The People," in *Continuum: New and Selected Poems* (Baltimore, MD: Black Classic Press, 1970), 22-23.

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