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Vox Victimarum Vox Dei: Malcolm X as Neglected "Classic" for Catholic Theological Reflection

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VOX VICTIMARUM VOX DEI: MALCOLM X AS NEGLECTED “CLASSIC” FOR CATHOLIC THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

Allow me to preface this address with a brief explanation of the professional interests that influenced my choice of this topic. One of the burning questions I seek to address in my scholarly work is this: *What would Catholic ethics look like if it took the Black Experience seriously as a dialogue partner?*

Malcolm X is one of the most influential articulators of the African American experience in the twentieth century. However, he is seldom utilized in Catholic theological reflection. Yet any encounter with this cultural experience is inadequate if it neglects, evades, or mutes his voice. He speaks on behalf of those whom he calls the victims of America’s “so-called democracy.” He gives us a means by which to hear the cries of the voiceless, disdained and despised. He reminds us, in uncompromising terms, that *vox victimarum vox Dei*.¹ If the cries, demands and protests of victims are the voice of God, then Malcolm’s voice must be an essential resource for Catholic theological and ethical reflection. So the question I want to explore is this: *How would Catholic social and theological reflection look if it took Malcolm’s voice seriously?* All of this is to illustrate how today’s address fits into my overall quest of shaping a moral theology that is both “authentically black and truly Catholic.”

If anyone had told me at the beginning of my graduate studies that I would be addressing the CTSA as its president, I would have smiled or laughed at the improbability. To have added that my address would focus on Malcolm X’s contribution and challenge to Catholic theology would have been considered absurd. Malcolm X’s militancy, his “vibe,” didn’t fit into the narrative arc of my life. As one of the few black students attending the largest Catholic high school in Wisconsin during the early 1970s, I strove to “fit in” and be accepted—a desire motivated by adolescent fears of rejection compounded by the reality that I was the only Black in the honors sections into which I was tracked. Moreover, Martin Luther King was the inspirational role model held up for me; his call for racial justice achieved through the transformative integration of social institutions resonated with both my life situation and the religious ideals instilled by my sincere yet idealistic appropriation of the Catholic faith.

It was not until I was a student in Rome, in the midst of a doctoral dissertation on James Cone and Gustavo Gutiérrez, that I studied Malcolm X in any depth.

¹I first encountered this phrase during my seminary studies while reading Matthew Lamb’s *Solidarity with Victims: Toward a Theology of Social Transformation* (New York: Crossroad, 1982). I have been inspired and haunted by it ever since.

My principal motivation was to better understand Cone, whose theological perspective was greatly influenced by Malcolm's race critique as filtered through the Black Power Movement. Thinking that I was already familiar with his life story, I did not begin with his famed *Autobiography*. Rather, I plunged into a collection of his speeches, *Malcolm X Speaks*. I was arrested, and disturbed—even shaken—by what I encountered. The truth of the following declaration haunted me:

. . . America has a very serious problem. Not only does America have a very serious problem, but our people have a very serious problem. America's problem is us. We're her problem. The only reason she has a problem is she doesn't want us here. And every time you look at yourself, be you black, brown, red or yellow, a so-called Negro, you represent a person who poses such a serious problem for America because you're not wanted. Once you face this as a fact, then you can start plotting a course that will make you appear intelligent instead of unintelligent.²

I was then blown away, nearly devastated, by the harsh truth conveyed when he observed:

. . . people who just got off of the boat yesterday in this country, from the various so-called Iron Curtain countries, which are supposedly an enemy to this country, and no civil rights legislation is needed to bring them into the mainstream of the American way of life, then you and I should just stop and ask ourselves, why is it needed for us? They're actually slapping you and me in the face when they pass a civil rights bill. It's not an honor; it's a slap in the face. . . . [T]hey're telling you that they have to legislate before you can get it. Which in essence means they're telling you that since you don't have it and yet you're born here, there must be something about you that makes you different from everybody else who's born here; something about you that actually, though you have the right of birth in this land, you're still not qualified under their particular system to be recognized as a citizen.

Yet the Germans, that they used to fight just a few years ago, can come here and get what you can't get. The Russians, whom they're supposedly fighting right now, can come here and get what you can't get without legislation; don't need legislation. The Polish don't need legislation. Nobody needs it but you. Why?—you should stop and ask yourself why. And when you find out why, then you'll change the direction you've been going in, and you'll change also the methods that you've been using trying to get in that direction.³

As I continued my deep exploration of his beliefs and ideas, I experienced in Rome, thousands of miles from home, what Malcolm himself described concerning his own journey into truth and encounter with dazzling yet disturbing insight: “It was like a blinding light. . . . I was going through the hardest thing, also the

²Malcolm X, *Malcolm X Speaks*, ed. George Breitman (New York: Grove Weidefeld, 1990), 4. Hereafter cited as *MXS*.

³Malcolm X, *By Any Means Necessary*, ed. George Breitman (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970), 81. Hereafter cited as *BAMN*.

greatest thing, for any human being to do; to accept that which is already within you, and around you.”⁴

Little did I realize that, as with many other African American intellectuals, my exposure to Malcolm X’s life and work would become a life-altering catalyst for an on-going journey into critical thinking and mature political consciousness.⁵

I begin with these biographical reflections to show that I understand why some may approach this address and its subject with hesitation, trepidation, and even anxiety. Malcolm X conjures up images that can be disturbing, imprisoned as he is by the dominant culture’s narrative as a hate-filled demagogue, whose fiery rhetoric is out of place in the calm and dispassionate venue of academic discourse.

There are many reasons why a dialogue with Malcolm X seems an unlikely or unpromising locus for Catholic theological engagement. For one, there is his unflattering (to say the least), if not incendiary, description of white Americans as “blond-haired, blue-eyed, pale-skinned devils,” and his early belief that they were constitutionally incapable of moral goodness. Others find his characterizations of women problematic, if not misogynistic; his depictions of women as scheming, cunning, and in need of paternalistic protection rightly rankle and disturb contemporary sensibilities.⁶ Some among us find his righteous anger at racial injustice hard to stomach.⁷ Jon Nilson has accurately named the fear of black anger as a major obstacle to white Catholic theological engagement with Black Theology, and by extension, with Malcolm X.⁸

⁴Malcolm X, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X (as told to Alex Haley)* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1965), 189. Hereafter cited as *AMX*.

⁵bell hooks, *Remembered Rapture: The Writer at Work* (New York: Owl Books, 1999), 114. See also Reiland Rabaka, “Malcolm X and/as Critical Theory: Philosophy, Radical Politics, and the African American Search for Social Justice,” *Journal of Black Studies* 33:2 (November 2002), 145-165.

⁶For studies of Malcolm’s evolving views of women, see Sheila Radford-Hill, “Womanizing Malcolm X,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Malcolm X*, ed. Robert E. Terrill (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 63-77; and Lewis V. Baldwin, “The Character of Womanhood: The Views of Malcolm and Martin,” in *Between Cross and Crescent: Christian and Muslim Perspectives on Malcolm and Martin*, eds. Lewis V. Baldwin and Amiri Yasin Al-Hadid (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 2002), 160-199.

⁷“They called me ‘the angriest Negro in America.’ I wouldn’t deny that charge. I spoke exactly as I felt. ‘I believe in anger. The Bible says there is a *time* for anger.’” (*AMX*, 421). The topic of “black rage” was discussed at a previous session of the CTSA, a summary of which is found in Bryan N. Massingale, “Black Catholic Theology,” *CTSA Proceedings* 51 (1996), 263-265.

⁸Jon Nilson, *Hearing Past the Pain: Why White Catholic Theologians Need Black Theology* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2007), 63-66. See also James H. Cone, “Theology’s Great Sin: Silence in the Face of White Supremacy,” in *Soul Work: Anti-Racist Theologies*

A more insidious objection from some stems from Malcolm's lack of formal education; having never completed high school or published a single written text, he cannot have developed a perspective that is worthy of serious academic attention. Such an attitude, I contend, at best betrays a rather narrow and elitist understanding of intellectuals and intellectual activity. At worst, it expresses a thinly-veiled disbelief in the intellectual abilities of Black persons: a disdain necessary to maintain a system of white supremacy.⁹

Despite such objections and misgivings, I contend that Malcolm's thought is a "classic" as defined by David Tracy. Tracy states that a classic "is assumed to be any text that always has the power to transform the horizon of the interpreter and thereby disclose new meanings and experiential possibilities."¹⁰ In other words, classics are texts, events, or persons that are rooted in a particular culture, yet also have the power to speak beyond their originating culture to something universal in the human experience. They have a transcultural significance and resonance. Thus they are accessible to and instructive for those who do not belong to a specific cultural heritage.

Malcolm's thought, I argue, is such a classic. One need not have directly experienced racial bias to be moved and offended by his eighth grade teacher's dismissal of his dream of becoming a lawyer as an unrealistic career for a "nigger." One need not be a resident of urban America to appreciate his lament that the street hustlers and drug dealers he encountered perhaps, in a more just nation, could have been scientists or physicians.¹¹ His narrative of conversion and constant openness to truth, whatever its personal cost, is a witness of integrity that speaks across cultural and racial divides. Finally, Malcolm's thought is a "classic" in that it describes "America." Not only "Black" America, but an essential part of the entirety of the American experience without which we possess truncated and inaccurate understandings of who we are and why we are as we are.¹²

in *Dialogue*, eds. Marjorie Bowers-Wheatley and Nancy Palmer Jones (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2003), 8-10. Here he treats the white reluctance to engage black rage as a major obstacle to forthright engagement with Malcolm X.

⁹Clarence Taylor, *Black Religious Intellectuals: The Fight for Equality from Jim Crow to the 21st Century* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 196; and W.D. Wallace, *Crisis of the Black Intellectual* (Third World Press, 2007), ch. 1 and *passim*.

¹⁰David Tracy, *On Naming the Present* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), 15. See also his discussion in *The Analogical Imagination* (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 12-14.

¹¹AMX, 104.

¹²My mostly white, largely middle class college students at Marquette University witness to Malcolm's "classic" character. They enter the study of Malcolm with fears and hesitations. Then they have what I call the "OMG" (that is, "Oh, my God!") experience. He describes an America they never knew existed. He speaks for those to whom they have never had to listen. He voices a view of American reality that is foreign, painful, and yet accessible. They often state, "I never knew this. How could this have happened and we not be taught about it?" And then some realize, "It's still happening, still going on. And we

I will now highlight what I consider three principles that convey the essential “spirit” of Malcolm’s thought. I then explore several signal contributions and challenges he gives to Catholic theological and ethical reflection. I conclude by reflecting upon the enduring significance of Malcolm X forty-five years after his death, and especially his relevance in a “post-Obama” America.

THE “SPIRIT” OF MALCOLM’S THOUGHT

Rather than provide an exhaustive treatment of Malcolm’s social and political philosophy, I will focus our attention upon a small number of critical points that inspire and animate Malcolm’s thought.¹³ My aim is neither to justify nor critique Malcolm’s perspectives and insights, but rather to unpack their meaning and import in a way that hopefully does not betray his intentions.

A. Self-Hatred and the Need for Cultural Pride and Affirmation

Malcolm’s typical description of the situation of African Americans in the United States is that they suffer from a triad of social misery, namely, political oppression, economic exploitation, and social degradation. He does not see these as isolated phenomena, however, but as interlocking and interwoven manifestations of a more comprehensive system of white racial dominance: “All of us have suffered here, in this country, political oppression at the hands of the white man, economic exploitation at the hands of the white man, and social degradation at the hands of the white man.”¹⁴ I will return to his social analysis and the prescriptions he offered for it momentarily.

Yet it is essential to note that the primary ill that Malcolm sees afflicting Black America stems from a profound inner wounding, a plight he vividly

don’t know.” While duly critical, they yet appreciate him; for some, their encounter with Malcolm is the beginning or the confirmation of a nascent critical consciousness concerning the society in which they live.

¹³I take inspiration for this approach from Etienne Gilson, *The Spirit of Thomism* (New York: P. J. Kennedy & Sons, 1964). Note that I will not distinguish, unless necessary, between the “pre-Mecca” and “post-Mecca” Malcolm X. While most scholars recognize that there are significant developments or shifts in his ideas, worldview, and strategy after his break with the Nation of Islam (NOI) around March of 1964, many maintain that there is, nonetheless, an essential continuity that unites his thinking across the self-admitted “chronology of changes” that mark his life (*AMX*, 390). Without taking a definitive position on this dispute, I believe that the characteristics I list mark the whole of his public life, though with differing modes of expression and emphasis.

¹⁴*MXS*, 24. It should be noted that by “white man,” Malcolm explicitly states that he does not intend an indictment of *all* white people. Responding to his early characterization of white people as “white devils,” he explains: “Unless we call one white man, by name, a ‘devil,’ we are not speaking of any *individual* white man. We are speaking of the *collective* white man’s *historical* record. We are speaking of the collective white man’s cruelties, and

describes as a “psychological castration.”¹⁵ Malcolm constantly insisted that no real progress for social justice could be realized unless a corrosive, debilitating self-hatred in and among black peoples was squarely acknowledged and confronted. On this point, he was uncompromising. Hear a pivotal expression of this insight from an interview given just days before his death:

Malcolm: The greatest mistake of the movement has been trying to organize a sleeping people around specific goals. You have to wake the people up first, then you’ll get action.

Interviewer: Wake them up to their exploitation?

Malcolm: No, to their humanity, to their own worth, and to their heritage. The biggest difference between the parallel oppression of the Jew and the Negro is that the Jew never lost his pride in being a Jew. . . . [H]is sense of his own value gave him the courage to fight back. It enabled him to act and think independently, unlike our people and our leaders.¹⁶

Though he was vehement in denouncing black “second-class citizenship” as nothing more than “twentieth-century slavery” and “American colonialism,”¹⁷ he just as strongly avowed that the more debilitating barriers to freedom and justice were the inner chains of hatred, loathing, and worthlessness which were perhaps even more essential for maintaining social injustice: “They just took the physical chains from his [the slave’s] ankles and put them on his mind.”¹⁸

For Malcolm, the most striking dramatization of this racialized self-hatred and inner estrangement was his eagerness to have his hair “conked,” that is, artificially straightened in imitation of white aesthetics and standards of beauty. He vividly describes the excruciatingly painful and traumatic process this involved.

evils, and greeds, that have seen him *act* like a devil toward the non-white man” (*AMX*, 306; emphasis in the original). Especially after his break with the NOI, he explicitly states that white is not a reference to skin color, but to actions and attitudes stemming from race-based dominance and superiority (*AMX*, 383). He emphatically declares, “In the past, yes, I have made sweeping indictments of *all* white people. I never will be guilty of that again—as I know now that some truly are capable of being brotherly toward a black man. . . . The *problem* here in America is that we meet such a small minority of individual so-called ‘good’ or ‘brotherly’ white people. Here in the United States, notwithstanding those few ‘good’ white people, it is the *collective* 150 million white people whom the *collective* 22 million black people have to deal with! (*AMX*, 416-417; emphasis in the original).

¹⁵*AMX*, 389.

¹⁶*MXS*, 198; emphasis added.

¹⁷*MXS*, 4-17.

¹⁸*BAMN*, 80. A more contemporary statement of this idea can be discerned in Cornel West’s examination of “nihilism” and “lovelessness” in black America; see his *Race Matters* (New York: Vintage Press, 1993), 17-31.

He then reflects upon the experience of standing before a mirror to behold his new image:

How ridiculous I was! Stupid enough to stand there simply lost in admiration of my hair now looking “white”. . . .

This was my first really big step toward self-degradation: when I endured all of that pain, literally burning my flesh to have it look like a white man’s hair. I had joined that multitude of Negro men and women in America who are brainwashed into believing that the black people are “inferior”—and white people “superior”—that they will even violate and mutilate their God-created bodies to try to look “pretty” by white standards.¹⁹

Such self-hatred and psychic estrangement, Malcolm believed, make oppressed peoples passive and complicit in their own oppression.²⁰ Whether through media-manipulated images of Africans as primitive and savage peoples, or by the omission of black contributions to American society in the recitals of its history, Malcolm alleged that U.S. society conspired to engender black self-hatred and inferiority, all to the end of social domestication and control: “But here [Europe] and in America, they have taught us to hate ourselves. To hate our skin, to hate our hair, to hate our features, hate our blood, hate what we are. Why Uncle Sam is a master hate-teacher.”²¹ Thus blacks bore (and arguably, continue to bear) the scars of colonization and oppression not only upon their bodies, but upon their hearts and souls as well.

¹⁹AMX, 64.

²⁰Malcolm believed that such inner estrangement led one to conform to the deleterious image provided, either by destructive acting out in various forms of predatory behaviors (e.g., “hustling”), or by culturally conforming in one’s demeanor to the expectations of white society in a futile quest for white acceptance (so-called “Uncle Toms” or “house negroes”). See, for example, his discussion in *MXS*, 10-17.

²¹BAMN, 181. See also the same point developed at length in a February 18, 1965 speech in Detroit: “Having complete control over Africa, the colonial powers of Europe had projected the image of Africa negatively . . . jungle savages, cannibals, nothing civilized. . . . We didn’t want anybody telling us anything about Africa, much less calling us Africans. In hating Africa and in hating the Africans, we ended up hating ourselves. . . . We hated our heads, we hated the shape of our nose. . . . We hated the color of our skin, hated the blood of Africa that was in our veins. We didn’t have confidence in another Black man. . . . we didn’t think a Black man could do anything except play some horns. But in serious things, where our food, clothing, shelter, and education were concerned, we turned to the Man. We never thought in terms of bringing these things into existence for ourselves, because we felt helpless. What made us feel helpless was our hatred for ourselves. . . . It made us feel inferior; it made us feel inadequate; made us feel helpless. And when we fell victims to this feeling of inadequacy or inferiority or helplessness, we turned to somebody else to show us the way.” Cited in Malcolm X, *Malcolm X on Afro-American History* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1990), 90-91; also in *MXS*, 168-169.

Thus, a fundamental principle in the “spirit” of Malcolm is the necessity of “inner emancipation”²² in the quest for liberation. This is the deepest meaning behind his pivotal affirmation and declaration of this aim:

We declare our right on this earth to be a man, to be a human being, to be respected as a human being, to be given the rights of a human being in this society, on this earth, in this day, which we intend to bring into existence by any means necessary.²³

Note that this is not simply a demand for political, economic, and social self-determination. Such actions are rooted in the deeper and more existential affirmations of one’s right to exist and one’s inner sense of worth, value, and dignity. Indeed, without this interior transformation and self-affirmation, social strategies and political practices are limited at best, if not futile.

For Malcolm, this involved an advocacy of cultural pride and affirmation through a “return” to Africa culturally, philosophically and psychologically.²⁴ An essential component of his liberation project was the promotion of a “cultural revolution,” by which the oppressed would redefine themselves through a recovery of their lost and suppressed history. This retrieval of a more authentic “set of meanings and symbols”²⁵ would inform a more genuine self and communal identity and lay the foundation for lasting and effective social, political, and economic activism:

This is no accident. It is no accident that such a high state of culture existed in Africa and you and I know nothing about it. Why, the man knew that as long as you and I thought we were somebody, he could never treat us like we were nobody. . . .

We must recapture our heritage and our identity if we are ever to liberate ourselves from the bonds of white supremacy. We must launch a cultural revolution to unbrainwash an entire people. . . . [T]hat knowledge in itself will usher in your action program.

This cultural revolution will be the journey to our rediscovery of ourselves. History is a people’s memory, and without a memory man is demoted to the level of

²²Archie Epps, “Preface” in Malcolm X, *Malcolm X: Speeches at Harvard*, edited with an Introduction and New Preface by Archie Epps (New York: Paragon House, 1991), 1.

²³*BAMN*, 56. See also *AMX*, p. 313, where Malcolm states: “Human rights! Respect as *human beings!* That’s what America’s blacks want. That’s the true problem. . . . They want to live in an open, free society where they can walk with their heads up, like men and women!” (emphasis in the original).

²⁴*MXS*, 63.

²⁵Here I am indebted to Bernard Lonergan’s understanding of “culture,” which he defines as “the set of meanings and values that inform the way of life of a community.” See his *A Second Collection*, ed. William F.J. Ryan and Bernard J. Terrell (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1974), 232; and *Method in Theology* (New York: Seabury Press, 1979), 32. I discuss the relevance of Lonergan’s understanding of culture for appreciating the depth of racism in the U.S. in my book, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 15-33.

the lower animals. . . . Culture is an indispensable weapon in the freedom struggle.²⁶

Hence, the first and most fundamental principle in the “spirit” of Malcolm: the importance of cultural recovery and celebration as a means for redressing the profound psychic wounding of oppressed and despised peoples. Such processes of inner emancipation, which facilitate the outcasts’ belief in their value, pride, dignity, worth, and beauty, are essential for liberationist reflection and activity. To concern ourselves principally or primarily with material deprivation or political disenfranchisement is not only insufficient; Malcolm would judge this as misguided and ineffective.

B. Critical Consciousness and Ideological Struggle

As I stated above, Malcolm maintains that the black situation in America is marked by an interlocking network of injustices, including political oppression, economic exploitation, and social degradation. This social analysis was expressed in incisive, bold, and uncompromising terms. Malcolm’s signal contribution, though, lies in his strategy for addressing this situation: the development of a critical consciousness, or creating what one author calls “a matrix of consciousness.”²⁷

The importance of this contribution is best appreciated when one realizes that, unlike King and other civil rights activists, Malcolm was not instrumental in passing any significant act of legislation or in organizing any mass demonstration. Yet, when asked of his contribution, one of his close associates stated:

People [are] always [asking] “What did [Malcolm] leave?” and I tell people that he left changed minds! You know, he didn’t leave no buildings, no roads, he left *minds!* [He] literally [left] transformed minds. The first time I heard him speak I felt like somebody was literally pulling on my scalp and just pouring stuff into my brain. It was almost overwhelming that, you know, you were getting so much information that you didn’t know how to take it all. It was and I’m not saying this in any kind of a romantic sense, I’m talking literally, it was a *learning process*.²⁸

Malcolm’s strategic contribution was to instill in his listeners a “liberated consciousness,” a form of critical thinking based upon an awareness of their true situation. To this end, Malcolm continually strove to unmask for his hearers the “trickery, lies, and false promises” of what he termed “so-called American

²⁶BAMN, 54-56. See also James Smethurst, “Malcolm X and the Black Arts Movement,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Malcolm X*, 78-89.

²⁷Maghan Keita, “Malcolm X in the Company of Thinkers,” in *Malcolm X: A Historical Reader*, ed. James L. Conyers, Jr. and Andrew P. Smallwood (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2008) 251.

²⁸A. Peter Bailey, cited in Najee Muhammad, “The Transformational Leadership of Malcolm X,” *The Initiative Anthology* (April 9, 2004). Available at www.muohio.edu/InitiativeAnthology/. Accessed March 15, 2010. Emphasis in the original.

democracy.”²⁹ Through blunt and uncompromising rhetoric, he strove to provide an honest and dire exposé of the black situation in America, whether through his refusal to call himself an American, but rather a “black victim of Americanism,” or his criticism of unilateral black pacifism in the face of white brutality (pointing out that white Americans gained their independence through violence). He constantly called for a “reeducation” of black people so that they might become more politically astute, economically self-sufficient, and socially responsible.³⁰ One of his close associates, Benjamin Karim, expressed this as follows:

“Untruths had to be untold,” Karim recalls Malcolm telling his students. “We had to be untaught before we could be taught, and once untaught, we ourselves could unteach others.”³¹

Malcolm’s task, then, involved the rehabilitation of the “thinking of our people” by instilling and modeling habits of sustained critical awareness of one’s true situation. He constantly exhorted his followers, and especially the young, to “learn how to see for yourself and listen for yourself and think for yourself. Then you can come to an intelligent decision [and action] for yourself.”³² He expressed his understanding of the relationship between liberating awareness and effective social protest as follows:

Once you change your philosophy, you change your thought pattern. Once you change your thought pattern, you change your attitude. Once you change your attitude, it changes your behavior pattern. And then you go on into some action.³³

Thus, a hallmark of Malcolm’s thought is cultivating a critical consciousness that attains the truth of one’s situation.³⁴ He thus emphasizes that ideological and

²⁹Malcolm X, “The Ballot or the Bullet” Speech, (April 3, 1964), Cleveland, OH. I cite from a private CD recording of this address.

³⁰*MXS*, 38-39.

³¹Benjamin Karim, cited in Robert E. Terrill, *Malcolm X: Inventing Radical Judgment* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2004), 7.

³²Malcolm X, *Malcolm X Talks to Young People*, ed. Steve Clark (New York: Pathfinder Press, 2002), 78.

³³Malcolm X, “The Ballot or the Bullet.” Malcolm continued, giving a concrete example, excoriating what he considered as ineffective—indeed emasculating—means of social protest rooted in inadequate critical thinking: “As long as you’ve got a sit down philosophy, you’ll have a sit down thought pattern. And as long as you’re thinking that sit down thought, you’ll be in some kind of sit down everywhere.” This emphasis upon the importance of critical consciousness in Malcolm’s program of social transformation has led at least one scholar to state that Malcolm’s black nationalism was not so much as a “group or movement unto itself but a habit of thought and a way of being that, once internalized, governs individual action” (Terrill, 131).

³⁴Perhaps Malcolm X should be regarded, along with Marx and Nietzsche, as a master of “suspicion” (to borrow from a discussion found in David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987], 100, 112). That Tracy omits any reference

epistemological struggles—that is, “the creation of new ways of knowing and understanding”³⁵—are essential for liberationist reflection. Awareness of the truth is the essential precondition for the actions required for challenging and resisting the systemic injustice in which one is enmeshed.³⁶

C. Critique of Christianity and the White Idol

A final principle essential for understanding the spirit of Malcolm is his harsh and devastating critique of organized religion, especially Christianity. His assessment is blunt and unsparing: “Christianity has failed us.”³⁷ The reason for this failure is also expressed directly: “And what is the single greatest reason for this Christian Church’s failure? It is its failure to combat racism.”³⁸

Malcolm roots Christianity’s failure in its fundamental religious symbol structure, namely, its image of God. Catholic liberationist theologues often advance a critique of the symbol of “God,” arguing that cultural definitions and understandings of the Divine can and have served to legitimate various forms of social injustice. For example, Juan Luis Segundo forthrightly declares, “Our falsified and inauthentic ways of dealing with our fellow human beings are allied to our falsification of the idea of God. Our perverse idea of God and our unjust society are in close and terrible alliance.”³⁹ Speaking from a feminist perspective, Elizabeth Johnson keenly observes how naming the Divine has critical theological and social consequences:

How a group names its God has critical consequences, for the symbol of the divine organizes every other aspect of a religious system. The way a faith community speaks about God indicates what it considers the greatest good, the profoundest truth, the most appealing beauty. In turn, the image of God shapes a community’s

to Malcolm X in this context is yet more evidence of the lack of Catholic engagement with the racial critique that Malcolm represents.

³⁵Keita, 251.

³⁶Related to this was Malcolm’s rejection of predetermined or ideologically based solutions, methods, or strategies for attaining justice. His hallmark phrase, “by any means necessary,” conveys his conviction about the need for analytical flexibility and intellectual openness with regard to the concrete methods the oppressed would use for the accomplishing their goals of freedom and self-determination. He more than once admitted that he did not possess detailed answers or responses adequate to his increasing awareness of the complicated and complex situation of African Americans in this country. What he was emphatic about, however, was the need for a critical consciousness that could penetrate beyond the “trickery, lies, and false promises” that keep one politically powerless and economically exploited. See Judy Richardson and James Turner, “Malcolm X: Make it Plain,” in *Teaching Malcolm X*, ed. Theresa Perry (New York: Routledge, 1996) 30.

³⁷AMX, 420; this sentiment is found throughout most of his public addresses.

³⁸AMX, 425.

³⁹Juan Luis Segundo, *Our Idea of God*, trans. John Drury (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1974), 8.

porate identity and behavior as well as the individual behavior of its members. . . . The symbol of God functions. It is never neutral in its effects, but expresses and molds a community's bedrock convictions and actions.⁴⁰

Yet this insight apparently resists transference to the context of U.S. society and its endemic racism, as most forms of Catholic liberationist reflection have failed to address the similar critique advanced on racial grounds by someone like Malcolm X.⁴¹ He argues that the representation of the Divine in Western Christianity does not merely provide a "sacred canopy"⁴² for racial injustice and white supremacy. It also serves to bolster the internal sense of superiority of whites—both American and European—and the inferiority of black and nonwhite peoples.

Malcolm castigates white Christianity for sacralizing racial injustice and providing religious legitimation for white dominance in U.S. political and economic life through its rendering of the Divine in exclusively white images:

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

(He continues:) Don't join a church where white nationalism is preached. You can go to a Negro church and be exposed to white nationalism. Cause when you walk into a Negro church and see a white Jesus, and a white Mary, and some white angels, that Negro church is preaching white nationalism.⁴³

Throughout his *Autobiography*, one finds a critique of the European subjugation of dark-skinned peoples and justification of African enslavement, all in the

⁴⁰Elizabeth A. Johnson, "Naming God She: Theological Implications," *The Boardman Lecture in Christian Ethics* (October 19, 2000), 1. Available online at <http://repository.upenn.edu/boardman/5>. Accessed February 22, 2010.

⁴¹This is the essence of James Cone's constant critique of white theology, namely, its continued propensity to marginalize the reality of racism, that is, "to do theology as if white supremacy did not exist or "created any serious problem for Christian belief." He declares that it is amazing that racism could be so pervasive in American society, and yet so absent in white theological discourse [See his *Risks of Faith* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1999), 130-137]. He also has remarked how naming God "black" arouses an impassioned opposition not matched by feminist renderings. In fairness, I point out that Johnson's article, cited above, does attend to the voices of black and Latina women novelists, playwrights, and theologians in critiquing the maleness of God. She relates their critique that a God named as "She" is still too often a white, middle class "She." Despite this openness and awareness, I believe it is fair to note that such a concern is not central to her project of unmasking the ideological misuses of exclusively masculine male imagery for the Divine.

⁴²Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1967).

⁴³Malcolm X, "The Ballot or the Bullet."

name of an interpretation of Christian doctrine predicated upon the assumption that the Divine is made in the image of white:

The Christian church became infected with racism when it entered white Europe. The Christian church returned to Africa under the banner of the Cross—conquering, killing, exploiting, pillaging, raping, bullying, beating—and teaching white supremacy.⁴⁴

Christianity is the white man's religion. The Holy Bible in the white man's hands and his interpretations of it have been the greatest single ideological weapon for enslaving millions of nonwhite human beings. Every country the white man has conquered with his guns, he has always paved the way, and saved his conscience, by carrying the Bible and interpreting it to call the people "heathens" and "pagans"; then he sends his guns, then his missionaries behind the guns to mop up.⁴⁵

But his criticism is not merely that Western Christianity justifies racial dominance. The heart of his rejection lies in how the white image of God effects a *dual* brainwashing, rendering whites unaware of the horrors of racial oppression and black people passive in their wake. Concerning the pacifying effects of the perverted image of God upon the black consciousness, Malcolm is unsparing:

This "Negro" was taught to worship an alien God having the same blond hair, pale skin, and blue eyes as the slave master. This religion taught the "Negro" that black was a curse. It taught him to hate everything black, including himself. It taught him that everything white was good, to be admired, respected, and loved. It brainwashed this "Negro" to think he was superior if his complexion showed more of the white pollution of the slavemaster. This white man's Christian religion further deceived and brainwashed this "Negro" to always turn the other cheek, and grin, and scrape, and bow, and be humble, and to sing, and to pray, and to take whatever was dished out by the devilish white man; and to look for his pie in the sky, and his heaven in the hereafter, while right here on earth the slavemaster white man enjoyed *his* heaven.⁴⁶

Yet, while Malcolm stressed the deleterious effects of white sacred imagery for nonwhite peoples, he was just as aware of the corollary impact it has upon the white subconscious. Imaging God as normatively white, Malcolm argues, imprisons white people in a sense of illusion, instilling a false sense of superiority and an unrecognized sense of racialized entitlement.

⁴⁴AMX, 424.

⁴⁵AMX, 277-278.

⁴⁶AMX, 188. A similar critique occurs later in the *Autobiography*: "Brothers and sisters, the white man has brainwashed us black people to fasten our gaze upon a blond-haired, blue-eyed Jesus! We're worshipping a Jesus that doesn't even *look* like us! . . . The blond-haired, blue-eyed white man has taught you and me to worship a *white* Jesus, and to shout and sing and pray to this God that's *his* God, the white man's God. The white man has taught us to shout and sing and pray until we *die*, to wait until *death*, for some dreamy heaven-in-the-hereafter, when we're *dead*, while this white man has his milk and honey in the streets paved with golden dollars right here on *this* earth!" (253).

Speaking before a predominately white audience at Boston University, he chided them for possessing illusory attitudes of privilege, arguing that these resulted from an “educational system . . . designed to make you think you are God; [that] there is no one like you and everyone else is below you.”⁴⁷ In other words, whites are also victims of a religious system, brainwashed into a false consciousness that no one is—or ought to be—on their level. Little wonder, then, that many white Christians regard “white,” “Christian,” and “American” as interchangeable and even equivalent identities. Or that many Catholics believe that “Catholic” = “white.”⁴⁸

It comes as no surprise, then, that Malcolm concludes that Christianity is incompatible with black aspirations for freedom and equality. He declares, “It has hindered where it might have helped; it has been evasive when it was morally bound to be forthright; it has separated believers on the basis of color, although it has declared its mission to be a universal brotherhood under Jesus Christ. Christian love is the white man’s love for himself and for his race.”⁴⁹

IMPLICATIONS FOR CATHOLIC THEOLOGY: THE CHALLENGE OF SOLIDARITY

Considering a protean figure such as Malcolm X raises significant challenges for both the discipline of Catholic theology and Catholic theologians. I will consider these under the rubric of *solidarity*, that is, by exploring how a serious engagement with Malcolm X stretches not only our understanding but also the ramifications of the commonplace Christian imperative to live and think in solidarity with the poor.⁵⁰

⁴⁷Cited in C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Muslims in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 173.

⁴⁸I develop this point in *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*, 78-82.

⁴⁹*AMX*, 271-272. Note, however, the deeper significance of Malcolm’s critique is that it represents an interrogation and rejection of the symbol system of Western culture. It calls into question the fundamental set of meanings and values that inform the way of life of Western societies. He unmask the profound cultural malformations and deformations of white and nonwhite personal identity (covered at length in *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*). In other words, he advances an understanding that racism is a culture, a culture of racially conferred white dominance, which has derivative societal and interpersonal manifestations. He thus implicitly argues that effective anti-racist action must address these deep cultural roots—with the attendant threat to white identity—rather than focus upon racism’s more obvious yet comparatively superficial manifestations. He thus raises the vexing question of the theologian’s own call to racial conversion and solidarity, that is, an awareness of how we, all of us, are “raced” . . . and the implications of this realization for our personal identities and our intellectual integrity.

⁵⁰By calling this “commonplace,” I am by no means implying that all theologians agree upon the meaning or demands of such solidarity. I mean only to say that the call to

A. Listening to the Vox Victimarum: The Rationality of the Oppressed

In her 2004 presidential address, Shawn Copeland called upon Catholic theology to attend to a new “anthropological subject” in its reflection, namely, “exploited, despised, poor women of color.”⁵¹ I believe that few among us, in principle, would disagree with her summons. Yet a consideration of Malcolm X reveals why, in reality, many among us would find difficulty mustering the solidarity that such a summons entails. One of the challenges is that of listening to and honoring a form of discourse and rationality that is not only impermissible in the academy, but more often than not, even despised.

Our tendency, as scholars schooled in a particular form of rational discourse, is to dismiss a lot of what Malcolm says as overstated, overblown, or downright false. For example, we might be critical of his harsh dismissal of Christianity. What of those who, inspired by Christian faith, have struggled for justice? What of the enslaved Africans who saw through the slave master’s catechisms,⁵² with their blatantly self-serving skewing of Christianity, and then appropriated an understanding of Christian faith that nurtured their hope and sustained heroic acts of resistance? What of those believers, such as Martin Luther King, who in the name of Christian faith challenged the edifice of Jim Crow racial separation and humiliation? Finally, doesn’t Malcolm’s avowal of Islam as the only authentic religion for black people run into immense historical difficulty given Muslim complicity in the sub-Saharan slave trade?⁵³

Such objections have their legitimacy. Yet, they also miss the point. Malcolm’s significance as an articulation of the *vox victimarum* challenges us to attend to a different form of rationality and logic, one that subverts the canons that most of us have been trained to recognize. For as Malcolm declared during a lecture at Harvard, “What is logical to the oppressor isn’t logical to the oppressed. And what is reason to the oppressor isn’t reason to the oppressed. . . . [W]hat sounds reasonable to those who exploit us doesn’t sound reasonable to us. There just has to be a new system of reason and logic devised by us who are at the bottom, if we want to get some results in this struggle that is called ‘the Negro revolution.’”⁵⁴

live, work, and be in solidarity with the poor is not seriously disputed by most contemporary Catholic theologians.

⁵¹M. Shawn Copeland, “Turning the Subject,” in her *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (New York: Fortress Press, 2010), 89 and *passim*.

⁵²For studies of the slave catechisms and their “instructional” dialogues see Charles C. Jones, *A Catechism for Colored Persons* (Charleston, SC, 1834); H. Shelton Smith, *In His Image, But . . . : Racism in Southern Religion, 1780-1910* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1972); and R. Earl Riggins, Jr., *Dark Symbols, Obscure Signs: God, Self, & Community in the Slave Mind* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993).

⁵³Richard Brent Turner, *Islam in the African-American Experience* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1997), 21-23.

⁵⁴Malcolm X, *Speeches at Harvard*, 133.

The key to this new system of rationality, as Africanist Maulana Karenga contends, is that it is conceived of and constructed toward the goal of liberation. It is a form of discourse and rationality which “encourages critical engagement rather than critical distance, informality rather than formality, focus on everyday experience rather than abstractions, and human sensitivity or emotion as essential to critical understanding. Moreover, it is self-consciously posed in a language available to the many rather than the few.”⁵⁵ Karenga continues by insightfully noting the purpose of what he calls Malcolm’s “unorthodox” mode of reasoning: “His project . . . focuses not so much on logical justification of his own arguments as on the persistent unmasking of contradictions in the logic and practice of the established order. Therefore, it is not always his *assertions* which are paramount but the *questions* he raises about the logic and practice of domination of the established order.”⁵⁶

This represents a fundamental epistemological challenge, one far more radical than what is usually intended when liberationist theologians speak of the “epistemological privilege” of the poor and outcast.⁵⁷ The point of his critique of white Christianity is to call attention to the uncomfortable, and thus deeply resisted, truth of how it has served as a rationalization of vested interests.

Malcolm’s discourse strips away the facile confidence that we have in the compatibility of Christian belief with social justice praxis. His “logic” explains why many black Christians struggle to affirm their adherence to a religion that justified the subjugation and murders of their people. His “logic” exposes why many Black Catholics have abandoned the Church—impatient, furious, and brokenhearted by its legacy of false promises, lukewarm welcome, half-hearted acceptance, and outright abandonment. Malcolm’s passionate and engaged “logic”—with all of its richness, vibrancy, and urgency—exposes how most academic discussions render justice abstract, sterile, and above all, “safe.”⁵⁸

If indeed the voices, cries and pleas of the victims are the voice of God, then Malcolm, as a skilled articulator of the underside of black life—especially of the poor and the imprisoned—challenges us to realize that God speaks not only in a different idiom, but also may employ a form of rationality that exposes the inadequacy, complacency, and superficiality of our own. Perhaps this is what the prophet meant when he declared: “My ways are not your ways, nor are your thoughts my thoughts” (Isaiah 55:8).

Vox victimarum vox Dei, as embodied by Malcolm X, is surely terrifying . . . and strains our at times facile efforts at authentic solidarity. David Tracy reminds

⁵⁵Maulana Karenga, “The Oppositional Logic of Malcolm X: Differentiation, Engagement and Resistance,” *Western Journal of Black Studies* 17:1 (Spring 1993), 6-7.

⁵⁶*Ibid.*, 7; emphasis added.

⁵⁷A survey of the import of this term is offered by William R. O’Neill, “No Amnesty for Sorrow: The Privilege of the Poor in Christian Social Ethics,” *Theological Studies* 55 (December 1994), 638-656.

⁵⁸I discuss the sterility of the standard discussions of justice in *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*, Chapter 4.

us that the discourse of the victims exposes the “anonymous and unrecognized” power behind and beneath what passes as established “knowledge.” Yet, Tracy also proclaims that the voices of the stigmatized “others”—though perhaps “strident” and “uncivil”—also bear witness to “possibilities we have never dared to dream.”⁵⁹

Thus Malcolm’s first challenge lies in expanding the range of accepted logic and discourse by calling into question our ability to attend to the limits of our own rationality.

*B. “Social Alexithymia” amid Profound
Demographic Change*

Catholic social thought avows that solidarity is not merely a vague sympathy for another’s plight. Rather, John Paul II teaches that solidarity is a commitment, a “firm and persevering determination” to act on behalf of the common good, and preferentially for the good of the poor.⁶⁰ Solidarity rests upon the deep-seated conviction that the concerns of the despised other are intimately bound up with our own, grounded in a recognition of the other’s shared personhood.

Yet, this recognition is precisely what is compromised through systemic racism. Joe Feagin, a prolific scholar on the sociology of white racism, notes that socialization in a culture of racism blunts one’s ability to feel the pain of the oppressed. He calls this “social alexithymia,” that is, “the sustained inability to relate to and understand the suffering of those who are oppressed.” Such emotional blunting or callousness is essential for maintaining an unjust racialized society: “Essential to being an oppressor in a racist society is a significantly reduced ability, or inability, to understand or relate to the emotions, such as recurring pain, of those targeted by oppression.”⁶¹

Malcolm X places the challenge of “social alexithymia” front and center for the majority of Catholic theologians. He contends:

Why, here in America, the seeds of racism are so rooted in white people collectively, their belief that they are “superior” in some way so deeply rooted, that these things are in the national white subconsciousness. Many whites are even actually unaware of their own racism, until they face some test, and then their racism emerges in one form or another. . . . The white man can’t separate himself from the stigma that he automatically feels about anyone, no matter who, who is not of his color. . . . The white man is *not* inherently evil, but America’s racist society influences him to act evilly. The society has produced and nourishes a psychology which brings out the lowest, most base part of human beings.⁶²

⁵⁹David Tracy, *Plurality and Ambiguity*, 79.

⁶⁰John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, nos. 38 and 42.

⁶¹Joe R. Feagin, *Systemic Racism: A Theory of Oppression* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 27-28, 275.

⁶²AMX, 417, 427; emphasis in the original.

The challenges of socialized callousness, cultured indifference,⁶³ and the unconscious tendency to distance oneself from the plight of those deemed inferior, are of great importance not only for Catholic theologians but the whole U.S. Church. At a recent USCCB-sponsored convocation on cultural diversity in the Church, it was revealed that white Anglos (those whom the Census Bureau identifies as “white non-Hispanics”) are no longer the majority of the U.S. church.⁶⁴ We are now a “majority-minority” faith community, a church with no single majority racial group, a church of racial and ethnic minorities. As one conference participant noted, “We do not have diversity *in* the church; we *are* a diverse church!”⁶⁵

I think I am on very solid ground when I say that this realization has not yet seeped into the collective American Catholic consciousness. The reality of “social alexithymia” raises troubling questions as we contemplate U.S. Catholicism’s future. Will there be an exodus of whites out of the Catholic Church, paralleling the “white flight” from the nation’s cities during the 1960s and 1970s, when whites abandoned neighborhoods considered too “colored?” Will white Catholics in the U.S. imitate the practices of pre-Mandela South Africa, whereby effective power is kept in the hands of a white racial minority to the exclusion of the darker majority? Will U.S. Catholicism, confronted with an inevitable “browning” that mirrors that of the wider society, become a (perhaps unwitting) ally in conservative social causes, aligning itself *de facto* with political parties and social groups – overwhelmingly white – who vow to “take back *our* country?”⁶⁶

⁶³Bryan N. Massingale, “The Scandal of Poverty: ‘Cultured Indifference’ and the Option for the Poor Post-Katrina,” *Journal of Religion and Society* Supplement Series 4 (2008), 55-72.

⁶⁴“Catholic Cultural Diversity Network Convocation,” sponsored by the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Secretariat of Cultural Diversity in the Church, held at the University of Notre Dame, May 6-8, 2010.

⁶⁵A similar phrasing is found in the work of Latina theologian, Carmen Nanko-Fernández, who declares, “We are not your diversity, we are the Church!” See her *Theologizing en Espanish* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 1-20.

⁶⁶Of concern to communities of color are the recent efforts to revive the Catholic (white) Evangelical political alliance of the Bush era (e.g., the Fall 2009 “Manhattan Declaration”), which are insufficiently attentive to—and *moreover, silent about*—the substantial overlap between conservative religious faith and racially-tinged protest movements (e.g., the “Tea Party”). The palpable overlap between conservative religious faith and opposition to comprehensive health care and immigration reform—both of which significantly benefit communities of color—also causes one to view Catholic alliances with such efforts with concern, if not alarm. The danger, to put it bluntly, is that an uncritical alliance of U.S. Catholic leaders with such conservative causes marks the Catholic Church as racially insensitive and tone deaf, at best. At worst, it represents *de facto* Catholic support for racially-tinged opposition to any proposals offered by a nonwhite president. I discuss this racially motivated opposition to President Obama and its connection to anxiety over the nation’s changing demographics in *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*, 4-13. See also John Quinn, “The Public Duty of Bishops: Lessons from the Storm in South Bend,” *America* (August 31, 2009). For the convergence between white Evangelical conservative

These are not idle or speculative questions. They stem from an awareness of both our past history⁶⁷ and the ways we all have been malformed, deformed, and conformed by a culture of racism that is alien and hostile to our deepest faith convictions. I argue that without a deeper, more intentional dialogue with the entirety of the Black Experience and the whole range of black thought (not simply with that which is considered tame or acceptable), the Church in the U.S. and its theologians cannot and will not adequately and justly rise to the challenge of this hour. To put it bluntly, Malcolm's thought reveals how and why we are about to face a crisis of unimaginable import in the next decade as both the Church and U.S. society navigate a profound demographic shift.

C. *Solidarity in the Midst of Social Conflict*

I outlined above how solidarity emerged as a central concept in Catholic social thought, particularly during the pontificate of John Paul II. He envisions that a "firm and persevering" commitment to the common good will lead individuals to recognize one another as persons, and move them to overturn the "structures of sin" which embody the human vices of a "desire for profit" and "thirst for power."⁶⁸

But how is this "solidarity" to manifest itself in concrete social life? How does the pope envision solidarity manifesting itself in the process of social change? The key passage follows:

Those who are more influential, because they have a greater share of goods and common services, should feel *responsible* for the weaker and be ready to share with them all they possess. Those who are weaker, for their part, in the same spirit of *solidarity*, should not adopt a purely *passive* attitude or one that is destructive of the social fabric, but while claiming their legitimate rights, should do what they can for the good of all.⁶⁹

While the pope clearly does not counsel passivity or resignation on the part of the victims of social injustice, his appeal to them is full of caution, lest in pressing their grievances they damage social peace. It is the powerful who are summoned to a more proactive stance of care for the weak. Moved by moral exhortation, imbued with the virtue of solidarity, social elites voluntarily will undertake practices of social dispossession and divestment of privilege. In the words of one

religious faith and U.S. racism, see Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000).

⁶⁷See Cyprian Davis, *The History of Black Catholics in the Church* (New York: Crossroad Books, 1990); and John T. McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries: The History of the Catholic Encounter with Race in the Twentieth-Century Urban North* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

⁶⁸John Paul II, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 38.

⁶⁹John Paul II, *Sollicitudo*, #39.

commentator, the pontiff—and Catholic social thought as a whole—is proposing a vision of “solidarity without [social] struggle.”⁷⁰

The African American ethical tradition is severely critical of such an approach. Frederick Douglass provides a classic expression of both this critique and an alternative approach:

If there is no struggle, there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom, yet deprecate agitation, are [people] who want crops without plowing up the ground. They want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its mighty waters. This struggle may be a moral one; or it may be a physical one; or it may be both moral and physical; but there must be struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will.⁷¹

That Malcolm shares Douglass’ sentiments is beyond understatement. We have seen how he castigates Christianity for instilling black passivity and resignation in the face of racial injustice. African Americans, he contends, have “been America’s most fervent Christian[s]—and where has it gotten [them]?”⁷² He is especially critical of its self-serving appeals to nonviolence, especially when directed almost exclusively to black protesters, as a barely disguised means to blunt the effectiveness of black activism.

Yet he is not entirely dismissive of religious faith in the cause for justice. He hints at the proper role of faith in this appeal to a largely black Christian audience to not let religious differences divide them: “The best way to avoid divisions and arguments is to keep your religion at home, in the closet. Keep it between you and your God. Because if it hasn’t done anything more for you than it has, you need to forget it anyway.”⁷³

Beneath this rhetorical flourish is a profound assertion, namely, that the acid test for religious relevance and authenticity is its commitment to the welfare of the despised, oppressed, and disdained. If Christianity is anything, it should be good news for a society’s outcasts. If not, then it is not only best abandoned; Malcolm contends that forsaking it is the only sane, rational—and indeed, ethical—response: “I believe in a religion that believes in freedom. Any time I have to accept a religion that won’t let me fight a battle for my people, I say to hell with that religion.”⁷⁴

⁷⁰See the essays by William K. Tabb, “John Paul II and Fidel Castro: Two Views of Development,” and Mary E. Hobgood, “Conflicting Paradigms in Social Analysis,” both in *The Logic of Solidarity: Commentaries on Pope John Paul’s Encyclical “On Social Concern,”* eds. Gregory Baum and Robert Ellsberg (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989).

⁷¹Frederick Douglass, “West Indian Emancipation Speech,” August 4, 1857. The text of this address can be found in Lerone Bennett, Jr., *Before the Mayflower: A History of Black America*, Fifth Edition (New York: Penguin Books, 1982), 160-161.

⁷²AMX, 424.

⁷³Malcolm X, “The Ballot or the Bullet.”

⁷⁴BAMN, 140. See also AMX, 425: “Well, if *this* is so—if the so-called “Christianity” now being practiced in America displays the best that world Christianity has left to

This point is made even more directly when Malcolm answered challenges concerning his religious orthodoxy. After his life-altering pilgrimage to Mecca, when confronted by those who objected that orthodox Islam does not allow for his militant advocacy of racial justice, Malcolm countered:

No religion will ever make me forget the condition of our people in this country. No religion will make me forget the police clubs that come up 'side our heads. No God, no religion, no nothing will make me forget it until it stops, until it's finished, until it's eliminated. I want to make that point clear . . .⁷⁵

In other words, as long as religious believers must live in the midst of social injustice, authentic faith-inspired solidarity forbids an attitude of neutrality and demands an unambiguous commitment on behalf of the victims of injustice. The acid test of authentic solidarity is how it is lived in the midst of reality, that is, in the midst of social conflict.

This conviction becomes clearer when Malcolm addresses the proper role of whites in the struggle for racial justice. Reversing (and regretting) an earlier stance that had no room for white participation in the struggle for human rights and dignity, Malcolm declared that sincere white people need to prove themselves where it is most needed, namely, among their own as they work to convert whites who think and act in racist ways. He states: "Where the really sincere white people have got to do their 'proving' of themselves is not among the black *victims*, but out on the battle lines of where America's racism really *is*—and that's in their own home communities; America's racism is among their own fellow whites."⁷⁶

Leaving aside the arguable point of whether that is the only or exclusive avenue for racial solidarity, what is manifestly clear is the conviction that authentic solidarity cannot evade social conflict, resistance, and recalcitrance if it is to be of genuine service in the quest for social transformation. The privileged, Malcolm contends, will not easily surrender their privileged status merely because they are exhorted to do so.

In sum, Malcolm would judge the solidarity advocated by Catholic social ethics as unrealistic (if not ideologically complicit) in its assessment of the difficulty of achieving social change. It underestimates both the recalcitrance of the privileged and the potential power of the dispossessed. A more detailed discussion of the reasons for the Catholic stress upon moral exhortations addressed to the powerful is beyond the scope of this address.⁷⁷ For now, it suffices to say that Malcolm's understanding of solidarity lived in the midst of social conflict—with its more

offer—no one in his right mind should need any much greater proof that very close at hand is the *end* of Christianity." (emphasis in the original).

⁷⁵*MXS*, 70.

⁷⁶*AMX*, 433-434; emphasis in the original.

⁷⁷Such would surely include its reliance upon natural law reasoning, assuming it is addressing an audience of rational and well-intentioned individuals. I discuss this further in *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*, 74-78.

realistic appraisal of both the obstacles that justice faces and the power struggle needed to achieve it—is a valuable corrective for an overly-optimistic Catholic perspective. Without an appreciation of what might be called “conflictual solidarity,” Catholic theology cannot answer the summons to attend to the new subjects in its midst—the poor, the exploited, and those of color—who bear the image of God.

MALCOLM’S RELEVANCE IN A “POST-OBAMA” AMERICA

For some, reflecting upon Malcolm X’s contribution and challenge to Catholic theology would seem to be an odd choice for a CTSA Presidential Address. How does his rhetoric of being a “victim of Americanism” and “American hypocrisy” square with the reality of a Black man occupying the nation’s highest office? Isn’t it perhaps incongruous to summon Catholic theology to a greater openness to the racial “other;” especially when a Black man heads the world’s largest learned society of Catholic theologians? In other words, aren’t we far beyond all of this? Why Malcolm X now? What is his relevance to a “post-Obama America?”⁷⁸

My answer: Malcolm X remains relevant, even “post-Obama,” because the social conditions that marked his life still exist:

- As during his lifetime, the myth of black achievement and progress masks the reality of token accomplishment on the part of a few. Malcolm’s words then are still relevant today: “And so they come up with only tokenism. . . . a few handpicked Negroes get good jobs; a few handpicked Negroes get good homes or go to a decent school. And then they use these handpicked Negroes, they put ‘em on television, blow ‘em up, and make it look like you got a whole lot of ‘em, when you only got one or two.”⁷⁹

⁷⁸As evidence of this thinking, I offer the objections of an anonymous reviewer (which I cite in their entirety as written) to an article I submitted to a referred journal examining the situation of Black Catholics: “Look!!!! Look!!!! at our present political environment: Come on: a Black President!!!!!!!!!!!! the most recent appointee-nominee—a 4 star Black General—for the TSA. . . . key White House personnel, black, etc etc. etc. And then I think of the Church and I think: Wilton Gregory. Only one of several key bishops/archbishops. I think of a Black priest in our Archdiocese who is a historian from Zambia and has read Davis in my class and has published two books on colonialism and Black Catholics. I could go on to the world of entertainment, sports. . . . and, yes, even literature: Chinua Achebe HAS made it for sure. WHITE PRIVILEGE? or Power Privilege today (white and black)? Monied privilege. These examples are not, to my mind, exceptions to a pervasive racism that undermines our nation and our church. How can we paint with the exact same brush the pre-2000 world (or the pre-1980s) world. . . . with the world before Civil Rights? Anymore than we can do it with regard to women.”

⁷⁹*Malcolm X Talks to Young People*, 69. Today, he might add that they would “photo-shop” in a few people of color to further create the illusion of diversity, as has happened on some college websites.

- As in his life, black and brown children still are too often uneducated and undereducated, enduring learning environments that would be deemed intolerable for whites, and thus are stymied in their quests for intellectual opportunities commensurate with their abilities.⁸⁰
- As in his life, our nation's prison population is overwhelmingly young, poor, male, uneducated, black and brown, who experience harsher sentences than white men charged with similar crimes.⁸¹
- As during Malcolm's life, our nation's street corners are gathering places for "young men and women without hope, without miracles and without a sense of destiny other than life on the edge—the edge of the law, the edge of the economy, the edge of family structures and communities."⁸² Indeed, in many neighborhoods, a mere 10% unemployment rate would be a cause for celebration (as opposed to the current national lament). Malcolm's words, disturbingly, are all too accurate even today: "Thicker each year in these ghettos is the kind of teen-ager I was – with the wrong kind of heroes, and the wrong kind of influences."⁸³
- As during Malcolm's lifetime, many poor, black, brown, and white disenfranchised people lack the critical skills needed for a true comprehension of their social situation . . . and thus often fall prey to unscrupulous demagogues who feign populist outrage while pocketing six-figure speaking fees.⁸⁴
- As during his lifetime, racial violence and hate crimes still stain our public life. Burning crosses, hanging nooses, and Nazi swastikas are still deployed to remind us of the normative racial ordering that ought not be disturbed. Black and brown women and men – including many suspected of being immigrants – are the targets of vicious attacks, reflecting white anxiety over the changing demographics of the country and hostility toward a nonwhite president.⁸⁵
- Perhaps most poignantly, as during his lifetime, many poor persons of color struggle with a sense of racialized inferiority and lovelessness. In 2006, a young African American high school student, Kiri Davis,

⁸⁰See Jonathan Kozol, *The Shame of the Nation: The Restoration of Apartheid Schooling in America* (New York: Crown Publishing, 2005).

⁸¹For a trenchant and disturbing analysis, see Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2010).

⁸²"Obama warns of black 'quiet riot,'" *Chicago Tribune* (June 6, 2007), Section 1, page 4.

⁸³AMX, 436.

⁸⁴Tom Burrell, *Brainwashed: Challenging the Myth of Black Inferiority* (New York: Smiley Books, 2010).

⁸⁵Southern Poverty Law Center, *Intelligence Report* (Summer 2010); and Southern Poverty Law Center, *The Second Wave: Return of the Militias* (Montgomery, AL: Southern Poverty Law Center, 2009), 9. Also discussed in *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*, 3-13.

produced a short documentary, entitled “A Girl Like Me,” exploring the struggles that women like herself experience as they navigate a world that tells them that they do not conform to its standards of beauty.⁸⁶ They talk of using hair relaxers and skin bleaching creams, and of the perception that they are loud, obnoxious, and unintelligent. They speak forthrightly of their discomfort with having “big butts or boobs” or looking too “African,” and being disdained because they are too light or too dark. Their stories are heartbreaking, and difficult for me—a child of the 1960s “Black is beautiful” credo—to hear. Have we made so little progress? I wondered. But the most wrenching moments occur when Davis re-conducts the famous “Dolls Experiment” used in the 1950s to demonstrate the corrosive effects of segregated environments upon the self-esteem of black children. Using a group of twenty-one black boys and girls, the oldest of whom seem to be no more than four years old, she shows them a black doll and a white doll, identical in every way except for the color of their skins. She asks them, “Can you show me the doll that you like best or like to play with?” The majority choose the white doll. She continues: “Can you show me which doll is the nice doll? Can you show me the doll which looks bad?” Then she asks, “Why is this the nice doll?” The response: “Because he’s white.” Davis follows up: “Why does this one look bad?” “Because it’s black.” And then the truly gut-wrenching question: “Can you give me the doll that looks like you?” A little girl, no more than three, reaches for the white doll, visibly hesitates, and then reluctantly . . . sadly . . . pushes the interviewer the black doll. The majority of the children, 15 out of 21, preferred the white doll, and saw themselves as bearing the stigmas associated with the black one.

Malcolm X is still relevant, even post-Obama, because social conditions of despair, fatalism, resignation, and brainwashing—the effects of social marginalization and exclusion—still exist. These signs of the time still cry out for Catholic theology to articulate prophetic responses: responses that interrogate not only the material conditions of economic exploitation and political irrelevance, but also facilitate emancipation from internalized shame and inferiority.

MALCOLM X AND THEOLOGY’S PROPHETIC COMMITMENTS

Earlier, I stated that Malcolm’s life and ideas were “classics” that transcended their originating culture and possess universal significance. This will be further demonstrated as we ponder him as an image of hope.

⁸⁶“A Girl Like Me,” directed by Kiri Davis. Available on-line at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rjy9q8VekmE>. Accessed January 31, 2010.

We gather this year to consider “theology’s prophetic commitments.” So I returned to a favorite text, Walter Brueggemann’s *The Prophetic Imagination*.⁸⁷ I have always been taken by his understanding that prophecy is not so much an action as it is a mentality, a consciousness, a way of imagining and seeing the world. The prophet’s role, Brueggemann argues, is to propose alternative visions and possibilities than those that are officially endorsed. He states that the biblical prophets had a twofold task: first, in light of God’s word, to articulate the people’s groans, griefs, and losses; and then, in light of God’s word, to express the people’s deepest hopes and lead them to embrace God’s promise of new life. Thus I believe that the prophetic vocation is first, to help the faith community to embrace a loss it does not want to admit; and then to proclaim to the people a hope that they cannot dare to imagine.

Malcolm X obviously embodies the first characteristic. He relentlessly proclaimed “the end of white world supremacy,”⁸⁸ that is, the loss of racially conferred dominance and privilege. It is an excruciating loss and threat to white identity, a loss many still resist and struggle to admit.

But Malcolm also proclaims a hope that we can hardly imagine and struggle to believe. It is a hope engendered during his life-changing pilgrimage to the holy sites of Islam. It is a faith-inspired vision, one he wrote “from the heart” and believed capable of sustaining critical thought, radical advocacy and daring deeds . . . even as it moved into an unknown future:

[W]e were all participating in the same ritual, displaying a spirit of unity and brotherhood that my experiences in America had led me to believe never could exist between the white and non-white. . . .

We were *truly* all the same (brothers)—because their belief in one God had removed the “white” from their *minds*, the “white” from their *behavior*, and the “white” from their *attitude*.

I could see from this, that perhaps if white Americans could accept the Oneness of God, then perhaps, too, they could accept *in reality* the Oneness of Man—and cease to measure, and hinder, and harm others in terms of their “differences” in color.⁸⁹

“Perhaps.” “Perhaps.” Therein lies the hope. And the challenge.

I conclude with this invocation of hope—a fragile yet tenacious hope that seems characteristic of the Black Experience (and perhaps Christian belief as well). At the end of his life, Malcolm was not sure of his legacy or impact. Yet he models what Brueggemann understands as a central characteristic of biblical

⁸⁷Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, Second Edition (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2001).

⁸⁸Cf. Malcolm X, *The End of White World Supremacy*, edited and with an Introduction by Benjamin Karim (New York: Arcade Publishing, 1971).

⁸⁹AMX, 391-392; emphasis in the original.

prophecy, namely, a worldview that sees social life as an unfolding drama where God listens to the cries of victims and then acts—at times obscurely and inconspicuously, at times decisively and dramatically—to bring justice for the widow, the orphan, the stranger and the poor: that is, for those whose voices can be ignored with little penalty in both church and society.

It is our humble yet privileged charge as theologians to help—and even challenge—the faith community to perceive and understand how God is so acting even now, in our midst. This, I believe, is the essence of theology's prophetic commitments in every age.

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