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JAMES BALDWIN'S CHALLENGE TO CATHOLIC THEOLOGIAN AND THE CHURCH

JON NILSON

Racism/white supremacy is seemingly ineradicable, despite its contradictions to the gospel and American ideals. James Baldwin perceived the reason: whites' fears of their own mortality. He did not demonstrate the truth of his claim, but Terror Management Theory (TMT) provides empirical confirmation for it. The Church has declared reconciliation to be the heart of its mission. So TMT must shape its new, effective strategies, like the processes that produced the two influential pastoral letters in the early 1980's.

*Not everything that is faced can be changed;
but nothing can be changed until it is faced.*

— James Baldwin¹

MY AIM HERE is to contribute to the developing conversation between African American intellectuals and US Catholic theologians that Mary Doak initiated in these pages.² White supremacy constitutes US society's

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¹ James Baldwin, *The Cross of Redemption: Uncollected Writings*, ed. Randall Kenan (1962; New York: Pantheon, 2010) 34; cited hereafter as *Cross*. This is a collection of his writings that Toni Morrison did not include in the Library of America series volume, *James Baldwin: Collected Essays* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 1998); cited hereafter as *Essays*. In the *Essays* citations, the date of original publication in book form (1955) is given in parentheses. Also in the *Cross* citations, the date of original publication (1962) is given in parentheses.

I am grateful to *Theological Studies*'s anonymous reviewers for their comments and suggestions.

² Mary C. Doak, "Cornel West's Challenge to the Catholic Evasion of Black Theology," *Theological Studies* 63 (2002) 87–106. Bryan N. Massingale continued the conversation in his Presidential Address, "Vox Victimarum Vox Dei: Malcolm X as Neglected 'Classic' for Catholic Theological Reflection," *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 65 (2010) 63–88.

most persistent, damaging, and hidden social sin.³ So this conversation is essential if Catholic theologians are to unmask white supremacy's social and intrapsychic workings and influence on their work. It is essential for a church that has declared reconciliation to be the heart of its mission, as the Catholic Church has done.⁴

This conversation also exemplifies the encounter that is foundational to Bernard Lonergan's understanding of conversion—and conversion is the heart and key to theological method as he presents it. Without a commitment to the demands of conversion (intellectual, moral, and religious), Lonergan maintains, theologians will not produce the “cumulative and progressive results” that authentic method yields. Instead, their personal and communal biases will distort the challenge and promise of the gospel.

How do these biases come to light? “No problem is at once more delicate and more profound, more practical and perhaps more pressing” than this one. Lonergan continues:

How, indeed, is a mind to become conscious of its own bias when that bias springs from a communal flight from understanding and is supported by the whole texture of a civilization? How can new strength and vigor be imparted to the detached and disinterested desire to understand without the reinforcement acting as an added bias?⁵

He answers: we become conscious of our biases only by means of *encounter*, since “encounter is the one way in which self-understanding and horizon are put to the test.” Encounter means “meeting persons, appreciating the

³ The literature that demonstrates the persistence, destructiveness, and hiddenness of white supremacy is vast. On its persistence, see, e.g., James W. Perkinson, *White Theology: Outing Supremacy in Modernity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); and Joe R. Feagin, *Systemic Racism: A Theory of Oppression* (New York: Routledge, 2006). On its destructive character, see, e.g., Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: New Press, 2010); and Maureen H. O'Connell, *If These Walls Could Talk: Community Muralism and the Beauty of Justice* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2012). On its hiddenness, see, e.g., Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003); and Leslie Houts Picca and Joe R. Feagin, *Two-Faced Racism: Whites in the Backstage and Frontstage* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

⁴ See n. 61 below. Regarding the orthography of “church” through this article, I lowercase the word except when I mean it to refer specifically to the Roman Catholic Church.

⁵ Bernard Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, 5th ed., rev. and augm., ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto, 1992) 8–9.

values they represent, criticizing their defects, and allowing one's living to be challenged *at its very roots* by their words and deeds."⁶ Theologians need "others" who offer the gifts and graces necessary for conversion and genuine progress in the academy, the church, and the world.⁷

Like Doak's Cornel West and Massingale's Malcolm X, James Baldwin (1924–1987) is an "other" for US Catholic theology. Like West, he was not a Catholic, and like Malcolm, he was neither a practicing Christian nor an academic. In fact, Baldwin did not even have a college degree. He saw himself as an artist, not as an intellectual. For him, this entailed a heavy responsibility. To be an artist demanded ruthless honesty with oneself and others.⁸ The artist's task was not to entertain, but to expose the soothing illusions by which people evade the harsh realities of their individual and collective lives and then to tell them some hard truths about their social, racial, and sexual selves.

Baldwin was so faithful to the demands of his calling that he came to be described as a prophet. When the inner-city riots broke out in the wake of Martin Luther King's assassination in April 1968, it seemed as though Baldwin's predictions in *The Fire Next Time* (1963) had come true.⁹ Today, nearly 25 years after he died, he still participates in what passes for our national conversation about race. The Library of America keeps his works in print, and the recent publication of *The Cross of Redemption* (2010) shows that he still has much to teach us. Facing Baldwin's challenge, I contend, is crucial for the credibility and integrity of US Catholic theology and for the mission of the US Catholic Church. Baldwin would certainly not deny that there has been some progress in racial justice since the upheavals of the late 1960s. If he were alive today, even after the election of Barack Obama as President of the United States, he would not be surprised by the suffering that our laws, social structures, and "racial framing" continue to inflict on people of color in this country.¹⁰ Nor would he be deceived by arguments and suggestions that white supremacy is fading fast

⁶ Bernard J. F. Lonergan, *Method in Theology* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972) 247, emphasis added.

⁷ "Face-to face" is not the only mode of encounter, and blacks cannot be tasked with educating whites on the realities of racism. See Karen Teel, *Racism and the Image of God* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010) 36.

⁸ See, e.g., "The Creative Process" (1962), in *Essays* 669–72.

⁹ Lisa Clayton Robinson, "Baldwin, James," in *Africana: The Encyclopedia of the African and African American Experience*, ed. Kwame Anthony Appiah and Henry Louis Gates Jr. (New York: Basic, 1999) 168–69.

¹⁰ "For centuries the white racial framing of ingroup superiority and outgroup inferiority has been, to use Antonio Gramsci's term, *hegemonic* in this society" (Joe R. Feagin, *The White Racial Frame: Centuries of Racial Framing and Counter-Framing* [Routledge: New York, 2010] 11).

as a social force because he had perceived the deeply hidden motive that drives many white people to cling to white supremacy. James Baldwin is a prophet whom we ignore at our peril, because "the question of color especially, in this country, operates to hide the graver questions of the self. That is precisely why what we like to call 'the Negro problem' is so tenacious in American life, and so dangerous."¹¹

WHO WAS JAMES BALDWIN?

Baldwin was born in Harlem in 1924 to a single mother, Emma Berdis Jones, who married a preacher, David Baldwin, a short time later.¹² As the eldest of eight sisters and brothers, he "took them over with one hand and held a book with the other. The children probably suffered, though they have since been kind enough to deny it."¹³ His stepfather grew to resent white teachers' encouragement of the young James's voracious reading and first writing efforts, but James secured some independence when he joined a Pentecostal church at age 14 and became a boy-preacher himself.¹⁴ Three years later, however, he left the church because of what he saw as its hypocrisy and manipulation. Mentored by the Harlem Renaissance poet and teacher Countee Cullen, he began to write more in earnest. In 1944 he moved to Greenwich Village where he met people like Richard Wright, who grasped Baldwin's potential and encouraged his literary efforts.

In 1948 he spent fellowship money on a one-way ticket to France, where he spent much of the rest of his life. His novels, plays, short stories, literary criticism, and especially his essays on race won him a wide readership in the United States. So he frequently returned to the States to lecture, take up visiting professorships (despite his lack of even a baccalaureate degree), and engage figures as diverse as Elijah Muhammad, Stokely Carmichael, and Martin Luther King Jr. Gradually his health declined and he died in France of stomach cancer in 1987.

¹¹ *Essays* 136. "Negro" and "Negroes" were, of course, the accepted terms of his time. Reading Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*, Thomas Merton agreed that "at the heart of the matter then is man's contempt for truth, and the substitution of his 'self' for reality. His image is his truth. He believes in his specter and sacrifices human beings to his specter. This is what we are doing, and this is not Christianity or any other true religion: it is barbarity" (Thomas Merton, *The Courage for Truth: The Letters of Thomas Merton to Writers*, ed. Christine M. Bochen [New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1993] 245–46).

¹² This sketch is indebted mainly to Trudier Harris, "Baldwin, James," in *The Concise Oxford Dictionary to African American Literature*, ed. William L. Andrews, Frances Smith Foster, and Trudier Harris (New York: Oxford University, 2001) 20–22.

¹³ *Essays* 5 (1955).

¹⁴ These experiences found expression in his first novel, *Go Tell It on the Mountain* (1953).

BALDWIN ON WHITE SUPREMACY

Simply as an African American, Baldwin was well equipped to unmask the illusions of white superiority. As David Roediger notes, "From folktales onward African Americans have been among the nation's keenest students of white consciousness and white behavior."¹⁵ Baldwin was among the keenest of the keen, and he knew it.

You [white people] give me this advantage, that whereas you have never had to look at me, because you've sealed me away along with sin and death and all the other things you didn't want to look at, including love, my life was in your hands and I had to look at you. I know more about you, therefore, than you know about me. I've had to spend my life, after all—and all the other Negroes in the country have had to spend their lives—outwitting and watching white people. I had to know what you were doing before you did it.¹⁶

But Baldwin did not hate white people, even though their attitudes and (in)actions¹⁷ infuriated him. He had learned from his stepfather's example that hating whites would literally kill him, one way or another.¹⁸ Instead, he developed an unsentimental compassion for whites so trapped by their fear that they are deeply alienated from their true selves.¹⁹

Early in his career, Baldwin had decided to find out what makes white supremacy so persistent. In spite of all the legal measures enacted to achieve racial equality, all the moral exhortations to elemental fairness, and all the religious imperatives of justice and charity, why do people "who have mastered Kant, Hegel, Shakespeare, Marx, Freud, and the Bible find this statement [that blacks simply want to be treated like human beings] so impenetrable?"²⁰ He came to see that the question of skin color is really the question of the self. Racism is the site of deeper struggles.²¹ A lethal mix of ignorance, guilt, greed, and fear underlie the biases that maintain white supremacy. Thus, Baldwin realized, nothing less than whites' souls are at stake:

You see, there is no prospect of setting Negroes free, unless one is prepared to set the white people in America free. . . . Free from their terrors, free from their

¹⁵ David R. Roediger, "Introduction," in *Black on White: Black Writers on What It Means to be White*, ed. David R. Roediger (New York: Schocken, 1998) 1–26, at 4.

¹⁶ *Cross* 15 (1961); see also 68 (1964), 93 (1969), and 128–29 (1980).

¹⁷ "Negroes know how little white people are prepared to implement their words with deeds, how little, when the chips are down, they are prepared to risk. And this long history of moral evasion has had an unhealthy effect on the total life of the country, and has eroded whatever respect Negroes may once have felt for white people" (*Essays* 183 [1961]).

¹⁸ *Essays* 84 (1955).

¹⁹ *Essays* 311–12 (1963).

²⁰ *Essays* 177 (1961).

²¹ *Essays* 341 (1963); see also 136 (1961).

ignorance, free from their prejudices and free, really, from the right to do wrong, knowing that it is wrong.²²

Segregation (whether legally constructed, as it was in the Jim Crow era, or economically constructed, as it is today, resulting in separate "white" and "black" neighborhoods) produces white ignorance of the realities of black life and of the full humanity of black persons. "For segregation," Baldwin wrote, "has worked brilliantly in the South, and, in fact, in the nation, to this extent: it has allowed white people, with scarcely any pangs of conscience whatever, to *create*, in every generation, only the Negro they wished to see."²³ Thus, derogatory stereotypes of black people provide the rationalizations for black subordination.

How many whites know about the ugly history of slavery in its pre- and post-Civil War forms²⁴ and their own complicity in it? Do they really want to know? Baldwin saw how ignorance confers a happy innocence on white people. They need to keep blacks at a spatial and emotional distance "to avoid being called to account for crimes committed by [their] forefathers, or by [their] neighbors."²⁵ Genuine encounters with black people would threaten white self-esteem and undermine the illusion of US national virtue. "White America remains unable to believe that black America's grievances are real; they are unable to believe this because they cannot face what this fact says about themselves and their country,"²⁶ grievances like the one Baldwin unveiled for his nephew:

This innocent country set you down in a ghetto in which, in fact, it intended that you should perish. . . . You were born where you were born and faced the future that you faced because you were black and *for no other reason*. . . . You were born into a society which spelled out with brutal clarity, and in as many ways as possible, that you were a worthless human being.²⁷

It was no surprise to Baldwin that many whites do not really want equality with black people. They want superiority.²⁸ White superiority makes it easy to believe that black people deserve their condition and status on account of their "inferiority," however that inferiority may be biologically, morally, intellectually, or culturally construed.²⁹ Shielded from contact with black people who could challenge their "superiority," untroubled

²² James Baldwin and François Bondy, "James Baldwin, as Interviewed by François Bondy," *Transition* 12 (1964) 12–19, at 12.

²³ *Essays* 195 (1961), emphasis original.

²⁴ See, e.g., Douglas A. Blackmon, *Slavery by Another Name: The Re-Enslavement of Black Americans from the Civil War to World War II* (New York: Doubleday, 2008).

²⁵ *Essays* 122 (1955).

²⁶ *Essays* 455 (1972).

²⁷ *Essays* 293 (1963), emphasis original.

²⁸ *Essays* 471 (1972) 337 (1963).

²⁹ *Essays* 174–75 (1961).

white consciences can feel that black people are not people they need to care about.³⁰ “In all, 51 percent of Americans now express explicit anti-black attitudes, compared with 48 percent in a similar 2008 survey. When measured by an implicit racial attitudes test, the number of Americans with antiblack sentiments jumped to 56 percent during the last presidential election.”³¹

When blacks in the South and the North began to challenge segregation and thus threaten the racial hierarchy, many whites reacted violently to keep blacks “in their place”—the bottom. “In a way, the Negro tells us where the bottom is; *because he is there*, and *where* he is, beneath us, we know where the limits are and how far we must not fall. We must not fall beneath him.”³² But why must “we” not fall so far?

Baldwin perceived that this need to keep blacks down is ultimately grounded in whites’ fear of their own mortality. White supremacists create and maintain the illusion of whiteness not just as skin color, but as the way of life that constitutes the standard for humanity at its best. Thus whiteness confers a “symbolic immortality,” an assurance of belonging to something more enduring and worthwhile in which, somehow, they will continue to participate after they die. Since white supremacy keeps the fear of death from paralyzing them, it functions as an idol in precisely the way theologians describe idolatry: a finite reality is inflated to take the place of the unnamable, uncontrollable Ultimate within which truly “we live and move and have our being.” Theological discussions of idolatry tend toward the general and abstract because the list of what or who might function as an idol is virtually endless. Baldwin points to the idolatry that actually underlies racism/white supremacy.

Thus, the so-called racial problem is fundamentally a white problem. A “nameless fear that has nothing to do with Negroes” is the root of it all.³³ “Perhaps the whole root of our trouble, the human trouble, is that we will sacrifice all the beauty of our lives, will imprison ourselves in totems, taboos, blood sacrifices, steeples, mosques, races, armies, flags, nations, in order to deny the fact of death, which is the only fact we have.”³⁴

³⁰ Paul L. Wachtel observed: “The real meaning of race comes down largely to this: *Is this someone I should care about?*” (*Race in the Mind of America: Breaking the Vicious Circle between Blacks and Whites* [New York: Routledge, 1999] 37, emphasis original).

³¹ Charles M. Blow, “Escaping Slavery,” *New York Times*, January 5, 2013.

³² *Essays* 218–19 (1961), emphasis original; see also 337 (1963).

³³ *Essays* 219–21 (1961).

³⁴ *Essays* 339 (1963). Indeed, as Jeremy McCarter notes, “his essays hit hardest when he seeks the origins of America’s racial crisis not in the head-on collision of black and white, but in certain corners of the national psyche that we don’t like to inspect too closely” (“The Fire This Time: Baldwin’s New Collected Essays Pack as Much Firepower as Ever,” *Newsweek* 156.7 [August 16, 2010] 47).

Fear of the unknown that awaits us all in death is not the only ground of white supremacy. Baldwin points out others—the unacknowledged guilt, for instance—but this fear is the basis of all the others. If white people would only come to terms with their tragic humanity, all the other supports for racism would evaporate. If whites were to stop using blacks to cope with their own fears, then maybe whites and blacks can begin to work toward true reconciliation.

Whites, therefore, must accept and embrace the full burden of their humanity. That means accepting and embracing their own certain future death. Only that truth can set them really free. Face the fact that life is tragic, Baldwin urges.³⁵ Plunge into the fullness of life, where the only light we have can be found, and make yourself worthy of death.³⁶ Otherwise, you will try to ground your fragile self in some apparently enduring and transcendent reality, like white supremacy.

All this was clear and indisputable to Baldwin. But he takes it simply as a given. He does not try to argue or demonstrate it in his essays. So his intuition about whites' fear of death as the deepest root of racism remains a provocative claim, not a proven thesis, in his work. We may sense that Baldwin was on to something. But we have to look elsewhere to discover why he was right. As it happens, there is a body of empirical evidence that supports his perception: Terror Management Theory or, as it is usually abbreviated, TMT.

THE INTRAPSYCHIC DYNAMICS OF WHITE SUPREMACY

About 30 years ago (1983), reading Ernst Becker began to shape the research of three social psychologists, Jeff Greenberg, Tom Pyszcznski, and Sheldon Solomon. In *The Birth and Death of Meaning: A Perspective in Psychiatry and Anthropology* (1962); *The Birth and Death of Meaning: An Interdisciplinary Perspective on the Problem of Man* (1971); *The Denial of Death* (1973); and *Escape From Evil* (1975), Becker argued that the denial of death was the underlying dynamism of many otherwise puzzling forms of human behavior. If Becker was right, the three social psychologists thought, it should be possible to design experiments to determine whether there was such a thing as the denial of death and how it worked to create and maintain forms of "symbolic immortality." So they developed a hypothesis: if people's subliminal consciousness of their own death is enhanced ("mortality salience") and their particular way of coping with their fear of death ("symbolic immortality") is threatened at the same time, they will do whatever is needed to reestablish their full confidence in that symbolic immortality.

³⁵ *Essays* 338–39 (1963).

³⁶ *Essays* 701 (1985).

"At the most fundamental level," these authors wrote, "cultures allow people to control the ever-present potential terror of death by convincing them that they are beings of enduring significance living in a meaningful reality. This is the core proposition of TMT."³⁷ This "ever-present potential terror of death" lies in our subliminal consciousness, not in our focal awareness. We can evade a disturbing thought or image that enters our focal awareness by "pushing it away." If this discussion about death makes you uncomfortable, you can just stop reading and do something else to distract yourself. But TMT research reveals that the subliminal consciousness of death operates in the background, so to speak. When the terror of death is not in our focal awareness, we cannot push it away, and it can influence our behavior in ways that make us wonder, "Why did I do that?"³⁸ According to the *mortality salience hypothesis*,

if a psychological structure provides protection against anxiety, then reminding people about the source of this anxiety should increase the need for that structure. This in turn will lead to especially positive reactions to anyone or anything that supports it, and especially negative reactions to anyone or anything that threatens it.³⁹

TMT's first experiment asked 22 municipal court judges (15 male and 7 female) who had volunteered for the study to set bond for an accused prostitute who had a prior conviction for the same offense six months earlier.⁴⁰ They would make their bond decision based on the information used in a normal court proceeding of this kind. The researchers' experimental question was, How would these judges, trained and experienced in making decisions based on a rational analysis of facts in relation to the law, be affected if their subliminal consciousness that one day they would die were heightened?

Just before the judges were asked to set bond, half of them filled out a questionnaire asking them to report on their own thoughts and feelings about death. Then all the judges set bond for the prostitute. Those who

³⁷ Tom Pyszcznski, Sheldon Solomon, and Jeff Greenberg, *In the Wake of 9/11: The Psychology of Terror* (Washington: American Psychological Association, 2003) 16.

³⁸ See Tom Pyszcznski, Jeff Greenberg, and Sheldon Solomon, "Why Do We Need What We Need? A Terror Management Perspective on the Roots of Human Social Motivation," *Psychological Inquiry* 8 (1997) 1–20, at 4; and Winifred Gallagher, *Rapt: Attention and the Focused Life* (New York: Penguin, 2009) 41.

³⁹ Pyszcznski, Greenberg, and Solomon, "Why Do We Need What We Need" 3, emphasis original.

⁴⁰ Pyszcznski, Solomon, and Greenberg, *In the Wake of 9/11*, 45–47. Shannon K. McCoy et al., "Transcending the Self: A Terror Management Perspective on Successful Aging," in *Death Attitudes and the Older Adult: Theories, Concepts, and Applications*, ed. Adrian Tomer (Philadelphia: Brunner-Routledge, 2000) 37–63, at 42.

had not filled out the questionnaire set an average bond at around \$50. The "mortality salient" judges who did fill out the questionnaire set an average bond for the accused prostitute at roughly \$450, nine times the amount set by the nonmortality salient judges. Conclusion: their fundamental values had been threatened by having to deal with a person whose way of life was apparently very different from their own. They reacted to this threat by imposing a much more punitive bond.

TMT maintains that cultural constructions (e.g., ideologies, value systems, religions) offer forms of "symbolic immortality." People may adopt these constructions for many reasons that they can articulate, but their fundamental and subconscious reason is the protection it gives them from their otherwise paralyzing terror of death. A construction is felt to be so true, meaningful, and universal as to be virtually ultimate. Belonging to it, agreeing with it, participating in its reality makes them feel worthwhile, superior, and thus impervious to annihilation. So it is not surprising that mortality salience tends to make people intolerant of anyone perceived as "other," especially others with different values and worldviews. Further research revealed that mortality salience increases prejudice, discrimination, and acceptance of the fundamental injustices of the racial hierarchy in the United States.⁴¹ Jesse Jackson is right: "There's a historical indifference to the pain of poor people and black people."⁴² But the tolerance is less amazing if we see it through Baldwin's eyes and in the light of TMT.

Forms of symbolic immortality (or "idols," to use theological terminology), like white supremacy, are inherently fragile. They promise what they cannot ultimately deliver. So they need consistent social validation. "From a terror management perspective, this is a crucial concern because others who share one's basic worldview are ultimate validators of the fragile social fiction that is our private sense of meaning and value."⁴³ "Others" with different ways of life and values (like the prostitute) threaten the credibility of the idol that provides one's own life with meaning and value. After all, the thinking would go like this: if these "others" are as intelligent, moral, and deserving of attention and respect as we are, then maybe they're right, and we are the ones who are really naked in the face of death! Serious encounters with "others" are avoided as much as possible (via, e.g.,

⁴¹ "The chilling message is that under mortality salient conditions, white Americans become rather sympathetic to other whites who express racist sentiments" (Pyszczynski, Sheldon Solomon, and Greenberg, *In the Wake of 9/11* 90; see also 77, 80).

⁴² Doug Simpson, "Jesse Jackson Lashes out at Bush over Katrina Response," Associated Press, September 2, 2005, <http://web.archive.org/web/20080327035254/http://www.wwltv.com/local/stories/wwl090205jackson.1c68e297.html>. I am grateful to Bryan N. Massingale for this reference.

⁴³ Pyszczynski, Greenberg, and Solomon, "Why Do We Need What We Need" 15.

residential segregation). Stereotyping justifies their place at the bottom of the social hierarchy. So Big Bill Broonzy sang:

This little song that I'm singin' about,
 People you know it's true
 If you're black and gotta work for a living,
 This is what they will say to you,
 They says, "if you was white, should be all right,
 If you was brown, stick around,
 But as you's black, hmm brother, get back, get back, get back"⁴⁴

Caricatures that depict African Americans as unworthy of respect, care, and attention are nurtured and defended. Challenges to the racial hierarchy are resisted "to the death." "White men have killed black men for refusing to say, 'Sir': but it was the corroboration of their worth and power that they wanted, and not the corpse, still less the staining blood," writes Baldwin.⁴⁵ Lynching in both its pre- and post-1960 forms was indeed a "reign of terror." US history shows how whites repeatedly resorted to violence and the threat of violence in order to keep blacks "in their place," the bottom. Antiblack violence continues today in many different forms, such as racial profiling, the "war on drugs," the penal system,⁴⁶ and the maintenance of inner-city ghettos.

How credible is TMT? Especially in its initial stages, TMT's three pioneers overstated their case by presenting it as a sort of unified field theory in psychology that could explain nearly all human behavior. As late as 2000, they were saying that the terror of death was the fear that underlies all other fears⁴⁷ and the impulse that drives people to create meaning and value.⁴⁸ They dismissed religion as a false but comforting story to help weak people cope with their fear. At one point, they even claimed that all human evil is at root a TMT error.⁴⁹ However, they and other researchers have backed away from such claims.

More recent TMT studies have become more sophisticated, distinguishing between extrinsic and intrinsic religiosity. Extrinsic religiosity functions as a form of "symbolic immortality" or, in theological terms, idolatry. Thus, the "extrinsically religious" person will avoid, resist, deny, and even attack anyone or anything that threatens the credibility of her or his religion. By contrast, the "intrinsically religious" individual engages the challenges

⁴⁴ "Black, Brown, and White," on *Trouble in Mind*, Smithsonian Folkways Recordings (2000) SFW401031.

⁴⁵ *Essays* 471.

⁴⁶ See Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*; and James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2011).

⁴⁷ McCoy, Pyszcznski, Solomon, and Greenberg, "Successful Aging" 37.

⁴⁸ McCoy, Pyszcznski, Solomon, and Greenberg, "Successful Aging" 39.

⁴⁹ Pyszcznski, Solomon, and Greenberg, *In the Wake of 9/11* 196.

of religious commitment, knowing that he or she always has more to learn and absorb in an authentic relationship with the divine. TMT researchers have found that such religious devotion can increase tolerance and decrease prejudice. Where institutional religion does not function as symbolic immortality, "Intrinsic religiosity and spirituality have been shown . . . to be protective against the anxiety associated with thoughts of death."⁵⁰

Expanding the pool of research subjects has also helped fine-tune TMT. Many early TMT experiments were conducted with college students ("the human version of the laboratory white rat"⁵¹), because they are readily available to university researchers. What about the elderly? Their contemporaries are dying, their bodies are weakening, and one look in the mirror tells them that most of their life is over. In sum, their "mortality salience" is necessarily and consistently elevated. Aging, therefore, puts their particular form of "symbolic immortality" to its severest test. If it collapses, the elderly must reorganize psychologically. Many do. They reassess the meaning of their lives and make the corresponding adjustments. Others do not and come to die embittered and hopeless.⁵²

TMT complements the argument that racism is not so much a matter of individuals' behaviors and attitudes as a social system that protects white economic privilege.⁵³ Wealth cannot completely eliminate one's vulnerability to the vicissitudes of life, of course, but it certainly can diminish those threats. Money can protect people against sickness, pain, and violence because it is the ticket to quality medical care and life in "safe" neighborhoods. With sufficient financial resources, death can often be postponed and reminders of its inevitability kept at bay.

More than 300 studies in nine countries support TMT's credibility.⁵⁴ It not only sheds light on dramatic, public events of our ugly racial past, such as lynching, the bombings and burnings of churches, and the hate-filled mobs that opposed Dr. King, but it also explains why white supremacy

⁵⁰ McCoy et al., "Successful Aging" 52. See also Adrian Tomer and Grafton Eliason, "Beliefs about Self, Life, and Death: Testing Aspects of a Comprehensive Model of Death Anxiety and Death Attitudes," in *Death Attitudes and the Older Adult* 149.

⁵¹ Pyszcznski, Solomon, and Greenberg, *In the Wake of 9/11* 47.

⁵² McCoy et al., "Successful Aging" 46–47.

⁵³ See "Poverty and Racism. Overlapping Threats to the Common Good," a position paper issued by Catholic Charities in 2008, <http://www/catholiccharitiesusa.org/NetCommunity/Document.Doc?id=614>.

⁵⁴ Jeff Greenberg et al., "How Our Dreams of Death Transcendence Breed Prejudice, Stereotyping, and Conflict: Terror Management Theory," in *Handbook of Prejudice, Stereotyping, and Discrimination*, ed. Todd D. Nelson (Hoboken, NY: Psychology, 2009) 309–32, at 310. See also Kim-Pong Tam, Chi-Yue Chiu, and Ivy Lee-Man Lau, "Terror Management among the Chinese: Worldview Defence and

has not gone away. As racist language and behaviors become less acceptable in the public arena today, they go underground or “backstage.” In private, “safe” settings among groups of white people and on the Internet, which provides anonymity, vicious expressions of antiblack prejudice flourish.⁵⁵ Too many whites continue to need blacks to show where the bottom is, just as Baldwin said.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

A church with “an amazing tolerance for black pain” risks being simply a church of the comfortable led by the comfortable for the comfortable or, as Cone says, “a chaplaincy for sick middle-class egos.”⁵⁶ Certainly the risks of confronting the realities of black suffering can appear too great to some church leaders.⁵⁷ To face black suffering head on may alienate many white Christians. As Baldwin observed, “It demands a very rare, intrepid, and genuinely free and loving shepherd to challenge the habits and fears and assumptions of his flock and help them enter into the freedom that enables us to move to higher ground.”⁵⁸ But the price of evading black suffering is also high. The price is no less than Christian credibility and integrity. Cone’s lifelong question makes this clear: how can one be a follower of Jesus and remain untroubled by white supremacy? Moreover, white US Catholics who cling to white “supremacy” to manage their terror of death not only ignore the linkage between racism and poverty,⁵⁹ but they also dehumanize themselves. Baldwin warned that “the failure on our part to accept the reality of pain, of anguish, of ambiguity, of death, has turned us into a very peculiar and sometimes monstrous people. It means, for one thing, and it’s very serious, that people who have had no experience have no compassion.”⁶⁰

By 1963, Baldwin had given up on the church. Its complicity in the exploitation and death of millions of black people convinced him that

Intergroup Bias in Resource Allocation,” *Asian Journal of Social Psychology* 10 (2007) 93–102.

⁵⁵ See Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists*; and Picca and Feagin, *Two-Faced Racism*.

⁵⁶ James H. Cone, “The White Church and Black Power,” in *Black Theology: A Documentary History*, 2 vols., 2nd rev. ed., ed. James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis, 1993) 1:66–85, at 78. The quote is from James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: Seabury, 1969) 80.

⁵⁷ See Bryan N. Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2010) 80.

⁵⁸ *Cross* 160, from “To Crush a Serpent,” written in 1987, the year Baldwin died.

⁵⁹ Catholic Charities, “Poverty and Racism.”

⁶⁰ *Cross* 64 (1964). Elsewhere Baldwin observes, “I do not mean to be sentimental about suffering—enough is as good as a feast—but people who cannot suffer can never grow up, can never discover who they are” (*Essays* 343 [1963]). See also Roberto S. Goizueta, “To the Poor, the Sick, and the Suffering,” in *Vatican II: A*

"it is not too much to say that whoever wishes to become a truly moral human being . . . must first divorce himself from all the prohibitions, crimes, and hypocrisies of the Christian church."⁶¹ Yet, if the fear of death is the deep root of racism, and if "intrinsic religiosity" diminishes and even overcomes that fear (witness Martin Luther King Jr.), then the church must play a role here. The best hope of overcoming the evil of white supremacy still lies in the church.

Consider the church's identity. "By her relationship with Christ, the Church is a kind of sacrament of intimate union with God, and of the unity of all humankind; that is, she is a sign and an instrument of such union and unity." These are the familiar opening words of *Lumen gentium*, Vatican II's Dogmatic Constitution on the Church. They imply a commitment. If the Church is "a sign and an instrument of . . . union and unity," then reconciliation must be its first priority in situations scarred by alienation and injustice. Inasmuch as the Church ignores the imperative of reconciliation, it misrepresents its very reason for existence.⁶²

Literally hundreds of years of devastating structural injustices have produced the massive alienations that characterize "Racist America." Of course, Hispanics, Asians, gays and lesbians, women, and the poor are also victims, whites as well as people of color. Still, there are two reasons why the Church ought to prioritize the struggle against white supremacy and race-based oppression.

First, as Baldwin maintained and TMT confirms, white supremacy constitutes idolatry. It ascribes to whiteness a saving power that belongs to God alone. To confront racism root and branch is to confront the fear of death and thus liberate us for life and service, as Martin Luther King Jr.'s witness demonstrates. Second, history and sociology support Massingale's argument that "the estrangement between these two groups [black and white] has shaped American society in decisive ways not matched by either the estrangement between whites and other groups, or race-based tensions among the groups of color."⁶³

Universal Call to Holiness, ed. Anthony F. Ciorra and Michael W. Higgins (New York: Paulist, 2012) 62–79.

⁶¹ *Essays* 314 (1963).

⁶² This key point is explicated in eloquent detail in *Gaudium et spes* nos. 40–44. See also Francis A. Sullivan, "The Evangelizing Mission of the Church," in *The Gift of the Church*, ed. Peter C. Phan (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2000) 231–48, at 247. Quotations from Vatican II are from *The Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott, S.J., and Joseph Gallagher (New York: Herder & Herder, 1966).

⁶³ Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* 87. His first chapter, "What Is Racism?", provides ample evidence for this claim.

White supremacy is woven so deeply into the textures of American culture as to become the “unconscious racism”⁶⁴ that reflexively associates black skin color with deviant and criminal behavior. Like a virus, racism morphs to evade detection, confrontation, and eradication.⁶⁵ Most whites do not even realize that the United States is a racist society, and probably most of them would angrily reject this description. “A majority of whites deny the painful and continuing impact of systemic racism endured by Americans of color.”⁶⁶

But the empirical research to the contrary is overwhelming. For instance, less than one-half of all black males graduate from high school, and the percentage is lower in urban areas.⁶⁷ No wonder that unemployment continues to cripple the black community at a rate double that of the white community. More than a third of all black children grow up in poverty. On average, white families are five times as wealthy as black families. By every measure of the “quality of life,” such as infant mortality, access to health care, and life expectancy, African Americans suffer much more than any other racial or ethnic group from multiple forms of brutal oppression.

White ignorance of these realities is widespread and tolerated in the Catholic Church too. Witness the 1999 claim of EWTN, a much-watched Catholic cable TV network, that “racism is no longer a pressing social issue in the United States.”⁶⁸ The Church has consistently failed to meet the demands of justice and reconciliation in the past.⁶⁹ Massingale shows how and why the Church’s efforts in the present remain utterly inadequate.⁷⁰ The US Catholic Church is a white racist institution with its “pervasive belief that European aesthetics, music, theology, and *persons*—and only these—are standard, normative, universal, and truly ‘Catholic.’”⁷¹

“Not everything that is faced can be changed; but nothing can be changed until it is faced,” says Baldwin.⁷² So the Church must become a community of teaching and learning about white supremacy, if it is to be faithful to its

⁶⁴ See *ibid.* 26–33. For an extensive treatment, see Feagin, *White Racial Frame*.

⁶⁵ See Bonilla-Silva, *Racism without Racists*; and Picca and Feagin, *Two-Faced Racism*.

⁶⁶ Feagin, *White Racial Frame* 131.

⁶⁷ Bob Herbert, “Too Long Ignored,” *New York Times*, August 21, 2010, A17. See also National Urban League, *State of Black America 2009: Message to the President*, ed. Stephanie J. Jones (New York: National Urban League, 2009).

⁶⁸ Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* 46.

⁶⁹ Cyprian Davis, *The History of Black Catholics in the United States* (New York: Crossroad, 1990).

⁷⁰ Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* 43–82.

⁷¹ *Ibid.* 80, emphasis added. ⁷² *Cross* 34 (1962).

mission of reconciliation. The main and most difficult obstacle to racial reconciliation is certainly, in Lonergan's terms, the lack of conversion: moral, intellectual, and religious. But the need for conversion first has to be recognized and acknowledged: "To know the good, [the human spirit] must know the real; to know the real, it must know the true; to know the true, it must know the intelligible; to know the intelligible, *it must attend to the data*."⁷³ White denial and ignorance of the brutalities of racism and white supremacy as systemic, structural factors that constitute America's "original sin"⁷⁴ must be the first point of attack. Conversion may be the most difficult obstacle to reconciliation, but ignorance is the primary one.

Yet the US Catholic Church already knows how to face what must be changed. The method remains vivid in the memory of many of its members. Kenneth Himes has described how the process of writing the two pastoral letters by the US bishops, *The Challenge of Peace* (1983; hereafter CP) and *Economic Justice for All* (1986; hereafter EJFA), helped create a moral community of discernment and discourse, focusing on evils that plagued the nation and committed to undoing them and their effects.⁷⁵ Cardinal Joseph Bernardin described it thus:

Committing the bishops to public dialogue in this way has been a demanding exercise in pastoral leadership. But I believe the vast majority of our bishops would agree with my view that it has been an effective method of presenting the social teaching, an important witness to the bishops' concerns about signs of our times, and a contribution to the wider civil dialogue in the United States.⁷⁶

Archbishop Rembert Weakland, who chaired the drafting committee for EJFA, had been warned, however, that Rome would not be pleased with the collaborative, consultative, and dialogical process that produced CP and EJFA.⁷⁷ His friends were right. The leaders of the US hierarchy were summoned to Rome in March 1989 for a four-day meeting on "Evangelization in the Context and Culture of the United States with Particular Emphasis on the Role of the Bishop as Teacher of the Faith."⁷⁸ Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger delivered the opening address. He maintained that the theologians

⁷³ Lonergan, *Method* 13, emphasis added.

⁷⁴ James H. Cone, "Theology's Great Sin: Silence in the Face of White Supremacy," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 55.3-4 (2001) 1-14, at 3.

⁷⁵ Kenneth Himes, "The Challenge of Peace and Economic Justice for All: Reflections Twenty Years Later," *Proceedings of the Catholic Theological Society of America* 56 (2001) 77-96.

⁷⁶ Joseph Bernardin, "The Impact of Vatican II: The Church in the World," *Origins* 15 (1985) 306-8, at 308.

⁷⁷ Rembert Weakland, *A Pilgrim in a Pilgrim Church: Memoirs of a Catholic Archbishop*. (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009) 289.

⁷⁸ Racism was never discussed or brought up during these sessions.

and the mass media had "drowned out" the voice of the bishops. The US bishops had allowed themselves to become simply moderators.⁷⁹

The bishops responded with arguments they had been putting forward since the inception of the two pastorals' drafting process. It was indeed something new, but the process was grounded in Vatican II, especially *Gaudium et spes*.⁸⁰ Dialogue, consultation, and collaboration were essential modes of exercising episcopal authority in the United States with its educated laity.⁸¹

Is not the same kind of painstaking, public, national, church-wide, and collaborative process that produced the bishops' pastorals indispensable in grappling with racism now? And is it not the case that "the explosive reality of racism is a far more immediate threat than the unlikely reality of a nuclear war, which has been so much discussed as a result of the pastoral 'The Challenge of Peace'?", asks Edward Braxton.⁸² Such a process need not be crippled by the "deficits" that Massingale has identified in most previous Catholic teaching documents on racism.

However well-intentioned these documents were, they have been ineffective for a number of reasons. They omitted any serious social analyses of racism; consequently they never conveyed how racism is deeply woven into every aspect of our society. Their theological treatments of racism as a "sin" and not as fundamentally contrary to the gospel were superficial. They depended on Catholic good will, since there was no implementation or action plan to affect Catholic consciousness and consciences. The "hermeneutical privilege of the oppressed" was ignored since, apparently, black testimonies to white supremacy's brutality were deemed irrelevant. Finally, throughout the documents, there is that "historical indifference to the pain of poor people and black people" that contrasts so strongly with the way the bishops oppose, say, abortion and same-sex marriage: "repeatedly, forcefully, and uncompromisingly . . . fervently and passionately."⁸³

A pastoral letter on racism, crafted through the same process that produced CP and EJFA, could lay the new and necessary foundations for the Church's work. To invite comments on draft texts is to invite one and all to "fill in the blanks." Thus the findings of social scientists (like

⁷⁹ The addresses are available in *Origins* 18 (1989) 677, 679–95, 697, 699–725; for Ratzinger's address see 681–82.

⁸⁰ Rembert Weakland, "Where Does the Economics Pastoral Stand?" *Origins* 13 (1984) 753, 755–59; Bernardin, "The Impact of Vatican II" 306–8.

⁸¹ Rembert Weakland, untitled remarks to John Paul II, *Origins* 17 (1987) 261–63; see also Bernardin, "Impact."

⁸² Edward K. Braxton, "The Key Role of the Black Catholic Laity," *Origins* 14 (1984) 33, 35–40, at 39. Braxton, at the time a black Catholic priest of the archdiocese of Chicago, with a PhD from the Catholic University of Louvain, is widely published (including in *Theological Studies*) and was ordained bishop in 1995.

⁸³ Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* 74, 78.

Bonilla-Silva, Feagin, Pyszcinski, Wachtel, and the others) could unmask white supremacy's everyday but often hidden workings. Historians like Ira Katznelson and Noel Ignatiev would show how white economic advantage was created and maintained.⁸⁴ As younger Catholic theologians develop their antiracial stances,⁸⁵ future superficial theological treatments of racism are far less likely to survive their scrutiny.

The full EJFA process also points the way to reconciliation because the bishops funded an "Office of Implementation" to prevent the letter's being dead on arrival. Its main objective was "to let some 52 million US Catholics know what the bishops have written, now that the secular media no longer find the pastoral newsworthy."⁸⁶ A newsletter, teaching materials, and consultation were among the Office's activities. Sadly, a *National Catholic Reporter* survey found that 71 percent of Catholics had never heard of the pastoral just one year later.⁸⁷ So answers to critical questions, such as "Whom is the pastoral really reaching?" and "What are its lasting effects?", remained speculative. That omission could be easily remedied in a revised process.

Yet, even if it was and is impossible to measure the extent to which CP and EJFA changed Catholic minds and hearts, there was no doubt where the hierarchical leadership of the Church stood. The bishops were summoning the Church and the country to an examination of conscience and from there to conversion.⁸⁸ No longer could they be mistaken as "arch-defenders of the status quo," in Martin Luther King Jr.'s memorable phrase.⁸⁹

Today, writes Lonergan, "there is always a great need to eye very critically any religious individual or group and to discern beyond the very real charity they may well have been granted the various types of bias that may distort or block their exercise of it."⁹⁰ This will require listening to the victims of white supremacy, acknowledging their grievances, and sharing their pain. There is much to be learned, especially critical lessons about suffering and death,⁹¹ and then there is much to be done. The final results

⁸⁴ See Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action Was White: An Untold History of Racial Inequality in Twentieth-Century America* (New York: Norton, 2005); and Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1999).

⁸⁵ E.g., Laurie Cassidy, Shawnee Daniels-Sykes, Mary Doak, Alex Mikulich, LaReine-Marie Mosely, Maureen O'Connell, Margaret Pfeil, Christopher Pramuk, Lincoln Rice, and Karen Teel.

⁸⁶ Karen Sue Smith, "What's Become of the Pastoral?" *Commonweal* 114 (1987) 742-47, at 742.

⁸⁷ Ibid.

⁸⁸ See Robert N. Bellah, "Resurrecting the Common Good," in *ibid.* 736-41.

⁸⁹ The phrase appears near the end of his "Letter from Birmingham Jail," April 16, 1963, which is widely available on the Internet and in various anthologies.

⁹⁰ Lonergan, *Method* 284.

⁹¹ See Anthony B. Pinn, *Terror and Triumph: The Nature of Black Religion* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2003).

of such a process are impossible to predict. Yet, with courage and grace, we may come to experience Baldwin's promise:

One is confronted with the agony and nakedness and the beauty of a power which has no beginning and no end, which contains you, and which you contain, and which will be using you when your bones are dust. One thus confronts a self both limited and boundless, born to die and born to live. The creature is, also, the creation, and responsible, endlessly, for that perpetual act of creation which is both the self and more than the self. One is set free, then, to live among one's terrors, hour by hour and day by day, alone, and yet never alone.⁹²

⁹² *Essays* 566 (1976).

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