

# Malcolm X and the Limits of “Authentically Black and Truly Catholic”: A Research Project on Black Radicalism and Black Catholic Faith<sup>1</sup>

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*Based on the talk he delivered during the 2010 Annual Meeting, Massingale here tackles head-on the unvoiced questions with which most of us have struggled at some point in our careers and ministries. He begins by unveiling the conflicted ramifications of ‘authentically black and truly Catholic’. Echoing Copeland’s reference in Volume IV to the price that black scholars and theologians must pay to “speak and act and live in truth” (p. 75), Massingale explores Malcolm X’s call for Black Nationalism and its synthesis and coexistence with Integrationism in current Black Catholicism. Finally, he asks a series of haunting questions about what it means to be a Black Catholic in terms of our identity, our consciousness, and the needs of the Black community. Might “Black” and “Catholic” be oxymorons?*

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I believe in a religion that believes in freedom.  
Anytime I have to accept a religion that won’t let  
me fight a battle for my people, I say to hell with  
that religion.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup>Malcolm X, *By Any Means Necessary*, edited by George Breitman (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970) 140.

The genesis of my current research project lies in my recent work on Malcolm X. In June 2010, I delivered my presidential address to the Catholic Theological Society of America (CTSA), entitled “*Vox Victimarum Vox Dei: Malcolm X as Neglected ‘Classic’ for Catholic Theological Reflection.*”<sup>3</sup> I wanted to signal to the Catholic theological guild not only the necessity of engaging the Black Experience, but also the need to engage the *entirety* of that cultural experience – including currents of Black Nationalist thought – instead of only those aspects of the Black Experience considered safe or unthreatening.<sup>4</sup>

My next step in this project is to present a paper during the 2011 CTSA convention at the Black Catholic Theology session that explores Malcolm’s two major religious conversions through the lens of apophatic spirituality’s understanding of the “Dark Night of the Soul.”<sup>5</sup> I hope to

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<sup>3</sup>CTSA *Proceedings* 65 (2010): 63-88.

<sup>4</sup>For example, Martin Luther King, Jr., is the apparent dialogue partner of choice for the majority of white Catholic theologians who avert to black contributions in theology. Yet even with this iconic figure, Christian theologians for the most part only consider the first part of his public ministry and neglect his more radical ideas and positions developed in the last years of his life. On this point, see Kenneth L. Smith, “The Radicalization of Martin Luther King, Jr.: The Last Years,” *Journal of Ecumenical Studies* 26:2 (1989) 270-288.

<sup>5</sup>This paper was entitled, “The Dark Nights(s) of Malcolm X: Catholic Spirituality and African American Sanctity.” It was delivered at the CTSA during its June 2011 convention.

By way of explanation: apophatic theology is not primarily about doctrines concerning God, but rather connotes a specific kind of human-divine interaction or experience: “[Apophatic theology] is primarily an

show how the categories of Christian spirituality can illuminate our understanding of Malcolm's spiritual journey (and that of many other African Americans) – and in the process also show how engaging Malcolm's spiritual-political struggle leads to and demands a transformed understanding of classic theological constructs. My goal is to make Malcolm and, by extension, the more radical currents of Black thought, accessible for Catholic theologians by discussing him in terms of their own theology. At the same time, the bridge that enables Catholic theologians to encounter him also allows Malcolm and the radical wing of the Black Experience to challenge and interrogate Catholic theology.

In my presidential address, I delineated three pillars of Malcolm's thought. These are: 1) the reality of self-hatred and the need for cultural affirmation; 2) developing critical consciousness (that is, knowledge of one's real situation) and the importance of ideological struggle in the work of liberation and justice; and 3) an uncompromising critique of Christianity and its white idol, that is, its collusion in the idolatry of whiteness. I then presented three challenges that Malcolm gives to Catholic theological reflection: 1) an appreciation of the rationality of the oppressed; 2) acknowledging the impact of unconscious racism and cultured indifference in a church undergoing dramatic

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experiential *process*, a process of entering into the infinite mystery that is God, so that gradually one is transformed by grace and this grace moves through the intense experience of darkness [impasse] into the *vision* of the incomprehensible God" (Michael Buckley, "Atheism and Contemplation," *Theological Studies* 40 (1979) 690; italics added). Thus apophatic spirituality understands the believer's journey toward God on a path marked by considerable adversity and often heroic trust.

demographic changes; and 3) living authentic solidarity in the midst of social and racial conflict – realities that persist despite the election of an African American president. These profound challenges to the Catholic theological guild were, for the most part, well-received.

“Vox Victimarum, Vox Dei” also marked a turning point for me, both personally and professionally. For years, I have taught a course on the social thought and religious faith of Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, and James Baldwin. Even so, I have resisted an in-depth encounter with Malcolm’s works and thoughts. I questioned whether his brand of nationalism would have anything significant to offer in a so-called “post-racial” U.S. society (a description that I frankly deplore). More importantly, I also honestly wondered where Malcolm’s militancy would take me. I further questioned my ability to make the connections between his incisive and sharp critique of Christian faith and my own religious tradition and loyalties. So I studied Malcolm from afar, with scholarly detachment and academic distance.

Despite these hesitations, I have long been haunted by Malcolm. This may be because I began to suspect that he was more influential in the genesis of the contemporary Black Catholic movement than has been commonly acknowledged. For some time now, I have been thinking and teaching that contemporary Black Catholicism can be understood as a tense synthesis between the integrationist and nationalist currents of African American life and thought, and in particular, a tense synthesis between Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X.

Integrationism can be defined as a set of beliefs and practices that challenges the endemic racism of U.S. society through efforts that promote interracial justice, understanding, and social transformation. Such strategies have as their goal the full inclusion of African Americans and Black peoples in all aspects of U.S. life. While the undoubted goal is to transform the endemic injustice of racial exclusion, the integrationist assumes the fundamental soundness of the American project. In the words of James Cone, the integrationist declares that America “is our home” and accentuates the “American” in African American identity.<sup>6</sup> Thus integrationists engage in a constant “home remodeling” project, ever striving to make their national house a fit dwelling place and worthy of its fundamental blueprints.

Black Nationalism, on the other hand, while admitting of various currents and degrees, is a set of beliefs or worldview that holds that blacks should create and maintain social, economic, and political institutions that are separate and distinct from those of whites. Nationalism subscribes to the belief that the solution to white supremacy lies in the cultivation of black pride, self-identity and self-determination – the ability to exercise responsible moral agency by controlling one’s economic, political, social, cultural and religious institutions. Given the recalcitrance of U.S. and global white supremacy, black nationalists believe that the goals of black self-identity and black self-determination can only be achieved through some distance from white society.

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<sup>6</sup>James H. Cone, *Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream or a Nightmare* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991) 4.

Some degree of institutional autonomy or psychic disengagement is required, if not complete territorial separation. In Cone's language, black nationalists believe that an America committed to white supremacy can never be "home" for black people. They stress the "African" facet of African American identity – if they acknowledge an "American" identity at all.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, black nationalists avow that some degree of distance or measure of autonomy from white society is required for psychic health and emotional sanity. If complete separation and independence from white society are not feasible, then the development of a capability free from white control or dependence is absolutely essential.

I believe it is obvious that being members of a white-controlled institution such as the Catholic Church, Black Catholics tend to default toward the integrationist pole. Of necessity, we have worship and live our religious lives in interracial contexts. The leaders of our faith communities, whether at the diocesan, parish, or congregational levels, are most often white Americans. We espouse a "universal" (i.e., catholic) faith, one that explicitly forbids racial and ethnic exclusion in matters of faith.<sup>8</sup> This is why even our "separate" spaces, such as the National Black Catholic Congresses, are not racially exclusive. Whites have long been welcomed in our black-identified parishes, schools, and

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<sup>7</sup>Cone, *Martin & Malcolm*, 9-10.

<sup>8</sup>Cf. National Conference of Catholic Bishops, *Brothers and Sisters to Us: U.S. Bishops' Pastoral Letter on the Sin of Racism* (Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1979).

fraternal societies (e.g., the Knights and Ladies of Peter Claver).<sup>9</sup>

Nevertheless, the nationalist influence cannot be denied in the Black Catholic movement. We are a Black people with dreams, longings, and passions for self-identity and self-determination which, given the deep-seated reality of white racism, cannot be satisfied apart from the creation and maintenance of autonomous and black-controlled institutions. (Consider, for example, the National Office for Black Catholics of the 1970s, the current existence of the Institute for Black Catholic Studies of Xavier University of Louisiana, and the Black Catholic Theological Symposium).

Yet, the coexistence of these two currents of thought in Black Catholicism is not always acknowledged. As a result, the tensions that arise from the inherent contradictions between these currents in Black Catholicism are not always named. For example, consider the controversy that occurred during the 1992 Black Catholic Congress in New Orleans, where a dispute arose as to whether white bishops would – or should – have voting rights as the assembly deliberated over various planks for a Black Catholic platform. Or again,

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<sup>9</sup>The National Black Catholic Congresses are national gatherings of black Catholics held every five years at various locations in the United States. With upwards of five thousand participants, they are a major vehicle for drawing the attention of the wider church to black Catholic concerns. The Knights and Ladies of Peter Claver were established in the early part of the twentieth century as fraternal societies to meet the social and spiritual needs of black Catholic believers in the face of the racial discrimination practiced by the Knights of Columbus. Further information on these organizations can be found at the Black Catholic Congress website: [www.nbccongress.org](http://www.nbccongress.org).

the consternation and dismay among some Black Catholics when Cardinal Law of Boston, at the same Congress, proudly showed off the kente strip about his neck and proclaimed himself an “honorary African American.” Many thought this gesture was a wonderful show of solidarity from a church leader who was sympathetic to his black membership. Others, however, were dismayed not only at his assuming the prerogative of declaring who was an African American, but also at the incongruity of having white prelates exercise any role in determining matters of importance to the black faith community. At this national gathering of Black Catholic leaders and activists, the nationalist and integrationist polarities were on full display, yet were never named as such . . . and arguably, still remain unresolved.

The truth is that black nationalism – or more broadly, black radicalism<sup>10</sup> – is deeply embedded in the Black Catholic movement, though we seldom acknowledge this given our default bias toward integrationism. Modern Black Catholicism was born out of the social struggles of the Black Power Movement. Indeed, the 20<sup>th</sup> century pioneers of modern Black Catholicism were forthright in acknowledging the pivotal and pervasive influence of Black Power rhetoric and thinking in their analyses of their situation in the Church,

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<sup>10</sup>Gayraud S. Wilmore identifies three characteristics of what he calls the “radical tradition in black religion,” namely, “(1) the quest for independence from white control; (2) the revalorization of the image of Africa; and (3) the acceptance of protest and agitation as theological prerequisites for black liberation and the liberation of all oppressed peoples” (*Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of African Americans*, Third Edition [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998] p. ix).

and in particular, the catalyzing influence of Malcolm X in developing their new consciousness.

For example, consider how the founding document of the National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus in 1968, naming the Church a “white racist institution,” explicitly cites the new moment in the black community, one that demands self-determination and empowerment, as a rationale for its demands. They called upon the church to recognize that a profound change had occurred in the attitude of the black community, manifested in the demand that “black people control their own affairs and make decisions for themselves.”<sup>11</sup> This manifesto, which unleashed in an unprecedented way the creative energies of Black Catholic clergy, sisters, seminarians, and laity, is incomprehensible without understanding the influence of Black Power, Malcolm X, and other radical currents of African American thought and analysis.

Consider also the work of Father Lawrence Lucas, entitled *Black Priest, White Church*, where he relates the life-changing influence of Malcolm X upon his perspective and that of a generation of pioneers in the nascent Black Catholic movement – among whom are Fathers Rollins Lambert and George Clements.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Mary Roger Thibodeaux of the Sisters of the Blessed Sacrament authored *A Black Nun Looks*

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<sup>11</sup>The complete text of this statement can be found in: Gayrond S. Wilmore and James H. Cone (eds.), *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-1979* (New York: Orbis Books, 1979) 322-324.

<sup>12</sup>Lawrence E. Lucas, *Black Priest, White Church: Catholics and Racism* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, [1970] 1990).

at *Black Power*, which celebrated the Black Power Movement and its gospel of black affirmation. She spoke positively of the activity of the Black Panthers as well.<sup>13</sup>

My point is not that all Black Catholics of the founding period of modern Black Catholicism were advocates of Black Power, black radicalism, or black nationalism. Clearly, many were not, as Lucas attests (much to his dismay). The point is that black nationalism and religious radicalism were certainly formative, and to a greater degree than we may realize. I argue that there is a subterranean and pervasive current of radical thought and analysis – one perhaps present in the work of people like Sister Thea Bowman and Father Bede Abrams – that has decisively shaped who we are as Black Catholics. This current coexists, with some unease, alongside a more dominant or “public” integrationist ethos.

Naming and examining this radical current in Black Catholic life would itself be a contribution to knowledge and a service to this faith community.

However, there is a larger and more disconcerting point to consider. My *larger* point is that the tensions of black radical thought with a predominantly white Catholic ethos – that is to say, the contradictions of achieving positive self-identity and promoting self-determination in an institution compromised by and complicitous with white racial supremacy – were recognized by Black Catholicism’s founding pioneers, and to my mind, have not yet been satisfactorily addressed.

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<sup>13</sup>Mary Roger Thibodeaux, *A Black Nun Looks at Black Power* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1972) 34.

To illustrate this point: Father Lucas describes an encounter he had with Malcolm X as a young seminarian. After informing Malcolm that he was studying to be a Catholic priest, Lucas relates:

I'll never forget his expression. . . . Malcolm stood in his tracks, looked me straight in the eyes, and said, "Are you out of your God damned mind?" A few chats later I began to understand what he meant. Today I see the full, horrible truth. The full, horrible truth is that the Church wrecks black minds.<sup>14</sup>

Now we are getting close to the heart of my current project, one that I struggle to articulate clearly. For over forty years, the phrase "authentically black and truly Catholic" has been Black Catholicism's motto and "battle cry," the succinct expression of the goal of our struggles and efforts. We insisted that there was not, should not be, and indeed *could* not be an inherent contradiction between our "blackness" and "Catholicism." We strove to create worship forms, theological analyses, and historical studies that showed the fundamental compatibility and a seamless connection between black cultural expression and Catholic faith commitment.

But if we take Malcolm seriously, if we allow Malcolm to challenge us as we want him to challenge white theology and theologians, then we must let his question – "Are you out of your God damned mind?" – haunt us now as it once haunted

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<sup>14</sup>Lucas, *Black Priest, White Church*, 12-13.

Larry Lucas. To quote my own CTSA presidential address: “Malcolm’s discourse strips away the facile confidence we have in the compatibility of Christian belief with social justice praxis.” Or again, “The point of [Malcolm’s] 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” – interests that are at best indifferent, if not hostile, to black well-being and flourishing.<sup>15</sup>

Malcolm’s discourses, and the analyses of black religious radicalism, challenge a too facile assertion of “authentically Black and truly Catholic.” At the very least, Black Catholics have to acknowledge the existence of profound tensions – if not a fundamental disconnect-estrangement-incompatibility – between the quest for black self-determination and a Catholic Church all too often still committed to practices that foster and defend white racial supremacy.<sup>16</sup>

I am fully aware that acknowledging the tensions between the black nationalist and integrationist currents in

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<sup>15</sup>Massingale, *CTSA Proceedings*, 78.

<sup>16</sup>Bishop Edward Braxton gestured toward this fundamental estrangement and disconnect in his essay, “Evangelization: Crossing the Cultural Divide,” *Origins* 27 (October 2, 1997) 272-279. However, he only considered the unattractiveness of the Church to the unchurched black Americas, but did not consider how such cultural estrangement impacts current black members. I myself began to articulate this impact in my 2008 keynote address to the Joint Conference of the National Black Clergy Caucus and National Black Sisters Conference (available at [www.nbccc-us.com/docs/joint\\_conference\\_2008.doc](http://www.nbccc-us.com/docs/joint_conference_2008.doc)). I have also developed this line of thinking in my book, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), especially in chapters 2 and 5.

the Black Catholic soul, as well as the immense difficulties of pursuing black self-identity and self-determination within a white institution, raises many daunting and demanding questions:

- ❖ Is black radicalism (yet to be more fully defined) compatible with Catholicism?
- ❖ Is Catholicism hostile to genuine black self-identity and self-determination? Is Catholicism an apt vehicle for Black Radical Thought?
- ❖ Is there a de facto alliance happening between the U.S. Catholic hierarchy and conservative political leaders and movements, such that one can speak fearfully yet credibly of a “Catholic Tea Party” movement (e.g., the hierarchy’s open disdain of President Obama’s election, the fiasco over Notre Dame University’s decision to grant him the customary honorary doctorate given to U.S. presidents, and the debacle within U.S. Catholicism over his health care legislation)?
- ❖ If this is so, then what is to be the response of black Catholic leaders and theologians? Is our silence a reflection of the unresolved tensions and strains between our integrationist and nationalist currents? Of how to be authentically black in a Catholic ethos that has little intention of nurturing such an identity?

- ❖ Are we black Catholics, in the words of Gayraud Wilmore, settling “for a middle ground between political militancy and conventional Christianity?”<sup>17</sup>
- ❖ If indeed Malcolm is right in declaring that the seeds of racial superiority are so deeply rooted in the white national and ecclesial subconsciousness that they are unaware of this, how does that challenge and qualify a too easy assertion of harmony between Catholic and black identities?
- ❖ Must we at the least understand, to a degree that we have not always been acknowledged, that Black Catholicism will find an uneasy welcome in the Church because, if it is “authentically black,” it must summon white Catholicism to a profound and deeply resisted conversion, one that demands that it die to a false racial identity for the sake of the gospel?
- ❖ And thus must we accept that white Christianity and black Christianity are significantly different realities,<sup>18</sup> and that the only way to affirm an “authentically black and truly Catholic” identity is to be committed to the deep transformation of the Catholic Church?
- ❖ Have we Black Catholics muted our protest and agitation within the Church out of an over-emphasis

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<sup>17</sup>Gayraud Wilmore, “Black Theology at the Turn of the Century: Some Unmet Needs and Challenges,” in Dwight N. Hopkins (ed.), *Black Faith and Public Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999) 235.

<sup>18</sup>Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, p. ix.

upon and misunderstanding of the integrationist impulse toward interracial cooperation and witness . . . an over-emphasis further compounded by appeals not to stress or sunder the unity of the Body of Christ?

- ❖ Can we really appreciate Malcolm's trenchant observation that African Americans have been America's most fervent Christians – and what has it gotten us?<sup>19</sup>
- ❖ Can we confront the fear that keeps us from a forthright engagement with black radicalism, namely, that if we develop a deep analysis of our situation in the Catholic Church, we will be compelled to leave it?

I do not have the answers to these questions, but I am convinced that we must address them if Black Catholicism and Black Catholic Theology are to have a viable future and be credible as compelling manifestations of the black religious experience.

Yet it must be acknowledged that one of the major obstacles to this research project is the strong reluctance of Black Catholics to face, much less engage, such questions. I myself am not immune to this reluctance, for this project taxes the limits of my intellectual and existential abilities. Perhaps the fears of Black Catholics are best expressed in the intervention offered by a Black Catholic woman during a recent discussion: "I confess that the only reason I am

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<sup>19</sup>Malcolm X, *By Any Means Necessary*, edited by George Breitman (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970) 140.

hanging in there with the Church is because of *you*. But is the only reason you are staying is because you aren't willing to admit that you've made a mistake?" Perhaps the outgrowth of this project will be the development of alternative forms of Catholic engagement, belief, and practice, where the contradictions between black nationalism and integration in Black Catholicism will be resolved in a different way than either departure or assimilation.

At Vatican II, communities of religious women and men were directed to renew and even re-found themselves through a reexamining and recovering the spirit of their founders and adapting it for a new age and new challenges. It is in this spirit that I propose to undertake this current project on black radicalism and Black Catholicism. This entails a return to the radical stream of Black Catholicism through a study of Malcolm X, the Black Power movement and the Black Panther Party and their influences upon a nascent modern Black Catholicism. I will examine not only the thinking and proposals of these social movements, but to recover and rediscover their influences upon the pioneers of Black Catholicism and their continuing (but not often acknowledged) presence and influence today. If they have waned in contemporary Black Catholicism, I hope to account for why. And most importantly, I seek to discern the continuing relevance and challenge of black religious radicalism for Catholicism today.

The goal is neither to replicate what went before nor to imitate the strategies of a bygone era. I am not calling for either contemporary cries of "Black Power" or chants of "Black is Beautiful."

Rather what I am proposing and advocating is a retrieval of the best of the shattered fragments of a recent past, and then forging these materials – these shards/fragments/and enduring insights – into a new faith vision of what is needed now as we serve a black community suffering not only from mass incarceration, an epidemic of single motherhood, ever-widening class divisions, chronic unemployment, and increasing irrelevance in an economy of globalized predatory capitalism, but also from an eclipse of hope, a deficit of self-love and a dearth of compassion for one another. These latter realities, Malcolm reminds us, are the deepest wounds that must be addressed in an authentic project of black liberation. Such an account of hope, love, and compassion may well be the most important contribution of religious intellectuals to the survival and liberation of our people.

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