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CATHOLICS & CULTURES

Scholarship for the Pedagogy of Global Catholicism

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MARA BRECHT

A Widened Angle of View: Teaching Theology and Racial Embodiment



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Online platforms invite us to explore the world widely. Social media lets us hear from people far from our homes. Live streaming allows us to witness events around the globe in real time, and our feeds constantly update us with the commentary, criticisms, and memes that pop up around any given phenomena. This is a native environment for today's undergraduate and graduate students. Teaching Millennials and Generation Z requires accounting for the fact that this digital environment isn't *extra* but *constitutive* for them and that's where they're likely to encounter difference: online, through memes rather than intentional, academic study.

My commitments as a teacher of Catholic theology involve helping students uncover the breadth of the Catholic tradition—a breadth that's beyond their imagining, with textures and complexities that couldn't be adequately comprehended in a lifetime—something that they might well expect in a classroom. But I'm also there to help them discover and embrace difference. In that work, I'm attuned to the reality that difference already saturates these students' worlds, in their "reality" and certainly in the digital realm. To get them to see it, understand it, and recognize that difference it isn't *extra* to their worlds, but *constitutive* of them—that demands my disciplinary field of theology shift from highly abstract and speculative modes of inquiry to tangible and concrete ones.

This combination of circumstances—that digital life makes students almost overly comfortable with difference because they often don't take time to interrogate it, and that theology is overly abstract—present odd stumbling blocks for classes that aim to help students appreciate breadth, complexity, and difference. My comments in this essay begin from this teaching quagmire. I hope my reflections on the pedagogical value of Catholics & Cultures can aid fellow teachers of theology to use its resources to help students encounter and learn from the rich variety of Catholic life and practice. The encounter with the internal diversity of Catholicism, I propose, can go so far as to help students tackle the challenging matter of racialized embodiment.

CHANGING THE FOCAL LENGTH

I'll begin with a common metaphor in the study of religion: the lens. Teachers often try to get students to recognize they see the world through a particular lens. Once they've done that—no small task—then they try and get students to experiment with alternate lenses. In my theology classes, for example, I ask students: What does the doctrine of God look like if viewed through a feminist lens? The exercise requires students to recognize we all come to what we see from a viewpoint. Then they have to understand trinitarian monotheism, how they view it, and finally grasp feminist principles which, in turn, guide and shape how feminists view the Christian notion of God.

I will extend the lens metaphor, and consider the idea of focal length. Focal length determines how much we see and the degree to which it's magnified. A telephoto lens has a narrow angle of view and is highly magnified because the longer a lens, the smaller the slice of the world that comes into view, and the larger the objects in it appear to us. A wide-angle lens has a short focal length, a wider the angle of view, and includes more objects but they all appear smaller. More things are in view but they're not magnified as much. (It's worth noting that both narrow and wide angles of view have clear focus, clarity and sharpness.)

The classes I teach are theological and philosophical in nature. My students learn about what Catholics believe and think, how they got there, along with issues and ideas the Church actively debates. We explore the tradition *propositionally*, which is to say through the statements of belief the Catholic faithful have articulated over the centuries. Of any Christian claim—for example “Jesus is God made flesh”—students learn about historical development, analyze philosophical influence, and consider the forms of relationship and ethic that flow from such a claim. This type of theological study typically makes use of a long focal length. *Beliefs* are magnified to a high degree and take up most of the narrow field of vision.

Through such a lens, the Magisterial tradition—the governing, authoritative body of the Roman Catholic Church—looms large. So I frequently change lenses to remind my students that the Magisterium is not Catholicism. That is, Catholics



across the world and throughout time live out vibrant lives of faith without giving much (or any) explicit thought to what the Magisterium deems “orthodox.” The tradition represented by the “official” Roman Catholic Church does not necessarily accord with the lived experience of Catholic practitioners, nor mirror the theological positions developed by all Catholic theologians. My point isn’t to dispute the official and authoritative teaching of the Roman Catholic Church, but to remind students that Catholicism isn’t supposed to be photographed through a telephoto lens. Ours is a wide-angle faith, a lived tradition, rich and varied in composition.

That doesn’t mean I discount the Magisterium or think it should be excluded from the photograph, to stretch the metaphor yet further. In a class on the development of Catholic theology, students ought to learn something about Catholic beliefs as they’re filtered through and articulated by the Magisterium: creeds, the Catechism, orders and rites, and so on. Yes, I teach my students, the Catholic tradition includes, involves, and even specially reveres the Magisterium, but it is also the case that the tradition extends far beyond the Magisterial tradition. A quick diagram I often draw up on the white-board makes the point visually: one circle, labeled Magisterium, is encompassed by a larger one, labeled Catholic tradition. If you took a picture of that whiteboard with a telephoto lens, the Magisterium would take up the entire frame. But that’s not what’s on my whiteboard, it’s just the way it looks through a particular lens. This is where Catholics & Cultures can be especially useful. It can help fill in the white space in the larger circle surrounding “Magisterium.” The journal serves as a reminder not to forget our wide-angle lens.

If students are to appreciate Catholicism-beyond-doctrine as *real* Catholicism, as I believe they should, they must be given tools to understand lived Catholic faith and practices as such. The concept of the Catholic or sacramental imagination is helpful here. Andrew Greeley defines the Catholic imagination as “the imaginative and narrative infrastructure of the Catholic heritage” that exists “beyond the walls of the Church.” It is how Catholics “picture the world” and think about God’s relationship to it.¹

1 Andrew Greeley, *The Catholic Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 16–17.

The Catholic imagination is sacramental, Greeley explains, because Catholics perceive and experience reality *as* sacramental, as a medium for meeting God. For Catholics, the natural world and all it contains, including society and human relationships, tells us something about God. These are also the places where God becomes present among us.² For college classes like mine, which are *not* designed to be courses in Global Catholicism, Catholics & Cultures gives students a glimpse of how the Catholic imagination manifests the world over, and it gives them the tools to understand both doctrine and Catholicism-beyond-doctrine.

Each page of the website shows students other Catholics who live out their faith in distinct cultural circumstances. It lets them widen the angle of their vision, broadening their perception of what constitutes the Catholic tradition by inviting them to see faith lived out in a multiplicity of ways. Responding to what they see, students can answer theological questions about the sacramental imagination: How do Catholics in x culture understand the world? How do they relate to God? (What does this—or doesn't this—have to do with propositional theology?)

This activity, I propose, helpfully moves students from where they began to a new place of understanding. When students (and, in my experience, especially those who come from Catholic backgrounds and who attended Catholic primary or secondary schools) begin to study Catholic theology at the undergraduate level, their angle of focus tends to be narrow. They see a small, magnified slice of Catholic faith and practice—one closely linked to the Magisterial tradition and expressed in the grammar of propositional theology. Through changing their lens and widening the angle of view, that slice of the world sinks into the background, and what once appeared magnified now appears smaller, and relative to surrounding “objects.”

SHIFTING TO BODIES AND RACE

My experience is that when students have their angle of view widened, their pre-suppositions are scaled down. With a new lens, students can identify what they see as the center of Catholic faith—what particular way of believing and being Catholic, what form of sacramental imagination—stands front and center of their

2 Greeley, *The Catholic Imagination*, 10–12.



vision of what being Catholic *is*. For me, there is an imperative “next step” that must be taken even after putting on a wide-angle lens. The “next step” is to help students grasp the racialized roots of what was at the center of their narrow view.

A Small Christian Community gathers in Mwanza, Tanzania. Photo courtesy of James Jay Carney/catholicsandcultures.org.

A new wave of philosophers, historians, and theologians observe a deep link between religion and race, and between Christianity and whiteness. These researchers expose the subtle ways race operates in our everyday thinking, and how religion keeps racial hierarchies in place. This research suggests that any and all inquiry into religion—including in the study of Catholic theology, as well as the study of global Catholicism—must also deal with race. If not, those inquiries only help to cement further the *status quo* around racial privilege and power.

To return to the “teaching quagmire” I began with: helping digitally native students both to move beyond easy comfort with difference and to get concrete about something abstract like theology.

Encountering difference primarily in digital space has a way of convincing us that such encounters are outside of embodied reality, and so not subject to the forces of power and privilege that operate in “real” space. The truth is that even when we Google, our bodies—our social locations and identities—*matter*. I want students



The Ghanaian Catholic community in Berlin, Germany worships at St. Michael's Church, Kreuzberg. Video still from Thomas M. Landy/catholicsandcultures.org.

not just to encounter breadth and difference, but to make sure that breadth and difference register with them deeply—at the level of racial embodiment.

An example from the new scholarship on race and religion comes from historian Theodore Vial. He digs into the intellectual history of race and religion, exploring why race and religion are two of the primary ways we talk about human identity.³ Vial doesn't take the categories for granted: They came from somewhere and for a specific purpose and continue, he says, to do "real work in today's world."⁴ Vial finds that race and religion have a common genealogy, rooted in the philosophies of German idealists like Immanuel Kant, Friedrich Schleiermacher, and Johann Herder.⁵

The German idealists originated a notion of race that is foundational for how we understand race today. Kant, Schleiermacher, Herder, and their ken set up a way of thinking about human bodies such that bodies indicate cultural capacities.⁶ Physical characteristics (like skin-color, facial features, and hair texture) convey something about the deeper level capabilities a person or group have. A group's ability

3 Theodore Vial, *Modern Race, Modern Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 12.

4 Theodore Vial, *Modern Race, Modern Religion*, 7.

5 Theodore Vial, *Modern Race, Modern Religion*, 124.

6 Theodore Vial, *Modern Race, Modern Religion*, 158.



to have mastery over passions and desires, or to be capable of self-governance, for example, is indicated by physical features. Our commonplace understanding of race today as a physically observable traits that signals social grouping has its roots in the German idealist conception—even if we also now have the sense that we should not attribute capabilities to social groups.

Religion, like race, comes from the German idealist way of thinking about humans. Religion is essentially a *social* classification. It developed not as a generic category but “always embodied in specific social group.”⁷ This history exerts its influence today. Though we have broad categories like Jewish, Christian, and Muslim, these categories are only meaningful because we picture actual people in them. In other words, we don’t—we *can’t*—think about religion abstractly, but only in how they manifest in the practices and lives and people. And, as with race, the German idealist tradition connects external feature to internal qualities. The “language, gesture, and customs” given by religions penetrate beneath the surface of the skin of those who participate in them to constitute *who religious people are*.⁸

Thus, religion and race, together, account for how social groups form, have identity, and maintain the boundaries of community.⁹ Just as our taxonomic classifications come from German idealist thought, we are also influenced by German idealism in how we organize these categories. We inevitably position different groups alongside one another, drawing comparisons among them and, according to Vial, “load our comparisons with assumptions about the relative progress of the groups under consideration on a trajectory of progress toward human flourishing.”¹⁰ In other words, we arrange groups on a spectrum that is also a scale.

Though I’ve only just breezed through an enormously complex body of research, consider what could happen if students of theology put their widened perspective of the Catholic tradition into dialogue with three basic ideas: (1) race-thinking links physical characteristics to innate capacities, (2) religion always already

7 Theodore Vial, *Modern Race, Modern Religion*, 204.

8 Theodore Vial, *Modern Race, Modern Religion*, 158.

9 Theodore Vial, *Modern Race, Modern Religion*, 92.

10 Theodore Vial, *Modern Race, Modern Religion*, 223.

involves race-thinking; (3) racial and religious categories are inevitably positioned teleologically. As students delve into *Catholics & Cultures*, they can attend to moments when “race” enters their awareness; they can interrogate how their notion of Catholicism as a religion is not just widened, but possibly challenged by what they see; they can ask what their own skin color has to do with their first-hand experience of Catholicism.

To be sure, many students in our classrooms are *not* white, and so don’t come at their studies from white perspectives. Moreover, *Catholics & Cultures* clearly shows that there are Brown and Black Catholics, and so the Catholic tradition is not white-washed. But here lies just the point. My hunch is that the Magisterium and the propositional theology that reflects that “slice” of the Catholic tradition is often the focus of most students’ understanding of Catholicism, not because it is the seat of doctrinal authority but rather because the Catholicism of Western Europe takes up their whole field of vision. That is, students from the dominant culture (that in the lineage of Western Europe) see “Catholicism” as coterminous with the authoritative Magisterial tradition because the authoritative Magisterial tradition is the form of Catholicism that is known and practiced by whites. In other words, what students tacitly understand to be “official” or “true” Catholicism is really just Catholicism that is familiar, that is white.

With theoretical precepts from this research on the entanglements of Christian theology and whiteness in hand, students can face thorny questions: Which Catholic practices fill the center and which fill the periphery of their views of the tradition? Do the sacramental imaginations of Brown and Black Catholics factor into our theologies? Which Catholics are *real* Catholics? To be clear, these questions are provocative and self-reflective—meant to point out the priorities and limitations of perspective. These are not questions about empirical facts, nor are they only addressed to white students. (That is, it’s possible for white, European Catholicism to “anchor” how people of color view the tradition.) *Catholics & Cultures*, set alongside new theoretical perspectives on race and religion, can help break the hold white racialization has on “the” Catholic way of understanding the world and God’s relationship to it.



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