

Hermanas, a Latina Catholic women's organization, began to advocate for women's ordination, PADRES' relationship with them deteriorated.⁵³ Finally, because PADRES was so focused on a narrow vision of institutional change, the group no longer served any vital purpose after it achieved its goals.⁵⁴ Throughout the 1980s, the Vatican appointed several conservative Spanish-speaking bishops in the United States. This was a victory that PADRES celebrated but also lamented because it meant the ostracization of the Chicano movement in the Catholic Church. As one member of PADRES claims, the Vatican "beat us at our own game."⁵⁵ After a number of Hispanic ministries were created and bishops were appointed, PADRES ceased operations in 1987.

Although CPLR may seem like a failure and PADRES a success, their dissent accomplished different purposes. CPLR's activism brought immediate attention to the plight of Chicanos. Their radical activism expanded the imaginations of Chicano organizations, which could take up the community's concerns through long-term strategies for change. Likewise, although PADRES' institutional activism can be seen as a success, many Chicano priests were unwilling to challenge Catholic patriarchy or imagine how the organization could expand beyond its limited goals. The successes and failures of CPLR and PADRES were relative. In their own way, each made a contribution to the Chicano movement that was overwhelmingly transformative for the US Catholic Church.

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VI. Examining Theological Appropriations of Problematic Historical Dissent

This contribution will examine several theological methods used to understand morally egregious examples of historical dissent in the Catholic

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 107.

⁵⁴ Romero, "Charism and Power," 161–63.

⁵⁵ Vincent Lopez, quoted by Romero, "Charism and Power," 158.

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Church. From the 1600s to the late 1800s, large numbers of Catholics in the young United States dissented from the Holy See in one particularly egregious manner: their support for and defense of chattel slavery and the Atlantic slave trade. While chattel slavery is universally declared horrific and immoral, its vestiges have not been erased from church history, nor has its influence been eradicated in the modern experience of Christians in the United States today. After naming the contemporary problem caused by this historical example of dissent and analyzing theological approaches to ameliorate this problem, I will propose a theological-historical approach that may offer better solutions in the future.

In 1839, Pope Gregory XVI published *In Supremo Apostolatus*, which forbade “any Ecclesiastic or lay person from presuming to defend as permissible this traffic in Blacks under no matter what pretext or excuse, or from publishing or teaching in any manner whatsoever ... opinions contrary to what We have set forth in this Apostolic Letter.”⁵⁶ While abolitionist groups gladly accepted the letter, most Catholics in the United States did not.⁵⁷ Among those who dissented openly was Bishop Auguste Martin of Natchitoches, Louisiana, who issued a pastoral letter as late as 1861 praising slavery as “the manifest will of God.” Catholics must continue, he argued, “snatching from the barbarity of their ferocious customs thousands of children of the race of Canaan.”⁵⁸ Martin’s opinion was not unique—his letter was reprinted by the Archdiocese of New Orleans, and his opinions were shared by bishops, priests, and laypersons throughout the American South and North.

Despite the fact that Bishop Martin was reprimanded by Rome for this letter in 1864, he was not removed from his bishopric.⁵⁹ Instead, he continued to direct a growing seminary and missionary field; he traveled to Rome and voted in the First Vatican Council, and he accompanied Pope Pius IX during his 1871 visit to New Orleans. After Martin’s death in 1875, his tombstone was laid to the right of the altar at the Basilica of the Immaculate Conception of Mary in Natchitoches, Louisiana, and remains there today. The website of the diocese and basilica lists no connection of Bishop

⁵⁶ Pope Gregory XVI, *In Supremo Apostolatus*, 1839; quoted in Kenneth Zanca, ed., *American Catholics and Slavery: 1789–1866* (New York: University Press of America, 1994), 27 (the decree); also see 221–25 for comments from a consultor to the Sacred Congregation of the Index on the decree.

⁵⁷ E.g., Zanca, *American Catholics and Slavery*, 128–29, 191–94.

⁵⁸ Quoted in Maria Genoio Caravaglios, “A Roman Critique of the Pro-Slavery View of Bishop Martin of Natchitoches, LA,” *American Catholic Historical Society of Philadelphia Records* 83 (June 1972): 67–82.

⁵⁹ Caravaglios, “A Roman Critique,” 71; Zanca, *American Catholics and Slavery*, 219–25.

Martin to slavery, nor does the national record of historical landmarks in Louisiana. The basilica, instead, houses the Bishop Martin Museum, a regular stopping point on the historical tour of this southern Louisiana city.⁶⁰

I offer Martin not as unique but emblematic of the problem being examined in this roundtable. How can we look back on millions of Catholics who supported the institution of chattel slavery in direct opposition to the pope—at least after 1839—but in complete agreement with countless bishops and priests around the United States?⁶¹ How many parishes and universities of the United States, not to mention theological faculties and centers of study, reaped the economic benefits of centuries of a societal structure that enslaved, raped, dehumanized, and slaughtered millions upon millions of children, women, and men? Dissent is not only a problem of the present but one that involves a proper theological interpretation of a difficult past. Of the many attempts to understand such historical events, modern theological approaches can be organized into three general methods.⁶²

First, and more popular than one might expect, is a “love the sinner, hate the sin” approach. The fact that modern Catholic theology was created almost entirely by white European men does not call the theology itself into question, just the men who created it. Catholic theology, argues this approach, is not inherently racist or misogynist and thus can still be considered wholly systematic because, quite simply, God works through imperfect vessels.⁶³ The critique of this approach is well known: theological arguments constructed by persons complicit with systematic oppression necessarily contain significant traces of, if not outright arguments for, said oppression. Culture and method, theological or otherwise, exist in a symbiotic relationship, for better and for worse.

The second theological approach to a sinful past is a popular postmodern argument of fragmentation represented best by David Tracy in the 1990s.

⁶⁰ “Immaculate Conception Catholic Church,” <http://www.natchitoches.net/attractions/historic-district/immaculate-conception-catholic-church/>.

⁶¹ Furthermore, how can we look back on Gregory XVI’s condemnation of slavery and not consider how the papacy directly supported the origins of the slave trade in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a fact that Gregory’s encyclical did not mention?

⁶² Obviously, these three categories are not all-inclusive and have many exceptions, but I find them helpful for the present analysis.

⁶³ This assertion is based on the commonly employed conception that past scholarship is redeemed through holy interpretations, despite the source. A relevant example would be the continued incorporation of Martin Heidegger’s ideas in contemporary theology, including through Karl Rahner and Hans Urs von Balthasar, despite the fact that Heidegger’s ideas were deeply twisted around notions of Nazism, bias, and antisemitism. See Martin Heidegger, *Ponderings: Black Notebooks* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016–17).

Leaning on Walter Benjamin, Tracy argues that “the fragments of life embedded in [Benjamin’s] kabbalistic readings of Messianic Judaism ... gave hope, not resignation” to modern thought.⁶⁴ Benjamin’s fragments become “hints of redemption,” which reveal “through the fragmentary form itself the brokenness and falseness of modern experience and the obfuscation of all singularities in the nineteenth century’s deceptively continuous modern bourgeois experience.”⁶⁵ Through his repudiation of “any totality system whatsoever,” Tracy argues that we can “blast the marginalized fragments of the past alive with the memory of suffering and hope” and “remove them from their seemingly coherent place in the grand narratives we have imposed upon them.”⁶⁶ This approach attempts to allow the Catholic theologian to “admit our present polycentric Catholic situation [and find] ... our best hope for creating a new unity-in-diversity.”⁶⁷ Despite the benefits and progressive nature of such a position, Dwight Hopkins has argued against applying Tracy’s framework to African American theology.⁶⁸ Tracy’s characterization of scholars from historically oppressed groups as fragments, Hopkins argues, disallows the construction of any theological system that rivals and challenges the European narrative. Despite assurances to the contrary, any argument for a piecemeal

⁶⁴ While many aspects of Tracy’s corpus cover this topic implicitly, Tracy addresses the topic directly in five articles from 1997 to 2005: “Fragments and Forms: Universality and Particularity Today,” in *The Church in Fragments: Towards What Kind of Unity*, ed. Giuseppe Ruggieri and Miklos Tomka (London: SCM Press, 1997), 122–29; “Fragments of Synthesis: The Hopeful Paradox of Dupré’s Modernity,” in *Christian Spirituality and the Culture of Modernity: The Thought of Louis Dupre*, ed. Peter J. Casarella and George P. Schner, SJ (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 9–24; “African American Thought: The Discovery of Fragments,” in *Black Faith and Public Talk: Critical Essays on James H. Cone’s “Black Theology and Black Power”* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), 29–38; “Fragments: The Spiritual Situation of Our Times,” in *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism*, ed. John D. Caputo and Michael J. Scanlon (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 170–84; “Form and Fragment: The Recovery of the Hidden and Incomprehensible God,” in *The Concept of God in Global Dialogue*, ed. Werner Jeanrond and Aasulv Lande (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005), 98–114.

⁶⁵ Tracy, “Fragments: The Spiritual Situation of Our Times,” 179.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 179–80.

⁶⁷ Tracy, “Fragments and Forms: Universality and Particularity Today,” 125–26.

⁶⁸ Tracy, “African American Thought,” 37–38. Tracy argues, for example, that “no major African American thinker, long before the rest of us, ever attempted or wanted a system. They have left us, all of them (especially James Cone ... Cornel West ... and Toni Morrison ...) with something far more valuable than a system. They have left to us fragments that break and undo such pretense to totality, and that describe hints and guesses of hope... . These are the crucial resources which African-American thought, if heeded, can provide for our desiccated public realm.”

insertion of subversive voices seems masked beneath an assumed hierarchy of a white dominant culture against which all other cultures must be measured.⁶⁹

The third theological-historical approach is marked by a theological reclamation of Christianity through historically oppressed sources. The Africanist theological *ressourcement*, argued by such esteemed theologians as Diana Hayes and Dwight Hopkins, exemplifies such reclamation of Christian theological traditions through close studies of African and African American practices and stories.⁷⁰ Womanist Catholic theologian M. Shawn Copeland sees this method as one “decenter[ing] racial critique, without abandoning it.”⁷¹ Africanist arguments like those of Hopkins and Hayes—and many others—are integral to pushing past the limitations of Tracy’s fragmentation, as the dominant narrative of postmodernity itself is challenged by African- and African American-based alternative theological conceptions of race, class, culture, and faith.

I find this third argument extremely hopeful, but still only part of the answer. Growing up Catholic in southern Louisiana, I am personally well aware of the long effects of proslavery Catholicism on generations upon generations of Catholics, and the long history of complicity between racism and American Catholic culture. As such, I propose to categorize a fourth approach to the historical problematic, which I call “the negation of history as sacred tradition.” Like the traditional systematic argument, this theological approach allows for possibilities of methodologies of grace within the dominant European narrative. Furthermore, like the fragmentary hypothesis, it recognizes the limitations of dominant methodological frameworks and calls for a breaking and reorganization of the past. Unlike Tracy’s method, however, it follows the Africanist approach in arguing that such breaking can be

⁶⁹ Dwight N. Hopkins, *Being Human: Race, Culture, and Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 16–23. Hopkins uses the analogy of a discussion forum to argue that Tracy allows new voices to the table, but does not allow the voices the ability to change the table, the method of discussion, the language, or the key vocabulary terms (20). One could respond by arguing that Tracy meant only to elevate certain positive aspects of the Enlightenment and not to require the underlying modern or postmodern method en masse, but Tracy’s essays do not lend themselves easily to this response.

⁷⁰ Many others inhabit this rich *ressourcement*, but two examples would be Diana Hayes, *Forged in the Fiery Furnace: African American Spirituality* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2012) and Hopkins, *Being Human*.

⁷¹ M. Shawn Copeland, “Foundations for Catholic Theology: Bibliographical Essay,” in *Black and Catholic: The Challenge and Gift of Black Folk*, ed. Jamie Phelps (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 1997), 155.

done only if it can lacerate the structural and methodological narratives that define the Western European impact on sacred tradition today.⁷²

Practically, following the example of Bishop Martin, this approach would declare not that Martin is necessarily damned, but that his history of power and preaching can never again be claimed as an aspect of sacred tradition. Perhaps Martin's grave is moved outside the basilica, or perhaps alongside Martin's grave a plaque reminds the faithful of the millions of black persons in southern Louisiana who have suffered directly from Martin's words. Martin's person was not incapable of holiness, but his legacy must be deemed incommensurable with the development of sacred tradition. His influence undeniably supported and continued the horrific philosophical and theological arguments of racism and antiblackness that have persisted to this very day.

On a wider practical level, this theology of negation demands the implementation of historical truth commissions in every diocese around the country. It demands that all Catholic educational institutions—not just Georgetown University—acknowledge their complicity in racial inequality and work practically to overcome lingering biases. Such a theology of negation claims that we can neither wash away nor leave behind a corrupted past. Our only hope of salvation is to confront it, and its theological descendants, directly. It is easy to remember only those who dissented for the cause of righteousness and liberalism. But until we as a church can directly confront the negative effects of dissent, such as the widespread support for chattel slavery in nineteenth-century American Catholicism, we cannot hope to understand the intricacies of dissent in the twenty-first century. As long as theology relies on problematic approaches to historical sins, the oppressed voices of the past will continue to haunt the church of the future, driving believers and nonbelievers away from the hope of the Body of Christ.

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⁷² There are many examples of this approach already in print today, but I find M. Shawn Copeland's approach to Bernard Lonergan and Johann Baptist Metz in *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010) to be exemplary of this idea.