

## Special Issue on Intersectional Methods and Moral Theology: Introduction

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ON NOVEMBER 4, 2021, ARCHBISHOP JOSÉ H. GOMEZ OF Los Angeles, then-president of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, gave a speech to a Catholic conference in Spain in which he referred to “cancel culture” and “political correctness” as cultural trends that neglect the wisdom of the Church’s traditions.<sup>1</sup> The Archbishop stated, “We recognize that often what is being canceled and corrected are perspectives rooted in Christian beliefs—about human life and the human person, marriage, the family, and more.”<sup>2</sup> Gomez went on to criticize “new social justice movements” as “pseudo-religions.”

Whatever we call these movements—“social justice,” “wokeness,” “identity politics,” “intersectionality,” “successor ideology”—they claim to offer what religion provides. They provide people with an explanation for events and conditions in the world. They offer a sense of meaning, a purpose for living, and the feeling of belonging to a community.<sup>3</sup>

Here is how he characterized the “woke” story:

We cannot know where we came from, but we are aware that we have interests in common with those who share our skin color or our position in society. We are also painfully aware that our group is suffering and alienated, through no fault of our own. The cause of our unhappiness is that we are victims of oppression by other groups in society. We are liberated and find redemption through our constant

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<sup>1</sup> A critique of “political correctness” has been central to the writings of Jordan Peterson, who in turn has been deeply influential for Bishop Robert Barron’s *Word on Fire* ministry, which has a significant online presence.

<sup>2</sup> José H. Gomez, “Reflections on the Church and America’s New Religions,” Congress of Catholics and Public Life, Madrid, Spain (November 4, 2021), [archbishopgomez.org/blog/reflections-on-the-church-and-americas-new-religions](https://archbishopgomez.org/blog/reflections-on-the-church-and-americas-new-religions).

<sup>3</sup> Gomez, “Reflections.”

struggle against our oppressors, by waging a battle for political and cultural power in the name of creating a society of equity.<sup>4</sup>

Gomez asserted that “today’s critical theories and ideologies are profoundly atheistic” and divide people into categories of “victims” and “adversaries.” He went on to call these new movements “dangerous substitutes for true religion.” Instead, Gomez proposes the “simple” answer: “We need to proclaim Jesus Christ. Boldly, creatively.”<sup>5</sup> But proclaiming Jesus Christ in a context of structural injustice is anything but simple.

When the co-editors met to collaborate on this special issue and send the call for papers, we never thought of ourselves as claiming to offer a new religion to readers! The fact that such a high-ranking Catholic leader has such a distorted understanding of intersectionality, and the platform to misrepresent the discourse for lay readers around the globe, does expose some of the problems this special issue is trying to raise up for theological consideration. We believe that this collection of essays demonstrates some of the very fruitful conversations emerging between intersectionality studies and Christian theology.

Gomez is not the first to distort intersectionality for a popular audience in theology circles. Grant Kaplan suggests that when students of theology are encouraged to integrate theological questions with methods or fields adjacent to theology, the depth of their coursework in theology suffers. “For theology to maintain identity and coherence,” writes Kaplan, “the application of supplementary disciplines and methods needs to be paired with an appreciation for theology’s historical achievements, which the faculty should embody and articulate through a palpable love of theology.”<sup>6</sup> The goal, he says, is “to seek theologians and scholars of religion interested in continuing to think, remember, and imagine with a broadly Catholic pattern of doing theology.” Nowhere in his piece does Kaplan explain what this means, and how his own positionality influences his conception of the right way of doing Catholic theology. Kaplan worries that Catholic theology will be “winnowed down to a variant of cultural studies, in which the discipline of theology is replaced by a medley of methods and fields.”<sup>7</sup> Such analysis raises the question of which methods of doing theology should be considered central, and which ones are rightfully described as supplemental.

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<sup>4</sup> Gomez, “Reflections.”

<sup>5</sup> Gomez, “Reflections.”

<sup>6</sup> Grant Kaplan, “The Crisis in Catholic Theology,” *America* 224, no. 7 (June 2021): 20–25, [www.americamagazine.org/faith/2021/05/19/crisis-catholic-theology-doctoral-programs-240675](http://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2021/05/19/crisis-catholic-theology-doctoral-programs-240675).

<sup>7</sup> Kaplan, “The Crisis,” 25.

Kaplan proposes “deeper engagement with the tradition.” But one is left wondering, whose tradition? Tradition told from the perspective of which communities, from which places? Kaplan’s own version is decidedly Eurocentric and male-focused.<sup>8</sup> One wonders if reading lists for his Catholic theology courses would include females or people of color. Or would such studies be considered cultural studies? He writes about the need for greater “collaboration with institutions in places like Brazil, China, Nigeria, and the Philippines,” but does not seem to imagine how postcolonial theology, feminist theory, and political theology have created the pathways for the very work he outlines as necessary. Moreover, Kaplan does not himself engage with the theologians in those places. He does not reflect upon the selection process for the “mainstream, well-known theologians” his book identifies as important for shaping the field. He even claims that these white, male, Eurocentric theologians are in danger of “becoming forgotten.” Kaplan acknowledges, but does not offer a rationale for, the fact that in his presentation of “faith and reason through Christian history,” under-represented voices have not been allowed to speak.<sup>9</sup>

Charles Camosy has similarly argued that the discipline of moral theology is in “crisis” because increasingly theologians are employing the “hyper-secular” methods of sociology and history. Camosy claims that “the ascendant and dominant social ethicists today are committed to a power discourse which, broadly speaking, could be described as intersectional.”<sup>10</sup> In his description of “intersectional critical theory,” Camosy argues that “everything boils down to a struggle for power.” This makes intersectional discourse “highly problematic for Christian academics,” for Roman Catholics “cannot be at home in a discourse that requires the destruction of the perceived enemies of our identity.” For Camosy, “the current intersectionalist project” cannot count as an authentic form of moral theology or Catholic theological ethics because in Catholicism the “tradition and teaching of the Church”

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<sup>8</sup> Kaplan names the following thinkers in his piece: Thomas O’Meara, OP, Matthew Lamb, John Courtney Murray, SJ, Raymond Brown, SS, Peter Hünermann, Karl Rahner, SJ, James Keenan, SJ, Augustine, President Joseph Biden, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Karl Barth, Bernard Lonergan, SJ, Aquinas, Hans Urs von Balthasar, Henri de Lubac, SJ, and Edith Stein. Kaplan’s recently published book, *Faith and Reason through Christian History*, is similarly focused on the contributions of male thinkers. As Kaplan explains, the entire task of theology can be completed without paying attention to women or people of color, who are unnecessary to the task of “faith seeking understanding,” since feminist methods involve “faith seeking moral legitimacy” (Kaplan, *Faith and Reason through Christian History: A Theological Essay* [Washington, DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2022], 295).

<sup>9</sup> Kaplan, *Faith and Reason*, xiv–xv.

<sup>10</sup> Charles Camosy, “The Crisis in Moral Theology,” *Church Life Journal* (November 15, 2018), [churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/the-crisis-of-catholic-moral-theology/](http://churchlifejournal.nd.edu/articles/the-crisis-of-catholic-moral-theology/).

should be the “starting point.” The relationships between truth, justice, and viewpoint diversity remain unexplored.

We find the portraits of intersectionality in the work of Gomez, Kaplan, and Camosy unrecognizable in relation to the interdisciplinary literature on intersectional methods in the social sciences, humanities, and law. Intersectionality is not inherently atheistic, does not categorize people in simplistic ways, does not demand destruction of perceived enemies, and does not demand rejection of Christianity or of faith communities. It is not about power. It *does*, however, analyze the use and abuse of power within complex systems; such social analysis is not new, but gatekeepers of theology today seem to find it threatening in new ways.

Intersectionality explores a theme—human suffering—many theologians have found worthy of sustained treatment in our tradition and uses theoretical and analytical tools to understand better the phenomena of human suffering in order to foster positive social change. Intersectional methods in theological ethics have explanatory power for many researchers who see how unjust social structures impede human flourishing, but the realities of these injustices are experienced differently depending on one’s positionality. This special issue on intersectionality is needed because bad theology kills. For example, white theology can be deadly for people of color, in ways often rendered natural, holy, or invisible in traditional theological discourse. We lift up the names of particular victims of violence, a small subset of a much wider communion of saints who inspire this work: Trayvon Martin, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd, Christina Yuna Lee, Pak Ho, Julia Li, Michelle Alyssa Go, Vicha Ratanapakdee, Atatianna Jefferson, Aura Rosser, Stephen Clark, Botham Jean, Freddie Gray, Tamir Rice, and Daniel Prude.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, patriarchal theologies can be deadly for women. The colonizer’s theology can be deadly for the colonized. That these systems of oppression continue to operate is undisputed; how to transform them is a topic worthy of sustained critical theological reflection.

Theology that makes sense of one’s identity and complex experiences can be deeply empowering, especially for voices traditionally marginalized. Intersectionality can sharpen theological reflection. In this introduction, we begin with a first attempt at an

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<sup>11</sup> For more, see Alia Chughtai, “Know Their Names,” *Al Jazeera*, interactive. [aljazeera.com/aje/2020/know-their-names/index.html](http://aljazeera.com/aje/2020/know-their-names/index.html); Laura Bult, “A Timeline of 1,944 Black Americans Killed by Police,” *Vox*, June 30, 2022, [www.vox.com/2020/6/30/21306843/black-police-killings](http://www.vox.com/2020/6/30/21306843/black-police-killings); Michael Chow, “Remembering Victims of Anti-Asian Hate Crimes,” *USCAnnenbergMedia*, March 11, 2022, [www.uscannenbergmedia.com/2022/03/11/photos-remembering-victims-of-anti-asian-hate-crimes/](http://www.uscannenbergmedia.com/2022/03/11/photos-remembering-victims-of-anti-asian-hate-crimes/). See also Devon Johnson, Patricia Y. Warren, and Amy Farrell, eds., *Deadly Injustice: Trayvon Martin, Race, and the Criminal Justice System* (New York: New York University Press, 2015).

explanation of intersectionality, with the caution that this is not a final or authoritative definition. We then explain some of the reasons theologians find this theoretical lens fruitful and what intersectional methods can contribute to our discourse. Finally, we signal the exciting work ahead in the essays that follow, each of which furthers the discourse in its own way.

### EPISTEMOLOGY AND THE COMMUNAL TASK OF THEOLOGY

An important note about the “we” here: our collaboration as co-editors has been rooted in dialogue and shared responsibilities from the beginning. Our stories and positionality differ. We are all Catholic scholars trained in theological ethics, but our perspectives are shaped by our embodied and contextual experiences. Emily writes as a US-based, white, cisgender, heterosexual, married, parenting, English-speaking, well-educated, well-fed, housed, tenured female. Anna writes as an African-descended Jamaican, US and UK-educated, English and Jamaican-speaking, highly-educated, privileged, cisgender, heterosexual, locks-wearing, home-based administrator-theologian. Meghan is a US-based, white, cisgender, heterosexual, English-speaking theologian who enjoys the stability of tenure, housing, health insurance in treating chronic illness, and the support of extended family networks. We share these markers of our identity to enable our readers to get a better sense of who is engaging in this conversation with them, to be true to our positionality. Our theologies emerge from reflections on our lived experiences of God’s ongoing revelation. We interpret God’s revelation through our experiences and everyday encounters of grace and sin. Emily cannot step outside her whiteness when she goes to Mass. The church’s theology of ministry imposes restrictions for Emily on the basis of her presentation as female. Should Emily think of her embodiment as white and female as a limitation? Do these aspects of her identity no longer matter since Emily is baptized in Christ and “all are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28)? 12-year old Tamir Rice (who was Black) was shot to death by police because he held a plastic toy gun. Kyle Rittenhouse, a 17-year old white male, fatally shot two and wounded another with a semi-automatic AR-15 rifle, but police failed to arrest him on the scene even when witnesses identified him as the shooter; a jury later found Rittenhouse not guilty of homicide.<sup>12</sup> It seems that racial and gender identities *do* matter significantly in some contexts. How could these not “matter” when engaging in theological and liturgical life and reflection? How exactly these identities shape our theology and liturgical practice is a question demanding further exploration.

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<sup>12</sup> Josiah Bates, “Kyle Rittenhouse Found Not Guilty,” *Time*, November 20, 2021.

Intersectionality discourse invites sustained reflection on identity. For activists such as Barbara Smith of the Combahee River Collective, among the first groups to pioneer “identity politics,” the term was not meant to be divisive but rather to seek political coalition through shared struggle. They wrote:

We believe that the most profound and potentially most radical politics come directly out of our own identity, as opposed to working to end somebody else’s oppression. In the case of Black women this is a particularly repugnant, dangerous, threatening, and therefore revolutionary concept because it is obvious from looking at all the political movements that have preceded us that anyone is more worthy of liberation than ourselves. We reject pedestals, queenhood, and walking ten paces behind. To be recognized as human, levelly human, is enough.<sup>13</sup>

What would it mean to do theology in a community that invites each theologian to critically reflect on their own positionality, and that sees this critical self-reflection as an ethical praxis of humility and truth-telling in the task of theology itself? What would it mean to do theology in a community that recognizes the humanity of its interlocutors in this way? We envision the practice of theology as a communal task in which each person—from their own standpoint and lived experience—shares their truth and learns from other witnesses to truth. Much like a synodal ecclesiology, this way of thinking about standpoint epistemology and the communal work of theology is central to our vision of the discourse of theology.<sup>14</sup>

### INTERSECTIONALITY IS EASY TO EXPLAIN!

While each author in this collection will address various aspects of the term *intersectionality* and its relevance for their work, we need some basic understanding to begin. Let us start with an easy definition and move towards complexity. Legal scholar and activist Kimberlé Crenshaw explains that intersectionality is “just a metaphor for understanding how multiple forms of inequality or disadvantage

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<sup>13</sup> Combahee River Collective, “A Black Feminist Statement” (1977), in L. Ayu Saraswati, Barbara L. Shaw, and Heather Rellihan, *Introduction to Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021), 141–146. See also Keeanga-Yamahatta Taylor, “Until Black Women Are Free, None of Us Will Be Free,” *New Yorker*, July 20, 2020, [www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/until-black-women-are-free-none-of-us-will-be-free](http://www.newyorker.com/news/our-columnists/until-black-women-are-free-none-of-us-will-be-free).

<sup>14</sup> See also work on hermeneutic injustice, for example José Medina, “Hermeneutical Injustice and Polyphonic Contextualism: Social Silences and Shared Hermeneutical Responsibilities,” *Social Epistemology* 26, no. 2 (2012): 201–220, and work on moral repair, for example Margaret Urban Walker, *Moral Repair: Reconstructing Moral Relations after Wrongdoing* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

sometimes compound themselves.”<sup>15</sup> The point here is one made by scholars working in a variety of contexts: not all suffering is equal.<sup>16</sup> Originally coined when working on a 1989 case in which Black women at General Motors could not claim discrimination as Black women but only as Black people or as women, Crenshaw helped scholars in the legal profession understand that what the plaintiffs experienced in the case was the *intersection* of racism and sexism, and that their lives were not easily separated into those categories or identities.<sup>17</sup> The reason this terminology is important has to do with how oppression functions—including by rendering invisible the very systems it creates. The legal system did not have a way of accounting for how Black women experienced the intersection of racism and sexism. One could argue that this *lack of accounting* or *rendering invisible* the complexity of Black women’s experiences of oppression served to further advantage the people already advantaged by the system. By naming it as such, Black women could find common cause, and link to other groups similarly positioned in a white supremacist and sexist culture.

Crenshaw was not the first to make these connections. African American feminist and womanist scholars raised up the complexities of their experiences as women in a racist and patriarchal society. For example, in 1978 the Combahee River Collective declared:

We believe that sexual politics under patriarchy is as pervasive in Black women’s lives as are the politics of class and race. We also often find it difficult to separate race from class from sex oppression because in our lives they are most often experienced simultaneously. We know that there is such a thing as racial-sexual oppression, which is neither solely racial nor solely sexual. ... We need to articulate the real class situation of persons who are not merely raceless, sexless workers, but for whom racial and sexual oppression are significant determinants in their working/economic lives.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Kimberlé Crenshaw, “What Is Intersectionality?,” National Association of Independent Schools, Interview (June 22, 2018), [www.youtube.com/watch?v=ViDtnfQ9FHc](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ViDtnfQ9FHc).

<sup>16</sup> We have in mind the work of the late Dr. Paul Farmer, an advocate for human rights in medicine. See his *Pathologies of Power: Health, Human Rights, and the New War on the Poor* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003).

<sup>17</sup> *DeGraffenreid v. General Motors*, 413. F. Supp. 142, 145 E. D. (Mo., 1976). See also Mary Elizabeth Powell, “The Claims of Women of Color under Title VII: The Interaction of Race and Gender,” *Golden Gate University Law Review* (1996): 26, [digitalcommons.law.ggu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1677&context=ggulrev](http://digitalcommons.law.ggu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1677&context=ggulrev).

<sup>18</sup> Combahee River Collective, “A Black Feminist Statement” (1977), in Saraswati, Shaw, and Rellihan, *Introduction to Women’s Gender, and Sexuality Studies*, 141–146.

In other words, some people experience a cumulative effect of oppressions while others experience empowerment in one area and disempowerment in another. Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Susan M. Shaw highlight how intersectional analysis “is kaleidoscopic, constantly rendering shifting patterns of power visible.”<sup>19</sup> So in addition to analysis of sexual identity, gender identity, class, and race, scholars add ability, citizenship, sexual orientation, ethnicity, clerical status, and any other markers of identity that confer power and/or privilege. Audre Lorde’s 1982 speech anticipated this work as she drew together social movements “among women, other peoples of Color, gays, the handicapped”—and encouraged people not to despair even as the gains of the 60s were being dismantled. Her often-quoted line, “There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives” is particularly meaningful today.<sup>20</sup> Renowned Nigerian author Chimamanda Adichie approached similar concerns in alerting us to the danger of a single story: “Stories matter. Many stories matter. Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign, but stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity.”<sup>21</sup>

Stories are layered, contextual, and complex. They defy easy categorization. Whether one begins with the layered experiences of personal trauma or by investigating an issue’s complex realities and connections to other social issues, the data of theological ethics today is more and more complex. Increasingly, we are seeing that issues such as climate change, incarceration, health care, and other thorny social problems cannot be addressed as single issues apart from other issues of structural injustice.

Black feminist and womanist scholars and activists have advanced the theoretical labor to bring this discourse to our attention. Patricia Hill Collins, Audre Lorde, Ange-Marie Hancock, Vivian May, Rickie Solinger, Kelly Brown Douglas, Elizabeth Spelman, Emilie Townes, M. Shawn Copeland, and others continue to teach us about the interconnectedness of oppressions. Patricia Hill Collins furthers this analysis by explaining how this “matrix of domination” functions through four domains of power: structural, disciplinary, hegemonic,

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<sup>19</sup> Grace Ji-Sun Kim and Susan M. Shaw, *Intersectional Theology: An Introductory Guide* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2018), 2.

<sup>20</sup> Audre Lorde, “Learning from the Sixties,” February 1982, [www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/1982-audre-lorde-learning-60s/](http://www.blackpast.org/african-american-history/1982-audre-lorde-learning-60s/).

<sup>21</sup> Chimamanda Adichie, “The Danger of a Single Story,” January 27, 2021, [www.facinghistory.org/holocaust-and-human-behavior/chapter-1/danger-single-story#:~:text=The%20single%20story%20creates%20stereotypes,story%20become%20the%20only%20story](http://www.facinghistory.org/holocaust-and-human-behavior/chapter-1/danger-single-story#:~:text=The%20single%20story%20creates%20stereotypes,story%20become%20the%20only%20story.). See video at [youtu.be/D9lhs241zeg](https://youtu.be/D9lhs241zeg).



and interpersonal.<sup>22</sup> Because of people's shifting domains and locations, they can hold and wield power differently in different contexts, experiencing oppression and empowerment simultaneously in various aspects of their multiple identities. For many, such a framework does explain everyday realities as well as long-standing disputes such as conflicts within the so-called "sisterhood" of women. White feminists in the US have not been faithful allies and collaborative partners with Black feminists and womanist theologians in this struggle spanning over a century. As Patricia Beattie Jung notes, white suffragists demonstrated bravery and heroism in the fight for their own rights, but were all too willing to place their needs above the needs of their Black sisters. The moral failures of white feminist suffragists to work for the voting rights of *all* women and seek solidarity across racial divides were significant failures.<sup>23</sup> White feminists who employ gender essentialism to lift up their own experiences of sexism without attention to their complicity in white supremacy and/or classism faced important critiques by Black feminist and womanist scholars such as Elizabeth Spelman and Audre Lorde.<sup>24</sup> Such scrutiny is important today as well, including in situations in which white women "derive a degree of structural and emotional privilege from their familial relationships to white patriarchy in the United States."<sup>25</sup> White women inherit "relational power" that informs their perspectives on gender relations and power; the results have been deadly for women of color and help explain why Black women may lack trust in white women's pledges of solidarity today.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Routledge, 2009), 295–307.

<sup>23</sup> Patricia Beattie Jung, "Celebrate Suffrage," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 40, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2020): 205–220, doi.org/10.5840/jsce202011729.

<sup>24</sup> Elizabeth V. Spelman, *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (Boston: Beacon, 1988), 114–132. See also Audre Lorde's "Open Letter to Mary Daly," May 6, 1979, [www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/lordeopenlettertomarydaly.html](http://www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/lordeopenlettertomarydaly.html).

<sup>25</sup> Aida Hurtado, *The Color of Privilege* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1996).

<sup>26</sup> For example, M. Shawn Copeland notes that in the power dynamics of the plantation, ordinary women and men participated and benefited from the sin of slavery (*Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 2010], 116). Drawing on the scholarship of Hazel Carby, Copeland shows how white planter wives were complicit in the suffering of enslaved women; they did not choose solidarity with enslaved Black women but with their white husbands (*Enfleshing Freedom*, 36–37).

Asian and Asian American feminists,<sup>27</sup> Chicana<sup>28</sup> and Latina feminists,<sup>29</sup> mujerista theologians, postcolonial feminists,<sup>30</sup> and scholars of indigenous traditions<sup>31</sup> have also contributed in significant ways to the critique of white feminism and US capitalism and its ongoing project of colonization. Intersectional discourse can therefore also be framed as hybridity,<sup>32</sup> decoloniality,<sup>33</sup> or recovery of voices from marginalized positions.<sup>34</sup> Kim and Shaw explain that the goal of

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<sup>27</sup> Lisa Lowe, "Heterogeneity, Hybridity, Multiplicity: Making Asian American Difference," *Diaspora* 1 (1991): 24–44.

<sup>28</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands: La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed. (San Francisco: Aunt Lute, 2012). Within borderlands theory, oppressions are not ranked or seen as static; rather, they are recognized as fluid systems open to various forms of resistance. See Aida Hurtado and Sinha Mrinal, *Beyond Machismo: Intersectional Latino Masculinities* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2016), 45. Hurtado and Mrinal cite Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*, 78–79: "It is not enough to stand on the opposite river bank, shouting questions, challenging patriarchal, white conventions. A counterstance locks one into a duel of oppressor and oppressed; locked in mortal combat, like the cop and the criminal, both are reduced to a common denominator of violence."

<sup>29</sup> María Pilar Aquino, Daisy L. Machado, and Jeanette Rodriguez, eds., *A Reader in Latina Feminist Theology* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002); Rosa-Linda Fregoso and Cynthia Bejarano, eds., *Terrorizing Women: Feminicide in the Américas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010).

<sup>30</sup> Kwok Pui-lan, *Postcolonial Imagination and Feminist Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2005); Agnes Brazal, *A Theology of Southeast Asia: Liberation-Postcolonial Ethics in the Philippines* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2019).

<sup>31</sup> Margaret Kovach, *Indigenous Methodologies: Characteristics, Conversations, and Contexts*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2021); Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (London: Zed, 2021).

<sup>32</sup> Mariana Ortega, "New Mestizas, World Travelers, and Dasein: Phenomenology and the Multi-Voiced, Multi-Cultural Self," *Hypatia* 16, no. 3 (2001): 1–29. See also Mariana Ortega, "Being Lovingly, Knowingly Ignorant: White Feminism and Women of Color," *Hypatia* 21, no. 3 (2006): 56–74.

<sup>33</sup> Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," in *Third World Women and the Politics of Feminism*, ed. Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Ann Russo, and Lourdes Torres (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991), 51–80. Revised and republished as "Under Western Eyes Revisited," in *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 221–251.

<sup>34</sup> Anne Naisimiyu-Wasike, "The Missing Voices of Women," in James F. Keenan, *Catholic Theological Ethics: Past, Present, and Future* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 107–115; Beverley Haddad, "Living It Out: Faith Resources and Sites as Critical to Participatory Learning with Rural South African Women," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 22, no. 1 (2006): 135–154; Teresia Mbari Hinga, "African Feminist Theologies, The Global Village and the Imperative of Solidarity across Borders: the Case of The Circle of Concerned African Women Theologians," *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 18:1 (2003).

the discourse is not more discourse. Rather, the goal is structural reform and flourishing for all.<sup>35</sup>

### INTERSECTIONAL METHODS AND THEOLOGY

Intersectional methods begin with reflection on the human person and their identity and context. In this way, one can see fruitful overlap with theological anthropology and thinkers who reflect on human dignity and the moral life. Theological anthropology situates the human person as embodied in history—that is, in a particular cultural moment, geographical context, and situation. The person’s growth is always influenced by their context: family of origin, access to the goods of flourishing, education and moral formation, and so forth. An intersectional inquiry into theological anthropology would go on to ask if those who craft normative accounts of what it means to be “human” have taken human diversity seriously. With regard to theological anthropology, intersectionality has explanatory power. It does not diminish the Christian claim that all are created in the image and likeness of God and should be treated as subjects with inherent dignity. It does account for our uniqueness in our experience of createdness and its material implications in a world shaped by sin and oppression.

Intersectional methods recognize how oppressions prevent flourishing, and thus align broadly speaking with an approach to social justice found in Catholic social teaching, liberation theologies, and contextual theologies. Intersectional approaches to theological discourse are present among Caribbean womanist theologians such as Marjorie Lewis, who articulates a “Nannyish T’eology”<sup>36</sup> (note the Jamaican pronunciation), “based on a consensus on a core life-giving, egalitarian, and community-building African-derived value system and worldview shared by women of different religions and ideologies.”<sup>37</sup> Given the experiences of the Women’s Movement in the Caribbean, Nannyish T’eology welcomes women of all faiths and of no faith commitments. While Lewis identifies some contested issues among Caribbean women such as sexuality, she insists that the commitment to the well-being of the wider society must involve dialogue including a commitment to listen to and respect differences of race, age, religion, and sexuality. Intersectional thinkers call for solidarity among people and invite activists to work together for social change.

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<sup>35</sup> Kim and Shaw, *Intersectional Theology*, 8.

<sup>36</sup> “Nannyish T’eology” is named after “Nanny of the Maroons,” Jamaica’s only national heroine.

<sup>37</sup> Marjorie Lewis, “Womanist Theology in the Caribbean,” WAND and Codrington College Conference, Codrington College, Barbados, March 8, 2006.

Intersectional methods invite biblical scholars to explore how the positionality of a reader influences an interpretation, as well as how the history of interpretation of a text can be contextualized according to broader understandings of social oppression. For example, while many feminists have noted that the Bible was written by men and contains the cultural assumptions of the authors—including about gender, class, and other facets of identity—the Bible has also been a source of wisdom and inspiration for women seeking freedom in and through their encounter with the living God of the text.<sup>38</sup> Sojourner Truth's speech "Ain't I A Woman?" from 1851 referred to Eve: "Well if woman upset the world, do give her a chance to set it right side up again."<sup>39</sup> African American biblical scholar Renita J. Weems has long argued that it is important for African American women to read the text from their experiences and recover the voice of the oppressed within the biblical texts.<sup>40</sup> Caribbean theologian Diane Jagdeo likewise denounces male readings of Scripture and use of words such as "home" and "enchantress" as "words without wisdom," calling upon women to turn them on their heads.<sup>41</sup> Theresa Lowe Ching unflinchingly challenges not only the exclusion of women from the development of the discourse of Caribbean theology but dares to ask questions about the relative silencing of some racial groups in the enterprise.<sup>42</sup> Queer biblical hermeneutics similarly positions queer readers as privileged interpreters of the text.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> See, for example, the scholarship of Sister Barbara Reid, OP, general editor of the *Wisdom Commentary Series*.

<sup>39</sup> "Ain't I A Woman?," transcription of Marius Robinson, documented by Leslie Podell, The Sojourner Truth Project, [www.thesojournertruthproject.com/compare-the-speeches](http://www.thesojournertruthproject.com/compare-the-speeches). See also Karen Baker-Fletcher, "Anna Julia Cooper and Sojourner Truth: Two Nineteenth Century Black Feminist Interpreters of Scriptures," in *Search the Scripture: A Feminist Introduction*, ed. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza (New York: Crossroad, 1995), 41–51.

<sup>40</sup> Renita J. Weems, "Reading Her Way through the Struggle: African American Women and the Bible," in *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1991), 72–73. See also Renita Weems, *Battered Love: Marriage, Sex, and Violence in the Hebrew Prophets* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995) and Gale A. Yee, ed., *Hebrew Bible: Feminist and Intersectional Perspectives* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2018).

<sup>41</sup> Diane Jagdeo, "Women's Contribution in Transforming the Caribbean Church," *Groundings* 9 (September 2002): 27–39.

<sup>42</sup> Theresa Lowe Ching, "Seminar on Caribbean Spirituality: Opening Remarks," *Groundings* 9 (September 2000): 1–3; Theresa Lowe Ching, "Befriending the Dragon," *Groundings* 8 (May 2002): 10–14.

<sup>43</sup> Ken Stone, "Safer Text: Reading Biblical Laments in the Age of AIDS," in *Sexuality and the Sacred*, 349. See also Ken Stone, *Queer Commentary and the Hebrew Bible* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2001); Mona West, "Reading the Bible as Queer Americans: Social Location and the Hebrew Scriptures," *Theology and Sexuality* 10 (1999): 30.

Theologians who craft arguments about the human person, God, the Church, and the moral life are people who are themselves embodied, shaped by particular cultural and linguistic traditions, histories, and experiences. Intersectional discourse invites theologians to greater honesty and transparency about this reality and intellectual humility about both the resources and blind spots of our own particular histories and experiences. As a communal discourse, theology also involves relationships of mentoring, review, and dialogue; an intersectional lens invites us to become attuned to the power dynamics inhering the ways we relate to one another in the discipline.

But these resonances are not enough. Intersectional methods also pose a challenge to theology and top-down authoritative theological and ecclesial methods. Scholars who take up intersectional methods would challenge teachings imposed simply on the basis of their having been “authoritatively taught.” Tradition, revelation, and authority can be invoked in unethical and problematic ways.<sup>44</sup> Intersectional scholars point out these potentialities and engage in critical analysis of faith claims. This method can be destabilizing, for sure, as any critical theory can be. Intersectional thinking invites critical analysis of ahistorical claims, demands contextual analysis of historical figures/theologians/popes, and reminds us that there is no perspective-free location from which anyone engages in the task of theological ethics.

Intersectional thinking corrects the tradition by asking: Who speaks for the church? Whose stories are told and interpreted, and by whom? It reminds us that every saint and pope and theologian of the past was writing in a particular context shaped by culture, geography, gender, and other facets of power and identity. It reminds us, therefore, that every theology is contextual, and in many ways, contingent. This is not to detract from engaging thinkers of the past, but instead an

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<sup>44</sup> In “Method in Emerging Black Catholic Theology,” M. Shawn Copeland notes this distinction between ethical and unethical use of source material when she explains how Black theology distinguished Sacred Scripture “as the word of God from Sacred Scripture as an ideology wielded for the religious, cultural, and social benefit of white Protestant and Catholic Churches and their membership” (“Method in Emerging Black Catholic Theology,” in *Taking Down Our Harps*, ed. Diana L. Hayes and Cyprian Davis, OSB [Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998], 120–144). Black and Latinx theologians have shaped these conversations about theological method and ethics. See, for example, Diana L. Hayes, *Hagar's Daughters: Womanist Ways of Being in the World* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1995); Jamie T. Phelps, *Black and Catholic: The Challenge and Gift of Black Folk* (Milwaukee, WI: Marquette University Press, 1998); Cyprian Davis, OSB and Jamie T. Phelps, eds., *Stamped with the Image of God: African Americans as God's Image in Black* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004); Pilar Aquino, Machado, and Rodriguez, eds., *A Reader in Latina Feminist Theology*; Orlando Espin, ed., *Wiley Blackwell Companion to Latino/a Theology* (New York: Wiley, 2015).

invitation to more critical approaches as to how we invoke the past to draw meaning in our present.

As a critical theory, intersectionality pays attention to how power functions within a system. Gender studies have long focused on power analysis as part of their methodology; intersectionality builds on that work so that power is not rendered “divinely ordained,” “natural,” or invisible, but understood as constructed in systems that can and need to be transformed over time.

Finally, there is obvious common ground between theology and intersectionality in terms of the telos or end of our discipline and the work of intersectionality, aimed at flourishing for all. Intersectionality rightly raises questions about existing oppressions, but the telos of this critical work is justice-based activism. This does not mean that all scholars of intersectionality share Christian convictions about God, the Church, or Catholic social teachings; there is considerable variability among scholars of intersectionality. But, as Patricia Hill Collins notes, faith-based ethics often catalyze action into political work. There are tensions between secular and faith-based ethics and an opportunity for scholars of Catholic ethics to “critically examine the meaning of social justice and similar ideals [that] have been both circumscribed within the academy and positioned outside it.”<sup>45</sup>

So why is intersectional work threatening to our status quo? By centering Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) scholars, activists, and the concerns of nonwhite communities, intersectional work tends to shift assumptions about authority and epistemology taken for granted in the Catholic moral tradition. This should be, even if it means decentering white scholarship and authorities from the tradition, and problematizing Revelation/Tradition in appropriate ways. That work will require more unpacking for those of us working in traditions of hierarchical, institutional, and clerical privilege.

Intersectional work cannot simply be academic work. It begins as a spiritual practice of self-exploration. In this way, it asks the same questions posed by virtue ethics: Who am I? Who am I becoming? Who am I called to be? Scholars must do the hard work individually so that we are prepared for similar work in our classrooms and scholarship. Intersectionality can be a personal spiritual praxis before it becomes a research method.

Intersectional work may seem messy and destabilizing. This is a threat to some perceptions of tradition and the status quo. But we should be careful not to try to make this work too tidy. We are looking for coherence and explanatory power of human experience, while recognizing plurality, ambiguity, and context-dependent normative claims. Intersectional methods in Catholic theological ethics will not

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<sup>45</sup> Patricia Hill Collins, *Intersectionality as Critical Social Theory* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2019), 283 (see also 277).

require a retreat from normative ethics. It will, however, require greater nuance and humility as we seek truth together. The fear of relativism or capitulation to the secular does not stand in the face of true engagement with plurality, ambiguity, and context embracing the value of the other.

No matter one's sub-field within the discipline, intersectionality is a tool that sharpens theological work because it demands: attention to the concrete, attention to power, attention to context, and a shared movement towards the telos of justice for all. We present this volume as an invitation to scholars to explore the resources of intersectional methods and engage in self-reflection on one's own positionality and how that location shapes the way one does theological ethics. Vivian May has rightly stated that this method is inclusive because "everyone has intersecting identities and all of us live within interlocking structures of raced and gendered social stratification."<sup>46</sup> May argues further that intersectionality is relevant to everyone, inclusive of everyone, and yet not neutral.<sup>47</sup>

## OVERVIEW OF THIS SPECIAL ISSUE

Despite the delays, interruptions, and complications of the Covid-19 pandemic, this issue brings together scholarship from a diverse constellation of religious, racial, gender, and national contexts. These ten voices demonstrate well the breadth and depth of intersectionality's relevance and usefulness for the practice of moral theology.

Three essays focus on interrogating and illuminating the use of intersectional method to develop Christian theology so as to more faithfully include those who experience multiple intersecting oppressions as the subjects and foci of theological reflection. In "Cartographies in the Wilderness: A Decolonial Theological Reflection on Intersectionality," decolonial Black theologian Rufus Burnett argues that intersectionality can be used as a tool that makes room for constructive theological reflection on suffering, particularly with how we understand and become aware of unseen vulnerabilities.<sup>48</sup> Burnett creatively places intersectional and decolonial theory in conversation to illustrate ways they can focus attention on "pockets of vulnerability" in theology.<sup>49</sup> Arguing for "An

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<sup>46</sup> Vivian M. May, *Pursuing Intersectionality: Unsettling Dominant Imaginaries* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 25; Kim and Shaw, *Intersectional Theology*, 13.

<sup>47</sup> May, *Pursuing Intersectionality*, 12.

<sup>48</sup> Rufus Burnett, "Cartographies in the Wilderness: A Decolonial Theological Reflection on Intersectionality," *Journal of Moral Theology* 12, Special Issue 1 (2023): 19–41.

<sup>49</sup> Burnett, "Cartographies," 25.

Interdisciplinary Theological Method from the Knowledge of the Forgotten,” Brazilian theologian Alexandre Martins demonstrates that “the experience of the poor and oppressed, their narratives and voices, have a contribution to make to our systematic and imperfect attempts to understand the mystery of God.”<sup>50</sup> Focusing on the complexities of theology alongside his own experience and scholarly development, Asian American theologian Hoon Choi argues that “by observing a particular location, a contextual-liberation framework makes visible that which has been made invisible within that location *and*—if done carefully, intentionally, and honestly—recognizes the *observer’s own* (or their tradition’s) locationality, privilege, and complicity.” His essay, “The Case for Intersectional Theology: An Asian American Catholic Perspective,” issues a poignant call for the church to be an intersectional body of Christ.<sup>51</sup>

White, US-based Catholic feminist ethicist Kristin Heyer’s “Enfleshing the Work of Social Production: Gender, Race, and Agency,” examines the way the Covid-19 pandemic “exacerbated intersectional inequalities” by arguing that “an intersectional analysis of the work of social production demands that the Catholic tradition of workers’ rights better counter structural and ideological currents that abet exploitation.”<sup>52</sup> Also focusing on vulnerabilities exacerbated by the pandemic, Julie George, SSpS, presents the case study of victims and survivors of domestic violence in India.<sup>53</sup> A women’s rights lawyer, she highlights the intersecting oppressions faced by Dalit women and how intersectionality assists the analysis of their complex realities. Both Heyer and George name the divisions wherein privileged classes of women fail to align themselves as allies for those facing multiple oppressions attended to by intersectionality.

In the final article, Orthodox feminist theologian Rachel Contos invites us to explore a conversation between Orthodox theology and intersectional methods in “Intersectionality and Orthodox Theology: Searching for Spandrels.”<sup>54</sup> She engages in a dialogue seeking to “produce coherent and iterative understandings of dismantling

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<sup>50</sup> Alexandre Martins, “An Interdisciplinary Theological Method from the Knowledge of the Forgotten,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 12, Special Issue 1 (2023): 42–61.

<sup>51</sup> Hoon Choi, “The Case for Intersectional Theology: An Asian American Catholic Perspective,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 12, Special Issue 1 (2023): 62–81.

<sup>52</sup> Kristin Heyer, “Enfleshing the Work of Social Production: Gender, Race, and Agency,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 12, Special Issue 1 (2023): 82–107.

<sup>53</sup> Julie George, “Intersectionality at the Heart of Oppression and Violence against Women in Law: Case Studies from India,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 12, Special Issue 1 (2023): 108–131.

<sup>54</sup> Rachel Contos, “Intersectionality and Orthodox Theology: Searching for Spandrels,” *Journal of Moral Theology* 12, Special Issue 1 (2023): 132–156.



systems of oppression that involve community, encounter, and the use of everyday practice.”<sup>55</sup>

Seeking to explore more deeply the way intersectional methodology inspires and influences the practice of moral theology, we invited a number of theologians to participate in a roundtable. We asked them to write brief reflections on “Why is intersectionality important for how you do theology?” The resulting roundtable of four leading Black Christian theologians reveals that the work before us is not only critical but constructive: co-editor and Jamaican ethicist Anna Kasafi Perkins, South African feminist theologian Nontando Hadebe, US-based ethicist Nicole Symmonds, and Black feminist scholar Jennifer S. Leath began by reflecting on the value of this method in their own academic work and lives. These scholars offer bold and creative approaches to theological work—deeply faithful, yet fed up with the status quo which supports brokenness and indignity. Their words are a gift and challenge to our readers.

Like so many other JMT readers, we thirst for justice in a broken world. The tools of the academy are part of our toolkit, but cannot fully capture the hope our faith provides. We are also full of gratitude, not only to the contributors of this special issue, but to the leadership team of the *Journal of Moral Theology*. In particular, we want to thank Jason King and M. Therese Lysaught, who saw possibilities for these conversations before we did. They are role models not only in the work of journal editing, but more importantly for encouraging important conversations in the Catholic academic community. **M**

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<sup>55</sup> Contos, “Intersectionality and Orthodox Theology,” 135.

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