

Religion and Race

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Religion and Race: Editorial for the *Open Theology* Special Issue on Religion and Racism

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Religion and racism are two seemingly “controversial” topics that have been socially constructed into taboo subjects never to engage in—especially when combined. Yet, in an age when religion is entwined into politics, economics, medicine, applied science, and education, it is imperative to engross ourselves in a dialog about the implications of both religion and racism. Moreover, it is crucial to ask ourselves: Who is creating the narrative of deity and of those spaces marked as sacred? How are ethnicities treated and embraced when their theological worldviews differ from that of the dominant canon? Further, how might one approach the subject of race and dominance when often it is heard that “the color of God doesn’t matter?” Religion is a powerful construct. It creates meaning, identity, passion, worldviews, geographical migrations, liturgy, processes, and the ability to deal with the unknown and eschatology. In its worst form, it produces genocide, mass murder, horrendous violence, and death - all in the name of a “God” that often “calls” the religious zealot to that atrocious violence. And so, it is with great need that we approach this subject—especially in a post-9/11 world in which even if one is not from the U.S., they were affected by those events.

Racial relations in the U.S. have been a muddled and turbulent road since the creation of the country. White culture has been upheld as the dominant culture and racial group in the U.S. and has created intricate systems and institutions to reinforce its supremacy—portrayals of deity, religion, and faith being one of those.¹ The Euro-Western captivation of the Christian church, for example, has manipulated symbols of piety, such as the image of Jesus as a blonde, White, blue-eyed, deity that is irrelevant outside of those White contexts, making the religion of Christianity a problematic one for anyone attempting to find a racially and ethnically appropriate deity.² In this sense, for some, religion cannot be redeemed because of centuries of racism. The past is too historically skewed toward Whiteness, and any attempt to reach ‘reconciliation’ will result in the oppressed becoming more oppressed and disenfranchised.³ Further, with a White image of Jesus, one is never able to appreciate fully the message of Jesus, because it will always be tainted with racialized imagery which, for some scholars, distorts the Christology and ‘gospel message’ within.⁴ For scholars such as William Jones, a ‘divine racism’ takes place when an ‘in-group’ and an ‘out-group’ are created. Those who are outside of ‘God’s grace’ are hostile toward God and, in return, God is hostile toward them. In other words, God does not value all persons equally. Further, the out-group suffers more than the in-group and God becomes indifferent toward the suffering of the ‘out-group’ as its members

1 Battle, *The Black Church in America*; God in America; Bennett, *The Shaping of Black America*; Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*; Jay and Forman, *Living Black in White America*; Wells-Barnett, *On Lynchings*.

2 Hempton, *Evangelical Disenchantment*; Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism*.

3 Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*

4 Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*; Cone, *God of the Oppressed*; Jay and Forman, *Living Black in White America*; Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*; Rah, *The Next Evangelicalism*.

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are outside of God's 'will' and they will be made to suffer. Racial and ethnic categorization is also crucial under 'divine racism' as it divides those who are 'blessed' from those who are not. Constructs of a racial deity are conflated under discourses of sin, immorality, and debauchery and this renders into a pathology behaviours and attitudes deemed by the 'in-group' to be sinful, immoral and debauched.⁵

To see this more closely, Traci West writes compellingly that "for Christians of African descent in the United States, certain teachings about Jesus can advance their acceptance of White-supremacist ideas about their own Black humanity."⁶ In other words, the mere notion of having a "White Jesus" clouds, disrupts, and corrupts the theological pursuits by not only Blacks, but all ethnic minorities. West continues with a set of powerful questions:

When missionaries who converted enslaved Blacks in the Americas or colonized Blacks in Africa taught a Christology informed by White dominance—Black inferiority mythology, their evangelism confused truth with lies. How did such Christology rooted in confusion teach anti-Black devaluation of embodied, human worth? Currently, what kinds of theo-ethical understandings of Jesus as Christ might assist Christians in disrupting racialized (and kindred heteropatriarchal) paradigms of human subjugation that continue to exist within Christian-dominated societies? In a contemporary liberationist Christian ethics that foment such anti-racist intervention, the varied permutations of anti-Black racism interwoven for centuries into the Christology initially introduced to Black converts would need to have been discarded—right?⁷

Centuries of seminary training, theological teaching, missions, and a colossal breadth of Sunday (and Saturday) morning sermons have created a Christology which places Whiteness at the top and Blacks near the bottom.⁸ What is even more problematic and troubling is that Blacks and other ethnic minority religious leaders continue the tradition of a White-supremacist Jesus simply because it is "truth" to them and tradition and culture are far more convenient than a search for contextualized Christologies. Howard Thurman argues that

The significance of the religion of Jesus to the people who stand with their backs against the wall has always seemed to me to be crucial. It is one emphasis which has been lacking—except where it has been a part of a very unfortunate corruption of the missionary impulse, which is, in a sense, the very heartbeat of the Christian religion.⁹

Thurman is establishing parallels between the life of Jesus and the experiences of African Americans, or, for that matter, all oppressed peoples who seek out a contextual image of Jesus. William Hart tells us that "as a Jew, Jesus was shaped by his ethnicity, as were Black Americans; furthermore, he was poor and a member of a despised minority group dominated by a great imperial power."¹⁰ Jesus' back was, using Thurman's metaphor, "against the wall" and in the context of his time, was oppressed and disenfranchised.

Tim Wise, noted anti-racist and opponent of White privilege, recalls the first time he brought up the issue of Jesus' ethnicity to an all-White Catholic college. The audience was quick to insist that Jesus' ethnicity was irrelevant, yet could not entertain the notion that Jesus could have been Black.¹¹ Their resistance was upheld by the myth that Jesus' race is insignificant and their failure of imagination and ensuing outright resistance to imagine a Black Jesus reveals just how deeply racial ideology has affected the Christian imagination.¹² Jennifer Harvey, in "What Would Zacchaeus Do?" states that, "Traditional Christianity has committed this sin [dis-acknowledgment and dis-embracing of a Black Jesus] in its invention of the White Jesus."¹³ Those

⁵ Jones, *Is God a White Racist?* 3-6.

⁶ West, "When a White Man-God Is the Truth and the Way for Black Christians," 114.

⁷ Ibid., 15.

⁸ For example, Immanuel Kant writes that, "...humanity is at its greatest perfection in the race of the Whites." Immanuel Kant, "Physical Geography," 64. Kantian ethics is taught in numerous classrooms, including some Christian churches. This type of White-supremacist worldview is in the social, cultural, and pedagogical DNA and creates a Euro-tribal *theos* which is, above all else, perfection and THE form of study; different pursuits are treated as 'others' and marginalized the same. Rah, 78-79.

⁹ Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 7.

¹⁰ Hart, "Jesus, Whiteness, and the Disinherited," 158.

¹¹ Ibid., 156-57.

¹² Wise, *White Like Me*, 54-56.

¹³ Harvey, "What Would Zacchaeus Do?" 90.

mythological notions that Jesus was White, the downplaying of his ethnic background, the impression that he was Euro-centric, and the narrative of his inability to cope with minority groups (even though that is a false narrative for Jesus), have become not only problematical for ethnic-minorities, but for those pursuing religious and spiritual fulfillment.

And so it is with these imperatives that we enter into a special issue of the *Open Theology* journal on religion and racism. This issue contains essays which explore the intersections of gender, class, ethnicity, race, and power and their affiliations with religion. The essays contained here raise serious questions about God, proselytizing, missions, religious violence, and the influence of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in conversation with Kim Chi-Ha. Each of the essays presents new work and holds in tension the critical areas of power, narrative, deity, divinity, and how they connect with racialized constructs of religion.

Lastly, I would like to thank all the reviewers who helped in putting this issue together. Without them, we would not have the fine essays we have now. Also, a very special thank you to Dr. Katarzyna Tempczyk for allowing me to guest edit this issue and for having the vision to construct such an issue. Dr. Tempczyk played a crucial role in the organizing of this volume and her own scholarship adds to the field of religious studies.

I now invite you to take part in the research and explore this subject with intent and critical inquiry.

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