part two

WHITENESS AS THE NORM: FIVE LOCI OF INSIGHTS ON THE BINARY OF LIGHT/DARK AND BLACK/WHITE

chapter one

WHITENESS AS THE NORM: REFLECTIONS ON HOW THIS IS EVIDENCED AND EXPERIENCED IN AMERICA

John Dorhauer

As a white hetero male, this is the hardest thing for me to see. In essence, I move with great ease through a world that is set up to advantage me—and I just don't see the world that way.

As far as getting the impact of privilege, this is, for me, where it has to start.

When I look at the TV or go to the movies as a white man and see news anchors and lead actors who are white, I rarely note the fact that those who look like me are the given.

When I go down the street and look for a barber, it never occurs to me that I know I won't have any trouble finding a white guy there who knows how to cut the hair of another white man.

When I shop at my grocery store, I never stop to think that another white man owns it and will stock the shelves with food he knows I like to eat.

I don't even bother to ask, so it may not occur to me that 96% of news media outlets are owned by white men, and therefore they are going to choose news stories that they know I will care about, told from a perspective that doesn't threaten my worldview.

When I apply for a job in the church, I assume my education and skills are the reasons I am considered for the job—and never does it cross my mind that being white had anything to do with being hired in a denomination that is still well over 90% white.

When I run down the street in the evening, I routinely cross in the middle when traffic is light, never worrying about whether a police officer would stop me; or, if he did, that he would be anything but polite about reminding me that I shouldn't do that. I almost never have to worry about whether or not one of the police that stops me will be white, or if not, will treat me badly because I am white.

When I walk into a church, I never have to ask: "Why doesn't Jesus look like me?" And I don't even consider the fact that Jesus being white is not reflective of his true racial identity as a Middle Eastern Jew. I grew up believing that he could, that he should, be white.

I am unaffected by incarceration rates that see one in three black men arrested before their 30th birthday. It is not I or my children who are impacted by that in a system where most police, attorneys, and judges are going to be white.

Whiteness is part of the air I breathe.

Reflection Questions and Discussion Topics

Over the next week, try and take notice of whiteness around you. Where and when to you see whiteness? If you are white, try to say to yourself, even in some of the more routine aspects of your life, 'this happened to me because I am white.' Be open to discussing insights about what you noticed or experienced as you go through this exercise. For example, when in worship ask yourself "Is that a Hymn we only sing in white churches?"; when in grocery stores ask yourself "are these food products here because they meet the needs of white people?"; when walking down the street watch how people react to you and ask yourself "would that have gone differently if I were not white?" Play with this, and look for opportunities to recognize how whiteness establishes itself every day in very routine ways as the norm.

Stephen G. Ray, Jr.

To be normal is to be unquestionably human. That is to say, the very idea of "the norm," when applied to human beings, has attached to it more than simply presumptions about, dare I say, normalcy. The idea has attached to it the simple assumption that this is another human being with whom we are interacting.

This becomes clear when we notice how the idea of aberration functions to moderate the claims for a robust expression and acceptance of one's, or another's, humanity. The very idea of aberration calls to mind corollary notions like policing or expunging. The aberrant is rarely treated as simply different; it is treated as that which is out of place, with such displacement creating disorder. Whiteness as norm is a useful way to describe the ways that our material world is shaped, so that the mental maps along which we place the variety of human beings who constitute our world place whiteness at the unquestioned center, with other hues at varying distances from it.

Usually, when the idea of whiteness as the norm is raised in social and cultural settings, we have in mind practices and cultural predispositions. For instance, in our racialized church settings, liturgical practices which are deemed white (e.g. hymnody rooted in the classical or folk traditions of Europe) become the basis from which practices rooted in other polyphonies are invited into a space in the worship experience. As generous as the invitation may seem, it is important to note who claims the role of host and who visitor. This dynamic of host/guest is important for this curriculum because it focuses our attention on which bodies and cultural practices "belong," and which are being granted space.

In an ecclesial environment, we get caught up in ideas of hospitality and welcome, which moderate the exclusionary effects of this dynamic. This, however, is not the case in the broader social and residential geographies that we all inhabit. In those spaces, the everyday of our lives, presumptively belonging or not deeply affects the expression and experience of our humanity. It can quite literally mean the difference between life and death. The instances of Black persons killed by either police or vigilantes

because some "good neighbor" thought them out of place are legion. It is just here that we are reminded of not only the lethal consequences of whiteness as the norm, but also the capacity of this presumption to actually create physical spaces that are dangerous to persons who are not white. It is precisely the systems and forces that create this danger whose functioning circumscribes the full exercise of the humanity of brown persons.

> *Because to be normal is to unquestionably be human, whiteness as the norm brings all other human lives into question.*

Whiteness as the norm is necessarily the circumscription of otherwise life-worlds and the diminishing of the lives of their brown inhabitants. Because to be normal is to unquestionably be human, whiteness as the norm brings all other human lives into question.

John Paddock

I love the title of Debby Irving's book, *Waking Up White and Finding Myself in the Story of Race*. This is, in effect, what happened to me, as I described in my spiritual autobiography in Part One. For us white folk to discover that we have race and that we are part of the story of race is to become conscious in a whole new way.

Professor Peggy McIntosh suggests that we whites are so much the norm in America that that we can easily go through our days oblivious to our race, but also to the privileges that are bestowed upon us. She says that we carry an "invisible knapsack" of privilege. Although the knapsack may be invisible to white eyes, the privileges it contains have real consequences.

It has been demonstrated many times that whites find it easier to get credit, education, jobs, and healthcare. If I enter a department store, I am free to roam about with no interactions with staff other than occasional offers to help find whatever I may be looking for. It's quite a different experience for my black children. They are likely to be followed throughout the establishment and to be treated with less hospitality.

We whites can expect to be able to live anywhere that we can afford, be treated with more dignity by law enforcement, be called upon in class more often. In an incredible demonstration of privilege, we can put on a flesh-colored band-aid that's highly likely to come close to matching our skin color. People in positions of authority and power in government, industry, education, technology, sports, entertainment—almost every field of endeavor—are far more likely to be white than to be people of color.

W.E.B. Dubois wrote about the color line in his

classic 1903 work, *The Souls of Black Folk*. On the black side of the line lives disadvantage, and on the white side is advantage. Although more than 100 years have passed since Dubois published his work, and 60 years since the beginning of the Civil Rights movement, the color line is still firmly entrenched. Implicit Bias studies demonstrate that whiteness is so much the norm in mainstream media and culture that even black folk often demonstrate preferences for whites.

We are seeing more barriers to voting being erected for non-whites and re-segregation of our schools in many parts of the land. And as Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice, and far too many other people of color have discovered, the consequences for being outside our culturally defined norm can be lethal.

Da Vita D. McCallister

I had two favorite television shows as a child: the *Dukes of Hazzard* and *Happy Days*. I loved them equally and with full devotion. I watched General Lee flying through the air in Hazzard County and considered Uncle Jesse my protector and friend. As I sat in my basement mesmerized by those images, the reflection I saw was Whiteness as Norm. It didn't occur to me that I would not be welcomed in Hazard County. The image of the Confederate Flag atop the General Lee did not signal that I was unwelcome. Even the name "General Lee" did not resonate as trouble. The Whiteness I viewed on television was ubiquitous. My home, my church, and my community were filled with People of Color, yet white standards, white culture, and whiteness as the norm permeated even those spaces.

The harsh reality that whiteness was not only normative, but privileged above all other characteristics, occurred as I watched *Happy Days*. I had always assumed that there was a place for me in the Cunningham family. They had taken in the Fonz: he was a rebel, much older than their children, and a womanizer, yet they saw the humanity in his loyalty and deep sense of fairness. He was welcomed in their home and considered a member of the extended family.

I watched in horror as the gang traveled to eat and entered a separate diner for a meal. A man of color went to the counter and was refused service. It was the first time I had ever seen a Person of Color on *Happy Days*, and I was hurt by his treatment. The core members of the cast came to his defense, but the impression had been cast in my mind; my humanity as a Person of Color was debatable. There were individuals who would be able to see me as a person, and others who would stop at my complexion. The Cunninghams' home was not a place of safety, and neither was Arnold's, because my very presence would have to be defended. This is *Whiteness as Normative*.

Every trip to the movie theater, to the mall, and to the grocery store reminded me that whiteness was the norm and my presence could, and often would, be viewed as problematic. I remember my mother giving me the same speech each time I entered a store by her side: "Keep your hands in sight and DON'T touch anything." I didn't recognize at the time that she was teaching me how to perform in *White Spaces*. I thought this was simply the polite way to behave in society until I noticed other children had either not been given this speech or were not required to adhere to it. Those children were White.

> *Every trip to the movie theater, to the mall, and to the grocery store reminded me that whiteness was the norm and my presence could, and often would, be viewed as problematic.*

Whiteness as the norm was also evident in my education. I remember when sex education was introduced in my middle school. As students, we were excited to learn the details of the "Birds and the Bees." But the pictures were not at all what we expected: instead of images of men and women in the nude, we saw medical photos of our internal sexual organs. The thrill of being admitted into adult spaces was lessened by this clinical approach.

Shortly after the sex education class concluded, my classmates and I were introduced to *National Geographic*. Our classroom was filled with those magazines whose borders were bright yellow. Inside were photos of naked bodies on display: women's breasts in full view and scantily dressed men with little more than loin cloth as their shield from our peering eyes. I wondered aloud, "Why are we allowed to view these bodies and not allowed to view the others?" These were Brown bodies, and they were available for our voyeuristic gaze.

This is *Whiteness as Norm*. It is more than representing the majority in film, print, television, and media the majority of the time; it is privileging those images—protecting and exalting them above all others.

Traci Blackmon

This section has been particularly difficult for me to write, namely because my understanding of white normalcy is a one-sided analysis of what it feels like to be impacted by whiteness, as opposed to being infected with whiteness. How can I write about the impact of whiteness in a way that might illuminate an often unconscious reality for people who are perceived as white? I have decided to follow the format of Lori Lakin Hutcherson, Editor-in-Chief of *Good Black News*, and share a few life experiences made memorable by the normalcy of whiteness in American culture.

As a young girl, I was a huge fan of Disney movies. However, I noticed that there were no Disney

princesses that looked like me. The same was true of comic book and cartoon characters, and the popular dolls in high demand for Christmas. None of these childhood indulgences offered an opportunity for me to see myself reflected in the superpowers of my youth. **If you grew up with an expectation that images on TV, in books, and at movie theaters would share your racial identity, you have white privilege.**

In high school, I was a soloist in the touring choir. I was the only black in the choir. During a concert at an exclusive country club in the South, all of the service staff came out of the kitchen to hear me sing. They were all black. The audience was all white. I was glad I did not disappoint them. **If you have NEVER felt the burden of "representing your race," you have white privilege.**

If you have NEVER felt the burden of "representing your race," you have white privilege.

My junior year of high school, the area recruitment representative for Harvard visited my school. I attended an elite college prep school in Birmingham, Alabama with a reputation for a high percentage of Ivy League acceptances in every graduating class, so Ivy League recruiters were frequent visitors. The recruiter spoke with our entire class about the necessity for our high school transcript to reflect excellent academic grades and extensive extracurricular activities. I had both. Later, the recruiter approached me to say the previously stated requirements did not apply to me. I only needed a "C" average to be accepted, he said. I did not apply. **If you have NEVER been presumed as intellectually inferior or incapable solely because of the color of your skin, you have white privilege.**

All of my American History classes were centered around the narrative of white people in America. Black History, when offered, was always an elective. **If you can presume that history courses offered in your school will provide a narrative about people who look like you, you have white privilege.**

If this country has NEVER debated the monetary value of all the people who look like you, you have white privilege.

If there have NEVER been laws passed to prevent your full participation in democracy, you have white privilege.

Today at the airport, I was standing in the Global World Traveller line of United Airlines when a white man walked up and proceeded to stand in front of me in line. He informed me he was a premier customer and I was in the wrong line. I was not in the wrong line.

If you have NEVER been categorized based solely on the color of your skin, you have white privilege.

chapter one | whiteness as the norm: reflections on how this is evidenced and experienced in america

The unearned, unrequested, and unwarranted benefits of perceived white skin in America are only one manifestation of the way whiteness has been normalized in our culture. From literature to music to art, whiteness needs no qualifier. Whiteness is assumed unless we are told otherwise. There is no area of my life that is not impacted by the perception that whiteness is normal.

Nowhere is this injustice more pronounced to me than in the preamble to the founding document of this country: *"We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness."*

Reflection Questions and Discussion Topics

1. *Take some time in your personal reflection and in your group conversation to think of some ways that your "norm" defines some others as "abnormal"—making life easier for you and more challenging for people of color.*
2. *Over the next week, try and take notice of whiteness around you. Where and when to you see whiteness? If you are white, try to say to yourself, even in some of the more routine aspects of your life, "This happened to me because I am white." Be open to discussing insights about what you noticed or experienced as you go through this exercise. For example, when in worship ask yourself "Is that a hymn we only sing in white churches?"; when in grocery stores ask yourself "Are these food products here because they meet the needs of white people?"; when walking down the street watch how people react to you and ask yourself "Would that have gone differently if I were not white?" Play with this, and look for opportunities to recognize how whiteness establishes itself every day in very routine ways as the norm.*

chapter two

BINARY: LIGHTNESS AND DARKNESS

John Dorhauer

Metaphors of black/white and light/dark prevail throughout American myth and story, and reveal much about what is valued and what is not.

Even before my vocabulary could catch up to my conscious awareness of things, I knew the difference between what whiteness stood for and what blackness stood for.

If I saw a western, I knew that guy in the white hat was the good guy; the one in black, not so much.

I knew what the Psalmist was saying when she wrote: “cleanse me and I shall be whiter than snow.” (This wasn’t what she was saying, but I didn’t question that when growing up.)

When Robert Frost writes about being one ‘acquainted with the night,’ I could translate night into darkness, and darkness into depression.

When Tommie Smith and John Carlos stood on the podium with their fists upraised at the 1968 Olympic medal ceremony wearing a black glove, I was only seven, but I knew what I was seeing and why it made my dad so angry.

I knew why Disney wanted their hero to be Snow White, and why, when my own children began watching Disney, Aladdin, though Middle Eastern, was white and Jafar, the villain, looked—well, dark.

I knew what it meant for the president to live in the White House.

It made perfect sense to me that churches were almost always painted white.

Before I knew it, I was a child who knew that white was good, black was dirty. That light was positive and dark was scary. No one had to tell me that when I look at dark skin, I should be wary. Metaphor works at a preconscious level—and my entire childhood prepared me for being an adult in a world of white privilege. It wasn’t that I had to make a conscious effort to choose to participate in a racist culture. If left to that, I would have certainly chosen not to.

It was more the case that the culture had so perfected its commitment to whiteness as a metaphor for goodness that I never had to be asked to make a conscious decision to benefit from the privilege I had as a white man.

But this I must now do: unlearn everything I have

been taught about what it means to be white and what it means to be black. Learn and utilize new metaphors, becoming an active agent in the creation of a new world of racial equity. I must give my grandchildren a chance to shape deep understandings at a preconscious level before they fully absorb the teachings of a culture with ongoing commitments to whiteness as the norm.

Stephen G. Ray, Jr.

In a world lit by not much more than a campfire or torch, the night can be wondrous. It can also be exceedingly dangerous, because it presents manifold opportunities for hurt and harm by the red tooth of nature or the bloodied hand of a fellow human. It is good for us to remember that this is the world in which scripture was written. One has but to hearken to the 23rd Psalm for a preeminent example of this reality.

This is a significant reason why our scriptures are shot through with images of the goodness of light and the evil of darkness. Light is a metaphor for safety and the leisure to enjoy the beauty of the world we inhabit; alternatively, darkness is a metaphor for danger and death. This is, perhaps, a contributing factor to heaven being associated with the sky and Sheol with the bowels of the earth. Additionally, scripture was written in a world in which soiled persons and clothing were closely associated with bodily decay—a particular obsession in the Hellenic world—and bodily decay with death. Consequently, "clean" bodies and garments were associated with health and wellbeing. All of which is to say, there are clear reasons behind the vibrant scriptural threads woven around light and dark as metaphors for clean and dirty. What is not so clear is how these categories and their import become attached to persons and communities.

A significant legacy of the cultural and theological rationalizations for chattel slavery has been both the explicit interpretation of Black bodies and the implicit interpretation of white bodies through the aforementioned lens. These interpretations created a continuum definitively locating goodness and health at the white end and badness and decay at the dark, with other-hued bodies placed along the spectrum between.

It is good for us to remember that this is the world in which scripture was written.

Perhaps the most significant operation of this continuum has been its effect on the distribution of social goods within our society. Put plainly, the more closely a person or community reflects the light (white) end of the spectrum, the more likely they are to have access to the best of whatever social goods exist in their context. If we understand social goods to include education, residential preference, financial access, and being the presumptive recipient of legal protection, it becomes quite clear that what we are

dealing with is privilege. Correlatively, unearned disadvantage and lack of access increase the closer a person or community moves to the dark (black) end of the spectrum. It is important for us to recall that, for the most part, neither this privilege nor this disadvantage is earned. Both are consequences of the cultural interpretation of human bodies.
A significant challenge for the Church is then the retrieval of the intent of the religious language of light and dark in a cultural context that has profaned them through their use to rationalize histories and systems of racial oppression. It is an open question whether we can. Can the words "wash me white as snow" ever be sung innocently again?

John Paddock

We have so many metaphors about the lightness and darkness that surround us: metaphors in which light is good and honorable and pure, whereas dark is evil and dishonorable and impure.

I am writing this a few days after Easter. This past Holy Week, I was very conscious of the contrasts painted in the stories. Jesus was betrayed in the garden at night. When he was crucified, the Gospel of Luke says, "It was now about noon, and darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, while the sun's light failed . . . " (Luke 23:44-45). Jesus was buried in a dark tomb. The resurrection was discovered in the morning during the light of day. Young men (angels) in dazzling white proclaimed that Jesus had risen.

I know that neither racism nor the color line existed when the biblical texts were written, but within our cultural context, they feed into the binary of lightness and darkness. We talk about the "Dark Ages" followed by "The Enlightenment."

Years ago, I lived for a time in Scandinavia where during late fall and winter, nighttime lasted for up to 18 hours a day. It is a time of deep depression for many people and suicide rates peak. Here in the U.S., many folk are afflicted with SAD (Seasonal Affective Disorder) when they are not exposed to enough sunlight. And, of course, spring in the northern hemisphere brings more light and growth and new life to the earth.

We speak of "night and day," "white hats and black hats." Brides wear white dresses to represent purity and innocence. "Dark thoughts" are bad thoughts. A quick glance at a thesaurus yields synonyms for dark as dim, shady, shadowy, murky, dusky, and gloomy, whereas light is sprightly, bright, sunny, graceful, nimble, elegant.

Brain science teaches that each time a synapse fires, it reinforces the connection between synapses. Clusters of synapses can form frames that contain thoughts and/or emotions. Our linguistic, historical, and cultural environments create many of these frames that assign good, happy, and joyful feelings to lightness, and bad, fearful, and anxious feelings to darkness. When applied to skin color, these same frames can be activated. When racist language and metaphors are attached, the frames reinforce negative stereotypes.

Reflection Questions and Discussion Topics

In your group, discuss some examples of the light/dark binary in literature, music, television, advertising, and movies. Ask what kinds of things might be done to shift and challenge these frames.

Da Vita D. McCallister

My maternal grandfather was a small-framed man with kind eyes and a huge heart. He and my grandmother were married for over 50 years. His skin was black like a country night unfettered by city lights. It was smooth like deep rich chocolate and tight, yet soft to the touch. My grandfather was born and raised in Florida, and like many People of Color raised in the South, he spent many days and nights in the sun. The richness of the melatonin in his skin allowed him to hold onto those "kisses" from the sun and caused his hue to darken with time and age. As a small child, his color represented strength and power, but my ideas shifted as I entered school.

In school you could and often would be ridiculed for having "dark" skin. I grew up in Maryland and no one had skin as dark as my grandfather in any of my schools. Yet, I heard the teasing of classmates on a daily basis; the binary we lived in wasn't White and Black, it was Light and Dark. As a Person of Color you were viewed more favorably if you had "Light" skin and harshly if you had "Dark" skin. I not only heard taunts hurled toward Children of Color but I am ashamed to admit that I was silent while it happened. Somehow, I didn't think of my grandfather in those moments, I was just happy that I wouldn't have to bear that burden.

I learned early on that the standard of *Whiteness* required for beauty to be equated with lighter skin and this meant that Black skin could not be too Black; caramel was preferred to chocolate and tan over brown. The cost of the Binary of Light to Dark was steep. It reared its ugly head in the safety of my own home. My father was deeply concerned with my complexion. He worried that I might hold onto the "kisses" from the sun way past the summer and into the fall. Perhaps I had inherited my grandfather's abundance of melatonin and I too would darken with too many days spent outside in play. I adored my father and sought to please him often, but his fixation on my hue often frustrated and perplexed me. We were "Black" and there was no way to confuse that point regardless of how much time I spent inside or outside of our home. I did not recognize that as a son of the South, my father was passing on his understanding of Whiteness as norm. He had learned the hard way that darker skinned Black people were treated more harshly and lighter skinned Black people were treated more favorably. This treatment was due to the assumption that the lighter the Black person the larger the influx of *Whiteness* in their gene pool.

I needed a way to push back on the binary of Light and Dark; some small way to make room for all of the beauty I found in the *Blackness* that surrounded me. I turned to my words and began to write prose. My attempts failed to capture my frustration and

they did no justice to the beauty in Blackness that I dreamed to exclaim, but it pointed me in the right direction. I began to search out the prose of other Men and Women of Color. When I heard James Weldon Johnson's "The Creation" I leapt with joy.

> *"And far as the eye of God could see Darkness covered everything, Blacker than a hundred midnights down in a cypress swamp. Then God smiled."*

Johnson declared "And far as the eye of God could see *Darkness* covered everything, Blacker than a hundred midnights down in a cypress swamp. Then God smiled." The idea of God smiling at the Darkness gave me such a sense of pride and joy. My grandfather's skin was blacker than a hundred midnights and it was glorious to behold. Later in Johnson's work he penned these words:

Up from the bed of the river
God scooped the clay;
And by the bank of the river
He kneeled Him down;
And there the great God Almighty
Who lit the sun and fixed it in the sky,
Who flung the stars to the most far corner of the night,
Who rounded the earth in the middle of His hand;
This Great God,
Like a mammy bending over her baby,
Kneeled down in the dust
Toiling over a lump of clay
Till He shaped it in His own image;

The image of God scooping clay from the riverbed reminded me of all of the clay I had seen, the dark lush and moist clay; the deep brown and dry clay; the oozing odd shaded tan clay; each of them hues in my family. Then just in case I had missed the inclusion of my people Johnson invoked a term that had been used as scorn for Women of Color – "Mammy." Yet, in his mouth this term was not a derogatory slur used to belittle Women of Color who cared for and nursed *White* children, but instead an image of the Divine creating humanity. Blackness was no longer the seat of scorn but a joyous celebration of Creation. The Binary of Light and Dark had been broken open in a retelling of creation. Thanks Be to God!

Reflection Questions and Discussion Topics

1. *Watch the video clip of James Weldon Johnson's "The Creation" read by Wintley Phipps on YouTube: https://youtu.be/C-h4_VPXdoY What did you hear as you watched the clip? What did you see?*
2. *Divide a single piece of paper in half with the word "Light" on one side and the word "Dark" on the other. Draw a single vertical line between these two words. Then write all of the terms you associate with the word "Light" on one side of the paper and all of the terms you associate with the word "Dark" on the other. Notice how many of the words include an implicit judgement (good/bad etc.). Are any of the terms associated with "Light" also associated with Whiteness and are any of the terms associated with "Dark" also associated with Blackness?*
3. *Return to the YouTube clip (https://youtu.be/C-h4_VPXdoY) of James Weldon's Johnson's "The Creation" read by Wintley Phipps and this time listen to the clip with your eyes closed. What did you hear as you listened and what did you see as you heard the words?*

chapter three

ICONOGRAPHY: THE INVESTMENT OF WHITENESS IN NARRATING HISTORY

Stephen G. Ray, Jr.

It is perhaps obvious to observe that the scriptural imagination of most Christians past a certain age is shaped and formed by character and historical depictions that are almost exclusively white. Even when people of color appear, it is always as members of the crowd, always having the feel of an homage to ideological commitments to inclusion and not a "natural" depiction of the truth of the matter.

This imagination was formed through the stained glass that surrounded the faithful, and most importantly the Sunday School curricula, whose pictures created the imaginative space into which generations of children would form their own appropriation of "our" story as Christians. Such iconographically formed imaginations go a long way toward explaining why the Christian faith has long been an arch defender of the privileges and prerogatives of white people in this nation.

There is a puzzling dimension to all of this that we do well to note: namely, the historical coincidence of biblical archaeology, the rise of photography, and the university model of theological education during the 18th and 19th centuries. I suggest puzzlement because the confluence of these three cultural events would seem to lead to a profound alteration in our iconography, yet they do not. Biblical archaeology has made it clear that the people in the biblical narratives did not bear very much resemblance to those pictured in our stained glass or Sunday School materials; photography has embedded in our understanding the difference between symbolic images and actual "pictures;" the modern model of theological education has placed at its center a dedication to the actual—the actual history narrated in the Bible, the actual meaning of the text, and most importantly the actually probable truth of the biblical stories. One would think, then, that a church such as ours, thoroughly modern and dedicated to an educated clergy committed to the best contemporary human knowledge, would have an iconography that consistently reflects a biblical narrative peopled by the shades of brown which have historically been visible in the inhabitants of the Holy Lands. Yet . . .

An answer to this puzzlement draws us to the notice of another cultural event emergent during the same period as the preceding. That event was the development of a national economy in the United States largely dependent on the institution of chattel slavery, which occasioned an ecclesial project of making sense of how "good Christian" people could participate in a system so evidently evil. Concisely,

this project focused on the divine vocation of white people as God's agents in the world. It is a short step from here to an iconography that retrojects this theological commitment back into the pages of the biblical text, which is, after all, made up of stories about God's agents in the world living out their divine vocation.

> *Why do we allow our children to be shaped in their faith by an iconography which would surely fail any test of acceptability in classrooms outside of our churches?*

A good question to ask ourselves is this: why do we allow our children to be shaped in their faith by an iconography which would surely fail any test of acceptability in classrooms outside of our churches?

Da Vita D. McCallister

Science Fiction

Saturday mornings in my childhood were filled with three things: gospel music, housecleaning chores and *Star Trek*[6]. My mother would wake us up early to begin the work of the day. The house was cleaned with care each Saturday before we could leave or begin to play. The soundtrack of our work was Gospel Music, old school artists like James Cleveland and Shirley Caesar. The sounds were so rich they perfumed the house and created a cloud of witnesses to our work. The only interruption in this process was *Star Trek*. The moment it came on, no matter the stage in our work, all things came to a halt. My mother watched *Star Trek* every Saturday morning. I sat with her, happy for the break it provided or glad to have it as the final act of my Saturday duties. Captain *James T. Kirk, Lt. Uhura, Scottie, Bones, Spock, Chekov,* and *Sulu*[7] were my playmates and teachers. This host of characters represented the most diverse cast ever assembled in mainstream TV in the late 1960's and early 70's. It was ground-breaking and my mother was drawn to these images. The TV show was based on a premise that the future was a place where the division of *light and dark* would be seen as ridiculous.

The original series poked holes in stereotypes that suggested People of Color could not speak proper English. *Lt. Uhura* served as the Communications officer. As a brown skinned Woman of Color, she offered a stark contrast to other popular Women of Color actresses during the late 60's and early 70's who were *Lighter*-skinned, like Lena Horne. In both her role, Communications officer, and her color, brown-skinned, she shattered stereotypes. She was beautiful, brown and bold. In addition to a Woman of Color,

[6] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Star_Trek ***Star Trek*** is an American science fiction entertainment franchise created by Gene Roddenberry and owned by CBS and Paramount Pictures. It debuted in 1966 and ran for three seasons on NBC. It followed the galactic adventures of James T. Kirk and the crew of the starship Enterprise, an exploration vessel of a 23rd-century interstellar "United Federation of Planets".[3] Robinson, Randall, *The Debt: What America Owes to Blacks*. New York: Plume Books, 2001.

[7] Members of the Star Trek crew on the starship Enterprise.

there was *Sulu*, a Man of Color who honored his Asian ancestry and charted the course for the ship. These characters were going "where no man had gone before[8]" and this was not just a reference to space. It was an indictment of our contemporary inability to travel to a place where there is *Universal Acceptance* of each person's undeniable humanity. The *Starship Enterprise* was a vessel that allowed us to travel to this unfamiliar yet possible place of racial equality.
In the fifteenth episode in the third season entitled: "Let that Be Your Last Battlefield," the crew encountered *Lokai and Bele*. Two survivors of a world destroyed by a war between races. Lokai and Bele are both half black and half white. They were NOT biracial characters, one half of each of their bodies was black and the other half was white. The division of these colors could be seen on their faces. On one the left side of his face was Black and on the other the right side of his face was Black. When the crew encountered *Lokai and Bele*, they did not recognize this distinction. Yet, for *Lokai and Bele* the differences between them were readily apparent and stark. On their home planet, these two races had been at war for centuries after one race had enslaved the other race. (Even as a child I could see the not so subtle jab at the racial caste system constructed in the United States of America.)

While *Lokai and Bele* are on board the *Enterprise*, they are frustrated by the crew's inability to recognize the superior and inferior race as represented by this division of skin color. The violent episodes between *Lokai and Bele* are so severe that the crew returns them to their home planet. When they arrive they discover the devastation that their racialized hate has caused. The entire planet has been destroyed and *Lokai and Bele* are the sole survivors of their species. Rather than use this as an opportunity to reconcile they continue to fight and are removed from the ship. Even after they witness the cost of racial hatred, they continue to fight with each other. That episode provided a powerful lesson for me about the absurdity of White Supremacy and the absolute danger in racial hatred. If left unchecked it could destroy an entire civilization.

As a cultural marker, science fiction projects our shared values and beliefs onto a canvas that allows viewers to examine and reexamine the validity and/or absurdity of long-held traditions and ideas. Science fiction has the ability to demonstrate our human frailties and our greatest attributes. When done with a commitment to inclusivity it can recast our imagination toward God's magnificent Creation, but left unexamined it can manifest our short-sighted biases into the foreseeable future and beyond.

Reflection Questions and Discussion Topics

1. *Consider the images you have consumed in science fiction, including Harry Potter; Lord of the Rings; Star Wars and The Marvel Universe of Super Hero themed films. What has science fiction taught you about Whiteness and People of Color?*
2. *How many Super Hero movies have you watched that included Asian-American; Latina-American; Native American and/or African-American Super Heroes? Of the movies that did, how many of*

[8] Lines from the opening of the TV Series: ***Star Trek***.

those Heroes of Color were the main character in the film?

3. *Create a science fiction character that is smart, analytical, strong, sensitive, courageous and caring. What does the character look like?*

John Paddock

The Doctrine of Discovery

It is a truism that the victors have the privilege of writing history. Some stories are told, taught, and celebrated, while others are suppressed and forgotten. Authors like James Loewen (*Lies My Teacher Told Me*), Randall Robinson (*The Debt: What America Owes to Blacks*), Howard Zinn (*A People's History of the United States: 1492-Present*), and many others have worked to recover some American history that is not taught in our textbooks and classrooms, or to correct other stories that are taught inaccurately.

My junior and senior high school years were spent in Columbus, Ohio, named after our great discoverer. Columbus Day is a federal holiday. American history begins with the "discovery" of the New World. Every school child knows about Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand. *Pinta, Niña,* and *Santa Maria* can still roll off my tongue more than a half-century after I learned about them. Columbus' discovery of America was a triumphant event.

What I was never taught was what Paul Harvey used to call "the rest of the story." Columbus is a primary exemplar of the Doctrine of Discovery.

In 1452, forty years before Columbus' first voyage, Pope Nicholas V issued a papal bull declaring that non-Christian nations were fair game for Christian nations to conquer, exploit, and colonize. Under this Doctrine of Discovery, indigenous peoples were subjected to persecution, enslavement, and even genocide. Pagans were considered less than fully human and had no rights to their own land. The Doctrine has been used by the U.S. Supreme Court to justify sovereignty of Christians over indigenous peoples. As recently as 2005, it was used in *City of Sherrill, NY v. Oneida Nation* to support the taking of native land.

What I was never taught was what Paul Harvey used to call "the rest of the story."

My American history textbooks did not mention that the island of Haiti had an estimated population of up to 8 million Arawak people when Columbus "discovered" it. In 1493, Columbus returned with an armed armada of 1,200 to 1,500 troops to begin a systematic regime of forced labor, rape, murder, and the transportation of Arawak slaves to Europe. By 1555, as detailed in Loewen's book (p 63), the Arawaks had been completely exterminated.

Columbus and his son began the trans-Atlantic slave trade by sending Arawak slaves to Europe. The trade in slaves from West Africa going the other way began

when the labor force was decimated and new workers were required.

My own Episcopal Church and the United Church of Christ have repudiated the Doctrine of Discovery. We have to start telling the truth about our past. The UCC's resolution of witness on the subject can be found online (http://www.doctrineofdiscovery.org/ucc%20gs29-1.pdf).

Possible Action Item

Consider the possibility of replacing Columbus Day in your congregation. Plan instead an Indigenous Peoples' Day or a Native American Day. Use it as an opportunity to teach about white privilege in our history.

Traci Blackmon

Black Barbie

Christmas is always a festive season in our church. In my second year as pastor of Christ The King, one of our members stopped by my study following Christmas worship to offer a holiday greeting. In one hand, she clutched the hand of her six-year-old granddaughter, whom I will call Lauren. In the other hand, she held a Barbie that Lauren had rejected as a gift that morning.

This was not like the Barbies I played with as a little girl. The Barbies of my childhood did not look like me. This Barbie was black. This Barbie was more than a mocha-tinted doll with European features. She was a Nubian princess, black with short nappy hair. This Barbie was Black, and despite her anatomically impossible figure, I loved her instantly.

But Lauren hated her.

For Lauren, this Barbie was too black. And no amount of rave reviews about this Barbie's beauty and uniqueness was enough to even convince Lauren to hold this doll that she called ugly. Of course, it is perfectly fine for little girls to not like dolls. Many do not. But it wasn't dolls that Lauren didn't like, it was blackness.

How do we create counter-narratives of beauty for little black and brown girls in a world that idolizes whiteness as the standard of beauty? We must tell a different story.

My Old Testament professor, Dr. John Bracke, taught me an invaluable lesson. He cautioned me that congregants will pay attention to what I pray about publicly and what I read privately. This will tell the congregation what touches my heart, and that will help them decide whether or not their hearts are safe with me.

I heed that advice and pray broadly. I arrange the books in my study so that controversial and urgent topics are eye level when seated at my desk. On this particular Sunday, when I observed this grandmother's exchange with her granddaughter, I asked her to sell me the Barbie instead. Barbie holds

a prominent spot in my office. And every young person who enters my study sees my black Barbie.

Over the years, many have loved her.
Some have asked to take her home.
But Barbie stays in my study.

Barbie is a reminder that we are fearfully and wonderfully made as the sun-kissed children of God, and beauty is our name.

I was reminded again of the significance of counter-cultural narratives when an eight-year-old Nubian princess black girl child raised her hand to ask me a question after a recent lecture: "What do you love about being Black?"

> *"What do you love about being Black?"*

I told her I love the color of our skin color in all its many tones. I told her I love the texture of our hair whether it is kinky or wavy or straight. I love my broad nose and wide hips and full lips, and I love our rhythm and the music black people create. I love our strength and the way we automatically speak to one another, and I love our traditions and our culture.

She smiled.
Thank God, I know.

John Dorhauer

John Brown

In his landmark book *Lies My Teacher Taught Me,* Smithsonian historian James Loewen dedicates a chapter to what our history books get wrong about John Brown and Abraham Lincoln. We are going to focus now on what white privilege has done to reshape the story of John Brown—a white man and abolitionist who armed slaves and rebelled against white establishment.

The subtitle to a biography of John Brown written by David S. Reynolds reads: "The Man Who Killed Slavery, Sparked the Civil War, and Seeded Civil Rights."

That subtitle references an impact and a presence often left out of whitewashed history book accounts that tend to portray him as mad, crazy, or unstable. From the lens of white privilege, the story of a white man arming black slaves to rebel against white power, white government, and white establishment has to be accounted for so as not to inspire other white children to rebel in similar fashion.

To this end, histories written by whites and for whites have not been kind to John Brown. James Loewen has spent his career studying history and evaluating what those who wrote our children's textbooks have done over time to perpetuate the mythologies of white power, white privilege, and white supremacy. He notes that what they did to John Brown is just one

example of what a retelling of the story through the lens of white privilege looks like.

Looking beyond these textbooks, we can find a very different history told of John Brown. Ralph Waldo Emerson, as a staunch Northern Abolitionist, saw in John Brown an inspiration to the freedom movement. The speech Brown wrote at the close of his trial was noted by Emerson as one of the two greatest speeches, along with Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, in American history.

Look around the room you are in today and ask the group assembled: how many of you can quote a single line from this speech? How many of you have read it, or even heard of it? Unlike the Gettysburg Address, with which we are all familiar, John Brown's stirring speech has been hidden from us.

A copy of Brown's speech can be found online at NationalCenter.org. (http://www.nationalcenter.org/JohnBrown'sSpeech.html)
Take the time to read it aloud. You can also watch a brief video of highlights of the speech performed by David Strathairn on History.com.
(http://www.history.com/topics/john-brown/videos/john-browns-last-speech)

While reading, think about how seeing this speech might affect students' perceptions of a figure portrayed in their textbooks as a madman:

None other than Frederick Douglass, a contemporary of John Brown's and one of the leading Black scholars and liberationists of his generation, wrote of him:

> His zeal in the cause of my race was far greater than mine—it was as the burning sun to my taper light—mine was bounded by time, his stretched away to the boundless shores of eternity. I could live for the slave, but he could die for him.

Likewise, W.E.B. DuBois, a Black scholar of the early 20th century and author of the landmark book on race in America, The Souls of Black Folk, wrote in the opening lines to his biography of John Brown:

> Of all inspiration which America owes to Africa, however; the greatest by far is the score of heroic men [sic] whom the sorrows of these dark children called to unselfish devotion and heroic self-realization: Benezer, Garrison, and Harriet Stowe; Sumner, Douglass and Lincoln—these and others, but above all, John Brown.

Above all, in a list that ends with the name Abraham Lincoln: John Brown.

This short essay is not intended to sing the praises of John Brown. He was a complex character who, over time, has come to be seen through the lens of white privilege as having but a single dimension: lunacy. This essay intends to introduce the reader to more complex renderings of our shared histories and the characters who appear in them. John Brown is used here as an example of what rewriting history to perpetuate an ideology looks like. The hope is that it inspires us to inquire about what new stories must

emerge, both to unlearn what the previous ones have instilled within us, and to open our eyes, ears, and minds to knowing what was always there to be seen: the truth. Such truth cannot be seen when filtered through a lens of privilege that favors one race over another.

Reflection Questions and Discussion Topics

1. *What does the lens of privilege do to change the way we tell a story?*
2. *What stories are being told today that might be told differently when viewed through the lens of privilege?*
3. *If you could explore a story of our shared history through another lens, what would you be most curious to learn something new about? What might be a resource you could draw on to hear that story through a different lens?*

chapter four

THE WHITE JESUS

Stephen G. Ray, Jr.

The recent spate of films drawn from the Christian scriptures, such as *Risen*, raises an important question for this curriculum. The question is simple. Why is it culturally so important that Jesus be white? The question arises because film, particularly as a marketable cultural production, reflects the sensibilities of the target audience. Rarely is it the case that in both subject and character portrayal do films so violate the general sense of possibility and accepted order of things that they become unintelligible.

This is particularly the case when the subject is a central figure for the narration of a community's history, one that guides the construction of its identity. For example, it is unimaginable to most people within our society that film and theater would routinely portray our Founding Fathers as people of color, save as an ironic device of disruption, as in the musical "Hamilton." Why, then, is it more than just imaginable but customary that Jesus be white?

We can trace the migration of the phenomenon from the symbolic portrayals of the pre-modern era, which no one presumed to be anything more than the appropriation of Christ into their context, to the modern era, in which portrayals of Jesus are generally accepted as real. This reality is presumed ambiguous in most aspects, save one. So—while some films and books portray Jesus as regal and others common, some as a wise teacher and others as a rabble-rouser—they all share a common sense about the racial identity of Jesus. As a historical matter, we can trace this modern sensibility back to a faux archeological find, the Letter of Lentulus, which purported to give a contemporaneous description of Jesus:

> His hair is of the colour of the ripe hazel-nut, straight down to the ears, but below the ears wavy and curled, with a bluish and bright reflection, flowing over his shoulders. It is parted in two on the top of the head, after the pattern of the Nazarenes. His brow is smooth and very cheerful with a face without wrinkle or spot, embellished by a slightly reddish complexion.

The import of this document is that it fixes within the popular imagination the idea that Jesus looked more like a European than either his immediate kinsmen or others in the geographic area of his ministry. The importance of this "find" is clear when we recall that this was the historical moment in which race was used as both a sense-making tool for interpreting

human diversity and a rationalizing discourse for the beginnings of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. There was very much at stake in the flesh taken on by the Word being white. Its continuing importance has to do with the social and theological systems and structures built upon that commonsense. Then, as now, the idea of the whiteness of Jesus was more concerned with locating God's providential presence in some in ways that it is not located in others. In the end, white supremacy is the idea that God is ultimately concerned with the people who hold a central place in God's plan: white people.

White supremacy is the idea that God is ultimately concerned with the people who hold a central place in God's plan: white people.

Da Vita D. McCallister

Alfred Street Baptist Church, a 213-year old congregation in Alexandria, Virginia, was the faith community of my childhood and remains the faith community of my family of origin. The pastor of my youth was the Rev. John O. Peterson, Sr. Rev. Peterson had a staff of clergy who supported the ministry and each was seminary-trained. Each Sunday when I entered our Church I was surrounded by erudite, edifying ebony faces. This was and is a Black Baptist Church. Our pastors were educated at a Historically Black Seminary in Richmond, Virginia. They studied Hebrew and Greek, Liberation and Systematic Theology and were versed in Administration and Liturgy. Our choir directors were classically trained and the range of music I heard was diverse and deeply rooted in the African-American tradition. Growing up I knew our old church building like the back of my hand. It was an older building[9] with a basement, hidden stairs and a small sanctuary. I spent time in all of the classrooms and learned the best places to play when I needed to entertain myself as my mother attended Bible Study. Yet, the building that I loved, which was filled with brown bodies, was adorned with images of a *White Jesus*. He was in the stained glass windows on either side of the sanctuary. I walked past his image on most Sunday mornings and recognized his pale skin, brown silky hair, and small frame draped in a white garment and sandaled feet. I never questioned why he was the only white person in our church.

When I graduated from high school I attended Lincoln University just outside of Oxford, Pennsylvania. Founded as Ashmun Institute in 1854 (the named was changed to Lincoln University in 1866 in honor of President Abraham Lincoln), the college was known "colloquially as 'the Black Princeton' due to its Princeton University-educated founder and early faculty; rigorous classical curriculum; ties to the Presbyterian Church; and its similarities in colors and mascots (Princeton's colors: orange and black; Lincoln's colors: orange and blue; Princeton's mascot: the tiger; Lincoln's mascot: the lion.)"[10] My

[9] A new edifice was erected when I was in high school and serves as the primary worship today. The new structure does NOT contain the historic stained-glass windows
[10] Lincoln University Website: http://www.lincoln.edu/about/history

favorite spot on campus was the Mary Dod Brown Memorial Chapel. The deep dark paneled walls, matching hued pews and brick exterior made it a place of comfort and sanctuary. Our Chaplain, Rev. West, was a dark-skinned man with an unassuming voice and the energy to lead young adults. Yet, here in the cradle of Black Community, I did not find a single rendering of a Black Jesus.

When I graduated from Lincoln and began my matriculation at the Interdenominational Theological Center I wondered why those pastors from my youth had never distanced themselves from the White Jesus. I read Liberation Theology, just as they did, I was exposed to the Hebrew Bible, just as they were, and in every setting the *White Jesus* was questioned and interrogated. The likeness I had known throughout my childhood and early adulthood was not consistent with the biblical text's description, nor was it consistent with regard to the geography of his birth or the place of his hiding (Egypt).

Everything I read and studied in Seminary pointed to the probability that Jesus' skin was closer to mine and his hair felt like mine. So why was I denied this image of Jesus? Why did I feel no connection to the images that were hued with sun-kissed skin? Why was the conversation of Black Jesus problematic in my grandmother's home? What had worshipping a *White Jesus* done to my understanding of God and my place in creation? It took years for me to answer these questions. Here is a question I hope you will give serious consideration to: Would placing a photo of anything other than a White Jesus cause a conflict in your church?

Everything I read and studied in Seminary pointed to the probability that Jesus' skin was closer to mine and his hair felt like mine.

Reflection Questions and Discussion Topics

1. Consider the images of Jesus that you have seen throughout your life in Church buildings and sanctuaries. How many of those images were of a non-white Jesus? How did you feel when you saw a non-white Jesus?
2. When you participate in Holy Communion what color juice do you use in the service? Why do you use this color? How would individuals react in your community of faith if you changed the juice in the Communion cup to apple juice? If this would be a problem please explain why?
3. When you participate in Holy Communion what color bread do you use in the service? Why do you use this color bread? If the bread is not rye or pumpernickel, how would changing to either rye or pumpernickel be received in your church? Assume that this change would be for the majority of Communion services.

John Paddock

There is an Episcopal church in my community that is predominately African American. Their worship space was completely inaccessible to folk with

walkers and wheelchairs, and the only way into the Sunday school and fellowship areas in the basement was a stairway. There was neither enough land to build a proper ramp nor enough space within the building to put in an elevator.

The church was located in a poor neighborhood with declining home values and rising crime rates. Many of the parishioners had previously moved to the suburbs and had to drive quite a distance to attend church events. Parking was also limited.

Who does Jesus look like?

When I had a Sunday off from my own parish, I would attend that church whose pastor (a black priest) and I are friends. One of the features of that old building was a giant crucifix that hung over the altar. Nailed to that cross was a very white representation of Jesus. After much soul searching and fundraising, the church acquired land in a suburban area and built a magnificent new building. It has a very large parking lot, a completely accessible building, and plenty of worship, education, fellowship, and office space. The sanctuary is beautiful with all new furniture, altar, pulpit, and organ. It has a state of the art sound system and adjustable lighting.

So you might imagine my surprise the first time I entered the new church to discover the white Jesus crucifix from the old building hanging above the altar. Apparently, it had been purchased by a parishioner in Italy and donated to the parish. They weren't about to dispose of their white Jesus. Every time I go into that sanctuary, I ask myself what it must be like to be black and to have the Savior represented as white.

Does that make God white?

When Christian education materials, church art, stained glass, and other representations of Jesus predominately show Jesus as a white man, what impact might that have? How do black children identify with their savior? How do descendants of slaves feel about being called into service of a white master? How is white privilege reinforced? Who does Jesus look like?

Traci Blackmon

In 2009, I visited the Dutch slave castle El Amin on the Ivory Coast of West Africa. There were many traumatizing moments during that visit, and even now, eight years later, I can close my eyes and remember that place vividly, even down to the thick stench of blood that permeates the dungeon air all these years later.

I was expectedly angered by the cells where Africans who were to be enslaved were held until ships arrived. I was enraged by the portal in the floor of the courtyard surrounded by balconies where African women were roped and lowered into water to be cleaned off before being delivered to whatever hunter desired them for their rape pleasure. I grieved as I stood in the door of no return and wondered whether or not my ancestors passed this way. But

nothing traumatized me more than the pristine chapel erected in the center of the courtyard so that those responsible for the brutality of those days could still gather to worship their god.

And on the wall of that chapel, there is a white Jesus.

For me, white Jesus is a reminder of the dominant culture's insatiable need for supremacy and the toxic roots of racism woven into the fabric of American Christianity.

If my faith demands that I follow Jesus, then Jesus cannot be black. What does it mean that even staunch biblical literalists are resistant to displaying more likely depictions of the Afro-Semitic Palestinian named Jesus in houses of worship?

What does it mean to gather for worship in sanctuaries surrounded by lies etched in stained glass?
What might it mean to actually be confronted with images of Jesus that are not white? Is this incarnation of God somehow less worthy of our worship?

When I took my daughter, Kortni, for a 3rd grade admissions interview at the Lutheran school in our neighborhood, there was a large mural of Jesus with the little children in the foyer. I was impressed to see a black girl child among those surrounding this Jesus. Even in church, all the children depicted as having access to Jesus in this familiar scene are white.

After the interview, the teacher asked Kortni whether she had any additional questions, and Kortni replied, "Just one. What makes you think that Jesus is white?"

> *In Christian churches in Cairo, Jordan, Beirut, Ramallah, and Israel, there is white Jesus.*

The teacher and I exchanged glances, both baffled by the question. What was the impetus for this inquiry?

Kortni explained that she noticed the painting of Jesus and the children on the wall and she wanted to know why Jesus was white. She never mentioned the little black girl included with the children. She wanted to know why Jesus himself was not painted to look like her.

The gift, to a black child, of being nurtured in an environment where blackness is not exclusive, yet blackness is the norm, produces for all children equal self-actualization in the midst of crafted narratives that do not always affirm every being. Such an environment caused Kortni to question something I had long ago stopped noticing.

The teacher responded well by saying to Kortni that we do not have actual photos of Jesus and most artists tend to paint Jesus in their most comfortable image, and many of these artists in America are white.

There are many who embrace this explanation, but I suggest there may be something more.

In the Christian churches of Ghana, there is white Jesus.

In Christian churches in Cairo, Jordan, Beirut, Ramallah, and Israel, there is white Jesus.

Jomo Kenyatta, former prime minister and president of Kenya, is quoted as saying, “When the missionaries came to Africa, they had the Bible and we had the land. They said ‘let us close our eyes and pray.’ When we opened them, we had the Bible, and they had the land.”

I would add something else was left behind: white Jesus. I am not suggesting some conspiracy theory. However, I am suggesting that the soil of this country has been so thoroughly saturated with the fallacy of white supremacy that any depiction of a Savior with black skin creates dissonance.

I am suggesting the need for a white Jesus satiates a hunger for the worship of whiteness.

John Dorhauer

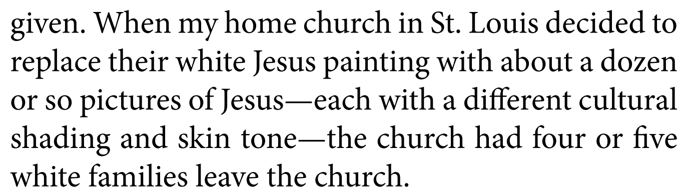
I remember the first time I walked into the Church of the Rock with Fr. Kevin Hederman, a white Catholic priest who was showing me around the streets of North St. Louis. There on the back wall was a large painting of Jesus that took my breath away. It was the first portrayal of Jesus I had seen in my entire life to that point that was not white. Jesus was black.

> *Seeing black Jesus was shocking to me.*

I distinctly remember thinking, but not saying, that there was something very wrong about that. I was 19, maybe 20 years old. No one had ever said to me that Jesus had to be white, but I clearly had developed a sensitivity to that—and with that an expectation that he better be. Seeing black Jesus was shocking to me, I didn’t dare ask, but I really wanted to know why Kevin, this white priest, would put up with such radical behavior as this.

I am not very proud of that moment. Clearly I had absorbed fully what my white normative culture expected me to: that Jesus must be white. I had to re-sensitize myself, reorient myself to a whole different set of assumptions and expectations. Seeing that single portrayal—and it would be years before I would see another one, set me to asking questions about why I reacted the way I did. For the first time in my life, I told myself the truth about Jesus: that he wasn’t white. I knew he wasn’t black, either—but probably an olive-skinned Galilean Jew. Now, though, I had to come face to face with my privilege. I could allow for—no, require—that Jesus be white when I knew he wasn’t in fact white; but I could not tolerate him appearing black in front of me.

My personal faith journey has brought me to a place where I see beauty in all the ways that artists appropriate Jesus to reflect their culture’s expectations. Of that I am proud. But I am aware that the whiteness of Jesus remains for many white members, white churches, and white institutions a



given. When my home church in St. Louis decided to replace their white Jesus painting with about a dozen or so pictures of Jesus—each with a different cultural shading and skin tone—the church had four or five white families leave the church.

One of the lingering, and actually pretty damaging, manifestations of white privilege in the life of the church is the ongoing commitment to portray Jesus as white. There is nothing at all wrong with expressing solidarity with Jesus by making him look like you and your race. There is something very wrong with accepting a status quo which makes that white Jesus your, or anyone else's, only choice.

Reflection Questions and Discussion Topics

1. *Can you remember the first time you saw a portrayal of Jesus that was not white? What was your reaction?*
2. *Take a walk through your church and find every painting or picture of Jesus. What does it reveal to you?*

chapter five

LIGHTNESS AND DARKNESS AS EXPERIENCED IN THE GENEALOGY AND LITURGY OF THE CHURCH

Stephen G. Ray, Jr.

A few years back I had the good fortune of preaching at the wonderful church of a friend. They were a warm and welcoming expression of their Lutheran faith. In fact, during the service an older woman said aloud "God Bless Martin Luther!" The ways of prayer, the approach to the altar, and the liturgy bathed in the language of grace felt quintessentially Lutheran to me. This congregation of West Indian and African immigrants persuaded me that perhaps there was a way that the traditions of the Lutherans might yet be given voice in rhythms familiar to my ear.

Returning the next day to the Lutheran seminary at which I taught, I was struck by how unique my experience had indeed been. For to my Lutheran colleagues this particular congregation was quaint and an interesting appropriation of the Lutheran tradition. What struck me was the term "appropriation" used to describe this congregation. So, theirs was not an authentic expression of Lutheranism, per se, but rather a quaint adoption. I had not heard other congregations described in this way, even where the congregants were largely converts to the tradition. The irony of the situation was that for the most part these West Indian and African immigrants had brought their Lutheranism with them as family traditions of some generations. From this experience I noted a deep assumption which would recur again in my experiences teaching there and which resonated with my own experiences in the United Church of Christ. That assumption was quite plainly that the proper heirs to the Protestant traditions here in America are most authentically those who can trace some visible genealogical heritage to Europe, usually through white embodiment.

While this assumption makes sense in our racialized context, it holds within it two deeply troubling demonstrations of its participation in the corruption of our faith by white supremacy. The first is that on its face it is a denial that faith given to us by scripture is one whose genealogy is pneumatological (the work of the Holy Spirit through Scripture) and not physical. We are all adopted into the family of God. To say otherwise is to make ours a religion of the flesh and not a faith of the Spirit. When this becomes the basis of the faith, the question immediately comes to the fore: whose flesh? Whatever flesh is then identified becomes the most authentically the family of God and bearers of the Church's traditions. It is a short step then to implicitly attribute divinity to that flesh even if there is no such explicit identification made. I would suggest that this implicit dynamic is at work in much of the Church of our day and helps explain the

earlier question: why is it so important to so many that Jesus be white? It is important because without it the whole ecology of genealogical inheritance becomes terminally unstable, as most idolatries are wont to do.

John Paddock

> *The existence of these songs (Negro Spirituals) is in itself a monument to one of the most striking instances on record in which a people forged a weapon of offense and defense out of a psychological shackle. By some amazing but vastly creative spiritual insight the slave undertook the redemption of a religion that the master had profaned in his midst.* [11]

This observation by Howard Thurman is testimony to how far some white Christians had moved from the faith proclaimed by the apostles.

Christianity was often imposed upon the slaves. It was used as a form of social control. Live a life of obedience to your owner, your master, then you will be rewarded with eternal life in heaven. Some of the slaves started paying attention, learned to read the Bible, and studied their new religion. Rejecting the theology of the official plantation preachers, they began to respond to and hold up the messages of liberation for God's oppressed and suffering people. They often had to meet in secret to hear their own slave preachers. The spirituals evolved out of the matrix of tribulation, pain, biblical tales of exodus, and hope for release. "Tell ole Pharaoh, let my people go." The spirituals sometimes contained coded messages of liberty and directions for escape to the north. "Follow the drinking gourd" was a reference to the Big Dipper pointing to the North Star.

So it was, as Howard Thurman suggested, that the slaves saved the Christian religion from the narrow messages of social control and individual salvation in favor of the proclamation of the Good News of freedom for all God's people. Social control was what the Romans were about with crucifixion, which was reserved as the death penalty for slaves and rebels whose bodies were often left to rot. Passers-by were reminded that it didn't pay to disobey the master or rebel against the emperor. The same message was sent with the lynching trees of the Jim Crow era, or the prison system of today. "Slaves or uppity people of color, beware."

Every now and then I'm asked to make sure that our teenagers "are taught morals." Usually that means refrain from sex and honor your father and mother. Rarely does it mean to teach them to love their neighbor, to respect the dignity of every human being, or to work for equity and justice for all.

Reflection Questions and Discussion Topics

What kinds of messages are contained in your parish histories and stories? What do your worship materials, prayers, hymns, special liturgies, and education programs teach about the purpose of the Christian life?

[11] Thurman, Howard J. *Deep River and The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death*. Richmond, Indiana: Friends United Press, 1975, p. 36.

Stephen G. Ray, Jr.

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the earlier question: why is it so important to so many that Jesus be white? It is important because without it, the whole ecology of genealogical inheritance becomes terminally unstable, as most idolatries are wont to do.

Da Vita D. McCallister

I have memorized many scriptures in my life. Several were required in my childhood while others were memorized due to my reoccurring use in sermons: the 23rd Psalm with the imagery of God as Shepherd and the fifth chapter of Matthew commonly referred to as the Beatitudes, to name just a few. One Saturday afternoon I stumbled upon a scripture that caused me to wonder why it had not been included in my required memorizations. I was a high schooler and I had just received a copy of a Non-King James Bible (I must confess that I do not remember the translation). My step-sister Jenny and I began to read the book of Revelations as a dare. The first chapter begins with a vision in which Jesus' physical description is offered. Revelation 1:14-15 states: "The hair on his head was white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters."

We continued to read unfazed by the discrepancy between this text and our experience of the sacrament. We were too interested in the four horsemen and the coming apocalypse to be bothered by a Jesus with hair like wool and feet that were bronze. This text returned to my life in seminary and then I recalled how easy it was for Jenny and me to overlook it. We had been trained to ignore examples in text that pointed to anything other than *Whiteness* in our reading. It was the same as expecting a doctor or attorney to be male if no gender was noted or a nurse to be female, unless specifically stated as otherwise. *Whiteness* was the norm when reading, whether the text was current, historical or futuristic.

How was it that the bread that was broken before me during Holy Communion was a white loaf? Wouldn't pumpernickel or wheat have been more symbolic of this bronzed feet Jesus? The Cup of the New Covenant was not fashioned with white wine and we were not required to drink apple juice as children to celebrate the Eucharist. So why were we committed to replicating the *blood* of Christ but not the *body?* Surely, it was not because we were afraid to witness the breaking of brown bodies; I had been shown that repeatedly without warning.

These were not just questions for my church but for the industry that had evolved around Communion. When I was gifted with my first travel-communion set it included a small roll of white circular wafers. The wafers were uniform in color, size and logo; each was stamped with a tiny cross. They were mass produced and disseminated at Christian bookstores and church supply companies across the globe. How had an entire industry developed based on a historically inaccurate description of the most important person in the Christian faith?

The words of the table echo in my mind: "The Body of Christ broken for you." How difficult would it be to imagine a middle-eastern body broken in order to save a whitened-world? How would it change the way we view brown and black bodies if we had to consume them in our worship? What would the word "remembrance" mean if the symbol of the body of Christ gathered around the table began with a brown body and added white bodies to it? What if *World Communion* day was the only day to witness a *White* Christ in the loaf, how would that shift the thinking in your church?

How difficult would it be to imagine a middle-eastern body broken in order to save a whitened-world?

Reflection Questions and Discussion Topics

1. *How do you think worshipping a Black or Brown Jesus would change your worship experience? Would it change the images in your church; in your Bible; in your Sunday School classroom?*
2. *Do you think worshipping a Black or Brown Jesus would change the style of your worship or your music? Do you think it would resemble other Black and Brown faith traditions around the world?*
3. *Do you think worshipping a Black or Brown Jesus would impact the way that other Black and Brown bodies are viewed around the globe?*

John Dorhauer

My first church was in a town of 250 people.

It was ten miles from a gallon of gas and a loaf of bread.

The town was about 33% black, and the mayor of this town was a black woman.

As well integrated as the town was (quite remarkable for a rural, Midwest farm town), the churches were something quite different.

There were two black churches in town, and two white churches. Two of the four churches were located on top of a hill that sat as the highest point in the county, overlooking the expansive vistas of the surrounding countryside with access to sunrise and sundown views: stunning ones, at that. Two churches were at the bottom of the hill, blocks off the main road that ran through town – hidden from view. Guess which two belonged to the white churches?

One of the first stories I was told was that a few decades earlier, a few black families were invited to attend Zion United Church of Christ. That was my church. Two white men, head ushers in the church, had heard they might be coming and stood outside the front door waiting for them. They refused to let them enter, telling them and their families that everyone would be better off if they just left.

Every week, one of the white farmers who was a

member of my church used to tell me, "You made me want to say 'Amen' again today, John. I swear, one of these times I'm going to actually do that." He never did. Hold that thought.

I took my confirmation class one year from that small town to an inner city black church at a city about an hour away. They were having a youth revival. My youth sat with their jaws dropped when they heard that black youth choir sing. They talked about how amazing that was, and I said, "There's no reason you couldn't sing like that." The pastor had just come by, heard me say that, and said back to me: "Yes there is."

In his book *Deep River: the Negro Spiritual Sings of Life and Death*, Howard Thurman writes: "By some amazing but vastly creative spiritual insight the slave undertook the redemption of a religion that the master had profaned in his midst." The slaves redeemed the Christianity that the slaveholders had profaned.

In its original meaning, something profane was something ordinary, normal – like everything else. What Thurman suggests is that the religion of the white man had been profaned: made common, ordinary. The slave redeemed it. The descendants of the slaves embody that posture before God: a recognition that before God they sing of life and death.

That is what my confirmation class heard. It was what they could not replicate – that posture before God that emanates from the shadows of now centuries of injustice heaped upon you. White religion in America has not replicated that. Staid, comported, dignified. No Amens, no displays of emotion, no outbursts. Decorum being the order of the day, the cultural differences made manifest in worship display the clear divides that privilege engenders.

Reflection Questions and Discussion Topics

1. *For many white communities who wish to integrate, there is an expectation that black families and black members will adapt to a normative white, worship experience. There can follow a deep frustration that efforts to become more diverse fail. Talk about this.*
2. *What do you imagine the pastor meant when he said, "Yes there is," referring to a reason why the white youth could not sing like that?*