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# Reinhold Niebuhr's Christian Nation: The Theology of White Supremacy in Liberal White American Christianity

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REINHOLD NIEBUHR'S CHRISTIAN NATION:  
The Theology of White Supremacy in Liberal White American Christianity

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Ursinus College  
Department of Philosophy & Religious Studies  
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OUR CHRISTIAN NATION  
White Supremacy and the Making of an American Theology

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## ABSTRACT

*Reinhold Niebuhr's Christian Nation* explores the relationships between white supremacy, American nation-building, and Protestantism. The argument operates on two levels. It is firstly concerned with unpacking the development of white supremacy as a cultural theology that evolved alongside the American project from European colonization to the present day, one which infiltrates all aspects of the American project and provides its unjust racial hierarchies with divine justification. To this end, the project then turns to an analysis of the development of American nationalism and discusses the ways in which we have cultivated a heroic American mythology that undergirds both white supremacy and national sovereignty in the United States. A breakdown of the ontological significance of white supremacy for white and non-white Americans is offered, followed by discussion of some of the necessary revolutions in white American church life and social culture needed to bring about real racial justice. The study operates on a second level as a case-study exploration of the life and work of Reinhold Niebuhr, a prominent 20<sup>th</sup> century American Protestant theologian who pushed for social and economic justice initiatives but was criticized by later commentators for being too passive in the fight for racial justice. Through an examination of Niebuhr's writings, the paper seeks to prompt progressive white Christians and social justice advocates alike to take a stronger and more active stance against all forms of racial violence.

## INTRODUCTION

I first encountered the work of Reinhold Niebuhr in the spring of my junior year of college, and I first encountered him, as maybe all brilliant minds should be, in the midst of critique and commentary. I was assigned to read James Cone's *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, in which Cone devotes an entire chapter to a deep critique of Niebuhr's failure to thoroughly address racism and white supremacy in his work. Niebuhr, a white theologian and pastor several decades Cone's senior, had written extensively on the cross and its relationship to politics and social justice in the United States and beyond. Niebuhr spoke and wrote frequently on Christ's crucifixion and the meaning of the cross. The cross was his entry point to almost, if not every attempt he made to relate the moral and ethical imperatives of the Christian faith to the more tragic social and political realities of his age, but in no part of his published work does Niebuhr meaningfully connect the suffering of Jesus on the cross to the social and political reality of structural and interpersonal racism. Cone argued that no honest attempt to understand the significance of Christ in the modern American context could ignore white supremacy. I remember these moments spent reading Cone's assertions on Christ in the American context as revelations. Cone's analysis of Christ in context helped me to see how Christ is fully and incontrovertibly relevant to my life. When Cone drew Niebuhr into his conversation and began to unpack both the brilliance and the profound failures of Niebuhr's theology, I realized I had encountered a mirror held up to my own progressively-minded, "well-intentioned" whiteness and to the whiteness that infiltrates American society and church life and cripples our efforts to answer these questions. I saw in Cone, a black theologian from rural Arkansas, responses to questions that I, a white woman, also wrestled with: What does it mean to be a Christian residing in a deeply unchristian nation? What does it mean to be an American? What are the moral imperatives that arise from knowing who we are, where we've come from, and where we

stand—and why does this country and so many of its citizens do so much work to avoid answering those questions? I turned to Niebuhr’s writings—witnessing in them the deep unkindness and failure of a yearning for justice that is blinded by whiteness-- and saw reflections of myself. In this witnessing I became consumed by the question of what it means to be Christian, white, and liberal in America. It did not take long to see how the false constructions of whiteness and Americanness deeply contradict the Christian message.

This work is framed in an examination of the life and writings of Reinhold Niebuhr, though I love to talk about James Cone, because this work is written to white Christians. As a white woman whose calling to religious life is entirely bound up in the praxis of justice work, I found the story of Reinhold Niebuhr—who would absolutely say the same thing of his own calling to religious life—incidentally compelling and important in its fullness, for all of Niebuhr’s brilliance and his failures and for the lessons that we so-called “well-intentioned” white people could learn from digging into the place of white apathy and blindness to racial injustice from which his shortcomings likely arose.

Niebuhr preached a realistic understanding of the limitations of the human heart. He was a dedicated pragmatist, though I also like to believe he was probably exceptionally kind. He was well aware of our capacity for sinfulness and cruelty towards one another, and in his work he strove to remind us that we must acknowledge these tendencies in our efforts to do God’s work of justice-making and wholeness if we are to do that work well. A white pastor from Detroit, Niebuhr spent his life preaching and teaching on issues of political and socioeconomic justice. He began his ministry in the 1920s as a minister with strong working-class sympathies and a dedication to the pragmatic role of the church in aiding the working poor. His social and theological perspective developed under the shadow of Detroit Ford factories, in which the appalling injustices of modern industrial civilization and the continued concentration of power within small circles of wealthy elites were all too evident. Over the course of his long career as a public intellectual, pastor, and

theologian, he would push the boundaries of mainline Protestantism and popular social gospel theology and propagate what would become known as “Christian realism,” a philosophical perspective that held that the Kingdom of God could never be realized on Earth because of innate human tendencies towards injustice. Having been deeply influenced by the horrors of Hitler and Stalin in the 1930s and 40s, Niebuhr adamantly rejected the popular social gospel theology of his time because it took too optimistic a stance on human perfectibility and innocence and built his push for political and social justice off of a more realistic view of our human propensities for sinfulness and evil behavior. In his writing and ministry, Niebuhr taught that lived justice was the closest approximation of divine love that human society could accomplish, and he pushed for a theology that was, in his thinking, more capable of promoting this justice ethic in mainline Protestantism than the existing social gospel theology. Niebuhr’s insistence on justice-doing as the essential work of the church earned him many supporters in the Civil Rights Movements of the 1960s and in liberal white churches already steeped in the tradition of the social gospel, but he also earned himself some harsh critics.

Though clearly very influenced by Niebuhr’s contributions to their discipline, Cone has criticized Niebuhr for failing to properly address racial injustice particularly as it pertained to lynching, one of the most horrific manifestations of 20<sup>th</sup> century racism. As already mentioned, much of Niebuhr’s work had focused on Jesus’s crucifixion but failed to note the presence of thousands of modern-day crucifixions in his own country. A recent study by researchers working with the Equal Justice Initiative documented 4,075 lynchings of African Americans in twelve southern states between 1877 and 1950.<sup>1</sup> This number does not include the many instances of race-based acts of terror that occurred outside these southern states or the many acts that might have

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<sup>1</sup> "Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror." *Equal Justice Initiative*. N.p., n.d. Web. 10 July 2017. <<https://eji.org/reports/lynching-in-america>>.

gone undocumented, but it does reflect the kind of racialized terror that shaped the nation and environment in which Niebuhr's intellectual and theological development occurred. Lynchings became social affairs that drew white spectators from across county lines. White women and children cut off the ears, toes, and fingers of lynching victims as souvenirs.<sup>2</sup> This horrific violence was meant to reinforce the racial caste system and instill profound terror in black communities, and it was incredibly common, along with other forms of socially condoned racial aggression, during the time in which Niebuhr was developing and publishing his work. Even from his vantage point in Detroit, Niebuhr would have witnessed this kind of racial terror in news media and popular discourse, and his city would have been inundated with black migrants relocating from the south to northern industrial towns and bearing with them their testimony to white supremacist violence. It's clear in his writing that Niebuhr was rhetorically anti-racist—he is obviously sympathetic to the plight of black Americans and he makes nods towards the importance of anti-racism in his work—but it's also clear from how he wrote and how he approached his public life as a white intellectual that his understanding of whiteness and his push for anti-racism only went so far. Here was a man of great complexity, a legend in American theology who advocated for lived justice as the closest approximation of divine love, who was nevertheless reluctant or unable by virtue of his whiteness to imagine the full implications of generations of systematic racial violence on American Christianity. In examining Cone's interrogation of Niebuhr's shortcomings and as I began to read Niebuhr for myself, I became even more aware of the theological significance of white supremacy and aware of how white supremacy has constructed mythology and ritual for itself and woven itself into the white theological imagination, even in the most progressive and well-meaning of white folks.

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<sup>2</sup> John Blake. "America's 'Angriest' Theologian Faces Lynching Tree." *CNN*. Cable News Network, 21 Apr. 2012. Web. 10 July 2017.



Niebuhrian theology for me was of enormous significance because of how helpful it was in putting together an understanding of the development of white supremacy as a theologically sanctioned mechanism with eschatological and cosmological implications. Though Niebuhr spends very little time indeed on the discussion of racial inequality in *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, and this work focuses predominately on that text, he does pay particular attention to other forms of American inequality, and it is a reapplication of some of those key ideas that inform my deconstruction of “holy whiteness,” a term I lifted from Kelly Brown Douglas’ *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* that refers to the idol white people have made of their whiteness—an idol that must be worshipped, protected, and defended. Through the years since Paul the Apostle was made a prisoner of Rome and Augustine began formulating just war theory, a key component of the Christian tradition has become the struggle to reconcile our moral vision of universal love, humility, and justice with the realities of the state and complex community life. Today, and for the last four hundred years, racial violence and white supremacy represent the crux of this struggle in the American context, in that American Christianity has defaulted on the biblical tradition of faith over fear in favor of cooptation. Now, the struggle is to reconcile the Christian moral vision within a nation and culture which claims the guise of Christianity in order to ordain an agenda of oppression.

White supremacy is therefore not limited in scope to purely economic or social motivations and consequences. We cannot simply think of race as an element of our lives, but must instead see the ways in which race in the American context infiltrates every part of individual and social life. To trace citizenship practices back to the origins of the nation reveals a sense of Americanness which is bound to whiteness and Christianity, and an understanding of a person’s very *humanness* as contingent upon their whiteness. The development of whiteness as a marker of Americanness and the development of an American national identity are squarely oriented around a myth of divinely-

ordained exceptionalism, and in exploring this entwined history I began to wonder about what the heritage and culture of white supremacy in the United States meant for the development of the American theological imagination, and what this in turn meant for how broader “secular” American moral imagination conceived of what is good, just, and human. Is this how someone as theologically brilliant and pragmatic as Niebuhr could’ve failed to include a stronger emphasis on racial justice and white supremacy in his own work, when his own work so clearly made room for it? Because white supremacy makes claims about the humanness and moral significance of different groups of human beings, and because it does so with liturgy, mythology, and claims to divinity, we must recognize that white supremacy contains deep theological justifications and operates as its own theological structure, and furthermore we must recognize that even the most justice-oriented white Christian theologians can still be fearfully blinded or immobilized by the often-times unconscious hermeneutic of white supremacy that our whiteness predisposes us to.

As deeply social meaning-making creatures, human beings are driven by a desire to understand ourselves, the other beings we encounter, and the world of mortality and liminality in which we are all situated. When in our attempts to understand the world we butt up against a sense of the divine, we call our new thoughts “theology” and conceive that we are translating the language of the divine for the ear of the mortal, making sense from a great unknowable. “Theology” defined loosely is people talk about God talk. It is not the ultimate divine truth itself, but rather a persona or cultural attempt at translating and interpreting divine truth. There is great power for those who claim to hold the untranslated word of God, and so the work of all theological study must be one not just of teasing out what God means, but also what implications our theologies will have on other people, particularly those that our theology positions as “other.” For white supremacy, the theological other is the nonwhite person of color, a figure how is made other in a diverse and troubling array of ways as we will explore in subsequent chapters. But perhaps more broadly we should say that the other of

the white supremacist theological imagination, an imagination which is so closely bound to all Western systems of domination as we will also explore in later chapters, can be more generally known as the one whose exploitation is sanctioned by the need for white comfort and one whose suffering is absolutely normalized as a fact of social architecture.

Protestant Christianity has had a hegemonic hold on shaping the culture of faith in America and has unduly led us to believe that religion and race are separate entities. This is fallacy. There is always something deeply cosmological and eschatological in a belief system that positions one group in a state of privilege over another. By placing some groups above or beneath others, we create a system of moral significance in which some have more right to life than others, some are purer or better than others, and some, standing on the backs on those beneath them, will be closer to God than others when their day of judgement arrives. Social hierarchy quickly becomes mythical when embedded within religious justification, and will produce a system that replicates hierarchy ad infinitum. As Americans, Christian or not and white or not, we are living within a cultural religious tradition that has allowed massive violence to be perpetrated in its name. How are we to reconcile a Christ who can be used so effectively to viciously hurt and to gloriously heal? This must be one of our essential questions as we attempt to pursue a more wholly Christlike Christianity.

Before continuing I think it's necessary to unpack two of the key assumptions and observations of white supremacy, throughout referred to as "holy whiteness" or simply "whiteness," that I'm working with. The first is a reconceptualization of whiteness that speaks to its significance as social architecture rather than as individual phenotypical marker. Whiteness operates as a hegemonic power apparatus which exists above and throughout American society. It infiltrates all bodies within that society, though it might act upon them in radically different ways depending on the individual body's socially-designated racial category within the social structure. As white folks, we often disengage from conversations about race because we might feel personally attacked, as

though it is our white skin that makes us evil rather than our acceptance of the place of power that skin allows us entry into and our continued adherence to a system of cruelty. I am not talking about individual human bodies when I refer to “the white body.” I am instead referring to something that we created, that evolved into something all-pervasive in the American social system, and became so formally incorporated into our modes of being that other social institutions, like American Christianity itself, took their cues from it or were built upon it. The second assumption addresses the phenotypical marker more specifically. Race as it is acted out is a social construction and something that we are born into, rather than a genetic reality that we are born with. The categorical boundaries of whiteness, as we’ll later explore in another section, have evolved to *accommodate* different groups of people under the white moniker as suited the needs of a growing nation that relied heavily on a founding myth of exceptionalism and chosenness rooted in Anglo-Saxon supremacy, which would develop into whiteness. Cone takes this critique of whiteness as a phenotypical marker even farther and says that “being black in America has very little to do with skin color. To be black means that your heart, your soul, your mind, and your body are where the dispossessed are.”<sup>3</sup> In that vein, to be white means that one is aligned with a power structure that dispossesses.

Whiteness as social construct and whiteness falsely identified with a phenotypical marker are to me essential understandings, because they leave two further lines of questioning open. Firstly, if whiteness is manufactured, who manufactured it in the first place and continues to, and to what purpose? James Baldwin speaks to this in a 1963 television segment titled “The Negro and the American Promise” when he says that “what white people have to do is try to find out in their hearts why it was necessary for them to have a nigger in the first place. Because I am not a nigger. I’m a man. If I’m not the nigger here, and if you invented him, you the white people invented him,

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid. 151.

then you have to find out why. The future of the country depends on it. Whether or not it is able to ask that question.”<sup>4</sup> Suring up a founding myth of exceptionalism is not a substantial enough answer to this question for me. I want to know why “we,” the white people Baldwin speaks to, need that myth in the first place. Secondly, if whiteness is a social condition rather than a biological one, can our whiteness be in some way rejected? How can “we” attempt to remove ourselves from an immoral power apparatus, and what becomes of our bodies when we reject whiteness? How does the whiteness within us respond; how does the whiteness operating outside us react? “We all know,” writes Cone, “that a racist structure will reject and threaten a black man in white skin as quickly as a black man in black skin. It accepts and rewards whites in black skins nearly as well as whites in white skins.”<sup>5</sup> These two questions carry deeply religious overtones when examined theologically. The first becomes a question of why we sin. The second becomes a question of how Americans liberate ourselves from our social sin of racism and seek a collective social salvation.

This work attempts to speak into the heart of these questions and turns at its close to a new task: the development of a new wave of liberation theology specifically targeted at the oppressor, one which acknowledges that whiteness holds all bodies in a state of alienation from God and one which demands that white people actively engage in the process of dismantling theological and social systems that privilege them. If white Americans are to truly love God and love people, drawing into real and abiding communion with creation, then we must strive to understand and exorcise the antichrist of our whiteness. It is only in doing so that we might begin to live in full humanness and kinship with God and all of God’s people. And frankly, it is also in doing so that we begin to live in full communion with ourselves, for whiteness makes it hard for us to be honest with ourselves about

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<sup>4</sup> James Baldwin. "S16: James Baldwin from "The Negro and the American Promise," first broadcast 1963." *PBS*. Public Broadcasting Service, 18 Jan. 2004. Web. 20 July 2017.

<sup>5</sup> James Cone. *Black Theology and Black Power*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1969). 151.

our tendencies to hurt people by habit, and we cannot love that which we cannot be honest with and we do not love that from which we do not encourage a high level of moral integrity and ethical being. We must develop models for explaining the sin of racism to other white people in ways that don't make people of color the exploitative focus of a white man's moral revolution. To say, as so many white churches do, that we white folks must love our black brothers and sisters because "they, too, are God's creation" and we are obligated by the spirit of Christian charity to "help lift them up out of their suffering" is deeply paternalistic and abusive. To recognize the struggle of people of color and then to do little to mitigate the lived reality of that struggle is do just as the first letter of John warns us not to: we must love in action and truth and not simply in word or speech. That approach to loving our siblings of color ignores the fact that whiteness engineered that same suffering and struggle for its own benefit and it shelters us from the understanding that some deep surrender and sacrifice is required of us—we must seek to cast off our whiteness, our membership card entitling us to the comfortable protection of empire-- if we are to live in full communion.

White American Christianity, if it is to ever authentically claim Christlikeness, must instead teach racism as structural sin, understanding as Niebuhr did that we are all inclined to sin collectively when it suits our interests, and in this new teaching we must strive to turn the moral onus inward on individuals and communities in ways that demand an acknowledgement of systematic structures of dispossession and oppression. White Americans must seek to recognize and exorcise whiteness and its associated social and theological fallacies from our ways of knowing and behaving in the world if we are to be fully human, for it is only in striving to be fully human that white people become capable of drawing into authentic human communion and living in the kingdom of God. White people must reject the comfortable yoke of white supremacy and white theology if the American project is to proceed further in its attempts to rid itself of its fundamental hypocrisy and

foundational evil, finally becoming what it has so often claimed to be: a land of the free and a nation for all people.

## Chapter One:

## COLLECTIVE SIN AND RELIGIOUS NATIONALISM

Published in 1932 after only one frenetic summer of writing, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* represented one of Reinhold Niebuhr's most decisive breaks from mainstream mainline social gospel theological thinking towards a new pragmatism. Niebuhr offered a groundbreaking thesis, positing that while individual people are capable of the self-transcendence required for true moral thought and action, social groups are always subject to moral apathy and ethical failure because of the natural compounding of self-oriented egos that occurs when people come together into collectives. Thus, he says, the individual could behavior morally but is made an ineffective and corrupted moral agent when situated within a collective group that is jointly more inclined to sin than the individual. The concept of sin within the Christian dogma meant, to Niebuhr, the ever-present possibility of evil and the very real challenge that human ego and fear presents to actualizing justice. The concept of *original* sin further helps us to understand the consistent limitations of the human condition and our easy disposition to cruelty against one another, particularly when acting as a majority group. While individuals might martyr or messiah themselves in the name of moral good, human groups never willingly subordinate their interests to the interests of others. Instead, they might find creative ways for the group to sanctify and justify its own behaviors. So it is with white supremacy: without monumental inner investigation and pulling away from the group, white psyche and white society will likely never give up the self-worship of white supremacy, regardless of any moral or intellectual arguments made, because whiteness continuously reifies and reasserts itself through those taken up by it.

Written into the very framework of his thesis was a theory ready to be applied to the willingness of white folks, even those claiming to love God and neighbor, to give way to their



whiteness and lean on their position of social power. Niebuhr never fully makes this application, in that he doesn't commit to living it out beyond his writing. Throughout his career, particularly in his later years after leaving his church in Detroit, Niebuhr speaks and writes often on the importance of bettering race relations between Jews, white Christians, and people of color. In the closing pages of *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, Niebuhr lays out a volley of criticism for southern whites, whose disregard for the condition of black people he regards as morally bankrupt and reprehensible. This is great. By all intents and purposes, he does this relatively well, and it is important to have white faith leaders calling out their constituents like that. What Cone takes issue with is Niebuhr's lack of engagement in initiatives that could practically help to address the situations of people of color.

Niebuhr understood humankind as possessing an intense fear of death that provokes a kind of spiritual insatiability, generally either for the comfort and distraction of hedonistic pleasure or imperialistic conquest. The fear of death arises from a self-conscious awareness of the human condition. Self-consciousness

“means the recognition of finiteness within infinity. The mind recognizes the ego as an insignificant point amidst the immensities of the world. In all vital self-consciousness there is a note of protest against this finiteness. It may express itself in religion by the desire to be absorbed in infinitude. On the secular level it expresses itself in man's effort to universalize himself and give his life significance beyond himself. The root of imperialism is therefore in all self-consciousness.”<sup>6</sup>

And therefore, if we abide in self-consciousness alone, we are doomed to fixate on our own self-interest as a means of reconciling with our mortal finitude. It is the individual capacity for self-transcendence, or a transcendence from our individual bodily realities, that provides the grounds for ethical thought and action. Self-transcendence requires a measure of irrationality because it does at

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<sup>6</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr. *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013).42.

times demand that self-interest and self-preservation take a back seat to larger concerns. In all true kindness there is a measure of what might look like foolishness involved.

We compound our aggregate vices when we come together as a group, and thus we will never escape the problem of equitable distribution of resources—of land, of food, and I would say of our very own humanness, which has throughout history been a controlled substance as people in power determine who has the right to dignity and life and who is considered morally significant. And so human beings will always be more predisposed to immoral action in groups than when acting individually. As soon as two or three come together, it becomes acceptable to sublimate group interests over moral prerogatives, even at terrible moral cost. The selfishness of nations, themselves the most absolute of human relations, is proverbial.

“Reason” and that which is considered “reasonable” will always be the subject of personal or group interest and it will always lie in the hands of the powerful. “The man of power, though human impulse may awaken in him, always remains something of a beast of prey”<sup>7</sup> and in the marriage of these two aspects the “men of power” will often “create injustice in [their] attempts to create peace” for themselves and those they are bonded to through familial or national ties.<sup>8</sup> “Every group, as every individual, has expansive desires which are rooted in the instinct of survival and soon extend beyond it. The will-to-live becomes the will-to-power.”<sup>9</sup> Intelligent reason or morality will never be enough to do all the work necessary “to grant for others what we claim for ourselves,” and so all the moral and rational arguments put to white supremacists by antiracists are summarily dismissed.<sup>10</sup> While Niebuhr was focused more on despotic capitalistic industry than on racism (which even still are deeply related), his statement applies: “despotic industry will not give up despotism just because

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid. 12.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. 16.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. 18.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 46-47.

it is told that despotism is anachronistic and counter to American ideology.”<sup>11</sup> Similarly, and as we have seen played out again and again, racism will not give up racism just because it is told that racism is counter to American ideology.

When we further analyze the relationship between power and reason, we also must submit ourselves to the painful realization that those whose rationality is affirmed by their power status will not extend that affirmation of reason to unprivileged classes as a means of continuous subordination through a show of oppressive patriarchal care and/or criminalization.<sup>12</sup> Reason can be denied to people as a means of using it against them. Withholding the affirmation of another’s reason becomes a power-play meant to reinforce the ultimate goodness or rightness of the oppressor and the ultimate lowness of the oppressed. This was and is done constantly to people of color in a variety of ways by white oppressors since the origination of the American project.

To understand the theological structure of whiteness, we must also dig down into the ways in which patriotism and exceptionalism operate as religion. In Niebuhr’s discussion of patriotism, we are told that “it is not only religion which gives a special dignity and worth to the life of the nation to which it belongs. Patriotism is a form of piety” that “transmutes individual unselfishness into national egoism.”<sup>13</sup> American exceptionalism, itself born from whiteness as we’ll discuss in the next section, put into conjunction with patriotism creates the institution of American religious nationalism that was utilized when building national unity and federal cogency in the days following the American Revolution and then again in the post-Civil War reconstruction era.

This religious nationalism is still invoked in attempts to unite the American mind after situations of massive community trauma, like when President George W. Bush on the evening of the September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center said that

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid. xxxiii.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 46-47.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 80.

“a great people has been moved to defend a great nation. Terrorist attacks can shake the foundations of our biggest buildings, but they cannot touch the foundation of America. These acts shatter steel, but they cannot dent the steel of American resolve. America was targeted for attack because we're the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world. And no one will keep that light from shining... This is a day when all Americans from every walk of life unite in our resolve for justice and peace... None of us will ever forget this day, yet we go forward to defend freedom and all that is good and just in our world. Thank you. Good night. And God bless America.”<sup>14</sup>

It has also been utilized during election cycles to unite an electorate, like when then-presidential candidate Mitt Romney said in 2011 in front of a crowd of students at the Citadel that “we [Americans] are exceptional because we are a nation founded on a precious idea that was birthed in the American Revolution, namely, that all men are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights. It is our belief in the universality of these unalienable rights that leads us to our exceptional role on the world stage, that of a great champion of human dignity and human freedom.”<sup>15</sup> Indeed, it’s a little difficult to think of a presidential campaign that hasn’t made use of American exceptionalist and religiously nationalistic rhetoric, with the recent exception of Donald Trump’s 2016 campaign, which ran off a very successful inversion of American exceptionalism. “Make America Great Again” claimed simultaneously that American exceptionalism was once real but is now in current catastrophe, and thus America must be in some way saved and restored to its position of greatness lest we fall further and further down on the global food chain. This played excellently to the anxieties and existing cosmologies of Trump’s key electorates.

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<sup>14</sup> George W. Bush. “Address to the Nation on the September 11 Attacks.” September 2001. The Oval Office, Washington D.C., Presidential Address.

<sup>15</sup> Peter Beinart. “How Trump Wants to Make America Exceptional Again.” *The Atlantic*. Atlantic Media Company, 02 Feb. 2017. Web. 20 July 2017.

Patriotism positions the nation as the supreme soul, the whole which is greater than the sum. The nation would seem then to take the place of God, except that Christian faith in America has become so married to the national identity that God came to be seen as on the side of our nation, and the nation came to be seen as being of God. The patriot is urged to sacrifice themselves to the will of the nation and become one with the infinitude of nationalistic glory. It is a deeply religious undertaking that says a lot about how the individual patriot understands their relationship to the nation. “In the imagination of the simple patriot,” Niebuhr says, “the nation is not a society but the society. Though its values are relative they appear from his naïve perspective to be absolute. The religious instinct for the absolute is no less potent in patriotism than any other religion. The nation is always endowed with a divine aura, which is one reason why religion is so easily captured and tamed by national sentiment.”<sup>16</sup>

Religion and cultural exceptionalism, of any kind, are often employed to provide a level of psychological comfort from deep rooted fears. The national identity, from Niebuhr’s perspective, is a corporate unity which is united more by force and emotions (perhaps most often by fear) than by the rational life of the mind.<sup>17</sup> Fear dominates our collective engagements, rather than rationality or morality, because collective life is a life of compounded ego. It is within this fear and emotion that Americanness and whiteness find their roots. As Niebuhr says, insecurity contains the seed of imperialism. Fear contains the root of exploitation. And besides this, we must also reconcile with this crucial realization: that all reason (rational or moral or both) is the servant of interest. Rational or moral reason, even in the service of public interest, can be good, but it is still nevertheless serving a particular interest. Even perfect democracy, which the United States can hardly claim to practice, is subject to its own hubris. Reason and morality are thus also subject to power dynamics, because

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<sup>16</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr. *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013). 96.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* 88.

those with power, particularly those with religious power, can designate which groups or individuals possess legitimate moral and rational faculties or legitimate interests.

Because of its preponderance of fear, the nation is prone to attacking those that speak against it, critique it, or otherwise go against the ruling social order, as such critique will appear to the emotional mind of the nation to be a threat to national sanctity and unity. “It is... probably inevitable that every society should regard criticism as a proof of a want of loyalty.”<sup>18</sup> And while this tendency to crush criticism is sometimes useful and can promote a common ethos around the values of the nation, it also further places the nation at odds with ethical activity because the nation will become more interested in preserving its idealized image than honestly addressing its shortcomings. We must understand the root of ethical behavior as self-criticism and humility, and the nation, which by nature is unabashedly self-interested, is seldom truly capable of this because there is a measure of self-transcendence that is a prerequisite for self-criticism. We must be able to see a bit beyond ourselves to critique our behavior—in a sense, letting our moral consciousness “leave our body” and take in a broader perspective. Self-transcendence requires a putting-aside of self-interest, which the nation—a collective unity, a oneness made of many individuals, a compounding of egos into one ego—is generally simply incapable of.<sup>19</sup> “For self-criticism of any kind,” Niebuhr reminds us, “is a kind of inner disunity, which the feeble mind of a nation finds difficulty in distinguishing from dangerous forms of inner conflict.”<sup>20</sup>

Even those tendencies toward self-criticism in a nation are usually thwarted by the privileged and/or governing classes. Niebuhr illustrates this in his discussion of the vitriolic anxiety of American political power players in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in response to the spread of socialist thought, which when placed in the American context contains both intense moral idealism

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.* 89.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* 88.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* 88.

and profound critique. This tendency however is absolutely true of the response of whiteness to anti-racist activity. Over the years whiteness has responded to the moral idealism and status-quo critique of racial equality and equity in a number of ways, not limited to these three: (1) by systematically belittling the moral and intellectual integrity of the person of color and the anti-racist; (2) by criminalizing the black body and enacting socially-justified terror reigns over black society (lynching campaigns of the Jim Crow Era, the terroristic activities of the Ku Klux Klan); and (3) by murdering its movement leaders (as was the case for Martin Luther King Jr. in 1968, for Malcom X in 1965, for Medgar Evers in 1963, for Harry and Harriette Moore in 1951, and for Fred Hampton in 1968, each of whom attacked racism from a different lens and with a different arsenal and all of whom were murdered regardless of their tactics because of their unflinching rejection of white supremacy and black inferiority).

A nation built on exceptionalism will promote a rhetorical reality of exceptionalism rather than assess the truth of that claim or dig into what that claim is built on and from whence it originated. It will classify as morally bankrupt all that transgresses against this claim, because such a transgression reads to the mind of the nation as a sin against the national order. In the United States, where Protestantism has been tied to national power since the 1600s, the sin against the national order becomes a sin against God's chosen nation and people, and thus a sin against God.

## Chapter Two:

## EXCEPTIONALISM AS LITURGY, WHITENESS AS CONFIRMATION

But where did this sense of American exceptionalism come from, and what sustains it? How is it related to whiteness? These too are critical questions that must be examined. A sense of exceptionalism, of extraordinariness, has been at the heart of the American story since the early days of its inception when Europeans arrived on this continent, and when probed we find that it is deeply connected to white supremacy and to Christianity. As one scholar says, Americans have “made a liturgy out of their history” since the very beginning.<sup>21</sup> Whiteness, first as a marker of exceptionalism and then as a marker of citizenship, becomes in a way the confirmation and induction of the white body into the fold of Americanness. Blackness, simply in not being whiteness, becomes the locus of exclusion from citizenship and belongingness.

In 1630, while still at sea aboard the flagship *Arabella*, John Winthrop famously stated that the Puritan colony he would found in on the American continent “shall be as a city upon a hill—the eyes of all people are upon us.” These words were immortalized in the founding charter of the Massachusetts Bay Colony. Winthrop, a Puritan minister who believed he and his fellow Puritans were founding the colony as a sanctuary of reform and a model Christian community, takes his language from the Salt and Light parable from the Sermon on the Mount as written in Matthew 4:14, when Jesus says to his followers: “You are the light of the world. A city that is set on a hill cannot be hidden.”

This declaration was made even before Winthrop and his fellows had landed on the North American continent and long before the continent had been united under a new national identity, and it epitomizes the fervent dream of American exceptionalism. American exceptionalism is

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<sup>21</sup>Martin E. Marty. *Righteous Empire: The Protestant Experience in America*. (New York: Dial Press, 1970), 17.



essentially the belief that the United States stands in the forefront of history as a global leader, chosen by providence or destiny to cultivate the ideal social existence and redeem the morality of humankind. It is deeply tied to American patriotism, in that the religious ardor of American patriotism is grounded in the belief that God has divinely ordained the American project and is actively aligned with its advancement as a global leader. Therefore, the patriot, being steadfast in love and sacrifice to their country, is steadfast in love and sacrifice to God.

As discussed in the previous section, this claim to exceptionalism and chosenness has been used time and time again in various attempts to unite national opinion around different agendas, and indeed its durability is perhaps grounded in the malleability of an ideology that claims to be a permanent part of the American condition:

“Exceptionalism does not necessarily prescribe a single course of action. Indeed, it has proven durable because it can vindicate opposing foreign policies: it justified the United States’ political and military separation from the corrupt Old World before World War II, and has lent legitimacy to U.S. interventions thereafter. But whatever the specific policy, the doctrine of exceptionalism has traditionally led Americans to believe that their country is leading the world, whether through the power of its example or the example of its power.”<sup>22</sup>

Niebuhr himself, for all of his writing on patriotism and imperialism that we explored in the previous section, was won over by the narrative of American superiority and Anglo-Saxon supremacy. Among his many pieces on American exceptionalism and global destiny, his 1943 essay titled, “Anglo-Saxon Destiny and Responsibility,” stands out. Niebuhr writes there that “only those who have no sense of the profundities of history could deny that various nations and classes, various social groups and races are at various times placed in such a position that a special measure of the divine mission in history falls on them. In that sense God has chosen us in this fateful period of

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<sup>22</sup> Stephen Wertheim. "Trump and American Exceptionalism." *Foreign Affairs*. N.p., 11 Feb. 2017. Web. 20 July 2017.

world history.”<sup>23</sup> Niebuhr believed wholeheartedly in the ordination of the American project and its ability to curate the world stage and bring about some greater global community, but the notion of American exceptionalism is so deeply tied to the development of whiteness (Niebuhr even acknowledges this in his own way when he titles his piece “Anglo-Saxon Destiny”) that any deep admiration for American exceptionalism relies on a certain blindness or disregard for the historic evil of white supremacy.

To understand the theological implications that whiteness carries, we must understand the implications that whiteness has for American people; we must understand who in fact is American; and we must understand how these Americans came to be so exceptional. This is a complicated story of mythology, nation building, the need for national unity, and markers of citizenship and belongingness to the American project. It is one that cannot be explored fully or with any real thoroughness within the confines of this particular project, but one which bears utmost importance to our understanding of whiteness as a theology. Kelly Brown Douglas, a contemporary theologian trained at Union Theological Seminary (where both Niebuhr and Cone have held faculty positions), offers an essential analysis of whiteness and American exceptionalism in her 2015 book, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God*. She argues that the seeds of this complicated American story, imported from Europe and planted in the early days of our colonial history, “produced a myth of racial superiority that both determined America’s founding and defined its identity. This myth then gave way to America’s grand narrative of exceptionalism.”<sup>24</sup> This narrative is filled with its own sacred language and philosophy, which created a culture that protected and promoted that narrative so as to ensure its continuous reproduction.

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<sup>23</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr. *Love and Justice: Selections from the Shorter Writings of Reinhold Niebuhr*. “Anglo Saxon Destiny and Responsibility.” (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1969). 186-187.

<sup>24</sup> Kelly Brown Douglas. *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015). 4.

The narrative begins with the importing of the myth of Anglo-Saxon supremacy from Europe by the early colonizers. Especially among the English, but diffuse across much of continental Europe as well, there existed a cultural attitude of Anglo-Saxon supremacy which was rooted first in a belief that Anglo-Saxon culture embodied the best of human political and social life. This cultural preference has been traced in part back to the ethnographic work *Germania*, published by the Roman author Tacitus in 98 CE. Tacitus presented an account of Germanic tribal society which was based on others' writings and observations, and which painted that society as exceptional among tribal societies, and indeed even approaching Roman greatness. In her analysis of *Germania*, Douglas offers this synopsis:

“[Tacitus] identifies the tribes as “aboriginal people” “free from all taint of intermarriages.” They are, he says, “a distinct unmixed race, like none but themselves” with “fierce blue eyes, red hair, huge frames.” Tacitus commended these Germans for their bravery and strong moral character...He went on to say that for these Germans “good moral habits” were more effectual than “good laws.” Perhaps what was most significant at least in garnering the attention of political architects for centuries to come, is that Tacitus portrayed these Germans as possessing a peculiar respect for individual rights and an almost “instinctive love for freedom.””<sup>25</sup>

Tacitus went on to describe how this love for freedom was evinced in the governing structures the Germans had in place, which conveyed a high level of public involvement and proto-democracy in which all members were encouraged to participate. Over the years, interpreters would say that “Tacitus was describing the perfect form of government.”<sup>26</sup>

Slowly over time the belief in the perfection of Anglo-Saxon governing and social institutions was transmuted into a belief in the perfection of Anglo-Saxon blood. The belief in the superiority of Anglo-Saxon government became a belief in the superiority of Anglo-Saxon genes. Douglas says that this was perhaps inevitable. This shift “seized upon Tacitus’s characterization of

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<sup>25</sup>Ibid. 5.

<sup>26</sup>Ibid. 5.

the ancient Germans as “free from taint,” and it suggested that the superiority of their institutions was a result of their blood.”<sup>27</sup>

The English, who believed themselves to be the descendants of Tacitus’s Germanic tribes (a belief shared by other Europeans at the time), brought this belief with them to their American colonies. The Protestant Reformation shook the social order throughout Europe, and further fallings out in England rose questions between different religious factions about the purity of the English nation, the purity of the Anglican faith, and the purity of the English people. Puritanism developed with a focus on cutting out the corrupting religious influences of Catholicism and popular Anglicanism and fostering deeper religious and social purity. The English Puritans eventually fled England. Their critique of Anglicanism, which was taken as a critique of the state, would scarcely be tolerated for long by the national power structure. They made their own exodus out of their own Egypt to found their ideal society in a foreign land, taking with them the comfort of the biblical promise of Canaan and a fierce desire to “build a nation that was in keeping with their Anglo-Saxon political heritage, but also to build a religious nation.”<sup>28</sup> And so while there were many other groups coming to the American continent that weren’t necessarily explicitly religiously motivated, a religious desire to found a pure and perfect society for God’s chosen people has always been part of our American historical liturgy and has become part of the mythology we teach each other.

It is interesting and perhaps helpful to note that the American religious imagination of Jesus developed divine imagery of Jesus along a similar trajectory as the American socio-political structure developed qualifications for citizenship. Jesus as white developed out of necessity alongside the evolution of whiteness as a social institution. He has a long and complex history as well that was (and continues to be) influenced by the emerging social and political challenges of American nation

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid. 6

<sup>28</sup> Edward J. Blum and Paul Harvey. *The Color of Christ: The Son of God and the Saga of Race in America*. (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012). 9.

building. From the very beginning, Americans have “remade the Son of God visually time and again into a sacred symbol of their greatest aspirations, deepest terrors, lowest actions, highest expressions, and mightiest strivings of racial power and justice... [Jesus] changed appearances subtly with shifting perceptions of who was considered genuinely white.”<sup>29</sup>

With Jesus as a white man, and whiteness as we shall soon see an expanded version of Anglo-Saxonness, and Anglo-Saxon values understood both as being proto-American and as being fully-realized by American society, “Americans” should be understood to mean the white inheritors of Anglo-Saxon supremacy, or anyone who is taken in by and aligns with the myth of white supremacy. People of color, by this mythology and by various citizenship practices, have always been in some way excluded from full Americanness. A white Jesus who is working for the success of the American project allows white Americans to feel as though white supremacy stretches back thousands of years and stretches forward through sacred space to heaven, where it sits at the right hand of God. Holy whiteness is used to sanctify racial hierarchy, American exceptionalism, and Manifest Destiny, which sits at the root of US imperialistic agendas. It builds a narrative that positions white people as God’s Israelites, chosen people in a chosen land destined to bring about a new world order predicated upon their greatness. Americans used the Christian religious tradition to create and reinforce racial hierarchies. “By spiritualizing social concerns like slavery, land expropriation, tribal removals, segregation or interracial marriage, Americans imbued racial issues with cosmic significance.”<sup>30</sup> White theology reached its culmination when it succeeded in placing whites in a position of chosenness and superiority, and then adjusted its mythology even in the face of losses like the Civil War. Whiteness assumed that white domination over people of color was a

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid. 7.

<sup>30</sup> Kelly Brown Douglas. *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015).

god-given moral right, given either for the promotion of white society as divinely ordained rulers and/or the patriarchal “protection” and stewardship of people of color by white people.

Referring back to Niebuhr, we must remember that people with power get to determine who has legitimate moral and rational faculties, and that rational and moral arguments are always the subject of an interest. In the case of the theology of white supremacy, if white interests lie in the cosmological fallacy that positions the white body in a superhuman/divine state, white bodies will manipulate reason and morality to uphold and reify that eschatology. It will create mythic history to justify its current present situation and its future goals. Whiteness (and power in general) will always find ways to fashion the divine in its likeness, and so we have the fair-skinned, blue-eyed image of Christ that even today holds such a spot of prominence in American religious imagination.

## Chapter Three:

## THE FOUNDING MYTHOLOGY OF WHITE THEOLOGY

As previously mentioned, Americans have long made a liturgy of our history, but we have also made sacred social imagery that permeates the collective American cultural consciousness. We have mythologized ourselves to the detriment of the accuracy of our historical memory, and this mythologizing has been essential to the structural maintenance and promulgation of whiteness as a socio-theological institution.

When the Puritans arrived in Massachusetts, they bore with them no imagery of Jesus. As iconoclastic reformers attempting to purify themselves of Anglican and Catholic influence, they considered attempts to depict the divine as deeply sacrilegious. Instead, they imagined Jesus as light. There are various descriptions of Jesus as being surrounded by a brilliant and blinding light which obscured his features.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, for a long time, the image of a white Jesus was far from the American imagination, arguably because there was no quintessentially “American” identity yet established. Each distinct group of Christians in the colonies imagined Jesus as what they needed him to be. Puritans and Quakers visualized Jesus as light or as the spirit of God within each person, respectively. This was likely a reactionary response to the religious iconography so heavily present in the Catholic and Anglican faiths, from whom Quakers and Puritans had suffered persecution in Europe.<sup>32</sup> Native American Christian converts, many of whom understood the white settlers as bringers of profound terror and trauma, identified with the “redness” of Jesus—his blood and wounds and suffering— which resonated deeply with their own struggle. “Bloodied and beaten, the crucified Christ became for many Native Americans a symbol of their experience. If the sacred bled,

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<sup>31</sup> Edward J. Blum and Paul Harvey. *The Color of Christ: The Son of God and the Saga of Race in America*. (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012). 37.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* 53.

then their bleeding would be meaningful as well.<sup>33</sup> Moravians and other clusters of colonists struggling to eke out a new life for themselves in the early frontier also developed religious imagery that fixated on wounds and suffering, perhaps also to make their struggle against the wilderness meaningful.<sup>34</sup>

People came to the colonies for a wide variety of reasons and carried with them various conceptions of the divine and the nation. Promise of economic possibility, hope for freedom from religious persecution, and forced migration through enslavement, prison sentencing, and indentured servitude brought hundreds of thousands of people to the colonies over the ensuing century. Ethnic representation and difference increased, but whiteness as a racial category had not yet developed—Anglo-Saxons still held a hegemonic position of racial dominance. The early English colonizers saw themselves as a chosen-people in a land chosen for them by God and destined for greatness. It is reasonable to imagine perhaps that reliance on this myth was a coping mechanism for the struggle of the settler life, but reliance on the myth also demanded a close-keeping of ethnic boundaries and a pitting of the dominant hegemonic Anglo-Saxon “race” and those other groups wishing to remain in good standing against incoming minority groups. It is important to note that because the English settlers of power and means were fiercely Protestant (though of various denominations) Anglo-Saxon supremacy was also tied to hegemonic presence of Protestantism and its position of superiority.

Among European colonists, the narrative of chosenness gradually expanded, developed, and became recodified to adapt to the changing demographics and pushes for greater political unity among the colonies and their constituencies. The status quo of ethnic difference in the Americas was changing and would soon become racial difference. As a new nation following the end of the

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid. 66.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. 61.



American Revolution, the United States had to figure out “who was a citizen, who could become a citizen, and what that status conferred.”<sup>35</sup> Markers of citizenship came to heavily revolve around race, and thus those who could be considered fully American and fully worthy of socio-political protection and privilege was codified around racial parameters. In many ways, the parameters of citizenship and census signaled for white society how human they were to regard nonwhites. “For the purposes of compromise, the Constitution counted enslaved individuals as three-fifths of a person. No one knew for sure if that elevated or lessened the status of slaves” but either way, it made it clear that enslaved people, the overwhelming majority of whom were people of color, were not fully human. This translated to a widespread racist viewing of all people of color, free or not, as not fully human. Almost twenty years later, the Naturalization Act of 1790 “declared that any “white” individual who resided in the country for two years could apply for and become a citizen. Compared to European nations of the time, this was not only an easy route to citizenship but also an expansive view of whiteness” that could be appealed to and expanded to include many different types of Europeans, even Catholics and Jews.<sup>36</sup> This dichotomy between the blanket disenfranchisement of people of color and the relative ease that whiteness provided to those attempting to secure citizenship both set up and played upon white American society’s belief in the universal humanness of the white body and the universal non-humanness or subhumanness of the black body.

Anglo-Saxonness was “expanded” to gradually allow other groups into the rank of recognized American citizenry. At first, Anglo-Saxon Protestant supremacy rejected outright the legitimacy of non-Anglo-Saxon claims to Americanness. “A wave of Catholic immigrants—many of whom were poverty-stricken from Ireland—came after 1830 and further muddied the waters of

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid. 79.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. 79.

citizenship and identity. Some “native whites” [quotations mine] likened Irish Catholics to blacks and deemed them to be a racial group outside the parameters of whiteness.”<sup>37</sup> Gradually, European immigrant groups found greater acceptance as they appealed to hegemony on the grounds of that their phenotypical whiteness could and did make them white in the same sense that Anglo-Saxon Englishmen were.<sup>38</sup> People of color could not make a similar appeal and thus the parameters of whiteness would not be expanded to include them. Claiming whiteness and successfully embodying its embedded Anglo-Saxon values became something that immigrants had to do in order to assimilate into the power structure. Non-English European colonists had to in a sense “pass” for Englishmen and people of color were systematically locked into a permanent state of rightlessness and alien-ness, either as slaves to white masters or as freed but non-enfranchised men and women without any real rights to speak of.<sup>39</sup> The parameters of whiteness would continue to evolve through the 1800s and 1900s with each wave of immigrants, each round of immigration law reform, and is even today still evolving, such that we now talk about “white-passing” people of color.

Leading up to and after the Revolutionary War and all throughout the early federalist era, regional ideological differences developed between the north and south. Put incredibly simply, the north developed a fierce evangelical religious nationalism steeped in its Puritan heritage, and the south developed a secularized civil religion based in rational Deism. Though in many ways incredibly similar belief structures, these competing regional ideologies, coupled with regional economic and politic competition, created a lot of tension. Their main point of contention boiled down to who would get to shape the moral and legal architecture of the country in the image of their ideology. In some senses, they both won out in the long run. Both had profound influence over the country and

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid. 79.

<sup>38</sup> Kelly Brown Douglas. *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015). 38.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. 30-32.

did much of the early work of “liturgizing” American history and values. According to Douglas, “while the canopies of [southern] civil religion and [northern] Protestant evangelism were different in terms of their secularism, they both functioned in the same way. They legitimated America’s Anglo-Saxon mission; at the same time they gave sacred validity to the Anglo-Saxon myth. They connected both to God... A myth that declares the “supra-status” of a group of people compels a sense of destiny that is bound to turn deadly” for those not in the supra-human class.<sup>40</sup>

Regional tensions between north and south became even more complicated in the years following the American Revolution, when the end of British rule heralded the opening of the western frontier and settlers began to flood the west in earnest. Frontier territories became a source of contention for the North and South, both of whom wanted control over shaping the national government and both of whom worried about what the legality or illegality of slavery in the new western states would mean for the balance of regional economic and political power.

The work of bringing frontiersmen into the project of nation building became a major priority for eastern Protestants. In addition to anxiety over the fate of slavery, the young country was in many ways geographically amorphous and unsteady. There were two wide-scale and interrelated concerns: first, that frontier communities would align with the Spanish or French still in the area, and the country would lose those citizens and that territory to their competitors on the continent; and second, that frontier faith, nurtured by new denominations like Methodism or Mormonism that arose to serve the particular theological needs of settlers, would be incompatible with the Christianity of the east coast and would not be able to utilize a sense of shared faith to encourage widespread participation in nation building efforts.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid. 14.

This is when the image of Jesus as white began to really take off and sink deep roots into the American cultural psyche. Jesus as white had already developed some favor in the popular imagination. A letter attributed to a fictitious Roman author by the name of Publius Lentulus, who was allegedly writing to a Roman official with a first-hand account of the appearance of Jesus, was circulating in the American academy, seminary, and broader community consciousness and gaining esteem and popularity. This account gave a testimony of Jesus, though a Jew, as a man of complexion and values distinctly in line with the mythology of Anglo-Saxon supremacy. In the letter, Jesus is described as

“a man of medium size;... he has a venerable aspect, and his beholders can both fear and love him. His hair is of the color of the ripe hazel nut, straight down to the ears, but below the ears wavy and curled, with a blueish and bright reflection flowing over his shoulders...His brow is smooth and very cheerful, with a face without a wrinkle or spot, embellished by a slightly ruddy complexion. His nose and mouth are faultless. His beard is abundant, of the color of his hair, not long, but divided at the chin. His aspect is simple and mature, his eyes are changeable and bright. He is terrible in his reprimands, sweet and amiable in his admonitions, cheerful without loss of gravity. He was never known to laugh, but often to weep. His stature is straight, he hands and arms beautiful to behold. His conversation is grave, infrequent, and modest. He is the most beautiful among the children of men.”<sup>41</sup>

Although the letter had been well known in Europe even prior to American colonization, it had been widely and flatly regarded as fraudulent. Even as it gained popularity again in the United States, people had a general sense that it was fake. There was also, however, a deep and powerful yearning for it to be true. An English traveler and author by the name of E.D. Clarke “trekked through the Middle East and found in Nazareth numerous paintings of Christ. Of one painting, he claimed that it “seems to have borrowed his notions for the picture from the spurious *Letter of Publius Lentulus*... which is so interesting, that, while we believe it to be false, we perhaps wish that it

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<sup>41</sup>Edward J. Blum and Paul Harvey. *The Color of Christ: The Son of God and the Saga of Race in America*. (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012). 20-21.

were true.”<sup>42</sup> With the advent of new production, transportation, and communication technologies and the anxiety surrounding the fate of the western frontier, mission societies began popping up in the east, particularly in the north, to bring a more cogent sense of patriotism and Christianity to the west. They bore with them this fraudulent image of Jesus, broadly disseminating it across the country and planting it deep within the American religious imagination.

Of these many missionary societies, the work of the American Bible Society and the American Tract Society are particularly notable. The American Bible Society (ABS) was founded as a non-denominational, nonprofit organization in 1816 in New York City. Its goals to this day were to distribute and translate the Bible and to provide aids and tools for biblical study to as many people as possible, namely those in regions without a strong Christian presence. The American Tract Society was founded about a decade later in 1825, also as a nonprofit and nondenominational (but distinctly evangelical) organization with the express mission of publishing and disseminating Christian literature across the entirety of the young nation. These “tracts” were generally small pamphlets containing information on a wide variety of topics, from recipes and to children’s bible study aids to narrative tales meant to help Christians explore the guidelines of Christian moral life. They were often replete with interpretive guides to the Bible, many hundreds of which were of course still being broadly distributed by the ABS. Over a ten year span alone, the ATS sold 2.4 million books. Over the course of a century, they would distribute over 800 million tracts. In that same period, their teams of missionary agents would visit over 25 million families across the far reaches of the continent, uniting the country in a network of biblical literature that put patriotism and Christianity at the forefront of community building efforts.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid. 82-83.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid. 80.

Many of these pamphlets contained images of a white Jesus that closely matched the Publius Lentulus description, and many of them contained information meant to aid in a theological understanding of slavery. Much of this narrative focused on the importance of patriotism and national unity, the virtues of the American people, and God's blessing over the American project. They also often presented slavery as a positive good, a symbiotic institution which protected the interests of both slave and master. A lot of focus was paid to how forced migration brought Africans out of their heathen and allegedly Christ-less continent and into a civilized, Christian setting where they could come to a knowledge of their savior, repent their sins, and find salvation.<sup>44</sup>

The mass-production and mass-distribution of religious literature from the north to the western frontier spread images of white Jesus and carried a key message: participating in the work of nation-building and the American project was a deeply spiritualized Christian undertaking. Patriotism now became overtly and expressly aligned with Christianity, and the work of the ATA, ABA, and other evangelical mission societies were arguably essential in uniting disparate regions. This push for unity in thought and mission fits readily into Niebuhr's assessment of the moral conscience of a nation.

Jesus began to be represented with white features as whiteness developed as a demographic category to accommodate the waves of various non-English European ethnic groups, and this image was popularized and widely disseminated as part of an attempt to ideologically unite the disparate frontier communities with the original colonies. White Jesus found his origins as whiteness developed and a greater need for widely recognizable markers of belongingness emerged. The American Tract Society, American Bible Association, and other Christian mission societies founded in the northeast began the work of mass-producing images and stories of Jesus for missionaries to carry out from the northeast to the west. Mission work carried out by East coast Christians in

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid. 80-84.

frontier territories was in many ways a program dedicated to colonizing one's own fellow countrymen—uniting everyone under a banner of Christianity that promotes the ethic of nation building and national unity. This work was arguably more successful in uniting the nation than any attempts at bringing people together under a secular banner of nation building. It made significant use of new transportation and mass-production technology.

By the time the Civil War began, citizenship and humanness were firmly attached to whiteness. Efforts were being made by enslaved and free black people and some abolitionists to undermine this connection and to reconcile Jesus to their own desire for freedom, agency, and liberation, but even so these activities were still relegated to the fringes of society. The beginnings of the black theology that would both nurture and develop James Cone got its footing. Black people began associating Jesus and the Christian message with their struggle, seeing him as one of the oppressed who subtly subverts and resists his oppressor. During the Civil War, the Confederacy and the Union both claimed to carry Jesus onto the battlefield with them. Both used Christian nationalistic and religious language to justify their causes. The Union in many senses won the battle over who got to interpret what the message of Jesus meant for racial relations in the United States. Not willing to give up their claim to Jesus or their deeply embedded ties to a racially stratified society, the Confederacy, whose supporters were not just limited to the south, was forced to retool their theological thinking so that they might maintain their notions of white supremacy and chosenness even in the face of their great loss. With marvelous success, and truly indicating the ways in which a religious narrative can be manipulated to suit a cultural contextual need, the Confederacy used the war and the massive traumas and indignities it inflicted upon them to reclaim Jesus from the north and from people of color.

“With a war they considered one of “Yankee aggression,” Confederates looked to Christ as a warrior who experienced mortal pain. They grabbed the Jesus of the slave imagination, grafted it onto their national agenda, and created a new hybrid. Jesus

would be in the south, but not a slave. He would be there as a Confederate captain.”<sup>45</sup>

After the war, former slaveholders fashioned themselves as the oppressed group that suffered at the hand of empirical tyranny (the Union).

“What ultimately occurred was a great reversal and resurrection. By the end of the century, the American Christ who had come to identify with slaves was transformed into a messiah of former slaveholders whose disciples wore white robes, burned crosses, and terrorized people of color.”<sup>46</sup>

In the years following the war, the great hope of the Reconstruction Era was met instead with new covert forms of slavery—from penal slavery, to Jim Crow, to the War on Drugs and mass incarceration. The white body is still the privileged citizen. Obviously the saga of race in American continued to take many evolutionary turns in the decades since the Civil War, but it is this post-war moment that I find to be truly evocative of the ways that white supremacy manipulates history and Christianity, being that this moment was so monumental in its massive trauma for the nation, its apparent victory for slaves and abolitionists, and its decoupling of whiteness from citizenship and forced whiteness to re-strategize. The Reconstruction Era required that whiteness to take on more covert forms of white advocacy and black oppression. These strategies today are even still evolving and still demand intensive analysis through an application of white-theology theory.

On paper, the end of the Civil War and the announcement of the Emancipation Proclamation had decoupled whiteness from citizenship and opened citizenship up to non-white individuals, but the American national identity was deeply shaken by the monumental self-criticism that the war embodied. The country had experienced a massive communal trauma and a forced shift away from what had been a cherished, traditional, profitable, and biblically rooted way of life for southern slaveholders. It was also a shift away from the hegemonic hold of Anglo-Saxon supremacy

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid. 124.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid. 122.



and towards an expansion of whiteness and citizenship that still maintained the normative privileged power dynamic. The national unity, as Niebuhr promises it would, found tactics to subvert the “self-criticism” of civil war and abolition that in many ways simply returned it to its previous state of racial hierarchy and white power. Even after the close of the Civil War and what seemed to be the tremendous moral victory it heralded for the maturation of the national identity, the colonizing forces of whiteness and exceptionalism prevailed. The superficiality of liberal Christianity can sometimes be much the same if we are not careful to mitigate our joyful rhetoric of Christ’s reconciling love and power with actual lived efforts towards reconciliation.

## Chapter Four:

## SOCIAL LIBERATION VERSUS PERSONAL RELATIONSHIP

Despite putting forth so much of the framework from which we can understand the very mechanization of white supremacy and undoubtedly encountering various aspects and effects of the aforementioned history, it remains unclear why Niebuhr did not make racial inequality a bigger component of his writing and ministry. This for me is perhaps of even more profound significance than the framework itself. Cone's biggest critique of Niebuhr lies in that though Niebuhr knew of the cruelties of racism, preached on racism, and aligned himself with the Civil Rights Movement, he did not actually take real *risks* for the sake of anti-racism. He remained cozy with liberal Protestantism even as he called it out for the short-sightedness of the Social Gospel and its sanctioning of corrupt or amoral US domestic and foreign policy. Cone levies a criticism that amounts to demanding why Niebuhr talked the talk but could not walk the walk.

That a man so wholly devoted to making loud and clear the very real reality of our individual and communal predisposal to sin should himself be blind or silent to racism, one of our most nefarious social evils, astounds me. It speaks to our very human tendency to place our own egos and senses of security above our ethical convictions. And it reminds me above all of the power that sin has to make us blind or complacent to its existence. According to Cone, Niebuhr never specifically said anything about lynching and failed more broadly to include any sort of comprehensive discussion of segregation and white supremacy in his work.

Because of Niebuhr's nation-wide acclaim and significance, Cone has stated that Niebuhr's apparent indifference and apathy towards lynching and racism in America encouraged other white theologians to ignore the issue as well.<sup>47</sup> That Niebuhr could fail to seriously address the horror and

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<sup>47</sup> James Cone. *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books 2011).

injustice of racism and its theological implications speaks to what at best seems to be a willful ignorance and at worst a morally bankrupt indifference, both of which still saturate white Protestantism today.

What we must acknowledge is that white supremacy contains within it its own theological groundings, its own hermeneutic, its own deeply-theological conclusions about the way the universe operates and human beings' place in such an arrangement, because white supremacy levels claims about the human-ness of human beings and thus imposes an eschatological structure that places white people closer to God and thus closer to heaven. Failing to understand the deep-rootedness of whiteness within our individual and national conceptions of selfhood and soul has led to an incompetent and incomplete conversation which is incapable of bringing about true transformation.

James Cone's work follows on the heels of Niebuhr and makes plain the theological failure of Niebuhr's omission. The hermeneutic for James Cone's theology is rooted in the historical lived experiences of African Americans. It aggressively avoids any white-washing universalism by explicitly addressing the theological realities and implications of American racism and white supremacy. It is motivated by the theological questions he encountered in his own life and in the tension he saw between the Black Power movement and in the Civil Rights movement.

Like Niebuhr, Cone was something of a theological pragmatist, but he positioned his work squarely against the indifference of white Protestantism, which for too long had ignored the evil of racism in America with the effect of promoting and protecting it. Niebuhr criticized liberal white Protestantism as being too optimistic in their faith that they could build the kingdom of God on earth through their pursuit of perfect social justice. Unlike Social Gospel adherents, Niebuhr was certain that the kingdom of God could never be realized on earth and that heaven must be understood as a sphere entirely separate from earthly existence. Human beings could hope to achieve enough justice by striving to emulate the example of perfect justice that was surely present in

the kingdom of God, but Niebuhr insisted upon this separation because he believed the predisposition of humans towards sin would render them always incapable of perfect justice. This is striking because Niebuhr in turn was criticized himself for failing to actualize his moral and ethical beliefs surrounding racial justice, namely because he himself was guilty of the sin of being too cozy with his prestige within white Protestantism to ever actually offer a radical critique it. Cone does not permit this hypocrisy: that white Christians could claim to work towards a social good while ignoring racism, and that they could not agree with him that we are in fact always engaged in the struggle of the heavenly kingdom on earth, was to him a profound failure and evidence of the power of whiteness to corrupt and coopt Christianity.

To Cone, the theologians he had studied in graduate school had little real power or promise to offer to African American students who were, among other things, struggling to understand what white supremacy meant for theodicy. “What could Karl Barth possibly mean,” wrote Cone, “for black students who had come from the cotton fields of Arkansas, Louisiana and Mississippi, seeking to change the structure of their lives in a society that had defined black as non-being?”<sup>48</sup> Cone saw a deep disconnect between the theological imperatives of Christianity and the lived-Christianity of white Protestant Americans, which was so frequently called upon to justify racial oppression or to provide the grounds for ignoring it. In response, he further developed black theology and made clear the biblical imperative of liberation from oppression:

“By electing Israelite slaves as the people of God and by becoming the Oppressed One in Jesus Christ, the human race is made to understand that God is known where human beings experience humiliation and suffering...Liberation is not an afterthought, but the very essence of divine activity.”<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> James Cone. *God of the Oppressed*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 3.

<sup>49</sup> James Cone. *Black Theology of Liberation*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1969) 63-64.

God is consistent in God's choice to be with the oppressed and the work of liberation is the way that we recognize God's presence in the world. God reveals Godself as the God of those that are oppressed by empirical powers again and again throughout the biblical record. Tales of the Israelites struggling against the empirical powers of Egypt or Babylon make up the bulk of the Old Testament. In the New Testament, we are given a case study of one man's life spent undermining the oppressive empirical power of Rome and organizing the resistance movement. But what of the god of the Oppressor? The god who is everyday across the American continent represented by the white body of Jesus Christ? The god that Cone has called out as the antichrist and that Niebuhr allowed to exist with his silence? White supremacists have called upon a version of Christ which is consistent with our holy American historical liturgy but in no way consistent with the Biblical text, and which again and again has been used to justify horrific violence and indignity perpetrated upon nonwhite bodies. White supremacy coops Christianity and constructs it into a system of justification and subjugation. Cone refers to it as false Christianity and an antichrist.<sup>50</sup> "The cross has been transformed into a harmless, non-offensive ornament that [white] Christians wear around their necks. Rather than reminding us of "the cost of discipleship," it has become a form of "cheap grace," an easy way to salvation that doesn't force us to confront the power of Christ's message and mission."<sup>51</sup> This cross no longer carries its revolutionary significance. The false Christianity of white America does not turn systems of empire and oppression on their head, as the cross insists, because it has become one with those systems. Though it might be a false theology, it is still operating as theology nonetheless, and wrapping our heads around the basics of this theology is imperative to understanding how it works and how we might begin to dismantle it.

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<sup>50</sup> James Cone. *Black Theology and Black Power*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1969) 135.

<sup>51</sup> James Cone. *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011) xiv.

This false American Christianity focuses on personal purity, egoistic spirituality, and empire building rather than on “kingdom building,” or the cultivation of social equity and justice. The imperative of personal purity is a failure of interpretation, a bastardization of the promise of God, and the imperative to grow the American empire is entirely count. It makes salvation easy, because all it requires is a kind of passive *abstinence* from aspects of life deemed unclean by a ruling power, rather than an active *involvement* in aspects of life deemed unjust by our own conscience. There is no risk for the abstainer involved. They are not going against the grain of the empirical structure, and in actuality are providing greater ease for the empirical structure as it attempts to claim greater territory because opting in to a system of purity automatically opts us in to a system of hierarchy.

The significance of Jesus in white theology lies in his purity. The premium on purity forces the Christian mind into an egoistic spiritual experience, one which is most concerned with individualized religious experiences that are completely focused on the self— on its purity and perfection. A concern for purity means that the individual must be more focused on distancing themselves from sin rather than seeing sin as a locus for liberation. Ultimately this emphasis will translate into the development of opposing dichotomous categories of pure versus impure, clean versus unclean, saved versus damned. It is incredibly easy to utilize that categorical structure to the benefit of white supremacy. Over time and through an evolutionary series of calculated choices, purity has come to be symbolized by whiteness. This symbolism has been affirmed by the relationship of whiteness to divinely-ordained American exceptionalism. Pure versus impure readily becomes white versus black in the American system. With purity as premium, whiteness now implies a certain closeness to the divine, while blackness has been made time after time the symbol of sin— of moral and intellectual inferiority. Purity represented by whiteness can easily be utilized wholesale against the black body, which is soon assumed to be unclean, coarse, and immoral by default.

This is perhaps best understood in the ways that the white body reacts to the black body. To the white supremacist society, which already relies so much on fear, people of color become dangerous beings bearing the threat of physical harm and sexual impurity. Black men are not men, but rapists and miscengenators who could defile the body (and thus also the purity) of a white woman in a way that would jeopardize her salvation. Black women are not women, but overtly sexualized solicitors. Black children are not children, but proto-criminals: unruly, uneducable, defiant, prone to fighting, untrustworthy. This is everyday reproduced in our media and in our casual conversation, just as it has been since the early days of lynching, when an accusation of even the remotest impropriety with a white woman (even so slight as bumping in to her on a crowded train platform) could send a black man to his death.<sup>52</sup> These stereotypes rely on the default goodness and moral purity of whiteness to establish the default evilness and uncleanness of blackness, and they assist in the dehumanizing effects of whiteness on the black body by providing a justification for white violence against black bodies.

This dehumanization by whites might range in manner from a basic white fear of the black body to active indignities and condescension to various kinds of theft of black agency to white-justified murder, arguably the most complete theft of personal volition and one that sends a clear message. Kelly Brown Douglas speaks to this in her analysis of the February 2012 murder of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed seventeen-year-old black child who was killed one night by a neighborhood watchman in Florida after the watchman perceived Trayvon to be a threat to his safety. “There is virtually a visceral reaction to the black male presence—from locking car doors to clutching one’s purse on an elevator. . . . After hearing what happened to Trayvon as he was walking home from a store wearing a hoodie and carrying Skittles and ice tea, I was once again reminded of what a dangerous world this is for our sons. And I thought about Trayvon’s mother. She sent her

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid. 1-5.

son on a trip to visit family, only to have him fall victim to the unfounded fears and stereotypes grafted onto black male bodies.”<sup>53</sup>

The real power and significance of Jesus however, lies in the critique of oppressive empirical power that his life and death illustrates. The essence of Jesus’ life and death centers on the themes of liberation and inverted social order flowing throughout the Gospels. When Jesus is proclaimed as “Lord,” this is contextually powerful because it was a political subversion that contained a theological belief. It undermined the authority of Caesar, the Roman emperor, who was also called “Lord.” The Old and New Testaments alike are very much focused on justice and the righting of wrongs, and the New Testament in particular turns a careful eye to social injustices perpetrated against social groups by empirical power. It also contains a theme of stripping bare the false claims of political regimes that claim to be operating as the ultimate source of justice and peace, as Rome under Caesar Augustus was, because political powers will always be subject to their own interest, which lies adjacent to the people that sustain and benefit from their supremacy. Justice and liberation for an oppressed out-group of individuals, those not sustaining or benefiting from the power dynamic, becomes the focus of the Gospels. This is what Cone is talking about when he says that liberation is the very essence of divine activity.

With liberation at the heart of it, the Gospel message returns to that of the very early days of the Church before Constantine, when Christianity was politically and culturally decentralized and unincorporated in hegemonic structures. In matters of purity, Jesus is not so concerned with the personal purity of his followers. He is chiefly concerned about the ethical purity of their motivations and actions. Jesus demands that his followers be devoted to him and to living out his message of self-sacrificial liberation and justice, rather than permitting themselves to be motivated by their own

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<sup>53</sup> Kelly Brown Douglas. *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015). xi.



egoistic and individual concerns. He asks them to transcend themselves, and does so himself throughout the Gospel narratives and then ultimately in his crucifixion and resurrection, a self-transcendence of the most radical degree available to him through God.

Cone applies this imperative of liberation to the American context of white supremacy and racial injustice. He insists throughout his work that if the Church is truly to live up to its great promise, than American Christians must understand that black liberation is Christ's

“central message to twentieth-century [and twenty-first century] America. And unless the empirical denominational church makes a determined effort to recapture the man Jesus through a total identification with the poor as expressed in Black Power, that church will become exactly what Christ is not.”<sup>54</sup>

Black Power for Cone was defined as “complete emancipation of black people from white oppression by whatever means black people deem necessary...Black power means black freedom, black self-determination, wherein black people no longer view themselves as being without dignity but as men, human beings with the ability to carve out their own destiny.”<sup>55</sup>

For the Christian faith to stay rooted in the teachings of Jesus, it cannot continue to be cozy with social, political, and economic power structures. It must instead “make a decisive break with the structure of this society by launching a vehement attack on the evils of racism in all forms. It must become *prophetic*, demanding a radical change in the interlocking structures of this society.”<sup>56</sup> For modern Christianity to be the faith of Jesus, rather than a coopted power tool of a contemporary Caesar, American Christians must give up the false faith of white superiority, decouple their religious traditions and structures from those of power and privilege, and fight those very systems with which they were once aligned.

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<sup>54</sup> James Cone. *Black Theology and Black Power*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1969) 2.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.* 6.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.* 2.



Chapter Five:  
THE ASSUMED DIVINITY OF WHITENESS

Cone writes that whiteness makes the black body a non-being, an entity relegated to the sub-human realm of moral consideration.<sup>57</sup> The mythology of American exceptionalism supports this and reifies it. By positioning the white body as exceptional, aligned with God, and superior to the person of color, whiteness makes itself sacred. That Jesus has come to be imagined as a white man, sometimes even with blue eyes or blond hair, speaks to the pervasiveness of white theology and bears the promise of “a white past, a white present, and a future of white glory.”<sup>58</sup> This is the point at which whiteness becomes the object of divine preference. Through the installation of mythological hierarchy, phenotypical whiteness became holy whiteness, and holy whiteness became an indication of divine preference and predestination. Challenges to the supremacy of whiteness become in many ways challenges to what white people seem to have been treating as a ticket to God’s inner circle, an assurance of their standing as individuals before the infinitude. Placing the black body beneath theirs in the divine hierarchy provides a modicum of subconscious comfort to white people that additionally makes convincing people to give up their racist beliefs a challenging task.

White supremacy necessarily alienates the black body from its humanness through systemic oppression, indignity, and denial of agency. Lynching, segregation, and the evolutions of slavery (namely, Jim Crow and mass incarceration) have been utilized by white communities to violently reinforce the inferiority and powerlessness of people of color.<sup>59</sup> This alienation and denial has been relatively well explored through the lens of black liberation theology, but there is an important

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid. 116-134.

<sup>58</sup> Edward J. Blum and Paul Harvey. *The Color of Christ: The Son of God and the Saga of Race in America*. (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2012).16.

<sup>59</sup> James Cone. *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011). 7.

inverse to consider here that helps to explain why white people have clung to whiteness even after the moral bankruptcy of racial hierarchy has been made plainly clear. If whiteness alienates the black body from its humanness, what is whiteness doing to the white body?

By its exclusion of people of color from humanness, white supremacy privileges the white body by promoting the stance that whiteness predisposes people to being morally and rationally better than nonwhites, and that whiteness *is* humanness, or that the white body is in fact the *most* human body or the *only* human body. The “average” or “default” American is thus conceptualized even in modernity as a white middle-class to upper-middle-class man, who bears all the original indicators of citizenship from the post-Revolutionary War era. Remember, it is not insignificant that this image has also become the default image of Jesus as well. These beliefs, conscious or not, have developed with the American project as social and legal attitudes surrounding citizenship and belongingness have evolved. They also seems to coincide with a surface understanding of racism that understands racial oppression as motivated only by economic forces or the basic human tendency towards prejudice.

I do not believe that this is a thorough enough interpretation of what white supremacy does to the white body and white consciousness though. It is not enough to say that white supremacy makes the white body the default manifestation of humanness, though I think that this is likely the deepest level of awareness of how whiteness is operating on them that most white people could identify. The apparatus of whiteness comes to carry profound significance because it implies that white people are directly affiliated with God, and so whiteness ceases to be a phenotypical marker and is transformed into holy whiteness, an indicator of closeness to God and association with Christ. Whiteness placed white bodies as lords over black bodies, capable of giving and taking autonomy and drawing the lines around what constituted humanity. In doing so, white supremacy gave the white body tasks that belong to God and affirmed its own ownership of rationality and

moral decision making by making the black body one which was morally degenerate and incapable of higher thinking.

So in truth it is not only people of color who are alienated from their humanness by the apparatus of whiteness. American white supremacy by necessity alienates all people within its structure from their humanness by delineating some as subhuman and others as superhuman. When whiteness places some people on a superhuman level, it actually places white people in a God-like state, a state which manifests itself in a belief that white people are specifically chosen by God and destined for greatness. White supremacy creates a social reality in which the humanity of one group is denied by a ruling class that has fashioned itself into a god-like being with powers that do not and should not belong within human practice. Simultaneously, it affirms that the white body is chosen and linked to a divine destiny, thus placing upon the white body a theological and psychological imperative for racial hierarchy that makes shaking off the hold of white supremacy incredibly difficult. Who would want to give up something that seems by all accounts to indicate God's preference for you? Who would want to give up an assurance of divine destiny, of heaven, of something beyond our own mortality?

Thus we must recognize that just as the apparatus of whiteness infiltrates every body within the system, white supremacy also holds *everyone* in a state of alienation as a captive to its great untruth. All bodies trapped within the racist mechanism live in a state of estrangement, though this state undeniably manifests differently on different bodies. All bodies require liberation, and must participate in their own liberation and the greater liberation of the whole. The very mechanism which whites used for centuries to enslave their fellow human beings has in fact enslaved them in a system that separates the white supremacist from the realization of their own moral self and the self-transcendence required in order to live into the fullness of that moral self in an immoral society. Transcending whiteness establishes the basic paradigmatic parameters for living a life in unification

with what some might call the will of God and what others might call our most loving and authentically human self. For white people to give up the cruel eschatological comfort of white supremacy, something must replace it.

Niebuhr says that the root of imperialism lies in our self-conscious anxiety, that all insecurity contains the root of colonialism,<sup>60</sup> and from this we can understand a little more of the deep uncertainty and distress that built our nation and sustains the horrifically unjust paradigms that we accept as the normative status quo. The profundity of the major tenets of the Christian faith lies in that they provide a freedom from our mortal fears by granting us an assurance of the overwhelming meaningfulness of a life lived for the will of God, and they remind us that we abide together in an immortal Eucharistic connectedness that proclaims loudly and boldly that suffering, struggle, injustice, and death do not have the last word. What is at stake for the white supremacist that persists in their holy whiteness is their very *humanness*, and thus their very *salvation*.

Whiteness imposes an antichristic will upon the white body that will reproduce itself in perpetuity unless it is consciously rejected, again and again, even as it works through other white bodies to reassert itself. Obeying the rule of God becomes impossible while a human body persists in being a white body. White supremacy forces a human body and human mind to make a false idol out of whiteness, one which sanctifies itself by donning the symbolism and rhetoric of Jesus but never making good on Jesus' promise and power. The god that we worship when we allow racial injustice to persist within ourselves and our communities cannot be the god of the Biblical tradition. God is consistent in God's choice to show up, support, love, chose, and *make chosen* the oppressed. In the glorification of whiteness and the reification of whiteness as the locus of the moral and divine, we are in fact worshipping an antichrist fashioned off our own image, one that we lean on

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<sup>60</sup>Reinhold Niebuhr. *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013). 42.

for the psychological support it offers. And in claiming to be Christians while living in a wholly unchristian way, adherents to white supremacy take the Lord's name in vain in perhaps the most sacrilegious of ways.

Our nation, which holds on to an idea of itself as divinely chosen and selected out for global and historical greatness and is so despicably comforted by that idea, is in actuality a Christian nation only in the sense that we were told in the scripture that the antichrist will come claiming to be that which it cannot be. This great evil that lives within, around, and above us beguiles our senses and demands that we worship the fear that it creates to sustain itself instead of the God that seeks to overrule that fear. It wreaks massive injustice upon the human family through *human hands* that desperately want an easier way out of the hard work of living. If people can be God's hands and feet on earth, then surely we can become the hands and feet of the evil our own fear creates.

## Chapter Six:

QUESTIONS AND REFLECTIONS  
ON THE POSSIBILITIES OF A “GOOD EGYPTIAN”

Niebuhr rejected the notion that we were living the Kingdom of God out on Earth, a notion which Cone considered essential to making relevant the Christian message in our age. The Kingdom, according to Niebuhr, could only be accomplished with God in Heaven because human tendency towards sin was too great and too all-pervasive that any notion of earthly kingdom building was impractical at best. This gets his theology into some trouble, because it allows him to never have to fully interrogate the relationship between his social location and the biblical narrative. If the Christian message is relevant at all, it is so in our attempts to live it in our modern day. I often cycle back to a deeply disturbing question: If black America is the modern day people of Israel, then what is white Christian America, and can white Christian America live well within that identity? If so, how? These questions are most disturbing not because it is clear that white America has inherited the role of the Biblical captors and slave-drivers— the Egyptians, the Babylonians, the Romans. This is indeed quite clear if we attempt to overlay these stories on our contemporary experience and seek out modern parallels that help us place ourselves in the Biblical tradition. I do not believe it can be refuted. James Cone puts this claim out quite straightforwardly in *Black Theology and Black Power*, saying that “[t]o be Christian is to be one of those whom God has chosen. God has chosen black people!”<sup>61</sup> For Cone, blackness and the state of being oppressed by the exploitative and colonizing power of empire are closely, and perhaps even synonymously, related. Cone believed, as we’ve discussed a bit already, that the God of the biblical tradition is and always will be the God of the oppressed. God makes God’s stance quite clear in the biblical tradition. What is so disturbing is that white Christians have, for several centuries now, consciously and unconsciously rejected and refused

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<sup>61</sup>James Cone. *Black Theology and Black Power*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1969). 139.



to reconcile with this truth, supplying instead over four hundred years their own exceptionalist supremacist narrative that God has chosen America to favor as God's beloved people. The racial and national identity of today's white folks, even those who claim to be a little more liberally minded or socially progressive, has been shaped by this narrative in deeply problematic ways that has served to ground white supremacy in a carefully cultivated, but totally contrived theological foundation. The denial of African Americans and people of color as the true inheritors of the Israelite identity in this, our own modern metropolis, allows white America to continue on as a "justified" power-player—an oppressor who can't see that they in fact are the biggest bully on the playground. Or perhaps, a well-intentioned oppressor who thinks of themselves, as Niebuhr might have, not as a force for colonization but rather as a radical and divinely chosen force for good, whose actions in the world are justified by this ordination.

For quite some time even before beginning this project I had been worried about the place of white folk in contemporary American Christianity. This is a twofold concern and is intimately connected to white supremacy and black oppression. I simultaneously worry about the places we *actually* occupy in the continuation of the Gospel narrative and the places we have *taught* ourselves and *talked* ourselves and *wished* ourselves into occupying. They are in all or most circles totally different spaces, and the white Christian's inability to see the distance between the two is deeply worrisome. White Christians don't accurately (or at all) "place" ourselves in the Biblical text, largely because doing so would force us into a reckoning with race with which we are unwilling to engage, and in our failure to own our position we render both the biblical narrative and our efforts at justice making functionally useless, frequently misplaced, and oftentimes irrelevant. White America has been oppressing people of color in various ways and according to various schemes for centuries but has not effectively incorporated and reconciled that history into our faith traditions and narratives.

Could we bear to see ourselves in the Egyptians, the Babylonians, or the Romans? Baldwin writes in a letter to his nephew in 1962,

“There is no reason for you to try to become like white men and there is no basis whatever for their impertinent assumption that they must accept you. The really terrible thing, old buddy, is that you must accept them, and I mean that very seriously. You must accept them and accept them with love, for these innocent people have no other hope. They are in effect still trapped in a history which they do not understand and until they understand it, they cannot be released from it. They have had to believe for many years, and for innumerable reasons, that black men are inferior to white men.”<sup>62</sup>

There are no good heroes for white folks there, and white America loves a good hero from our own fold. Because of the hold that white Christian hegemony has over the minds of white folks and the role it plays in our perception of our place in the cosmic universe, accepting the full implications of black America as the modern day Israelites means a total overhaul of white America’s understanding of where we stand in the world. Finding ourselves in the Biblical metaphor would force us to admit our country’s history of oppressive hate and violence and to admit to ourselves that we are not chosen; we are not most loved and invincible. Instead, we choose to construct an artificial history in which white folks can see ourselves as oppressed, down-trodden, hard-striving individuals just doing our best in a world set against us. We build the narrative of progress and say that God is shining His love down upon us, guiding us, blessing our government, our businesses, and our families.

White folks are detached from the fullness of American history and distanced from the pieces of it that cast us in an ugly light. As the discussion of “alternative facts” becomes a more prominent feature of political discourse, I think it’s important to make a definitive statement: alternative facts have been utilized by power since long before the advent of Donald Trump and Sean Spicer. It just so happens that these days it’s white people who are calling out other white

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<sup>62</sup> James Baldwin. “A Letter to My Nephew.” *Progressive.org*, 1 Jan. 1962, [progressive.org/magazine/letter-nephew/](http://progressive.org/magazine/letter-nephew/). Accessed April 9, 2018.

people putting out the alternative fact. Power is bickering with power, and that is why it's making the national news reels. Cone says that "[t]here can be no Christian speech about God which does not represent the interest of the victims in our society."<sup>63</sup> Certainly, Niebuhr stood beside the white, economically disadvantaged, Christian victims in our society, whose suffering is absolutely real and important, but to not align his anti-racism preaching with a more developed anti-racism practice fails to address oppressed American social groups and speaks to Cone's call that we must actively bring down the Kingdom of God rather than just talk about it. Even if we white folks have created a history for ourselves in which it is conceivable that we are the only legitimate victims, we at times also act very much like the hero and the savior. If the last fifty pages of research has taught me anything, it is that reliance on this history and acceptance of this identity destroys any hope of bringing about beloved community because it kills our ability to be honest, to be vulnerable, to be intimate, and to be fully engaged in the practical work of racial justice.

So what then must I as a white Christian do? I cannot continue without asking what the statements of the previous pages demand of me in turn, for if I did not I might be guilty of the same complacency that Niebuhr was. What does it mean for me as a white woman to love God and to love Jesus when people of color today are viciously oppressed by white hegemony? How do white Christians arrive at an understanding of our faith and our social location that allows us to place ourselves in the narrative more appropriately? That is not self-aggrandizing? That serves the same God that is working on behalf of the enslaved and oppressed? What would that faith look like? What does it mean to love God and be an Egyptian? Are the two mutually exclusive? This question keeps me up at night: *how do we be truly good and just Egyptians?*

In the summer of 2016, I worked with a loosely Presbyterian church and non-profit in center city Philadelphia. The bulk of this church's work is built around a broad consortium of social

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<sup>63</sup>James Cone. *Black Theology and Black Power*. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1969).

services for Philadelphia's vulnerable, insecure, and marginalized populations, but they also run week long summer youth mission programs in Philadelphia. The goal of these mission trips is to introduce young white suburban Protestant kids to the theological stance that God commands them to actively love others through justice-work and calls them to be a servant of the oppressed. As mission leaders, my team and I sought to honestly address racism and privilege and to dismantle the specter of white saviorism within white mainline Protestant Christian mission work (and in all honesty we came up short plenty, if not most, of the times). In our evening Bible study sessions I led our high school and middle school students through discussions on the Book of Exodus, with particular attention paid to Moses as the original activist organizer, a role model for us as we navigate our own ongoing American manifestations of enslavement and oppression. Part of these discussions was dedicated to figuring out which characters in the story we as white folks were and how we fit could fit into the freeing of modern day Israelites.

It was during these discussions that I first wrestled with questions of parallels and socially analogous placements in biblical text. "Were we the Moses of our society's story today?" I would ask my sea of lily white high schoolers from places like Upper Merion and Swarthmore, wealthy suburban towns outside the Philadelphia city limits. "Or perhaps, are we the beleaguered Israelites?" After a week working at non-profits and community coalitions in Swampoodle and Kensington, two north Philly neighborhoods decimated by layer upon layer of structural violence, most of our kids thankfully found it easy enough to reject both of those stances. I'd ask them to dig deeper into the text, pulling them towards the section on the clever Israelite midwives who deceived Pharaoh in order to save the lives of male Israelite infants after Pharaoh's decree that only female babies be permitted to survive. "So are we then perhaps like the clever Hebrew midwives who deceived Pharaoh and helped to save the lives of baby male Hebrews?" No, I'd try to get our students to see, because the midwives themselves were also Israelites. So who in hell are we? The closest analogous

“hero” we could tease out was Pharaoh’s daughter, who pulls Moses from the Nile and helps to create the conditions necessary for his revolution. I am at odds with the lessons we planted during these week long service trips because while we might have managed to convince some that they could be heroes like Pharaoh’s daughter, we often did not quite make it to the crucial point that either way we are not Israelites, we are Egyptians, and very, very few white folks actually operate as Pharaoh’s daughter did. I also reject the idea that we must all be heroes. White America loves to respond to oppression by being a heroic savior, and look how much good that’s done. No, I want an “accurate” place for young white people in the story of the Christian tradition that empowers them to act without presenting the Gospel in a way that promotes oppression, ignorance, self-aggrandizement, or passivity. I want them educated into a place of understanding that allows them to be meaningful agents of justice from their social location. I want to believe that such a place is possible; that a rejection of hegemonic white Christianity could occur, that privileged Christians could conceivably love and serve the same God as our marginalized brothers and sisters.

I’ve been spending a lot of time over the past few weeks and months meditating on the closing calls of James Cone’s *Black Theology and Black Power*. Cone closes out his book with some of the most deeply interrogating and essential questions I have ever encountered, questions that I had been yearning for without knowing it, questions that I could not properly articulate for myself, questions that now terrify and strengthen me as I pursue some sort of reconciliation with the very many more new questions that proliferated out of Cone’s urgings and came to fill the space where answers might one day live. Cone says on page 151 going into 152,

“It is to be expected that many white people will ask: “How can I, a *white* [person], become black? My skin is white and there is nothing I can do.” Being black in America has very little to do with skin color. To be black means that your heart, your soul, your mind, and your body are where the dispossessed are. We all know that a racist structure will reject and threaten a black man in white skin as quickly as a black man in black skin. It accepts and rewards whites in black skins nearly as well as whites in white skins. Therefore, being reconciled to God does not mean that one’s skin is physically black. It essentially depends on

the color of your heart, soul, and mind. Some may want to argue that persons with skins physically black will have a running start on others; but there seems to be enough evidence that though one's skin is black, the heart may be lily white. The real questions are: Where is your identity? Where is your being? Does it lie with the oppressed blacks or with the white oppressors?"<sup>64</sup>

This passage strikes me every time I read it as one I need to commit to memory in its entirety. What does it mean for my heart, my soul, my mind, and my body to be where the dispossessed are? Where is my identity and my being? What can I do and what must I do to ensure that my identity and my being do not lie with white oppressors, knowing that whiteness will try to lure me with comfort and power and that I was birthed into the cradle of whiteness and blinded by its conditioning? How must I go about "becoming black" ethically but without colonizing or exploiting the experiences of oppressed groups? Actively and intentionally pursuing the answers to these questions is to Cone critical and tantamount to the salvation of white people. Cone says explicitly that it is not enough for white liberals to just talk about racial reconciliation or justice amongst each other or with their black neighbors. That will still promulgate and reinforce white hegemony. We must instead engage in something more, and something radical. "As long as whites live like *white* people (through marriages, schools, neighborhood, power, etc.) black people must use blackness as the sole criterion for dialogue," Cone says on page 148. "Otherwise reconciliation will mean black people living according to white rules to glorify white values, being orderly and calm while others enact laws which will destroy them."<sup>65</sup>

I wonder then if it is enough for white people to strive to behave as Pharaoh's daughter did, a young woman born into the cradle of privilege who sweeps baby Moses up out of the Nile and asks her father if they could raise the child as their own. Pharaoh's daughter appears to risk very little in the end; she primarily serves only to pull the child from the river and ship the child back off to his

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid. 151-152.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid. 148.

mother until he comes of age, at which point Moses joins the royal family and assumes some royal power. It is quite a lot to save a life, for sure, but does it mean much if that life is never quite free, never quite honest, never quite aware of its heritage and destiny? Moses goes on to take up Egyptian values; he plays by their rules and speaks in their language. He becomes Egyptian in the way many people of color today are told they must become white. Indeed, even in the Biblical text it is unclear whether or not Moses knew he was a Hebrew or if he just grew up believing he was Egyptian by birth. Pharaoh's daughter certainly assures that Moses will get a chance to grow up, but she had no way of knowing that he would one day lead a radical resistance movement and therefore cannot be assumed to have been in favor of such a movement. Pharaoh's daughter is not who we want to be. Her attempt at justice making was still just "whites [Egyptians] living as *white* [Egyptian] people."<sup>66</sup> Her attempts at reconciliation here just meant "black people living according to white rules to glorify white values, being orderly and calm while others enact laws which will destroy them."<sup>67</sup> This is not enough. This is not what Cone means when he says that white people must become black, and that doing so means putting your heart, soul, mind, and body where the dispossessed are. And this is not what I believe Niebuhr, had he pushed his practice to include people of color, would say of lived justice either. Niebuhr would take the story of Exodus and call the cross into its questions, perhaps reminding us that the cross calls us into sacrificial love at the same time as it also calls us more deeply into communion through radical systems-level social inversion. In his personal writings, Niebuhr reveals his understanding of what it means to become black as Cone interprets blackness, though Niebuhr never quite put it together that he was talking about blackness:

"Anyone who incarnates the strategy of love as Jesus did meets the resistance and incites the passions of human society, the respectabilities of human societies are based upon moral compromises and every community is anxious to defend these compromises against the prophet who presents some higher moral logic as against the criminal who imperils the structure from below... The cross is central to the Christian religion... because it symbolizes

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid. 148.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. 148.

a cosmic as well as historic truth. Love conquers the world, but its victory is not an easy one.”<sup>68</sup>

Perhaps what whites must strive to undergo is something like the crisis of conscience that undid Moses that day when he saw one of his Egyptian kin, an overseer, viciously beating one of his other kin, a Hebrew slave. Who knows if Moses grew up recognizing the Egyptian or the Hebrew as kindred? The scripture doesn't tell us how much he knew of his own background and birth, but he had effectively become Egyptian. He *passed*. Moses profited off the privilege of associating and being associated with Egyptian power. What matters here is that Moses put his heart, soul, mind, and *body* where this Hebrew slave was and made that slave his *chosen* kin in doing so. In this action he took himself out of Egypt, both physically in his flight into the desert and socio-politically in his violent rejection of Egyptian injustice.

While I don't believe that white people should ever hope to have the kind of leader-of-the-movement career that Moses did when it comes to black liberation, we must also recognize that we cannot stay safe inside the palace after pulling a baby from the river. There is a place for us within the racial reconciliation movement that we must step up to. We must undergo that crisis of connection, of family, of consciousness that must have consumed Moses in the moments leading up to the murder of the overseer and in the long years he spent in the desert afterwards, and we must recognize that white Americans need to do a lot of work to remove the love for holy whiteness from our hearts and our dedication to white supremacy from our practices. We must recognize the totality of shared kinship and the imperative of *chosen* kinship in a world which denies inclusion in the family to so many. It is not enough to save a life and then go on as if nothing had ever happened and our own fathers weren't responsible for enacting the legislation that put the baby in the basket in the first place. We cannot just take in the Hebrew baby and create him anew as an Egyptian. This is, at

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<sup>68</sup>Reinhold Niebuhr. *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1929). 81



best, a disgusting and perverted attempt at justice which in fact only perpetuates unjust power. It is charity in its ugliest form. White people must come face to face with the cruelty of the system that upholds us and then seek out its destruction in ways that will force us to flee the kingdom and never again be welcomed in its palaces. We must face the fact that we have some time coming to us that must be spent wandering around in the desert trying to get our heads on right, that we will be alone and tired and hungry and deeply uncomfortable, that we will not be welcomed back into the arms that once embraced us. We must yearn to hear the voice of God in the wilderness coming forth from the most unexpected places. We must seek to tear things down and kill that in us which seeks to exploit and kill our own human family.

Practically speaking, what will this mean for me? I love Reinhold Niebuhr for his pragmatism, and I humbly recognize the limitations of my own heart, the compromises I have made and will likely continue to make to ensure that my desire for comfort or stability, these things so entwined with whiteness, is sated. What will this understanding of whiteness, Americanness, and Christianity mean for me? How will I live out this understanding such that I move more ethically, less violently, and with greater consciousness and care for human communion? This question plagues me as I prepare to graduate, as I contemplate my own vocation and my own trajectory and my own deadly personal shortcomings. I am a young white woman, and I am human—I am a bundle of wants: I want a loving partner to share my life with; I want children; I want to be respected in my community; I want some material comfort; I want to provide for my parents in their old age; I want some level of success and acclaim; on and on and on with desires. But I also want to do God's will as I strive to live ethically with integrity, and meet the deepest needs of my human family. If I am to try not to live as whiteness demands I live and if I am to seek to live with the entirety of my identity and my being with and for the oppressed, how will that laundry list of desires pan out? How must I practically evaluate my own desires and the inertia and violence built into

them? I'll need a partner who is a partner not just to me but also to the struggle. Where and how will our children grow up and what schools will they go to? How will I speak with them and model for them a kinder way to live in the bodies they will be born into? My vision of material comfort will need to shift, because if I am truly doing the work of anti-whiteness well it is quite possible that my employability within a white system will be compromised. My priorities will have to allow for necessary sacrifice, my ideas of success and acclaim will have to change because I cannot accept the accolades of the Egyptians, nor will they give them to me in the first place for the kind of work I want to be doing. How can I use Pharaoh and my relationship to him to my advantage? What are the modern day American overseers I must take down? What or who is the overseer within me that I must kill? A life spent overturning whiteness means overturning everything I know—I am a white woman, and I acknowledge that I am not always comfortable in deserts or in conflict. But God did not call us to be comfortable, and furthermore there are many beloved by God who are not permitted this choice between comfort and discomfort. It is a profound privilege to have this particular choice now, in front of you, to join yourself to the joy and challenge of God's call for justice. Considering this call in its fullness has given me bizarrely and wonderfully profound comfort within discomfort—just as the cross promises.

## CONCLUSION:

## LOVE AND JUSTICE FROM THE MOUTH OF A TAMED CYNIC

I wonder sometimes if Reinhold Niebuhr asked himself these very same questions too: if he wrestled with them in his own heart in and out of evenings after long days of meetings with Detroit city councilmen and his beloved parishioners or in publically in his classrooms with students and colleagues. If one interrogates his work long enough, I believe one might come to the same conclusions I have come to about Niebuhr. He knew what it meant to be a prophet in a world where prophets are hung beside thieves, and for all of his demands that we pursue the adventure of the Christian message and for all of his attempts at living it out, he most likely clung so ardently to his stance that human beings are incapable of building the Kingdom on earth because he either could not or did not want to engage in that Kingdom-building himself. It was by conscious choice or unconscious conditioning that he chose to exercise his prophetic voice only but so far, and never quite reached out to touch the terror of racial violence and recognize his place within that violent structure. The faith and praxis of whiteness exercised itself over him even as he pushed the social, political, and intellectual discourses around the necessary intersections of contemporary justice imperatives and the Christian message. I came into my relationship with Niebuhr's life and work through Jame's Cone critique of it, but in the last few weeks of researching for this project I came across *Leaves from the Notebook of Tamed Cynic*, a small but nevertheless incredible collection of Niebuhr's personal writings and reflections during his thirteen years pastoring in Detroit at Bethel Evangelical Church. For as much as I agree entirely with Cone's critique of Niebuhr as Cone laid out in *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, I began to feel a deep compassion for Niebuhr as I read through his personal musings, filled with grace and frustration and conflict and a clear desire to live his life for others. I love him—I love the love that I see in him—and I feel a deep sadness for his failures

because they represent the distance that must have existed between him and God, and between him and our human family. It is this distance which is present throughout white communities, and a distance which white people must commit ourselves with our bodies, hearts, and minds to bridging lest we miss out on what I believe is the whole point of living: truthful, right relationship with God and all of God's beloved community of creation.

Whiteness exerts itself as a necessary limitation on the moral, ethical, and theological imaginations, and this I believe is the first locus of hindrance for Niebuhr's theology. Whiteness imposes a systematic structural blindness over white people, a kind of blindness that we often cannot do not even realize is influencing how much or how little of the world we are actually able to see because we were born into it. Creatures born into moral darkness, white people often experience a certain kind of existential pain when coming to the light of the American reality of racism. As I've tried to understand and outline here in these last few chapters, whiteness teaches a false history and glorifies a cruel mythology, and it relies on the preservation of a theological premise that promotes white power and domination. Whiteness married itself to Christianity and to Americanness such that divorcing any from the other might feel like a substantial betrayal with mortal consequences to the parishioner, preacher, or prophetic alike. Niebuhr loved his image of the United States as a divinely ordained global power player with the God given potential to bring peace or unity to the global scene. His hermeneutic of Americanness and whiteness married him to this vision at the same time as it blinded him to its shortcomings. As a readers taking in the scope of his work, I found it very frustrating to read the following passage, first penned in 1924:

“The eyes of so many people have been covered by superstition and illusions that they are not strong enough to preserve their sight in the daylight of knowledge. Freed from their superstitions, they are blinded in the very moment that they are given an unhindered view. They could see beauty while they lived in twilight, but a brilliant light obscures life's beauty and meaning. Of course the eye may ultimately adjust itself to the brilliance of the light, and as men grow accustomed to the concrete and specific objects which distract them on first sight, they will learn again

to view the whole scene and to regard all things in their relationships. It is in relationship and in totalities that life's meaning is revealed."<sup>69</sup>

He clearly knew something of blindness and complacency, and it was his that allowed him to draft some of the most influential writings on Christian pragmatism and liberalism without connecting that work to issues of racial nationalism. Perhaps he could not "see" racism as a social imperative facing the church, but it also strikes me just as much that he might have been drafting a theology that let white people off the hook for their tendency to commit racial relational sin in social settings. If he presented a theological framework that took as a given the relative inability of humans to enact real justice, he would not be held responsible to push for that real justice.

Real justice is dangerous. This could've been the second site of theological failure for Niebuhr, but it also really represents a personal moral failure as well. "I am not really a Christian," Niebuhr wrote in 1928. "I am too cautious to be Christian. I can justify my caution, but so can the other fellow who is more cautious than I am. The whole Christian adventure is frustrated continually not so much by malice as by cowardice and reasonableness."<sup>70</sup> I believe that Niebuhr saw the example of Christ crucified on Golgotha beside the lowest of petty criminals and knew exactly what it meant for a prophet of God's moral vision to speak that vision too honestly, too fearlessly, and too loudly. Empire seeks to destroy the prophetic voice, and so the well-intentioned white person is caught always between the imperative of justice and the instinct for self-preservation. Niebuhr knew this, and he also knew how difficult it was to live into the prophetic voice of Christ. Reflecting on another minister's sermon, Niebuhr writes, "Through the whole discourse there ran the erroneous assumption that Christians are real followers of Jesus and no effort was made to describe the wide chasm which yawns between the uncompromising idealism of the Galilean and the current

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<sup>69</sup> Niebuhr, Reinhold. *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1929). 51.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.* 131.

morality. I wonder how many sermons of that type are still being preached. If that sermon is typical it would explain much of the conventional tameness of the church. How much easier it is to adore an ideal character than to emulate it.”<sup>71</sup> Toeing a bold-but-not-too-bold line between empire and justice becomes the work of the liberal white theologian, who must decide which punches to pull that will push for justice in ways which won’t cause whiteness to expel them from its company. Niebuhr was the most respected voice in American public intellectualism, a pillar of the liberal intellectual white elite. I imagine the attraction he must have felt towards preserving that position. Did he think perhaps that if he maintained this place of power he could use that power for some level of good? Did he mostly just love the comfort and accolade that came with it? I feel myself every so often choosing the comfort of my social location over the prophetic voice, that spirit of Christ within, that longs to speak for justice, and I wonder if Niebuhr’s failure to address racism in his theology was more due to his desire to not sacrifice his comfort, status, and acclaim within elite white liberal spheres and less due to his white blindness.

Finally, I believe that Niebuhr’s failure rests on one of his most beautiful spiritual gifts—the deep love he felt for the people he served. It cannot be excused that Niebuhr made family and neighbor the white Christians of Detroit only, but the love he felt for the people he understood to be his own still maintains a kind of beautiful admirableness. Niebuhr writes throughout *Leaves* that it is far more conducive to the prophetic voice to be wielded by an itinerant preacher, rather than a pastor stationed in a community pulpit. Itinerant preachers can afford to be more ruthless in their truth-telling.

“I am not surprised that most prophets are itinerants. Critics of the church think we preachers are afraid to tell the truth because we are economically dependent upon the people of our church. There is something in that, but it does not quite get to the root of the matter. I certainly could easily get more money than I am securing now, and yet I catch myself weighing my words and gauging their possible effect upon this

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid. 90.

and that person. I think the real clue to the tameness of a preacher is the difficulty one finds in telling unpleasant truths to people whom one has learned to love.”<sup>72</sup>

Perhaps Niebuhr wanted to preserve his status, or perhaps he was blinded to the reality of whiteness, its infiltration into the moral core of American Christendom, and its relationships with other kinds of oppression (namely, the economic justice issues his work chiefly addressed). Perhaps all or none of this is true, and even more likely perhaps all or none or some of this was true at various points in his career as his theories evolved. But I do believe in the intellectual and moral brilliance of Reinhold Niebuhr. I believe he saw clearly enough to know at least enough of the reality of race to begin dissecting it within him. And I believe in the ethical vision and integrity of Reinhold Niebuhr—I think certainly that Niebuhr meant what he said about the imperative of justice-making and tried in the wholeness of his world to live that out as best he knew how. But I also believe that Niebuhr perhaps failed to construct a theology that pushed white people to address their whiteness because he was keenly aware that asking people to see their complacency within systems of violence can be very painful for them.

Because whiteness operates as theology and because it has epistemological and cosmological impacts on its adherents, it can be incredibly emotionally painful to attempt to exorcise whiteness from the white body. Asking white people to acknowledge their racism also asks them to destroy their assumptions about the world and their place in it, starting afresh in new world paradigm that forces us to see ourselves as we really are. James Baldwin articulates this problem quite succinctly when he says in *The Fire Next Time*, “I suspect one of the reasons people cling to their hates so stubbornly is because they sense, once their hate is gone, they will be forced to deal with pain.”<sup>73</sup> Dr. Martin Luther King frequently refers to white folks as his “sick brothers and sisters”—and truly, whiteness is like sickness. White people are a people terrified of the pain that we carry with us and

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid. 47.

<sup>73</sup> James Baldwin. *The Fire Next Time*. (New York, NY: Dial Press, 1963.)

inflict on others, and if we are brave enough to see that violence attached to us than we are often frightened of the process of exorcising that tendency from our lives. What we must undergo is often like the rebreaking of a bone that has healed incorrectly in order that it might heal in proper alignment and therefore stop prohibiting the rest of the limb and the rest of the body from functioning properly. We are certainly in real need of healing. I think Niebuhr grew too much in love with the people he believed he was called to, and this illustrates something of the beautiful and tragic nature of human love. He threw himself into advocating for socioeconomic rights and anti-poverty initiatives and the place of America in the global scene, but I wonder if he would have pushed harder and farther if he did not so love the people he felt called to that he thought twice about wounding them with truth that could help to set them free. I wonder if he would have pushed harder on issues of race and white supremacy if he saw these issues as being at the heart of the lived struggles of the people he felt called to.

But what does it really mean to love someone, and what is the love that helps us become free? Herein lies the difference between prophetic and sentimental love. Prophetic love truly can be a form of justice-making, which itself is the closest approximation to divine love. I return again to the urgency with which I understand the need to bring white people into a fuller understanding of our whiteness, such that we interrupt our cycles of destruction, colonization, and violence and join ourselves instead to the love and will of God and draw into deeper communion with God's beloved community of creation. A theology of whiteness destroys the potential for real intimacy and deep love because it demands that we do not know ourselves in our fullness or each other in our complexity. To truly love someone then must include some hurt, lest we never break open the cages of ignorance and untruth that the world builds around us. All real intimacy must involve a certain bravery in the breaking open and laying free of the moral mind and soul for examination and edification. The point of living in relationship and intimate proximity to others is that we might



witness to others the realities of the world and grow in radical connection and deep love for one another, such that we enable one another to confront our personal and social demons and promote transformative healing. This is what the cross tells me. If we truly love someone, we must help them get free. No one can claim freedom on someone else's behalf, but we can urge one another to become aware of the ways that we and others around us are not free. I am with Niebuhr when I see white folks, kindred to me in social location, and feel called to them. There is something in this tendency-to-wound in whiteness and its accompanying moral woundedness that I share with other white Americans that draws me to deconstruct the theology of whiteness and invite us all into to a more honest and Christlike life of the gospel that could serve to help make us a little freer. God, I think, has been calling us all to this for a long time.

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