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A Cry to Defeat White Jesus

Kari Flatness

Religion 362

Dr. Wolff

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On October 27, 2018, the Sabbath service at Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburg, PA, was cut short when a cry from Robert Bowes bolstered in, “All Jews must die”¹. In this unjust act of hate, eleven souls lost their lives while six others were injured. During that time, I, and a handful of other members of the Lutheran Volunteer Corps, were able to attend an interfaith prayer vigil and protest in front of the White House in our nation’s capital. This was a stand against the continued discrimination against Jewish communities, and against the root cause of this hatred: our country’s heritage as a “Christian”, patriarchal, privilege white supremacist nation. Protest signs against the leadership in our country read “Trump, your white nationalism kills” and “Trump, our blood-- Jewish, Muslim, Sikh, Black, Immigrant, LGBTQ-- is on your hands”.² One of the signs that resonated with me was, “We are only safe in solidarity”.³ As a follower of God and Christ Jesus, this sign caught my attention as it encapsulated Christian liberation theology. This was a call to action to fight alongside those seeking justice in the face of oppression. While this tragedy showcases the need for justice for minorities in our country, our college campus- which is rooted in Swedish Lutheran tradition- mirrors the cry of oppression caused by white Christianity. Hatred, oppression, and injustice towards those that self-identify outside of the white Christian identity, can be witnessed on campus even today. In this paper I will argue that whiteness and white fragility promote docile bystanders during racially charged campus incidents; however, a womanist, liberationist theology can effectively redress the misuse of Christian theology to advance white-supremacy in Lutheran institutions. First, I will leverage womanist ethicist Emilie Townes’ concept of the fantastic hegemonic imagination to debunk stereotypes about Black students and analyze a recent racist incident at Augustana College. Next,

¹ “Deadly Shooting at Tree of Life Synagogue,” Anti-Defamation League, accessed May 11, 2020, <https://www.adl.org/education/educator-resources/lesson-plans/deadly-shooting-at-the-tree-of-life-synagogue>

² See Photo Appendix A and B

³ Ibid. C

utilizing Townes' concept of counter memory and Black liberation James Cone's insights in combination with Martin Luther and Dorothy Soelle's work, I will articulate a distinctly Lutheran theology that is oppositional to racist campus climates.

In my faith tradition, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, we proclaim, "God's work, our hands," to signal our commitment to advancing social justice.⁴ My reading of James Cone's Black liberationist theology leads me to believe that the heart of doing God's work is to combat the sins of racism and sexism. As the father of Black theology Cone proclaims, "Christian theology is a theology of liberation."⁵ In the Gospels of Luke and John, we read that Jesus summed up all the commandments as such: love God and love your neighbor as yourself.⁶ Taken together, loving my neighbor as myself means that as a white person, I must actively work to redress the sin of racism., "God's Work, Our Hands" reminding us of this call to action- a call for justice for our neighbor.

One of the greatest obstacles to combating racism is white fragility. Robin DiAngelo defines white fragility as "a state in which even a minimum amount of racial stress becomes intolerable, triggering a range of defensive moves."⁷ Christian traditions that emphasis personal sin struggle to combat racism because most individuals, regardless of their beliefs and actions, do not consider themselves to be racist. Emilie Townes helpfully shifts the conversation away from individual sin by criticizing "whiteness" rather than white people⁸. According to Townes, sin is

⁴ "Mission and Vision-Evangelical Lutheran Church in America," Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, accessed May 11, 2020, <https://www.elca.org/About/Mission-and-Vision>

⁵ James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1986), 1.

⁶ See Luke 10:27; 1 John 4:21

⁷ Robin DiAngelo, "White Fragility," *International Journal of Critical Pedagogy* 3, no. 3 (2011): 57

⁸ Emile M. Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006): 65.

found in systems. This insight enables white Christians to overcome their white fragility and engage in dismantling patriarchy and capitalism for the benefit of all people.

The Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion at Augustana College hosted an event aimed at debunking myths much in the way that Townes prescribes. Although many Americans understand the foundation of our nation and constitution to ensure rights to life, liberty, and happiness for all, host Michael Rogers demonstrated that these were not intended for women, people of color, or non-propertied citizens. More specifically, Thomas Jefferson understood racial difference as a gift from God to distinguish the elite from savage.⁹ Historians still dispute if Sally Hemings, a black female slave, was used as a sexually exploited servant on Jefferson's Monticello plantation which in turn led to the birth of Sally's six children. Even with DNA evidence leading towards Jefferson as a paternal match, it is tossed aside to help maintain his status long after he has been gone.¹⁰ Whiteness continues to lead the dance between history and memory. It carries the dominate fist of exclusion for what composes history favoring whiteness. On the contrary, memory holds favor of oppressed voices. Townes reiterates that we continuously create and recreate our responses to the ever shifting social and political circumstances, causing a present tug of war with history and collective memory of groups as we understand the past, present, and future.¹¹

As the seeds of a white Christian nation grew, it can be inferred that these roots influenced the development of college campuses like Augustana. Students of color indicated during the campus event, that even though Augustana values inclusion of diverse persons, racism

⁹ Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 86.

¹⁰ "Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings, A Brief Account," Monticello, accessed May 20, 2020, <https://www.monticello.org/thomas-jefferson/jefferson-slavery/thomas-jefferson-and-sally-hemings-a-brief-account>.

¹¹ Townes, *Womanist Ethics*, 17.

is still prevalent. One of students of color shared a story of while at his campus job, his white coworker called him a monkey. The comment itself did not ignite the anger that he felt. Rather, it was the students within earshot, including his supervisor, all of whom are white, were silent bystanders. The student then had to on his own accord explain why this was inappropriate. A coworker then exposed his racial arrogance when indicating that this was not a big deal and that because he is white, he does not have to be well versed in inappropriate racial comments unlike the black student. What does this situation suggest about our campus culture? Indubitably, this is not the first event in which observers stood silently by as one member of our campus community was harassed. Since Augustana is a white dominate school with Swedish roots, whiteness has created a protective layer of arrogance for racial situations.

It should be noted that during the Deconstructing the Myth on Race event, the vast majority of the students and faculty present were those of color. For them, being represented in this space created a safe opportunity to share personal experiences of racial discrimination. Yet, on the other hand, this poses a different issue. Is this an indication that members of the Augustana community are fearful of racial stress that would trigger their white fragility? Are they showing that anti-racist or multicultural education is only needed for those who wish to benefit those in their environment? Whites would need to place themselves into a racial integrated conversation in order to challenge what Bourdieu calls *habitus*- a socialized subjectivity; a set of dispositions which generate practice, perceptions, and actions.¹² Whites would also have to forfeit their ideas on universalism and individualism in racial terms. If a white person believes that humanity is fully represented in whiteness, they then are refusing to

¹² DiAngelo, "White Fragility," 57-58.

acknowledge that the privilege that they have is due to racism¹³. Individualism clears the moral compass, willing to point fingers at the “bad” white people. In their unwillingness to attend such an event, are they dismissing the idea that racism is present on campus because they have not witnessed it or because they are the part of the “good” batch of white people?¹⁴ Or part of the “good” batch of loving Christians?

The white coworker may have felt that his comment was merely a harmless joke. Similarly, slapstick humor of a minstrel show meant to mock black culture ironically left the white performers in blackface mocking themselves.¹⁵ The coworker’s joke left him to wallow in his own ignorance. He can defend himself by reminding the student of his privilege, his blindness to racism. As a white student in a primarily white college in a white American culture, it could be stated this person may in fact have limited understanding of racism which feeds white dominate culture. Dominance can create in an individual racial arrogance which then allows them to dismiss voices of minorities in which have a greater understanding of race. Racial arrogance does not give this person the right to have made the comment, nor does it provide justification that he does not have to be up to date on how to have human decency. As whites cling to racial comfort afforded inherently due to privilege, racial arrogance was shown in the needing of an explanation that was crafted to ease the white person’s situational experience. In doing so, racism reigns triumphant causing the abuser to walk away in glory while the abused is bruised from the punches.

¹³ David Chidester, *Savage Systems: Colonialism and Comparative Religion in Southern Africa* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1996) 3-4.

¹⁴ DiAngelo, “White Fragility,” 58-60.

¹⁵ Townes, *Womanist Ethics*, 38.

White superiority is so much imbedded into our culture that whites cannot escape it. When focus turns to race, we tend to focus on darker-skinned folks leading whites' ignorance to the social construct of whiteness.¹⁶ With this said, whites who oppose racism struggle with the challenge to escape white fragility. White advantage then gives way to the protection of a white person's moral reputation instead of changing their participation in systems of inequality and white domination. Accountability of whites' actions not complying to their values of equality leads to self-defense of their moral character in order to remain morally superior allowing them to avoid personal responsibility for the racial power and privilege they have. Similarly, white Christian theology reigns in America in its own breath of racial arrogance.

Our nation was built on white theology which in turn could best be described as a theology for the oppressor- the slave owner, the Klan leader, the white police officer. Even the Swedes bring to our establishment this idea. If Christianity, as described by Cone, is truly that of liberation, then it comes with a double edge sword- the side of the oppressor versus the oppressed. God thus liberates the blacks from the chains of racial discrimination and gives liberation for the slave owner to seek grace for their wrong doings. Black people and white people cannot experience the same God in this respect. The God of white theology provides the comfort of a whitewash version of Jesus, a sacrifice for the gift of "cheap grace".¹⁷ White Jesus is formed losing his labels that would cause him to be an outcaste if he walked into a white church- immigrant, bastard, friend to sex workers, Middle Eastern, and not white. This Jesus thrives from white superiority right from the beginning, a concept that not only has chained blacks in inequality for centuries but is also the source of many injustices to people who do not

¹⁶ Townes, *Womanist Ethics*, 60.

¹⁷ Lori Brandt Hale, "Dietrich Bonhoeffer: Political resistance in Tyrannical Times," in *Radical Lutherans/Lutheran Radicals*, ed. Jason A. Mahn (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2017), 80-84.

fall into the white world-- extermination of Native Americans, the persecution of Jews, the oppression of Mexican-Americans, black trans women countless murdered. White-supremacist theology wrongly suggests that Jesus forgives heinous acts of racist and sexist violence.

While race maybe an easy avenue to expose the suffering caused by white supremacy, we must remember that this is only one beast of oppression in our society. White racism concomitantly supports systems and structures that denies basic human rights to non-white people. In a similar fashion homophobia demonizes, wants to subjugate, and can even lead to the innocent murders of LGBTQ persons.¹⁸ Sexism, classism, and xenophobia also come to life due to the complex of structural evil of the dominate whiteness hierarchy.

As White Jesus fails to acknowledge the suffering caused by a vast array of oppression, which demonstrates the ignorance of whiteness. Whiteness fails to recognize those who do not fit within it is understanding of “good”. White Jesus in turn does not carry the mark of true discipleship to God as seen in Martin Luther’s theology of the cross- those who join God in solidarity with people who suffer even if it means going against cultural norms.¹⁹ The ELCA reiterates a call to justice. Through Christ’s death and resurrection, sin no longer can stop us from living out our calling as “ministers of reconciliation in loving and generous service of our neighbors.”²⁰ Martin Luther could not have introduced the theology of the cross if Christians were to merely except the world in which we live in. The theology of the cross paves the way to the universal ideology of the Christian tradition, liberation theology.

¹⁸ Pamela Lightsey, *Our Lives Matter: A Womanist Queer Theology* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2015), 64.

¹⁹ Hale, “Dietrich Bonhoeffer,” 71.

²⁰ “About- Evangelical Lutheran Church in America,” Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, accessed May 20, 2020, <https://www.elca.org/About>

Liberationist theology is a call of action. It is to not only follow in the theology of the cross but to also join in solidarity with the suffering to walk along towards freedom of the oppressed.²¹ By dismantling the image of White Jesus, we can begin to work towards the liberation of all who are and have been impacted by whiteness injustice in our school and our world. We need action to create real change. We need action to truly embrace the lessons taught to Christians through Jesus's cry for justice for those in need. We need action to truly call ourselves Christians. Our American society has come too wrapped in its whiteness to the point of shallow attempts of keeping the image of the "good" white person such as proclaiming acceptance to diversity, painting murals broadcasting the goodness found in equality, failing to teach the evils of white history, and celebrating changemakers of oppressed minorities by presenting them in whitewashed versions. Whiteness clings to presenting goodness without the need to show any action.²² We can claim that Augustana is an institution that carries out its high honored values of Lutheran tradition, diversity, and equality, but the failure of action in response to events such as racial language, education, and history of violence demonstrates the need for a reform in understanding of the Lutheran tradition in which it claims.²³ "God's Work, Our Hands," calls us to act as the hands and feet of God in this world to help those facing oppression.

Radical Lutheran theologian Dorothee Soelle captured the truth of what it meant to be a liberation theologian of the cross in stating,

God's message is unambiguous: 'You are to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, bury the dead, visit the imprisoned.' All of these works are forbidden by economic structure in

²¹ Jacqueline Bussie, "Dorothee Soelle: Lutheran Liberation Theologian of the Cross," in *Radical Lutherans/Lutheran Radicals*, ed. Jason A. Mahn (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2017), 106.

²² DiAngelo, "White Fragility", 61

²³ "Mission, purpose, and values of Augustana College," Augustana College, accessed May 11, 2020, <https://www.augustana.edu/about-us/mission>

which we live. It is designed to let the hungry starve, make the rich richer, and the poor poorer...God is justice. To know God means to do justice.²⁴

In order to do justice as we are commanded in the liberating of the oppressed, we must begin to welcome colonialism into the conversation. Whiteness does not simply cause oppression due to race but creates a fear of difference from that of social acceptance of “good”. By learning of the specific groups and individual’s oppression, we can best take up the cross to walk with them in their need for liberation.

Our duty as a Lutherans, working to carry out the cry of Christian liberation theology, is to hear their experience and fight alongside without becoming their ‘white savior’. Womanism and womanist theology captured my attention due to its nature of being rooted in the importance of experience of black women. Alice Walker, who first wrote of womanism, defines womanism as black women shaping community, struggling and surviving, and celebrating themselves and their communities. A large component of womanism is relationships- in the black community, mother and daughter, individual men. Womanists love women, women’s culture, and woman’s emotional flexibility and strength. Womanism is rooted in the importance of experience, whether written or spoken to learn of a black woman’s joys and moments of oppression. Some believe this idea of womanism is a way in which can allow for the voices of Black women to come through after failing to be recognized by male dominated black theology and the white focus of feminist theology. While many can claim that womanism is just black feminism, Walker’s claims that that “womanist is to feminist as purple to lavender”.²⁵

²⁴ Dorothee Soelle, *Against the Wind: Memoir of a Radical Christian*. trans. Barbara and Martin Rumscheidt (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1999), 99, 103.

²⁵ Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, 1983), xi-xii.

Pamela R. Lightsey- a scholar, professor, social justice advocate and self-identified queer lesbian ordained elder in the United Methodist Church- argues that Christian womanist theology neglects the voices of black LGBTQ women. While she encourages more black women who self-identify as LGBTQ to bring forward their experience to “play a more immediate role in liberation theology” as a way to protect from “the risk of our history and theology of our people being shaped primarily from the perspective of our allies”,²⁶ Lightsey knows that there is more to this issue. Here again we see the dance of memory and history in action. The memory created by black LGBTQ women can be used as a tool to correct the white dominate history portrayals of them. Their voices can create a counter-history to challenge exclusionary history by their false generalizations.²⁷ Within the Black church, the influence of white Christianity has not been fully divested leading to continued ideas of homophobia in Black communities. The term queer also holds tradition of oppression from the white world.

At the end of the day, race and sexual orientation are both faces of oppression. Experience of black women- cis, straight, lesbian, trans, etc.- deserve to be heard. One source of oppression does not hold higher importance than other. Neglection of identity of a person, or group of folks, can add more of a pain of oppression. Masuzawa shares through the example of defining world religions that universalism varies in the matter of importance of inclusion in categorizing religions²⁸. For some scholars, Islam can be categorized with Christianity and Buddhism as world religions. For others, Islam fails to incorporate in this group. If folks began to use a similar universal approach to oppression caused by whiteness in American society, some would fail to acknowledge sexual orientation while including race. By employing colonialism,

²⁶ Lightsey, *Our Lives Matter*, 3.

²⁷ Townes, *Womanist Ethics*, 15.

²⁸ Tomoko Masuzawa, *The Invention of World Religions: or, How European Universalism Was Preserved in Language of Pluralism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 120.

each individual would be able to voice their oppression that they face. This in turn would provide a solid foundation for needed action to better them and those in similar situations such as fighting to ban gay conversion therapy or fighting against gun violence.

If Christianity is truly a religion rooted in liberation, then it is call to action against oppression, violence, and poverty. The ELCA mission statement presents this calling. In order to work towards this ideal Christianity, we need to address and dismantle whiteness within our image of Christianity. Liberation theology calls us to walk with the suffering, and fight for justice as the hands and feet of Christ in this world. We need to be able allow for self-defined identity to not be overshadowed in the main wrath of oppression. To be called a Christian nation, a Christian institution, or to simply identify as a Christian, we are to fight for justice of all while understanding the unique needs for justice for the individual. Move over White Jesus- it's time for a God of justice.

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Photo Appendix



A. Flatness, Kari, "Trump, Your white nationalism kills", October 28, 2018. Washington D.C.



B. Flatness, Kari, "Trump, Our Blood Is On Your Hands", October 28, 2018, Washington D.C.



C. Flatness, Kari, "We are only safe in solidarity", October 28, 2018, Washington D.C.