

Review Article



Christological Discourse as Racial Discourse

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Abstract

This article presents a critical review of two edited volumes that deal with the complex intersection of christological discourse and racial discourse. The inquiry is guided by two questions: (1) How is the critical intersection between the two constructed and conceived? (2) What are the constructive solutions and proposals that are offered in response? After an examination of each book, an overall assessment is provided that highlights the enduring significance of race in American Christianity.

Keywords

race – whiteness – Christology – evangelicalism – ideological criticism

Christians and the Color Line: Race and Religion after Divided by Faith. Edited by J. Russell Hawkins and Phillip Luke Sinitiere. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014. viii + 278 pp. USD 29.95 (Hardcover). ISBN: 978-0-19-9329502.

Christology and Whiteness: What Would Jesus Do? Edited by George Yancy. New York: Routledge, 2012. Pp. xiv + 240. USD 44.95 (Paperback). ISBN: 978-0-415-69998-3.

1 Introduction

One of the enduring legacies of modernity is the thorny problematic of race. The countless atrocities of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have precipitated a radical rethinking of modernity's assumptions about race, including the two major authorities that have funded its logic – science and the Bible. This has sparked a renewal of interest across the disciplinary spectrum (sometimes referred to in the theoretical literature as the “racial turn”¹) with mixed results. For while contemporary research in the sciences and social sciences has debunked the myth of scientific racism – such that it is no longer tenable to posit biologically distinct racial groups based on phenotypes² – the modern problem of racism paradoxically persists. In light of the ways that modernity's thinking about race has been discredited, one might reasonably expect the problem to diminish and eventually disappear. But if race is a defunct concept that no longer has any scientific merit, why do racial classifications, and the oppressive practices on which they are based, continue to have currency in contemporary U.S. society? Part of the tension can be explained by turning to the second major authority behind modernity's understanding of race.

That the Bible has been used to justify racism is not a novel suggestion.³ Yet while explicit forms of biblical racialization have been denounced, there are many implicit forms that are routinely bypassed. What is to account for the discrepancy? An initial assessment is that traditional scholarly modes of inquiry (e.g., scientific study, sociological analysis, historical interpretation) are not single-handedly suited to deal with the problem. The systems, sources,

1 See Shankar Raman, “The Racial Turn: ‘Race’, Postkolonialität, Literaturwissenschaft,” in *Einführung in die Literaturwissenschaft*, ed. Miltos Pechlivanos (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 1995), 241–256; Susan Arndt, “The ‘Racial Turn’: Kolonialismus, Weiße Mythen und Critical Whiteness Studies,” in *Koloniale und postkoloniale Konstruktionen von Afrika und Menschen afrikanischer Herkunft in der deutschen Alltagskultur*, ed. Marianne Bechhaus-Gerst (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2007), 11–26.

2 That is, differences among individuals within racial groups have been shown to exhibit as much, if not more, genetic variance than individuals between races, effectively rendering any system of racial classification arbitrary. For further discussion of scientific racism, see: Ali Rattansi, *Racism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 69–85.

3 See Susannah Heschel, *The Aryan Jesus: Christian Theologians and the Bible in Nazi Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2008); Laura S. Nasrallah and Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, eds., *Prejudice and Christian Beginnings: Investigating Race, Gender, and Ethnicity in Early Christian Studies* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2009); Shawn Kelley, *Racializing Jesus: Race, Ideology, and the Formation of Modern Biblical Scholarship* (London: Routledge, 2002).

and logics of modern racialization lie much deeper. The problem, instead, is ideological. Accordingly, the very notion of race is a contested concept, a site of domination and resistance, entangled in a web of competing discourses – none of which can be taken for granted. On this account the Bible is both more than and less than a justification for racist practices: it serves as the very vehicle for modernity's racial thinking. The underlying issue, therefore, is not so much that the Bible has been racialized, but that the very idea of race has been biblicalized. This crisscrossing of racializing the Bible, or biblicalizing race, is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the dominant Western representation of Jesus who has been deracialized from a dark-skinned Mediterranean to a light-skinned Euro-American. Jesus is made white.

Two recent volumes have tackled the complex intersection of race in American Christianity. The first volume, *Christians and the Color Line*, is a collection of essays edited by J. Russell Hawkins and Phillip Luke Sinitiere. The second volume, *Christology and Whiteness*, is a collection of essays edited by George Yancy. Although the structure and aims of the volumes vary, there is nevertheless a common assumption they both share – there is something afoot between christological discourse, on the one hand, and racial discourse, on the other. Notably, the titles of each book juxtapose a similar pairing of terms (e.g., Christians/Christology, color line/whiteness). Any review is selective and partial, and the present review is no different. My aim in what follows is to zero in on the intricate relationship between christological and racial discourse. My inquiry will be guided by two questions: (1) How is the critical intersection between the two constructed and conceived? (2) What are the constructive solutions and proposals that are offered in response? After an examination of each book, I conclude with an overall assessment of both volumes.

2 Racial Discourse and Evangelical Theology

In the first volume, the correlation between christological discourse and race is directly proportional: the former contributes to and is partially responsible for the latter. According to Hawkins and Sinitiere, the collection of essays originated as a multidisciplinary conference held in 2010 to commemorate the ten year anniversary of *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*, written by two sociologists and self-identifying evangelicals, Michael Emerson and Christian Smith.⁴ Emerson and Smith issued a trenchant

4 Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

critique that the individualistic focus of white evangelical theology served to maintain the color line.⁵ Hawkins and Sinitiere affirm the provocative thesis that “white evangelicals are more individualistic, relational, and antistructural than other Americans *and that their theology has contributed to the manifestation of these characteristics*” (emphasis original).⁶ According to this assessment, evangelicalism is not strictly a theological enterprise devoid of bias, but is itself the vehicle that produces and perpetuates a racialized society. Hawkins and Sinitiere explain:

And, most compellingly, their theological commitments rooted in freewill accountable individualism along with their racial isolation from minority groups causes white evangelicals not only to miss the deeper effects of a racialized society but also to reproduce these effects.⁷

All of the essays in *Christians and the Color Line* take Emerson and Smith’s thesis as a point of departure with the aims of bolstering, revising, and expanding their research. These aims are reflected in the two-fold organization of the volume. Part 1 is comprised of five essays that offer a historical assessment of evangelical failures and successes in erasing the color line. Part 2 is comprised of five essays that discuss possibilities for overcoming the color line.

Some essays further substantiate Emerson and Smith’s research. Miles S. Mullin analyzes neo-evangelical periodicals to pinpoint the moderate individualism that has come to characterize current evangelical responses to racial issues. Surveying this historical context helps to explain why evangelical efforts at racial integration were minimal, and at times even hostile, in the period leading up to the Civil Rights Movement.⁸ Other essays broaden the scope of *Divided by Faith* by analyzing non-evangelical examples of racial integration. Karen Joy Johnson traces the founding of Friendship House in Chicago as an

5 J. Russell Hawkins and Phillip Luke Sinitiere, “Introduction,” in *Christians and the Color Line*, eds. J. Russell Hawkins and Phillip Luke Sinitiere (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 1–14; here, 2.

6 Hawkins and Sinitiere, “Introduction,” 4–5.

7 Hawkins and Sinitiere, “Introduction,” 5.

8 Miles S. Mullin, “Neoevangelicalism and the Problem of Race in Postwar America,” in *Christians and the Color Line*, eds. J. Russell Hawkins and Phillip Luke Sinitiere (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 15–44; here, 33. For a critical account of evangelical individualism and opposition to Martin Luther King, Jr. and the Civil Rights Movement, see Curtis J. Evans, “White Evangelical Protestant Responses to the Civil Rights Movement,” *Harvard Theological Review* 102, no. 2 (2009): 245–273; especially, 252–269.

example of white Catholics crossing racial boundaries to create personal relationships in what she refers to as “Catholic interracialism.”⁹ Still others problematize various aspects of Emerson and Smith’s thesis. For example, Brantley W. Gasaway shows how certain progressive evangelical leaders – notably, Jim Wallis and Ronald Sider – have outspokenly condemned racism against Native Americans and African Americans as a structural sin.¹⁰ For Gasaway, then, progressive evangelicals are an important exception to the norm. Yet in each of the essays, Emerson and Smith’s original diagnosis is by and large assumed as a given.

What are the proposed solutions? As one might expect from a collection of essays, the suggestions are varied. But they are mostly centered around ecclesiological praxis – i.e., what local evangelical congregations can do to become more racially inclusive.

Some of the responses are optimistic in tone and outlook. A solution that is recurrent throughout the volume, as seen above in the example of Friendship House, is fostering interpersonal church-based relationships to bring about social change.¹¹ Tobin Miller Shearer cites the example of Community Mennonite Church to contest what he believes to be an undue emphasis on structural matters in Emerson and Smith’s critique. Shearer is also critical of the sociological framework Emerson and Smith employ and believes that critical race theory, whiteness studies, and sociology of race have a limited role in changing white evangelical attitudes.¹² Instead, Shearer sees church-based relationships as a promising avenue. Far from being a deterrent to racial integration, individual relationships, Shearer suggests, have the potential of relativizing oppressive racial norms.¹³ Edward J. Blum takes a slightly more nuanced approach to individualism. Blum acknowledges that individualism has been used paradoxically

9 Karen Joy Johnson, “Healing the Mystical Body: Catholic Attempts to Overcome the Racial Divide in Chicago, 1930–1948” in *Christians and the Color Line*, eds. J. Russell Hawkins and Phillip Luke Sinitiere (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 45–71; here, 47.

10 Brantley W. Gasaway, “‘Glimmers of Hope’: Progressive Evangelicals and Racism, 1965–2000” in *Christians and the Color Line*, eds. J. Russell Hawkins and Phillip Luke Sinitiere (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 72–99; here, 89.

11 See Curtiss DeYoung, Michael O. Emerson, George Yancey, and Karen Chai Kim, *United by Faith: The Multiracial Congregation as an Answer to the Problem of Race* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

12 Tobin Miller Shearer, “‘Buttcheek to Buttcheek in the Pew’: Interracial Relationalism in a Mennonite Congregation, 1957–2010” in *Christians and the Color Line*, eds. J. Russell Hawkins and Phillip Luke Sinitiere (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 100–127; here, 101.

13 Shearer, “Buttcheek to Buttcheek in the Pew,” 103.

to perpetuate and dismantle racist practices in society.¹⁴ Nevertheless, Blum believes that a shift in thinking from individuals to individual family units is necessary. Building on this insight, he concludes with an intriguing suggestion that multiracial family units will have an important role to play in shaping the future of evangelical multiracial churches.¹⁵

However, there is considerable debate on the efficacy of the multiracial church model. A number of contributors are unconvinced that fostering multiracial congregations represents a viable solution for overcoming the color line. For instance, Erica Ryu Wong is doubtful whether the multiracial church model can actually impact racial inequalities in a meaningful way, since a demographically integrated church is not the same as a relationally integrated multiracial church.¹⁶ In some cases, multiracial churches have less solidarity and can produce more conflict. Similarly, Korie L. Edwards is wary of the limits of the multiracial church model. She shows how multiracial churches in the past have actually reinforced the status quo regarding social ills such as slavery.¹⁷ Racial integration, even when achieved, only occurs inside the walls of a church and leaves the racialized structures of broader society intact. Mark T. Mulder approaches the question from yet another angle. Through an examination of worship service transcripts, Mulder concludes that evangelical worship is almost always decontextualized and functions primarily in the interest of group cohesion rather than social or political transformation.¹⁸ This helps to explain why many evangelical congregations are homogeneous and remain in isolation.¹⁹

14 Edward J. Blum, "Beyond Body Counts: Sex, Individualism, and the Segregated Shape of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism" in *Christians and the Color Line*, eds. J. Russell Hawkins and Phillip Luke Sinitiere (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 161–177; here, 163.

15 Blum, "Beyond Body Counts," 174.

16 Erica Ryu Wong, "Knotted Together: Identity and Community in a Multiracial Church" in *Christians and the Color Line*, eds. J. Russell Hawkins and Phillip Luke Sinitiere (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 205–230; here, 206, 207, 225.

17 Korie L. Edwards, "Much Ado About Nothing? Rethinking the Efficacy of Multiracial Churches for Racial Reconciliation" in *Christians and the Color Line*, eds. J. Russell Hawkins and Phillip Luke Sinitiere (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 231–254; here, 234, 248, 250.

18 Mark T. Mulder, "Worshipping to Stay the Same: Avoiding the Local to Maintain Solidarity" in *Christians and the Color Line*, eds. J. Russell Hawkins and Phillip Luke Sinitiere (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 143–160; here, 145.

19 In many ways, these conclusions support but do not significantly alter Emerson and Smith's original assessment in *Divided by Faith*, 18: "Nevertheless, we argue that religion, as structured in America, is unable to make a great impact on the racialized society. In

As the essays in Part 2 of the volume indicate, there is no real consensus on how evangelicals can overcome the color line. A major weakness of the volume, therefore, is that it does not spell out a clear or compelling solution. To be sure, there are several constructive possibilities that are explored. But many of the proposed solutions are tertiary to the original problem identified by Emerson and Smith. Indeed, according to Emerson and Smith's contention, the underlying problem of the color line is not ecclesiological, but theologically rooted in "freewill-individualist tradition."²⁰ Therefore, it stands to reason that a major avenue for further inquiry should be evangelical theology itself. Regrettably, discussions of how evangelical theology is implicated in, or might be extricated from, the problem of racial division are curiously absent. A related issue is that while the correlation between evangelical theology and race is frequently referenced, it is not clearly or sufficiently addressed. Consequently, key terms (e.g., race, racism, color line) are neither defined nor adequately theorized, but are assumed to be self-evident concepts used interchangeably by historians, sociologists, and theologians alike.

There are two important exceptions that should be noted. The first exception is Jerry Park, a sociologist, who critiques the multiracial church model by exploring the role of other minority groups such as Asian American Christians. He argues that only a select group of upwardly mobile, second generation Asian Americans typically attend multiracial congregations. This group, however, is unlikely to "pose a threat to the power and influence of whites in these religious organizations" and can unintentionally maintain the racial divide.²¹ Park's analysis is significant insofar as it highlights the role of other racial-ethnic minorities, thereby destabilizing the white-black binary Emerson and Smith's research presupposes. But what is important for our purposes is how Park couples theories of assimilation with Christian identity formation.

fact, far from knocking down racial barriers, religion generally serves to maintain these historical divides, and helps to develop new ones ... In short, religion in the United States can serve as a moral force in freeing people, but not in bringing them together as equals across racial lines. American religion is thus one embodiment of larger American contradictions."

20 Emerson and Smith, *Divided by Faith*, 77.

21 Jerry Park, "Color-Conscious Structure-Blind Assimilation: How Asian American Christians Can Unintentionally Maintain the Racial Divide" in *Christians and the Color Line*, eds. J. Russell Hawkins and Phillip Luke Sinitiere (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 143–160; here, 197. For further discussion of the role of second generation Asian Americans, see: Rebecca Y. Kim, "Second-Generation Korean American Evangelicals: Ethnic, Multiethnic, Or White Campus Ministries?" *Sociology of Religion* 65.1 (2004): 19–34.

In developing his case, he draws special attention to the link between christological and racial discourse in white Christian assimilation: "To the extent that white Christian Americans associate national identity with Christian identity, then Christian identity is linked with whiteness."²² This latent connection between Christianness and whiteness as constituting the quintessential national American identity furnishes a crucial insight, beyond Emerson and Smith, for understanding evangelical failures in overcoming the color line. Park further gestures at the significance of this link when he writes, "Indeed, if Christianity, American identity, and whiteness are all linked together, then the roots of American identity have the imprint of their faith."²³ In this statement, Park puts his finger on the intersection between evangelical theology and the problematic of race. But he does not go any further in developing this insight in explicit terms. What precisely is it about evangelical theology that makes white evangelicals arguably one of the least racially integrated groups in American society? How did Christianness and whiteness become so closely aligned in the history of American evangelicalism so as to be virtually indistinguishable?

The other notable exception is Darryl Scriven who issues a powerful critique that hits the theological nerve of the problem. In the Theological Afterword to the volume, entitled "The Call to Blackness in American Christianity," Scriven points out an important theological difference between white and black evangelicals. If white evangelicals tend toward a more individualistic theology that emphasizes spiritual matters, then black evangelicals tend toward a more progressive theology that is social in character. This theological dichotomy of spiritual and social serves as an important marker of racial difference. Here, whiteness is much more than a skin color, but a political idea that maintains structural forms of power and privilege over and against non-white others.²⁴ With this definition, Scriven proceeds to locate whiteness as a theological byproduct of evangelicalism. He writes:

In relation to the American church, whiteness is not something divorced from theological underpinnings. Instead, whiteness becomes amalgamated with the orientation and framework in which Christianity is practiced. In that context, Christianity is acculturated and mixed with whiteness but presented in the society as meta-cultural and imperceptibly free

22 Park, "Color-Conscious Structure-Blind Assimilation," 180.

23 Park, "Color-Conscious Structure-Blind Assimilation," 181.

24 Darryl Scriven, "Theological Afterword: The Call to Blackness in American Christianity" in *Christians and the Color Line*, eds. J. Russell Hawkins and Phillip Luke Sinitiere (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 255–274; here, 257.

from racialized entrapments. In fact, some of the epistemic beauty of whiteness is how it seamlessly blends into its surroundings as if it does not exist.²⁵

Christianness and whiteness are comparable insofar as they enjoy a similar position: both are universal, invisible, and “free from racialized entrapments.” Yet there is a deeper logic at work that underscores how they are interconnected. Scriven continues:

Christian theology for African Americans is firmly rooted in the socio-spiritual as opposed to what seems to be the prevailing evangelical idea that the theological precedes, overshadows, and therefore reduces the social to irrelevance. The evangelical claim is that conversion experiences fundamentally transcend barriers of race and class. This notion comes from a certain theological vantage point with hidden class and racial presumptions.²⁶

This is perhaps the clearest statement in the volume on the intersection between evangelical theology and race. To rephrase Scriven, there is a crucial difference in how Christian theology functions between the two groups. For black evangelicals Christian theology is a socio-spiritual enterprise that helps to confront matters such as race. For white evangelicals, in contrast, Christian theology helps to subvert social matters such as race and is the very means of that subversion (i.e., conversion). On this reading, the fault lines that divide white and black evangelicals are not racial, but profoundly theological. Indeed, it is precisely the individualistic framework of evangelical theology that produces and perpetuates whiteness.²⁷ It is in this sense that white evangelicals are racially “divided by faith.”

Both Parts 1 and 2 of *Christians and the Color Line* end on a somber note. The problem of racial division among evangelicals remains. But no coherent plan of action is agreed upon for moving forward. This predicament is at odds with the Introduction, in which the editors state that *Divided by Faith's* unique accomplishment lies in its influence in shaping the subculture of American

25 Scriven, “Theological Afterword,” 258.

26 Scriven, “Theological Afterword,” 263.

27 For a critique of individualism vis-à-vis Whiteness studies, see: Eric Tranby and Douglas Hartmann, “Critical Whiteness Theories and the Evangelical ‘Race Problem’: Extending Emerson and Smith’s Divided By Faith,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 47, no. 3 (2008): 341–359.

evangelicalism. Yet there is no sustained discussion on how evangelical race relations have improved since the publication of *Divided by Faith* beyond a few anecdotes in the Introduction. In point of fact, Ryan Cobb's survey of recent evangelical responses to the problem of race argues the very opposite. Cobb claims that the problem of racial division has worsened, and that white evangelicals continue to be more individualistic than any other group in American society.²⁸ To be sure, Hawkins and Sinitiere are right in celebrating the recent trend of evangelicals embracing racial diversity. This is a remarkable fact that anyone familiar with the history of American evangelicalism can appreciate. Overall, then, *Christians and the Color Line* contains a number of good insights on making evangelical churches more racially integrated. But regarding the original problem as diagnosed by Emerson and Smith, the two noted exceptions notwithstanding, the volume leaves something to be desired in addressing the racial implications of evangelical theology.²⁹

3 Racial Discourse and Contemporary Christology

The second volume, *Christology and Whiteness*, is similar to the first insofar as it presents a number of constructive interventions on the complex relationship between Christianity and race. Yet there are important differences in the way the problematic is constructed. These differences are important to note at the outset since a different starting point and diagnosis inevitably lead to different solutions. The first difference is a broader scope of participants. According to the Introduction by George Yancy, the volume encompasses American Christianity more broadly, including Protestants and Catholics (i.e., white Christians) – rather than focusing on a particular tradition (i.e., white evangelicals). A second important difference concerns the definition of race. In *Christians and the Color Line*, race seems to be a self-evident concept that marks biological or social differences between individual groups. By contrast, race in *Christology and Whiteness* is not so much a natural phenomenon, but an ideology that structures relations between dominant and minority groups in hierarchi-

28 Ryan J. Cobb, "Still Divided by Faith? Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America, 1977–2010" in *Christians and the Color Line*, eds. J. Russell Hawkins and Phillip Luke Sinitiere (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 128–142; here, 129.

29 For a more critical and robust account of the politics of race in evangelicalism, see J. Kameron Carter, "Race and the Experience of Death: Theologically Reappraising American Evangelicalism" in *Cambridge Companion to Evangelical Theology*, ed. Timothy Larsen and Daniel J. Treier (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 177–198.

cal fashion. In Yancy's words, race is "a socially constructed category that has real and profound *socio*-ontological, existential, political, and psychological implications for those who are categorized as white and nonwhite (emphasis original)."³⁰ According to this perspective, also known as "race realism," race is a highly politicized discourse by which the formations and relations of power in society are constituted.

Another key difference that follows from different definitions is how the underlying problematic is constructed. In *Christians and the Color Line*, the racial problematic is conceived of in static terms as racial division (i.e., color line). Therefore, many of solutions are framed as removing the color line, interracialism, multiracial congregations, etc. In essence, the main issue is the problem of the color line (i.e., the racial). In *Christology and Whiteness*, racial division is significant but largely symptomatic. There is a deeper issue that lies beneath the problem of the color line – namely, the problem of whiteness (i.e., the non-racial). Yancy defines whiteness as a structural system of power and privilege that "functions, paradoxically, as that which signifies the 'superior' *race* while precisely obfuscating its status as *raced*."³¹ Against this backdrop, he reverses the traditional focus of race on minority groups and shifts the problematic to dominant groups by making explicit the convergence of white identity with Christian identity. He writes:

The entire problematic regarding one's white Christian identity in relationship to whiteness is one that ought to be taken seriously. Within this context, Christology becomes a deep existential prism through which to think about what ought to be done about one's whiteness and the problem of whiteness in our contemporary moment.³²

Although many Christians would no doubt reject white supremacist ideologies as antithetical to Christian faith, white Christians, being part of the dominant group, nevertheless benefit from structural advantages whiteness confers in American society over and against non-white minorities. It is incumbent upon white Christians, Yancy argues, to think theologically about the problem of whiteness. Therefore, the central question of the book seeks to address the problem of whiteness, drawing on a popular evangelical mantra: What Would Jesus Do? (wwJD). This question serves as the constructive point of departure

30 George Yancy, "Introduction: Framing the Problem," in *Christology and Whiteness: What Would Jesus Do?* ed. George Yancy (New York: Routledge, 2012), 1–18; here, 12.

31 Yancy, "Introduction," 8.

32 Yancy, "Introduction," 6.

for each essay. As a whole, the volume is intended to be a direct challenge to white Christians to rethink the normative relationship between Christology and whiteness.³³

What are the solutions? Similar to the first volume, the responses are varied, but for different reasons. For some, the figure of Jesus is so fraught and hotly contested that the question of what Jesus might do about the problem of whiteness, even hypothetically, is a non-starter. For William David Hart, not only is the Christian imagination deeply influenced by racial ideology, the very premise of Historical Jesus scholarship is also inherently flawed. According to Hart, there is little substance to the life and teaching of Jesus that is actually recoverable. Drawing on Howard Thurman's *Jesus and the Disinherited*, he concludes that the question (WWJD) is not very useful: "Jesus is not the answer to whiteness. He is a contested signifier, a site of struggle *for and against* the ideology of race, the practices of racism, and the residual structures of white supremacy (emphasis original)."³⁴ Anthony B. Pinn is more sympathetic to the ways enslaved Africans, African Americans during Civil Rights, and womanist theologians have identified with Jesus in their fight against racial injustice. Yet he, too, is critical of the mythology surrounding Jesus and the contradictory ways the figure of Jesus have been deployed to promote and critique whiteness.³⁵ Pinn reasons that using Christology as the basis for any constructive project normalizes human suffering, reinscribes whiteness, and fails to address power relations. Victor Anderson is also skeptical, but for theological reasons. Anderson approaches the figure of the white Jesus through the lens of Christian supersessionism – a system of belief that understands Christ's redemption as fulfilling and superseding God's prior covenants. Supersessionism consists of binaries (e.g., Jews or Gentiles, synagogue or church, Christian or Muslim, white or black), which, he argues, drawing on the work of René Girard, are marked by mimetic desire. In short, the rivalry and violence that mimetic desire produces are part and parcel of the logic on which the white Jesus is based. The gospel of Jesus is therefore scandalous insofar as it supersedes racial difference, which is good news for some but not for others.³⁶

33 Yancy, "Introduction: Framing the Problem," 12.

34 William David Hart, "Jesus, Whiteness, and the Disinherited" in *Christology and Whiteness: What Would Jesus Do?* ed. George Yancy (New York: Routledge, 2012), 156–168; here, 167.

35 Anthony B. Pinn, "Looking like Me?: Jesus Images, Christology, and the Limitations of Theological Blackness" in *Christology and Whiteness: What Would Jesus Do?* ed. George Yancy (New York: Routledge, 2012), 169–179; here, 169.

36 Victor Anderson, "The Mimesis of Salvation and Dissimilitude in the Scandalous Gospel

Other contributors see the Bible as a viable starting point for asking how Jesus might address the problem of whiteness. James W. Perkinson approaches the question (WWJD) by comparing what Jesus did to what he is doing now. Using a call/response method, Perkinson defines whiteness in terms of economic oppression and locates the problem of whiteness to Wall Street, and, more specifically, the 1 percent. Perkinson responds by turning to biblical references to the Samaritans in Luke and John. He argues that Jesus engaged in the subversive social practice of trespassing ethnic boundaries by willingly identifying as a disenfranchised Samaritan. This, then, provides a possible example of resistance to disrupt the current political and economic order. Cheryl Townsend Gilkes also appeals to Jesus's encounter with Samaritans. She argues that both Elisha's and Jesus's ministry in Samaria, of breaking down racial barriers between Jews and Samaritans, provide a model in contemporary North America for overturning the idea of race as a modern invention.³⁷ Josiah U. Young III is more cautious in his approach to the question. He does not believe that the problem of racism will be resolved until Christ returns in glory. Until then, the problematic link between Christian soteriology and racism will likely remain, but all is not lost, and herein lies the tension. For even in liberative passages such as Luke 4:18–19, there is conflicting evidence of oppressive practices such as slavery that linger in the background (Lev. 25:44–46). Nevertheless, Young finds hope in the eschatological future of the risen Christ. The promise of the *parousia* brings about the realization of racial justice in the present.

Other contributors approach the question, more narrowly, from the vantage point and experience of black Christians. Moni McIntyre surveys the influential role the black church has had historically. From its early origins in colonial times, the black church was marked by the belief that “God is on the side of the poor and marginalized.”³⁸ This liberative message shaped a distinctive style of worship and preaching that is characteristic of the black church tradition. She pinpoints a key moment of segregation to the founding of two churches in Philadelphia in 1794: Bethel African American Methodist by Richard Allen

of Jesus” in *Christology and Whiteness: What Would Jesus Do?* ed. George Yancy (New York: Routledge, 2012), 196–211; here, 197.

37 Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, “Jesus Must Needs Go through Samaria: Disestablishing the Mountains of Race and the Hegemony of Whiteness” in *Christology and Whiteness: What Would Jesus Do?* ed. George Yancy (New York: Routledge, 2012), 59–74; here, 69.

38 Moni McIntyre, “The Black Church and Whiteness: Looking for Jesus in Strange Places” in *Christology and Whiteness: What Would Jesus Do?* ed. George Yancy (New York: Routledge, 2012), 75–83; here, 76.

and St. Thomas African Episcopal Church by Absalom Jones. This is a significant moment because Allen subsequently formed the first African-American denomination, the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME), from which other black denominations originated – including, African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, the Church of God in Christ, and the National Baptist Convention, among others. McIntyre argues that the oppressive power of whiteness led to the exclusion of black Christians, spawning the black church movement and causing it to flourish.³⁹ One mainline denomination McIntyre notes as an exception is the Episcopal Church. She cites the Church of the Holy Cross in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania as an example where both white and black Christians found a resilient Jesus in strange places. Traci West's essay, entitled "When a White Man-God is the Truth and the Way for Black Christians," also grapples with the experience of black Christians. West shows how white-supremacist ideology has been fused with a "Christocentric belief in white superiority and black inferiority."⁴⁰ Consequently, she argues it is imperative to acknowledge the deleterious effects of white-supremacist Christologies and the ways they have been harmful to the psyche of black Christians. An appropriate Jesus-ethic, West proposes, is a "blackening" Christology – by which she means a counter-cultural Christology that acknowledges the worth of black humanity and undermines social hierarchies.⁴¹

The most compelling responses to the question, in my view, are the essays that directly address the problem of whiteness. Karen Teel, a white Roman Catholic theologian, takes up this challenge in the first essay of the collection. She opens with W.E.B. Du Bois's famous declaration that "the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line." Du Bois notes how many white people responded with the question, "How does it feel to be a problem?" Teel turns this sentiment on its ears by shifting the problem back onto whiteness, which she argues is a "white Christian theological problem that demands a white theological response."⁴² But part of the problem is that whiteness, by definition, is always unmarked and assumed, so it is never seen to be a problem. So the first step, she argues, is to help individual white Christians

39 McIntyre, "The Black Church and Whiteness," 77.

40 Traci C. West, "When a White Man-God is the Truth and the Way for Black Christians" in *Christology and Whiteness: What Would Jesus Do?* ed. George Yancy (New York: Routledge, 2012), 114–127; here, 124.

41 West, "When a White Man-God is the Truth and the Way for Black Christians," 124.

42 Karen Teel, "What Jesus Wouldn't Do: A White Theologian Engages Whiteness" in *Christology and Whiteness: What Would Jesus Do?* ed. George Yancy (New York: Routledge, 2012), 19–35; here, 19–20.

see the systemic nature of the problem before identifying ways to struggle against it. What is necessary, then, is to challenge the dominant assumption that Jesus would be white were he to be alive today and to see this assumption as highly problematic. In fact, without an understanding of whiteness as a structural problem, asking the question (wwJD) is not only distracting but also “lends itself to answers that address symptoms, not the disease itself.”⁴³ Teel proposes that one way for white Christians to oppose whiteness is developing a Christology to “cultivate discomfort in our own skins” as a way to reckon with the fact Jesus would not be white.⁴⁴

Jennifer Harvey’s essay dovetails nicely with Teel’s and further develops some of its implications. Harvey’s starting point is to foreground the self and the social landscape in which race becomes meaningful and imbued with power. She defines whiteness as a “hydra-headed phenomenon intrinsically related to white supremacy” that “pervades the U.S. landscape, normalizing and making normative the collective dominance of persons racialized as ‘white.’”⁴⁵ In a context where the default image of Jesus is white, Harvey reasons that identifying with Jesus has very different implications for white Christians than for, say, black, Latino/a, and Asian American Christians. She suggests that for white Christians the question of “identifying with Jesus is a problematic enterprise that might actually reinscribe whiteness.”⁴⁶ What kind of Jesus, then, should white Christians identify with? Harvey examines two possibilities – the social justice Jesus and the Black Christ. She finds that the figure of the social justice Jesus is insufficient insofar as it is typically rendered “race-less.”⁴⁷ However, she also finds a problematic tension for white Christians to identify with the Black Christ, since they are not black, which then “runs the risk of actually avoiding their own race and power.”⁴⁸ Her solution is for white Christians to disidentify with Jesus. She explains:

The task of white Christians is not to ask what Jesus would do in order to identify with or imitate Jesus – at least not yet. As long as whiteness is the norm and white supremacy that which constitutes our identity, we must

43 Teel, “What Jesus Wouldn’t Do,” 25.

44 Teel, “What Jesus Wouldn’t Do,” 30.

45 Jennifer Harvey, “What Would Zacchaeus Do? The Case for *Disidentifying* with Jesus” in in *Christology and Whiteness: What Would Jesus Do?* ed. George Yancy (New York: Routledge, 2012), 84–100; here, 84.

46 Harvey, “What Would Zacchaeus Do?” 86.

47 Harvey, “What Would Zacchaeus Do?” 89.

48 Harvey, “What Would Zacchaeus Do?” 95.

ever acknowledge the real hurdles that exist, creating distance between ourselves and the Black Christ. Our task is to recognize that what Jesus did and said, taken seriously, means that the white Christian is instead called to identify with and imitate Zacchaeus.⁴⁹

If whiteness is a structural phenomenon that is profoundly theological, as Teel argues, then a logical implication, as Harvey develops, is for white Christians to respond collectively in a way that is not race-less or race-evasive. Identifying with Zacchaeus, not Jesus, represents a critical move that allows white Christians to simultaneously become race-cognizant and decenter whiteness. Teel's and Harvey's contributions are both theologically and theoretically-astute. They are, in my view, worth the price of the volume.

As this survey of possible solutions indicates, the breadth of responses in *Christology and Whiteness* is impressive. Overall, the link between christological and racial discourse is more explicit. But rather than being directly proportional, as in *Christians and the Color Line*, the relationship is more convoluted. Sometimes racial discourse is framed as the problem christological discourse can resolve; other times, the relationship is inverted such that christological discourse itself is seen as part of the problem; and still at other times, there is no discernible correlation between the two. Likewise, the solutions that are proposed are just as varied and divergent. In the end, there is no clear-cut solution and there are more questions raised than there are answers. But this is one of the volume's strengths for it underscores the multi-faceted nature of whiteness as a compelling theological problem.

4 Conclusion

Christians and the Color Line and *Christology and Whiteness* represent two very different perspectives on and approaches to the intersection of christological and racial discourse in American Christianity. As we have seen, there are key differences in the way the underlying problematic is constructed. In the first volume, the problematic of race is framed in static terms as ostensibly shaped by yet still very much external to christological discourse. Indeed, the title of the volume seems to telegraph this assumption, differentiating "Christians" *here* from "the color line" *there*. The implication seems to be that white evangelical Christians, as a homogenous group, are a non-racial entity

49 Harvey, "What Would Zacchaeus Do?" 98–99.

that must somehow cross, overcome, or otherwise remove the color line in order for racial unity to be achieved. In the second volume, the problematic of race is framed in ideological terms to foreground the formations and relations of power involving race. According to this perspective, there is a peculiar logic at work in the discourse of race (e.g., it applies to some people, but not to all) – a logic, moreover, that is christologically produced.

Yet on balance, both volumes model the importance of critical and open dialogue as an integral way of moving the conversation forward. For if the problems surrounding race – whether defined statically as racial division or ideologically as power and privilege – are not only individual but also structural, then engaging in critical dialogue with a diverse range of interlocutors is absolutely necessary. To be sure, the circle of participants in *Christians and the Color Line* is predominantly white, just as the circle of participants in *Christology and Whiteness* is predominantly black. But ironically enough, in both volumes it is those who are on the outside, so to speak, who offer the most insightful proposals – namely, Park and Scriven as minority contributors to *Christians and the Color Line* and Teel and Harvey as dominant contributors to *Christology and Whiteness*. In the final analysis, there are a myriad of differences that complicate any simple or easy diagnosis or solution. Despite their differences, or perhaps on account of them, both volumes attest to the enduring significance of race as a powerful ideology that has shaped and continues to shape the history of American Christianity.

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