

BETRAYING GRADUALIST WHITE CHRISTIAN SOCIAL ETHICS:  
AN ETHICS OF RUPTURE

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## **ABSTRACT**

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An Ethics of Rupture

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Despite the increasingly strident tone of racial discourse and the dismaying growth in hateful, racist conduct in the United States, there does not appear to be an accompanying upsurge in the attention given to these developments in Christian social ethics. Indeed, there is a profound silence from some White Christian, social ethicists on issues of racism and White supremacy. Other White Christian social ethicists continue to employ Christian realist analyses as Reinhold Niebuhr did in the mid-twentieth century.

At the same time, many progressive White Christians continue to oppose racial justice initiatives that have the potential to make significant inroads against structural racism and White supremacy. These individuals remain committed to gradualistic remedies, which result in progress, but at an exceedingly slow pace and in tiny increments. In addition, many progressive White Christians understand racial colorblindness as another effective remedy for racial injustice despite its adverse effects on people of color. Racial colorblindness was a progressive concept in the mid-twentieth century when juxtaposed with Jim Crow laws. Over the years, however, the progressiveness of racial colorblindness has been usurped and replaced by an understanding that reinforces and exacerbates racism and White supremacy.

In response to the absence of sustained progress toward racial justice, I propose an ethic of rupture intended to unsettle radically current theoretical approaches to antiracist Christian social ethics. In addition, this proposed ethic of rupture will explore

possibilities to replace existing theoretical models and offer concrete practices that will bring about rapid and sustained progress toward eliminating racial injustice.

## **DEDICATION**

To my family

My parents, John and Irene Matteis. Without you, none of this would have been possible.

To my son Brandon Nuyen and my daughter Kristen Nuyen. Thank you for your love and support. Your faith in me is awe-inspiring and so appreciated. I love you both.

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## INTRODUCTION

*Betraying* gradualist White Christian social ethics? Intuitively it might be easy to understand a betrayal of gradualism as a method of eliminating racial injustice. As will be developed, gradualism has resulted in some change in the direction of racial justice, but it occurs very slowly and in small increments. But why betray White Christian social ethics, and why is it so urgent? I use the word “betraying” intentionally to suggest a rejection and turning away from many of the iterations of antiracist social ethics constructed by well-meaning and progressive White Christian social ethicists. This term expresses needed discontent and reflects a demand for a relentless critique of scholarship that adheres to a canon that may support or reinforce the racial status quo rather than positing how to replace it.<sup>1</sup>

### The Genesis of the Project

I was born in Detroit, Michigan. My parents, of Russian and German descent, emigrated from Canada in the 1940s. My family moved from Detroit to Westland, a second-ring suburb of Detroit, when I was sixteen months old. Westland was and is a predominantly blue-collar city. It was almost exclusively White when I lived there and is still overwhelmingly White today. I recall my parents telling me at some point that we moved because the Detroit neighborhood we had lived in was “changing.” I eventually understood this was coded language; my family moved because Blacks were moving into

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<sup>1</sup> In many ways, this betrayal is akin to being a race traitor, as brought to life in Mab Segrest’s, *Memoir of a Race Traitor: Fighting Racism in the American South*, (New York: The New Press, 2019). Noel Ignatiev’s “How to be a Race Traitor: Six Ways to Fight Being White,” in *Critical White Studies: Looking Behind the Mirror*, ed. Richard Delgado and Jean Stefanie (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1997), 613, identifies specific ways of being a race traitor.



the Detroit neighborhood where we lived. In the entirely White area of Westland where I grew up, bigoted and racist attitudes abounded, both at home and in the community.

In 1970, I completed the eighth grade and started ninth grade. The elementary and junior high schools I attended were virtually all White; only four Black students out of approximately 1600 students attended my high school. Although Westland is only twenty-five miles from Detroit, I did not pay any attention to events in the city, and I paid no attention to the Detroit Public Schools (DPS) or the court case filed in 1970 challenging segregation in those schools.

In between my sophomore and junior years of high school, the DPS and the litigation edged into my world, however, when on June 14, 1972, a federal District Court judge issued an order requiring cross-district busing among the 86 suburbs surrounding the City of Detroit and the City itself to ameliorate the racial segregation in the DPS.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> In 1970, the NAACP and the parents of several DPS students filed a lawsuit against the governor, the attorney general, the Michigan Board of Education, the Detroit Board of Education, and the Detroit School Superintendent, challenging the segregation of the DPS. After numerous legal maneuvers, a trial on the merits began on April 6, 1971. After the trial, Judge Stephen Roth ruled in favor of the plaintiffs, finding de jure segregation in the city of Detroit, and ordered intra-district busing within the DPS to achieve proportionate representation in the DPS. *Bradley, et al. v Milliken, et al.*, 338 F Supp 582 (ED Mich 1971). White parents opposed this plan due to the inferior schools that the minority students attended (older, more crowded, and with fewer resources) and the lengthy intra-district bus rides to which their children would be subjected. Joyce A. Baugh, *The Detroit School Busing Case: Milliken v Bradley and the Controversy Over Desegregation*, (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 2011), 110, 112, 119. After several appeals on various issues, Judge Roth issued another opinion on June 14, 1972, requiring busing within the boundaries of the DPS and among 86 suburban school districts in the Metropolitan Detroit Area. *Bradley, et al. v Milliken, et al.*, 345 F Supp 914 (ED Mich 1972). In 1974, the United States Supreme Court ruled in *Milliken I* that desegregation plans requiring inter-district busing could not be enforced without a finding of de jure segregation. In doing so, the United States Supreme Court elevated the right to local school district control over the rights of Black schoolchildren. *Milliken, et al. v. Bradley et al.*, 418 U.S. 714 (1974).

This decision provoked a significant commotion in my school, neighborhood, and home. White parents fearfully raised concerns about the long bus rides to which their children would be subjected (up to one and one-half hours one way), the quality of education their children would receive, and fears that their children might not be safe. These voiced concerns by White community members frequently were accompanied by racial epithets and racial stereotypes. Opposition to busing was vocalized publicly in rallies, demonstrations, and violence (bombing school buses).<sup>3</sup>

In my classes, the other White students would not use racial epithets when voicing their opposition to busing, instead couching their objections in relation to the long bus rides or the quality of education they would receive. I vividly remember one student who seemed suddenly concerned with the school's accreditation by the North Central Accreditation Association. I remember challenging this student and voicing the opinion that, but for the busing issue, he would not be concerned about the school's accreditation. He did not disagree. I recall having difficulty understanding why students in my school, their parents, and my parents exhibited such strong opposition to busing.

Although unable to articulate the reasons with any degree of sophistication, I know that I believed the underlying premise was faulty. White students were not somehow entitled to a better education, in better facilities, benefitting from a higher per pupil expenditure<sup>4</sup> than Black children. I also could not understand how or why I would be at risk by attending school with Black children. I recall wondering what the Black

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<sup>3</sup> Baugh, 109, 113. In the Pontiac, Michigan school district, where desegregation of the schools had been ordered in separate litigation, ten empty school buses were bombed and destroyed.

<sup>4</sup> Baugh, 144.

parents thought of the visceral adverse reaction to the possibility of their children attending schools in the suburbs. From my unsophisticated perspective, I saw only White parents opposing busing based on race-based beliefs.

As a child in 1970, I could not have known that the racial composition of the City of Detroit was 44.5% Black and that the racial composition of the DPS was 70% minority students and 30% White students.<sup>5</sup> I was unaware that, for the most part, White students in the DPS went to majority White schools, minority students went to predominantly minority schools, and that the predominantly minority schools had fewer resources and the quality of education provided was not equivalent to that of the White schools.<sup>6</sup> I also did not know the history of racial segregation in the Detroit area that resulted in segregated schools.

My Christian faith upbringing did not provide any assistance to help me understand this White opposition to busing. My family initially attended Hope Lutheran

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<sup>5</sup> Detroit History, accessed July 21, 2019, [www. http://historydetroit.com/statistics](http://historydetroit.com/statistics). The racial composition of the City of Detroit in 2016 reflected a minority population of approximately 90%. DataUSA: Detroit, MI, <https://datausa.io/profile/geo/detroit-mi/#demographics>. This includes Blacks, Indians, and people of Arabic descent, accessed July 15, 2019. A 2017 AP analysis of data from the National Center for Education Statistics enrollment data for the 2014-2015 school year revealed that Michigan had the second most segregated schools in the nation. Steve Carmody and Emma Winowiecki, "Report: Michigan Schools Second-Most Segregated in the Nation," December 4, 2017. <http://www.michiganradio.org/post/report-michigan-schools-second-most-segregated-nation>. But see "Fault Lines America's Most Segregating School District Borders," EdBuild, <http://viz.edbuild.org/maps/2016/fault-lines>, a 2015 study by EdBuild which found that the Detroit Public Schools were the most segregated in the nation. A State of Michigan report for the 2017-2018 school year revealed a minority population of 97.57% in the DPS, Ibid. The Detroit Board of Education policies and practices that contributed to segregation included "optional attendance zones, open enrollment, and school transfer policies, feeder patterns ... gerrymandering of attendance lines, school transportation policies, and school construction decisions." Baugh, 107.

<sup>6</sup> Baugh, 63, 95, 112.

church in Detroit. When the neighborhood in which Hope was located also began to “change,” a mission church, now known as Holy Cross Evangelical Lutheran Church, was started in Livonia, also a second-ring suburb, another overwhelmingly White suburb of Detroit.<sup>7</sup> Although founding members of the mission start might deny it, Holy Cross was a White flight church. Racial justice efforts at Holy Cross were nonexistent. Racism was not the subject of sermons in my formative years. Racist incidents did occur during the time I attended. When Thanksgiving and Christmas food baskets were distributed each year, judgmental comments were made about Blacks – “I don’t see why she needs a food basket; look at the expensive clothes she’s wearing,” or “Did you see the car? They probably spent all their money on that and didn’t have any left for food for the kids.” Given my parents’ attitudes on race and the absence of faith formation on subjects of discrimination, segregation, and racism, it is unsurprising that I had difficulty understanding the opposition to busing.

From the perspective of Christian social ethics, how should the reaction of White parents who opposed the court’s effort to enforce racial justice to the detriment of Black schoolchildren and their families be analyzed? What should the White Christian response be to this communal opposition? What sort of faith formation and education should be provided on racism and White supremacy? How might new theories and new analyses result in just racial relationships? This dissertation considers these questions as it explores the meaning of gradualism and a Christian ethical vision of antiracism.

To this end, Christian social ethics should contribute significant, critical insights and language to analyze the phenomenon of progressive, White Christian opposition to

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<sup>7</sup> Livonia had and continues to have a reputation for being very inhospitable to Blacks.

racial justice initiatives. Yet how White Christians exercise the impulse to oppose initiatives for racial justice has been insufficiently critiqued within the field of Christian social ethics. Even when Christian ethicists acknowledge such White Christian impulses, this social dynamic too often remains an ancillary point in Christian social ethics analyses.

In contrast to the sizable body of sociological, legal, and historical scholarship that has considered these issues and addressed Whites' resistance to initiatives for racial justice, there is insufficient theo-ethical scholarship that engages in similar analyses. My consideration not only engages a portion of that interdisciplinary scholarship but because of my childhood experiences, it also includes a contextual case study investigation of the opposition of White Christians to housing, employment, and school segregation in the City of Detroit between 1920 and 1975.<sup>8</sup> This segregation was rooted in decades-long patterns of social, political, and economic discrimination within the City of Detroit and the suburbs that sprang up around Detroit.<sup>9</sup> To a disturbingly significant extent, such segregation in the Detroit area continues today.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> This period was chosen as it coincides with the First and Second Great Migrations of Blacks (1910-1940 and 1940-1970, respectively) from the southern states to Detroit and the U.S. Supreme Court decision in *Milliken, et al., v Bradley, et al.*, in 1974 prohibiting cross-district busing to desegregate the DPS.

<sup>9</sup> See Baugh, 178. "School segregation between the city and its prosperous suburbs was the result of mortgage discrimination, suburban zoning, and home buying practices, and unequal education funding by the state." Also see Baugh, 19-42 generally for a history of segregation in Detroit; Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996) who analyzed the history of housing discrimination in Detroit, and "Fault Lines America's Most Segregating School District Borders," <http://viz.edbuild.org/maps/2016/fault-lines>, for an economic analysis of segregation in the DPS.

<sup>10</sup> "Fault Lines," 14-15.

## **A Problem With the Canon and a Program of Betrayal**

The canon of Christian social ethics is visible in many syllabi used in introductory Christian ethics courses in seminaries and undergraduate liberal arts curricula. White males often author the textbooks used; the standardized theoretical approaches are frequently based upon the earlier scholarly work of White males such as Reinhold Niebuhr. The focus is often on the categories of deontological, teleological, and virtue ethics as the favored approaches to ethical conundrums, as opposed to strategies that might consider how people who claim a Christian identity genuinely and authentically live in relation to one another consistent with the foundational Christian norms of love and justice.<sup>11</sup> To the extent scholarship of non-White, non-male scholars are included in a syllabus, it is often preceded by a racial, ethnic, gender, or other identifying appellation, differentiating it from the supposed norm of White male scholarship. While indeed canonical texts and categories of ethical approaches retain their utility and viability, I suggest that given the snail-like pace of gradualistic approaches to redressing racial injustices, new possibilities for urgently and extensively addressing racial discord must be considered and explored, especially considering the ongoing opposition to racial justice initiatives by White progressive Christians, despite their profession of antiracist beliefs.

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<sup>11</sup> This consideration encompasses more than identifying Christian virtues; it includes critically assessing human actions and behaviors concerning such virtues. For example, a White Christian can claim to be enacting the Christian virtue of justice by asserting that they do not see racial differences and that they treat all people equally. As shall be seen later, racial colorblindness reflects this perspective. A critical assessment of that claim reveals that, in most instances, racial colorblindness does not result in equality or justice for those raced as other than white.

This is not to suggest that no White Christian social ethicists are questioning or resisting what are deemed traditional social ethics analyses of racial inequities or have not explored White Christian opposition to racial justice initiatives. There are. Cynthia D. Moe-Lobeda, a White feminist Lutheran Christian social ethicist, has employed theological constructs to theorize racism as a structural sin, investigated environmental racism, and proposed ethics of resistance to White privilege.<sup>12</sup> Aana Marie Vigen, also a White feminist, Lutheran Christian social ethicist, has examined racial disparities in health care and has advanced possibilities for ethical reform.<sup>13</sup> Jennifer Harvey, another White feminist, Christian social ethicist, has focused her scholarship on antiracist work in Christian communities.<sup>14</sup> These White scholars, among others, are committed to working outside the canon both when theorizing issues of racism and exploring the relationship between theory and antiracist practices. Their work and the academic work of many scholars of color inform my effort to betray White Christian social ethics. This conversation ought not to end with this dissertation. I fervently hope that other White Christian social ethicists will join the discussion in an ongoing effort to find compelling, immediate alternatives to current antiracist scholarship.

### **An Explanation of Method**

I approach this project predicated upon my conviction that the Christian norm of justice is fundamental to Christian identity. As the prophet Micah in the Hebrew Bible

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<sup>12</sup> Cynthia D. Moe-Lobeda, *Resisting Structural Evil: Love as Ecological-Economic Vocation*, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2013).

<sup>13</sup> Aana Marie Vigen, *Women, Ethics, and Inequality in U.S. Healthcare: "To Count Among the Living,"* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).

<sup>14</sup> Jennifer Harvey, *Dear White Christians: For Those Still Longing for Racial Reconciliation*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2014).

enjoins Christians, God *requires* us to do justice.<sup>15</sup> God does not suggest that justice is insignificant, elective, or ephemeral. This emphasis on justice throughout scripture emphasizes the centrality of justice to a Christian faith identity. However, since justice is a complex principle comprised of many forms, e.g., retributive, compensatory, or distributive, a detailed examination of justice as a theological and biblical construct is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

At its most basic, justice incorporates concepts of fairness, equality, and equitable treatment of individuals. Yet, as a fundamental Christian norm, justice must mean more than merely these basic principles. Scripture informs the meaning of justice, particularly in Matthew 25: 41-46, in which Jesus describes judgment day. He warns, “I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not give me clothing, sick and in prison and you did not visit me.... Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me. And these will go away into eternal punishment . . .”

I argue that this understanding of justice equates to living in right relationship with each other, as informed by the fundamental Christian norm of love – neighbor love. I approach the concept of justice from a liberationist perspective, which calls us to pay particular attention to the circumstances of the marginalized and oppressed.<sup>16</sup> Within

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<sup>15</sup> Micah 6:8. Italics added..

<sup>16</sup> Lovin, in *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism*, offers his perspective on liberation theology vis-à-vis Christian Realism. Lovin asserts, “For liberation theology, Christian ethics does not begin with objectivity. It begins with a ‘fundamental option for the poor.’” Lovin contrasts this understanding to Niebuhr’s approach, which he characterizes as an “evenhanded assessment of the claims and counterclaims at work in social conflict.” Ibid., 212. Rejecting that conclusion, I argue that liberation theology is



Christian antiracist social ethics, justice is not satisfied with being proximate, it is not the trickle of progress afforded by gradualism, and it is not the myopic and skewed perspective of colorblindness.

Developing an ethics of rupture to address racial injustice involves dialogical and dialectical approaches. A dialogical approach is necessary for understanding White Christian opposition to racial justice initiatives since, in many instances, the same scriptural passages used to support gradualism and racial colorblindness are the same as those used by individuals advocating for the elimination of these concepts. Thus, particular attention must be paid to what language is used, the context in which it is used, and how it is used to demarcate the contours of any newly proposed antiracist social ethic.

A dialectical approach is also necessary as it rejects thinking that limits racial justice remedies to an either/or possibility. Either gradualistic remedies or no remedies. Either gradualistic remedies or attempting to correct all injustices at once, resulting in significant societal disruption. Either affirmative action programs are eliminated, or Whites are subjected to reverse discrimination. In any of these either/or situations, Blacks remain marginalized and oppressed. Dialectical thinking rejects both extremes in these examples, focusing instead on transcending these opposites, uncovering, and empowering other possibilities.

The expression of progressive, White Christian opposition to racial justice requires a conceptualization of Christian ethics comprised of sociological, legal,

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objective as it is consonant with Micah 6:8 and Matthew 25: 31-46, which instruct us that Christian justice begins with the most oppressed and marginalized – the poor.

historical, and theological scholarly interrogation. This dissertation will consider Christian realism, critical race theory (CRT), and historical analyses as they bear upon the case study. These combined multidisciplinary perspectives enable a more thorough examination of how progressive White Christians exercise the impulse to oppose efforts to combat racial inequities. It will then turn to an attempt to answer how a realist Christian social ethics method might be formulated to address situations of progressive, White, Christian responses to antiracism efforts.

I will engage the work of several scholars to open a dialogue about developing an ethics of rupture. However, the development of an ethics of rupture must continue after theorization, and it must also envision the possibilities of praxes that will challenge White defiance of racial justice efforts. Theorizing without attention to praxis and praxis without theorization results in an incomplete analysis as one contributes to the development of the other.

To ground the work of this dissertation, it is necessary to consider the scholarship of Reinhold Niebuhr, one of the foremost Christian realism scholars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and part of the canon of Christian social ethics.<sup>17</sup> This dissertation critically engages Niebuhr's foundational Christian realist school of thought, particularly his writings on

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<sup>17</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr is the theologian primarily credited with the concept of Christian realism and maybe the "most important voice of the movement." Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism*, 1-2. It should be acknowledged, however, that Christian realism is neither monolithic nor univocal. See Lovin's discussion of the Christian realism of the "Younger Theologians," (41-43, 67), John C. Bennett (211), William Horton (36), and H. Richard Niebuhr's (46). Cf., Traci West, "Constructing Ethics: Reinhold Niebuhr and Harlem Women Activists," *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics* 24, no. 1 (2004): 28-49, 35, who cautions, however, that this tendency to ascribe to Niebuhr the appellation of most important voice reinforces the notion that "ideas were singularly generated by certain great White men ... [as if] furthering civilization [was] something Whites do."

race pride, race prejudice, and the race problem.<sup>18</sup> Despite myriad criticisms by Christian social ethicists that Niebuhr did not engage the issue of race during his career or make race a priority, Niebuhr wrote critically and prolifically on issues of race throughout his lifetime, more so than any other White Christian social ethicist in the twentieth century.<sup>19</sup>

The field of Christian realism was shaped by Niebuhr's scholarship, which was informed by his context as a German Lutheran raised in the 1890s and early 1900s. In his 1932 tome *Moral Man, Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics*,<sup>20</sup> Niebuhr considered the issue of Black-White racism in the United States, concluding that strife between the races was due to race pride. Niebuhr understood race pride as a form of original sin and the root of racist actions by Whites and Blacks. He interrogated the power dynamics between Blacks and Whites, arguing that it would be "hopeless" for Blacks to assume that they would achieve racial equality if they depended upon the "moral sense" of Whites.<sup>21</sup> In this same vein, Niebuhr wrote, "those who hold great economic and political power are more guilty of pride against God and of injustice against the weak than those who lack power and prestige."<sup>22</sup> "But will a disinherited

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<sup>18</sup> Niebuhr used the phrases "race problem," "race prejudice," and "race pride" rather than racism to refer to issues of racial injustice. Accordingly, I will use these phrases when quoting Niebuhr or discussing his scholarship.

<sup>19</sup> See e.g., Traci West, "Racial Justice," in *The Oxford Handbook of Reinhold Niebuhr*, Suggested Reading list, 517-519, ed., Robin Lovin and Joshua Mauldin, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021).

<sup>20</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man, Immoral Society: A Study in Ethics and Politics*, 2nd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013).

<sup>21</sup> Niebuhr, *Moral Man, Immoral Society*, Introduction, xxxii, 252.

<sup>22</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation*, (Louisville, KY: 1941), Vol. I, 225.

group, such as the Negroes for instance, ever win full justice.... Will not even its most minimum demands seem exorbitant to the dominant Whites....”<sup>23</sup>

In 1954 and 1955, explicitly considering school desegregation, Niebuhr again engaged this analysis of social power, arguing that the intervention of the United States Supreme Court was necessary to overcome the resistance of Whites to desegregated schools.<sup>24</sup> In 1954, Niebuhr was optimistic that the South would not react adversely to the decision, predicting that there would be little resistance.<sup>25</sup> In 1955, however, while describing *Brown I* as the “greatest moral adventure in American life,” he noted that progress in desegregation was uneven at best and that relations between Blacks and Whites were “even more vivid and tragic” than ever.<sup>26</sup>

While Niebuhr criticized the actions of White parents in response to the decision, he also validated White Christian opposition to judicial remedies of racial justice through his Christian realist framework. He opined that cultural inequalities between the two races made it more difficult for the South to accept integrated schools since these cultural inequalities unleashed the fears and biases of Whites that desegregation would adversely affect the education of their children, “Any criticisms of southern communities would be totally unfair if they did not take account of the difficulties of school integration caused

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<sup>23</sup> Niebuhr, *Moral Man, Immoral Society*, Introduction, xxxii.

<sup>24</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Supreme Court on Segregation in the Schools,” *Christianity and Crisis* 14, no. 14 (June 19, 1954): 75-77, Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Mounting Racial Crisis,” *Christianity and Crisis* 23, no. 12 (July 8, 1963): 121-122, Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Desegregation Issue,” *Christianity and Society* 21, no. 2 (Spring 1956): 3-4.

<sup>25</sup> “The reaction in the south to the decision is almost as cheering as the decision itself ... there will evidently not be a widespread revolt against the court’s interpretation of the law.” Niebuhr, “Supreme Court on Segregation in the Schools,” 76.

<sup>26</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Morals and Percentages,” *Christianity and Crisis* 20, no. 4 (Autumn, 1955): 3-4, 3.

by the different cultural standards of the two races.”<sup>27</sup> To no small degree, the realist balance Niebuhr struck favored Whites' interests to the detriment of Blacks. This balance appeared to downplay the extreme social, political, and economic power differentials between Blacks and Whites. While recognizing the contributions of Niebuhr's realist thought, I want to offer a contrasting analysis that more explicitly centers those on the margins.

In addition to his Christian realist analyses that skewed to the benefit of Whites, Niebuhr also introduced a problematic gradualist dimension,<sup>28</sup> which again favored the interests of Whites. He suggested that the desegregation of schools should not be pushed too fast since “one cannot correct a historically founded and collective evil by any court decision or political policy.”<sup>29</sup> Gradualism thus became a tool for preserving and validating the interests of White parents in maintaining segregation.

Moreover, gradualism has enabled current perceptions that racism has significantly abated. Many Whites understand racism to be limited to individual, overtly racist acts and the use of overtly racist language. The concept of structural racism is resisted and often outright rejected. Since Whites, for the most part, no longer openly engage in or promote these behaviors, at least before 2016, many Whites believe that the slow approach of gradualism has been successful and therefore is still a valid idea. They further believe that the reduced frequency of openly racist statements and actions means that racism is on the decline. These same beliefs also enable racial colorblindness, which implies that it will continue to disappear if we do not acknowledge or discuss race.

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<sup>27</sup> Niebuhr, “The Desegregation Issue,” 4.

<sup>28</sup> Niebuhr, “The Mounting Racial Crisis,” Niebuhr, “The Desegregation Issue.”

<sup>29</sup> Niebuhr, “The Desegregation Issue,” 4.

My assessment of Christian realism rejects Niebuhr's paradigms of realism and gradualism and critiques his assumptions that led to the elevation of the interests of Whites over those of Blacks. Further, I intend to correlate Niebuhr's gradualist realism to a White commitment to pursuing their interests at the cost of racial equity. Multidisciplinary engagement with CRT also aids in challenging Niebuhr's overly sympathetic response to White opposition to immediate and substantial racial justice. It assists in critiquing current White Christian attitudes about and understandings of race.

Derrick Bell, a preeminent legal CRT scholar,<sup>30</sup> described CRT as, among other things, a body of scholarship that engages in a critique of the legal system that disempowers people of color.<sup>31</sup> To this end, Bell developed his Interest Convergence Principle (ICP), highlighting and explaining the cyclical nature of gains and losses in racial equity for Blacks. According to Bell, once racial equality for people of color has the potential to surpass the interests of Whites, the progress that has been made will be halted and/or eliminated. In short, Bell's critical race scholarship can bring more realism to Niebuhr's Christian Realism by bringing a fresh understanding of how Blacks gain and lose rights and privileges accorded to Whites.

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<sup>30</sup> Derrick Bell is the legal scholar credited as the intellectual parent of Critical Race Theory (CRT). As with Christian realism, CRT is neither univocal nor monolithic. See Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, eds. in *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, (New York: New York University Press, 2001), 4-6, for a discussion of other CRT foundational scholars. Formational articles on the development of CRT can be found in *Critical Race Theory: The Cutting Edge*, 3rd ed., Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2014).

<sup>31</sup> Derrick Bell, "Who's Afraid of Critical Race Theory?" *The University of Illinois Law Review*, 1995, no. 4 (1995): 893-910.

Sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva<sup>32</sup> has employed CRT to challenge the notions that racism is comprised solely of individual acts, has abated significantly, and that focusing on racial issues should be avoided since it only exacerbates racial tension. Bonilla-Silva's research reveals that many Whites may articulate racially progressive beliefs and claim to support racial justice. However, when additional specific inquiries are made, people employ language that, while facially neutral, reveals racist beliefs and assumptions. They further indicate that they do not favor racially equitable remedies for racial injustice. Indeed, they openly and vociferously oppose judicially mandated programs to achieve racial parity. As with Bell's work, this unmasking of White resistance reinforces the importance of rejecting Niebuhr's gradualist approach since it reveals that gradualism has not resulted in a significant diminution of racism.

The historical case study will illustrate White Christian opposition to desegregation efforts and the inadequacy of realism and gradualism to rectify racial injustice. This requires a thorough historical review of segregation in the City of Detroit. White sociologist and historian Thomas Sugrue and Black political scientist Joyce Baugh have studied the history of segregation in Detroit. Through their disciplinary lenses, they have amplified the various factors and the interplay among them.

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<sup>32</sup> Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists: Color-blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Equality in the United States*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed., (Lanham MA: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2018) analyzed the data he collected in a study of college students, finding that although the students professed to support equal rights for Blacks when questioned about the need for affirmative actions to redress racial inequities, the White students almost unanimously argued that such remedies were unfair and unnecessary as they adversely affected the rights of Whites. Ibid., 11-13.

Sugrue's scholarship primarily investigates housing and employment discrimination due to racist governmental policies and procedures.<sup>33</sup> Baugh also thoroughly analyzed the pattern of housing desegregation in Detroit, the effort to desegregate the DPS, and the concomitant litigation that followed, which challenged the segregated nature of the schools. The work of both Sugrue and Baugh demonstrates how segregation in one area created and exacerbated segregation in another, creating a circular pattern that remains today. Their scholarship further identifies and explains systemic racism.

The example of segregation in Detroit allows contemporary White Christians to learn from, but not excuse or re-inscribe, White privilege and White supremacy. As White Lutheran Christian ethicist Cynthia Moe Lobeda writes, “‘Resisting and rebuilding’ ... anchored in Christian theology [denounces] that which thwarts the in-breaking reign of God and [announces] that which furthers it.”<sup>34</sup> A beginning point to explore the in-breaking reign of God is an examination of Jesus' teachings on the kingdom of God.

Jesus' announced in Luke 4:18 that he came “to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim the release of the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.” He also explained, “I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other cities also, for I was sent for this purpose.” Luke 4:43. Jesus' proclamations explain some aspects of the kingdom or reign of God and how they ought to be experienced on Earth.

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<sup>33</sup>Sugrue, *Urban Crisis*. In *Urban Crisis*, Sugrue considered the temporal period from World War II through the 1970s.

<sup>34</sup> Moe Lobeda, *Resisting Structural Evil*, 240.



White Christian ethicists David P. Gushee and Glen H. Stassen assert that the kingdom reflects God's intervention to "rescue those who are crushed by unjust power. It is a liberating message, especially directed at those whose faces are ground in the dust by the powerful – those who live on what has been called the 'underside of history.'"<sup>35</sup> They identify seven marks of the Kingdom: deliverance/salvation, justice, peace, healing, restoration/rebuilding of community, joy, and the experience of God's presence."<sup>36</sup>

Persecution of the oppressed thwarts the reign of God, whereas resisting and rebuilding this persecution allows for the reign of God to be experienced on Earth consistent with the proclamations of Jesus. Might this resistance and rebuilding provide a basis to rupture and transform current White Christian social ethics approaches to racism and assist in developing praxes that urgently and substantially change how White Christians engage in antiracist activities? How might this resistance and rebuilding permit the in-breaking of the reign of God?

### **Focus and Terminology**

Before moving into a brief introduction of the chapters, it will be helpful to explain both the scope of this project and define the specific terminology I employ throughout the dissertation.

### **Focus**

This dissertation focuses on the relationship between White Christianity and its commitment to racial justice for Blacks in the United States. An understandably fair

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<sup>35</sup> David P. Gushee and Glen H. Stassen, *Kingdom Ethics: Following Jesus in Contemporary Context*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2016).

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

critique of this focus is that I employ a Black/White binary, which omits consideration of the racism and the impact of White supremacy directed at Latinx, American Indian, Alaskan Native, Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islanders, and Asian peoples. This critique is both valid and necessary, as a focus solely on a Black/White binary continues harmful narratives of erasure that obscure and deny the validity of the experiences of others that result in their marginalization and oppression and blunt a more comprehensive understanding of White supremacy in the United States. Therefore, White Christian social ethicists must expand their scholarly inquiries beyond the Black/White binary to consider how justice has been denied to other marginalized peoples.

Despite the validity of such critiques, I have nevertheless chosen to focus on relationships between Blacks and Whites. There are several reasons for this. First is my belief that the racial dynamic between Blacks and Whites in the U.S. continues to be particularly virulent, rooted as it was in the complete subjugation of Blacks through slavery. I contend that history has made it particularly difficult for Whites to talk about racism against Blacks, and that dynamic continues to need close examination. Second, the explicit focus of the dissertation considers the many ways White Christians explicitly resisted efforts of desegregation vis-à-vis Blacks. The case study examines the segregation of Blacks in Detroit and White Christian efforts to maintain that segregation. Thus, the conversation is shaped by the dominant racial dynamic of the historical period and geographical location under consideration. Third, the scholarship of Reinhold Niebuhr focuses almost exclusively on Black/White racial issues. While this narrow focus of Niebuhr's, is subject to the same criticisms I already mentioned, I have chosen to engage his scholarship using the same focus. Finally, without dismissing those criticisms

from a purely practical perspective, the scope of a project that examines, in-depth, White Christian resistance to racial justice for all marginalized people renders it too large to allow for adequate consideration herein. Such an in-depth examination will need to be considered in a later project.

As regards the choice to focus on Detroit and to look particularly at the effects of the effort to desegregate the schools in the Detroit metropolitan area, it is primarily the result of my having lived the experience during my early years. The period of 1920-1975 was chosen because it explores the origins of segregation in Detroit, beginning with the First Great Migration of Black community members from the southern United States and ending with the Supreme Court giving the imprimatur of legitimacy to racial segregation once again.

Finally, throughout this dissertation, I have employed racial identifiers for the scholars I engage. This is deliberate. Christian ethics scholarship is often referred to by identifiers (e.g., Black theology, Latinx social ethics, feminist approaches) appearing to suggest that such scholarship is outside the canon. I sharply disagree. Therefore, I have chosen to use racial identifiers to situate and contextualize all scholars.

### **Terminology**

Black: I have chosen to use the term Black in this dissertation because I wanted to be inclusive. Some Black people may not identify as African and/or American, yet White racism and White supremacy affect all Black people. I have also chosen to capitalize Black to reflect that it is more than a color and to convey that Black represents a shared sense of history, identity, and community.

Desegregation vs. Integration: These two terms are sometimes understood to mean the same thing. They do not. Generally, desegregation is designed to end segregation via a legal process (court order) or political process (such as repealing or removing a segregationist practice). It places different groups of people in the same physical environment. Integration is a social process that eliminates barriers to equitable treatment for all people. It is the process of developing a culture based on social interaction among groups formerly separated. It represents actual diversity and does not require the assimilation of a minority group into the majority group's culture.

Peoples of Color: POC, BIPOC, BBIPOC, LBIPOC: I find it difficult to determine how to refer to Latinx, American Indian, Alaskan Native, Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islanders, Asian, and Black peoples, or other than White peoples. That phrase, while broadly descriptive and inclusive, seems unwieldy, and it may contain only some of the descriptors by which people identify themselves. Yet using the capitalized descriptors is also problematic to me, as a White person, since they seem to be an overly facile way for Whites to identify those who are raced as other than White; a lazy way for Whites to refer to others without considering what the letters mean. On the other hand, descriptors such as “non-White” or “other than White” are troublesome since they continue to “other” everyone except for Whites and further suggests that White is the norm. In contrast to this, POC, BIPOC, BBIPOC, and LBIPOC appear to be more celebratory of identity. Throughout the dissertation, however, I may use one or more of these descriptors depending on the contexts in which they are used.

Racial Colorblindness or Racially Colorblind: I use these terms, also employed by many scholars, throughout the dissertation to refer to a racial ideology – a concept

adopted by many Whites for refusing to acknowledge race by claiming that they do not see the race of individuals. As I use them, these phrases reflect an intentional or purposeful choice to ignore race rather than a literal inability to see race. While the term color-evasiveness might more accurately reflect this intentionality, I have chosen to use racially colorblind and racial colorblindness for the sake of consistency with the usage of these terms by Whites to critique the racial ideology of racial colorblindness. I do not use these phrases to sanction a merger of the ideology of racial colorblindness with a lack of eyesight or to conflate a lack of eyesight with a lack of knowing. While there is a significant body of scholarship that discusses the ableism inherent in the terms racially colorblind and racial colorblindness, exploration of this scholarship is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

Racial Equality: This phrase is frequently employed to mean equal opportunity for all races, not equality of outcomes. It does not, for the most part, take structural racism into account, believing racism is limited to the acts of individuals.

Racial Equity: The distribution of and access to rights, privileges, and benefits are available to people of all races. That is, no one racial group would experience society's benefits or burdens in differential degrees. It focuses on equality of outcomes, not equality of opportunity.

Racism: Unlike some definitions of racism, I do not limit this term to prejudice plus power. I expand it to include bias, discrimination, antagonism, hatred, use of stereotypes, and racial epithets that are directed towards persons of other races. Moreover, I do not limit the term to acts of individuals; it also includes structural and systemic racism (see below).

Segregation: A prohibitive system that physically separates groups from each other based on, among other things, race, ethnicity, gender, age, or religion. It can occur either by law (de jure) or by practice (de facto) and is used to deny identifiable groups of people access to, among other things, churches, housing, employment, education, and public facilities.

Structural and Systemic Racism: Systems and structures in which governmental, institutional, or cultural policies, procedures, and practices, as well as cultural and religious norms, disadvantage racial groups.

United States or U.S.: I have chosen to use these identifiers rather than “America” or “American.” America includes two continents, many countries, societies, and people. Accordingly, unless “America” or “American” is within a quotation or using ‘United States’ or ‘U.S.’ would result in unwieldy linguistic contortions, I will use the latter phrases.

White: Within the context of discussions about White racism, White supremacy, and White resistance to initiatives for racial justice, I am also attempting to convey that White is more than a color, that it too represents a shared history, identity, and community. If White is spelled with a lowercase w in a quote, or using a capital W would alter the meaning of what I, or another scholar, is trying to convey, I will use the lowercase w.

White Christianity: An understanding that being the church and being Christian is to insist on adherence to “the way we’ve always done things before.” The validity of non-Eurocentric ways of being church is questioned, and the inclusion of non-Eurocentric worship practices is resisted.

Whiteness: Although there are many definitions of Whiteness, for my purposes, I find it helpful to describe it as a conscious or subconscious understanding of difference from, and a belief in, the superiority over, peoples of color. It is the standard by which all other racial groups are compared and by which all other racial groups are judged.

Whiteness also defines how issues of race, racial identity, and racism are defined and understood. Indeed, Whiteness encompasses a sense of obliviousness that allows Whites not to see White as a category of privilege.

White Privilege: It does not, as believed by many Whites, suggest that all Whites have never had to struggle or that everything they have accomplished or achieved is unearned. Instead, it is a collection of benefits and advantages not shared by most people of color but remain invisible to many Whites. White privilege allows Whites to decide what is normal and acceptable in all aspects of life. It is access to power and has greater power than POC have.

White Supremacy: An ideology in which White people are believed to be superior to people of other races.

## **Chapter Introduction**

Chapter 1 will explore how Whiteness constitutes a core aspect of Christian realism, as revealed in Reinhold Niebuhr's scholarship on race. It will investigate Niebuhr's adoption of a gradualist approach to racial injustice, which empowered White Christian resistance to initiatives for racial justice. It will also consider how his gradualist approach elevated the concerns of Whites over the concerns of Blacks, to their detriment.

Chapter 2 raises challenges to gradualism, particularly as it is deployed in the form of colorblindness, by considering the scholarship of critical race theorists Eduardo

Bonilla-Silva and Derrick Bell. I will examine how critical race theorists might illumine alternatives to Christian realist and gradualist approaches to racial injustice.

Chapter 3 will scrutinize White Christian support of segregation and its opposition to desegregation efforts in the City of Detroit from 1920 to 1975. I examine housing, employment, and school segregation, looking at both individual acts of racism and the structural and systemic racism that supported and reinforced segregation. This chapter will illustrate how Christian realism and gradualism failed to provide real opportunities for racial justice. This analysis is central to my deconstruction of a social dynamic that privileges White resistance to communal remedies of racial justice.

In Chapter 4, I propose an ethic of rupture that will interrupt White Christian opposition to racial justice efforts. It will offer a reconstructed Christian realism and assist in developing approaches to remediating racial injustice that result in immediate and substantial gains for Latine, American Indian, Alaskan Native, Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islanders, Asian, and Black peoples. To this end, I develop a theory of rupture and praxes of rupture.

A critical exploration of White Christian opposition to racial justice initiatives is overdue. Further, critical engagement with the paucity of current Christian social ethics scholarship on this topic is also necessary. This dissertation will attempt to fill these lacunae by positing an ethic of rupture. This ethic will provide an alternative to the current canon of scholarship in Christian social ethics, thus providing an opening for dismantling the racial status quo.



## CHAPTER 1 – THE WHITENESS OF CHRISTIAN REALISM AND GRADUALISM

### Introduction

How did gradualism, a strategy employed by southern Whites to “delay and to limit the implementation of school desegregation for as long as legally possible,”<sup>37</sup> evolve into a strategy endorsed by White Christians and White Christian social ethicists? This chapter will consider that question as it explores the scholarship of Reinhold Niebuhr on racial discord.

In Christian social ethics, it is difficult not to engage the work of Reinhold Niebuhr,<sup>38</sup> a twentieth-century White Christian social ethicist. Primarily credited with developing the concept of Christian realism, Niebuhr has been described as the “most important voice of the movement.”<sup>39</sup> Concerned with social, political, and economic

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<sup>37</sup> John A. Kirk, and Minnijean Brown-Trickey, *Beyond Little Rock: The Origins and Legacies of the Central High Crisis*, (Fayetteville, AK: The University of Arkansas Press, 2007), 96.

<sup>38</sup> Niebuhr, born in rural Missouri, was the son of a German immigrant pastor and a missionary’s daughter. He attended Eden Theological Seminary, then Yale University. According to K. Healon Gaston, as the son of a German immigrant, “Niebuhr possessed a minority consciousness even though German Americans counted as ‘old stock.’” K. K. Healon Gaston, “Niebuhr’s Background: Family, Church, and Society,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Reinhold Niebuhr*, eds. Robin Lovin and Joshua Mauldin, 3-25, (London, Oxford University Press, 2021), 4. At Yale, where he was one of only a few German students, he felt “‘thoroughly intimidated and marginalized’ . . . and the young Niebuhr seems to have had [a bi-level] understanding of his racial/ethnic identity, believing that the German ‘race’ possessed a superior heritage while seeing himself as a ‘mongrel,’ with his German heritage a source of shame and a reason to feel intimidated by his ‘thoroughbred’ peers.” Traci West, “Reinhold Niebuhr On Realism,” in *Beyond the Pale: Reading Ethics From the Margins*, 121-122, eds. Stacey M. Floyd and Miguel De La Torre, (Knoxville: Westminster John Knox Press: 2011).

<sup>39</sup> Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism*, 2. Christian realism is, however, neither monolithic nor univocal. See Lovin’s discussion of the Christian realism of the “Younger Theologians,” 41-43, 67), John C. Bennett (211), William Horton (36), and H. Richard Niebuhr’s (46). Cf., Traci West, “Constructing Ethics: Reinhold Niebuhr and Harlem Women Activists,” *Journal of the Society of Christian Ethics*, 24, no. 1 (2004):

issues, Niebuhr sought to balance competing interests on such issues by mediating between realities and the ideal.<sup>40</sup> He asserted, “In political and moral theory ‘realism’ denotes the disposition to take all factors in a social and political situation ... into account, particularly the factors of self-interest and power.”<sup>41</sup> Christian realism, as understood by Niebuhr, is both contextual and historical; the former is by consideration of specific situations, and the latter by considering historical factors of self-interest and power. Yet, Niebuhr’s application of Christian Realism analyses of racial issues remained problematic, revealing how Whiteness was privileged. Black theologian Herbert O. Edwards described the steps of Niebuhr’s approach, asserting,

First, agreement with the noble aims and ideals of the black movement, with the *moral* ideal. Second, the “realistic” analysis of the *political* situation, an analysis that almost places the White power structure in the foreground as definitive of the “real” situation and then explains why failure is all but inevitable given the nature of that “reality.” Third, the attempt to locate a course of action that will not rock the boat too much, to locate an “uneasy conscience” among the enemies of “racial justice.” This conscience can be appealed to by not demanding too much too soon, by demanding not what the established powers will not give but what they might be willing to cede. Finally comes the advice to the victims of racism and their supporters: Be patient.”<sup>42</sup>

Despite the frequent adverse results produced for Blacks through applying Niebuhr’s analyses, I argue that Christian realism remains relevant in Christian social ethics for

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(Spring-Summer, 2004): 24-49. West cautions that this tendency to ascribe to Niebuhr the appellation of most important voice reinforces the notion that “certain great white men singularly generated ideas. . . [as if] furthering civilization [was] something whites do, 35.”

<sup>40</sup> Gary Dorrien, *Social Ethics in the Making: Interpreting an American Tradition*, (Walden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), 273.

<sup>41</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Augustine’s Political Realism,” in *Christian Realism and Political Problems*, (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1953), 119-146.

<sup>42</sup> Herbert O. Edwards, “Niebuhr, ‘Realism,’ and Civil Rights in America,” *Christianity and Crisis*, 46, no. 1, (February 3, 1986): 12-15, 13.

addressing racial issues. I will propose a potential corrective to Niebuhr's practical application of Christian realism in Chapter 4

Niebuhr applied this understanding when he addressed matters of racial justice, considering historical and current injustices experienced by Blacks juxtaposed with the interests of Whites who opposed initiatives for racial equity. Despite his awareness of the historically horrific and violent racism of Whites, Niebuhr frequently determined that the interests of Whites necessitated a gradual response to resolving the race problem, even if it meant the Blacks would need to be patient and wait for full racial justice.<sup>43</sup>

This emphasis on gradualism became an integral part of the overall approach to racial injustice and became the one favored by many White Christians to redress those injustices. Why does gradualism remain an integral part of remedies for racial injustice? As significantly, why is gradualism a Christian ethical issue? This chapter will consider those questions by exploring the scholarship of Niebuhr on race, with a particular focus on his writings that address school desegregation in the aftermath of the *Brown, et al. v. Board of Education of Topeka, et al.* decisions.<sup>44</sup>

### **Gradualism: A Model for Social Change or an Impediment?**

Gradualism, as an approach to facilitating social change, does not favor abrupt, large-scale changes<sup>45</sup> to avoid disruption of the societal order. Instead, gradualists put their faith in slow, incremental progress. They "are praised for their 'reasonableness,'

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<sup>43</sup> James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 40.

<sup>44</sup> *Brown, et al. v. Board of Education of Topeka, et al.*, 347 U.S. 483 (1954) (*Brown I*), and *Brown, et al. v. Board of Education of Topeka, et al.*, 349 U.S. 294 (1955) (*Brown II*).

<sup>45</sup> William E. Bittle, "Racial Myth and Social Action," *Phylon Quarterly*, 16, No. 3 (3rd Qtr., 1955): 232-240, 232.

their ‘level-headedness,’ and their ‘understanding’<sup>46</sup> and are treated as harbingers of fairness, openness, and justice.

In 1955, White anthropologist William E. Bittle asserted that there was a systematic program of gradualism in matters of racial equality<sup>47</sup> in the U.S. that operated beside a program of open racism. According to Bittle, the impact of that gradualistic program resulted in the achievement “of partial goals, [and] piecemeal gains made in trivial areas of individual liberties.”<sup>48</sup> Moreover, “this ‘wait and time will provide an answer’ approach to the nation’s most critical problem ... was a veil behind which hid the very people who actively worked against the day of equality.”<sup>49</sup> Accordingly, gradualism gave an official imprimatur to state-sanctioned, less openly hostile attitudes to people of color, but which had the same effect as state-sanctioned openly racist policies and practices.

Consequently, the very environment of the U.S. on matters of race is to delay the implementation of court decisions and compliance with statutes designed to rectify racial injustice as long as possible and to avoid overt support for genuine change. In this way, gradualism gives an official imprimatur to state-sanctioned, less openly hostile attitudes toward people of color, which has the same effect as state-sanctioned racist policies and practices. As Bittle argued, if “the interim period is too long, ... the losses that the minority will suffer ... are too high a price to pay for the peace-of-mind of the dominant

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<sup>46</sup> Charles V. Hamilton, “Race, Morality, and Political Solutions,” *The Phylon Quarterly*, 20, no. 3 (3<sup>rd</sup> Quarter, 1959): 242-247, 244.

<sup>47</sup> Bittle, 232.

<sup>48</sup> Bittle, 232.

<sup>49</sup> Bittle, 232.

majority.”<sup>50</sup> Thus, a gradualistic approach may not be reasonable, fair, or just. Despite its positive aspects then, it is necessary to scrutinize closely the adequacy of gradualism as a method for attaining racial justice.

The application of gradualism to the court-ordered desegregation of schools in the *Brown* decisions illustrates this point. The first *Brown* decision ordered the desegregation of public schools by a unanimous decision. However, Supreme Court Justice Stanley Reed joined the majority only because “segregation would be dismantled gradually rather than all at once.”<sup>51</sup> The second decision, *Brown II*, held that desegregation must proceed with all deliberate speed. This standard legally legitimated the slow processes by which desegregation would or could occur. This “obtuse language” of the *Brown II* decision “opened the door for ‘obstructionism, foot-dragging, and outright refusal to begin the process of school integration.’”<sup>52</sup>

The reaction to these decisions by White school board members and White state and local officials was swift and unfavorable. Almost instantly, resistance became the order of the day, with local authorities either ignoring the decision or implementing minute, piecemeal actions that did not result in meaningful desegregation.<sup>53</sup> Segregated

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<sup>50</sup> Bittle, 239

<sup>51</sup> Juan Williams, *Eye on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years 1954-1965*, (New York: Viking Penguin Press (1987), 33.

<sup>52</sup> Peter Irons, *Jim Crow's Children: The Broken Promise of the Brown Decision*, (New York: Viking, 2002), 195, quoted in Beth A. Ferri and David J. Connor, Tools of Exclusion: Race, Disability, and (Re)segregated Education, *Teachers College Record* 107, no. 3, (March 2005): 453-474, 456.

<sup>53</sup> According to one article published in 1960, “If school integration in the South were to continue at its 1959 rate, it would take four thousand years for all Southern Negro children to achieve their right to equal educational opportunity. Ralph Lee Smith, “The South’s Pupil Placement Laws: Newest Weapon Against Integration,” *Commentary*, (October 1960), <https://www.commentary.org/articles/ralph-smith/the->

schools were replaced with pupil placement plans<sup>54</sup> that operated to benefit White schoolchildren. Schools that would have been integrated were closed. Private and parochial schools, considered exempt from the *Brown* decisions, admitted only White students. Moreover, the “with all deliberate speed” standard was employed by southern Whites to “delay and to limit the implementation of school desegregation for as long as legally possible.”<sup>55</sup>

Using gradualism as a means to avoid the requirements of the *Brown* decisions perpetuated racially based policies.<sup>56</sup> While they gave the appearance of compliance to some, these cursory efforts by school boards and local and state officials and the use of delay tactics operated to the detriment of Black students without regard for the harm they imposed. Gradualism concerning school desegregation was the “development of a policy of minimum compliance ... to delay and to limit the implementation of school desegregation for as long as legally possible.”<sup>57</sup> The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

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souths-pupil-placement-lawsnewest-weapon-against-integration/, accessed January 25, 2023.

<sup>54</sup> Generally, pupil placement plans required students to apply for a transfer to a school other than their assigned one. An overwhelming number of the transfer applications came from Black students seeking transfers to White majority schools. In almost every case, these requests were denied, thus continuing segregation. The U.S. Supreme Court upheld a pupil placement plan, ruling it constitutional. *Shuttlesworth, et al. vs. Birmingham Board of Education*, 358 U.S. 101 (1958).

<sup>55</sup> Kirk and Brown-Trickey, *Beyond Little Rock*, 96.

<sup>56</sup> J. L. Hochschild, “The New American Dilemma: Liberal Democracy and School Desegregation, (New Haven: Yale University Press Publishing, 1984), 463-464, quoted in Ferri and Connor, *Reading Resistance*, Vol.1 (New York: International Academic Publishers, 2006), 70. Hochschild argued that incremental approaches to school desegregation have proven “little ... help [to] either minorities or Whites,” By arguing that “half a loaf ... may be worse than none at all,” Hochschild suggested that “incremental policies may be more damaging in the long run than no policy at all, because gradualism results in backlash and resegregation,” 463.

<sup>57</sup> Kirk and Brown-Trickey, *Beyond Little Rock*), 96. “The driving force behind minimum compliance was that it theoretically placated those who did not want school

described gradualism, “I find it is a problem. And we have lived so long with this idea, with people saying it takes time and wait on time, that I find it very difficult to, to adjust to this. I mean, I, I get annoyed almost when I hear it, although I know it takes time. But the people that use this argument have been people so often who, who really didn’t want the change to come, and gradualism for them meant a do-nothing-ism, you know, and the standstill-ism ...<sup>58</sup>

To a certain extent, gradualism did facilitate movement toward racial justice. Courts slowly continued to find Jim Crow laws unconstitutional. Political and economic interests, affected by sit-ins, voter registration drives, and protests, also gradually changed segregation policies. Simultaneously, however, gradualism also impeded the elimination of racial injustices. This examination of how gradualistic remedies were deployed ostensibly to achieve racial justice indicates that it was less than satisfactory. Any change occurred in small incremental steps. As such, justice for Blacks vis-à-vis desegregated schools remained elusive. Gradualism, therefore, does not always work as a model for social change. Instead, in some cases, it operates as an impediment.

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desegregation by limiting integration to the bare minimum. At the same time, it allowed school districts to maintain that they were implementing the law. Advocates of minimum compliance viewed such a stance as ‘moderate’ in relation to the ‘extremes’ of meaningful integration and the outright opposition to school desegregation offered by those who advocated massive resistance. Yet, minimum compliance turned out to be simply a more diluted form of massive resistance that offered a less harmful way of frustrating the process of school desegregation but that wreaked chaos.”

<sup>58</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., “Who Speaks for the Negro: From An Interview with Robert Penn Warren,” (March 18, 1964), in *Martin Luther King, Jr.: The Last Interview and Other Conversations*, (Brooklyn, NY: Melville House Publishing, 2017), 43-83, 70.

## Reinhold Niebuhr and the Race Problem: The Church and White Christians

Outspoken on race matters,<sup>59</sup> Niebuhr believed that the race problem<sup>60</sup> between Blacks and Whites was widespread, deep-seated, and pernicious. Niebuhr's willingness to speak frankly on race prejudice was evident in one of his earliest articles on race, a

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<sup>59</sup> While acknowledging Niebuhr's ongoing attention to issues of race, some scholars are ambivalent about the degree of Niebuhr's commitment to eradicating racism. While Black theologian James Cone in *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* observed, "Among white theologians he was particularly sensitive to the evils of racism and spoke and wrote on many occasions of the sufferings of African Americans," he also asserted that "the problem of race was never one of his central theological or political concerns," 32, 41. White Christian social ethicist Gary Dorrien, in *Social Ethics in the Making: Interpreting an American Tradition*, (Malden MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011), acknowledged that Niebuhr was better at addressing racism than most of his White contemporaries. Nevertheless, he believed Niebuhr was still not sufficiently responsive to the needs of oppressed peoples. Dorrien also noted that while the "Niebuhr/Bennett corpus had some articles opposing racial discrimination," neither scholar "privileged black oppression and white supremacy as categories of oppression." Dorrien also wrote that Niebuhr never challenged his White theologian contemporaries to consider their White supremacy and privilege, arguing that too frequently, Niebuhr legitimized rather than challenged the racial status quo.), 292, 677.

In contrast, other scholars assert that Niebuhr's focus on race was significant. West, in "Racial Justice," pointed out that Niebuhr referred to issues of racial justice in "scores [of] articles and several of his major books," 503, 518. (In her chapter, West helpfully lists Niebuhr's articles that address race at 518-519.) West also believed that Niebuhr "was genuinely concerned about the persistence of racial and economic inequalities plaguing African Americans." Black theologian Herbert O. Edwards wrote, "Certainly Niebuhr spoke out against 'race pride' more often and more critically than any other theologian of that time," Herbert O. Edwards, "Niebuhr, 'Realism,' and Civil Rights in America," 13. White Christian social ethicist Therese B. DeLisio averred, "From the very beginning of Reinhold Niebuhr's public career in the 1920s to the end of it nearly a half-century later, he consistently condemned those in American civic and religious life whose racial prejudice denied the common humanity and human dignity of black people. Except for the years immediately preceding and during World War II, the issue of race never dropped out of the wide range of Niebuhr's religious and political commentary." Therese B. DeLisio, "Did Reinhold Niebuhr Care About Racism in America?" *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, nos. 3-4, (2008): 1-16, 1.

<sup>60</sup> This phrase and race prejudice are terms used by Niebuhr. I am unaware of any work of his that uses the word "racism." Accordingly, I will use his terms in discussing Niebuhr and race.



1927 unsigned editorial, "Race Prejudice in the North."<sup>61</sup> His scholarship on race concluded with a 1968 essay, "The Negro Minority and Its Fate in a Self-Righteous Nation."<sup>62</sup> In "Race Prejudice,"<sup>63</sup> Niebuhr, reacting to ongoing racial tensions in Detroit, Michigan, stated his perspective on the impact of racial prejudice on Christianity. He wrote, "Race prejudice is one of the greatest challenges to the spirit of real Christianity. The entire validity of the Christian faith is in the balance as men try to solve the race problem. Either there is in Christ neither white nor black or the whole Christian faith becomes absurd."<sup>64</sup>

Niebuhr considered the 1967 and 1968 racial uprisings across the U.S. at the opposite end of these forty years. In "The Negro Minority and Its Fate in a Self-Righteous Nation," he reflected an understanding of the underlying economic and social causes of those uprisings and further reflected sympathy for those who participated.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "Race "Race Prejudice in the North." *The Christian Century*. (May 12, 1927): 583-584.

<sup>62</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Negro Minority and Its Fate in a Self-righteous Country." *Social Action* 35 (1968).

<sup>63</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "Race Prejudice," 584. This editorial was written upon the release of a report by the Mayor's Commission on Race Relations in the City of Detroit, of which Niebuhr was the Chairman. Concerning that report, Niebuhr stated that it "fills the reader with a feeling akin to despair," 583. The editorial was written during the First Great Migration of Blacks from the Southern states to the Northern industrialized cities. This migration contributed to racial tensions in the City of Detroit, where Niebuhr's pastorate was located. One racial incident that prompted the formation of the Commission was the murder of a White man at the home of Dr. Ossian Sweet, a Black physician who had moved into what had previously been an all-white neighborhood. See Cone, *The Lynching Tree*, 40-41, for a description and discussion of the Ossian Sweet trials.

<sup>64</sup> Niebuhr, "Race Prejudice," 584.

<sup>65</sup> Niebuhr, "Negro Minority and Its Fate," 118. Despite expressing an understanding of why the uprisings occurred, Niebuhr downplayed the significance of demonstrations, as they did not, in his opinion, instruct the majority about the depth of problems faced by Blacks.

Niebuhr spoke about the “tragedy of the relationship of the Negro minority to a complacent white culture” that did not understand the rage of oppressed blacks.<sup>66</sup> He pointed to the failure of a “self-righteous nation in meeting so obvious a responsibility toward a minority that labors under two disadvantages: the dreadful burden of its slave past and its obvious divergence in physiognomy from the dominant white culture.” He concluded that after two centuries, the debt owed to the black minority anchored in “broken promises and pledges,” was both glaring and enormous, the shame of which “lies heavy upon our consciences.”<sup>67</sup>

Between the race problem being “the greatest challenge” (1927) and the “tragedy of the relationship of the Negro minority to a complacent white culture” (1968), Niebuhr, in his compendium of writings on race, continued to identify racism as one of the most persistent and pernicious problems faced by the U.S. Niebuhr variously described the race problem as a very desperate situation for the “colored people,”<sup>68</sup> “the most vicious of all forms of social conflict,”<sup>69</sup> “racial self-worship [as] the worst form of human evil,”<sup>70</sup> and “the enduring negro [sic] problem and endemic race pride.”<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism*, 7.

<sup>67</sup> Niebuhr, “The Negro Minority and Its Fate”: 123-127. See also Reinhold Niebuhr, “Man the Unregenerate Tribalist,” *Christianity and Crisis*, 24, no. 12 (July 6, 1964): 134.

<sup>68</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster, 1929), 167-169. In his compendium of editorials, articles, and essays, Niebuhr uses language that is now considered pejorative; this language will only be used when directly quoting Niebuhr.

<sup>69</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Christian Faith and The Race Problem,” *Christianity and Society*, 10, no. 2 (Spring, 1945): 21-24.

<sup>70</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Sin of Racial Prejudice.” *The Messenger* 13, no. 3 (February 3, 1948): 6.

<sup>71</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Fair Employment Practices Act,” *Christianity and Society* 15, no 3. (Summer, 1950): 3.

In 1954, Niebuhr, commenting on the United States Supreme Court decision in *Brown I*, congratulated the court for a bold and wise decision<sup>72</sup> and approvingly noted that the court acknowledged that the separate but equal standard was inherently discriminatory since it “left a mark upon both white and colored children by the implication of inferiority for the colored group.”<sup>73</sup> Niebuhr further noted that the decision was an “excellent example of the power of law and of ethical norms in directing the moral growth of a community. For the law ordained ‘equality.’ It embodied the principle of justice....”<sup>74</sup> Niebuhr appeared to believe that the U.S. was on the brink of racial equality. His exuberance, however, was short-lived.

In 1955, while describing *Brown I* as the “greatest moral adventure in American life,” Niebuhr nevertheless noted that progress in desegregation was uneven at best and that relations between Blacks and whites were “even more vivid and tragic” than ever. He argued that anytime a judicial decision was resisted by the majority of citizens or by a determined minority, as were the *Brown* decisions, the ruling could be rendered ineffective, thereby substantially reducing its efficacy.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Niebuhr, “The Supreme Court on Segregation in the Schools,” 75-76. Despite his optimism, Niebuhr noted that the court was aware that the decision could not be enforced if a majority of the people did not accept it.

<sup>73</sup> Niebuhr, “Supreme Court on Segregation in the Schools,” 76.

<sup>74</sup> Niebuhr does note that the United States Supreme Court did not address the overt racism that led to segregated schools in the first instance. Niebuhr was optimistic that the South would not react adversely to the decision, predicting that there would be little resistance. “The reaction in the south to the decision is almost as cheering as the decision itself . . . there will evidently not be a widespread revolt against the court’s interpretation of the law.” Ibid., at 75.

<sup>75</sup> Niebuhr, “Morals and Percentages,” 3-4. Niebuhr applied a mathematical formula to explain this outcome, indicating that resistance to Brown was significant where the Black population approximated 50% in a locale. Niebuhr’s mathematical principle provided that there was little resistance to desegregation in counties where the Black population was less than 25%. In contrast, resistance was significant in counties where the Black

Niebuhr asserted that the *Brown* decisions had complicated race relations in the U.S.<sup>76</sup> and precipitated the worst race relations crisis since the Civil War.<sup>77</sup> He called “the school question . . . almost as great a moral crisis in our national history as the slavery question.”<sup>78</sup> Resistance to desegregation was so severe that Niebuhr once argued that the country should focus on universal suffrage for Blacks instead of being concerned about desegregating schools.<sup>79</sup> He lamented the need for armed guards to enforce desegregation in Little Rock and at the University of Mississippi, noting, “Education under the protection of bayonets is not a good education.” Niebuhr poignantly stated, “If anyone had doubts that the problem of racial justice was more intractable than we had believed, that race prejudice is the most recalcitrant aspect of the evil in man . . . then the recent

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population approximated 50%. Niebuhr described this as “the ‘relation of moral ideals to mathematical facts. It is easier for a majority to be tolerant of a small than of a large minority. If the minority is large the tension between the two groups shows a corresponding increase.’” See also “Supreme Court and Desegregation in the Schools,” 75. According to Niebuhr, resistance to *Brown* in Southern states could be traced to this mathematical equation. See also “Fair Employment Practices Act,” 3 and Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Intractability of Race Prejudice,” *Christianity and Crisis*, 22, no. 18 (October 29, 1962): 181.

<sup>76</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Desegregation Issue,” 4. “No one quite anticipated that the decision . . . would unloose suppressed prejudices and fears and would complicate the problem of race relations for perhaps decades.”

<sup>77</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “What Resources Can the Christian Church Offer to Meet the Crisis in Race Relations?” *The Messenger*, (April 3, 1956), in Elizabeth Sifton, ed., *Reinhold Niebuhr: Major Works on Religion and Politics*, (New York: Library of America, 2015), 676-677, 676..

<sup>78</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “School, Church and the Ordeals of Integration,” *Christianity Crisis* 16, no. 16 (October 1, 1956): 121-122. In this article, Niebuhr returned to the issue of cultural competencies and claimed, “The race is backward.” While he explained that this conclusion was due to the lack of opportunities that good schools could provide, *Ibid.*, 121, he appears to assume that non-assimilation into White cultural standards was equivalent to backwardness.

<sup>79</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Civil Rights and Democracy,” *Christianity and Crisis*, 7, no. 12 (July 8, 1957): 89.

dismal events in Mississippi should have disabused him of these doubts.”<sup>80</sup> By the 1960s, Niebuhr remained primarily disenchanted with the idea that Blacks would eventually overcome racial prejudice.<sup>81</sup> In considering proposed civil rights legislation, he took the position that even if it passed, it offered Blacks no hope; their situation would remain desperate,<sup>82</sup> as civil rights legislation was merely a panacea, not a solution to the race problem.

While Niebuhr never actually stated that the race problem and race prejudice were permanent, that sentiment is present in the language he chose to describe them: enduring, intractable, and ineradicable, which reflect a substantial degree of permanence. Niebuhr’s enthusiasm and hopes for remediation of the race problem before and immediately after *Brown I* were short-lived; his disappointment is palpable in his post-*Brown* editorials and articles. Niebuhr’s disillusionment with the court system and the efficacy of civil rights legislation had brought him full circle, considering race relations in the U.S. a desperate situation. Blacks were unlikely to ever win “full justice in society”<sup>83</sup> since society accords too great a deference to the interests of Whites. Niebuhr’s analyses and conclusions about

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<sup>80</sup> Niebuhr, “The Intractability of Race Prejudice,” 181. Niebuhr’s concern was related to the decision to use armed guards rather than the underlying racist behaviors that necessitated the use of armed guards in the first instance. Those did not seem to enter into his concern. See, e.g., DeLisio, “Did Niebuhr Care,” 2-3, in which she pointed out that to Niebuhr, “grown white women hissing ‘like angry geese’ at little black schoolgirls did not quite rise to the level of racism.”

<sup>81</sup> Niebuhr, “The Mounting Racial Crisis,” See also Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism*, 216, who pointed out that “Niebuhr would eventually admit that racial justice proved more elusive than he had anticipated.”

<sup>82</sup> Niebuhr, “Unregenerate Tribalism.” See also Davison M. Douglas, “Reinhold Niebuhr and Critical Race Theory,” in *Christian Perspectives on Legal Thought* 149-162, eds. Michael W. McConnell, Robert F. Cochran, and Angela C. Carmella. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 159.

<sup>83</sup> Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society*, Introduction, xxxii.

the race problem included a critique of the efforts of the church and White Christian laity to address decisively racial injustice. That critique will be considered in the next section.

### **The church and White Christians**

As early as 1928, Niebuhr critiqued how the Christian church addressed the race problem. Niebuhr wrote about a meeting of the Federal Council of Churches (now the National Council of Churches) at which a proposal that the Council go on record as favoring enforcement of the fifteenth amendment (giving Black men the right to vote) as well as the Eighteenth amendment (prohibition), was defeated.<sup>84</sup> Niebuhr asserted, “it does not make one feel very comfortable to have a great church body seek some politic solution for a problem in which the ideal of Christian brotherhood leaves little room for equivocation.”<sup>85</sup> In 1930, Niebuhr wrote, “But I do not see how any church can be so completely disloyal to the Gospel of love as to put up bars against members of another racial group.”<sup>86</sup> In a subsequent news column, Niebuhr wrote, “Any institution of the ideal, such as the church, must deal with problem of interracial conflict if it is to justify the pretensions of moral leadership which it continually makes.”<sup>87</sup>

His dissatisfaction with the church's efforts is readily apparent throughout his scholarship. In 1942, Niebuhr wrote, “The liberal church ... might well engage in some contrite reflection upon the fact that liberal churches have not become interracial by force of their educational programs, and that there are not a half dozen churches in our whole

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<sup>84</sup> Niebuhr, *Leaves*, 190-192. In this same entry, Niebuhr wrote, “I have a sneaking suspicion that the fifteenth amendment expresses more of the genius of the gospel than the Eighteenth.”

<sup>85</sup> Niebuhr, *Leaves*, 192.

<sup>86</sup> Richard Wrightman Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Bibliography*, (San Francisco: Harper & Row Publishers, Inc., 1985). 119.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 119-120.

nation that have transcended race pride ... to any considerable degree.”<sup>88</sup> Niebuhr also noted that the “liberal church merely preaches ethnic goodwill.”<sup>89</sup> In 1944, Niebuhr wrote, “It may be worth observing that at the present moment, the Christian church is making no great contribution to the solution of this issue.”<sup>90</sup> He continued, “One other point at which the church fails miserably in its attack upon the race issue today. It is always calling upon the community to abolish . . . discrimination, but it makes no contrite admission of the fact that the church in America is almost consistently Jim Crow in its pattern of segregation.... It might be well for the church to make fewer ideal demands upon the community for a while and center upon this problem in its own life.”<sup>91</sup>

Over a decade later, Niebuhr noted, “Since the church ... defines itself, somewhat pretentiously, as the conscience of the nation, it is ... interesting to gauge the influence of the Church upon the problems of desegregation.... It must prove that it is as least as good as sports in establishing brotherhood between the races.”<sup>92</sup> Niebuhr averred, “The fact is – and it is a disturbing one – that the church is not now, and has not been, very creative on this issue [of race relations].”<sup>93</sup>

He called the church “irrelevant”<sup>94</sup> and flatly stated that the church's role had been less than inspiring.<sup>95</sup> Niebuhr announced that there had been a “significant lack of

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<sup>88</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Race Problem,” *Christianity and Society* 7, no. 3 (Summer 1942): 3-5, in *Love and Justice*, 129-132, 130.

<sup>89</sup> Niebuhr, “Christian Faith and the Race Problem,” 23.

<sup>90</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Negro Issue in America,” *Christianity and Society* 9, no. 3, 5-7, (Summer 1944): 5-7, reproduced in *Love and Justice*, 142-145, 143-144.

<sup>91</sup> Niebuhr, “The Negro Issue in America,” in *Love and Justice*, 145.

<sup>92</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Race Problem in America,” *Christianity and Crisis* 15, (December 26, 1955): 169-170.

<sup>93</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “What Resources Can the Christian Church Offer,” in *Sifton*, 676.

<sup>94</sup> Niebuhr, “The Race Problem in America,” 169-170.

<sup>95</sup> Niebuhr, “School, Church, and the Ordeals of Integration,” 121-122.

leadership of the White Christian church in this crucial struggle for primary justice,” It was “crystal clear” that there was no excuse for the church’s ongoing failure to tackle issues of racial justice. He stated, “The question is simply whether we are prepared to treat our fellow man with the respect that his innate dignity as a human being requires and deserves. That the church should have failed to meet this primary test of its moral vitality is a fact of grave concern. Could it be that the Protestant church in America has sunk to the insignificant status of a middle-class conventicle, where man’s pride is nurtured rather than disciplined?”<sup>96</sup> Niebuhr also claimed that the church was less effective in opposing the race problem than the labor movement.<sup>97</sup>

Niebuhr’s objections to the church’s actions were rooted in his belief that the church’s role was to be prophetic, arguing that a pastor had to be as much a prophet as a statesman<sup>98</sup> while recognizing that this prophetic message must be preached in specific not abstract terms.<sup>99</sup> As part of this propheticism, Niebuhr believed it necessary to preach the gospel in all its implications and that it should be preached “sharper than a two edged sword.”<sup>100</sup> Niebuhr believed that the church’s reliance on idealism and on education<sup>101</sup> to

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<sup>96</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Montgomery Savagery,” *Christianity and Crisis* 21, no. 10, (June 12, 1961): 102-103.

<sup>97</sup> Niebuhr, “The Race Problem in America,” 169-170

<sup>98</sup> Preface in *Leaves*, 6, “a minister is bound to be a statesman as well as much as a prophet, dealing with situations as well as principles.” See also, Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Perils of Complacency,” *Christianity and Crisis* 14, no. 1, (February 8, 1954): 1-2.

<sup>99</sup> Niebuhr, Preface in *Leaves*, 5 “it is more perilous to proclaim [moral ideals] in abstract terms without bringing them into juxtaposition with specific social and moral issues of the day.”

<sup>100</sup> Niebuhr, 1919 Entry, *Leaves*. The church must “preach and teach the gospel in its full implications,” 38-39. See also “Christian Faith and the Race Problem,” 23; “The Negro Issue in America,” 144

<sup>101</sup> See, e.g., Reinhold Niebuhr, “Meditations from Mississippi,” *Christian Century*, 52 (February 10, 1937): 183-184, 183. Niebuhr, “Christian Faith and the Race Problem,” the



eradicate the race problem was unsatisfactory, noting that the church had “too simple hope that the cruelties of society can be overcome by a little moral suasion,”<sup>102</sup> From Niebuhr’s perspective then, the church’s actions were woefully inadequate.

Niebuhr recognized the race problem as an issue of concern to Christianity. He lamented, “Race prejudice is one of the greatest challenges to the spirit of real Christianity. The entire validity of the Christian faith is in the balance as men try to solve the race problem. Either there is in Christ neither White nor Black or the whole Christian faith becomes absurd.”<sup>103</sup>

In 1927, while a pastor at Bethel Evangelical Church in Detroit, Michigan, Niebuhr criticized White Christians for their unwillingness to take a public stance or direct action to combat race prejudice, leaving politicians<sup>104</sup> to have the social conscience to address such matters.<sup>105</sup> He stated, “It seems to me rather unfortunate that we must

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“liberal church has assumed that the right kind of religious education would eliminate race prejudice,” 144-145.

<sup>102</sup> Niebuhr, “Meditations From Mississippi,” 183.

<sup>103</sup> Niebuhr, “Race Prejudice,” 584

<sup>104</sup> Niebuhr, 1927 entry in *Leaves*, 169. In 1957 Niebuhr opined that the “Christian faith is as liable to sanctify local custom [over] support for the law,” Reinhold Niebuhr, “Civil Rights and Democracy,” 89. In this same article, Niebuhr urged Blacks to be patient and be sustained by their faith as the democratic process moved toward racial justice. This exhortation to be sustained by a faith Niebuhr just indicated was sanctifying local customs of racial injustice is inexplicable.

<sup>105</sup> In this entry, Niebuhr wrote about the Mayor’s Committee on Race Relations report, of which Niebuhr was the Chair. This Committee was formed to examine race relations in the City of Detroit after a series of “race difficulties.” These racial difficulties included a murder of a White man at the home of Dr. Ossian Sweet, a Black physician who had moved into what had previously been an all-White neighborhood. See Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 40-41, for a description and discussion of the Ossian Sweet trials.) Ronald Stone, who noted that Niebuhr “worked in the struggle for the rights of Black Americans throughout his ministry,” also noted, however, that Niebuhr was paternalistic on several points in the report he authored for the Mayor’s Commission on Race Relations in 1927; e.g., Blacks were hampered by “their own inadequacies,” and they also needed “a plan of education to help them keep their neighborhoods in an

depend upon the ‘publicans’ for our social conscience... I wish the good people of the church ... could appreciate how superior [the Mayor’s] attitudes and viewpoints on race relations are to those held by most church people.”<sup>106</sup>

He repeated this point in 1962 when he wrote, “As Christians, we also have no reason for rejoicing because civil government, rather than the impingement of religion on culture, has been the more creative in dealing with this evil [of race prejudice].”<sup>107</sup>

Niebuhr also emphasized that White Christians were called to seek racial justice. He wrote, “The heightening tension in Negro-White relations all over the nation and particularly in the South must fill every Christian with grave concern and a contrite desire to make a useful contribution to the cause of reconciliation and justice.”<sup>108</sup>

### **Niebuhr’s Theological Consideration of Race**

While addressing the perennial force of racism in the U.S., Niebuhr began the development of his theological consideration of race in his earliest writings. He described

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attractive condition.” Stone attempted to mitigate this language by suggesting that “some conservative on the committee insisted on that sentence,” but he cited no authority for that proposition. Ronald Stone, “The Contribution of Reinhold Niebuhr,” in Charles W. Kegley, ed., *Reinhold Niebuhr, His Religious, Social and Political Thought*, 2nd ed., 43-80, (New York: The Pilgrim Press 1984), 60-61.

<sup>106</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, 1927 entry in *Leaves*, 100.

<sup>107</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Intractability of Race Prejudice,” 181.

<sup>108</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Editorial Notes,” *Christianity and Crisis* 4, no. 4 (March 20, 1944): 2. Niebuhr did not root his call to White Christians in the person or the teachings of Jesus. In *Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2012, Niebuhr wrote, “The ethic of Jesus does not deal at all with the immediate moral problem of every human life – the problem of attempting some kind of armistice between various contending factions and forces,” *Ibid.*, 23, 105. Dorrien, *Social Gospel in the Making* does note that “many years later he admitted it was too stark,” *Ibid.*, 249.

race prejudice as a form of race pride and a sin.<sup>109</sup> Niebuhr understood sin to be a rebellion against God, which was central to his thought.<sup>110</sup>

He argued that the essence of humans vis-à-vis sin is paradoxical. On the one hand, people are made in the *imago dei*,<sup>111</sup> and therefore possess freedom giving them the capacity to consider and choose who they are and how they relate to others. This freedom, given by God, results in people believing in their self-sufficiency<sup>112</sup> and that they are the source of their own life. In turn, people use that freedom to make themselves

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<sup>109</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "The Confession of a Tired Radical," *The Christian Century*, (August 30, 1928) reproduced in *Love and Justice: Selected Writings From the Shorter Works of Reinhold Niebuhr*, ed., Robertson, D.B. (New York: Meridian Books, 1967): 120-124, 120-121. *NDM I*, 17. Feminist theologians have challenged Niebuhr's focus on the sin of pride. Black feminist Christian social ethicist Traci West explains, "Jewish feminist theologian Judith Plaskow describes women's sin as primarily a failure to take responsibility for self-actualization.... Hence for Plaskow and other feminists, Niebuhr not only fails to consider the sinfulness of an overemphasis on self-sacrificing and self-effacing behavior that many women practice, but he also celebrates this self-destructive practice as virtuous behavior. Traci West, *Disruptive Christian Ethics: When Racism and Women's Lives Matter*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 25, citing Judith Plaskow, *Sex, Sin, and Grace: Women's Experience and the Theologies of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich*, (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1980), 3. West hones this understanding when she notes, "When insisting upon taking 'women's experience' into account, some white feminist ethicists and theologians seem to have made the mistake of overgeneralizing based upon the privileges of whiteness in much the same way that they accuse Niebuhr of overgeneralizing from the privileged experience of maleness." *Disruptive Christian Ethics*, 23, 187 n. 78. A more thorough engagement of their critiques is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

<sup>110</sup> Niebuhr explained that rebellion against God is the vertical dimension of sin, while the horizontal dimension of sin is injustice directed at others. *NDM, Vol. 1*, 226.

<sup>111</sup> Niebuhr, "Race Prejudice in the North."

<sup>112</sup> Niebuhr identified this as the pride of power, *NDM I* 188-189. According to Niebuhr, this assumption of self-sufficiency existed to a greater degree "among those individuals and classes who have a more than ordinary degree of social power."

the center of existence.<sup>113</sup> Humans, believing they are now God-like,<sup>114</sup> engage in self-deification rather than worshipping God.<sup>115</sup> Such self-deification is grounded in the sin of pride and as applied to race, group racial pride.

On the other side of the paradox is human awareness of their finiteness. This awareness, coupled with attempts to avoid that finiteness, gives rise to anxiety,<sup>116</sup> which humans constantly try to escape by seeking security through the domination of others.<sup>117</sup> This effort to escape anxiety is also a sin of pride,<sup>118</sup> as it too leads to self-deification in its belief that human finiteness can be escaped.

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<sup>113</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM I*, 179, 188. The myth of the fall expressed that “an element of human perversity is always involved in human sin, since a degree of freedom enters into every human action; ... sin is inevitable; ... and finally the fall is not to be attributed merely to the fact of nature ... [instead] it is because man can transcend nature and himself that he is able to conceive of himself as the center of all life ... this is the very essence of sin.” Niebuhr, “Truth in Myths.”

<sup>114</sup> Pride of knowledge, *NDM I*, 192.

<sup>115</sup> *NDM I*, 16, 137, 200. Niebuhr identifies this as spiritual pride, *NDM I*, *Id.*, 200.

<sup>116</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Discerning Signs of the Times,” in Sifton, 751.

<sup>117</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM I*, 137, 168, 182, *NDM II*, 287, 293, Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism*, 8-9. The root cause of our illusions resides in anxiety over our finitude; we trust distorted visions of ourselves because we are afraid to trust God. The source is not one’s social location but the human condition in all racial groups.

<sup>118</sup> Niebuhr identified four types of pride:

1) Pride of Power, where people, particularly those who have more than an ordinary degree of social power, attempt to exert control over others (Niebuhr notes that “the greater the power, the greater the sin”).

2) Intellectual pride occurs when people set up their ideology or culture as normative and other ideologies and cultures as somehow deficient, allowing domination of the inferior culture.

3) Moral pride or self-righteousness when people see their group as internalizing and holding the ultimate virtue, again allowing and requiring dominance over those with inferior virtues. Niebuhr identified self-righteousness as the source of the “most serious cruelties, injustice, and defamations against our fellow men. The whole history of racial ... struggles is a commentary on the objective wickedness and social miseries which result from self-righteousness.” *NDM I*, 200.

4. Spiritual pride, when humans engage in self-deification.

## Race and power

Niebuhr's theological concept of sin led him to conclude that it is a natural impulse of all races to make themselves the center of existence leading to self-concern, self-interest, and striving for wealth and power. Those in power will do whatever is necessary to maintain it, seeking to justify their actions by the "most plausible arguments they are able to devise," even if those arguments are based on invented "specious proofs."<sup>119</sup> Niebuhr further argued that even when circumstances might suggest that a group is acting for a benevolent motive, each group is still acting in what it believes is its own best interests.<sup>120</sup>

He wrote, "The relations between groups ... will be determined by the proportion of power which each group possesses at least as much as by any rational and moral appraisal of the comparative needs and claims of each group."<sup>121</sup> If "each group" is replaced by "Whites and Blacks," the sentence would read, in part, as follows: "The relations between Blacks and Whites will be determined by the proportion of power

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<sup>119</sup> Niebuhr, *MMIS*, 34, 117. Illustrative of this point, Niebuhr dismantles White southern objections to suffrage. He applies this principle by pointing out that Whites have the right to vote because they believe themselves inherently intelligent and literate. Blacks are denied the right to vote by Whites because they are illiterate. The lack of educational facilities causes this illiteracy. However, no educational facilities are provided to Blacks because they cannot learn. Thus, Whites deny Blacks the right to vote without any evidence of a real lack of qualifications or where Whites have eliminated the means by which to achieve those qualifications. Niebuhr, *MMIS*, 119-120. See also Niebuhr, "Fair Employment Practices Act," 4. As a result, no group, according to Niebuhr, will be dislodged from power willingly; it will take economic or political power to do so.

<sup>120</sup> Niebuhr's suggestion on this point is remarkably similar to the Interest Convergence Principle developed by critical legal scholar Derrick Bell. Briefly, Bell's Principle postulates, in part, that the interests of Blacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when that interest converges with the interests of Whites. This principle will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Two.

<sup>121</sup> Niebuhr, *MMIS*, xxxv.

which Blacks and Whites possess.” Since Whites hold virtually all the economic, political, and social power and have done so throughout the history of the U.S., it appears that Niebuhr was remarkably prescient when he wrote, “the white race in America will not admit the Negro to equal rights if it is not forced to do so. Upon that point one may speak with a dogmatism which all history justifies.”<sup>122</sup>

For Niebuhr, “those who hold great economic and political power are more guilty<sup>123</sup> of pride against God and of injustice against the weak than those who lack power and prestige.”<sup>124</sup> Pointing to the Hebrew Bible, Niebuhr noted that people who sin are repeatedly singled out for judgment and that especially harsh judgments are levied against those who hold undue power, asserting that those who have inordinate power become “more guilty of pride and of injustice than those who lack power and position.”<sup>125</sup>

Regarding race, Niebuhr stated, “White men sin against Negroes in ... America more than Negroes sin against White men.”<sup>126</sup> Accordingly, Whites are guiltier of and more responsible for race prejudice than Blacks. Niebuhr hypothesized that one explanation for this phenomenon was White fear of competition by Blacks, and this

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<sup>122</sup> Niebuhr, *MMIS*, 253. Niebuhr also asserted, “It is hopeless for the Negro to expect complete emancipation from the menial social and economic position into which the white man has forced him, merely by trusting in the moral sense of the white race,” 252.

<sup>123</sup> The word guilty is used in the sense of culpability or blameworthiness, not in the sense of remorse or shame.

<sup>124</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM I*, 225. George H. Taylor, “Racism as the Nation’s Crucial Sin: Theology and Derrick Bell,” *Michigan Journal of Race & Law* 9 (April 15, 2004): 269-322: 296-97, interpreted this as equality of sin, but inequality of guilt. *NDM I*, 220-222.

<sup>125</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM, Vol. 1*, 223. Niebuhr comments that the prophets saw “much more clearly than most historic Christianity has seen, that an inevitable concomitant of pride is injustice,” *Ibid.*

<sup>126</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM I*, 226.

insecurity caused the accusation of inferiority.<sup>127</sup> According to Niebuhr, Whites were aware that their group racial pride and racial prejudice were evidence of wrongdoing. This knowledge of wrongdoing caused uneasiness and despair, which Niebuhr equated with anxiety, leading to a temptation to further engage in the sin of race pride.<sup>128</sup> Race pride, for Niebuhr, provided a key illustration of group pride, the exercise of which resulted in “inhuman brutality.”<sup>129</sup>

### **Love, justice, and tolerable minimal solutions**

Christian Realism, as developed by Niebuhr, is grounded in the fundamental Christian norms of love and justice. He saw the relationship between these two norms as complex. He wrote, “The gospel ethic is absolute because it merely presents the final law of human freedom: The love of God and neighbor.”<sup>130</sup> But because race pride is rooted in sin, there cannot be a complete solution since it is impossible to purge humanity of sin thoroughly; sins of pride can be mitigated by empiricism, but they ultimately remain religious problems – people must become aware of their self-worship to change.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>127</sup> Niebuhr, “The Negro Issue in America,” 143. Niebuhr attributed the significant polarity in Black/White relations to the considerable divergence of Blacks from Whites – the vestige of slavery still results in assumptions of inferiority, and Blacks diverge significantly in appearance from Whites.

<sup>128</sup> Niebuhr, “Christian Faith and the Race Problem,” in *Love and Justice*, 126-127.

<sup>129</sup> Niebuhr, *NDMI*, 208.

<sup>130</sup> Frederick V. Simmons, “Love,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Reinhold Niebuhr*, eds. Robin Lovin and Joshua Mauldin, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 263-280, 267.

<sup>131</sup> Niebuhr, “The Race Problem,” 131.

In *Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol. I*, Niebuhr, described love as a commandment<sup>132</sup> explaining, “What is commanded is a state of heart and mind, a harmony between the soul and God ... and a harmony between self and neighbor.” Niebuhr identified love as the highest religious virtue that “insists that the needs of the neighbor shall be met, without a careful computation of relative needs,”<sup>133</sup> essentially “standing in the place of the other.”<sup>134</sup> Yet Niebuhr also believed that the virtue of love was an “impossible impossibility.”<sup>135</sup> He asked, “how is it possible to derive a social ethic from the absolute ethic of the gospels... The love of God and neighbor.”<sup>136</sup> A social ethic must be concerned with the tolerable harmonies of life, tolerable forms of justice, and tolerable stabilities in the flux of life. All this must be done, not by asking selfish people to love one another ...”<sup>137</sup> because humans, due to their sinful nature, could never attain the true nature of Christian love. Moreover, Niebuhr noted that love as a moral norm becomes less effective for solving more extensive and complex problems, such as racial injustice, “as one proceeds from ordinary relations between individuals to the life of social groups.”<sup>138</sup>

Niebuhr dismissed attempts to apply the law of love to social ethics as sentimentality.<sup>139</sup> Niebuhr explained, “Love is a motive and not a method. Love must

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<sup>132</sup> “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and all thy soul, and all thy mind” and Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself.” *Nature and Destiny of Man, Vol. I*, (NDM I), 286.

<sup>133</sup> *MMIS*, 57.

<sup>134</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, ed. Robert McAfee Brown, “Love and Law in Protestantism and Catholicism,” *The Essential Reinhold Niebuhr: Selected Essays and Addresses*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 154-155.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>136</sup> Cynthia D. Moe-Lobeda, in a discussion of neighbor-love as a biblical and theological norm, identifies several characteristics of neighbor love. *Structural Evil*, 184.

<sup>137</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, 2013 version, xxxii.



always be intent on justice... It is justice, rather than love, which becomes relevant whenever one has to deal with conflicting wills and interests.”<sup>140</sup>

White Christian social ethicist Robin Lovin described Niebuhr’s perspective on justice: “For Niebuhr, the pursuit of justice requires that we understand<sup>141</sup> what it would mean for real persons to live well. We must know what we would want for them if we loved them. This is necessary to formulate the requirements of justice, even if what we are actually prepared to give is a good deal less than love requires, and also if what love requires proves to be quite different from what the others actually want.”

For Niebuhr, “Rules of justice do not follow in a “necessary manner” from some basic proposition of justice. They are the fruit of a rational survey of the whole field of human interests, of the structure of human life and the causal sequences in human relations.”<sup>142</sup> Regarding race prejudice, Niebuhr argued that all the spiritual resources would be necessary to “effect even a tolerable minimum solution” for achieving a modicum of racial justice.<sup>143</sup>

### **The Enigma of Niebuhr’s Gradualism**

Niebuhr identified race pride as original sin and argued that Whites were guiltier of race pride than Blacks. He acknowledged that a power differential existed between Blacks and Whites. He believed Blacks were unlikely ever to win full justice since even

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<sup>138</sup> *MMIS*, 73.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 140. In *MMIS*, Niebuhr stated, “the religious ideal in its purest form has nothing to do with social justice,” 263.

<sup>140</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Way of Non-violent Resistance,” *Christianity and Society* 21, no. 2 (Spring 1956): 3.

<sup>141</sup> Lovin, *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism*, 196.

<sup>142</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, *Faith and History*, 193.

<sup>143</sup> Niebuhr, “The Negro Issue in America,” 143.

the most minimal demands of Blacks would be deemed exorbitant by Whites. He argued that Whites would never provide equal rights to Blacks unless they were forced to do so. Niebuhr recognized that segregated schools harmed Black schoolchildren. He also criticized the Christian church and Christians for moving too slowly to address race prejudice and for endorsing remedies that he believed were inadequate. Despite this multitude of perspectives, opinions, and arguments recognizing how Blacks were denied justice, Niebuhr frequently argued for gradual approaches when addressing specific, concrete, discrete events of racial injustice.

He did so in 1929 regarding his former church, Bethel Evangelical Church in Detroit. At that time, Bethel had split over the application of two Black families for membership at the Church.<sup>144</sup> His successor, Adelbert Helm, argued that admitting these two families was a test of the church's commitment to the gospel.<sup>145</sup> Niebuhr chastised Helm for his actions and implicitly supported the church council when it forced Helm out.<sup>146</sup> In a letter to the church council, he explained that he had "never envisaged a fully developed interracial church at Bethel,"<sup>147</sup> "I do not think we are ready for that."<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography*, 118-119.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>147</sup> Fox, 119. Niebuhr later apparently "confessed to the young minister that he might have 'thrown too much blame' on him in trying to 'excuse' a church with which he was 'sentimentally pretty much bound up.'" *Ibid.*

<sup>148</sup> Fox, 119, citing a Jan 22, 1930, letter from Reinhold Niebuhr to the church council. Nevertheless, Niebuhr was deeply distressed by the congregational vote to bar Blacks from membership. He further wrote, "But I do not see how any church can be so completely disloyal to the Gospel of love as to put up bars against members of another racial group." Niebuhr, pained by the church's refusal to admit the two families to membership, wrote, "Any institution of the ideal, such as the church, must deal with problem of interracial conflict if it is to justify the pretensions of moral leadership which it continually makes." Fox at 119-120.

Despite his angst over Bethel's failure to integrate, Niebuhr nevertheless argued that the lack of readiness of Whites to be open to integration was *the* primary factor in that situation.

1937 found Niebuhr addressing a group of southern clergy on the interracial policy of the Delta Cooperative Farm.<sup>149</sup> The Farm, founded in 1936 "under the leadership of Sam Franklin and with the support of Sherwood Eddy" as well as the assistance of Niebuhr, was designed to assist economically both Black and White sharecroppers whom their landlords had evicted.<sup>150</sup>

In "Meditations from Mississippi," Niebuhr indicated that the "Delta Cooperative Farm seems to me the most significant experiment in social Christianity now being conducted in America."<sup>151</sup> Despite explaining to the southern clergymen "that economic cooperation between the races was a *sine qua non* of such an effort to abolish landlordism as the Delta Cooperative Farm represents," and remarking, "A group of ministers of the

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<sup>149</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, "Meditations from Mississippi." Niebuhr described the Farm as a group of thirty families of evicted sharecroppers who worked collectively to challenge "landlordism." Ibid., 183. He argued that improved economic conditions for Blacks and Whites could come "only through their joint action, [since] one cannot afford to sacrifice the principle of economic interracialism." The cooperative was organized around four principles: efficiency in production and economy in finance through the cooperative principle, participation in building a socialized economy of abundance, interracial justice, and realistic religion as a social dynamic. To these ends, the Delta and Providence cooperatives were to pay Blacks and Whites equal wages for work and provide social and other services. See Sam H. Franklin, Jr., "The Delta Cooperative Farm," [https://egrove.olemiss.edu/civ\\_pubs/2](https://egrove.olemiss.edu/civ_pubs/2), accessed April 17, 2023. Niebuhr was also active in forming the United Christian Council for Democracy. He further supported the Southern Tenant Farmers' Union and the Fellowship of Southern Churchmen. Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography*, 176, and Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 45. Cone indicated, "All of these organizations focused on justice with an accent on racial and economic issues, and received support from the Fellowship of Socialist Christians, which Niebuhr founded," Ibid., 45.

<sup>150</sup> Niebuhr, "Meditations from Mississippi," 184.

<sup>151</sup> Niebuhr, "Meditations from Mississippi," 184.

gospel, defending the unchristian *mores* of their community is always a slightly pathetic sight,”<sup>152</sup> Niebuhr nevertheless “told the ministers the farm would not *unnecessarily* challenge the prejudices of the south. That is not only a matter of expediency. Economic cooperation is so necessary that it is worth establishing it even if *scruples must be sacrificed* to prejudices in the matter of social and educational relationships.”<sup>153</sup> It appears as if Niebuhr believed it was better to remain silent about the racism of White southern clergy to maintain collegiality over racial justice.

In a 1942 article, Niebuhr considered the segregation of Army units and the internment of Japanese Americans during WWII. These simultaneous situations allowed Niebuhr to forcefully address two cases where the federal government took racially adverse actions. While acknowledging harm in both situations, Niebuhr advocated for a quick end only to the internment of Japanese Americans.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> Ibid., 183.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid. Italics added. Here also, Niebuhr expressed his own biases and prejudices about Blacks. He stated, “the Negro betrays some characteristics of a pure child of nature. He does not concern himself with the problems of tomorrow. Since a cooperative farm means building for a distant future, the leadership must develop an almost superhuman patience with the vagrant fancies of some of the Black members.” *Id.* 184. He also wrote that he had learned of the “hanging of two Negro boys after the conference had concluded. Rather than indicating that he would have raised the issue of the lynching in the most forceful of terms, he stated instead that he “*might* have used the incident to suggest that there [was] no reason to be particularly proud of the ‘customs’ of the south.” He concluded, “But perhaps it is just as well that I didn’t use that argument.” Ibid., Italics added, 183.

<sup>154</sup> Niebuhr also advocated for a quick, equitable solution for a homeland for Jews. In writing about the status and rights of Jews in early 1942, Niebuhr believed it was insufficient to return Jews to the status quo of their position before WWII. Rather “something more” was necessary to address their displacement during the war. Reinhold Niebuhr, “Jews After the War, Part II,” *The Nation*, (February 28, 1942) in *Love and Justice*, 137-142, 142. In other words, in the aftermath of the holocaust, Jews needed affirmative action to place them in a place of equality with their homeland. Niebuhr never took such a position regarding Blacks.

Turning to the desegregation of army units, Niebuhr criticized the Black soldiers for insisting on immediate desegregation and their unwillingness to compromise.<sup>155</sup> He castigated the Black soldiers for rejecting “separate” segregated units and their unwillingness to compromise their principles. He further suggested that Blacks needed to be more patient and accept change at a slower pace, arguing that “on the part of minority groups a little more Christian realism would also have its advantages.”<sup>156</sup>

*In the Children of Light and the Children of Darkness*, Niebuhr opined that equal justice should be obtained by “gradual and evolutionary processes [and that] a democratic society, must, in other words, seek proximate solutions for [the race problem].”<sup>157</sup> In 1950, Niebuhr elevated political expediency over the harm sustained by Blacks due to the defeat of the proposed Fair Employment Practices Act in Congress,<sup>158</sup> claiming that the Act was premature since most of the citizenry in the South opposed it.<sup>159</sup>

Niebuhr’s gradualist bent became even more pronounced after the U.S. Supreme Court *Brown* decisions. Niebuhr’s initial reaction to the *Brown I* decision was highly positive, and he endorsed the decision for delaying implementation. First, Niebuhr opined that progress toward racial justice had been so rapid since *Plessy v Ferguson* “that it would have seemed plausible to ‘let well enough alone’ and continue upon this [gradual] course.”<sup>160</sup> The *Brown* decision, according to Niebuhr, “wisely postpones application of

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<sup>155</sup> Niebuhr, “The Race Problem,” 131.

<sup>156</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>157</sup> Niebuhr, *The Children of Light and The Children of Darkness*, in Sifton, 300, 434.

<sup>158</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “Fair Employment Practices Act.” FEPA was part of President Truman’s proposed “Fair Deal” legislative program. This program also contained a proposed anti-lynching bill and an anti-poll tax bill.

<sup>159</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>160</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Supreme Court on Segregation in the Schools,” 75, italics added.

the principle for most of the affected states until they have time to adjust themselves to the conditions created by the decision. *Thus, any undue shock is avoided*, and the danger is lessened that the decision will provoke resistance by southern authorities.”<sup>161</sup> Later in the same article, Niebuhr reiterated that the court “gave additional proof of its wisdom” by deferring the date on which most of the states would have to meet the new norms. This policy did much to deflect any incipient revolt against the decision.”<sup>162</sup>

In a 1956 editorial, “The Desegregation Issue,”<sup>163</sup> Niebuhr again explicitly counseled that Blacks would need to wait for racial equity despite recognizing that “this advice will not seem very sound to the Negro race which has suffered so long from the White man’s arrogance.”<sup>164</sup> The following year, Niebuhr again urged Blacks to be patient and sustained by their faith while the democratic process moved toward racial justice.<sup>165</sup> Also, in 1957, Niebuhr opined that “negroes [sic] will have to exercise patience and be sustained by a robust faith that history will gradually fulfill the logic of justice.”<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> Ibid., italics added. It should be noted that at this time, Niebuhr believed that southern resistance to the decision would be minimal.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 75-76. Black critical legal scholar Derrick Bell has argued that the *Brown* decisions were based as much on political expediency (“Racial segregation was hampering the United States in the Cold War with communist nations and undermining U.S. efforts to combat subversion at home.”) as a desire to end segregated education. Derrick Bell, “The Unintended Lessons in *Brown v. Board of Education*,” *New York Law School Law Review* 49, (April 29, 2005): 1053-1067, 1056. Much like Niebuhr in “The Supreme Court on Segregation in the Schools,” Bell further argued that the historical account of segregation in the *Brown* decisions “failed to acknowledge the full magnitude and duration of white supremacy and the extent of black subordination after *Plessy*.” Derrick Bell, *Silent Covenants: Brown v. Board of Education and the Unfilled Hopes for Racial Reform*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 136.

<sup>163</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Desegregation Issue,” *Christianity and Society*, 21, no. 2 (Spring 1956): 3-4.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>165</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Montgomery Savagery,” 102-103

<sup>166</sup> Niebuhr, “Civil Rights and Democracy,” 89, italics added.

Niebuhr's justification for gradualistic approaches arguably fell into two categories, each reinforcing the other. The first was Niebuhr's sometimes biased perspectives and opinions of Blacks, rooted in negative stereotypes and racial assumptions. The second emphasized the need to accommodate the fears and concerns of White parents. However, these approaches do not appear to consider gradualism as a Christian problem, contradicting scripture and the Christian norms of love and justice. Moreover, Niebuhr's ongoing support of gradualism contradicted his critiques of the Christian church regarding its minimal efforts to address racial injustice and the unwillingness of White Christians to work for racial justice.

### **Niebuhr's racial views**

In many situations in which Niebuhr argued for a gradualist approach, he relied upon his characterizations of Blacks, and his critique of Black culture, which he presented as objective fact. In a 1927 entry in *Leaves*, Niebuhr claimed that correcting the problems of the colored people was "hampered by their own inadequacies."<sup>167</sup> Similarly, in "Meditations from Mississippi," written in 1937, he claimed that "*nature* has created the chasm between the White man and Negroes,"<sup>168</sup> and that the "Negroes betrays some of the same characteristics of a pure child of nature. He does not concern himself with the problems of tomorrow."<sup>169</sup>

In "The Race Problem in America," written in 1955, Niebuhr discussed the adverse reactions of southern communities to the *Brown* decision. Although revealing

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<sup>167</sup> Niebuhr, *Leaves*, Ibid., 100.

<sup>168</sup> Niebuhr, *Meditations From Mississippi*, 183.

<sup>169</sup> Niebuhr, *Meditations From Mississippi*, 183. See also, *The Race Problem*, "But we would also know that the inclination to place them all in the same category is not justified by the facts," *Love and Justice*, 136.

disappointment about these reactions, Niebuhr also wrote, “Any criticisms of southern communities would be totally unfair if they did not take account of the difficulties of school integration caused by the different cultural standards of the two races” claiming that these cultural inequalities made it more difficult for the South to accept integrated schools.<sup>170</sup>

Niebuhr’s comments in “The Desegregation Issue”<sup>171</sup> reemphasized his comments on different cultural standards, “The two races, are after all, not culturally equal,” which resulted in “fathers and mothers who are afraid that common schools will lower the cultural quality of their children’s education;” Niebuhr called these fears “very reasonable.”<sup>172</sup> Finally, in “School, Church and the Ordeals of Integration,” Niebuhr, in addressing the concerns of White parents regarding “the cultural adequacy of *their* schools,” Niebuhr flatly stated, “the race is backward.”<sup>173</sup>

Niebuhr’s repeated emphasis on the notion that Blacks were backward, culturally different, and deficient suggests that he did not consider Blacks full members of society (read White society).<sup>174</sup> This, together with his persistent endorsement of gradualistic approaches, arguably gives rise to an inference that Niebuhr may have considered even gradualistic approaches as a gracious bestowal of undeserved benefits.

### **Assuaging the fears of White parents**

Niebuhr’s affinity for gradualistic remedies was explained by his arguments that the cultural backwardness of Blacks created a legitimate fear for White parents that

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<sup>170</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Race Problem in America,” 169.

<sup>171</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Desegregation Issue,” 3-4.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

<sup>173</sup> Niebuhr, “School, Church and the Ordeals of Integration,” 121.

<sup>174</sup> Edwards, “Niebuhr, ‘Realism,’ and Civil Rights in America,” 13.



needed to be assuaged to avoid exacerbating societal unrest. In “The Supreme Court on Segregation in the Schools,” Niebuhr applauded the *Brown* Court’s decision to establish a gradualistic standard for implementation. He wrote that this permitted “time to adjust themselves to the conditions created by the decision. Thus any undue shock is avoided and the danger is lessened that the decision will provoke resistance by southern authorities.”<sup>175</sup> Niebuhr reiterated this point the following year when he observed that the *Brown* decisions had “unloosed passions and fears in the White minority in some states.” He further cautioned, “Any criticisms of southern communities would be totally unfair if they did not take account of the difficulties of school integration caused by the different cultural standards of the two races.”<sup>176</sup> Niebuhr pointed out that “in race relations one deals not only with facts, but also with fears which may be more potent than facts.”<sup>177</sup> In “School, Church, and the Ordeals of Integration, Niebuhr again endorsed a gradualistic approach to school desegregation “lest the Southern White people are pushed ... off balance and are not allowed time to get their balance.”<sup>178</sup>

Niebuhr’s concerns about the fears and anxieties of Whites and the potential ramifications if those fears were not given primary importance, led to his reliance on gradualism – minor changes at a snail’s pace. His reliance necessitates consideration of the inconsistencies between Niebuhr’s understanding of love and justice and gradualism. In “The Ethic of Jesus and the Social Problem, Niebuhr wrote, “If the portion of society

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<sup>175</sup> Niebuhr, “The Supreme Court on Segregation in the Schools,” 75. Niebuhr further wrote that Blacks had “proved their worth” to participate in sports and had “splendid proofs of worth” manifested in their “moral character.” Ibid., 76.

<sup>176</sup> Niebuhr, “The Race Problem in America,” 170.

<sup>177</sup> Niebuhr, “The Race Problem in America,” 170.

<sup>178</sup> Niebuhr, “School, Church, and the Ordeals of Integration,” 122.

that benefits from social inequality and which is endangered by a rising tide of social discontent attempts to counsel love, forgiveness, and patience to the discontented, it will convict itself of hypocrisy...”<sup>179</sup> Does this mean that Niebuhr was hypocritical to counsel patience to Blacks, or to employ gradualistic remedies to redress racial injustices? Similarly, how does gradualism affect Niebuhr’s understanding of love as the “highest religious virtue” that insists that the neighbor’s needs should be met without assessing the relative needs of the neighbor? Are Blacks required to disproportionately demonstrate that maxim when the focus is on small incremental steps to address racial injustice?

Niebuhr’s position maintained the racial status quo, which continued to marginalize and oppress Blacks. As Cone wrote, “Niebuhr’s call for gradualism, patience, and prudence during the decade when Willie McGee (1951), Emmett Till (1955), M.C. “Mack” Parker (1959) and other blacks were lynched sounds like that of a southern moderate more concerned about not challenging the cultural traditions of the white South than achieving justice for black people.”<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Ethic of Jesus and the Social Problem,” *Love and Justice: Selected Writings From the Shorter Works of Reinhold Niebuhr*, ed. E.B. Robertson (Cleveland, OH: The World Publishing Company, 1957), 39.

<sup>180</sup> Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 39. Calling Niebuhr seems generous. Herbert O. Edwards characterizes Niebuhr’s Christian realism as “establishment oriented,” Niebuhr, ‘Realism,’ and Civil Rights in America,” 14. White Christian ethicist Gloria Albrecht characterizes chapter 2 of *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, Cone’ as revealing “the whiteness in white theology: the emptiness of ideals un-lived in reality, the way that fear of disorder tramples the demands of justice, the conservative goals at the heart of Christian realism, the unwillingness to acknowledge disparate access to social power, and the refusal to learn from communities of the oppressed,” “The Heresy of White Christianity,” *Cross Currents*, 64, no. 3 (2014): 346-352, 350.

## Conclusion

There is little doubt that Niebuhr's accurately assessed White fears and resistance to racial integration during the 1940s and 1950s was accurate. There is little doubt that he sincerely believed that the *Brown* decisions were a positive step forward to addressing the race problem in the U.S. There is little doubt that Niebuhr understood the structural aspect of racism even though he may not have used the phrase "structural racism."<sup>181</sup>

Yet Niebuhr systematically elevated Whites' fears over Blacks' rights in articulating social ethics. If, as Niebuhr asserted, Whites were guiltier of race prejudice than Blacks, then the question must be asked why was he almost always willing to sacrifice the rights of the less guilty?

This question reveals the flaws in Niebuhr's Christian realism and his loyalty to gradualism. Niebuhr knew about the horrors of slavery, the widespread existence of Jim Crow segregation, and ongoing instances of lynching. Further, "When he was a pastor in Detroit, the Ku Klux Klan was very active politically, nearly capturing the mayor's office in 1925."<sup>182</sup> He recognized that Whites held greater power than Blacks. He acknowledged the resistance by Whites to desegregation. He accepted the validity of the demands of Blacks for desegregated schools. Yet, in almost every instance when Niebuhr considered these factors, the interests of Whites were given primacy over the interests of Blacks. Similarly, Niebuhr frequently prioritized societal calm over White Christian compliance with court decisions.

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<sup>181</sup> Niebuhr's critiques of the church, government policies and practices,<sup>181</sup> police practices,<sup>181</sup> and employment practices<sup>181</sup> all implicate structures and systems.

<sup>182</sup> Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 40.

As Black feminist, Christian social ethicist Traci West stated, it seems as if Niebuhr attempted to “adopt a veneer of objective, disinterested analysis” when analyzing racial issues.<sup>183</sup> But Niebuhr’s analysis was arguably neither disengaged from his Whiteness nor neutral in his assessments, especially in light of his use of patronizing and racially stereotyped language in his editorials and articles.<sup>184</sup>

Gradualistic remedies do little to alter discriminatory policies and practices and do not necessarily reflect sustained incremental progress toward racial equity. Instead, gradualism has operated as a panacea designed to placate those subjected to racial inequities, lulling people into a false sense of security while avoiding or delaying significant change altogether. If Whites decide how quickly change occurs it suggests that Whites also will determine the degree of change to be undertaken. Thus, gradualism masquerades as progress while Whites continue to receive benefits and privileges to a greater degree than are granted to people of color. It is a “rationale for laissez-faire race relations” that results in “sedative peace offerings,” which itself results [only] in “piecemeal gains.”<sup>185</sup> Stated differently, a gradualistic paradigm provides a safe harbor for White Christian racism and lulls people of color into a false sense of progress. Gradualism retards progress toward initiatives for racial equity.

The next chapter will explore the impact and ramifications of continuing White Christian approval of gradualism on initiatives for racial justice.

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<sup>183</sup> West, “Constructing Ethics,” 45.

<sup>184</sup> Niebuhr, “The Negro Issue in America.”

<sup>185</sup> Bittle, 233.110

## **CHAPTER 2 – WHAT HAS GRADUALISM WROUGHT?**

### **Introduction**

In chapter one, I examined Christian realist discourse and its resultant emphasis on gradualism as a Christian theo-ethical strategy for remediating White Christian opposition to initiatives for racial justice. The scholarship of Reinhold Niebuhr on race, rooted in his conceptualization of sin and his reliance on the two foundational Christian norms of love and justice, provides valuable theoretical and applied frameworks for analyzing the efficacy of gradualistic strategies in Christian social ethics on racial justice issues.

While my examination of gradualism revealed that it might result in progress toward attaining racial justice, it also revealed that such progress could be minuscule and lethargic or more troubling, stagnant, and regressive. Rather than acting as vehicles for change, Christian realism and gradualism have sometimes perpetuated or bolstered White Christian resistance to racial equity initiatives, despite their averred adherence to anti-racist beliefs and a professed commitment to engage in anti-racist actions. This chapter will augment and extend the examination of gradualism in chapter one by scrutinizing and assessing the theoretical and theological underpinnings of continued White Christian support for gradualistic remedies.

Critical scrutiny by White Christian social ethicists of the contradiction between vocalized support by White Christians for racial justice and the relatively ineffective gradualistic solutions most often favored must occur to rekindle authentic progress toward true racial equity. Too few White Christian social ethicists consider, analyze, or theorize how gradualism as a remedy for racial inequities is inconsistent with and

contradictory to the cultivation of Christian biblical and moral values that can help to decenter White racism. To address the paucity of substantive scholarly examination of the disconnect between claimed commitments and actual beliefs and behaviors, Christian social ethicists must deconstruct why White Christians too often remain enamored with gradualism. To do this, a thorough assessment of current Christian realist strategies and the underlying foundations upon which they rest must occur to determine if these strategies have any ongoing viability that might assist in the development of more effective theo-ethical approaches to the eradication of racial injustice, or if they should be jettisoned in their entirety. Either way, Christian social ethicists must theorize and devise new strategies and practices to interrupt or replace gradualistic remedies with remedies that bring about substantial genuine progress toward racial justice at an accelerated pace.

Critical race theory (CRT) provides insights into why some White Christians continue demonstrating fealty to gradualism that Christian social ethics can mine. Sociological CRT scholarship emphasizes how Whites express support for racial justice while simultaneously using linguistic devices that contradict those assertions, allowing Whites to verbalize racist thoughts and opinions without sounding racist. In much the same way, White Christians claim to support efforts to eliminate racial injustice but rely on scriptural interpretations and theological concepts that continue to resist racial justice initiatives also without sounding racist.

Legal CRT analyses challenge the alleged neutrality of the legal system in its consideration of race discrimination claims. These challenges reveal that the legal system provides relief from discriminatory practices but only to the extent that the relief does not give equal or more significant benefits and privileges to Blacks than Whites. Similarly,

some White Christians are willing to support initiatives for racial justice as long as any changes come slowly, involve small incremental steps, and do not approximate the privileges and benefits they enjoy. Thus, engagement with CRT contributes to developing a robust theo-ethical critique of Christian realism and gradualism and assists in the work to create sustained and efficacious theo-ethical anti-racist practices.

### **Racial Colorblindness and White Resistance to Antiracism Efforts**

“[My daughter] has friends, black and white kids in her classroom, and she doesn't see any difference. I have actually raised my kids to love people and accept people no matter what, and just because I don't want critical race theory taught to my children at school doesn't make me a racist, dammit.”<sup>186</sup> Crying, a White mother, further stated that her daughter regrets being White.<sup>187</sup> These statements were made on April 20, 2021, before the Rockwood School District Board of Education in Missouri, a public, secular school setting. She spoke to state her opposition to what she claimed was the teaching of CRT in the District.<sup>188</sup> She was not alone in her belief that the purported

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<sup>186</sup> Jason Lemon, “Video of Mom Insisting She Isn't Racist for Opposing Racial Justice Lessons Viewed Over 500K Times,” *Newsweek*, May 2, 2021, accessed June 9, 2021, <https://www.newsweek.com/video-mom-insisting-she-isnt-racist-opposing-racial-justice-lessons-viewed-over-500k-times-1588167>.

<sup>187</sup> How this regret manifested itself is unclear from the video.

<sup>188</sup> The district proposed to teach its students about cultural and racial diversity and to address the long-term effects of racism. They further expressed the hope that the community would be willing to work to address the long-term effects of racism. The plan asserted, “We wish to speak and act. We also recognize that speaking and acting may cause feelings of discomfort, vulnerability, and uncertainty. While we do not have all the answers, we are confident that if we act with grace, love, compassion and empathy, and listen with open hearts and minds, we can make positive change throughout our schools and communities.” The plan further identified additional elective classes that would be offered to support the plan's goals. This is *not* CRT (See n. 6, *infra*). This information was taken from the District's website. Rockwood School District, <https://www.rsdmo.org/departments/superintendent/equity/Pages/Curriculum.aspx>) and the goals for student academic learning,

teaching of CRT in the District was harmful to her children. According to an article in Newsweek, “the majority of the room’s reaction to her outburst wasn’t mockery, but approval — and they gave her the loudest applause of the day.” Similarly, Jennifer Spencer, another White parent in the same district, averred, “As a parent, my first and most important job is to protect MY children and what is in their best interests. And being told that they are racists, or White supremacists, is not true, and is most definitely not in their best interests. I will not allow anyone to make them feel guilt or shame for the color of their skin, which we should know is NEVER OKAY.”<sup>189</sup>

More recently, the parent (who also happens to be the Executive Director of the St. Petersburg, FL YMCA) of a North Shore Elementary School student in St. Petersburg, FL, objected to the Disney movie *Ruby Bridges*. The parent declined to allow her child to view the film, claiming it was inappropriate because it could teach the class that “White people hate Black people.” Citing a list of slurs and threatening comments heard in the film’s depiction of what Bridges endured, the parent asked for the movie to be removed from a list of films approved for elementary school students.<sup>190</sup>

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(<https://forward.rsdmo.org/plan/goals/Pages/Student-Academic-Learning.aspx>. Accessed June 15, 2021. As of August 1, 2021, neither of those web pages existed.

<sup>189</sup> St. Louis Public Radio, <https://news.stlpublicradio.org/education/2021-05-04/a-split-rockwood-school-community-in-war-of-words-over-how-to-teach-diversity>, accessed June 9, 2021, capitalization in original. Regrettably, Ms. Spencer’s averred moral stance that children should never have to experience guilt or shame for the color of their skin did not appear to consider the extent to which Black children throughout history unceasingly have been subjected to actions and practices that have made them feel guilt or shame for the color of their skin.

<sup>190</sup> Charles M. Blow, editorial, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/29/opinion/florida-school-disney-ruby-bridges.html> “A Florida School Banned a Disney Movie About Ruby Bridges. Here’s What That Really Means,” *The New York Times*, March 29, 2023. Accessed April 1, 2023. North Shore Elementary sent a letter to the parents of second graders in February 2023 asking parents if their children had permission to watch *Ruby Bridges*. Blow went on to detail how Ruby Bridges was treated. He



Although a review of the District's curriculum plan reveals that it was *not* rooted in CRT,<sup>191</sup> and at best was only a gradualistic effort to teach students about racism,<sup>192</sup>

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wrote, "When she integrated that school, she had to be escorted by federal marshals. She was met by throngs of white racists — adults! — jeering, hurling epithets, spitting at her and threatening her life. Parents withdrew their children. Only one teacher would teach her, so every day that 6-year-old girl had to be in class by herself, save for the teacher, and eat lunch alone. Ruby became afraid to eat because one of the protesters threatened to poison her. Her father lost his job, and the local grocery asked that her family not come back to the store."

<sup>191</sup> Many scholars who engage CRT in their work are not necessarily arguing that all White people are to blame for the actions of individuals in the past. Instead, they assert that Whites have a moral obligation to engage the issues of how and why racism, especially systemic and structural racism, continues to impact all of us in the U.S. /. Rashawn Ray and Alexandra Gibbons, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/fixgov/2021/07/02/why-are-states-banning-critical-race-theory>. Accessed 2/25/22. While CRT has no static definition, it has several core foundational principles (see, e.g., Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, "Twenty Years of Critical Race Theory: Looking Back to Move Forward." *Conn. L. Rev.* 43 (2010): 1253-1353.

1. Racism is not aberrant but an ordinary, everyday occurrence embedded in all societal structures and institutions. As a result, it is accepted as normal and natural.
2. Race is a social construction; no biological or genetic basis exists for assumed understandings of race.
3. Narratives may be used to critique and challenge societal myths and assumptions based on race.
4. There is interest convergence. That is, advances toward, or setbacks from, efforts to achieve racial equity for people of color generally occur only when they serve the interests of Whites.
5. Intersectionality, universalism, and anti-essentialism. No person has a single, easily stated, unitary identity, and no one person can speak for, or represent, the entirety of a socially created group. Moreover, intersectionality emphasizes the juncture between race and other identities, such as class and gender, and how they combine to produce complex mixtures of power and privilege.
6. Critique of, and disentanglement from, liberal reform tenets of racial colorblindness, individualism, legal neutrality, and meritocracy.
7. An activist component, it moves beyond the theoretical, seeking the transformation of racist structures and institutions.

<sup>192</sup> In this regard, it should be noted that the objected-to curriculum was merely a gradual approach to teaching about racism. The District did not implement a mandatory, totally comprehensive curriculum that fully attended to the violent, oppressive, and shameful

some White parents nevertheless objected because they believed the plan might personally target their White children and inflict trauma upon them because it included lessons on cultural and racial diversity and the long-term effects of racism.<sup>193</sup> Indeed, resistance to the alleged teaching of CRT continues to grow,<sup>194</sup> and public challenges to the purported teaching of CRT are too numerous to mention. Regrettably, objections to CRT are not limited to exhortations by parents at school board meetings, nor are complaints about CRT limited to White parents. Although my focus in this dissertation is on White resistance and support of gradualism, some parents who do not racially identify as White have also objected to the purported inclusion of CRT into public school curriculum, arguing that telling their child, “or any child that they are in a permanent oppressed status in America because they are black is racist.”<sup>195</sup> A plethora of states have enacted statutes prohibiting the teaching of CRT. Florida, for example, passed a law that provides in part, “A person should not be instructed that he or she must feel guilt,

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history of slavery and virulent racism in the US to the exclusion of other subject matter. It did not require all its students to engage the proposed curriculum. It did not insist that only certain books and resources be used. Instead, the school district offered *elective* classes that proposed to teach students about cultural and racial diversity and the ongoing effects of racism. By choosing a gradualistic approach to its curriculum, deference to White parental concerns was already factored into the district’s proposed curriculum. Even this modest effort, however, appears to have been too much for some White parents.

<sup>193</sup> “Sociologists and other scholars have long noted that racism can exist without racists. However, many Americans are not able to separate their individual identity as an American from the social institutions that govern us – these people perceive themselves *as* the system. Consequently, they interpret calling social institutions racist as calling them racist personally.” Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*, (Fifth Ed.), (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018).

<sup>194</sup> As of 2022.

<sup>195</sup> Karol Markewicz, “Kudos to Black and White Parents for Mounting an Uprising Against Race Theory,” interview with Quisha King, *New York Post*, June 23, 2021.

anguish, or other forms of psychological distress for actions, in which he or she played no part, committed in the past by other members of the same race or sex."<sup>196</sup>

What is it about efforts to teach cultural and racial diversity, to teach the ugly truths of slavery, racism, and White supremacy, or to teach ways in which to overcome lingering racism in the United States that causes such agitated opposition?<sup>197</sup> Are the White parents subtly espousing racist beliefs and attitudes, or are they merely acting from their anxieties and fears, vocalizing what they believe to be legitimate concerns for their children? In either case, parents, understandably and justifiably, do not want their children placed in what they perceive to be harm's way and will act to protect their children from such perceived harm at all costs. Parents who feel that they are, or might be, unable to protect their children may become fearful, anxious, or angry, lashing out at those seen as responsible for jeopardizing their children's safety and well-being.

Does it matter if White parental opposition to public school curricula, policies, or practices is rooted in fearful protectiveness or if it is rooted in racist beliefs? On the one hand, perhaps it is tempting to say no, since, irrespective of motivation, both possibilities have identical outcomes – White parents do not want their children exposed to ideas and

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<sup>196</sup> Title XLVIII, Section 1003.42.

<sup>197</sup> The issue of parental opposition to curriculum content is not new. Over the years, parents have objected to school curricula both for what is taught as well as that which is not taught. Sex education, religion, evolution, abortion, euthanasia, and witchcraft are examples of subject matter to which parents have objected. The Hatch Amendment to the Federal General Education Provisions Act (20 USC §1232h) allows parents to opt out their children from certain activities. Nothing in this act prevents a state (or perhaps a local school board depending on state requirements) from allowing parents to opt out of a particular curriculum for their children; many states permit opt-outs for sex education. Why this was not considered or suggested by parents vs. wholesale objection to CRT is not clear. If some parents find curriculum content objectionable on religious, moral, or other grounds, "These opt-out statutes provide a sensible public policy response to conflicts in the schools, rather than the wholesale statutory banning of certain subjects.

concepts they imagine might somehow harm them. On the other hand, to assert that it does not matter if White parental resistance is rooted in racism ought to be repugnant to secular standards of justice as well as foundational Christian ethical understandings of justice. If it is not, White Christians risk continuing to encourage, accept, and enforce religious definitions and faith practices of justice that ultimately inflict harm upon forty percent of U.S. residents by ignoring their history, marginalization, and oppression. In either case, Christian social ethicists still must hypothesize new approaches to racial justice theories and praxes to disrupt White parental resistance, whatever the motivation for resistance.

Before the commencement of such work, however, it is crucial to understand how the meaning of language that appears racially neutral may instead communicate coded racial messages that maintain and reinforce White privilege and White supremacy. Understanding this metamorphosis will allow Christian social ethicists to unravel current ideologies, including Christian theological ones, perpetuating racial oppression and injustice.

### **I don't see color**

One place to begin is to examine a concept known as racial colorblindness, an example of a gradualistic remedy for racial inequities that posits that racial harmony will be achieved over time through changed hearts and minds if we claim not to see racial differences.<sup>198</sup> This is remarkably similar to the concept of gradualistic remedies discussed in Chapter 1, which suggested gradualism was a way to progress since people

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<sup>198</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr dismissed the notion that time and education would solve the “race problem” as too simplistic and overly idealistic.

can slowly live into racial justice. At its most basic, adherents insist they “do not see color or race, only people.” It is an ideology that assumes a level playing field between Whites and people of color is possible and hypothesizes that the best way to achieve it and eliminate racial strife is to treat all individuals the same without regard to race. It is portrayed as a system that reflects and enacts nonracist intentions, seeking only to ensure that people are treated identically. It is reflected in such phrases as, “We’re all just people,” “We’re all one race, the human race,” or in the lyrics “red and yellow, black and white, they are precious in His sight.”<sup>199</sup> from the children’s hymn, “Jesus Loves the Little Children.” Without any additional deconstruction, such sentiments give the impression that they represent a racially neutral position in which classifications and distinctions based on race ought not to have any moral or legal validity.

These expressions may appear inoffensive and harmless, devoid of overt or arguably even covert manifestations of racist beliefs or sentiments, making racial colorblindness sound like the epitome of a desirable, nonracist ideal. Similarly, the pronouncement of the mother that she “will not allow anyone to make [her children] feel guilt or shame for the color of their skin,”<sup>200</sup> or the language of the Florida statute, is devoid of verbiage that overtly categorizes people of color unfairly or glorifies or preferences Whiteness.<sup>201</sup> Arguably, it could be claimed that since the phraseology is racially neutral, they shield both Black and White children from curricula that will adversely reflect upon their race.

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<sup>199</sup> George Frederick Root and Clare Herbert Woolston, “Jesus Loves the Little Children,” (Tune 1864), (Lyrics date unknown).

<sup>200</sup> See note 4, *supra*.

<sup>201</sup> See note 5, *supra*.

Other examples of racially colorblind expressions regarding segregated educational opportunities might include “In principle school integration is a good idea,” “Equal educational opportunity is important,” or “Community schools are key to child development.” Such statements are often followed with a “but” – “but I think busing to achieve integration is wrong,” “but the government should not impose integration,” or “but all-White or all-black schools are acceptable if the communities are all-White or all-black by choice.”<sup>202</sup> As with parental objections to, and statutory prohibitions against CRT, the first clause of these hypothetical statements also appear racially “neutral” and innocuous. Even the language that follows the “but” is devoid of explicitly derogatory and racist language. Yet, the result is that racial colorblindness, much like gradualism, is a path to sluggish and limited progress, or worse yet, no progress. Moreover, it fails to confront the damage inflicted by past wrongs, thereby perpetuating present inequalities.

Such avowals and use of “impartial” verbiage are often intended to establish nonracist bona fides, preempting challenges to the articulations of opinions, beliefs, or behaviors that might otherwise be questioned as racist. Some White Christians believe that identifying as racially colorblind positively reflects their identity. Thus, the current

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<sup>202</sup> Whites rationalize that any racial differences are due to racial groups naturally choosing to associate with people with whom there is racial likeness. For example, while Whites profess to favor integration in schools and housing and having friends of other races, few Whites choose integrated schools or neighborhoods or have friends of other races. “It’s just the way it is. People naturally choose to be around people who are like themselves,” “people like to be with people that they are similar with,” and “we all try to stay with our own kind.” *Racism Without Racists: Colorblind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*, Fifth Edition, (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), 37, 64-65. See also Zuberi, Tukufu and Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, *White Logic, White Methods: Racism and Methodology*, (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2008) 129, and Joe R. Feagin, *The White Racial Frame: Centuries of Racial Framing and Counter-Framing*, Second Edition, (New York: Routledge, 2013), 128-129.

iteration of racial colorblindness may sound like a lofty, desirable, nonracist ideal, a potent reflection that the promises that all are created equal outlined in the governing documents of the U.S. have been achieved. A meticulous investigation of the origins of racial colorblindness and how it has been deployed, however, reveals that it may be anything but not nonracist in nature or application.

Such an investigation reveals that the notion of racial colorblindness used in popular U.S. cultural imaginings and judicial decisions has vacillated between progressive meanings of the concept and reactionary or regressive ones.<sup>203</sup> Progressive colorblindness, explains legal scholar Ian F. Haney López,<sup>204</sup> is emancipative, designed to promote equality and ameliorate the effects of subordination, discrimination, and segregation.<sup>205</sup> It approves of race-conscious relief to “repair gross injustice”<sup>206</sup> and to remedy racist practices and policies that subjugate people of color. Reactionary colorblindness, on the other hand, rests on a false equivalency between the immense harm inflicted upon BIPOC through discrimination and segregation and the benefits and privileges afforded to Whites. It is designed to prevent the distastefulness experienced by Whites when efforts are made to redress these harms. Arising out of this false equivalency is the view that any race-conscious relief is unacceptable. Reacting to an

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<sup>203</sup> Ian F. Haney López, "A Nation of Minorities: Race, Ethnicity, and Reactionary Racial Colorblindness," *Stan. L. Rev.* 59 (2006): 985, 1000, n.51, Brief for Petitioner at 27, *Sipuel v. Bd. of Regents of Univ. of Okla.*, 332 U.S. 631 (1948) (No. 369).

<sup>204</sup> Haney López is of Irish and El Salvadoran descent.

<sup>205</sup> Haney López, 987. The analyses of López, a professor at Boalt Hall School of Law, University of California, Berkeley, focus on how the legal system has employed colorblind analyses. His analyses, however, are germane to understanding how racial colorblindness has been deployed outside of the legal system and, more specifically, by White Christians.

<sup>206</sup> Haney López, 1012.

opinion of Justice Clarence Thomas, Haney López asked, “Can Thomas really believe that the limited use of race-conscious means to promote integration constitutes instead another, equivalent instance of racial oppression?”<sup>207</sup>

In the 1940s and 1950s, leading up to the peak moments of the U.S. Civil Rights Movement, racial colorblindness was sometimes used progressively in legal arguments to challenge Jim Crow laws, segregated housing, and segregated schools, as well as actions, policies, and practices that reflected overt and virulent expressions of racial hatred against Blacks. In one such case,<sup>208</sup> Thurgood Marshall argued that “[c]lassifications and distinctions based on race or color have no moral or legal validity in our society. They are contrary to our constitution and laws.”<sup>209</sup> Shortly after that, opponents of integration began to use racial colorblindness, but in a reactionary manner, to challenge race-based remedies. One federal court in South Carolina considering legal remedies to enforce integration ruled, “[t]he Constitution is color-blind; it should no more be violated to attempt integration than to preserve segregation.”<sup>210</sup>

While some courts rejected racially colorblind standards,<sup>211</sup> reactionary racial colorblindness has been utilized to challenge school desegregation plans, affirmative

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<sup>207</sup> Haney López, 987, 995.

<sup>208</sup> In *Sipuel v. Board of Regents*, 332 U.S. 631 (1948), a decision that preceded *Brown v. Board of Education* by several years, the plaintiff, a Black woman, sought admission to the all-White University of Oklahoma Law School; her application was denied due to her race.

<sup>209</sup> *Sipuel v. Board of Regents*, 332 U.S. 631 (1948). In *Sipuel*, the plaintiff, a Black woman, sought admission to the all-White University of Oklahoma Law School. She was denied admission due to her race.

<sup>210</sup> *Randall v. Sumter Sch. Dist. No. 2*, 241 F. Supp. 787, 789 (E.D.S.C. 1965) (citation omitted).

<sup>211</sup> “The Constitution is both color blind and color conscious . . . a classification that denies a benefit, causes harm, or imposes a burden must not be based on race. In that sense the Constitution is color blind. But the Constitution is color conscious to prevent discrimination



action plans, and government set-aside programs. Indeed, some backlash to race-conscious remedies came from Whites' continued commitment to White supremacy. Still, it also came from many moderate and liberal Whites who considered themselves firm supporters of the Civil Rights Movement. They "embraced the moral necessity of ending de jure discrimination and yet rejected race-conscious remedies,"<sup>212</sup> believing equal opportunity and racial colorblindness were the epitome of fairness.

The most fundamental underlying claim of racial colorblindness that "I do not see color, only people" is dubious at best and, at worst, calculated to obscure racist beliefs. As White scholars Laura G. Babbitt, Negin R. Toosi, and Samuel R. Sommers point out, "One of the first things that we notice about other people is their racial background. Within milliseconds, our brains have categorized and classified the people we encounter using physical cues to, among other things, race, gender, and age. Racial stereotypes are activated automatically as well . . . This means that *ending bias requires paying attention to race* and understanding its effects on our behavior, not claiming that we do not see race and are not affected by it."<sup>213</sup>

Seeing the color of another's skin then is not the problem; pretending not to see it and pretending it has no social, economic, or political meaning is an issue. Skin color becomes problematic when one's skin color is regarded as imputing superiority to some

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being perpetuated and to undo the effects of prior discrimination." *United States v. Jefferson County Bd. of Educ.*, 372 F.2d 836, 876 (5th Cir. 1966).

<sup>212</sup> Haney López, 1004.

<sup>213</sup> Laura G. Babbitt, Negin R. Toosi, and Samuel R. Sommers, "A Broad and Insidious Appeal: Unpacking the Reasons for Endorsing Racial Colorblindness," *The Myth of Racial Colorblindness: Manifestations, Dynamics and Impact*, eds. H.A. Neville, M.E. Gallardo, and D.W. Sue, (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2016), 356. Italics added. See also, Jennifer Harvey, *Raising White Kids: Bringing Up Children in a Racially Unjust America*, (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 2017).

and inferiority to others and is used to justify the use of racial stereotypes and discrimination against and subjugation of those with different skin colors.

All claims to the contrary, racial colorblindness is a race-based remedy. Pretending that race does not exist operates for the benefit of Whites and reflects a choice to overlook how race continues to function to the detriment of Latinx, American Indian, Alaskan Native, Native Hawaiian, Pacific Islanders, Asian, and Black peoples. And, as with gradualism, it is White directed and White centered, allowing Whites to determine what racial inequality is, how quickly it should be addressed, and then to determine when equality has been achieved. This perpetuates and reinforces the racial status quo, under which the allegedly superior status of Whites is maintained and reinforced. Racial colorblindness, then, is anything but not nonracist in its application.

In this way, racial colorblindness can permit the maintenance of an insidious ideology that claims gradual progress away from racism, even while it is rooted in racist beliefs, practices, and policies that perpetuate racist structural exclusions, without ever having to mention race. Simultaneously, it legitimizes White views that racism is no longer a dominant force in the lives of people of color. This perspective is reflected in phrases such as, “I don’t believe minorities experience discrimination,” “I think that there’s probably less [racism] than there used to be . . . It’s just in isolated places,” and “I don’t think it’s as bad as it was.”<sup>214</sup>

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<sup>214</sup> This belief is based upon one of four frames identified by sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva that Whites use to filter their perceptions and ideas about race, allowing them to claim that they are not racist while continuing to elevate the interests of Whites. This particular frame of *Minimization* posits that racism is declining and is no longer a dominant factor affecting the lives of people of color. Under this frame, Whites define discrimination only as intentional or overt discriminatory actions, statements, policies,

As Black, Puerto Rican sociologist Eduardo Bonilla-Silva points out in explaining cultural racism, this line of reasoning that instances of discrimination, segregation, and subordination are infrequent enables adherents of racial colorblindness to insist that any ongoing inequalities in the economic, political, and social standing of people of color are attributable to their cultural failings. These sentiments are reflected in statements such as, “They do not emphasize the importance of education,” or “They have too many babies,” and “They’re lazy [or ruder, or less intelligent].”<sup>215</sup> To the extent that there is a “race problem,” it is the result of people of color “playing the race card,” “being overly sensitive,” or “seeking a handout they don’t deserve.”

Other Whites rationalize that racial differences are due to racial groups naturally choosing to associate with people with whom they share a racial likeness.<sup>216</sup> This is reflected in statements such as, “It’s just the way it is. People naturally choose to be around people who are like themselves,” “people like to be with people that they are similar with,” and “we all try to stay with our own kind.” Finally, many Whites who adhere to the concept of racial colorblindness frequently profess that it is the continued discussion of racism that is the disruptive practice, e.g., “If only blacks would stop

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and practices, which in a colorblind racist society eliminates the vast majority of White actions, practices, and statements as racist. *Racism Without Racists*, 57, 70-74.

<sup>215</sup> Ibid., 56-57, 67-70. This rationalization is indicative of the frame of **Cultural Racism** that allows Whites to impute cultural practices to people of color as fact and as fixed aspects of racial groups. The standing of racial groups is due to their lack of drive to get ahead, lack of effort, inappropriate values, and not racist systems and structures. Under this approach, Whites perceive that discrimination claims by people of color are used to mask laziness and different priorities.

<sup>216</sup> Bonilla-Silva identifies this frame as “**Naturalization.**” While Whites may use this frame to profess to be in favor of integration in schools and housing, and having friends of other races, few Whites actually choose integrated schools or neighborhoods, or have friends of other races. *Racism Without Racists*, 37, 64-65. See also, Zuberi and Bonilla-Silva, *White Logic, White Methods*, 129 and Feagin, *The White Racial Frame*, 128-129.

talking about racism, we would no longer experience racial strife.”<sup>217</sup> Based on such sentiments, race-based remedies have been opposed, even likening affirmative action to Jim Crow laws.<sup>218</sup>

If it is true that racism has significantly abated, the reasoning goes, there is no rush to address any remaining vestiges; gradualistic remedies will suffice. Similarly, broad, sweeping policies and practices that benefit people of color but not Whites are unnecessary. In the exceedingly rare cases where a race-based remedy might be needed, it should be as narrowly tailored in scope and duration as possible. This rationale has ushered in what appears to be a moratorium on progress toward racial equity. More alarmingly, it has ushered in a reversal of earlier gains toward equity for people of color. It is incumbent upon Christian social ethicists to respond to the inherent contradictions and fallacies of such allegedly colorblind assertions, exposing the inadequacy of such gradualistic thinking and the injustices that redound to people of color as a result.

The power of racial colorblindness is its dexterity in crafting an artificial appearance of equity while simultaneously maintaining inequities. This renders challenges to standards of racial colorblindness extraordinarily difficult to maintain because of the racially neutral language used to express this position. As Bonilla-Silva puts it, racial

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<sup>217</sup> Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists*, 1. See also *Plessy v. Ferguson*, in which the Supreme Court told Blacks that the indignity of being shunted off to separate facilities is offensive only because they chose to put that construction on it. *Plessy*, 551.

<sup>218</sup> Haney López, 989. “The most striking feature of contemporary colorblindness lies not in the mere fact of its opposition to race-conscious remedies, however, but in the strict doctrinal equation of affirmative action and Jim Crow racism.”

colorblindness is a “very indirect, ‘now you see it, now you don’t style.”<sup>219</sup> Racial colorblindness allows Whites to “talk nasty about minorities without sounding racist.”<sup>220</sup>

### **White Christians and Racial Colorblindness**

From a Christian social ethics perspective, however, it is not sufficient to investigate the secular embrace of racial colorblindness. Since many White Christians, spanning the spectrum of Christian faith traditions, have also enthusiastically endorsed racial colorblindness as representative of Christian values, White Christian social ethicists must pay particular attention to analyzing this phenomenon.

What is Christian racial colorblindness, and how does it differ from secular racial colorblindness? While verbiage used in secular settings also is used by White Christians to express colorblind beliefs, proponents of Christian racial colorblindness also invoke religious and theological language such as “We’re all part of the body of Christ,” “there is unity in Christ,” “Jesus died for all of us,” and “we’re all equal at the cross,” to affirm the Christian authenticity of racial colorblindness.<sup>221</sup> Identical to the secular phrases

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<sup>219</sup> Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists*.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid., 77 (partial title of chapter 4, capitalization omitted). Bonilla-Silva expanded this point by writing, “Modern racial ideology does not thrive on the ugliness of the past or on the language and tropes typical of slavery and Jim Crow. Today there is a sanitized, colorblind way of calling minorities niggers, spics, or chinks. Today most whites justify keeping minorities from having the good things of life with the language of liberalism (I am all for equal opportunity; that’s why I oppose affirmative action!”). And today, as yesterday, Whites do not feel guilty about the plight of minorities (blacks in particular). Whites believe that minorities have the opportunities to succeed and that if they do not, it is because they do not try hard enough. And if minorities dare talk about discrimination, they are rebuked with statements such as “Discrimination ended in the sixties, man” or “You guys are hypersensitive.” Ibid., 241-242. See also Feagin, *The White Racial Frame*, 87.

<sup>221</sup> This concept of “Christian Whiteness” is explained by Black historian Jesse Curtis in, *The Myth of Colorblind Racism: Evangelicals and White Supremacy in the Civil Rights Era*, (New York: New York University Press, 2021). He states, “Whiteness becomes as

above, nothing is overtly racial about these statements, and most Christians would likely agree with them. Much like secular racial colorblindness, it is necessary to dig deeper to unearth the contexts in which these exhortations are used, to understand the impact of racially colorblind Christianity.

Just as secular efforts employed progressive racial colorblindness to challenge racism and White supremacy during the Civil Rights Movement, so too did faith-based efforts. In the latter half of the twentieth century, some Black evangelicals became more active in seeking equality, inclusion, and an end to segregation in church polity.<sup>222</sup> They urged their White counterparts likewise to seek racial change.<sup>223</sup> Unfortunately, White church leaders resisted the calls for change, except for the most virulent expressions of racist ideology, claiming that “Black evangelicals’ efforts were a divisive threat to the unity of the church.”<sup>224</sup> With the failure of these efforts, Black evangelicals argued for a colorblind evangelicalism rooted in scripture and theology.<sup>225</sup> Howard Jones, a Black evangelical, called for a colorblind gospel transcending race. Jones argued, “The church must demonstrate the truth that as Christians we are one in Christ, regardless of race and nationality, and that all barriers lie shattered at the foot of the cross.”<sup>226</sup> Their actions utilized “colorblind theologies to challenge racial discrimination in evangelical spaces.” Pastor King A. Butler opined, “Where Christ is supreme, our hearts and minds will bend to his will. And then, yellow skin, red skin, white skin, or black skin will not be a

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much religious as racial as it takes on theological, institutional, and temporal inflections,”

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<sup>222</sup> Curtis, 2.

<sup>223</sup> Curtis, 9.

<sup>224</sup> Curtis, 2.

<sup>225</sup> Curtis, 24.

<sup>226</sup> Curtis, 13, 15.

motivating factor for our relationships with one another.”<sup>227</sup> Moreover, some White Christians also employed racial colorblindness progressively to argue for an end to segregation and discrimination.

Despite these secular and faith-based efforts, racial tension continues to thrive in the U.S.<sup>228</sup> In the face of this enduring racism, one would expect to find a substantial body of work by White Christian social ethicists exploring this conundrum, but there is not. Consideration by White Christian social ethicists of how racial colorblindness and gradualism defend and exacerbate these inequities is even rarer. Not surprisingly, many Christian ethicists of color directly challenge this paucity of work, confronting the field’s ongoing acceptance of White, primarily male, Christian ethicists as definitive and authoritative in the field.

Black, feminist, Christian social ethicist Traci C. West has identified several areas in which the scholarly work of many White Christian ethicists falls short of developing pertinent analyses of racial injustices.<sup>229</sup> Noting that “silence appears to be the most appropriate response” for several White Christian ethicists and theologians on issues of racial justice, West goes on to note that the moral quandaries raised by racial crises are assumed to be “already intrinsically incorporated in more enduring, supposedly

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<sup>227</sup> Curtis, 42, citing King A. Butler, “Black, White or God Supremacy,” *Eternity*, (July 1964), 32-33.

<sup>228</sup> Meghan A. Burke, “Color-Blind Racism,” in *The Cambridge Handbook of Sociology*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 21-29. “It is crucial to note that ‘traditional’ or overt forms of racism have not disappeared. Journalists noted a rise in hate-based groups after the election of Barack Obama, and social media has helped to document ongoing instances of racist language and imagery in both public and private life.” 23.

<sup>229</sup> West, “Racial Justice,” 502-503.

universally framed, scholarly questions on which they focus,”<sup>230</sup> they are not considered of “sufficient intellectual substance” or are lacking . . . in “complexity, to fulfill the definition of serious study of Christian ethics,”<sup>231</sup> to receive more than minimal attention.<sup>232</sup> West further asserts that “the virtues the ‘Christian Community’ can contribute to society are not perceived by White Christian ethicists as requiring any differentiated analyses of racial and economic privilege and power experienced by members of the ‘Christian Community.’ In-depth investigation of such discrete communal realities is seen as unnecessary for the ethicists’ claims about the communal expression of virtuousness to be accurate and meaningful.”<sup>233</sup>

Latinx scholar Miguel A. De La Torre identifies the harm these mostly White male Christian ethicists inflicted.<sup>234</sup> He states, “No matter how progressive we wish to consider these ethicists, they remain a product of the empire to which they belong, reflecting the racism and ethnic discrimination of their time that continues to make empire possible.”<sup>235</sup> He further explains that “in the final analysis, they contributed to the undergirding racial and ethnic assumptions that provided justification for the empire

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<sup>230</sup> Ibid., 502.

<sup>231</sup> Ibid., 503.

<sup>232</sup> Ibid., 503.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid., 503. Indeed, the absence of such analyses is so glaring that historian Jesse Curtis also noticed the surfeit. He wrote “scholars of race and Whiteness have done excellent work to explore colorblind racial ideology but have been slow to recognize its religious features . . . Though the crucial role of religion in the racialization in the early modern period is widely understood.”<sup>233</sup>

<sup>234</sup> Miguel A. De La Torre, *Latina/o Social Ethics: Moving Beyond Eurocentric Moral Thinking*, (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010).

<sup>235</sup> De La Torre, *Latina/o Social Ethics*, 5.



because they failed to recognize their complicity with the overarching power structures that make empire possible.”<sup>236</sup>

Suppose the analyses of White Christian social ethicists have been less than adequate. Is it possible for CRT scholarship, which is anathema to many White Christians,<sup>237</sup> to assist in developing alternative theo-ethical standards for ameliorating racial injustice? And if so, how might it promote a critique of the existing approach of White theo-ethical scholars who consider issues of racial justice and racial equity in their scholarship? Finally, how can CRT assist in cultivating the broader project of developing a Christian social ethic of just racial relationships that employs an approach more efficacious than one rooted in racial colorblindness and gradualism?

### **CRT and demystifying the allure of racial colorblindness and gradualism for white Christians**

CRT had its genesis in the 1970s<sup>238</sup> when a group of legal scholars and activists recognized that the gains for Blacks achieved during the Civil Rights Movement of the

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<sup>236</sup> Ibid.

<sup>237</sup> Conservative Baptist Network, Center for Renewing America; “10 Ways Catholic Education and Critical Race Theory Are Incompatible,” *Issues in Brief: The Cardinal Newman Society*, (July 15, 2021), <https://cardinalnewmansociety.org/10-ways-catholic-education-and-critical-race-theory-are-incompatible/>, accessed May 4, 2023; Todd Pruitt, “Who’s Afraid of CRT?” *Reformation21*, (February 9, 2021), <https://www.reformation21.org/blog/whos-afraid-of-crt>, accessed May 4, 2023; Lucas Woodford, “Talking Points with Pastor Lucas: Critical Race Theory--Lutheran Clarity, Loving Care,” *The Lutheran Church, Missouri Synod, Minnesota South District*, (August 1, 2021), accessed May 4, 2023.

<sup>238</sup> See, e.g., Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, "The First Decade: Critical Reflections, or A Foot in the Closing Door," *UCLA Law Review* 49, no. 5 (June 2002): 1343-1373, Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, “Unmasking Colorblindness in the Law: Lessons from the Formation of Critical Race Theory,” in *Seeing Race Again : Countering Colorblindness Across the Disciplines*, ed. Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw, Luke Charles Harris, Daniel Martinez Ho Sang, and George Lipsitz, (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2019, and Cho and Robert Westley, "Critical Race Coalitions: Key Movements That Performed the Theory," *U.C. Davis Law Review*, 33, no. 4 (Summer 2000): 1377-1428.

1950s and 1960s had not only stalled but, in many cases, had been decimated due to adverse legal decisions, the enactment of restrictive legislation, or by the implementation of societal policies and practices that adversely affected the interests of BIPOC.<sup>239</sup> The formative work of secular CRT scholars such as Eduardo Bonilla-Silva and Derrick Bell, a Black legal scholar, focuses, among other things, upon identifying and highlighting the deficiencies of racially colorblind approaches to racial justice.

These analyses offer the possibility of adaptation by Christian social ethicists so they may be utilized as a blueprint for developing a Christian critique of racial colorblindness and the inherent flaws of Christian realist and gradualist remedies. They offer more than the prospect of a review of current Christian social ethics methodologies; they also illuminate possibilities for the construction of a Christian social ethic of just racial relationships that employs an approach other than gradualism, one that avoids reliance on racially colorblind standards, and one that will not hinder, or reverse, progress toward racial justice.

Bonilla-Silva has argued that colorblind racism has been the prevailing White racial system in the U.S. It allows Whites to repudiate the ongoing existence of racism. It further permits them to deny that they receive advantages that people of color do not.<sup>240</sup> In his seminal book, *Racism Without Racists: Colorblind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America*,<sup>241</sup> Bonilla-Silva investigated how racial colorblindness, entrenched in White liberal principles of individualism, egalitarianism, universalism, and

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<sup>239</sup> Delgado, and Stefancic, *Critical Race Theory: An Introduction*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., (New York University Press, 2017), 5.

<sup>240</sup> Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists*, 9-10.

<sup>241</sup> Ibid.

meritocratic principles,<sup>242</sup> has encouraged Whites to develop “powerful explanations – which have ultimately become justifications – for contemporary racial inequality that exculpate them from any responsibility for the status of people of color.”<sup>243</sup> These explanations include emphases on equal opportunity, merit (“the most qualified should get the job”), limited government intervention (“Nothing should be forced on people”), individual choice (“people like people that they’re similar with”),<sup>244</sup> naturalization (“that’s just the way it is”),<sup>245</sup> blaming the victim (“they don’t have it all together,” “they just want to get a shortcut to make money”),<sup>246</sup> and minimization (“I think there’s probably less discrimination than there used to be,” “I don’t think it’s as bad as it was”).<sup>247</sup>

While Bonilla-Silva acknowledges that social-reform liberalism can be progressive, his concern is “about how central elements of liberalism have been *rearticulated* in post-civil rights America to rationalize racially unfair situations.”<sup>248</sup> This re-articulation, according to Bonilla-Silva, has resulted in a new racism – “racism lite”<sup>249</sup>

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<sup>242</sup> Ibid., 54-56. Bonilla-Silva introduces the concept of “abstract liberalism,” which he emphasizes is the “foundation of the new racial ideology.” According to Bonilla-Silva, “abstract liberalism involves using ideas associated with political liberalism (e.g., “equal opportunity,” the idea that force should not be used to achieve social policy) and economic liberalism (e.g., choice, individualism) in an abstract manner to explain racial matters.”

<sup>243</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid., 59-64.

<sup>245</sup> Ibid., 64-67.

<sup>246</sup> Ibid., 67-70

<sup>247</sup> Ibid., 70-74.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid., 56 Italics in original.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid., 2. “Modern racial ideology does not thrive on the ugliness of the past or on the language and tropes typical of slavery and Jim Crow. Today there is a sanitized, colorblind way of calling minorities’ niggers, spics, or chinks. Today most White justify keeping minorities from having the good things of life with the language of liberalism (I am all for equal opportunity; that’s why I oppose affirmative action!). And today, as

– that has racial colorblindness as its core tenet. This approach assumes that those raced as White and those raced as other than White have the same opportunities, ignoring the reality of the restricted number of choices available to people of color and ignoring structures and systems that reinforce racism.<sup>250</sup> “It takes the social system we *should* have and [allows Whites to operate] as though this system is already in place.”<sup>251</sup>

Bonilla-Silva further identified rhetorical moves, grounded in assertions of racial colorblindness, that Whites use to justify racial inequality allowing them to reinforce racist systems and structures without appearing racist. These moves include discursive

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yesterday, Whites do not feel guilty about the plight of minorities (blacks in particular). And today, as yesterday, Whites do not feel guilty about the plight of minorities (blacks in particular). Whites believe that minorities have the opportunities to succeed and that if they do not, it is because they do not try hard enough. And if minorities dare talk about discrimination, they are rebuked with statements such as “Discrimination ended in the sixties, man” or “You guys are hypersensitive.” Ibid., 241-242.

<sup>250</sup> Eileen O’Brien cautions against this assumption. She indicates that “such a supposition would obscure ‘what racial group wins these [often fixed] contests over concrete resources most of the time, and what racial group, fundamentally and usually, has the power to impose most central racial meanings and structures of oppression on less-powerful racial groups.’” Eileen O’Brien, “Racial Formation,” in *The Cambridge Handbook of Sociology*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2021), 5-11, 10.

O’Brien cites Joe R. Feagin and Sean Elias, “Rethinking Racial Formation Theory: A Systemic Racism Critique,” *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 36, 2012, 1-30, 14.

<sup>251</sup> Burke, “Color Blind Racism,” 22.

buffers,<sup>252</sup> projections,<sup>253</sup> diminutives,<sup>254</sup> and incoherence.<sup>255</sup> These, according to Bonilla-Silva, reveal that the “language of racial colorblindness is slippery, apparently contradictory, and often subtle.”<sup>256</sup> Thus, the frames and rhetorical moves employed by “colorblind” Whites reinforce White privilege without ever mentioning race. The vast majority of Bonilla-Silva’s analyses of racial colorblindness also apply to the rhetorical devices used by White Christians to assert the theological soundness of racial colorblindness.

As with Bonilla-Silva, Derrick Bell also challenged the concept of racial colorblindness throughout his work, urging that it be discarded despite it being considered as a “comforting [to Whites], but wholly inaccurate, view that racial discrimination is a thing of the past and that color blindness is the appropriate answer to

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<sup>252</sup> For Bonilla-Silva, a discursive buffer is phrases or words used before or after “someone states something that is or could be interpreted as racist.” These buffers included terms such as, “I am not prejudiced, but . . .,” “Some of my best friends are . . .,” “I’m not black, so I don’t know,” yes and no, but . . ., and “anything but race” (the use of this phrase is typified by statements such as “it’s not a prejudice thing” that allows Whites “to dismiss the fact that race affects an aspect of the respondent’s life [and] allows Whites to explain away racial fractures in their color-blind story.” Bonilla-Silva, 81-86.

<sup>253</sup> This is exemplified by phrases such as, “They are the racist ones.” According to Bonilla-Silva, projection allows Whites to avoid feelings of guilt and responsibility and thereby feel good about themselves. Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists*, 86-89.

<sup>254</sup> Diminutives are phrases used to temper their racist views. They include “it makes me a little angry,” “I am just a little bit against . . .” or “I’m just a little bit concerned.” Ibid., 90-91.

<sup>255</sup> Bonilla-Silva explains that incoherence includes grammatical mistakes, lengthy pauses, or repetition. It may be reflected when a person utters “I, I, I, I don’t mean, you know, but” or “I, I, I, feel that uh, I dunno, I just feel like, that uh . . .” Ibid., 91-94

<sup>256</sup> Ibid., 77. Bonilla-Silva explains that these rhetorical moves are often used in conjunction. He provided this example, “respondents could use a diminutive (‘I’m a little bit upset with blacks . . .’), followed by a projection (‘. . . because they cry racism for everything, even though they are the ones who are racist’), and balance out the statement with a semantic move at the end (‘. . . and I am not being racial about this, it’s just that I don’t know.’” Ibid., 94.

all racial questions.”<sup>257</sup> Referring to regressive racial colorblindness, Bell further wrote, “Color blindness, now as a century ago,<sup>258</sup> is adopted as the easy resolution of issues of race with which the nation would rather not wrestle, much less seriously try to resolve. It is an attractive veneer obscuring flaws in the society that are not corrected by being hidden from view.”<sup>259</sup> Frequently interrogating legal decisions related to school desegregation efforts, Bell argued that when opponents of the *Brown* decision portrayed state action or inaction as colorblind, it required the judicial process to contend with and accept a myth<sup>260</sup> that was necessary for Whites to prevent the White dominant racial structure of U.S. society from collapsing.<sup>261</sup> Consequently, employing regressive racial colorblindness as a legal standard results in a justice system that is not fair or just for people of color and is not genuinely colorblind in application to issues of racial injustice.

Also similar to Bonilla-Silva, Bell critiqued the liberal principles of individualism, egalitarianism, universalism, and meritocratic principles. Regarding individualism, he stated, “The *Brown* decision’s rejection of the racial barriers imposed by segregation, then, reinforced the fiction that the path of progress was clear. Everyone could and should succeed through individual ability and effort.”<sup>262</sup> Meritocracy was also criticized by Bell, “Distribution of employment and educational opportunities according

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<sup>257</sup> Derrick A. Bell, Jr., “Wanted: A White Leader Able to Free Whites of Racism,” *UC Davis Law Review*, Vol. 33, Spring 2000, 527-544, 527.

<sup>258</sup> See generally, Derrick A. Bell, Jr. *Silent Covenants*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 11-13 for a brief description of pre-*Brown* use of racial colorblindness to maintain segregation.

<sup>259</sup> Bell, *Silent Covenants*, 8

<sup>260</sup> Niebuhr, *Faith, and Politics*, 15-31.

<sup>261</sup> Bell, *Silent Covenants*, 107.

<sup>262</sup> Bell, “The Unintended Lessons in *Brown*,” 1060. Bell also pointed out that the substantial negative impact of segregation on the United States in the cold war was a factor in the court’s decision. *Ibid.*, 1056.

to merit goes largely unchallenged and lauded as the just and existing method by which such benefits are rewarded in American society, although it is neither... it undermines, perhaps intentionally, the quest for racial justice, by subjecting blacks and other dispossessed minorities to meritocratic rules and hurdles never before encountered by empowered Whites in their advancement.”<sup>263</sup>

In both his book *Silent Covenants: Brown v. Board of Education and the Unfulfilled Hopes for Racial Reform* and his law review article “Brown v Board of Education and the Interest Convergence Dilemma.”<sup>264</sup> Bell introduced the concepts of his Interest Convergence Principle (ICP) and the Tipping Point Principle (TPP). The ICP posits that “the interest of blacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when that interest converges with the interests of Whites in policy-making positions;” and that such accommodation “will be abrogated at the point that policymakers fear the remedial policy is threatening the superior societal status of Whites.”<sup>265</sup> The TPP<sup>266</sup> further posits that the abrogation of rights for people of color will occur when the

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<sup>263</sup> Derrick Bell, Tracy Higgins, and Sung-Hee Suh, Racial Reflections: Dialogues in the Direction of Liberation, 37 *UCLA L. Rev.* 1037-1100, (1989-1990), 1065.

<sup>264</sup> Derrick A. Bell, Jr., “Brown v Board of Education and the Interest Convergence Dilemma,” *Harvard Law Review*, 93 (1980): 518-533.

<sup>265</sup> The ICP, as postulated fully by Bell, provides: “*Rule 1.* The interest of blacks in achieving racial equality will be accommodated only when that interest converges with the interests of Whites in policy-making positions. This convergence is far more important for gaining relief than the degree of harm suffered by blacks or the character of proof offered to prove that harm. *Rule 2.* Even when interest-convergence results in an effective racial remedy, particularly those in the middle and upper classes.” *Silent Covenants*, 69. Bell articulated the first of these principles in “Brown v Board of Education and the Interest Convergence Dilemma,” 518-533. The first rule was refined to that represented above, and the second rule was added.

<sup>266</sup> Derrick A. Bell, Jr., “Application of the ‘Tipping Point’ Principle to Law Faculty Hiring Policies,” 10 *Nova L.J.* 319 (1986), reproduced in *DBR*, 196-200, 197. See Derrick A. Bell, Jr., “The Chronicle of the DeVine Gift,” in Bell, *And We Are Not Saved: The Elusive Quest for Racial Justice*. (New York: Basic Books, 1987), 140-161.

mathematical ratio of Blacks to Whites in housing, education, or employment precipitates White fear.<sup>267</sup> Within the field of education, Bell argued that White support for educational policies and practices that benefit both Black and White schoolchildren tips, or dissipates, when Whites deem those educational policies and practices to provide benefits to people of color that approximate or supersede those provided to Whites, or when those policies and practices portray them in a less than faultless manner. Both the ICP and the TPP reflect techniques employed by White Christians to justify theologically the implementation of racially colorblind principles.

The fundamental principles of CRT that both Bonilla-Silva and Bell employ may significantly assist White Christian social ethicists who desire better to understand White Christian resistance to communal racial justice initiatives. These principles aid in understanding how White Christian adoption of racial colorblindness has become synonymous with Christian virtuousness, how White Christian utilization of racial colorblindness constructs narratives that erase the history and existence of people of

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<sup>267</sup> Derrick A. Bell, Jr., "In Defense of Minority Admissions Programs: A Response to Professor Graglia," *U. Penn. L. Rev.*, 119 (1970): 364-370, 365, 369 n. 13. In "Minority Admissions," the idea is raised when Bell pointed out that once the minority population at the University of Texas Law School reached 45 students (out of 1500, or 3%), the University adopted a rule prohibiting the admission of any student who did not meet the "school's normal admission criteria." *Id.*, 365, fn. 4. Reinhold Niebuhr articulated this principle in "Morals and Percentages," 3-4. Niebuhr's mathematical principle provided that there was little resistance to desegregation in counties where the Black population was less than 25%. In contrast, resistance was significant in counties where the Black population approximated 50%. Niebuhr described this as "the 'relation of moral ideals to mathematical facts. It is easier for a majority to be tolerant of a small than of a large minority. If the minority is large the tension between the two groups shows a corresponding increase.'" See also, "Supreme Court and Desegregation in the Schools, 75. According to Niebuhr, resistance to Brown in Southern states could be traced to this mathematical equation. See also "Fair Employment Practices Act" and "Intractability," 181.



color, and how White Christian embrace of colorblind standards equates to a defense of Whiteness, rather than creating a strategy to achieve racial equity. To respond to and to counteract the perpetuation of White supremacy arising out of these attitudes and practices, White Christian social ethics must confront well-meaning White Christian moderates and White Christian progressives for whom the symbolic signaling of both racial colorblindness and gradualistic remedies is deemed sufficient to oppose racial injustice.

Before discussing these points, however, a truncated<sup>268</sup> review of the biblical and theological bases upon which some White Christians relied to justify racial violence and hatred is helpful to establish a context for the events that have led to White Christian adoption of racially colorblind standards. According to Black historian Jesse Curtis, “much of the scholarship on race in contemporary America does not account for religion’s ongoing part in racial formation.”<sup>269</sup> Indeed, the entire concept of race, as it is understood today, developed alongside the religious formation of the United States as a justification to enslave Blacks.<sup>270</sup>

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<sup>268</sup> While a thorough examination of the historical relationship between White Christianity and the harsh realities of racism and White supremacy in this country is beyond this dissertation's scope, it is essential to understand Christianity's role in the oppression and degradation of Blacks in the US.

<sup>269</sup> Curtis, *The Myth of Colorblind Racism*, 4. This is despite “scholars of religion [showing] that religion shapes the very meaning of the so-called secular,” citing Tracy Fessenden, *Culture and Redemption: Religion the Secular, and American Literature*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007). He also quoted Kathryn Lofton, *Oprah: The Gospel of an Icon*, (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2011), who stated, “The secular is not an absence of religion, rather, the secular is religion’s kaleidoscopic buffet.”

<sup>270</sup> In their seminal book, Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, *Divided by Faith: Evangelical Religion and the Problem of Race in America*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001) they emphasize that the founding of America was constructed with values derived “largely from the confluence of evangelical Protestant Christianity

Slavery in the U.S. was justified by White Christians claiming that Blacks were "inferior to the Whites in the endowments both of body and mind."<sup>271</sup> This claim was rooted in the story of Ham in as outlined in Genesis 9:20-25. In this story, Ham is cursed by his father Noah, because Ham saw Noah's nakedness. Over time, this passage was interpreted as an explanation for Black skin, which then to the belief that Blacks were cursed by God. White Christian pastors preached that slavery was God-ordained and gave a Christian imprimatur to harsh, violent, and cruel treatment by slave owners.<sup>272</sup>

As the Jim Crow era was ushered in, lynchings were sanctioned in the name of God, and some White Christians celebrated lynchings, often as family or church events, complete with picnic lunches. Occasionally, lynchings occurred on church grounds after worship services.<sup>273</sup> Black theologian James Cone wrote, "Whites had the right to control the black population through lynching and other extralegal forms of mob violence ...

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and Enlightenment philosophy." "Though the crucial role of religion in racialization in the early modern period is widely understood, much of the scholarship on race in contemporary America does not account for religion's ongoing part in racial formation." Curtis, 4.

<sup>271</sup> Nicholas E. Magnis, "Thomas Jefferson and Slavery: An Analysis of His Racist Thinking as Revealed by His Writings and Political Behavior," *Journal of Black Studies* 29, no. 4 (1999): 491-509, 498.

<sup>272</sup> They pointed to the curse of Ham in the book of Genesis in Hebrew scripture, Genesis 9:20-27. Those same pastors preached that enslaved people should willingly submit to their masters based upon Paul's letter to the Ephesians ("Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, in singleness of heart, as you obey Christ." Ephesians 6:5), his letter to the Colossians ("Slaves, obey your earthly masters in everything, not only while being watched, and in order to please them, but wholeheartedly, fearing the Lord. Colossians 3:22)," and in Peter's first letter ("Slaves, accept the authority of your masters with all deference, not only those who are kind and gentle but also those who are harsh." 1 Peter 2:18). See also, Emerson and Smith, *Divided By Faith*, 35, Figure 2.1, for a page reprinted from *Christian History*, vol. 11, no. 1., (1992). The chart is entitled "Why Christians Should Support Slavery: Key Reasons Advanced By Southern Church Leaders." It sets forth biblical, charitable, evangelistic, social, and political reasons why slavery is appropriate.

<sup>273</sup> Cone, *Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 8-9.

*grounded in the religious belief* that America is a White nation called by God to bear witness to the superiority of ‘white over black.’”<sup>274</sup>

As the Jim Crow era was ushered in, lynchings were sanctioned in the name of God, and some White Christians celebrated lynchings, often as family or church events, complete with picnic lunches. Occasionally, lynchings occurred on church grounds after worship services.<sup>275</sup> Black theologian James Cone wrote, “Whites had the right to control the black population through lynching and other extralegal forms of mob violence ... *grounded in the religious belief* that America is a White nation called by God to bear witness to the superiority of ‘white over black.’”<sup>276</sup>

Christian churches were explicitly segregated. Some White pastors openly and frequently expressed racist ideologies and preached segregationist scriptural interpretations that patently and falsely claimed the biological inferiority of Blacks and further claimed that Blacks were violent, indolent, and culturally backward. White Christians further supported segregation allegedly to protect the virtue of white women.

The 1943 race riot in Detroit was prompted by a rumor that a Black man had killed a White woman.<sup>277</sup> In 1948, the Dixiecrat platform included a plank that stated, “We stand for the segregation of the races and... We oppose the elimination of

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<sup>274</sup> Cone, *Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 7, quoting Winthrop Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro*, (Baltimore, MD: Penguin Books, 1969), italics added.

<sup>275</sup> Cone, *Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 8-9.

<sup>276</sup> Cone, *Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 7, quoting Winthrop Jordan, *White Over Black: American Attitudes Toward the Negro*, (Baltimore, MD: Penguin Books, 1969), italics added.

<sup>277</sup> Gerald Van Dusen, *Detroit’s Sojourner Truth Riot: Prelude to the Race Riot of 1943*, (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2020).

segregation, the repeal of miscegenation statutes.”<sup>278</sup> In 1955, Emmitt Till was kidnapped, tortured, and executed by White Christians because of his interactions with a White female store clerk.<sup>279</sup> Miguel De La Torre pointed out the role of White women in upholding segregation on issues, among others, related to the preservation of the purity of White children. He wrote, “Missing from the historical narrative are the unnamed women who, as school teachers, church ladies, midwives, and socialites, protected their children from the perceived menace of those who would sully genteel, white purity.”<sup>280</sup>

Many White Christians continued to claim superiority during the concerted, peaceful resistance to anti-Black hatred during the Civil Rights Movement. Open correlations of Whiteness with godliness were routine.<sup>281</sup> Most White Christians in the South, both laity and church leadership, openly opposed desegregation efforts, ignoring court orders and governmental efforts to achieve integration.<sup>282</sup>

Numerous White Christians continued to claim superiority during the concerted, peaceful resistance to anti-Black hatred during the Civil Rights Movement. Open

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<sup>278</sup> Robert P. Jones, *White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2020), 133.

<sup>279</sup> Jennine Hill Fletcher, “The Christology of the Lynching Tree: Barth’s Crimson Thread, Mamie Till Bradley and the Indictment of White Supremacy,” *Black Theology Papers* 4, no. 1 (2018): 1-7.

<sup>280</sup> De La Torre, Miguel A. *Burying White Privilege: Resurrecting a Badass Christianity*, Kindle Edition, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2019), 821. Traci West also emphasized the intersectionality between race and gender in *Disruptive Christian Ethics*, 124-127.

<sup>281</sup> Curtis, *Myth of Colorblind Racism*, 3.

<sup>282</sup> Emerson and Smith, *Divided By Faith*, 46. The authors, after noting Northern White liberal Christian participation in the Civil Rights Movement, went on to state: In the White evangelical world, the story is quite different...Southern evangelicals generally sided against black evangelicals on the segregation issue, and Northern evangelicals seemed more preoccupied with other issues – such as evangelism and fighting communism and theological liberalism.”

correlations of Whiteness with godliness were routine.<sup>283</sup> Most White Christians in the South, both laity and church leadership, openly opposed desegregation efforts, ignoring court orders and governmental efforts to achieve integration.<sup>284</sup>

While it is true that resistance by some White Christians mutated to grudging tolerance of integration, it was not always because of increased acceptance of Blacks but because of the economic and political toll it took on White institutions. Racism became more covert.<sup>285</sup> Whites' public and open expressions of support for Jim Crow laws, segregated schools, housing, employment, or public transportation lessened, and the use of overtly racial epithets and explicit racial terminology began to abate.

Optimistically, today most White Christians neither openly nor privately continue to adhere to a belief in stereotypical tropes of biological inferiority nor find acceptable explicitly racist acts such as mandated segregated churches or scriptural justifications for slavery. Yet White Christian belief in a colorblind ideology and the notion that racism no longer exists results in the faith-based oppression of Blacks, and racial disharmony has increased.

While we also might like to believe that White Christians no longer celebrate lynchings (as they occurred in the 1900s as family or church events marked by picnics and commemorated with postcards), lynchings in the form of the extra-judicial murders

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<sup>283</sup> Curtis, *Myth of Colorblind Racism*, 3.

<sup>284</sup> Emerson and Smith, *Divided By Faith*, 46. The authors, after noting Northern White liberal Christian participation in the Civil Rights Movement, went on to state: In the White evangelical world, the story is quite different...Southern evangelicals generally sided against black evangelicals on the segregation issue, and Northern evangelicals seemed more preoccupied with other issues – such as evangelism and fighting communism and theological liberalism.”

<sup>285</sup> Or at least it had prior to 2016.

of people of color in the U.S. continue to occur, either by police officers or by the public at large mostly without sustained vocal Christian opposition.<sup>286</sup> The extra-judicial public executions of people of color continue to occur with alarming frequency. The murders of James Byrd,<sup>287</sup> Trayvon Martin,<sup>288</sup> Eric Garner,<sup>289</sup> Michael Brown,<sup>290</sup> Tamir Rice,<sup>291</sup> Atatiana Jefferson,<sup>292</sup> Alton Sterling,<sup>293</sup> Philando Castille,<sup>294</sup> Stephon Clark,<sup>295</sup> Breonna Taylor,<sup>296</sup> George Floyd,<sup>297</sup> and Daunte Taylor,<sup>298</sup> to name only a few, are all examples of extra-judicial, public killings that occurred without due process.<sup>299</sup>

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<sup>286</sup> “History of Lynching in America,” <https://naacp.org/find-resources/history-explained/history-lynching-america>, accessed February 13, 2022. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) defines lynching as “the public killing of an individual who has not received any due process.”

<sup>287</sup> In 1998, James Byrd was chained to a car by three White supremacists and dragged to his death in the streets of Jasper, Texas. “Since <https://www.npr.org/2021/01/25/956177021/fatal-police-shootings-of-unarmed-black-people-reveal-troubling-patterns>

<sup>288</sup> Trayvon Martin, February 26, 2012. Trayvon Martin was walking home from a store when he was shot and killed by George Zimmerman. Trayvon was unarmed.

<sup>289</sup> On July 17, 2014, Eric Garner died after he was wrestled to the ground by a New York police officer on suspicion of illegally selling cigarettes. In a prohibited choke hold, Mr. Garner uttered the words “I can’t breathe” 11 times.

<sup>290</sup> On August 9, 2014, Michael Brown, 18, was killed by a police officer, in Ferguson, Missouri, who was responding to reports that Brown had stolen a box of cigars.

<sup>291</sup> On November 22, 2014, Tamir Rice a boy of 12, was shot dead in Cleveland, Ohio by a police officer. Tamir was holding a toy gun.

<sup>292</sup> Twenty-eight-year-old Jefferson was playing video games with her 8-year-old nephew when Dean entered her backyard. She rose up to take a look out the window when she was shot. Adrian Moore, “#SayHerName: Black Women And Girls Killed By Police,” (December 12, 2019), accessed March 21, 2022. 1

<sup>293</sup> Alton Sterling

<sup>294</sup> Philando Castille

<sup>295</sup> Stephon Clark

<sup>296</sup> Breonna Taylor was murdered by police during the bungled execution of a warrant.

<sup>297</sup> George Floyd was executed by a police officer who knelt on his neck for 9.5 minutes.

<sup>298</sup> Daunte Taylor

<sup>299</sup> Providing only a few examples of modern-day lynchings does not mean that the lynching of people not named in this dissertation's body is less significant, meaningful, or compelling. The tragedy is that there have been so many extrajudicial murders of Blacks that all victims cannot be named here. For a more complete list of Black individuals who

Still, ignorance of, indifference to, or thinly veiled animosity toward racial injustice remains in the Christian church. White Christians may still unwittingly, or in some instances deliberately, continue to encourage or countenance racism in their faith homes and communities while simultaneously expressing anti-racist beliefs and practices. The adoption of biblical and theological justifications for racial colorblindness has permitted a re-articulation of White Christian responses to racism with God's imprimatur that has resulted in a new form of White Christian racism, akin to what Bonilla-Silva in the sociological realm has titled "racism lite."<sup>300</sup>

Against this historical backdrop of White Christian violence, oppression, and segregation, I consider racial colorblindness as White Christian virtuousness, how it constructs narratives of erasure, and how it equates to a defense of Whiteness rather than exemplifying a strategy to achieve racial equity.

### **Racial colorblindness as White Christian virtuousness**

In his recent book, White Christian ethicist David P. Gushee identifies the questions asked by virtue ethicists, "What is a good person? What qualities of character make an individual or a community flourish?"<sup>301</sup> Gushee argues that "character is formed in communities, most of which have very definite ideas regarding the traits they believe

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have been the victims of extrajudicial killings, see <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-52905408> George Floyd: Timeline of black deaths and protests 22 April 2021. Accessed 2/13/2022. Fatal Police Shootings Of Unarmed Black People Reveal Troubling Patterns, <https://www.npr.org/2021/01/25/956177021/fatal-police-shootings-of-unarmed-black-people-reveal-troubling-patterns>, Cheryl W. Thompson, accessed 2/13/2022. See also, "#SayHerName: Black Women And Girls Killed By Police" 3/21/2021.

<sup>300</sup> Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists*, 2.

<sup>301</sup> David P. Gushee, *Introducing Christian Ethics: Core Convictions for Christians Today*, (Canton, MI: Front Edge Publishing, 2022), 79.

essential for community well-being.”<sup>302</sup> If a person adopts, practices, and exhibits those traits valued by the community, they will be considered virtuous by the community.

De La Torre posits that many White Christian social ethicists emphasize virtue ethics premised upon the hypothesis that “good actions flow from good character.”<sup>303</sup> That hypothesis is flawed, though, because it rests upon the assumption that the traits considered good by a community are traits that do not cause harm to self or others, or to the extent that they do cause harm, the damage is desirable, acceptable, or both. If this is the case, for a person to be considered virtuous by the community, they would be someone who adopts, practices, and who exhibits harmful behaviors. While this might seem preposterous in the abstract, the history of White Christianity in the U.S. reflects that, over the years, it has cultivated valuable beliefs, customs, and behaviors that have inflicted and continue to inflict severe harm on people of color. As De La Torre notes, implementing virtues may permit unjust social practices to be ignored or justified.<sup>304</sup>

Support of slavery and its accompanying brutality was considered a theologically positive perspective for White Christians. White Christian support of lynchings, Jim Crow laws, and blatant discrimination was considered appropriate, as was the biblical and theological constructs that God called White Christians to bear witness to the superiority of ‘White over black.’”<sup>305</sup> White Christians who adopted, practiced, and exhibited those characteristics would have been (and were) considered virtuous. Such a fluid

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<sup>302</sup> *Ibid.*, 81.

<sup>303</sup> De La Torre, *Latina/o Social Ethics*, 28.

<sup>304</sup> *Ibid.*,

<sup>305</sup> See, n. 71.



understanding of Christian virtues and virtuousness is distressing since they reinscribe and reinforce racism and White supremacy.

Racial colorblindness is no different. White Christians who support gradualistic remedies or consider racial colorblindness the appropriate standard for achieving racial justice are considered virtuous within the Christian communities that espouse these beliefs. For many White Christians, scriptural interpretations and theological doctrine justify adherence to racially colorblind standards. The overarching theological principle upon which White Christians rely is that we are all one in Christ – “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus,” Galatians 3:28.

Much like the secular use of progressive racial colorblindness immediately before and during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, Black Christians in that same time frame urged a progressive racially colorblind interpretation of this scriptural passage that challenged racial exclusion and sought economic and social equality outside the church.<sup>306</sup> Indeed, Black evangelicals urged unity in Christ as the bedrock of racial equality.<sup>307</sup> Some Black evangelicals began to argue theologically for a colorblind gospel that called for practical, inclusive changes in church polity. White evangelicals resisted these efforts. Leroy Gardner, a White evangelical, wrote that while White evangelicals

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<sup>306</sup> In a speech the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. gave in Birmingham, Alabama, in 1956, he stated, “The ‘church’ is the Body of Christ. So when the church is true to its nature it knows neither division nor disunity.” He addressed White Christians, declaring, “I am disturbed about what you are doing to the Body of Christ.” See n. 37 and accompanying text.

<sup>307</sup> Curtis, 43. Curtis explains, “As Billy Graham’s father-in-law, L. Nelson Bell, put it, the church faced ‘the urgent necessity of removing all barriers to spiritual fellowship in Christ, without at the same time attempting to force un-natural social relationships.’”

had an obligation to expound the gospel to Blacks in the same manner as they preached to White evangelicals, that was all that was required. “Social and economic discrimination” were topics to be addressed through “personal prerogative.” Gardner further averred that the Black church was “a veritable hellhole of heresy, emotional excess, and immoral behavior.’ Gardner confidently claimed, ‘You’ll find many Negroes congenial by nature and receptive to any friendly gesture’ but it was ‘not necessary to socialize with the Negro; just witness to him.’”<sup>308</sup> Oneness in Christ was given the “narrowest possible definition”<sup>309</sup> by White Christians.

Subsequently, as White evangelicals noted that “the racial order was irrevocably changing,” they recognized the need to signal an affinity for racial justice as a failure to do so likely would have harmed their institutions.<sup>310</sup> As a result, some White Christian leaders understood that it was necessary to publicly repudiate and jettison their prior explicitly race-based theological justifications for separation between Blacks and Whites. Co-opting the progressive use of racial colorblindness, they revised it to a regressive understanding to support their own goals. Black historian Jesse Curtis said, “As evangelicals sought to calibrate their movement’s appeal amid the confusion of changing racial norms, the question of oneness in Christ became a key fault line.”<sup>311</sup>

For many White Christians, “oneness in Christ” means spiritual unity in Christ, which in turn reflects that God reaches out to all peoples equally without considering the race of individuals. Thus, God is racially colorblind, and Christians must also be racially

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<sup>308</sup> Curtis, 43.

<sup>309</sup> Curtis, 43.

<sup>310</sup> Curtis, 23.

<sup>311</sup> Curtis, 32-33.

colorblind. Adherence to the concept of racial colorblindness, therefore, reflects the virtue of Christian maturity since “mature Christians did not care much about their racial identities.”<sup>312</sup>

Flowing from this understanding is the corollary that talking about race, acknowledging racial consciousness, recognizing racial differences, and referencing racial hierarchies undermine our shared identity in Christ that divides God’s children from each other. In addition, most U.S. White Christians will assert that they accept and believe racism is a sin. Racist actions reflect an inability of people to choose the “right” courses of action because of their fallen nature. These individual sins lead to fractured relationships between individuals that contravene God’s racial colorblindness – a failure to love our neighbors as ourselves.<sup>313</sup>

In contrast to this understanding of individual sin, raising claims of structural or systemic racism are considered divisive, preventing real progress toward racial justice and contravening the notion that racism is individualistic. Any attempt to shift the blame for one’s sins to something other than accepting individual responsibility and repenting is inappropriate.<sup>314</sup> Moreover, doing so implicates remedies perceived as group-based, e.g., affirmative action undermining the individualism in which they believe.<sup>315</sup> For some White Christians, when institutions – universities, employers, public schools – claim that racism exists within their institutions and attempt to use race-based remedies to overcome

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<sup>312</sup> Curtis, 8.

<sup>313</sup> Emerson and Smith, 78-79.

<sup>314</sup> Curtis, 5.

<sup>315</sup> Emerson and Smith, 80.

past discrimination, the response by some White Christians is that the perception of racism would disappear if issues were not acknowledged or named.

As a result, governmental intrusion into what are individual actions is not acceptable and should be prohibited. Moreover, the effort to use race-based remedies further undermines their beliefs that institutional actions should be based on personal merit, thereby reflecting accepting the notion of a meritocracy. These understandings are also reminiscent of the work of Bonilla-Silva and Bell, who pointed out that objections to governmental intrusion are also a hallmark of people who use linguistic devices or legal rulings to object to actions that they believe constitute “reverse discrimination.” Similarly, they pointed out that such emphases also provide bases for Whites to claim a nonracist identity while simultaneously espousing contradictory beliefs.

Many White Christians consider spiritual rebirth the “solution to America’s racial ills.”<sup>316</sup> It is through the power of the gospel that the sins of racism will be eradicated, and racial wounds will heal.<sup>317</sup> Prayer, changing hearts and minds, and striving to be in right relationship with God and others through individual interactions are the measures Christians must take to eradicate racial injustice.

A consequence of these understandings is that those White Christians who see, believe, accept, and act in accordance with these theological concepts see themselves as virtuous. Moreover, because they are trying to overcome the sin of racism, they also perceive themselves as virtuous. Similarly, congregations that point to their mission statements or vision statements that proclaim, “We welcome all people” or “We open our

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<sup>316</sup> Curtis, 8.

<sup>317</sup> Curtis, 2.

doors to everyone” are indicative of racially colorblind credentials (or evidence of antiracist work in action),<sup>318</sup> as evidence that they are kind and welcoming to people of color, in short, virtuous.

Finally, for many White Christians, racial colorblindness may signal a radical reversal in their thinking. By contrasting colorblindness to the appalling history of White Christian treatment of Blacks, perhaps a claim not to see race might be considered significant progress. Indeed, since racial colorblindness on the surface arguably reflects pro-diversity and antiracist intentions, White Christians might see it as explicitly repudiating past White Christian hate-filled racial attitudes. Adopting racially colorblind standards may thus lead to a belief that their behavior reflects Christian virtuousness.

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<sup>318</sup> Such claims of welcome are belied, though, when White congregants continue to express cultural stereotypes: In 2010, at a Wednesday evening Lenten service at the church in which I grew up, an almost exclusively White congregation in Livonia, Michigan, I gave a temple talk about my experiences in Palestine as part of an international peace-keeping organization. A Black male visitor, who identified himself as a disabled veteran, attended this service. Subsequently, a White woman suggested more than once, without any factual support, that he was the same person who had broken into a Catholic church four miles away since that person was identified as a Black man. Moreover, the White female pastor contacted the visitor’s therapist to discuss whether the visitor had a propensity for violence, something not done for other visitors. In a conversation with another member (White male) about the racist intent and implications behind this claim, he stated that he had not even considered the possibility that he was responsible for the break-in because he thought the visitor was a member of the Bishop’s staff. I asked him why he thought this, and he responded that it was because the Bishop was Black. A further reflection of the insincerity of such mission/vision statements is revealed when requests to include non-eurocentric liturgical practices are flatly denied, when religious art depicts God, Jesus, and other religious figures only as European,<sup>318</sup> and congregants react angrily to scriptural interpretations or sermons that focus on racial justice, accompanied by threats that financial support will be withdrawn, or by continuing to concentrate congregational governance and decision making authority in the hands of White males.

### White Christian racial colorblindness and narratives of erasure

If racial colorblindness indicates Christian virtuousness and race is to be ignored, a question arises –whose race is being ignored? The simplistic answer ought to be “all of them.” If God is racially colorblind, logically, it stands to reason that we must all be colorblind too. In the context under consideration here, that answer is inaccurate and disingenuous. Indeed, something seems to get lost in Whites' definition and application of racial colorblindness since Whites do not necessarily see themselves as raced.<sup>319</sup> This results in racially colorblind standards generally applying only to people of color and reinforce a conclusion that a racially colorblind ideal is not colorblind at all.

This understanding impacts people of color by erasing their lived and historical experiences. This is accomplished by creating narratives that either omit that history, refashion it to minimize its significance, or portray Whites as fervent supporters of racial

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<sup>319</sup> There is a substantial body of scholarship that cannot be considered here at length that considers how Whites either do not or have trouble conceiving of themselves as raced individuals Bonilla-Silva explains, “The lack of reflexivity [among Whites] is not surprising . . . since, as Beverly Tatum argues, dominant identities tend to remain inarticulate precisely because they are seen as the ‘norm’ and, therefore, ‘Whites can easily reach adulthood without thinking much about their racial group,’” 129. See also, Curtis (“Like other White Americans, White evangelicals invested in and benefitted from a racial hierarchy that was often invisible to them.”), 4. Black womanist scholar Emilie Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), quotes Adrienne Davis, who asserts, “White Americans do not appear to have a sense of racial identity that is not linked to ethnicity or class unless they are juxtaposing themselves against darker-skinned races.” Townes notes that when considering race, “we focus on darker-skinned peoples almost exclusively. This invites folks of European descent and others to ignore the social construction of Whiteness, Ibid., 60. See also Emerson and Smith, 90. They detail various ways in which White inability to see White advantage occurs. In *Disruptive Christian Ethics*, West points out that Whites enjoy the freedom to choose whether or not to think about race and further that Whites may be seen as “the normal ones who do not project a particular racial identity and perspective.” 118.

justice or, at the very least, nonracists. This creation of narratives of erasure forms the basis of this section.

As with the association of virtuousness with White Christian treatment of people of color, the creation of narratives of erasure by Whites is not a new phenomenon. These narratives authored by White Christians are voluminous; they have been edited as necessary to allow Whites to maintain their social, economic, and political power. These narratives commenced as early as 1565 when the Spanish invaded what is now known as St. Augustine, Florida. Written by Spanish invaders, these narratives deemed indigenous people savages who, among other things, had no societal structure, no religion, and no cultural system. In doing so, much of the rich history of Indigenous peoples was erased, allowing these invaders and colonizers to justify weaponizing smallpox, forcing them from their lands, and sometimes slaughtering them.

Almost simultaneously, narratives of erasure were developed by White Christians to justify the enslavement of Africans who were captured and brought to what would become the United States.”<sup>320</sup> Their history was erased upon their capture, forced transfer to the Colonies, and enslavement. Torn from their families and villages, their culture, their religion, and their entire way of life as they knew it ceased to exist. Indeed, their identity was erased when stripped of their African names, and their very humanness was erased when they were deemed property.

The theological rationale that we are all one in Christ based upon Galatians 3:28 (“there is no longer Jew or Greek...”) conflates difference and celebrates sameness.

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<sup>320</sup> Nikole Hannah-Jones, *The 1619 Project*, (New York: One World, 2021), 2. In 1619, approximately 30 African captives were “traded to the Virginia colonists for provisions, making them the first enslaved Africans in the English colonies.”

Correspondingly, racial differences are unimportant and ought not to be acknowledged. Any assertion, vocalization, or acknowledgment of racial differences is divisive and contrary to God's will.

In contrast, is it possible to construct a theological position that counters this insistence on sameness, perhaps a theology of unity? Biblically, God created all humans and, therefore, all our differences. Genesis 1:26-27 informs us that God said, "Let us make humans in our image, according to our likeness. . . So God created humans in his image, in the image of God he created them." Romans 12:4-7 informs us that the body of Christ is comprised of many members, all of which perform different functions.<sup>321</sup> Acts 2 tells us that even though we may be different, we are all brought together into the body of Christ. In recognition that these differences are essential, a theology of unity might be served by celebrating and valuing these differences. Such a unity would begin with regard for others and their differences. Moreover, a theology of unity would posit that unity is not the same as homogeneity.

Second, glossing over human differences arguably is an affront to God, who created humanity with endless variations.<sup>322</sup> To suggest that these differences should be ignored under the rubric of "we are all one in Christ" is hubris, an effort to supplant God's intentions for creation. White Christian theological Additional scriptural passages that support a different theological interpretation. For example, in Acts, on the day of Pentecost, "they were all together in one place. And suddenly from heaven there came a sound like the rush of a violent wind, and it filled the entire house where they were

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<sup>321</sup> See also 1 Corinthians 12:12-31.

<sup>322</sup> The story in Genesis about the Tower of Babel (Genesis 11: 1-9) reveals that God indeed created differences in people.



sitting.... All of them began to speak in other languages, as the Spirit gave them ability.... Amazed and astonished, they asked, ... how is it that we hear, each of us, in our own native language?" Acts 2: 1-2, 4, 7-8.

In his letter to the Romans, St. Paul had a different understanding of the "body of Christ." He wrote, "For as one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members of each other," Romans 12: 4-5.

These narratives of erasure have further troubling consequences. Whites benefit when they substitute their manufactured identities for people of color, defined in terms of non-Whiteness, sometimes without any recognition that they are doing so or of their own Whiteness.<sup>323</sup> Indeed, "the social and legal construction of darker-colored identities is critical to the maintenance of White identity."<sup>324</sup>

As Sumi Cho and Robert Wesley point out,

steady progress from barbarism to civilization, principled application of neutral rules, participatory democratic decision making, meritocratic reward systems, making the victim whole, the dignity of the individual, etc. Each alibi is contradicted by U.S. society's treatment of women, people of color, and other historically disparaged groups. These narrative alibis legitimate existing power arrangements through the purgation of history and the subjugation of illicit knowledge produced in resistance experiences.<sup>325</sup>

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<sup>323</sup> Townes, citing Adrienne Davis, notes that Davis argues that "White American identity that does not have Latino/a roots appears to be formed solely around the experience of being not-Black, not-Asian, not-Latino/a, non-Native American." See Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists*, "Although [Whites] abhor what they regard as blacks 'self-segregation,' they do not have any problem with their own racial segregation because they do not see it as a racial phenomenon." 142.

<sup>324</sup> Townes, 72-73.

<sup>325</sup> Sumi Cho and Robert Westley, *Critical Race Coalitions*, 1409.

Michelle A. Williams, epidemiologist and former dean of the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, wrote in the school's newsletter how "unjust erasure torments large swaths of humanity" since "people experience it as societal blindness," silence, and "a lack of sustained attention to the hate impacting their communities."<sup>326</sup>

These narratives of White Christian racial colorblindness reject the struggles of people of color for racial justice, glossing over the truths of their lived experiences, irrespective of their centrality to people of color. Attempts to read scripture through a lens that *celebrates* differences and diversity are dismissed and disallowed. Those who question the theological soundness of White Christian racial colorblindness are viewed as divisive, lacking in Christian maturity, and ultimately silenced.

Narratives of erasure are not limited only to church polity and Christian theology. These same narratives of erasure are reproduced within the academy when White Christian social ethicists opt to ignore racial conflicts in their work or fail to challenge long-standing White assumptions about these conflicts.<sup>327</sup> Womanist scholar Emile Townes writes, "Latter day versions of 'what do they want?' or 'they get all the jobs, don't they?' abound in our academic musings in print, in professional societies . . . in the offices of colleagues, and in the halls of our institutions."<sup>328</sup> Additionally, within the academy, further erasure occurs when White Christian social ethicists appropriate the work of scholars of color and represent it as their own, thereby erasing the contributions of scholars of color on matters of race and racism that far outstrip the assistance of their

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<sup>326</sup> Michelle A. Williams, "The Legacy of Slavery and the Danger of Erasure," April 28, 2022. <https://www.hsph.harvard.edu/deans-office/2022/04/28/the-legacy-of-slavery-and-the-danger-of-erasure/>. Accessed September 29, 2022.

<sup>327</sup> West, "Racial Justice," 502-503.

<sup>328</sup> Townes, 59.

White colleagues, both in content, analyses, and frequency. Or, just as problematic, the scholarship of academicians of color may be dismissed as lacking sufficient analyses, having the accuracy of their work questioned, or dismissal of their methodology because it lacks objectivity.<sup>329</sup>

Such actions by White Christians, within religious settings, within the academy, and society at large, based upon the invention of false narratives, fabricate a society in which the existence of dismissive racial incidents is denied. Ignoring such incidents does not equate to their non-existence.<sup>330</sup> Instead, racial colorblindness reflects a choice for active ignorance, allowing many White Christians to avoid potentially difficult conversations, ignore the existence of structural and institutional racism, and ignore ongoing racial injustice. It allows Whites to feel good about themselves, signals Christian virtuousness in their minds, and indicates that they are done with the fight for racial justice. White Christian racial colorblindness further champions sameness, even though sameness is fiction. It allows Whites to make-believe that the claim that they “do not see race” somehow precludes them from acting based on race.

These destructive narratives of erasures precipitated by White Christian adherence to racial colorblindness, together with notions of Christian virtuousness engendered by that

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<sup>329</sup> Bell, “Who’s Afraid of Critical Race Theory?” In this article, Bell explained how “critical race theory is characterized by frequent use of the first person, storytelling, narrative, allegory, interdisciplinary treatment of law, and the unapologetic use of creativity,” 893. He went on to point out that, while other scholars in the legal academy found CRT interesting, they did not see it as an appropriate subdiscipline, questioning the accuracy of the narratives, failing to see the relevance of the narratives, and critiquing what they perceived to be the absence of sufficient analysis. Bell pointed to a critique by Daniel Farber and Suzanna Sherry both White, in which they pronounced that “*we know of no work on critical race theory that discusses psychological or other social science studies supporting the existence of a voice of color.*” Italics added.

<sup>330</sup> Townes, 58. She labels these phenomena as “willful oblivion.”

same construct, colorblindness combine to suggest a more accurate explanation for commitment to racially colorblind theology amounts to a defense of Whiteness.

### **Defense of Whiteness**

We fool ourselves if we believe that continuing to obscure Whiteness eradicates it or erases its history and deadly effects. Whiteness has been and continues to be strategically maintained through trumpeting its colorlessness. The values, belief systems, privileges, histories, experiences of White folks is marked as normal – all else the exception to it. [Whiteness] is deadly for it either fails to see the work it does, obscures its domination through evocations of neutrality and objectivity, or remains sublimely indifferent to the devastation it inflicts as long as the status quo is maintained.<sup>331</sup>

Opening a chapter section with a long quotation may not be archetypal or conventional. Still, it is the rare quotation that succinctly, precisely, and powerfully articulates the thesis of a section. In a few lines, Townes identifies with devastating accuracy the benefits and advantages for Whites that result from claiming not to see race while simultaneously detailing the burdens and hardships it imposes upon people of color. In short, she exposes that White Christian affinity for racial colorblindness rarely addresses racial inequities. Instead, it is about defending the racial status quo or, more explicitly, defending Whiteness.

White Christian support for racial colorblindness is, among other things, premised on the notion that race-based remedies to rectify racial injustices are inappropriate and unfair to Whites. Such remedies are claimed to result in “reverse discrimination” or “giving people something they did not earn.” Instead, racially “neutral” concepts (racial colorblindness) are used to define the parameters of racial justice.<sup>332</sup> No race-based

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<sup>331</sup> Townes, 74.

<sup>332</sup> “Part of maintaining Whiteness as an abstraction involves cluttering our common discourse with ostensibly race-neutral words, actions, or policies.” Townes, 75.

remedies are appropriate to redress racial injustice except in rare circumstances. Whites' suggestions that racial colorblindness is neutral and not race-based and protects everyone, with no one being advantaged or disadvantaged due to race, is entirely untrue.

Whites feel empowered to object to race-based remedies for racial injustice as they overlook or ignore how Whites are privileged by the current systems. For example, the decimation of affirmative action programs ignores White legacy admissions, differences in public education funding, ongoing housing segregation, the use of educational policies that track students, assigning more significant numbers of students of color to special education programs, and implementing disciplinary practices that disproportionately affect students of color, all have an impact on college admissions for students of color. Yet, since Whites do not see or understand these race-based differences, they do not see or know that those racially colorblind standards benefit them as Whites.

The insistence that racism is limited to individual acts of bigotry or prejudice, that it is rare, and that racial inequities no longer exist is often accompanied by a general refusal or inability by White Christians to consider the existence of structural racism, despite overwhelming evidence to the contrary. While a comprehensive exploration of structural and systemic racism is beyond the scope of this dissertation, its depth and breadth are considerable: income differentials, employment opportunities, accumulated wealth, ongoing housing segregation, school segregation, gerrymandering political districts, a new wave of voting restrictions, the disproportionate imprisonment and imposition of capital punishment, unequal access to health care, locating refuse incinerators in neighborhoods comprised predominantly of people of color, are only *some* examples of current racial disparities that are perpetuated by existing social, economic, and political

systems and institutions.<sup>333</sup> To deny the existence of these inequities or to attempt to dismiss them as the result of individual choices, preferences, or cultural deficiencies, requires an active effort. More problematic is that the denial, however questionable, defends the racial status quo of White privilege and White supremacy. Restated, denying the existence of structural and systemic racism defends Whiteness.

Denying the existence of systemic racism, coupled with racially colorblind standards, is an example of how Whites have coopted the progressive use of racial colorblindness. White preferences and opinions on racism and efforts to eradicate racial injustice have become the definitional focal point for determining the breadth, depth, and duration of appropriate and necessary measures to achieve racial justice. In contrast, the desires, preferences, and opinions of people of color for achieving racial justice remain on the periphery, subordinated to White interests.<sup>334</sup>

A particularly egregious example is how the words of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. have been distorted and twisted by conservative White Christians as “proof” that Dr. King would agree with their agenda. In his 1963 speech in Washington, D.C., Dr. King poignantly stated, “I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.”<sup>335</sup> In context, Dr. King spoke out against the evils of segregation and discrimination, economic inequalities, and poverty. He challenged the pervasive systemic

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<sup>333</sup> Townes, 156.

<sup>334</sup> See Chapter 1.

<sup>335</sup> Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., “I Have a Dream,” in Washington, D.C. 1963. *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, (New York: Harper and Row), 1986, 219. Unfortunately, this particular sentence is often the only sentence in that speech with which many people are familiar.

racism that permeated every aspect of life for Blacks. He critiqued how America's promises of equality, freedom, and justice had been denied to Blacks. He called for immediate action "to make real the promises of democracy." He was not suggesting racial colorblindness, i.e., ignoring or pretending the non-existence of racism as a guiding principle to redress racial inequalities.

White Christians' sense of virtuousness also defends Christian Whiteness. The theological meaning of "We are all one in Christ" is determined by White Christians and reinforces White theology without regard to the impact upon people of color. This results in White Christians assuming that the theology with which they are familiar is the "correct" theology to the exclusion of all other possibilities. Narratives of erasure are composed by White Christians to avoid guilt or responsibility for race-based injustices. Challenges or requests for White Christians to be more inclusive, other than the "all are welcome" language of mission statements, are met with the dreaded seven words of White Christianity, "We've never done it that way before," firmly establishing the "rightness" of White Christian worship practices. In other words, Whiteness is used "as 'a commonsense' category providing cover for the operations of White racism."<sup>336</sup>

### **Confronting Well-Meaning Moderate and Progressive Liberal White Christian Adherence to Racial Colorblindness.**

Despite the sometimes harsh critique of White Christians in this chapter, the intent is not to vilify all White Christians or label them all as racists. Both Bonilla-Silva and Bell make this point in their scholarship. Instead, most White Christians who support racial

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<sup>336</sup> James Perkinson, *White Theology: Outing Supremacy in Modernity*, (New York: Palgrave, MacMillan, 2004), 159. Perkinson further explains that "Whiteness has continued its career as a largely invisible norm of adjudication," 162.

colorblindness are likely good, faithful, well-meaning people unaware of the harm caused to people of color by racially colorblind theology and faith practices. In truth, in the past, progressive White Christian<sup>337</sup> supported the Civil Rights Movement, viewing this work as a moral imperative. Along with Black Christians, they championed progressive racial colorblindness as an appropriate approach to achieving racial justice. This translated into adopting equality and “equal opportunity” as the ultimate goals of the Movement, which at that time represented significant progress in the struggle against racial inequities. As discussed in Chapter 1, many of these same progressive White Christians also supported gradualistic remedies that, again, for the time, represented movement, albeit in small, incremental steps, toward racial equality.

Progressive White Christians employed these ideals to work for integrated schools, neighborhoods, and job opportunities. They believed this work demonstrated how Christians “make their love real,” welcoming “people as good neighbors regardless of race.”<sup>338</sup> Protestant activist groups argued that creating racially integrated neighborhoods would “contribute to overcoming the estrangement and to binding up the broken fellowship which discrimination and segregation have caused in the Christian

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<sup>337</sup> The word progressive is used instead of liberal for several reasons. First, even though social reform liberalism has resulted in some social, economic, and political reforms, the use of the term liberal may still result in confusion with the tenets of classical liberalism (individualism, meritocracies) that prop up racial colorblindness. As Bonilla-Silva points out, “racially based policies such as slavery, the removal of Native Americans from their lands and their banishment to reservations, the superexploitation and degrading utilization of Mexicans and various Asian groups as contract laborers, Jim Crow, and many other policies were part of the United States’ ‘liberal’ history from 1776 until the 1960s,” Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists*, 55. Second, in the current political and social climate the word “liberal” has been redefined to be synonymous with unfettered immigration policies.

<sup>338</sup> Thomas J. Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle For Civil Rights in the North*, (New York: Random House, 2008), 243.



community.”<sup>339</sup> These pleas reflected the theological concept of unity in Christ and a morality that viewed all people equally, irrespective of skin color. Many moderate and progressive White Christians enthusiastically signed open housing pledge cards to demonstrate their acceptance of integrated housing.<sup>340</sup> The passionate support of the *Brown* decision exemplified efforts to desegregate schools. Efforts to desegregate employment discrimination urged that Black and White applicants should be treated equally rather than Blacks being openly rejected due to their race.

However, this avowed adoption of the principles of integration by moderate and progressive White Christians was not always accompanied by corresponding shifts in behavior. As Dr. King wrote in his “Letter From Birmingham Jail”:

I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro’s great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizens’ Counciler, or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the White moderate, who is more devoted to “order” than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: “I agree with you in the goal you seek but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action”; who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man’s freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a “more convenient season.”<sup>341</sup>

Irrespective of the number of progressive White Christians who signed pledged cards supporting housing desegregation, authentic acceptance of housing integration was much rarer. As with the White male clergy to whom King’s letter was addressed, the White Christian moderates who claimed that a faith-based response to racial injustice was an

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<sup>339</sup> Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, 243-44.

<sup>340</sup> As Sugrue wrote, “By the end of the 1960s, tens of thousands of northern Whites, most of them churchgoers, the majority suburban, had signed open-occupancy pledges.” *Sweet Land of Liberty*, 246.

<sup>341</sup> Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can’t Wait*, (New York: Signet Classics, 1964), 97

integral part of their faith represented a “stumbling block in [the black] stride toward freedom. White historian Thomas J. Sugrue noted, “Signing a pledge card was a cost-free way to demonstrate one’s liberality on racial issues . . . one could occupy the moral high ground.”<sup>342</sup> As Sugrue further explained, “racial liberalism did bequeath to suburban Whites a new language of color blindness that allowed them to claim that they had overcome their racist past and to profess their innocence . . . Expressing concern about ‘class’ had become an increasingly common way for northern Whites to express discomfort with integration. Whites could profess their color blindness – they did not move to all-White communities because they were racist but because they were exercising their free choice to live among people of their ‘class.’<sup>343</sup>

Notwithstanding how their actions have maintained segregation, it cannot be denied that well-meaning moderate and progressive White Christians contributed to the Civil Rights Movement and continued engaging in anti-racist work. Many White Christian moderates and White Christian progressives continue to assert that they are or want to be allies in the struggle for racial justice. As with the efforts of moderate and progressive White Christians during the Civil Rights Movement, though, there remains a discrepancy between the current claims of ally-ship by White Christian progressives and their actions.<sup>344</sup>

Looking back to the example at the beginning of this chapter, where White parents voiced their opposition to the alleged teaching of CRT in a public school district, I acknowledged that even well-meaning Whites might voice such opposition since their

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<sup>342</sup> Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, 247.

<sup>343</sup> Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, 248.

<sup>344</sup> Bonilla-Silva, *Racism Without Racists*, 142.

concerns might be rooted in the instinct to protect one's children from real, or even perceived, harm. I asked the question, however, whether it mattered if the parents' reactions were rooted in racism. If racism motivates White resistance to the teaching of U.S. racial history (or the enactment of statutory prohibitions does the same), then the direction of the work of White Christian social ethicists must be re-examined. Suppose the discipline is genuinely committed to achieving racial equity. In that case, it becomes imperative and obligatory for White Christian social ethicists also to interrogate critically and challenge the use of allegedly "neutral" standards to reveal that they are not, in practice or effect, neutral but are racially based standards.

To interrupt the racial status quo, Christian theological ethics must engage those well-meaning White Christians who believe that the incremental changes endorsed by gradualism and the symbolic signaling of equality in the concept of racial colorblindness are sufficient. How, then, can the theoretical analyses of CRT assist in this engagement? Recalling the identification of the core principles of CRT, it can be easily seen how White Christian racial colorblindness denies and contradicts many of these principles,

Those who adhere to racial colorblindness assert that instances of racism are few and far between, are limited to individual acts, and decline to accept that racism is embedded in structures and systems. The narratives constructed by White Christians reinforce racial myths and assumptions. The ICP developed by Bell is visible in White reaction to communal initiatives for racial justice. Their adoption of racial colorblindness is rooted in universality; everyone should be treated the same. Racial colorblindness is informed by individualism, a belief that systems are neutral. Activism, or efforts to change, may be limited to efforts to be in right relationship with God and others.

The challenge for White Christian social ethicists is to make visible that which racial colorblindness attempts to make invisible by paying attention to the pervasiveness of racism, uncovering and critiquing how White Christians attempt to work for racial justice. They must develop analyses, theories, and praxes that effectively respond to those who agree with these understandings.<sup>345</sup> Just as important, if not more so, is the need to confront the silence among White Christian social ethicists who choose not to engage these beliefs by for a variety of reasons, as identified by Traci West in “Racial Justice.”<sup>346</sup>

The contradiction of CRT principles by many White Christians is subsumed within the explanations offered by White Christian social ethicists who choose to ignore or avoid the moral dilemmas presented by the current racial status quo: issues of race are incorporated into more enduring, universal scholarly questions; addressing ongoing racism is not necessary to the development of their claims regarding the “communal expression” of Christian virtuousness, racism may be excluded or receive negligible attention because of its “isolated moral dimensions”; and a belief that their perspectives (White and mostly male) are not influenced by their social locations; and there is no sense of immediacy to address racial conflict.

What then is to be done? Theoretical models must be developed that uncover any rhetorical or behavioral devices White Christians use that allow them to conceal or gloss over any underlying racial animus. In addition, a historical exploration of how White Christianity has employed Bell’s ICP and TPP should be undertaken so that such patterns might be interrupted. There also needs to be a reconsideration of the applicability of a

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<sup>345</sup> Chapter 4 will propose such an approach, accompanied by a more thorough analysis of the current status of White Christian ethics on these issues.

<sup>346</sup> West, “Racial Justice,” 502-503.

universal ethic on matters of racial injustice since a universal ethic perpetuates narratives of erasure and the notion that Whites “know best.” Finally, Christian social ethics needs to move beyond reliance on liberal concepts and White perspectives, emphasizing communal Christianity in place of individualism and opting to theorize ethics of race from the margins instead of from perspectives of privilege. What if, instead of this emphasis, we consider how a revolutionary Jesus, one concerned with creating a prophetic counterculture that insists on racial justice? C. René Padilla, an Ecuadorian theologian who spoke at the International Congress on World Evangelization meeting in 1974, was adamant that the church should be a prophetic counterculture that demanded an end to racial divisions.<sup>347</sup> Churches that did not do so were interested primarily in preserving the racial status quo rather than working for racial justice.<sup>348</sup> This was the cheap gospel (or cheap grace) because it demanded nothing from Christians.

To accomplish these goals, the voices of scholars of color, women, and gender non-conforming persons must be considered and incorporated, but without misappropriation. A wide variety of theological approaches must be included (e.g., liberation theology, Black theology, womanist theology, Latinx theology, Asian theology, feminist theology, and queer theology) to address and refute, where necessary, the paternalistic, White, cis-gendered, and first world notions and hermeneutical lenses that have dominated Christian theology. In addition, Christologies and ecclesiologies of inclusiveness must be developed along with praxes that will engage Christians “in the pews” in anti-racist work that challenges White supremacy. Finally, might it be possible to incorporate the seven

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<sup>347</sup> Curtis, *Myth of Colorblind Christians*. 144.

<sup>348</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

marks of the Kingdom identified by Gushee and Stassen, which might all space for the in-breaking reign of God that might assist with such efforts?

The next chapter investigates historical patterns of segregation in Detroit. It begins with the First Great Migration of Blacks (approximately 1920) from the southern United States. It ends with the 1974 United States Supreme Court decision in *Milliken v. Bradley*, in which the Court rejected a remedy that would have resulted in the integration of the Detroit Public Schools. Tracing this history, specifically, as it relates to White Christians, helps illustrate how Christian realism, gradualism, and racial colorblindness assisted and reinforced patterns of systemic racism.

## CHAPTER 3 - THE CREATION AND PROTECTION OF WHITE CHRISTIAN SPACES IN DETROIT, MICHIGAN

### Introduction

In 1929, three Black families applied for membership in Bethel Evangelical Church, an all-White, and largely German-American congregation in Detroit, Michigan. The application was supported by the pastor Adelbert Helm, who made admission of Blacks “a test of the church’s adherence to the Gospel.”<sup>349</sup> After removing Helm as pastor in response to his unequivocal support for congregational integration, the congregation in January 1930 voted to bar the admission of Blacks to the congregation, reaffirming its all White status.<sup>350</sup>

In the 1930s, in a substantially Polish-Catholic east-side neighborhood in Detroit, resistance to housing integration was fierce. Monsignor Ciarrocchi of the Church of Santa Maria, a Catholic parish in the community, informed the archbishop that he [Ciarrocchi] was “just in time to stop a property deal which concerns a piece of land and one house, just across our Church door. Negroes would get it.” Businessmen, too, urged the local

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<sup>349</sup> Fox, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography*, 118.

<sup>350</sup> Fox, 120. Reinhold Niebuhr was the pastor at Bethel immediately before Helm. Niebuhr was appointed chairman of the Mayor’s Inter-Racial Committee, whose report noted the impact of residential segregation, discriminatory institutional practices, and discriminatory employment practices upon the lives of the Black population in Detroit. Niebuhr affirmed his reprehension of the conditions of Blacks in the city in an entry in *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*. He wrote, “The situation which the colored people of the city face is a really desperate one, and no one who does not spend real time in gathering the facts can have any idea of the misery and pain which exists among these people... I wish the good church people ... could appreciate how superior [the Mayor’s] attitudes and viewpoints on race relations are to those held by most church people.” Niebuhr, *Leaves From the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*, 6.

archbishop to “establish an Italian national parish in one area, hoping that ‘an Italian Catholic Church, and possibly a Catholic school would keep away the Negroes.’”<sup>351</sup>

In 1941, the Reverend Constantine Dziuk, a White pastor at St. Louis the King Catholic Church in Detroit, expressed his opposition to the construction of the Sojourner Truth public housing project designed to alleviate the housing shortage for Blacks in the City.<sup>352</sup> Dziuk argued, “Construction of a low-cost housing project ... for the colored people ... would mean utter ruin for many people who have mortgaged their homes to the FHA.”<sup>353</sup> Dziuk went beyond neighborhood stability and economic concerns. He also raised issues of White purity, arguing that the project “would jeopardize the safety of many of our White girls, as no colored people live closely by.”<sup>354</sup> Lastly, Dziuk implied that moving forward with the project might result in violence, “It is the sentiment of all people residing within the vicinity to object to this project in order to stop race riots in the

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<sup>351</sup> John T. McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries: The Catholic Encounter with Race in the Twentieth-Century Urban North*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 37. McGreevy also reports that in 1948 a Detroit priest refused a Black man absolution because “‘he had his [own] church and that he should go there to confession. He also informed him that he need not go to the assistants because they had their instructions not to absolve Negroes,’” 101.

<sup>352</sup> Housing for Blacks was scarce due to existing housing segregation. Most Blacks lived in the same neighborhoods occupied by Blacks since the 1920s. The housing was old, decrepit, densely packed, and dangerous. Historian Thomas Sugrue reported, “Housing was so scarce that Black war workers slept in ‘hot sheet’ boardinghouses where beds turned over every eight hours as one shift set out for work and the last returned home.” Thomas J. Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North*, (New York: Random House, 2008), 66.

<sup>353</sup> Gerald Van Dusen, *Detroit’s Sojourner Truth Housing Riot of 1942: Prelude to the Race Riot of 1943*, (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2020), 110. Dziuk was also rabidly anti-Semitic. See, McGreevy, 75.

<sup>354</sup> *Ibid.*, 110



future.”<sup>355</sup> Dziuk further encouraged numerous homeowners’ associations,<sup>356</sup> at least one of which met in St. Louis the King, to protest the project. A sign erected in a vacant lot near the project announced, “We Want White Tenants in Our White Community.”<sup>357</sup>

The words of Father Dziuk referencing potential violence proved remarkably prescient. On February 20, 1942, when the first Black families were scheduled to move into the Sojourner Truth project, a massive gathering of Whites swarmed the streets around the project, barricading them to prevent movers from entering the area. They started throwing rocks then gunfire erupted. While the police used tear gas to disperse the crowd,<sup>358</sup> they “were clearly unwilling to disperse the large crowd of White protestors who refused to leave.”<sup>359</sup> The ensuing violence resulted in 40 people being injured, 220 arrests, and 109 held for trial—all but three were Black.<sup>360</sup> The Sunday morning after the violence, “Many of the Roman Catholic pickets made it to midmorning Mass at St. Louis the King Parish in time to hear Father Dziuk’s [sic] homily on the righteousness of the

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<sup>355</sup> Ibid., 110.

<sup>356</sup> Between 1946-1965, Whites, primarily for keeping Blacks out of their neighborhoods, formed two hundred neighborhood associations. Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, 204.

<sup>357</sup> Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, 67. In St. Bartholomew’s parish, located in the same geographical area as St. Louis the King, the first Black family who moved into the neighborhood was greeted with a sign that read, “Get back on the other side of 7 Mile,” Thomas Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*, Princeton Classic Edition, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005, 247. Similarly, on either end of a street in St. Luke’s parish, located in the Seven-Mile Fenelon area of Detroit, were two signs proclaiming, “ALL WHITE,” Ibid.

<sup>358</sup> Van Dusen, *Sojourner Truth Housing Riot*, 147.

<sup>359</sup> Van Dusen, *Sojourner Truth Housing Riot*, 158.

<sup>360</sup> Sugrue, Ibid. “‘Detroit is dynamite,’ wrote a reporter for *Life* magazine after the Sojourner Truth battle. ‘It can either blow up Hitler or blow up the U.S.’” See also, Jay and Conklin, *People’s History*, 116-117.

cause.”<sup>361</sup> It would take another month and a half before Black residents could move peacefully into their homes.<sup>362</sup>

Unfortunately, Detroit’s Catholic leadership under Archbishop Mooney refused to address these church-incited racist actions.<sup>363</sup> Mooney stated after a meeting with two representatives of the local NAACP, “‘ I must in conscience consider that any declaration of mine which might have a general apologetic value for the Church among the Negroes would most certainly have a disastrously disturbing effect on the more than two-hundred thousand Polish Catholics who are a large part of my direct responsibility.’”<sup>364</sup>

A decade later, in 1955, Easby Wilson purchased a house in a predominantly White neighborhood near the Sojourner Truth housing development. The house was broken into and vandalized just before he, his wife, and his five-year-old son moved in. The faucets were turned on, the kitchen sink was blocked, and paint was spattered on the walls. Later that same day, all the windows in the front of the house were broken. After moving in, White members of a homeowners’ association confronted the Wilsons and demanded they sell their home. Over the next five months, Whites frequently picketed the house screaming racist epithets at the Wilsons. Their phone constantly rang with anonymous threatening calls. Eggs, rocks, and bricks were repeatedly thrown at the Wilson house, paint was splashed over the home's exterior, and several snakes were put in the basement.

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<sup>361</sup> Van Dusen, *Sojourner Truth Housing Riot*, 160.

<sup>362</sup> Jay and Conklin, *People’s History*, 116.

<sup>363</sup> Ibid.

<sup>364</sup> McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries*, 76.

"Much of this racist harassment occurred under the watchful eyes of police officers that ostensibly were there to protect the Wilsons, yet they did not stop the violence and vandalism. Mr. Wilson's heart condition was aggravated by the stress caused by the continuous harassment. Wilson's young son began having nightmares and nervous attacks, reporting that it felt as if something was crawling all over him. The Wilsons moved shortly after that."<sup>365</sup>

During the uprising of 1967,<sup>366</sup> Black Lutheran pastors in the Missouri Synod of the Lutheran Church "had absolutely no confidence in the District<sup>367</sup> office ... to even understand the nature and scope of the crisis, and absolutely no commitment to try to resolve it... Detroit was burning, and Black ministry had nowhere to turn for some official who could understand and bring hope or comfort."<sup>368</sup>

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<sup>365</sup> Sugrue, *Origins*, 232-233. While it cannot be asserted that those harassing the Wilsons were Christian, it should be noted that in the mid-1950s, approximately seventy-five to eighty percent of Detroit's White population was Roman Catholic. Ibid., 240. The 2014 Religious Landscape Study, conducted by the Pew Research Center, revealed that 67% of the Detroit Metropolitan Statistical Area population were Roman Catholic. (Lapeer, Livingston, Macomb, Oakland, St. Clair, and Wayne counties) identified themselves as Christian. <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/religious-landscape-study/metro-area/Detroit-metro-area>.

<sup>366</sup> A police raid on an illegal after-hours blind pig initially prompted the uprising where friends and relatives were celebrating the return of two Black Vietnam veterans. However, focusing only on the raid as the cause of the uprising is overly facile. It was much more than that. The rebellion responded to years of segregation, discrimination, police brutality, and racial profiling in the City. Over five days, as tanks rumbled through the streets, forty-three people died, 33 of whom were Black. "Most of the casualties were the result of law enforcement actions against Blacks, not Black violence against the police or White bystanders," Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, 326.

<sup>367</sup> Michigan District, The Lutheran Church Missouri Synod.

<sup>368</sup> "Black Clergy Caucus Statement on George Floyd," Black Clergy Caucus of the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod, June 3, 2020. The statement quotes from Rev. Dr. Richard Dickinson, Executive Director of Black Ministry, in 1967. The first paragraph of the statement refers to 1967. The third paragraph is an almost verbatim copy of the first, but it refers to the murder of George Floyd in 2020. <https://www.theunbrokencord.com/writings/Black-clergy-caucus-statement-on-george->

These narratives of Blacks and Whites, laity, and clergy, describe the impact of attempts at desegregation in Detroit during the 1920s – 1970s.<sup>369</sup> They communicate the fear, hopelessness, and anger felt by Blacks and Whites in the city. Catholics, encouraged by their priests, actively supported homeowners' associations whose members often engaged in violent, intimidating, and openly racist actions to oppose housing, employment, and school desegregation efforts. Protestants also firmly lined up to give religious and political support to oppose these efforts. Many Protestant churches quickly moved from racially changing neighborhoods rather than staying in integrated neighborhoods.<sup>370</sup>

Since I have lived in the Detroit metropolitan area for most of my life, lived through the legal efforts to desegregate the DPS, and have first-hand knowledge of some of the racial discord in the Detroit metropolitan area, I chose to focus on Detroit for this case study. By analyzing some of the racial dynamics of Detroit, and the surrounding metropolitan area between 1920 and 1975, this chapter will investigate why and how White Christians came to define some neighborhoods as “their” spaces, resulting in fierce

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floyd. Accessed October 20, 2022. See Richard Rothstein, *The Color of Law: A Forgotten History of How Our Government Segregated America*, (New York: Liveright Publishing Corporation, 2017). Rothstein points out, “During the immediate postwar period, [Detroit] saw more than 200 acts of intimidation and violence to deter African Americans from moving to predominantly White neighborhoods.” This occurred, according to Rothstein, because “police officers could be counted on to stand by, making no effort to stop, much less to prevent, the assaults.” Rothstein also notes, “In 1968, an official of the Michigan Civil Rights Commission reported that ‘our experience has been that nearly all attempts by Black families to move to Detroit’s suburbs have been met by harassment,’” 146-147.

<sup>369</sup> This is not to suggest that racial tension and racial violence in Detroit were limited to these decades. Quite the contrary. Detroit has a prolonged history of racial tensions that continues to the present day.

<sup>370</sup> Sugrue, *Origins*, 192.

resistance to desegregation efforts to retain those spaces. It will also explore how the perceived encroachment of Blacks into their White Christian spaces exacerbated White Christian fears, especially for the safety and security of their children. Finally, this chapter will consider the responses of White Christian church leadership and some White Christians to the White Christian fears and efforts to retain control of their spaces during this time frame.

### **Nurturing White Fear: The Creation and Maintenance of White Christian Spaces in Detroit**

#### **The process of constructing a threat to Christian Whiteness**

Despite being known in the nineteenth century as a “beacon of liberty” due to its strong abolitionist movement, Michigan nevertheless had Jim Crow laws restricting the rights of Blacks, especially those who could not prove their free status. Voting restrictions, anti-miscegenation laws, and local government endorsed segregation in schools were all sanctioned by the state.

The movement from “beacon of liberty” to widespread and uncompromising White Christian resistance to efforts to desegregate employment, housing, and schools in Detroit, was constructed painstakingly and deliberately over time resulting from immigration patterns, the calculated economics of industrialization, the quest for political power and theological and ecclesial understandings of Whiteness. These elements combined to alter and reinforce a segregated racial landscape in Detroit that remains largely unmitigated today.

Unraveling the interplay among employment, housing, and school segregation is an arduous and painstaking task in the larger project of examining White racial animosities. Yet, understanding the relationships among immigration patterns,

employment segregation, housing segregation, and segregated schools is essential to analyzing White Christian fears and the resulting efforts to defend White Christian spaces in Detroit.

### **White Immigration and Detroit**

Between 1880 and 1920, the population of Detroit increased from approximately 116,000 people to almost one million people. During that same period, the economy of Detroit shifted from a primarily commercial center to almost entirely industrial.<sup>371</sup> In 1880, people with French, German, Irish, British, Canadian, Scottish, and Scandinavian roots populated Detroit.<sup>372</sup> Before 1880, most immigrants came from northern and western Europe. After that, eastern and southern Europeans dominated immigration.

Between 1900 and 1920, European immigration patterns to Detroit initially created distinct “cross-class”<sup>373</sup> neighborhoods centered on ethnicity or religion, not wealth. As Leslie Woodcock Tentler noted, “Catholics had long been divided, politically and socially, from most of their Protestant brethren.”<sup>374</sup> Tentler also explained that in the early 1920s, there was a “resurgence of organized anti-Catholicism... These problems were acutely manifested in Detroit, where unemployment was at crisis proportions in 1921. Where rapid population growth, much of it due to immigration, had caused a

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<sup>371</sup> Olivier Zunz, *The Changing Face of Inequality: Urbanization, Industrial Development, and Immigrants in Detroit, 1880-1920*, (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 3.

<sup>372</sup> The French, in 1701, were the first Europeans to enter the area that later became as Detroit.

<sup>373</sup> Zunz, 6.

<sup>374</sup> Leslie Woodcock Tentler, *Seasons of Grace: A History of the Catholic Archdiocese of Detroit*, Kindle Edition, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1990), 261.

serious housing shortage”<sup>375</sup> and were reflected among other things in a campaign to outlaw parochial schools. In addition, the Ku Klux Klan, which became active in Detroit again in the 1920s was “bitterly anti-Catholic.”<sup>376</sup>

White-collar workers, skilled and unskilled laborers, lived in the same neighborhoods, bound together by their common ethnic roots. Ethnic churches, often accompanied by a parochial school, were built in the neighborhoods, offering worship services and school instruction in the language common to the residents. Ethnic social associations were created, and foreign-language newspapers served these ethnic communities. Life in such neighborhoods was deeply communal, knit together by many daily interactions among neighbors. Indeed, White historian Thomas Sugrue emphasizes that “familial and institutional bonds ordered urban life in ways that cannot be underestimated.”<sup>377</sup> A resident of one such neighborhood remembered that his life “centered around three separate but related spheres: Family, Parish, and Neighborhood.”<sup>378</sup> This deep sense of community created a sense of ownership in and of the neighborhoods; the neighborhoods became “theirs,” known by ethnicity.

As Detroit became more industrialized, these ethnic neighborhoods gave way to communities organized along socioeconomic and ethnic lines.<sup>379</sup> White-collar workers

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<sup>375</sup> Tentler, *Seasons of Grace*, 483.

<sup>376</sup> Ibid.

<sup>377</sup> Sugrue, *Origins*, 213-214. Sugrue’s information came from a National Council of Churches church membership census conducted in the mid-1950s. That census reflected that “about 65.9 percent of residents of Wayne County, Michigan, were Roman Catholics. Because so few African Americans were Catholic, the percentage of Wayne County Whites who were Catholic was probably significantly higher.” National Council of Churches, Bureau of Research and Survey, “Churches and Church Membership in the United States: An Enumeration and Analysis by Counties, States, and Regions.”

<sup>378</sup> Sugrue, *Origins*, 214.

<sup>379</sup> Zunz, 3, 341.

moved into neighborhoods populated by White-collar workers of other ethnicities, while skilled and unskilled workers often remained in an ethnic enclave.<sup>380</sup> This development eventually led to “successive settlement” in “which newcomers entered in a set order,” becoming assimilated into U.S. society.<sup>381</sup> Despite this shift to class-based neighborhoods, communal bonds remained strong and were still anchored in religion, shared values, home ownership, employment, and schools.

While Blacks had lived in Detroit from its inception, they did not comprise a significant segment of the population in 1880.<sup>382</sup> Before 1910, Blacks frequently lived in the same neighborhoods as White European immigrants, although there were a few Black enclaves.<sup>383</sup> During World War I, European immigrants and Blacks populated the Black Bottom neighborhood, named for the dark, rich, marshy soils on which it was built. As Black migration continued in the 1920s, that neighborhood became predominantly Black. Paradise Valley, adjacent to the Black Bottom neighborhood, was the business and entertainment center for residents of Black Bottom. Both areas were wracked by poverty and deteriorating, overcrowded housing, often with several families occupying a single home, which may or may not have had indoor bathroom facilities.<sup>384</sup>

This pattern of White immigration reflected not only racial segregation, but multiple class distinctions that initially limited where various White immigrant groups

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<sup>380</sup> Zunz, 327.

<sup>381</sup> Zunz, 327.

<sup>382</sup> Zunz, 35. Zunz estimates that Blacks comprised a mere 2.4% of Detroit’s households, or approximately 58 households. Zunz, 35-36.

<sup>383</sup> Zunz, 353-54 Sugrue, *Origins*, 23. See also Baugh, 25.

<sup>384</sup> *The Detroit Historical Society Encyclopedia of Detroit*, “Black Bottom Neighborhood,” <https://detroithistorical.org/learn/encyclopedia-of-detroit/Black-bottom-neighborhood>. Accessed November 30, 2022.



settled and the employment opportunities available to them. Nevertheless, as the Black population in Detroit increased, racial differences became the primary force behind segregation.

Between 1910 and 1930, as Detroit's Black population swelled from 6,000 to 120,000, so did housing segregation,<sup>385</sup> resulting in the continued maintenance of cross-class Black neighborhoods rather than following the pattern of socioeconomic structuring found in European immigrant communities. White historian Olivier Zunz emphasized that Black migration from the South did not follow the same pattern as European immigration patterns. He wrote that Blacks "experienced a settlement process radically different from White ethnic groups... Compared with White ethnic groups, Blacks lived history in reverse: while foreign immigrants ultimately became assimilated into a unified structure ... based on rank and social status within it, Blacks were increasingly segregated from Whites based on race irrespective of social status."<sup>386</sup> Ethnic identity of neighborhoods had given way to strictly, and sometimes violently, enforced racial identities.<sup>387</sup>

#### Housing segregation in Detroit

Homeownership was considered an indicator of success, relative affluence, and evidence that they were now unequivocally American. Owning a house was not only a significant financial investment but was also an integral part of the identity of White

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<sup>385</sup> In 1947, the Michigan Supreme Court upheld a restrictive covenant and further upheld an order directing the homeowners to leave the property. *Sipes v McGhee*, 316 Mich 614 (Mich 1947). The US Supreme Court overturned this decision in *Shelley v Kraemer*, 334 US 1 (1948).

<sup>386</sup> Zunz, 6.

<sup>387</sup> Sugrue, *Origins*, 22.

industrial workers. For many, property and home were intrinsic to their understanding of a family as “they placed enormous value on the household as the repository of family values and the center of community life.”<sup>388</sup> As a result, a neatly kept home and a well-tended property were indicators of “hard work, savings, and prudent investment, the sign of upward mobility and middle-class status.”<sup>389</sup>

To achieve home ownership, many working-class Whites spent a significant portion of their savings on buying a home, making it their sole asset. Making monthly house payments could be challenging, straining family budgets. The employment uncertainties, such as loss of wages due to illness or injury, layoffs, and plant closings, meant that the possibility of foreclosure and eviction was very real to these homeowners.<sup>390</sup> Accordingly, anything viewed as a threat to the value of their primary asset, their middle-class status, or their identity was met with resistance. Rooted in racist stereotypes, Blacks were considered just such a threat. The City, influenced by these threats,<sup>391</sup> established policies that detrimentally affected Detroit's public housing for decades. The Detroit Housing Commission (DHC) established a repressive directive for racial segregation in all public housing projects. Utilizing the language of the National Associate of Real Estate Boards, city officials vowed that their projects would “not change the racial pattern of a neighborhood.” Similarly, the Detroit Realtors’

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<sup>388</sup> Sugrue, *Origins*, 213.

<sup>389</sup> Ibid. “Property, behavior, and attitudes seldom escaped the close scrutiny of neighbors.”

<sup>390</sup> Sugrue, *Origins*, 213.

<sup>391</sup> Sugrue

Association's Code of Ethics instructed its members not to sell to "members of any race or nationality ... whose presence will be detrimental to property values."<sup>392</sup>

Federal Housing Authority (FHA) policies further reinforced these stereotypes, essentially guaranteeing that Black residents would remain confined in decaying and unsafe housing, as it favored racially homogenous neighborhoods.<sup>393</sup> The FHA and bank mortgage lending policies steered "mortgages, loans, and insurance toward 'desirable' White neighborhoods and away from 'risky' mixed and Black neighborhoods"<sup>394</sup> as defined by the Homeowners' Loan Corporation (HOLC), also a federal agency. The HOLC's *Underwriters Manual* identified neighborhoods, block by block, that it deemed "safe" for mortgages.<sup>395</sup> Those neighborhoods outlined in red (redlining) were almost exclusively Black neighborhoods and were considered ineligible for public or private loans.<sup>396</sup> The FHA also recommended the inclusion of restrictive covenants in the deeds of the homes it insured.

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<sup>392</sup> Jay and Conklin, *People's History*, 84-85.

<sup>393</sup> Jay and Conklin, *People's History*, 119. The Manual referenced "inharmonious racial or nationality groups" and further indicated, "if a neighborhood is to retain stability, it is necessary that properties shall continue to be occupied by the same social and racial classes." Baugh, *The Detroit School Busing Case*, 31. In *The Color of Law*, Rothstein explains that "the FHA justified its racial policies – both its appraisal standards and its restrictive covenant recommendations – by claiming that a purchase by an African American in a White neighborhood, or the presence of African Americans in or near such a neighborhood, would cause the value of White-owned properties to decline. This, in turn, would increase the FHA's losses because White property owners would be more likely to default on their mortgages. In the three decades it administered this policy, the agency never provided or obtained evidence to support its claim that integration undermined property values." Ibid., 93 and accompanying n. 94.

<sup>394</sup> Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, 259.

<sup>395</sup> These ratings were used to prepare color-coded "Residential Security Maps." Baugh, 30.

<sup>396</sup> Jay and Conklin, *People's History*, 119, Rothstein, *Color of Law*, 74.

In one instance in 1941, the FHA initially denied an application for mortgage insurance when a builder wanted to construct an all-White housing project near a redlined Black neighborhood. To overcome the objections, the builder built a half-mile concrete wall, six feet high and a foot thick, to separate the two areas; the FHA then willingly provided loans and mortgage guarantees for houses in the all-White subdivision. That wall, known as the Birwood wall, remains standing today.

These policies, coupled with the possibility of financial loss, prompted refusals by White homeowners to sell to Blacks, using violence and intimidation. Homeowner associations (HOA) became a line of defense as White Christians fought to keep what was “theirs” safe. Between 1943 and 1965, Whites established at least 192 HOAs.<sup>397</sup> In “the era of open housing, responding to the threat of Black movement into their neighborhoods became the *raison d’être* of White community groups.”<sup>398</sup> The introductory narratives regarding the Sojourner Truth Housing Project and Easby Wilson involved members of HOAs, and are indicative of the terror inflicted upon Black families who moved or attempted to move into White neighborhoods. These HOAs “fiercely guarded the investments their members had made in their homes.”<sup>399</sup>

### Employment Segregation

In the decades spanning 1920-1975, the employment opportunities for Blacks, particularly Black women,<sup>400</sup> were minimal. Employment was often achieved through

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<sup>397</sup> Sugrue, *Origins*, 214.

<sup>398</sup> Sugrue *Origins*, 214.

<sup>399</sup> Sugrue, *Origins*, 211.

<sup>400</sup> Jay and Conklin, *People’s History*, 97. Although the number of Black women employed in the industrial workforce in the City increased substantially between 1941-1945, like their male counterparts they too were “relegated to the lowest-paying industrial jobs” and racist attacks. In addition, they were “routinely subject to ... sexual assaults.”

nepotism, word-of-mouth referral, or clergy recommendation at White churches. While some Blacks were hired due to referrals from their pastors, the paths of nepotism and word-of-mouth referrals were, with infrequent exceptions, not open to Black workers. Segregated lunchroom and bathroom facilities were the norm, and Black workers were “systematically excluded from the social life of factories, the bowling leagues, the baseball teams, the dances, the picnics.”<sup>401</sup> Some employers actively exacerbated racial divisions by segregating lunchrooms and bathrooms. Black women were subjected to even harsher conditions. They were also ostracized from social events, they worked “at separate benches, in separate rooms, or even in separate occupations”<sup>402</sup> and they were frequently subjected to sexual harassment, in addition to racial harassment and discrimination.

The vagaries of economic expansion, contraction, and the relocation of industrial and manufacturing facilities exacerbated the anxieties of White Christian homeowners regarding their financial stability. The outbreak of World War I created a need for labor to fill manufacturing and production job vacancies that resulted from military enlistment and restrictions on immigration.<sup>403</sup> With its sprawling industrial factories, Detroit was a primary locus of these job vacancies. Due to a post-war recession in 1919, many Blacks lost their positions. As a result, violent clashes sometimes erupted between Blacks and

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Ibid. Niebuhr also recognized that Black women in particular faced significant hardships finding employment. He wrote, “The handicaps which the Negro faces in securing employment are well known and as universal as his other disabilities. The Detroit committee finds *the situation in regard to employment of Negro women particularly bad*, “Race Prejudice in the North,” 583, italics added.

<sup>401</sup> Zunz, 321.

<sup>402</sup> Zunz, 322.

<sup>403</sup> Jay and Conklin, *People's History*, 84.

Whites over the availability of factory jobs. Employers often hired Blacks as strikebreakers, positions that Blacks were willing to accept for the income they provided and because most unions excluded Blacks from membership.<sup>404</sup>

With the advent of WWII, Detroit became known as the Arsenal of Democracy due to its manufacturing capabilities and its ability to convert to wartime production quickly. As with WWI, there was a significant need for labor to fill job vacancies. Once again, a considerable influx of Blacks from the South sought to fill these positions in the defense industry. After the war ended, many Black workers lost their positions as White veterans returned home to reclaim their jobs. In addition, manufacturing plant production declined with the concomitant effect of fewer positions needing to be filled. With Detroit suffering four major recessions between 1949 and 1960,<sup>405</sup> unemployment was always near ten percent.<sup>406</sup> Mechanization, plant relocations from Detroit to the suburbs, or other states,<sup>407</sup> and the loss of “140,000 manufacturing jobs between 1947 and 1963, most in unskilled or semiskilled positions that had provided an avenue of opportunity for Black workers,”<sup>408</sup> further reduced employment opportunities for Blacks.

It did not help that the unions in the manufacturing industries were hostile to Black members. Hate strikes by White employees were not uncommon. In one instance, “twenty-five thousand White workers at Packard walked off the job in protest of the

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<sup>404</sup> Zunz, 373-374.

<sup>405</sup> Sugrue, *Origins*, 126.

<sup>406</sup> Jay, Conklin, *People's History*, 102,

<sup>407</sup> “Between 1947 and 1958 the Big Three auto companies built *twenty-five* new factories in southeast Michigan – none of them in Detroit,” Jay and Conklin, *People's History*, 119, emphasis added.

<sup>408</sup> Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, 257.

promotion of three Black men.”<sup>409</sup> The United Autoworkers Union (UAW) marginalized Black workers, failing to protect their safety and jobs. As the percentage of Black workers increased in automobile manufacturing plants, their working conditions deteriorated.<sup>410</sup> The UAW’s treatment of Black workers was so horrendous that the acronym was recast as standing for “You Ain’t White.”<sup>411</sup> All of these factors harmed the economic standing of Black workers and continued to have an impact on their economic and social mobility.

Confined to the lowest-paying, menial, unskilled, and dangerous jobs,<sup>412</sup> most Blacks lacked the economic resources to move from the morbidly overcrowded Black Bottom and Paradise Valley neighborhoods. Homeownership was beyond the reach of most Blacks.<sup>413</sup> When they had the financial means to move out of predominantly poorer Black communities, they were met with White religious and political resistance and blatantly discriminatory governmental practices. During the 1960s, Black workers

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<sup>409</sup> Jay and Conklin, *People’s History*, 117.

<sup>410</sup> Jay and Conklin, *People’s History*, 162-163. The authors describe how work previously performed by two White workers was subsequently assigned to one Black worker.

<sup>411</sup> Jay and Conklin, *People’s History*, 162. In 1951, George Schermer, Director of the City of Detroit Mayor’s Interracial Committee, testified before the Michigan House of Representatives on a proposed fair employment bill. He informed the House that the Mayor’s Committee believed economic opportunity was a primary issue that must be addressed. He stated, “The facts of economic discriminations and restrictions are everywhere manifest.... It is readily apparent that Negroes are out of work in disproportion to the Negro population,” Ibid.

<sup>412</sup> The 1926 report of Mayor’s Inter-racial Committee (chaired by Reinhold Niebuhr) observed, “It appears that the Negro group as a whole is working on the more inferior jobs and, therefore, earning less proportionately as a group. In addition ... there is a marked difference in the real wages of the Negroes compared with the Whites,” Section III – Industry, 15.

<sup>413</sup> Zunz, 377, 393, 396. Floors in houses were often partitioned into many small, windowless rooms. Twenty-five percent of the homes had no indoor bathroom facilities, lacked heat, were dilapidated, and needed structural repairs. Ibid.

continued to be assigned positions in the foundries, the hottest, dirtiest, and most dangerous positions. Kept off assembly line positions, there was no easy path to advancement to better-paying supervisory positions that would have allowed upward mobility.<sup>414</sup> As with the multiple class distinctions discussed earlier, the racial animus toward Black women was not limited to race but also included class and gender in the employment setting.

### School segregation

In 1846 the legislature passed the Public Primary Schools Act, providing free public schools. That law, however, permitted local governmental bodies to segregate schools. Detroit chose to do so, leaving only private schools in churches for Black children.<sup>415</sup> Eventually, the Detroit School Board established seven public schools for White children that provided twelve years of schooling and only one citywide school for Black children that provided six years of schooling, leaving approximately forty percent of Black schoolchildren without access to public schools.<sup>416</sup> The State eventually outlawed segregated schools, but Detroit resisted integration until the Michigan Supreme Court ordered it to do so.<sup>417</sup> Despite progress toward integration as a result of this ruling,

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<sup>414</sup> Baugh, *The Detroit School Busing Case*, 40.

<sup>415</sup> Ibid. This imposed a significant financial burden on Black families. They had to pay taxes to support the public schools their children were not allowed to attend, and they had to fund the operation of private schools so their children would receive an education. Eventually, the State provided free public schools, but these schools were required to operate on a segregated basis. Ibid.

<sup>416</sup> Baugh, *The Detroit School Busing Case*, 57-58. A second public school for Black children was not established until 1860.

<sup>417</sup> Baugh, *The Detroit School Busing Case*, 58. In a lawsuit involving this statute, the Michigan Supreme Court held, "It cannot be seriously urged that ... the school board may make regulations which would exclude any resident of the district from any of its schools, because of race or color, or religious beliefs or personal peculiarities. It is too plain for argument that an equal right to all the schools, irrespective of such distinctions,



the Detroit public schools became resegregated as a result of immigration patterns, the housing segregation previously described, and deliberate policies designed to maximize segregation, such as redrawing attendance boundaries, location of new schools, selective busing, and transfer policies.<sup>418</sup>

### Racial violence

White resistance to housing, employment, and school desegregation also increased due to several violent racial clashes between Blacks and Whites. The Sojourner Truth riot described in the Introduction was a White Christian response to the construction of a Black housing project near an all-White neighborhood, fomented directly by clergy. The 1943 riot began on a hot summer June day when fights broke out between Blacks and Whites on Belle Isle, Detroit's largest park. "Over the next day, more than ten thousand Whites, [fueled in part by an unfounded rumor that a Black man had raped a White woman], descended on Hastings Street [in the Black Bottom neighborhood], many armed and ready to fend off the Black 'invasion.' White mobs stopped buses and trolleys on major thoroughfares, pulled off Black passengers, and beat them."<sup>419</sup> During the riot, thirty-four people were killed, twenty-five of whom were Black, most at the hands of the overwhelmingly White police force.<sup>420</sup> Indeed, "Officers ordered Black bystanders to 'run and not look back' and then shot several people in the back as they ran away."

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was meant to be established." *People ex rel. Workman v Board of Education of Detroit*, (1869).

<sup>418</sup> Farley Reynolds, Sheldon Danziger, and Harry J. Holzer, *Detroit Divided (Multi-City Study of Urban Inequality)*. (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 2002), 39.

<sup>419</sup> Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, 68; Sugrue, *Origins*, 29.

<sup>420</sup> Jay and Conklin, *People's History*, 117.

The 1967 uprising, ostensibly a response to a police raid on a blind pig in a Black neighborhood where people were celebrating the return of two soldiers from Vietnam, was entirely different. Such raids had occurred before and did not precipitate a violent reaction. But this time, a festering rage created by years of oppression and police violence directed against Blacks created an environment ripe for rebellion. During the five-day uprising,<sup>421</sup> National Guard tanks rumbled through the streets. Over 7,200 people were arrested; 43 people, 33 of whom were Black, were killed, mainly by the police, and property damage was in the millions.<sup>422</sup> These events created a profound and far-reaching chasm between Blacks and Whites.

This amalgamation of immigration patterns, housing segregation, employment discrimination, school segregation, and racial violence produced a petri dish brimming with social distress, resentment, racial animosity, fury, and bitterness. Recognizing that desegregation would change “their” neighborhoods, “their” jobs, and “their” schools, opposition by Whites to desegregation efforts was almost inevitable. Whites would have to cede power and control, never before shared with Blacks, over those things they held dear. This sense of loss experienced by Whites and the knowledge they would have to share what was previously theirs alone frightened them.

Moreover, Whites feared the possibility of having Black bodies in their midst. They feared that being near Black children would harm their children emotionally, and they feared for their children's physical safety based on racist stereotypes. Knowing that

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<sup>421</sup> I was ten years old at the time of the uprising. Although my family was on vacation in Saskatchewan I remember hearing about “the riots”. My parents called a neighbor to make sure the neighborhood was okay. My father’s two places of employment at the time were each located within four blocks of the main location of the uprising.

<sup>422</sup> Baugh, *The Detroit School Busing Case*, 41.

segregated schools for Black children were underfunded, understaffed, and under-supplied, they were frightened that their children would receive the inferior education previously limited to Black children.

White theologian James Perkinson posits that the “history of White fear – perhaps the deepest meaning of Whiteness itself – is clear: a male terror of male trauma, should a level playing field ever intrude between Black and White.”<sup>423</sup> This leads to an ongoing White fear that “at any moment the encounter could plunge through the veneer of polite exchange or not-so-polite avoidance into this other realm of the terrifying.”<sup>424</sup> Black author and journalist Roland S. Martin posits that White fear is “an unwillingness to share power and resources and allow for the redefinition of America’s morals, values, and principles.”<sup>425</sup> He asserts that it is driven by demographic shifts that signal that by 2043, Whites will comprise only forty-seven percent of the U.S. population.<sup>426</sup> Like Derrick Bell’s ICP, Martin argues, “Black success is always followed by White backlash,”<sup>427</sup> noting that it must be incredibly frightening to Whites when they are so used to being in control.

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<sup>423</sup> Perkinson, *White Theology*, 109.

<sup>424</sup> Perkinson, *White Theology*, 130.

<sup>425</sup> Roland S. Martin, *White Fear: How the Browning of America is Making White Folks Lose Their Minds*, (Dallas, TX: BenBella Books, Inc., 2022), 1. The US Census Bureau confirms this. The Bureau projects that by 2045, Whites will likely no longer comprise most of the United States’ population. Jonathan Vespa, Medina, Lauren, and Armstrong, David M., “Demographic Turning Points for the United States: Population Projections for 2020-2060,” *Current Population Reports, P25-1114*, US Census Bureau. <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2020/demo/p25-1114.pdf>. Accessed November 20, 2022.

<sup>426</sup> Martin, 2-3.

<sup>427</sup> Martin, 13.

Having explored how White Christians and their fears contributed to and reinforced across-the-board segregation patterns, the next section will consider how White spaces were created and how theological and ecclesial understandings of White spaces affected their creation.

### **The creation of White spaces**

#### The shift from ethnic Status to White racial status

An early model for understanding immigration to the U.S. posited that as each new immigrant group arrived, they would, over time, become assimilated into the dominant cultural system. To be considered White was to be thoroughly American. As a result, each new wave of “not quite White” immigrants sought to establish their Whiteness to move into mainstream America. Indeed, this model explains how ethnic European immigrants were accepted and integrated into the Detroit population relatively quickly, even though they initially may have been met with distrust and suspicion. Some “not quite White” immigrants who struggled to achieve Whiteness eventually were regarded as White, united against the arrival of Blacks in the city.

The immigration and migration patterns described in the preceding section established that the distinction between White and Black residents of Detroit became increasingly more significant than distinctions among immigrants from different geographical locations in Europe. Initially, spaces were “enforced” by ethnicity, e.g., Italian immigrants settled in Italian neighborhoods, Poles settled in Polish neighborhoods, and Catholics settled in Catholic areas. With the advent of Black migration from the south and increased competition for housing and employment, it became less important to

identify as Italian or Polish and more important to become White to oppose desegregation efforts.

Mutually reinforcing each other, race-based segregation imposed upon Blacks by Whites was used to justify perspectives that Blacks were inherently different and inferior. This led to White feelings of superiority<sup>428</sup> and a proprietary sense of ownership of spaces from which Blacks were excluded.<sup>429</sup> In turn, these perspectives legitimated the continued imposition of racial distinctions and ongoing housing, employment, and school segregation. This enforcement of boundaries kept Blacks in a marginalized status and out of “White” spaces.

### **Defending economic stability**

Between 1920 and 1975, White working-class men in Detroit watched their jobs disappear, and their income stagnate. The detailed examination earlier in this chapter of White working-class fear of financial instability resulted in a vigorous defense of their often precarious financial position. This occurred by keeping Blacks out of “their” neighborhoods to keep their home values high. Similarly, relegating Blacks to the most dangerous, dirty, and lowest-paying jobs while restricting their promotional opportunities ensured that working-class Whites would receive higher wages, thereby shoring up their financial stability. This also resulted in keeping Blacks from accumulating sufficient wealth for homeownership.

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<sup>428</sup> This feeling of white superiority, cloaked by the language of colorblindness, is nevertheless apparent in the work of Bonilla-Silva, specifically where he describes how whites continue to ascribe to Blacks cultural stereotypes to explain economic, social, and political differences. This ascription further supports the notion held by some whites that Blacks are intrinsically different from whites.

<sup>429</sup> Sáenz and Douglas, 172.

### Consolidation of political power

White fears generated by the interrelationship among housing segregation, employment discrimination, and the economic restructuring of Detroit created a White political space that consolidated White political power. The growth and exercise of this political power, evidenced through the election of blatantly racist White candidates and White elected officials who hurried to jump on the segregation bandwagon, further marginalized Blacks in Detroit, limiting their rights and opportunities.

Until relatively recently, when the city became a majority Black city, Blacks living in Detroit wielded very little political power, especially regarding issues of segregation. Before 1870, the Constitution of Michigan restricted voting to White male citizens. In 1850 the general populace rejected a proposal for Black suffrage by an overwhelming 71.3 percent of the vote. In 1855, 1857, 1859, and 1861 petitions for Black suffrage were all refused. It was not until 1870, after the passage of the Fifteenth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States, that the Michigan Constitution was amended to end the racial ban on voting.<sup>430</sup>

White law professor Edward J. Littlejohn identified a primary reason for repeatedly denying Blacks the right to vote. He wrote that it “was the fear that it would encourage Black migration to Michigan. Inextricably interrelated ... was the concern that resident Blacks would compete for jobs with Whites, primarily European immigrants.”<sup>431</sup>

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<sup>430</sup> Edward J. Littlejohn, “Black Before the Bar: A History of Slavery, Race, Race Laws, and Cases in Detroit and Michigan,” *The Journal of Law in Society* 18, no. 1(Spring, 2018): 1-84, 62.

<sup>431</sup> Littlejohn, “Black Before the Bar,” 60. Pamphlets provided to immigrants emphasized that Blacks could not vote “as an inducement for immigrants who did not want to live with Blacks.” Ibid. Littlejohn described these fears as “more inchoate or anticipatory than

Littlejohn further wrote that opposition to Black voting rights was rooted in openly caustic and racist sentiments, including fears of interracial sex. As a result, Blacks had no political power in Michigan vis-à-vis the right to vote until 1870.

Despite the 1870 constitutional amendment granting Blacks the right to vote, they still did not comprise a large enough percentage of the population to affect the outcome of elections. Detroit's White residents supported candidates who openly espoused racist beliefs. In 1924, a candidate for mayor who was also a member of the Ku Klux Klan won the popular vote, but he was disqualified on the technicality that his name was frequently misspelled as a write-in candidate.<sup>432</sup> In 1941, Congressman Rudolph Tenerowicz, in whose district the Sojourner Truth project was to be located, received a letter from a community association objecting to the project. Tenerowicz began a campaign with St. Louis of the King parish members to prevent project construction. After one particularly emotional meeting about the Sojourner Truth project, one Councilman who withdrew his support for the project announced that he "was a 'Catholic first, last, and always,'" <sup>433</sup>, suggesting that his Catholicism prevented his support for the project.

In 1945, incumbent Mayor Edward Jeffries successfully campaigned for re-election by claiming, among other things, that his opponent would encourage "racial invasions" whereas he was against a Negro flood. One of his campaign posters announced, "Mayor Jeffries is Against Mixed Housing."<sup>434</sup> In 1949, Albert Cobo waged a similarly successful mayoral campaign by promising "voters that he would stop the

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real" as the Black population in Michigan in the nineteenth century never exceeded one percent of the state's entire population.

<sup>432</sup> Jay, Conklin, *People's History*, 85.

<sup>433</sup> McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries*, 74.

<sup>434</sup> Sugrue, *Origins*, 80.

‘Negro invasion’ of White neighborhoods.<sup>435</sup> The campaign of Louis Miriani for mayor in 1951 “centered on his promise to wage a war on ‘Negro crime,’ won in a landslide election.”<sup>436</sup>

Constituent pressure over school desegregation efforts also created a significant political impact in the Detroit area. In Pontiac, a suburb of Detroit, the violent reaction to court-ordered busing between neighborhoods resulted in ten school buses being dynamited. White mothers chained themselves to the school bus yard gate. At the same time, other Whites screamed, “N----- go home” at Black children as they were escorted from buses into their new schools.<sup>437</sup> Their congressional representative James G. O’Hara, who repeatedly had opposed efforts to put anti-busing provisions in appropriations bills, swiftly changed his position after the federal district court judge ordered cross-district busing. O’Hara announced he would ‘do whatever is necessary by way of further legislation or a constitutional amendment of [desegregation orders] by cross-district busing.’<sup>438</sup> Similarly, Michigan Senator Robert Griffin reacted to Roth’s ruling of de jure segregation in the DPS by immediately introducing a proposed constitutional amendment to the U.S. Constitution prohibiting busing as a remedy for school desegregation.

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<sup>435</sup> Jay and Conklin, *People’s History*, 123. *Origins*, 83-85.

<sup>436</sup> Jay and Conklin, *People’s History*, 126-127.

<sup>437</sup> Peter Irons, *Jim Crow’s Children*, 225-226.

<sup>438</sup> Irons, *Jim Crow’s Children*, 227. Irons indicates that “the violence over school integration in Pontiac was the worst in any American city since screaming mobs filled the streets around Central High in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957.” *Ibid.*, 226. President Nixon responded not to the anti-busing extremists but to “the extreme social planners on the other side who insist on more busing, even at the cost of better education,” *Ibid.*, 229.



The exercise of White political power also operated to expand White space in Detroit physically. In the late 1940s and through the 1950s, the political focus used euphemisms to describe further the efforts to affect Blacks in Detroit. They started “urban renewal” projects that called for “slum clearance” and the elimination of “blighted areas.”<sup>439</sup> In Detroit, the “majority of all housing aid granted to the city by the Federal Housing Act of 1949 was directed toward slum clearance and subsidized high-end urban renewal projects, dislocating up to half of Detroit’s Black population.”<sup>440</sup>

The Federal-Aid Highway Act of 1956, which ultimately created a 41,000-mile network of interstate highways, was also used to develop additional White spaces in Detroit, adversely affecting the property values of Black residents whose homes were in the path of the proposed highways. Alfred Johnson, the executive director of the American Association of State Highway Officials, recalled, “some city officials expressed the view that the urban Interstates would give them a good opportunity to rid of the local “n----town.”<sup>441</sup>

In Detroit, Black Bottom and Paradise Valley, the two most densely populated Black neighborhoods, were obliterated by the construction of a highway in an urban renewal effort.<sup>442</sup> Concerned that one candidate would promote racial integration, White homeowners voted for Albert Cobo, a White candidate who owned a realty company that stood to profit from the Black Bottom project. After the election, 700 buildings were

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<sup>439</sup> Rothstein, *The Color of Law*, 127.

<sup>440</sup> Jay and Conklin, *People’s History*, 123.

<sup>441</sup> Rothstein, *The Color of Law*, 128.

<sup>442</sup> Steve Babson, Ron Alpern, Dave Elsil, and John Revitte, *Working Detroit: The Making of a Union Town*, (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1986), 157-158. The authors detail that the initial urban renewal plan for Black Bottom called for the city to buy and demolish the neighborhood, then sell it to private real estate developers.

destroyed, displacing 4000 people,<sup>443</sup> yet no provision was made to provide sufficient housing for the residents displaced by highway construction.<sup>444</sup> Over twenty thousand Black homes were destroyed for highway construction during Cobo's term in office.<sup>445</sup> The White fear exercised through White political power was also used to create White spaces in Detroit.

### Theological and ecclesiastical understandings of segregation as Christian virtuousness

As discussed in Chapter 2, Christians learn what is virtuous by observing and listening to authoritative pronouncements of the church, parents, respected friends, and teachers and imitating their actions or acting consistently with what they hear and see. With regard to segregation in Detroit, White Christian laity learned from ecclesial authorities who either refused to condemn or actively resisted desegregation that racist vitriol and violence were consistent with church doctrine. Their acts, then, must be moral, virtuous, and consistent with Christian theology.

Throughout this chapter, myriad examples of White Christian resistance to desegregation efforts have been described. At times ecclesial leadership either remained silent or, more troublesome, openly opposed desegregation efforts and encouraged the members of their congregations to do likewise. As outlined in the introduction to this chapter, the Detroit Archdiocese often refused to address clergy resistance to desegregation. Monsignor Ciarrocchi of the Church of Santa Maria opposed the sale of

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<sup>443</sup> Babson, *Working Detroit*, 158.

<sup>444</sup> Baugh, *The Detroit School Busing Case*, 31. The highway projects were announced years before construction began, rendering homes and stores unsaleable in the face of impending condemnation. Sugrue, *Origins*, 47.

<sup>445</sup> Jay and Conklin, *People's History*, 123. Cobo, elected in 1949, promised voters during his campaign that "he would stop the 'Negro invasion' of White neighborhoods." Ibid.

land across the street from the church, fearful that the “Negroes would get it.”

Archbishop<sup>446</sup> Edward Mooney, to whom Ciarrocchi directed his concerns about the land sale, questioned the efficacy of housing integration, stating, “‘ if the coming of the colored people caused others to move, the pastors would be left with a big problem on their hands.’”<sup>447</sup> A year after Ciarrocchi’s letter to Mooney, a Santa Maria jubilee album noted, “the many houses we own, are now occupied by our own people; and thus the approach to the Church and to Parish activities has remained unmolested.”<sup>448</sup>

As noted above, Father Dziuk at St. Louis the King Catholic Church encouraged White Christian resistance to housing desegregation, raising threats of potential violence and the specter that Black men would molest White girls in the parish if the housing project moved forward. Dziuk also actively sought to influence political and governmental decisions about housing developments. These actions by church leaders gave legitimacy to white opposition to desegregation.

White Christian laity also actively opposed desegregation efforts. White picketers against the Sojourner Truth project were celebrated, and their cause was seen as righteous.<sup>449</sup> Indeed, when reporters from the *Catholic Worker* visited St. Louis the King to interview church members about their opposition to the project, one White parishioner denied that “Christ died for both White and Negro.”<sup>450</sup> “Another ‘good Catholic’ accused

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<sup>446</sup> *People’s History*, 116

<sup>447</sup> McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries*, 73. Mooney eventually became more supportive of desegregation initiatives.

<sup>448</sup> McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries*, 37.

<sup>449</sup> “Many of the Roman Catholic pickets made it to midmorning Mass at St. Louis the King Parish in time to hear Father Dziuk’s [sic] homily on the righteousness of the cause.” Van Dusen, *Sojourner Truth Housing Riot*, 160.

<sup>450</sup> Van Dusen, *Sojourner Truth*, 124.

members of the Catholic Workers movement of not being ‘real’ Catholics, but communists and “n---- lovers.” Marie Conti, one of the reporters, later stated, “I have never seen hate personified as I did in the persons of those Catholics.” White picketers outside their church protested against desegregation, connecting racial integration and communism. Their signs opposed “race mixing in church,” asserted that “race mixing is communism in action,” and claimed that “mixing defies God’s plan of life.”<sup>451</sup>

While Protestant denominations generally do not have the same hierarchical structure<sup>452</sup> as the Catholic Church, resulting in reduced or absent congregational control, that does not mean that Protestant hierarchal ecclesial actions opposing desegregation did not occur. White historian Thomas Sugrue notes, for example, that many protestant churches quickly moved out of racially changing neighborhoods with denominational leadership approval.<sup>453</sup> Protestant churches also supported neighborhood association resistance efforts. When Protestant ecclesial leadership did urge support of desegregation efforts, the “loudest critics came from ... laity that believed their rights to racially discriminate as homeowners were called into question.”<sup>454</sup>

Jim Wallis, in his article, “By Accident of Birth,”<sup>455</sup> recounted how people at his church responded to his questions about Blacks. He was told they “were better off separated,” pointing to the Curse of Ham. He was also told, “Blacks were happy with the

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<sup>451</sup> Steve Babson, Alpern, Ron, Elsil, Dave, and Revitte, John, *Working Detroit: The Making of a Union Town*, (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1986), 137.

<sup>452</sup> Due to this, even when protestant ecclesial leaders advocated for racial integration, the laity rejected that position, Brown, 6.

<sup>453</sup> Sugrue, *Origins*, 192.

<sup>454</sup> R. Khari. Brown, “Denominational Difference in White Christian Housing-Related Racial Attitudes,” *Journal of Religion and Society* 10, (2008): 1-20, 15.

<sup>455</sup> Jim Wallis, “By Accident of Birth,” *Sojourners*, June-July 1983.

way things were. They had their ways and places to live, and we had ours. There should be no problems. And if they had problems, they probably deserved them; after all, they were lazy, had too many children, and were dangerous.”<sup>456</sup> When attempting to facilitate a conversation about racism, he found that most congregation members refused to consider the suffering of Blacks. Two elders questioned why Blacks did not pull themselves up by their bootstraps as the elders’ families had. A congregation member asked if Wallis would want his sister to marry a Black person.

On what theological bases did church leadership and laity rely to support their apparent beliefs that opposition to desegregation was reflective of Christian virtuousness? A key element appears to be a prohibition against miscegenation. Rather than the Curse of Ham justifying the enslavement of Blacks, it was reinterpreted to mean that “Mixing of the races would invite interracial sexual congress, which was a violation of God’s word.”<sup>457</sup> As discussed in chapter 2, ensuring the purity of White women and girls was a key reason for supporting segregation. As time passed, this theological construct was expanded to include the notion that just as Jewish people were God’s instrument “in the development of monotheistic religion, which in turn produced a Messiah, so the White man was God’s instrument in the development of modern civilization.”<sup>458</sup>

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<sup>456</sup> Wallis, “By Accident of Birth.”

<sup>457</sup> William N. Eskridge, Jr., “Noah’s Curse: How Religion Often Conflates Status, Belief, and Conduct to Resist Antidiscrimination Norms,” *Georgia Law Review* 45, no. 3 (Spring 2011): 657-720, 671. Segregationists also pointed to Genesis 28:1, “Then Isaac called Jacob and blessed him, and charged him, ‘You shall not marry one of the Canaanite women,’ reading ‘Canaanite women’ as women of African descent. Additional scriptural passages undergirding segregation include Ezra 9:11-15, Deuteronomy 7:3, Acts 17:26, 2 Corinthians 6:17-18, Luke 3:23-38 (the racially pure lineage of Christ)

<sup>458</sup> J. Russell Hawkins, *The Bible Told Them So: Southern Evangelicals Fought to Preserve White Supremacy*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 50. From a sermon by Reverend Montague Cook in 1963.

Presaging current conservative Christian challenges to legalizing LGBTQIA+ equality, segregationists also argued that it was a matter of religious liberty for Whites to remain separate from Blacks.<sup>459</sup> The story of the Tower of Babel was read as God separating “people and groups and plac[ing] them where he wanted. According to this narrative, Whites and Blacks are segregated races placed exactly where they are by God’s hand.”<sup>460</sup> Perhaps most disturbing was a claim that *Jesus was a segregationist!* Relying on Matthew 25:32, Marvin Brooks Norfleet, an attorney,<sup>461</sup> claimed, “Jesus was a segregationist as evidenced by the fact that upon his [Jesus’s] return all nations will be gathered before him, ‘and he shall separate them one from another.’”<sup>462</sup>

The importance of the alleged theological construction given to these scriptural passages is twofold. First is a belief that Whites are superior to Blacks, suggesting that it is morally imperative to maintain the supremacy of the White race. Second, it is also morally imperative to physically separate Blacks and Whites to avoid contamination of the superior White race. When applied to the actions of ecclesial leaders and the laity who opposed desegregation in Detroit, they believed their actions, rather than contravening Christianity, were moral and virtuous. Creating and maintaining White Christian spaces was a Christian act.

### **Desegregation of the Detroit Public Schools and White Christian fears for children.**

“Intellectually, I’m for equality in education, and busing. But not in the Detroit area. I’m interested in equality, but I do not want my child in the inner city and faced

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<sup>459</sup> Eskridge, 671.

<sup>460</sup> Hawkins, 49.

<sup>461</sup> It is unclear whether Norfleet had any theological education.

<sup>462</sup> Hawkins, 52.

with the problem of the ghetto;” “I clapped my hands and said something like goodie. My kids would have been bused in a bad neighborhood;” “My dad used to live in an integrated neighborhood, and he said he’d go to jail before he’d let them bus me;” “You’ve got your good colored, and your bad, just like White. But if you could live down there and see those animals coming and going,” “Stop kidding yourselves that Detroit school conditions are a result of segregation. They are bad and dangerous because there is no control put on the ‘rotten apples.’ Did the NAACP and Roth really think we would allow them to experiment with our children?” “To be forced to put my children on a bus and have them sent into an unknown or hostile area would have brought out the fight in me.”<sup>463</sup>

These utterances were the responses of White parents to the U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *Milliken v Bradley*, in which the court ruled that cross-district busing between Detroit and the surrounding suburbs to achieve integration was not permissible. These articulated fears, much like fears expressed by the White parents in opposition to the purported teaching of CRT, resulted in the continued maintenance of segregated education systems in Detroit. Today, the schools in the Detroit metropolitan area remain heavily segregated. The DPS currently has an eighty-two percent Black enrollment, while

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<sup>463</sup> Baugh, *The Detroit School*, 172, 174. The first quote is from a woman from Grosse Pointe, a very wealthy suburb immediately east of Detroit. The next two quotes are from residents from Warren, an inner-ring suburb that shares a border with a border with Detroit on the northeast side, approximately 3 miles from St. Louis the King Catholic Church and 5 miles from the Birwood wall. The next quote is from a woman in Roseville, a city northeast of Detroit, the fifth quote is from Southfield, a city directly north of Detroit, and the final quote is also from a Warren resident.

suburban school districts are sixty percent White.<sup>464</sup> Out of approximately 49,000 students in the DPS, only 1,200 are White.

### **History of segregation in the Detroit Public Schools**

In 1869, the Michigan Supreme Court ruled that it was impermissible for Detroit to operate segregated schools, “It cannot be seriously urged that . . . the school board may make regulations which would exclude any resident of the district from any of its schools, because of race.”<sup>465</sup> In response to this ruling, the DPS Board of Education, over time, chose to build neighborhood schools, which replicated the housing segregation of the neighborhoods. By the mid-1930s, “70 percent of the schools were virtually all-White or all-Black, with more than 90 percent of their students in the majority race.”<sup>466</sup> The DPS Board also adopted identifiably discriminatory actions, such as redrawing attendance zones and re-designating schools from intermediate to high schools, contributing to the resegregation of the schools.<sup>467</sup>

Efforts to desegregate the schools in the early 1960s continued to be opposed by White parents. They opposed busing across intra-district attendance boundaries, boycotted newly integrated neighborhood schools, and defeated millage proposals to support the schools.<sup>468</sup> The Citizens Advisory Committee on School Needs (CAC),

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<sup>464</sup> Wayne County, the county in which Detroit is located, has 137 school districts,

<sup>465</sup> Baugh, *The Detroit School Busing Case*, 58. When the board initiated its integration plan, it used resources to replace double desks with single desks to “allay the concerns of white parents and teachers who could not abide black and white children sharing the same desks,” *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>466</sup> Irons, 237. While the Black population and White population of Detroit was comparatively equal in 1970, the “vast majority of Detroit’s census tracts were more than 90 percent White or Black.” *Ibid.*, 236-237.

<sup>467</sup> Baugh, 60. See generally, Baugh at 60-63 for a detailed description of these actions and the substandard education afforded to Black students.

<sup>468</sup> Baugh, 65-66.



created in 1957, issued a report in 1961 finding that “school boundaries have been used to further racial and class segregation.” The CAC also found a “clear-cut pattern of racial discrimination in the assignment of teachers and principals to schools throughout the city.”<sup>469</sup>

In response, the DPS Board of Education hired Norman Drachler as Superintendent in 1966. Drachler demanded textbook publishers “improve their presentation of Blacks.” When that failed, the District published its own textbooks. Drachler also “implemented affirmative action in contracts with the school system, requiring contractors to demonstrate that they employed a reasonable number of Blacks”<sup>470</sup> and permitted transfers between schools only if they furthered the goal of integration. Despite Drachler’s positive steps toward the positive representation of Blacks and steps toward integration, however, by 1970, the DPS remained heavily segregated. Sixty-five percent of the students were Black, and the White students were concentrated in a few high schools on the city’s far east and far west sides.

The resegregation of the DPS eventually was challenged in a federal lawsuit, *Bradley, et al. v Milliken, et al.*, filed in 1970. The case claimed, among other things, that racially discriminatory practices by the school board, the city, and the state had resulted in racially segregated schools.<sup>471</sup> On September 21, 1971, the District Court ruled that “Residential segregation within the city and throughout the larger metropolitan area is substantial, pervasive and of long standing. Black citizens are located in separate and distinct areas within the city and are not generally to be found in the suburbs .... [and] is,

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<sup>469</sup> Baugh, 65.

<sup>470</sup> Baugh, 70.

<sup>471</sup> *Bradley, et al., v Milliken, et al.*, 338 F Supp 582 (ED Mich 1971)

in the main, the result of past and present practices and customs of racial discrimination, both public and private, which . . . do restrict the housing opportunities of black people.”<sup>472</sup> The court ruled that this housing segregation directly affected the racial composition of the DPS<sup>473</sup> and ordered cross-district busing as a remedy.

The lower court decision was overturned when the case eventually reached the United States Supreme Court. Justice Stewart, writing for the majority, opined, “The Constitution simply does not allow federal courts to attempt to change that situation unless and until it is shown that the State, or its political subdivisions, have contributed to cause the situation to exist. No record has been made in this case showing that the racial composition of the Detroit school population or that residential patterns within Detroit and in the surrounding areas were in any significant measure by governmental activity.”<sup>474</sup> Justice Marshall believed otherwise. In his dissenting opinion, Marshall wrote, “Today’s holding, I fear, is more a reflection of perceived public mood that we *have gone far enough* in enforcing the Constitution’s guarantee of equal justice.”<sup>475</sup>

As White economist Richard Rothstein pointed out in *The Color of Law*, however, “the civil rights plaintiffs did offer evidence to prove that residential patterns within Detroit and in the surrounding areas were in significant measure caused by governmental activity.... Justice Stewart and his colleagues chose to ignore, denying that such evidence even existed.”<sup>476</sup>

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<sup>472</sup> Ibid., 586-587.

<sup>473</sup> Ibid, 587.

<sup>474</sup> *Milliken*, 418 U.S. 814.

<sup>475</sup> *Milliken*, 418 U.S. 724.

<sup>476</sup> Rothstein, xiii. District Court judge Stephen J. Roth concluded, “The policies pursued by both government and private persons and agencies have a continuing and present effect upon the complexion of the community – as we know, the choice of a residence is

### **The fear of physical and emotional harm**

Any White Christian fears that their children might be physically or emotionally harmed if schools were desegregated were exacerbated by the influx of Blacks from the South during the First Great Migration between 1910-1940. Whites were alarmed at the sheer number of Blacks as they foresaw them taking over the city. Whites began circulating stories of Black crime that was allegedly accompanied by increased racial violence.<sup>477</sup> There was a similar uptick in White fear with the Second Great Migration of Blacks to Detroit. The rise of the Black Power movement in the 1960s and the Black Panthers, who openly carried weapons, terrified Whites.<sup>478</sup>

The 1967 rebellion further drove White fears. Rather than recognizing that the uprising was a reaction to a staggering unemployment rate, long-standing discrimination, segregation, and police violence, Whites perceived it as “mass lawlessness and criminal behavior”<sup>479</sup> that threatened their physical safety. A local newspaper, The Detroit Free Press, reported, “As the looting spread, so did the conviction that this riot had less to do with race than with color TV sets, less with Black Power than with something for nothing.” These factors resulted in some White parents explicitly voicing fears of safety about their children having to attend unsafe schools with Black schoolchildren.

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a relatively infrequent affair. For many years FHA and VA openly advocated the maintenance of ‘harmonious’ neighborhoods, i.e., racially and economically harmonious. The conditions created continue.”

<sup>477</sup> Baugh, *The Detroit School Busing Case*, 25.

<sup>478</sup> Perkinson, *White Theology*, 83.

<sup>479</sup> Baugh, *The Detroit School Busing Case*, 41, Sugrue, *Origins*, 261. Sugrue further asserts that “a growing number of young people turned to criminal activity” to survive.

While some parents explicitly voiced fears of safety over their children having to attend unsafe schools, others voiced fears about the effect of long bus rides on their children.<sup>480</sup>

### **The fear of weakened educational standards and compromised intellectual and economic opportunities**

Black historian Joyce Baugh's book, *The Detroit School Busing Case*, thoroughly documents the status of the DPS before the *Milliken* decisions. The schools were overcrowded and underfunded, plagued by resource and staffing shortages, and curricula offerings lagged behind those of suburban school districts. The schools themselves were dilapidated and decaying. In contrast, suburban school districts had a higher per-pupil spending ratio, newer textbooks, and numerous extracurricular activities.

White parents feared that if their children were bused to Detroit schools, they would no longer have access to the benefits they enjoyed by attending public school in the districts where they lived. And they feared that there would be a corresponding decrease in the quality of education they would receive in Detroit schools, not only for that period but that the inferior education would severely limit their intellectual development and future economic opportunities.

### **Response of White Christian Leadership and Laity to White Christian Fears About Segregation**

Despite the bleak picture painted by the historical evidence of segregation in Detroit, White church leadership endorsement of segregation, and White Christian laity efforts to enforce it, there was support for these racial justice initiatives as some White Christian leaders and laity worked to challenge segregation.

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<sup>480</sup> Baugh, 173.

In 1946, a citizens' group, The Greater Detroit Interracial and Intercultural Fellowship, comprised of religious leaders, was formed to address racial conflict in the city. Even though "by and large it ... achieved little" because it had "not been able to launch an effective program,"<sup>481</sup> it still represented an effort by White Christians to engage in racial justice efforts.

During the 1960s, several Protestant churches participated in the open housing movement in Detroit. In 1963, a few White and Black ministers joined with other open housing activists in a march on Dearborn, Michigan, a suburb west of Detroit, to challenge housing segregation. The mayor of Dearborn, Orville Hubbard, had vowed to prevent "Detroit's trash" from moving into the city,<sup>482</sup> which its residents considered a sundown town.<sup>483</sup> The ministers appealed to the hostile crowd of several thousand Whites to become an open housing city. The plea to do "this peacefully, as brothers in Christ," was met with boos and jeers that drowned out the offered prayers.<sup>484</sup>

Despite Cardinal Mooney's initial reluctance to challenge the actions of several priests, the Catholic church has actively sought to address racial injustice. In 1958 the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) recognized that Blacks were

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<sup>481</sup> Alfred McClung Lee and Norman Daymond Humphrey, "The Interracial Committee of the City of Detroit," *The Journal of Educational Sociology*, January 1946, Vol. 19, No. 5, Committees on Good Will (Jan. 1946), 278-88, 287.

<sup>482</sup> During a 1956 interview with an Alabama newspaper, Hubbard stated, "They can't get in here. Every time we hear of a Negro moving in ... we respond quicker than you do to a fire." In 1970, the three largest Detroit suburbs were Warren, Livonia, and Dearborn, with a combined population of 400,000. Only 186 were Black.

<sup>483</sup> Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, 228. A sundown town is an all-White community that excludes people of color by intimidation and violence. It was understood that people of color should not be caught in the town after sundown.

<sup>484</sup> Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, 229.

owed a “special obligation of justice,”<sup>485</sup> because of their history and treatment. It further confirmed that “discrimination based on the accidental fact of race and color, and as such injurious to human rights regardless of personal qualities or achievements, cannot be reconciled with the truth that God has created all men with equal rights and equal dignity.”<sup>486</sup> In January 1963, the Detroit Archdiocese church joined with the leadership of several Protestant denominations to sponsor the Metropolitan Conference on Open Occupancy to consider public policy strategies for housing integration initiatives.<sup>487</sup> The Archdiocese also created Project Commitment, designed to “create a core of Catholics” committed to improving race relations in each parish.<sup>488</sup>

While these efforts are laudable, given the continued actions of White Christians, in supporting segregation between 1920 and 1975, it does not appear that these efforts were sufficient to overcome the influence of parish priests or significantly influence the Catholic laity.

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<sup>485</sup> United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Racial Discrimination and Christian Conscience: A Statement Issued by the Catholic Bishops of the United States,” (November 14, 1958). The Catholic church has issued several other letters on racism. “On Racial Harmony,” (August 23, 1963), “Brothers and Sisters to Us,” (1979), “A Research Report Commemorating the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Brothers and Sisters to Us,” (October 2004), and “Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love,” (November 2018).

<sup>486</sup> United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Discrimination and Christian Conscience: A Statement Issued by the Catholic Bishops of the United States,” (November 14, 1958).

<sup>487</sup> R. Khari Brown, “Denominational Difference in White Christian Housing-Related Racial Attitudes,” *Journal of Religion and Society*, 10, (2008), 1-20, 6.

<sup>488</sup> McGreevy, *Parish Boundaries*, 209. According to McGreevy, Archbishop Dearden “explicitly connected the program to the Vatican Council. Ibid., 210.

## Conclusion

In the first three chapters, I have investigated and attempted to identify why White Christians have continued to resist efforts toward the remediation of racial injustices, despite their verbalized support for antiracist work. I have also discussed the weaknesses of traditional White Christian social ethics analyses and approaches that appear acceptable to progressive White Christians.

The case study in this chapter revealed a significant degree of White Christian resistance to desegregation efforts. The support of White Christian leadership and the use of violence by White Christians to prevent desegregation illustrate how theological concepts were employed to deny Blacks access to housing, employment, and education during much of the twentieth century. Despite these efforts, however, Sugrue described the pace of change in Detroit as “glacial.”<sup>489</sup>

The question of where we go from here will be considered in the next chapter. I will consider the implications for the field of Christian social ethics as I posit other analyses and praxes that more urgently and more adequately redress racial injustices.

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<sup>489</sup> Sugrue, *Origins*, 263.

## CHAPTER 4: AN ETHICS OF RUPTURE

### Introduction

With the twenty-first century almost one-quarter over, the U.S. remains firmly mired in a swamp of racism and White supremacy. Media reports describe instances in which efforts at racial change are met with choruses from White Christians that “Critical Race Theory is contrary to Catholic education on the dignity of all people;”<sup>490</sup> and “CRT has no place for the gospel.”<sup>491</sup> The Florida Department of Education banned an advanced placement course in African American studies because it “is inexplicably contrary to Florida law and significantly lacks educational value.”<sup>492</sup>

White Christians sue school districts over classroom discussions about the Black Lives Matter movement and systemic racism, claiming that the subject is anti-Christian and infringes on their religious liberty. During a sermon, a pastor cut up his Nike apparel when the company chose Colin Kaepernick for an advertisement campaign.<sup>493</sup> Supreme Court Justice Samuel Alito, who stresses the importance of his Catholic faith, joked about Black Santas and Black children in Ku Klux Klan outfits during oral arguments.<sup>494</sup>

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<sup>490</sup> Newman Society Staff, “10 Ways Catholic Education and Critical Race Theory are Incompatible,” *The Cardinal Newman Society*, July 15, 2021. [https://cardinalnewmansociety.org/10-ways-catholic-education-and-critical-race-theory-are-incompatible/?gclid=Cj0KCQiAiJSeBhCCARIsAHnAzT8e1iBnQ0olJ0uV5jFalH0y-f4oMUyg-Kxtm1pg9zqTksyDKgJFe38aAnozEALw\\_wcB](https://cardinalnewmansociety.org/10-ways-catholic-education-and-critical-race-theory-are-incompatible/?gclid=Cj0KCQiAiJSeBhCCARIsAHnAzT8e1iBnQ0olJ0uV5jFalH0y-f4oMUyg-Kxtm1pg9zqTksyDKgJFe38aAnozEALw_wcB). Accessed December 15, 2022.

<sup>491</sup> Remarks of Coach Dale Clayton, Vice-President of Coaches’ Ministries at Nations of Coaches at Louisiana College on September 22, 2021.

<sup>492</sup> January 12, 2023, letter from the Florida Department of Education to the College Board, which develops AP courses. Florida has also banned access to education about sexual and gender identity and banned math textbooks that allegedly taught CRT.

<sup>493</sup> Pastor Mack Morris of the Woodridge Baptist church in Mobile, AL, received a standing ovation from his congregation for his sermon.

<sup>494</sup> Justice Samuel Alito, comments during oral arguments in *303 Creative LLC v Elenis*, December 5, 2022.



Such behaviors and ideologies are not just individual acts; they also wield influence and dominate U.S. public culture and politics. The theologies they reflect and are rooted in must be firmly opposed. Efforts by White Christians to continue to control the narrative of race in the U.S. and to dictate the where, when, why, and how of racial justice initiatives must end. To the extent that the discipline of Christian social ethics emboldens such rhetoric, fails to challenge it, or continues to support White Christian control and dominance over people of color, it must be confronted emphatically and expeditiously. How to do that is the challenge taken up in this chapter.

My theological starting point is rooted in the claim that the soul of any antiracist Christian social ethic is both moral and faith-based, grounded on the two fundamental Christian norms of love and justice. Such an ethic seeks justice, it insists on recognizing the human dignity of all people; it believes that all people have value and worth; it requires treating all people with respect, and it expects everyone to receive the rights and privileges provided to others, irrespective of race or other differences. Such a theological construct incorporates several marks of the Kingdom as articulated by Gushee and Stassen that would all for the in-breaking reign of God. How might this theological starting point permit scriptural interpretations and understandings in such a way to support this theological claim?

Perhaps a starting point could be in Genesis. Genesis informs us that all people were created in God's image. A theological understanding of love and justice in the context of racial justice might be a basis to challenge the conflation of racial differences previously discussed. This opens the possibility of claiming that God celebrates the diversity of all people. In addition, such a theological construct provides the possibility

that both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament inform us that God loves each person and expects people to love one another. During Jesus' explanation of how nations and people would be judged, Jesus revealed that he expected everyone to be treated fairly and with human dignity, especially "the least of these."<sup>495</sup> Racism, by deeming some as inherently superior and others and inherently inferior because of race, necessarily violates these fundamental principles.<sup>496</sup>

To that point, in this chapter, I propose an ethic of rupture for consideration to ignite a conversation regarding the urgent need for Christian social ethics to abandon approaches for remediating racial injustice that, while helpful to some extent, have not gone far enough or fast enough to bring about individual and systemic change. This breaking apart, the insistence on immediacy, and the tone of impatience are not intended to be hyperbole. In the United States, virtually every mainline Protestant denomination and the Catholic Church claim racial justice is a foundational tenet of their faith. Yet White progressive Christian resistance to many racial justice initiatives continues. White Christian social ethicists have analyzed and hypothesized issues of race, but they "have not made the problem of racial oppression a central issue in their theological discourse."<sup>497</sup> Given the increasingly overt incidents of racist rhetoric, and racial violence, it is time for the current approaches to racism and White supremacy by some

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<sup>495</sup> Matthew 5:31-46.

<sup>496</sup> USCCB, "Brothers and Sisters to Us, U.S. Catholic Bishops Pastoral Letter on Racism," (1979) in *Catholic Social Thought, the Documentary Heritage*, 591-603, 592-593. ELCA, *A Social statement on: Freed in Christ: Race, Ethnicity, and Culture*, adopted by the third Churchwide Assembly on August 3, 1993, 1-8, 4.

<sup>497</sup> Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 184.

White Christian social ethicists to be laid to rest. The conversations about racism and White supremacy must move beyond that which the field has embraced thus far.

Before exploring the possibilities created by an ethics of rupture, consider briefly what has not been particularly effective in the past and why it has yet to achieve sustained momentum toward racial justice. Early Christian realist social ethical analyses of race by Reinhold Niebuhr acknowledged a race problem, identifying race bigotry as a form of original sin.<sup>498</sup> He further recognized the elusiveness of racial justice for Blacks,<sup>499</sup> confirming that White race prejudice<sup>500</sup> far outstripped that of Blacks.<sup>501</sup> Niebuhr repeatedly argued that the church and Christians needed to adopt a more realistic perspective on race prejudice to defeat it.<sup>502</sup>

Unfortunately, his realist analyses of the race problem failed to consider how the societal, economic, and political power of White Christians and the exercise of it far outweighed the corresponding power of Blacks. Moreover, in his analyses, Niebuhr seemed to assign weight to the factors he considered according to his scale of values rather than a weight that accurately reflected the severity of White Christian opposition to *Brown*. How else to explain the outcome of the realist analysis of the issue of school desegregation, in which the acknowledged moral legitimacy of desegregated schools for Black schoolchildren was nevertheless subordinated to the interests of White parents,

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<sup>498</sup> Niebuhr, "Christian Faith and The Race Problem," 21-24, 23.

<sup>499</sup> He wrote, "But will a disinherited group, such as the Negroes for instance, ever win full justice in society in this fashion? Will not even its most minimum demands seem exorbitant to the dominant Whites...." *Moral Man, Immoral Society*, xxxii.

<sup>500</sup> The terms race problem and race prejudice are the terms used by Niebuhr. "Race Prejudice in the North," *The Christian Century*, vol. 44, (May 12, 1927), 583-584.

<sup>501</sup> Niebuhr, *NDM I*, 225.

<sup>502</sup> Niebuhr, *Leaves From the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*, 100.

whom Niebuhr condemned for their resistance to school desegregation?<sup>503</sup> Despite these imbalances, Niebuhr privileged the beliefs, opinions, perspectives, and reactions of White parents and White schoolchildren in ways that ignored the detriment of Black parents and Black schoolchildren. He centered White ideas and views on race and racism over the opinions and viewpoints of Blacks. This application of Christian realism did not rectify racial injustice but perpetuated it. To the extent that current realist Christian social analyses of racism continue to misapply factors of self-interest and power or continue to reflect our scale of values rather than the actual effect they have on the course of events, Christian realism remains less than a satisfactory approach to racial injustice, and this iteration needs to be discarded.

Niebuhr also accepted and endorsed the gradualistic implementation of the *Brown* decisions. Despite the vituperative opposition<sup>504</sup> by White Christians, he stated, “The Negroes will have to exercise patience and be sustained by a robust faith that history will gradually fulfill the logic of justice.”<sup>505</sup> In his articles and editorials, Niebuhr endorsed gradualistic approaches to desegregation, giving a Christian moral and faith-based imprimatur of legitimacy to the efforts to halt or delay it. These slow-paced Christian realist and gradualistic remedies that remain favored by many White Christians

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<sup>503</sup> Niebuhr, “The Supreme Court on Segregation in the Schools,” *Christianity and Crisis*, vol. 14, no. 14 (June 14, 1954): 75-77, 75.

<sup>504</sup> This vehement opposition was not limited solely to the South. Once public schools in the North were also required to desegregate, White parental defiance was as fierce as the resistance in the South. Northern resistance was discussed in Chapter 3.

<sup>505</sup> Niebuhr, “Civil Rights and Democracy,” *Christianity and Crisis*, 17, no. 12 (July 8, 1957), 89. See also Niebuhr, “What Resources Can the Christian Church Offer to Meet the Crisis in Race Relations?” *The Messenger*, 21, (April 3, 1956), in which Niebuhr wrote that Blacks have “long smarted under the contempt of their fellow men,”<sup>505</sup> yet racial prejudice must “slowly erode,” “so as not to push the southern White people ‘off balance.’”

act as a placebo that allows well-meaning progressive White Christians to believe they are engaging in antiracist actions while simultaneously protecting the privileges of their Whiteness. As a result, White desires, preferences, and opinions on racism and efforts to eradicate racial injustice remain the definitional point for determining the breadth, depth, and duration of appropriate and necessary communal efforts to achieve racial justice. If Christian realism and gradualistic remedies, as envisioned by Niebuhr, are the only approaches to redress racial injustice, racial equity will never be achieved.<sup>506</sup>

The concept of racial colorblindness, adopted by many White Christians as the appropriate standard for addressing racial injustice, has been relatively ineffective as a remedy and reinforces racial stereotypes, racism, and White supremacy. It supports the notion that racism is no longer prevalent in the U.S. and that racism is limited to individual actions. It denies the existence of structural racism, and in the rare instance where it might exist, it is attributable to individuals. Racial colorblindness justifies the assumption that any racial inequities that exist are attributable to the failings of Blacks and creates a false equivalency that Blacks and Whites are on an equal footing. The belief that racism is no longer a significant problem in the U.S., or to the extent it exists, it is an individual issue, eliminates the need for any “balancing” of interests.

Racial colorblindness, as a variant of gradualism, claims that any remaining racism will dissipate over time due to personal interactions between people of different races. This reinforces the acceptance of minuscule and slow progress toward racial

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<sup>506</sup> The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., responded to the White clergymen who counseled for a gradual approach, explaining “Wait” has almost always meant “Never,”<sup>506</sup> and argued, “This is no time to engage in the luxury of cooling off or to take the tranquilizing drug of gradualism.”

equity, and progress becomes even smaller and slower. To a significant degree, it provides only an illusion of progress. While the claim is that everyone is treated the same, the racial status quo is actually preserved.

The historical case study detailed White Christian resistance to Detroit's housing, employment, and school desegregation during much of the twentieth century. Ecclesial leadership openly opposed desegregation efforts, and the laity followed suit, sometimes employing violence to achieve their goals. White political power was exercised to stymie desegregation efforts, and White Christians fled to the suburbs when desegregation became inevitable. These actions illustrate the problems with Christian realism, gradualism, and racial colorblindness as remedies for racism. Governmental authorities, church leadership, and even the laity recognized a need for housing for Blacks, but each of these entities opposed efforts to ameliorate the housing shortage through desegregation. If there was any balancing of the rights of Blacks for desegregated housing against White desires for segregated housing, it was skewed in favor of White interests.

Politicians supported segregation in their election campaigns and made policy decisions that adversely impacted Black-owned housing. Federal, state, and local government policies and business practices also elevated the rights of Whites over those of Blacks (e.g., FHA loans, redlining, hiring practices, school attendance boundaries, and new school construction). Racial stereotypes, fears for safety, concerns about the quality of education, and claims of cultural deficiencies were all used to justify segregation. Efforts to challenge White Christian resistance were met by violence (e.g., Sojourner Truth Housing Project, cross-district busing).

Similar to Bonilla-Silva's argument regarding the shift from openly racist expressions and practices, White Christians went from using explicit racial epithets to using coded language. White Christians began to invoke racial colorblindness, raising claims of reverse discrimination. Christian theology shifted from "God does not want the races to mix" to "God wants everyone treated exactly the same" to the extent that acknowledging racial differences were perceived to be divisive and racist. Yet by their actions, White Christians continued to accept race-based ideologies, albeit more covertly. Curtis suggests that this theological shift was motivated less by recognizing the evils of racial enmity and more by realizing that it was necessary to maintain or grow churches.<sup>507</sup>

To be sure, there were progressive clergy and laity who worked to disrupt resistance efforts. Inter-religious councils were created, the open housing movement began, and protests and marches were organized. Yet, at times ecclesial support for desegregation was couched in secular terms rather than on scriptural or theological bases, which might have prompted a change of heart for some White Christians. Also, those supportive of desegregation nevertheless suggested that Blacks should not push too hard, for too much, or too soon.

Christian realist balancing of rights, an emphasis on gradualism, and a penchant for racial colorblindness have yet to result in sustained progress toward racial equity. The passage of time has not resulted in significant change, and educational efforts have also

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<sup>507</sup> Curtis wrote, "White evangelicals experienced the civil rights movement as a test of the strengths of their institutions and the credibility of their movement.... As Jim Crow crumbled and racial norms rapidly shifted, White evangelicals sought a new way forward that would broaden the appeal of their evangelistic message and maintain the unity of their churches." *The Myth of Colorblind Christians*, 9.

been insufficient. Many Protestant denominations and the Catholic Church have not elevated racial justice sufficiently to the forefront of their focus on social justice matters. While Protestant denominations have issued social statements<sup>508</sup> and the USCCB has released several pastoral letters on racism,<sup>509</sup> many White Christians remain unaware of these statements or letters or perhaps choose not to act upon those statements and letters.<sup>510</sup>

Pastors in Protestant denominations that provide substantial autonomy to congregations are reluctant to focus consistently on racial justice issues due to their economic fears prompted by the not-always-subtle threats of reduced giving or revocation of calls.

Despite the many official ecclesial pronouncements condemning racism in biblical and theological terms, many White Christians resist concrete proposals for achieving racial equity. Well-meaning progressive White Christians continue to embrace Christian realism, gradualism, and racial colorblindness because they believe these practices represent progress. Yet most of the analyses, approaches, and praxes utilized by

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<sup>508</sup> See, e.g., ELCA, *Social Statement On Freed in Christ: Race, Ethnicity, and Culture*, (1993). The United Methodist Church, *The Book of Discipline of The United Methodist Church 2016*, ¶5, Presbyterian Church, USA, *Facing Racism: A Vision of the Intercultural Community Churchwide Antiracism Policy*.

<sup>509</sup> United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Discrimination and Christian Conscience,” (November 14, 1958), “On Racial Harmony,” (August 23, 1963), “Brothers and Sisters to Us,” (1979), “A Research Report Commemorating the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Brothers and Sisters to Us,” (October 2004), and “Open Wide Our Hearts: The Enduring Call to Love,” (November 2018).

<sup>510</sup> United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, “Sharing Catholic Social Teaching: Challenges and Directions,” (2011). “...it is clear that in some educational programs Catholic social teaching is not really shared or not sufficiently integral and explicit. As a result, far too many Catholics are not familiar with the basic content of Catholic social teaching. More fundamentally, many Catholics do not adequately understand the social teaching of the Church is an essential part of Catholic faith.”



some White Christian social ethicists and some White Christians have *not* resulted in substantial and sustained progress toward racial equity in the U.S. Legislation and judicial decisions have also been ineffective in the long term since the rights afforded by them have been restricted or eliminated by subsequent legislation and litigation.

Given the totality of these conventional yet mostly ineffective approaches, is there a way forward for Christian social ethicists to hypothesize new analytical methods to create widespread just racial relationships? Concurrently, are there possibilities for adapting previous praxes and positing new ones? The following section argues that these questions can be answered in the affirmative, providing direction on where we go from here.

### **Betraying White Christian Social Ethics**

A decision to not move beyond the antiracist approaches of well-meaning White Christians who continue to cling to colorblindness and other gradualist remedies calls to mind the hoary definition of insanity – doing the same thing repeatedly and expecting different results. That is why I call for a betrayal of White Christian social ethics. In much the same way White Christian social ethics has betrayed people of color by failing to address adequately racial injustice, we must betray the status quo by turning our back on current approaches and constructing something new.

Something more urgent, expansive, and consequential than current approaches is necessary. I argue for an ethics of rupture – a rebellious revision of White Christian social ethics analyses of racism and White supremacy and current White Christian antiracism praxes – that results in dismantling, reorienting, and restructuring current ways of knowing, being, and doing.

In contrast to one of the definitions of gradualism in Chapter 1, In the field of political science, it is the view “that the transformation of social and political life cannot be achieved by sudden revolution, but can be achieved by steady and systematic ‘permeation’ of existing political institutions.”<sup>511</sup> In considering the question of how to move forward, others have called for challenges to and the elimination of racism and White supremacy by:

1. Employing a “strategy of chaos;”<sup>512</sup>
2. “Overturning of relationships, the transformation of life, and then a reconstruction, resulting in a “radical break with the existing political and social structures and a redefinition of Black life along the lines of Black power and self-determination;”<sup>513</sup>
3. Radically reorienting one’s whole life and personality;<sup>514</sup>
4. Disrupting the silence and evasion attendant to the business-as-usual approach to antiracist Christian social ethics;<sup>515</sup>
5. Using “confrontational relational strateg[ies];”<sup>516</sup>
6. Dismantling the status quo;<sup>517</sup>

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<sup>511</sup> "Gradualism." In *Palgrave Macmillan Dictionary of Political Thought*, by Roger Scruton. 3rd ed. Macmillan Publishers Ltd, 2007.  
<http://ezproxy.drew.edu/login?url=https://search.credoreference.com/content/entry/macpt/gradualism/0?institutionId=1119>. Accessed 3/2/0/2020.

<sup>512</sup> Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, 213-214, describing the approach proposed by Rev. Albert Cleage, Jr., a Black activist in Detroit, in 1963. Cleage decried incremental change and assimilation into White culture.

<sup>513</sup> Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 179, quoting Vitaly Baroxoj, “Why the Gospels Are Revolutionary: The Foundation of a Theology in the Service of Social Revolutions,” *Where All Else Fails*, (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1970), 65.

<sup>514</sup> Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 221

<sup>515</sup> Traci C. West, *Disruptive Christian Ethics: When Racism and Women’s Lives Matter*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press 2006); “Racial Justice,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Reinhold Niebuhr*, eds. Robin Lovin and Joshua Mauldin, (London: Oxford University Press, 2021), 502-503.

<sup>516</sup> West, “Racial Justice,” 510.

<sup>517</sup> De La Torre, *Latina/o Social Ethics*, 2.

7. Resistance and rebuilding;<sup>518</sup>
8. Seeking a “revolutionary restructuring of how power is presently distributed and how knowledge is constructed;”<sup>519</sup>
9. A crucifixion of power and privilege;<sup>520</sup>
10. A “militant program of action;”<sup>521</sup>
11. Refusing to play by the rules;
12. Engaging in subversive praxes.

These articulations of approaches to a Christian social ethic that respond to racial injustices – mediated by a God who created differences among people, celebrates those differences, and demands justice, especially for the marginalized and oppressed – offer a way forward.

It seems necessary to acknowledge the claims of naiveté, utopianism, and futility that are likely to undergird objections to such an ethic. To some extent, perhaps it is utopian and naive. But it is the same charge that is often leveled at Christianity itself. “You believe in a God that is good, but who allows war, famine, and disease,” “You believe that someone rose from the dead,” If it is not utopian to believe in a God for whom all things are possible, then similarly it is not utopian or naïve to think that

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<sup>518</sup> Moe-Lobeda, *Resisting Structural Evil* 240. Moe-Lobeda defines resistance as “refusing to participate in some aspects of an economic system that is fast destroying earth’s atmosphere and countless livelihoods, communities, and lives.” Rebuilding “signifies supporting more socially just and ecologically healthier alternatives.” These two elements support the “in-breaking reign of God.”

<sup>519</sup> De La Torre, *Latina/o Social Ethics*, 75. De La Torre explains later that revolution is “not meant in a violent way but as faith in a God that so loves humanity that he gave us Jesus Christ, who calls his followers to love their neighbors, including their enemies,” 85.

<sup>520</sup> Miguel A. De La Torre, *Doing Christian Ethics From the Margins*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2007), 18.

<sup>521</sup> Bittle, “Racial Myths and Social Action,” 239.

antiracist Christian social ethics can radically be rewritten and renewed. Indeed there are several White Christian social ethicists engaged in this work.<sup>522</sup> Idealistic and naïve or not, something different is necessary.

Social ethicists' challenges and resistance to an ethic of rupture will likely parallel White Christian resistance to racial justice initiatives. Too much (the government cannot force things on people).<sup>523</sup> Too ambitious (you cannot go too fast people are not ready for this much change). Too disruptive (people like to be with people like them).<sup>524</sup> Equal opportunity already exists (it is discrimination against Whites). These objections and criticisms leave us in an eerily familiar place – we choose to do nothing or selectively pursue the possibilities that are least likely to disturb us (read Whites) physically, mentally, and/or emotionally. Capitulation to these criticisms results, at best, in continuing with piecemeal efforts at a glacier-like pace and, at worst, watching the repeated replication of Bell's ICP as people of color continue to navigate a one-step-forward, two-steps back approach to racial inequities. At the same time, Whites retain their power and privileges. Suppose Christian social ethics, as an academic endeavor and a call to a Christian way of life, is genuinely committed to achieving racial equity. In that case, it cannot afford to continue to utilize the same approaches. As a result, while some may consider ethics of rupture to be naïve and somewhat utopian, it is not futile.

The more confounding obstacle, however, is overcoming White Christian indifference to, pessimism about, or a sense of futility regarding Christian challenges to racial inequities. Since 1993, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA) has

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<sup>522</sup> See n. 12-14 and accompanying text.

<sup>523</sup> Bonilla-Silva, *RWR*, 61-63.

<sup>524</sup> Bonilla-Silva, *RWR*, 64-67.

engaged in repeated efforts to engage racial justice issues.<sup>525</sup> Similarly, through the USCCB, the Catholic Church has repeatedly addressed racial justice as a theological and moral imperative<sup>526</sup> and has openly lamented that Catholic social teaching “is not really shared or not sufficiently integral and explicit” as it ought to be.<sup>527</sup> Fostered by increasingly visible and vocal racial enmity, hostility, and violence, nurtured by a steady diet of misinformation and provocation, and reinforced by racist dog-whistle politics, finding a way to neutralize apathy, cynicism, and futility is essential.

### **Theory and an Ethics of Rupture**

To begin constructing an ethic of rupture that deliberately betrays the desire of White Christians to accept the premises of racial colorblindness and to support gradualistic remedies, this section will first turn to developing a theoretical framework for an ethics of rupture. This will include constructing a theological basis, scrutinizing Christian Realism and gradualism to ascertain if they retain any efficacy, and identifying essential elements of an ethics of rupture. I will then turn to a consideration of possible praxes of rupture.

#### **A theology of rupture**

The theology of rupture I propose contains several elements. It invokes the militancy of Jesus’ ministry; it is premised upon an understanding of radical grace; it is particularistic in nature rather than universal, it insists on a communitarian understanding of human existence and an option for the marginalized and oppressed, in contraindication

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<sup>525</sup> ELCA Social Statement on Race, Ethnicity, and Culture (1993),

<sup>526</sup> See n. 439

<sup>527</sup> See n. 440.

to individualism and meritocracy, and it incorporates the two fundamental Christian norms of love and justice.

### **Jesus as Political Revolutionary**

Many White Christians resist the notion of Jesus as political, much less as radical. Indeed, for some, the resistance comes from the image of Jesus they learned about in Sunday School. Jesus was kind, gentle, and loving, asking us to love our neighbors and enemies in return. For others, their understanding is limited by how they define politics—limited to government functions, relations between countries, or connection to a political party. And for others, the idea contravenes their belief that the church should be apolitical and not attempt to influence public policy decisions or government officials, engage society, or divisive social issues.

This understanding of Jesus is difficult to reconcile with the Jesus in scripture who instructed, I came “to bring good news to the poor... to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free;”<sup>528</sup> “Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace, but a sword;”<sup>529</sup> and “...sell what you own, and give the money to the poor...”<sup>530</sup>

An understanding of Jesus as non-political and non-radical is challenging to align with the many actions he took that contravened societal norms: he ate with tax collectors, he touched lepers, he advocated for the poor, the widow, the orphan, the sick, the stranger, and the imprisoned all of whom were marginalized societal outcasts. Jesus, a Jew, challenged Jewish religious teachings and authorities by performing work on the

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<sup>528</sup> Luke 4:18.

<sup>529</sup> Matthew 10:34.

<sup>530</sup> Mark 10:21.

Sabbath, overturning the moneychangers' tables in the temple, and telling the Pharisees they were full of greed and wickedness. Jesus challenged the Roman occupation's civil government by proclaiming the Kingdom of God, criticizing Roman leaders as tyrants,<sup>531</sup> and by telling Pilate that his “kingdom is not of this world.”<sup>532</sup> An insistence that Jesus was non-political and not radical contradicts Jesus’ words and actions.

What does it mean for ethics of rupture if Jesus was both political and radical? Those identifying as Christians must also challenge unjust religious and civil laws that marginalize and oppress people. In the context of racial justice, White Christians must work for racial equity, in which all of God’s people have access to all the goods, rights, and privileges available to them. It is not simply equal opportunities; it is equality of outcomes.

### Radical grace

Understanding grace as radical also provides support for ethics of rupture. For the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA),<sup>533</sup> to which I belong, justification by grace through faith – deliverance from sin, unmerited love, acceptance, and forgiveness by God, that we receive through no work of our own – is at the heart of its theology.<sup>534</sup> Unfortunately, many Christians, not just Lutherans, have come to understand grace as something that provides them with forgiveness but otherwise leaves their lives

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<sup>531</sup> Mark 10:42. This verse speaks of Gentiles, who at the time were Romans.

<sup>532</sup> John 18:36.

<sup>533</sup> I was baptized in the Lutheran Church of America, which later merged with other Lutheran denominations into the ELCA in 1988. I will not address the theology of other Lutheran denominations outside the ELCA.

<sup>534</sup> Martin Luther described theology as: sola fide, sola scriptura, and sola gratia. A complete discussion of the theological concept of grace is beyond the scope of this dissertation.

untouched,<sup>535</sup> to the detriment of understanding how God calls us to live our lives God's. It is viewed as a get-out-of-jail-free card that allows the recipient of grace to continue to engage in, among other things, ongoing acts of racism and concomitantly does not require any action to seek racial justice.

Luther recognized this possibility acknowledging that Christians “will take our ease and do no works and be content with faith.”<sup>536</sup> Luther understands grace as calling one to lifelong repentance that, in turn, changes how Christians live out their faith in the world, seeking the well-being of others. It is a shift from an inward to an outward focus, grounded in love, justice, and a whole way of living. In short, it is faith alive through love and love alive through faith. As White Lutheran ethicist Robert Benne states, grace “allows the love of God in Christ to permeate the soul and bend the will outward to the neighbor.... Our faith becomes active in love. This love expresses itself in deeds that follow spontaneously from faith and no longer from the compulsion of the law.”<sup>537</sup> Unmerited grace does not mean Christians can stand by and watch evil and injustice perpetrated against others.

German Lutheran theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer opened his book on discipleship with a ringing condemnation of silence and passivity in the face of evil, what he identified as “cheap grace.” He wrote, “It is grace without a price, without costs ...

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<sup>535</sup> This appears to be the outcome of Niebuhr's Christian realism applied to the desegregation of schools. White parents were recognized as perpetrators of racial injustice, yet Niebuhr seems satisfied with Whites eventually being forgiven without being called immediately to antiracist work.

<sup>536</sup> Martin Luther, “The Freedom of a Christian,” *Luther's Works*, vol. 31, ed. Harold J. Grimm (Philadelphia, PA: Muhlenberg, 1957), 358.

<sup>537</sup> Robert Benne, “Lutheran Ethics: Perennial Themes and Contemporary Challenges,” in *The Promise of Lutheran Ethics*, ed. Karen L. Bloomquist and John R. Stumme (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1998), 14.



because grace alone does everything, everything can stay in its old ways ... the Christian can be comforted and secure in possession of that grace which takes care of everything by itself.”<sup>538</sup> Bonhoeffer contrasted “cheap grace,” with what he called “costly grace,” that which calls us to follow Jesus; it is when grace becomes inseparable from discipleship.<sup>539</sup>

Rather than continuing to invoke a theology of grace that justifies the racial status quo and thwarts initiatives for racial justice, how might a theology of grace be radically re-envisioned and re-deployed to support an ethic of rupture that represents a frontal assault on the racial status quo?<sup>540</sup> How do we stretch our understanding of grace that expands our moral imagination to work more vigorously, expeditiously, and persuasively for racial justice?

Initially, this inquiry begins by exposing the connections between cheap grace and White privilege. Cheap grace reinforces the notion that one is already morally right with God. There is no need to examine personal behaviors, beliefs, systems, and structures for indications of racial injustice. It promises security and a sense of well-being and comfort to those upon whom grace has been bestowed. As a result, cheap grace buttresses White Christian resistance to efforts to attain racial justice rather than breaking it down.

In contrast, radical grace necessitates devotion to the Sermon on the Mount. It understands that justification by grace includes a focus on justice and gives us freedom

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<sup>538</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works*, vol. 4, trans. Martin Kuske and Ilse Tödt (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2001), 43-44.

<sup>539</sup> *Discipleship*, 46.

<sup>540</sup> Bonhoeffer described Luther’s decision to leave the monastery as “the sharpest attack that had been launched on the world since early Christianity” and described that attack as a “frontal assault;”<sup>540</sup> a rupture in the way of being Christian.

from those things which immobilize us to work on behalf of others. It ruptures the fear of change, ruptures a sense of futility, ruptures the slow, incremental pace of gradualistic remedies, and ruptures the falsehoods inherent in racial colorblindness. Radical grace frees people from the guilt, shame, and embarrassment precipitated by recognizing complicity in racist systems and structures. It liberates and frees White Christians from the sin of complacency. It heals brokenness and opens eyes to see the truth. It gives us the strength to confront and challenge. Finally, radical grace allows us to experience the “life-giving, life-saving, life-sustaining, and life-savoring power of a God whose love for this world cannot be thwarted by any force in heaven or on earth.”<sup>541</sup>

#### A fear of “Not Enough”

An underlying belief that appears to craft and shape approaches to racial injustice developed and utilized by well-meaning White progressive Christians is that resources (e.g., educational and occupational opportunities) are finite. Fear drives a belief that achieving racial equity<sup>542</sup> will result in Whites losing “their” allotment of these resources. The effect of the sluggish, meager progress from gradualistic remedies ensures that their resources are not wholly and suddenly taken from them. Reinhold Niebuhr repeatedly affirmed this principle when he discussed White resistance to desegregation.<sup>543</sup> Although

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<sup>541</sup> Cynthia Moe-Lobeda, “Being Church As, In, and Against White Privilege,” in *Transformative Lutheran Theologies: Feminist, Womanist, and Mujerista Perspectives*, ed. Mary J. Streufert, (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010), 197-210, 207.

<sup>542</sup> Equality of outcomes, not simply equal opportunities.

<sup>543</sup> Niebuhr, *Leaves from the Notebook of a Tamed Cynic*, 1928, 190-192. Niebuhr wrote, “the [race] problem, as every moral problem ... [is] conditioned ... by mathematics. Contact between races when the race is almost as numerous as the other is quite a different story from a relationship in which the subject race is numerically very much weaker than the dominant group.” Niebuhr further reaffirmed this point in an editorial, “Morals and Percentages,” written for *Christianity and Society* in 1955, regarding the efforts to desegregate schools in the aftermath of *Brown*. In that editorial, he wrote, “The

couched in slightly different terms, Niebuhr acknowledged that Whites were more accepting of desegregation when the population of Blacks was small since “It is easier for a majority to be tolerant of a small than a large majority.”<sup>544</sup> This same principle seems to apply to current remedies. If the percentage of people of color who will benefit from an antiracist policy is small, Whites are more accepting. But, when people of color receive too many benefits too fast, White resistance grows.

More recently, Derrick Bell explored the phenomenon of “interest convergence” in the formulation of his ICP, discussed in Chapter 2. This fear of not enough is replicated in his ICP. Once Whites perceive that “their” share of college admissions decreases, “their” job opportunities dwindle, or the quality of education provided to their children might decrease, Whites resist racial justice initiatives. This fear of “not enough” is fueled by the individualism that is so highly prized in the U.S. The focus is on me and mine. A belief in the existence of a meritocracy further drives it. Those with wealth credit it solely to their hard work and are loathe to offer opportunities to those they consider undeserving or those they perceive do not work hard enough.

How would radical grace respond to this notion of “not enough?” Both the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament provide a starting point. The hoarding of resources is condemned<sup>545</sup> while generosity is affirmed and praised. In the parable of the widow’s

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progress of desegregation is uneven of course... When analyzing this record, it becomes significant that counties which comply are usually those which have a minority of 25 percent or less of Negroes. On the other hand, counties which approach the 50 percent ratio almost invariably seek some form of evasion....” “Morals and Percentages,” *Christianity and Society*, vol. 20, no. 4 (Autumn, 1955), 3-4, 3.

<sup>544</sup> Niebuhr, “Morals and Percentages,” 3-4

<sup>545</sup> See, e.g., Ecclesiastes 5:13, “There is a grievous ill that I have seen under the sun: riches were kept by their owners to their hurt ...;” James 5:3 addresses oppressors who have hoarded their wealth, informing them that their “riches have rotted, and your clothes

offering, Jesus commended the widow's contribution even though it was meager compared to the contributions of the rich. Jesus said, "This poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance...."<sup>546</sup>

In Matthew 25:31-46, Jesus clearly announces what is expected of us: to feed the hungry, provide drink to the poor, clothe the naked, or visit the sick and the poor. The parable of the friend at midnight,<sup>547</sup> reveals what White New Testament scholar William R. Herzog, II, describes as "shameless hospitality."<sup>548</sup> The friend roused from sleep to provide his friend what he needs reflects, according to Herzog, participation "in a 'shameless' social order where their continual but small redistributions of wealth and food foreshadowed a different order of human relations, one molded by justice and mutual reciprocity."<sup>549</sup>

This parable reflects essential aspects of an ethics of rupture: it is communal in nature, and it reflects a rejection of the liberal tenets of individualism and meritocracy. The validity of the request for three loaves of bread is not evaluated by what each person has acquired through hard work, and it is not a question of whether one person is more deserving than another. Instead, it is an issue of justice and mutual care of and for

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are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you, and it will eat your flesh like fire;" and Luke 12:15, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions."

<sup>546</sup> Mark 12:41-44; Luke 21:1-4.

<sup>547</sup> Luke 11:5-8.

<sup>548</sup> William R. Herzog, II, "The Moral Economy of the Peasant," *Parables of Subversive Speech: Jesus as Pedagogue of the Oppressed*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1994), 194-214, 212-214.

<sup>549</sup> Herzog, *Parables of Subversive Speech*, 214.

neighbors; it reflects the importance of the common good, not what is suitable only for the individual good.

White Christian resistance to racial justice initiatives resulting from a fear that there is “not enough” in the way of opportunities to be allotted fairly results in the drip, drip, drip of gradualism, which ever so slowly moves toward some semblance of racial justice. Similarly, White Christian affinity for racial colorblindness, which insists that equal opportunity exists and is provided to everyone, reflects a “grace without a price, one without costs to Whites.” It is a “cheap” grace and reinforces the status quo.

In contrast, costly or radical grace, which calls us to care for our neighbor and avoid amassing power and opportunities at the expense of others, assuages fears of scarcity, assuring us that there is “enough” for all. Radical grace provides an avenue for considering and implementing an ethic of rupture. The following section will explore the ongoing viability of Christian realism as a theoretical basis for surmounting racial injustice.

### **Just Racial Relationships**

Radical grace empowers just racial relationships by reminding Christians that faith comes to life through love of neighbor, expressed through deeds that oppose racial injustice. Reformation theologian, Martin Luther, writing on the Fifth Commandment, “Thou shalt not kill,” pointed out that “it is God’s real intention that we should allow no man to suffer harm, but show to everyone all kindness and love,” demonstrating gentleness, and patience, especially toward our enemies.<sup>550</sup> *Luther’s Small Catechism*

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<sup>550</sup> Theodore Gerhardt Tappert, ed., *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, (Philadelphia, PA: 1959), 391. Luther’s own adherence to this understanding of the Fifth Commandment could be called into question given his

*With African Descent Reflections*, reflects on the Fifth Commandment, “We should be so respectful and in awe of God that we protect the integrity of each person’s life as of special concern to God.”<sup>551</sup>

To help create just racial relationships, love<sup>552</sup> requires a series of sustained actions. Love encompasses honest, transparent, and authentic relationships with self and others. Love is mindful of differences among people and tends to those differences. It requires seeing full humanity in everyone, deserving of respect, dignity, and understanding. Love demands that we care for, comfort, and nourish each other, balancing the needs of others with our own.<sup>553</sup> It communicates openly and honestly and accepts the truth of others even when it causes us to feel guilt, embarrassment, grief, anger, or is challenging to hear. It requires sitting with those emotions without rushing to do something, anything, to alleviate them.

Just racial relationships require intentionality. Christian love calls us into community<sup>554</sup> and challenges those who oppress others. It centers the marginalized and the oppressed. Love enters the context of the oppressed and challenges those who

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comments in “Against the Murderous, Thieving Hordes of Peasants,” in which he wrote, “whosoever can, should smite, strangle, and stab” the peasants.

<sup>551</sup> *Luther’s Small Catechism With African Descent Reflections*, ed. Joseph Bocko, (Minneapolis, MN: 2019), 21. Similarly, *Luther’s Small Catechism: An Exposition of the Christian Faith in Asian Contexts and Cultures*, ed. J. Paul Rajashekar, (Delhi, India: Christian World Imprints, 2019), proclaims that “God not only calls us not to hurt people, but because of the fear and love of God, we are to help people, such that we are ‘killing’ people if we can help them but don’t,” 25.

<sup>552</sup> Distinguish from Niebuhr’s understanding.

<sup>553</sup> I am not suggesting a self-sacrificial love.

<sup>554</sup> Community is not meant to reflect an “‘assimilation’” approach to culture,” where the assimilated adopt the values and behaviors of the dominant culture. This keeps us from appreciating the plurality of cultures in society.” Evangelical Lutheran Church Social Statement, “Freed in Christ: Race, Ethnicity, and Culture,” (1993).

persecute or marginalize people. Paraphrasing James Cone, love requires more than “the eyes to see” Black suffering; it also involves action to alleviate it.<sup>555</sup>

The Catholic Social Teaching document, *Justitia in Mundo*, of the 1971 Synod of Bishops, points out, “Christian love of neighbor and justice cannot be separated. For love implies an absolute demand for justice, namely a recognition of the dignity and rights of one’s neighbor. Justice attains its inner fullness only in love. Because every man is truly a visible image of the invisible God and a brother of Christ, the Christian finds in every man God himself and God’s absolute demand for justice and love.”<sup>556</sup>

God’s demand for justice is contained in Micah, which informs us that God *requires* us to do justice.<sup>557</sup> Jesus repeatedly teaches us to seek justice for those on the margins.<sup>558</sup> Luther, further discussing the Fifth Commandment, wrote, “God wishes to remove the root and source of this bitterness toward our neighbor,” therefore “we should not use our tongue to advocate or advise harming anyone; again we should neither use nor sanction any means or methods whereby anyone may be harmed; finally, our heart should harbor no hostility or malice toward anyone in a spirit of anger and hatred.”<sup>559</sup>

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<sup>555</sup> Niebuhr appeared to recognize this when he wrote “Try as we will, we cannot feel the pain of others as vividly as they do.” Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Mounting Racial Crisis,” *Christianity and Crisis*, vol. 23, no. 12 (July 8, 1963), 121.

<sup>556</sup> *Justice in the World*, in *Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage*, Expanded Edition, eds., David J. O’Brien and Thomas A. Shannon, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, fourth printing 2014, originally 1992), 311.

<sup>557</sup> Micah 6:8. Italics added.

<sup>558</sup> Matthew, 25: 31-46. This scripture passage was identified by Marvin Brooks Norfleet, an attorney, as the basis for his claim that “Jesus was a segregationist as evidenced by the fact that upon his return all nations will be gathered before him, ‘and he shall separate them one from another.’” Hawkins, *The Bible Told Them So*, 52.

<sup>559</sup> *The Book of Concord*, 390.

Justice, like love, requires intentionality. It calls for confronting racism and understanding how social, economic, and political institutions and structures work against people of color. It involves conversation, it requires an honest engagement of issues of race, it demonstrates support for change, and it offers healing to those who have been harmed. The social statement of the ELCA on race, ethnicity, and culture acknowledged an obligation to work for justice for our neighbors, providing that the “Church must cry out for justice ... must insist on justice” because “the God who justifies expects all people to do justice.”<sup>560</sup> In this regard, however, justice is not impartial. It requires Christians to identify with those who are oppressed, marginalized, or dehumanized. In other words, justice has different requirements for those who lack social, political, and economic power. In short, just racial relationships allow “the needs of all to be met in a way in which relationships can flourish and community can be [recovered and] preserved.”<sup>561</sup>

### **Antiracist Christian realism**

Given the prior discussion and critiques of Christian Realism, does it retain any viability as a school of thought for addressing racial injustice? Can a realist approach to Christian social ethics provide immediate and sustained attainment of racial equity? If these questions are answered affirmatively, how must Christian realism be dismantled and reconstructed?

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<sup>560</sup> *Race, Ethnicity, and Culture*, 4. The Church named both individual racism (personal attitudes) and social racism as sin.  
[https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/race\\_ethnicity\\_culture\\_statement.pdf?\\_ga=2.56616491.1602984675.1672598381-1116240835.1672598381](https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/race_ethnicity_culture_statement.pdf?_ga=2.56616491.1602984675.1672598381-1116240835.1672598381).  
 Accessed April 19, 2021.

<sup>561</sup> Moe-Lobeda, *Resisting Structural Evil*, 179.



Over the last several years, there has been a substantial increase in the expression of racial hatred and support for White supremacist views.<sup>562</sup> As seen in Chapter 2, White parents oppose the teaching of slavery, its ongoing effects, and the existence of systemic racism. An advanced placement course in African American studies has been banned in Florida because it significantly lacks educational value. White support for Black Lives Matter declined considerably in the three months after George Floyd's murder. Since Elon Musk purchased Twitter, the number of racist tweets has tripled. These statistics reflect a growing schism among people in the U.S. on issues of racism and White supremacy.

Several years ago, I may have argued that a Christian realist approach was outdated, insufficient, and too accommodating of White fears. Today, however, with this deluge of racial hatred, the increasingly explicit and undisguised racist behavior, and the increasing polarization on racial issues, a realist approach is virtually demanded. To propose otherwise would seem to doom this endeavor to irrelevance.

I am not suggesting, however, a return to Christian Realism as it previously has been employed to propose resolutions for racial injustice since that formulation suffered from several significant deficiencies, as was discussed earlier. Christian Realism still has the potential to be a robust implement in developing revised Christian social ethical

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<sup>562</sup> The thirty-fifth president of the United States repeatedly encouraged racial animus (e.g., characterizing a neo-Nazi rally as including “very fine people on both sides,” tweeting false statistics that claimed to show that Blacks are responsible for most murders of Whites in the U.S.). His Department of Justice sought to eliminate disparate impact discrimination claims, and he suspended all diversity, equity, and inclusion training for federal employees. National hate crime data for 2021 from the Federal Bureau of Investigation indicates that there were almost 4,500 hate crimes based on race, ethnicity, or ancestry, roughly half of which were directed against Blacks. In 2021, approximately one-third of historically Black colleges and universities were targeted with bomb threats.

approaches to racial justice. Niebuhr's Christian realism can be expanded to incorporate the possibility of radical grace. In this way, a reorientation of Christian realism requires White Christian social ethicists to engage in sustained efforts to recognize and accept what people of color already know – that the weighty social, political, and economic factors of their contexts always have and will continue to result in racial injustice. Moreover, Niebuhr's assertion that realism must “take all factors in a social and political situation ... into account, particularly the factors of self-interest and power” remains foundational as it recognizes that context – historical, political, social, and economic – is essential for discerning the “reality” of a situation.<sup>563</sup> It is how these factors are considered though, that is crucial.

### Reality

The initial starting point for analyzing the efficacy of Christian realism is a commitment to seeing, hearing, and talking about the realities of racial injustice. White Christians must embrace a hermeneutic of suspicion that allows them to recognize half-truths or outright falsehoods about matters of race designed to sow confusion and doubt. White Christians must further reject the polemical speech and toxic behaviors accompanying these fabrications and commit to telling the truth about race, racism, and White supremacy. They must denounce this speech and these behaviors as contrary to the fundamental Christian norms of love and justice and as inconsistent with the teachings of

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<sup>563</sup> See, e.g., De La Torre, *Latina/o Social Ethics*, 14.

Christ. White Christians must acknowledge and make visible that which seems invisible – the structures and systems that oppress and marginalize persons of color.

### Context

Determining the context in which White Christian social ethicists employ a Christian realist analysis is to work toward becoming aware of our contexts and how Whiteness permeates every aspect of our beings and work, i.e., what are all the factors of our self-interest and our power that need to be considered? For example, why is it in the academy that we identify, among others, Black Theology, Asian Theology, Latinx Theology, Mujerista Theology, Black Feminist Theology, Womanist Theology, and Native American Theology?<sup>564</sup> What do we mean when we refer to Theology; is it the theology almost exclusively rooted in European American thought and, therefore, White theology? Who is making the distinctions and why? And finally, what import does this distinction-making have on our work as Christian social ethicists? Ignoring these questions is a choice to continue not to know what we know.

Second, rather than considering how White Christian social ethicists can *begin* to talk about race, it would be helpful to assess, understand and internalize that we have always spoken about race, even if we do not always recognize it. Returning briefly to a thought in the prior paragraph, each time we speak of theology or ethics, we also talk about race. Whenever we attach a racial descriptor to a school of thought, we speak of race and re-inscribe Whiteness. Finally, we ought never to assume, as I overheard in a session of the Reinhold Niebuhr Society at the 2022 American Academy of Religion

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<sup>564</sup> I do not intend this as a comprehensive list.

Annual Meeting, that we have “done” race.<sup>565</sup> Moreover, considering the upsurge in White supremacist groups, racial violence, and other overtly racist acts, to suggest that race has been “done” indicates that White Christian ethicists do not perceive any urgency to address racial strife.<sup>566</sup> Accordingly, White Christian social ethicists should begin with efforts to understand how Whiteness thoroughly and completely permeates our contexts, shaping our perspectives and approaches to theorizing racial justice.

Third, alongside this continual examination of White self-interest and power, White social Christian ethicists must also examine the contexts of those who have been and remain disadvantaged and marginalized due to their race. This examination ought not to be abridged. The breadth of it encompasses a period that is congruent with the history of what has become the United States, reaching back to at least 1619. From that point forward, social, political, and economic factors limited, disadvantaged, and marginalized those not of European descent. The events of Chapter 3, regarding housing, employment, and school segregation in Detroit, reflect a small microcosm of how Whites, including White Christians, have intentionally and adversely controlled these factors for people, sharply defining and shaping their context.

### Balancing

After considering the reality and context, the next level of analysis for a restructured Christian realism to address racial injustice is how to “balance” the social,

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<sup>565</sup> This comment was made during the business meeting portion of the session. It came in response to a suggestion that the Niebuhr Society explore a joint session with the Black Theology Unit at the 2023 Annual Meeting. The answer was, “We’ve done race before. In fact, James Cone spoke at that meeting.” That meeting took place in 2015.

<sup>566</sup> See, Traci West, “Racial Justice,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Reinhold Niebuhr*, eds. Robin Lovin and Joshua Mauldin, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2021), 501-521, 503.

economic, and political factors that affect contexts of people of color and Whites so that the harm can be acknowledged and rectified. Any “balancing” required by Christian realism must begin from the margins. If the Christian norms of love and justice are accepted as foundational, then ethical inquiries should examine who has not been loved as a neighbor and those who have been denied justice. The breach, or gap, between justice as a Christian moral norm and how justice is reflected in behaviors, policies, and practices must be repaired.

But that is not all. More is needed to acknowledge the gap between context and justice. Antiracist Christian realism must strike a “balance” among competing contexts and factors to arrive at possibilities for achieving justice to repair or eliminate that gap and determine a way forward. In doing so, what caused the injustice and who is harmed by it must be given primacy in any required balancing. In the context of racial injustice, applying a modified Christian realism results in a balancing that brings those harmed by injustice to the foreground; it is a preference for the marginalized.<sup>567</sup> Doing so is biblically supported.

Jesus was neither silent about injustice against the marginalized nor inactive. He acted decisively for justice rather than moving slowly so religious and civil authorities would not be thrown off-balance. Efforts to redress racial injustices will be sufficient with a reconfigured understanding of Christian realism.

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<sup>567</sup> In *Resisting Structural Evil*, Moe-Lobeda points out that the “Latin American Conferences of Bishops taught ... that God’s justice is not impartial. It leans toward the needs and plight of the poor, and calls people of relative privilege to identify with those who are marginalized, dehumanized, or otherwise oppressed. This assertion termed ‘preferential option for the poor,’ is grounded in Jesus’ identification with marginalized people,” 178.

## **Practices of Rupture**

The dismantling, reorienting, and reconstruction of Christian realist theoretical approaches are vital in considering an ethic of rupture. Theory risks irrelevancy unless these analyses are translated into or accompanied by tangible practices. Limiting oneself to thinking thoughts about racism will not result in change. Conversely, developing and implementing practices without theory runs the risk of not addressing or, worse yet, exacerbating racial discord. Theory and practice, then, are mutually constitutive.

Up until now, I have focused on the theoretical. A discussion of all possible practices that might come out of this theory is beyond the scope of this dissertation. Nevertheless, I would like to propose some possibilities to explore, and I invite additional conversation to consider these and other practices not discussed herein. This section considers possible specific practices that might imbue the theoretical discussion with materiality and pertinence.

## **Progressive White Christians**

What do we do when the church's social teachings on race are not really shared or not sufficiently integral and explicit as they ought to be? What do we do when progressive White laity members do not want to hear about racial justice? Or they do not want to support programs that affirmatively redress racial inequities? What does an ethics of rupture have to offer in these situations?

This is the crux of the matter. We need new responses and actions that respond directly to the growing racial animus in the U.S. These questions demand alternatives to biblical and theological constructs that support traditional Christian realist analyses, gradualist remedies, and racial colorblindness. The task seems daunting, considering

resistance to new approaches that strive for racial equity, and continued support for the largely ineffective past practices.

*Radical grace* provides us with a theological base from which to hypothesize new possibilities, including the formation of just racial relationships. God rejoices when we work for racial justice. Radical grace assists us in overcoming our fear, guilt, and shame evoked by discussions about race, racism, and White supremacy. In turn, this allows us to create just racial relationships that enable opposition to racial injustice.

In addition, grace empowers us to:

1. Be open to learning more about racism and White supremacy, individual and structural.
2. Listen and accept as truth what we learn about racism and White supremacy, even if it makes us skeptical, uncomfortable, or vulnerable.
3. Engage in ongoing self-reflection, self-confrontation, and self-interrogation of beliefs, attitudes, and actions.
4. Have open, honest conversations with others about racism.
5. Recognize acts of racism.
6. Confront acts of racism.

Grace also provides the opportunities to:

1. Acknowledge the existence and sacredness of everyone as a child of God.
2. Acknowledge the humanity in every person as a child of God.
3. Treat the needs and wants of others as holy and work to meet those needs on an equitable basis as children of God.

*A revolutionary Jesus* who challenged religious and civil authorities and structures empowers the laity to understand that racism is not limited to racist statements, racial stereotypes, and individual acts. He encourages White Christians to question

church authorities about antiracist policies or procedures, to demand that such policies be developed and implemented, and to challenge actions that might contravene those policies. A revolutionary Jesus encourages Christians to challenge structural racism and individual racism by engaging governmental authorities, private business entities, and individuals through meetings, letter writing, or non-violent protests.

### **The church**

As the USCCB has acknowledged, issuing pastoral letters and social statements identifying racism as a sin and urging Christians to oppose it by various means does not necessarily mean that the letters and statements will have the desired effect, if any, upon the laity. Over a span of approximately 30 years, the ELCA has issued a social statement on racism, a declaration to people of African Descent apologizing for its role in slavery and for its institutional racism, and numerous pastoral letters from the presiding bishop addressing issues of race. In addition, it has offered at least three types of antiracism training to congregations and has provided antiracism training to synodical bishops. Lists of resources, training materials, and an online antiracism pledge are also available. Despite these efforts,<sup>568</sup> the ELCA remains over ninety-five percent White, and persons of color remain marginalized within the church.

Something more is clearly needed. An ethic of rupture opens space for a radical reorientation of the church's approaches to racial justice; to enable it to move from a passive focus, evidenced by statements, letters, and announcements, to "a militant

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<sup>568</sup> The ELCA church body is organized in three expressions: the churchwide unit, 65 regional synods, and the congregations. The churchwide unit cannot impose policies and practices upon the synods or congregations, with a few limited exceptions.



program of action,”<sup>569</sup> in much the same way that Jesus engaged in a militant program of action during his ministry. Not all of the following practices may apply to all Protestant denominations or the Catholic church. Even if the particularities may not be applicable, the underlying concept is nevertheless likely helpful.

### **Denominational Leadership**

Denominational leadership must continue to lift up the urgent and critical need for Christians to seek racial justice for the marginalized and the oppressed. While social statements, pastoral letters, and announcements may only be somewhat effective, such pronouncements still need to be made more. Given the ongoing affinity of progressive White Christians for gradualism and racial colorblindness, denominational leadership ought to develop and publish theological analyses and statements that repudiate gradualistic remedies and racial colorblindness as denying racial justice to people of color. Doing so is essential to counteract the biblical and theological arguments of those White Christians who oppose more rapid and substantial efforts. Denominational leadership needs to commit economic resources to synods so that synods can engage in antiracism work through training, the development of educational programs, congregational outreach efforts, and support for congregations of color. It should also require synodical bishops periodically to attend antiracism training.

Denominational leadership must also commit economic resources to recruit and train people of color for congregational calls or other church leadership positions. Financial support should also be available to those pastors who fear for their livelihood, i.e., revocation of call if they speak or preach about racism and White supremacy.

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<sup>569</sup> De La Torre, *Latina/o Social Ethics*,

Denominational leadership further needs to monitor the call process to ensure that candidates of color are considered for vacancies and do not languish in the call process, waiting months or years longer for a call than their White counterparts. Finally, the development and distribution of multicultural worship resources that incorporate music, liturgies, and art that are non-Eurocentric in nature should also be undertaken by denominational leadership.

### **Synodical Leadership**

Synodical leadership ought to require synodical staff and all pastors/priests in the synod to undergo antiracism training regularly and make such training available to congregational leadership and congregants. Synodical leadership should also monitor the call process by submitting candidates of color for call vacancies, monitoring the call process's duration, and investigating if congregations repeatedly reject candidates of color. Synodical leadership should also commit economic resources to those congregations that engage in antiracism work and to support pastors who engage in such work.

### **Congregational Leadership**

Congregational leadership, whether council members, pastors, or priests, must commit to using multicultural liturgical and worship resources rather than insisting on Eurocentric resources. It must commit to considering candidates of color for employment vacancies. Congregational leadership should publicize and financially support racial justice efforts and educational programs. It should engage in a physical plant audit to ensure an authentic welcome for all people and remove any material that might be offensive. Finally, congregational leadership must commit to a biblical and theological

focus on racial justice, particularly regarding the relative ineffectiveness of gradualism and racial colorblindness.

### **Pedagogy**

As mentioned in the Introduction, one of the issues with the canon of Christian social ethics regarding racial justice issues is the pedagogy employed, as it regularly emphasizes the scholarship and theoretical approaches of White males as normative. In addition, many institutions of higher learning were founded by openly racist individuals. They have physical facilities that are evocative of slavery (plantation style) and built by slave labor, Black convict labor, or Blacks who were paid less than their White counterparts. Moreover, many, if not most, institutions of higher learning have been segregated by race, ethnicity, or gender. As a result, faculty of color who teach at these institutions and students of color who attend such institutions must walk through White hallways, attend class in White classrooms, and adapt to and even adopt White truth claims and ways of learning. There must be deliberate efforts to acknowledge and counter the ubiquitous Whiteness that permeates their institutions.

If educational institutions are unaware of or choose to ignore their institutions' pervasive Whiteness, they may continue to perpetuate this structural racism. Therefore, it is incumbent upon higher learning institutions to deploy an intentional, revolutionary restructuring of their practices that an ethic of rupture can enable.

The disruption and reorientation must begin with the administration. It must be committed to seeking out, hiring, and granting tenure to faculty of color, particularly women of color, who continue to be underrepresented in most academic fields. As the gatekeepers of what constitutes knowledge or education, administrations that continue to

hire predominantly White male scholars impart the message that the scholarship of non-White, non-male scholars, is not true scholarship or the scholarship is of lesser importance. Administrations must also consider how decisions are made regarding course offerings and who teaches these courses. Are scholars of color included in the decision-making process? Are students of color included in the decision-making process?

Faculty must consider the context of the students since a course may include students of different races, different socioeconomic backgrounds, different gender expressions, different nationalities, ethnicities, and cultures, as well as different religious, political, and racial beliefs. A classroom comprised of students with diverse cultural and racial backgrounds and perspectives requires a deliberate commitment to intersectionality to uncover and engage students about these overlapping and interdependent systems of discrimination, advantage, and disadvantage.

To do this, careful consideration must be given to course content – what material is considered foundational and what texts or sources will be used that recognize the students' diverse cultural and racial backgrounds and which incorporate intersectional analyses. Second, courses must be taught to integrate issues of racism, White supremacy, and other categories of oppression and marginalization in each class session to demonstrate how these matters permeate every aspect of life in the United States. This gives students a dynamic base from which to question, challenge, and transform not just the areas of their studies but also broader social systems. Finally, it assists students in deepening their awareness of the lived experiences of others.

These are only a few possibilities for changing pedagogy from the traditional canon of Christian social ethics to a much more diverse, inclusive, equitable, and diverse pedagogy that serves all students equally well.

## **Conclusion**

Throughout the dissertation, I have challenged many of the ways in which the field of Christian social ethics, some White Christian social ethicists, and some White Christian leadership and laity have continued to contribute to the perpetuation of racism and White supremacy in the United States. I considered the adherence of some White Christian social ethicists to twentieth-century analyses and applications of Christian social realism. I also explored ongoing White Christian affinity for gradualistic remedies and the concept of racial colorblindness, both of which fail to address racial inequities with the necessary urgency or with the significant progress required.

The case study of housing, employment, and educational segregation in Detroit during a portion of the twentieth century illustrated how White Christians opposed efforts to address racial discrimination through the exercise of social, economic, and political power. The case study also illustrated that the various means employed by White Christian leadership and laity, while effective to a certain degree, remained largely unsuccessful in achieving racial justice.

This last chapter focused on a proposed ethic of rupture that would disrupt the current antiracist practices of White Christians and the institutional church. I offered a variety of possibilities that might be part of an ethic of rupture. Finally, I considered possible pedagogical changes to ensure that future scholars and citizens understand the

debilitating effects of racism and White supremacy and the ramifications of a failure to alter current behaviors and practices.

I am explicitly repudiating a slow, piecemeal approach to eliminating racial injustice. While some of my proposals may seem familiar, I am combining those with new suggestions and strategies. More significantly, I argue that White Christian social ethicists, White religious leadership, and White Christian laity commit to simultaneously and immediately engaging as many of these ideas as possible. Only by immediate, substantial, and sustained efforts will Christian social ethics provide a way forward. If the field of Christian social ethics is committed to racial justice, it is only by such communal initiatives that real progress toward racial equity will be accomplished.

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