
The Theological Origins of White Supremacy

1. The Polluted Waters of Baptism

In graduate school I planned to write a dissertation on James Cone, the founder of black theology—a dissertation that did not concern race. My research interests were in political theology and the American church, and I wanted to compare the ecclesiology of Cone to that of Stanley Hauerwas, one of the most influential contemporary theologians writing about the church. I considered Cone and Hauerwas to be the most prominent representatives of the two dominant strands of Christian ethics today. Yet, in my two-thousand-word dissertation proposal featuring the architect of black liberation theology I did not include the word *race*. I did not even mention *racism*, *blackness*, or *whiteness*. To me, Cone was an obvious choice for a study in church and politics. But at the time, like many other white theologians, I didn't consider racial justice to be a significant theological factor in my work or a major problem for the politics of the American church.

Ten days later a grand jury in Ferguson, Missouri, failed to indict white police officer Darren Wilson in the shooting death of black teenager Michael Brown. This sparked a nationwide controversy and protests that only grew in intensity following the high-profile deaths of many other unarmed African Americans. A national movement grew, taking the name Black Lives Matter and developing a new racial consciousness, yet white theologians were slow and floundered in their responses to a fraught situation.

I found it increasingly difficult to think of church and politics in the abstract terms I had outlined. Far too slowly I came to realize that the story of the church in America is also the story of race. I had evaded the issue of race for years, failing to see the integral role white supremacy played in any account of ecclesiology in the American context, which simply highlights the power of white supremacy to

blind white Christians from seeing the depths and history of our implication in its oppression.

In her landmark book *The New Jim Crow*, Michelle Alexander contends that white supremacy “became a religion of sorts.” By this she means that it operates “as a deeply held belief system based on ‘truths’ beyond question or doubt.”¹ In our current moment it may be even more instructive to say that white supremacy is a theological innovation—an invention, specifically, of the Christian church. My contention is that beyond white fragility, blindness to systemic racism, and a universalized (white) ethic, the deepest obstacle to racial justice for Christians is a failure to acknowledge the Christian theological origins of white supremacy.

Theologian and pastor Brad Braxton writes of a visit to the slave castles of Ghana, the last stop and holding place for millions of Africans before they were prodded onto ships bound for the Americas. Many were forcibly baptized, stripped of their communal and familial identities and bound sacramentally to their new white, Christian masters.² In Cape Coast, he reports, a slave dungeon sat directly beneath the chapel in which the European Christians held their worship services. At another castle in Elmina, a slave fort constructed by the Portuguese ten years before Columbus’s arrival in the New World, Braxton observed that “the slave auction block was literally beneath the chapel used for worship.”³ Reflecting on these spectacles, Braxton says, the church was literally “propped up by the backs and bones of enslaved Africans.” This is not only true regarding Christian slave traders in Africa but in America as well. Enslaved people were not only responsible for building governmental structures like the White House and Capitol, but religious institutions like Georgetown and Yale Universities. In fact, by 1767 the Jesuit order owned the greatest number of Africans of any institution in the Western Hemisphere.⁴

Like the dark waters of the Atlantic, the white church’s baptismal waters are not pure, Braxton concludes; they are polluted with the blood and dead bodies of enslaved Africans. If churches do not begin to reckon with the reality of these toxic waters and start taking responsibility for our collective history—and present—we must ask ourselves if we are simply baptizing one another into a church of white supremacy.⁵

It is simply too hard to deny the white church’s silence during the black freedom movement of the 1950s and 1960s, its support of Jim Crow laws and lynchings, and its justification of slavery and proclamation of a slaveholder gospel that taught enslaved people to maintain fidelity to their masters as Christian obedience. Yet most white theologians neglect this dark side of Christianity in their work. The few white theologians who do address the legacy of white supremacy, structural racism, or colorblindness generally identify them as external

problems: they are evils in which the church is only complicit, sins that are “brought to church,” and ways we have been “shaped by ‘the world.’”⁶

My contention in this chapter is that the problem is stronger than mere complicity and runs deeper than most white theologians want to admit. Theologian Willie Jennings indicts Christianity in the development of white supremacy through its collusion with what he calls a “diseased social imagination” of colonialism and European superiority.⁷ Consequently, white supremacy is the product of what we might call Christianity’s diseased theological imagination. Attributing white supremacy to the world outside the church obscures our role in its development. White supremacy is not something in which the white Christian church is merely complicit—as if it is something “out there” that we let escape into our churches or something to which the church simply lent theological justification. White supremacy is not a result of the church assimilating to the world or being co-opted by external worldly liturgies or practices. Rather, it is a result of liturgies and practices inherent to the church itself—of malformative liturgies and practices that the church actually gave to the world. White supremacy was not simply justified by Christian theology but invented by it.

Sociologist Joe Feagin shows how this “white racial frame”—by which he means the racist narratives, ideologies, imagery, and attitudes that shape our discriminatory actions and systems—began developing during colonialism. Yet he concludes that “after developing an extensive colonial system,” Christian colonizers developed the ideology of whiteness to “rationalize, explain, and structure” how they could commit such atrocities. For him, white supremacy was merely “dressed up in religious language” and “religiously sanctioned.”⁸ While this analysis moves us deeper into the problem, I am arguing that the origins of white supremacy reside in theology itself.⁹ Thus, I believe the white church will never fully confront and contest the depth of the problem—nor our responsibility for it—if we do not begin to see it as a failure of our theology itself. Again, as Kelly Brown Douglas pointedly asks, if Christianity has been used for centuries to oppress black people, “Was there not something wrong with Christianity itself?”¹⁰

In this chapter I analyze Douglas’s question. My task is to assess how white supremacy developed out of the church and its theology, but also to uncover the impact that development had reflectively upon and within the church—contorting and distorting its theology. The relationship between Christian theology and white supremacy is a mutually reinforcing, symbiotic one, suggesting the important task of identifying the ways white Christian theology is responsible for the diseased imagination and concrete practices of white supremacy, and responsible to do something about it.

My argument proceeds in three steps. First, I give a brief historical account of the theological roots of white supremacy, identifying several key episodes in its theological development. Next, from this account I draw out four theological elements that contributed to the development of white supremacy and were, in turn, distorted and continue to be malformative aspects of white Christian theology. These elements demonstrate the way that this corrosive relationship between theology and white supremacy persists. Finally, to further demonstrate these claims I investigate the ways these elements of white supremacy show up in the work of two of America's most influential theologians, Walter Rauschenbusch and Reinhold Niebuhr. Their cases illuminate the power of white supremacy to corrupt theological personalities and systems despite their best efforts and intentions to resist it. This chapter, therefore, illustrates why I believe the white church in America should take responsibility for white supremacy by demonstrating its theological origins and continuing presence in inflecting and corrupting even the most well-meaning white theology.

2. *The Theological Invention of White Supremacy*

In 1554, three ships bearing the names of Trinity, John the Evangelist, and Bartholomew set sail for the coast of Guinea from England. These voyages undertaken by Christian enterprisers—on ships bearing theological names, hoping to mine the abundant resources of this “dark” continent—returned with five Africans, the first black enslaved people to set foot in England (though the Portuguese and Spanish had been enslaving Africans for the past century). As Joseph Washington comments, “Extracted from Africa and transported to England on waves of symbolism, these first black slaves were far from repulsive to Englishmen of Puritan pride and piety.”¹¹ In just over half a century the next generation of English entrepreneurs would bring the first African enslaved people to the shores of the American colonies. Beginning with the arrival of twenty-something enslaved people from the Ndongo region of West Africa, stolen by an English privateer from a Portuguese ship, these first enslaved people were sold to residents of Jamestown in 1619. By 1700 the slave population of the colony of Virginia would reach eight thousand.

By 1594, 47.9 percent of ships arriving in the Americas were already part of the Atlantic slave trade, and by the turn of the nineteenth century, ships had brought three times as many African enslaved people to the British colonies as white Europeans.¹² The Atlantic became a “conveyor belt to early death in the fields of an immense swath of plantations that stretched from Baltimore to Rio de Janeiro and beyond.”¹³ Before it was all over, between 10 million and 15 million Africans would be ripped from their land and imported to the New World, not counting those who perished in the Middle Passage or in slave castles on African shores.

But what led European Christians to such depths of depravity? As the names of the slave ships sailing on that “wave of symbolism” suggest, the white supremacy that animated the institution of slavery was rooted in Christian theology and promoted by Christian churches. Tracing the theological development of white supremacy requires gaining perspective on several historical episodes before and after this moment. These moments suggest a thread that runs through early efforts to distinguish Christianity from Judaism, church-funded anti-Semitism transitioning to supersessionism, colonial conquest resulting in slave trade, and the uniquely American form of racism. The thread woven through them is one of European Christians attempting to make sense of alterity and bodily encounter with the theological tools at their disposal—of religious difference morphing into racial difference. The story that follows traces these particular moments and identifies the theological ingredients that began mixing at an early stage to form white supremacy.

The “Enlightenment Construction of Race”

First we must address many scholars’ claims of later and more secular origins for race and racism. Journalist Jamelle Bouie summarizes one popular belief: “Race as we understand it—a biological taxonomy that turns physical difference into relations of domination—is a product of the Enlightenment.”¹⁴ Similarly, post-colonial philosopher Emmanuel Chuckwudi Eze concludes that Enlightenment philosophy was instrumental in generating and institutionalizing European ideas about race.¹⁵ Though primitive forms of the modern conception of race began taking shape in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, it took the scientific thought of the Enlightenment to construct a biological racial taxonomy, so the argument goes. Only then did beliefs in a natural superiority of whiteness capture the Western imagination and begin structuring its political and economic institutions. For scholars including Cornel West and historian Ivan Hannaford, it was in fact the displacement of theology as queen of the sciences created the conditions for racism to develop. West pins the origin of modern conceptions of race and practices of racism to “the classificatory categories and the descriptive, representational, order-imposing aims of natural history” that emerged during the Enlightenment. He tells the story as an “Enlightenment revolt against the authority of the church.”¹⁶ Hannaford argues that the concepts of race and racial superiority were necessarily achieved by “the setting aside of the metaphysical and theological scheme of things for a more logical description and classification.”¹⁷ In this portrayal, the *loss* of theology fostered the rise of white supremacy.

This scholarly focus on the Enlightenment as the origin of racism, however, overlooks the role of Christianity in developing white supremacy before the

Enlightenment period, and in nurturing its maturation during the Enlightenment. Historian Terence Keel, in his book *Divine Variations*, argues that the European “stories” that surface in the Enlightenment about the origins and diversity of human life, while pretending to encompass universal, scientific objectivity, have a particular origin that frames their attempts to explain race: Christianity.¹⁸ Christian intellectual history shaped later Enlightenment scientific efforts to construct theories about ethnic and racial variations in humanity.¹⁹ West and others too easily discount the impact of the church, not only in promulgating biblical accounts of racism but also in producing white supremacy before, independent of, and in collusion with these Enlightenment developments. Even by the time of the Enlightenment, the persistent role of theology in shaping cultural, scientific, and political thought is apparent. Enlightenment liberalism and theology are not so easily untethered.²⁰

Take John Locke, himself an investor in a slave-trading company. He wrote into the Fundamental Constitutions of Carolina a provision declaring that enslaved people could be “of what opinion or Religion soever. . . . But yet, no Slave shall hereby be exempted from that civil dominion his Master has over him, but be in all other things in the State and condition he was in before.”²¹ In fact, most colonial legislation codified this thought, declaring that baptism was not a reason for emancipation.²² Here, in declaring that conversion does not alter the status of the slave, Locke is making a theological claim. This legal provision is based in liberalism, but one predicated upon a prior, even age-old theological distinction between body and soul: salvation of the soul does not demand liberation of the body. If Christian theology presented a problem for slavery, then Christian theology was needed in order to develop an adequate resolution.

In a world still dominated by Christianity, theology was necessary to make sense of new encounter and bodily difference, and ultimately to legitimate the subjugation of other human beings. In this way, theology offered a theory of white supremacy that would draw on the pseudoscientific “evidence” of the Enlightenment to weave a theological rationale of black physical, moral, and spiritual inferiority.

Blood and Conquest

Though the modern, scientific concept of race may not have emerged until the Enlightenment, one can detect the tentacles of white supremacy spreading from the moment that bodily difference—especially regarding skin tone—converged with and eventually superseded religious difference in delineating insiders and outsiders.²³ The strange cocktail of theological elements that would combine to invent white supremacy began mixing well before Enlightenment, even in the

earliest moments of Christianity itself. Crucially, then, white supremacy was not the result of setting theology aside, but was precisely a theological and ecclesial invention.²⁴

The theological origins of white supremacy lie at the point at which religious difference morphed into racial difference, especially around the status of Jewishness. That is, before European explorers and slave traders set foot in Africa or America, white supremacy appears to develop out of Christian attempts to identify Jewishness as a race, prior to a well-established account or definition of race. A few historical episodes mark this transition. One of the clearest and earliest pieces of evidence of Jewishness becoming racialized comes from the controversy over the “Jewish Pope” in 1130. When Pope Anacletus II, whose great-grandfather had been Jewish, contended for the seat, theologians as venerable as Bernard of Clairvaux clamored to oppose him. Four generations after conversion, the descendant of a once-Jew was still a Jew, portending already the impotence of baptism upon racial difference.²⁵ As historian Robert Stacey contends, “There was clearly an irreducible element to Jewish identity in the eyes of many Christians, which no amount of baptismal water could entirely eradicate.”²⁶ Jewish conversion, in this way, projected an early instance of hybrid identity, whereby the convert passed as Christian interiorly—as a matter of soul—but not bodily, where a person’s appearance and lineage betrayed one’s true racial identity. Race became marked upon the body. As medievalist Geraldine Heng puts it, “Jewish bodies were always giving themselves away.”²⁷

Heng focuses on the story of Jews in England in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries to demonstrate how medieval Europe had already begun understanding Jewishness in racial terms. She argues that what appeared to be contentious financial and religious relationships between Jews and Christians betrayed a more significant difference. Considerable Christian debt to Jewish lenders led to an identification of Jews with usury,²⁸ resulting in mass executions of Jews for violating financial law. In 1189–1190, 10 percent of English Jews were slaughtered and documents of debt to Jews were destroyed.²⁹ She suggests that because these executions were actually orchestrated not by lower-class subjects indebted to Jewish lenders but by members of the powerful gentry, they were not motivated by economics alone. Additionally, medieval stories of host desecration (tales of Jewish people attempting to destroy the Eucharistic wafer), shaped the religious imaginations of Christians toward their Jewish neighbors and led to further executions.³⁰

The church seemed almost obsessed with marking and ensuring Jewish difference.³¹ A series of decrees from the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 began imposing regulations on the activities of European Jews. The most significant and foreboding imposition was the requirement in Spain and England that Jews wear

a badge of identification.³² This ruling was motivated, in part, by the fear that “through error Christians have relations with the women of Jews and Saracens.”³³ A Statute of Jewry issued by the English Crown in coordination with the church segregated Jews into their own towns and declared, “no Christian shall go to bed nor rise up among them,” as well as demanded that any Jewish person age seven or older must wear a yellow badge.³⁴ This not only evinces a fear of intimacy but constructs appearance as a way to distinguish and categorize Jews as a people. That is, concern over the mixing of blood suggests a shifting ambiguity among the categories of religious and ethnic identity. In fact, Heng concludes that Canon 68, the rule in the council requiring Jewish badges, “thus in effect instantiates racial regime, and racial governance, in the Latin West through the force of law.”³⁵

Though Jews had been persecuted across Europe for centuries, mass executions and ritual murders of Jewish people increased after the ruling in 1215, and many Jews began converting—not always by choice—to Christianity. This new ecclesiastical class of people, known in Spain (where persecution was the strongest) as *conversos*, gradually became known as *marranos*—or swine—because church officials viewed them as religious frauds.³⁶ The first tribunal of the Spanish Inquisition in 1480 further infused racial meaning into theological categories by instituting a test of blood purity, which “had the effect of turning the search for heresy within the faith into a search for the defilement of blood wherever it might be found.”³⁷ This test targeted the formerly Jewish *marranos*, who were obviously unable to prove purity of Christian blood. While the idea of blood purity was not a full-fledged concept of race, it blurred theological categories with those that began approximating race and added a new identity marker to the ecclesiastical orders that had previously divided groups of people.³⁸ Before the invention of a systematic and biological racial taxonomy, this innovation marked a significant shift in the development of white supremacy. These religious and political events suggest public and ecclesiastical practices of supersessionism, functioning to assign Jewishness a racial designation and then replace it through badge or execution with a white, Christian center.

This shifting notion of Jewishness as a race and focus upon blood purity as a marker of religious identity set the stage for a “racially” charged colonial encounter with another form of otherness. Twelve years after the first tribunal of the Spanish Inquisition, in the same year Columbus set sail for his ultimately genocidal “discovery” of the Americas, the Catholic monarchies of Ferdinand and Isabella expelled all Jews and Muslims from the territory of Spain. This spiritual victory over its enemies linked Christian faith and European genealogy at the very moment European Christians began encountering ethnic others in the Americas.³⁹ This allowed the Spanish colonizers, and the church that supported them, to claim divine favor on their missions as they encountered differently

bodied people in the New World. The theological foundation for racial difference began in blood and, with colonialism, transferred to skin.

Upon Columbus's triumphant return, Pope Alexander VI issued two papal bulls in 1493, now known as the founding documents of the "Doctrine of Discovery." *Inter caetera* and *Dudum siquidem* gave the Spanish monarchs authority to expropriate any new land that was not owned by a Christian lord.⁴⁰ Earlier papal decrees had already provided legitimacy for the slave trade of Africans by Portuguese explorers. These statements reasoned that Africans were religious enemies and granted explorers full authority "to invade, search out, capture, vanquish, and subdue all Saracens and pagans whatsoever, and other enemies of Christ wheresoever placed, and reduce their persons to perpetual servitude."⁴¹ Behind the missiological veneer of evangelism resided an imperial effort to conquer infidels, now marked as such by skin tone.

In this context, white identity was taking shape as a theological identity born out of European attempts to make sense of their encounter with people who did not fit into their preestablished Christian taxonomy of insiders and pagans.⁴² Physical characteristics and blood lineage now signaled important anthropological distinctions between superior and inferior humans. Theologian Willie Jennings and historian Anthony Pagden both point to the story of Gomes Eanes de Zurara as the beginning of modern, race-based slavery, a colonial product of theological white supremacy. Zurara was the royal chronicler for Prince Henry of Portugal who recorded the day in August 1444 when the first human cargo from Africa set foot on European soil for the prince's inspection.⁴³ After recording Prince Henry's pleasure at all the "souls that before were lost," Zurara attended to their bodies. He divided the Africans into categories—some "white enough, fair to look upon" and others that were "black as Ethiops, and so ugly, both in features and in body, as almost to appear the images of a lower hemisphere."⁴⁴ Drawing on the writings of Zurara and countless others who also began categorizing people according to skin tone in this period, Jennings claims that the ordering of existence from white to black signifies the beginnings of racial formation on a global scale. Out of this developed the conceptual frame of whiteness, often invisible, always juxtaposed with blackness in such a way that "black bodies are the ever-visible counterweight of a usually invisible white identity."⁴⁵

In European Christians' attempts to evaluate the new people it encountered in Africa and America, the question of one's ability to be saved became indexed to skin color. The dark-skinned humans encountered in colonial missions were spiritually questionable, making white skin the marker of soteriological security. In fact, it was because the peoples of the New World and Africa were not under God's salvific grace that they could be ruled.⁴⁶ "Dark skin came to symbolize, both in Africa and America, the voluntary and stubborn abandonment of a race

in sin,” writes Roger Bastide.⁴⁷ The original missional mandate to convert and save evolved into an obsession not only to “civilize” for the sake of salvation, but also to classify humans, as white superiority subtly replaced salvation within the same structure of theological comparison. Theologian James Perkinson observes that the question “Are you savable within the economy of salvation, determined by Christ?” became “Are you orderable within a taxonomy of civilized humanity, determined by whiteness?”⁴⁸ Whiteness indicated a high probability of salvation at the top and then moved along a sliding scale of darkness, with black bodies being the least likely to be saved—except perhaps through force or slavery.

In this way, theological hierarchy became a tool for colonialist evaluation, assessing bodies socially, politically, physically, and spiritually.⁴⁹ Jennings argues that from the first moment of colonial discovery, whiteness “evolved into a method of understanding the world”—ordering judgments regarding who was capable or incapable of rationality, morality, and religion.⁵⁰ Being white placed one at the symbolic center of an expanding world, and whiteness became “a way of organizing bodies by proximity to and approximation of white bodies.”⁵¹ Blackness was “more than skin deep”; it penetrated to the person’s character and soul.⁵² In short, salvation became white. As the Reconstruction-era hymn proclaims, being saved was simply a matter of being “whiter than snow.”⁵³

According to Jennings, racial agency was fundamentally a “theologically articulated way” for Europeans to understand their white bodies in relation to the new territories and peoples they encountered. “Before this agency would yield ‘the idea of race,’ ‘the scientific concept of race,’ the ‘social principle of race,’ or even a fully formed ‘racial optic’ on the world,” he argues, “it was a theological form.”⁵⁴ Put simply, white supremacy emerged before and out of colonialism in its development of race as a theological tool of evaluation and later justification for slavery.

Jennings’s claim is that Western Christianity lives within a “diseased social imagination”: “the Christian theological imagination was woven into a process of colonial dominance. Other peoples and their ways of life had to adapt, become fluid, even morph into the colonial order of things, and such a situation drew Christianity and its theologians inside habits of mind and life that internalized and normalized that order of things.”⁵⁵ The church established the framework through which Europeans would make sense of the differently bodied others they encountered through exploration and conquest.⁵⁶ And these violent encounters at the bows of ships christened with divine and apostolic titles not only spawned one of the most devastating institutions the world has ever seen, but reflexively altered the shape and integrity of Christian theology in ways the church has yet to fully address.

Slavery created such a distance from a subject position that the enslaved body became, in a real sense, simply “real estate”—a commodity.⁵⁷ Slave merchants and traders “transformed African bodies into perishable goods and fragile services.”⁵⁸ At the auction block, slave prices could be based on particular bodily features or characteristics, or enslaved people were simply sold by the pound. Orlando Patterson writes, “Hands were opened and shut and looked at inside and out. Arms and legs were felt to decide whether slaves were muscular and regular. Backs and buttocks were scrutinized for the welts that heavy blows with a whip usually left. Necks were rubbed or pinched to detect any soreness or lumps. Jaws were grasped, fingers were run into . . . the teeth and gums could be seen.”⁵⁹ As Toni Morrison describes, a black person was reduced to “the dollar value of his weight, his strength, his heart, his brain, his penis, and his future.”⁶⁰ As the auctioneers and slaveholders touched, manipulated, controlled, and punished black flesh in a liturgy of domination, black bodies lost their humanity and became objects.

Epidermal logic captivated most European—and later, American—theology, both Roman Catholic and the emerging Protestant strands. Colonial theology placed white Christians at the top of the human scale of being, and now their mandate was to subdue the earth. Those whose skin tone deviated from this white norm were religious, moral, and intellectual degenerates. The institution of slavery and the terror of the auction block were constructed to reinforce this normalization, deconstructing particular human beings into functional bodies that were useful and available for manipulation, economic exploitation, and sordid pleasure.

From the first moments of their encounter with nonwhite others, colonists created the conditions for their sustained social superiority through exploitation and violent control. They did so with the support of a church and its theology that had sold its soul to provide legitimation for the exploitation, possession, and dehumanization of dark bodies—predicated upon a centuries-long process of developing racial difference out of religious difference. Theological concepts like creation, election, and sovereignty were baptized into the colonial agenda of comparing these newly discovered bodies: sorting them into insiders and outsiders, those who had been created further from and closer to the “elected” Christian norm of the white European. Whiteness had become the marker of true Christianity—God’s chosen people. All others—those in need of conversion, often through the catechetical method of slavery—were organized around this racial center. Thus, systematic theology began to develop around this racial center as well. As Jeannine Hill Fletcher contends, “Rather than an anomaly in the theological discipline,” whiteness came to express “a dominant theological outlook by which non-White, non-Christian persons have been assessed along a hierarchy of humanity.”⁶¹ The Christian evangelistic impulse became systematically wedded

to a “sliding scale of humanity [that] could be seen in God’s favor on [white] Christians and God’s curse on [non-white] Christians.”⁶² These proclamations and practices clearly cannot be dismissed as simple misuses of theology, but theologically generated convictions themselves.

3. *Malforming Theology*

In her account of the Atlantic slave trade and personal journey along a Ghanaian slave route, *Lose Your Mother*, Saidiya Hartman claims, “The stories we tell about what happened then, the correspondences we discern between today and times past, and the ethical and political stakes of these stories redound in the present.”⁶³ The story told in the previous section sets the stakes for Christianity by suggesting a symbiotic relationship between Christian theology and white supremacy. Theology did not simply invent white supremacy, but this invention reflected back upon the church to reshape its theology in the image of its newly invented whiteness. The Christian tradition funded a collective theological consciousness that sanctioned a racial hierarchy and provided resources for the oppression of human beings that fell on the underside of this taxonomy. As theologian Kelly Brown Douglas puts it, Christianity provided a “sacred canopy” for racism, and thus found its own tradition malformed and continually malforming in the wake of this alliance.⁶⁴

Since the relationship is symbiotic, parsing the contributing factors from the corrupted effects is less urgent. The crucial task is collectively identifying the ways Christian theology is responsible for and responsive to this diseased imagination. In this section I draw from the earlier historical account to identify four key theological elements that contributed to the development of white supremacy and that, in turn, continue to be malforming aspects of white Christian theology. Some were present at the beginning of Christian faith.

Emerging Dualisms

Christianity emerged with three sets of dualisms structuring the thought of early writers and thinkers on materiality. First, as it developed within a Hellenized context, Christianity quickly adopted elements of Platonic thought, especially the dualisms of spiritual and material, soul and body. Womanist theologian Kelly Brown Douglas claims that Platonism provided the definitive dualistic paradigm that was built into Christian thinking.⁶⁵ It privileged soul over body in a relation of opposition, demonizing the body as the source of sensuality and lust. As Douglas notes, we can see how this dualism shaped the early Christian

imagination in the Apostle Paul's frequent denigration of flesh as the site of sin and in the works of Saint Augustine.⁶⁶

Another, related contributor to this dualism was Docetism, a general name for theological teachings in the first centuries of Christian history, including Gnosticism, that denied Christ's embodiment. Docetists could not stomach the idea that God would assume carnal human flesh and claimed that, despite appearance, the body of Jesus was composed of exclusively spiritual matter.⁶⁷ Like Platonism, this movement denigrated materiality in general and bodies in particular. The body is bound to its sinful form, but the soul—and the rational mind—can aspire toward divine transcendence. In fact, salvation was understood to be the final escape from the fleshly prison of our material world. Some Docetic sects believed that not all human beings contain spirit; some are purely carnal and “thus irreparably condemned to destruction.”⁶⁸ While the church rejected Docetism as heresy and combated it in early confessions such as the Apostles' Creed, Docetism's sharp dualism between the spiritual and material left an indelible mark on the Christian tradition. By divinizing the soul and demonizing the body, even identifying some humans as purely “carnal” and “condemned to destruction,” this tradition provided “a foundation for easily disregarding certain bodies.”⁶⁹

A third source of dualism emerged from the use of color labels in early Christian texts, even biblical ones that delineated whiteness and blackness. Blackness, within the biblical and social imagination of the early church, and later of European Christians, symbolized sin and evil. Historian Jean Devisse suggests that, before substantial encounters with people with black skin, “blackness as a hermeneutic was able to grow and thrive in Western Europe”—evolving from a theological, even biblical association of dark and black with sinfulness, and white with purity.⁷⁰ Before their colonial travels to Africa, European Christians encountered black-skinned African Muslims on the Crusade battlefields in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Black skin was thus already registered as an enemy to Christianity; paganness and barbarianism were indexed to blackness. “Within Christianity the color black accrued a slate of negative significations that yoked the ‘abstraction’ of blackness,” Heng notes, “to sin, ignorance, shame, error, and the state of unredemption.”⁷¹ Consequently, when European Christians encountered Africans with black skin during their exploitative explorations to the western coast of the continent, this hermeneutic shaped their perceptions of the inhabitants. As Jennings puts it, the Christian tradition “faltered in the face of new materiality.”⁷²

Likewise, because European Christians “had been coming in contact in large numbers with brown infidels, and with [black] sub-Saharan Africans,” these European Christians first began regarding themselves as white by 1250, argues Madeline Caviness.⁷³ Thus, a sliding scale of humanity developed with superiority indexed to whiteness and inferiority indexed to blackness (with the racial

classifications of red, brown, etc., later filling in the normative spectrum). Whereas the white race was capable of achieving a universal existence because of its capacity for rationality and spirituality, black flesh was, in J. Kameron Carter's words, "trapped in its particularity"⁷⁴ in a way that would not be true for universal white flesh. Black people could never obtain the transcendent and universal status of white flesh; in fact, their blackness posed a danger to the soul of white folks.⁷⁵ All three of these dualisms converged in Christian thought to create a "dualistically defined theo-ideological foundation" that created hierarchical dichotomies of material/immaterial and blackness/whiteness. These dualisms would provide sacred symbolic justification for racial hierarchies and contribute to the Christian denigration of black bodies.⁷⁶

Christian Superiority

On a theological register, the intrinsic soteriological exclusiveness of Christianity—based on scriptural claims that Jesus is "the way, the truth, and the life" and no one approaches God except through him (John 14:6)—birthed a social antagonism toward religious difference.⁷⁷ That is, this belief projected a polarized universe in which anyone who did not adhere to these faith claims was deemed evil, or at least inferior. It created a dualistic world of "us versus them" where nonbelievers are not only outside the truth but automatically enemies of it.⁷⁸

The belief that Christians understood and represented God's will for humanity better than any other religion further codified this emerging sliding scale of humanity. Again, since Europeans understood themselves to be the center of Christianity, and Europeans were almost exclusively white-skinned, their sliding scale placed whiteness at the top, making this theological hierarchy also a racial one.⁷⁹ White supremacy emerged within this polarized world, as religious difference and superiority transformed into racial difference and superiority. God's creative design for humanity and therefore God's favor were reflected in skin tone.⁸⁰ This became an interpretive lens through which to see and evaluate other peoples, as closer to or further from this salvific center of whiteness.⁸¹ As Jeanine Hill Fletcher summarizes, "Christian supremacy" underwrote white supremacy.⁸²

Supersessionism

The impact of Christian superiority was most evident in the relationship between Christianity and Jewishness, as the just-rendered historical account suggests. The borders of European/Christian identity were clarified by Jewish otherness, even before the first explorers set sail. "The troubling instability of Jewish difference,"

Daniel Boyarin writes, “shaped both Christian Europeans’ self-image and their reactions to those they encountered in the course of exploration and conquest.”⁸³ The seeds of supersessionism were planted in the Christian faith at its outset, nurtured through church fathers including Justin Martyr and made explicit in Reformation texts like Martin Luther’s, which enabled the earliest Spanish explorers to begin to conceive of the newfound peoples as racially other.⁸⁴ Rather than recognizing Paul’s caution to Gentile Christians to remember they have been “grafted in” to the root of Israel—“it is not you that support the root, but the root that supports you”—so that they should not boast (Romans 11:17–18), Christians came to believe themselves to be the first fruits, the elect.

This was funded, perhaps paradoxically, by the way early Christians understood what it meant to be part of their community in ethnic terms. We can see this in the early church debates about gentile inclusion at the Council of Jerusalem (Acts 15:2–35) and in their use of the language of citizenship: conversion was “transformation from one descent group, tribe, people, or citizenship to a new and better one.”⁸⁵ This was especially salient, historian Denise Kimber Buell contends, in the ways they contrasted the universalism of Christianity—in its availability to all and its teleological goal for all humanity—with ethnic or quasiracial affiliation, like Jewishness.⁸⁶ Without making a direct link to modern racism, she argues that early Christianity provided conceptual tools for racist discourse by designating Jewishness as a rival.⁸⁷ With this we see the early codification of supersessionism, drawn from New Testament texts that vilify Jews, especially in Jesus’s death (Matthew 27:25) and passages that seem to identify the church as the new Israel (1 Peter 2:4–10). Through a history of gradually displacing Israel from the soteriological and identity-making center of Christian formation, European theologians created a conceptual vacuum that was easily filled by those who had done the displacing: white Europeans. During the colonial and Enlightenment periods, Europe became conceptually mapped onto Israel’s journey and special relationship with God, and Israel’s history and covenant disappeared. European Christianity took Israel’s story as its own.

Regarding this history of supersessionist practice, J. Kameron Carter focuses on the work of Immanuel Kant. There is ample evidence for Kant institutionalizing the modern use of a concept of race, defining it as a “class distinction between animals of one and the same line of descent, which is unfailingly transmitted by inheritance.”⁸⁸ There is also, in the words of Robert Bernasconi, “no shortage among Kant’s writings of remarks that would today unquestionably be characterized as racist”—not the least of which is his claim that black skin was proof of one’s stupidity.⁸⁹ Yet Carter provides an argument that it was his treatment of Judaism and its supersession by Christianity that generated his lasting contribution to white supremacy, an argument worth revisiting briefly here specifically because it reflects the racializing of Jewishness in medieval Europe.

Carter contends that Kant draws on the racial logics of colonialism to contrast Jews not only as a religious group but also as an inferior race group due to the soteriological centerpiece of white, European Christianity.⁹⁰ Jewishness became a race alien to Western civilization and culture—even if it lived within it—and thus made all nonwhite races also alien to Western civilization and unseen in Western Christianity. With this racializing move accomplished, Kant next contrasts Judaism with the “rational religion” of Christianity, which he unconsciously ties to “the stock of the races of whites in whom the species will realize its destiny.”⁹¹ This shift again draws upon a Docetic Christology. As Jonathan Hess argues, for Kant, Judaism is bound to the empirical details of history and must be overcome by Christianity’s universality, that is, its ability to transcend history.⁹² Kant’s contrast between Jewish empiricism and Christian transcendentalism results in a dualism of Christian rationality with material life and, again, a rejection of the body. Without discounting the incarnation as do the earlier Docetists, Kant legitimates this account with a Christology that still severs Christ from his Jewish flesh.⁹³ As Carter comments, Christ’s divinity “inaugurates a discontinuity, at the level of his humanity or his flesh, with Israel.”⁹⁴ After Kant, Christ loses his particularity and ceases to be Jewish, and now “represents the wisdom of Europe.”⁹⁵ Like blackness, Jewishness is too bound up in its own particularity. Thus, Christianity finds its teleology in a rational and universal white European transcendence—even mastery—over all of life, while Judaism is a religion that finds its teleology, ominously according to Kant, in its “euthanasia.”⁹⁶

Finally, people who exhibit whiteness, because of its universality, supplant Israel as God’s elect. Carter argues that with Kant, Christianity is “reimagined as ‘racially’ severed from and ethnographically triumphant over its oriental Jewish roots.”⁹⁷ With the refashioning of Jewishness as a racial identity and Christianity as a religion of universal rationality, theological reasoning and Christian formation became reconfigured around the European body as the true marker of divine election. The result of all of this is that now racial discourse becomes the primary grammar for understanding the relationship between Christianity and Judaism—and between Christians and colonized, dark-fleshed others as well.

European recalibration to the pinnacle of salvation history theologically justified them to judge civilizations as well as individual humans—eventually transforming them into goods and services. Walter Mignolo indicts the “theological foundation of knowledge”—that is, the privileging of soul over body—as leading directly to imperialism, colonialism, and white supremacy. Theology produced the colonial mission endeavors that quite literally redrew the maps of the globe in the sixteenth century. When the pope granted Spain and Portugal dominion over the New World, maps identified Europe as the center of the globe and, thus, the “zero point” of knowledge; Europe and Christianity assumed an epistemological

hegemony over all other geographies and people. The “zero point,” Mignolo says, “is the site of observation from which the epistemic colonial differences . . . are mapped out.” Yet this zero point, he claims, “hides its own local knowledge universally projected.” While the zero point configures theology and geography around differences in bodies, it simultaneously denies that bodily differences are relevant to knowledge, foreshadowing the colorblindness we witness today. Thus, the zero point veils its own contextuality, its geo-historical location, “assuming to be universal and thus managing the universality to which everyone has to submit.”⁹⁸ Theology spawned not only racial discourse through its supersessionist supplanting of Israel, but specifically a culture and practice of white supremacy that views itself as universal, triumphal, and elect. And theology itself morphed into a form now bound to its spawn.

These three factors of dualism, superiority, and supersessionism distorted the way Europeans began envisioning God’s work of creation and redemption, viewing humanity on a sliding racial scale in which white people were more capable of salvation—because of the way God created them—and darker people were further from salvation. Salvation for the nonwhite may require physical coercion and the spiritual guidance only available in the form of slavery. Linked with their zeal for evangelism and conquest, Europeans shipped these theological innovations to the American colonies along with the human cargo in their hulls. The church in America, fleeing persecution itself, was founded on the persecution of dark bodies, justified theologically in order to secure their salvation.

In the American colonial context, one can see this logic explicitly in the national seals proposed by both Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin. The latter identified the new nation with Israel by depicting Moses dividing the Red Sea, Pharaoh overwhelmed in the waters, and the motto: “Rebellion to Tyrants Is Obedience to God.” Jefferson’s proposal included, “The Children of Israel in the Wilderness, led by a Cloud by day, and a Pillar of fire by night, and on the other Side Hengist and Horsa, the Saxon Chiefs, from whom We claim the Honour of being descended and whose Political Principles and Form of Government We have assumed.”⁹⁹ Jefferson explicitly projected America’s whiteness and its presumed Saxon heritage (a favorite defining racial and political myth) as indicative of the new Israel—God’s new, chosen white people. As Kelly Brown Douglas comments, for these founding fathers, “America was the New Israel and Americans the New Israelites,” and “Anglo-Saxonism was their religion.”¹⁰⁰

Political Power and the Nation-State

With this white supremacist corrosion of Christian theology complete, the last factor links Christianity with the political power of the nation-state, as evident

in the national seal example. The theological developments that led to antagonistic dualisms between body and soul, Christian and non-Christian beliefs, and white and nonwhite bodies theologically predisposed Christians to become oppressors.¹⁰¹ When this disposition was united with political authority, specifically a colonial power, it was given the force to effect this oppression all over the globe. This power only expanded when the political landscape shifted with the rise of modern nation-states. As wars between religious groups exploded across Europe during this same period of colonialism, the rivalries between nation-states mixed with the holy-war mentality remaining from the Crusades to transform Christians' notions of love into group loyalty and justification of violence toward anyone outside of one's group. That is, the crusading mentality significantly corrupted visions of Christian social responsibility that simultaneously developed into an ethnonationalist identity of the nation-state.¹⁰² Viewing those outside of one's state as a degenerate "other" was a culmination of the transformation of religious enemy to racial outsider.

Additionally, Carter argues that the same modern discourse that molded racial discourse and white supremacy also gave rise to the modern state and its apparatus of power—often disguised in the form of liberal democracy, or sovereignty as the will of the people. Referencing the insights of Michel Foucault, Carter notes the way a people produces, defines, reproduces, and redefines itself continually as a people over and against other people. As a group begins to see itself as a nation-state, an identity arises between that people and the state, but quickly takes on a bellicosity that can only conceive of itself in agonistic relation to other nation-states, and thus to other peoples. The nation, in this way, incorporates itself through a nationalism that racializes other peoples and can only imagine them as enemies.¹⁰³ The state presumes to save its people from violent human division through the creation of an exclusive social body, identified in antagonistic relation to other peoples.¹⁰⁴ As William Cavanaugh explains, "The nation-state tends to develop its own . . . worldview and a discipline which aspires to train us in certain virtues, to mold our thoughts and our actions."¹⁰⁵ The modern arrangement was that the church was charged with care for soul and the nation-state with care for (or control of) the body, but as it turns out, the state is not satisfied with just the body; it wants to colonize the soul as well. The state derives its power from and legitimates that power with theological language, and requires ultimate allegiance from its subjects-citizens.

Race and nation-state formed twin products of modern discourse shaped by the racial anxiety of a world that now included contact with ethnic others. Douglas claims that the state often implicitly draws upon an implicit natural-law theology that risks the moral collapse of *is* into *ought*: "The world, the way that it is, is viewed as the way it ought to be."¹⁰⁶ If those with political authority—those

with the power to create law—“rationally” discern the good and proper within a world that they believe was divinely created with levels of inferiority and superiority, then this entanglement of theology and state “serves to justify unjust structures, and thus it sanctifies an oppressive status quo.”¹⁰⁷ Morality becomes naturalized; specifically in this case, once dark-skinned people are evaluated and classified as naturally inferior, this quickly becomes a theological truth that justifies their mistreatment. The linking of a dualistic theology to political power, and the desire to maintain the social and cultural status quo that preserves this power, resulted in the diseased theological imagination that interpreted black bodies as subject to slavery and death.

The four factors identified here are not the only contributors to the emergence of white supremacy. One might discover other resources within particular atonement theories, interpretations of Scripture, or elsewhere. Still, these factors illuminate a contiguous line between early dualism and modern racism. White supremacy did not emerge as an isolated tumor in the tradition or an external factor; it emerged from within Christianity. In more popular terminology, white supremacy was not a bug but a feature. When a dangerous constellation of theological factors was exposed to the new situation of colonial encounter with the dark-skinned other, and Europeans had to make sense of human otherness within their Christian social imagination, these elements converged to birth white supremacy. This malformed theology—infused from its earliest years with the resources to support white supremacy—is now malforming, continuing to shape the world according to its imagination.

4. *The Legacy of White Supremacy in the Theologies of Rauschenbusch and Niebuhr*

Recognizing the ways these corrupted theological impulses have generated and abetted the practices of slavery, Jim Crow, and racial segregation in U.S. history, as well as the white American church’s justification and support of them, is not difficult. These theological impulses have granted legitimacy to America’s racial caste system, founded upon a theologically invented doctrine of white supremacy. One could easily discern these theological corruptions in the sermons of antebellum southern pastors or theologians who defend of segregation. Yet, in order to fully observe their power and identify the ways they have persisted into the twentieth century to infect and inflect white theology in the United States, I turn now to two of America’s most prominent and influential theologians, both respected as progressive social voices in their time. Walter Rauschenbusch and Reinhold Niebuhr serve as important test cases not only because they were the

key figures of two of America's most important theological movements since the Civil War: the social gospel and Christian realism. Rauschenbusch and Niebuhr also illuminate the power of white supremacy to corrupt theological personalities and systems that perceived themselves to be contributors to racial equality and justice. In order to see the power of the four corrupting theological elements of whiteness identified earlier as well as the "colorblind" elements of individualism and projected universalism (analyzed in the previous chapter), we should investigate if they persist, and in what forms, in the theologies of the most formative progressive figures of the previous century.

Rauschenbusch and Niebuhr were both aware of racial injustice in the United States, and unlike many theologians and pastors of their days, they determined to use the resources of their theological perspectives to address the issue. But each serves as an example of the ways white supremacy exists as a sinister canopy casting a wicked shadow over even the best-intended efforts. Both theologians exhibited a general blindness to the complexities of the issue. While eventually addressing the "race problem," Rauschenbusch viewed it primarily as an issue for the American South. Serving as a pastor and theologian in Hell's Kitchen in New York City in the first decades of the twentieth century, Rauschenbusch never collaborated with black leaders to develop social goals or expand his vision of social evil to include racism.¹⁰⁸ New York City was still primarily white at this time, and his lack of encounter with the reality of black suffering led to a belief that it was the South's problem to solve.¹⁰⁹ Niebuhr, on the other hand, lived in Detroit in the 1910s and 1920s during the "great migration" of black people from the South, and in Harlem during its renaissance of the 1930s and 1940s. Niebuhr could not avoid seeing the reality of black life in America. While a pastor in Detroit he served as chair of the Mayor's Committee on Race Relations and on the board of a farming co-op in the Mississippi Delta.¹¹⁰ Reflecting on these experiences he observed the situation of African Americans as a "really desperate one" and claimed that most people do not understand "the misery and pain which exists among these people."¹¹¹ He called white racial pride a "form of original sin" and advocated for nonviolent coercive strategies like boycotts.¹¹² Yet, as Traci West argues, despite living in Harlem, he was blind to black women activists like Ella Baker, right outside the window of his Union Seminary office, who were already carrying out the nonviolent strategies of boycotts that he proposed. West suggests that Niebuhr evinces the "erasure of the significance of what people of color were doing and thinking within history."¹¹³

Rauschenbusch and Niebuhr serve not only as examples of the way well-intentioned Christians are embedded within an expansive repertoire of white supremacist theological concepts that inflect their theological perspectives. These theologians also serve as a bridge between the formative factors in Christianity's

development of white supremacy (see chapters 1 and 2 in this volume) and the way similar elements frame the discussion of race and racism in contemporary theology (chapters 3–4). That is, as I mentioned in the introduction, Rauschenbusch and Niebuhr cultivated the theological ground that produced Hauerwas and Cone. It is difficult to understand the emergence of postliberalism and black theology without accounting for the theological innovations and shortcomings of the social gospel and Christian realism. Therefore, I show here, for both Rauschenbusch and Niebuhr, how one or more of the factors described in this chapter shape the way they approach the question of race. These same elements presage the comparative account I offer of Hauerwas and Cone in part II of this book.

Rauschenbusch and the Social Gospel

In a 1914 essay, “The Problem of the Black Man,” Walter Rauschenbusch expressed regret for not addressing the race problem. Yet even his meager late-career attempts never completely remedied this oversight. The social gospel emerged at the turn of the twentieth century, proposing to “Christianize the social order” in the face of growing economic and social crises. It may seem surprising, then, that Rauschenbusch had little to say about race in spite of the fact that the social gospel reached its apex during the United States’ worst years for lynching. In fact, Preston Williams contends that the social gospel’s “astigmatism” regarding race was no simple oversight, but an embedded feature of its mode of analysis.¹¹⁴

But racial oppression was not simply a blind spot for Rauschenbusch. His failure to address racial justice was a larger symptom of his methodology and the broader perspective and aims of the social gospel. In his messages about love and social progress he enjoined Christians to love without distinction for race. Yet, because the situation of African Americans “seemed to me so tragic, so insoluble,” Rauschenbusch seldom found a way to speak beyond such platitudes and address the reality of racial injustice.¹¹⁵ Since the social gospel developed out of a European context that was dealing with issues of labor and poverty, and collaborated almost exclusively with white churches, Rauschenbusch “analyzed America in terms of class alone with no reference to race.”¹¹⁶ He considered racial injustice a problem limited to the American South that would gradually be resolved through economic reform.¹¹⁷ He did dedicate a few lines to lynching but mostly noted the economic “slavery” of the industrial system and mob violence as elements of “the present crisis” in Christianity and the social gospel failing to make a connection to lynching or the legacies of racial slavery. He frequently called on those suffering to wait patiently for God’s coming kingdom of justice.¹¹⁸

This gradualism and “superficial optimism” were characteristics of the social gospel that Martin Luther King Jr. would later suggest contributed to its failure to comprehend the systemic nature of racism and depths of suffering caused by it.¹¹⁹ Rauschenbusch’s optimistic account of human moral agency led him to support gradual change in achieving social justice. He employed the idyllic example of fruit trees blossoming to describe the gradual moral growth of society—“the culmination of a long process.”¹²⁰ God’s kingdom advances slowly, meaning that Christians “can afford to wait” while working for moderate social changes. All of this resulted in calls for patience in the struggle against racism. Rauschenbusch’s insistence that we “give it time” strikes a bold contrast with King’s later assertion of “Why we can’t wait.”¹²¹ Regarding the issue of race, then, Glenn Bucher claims that “the social gospel was less an effort to Christianize the social order and more a Christianing of the status quo.”¹²²

On a deeper level, Rauschenbusch and the social gospel reveal the persistence of Christian superiority and the remnants of the racial hierarchy that it constructed. Rauschenbusch wrote an extended version of his “The Problem of the Black Man” essay that focused on aiding the “belated race” and “backward people,” which include “the Negroes of the Black Belt.”¹²³ He recognized the devastating effects of colonialism and Christian missionary activity upon these communities but perceived their only hope for social progress in the work of white Christians. Rauschenbusch identified the real problem of race as “how to get a really quickening and uplifting religion implanted” in these backward communities—a claim that suggests two aspects of the Christian superiority described earlier: (1) the acceptance of a racial taxonomy that placed whites as intellectually and morally higher than blacks, and (2) the belief in Christian exceptionalism—that Christianity was not the culprit but, in fact, the only solution to the race problem.¹²⁴

First, while encouraging the black community to engage in nonviolent civil disobedience in order to achieve greater self-determination, Rauschenbusch simultaneously addressed black people paternalistically as culturally “backward” and as among the “belated” races. “The Christian way out,” he proclaimed, “is to take our belated black brother by the hand and urge him along the road of steady and intelligent labor, of property rights, of family fidelity, of hope and self-confidence.”¹²⁵ In other words, African Americans were a backward group that needed to be “urge[d]” along by the “hand” of white leaders to self-determination by instilling Christian values like family commitment and “stead[iness].”

This vision of white racial superiority was fueled by an embrace of the “new science” of social Darwinism, which led social gospel leaders to uncritically accept the assumptions of the racial pseudoscience of their day.¹²⁶ The social gospel, in its eagerness to distance itself from the anti-intellectual tone of fundamentalist

and conventional Christianity, embraced cultural and scientific ideas like evolution. But in this cultural period, accepting evolution also meant accepting theories of racial stages of development—superior and inferior races. Rauschenbusch too easily promoted the racist presuppositions of the period with too little criticism and resistance. For him and the other social gospellers, Preston Williams claims, “Evolutionary theory provided an explanation for the visible difference between blacks and whites and suggested a new understanding of God’s creative act” in which different races matured at different rates.¹²⁷ These “belated races,” as Rauschenbusch would call them—those who trailed behind the white race in civil evolution—needed the assistance of the more advanced races for social progress.

This led not only to a cultural accommodation in Rauschenbusch’s theology but also to a white Christian exceptionalism: the conviction that only when (white) church members reach out to these belated communities can they “can expand the intellectual horizon of these people, awaken their intellectual appetites, elevate their music and art, create a new architecture, set new standards for their marriage customs and the comforts of their homes, and in one generation lead them farther in social progress than they would have moved unaided for centuries.”¹²⁸ The white Christian church, according to Rauschenbusch, is the only institution capable of bringing the belated races to social salvation.¹²⁹ According to Daryl Trimiew, this conviction was based on an assumption that “only Anglo-American males were moral agents fit to make changes in society.”¹³⁰ Rauschenbusch’s outlook suggests a second aspect of Christian superiority: an ecclesial exceptionalism that perceived as external to Christianity the factors that oppress the belated races. The social gospel was concerned with reforming society through ecclesial means rather than uncovering problems internal to the church, thus rendering its theologians blind to the ways that the church perpetuated or even caused evils like white supremacy.

Niebuhr and Christian Realism

The optimism and sentimental hope of the social gospel began to dismantle in the trenches of World War I. Taking as his starting point for theological reflection “the facts of experience,”¹³¹ Reinhold Niebuhr became the key figure in the emergence of Christian realism, a theological movement cognizant of the sinful self-interest of society and concerned with creating tolerable forms of order and justice through rational analysis of a given situation.¹³² Niebuhr’s realism in some ways allowed him to see the depth and complexity of the issue. By assessing the facts of experience and all the factors that contribute to it, especially self-interest and power, Niebuhr gained a fuller understanding of the race situation.

Perceiving the structural nature of racism, the theologian knew that interpersonal strategies—for example, race commissions or relying on the goodwill and philanthropy of well-meaning white citizens—were limited because “they operate within a given system of injustice” and do not address political and economic factors.¹³³ Niebuhr famously admitted that “the white race in America will not admit the Negro to equal rights if it is not forced to do so.”¹³⁴ Such sober reflections made him less confident of various panaceas proposed to resolve racism. In fact, he lamented, “There is no absolute solution to this problem.”¹³⁵

These prescient observations did not, however, render Niebuhr immune to the universalizing tendencies of whiteness, or other ways of evading the depth of the problem, and his own complicity in it. While his realism allowed him to perceive the reality of racial injustice in ways obscured for Rauschenbusch, such realism is also to blame for Niebuhr’s failures.¹³⁶ Niebuhr perceived the reasons black people were impatient with calls for patience, but he still believed that “prudence is what is demanded in such critical situations as this one”;¹³⁷ Niebuhr suggested that “on the side of minority groups a little more Christian realism [and compromise] would also have its advantages.”¹³⁸ These concerns are revealed by his worry that his former Detroit church would integrate too quickly,¹³⁹ or his claim that the *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling mandating the separate-but-equal policy was “a very good doctrine for its day.” His reasoning was that anything more radical would have prompted revolt.¹⁴⁰ Christian realists maintain a clear sense of human sinfulness and therefore tend to seek the most “realistic” solution available in a fallen world. Niebuhr’s ethical pragmatism led him to promote a “gradual and evolutionary process” of social change. He condoned applying pressure through coercive measures like bank boycotts and nonviolent resistance, but insisted that such pressure must be “gradually applied.”¹⁴¹ He recognized why African Americans were impatient with calls for patience, but still considered patience “the course of wisdom in overcoming historic injustices.”¹⁴² As Robert Bellah contends, a danger of Christian realism is that it may blind us to the desperate realities in which we live. Bellah continues, with realism “one may be forced into the defense of established interests on the grounds that after all, human nature being what it is, this is the best we can expect.”¹⁴³ Also indicting the pragmatism of Niebuhr’s realist theology, James Cone concludes, “Niebuhr had ‘eyes to see’ black suffering, but I believe he lacked the ‘heart to feel’ it as his own.”¹⁴⁴

Like Rauschenbusch, these failures betray the persistence of the racial taxonomy forged from white supremacist theology. Niebuhr frequently used the term *cultural backwardness* to describe African Americans without ever fully defining what he meant.¹⁴⁵ For example, he insisted that the black race in the United States suffers partly because of its “cultural backwardness [which is] only transcended by the most gifted members of the race.”¹⁴⁶ So, even while advocating

for the “peculiar spiritual gifts of the Negro,” he simultaneously essentialized the race as one of “vindictiveness” and “lethargy.”¹⁴⁷ Such beliefs would lead him to express sympathy for white southerners who had “honest scruples” about “common education for races with different cultural inheritances.”¹⁴⁸ Thus, Niebuhr would grant that “cultural differences between the two races are still great enough to warrant a certain amount of disquiet on the part of the [white] parents.”¹⁴⁹ Therefore patience and prudence were necessary measures to appease these anxious parents.¹⁵⁰

One piece of evidence for Niebuhr’s implicit racial taxonomy lies in his confutations of communism, in which he addresses why some people—specifically Russians (whom he distinguishes racially from Europeans)—may be susceptible to its allures. He writes that rather than economic or political reasons, the real explanation is “the soul of an Asiatic rather than a European nation” and its “very lack of intellectual sophistication.”¹⁵¹ The reason Russians were susceptible to communist manipulation lies in their racial inferiority. Niebuhr never says this explicitly, of course. Rather, he engages in the colorblind language game of naming “culture” as the marker of inferiority—an increasingly transparent stand-in for race from the time of the U.S. Republican Party’s Southern Strategy (see chapter 1) to present-day debates over entitlement programs. For Niebuhr, the “primitive culture” of the Russians rendered them unsophisticated by the “influences of intellectualism.” As Traci West observes, “It seems for him, when measured against the European soul, the ‘Asiatic soul’ [of the Russian] was lacking. To Niebuhr, this racial deficit explains why the Russian people were so available for manipulation.”¹⁵² Perhaps this same taxonomy of racial superiority and inferiority, with Europeans placed at the top, explains the need for white liberals’ paternalism in their dealings with and advocacy for African Americans. All of this simply highlights the “white superiority inherent in Niebuhr’s audacity” to locate flaws in the struggle in terms of “Negro character flaws” as well as “liberal, white self-interest in maintaining paternalistic superiority over the Negro.”¹⁵³ In Cone’s words, it is another case of white people, who, whether “for us or against us . . . [,] seem to think that they know what is best for our struggle.”¹⁵⁴

In his attempts at an unvarnished realism regarding racism, Niebuhr frequently invoked “racial pride.” Yet, for him, this was “a general human shortcoming,”¹⁵⁵ an inevitable and ubiquitous symptom of what he calls “the ethnic will to live” that exists within every racial group. Here Niebuhr displays the universalizing tendency of whiteness that I addressed in chapter 1, as well as the antagonistic dualisms that emerged from Christian theology and the European church’s encounter with other races. Niebuhr believes that whenever one racial group encounters another, this integration generates a collective “survival impulse.”¹⁵⁶ Thus, all racial groups “tend to preserve their self-respect by adopting

contemptuous attitudes toward other groups and to express their appreciation of their own characteristic culture by depreciating that of others.”¹⁵⁷ He suggested that black and white leaders not analyze racism as primarily white supremacy but as a “universal characteristic of *Homo sapiens*.” As evidence he cites northern black men who contribute to racial injustice as much as their white counterparts. These are the effect of “man’s incapacity to comprehend his own finiteness,” or as he believes, the root of all sin.¹⁵⁸

Niebuhr understands that the source of human sin is to be found in humanity’s willful refusal to acknowledge the finite and determinate character of our existence. “Man seeks to overcome his insecurity by a will-to-power to overreach limits of creatureliness,” he says.¹⁵⁹ In light of this reality of universal racial prejudice, Niebuhr proposes “mutual repentance and forgiveness” on the part of all groups.¹⁶⁰ According to Cornel West, however, Niebuhr’s theological definition of sin as existential anxiety followed by pride, and promotion of that as a universal reality, “presumes that one is uncertain about the sources of one’s suffering and the basis of hope for redemption.”¹⁶¹ This may be true for white liberals like Niebuhr, but not for black people in America. By invoking the universal nature of sin, including the sin of racism, and the universal need for forgiveness and repair, Niebuhr flattens the sins and prejudice of all racial groups into a false equivalence.¹⁶² He, like Rauschenbusch a few decades before, exemplifies the lingering impact of Christianity’s long legacy of white supremacy—from its early antagonistic dualisms to modern colorblindness.

James Cone observes, “Whether we speak of Jonathan Edwards, Walter Rauschenbusch, or Reinhold Niebuhr as America’s greatest theologian, none of them made the rejection of white supremacy central to their understanding of the gospel.” He adds, “It takes a lot of theological blindness to do that.”¹⁶³ This blindness is a symptom of a larger legacy of white supremacy that was both invented by and corrosive for Christian theology. The problem does not lie elsewhere as something that the Christian church can resolve. Rather, it continues to inflect and corrupt white Christian theology, even among those who consider ourselves working to eradicate it.

5. *Conclusion: Thus Have We Made the World*

The pollution of our baptismal waters is ubiquitous. At stake here is not just a matter of white Europeans using Christianity, among a number of options, to justify white supremacy. Rather, these white Europeans were white supremacists because they were Christian. I am not claiming that Christianity was the only oppressive religion or ideology that resourced dehumanization, slavery, or genocide. My assertion in this chapter is that the particular form of oppression that

is white supremacy was a symptom of their Christianity. This legacy of Western Christianity is now our responsibility.

Whiteness originated within our tradition; it stewed in our sanctuaries, was proclaimed from our pulpits and with our pens, and spread with our slave ships. It shapes the work of some of our most revered and progressive theologians. This legacy continues to hold captive the modern, white Christian imagination, now abetted by a colorblindness that refuses to reckon with this inheritance. Whether memorialized in a twisted or burning cross or a painting of a porcelain Jesus hanging in the church narthex, we have unleashed this invention on the world in white nationalist rallies and quotidian microaggressions.

There is a chilling scene at the conclusion of the film *The Mission*, about missionary activity in the South American colonies. As the Jesuit priests prove unable to prevent the slaughter and enslavement of the natives by their own church partnership with the colonial state, the Portuguese governor attempts to reassure the cardinal who is now lamenting his support. He tells the cardinal, "We must work in the world, and the world is thus." But staring at the devastation his church had just wrought, the astute cardinal corrects him: "No, thus we have made the world."¹⁶⁴ White Christians provided the logic, worldview, rationalizations, and stories that have shifted the weight of the world onto the backs of nonwhites. For our crucial roles in producing and maintaining this system of white supremacy, Jeannine Hill Fletcher contends, "Theologians are not only responsible for the past construction of ideologies of White supremacy and conditions of dispossession for people of color. Those past constructions of White supremacy created the conditions of the racialized disparity we experience in the United States today."¹⁶⁵

Our diseased theological imagination has infected the world and re-created it in the image of the masked white supremacy that holds us captive. Put simply, white supremacy is an infection we gave to the world; it is our responsibility to do something about it. This means, first, heeding the Apostle Paul's words, to take care of our own house (1 Timothy 3:4–5). We cannot propose to help with the world's redemption while our own house is out of order with a contagion of racism that continues to infect all our global neighbors. In the same way that most American theology portrays the character of whiteness, whiteness itself has an inherent theological quality. Because of the way the two are tethered, as I hope to have shown in this chapter, in the next I provide a deeper analysis of white theology in its most popular and influential form. We must first more deeply and painfully examine our own theology in order to uncover and uproot the products and causes of white supremacy that have extended throughout our theology. The problem is worse than we thought, and the effort to undo this harm will be more difficult than we expect. We must exorcise our own demons.