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Taking Hold of Reality

White Protestant Theology and Racism at the End of White Christian America

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Abstract

This essay places twentieth century white U.S. Protestant theology in conversation with the liberation theologies of Ignacio Ellacuría and James Cone. Drawing on Ellacuría's belief that theology begins with "taking hold of reality," it demonstrates the ways that the most prominent threads in white U.S. Protestant theology and ethics failed to take hold of the reality of racism, neglecting those Cone calls "the crucified people" in America – African Americans. It then argues that black liberation theology supplies the perspective and methodology – at least in U.S. Protestant theology – for following Ellacuría's proposal. The Black theology of Cone, in light of Ellacuría's concerns, offers a different model of doing theology in the U.S. context, one that corrects for the blindnesses and abstractions in conventional white Protestant theology.

Keywords: Liberation theology, ethics, racism, Protestant theology, James Cone, Walter Rauschenbusch, Reinhold Niebuhr, Stanley Hauerwas

Introduction

In the mountain village of Juayua, El Salvador, stands a white cathedral. In January 1932 the Salvadoran military executed hundreds, perhaps thousands of poor *campesinos* in the square facing this cathedral, as part of a massacre of over 30,000 indigenous peasants. Despite its porcelain façade, the cathedral is called the Church of the Black Christ because of the crucifix adorning its altar. Charred from 400 years of candle flames, this statue of Christ – transfigured into the dark skin of the murdered indigenous people – stands as a pilgrimage site and emblem of God’s solidarity with the oppressed. Such symbols and memories served as inspiration for Salvadoran priests and liberation theologians like Oscar Romero, Jon Sobrino, and Ignacio Ellacuría to write about the oppression of the “crucified peoples” of Latin America.

The Jesuit priest Ellacuría insisted that any theology concerned with discerning the activity and reign of God in the world must begin by “taking hold of reality” (Ellacuría 1987: 9). For him, this means “not only standing before the *idea* of things or their meaning” – theology as abstract divine ideas to be applied to reality – but actually joining people in their reality. It is “being among them through their active, material mediations,” a lived theology emerging from within the concrete and material conditions of the people seeking after God (Ellacuría 1975a: 419).¹ In light of the brutal reality that was facing the Salvadoran people – one of civil war, poverty and hunger, and governmental oppression – he proposed that theology must be “historicized,” by which he meant that any theological concept like salvation or utopia must be understood “as part of an ongoing historical process, to grasp how its usage interacts with, resists, or transforms, the various dynamisms that constitute one’s own specific historical situation” (Ashley: 146).² A historical method of doing theology, according to Ellacuría, “ought to be adequate to what history is: a real process encompassing all of human reality, personally and structurally considered” (Ellacuría 1975b: 12).

Moreover, and perhaps more importantly, Ellacuría insisted that the theologian cannot fully grasp this reality, one’s specific situation, without considering the “crucified people.” “A vast portion of humankind,” he lamented, “is literally and historically crucified by natural oppressions and especially by historical and personal oppressions” (Ellacuría 1993a: 581). Like the Black Christ hanging on a cross, the crucified people – the poor farmers and laborers long oppressed by state and church – provide a mirror to those with wealth, power, and privilege, revealing them for who they truly are. They reflect a reality that the powerful attempt to mask.

This means, for theologians in the U.S. to properly discern the work of God, we must take hold of our own reality by witnessing the crucified people in our midst (Sobrino: 5). In

¹ Ellacuría was one of six Jesuit priests and two others who were murdered in 1989 by a US-trained battalion of the Salvadoran military at the University of Central America, where he taught philosophy and theology, during the long civil war in El Salvador.

² This theological epistemology emerged in Ellacuría’s work due to the influence of his philosophical mentor, Xavier Zubiri. Zubiri criticized modern philosophy’s preoccupation with the mind over the material and being over reality. In contrast to this “logification of intelligence” and “entification of reality,” he sought a philosophical integration of “being rooted in reality” which illuminated the material and sensual dimensions and consequences of human thought. Ellacuría reasserted this epistemology in a theological register, contending that it was the only true way for a theologian to critically engage reality (Lassalle-Klein: 99-102, 90-92). I thank Matt Cuff for pointing me to this material and for discussions on Jesuit and liberation theology.

our context, Black and womanist theologians like James Cone, M. Shawn Copeland, and Kelly Brown Douglas have argued that the crucified bodies are the lynched bodies of African Americans (see Copeland 2010, Cone 2011, and Douglas 2015). In the US, the oppressed are Black (Cone 1969: 68).³ Whether oppressed by slavery, the terror of Jim Crow, the humiliation of segregation, or the more sinister and veiled forms of white supremacy we witness today, Cone writes, “If one wants to create an American Christian theology, one must begin with the experience of the slaves, the *crucified people* in American history” (Cone 2015).⁴ Yet, white Protestant theology in America has failed to do this.

This essay is a critical reflection upon my own theological heritage. I will briefly demonstrate how the most prominent threads in white U.S. Protestant theology and ethics have failed to take hold of the reality of racism, neglecting the crucified people. Over the last 150 years, since the end of the Civil War and emancipation of enslaved African Americans, white Protestant theological ethics in the United States has witnessed three major movements: the social gospel, Christian realism, and postliberalism. Each of these has engaged social and political concerns in successive attempts to correct for the inadequacies of its predecessor. Yet, despite their commitments to developing a political vision or social ethic, each has inadequately addressed the reality of racism in the US. In this way, they have failed at the theological task identified by Ellacuría and Catholic liberation theologians of taking hold of reality and have neglected one of the most consequential social and political issues during their time. I will focus on the work of the key figure in each movement, three of the most influential theologians in U.S. history: Walter Rauschenbusch, Reinhold Niebuhr, and Stanley Hauerwas, respectively.

But before turning to that task, I should first explain why I would expect these figures to adhere to the prescription of a Jesuit priest writing, in some cases, a quarter to half a century later. I make this argument for two reasons. First, I contend that Ellacuría’s vision of the task of theology is perennial and unavoidable. This is a descriptive claim: it simply *is* the way faith seeks understanding within contingent, conditioned human contexts. There is no way around it. My normative claim that follows is that theologians would speak more profoundly and truthfully if their human speech about God began by explicitly attending to those contingent, created, and fallen realities. Second, this is what each of these three theologians, in their own particular ways, professed to be doing. Rauschenbusch and Niebuhr were concerned about social issues but failed to adequately address what was undoubtedly one of the most pressing social problems of their moment. Additionally, Hauerwas, by contending that the church itself is a social ethic, fails to see the white supremacy promoted within the church.⁵ Consequently,

³ Cone was not the first to make this claim. A few earlier references in American history were Robert Alexander Young in his 1829 *Ethiopian Manifesto*, Henry McNeal Turner, who called God a “Negro” in an 1898 speech; and, of course, Countee Cullen in his 1928 poem titled “The Black Christ.”

⁴ In fact, in his posthumously published memoir, Cone claims that though he writes “out of my experience as an African American growing up in segregated Arkansas,” he writes “on behalf of all those whom the Salvadoran theologian and martyr Ignacio Ellacuría called the ‘crucified peoples of history’” (Cone 2018: 132).

⁵ See criticisms of the dangers of Hauerwas’s sharply bounded and self-contained ecclesiology in Tanner; Healy.

by not taking hold of reality, white American Protestant theology has perpetuated racial oppression by not tending to its own, often latent, white supremacy.

After briefly analyzing each theologian, I will argue that Black liberation theology supplies the perspective and methodology – at least in U.S. Protestant theology – for following Ellacuría’s proposal. Yet, as Ellacuría insists, taking hold of reality is only the first step. It must be followed by the tasks of “bearing the burden of reality” and “taking responsibility for reality,” which he defines as the work of “taking the crucified people down from the cross” (Ellacuría 1975a: 419; 1991: 119-24).⁶ I conclude by drawing on the work of James Cone to construct a model for what these tasks entail in our current U.S. reality. The Black theology of Cone, in light of Ellacuría’s concerns, offers white Protestant theologians resources for a different model of doing theology in the U.S. context, one that corrects for the blindnesses and abstractions in conventional white Protestant theology.

Rauschenbusch and the Social Gospel

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 its foremost theologian, Walter Rauschenbusch, had little to say about race in spite of the fact that the social gospel reached its apex during the worst years of lynching. In a 1914 essay on “The Problem of the Black Man,” he expressed regret for not addressing the race problem. Yet even his meager late-career attempts never remedied this oversight. 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 (Williams: 233, 236).

Rauschenbusch never collaborated with Black leaders to develop social goals or expand his vision of social evil to include racism (Trimiew: 29). Hell’s Kitchen, where he served as pastor of a Baptist congregation, 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 (Rauschenbusch 1914: 732). Additionally, 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, according to Williams, “analyzed America in terms of class alone with no reference to race” (236). He did offer a few lines to lynching, but mostly noted the *economic* “slavery” of the industrial system and outbursts of mob violence as elements of “the present crisis” in *Christianity and the Social Gospel* and failed to connect these to the legacies of racial slavery or mob lynchings (Guth: 18). There was no need to engage with the Black community, because the agency for social change resided with white Christians. Betraying his own beliefs in white superiority and accommodating the pseudo-scientific cultural assumptions of the day, he paternalistically enjoined the white church to “take our *belated* black brother by the hand and urge him along the road of steady and intelligent labor, of family fidelity, of hope and self-confidence” (Rauschenbusch 1914: 733). The Black community was a backward group, who needed to be “urged” along by the “hand” of white

⁶ Robert Lassalle-Klein describes these three steps in Ellacuría’s methodology as being present to reality, recognizing the ethical weight of reality, and transforming reality (Lassalle-Klein: 94-97). Ellacuría explains this final step as “taking away the sin of the world and making the incarnate life of God present in humanity and human relationships” (Ellacuría 1993b: 291).

leaders toward self-determination by instilling Christian values like family commitment and “steadiness” (read: patience).

This failure to attend to the urgent reality of racial oppression is also grounded, methodologically, in the theological underpinnings of the social gospel itself. Rauschenbusch considered racial injustice a problem limited to the American south that would gradually be resolved through economic reform (Rauschenbusch 1914: 732). But this gradualism and “superficial optimism” were characteristics of the social gospel that Martin Luther King would later suggest contributed to its failure to comprehend the systemic nature of racism and depths of suffering caused by it (King 2010: 87). Rauschenbusch’s optimistic account of human moral agency led to support of incremental 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” (Rauschenbusch 1991: 422). God’s kingdom advances slowly, meaning that Christians “can afford to wait” while working for gradual, incremental social changes. All of this resulted in calls for patience in the struggle against racism. His insistence that we “Give it time!” strikes a bold contrast with King’s later assertion of “Why we can’t wait.” (Rauschenbusch 1991: 142; King 1963). Regarding the issue of race, then, Glenn Bucher claims, “the social gospel was less an effort to Christianize the social order and more a Christianing of the status quo” (Bucher: 146).

Niebuhr and Christian Realism

The optimism and sentimental hope of the social gospel began to dismantle in the trenches of world war. Taking as his starting point for theological reflection “the facts of experience” (Niebuhr 1953: 119), Reinhold Niebuhr became the key figure of Christian realism, a theological movement sober to the sinful self-interest of society and concerned with creating tolerable forms of order and justice through rational analysis of particular situations (Niebuhr 1959a: 2, 7, 11). Niebuhr lived in Detroit in the 1910s and 20s during the “great migration” of Black people from the south, and in Harlem during the Renaissance of the 1930s and 40s. He could not avoid seeing the reality of Black life in America. While a pastor in Detroit he served as chairman of the Mayor’s Committee on Race Relations and on the board of a farming co-operative in the Mississippi Delta (West: 29-49, 33). 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” (Niebuhr 1965: 12). He called white racial pride a “form of original sin” and advocated for nonviolent coercive strategies like boycotts of segregated white-owned businesses (Niebuhr 1934: 285-86). However, he never deeply engaged with those in the struggle nor offered concrete calls for white repentance and reparation. James Cone claims that while Niebuhr wrote essays about race, it “was never one of his central theological or political concerns” (Cone 2011: 41).

As womanist ethicist 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 was busy proposing. She suggests that Niebuhr serves as an example of the “erasure of the significance of what people of color were doing and thinking within history” (West: 35). In fact, while expressing a white paternalism that blamed the suffering of African Americans, in part, on their “cultural

backwardness” (Edwards: 18)⁷ he expressed sympathy for white southerners opposed to school integration who had “honest scruples” about “common education for races with different cultural inheritances” (Niebuhr 1959b: 542). Patience and prudence were necessary measures to appease these anxious parents.

Again, methodologically, these were symptoms of his realist approach. It allowed him to recognize the reasons Black people were impatient with calls for patience, but still to believe that “prudence is what is demanded in such critical situations as this one” (Niebuhr 2015: 677) and to suggest that “on the side of minority groups a little more Christian realism [and compromise] would also have its advantages” (Niebuhr 2015: 652). These concerns are evinced by his worry that his former Detroit church would integrate too quickly or his claim that the *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling mandating the separate-but-equal policy was “a very good doctrine for its day.” This was because anything more radical would have prompted revolt (Niebuhr 1957: 150). Christian realists maintain a clear sense of human sinfulness and, therefore, tend to seek the most “realistic” solution available in a fallen world. This political pragmatism, however, often forces them into support of the status quo or gradualism. As Robert Bellah contends, a danger of Christian realism “is that 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” (369). Indicting the pragmatism of his 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” (Cone 2011: 41).

The racial blindness of both Rauschenbusch and Niebuhr are revealing because they were not only two of America’s most prominent and influential theologians, but were both respected as progressive social voices in their time. Both Rauschenbusch and Niebuhr were aware of racial injustice in the US, 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 (Douglas 2005: 9). They illuminate the power of white supremacy to prevent even progressive theologians and methods (ones that perceived themselves to be contributors to racial equality and progress) from fully taking hold of the reality of racism and taking down those crucified by racial oppression.

Hauerwas and Postliberal Theology

Beginning his career in the waning years of the civil rights movement, Stanley Hauerwas became a key figure of postliberal theology, a method that self-consciously departed from the previous two threads. It explicitly condemned their cultural and political accommodation to liberalism, proposing instead a turn inward to the church’s distinctiveness and commitment to its own formative narrative and practices. Hauerwas has written only a handful of essays on race despite a large corpus on issues from war to bioethics to disability, and admits that he does not engage the issue because he worries about instrumentalizing the struggle of African Americans for his own intellectual purposes. He claims that the Black experience is “not my story” to tell (Hauerwas 1997: 225). “That we continue in separate worlds is a deep sadness,” he says, “but also a certain sense that white/black names different worlds that need to be

⁷ See citations to Niebuhr’s consistent use of this term in Edwards: 18.

respected” (Hauerwas 2015). His claim that “knowing whom I’m writing about makes it much easier” to write about an issue in light of his lack of attention to the issue (Hauerwas 2015), reveals his personal and epistemological distance from the realities of black suffering. All of this has led him to silence.⁸

In the few times he has written about the topic, he has either weaponized race as a tool against liberalism or theologized it away from its empirical realities – both strategies of abstraction. In essays on King and on racial violence he instrumentalizes race and America’s desire to forget its racist history as tools to critique liberalism (Hauerwas 1997: 225-34; 2000: 139-54). But more revealing, in one of his more recent treatment of race, he frames it as a doctrinal issue, specifically, “an effort to deny the sovereignty of God.” He concludes that, “Once a person has truly seen this truth, that person can no longer be a racist” (Hauerwas 2008: 98). Yet by making such a move he evades the complexity of the issue and dismisses the insights of black theologians like James Cone that any theological account of race must begin with a social analysis – a taking hold of reality – in order to have any concrete effect (Cone 1982).

Both of these reactions reflect the essentializing tendencies in a postliberal account of narrative, in which the “white” story and “Black” story remain closed systems and can only be comprehended within the grammar of the community they form. Otherwise, they are incommensurable across different communities of formation. Hauerwas’s disavowal of any language that smells of liberalism prevents him from appealing to mediating concepts like justice or democratic process to find language to bridge these stories.⁹ His only attempt to do so in a theological register (racism is really a misunderstanding of God’s sovereignty) simply obfuscates the concrete realities of racism (Hauerwas 2008: 98).

Hauerwas’s postliberal white theology offers an important contrast to Rauschenbusch and Niebuhr. He saw them as erring on the side of cultural accommodation.¹⁰ While this rejects some of the ways white supremacy had infused their theology, his alternative only reified other elements of white supremacy. That is, in Hauerwas’s rejection of their cultural or political accommodation, we see the way he positions racism as a sin outside of the church. By rejecting the sins of the world and turning inward to the story and practices of the church for moral formation, Hauerwas believes Christians can avoid racism. But this fails to understand racism as a “distortion in the grammar of the Christian faith” itself (Logan: 525) and forsakes the role of the church in perpetuating racism through its historical support of slavery and Jim Crow and continued segregation and general unwillingness to support secular movements for racial justice. Thus, while Hauerwas’s postliberal theology attempts to correct for some of the methodological oversights in both the social gospel and Christian realism, it

⁸ For a more comprehensive assessment of Hauerwas’s silence on racism see Norris. Some material used here with permission.

⁹ See both Albrecht and Stout for criticisms of Hauerwas’s aversion to language of liberalism, justice, or democracy. For a pithy example of this aversion simply read the subtitle of Hauerwas’s *After Christendom: How the Church Is to Behave if Freedom, Justice, and a Christian Nation Are Bad Ideas* (1991).

¹⁰ See, for example, Hauerwas 2001, in which he contends that Niebuhr “assumed that Christianity must be tested by standards generally accepted by the intellectual elites of the day” (87).

succumbs to another form of blindness and abstraction when it comes to taking hold of the U.S. reality of white supremacy.

Cone and Black Liberation Theology

Reflecting on this history of white Protestant theology in America, James Cone, the founder of Black liberation theology, 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” (Cone 2011: 159). Cone began his career following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., and ensuing riots across U.S. cities. He returned home to his Black neighborhood, and, from an office in his brother’s AME church, launched Black liberation theology with his 1969 *Black Theology and Black Power*. He developed a theological method that spoke to the reality of the black experience in America and recognized the blindnesses in white theology. He insisted, “[White theologians] do not recognize the narrowness of their experience and the particularity of their theological expressions” (Cone 1975a: 126). In other words, white theologians are blind to the contextually dependent nature of all theology (Cone 1969: 73). We do not recognize how our theologies already reflect the reality that has taken hold of us – a reality distanced from and unconcerned about black suffering.

Cone appeals, methodologically, to Ludwig Feuerbach and Karl Marx to argue for the contextuality of all intellectual thought. This means that all thinking is dependent on a social *a priori*, but this is particularly true for theological thinking. “Theology is subjective speech about God,” he notes, “a speech that tells us far more about the hopes and dreams of certain God-talkers than about the Maker and Creator of heaven and earth” (Cone 1975a: 40, 38). Ideas do not have independent existence but are a social product of theologians’ reflections about divine things, and are always intertwined with manifestations of actual life. In other words, revelation is universal and eternal; but theological talk about that revelation is always filtered through human experience (Cone 1975a: 39). One cannot understand revelation to be a deposit of fixed doctrines, because there is no truth outside of the concrete historical events in which people are engaged as agents (Cone 1984: 148).¹¹ In this sense, theology is second-order critical reflection upon a people’s prior affirmations and political commitments. All questions and answers about the gospel are filtered through their social contexts and actually reveal more about the material conditions of a given society than they do some abstract and universal truth about God.

Allowing that all theology is situated in history means understanding that it is a task performed by human beings and must begin with “the human situation as perceived from a particular standpoint of a given people” (Cone 1984: 148). Theological speech is always limited by history, time, and community. “It is interested language,” Cone says, “reflecting the values and aspirations of a particular people in a particular time and place” (Cone 1975b: 144). Theological discourse attempts to advance toward the truth and discern the character and

¹¹ He appeals to Gustavo Gutierrez, who claims, “Theology is done by persons who, whether they know it or not, are caught up in particular social processes. Consequently, all theology is in part a reflection of this or that concrete process. Theology is not something disembodied or atemporal” (Cone 1984: 172).

activity of God. It reveals something about the meaning of the world around us, but this meaning is inflected through the context and experience of the ones doing and reading the theology. This means that theology must self-reflexively engage with the concrete reality and context within which it is developed.

This is true for white Protestant theology today. I write this in a time that some call “the end of white Christian America” (Jones). For the last century and a half, these three movements have helped construct a culture of “white Christian America” that has dominated U.S. politics and society. And while demographic and religious shifts signal the waning of this cultural monopoly, its legacy of racism and supremacy live on. And whatever comes next will have to reflect on and confront this history and reality.

Ellacuría and Cone: A New Theological Model

In conclusion I will demonstrate the ways that Cone’s theology corrects for the blindnesses and evasions in white Protestant theology and provides resources for a different model of doing theology in the U.S. context – one that begins by taking hold of our shared reality. Cone directs his writing primarily to the Black community for the purpose of their liberation and self-determination. While he criticizes white theology, white theologians are not his primary concern. In fact, he addresses Niebuhr substantively in only one chapter of one book (Cone 2010: 30-64), and rarely if ever references Rauschenbusch or Hauerwas. In many ways, he is simply not that concerned with us. Consequently, while he does offer a different model of theology, he does not suggest ways that white theologians ought to apply that model to our own work. He compels white Christians to “become black” with the Black Christ as the only way of joining in solidarity with the “crucified peoples” (Cone 1969: 151; 1970: 124-25). Yet he does not provide a map or method for how white Christians might do so. Some interpretive work is necessary in order to convey the gravity of his criticism for white theology and to uncover the resources he offers us for correcting our old habits. In what follows in this section, I argue for the ways Cone provides resources for white Protestant theologians by examining his theological method through the framework provided by another theologian concerned with the “crucified people,” Ignacio Ellacuría.

Each of the old, white Protestant models addressed above begins with a theological system that diagnoses social problems from a distance and, from this unreflective position, proposes antidotes. But this model assumes that our divine ideas will make us well, that we can contest sins like racism by thinking rightly about God or rightly about society without first engaging with those suffering from these sins. This model ends up proposing that we can unmake our racism by patiently waiting on God, calculating the most realistic step, or properly understanding the sovereignty of God.

With the aid of Ellacuría and Cone, we must now refuse this way of thinking about the theological task. Instead, theology must begin with “the human situation as perceived from a particular standpoint of a given people” as its point of departure (Cone 1984: 172). In other words, their model reveals that we cannot properly discern the work of God in the world without “taking hold of our reality” and taking bodies down from the cross. Now I should note a couple disclaimers regarding what I mean by “their model.” First, Cone’s debt to Latin American liberation theology is ambiguous. Despite emerging simultaneously, Cone does not often reference liberation theologians in his work, aside from a few quotations of Gustavo

Gutierrez, a couple chapters on international conferences, and the reference to Ellacuría noted above. Second, correcting the mistakes of white theology was never Cone's objective. The analysis of and corrections to the mistakes of the social gospel, realism, and postliberalism in this essay are my own use of Cone's work for critical self-reflection upon my own theological heritage. Still, my argument is if white American Protestant theologians were to take seriously Ellacuría's claim about the task of theology, then we would turn to a theologian like Cone as our guide, and our work in taking hold, bearing, and taking responsibility for reality would look something like what follows in this final section.

Taking Hold of Reality

Taking hold of our reality compels theology to include social analysis to illuminate its social location and uncover the structural roots of its position as oppressed, oppressor, or both (Cone 1984: 174). Theology proceeds in dialogue with social theory, Cone says, and learns from liberation theology to "actualize its Christian identity through social analysis and political participation on behalf of the victims of economic justice" (Cone 1982: 140).

In the U.S. context of racial oppression against Black bodies, spanning 400 years from Middle Passage to prison industrial complex, this analysis requires memory. White people must remember our own racial malformation and examine the ignorance, distance, and methodologies that allowed the theology of white Christian America to cultivate and perpetuate white supremacy. Cone writes, "Whites today cannot separate themselves from the culture that lynched blacks, unless they confront their history and expose the sin of white supremacy" (Cone 2011: 165). Despite our inclinations to forget this past and move hastily toward reconciliation, we cannot easily dispense with the history that informs our formation (Butler: 170).¹²

This requires addressing painful memories of our collective past. "My hope is that whites will be redeemed from their blindness," Cone says, "and open their eyes to the terror of their deeds so they will know we are all of one blood and what we do to others we do to ourselves" (Cone 2015). Joining womanist theologians M. Shawn Copeland, Angela D. Sims, and Kelly Brown Douglas who point to the history of lynching to inform an analysis of racial oppression (see Copeland 2010, 2018; Sims; and Douglas 2015), he says, "If white people and black people are going to be reconciled, they have to do that looking at the lynched bodies, the enslaved bodies, the Trayvon Martins. You've got to look them in the eye, their mothers, their fathers, their future" (Cone 2016). And then allow our theology to develop from that standpoint.

Bearing the Burden of Reality

Taking hold of reality by looking at the lynched bodies, past and present, suggests the second task of theology – bearing the burden of the reality we see. Reckoning with this collective history and its persistent effects, according to Cone, necessarily takes the form of repentance. Despite all three of the white Protestant theologians resisting the Protestant individualism that views repentance as an individual act, they never saw it as an act that

¹² Judith Butler reminds us that I cannot simply "dispense with the history of my formation." I can only struggle against repeating its effects. "The point is not to eradicate the condition's of one's own production," she says, "but only to assume responsibility for living a life that contests the determining power of that production" (170).

involved submitting to the group to which one repents. Hauerwas, in an essay actually titled “Bearing Reality,” admits that philosophical – or perhaps even theological – discourse is often “an attempt at ‘deflection,’” a way of making “bodies mere facts that may or may not be relevant to the issue at hand” (Hauerwas 2013: 145-46).¹³ He contends that theology should not be used as a superficial solution to the difficulties of reality, but, instead, points us to the church as a community that helps us go on living without engaging in false hopes (Hauerwas 2013: 157).

This view of the task of theology proposed by Hauerwas approaches the repentant mode that Cone enjoins. Yet, it still stops short of suggesting that repentance – and thus, the task of bearing the burden of reality – demands listening to the voices of others re-narrate our story in ways to which we were deaf. White Christians must continually challenge our whiteness by submitting in full accountability to black leaders and theologians until our “value system is now defined by the oppressed engaged in the liberation struggle” (Cone 1975a: 242-43). In this way, repentance breaks down the incommensurability and distance (conceptual or physical) between the white and black story that inhibited Rauschenbusch, Niebuhr, and Hauerwas, and places the history of white theology “at another’s feet, for another’s adjudication.” This is an ultimate act of “turning toward the other” in openness to “transforming, and being transformed by, the other” (Mathewes: 210). (I should add that while my historical account and appeal to Cone have focused this article on anti-Black racism, equally important projects could continue Ellacuría’s legacy by taking hold of Latinx bodies impacted by the US’s repressive immigration and asylum policies, or accounting for the intersectional ways in which white supremacy generates multiple and overlapping forms of oppression based on race, gender, class, or sexuality.)

Taking Responsibility for Reality

Finally, remembrance leads to repentance, and repentance is completed in repair. Reparation rejects the paternalistic racial relationship expressed by Rauschenbusch and Niebuhr; rather, taking responsibility for the reality that white supremacy has created demands actively destroying whiteness by working alongside the oppressed, taking on their risks, and discerning the redistribution of resources and power. This may take shape through the giving of or advocacy for monetary reparations, or other means. The form of reparations, like the theology that precipitates them, is also contextual: those responsible for redress must be attentive to what specifically the survivors are seeking.

Cone calls this last step “becoming black with Christ” (Cone 1990: 204). This is not a naïve and patient optimism, a pragmatic support for the status quo, or an incommensurable system of closed experiences prohibiting solidarity. Rather, Cone’s model is the ultimate act of taking responsibility for reality, forsaking whiteness by sharing in the passions, sorrows, and risks of the oppressed community in the hope and active pursuit of God’s liberating reign. Like the Black Christ watching over the sacred site of racial massacre in a Salvadoran village, Cone insists that Christ is not neutral and universal, but identifies in life and death with the oppressed of the earth. The one who “bore the nature of reality in his own body” (Bonhoeffer:

¹³ I thank Joe Lenow for reminding me of this reference.

231) calls all his followers to take hold of our reality by standing at the foot of the cross *and* the lynching tree and taking down the crucified people.

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