

# Journal of the Black Catholic Theological Symposium

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Volume 7

Article 9

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12-1-2013

**Reviews – *The Color of Christ: The Son of God and the Saga of Race in America*, by Edward J. Blum and Paul Harvey; *Christology and Whiteness: What Would Jesus Do?* edited by George Yancy**

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## Recommended Citation

Hayes, Diana L. (2013) "Reviews – *The Color of Christ: The Son of God and the Saga of Race in America*, by Edward J. Blum and Paul Harvey; *Christology and Whiteness: What Would Jesus Do?* edited by George Yancy," *Journal of the Black Catholic Theological Symposium*: Vol. 7, Article 9.  
Available at: <https://ecommons.udayton.edu/jbcts/vol7/iss1/9>

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*THE COLOR OF CHRIST: THE SON OF GOD AND THE SAGA OF RACE IN AMERICA*, by Edward J. Blum and Paul Harvey. Pp. vi + 340.

University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, North Carolina, 2012. \$32.50 (hardcover), ISBN 978-0807835722; and

*CHRISTOLOGY AND WHITENESS: WHAT WOULD JESUS DO?*, edited by George Yancy. Pp. xi + 224. Routledge, London and New York, 2012. \$39.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0415699983.

In 1969, James H. Cone proclaimed that God is Black as is Jesus, the son of God. He was following in the footsteps of AME Bishop Henry McNeal Turner who, in 1891, proclaimed the same truth in the language of his time (God is a Negro). McNeal's proclamation received little attention but Cone's, presented in the midst of the civil rights and Black Power turmoil, landed like a bombshell in the hearts and minds of many, especially those in Christian seminaries and churches. Both blacks and whites were left grappling with a statement that as with all metaphors contrasted that which was seen as holy in its fullest sense with that which was not so seen, blackness and, thus, black people, and confounded their faith.

The two books under discussion address the issue of the skin color (as well as eye and hair color) of Jesus over the past 500 years as well as the significance of whiteness as a symbol of authority and privilege in the United States. The authors' use different perspectives and methodologies, history for Blum and Yancey and theology (Christology) and philosophy for the contributors to the Yancy volume but reach a similar conclusion: the perception of Jesus today is of critical importance in a world and faith (Christianity) that is increasingly one of persons of color.

In The Color of Christ, Blum and Harvey review 500 years of human history from the founding of the U.S. to the present day in order to discern how a Palestinian Jew was transformed into an Aryan /Nordic white, a symbol of power and domination for white Americans and the basis for claims that the U.S. is not only a Christian nation but it is also a white nation. Using art, history, cultural studies, religious history, and the interpretations of white, black, Native American, Latino/a, and Asian Christians in the United States, the authors explore how, in the United States, Jesus was initially seen only in a spiritual sense as a blinding or brilliant light or as a bloodied figure of suffering by iconoclastic Protestants. However, these images slowly and subtly shifted and Jesus came to be seen as a white European male, the nation's leading symbol of superiority and domination. This image of Jesus was repeatedly remade visually into a "sacred symbol of white Americans' greatest aspirations, deepest terrors, lowest actions, highest expressions, and mightiest strivings for racial power and justice" (2).

The image of Christ became a source of conflict over the centuries as each ethnic/racial group in the United States attempted to claim him as their own. Despite ongoing efforts by white Americans to depict Jesus in their own image and likeness in order to use him as a symbol of white power and white supremacy, others, persons of color, fought to preserve his universal appeal to all. Native Americans contested the whitening of Jesus as they saw him as a bloodied and battered co-sufferer while those of African descent who were enslaved also saw in him a co-sufferer who, even though he might be white, sided with them in their oppression rather than joining with slave masters and others to oppress them. It is not until the 1960s and after, however, that we find efforts to re-imagine Jesus as Black, Latino/a, Asian or Native American among others. This is because the westernized white image of Jesus had become the norm, deeply embedded in the

psyche of all Americans regardless of race and ethnicity, aided and abetted by Sunday School depictions, artwork, especially Sallman's painting of *The Head of Jesus*, and a sustained propaganda effort that made the US the greatest purveyor of this image throughout the world.

As a result, "the body of Christ ascended from largely unknown and inconsequential" at the beginning of the nation's founding "to becoming an object of obsession, adoration, confusion, conflict and comedy by the Twenty-first century....the sacred [was] racialized and.... the spiritualization of race [gave] notions of human difference not only a life beyond scientific studies or anthropological insights but also a sense of eternal worth" (14-15). By linking Jesus with whiteness, all Americans were taught that whiteness was the norm and that white domination "was a God-given right" (15) unavailable to many.

The Color of Christ "shows how the body of Jesus rose from irrelevant to critical in American history, how the white Jesus became a dominant and unstable symbol of white American supremacy, how he was refashioned with changes to whiteness, and how millions of women and men of color put their faith in him while transforming him in subtle ways. It demonstrates how liberation theologies emerged first among everyday peoples and then among theologians. And, it explains how white Christ imagery has had the power to last and shape-shift even after massive assaults from civil rights crusades, scientific discoveries, and demographic transformations" (22).

George Yancy has brought together a diverse group of scholars to answer the critical question: "What would Jesus do?" looking through a lens of "whiteness." In this way, "the philosophical, ideological, and theological underpinnings of our racialized narratives and interactions" can be exposed and

discussed (xiv). As Kelly Brown Douglas notes in her preface that the work “exposes the multiple ways in which ‘whiteness’ has acted as a ‘transcendental norm’, that is a standard for all that which is good and acceptable,” and reveals the impact of ‘normative whiteness’ on bodies that aren’t white, especially black bodies (xiv).

The question is raised: What is the meaning of “whiteness”, not just for persons of color but even more importantly for whites themselves? The contributors in their responses do not seek a pietistic or overtly moral perspective but see the question of “what would Jesus do?” as one of social justice and Christian integrity. Yancy, himself, defines his understanding of whiteness as “a historical practice that continues to express its hegemony and privilege through various cultural, political, entrepreneurial, and institutional practices, and that forces bodies of color to the margins and politically and ontologically positions them as subpersons” (5). He and the other writers also acknowledge that “race is ontologically empty and epistemologically bankrupt,” but as a “socially constructed category, race has real socio-ontological, existential, political and psychological implications for those categorized as non-white” (12).

Coming from diverse theological and philosophical disciplines as well as religious perspectives, some contributors use the understanding of Jesus as white as a way to explore his meaning in terms of sustaining normative whiteness and his relevance in pursuit of racial justice. Another group questions the significance of a black Christ in black faith and theology. Some argue that a black Christ is of critical importance for those whose blackness has been historically demonized while others find that image troubling, seeing it as “simply reinforcing the reality of whiteness while ignoring the web of power relationships which foster white supremacy” (xv). Yet another group of contributors question the

relevance of Jesus for contemporary racial issues arguing that the issue of Jesus' skin color and action in today's world forces contemporary Christians to become "actively engaged in today's struggles for justice" (xv) while others disagree, arguing that humanity must wait until Jesus' actual return when he will provide a clear answer to his stance on race. Until then we must live in hope of the future where Jesus will render racism no longer conscious. One final group asserts that the question simply gives positive value to suffering and is thus detrimental to the ongoing struggle against injustice because of it.

As can be seen by the diversity of responses, there is no one clear or definitive answer; rather it is constantly evolving. Our answer is affected by and filtered through our own lived experiences of both Jesus and the world in which we live.

The central argument for the work is that looking through a "certain hermeneutic lens Christian theology and whiteness" can be seen as completely and totally "incompatible" (5) because Jesus Christ is love and that love is a refusal to accept whiteness. Christology is fundamentally predicated upon love, thus, any actions or ways of thinking that deny love are not Christian. White Christians must, therefore, reject whiteness while continuing to benefit from its power and privilege. "Christology becomes a deep existential prism through which to think about what ought to be done about one's whiteness and the problem of whiteness in our contemporary moment" (6).

Yancy calls for a metanoia that requires a "constant process of choosing against whiteness, training against whiteness and constantly offering a Christian anthropology that militates against whiteness as the quintessential image of God" (6). By asking what Jesus would do, white Christians are led to rethink their white Christian identities within "the context of Jesus' liberative praxis."

Both of these works break new ground in terms of their approaches and goals. *The Color of Christ* provides a detailed and in-depth review of Americans reception of Jesus as human and divine and the impact of the increasingly whitenized image that became normative. The authors clearly show the struggles that took place among the different racial and ethnic groups in the United States and how the whitening of Jesus played a foundational role in the emergence of the US as a nation. It resulted in laws that defined a person by race/ethnicity, especially their level of whiteness, rulings which were comparable both in social, legal and psychological effect to the apartheid laws of South Africa Seeing itself as a white nation grounded in the Christian faith and exporting its own biased understandings of race around the world, the United States as a result became a world power whose racial perspective affected everyone. It has left us with a legacy of race consciousness that significantly hinders our ability to come together as a nation united with a common goal.

*Christology and Whiteness* can be said to build upon this history to challenge the readers, whether religious scholars or laity, to rethink our own images of Jesus and to question what has influenced our image and understanding of Jesus the Christ. White Christians are challenged to encounter and grapple with their whiteness in ways that will, hopefully, enlighten them to the ways in which whiteness has served to uplift one group of Americans while demonizing others. The contributors provide an excellent exploration of the question with a diversity that challenges and informs.

Both books are well-written, informative, and revealing of the great dichotomy that still persists in the United States over the issue of race. We are called as readers to recognize our own failings and biases in order to free ourselves to work toward perspectives of Jesus that are compatible with and informed by the experiences

of all. We are challenged to be aware of the weight and burden of whiteness that still oppresses not only in the United States but globally and to work toward newer and more inclusive understandings of our history and the many who contributed to it as well as to the critical role a Jesus of all the people can play in our lives.

One minor point of criticism with *The Color of Christ* is that they provided a number of images of Jesus over a historical timeline but the great majority (over two-thirds) still reflected white rather than Black, Latino/a, Asian or other images. It would have been helpful to have some of the many contemporary and beautiful images now portrayed in many Black and other churches to support the understanding that times are, indeed, changing.

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