

# Disruptive Christian Ethics

*When Racism and  
Women's Lives Matter*

Traci C. West

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*For the justice-seeking activist/intellectuals who routinely  
confront racist insults and paternalistic dismissals by politicians  
and religious leaders but refuse to let them have the last word  
on morality and women's worth*

## Liturgy

### Church Worship and White Superiority

The rituals of Sunday worship enable Christians to publicly rehearse what it means to uphold the moral values they are supposed to bring to every aspect of their lives, from their attitudes about public policy to their intimate relations. Christian worship should provide ritual reminders of how these moral values can be distinctively rooted in their Christian faith. As God's powerful presence and sanction for certain attitudes and behavior is liturgically invoked, Christian worship practices also reinforce or challenge cultural norms of our society. This tradition of ritually representing cultural behaviors and attitudes as endorsed by God makes the public venue of Christian worship so crucial for liberative ethics.

One of the persistent cultural norms in the United States that needs to be closely examined and challenged is a commitment to the superiority of white people (usually those of European heritage) and their cultural contributions, traditions, and history. As we have seen in earlier chapters, ideas that support white superiority can surface in the formulation of Christian ethical thought, whether expressed in the work of figures such as Niebuhr or a contemporary feminist approach. Examples of the competition between ideas supporting the superiority of white middle-class people and ideas about poor people in the Christian gospel were also apparent in the creation of welfare reform policy.

To be a valuable resource in this morally competitive climate, a liberatory social ethic based upon the Christian gospel has to be fostered within the concrete practices of Christian faith communities. The weekly practice of communal worship holds promise for providing Christians with a space to cultivate their ability to recognize and contest repressive cultural norms like white superiority. While appreciating this constructive potential in

worship, one must also acknowledge the unlikelihood that repressive, pervasive cultural norms can be completely abandoned when segments of the public gather for Christian worship. How might a commitment to white superiority be manifested and sometimes encouraged within weekly worship practices?

Theories about white privilege and multiculturalism are especially useful for investigating racially repressive cultural norms within Christian worship. Theoretical understandings of the cultural dominance of "whiteness" by sociologists, legal scholars, and Christian ethicists describe deeply embedded rituals of racism in the broader society. Multicultural approaches to racial/ethnic justice can help to break up the simplistic white-black dichotomy too often assumed when racism is discussed, and support a religious sensibility within Christian worship practices that views God's power and mystery as multiply located and shared. Theoretical discussions of white privilege and multiculturalism can, therefore, not only aid in identifying a commitment to white superiority in worship practices, but also help to suggest liturgical strategies for relinquishing that commitment.

Just as it is possible to make choices about which ethical values are espoused in the communal practices of the broader society (e.g., addressing unjust conditions of wealth and poverty in the formulation of governmental public policy), it is also possible to make choices about which values are supported in the communal practices of the church, such as public worship. For Christians to make conscious choices about reversing their commitment to white superiority, or at least occasionally reneging on it, an intense scrutiny of worship practices is required. This includes provocative and speculative questioning about racial messages in Christian worship practices that individual worshipping communities would need to explore together and tailor to reflect their racial/ethnic composition. Racial messages do not need to be intentionally placed within the service to be present and have a powerful impact on the spiritual and moral formation of the worshipping community, and thus must be deliberately investigated. To begin, I share a few personal experiences. Like the stories in earlier chapters, my stories are offered to highlight some of the complicated dynamics of ordinary life that are part of the construction of liberative Christian social ethics.

### Welcome to Our Church, White Church

I am a black member of a predominantly white Protestant denomination, a tradition in which I was raised from infancy.<sup>1</sup> The following account includes some of my visits to predominantly white congregations, mostly

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within my own denomination, and take place in various locations in the United States. My experiences can assist in reflection about how whites may culturally assert themselves within the worship setting of a Christian faith community, through a routine, initial encounter with an "outsider."

I am embarrassed to admit that I sometimes fall prey to some of the most naïve and idealistic longings about what it means to participate in local church life. I can induce especially maudlin desires about attending Sunday morning worship services. On several occasions, filled with spiritual cravings and theological ideals about worship, I've popped into the nearest church I could find only to be reawakened to the racial realities present within the Christian worship context and have my spiritual longings and questions deepened.

For instance, on one very snowy morning, when I was living in a northeastern suburban community, I decided to visit a church that was close by. As I drove, I traveled on slippery roads and had to stop a few times to clean the ice off of my windshield wipers. When I entered the large church building, relieved to have made it there, it was bustling with people. I began to surmise that this was probably not a racially integrated church when not only was everyone that I saw white, several people seemed to gape at me in a rather obvious way when I encountered them, almost making me feel like an intruder. When I said "Good morning," most of them answered with, "Welcome to our church." I toyed with the idea of obnoxiously giving a response to their welcome that asked how they knew that I was a visitor and not a lapsed member. (I guessed that there were probably hundreds of families affiliated with this church.)

I sat down in the sanctuary and began my personal meditations. Because I had been anxiously preoccupied with the snow and ice on the roads, I needed a little extra time to settle down and prepare myself for worship. Just at that moment, I looked up at a woman who was walking down the center aisle. She was probably volunteering as an usher for those arriving at the service. She approached me, peered into my pew, and asked in an assertive tone, "Where do you live?" I was very startled and unsure of how to respond. I wanted to know why she was inquiring. I glanced around quickly at all of the white faces and started thinking that maybe this really is a concertedly segregated white church! In a tentative, questioning tone, I told her that I lived in the neighborhood. She said, "Oh," and walked away. I never did figure out the meaning of that inquiry. Later, after becoming

acquainted with a white woman who was a long-standing member of that church, I told her about my initial experience of her church. She explained that it was impossible for members of her congregation to be unwelcoming on the basis of race, and supported this claim with a description of their participation in a successful annual choir exchange with a black congregation located in a nearby city. I could not convince her that issues of race might be a component in my experience of her church as less than friendly when I visited.

On another occasion, when visiting relatives in the South, I decided that I wanted to attend a local church in town because it was part of my own Methodist denomination. Along with several members of my extended family, I had come to gather around an uncle who had been recently diagnosed with terminal lung cancer. We were enjoying a happy occasion with him, knowing that all too soon our visits would be focused on his suffering and pain, and then our sadness about his death. On this particular Sunday morning, I felt like going off on my own for a little private time and to worship with what I (naively) regarded as another kind of extended family. My relatives gave me puzzled and somewhat amused glances as they prepared to go to their own black Baptist church, and remarked to one another, "Traci's going to the white church."

When I entered this huge church in the center of town and realized that my face was the only brown one amidst a sea of white ones, I was a bit worried, but tried not to make cynical assumptions about how I would be accepted at that worship service. In fact, most people were quite friendly to me, which would have been okay except for the nature of some of their comments. For instance, after the service, one smiling woman who had been in the choir came up to me and warmly greeted me with a handshake. She informed me that she had picked me out during the worship service and guessed that I was a visitor. She further explained, "I said to myself, *Now I just know that that gal can sing. We ought to get her up here to do it.*" I was not sure how to respond to her. To be honest, I repressed the urge to burst out laughing and mumbled something about the fact that I am actually a dreadful singer. When I told my family about this exchange at lunch that day, one of my relatives suggested a wonderful retort to the woman's comment. She said that I should have given the widest grin that my lips could stretch into and said, "I does dance too!"

At one point, I was almost starting to think that this singing theme might be a special greeting that white churchgoers save for black

visitors, because when I was a guest at another predominantly white church in the Northeast, I almost got into a big argument with another white woman over this same issue. This time, in an attempt to make me feel welcome after the service, a white woman came up to compliment the sound of my singing. Because I am very aware of my inability to sing well, I tend to sing in a fairly self-conscious, quiet way. I explained to this woman that she had definitely mistaken my voice for someone else's in the congregation, but she maintained that she had indeed heard the almost operatic quality of my voice booming out above the others during the hymns. "That wasn't me," I repeated, gently but firmly. She continued to insist that she *knew* it was me that she had heard singing so beautifully. I soon realized that no matter what I said, it was a futile effort to try to convince her otherwise, for "just looking at me" confirmed her statement about my extraordinary singing abilities.

In varying ways, in these encounters my worship experience was profoundly affected by my growing awareness of being a racial outsider, an awareness that was tentative at first but grew progressively stronger. My ability to focus upon worshipping God during the service, and in some instances my reflection following the service about my communal experience of worshipping God, were saturated with messages about race. My pursuit of a holy gathering of people in a holy space was infiltrated with a cognizance of what it means for me to spend time with white people in white organizations.

Of course, my reactions should be further explored and questioned in ways that I do not include here. Even without more explanation, these stories introduce some of the intense spiritual, emotional, and cultural issues that a racial interrogation of worship practices might bring. They also point to the need for clarity about the definition of white racism and how it functions in order to effectively identify worship practices that uphold it.

### **Analyzing White Privilege: The Basics**

Issues of race were not the only factors at work in my encounters as a visiting worshiper. A variety of other cultural dynamics were part of those interactions and could also be considered, such as gender, class, or ethnicity (e.g., exploring which white ethnic groups were involved and how they differed). It would be erroneous, however, to deny that race was one of the factors present. A basic starting point for understanding white dom-



inance is the reality that issues of race are at play in all interactions. When there are only white people in the room, issues of race are still there. Whites contest, reinforce, and create the meaning of their racial identities even when they exclusively engage each other in conversations and activities. Likewise, when there are only people of color in the room, issues of race, including white dominance, are there. Even when they exclusively engage each other, people of color are always contesting, negotiating, and creating the meaning of their racial identities, especially in reaction to the boundaries and stigmas marking them as inferior.

White dominance is perpetuated through varied forms of denial—that is, by ignoring racial realities, pretending they are not relevant in certain kinds of social interactions, like the dynamics within Christian worship services. There is widespread consensus that Sunday morning is the most segregated hour of the week for Christians, and that this high degree of segregation is an indication of racial problems in the United States. But reinforcement of racial divisions and inequities that takes place within that Sunday morning hour continues to be largely ignored or denied. Examining the content of worship practices for their racial messages represents acknowledgment that a problem exists and takes a small step forward in challenging the stranglehold of white dominance. Racism analyses focusing on critical studies of “whiteness” can provide valuable tools for probing racial messages in worship, but these resources tend to be underutilized by Christian churches and seminaries. Discussions of white supremacy (or dominance) and white privilege are more commonly understood as useful for studying social attitudes and stratification in secular society, but rarely seen as applicable to internal church practices.

White privilege is derived from white supremacy (or white dominance). White supremacy is characterized by the manner in which access to power and resources in U.S. society is structured.<sup>2</sup> Whites tend to be favored with greater access to money, property, education, health care, and environmentally healthy conditions. White supremacy is also maintained by the ways in which cultural expressions and patterns are valued, such as notions of “classic” art and music, stable families, proper speech and language. The cultural expressions and behavioral patterns of whites (and Europeans) are usually valorized as the most worthwhile aspects of civilization. White privilege is a concrete manifestation of how whites benefit from white supremacy. The need to recognize white privilege provides a specific starting point for opposing white supremacy that further clarifies what it means to acknowledge the presence of racial dynamics in daily interactions. Many theorists emphasize the freedom to choose whether or

not to think about race as one of the main features of white privilege.<sup>3</sup> For instance, in most places in the United States white Christians who go off to visit a worship service probably do not think about the racial dynamics ahead of time. Unless they consciously decide to attend a service with a majority nonwhite congregation (which would be an unusual choice), they are most likely to simply assume that they do not need to be concerned about race.

Racist socialization privileging whites is revealed in ordinary matters that may be part of our daily routine. A variety of cultural sources teach us that whites are to be seen as those who are "just human beings" or as the normal ones who do not project a particular racial identity and perspective. This understanding may be reinforced when reading a novel and the characters whose racial group remains unidentified are assumed to be white, listening to a news report that only reveals the race/ethnicity of a group or individual if they are not white, or attending a big church gathering in a predominantly white denomination where it is exuberantly announced that "diversity is here," which is meant as an announcement that more than just white people are present. When, over and over, in so many different arenas of our culture, whites are treated as the normal group of human beings that do not need to be racially classified, this status comes to be taken for granted. It seems like something to which whites are naturally entitled.

This entitlement aspect of white privilege could be communicated or inculcated in predominantly white worship services, especially among those with socioeconomic advantages. In congregational prayers or announcements about mission activities, for example, ideas might be conveyed about who the normal, regular (white) people are, and who should be assumed to be the (racial) others. Racialized understandings of "us and them" can be strongly conveyed in prayers about those who are "less fortunate than we are" or projects to reach out to help "them." These practices exemplify ritualized responses to local community and global needs, and teach the congregation to recognize its distinctive Christian identity on a weekly basis. They also link Christian identity to a sense of privilege that easily merges with racial messages about privilege in the broader culture.

Similarly, special rituals in church services surrounding outreach projects might be a central way of celebrating key Christian events, like the birth of Jesus. These rituals might provide a routinized confirmation that the distinctiveness of being an active Christian lies in the obligation to help those "others," who are not the normal, independent, regular (white) people. However, in predominantly white congregations, where do con-

gregants learn about what kind of "help" white people need with giving up privileges they enjoy at the expense of other people's exploitation?<sup>4</sup> Besides problematic intercessory prayers for the unfortunate dependent "others," prayers of thankfulness for what "God has given to us" can undergird a sense of entitlement to material "blessings." Such prayers of thanksgiving by whites as well as prayers about "our" entitlement to God's grace and forgiveness because "we are God's children" could get confused with entitlement to white privilege or seem to be confirming entitlement to white privilege. When giving thanks, where do these white congregants learn to recognize privileges to which they are not entitled, but receive anyway? Said differently, how do they learn to distinguish between privileges they receive from the racist cultural elevation of their racial group and the "blessings" they receive as children of God?

To garner nuanced insights about whiteness and white privilege in a Christian worship context, the considerable complexity in the meaning of these racial terms must be noted. In the United States, the identification of an Irish immigrant during the 1840s and 1850s as white, and the identification of a citizen of Irish descent in the twenty-first century as white, involve considerably different cultural descriptions and experiences. Classification as white would have been highly contested for the person in the former case, but would be unquestioned for the person in the latter one. Moreover, in our contemporary period, white people experience whiteness and white privilege in multiple ways. A socioeconomically destitute and homeless white woman, a working-class Jewish white man, an openly gay white male Christian couple, and a wealthy, white, Spanish-speaking immigrant woman from Spain each experience whiteness and white privilege in differing ways and degrees. Yet, all of them benefit from some degree of white privilege. A very basic aspect of whiteness and of race in general is that it is socially constructed, not biologically determined. 050

The fact that all racial classifications have been constructed on the basis of historical and social conditions may be erased in church worship. A contrary lesson is frequently conveyed in church settings where culturally dependent markers of social identity are merged with theology. Rather than learning that God created humankind with a range of biological and social capabilities and then humankind created social labels and racial categories to assign to those traits, some expressions of Christian creation theology may lead one astray. They may propagate divine endorsement of the social formula of using biology as a means for defining race. In liberal church settings, for instance, the supposed fact that "we are red and yellow, black and white" may be celebrated as evidence of racial differences

that God created. This is well-intentioned theology about racial diversity but problematically linked to biology, and is, unfortunately, often taught to children in worship celebrations.

Complications in the social construction of race presented by socioeconomic class differences also must be taken into account when strategizing about how to recognize encouragement for the entitlements of white privilege in worship. Definitions of white privilege that point to an individual's material "blessings" will be inadequate. As Christian social ethicist Elizabeth Bounds argues, "White working-class persons generally do not experience themselves as privileged, and are likely to feel that this idea adds insult to class injury."<sup>5</sup> For working-class whites struggling to maintain basic material comforts, assumptions about the nature of white privilege that are linked to assumptions about the material "blessings" of whites may only fuel a stronger denial of the existence of white privilege. For poor whites, like those who receive welfare benefits, distinguishing oneself from blacks and Latinos and more transparently embracing the superiority of whiteness may seem more important than for economically advantaged whites who tend to have less daily contact with racial others as peers.<sup>6</sup> Bounds cites the example of a white woman secretary who had, at an earlier time in her life, needed to receive public assistance funds. The woman's account of this difficult time refers to black women "on welfare," depicting them as lazy, and to her own, contrasting, superior qualities.<sup>7</sup>

In worship services, prayers of thanksgiving by white congregants, a sense of one's "blessings and blessedness" linked to a sense of one's white superiority, could be supported by widely ranging social status and economic needs. Liturgical strategies that intervene in this sense of blessedness would have to attend to the distinctive socioeconomic class circumstances that might inform the spiritual and social identity of these congregants. Such strictly individualistic perspectives on the construction of whiteness through denial and entitlement do not, however, satisfactorily depict how white superiority is collectively sustained.

As a systemic concept, white privilege also uncovers the basis for acts of racial discrimination by individuals or groups in our society. Cultural historian and theorist George Lipsitz stresses the "systemic, collective, and coordinated" group behavior of whites.<sup>8</sup> He describes how environmental racism protects the health and welfare of whites by placing health-endangering facilities, such as those for garbage incineration, toxic waste dumping, and nuclear waste storage, in predominantly black, Latino, and Native American communities. As a result of their proximity to these sites, members of these communities, especially the children, suffer from seri-

ous health problems (e.g., phenomenally high rates of reproductive organ cancer for exposed Navajo teenagers).<sup>9</sup>

There are harsh penalties for endangering the environment where white citizens live. Lipsitz cites findings from a study of the Environmental Protection Agency's response to toxic waste polluters, disclosing how "polluters of sites near the greatest white population received penalties 500 percent higher than penalties imposed on polluters in minority areas."<sup>10</sup> The interests of whites, in this case, their health and especially the health of the more vulnerable members of their communities—white children—are given governmental priority. These examples clarify how white privilege is extended through the consequences of discriminatory actions. The white beneficiaries of racial discrimination may or may not participate in those discriminatory practices. Thus, even if whites claim that they do not personally engage in racially discriminatory acts, the salient point is that, in reality, they benefit from and are advantaged by a persistent, historic pattern of such acts.

In what ways might these systemic aspects of white privilege be preserved in predominantly white worship settings? Within their worship, this systemic priority of treating whites as a group deserving of protection may not be distinguishable from the designation of Christian people as deserving recipients of special protection under the new covenant Jesus established. Christian worship celebrations deliberately foment a sense of Christian peoplehood, of being collectively called by God, and of being God's people. Power relations in the society that reward an "investment in whiteness," in maintaining the privileges and protection of whites, could be subtly reaffirmed in liturgical pronouncements by white congregational members about their special status as God's people. What message in the service interrupts, for instance, liturgical language such as "This is the Word of God for the people of God" (that may be said after scripture is read), from undergirding the existing strong cultural investment in maintaining the privileges of the society for the central people (whites) of the society?

An investment in whiteness prioritizes the group interests of whites through systemic discrimination, and also involves the elements of denial and entitlement described above. All three—denial, entitlement, and systemic investment—are aspects of white privilege that rely upon each other, upholding one another. Denial of the fact that issues of race and racism are significant in white people's self-expression and interactions protects their entitlement. Conversely, the entitlement of whites to be seen as the normal group, or as "just human beings" who do not need to

be classified, rests upon denial. Entitlement employs denial, gives it a purpose: to keep the benefits of white privilege from being acknowledged. Finally, the systemic assertion of the racial group interests of whites, by means of discriminatory policies favoring whites, requires both entitlement and denial. This systematic assertion of group interests is propped up by a sense of white entitlement—that is, whites, as opposed to others, are naturally entitled to have their human worth considered incontestable and of paramount importance. In addition, systemically discriminatory policies seem rational and fair because of various forms of denial about their existence. When historic, institutional patterns that advantage whites are covered up with denials, it can seem reasonable to minimize or dismiss individual claims of racism (such as the pollution examples above) as isolated phenomena.

The denial of white privilege, entitlement to white privilege, and systemic investment in it all dance together to create a form of cultural ritual that helps to supply meaning and order for living together in our society.

### **Rituals and Ritualizing**

We need rituals. They celebrate, promote, and create patterns of behavior. Rituals provide a sense of stability and of possibility. On Sunday mornings, in the lived experiences and attitudes of the worshipers, cultural rituals that preserve white privilege encounter rituals of Christian faith. A commitment to the superiority of whites supplies meaning and order in the broader society, and thus offers clear moral guidance about the status and worth of people in our shared communal lives. At the same time, a commitment to Christian faith is difficult if not impossible to maintain without some ritual reminders of the distinctive substance of Christianity. Worship rituals of gathering people and sending them off, receiving sacraments like Communion and baptism, as well as listening to preaching about the meaning of scripture, help to provide spiritual and moral guidance for a Christian's daily life.

Theologian Tom Driver helpfully differentiates the meanings of "ritual" and "ritualization."

Like art ritualization involves both improvisation and the establishment of repeatable form. These two elements provide a way of distinguishing the words "ritualization" and "ritual" in reference to human activity. The former (ritualization) emphasizes the making of new forms through which expressive behavior can flow, while the latter (rit-

ual) connotes an already known, richly symbolic pattern of behavior, the emphasis falling less upon the making and more upon the valued pattern and its panoply of associations. . . . Without its ritualizing component, ritual would be entirely repetitious and static.<sup>11</sup>

Christian worship includes both of these ritualizing and ritual functions as it links contemporary cultural events and attitudes to ancient Christian symbols and texts. In its ritualizing function, new forms are created that allow the worshipping community to engage in behavior that recognizes or celebrates the events, needs, and concerns continuously arising from the faith community. In its ritual function, symbolic and repeated acts of naming and silencing in Christian worship may preserve and even sacralize established patterns of behavior and attitudes of the gathered community as well as the broader society.

Messages about denial, entitlement, and systemic investment in white dominance function in a ritualizing manner, creating new adaptations to social changes in economic conditions or in response to varied forms of anti-racist resistance. The ritualizing function performed by that triumvirate of white dominance can adhere to the ritual function of Christian worship, to the repeatable forms of worship that lend a sense of stability and order and conserve social patterns. Thus, a syncretistic fusion between the meaning of Christian worship and cultural expressions of white dominance may occur in the worshipping congregant's experience of this comfortable liaison.

The maintenance of white dominance exhibits its own religious qualities. It can be understood as a system of beliefs that assigns moral worth and functions through symbols and spokespersons. As sociologists Joe Feagin and Hernán Vera demonstrate in their research chronicling a series of antiblack incidents in the 1980s and 1990s—sometimes through brutal violent acts by private groups or by police officers,<sup>12</sup> and at other times through pronouncements by state officials who assign stigmatizing labels—persons of color are routinely treated as inferior in ways that have symbolic meaning for every member of the broader society. Feagin and Vera argue that there are "racialized rituals" such as hostile acts of discrimination and violence against blacks that "broadcast to the entire community the racial mythologies held by many in the dominant white group."<sup>13</sup> Through such racist rituals, unspoken understandings about the status and worth of white people and of black people "are maintained and propagated to present and future generations of Americans in all racial and ethnic groups."<sup>14</sup>

These rituals bolster faith in the myth that peoples not considered to be white have innate deficiencies as well as accompanying fictions about the superior qualities of whites. Feagin and Vera identify the central participants in these incidents/rituals as "officiants" and those who willingly or unwillingly carry out racist policies as "acolytes." There are also a host of passive white participants who choose not to intervene or protest the racially hostile acts and statements that are usually part of these rites. Most importantly, racist rituals deprive their victims of basic human rights, and have a destructive impact on their lives, their energy, and their talents. Feagin and Vera explain:

The millions of people of color in the United States who have been and continue to be sacrificed to the mythological needs of white superiority are in certain ways like the sacrificial victims of religious rites of some ancient societies: alien others who may be compelled to forfeit their lives or well-being in the name of compelling dominant-group interests.<sup>15</sup>

How might lessons about the "alien other" that racist rituals teach be reinscribed within Christian worship rituals?

In predominantly white cultural contexts, there are some ways in which the ritual of Communion might absorb the kinds of cultural meanings related to whiteness that Feagin and Vera depict. When they enter the worship service having been "acolytes" or passive observers of the ways persons of color are "sacrificed to the mythological needs of white superiority," what does it mean for whites to repeatedly rehearse this ritual of giving thanks for the fact that Jesus suffered, sacrificed, and died to take away their sins? Does this ritual encourage whites in taking for granted the suffering of others, and maybe even the deaths that benefit them (whites)? To some degree, atonement theology expressed in church rituals like Communion could merge with and inform white people's sense of entitlement. It could teach them that reaping the benefits of forgiveness and absolution that is due them because of God's intentional sacrifice of a person for their sake. Communion could function as a kind of liturgical reinscribing of the privileges of whiteness, possibly fostering a lack of concern for the systemic ways they may benefit from the sacrifice of the health, safety, and well-being of "alien others."

Christians may resist an investigation of worship for such particularized social messages about white privilege because worship is considered an important expression of universality in Christianity. The universal quality



of Christian liturgy has usually been understood as providing Christians with common practices such as baptism and Communion that are not fundamentally shaped by the particular cultural contexts where those rites are performed. A major reason for stressing this universal quality has been to promote Christian unity across national boundaries, differences in structure and polity of church bodies, and theology and methods of interpreting scripture. A Christian theological emphasis on how rites like Communion are a celebration of unspecified divine mystery also contributes to this characterization of Christian liturgy's universality.

If instilling a notion of universality means that Christian ritual is unaffected by cultural particularity, then worshipping congregants are encouraged to pretend that race and culture do not matter in this worship space, practicing one of the major characteristics upholding white privilege: denial. Though beyond the scope of this discussion, it might be helpful to review the origins of Christian liturgy in elitist Greco-Roman culture and the historical development of its capacity to function as a mechanism of social control within culturally pluralistic contexts.<sup>16</sup> The problem of how routine Christian liturgical practices preserve the denial of sociopolitical inequalities within the faith community may be rooted in the social origins of Christianity. On comp

Participation in worship practices falsely labeled culturally neutral constitutes a specific practice of denial that can foster white dissociation from the reality of racist inequality, how people are implicated in it, and what its costs are. White denial provides insulation from the pain caused by sacrificing persons of color to the need for a sense of superiority. In another point of mutual reinforcement between rituals of white dominance and rituals of Christian worship, the true virtue (perhaps divine ingredient) of Christian worship may seem to be found in its distance from and inability to be shaped by ongoing, discrete (painful) sociopolitical realities. Christian worship may be aided in taking on this socially distancing (absolving?) function by ongoing cultural rites in the broader society that abet the denial of painful social arrangements advantaging whites.

Mary Hobgood, a white Christian social ethicist, points out the moral costs to whites of this kind of dissociation. She describes the fear of their own vulnerability and dependence that fuels white projections of negative characteristics onto people of color, the need "to split off the vulnerable and dependent self onto racialized and impoverished others."<sup>17</sup> There are moral costs to whites in this behavior "because white status depends on denying the deepest parts of the relational self, our humanity is impoverished, and our capacity to be moral—in right relationship with others—is

diminished."<sup>18</sup> Such alienation from self and others can produce a psychic and spiritual numbness that needs to be shattered for change to occur.<sup>19</sup>

Christian worship practices frequently invoke an emotional and spiritual sense of relational dependence, and nurturing this sense of dependence presents an opening for both consenting to and contesting white privilege. A student in an ethics class that I taught, Sally Wilson,<sup>20</sup> helpfully analyzed white privilege in a written account of her experience as a participant-observer at a Protestant worship service in Massachusetts made up of fairly affluent whites (middle and upper-middle-income households). Her report drew attention to messages about dependence that were part of the liturgy.

On the one hand, phrases in the invocation ("make us ready to hear your good news") and the doxology ("praise God from whom all blessings flow") suggest human dependence upon God, challenging white elite assumptions about independence and inherent or personally achieved wisdom, strength, and wealth. . . . At the same time that the (primarily white) congregants are called upon to see themselves as dependent upon God, we are called upon to see others (those outside of the congregation) as dependent upon us and persons to whom we give, (the invocation calls upon God to "touch us so that we may touch others with your love").<sup>21</sup>

These are community-building rituals that affirm the congregation's sense of common purpose in coming together before their God. Remembering their dependence upon and need for God can challenge the white privilege of these congregants or support it when their sense of neediness is attached to a hierarchical theological understanding of relating: God (down?) to us, us (down?) to others in need.

For faith communities such as the one that Sally Wilson visited, social hierarchies might be ritually supported through some of the following dynamics. Habitual practices that maintain social dominance and exploitation surround congregants in daily life, especially within their economic relationships, and are uncontested in regular enactments of Christian spirituality in church. The broader culture consists of socioeconomic relations where richer people with more material wealth who are disproportionately whites have higher status and more privileges than poorer people, disproportionately blacks and Latinos. When denial about certain unfair realities is maintained, this ordering of society seems deserved. For example, these

white privilege at work

congregational members might have mortgage loans upon which they depend in order to afford their housing, thereby benefiting from the frequent incidence of discrimination favoring white housing-loan applicants.<sup>22</sup> When they get dressed each day, in most cases, they rely upon the labor of the poor who have produced their clothes, often under sweatshop factory conditions in Asia and Latin America.<sup>23</sup> When eating their meals they probably depend upon fruits and vegetables picked by economically exploited U.S. immigrant workers from Mexico or South America. These worshipers may cling to the myth that they are economically advantaged—better off than those “below” them, because they are economically independent and self-sufficient members of society.

Concealing their dependence upon varied forms of socioeconomic exploitation and racist privileging may be upheld rather than challenged by well-intentioned Christian prayers asking God to “touch us so that we may touch others.” The moral and spiritual message these congregants receive from such prayers might not only protect their social dominance from being questioned, but also imbue it with righteousness in the following manner. First this kind of liturgy could convey a need for them to replace their sense of self-sufficiency with recognition of their dependence upon God’s blessed “touch” for the wealth and comfort they enjoy. Second, it could also convey a need to reach out with caring to “others” below them in social status and privileges, fulfilling the role that God intends for those to whom God has given so many “blessings.” In this prayer the social hierarchy is therefore left intact and appears to be part of God’s plan. In a different church setting, one where there are more working-class and poor whites, such Christian rituals may give members an opportunity to symbolically inhabit a position of superiority and advantage that is not realized materially in their daily lives.

As a corrective response to the demands of racist rituals in society, Christians cannot abandon their own rituals. Christians need worship rituals that destabilize rituals of white dominance and confront its entangled religious and political veneer. Especially for predominantly white faith communities, liturgical acknowledgment of dependence upon both God and upon other people could lead to an awakening, instigating a cognizance of the rituals of white dominance in the broader community in which they also participate. Not everyone, however, in such Christian worship settings is white. We must also inquire about how people of color might negotiate overlapping messages about faith and race that support white dominance.

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### White Dominance and the Practices of the Rest of Us

Focusing our discussion only on whites within predominantly white settings can maintain the privileges of whiteness, that is, the centrality of whites in precisely the manner I have been criticizing. Persons of color can internalize notions of white superiority and of their own inferiority in multiple ways, and these notions can surface in the context of Christian worship, especially within predominantly white Protestant churches and denominational gatherings. They can also be present in worship settings that are predominantly composed of persons of color.

As I emphasize problematic dynamics of racism for persons of color within predominantly white worship settings, I am definitely not covertly advocating racial separation during worship. On the contrary, I am urging the formulation of probing questions about existing social dynamics in order to enable the discovery of more liberative practices. Persons of color enter the worship space with well-learned cultural lessons from having been victims of, passive observers to, and sometimes even "acolytes" for racist rites of white dominance in the broader society. Their socialization also includes the messages about moral worth in the highly rewarded practices of denial, entitlement, and systemic investment in white domination. Why wouldn't the distortions of personhood that these experiences produce, merge with, and hence also distort, their corporate experience of worshipping God? The following examples explore varied forms of racial silencing and misrepresentation of self and community as well as taboos about openly criticizing repressive practices in one's own community.

"Presenting an acceptable face, speaking without a Spanish accent, hiding what we really felt—masking our inner selves—were defenses against racism passed on to us by our parents to help us get along," comments legal scholar Margaret Montoya.<sup>24</sup> Montoya describes this process of *máscaras* (masks) as she reflects on her law school education. This process is a response to white denial that pressures persons of color to silence parts of their identities and self-expression. In spite of these costs, *máscaras* is also learned as a way of coping, surviving, and generally "getting along." As Montoya points out, "Silence ensures invisibility. Silence provides protection. Silence masks."<sup>25</sup> Silence is a helpful tactic to avoid looking, as her mother chided her against when she was a child, *greñudas* (uncombed). Besides a reference to her hair looking messy, this term protectively conveyed, "Be prepared, because you will be judged by your skin color, your names, your accents. They will see you as ugly, lazy, dumb, and dirty."<sup>26</sup>

In predominantly white worship settings, the avoidance of looking *greñudas* might mean consciously attempting to be "the exceptional" racial/ethnic minority person, the one who evades the stereotypes of ugly-lazy-dumb-dirty racial minorities. For a Latina, this conscious attempt may involve trying to excel in speaking English without an accent when offering prayers, singing a hymn, or reading scripture. For a South Asian male, it may mean trying to look and behave in a manner that makes it obvious that he is not a "terrorist." For an African American, it could mean a preoccupation with attempting to be seen as always impeccably neat and clean, arriving on time, and speaking in a manner that is extremely articulate in order to prove one is an exception to racist white expectations. In numerous ways, one may participate in the denial that is commonly assumed to be part of Christian worship rituals—that race does not matter in this space. But, at the same time, the constraints of race are always looming, so that the approval of whites may remain, implicitly, almost as important as the approval of the God one has come to church to worship.

Even in predominantly black worship spaces, where rituals may be created to celebrate "our people and heritage," pursuit of the status of the exceptional black may still be nurtured. Undeniably such ceremonies of recognition in predominantly black churches can be an innovative tactic for ritualizing resistance to the racist exclusion that occurs elsewhere, creating a place for valuing and celebrating black life in opposition to its devalued status in mainstream society. For instance, recognizing the educational achievement of black youth in worship services can defy more popular images of black youth that do not emphasize their interest in education.

Those who are celebrated as the achievers in whom "we can take pride" rarely include the economically destitute. Instead, those who are commended in such black worship rituals can be seen as "exceptional" blacks and cherished for being unlike "the others" who are, it seems, a source of embarrassment. As a result, some of those popularly labeled as deficient by white racist judgments in the broader public sphere may face that same stigmatizing treatment within church practices. Community members such as poor black single mothers who have achieved amazing feats of struggle and survival on public assistance will most likely not be among those celebrated for accomplishments or for gifts of courage and tenacity. Indeed, the salvation that may often be preached and prayed about them will be focused on helping them repent of their allegedly ugly-lazy-dumb-dirty ways. These worshipers may learn that earning God's approval is exactly the same as earning the approval of white politicians and media spokespersons who make racist assessments of them. For example, Elder Smith of the predominantly

African American Temple Zion Church of God in Christ in Mississippi explains how he preaches about welfare in his sermons:

I tell them this. "It is not God's will for you to be on welfare. And it insults God for Him to be our Father, [for] us to trust Him, and we have to have a handout every day of our lives." So, therefore, I teach it is essential to us growing, to being proper witnesses, that we don't find ourselves on welfare.<sup>27</sup>

The problem for Christian public assistance recipients who hear this message is not merely that this preacher compounds their social stigma by adding religious authorization to it. Heeding this message that it is insulting to God and a sign of Christian failure to receive public assistance (welfare) can endanger women who are trying to escape the terror of life with an abusive male partner (as is the case for many applying for welfare benefits).<sup>28</sup>

Besides rewarding or punishing proclamations by worship leaders, a different response by worship participants to the endless task of fending off white racism may be a kind of surrender to the protection of silence. The easiest response, for some, may be to simply accede to white dominance by performing the discrete tasks of taking care of one's self, family, and church family, and never bringing up anything about racism. Even if, for instance, one does argue a little when a white person greets her during worship with insistent comments that reflect a racial stereotype about all blacks being able to sing, pretty quickly one just lets it go. One silently allows that white-centered definition of reality and of one's self to merge with all of the other ways that the centrality of white people and their cultural understandings reign in our society as dominant and superior.

For some persons of color, this struggle with acquiescence to white dominance may compel them to claim inaccurate self-definitions in order to fit one of the acceptable racial classifications.<sup>29</sup> If their physical appearance does not immediately indicate to strangers how their racial classification conforms to one of the societally prescribed categories, they frequently have to respond to some form of the racial question, "What are you?" In their response, any choice these persons of color make from the limited options available demands a distorted and truncated representation of their cultural identity. And often, they must also make a decision about whether or not to claim some degree of the superiority of whiteness as part of their identity. Lisa Kahaleole Chang Hall, a native Hawaiian, describes her experiences of continually having her identity questioned as she moved to different regions of the United States while growing up.

Throughout my childhood, anyone telling racial/ethnic jokes always questioned me to make sure that I wasn't one of the "them" they were about to degrade. Depending upon where we were stationed, I was offered many chances to be one of the good colored/(not Bad Black) people and sometimes I took them.<sup>30</sup>

She mutes the particularity of her native Hawaiian racial/ethnic identity in order to be accepted, lessening the worth of her own identity and of other "others" (blacks). Even in childhood, she clearly understood the moral currency in distancing herself from a black racial identity. Later, in high school in Virginia, she admits that she "became white exotica," rather than a black girl, apparently the only two options she had.<sup>31</sup>

This racial classification system of the broader culture and the moral climate it nurtures is too often mirrored in church life. Especially in predominantly white Protestant denominations, persons of color who are not African Americans may be offered the limited options of identifying with "regular" church worship (among whites), black worship and preaching, or "one of our" ethnic church worship styles resulting from "our foreign missionary work." This spectrum may be the only one available in predominantly white church organizations, only a monocultural, monolithic identity is permitted, and the centrality of whiteness as reference point is undisturbed. The spiritual implications of acquiescence to this unsatisfactory choice can involve wrestling with white-centered definitions of culture and self in order to recognize one's self as part of the people of God.

An assertive, rather than yielding, expression of this wrestling with self-definition might include generalized, celebratory claims by persons of color about worship practices from their "own" culture or tradition, accompanied by requests for inclusion of such practices in predominantly white worship settings. These claims are intended to counter the stranglehold of European influences represented as classical and authentically universal in most Western Christian liturgy and hymnody.<sup>32</sup> Requests for multicultural resources are, therefore, a creative and useful intervention by persons of color in predominantly white contexts. But the outcome can be a strange distortion when such requests are fulfilled by efforts like adding the "Korean worship style" to one service or "Latino rhythms" to the hymnody. The diversity within the Korean and Latino traditions being introduced is lost. Moreover, even as it is celebrated, cultural particularity is recognized as only a characteristic of those who are not Euro-American. An eighteenth-century British hymn writer like Charles Wesley ("O for a Thousand Tongues to Sing") remains a symbol of culturally universal

worship resources. In addition, issues of power, domination, and exploitation within and among the religious traditions of peoples of color are avoided when acting out this type of liturgical multicultural tourism. A preference for denial about injustices and inequalities that is so prevalent in the dominant ethos of the society may also be reproduced within non-dominant racial/ethnic communities.

Discriminatory treatment of women in the worship practices of certain predominantly black churches illustrates this problem of reproducing inequality and is sometimes even treated as a reasonable strategy to offset racist treatment of black men.<sup>33</sup> In these churches women are denied access to full pastoral leadership and may be physically barred from the pulpit area—as if the mere presence of a female body constitutes a desecration of it. The preaching/pastoral role in worship may be treated as a province of authority and status to which black males are solely entitled because of the white racism that they encounter in the broader society. In other words, for some, black women should be denied full participation in the preaching/pastoral role because racism in the society prevents black men from assuming their (rightful?) roles as patriarchal figures of authority. Within this sexist logic, in order to counter racism in the broader society, the worship space of black churches becomes the one public space where black males who function as preachers and pastoral leaders can claim a supposed patriarchal male entitlement to exert dominating authority over women. Unjust treatment of women is institutionalized in Christian worship and justified by the realities of white domination.

When claims about the nature of worship in “the” black tradition are made in the presence of whites (any public sphere of dominant society), this problem of discrimination against women is not often acknowledged by black Christians as one of its core components, even by many scholars of African American religion.<sup>34</sup> There is a concern that such open criticism of black religious tradition undermines its historic role of maintaining unity and cohesion in the black community that enables resistance to white domination. (Remember that “black community” does not refer to a geographic grouping, but a political one; it includes African Americans in diverse community settings.) Assertions about worship in “the black tradition” that strongly criticize the sexism that has been and continues to be so thoroughly a part of that tradition is often seen as divisive.

What is really at stake in the fear of divisiveness is the concern that whites will take the criticisms of blacks and use them as evidence of black inferiority or as a means to escape self-criticism. This is hardly a trivial concern. Some whites will use such criticism of blacks to further ratio-



nalize the subjugating treatment of them or simply to feed an insatiable appetite for entertaining themselves with the curiosity of black objects, and when those objects are in conflict with each other, the excitement of the spectacle is heightened. Discussing the problem of sexism in black churches may provide whites with a way of evading criticism of similar patterns among predominantly white church groups with comparable exclusions of women's ordained leadership in Roman Catholicism, Orthodox Christianity, or among Southern Baptists.

The concern for avoiding divisiveness provides a helpful reminder that one's sense of performing "in front of whites" even surfaces in racially homogeneous settings. Because the response of whites matters so much, to a certain extent, one is always in front of whites. The white gaze can take root in black psyches even when whites are not physically present. But acceding to their dominance comes with costs that are too high—such as sacrificing black women's gifts of preaching and leadership to the myth of male superiority. When some demonstration of "our black tradition" is uncritically performed in worship, it can take on a warped form that will not trouble white dominance, and even reproduces some of its characteristics of denial and entitlement.

Building blocks for creating more liberative practices can be found in an understanding of the inseparability of form and content. The content of Christian practices, such as the language or words charismatically preached in worship, cannot be separated from the form guiding those practices, e.g., the rules that define who can speak from the pulpit. There is a powerful moral message in preaching and teaching about God's inclusive love within exclusive traditions that rule out certain groups of people as innately ineligible to do that preaching and teaching. This worship practice conveys moral hypocrisy, and cultivates a spiritually comforting routine for denying that hypocrisy.

White supremacy, namely the benefits of white privilege, can produce a numbing effect on everyone. For whites, there may be a deadening of empathy for persons of color and a diminished capacity to be in right relation with them. For persons of color, this dehumanizing relationship can produce a deep hunger for affirmation. Hence, rituals that provide self-affirmation are necessary, but not just any self-affirming ritual will be adequate. Within Christian worship, a conscious choice has to be made for inclusion of affirming rituals that stimulate a faithfulness to God that opposes rather than replicates a loss of empathy for persons of color in groups other than one's own as well as for low status members of one's own racial/ethnic group.

### Multicultural Methods for Making Liturgical Choices

More specific ideas are needed to boost Christian imagination about how to gain some measure of freedom from this preoccupation with white dominance.

Potential for change lies in the fact that choices are always made about appropriate elements of worship. Deliberations take place for the selection of instrumental and choral music or the design of stained-glass windows and wall banners in the sanctuary. In the desire to inspire meaningful silent meditation by individuals and heartfelt hymn singing by the whole congregation, a decision-making process about how to do so occurs. The scripture texts that are given emphasis and the words that are used to encourage people to offer their prayers and testimonies also reflect certain choices. In the many details of preparing a worship service, choices are made about how public, communal expressions of Christian worship nurture or challenge existing mores about white dominance.

Multicultural theoretical approaches can assist Christians in making liturgical choices that enhance their recognition of human diversity as good, as well as their intolerance for unjust social relationships among diverse human communities. Multicultural understandings can offer guidance in creating worship rituals where Christians are more likely to be offered the chance to participate in disrupting a commitment to white dominance than encouraged in going along with it and similar repressive social practices.

To recognize human diversity as good requires some understanding of varying cultural patterns. Cultural variations display the distinctive ways human beings express their thought and creativity. As advocates of multicultural education in U.S. schools have argued, increasing cultural literacy about the broad spectrum of racial/ethnic identities, traditions, and experiences provides a more accurate and thorough understanding of how this nation's history and culture have evolved.<sup>35</sup> Indeed this kind of multicultural literacy can unleash a sense of plurality (in cultural perspectives) as norm rather than exception, as valuable rather than a problem to be overcome. It can break open binary categories that mute the racial/ethnic pluralism that exists and insist on the racial identity question, "Are you black or white?" A basic understanding of a range of cultural traditions and experiences can encourage appreciation for interwoven cultural identities like those of persons of mixed racial parentage or who have been cross-racially adopted.

This multicultural emphasis can also shift our identification of white Americans and Europeans as the central agents of history. It allows greater

awareness of patterns of discrimination and racial prejudice among, for instance, the varying groups lumped together under the category of "Asians" or "Hispanics/Latino/as." This form of historical literacy also includes cognizance of patterns of solidarity between nondominant racial/ethnic groups as well, like historical examples of relations between Native American tribes and African American slaves in Florida, or Mexican American and Japanese American farm workers in California at the turn of the twentieth century.<sup>36</sup>

James Banks, a multicultural education scholar, stresses how multicultural competency "helps students expand their conception of what it means to be human . . . Because cultures are made by people, there are many ways of being human."<sup>37</sup> In Christian religious terms, learning about multiple cultural patterns needs to be valued not only because it can expand an understanding of what it means to be human. It also offers worshipers the spiritually enlivening opportunity to grow in their views about how God's creative power and justice-seeking interacts with the social adaptations human beings create.

Ritualizing diverse, nondominant, cultural expressions of faith may provide an affirmation of human diversity with the potential to expand the conception of God that Christians gather to worship. Such practices can perhaps develop recognition of God's blessed presence amid the wide spectrum of cultural patterns developed by God's human creations. Filipino theologian Eleazar Fernandez celebrates Asian American preaching that speaks to Asian American congregations "of a God who affirms their color, a color that has been devalued in white racist society . . . God is colorful and delights in the variety of colors. . . . God transcends not by becoming colorless; rather God delights and takes cognizance in a variety of colors."<sup>38</sup> As Fernandez suggests, theologically expressed, direct attention to issues of race/ethnicity within worship can address the combined spiritual and social needs of the people. But the particularity of the message is essential. In communities of color, this theology about God's cognizance of a variety of colors might enable the faith community to resist the poisonous effects of racism that surround them and deepen their understanding of God as well.

An emphasis on multicultural patterns and experiences as reflective of diverse ways of being human might be theologically nourishing in yet another way. It may help worshipers engage and reflect upon key, historic theological understandings of God within Christianity. Similar to human cultural identities, core theological descriptions of God are also fundamentally pluralistic, such as the Trinitarian notion of God as Creator, Redeemer,

and Holy Spirit, or the understanding of Jesus as simultaneously fully human, fully divine, and fully divine/human. For Christians, contemporary heterogeneous cultural understandings of our communities may be understood in a way that is directly relevant to historic expressions of faith. Hence the content of worship celebrations of Christian faith could be guided by the assumption that consciousness of human plurality can enrich one's ability to perceive plurality within the very nature of the divine, and vice versa.

The possibilities that break open when nondominant multicultural perspectives are incorporated in worship are abundant, but my purpose is not to simply extol the virtues of such an approach.<sup>39</sup> The pull of white dominance and its destructive patterns of relating still present a formidable challenge for Christian worship in the U.S. context, even when a focus upon including nondominant cultural traditions and theology is secured. As noted earlier, representations of these nondominant traditions can be inserted into worship in a static way that unintentionally promotes racial stereotypes. Especially in predominantly white settings, celebrations of multiple cultural identities can be a means for avoiding and thus denying the presence of racism. A racially integrated congregation or a liturgy with culturally diverse expressions of faith is not necessarily an indication that racism is being addressed. There is still a need to clarify how multiculturalism can provide guidance on what it means to disrupt that consuming social commitment to white supremacy which can seep into the ritual practices of the church.

An assessment of what it means to expand the cultural assumptions in one's worship practices certainly could be a starting point for addressing racism. Banks created a grid for analyzing multicultural education that might be useful to congregations for generating ideas about how to evaluate the inclusion of multicultural content, beyond dominant white (and European) centered cultural sources, in their liturgical traditions. Banks describes four levels of integration for ethnic content in schools.

*Level 1: Contributions Approach*—Focuses on heroes, holidays, and discrete cultural elements.

*Level 2: Additive Approach*—Content, concepts, themes, and perspectives are added to the curriculum.

*Level 3: Transformation Approach*—The structure of the curriculum is changed to enable students to view concepts, issues, events, themes from the perspective of diverse ethnic and cultural groups.

*Level 4: Social Action Approach*—Students make decisions on important social issues and take actions to help solve them.<sup>40</sup>

Besides offering churches an instructive tool for assessment, the precedence given here to decision making as the culminating goal is key for addressing white supremacy, particularly the numbing effects of white privilege. Churches that are already committed to inclusion of nondominant multicultural expressions of faith in their liturgies are likely to employ some combination of these approaches, and the categories Banks suggests could help to organize their evaluation of how racial messages are conveyed in their practices.

For example, in a predominantly white church, the congregation may have an annual recognition of Martin Luther King Jr. during worship. They acknowledge the fact that one special individual who is not white has made contributions to church and society that should be honored by their congregation within worship (contributions approach). Or a predominantly black congregation may host a guest Korean choir in their worship service. The choir may come and sing a song in Korean with references to ideas popularly known in Korea that are translated and explained to their hosts. This church thereby adds a cultural perspective on worshipping God through music that it would not have otherwise experienced (additive approach). In another approach, a church might change its Communion ritual. As a way of commemorating the execution of Jesus by the Roman state, his suffering that preceded it, and resurrection that followed it, the Communion ritual could highlight a range of cultural contexts where suffering due to state sponsored terrorism and killing has occurred in the past or present (transformation approach).

Unless congregants reflect on the daily choices they make related to issues of race/ethnicity and power, these worship rituals will not represent a meaningful shift in practices for either the church or society (social action approach). An emphasis on cultural diversity that leaves out an examination of how issues of power and status have shaped relationships between racial/ethnic groups fails to accurately reflect social realities and certainly does not challenge white dominance.<sup>41</sup> For instance, it would be misleading if one were to describe U.S. history by equating the cultural perspectives of the indigenous nations of people and the perspectives of the people from European nations who came and settled on the lands of the indigenous peoples. Attempting, with the best of intentions, for a more inclusive understanding of cultural history, one might tell stories in, for example, a Thanksgiving worship service about the distinctive cultural traditions that the Europeans brought, alongside of a description of the unique cultural traditions of the indigenous peoples that Europeans encountered. But the genocide, rape of Native women, and theft of Native lands that was part of

the cultural perspective asserted by European Christians and their descendants would be rendered morally neutral in this form of multiculturalism. An antiracist consciousness that is alerted to how cultural rituals can so easily merge with and corrupt corporate experiences of worshipping God will reject liturgy that renders all social particularities relative.

Another way to trivialize the peculiar, differing circumstances oppressive conditions create could be overgeneralization in the form of prayers about "celebrating the blessedness of *all* of our diversity in age, race/ethnicity, sexuality, gender, abilities/disabilities." Similarly, a universal call for repentance from "our" complicity in sinfulness may help to reproduce injustice rather than repair it. These appeals to universality lump what it means to perpetrate or benefit from sinful acts together with what it means to be "the sinned-against."<sup>42</sup> Just as the social circumstances differ for those whose identities are given privileged status from those whose identities are devalued, so too should the theological message for each that is offered in worship.

In a liberative Christian ethic, multicultural awareness must include theological attention to the choices that have been made in our society which result in some people being granted status and privilege on the basis of their racial/ethnic identity. Especially in predominantly white congregations, to destabilize patterns of social dominance will mean deliberately making choices that risk diminishing one's access to certain benefits of social privilege or status. In Christianity, where the incarnation of Jesus and the church's embodiment of Christ are such central beliefs, a liturgy that is unrelated to the concrete, embodied practices of the worshiper's life is inadequate. A liberative ethic enjoins participatory expressions of this faith within the worship practices themselves as well as the practices of the broader society that one engages within daily life.

In congregations with varied racial/ethnic configurations as well as predominantly white ones, engendering a breach in their embrace of white dominance and similar social patterns will necessitate choices that comprehensively break with exclusive and excluding patterns within religion. As liturgical studies scholar Janet Walton argues when defining feminist liturgy, "Whereas in a patriarchal ritual one or a few men traditionally mediate power to and from God and to and from the people," feminist liturgy must be participatory where "leadership is reordered as collective authority, and power is imaged in new ways."<sup>43</sup> In liberative Christian ethics, power can be imaged in new ways in worship by interfering with all of the status quo hierarchical arrangements of it. Mixed messages, like a contradictory insistence on confronting white supremacy together with

claims and practices that assert the superiority of heterosexuals in God's sight will be counterproductive. Contradictions in the Christian group's opposition to varying forms of exclusion and devaluation based upon identity will rob the truthfulness from any ritual of dissent with white dominance that is included in worship. Eric Law, author/activist specializing in a multicultural approach to Christian ministry, suggests that living the good news at the "crossings" requires a vigilant commitment to power analysis in order to know how "the gospel challenges the powerful to let go of power, to pick up the cross and follow Jesus," and how it "empowers the powerless to speak and act, because they are blessed, and God will liberate them."<sup>44</sup>

What if, within the worship service, there was an opportunity for testimonies of spiritual courage about confronting an everyday practice of privileging some people over others on the basis of their identity? Individuals could be invited to stand up and testify about instances of white privilege that they notice in the details of their daily life and the decisions that they made to resist those cultural practices. They could include details like their response to a store's selection of "nude" panty hose or an author's novel where the race of the white characters is assumed to be the normal one that does not need to be identified by the author. No detail would be too insignificant for this ritual of testifying.

What if, in worship of multiracial congregations, the cultural location of "classical" music was identified, such as German composer Ludwig van Beethoven's (1770–1827) "Hymn to Joy" ("Joyful, Joyful, We Adore Thee"), by reminding congregants of multicultural understandings within the composer's own sociohistorical German context? Through reminders as simple as bulletin inserts or as elaborate as a play preceding the music, contemporary ideas in the composer's setting could be cited, like German anthropologist Johann Friedrich Blumenbach's pioneering 1770s notion of five races of the human species—Caucasian, Mongolian, American, Ethiopian, and Malay—with Caucasian (originating from Mount Caucasus) as the primary race whose physical characteristics prove their loftier mentality and generous spirit.<sup>45</sup> As they sing Beethoven's tune, congregants could be asked to morally reflect on whether they perpetuate any of the same supremacist ideas about race as those surrounding this German musician when he chose a poem emphasizing "all human beings as brothers [and sisters]" to adapt for his Symphony No. 9 in D minor (from which the tune comes).<sup>46</sup>

What if, in predominantly white, economically advantaged congregations, there was a "God asks who is supposed to dispose of your trash"

week during Advent? Every household could hold onto its trash for a week.<sup>47</sup> Youth could investigate the racial/ethnic and economic "geography" of trash and toxic waste disposal for their communities as well as the health and environmental consequences, and adults could find ways to minimize their household's accrual of trash. Sunday worship would include a ritual utilizing some representative piece of trash that each member brings to church, acknowledging sinful privileges and naming the costs passed onto others in disposal of household trash, as well as celebrating the need to do one's own work of building (environmental) justice when preparing the Way for Christ's advent, using noisemakers made out of the pieces of trash the children, youth, and adults brings forward.

We need many more concrete ideas about what liberative ethical practices might entail.