

## **Whose Christmas Is Coming?: Liturgical Color and White Privilege**

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### **Vocabulary**

- (1) Racism: "Power + Prejudice = Racism. Racism describes the result of prejudicial attitudes being combined with the power to dominate and control the systems and institutions capable of carrying out discriminatory practices. In other words, racism results from access to the power to enforce prejudices so as to advantage one racial group."
- (2) White Fragility: "The defensiveness and avoidance that arise for white people when facing even a minimum amount of racial stress. The feeling can be so uncomfortable that white people distance themselves from engaging or actively shut down conversations about race. It may surface as the outward display of emotions such as anger, fear, and guilt, and behaviors such as argumentation, silence, and leaving the stress-inducing situation."
- (3) White Privilege: "The term for the way people and social institutions grant social privileges that benefit white people beyond what is commonly experienced by people of color under the same social, political, or economic circumstances. White privilege is not something that white people do, create, or enjoy on purpose. It refers more to the phenomenon that social systems award preference based on the presumptions of white as norm."<sup>1</sup>

In July 2017, I participated in five sessions of a facilitator training workshop on racism and white privilege run by the Rhode Island State Council of Churches (RISCC). The above definitions were presented in the workshop material, titled "White Privilege: Let's Talk – A Resource for Transformational Dialogue" (WPLT), an adult curriculum from the United Church of Christ (UCC).

As part of the dialogue about iconography in the WPLT, Stephen G. Ray, Jr. argues that "the scriptural imagination of most Christians past a certain age is shaped and formed by character[s] and historical depictions that are almost exclusively white."<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, according to Ray, people of color appear "as members of the crowd, always having the feel of an

homage to ideological commitment to inclusion and not a ‘natural’ depiction of the truth of the matter.” Ray notes that we often see the same condescension in stained glass or Sunday school curricula.<sup>3</sup> Those white-centered Christian iconographies, Ray argues, have contributed to building the “imaginative space” in which White privilege has been formed and defended through generations.<sup>4</sup>

The RISCC’s training workshop reminded me of my own presentation, titled “Whose Christmas is Coming?: Multicultural Understanding of the Christian Year,” given at the Open Table of Christ United Methodist Church in Providence, Rhode Island in December 2006. It was an invitation for both clergy and laity to explore and use more diverse Christian images from many different cultures and countries. In this article, I am using the same title, “Whose Christmas is Coming?” recapping how Christian expressions and experiences continue to reflect attitudes and perceptions shaped by white privilege.

Dealing with some of the Christmas rituals and customs, especially focusing on the use of liturgical colors, I would like to journey together with other Christian siblings who recognize the sin of racism and white privilege and fight against them. So, in this regard, why am I interested in liturgical colors? After all, they are considered secondary rather than primary or essential in terms of liturgical significance. It is because through the increasing use of lectionaries and visual arts, denominational worship books and other materials, and sharing information online, liturgical colors have been gaining popularity.

Since visual impacts are more immediate and stronger than theological and liturgical reasoning, liturgical colors (and images) have effectively catechized children and adults to accept white as the supreme color that symbolizes Jesus, especially during the Christmas and Easter

seasons. For example, candles around wreaths during Advent and Christmas are often overlapped with images in which a white Jesus is surrounded by multi-colored children from diverse cultures and nations. Regardless of their liturgical weight or purpose, liturgical colors have become a trend that is rarely questioned and have contributed to reinforcing white supremacy and privilege.

I would not be uncomfortable about white Euro-American (Euro-American hereafter) Christmas rituals and customs if they were understood as practices that have been inculturated by one socially constructed group within a larger, and increasingly non-white, community. I would encourage and celebrate Euro-Americans' ways of expressing and experiencing Christmas, reflecting their own (although still diverse) cultural backgrounds. As part of one Body of Christ, I would be glad to make a joyful noise praising and being grateful for God's self-giving love in and through various languages and cultural dynamics in which we continue to learn to appreciate and respect each other as siblings in God's house.

Unfortunately, the Euro-American Christmas rituals and customs have pervasively been accepted and practiced as the *norm* in both Christian and cultural realms. Likewise, "dreaming of a white Christmas" has been not only an expression of expectations and joys for a snowy winter wonderland; it has also become one of the doorways to racism and white privilege that have played veiled and manifest roles in both personal interactions and institutional/systemic power dynamics.

## **Christmas Season**

In this article, the seasonal package of Advent-Christmas-Epiphany is called the Christmas season (or "incarnational cycle"<sup>5</sup>) that invites Christians to seek, to be awakened, and

to celebrate God's coming and being present in and through Jesus Christ. The origins of this assembling of traditions are obscure and controversial: it has been commonly accepted, though, that Epiphany, traced to as early as the mid-second century, preceded Christmas and Advent. Spotty ancient records from the third century (Christmas) and the fourth century (Advent) hint at how the Christmas season evolved: Rome eventually adopted a four-week Advent before Christmas by the sixth century.<sup>6</sup> It is also plausible that the development of the Christmas season was influenced by Roman cultural/religious festivities.<sup>7</sup>

The Advent-Christmas-Epiphany observances are thematically related to showing God's self-giving love that was born and embodied in Jesus Christ and continues to invite people to live out hope for the second coming of Christ in the present as well as in God's timing. The Christmas cycle is also associated with the Paschal Mystery that vividly shows God's self-giving love on the cross and beyond.<sup>8</sup> Peter C. Phan's understanding of Jesus' "border crossing ministry" helps us to see how the mystery of incarnation and the Paschal Mystery are interwoven, as seen in the following list: (1) the "divine crossing over to the human;" (2) Jesus' border-crossing ministry that broke through human-made barriers; and (3) his death and resurrection through which "he crossed the borders of death into a new life," revealing God's kenotic, self-giving love.<sup>9</sup>

It is worth noting that from the beginning, the magi from the east (Matthew) and the shepherds (Luke) represent Gentiles ("outsiders" to the dominant culture) and the lowly and outcast, whose presence figuratively anticipate Jesus' ministry and mission of God's reign. In his ministry, Jesus identified himself with those who were severely discriminated against and marginalized, while denouncing the purity system that created "a world with sharp social

boundaries: between pure and impure, righteous and sinner, whole and not whole, male and female, rich and poor, Jew and Gentile.”<sup>10</sup>

For many, Christmas season does not resonate with God’s self-giving love embodied in Jesus’s birth and his ongoing ministry and mission of God’s reign. It is simply a season that is comfy, cozy, and nostalgic. It is often cherished as romantic and/or filled with sentimental childhood memories. For others, Christmas is also remembered and experienced as a holiday season dominated by consumerism. Whenever I think of my own childhood Christmas in Korea, I feel that my heart is strangely warmed. I still remember the Advent drumbeat in my heart when I sang “O come O come, Emmanuel.” On Christmas Eve, when I, along with the other children and youths, sang Christmas hymns during the door to door caroling, I was excited not only about singing the Nativity but also being treated to goodies like rice cake and dumpling soup: “Silent Night, Holy Night,” “The First Noel,” “O Little Town of Bethlehem,” “Angels We Heard on High,” and “Joy to the World,” and some other Christmas hymns are still parts of my childhood memories that make me emotional at times. Later on, while living in the U.S.A., I came to know that the door-to-door Christmas caroling tradition has European origins.

Not surprisingly, pervasive Euro-American Christian influences have shaped Christmas season feelings, memories, and rituals of both Euro-Americans and many other racial-ethnic people.<sup>11</sup> For example, nativity paintings from the Renaissance and other periods that depict Mary and baby Jesus with white skin and blond hair have been accepted without a second thought. Until recent years, most popular and familiar Christian Christmas carols and hymns have been those composed and written by Europeans and Euro-Americans. They have been ingrained in people’s minds and memories: I cherish them too.

Although multicultural hymns and visuals have recently been embraced and used by many denominations and congregations, they are often considered to be addenda to the so-called “traditional” ones. Moreover, when non-European congregations are encouraged to find creative ways of celebrating the Christmas season in their own cultural contexts, they are often perplexed, realizing with surprise how much their own memories and feelings have been shaped by Euro-American influences. They also have limited resources for inculturation of liturgical expressions during the Christmas season: many still resist attempts to change their familiar practices, most of which came from early Western missionaries, often with colonial and postcolonial power dynamics behind them.

Liturgical colors, though whispering the possibility of more diverse and creative colors, have been standardized among many denominations and congregations. While providing guidelines for matching colors with seasons of the church year, the references of denominational worship books rarely provide the historical backgrounds of the liturgical colors. The adverb “traditionally” seems to be the most common explanation for their use.

Whether of Catholic or Protestant traditions, white or gold is the paramount liturgical color that symbolizes both Easter and Christmas, while other nonwhite colors still symbolize important theological and pastoral themes. When lighting the Advent candles, those purple and pink colors invite worship attendants to ignite the candles of hope, love, joy and peace (or expectation, proclamation, joy and purity) in their hearts and the world, too. Unfortunately, these beautiful colors are often perceived to be supporting colors that can’t be completed without white or gold. Irrespective of the liturgical significance, on the top of the other religious and cultural components that aggravate and reinforce racism and white privilege, liturgical color

often fosters the perception, from earliest childhood, of whiteness as the norm. Liturgical color has unconsciously fed white privilege in the church and society.

Just as the liturgical year was slowly evolved, liturgical color also emerged gradually, especially “during late antiquity and the early Middle Ages.”<sup>12</sup> For the first millennium, having the liberty of choosing colors and textures, churches in different regions used diverse colors without seeking liturgical/theological meanings; the major concern was how to choose the most pleasing colors or fabrics.<sup>13</sup> According to Gilbert Cope, except for a preference for white robes, the colors of vestments and hangings were not different from “what was customary among the Roman middle and upper classes of the empire and of its Byzantine continuation.”<sup>14</sup>

In Western Europe, colors came to be linked with the medieval development of liturgical seasons.<sup>15</sup> In the twelfth century, Pope Innocent III (1198-1216) implemented the “Roman rule based on white for feasts, red for martyrs, black for penitential seasons and green at other times,” providing the first full rationale for the system of liturgical colors.<sup>16</sup> It is worth noting that the liturgical colors were officially adopted when Medieval European Christians’ religious and cultural stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination were brutally exercised in the context of Crusades.<sup>17</sup>

Similar use of color-symbolism continued to be maintained, but still differed widely among regions, especially before the Council of Trent (1545-1563).<sup>18</sup> As part of the reaction to the Reformation abandonment, completely or at least partially, of the medieval model of liturgical color, the Council of Trent more strictly standardized the assignment of liturgical colors: “white for festive occasions such as Christmas and its season, or Easter and its season; purple or violet for more penitential seasons including Lent; red for feasts of martyrs, the Holy

Spirit, or other occasions such as ordinations; black for funerals, seasons of mourning, and occasional feasts of the Virgin, including Candlemas; and green for the Sundays ‘after Pentecost’....”<sup>19</sup> Since Vatican II, the Roman Catholic Church maintained almost the same system of liturgical color, while Eastern churches have allowed for more flexible uses of color.<sup>20</sup>

Commercial interests were also involved in the growing demand for and use of liturgical colors and objects, as Cope explains:

... Victorian commercial interests were mobilized to supply full sets of vestments and hangings in the ‘correct’ liturgical colours. It is stated by several writers on the subject that complete standardization of the colours in the Roman Catholic Church was not attempted until the nineteenth century, and this, presumably, is an allusion to the persistence of local uses in France until this time and to the growing commercial pressures for mass-produced correctness.<sup>21</sup>

Another drastic change came from the influence of the first Liturgical Movement, a 19th-century Roman Catholic movement for the reform of worship, and the second Liturgical Movement of the Protestant churches that arose after World War II. According to Cope, being influenced by the liturgical movement, both “historical and psychological virtue [or ‘emotional effect’] in the traditional seasonal colours” were recognized—that is, liturgical colors have been “interpreted in terms of mood rather than in conformity to a rigid system of rules.”<sup>22</sup> Cope’s argument suggests that the psychological reasoning appears to be mostly applied to Euro-American “mood”: “it is reasonable in penitential periods to use drab materials in the violet-brown-grey range (though avoiding black); to use red-purples and gold to express majesty and high-priesthood; challenging reds for leaders and martyrs; green and yellow to signify renewal; and to employ white and gold (with the whole palette, if desired) for festivals.”<sup>23</sup>

Although brief, this history of the liturgical colors hints at why we use current colors. Still, liturgical colors have been used in ways reflecting individual cultural traditions, but doing



so is neither common nor passed on interculturally. For example, in Pakistani-American Christian congregations, white is reserved for Holy Week (especially for Good Friday services).<sup>24</sup> This also emerges from the fact that in many Asian cultures, white – a sign of joy in Europe – is the color of mourning.<sup>25</sup>

It was 1996 when Laurence Hull Stookey wrote that “the standard post-Reformation Western use” of the liturgical colors became “very problematical under changing circumstances.”<sup>26</sup> While observing that the *Common Lectionary* (1983) and the *Revised Common Lectionary* (1992) were extensively used in North America and beyond, Stookey recognized the dilemma on the other side of the “common” lectionaries and their matching colors, mentioning that “today among certain groups, white is rejected as being an evidence of subtle white racism and thus of discrimination against persons of darker skin.”<sup>27</sup>

Stookey’s observation implies that the use of the liturgical color may reinforce racism and white privilege regardless of its intention: racism and white privilege are phenomena that are socially and culturally absorbed regardless of whether or not certain individuals or groups recognize it. As expressed in the UCC’s “White Privilege: Let’s Talk” (WPLP), white privilege is beyond what “white people do, create, or enjoy on purpose:” it is “the way people and social institutions grant social privileges that benefit white people beyond what is commonly experienced by people of color under the same social, political, or economic circumstances.”<sup>28</sup>

In relation to liturgical color, the prevalent dualistic perception of lightness and darkness needs to be reexamined too. Night can be seen as both wondrous and dangerous: Scripture was written when night, lacking the illumination of electric lighting in homes and on streets, was experienced as harboring dangerous natural and human threats.<sup>29</sup> According to Ray, “[t]his is a

significant reason why our scriptures are shot through with images of the goodness of light and the evil of darkness. Light is a metaphor for safety and the leisure to enjoy the beauty of the world we inhabit; alternatively, darkness is a metaphor for danger and death.”<sup>30</sup> Furthermore, the dualistic notion of lightness and darkness in the Bible (especially the New Testament) reflects the Hellenic worldview.<sup>31</sup> Although the color line did not exist when the Bible was written, the binary of lightness and darkness was often decoded to support and feed the systems of slavery, racism, and white privilege.<sup>32</sup>

Living in rapidly changing contemporary landscapes, where diverse expressions and experiences are encouraged to be explored not only for inculturation of worship and theology but also in the contexts of fighting against racial injustice and white privilege, we need to be vigilant about how liturgical colors along with the other Christmas traditions in Western Christianity can support white privilege, as seen in the following summary examples:

- White children and adults have the privilege of observing and learning about white color as supreme color in the church, especially during Christmas and Easter season. In a society where “social systems award preference based on the presumptions of white as norm,” white as supreme liturgical color can be easily perceived as one of the many other religious and cultural components that lead to reinforcing white privilege.
- Often unconsciously and implicitly, our Christian educations and daily catechisms including Christmas stories and related visuals and cartoons that depict God, baby Jesus, Mary and Joseph, and angels with white skins and garments, blond hair and blue-eyes contribute to racial stereotyping and prejudice that result in systematic racial injustice.
- Along with the above images, the other Christian arts, hymns/carols, musical instruments, and cultural components that support white privilege, reveal the comfort level of whiteness as a norm.

These examples invite us to continue to be mindful that familiar rituals and customs in both religious and cultural arenas may contribute to build what Ray called “imaginative space” in which white privilege is defended and intensified.

### **Concluding Remarks**

White-filled assumptions, understandings, and practices of the Christmas season have recently been presented in more creative, artistic, and carefully nuanced forms. Still, white-centered visuals are often experienced in many congregations revealing the strength of people’s emotional attachment to “traditional” Christmas memories. Some of these congregations intentionally introduce nativity images from different cultures longing for overcoming white privilege, but at the same time ‘pastorally’ compromise with congregants who have nostalgic feelings about the Christmas season. Christmas commonly becomes a seasonal bracket in which most people thoroughly enjoy “whiteness” as a norm.

I hope this article helps us be aware of the risk of unconsciously demeaning or marginalizing many racial-ethnic populations in some current Christmas practices, in ways that may have escaped our notice. Da Vita D. McCallister, one of the authors of the WPLT, reminds us of both “the joy of the Birth of Jesus and the inability to fully celebrate his birth in light of the death and disregard for black and brown bodies.”<sup>33</sup> That’s why the WPLT maintains that “it is a heavy price we pay to maintain our silence in the face of such evil [of racism and white privilege], no matter what benefits we accrue because of it.”<sup>34</sup> As we continue to explore alternative ways to celebrate the Christmas season, we are invited to continue to learn, pray and work together, committing ourselves to reducing the impact of white privilege by which injustice and inequality has been created and fed.<sup>35</sup>

Finally, at this beginning of a journey in which reflections on the Christmas season may lead to further conversations, I would like to share Ray's invitational words specifically for white and other allies: "Accept its ubiquity [racial prejudice ranging from discomfort to animus]. Become aware of the privilege [whiteness] gives us. Use that privilege to the Glory of God by exercising it on behalf of our neighbors disadvantaged by it. Get up tomorrow morning and do the same thing. That is being an ally."<sup>36</sup> Doesn't it also sound like an invitation for us to live out an authentic Christmas in which God's self-giving love is born and lived, especially among the marginalized? "Whose Christmas is coming?" Although paradoxical, this is a question we need to keep asking as we continue our journey together.

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<sup>1</sup> United Church of Christ, "White Privilege: Let's Talk – A Resource for Transformational Dialogue." <http://privilege.uccpages.org/> (accessed November 25, 2017).

<sup>2</sup> Stephen G. Ray, Jr. in *ibid.*, 43.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

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

<sup>5</sup> Ruth C. Duck, *Worship for the Whole People of God: Vital Worship for the 21st Century* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2013), 133-34.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 133-137; James F. White, *Introduction to Christian Worship*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2000), 61-63; White, *A Brief History of Christian Worship* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), 62-65; Paul F. Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship: Sources and Methods for the Study of Early Liturgy* (Oxford/New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 202-4.

<sup>7</sup> White, *Introduction*, 61-62; Bradshaw, 202; Duck, 134; Anscar J. Chupunco, "Reenvisioning 'Liturgy and the Components of Culture,'" in Gláucia Vasconcelos Wilkey, *Worship and Culture: Foreign Country or Homeland?* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2014), 75. It is also worth noting that the 1560 *Book of Discipline* of the Church of Scotland and the *Westminster Directory*, a manual of directions for worship approved by the Scottish Parliament in 1645 to replace the *Book of Common Prayer*, and the Puritans in later years denounced Christmas season as unscriptural. In the United States, Christmas had been outlawed from 1659 to 1681 in Massachusetts: December 25 became a legal holiday in 1856. See White, *Introduction*, 65; Laurence Hull Stookey, *Calendar: Christ's Time for the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press), 107.

<sup>8</sup> Hoyt L. Hickman and others, *The New Handbook of the Christian Year Based on the Common Lectionary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992), 51.

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<sup>9</sup> Peter C. Phan, *In Our Own Tongues: Perspectives from Asia on Mission and Inculturation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2003), 138, 147-49.

<sup>10</sup> Marcus Borg, *Meeting Jesus Again for the First Time: The Historical Jesus and the Heart of Contemporary Faith* (San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1994), 52; Eldon Jay Epp, *Mark*, in *The Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 8, ed Leander E. Keck, et. al. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995), 142; R. Alan Culpepper, *Luke*, in *The New Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 9, ed Leander E. Keck, et. al. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995), 65.

<sup>11</sup> I haven't found relevant term for

<sup>12</sup> Joanne M. Pierce, "Vestments and Objects" in Geoffrey Wainwright and Karen B. Westerfield Tucker, *The Oxford History of Christian Worship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 846.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 847; Gilbert Cope, "Colours, Liturgical" in J. G. Davies ed., *Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1986), 178; Laurence Hull Stookey, *Calendar: Christ's Time for the Church* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1996), 155.

<sup>14</sup> Cope, "Colours," 178. As time passed, "although liturgical vesture remained the same in form as civilian dress, the indications are that the clergy reserved special 'suit' of alb and chasuble for use in church, and also that increasingly these vestments were of white materials only." See Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.; Pierce, 847; Innocent III, *Centering the Holy Mystery of the Altar*, LXV (c. 1195) in White, *Documents of Christian Worship: Descriptive and Interpretive Sources* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 32-34.

<sup>17</sup> For example, the Fourth Council of the Lateran of 1215, convoked by Pope Innocent III, required Jews and Muslims living in Western Christian Christendom to wear distinguishable clothing. For more information, read the following links: <http://jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/9659-lateran-councils> and <http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/4379-church-councils> (accessed December 26, 2017). Pope Innocent III was one of the most powerful popes who claimed sovereignty over all of the kings of the Christian states of Europe. He called for the Fourth Crusade.

<sup>18</sup> Cope, 178-9; Pierce, 847; Stookey, 155.

<sup>19</sup> Pierce, 847; Stookey, 155; White, *Brief History*, 127-8. Cope implies that standardization of the colors in the Roman Catholic Church was finalized in the nineteenth century. See Cope, 180.

<sup>20</sup> Pierce, 847.

<sup>21</sup> Cope, 180. Stookey also mentions the possibility of commercial involvements in relation to the frequent use of liturgical colors and other visuals in modern era: "It is not difficult to become skeptical about whether the proliferation of colors arises from the needs of the faithful to have the occasion signaled visually or from the desire of the vestment manufactures to sell more ecclesiastical goods." See Stookey, 156.

<sup>22</sup> Cope, 180; White, *Brief History*, 146-47.

<sup>23</sup> Cope, 180. Cope implies that the post Vatican II *Ordo Missae* (1969) reflect the trend following the Liturgical Movement. As Don E. Saliers claims that "liturgy is always culturally embodies and embodied," those colors implicitly or explicitly reflected religious, cultural, and political contexts of medieval Europe and afterward, while echoing modern EAs' perceptions and emotional responses to certain colors. See Don E. Saliers, *Worship as Theology: Foretaste of Glory Divine* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 17.

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<sup>24</sup> Kathy Black, *Worship Across Cultures: A Handbook* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1998), 188.

<sup>25</sup> Stookey recognizes that “[m]issionaries in Asia were confronted by the fact that white, interpreted as a sign of joy in Europe, connoted mourning in [Asian] cultures. Stookey, 155-6.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 155.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 155-56. Dealing with liturgical colors, White also mentions that “[c]olors signify different meanings in various cultures, and we must recognize this.” See White, *Introduction*, 78.

<sup>28</sup> Vocabulary in *WPLT*

<sup>29</sup> Lay in Ibid., 38.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> John Paddock in Ibid., 39.

<sup>33</sup> Da Vita D. McCallister in Ibid., 89

<sup>34</sup> Introduction in Ibid., 3.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ray in Ibid., 106. Slightly modified.