
2018 AAR Presidential Address: In the Ruins of White Evangelicalism: Interpreting a Compromised Christian Tradition through the Witness of African American Literature

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This paper begins by describing the author's exit from white US evangelicalism, and his revulsion at the overwhelming support of white US evangelicals for Donald Trump. The author describes this as an unveiling of the moral collapse of a once-moralistic white evangelicalism, then situates that collapse within the long historical trajectory of white supremacist Christianity in the United States. This corrupted white Christianity is exposed here through scenes from major works in the African American literary canon. The categories of moral debasement (greed, pride, slander, arbitrary use of power, unchecked anger and violence, and alienation), religious powerlessness, and perceptual blindness are deployed to summarize how racist white Christians and Christianity are described in these fictional (but historically realistic) literary works. Citing three recent dissertations by young (ex-) evangelicals, the author

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claims that white evangelicalism has always been corrupted by white supremacy but now appears to have been swallowed up by the politics of white reactionary grievance. The only way forward is complete repudiation of this history and the development of a post-white evangelical Christianity, and scholarship, undertaken humbly and in the context of diverse interracial friendship and community.

INTRODUCTION

I RECALL with some amusement that, three years ago, some in the AAR membership expressed concern that an evangelical (defined, for now, as a theologically conservative Protestant Christian) had been elected president. This reflected the reoccurrence of our persistent “religious studies” vs. “confessional” tension in the AAR. But it was more than that, because the taint associated with evangelicalism in the academy has a distinctive quality to it.

Those who then expressed worries about me had no idea that by the time of my AAR election my relationship with evangelicalism—at least, US white evangelicalism—was heading toward a less-than-amicable divorce. On my side, disillusionment over evangelicals’ widespread sexism, support for United States-sponsored torture, resistance to climate science, and love affair with the Republican Party had pushed me to the edge (Gushee 2008; Gushee 2017). On their side, my 2014 book (Gushee 2014) calling for equal moral status in the church for LGBTIQ persons and relationships had led to my rejection on grounds of heresy. Of course, I am hardly the first disillusioned ex-evangelical (Hempton 2008).

Even though my evangelical farewell tour was well under way by the time of the election of Donald Trump in 2016, the overwhelming support of white US evangelicals (Cox and Jones 2016) for this man struck me with staggering force. I would describe it as a mix of astonishment, outrage, and humiliation by association.

As a Christian ethicist who spent nearly forty years of my life and nine-tenths of my professional career within the white evangelical subculture, I cannot help but engage with this moral surrender to Donald Trump. There is every evidence that this is a matter of wide interest (Douthat 2017; Wehner 2017; Miller 2018), and to address it here fits with my AAR theme of religious studies in public.

Still, this theme, faith community, and subdiscipline do not interest everyone. That is fine. Every AAR presidential address enters the

conversation in our scholarly Tower of Babel as just one strange tongue among others.

My essay begins with the belief that even in a time of high evangelical visibility and apparent influence, we are witnessing the moral ruin of white US evangelicalism, at least in its majority expression.

This moral ruin is no small matter. Many of us who come from a certain background ask what happened to all those Christians we once knew—the people who were in church every time the doors were open, who poured over their well-worn Bibles looking for clues as to how to live, and who often exemplified high character in personal and professional life. How did they end up with #MAGA hats, claims about God's special anointing of Donald Trump, and Romans 13 defenses of children ripped from their parents at our southern border?

Until 2016, I thought that the main problem with white evangelicals was their recent overenthusiastic embrace of the Republican Party, the marriage of convenience that has yielded such good political fruit for the GOP. But the Trump 81% (Cox and Jones 2016) forced a deeper investigation. In the face of an explicitly racist candidate and then president, it finally became clear to me that the Trump phenomenon is at least in large part about race, and so evangelical support must also implicate race. (I note here that Trumpism is also about sex and gender. A whole different presidential address could have been written about that.)

The theme of evangelicals and racism was not entirely new to me. I knew that my own (former) Southern Baptist Convention had been founded in 1845 on the disastrous proposition that slave-owning should not be a bar to missionary appointment, and that it was not only America's Baptists who divided over slavery and race. I knew that Southern Baptists sat through the Jim Crow and Civil Rights years largely silent. I had long ago internalized Martin Luther King's critique, in "Letter from Birmingham City Jail," of the white churches of the South, which, he said, "have remained silent behind the anesthetizing security of stained-glass windows" (King 1963, 299).

More recently, I had supervised doctoral dissertations by Justin Phillips (Phillips 2013) and Jacob Cook (Cook 2018) that, respectively, examined the tepid response of leading white evangelicals to the civil rights movement and found racist tropes embedded in the supposed "biblical worldviews" of evangelical icons like Abraham Kuyper and Harold Ockenga. I had also republished scathing critiques of white evangelical racism by William Pannell and Soong-Chan Rah, evangelicals of color who have experienced racism from within the US evangelical world (Gushee and Sharp 2015).

But a sense of this moment's apocalyptic white evangelical moral bankruptcy finally pushed me to see that I had so much more to learn. I needed a much more serious engagement with race and racism than I had ever undertaken.

In a career in which I have made my way from one injustice to another for research and activism, I have until now never fixed my gaze very long or very deeply on the injustice closest at hand—white American Christian racism. And this in a career spent entirely in the Baptist South, in Kentucky, Tennessee, and Georgia. It dawned on me that the moral failure of my erstwhile evangelical people in the age of Trump, and my own failure to center racism and white supremacism in my work, were deeply intertwined.

I can only describe the realization of this failure in the language of my faith tradition—as conviction of sin. For that sin, I have no excuse. Forty years ago, the Southern Baptists taught me that when you realize you have sinned you must repent—receive the pain of moral conviction without evasion, confess your wrongdoing honestly to God and those you have harmed, and live in the opposite direction. This essay constitutes part of my repentance. In saying this, I do not seek your praise or your condemnation, only your understanding of the position from which I write.

And so, from that place, I decided to sit at the feet of African American writers and thinkers in a posture of eager listening and learning—not to appropriate, not to appear “woke,” but to learn and understand in the service of “repentance and reparation.” These are the primary moral obligations facing white Americans, according to our honored colleague James Cone (Cone 2011, 166), whose death this past year we continue to grieve.

A second grievous loss this year was that of another honored colleague, Katie Cannon. She was the first Christian ethicist to center African American fictional works as authoritative sources. Following Cannon's lead, and that of womanist thinkers after her, I decided to read African American novels first, and extensively. Cannon claims, “Black women's writings have paralleled Black history . . . the patterns and themes in their writings are reflective of historical facts, sociological realities and religious convictions that lie behind the ethos and the ethics of the black community. . . . Seldom, if ever, is their work art-for-art's sake” (Cannon 1988, 78).

After delving into novels, my plan was then to go on to black history, theology, and ethics. But I became utterly transfixed by the revelatory power of the novels. I tried to listen to and learn from everything they had to say. In particular, I listened for what they had to say about white people's character and religion. (I could pause here to litigate the complex definitional issues around using the terms “white” and “black” to describe

human populations. I acknowledge these categories as social constructions, damagingly real in their consequences, entirely arguable, but used routinely in the literature I am examining.)

Cannon writes, “Black women writers document the attitudes and morality of [people] who chafe at and deny the restrictions imposed by the dominant white-capitalist value system” (Cannon 1988, 85). Her claim is that, at least for black women writers, their focus is not so much the omnipresent context of white racism but creative black responses. It is as if the nature of the oppression is depressingly obvious, but the creative responses are truly revelatory (Cannon 1988, 14). For this paper, I will focus on the oppression revealed in these novels because it is what I—and the white-supremacist study of religion—need to understand right now; but I acknowledge Cannon’s claim with appreciation and look forward to future reading.

WORRIES

Let me pause here to acknowledge three worries.

I worry that leading scholars in the study of these works are members of the AAR, that your magisterial scholarship sets the standard in this arena, and that I am a novice. All I can do about that worry is to ask for your patience, and your feedback.

I worry that the specter of a white guy of a certain age and background engaging classic African American works is uncomfortable. I can only hope that my treatment of this literature will be viewed as academically sound, humbly respectful, and coming from an honest place.

Finally, I worry that this paper on white racism does not broaden its gaze beyond African American experience to that of other groups who have been its targets and victims. I can only plead the necessity of limiting my literature focus for this one address.

And so: This paper draws from readings in a substantial number of fictional works by African Americans in search of an answer to this question: *how do characters describe white Christian people’s morality and religion, in light of the racism they exhibit and inflict?*

Each novel is an individual work of art. Characters, lines, and scenes have their place within each work. Everyone should read these books for themselves. My purpose must be limited to offering glimpses into these books, seeing through their eyes into what W.E.B. DuBois once called “the souls of white folk” (DuBois 1920, 17–29).

THE SOULS OF WHITE FOLK AS SEEN IN AFRICAN AMERICAN NOVELS

My effort at reflecting upon what I have read suggests three primary themes related to white racism and its effects: *moral debasement*, *religious powerlessness*, and *perceptual blindness*. Under those three themes, I suggest we all listen and learn from these authors.

Moral Debasement: The Spirit and Result of White Racism

These novels reveal that the structurally racist society that white people created and sustain morally damages us. (I will say “us” rather than “them” when referring to white people, so as not to distance myself from the descriptions offered by these novels.) Attempting to distill the specific elements of moral debasement, I suggest the following six deadly sins: *greed, pride, slander, arbitrary use of power, unchecked anger and violence, and alienation from human relationship*. For each, I will offer a summary statement, and then a few examples from the novels. Some of the quotes I will offer are bracing.

Greed: Economic Self-Interest at the Root

First, to the issue of greed. These novels suggest that white people enjoy massive economic advantages over black people, that we created and today maintain a society in which this remains the case. White people act based on our self-interest, and nothing stands in the way of that. We created the entire system to benefit ourselves, and this is pivotal to understanding white racism in all periods of American history.

“I know how they is. The key to all of ‘em is money. The trouble with our people is as soon as they got out of slavery they didn’t want to give the white man nothing else. But the fact is, you got to give ‘em something. Either your money, your land, your woman or your ass.” (Walker [1982] 2003, 183)

He understood then why many old Negroes said: Take all this world and give me Jesus! It was because they couldn’t get this world anyway—it belonged to the white folks. They alone had the power to give or withhold at their back doors. Always back doors... (Hughes [1930] 1995, 260)

I just can’t get used to it. I swear to God I can’t. I know I oughtn’t think about it, but I can’t help it. Every time I think about it I feel like somebody’s poking a red-hot iron down my throat. ...Look! We live here and

they live there. We black and they white. They got things and we ain't. They do things and we can't. It's just like living in jail. Half the time I feel like I'm on the outside of the world peeping in through a knothole in the fence. (Wright [1940] 2005, 20)

Pride: An Assumption of Superiority

Racism is in large part about pride, an assumption of superiority. In these novels, white people assume that we are supreme and morally superior to black people in all meaningful ways. We do not have to say it, and we usually do not do so. But we assume it. The novels offer glimpses of that prideful sense of superiority, and of those wounded by it.

"Ain't no way to read the bible and not think God white, she say. Then she sigh. When I found out I thought God was white, and a man, I lost interest. You mad cause he don't seem to listen to your prayers. Humph! Do the mayor listen to anything colored say? . . . I know white people never listen to colored, period. If they do, they only listen long enough to be able to tell you what to do." (Walker [1982] 2003, 196)

She looked out into the quiet, sunny streets, and for the first time in her life, she hated it all—the white city, the white world. She could not, that day, think of one decent white person in the whole world. She sat there, and she hoped that one day God, with tortures inconceivable, would grind them utterly into humility, and make them know that black boys and black girls, whom they treated with such condescension, such disdain, and such good humor, had hearts like human beings too, more human hearts than theirs. (Baldwin [1952] 1980, 204)

The Judge sat in the dining-room amid his morning's mail, and he did not ask John to sit down. He plunged squarely into the business. 'You've come for the school, I suppose. Well, John, I want to speak to you plainly . . . Now I like the colored people, and sympathize with all their reasonable aspirations; but you and I both know, John, that in this country the Negro must remain subordinate, and can never expect to be the equal of white men. In their place, your people can be honest and respectful; and God knows, I'll do what I can to help them. But when they want to reverse nature, and rule white men, and marry white women, and sit in my parlor, then, by God! We'll hold them under if we have to lynch every N***** in the land.' (DuBois [1903] 2003, 172)

Slander: Defamation of Black Character

These novels suggest that white people routinely slander the character of black people. We create—and continually re-create—a degraded moral image of black people and act accordingly.

“Funny thing, though, Ma, how some white people certainly don’t like colored people, do they? They go out of their way sometimes to say bad things about colored folks, putting it out that all of us are thieves and liars, or else diseased—corruption and syphilis and the like. No wonder it’s hard for a black man to get a good job with that kind of false propaganda going around.” (Hughes [1933] 1990, 52)

Whitepeople believed that whatever the manners, under every dark skin was a jungle. Swift unnavigable waters, swinging screaming baboons, sleeping snakes, red gums ready for their sweet white blood. In a way, he thought, they were right. The more coloredpeople spent their strength trying to convince them how gentle they were, how clever and loving, how human, the more they used themselves up to persuade whites of something Negroes believed could not be questioned, the more tangled the jungle grew inside. But it wasn’t the jungle blacks brought with them to this place from the other (livable) place. It was the jungle whitefolks planted in them. And it grew. It spread. In, through and after life, it spread, until it invaded the whites who had made it. Touched them every one. Changed and altered them. Made them bloody, silly, worse than even they wanted to be, so scared were they of the jungle they had made. The screaming baboon lived under their own white skin; the red gums were their own. (Morrison [1987] 2004, 234)

Arbitrary Use of Power: Because Absolute Power Corrupts Absolutely

The novels I have engaged suggest that white people are capricious and unpredictable in how we use our power over black people. No force can constrain us, while state power supports us. This is arbitrary power, and such absolute, or near absolute, power is always morally corrupting.

His father [the slavemaster] wasn’t the monster he could have been with the power he held over his slaves. He wasn’t a monster at all. Just an ordinary man who sometimes did the monstrous things his society said were legal and proper. (Butler 1979, 134)

“[Mayor’s wife] say to Sofia, ‘All your children so clean,’ she say, ‘would you like to work for me, be my maid?’

Sofia say, ‘Hell no.’

She say, ‘What you say?’

Sofia say, ‘Hell no.’

Mayor look at Sofia, push his wife out the way. Stick out his chest. ‘Girl, what you say to Miss Millie?’

Sofia say, ‘I say, Hell no.’

He slap her.” (Walker [1982] 2003, 87)

Out there were whitepeople and how could you tell about them? . . . Grandma Baby said there was no defense—they could prowl at will, change from one mind to another, and even when they thought they were behaving, it was a far cry from what real humans did. (Morrison [1987] 2004, 90)

Unchecked Anger and Violence

White people created a slave system of unspeakable violence and settled into the practice of anger and violence against black people, even long after slavery ended. Often seeming to be on a hair-trigger, in local situations white people routinely resort to violence.

“‘What’s your baby doing with gray eyes and yellow hair?’ She began to slap my jaws every which way. I never felt the first ones ‘cause I was too busy getting the cover back over my child. But the last lick burnt me like fire. I had too many feelings to tell which one to follow so I didn’t cry and I didn’t do nothing else. But then she kept asking me how come my baby look white. . . . So I told her, ‘I don’t know nothing but what I’m told to do cause I ain’t nothing but a n***** and a slave.’” (Hurston [1937] 2006, 17, paraphrased for clarity)

Eighteen seventy-four and whitefolks were still on the loose. Whole towns wiped clean of Negroes; eighty-seven lynchings in one year alone in Kentucky; four colored schools burned to the ground; grown men whipped like children; children whipped like adults; black women raped; property taken, necks broken. He smelled skin, skin and hot blood. The skin was one thing, but human blood cooked in a lynch fire was a whole other thing.” (Morrison [1987] 2004, 212)

Blood, in all the cities through which he passed, ran down. There seemed no door, anywhere, behind which blood did not call out, unceasingly, for blood; no woman . . . who had not seen her father, her brother, her lover, or her son cut down without mercy; who had not seen her sister become part of the white man’s great whorehouse, who had not, all too narrowly, escaped that house herself; no man, preaching or cursing . . . who had not been made to bend his head and drink white men’s muddy water; no man whose manhood had not been, at the root, sickened . . . whose seed had not been scattered into oblivion and worse than oblivion, into living shame and rage, and into endless battle. Yes, their parts were all cut off, they were dishonored, their very names were nothing more than dust blown disdainfully across the field of time. . . . Behind them was the darkness, nothing but the darkness, and all around them destruction, and before them nothing but the fire—a bastard people, far from God, singing and crying in the wilderness! (Baldwin [1952] 1980, 158–59)

Alienation: The Impossibility of Human Relationship

All is not violence. The novels depict times when white people seek normal, healthy human relationships with black people, or seem to seek it. But we cannot quite get there because we cannot release our superiority. Meanwhile, black people have no particular reason to trust white people, and thus real human communion is tragically out of reach.

Rufus [the slave master] had done exactly what I had said he would do: Gotten possession of the [slave] woman without having to bother with her husband [whom he had killed]. Now, somehow, Alice would have to accept not only the loss of her husband, but her own enslavement. Rufus had caused her trouble, and now he had been rewarded for it. It made no sense. No matter how kindly he treated her now that he had destroyed her, it made no sense. (Butler 1979, 149)

Jane: "And you think you can handle him?"

Mary Agnes: "More than anything else in this world, Robert is decent."

Jane: "Is this world decent, Mary Agnes?"

Mary Agnes: "Robert is more human being than he is white man, Miss Jane."

Jane: "And how long you think this world go'n let him stay like that?" (Gaines 1971, 178)

He felt something in her over and above the fear she inspired in him. She responded to him as if he were human, as if he lived in the same world as she. And he had never felt that before in a white person. But why? Was this some kind of game? The guarded feeling of freedom he had while listening to her was tangled with the hard fact that she was white and rich, a part of the world of people who told him what he could and could not do. . . . Maybe they did not despise him? But they made him feel his black skin by just standing there looking at him. . . . He felt he had no physical existence at all then; he was something he hated, the badge of shame which he knew was attached to a black skin. It was a shadowy region, a no man's land, the ground that separated the white world from the black that he stood upon. He felt naked, transparent; he felt that this white man, having helped to put him down, having helped to deform him, held him up now to look at him and be amused. (Wright [1940] 2005, 65–67)

White Religion as Powerless

There is much allusion to religion in these novels. White people's religion is always supposedly Christianity. But insightful characters wonder

over this religion, which they see is powerless to correct white people's behavior despite a whole lot of churchgoing. Its main power is the ability to underwrite white hegemony with an all-powerful white God and a white Jesus who represents the status quo. It also has the power to distract and anesthetize the white Christian conscience. Like all the idols described in the Bible, white religion is most powerful in its ability to lead people away from the true God.

Don't think I love n***** just because I'm giving y'all water . . . I hate y'all. Hate y'all with all my heart. Doing it because I'm a God-fearing Christian. . . I hope the good white people round here kill all y'all off. . . Hope they kill y'all before the night over. Now, get away from here. Get away from here before I kill y'all myself. If I wasn't a God-fearing Christian I'd kill y'all myself. (Gaines 1971, 43)

Some of his neighbors found out what I was doing [teaching slaves] and offered him fatherly advice. It was dangerous to educate slaves, they warned. Education made blacks dissatisfied with slavery. It spoiled them for field work. The Methodist minister said it made them disobedient, made them want more than the Lord intended them to have. (Butler 1979, 236)

White folks' religion—Lord help! 'Taint no use in mentionin' them . . . 'Cause if the gates of heaven shut in white folks' faces like the doors of the church in us n***** faces, it'll be too bad! Yes, sir! One thing sure, the Lord ain't prejudiced." (Hughes [1930] 1995, 81–82, paraphrased for clarity)

The truth about Josephine would have knocked them over like ninepins. They, like herself, had too little left in their lives to have their faith in their divinity destroyed by Josephine's apostasy. (West, 1995, 45, a scene in which the white grandmother of a mixed-race baby reflects on what would happen if her white friends found out).

Show me one white man who can look at a colored man without saying to himself, I see a colored man. . . The only one I know of died on the cross, and the other one has not yet been born. . . Keeping us colored is one of their chief occupations. If they don't remember it every minute, they're afraid they'll forget we're not children of God. (West 1995, 74–75)

Perceptual Blindness: The Trained Ability Not to See the Obvious

One final major theme has to do with moral perception. Black characters in these novels clearly see white racism for what it is, decry its injustice, and try to resist it. But white people are willfully blind to it. We choose not to see the evil we are enforcing and the suffering we are inflicting. We live in a privileged fog, out of touch with obvious realities.

I been knowin white folks all my life, an they's good as far as they can see—but when it comes to po n*****, they just can't see, that's all. (Hughes [1930] 1995, 82)

In her tribulations, death, and parting, and the lash, she did not forget that deliverance was promised and would surely come. She had only to endure and trust in God. She knew that the big house, the house of pride where the white folks lived, would come down: it was written in the Word of God. They, who walked so proudly now, had not fashioned for themselves or their children so sure a foundation as was hers. They walked on the edge of a steep place *and their eyes were sightless*—God would cause them to rush down, as the herd of swine . . . (Baldwin [1952] 1980, 75, emphasis added)

Now, ain't that just like white folks? . . . Black people get lynched, get drowned, get shot, guts all hanging out—and here he come up with ain't no proof who did it. The proof was them two little children laying there in them two coffins. That's proof enough they was dead. (Gaines 1983, 108)

Here I must break my pattern of staying with the novels and quote James Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*:

It is not permissible that the authors of devastation should also be innocent. It is the innocence which constitutes the crime. (Baldwin [1963] 1988, 292)

And then a line from our contemporary Ta-Nehisi Coates:

The mettle that it takes to look away from the horror of our prison system, from police forces transformed into armies, from the long war against the black body, is not forged overnight. This is the practiced habit of jabbing out one's eyes and forgetting the work of one's hands. (Coates 2015, 98)

CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS

African American literary traditions offer consistent, realistic, “thick” critical description of white Christian racism, even when that is not their main subject. These novels trace a long arc that contains far more continuity than discontinuity over its 400 years. White American Christians rarely tell the story of US history that way, imagining a bad but very distant past that has largely been overcome.

Whenever written and in whatever year their stories begin, these novels regularly work their way back and forth over multiple generations of black history in a process of remembering, grieving, and processing trauma at the hands of white people. But these works simultaneously

remember and honor ancestors—and a people—who survived, endured, and transcended.

The picture these novels offer is of a systematically criminal and abusive racist enterprise under the color of law, justified by an absurd ideology of white moral superiority; a system that inflicted and still inflicts massive oppression on black people, and in which unchecked white power over black bodies morally ruins white perpetrators—whose religion does not constrain evildoing but instead underwrites it.

These novels continually return to the unforgettable symbols of American slavocracy and white terrorism, including all those state-sanctioned, state-enforced chains, auction blocks, whips, nooses, rapes, guns, and marauders on horseback. I daresay few white people have such images very deeply inscribed in our consciousness. But these images continually recur in these novels, as if in nightmares.

My original question was what has gone wrong with white US evangelicalism. African American literature offers insights that of course go beyond one group. But I do believe I have at least a preliminary answer to my original question.

For 400 years, white evangelical Christians have been full participants in the moral debasement, religious powerlessness, and perceptual blindness that is described in these novels. In historical perspective, our recent baby steps toward recognition, a bit of repentance, and some premature reconciliation efforts have not just been very, very recent. They also have been very, very limited, deeply hindered by the morally compromised version of Christianity that we constructed so long ago—and still maintain.

Much the same indictment can be offered of historic white mainline Christianity. But American evangelicalism is different, for a particular reason.

In another dissertation that I am supervising along with Gary Dorrien and Andrea White, Isaac Sharp, now finishing at Union Seminary, will argue, “Over the course of the 20th century, not only were white evangelical leaders by and large intractably blind to their own racism, ‘evangelical’ also became an *identity* that was intrinsically tied to whiteness (of a particularly American sort) as never before. Evangelicalism has never confronted the fact that its 20th century American iteration was built not so much around a theological identity as it was around a *white cultural* identity. Evangelical became, that is, a political identity for aggrieved white conservatives” (Sharp, *Forthcoming*).¹

¹Personal correspondence with Isaac B. Sharp. At the time of this writing, Sharp’s dissertation is not yet complete. Some version of this statement will be included.

This very much helps explain why it was that when seventeen Republican candidates were running for president in 2016, the most racially reactionary candidate, the morally bankrupt birther businessman Donald Trump, emerged victorious—and why this man, who fully embodies the moral debasement, religious powerlessness, and perceptual blindness discussed in this paper, today retains the support of 70% of white evangelical Christians.

I am driven to the horrifying conclusion that perhaps Trump is a continued favorite of most of my former coreligionists not despite what he embodies, but because of it. If “evangelical” just means “aggrieved white conservative,” if evangelicalism’s supposed theology adds exactly zero theological-ethical substance to evangelical identity and evangelical politics, then Trump makes perfect sense as a preferred evangelical politician.

But that, in turn, means that today, fully 400 years after African slavery was introduced on this continent by white “Christians,” white supremacy, now in aggrieved post-Martin Luther King, post-Civil Rights movement, post-Barack Obama form, has not abated but advanced.

And so it is still true that what many white Christians most faithfully worship is ourselves, our beloved whiteness, the nostalgized white communities we remember and envision, and the white god we have made in our own image—none of which has anything to do with the brown, historical Jesus of Nazareth.

That, of course, is pretty much what black intellectuals, preachers, theologians, and novelists have been saying for centuries.

Frederick Douglass: “There is the Christianity of this land, and the Christianity of Christ. To be the friend of the one, is of necessity to be the enemy of the other.” (Douglass 1995, 71)

Ida B. Wells: “Our American Christians are too busy saving the souls of white Christians from burning in hellfire to save the lives of black ones from present burning in fires kindled by white Christians.” (Wells 1991, 154–55)

W.E.B. DuBois: “A nation’s religion is its life, and as such white Christianity is a miserable failure.” (Quoted in Cone 2011, 102)

James Cone: “Black people did not need to go to seminary and study theology to know that white Christianity was fraudulent. As a teenager in the South where whites treated blacks with contempt, I and other blacks knew that the Christian identity of whites was not a true expression of what it meant to follow Jesus. . . . We wondered how whites could live with their hypocrisy—such a blatant contradiction of the man from Nazareth.” (Cone 2011, 132)

Malcolm X: “If the so-called Christianity now being practiced in America displays the best that world Christianity has to offer—no one in his right mind should need any much greater proof that very close at hand is the end of Christianity.” (Malcolm X and Haley 2015, 376)

Was Malcolm right? Are we witnessing the end of American Christianity? We are certainly witnessing the self-immolation of US white evangelicalism, as it sacrifices its remaining credibility on the altar of Donald Trump. Even after this disaster, many millions will remain attracted to US white tribalist religion of this type. But a whole lot of others, including millions of ex-evangelicals, will look for something altogether different to emerge from its ashes.

White Christian supremacism ruined white Christian theology. Looking toward the future, only a historically informed, deeply repentant posture in relation to this poisoned theology will do. And after that is even harder work, at least for white Christian theologians. From now on we must privilege the voices of thinkers and communities, like the voices we read above, that resisted white supremacism. From now on we must learn to do theology collaboratively. Deep interracial friendship and richly diverse communities of scholarly conversation look like the social contexts from which truly liberative Christian theology and ethics will be done. That is where I hope to find myself in the remaining years of my career.

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