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From the SelectedWorks of Colleen Carpenter, PhD

Spring 2017

CTSAKatrina 2017.docx

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Katrina Was Not an Act of God:
The Black Christ in an Age of Environmental Disaster

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In his classic work *Jesus Through the Centuries*, historian and theologian Jaroslav Pelikan traces the many ways that Jesus has been portrayed over time, arguing that, while we affirm that Jesus Christ is in an important theological sense "the same yesterday, today, and forever," it is also true that the many images of Christ over the centuries are marked "not [by] sameness but kaleidoscopic variety" (1-2). Pelikan claims that "for each age, the life and teachings of Jesus represented an answer (or, more often, *the* answer) to the most fundamental questions of human existence and of human destiny" (2). Thus when the lordship of Caesar vs. the lordship of Christ dominated Christian thinking during the Roman Empire of the second and third centuries, the image of Christ as "King of Kings" dominated. The rise of monasticism in the early middle ages led to Christ being portrayed as "The Monk Who Rules the World," while the Renaissance brought us Christ as "The Universal Man." More recently, 19th century idealism and Romanticism led to the portrayal of Christ as "The Poet of the Spirit," and by the 20th century, Jesus was associated with a variety of social-justice and revolutionary movements around the world, leading to "The Liberator" as a key image.

In our own time, climate change and the broader ecological crisis—including pollution, species loss, deforestation etc.—is certainly (in Pelikan's terms) one of the most fundamental questions of human existence and of human destiny. If Jesus is indeed the answer to this question, then the way we portray and think about him should reflect that. Perhaps an emphasis

on Jesus as The Good Shepherd is in order here, or at the very least, an ecological image of Christ would focus on the prominence of nature imagery in the parables—Jesus as The One Who Cares for the Sparrows, perhaps.

Yet it is also true that the planetary devastation we face is not the only great and pressing problem of our age. Especially in the United States, where the problem is so severe that James Cone has identified it as "America's original sin,"[1] **racism** has been and continues to be a source of massive suffering, devastating violence, and seemingly endless physical and spiritual death. Racism here is far more than individual hatred or bigotry, but rather a structural, systemic problem. Womanist theologian Shawn Copeland points us to the following definition of the term, penned by James Boggs:

> Racism is systematized oppression of one race by another. In other words, the various forms of oppression within every sphere of social relations—economic exploitation, military subjugation, political subordination, cultural devaluation, psychological violation, sexual degradation, verbal abuse, etc.—together make up a whole of interacting and developing processes which operate so normally and naturally and are so much a part of the existing institutions of society that the individuals involved are barely conscious of their operation. (*Spiritus* 2:1, 2002, p. 16)

Copeland adds to this an element that Boggs did not mention: "[white racist supremacy has] the destructive capability to . . . twist and distort spirituality . . . to subvert the place of the Divine [and] the Transcendent in lived human life" (17).

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[1] "Theology's Great Sin: Silence in the Face of White Supremacy," Black Theology: An International Journal (2.2, 2004), p. 142.

In response to this problem, James Cone asserts that "we are required to affirm the blackness of Jesus Christ" (*God of the Oppressed*, 122). The Black Christ is the One who liberates the oppressed and suffering, who identifies with the poor, and who "transforms oppressed slaves into liberated servants" (126). "The least in America," Cone argues, "are literally and symbolically present in black people . . . Christ is black, therefore . . . because and only because Christ *really* enters into our world where the poor, the despised, and the black are disclosing that he is with them, enduring their humiliation and pain" and "setting them free" (126).

Here we have reached a seeming impasse: is the Black Christ the signature image of Christ for today, or is it instead the Good Shepherd—the Green Christ? How would we choose between them? Do we perhaps live in such complex times that we need both? Or is one issue— and thus one image—more significant than the other?

No. We do not need to decide which of these problems should command our attention, for they are not, in the end, separate problems. In *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis tells us clearly: "We are faced not with two separate crises, one environmental and the other social, but rather with one complex crisis which is both social and environmental. Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature." (LS §139)

What Pope Francis does not say is that the reason these two issues are in the end one larger, complex problem is that they share a single source: at the root of the environmental crisis, just as much as at the root of structural racism, we find **whiteness**. White supremacy is the hydra-headed monster whose destructive work threatens both people and the planet itself. In his

article "Whose Earth is it Anyway?", published more than a decade before *Laudato Si*, James Cone makes the case that:

> People who fight against white racism but fail to connect it to the degradation of the earth are anti-ecological, whether they know it or not. People who struggle against environmental degradation but do not incorporate in it a disciplined and sustained fight against white supremacy are racists—whether they acknowledge it or not. The fight for justice cannot be segregated but must be integrated with the fight for life in all its forms (1).

Cone argues that this is one fight because:

> the logic that led to slavery and segregation in the Americas, colonization and Apartheid in Africa, and the rule of white supremacy throughout the world is the same one that leads to the exploitation of animals and the ravaging of nature. It is a mechanistic and instrumental logic that defines everything and everybody in terms of their contribution to the development and defense of white supremacy.

Thus the most appropriate image of Christ in our time—an age of ecological devastation and an age that is marked (indeed, scarred) by the devastation wrought by racism—is the Black Christ. Christians today (and perhaps especially white Christians) are called to follow the Black Christ.

In order to explore this idea in more depth, I'd like to do several things: first, I'll begin with a brief look at Hurricane Katrina, in order to examine the ways that race and environmental destruction are inextricably linked in our world today. Next, I will look more closely at the idea of whiteness as a problem—and indeed as *the* problem facing us. I will then turn to the role of

the imagination in shaping our experience, especially our experience of God, and will conclude

with an account of the Black Christ as the central image of Jesus for our time.

Katrina:

To begin with Hurricane Katrina: I said in my title that Katrina was not an act of God.

Traditionally (and legally) in the United States, the term "act of God" refers to "a natural disaster

outside human control, such as an earthquake or tsunami, for which no person can be held

responsible." Certainly Hurricane Katrina, considered in and of itself, was in this legal sense an

act of God: no human being can create or direct a hurricane. But the disaster that swept through

the city of New Orleans in 2005, while it is often referred to simply as "Hurricane Katrina,"

consisted of much more than the results of the hurricane. Indeed, some scholars refer to the

disaster not as Hurricane Katrina but as "the 2005 Levee Disaster" because the majority of

destruction was not due to the rains and wind of the storm itself, but instead was the result of

failed levees, which collapsed due to poor design, piecemeal construction, errors in measurement

of the levees' actual height, and other clearly human errors.

And yet it wasn't just the hurricane, nor even the hurricane plus the failure of the

(underbuilt, underfunded, poorly maintained) levees: a key aspect of the overall Katrina disaster

was the miserably inadequate government response to the people stranded in a flooded New

Orleans. As University of Florida law professor Kenneth Nunn reports:

> Days passed before any organized and coordinated efforts were made to rescue New
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> Orleans residents. Residents were left stranded on roofs until private citizens
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> organized private flotillas to attempt to rescue them. Food was not provided. Water
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> was not made available. Medical facilities were nonexistent. Dead bodies were left to

lie in the street. Transportation out of New Orleans was not organized. On at least one

key occasion, residents trying to leave New Orleans were turned back at gunpoint. To

make matters worse, not only did public officials fail to ameliorate the situation, but it

appears they did everything they could to stop private relief efforts from assisting

New Orleans residents as well.[2]

The overall disaster, then, resulted from a deadly combination of natural catastrophe and

human choices—and those human choices were all too often at least influenced, if not outright

caused, by the racism of those who chose not to deal with a city in which 68% of the residents

were black, and 28% lived below the poverty line[3] in the same way that they dealt with

wealthier, whiter places that also needed protection from storms and rescue from their aftermath.

Today, as the effects of climate change begin to be evident around the world, it has

become clear that those most at risk are poor, and brown. Much like the residents of New

Orleans, they are not only living in poverty shaped by decades, if not centuries, of choices made

by wealthier and whiter people, they are also newly at risk because of changes to the Earth's

climate caused again by choices made (and fossil fuels burned) by wealthier and whiter people.

Indeed, the average American's carbon footprint is over 2000 times that of someone living in the

African nation of Chad.[4] And as the changing climate causes more hurricanes, droughts, floods,

and famines, these once "natural" disasters are more and more not natural at all, but instead are

the direct, traceable result of human activity. The central ecological problems of our age are

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[2] *Hurricane Katrina: America's Unnatural Disaster*, ed. Jeremy Levitt. "Still Up on the Roof: Race, Victimology and the Response to Hurricane Katrina," by Kenneth B. Nunn. P. 191
[3] Levitt p. 7
[4] cnn

inextricably tied up with the central human, social problems—and those human problems are inextricably tied up with race and colonialism—or, in other words, with whiteness.

Whiteness:

Theologian Karen Teel argues that the famous "problem of the color-line" does not mean that people of color are the problem: instead, white people, and whiteness itself, is the problem. But what exactly does this mean? I often tell my students that if I were ever to adopt some sort of personal motto, it would probably be, "Define your terms!" And while I believe that it is impossible to do any theology responsibly without carefully defining one's terms, it is absolutely crucial to do so when dealing with race and racism, since, as Bryan Massingale points out, "the terminology used to refer to the various racial and ethnic groups is fluid, evolving, contested, and rarely emotionally neutral" (2). Accordingly, I need to clarify what I mean by the terms "white" and "whiteness." Following Massingale, I am using "the term "white" [to refer] to the dominant cultural group in our country . . . [Massingale adds,] it is important to note that "white" is a fluid category that [once referred primarily to people of Western European descent but] has come to include over the years ethnic groups from other parts of the world [including the Middle East and North Africa] . . . "White," then, does not refer to a race, but rather to a social group that has access to political, social, economic or cultural advantages that people of color do not share" (2).

Moreover, while this privileged social group sets the terms of everything from "socioeconomic policy to interpersonal relationships," it also, according to Elisabeth Vasko, manages to see the world in such a way that its privilege is unquestioned, invisible, and unnamed (70). Whiteness is simply seen by most white people as "normal"—which "erroneously leads white people to ignore their own complicity in racial injustice" (70). Ignoring what is

uncomfortable or guilt-inducing about being white is in fact one of the privileges of whiteness. White people simply do not *have to* recognize that "racism and racial injustice are actual material conditions that shape all of our lives and mediate all of our relationships with one another" (Harvey 61)—to be white is to be able to ignore such things.

It is this combination of defining the terms through which all of us live, doing so in a way that privileges one group while discounting all others—and at the same time ignoring and denying the very real and destructive consequences of this behavior—that makes whiteness a problem. Whiteness is, in the end, a socially and historically constructed category that not only arose as part of the violence of colonialism and slavery, but plays out in phenomenally destructive ways both for people and for the planet as a whole—because it is impossible for domination, deception, and willful ignorance to be anything but destructive.

Imagination:

Once we have recognized whiteness, and recognized that it lies at the root of both the ecological and racial crises that are central to our time, we are called to fight against it. This is, however, for white people at least, quite a difficult thing to do. We cannot escape the color of our skin, even if we would like to reject the structures of power and privilege that have been historically and socially constructed to accompany that skin color. As Karen Teel argues, "One cannot be white in the US without receiving the privileges of being white in the US . . . white bodies *perform*. Because of my skin color, I am logically associated with the hegemony of whiteness and receive its benefits, unasked for, unearned, and largely unnoticed" (22). Teel goes on to say that, while a few white thinkers have begun to write about how white people can work to resist the insidious power of whiteness, we still need to back up and deal with the prior

problem of how to convince most white people that whiteness is a problem at all. Here I believe that one aspect of that project is a turn to the imagination.

In her powerful and thought-provoking Madeleva Lecture, "Women and the Word," biblical scholar Sandra Schneiders argues that "Our God-image . . . is a function of the imagination, and the Christian religious imagination is deeply influenced by . . . the incarnation of God in the concrete humanity of a male human being, Jesus" (9). While she is making an argument here about maleness and the religious imagination, it is equally true that for many if not most white Christians, the whiteness of Jesus—and thus the whiteness of God—is just as deeply rooted. The white Christian imagination is profoundly influenced by the unquestioned assumption that of course Jesus is "like me"—that is, Jesus is white. This is problematic not just because it is historically wrong, but because of the way the imagination structures our experience—indeed, the way the imagination structures what we *can* experience.

Schneiders defines the imagination not as "making things up," or as something that enables us to escape reality, but instead as "our constructive capacity to integrate our experience into dynamic and effective wholes which then function as interpretive grids of further experience" (16). This movement between our experience and the interpretive grids we have constructed in order to make sense of our experience means that if we consistently mis-interpret a key aspect of our experience, and thus build up a false interpretive grid through which we attempt to understand later experience, we end up incapable of truly knowing what is going on. Thus the distorted image of God embraced by many white people—one that unconsciously assumes that Jesus is white . . . meaning not just light-skinned but also privileged, having access to political, social, economic and cultural advantages not available to people of color—that image of Jesus means that what the Gospel actually says about Jesus's status as poor, as

marginal, and as someone who sided with the powerless against the powerful might well be almost impossible for white people to truly hear, or understand.

Schneiders goes on to argue that healing the imagination is possible—but not through rational analysis or argument. The imagination, she says, "is accessible not primarily to abstract ideas but to language, images, interpersonal experience, symbolism, art . . . metaphor, gesture, and music" (19, 71). Thus for white Christians to reshape their imaginations to more accurately reflect reality, and to more accurately reflect the truth of the Gospel, we need art, images, and symbols that challenge whiteness. We need the Black Christ.

The Black Christ:

And just what is meant by "the Black Christ"? Does skin color really make a *theological* difference? In a world where whiteness not just symbolizes but enacts power, and blackness not just symbolizes but experiences and endures oppression, it certainly does. James Cone argues that blackness is an appropriate Christological title because it points to both the historical liberating work of Jesus in the gospels and to the present liberating work of Jesus among black people living in a white racist world.

> "If we assume that the Risen Lord is truly present with us as defined by his past history and witnessed by Scripture and tradition, [Cone says,] what then does his presence mean in the social context of white racism? If Jesus's presence is real and not docetic, is it not true that Christ must be black in order to remain faithful to the divine promise to bear the suffering of the poor?" (GOO 123-5).

And while the Black Christ stands with black people, identifying with their struggle and their suffering, and acting as liberator—the one who sets them free . . . it is equally true that the

Black Christ stands apart from white people, and stands against whiteness. This is of course a good thing: as Karen Teel argues, "to struggle effectively against whiteness, white Christians need a Christology that renders us *uncomfortable in our skins*." White Christians need the Black Christ to shake us out of our complacency, our delusion that whiteness is "normal." We need to be challenged, confronted; we need our assumptions of white moral innocence shaken. Elisabeth Vasko reminds us that "in contexts marked by radical inequality and violence, Christians need a soteriological vision that resists comfortable assurance and generates affective dis-ease and dis-comfort. We need this in order to be awakened from the sleep of inhumanity. It is only when we are awakened to the reality of an oppressed and subjugated world and our own Christian complicity in this oppression and subjugation that we can begin to tap possibilities for transformation" (155).

To return, as I conclude, to Hurricane Katrina: In another age, perhaps, the most operative and compelling image of Christ could well be the One who commands the winds and the waters. This is, after all, a powerful and dramatic image of the power of God in the world.—but not for a time when the winds and the waters are so deadly, so unpredictable, so terrifying. We do not, cannot, and should not see Christ as the one who sent Katrina, but instead as the one who endured the storm in solidarity with Katrina's victims. The Black Christ stands with the suffering—which means scavenging for food in a flooded New Orleans, drinking poisoned water in Flint, and breathing the air downwind of a trash incinerator spewing toxic chemicals from its smokestacks. The Black Christ also stands with those fighting against environmental destruction—the Appalachian communities fighting mountaintop removal, the water protectors at Standing Rock, and those marching against police violence and for black lives in Ferguson,

Baltimore, and Saint Paul. The Black Christ stands with the poor in their suffering, in their dignity, and in their liberation—and calls to the privileged to abandon that privilege, and join Him in solidarity with the oppressed. Thus white Christians who would follow Him must, like Zacchaeus—who climbed down from the tree, repaid what he had stolen, and gave away half his possessions to the poor—renounce their privilege, take concrete actions in reparation for harm already done, and begin life anew. We live today in an age of environmental disaster, and of white racist supremacy: the Christ we meet in our time addresses these fundamental issues in his life, in his teachings, *and in his color*—the Christ of the 21st century is, and must be, Black.