

Reviews



THE BIBLE AND BORDERS: HEARING GOD'S WORD ON IMMIGRATION, by M. Daniel Carroll
R. Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2020. 148 pages. \$14.99.

This book begins by observing, “The numbers on migration are staggering” (1). Just as staggering are the real human costs of migration, the weight of the stories borne by migrants at the border, the political disorder that harms the migrant, and the theological malpractice that nurtures fear of those seeking a different life via migration. For these and a litany of other reasons, Daniel Carroll’s book is important reading for Christians seeking resources for understanding immigration and practicing hospitality toward migrants in a way infused with biblical texts and their interpretation. Clergy and laity alike will find here a thoughtful, accessible introduction to key scriptures that can illuminate how we think about and debate questions around immigration. Carroll makes clear that these readings will not simply end political debates about migration nor provide easy policy solutions. Instead, he hopes to equip Christians with a wide set of perspectives informed by a breadth of biblical texts. Citing Romans 12:2, Carroll sets out a significant agenda: “This renewal of the mind

concerning immigration has been the purpose of this book” (112).

The Bible and Borders includes three central chapters, each taking up themes around migration in the Bible. First is a chapter looking at how frequent and how characteristic migration is to the narratives of the Hebrew Scriptures. Carroll begins with a critical theological confession: that humans bear the image of God assigns significant value to all. With that foundation, then, the stories of migration are pictures of image-bearers and their travels. In this way, the narratives of Hebrew Scripture ought to evoke empathy for migrants among its readers. The next chapter turns primarily to the legal material in the Hebrew Scriptures around two key notions: hospitality and care for the sojourner. Both are central features of the Hebrew Scriptures’ legal and moral imagination and thus critical in any ethical deliberation by Christians today. These practices of hospitality and care are characteristic of the Bible’s moral and ethical imagination, and thus Christian faithfulness cares for emulation of these central convictions.

The last main chapter focuses on New Testament texts, specifically the Gospel accounts of Jesus’s ministry, along with a reflection on Romans 13 and its (mis)use in political discourse. When it comes to the Gospels, Carroll contends that “the concept that all Christians are sojourners

in the world” (7) should guide reflection on immigration. Carroll concludes “that there is a consistent ethic of hospitable welcome toward the outsider across both Testaments” (117).

Indeed, this is a central exegetical and theological approach of the whole book. The Bible, read faithfully, will teach us to be empathetic with migrants of all kinds. This is, of course, a critical step. Without recognition of the other, without love of the other, advocacy will remain paternalistic or uninterested. At the same time, I am left wondering to what else our theological attention might turn as we wrestle with Christian witness and the immigration crises the United States faces and under which migrants suffer right up to this day. On this front, empathy is both necessary *and* insufficient. Christians can turn to the Bible to hone these sensibilities, this neighborliness, but Christians must also develop a robust theological imagination about the salvific possibilities of liberation, the ways racism courses through political discourse around immigrants, the fragile power of empire, the centrality of justice in Jesus’s reign. That is, Carroll narrates expertly the biblical bases for generous welcome of immigrants. Theological and biblical work yet remains, of course, beyond these foundational points.

Moreover, I would exhort pastors and lay folks entering this conversation to draw upon Carroll’s work and take an additional step: reflect on the interpretive assumptions that nourish fear of the stranger and narratives of scarcity that teach us to hold on to what we have and not share the economic bounty many enjoy but which rests on the labor of the underpaid migrant. Such a reading of the Bible would make central the stories migrants tell and would listen carefully

to how God is moving and active in the caravans of migrants making their way to the border and building lives made tenuous due to undocumented status. In addition, beyond listening to stories of the migrants narrated in Scripture, it would transform Christian communities to trust the witness of those migrants today leaving home in hope of a better life. Their struggles may be the most important hermeneutical key we have in order to be more fully formed as a community of wide welcome and generous embrace of the stranger. With such hermeneutical insights, Christians would be more fully equipped to return to the biblical texts of terror many of us struggle to understand. What of Hagar and the way her story echoes the experiences of enslaved women? How do Christians embrace the centrality of gracious welcome of the stranger in light of the narratives found in Ezra and Nehemiah? That is, how might readers of the Bible live in the inherent and prevailing tensions that a collection of texts from a vast swath of historical and theological contexts places before them?

This book is an important contribution, for Carroll clearly narrates aspects of the Bible’s stories about insiders and outsiders, aliens and exiles, welcome and exclusion that can too often be muted when partisan commitments or fear of the stranger crowd out what the Bible has taught us. It is also a first step to remind Christians of the character of God even as we must also seek resources that unveil imperial assumptions, subvert colonial legacies, and confess the racist realities that underpin too much of American politics and far too much of American biblical interpretation.

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DEAR CHURCH: A LOVE LETTER FROM A BLACK PREACHER TO THE WHITEST DENOMINATION IN THE U.S., by Lenny Duncan. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2019. 166 pages. \$16.99.

I was excited to read this book by the Reverend Lenny Duncan, who was my neighbor on the Philadelphia campus of United Lutheran Seminary. Over the course of his years in seminary, we often stood in the campus parking lot talking about some of the issues he addresses in this book. Thus, reading *Dear Church* was like reading the textbook of a former professor. I recognized his voice and passion, and as I read the book, I felt like he and I were in the parking lot discussing the current issues of the day.

The author opens with a powerful illustration of the welcome he received at a local ELCA church to share with others at the Lord's table for communion. He sets the tone by reminding us of our common bond through our baptism and faith in Christ. Although the book is written specifically to the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, it crosses over to all mainline denominations in America. And as you continue to read, you may conclude that it could have been written to America in general.

The book is composed of eleven chapters, divided into three parts. Part 1 is titled "Dismantling White Supremacy Is the Way of the Cross"; part 2, "Grace Is an Ever-Widening Circle"; and part 3, "The Church Can Lead the Way." Since Lenny divided the book into three parts, it seems best to review it in three parts. Yet, as I read part 1, many questions came to mind that were answered in parts 2 and 3. In other words, you cannot read one chapter or one part of *Dear*

Church and fully comprehend the message of the author.

In my opinion, Duncan uses the Hegelian dialectic format in writing the book. The three parts listed above serve as three dialectical stages of development. The author's thesis in part 1 is that dismantling white supremacy is the way of the cross. It sets the tone for the book and stirred many emotions in this reader. The author confronts us in each of the five chapters in part 1. He forces us to look in the mirror and see our own hypocrisy—maybe not in actions of discrimination, but in failure to acknowledge and address the discrimination we witness in our society.

Lenny Duncan addresses repentance, reparations, and reconciliation, and challenges us not to skip a step but to address each in the order they are listed. And then the author reminds us of the murder of the Emanuel Nine in Charleston, South Carolina: a tragic event caused by a member of the ELCA who embraced white supremacy. Finally, the author challenges us about the use of language and symbols in our liturgy that lack sensitivity to persons of color. The one symbol that stood out for me was the author's view of a white Jesus that sent an unspoken message to him at five years old that he was not like the creator of the universe. Part 1 of this book cuts deep and triggers many questions.

As I read part 1, I thought of other marginalized groups who should join forces with black people in America to cry out against injustice, and then the author included some—not all, but some of the other groups I had thought about. In part 2, the author's antithesis is a reminder to us that grace is an ever-widening circle. I use the term *antithesis* not in the sense that the author

contradicts or negates his thesis in part 1, but because he stretches our understanding of humanity and all who have been discriminated against just because they exist. And all marginalized groups must be aware of each other and supportive of each other.

The author really pushes the reader in part 2. Just when you think the book is about black persons in America, the author stretches you. Duncan challenges the church to also consider LGBTQIA+ persons and women as marginalized—as groups the church has not always welcomed. The grace of God is ever widening, and in the last chapter of part 2, he makes a connection between how each marginalized group has been hurt by the church and yet remains in the church.

Then in part 3, the author shares the synthesis: he states that the church can lead the way. Just when the reader has gotten comfortable with the complaints, the author now challenges us. I must confess, as I started reading the book, I asked myself, “Why does the author stay in the ELCA?” But reading the book to the end led me to think that maybe Lenny Duncan’s call is to the ELCA. Maybe Lenny is a modern-day prophet, not just showing us our sins but showing us how to change and make a difference.

This book could have been addressed to other denominations or to our nation as a whole. The author could have written, and maybe should write, a book called *Dear America*, making the same points. Duncan wrote this book a couple of years ago, but it feels as if he wrote it last week. He speaks of the “soul of our country,” which became a popular term during the 2020 election season. This book should be read by all with an open

mind. Thank you, Lenny, for challenging us!

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CHURCH IN COLOR: YOUTH MINISTRY, RACE, AND THE THEOLOGY OF MARTIN LUTHER KING JR., by Montague R. Williams. Waco: Baylor University, 2020. 243 pages. \$44.95.

Montague R. Williams, who worked with youths throughout his career, wrote *Church in Color: Youth Ministry, Race, and the Theology of Martin Luther King Jr.* as his faithful commitment to examine how race, racism, and racial identity work in the church. He uses an ethnographic approach and analysis through the frame of ecology, culture, identity, and process to scrutinize the patterns, differences, and complexities within three Wesleyan congregations from the northeastern region of the United States.

This book has three aims. First, it helps youth workers embrace the experiences of youth. Second, it offers a new theological imagination grounded in forgotten lay voices. Third, it provides concrete anti-racist discipleship practices.

Chapter 1 depicts the ethnographic results from Beachland Community Church (all congregational names are pseudonyms). The church leaders, who are white, agree explicitly that racial color blindness is a Christian virtue. They underestimate race and racism’s influence on their students’ lives and dismiss students’ wonderings and experiences by

giving no room for discussion. Chapter 2 explains why color blindness leads us to neglect youths' struggles with racism. Chapters 3 and 4 describe Cityland Community Church and Southland Community Church (SCC), both of which are dominated by "post-racialism," the sociopolitical belief system that finds color blindness necessary for the world's progress. Youths from both churches are concerned about racial violence and struggle with their racial identities. The black youth ministers from these two churches embrace color blindness implicitly by forgetting the stories of race, racial identity, and racism. SCC's youth workers try to exit the post-racial youth ministry, yet they fear it will trigger disunity.

Chapter 5 discusses post-racialism as habitus and aesthetic. As a habitus, it functions as a societal guise woven into American culture that invites people to a pervasive system of racism and forgetfulness of the reality of racism. It aesthetically promotes white supremacy through popular culture. Therefore, Williams offers a new term—*race-ism*—to show the interconnection of race and racism as anti-Christian discipleship. Chapter 6 discerns how to disrupt post-racialist aesthetics and resist *race-ism* by deepening King's theological praxis. Chapter 7 explains Williams's practical proposals to start anti-racist Christian discipleship.

Williams's theological commitments were inspired by King's notion of the Beloved Community, an eschatological hope offered by God. This community is characterized by God's love reframing the power that demands justice and correcting everything that stands in opposition to love. This countercultural community rejects three interrelated

social evils (racism, poverty, and militarism). It also highlights the development of a sense of "somebodiness," or the dignity and equality of human beings created in God's image. King argued that Jesus's crucifixion was caused by human blindness that disrespects "somebodiness." In this sense, racial color blindness disregards "somebodiness." In a larger context, the Holy Spirit blurs the boundaries between church and society and expands the Beloved Community to include "the world house" (128). As a result, we can listen to stories of racial violence in society in order to sharpen Christian vocation.

Williams reframes the work of youth ministry by rejecting racial color blindness and listening to the stories of marginalized people. Specifically, he urges us to listen to youths' experiences and questions about race, racism, and racial identity. Commendably, Williams also argues for interrelated practices in youth ministry (critical storytelling, collaborative somebodiness, and cruciform creativity) as part of a strategy to dismantle racism and create microcosms of the Beloved Community.

In a nutshell, this book invites us to see the church in color by reflecting on what has been happening in our own church's youth ministry and by encouraging us to remove racial color blindness from our mindset and habits. Williams's practical suggestions, rooted in his robust theological commitments, are very applicable and help one understand youths and their struggles with race and racism. I have personally implemented his recommendations when discussing racism with youth in an Indonesian context. Although this book is situated in an American context, I recommend it

to youth workers across the globe, since white supremacy and racism are present worldwide as a result of colonialization in the form of popular culture.

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WHITE TOO LONG: THE LEGACY OF WHITE SUPREMACY IN AMERICAN CHRISTIANITY, by Robert P. Jones. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2020. 236 pages. \$28.00.

As I write this, we are in the aftermath of witnessing what had been unimaginable to many: the January 6 storming of the United States Capitol by an angry mob of Trump supporters. The media images have been chilling: insurrectionists desecrating the sacred space of American civil religion—mocking, vandalizing, and bullying the leaders and protectors in whom we had placed our trust. Among the sea of Trump banners and Confederate flags were disturbing images of Bibles, Christian symbols, and “Jesus 2020” flags. I would expect that readers of this journal found it repulsive that on that day of Epiphany, Christ would be in any way represented in this explosive expression of white supremacy. Such extremists could only be an anomaly, not at all representative of the true church.

I suspect that Robert Jones was not as shocked. In his book *White Too Long: The Legacy of White Supremacy in American Christianity*, Jones argues that not only has the church committed racist acts, but white supremacy is baked

into American Christianity, which has been the “dominant cultural power in America” (6). Much as the *New York Times’* 1619 Project demonstrated that white supremacy was in the very bones of the American experiment—woven into the warp and woof of its economic and political systems—Jones analyzes the role of the American church as the cultural vehicle, the “conductor,” for that process, “responsible for constructing and sustaining a project to protect white supremacy and resist black equality” (6).

This book takes a different approach than his earlier work (*The End of White Christian America*, 2016), which documented the decline of white Christian cultural dominance and was based largely on sociological data gleaned through surveys conducted by the Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI), a polling organization he founded and directs. In *White Too Long* Jones builds his argument through multiple lenses, including historic analysis, developmental psychology, memoir, and his signature strength: quantitative research.

Jones begins his historical survey during the Civil War, identifying the links between the Confederacy and prominent Christian leaders and churches. The overlap between politicians, media (particularly newspapers), and religion resulted in a collusion that drove the legitimization of white supremacy from the nineteenth century until the present. An illustration that Jones mines deeply is the establishment of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in 1845 by proud and vocal proponents of slavery and financed with wealth generated by slave labor. Although there has been some acknowledgment of its tainted history, the current seminary president,

Albert Mohler, continues to refer to the founders as “titans of faith” and “consummate Christian gentlemen” (58). In refusing to rename buildings or contribute reparations, President Mohler stated, “We must repent of our own sins, we cannot repent for the dead” (59).

However, there is enough blame to go around—white supremacy is not confined to the evangelical Baptists and Methodists in the South. Jones also documents how Catholics and mainline Protestants from the Northeast to California and parts in between have participated in and even led restrictive neighborhood covenants—that is, segregation. Although denominational statements aplenty have decried racism from the 1960s on, they did not reflect or change consciousness at the congregational level. This disconnect has been observed by others (such as Robert Wuthnow) and experienced by many clergy, but the intransigence of racism begs the question posed by Jones: “Is it possible that the white supremacy heresy is so integrated into white Christian DNA that it eludes even sincere efforts to excise it?” (71). Have we in the white church been “white too long,” as James Baldwin observed, so that we are beyond hope of redemption?

Jones draws on his theological training (M.Div., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary) in his forensic analysis of the deep enmeshment of white supremacy and the white churches in the US. The commitment to doctrinal purity, biblical inerrancy, and individualistic salvation provided fertile evangelical soil in which white supremacy could flourish and be sustained. (Jones notes that individualistic piety has certainly infiltrated other religious traditions as well, including mainline Protestantism.) For all the dogma, however, the

theological infrastructure has been remarkably flexible, presenting at once “slave theology” (stressing submission) and Confederate theology (heavy on dominance and mandates), then “Lost Cause Theology” (focused on martyrdom and resurrection). Later, this theological base could justify both staying apart from political processes and then engaging them deeply. Despite its malleability, the goal has been consistent: what Jones calls “the inoculation of white consciences” (16) to keep the virus of racism invisible and therefore intact.

Adding to the cultural cover-up, symbols of the mixing of religion and white supremacy continued well after the Confederacy, Reconstruction, and Redemption into the twentieth century. Stained-glass windows deifying Confederate leaders adorned public buildings and churches—including those installed in the National Cathedral in 1953. Confederate battle flags, originally produced by ladies in churches, have been a contested symbol of late, as have been over 1,800 Confederate monuments (1,747 of which are still standing). Jones documents the spikes in the installation of Confederate monuments at historic moments in the progress of African Americans. For example, the massive carving of Jefferson Davis, Robert E. Lee, and Andrew Jackson on Stone Mountain, Georgia, was completed in 1965, at the peak of the civil rights movement.

While the theological analysis is clear but deserves to be developed more deeply, and there are ample conscience-curdling anecdotes to create a credible historic narrative, the most compelling aspect of the book is the quantitative dive into teasing out the “white supremacy gene” in the DNA of contemporary American Christianity. To do this, PRRI created a “racism index” from their findings in

their American Values Survey in 2018. They bundled fifteen survey questions about attitudes toward Confederate monuments, racial economic inequality, treatment of African Americans in the criminal justice system, and general opinions about race and racism. (With an index, you can measure the intensity of a belief rather than just asking a single question.) Jones then analyzes the racism scores in relationship to religious identity (white evangelical, white mainline Protestant, white Catholic, and the control group of whites who are religiously unaffiliated). He looks at the impact of other variables as well, including region of the country, education, and church attendance. Jones uses sophisticated statistical multivariate analysis to look at these relationships, which he explains with remarkable clarity. The reader who is statistics-averse will not glaze over. Rather, the author's documentation clearly indicates that racism and Christian identity travel together for whites from all three traditions in comparable degrees; racism is not just a phenomenon among white evangelicals in the South. This comes into high relief through the data from those who are not religiously affiliated and scored significantly lower on the Racism Index. Christian identity is correlated with racism.

The author's intent is for white American Christians to face the truth about themselves. Ourselves. He begins by confronting his own family history, which

includes slave owners, and his racist formation in his home church and community. He highlights other faith communities who have had to face their racist past and present, such as the congregation who realized in celebrating their history that their forebears had actually sold slaves *who had been members* in order to purchase their building. After the massacre at Mother Emanuel AME Church in Charleston, South Carolina—an event that Jones explores over several pages—Bishop Elizabeth Eaton not only lamented the tragedy but confronted the hard reality that the murderer was a baptized member of an ELCA congregation. The book includes several other examples of the hard encounter with racist truth that can produce a reckoning. If there is hope in *White Too Long*, it is that transformation is possible—but it is a painful process that will leave white American Christianity looking very different on the other side of it. Jones argues that “white Christians must take up this work not just because it is morally right or politically prudent but also because it is the only path that can salvage the integrity of our faith, psyches, and legacies. . . . It's no exaggeration to say our very identities—our souls, to put it theologically—are at stake” (24).

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