

2019

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### Recommended Citation

Paxton, Sky (2019) "Jim Crow Jesus," *Denison Journal of Religion*: Vol. 18 , Article 6.  
Available at: <https://digitalcommons.denison.edu/religion/vol18/iss1/6>

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# Jim Crow Jesus

*Sky Paxton*<sup>1</sup>

## *Abstract*

*With an attention to womanist theological critiques of hetero-patriarchal-white-sexist America especially from Kelly Brown Douglas, this essay deconstructs the images of the white Christ and reconstructs the Black Christ. The Black Christ was born out of Blacks' critical awareness of white exceptionalism, experiences of historical racism, and gender and sexuality-sensitive approach to Christian theology. Finally, Paxton suggests a Black female gay as the radical embodiment of the Christ in the 21st century America.*

## **Introduction**

The Christian faith has manifested itself in the construction of American society in ways that have contributed to the justification of oppressive behaviors among the elite members of society. This is because theology is easily used in ways that combine religious tradition with political theory. Recognizing this, academics have developed the fields of liberation and feminist theology as a response to the conflation of Christianity with repressive social behaviors.

Liberation theology is still a developing field that seeks to make religion accessible to groups who have been historically oppressed by dominant groups in society. Encompassed by this field are the subcategories of black and feminist theologies. With the emergence of these disciplines, pioneered by James Cone and Mary Daly respectively, many are content to believe that there has been enough progress made in the pursuit of the development of an intersectional faith (faith that takes into account the intersection of social identities). However, while these two famous theologians did groundbreaking work at creating the foundation of intersectional faith, a truly all inclusive understanding of God was not arguably achieved until womanist discourse disturbed the field of Christian theology. Among various womanist theologians and ethicists, Kelly Brown Douglas attempts to bridge the gap between the two social identities of the black woman: being black and being a woman. By analytically engaging with Kelly Brown Douglas' womanist theology, this paper aims to contemplate Black religious thoughts in America. More specifically, what is it like to be a Black feminist Christian and

<sup>1</sup> I thank Dr. Woodyard for this article. Also, his mentorship and dedication to forming relationships with students has helped me grow tremendously. With his guidance I have been able to achieve and set goals for myself that I never thought were possible.

how have Black feminist and womanist scholars made space for themselves in an academic field of theology, dominated by scholars such as Cone and Daly who have left them out from their theological discourse? The plight of the Black woman has been generally ignored by both feminist and black icons throughout history. It is disappointing that neither of the two movements has done an adequate job of including women of color in their theological discourse. Through the womanist lens, this paper seeks to stay true to the goals of feminist liberation theology, offering an analysis of the implications of faith for the oppressed, and unlike Cone and Daly, prioritizing intersectionality of race, gender, and class as shown in the ways in which it blurs the binary construction such as women vs. men, black men vs. whites, or women vs. black men.

Through the lens of womanist theologians such as Kelly Brown Douglas, this paper examines the ways in which the manipulation of the Christian tradition has been used as a means of exerting social control at the expense of Black lives and the implications this has for Black religion.

### White Exceptionalism

Black history in America is one of the constant systematic subjugations at the hands of white oppressors. Kelly Brown Douglas examines the sociocultural factors that have contributed to the way we view our Black citizens. In *Stand Your Ground*, she discusses at length how we are living in the afterlife of a society grounded in exclusionist culture, for example, how the Stand Your Ground Law allows the deaths of countless Black people, including the most notable death of Trayvon Martin. As evident through America's social, cultural, and theological discourse, Black lives have been considered dispensable. Douglas argues that "black oppression is, in fact, not symptomatic of a crisis state, but actually the result of an institution functioning exactly as it was intended to"<sup>2</sup>

To begin, Douglas criticizing the Stand Your Ground law that took Trayvon's life for being arbitrary; it is of greater importance to glean from it or the social reality of which it is representative to. In this case, the law is founded upon the hyper valuation of white lives and thus, the pinnacle of a culmination of racial oppression. Enacted by thirty three states, this law imbues citizens with the right to defend and protect their property. Property in this sense is not restricted to only physical objects, but refers to a person's life as well. The problem here is that the "dominant consciousness" has created a paradigm that tells us Black lives do not matter, and, therefore, they are barred from partaking in the same rights offered to

<sup>2</sup> Kelly Brown Douglas, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* ( Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015), 25.

whites.<sup>3</sup> This is not a result of stand your ground culture, but of centuries of racial stereotyping and stigmatizing.<sup>4</sup>

America's exceptionalist values are to blame for the religious authorization and creation of slave culture. It is important to note that when I speak of "American exceptionalism," I am referring exclusively to the elite members of society who are pulling the strings and reaping the benefits of participating in a society that operates in a hierarchical sense: white people. This is because people institutionally conflate white American culture with being Godly. As David Woodyard writes in *Liberating Privilege*, "the nation under God is more likely this God under the nation."<sup>5</sup> While the United States makes claims of secularity, the opposite is true in the country.

The reality is that through embodying exceptionalist values, the United States has captured God, ripping away God's transcendence. Resultantly, this captured God is easily manipulated to sanction acts of oppression such as the slave trade and its continuing negative effects on the wellbeing of Blacks. In this sense, God is a prisoner to the superiority complex running through America's political and social culture. Christian triumphalism is largely responsible for the indoctrination of religiosity in American government. The privilege that America clings so tightly to is dangerous because it imbues white elites with a heightened sense of self. When "dominant consciousness" traps God, it becomes nearly impossible for people to rise up against the image of a triumphal God. Creating apathy among the oppressed is a tactic that keeps exceptionalist values in place.

Exceptionalism is self serving. American governmental principles are, as Douglas describes, "a testament to Anglo-Saxon chauvinism".<sup>6</sup> Documents such as The Declaration of Independence were actually racialized attempts to pay homage to their progenitors. It is when exceptionalism shifts from an institutionalized to a racialized focus that this myth becomes deadly to people of color. This exceptionalism led to Christendom-like influences; it gives a state authorization to do whatever they want.

What Kelly Brown Douglas calls platonized Christianity is dominated by slave culture and atemporal.<sup>7</sup> Though many would argue that we live in a post-racial society, the myth of blacks as non beings continues to have effects on America's dominant consciousness. As evident through examples of violence against Black

<sup>3</sup>Walter Brueggemann, *Prophetic Imagination: Revised Edition* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2001)

<sup>4</sup>Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, 28.

<sup>5</sup>David O Woodyard, *Liberating Privilege: The Breakthrough of God and the Persistence of Normality* (Winchester, UK: Circle Books, 2016), 82.

<sup>6</sup>Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, 10.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

bodies at the hands of whites and their forced theological subjugation, Douglas argues that racism did not simply exist during the slave trade. Rather, racism is deeply ingrained in the worldviews of both blacks and whites alike. Douglas attempts to present two opposing dialectics: Christianity as a tool used in white exceptionalist policies vs. Christianity as a delegitimizing force that stands in stark opposition to white supremacy.

### A Racialized Hierarchy

In *Sexuality and the Black Church*, Douglas unpacks the implications of American exceptionalism by analyzing power dynamics in early America to show how white culture has come out on top. She argues that white power can only be preserved through the oppression of others and for this reason, white culture is generally devoted to maintaining this hierarchical system.<sup>8</sup> Since the foundation of American society, the white identity has been intended to overtake all others. The tie of white culture to Anglo-Saxon identity is important because it reminds that white culture is authorized by religious roots.

Anglo-Saxon exceptionalism is dangerous because Christian reformers viewed themselves as divinely authorized to spread their mission. The early European settlers in America did this through blood.<sup>9</sup> The desire to create a pure community, based on the strong differentiation between ingroup and outgroup, uniquely situated Anglo-Saxon blood in exceptional morality. The emphasis on blood made it easy to discern who was a part of this sanctified ingroup. The differentiation between who was and who was not “chosen” depended on race and language. The American experiment was intended to create a homogeneous society; white skin and English language were key to surviving the cultural climate of American exceptionalism. Enslaved Blacks were excluded from participating in this uniformed population. Instead, they were segregated and denied opportunities to fit in with the homogeneous reality crafted by the dominant consciousness.

Obsession with racial purity created a racial hierarchy and, of course, “it was the people with the least amount of Anglo-Saxon blood coursing through their veins that fell to the bottom... black Americans”.<sup>10</sup> The success of America was contingent upon a unified society and because it had been institutionally crafted to place certain people on a pedestal while eclipsing others, those left behind were forced to assimilate into a civilization that was intended to keep them out

<sup>8</sup> Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999).

<sup>9</sup> Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, 23--25.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

of it. Assimilation, however, was not what Blacks could easily do. Unlike many European immigrants, they had to face the burden of brandishing dark skin that marked them as obviously not of divine Anglo-Saxon blood. Even the poorest white worker was privileged in a racially hierarchical society.

Anglo-Saxon blood was seen to be a blessing from God. This meant that to be Anglo-Saxon was to be godlike. Theological authorization of the white agenda is best seen through the Manifest Destiny Movement. Those working to devalue black lives argued that God made blacks purposefully worse off than Anglo-Saxons and that the slavocracy is just black peoples living out their life as He intended. By this standard, "instead of the white/black divide being a human production that can perhaps be overcome, it is a divine creation that must not be violated".<sup>11</sup> In this way, the dominant consciousness was authorized by religiosity. This serves the dual purpose of giving the black stereotypes staying power while also further cementing the white correlation to God.

### **Racialized Stereotypes**

With their dark skin and distinct features such as larger lips and flat noses, Black people were set at a unique disadvantage. Black women in particular are separated by physicality other than their skin. To be a black woman in America is to be twice as enslaved, both literally and figuratively through the formation of hypersexualized caricatures.<sup>12</sup> In Christianity, women are often portrayed as creatures of passion. Unlike men who are morally superior, women are depicted as temptresses, who embody desire and sin. Black women can be "at least doubly victimized, thoroughly entrapped by a sexist and racist sacred dualistic ideology that implied their humanity."<sup>13</sup>

The idea that blackness threatens the white agenda is so indoctrinated into the fabric of the US mindset from centuries of racialized profiling that is now the age where Blacks are said to be guilty of their own oppression. White America punishes blacks for taking on roles they were not prepared for without acknowledging the ways in which white hegemony contributed to this problem. I am thinking specifically about the trend of "white flight." Blacks, who were internalized white cultural values, slowly began to own property and make their homes in spaces that white people had already built up. In response, whites often flee the area and relocate. This could be detrimental to Blacks, who hoped to improve their current social location, because white flight often cause severe economic downfalls in

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>12</sup> Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, 27.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

cities where were once prosperous. I have seen this personally in my hometown of Dayton, Ohio. This is a contributing factor to ghettoization. Blacks are blamed for crimes and destitution in these segregated neighborhoods due to white flight which allows Jim Crow style oppression to exist.

### Is Christianity Evil?

In keeping with the theme of protecting segregationist culture, Douglas discusses the early history of Christianity and its implications for the existing social order in her book, *What's Faith Got to Do With It?*. The first chapters of this book serve to supplement her conclusion to her later book, *Stand Your Ground*. Douglas writes about the nature of Black faith and its devotion to living out God's historical message through present day actions. The nature of Black faith is complex because it is derived from Christianity, the religion of their oppressors--whites. Christianity has served as a legitimator of the white agenda and simultaneously delegitimized political oppression. Douglas seeks to answer the question: what is it about the Christian faith that gives it such malleable qualities and what does this mean for the Black faith?<sup>14</sup>

Black religion is emblematic of Christian faith. Early Christianity was greatly influenced by Hellenistic philosophy and the works of Plato. Douglas argues that this platonic thought uniquely situated Christianity to authorize oppression in the highest forms due to its strict devotion to monotheism. Commitment to one god was unusual at that time, so it created a sharp contrast between Christianity and other religions that would resulted in an intense ingroup outgroup division. Douglas argues that early Christian faith was "virtually unprepared to coexist peacefully with other religions".<sup>15</sup> Not only were early Christians intolerant of other gods, but they viewed other religious people as agents of evil which produced the apocalyptic worldview that placed Christians in the fray between light and darkness. There was a belief in the constant struggle between God and those standing in opposition; for one to be faithful was contingent upon them actively fighting for the side of God. During the time period when this belief took root, there was no concept of Satan, therefore for lack of a theological figure to personify evil, the viewpoint was that God was up against other "false" idols and the non-conformers that worshiped them. The need for a human personification of evil eventually found its way into white interactions with blacks, effectively placing them as subversive to God's plan for America. Similarly, white America has personified crime through the subjection of blacks.

<sup>14</sup> Kelly Brown Douglas, *What's Faith Got to Do with It?: Black Bodies/Christian Souls* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

With this historical backing, how then does a black person identify with the Christian faith? Douglas closes *Stand Your Ground* with a discussion about the ethics of manipulating God's agenda to fit your own. Like James Cone, she affirms that God has a preference for the marginalized in society. Never has it ever been, nor will it ever be, ethical to invoke faith tradition to legitimize oppression. God sides with the marginalized because "to be created in the image of a God that is free means that the human person is meant to be free".<sup>16</sup> While Black faith does stem from Christianity, Douglas argues that Christian faith means a completely different thing for Blacks. Black theology is a theology in which God is not stagnant, but a constant unfolding with an ever present hand in history. Therefore, the black God cannot be caught by any human agenda. It is through ultimate transcendence that God is able to remain free from human constraints while simultaneously offering an ongoing presence, urging people to think outside of dominant consciousness. Likewise, the Black God of Christianity is one that does not desire suffering and pain at the hands of lynchers but the One who calls upon the people of faith to fight for freedom that they are endowed with. To be a Black Christian is to be devoted to continuing this fight.

Douglas argues that the problem is not that Christianity is inherently bad, but that the religion can be dangerous when taken from a privatized sphere to an institutionalized one.<sup>17</sup> This does not mean that institutionalized religion is always dangerous. Institutionalized religion can be beneficial when it is viewed through the lens of the experiences of the oppressed. Douglas fights for the God who is free to empower people to fight for their own freedom. This is not a white Anglo-Saxon God, but the Being that is so transcendental and, therefore, cannot be grasped by one group's interpretation. When we harness God to authorize the agenda of oppression, we cease to talk about God at all. Through the centuries-old racially charged rhetoric, the Black reality becomes worthless. Douglas argues that in adapting the God of their oppressor, Black peoples changed the narrative of God and refused to let the reality of the white Anglo-Saxon define them. Black Christianity is not an accommodation but the highest form of resistance.

### The Black Christ

Black theologians have dedicated their work toward attaining the goal of presenting a Jesus with whom their people can identify: the Black Jesus. James Cone offered a Black Christ that was not bound by racial ties. Cone's God operates on the basis of ontology. With this ontological symbol for Christ, Cone lays the

<sup>16</sup> Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, 151.

<sup>17</sup> Douglas, *Stand Your Ground*, *Ibid.*, 152.



groundwork for a theology that is accessible to both whites and blacks--as long they meet the condition of actively working toward the liberation of the oppressed. Cone's version of Christ is not passive; it requires members of the faith to live out Jesus' teachings. In his understanding, Christ is Black because Blacks are the most subjugated group in America. As an oppressed person, Jesus is compelled to identify with them. He writes "Christ is black therefore, not because of some cultural or psychological need of black people, but because and only because God *really* enters into the world where the poor, the despised, and the oppressed are".<sup>18</sup> Through his employment of ontological symbols, Cone offered a perspective by which white can be black and black can be white. This ontological symbol allowed Cone to supplant the story of Jesus beneath the present condition of marginalization that Blacks face in America as a means of giving the liberative agenda divine authorization.

### Womanist Model of God

Expanding Douglas' theological ideas, I would argue that the most appropriate model for God in America would be that of "a Black homosexual woman." This ontological interpretation of God would be the most beneficial in being accessible to all Christians while also giving identification to the most oppressed members of society. Cone was on the right track when he named Christ as ontologically black, but he did not originally go far enough in his understanding of just who is oppressed. It was not until mentoring black female theologians such as Kelly Brown Douglas, that Cone began to analyze liberation theology through a womanist lens. To James Cone's credit, he was working on laying the very foundation for Black liberation theology while facing backlash from every angle. While he did not initially detail the black woman's religious experience, one should recognize that every movement needs to start somewhere. Cone created the groundwork for Douglas and others to embellish with their own experience.

Douglas makes it clear that the current God paradigm does not achieve the politicization of faith within the church that Cone wants because it is not intersectional in that it leaves out the majority of black church congregations. This metaphor for God would be more influential because it has the potential to enact change within Black communities and brings theology out of the academic bubble through which male theologians have previously written about God. God as a Black gay woman is the best way to encompass a womanist perspective because it combines the liberative goals of black theology while simultaneously addressing

<sup>18</sup> James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 59.

the problems of attaining wholeness within a black community that still ostracizes certain identities.

It is hard to truly understand God when a falsified version is indoctrinated in the minds of young oppressed peoples and enforced by authority figures. This is why womanists such as Pamela Lightsey and Kelly Brown Douglas argue that oppressed people can ethically take agency and creative liberty over their readings of scripture. An authentic model of God cannot be static if it is to be inclusive. Oppressed peoples are capable of making accurate impositions on the text because they live its reality and truly understand the meaning. However, Lightsey makes it clear that “this does not mean we know all there is to know of God through works, or our experience of God’s works alone”.<sup>19</sup> Lightsey expounds upon this, explaining that womanism pulls its understanding of God through the combination of reason, the experience of the oppressed, the Bible, and tradition. She advocates for reading scripture critically, but sympathetically--accepting that the Bible is not exactly who God is, but actually just a myriad of person’s interpretation of who God is to them. In womanist reading, “God stands within and outside of the text.”<sup>20</sup> Reason is essential to a black queer understanding of God because it reminds them that the oppressive interpretations of religion are false. God is bigger than the human confinement of racism/sexism. Reading critically, but sympathetically often means reading selectively. As Douglas and Cone argue, we will never be able to fully understand God, so it is more important to focus on the message of justice, hope, equality, and love and embody this in the fulfilment of life for all persons.

### Conclusion

My paper argues that the Black experience in America is one of the constant subjugations at the hands of white oppressors. However, through further analysis, it also shows the fortitude and power of faith against these odds. The most important takeaway from this paper comes from my contemplation on the significance of a God-talk for and by Black peoples. When I had the opportunity to directly meet Kelly Brown Douglas who laid the groundwork for womanist theology, a message came to my mind: God reveals Godself to you in your interactions with the world and it is up to you to decide the most appropriate model for which to characterize this phenomena. The statement is vital to an authentic religious experience and is especially important for an understanding of womanism. It is powerful in that this understanding of God maintains that religion can only be used for liberative purposes. When you decide who God is to you, God becomes

<sup>19</sup> Pamela R. Lightsey, *Our Lives Matter* (Pickwick Publications, 2015), 39.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

an extension of yourself. It is precisely through this mindset that black peoples are freed from the constraints of earthly oppression by Christianity as viewed through the womanist lens.

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