

CHRIST—TOPIC SESSION

Topic: Practical Applications of Mercy and Justice in Christology
Convener: Susie Paulik Babka, University of San Diego
Moderator: Elisabeth Vasko, Duquesne University
Presenters: Karen Teel, University of San Diego
Jeannine Hill Fletcher, Fordham University
Christian S. Krokus, University of Scranton

In her paper, “Whiteness in Christology,” Karen Teel argues that many contemporary Christologies fail to articulate a praxis of justice and mercy that engages current social problems. She contends that one reason for this failure is the unexamined whiteness of the scholars who produce these Christologies. Whiteness is not simply having light skin and a set of privileges, but also an attitude manifested in a thought pattern that expresses the feeling that to be white is to be normal. After proposing that the concept of “whiteness” implicitly functions as something “normal” in the theological task when performed by white scholars, Teel applies this working hypothesis to Christologies authored by white thinkers. To this end, she examines Terrence Tilley’s 2008 book, *The Disciples’ Jesus: Christology as Reconciling Practice*. Teel, a white theologian herself, clarifies that she singles out Tilley’s work because of two key features of his book: a) it makes the claim that who Jesus is and how we should follow him cannot be separated; b) it refers to the author’s experiences and engages the concrete situation of the world. Teel then examines three moments in the book where Tilley acknowledges that theologians’ identities matter but fails to address the national culture of white supremacy, being a white theologian himself, and the meaning of being white. Such silence, Teel argues, reflects a type of racist thinking that prevents the author from being fully and consciously rooted where he or she actually is. Finally, Teel proposes three steps that theologians need to take to begin accounting for their whiteness. They should 1) learn from their own history to better understand their participation in U.S. white supremacist culture; 2) internalize Jesus’ challenge to act compassionately; 3) participate in the movements that Jesus surely would join if he were here.

Jeannine Hill Fletcher presented a paper titled “Color of the Crucified: Justice, Mercy and the Sin of White Supremacy.” The paper stresses the essential relationship that exists between the Crucified Christ and the victims of history, who today continue to be crucified by economic injustice and racism. Hill Fletcher raises the question of whether in the United States, where the sin of white supremacy has created such an unequal society, we can fashion a Christology and a Christ-imagery that effectively responds to our current situation. She reminds us that the presence of the Crucified One points to the “concentrated bodies” of the Crucified People who, in turn, become a haunting presence giving expression to the Crucified One. Hence, Christians must scrutinize the signs of the times to discern the places where their sins keep “Christ in his torture.” In the first part of the paper, Hill Fletcher enlists the measures of economic inequality, home ownership, and education to put the U.S. racialized disparity in historical and contemporary perspective. Borrowing the words of Joseph Barndt, she asserts that “every institution in the United States—including every church—was created with the mission and purpose to serve white people exclusively,” and that this structural history is the foundation of the nation’s

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economic, social, and racial inequality. In the second part of the paper, Hill Fletcher turns to examining contemporary images of Christ. She notes that the images of a white crucified Jesus can hardly communicate effectively the crucifixion currently experienced by so many Black, Brown, Asian, and Arab bodies. Thus, Hill Fletcher argues that “instead of the White Christ raised high in White Churches, the color of the Christ should remind us of race hatred and the cost of our sinfulness.” Finally, Hill Fletcher intimates that the existing structural evil of race-based disparity should invite us to further consider the theological logic that might have sustained these structures: the toxic interaction of Christian supremacy and white supremacy.

Christian Krokus’ paper, “Christ as Mercy: Insights from Islam,” begins by tracing the meanings of mercy in the Christian tradition, particularly the notion that Jesus is God’s mercy. He notes that in the gospels mercy is usually linked to Jesus’ acts and dispositions, and that the relationship between Jesus as the agent of God’s mercy grounds much of Christian liturgy and piety. Krokus focuses on the noetic dimension of mercy that encompasses God’s efforts at self-communication and reaches its zenith in the incarnation. While this notion of mercy has been clouded over in Western theology (cf. Kasper), it is an attribute of God that is central in the Islamic tradition. Similar to the Christian tradition, the Islamic notion of God’s mercy is multivalent, and can refer to God’s generous creativity, kindness, forgiveness, and primarily, to an unmerited and unexpected gift. Krokus also notes that there are certain interpretations of Islam that associate Muhammad with the principle known as Muhammad reality—“the uncreated prototype of creation”—which can be compared to the Christian understanding of the Logos. The point of the comparison, explains Krokus, is not to force Christian categories onto Islam or vice versa, but rather to look at Christ again, with new eyes. The Islamic lens may help us, for instance, recover the patristic emphasis on the integration between creation and the incarnation and confirm that the incarnation surpasses God’s repeated communications in a new, fuller, and more tangible way.

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