

Resurrecting Tradition: The Challenge from and towards Kelly Brown Douglas's *Resurrecting Hope*

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ABSTRACT

This paper reviews Kelly Brown Douglas's Resurrecting Hope and brings it into conversation with certain themes in Catholic theology and with the theory of the scapegoat mechanism articulated by the French intellectual, René Girard.

Keywords: black theology, Eucharistic theology, dangerous memory, René Girard, scapegoat mechanism

Although not a long book by theological standards, *Resurrecting Hope: A Future Where Black Lives Matter* has a lot to say about a lot of things, and its author skillfully weaves American history and current events together with Christian theology, treating a diverse range of subjects and while manifesting a mesmerizing range of scholarship between diverse discourses. Yet beyond being a learned work of scholarship, it is also an impassioned work of pastoral theology. Brown writes not only as a pastor but as a mother, as a mother to her son who calls on her, and, through reproducing his words at the beginning of each chapter, calls all of us to face the ethical imperative of what Martin Luther King termed “the fierce urgency of now.”

Coming from Saint Louis, the fierce urgency of now feels like it has been lingering in the air ever since Michael Brown was shot dead and left lying in the middle of a Ferguson street for hours on a hot August night. A few weeks later, in October of 2014, VonDerrit Myers was shot and killed by an off-duty police officer in my own neighborhood, one mile from the church and school where we worship and where my children attend their local parish school. The killing sparked marches and protests the next evening, and these events unfolded just blocks from where I live. When further protests took place in November, a former colleague and I were at the AAR in San Diego while our partners gathered our young children together in fear as police teargassed protesters in my favorite coffee shop, just three blocks from my house. Back then, people asked me, what's wrong with Saint Louis? *Everything*, I would answer. But within a few years, the racial division of Saint Louis seemed like less of an exception and more like the norm for America.

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Can urgency last nearly a decade? Or does the sense of being near a tipping point that does not tip, lead to despair? Here Douglas toes the line between two discourses of prominent Black intellectuals: one discourse, associated with King, Howard Thurman, and Barack Obama, while ever mindful of historical injustice and of America's original sin, sees the arc of the moral universe bending toward justice and deems the racism in America's history as a contradiction of its ideals. The other, represented in the Douglas's book by William Jones, Anthony Pinn, and Nikole Hannah-Jones (and here I would also include James Hal Cone, though not without qualification) understands this racism and anti-blackness to be so deeply woven into the American identity as to provide sufficient cause for a pessimism that imagines the unraveling of this racist thread as unraveling the entire American project. In her book Douglas employs both discourses and in the end opts for hope.

I am neither tasked nor even interested in defending American history. What does interest me, however, is the matter of how this pessimistic discourse translates to the Christian theological tradition and how the question about the relationship of the current believer to the Christian past gets reframed inside of theological discourses. Numerous voices, gradually becoming part of mainstream theology, have asked whether the Christian tradition is so profoundly marked by a malevolent whiteness that one cannot realistically expect to uphold the Christian theological tradition without at the same time perpetuating a white Christian colonialist gaze that necessarily denigrates black bodies. Although this argument is not central to Douglas's text, it is nonetheless featured in it. Its presences raises the question, to paraphrase Willie James Jennings, how, after understanding the way whiteness has seeped into theological discourse, we might reimagine Christian theological training, institutions, and conversation?

Here I want to suggest that the question raised about the taint or entanglement of theological tradition bears added weight from the perspective of Catholic theology. The Catholic upholds a more organic understanding of history than the Protestant. It is an understanding that presupposes the abiding presence of a Spirit in history and that imagines the church as an ongoing incarnation. Catholic theology has given a maximalist reading of the passage in John's Gospel where Jesus says, "The Father will give you another Advocate, and he will be with you forever" (14:16). Whatever corruptions and deviations occur, a Catholic approach to history insists that the Holy Spirit, who guides the Church, does not appear episodically in this history, like a guest star in a sitcom. The Spirit *abides*. One finds this, for instance, in the Catholic theology of ministry, in which ministerial authority resides in an unbroken chain stretching back to the apostles, and in the theology of the Eucharist, where the *anamnesis* of the mass makes present the past in such a way that bridges linear time. This perspective can and must include critique and reform, and its history is littered with such reforms. This perspective must also identify and correct inauthentic developments that litter both its history and its present. But it cannot throw out centuries of history and learning as if there were no Spirit guiding it.

I would like to bring the Douglas's book into conversation with certain Catholic theological perspectives. This is not a matter of choosing one over the other, or suggesting what a book should have been. Instead, it is to recall certain emphases from other quarters and to ask Douglas, how she might imagine future collaboration between the insights and arguments of *Resurrection Hope* and a few notes in the Catholic theological tradition. This process will unfold in two episodes: the first suggests that Douglas's reflections on memory could be brought into fruitful conversation with the notion of "dangerous memory" coined by Johann Sebastian Metz and recently applied by M. Shawn Copeland. The second highlights the benefit of extending the insights of René Girard, cited toward the end of *Resurrection Hope* to understand sinful behavior.

In the section of Chapter Four titled "Anamnesis Remembering," Douglas outlines a form of remembering, derived from Jesus's command at the last supper—"do this in memory of me"—that "changes the gaze through which history is viewed." One way to change this gaze is to link this remembering to the "dangerous memory" coined by Johann Baptist Metz. For Metz, most of history is written by the winners, but gospels tell the story of Jesus—a seemingly deluded Galilean peasant crucified under the full force of the greatest earthly authority—from the perspective of the crucified, and from those Howard Thurman calls "the disinherited." The story, as Flannery O'Connor's Misfit notes, "thrown everything off balance."

The opposite of re-member is not to forget, it is to dis-member. The force of sin dismembers on both a social and personal level. Douglas helpfully describes this dismembering, even if she does not label it as such, when she recalls the brokenness of both whites and blacks on account of sins done and suffered. The healing grace of Christ, the resurrecting hope derived from the

risen one, help us remember. The Eucharist, Douglas notes, is “an incarnate memory [...] Through this act, Jesus is symbolically connecting his incarnate reality to the call to remember [...] Simply put, Jesus’s call is a charge to his disciples to embody in their present their memory of him” (150). For Catholics, the mass is not a memorial, but a sacrifice in which Christ’s sacrifice on Calvary is made present in the here and now. The mass collapses time, and the bread and wine are transubstantiated to become Christ’s body and blood. This act, the Eucharistic sacrifice, is “the source and summit of the Christian life” (*Lumen Gentium*, 1). I’d like to suggest that the Catholic theology of the Eucharist can enhance the ethical imperative articulated by Douglas.

Following Metz, the Catholic theologian M. Shawn Copeland connects the dangerous memory of Jesus’s death to a pattern of remembering—a thick form of anamnesis borne of eucharistic habituation that makes present this memory and sees this re-presented in unjust suffering. This, Copeland argues, is what it means to *know Christ crucified*, and in her book, *Knowing Christ Crucified*, she asks what it would mean for Catholic leadership to open itself to the “dangerous memory of chattel slavery.”

Nowhere have I seen this dangerous memory brought to attention more sharply than in “The Wire” (Season 1, Episode 12), when D’Angelo Barksdale asks Stringer Bell, “Where’s Wallace At?” Wallace of course has been killed, and to be an effective drug dealer (analogous to being a good American) necessitates a forgetting. D’Angelo recalls the memory of the unjustly slain Wallace. This refusal to forget of course ends any realistic hope of D’Angelo making a living as a drug dealer and thus spells his own doom. In similar ways, those seeking a future where Black lives matter ask, where are Michael and George? It is through the cross that we interpret the lynching tree as cruciform, but it is also through the lynching tree that we come to understand the cross not as a symbol of triumph that could be used to justify a crusade, or that could be hacked (*Hackenkreuz*) into a swastika, but as an event demands our solidarity with the forgotten and the displaced.

It is from the cross that one finds solidarity with the victim, as Douglas highlights. The old translation of the Catholic eucharistic prayer declared, “See the victim whose death reconciles us to you.” Douglas helpfully points to the many and myriad ways that whiteness and white supremacy have made the powerful and those raced white unable to translate or transfer a professed allegiance to the crucified and risen Lord into solidarity with the dark and poor. Here it might prove fruitful to lean more into the work of René Girard, whose writings provide an undeniable resources for Christian thinking in the 21st century. As Douglas notes in Chapter 5, Girard articulates a double-edged contagion. Cone, it should be noted, also gives a tantalizing hint of the impact of Girard when he cites him as an exception to the astounding rule of scholars who fail to connect the cross and the lynching tree. Indeed, Julia Robinson Moore presented an excellent paper just this morning integrating Cone and Girard, which persuaded me that black theology has much to gain from incorporating the insights of Girard.

For Girard, the scapegoat mechanism lies at the foundation of all fallen human culture, and if one looks the right way at any culture, one can find traces of evidence covered up, and these traces reveal violent origins. Biblical religion, or Judeo-Christianity, reverse the flow of cultural and religious history by telling a similar story of a resurrected victim, but compared to the other myths that conceal, the bible unveils our greatest lie: it is we who align God to our cause, but the real God is not only on the side of the victims, God is the victim, which our sinful structures and biases disable us from seeing. The solidarity gained through the lynching tree and the transcendence achieved through violence are both false forms of true solidarity. And there are some indications that Girard’s trip through the South in the 1950s helped aid his theory of scapegoating against the backdrop of a still smoldering practice of lynching (see Cynthia Haven, *Evolution of Desire: A Life of René Girard*, 64–71)

Biblical religion, and especially Christianity, works almost like those engineers who can reverse the flow of a river. Instead of a false solidarity formed around a common victim, Christianity offers a true solidarity, a community of forgiven forgivers, almost all of whom, at the outset at least, were themselves part of the lynching mob or were bystanders to it. Just as Girard’s theory, in Douglas’s rendering, accounts for both good and bad contagion through the same explanatory mechanism, so too does it account for Christianity’s success and failure. The same power of modeling and imitation that led Peter to declare so boldly that he would never defy Christ accounts for why he denied Christ three times. And here we come to the crux of the matter—the same mechanism that explains how, let’s say, a wretched, abusive drunkard could find the Lord, renounce his wretched ways, and no longer be abusive to his partner and children,

could, without seeing any contradiction, join a lynch mob, or support segregation, or cheer Bull Connor, or vote for Donald Trump. Humans have an almost limitless capacity to remain blind while purporting to see the light.

This mechanism is universal and there is no reason why the downcast, or marginalized, or non-able-bodied, or darker skinned could not succumb to it. And we have the election results to prove it. After four years under Trump, Trump lost white support but gained support from people, especially men, of color. Here, I would suggest, that frameworks centered around whiteness have limited explanatory capacity. Surely something like an epistemology of whiteness explains much of anti-blackness. And indeed, as Douglas outlines with particular force, this anti-blackness has led to unbearable oppression.

Here I would suggest, as a supplement or perhaps something more, a more universal theory to explain discrimination, not in any attempt to equate it with the suffering done to those with skin coded red and black, but in order to understand its universal grasp. And I would be eager to hear Douglas's thoughts on whether or not a theory of the scapegoat mechanism might offer a hermeneutical key in two ways: first, to explain the question her son and so many others ask: why bother with a Church and a religion that has permitted and promoted so much oppression? And second, whether whiteness is not comprehensive enough to explain both historical patterns of discrimination and othering, and whether its eradication will lead to the kind of restorative justice advocated in the book.

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