Beyond the Black–White Binary of U.S. Race Relations: A Next Step in Religious Education

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Beyond the Black–White Binary of U.S. Race Relations: A Next Step in Religious Education

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Abstract

Many if not most people in the academy as well as the public sphere tend to regard race and racism in the United States in terms of a default frame of reference (i.e., a paradigm): the black–white binary. Although this frame is constructive as well as compelling, it displays serious liabilities. This article outlines, for religious educators, nine expressions of the black–white paradigm—three variations of the binary, three approaches from black studies/theology, and three models that express efforts to transcend binary thinking. A concluding comparative exercise illustrates how participants may discern, address, and ideally revise the paradigm.

Discussing issues of race in the United States, W.E.B. Du Bois famously said that “the problem of the Twentieth Century is the problem of the color-line” (2007, 20). This well-known and often-cited declaration about a black–white divide has defined American experience—even mine, American born, but neither white nor black.

In this article, I argue that a common practice of interpreting race and racism is itself problematic: framing discourse in a black–white paradigm. Many if not most people in the academy as well as the public sphere tend to take the experiences, practices, and histories of white racism against African Americans as the default frame of reference, choosing to remember history, construct identity, and view the present in terms of black and white relations.1 Given these customary habits of perception, memory, and discourse, it is almost impossible not to think of black–white relations when one thinks of race and racism, despite a national history of racial oppression in the form of colonizing or exploiting multiple ethnoracial groups as well as growing minority-majorities in many parts of the United States.

Although there has been little attention to the black–white binary in religious education literature, theorists from multiple disciplines in the social sciences have been discussing it since the mid-1990s as a “paradigm,” borrowing from Thomas Kuhn’s seminal work (1970).2 Latino legal theorist Juan Perea defines the “Black/White binary paradigm” as “the conception that race in America consists, either exclusively or primarily, of only two constituent racial groups, the Black and the White” (1997, 1219). He writes, “[T]he paradigm dictates that all other racial identities and groups in the United States are best understood through the Black/White binary paradigm” (1219–20). A Kuhnian paradigm refers to the tacit, shared understandings that guide

1One exception is Hawai‘i, where the black–white binary is not the default frame of reference for understanding race and racism, although its influence is felt indirectly (Sharma 2011).

2In note 2, Perea cites and quotes eight articles in various law reviews and journals from the mid-1990s that address the black–white binary in terms of a paradigm (1997, 1214).
a community of researchers in deciding how to approach and define theoretical problems (1216). The “Black/White binary paradigm” determines and limits discussions of race and racism by ignoring the experiences of people who are neither black nor white (1219).

In a time when violence against African Americans should stir up moral outcry and political will to transform unjust structures in the United States, this might seem like an inauspicious moment to problematize the dominance of the black–white paradigm. My argument might be perceived as a threat to the imperative that “Black Lives Matter,” because attending to the experiences of other people of color distracts from or competes with focus on black suffering. I do believe that all groups need to be in conversation with African American communities to expose and shift the oppressive ways that blacks are treated and perceived in the United States. However, at the same time I wish to call attention to the danger of using relationships between blacks and whites as an unexamined, default lens for perceiving race relations in the United States.

My primary contribution is twofold. First, I attempt to help religious educators to reflect critically on how and why the black–white split powerfully shapes how we conceptualize race relations in the United States, how we often theologize, and how we treat others. Providing some tools for analysis, I outline three versions of the binary, three examples from black studies and theology, as well as three models that attempt to move beyond the paradigm. Second, I invite readers to examine with me (and/or with others who are neither black nor white) their experience of and/or their investment in this dichotomous way of thinking. A comprehensive approach that includes theological reflection and a more developed vision of antiracism education must be saved for a larger project.

PAIN MANAGEMENT

Talking about racial oppression risks exposing the injury and pain of victims as well as the guilt and shame of perpetrators both past and present—all of which can be experienced as threatening, awkward, and challenging. Many colleagues often grow disillusioned with talking about race because it never seems to get anywhere, much less to help. When faced with discomfort or the prospect of pain, a natural human response is to take deliberate or unconscious measures to avoid it, minimize it, or deflect attention from it. Likewise, in the case of talking about race, people adopt multiple strategies to cope with the pain of it.

In religious education, resistance to exploring racism in depth is an effort in pain management. When Russell Moy (2000) declared racism to be the “null curriculum” of religious education, he based his conclusion on a review of publications in this journal since 1994. Unfortunately, few authors published in Religious Education (Moore 2012; Hearn 2009; Cross 2003; Hess 1998) have focused exclusively or significantly on racism since Moy’s survey. The fact that racism is rarely a focal topic in religious education may seem surprising, precisely because racism is seemingly addressed everywhere. The problem is that religious education responses to racial oppression are more often expressed indirectly or implicitly, either left to people of color to discuss in relation to their community, or incorporated within broader approaches to transformation, for
example, multicultural education. In the former, when I (for example) discuss wartime racism as the historical context of my own Japanese American Christian community, whites can feel interested or sympathetic without needing to become aware of their own complicity with structures that perpetuate white privilege. In the latter, multicultural approaches to religious education can conveniently deflect attention from addressing racial oppression by focusing on “good citizenship” that “celebrates diversity,” which I discuss in a moment. In both cases, it might seem like racism has been adequately addressed, yet we have managed to avoid unearthing some deep assumptions about the ways that race is habitually discussed.

Thinking of race in black–white terms is itself another tactic to manage the pain of discussing racism, providing a self-protective benefit that accompanies the use of any binary. All human beings tend to make sense of and navigate the world by sorting experiences, objects, and people into two broad, mutually exclusive categories—right or wrong, good or bad, or friend or foe, for example. Simplifying information through binaries reduces life’s many stressors, foreclosing awareness of information that is potentially ambiguous, challenging, or threatening. Of course, the cost of simplification is neglecting information that cannot be fitted in either/or terms. In the case of American habits of reflecting on race, the black–white binary can provide a familiar “structure” in which we discuss racism, helping to mitigate a cognitively and emotionally costly project. Accounting for the complexity of diverse experiences of racism between among multiple groups would not simply be intellectually unmanageable but emotionally taxing. For whites, seeing race in terms of black–white allows people to protect themselves by inhibiting awareness of whites being implicated in racism against other racialized groups.3

Most educated whites are aware that African Americans are different from Latino(a), Native, and Asian Americans, but this knowledge does not stop many people from thinking and acting according to a tacit assumption that all experiences of racism are basically the same. By this logic, if one understands how white supremacy led to the enslavement and disenfranchisement of blacks, one comprehends American racism more generally. Whether the black–white paradigm is appropriate for understanding other experiences of racism is irrelevant from the standpoint of pain management. People need some mechanism to cope with potentially volatile discussions of racial difference and oppression, even if the mechanism is itself problematic.

**UNFOLDING VARIATIONS ON THE THEME OF A BLACK–WHITE BINARY**

The habit of interpreting race relations primarily as ongoing tension between blacks and whites has evolved subtly with multiple variations yet maintained its dominance in the American social imaginary. As I discuss below, the simple color-line of black versus white has shifted to white versus “people of color,” and subsequently to

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3For a discussion of the need for whites to protect their “fragility” when it comes to race, see DiAngelo (2011).
black versus nonblack. These interpretative moves are not exclusive. Rather, they coexist simultaneously.

W.E.B. Du Bois’s “color-line” epitomizes the most basic form of black–white thinking, in which members of the dominant group—that is, those with status and power who determine how to construe reality—differentiate between themselves and those who are nonwhite. This traditional way of sorting people is historically grounded in American jurisprudence that made distinctions between whites and nonwhites in order to preserve the privileges of the majority (Dalmage 2008, 324). Under these racist laws, even one drop of black blood made a person nonwhite. All other racialized minorities were sorted accordingly. In the 1927 Supreme Court case, Gong Lum v. Rice, Chinese in Mississippi were considered nonwhite or “colored” (Bow 2007, 4). In certain regions and times, Mexicans were classified as “colored,” obliged to refrain from white-only spaces along with blacks (Vidal-Ortiz 2008, 1037).

As nonwhites began to organize and create coalitions, a newer binary arose in the late 1980s—whites versus “people of color.” The history of the term “people of color” is somewhat murky, though the notion of “colored people” or a “person of color” has precedents in seventeenth-century American property law to protect whites. The term “people of color” has broadened to include all nonwhites, including people of mixed race (Vidal-Ortiz 2008, 1037). “White versus people of color” is itself a binary, a variation on whites versus nonwhites that is curiously double-sided. First, unlike calling nonwhites “colored,” referring to “people of color” is not a derogatory term; yet it functions similarly by preserving whiteness as the standard of comparison and blurs distinctions among racialized minorities. In a sense, this newer dichotomy, though meant to be more sensitive, is little different from the classic black–white binary, except that “people of color” has been substituted for “black.” However, in a second sense, the practice of distinguishing between whites and “people of color” enables nonwhites to identify with one another as potential allies.

Examining patterns of interracial and multiracial identification of Asians, Latinos, and African Americans, sociologists Jennifer Lee and Frank Bean (2010) conclude that the newest color-line to explain racial stratification is not “white versus nonwhite” but “black versus nonblack.” This updated version uses black as opposed to white as the point of comparison. In the traditional, historic practice of dichotomous thinking, whites use “whiteness” to establish “us” (friend) as a basis for identifying who is “them” (foe). Anyone nonwhite is a potential enemy, meaning blacks as well as Latinos, for example, would be considered other. In the newer practice of the binary, whites (and nonwhites who have internalized white racism) use “blackness” to identify the essence of “other.” Black = dangerous, and nonblack = safe. In this way of thinking, for example, American-born Latinos, who are not black, would be considered potential friends. For whites, seeing black people triggers an entire history of black and white racial conflict, a history that is not associated with and therefore not set off by nonblacks (Williamson 2016). Categorizing Latino(a), Native, and Asian Americans as

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5Journalists have attempted to trace this history in Saffire (1988) and Malesky (2014).
“nonblack” may serve to conjure less white shame, guilt, or fear as it creates a sense of security or insulation.

Although there seems to be multiple “color-lines” in operation, the black–white binary persists. Part of our work as religious educators is to practice and help others to practice catching ourselves using one or another of these common binaries and noticing what it forecloses.

THE BLACK–WHITE PARADIGM AT WORK IN THEOLOGY

Christian religious education and theology more broadly have been deeply influenced by theorists and theologians who are formed by and reproduce the black–white binary.\(^6\) For example, James Cone and Cornel West propose blackness as symbol or metaphor for oppression and racial evil that all Christians should resist (Choi 2015, 133). For Cone (1994), blackness is an “ontological symbol” of oppression, which in its re-appropriated form can stand for all victims of white racism (Choi 2015, 133). For West (1999, 502, 504), blackness is a metaphor for racial evil that can galvanize moral people to enact racial justice (Choi 2015, 133). West consistently conflates discussions of race relations with black experiences of racism, whether he comments on the Los Angeles riots of 1992, the cultural conservatism of white America, or cultural hybridity (Perea 1997, 1227–28). Writing from a situated perspective is quite different from elevating it as a universal, representing it as the experience of others, or failing to include more diverse perspectives on race.

Although Cone and West’s respective work was groundbreaking and continues to be influential,\(^7\) the work of Willie Jennings (2010) is in many ways more nuanced than either. Jennings explores why and how Christian imagination in the West was indelibly shaped by colonialism during the conquest of Africa and the Americas. To his credit, Jennings discusses not only the slave trade and the colonization of Africa, he also addresses imperialism inflicted on Native Americans and Indians in Peru. One insight I find astute is his argument that a racial hierarchy was established as “racial agency” (58), particularly whiteness, became divorced from the places that people belonged with particular geographies, climates, flora, and fauna.

Because Jennings discusses Native American, Amerindian, and brief references to Chinese and Japanese experiences of racism and colonialism, one might assume that he disrupts the black–white binary, yet in my judgment he presents the story of the “origins of race” in ways that keep the binary intact.\(^8\) In his characterization of colonial imagination, whites are on top and blacks are on the bottom of the racial hierarchy, with all others fitting in between (58, 78). The author’s depiction reflects the worldview of white European colonialists. However, one wonders if Jennings is more a part of the black–white paradigm than he acknowledges. Most of the chapters dis-

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\(^6\) A major proponent of the appropriateness of black oppression as the appropriate frame of reference for all white racism, even globally is Feagin (2000).

\(^7\) An example of a white theologian influenced by Cone and perpetuating the black–white paradigm is the work of Jon Nilson (2007), who argues “why white Catholic theologians need black theology” as he says in the subtitle of his book.

\(^8\) I make this same critique of the “middlemen theory” and the “tri-racial system” theory below.
cuss African and African American experiences of colonial oppression and racism, a fact that accentuates the opposition between blacks and whites. Discussions of Native American and native Peruvians appear (to this reader) as variations on the theme of how blacks were treated (see for example, 54), although often not as badly as African slaves (78–80). In making a case about white Christian imagination, some of the particularity and differences between and among experiences of colonialism and racial oppression are lost.

Providing critical insight on these African American authors, black pastoral theologian Homer Ashby (2003) identifies a tendency to define blackness in terms of whiteness (in the cases of Cone and West) and/or, I would add, to define whiteness in terms of blackness (in the case of Jennings). For example, Ashby critiques Cone’s support for “ontological blackness” because it “requires whiteness, white racism, and white theology to justify its opposition to whiteness,” which robs blackness of the possibility of transcendence (2003, 78). Drawing on the work of Anthony Pinn (1998) and Victor Anderson (1995), Ashby argues that defining blackness in ways that require whiteness limits black identity and theology by focusing on oppression and survival rather than also investigating possibilities of fulfillment and flourishing (2003, 78). His work causes me to consider that theologians such as Cone are powerfully compelled to mine repeatedly the experience of slavery and African heritage to define both black identity and faith, which Ashby refers to as the “hermeneutics of return” (2003, 79). Retrieving slave narratives and other stories of New World conquest, Jennings also engages in some of these same hermeneutics but to explain white Christianity and its history of colonialism. If we apply Ashby’s logic, then defining white Christianity in terms of black experiences is both illuminating in some ways but limiting in others.

In seeking to engage students in addressing issues of racism and theology, many religious educators and other theologians turn to theorists such as Cone, West, Jennings (and others), whose work has been highly influential in theological education, including religious education. The black–white binary paradigm habituates American theologians to taking the views of African American (especially male) theorists as primary and authoritative when it comes to race. However, if religious educators draw uncritically on black theorists who perpetuate the black–white binary, they unwittingly replicate and extend the problem.

THE STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS OF THINKING IN BLACK AND WHITE

If we look beyond race for a moment, it is readily apparent that dichotomous thinking is effective in drawing attention to what is wrong with a situation, especially at an early stage of consciousness-raising. For example, Paulo Freire (2003) created new awareness by writing about the “oppressors” and the “oppressed.” Analogously, early feminists fostered new sensitivity toward issues of power in regard to gender by invoking the binary male–female. Similarly, in the struggle for civil rights and antiracism, black–white has focused attention on how the historical communal injury of racism contributes to the disadvantages, trauma, and violence that African Americans (especially low-income blacks) continue to suffer. However, just as postcolonial studies
has advanced the study of oppression beyond oppressed/oppressor, and more recent feminist studies have problematized the polarity of male–female, the need to consider moving beyond black–white is long overdue.

While the black–white binary may benefit blacks by inspiring solidarity and empathy for what they have experienced, it also has significant undersides. For example, it tends to obscure complexity and diversity among African Americans who have particular experiences of racism that intersect variously with class, gender, and sexuality and according to various black cultures. For example, wealthy, well-educated, suburban African Americans’ experiences of racism are related but not identical to those of low-income, poorly educated, urban counterparts (see Jimenez, Fields, and Schachter 2015). The paradigm misrepresents diverse people as monolithic.

Paradoxically, the black–white binary ensures the supremacy of whites by reinforcing the apparent inevitability of white domination (Alcoff 2003, 17). The dichotomy ultimately portrays whites as the pinnacle of what all other groups are attempting to attain or the standard by which all others are measured. Boxed into this narrow position, white people are caught in some of the same liabilities of the black–white binary. In relation to African Americans, whites are assigned the role of racists, colonizers, or victims of black crime, likewise creating too-simple images of white European Americans. In relation to blacks, white people of moral conscience are assigned relatively limited roles: listening to stories of racism, engaging in self-critique to expose white privilege, and showing support for black people. While white people do need to engage this important work, it cannot be the only work they are allowed or encouraged to do. Regrettably, the binary places whites in a weak position to reflect critically on black views of racism, which risks being experienced as racist. Furthermore, when blacks are treated as if only they are qualified to speak about racism, it limits the potential of whites to develop any kind of moral authority other than in relation to white privilege. Ultimately, whites cannot become full and equal partners in conversations about racism in the black–white binary paradigm. The binary, in this sense, functions ontologically and has little flexibility in functioning as a pairing of social constructions.

The dominant black–white narrative treats black experiences of racial oppression as the standard by which all others are measured and, by doing so, racism against nonblack racialized minorities are minimized if not rendered invisible. Consider, for example, how Latino(a) American experiences of racism are often erased as they are coded as immigration issues. People can debate U.S. immigration policies without ever discussing racism, partly because racism against people of Latin descent does not fit the dominant narrative about black–white conflict. The reality is that neither black nor white experiences of racism map well enough onto the experiences of Latino(a) (Gold 2004, 958–9), Native, or Asian Americans. For example, most Americans think of racism in terms of segregation and the struggle for civil rights. However, this narrative is less appropriate for Asian Americans, for example, whose experiences of racism are primarily rooted in a history of U.S. wars in Asia as well as American exclusionary laws that restricted immigration (E. H. Kim and Lowe 1997, x).

Finally, in a world where Americans are perceived to have only two locations—on either side of the color-line—complex relationships between members of all groups are obscured and possibilities for solidarity are constantly disrupted (Gold 2004, 958;
Alcoff 2003, 17; Sethi 1994, 235–36). Conflict between African Americans and Asian Americans, for example, is rarely discussed.

“MILES TO GO BEFORE [WE] SLEEP”

Although multicultural religious education that cultivates citizenship has advanced the field in some important respects, we have a long way to go in addressing racism. One might assume that multicultural approaches effectively destabilize the black-white binary. After all, the civil rights movement of the 1960s gave rise to multicultural education (Banks 2013, 4). In the area of race, it has made critical gains in remediying Eurocentric bias in religious education settings, leadership, and curriculum (Moore et al. 2004). By emphasizing inclusivity and diversity, multicultural education for citizenship increases the participation of a range of ethnoracial groups and calls attention to ignorance of various cultures (Banks 2013, 17). However, multiculturalism that emphasizes pluralism implicitly employs the binary “whites versus people of color.” It preserves white privilege no matter how racially “diverse” a community appears, as “people of color” are expected to participate in community life on terms set by the dominant group.

Unfortunately, multicultural approaches that emphasize diversity and inclusivity are no substitute for antiracism education. Most multicultural education tends to be too broad—treated not only as a response to racism, but to all forms of prejudice. Racism typically receives insufficient treatment and commitment (Moy 1993, 416; Banks 1988). Second, multicultural education that primarily cultivates citizenship emphasizes equality, plurality, and inclusivity rather than addressing power and hierarchy. Addressing “diversity” frames cultural pluralism as evidence of progress toward good citizenship or, in Christian theological language that has been co-opted, being “brothers and sisters in Christ.” However, cultural diversity implies norms set by those with power to which others are held (San Juan 2002, 5) and fetishized. It hides the complicity of whites in racial privilege. Third, most multicultural approaches can unwittingly and subtly reinforce ethnocentrism as it forces participants of diverse cultures to relate to whites as the center rather than to one another (Lee 2010, 285).

LEARNING TO SEE BEYOND BLACK AND WHITE: A COMPARATIVE EXERCISE

Religious educators can help slowly shift the common habit of seeing race in terms of black and white by understanding the paradigm, by catching themselves in the

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9This is a reference from Robert Frost’s “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” (1969, 225).
10Hyun-Sook Kim (2012, 251) helps me to understand the varieties of multicultural education. The author identifies three perspectives: “(1) the critical race approach from a liberation perspective; (2) the citizenship approach from an inclusive perspective; and (3) the intercultural approach from a global perspective.” I address citizenship approaches because I believe they are most common in religious education.
11Hess critiques her graduate studies in religious education as avoiding issues of race and power (1998, 121).
act, reflecting critically, and exploring what and whose experiences are obscured. Of course, religious educators can help others to do the same.

I propose that religious educators facilitate a small group exercise that could be part of a larger antiracism curriculum. Learners compare different versions of the black–white paradigm as well as three models that attempt to view race relations in more complex terms—“middleman” theory, a “tri-racial system” theory, and “racial triangulation” theory. Ideally, one could facilitate this comparative exercise among small groups of learners who belong to the same ethnoracial group and repeat the exercise among groups of learners who must work across color differences. This is intended not simply as an intellectual exercise but as a means of relating to one another in ways that deviate from the black–white paradigm, as we invite stories that are erased through our use of the binary.

With the intention of modeling for readers participation in a learning group, I comment on these theories from an Asian American perspective and include the critiques of others. In a group setting, comparing, contrasting, and evaluating these models from the perspective of each person’s experience of racialization would be the shared work of all learners.

**“Middleman” Theory**

The “middleman” theory orders the racialization of groups in the United States with whites on top, blacks on the bottom, and other racialized minorities in between. In this way of thinking, nonblacks and nonwhites are intermediary or “middleman” minorities (Bonacich 1973; Bow 2007, 5) creating an important buffer between the two groups. A variation on the theme of being in the middle is the “colonial sandwich” (Brah 1996). For example, in Africa, there are “Europeans at the top, Asians in the middle, and Africans at the bottom” (Brah 1996; Bow 2007, 5) creating a tense colonial social hierarchy in which Asians serve as an intermediary between elites and those most oppressed by colonialism. Conceiving of “middleman” minorities acknowledges the experiences of those who are neither black nor white, which is an improvement over the traditional binary.

As an Asian American, I would share with other learners the pain of being locked between black and white, inviting others to discuss where they are located in this three-tiered racial hierarchy. As “middlemen,” Asian Americans are told, “At least you’re not black” (E. H. Kim 1998, 1) or they tell themselves, “At least we’re not black,” which is supposed to be a consolation for being treated better than African Americans but never equal to whites. This racial hierarchy either encourages Asian Americans to side with whites, internalizing and practicing anti-black prejudice, or to risk further discrimination by siding with blacks. Either way, both blacks and whites use intermediary minorities like Asian Americans for political leverage, while denying to awareness the complexity and uniqueness of Asian American experiences of racial oppression.

**Tri-Racial System Theory**

A second model to discuss is Eduardo Bonilla-Silva’s (2004) tri-racial system for explaining racial stratification in the United States. His model presents a hierarchy
of three groups (white, honorary white, and the “collective black”). He argues that Americans abide by what he calls a “pigmentocratic logic,” which relegates people with darker skin to the bottom of the racial order and those with the lightest skin at the top (931). The tri-racial system deviates from the middleman theory in that certain groups (Latinos and Asians) can have representation in all three tiers, depending on how light or dark skinned and assimilated they are. However, Bonilla-Silva’s theory resembles the traditional black–white binary and the middleman theory in that whites are never in the bottom tier with the “collective black,” and blacks are never considered in the top tier with those who are white.

Bonilla-Silva’s theory improves on the simple black–white binary and the middleman theory by helping to locate, distinguish, and explain differences and similarities between various experiences of racialization among multiple groups. It accounts for colorism, which adds dimension to how different groups and different people in the same group experience racism to varying degrees. The model allows for all groups to have a place in mapping a racial order, possibly with greater precision and nuance than the middleman model.

As is true of any theory, the tri-racial system has its flaws. Discrimination based on race includes more than making value judgments about skin pigmentation, since it also involves, for example, evaluations based on natality and degrees of assimilation. 12 Bonilla-Silva himself takes assimilation into account but the model emphasizes a racist continuum of colorism.

In discussing this second model with learners, I would share my perspective as an Asian American and again invite others to share their experience of “pigmentocracy.” I find his sorting certain Asian groups into “Honorary White” and “Collective Black” somewhat arbitrary in terms of skin color. Supposedly Asian Indians are considered “Honorary Whites,” but there are certainly many South Asian Indians who are as dark as many African Americans, who are part of the “Collective Black.” Similarly, there are many Vietnamese Americans, who supposedly belong to the “Collective Black” category, who are as light skinned as I am in the “Honorary White” classification. The spectrum is more reflective of degrees of assimilation and class than skin-color alone.

Racial Triangulation Theory

A third model that might be discussed with learners is Claire Jean Kim’s racial triangulation theory (1999). Rather than using a single measure for tracking racial stratification, Kim envisions two axes. This allows a racially minoritized group to occupy different positions on two measures at the same time. For example, on the superior/inferior axis, Kim claims that Asian Americans are esteemed more highly than African Americans in the eyes of whites, which she calls “relative valorization” (107). However, on the insider/foreigner axis, African Americans enjoy higher degrees of recognition and acceptance as Americans than people who look Asian, which Kim characterizes as “civic ostracism” (107). Multiple studies have built on or rejected Kim’s original study, which could be explored (Xu and Lee 2013; Chou, Lee, and Ho 2015).

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12 Alcoff makes a similar critique of the black–white binary, recognizing that racism operates on more than the axis of color (2003, 19).
Racial triangulation does not overturn the notion that Asian Americans and other groups are in the middle, between black and white, but it provides a more complex picture of racial stratification in the United States, revealing how a group experiences multiple facets of race and racism and varying perceptions by other groups.\textsuperscript{13} Racial triangulation makes the notion of who is on the bottom of the racial hierarchy more fluid and variable, depending on what axis one is using to analyze racial stratification. Considering multiple axes of analysis reduces the risk of being mired in arguments about which group is most oppressed and assigning any one group the permanent role of victims. However, racial triangulation obscures the racial stratification within ethnoracial groups that Bonilla-Silva’s model reveals (Son 2014, 768).

This comparative exercise has multiple benefits. Discussing these three models as I have presented them, one sees a developmental progression as one model attempts to correct some of the limitations of others, providing more explanation for intra-group diversity and for the racialization of Americans who are neither black nor white. Learners can practice identifying the strengths and liabilities of each approach while reflecting on issues of power and privilege. In addition, comparing these models invites learners to find themselves within a given spectrum, sharing whether the model accurately portrays their own experience of racialization.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR RELIGIOUS EDUCATION**

One of the most important of roles of religious educators is to help the faithful critically reflect on and revise habits that lead to more just, abundant living. The task is to help unmask the paradigm that keeps us blind to what is painful to manage, using analytical tools to gain perspective on habits of seeing race in terms of black and white. My hope is that readers will practice identifying three versions of the binary when they arise in conversation, recognizing examples of the binary in theology, and reflecting on alternatives for understanding racial stratification. The more practiced one becomes at identifying the black–white paradigm, the more one realizes its prevalence, and the more one becomes equipped to investigate experiences of racism beyond the binary. Helping the faithful alter habitual ways of seeing race is meant to shift the ways in which diverse people relate to one another.\textsuperscript{14}

A revised paradigm must be built on the fact that there is no such thing as racism in general. We cannot assume that the relationships between blacks and whites can

\textsuperscript{13}Xu and Lee’s study compares white and black perceptions of Asian Americans. They also analyze perceptions of Hispanic Americans and compare it with that of Asian Americans.

\textsuperscript{14}In trying to identify additional strategies, one might assume that intersectionality theory could effectively disrupt the black–white binary. On the face of it, intersectionality offers what may appear to be a new frame in which to consider race—as inextricably related to dynamics of sexism, classism, and other forms of privilege. Although a reframe suggests movement beyond the binary, I would be hesitant to embrace this view for several reasons. First, the black–white dichotomy is, as I have sought to demonstrate, thoroughly entrenched in scholarly and public thinking. One cannot truly supplant something tacitly operating and treated as “given” without directly challenging it and explaining how what is new functions as a more adequate replacement. Second, by situating race as one among several factors, it runs the risk of muting awareness not only of race and racism, but of the enduring ways of making sense of race and racism (that is, the tacit binary), including underlying motivations to continue to think and speak in terms of the dichotomy.
represent or can be used to interpret racism in the abstract. We need to seek and learn from multiple, particular lived experiences of racism. That is, we attend to the complexity of racism in situ. We assume that each ethnoracial subgroup has its own histories, languages, and narratives that capture how members see themselves and their experiences of racism. In the process, we discern how racial oppression continues to harm in ways of which we may not be aware, strengthening our capacity to address it.

Moving beyond the black–white paradigm through religious education involves not only teaching about the binary and considering alternatives (as the exercise models), but also engaging learners in ways that disrupt it, practicing more just and compassionate ways of being with one another. Those of us seeking to understand and address race and racism must, in the words of D. W. Winnicott, “live an experience together” (1945, 152). Indeed, how we are with one another as we explore and address these problems facilitates our creating a new paradigm.

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