Calling a Thing What It Is: a Lutheran Approach to Whiteness

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In his fascinating article on "The Lutheran Difference" published in 1992, Mark Noll challenges Lutherans to make more of a mark in the American public arena. To do this, Noll insists, Lutherans must remain "authentically Lutheran," injecting "the voice of Luther" into the public realm.[1] What is distinctive about Luther's voice, Noll proposes, is that "in it we hear uncommon resonances with the voice of God."[2] One of the uncommon resonances Noll highlights is Luther's bold and subversive stance as a theologian of the cross who calls a thing what it is, over against a theologian of glory who calls a thing what it is not. Noll concludes his article by calling on Lutherans to apply Luther's theological insights to our current American society.

As a Lutheran who wants Christians to think more about how their faith affects their everyday existence in society, I am challenged by Noll's remarks. In what follows I take on a pressing problem that has been occupying much of my thinking in recent years—whiteness--and put it to the test to see if Luther can help me think through this issue theologically. I begin with a thumbnail sketch of whiteness in America, and then move on to a cross-centered attempt at dislodging whiteness.

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[1]Mark A. Noll, "The Lutheran Difference," *First Things* 20 (February 1992) 31, 39.

[2]Noll 39.

Defining to Dislodge: Whiteness in America

Noll argues that Lutherans in America must "find out how to speak Lutheranism with an American accent."[3] The power behind Luther's voice has yet to be felt in the public realm, in dealing with public issues. One such issue that possesses a distinctively American shape is the problem of whiteness. While the concept of *race* originated in Europe, numerous scholars argue that the use of the word *white* to refer to a race of people can be traced to the American colonies.[4] Undoubtedly the construction of whiteness has not been solely an American phenomena; however, it is crucial to describe its particular shape and development in America. What does whiteness mean in the American context?

Before embarking on an attempt at definition, I must point out that the recent academic preoccupation with whiteness has not been viewed positively by all. Very understandably, the move to examine whiteness has been met with ambivalence by black scholars and others who worry about the intent, the methodology, and the effects of whites studying whiteness.[5] For instance, Dr. Maulana Karenga, Professor and Chair of Black Studies at California State University Long Beach, applauds any effort to offer additional study of white domination, something whiteness studies might accomplish. However, he worries that studying whiteness "carries with it the capacity to become both conceptually diversionary and intellectually

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[3]Noll 31.

[4]Richard Dyer *White* (New York: Routledge, 1997) 66. Dyer states that the *Oxford English Dictionary* locates the emergence of the term Awhite@ in reference to a race of people in the American colonies in 1604.

[5]See the interview with Dr. Maulana Karenga entitled, AWhiteness Studies: Deceptive or Welcome Discourse?@ *Black Issues in Higher Education* v. 16, no.6(1999) 26-29.

deceptive."[6] Karenga suggests that it can easily become an opportunity for whites to talk more about ourselves, or a chance for us to treat whiteness as purely an intellectual concept rather than a social problem[7]. For Karenga, focusing on whiteness can be fruitful **only** if done within the context of white domination. I see Karenga's words as a warning to any of us who wants to pursue this issue. We must be constantly vigilant against any examination of whiteness that would perpetuate what Luther called "the curvature of the self in upon itself." The purpose of an articulation of whiteness must be to dislodge it.

One white perspective on whiteness that internalizes concerns like those set forth by Dr. Karenga is the disarming analysis of white racial imagery in Richard Dyer's *White*. Dyer is clear that he does not intend for his work to perpetuate white selves being turned in upon themselves. Instead, Dyer insists that

> [t]he point of seeing the racing of whites is to dislodge them/us from the position of power, with all the inequities, oppression, privileges and sufferings in its train, dislodging them/us by undercutting the authority with which they/we speak and act in the world.[8]

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[6]Karenga 27.

[7]And I would add theological problem; I imagine it is easier for those of us Lutherans who are white to treat whiteness as a concept, rather than as a problem in which we and our tradition are complicit.

[8]Dyer 2.

Foundational to Dyer's understanding of whiteness is the claim that much of western notions of whiteness can be traced back to Christianity's influence on western culture. While he is careful to claim that Christianity is neither essentially white nor can it be equated with whiteness, Dyer nevertheless argues that Christianity as the incarnational religion ultimately inculcates dualistic thinking by describing the spirit "in" the body, or Christ's divinity in--but able to transcend--the confines of the body.[9] In his analysis of the starkly different ways in which racially white persons versus persons of other races have been described historically, Dyer argues that what makes white people unique is the "fact" that they are neither fully contained nor fully determined by their bodies. Dyer points to the disinterest or even reluctance on the part of those who worked to determine biologically-based race differences to investigate the racial character of white people, "for that would be to understand white people as, like non-whites, no more than their bodies."[10] To drive this point home, Dyer highlights the work of Houston Stewart Chamberlain, who worked on the nature of the German people as the Aryan race. Although Chamberlain utilized the findings of such racial indicators as blood and skull measurements, he nevertheless admitted that not all Germans "possessed the outward appearance proper to Aryans, [therefore] it seemed best to retreat to the race-soul which they did share."[11] In other words, Germans belonged to the Aryan race by virtue of their "spiritual qualities" rather than their biological ones.

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[9]Dyer 14-17.

[10]Dyer 23.

[11]Dyer 23.

The insistence that the identity of persons of color other than white is determined solely by their racially conscripted bodies appears in American versions of Christianity as well. In eighteenth century Virginia, the following is a declaration that adult slaves would have to accept before being allowed to be baptized:

> You declare in the presence of God and before this Congregation that you do not ask for the holy baptism out of any design to free yourself from the Duty and Obligation that you owe to your Master while you live, but merely for the good of Your Soul and to partake of the Graces and Blessings promised to the members of the Church of Jesus Christ.[12]

There is an unquestionable dualism present here: blessings and grace are conferred upon the soul while the body remains exactly as it was before baptism. White Christians wanted Virginian slaves to be fully aware that the freedom granted them through baptism could not transcend their embodied reality as slaves.

In addition to biology, genealogy has been another means by which non-white races were determined in America. For example,

> [a]ccording to a Virginia law in 1860, a person with but three "white" grandparents was a Negro; in 1907, having no more than fifteen out of sixteen Awhite@ great-grandparents entitled one to the same classification; in 1910, the limit was asymptotic: "every person in whom there is ascertainable any Negro blood . . . [was to] be deemed a colored person."[13]

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[12]Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978)123.

[13]Cited in June Purcell Guild, *Black Laws of Virginia* (1936: Negro University Press reprint, 1969), from the Virginia Statutes for the given years, as cited in Theodore W. Allen, *The Invention of the White Race: Racial Oppression and Social Control, V.1*. (London: Verso, 1994) 27-8.

Even as late as 1974, the Louisiana Supreme Court upheld the state's racial classification that 1/32 "Negro forebears" meant one was considered Black.[14] In addition to ancestry, physical features such as flesh tones, the shape of nose, eyes, and lips, the color and type of hair, even body shape have been used to determine one's "color."[15] Whiteness, then, has been partially defined by a particular set of physical features. Yet as the German scientist Chamberlain seemed to suggest, whiteness as a racial category is about more than just physical features. Indeed, Dyer asserts that "true whiteness" extends beyond what is clearly visible or distinctly measurable:

> whiteness as race resides in invisible properties and whiteness as power is maintained by being unseen. To be seen as white is to have one's corporeality registered, yet true whiteness resides in the non-corporeal. . . . Whiteness is the sign that makes white people visible as white, while simultaneously signifying the true character of white people, which is invisible.[16]

This brings us back to the claim that whiteness cannot be confined to bodies; rather, whiteness transcends and extends far beyond what is visible or tangible.

But if we are not careful, this acknowledgment of invisibility is a point where an investigation of whiteness can lead us astray. We have to be clear when we talk about invisibility and about what is invisible to whom. To most persons whose color is not white, "the evidence of the reality and power [of whiteness] in the academy, society, [and I would add the church] is visible and abundant."[17] Dyer's point is that *seeing* whiteness is not only about

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[14]Allen 28.

[15]Dyer 42.

[16]Dyer 45.

[17]Karenga 2.

seeing physical features or investigating a family tree. Whiteness also carries with it the unseen assumption of access to privilege by those who are white.

Therefore, physical features are part of the equation, but as Theodore Allen observes, "there is no gene for a 'white' attitude."[18] One contemporary example of a white attitude is the practice of whites referring to everyone who is not white by their racial designation. This habit is apparent on nightly news reports that in the first instance will speak of "a group of teenagers" [meaning Aa group of *white* teenagers] and then will go on to report the arrest of "two black males in their twenties." A simple illustration of this tendency in white Christian circles is to reference the beautiful portrait of the *Black* Christ or the *Black* Madonna, but never to mention the white race of Christ or Mary in the portraits hanging in most white churches. Dyer believes this phenomenon reveals something important:

> As long as race is something only applied to non-white peoples, as long as white people are not racially seen and named, they/we function as a human norm. Other people are raced, we are just people . . . . There is no more powerful position than that of being "just" human. The claim to power is the claim to speak for the commonality of humanity. Raced people can't do that; they can only speak for their race.[19]

This "racing" of all others who are not white is not a new thing, Allen argues. He suggests that it is the very hallmark of racial oppression operative in the American colonies. All members of the oppressed group are reduced to a single, undifferentiated status beneath that of any member of any class within the colonizing population.[20] In other words, whites are "just people," unique

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[18]Allen 22.

[19]Dyer 1-2.

[20]Allen 32.

individuals, while all others are singularly distinct by virtue of their race. A white American's scornful view of American Indians in the early 19th century powerfully illustrates this point: "An Indian . . . is frowned upon by the meanest peasant, and the scum of the earth are considered sacred in comparison to the son of nature. If an Indian is educated in the sciences . . . and his conduct is modest and polite, yet he is an Indian, and the most stupid and illiterate white man will disdain and triumph over [him]."[21]

The above examples are illustrations of the white domination of which Dr. Karanga spoke. Whiteness--this reality of unearned privilege that originated in America's past and remains painfully present to us today--is what must be dislodged. But what exactly does it mean to "dislodge whiteness"? According to Dyer, we can dislodge whiteness only "by undercutting the authority with which they/we speak and act in the world."[22] In the next section, I will investigate the possibility of utilizing Luther's theology of the cross to undercut the authority of whiteness.

Calling Whiteness What It Is: A Cross-Centered Approach

How should white Lutherans respond to the reality of whiteness in America? What role can white Lutherans play in attempting to "dislodge" whiteness from its domain of domination? To be sure, I agree wholeheartedly with Mark Noll's assessment that there are times where we hear in Luther "uncommon resonances with the voice of God."[23] But I also know about a

[21] *Christian Herald,* Vol.10, p.468 (20 December 1823), as quoted in Allen 34.

[22] Dyer 2.

[23] Noll 39.

Luther who seemed to misinterpret the voice of God when it came to supporting the Peasants or maintaining a compassionate position toward the Jews. I think it no accident, then, that Noll's primary reference for Luther's speech bearing uncommon resonances with God is his innovative theology of the cross. Luther articulated his cross-centered approach to theology early on in his career, and I think it encapsulates his theology in its most bold, most critical, and most liberating form. Can it help us dislodge whiteness by undercutting its authority? I think it can.

Luther's original use of the theology of the cross was intended to juxtapose his cross-centered theology with the more speculative theology of the prevailing scholastic views of his day. It is important to note that although Luther's christology is definitely integral to his theology of the cross, his primary focus was on the *theologian* of the cross.[24] In other words, Luther's primary concern was existential, focusing on "what God has done to us" on the cross.[25] What does God do to us on the cross? Luther saw us as being conformed to Christ, that is, united with Christ by faith alone while still remaining sinful. A theology of the cross, then, highlights the constancy of human sinfulness, even among the justified.

One issue that particularly angered Luther about scholastic theology was their reluctance to talk explicitly about human sinfulness. He scorned their attempts to redefine sin simply as a "weakness" or a "defect." Luther insisted that the scholastics "play tricks on us until we no

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[24]Jos. E. Vercruysee, "Luther's Theology of the Cross at the Time of the Heidelberg Disputation," *Gregorium* 57 (1976) 542.

[25]As Lewis Spitz observes, "Man is a central concern for Luther precisely because man is a central concern for God." See Lewis W. Spitz, "Luther's Importance for Anthropological Realism," *Medieval and Renaissance Studies*, ed. John L. Lievsay. Proceedings of the Southeastern Institute of Medieval and Renaissance Studies (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1970) 156.

longer see what's plainly before our eyes."[26] Luther worried that if we do not clearly identify sin or to continue acknowledging its reality, we begin to lose sight of our own sinfulness. In contrast to the scholastics, Luther asserts, a theology of the cross calls the thing what it actually is.[27]

In seeking to define whiteness, we should appreciate the difficulty in settling on a clear and concise definition. As Joe Kincheloe observes, in his article on "The Struggle to Define and Reinvent Whiteness," the concept of whiteness is "slippery and elusive . . . . whiteness is always shifting, reinscribing itself around changing meanings of race in the larger society."[28] While the actual shape of whiteness is always shifting, it is crucial when examining whiteness through a Lutheran, cross-centered lens, to be clear that participation in whiteness is almost always a participation in a system of unearned privilege. And if we are going to call a thing what it is, we must call our participation in whiteness a clear example of <u>sin</u>. Why is it necessary to call participation in whiteness a sin? It is sinful because whiteness is lodged in a *false* understanding of the white self as somehow having earned these privileges. A *false*, inflated self-understanding is precisely what Luther was attacking in medieval scholasticism. The scholastic view of humanity was undergirded by Aristotle's axiom "acting eventually makes it so." Luther soundly rejected this understanding of the self as able to achieve a set of rewards or privileges simply by virtue of its actions. This false self understanding is the basis of what Luther called a

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[26]*Luther's Works* 32:232.

[27]thesis 21 of the Heidelberg Disputation, *LW* 31:44..

[28]Joe Kincheloe, "The Struggle to Define and Reinvent Whiteness: A Pedagogical Analysis," *College Literature* v. 26, no.3 (1999) 162-190.

theology of glory, a theology which calls a thing what it is not. We are not infinitely improvable selves, Luther insisted; we are fundamentally sinful people, people who are curved in upon ourselves. In contemporary American society, white persons' participation in whiteness becomes a new model for the self turned in upon itself, believing falsely that their/our white privilege is of their/our own doing.

The precise reason why Luther needed to resurrect the cross as the focus of Christian faith was because he was convinced that the glorious theology of the scholastics led them to worship a glorious God, full of power and majesty; "they want to reign with Christ," Luther wrote.[29] In his cross-centered theology, Luther countered that God can indeed be glorious, but that Christians must acknowledge God's double way of operating. In the suffering of Christ, we experience God's hiddenness. We glimpse what Luther called God's "strange work" in each one of us. This strange work continually judges our enslaved will, and continually conflates our inflated sense of self. In the theological milieu of his day, Luther needed to articulate the strangeness of God's activity toward human beings in order to jar them into examining the ways in which God and God's Word had become all too familiar, too comfortable, and therefore, misguided.

It is interesting to note the parallels of Luther's attempt to make the Word of God strange to Christians of his time and Richard Dyer's attempt to "make whiteness strange" for whites.[30] For most white people, whiteness tends to be unseen and unconscious. By making whiteness strange, Dyer's hope is to make whiteness and its privileges visible to whites in a disturbing

[29]*LW* 11:103.

[30]Dyer 4.

way. Peggy McIntosh, in her now-famous list of white privileges, also attempts to make whiteness strange in concrete ways. She articulates the privileges afforded those of us who are white strictly by virtue of our race. A few items from her list include:

*I can, if I wish, arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time.
*I can turn on the television or open to the front page of the paper and see people of my race widely represented.
*I can be sure my children will be given curricular materials that testify to the existence of their race.
*I can swear, or dress in second-hand clothes, or not answer letters without having people attribute these choices to the bad morals, the poverty, or the illiteracy of my race.
*I can do well in a challenging situation without being called a credit to my race.
*I am never asked to speak for all the people of my racial group.[31]

This list certainly causes discomfort for most of us who are white. To push the discomfort explicitly into the religious realm, what might a list of white Lutheran privilege look like? Here are a few tentative thoughts (I encourage you to add your own):

*I can, if I wish, arrange to be in the company of people of my race most of the time.
*I can be quite sure of seeing Jesus depicted as a member of my race every Sunday.
*I can see members of my race in virtually all the prominent positions of our national church body.
*I can easily find Children's Bibles and other Christian reading for my children that reflect their race.
*I can be pretty sure that the music sung each Sunday will be written by members of my race.

Strange, uncomfortable, indeed.

According to Luther, what kind of effect should God's strange work have in us? Simply put, it pronounces a harsh word of judgment. Through the cross of Christ God judges our sinfulness, laying bear our failure to live faithfully. These lists of white privilege have much the

[31]Peggy McIntosh, AWhite Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See the Correspondences Through Work in Women=s Studies,@ Center For Research on Women AWorking Papers Series,@ no.189(1988), 6-8.

same effect: they judge those of us who are white, make visible our often invisible participation in privilege. They disrupt us, disturb us, and hopefully, just as God's strange work intends, call us to repentance.

In the midst of the judgment and failure we experience, Luther's cross-centered approach reminds us of the dialectical nature of both God and humanity. The first part of God's "double way of operating" on the cross is the strange work of judgment in us. In the case of white privilege, judgment is pronounced over our reliance on unearned privilege. But a cross-centered approach to whiteness must go beyond the judgment; it must go beyond an admittance that we are now sufficiently disturbed by whiteness. Luther's theology of the cross informs us that God's strange work is penultimate. God's second way of operating involves the revelation of righteousness and the gift of faith given to us through the crucified Christ. This gift of faith allows us to break free from the self curved in upon the self. Speaking specifically to whiteness, the gift of faith offered from the cross interrupts the white predisposition to revel in whiteness.

And what happens to us once this inward curvature is broken? One of Luther's greatest theological accomplishments was his redefinition of Christian freedom, emphasizing the process of *freedom from* keeping laws and following rules to achieve salvation, to a *freedom for* serving others in the world. This freedom for service was a radical one, insisting that Christian should understand service to others "without hope of reward."[32] But lest we assume that we completely embody God's gift of faith in our every action, Luther reminds us that we remain sinners. That

[32]*LW* 31:365.

in our free service of others, God lets the cross take form[33] as we conform to the reality of the gift of righteousness given by Christ.

I find this idea of "letting the cross take form" an intriguing one. What would that mean for those of us who are white to let the cross take form as we work to dislodge whiteness? One illustration that could be useful comes from Peggy McIntosh's description of the great pressure to avoid *seeing* white privilege, because "in facing it I must give up the myth of meritocracy. If these things are true, this is not such a free country; one's life is not what one makes it; many doors open for certain people through no virtues of their own."[34] Free service of others would mean that in serving other white persons, we must speak the truth that the privileges granted us are not fundamentally based on hard work and merit, as most of us want to believe. Indeed, speaking this claim clearly in predominantly white contexts will likely lead to a cross taking form. When freely serving persons whose color is other than white, our service needs to take the form of actively working for doors to be opened more widely, and for me as a white person to be self-critically aware of my status as white and to resist standing on that privilege to get my own way over someone who cannot stand on that same privilege.

But what about the realms beyond interpersonal relations? What about institutions like the church or even more broadly, the public sphere? Looking to Luther, we see someone who sinned much more boldly in the ecclesial realm than he did in the temporal or civic realm. As Robert Bertram asserts, Luther committed ecclesiastical disobedience, attacking the idolatrous

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[33]Gustav Wingren, *Luther on Vocation*, trans. Carl C. Rasmussen (Philadelphia: Muhlenberg Press, 1957) 53.

[34]McIntosh 9.

practices of the church and its hierarchy, and demanding radical reforms in the face of threats on his office as priest and even on his life.[35] I do not think it would be sinning too boldly to suggest that ecclesiastical disobedience with respect to the white hue of our church life is in order. White Lutherans need to dislodge whiteness from our understandings of God, of Jesus, of the apostle Paul, of Luther himself. A theology of the cross calls on us to call a thing what it is, and I expect most ELCA bodies have significant work to do in this area.

What about with respect to wider society? Remember, Mark Noll insists that Lutherans have something distinctive to offer America; that the power of Luther's voice has yet to be tapped.[36] If we do not have a clear understanding of Luther's theology of the cross, Noll's assertion will sound quite presumptuous. But I would argue that the critical function of Luther's cross-centered approach has much to offer the wider discussion of whiteness and privilege. It is particularly crucial that Christian voices speaking to dislodge whiteness are heard, for it was all-too often through the voices of Christians that whiteness has been constructed. White Christians, using Luther's theology of the cross as their guide, must speak to dislodge and serve to reveal that living life in faithful response to God cannot be lived within the visible invisibility of whiteness.

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[35]See his intriguing article, "*Confessio:* Self-Defense Becomes Subversive," *Dialog* 26:3 (1987) 205.

[36]Noll 31.

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