

Resurrection Hope

A Future Where Black Lives Matter

Kelly Brown Douglas

ORBIS  BOOKS
Maryknoll, New York 10545

INTRODUCTION

A Journey of Faith

Anselm's dictum that theology is "faith seeking understanding" perfectly describes my theological journey. Even before I knew the word "theology," I struggled to understand the meaning of my faith in relationship to my Blackness. That struggle has been reflected in my previous writings, from *The Black Christ* (1994) to *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God* (2015). At that point, my faith journey had taken me from understanding the meaning of Jesus's birth in a manger to his death on a cross. On that journey I was affirmed in my faith that Jesus was Black and, therefore, intimately identified with the Black fight for life and wholeness in this country—a fight defined by the perverse realities of white supremacy. In discovering the Blackness of Christ, I was able to affirm my love for Jesus without contradiction, because in fact Jesus was Black like me.

Nevertheless, my struggle to affirm my faith in light of my Blackness continues for me today, though perhaps in a more focused and intense way, for while I had initially wondered about the propriety of faith in what I originally believed to be a "white Jesus," I now found myself struggling with the efficacy of faith itself. James Baldwin once said that there comes a time in the life of every Black person in America when they must face the "shock" of discovering "that the flag to which you have pledged

allegiance . . . has not pledged allegiance to you.”¹ And now, as the mother of a six-foot-tall, loc-wearing, twenty-seven-year-old Black man, fearing for his life in this nation as much as I did when he was born, and realizing the gravity of this country’s “sin” that is a mortal threat to all Black life, I find myself facing the shock that perhaps the “God of Jesus Christ” in whom Black people have pledged our faith has not really “pledged allegiance to us.”

That “shock” was made even more real by the questions my son asked me. As Black death was becoming more and more routine in the nation—whether at the hands of police or from the COVID-19 virus—my son challenged my faith in a Black Christ.

“How do we really know that God cares when Black people are still getting killed? How long do we have to wait for the justice of God?” he asked. “I get it, that Christ is Black, but that doesn’t seem to be helping us right now.”

These are the questions that I seek to answer. This book reflects my journey of faith-seeking-understanding amidst the cries of “Black Lives Matter” and the questions my son was asking me. Through this book I attempt to answer these questions by first discerning why this nation is one that “lets Black people die” and then figuring out what God has to say about it. This book is essentially a journey of faith.

Paul Tillich reminds us that “the element of uncertainty in faith cannot be removed,” given that the object of our faith is transcendent, that is, beyond our human grasp.² Essentially,

1. “Debate: Baldwin vs. Buckley,” June 14, 1965, Film and Media Archive, Washington University in St. Louis, Library of Congress, American Archive of Public Broadcasting (GBH and the Library of Congress), Boston, MA, and Washington, DC, <http://americanarchive.org/catalog/cpb-aacip-151-sn00z71m54>.

2. Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper and Row, 1957; New York: Penguin Classics, 2001), 18.

Tillich is reminding us that doubt is intrinsic to faith. This book has been for me a journey through the doubts intrinsic to *my* faith, as I began to wonder whether God's promise in a just future is to be believed. Not only was it hard to live in the promise yet-to-be-fulfilled, but with each—almost daily—reminder that Black life does not matter in this nation, I no longer trusted the promise itself. And so, in this book I essentially walk through the valley of death when it comes to Black life, not knowing if on the other side I will affirm my faith or give in to despair. This is a journey from the crucifying realities of Black death to an attempt to find the resurrection hope of Black life.

The book is divided into two parts. Part 1 reflects the “valley of the shadow of death” that is signaled by a “raced” moral imaginary. In this section I discover the ways in which whiteness has so corrupted the moral imaginary that it is impossible to envision a society—and perhaps even a world—where Black lives can ever truly matter. In chapter 1 I argue that if we are to understand the threat to Black life in this country we must appreciate the profound and pervasive impact of an anti-Black narrative that is inseparable from the nation's white supremacist foundation. One of the most disconcerting aspects in this part of my journey was discovering the ways in which this anti-Blackness is embedded in the very theological fabric of Christianity. What, I wonder, is to become of the moral imaginary if even Christianity itself is beholden to a theological framework that fosters death for Black bodies? In chapter 2, I turn to one of the most visible symbols of the nation's compromised moral imaginary, as well as indicators of the depth of the problem when it comes to race: the Confederate monuments on the public square. In this chapter I argue that these monuments reflect a “white way of knowing” to which the nation's moral imaginary is tethered. But what about faith leaders, the stewards of God's promise for a more just future? Chapter 3 attempts to understand the “silence” of “good white Christians” when it comes to being in utter solidarity with Black people in the quest for justice. This chapter identifies the

way in which whiteness has so impacted the gaze of even “good” white Christians that it does not open them to the complex realities of Black people who “live with their backs against the wall” of white supremacy, let alone to the significance of God’s revelation when it comes to the struggle for Black lives to matter. Each chapter ends by looking at the implications for the moral imaginary and the possibility of freeing it from “white knowing,” and thus the possibility for a future where Black life will matter.

Part 2 is primarily theological testimony. It consists of two chapters that explore my walk from the valley of crucifying death into the hope of resurrection. Through that walk I have come to a new theological appreciation of Jesus’s movement from cross to resurrection. I begin by exploring in chapter 4 what it would mean to free the moral imaginary from a white knowing. What are the implications for a faith that places a crucified and resurrected savior at its center? I explore this in relation to reparations, with special attention to the call to “defund the police.” The focus is on the implications for the faith community, especially the white faith community. Chapter 5 represents the culmination of the journey. In this chapter I heed the call of the resurrected Jesus to meet him in Galilee. It is in the “Galilee” of a Black Lives Matter protest that I discover the truth of “resurrection hope” that is God’s promise.

And so, as much as this book is about a nation’s story, it is also about my own story. It is a personal journey in which my son’s questions pressed me to struggle with the very meaning of my faith, and not to run from the doubts. Through this book, I invite you to take that journey with me.

PART ONE

A CORRUPTED MORAL IMAGINARY

“I Am Trayvon.” “Say Her Name.” “Hands Up Don’t Shoot.” “I Can’t Breathe.” “Black Lives Matter.” These mantras filled my mind as I answered the call to run 2.23 miles to honor and demand justice for Ahmaud Arbery, who was gunned down by two white men as he was jogging in a Georgia suburb.¹

By the time I completed the run, I was breathless—but not because my legs were tired or my lungs were winded. I was breathless because my heart was heavy and my spirit was troubled. Ahmaud had become the latest in a long list of young Black lives lost to the hatred of white racist violence. Then there was Breonna Taylor, killed in her own home in Louisville.² Next came the videos of George Floyd uttering those fateful words, “I can’t breathe,” before calling out for his “Mama,” while pinned under the deadly knee of a white police officer.³ As I was taking

1. On May 8, 2020, which would have been Ahmaud Arbery’s 26th birthday, supporters from around the world ran 2.23 miles, representing the date of Ahmaud’s murder on February 23.

2. Breonna Taylor, 26 years old, was killed on March 13, 2020, in Louisville, Kentucky, when police executed a no-knock warrant at her home shortly after midnight.

3. George Floyd, 46, was killed on May 25, 2020, in Minneapolis, Minnesota, during an arrest for allegedly passing a counterfeit bill.

in all of this horror, I was also haunted by my son's question: "Do you really believe that Black life will ever truly matter in this country?"

As I pondered the expendable nature of Black life in American society, I became increasingly aware that the threat to Black life comes not just from the white supremacist foundation upon which this country was built. What I found myself contemplating was the corrupted soul of the nation.

The soul signifies the human connection to a divine creator; it connects human beings to their higher, aspirational selves. It is that which animates and propels humans to do better and to be better. The soul is that imperceptible aspect of the human creature which indicates its vital moral core. It pushes humans toward the fullest potential of what it means to be "just," thus propelling them in reflecting the just and loving God in whose image they were created. The soul is the essence of that divinely created humanity within each human being.

The human soul is not defined by the unpredictable and vacillating protestations of society, nor is it accountable to the politics and prejudices of human history. Rather, it is responsive to a vision of justice that stands above the biased considerations of a nation at any given time. The soul is inextricably bound to the transcendent "moral arc of the universe, that bends toward justice"—a justice that is nothing other than the perfect justice of God.

It was perhaps that conception of the human soul that Abraham Lincoln invoked in his first inaugural address, stating that he hoped that the nation would be "touched" by "the better angels of our nature." In effect, he was suggesting that a nation has something analogous to the human soul—a vital moral core that propels a nation, as it does a human person, toward its highest aspirational self. In the case of a nation, that would be a future in which all human beings are treated with equal dignity and, therefore, respected as the divinely created beings that we all are.

This brings us to the question: What has corrupted the very soul of America, resulting not only in routine violence against Black lives, but also in preventing people from simply reaching for their best selves and treating others, no matter how “raced,” with decency and compassion? The answer: whiteness itself.

As I have argued in previous texts, whiteness is not a biological or an ethnic given. Rather, it is a socially constructed demarcation of race that serves as a badge of privilege and power. It fuels white supremacy, which in turn exists to protect it. White supremacy is the network of systemic, structural, and ideological realities that protect the “presumed” superiority of whiteness by granting certain privileges to those raced white and not to others. These are the privileges of social, political, economic, and even personal entitlements, such as claiming space and “standing one’s ground.” It is in this way that whiteness signals social relationships of power. It defines the relationship between those who represent the “privileged dominant caste” (signaled by whiteness) and those who represent the “subjugated caste” (signaled by Blackness).⁴

Whiteness is an inherently oppositional construct. Its existence, indeed its power, is characteristically defined in antagonistic opposition to groups not raced white, thereby threatening the “unalienable rights” of the non-white other (*their* rights to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness”). Anything that belittles, degrades, or betrays the sacred humanity of another is violent and, insofar as it separates one from the ways of a just and loving God, sinful. Whiteness, therefore, is both an intrinsically violent and sinful construct.

In the final analysis, whiteness is soul-crushing. In an obvious way it crushes the souls of those whom whiteness *others*. But

4. Isabel Wilkerson speaks of these power relationships as indicative of a caste system baked into America’s social/political fabric, much like the caste system of India. See *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents* (New York: Random House, 2020).

it also hinders people consumed by and enamored with the privileges of being raced white from reaching for their better selves. Those who remain willfully or obliviously trapped in the privileges of whiteness are prevented from appreciating their common connection with the rest of humanity. In effect, uninterrupted whiteness overwhelms white people's very souls, foiling their ability to live into the urgings of their "better angels."

In regard to America's soul, while it is inextricably related to and shaped by the historically dominant cultural group (that is, the group that has defined the nation's very sense of self), it is about more than the way a particular people adjudicates whiteness. Indeed, the soul of the nation is not even defined by whether or not individuals consider themselves racist or anti-racist. Rather it is shaped, in this instance, by the way in which whiteness has so penetrated and defined the nation's foundation that it ultimately impacts its vision of justice and thereby affects the nation's moral impulses across succeeding generations. Simply put, the state of the nation's soul is reflected in the nation's moral imaginary (to which we shall return).

For now, what is important to note is that while the reality of whiteness—which manifests as white supremacy—has, from America's origins, shaped the nation's laws, policies, social-cultural relationships, and fundamental ethos, this nation, at the same time, was able to cultivate a higher vision for an equitable and just society. This is the aforementioned vision which contends that all persons are created equal with certain "unalienable rights." The sheer fact that this vision was ever even articulated (albeit as a part of the Declaration of Independence and not the Constitution itself) reflects a force beyond the biases of a people trapped in their own whiteness. As fleeting a vision as it may have been (even within the Declaration, as we will later see), it at least indicates the urgings of the nation's soul, pushing its founders and framers beyond their white presumptions and ideologies toward an unbiased sense of justice. It was this "soul"-driven vision that Martin Luther King Jr. referred to

as the “promissory note” on which, when it came to its Black citizens, America had “defaulted.” This note, he said, “was a promise that all men, yes, black men as well as white men, would be guaranteed the ‘unalienable Rights’ of ‘Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.’”⁵

Unfortunately, this vision of an equitable and just nation was corrupted from its very inception by the pervasive reality of whiteness intrinsic to America’s foundation, and thus, baked into its very Constitution. The white supremacist bent of this nation is most evident in the U.S. Constitution’s Fugitive Slave Clause, Article 4, Section 2, which reads:

No Person held to Service or Labour in one State, under the Laws thereof, escaping into another, shall, in Consequence of any Law or Regulation therein, be discharged from such Service or Labour, but shall be delivered up of Claim of the Party to whom such Service or Labour may be due.⁶

It would not be until the passage of the Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution that this clause would be nominally annulled. With the Fourteenth and other Reconstruction-era Amendments the nation at last began to gesture toward the reality of an American identity beyond the “Caucasian race,” a nation not simply meant “for white men.”⁷

It cannot be stressed enough that whiteness is integral to America’s sense of self. A belief in the superiority of whiteness was essentially a given in the minds of the founders and framers, thus assuring the inevitability of white supremacist

5. *American Rhetoric: Top 100 Speeches*, “Martin Luther King, Jr., ‘I Have a Dream,’” <https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkihavedream.htm>.

6. <https://constitutioncenter.org/interactive-constitution/article/article-iv>.

7. Eric Foner, *The Second Founding: How the Civil War and Reconstruction Remade the Constitution* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company Inc., 2019), chapter 2, esp. pp. 86ff.

structures and systems. It is no overstatement to say that white supremacy is the normative identifying marker of American identity. The insidious consequence of this is that the belief in white superiority is embedded within the collective consciousness of America and has been from its earliest beginnings. Because of this, whiteness has not only produced what theologian Willie Jennings calls “a social imaginary,” but it has also profoundly affected the nation’s “moral imaginary.”

The “imaginary” is different from the imagination. It is suggestive of more than an idea or conception. The imaginary reflects the zeitgeist, that is, the characteristic propensity and inclination of a nation. The moral imaginary reflects the nation’s moral impulse. It is the reflexive moral response, that is, the nation’s organic reaction to social issues and concerns. Essentially, the moral imaginary is that palpable yet imperceptible force that defines the way in which a nation intuitively perceives and responds to matters of injustice as well as the way it envisions and enacts justice. As suggested earlier, the moral imaginary is conspicuously shaped by the group that has been historically, culturally, and socially dominant in a nation. In the words of Erich Fromm, “In any society the spirit [i.e., imaginary] of the whole culture is determined by the spirit of those groups that are most powerful in that society.”⁸ As for America, borrowing from the words of Reinhold Niebuhr, “the natural impulse by which [American] society achieves its [moral] cohesion,” is whiteness.⁹

As whiteness has compromised the soul of America, it has inexorably impacted its moral imaginary. Whiteness has prevented the nation from living from its soul into the vision of a land of equal justice for all; at times, it has even inhibited its ability to gesture toward such a vision. A non-raced vision of justice

8. Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom* (New York/Toronto: Rinehart and Company, Inc., 1941), 112–13.

9. Niebuhr, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1932), xii.

exceeds the possibilities of a white moral imaginary. Whiteness has so stifled the nation's moral imaginary that a true non-racialized democratic society of equality pushes it beyond its limits. America's old "wineskins" of whiteness cannot contain a society where there is justice and freedom for all. Whiteness has so impacted the nation's soul that white privileging and justice have become reflexively synonymous within the nation's moral imaginary.

In 2016 nearly half of American voters (victorious because of the Electoral College) embraced a vision of American "greatness" rooted in whiteness. That an even larger number of Americans doubled down on this choice four years later signaled the troubling state of America's soul—and thus its profoundly "raced" moral imaginary. In Part 1 of this book we will look at the varied impacts and implications of a "raced" moral imaginary.