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

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 (that is, a paradigm): the black-white binary. Although this frame is constructive as well as compelling, it displays serious liabilities. This paper 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. Whereas Du Bois’ words fail completely to speak to and of my experience, Frank Wu’s hit home: “[Outside of family and Asian American circles], I alternate between being conspicuous and vanishing, being stared at or looked through. Although the conditions may seem contradictory, they have in common the loss of control. In most instances, I am who others perceive me to be rather than how I perceive myself to be. Considered by the strong sense of individualism inherent to American society, the inability to define one’s self is the greatest loss of liberty possible” (Wu 2002, 8). Like Wu, sometimes I am
“conspicuous”—when I am seen as a foreigner or as a token representative of “my people.” At other times, I “vanish” as someone seen as an honorary white or as nonblack and therefore considered temporarily as one of “us.” I have lost not only the authority to define myself, as Wu says, on a more basic level I am also denied an accurate sense of personhood, as my experiences of racial oppression that inform who I am do not matter. I speak from my perspective as an Asian American religious educator, who hails from a Japanese American Christian community with its own history of experiencing racism in the United States.

In this essay, 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. One cannot underestimate the degree to which the legal, political, and social history of slavery, Reconstruction, and civil rights have indelibly influenced the formation of the United States and become embedded in its social imaginary. Given these customary habits of thought, it seems 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.

My primary contribution is to examine the complexity and significance of the problem for religious educators. Providing some tools for analysis, I outline three versions of the black-white binary, three examples from black studies and theology, as
well as three models that attempt to move beyond the paradigm. A comprehensive
approach that includes theological reflection and a more developed vision of anti-racism
education must be saved for a larger project.

Pain Management

For Americans of any race, race and racism are uncomfortable topics of
collection to avoid. Talking about racial oppression involves recognizing the injury
and pain of victims as well as the guilt and shame of perpetrators both past and present.
Any discussion is personal because in our midst are victims as well as perpetrators,
including ourselves, loved ones, and community members. Many colleagues often feel
tired of talking about race because it never seems to get anywhere, much less to help.

Unfortunately, religious educators are not immune to practicing resistance to
exploring this delicate subject. 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, surprisingly 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. In our field, scholarly responses to racial
oppression are often expressed implicitly, left to people of color to discuss in relation to
their community, or incorporated within broader approaches to transformation, for
example, multicultural education. Though racism is seemingly addressed everywhere, it
is rarely the focal topic explored in depth.

Thinking of race in dichotomous terms has 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 be understood partly as a tool to orient knowers, as I discuss below, and partly as a means of limiting or titrating the painful and shameful implications of racism. 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. Each additional history of racism experienced by Latino(a), Native, and Asian Americans threatens to overwhelm. It is better not to know, not to see beyond black-white.

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 black versus nonblack. These interpretative moves are not exclusive. Rather, they coexist simultaneously.

W.E.B. Du Bois’ “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 white 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 17th century American property law to protect whites. Progressing from derogatory terms such as “negroes” and “colored” people, the term “people of color” has broadened to include all nonwhites, including people of mixed race (Vidal-Ortiz 2008,
“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. This creates an “us” among people of color and their allies who are resisting white privilege, being watchful of “them” (as in whites who have yet to take responsibility for their racism).

Unfortunately, we have not moved to a colorblind society despite declarations to the contrary, but rather whites (and nonwhites who “think white”) sort the racial economy along a third binary. 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. Lee and Bean find that newer nonblack immigrants (Latinos and Asians) are assimilating at higher rates, while blacks continue to be rejected and alienated (2010, 19-20). 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 “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.

**The Black-White Paradigm at Work in Theology**

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). Latino legal theorist, Juan Perera 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 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 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).

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), 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.

Also perpetuating the black-white binary, Willie Jennings (2010) explores the incapacity of white Christians to sense how their everyday performances of the faith are informed by theological imagination steeped in colonialism. The racial violence that African American Christians experience (and by implication the oppression that other racialized minorities experience) can be traced to a long history of white Christians normalizing the objectification and domination of black bodies. When Jennings argues that Christian social imagination in the Western world is “diseased” (6), he refers to the
history of white Christian colonizers, particularly their investment in the African slave trade.

Investigating the “origins of race” seems overly ambitious, considering Jennings’ research sample includes only white and black Christians. Because black experiences of white supremacy are not presented as a case study, it appears that the author considers black experiences of colonialism as fundamental to understanding both race and the formation of Christianity itself. The text primarily reads (in my experience) as a black-white conversation to be overheard by others. Readers who are neither black nor white are expected to use black experiences of racism to understand what is wrong with Christian tradition and race relations. Like others who are neither black nor white, my experience remains invisible.

Black Pastoral theologian Homer Ashby (2003) provides critical insight on these African American authors in terms of 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 (Ashby 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, 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. 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

Aside from its liabilities, perceiving race and race relations mostly in terms of white supremacy and black suffering in the U.S. has had multiple advantages. 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 anti-racism, 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 (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, 235-6). 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 remedying 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 anti-racism 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).

Helping Learners to See Beyond Black and White: A Comparative Exercise

To help members of faith communities and the academy to see beyond black and white, I propose that religious educators facilitate a small group exercise that could be part of a larger anti-racism 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.

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 U.S. 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” (Kim 1998) 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. Elaine Kim argues that whites are invested in the “notion of Asian Americans as docile honorary white people whose very existence proves that other people of color are lazy and stupid and that
racism does not exist in U.S. society” (Kim 1998, 1). At the same time, blacks invite Asian Americans and other people of color to join in combating racism, while assuming the rightness of maintaining the leadership and agenda of blacks. Acknowledging the political power that African Americans have accrued since the civil rights era, Kim claims that African Americans are reluctant to share power with other racially minoritized groups and unwilling to admit that blacks have perpetrated racial violence against them (Gold 2004, 958; Kim 1994, 87).

**Tri-Racial System Theory**

A second model to discuss is Eduardo Bonilla-Silva’s (2004) tri-racial system for explaining racial stratification in the U.S. 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 is both like and unlike the middleman theory. It 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. 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).

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 U.S., revealing how a group experiences multiple facets of race and racism and varying perceptions by other groups. Conceivably, one might test additional axes, beyond racial valorization and civic ostracism, allowing for tension and contradiction between ratings for a single group. As the case of Asian Americans shows, a group can be high on one axis but low on another. The theory also demonstrates how Asian Americans may be closer to being treated like whites in some respects and closer to being treated like blacks in others.

From my perspective as an Asian American, racial triangulation theory holds greater potential than previous models. 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). I would be interested in knowing whether the method can also show how Asian Americans are treated differently than some blacks and some whites.
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

Take heart in signs of progress in the discourse on race. The growing use of the term “people of color” shows increased sensitivity toward the need to account for cultural differences. Black theology enjoys greater legitimacy than ever. Multicultural education has led to greater institutional commitment to address Eurocentric bias in religious education and beyond. Theories to explain racial stratification have become more nuanced and complex.

While these are hopeful signs of change, gains are slow and not without limitations because black-white habits of thinking are thoroughgoing and difficult to challenge. Not only are people accustomed to binary thinking in general, in the U.S. people are invested in black-white thinking (or its variations) as a strategy for containing the problems of race, as a dominant narrative about American history, as a trope for understanding racial stratification, and in the case of Christian communities, a common frame for discussing race and theology.
A revised paradigm must be built on the fact that there is no such thing as racism in general. Therefore, we cannot assume that the relationships between blacks and whites can 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.

References


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1 One exception is Hawaii, where the black-white binary is not the default frame of reference for understanding race and racism, though its influence is felt indirectly (Sharma 2011).

2 For a discussion of the need for whites to protect their “fragility” when it comes to race, see DiAngelo 2011.

Journalists have attempted to trace this history in Saffire 1988 and Malesky 2014.

In 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 major proponent of the appropriateness of black oppression as the appropriate frame of reference for all white racism, even globally is Feagin 2000.

This is a reference from Robert Frost’s “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” (1969, 225).

Hyun-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.

Hess critiques her graduate studies in religious education as avoiding issues of race and power (1998, 121).

Alcoff makes a similar critique of the black-white binary, recognizing that racism operates on more than the axis of color (2003, 19).

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.