Free Contribution

White Innocence / White Supremacy

Exploring the Theo-political Intersections of Race and Salvation

Judith Gruber

Professor of Systematic Theology, Research Unit Systematic Theology and
Study of Religions, Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, KU Leuven,
Leuven, Belgium

Judith.gruber@kuleuven.be

Abstract

This article starts from the observation that current debates about race and racism are often couched in soteriological terms such as guilt and forgiveness, or confession and exoneration, and it argues that this overlap calls for theological analysis. Using the debate about Achille Mbembe's disinvitation from the German art festival 'Ruhrtriennale' 2020 as a case that is typical of a specifically Western European discourse on race, it first sketches a brief genealogy of the modern/colonial history of religio-racialisation and its intersections with Christian tradition, in which racial categories were forged in soteriological discourses, and in which, in turn, soteriological categories were shaped by racist discourses. It proposes that in this process, Christianity, Whiteness and salvation were conflated in a way that has sponsored White supremacy, disguised as innocence. Engaging with performative race theory, the article concludes by making a constructive proposal for a performative theology of race that can account for the profound intersections between racism and soteriology, but also opens trajectories for transforming hegemonic discourses of race and their theological underpinnings.

Keywords

Soteriology – Whiteness – performative race studies – Race – Racism – theology

1 Introduction

In a column for the magazine FOCUS, Jan Fleischhauer argues that we can observe profound changes in recent debates about racism: discussing the growing impact of anti-racism movements in Germany, he posits that racism is no longer treated as a psychological problem or political ideology, but as “a theological concept that cannot really be understood without the help of religious categories.”¹ More particularly, racism is framed theologically as hereditary sin: “White people are born with the stigma of racism [...]. We are descendants of the slave traders and therefore children of the Fall.” Nonetheless, Fleischhauer posits, even though this theology of racism highlights the irresolvable entanglement in the “original sin” of colonialism, it still contains the idea of transformation:

At the beginning of the improvement is the admission of guilt. It is a bit like the penitential service: the path to salvation leads through confession and the request for forgiveness of sins. Those who stubbornly insist that they have done no wrong risk [...] excommunication.²

Fleischhauer’s style leaves no doubt that he uses this theological framing of racism to discredit anti-racist efforts as ‘dogmatic’ narrow-mindedness. As “theology” he insinuates, the current anti-racist movement undercuts the progress that has been achieved in overcoming the biologicistic concept of race of National Socialism: Its metaphor of original sin re-establishes an understanding of race as a hereditary difference between “whites” and “people of colour” and thus promotes an understanding of racism which can no longer be overcome by “enlightenment and education”. Instead, the antiracist efforts of this theology of racism will exhaust themselves in seeking to implement diversity policies that ‘dogmatically’ follow its “theory of colour” as a seemingly inescapable legacy of the colonial past.

1 Fleischhauer, *Schuldig durch Geburt* (all quotations in this paragraph from this article, translations mine).

2 Fleischhauer, *Schuldig durch Geburt*.

Of course, Fleischhauer's polemic lacks the complexity of constructive theologies that reject a biologicistic understanding of original sin and instead activate the doctrine for a critique of systemic oppression. Nevertheless, his caricature contains an insightful observation: current discourses on racism are indeed often couched in soteriological categories of guilt and atonement. In this article, I argue that this connection between race and soteriology is neither accidental nor superficial, but based on a reciprocal, constitutional relationship. Writing as a theologian, I further posit that this entanglement poses a major challenge for the Christian understanding of salvation that calls for a critical evaluation and constructive reorientation of soteriological discourses. The article pursues this investigation by way of an interdisciplinary approach that brings together theology and critical race theory in order to uncover the soteriological patterns in racial discourses and, consequently, to look for resources for their reconfiguration in race-critical terms. All in all, it aims to develop a *performative theology of race* that can account for the profound intersections between racism and soteriology, but also opens trajectories for transforming hegemonic discourses of race and their theological underpinnings. It proceeds in four steps. Part 1 starts out by locating this investigation within a specifically European history of race, arguing that the central characteristic of this discourse is a dominant belief in *White Christian innocence*. The article then turns to a case study that allows to further unfold this argument: the debate about Achille Mbembe's invitation to the art festival "Ruhrtriennale" (Germany 2020). Reading this controversy as a typical performance of White Christian innocence opens a gateway for sketching a brief genealogy of European racial discourse that unmasks Christian imaginaries of salvation as a central instrument in the production of White supremacy (part 2). This genealogical approach, in turn, offers a foundation to embrace an understanding of race in terms of performativity: Part 3 draws on critical race theorists to argue that self-declarations of anti-racism (such as White innocence) are *non-performative* – they do not transform, but cement racialized hegemony, and again, soteriological patterns serve as a technology of power for buttressing the ongoing performance of White supremacy. Yet, performative race theory does not limit itself to a critical analysis of hegemonic racial discourses, but also includes a normative approach that explores possibilities for their transformation. Having acknowledged the profound entanglements between racial and soteriological discourses in the construction of White supremacy, part 4 turns to race-critical writing to discover resources for a theo-political performance of race that may transform racism and its theological underpinnings. By claiming race-critical proposals for un/doing White supremacy as resources for constructing a soteriology that may have transformative effects, the article

thus also makes an implicit argument about theological epistemology and the locus of salvation: it builds on the assumption that theology is not an episteme sui generis, but inextricably entangled into political discourses.

2 White Innocence – a Specifically European History of Race

By addressing race as a point of construction for theological discourses, we enter relatively new scholarly territory, especially in Western Europe. Researchers consider this conceptual vacuum as a central element of a specifically European history of race. A central feature of European racial discourse is the assumption that racial discourses are not an essential part of European history and present; race and therefore racism is not perceived as a European problem.³ A Eurocentric model of historiography continues to dominate contemporary discourses; it locates the history of Europe exclusively on the continent and considers colonial history a negligible marginality. This principle of “displacement”⁴ in European historiography goes hand in hand with policies that make non-white communities in Europe invisible. Together, these ‘blind spots’ subsidise “the myth of racial purity”⁵ (i.e., a notion of Europe as homogeneously white) and simultaneously allow to maintain a European self-understanding as anti-racist. Accordingly, Dienke Hondius diagnoses two central features in Western European racial discourses. On the one hand, there is a *historically continuous presence of racism* in European societies.⁶ On the other hand, an “*antiracist norm*”⁷ has begun to take hold which considers the idea of racial difference ‘after’ National Socialist anti-Semitism a “thing of the past”.⁸ While Hondius perceives these trends as contradictory, anthropologist Gloria Wekker posits that there is an intimate connection between the racist discourses that have inscribed themselves deeply into European cultural archives in the centuries of imperial history, and a simultaneous denial of racism, which sponsors an anti-racist self-representation and thus generates discourses of “exceptionalism”.⁹ Wekker argues that this “paradox”¹⁰ captures an essential part of the dominant collective white self-image in Western European states with a colonial past, and she postulates that there is an intimate connection

3 Cf. El-Tayeb, *European Others*, p. xv.

4 Wekker, *White Innocence*, p. 4.

5 Wekker, *White Innocence*, p. 4.

6 Hondius, *Blackness in Western Europe*, p. 1 et seq.

7 Hondius, *Blackness in Western Europe*, p. 8.

8 Hondius, *Blackness in Western Europe*, p. 7.

9 Wekker, *White Innocence*, p. 5.

10 Wekker, *White Innocence*, p. 1.

between the simultaneous persistence of racism and the denial of its existence in Western Europe, for which she coins the term “White innocence”.

This concept describes a reservoir of knowledge practices and affects with which deeply anchored racial discourses can be simultaneously activated and concealed. It is a habitus in relation to race which embodies both, racially framed epistemic privilege and epistemic violence: White innocence is a constitutive component

of a white supremacist state in which the human race is racially divided into full persons and subpersons. Even though – or more accurately, precisely because – they tend not to understand the racist world in which they live, white people are able to fully benefit from its racial hierarchies, ontologies and economies.¹¹

These dominant white practices of not/known perpetuate racist hierarchies by “(aggressively) rejecting the possibility to know”¹² about racism. White innocence is thus “not as innocent as it appears”.¹³ Rather, it is a central instrument for maintaining white supremacy by concealing the violent effectiveness of historically grown racial discourses, thus making them immune against critique, and at the same time by promoting discourses of white moral superiority. Shannen Dee Williams puts it succinctly: “The most dangerous weapon of White Supremacy has always been to erase the history of its violence.”¹⁴ This erasure affords innocence in terms of race, which, in turn, assures the dominant white subject of its indisputable moral standing.

Wekker’s critique of White Innocence highlights its close links to the Christian tradition. Not only does the dominant self-understanding of Western European nations imagine itself to be homogeneously white, but it also frames itself as exclusively Christian,¹⁵ and strong secularisation processes notwithstanding, Christian narratives still provide powerful symbolic resources for the production of national innocence.¹⁶ Wekker herself does not further investigate these theological traces, but a case study can help us to substantiate this argument and connect it to an emergent body of research that scrutinizes the intimate relations between racial and theological discourses: the debate about Achille Mbembe’s invitation to the art festival “Ruhrtriennale”. At first glance, this controversy did not focus on the possible presence of racism in Germany, but on

11 Wekker, *White Innocence*, p. 17.

12 Wekker, *White Innocence*, p. 18.

13 Wekker, *White Innocence*, p. 18.

14 Williams, *The Color of Christ’s Brides*, p. 14.

15 Wekker, *White Innocence*, p. 7 et passim.

16 Cf. Wekker, *White Innocence*, p. 16 et passim.

accusations of anti-Semitism against Mbembe; neither was it conducted in an explicitly theological framework. Nevertheless, it offers a gateway for sketching a brief genealogy that examines the interrelations between European racial and religious discourses, and shows how Christian superiority has been transformed into white supremacy in the course of modern colonial expansion.

3 The “Mbembe Debate” as a Performance of White Christian Innocence

The work of Cameroonian philosopher Achille Mbembe is of international influence and has also been widely recognised in Germany. His invitation to give the opening address at the “Ruhrtriennale 2020” however, was met with growing resistance, culminating in public appeals for his disinvitation, spearheaded by Lorenz Deutsch, an FDP politician from North Rhine-Westphalia, and Felix Klein, the anti-Semitism commissioner of the German government. Referring to short passages in selected writings, in which Mbembe compared the apartheid system in South Africa with the Holocaust and the Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories, they argued that such comparisons follow anti-Semitic patterns of argumentation such as relativising the Holocaust and demonising Israel. A heated controversy ensued, whose scope however remained limited and was dominated by a formulaic search for evidence for or against anti-Semitic patterns in Mbembe’s work. For most of the debate, the collective gaze remained fixated on Mbembe as an object of investigation. Yet, there were also some contributions that asked what kind of self-image of Germany came to the fore in this debate. This change of perspective does not, of course, dispense from a nuanced examination of Mbembe’s positions. Nonetheless, a closer investigation of the performance of German self-understanding in this debate offers new insight into a longer history of constellations between (anti)anti-Semitism and racism that were hardly addressed in the current debate, but on closer inspection turn out to be a constitutive element of hegemonic identity in Western Europe.

Michael Rothberg’s commentary offers a first starting point for uncovering this history. He emphasizes that the accusations against Mbembe were made against the background of a specifically German memory discourse that focuses on the assumption of responsibility for the genocide of Jews by the Nazi regime and insists on the uniqueness of the Holocaust as an extraordinary event of suffering. This memory discourse follows the pattern of competitive memory which fears that a comparison of the Holocaust with other historical traumata will result in its denial. Mbembe’s work, in contrast, is part of a

tradition that brings the Holocaust into a dialogical relation with other memories of violence. Impinging on the dominant discourse in Germany, the comparisons that Mbembe suggests are ultimately an affront to official German self-understanding that cannot go unsanctioned.¹⁷ Ralf Michaels is even sharper. He highlights that this dominant memory discourse determined the debate in a seemingly self-evident way: There was “no work-immanent interpretation or contextualization of Mbembe’s writing, instead, the framing by the accusation of anti-Semitism determined the view on [his] entire work.”¹⁸ This powerful claim to sovereignty of interpretation, Michaels argues, is underpinned by violence with which the established German identity discourse reproduces itself. By claiming universal validity for a particular discourse, it follows a colonial pattern which dodges the critique of postcolonial theory and recognizes Mbembe’s position only insofar as it can fit it into its own discourse. In this way, it exercises epistemic violence that immunises its interpretative sovereignty against contestation. Questioning the epistemic and political pre-suppositions that have silently determined the assessment of Mbembe’s work, Rothberg and Michaels thus reveal that the objections against Mbembe have been formulated against a dominant German memory discourse that is not free of ambivalence: A proud narrative of achievements in the memory work ‘after’¹⁹ the Holocaust gives the nation certainty about its moral position and underpins its claims to hermeneutical sovereignty in competitive discourses of remembrance. In this way, it provides resources for the dominant German self-understanding to act as the “arbiter of anti-Semitism”²⁰ while seeing itself beyond reproach in matters of racism.

Astrid Messerschmidt further illuminates how the dominant discourse of anti-antisemitism and (a denial of) racism intersect in the construction of German self-understanding as morally unassailable. The dominant politics of remembrance after World War II, she argues, can develop into a racist discourse of domination if it is underpinned by “an imagination of salvation in which the acknowledgement of historical responsibility results in purification.”²¹ Theological concepts of salvation, she thus proposes, are a critical component of dominant collective memory in Germany ‘after’ 1945. Promoting the “fiction of having successfully worked through the past,”²² this soteriological discourse

17 Rothberg, *The Spectres of Comparison*.

18 Michaels, *Deutschstunde für alle Welt* (translations mine).

19 ‘After’ is put into inverted commas to disrupt the notion that the Holocaust – and the anti-semitic discourses that underpinned it – are ‘simply’ a ‘thing of the past’.

20 Rothberg, *The Spectres of Comparison*.

21 Messerschmidt, *Postkoloniale Erinnerungsprozesse*, p. 49 (translations mine).

22 Messerschmidt, *Postkoloniale Erinnerungsprozesse*, p. 44.

allows to restrict the concept of racism solely to the national-socialist persecution of Jews, such that it fosters the narrative that ‘after’ the Holocaust, racism has been overcome. In this way, it allows to relegate German antisemitism to the past in ways that sponsor amnesia about the nation’s colonial history, and affords the dominant German self-understanding with ignorance about the prevalence of racism in contemporary Germany. Simultaneously, the narrative of successful German ‘Vergangenheitsbewältigung’ can turn the discourse of anti-anti-Semitism into an exclusivist tool of nation-building that allows to project persistent antisemitisms onto minorities to create a division between “us’ (native Germans) and ‘you’ (migrants) [...] [I]t is the others who are racist and antisemitic, and not us who have so intensely and successfully worked to come to terms with our history”.²³ Silently framing the Muslim immigrant as the antitype of anti-anti-Semitism,²⁴ this memory discourse is thus open to a racializing logic, in which the “racist division of society becomes an instrument of its own exoneration”²⁵ and at the same time allows to maintain the dominant German self-image as anti-racist. Messerschmidt points to close links between an explicit discourse of anti-anti-Semitism and a more subtle one of Islamophobia, which together serve as a racist instrument for the construction of dominant German identity. Furthermore, she indicates that theological knowledge practices are operative in this discourse.

It can be argued that such constellations of (anti-)anti-Semitism, Islamophobia and racism have a much longer history. Its exposure allows us to understand how religio-racialized practices of exclusion function as a constitutive element of nation-building in Western Europe, and also shows in more detail how these constellations have roots in the theological knowledge practices of the Christian tradition. Arguing that Europe’s “Jewish [and] Muslim question is the product of a Christian question”,²⁶ James Renton and Ben Gidley, for example, postulate that these two questions have been constitutive for the formation of systems of hegemonic rule in Western Europe, where varying constellations of a shared “Judeo-Muslim epistemology”²⁷ have served as a foil to define Europe as normatively Christian. Pursuing a diachronic analysis of such “boundary-making work”²⁸ from pre-modern Christendom to purportedly secularized modern Europe, they show that in this history, antisemitism and islamophobia have, for a large part, been coupled to each other in racializing ways to support Western Christian hegemony. Their argument is supported

23 Messerschmidt, *Postkoloniale Erinnerungsprozesse*, p. 52.

24 Cf. Anidjar, *Antisemitism and Its Critics*.

25 Messerschmidt, *Postkoloniale Erinnerungsprozesse*, p. 53.

26 Renton/Gidley, *Antisemitism and Islamophobia in Europe*, p. 11.

27 Renton/Gidley, *Antisemitism and Islamophobia in Europe*, p. 11.

28 Renton/Gidley, *Antisemitism and Islamophobia in Europe*, p. 14.

by research that studies such global entangled histories of religio-racialized othering, by means of which Western Europe constituted itself as Christian in an interplay of anti-Jewish, anti-muslim and colonial racism. Locating the origins of modern Europe in the violent renegotiations of Christendom's boundaries during the Reconquista, Enrique Dussel has done ground-breaking work in this field.²⁹ Europe, he argues, redefined itself in purging Al-Andalus of religious difference. The Reconquista, in turn, with its massacres, evictions and redistribution of appropriated land, became the blueprint for Spanish and Portuguese colonial projects in the Americas, and thus the model for modern Western European empire-building.³⁰ As Catherine Keller summarizes:

The Reconquest was not a crusade, but a new state-building deployment of Christian resentment against the Moors and [...] Jews. Almost simultaneously with these expulsions and massacres, the same aggression was applied to those new infidels without [...] [T]he natives were branded in each case as [...] 'Indians'.³¹

The violence of the modern European re/conquista is thus "definitive of modern statehood and nonetheless religious".³²

Hence, modern-colonial Europe continued to rely on pre-modern Christendom's theological management of its hegemonic power. It maintained its dominance through a grammar of religious difference that figured Jews and Muslims as inferior, and therefore conquerable, because they practiced the "wrong religion".³³ At the same time, in its export to the colonies, Christian hegemony went through a profound change. The indictment of Jews and Muslims as practicing the "wrong religion" became a question whether the new 'Orientals' in the colonies had religion at all. The pre-modern grammar of religious difference was thus reconfigured into a controversial anthropological question: "Religion is universal among humans, but the alleged lack of it among natives is not initially taken to indicate the falseness of this statement, but rather the opposite, that there exist subjects in the world who are not fully human."³⁴ This anthropological debate was negotiated in soteriological categories and had, in intersecting ways, a far-reaching impact on the positioning of colonial subjects within the Christian economy of salvation and the newly emerging economy of capitalism: to find that the indigenous practiced

29 Dussel, *The Invention of the Americas*.

30 Van Hoogstraten, *Theopoetics and Religious Difference*, p. 189.

31 Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible*, p. 247.

32 Keller, *Cloud of the Impossible*, p. 247.

33 Grosfoguel, *The Structure of Knowledge*, p. 79.

34 Grosfoguel, *The Structure of Knowledge*, p. 81.

religion, even it is the wrong one, meant that they had a soul, and hence were salvageable, and therefore to be Christianized. If, however, it is determined that they had no religion, and therefore lack a soul, they fall outside God's plan of salvation. Theologically unsalvageable, they are economically enslavable. In this theological dispute about the salvific possibilities of colonial subjects, Ramón Grosfoguel locates the origins of racism as a system of domination:

Even though the word 'race' was not used at the time, the debate about having a soul [...] was already a racist debate in the sense used by scientific racism in the 19th century [...] about having the human biological constitution [...] Both were debates about the humanity [...] of others [and] became the organizing principle of the international division of labor and capitalist accumulation at a world-scale.³⁵

The category of race was thus forged through processes of theological knowledge production in the context of colonialism in order to identify the salvific possibilities of colonial subjects and to simultaneously determine their status in the capitalist economy of extraction. According to Willie Jennings, racialization thus finds a foundation in the "Christian imagination",³⁶ and at the same time, a "racial calculus [became] deeply embedded in the theological vision of the Western world".³⁷ In this process, salvation was conflated with Whiteness by linking gradations in skin pigmentation with the religious, geographical and cultural distinctions that divided the world into colonizer and colonized, redeemed and unredeemed, Christian and pagan, civilized and wild. In "nothing less than a theological operation",³⁸ the Whiteness of the colonialists became both a benchmark of progress and an icon of salvation. The colonial racialisation of religious difference returned to the European metropolis and transformed "the old Islamophobic and Judeophobic discriminatory practices of the Middle Ages [...] into racial discrimination".³⁹ The racialisation of Europe's religious others reconfigured Christian hegemony into White supremacy. The theological operations that transformed religious inferiority into racial inferiority produced "whiteness as a structural-aesthetic order and a socio-political arrangement".⁴⁰

35 Grosfoguel, *The Structure of Knowledge*, p. 83.

36 Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*.

37 Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, p. 275.

38 Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, p. 31.

39 Grosfoguel, *The Structure of Knowledge*, p. 84.

40 Carter, *Race*, p. 89.

In a global circulation of anti-Semitism, Islamophobia and colonial racism, White Christian dominance thus became the definitive model for modern nation-building. The postcolonial era, Renton and Gidley posit, has brought shifts to this constellation that resulted in a “splintering”⁴¹ of Christendom’s Jewish-Muslim question without completely dissolving it. In the post-9/11 era, in particular, it is the “figures of the persecuted Jew and the political Muslim”⁴² that are central to Western (European) nation-building so that today, “[a]ntisemitism and so-called Islamism – not Islamophobia – are twin and, in the Western official mind, connected enemies of the West.”⁴³ By tracing how these two racisms have changed in shifting configurations of statehood, they corroborate Messerschmitt’s observation that an intertwined discourse of anti-Antisemitism and Islamophobia is constitutive of contemporary nation-building in Western Europe today. Situating this current constellation within a longer history of religio-racial othering, we can argue that the recent embrace of anti-antisemitism perpetuates a discourse that relies on an interrelated framing of Jews and Muslims as constitutive of Western European nationhood. Considered as an instance of shifting constellations of a racialized Judeo-Muslim epistemology at the heart of Western European nation-building, the discourse of anti-antisemitism in the wake of the Holocaust has not fundamentally changed the politics of religio-racialized othering through which White Christian Supremacy has been accomplished as definitive of nation-building in Western Europe. It has merely shifted the religio-racialized boundaries in the positioning of Jews and Muslims as Europe’s constitutive others.

With this result, we can return to the Mbembe debate. Situating it in this multifaceted history, we see that the German defence of anti-Antisemitism is perhaps less innocent than it appears at first glance. It can promote a hegemonic politics of remembrance that selectively remembers anti-Semitism in Germany as an event of the past and/or committed by ‘others’. When it is based on a diachronic and synchronic erasure of anti-Semitism from dominant German self-representation, anti-Antisemitism turns into a hegemonic discourse that allows to turn a blind eye on the persistence of anti-Semitism ‘after’ the Holocaust, promotes a militant ignorance of racism in Germany, and sponsors an exclusive discourse of nation-building based on Islamophobia. As the Mbembe debate has brought to the fore, this erasure grants the dominant German self-understanding with “certainty about its own moral position”⁴⁴

41 Renton/Gidley, *Antisemitism and Islamophobia in Europe*, p. 13.

42 Renton/Gidley, *Antisemitism and Islamophobia in Europe*, p. 4.

43 Renton/Gidley, *Antisemitism and Islamophobia in Europe*, p. 4.

44 Michaels, *Deutschstunde für alle Welt*.

and supports its claim to interpretative sovereignty over histories of violence. The aggressive defence of anti-Antisemitism as a decisive feature of German identity is therefore indeed not unambivalently innocent. Rather, sponsoring a claim to moral superiority through a disavowal of its complicity in an ongoing history of religio-racialised violence, it can be understood as a performance of White innocence: a defence of White saviourism through the erasure of a history of religio-racialized violence that maintains White Christian supremacy.

4 **Theopolitical Performances of Innocence: The Performativity of Race, the Non-Performativity of Anti-Racism and Theological Complicities**

The Mbembe debate thus offers a gateway to reveal a longer history of religio-racialisation and its intersections with Christian tradition, in which racist categories were forged in soteriological discourses, and in which, in turn, soteriological categories were shaped by racist discourses. This genealogy affords resources for a nuanced conceptualization of race as a social construct that inscribes itself in bodies and creates somatic and political realities. For the development of such a concept of race, proponents of critical race theory draw on theories of performativity, which offer a productive instrument for destabilising a biologicist/essentialist understanding of race without concealing the effectiveness of racial discourses in the order of things and its irreducibly material dimension.⁴⁵ At the same time, understanding race through the lens of performativity offers a vocabulary with which the discourse of white innocence can be critically examined as to its effects in the ongoing history of racialisation. As Sarah Ahmed argues, in contrast to the performativity of race that produces effects in reality, declarations of white innocence, condensed in the white self-description as anti-racist, remain “non-performative”.⁴⁶

Ahmed’s analysis of the declaration “we are ashamed by [...] our racism”⁴⁷ provides a particularly lucid example of the non-performativity of anti-racist self-descriptions. She points to a close connection between national shame and national pride: If declarations of shame rest on the belief that the very enactment of shame overcomes a shameful past, they serve to restore “an identity of which we can be proud”.⁴⁸ It is thus “a fantasy of transcendence”⁴⁹ that converts

45 Ahmed, *Declarations*, p. 50.

46 Ahmed, *Declarations*, p. 1.

47 Ahmed, *Declarations*, p. 21.

48 Ahmed, *Declarations*, p. 23.

49 Ahmed, *Declarations*, p. 52.

acts of shame into performances of national pride. By allowing the nation to “inhabit a beyond”,⁵⁰ it has a politically reintegrating effect which facilitates “reconciliation as self-reconciliation”⁵¹ and even realizes “a [national] subject that is proud about its shame”.⁵² However, such confessions of shameful pride/proud shame do not bring about an emancipative transformation of white supremacy, but rather cement it and thus serve as an instrument of hegemonic nation-building. First, the conversion from shame to pride is subject to an exclusive dynamic which makes the perpetrators the self-evident subject of the nation – “If saying sorry leads to pride, who gets to be proud?”⁵³ – and repositions the white subject, who is ashamed of their racist past, as the social ideal of the nation. Secondly, the “fantasy of transcendence”, with which proud performances of national shame seemingly effect the erasure of a racist past, is an epistemic privilege reserved for white people. They are the ones who can consider their whiteness invisible, while all others cannot escape its effects. Racism thus remains “the burden of non-white others”,⁵⁴ while declarations of “anti-racism may even provide the conditions for a new discourse of white pride”.⁵⁵ Therefore, Ahmed concludes, these dominant declarations of anti-racism do “not do what they say”.⁵⁶ Rather, under the conditions of a fantasy of transcendence, the articulation of anti-racism sponsors a national feeling of white superiority based on the erasure of a history of violence.

Ahmed’s critique of a “fantasy of transcendence” as an instrument of white supremacy echoes Messerschmidt’s analysis of German memory politics in the post-National Socialist context as a soteriologically underpinned racist discourse of domination. Both point to theological thinking practices as a crucial element in the performance of White supremacy-disguised-as-innocence. Robyn Westcott is even more detailed in her analysis of soteriological patterns in current discourses on dominant Whiteness. She, too, argues that White confessions to a racist history of guilt do not bring about transformation if they are framed by “a teleology of salvation”.⁵⁷ With reference to Foucault’s observations on confession as a disciplinary practice, she notes that the White recognition of a history of guilt is informed by the desire for exoneration and takes place in a ritual sequence of codifiable elements that can be identified as Christian (confession of guilt, pronouncing the script of confession and absolution, act

50 Ahmed, *Declarations*, p. 59.

51 Ahmed, *Declarations*, p. 24.

52 Ahmed, *Declarations*, p. 28.

53 Ahmed, *Declarations*, p. 27.

54 Ahmed, *Declarations*, p. 34.

55 Ahmed, *Declarations*, p. 33.

56 Ahmed, *Declarations*, p. 12.

57 Westcott, *Witnessing Whiteness*, p. 38.

of penance). In White confessions to a racist history, utterances of guilt and atonement tend to be conflated such that they facilitate “cathartic pleasure”⁵⁸ and “narrative resolution”.⁵⁹ In the genre of confession, which signifies at once apology and restoration of innocence, the white subject alleviates itself of its guilty history and thus achieves a “reconciliation with [its] racial position”⁶⁰ and experiences its restitution as “sanctioned and sanctified”.⁶¹

Theologians, too, interrogate the complicity of Christian ideas of salvation in performances of national innocence ‘after’ events of historical trauma. Examining the theological legacy ‘after’ the Holocaust and its collusion in the search for exoneration, Katharina von Kellenbach for example demonstrates that a theology of forgiveness was activated to effect the protection of perpetrators after World War II. Analyzing confessions of guilt promulgated by Protestant and Catholic churches, she argues that “in 1945, the Christian paradigm of confession became a public ritual of self-incrimination and apology”.⁶² However, the aim of these acts of repentance was not to provide moral support for the prosecution of Nazi crimes. Rather, theological *topoi* such as ‘solidarity in sin’ and ‘universality of guilt’ were used to obscure the responsibility of individual perpetrators. Drawing on soteriology in a politically effective way, they suggested that “forgiveness in faith in Christ’s atoning death is possible even without repentance, atonement or symbolic acts of reparation towards the victims”.⁶³ The ecclesial confessions of guilt thus accommodated “the perpetrators’ interest to forget their past”⁶⁴ and worked to achieve innocence by concealing a history of violence and its victims. Second generation proponents of a “theology after Auschwitz” proffered sharp critique of these (post-)war theological discourses that sponsored the interests of perpetrators. Instead, they sought to develop a theology that resists the temptation to achieve exculpation through an erasure of violent history. By way of reparation for the complicities of theology in the Holocaust, they called for a theology that is in solidarity with victims. Yet, such identification with the victims/survivors is not immune to problematic productions of innocence, either. It, too, is prone to satisfying the desire for exculpation by suppressing collective and individual responsibility in the perpetration of violence: As Björn Krondorfer shows, theologians ‘after Auschwitz’ also failed to account for their own (family’s) entanglement

58 Westcott, *Witnessing Whiteness*, p. 31.

59 Westcott, *Witnessing Whiteness*, p. 22.

60 Westcott, *Witnessing Whiteness*, p. 23.

61 Westcott, *Witnessing Whiteness*, p. 22.

62 Kellenbach, *Schuld und Vergebung*, p. 46 (translations mine).

63 Kellenbach, *Schuld und Vergebung*, p. 46.

64 Kellenbach, *Schuld und Vergebung*, p. 47.

into a history of guilt and instead framed suffering as a locus theologicus in a way that does not sufficiently differentiate between the agency of perpetrators and victims.⁶⁵ Centering on the victims, the theology after Auschwitz fell short in forging a sustainable language to account for responsibility of perpetrators in an ongoing history of violence; instead, it sought to “achieve exoneration [through] the ambivalent desire to take the side of the victims.”⁶⁶

As Sarah Pinnock argues, such disowning of complicity informed the method of the *Theologie nach Auschwitz* and became the point of construction for its imaginaries of salvation. It complemented the critique of theological complicities with Nazism with attempts “to vindicate the tradition”⁶⁷ by retrieving a “core’ of Christianity that is innocent of such abuses”.⁶⁸ This “appeal to historical and moral authenticity”⁶⁹ purifies Christianity from complicity by implementing a linear historiography that describes Christian tradition as a decline from original innocence and calls for a return to such innocence. This teleological framing of history finds a mirror image in a theological imagination of salvation history as an arch of redemption that spans from an innocent origin through a fall to the restoration of original innocence. The methodological appeal to authenticity thus sponsors an understanding of salvation that is not *constitutively* affected by violence and suffering. Instead, it holds on to a soteriological paradigm that can integrate historical violence “perhaps all too smoothly, into a [...] redemptive message of Christianity”.⁷⁰ This linear narrative of redemption leaves no room for tainted histories that can speak to the ambivalences of the Christian tradition. Engaging in theological practices that outsource Christian complicity in the perpetration of violence, this soteriology produces an original/ultimate innocence that absolves from the need to confront issues of theological accountability.

Not only does this linear redemption narrative provide an effective instrument for exonerating the Christian tradition, but, as shown above, it also offers a powerful model for the construction of innocence in contemporary national identity discourses. For a nation that seeks to alleviate historical guilt by assuming responsibility for a violent past, it provides a symbolic reservoir for producing innocence, because it allows to frame history ‘after’ violence as the restoration of original innocence through repentance. In this way, it can claim that a traumatizing history of violence has been overcome and thus allows to

65 Jarosch, *Postkoloniale Theologie*, p. 82 (translations mine).

66 Jarosch, *Postkoloniale Theologie*, p. 73.

67 Pinnock, *Atrocity and Ambiguity*, p. 502.

68 Pinnock, *Atrocity and Ambiguity*, p. 502.

69 Pinnock, *Atrocity and Ambiguity*, p. 506.

70 Krondorfer, *Abschied*, p. 14.

conceal irresolvable complicities and ongoing histories of guilt – theological knowledge is activated for a narrative of national exoneration. At the same time, these soteriological productions of national innocence remain entangled into the long history of religious-racialization that conflated Christianity, Whiteness and salvation, with the upshot that national narratives of innocence are not religious-racially neutral, but imagine innocence as White and Christian. In revealing these interferences between soteriological imagination and dominant nation-building, we can conclude with Marika Rose that “statements of innocence and guilt [...] are always also statements of white [Christian] supremacy”.⁷¹

5 Performing Transformative Soteriology

We can summarize: National discourses of innocence perpetuate White supremacy and are closely interwoven with Christian imaginaries of salvation. For a theology that is not only interested in a genealogical exposure of these entanglements, but also seeks to hold on to the normative task to “account for the hope that is in” us (1 Petr 3:15), this result poses a profound theological problem: In view of the historically grown interdependencies between racial discourses and soteriology, it raises the question to what extent the Christian promise of salvation ‘does what it says’. Is the message of salvation ‘after’ a history of violent religio-racialisation really performative, i.e. can a transformation from death to life really take place in the proclamation of Christian hope for liberation from a history of violence and guilt? Once we have exposed the intimate links between discourses of White supremacy and Christian imaginaries of salvation, a theologically constructive faithfulness to the belief in the effectiveness of salvation can no longer take refuge in the search for an authentic Christianity that is purportedly free from entanglements into White hegemony. On the contrary, as Pinnock has shown, such a postulate of authenticity provides a powerful resource for problematic discourses of innocence. Instead, I argue in a final step that a constructive theology ‘after’ a soteriologically informed history of violence must be concerned with confronting the irresolvable ambiguity of Christian performances.

For developing this argument, we return to the theoretical framework of performativity, which not only offers an analytical tool for exposing the entanglement of racism and soteriology, but also provides instruments for a (de)constructive “un/doing” of the violent conflation of salvation, Whiteness

⁷¹ Rose, *For Our Sins*, p. 62.

and Christianity. When Ahmed states that anti-racist self-descriptions ‘do not do what they say’ within the framework of a fantasy of transcendence, she also notes that it is *specific conditions* under which these declarations remain non-performative: “It is important to note here that [...] performativity is not a quality of a sign or an utterance: it does not reside within the sign, as if the sign was magical.”⁷² Instead, performativity theories zoom in on the concrete circumstances in which an utterance occurs: utterances develop their discursive effectiveness in specific conditions and in particular forms. With Rosi Braidotti, Westcott puts it succinctly: “The question of style is inseparable from the making of political choices”⁷³ – and therefore “the techniques of [...] locution require a more nuanced analysis.”⁷⁴ Instead of focusing on the purportedly static content of an utterance, the lens of performativity calls for an analysis of its “how [...] [i.e.] the rhetorical strategies at work in the production of material truths”.⁷⁵

Situating enunciations of the Christian hope for salvation within the framework of performativity provides resources for reconceptualizing Christian tradition such that its constitutive entanglement into racial discourses can be acknowledged without giving up the hope for transformation. At stake is not a comprehensive condemnation (or rehabilitation) of the Christian tradition in view of its complicities with racialized violence. On the contrary, theories of performativity call for a nuanced analysis of its specific performances in concrete situations, and disclose the specific situations under which the Christian message of salvation acquires its particular meaning. Such a reconstruction of Christian tradition will reveal the variegated ways in which people in different societies have embodied Christian identity. This nuanced look at performances of Christian tradition in local histories will show that the narrative of salvation is enacted in ways that stabilize power as well as in emancipatory ways and, consequently, makes it possible to address both the life-giving and the deadly effectiveness of Christian proclamations of salvation. Such a re-reading of Christian tradition through the lens of performativity thus allows to hold on to the faith in transformative performances of soteriology without losing sight of its entanglement in violent histories. It does this at the price of the unambiguity of Christian tradition: it shows that soteriological symbols are not endowed with unambiguous meaning. Rather, they acquire their meaning only in concrete articulations from specific political positionings.

⁷² Ahmed, *Declarations*, p. 50.

⁷³ Westcott, *Witnessing Whiteness*, p. 9, quoting Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects*, p. 16.

⁷⁴ Westcott, *Witnessing Whiteness*, p. 3.

⁷⁵ Westcott, *Witnessing Whiteness*, p. 1.

Erna Kim Hackett gives an example of the political effects of soteriology that points to the constitutive role of rhetorical strategies in the performance of Christian texts and thus reveals their irreducible ambiguity. Analyzing the specific articulation techniques with which White Theology stages political innocence, Hackett describes it with a memorable metaphor as “a bad case of Disney Princess theology. As each individual reads Scripture, they see themselves as the princess in every story. [...] They are Peter, but never Judas. [...] They are the Jews escaping slavery, never Egypt.”⁷⁶ White theology puts the victim at the centre of history. Such a theological performance of victimhood has profound political repercussions when it is claimed by those who hold political office and social influence:

For the citizens of [the USA,] the most powerful country in the world, who enslaved both Native and Black people, to see itself as Israel and not Egypt when it is studying Scripture, [...] means that as people in power, they have no lens for locating themselves rightly in Scripture or society – and it has made them [...] utterly ill equipped to engage issues of power and injustice.⁷⁷

White theology uses the narrative of redemption to engender a system of political practices whose agents can see themselves as victims of violence rather than perpetrators and who therefore lack critical tools for recognizing and working with their power. This lack is by no means politically ineffective. On the contrary, the claim to innocence provides a technology of power that consists in the disavowal of power and an erasure of the violent histories in which it is produced.

Hackett thus notes that biblical texts provide resources for a political theology of innocence, but she further indicates that they would also offer tools for addressing the responsibility of perpetrators in histories of violence. Hence, according to her reading, scripture does not translate into a theo-politically unambiguous narrative of innocence but provides a multi-layered portrait of the complexity of historical trauma. For their recipients, the biblical texts offer a nuanced tableau of identification possibilities – it is specific rhetorical decisions in their appropriation that determine the political effectivity of Christian texts. By describing biblical reading as a process of identification, and even more so a process of embodiment (“[...] they see themselves as [...], they are [...]”), Hackett points to the performativity of Christian identity: Christian

⁷⁶ Hackett, *White Supremacy*.

⁷⁷ Hackett, *White Supremacy*.

narratives of guilt and redemption can do both, sponsor supremacy in the mode of innocence or open trajectories for addressing perpetrator responsibility. Which political effects they have, depends on their enactment via the rhetorical strategies of particular actors and their position of power in specific situations.

Ultimately, such an exposure of the constitutive role of performativity in Christian soteriology shows that the enunciation of the hope for salvation results in a range of political effects. It further highlights that it would be an inadequate response to these irreducibly diverse performances of soteriology to simply privilege one reading over the other and validate it as 'authentic'. Rather, it calls for an embrace of the irresolvable ambiguity of Scripture as the normative basis of Christian identity. As Stephen Moore notes, the bible is "a fraught site of simultaneous compliance and resistance [...] that could, and did, function as a colonialist instrument of coercion and co-option [...] [b]ut simultaneously [also] as an instrument of [...] resistance."⁷⁸ Once we courageously acknowledge these irreducible discrepancies in the political performances of Scripture, we can no longer "translat[e], sublat[e] [...] this Sign of signs [...] into a transcendental [...] signified."⁷⁹ It offers no warrant of unambiguity for Christian identity – what remains are its many conflicting representations which achieve political effects in concrete situations. The irreducible ambiguity of Christian soteriology makes it untenable to hold on to the soteriological ideal of an 'arch of redemption', that would allow us to subject the discrepant political performances of Christian theology to a recognisable teleology of salvation amidst the violent history of its complicity with racialization. A theology that nevertheless seeks to hold on to the normative message of life-giving transformation can no longer attempt to uncover an unambivalent hope for salvation, but must address the question *how* soteriology can be practiced in order to really 'do what it says': *Under which (political-aesthetic) conditions* does the Christian message of salvation actually become performative? For it, too, an analysis of the 'how' of its statements becomes inevitable: "The question of style is [not only] inseparable from the making of political choices",⁸⁰ but also determines the effectivity of soteriological statements.

In the search for performative styles for a soteriology that actually 'does what it says', I turn once more to race-critical writing in order to mine it for conceptual resources for developing imaginaries of salvation that may have transformative effects. This concluding step embraces the theological conclusions that

⁷⁸ Moore, *Biblical Ambivalence*, p. 92.

⁷⁹ Moore, *Biblical Ambivalence*, p. 92.

⁸⁰ Westcott, *Witnessing Whiteness*, p. 3.

can be drawn from the exposure of the theologicity of race: my wager is this: when theologies of salvation constitutively inform political discourses of race, then the politics of race also provide resources for a theological understanding of salvation. The constitutive and reciprocal relation between race and soteriology not only implies that theological imaginaries of salvation provide instruments for the performance of White-supremacy-disguised-as-innocence, but it also entails that race-critical proposals for a transformation of racist discourses can offer starting points for the reconstruction of a possibly transformative soteriology. So, how, then, can we perform race/soteriology in transformative ways? Race-critical scholars find the potential for such transformation in frustrating the desire for closure, nourished by soteriological/national narratives of teleological redemption. Ahmed, for example, suggests that transformative critique does not occur in a “position of transcendence” but, on the contrary, in “an intimate relation with that which one is against”,⁸¹ so much so that transformative “critique might even be *dependent on non-transcendence*”.⁸² The performance of transformation is “messy work”⁸³ that does not “rush to ‘inhabit’ a beyond”⁸⁴ but “inhabits the critique, *with its lengthy duration*”.⁸⁵ Westcott further develops this tentative proposal. For her, too, transformation does not occur in an alleged overcoming of a history of guilt that grants the pleasure of catharsis. Instead, it takes place in articulations that problematize this teleology of redemption. Dealing with a history of guilt can only have a transformative effect if it avoids the enactment of a “finite act of penitence”.⁸⁶

Westcott proposes autobiography as a form of articulation for such a “staying with the trouble”.⁸⁷ Aware of literary critiques of autobiography as a performance of sovereignty that is tied to economic privilege and cultural capital, she draws on concepts of autobiography that frame it as a profoundly political, rather than a solitary, act which disorganizes, rather than consolidates, the subject. Quoting Foucault, she posits that to “write autobiographically, one has to possess a sense of being constituted in and through narrative, of remaining in flux. To understand that there is no essence except that ‘fabricated in a piecemeal fashion from alien forms.’”⁸⁸ Autobiographical writing does not reveal

81 Ahmed, *Declarations*, p. 47.

82 Ahmed, *Declarations*, p. 47 (my emphasis).

83 Ahmed, *Declarations*, p. 47.

84 Ahmed, *Declarations*, p. 59.

85 Ahmed, *Declarations*, p. 57.

86 Westcott, *Witnessing Whiteness*, p. 49.

87 Cf. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*.

88 Westcott, *Witnessing Whiteness*, p. 37.

“the possibility of self-knowledge”.⁸⁹ Rather, it is a performance only through which the subject constitutes itself – as Westcott puts it with reference to Derrida: “The self does not exist. [...] It is given by writing, by the other: born by being given, delivered, offered and betrayed all at once.”⁹⁰ In this way, the style of the autobiographical enacts a *different form of transcendence*, which takes place in an “active engagement with that which exceeds us”⁹¹ – that which we have decided to place outside our purportedly stable, given subjectivity. It does not take place through the repression of a history of guilt, but in the confrontation with what we would prefer to reject, even though it is a constitutive part of our selves. “Inhabit[ing] the critique, *with its lengthy duration*”,⁹² transcendence that is performed in autobiographical writing cannot be activated for a powerful erasure of a violent past. *This* performance of transcendence does not strive for a “beyond”.⁹³ Instead, “to enact the autobiographic is to let go of the finality and legitimation offered through the technique of confession”.⁹⁴ It does not seek the cathartic pleasure of closure, but “works against a teleology of redemption.”⁹⁵ Because autobiography resists “the drive for reconciliation”,⁹⁶ it may allow the messy, unfinished work of transformation to take place.

Transformation, Ahmed and Westcott postulate, does not occur beyond a history of guilt, but in a localised performance of transcendence which emerges from the confrontation with the shameful history of traumatic violence. The theologicity of their race-critical writing translates without too much difficulty into more traditionally Christian narratives of redemption: The soteriological tradition of Christianity can also be read in ways that do not stage simple reversals of guilt and a triumphal procession from death to life, but offer more complex conceptions of redemption that speak to a transformed life *in the midst of and marked by* stories of violence, thus opposing a totalising teleology of redemption. Such articulations of soteriological ambiguity can, for instance, be found in the narratives about Christ’s wounded resurrection body. The resurrection narratives of the New Testament tell a story about the complexities of resurrection faith that is only accessible through a hermeneutics

89 Westcott, *Witnessing Whiteness*, p. 36.

90 Westcott, *Witnessing Whiteness*, p. 36.

91 Westcott, *Witnessing Whiteness*, p. 36 (emphasis in original).

92 Ahmed, *Declarations*, p. 57.

93 Ahmed, *Declarations*, p. 57.

94 Westcott, *Witnessing Whiteness*, p. 37.

95 Westcott, *Witnessing Whiteness*, p. 38.

96 Westcott, *Witnessing Whiteness*, p. 6.

of wounds and tears:⁹⁷ Thomas must touch the wounds of the resurrected in order to be able to believe.⁹⁸ Only through a veil of tears can Mary recognise her Rabbuni at the tomb (cf. John 20:11–18). Resurrection remains irresolvably tied to the recognition of a history of grief and wounds and thus does not offer the cathartic pleasure of narrative closure and soteriological security – the transformative presence of the Risen Christ becomes intangible in the very moment when the disciples of Emmaus finally recognise their Lord.⁹⁹ Here, salvation is not styled as overcoming a history of violence. Instead, the hope for salvation is kept alive in tracing possible transformations in the midst of historical trauma. Without offering any final warrant, but precisely by bringing out ambiguities in the Christian hope of salvation, these soteriological performances could thus become a tool for an anti-racist theology which – by un/doing its long history of complicity with white innocence/supremacy – accounts for its responsibility without giving up the hope for transformation. Embracing such theo-political ambiguity does not deprive us of agency; on the contrary, it engenders a performance that embraces and acts within a concrete political position, and – by marking its limitations – opens up the possibility of its transcendence.

Biography

Judith Gruber received her PhD in systematic theology from the University of Salzburg, Austria (2012). From 2012–2017, she was Assistant Professor of Systematic Theology at Loyola University New Orleans. In 2017, she joined the Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Belgium, as Research Professor of Systematic

97 Cf. New Testament readings through the lens of trauma theory, e.g.: Rambo, *Resurrecting Wounds*.

98 Cf. John 20:24–25: “Now Thomas, one of the twelve, called the Twin, was not with them when Jesus came. So the other disciples told him, ‘We have seen the Lord.’ But he said to them, ‘Unless I see in his hands the print of the nails, and place my finger in the mark of the nails, and place my hand in his side, I will not believe.’” (quoted from the Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition).

99 Cf. Luke 24:13–16; 28–31: “That very day two of them were going to a village named Emmaus, about seven miles from Jerusalem, and talking with each other about all these things that had happened. While they were talking and discussing together, Jesus himself drew near and went with them. But their eyes were kept from recognizing him. [...] So they drew near to the village to which they were going. He appeared to be going further, but they constrained him, saying, ‘Stay with us, for it is toward evening and the day is now far spent.’ So he went in to stay with them. When he was at table with them, he took the bread and blessed, and broke it, and gave it to them. And their eyes were opened and they recognized him; and he vanished out of their sight.”

Theology and Director of the Centre for Liberation Theologies. Her research brings Catholic theology into conversation with critical cultural theories, focusing on intercultural theology and postcolonial theology. Publications include *Intercultural Theology. Exploring World Christianity after the Cultural Turn* (Vandenhoeck&Ruprecht 2017).

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