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Is There a Common Good Anymore?

**A Candid Look at the Opposing Wills of Race,
Religion, and Gender at Work**

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*Got Ethics?***

***Envisioning and Evaluating the Future of Our Guild and Discipline,*
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It's a daunting task any time to be thinking about the future of Christian ethics. But the challenges of the 21st century seem unprecedented. As Naomi Klein's latest book declares, *This*

Changes Everything.¹ She was talking about climate change caused by an economic system based on material growth designed by self-interest and financed by cheap labor and the extraction of earth's resources.

In Paris, developed nations were confronted with global voices demanding redress for the devastation, caused by our way of life, that will fall first on the poorest 40% of the world's population, mostly folks of color.² Subjugated voices rise up to test our moral character.

In the U.S., headlines sound an alarm because people who call ourselves "White" will become a minority of 43% as people labeled Black and Hispanic and Asian will together constitute a majority of 51%.³ If this were about blue eyes and brown eyes, who would care? But it feels like "this changes everything." Subjugated voices rising up to test our moral character?

The problem is--these challenges are likely to scratch raw and bleeding the always festering sores in a nation that began, as Ta-Nehisi Coates puts it, with "the pillaging of life, liberty, labor and land," based on what Jacqueline Jones calls "a dreadful deceit."⁴ Socially constructed narratives of difference justify the creation of exploitive social relationships that make effectively real and acceptable the lies called race, gender, and class, among others, as a

¹ Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything* (Simon & Schuster, 2015).

² "Human Development Report 2007/2008," UNDP, http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/reports/268/hdr_20072008_en_complete.pdf.

³ Paul Taylor, "'A Milestone En Route to a Majority Minority Nation,'" *Pew Research Center*, November 7, 2012, <http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2012/11/07/a-milestone-en-route-to-a-majority-minority-nation/>.

⁴ Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (Spiegel & Girau, 2015), 8. Jacqueline Jones, *A Dreadful Deceit* (Basic Books, 2013).

dominant narrative celebrates democracy, freedom, opportunity and moral exceptionalism: a myth of the *common* good that was never *common*. Now we face the environmental, economic, and social devastation created by the lies that produced the policies that created the wealth and global power that sustains life for people like me.⁵

Is “devastation” too strong a word?

- In the 2015 NEAP test, only 12% of African American 8th graders were proficient or above in eight-grade math; only 12% of African American high school students scored college ready on the ACT test.⁶
- African Americans households have just 6% and Hispanic households just 8% of the median wealth of white households (2011).⁷
- Full-time women workers earn 79 cents to the dollar men earn. Latinas earn just 54 cents of the \$1 earned by “White” men. As things are going, the gender wage gap may close by the year 2059.⁸
- And, in the US, between 30 and 40% of American Indian (36%), Latino (32%), and Black (38%) children live in poverty (2014).⁹

Education, wealth, wages, poverty. Of course, the list is much, much longer...incarceration, occupational segregation, foreclosures, segregated schools, asthma, breast cancer, environmental

⁵ For example, Ira Katznelson, *When Affirmative Action was White*, reprint edition (W.W. Norton & Co., 2006); Coates, “The Case for Reparations,” *The Atlantic* (June 2014), <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/>

⁶ “The Path Forward,” U.S. Chamber of Commerce, 2015, https://www.uschamberfoundation.org/sites/default/files/The_Path_Forward_Report_Final.pdf (compared to 34% reading and 33% math for all students).

⁷ Laura Sullivan, et. al., “The Racial Wealth Gap: Why Policy Matters,” Demos (2015), http://www.demos.org/sites/default/files/publications/RacialWealthGap_1.pdf

⁸ “The Gender Wage Gap 2014,” *Institute for Women’s Policy Research*, September 2015, <http://www.iwpr.org/publications/pubs/the-gender-wage-gap-2014>

⁹ “Children in Poverty by Race and Ethnicity,” Kids Count Data Center, 2015, <http://datacenter.kidscount.org/data/tables/44-children-in-poverty-by-race-and-ethnicity#detailed/1/any/false/869,36,868,867,133/10,11,9,12,1,185,13/324,323>

injustice, ... a constellation of violence made permissible by dreadful deceptions of race and gender, and class.

Nothing suggests optimism for achieving the greater representation and participation in the Society of Christian Ethics of members of “historically underrepresented groups” (an outrageously pleasant term unmarred by thoughts of who actually did what to whom).¹⁰ After decades of good intentions, or at least good words, we are merely one-third female and 15% “of color” in a society that is half female and soon to be 51% “of color.” Of course, we may ask, as has Chief Justice John Roberts, “What unique perspective does a minority student bring” ... to an ethics class, or to the study of the Bible, or to an inquiry into the nature of God and humanity?” Or, like Judge Scalia, we might point out that less-prepared minority students might do better in less rigorous schools, preparing for less intellectually demanding careers.¹¹ Neither of these good men suspects the shaping of his own chiseled intellect, alert consciousness, and clear conscience by prevailing myths.

But then, neither did I. In the '80s I served a White congregation in downtown Baltimore. Although I didn't know it then, elsewhere in Baltimore, not far away, Ta-Nehisi Coates was a Black teenager growing up in Sandtown, living, in other words, in another universe--a universe that, as I climbed the steps to a high pulpit to preach the Word of the Lord, I didn't know existed. Of course we decried poverty and racism – those things out there. But, the truth is, for all my education, I was ignorant of the universe in which Coates lived.

¹⁰ “Report of the 21st Century Committee, Recommendation 5(a).”

¹¹ Jedidah C. Isler, “Being Black in Physics Class,” *New York Times*, December 17, 2015. These comments were made during oral arguments in *Fisher v. University of Texas*.

Coates writes to his son:

To be black in the Baltimore of my youth was to be naked before the elements of the world, before all the guns, fists, knives, crack, rape, and disease. The nakedness is not an error, nor pathology. The nakedness is the correct and intended result of policy, the predictable upshot of people forced for centuries to live in fear. The law did not protect us. And now, in your time, the law has become an excuse for stopping and frisking you, which is to say, for furthering the assault on your body. But a society that protects some people through a safety net of schools, government-backed home loans, and ancestral wealth but can only protect you with the club of criminal justice has either failed at enforcing its good intentions or has succeeded at something much darker.¹²

Between Coates, living in fear of the street, the school, and the police, “fear and violence the weaponry”¹³ of each, he says, and me rising to the pulpit, there existed a space so vast--unmeasurable in meters or light years--yet also so close, so intimately entwined, that a blink in one can set forth a tsunami in the other. This sense of distance and difference can be felt because I, and my world, can live more or less successfully while being ignorant of him and his. But, as Coates tells his son, “...you do not have the privilege of living in ignorance”¹⁴ Sandtown--the neighborhood of Ta-Nehisi Coates in the '80s and, in 2015, the home of Freddie Gray--is, like Detroit, a place of vacant houses, high unemployment, low income, and run-down schools--a place that from a distance we call a neighborhood of concentrated poverty and think we have said something meaningful.

But in Baltimore, homicide is the leading cause of death for young adults, ages 15-24, and the second leading cause of death for children ages 1-14. In Detroit, homicide is the leading

¹² Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel and Grau, 2015), 17-18

¹³ *Ibid.*, 33.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 107.

cause of death for children between 1 and 18.¹⁵ Children dying in their neighborhoods--that's meaningful.

So, did someone ask, "Is there a common good *anymore?*" I'll defer briefly to Langston Hughes:

O, let my land be a land where Liberty
Is crowned with no false patriotic wreath,
But opportunity is real, and life is free,
Equality is in the air we breathe.
(There's never been equality for me,
Nor freedom in this "homeland of the free.")¹⁶

So, I have come to believe that this beautiful concept, this common good, this Eden where the basic needs of life are met and each can flourish, is itself a deceptive myth embedded these days in liberal fantasies of agreement, where dialogue erases difference, and we are all one, kumbaya, forgetting (or perhaps never knowing) the fences that shaped this "commons" for our own purposes: a false innocence that cannot meet the moral challenges being raised by subjugated voices in the 21st century.

If there is a meaningful future for Christian ethics in face of the seismic challenges ahead of us, it will need to be an ethics of suspicion: an ethics that uncovers the power that shapes the myths that divide and misname us all. For those of us called White, it will need to be a

¹⁵ Leaf, et.al., "Health & Well Being of Baltimore's Children, Youth and Families," *Johns Hopkins Urban Health Institute*, 13, http://urbanhealth.jhu.edu/_PDFs/HealthBaltimore.pdf.
Kate Abbey-Lambertz, "Detroit's Staggering Murder And Violent Crime Rate Are 'A Public Health Issue'," *Huffington Post Crime* November 14, 2014, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/11/14/detroit-highest-murder-rate-violent-crime_n_6144460.html.

¹⁶ Langston Hughes, "Let America Be America Again," 1935, *Esquire* 1936.

courageous ethics aimed at exposing ourselves to ourselves, seeking out our intimate connections to the disadvantage of others, in Detroit and Baltimore and Bangladesh. We will need to search for the silenced voices that will challenge our innocence and dismantle the silos that protect our lives and self-satisfaction. It will be an ethics that holds itself, as a guild and a praxis, seriously accountable first to those voices. In 1988 Katie Cannon asked: “How could Christians who were white, flatly and openly, refuse to treat as fellow human beings Christians who had African ancestry? Was not the essence of the Gospel mandate a call to eradicate affliction, despair and systems of injustice?”¹⁷ Her questions remain, still unanswered, challenging our moral character. And until they are answered and embodied, there will be no common good.

¹⁷ Katie Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 1.