

Whiteness and the Aesthetics of the Eucharist

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'Beauty can be consoling, disturbing, sacred, profane; it can be exhilarating, appealing, inspiring, chilling. It can affect us in an unlimited variety of ways. Yet it is never viewed with indifference: beauty demands to be noticed; it speaks to us directly like the voice of an intimate friend.'^[1]



'Christ Child and Maddona' – Salvador Dali, 1950 (full painting below)

The Eucharist is the source and summit of the Church's life^[2], the culmination of all her action as she offers worship to God in the name of the Son, to the Father, in the Spirits power. It is in this celebration of Christ's most precious body and blood, the memorial of his sacrifice upon the cross as a central

moment for the Christian community that we are prepared for what St Thomas Aquinas refers to as ‘the beatific vision’.^[3] In other words, it is in the Eucharist that we are prepared for our apotheosis in death at that moment when both sacraments and longing shall cease. The Eucharist therefore is particular preparation for that moment when ‘In the manifestation of Christ, shining with the light of uncreated glory, the Holy Spirit will grant the revelation of the Father’s face shining through that of the Son...[and] God the Holy Trinity will be seen by all the blessed through the direct vision of Christ’.^[4] In bread and wine, his body and his blood, Christ is both the face of the Eucharist and the window into eternity. In the Eucharist, Christ’s glorious and glorified body is lifted up and adored, and, in our sharing in one bread and one cup we are united with Him who concomitantly through effective symbols is made manifest before our very eyes. We see as participants in the Eucharist what we shall come to behold in eternity. We should remember in our participation however that ‘the church uses physical things to convey God’s grace, and this use has a significance for the way Christians look on the natural world’.^[5] For those participating in this mystery, the Eucharist is not the resuscitation in our minds of the memory of a man once dead. Rather, it is intimacy with the living God in the flesh and blood of Jesus of Nazareth crucified, risen and ascended. The same God who in solidarity with his creatures takes residence in the womb of Mary, is present on every altar and tabernacle of the world veiled under the Eucharistic species of bread and wine. Thus, for the Christian community, Jesus is both our Saviour and our home, he ‘is the temple of the final age, he is heaven, the new Jerusalem; he is the cultic space for God’^[6] both in the world and in our lives for all eternity.

Jesus Christ then, and all to which we look at as his body, symbolizes our eternal home. But Christ’s body too as seen in the Eucharist is symbolic of much more than just that which takes place in the Eucharistic ritual. In this essay I shall speak primarily about the Eucharistic species and their appearance by exploring how the Whiteness of Eucharistic bread has the capacity to affect our communication of the Church’s faith and teaching through the liturgy in relation to race. This occurs, I want to suggest, through a distortion of our perception of who Jesus Christ is in his Jewish identity, a confusion of the value the Church places on Black and brown bodies, and a lack of deep reflection on the Eucharist’s capacity for violence. There will not be space here to explore all these facets in depth, but I intend this to be the beginning of further reflection on the aesthetics of Eucharistic Whiteness. In reflecting on how our aesthetic choices in regard to Eucharistic ritual might be a barrier to both participation in and catechesis of the mystery of the sacrament of Christ’s Body and Blood, I suggest that unblemished white bread should be reconsidered so that it ceases to be treated as *sine qua non* the Eucharist. In reflecting on the ideology of white aesthetics I am not arguing that the whiteness of the host which is an accidental is a mark of the substance of Christ, but simply that this accidental allows Christ in substance and in every other way to be associated with Whiteness in the ideological sense – and thus renders the Eucharist with a capacity for racial violence. To state that the Eucharist has a capacity for such violence is to engage the initial problem. Most Christians would place the Eucharist and its liturgical paraphernalia in the realm of the good and the beautiful. It is a contention of this essay that as Christians, we must consider the dangers of Christian practice, particularly the Eucharist, and take seriously the capacity of liturgical ritual for perpetuating violence and firming up divides in the world both theological and political.

Our relationship with the Eucharist as that which is ‘beautiful’ and ‘good’ is intricately connected to our relationship with the person whom we not only meet in its ritual but about whom the Eucharist speaks, and our posture in that narrative. To ignore the Eucharist’s capacity for violence is to deny the facts of

history^[7] where Jewish suffering in particular is palpable, but also where our ignorance and naïveté serves as a double failure to acknowledge that what would otherwise remain an unidentified object, the Eucharistic host, has special meaning and alluring qualities in our lives because of our personal and communal experience with and of Jesus Christ. At this juncture then we can note that, 'What makes an experience aesthetic is not that the thing we experience is beautiful, but that we experience it in a certain way'^[8]. Art, architecture, ritual, are all mediums for catechesis, but they are also the actions, objects and movements through which other objects, actions and movements gather meaning in our particular lives and communities. Some of the violence, indeed much of the violence faced by Jewish people in the Middle Ages found its *fons et origo* in the Church's denial of Jesus' real identity at the site of Eucharistic worship. Encouraged by Peter Och's work, Lauren F. Winner in her analysis of the Eucharist asks us to consider the multifarious ways in which the Eucharist forms its practitioners, i.e. the judgements it enables participants to make, the postures it encourages them to assume in the world, and the politics it makes possible.^[9] In failing to ask these questions, mediaeval Christians inflicted heinous crimes on their Jewish neighbours as stories of 'host desecrations' apparently carried out by Jewish people led to charges as well as physical and brutal acts of violence which were repeated in a number of places. The source and summit of the Church's life, the Eucharist, became the place where exclusion was practiced in place of embrace and rejection in place of hospitality. The Church's failure to consider what its theology and its ritual *did* in the world, and the judgements it formed in the minds and hearts of the faithful, enabled violence in its name to occur. And our failure in this time to consider what the aesthetics of the Eucharist *do* in the world present us with a similar problem. To hear this and consider it in this moment in the life of the world reminds us that our 'Liturgical theology suffers when it fails to acknowledge 'hidden' power issues'^[10]. There are multidimensional powers at play in the Eucharist, and some of that power is human – individual and communal.

In the same way in which, in its present life and in its history, the Church's Eucharistic ritual served as a site of anti-Jewish violence we must consider whether the Eucharist might, as a site for the preservation of Whiteness, in which (in a multitude of contexts) an unblemished white host venerated as the body of Christ is lifted up, can serve as a perpetuating symbol of White Supremacy. In our analysis of the Eucharistic ritual as a place with the potential for the perpetuating of violence we can ask: What would it render to us as the Body of Christ to see an olive-brown host, which is truly the body, blood, soul and divinity of Christ lifted up and adored in the Church's liturgy and ritual? Whilst not every celebrant of the Eucharist, nor every Eucharistic rite offers a moment of elevation – those traditions in which Eucharistic adoration for example is a fundamental component, Jesus Christ is regularly raised and adored under the species of a host. At this moment, where is the Jewish-ness of Jesus? Where is the holy blackness of the Christ who spoke the words: '*And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself.*' (John 12:32). How are all people to connect with the Christ who lives in flesh beyond unblemished white bread and who gave his life for Black and brown as well as all other bodies? To understand why the whiteness of Eucharistic bread may serve as a medium through which violence is perpetuated, we must first consider whiteness and its multifarious ways of functioning in the world.

It is an unavoidable fact that the ideology of white aesthetics, insofar as it renders whiteness the paradigm of beauty in liturgical ritual, affects not only how white individuals view others but how Black people view themselves. From the whiteness of a wedding dress, to the whiteness of an alb, cotta, cope, candle, or altar cloth to the unblemished whiteness of Eucharistic bread – what is communicated is that whiteness equals purity, and is the suitable aesthetic to accompany the holiness of God. The whiteness

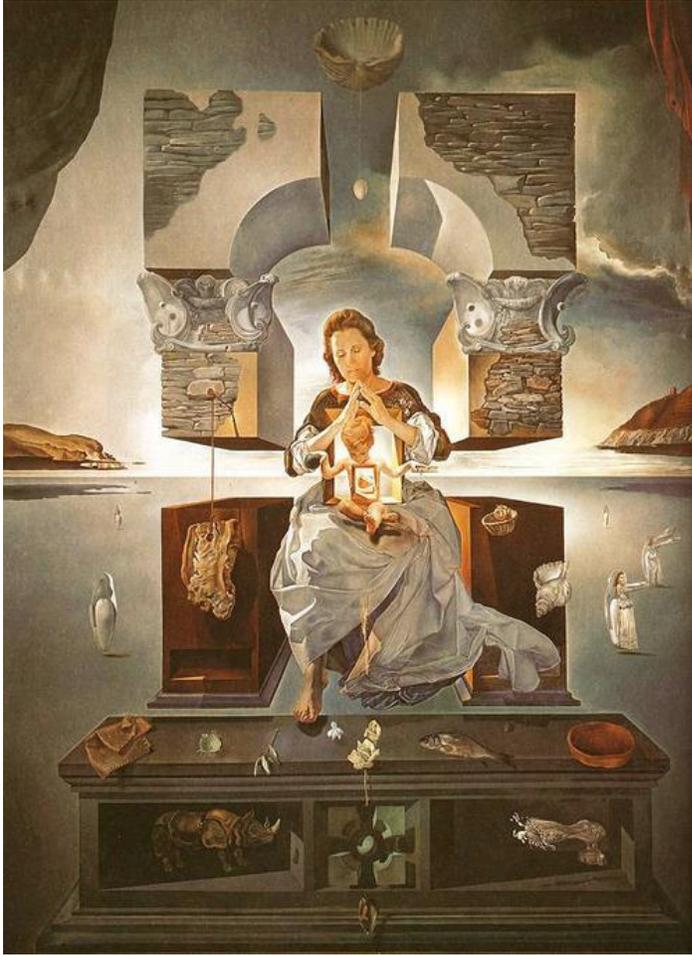
of Eucharistic bread, in a society which positions notions of White beauty as universally desirable continues to make 'white' synonymous with the holy, the divine, and the eternal. In fact, we might ponder whether White Supremacy could ever have flourished so profoundly if Whiteness had never become synonymous with 'God'. In the Church's history, Black people were alienated from their own bodies and cultures because their skin did not resemble the whiteness seen today in the host. To insist that bodily aesthetics and liturgical aesthetics can be separated is to ignore the historical and lasting association of blackness with the demonic, ugly and sinful. We can see this in the 4th century work of Athanasius, who, in his life of Antony of Egypt when writing of the demonic, speaks of 'an ugly black boy [who] prostrated himself at Antony's feet'^[11] to whom Antony in response says 'You are utterly despicable and contemptible, for both your blackness and your age are signs of weakness.'^[12] But anti-blackness functions in the work of other patristic writers such as Origen and Jerome, the latter of whom writes of those "blackened by their sins" (Homily 18 on Psalm 86), and we see in the writings of Palladius and the Sayings of the Desert Fathers the use of Ethiopian women in particular as representations of sexual vice and sin – inherent in their physical blackness. John M. Kang writes that 'the ideology of White aesthetics claims that the physical features of White people are universally good and objectively true. White people institutionalize these beliefs through the media and, more generally, popular culture.'^[13] Works such as that by Athanasius mark the beginning of a long trajectory of associating Whiteness with the holy, the good and the true. We witness this in Elizabethan England for example where Whiteness carried a special significance, perceived as the colour of perfect human beauty the embodiment of which, when coupled with her red cheeks was the Queen.^[14] Black Africans challenged this ideal of beauty which they would never fit and to which many refuse to aspire. In America, 'Christian' attitudes to blackness were applied by Thomas Jefferson and Benjamin Franklin in their bolstering of White Supremacy particularly under the trope of black intellectual inferiority so much so that what Kelly Brown Douglas calls the 'crucifying reality' of White Supremacy is tangible in every area of Black life. Jefferson himself argued "that the "eternal monotony" of ugly Blackness not only covers the physical appearances of Black people but their emotions as well." Thus, Black people are reduced to one dimensional beings because of their skin color. By contrast, [Jefferson] argues that White people can express "every passion" because of their beautiful white hues." Racial aesthetics, then, confers a three-dimensional humanity upon White people while dehumanizing Black people'^[15] even to the degree that their ugly Blackness enters that eternity of which the Eucharist is a foretaste. Although these comments are rooted in a specific way in the American context, there are tangible global consequences to the ideology of Whiteness and its apparent worship and adoration in the Christian Church. I do not believe that the lifting up of an unblemished white host, which is Christ's body can be divorced as an action from the context of any society in which White racist violence is all-pervasive. There are social, political and epistemological consequences to ritual aesthetics that turn, and continue to hold what is white as a symbol of beauty and signifier of holiness. Indeed, this is not restricted to Athanasius's fourth-century^[16] context nor present day America. Frantz Fanon notes that: '*In Europe, the black man is the symbol of Evil. One must move softly, I know, but it is not easy. The torturer is the black man, Satan is black, one talks of shadows, when one is dirty one is black-whether one is thinking of physical dirtiness or of moral dirtiness. It would be astonishing, if the trouble were taken to bring them all together, to see the vast number of expressions that make the black man the equivalent of sin....Blackness, darkness, shadow, shades, night, the labyrinths of the earth, abysmal depths, blacken someone's reputation; and, on the other side, the bright look of innocence, the white dove of peace, magical, heavenly light. A magnificent blond child-how much peace there is in that phrase, how much joy, and above all how much*

hope! There is no comparison with a magnificent black child: literally, such a thing is un-wanted...In Europe the Negro has one function: that of symbolizing the lower emotions, the baser inclinations, the dark side of the soul. In the collective un-conscious of *homo occidentalis*, the Negro—or, if one prefers, the color Black—symbolizes evil, sin, wretchedness, death, war, famine.’^[17]

To conclude then, I wish to agree with Paulette Caldwell in that ‘Judgments about aesthetics do not exist apart from judgments about the social, political, and economic order of society. They are an essential part of that order. Aesthetic values determine who and what is valued, beautiful, and entitled to control. Thus established, the structure of society at other levels is also justified.’^[18]

In a world where blackness literally means death and whiteness literally means life – the Eucharist is not beyond the perpetuation of violence. The use of unblemished white bread by the Church in what it considers the source and summit of its life must be deeply reconsidered. Our Eucharistic theology is inadequate if it ends at the unblemished whiteness of consecrated bread whilst failing to transfigure our perception of Christ away from the altar – in the incarcerated, the hungry and disinherited. If Christ can only be adored and valued in the unblemished whiteness of a consecrated host, of such precious value that it is worth running into burning buildings to save^[19], but cannot be loved in the black and brown drowning refugee then our Eucharistic theology is already doing harm and mis-ordering our judgements. As Karen O’Donnell remarks in her work on trauma and the Eucharist: ‘When it comes to extending [the] Eucharistic presence beyond the doorways of the Church, then the physical, fleshly presence matters. It is [Christ’s] physical, fleshly presence that has real effect on the world. It is the Real Presence of Christ in Christians that rolls up its sleeves and gets its hands dirty in the filth of poverty, death and disease.’^[20] We are formed by the aesthetics of the Eucharist, formed by our theologies of the Eucharist and formed by the Eucharistic ritual. I do not suggest here that all Eucharistic bread become brown, rather I have challenged the assumption that it must be white.^[21] In suggesting that we reconsider the ability of bread, ritual, and the aesthetics of the Eucharist to exert violence, I am critiquing the aesthetics of the Eucharist as what many deem as neutral. There are no neutral aesthetics, no neutral ritual, no neutral theologies. Whilst doctrine cannot dictate the inner workings of individual worshippers, nor the associations they make between the whiteness of Eucharistic host and the blackness of their neighbor, the Eucharist has the potential to become a bastion of Whiteness in a world where societal structures, and indeed the Church as the Body of Christ – still fail to see that which is ‘black’ as holy – such that the aesthetics of the Eucharist have come now to be mimetic less with our beatific vision of eternity, but more possibly with a racist, exclusionary and increasingly isolated society.

‘The mere linguistic convergence of Eucharist and racism disturbs. It makes us queasy, uncomfortable. It should.’^[22]



[1]Scruton, Roger., *Beauty: A Very Short Introduction*.OUP. 2011. xi.

[2]Pope Paul VI., *Lumen Gentium*Ch:11. 1964.

[3]Davies, Brian., *Thomas Aquinas: A Very Brief History*. SPCK. 2017. pp. 76-77.

[4]Collins, Gregory., *Meeting Christ In His Mysteries*. Columba Press. 2010. p. 92.

[5]Quash, Ben and Wells, Samuel., *Introducing Christian Ethics*.Wile-Blackwell. 2010. p. 354.

[6]Ratzinger, Joseph., *Eschatology*.CUA Press. 1988. p. 234.

[7]For an extensive treatment of this see Lauren F. Winner: 'The Dangers of Christian Practice'. Yale. 2018. pp. 19-56.

[8]Nanay, Bence., *Aesthetics: A Very Short Introduction*. OUP. 2019. p. 10.

[9]Winner, Lauren F., *The Dangers of Christian Practice*.Yale. 2018. pp. 41-43

[10]Winner, Lauren F., *The Dangers of Christian Practice*.Yale. 2018. p. 42.

[11]White, Carolinne., *Early Christian Lives*. Penguin. 1998. p. 12

[12]ibid. p.13.

[13]Kang, John M., *Deconstructing the Ideology of White Aesthetics*. Michigan Journal of Race and Law Volume 2. 1997. p. 293.

[14]Winthrop, Jordan., *White Over Black: American Attitudes Towards the Negro 1550-1812*.1968. p.40.

[15]Kang, John M., *Deconstructing the Ideology of White Aesthetics*. Michigan Journal of Race and Law Volume 2. 1997. p. 302.

[16]See: Byron, Gay L., *Symbolic Blackness*. Routledge. 2002. pp. 17 – 52.

[17]Fanon, Frantz., *Black Skin White Masks*.(Charles Lam Markmann trans., 1967). pp.188-91.

[18]Caldwell, Paulette M., *A Hair Piece: Perspectives on the Intersection of Race and Gender*.Duke Law Journal. 1991. 365, 393.

[19]<https://www.ncregister.com/blog/notre-dame-priest-how-blessed-sacrament-crown-of-thorns-were-saved-from-fire>

[20]O'Donnell, Karen., *Broken Bodies*, SCM Press. 2019. p. 155.

[21]The canons of the Church of England only state the following regarding Eucharistic bread: Canon B17. 2. 'The bread, whether leavened or unleavened, shall be of the best and purest wheat flour that conveniently may be gotten, and the wine the fermented juice of the grape, good and wholesome.' Canon 924: Article 3: 2. 'The bread must be wheaten only and recently made, so that there is no danger of corruption.'

[22]Copeland, M. Shawn., *Enfleshing Freedom*. Fortress Press. 2010. p. 107.