How do we know Black lives matter to God?

# I used to wonder about the propriety of faith in a White Jesus. Now I struggle with the efficacy of faith at all.

by Kelly Brown Douglas in the October 7, 2020 issue

(Illustration by Tim Cook)

*During times of turbulence in politics, culture, and religious life, it's tempting to hold tightly to current convictions. Allowing a change of one's mind or heart can be difficult work. With this in mind, we have resumed a Century series published at intervals since 1939, in which we ask leading thinkers to reflect on their own struggles, disappointments, and hopes as they address the topic, "How my mind has changed." This essay is the fourth in the new series.*

Anselm's dictum that theology is "faith seeking understanding" perfectly describes my theological journey. Even before I knew the word *theology*, I struggled to understand the meaning of my faith in relationship to my Blackness. This struggle continues for me today, although perhaps in a more focused way. While I initially wondered about the propriety of faith in what I believed then to be a "White Jesus," I

now struggle with the efficacy of faith at all.

James Baldwin once said that there comes a time in the life of every Black person in America when they must face the “shock . . . that the flag to which you have pledged allegiance . . . has not pledged allegiance to you.” And now, as the mother of a six-foot-tall, loc-wearing, 27-year-old Black man—fearing for his life in this nation as much as I did when he was born, and realizing the gravity of sin in this country that is a mortal threat to all Black life—I find myself facing the shock that perhaps the “God of Jesus Christ,” in whom Black people have pledged faith, has not really pledged allegiance to us.

In light of that reality, I find myself reflecting not primarily upon how my theological mind has changed but upon how my journey to understand my faith continues. This journey is marked by two books, my first, *The Black Christ*, and my most recent, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God*.

The origins of *The Black Christ* began in my childhood. When I was six, I heard the whispers of the adults around me talking about how awful it was that a church was bombed and four little girls were killed. I can remember hearing someone say that “the White man” who did it would probably never be caught, and if he were caught nothing was likely to happen to him. I now know they were talking about the 1963 Birmingham church bombing.

Around that same time in my childhood, I remember seeing pictures on the news of White policemen with dogs attacking Black people, and what struck me most were images of dogs attacking Black children. I didn’t know what I was watching, but those images were seared into my mind. I also remember eavesdropping as my parents talked about a man in Mississippi, Medgar Evers, who was killed in his driveway in front of his family. My parents discussed what a shame it was, but I also heard them say that nothing would probably happen to the perpetrator (if he was even caught).

I have no doubt that these whispered conversations and violent images are what prompted me around that time to ask my father why White people didn’t like us. I don’t recall his answer, but I remember thinking that if I could figure out the reason, then maybe we could do something about it and then White people would stop treating us so badly. I was certain that we must have done something to warrant such treatment.

After some time had passed, I picked up the conversation with my father. As we were leaving our home one afternoon, I stopped on the porch and said, “Daddy, I figured out the answer to my question” (as if he and I had been having this continuous conversation).

He asked, “The answer to what question?”

I responded, “To what we did that made White people not like us and treat us so badly.”

“Oh, what did you figure out?”

“We didn’t do anything. They just treat us like this because they want to. It could be anybody; it just happens to be us.”

Amid images of Black children dying, Jesus’ death came to the forefront of my faith.

I didn’t realize then that it wasn’t just us, or that it was more than simply a question of whether White people liked us. What was important for me at the time was the discovery that there was nothing wrong with Black people; rather, there was something wrong with White people. This was my first understanding of White racism—the notion of a problem with White people, the enforcers of the color line.

It was also around that time that I first became aware of the realities of racialized economic injustice. When I was about seven years old, I remember riding with my parents through the inner city of my hometown, Dayton, Ohio. It was a rainy evening. I looked out the window of the car and noticed a little girl and boy crossing the street. They were about my age and Black like me. I presumed them to be sister and brother. They were a bit disheveled and not properly dressed for the cold rainy weather. From my perspective they looked poor and hungry. Tears filled my eyes as I imagined for them a life of struggle. In the midst of my tears I made a silent vow to one day come back and rescue those two children from the blight of Dayton’s inner city.

Initially, I fantasized that I would grow up while they remained young. I would become a teacher and somehow change their life options. As I got older, the thought of those children never left me. They created within me a deep sense of accountability to the poor and marginalized people of our society, especially those who looked like me. I was determined to find a vocation that makes a just difference

in the lives of Black people, particularly those who were trapped in life-negating conditions.

My sense of vocation didn't come only from the memory of those children. I was also motivated by my love for Jesus. I grew up in St. Margaret's, the only Black Episcopal church in Dayton. Nearly every Sunday I would awaken my parents and ask them to take me to church, even if they weren't planning to go that day. Most weeks I attended both the 8 a.m. and 11 a.m. services, plus Sunday school in between.

One of the reasons I liked going to church, especially as a young child, was that I loved hearing stories about Jesus. One of the most compelling yet saddest stories I heard was about his birth. I simply could not understand how people allowed a baby to be born in a cold barn and laid in a manger. I cried every time we sang, "Away in a manger, no crib for a bed / The little Lord Jesus lay down his sweet head." Those words reminded me of the girl and boy I'd seen that rainy evening. Somehow, I instinctively knew that there was a connection between Jesus' manger birth and those children's inner-city life. As time went on, I would try to figure out this connection—but not before a period of profound doubt.

I entered college with a deep pride in my Blackness, along with an intense understanding of what W. E. B. Du Bois meant when he wrote in *The Souls of Black Folk* that "the problem of the Twentieth Century [in America] is the problem of the color line." My experiences of growing up in Dayton—a city with a history of segregation and race riots—and of being called the *N*-word schooled me in the violence of White racism. These experiences also made me very wary of White people.

As this wariness grew, I became increasingly impatient with the color line that circumscribed and threatened Black life. Moreover, I recognized that as long as the color line existed, far too many Black children would be born into social conditions that fostered death—not life. My accountability to those two children I'd seen crossing the street became a passionate commitment to dismantle the White racist color line. Ironically, as that commitment grew, my belief in Jesus waned.

Whiteness prevents those who refuse to let go of its privileges from living into who they are.

By my junior year of college, my childhood love for Jesus was slowly being replaced by a deep skepticism. I wanted to know if the Jesus I'd loved unconditionally as a

child loved me back unconditionally. I wondered if my Blackness made a difference. After all, the Jesus of my Sunday school lessons was always pictured as White. This fact alone made me skeptical of his love for me—and it led me to question the propriety of my love for him.

How could a White Jesus ever care about me, not to speak of caring for poor Black children? And how could I, a Black person, ever have faith in a White Jesus? I didn't want to abandon the church—or Jesus—but I needed answers to these questions. I was experiencing an agonizing crisis of faith. And then my college chaplain, David Woodyard, introduced me to James Cone's book *A Black Theology of Liberation*.

When I opened the book, I could not believe what I was reading. Cone pronounces, "Jesus is the black Christ!" He further explains, "The definition of Christ as black means that he represents the complete opposite of the values of white culture . . . [and] leads the warfare against the white assault on blackness." When I read these words, my questions were answered. I could be Black with a love for Jesus without contradiction, because in fact Jesus was Black like me. And most significantly, as Cone made clear, because Jesus "was born in a stable and cradled in a manger (the equivalent of a beer case in a ghetto alley)," he was one with all those Black children who were trapped behind the life-draining color line of inner-city realities.

Essentially, Cone's declaration of Jesus' Blackness opened me to a whole new appreciation of my faith, the faith of my grandmother. My love for Jesus was renewed. My angst turned to excitement. This discovery marked the beginning of my purposeful theological journey. I wanted to learn as much as I could about my Black faith and the Black Christ that was at its center. Writing *The Black Christ* was the first step of that journey.

During this part of my journey, it was Jesus' manger birth that held the most meaning for me. That he was born in the starkness of a manger allowed me to see his connection to that Black girl and boy who had made such an imprint upon my childhood imagination. His manger birth convinced me that he understood the struggles, if not the hopes and dreams, of Black children who were trapped in manger-like conditions of living.

Jesus' manger birth continues to have theological significance for me as an indicator of his intrinsic bond with those on the outside, that is, on the wrong side of the color line. Nevertheless, as my youthful images of Black children crossing the street were

steadily overtaken with images of Black children dying in the street, it was Jesus' crucifixion death that came to the forefront of my faith.

Some 50 years after asking my father why White people treated Black people so badly, I found myself asking that question again. And once again, images of Black children in the street were haunting me. They were the faces of Trayvon, Jordan, Renisha, Jonathan, Tamir, Sandra, Michael, and so many more. These were young Black men and women being murdered at the hands of White people, for no apparent reason other than being Black. Worse yet, the White people who killed them were getting away with it. My father's words, "nothing will happen to the White man who did it," were echoing in my mind. History was repeating itself, and I wanted to know why.

Why were our Black children's lives as much at risk—if not more so—as they'd ever been in our nation's history? After all, the nation had just elected its first Black president, which signaled to some the advent of a postracial society. What was going on? I had to know, for now more was at stake for me than the relief that Black people did nothing to deserve such treatment. Our children's lives were at stake. My son's life was at stake. I needed answers.

Those answers began with the recognition that the problem was about more than White racism and whether or not White people liked Black people. It was about the lethal and insidious reality of White supremacy that is endemic to the very fabric of this nation. White supremacy is the system of structural, cultural, and ideological realities that protect and privilege Whiteness. Whiteness, therefore, is not a benign social-racial construct. It is both the foundation and the capital of White supremacy.

Recognizing this further complicated my understanding of the color line in America. The problem of the color line is not a matter of White people being overtly racist. Rather, it is about White people benefiting from White supremacist realities—whether or not they acknowledge these benefits. And the more they benefit from White supremacy, the more Black life is socially, economically, and physically endangered. What therefore became clear to me in this part of my theological journey was that White supremacy is the original sin to which this nation is still held captive.

Ironically, this recognition only caused my appreciation for the faith of my grandmother to grow. I felt indebted to a faith that was forged in the midst of one of

the most perverse and inhumane realities of Black life: slavery. This was a faith, as Howard Thurman says, that “has had to fight against the disillusionment, despair, and the vicissitudes of American history.” This was a faith in the Jesus who, in being crucified, revealed his utter solidarity with Black people as they struggled to survive the crucifying cross of White supremacy. That Jesus was crucified affirmed his absolute identification with the Trayvons, the Jordans, the Renishas, and all the other Black men and women whose lives were lost to White supremacist violence. It was in their faces that I could see Jesus.

Thus, as my youthful images of Black children crossing the street became overtaken with images of Black children dying in the street, Jesus’ crucifixion death came to the forefront of my faith. At the end of that part of my journey, marked by the publication of *Stand Your Ground*, I was able to echo the words of Trayvon Martin’s father: “My heart was broken, but my faith was not shattered.”

But now here I am, five years after *Stand Your Ground*, calling out more names of Black lives lost, seeking to understand not just the what but perhaps the why of Black faith.

*I am Trayvon. Say her name. Hands up, don’t shoot. I can’t breathe. Black lives matter.* These mantras filled my mind recently as I ran 2.23 miles to honor and demand justice for Ahmaud Arbery, who was gunned down by two White men while jogging in a Georgia suburb. By the time I completed the run, I was breathless, but not because my legs were tired or my lungs were winded. I was breathless because my heart was heavy and my spirit was troubled. Ahmaud had become the latest in a long list of young Black lives lost to the hate of White racist violence. Then there was Breonna Taylor. Then George Floyd.

In response to President John Kennedy’s assassination, Martin Luther King Jr. said, “While the question of ‘Who killed President Kennedy?’ is important, the question, ‘What killed him?’ is more important.” Inasmuch as what is killing Black people in this country is about the systemic, structural, and cultural realities of White supremacy, I have become increasingly aware that it is also about much more than that. It is about the collective soul of America.

The soul—that which connects human beings to our aspirational selves, animating and propelling us to do better, pushing us toward the fullest potential of what it means to be *good*—reflects the essence of our humanity. The soul of who we are as

divinely made creatures, therefore, is not defined by the mercurial and compromising protestations of human beings, nor is it accountable to the politics and biases of human history. Rather, it is inextricably bound to the transcendent arc of the universe that bends toward justice—that perfect goodness which is the loving justice of God. Our soul connects us to the beloved community, which God promises for all of us, a community where all persons are treated as the sacred creations that they are.

The bodies of Black people in the streets raise the question: What has alienated America from its very soul, thereby normalizing violence against Black lives and preventing all people from reaching for their best selves? The answer: Whiteness itself.

Whiteness is an inherently oppositional and violent construct. Not only does it stand in opposition to all those who are not White, but most insidiously, it opposes the very humanity of a people. Whiteness is soul-crushing, as it prevents those who refuse to name and let go of its privileges from living into who they are—sacred beings created in the image of a loving and just God. White America is alienated from its very soul, that is, its humanity. This fact has dire consequences for Black lives—and for Black faith.

In fighting against the White supremacist realities of his time, King noted that “the law can’t make a man love me, but it can restrain him from lynching me. . . . So while the law may not change the hearts of men, it does change the habits of men. And when you change the habits of men, pretty soon the attitudes and the hearts will be changed.” But as the “Make America great again” politics of this nation has recently revealed, changing laws is not enough—because a heartless and soulless people will defy just laws and create inhumane ones.

In this regard, Whiteness has a profound spiritual impact upon this nation. It renders it without the moral leadership to lead it back to its better angels, that is, to be reconciled with its soul. And as long as the soul of this nation is compromised by Whiteness, then Black lives will be at risk. This means that the realities of prison, poverty, policing, and “greatness” politics will continue to obscure the compassionate, loving, and healing justice that is the grace of a crucified Christ.

It is with this recognition that I have come full circle on my theological journey. More than 25 years after *The Black Christ*, I am in the midst of another crisis of faith as I

seek to discern God’s presence and power during an unrelenting war on Black lives.

But now, I am pushed not by my questions alone but mostly by my son’s questions to me: “How do we really know that God cares when Black people are still getting killed? How long do we have to wait for the justice of God?” he asks. “I get it, that Christ is Black, but that doesn’t seem to be helping us right now.” These are the questions that I now seek to answer. Left to be determined is how those answers will change my theological mind.

*A version of this article appears in the print edition under the title “Struggling with Black faith in America.”*