The New Diaspora and the Global Prophetic

Engaging the Scholarship of Marc H. Ellis

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Chapter 2

Israel and the Idolatry of Whiteness

The Critique of Race that Marc Ellis Never Knew He Made

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Images captivate us. They persuade and seduce us. They tell us stories that shape our identities and communicate something about the world. They populate the space of the social imaginary, teaching us how to make sense of the people and things that we encounter every day.[1] Herein lies their true power. This, I realize, is a strange way to begin a chapter honoring the life and work of Marc Ellis. When one thinks about Ellis' scholarship, visual theory does not typically come to mind. Yet the socially persuasive power of images is exactly what Ellis gestures toward when he writes of how Palestinians are typically depicted by the state of Israel. Ellis suggests that the "real prejudice of the day is found . . . where images of the unwashed, the ignorant and the terrorist are related *ad nauseam*."[2] Reflecting on the 1948 occupation and expulsion of the Palestinian population from Lydda, Ellis quotes an Israeli politician who makes a simple, but profound observation: "Many of us are losing their human image."[3] This loss of a peoples' human image, of their humanity, is essential in the conflict between Israel and Palestine. The way in which Palestinians are seen, the subhuman images attached to their bodies, the distorted and disordered ways in which they are perceived—such visual and imaginative moves help determine what treatment of this people is thought necessary for the proper order of Western modernity to be maintained.

In *Toward a Jewish Theology of Liberation*, Ellis links this subhuman treatment grounded in the loss of the Palestinian's human image with the problem of idolatry. Our inability to connect our suffering to that of others is a byproduct of our idolatrous infidelity. It is the outcome of shifting the direction of our devotion from God to someone or something else.[4] Allegiance

to this something else prompts our rejection of liberation. Instead of caring for those around us, we choose to privilege power, domination, and excessive materialism.[5] Such behavior is the natural consequence of idolatry. Ellis identifies "unbridled capitalism, jingoistic patriotism, and national security" as Israel's true contemporary idols.[6] He argues that these destructive national and market interests are byproducts of an idolatry born of Constantinianism. In Ellis's understanding, Constantinianism, in this case "Constantinian Judaism,"[7] emerges out of a sociopolitical order established under the guise of superficial religious values and, thereby, produces a form of civil religion that parodies religious ideas in order to establish docile subjects.

For Ellis, Constantinianism is a false religious commitment with idolatrous ends. Yet to focus on Constantinianism is only part of the picture. There is another form of idolatry at play. Alongside unrestrained capitalism and excessive nationalism is the worship of whiteness, one of the most powerful ideological forces undergirding the current structures and pursuits of Western modernity. Its idolization paves the way for Israel's and, not coincidentally, America's obsession with "unbridled capitalism, jingoistic patriotism, and national security."

IDOLATRY OF WHITENESS

While it is beyond the scope of this chapter to provide a comprehensive picture of the development of whiteness and its idolization, there is reason to consider Christianity's part in establishing this white ideal.[8] Within the folds of Constantinianism's religiously supported state power and guided by a persistent anti-Semitism, Jesus's Jewishness becomes a problem that white Western Christianity must fix. His Jewishness becomes a liability— one addressed in part within the realm of popular religious imagination. By decoupling Jesus from his Jewishness, he is repositioned within the European and American imagination in a manner consitent with a Western sense of the world's order.

Jesus is not born white; he is made white.[9] Through a series of subtle imaginative moves, Jesus's Semitic identity is dismantled. He is whitewashed and readied for Western deployment.[10] Transfigured into the white ideal, Jesus is made beautiful and, in turn, universal. As a white European, he embodies what is perceived to be normative humanity. And, of course, his embodiment of white Western masculinity further enshrines the normativity of his whiteness. This shift from non-white to white and from particular to universal is an important aspect of why the white idol remains so powerful today.

The link between whiteness, Christianity, and Western civilization is made possible by stripping Jesus of his Semitic character and reconstructing him as

a white European. Such a connection is furthered by the colonial ambitions of Spain, Portugal, France, and Britain whose emissaries are sent to those "dark" and "uncivilized" lands and pagan peoples. With the explicit support of the Catholic Church and, later, the Church of England, European colonial efforts become part of a comprehensive evangelistic strategy.[11] The colonizer's role, in part, is to spread the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ, converting the heathen to Christianity for the sake of God's Kingdom. Beyond this basic ecclesial mission, however, soldiers, missionaries, and the settlers that follow prove to be evangelists in another sense. They spread the good news of European culture and Western civilization. This culture promises to save all those who learn to conform to its holy order. Such salvation, however, is not simply rescue from spiritual damnation, but also from the ignorance of savagery. It brings order to those who are inherently disordered. The gospel of European culture promises to save a people's humanity.

When the French Jesuits seek to convert the Kaskaskia tribe, an Amerindian people living in the Northeastern Woodlands, they use engraved pictures of essential Bible stories to illustrate their lessons. The characters in these scenes, however, do not look like the Kaskaskia people at all. Instead, they appear distinctly European, styled in the latest French fashion and surrounded by contemporary European goods. These images implicitly teach the indigenous populations that European cultural practices are part of living properly ordered Christian lives, lives organized in a manner fit for participation within civilized Christian society.[12] In this manner, these images establish a racially, culturally, and spiritually charged sociopolitical order that eventually becomes the dominant imaginative reality within the Western world.

Fulfilling the role of both Christian disciple and Western subject, the colonizer is a living example that the indigenous populations are to emulate. The white European's paradigmatic status positions whiteness as essential to the social, political, and theological colonial imagination in the West. Whiteness becomes a mark of Christianity as well as a sign of civility. It becomes the ideal toward which all people are to strive, rendering its pursuit a form of sanctification.

As wild lands eventually coalesce into colonies and these colonies transition into a nation of immigrants, Jews are not immune to this manner of ordering people. They, too, are subject to this persuasive power of categorization and its salvific journey toward whiteness. The achievement of whiteness for many European immigrants in the United States hinges upon how successfully they undertake this journey by distancing themselves from African Americans and, thereby, establishing themselves as spiritually, socially, and culturally ordered. Karen Brodkin points toward the ways in which, for Jewish immigrants, this disassociation from African Americans occurs largely along economic and class lines. She notes how post–World

War II Federal Government programs were offered to white GIs, including American Jews, but denied to Black GIs. This proves to be a significant factor in the American Jewish ability to achieve their white status.[13] However, such a claim begs the question of why Jews are considered white enough to receive these benefits in the first place.

The history of anti-Semitism in the Constantinian context of medieval Europe, both in the expulsion of Jews and efforts to eliminate Arabs, suggests that the separation of Jews from their Semitic identity is a necessary prerequisite to their acceptance within Western modernity. Their once thoroughgoing Semitic character signals a threat to the West's civilized (Christian) society.[14] As Jews distance themselves from their Semitic identity they are rendered largely non-threatening to the orderliness and wellbeing of American society.[15] It is not until they separate themselves from the Semitic that they can be viewed as white. Their achievement of whiteness marks Jews as having an innate spiritual order that is accompanied by a way of life believed to be inherently more civilized and, therefore, more human than that of non-white peoples.[16] In this way, the Jewish people transition from being perceived as disordered and unruly Semites, a people who threaten the future stability and progress of human civilization, to white subjects who are productive participants and healthy contributors to modern Western society.[17]

DANGEROUS AND DISORDERLY PEOPLES

The racial and spiritual transfiguration that Jews undergo is not a transformation available to all peoples. Despite the multi-faceted nature of race and the ways in which it encompasses much more than visually assessable physical attributes, race nonetheless remains tied to the body. The Black body anchors the category of disorder within the Western theo-political social imaginary and, as such, the presence of the Black man is judged to be an ongoing threat to the stability of modern Western society.

As previously noted, modernity's concepts of order and disorder are not only social and political; they are also cultural and spiritual. It is from the seed of white European social, cultural, political, and spiritual norms that modern Western society takes shape. The persistence of these interlocking categories in the reading of racialized bodies is present in the grand jury testimony of Darren Wilson, the white police officer who murdered eighteen-year-old African American Michael Brown. In his account of the altercation that ended with Brown's death, Wilson uses language that demonstrates the imaginative connection that exists between race, savagery, social disorder,

and spiritual chaos. Grabbing onto Brown, Wilson describes feeling like a "five-year-old holding onto Hulk Hogan . . . that's just how big he felt and how small I felt just from grasping his arm."[18] He paints a picture of Brown as a raging beast of a man. Brown "had the most intense aggressive face," Wilson states. "The only way I can describe it, it looks like a demon, that's how angry he looked."[19] After shooting at Brown several times, Wilson notes that the suspect was "still coming." He "hadn't slowed down."[20]

> At this point it looked like he was almost bulking up to run through the shots, like it was making him mad that I'm shooting at him. And the face that he had was looking straight through me, like I wasn't even there, I wasn't even anything in his way.[21]

The Black man is unnaturally strong. His strength is not that of a man but of a beast. Bullets cannot stop him. The Black man is inherently violent. He is disordered and disorderly. As such, the Black man threatens the peaceful order of civilized society. Yet, as indicated in Wilson's testimony, the disorderliness associated with Brown is not only the allegedly anti-social behavior of stealing cigarillos from a convenience store or the violence of a "bulk[ed] up" Black man charging through a volley of bullets; Brown's disorderliness is more deeply rooted. It is spiritual in nature. He is demonic. He is an unstoppable Black demon with a face twisted in hate. The threat of the Black body rests in the danger it poses to the wellbeing and proper order of America's civilized (white, Christian) society. The Black (heathen, savage) body, particularly the Black body in public space, threatens the established stability of Western modernity.

Marc Ellis life and work have been profoundly shaped by his prophetic concern with Jewish identity in light of state power and the plight of the Palestinian people. Consequently, his scholarship rarely addresses the image of the Black savage populating the West's social imaginary. Nor does Ellis diagnose the ills of the modern Western nation-state through the lens of white idolatry. Nonetheless, his analysis of how Israel portrays Palestinians is strikingly similar to common stereotypes applied to Black Americans. Much like African Americans, Palestinians are imagined to be violent, erratic, unpredictable, and dangerous.[22] They, too, are seen as a threat to the orderliness of civilized, which is to say, white Western society. Both are thought to bear an intransigently anti-social character and disorderly spiritual presence. Both are viewed as ontologically chaotic and, therefore, incompatible with the civilized (white, spiritually enlightened) orderliness of modern Western society. Blackness, whether it takes the form of the African American "delinquent" or the Palestinian "terrorist," is deemed a serious threat to Western civilization.[23]

Within the Constantinian contexts of the United States and Israel, the idolization of whiteness requires certain safeguards, including the policing of the "delinquent."[24] Internally deployed, the task of maintaining this order entails practices of self-monitoring, habituated through social formation, and a robust commitment to law-and-order policing and a criminal justice system.[25] Externally, the defense of whiteness takes the form of heavily guarded borders and restrictive immigration policies. This dual-approach functions to fortify more than the physical boundaries of the nation and its Western democratic principles. It serves to protect the supremacy of whiteness, an idolatrous practice that, to borrow Ellis words, produces a "false transcendence, which legitimates oppression."[26]

THE PROPHETIC JEWISH VOICE

What does faithfulness look like within a society thoroughly shaped by this form of idolatry? Ellis presses us to take seriously the importance of the prophetic. Faithfulness within an idolatrous society is one that requires prophets. The prophet speaks the truth, helping us to see the world as it truly is. And while there are a number of religions with a prophetic tradition, the prophet is at the heart of Judaism. To learn to speak prophetically as a Christian means that I must learn to heed the prophetic Jewish voice.[27]

Unbeknownst to me, this process of heeding the prophetic began as an undergraduate at Baylor University when, without using the language race, Marc Ellis introduced me to the problem of whiteness. Discussing identity one afternoon, Ellis told me that, if I ever wanted to understand myself fully, I needed to gain a clearer sense of my Chinese identity and history. I am biracial. My dad is Chinese American and my mom is Scottish, German American. Growing up in mostly white environments, I remember feeling the weight of not being entirely white. I wanted to be white, and this desire for whiteness, this wayward devotion, persisted into my undergraduate years. At the time, steeped in the worship of whiteness, I felt uncomfortable with the direction of Ellis encouragement. "What did the past experiences of other people have to do with my identity?" I wondered. Yet even this question was evidence of the hold that the myth of whiteness—whiteness as a-historical and universal humanity, whiteness as a form of transcendence—had over me.

As a Gentile Christian, the only way that I could learn to speak faithfully was in conversation with a prophetic Jewish voice like that of Marc Ellis. In fact, it is the Christian attempt to erase the Jewish voice and claim Israel's story as our own that leads us down the path of Christian Constantinianism.[28] This is achieved through the decoupling of Jesus from his Jewish identity,

which paves the way for the idolatry of whiteness. Given this path to idolatry, it stands to reason that the way forward must involve a reformation of the Christian imagination to recognize that Jesus is Jewish and that we, Gentile Christians, are not.[29] Such an acknowledgment entails accepting that we have been grafted into the body of Christ through grace, and that our inclusion requires entry into another people's story, that is, into the story of the people of Israel.[30] This belonging and this story are never ours by birthright, but in a secondary and much more vulnerable way. Convincing Christians of this truth may seem like a simple and straightforward task. But, of course, it is never simple or straightforward to convince people to give up the very idols that serve to secure their power.[31]

Marc Ellis is the first prophetic voice to challenge the hold that whiteness had over my heart and my thoroughly racialized theo-political imagination. His teaching and mentorship enabled me to recognize the idolatrous nature of my devotion. Now, as a teacher myself, I seek to chip away at the captivating hold that whiteness has over my own students and, thereby, strive to honor the prophetic witness of Marc Ellis and his critique of the idolatry of whiteness, a critique that, I am quite sure, he never knew he made.

NOTES

1. W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?: The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

2. Marc H. Ellis, *Toward a Jewish Theology of Liberation: The Challenge of the 21st Century*, 3rd expanded ed. (Waco, Texas: Baylor University Press, 2004), 209.

3. Ibid., 125.

4. Ibid., 175.

5. Ibid.

6. Ibid., 176.

7. This is one among many powerful images that defines Marc Ellis prophetic imagination. The image is both provocative and evocative in its description of a Judaism in the service of state power. Ellis accuses the Jewish people of entering into a "Constantinian Deal" that reoriented Jewish life intellectually, politically and culturally such that Jewish hope, memory, intellect, wealth and religion are mobilized for empowerment, much as the early Christians were mobilized in the Constantinian synthesis of church and state in the fourth century. The assimilation of Jewish identity to power and state means a militarized Judaism and Jewish life, and results in the loss of Judaism's ethical foundation which Ellis describes as the "end of Jewish ethical history." See Marc H. Ellis, *Israel and Palestine: Out of the Ashes: The Search for Jewish Identity in the Twenty-First Century* (London: Pluto Press, 2002), 1–14, 69–73.

8. Dwight N. Hopkins, "Theological Basis of Ecclesial Anti-Racist Witness," *Anglican Theological Review* 90.1 (Winter 2008): 7–21.

9. See Thomas F. Torrance, *The Mediation of Christ*, American edition (Grand Rapids, MI: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1984), 19.

10. During the Byzantine Period, Jesus's face appears on a gold coin opposite the ruling emperor. This depiction not only lends authority to the ruler but also sets Jesus apart from the Jews. Marie-José Mondzain argues that the Jews are almost always depicted in profile. This profiled position communicates distance from the ideals of Greek beauty and their exclusion from the intimate encounter of salvation. Turned front, the face of Jesus is no longer a Jewish face, but the face of God; see Marie-José Mondzain, *Image, Icon, Economy: The Byzantine Origins of the Contemporary Imaginary*, Cultural Memory in the Present (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), 216. Moving forward in time, Anglican Bishop and missionary John William Colenso, in an attempt to universalize Christianity, introduces an ethnically transcendent form of Christian identity that functions to normalize whiteness; see Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010), 145–146. Finally, Collin Kidd's work demonstrates how Jesus is not only depicted as white but also stripped of his Semitic identity and made into an Aryan. This re-conception of Jesus is prompted by the negative characteristics attributed to Semites and the positive Christian-like virtues associated with Aryans. Such views are not isolated to Germany, but make their way across the Atlantic and into American biblical and theological scholarship; see Colin Kidd, *The Forging of Races: Race and Scripture in the Protestant Atlantic World, 1600–2000* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 50.

11. Jennings, *Christian Imagination*, 25–31.

12. Perhaps all the more interesting, such images establish a market desire for French goods even before such goods become available for consumption in the Americas; see Sophie White, *Wild Frenchmen and Frenchified Indians: Material Culture and Race in Colonial Louisiana*, 1st ed., Early American Studies (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012), 53.

13. Noel Ignatiev, *How the Irish Became White* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Barbarian Virtues: The United States Encounters Foreign Peoples at Home and Abroad, 1876–1917* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000).

14. There is no need to reproduce the important work that Gil Anidjar has already completed on the Jews' Semitic identity and their status as enemies of the West; see Gil Anidjar, *The Jew, the Arab: A History of the Enemy*, Cultural Memory in the Present (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003).

15. The process through which the Jews shed their Semitic identity occurs alongside the rise of Zionism. Anidjar notes that "with political Zionism, the Jews have entered secularized, Christian history;" see Nermeen Shaikh, "The Jew, the Arab: An Interview with Gil Anidjar," *The Asia Society*; available online at https://asiasociety.org/jew-arab-interview-gil-anidjar [accessed February 13, 2020]. Far from arguing that the religious disappeared entirely from modern society, the claim of Christian secularization or modern Constantinianism speaks to how religious ideas have been repositioned in support of political, state-oriented ends. Anidjar describes

Zionism as an example of the Jews "siding with the West." He explains that "Zionism and its affiliated scholars sought (still seek) to reintegrate 'history' and to liberate themselves from the distant East, to integrate the European community by reproducing it, to liberate themselves, first, from Judaism itself (that nineteenth-century invention that, aside from scientific subtleties, took pride—among other contributions to world civilization—in its Islamic offshoot), from a Judaism that potentially signified a 'bi-national' Arab Jewish existence; second, from Islam; and, finally, internally and externally, from the Arabs;" Gil Anidjar, *Semites: Race, Religion, Literature*, Cultural Memory in the Present (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), 33.

16. I am gesturing toward the Constantinian domestication of religion and, pushing forward, the rise of a secularized Western Christendom. This move that takes place in Western Christian and, later, Jewish identity is established over-against the supposedly irrational and unpredictable nature of the Eastern religions.

17. It is important to note that the acceptance of Jews as white is a partial and always tentative inclusion. U.S.-American and European histories show how Jews have regularly been recast as the internal enemy during times of perceived economic and political stress.

18. *State of Missouri V. Darren Wilson*, 1, 212 (2014).

19. Ibid., 225.

20. Ibid., 228.

21. Ibid.

22. Ellis, *Toward a Jewish Theology of Liberation: The Challenge of the 21st Century*, 209.

23. By identifying the imaginative association between Palestinians and blackness, I do not suggest that the Palestinian people display melanin levels comparable to that of African Americans. Instead, this claim is grounded in the recognition that racial categorization involves much more than skin color. Comparing the ways in which Palestinians and African Americans are imagined points toward the social, cultural, and spiritual aspects of racial designation.

24. Michel Foucault discusses the status of delinquency as it differs from illegality. The delinquent is a subject that exists apart and even prior to an illegal act. See Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan, 2nd Vintage Books edition (New York: Vintage Books, 1995), 277. The same analysis applies perhaps to the Middle-Eastern "terrorist."

25. Ibid., 282–283.

26. Ellis, *Toward a Jewish Theology of Liberation: The Challenge of the 21st Century*, 176.

27. I am heavily indebted to Willie Jennings for my understanding of the significance of the Jewish voice and story.

28. Jennings, *Christian Imagination*, 262.

29. Ibid., 252–259.

30. Ibid., 262.

31. Mondzain, *Image, Icon, Economy*, 6, 152, 65.

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