



BOSTON COLLEGE
School of Theology and Ministry
CONTINUING EDUCATION

Transcript of: Do Black Lives Matter to God?

**Presented on October 15, 2020 by
Amey Victoria Adkins-Jones, M.Div., Ph.D.**

Dean Thomas Stegman, S.J.:

Good evening, everyone, and welcome to tonight's presentation, Do Black Lives Matter to God. It's my distinct pleasure and privilege to introduce our speaker. Dr. Amey Victoria Adkins-Jones is Assistant Professor of Theology and African Diaspora Studies here at Boston College. A graduate of the University of Virginia and Duke Divinity School, Professor Adkins-Jones received her a PhD in religion from Duke University with a certificate in feminist theory.

As somebody who went to Emory, I'd like this comment about Duke, but I was told to stay on the script. Dr. Adkins-Jones was the first African-American woman to graduate in the field of Christian theological studies. She is currently finishing her first book-length project *Immaculate Misconceptions: A Theological Account of Colonial Purity Narratives in the Rise of the Global Sex Trade*.

And as a serious aside, Professor Adkins-Jones shared with the STM faculty over a year ago at a faculty colloquium her work on this book, and we're pretty much looking forward to seeing the fruits of her labors because there's some important theological reflection there. She's also at work on a book project titled *See No Evil: Iconic Resistance and a Theology of Black Being*.

In this work, she considers how technology operates as a third party means of how we envision race and of how we see death. In addition, she has other scholarly work published in several academic journals. A Baptist preacher, Dr. Adkins-Jones also brings pastoral sensibility to her work and teaching around issues of identity and justice.

A respected poet, photographer, and trained iconography, her poetry and essays have appeared online and in print. Her artistic background met with her professional experience in graphic design and UX copy-writing greatly influenced her distinctive interdisciplinary research methodology, all of which she mobilizes to reinforce her commitment to the liberation of people on the margins.

You honor us with your presence here tonight. Please welcome Dr. Amey Victoria Adkins-Jones.

Prof. Amey Victoria Adkins-Jones:

Thank you. Thank you so much Father Stegman. Good evening to all of you. As you've heard, my name is Amey Victoria Adkins-Jones, and I'm so proud to be part of the theology faculty and the African and African Diaspora Studies faculty here at Boston College. As I begin, I cannot express my thanks, my gratitude enough to be a part of the continuing education program here at the School for Theology and Ministry.

And I want to especially thank Father Stegman for the warm invitation, to Meghan for all the communications and planning, to Kara and all of those who have gone into making-- all those whose energies have gone into making this possible. To all of my faculty colleagues across Comm Ave., of students and friends thank you again for inviting me to share.

And also to those of you I don't know, viewers at home, never thought I would need to ever say that phrase seriously. But all of the viewers at home, thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule. I realize that we are all living in a land of Zoom fatigue. So that you would want to spend time on something that is very important to think with me for so many of us at this point in our history is not lost on me. And I am completely grateful.

Part of what I hope to think together tonight is a little bit of the practice of making visible the invisible, if you will. And so with that, and a reminder from Fred Moten that Black movement is indigenous movement, it is important for me to name that Boston College does sit on ancestral land of the Wampanoag, Nipmuc, Pawtucket and Massachusetts people whose name we find in our Commonwealth.

So I just want to take a moment given Indigenous People's Day in particular to pay respect to these communities and specifically their elders past and present. Let's take a moment to stand in solidarity, and to continue to acknowledge as an act of resistance the truth of the violence perpetrated against these communities in the name of this country as well. With that, to our topic for our next few moments together, Do Black Lives Matter to God? Do Black Lives Matter to God?

On August 18th, 1871 a slave ship called the Zong left the coast of West Africa headed for Jamaica. The hold of the ship had a maximum capacity of 220 African bodies. Now the ship sailed that day was somewhere between 442 and 470 captive Africans. I say African bodies here to insist upon the distinction and the recovery, and thinking with historian Robin D.G. Kelley's admonishment, to reinforce the dehumanizing, denigrating attitude of those capable of enslaving others.

I say bodies here because slave ships are not built for people, for humans, for dreams, for souls. They are built for cargo, for capital at any cost. Abhorrence and depravity are the invisible ballast, the weight necessary to keep such vessels, such harbors of evil, afloat. The Zong set sail prepared with enough provisions, enough abundance to sustain the treacherous journey across the Atlantic. The crew had fail-safe knowledge, backups, their own insurances, places where they could stop if food or water ran short.

According to the record, navigational errors were made. Islands were confused, mix ups occurred. According to the record, the provisions became scarce. According to the record, quote, "Some of the Negroes died for want of sustenance, and others were thrown overboard for the preservation of the rest." Can you imagine going below, wading through the disgust, the stench, the stick belly filled amongst the emaciated?

Choosing those you thought were weakest. Perhaps choosing some whom simply you did not like. Perhaps not really choosing at all, indiscriminate. Dragging them from the place of their torture, hoisting bodies, and shoving them out of a window into an open sea. Despite protests, tears, family, kin, dark waters made to swallow dark flesh. Trailing sharks lying in wait, the sea made accomplice, nature made to aid and abet and murder.

For the greater good, they said. You see, they were running out of water due to their own navigational errors. At one point, they were actually at Jamaica but mistook the island and sailed past without stopping. You see, they were running out of water, though the court records show no effort was made to reduce, to ration, to extend, to share.

They were running out of water. Though the cargo records upon arrival showed that when the Zong finally made it upon Jamaican shores with 132, or 140, or maybe 142 murdered Africans no longer in her hold, there was more than enough water on board the ship. For just a day after hurling Africans through windows one by one in the cabins, it rained. Deep calls to deep. What we know to be murder was never considered as such.

Because you see, you cannot murder black bodies. You cannot murder black cargo. You cannot murder black property. But what one can do is make an insurance claim, what Katherine McKittrick has called the mathematics of black life. Because black people, their bodies, their valuation as cargo were only underwritten for the voyage. Their terminal value was held between the shores along the sea. Upon arrival, those stolen bodies would have been sold for profit.

But what happens if they weren't sellable? What happens if they didn't make it in the first place? There is no profit for those who quote, "Die a natural death." Though thinking along with Christina Sharpe in her analysis here of the Zong as she points out what can possibly be considered natural about any kind of Black death on a slave ship?

In order to circumvent the problem of Black life, which is to say, the threat of natural death, to maximize profit and earning potential, the captain and crew chose quote, "the throwing over of goods." They were running out of water. They wanted their money back. A tax break, a stimulus package, the slave economy could not suffer. It needed to remain open.

Who is to blame when blackness, enslavement, abduction is the co-morbidity? And what Sharpe calls an act of lexical legal transubstantiation, the decision of the court declared that the case was a simple one of maritime insurance. Property loss, not murder. Something akin today to no one being held responsible for wrongful death, only an officer with a charge of wanton endangerment, or as several named it in our local Twitterspheres, watching dry wall receive more justice than someone like Breonna Taylor.

J.M.W. Turner tried to replicate this moment, tried to replicate this moment in his 1840 painting *Slave Ship, Slavers Throwing Overboard Dead And Dying, Typhoon Coming On*. Again, as Sharpe incisively writes about this event, this disaster, she points out quote, "in the roiling livid orpiment of Turner's painting, the dead are yoked to the dying." It's an unnamed un-designated ship filled, or formerly filled, with unnamed, un-designated bodies. Drowning under a reign of death, a part signifying the whole, the entire enterprise of trans-Atlantic abduction, captivity, and enslavement.

What I mean here to say is that we have been inundated with realities, images, truths of Black death and Black dying for centuries. We have to think one by one, black body after body, black person after black person pressed through a cabin window. We have to think one by one, black body after body, black person after person, strange fruit swinging in the breeze, blood at the root, blood on the leaves.

We must think, one by one, black body after body, black person after black person shot down by police in the United States. The litany of names that ever grows with no end in sight. And as Sharpe asks us to think, how does one mourn the interminable? How does one mourn the interminable?

I began here to help us ground the reality of our times. First, that black suffering, black torture, black disposability, black reprehensibility, black illegibility, black injustice are not new. That they have been deeply embedded, not only in our social fabric, but embedded in a Christian, explicitly Christian, colonial capitalist project.

One that supported mass capture, murder, enslavement and torture of African peoples, displacing them across Europe and the Americas for the purposes of profit. That racial violence, racial injustice, white supremacy, white

hierarchy, white desire, white ego, white access, white privilege is not new. That these questions are, at the very least, also deeply embedded in the Christian imagination.

Because today is not the first day. This summer was not the first summer. This year not the first year. This decade not the first. This century not first where we have had to ask do Black Lives matter to God? And because today will not be the last when we in ashes and sackcloth cry out again over black blood needlessly, senselessly disturbingly, disgustingly spilled without cause.

A poem paired with this image from Turner himself. It was unfinished and unpublished, and displayed alongside of his painting. "Aloft all hands strike the top-masts and belay; Yon angry setting sun and fierce-edged clouds declare the typhoon's coming. Before it sweeps your decks throw overboard the dead and dying - ne'er heed their chains. Hope, Hope, fallacious Hope, where is thy market now? " How does one mourn the interminable?

Two. I can't see you right now. There is no body language. No energy in the room. No reading the faces in the crowd. No assurances, no nods, no tilts, no questions, not even the clarity of someone getting up and walking out. I am standing in my home with an infant in the other room, dinner left out on the stove, and I am wrapped in an invisible blanket of grief. Anticipatory, lingering, it envelops me.

It is an invisible parasite. One that stalks and irritates. One that has taken up residence with me even in isolation, quietly making her presence known in migraines, and, tears, and exhaustion. Two pandemics, each's waist encircled by the arms of the other, effects exacerbated by a country that fails to respond, redress, repent. Invisible microscopic viruses trapped in air particles demonstrative that we in the United States have never breathed equal air.

Two pandemics, both pathologies, both rampant, ravaging, and yet there are some who feel it a hoax. A liberal fiction. Something to resist. This virus that some do not believe in, do not believe they are asymptomatic carriers, refuse facts, distort studies, dismiss science. Refuse ethics of accountability and care. Care not about community, or history, or acumen but perhaps some distorted vision of individual liberty, subjectivities of truth, if you can even call it that.

Two pandemics. Two pandemics. For reference, I share with you a slide with pictures from the summer. The difference between protesters asking for their freedom, predominantly white, wanting an economy and a country to be reopened. The way they are met, the way they are received. And those fighting for Black Lives Matter. Those asking questions about justice. The way that they are met, the way that they are received.

Two pandemics present for us a problem. Present a problem for a church that can no longer gather or commune in the ways that we have cherished and known. But in truth, present a problem for a church who has not truly gathered not beyond the superficial to take seriously who is marked by social distance, unspeaking, untouching, unfeeling. Two pandemics, and for some of us, COVID-19 is the least of our worries.

Two pandemics, and for some of us COVID-19 is the least of our worries. Though according to the CDC (excuse me) COVID-19 has disproportionately affected black people in this country. Black people have 2.6 times more cases than white people. This is, I will say this. I'll be honest. (This is a terrible time to start coughing. Excuse me. It's not, I'm not sick. OK.)

Black people have 4.7 times higher hospitalizations. Black people are two times likelier to die from this virus. But COVID-19 is not the most dangerous disease black people face. Arguably, white supremacy is. That invisibilized disease that is in fact killing us all. Asymptomatic carriers, but disproportionate effects swarming us all, though

perhaps in different registers, and in different ways. A poem for our parallel and our irony by Paul Lawrence Dunbar.

"We wear the mask that grins and lies, it hides our cheeks and shades our eyes. This debt we pay to human guile, with torn and bleeding hearts we smile, and mouth with myriad subtleties. Why should the world be over-wise in counting all our tears and sighs? Nay, let them only see us, while we wear the mask. We smile but O, great Christ, our cries to thee from tortured souls arise. We sing, but oh the clay is vile beneath our feet and long the mile. But let the world dream otherwise, we wear the mask!"

I can't see you right now, and yet I imagine that if you are joining us here tonight it is because you, too look with grief and sadness, confusion and frustration at the world in which we live. I imagine that if you are here tonight, it is in part because you already have an answer to the question, or at least that you want to. I imagine that if you are here tonight, then at the least, we share in a common hope, a fallacious hope for the proper response.

Do Black Lives matter to God? Well, yes. Right? Of course. Of course Black Lives matter to God. Don't they? Alas, we must pause. Because to answer the obvious is perhaps to misunderstand the question, and to mistake the gravity of our situation. Arguably, the answer for us, do black lives matter to God, today I think that we have to consider that the answer is no.

But first, a theological note on race. Contemporary notions of race, the pseudo-factual connotations of people, melanin contents, practices, beliefs, and perhaps most of all, potential, trace back to the earliest attempts at the scientific classifications of difference among the peoples of the world.

Such scientists, white Europeans, endeavored fiercely to bring order to the chaotic encounters of the presumed other. pontificating from their own bodies and lives as the center point from which all others might be calibrated. Such determinations were never benign.

When sketched inside of a Christian theological imagination, the emergence of race, the idea of varying skin colors and ethnicities of peoples gestated within the broader question of what exactly does it mean to be human? What are we to make of our created selves, of our lives and of our destinies, of our means and our ends? Who are we? Who counts?

The questions were less about whether or not God created the various races of humanity and their bodily informs. But instead with far more nuanced harbored violent capacity, the questions were tied to one's degree of humanity. One's place within a divine *ordo salutis*, and whether or not such an other would be considered human at all.

What lingered among confessing mouths and believing hearts was an ethical apparatus with assumed divisions of inferiority and superiority that asked and answered what good these lesser races are for. We are left in this legacy and this wake as inheritors of a distorted premise. Racism is modernity is greatest idol.

It is racism, as differentiated from race, that remains insidious in its scope and collateral. Persistent and enabled by the legacy of Christian thinking that gestates the lungs, animating racial hierarchy, liturgizes the practices of exclusion and dominance, consecrates with power the veneration of whiteness as holy icon.

And still much of formal Christian theology palpably maintains an extensive reticence to take seriously the formal investigation of racism and its effects. Acknowledging the racist relics shed a light on our praxis and doctrine taking seriously that racism is anti-Christ. Christianity writ large has not yet attended to the racial ideas that infuse archaeological imaginations.

Yes, yes we know. Racism is a sin. Anti-blackness is evil, of course. But acknowledgment is the easy part. Building an infrastructure of critical apparatus and abolitionist commitment is not. How offensive to reduce the structural and systemic killing of black and brown bodies to an issue of the heart, when the material realities of racism are the glinting mortar that still adorn our robes, our books, our pillars, and our steeples.

I have said it before and will say it again: if racism is something from which we need to repent, we must first take seriously that race is something we have been daily taught to confess. We believe in race just as we believe that some peoples, by birth and by class, are superior to others.

We confess these things with our apathy. We continue to invest in our power and our privilege. The fact of race has been memorized and memorialized at every juncture of Christianity in the world. Beyond the social constructs, or the biological data, or the intellectual categories, we have allowed race to become incarnate in our lives. Its own word made flesh.

But it is not a theological word. It is not a word from God, or to God, or about God. Instead, it becomes god. Our idol structural and systemic, a sacramental perversion. Race is thought the superlative, alternative fact. And racism is its execution as truth, a scapegoat from its accountability.

Do Black Lives matter to God? The title for this lecture tonight actually came from a dear and brilliant colleague, the Reverend Naomi Washington-Leapheart, who has been teaching a course the Villanova by this name for several years now. One of the assignments that she requires her undergraduate students to complete is to write a children's book. Her students are required to break down race, racism, and racial injustice at a level any child can understand.

At first, hearing this may seem an underwhelming task. But for those who attempt it, they will soon find it incredibly difficult to tell our children the truth. Having three older children myself who are coming into their realizations of the implications of their blackness. Having three older children who occupy the liminal space between still being cute and now, perhaps to some, looking like threats.

Having given birth this year and ending up postpartum in a pandemic. Having survived the threat of terror that black women are four times more likely to die giving birth in this country than white women, only to see name after name after name continue to be plastered against the news, if even a name makes it there.

This year has been hard, and I do not take for granted what it means to explain to a child that this world does not love your flesh. That for some of us, these are things necessary to speak to make known as an act of hoping in our own children's survival. Do Black Lives matter to God?

Take a moment and sit with it. Look around you. Don't follow your heart. Tell me what you see. Think about the news. Think about your home, think about this world. Listen for the cries. The cries of the dead and the dying ne'er heed their chains.

Three. This icon is named Our Lady, Mother of Ferguson and All Those Killed by Gun Violence. She is here with us across the room. I'm looking right at her. Written by iconographer - her reproduction, mind you -- written by iconographer Mark Dukes, Our Lady Mother of Ferguson depicts a Black Madonna. Sonorous umber skin, spherical eyes, pronounced cheekbones, and broad nose round out the features far more full than what the typical Byzantine style has made dogma.

She is in the orans position of prayer, hands lifted up in both veneration and revelation of the Christ who is usually positioned in an orb at the center of her body. But instead, here in Ferguson, where the face and body of Christ would usually be, there is instead only a silhouetted son. Full shadow, pure black without feature. The gilded nimbus haloing his body, a signature of divinity, is breached by the cross-hairs of a gun.

The orans positions of both mother and child genuflect to the gestures and shouts of protesters in the aftermath of the 2014 murder of Michael Brown. "Hands up, don't shoot." When teaching this piece, it usually takes my students some time to realize that they, too, are part of this icon. That they are the source of the target.

That they hold a gun in their hands. That they, like every viewer, are bound up and complicit in contemporary violences and injustices. Or at least the conditions of possibility for such an America, even in 2020. In Christian theological thought, the place of the image of the icon is critically present as a framework for anthropology, ontology, and relation.

Humanity is created in the image of God, the *imago dei*, all creation fashioned in God's love and desire. And the lives that we live, the stories we tell, the joys, the pains we face together have the capacity to draw us back in some way to the fundamental truth of human dignity.

We are not only made in God's image, modeled in such a way to maintain the capacity for God's likeness through Jesus Christ. Christian thought understands that in the Incarnation, Jesus is the Word of God, the Word made flesh. In Christ, who is the image of the invisible God, divinity is bound up with humanity, and this God made. It is the Incarnation (excuse me) -

It is the incarnation, God's very embodiment, presence, being with humanity that grounds the justification for holy images. Christ is the Icon. Capital I. The singular punctuation of discourse who disrupts the interruption between things seen and unseen, and changes the way we look out from and toward ourselves.

Every icon is a window illuminating and, bit by bit, alighting the space between divinity and humanity. In their work on images, icons, and iconomy, Marie-Jose Mondzain asks, "The visible world, the one given to us to see, is it liberty, or enslavement? One might ask is it liberty, or is it death?"

Mondzain's analysis of the place of the icon and iconography in the Christian tradition as a philosophy of the sacred image, sets to tease out the relation between the visible and its invisible meaning. For Mondzain, the image belongs to the category of the visible while the icon points beyond the visible realm to the invisible from which the visible derives its meaning.

Like Christ, holy icons are haptic. Breathing, active, the visual of faith and doctrine corresponding to the Word made flesh. (Coughing) Y'all have to forgive me, I'm trying. I'm struggling here. I have no idea what's going on in this room, so I'm just going to acknowledge it. Thank you.

This is why one writes an icon rather than paints an icon, by the way. Icon theology teaches us that there are no passive images. Rather, we are constantly being acted upon, being drawn closer to God or pushed further away, making meaning. In encountering a holy icon, we are not meant to simply observe.

We do not come into it, reach into it, bring ourselves to it. Rather it is the icon in its sacredness that reaches to us, changes us, brings us into an economy of relation. In his classic study on iconology, W.J.T. Mitchell considers the rhetoric of images. Considers them for two modes of inquiry. First to consider, what do we say about images? And second to consider, what do images say?

He goes on to explain that the critical study of the icon begins with the idea that human beings are created in the image and likeness of their creator, and culminates rather less grandly, in the modern science of image making in advertising and propaganda. The continuum is one that makes meaning at every end.

While icons reach out to us, drawing a worshipper closer to God, this economy, this field of relations does not find a bounded or pure manifestation in relationship to the icon alone. Other images, immeasurably powerful, also reach out, also ask to participate in their offering of the imaginary in exerting an iconic force, an iconic function.

Alas, in the wrong hands, without sacred community, left to her own devices, even the icon like anything can become an idol in person or through a screen. What have we been taught through image? Through death? Are the things we see moving us toward liberty or enslavement?

We have to remember that we have been inundated with images of black death, and black dying for centuries. Do Black Lives matter to God? It confuses me in as many places and spaces as I have invoked Our Lady of Ferguson how many people have commented to me that at first they did not see the overt references to race. To blackness, the references to racism, to police violence, to gun violence, to injustice, and the image.

It did not even really register that this quote, "beautiful image", it's always commented on in its beauty. I have it all over the place. For so many, they didn't even notice or recognize it as a Black Madonna. Even when made explicit perhaps to the untrained eye, or even just an unbroken heart one somehow can mistake the sorrow of the shadow of a black body held in Mary's chest.

Instead, what is readily seen was just a praying Mary, ornate with color positioning according to an already formed expectation of her likeness. A venerable rendering anticipatory of the moment - one that does not work. All right. We're in the middle of this. I just want to say thank you someone has-- my beloved spouse has brought me tea. Thank you.

So what makes an icon? What makes someone, something iconic? Who carries iconicity in their blood? The ongoing murder of black people in the US at the hands of the police without recourse reflects a nation whose Christian constituents continue to hold self-interest, racism, sexism classism and more as if patriotic values ordained by God.

I think about icons because race is an idolatrous way of seeing. One that leads to believing, particularly as it is embedded in the project of white supremacy. And yet the icon of Christ teaches us to resist. The icon still subtends. I cannot see you. Can you see me? Do Black Lives Matter to God?

I think that the question itself is not rooted in theodicy. It's not rooted in an evaluation of good or evil, or even the redress of sin. I think that this question itself is sadly entrenched already in the exhaustive regime of white supremacy. Because the fact that we have to ask, that we have to think twice. That we do not see, or live, or die by race in the same ways.

That the conversations we have with our children are not the same. This is an indictment on all who would imagine themselves to be people of faith. And I promise you, we need an indictment. Privilege cannot continue on for profit, and whiteness cannot be means to an insurance claim.

Tonight we ask, do Black Lives matter to God, because we are all at a point where we can actually consider, can imagine, can entertain, don't have a defense for those who claim that the answer might actually just be no. And the answer for so many is defiantly no. Disgustingly no, adamantly no. No, Black Lives do not matter to God if we

continue to insist, explicitly or implicitly, that God is white. For otherwise, we will never see the image of God in black flesh.

Four, and final. Black Lives Matter. Let me be clear that this is a theological statement of the most important kind. Black and womanist-- black liberation and womanist theologians have for years and years resisted the image of Christ that is only reflected in the values and beliefs that sustain white supremacy, masculinity, heteronormativity, patriarchy, and violence.

The idea of Black Lives Matter actually started as a love letter as Alicia Garza, one of the founders, wrote after Trayvon Martin's murder. "We don't deserve to be killed with impunity. We need to love ourselves and fight for a world where Black Lives Matter. Black people, I love you. I love us. We matter, our lives matter."

It reminds me of a moment in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* where Baby Suggs gives a sermon in the clearing. She says, "In this here place, we flesh. Flesh that weeps, laughs. Flesh that dances on bare feet and grass. Love it, love it hard. Yonder, they do not love your flesh. They despise it."

"They don't love your eyes, they'd just as soon pick them out. No more do they love the skin on your back, yonder they flay it. And oh, my people they do not love your hands. Those, they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands. Love them, raise them up, and kiss them."

"Touch others with them. Pat them together, stroke them on your face because they don't love that either. You've got to love it, you. And no, they ain't in love with your mouth. Yonder out there, they will see it broken and break it again. What you say out of it, they will not heed. What you scream from it, they do not hear."

"What you put into it to nourish your body, they will snatch away and give you leavins instead. No, they don't love your mouth. You got to love it. This is flesh I'm talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved. Feet that need to rest and to dance. Backs that need support, shoulders that need arms. Strong arms, I'm telling you. And oh my people out yonder, hear me, they do not love your neck un-noosed and straight."

"So love your neck. Put a hand on it. Grace it, stroke it, and hold it up. And all your inside parts that they just as soon slop for hogs, you got to love them. The dark, dark liver. Love it. Love it and the beat, and beating heart love that, too. More than eyes, or feet, more than lungs that have yet to draw the air, more than your life holding womb and your life giving private parts, hear me now, love your heart. For this is the prize."

Black people have learned to resist, to struggle for liberation through the eyes and the lens of a black Christ who hears their cries. A Word made flesh that loves their flesh, too. As so many womanist theologians have posited, this is something we can strive for. This is something that we can survive. That the insistence and the will to live is something that is a blessing and a gift.

But we must know that Jesus cannot be white. As James Cone so many years ago said, "Jesus is black, baby." And that definition of Christ, to quote Cone, 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. I want to be clear that whiteness as a logic does not require white skin to participate.

And that our individual ideas and values are no match for the systemic and structural racism that upholds the fabric of this country. In a recent article considering whether or not Black Lives matter to God, to our theologies, to our ideas. Kelly Brown Douglas says, "That the bodies of black people in the streets weighs 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 is whiteness itself." She continues, and says that 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 people. Whiteness is soul crushing as 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. And this fact continues to have dire consequences, both for black life and black faith. If the Jesus we serve is more committed to whiteness than to witness, to maintaining privilege than fighting together protesting oppression.

More committed to comfort than coalition, more committed to defending problems than defunding them. To slaves and situations rather than abolishing systems of supremacy, then no. Black lives cannot and will not matter to this God. But this is not the God I know. This is not the God I serve. And this is the task before us. What M. Shawn Copeland has called a prophetic praxis. It is a vision seeking after the end of this world as we know it.

As theologian Vincent Lloyd described, demanding the end of the world implies [that] the interlocking systems of domination, anti-blackness, patriarchy, capitalism, cyber-colonialism have captured the world. But it also makes a claim of faith: the world is never fully captured by domination.

There is always a remainder. Because domination has infected our language and our perception, we cannot point to that remainder and name it. But in song, poetry, dance, protest, and prayer, we can still conjure it now, and we can project it into the future, visioning a world without domination, and after - after the world's end.

New life awaits after the end of the world.

There's a poem I'd like to share as we close. One of my favorite poems by Ross Gay. "A small needful fact is that Eric Garner worked for some time for the parks and rec horticultural department, which means, perhaps, that with his very large hands, perhaps in all likelihood, he put gently into the earth some plants which most likely some of them, in all likelihood, continue to grow, continue to do what such plants do like house and feed small and necessary creatures."

"Like being pleasant to touch and smell. By converting sunlight into food, like making it easier for us to breathe."

Do Black Lives matter to God? That depends. Who is your god? A god who sits high and looks low. God in the cross-hairs, God on the body camera, a God who cannot breathe. Or someone more peaceable, more familiar. Who is your God?

Or as I prefer to quote Jesus on the matter, "who do you say that I am?" Perhaps a challenge for the Church in this treacherous moment, for those who claim to follow a crucified and risen Lord, is to choose, you, this day whom you will serve. Thank you so much.

Meghan Lovett:

Thank you so much, Dr. Adkins-Jones. I mean, you speak so eloquently. It was a beautiful presentation, and I know I speak for our audience, too. And three cheers for your husband for bringing you the tea. I think we're all wishing you some tea.

Prof. Adkins-Jones:

No idea what happened, but thank you for staying with me.

Meghan Lovett:

For sure. We're running a little short on time, but there's been a question that's been similarly posed in the Q&A so it might be a good one to pose to you. "What specifically can the Church do to address the issues that you raised? To lead towards the systemic change that we need?"

Prof. Adkins-Jones:

Right. So I think that it's a little difficult at times. Obviously, we are at Boston College. I'm not a member of the Catholic Church, so I have deep reverences for the church universal, and all of the ways that we are connected.

We are still reckoning with a time where if our churches are going to be active about racial injustice, and if we are going to take anti-racist work seriously, then we have got to name all of the ways that we are complicit in not only the historical instances of racism.

How we have been taught, how we have been catechized to see one another, or to not see one another. But also to take seriously that racism is not about whether or not we are kind, and we can have potlucks, and we like one another in our day-to-day lives, or in our neighborhoods. That racism goes far more deeply, that structural and systemic issues have to be addressed, and that the Church and the Church money are a part of those issues.

And so for connectional systems, we need to see our authorities make this a priority. We need more, we need the influence and the push, the groundswell that says that we will not stand to mar Christ's witness in this way by continuing to turn a blind eye, or to actively participate in the ways that some church functions do have histories of and continue to do, to actively participate in discrimination and white supremacy.

And so on a local level there are all sorts of things you can do. I have been so inspired by those who have taken up the mantles of this work. I see so and I've heard, and I've gotten so many requests, more than I can account for. Well, can-- we want to train, we want to learn, we want to know more in a way that is hopeful, in a way that I have not seen before.

And so reading our black theologians, listening to M. Shawn Copeland, and Bryan Massingale, and Andrew Prevot, and Vincent Lloyd, and James Cone, and Dolores Williams, and Katie Cannon, Emily Townes. There's so many people who have been thinking about this and writing this. And so listening to people of color on the issues of race, listening to black people on the issues of anti-violence, and committing to not only learning but committing to change.

When people are calling for de-funding, and people are calling for abolition, being open to those kinds of conversations and learning and putting down-- and putting down questions of fear, of ego that unfortunately work to maintain status quo. It also means being willing to forego aspects of privilege. It's a lot of work, and it is life work. And what my dream and hope for the Church is that we move beyond statements.

That we move beyond grander gestures. That we move beyond ideas that get refracted in the individual at the individual level, and that we take seriously that our legacy of witness not only with regard to African slavery and enslavement, but also with so many other moments, colonization, missionizing and spreading, that we still have yet to account for in deep and reparative ways.

The ways that we have-- the ways that we, I would say in a theological way, the ways that we have failed to keep the feast.

Meghan Lovett:

Thank you. Thank you for your presentation, for your response to their question. Unfortunately, we have reached the end of our time together. It went by so fast.

Prof. Adkins-Jones:

I think my coughing took up time. I'm so sorry.

Meghan Lovett:

No, no. It was time well spent for sure. So many thanks to you, and many thanks to our attendees for joining us this evening. Just a reminder, we have three additional webinars coming up. We have one next Thursday, October 22nd same time. STM's own Dr. Dan Daly is going to speak on the Catholic end of life ethics, and the COVID crisis. We'll include information in a follow up email that we will send.

Thank you so much, Dr. Adkins-Jones, and thank you all.

Amey Victoria Adkins-Jones:

Thank you for having me. Thank you, everyone.

Meghan Lovette:

Have a good evening.