

education, and other resources within” them.⁷³ White women have a particular responsibility to “de-legitimize the property interest in whiteness” due to our leading historical role in creating this pernicious property, and we have a unique opportunity to do so due to the cultural scripts that expect white women to be at the center of educational decisions and the maintenance of white families.

I have shown how reading the CST through a lens mindful of white womanhood challenges white US theologians. US theologians must remain alert to the dangers of reading whiteness into the depictions of women, families, and welfare in the encyclicals, especially since the “nice white ladies” trope and papal teaching do respond to some common cultural roots. Catholic social thought’s natural law tradition can envision a view of pernicious property informed by Cheryl Harris’s critical race theorizing, one that underlies the urgency of pursuing inclusive public policies and personal choices to dismantle the pernicious property that is whiteness.

KATE WARD

Marquette University, USA

katherine.ward@marquette.edu

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III. Rethinking Feminist Theologies of Sin in Light of White Women’s Racist Violence

In 1960, Valerie Saiving published a groundbreaking essay, “The Human Situation: a Feminine View,” in which she pointed to the failures of classical sin-talk to account for the ways that women sin. As an early work of feminist theology, the article pointed to the androcentrism of theology: classical notions of sin were rooted in the failures and temptations of men. It also set the stage for feminist treatment of sin going forward. For Saiving, it was theologically inaccurate to identify women’s experience of sinfulness with pride and will-to-power. Instead, she argues, the “feminine forms of sin ... are better suggested by such items as triviality, distractibility, and diffuseness ... in short, underdevelopment or negation of the self.”⁷⁴

Saiving’s perspective on sin shaped white feminist theologies that followed. Many follow her lead in a rejection of the tradition’s identification of

⁷³ Daniels, *Nice White Ladies*, 169.

⁷⁴ Valerie Saiving, “The Human Situation: A Feminine View,” in *Womanspirit Rising* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1979), 37.

sin with pride and an assessment that women suffer from self-negation. As feminist theology developed and more attention was given to sexist oppression, white feminists identified sin with systems of oppression.⁷⁵ Those white feminists who align sin with systems of oppression, primarily patriarchal oppression, do not deny that women are also sinners. Elizabeth Johnson maintains that “this analysis does not conclude that only men are capable of acting in a dominating fashion. Given the right opportunity, women too may sin in this way.”⁷⁶ Rosemary Radford Ruether similarly maintains that women sin by participating in dominating systems. White feminist theologies of sin, however, primarily focus on the systems that harm women, mentioning only in passing the identification of women’s sinful participation in dominating oppressions. For Ruether, not only have women not had the “same *opportunities*” to do evil, but also women’s participation in systems of domination cannot be equal to the responsibility of men who are at the apex of “an overall system of distorted humanity.”⁷⁷

Feminist theologians have also been careful to point to the harm sin-talk has done to women. This approach has identified the long history of the association of women with evil and sinfulness. Tertullian’s assertion (in *On the Apparel of Women*) that women are gateways to the devil is a glaring example of this tradition. Feminist attention to this association points to the history of witch burnings and the way that androcentric theologies of sin have been used to rationalize and justify patterns of abuse. Similarly, as Serene Jones states in a discussion of her church women’s group, “Several members were initially and understandably wary of ‘sin-talk.’ Christian

⁷⁵ See Serene Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2000); Mary Potter Engel, “Evil, Sin, and Violation of the Vulnerable,” in *Lift Every Voice: Constructing Christian Theologies from the Underside* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1998), 152–64; Rosemary R. Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1993); Mary Daly, *Beyond God the Father: Toward a Philosophy of Women’s Liberation*, Revised (Beacon Press, 1993); Barbara Hilbert Andersen, “Moral Deafness and Social Sin: Moral Theology and the Bishops from a US Perspective,” in *The Catholic Ethicist in the Local Church*, ed. Antonio Autiero and Laurenti Magesa (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2018), 259–69. This emphasis remains even in the work of feminist theologians who seek to develop the theology of sin in other ways. See, for example, Mary McClintock Fulkerson, “Sexism as Original Sin: Developing a Theocentric Discourse,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 59, no. 4 (December 1991): 653–75; Margaret D. Kamitsuka, “Toward a Feminist Postmodern and Postcolonial Interpretation of Sin,” *Journal of Religion* 84, no. 2 (April 2004): 179–211; Marjorie Suchocki, “Sin in Feminist and Process Thought,” *Word & World Supplement Series 4* (2000): 143–53.

⁷⁶ Johnson, *She Who Is*, 28.

⁷⁷ Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk*, 181.

views of sin had taught them that they were ‘bad,’ that they should be ashamed of their bodies and sexuality.”⁷⁸ Consequently, for some white feminist approaches, there is a hesitancy to embrace a robust sense of women’s sinfulness.

In the face, however, of Jessie Daniels’s critique of gender-focused feminism in *Nice White Ladies*, these theologies of sin from white feminist theologians are inadequate and fail to identify the ways in which white women are not only complicit in racist violence and whiteness but are both agents of violence and those who enforce the power of whiteness. A feminist theology of sin must be able to account for white women’s participation in oppressive and dominative systems.

Daniels wrestles, in particular, with the way that white women use their bodies as lethal weapons, benefiting from and reinforcing the power of whiteness that they carry at all times. A stark example of the weaponization of white women’s bodies was made evident on the morning of May 25, 2020. A video of a white woman, Amy Cooper, in New York went viral. In it she was yelling at a Black man, Christopher Cooper, with whom she was having a disagreement in the Ramble in New York’s Central Park. He had asked her to leash her dog in an area of the park where off-leash dogs were not allowed. And, in response, she warned him that she was going to call the police and say that “an African-American man is threatening my life.”⁷⁹ She then did just that. As Daniels recounts, “She calls the police, throws her voice up half an octave, and begins to perform ‘fear’ for the dispatcher. The video of her throwing her voice on that 911 call is the starkest display I have ever seen of someone intentionally weaponizing her white womanhood against a Black man.”⁸⁰ Amy Cooper put on the voice of fear and falsely claimed being at risk in a way that tapped into a centuries-old racist myth of Black male threats to white women. In so doing, “she is intentional about bringing ‘death by cop’ to Christopher Cooper,”⁸¹ mere hours before George Floyd would himself be murdered by police in Minneapolis.

As Daniels makes clear, white women are perpetrators of racist oppression, not merely victims of sexist oppression. Amy Cooper is one such perpetrator. But the reality is that her pattern of her behavior is not unique. The video of Cooper was only one such video to go viral. Others include white

⁷⁸ Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology*, 94.

⁷⁹ Sarah Mislin Nir, “How 2 Lives Collided in Central Park, Rattling the Nation” *New York Times*, June 14, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/14/nyregion/central-park-amy-cooper-christian-racism.html>.

⁸⁰ Daniels, *Nice White Ladies*, 46.

⁸¹ Daniels, *Nice White Ladies*, 214.

women calling the police in response to a Black family having a BBQ and a Black child for selling water bottles on a hot day. For Daniels, these cases connect with the rise of the “Karen” meme. She explains that “Karen” is “a shorthand for the entitled white women calling 911, asking to speak to a manager, or otherwise behaving badly.”⁸² As she describes, the sharing of “Karen” memes merged with the viral videos of white women calling the police in response to Black people simply living their lives. And, although the use of “Karen” memes has been critiqued as sexist by some white feminists, for Daniels they serve an important purpose: calling out white supremacy. In so doing, they highlight “the lethal power of white women”⁸³ that is carried out and called upon regularly, even when not captured on video. The repeated pattern of this kind of viral video indicates that these are not merely individual cases of rude, racist women. For Daniels, they point to something critical about white womanhood. And although technology has pointed to the use of white women’s bodies as lethal weapons, this is not a new phenomenon. Indeed, the “protection” of white womanhood has long been used to justify racist violence, most apparent in the brutal history of lynching. And as Daniels argues, Amy Cooper exhibited “the same look of murderous intent and expansive entitlement seen in the faces of white people in the crowds of lynching photographs.”⁸⁴

As much as she would like to disassociate herself from Karens, Daniels reflects on the reality that she carries the same power as these other white women. She notes, “One gesture of my nice white lady finger at someone darker, a request to speak to the manager, that call to 911, and my white/queer/femme body becomes an assault weapon.”⁸⁵ Well-meaning white women, including those like Daniels who strive to attend to the violence of white supremacy, cannot simply opt out of the power of whiteness that they carry in their bodies.

Not only does Daniels point to the capacity of white women’s bodies to become lethal weapons and the choices of individual white women to exercise this power in assertion of themselves and their desires over others, but she also identifies the history and patterns in the present that point to what she says is the “big picture of white women.” She says, “millions of white women have been heavily invested in violence, domination, and the suffering of racialized Others, while only a handful have tried to resist the invitation to

⁸² Daniels, *Nice White Ladies*, 22.

⁸³ Daniels, *Nice White Ladies*, 22.

⁸⁴ Daniels, *Nice White Ladies*, 215.

⁸⁵ Daniels, *Nice White Ladies*, 23.

join white men in this terrorism and oppression.”⁸⁶ It is the everyday “nice white ladies” who perpetuate the patterns of domination against those who are not white.

White women hoard public goods and opportunities for themselves and their families, as Kate Ward’s essay in this roundtable demonstrates. White women have led efforts to defend racial segregation, which, Daniels shows, is worse now than when *Brown v. Board of Education* was decided in 1954. As she argues, this growth in segregation is not an accident. White parents—in efforts often led by mothers—fight desegregation across the political spectrum, refuse to send their children to integrated schools, and move their families to segregated school districts when they cannot ensure that the schools or district will prioritize white children. This pattern exists even as mothers speak about being concerned about their children’s safety and educational opportunity.⁸⁷ As Daniels describes, “White women who think of themselves as liberal or progressive publicly declare their support for policies like school desegregation but then refuse to send their white children to integrated schools.”⁸⁸ White women ensure the hoarding of wealth, thus participating in preserving the racial wealth gap, which has grown greater than at the start of the twentieth century.⁸⁹ White women’s support for the Trump administration grew from 2016 to 2020, which for Daniels points to white women voting “for children in cages, a Muslim ban, and ‘good people on both sides’ at a white-supremacist rally.”⁹⁰ White women voted for Trump at higher rates than all other women, voting with white men, despite his regular denigration of women. At the most fundamental level, in all of this, white women ensure the passing on of whiteness itself, which Ward has called “pernicious property.”

The reality of white women’s violence and role in protecting and handing on whiteness points to the inadequacy of the theologies of sin that have thus far been developed by white feminists. Although white feminist theologians have helpfully and accurately identified the androcentrism of classical sin-talk and made efforts to attend to the intersection of systems of oppression and domination, they have not adequately accounted for white women’s moral responsibility for racist oppressions. In contrast, womanist theology has already, unsurprisingly, pointed in this direction.⁹¹ Delores Williams

⁸⁶ Daniels, *Nice White Ladies*, 35.

⁸⁷ Daniels, *Nice White Ladies*, 175.

⁸⁸ Daniels, *Nice White Ladies*, 175.

⁸⁹ Daniels, *Nice White Ladies*, 170.

⁹⁰ Daniels, *Nice White Ladies*, 225.

⁹¹ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*; Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006). For other Black theological

has argued that “White American patriarchy” provides privileges and status to white women that is not available to Black women. Critically, on the topic of sin specifically, Traci West has argued that the realities of white women’s oppression of Black women points to white women’s “self-assertive expressions of domination.” She continues, noting that “their behavior as employers contradicts much of white feminist ethical analysis of ‘women’s experience’ of sin.”⁹² So, too, the behavior of white women as Karens, as outlined by Daniels, and as hoarders of public goods suggests that white women do “not seem to have had any trouble asserting their self-interest at the cost of others.”⁹³

Daniels’s work calls for a careful consideration of feminist perspectives on sin, including of Saiving’s classic critique.⁹⁴ Specifically, a richer theology of sin from a white feminist perspective must be able to incorporate these womanist insights and the analysis offered by Daniels. Such a theology of sin would take seriously white women’s moral responsibility for the injustices and violence perpetuated in the protection of whiteness and white superiority.⁹⁵ This responsibility is not able to be answered by the identification of women’s sin with self-negation. It is not enough to note in passing that women *also* participate in sinful systems of domination or exert power in interpersonal settings or to develop theologies of sin around women as those who are harmed by sin-talk and sinful oppressions. Too often, white feminist theologies

engagement on this question, for example, see also Massingale, *Racial Justice and the Catholic Church*; Bryan N. Massingale, “Conscience Formation and the Challenge of Unconscious Racial Bias,” in *Conscience & Catholicism: Rights, Responsibilities, & Institutional Responses*, ed. Kristin E. Heyer and David E. DeCosse (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015), 53–68; Bryan N. Massingale, “The Erotic Life of Anti-Blackness: Police Sexual Violation of Black Bodies,” in *Anti-Blackness and Christian Ethics*, ed. Andrew Prevot and Vincent W. Lloyd (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2017), 173–94; Bryan N. Massingale, “Vox Victimarum Vox Dei: Malcom X as Neglected ‘Classic’ for Catholic Theological Reflection,” *CTSA Proceedings* 65 (2010): 63–88.

⁹² Traci C. West, *Disruptive Christian Ethics: When Racism and Women’s Lives Matter* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006), 23.

⁹³ West, *Disruptive Christian Ethics*, 23.

⁹⁴ For a recent reflection on and assessment of the contribution of Saiving see Elizabeth Hinson-Hasty et al., “Roundtable: Fifty Years of Reflection on Valerie Saiving’s ‘The Human Situation: A Feminine View.’” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion* 28, no. 1 (2012): 75–133.

⁹⁵ White feminists have certainly begun to address the topics of racism and white supremacy from the perspective of theological reflection on sin and evil. See, for example, Fletcher, *The Sin of White Supremacy*; Barbara Hilbert Andolsen, *Daughters of Jefferson, Daughters of Bootblacks: Racism and American Feminism* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1986); Vasko, *Beyond Apathy*; and Karen Teel, *Racism and the Image of God* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010). Here, however, I am primarily concerned with the specific feminist work seeking to develop a feminist theology of sin.

implicitly, and unintentionally, absolve white women from responsibility for such sins.

A robust feminist theology of sin, instead, requires a *recovery* of the tradition's language of sin as pride. A theological account of sin as pride is able to account for the prioritizing of self-interest exhibited by white women, including "nice white ladies" who think that racism is done by "those people over there" and who frame their participation in maintaining whiteness and white superiority as a loving expression of looking out for the best for their children and families. Sin as pride is also able to account for the *entitlement* exhibited by those women in the Karen memes who seek to control the behavior of Black people, even to the point of threatening violence through the use of their white femme bodies.

Understanding sin as pride from a feminist perspective benefits from attention to the work of Reinhold Niebuhr,⁹⁶ which was directly called into question by Saiving's intervention. For Niebuhr, it is the biblical tradition that directly defines sin as pride. It is this pride that is expressed as an inordinate love of self and the will to power. He maintains that although all persons sin through pride, "it rises to greater heights among those individuals and classes who have a more than ordinary degree of social power."⁹⁷ This caveat is able to take into account, then, the differing degrees of social power connected to gender, race, and class. Here, Niebuhr's perspective converges with the work of white feminists, such as Ruether, who note that women have not had the same opportunity to participate in oppressive systems as men.

As I have already argued, however, while Saiving and Ruether, along with other white feminists, have made an essential contribution to theology, Daniels's assessment of white women's role in maintaining and benefiting from whiteness is not adequately answered by this theology of sin. White women's role in racist oppression ought not be diminished with caveats that lessen their moral responsibility. Moreover, it is not enough to consider the pride of white women as individuals, for whiteness is a system of collective dominance. Here, too, a retrieval of Niebuhr's work on pride contributes to an adequate feminist theology of sin. Specifically, his notion of collective egotism, or group pride, accurately names the sinful ways white women maintain whiteness.

In Niebuhr's theology of sin, group pride "is the fruit of the undue claims which they make for their various social groups."⁹⁸ For Niebuhr, group pride is not simply a manifestation of individual pride. Rather, it "achieves a certain authority over the individual," even when it does not align with the

⁹⁶ Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996).

⁹⁷ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 189.

⁹⁸ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 208.

moral inclinations of the individual.⁹⁹ He also maintains that the “group is more arrogant, hypocritical, self-centered and more ruthless in the pursuit of its ends than the individual.”¹⁰⁰ Group belonging offers greater self-aggrandizement than would be possible for the individual alone. And, at the same time, the collective solicits loyalty from individuals. Consequently, white women’s loyalty to white people as a group allows them to maintain their own superiority, even as they may, as individuals, affirm values in conflict with white supremacy and racist oppression.

Previous critiques of pride and theologies of sin from white feminists should not be dismissed as irrelevant or misguided. Rather, feminist theological work must be able to account for and accurately theologically name intersecting systems of domination. White women may well suffer sexist oppression *and also* be perpetrators of racist oppression. An adequate feminist theology of sin, thus, needs to be multifaceted. It should identify white women as both pridefully exerting themselves as both individuals and as members of the dominant white group over others through racist oppression *and also* experiencing the harms of the sin of sexism, including gendered patterns of violence and a negation of the self.

Such a recovery of pride, including Niebuhr’s theology of sin, is not only theologically appropriate but essential from an ethical perspective. Daniels mentions a young white woman, Emily, who explains the appeal of getting involved in the white supremacist movement: “The guilt—I don’t have it anymore.”¹⁰¹ According to Daniels, Emily’s inability or unwillingness to confront her role in whiteness and the harm whiteness does to others pushes her to “[double] down on the idea of superiority.”¹⁰² A theology of sin that is able to account for the guilt of white women ought to prompt us to avoid the fear of guilt exhibited by Emily, for the Christian tradition maintains that all persons are simultaneously guilty of sin, but also loved by God and of great worth as created in God’s own image. And, most importantly, it ought to push white women, such as myself, to a conversion and new way of life, made possible by God’s grace, that works to heal our distorted humanity and toward the realization of the kingdom of God.

MEGAN K. MCCABE
 Gonzaga University, USA
mccabem@gonzaga.edu
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⁹⁹ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 208.

¹⁰⁰ Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, 208.

¹⁰¹ Daniels, *Nice White Ladies*, 118–19.

¹⁰² Daniels, *Nice White Ladies*, 119.