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A Reappropriation of the Joseph Story in Genesis 39 and Surah 12 for Contemporary Race-Discourse

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The death of George Floyd at the hands of law enforcement agents in 2020 and the racial tensions that followed it have again reignited the contentious debate about racism and society's inability to find an enduring solution. This article is a novel effort to situate the debate in an interreligious context and contribute meaningfully to the search for a solution. Drawing from the Joseph and Potiphar's wife story in Genesis 39 and Surah 12 of the holy Qur'an, the article shows the intersections of this patriarchal material with the axes of identity and marginality. Drawing from the multiple junctures of this intersectionality that include race, ethnicity, identity, and microaggressions, the article identifies in the scriptural texts seven resonances of contemporary racism that are often ignored or poorly understood in race discourse. Taking into consideration some meaningful solutions suggested by legal luminaries and behavioral scientists in their respective fields, the article augments these with a religious solution, pointing in the direction of a true penitential spirit, like the one demonstrated by Potiphar's wife in the Qur'an. The suggestion is that a genuine turnaround (conversion) is also in the spirit of the ecclesial repentance that was practiced in the early church before some medieval abuses crept in. The article concludes that human agencies aside, ultimately it is God's ability to bring good out of evil, the way God did with Joseph, that can bring an enduring solution to victims of racism.

Keywords: African American, Joseph and Potiphar's wife, racism, racial hoax, repentance, conversion

The year 2020 was a momentous year in the annals of race relations in the United States for many reasons. Coinciding with the pandemic, the racial fault lines in the United States were exposed in a rash of incidents in which Black people were killed or may have died at the hands of law

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enforcement agents. The racial fault lines were all the more exposed in a series of incidents in which some entitled white women used their gendered power of race to foment racial hoaxes against people of color. The latter, dubbed the "Karen" phenomenon, was as much a catalyst in exposing the racial fault lines as the former. There are some who think that bringing the "Karen" meme into racial discourse is unhelpful and fraught with patriarchal ideological biases and, that because there are no correlative white male constructs, the "Karen" construct may have some implicit sexist undertones. Sexism is a big problem for women, and their concerns should be taken seriously. This is why I believe steps have to be taken to make it clear that "Karen" is nongendered and gender neutral. When Black people experience implicit bias (which is the point of the meme), they are not thinking about gender at that moment. They are thinking about their pain and how irrational racism is. To reduce "Karen" to a specific gender is also to reduce the experiences of Black people to a meme when in actual fact the intent of the meme is to draw attention to the implicit bias and the imbalance of power that feeds racism. Sara Ahmed, the US feminist scholar, has shed a new light on implicit bias and power imbalance in her phenomenological study on complaints and the institutional mechanisms that undergird them. Her study reveals how power imbalance protects, in her words, "white women." When women of color complain about their experiences and ask for interventions, they are only "heard" by their addressees as just complaining and, therefore, perceived as "complaint magnets."[1] But when white women complain, they are likely to be heard and taken seriously because they are not heard as complaining by their addressees.[2] Ahmed goes on to conclude that "Karen" knows that when she calls the police on innocent Black people who are enjoying a good day in the park that her complaint is certainly going to be "heard as being the action of a responsible citizen."[3] So, "Karen" (here gender-neutral) knows the racial undertones of this power that "Karen" has to be "heard" and still chooses to use it indiscriminately against innocent people of color. Oftentimes "Karen" uses this power unconsciously. Because racism today is more implicit than explicit, how is "Karen" not an epitome of racism?

The coincidences of the aforementioned events raise questions about the insidiousness of racism in the United States and how the unconscious bias that feeds it might be addressed. In much of the debate that has ensued,

[1] Sara Ahmed, *Complaint!* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2021), 151.
[2] Ahmed, *Complaint!*, 327.
[3] Ahmed, *Com'plaint!*, 327.

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terms, such as "symbolic racism,"[4] "modern racism,"[5] "implicit racism,"[6] "aversive racism,"[7] and "dramatic bias"[8] have been used to explain these events. Although these terms have been helpful, much of the discussions and purported solutions have centered on the work of psychologists and behavioral theorists whose analyses draw on the effects of the transatlantic slave trade and Jim Crow laws in the United States. In the context of the "Karen" phenomenon that has brought to light many of the subtleties of racism that have hitherto been unaddressed or overlooked, I wish to locate the debate in a scriptural context, using the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife that is found in the scriptural traditions of Jews, Christians, and Muslims, and by so doing add some much-needed nuance to the debate, as well as recommend remedies. In truth, the contemporary Black situation in the United States where Black men are perceived as hypersexual and dangerous is an antithesis to the biblical and Qur'anic stories in which Joseph is falsely accused of raping a woman. The implications of this scriptural identity politics and ethnic hoax, as I demonstrate, go beyond rape.

The Genesis story of Joseph is a continuation of the patriarchal story of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and his children, as well as the constellation of events that led to the migration of Jacob and his descendants to Egypt. It culminated in their eventual rescue and deliverance by YHWH. The Qur'anic version does not attempt this national historical history of the people of Israel. It only attempts to tell the stories of God's guidance to God's apostles (like Joseph) as a way of strengthening Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him)

[4] See D. O. Sears, "Symbolic Racism," in *Eliminating Racism: Profiles in Controversy*, ed. P. A. Katz and D. A. Taylor (New York: Plenum Publishing), 53–84.

[5] See J. B. McConohay, "Modern Racism, Ambivalence, and the Modern Racism Scale," in *Prejudice, Discrimination, and Racism*, ed. J. F. Dovidio and S. L. Gaertner (Orlando, FL: Academic Press, 1986), 91–126.

[6] See M. R. Banaji, C. Hardin, and A. J. Rothman, "Implicit Stereotyping in Person Judgment," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 65 (1993): 272–81; M. R. Banaji and A. G. Greenwald, "Implicit Gender Stereotyping in Judgments of Fame," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 68 (1995): 181–98; M. R. Banaji, "Implicit Attitudes Can Be Measured," in *The Nature of Remembering: Essays in Honor of Robert G. Crowder*, ed. H. L. Roedinger III, J. S. Nairne, I. Neath, et al. (Washington DC: American Psychological Association, 2001), 117–50.

[7] See J. F. Dovidio and S. L. Gaertner, "Affirmative Action, Unintentional Biases, and Intergroup Relations," *Journal of Social Issues* 52 (1996): 51–75; J. F. Dovidio and S. L. Gaertner, "Aversive Racism and Selective Decisions 1989–1999," *Psychological Science* 11 (2000): 315–19.

[8] See Cyril Orji, *Lonergan and Black Theology: Quest for Racial Justice*, forthcoming from the University of Toronto Press in 2024.

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and providing guidance to believers.[9] Although the story as told in the scriptural traditions has nothing to do with race—a concept that was birthed at the dawn of modernity when the early Europeans began their expansion and exploitation of native peoples—I shall read the story through a twenty-first-century racial lens. The racial parallels of the biblical-Qur'anic story to the contemporary American situation are fascinating on many levels. My exegetical analysis will incorporate aspects of the story in the two revealed texts.[10] The Qur'anic story is especially significant on many levels. Genesis tells of how Joseph was sold by his brothers "to the Ishmaelites for twenty pieces of silver" (Gen 37:28). The Qur'an says his brothers sold him for "a few pieces of silver; so little did they value him" (Surah 12:20). Where Genesis says the Midianites "sold Joseph in Egypt to Potiphar, a courtier of Pharaoh and his chief steward" (Gen 37:36), the Qur'an speaks only of the "Egyptian" or the "noble" who bought Joseph and asked his wife to look after him so "we may adopt him as a son" (Surah 12:21). The Arabic translation does not identify the name of the buyer, except to say "one of Pharaoh's eunuchs."[11] Muslim literature will call him al-'Aziz. The same text (Surah 12:21) that refers to the noble man without mentioning him by name also refers to his wife without mentioning her by name (the text reads that someone, literally *min misr* [from Egypt], said to *amrā'tihi*, which quite literally means "his wife" or "his woman").[12] Unlike the biblical story, the Qur'anic story ends with a call to repentance and the conversion of Zuleika (the name given to Potiphar's wife in Muslim literature) and "some women of the city" (Surah 12:30) she had gathered to testify against Yusuf.

Rather than be an antagonist, the "women of the city" ended up witnessing to the beauty (Surah 21:31) and holiness of Yusuf before the king: "We know nothing bad of him" (Surah 21:51). Prophet Yusuf is portrayed in the Qur'an as a forerunner of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). The call to repentance and conversion (not to a religion, but as a change of heart) is a model for the kind of change of heart required to bring an end to racism. I identify and explain seven key ways racism manifests today—all having resonances in the scriptural story. Although each of the seven manifestations has

[9] See Muhammad Abdel Haleem, *Understanding the Qur'an: Themes and Style* (New York: I. B. Tauris Publishers, 1999), 139.

[10] All citations from the Qur'an are from *The Qur'an: English Translation and Parallel Arabic Text*, trans. M. A. S. Abdel Haleem (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). Biblical citations are from *The New American Bible*.

[11] Haleem, *Understanding the Qur'an*, 144.

[12] I am indebted to Prof. Adil Khan of Loyola University, New Orleans, for this nuance.

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its own distinctive features, they are all rooted in my appropriation of what the twentieth-century Canadian theologian Bernard Lonergan calls "basic sin."

What Lonergan calls "basic sin" is the human failure to choose a morally obligatory course of action and the failure to reject a morally reprehensible course of action.[13] In getting to the root of the problem, theologically at least, Lonergan poses the question, "What is a basic sin?" and answers that it is the irrational. "Why does it occur?" He answers, "If there were a reason for its occurrence it would not be sin."[14] Many Lonergan interpreters still do not know what to do with this text. On the surface level, it seems to give the impression that sin is irrational. A deeper analysis beyond the scope of this paper is needed to uncover what Lonergan means by the declaration that basic sin is irrational. My own interpretation is that there are some strands of sin that belong in the wastebasket of the irrational. Some types of racist acts belong to this strand.

Racism is a basic sin, not because there is no rationality involved on the part of those who are prone to racist acts, but because any attempt to make sense of them or justify their occurrences ends in futility. Sadly, we have become so used to racism that it has become a habit of the mind. How does one make sense of a person's claim to superiority over another on the basis of skin pigmentation? How does one make sense of "Karen"? Racism, simply, is irrational and racist acts, whether intended or not, are instantiations of evil, which in turn have moral consequences. I will suggest that because a person prone to prejudice or racism is so driven because of their failure to choose a morally obligatory course of action, a good number of those on the sidelines are equally non-innocent. By choosing to do nothing, they are exercising their vertical liberty to not reject a morally reprehensible course of action.[15] There is no neutrality in the struggle against racism. "The opposite of 'racist' isn't 'not racist.' It is anti-racist,"[16] as Ibram Kendi says. Because my analysis is rooted in the scriptures and grounded in theology, the solutions I propose will not be psychological, but theological. They are rooted in the intellectual, moral, religious, affective, and psychic conversions (a five-dimensional conversion process) stemming from Lonergan's work, which in turn are steeped in the theory and praxis of the penitential system of the early church. These theological solutions give credence to and complement the psychological remedies recommended by social and behavioral theorists. I argue that standalone

[13] Bernard Lonergan, *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, vol. 3, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, ed. Frederick E. Crowe and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 689.

[14] Lonergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, 689.

[15] Longergan, *Insight: A Study of Human Understanding*, 689.

[16] Ibram X. Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist* (New York: Random House, 2023), 10.

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psychological solutions are ineffective. They need to be complemented with a theological solution—the law of the cross.

Historically, the supposed rape of white women by Black men has been the most common criminal hoax perpetrated against Black men in the United States.[17] In 1955, for example, Emmett Till, a fourteen-year-old Black boy, was accused of sexually harassing Carolyn Bryant, a white woman at a grocery store. One month later, Emmet Till was brutally murdered by two white men. Six decades after the brutal murder of Emmett Till, the white woman who accused him of grabbing her and making sexual advances recanted, admitting that she made up the story. This is not an isolated incident. From the Scottsboro boys (nine African American young men ages thirteen to twenty) accused of raping two white women in Alabama in 1931, to the six young Black men who were falsely accused and jailed in Duluth, Minnesota, in 1920 for assaulting a white woman, to Christian Cooper, a Black man bird-watching in Central Park, New York who was accused by a white woman of assaulting her, there has been a consistent pattern of lies by some entitled white women to get Black people in trouble or jailed or killed. The microaggressions Black people face on a daily basis in the face of a system of injustice mirror the microaggressions Joseph dealt with in the house of Potiphar.

Microaggressions are "the everyday verbal, nonverbal, and environmental slights, snubs, or insults, whether intentional or unintentional, that communicate hostile, derogatory, or negative messages to target persons based solely upon their marginalized group membership."[18] When a group is targeted, as Black people are, the microaggressions directed against them are meant to invalidate their group identity and experiential reality. They are also meant to "demean them on a personal or group level, communicate they are lesser human beings, suggest they do not belong with the majority group, threaten and intimidate, or relegate them to inferior status and treatment."[19] University of California, Los Angeles, professor of law Devon Carbado could not have validated this point any better when he noted that Black people "live under a social regime of strict scrutiny that treats the mere sight of Blackness as a suspect classification."[20] In this suspect classification, Black people are treated as a problem wherever they are. It is like Black people have to provide a compelling

[17] Kathryn R. Russell, "The Racial Hoax as Crime: The Law as Affirmation," *Indiana Law Journal* 71: 593–621, esp. 597.

[18] Derald Wing Sue, "Microaggressions, Marginality, and Oppression: An Introduction," in *Microaggressions, and Marginality: Manifestation, Dynamic, and Impact*, ed. Derald Wing Sue, (New Jersey: Hoboken, 2010), 3.

[19] Sue, "Microaggressions, Marginality, and Oppression: An Introduction," 3.

[20] Devon W. Carbado, "Strict Scrutiny and the Black Body," *UCLA Law Review* 69 (2022): 2.

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justification for their presence anywhere they are located.[21] From driving while Black to jogging in the neighborhood while Black, to walking while Black, to entering inside your own home while Black, and even to teaching while Black, it is almost like nothing good can be done while Black.

Scholars of the Pentateuch are still not in agreement on the extent to which the patriarchal stories, like that of Joseph, ought to be regarded as history or legend.[22] But whether accepted as a history or a legend, the patriarchal material of Joseph's story found in the book of Genesis occupies a disproportionately large portion of the patriarchal narratives. Several biblical books, such as Esther, Daniel, Jeremiah, and Ezekiel, contain allusions to the story of Joseph.[23] Those who consider the story to be historical think Joseph may have been in Egypt during a time when the Hyksos dynasty ruled Egypt. The Hyksos were a marauding group of immigrants who conquered the Nile Delta around 1638 BCE and ruled Egypt until about 1530 BCE. Joseph's dramatic encounter with Potiphar's wife, related in Genesis 39:7-23, may have occurred around this time. The encounter is dramatic and complex. It became the focus of much narrative and exegetical activity in late antiquity and in rabbinic literature.[24] Interestingly, the story of Joseph and Potiphar's wife is also narrated in the holy Qur'an in Surah Yusuf (chapter 12, which consists of 111 verses). As I have already indicated, it is the same story, but with some significant differences. For example, in the Qur'an Yusuf is publicly vindicated through the evidence of the tunic that was torn in the back and Zuleika's own admission to the women of the city (Surah 12:26-30). The biblical tradition does not provide a public vindication; the reader alone knows Joseph's innocence.[25] This is why Abdel Haleem has admonished that we "approach the two versions with the difference in mind in order to appreciate the message and the qualities of each."[26]

In Rabbinic Jewish, Christian, and Islamic circles, a disproportionate amount of energy has been spent on infidelity and sexual temptation in the Joseph story. Although literary voyeurism has largely been thought to be responsible for this obsession,[27] the issues the story foregrounds, its imagery,

[21] Carbado, "Strict Scrutiny and the Black Body," 2.

[22] For more on this debate, see John J. Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2004), 83–105.

[23] Seth D. Postell, "Potiphar's Wife in David's Looking Glass: Reading 2 Samuel 11–12 as a Reflection Story of Genesis 39," *Tyndale Bulletin* 71 (2020): 95–113, esp. 95.

[24] Joshua Levinson, "An-Other Woman: Joseph and Potiphar's Wife Staging the Body Politic," *Jewish Quarterly Review* LXXXVII (1997): 269–301, esp. 270.

[25] I am indebted to the anonymous reviewer for this nuance.

[26] Haleem, *Understanding the Qur'an*, 138.

[27] Levinson, "An-Other Woman," 270.

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language, and style, make it difficult to read the story in terms of a single-story narrative.[28] The story is fascinating on a number of levels. In the social imaginary of rabbinic Judaism and older Christian theology, the story has been used as a touchstone for themes of power and knowledge and identity and experience.[29] This article uncovers the neglected issues of power imbalance, microaggressions, and racism and systemic oppression in the narrative. In the main, I tie these issues to the contemporary race problem in the United States. Joseph survived because of YHWH's predilection for the poor and the oppressed. Although the survival of African Americans in a racist system is still very much in the air, I shall seek a convergence of YHWH's predilection for the poor and oppressed in what Lonergan has termed the "law of the cross," suggesting that the redemption African Americans seek can only come through the law of the cross.

Exegetical Analysis of the Text

Biblical scholars are still at loggerheads on the extent of the core Joseph narrative.[30] There is also no agreement on the extent to which the core of the Joseph narrative might be considered a short story comparable to Jonah, Ruth, and Esther.[31] Some regard Genesis 37–50 as the "Jacob saga," a collection of traditions about Jacob and his sons.[32] But the fact that Joseph is the focal point of chapters 37 through 50 makes the Joseph story a "story" within the Jacob story.[33] Narrative studies suggest that the Joseph–Potiphar's wife's story is not to be read as an intrusion into the Joseph story, but rather as an interlude. Without calling it an interlude, the Qur'an refers to this story-in-a-story as "the best of stories" (Qur'an 12:3). Its import is that it underscores the importance of the whole Joseph cycle story that begins with the episode of Joseph's dreams, followed by other episodes, including his interpretation of Pharaoh's

[28] W. Bruce Jorgensen, "Scriptural Chastity Lessons: Joseph and Potiphar's Wife; Corianton and the Harlot Isabel," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 32 (1999): 7–34, esp. 8.

[29] Levinson, "An-Other Woman," 271.

[30] For example, George Coats thinks elements of the core narrative run from Genesis 37–47; see George Coats, "Redactional Unity in Genesis 37–50," *JBL* 93 (1974): 15–21. Claus Westermann, however, thinks the core narrative runs from Genesis 37–45; see Claus Westermann, *Genesis 37–50: A Commentary*, trans. J. J. Scullion (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing, 1986), 22.

[31] Peter Bekins, "Tamar and Joseph in Genesis 38 and 39," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 40 (2016): 375–97, esp. 379.

[32] See Richard J. Clifford, SJ, and Roland E. Murphy, O. Carm, "Genesis," in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, ed. Raymond E. Brown, SS, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, SJ, and Roland E. Murphy, OCarm (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1990), 8–43, esp. 36.

[33] Clifford and Murphy, "Genesis," 36.

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dreams, until his death in Egypt.[34] Thus, biblical scholars think that the dream motif provides a structural unity to a story that otherwise contains a number of digressions.[35]

At the end of Genesis 37 we read, "The Midianites, meanwhile, sold Joseph in Egypt to Potiphar, a courtier of Pharaoh and his chief steward" (Gen 37:36). Here Potiphar is introduced as the man who bought Joseph as a slave. He was obviously a wealthy man, a man of influence who had Pharaoh's ear. But it is interesting that the biblical narrative refers to Potiphar by name only twice. Otherwise, he is called an "Egyptian master."[36] We are also told very little about Potiphar and his wife. By contrast, we know a lot about Joseph, his ancestry, and how he ended up in Egypt. Joseph is described as "strikingly handsome in countenance and body" (Gen 39:6). Even though a slave, he rises through the ranks and becomes Potiphar's servant. Not just Potiphar's servant, but his most trusted loyalist and overseer of his household. Potiphar's wife lusted after this well-built and handsome man. Trying to seduce him, she beckons, "Lie with me!" (Gen 39:7). But being a God-fearing man, Joseph refuses her advances. Jewish tradition depicts Joseph as a *tzaddik*, a righteous man. Some Jewish sages think the title was gained precisely as a result of the temptations he resisted.[37] There is a hint in the text from Joseph's response that his was no easy struggle. "[My master] has withheld from me nothing but yourself, since you are his wife. How then could I commit so great a wrong and then stand condemned before God?" (Gen 39:9). Some interpreters see this response as a case of Joseph protesting too much, offering reasons why he must not succumb to Potiphar's advances.[38] In the end, Joseph chooses a wise course of action—not to be alone with Potiphar's wife. "One such day, when Joseph came into the house to do his work, and none of the household servants were then in the house, she laid hold of him by his cloak, saying, 'Lie with me!' But leaving the cloak in her hand, he got away from her and ran outside" (Gen 39:11-12). Joseph resisted her advances and bolted away.

What was so special about this one particular day when Joseph came to do his work? Is it conceivable that the court of the powerful and wealthy Potiphar

[34] Bekins, "Tamar and Joseph in Genesis 38 and 39," 376. See also Robert Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative* (New York: Basic Books, 1981), 3–22.

[35] Victor H. Matthews, "The Anthropology of Clothing in Joseph Narrative," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 65 (1995): 25–36, esp. 28.

[36] Joan E. Cook, SC, "Four Marginalized Foils—Tamar, Judah, Joseph, and Potiphar's Wife: A Literary Study of Genesis 38–39," *Proceedings of the Eastern Great Lakes and Midwest Biblical Societies* 21 (2001), 115–28, esp. 120.

[37] Shimon Bakon, "Subtleties in the Story of Joseph and Potiphar's Wife," *Jewish Bible Quarterly* 14 (2013): 171–74, esp. 171.

[38] Bakon, "Subtleties in the Story of Joseph and Potiphar's Wife," 172.

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can be empty on this day or any other day that there will be no servant in the house? Some interpret this to mean that Joseph "was finally succumbing to the blandishments of Potiphar's wife, who had arranged to be alone in a house empty of servants."[39] But according to the *midrashim*, this particular day was significant only to Potiphar's wife. Joseph simply went about his normal innocuous duties.[40] Angry and vindictive, Potiphar's wife "screamed for her household servants and told them, 'Look, my husband has brought in a Hebrew slave to make sport of us! He came in here to lie with me, but I cried out as loud as I could. When he heard me scream for help, he left his cloak beside me and ran away outside'" (Gen 39:14-15). One interpreter notes, "With all the fury of a woman scorned, Potiphar's wife goes about defaming Joseph and accusing him of molesting her."[41] Notice how Potiphar's wife broadened her accusations, blaming her husband for bringing Joseph into their house.[42] "The phrase 'he has brought' indicates the subconscious contempt she has for her husband."[43] As soon as Potiphar returned, his wife showed him Joseph's cloak and repeated to him the same falsified story of Joseph she had told the other men. "The Hebrew slave whom you brought here broke in on me, to make sport of me. But when I screamed for help, he left his cloak beside me and fled outside" (Gen 39:17-18). She stresses to Potiphar Joseph's alien status, Hebrew, and adds a stress on his status, servant.[44] She weighs Joseph's Hebrew-servant status against her own as an Egyptian wife to magnify Joseph's offense, "to make sport of me."[45] Potiphar was angered by Joseph's supposed betrayal. Without holding a trial, he puts Joseph in prison (Gen 39:20). Potiphar unquestionably believed his wife, notwithstanding that ordinarily he paid little or no attention to her (Gen 39:6). Thus, what we see play out is how the false accusation of a lecherous and powerful woman has led to Joseph losing Potiphar's trust and being stripped of the emblems of his power.[46] She has caused Joseph's status in the household to be reversed.[47]

[39] Bakon, "Subtleties in the Story of Joseph and Potiphar's Wife," 172.
[40] Levinson, "An-Other Woman," 275.
[41] Bakon, "Subtleties in the Story of Joseph and Potiphar's Wife," 173.
[42] Cook, "Four Marginalized Foils—Tamar, Judah, Joseph, and Potiphar's Wife," 121.
[43] Bakon, "Subtleties in the Story of Joseph and Potiphar's Wife," 173.
[44] Jorgensen, "Scriptural Chastity Lessons," 15.
[45] Jorgensen, "Scriptural Chastity Lessons," 15.
[46] D. M. R. Bentley, "Dante Gabriel Rossetti's 'Joseph Accused Before Potiphar,'" *British Art Journal* 19, no. 1 (2018): 57–61, esp. 57.
[47] Cook, "Four Marginalized Foils—Tamar, Judah, Joseph, and Potiphar's Wife," 121.

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Axes of Intersectionality with Contemporary Racial Attitudes

The parallel of the Joseph story to American racial attitudes is stark and hard to miss. The African American monk and historian Cyprian Davis, OSB (1930–2015), once insightfully likened racism in the United States to radiation—that it exists everywhere and its effect depends on the degree its recipient receives at a particular time.[48] Here I identify seven key ways contemporary racism unfolds, and I correlate them with the scriptural texts under examination. Let me be clear that there may be a couple of instances where the contextual equivalences of the scriptural story and the Black situation in the United States may not be as strong as the others, but their discontinuities are striking. Despite the contextual discontinuities, one does not need to look too hard to discover some striking continuities that resonate with the contemporary moral crisis of ongoing systemic racism.

The liminality of Black life

The paradox of Jewish identity is that the classical Jewish identity, as found in the scriptural traditions, was forged in the diaspora. This classical Jewish notion of "nation" should by no means be confused with the modern notion of "nation" or race that was birthed by the European Enlightenment.[49] I have already noted some differences between the enslavement of the nation of Israel in Egypt (which is not about race) and the chattel slavery and Middle Passage that brought tens of millions of kidnapped Africans to Europe and the Americas (which is about race). Apart from memoirs and notes that were left behind by the survivors of the Middle Passage by the likes of Olaudah Equiano, there is no accurate record anywhere of the number of African captives that were loaded in tranasatlantic ships and transported to Europe and the Americas. In contrast, the Qur'anic and biblical stories give a step-by-step account of how the people of Israel ended up in Egypt, beginning with the arrival of Jacob and his household. The Qur'an shows how it is a fulfillment of the dream with which the story began. In the case of kidnapped Blacks, it was the fulfillment of the economic and capitalist dream of European and American merchants. The essence of the scriptural story is that the evil act committed against Joseph by his brothers because of his dreams is eventually turned to his advantage, and he will use that advantage to benefit his

[48] As reported in personal communication with John D. Dadosky.

[49] For more, see Cyril Orji, *Exploring Theological Paradoxes* (London: Routledge, 2022), 68. See also J. Hutchinson and A. D. Smart, "Introduction," in *Ethnicity* ed. J. Hutchinson and A. D. Smart (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 6–7.

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own family, including his father and the brothers who enslaved him.[50] The one correlation in the Joseph story and the Middle Passage experience of kidnapped Black slaves is their shared experience of marginality. Before he rose to become the second most powerful man in Egypt, Joseph experienced marginality because of his status as a slave.

Biblical commentators have identified different kinds of marginalities in the Joseph–Potiphar's wife's story. One standout marginality is ethnicity. Ethnic marginality is complex because it intertwines with geographical and familial marginalization. Joseph is in a foreign land and away from his family. He is facing geographical and familial marginalization.[51] He is marginalized by Potiphar and his wife, and he is seen immediately as the enemy of their household.[52] The marginalization rose to a crescendo when Potiphar's wife came up with a crafty little script to kindle the anger of her husband against Joseph, who, up to this point, has been loyal to Potiphar. Her crafty script is two-pronged: to blame Potiphar for Joseph's presence in their household and to accuse Joseph of a crime she knows he did not commit. Potiphar may be sexually and emotionally estranged from his wife, but when she came up with the scheme that Joseph violated her, he immediately acted on her accusation, imprisoning Joseph to appease her.[53] Devon Carbado has identified similar ethnic-familial marginalization in the United States—that Black people are suspect both in law and in social life just because they are Black. His research uncovers that in law, the subject status of Black people renders them presumptively illegitimate subjects of racial remediation. That is, to say, the law considers Black people to be presumptively underserving of intervention when it comes to addressing inequality. In social life, the suspect status of Black people's ethnic identity also renders them presumptively nonnormative or nonlaw abiding.[54] From the way the system is set up, Carbado thinks that Black people are presumed to be presumptively deserving of only surveillance, discipline, and social control.[55] Carbado writes, "The combined effect of strict scrutiny's social and legal regimes is not only that the dominant ways in which Black people experience marginality—their various trajectories to 'premature death'—are pushed beyond the bounds of social and constitutional legibility and legitimacy; it is also that Black people become unspeakable witnesses

[50] Haleem, *Understanding the Qur'an*, 140.
[51] Cook, "Four Marginalized Foils—Tamar, Judah, Joseph, and Potiphar's Wife," 124.
[52] Cook, "Four Marginalized Foils—Tamar, Judah, Joseph, and Potiphar's Wife," 124.
[53] Cook, "Four Marginalized Foils—Tamar, Judah, Joseph, and Potiphar's Wife," 124.
[54] Carbado, "Strict Scrutiny and the Black Body," 2.
[55] Carbado, "Strict Scrutiny and the Black Body," 3.

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to this subordinating arrangement."[56] In simple terms, Black people live their lives "leveraging death."[57] Black people know firsthand what it means to live daily leveraging death. The families of Trayvon Martin, Breanna Taylor, and George Floyd have experienced firsthand this leveraging of death. What is true of Black life in the hands of police is true in general in all spheres of life, including the teaching academy where to be Black is to leverage death routinely.

The vulnerability of Black lives

Joseph's ordeal in the hands of Potiphar's wife challenges a number of assumptions about Black life in general. Joseph's ordeal at the hands of the vengeful woman offers a lens for understanding Black vulnerability and how easy it is to strip Black people of their social status. As a slave in Potiphar's house, Joseph would have had a distinctive type of clothing. In Egypt at the time, clothing was a status marker. At first Joseph would have worn clothing that marked him as a slave. But when he was elevated to the position of "overseer" (Gen 39:5), he would have been given a different kind of clothing, probably a gown worn over the tunic. This would be "an outward sign of his authority and his enhanced role within the household."[58] But Joseph had little knowledge as to how complex Potiphar's wife's lust was. He did not have a clue it was a lust that was bound up with resentment and violence.[59] When she tries to seduce him and he escapes her clutches by pulling out of his livery and leaving it in her hands, "he is stripped of his status-marker and the symbol of his role within that community."[60] Now that he is accused of rape, he has to exchange the clothing that marked him as an overseer for a new one that reflects his new role as a prisoner.[61]

Joseph cannot seem to catch a break; the same way people of color cannot catch a break in the hands of the law. Before his encounter with Potiphar's wife, there were two other times in his life that Joseph's garment or cloak got him in trouble. The first time, we heard that the coat his father had given him became for his brothers a source of envy. "They hated him so much that they would not even greet him" (Gen 37:4). The second time, we heard that his brothers dipped his cloak in blood to deceive their father into thinking Joseph was

[56] Carbado, "Strict Scrutiny and the Black Body," 3.
[57] Carbado, "Strict Scrutiny and the Black Body," 6.
[58] Matthews, "The Anthropology of Clothing in Joseph Narrative," 32.
[59] Jorgensen, "Scriptural Chastity Lessons," 18.
[60] Matthews, "The Anthropology of Clothing in Joseph Narrative," 32.
[61] Matthews, "The Anthropology of Clothing in Joseph Narrative," 32.

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dead (Gen 37:31-33).[62] We know that YHWH blessed Joseph with the gift of dreams, which led his brothers to envy. The dreams anticipate a reality where the brothers do indeed bow to Joseph.[63] The reason his brothers wanted to get rid of him in the first place was to squash his dream. This series of events cascaded into other things, leading to his cloak getting him in trouble at the hands of Potiphar's wife. This third time, although Potiphar's wife failed in her attempts to seduce Joseph, she still thought she could use the clothing that she had grabbed as evidence to destroy him.[64] This makes one question or wonder about Joseph's insipid capacity to court trouble. "Is it just chance or is Joseph repeating a pattern? Are these parallels related to some elements of Joseph's character which needs to be understood?"[65]

There are similarities between the stripping of Joseph's robe, which symbolizes the stripping of his status, with the stripping of African American pride and honor. Marginalization implies vulnerability.[66] "One who is liminal to a group cannot count on the usual supports and sanctions that bind and help shape the actions of those who are clearly identified as members."[67] Also, the extent to which the stereotypes against Black people and their degradation stem from their gifts and the necessity their adversaries have to squash their dreams have yet to be fully investigated. Historically, the marginalization of Black people has stemmed from the inordinate desire to kill their dreams and extinguish their gifts. During slavery, Black people were preferred in the plantations because they are naturally gifted—physically strong and have the innate ability to withstand harsher conditions than non-Blacks. What was intended by the maker of the universe to be a native endowment is used by the adversary for ungodly purposes.

The ghost of slavery

Joseph's ordeal in the hands of his brothers reached a crescendo when he was sold to the Midianite. The Qur'an describes his relationship with his brothers as dysfunctional, stemming from envy. "The brothers said to each

[62] Cook, "Four Marginalized Foils—Tamar, Judah, Joseph, and Potiphar's Wife," 121. Joseph was the favorite of all the sons of Jacob. The Bible tells us that this was because Joseph's mother, Rachel, who was beloved of Jacob, was barren for a long time before she gave birth to Joseph. This made his brothers hate him. Rachel died while giving birth to Joseph's younger brother, Benjamin.

[63] Clifford and Murphy, "Genesis," 37.

[64] Cook, "Four Marginalized Foils—Tamar, Judah, Joseph, and Potiphar's Wife," 121.

[65] Judith Elkan, "Joseph and Potiphar's Wife: Psycho-Analytic Reflections," *European Judaism: A Journal for the New Europe* 16 (1982): 32–37, esp. 33.

[66] Cook, "Four Marginalized Foils—Tamar, Judah, Joseph, and Potiphar's Wife," 125.

[67] Cook, "Four Marginalized Foils—Tamar, Judah, Joseph, and Potiphar's Wife," 125–26.

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other, 'Although we are many, Joseph and his brother are dearer to our father than we are—our father is clearly in the wrong'" (Surah 12:8). Sadly, vulnerability can and often begins in the hands of loved ones—be they family members or trusted friends or colleagues. Often glossed over in the racism discourse is the extent to which even some Black people themselves play a role, even if marginal, in the system of racism. Seldom do racists work alone. They work with allies and collaborators. I am not referring to those African chiefs who cooperated with the European and American slave traders to build "slave holdings" where they kept captured Africans before transporting them to the New World. The Europeans had the "maxim guns" and were always going to take slaves away, whether the African chiefs cooperated or not. Rather, I am referring to some contemporary Black actors who, like Joseph's brothers, will flimsily turn against their own brothers and sisters and are too willing to participate in a system that denigrates their own kind for whatever paltry short-term gains of their own. These kind of folks are in the public sector, they are at your institutions of learning, and they are in your neighborhood. Then there is also the case of those social justice enthusiasts, usually so-called white liberals that the Rev. Martin Luther King. Jr. was fed up with in his Letter from Birmingham Jail.[68] Their corollary are Christian theologians and ethicists of today. They are too quick to speak about God's preferential option for the poor, but never connect it to racism and never examine their own complicity in the system of racism. This oddity makes me wonder, as James Cone did, why many white Catholic and non-Catholic theologians, like Reinhold Niebuhr, remain "silent in regard to racism, even though they have been very outspoken about anti-Semitism and class and gender contradictions in response to radical protest."[69]

In Egypt, the descendants of Joseph worked in a house haunted by the ghost of slavery. In the United States, African Americans work in a human cultural society haunted by the ghost of slavery. Slavery was officially abolished after the Civil War, but its ghost continued to possess societal institutions, such as the American legal and economic systems. Jim Crow laws, and systemic racism, like the one that triggered the police beating of Rodney King in Los Angeles (1991) and the death of George Floyd at the hands of police officers (2020), are aftereffects of the ghost of slavery. M. Shawn Copeland has even gone a step further to suggest that Christian theologians in the United

[68] See Martin Luther King Jr., "Letter from Birmingham Jail," https://www.csuchico.edu/iege/_assets/documents/susi-letter-from-birmingham-jail.pdf.

[69] James H. Cone, "Black Liberation Theology and Black Catholics: A Critical Conversation," *Theological Studies* 63 (2000): 731–48.

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States "work . . . in a house haunted by the ghosts of slavery."[70] And despite the concerted effort to conceal slavery behind the narratives of innocence or mask it in pretense, "the most vivid reminder and remainder of slavery, then, is the black body. These bodies of evidence cannot be explained away so easily."[71] Potiphar's wife felt entitled to Joseph's body, similar to the way male slave holders in the antebellum American South were normatively permitted to have sexual access to their female slaves (although free women were barred or prohibited from engaging in sexual intercourse with Black male slaves). Potiphar's wife's entitlement provides us a lens for viewing how Black bodies are perceived and treated by the dominant society. In Potiphar's wife's mind, as during slavery, slaves do not own their bodies. They were mere objects.[72] Thanks to the events of the past few years, it is now common knowledge that many colleges and universities in the United States, such as the University of Virginia, Brown University, and Georgetown University, treated Black bodies as objects. It is not just that they used the slaves to build their campuses, "their literal bodies were also used as collateral to buy land and supplies to build those buildings."[73] It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss how Black bodies were treated during slavery and under Jim Crow. But it is hard to dispute that slavery and Jim Crow laws were an assault on Black bodies.[74] The pain that Potiphar's wife unleashed on Joseph for daring to protect his body makes visible the torture and pain to which Black bodies are incessantly subjected. We need not look too far for some contemporary examples: Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, Freddie Gray, Rodney King, and George Floyd.[75] It is needless to say that Black bodies in pain have been "an American national spectacle for centuries"[76] and still continue to be.

[70] M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom: Body, Race, and Being*, 2nd ed. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2023), xii.

[71] Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, xiii.

[72] See Anthony B. Pinn, *Terror and Triumph: The Nature of Black Religion* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 12.

[73] Angela J. Hattery and Earl Smith, *Policing Black Bodies: How Black Lives Are Surveilled and How to Work for Change* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2021), 5.

[74] For more on this discussion, see Luke A. Powery, "Do This in Remembrance of Me: Black Bodies and the Future of Theological Education," *Theology Today* 76, no. 4 (2020): 336–47.

[75] For more on the database of Blacks who have died in the custody of law enforcement, see the Smith & Hattery website at wewww.smithandhattery.com.

[76] Elizabeth Alexander, "Can You Be Black and Look at This?: Reading the Rodney King Videos," *Public Culture* 7 (1994): 77–94, esp. 77.

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The "Karen" phenomenon

"What sacred games shall we have to invent?"—Nietzsche

In the Joseph story, the general dominant interpretation, since Rabbinic Judaism at least, has been to present Joseph as a paragon of virtue, as one who mastered the art of self-control and who will not give in to sexual temptations. Potiphar's wife, by contrast, is presented as a woman who is driven by her uncontrollable passions. The contrasting reading reflects "a dominant code of self-fashioning in the Greco-Roman world, where self-control, especially in its sexual form, was a *sine qua non* of masculine gender identity, while women are constantly portrayed as 'constitutionally unable to constrain themselves.'"[77] This dominant ancient biblical interpretation sets up a gendered opposition—a dichotomy between self-control and promiscuity. But the Qur'anic interpretation differs slightly. It does not read the story as a seduction story. The Qur'an, in fact, dismisses any notion of a gendered dichotomy between man and woman and seems to reject the idea that Zuleika represents a female guile. The Qur'anic reading thinks if there were a "seduction" in the story at all, it will be more about prophet Yusuf's (Joseph) irresistible beauty than about Zuleika's desires. So, the Qur'an helps to mitigate the gendered sexual concerns of the Bible. But to be fair, to some extent the Bible also mitigates the representation of a woman as promiscuous with the story of the matriarch Rachel. Rachel is presented as an antithesis to Potiphar's wife because Rachel "despised intercourse with a man and chose continence."[78] I make these points to make clear that my reading of the text is not influenced by sexual continence. I am more concerned with the cultural continence of the story. In this respect, Potiphar's wife is not Joseph's sexual other, but more importantly his cultural other.[79] Potiphar's wife embodies the character type of a "Karen": the scheming man or woman who attempts to exploit his or her social position to ridicule the cultural other. "Karen" knows how and when to exploit her culturally given racial power. Racial hoax may have been steeped in history; "Karen" embodies its new phenomenon.

The *midrashim* think Potiphar's wife deliberately emptied her household so she could facilitate the seduction of Joseph.[80] "Karen" stages the scene to make the cultural other feel othered. In staging the scene, Potiphar's wife

[77] Levinson, "An-Other Woman," 272.
[78] Levinson, "An-Other Woman," 273.
[79] Levinson, "An-Other Woman," 274.
[80] Levinson, "An-Other Woman," 280.

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swiftly "screamed for her household servants and told them, 'Look! My husband has brought in a Hebrew slave to make sport of us. He came in here to lie with me, but I cried out as loud as I could. When he heard me scream for help, he left his cloak beside me and ran away outside'" (Gen 39:14-15). The white woman—"Karen"—in Central Park, New York, staged the scene and told the police that the African American man who was bird-watching was "threatening my life." Like Potiphar's wife, the white woman—"Karen"—"was mobilizing her racial bargaining power in the shadow of state violence that she knew her race and gender could authorize against his."[81] Like Potiphar's wife, the white woman—"Karen"—created a story in which the contrary was true. Like Potiphar's wife, who knew she could make her husband take her side, the white woman—"Karen"—in Central Park knew she could rely on the police to take her side.[82] Both Potiphar's wife and the white woman—"Karen"—expose a system of kyriarchy in which ethnicity, gender, class, and economics intersect to oppress the cultural other.[83]

In the biblical story, notice how the "men of her house" that Potiphar's wife hastily assembles to be her witnesses did not question her claims. The men were either her slaves beholden to her or they were committed to her. The Qur'anic version tells us, not only that Zuleika gossips against Yusuf (Joseph) to the town's folks; she also threatens him with humiliation and imprisonment. In both the biblical and Qur'anic versions, Potiphar's wife holds Joseph's garment as "proof"[84] and "evidence" of Joseph's assault. Both renditions of the story allude to the cunning of a "sexually frustrated and imaginatively vengeful lascivious woman."[85] The Talmud characterizes her as "the epitome of the

[81] Carbado, "Strict Scrutiny and the Black Body," 6.

[82] Carbado, "Strict Scrutiny and the Black Body," 6.

[83] Fiorenza, who introduced this term, defines "kyriarchy" as "a complex pyramidal system of intersecting multiplicative social structures of superordination and subordination, of ruling and oppression." See Elizabeth S. Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), 210.

[84] Some biblical scholars have argued for a garment motif in the Joseph story. In this garment motif, Joseph receives a garment from his father, which his brothers later divested from him; he later receives a garment from Pharaoh, which signals his authority, and later we see Joseph giving clothing to his brothers—the same ones who had divested him of his clothes. The suggestion is that the motif "highlights the theme of Joseph's rise to a position of favor, his precipitous fall and the manner in which he will save Jacob's household from extinction by rising once again to a position of power and influence"; see Matthews, "The Anthropology of Clothing in Joseph Narrative," 29. See also Claus Westermann, *Genesis 37-50*.

[85] Bentley, "Dante Gabriel Rossetti's 'Joseph Accused Before Potiphar,'" 60.

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artful adulteress: lascivious, impetuous, deceitful."[86] Potiphar's wife is "perfidiously two-faced,"[87] the same way "Karen" is perfidiously two-faced. Like Potiphar's wife, the white woman—"Karen"—in Central Park made a distress call to accuse a Black man of a crime she invented. Legal scholars have noted how "Her gendered signal of racial distress was potentially both exigency-producing and adjudicatory. It carried the power to create a particular kind of state of emergency for which Black men have frequently been killed within the boundaries of what the law authorizes the police to do."[88]

In every "Karen" event, "the victim suffers for being singled out on the basis of her race, and the general community of the target racial group is harmed as well."[89] In the US criminal justice system, the phrase "race and crime" is almost always used as a negative referent for Black people who are stereotypically associated with crime.[90] The criminal Black man/woman myth has been perpetuated to a point that many now use it to foment racial hoax,[91] even when they know that the offender is not Black. Potiphar's wife functions as an instrument for depriving Joseph of his self-identity and his cultural identity.[92] A "Karen" uses her gendered expression of racial power to play on the negative caricature of making "Black" and "crime" synonymous and to conjure a "racial hoax"[93] to deprive the Black person of their self-identify and cultural identity. I alluded, earlier, to how Black people live their lives leveraging death. Any time a "Karen" confronts a Black man, regardless of the facts of the case, one thing that is undeniable is that the "Karen" engages the Black person, not only as an individual subject, but also as a Black-person-group-species as well.[94] A Black person's encounter with a "Karen" engenders in many Black people "the racially liminal and vicarious sensation of feeling already dead."[95] In every "Karen" encounter, it is easy to dismiss each particular "Karen" as a bad apple in a basket full of good apples. But the vulnerable ground on which each and every individual Black victim of "Karen" stands is not produced by a bad apple,

[86] Levinson, "An-Other Woman," 282.
[87] Levinson, "An-Other Woman," 280.
[88] Carbado, "Strict Scrutiny and the Black Body," 6–7.
[89] Russell, "The Racial Hoax as Crime," 617.
[90] Russell, "The Racial Hoax as Crime," 595.
[91] Russell, "The Racial Hoax as Crime," 595.
[92] Levinson, "An-other Woman," 298.
[93] For ways in which racial hoaxes play out in American social life, see Russell, "The Racial Hoax as Crime," and Kathryn R. Russell, *The Color of Crime: Racial Hoaxes, White Fear, Black Protectionism, Police Harassment, and Other Microaggressions*, 2nd ed. (New York: New York University Press, 2008).
[94] Carbado, "Strict Scrutiny and the Black Body," 11.
[95] Carbado, "Strict Scrutiny and the Black Body," 11.

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but by a broader racial dynamic that scrutinizes and accepts the Black person as already-now guilty.[96]

Microaggressions and dramatic bias

> "Although, unfortunately, racism still exists, we will not allow that to stop us from continuing to smile."—Edson Arantes do Nascimento, aka Pelé

The Bible does not tell us much about the domestic life of Potiphar and his wife or their marriage. The first time Potiphar is mentioned in the Joseph story, we are made to understand that the man who bought Joseph from the Midianites was "a courtier of Pharaoh and his chief steward" (Gen 37:36). Some Bible translations render "courtier" in the text as "eunuch" because in Hebrew a eunuch is often used to designate a "royal official."[97] Islamic scholars mostly agree that al-Aziz was a eunuch and that he did not have any children. They believe there was no sexual intimacy between Al-Aziz and Zuleika. Eunuchs, in the ancient world, were "a class of emasculated men attached to the courts of eastern rulers. They were employed to watch over the harems, and also were often given positions as trusted officials."[98] If Potiphar were a eunuch, he probably was castrated so he could pose no threat to the royal wives or royal bloodline of his master, Pharaoh.[99] That would make him uninterested in sex and incapable of begetting children. That he has a wife is only for protocol. "A court official needs a wife for state functions; she might be a sort of ornament, like a badge or some item of full-dress uniform, little more. . .. No wonder the wife is a furious woman: like it or not, she's little more than an object in the house, possibly surrounded by eunuchs of her own."[100] Understandably, a woman who is sexually neglected would cast her eyes upon a gorgeous-looking man like Joseph. "She's sexually neglected and resentful; already mocked (structurally if not emotionally) by her marriage and now by the presence of this healthy and virile servant who is not hers to command and has, in fact, risen to a status that rivals or exceeds her own, and who, as a male and an overseer, would seem to have more sexual opportunity than she has."[101]

Jewish sages note how Joseph was being slowly worn down daily by Potiphar's wife. They interpret the phrase "she tried to entice him day after

[96] Carbado, "Strict Scrutiny and the Black Body," 15.
[97] Jorgensen, "Scriptural Chastity Lessons," 16.
[98] Jorgensen, "Scriptural Chastity Lessons," 17.
[99] Jorgensen, "Scriptural Chastity Lessons," 17.
[100] Jorgensen, "Scriptural Chastity Lessons," 17.
[101] Jorgensen, "Scriptural Chastity Lessons," 17.

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day" (Gen 39:10) to mean that Joseph was facing daily provocations that were capable of eroding his emotions.[102] Some Rabbis think the provocations were so intense as to make Joseph gradually succumb.[103] This is what microaggressions do. Subjections to microaggressions erode self-confidence.[104] The African American psychiatrist Chester Peirce (1927–2016), who was said to have been the first to use the term "microaggressions" in the 1970s, used it in reference to the subtle and automatic "put-downs" and insults directed at African Americans in their day-to-day living.[105] Derald Wing Sue, who has since developed the concept, extends it to all marginalized groups in society, including gender-based, sexual orientation–based, class-based, and disability-based prejudices.[106] Sue argues that it is naive to think that microaggressions come only from White supremacists, Skinheads, Ku Klux Klan, or other extreme groups that pose the greatest threat on the conscious level. Microaggressions can and do come from "well-intentioned people, who are strongly motivated by egalitarian values, believe in their own morality, and experience themselves as fair-minded and decent people who would never consciously discriminate."[107] Microaggressions are a fact of life for the marginalized. Black people routinely have to internalize negative images about themselves that are reinforced by the dominant culture. Even the negative stereotypes of Black people that white people learn at an early age cause an onslaught of microaggressions. "These images are developed, reinforced, assimilated, and over time accepted as 'truth rather than opinion.'"[108] "Microaggressions—individually directed, incessant, and cumulative assaults—do not operate in a vacuum," writes Elizabeth Russell. "Microaggressions are played out through the press at the national level, and as a result become part of our collective racial consciousness."[109]

Social theorists, like behavioral psychologists, have struggled to come up with the best terms that can describe the trauma induced in victims of racism. They have bounced around terms, such as the "normalization of racial

[102] Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 3.

[103] See James Kugel, *In Potiphar's House: The Interpretive Life of Biblical Texts* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994). This interpretation is based on a particular reading of Gen 39:6: "And Joseph was comely of form and comely of appearance."

[104] Russell, "The Racial Hoax as Crime," 602.

[105] Derald Wing Sue, *Microaggressions in Everyday Life: Race, Gender, and Sexual Orientation* (Hoboken, NJ: Wiley, 2010), 5.

[106] Sue, *Microaggressions in Everyday Life*, 5.

[107] Sue, *Microaggressions in Everyday Life*, xv.

[108] Russell, "The Racial Hoax as Crime," 602.

[109] Russell, "The Racial Hoax as Crime," 602.

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subordination,"[110] the "trauma of the routine,"[111] "ontological terror,"[112] and "cultural trauma." Each of these terms suggests that racism induces in the victim different kinds of trauma that affect the person individually and collectively or culturally. Cultural traumas are not inborn. They are socially mediated.[113] When they occur, they emerge "as shocks to the routines."[114] Cultural traumas occur "when members of a collective feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways."[115] The First Nations in Canada today are still dealing with the intergenerational trauma they experienced at the hands of the Catholic Church in the now infamous tragic history of the Native American boarding school system.[116]

Mythic consciousness

The ghost of slavery, echoed in the section, "The Ghost of Slavery," creates a range of illusions and distorts the truth. One of these illusions is the illusion Lonergan calls "mythic consciousness." "Mythic consciousness" is a term Lonergan uses for a whole range of lapses undermining the objectivity

[110] Carbado, "Strict Scrutiny and the Black Body," 11.

[111] Angela Onwuachi-Willig, "The Trauma of the Routine: Lessons on Cultural Trauma from the Emmet Till Verdict," *Social Theory* 34 (2016): 335–57.

[112] James Cameron, *A Time of Terror: A Survivor's Story* (Milwaukee, WI: TD Publications, 1982).

[113] Angela Onwuachi-Willig, "The Trauma of the Routine," 336.

[114] Angela Onwuachi-Willig, "The Trauma of the Routine," 336.

[115] Jeffrey Alexander, "Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma," in *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, ed. J. C. Alexander et al., (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 1–30, esp. 1.

[116] See Maka Black Elk and William Critchley-Menor, SJ, "Atoning for Sins Against Indigenous People Begins with Confronting the Past: Red Cloud Indian is Showing the Way," *America*, October 8, 2021, https://www.americamagazine.org/politics-society/2021/10/08/indigenous-peoples-day-orange-shirt-culture-jesuits-boarding-school. Today the descendants of the Lakota people who attended the Holy Rosary Mission, one of the three hundred boarding schools founded by the Christian government and the missionaries in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, speak of the "trauma experienced across generations." The government and the Christian missionaries who founded many of the schools among the Lakota people have been found to be complicit in the destruction of the Lakota language and culture through their policy of the assimilation method "Kill the Indian, Save the Man." The process took apart many native families, suppressed native cultures and their ways of life, and destroyed the bond between parents and their children.

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of human knowing. He labels as "myth" those things pertaining to the construction of false reality, like the false realities described in Northrop Frye's *Fables of Identity*.[117] He warns that mythic consciousness does not belong only to the primitives or to a past period of human history. "You can get right back to it very easily."[118] If, along with Lonergan who followed the Scholastics, we affirm *ens per verum innotescit* (that reality becomes known through knowing what is true),[119] then mythic consciousness is a distortion of reality. For the marginalized, mythic consciousness can create an internalized feeling of inferiority, which in turn undermines the person's self-worth and dignity. When induced in the Black person, mythic consciousness can make them narrowly tailor their race to "nothing more than inert skin color—skin color that is ostensibly without social meaning."[120] This kind of mythic consciousness is at the root of cultural trauma echoed in the section titled "Microaggressions and Dramatic Bias." But the worst kind of mythic consciousness is the one that afflicts the dominant group. It leads to a feeling of superiority and inflated ego. Fueled by mythic consciousness, Potiphar's wife felt entitled to Joseph's body whenever and however she wanted it. She would invent myth or construct lies, if she cannot have it her way. W. E. B. Dubois consistently spoke of the lies in the narrative history of the United States and in the reconstruction after the Civil War.[121] James Baldwin expressed his concern for the "lies" in the American narrative history that in turn begot a whole set of lies. Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. berated what he saw as a "fog of lies" in American moral vision.[122] Mythic consciousness can and does lead to a feeling of superiority, which in turn leads to an invention of lies. It plays out in white privilege.

[117] See Northrop Frye, *Fables of Identity: Studies in Poetic Mythology* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963).

[118] Bernard Lonergan, "An Interview with Fr. Bernard Lonergan, S.J.," in *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, vol. 13, *A Second Collection*, ed. Robert M. Doran and John D. Dadosky (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2016), 176–94, esp. 190.

[119] Bernard Lonergan, "The Origins of Christian Realism (1972)," in *A Second Collection*, 202–20, esp. 211.

[120] Carbado, "Strict Scrutiny and the Black Body," 2.

[121] See W. E. B. Dubois, *Black Reconstruction* (New York: Harcourt Press, 1935); see particularly the final chapter titled, "The Propaganda of History." See also Charles Lemert, "The Race of Time: Dubois and Reconstruction," *Boundary* 27 (October 2000): 215–48; Claire Parfait, "Rewriting History: The Publication of W. E. B. Dubois' Black Reconstruction in America (1935)," *Book History* 12 (2009): 266–94.

[122] Eddie Glaude Jr., *Begin Again: James Baldwin's America and Its Urgent Lessons for Our Own* (New York: Crown, 2020), 70.

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White privilege

Potiphar's wife is nameless in the biblical text. She is simply referred to as "Potiphar's wife." Her anonymity indicates she might be a foreigner. In fact, the narrator of Genesis 39 thinks she is a "foreign seductress."[123] Although she is not Egyptian, you would not be able to tell. She feels entitled to whatever she wants. She would like to get Joseph out of the way so she could save her own status in the household. It is the mark of privilege to eliminate all seeming oppositions to safeguard one's status and the status quo.

Racism and white privilege are two sides of the same coin. Subtle racism plays out behind closed doors; white privilege plays out in open doors. Both work hand in hand. Nowhere does white privilege play out more than in the corporate office and in our schools. Ta-Nehisi Coates speaks of his own moment of epiphany—that it came when he realized that the streets and the schools are arms of the same beast. "One enjoyed the official power of the state while the other enjoyed its implicit sanction."[124] Maya Angelou's contrast between the free bird and the caged bird captures the reality of white privilege as the other side of racism: The free bird "leaps on the back of the wind," but the caged bird is shackled in its cage. The free bird "floats downstream till the current ends," but the caged bird can "seldom see through his bars of rage." The free bird "dips his wings in the orange sun rays and dares to claim the sky," but the caged bird's wings are clipped and his feet are tied." Angelou's contrasts of the concerns of the free bird and the caged bird are also illuminating: "The free bird thinks of another breeze and the trade winds soft through the sighing trees and the fat worms waiting on a dawn-bright lawn and he names the sky his own." The caged bird "stands on the grave of dreams/his shadow shouts on a nightmare scream/his wings are clipped and his feet are tied/so he opens his throat to sing."[125]

A Schematic Repentance Model

> "Shoot all the blue jays you want, if you can hit 'em, but remember it's a sin to kill a mockingbird."—Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*

To use Lonergan's own terminology, racism represents a surd. It has no intelligibility. It does not have an intelligible dependence on anything. In the

[123] Cook, "Four Marginalized Foils—Tamar, Judah, Joseph, and Potiphar's Wife," 124.

[124] Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Random House, 2015), 33.

[125] See Maya Angelou, "Caged Bird," https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/48989/caged-bird.

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end, racism is the irrationality of rational creatures.[126] It is this human failure and the apparent lack of intelligibility of racism that Harper Lee was referencing in *To Kill a Mockingbird*. "Mockingbirds don't do one thing except make music for us to enjoy. They don't eat up people's gardens, don't nest in corncribs, they don't do one thing but sing their hearts out for us. That's why it's a sin to kill a mockingbird."[127] Racism requires a reasonable response, both theologically and sociologically. The white woman who filed a false police report stating that a Black bird-watcher threatened her and her dog got her charges of filing a false police report dropped because she went to therapy. It raises the question, can therapy make one antiracist? Is therapy the best solution to racism? When an audio recording of racist remarks by the president of the Los Angeles City Council, Nury Martinez, was leaked, Martinez apologized for her remarks and begged for forgiveness.[128] In 2020, the former mayor of New York City, Michael Bloomberg, who was then running to be the nominee for the Democratic Party for the president of the United States, came under fire for his comments in a 2015 speech that stereotyped Black men in the controversial stop-and-frisk law in New York City, which allowed police to target Black and Brown people in New York City for their purported proneness to crime. Bloomberg apologized when the footage was leaked and asked for forgiveness. Similarly, when a videotape of the music artist Justin Bieber, was released in 2014 showing Bieber using the N-word, making racist jokes, bragging about the killing of Black people at the hands of the police, and even bragging about joining the Ku Klux Klan, Bieber expressed remorse and issued an apology.[129] The pattern is the same everywhere: whenever a high-profile person is caught on tape expressing blatant racism, they claim to express "remorse" and then ask for "forgiveness." It begs the question whether their so-called remorse is genuine. I would like to see a study on whether such instant expressions of remorse and pleas for forgiveness lead to transformation of character. In the

[126] See Bernard Lonergan, "The Redemption," in *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, vol. 6, *Philosophical and Theological papers 1958–1964*, ed. Robert C. Croken, Frederick E. Crowe, and Robert M. Doran (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 3–28, esp. 12.

[127] Harper Lee, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, 40th anniversary ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 1999), 103.

[128] "Los Angeles City Council President Steps Down from Leadership Role after Leak of Racist Comments," NBC News, https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/la-city-councilor-president-resigns-racist-comments-leak-rcna51516.

[129] See Kaviena Spencer, "Should a Person's Racist Past Be Forgiven?" *The Famuan* (February 26, 2020), http://www.thefamuanonline.com/2020/02/26/should-a-persons-racist-past-be-forgiven/.

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absence of data, anecdotal evidence suggests that what often passes for repentance in these cases leads nowhere. Whatever remedy for racism that will lead to transformation of character must include remorse (acknowledgment of guilt) and plea for forgiveness (penitence) in a genuine way. I will return to remorse and forgiveness after examining recommendations of behavioral psychologists and legal luminaries.

Sociological remedies

Behavioral psychologists see prolonged behavioral, psychological, and health outcomes as a result of prolonged exposure to the microaggressions that lead to racism. They, therefore, suggest a set of remedies, ranging from racial socialization (RS), which they think helps to foster psychosocial, physiological, academic, and identity-related well-being of victims,[130] to the racial encounter coping appraisal and socialization theory (RECAST), which they think helps to repair the race-based traumatic stress often overlooked by traditional stress and coping models and clinical services.[131]

Legal remedies

Legal luminaries are exploring legal ways of addressing racism. They think the legal system needs more laws that will acknowledge American racial history.[132] Some have called for race-affirming legislations. They think such race-affirming legislations will send a strong message, real or symbolic, that the United States will no longer tolerate the wide-ranging and deleterious impact of racial hoaxes.[133] They think such laws will be more responsive to existing social realities and will acknowledge American racial history and the power of negative stereotypes of that history.[134] At minimum, they think the government needs to enact racial hoax laws. They think such laws will serve as a deterrent and will halt the criminal Black man/woman stereotype that feeds racism.

In her insightful essay on racial disparities in policing and the criminal justice system in the United States, Donna Coker, a professor of Law at the University of Miami, reasoned that there is a tendency in US court rulings "to pretend that the world we all know is not the world in which law enforcement

[130] R. E. Anderson and H. C. Stevenson, "RECASTing Racial Stress and Trauma: Theorizing and Healing Potential of Racial Socialization in Families," *American Psychologist* 74 (2019): 61–75, esp. 61.

[131] R. E. Anderson and H. C. Stevenson, "RECASTing Racial Stress and Trauma," 61.

[132] Russell, "The Racial Hoax as Crime," 605.

[133] Russell, "The Racial Hoax as Crime," 621.

[134] Russell, "The Racial Hoax as Crime," 620.

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operates."[135] Coker is alluding to the tendency in the courts, as well as in society, to pretend that we live in a "raceless world," that is, that we live in a constructed reality in which most police officers do not act on the basis of considerations of race. It pretends that the criminal justice system evaluates facts without considerations of race.[136] Coker argues that white people tend to understand race discrimination to mean intentional acts of a bigoted actor or a person motivated by racism[137] and that white people are seldom aware of the degree to which white privilege protects them from police suspicion and surveillance.[138] Coker thinks, "The invisibility of white privilege (to whites) encourages them to presume that system maltreatment is, in some part, the fault of the victim of such maltreatment."[139] Coker reasons further that most white people reject the idea that they are racist and that whites are more concerned with how to avoid the racist label than worrying about systemic racism.[140] There is something insightful about the race-affirming laws that legal luminaries are suggesting. In theological terms, race-affirming laws that acknowledge America's racial history are a necessary first step in an authentic penitential rite that begins with *culpa* (admission).

Theological remedy

Repentance begins with an acknowledgment of sin. Ending racism must begin with an acknowledgement of one's participation in or complicity in the system of racism. "The topmost level of human consciousness is conscience,"[141] Lonergan quipped. This follows Lonergan's distinction of the different levels of consciousness in which he reasons that being in love with God is on the topmost level of the different kinds of consciousness because being in love with God is the type of consciousness that deliberates, evaluates,

[135] Donna Coker, "Foreword: Addressing the Real World of Racial Injustice in the Criminal Justice System," *Journal of Criminal Law and Criminology* 93, no. 4 (2003): 827–80, esp. 827.

[136] Coker, "Foreword: Addressing the Real World of Racial Injustice in the Criminal Justice System," 827.

[137] Coker, "Foreword: Addressing the Real World of Racial Injustice in the Criminal Justice System," 830.

[138] Coker, "Foreword: Addressing the Real World of Racial Injustice in the Criminal Justice System," 831.

[139] Coker, "Foreword: Addressing the Real World of Racial Injustice in the Criminal Justice System," 831.

[140] Coker, "Foreword: Addressing the Real World of Racial Injustice in the Criminal Justice System," 870.

[141] Bernard Lonergan, "The Response of the Jesuit as Priest and Apostle in the Modern World," in *A Second Collection*, 140–58, esp. 143.

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decides, controls, and acts.[142] The protests that erupted on the streets of the United States in 2020 following the death of Breonna Taylor on March 13, 2020, and George Floyd on May 25, 2020, and the social movements organized and led by people of all races and genders in the United States and around the world show that something is happening in the consciences of people worldwide regarding racism. These are necessary first steps toward a remedy. Unfortunately, our remedies seem to end or balk at a good first step, oftentimes not undergoing conversion. In the biblical story, Potiphar's wife was no longer mentioned once Joseph was incarcerated. But in the Qur'anic rendering of the story, Zuleika is mentioned at least two other times after Joseph's imprisonment. She was given the chance to repent. The Qur'an represents her as a troubled soul in need of prophetic guidance. Even though she knows she needs prophetic guidance, Zuleika lacks courage. The Qur'anic tradition uses Zuleika to represent not a gendered woman but human pettiness. Zuleika is a symbolic representation of the hurt that the strong and the powerful inflict on the poor and oppressed—that we sometimes take our own pain out on those around us.[143] Zuleika is us and we are Zuleika. But in the legacy of the post-Qur'anic exegetical tradition—and especially in Sufi lore and symbology—Zuleika is portrayed as repenting such that her lust for the prophet Yusuf transmutes into chaste love of the prophet as she finally submits to God as a *muslima* and *mu'mina*.

During his struggles with Adolf Hitler and Nazism, Dietrich Bonhoeffer was bothered by the fact that a person could outwardly profess to be a Christian and doctrinally confess a true Christian doctrine and even outwardly express accepted Christian moral codes and practices, while at the same time partake in a system that contradicts all they outwardly express.[144] Worried that Christianity was increasingly becoming irrelevant, Bonhoeffer posed the question regarding what it means to be religious today in the face of sin. Let me rephrase Bonhoeffer's question: What does it mean to be a Christian today in the face of a racist system that often goes unchallenged? Lonergan reminded us that the church is not a conventicle of saints, but more like a net cast into the sea that catches all sorts of fish.[145] Christian schools vividly illustrate this gap between the ideal and the real[146]—between a Christian school as it strives to

[142] Lonergan, "The Response of the Jesuit as Priest and Apostle in the Modern World," 143.

[143] See Asma T. Uddin and Homayra Ziad, "Zuleika in the Qur'an and in the Bible," http://www.altfemmag.com/zuleikha-in-the-quran-and-in-the-bible/.

[144] See Peter Hooton, *Bonhoeffer's Religionless Christianity in Its Christological Context* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2020).

[145] Bernard Lonergan, "Theology and Man's Future," in *A Second Collection*, 114–26, esp. 124.

[146] Lonergan, "Theology and Man's Future," 125.

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be and a Christian school as it is in fact. Pope Francis labeled the discovery of unmarked graves in church-run schools among the First Nations in Canada a cultural genocide. Although not intentionally racist, many of our schools are hotbeds of white privilege, which is the other side of racism. Bonhoeffer's question to Christians and Lonergan's reminder that Christians fall short of the ideal are an acknowledgment that the weaknesses and sinfulness of Christians manifest in their outward behaviors, in their structures, and in their organizations.[147] The recently discovered unmarked graves of Indigenous residential school children in Canada and similar cultural genocides of Black peoples and people of color everywhere are a few examples of the church's complicity in sin. But, in truth, religious people might say one thing and do something different; apart from cases of self-deception or insincerity, the gap or contrast between what they say and do does not imply that religion is phony.[148] It shows rather that religious people need constant reminders that they are not living up to the ideal.

Pope Francis has asked for forgiveness "for the wrong done by some Christians to the Indigenous peoples" in Canada.[149] In the Qur'an, Zuleika shows us what Islamic repentance might look like. Later Muslim literature presents her as being given an opportunity to repent and confess publicly for her role in tempting a man of God, Yusuf. "It is I who tried to seduce him—he is an innocent man" (Surah 12: 51), she confessed. In acknowledging her wrong, Zuleika humbled herself, accepted guilt, asked for forgiveness, and called the townswomen to come and witness for themselves why she could not resist Yusuf's irresistible beauty. The townsfolk saw for themselves, bore witness to the irresistible beauty of the prophet, and declared that Zuleika was free from blame. Redemption is not an abstract intelligibility, but an incarnate intelligibility.[150] Zuleika demonstrates how one can cooperate to make one's own redemption an incarnate intelligibility. In fact, all the religions of the world teach that the path of redemption everywhere begins with sorrowful renunciation of wrongs done.[151] Thus, a reasonable redemption from racism follows along the five-dimensional (5-D) process that derives from Lonergan: intellectual, moral, religious, affective, and psychic conversion, which is in accord

[147] Bernard Lonergan, "The Future of Christianity," in *A Second Collection*, 127–39, esp. 135.

[148] Lonergan, "Theology and Man's Future," 125.

[149] See "The Pope Says Genocide Took Place at Canada's Residential Schools," *CBS News* (July 20, 2022), https://www.cbc.ca/news/indigenous/pope-francis-residential-schools-genocide-1.6537203.

[150] Lonergan, "The Redemption," 10.

[151] See Fredrich Heiler, "The History of Religions as a Preparation for the Cooperation of Religions," as cited by Lonergan, "The Future of Christianity," 128.

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with Christian Scripture and is found in the life of the church, and even has resonances in the Islamic way of coming to repentance.

Religious conversion is the otherworldly falling in love with God and the ethnic and the cultural other by which one is concerned primarily with ultimate concerns.[152] Moral conversion is a special instance of cognitional self-transcendence, which Lonergan locates in "the context of growth, in which one's knowledge of human living and operating is increasing in extent, precision, refinement, and in which one's responses are advancing from the agreeable to vital values, from vital to social, from social to cultural, from cultural to personal, from personal to religious."[153] Intellectual conversion is a shift or a radical clarification and elimination of an exceedingly stubborn and misleading myth by the dominant class about Black life and reality, the objective universe, and development of their knowledge with respect to how what they think and act gravely harms people of color.[154] Affective conversion can be conceived in terms of genuine friendship with the ethnic and cultural other. John Dadosky, who is the first to develop and expound this important element of conversion that exists in inchoate form in Lonergan, has helpfully done four good studies on the notion.[155] Similarly, Robert Doran has developed the notion of psychic conversion—that "moments of insight, judgment, and choice, and the dynamic state of being in love with another person, being in love in the community, and being in love with God, are higher integrations of psychic process."[156] Psychic conversion is a healing of the psychic wounds that may block a sustained self-transcendence.

The 5-D processes are suggested because together they capture the spirit behind the penitential discipline the early church saw as a panacea for sin. The early Christians thought that genuine repentance involves *culpa* (admission of guilt), *poenitentia* (punishment/penalty), and *satisfactio* (reparation/amend).

[152] Bernard Lonergan, *Collected Works of Bernard Lonergan*, vol. 14, *Method in Theology*, ed. Robert M. Doran and John D. Dadosky (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2017), 226.

[153] Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 40.

[154] Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, 223.

[155] See John D. Dadosky, "The Church and the Other: Mediation and Friendship in Post-Vatican II Roman Catholic Ecclesiology," *Pacifica: Australian Journal of Theology* (2005): 302–33; John D. Dadosky, "Towards a Fundamental RE-Interpretation of Vatican II," *Heythrop Journal* 49 (2008): 742–63; John D. Dadosky, "Has Vatican II Been Hemeneutered?: Recovering and Developing Its Theological Achievements Following Rahner and Lonergan," *Irish Theological Quarterly* 79 (2014): 327–49; and John D. Dadosky, "Mediation, Culture, and Religion: Approaching Lonergan's Method in Theology," *Lonergan Review* 11 (2020): 53–75.

[156] Robert M. Doran, *Theology and the Dialectics of History* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 44.

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They saw these as a demonstration of changed attitude and changed life. At least that was what was operative in the time of Cyprian and Tertullian, who both wrestled with the theory and praxis of penitence in the context of a hostile and idolatrous pagan Greco-Roman society.[157] It was because repentance, as was practiced in the early church, was effective that the medieval Christians (before medieval abuses crept in) also made repentance integral to their church's penitential system—that abandonment of one's sinful ways is the sine qua non condition for admission to the catechumenate and membership in the church. The Fathers, in their pragmatic view of penitence, knew that lapses into sinful ways were possible after baptism and admission into the church and therefore recommended and developed a sequel process of public penance they called *exomolegesis*—a second or public act of repentance by which satisfaction was attained.[158] In the Qur'an, we see Zuleika perform what is analogous to this exomologesis in the way she admitted guilt and was made whole.

Conclusion

I have used the Joseph and Potiphar's wife's story to create a reflection story on racism. Reflection stories are part of a broader class of what biblical scholars call narrative or literary analogies. They are also sometimes called narrative typology or narrative patterning.[159] Reflection stories are so-called because they contain unique common language and parallel plot-structures that portray a biblical character or event as a "new so-and-so" or a "new such-and-such."[160] Simply put, reflection stories are "opposite stories," in which a situation, or an event is crafted by way of contrast to the situation or the actions of a character from an already existing event.[161] The Joseph and Potiphar's wife's story is not just the typology or the "opposite story" of contemporary racial attitudes in the United States; it is also a biblical patterning of the insidious racism and its more blatant expression—the "Karen" phenomenon. In terms of similarity and gravity, the current Black situation in the United States where Blacks have been singled out as scapegoats for crime is an antithesis to the scriptural story it mirrors in many respects.

[157] Ruth Sutcliffe, "Learning Not to Sin: Repentance in Tertullian and Cyprian," *Colloquium* 53 (2021): 73–97, esp. 75.
[158] Sutcliffe, "Learning Not to Sin," 75.
[159] Postell, "Potiphar's Wife in David's Looking Glass," 97.
[160] Sutcliffe, "Learning Not to Sin," 98.
[161] Sutcliffe, "Learning Not to Sin," 99.

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Finally, the incident with Potiphar's wife is bookended by two passages that speak of God's love and blessing to Joseph. In both the biblical and the Qur'anic accounts, Joseph invokes God each time he is confronted by Potiphar's wife. When he was wrongly accused and sent to prison, God remained faithful. Lonergan speaks of the law of the cross—God's ability to bring good out of evil. When Potiphar's wife concocted lies and made him throw Joseph in prison unjustly, God was there, comforting and blessing Joseph. God "showed him kindness by making the chief jailer well-disposed toward him" (Gen 39:21). With God working on the sidelines, the keeper of the prison put Joseph in charge of the other prisoners and trusted him so fully that he no longer paid attention to anything that was under Joseph's control (Gen 39:22-23). We are told that everything Joseph did succeeded because "the Lord was with him" (Gen 39:23).

In what seems like divine justice, the sorry incident with Potiphar's wife was what in the end led to Joseph's greatness.[162] In prison, Joseph transcended the limits of his marginalization. Not only does he regain favor with Pharaoh, he also overcomes the alienation within his own family when he reveals himself to his brothers, forgives them for selling him into slavery, and arranges for his family to emigrate to Egypt, where they escape the drought in Canaan before finally migrating to the Promised Land.[163] The Qur'an says "God always prevails in His purpose, though most people do not realize it" (Surah 12:21). These are echoes of the law of the cross in the scriptural traditions. I am not sure racism will ever be brought to an end, nor can anyone give a realistic estimate of the extent and limit of how human agency can bring about its eradication. But this much is clear: through the law of the cross, God can transform human evil into good. The law of the cross effects the reversal of roles: the death that is the consequence of sin becomes in Christ the means of salvation.[164] On April 3, 1968, a day before he was assassinated, the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. proclaimed, at the end of his speech, "I've Been to the Mountaintop": "And so I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."[165] Dr. King was invoking the law of the cross that can bring a solution to racism.

[162] Bakon, "Subtleties in the Story of Joseph and Potiphar's Wife," 174.

[163] Cook, "Four Marginalized Foils—Tamar, Judah, Joseph, and Potiphar's Wife," 126–27.

[164] Lonergan, "The Redemption," 14.

[165] See Martin Luther King Jr., "I Have Been to the Mountaintop," https://www.americanrhetoric.com/speeches/mlkivebeentothemountaintop.htm.

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