Constructing Religious Identity in a Cosmopolitan World: The Theo-Politics of Interfaith Work[1]

By Jeannine Hill Fletcher

The practice of interreligious dialogue has long concentrated on the challenges that competing religious beliefs hold for the creation of an interfaith community. Differing religious beliefs about the nature of human existence and the role of humanity in the world construct distinctive religious identities grounded in particular thought systems. These religious identities bind some members of the interfaith community together but simultaneously distinguish them from 'others'. While attention to competing beliefs invites us to consider the role of religion in identity-formation, this focus tends to recognize 'difference' along only one axis with the distinction being among discrete faith communities. So the understanding goes: Christian identity is different from Muslim identity because Christians believe differently than Muslims. This approach, however, when it is abstracted from material, social and embodied realities leaves little room to consider difference emerging from other areas and intersecting with religious belief to inform religious identities. The lens of gender, for example, invites us to ask: *What difference does it make when we consider women's experiences in the light of claims to religious truth and the formation of religious identity?* Informed by feminist methodologies, I have argued that attention to gender makes a difference in the production of religious beliefs, in the experience of religious identities and in our theological conclusions about the multiplicity of religions. Analyzing the absence of women's voices and experiences within this discussion and working out the logic of their inclusion, challenges abstract theological production with embodied, embedded and dynamic religious identities arising out of the intersection of gender and religion and being constructed across religious boundaries.[2]

Invited into the multiplicity of subject locations inhabited by 'women' we realize that gender is not the only factor impacting our embodied and embedded lives, but 'woman' is an infinitely, internally diverse category. Intersectionality informs all religious persons, distinctively shaping their beliefs and identity. That is, just as claims to truth and religious identities are informed by gender as a distinct dimension of our being human, so too features of age, education, sexual orientation, culture and race (among others) impact belief and religious identities. The internal diversity of our religious traditions was brought to the fore, for me, in theological texts by women of color – womanist theologians, mujeristas, Asian theologians and postcolonial writers from India – who insisted that not only gender but race is a critical vector through which to understand the production of religious knowledge and religious identities.

As a Christian feminist theologian, I have been interested in the ways attention to gender informs theologies, interreligious dialogue and interfaith studies. As evidenced in recent issues of the *Journal of Interreligious Studies*, gender regularly frames explorations and critical questions in the field.[3] But if gender has opened us up to intersectionality, one might wonder why other crucial features of our identity have not been pressed to the fore in the interfaith conversation. That is, where is race in the dialogue of religions? As a White theologian trained with theological practices whereby White is a non-color, Willie James Jennings and other scholars of color have compellingly helped me to see "America as a space profoundly marked by whiteness."[4] I am compelled now to ask, what difference does it make to situate interreligious study and interrogate our theologies of religious pluralism through the lens of race, racialized difference and *racism*? To ask these questions, it is insufficient to remain at the level of theological belief and practices of dialogue. The question of race brings us squarely into our embodied and embedded lives, with a recognition that White theology has taken a toll on non-White bodies. Interfaith dialogue must be seen in the landscape of racialized disequilibrium.

Christian Hegemony, White Supremacy

In 2011, the Pew Research Center starkly reported that in the United States: "The median wealth of white households is 20 times that of black households and 18 times that of Hispanic households."[5] Wealth disparities along race lines indicate poverty disproportionately weighs upon persons of color as indicated also by homeownership (where "an owned home is the most important asset in the portfolio of most households"[6]) and personal assets.[7] Access to education intertwines with this racialized financial disparity[8] when the Chronicle of Higher Education can report that 28% of Whites in the U.S. (25 years or older) hold a degree from a 4-year college, while 17% of Black and 13% of Latinos do; this building on an 80% high school graduation rate for Whites, 62% for Blacks, 68% for Latinos and 51% for Native Americans. Health disparities as well illumine a disproportionate number of Black and Latino Americans uninsured; with health measures like diabetes and infant mortality favoring White Americans.[9] Incarceration rates for Black and Latino Americans further demonstrates that the weight of the world has been racialized.[10] On nearly every measure of our human landscape, the weight of our world falls disproportionately on men, women and children of color. To incorporate race more fully into the dialogue of religions, we must grapple with this landscape of racialized disparity. But we must also recognize the religious ideologies that created these disparities in the first place.

On each of these markers of human well-being, we can see a tragic history of political and legal decisions which prioritized the growth, transcendence and 'evolution' of White Christians over other racialized populations. We see over two hundred years of enslavement of Africans for the building of White colonies and White industry. Founding ideologies legitimating slavery were based on theologies of religious pluralism that were theologies of Christian supremacy and (often erroneously) identified African peoples as Muslim and justified enslavement on religious grounds.[11] White Christians continued to enslave African others on the assumptions that White Christianity was the highest form of religion, and that the more evolved race should have rights and religious responsibilities over the superstitious other. These deeply embedded Christian ideologies furthered White supremacy as the legalized enactment of social safety nets – like social security and the Federal Housing Administration – included racialized policies which kept benefits of home ownership and social security from African Americans in the 20th century.[12]

The dispossession of native American peoples was also grounded in a Christian theology of religious pluralism, this time impacting directly claims to the land. The 'doctrine of discovery' was legalized in an 1823 Supreme Court decision which traced ownership of land to the Pope's pronouncement that gave rights to Christians over 'pagans'.[13] In the desire for salvation of souls, White Christians erased native practices and native wisdoms, which was seen as a project of 'progress' and 'civilization' required for the evolution of the people who needed to move beyond their "pagan darkness." The assessment of indigenous peoples of North America as less-than-Christian not only expanded White land ownership (from colonial times through the early 20th century), but also helped to establish institutions of higher education for White Americans in the mid-19th century with the profits of sale from recently 'Indian' land.[14]

While we can see that the evolutionary story of progress has been built on the labor and exploitation of 'others', it is important to take seriously the history that Christians have not been mere re-actors to the processes by which some 'evolved' at the expense of others. Christians have actively enacted these barriers to our 'others'' well-being on social and religious grounds. The ideologies which provided theoretical and theological legitimation for the many

discriminations that created disparities were rooted in evolutionary thinking where white European expressions of religion, culture and race were the pinnacle of progress, justifying the colonization and exploitation of those who were religiously, culturally and racially other.[15] Religious beliefs about the superiority of Christianity informed White Christian identities of self-protection and advancement at the expense of others. Haunted by this history, we must wonder how these ideologies continue even today, as legislation against migrant workers and undocumented immigrants are enacted, while employing their work-power to feed and serve our nation.[16]

White Christian theologians interested in interfaith work and interreligious dialogue must come to terms with the ways in which our heritage includes not only the assertion of theological supremacy, but the establishment of White supremacies – once forged as a theology and ideology now inherited as the landscape of disequilibrium where White bodies regularly inherit benefit where others are compromised by generational dispossession. It is within *this* landscape that the White American theologian must attend to the question of constructions of Christian identity.

Christian Identities: Tribalization or Cosmpolitanism in a Weighted World

If previous constructions of Christian identity informed racialized injustices, how might we reconceive Christian identity such that it authentically learns from and grows with those who are 'other': racially, culturally, religiously? Our current condition for considering this question is informed not only by past injustices but by the present realities of dynamic shifting and moving bodies. Situated as we are within global systems of information, economics, migration and travel we increasingly have the sense of the world as "a single place."[17] The same lines of communication, travel and economic joining have also made it possible for multi-religious 'others' to move through these systems, creating places where religious difference is found very close to home. Religion and race create multi-dimensional communities where the religious other may also be a racialized other.

How do we shape a religious identity in *this* landscape. My proposal is that we need to shape ourselves with cosmopolitan religious identities in an interconnected, multireligious world, for the possibility of our evolving together toward the future. Our first step is to move carefully through the logic of religious identity guided by the insight of Elizabeth Spelman who reminds us that, "Since people can be classified and catalogued in any number of ways, overlapping ways, how we catalog them, in particular how we sort out the overlapping distinctions, will depend on our purposes and our sense of what the similarities and difference among them are and how they should be weighed."[18]

Too often, in the landscape of religious identity we define ourselves by who we are not. In this logic of identity, boundaries are established and criteria identified to determine who's in and who's out of the collective. As one set of researchers described, "All religious groups need boundaries. Boundaries strengthen collective identity by showing clearly who are members and who are not, and maintenance of boundaries requires clear rules and markers." Taking Catholic identity as the center of their concern, this group of prominent researchers goes on to offer that American Catholicism has four main boundaries, arguing, "If any of them become blurry, Catholic identity over and against the outside-the-border region will become confused, and many young Catholics will begin to wonder if the boundary makes sense."[19] So, one approach to the pluralism which globalization has brought is to ensure the clear establishment of boundaries and criteria for particular religious identities.

While the clarity of this approach may be appealing – we know who we are by contrasting ourselves with who we are not – it runs some real risks. As Linell Elizabeth Cady writes, "Indeed a major response to the increased pluralism and globalization of life in the late twentieth century has been a reassertion of tightly bounded personal and communal identities, what some have called tribalization."[20] Seeking religious identity over-and-against our 'others' can manifest in a fortress mentality that experiences one's own faith and tradition as 'under siege'.[21] But it is precisely this siege mentality that might be contrasted with a cosmopolitan religious identity.

Sociologist and theorist of globalization Ulrich Beck looks at the globalized landscape and argues that we have a choice in how to orient ourselves toward difference. Sure, we can imagine ourselves under siege and construct a boundary around ourselves and our 'tribe', and this is largely what's been done in modernity. The construction of a tribal identity could lead to simple 'indifference' about our racial and religious others, but Beck sees tribalization as supported by an unspoken establishment of 'hierarchical difference' since we look out from our tribe and judge ourselves to be 'the best'. But, beyond indifference and hierarchical difference, we've certainly moved in late modernity toward tolerance and acceptance of other identities. Yet, Beck suggests that this can sometimes take the form of 'sameness universalism'. He writes, "Universalism obliges us to respect others as equals in principle, yet for that very reason it does not involve any requirement that would inspire curiosity or respect for what makes others different. On the contrary, the particularity of others is sacrificed to an assumed universal equality which denies it its own origins and interests."[22] He concludes: "The voice of others is granted a hearing only as the voice of sameness, as self-confirmation, self-reflection and monologue."[23] Sameness universalism rests on the assumption that we're all the same so we don't need to spend too much time on the differences within our identities.

By contrast, Beck offers a constructive proposal for a different sort of approach to difference, which he captures with the idea of 'cosmopolitanism'. He describes instead a stance in which persons simultaneously view themselves as part of a narrow, localized collective which might be bound by some elements of sameness, and as part of a wider, global world interconnected with those who are different. In his words, a cosmopolitan outlook is one "in which people view themselves simultaneously as part of a threatened world and as part of their local situations and histories."[24] Cosmopolitan vision does not see oneself cut off from those who are different in an enclave of distinctiveness, but interwoven with the lives and futures of those whose culture, religion, and outlook are different. These differences are not the source of hierarchical assessment, or indifference, or painting as all the same, rather, the differences themselves enhance the encounter and provide resources for thinking together about our common future.

Cosmopolitan religious identity would require that we recognize those many ways that our religious identity has been constructed from out of conversation and engagement with diverse ideologies and different religious traditions. By Beck's description, it would also require that we see our past and our future wrapped up with the well-being of those who are not members of our community. With a cosmopolitan religious identity, one commits both to the distinctiveness of a particular community, and to the well-being of all, not by ignoring, erasing or judging their differences as 'less-than' our way of being, but by engaging in relationships across differences; relationships of mutual transformation of ourselves and our world.

In the United States and in many other parts of our world, globalization's transnational dynamic has brought religious difference close to home. The religious other is neighbor, colleague, and friend whom we meet in our complex identities and whose presence may

positively alter our theological reflection. It is time for our religious traditions to embrace a cosmopolitan vision in pursuit of dynamic religious identity for a globalized world. In the process, living, breathing, embodied interreligious encounters in their many and diverse forms may foster a theological shift in our appreciation of religious difference. As Kwame Anthony Appiah notes, social practices and ideologies change not so much from reasoned arguments across difference, but from getting to know *people* who hold different views.[25] Globalization's transnational dynamic and interreligious encounter provides a unique opportunity, then, for remaking religious identities as cosmopolitan responses to our interconnected world.

But, the encounter among religious others is simultaneously an encounter within the landscape of America's racial project, where White Christians have historically received benefits and privileges at the expense others. So the remaking of religious identities must be especially attuned to the continued disequilibrium that marks our world. In what ways do race and religious diversity intersect to exacerbate the weight of the world as it has been shifted from some and onto others? The 'point' of our interfaith work must rest in its theo-political dimension; in the ways that theology impacts the material-social-political well-being of persons in the world. What we produce as theologians cannot be disentangled from the social and political worlds in which we live: Christian theologians are either culpable in the patterns of white supremacy or they are actively resistant in producing anti-racist theologies. To understand this claim, we might consider what Mark Lewis Taylor has termed the 'agonistic political' reality of our very being.[26] In Taylor's social site ontology, we as human beings are irreducibly enmeshed in relations and locations through which capital flows: capital that is both economic (providing material realities that sustain and enhance persons) and symbolic (with the power of 'recognition' that creates and affirms persons). Within the flow of this enmeshment, certain regimes are identifiable as guardians of symbolic capital making decisions about what it means to be human and who counts as worthy of recognition.[27] The religious sphere is among them. The theologian then, in a particular way informs the well-being of some and the death-dealing misrecognition of others through theologies that trade in symbolic capital.

In the context of white, Christian dominance in US society and politics, my call as a White Christian theologian is to learn about the material and social struggles of my neighbors and to mobilize my tradition's resources in a project that combats white supremacy and Christian hegemony. Politically, this work matters because people in this country are regularly denied their full humanity on both religious and racialized grounds. But Appiah's invitation to see our minds changed by encounter with persons and not simply ideas challenges further the interfaith work in a weighted world, where systems of disequilibrium maintain privileged spaces to which our 'others' have little or no access. In crafting together an interfaith world and the richness of cosmopolitan identities attuned to the racialized dimensions of our weighted world, the Christian theologian and our colleagues across faith traditions are called into new spaces to do our work, not merely in the cool calm of our libraries and our dialogue halls, but in the heated struggles in our streets and in our world.

The work to be done here is manifold. On the theoretical level, students of interfaith might pursue questions of religious belief and religious identity that take into account the great range of internal diversity within religious traditions emergent from intersectionality. If gender and race matter, what other dimensions of our subject positions inform religious belief and religious identity? How might sexual orientation or economic status inform the particular identities of our dialogue partners? When interfaith studies foreground internal religious diversity, in addition to diversity among faith traditions, we can begin to ask the political questions of whose voices and insights matter. We can interrogate the mobilization of religious identities when they come at the expense of some among our human family.

On a theological level, theologians of all faiths might ask in what ways their work trades in symbolic capital that shifts the weight of the world. If all persons struggle for recognition in a world characterized by the 'agonistic political', how does our work as theologians confer recognition on human beings who struggle for material well-being and for recognition in our weighted world? From another direction, White Christian theologians producing theologies of religious pluralism might learn from the past to see the material outcomes of our theological production especially on non-White bodies.

On a practical and political level, perhaps all of us intent on interfaith work might see the necessity of raising the practical-justice questions in the midst of a landscape that continues to privilege White Christian identities. How might we commit ourselves to interfaith work in the public sphere whereby the well-being of our neighbors of *all* faiths is the center of our concern?

Attention to intersectionality -- to gender, race and more -- invites interfaith studies to a place of critical engagement within a landscape of White Christian supremacy. That is, for many involved in interreligious dialogue the 'point' of interfaith work is in its theo-political dimension; in the ways that theology and the material-social-political spheres intersect. In the context of white, Christian dominance in US society and politics, my call as a White Christian theologian is to learn about the material and social struggles of my neighbors and to mobilize my tradition's resources in a project that combats white supremacy and Christian hegemony. The many projects of interfaith studies might help us stand together as we stand on the side of the marginalized.

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[2] Jeannine Hill Fletcher, *Monopoly on Salvation? A Feminist Approach to Religious Pluralism* (Continuum, 2005) and *Motherhood as Metaphor: Engendering Interreligious Dialogue* (Fordham University Press, 2013).

[3] See: "Thinking Differently about Difference: Muslima Theology and REligious Pluralism" by Jerusha Tanner Lamptey http://irdialogue.org/journal/thinking-differently-about-difference-muslima-theology-and-religious-pluralism-by-jerusha-tanner-lamptey/
"Toward a Gender-Aware Approach to Abrahamic Dialogue," by Virginia A. Spatz http://irdialogue.org/journal/toward-a-gender-aware-approach-to-abrahamic-dialogue-by-virginia-a-spatz/
"Gender, Energy Healing, and the Church of Jesus Christ Latter Day Saints," by Sophia Lyn Nathenson http://irdialogue.org/journal/gender-energy-healing-and-the-church-of-jesus-christ-latter-day-saints-by-sophia-lyn-nathenson/

[4] Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010), 244.

[5] Paul Taylor, et. al, "Twenty-to-One: Wealth Gaps Rise to Record Highs Between Whites, Blacks and Hispanics" Pew Research Center (www.pewsocialtrends.org). Accessed March 1, 2013. In 2009, the median net worth of households aligned significantly with race differences with White households at $113,149, Asian households $78,066, Hispanic households $6,325 and Black households $5,677.

[6] Paul Taylor, 15. Homeownership: 74% of Whites; 46% of Blacks; 47% of Hispanics

[7] Paul Taylor, 23: "A sizeable minority of U.S. households own no assets other than a motor vehicle. In 2009, that was true for 24% of black and Hispanic households, 8% of Asian households and 6% of white households."
[8] Anthony Carneval and Jeff Strohl, "Separate and Unequal" (cew.georgetown.edu/separateandunequal) Accessed December 19, 2013.
[9] U.S. Department of Health and Human Services reports the following diabetes rates: 6.2% Whites; 10.8% Blacks; 10.6% Latino; 9.0% Native American. The Center for Disease Control reports the infant mortality rates per 1,000 live births: 6/1,000 Whites; 12/1,000 Blacks, 6/1,000 Latino, 8/1000 Native American. (cdc.gov) These figures will hopefully be improved with the enactment of the Affordable Care Act.
[10] Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, revised edition (New York: The New Press, 2012). Alexander charts the way that racialized application of drug laws in the United States have led to the policing of non-White communities and the incarceration of non-White persons radically different from the policing and incarceration of White communities and persons. Centering in on drug laws that have disproportionately jailed Black and Latino men, Alexander writes, "the war on drugs could have been waged primarily in overwhelmingly white suburbs or on college campuses." (page 124). But it was not.
[11] Cyprian Davis, *The History of Black Catholics in the United States* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 21.
[12] Jennifer Light, "Nationality and Neighborhood Risk at the Origins of FHA Underwriting" *Journal of Urban History* 16 June 2010 http://juh.sagepub.com/content/early/2010/06/14/0096144210365677.
[13] Stephen Newcomb, *Pagans in the Promised Land: Decoding the Doctrine of Discovery* (Golden, CO: Fulcrum Publishing, 2008).
[14] The legal enactments of the Indian Relocation Act in 1830 and the creation of the Reservation System in 1851 critical historical moments in the lives of native peoples of the First Nations. In 1854, the Federal Government abolished the northern half of Indian Territory and established the Kansas and Nebraska Territories, which were immediately opened up to white settlement. Many of the tribes occupying the land ended up on vastly reduced reservations. Shortly thereafter, the Morrill Land Grant 1862 uses sale of land to give funds to states for establishing Land-Grant Universities for the building up of (white) citizens. See Gary Sandefur, "American Indian Reservations: The First Underclass Area?" http://www.irp.wisc.edu/publications/focus/pdfs/foc121f.pdf. (University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Social Work and Sociology, in the Institute for Research on Poverty). Accessed July 2, 2014.
[15] Kwok Pui Lan and Jeorg Rieger, *Empire and the Christian Tradition: New Readings of Classical Theologians* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007); Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2010); J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).
[16] See "Harvest of Empire: The Untold Story of Latinos in America" documentary by journalist Juan Gonzalez.
[17] This is Robertson's term also. See his "Church-State Relations and the World System," in *Church-State Relations: Tensions and Transitions,* ed. Thomas Robbins and Roland Robertson (New Brunswick, N.J.: Transaction, 1987) 39-52.
[18] Elizabeth Spelman, *Inessential Woman: Problems of Exclusion in Feminist Thought* (Boston: Beacon, 1988), 173.
[19] William D'Antonio, James Davidson, Dean Hoge, and Katherine Meyer. *American Catholics: Gender, Generation and Commitment* (Altamira Press, 2001), 31.

[20] Linell Elizabeth Cady, "Identity, Feminist Theory and Theology," in *Horizons in Feminist Theology: Identity, Tradition and Norms*, ed. Rebecca S. Chopp and Sheila Greeve Davaney (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1997) 17-32 at 26.
[21] See, for example, Barbara Bradley Hagerty, "Feeling Under Seige, Catholic Leadership Shifts Right" *National Catholic Reporter*, July 4, 2012.
http://www.npr.org/2012/07/04/156190948/feeling-under-siege-catholic-leadership-shifts-right
[22] Ulrich Beck, *Cosmopolitan Vision*, trans. Ciaran Cronin (Cabridge, UK: Polity, 2006), 49. Beck is not talking about religion but about other forms of difference encountered under the conditions of globalization. His assessment applies well to Christian responses to religious difference.
[23] Beck, *Cosmopolitan Vision*, 51.
[24] Beck, *Cosmopolitan Vision*.
[25] Kwame Anthony Appiah, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers* (New York: Norton, 2006), 77.
[26] Mark Lewis Taylor, *The Theological and the Political: On the Weight of the World* (Fortress Press, 2011).
[27] Taylor identifies the family, the education system, religious systems, and the state as guardians of symbolic capital. See Taylor, 94-97.

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