

Moral Innovation and Ambiguity in Asian American Christianity

Theology Today

2018, Vol. 75(3) 347–357

© The Author(s) 2018

Article reuse guidelines:

sagepub.com/journals-permissions

DOI: 10.1177/0040573618791749

journals.sagepub.com/home/ttj**Jonathan Tran**

Baylor University, USA

Abstract

“The Parable of the Shrewd Manager” in Luke 16 illuminates some important features of Asian American life. Like the parable’s central character, Asian Americans live under a set of cultural expectations where success is achieved by accepting terms set by others. In America, those terms are often defined racially, where access gets indexed to one’s ethnicity, or to perceptions of one’s ethnicity. The terms can be of great benefit and can come at great cost, as was the case for managers in Jesus’ day. Understanding Asian American life requires the recognition of both sides of this dynamic. This article first examines the parable and then draws out its relevance for Asian American and Asian American Christian life, concluding with some thoughts on the relative status of normative judgment in the context of racialization.

Keywords

race, racism, Asian American Christian ethics, Viet Thanh Nguyen, parable of the shrewd manager

Introduction

A parable Jesus tells in Luke 16, a story often called “The Parable of the Shrewd Manager,” illuminates some important features of Asian American life.¹

-
1. This article was presented at the Asian American Theology Colloquium at Princeton Theological Seminary in Spring 2017 and at Duke Divinity School for the Asian Theology Group in Spring 2017. I am thankful to the respective organizers. Tyler Davis of Baylor University assisted greatly from its initial conceptualization all the way to current published format.

Corresponding author:

Jonathan Tran, Department of Religion, Baylor University, One Bear Place #97284, Waco, TX 76798-7284, USA.

Email: Jonathan_Tran@baylor.edu

After describing the passage's treatment of these features, specifically how something called "the model minority myth" initially seems beneficial but ultimately proves costly for Asian Americans, I consider the kinds of innovative strategies Asian American Christians employ to survive the myth's oppressive regime. I conclude with some ruminations on what those conditions and innovations tell us about the moral life under the broad and deep consequences of racialization.

The parable relates the story of a rich owner who, unsatisfied with his manager's "squandering" performance, prepares to let him go. Knowing what's coming, the manager sets out to take care of himself by swindling his boss. When the owner finds out, he commends the manager for his initiative. Jesus ends the parable by commenting, "make friends for yourselves by means of dishonest wealth so that when it is gone, they may welcome you into the eternal homes" (Luke 16:9).

The unexpected comment makes the parable intriguing, and perplexing. Not only does Jesus not condemn the manager's swindling, but he, by "commend[ing] the dishonest manager because he had acted shrewdly" (Luke 16:8) just about adopts the position of the unsavory business owner. Jesus apparently appreciates the manager's actions. He talks as if manipulating people for personal gain is praiseworthy. The notion that these kinds of shenanigans are necessary for eternal life (in Luke the parables of the lost sheep, lost coin, and lost son come right before our parable) does not make one feel any better about the parable, or about eternal life.

Not surprisingly, interpreters have struggled to make sense of the parable's questionable ethics.² Especially as it relates to stewardship and Jesus' seeming affirmation of dishonest wealth, exegetes have tried to reconcile how the parable fits in a book among Scripture's clearest calls for social justice. But I wonder if the best angle to take isn't one that seeks to square things so that everything makes sense, but rather conversely, as a lesson in moral ambiguity and what Christian discipleship looks like under less than ideal conditions. Maybe the parable helps us understand the world in which we find ourselves. Taking this angle allows the parable to address things like racial life in America, an instance of those less than ideal conditions where moral certainty gives way to moral ambiguity.

Going forth, one might imagine Asian American Christianity as the manager in the story. Staging the story this way sets American racial realities as the story's backdrop and casts everyone living under its yoke in the role of debtors. I will

2. Francis E. Williams, "Is Almsgiving the Point of the 'Unjust Steward?'" *Journal of Biblical Literature* 83, no. 3 (1964): 292-97; Mary Ann Beavis, "Ancient Slavery as an Interpretive Context for the New Testament Servant Parables with Special Reference to the Unjust Steward (Luke 16:1-8)," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 111:1 (1992): 37-54; A. Descamps, "La Composition Littéraire de Luc XVI 9-13," *Novum Testamentum* 1:1 (1957): 47-53; John J. Kilgallen, "Luke 15 and 16: A Connection," *Biblica* 78:3 (1997): 369-76; J. Duncan and M. Derrett, "Fresh Light on St. Luke XVI I. The Parable of the Unjust Steward," *New Testament Studies* 7:3 (1961): 198-219; L. John Topel, "On the Injustice of the Unjust Steward: LK 16:1-13," *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 37:2 (1975): 216-27; and C. H. Dodd, *Parables of the Kingdom* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1956), 17-18. I am indebted to Marcus Jerkins and Mikeal Parsons for directing me to these and other resources.

return to the identity of the rich owner since grasping that role will require the whole story.

Asian Americans, like the parable's manager, live under a set of cultural expectations. They are asked to play a role and their livelihood depends on their performing it well. The role is called "the model minority." This social role is circumscribed by codes similar to the religious and legal ones adhered to by the manager in Luke's version of the story. Recall that the manager in this story was responsible for collecting interest accrued by debtors who owed oil or wheat. Due to interest, debtors owed additional jugs of oil or containers of wheat on top of whatever they originally borrowed. It was the manager's job to collect on behalf of the owner.

Jewish law, wisely seeking to discourage people from taking advantage of those in need, prohibited making money off of debt. However, local leaders cleverly figured out how to give owners like the one in our story a pass by cooking the books in terms of debts and assets, and, just in case that didn't work, erected systems that placed the legal and moral burden on debt collectors. Managers were legally seen as acting under their own authority even though they served at the pleasure of their bosses. Managers were compensated by whatever salary paid by owners and whatever additional interest paid by debtors.

We have before us a system where owners got rich by keeping their hands clean and managers kept their jobs by getting their hands dirty. For managers, the only way to succeed was unscrupulously. Luke doesn't tell us anything about how the manager in the story earned his squanderer reputation, and we have no reason to believe that moral qualms on his part played a role. We only know that he was fired for squandering an opportunity to make his boss richer, his debtors poorer, and him a sinner. None of this is to excuse the manager's behavior, only to contextualize it.

The Seeming Benefits of Asian American Life

Asian Americans live under similar conditions, where success is achieved by accepting terms set by others. It is always the case that others set the terms of success. But in America, those terms tend to get defined racially, where access to the American Dream gets indexed to one's ethnicity, or to perceptions of one's ethnicity. The terms can be of great benefit and can come at great cost, as was the case for managers in Jesus' day. Understanding Asian American life requires the recognition of both sides of this dynamic. Most other Americans only see one side. Most Asian Americans only feel the other.

The model minority myth *benefits* Asian Americans because it positively propels them into the success it envisions. Conversely to how the presumption of African American criminality leads to discrimination and parallel to how society favors lighter-skinned people, presupposing Asian American success eases their path to success. They like the manager in our parable are beneficiaries of a cultural narrative that tells them their industry, work ethic, humility, and intelligence makes them winners. Insofar as they play their assigned roles, benefits abound, mostly in

the form of inclusion in an unending task of material security. Since social narratives predetermine pathways to success, setting some up to succeed and others to fail, the most successful Asian Americans will be those most able to play these roles. One can account for the runaway success of Amy Chua's bestseller *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* to its perceived ability to pantomime caricatures Americans already harbored about high-achieving Asian Americans.³

In societies that give lip service to multiculturalism, diversity, identity, and difference, it pays to be a minority.⁴ And if you happen to be the right kind of minority, all the better. Here we find a veritable cottage industry that has sprung up around Asian American this or that. Whether it be hipster love of Bánh mì sandwiches, institutional infatuation with diversity numbers, television shows like *Fresh Off the Boat* or international bestsellers like *Crazy Rich Asians*, the ubiquitous Thai food restaurant and the really ubiquitous Sriracha bottle, the ready contribution of the "minority perspective," or the crossover appeal of Bollywood and K-Pop, Asianness in America is big business. As the young Malcolm X discovered long ago, the token life can come with celebrity status. Emerging around minority life in America is an underestimated cultural capital that means one does not need to play the race card because others will play it for you.⁵ This is life on the sunny side of Orientalism 2.0.

The Ultimate Costs of Asian American Life

These benefits come with a tradeoff as ethnic culture gets reduced to digestible kitsch-sized bites. Here we begin to get at the significant costs incurred with the residual benefits of the Asian American's debt-collecting-manager existence. The debt collector's life—say, one given to sucking the life out of others—is fated to squandering because one can only do that job well for so long. It is a sign of his humanity that the manager in Jesus' story could not squeeze any more money out of those poor people.

Debt collecting on behalf of rich owners may have its benefits but its hidden costs make for high turnover rates. No one—not African Americans, not Latinos, not Asian Americans—can keep up with a myth. Public portrayal of Amy Chua's parenting style offered but the thinnest version of what she was actually saying about the heavy toll on Asian American families. Near the book's conclusion, Chua relates her daughter's response to her Tiger Mom ways: "I know—I'm not what you want—I'm not Chinese! I don't want to be Chinese. Why can't you get

3. Amy Chua, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011).

4. For a well-considered analysis of how these dynamics play out in universities and how they might better play out, see Jim Sleeper, *Liberal Racism: How Fixating on Race Subverts the American Dream* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2002) and Martha Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity: A Classical Defense of Reform in Liberal Education* (Cambridge: Harvard, 1998).

5. See Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America* (New York: Oxford, 2002) and Anne Anlin Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race: Psychoanalysis, Assimilation, and Hidden Grief* (New York: Oxford, 2001).

that through your head? I hate the violin. I HATE my life. I HATE you, and I HATE this family!”⁶ In *Battle Hymn*, Chua, an astute and accomplished legal theorist, was attempting to peel back the layers of the model minority stereotype—the book bravely leaves unresolved its central tensions—in order to arrive at some semblance of reality.

The reality is that for every Asian American who achieves the American Dream, many do not, subsisting instead under conditions of academic failure, economic destitution, cultural alienation, racial victimization, political invisibility, familial disintegration, and on and on. For every college-bound Asian American there are others who never graduate from high school—Cambodians, Laotians, and the Hmong have the lowest graduation rates among ethnic groups in America.⁷ Of Vietnamese Americans, only about 20% go to college.⁸ And while Asians do boast the highest educational rates, they also have an inverse proportion of education to wages earned; in other words, while more educated, Asian Americans are consistently paid less than their white counterparts, and all those degrees rarely get Asian Americans beyond the middle tiers of institutional leadership, the model minority not quite “the leader type.”⁹ The model sweeps under the rug a long history of legalized discrimination against Asian Americans, nineteenth- and twentieth-century labor and immigration laws that separated families and barred Asian folks from owning property and businesses.¹⁰ The fantasy asks us to forget that 75 years ago America during the Second World War rounded up tens of thousands of Americans of Japanese decent and imprisoned them in concentration camps in the deserts of the West. The only thing these long-term Americans did wrong was

6. Chua, *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother*, 205.

7. Consider Jennifer Lee, Jess Lee, and Oshin Khachikian, “The Untold Asian American Success Story,” *Data Bits: A Blog for AAPI Data*, October 9, 2016, accessed May 26, 2017, <http://aapidata.com/blog/the-untold-asian-american-success-story/>; “Education Policies,” Southeast Asia Resource Action Center (SEARAC), accessed May 26, 2017, <http://www.searac.org/content/education>; and C. N. Le, “School of Education at Johns Hopkins University—A Closer Look at Asian Americans and Education,” Johns Hopkins School of Education, accessed May 26, 2017, <http://education.jhu.edu/PD/newhorizons/strategies/topics/multicultural-education/A%20closer%20look%20at%20asian%20americans%20and%20education/>.

8. Consider “Education attainments among Asians,” American Association of Community Colleges, accessed May 26, 2017, http://www.aacc.nche.edu/Publications/datapoints/Documents/EducateAsians_06112014.pdf; “APIASF Reports,” Asian & Pacific Islander American Scholarship Fund (APIASF), accessed May 26, 2017, <http://apiasf.org/research/>; and Scott Jaschik “The Deceptive Data on Asians,” *Inside Higher Ed*, June 7, 2013, accessed May 26, 2017, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2013/06/07/report-calls-end-grouping-asian-american-students-one-category.0>

9. Consider Rosalind S. Chou and Joe R. Feagin, *Myth of the Model Minority: Asian Americans Facing Racism* (Boulder: Paradigm, 2008); Algernon Austin, “A closer look at Asian-American income,” *Working Economics Blog*, February 24, 2012, accessed May 26, 2017, <http://www.epi.org/blog/asian-american-income/>; and Christine E. Weller and Jeffrey Thompson, “Wealth Inequality among Asian Americans Greater Than Among Whites,” *Center for American Progress*, December 20, 2016, accessed May 26, 2017, <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/race/reports/2016/12/20/295359/wealth-inequality-among-asian-americans-greater-than-among-whites/>.

10. For a recent history, see Erika Lee, *The Making of Asian America: A History* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015).

wanting to fight for their country, against the Japanese.¹¹ Even today, the FBI reports that Asian Americans are among ethnic groups seeing the largest rise in hate crimes, and things are only getting worse with Donald Trump's vitriol toward China and South Asians getting confused for other groups.¹² Fantastic material accumulation on the part of some Asian Americans does the trick of diverting attention away from this larger reality, leaving Asian Americans spellbound under the impression that wealth (not justice, not democracy, not peoplehood) is what the American Dream is all about.

Not only must Asian Americans lie to themselves about these things if they are to maintain their cozy rich owner relationships, their adherence to the model minority myth makes debtors of fellow minority groups. The manager's employment requires that he both do his boss's bidding and that he steal from others. Fulfilling the requirements of the model minority role inscribes Asian Americans into straining the lives of racial minorities already laboring under the weight of injustice. The myth is after all a model of how to be non-White in America.¹³ It is on full display each year at the Scripps National Spelling Bee when dozens of South Asian children, paraded by ESPN across American television screens, dazzle us with their impressive mastery of the English language—the caption might as well read, “*This* is how to do it.” Groups who do not achieve similar levels of academic, financial, social, and spelling bee success (Ebonics or bilingual education be damned) are hence thought *unwilling* to do so.¹⁴ The image of Asian American success is meant to undermine the idea that minorities are, due to whatever reason, *unable* to do so, enlisting Asian American life to the role of counter-example. No wonder Asian Americans are hated, and hate themselves.¹⁵

11. See, for example, Greg Robinson, *A Tragedy of Democracy: Japanese Confinement in North America* (New York: Columbia, 2009).

12. See “About Hate Crime Statistics, 2015,” FBI: Uniform Crime Reporting, accessed May 26, 2017, <https://ucr.fbi.gov/hate-crime/2015>; Jenny J. Chen, “First-Ever Tracker of Hate Crimes against Asian-Americans Launched,” February 17, 2017, accessed May 26, 2017, <http://www.npr.org/sections/codeswitch/2017/02/17/515824196/first-ever-tracker-of-hate-crimes-against-asian-americans-launched>; Kimberly Yam, “After Trump Deemed China Foreign Enemy, Anti-Asian Hate Crimes in LA Surged: Expert,” *Huffington Post*, January 27, 2017, accessed May 26, 2017, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/hate-crime-tracker-asian-americans_us_58863497e4b0e3a7356a72b7; and Sangay K. Mishra, “An Indian immigrant is murdered in Kansas. It's part of a spike in hate crimes against South Asians,” *The Washington Post*, September 19, 2013, accessed May 26, 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2017/03/07/the-kansas-murder-of-an-indian-immigrant-is-part-of-a-spike-in-hate-crimes-against-south-asians/?utm_term=.f34e4b2efe33.

13. For a historical genealogy of the model minority myth, see Ellen D. Wu, *The Color of Success: Asian Americans and the Origins of the Model Minority* (Princeton: Princeton University, 2015).

14. See for example Brandon C. Martinez, Ryon Cobb, Julie J. Park, and Erica Ryu Wong, “Exceptional Outgroup Stereotypes and White Racial Inequality Attitudes toward Asian Americans,” *Social Psychology Quarterly* 78, no. 4 (2015): 399–411.

15. For especially disturbing but highly irregular picture of Asian-American self-hatred, see “The Manifesto of Elliot Rodger,” *The New York Times*, May 25, 2014, accessed May 26, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2014/05/25/us/shooting-document.html>. For a more standard portrayal see Patricia Park, *Re Jane: A Novel* (New York: Penguin, 2016).

Survival and Innovation

Faced with an untenable situation, the manager in Jesus' parable scratches out an existence for himself. We can fault him for what translators call "dishonest" or "unjust" behavior, but we should also acknowledge his impossible circumstances. Acknowledging conditions will not make his behavior less dishonest or unjust but it does remind us that he was left with few options. Recall that it is he, not the owner whom the system most benefited, who swallows the costs. His reputation, not the owner's, now lies in shambles. His actions can be viewed as an attempt to pick up the pieces and make some kind of life for himself. He is faced with a situation where he can either operate within the moral terms handed him and be left on the street, or he can force new terms. He chooses the latter. The quid pro quo arrangement he comes up with—charging debtors less than they owe—is not necessarily immoral; it is only *relatively* immoral, morally suspect according to the terms set by the owner and a society that made the owner an owner rather than a manager or debtor. Taking the manager's path means rejecting the owner's terms as well as society's. Indeed, not only a rejecting of moral terms but their reconstitution. With the deal the manager strikes, we move from the form of his shrewdness (that he innovates) to its content: he redirects and redistributes capital, from stealing *for* masters to stealing *from* them and from extorting debtors to forgiving them. This returns us to the story's emplacement in Luke's Gospel, and locates the force of its claim to the determining power of political economy on the status of moral claims.

We can characterize conditions for Asian Americans as similarly those where one must innovate if one is to survive. These conditions were recently dramatized to great effect by Viet Thanh Nguyen's Pulitzer-winning novel *The Sympathizer*, the story of a Vietnamese American double agent migrating amongst multiple allegiances. *The Sympathizer* comes after Nguyen's first book, *Race and Resistance*, about ethnic commodification and innovation and precedes his third, *Nothing Ever Dies*, about the fraught place between past and future. Through these three books, Nguyen brings to the fore the dynamics of innovation fundamentally at play for Asian Americans.¹⁶

We might ask what such innovation looks like for *Christian* Asian Americans. The first observation to make is that Asian American Christianity itself is an innovation, the very fact of its existence bespeaks inventiveness. Though there have always been Christians in places like the Philippines, South Korea, the southern tip of India, and the former British colony Hong Kong, most Asians do not come to America as Christians. They discover Christianity through church communities that become for them places that simultaneously enable ethnic and

16. Viet Thanh Nguyen, *The Sympathizer* (New York: Grove, 2015); Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Nothing Ever Dies: Vietnam and the Memory of War* (Cambridge: Harvard 2016); Viet Thanh Nguyen, *Race and Resistance: Literature and Politics in Asian America* (New York: Oxford 2002); see also his most recent collection of short stories, *The Refugees* (New York: Grove, 2017), which centers on Vietnamese citizens forced into migration at the end of the Vietnam War.

American identity. That Christian conversion meant not a departure from one's ethnicity but a new expression of it proved exactly the kind of innovation that helped these Asian Americans believe they could be Asian and American.

Other innovations followed. Asian American churches have incarnated Christianity in new ways as immigrant life fashioned novel forms of Christianity. These communities speak the gospel in new idioms, the Word becoming flesh through Korean morning prayer, Cantonese American "praise nights," immigrant emergent churches such as Vox Vaniae, Japanese American church basketball leagues, pan-Asian gatherings like SEALS (the South East Asian Leaders Summit), and a newly settled American home for an Indian Christianity that dates back to the time of the Apostle Thomas. We are long past the first generations of immigrant communities, and new generations of Christians are reinvigorating Asian American life, many between the languages of their immigrant families and the language of America so that their expressions of racial identity push faith beyond the limits of linguistic worlds. These new Christianities received traditions of faith and innovated over and against indebted historical legacies. We are talking about resistance by innovation along the lines of Toni Morrison's inestimable stylization of the English language: "My effort to manipulate American English was not to take standard English and use vernacular to decorate it, or to add 'color' to dialogue. My efforts were to carve away the accreditations of deceit, blindness, ignorance, paralysis, and sheer malevolence embedded in raced language so that other kinds of perception were not only available but were inevitable."¹⁷

One of the most imaginative and insightful Asian American Christians thinking about ethnic identity and faith does so through graphic novels. Gene Luen Yang offers penetrating accounts of Asian American immigrant life.¹⁸ Yang two years ago was named a MacArthur Fellow, the so-called Genius Grant, and his work has been compared to Art Spiegelman's brilliant *Maus* Holocaust novels. Yang dedicates one of his books "to the San Jose Chinese Catholic Community."¹⁹ A Roman Catholic Chinese American ingeniously describing the pathos of Asian American life, Yang exemplifies an Asian American Christianity conscripted to the model minority myth, and finding that myth untenable slipped its reigns and fashioned new forms of American life.

Many of these new expressions will be viewed, relative to cultural arrangements meant for others, as deviant or worse. When women from patriarchal cultures become leaders, when spoken word becomes a medium of worship, when community supplants autonomy, when globalized aesthetics transform liturgies, when tradition meets affirmative action, and when broken rice replaces broken bread, interpreters and exegetes will struggle with the questionable ethics. The most common version of the apprehension comes in the form of the old familiar

17. Toni Morrison, "Home," in *The House that Race Built*, ed. Wahneema Lubiano (Vintage, 1998), 7.

18. Consider, for instance, Gene Luen Yang, *American Born Chinese* (New York: Square Fish, 2008).

19. Gene Luen Yang, *Boxers & Saints* (New York: First Second, 2013).

charge of syncretism, that some ethnic group is taking the otherwise culturally pure gospel and relegating it to provincial obligations. Innovation becomes in this light ethnic accommodation, a betrayal of the gospel at the hands of foreigners, those whose “oriental” eyes slanted their reading of Scripture, jaundice faced as it were. The charge is disingenuous and misconceived from the start, proceeding as if every expression of Christianity, including European ones, did not issue from local, particular, and provincial concerns. The charge is also natural for those taught to believe that they occupy Christianity’s default position. These detractors will be slow to realize that the arrangement they set up, untenable as it was, created the very conditions that made these new forms inevitable.

Some of the most powerful and controversial construals of the parable draw a strong association between Jesus and the dishonest manager, an interpretation that at least makes sense of Jesus’ commendation.²⁰ This interpretation also helps envision Asian American faith christologically, where the arrival of the Son in the world does not simply replicate the Father but wondrously expresses God in previously unseen ways. Apocalyptically we can imagine Orientalism 2.0’s inevitable appropriation of these new forms of Christianity as the owner’s predictable attempt to exploit the manager’s shrewdness for his own purposes, and both approximating the appropriation of Christ by the powers.

I left until now the question of the rich owner’s identity. He is us. We are the makers of a balkanized racial world that pits ethnic peoples against one another in a densely packed zero-sum binary of white and black. We are the purveyors of its myths, the beneficiaries of its lies. For as long as we accept its terms we perpetuate its life. And inasmuch as we cling to its benefits, as Hegel’s philosophical reversal of the master–servant relationship demonstrated, we become its greatest debtors, slavishly dependent on a racialized world.²¹

The Moral Legacy of Racism

I earlier mentioned the relative status of moral claims and I want to conclude with a comment on race and normativity. Oftentimes when we talk about racism and its

20. See for example Larry Silver, *Peasant Scenes and Landscapes: The Rise of Pictorial Genres in the Antwerp Art Market* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2012), 84–85; and L. John Topel, “On the Injustice of the Unjust Steward: LK 16:1–13,” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 37:2 (1975): 216–22.

21. Regarding the fascinating and complex debate on post-racialism, see David A. Hollinger, “The Concept of Post-Racial: How Its Easy Dismissal Obscures Important Questions,” *Daedalus*, 140:1 (Winter 2011): 174–82; Jennifer Lee and Frank D. Bean, “A Postracial Society or a Diversity Paradox: Race, Immigration, and Multiraciality in the Twenty-First Century,” *Du Bois Review* 9:2 (2012): 419–37; Howard McGary, *The Post-Racial Ideal* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2012); Paul C. Taylor, “Taking Postracialism Seriously: From Movement Mythology to Racial Formation,” *Du Bois Review* 11:1 (2014): 9–25; Joseph R. Winters, *Hope Draped in Black: Race, Melancholy, and the Agony of Progress* (Durham, NC: Duke, 2016), 187–236.

problems we presume a kind of moral standard. We forget in such moments that morality is part of what racism devastates. We might say something like “*That* is racism!” with the idea being that whatever “that” is has transgressed a moral line and needs to be called to account. More constructively, people who write about racism do so by arguing for alternatives they consider less racist, which is to say more *moral*. A Christian ethicist might portray a reconciled church as morally superior to a segregated church, or a theology that honors ethnic particularity might be favorably compared to theologies that disparage ethnic difference. Impugning things as racist and offering alternatives presume a standard that has been missed and can still be met.

What if that presumption is wrong? What if the final casualty of America’s racism is morality itself, or at least certain frameworks of it? If so, we would come to see morality as something about which we can no longer speak with much confidence. More frightening still is the possibility that the whole idea that there exist norms of behavior to which we are all in every place and time accountable is and never was anything other than racism’s greatest ploy, really clever ways to keep some under the thumb of others. After all, what is racism but codes indexed to bodies about personhood, worth, identity, community, ends, all those features that comprise any worthwhile account of the good? Morality is not unlike religion in its ability to enslave. Our parable, as one that Luke’s Gospel uniquely shares, joins this Nietzschean point about power to the earlier post-Marxist one about redistribution, making this parable one about the pragmatics of surviving slavery and what that pragmatics discloses about the status of moral truth.²² In the final analysis, maybe this is what we American Christians have come to see about ourselves, that our racism does not so much come in the name of evil but rather goodness, and so our surviving racism occurs beyond good and evil. Perhaps our unwillingness to consider all this tells us that we have not yet taken stock of what racism does, both *to* us and *for* us.

22. Recognizing a judgment’s relative status may commit one to the relativity of judgments as such but it need not commit one in general to what has been called moral relativism. Claiming a judgment’s moral status as relative is only to contextualize that statement as having meaning within a certain discursive frame, beyond which its moral force becomes unclear. Much more can be said about this, but mention of a few significant treatments of normativity along these lines, and especially as related to the modes of American Pragmatism running throughout my argument, will suffice: Nicholas Rescher, *A System of Pragmatic Idealism: Volume II The Validity of Values* (Princeton: Princeton University, 1993); Richard Rorty, *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* (New York: Cambridge, 1989); Bernard Williams, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 1985); G. E. M. Anscombe, “Modern Moral Philosophy” *Philosophy* 33:124 (1958): 1–16; Cora Diamond, *The Realistic Spirit: Wittgenstein, Philosophy, and the Mind* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1991); Julius Kovesi, *Moral Notions* (New York: Routledge, 1967); Jeffrey Stout, *Ethics After Babel: The Language of Morals and their Discontents* (Princeton: Princeton University, 2001); and Alice Cary, *Inside Ethics: On the Demands of Moral Thought* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 2016). For treatments that consider normativity in the context of race, see Cornel West, *The American Evasion of Philosophy: A Genealogy of Pragmatism* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1989); Eddie Glaude, *In a Shade of Blue: Pragmatism and the Politics of Black America* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2008); and Winters, *Hope Draped in Black: Race, Melancholy, and the Agony of Progress*.

Considering such possibilities is what responsibility looks like in the aftermath of the kind of racism we have cultivated in America. We would like to clear the air of these ambiguities but we cannot do so while also acknowledging the devastation we have wrought. We do not get to commit all the racist atrocities we have and still expect the moral infrastructure in which we committed those atrocities to remain intact. The atrocities demonstrate that either the infrastructure is not to be trusted or we are not to be entrusted with it. Thinking and writing about race then might be better served by living with this ambiguity rather than attempting to dispel it by so much impugning and alternative hawking. Our manager for one does not seem to have the time to attend to the large philosophical questions. He reads the writing on the wall and either will or will not, depending on what he does next, have a roof over his head. The philosophical claims aren't going to help him with that. Those luxuries belong to the rich owners of the world.

That is how I increasingly view my life as a person of color in America. I am tempted to understand racism in ways that neatly divide the world between “good guys” and racists, using ever more fine-grained arguments to catch one another in unwitting racist moments—“Aha!”—outflanking each other as if we were not willing participants in a world of our making. I wish it were that easy. Maybe at one time I thought it was. I no longer do.

Author biography

Jonathan Tran is George W. Baines and Associate Professor of Religion (Theology & Ethics) at Baylor University where he also serves as Faculty Steward of the Honors Residential College. He is author of *The Vietnam War and Theologies of Memory: Time and Eternity in the Far Country* (Wiley-Blackwell), *Foucault and Theology* (Bloomsbury), as well as numerous academic and non-academic articles.