

RACIAL INNOCENCE AND THE *CHRISTUS*-BASED LATTER-DAY SAINTS SYMBOL

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On April 4, 2020, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS) formally adopted an institutional symbol that is now prominently displayed on the Church logo and is imprinted on Church publications, websites, videos, and other forms of communication. This symbol includes a depiction of Bertel Thorvaldsen's statue *Christus Consolator*. As philosopher and theologian Paul Tillich notes, all religious symbols both point beyond themselves and are also socially situated; symbols do not, in and of themselves, communicate outside a given cultural understanding.¹ The crucifix, for instance, carries deep theological meaning for many Christians, not because there is anything inherently communicative about two perpendicular lines but because within the cultural milieu of Christianity (1) the crucifix points to deeper theological realities tied to belief in Jesus and (2) the crucifix reinforces and engages a particular socially constructed way of understanding of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. All that is to say, a symbol is a space of social exchange that simultaneously draws us into deeper reflection and reinforces a particular cultural (socially situated) understanding. The reality that symbols are a space of social exchange is also necessarily true for the LDS *Christus*-based symbol.

1. H. D. McDonald, "The Symbolic Christology of Paul Tillich," *Vox Evangelica* 18 (1988): 76.

There are a variety of ways in which the new LDS symbol could be analyzed. This essay seeks to focus narrowly on the new LDS symbol's cultural interaction with the issue of race, specifically the way in which this new symbol reinforces the idea of "Jesus-as-white" and the impacts this theology of whiteness has on LDS adherents. Following the lead of Joanna Brooks, this essay will generally frame the discussion against the backdrop of racial innocence. As will be discussed in more detail below, Brooks describes racial innocence as including the "performance of not-noticing" and "holy ignorance" when it comes to issues of race and, more specifically, institutional racism.² Racial innocence is a particularly applicable framework for an analysis of the new *Christus* logo for two reasons: (1) Put plainly, the physical image of Jesus portrayed in the *Christus*, and thus in the new symbol, is based on a white body; and (2) the LDS Church has not yet acknowledged the reality that it has formally adopted a white Jesus as its institutional symbol nor has it grappled with the implications that this decision may have on LDS adherents.

In this essay, I will examine the LDS Church's new *Christus*-based symbol and how it interacts with contemporary discussions of race. First, I will examine the *Christus* itself and touch on the contemporaneous social situation surrounding the LDS Church's embracing of the statue. Second, I will look at the stated (official) intention behind the new *Christus*-based symbol, including the ways in which LDS leadership tried to steer meaning construction, and thus how the new *Christus*-based symbol enacts a form of racial innocence. Lastly, I will briefly consider some of the theological impacts of this new symbol. I hope to demonstrate that, as in other situations where racial innocence

2. Robin Bernstein, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood and Race from Slavery to Civil Rights* (New York: New York University Press, 2011), quoted in Joanna Brooks, *Mormonism and White Supremacy: American Religion and The Problem of Racial Innocence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 86.

is present, intentional or not, the announcement of the new LDS symbol demonstrated a “willed obliviousness” to the issue of race and “especially to the thorny moral responsibility entailed in institutional racism.”³

I. The *Christus*

LDS laypersons and leaders were likely first exposed to the Thorvaldsen’s *Christus* in the latter half of the nineteenth century and made moves to acquire it in the 1950s.⁴ George Reynolds, an LDS General Authority from the late nineteenth century, wrote for LDS periodicals, believed that black skin was a curse from God, and associated whiteness with godliness.⁵ He probably spoke for many LDS believers when he praised the *Christus*’s presentation of Jesus’ physical attributes, calling it a “very dignified example” of Jesus’ likeness.⁶ Stephen L. Richards of the First Presidency likely viewed the *Christus* in person on a trip to Europe sometime during the 1950s and was so taken by it that he advocated for its placement in the Temple Square visitors’ center.⁷ The *Christus* arrived in Salt Lake City in 1959. That the image of Jesus represented by the *Christus* was so readily and heartily embraced by the LDS leadership of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries should not be surprising since it portrays Jesus with stereotypically white features:

3. Brooks, *Mormonism and White Supremacy*, 94.

4. John G. Turner, *The Mormon Jesus* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2016), 269–70.

5. George Reynolds, “Man and His Varieties: The Negro Race,” *Juvenile Instructor* 3, no. 20 (Oct. 15, 1868): 157, available at <https://archive.org/details/juvenileinstruct320geor/page/157/mode/2up?view=theater/>.

6. George Reynolds, “The Personal Appearance of the Savior,” *Juvenile Instructor* (Aug. 15, 1904), 497–500, quoted in Turner, *Mormon Jesus*, 269; and Noel A. Carmack, “Images of Christ in Latter-day Saint Visual Culture 1900–1999,” *BYU Studies Quarterly* 39, no. 3 (2000): 30.

7. Turner, *Mormon Jesus*, 270.

long, flowing hair parted in the middle; a long, straight, narrow nose; thin lips; and a strong, squared chin with a short, parted beard.

Petra ten-Doesschate Chu and Peter Ahr describe Thorvaldsen's *Christus* as portraying a young Jesus with an "idealized body" that has "perfectly modeled classical features."⁸ Indeed, in his analysis of LDS depictions of Jesus between 1900 and 1999, Noel Carmack notes that the "formal order of Thorvaldsen's work exemplifies the symmetry and balance admired by mainstream Church members. This high regard for Thorvaldsen's formal classicism coincided with some Mormon authors' regard for Germanic physical attributes."⁹ John Turner further observes that Thorvaldsen's *Christus* is consonant with other LDS visual depictions of Jesus with white features.¹⁰ Edward J. Blum and Paul Harvey describe the use of the *Christus* in LDS "welcome centers" around the world noting that while "Blacks were technically welcome . . . they first had to pass by the powerful white *Christus*."¹¹ And though it may be true that "in the past several years, the church has introduced racially diverse images of the savior into its videos and online exhibitions," Turner also observes that LDS depictions of Jesus in the meetinghouses, temples, and temple visitors' centers have a recognizable "sameness" with regards to Jesus' "skin color, hair color, and physique" and "reinforce the way Latter-day Saints understand their savior," i.e., a Jesus who is white.¹²

8. Petra ten-Doesschate Chu and Peter Ahr describe the *Christus* as portraying "a young man" with an "idealized body." Petra ten-Doesschate Chu and Peter Ahr, "Bertel Thorvaldsen, Christus (Christ)," *Conversations: An Online Journal of the Center for the Study of Material and Visual Cultures of Religion* (2014), https://mavcor.yale.edu/sites/default/files/article_pdf/chu_and_ahr.pdf/.

9. Carmack, "Images of Christ in Latter-day Saint Visual Culture," 30.

10. Turner, *Mormon Jesus*, 269–73.

11. Edward J. Blum and Paul Harvey, *The Color of Christ: The Son of God and the Saga of Race in America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 254.

12. Turner, *Mormon Jesus*, 279, 280–81, 273. Capitalization from original.

Proximal to the time when the *Christus* was being considered for the purchase by the Church, prominent Church leadership were regularly rehashing now-discarded explanations for racial inequity—many of which privileged whiteness. Since it has been catalogued elsewhere, I will not recount the myriad teachings by prominent LDS Church leaders justifying the Church’s racial segregation that held sway between 1852 and 1978.¹³ Suffice it say, anti-Black LDS Church policy as enacted through the priesthood and temple ban was seen then as a divinely proclaimed institution that was premised on a variety of theories from the curse of Cain to a lack of fidelity the premortal life.¹⁴ Relatedly, and at the same time, whiteness was seen as symbol of purity and godliness.¹⁵

However, a less well-known incident occurred around this time: during the same era when the Church leaders were explicating these now-discarded theories of Black inferiority and close to the same

13. See, for instance, Lester E. Bush Jr. “Mormonism’s Negro Doctrine: A Historical Overview” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 8, no. 1 (Spring 1973): 22–68; Joanna Brooks, “The Possessive Investment in Rightness: White Supremacy and the Mormon Movement,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 51, no 3 (Fall 2018): 45–81; W. Paul Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color: Race and the Mormon Struggle for Whiteness* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); and Taylor G. Petrey, *Tabernacles of Clay: Sexuality and Gender in Modern Mormonism* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020).

14. Indeed, now-outdated official statements (e.g., First Presidency communications), semi-official statements (e.g., general conference addresses), and nonofficial sources (e.g., books written by prominent LDS leaders) justifying the priesthood and temple ban remain readily available. In an essay first published in 2013, the LDS Church asserts that “none of these explanations is accepted today as the official doctrine of the Church.” See The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “Race and the Priesthood,” *Gospel Topics Essays*, available at <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/manual/gospel-topics-essays/race-and-the-priesthood?lang=eng>.

15. See, for example, Spencer W. Kimball, “The Day of the Lamanites,” Report of the Semi-Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Oct. 7–9, 1960 (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, semiannual), 32–37.

period of time when the Church was considering acquiring the *Christus*, at least two Church leaders quoted from the Publius Lentulus letter in general conference addresses. The Publius Lentulus letter is a forged document “written sometime between the tenth and fourteenth century, [that] falsely claimed to come from a governor of Judea during Christ’s lifetime.”¹⁶ The fabricated letter describes Jesus’ physical appearance thusly:

He is a man of medium size. . . . His hair is the color of the ripe hazel nut, straight down to his ears, but below the ears wavy and curled, with a bluish and bright reflection flowing over his shoulders. It is parted in two on the top of the head, after the pattern of the Nazarenes. His brow is smooth and very cheerful, with a face without wrinkle or spot, embellished by a ruddy complexion. His nose and mouth are faultless. His beard is abundant, and the color of his hair, not long, but divided at the chin. His aspect is simple and mature, his eyes are changeable and bright . . . He is the most beautiful among the children of men.¹⁷

Though the letter was a known fraud among the nineteenth-century Puritans, Blum and Harvey note that “by the early twentieth century, a group of white supremacists were so dedicated to making Jesus an emblem of their racial power that they consciously transformed it [the letter] from a tall tale to an established truth.”¹⁸ Thus, as Blum and Harvey go on to assert, “where the Publius Lentulus fraud was accepted, white supremacy was not far behind.”¹⁹ George F. Richards, then president of the Quorum of the Twelve, presented the Publius Lentulus letter’s description of Jesus’ physical appearance as an unquestioned

16. Blum and Harvey, *Color of Christ*, 20.

17. There are a variety of translations that are readily available in numerous print and online sources. This version is used in Blum and Harvey, *Color of Christ*, 20–21.

18. Blum and Harvey, *Color of Christ*, 21.

19. Blum and Harvey, *Color of Christ*, 69.

fact in his October 1949 general conference address.²⁰ Six and a half years later, apostle Spencer W. Kimball also quoted directly from the Publius Lentulus letter in his April 1956 general conference address.²¹ Further, alongside his sharing of this language over the conference pulpit, Kimball also reinforced the validity of the description of Jesus' physical attributes by revealing that the Publius Lentulus letter was read to the Quorum of the Twelve by President David O. McKay during a temple meeting just a few days earlier. And, in that same address, Kimball quoted from another description of Jesus that similarly presents an image of Jesus as white with rosy cheeks, light brown shoulder-length hair with loose curls, blue eyes, and a well-maintained forked beard. Though Kimball went on to suggest that any physical descriptions of Jesus are incomplete portrayals of who Jesus is, he nonetheless allows the representation of a white Jesus to stand as reflective of his visual appearance. Reflecting back on this, I think it is unlikely that Richards, Kimball, or McKay knew the Publius Lentulus letter was fraudulent when they shared it; yet it is nonetheless notable that they each gravitated toward language that presented Jesus as having stereotypically white physical attributes.

For lay LDS members at the time, knowing that the prophet, seer, and revelator for the LDS Church shared this physical description of Jesus in the temple with other prophets, seers, and revelators—coupled with the fact that the Publius Lentulus letter was shared over the pulpit at two different general conferences by two different apostles—would have given this image of Jesus an authoritative status (despite the reality

20. George F. Richards, "God so Loved the World," Report of the Semi-Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Sept. 30–Oct. 2, 1949 (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, semiannual), 150–53.

21. Spencer W. Kimball, "Jesus the Christ," Report of the Semi-Annual Conference of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, Apr. 6–8, 1956 (Salt Lake City: Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, semiannual), 118–21.

that the letter is a proven fraud). Pertinent to this analysis, the *Christus*'s representation of Jesus clearly aligned closely with descriptions of Jesus made by prominent LDS leaders of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in public and non-public Church settings. These written descriptions and sculpted representations of Jesus likely reinforced preexisting racial bias and made them much easier to accept. Indeed, as John Turner notes, Mormons of the 1950s and 1960s saw in Thorvaldsen's *Christus* a "Jesus they recognized."²²

By any measure, the *Christus* is a magnificent piece of art. I, personally, find it to be one depiction of Jesus, among many, that moves me. The quality of the art is not in question, nor is there any intention here to impugn the artist in any way, nor should there be construed any suggestion that Thorvaldsen's statue is inherently racist. Rather, my point is that it seems to be no accident that the *Christus* has been favored by the Church and many of its members. Thorvaldsen's *Christus* reinforced both the Church's institutional proclivity for privileging images of Jesus as white and many LDS members' belief "in a fair-skinned Christ."²³ Given the social and theological climate of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (the time when the *Christus* became an important piece of art for the LDS Church) and the well-documented beliefs and statements by LDS Church leaders that associated whiteness with divinely ordained power and privilege, it is neither surprising nor coincidental that prominent LDS Church leaders were attracted to written descriptions and artistic depictions of Jesus, such as the Publius Lentulus letter and the *Christus*, that reinforced this prejudice.

22. John G. Turner, *Mormon Jesus*, 269.

23. Carmack, "Images of Christ in Latter-day Saint Visual Culture," 30.

II. The New Symbol

Its Official Purpose and Meaning

In his April 2020 remarks announcing the new symbol, President Russell M. Nelson briefly described the symbol itself and then went on to explain the intended meaning behind it.²⁴ Nelson said that the symbol “includes the name of the Church contained within a cornerstone. . . . At the center of the symbol is a representation of Thorvaldsen’s marble statue the *Christus*. . . . Jesus Christ is standing under an arch.” This relatively brief description of the design was accompanied by a lengthier discussion of the LDS Church’s official intention for the symbol. Broadly speaking, Nelson suggested that the symbol was created and deployed to visually represent to LDS members and non-members the LDS Church’s institutional approach to, and relationship with, Jesus.

Nelson’s descriptions of the symbol and its meaning have two important facets. First, he implicitly acknowledges the socially constructed nature of symbolic interpretation by seeking to impose a clear institutional, authorized, official meaning upon this symbol. Perhaps not surprisingly, Nelson’s institutional meaning construction is fully self-referential and self-reinforcing. The official interpretation of the LDS Church’s *Christus*-based symbol points back to the LDS Church institution, and conversely, the LDS Church institution uses this new visual schema to symbolically claim Jesus’ imprimatur. In fact, the symbol’s meaning, according to Nelson, is almost exclusively concerned with the connection between Jesus and the LDS Church as an institution, apparently intended to suggest both that faith in the one requires faith in the other and that Jesus is institutionally aligned with the LDS Church. Nelson makes this explicit through an inversion of Ephesians 2:20 where Paul identifies “Jesus Christ Himself” as the “Chief

24. Russell M. Nelson, “Opening the Heavens for Help,” Apr. 2020, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2020/04/37nelson?lang=eng>.

cornerstone” for the “household of God.” In the new LDS symbol, the LDS Church is Jesus’ cornerstone. In sum, the symbol’s imagery collapses “His gospel” (Christology) and “His Church” (LDS ecclesiology) into a single non-differentiated unit.

Second, Nelson seems to acknowledge that this particular physical portrayal of Jesus is meaningful but only offers an explanation for certain aspects of the image. To start, he notes that the symbol portrays Jesus “reaching out” and asserts that Jesus’ extended arms should be understood to reference his willingness to “embrace all who will come unto Him.” In other words, Nelson focuses on the body position of Jesus. Additionally, he notes that Jesus is “at the center of the symbol. . . . Standing under an arch” and further states that this imagery should be understood to connect “the restored gospel” (i.e., the LDS Church’s teachings, ordinances, and structures) with “the *living*, resurrected Christ” (emphasis original). Here, Nelson focuses on the space that the image of Jesus occupies relative to the other design elements. Thus, consistent with other aspects of the symbol that have already been discussed, Nelson casts the physical portrayal of Jesus in the symbol as only having meanings that reinforce the LDS Church’s institutional position. The fact that the *Christus* is based on a white body is not addressed.

As Nelson stated, the LDS institution’s symbol represents how the institution sees itself and seeks to influence how it is seen by others. This should not be surprising—this is part of the purpose of branding.²⁵ However, given the LDS Church’s complicated history surrounding race and its historical effort to establish its institutional credibility through an embrace of “whiteness,” as W. Paul Reeve extensively and skillfully explores,²⁶ it seems like a stark omission that Nelson does not

25. Stephen A. Greyser and Mats Urde, “What Does Your Corporate Brand Stand For?,” *Harvard Business Review* (Jan.–Feb. 2019), available at <https://hbr.org/2019/01/what-does-your-corporate-brand-stand-for/>.

26. Reeve, *Religion of a Different Color*.

acknowledge the fact that Thorvaldsen's statue depicts Jesus in a white body. In fact, Nelson's not-noticing the whiteness of the symbol's Jesus imagery leaves Jesus-as-white as an unquestioned fact.

Scholar Joanna Brooks has written about multiple ways in which LDS Church leaders sought to "preserve racial innocence" by failing to "acknowledge racism in the Mormon past and present."²⁷ Brooks suggests that throughout history, the LDS Church has been willfully blind to the racial impact of specific policies, practices, and doctrines, and instead "gestur[ed] toward a transcendence of racial issues that cost whites nothing and left segregation and white supremacy completely intact."²⁸ Building on the work of historian Robin Bernstein, Brooks suggests that this "performance of not-noticing," "active state of repelling knowledge," and "holy ignorance" when it comes to issues of race is characteristic of a pattern of actions that can rightly be called "racial innocence."²⁹

The Roll-Out

This new *Christus*-based symbol was unveiled on April 4, 2020 in the midst of a worldwide pandemic that disproportionately affected marginalized people (particularly people of color).³⁰ It was also in the immediate aftermath of the February 23, 2020 murder of Ahmaud Arbery and the March 13, 2020 murder of Breonna Taylor—which gained national prominence and that exacerbated already strained

27. Brooks, *Mormonism and White Supremacy*, 192.

28. Brooks, *Mormonism and White Supremacy*, 94. See, for example, Brooks's discussion of the Mormon Tabernacle Choir and the Osmonds, 89–106.

29. Bernstein, *Racial Innocence*, quoted in Brooks, *Mormonism and White Supremacy*, 86.

30. Sherita Hill Golden, "Coronavirus in African Americans and Other People of Color," Johns Hopkins Medicine, Apr. 20, 2020, <https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/conditions-and-diseases/coronavirus/covid19-racial-disparities/>.

racial tensions in the United States.³¹ Even in this context, when the new symbol was released, LDS leaders implied a universality to the symbol's imagery despite its depiction of a white body. Further, on May 11, 2020—shortly after this unveiling of the *Christus*-based symbol and recognizing that artwork can “teach principles of the gospel”—the First Presidency instructed that there would be a new emphasis on prominently displaying specifically approved depictions of Jesus in the entries and foyers of church buildings.³² Rather than creating a more diverse set of images to balance the Europeanness of the *Christus*-based symbol announced a month earlier, the twenty-two pieces of art approved for chapel use continued the “white Jesus” imagery. This May 11, 2020 announcement about approved foyer art was *also* made without any seeming recognition that the LDS Church's official Jesus imagery was exclusively white. In a blog post, Sam Brunson noted, “All of the paintings church buildings can choose from feature a white European Jesus. In fact, other than one Black boy in one painting, everybody in each of the paintings is a white *European*.”³³ These sentiments were echoed by a number of other commentators.³⁴

The context seemed to raise the stakes of these issues. Though the new symbol and approved artwork were likely decided sometime before, the heightened national attention to issues of racial injustice

31. Haley Price, William Jones, and Alina Scott, “Violence Against Black People in America: A ClioVis Timeline,” *Not Even Past* (blog), July 31, 2020, <https://notevenpast.org/violence-against-black-people-in-america-a-cliovis-timeline/>.

32. First Presidency letter, May 11, 2020, available at <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/multimedia/file/reverence-for-savior-in-meeting-houses.pdf/>.

33. Sam Brunson, “Whiteness and Jesus,” *By Common Consent* (blog), Sept. 16, 2020. <https://bycommonconsent.com/2020/09/16/whiteness-and-jesus/>.

34. See, for instance, MargaretOH, “Art in Meetinghouse Foyers,” *Exponent II* (blog), May 11, 2020, <https://exponentii.org/blog/art-in-meetinghouse-foyers/>; and Michael Austin, “The Graven Image in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” *By Common Consent* (blog), May 11, 2020, <https://bycommonconsent.com/2020/05/11/the-graven-image-in-the-age-of-mechanical-reproduction/>.

were pressing. Between the announcement of the symbol and the announcement of the approved foyer art, there had been another high-profile death of a person of color, this time the unarmed Mike Ramos in Austin, Texas on April 24, 2020. The announcement of LDS foyer art came just two weeks before the murder of George Floyd and the eruption of the Black Lives Matter protests.³⁵

III. Briefly: The Theological Impact of the Symbol

As a white man, I am not well situated to spend much time discussing the impact that Jesus-as-white imagery has on the BIPOC community. I will, however, briefly discuss the possible theological impacts of enshrining a white Jesus.

One of the powerful observations coming out of liberation theologies generally is the recognition that the *social situation* of Jesus (the person) is a theologically meaningful aspect of his mission. James Cone, a key figure in the development of Black liberation theology, explains that when we lose sight of Jesus' racial/ethnic background, we lose a critical aspect of who Jesus was, which in turn hampers our theological understanding of him. This revolutionary analysis, which plumbed the depths of Jesus' relationships with and within contemporaneous societal structures, resulted in seeing Jesus' life and death as God's intentional act of identifying with marginalized peoples and his work to liberate them from social and political oppression (the poor for Gustavo Gutiérrez, women for Rosemary Radford Ruether, and Black people for Cone).³⁶ Though some rightly point out that the pro-

35. Price, Jones, and Scott, "Violence Against Black People in America."

36. Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation (15th Anniversary Edition)*, translated and edited by Sister Caridad Inda and John Eagleson (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1988); Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Sexism and God-Talk: Toward a Feminist Theology* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993); James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1997).

liberation of various liberation theologies—each from the perspective of a particular (local) marginalized group, and each claiming broader (global) application—resulted in liberation theory “chaos,” these liberation theologians’ Christological perspectives successfully established that who Jesus was socially is as theologically important as who he was ontically.³⁷ What’s more, liberation theologians exposed the reality that social context has *always* impacted how Jesus is understood. Gutiérrez, Ruether, and Cone all point to the ways in which “dominant” (white, male, and affluent) readings of the Jesus story both reflect contemporary culture and serve to reinforce the status quo by allowing those in power to maintain power at the expense of marginalized groups.

Applied to the specific discussion of racial innocence and the new LDS symbol (and other Jesus-as-white imagery), and when considered against the “whiteness of Mormonism” historically,³⁸ one theological effect of the LDS Church’s perpetuation of unacknowledged white Jesus imagery that reinforces the notion of a universalized idea of race—or said differently, a nonracialized idea of the universal that is functionally expressed in white imagery—is the denial of non-white racial categories as a meaningful source for connection with the divine. James Cone observes, “the particularity of Jesus’ person as disclosed in his Jewishness is indispensable for Christological analysis. . . . It connects God’s salvation drama in Jesus with the Exodus-Sinai event. . . . Jesus’ Jewishness therefore was essential to his person. He was not a ‘universal man’ but a particular Jew. . . . His Jewishness establishes the concreteness of his existence in history, without which Christology inevitably moves in the direction of docetism.”³⁹ Cone implies that because Jesus’ racial/ethnic characteristics matter, our individual racial/ethnic characteristics must also matter. However, by attempting to transcend race through white

37. Blum and Harvey, *Color of Christ*, 238–49.

38. Darron T. Smith, “Negotiating Black Self-Hate within the LDS Church,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 51, no. 3 (Fall 2018): 38.

39. Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 109. Capitalization from the original.

imagery, race (and specifically any non-white racial category) is relegated to a non-meaningful, even trivial, part of LDS members' eternal identity. Cone goes so far as to suggest that a modern-day understanding of Jesus' ancient racial/ethnic roots not only is required to make room for a full embrace of racial difference among humankind but is foundational if we are to be able to see the image of God and Jesus in marginalized populations.⁴⁰ Thus, theologically, the new LDS symbol's racial-transcendence-as-symbolized-in-whiteness seems to embody the notion that, in the eternal scheme of things, race does not matter. Or, said more concretely, that formative earthly experiences, points of connection, and meaning creation that accompany one's racial identification and participation are only eternally relevant to the extent they are nonracial. Finally, it suggests that the "image" of God does not (and indeed cannot) include racial considerations.

The real-world impacts of this theological reality are stark. For instance, in her 2019 *Dialogue* essay, Daylin Amesimeku describes how she bought her daughter a puzzle with an image of a Jesus that was "as dark-skinned as my husband." Her daughter's response was "That's not Jesus, that's Dada." Amesimeku notes, "we do not have any images of a 'conventional' Jesus in our home. Her [the daughter's] imagery of Jesus came strictly from her nursery class at church and visits to Grandma's home." Amesimeku worries that rather than seeing Jesus within familial relations, the prominence of light-skinned images of Jesus could mean that her daughter may believe that "Jesus and Heavenly Father belong to the family of the classmates in her nursery class and not her own," and thus "because the current image of deity was a foreigner to my little girl . . . she could see herself being foreign to deity as well."⁴¹ Lest this be

40. Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 122–26. See this idea explored with some additional reflections in Cone's *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2013).

41. Daylin Amesimeku, "Imagery and Identity," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 52, no. 3 (Fall 2019): 92–93.

dismissed as misunderstanding confined to childhood, Kirstie Stanger Weyland, in her web-only feature essay for the same issue of *Dialogue*, describes her fellow BYU classmate's incorrect assumptions that "(1) to be perfect we all need to be white and (2) Heavenly Father and Jesus Christ are white."⁴² Powerfully, Weyland goes on to assert that "if God wanted me to be white, he would've made me white in the first place. My physical features are connected to my African heritage as well as my skin color which are a part of my identity."⁴³ Indeed, *Exponent II* blogger MargaretOH notes, "these [white] images serve only as mirrors for a small subset of the LDS population. They do not give LDS people of color an image of the divine that reflects their lives. They do not give women a sense of the potential of their relationship with Christ. They do not prompt white members to look out beyond their own narrow experiences."⁴⁴ And in the essay "A Balm in Gilead: Reconciling Black Bodies within a Mormon Imagination," Janan Graham-Russell notes, "We find wholeness in seeing ourselves in the eternal [via representations of the divine in "deep skin tones"] in that we recognize that our existence is not an aberration, but instead, it is intentional."⁴⁵

Further, Cone and his fellow liberation theologians helped us see that, absent accounting for things like race, gender, and social status, we run the risk of simply using theology as a tool of retrenchment. In this same vein, Brooks pointedly observes: "almost without exception, when predominantly white American Christianities have institutionalized, because institutionalization often requires the physical and social

42. Kirstie Stanger Weyland, "Racism at BYU," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* (blog), Oct. 1, 2019, <https://www.dialoguejournal.com/dialogue/racism-at-byu/>.

43. Stanger Weyland, "Racism at BYU."

44. MargaretOH, "Art in Meetinghouse Foyers."

45. Janan Graham-Russell, "A Balm in Gilead: Reconciling Black Bodies within a Mormon Imagination," *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 51, no. 3 (Fall 2018): 191.

capital that whiteness can offer access to, emancipatory possibilities have constricted.”⁴⁶ Thus, in adopting official Jesus imagery that is premised on a white body, the LDS Church as an institution not only fails to represent and reflect the diversity of ways in which Jesus might be seen and understood by its members, it may also unintentionally serve to perpetuate now-discarded approaches to race and LDS ecclesiastical power and access. As Sam Brunson observes, “We may not know what [Jesus] looked like, but we certainly know that He wasn’t European. . . . To the extent that we’re only willing to represent Him as a white Scandinavian, then, we’re perpetuating a myth of white supremacy, albeit without intending to do so. We’re sending the message that since we don’t know what He looks like, only white skin is good enough to represent our Savior.”⁴⁷ So, rather than embracing Cone’s recognition that “what people think about God, Jesus Christ, and the Church cannot be separated from their own social and political status in a given society”⁴⁸ by providing many, racially varied depictions of Jesus to reflect multiple social and political realities of LDS members (or, conversely, refusing to authorize any particular image), the LDS Church has enacted a form of racial innocence by privileging white imagery to gesture at transcendence.

IV. Conclusion

Historian Rebecca de Schweinitz observes that LDS Church leadership has a history of seeking to “ignore or not draw attention to racial issues in the Church and its history.”⁴⁹ Darius Gray generously frames it this

46. Brooks, *Mormonism and White Supremacy*, 25.

47. Brunson, “Whiteness and Jesus.”

48. Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 41.

49. Rebecca de Schweinitz, “‘There Is No Equality’: William E. Berrett, BYU, and Healing the Wounds of Racism in the Latter-day Saint Past and Present,” *Dialogue: A Journal of Mormon Thought* 52, no. 3 (Fall 2019): 74, 80.

way: “sometimes racism is so subtle, we may not realize we’re expressing it.”⁵⁰ Maybe LDS leadership just did not realize that a symbol of white Jesus could be problematic. Maybe LDS leadership did not realize that the Church’s history of racism continues to have very modern reverberations and that this logo seemingly supports discredited views on race advocated by past LDS leaders. Maybe LDS leadership did not realize that including a white Jesus in the LDS Church’s new symbol constrains members’ future efforts to “see” Jesus in new ways. Whatever the case, the idea of racial innocence provides a framework examine the lack of official acknowledgment of ways in which the new *Christus*-based symbol privileges whiteness without acknowledgement.

To be clear, I am not asserting that the *Christus*-based symbol (nor the Church-approved foyer art) is in and of itself inherently racist. Indeed, the LDS Church has made meaningful strides in addressing its past with regards to racial issues, including specifically the 2018 “Be One” event, President Dallin H. Oaks’s recent calls to “root out racism,” and President Nelson’s notable work with the NAACP.⁵¹ The problem explored herein is the Church’s failure to acknowledge and grapple with the *Christus*-based symbol’s privileging of whiteness (and thus its implicit ties to past racially charged ideology) and how this symbol, and other similar imagery, impacts members of the global LDS Church.

50. Darius Gray, “Moving Forward Together,” *Ensign*, June 2018, <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/ensign/2018/06/commemorating-the-1978-revelation/moving-forward-together?lang=eng>.

51. See for instance Oak’s October 2020 general conference address, “Love Your Enemies,” <https://www.churchofjesuschrist.org/study/general-conference/2020/10/17oaks?lang=eng>, or his October 27, 2020 devotional at Brigham Young University, “Racism and Other Challenges,” <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/president-oaks-byu-devotional-october-2020-talk>; The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, “First Presidency and NAACP Leaders Announce a Shared Vision to ‘Learn from and Serve One Another,’” June 14, 2021, Newsroom, <https://newsroom.churchofjesuschrist.org/article/first-presidency-naacp-shared-vision/>.

Some might suggest that the symbol does not attempt to depict race per se, that Jesus is beyond racial categories, or that the LDS Church is “color-blind” when it comes to Jesus’ race. They might say that the symbol seeks to portray universality when it comes to Jesus imagery. Yet, Blum and Harvey counter that any claim to a “universal Jesus” while continuing to “create visual imagery that associate[s] Jesus with whiteness” is little more than “a change verbally but not materially.”⁵² Indeed, Blum and Harvey suggest that “no group performs the rhetoric-versus-image magic better than the Latter-day Saints.”⁵³ While Nelson explained that the symbol reinforces the connection between Jesus and the LDS institution, the symbol also carries and communicates unaddressed racial dynamics. What are we as a church to do about it? Darius Gray offers us one path forward: “the first step toward healing is the realization that the problem exists, even among some of us in the Church. . . . We cannot fix that which we overlook or deny.”⁵⁴

52. Blum and Harvey, *Color of Christ*, 250.

53. Blum and Harvey, *Color of Christ*, 253.

54. Gray, “Moving Forward Together.”

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