

RENOUNCING HARVARD: THE ASCETIC THEOLOGY OF JONATHAN TRAN

Thomas J. Millay

If the popularity of Sarah Coakley's recent books is any indication, ascetic theology is going through a period of rebirth.¹ Sources like Gregory of Nyssa and Augustine of Hippo are being newly plumbed for their ascetic wisdom, out of what seems a general sentiment that such wisdom has been lost and needs to be retrieved.² I believe that this renewal should be welcomed, yet also conceived more broadly than it has been up to the present moment.³ In contemporary theological discourse, *askēsis* has been limited to topics having to do primarily with sexuality and concomitant disciplinings of the body. Such a restricted focus was not always the case. In fact, *askēsis* once described a whole field of renunciatory practices, only some of which were sexual in nature.

One way to recover this broader application of asceticism is to observe where renunciation shows up in contemporary theology and then highlight locales that are otherwise than sexual. An exemplary instance, notable for its avoidance of several pitfalls within ascetic theology, can be found in Jonathan Tran's essay "The Spirit of God Was Hovering over the Waters': Pressing Past Racialization in the Decolonial Missionary Context; or, Why Asian American Christians Should Give Up Their Spots at Harvard."⁴ In what follows, I first give a close reading to Tran's essay before suggesting how it can assist theologians attempting to expand the reach of a new asceticism. Key to this suggestion will be Tran's use of practical reason.

In the context of a book on missiology and whiteness, Tran's essay takes up a controversial topic: the recent lawsuit *Students For Fair Admissions v. Harvard* (filed in 2014), which alleges that Harvard has a policy of limiting Asian student enrollment and challenges the legality of such a policy. Through a series of complex negotiations with postracial ideology, Tran considers what a specifically Christian response to this situation should be. His essay unfolds in several steps.

After introducing the topic, Tran lays out the three theories of postracialism he sees as operative in contemporary discourse about race (231-234). In the first, called "simple postracialism," race was once a problem in North American society (that is, it was a source of discrimination), but it is so no longer. The election of Barack Obama is cited as proof of this fact. Next, "biological postracialism" posits a future in which the mixture of races generated by human reproductive activity will eventually make racism impossible. As Tran crassly if rather hilariously puts it, if everyone looks like Tiger Woods, racism not only won't but *can't* be a problem anymore. The last variety Tran describes is "aspirant postracialism," which holds that the best way to get past race is to stop using race as a categorical descriptor. In other words, we should act in accordance with the society we want to have, rather than being overdetermined by our pasts. Aspirant postracialism believes that if we stop acting as if race is determinative, it will eventually stop being determinative. Chief Justice John Roberts, in his *Shelby County v. Holder* (2013) decision, is a prominent example of this way of thinking.

Tran then lays out the basics of the *SFFA v. Harvard* litigation, followed by the application and evaluation of the three postracial theories to this specific case (234-240). This section of the essay closes with a series of profound meditations on how, like Kant, postracialism relies on erasure of the past as an essential component of a more ethical future.

Affirmative action and decolonial theory, on the other hand, rely on thick conceptions of the past and its perdurance as a frame for ethical action in the present (240-242). Yet there is a danger here that needs to be addressed: if we are to use the past as a resource, how are we to do so without picturing that past as all-determinative, as a prison house that dictates every detail of our still racialized society? In order to articulate how receptivity to the past as a resource does not trap us in past horror, Tran turns to theological resources (242-245), and first of all to

pneumatology. For Tran, the Holy Spirit stands for the possibility of a hope that does not rely on erasure of the past. By way of the Holy Spirit moving to introduce new life, past determination is not opposed to redemption, but is integrated into redemption's unfolding pattern. And what does this pattern look like, one might ask? This is an evangelical book, based on conversations held at Fuller Theological Seminary, so the answer is ready-at-hand: the unfolding pattern of redemption can be identified in lives that are growing daily in Christ-likeness.

Accepting that we will live in a racialized society for the foreseeable future, Tran then resources pneumatology and Christology to give a more specific answer to what it might look like 'to live missionally' (245) in such a society. His answer is specific to Asian Americans, and it develops as an exercise of practical reason in relation to the aforementioned *SFFA v. Harvard* case. Tran does decide on a course of action, and he proposes the following recommendation before delving into the logic that supports it:

The Harvard case would be helped by one simple act: Asian American Christians admitted to Harvard going elsewhere, leaving available spots for non-Asian Americans, divesting themselves of the privileges and benefits that may have paved their way to places like Harvard. (246)

So, Tran's recommendation for Asian American Christians is simple refusal; though many Asian Americans are worthy of taking spots at Harvard, they should not consider such worth something to be grasped. Instead, they should renounce their admittance and leave the spots for others.

This refusal serves four primary goals: (1) it leaves open more spots at Harvard for those of less privileged background (this requires what Tran calls the recognition of 'if not White privilege, Yellow privilege' [248]); (2) it frees Asian American Christians from the trap of the model-minority myth; they are liberated from 'perform[ing] the script as it is written' (245); (3) it refuses to be lured into the warped terms set by American society, ruled as it is by White privilege, where minority groups are pitted against one another and left to fight over remaining scraps;⁵ (4) it serves as a witness that there can be greater objectives for one's life than success such as it is defined by the world. For all these reasons, Tran argues that Asian American Christians should take his recommendation

seriously, and it is difficult to argue against the fact that such refusal would be a profound, almost unimaginable act.

Let us take a moment to reflect on what is going on here, beyond the case-at-hand. To put it simply, Tran recommends renunciation. This places him within a broad legacy of Christian ascetic thought that recognizes the lure of the world and bids the faithful Christian to resist that lure through a variety of practices, such as fasting, continence, rough clothing, sleeplessness, and spiritual warfare—all of which can be placed within the general category of renunciation. Tran's recommendation may be different than these traditional examples, but it is recognizably a part of the same trajectory.

I will return in a moment to how Tran's theology is embedded within traditions of Christian asceticism. Before looking more deeply at the ascetic legacy at work in Tran's theology in a positive sense, I would like to point out that Tran deftly avoids two dangers endemic to the ascetic tradition.

(1) In Tran's theology, the ascetic practice of renunciation has a larger purpose: namely, *askēsis* is tied to the missional goal of witness. Too often, the ascetic tradition has fallen into recommending suffering for other reasons, such as avoiding pleasure, earning an eternal reward, or connecting more deeply to Christ.⁶ All of these verge on elevating suffering into a kind of good, a potentially disastrous move with problems I return to below, in the form of a discussion of kenotic ethics.

Tying suffering to a larger purpose avoids the danger of valorizing suffering as a good in-itself. In Søren Kierkegaard's *Works of Love*, for example, the Christian is said to live in the category of the "double danger."⁷ To live in the double danger is not only to renounce worldly glory, but also to receive upon oneself the hatred of the world precisely because of one's renunciation. For Kierkegaard, writing within the context of a comfortable-bourgeois Danish Christendom,⁸ the embrace of suffering is a public act that results in anger being directed at the witnessing individual. Tran's call to renunciation forms a parallel: Asian American Christians are not to renounce Harvard simply for the sake of ruining their own lives. Instead, such renunciation should be a meaningful act of witness situated in such a way that it provokes a wider culture to puzzlement, at least, though possibly also rage.

(2) Tran's recommendation of renunciation is not universal. He does not believe every Asian American Christian student should renounce Harvard, let alone every student in general. Instead, renunciation is tied to an act of practical discernment: specifically, the recognition of one's own privilege. What follows is a restatement of Tran's recommendation, where he includes some crucial qualifications:

Asian American Christians might look to participate in the Spirit's reparative missional work of God in Christ, the full and therefore vulnerable inhabitation of history that inscribes them in lives that might, as imagined through Philippians 2, recognize Asian American privilege where it obtains (it certainly does not always) and where it is recognized (it certainly is not always) and learn to, in good Philippian fashion, not consider privilege something to be held on to (246)

Again, Tran's recommendation of renunciation is not universal, and here he has provided a relevant criterion: privilege.⁹ Whether or not Tran's asceticism applies to you thus depends on an act of discernment. One must sift through one's own life and see if this category of privilege applies to it. Only if the answer is 'yes' is renunciation an appropriate action; otherwise, its essential context is missing.

Tran's ascetic theology thus relies on an implied account of practical discernment. I take that account to be something like that offered by Oliver O'Donovan in his magisterial *Ethics as Theology* trilogy. O'Donovan calls practical discernment "practical reason," though I believe this to be potentially confusing considering the Kantian associations endemic to the phrase¹⁰ (and O'Donovan is by no means a Kantian; in fact he eschews *a priori* reasoning at every turn). At any rate, O'Donovan's description of what he calls "practical reason" is helpful for thinking through the kind of reasoning Tran employs in proffering his ascetic recommendation:

Practical reason is not deductive, but inductive.... Practical reason is not an inference from premises to conclusions. It has no premises, no points from which an uncontroversial start may be made, and it has no conclusions, on which its trains of reason come to rest. No premises, because the knowledge of the world on which practical reason turns is always contested, not agreed. No conclusions, because practical reason terminates in action, not in belief. The

descriptive accounts of reality that afford an *entrée* for action are not agreed starting-points. They are complex readings of the world, and as such arguable from the beginning.¹¹

O'Donovan develops this notion of practical reason's basis in "complex readings of the world" through his tripartite emphasis on personal experience,¹² the narratives which place that personal experience into an objective world,¹³ and the communal wisdom and advice that enable one to coordinate personal experience with a story about the broader world in which one acts.¹⁴ These three instantiations of practical reason result in awareness of the world in which one is acting and the place one holds in that world; this is what O'Donovan above calls "description."¹⁵ In O'Donovan's scheme, then, ethical action rests on a host of contingent and particular factors. Little is gained through abstract principles, and much relies on the dense matrix of interdependent reasonings that lead up to an act.

Of course, O'Donovan is not alone in giving an account such as this; Stanley Cavell or Robert Brandom could also serve as resources for explicating Tran's reasoning.¹⁶ Yet O'Donovan—by bringing together personal experience, narrative, and communal wisdom—usefully highlights the role discernment plays within ethics. And Tran's call to renunciation relies precisely on this factor of discernment. Based off one's own personal experience, the narrative of one's life and community, and the contextual advice given by one's community, one must decide whether or not the life one has lived can be categorized as privileged. If one accepts Tran's recommendation, one can then decide how to act. If one's life has been privileged, it is an act of Christian witness to renounce Harvard. If not, then not.

Incorporation of practical discernment with relation to an act that is not universally legislated helps to answer the strong objections that have been made with respect to the continuing viability of kenotic ethics (in regard to *kenosis*, see Tran's reference to Philippians 2, above). For example, Daphne Hampson calls such a renunciatory paradigm into question in her 1990 book *Theology and Feminism*:

That [*kenosis*] should have featured prominently in Christian thought is perhaps an indication of the fact that men have understood what the male problem, in thinking in terms of hierarchy

and domination, has been. It may well be a model which men need to appropriate and which may helpfully be built into the male understanding of God. *But . . . for women, the theme of self-emptying and self-abnegation is far from helpful as a paradigm.*¹⁷

According to Hampson, a universal call to *kenosis* serves to reinforce social inequality. It bids all to renounce without acknowledging the fact that some have more to renounce than others. This is why it is important that Tran builds subjective awareness of privilege into his account of renunciation; his recommendation is only applicable to those who would recognize themselves as privileged, as having something to renounce. Yet for those who do have something to renounce, and are able to recognize it, asceticism can be liberatory; it can result in what Tran labels “dispossessive empowerment” (249). Dispossession can be empowering because it can free a given subject from the constraints history, driven as it is by hegemonic forces, attempts to impose:

Our dispossessive act, where and when it is possible, would reverse the lines of moral agency usually at play for ethnic minorities under strains of white supremacy, as evidenced by the lawsuit’s [i.e., *SFFA v. Harvard*] wedging strategies. Instead, acting out of and toward mutuality, something always in need of attentive maintenance, such acts would avail and empower moral agency, a performative moment that explodes the model-minority myth (248-249).

Essentially, Hampson and Tran make the same point: renunciation, or a kenotic ethical imperative, is only appropriate in some situations, and which situations these might be requires the practice of what O’Donovan calls “description.” Hampson and Tran are in agreement, only she focuses on a situation in which renunciation would be harmful, while he highlights a case in which renunciation would be empowering.

We have seen how Tran’s ascetic theology avoids some of the pitfalls the ascetic tradition has fallen into in the past. But how is Tran’s thought connected to that tradition? The example of Kierkegaard’s asceticism-as-public witness has already been mentioned. There is one further historical resonance that can be added.

In the 14th-16th centuries, groups of devout Christians rejected promising clerical careers in order to dedicate themselves to lives of simplicity and moral witness. These groups, residing principally in the Dutch

lowlands, are collectively known as the *devotio moderna* movement. According to John Van Engen, the elements common to the ‘Devout experience’ are as follows:

conversion (teen or adult); breaking with family, with ecclesiastical promotion, with a career in learning; choosing to join a self-made urban commune sustained in part by manual labor; resolving to internalize and enact devotion in the face of suspicious townspeople and wary churchmen.¹⁸

To join the *devotio moderna* was to reject the script of success given to you. One’s parents may have spent a considerable amount of money grooming one to be a member of the intellectual caste. Becoming a member of the Devout was thus a rejection of long-cherished expectations.¹⁹ Instead of a comfortable, well-supported life of clerical labor,²⁰ one had to work with one’s hands and live as part of a serious, penitential group of Christians whose official status in relation to the church was always precarious. In other words, the Devout had other goals in life than success.

Tran’s call for privileged Asian American Christian students to renounce their Harvard acceptance thus has precedent in earlier forms of asceticism.²¹ In fact, by connecting to these earlier forms, Tran pushes contemporary theology to recognize a wider scope for asceticism than is currently regnant.

If such a broader conception of asceticism is indeed unpopular in current theological writing (as I have noted), what is popular? Sarah Coakley’s work is synonymous with a revival of asceticism in contemporary theological writing. She has written the eponymous book on the subject, titled *The New Asceticism*. With essays like “Beyond Libertinism and Repression: The Quest for a New Anglican Ascetics” and “Ecclesiastical Sex Scandals: The Lack of a Contemporary Theology of Desire,” Coakley focuses insistently on issues of desire and sexuality. Building off material in the first volume of her systematic theology, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay ‘On the Trinity’*, Coakley presents God as a kind of “third” who disrupts heteronormative desire between “the two.”²² Appropriation of such disruption is achieved through ascetic practices, particularly silence.²³ *Askēsis* enables access to divine desire, which destabilizes any and all human-to-human relations.

All of this certainly is certainly well-grounded in the ascetic traditions of Christian theology. Yet it also represents a certain narrowing of what asceticism can be. Coakley is surely right to affirm that human desire should not be reduced to sexuality.²⁴ However—at least so far in her work—she seems to performatively contradict this insight, in repeated returnings to issues of sexuality and gender. Given her context, narrowing asceticism to concerns with sexuality and gender can be understood as something strategic and laudable; Coakley consistently places her work within the context of a feminist theology also focused on sexuality and gender.²⁵ Yet—be that as it may—Coakley’s own attention to her context or subject position should not abrogate the fact that ascetic theology is also able to speak about things such as the desire for success, and what it looks like to deny that desire, and—furthermore—how denial of that desire can be a Christian act of public witness.

All this leads back to Jonathan Tran and a final question about his work not sufficiently addressed thus far. Why call Tran’s theology “ascetic,” especially given the “negative associations of repression, ecclesiastical authoritarianism, and denial” often attached to asceticism?²⁶ Is such a label necessary? Perhaps it is not necessary, but it does good descriptive work. Tran’s account of renunciation: (1) requires discipline, (2) rejects worldly success, (3) accepts the potential suffering that may result from the rejection of worldly success, and (4) is specifically patterned after the *kenosis* of Christ as described by Paul in Philippians 2. More important still than these multiple factors, (5) Tran’s renunciatory recommendation bears public witness to Christian commitment, in a way similar to Kierkegaard’s double danger. To call Jonathan Tran’s theology ‘ascetic’, then, can tie all these characteristic factors together and give them concrete basis in a well-established mode of theology.

Ascetic theology may be well-established, but Tran shows how it can also breathe new life by continuing to issue productive solutions to theological or ideological dilemmas. Asceticism’s potential ability to address issues of racial discrimination has yet to be tapped, which is why Tran’s essay bears a certain amount of theoretical excitement for the reader while she is reading it. There is a further dimension to the work Tran is doing. Beyond issues of sexuality (where it is certainly also useful), Christian commitment to asceticism can fund acts of public witness that

violate contemporary scripts of success. To be an ascetic is not to be repressed; it is to be liberated from the constraining claws of history.

From this last fact, we may conclude that the new asceticism should not only be expanded beyond the domain of sexuality; it should also not be separated from political theology. Jonathan Tran demonstrates that *askēsis* and Christian political witness can and sometimes should work in tandem. The precise conditions for advocating *askēsis* can never be completely established in advance, but as the new asceticism expands beyond sexuality, thinkers like Tran will become even more important as contemporary theologians perform the difficult work of discerning where the call to *askēsis* is appropriate and where inducement to renunciation is liberatory. Within an expanded new asceticism, the goal is dispossessive empowerment and the means is practical discernment. Guidance is needed.²⁷

Notes

1. Interest in Coakley's work has generated an edited volume and numerous stand-alone articles. See McRandal, Janice, ed., *Sarah Coakley and the Future of Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2016); Kirkland, Scott A., 2014, "Prayerful Dispossession and the Grammar of Thinking Theologically: Sarah Coakley and Gillian Rose," *New Blackfriars*, 95 (1060), November, pp. 662-73; Hilker, Mary Catherine, 2014, "Desire, Gender, and God-Talk: Sarah Coakley's Feminist Contemplative Theology," *Modern Theology*, 30(4), October, 575-81; Green, Chris E.W., 2017, "Prayer as Trinitarian and Transformative Event in Sarah Coakley's *God, Sexuality, and the Self*," *Journal of Pentecostal Theology*, 26(1), March, 16-22.
2. On Gregory of Nyssa, see Smith, J. Warren, *Passion and Paradise: Human and Divine Emotion in the Thought of Gregory of Nyssa* (Chestnut Ridge, NY: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2004), Cadenhead, Raphael A., *The Body and Desire: Gregory of Nyssa's Ascetical Theology* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2018). On Augustine of Hippo, see especially the work of Miles, Margaret R., *Desire and Delight: A New Reading of Augustine's "Confessions"* (Chestnut Ridge, NY: Crossroad Publishing Company, 1992), *Fullness of Life: Historical Foundations for a New Asceticism* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 1981). In addition, Peter Brown's *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1988) remains fundamental for contemporary attempts at retrieval.
3. As will become clear below, this is not so much a critique of Sarah Coakley as it is a recognition that she need not stand alone in the recovery of asceticism's potential.
4. See Sechrest, Love L., Johnny Ramirez-Johnson, and Amos Yong, eds., *Can "White" People Be Saved? Triangulating Race, Theology, and Mission* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2018), 229-52. Further references to this essay will be made in the text.
5. Ruether, Rosemary Radford makes a similar argument in *New Woman, New Earth* (New York, NY: Seabury Press, 1975), with respect to how white women should refuse to be positioned against black men.

6. Cohen's, Esther, *The Modulated Scream: Pain in Late Medieval Culture* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 2010) is an excellent resource on this topic.
7. See Millay, Thomas J., 'Kierkegaard, Imitation and Contemporaneity: The Importance of the Double Danger', *The Heythrop Journal*, forthcoming.
8. On this context, see especially Kirmmse, Bruce H., *Kierkegaard in Golden Age Denmark* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1990). Here as elsewhere in the present essay, my references to context can be only schematic in nature. My focus is on the formal category of thought (i.e., practical discernment) that is necessary for a contemporary revival of asceticism; thus I cannot do full justice to the various social contexts I evoke, which each deserve their own extended exegesis. See also below, n. 29.
9. For contemporary scholarly literature on privilege, see the useful review by Akin Taiwo in his dissertation 'The Praxis of Privilege: How Social Workers Experience Their Privilege' (University of Windsor, 2018), 17–43.
10. O'Donovan is, of course, aware of this. He makes useful distinctions between his position and both Kant and Aquinas in *Self, World, and Time: Ethics as Theology, Volume 1* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2013), 29–30.
11. *Self, World, and Time*, 30.
12. See *Self, World, and Time*, 11–14.
13. Being influenced by Paul Ricœur's account of narrative's ability to relate the subjective to the objective (see Ricœur's *Time and Narrative* trilogy [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984–1988], and Millay, Thomas J., 'In this Second Case, History: Fredric Jameson's Reading of Paul Ricœur's *Temps et récit*', *Telos: Critical Theory of the Contemporary*, Spring 2016, 75–91), I take this to be a fair summary of O'Donovan's argument as developed in *Self, World, and Time*, 10–11 (and see his own endorsement of the word in *Self, World, and Time*, 3). However, O'Donovan himself generally shies away from the word because of its use by narrative ethicists (see *Self, World, and Time*, 36–8, for a critique of narrative ethics).
14. See *Self, World, and Time*, 12: 'Precisely because we know the world is objective, we know that the processing of experience by community criticism and tradition is needed'; cf. 60–61, 49–52, on wisdom and advice (respectively).
15. On description, see further especially *Self, World, and Time*, 11.
16. See Cavell, Stanley, *The Claim of Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979); Brandom, Robert, *Making It Explicit* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).
17. Hampson, Daphne, *Theology and Feminism* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 155.
18. Van Engen, John, *Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life: The Devotio Moderna and the World of the Later Middle Ages* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 2.
19. See Engen, Van, *Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life*, 139: "upon finishing Latin school. . . They then faced options: going to university (if they had money), seeking a position in church or court or town (if they had connections), prowling for a job requiring 'clerical' skills, seeking entrance to a religious order. Beginning around 1400, another option was to join a Brothers' household, free of vows, freed of seeking a job in the world, settled in a quiet spiritual community. Nearly no men, in striking contrast with the women, get described as entering out of social necessity or awkward circumstances, though plainly student-clerics with poor prospects may have fit that description. Choosing this form of life took a certain resolve, because its status was widely adjudged humiliating, if not downright

strange or suspicious, especially compared to what clerics would ordinarily hope or aim for. They even had to engage in manual labor, not the mark of ‘bookmen’.”

20. To be a “cleric” in this context was to be a lawyer who dealt specifically with ecclesiastical legal decisions. See Van Engen, *Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life*, 138, 151.

21. On the *devotio moderna* as an ascetic movement (rather than a mystical one), see especially Van Engen, *Sisters and Brothers of the Common Life*, 79.

22. See Coakley, Sarah, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay ‘On the Trinity’* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), especially 24 and 56-8; *The New Asceticism: Sexuality, Gender and the Quest for God* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), 96-100.

23. Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 340-4; *The New Asceticism*, 85.

24. Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self*, 7-11; *The New Asceticism*, 6-10.

25. See especially the Preface to Coakley, *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2002), xii-xx.

26. Coakley, *The New Asceticism*, 4.

27. I have not paid attention to my own context in this essay, which is that of a male within White American Christianity. Such work is undoubtedly required. As Metzger, Johnathan M. and Angela Denker’s recent books *Dying of Whiteness* (New York, NY: Hachette Book Group, 2019) and *Red State Christians* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2019) make clear, there is a difference between lack of privilege and loss of privilege, with the latter carrying its own particular pathos. The difficult task of addressing my own context must include elements of ascetic wisdom that make sense of why one would want to renounce a politics of resentment that attempts to reassert authority, while at the same time recognizing the real exploitation of rural white America, with its connections to the ravages of globalized capitalism, extractive industries, and the engineering of the opioid crisis, which together qualify a univocal notion of ‘privilege’ in its application to White American Christians. As one can see from the broad territory just staked out, properly addressing this context requires (at least) a full-length essay dedicated to the topic. What I have instead aimed to do in this essay is—with Jonathan Tran as a guide—to practice the type of thinking that is necessary to undertake this separate and demanding task.