

Joerg Rieger

**Unite and Conquer: Religion, Race,
and Class, and the Possibility of
Solidarity in the United States
Then and Now**

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in the United States Then and Now

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Introduction*

Contemporary forms of racism in the United States go back to the history of enslavement of African Americans in the United States. This is a history of tremendous damage that negatively affected not only enslaved people themselves but the majority of the population. As a result of this history, these forms of racism exhibit specific entanglements of race and class. As Frederick Douglass—himself a former slave who escaped slavery in the nineteenth century—noted, “The slave is robbed by his master, of all his earnings above what is required for his physical necessities, and the white man is robbed by the slave system, because he is flung into competition with a class of laborers who work without wages.”¹ As Douglass noted, southern white workers not only earned less than Northern white workers, but they also made less than Northern Black workers.²

This history of slavery in the United States is not an isolated matter as it shaped and continues to shape all of life, including religion, politics, and broader economic relations. It has been argued, for instance, that capitalism in the United States is so harsh in its treatment of working people because it was developed in the context of slavery. Slavery in the US South produced a hierarchy of labor with clear demarcations of who was at the top and who was at the bottom—with those in the middle put into the service of those on the top without gaining similar benefits and often worse off than the middle class in the North. Moreover, the meticulous control over slave labor in the South prefigured the subsequent use of similar control of industrial labor in the North.³ In addi-

* This article draws on and further develops material from Joerg Rieger, *Theology in the Capitalocene: Ecology, Identity, Class, and Solidarity* (Fortress Press, 2022): chapter 4. Used by permission.

¹ Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, ed. William L. Andrews (University of Illinois Press, 1987): 188.

² Michael Reich, “The Economics of Racism,” in *The Capitalist System: A Radical Analysis of American Society*, ed. Richard C. Edwards, Michael Reich and Thomas E. Weisskopf (Prentice Hall, 1986): 316, 318.

³ Matthew Desmond, “American Capitalism Is Brutal. You Can Trace that to the Plantation,” *New York Times*, 14.08.2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2019/08/14/magazine/slavery-capitalism.html> [accessed 11.03.2026].

tion, the exploitation of enslaved labor for the production of cotton and therefore the profit of the landowners was mirrored by the extraction of the resources of the land for the same purpose. Contemporary forms of capitalism continue to combine the exploitation of work and extraction of natural resources for the profit of the owners of capital along the lines of class and race.

Religion and Politics display similar asymmetries. The ruling class in the South benefited from enslaved people being controlled religiously and politically—by ecclesial and municipal or statewide structures that set different rules for whites and blacks, for instance, or by various forms of education that included anti-literature laws for non-whites—while the middle class provided the religious and political leaders who facilitated the interests of the ruling class and made things happen. As a result, while the Southern middle class and even the Southern white working class were better off than the enslaved people, they still lagged behind their peers in the North.

In what follows, I will make a case that the transformation of these deeply entrenched structures is impossible without broad-based solidarity across the various divisions. Such solidarity is more than just a pious idea, as it has taken shape to some degree in American history before, embodied by all those who stood shoulder-to-shoulder in the fight for transformation, including the abolition of slavery, labor rights, women's suffrage, and civil rights. The basis of this solidarity is not wishful thinking or moral exhortation but a growing awareness of common interests that often emerge when the pressure is greatest. As historian Touré Reed has noted about African American history, "Righteousness was not the basis for the movements that opened opportunities to black Americans. Emancipation and even Reconstruction were produced by a convergence of interests among disparate constituencies—African Americans, abolitionists, business, small freeholders and northern laborers—united under the banner of free labor."⁴ The role of labor is of particular importance here, as we shall see.

⁴ Touré F. Reed, *Toward Freedom: The Case Against Race Reductionism* (Verso, 2020): 121.

Divide and Conquer and Unite and Conquer

When solidarity threatens to become a force, it does not go unnoticed by the powers that be. As a result, they try to subvert it in any way they can. Various mechanisms are employed to defuse broad-based solidarity, some of which may look harmless on the surface. Even efforts that promote inclusion and hospitality, prime concerns of contemporary liberal and mainline Christianity, can be used to deter solidarity. It is, for example, not hard for the dominant powers to become more inclusive and hospitable when they own the house where hospitality is offered, when they oversee the system into which minorities are included, and when they function as gatekeepers. Diversity, equity, and inclusion—despite being attacked and at times defeated by conservatives—have often been used to bring a limited number of diverse people into the dominant status quo, with the result of undermining other solidarities. In the United States, middle-class professionalism often helps to diffuse solidarity as well, as professional privilege appears to promise a safe place in the system even for minorities, typically in exchange for not challenging it and not rocking the boat. As a result, integrating a few representatives from minority groups into the status quo often results in dividing and conquering, a fact that is not lost to an enlightened ruling class.

Another way to deal with the challenges of solidarity is to co-opt it for the status quo. The political Right, in close alignment with the religion of the Christian Right, has produced its own forms of solidarity, which also diffuse struggles for liberation. The first example is the old divide-and-conquer method, which is designed not only to undermine the solidarity on the progressive Left but also to produce a solidarity on the Right that feeds back into the dominant status quo. And while divide and conquer may have various targets, like gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, citizenship, and even status, it is particularly useful in dividing those who—unbeknownst to most—make up the majority of the United States and whose solidarity would be the most challenging of all: the proverbial 99 percent who have to work for a living.

By dividing white, Black, Indigenous, Asian, and Latinx workers, as well as male, female, and queer workers, the dominant system makes

sure that it will never be challenged by a working-class majority. And while minority politics has its own place and potential that should not be underestimated, it is generally much easier to control. Racism has proven to be particularly useful in dividing the working majority by allowing the dominant powers to bestow privilege on some but not others. As one author has observed, for good reason, “racism remains the key division within the working class.”⁵

The history of anti-Black racism in the United States demonstrates how divide-and-conquer works and can be traced back to the early days of the settlement of the American continent in seventeenth-century Virginia. Here, a specific form of U.S. racism was incubated by the white masters with the goal to break up the emerging solidarity of whites and Blacks, beginning with those who worked side by side in the fields as bonded laborers but extending to the rest of society, including what might have then been considered a middle class of free white farmers, excluding free black farmers. Solidarity tends to occur quite naturally whenever people work side by side, whether in fields or factories or elsewhere, but it becomes a threat to the masters who never fail to respond. In Virginia, solidarity of Black and white laborers found its most powerful expression in Bacon’s Rebellion of 1676. Although this rebellion collapsed shortly after the death of its leader Nathaniel Bacon from dysentery, it further alerted the ruling class to the dangers of interracial solidarity and led to the reinforcement of racial discrimination and eventually chattel slavery for African Americans.

By dividing and thereby conquering white and Black laborers, the masters also accomplished something else: in this case, they managed to use racism to produce a strong but false solidarity between white laborers and white masters, according to which the limited privileges afforded to the white laborers by the white masters would cover up the differences between them.⁶ As a result, white laborers felt more closely related

⁵ Sharon Smith, “Race, Class, and ‘Whiteness Theory’,” *International Socialist Review* 46 (2006), <https://isreview.org/issues/46/whiteness/> [accessed 11.03.2026].

⁶ Theodore W. Allen, *The Invention of the White Race*, 2 vols. (Verso, 1994/1997), has investigated the beginnings of this phenomenon as far back as seventeenth-century Virginia and the aftermath of Bacon’s rebellion. See especially his conclusions in volume 2, 239–59.

to their white masters than to their fellow black workers, exchanging two very different forms of solidarity. The same was true for the rest of society, including the smaller white farmers who could not afford slaves but now felt closer to the slaveholding masters. In this way, race consciousness slowly but surely drowned out class consciousness. Over time, this foregrounding of race took root in the cultural and political unconscious, supported by legal rulings and religious belief, and it continues to be used by managers and conservative politicians very effectively after the end of chattel slavery and even today.

None of this is to say, of course, that there is not also a sense in which racism has other roots and runs deep elsewhere, as Cedric Robinson and others have argued, but the importance of the unite-and-conquer history of racial formation in the context of the United States is important to keep in mind when searching for solutions.⁷

What I am calling unite and conquer is the flip side of the divide-and-conquer strategy that is often overlooked. Unite and conquer describes the false solidarity that white masters in the Southern plantation economy were able to forge with white bonded laborers and the rest of white society—a racial solidarity that is hardly as natural as it may seem at first sight and that took many years to develop. Unite and conquer later became the foundation of the so-called “Southern strategy” in the United States that has been powerfully employed especially in Southern politics since the 1960. President Donald Trump and others took this approach national and continue to use with great success. Here, white supremacy and white racism are employed to unite whites of all classes in order to create a majority for the purpose of winning elections and maintaining conservative power. While the goal of this approach is to conquer, what exactly is conquered here is often overlooked. As would be expected, white supremacy effectively conquers both racial and ethnic minorities in the United States. This is not surprising.

⁷ See Cedric J. Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (University of North Carolina Press, 2000); and the summary of Robinson’s work in Robin D. G. Kelley, “What Did Cedric Robinson Mean by Racial Capitalism?” *Boston Review*, 12.01.2017, <https://bostonreview.net/race/robin-d-g-kelley-what-did-cedric-robinson-mean-racial-capitalism> [accessed 11.03.2026].

But—and this is the best-kept secret of unite-and-conquer methods—white supremacy also conquers working- and even middle-class white people by tricking them into believing that they have more in common with their white superiors than with fellow black and brown people. Religion is part of this arrangement, that is well established in politics and economics, as unite and conquer controls the theologies of white people, for instance by reproducing false images of a white God, a white Christ, and a white church. As a result, this identification of white people with the ruling class over against black and brown populations is deep-seated and strong, reaching into the deepest recesses of people’s consciousness, emotions, and beliefs. Here lies the key to answering the perennial question of why so many white people are voting against their own interests. Yet the problems this dynamic creates reach beyond elections and party politics. In the words of Asad Haider, “As long as racial solidarity among whites is more powerful than class solidarity across races, both capitalism and whiteness will continue to exist.”⁸ The 2024 elections in the United States might be seen as yet more evidence for this insight. Politics, economics, and religion are closely linked here. Once these connections are seen, the question becomes what to do about them. Since everything is connected, it stands to reason that a mere shift at the level of politics will not be sufficient.

Note that the specific solidarity of white supremacist unite-and-conquer does not actually need to benefit all white people equally—the point is merely to make them believe that it does. As a result, unite-and-conquer solidarity serves to subdue the majority of white people to the interests of the white elites. Like with divide and conquer, unite and conquer is not a natural process but devised specifically to destroy the solidarity of the working majority and to keep the elites in power and win democratic elections. Unite and conquer has split not only the working majority but even churches and religious communities in the United States, whose faiths have been hijacked and hollowed out systematically by big money since it started to push back to opposition that emerged

⁸ Asad Haider, *Mistaken Identity: Mass Movements and Racial Ideology* (Verso, 2018): 51.

after the Great Depression and in the New Deal of the 1930s.⁹ We can no longer ignore the roots of what are often misunderstood as mere theological and ideological differences. The same is true for politics, and party politics in particular: at stake are not merely differences of opinion but deep roots in the history of race and class.

Other examples for unite-and-conquer strategies are nationalism and the conservative emphasis on heteronormative family ideals that seek to reproduce the family values of the 1950s. Nationalism is a false solidarity that is used to defuse the transnational solidarity of working people, and it often goes hand in hand with racism. In Germany, the Nazis were masters at playing these games, making use of older cultural sentiments and traditions. And throughout the ages, the heteronormative family has been used to defy solidarity as well in many ways. Jesus understood the dangers when he wondered out loud who his real family was. His conclusion is well known: his real family were not his biological kin (apparently not even his mother Mary!) but “those who do the will of God” (Mark 3:31–35). Religious justifications for conservative family values find little support with Jesus of Nazareth and his movement.

Race and Class and the Distinction of Privilege and Power

The connections of race and class that are emerging here were already observed by W.E.B. Du Bois in the 1930s. Racism, he noted, meant not only that Black people could be enslaved and exploited but that wages for white people could be kept low as well.¹⁰ More recently it has been argued, in the words of Berkeley sociologist and law scholar Ian Haney López, that “racism is a class weapon”¹¹ that harms everyone but the

⁹ Kevin Michael Kruse, *One Nation under God: How Corporate America Invented Christian America* (Basic Books, 2015).

¹⁰ W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America: Toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880* (Free Press, 1965): 700.

¹¹ Ian Haney-López, *Merge Left: Fusing Race and Class, Winning Elections, and Saving America* (New Press, 2019): 6.

white elites. Surprisingly, white supremacist racism harms even the racists themselves, unless they are part of the white elites of the ruling class.

The close connection between race and class suggests, therefore, that racism cannot be defeated without dealing with class, and that class conflict cannot be addressed effectively without dealing with race. This insight is an apt response to the pernicious campaigns of the Right against critical race theory that separate race and class by making people believe that calling out racism means blaming all whites and that challenging racism would be beneficial for Black people alone and detrimental to all whites. The appropriate retort, developed by Haney López in the run-up to the 2020 elections in the United States, is that many whites also suffer because of racism and they, too, can gain from cross-racial solidarity. This message, according to Haney López and his team of researchers, is also more appealing to Black people, as they stand to gain a sense that whites can have their own interests in, and valid reasons for, collaborating with Black people.¹²

The fundamental problem of race and class is summarized succinctly by African American historian Barbara J. Fields who notes that, “Not all white people have the same power and not all white people are in the same class position.”¹³ Along the same lines, African American studies professor Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor points out that “racism in the United States has never been just about abusing Black and Brown people just for the sake of doing so. It has always been a means by which the most powerful white men in the country have justified their rule, made their money, and kept the rest of us at bay.”¹⁴ Seeing race and class together, therefore, is key not just for more appropriate analytical perspectives but also for developing solutions.

Following these trains of thought, everything depends on making a distinction between privilege and power, which is instructive for the study of religion and theology as well. Under the conditions of white

¹² Haney-López, *Merge Left*: 188. This is what he calls the “race-class message.”

¹³ Barbara J. Fields, Karen E. Fields and Daniel Denvir, “Beyond ‘Race Relations’,” *Jacobin*, 17.01.2018, <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2018/01/racecraft-racism-barbara-karen-fields> [accessed 11.03.2026].

¹⁴ Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #Blacklivesmatter to Black Liberation* (Haymarket Books, 2016): 216.

supremacist racism, all white people have privilege, whether they realize it or not. Racial privilege conveys many advantages in the dominant system; it can provide substantial benefits in every area of life, including politics, culture, religion, and the economy; and racial privilege is always systemic, which means that one can be privileged without feeling privileged.¹⁵ Nevertheless, systemic privilege does not always translate into power, which is also systemic. While all white people benefit in some ways from white racial privilege, they do not all have the same power—although some power usually goes with privilege. Power, to adopt a short-hand definition of sociologist Max Weber, is the ability to exercise influence on others against their interest. Extending that definition to social systems, the question is where the ability to influence others against their interests is located.

Labor relations—the bedrock of class formation¹⁶—exemplify well what is at stake in the relation of race and class: white warehouse workers enjoy white privilege compared to black and brown warehouse workers, but they do not have the same power as white warehouse managers, let alone the power that exists at the very top, where white warehouse owners tell the managers what to do. This seemingly simple insight tends to come as a rude awakening to many white working people, but it is even more unsettling for white middle managers, white professionals, white academics, and white religious leaders who enjoy a great deal of white privilege and even some power, but whose power to truly impact or even change the system is embarrassingly small. This insight also tends to come as a surprise to many nonwhite people, who—because they are unaware of the distinction between privilege and power—often overestimate the power of white people. The result is perennial disappointment and frustration all around. As a rule of thumb, too much focus on privilege results in covering up the question of power and the related topic of class. In the academy, this explains a lot about what is going on

¹⁵ See Allan G. Johnson, *Privilege, Power, and Difference*, 3rd ed. (McGraw Hill Education, 2018): 25, on the paradox that one can be privileged without feeling it. Johnson points out that diversity programs usually address the “milder forms” of privilege, reluctant to recognize the more entrenched forms (23).

¹⁶ For a definition of class in terms of labor relationships rather than status and stratification see Rieger, *Theology in the Capitalocene*: chapter 3.

not only in the social sciences today but also in the study of theology and religion.

The confusion of privilege and power, therefore, is not a harmless conceptual mistake but benefits the dominant system, as it hides the location of dominant power behind the notion of privilege and assigns most of the blame to those with some privilege but limited power. This confusion seems to have a special place in faith communities, when white and middle-class people of faith who realize their privilege accept the blame for racism (and sexism) and the related charge to make a difference. Neglecting the distinction of privilege and power, these people of faith conclude that they can change the world at least regarding racism (and sexism) and perhaps even in some cases of ecological destruction. Unfortunately, that is rarely the case because well-meaning people of faith who are led to think that they can change the world because of their cumulative privilege rarely pose much of a threat to systemic forms of domination and oppression under the conditions of global capitalism. Those who confuse privilege, of which they may have a considerable amount, and power, of which they have much less, not only misjudge their ability to change the world. Unfortunately, they also weaken the potential of broad-based solidarity of all those who are not running the system, which is the only thing that can bring about change.

Solidarity

So how might the kind of solidarity be formed that has the power to defeat exploitation and oppression along the lines of race and class (and ultimately alongside the lines of gender, sexuality, ethnicity, ability, etc., as well)? Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor explores the power lodged in relations of labor and class when she talks about a “potential for solidarity” that has to do with the fact that “when one group of workers suffer oppression, it negatively affects all workers.”¹⁷ There is, according to Taylor, a “material foundation for solidarity and unity within the

¹⁷ Taylor, *#Blacklivesmatter to Black Liberation*: 208, 209.

working class.”¹⁸ Adolph Reed talks about a politics that “presumes a concrete, material basis of solidarity—not gestures, guilt-tripping and idealist abstractions.”¹⁹ In other words, solidarity emerges in relation to the common pressures experienced by the working majority—this was the case with the white and black bonded laborers in seventeenth-century Virginia. Without this material foundation, solidarity may not be an option. This is something I have consistently emphasized in my own work as well, coining the notion of deep solidarity over a dozen years ago in the context of the Occupy Wall Street movement, where a rudimentary understanding of class emerged again in the United States after a long period of silence.²⁰

That there are material foundations for solidarity means that it is not primarily an illusion, as it often is for conservatives who promote a false sense of solidarity via the constructs of racism, sexism, and nationalism. But neither is solidarity merely a moral imperative for privileged people, as is often the case with liberals, where solidarity appears to be a matter of the moral will. The true potential for solidarity, by contrast, is rooted in the realities of exploitation and oppression that affect the many, not just a few. This was one of the lasting insights of the Occupy Wall Street movement’s recognition of the difference between the symbolic 99 percent majority who have to work for a living and the 1 percent minority who may also work but are not dependent on their work. Keep in mind that working people are always in the majority. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor helpfully pushes the boundaries of progressive politics when she notes that the popular idea of white people becoming allies to Black peo-

¹⁸ Taylor, *#Blacklivesmatter to Black Liberation*: 215.

¹⁹ Adolph Reed, *Class Notes: Posing as Politics and Other Thoughts on the American Scene* (New Press, 2001): xxvii. He continues, “To the extent that differences are real and meaningful, the best way to negotiate them is from a foundation of shared purpose and practical solidarity based on a pragmatic understanding of the old principle that an injury to one is an injury to all” (xvii–xviii). See also 207–11.

²⁰ See Kwok Pui-lan and Joerg Rieger, *Occupy Religion: Theology of the Multitude* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2012); Joerg Rieger, “Occupy Wall Street and Everything Else: Lessons for the Study and Praxis of Religion,” *Peace Studies Journal* 5, no. 1 (2012): 33–45, <http://peacestudiesjournal.org/volume-5-issue-1-2012/> [accessed 11.03.2026]. For a more extensive discussion of deep solidarity, see Joerg Rieger and Rosemarie Henkel-Rieger, *Unified We Are a Force: How Faith and Labor Can Overcome America’s Inequalities* (Chalice Press, 2016): chapter 3.

ple “doesn’t quite capture the degree to which Black and white workers are inextricably linked.”²¹ In order to understand what is going on and to do something about it, a basic awareness of class is therefore required.

Some theologians and other thinkers might find such a down-to-earth understanding of solidarity too ordinary and mundane or perhaps even too self-absorbed. Yet self-interest does not have to be confused with selfishness. Even Jesus’s commandment to love one’s neighbor as oneself concedes self-interest, and self-interest becomes more interesting when it is understood that the interest of the neighbor and the interest of the self are linked. Martin Buber’s and Emmanuel Levinas’s interpretations of this commandment, which argue in their own ways that the neighbor is always part of the self, set the stage. Our analysis builds on the insights of these two Jewish philosophers but clarifies the foundation of the relationship as grounded not primarily in some metaphysical or ethical claim but in the common experience of exploitation, domination, and oppression.²² Solidarity is a fact of life that needs to be deepened and developed, not merely an idea or a task. Paul understood this in his own way when he noted, talking about the body of Christ, that “If one member suffers, all suffer together with it.” (1 Cor 12:26)

Keeping in mind the often-overlooked lack of power of the working majority, we can now take another look at privilege. There is a well-founded concern that solidarity talk can lead to erasing the differentials of privilege between black and brown and white people and therefore to letting white people off the hook. Worse yet, certain ways to talk about solidarity might neglect profound Christian processes of confession of sin and repentance for white racial and gendered privilege, which are crucial both to theology and to the practice of faith. To state it clearly: erasing the differences between black and brown and white people and letting white people off the hook is not how racism is defeated and how solidarity is built. This is why deep solidarity is not about promoting

²¹ Taylor, *#Blacklivesmatter to Black Liberation*: 215.

²² A sustained analysis of oppression and power is missing in their major works: Martin Buber, *I and Thou*, trans. Ronald Gregor Smith (Scribner, 1986); and Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay in Exteriority*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Duquesne University Press, 1969).

uniformity but about actively embracing difference as a constructive element in the formation of solidarity, with special attention to the role that black and brown people and women are already playing and how it can be expanded (without imposing additional burdens on them). The role of white people in all of this—that is, the role of those who enjoy white privilege—needs special scrutiny, which further deepens the distinction of privilege and power.

The mistaken assumption that privilege equals power creates several problems for solidarity and for dealing with privilege. It raises expectations on all sides for what white people can do to fix the problems of white privilege and white supremacy. As a result, privileged white people typically overestimate what limited power they have, and non-white people hope for outcomes that cannot be achieved if privilege does not equal power. Not surprisingly, frustration and failed efforts of transformation are common, augmented by a misdirected but deep-seated sense of sin and guilt.

It is, therefore, not uncommon for well-meaning white people, especially in the middle class, to blame themselves either for not being able to change things or for being the primary cause of all exploitation and oppression in the world. Likewise, it is not uncommon for black and brown people to assume that they are on their own, except perhaps for a few white allies who pointlessly seek to divest themselves from power they do not have—and fail to develop whatever limited power they do have. As a result, the agency of such allies is quite small and mostly doomed to failure. In response to these problems, the development of deep solidarity can help by distinguishing privilege and power with a clearer sense of how the differentials of privilege can be addressed more constructively in order to develop communal power.

In the process, theologians can develop more appropriate understandings of sin, guilt, and repentance. If privilege and power are distinct, confession of and repentance for unchecked privilege can translate into embracing alternative forms of power. Armed with a distinction of privilege and power, confession and repentance for sin can be practiced for instance where white 99 percenters break the bonds of white privilege and white supremacy and embrace solidarity by siding with their

black and brown siblings against the dominant power represented by the executive class. In the process, privilege can be addressed, and the power of solidarity becomes an option.

The reversal that is characteristic of repentance is also reflected in the Jesus movement, which is not afraid to highlight divisions where false peace rules in order to create alternative solidarities: “Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division! From now on five in one household will be divided, three against two and two against three.” (Luke 12:51) Such divisions are necessary to cut through the false solidarities on the Right, based on nationalism, the heterosexual family and ideological identity. The difference to solidarity on the left, which is based on the experience of common pressure and collaborative projects of liberation, could not be greater. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus spells out the promise of his challenge to the heteronormative family in terms of an alternative solidarity:

Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields for my sake and for the sake of the good news who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields, with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. (Mark 10:29–30)

In sum, deep solidarity is not about letting privilege off the hook, and neither is it about claiming sameness and identity or becoming “color-blind.” Solidarity is built not on sameness or identity but on an understanding of the fact that the few are benefiting at the expense of the many, which is how the dominant status quo maintains itself. As a result, this situation can only be changed by the many, not the few, which requires solidarity rather than mere allyship, as allyship in social movement spaces is often understood as allies supporting others in need, without accounting for their own interests in the struggle. In this context, the distinction of privilege and power does two things for the formation of solidarity: 1) it enables the acknowledgment of the reality of white and other privilege, and 2) it allows for the subversion of dominant power. On this basis, the limited power white privilege bestows on all white

people can be put to use, challenging the dominant power to which unchecked white privilege contributes. By using white privilege against white power, white privilege can be transformed and ultimately deconstructed.

Directing attention to class in this context does not mean ignoring racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual difference—just the opposite: investigating class now explicitly requires a deeper sense of the diversity of identity. There is a common misunderstanding of which Barbara Fields reminds us: “When someone in the press says working class or working-class voters, they invariably mean white people. They forget that most Afro-Americans in this country are working people. Most Latinx people, however you define that ambiguous term, are working people. Southeast Asian migrants, most of them are working people, and indeed the same is true of a good many East Asian migrants.”²³ In other words, the working majority is more diverse than any other social formation the world has ever seen, disproportionately black and brown and female, and this is fundamental to solidarity as well as to the work of theology that seeks to engage it.

In sum, deep solidarity accomplishes two unexpected things: not only is it built on a challenge of privilege and genuine appreciation for difference, it also manages to employ differences for the common good and for the power of resistance. These differences can be multiple, tied simultaneously to race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, nationality, and even religion. Deep solidarity, therefore, amounts to a reversal of the solidarity of the Right, which is formed and guided by sameness and by privileged racial and religious identities. By contrast, the solidarity of the Left is formed and guided by experiences of economic exploitation that affect the working majority, compounded by race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, ability, and nationality.

Significant guidance comes, therefore, from those who experience these compounded forms of exploitation, domination, and oppression in their own bodies because they are more existentially affected by the system than anyone else. While deep solidarity thus needs to start from

²³ Fields, Fields and Denvir, “Beyond Race Relations.”

below, it does not mean that the burden of the work should be on the shoulders of the proverbial “least of these,” but vision and leadership have roots where the pressures are greatest and move up the line from there.

Theology is not an afterthought of solidarity but strikes at its roots. The solidarity of the Right offers a theological justification of the status quo, building on the perennial religion of empire that equates the divine with the dominant powers. This is why its solidarity implies everyone looking alike, talking alike, thinking alike—often misinterpreted by theologians as “orthodoxy”—along with well-known tropes of nationalist white racial and heterosexual gender identity. The solidarity of other side, by contrast, finds the divine elsewhere, informed by the incarnation of Christ in solidarity with the multitude of common people everywhere rather than the elites. This insight pushes for the transformation of the status quo, building on the revolutionary religious expressions of Moses, the Hebrew prophets, and Jesus, who are recorded in all three Abrahamic traditions. Add to that a surprisingly radical Paul, who writes about a God who “chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise” and who “chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong” (1 Cor 1:27).²⁴ These multiple foundations account for another sort of faith that is not grounded in sameness but in what we might call theological solidarity, where orthodoxy and orthopraxis are always connected and mutually shape and reshape each other.

As deep solidarity aims at the transformation of privilege and power it also provides the tools for it and even the necessary energy. The transformation of privileged straight white men may serve as an example: if they reappropriate the limited power their heterosexual white male privilege affords them to help build the power of the working multitude, various things change for good. Rather than privilege shaming, they can now use their privilege against itself and thereby move a few things forward. When doing so, new relationships emerge that are more fulfilling and inspiring than anything they found in the echo chambers of

²⁴ For this radical Paul, see Joerg Rieger, *Christ and Empire: From Paul to Postcolonial Times* (Fortress Press, 2007): chapter 1.

sameness. Nevertheless, a caveat is in order: Troubling one's alignment with the dominant powers and rejecting unite-and-conquer strategies (including false orthodoxies) has consequences. Those who go down that route long enough will be marked as traitors who eventually cannot go home anymore, often quite literally but also metaphorically. Conversion and repentance are built into this model, as the transformation of white heterosexual male privilege into something else is inevitable when deep solidarity is embraced and developed.

In Christianity, some of the holiness traditions were aware of these reversals and embodied them at their best—a development that some contemporary authors have reinterpreted as refreshing forms of theological queerness in relation to the straitjackets of the dominant system. There is indeed something queer about a solidarity that is not tied to sameness, the peace and quiet of the status quo, and the normalcy of the dominant system.²⁵

Note that such deep solidarity emerges from deeper reflections on and an embrace of class solidarity, as the 99 percent who do not belong to the executive class are beginning to understand that they share some things in common despite their obvious differences, starting with their relative levels of exploitation. Exploited are workers of all races and genders on whose backs the capitalist economy is built, the ones who do not have to sell much except their labor. But exploited are also the members of the middle class of all races and genders, who may find it hard to admit that their jobs are increasingly precarious and under threat of extinction by cost-cutting measures and AI, and who have to come to terms with the fact that their children can no longer count on moving up the social ladder. The good news is that we may find not only challenges but also inspirations in these conflict-laden positions.

²⁵ For the queerness of the Wesleyan traditions, see Keegan Osinski, *Queering Wesley, Queering the Church* (Cascade Books, 2021). For the political connotations of the holiness traditions, see Joerg Rieger, *No Religion but Social Religion: Liberating Wesleyan Theology* (Wesley's Foundry Books, 2018).

Conclusions

Moving beyond narrow forms of identity and class politics and developing new forms of solidarity opens up new ways of addressing power in terms of residual dualisms—even as dualism has been declared outdated and is therefore often shunned in theological studies and other academic work. Yet unlike traditional theological and philosophical dualisms located in identities seemingly fixed in nature and metaphysics, many of which can be safely relegated to the history books, we are now dealing with dualisms of raw power to exploit and extract that are constructed (many with the residues of slavery in the background) and can therefore be deconstructed as well. Just like workers are only workers in relation to their bosses, Black people are Black in relation to whites,²⁶ whatever is defined as feminine exists in relation to the masculine, gay is defined in relation to straight, and so on. All these identities can now be considered in terms of their construction in relations of power and are therefore open-ended and open to revision and reconstruction. Only when this is seen clearly does resistance become an option, starting always from particular identities.

The dualism of power in a global capitalist world, where the proverbial wisdom is that the rich get richer and the poor get poorer, serves as a stark reminder that dualism cannot be erased by simply rejecting the idea of it as outdated and affirming unity, and neither can racism be done away with in this way.²⁷ Real resistance to these residual dualisms requires recognizing them, noting their constructed nature that is linked to the dualism of the exploitation of human and nonhuman labor by the dominant interests, and moving forward with this in mind. It may come as a surprise that not only the working majority but corporate executives, too, have something to gain in the struggle—namely, an opportunity to turn around and switch their allegiances (a “conversion” in theological terms) and to embrace nonexploitative and nonextractive relationships to other people, the world, and even the divine.

²⁶ See also Victor Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism* (Bloomsbury, 2016).

²⁷ Rieger, *Theology in the Capitalocene*: chapter 3.

Whatever class consciousness and related identities develop in this struggle does not perpetuate the naturalized dualisms of narrow identity politics (where race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality are often essentialized and romanticized). In fact, recognizing the constructed nature of any and all dualisms is the first step to overcoming them, with the potential of bringing clarity and resolve not only to the extremes but even to those who are in the middle, where much of the battle is waged—in this case the middle class. These comments are not meant to deny the importance of other more subtle ways of resistance suggested by post-colonial critics and others, like “tactical ambiguity,” protective compliance, mimicry, and disguised resistance.²⁸ There is plenty of room for hybridity, mimicry, and ambivalence even in class analysis,²⁹ but what first initiates resistance may well be a sense of the ever-worsening and death-dealing dualism of class exploitation in form of the brutal extraction of human and nonhuman resources, reminding us that the history of slavery lives on below the surface.

If this is clear, the struggle shifts from what is often considered to be “special interests” or “interest groups” to common interest.³⁰ The labor unions’ motto that “an injury to one is an injury to all”—matching the apostle Paul’s insight that “if one member suffers, all suffer together with it” referenced above—can now be extended beyond the working majority to matters of race, gender, and ecology. Once again, the constructed dualisms of race, class, and gender are best seen from the perspective of those who suffer the most from them—from below. From above, dualisms are usually played down, especially by those on top who hold firm to the myths of individualism, as if women, ethnic and racial minorities, and working people were keeping themselves down and are

²⁸ The variety of options is nicely summarized by New Testament scholar Warren Carter and captured in Fernando F. Segovia, “A Postcolonial Commentary on the New Testament Writings,” in *A Postcolonial Commentary on the New Testament Writings*, ed. Fernando F. Segovia and R.S. Sugirtharajah (T&T Clark, 2009): 32.

²⁹ See the forthcoming chapter “Queering Labor as the Ultimate Concern of Theology and Religion,” in *Queering Theology: Transformative Perspektiven und Praxis queerender Theologien*, ed. Charlotte Jacobs, Sonja Thomaier and Joerg Rieger (Brill, 2026).

³⁰ See Joerg Rieger, “Developing a Common Interest Theology from the Bottom Up,” in *Liberating the Future: God, Mammon, and Theology*, ed. Joerg Rieger (Augsburg Fortress, 1998): 124–41.

thus to blame for their own misfortune. The truth, of course, is that the wealth of the few is by and large produced on the backs of the many via human and nonhuman labor, which is why individualism is one of the favorite myths of the dominant class. The same is true for male, white, or heterosexual privilege: it is produced on the backs of others and must be accounted for, which is why “men must see sexism as their problem, white people must see race as their issue,”³¹ and so on.

In the end, the possibility of alternatives not only for people but also for the planet is linked to the observation that capital itself is not autonomous but produced and reproduced in social relations and that these relations can be changed because solidarity may be possible after all.³² The study of theology and religion that picks up this awareness may have to weigh these arguments in relation to discussions of the location of the divine.

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³¹ Johnson, *Privilege, Power, and Difference*: 60.

³² See Néstor Míguez, Joerg Rieger and Jung Mo Sung, *Beyond the Spirit of Empire: Theology and Politics in a New Key* (SCM, 2009): chapter 2.

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How did racism come to be? And how does the relation of race and class figure in this history? What role does religion play? Just as race is not a biological reality, racism is not inherent to human nature. It was invented and sustained through historical encounters, economies, politics, and religious traditions. This article compares the history of racism in the United States to current developments, highlighting not just divide-and-conquer tactics but also “unite-and-conquer” strategies that reveal deeper complexities as well as potential solutions.

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Joerg Rieger is Distinguished Professor of Theology, Cal Turner Chancellor's Chair of Wesleyan Studies, and the Founding Director of the Wendland-Cook Program in Religion and Justice at Vanderbilt University. His work addresses the relation of theology and power in religion, politics, ecology and economics. His main interest is in developments and movements that bring about change. Author and editor of 27 books and over 200 academic articles, his books include *Theology in the Capitalocene: Ecology, Identity, Class, and Solidarity* (2022), *Jesus vs. Caesar: For People Tired of Serving the Wrong God* (2018), *No Religion but Social Religion: Liberating Wesleyan Theology* (2018), *Unified We are a Force: How Faith and Labor Can Overcome America's Inequalities* (with Rosemarie Henkel-Rieger, 2016), *Faith on the Road: A Short Theology of Travel and Justice* (2015), *Occupy Religion: Theology of the Multitude* (with Kwok Pui-lan, 2012), *No Rising Tide: Theology, Economics, and the Future* (2009), and *Christ and Empire: From Paul to Postcolonial Times* (2007). His works have been translated into Portuguese, Spanish, Italian, Croatian, German, Polish, Malayalam, Korean, and Chinese.