

Article

Dabo Swinney, Universal Whiteness, and a “Sin Problem”

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Abstract: Clemson University head football coach Dabo Swinney was asked to respond to Colin Kaepernick’s protest of police killings of unarmed black men and women by kneeling for the national anthem. Swinney’s response was surprisingly comprehensive and illuminating into his stance on race, religion, and sport. He crystallizes his overall interpretation of societal problems with the statement, “It’s so easy to say we have a race problem, but we got a sin problem.” In this essay, I examine “whiteness” as that which endows whites with a kind of universal authority to establish norms as well as provide a protective cloak of invisibility that effectively hides the identity of those constructing the norms. I argue that Swinney’s unconscious display of his own whiteness coupled with the additional cloak of universal sin, that purportedly knows no color, serves to downplay and dismiss Kaepernick’s call for racial justice.

Keywords: sport; race; evangelicalism; sin; college football

In the early fall of 2016, Dabo Swinney, head coach of the Clemson Tigers football team, was asked to comment on the ongoing protest of then San Francisco 49ers’ quarterback Colin Kaepernick. Kaepernick’s protest was boldly expressed out of the gate with his kneeling for the national anthem, which was meant to call the nation’s attention to the fact that the United States still sees an alarming number of police shootings of unarmed black men and women. Coach Swinney gave an unusually long response to the rare question concerning politics and race—the kind of question typically met with complete avoidance or safe, brief answers from head coaches. He opened with the obligatory nod to Kaepernick’s right to free speech, he highlighted several successful African Americans, and then he admitted that problems involving race still exist. Yet Swinney summed up Kaepernick’s emphasis on race being the source of certain societal problems as such:

It’s so easy to say we have a race problem, but we got a sin problem. It’s just my opinion.
That’s Dabo’s opinion.

I contend that Swinney’s reduction of Kaepernick’s concerns over racial injustice down to our sinful nature is predicated more on the privileged position of “whiteness” enjoyed by Swinney and other white people than on theological conviction. The subordination of the kinds of deep-seated issues that Kaepernick raises to a general problem of sin further universalizes and empowers Swinney’s claims against Kaepernick and anyone else that “plays the race card.” Further, the introduction of universal sin into persistent racial problems in the United States protects himself and his audience from the appearance of speaking from a position of whiteness by minimizing race, all while acknowledging that there is a problem.

Whiteness bestows the power on whites to speak universally for all people. Hence, thought and speech emanating from a position of whiteness tend to lessen if not obliterate the role that race plays in societal problems, such as income inequality, the achievement gap, and prison demographics. When gazing out upon the world, whiteness attributes its own color-blindness to individual talent and pluck, presumably accessible to all, which then become the exclusive reasons social stratification.

In addition, this rhetorical tactic of Swinney's suggests an equality amongst all people that dovetails nicely with the ideology of 'colorblindness.' 'We're all sinners' functions equivalently to 'we don't see color.' Moreover, sport is a great exemplar of a colorblind meritocracy. No matter the skin color, gender, class—if you can play, you make the team; if you are the best at your position, you start. Hence, it should come as no surprise that race is so easily overlooked by a coach whose team is predominantly black.

I contend that the claim that racial injustice (that evinced by police officers unevenly dealing with white and black citizens) falls under the aegis of sin constitutes a kind of widening out of the protection that whiteness already enjoys. That we have a 'sin problem' rather than a 'race problem' creates a kind of theological cover for Swinney that effectively expunges race from the social discourse. It unduly shelves the content of Kaepernick's (and other activists') concerns onto God's plate where it can then be ignored. Whiteness is then free to continue to roam with impunity as an invisible repository of cultural power under the twin tropes, 'I don't see color' and 'Well, we're all sinners.'

I first explore the category of whiteness and its ability to confer a universal authority to whites with minimal self-scrutiny. I will then recount the story of Swinney's hardscrabble life in rural Alabama and his religious history for clues into his ideology that seems to ignore race as a factor in success and failure. Finally, I will examine studies into the relationship between white evangelicals and race with attention paid to ways in which Swinney's comments utilize tools in the 'white evangelical tool kit.' I ultimately argue that Swinney's relegation of racial matters down to our shared fallen state of sin makes the conundrums of race far more palatable and almost ignorable to the wider (white) public. Or Swinney's use of universal sin acts as a safer proxy for whiteness in the wider culture—one that functions to camouflage white privilege and to enable Swinney to ignore, dangerously and erroneously, structural hindrances to racial equality.

Permit me to say that this essay is not an exercise in piling up evidence that Swinney is a racist. His self-told life story and his multiple biographies say nothing about race (his own or others') as playing a role in his success. Swinney inherited little monetarily and emotionally speaking. Yet, he has the luxury of being a white man who grew up in the American south and is now in a position of power that allows for the telling of his story as well as pontificating on current racial issues without recourse to including the role that race and/or gender played in his rise.

1. Whiteness as Universal

Whiteness is the quality that helps explain the prospering of whites over people of color based on the historic benefits afforded to those with the right skin pigmentation. A point that has been made repeatedly by scholars for years is that race is a social construct or "an idea, not a fact" (Painter 2010, p. ix), and therefore, whiteness and blackness are constructs as well. The construction of race as a category that works to identify, divide, and rank on the basis of race in the United States began later than one might assume. Yes, slaves were black; slave owners were white. However, each was separated more by economic and political status than by "race," as we use the term today. Only in the 19th century do we begin to see the deployment of whiteness over and against blackness (and other racial categories as well). As W.E.B DuBois put it,

The discovery of personal whiteness among the world's peoples is a very modern thing—a nineteenth and twentieth century matter, indeed. The ancient world would have laughed at such a distinction. The Middle Age regarded skin color with mild curiosity; and even up into the eighteenth century we were hammering our national manikins into one, great, Universal Man, with fine frenzy which ignored color and race even more than birth. Today we have changed all that, and the world in a sudden, emotional conversion has discovered that it is white and by that token, wonderful! (DuBois 1920, p. 453)

Sarcasm aside, the recent ‘discovery’ of whiteness in the United States served to remind blacks of white supremacy after the slaves were freed. Under slavery, racial supremacy had the law and sanctioned violence to do its work—categories of whiteness and blackness were not needed.

In addition, whiteness, as a construct and not a phenotype derived from a stable genotype, is variegated. Irish Americans arriving in the late 19th century were considered inferior to their Anglo-Saxon counterparts, for instance. The slow corralling of all with light skin and European ancestry into one category around the mid-20th century likely had more to do with the felt need to make race binary and hierarchal: whiteness over blackness in all matters.

Whiteness has a universal quality to it; it does not possess a particularity that would give it specific significance, especially when compared to non-white races. A white man is just a man, while a black man is always a black man. There do exist current-day particularities within predominantly white communities—Jews, Texans, and Italians draw on their own respective cultural mores for purposes of identification and solidarity. Yet, these particularities are more often than not deliberately subsumed under the broader category of whiteness because whiteness brings with it far more power than any regional or ethnic designation can.

Indeed, the power of whiteness lies in its ability to speak for all, to act on behalf of all, and to do so without recognizing from whence this ability originates. In the words of Michael Eric Dyson, when whiteness “shed its ethnic skin and struck a universal pose,” it did so because it conveniently forgot about its own skin color so that it could focus on non-whites and their supposed transgressions (Dyson 2017, p. 65). Or, words spoken from the position of whiteness are endowed with the kind of universal sweep that creates a kind of neglect of other peoples who have had to wear their race on their sleeve and therefore speak from their particular place. Blacks may clamor for the same rights and freedoms that whites enjoy, but they must first *prove* that they are playing by the rules that whites have laid down. As George Yancy puts it, whiteness acts as a “transcendental norm” that governs the discourse on race from a lofty perch (Yancy 2017, p. 19). By staying above the fray, whites either rarely must abide by the rules that they establish and enforce for others, or those rules are easier to obey for whites because they wrote them. Their norms are universal and hence absolute and inscrutable; norms of blackness are and hence relative and easily exposed to critique.

The universality of whiteness has rendered it invisible. Thomas K. Nakayama and Robert L. Krizek link the two concepts thusly: “The invisibility of whiteness has been manifested through its universality. The universality of whiteness resided in its already defined position as everything” (Nakayama and Krizek 1995, p. 293). Richard Dyer cites the co-constitutionality of whiteness and blackness that ends up constituting whiteness as the invisible universal: “In the realm of categories, black is always marked as a colour (as the term ‘coloured’ egregiously acknowledges), and is always particularizing; whereas white is not anything really, not an identity, not a particularizing quality, because it is everything—white is no colour because it is all colours” (Dyer 1988, p. 45).

White people have the luxury of invisibility that is the result of not having to take their own race into account when dealing with others.¹ James Perkinson resists defining whiteness in strict contrast to blackness; the two concepts are qualitatively distinct. “Whiteness here is not so much one term of a comparison as the eye that compares in the first place. And like any eye, the one thing it cannot see is itself. It is rather, for itself, a strange form of invisibility” (Perkinson 2004, p. 153). Its universality is granted on the basis of being the eye of the world; its invisibility stems from its inability to see itself.

That whites see and speak with catholic authority is what moves whiteness into the background when race is foregrounded. Or the invisibility and universality of whiteness give whites the kind of license to deploy their own ideological norms over those of other races without the restraints that visibility and often marginalized status confer on these other races. As David Roediger describes it, “(w)hiteness describes, from Little Big Horn to Simi Valley, not a culture but precisely the absence of

¹ Ralph Ellison defines “invisible” differently when he applies it to blackness in his book, *Invisible Man*.

culture. It is the empty and therefore terrifying attempt to build an identity based on what one isn't and on whom one can hold back" (Roediger 2000, p. 13). It is terrifying because of the absence of any restraints that whites experienced (and largely continue to experience) in forging societal norms, laws, and public policy that would explicitly and implicitly assure their power for centuries. Stephen Finley and Lori Latrice Martin state the development of such power thusly: "Whiteness emerged as the center, a center which sought to bring the people it encountered under the power of its imperialistic and epistemological regimes as well as to expand the power of its center outwardly to lands and people, all of which were named" (Finley and Martin 2017, p. 182). As the 'center,' whiteness built its own boundaries. With little to no speed bumps, those boundaries have extended far beyond what any one group of people should be allowed to expand.

Robin DiAngelo in her book, *White Fragility* (DiAngelo 2018), captures the Archimedean standpoint of whiteness as currently experienced.

Whiteness rests upon a foundational premise: the definition of whites as the norm or standard for human, and people of color as a deviation from that norm. Whiteness is not acknowledged by white people, and the white reference point is assumed to be universal and is imposed on everyone. White people find it very difficult to think about whiteness as a specific state of being that could have an impact on one's life and perceptions. . . . To say that whiteness is a standpoint is to say that a significant aspect of white identity is to see oneself as an individual, outside or innocent of race—'just human.' This standpoint views white people and their interests as central to, and representative of, humanity. (DiAngelo 2018, pp. 25, 27)

Think about the ease with which many whites rebut the 'Black Lives Matter' movement with the line, 'All Lives Matter.' Of course all lives matter, but this pithy retort betrays a willful ignorance of the fact that black lives have historic and present-day grievances that many whites simply do not have nor can grasp. The instinctual replacement of "black" with "all" conveys the speed with which the particularity of blackness is lost in a kind of universal soup and the visibility of the black race is deemed irrelevant (or merely annoying) by the invisible race.

The dominion of whiteness encourages the establishment of purported universal principles or narratives—ones that can be applied to all—that do not threaten the status of the one touting such principles or narratives.

Whites also produce and reinforce the dominant narratives of society—such as individualism and meritocracy—and use these narratives to explain the positions of other racial groups. These narratives allow us [whites] to congratulate ourselves on our success within the institutions of society and blame others for their lack of success. (DiAngelo 2018, p. 27)

The universality of whiteness and the invisibility that safeguards it find comfortable bedfellows with individualism and meritocracy precisely because these ideas seem universal *and* render whiteness invisible. If all human beings have the ability to attain life and liberty, as well as the opportunity to pursue happiness, then neither race (nor gender, etc.) can get in the way. If these goods are not secured, then one has only oneself to blame, not societal structures or systems. On the surface, this conditional proposition is irrefutable.

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva classifies the advocating of such principles as one from the playbook of "abstract liberalism". Abstract liberalism "involves using ideas associated with political liberalism (e.g., 'equal opportunity,' the idea that force should not be used to achieve social policy) and economic liberalism (e.g., choice, individualism) in an abstract manner to explain racial matters" (Bonilla-Silva 2017, p. 56). Here, classical liberalism and its historic concrete manifestations are abstracted and dropped down on racially mixed societies and expected to elucidate racial issues.

Those who back abstract liberalism, as it pertains to race, tend to minimize race as a player in the "who has opportunity" game. "Minimalization of racism is a frame that suggests discrimination is no longer a central factor affecting minorities' life chances ('It's better now than in the past' or 'There is

discrimination, but there are plenty of jobs out there)’” (Bonilla-Silva 2017, p. 57). Again, a reliance on individual merit as the predictor of success animates these statements, and racism is accordingly minimized. If it is better now than in the past and plenty of jobs are waiting for applicants, one’s own talent meeting meritocratic businesses will alone eventuate success and failure.

Historically, success and failure have been experienced by individuals for a host of reasons not remotely related to personal drive and imagination. Inherited wealth jump starts lives and being born into poverty besets individuals with the highest of hurdles. Yet, it is precisely because of this uncomfortable truth that individualism plus the belief that meritocracy truly governs institutions must be held onto all the more tightly by whites. Admitting that individual merit may not be all that is required forces an inquiry into other factors that lead one to success and others down the opposite path. This admission would strike at the heart of the power that whiteness holds. Instead, the trust that meritocracy guides business decisions means that its “citizens” do not have to be bothered with the uneven racial makeup of business executives, football coaches, elected leaders, or university presidents.

It is the universality and invisibility of whiteness that legitimizes meritocratic-based decisions in hiring, college admissions, and other enterprises that deal with a diverse pool of applicants. The executors of these decisions often refuse to countenance other considerations that would help make sense of the role that race, class, or gender may have played in unconventional resumes, to say nothing of those resumes that never reach the desk. If a person of color is passed over for a white person, the former was not the best person for the job. After all, the norms guiding meritocratic justice are a masked universal. The invisible quality of whiteness foregrounds the ‘visible’ races only to minimize race despite the fact that the visibility of blackness is precisely why American institutions have never operated meritocratically.

2. “Man, That’s the Easiest Question I’ve Had All Day”

If any white man has a compelling argument that individual grit conquers life’s circumstances, Dabo Swinney is one of them. He is the walking, talking embodiment of a person who was dealt the kind of hand that should have demoralized and decimated most, no matter race. Born of a polio-stricken mother who was isolated from everyone throughout her adolescence and of a father whose alcoholism forced a divorce and homelessness for the Swinney household, Dabo and his siblings had the deck stacked against them. He was born in Birmingham but was moved to rural Pelham, Alabama as a child, where, as an adolescent, he witnessed his older brother Tripp barely survive a severe car accident that left him with head trauma and a debilitating drinking habit for the rest of his life.

When Dabo was in high school, his father found himself a quarter of a million dollars in debt and similarly turned to the bottle for succor. Despite the nomadic life that he and his mother lived for the next several years, which included homelessness and sleeping on friends’ couches, Dabo still found a way to shine on the football field and in the classroom. He enrolled at the University of Alabama with the intention of playing football though without any recruitment attention from universities or a scholarship. Still, on campus Swinney enjoyed a modicum of respite from his life circumstances.

Though his mother was still homeless, Dabo took her in (yes, a modicum of respite). They shared a bedroom in his apartment for the first three years of his college life. Swinney decided to try out for the football team as a walk-on the spring of his freshman year and made the team. Yet, funding for his education fell through that summer, and it threatened to end his future at the university. By his own recounting, Swinney’s surprise receipt of a USD 1000 credit line through a Discover credit card mailer saved him. “It was part of God’s plan for me,” he would later recount. He was able to climb the ranks, gain a spot on the team, and help Alabama win the 1992 championship game. Swinney stayed in Tuscaloosa with the team as a graduate assistant/burgeoning coach, and then, his career began to take off.

Swinney imputes his against-all-odds success to God. Born into a Christian family in the deep South that was not especially devout, he traces the beginnings of his religious journey back to a

conversion experience he had when he was sixteen. He listened to former Alabama wide receiver Joey Jones give his testimony at a Fellowship of Christian Athletes gathering, and Swinney accepted Jesus Christ as his savior on the spot. It changed him permanently, as it did for many whose adolescence occurred the 1980s.

As Stephen P. Miller argues, post-Reagan era evangelicalism was infused with an energy not seen since the 1950s. The nation's concern with communism; the worrisome, lingering legacy of the 'secular' culture of the 1960s; the fear of an ever-encroaching government; the existential threat of abortion on demand; and a call for a renewed faith in normal, hard-working Americans, so captured in Reagan's 1984 "Morning in America" television ad, called for a kind of spiritual awakening for many Americans, particularly the youth. According to Miller, the Reagan-dominated 1980s,

made born-again faith increasingly an avowed identity, as opposed to an assumed one. In the process, labels like "evangelical" and "born again" gained new significance. To the extent that secularization, or something akin to it, occurred, it served to reconfigure the influence of evangelicalism, rather than diminish it. (Miller 2014, p. 4)

Because Swinney has not divulged his own religious biography publicly, we are left to assume that the cultural winds of the 1980s that blew towards galvanizing evangelical Christianity were inhaled by a young Swinney at the time. Swinney does give a glimpse of his life before his conversion experience via a press conference that he did in the summer of 2018 after Clemson decisively won the national championship. He recalls, "I grew up in a family that I was taught that there was a God and all that, but I didn't really have a relationship with Christ until I was 16. And that was a game changer for me. That's really become the foundation of my life." Swinney's mini-narrative follows the traditional evangelical testimonial: God was a part of family life 'and all that,' but the real relationship with God began after a conversion experience taught him the meaning of a true relationship with God through Christ. It is difficult to imagine that Swinney did not somehow feel the rising evangelical swell of the 1980s that made the adoption of an "avowed identity" over a milquetoast "assumed" Christian identity a life-changing event.

By the time he arrived at Clemson in 2003 as the wide receivers' coach, Swinney had already been playing the role of missionary/preacher/coach for recruits and players. It is a role that he had honed with his former players, and it fit snugly into then-coach Tommy Bowden's established Christian culture at Clemson. Acting as an ersatz pastor, Swinney could adopt the 'salesman of the gospel type that convinces potential converts that the Clemson football program is a kind of church Swinney advertised that players will not only be likely playing for a championship if they come to Clemson, but they will also be ensconced in a second 'Christian home' that Swinney presides over as the pastor along with his associate pastors (his staff of largely Christian coaches) (Baumgaertner 2019). Depending on the home of the recruit that Swinney enters, the line can register or land flat. However, Clemson's success under Swinney indicates that this tactic, combined with Swinney's charm, has clearly worked. For example, when D.J. Uiagalelei, the number one quarterback in the nation coming out of high school in 2020, met Swinney and grasped Clemson's religious culture, he was hooked. He called his mother with the message: "You can feel the presence of God here," he said. "He's here, Mom. He's here." In addition, as the head coach, Swinney directed the baptism of star wide receiver DeAndre Hopkins after practice in front of the entire team without apology or fear.

Swinney's religious biography stands as a witness to such commitment. His personal biography is a ballast against the prevailing winds of political correctness, secularism, affirmative action, and race-based public policy. His own experience of dire poverty, familial alcoholism, and preternatural ability to care for his family as a white man perhaps proves that that race played no role in his rise. It was God alone plus a little of Dabo.

Though as stated earlier, the telling of Swinney's story, whether told by himself or others and whether it is animated by tales of grit or of God's faithfulness, fails to mention race, his own or that of others. The dis-acknowledgement of the benefits of being white and a man along with the complete

lack of cognizance (by Swinney and his biographers) that black men and women encounter additional, unusually high hurdles (particularly in Alabama) divulges Swinney's unconscious privilege as a white man. Swinney's determination, hard work, and faith are admirable and rightfully the drivers of his self-told story. Admittedly, the inclusion of pesky realities such as race, class, and gender into his rags-to-riches tale would trip up an otherwise clean story as well as subtract from Swinney's own accomplishments. How does this avoidance of race inform his own worldview—the one that encapsulates his comments about Colin Kaepernick? More importantly for the purposes of this essay, how does his religious worldview overlap with and overwhelm any introjection of race into it?

3. "This World Is Falling Apart"

To reiterate, how exactly does Swinney's mix of bootstrap-ism and evangelicalism that is glued together whiteness help us make sense of his response to a question about Kaepernick? For starters, let us take a closer look at Swinney's opening statement.

I think everybody has a right to express themselves, you know, in that regard. But I don't think it's good to be a distraction to your team. I don't think it's good to use the team as a platform. I totally disagree with that. No one's ever asked me about Kaepernick or whatever ... I totally disagree with that. Not his protest, but I just think there's a right way to do things, and I don't think two wrongs make a right. Never have, and never will. And I think it just creates more divisiveness, more division.

Notice that Swinney's objection to Kaepernick's protest is not about the reason behind the protest but the means by which it was performed. Yes, Kaepernick is granted the right to exercise free speech. However, if that speech brings with it a distraction for the team *and* causes division in our country, then it is wrong to exercise it, according to Swinney. Swinney relies on general principles that are widely agreed upon: yelling 'Fire!' in a crowded theater is different than yelling it in your home when alone. However, is distracting your team and supposedly generating division in the United States in any way equivalent to endangering the physical well-being of those in the movie theater?²

In addition, Swinney's line that 'nobody's ever asked me about Kaepernick or whatever' conveys two things. One, that no one has asked a college coach in the south about Kaepernick is unfortunate, but not surprising. Two, Swinney's causal quip 'or whatever' betrays the fact that Kaepernick was the biggest story in sports at the time. It constitutes a dismissal of him and his protest and clears the way for Swinney to characterize the situation as he pleases.

Back to Swinney's 2016 press conference:

It's sad to me to see what's going on in this country. I think it creates more division. I think there's a better way. How about, you know, he calls a press conference? Express your feelings. Everybody will show up. Talk about it. Express yourself. Go and be a part of things and protest them. ... I think everybody has that right, and I certainly respect that. ... I think a lot of the things in this world, not everything is so bad. 'This world is falling apart.' Some of these people need to move to another country. Some of them need to move to another country.

Swinney's plea for Kaepernick to call 'a press conference' is one that asks Kaepernick to individualize the protest for the sake of reducing division in our country. Kaepernick *should* have

² Polling on this issue over the years has tended to support Swinney's claim, but only slightly. One of the last polls done that asked whether Kaepernick's kneeling at the national anthem was appropriate (a question that barely gets to the reason for the protest) garnered 54% of interviewees saying that it was not appropriate; 43% saying that it was. Again, the question is provocative—should anyone kneel for the national anthem. If 43% said "Yes," it becomes more difficult to assert widespread divisiveness in the United States over these numbers. <https://www.nbcnews.com/politics/first-read/nbc-wsj-poll-majority-say-kneeling-during-anthem-not-appropriate-n904891>.

personalized his score of grievances. With a microphone stuck to his mouth alone, he, then, would channel his words through the media that typically chops up longer statements and converts them into sound bites for public consumption. The line ‘go on and be a part of things and protest them’ is at once a flippant phrase that equates black men and women being gunned down by white cops to, you know, ‘things,’ as well as a putting of all of the burden on Kaepernick to do all of the work himself.

Yet, Kaepernick’s protest was and continues to be social, public, and operating on the level of national politics. A press conference in his locker room or on the stage of the 49ers’ media center would position him as the lone voice on his team and as the mouthpiece for similarly minded NFL players and maybe the entire black community. This kind of commercialized, media-controlled presentation would lack the register required to challenge the systems that perpetuate injustice. Or, if Kaepernick’s protest was *truly* about one lone man representing himself who airs his own personal complaints, it would likely not score on the national scene.

Lost on Swinney is that the spectacle of kneeling works to de-personalize the action itself. Despite a countervailing narrative that wants to make it all about Kaepernick, by kneeling in silence and refusing to enact a cherished public ritual in front of millions, his form of protest acts to decenter the actor and simultaneously center attention on his animating cause. If Kaepernick merely held a press conference to begin his protest and listed demands, then he would immediately be at the center. He and his protest could then be dismissed more quickly as that coming from one disgruntled individual. But Swinney’s elevating of Kaepernick as the sole spokesperson for this cause facilitates the kind of singling out of one individual for removal from the country that supposedly cannot tolerate such acts of treason.

Kaepernick’s kneeling at the national anthem convinced Swinney, and no doubt others, that the protest constituted a kind of blanket statement condemning the entire country when, as stated earlier, universalizing is a practice successfully executed by whites alone. Kaepernick effectively turned tables, if only for a little while, on who gets to universalize. Swinney seems to be saying that if dissenters call out injustice in the United States, then you are not able to see that this country is truly good, and you should find another place to live. Here again, Swinney seems to be speaking from a position of universal whiteness that is able to put down a gesture of universality performed by a black man. Swinney also invokes nationalism, which further allows proclamations about the goodness of this country with no investigation into why some are critiquing the United States. The world that is falling apart is the one built up by whites, and Kaepernick found a flaw in its construction.

4. White Evangelicals, Race, and Sin

Theologically contextualizing Swinney’s comments is tricky. How does religion inform his take on Kaepernick and his seeming willingness to treat black and white players differently? There are aspects of his theology that we can rightly assume. His self-avowed ‘real’ commitment to Christianity began after listening to a representative of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, an evangelical parachurch organization, and Swinney’s public statements about his faith continue to reflect boilerplate evangelical language. Swinney expresses reliance on the Bible, emphasizes sin with the attendant need for a savior, and uses his broad stage to evangelize whenever he can.

Michael O. Emerson and Christian Smith, in their study of evangelicalism and its relationship to race, find a strong tendency in white evangelicals to reject non-individualistic and non-structural explanations for extant racial inequality (Emerson and Smith 2000, pp. 76–80). The cultural ‘tool kit’ at-hand for most white evangelicals is geared towards three main, utterly interconnected ways this group makes sense of race.

The first is that “freewill-individualism” explains who rises and falls in society. It is the individual agent, without any influence from external societal forces, who chooses God or not, drugs or not, success or not. The second is ‘relationalism,’ which holds that personal relationships, especially those that cross the color line, contribute significantly to reducing racial strife and even racial disparity. This focus on relationships draws on and is, in Emerson and Smith’s words, a transposition of the primacy

of the relationship with Jesus Christ for evangelicals. As the relationship with Christ colors all aspects of life for believers, “healthy relationships encourage people to make right choices” (Emerson and Smith 2000, p. 78). Or the personal and perfect relationship with Christ, which is felt in transcendent ways above and over personal relationships, is the ideal for any personal relationship. Therefore, when race is brought in (from the outside) as a source of friction, it is typically shrugged off.

Third, white evangelicals are ‘anti-structuralists.’ They maintain that state policies guiding education, incarceration, police shootings, voting accessibility, or the mortgage/rental industry have a miniscule impact on the racial divide or the racism that exists. Emerson and Smith remark that most white evangelicals acknowledge the suffering that blacks have endured historically, but they refuse to attribute current injustice to any kind of past, overt racism that some claim is manifest today. That was the past, and if anyone fails to succeed in life today, the structures of that past that prevented blacks from succeeding have been torn down.

Sin is one of the theological concepts that Emerson and Smith use to tie all three tools in the white evangelical tool kit together. “For most white evangelicals . . . sin is limited to individuals. Thus, if race problems—poor relationships—result from sin, then race problems must largely be individually based” (Emerson and Smith 2000, p. 78). Or individuals are solely responsible for the kind of relationships they cultivate with members of another race. Are they healthy and open or toxic and racist? If the latter, it is the result of a sinful tendency to view one race as superior to another. One white evangelical interviewee of Emerson and Smith’s responds: “It is an issue of original sin. It’s human nature to be a sinner . . . to be not as accepting of a black person.” Another averred that the race problem was “in our hearts”, and judgment, whether reflexive or ingrained, towards black people “probably originates with Satan keeping that difference in us”. Finally, as if a voice from the past was whispering in Dabo Swinney’s ear, one interviewee said, “We don’t have a race problem, we have a sin problem” (Emerson and Smith 2000, p. 78).

How do Dabo Swinney’s words in his press conference align with Emerson and Smith’s findings? I return to a part of Swinney’s interview for signs that he is working out of the white evangelical tool kit:

I think the answer to our problems is exactly what they were for Martin Luther King when he changed the world. Love, peace, education, tolerance of others, Jesus. A lot of these things in this world were only a dream for Martin Luther King. Not a one-term, but a two-term African American president. And this is a terrible country? There are interracial marriages. I go to a church that’s an interracial church. Those were only dreams for Martin Luther King. Black head coaches. Black quarterbacks. Quarterbacks at places like Georgia and Alabama and Clemson. For Martin Luther King, that was just a dream. Black CEOs, NBA owners, you name it. Unbelievable.

Individualism is demonstrated in Swinney’s mere mentioning of black quarterbacks in the NFL, black CEOs, and a black president. If they can make it, against purported odds against them for simply being black, then all are left without excuse. In addition, Swinney’s referencing of his involvement in an interracial church speaks to relationalism. He rubs shoulders with African Americans at his church, and that could be enough to uplift his fellow church members to be the next Dr. King or President Obama.

Swinney continues with the admission that all is not right with the world and an explanation:

Now, does that mean that there’s not still problems? Yes. Where there’s people, whether they’re black, green, yellow, orange or white, there is going to be sin, greed, hate, jealousy, deceitfulness. There’s going to be that. That’s always going to be there. But attitude, work ethic, love, respect for others, that doesn’t know any color.

Along the lines of Swinney’s reasoning, when anyone, despite their skin color, congregates, sin will express itself—it is in our nature. Though, by touting a strong work ethic and good attitude

‘that doesn’t know any color,’ Swinney exposes a ‘colorblindness’ that ignores the part that structural barriers play in maintaining racial inequality on his way to having love and respect for others be his weapons against ‘sin, greed, hate, jealousy and deceitfulness.’ Swinney relativizes race by not only trumpeting progress as exemplified by successful African Americans, but also, after he admits that problems still exist, he puts forth a work ethic and good attitude as the corrective to those problems.

It is his reliance upon a universal notion of sin that explains societal problems. Here ere is a quote from the press conference that further confirms it. from his press conference:

You know, my brother is a retired police officer of 30 years. And [he] worked the night shift his entire life. And there’s a lot of good police officers. There’s [sic] thousands of perfect traffic stops—a lot of good men [and] a lot of good women. But those don’t get the stories. But there’s some bad ones too. There are some criminals that wear badges . . . There’s [sic] criminals that work in churches. I think we have a sin problem in the world. That’s what I think. It’s so easy to say we have a race problem. No, we got a sin problem. . . . That’s Dabo’s opinion.

Swinney’s mentioning of bad cops and criminals who work in churches sets the stage for the notion that sin infects some of our most cherished institutions. If criminals who let their sinful nature dictate their behavior roam police stations and churches, then they certainly exist everywhere. Furthermore, if people in respected professions can be criminals, then no one is exempt from the potential for bad behavior, no matter their race. He, of course, is stating facts here—there are criminals in all kinds of fields. However, instead of resigning himself to the expression, ‘there are bad apples in every group’ or attributing crime to, at least in part, life circumstances, Swinney chalks up the bad behavior to sin that is inescapable.

Swinney’s chalking up all bad behavior, presumably his own, to sin can ironically endow himself, as a prophet of sorts, with a strange power. As Friedrich Nietzsche wrote in *The AntiChrist*,

Viewed psychologically, ‘sins’ are indispensable in every society organized by priests. They are the real levers of power, the priest *lives* on sin, he needs ‘sinning’ to happen . . . Highest proposition: God forgives those who do penance’—in plain language: *those who subordinate themselves to the priest*”. (Nietzsche 2005, p. 24)

Dabo is not a priest nor is he presiding over an ecclesiastical society (so he would claim), but he does benefit if people (in particular his players) buy in to the idea of pervasive sin and that Swinney is a sinner just like you. Those who subordinate themselves to Swinney and Clemson football are encouraged to buy into a sense of equality in the eyes of God. Therefore, when black athletes being recruited are awed by Swinney’s attention, he can downplay his whiteness by walking in as a sinner. Or the way that Swinney transmits his religiosity is by way of humility and therefore universality.

The dismissal of race as a substantial contributor to the classifying some as criminals is enabled by an interpretation of sin that not only makes such behavior innate but also illuminative of societal division, crimes, and violence. In addition, as Nietzsche warns us, there is power behind such supposed claims of humility (I’m a sinner just like you!) that ends up being stored in the banks of those already in positions of power such as Swinney. The “there’s more good than bad out there in this world” line coupled with the “we’ve got a sin problem” viewpoint at once rationalizes the bad apples and frees Swinney from having to investigate specific instances of what he would call “sin”. His unwillingness to investigate, as evinced by the absence of any mention of the specifics of racial injustice at the hands of police officers as delineated by Kaepernick, can be more fully understood vis-a-vis Swinney’s reduction of all of it to sin.

As stated earlier, whiteness carries with it the ability and protection to ignore race with universal pronouncements. When coupled with the belief that sin is also universal and takes precedent over any other feature that we may claim for ourselves, the discounting of race further bolsters the power that whiteness already holds within it. Christoph Schwobel describes the relegation of race and the grievances that emerge from such cultural distinctions nicely:

Over and against the reality that we are all sinners, yet all called to be reconciled to God in order to be one in Christ, the distinctions of class, nation, culture, race or sex lost their significance. Since they do not define our identity ultimately, they are deprived of their capacity to trigger deadly conflicts. Over against our solidarity as sinners and our calling to the one in Christ, these distinctions have at best a penultimate and relative value. (Schwobel 2003, p. 37)

Swinney, no doubt, considers racism a sin. However, when given the opportunity to address the specific charges of racial injustice made by Kaepernick, Swinney disagreed with the way he protested, proclaimed his love for Martin Luther King Jr., and declared that there are good and bad cops. By contending that we have a sin problem rather than a race problem, Swinney does not have to examine the nature of Kaepernick's protest. He can chalk *all* of our problems up to sin, which cannot be investigated or prosecuted in any concrete way.

The sin that we are born into supersedes all circumstances into which we are born, and therefore, our collective propensity to sin minimizes poverty, race, gender, age, sexual orientation, family situation, and historical remnants of oppression. The lines "we're all sinners" or "we're all stained by sin" ironically wield even more power than those emanating from a place of whiteness because the former is able to dismiss race without recourse to its own race. Race is not completely erased within the white racial frame. It is dealt with ahistorically and indifferently. However, bake into whiteness the belief that universal sin is prior to and much more determinative than racial distinctions, and a kind of theological ahistoricity helps to insulate whiteness from self-reflection and scrutiny.

5. Conclusions

If Swinney truly believes that we have not a race problem but a sin problem in this country, what could possibly encourage him to take seriously the historic oppression of African Americans into his decision-making process? Can his whiteness, which is fused with his belief that sin is our *a priori* condition, allow for the possibility that the black athletes he coaches are nothing more than black bodies that sacrifice themselves to deliver fame and a ridiculous salary to his front door? How can we expect Swinney to interpret Kaepernick's protest in any other way than an affront to white America if the sin that we are all infected with rots us to the point that crimes committed against those marginalized on the basis of gender, class, sexual orientation, and race can be viewed as the effect of our depravity?

I hope to have responded to these questions in this essay with the answer that the privilege of whiteness, as articulated by DiAngelo and others, is automatically enjoyed by its fortunate recipients and is magnified when a sin is taken to transcend race and all other social categories. By taking a deeper look at how whiteness works as well as contemporary evangelical pronouncements on sin and race, with the help of Emerson and Smith, we can see how Swinney's exposition promotes this exact idea. It is made transparent that Swinney conveys these beliefs in the locker room, into the houses of recruits, onto the field, and through our television sets and computer screens.

Viewing Swinney's speech and actions as merely the expressions of a white man who is out of touch or of a white man who is speaking the truth neglects to see how his sidelining of race is influenced by his theology. His theology of sin seems to run a kind of political cover that releases Swinney from having to deal with the substance of Kaepernick's protest as well as from having to consider how some of his actions and statements are tied to race. Within the secular frame, Swinney's talk could be quickly condensed into that which flows from the stereotypical older white man from the South. While this may play a part in his inability to understand the legacy of race relations, this essay has shown that it is his theology that dictates the means to view any social problem that is confronted. In particular, his theology of sin, in concert with other theological concepts that interweave with this conceptualization of sin, trumps all other claims of injustice, whether from the mouth of Kaepernick or from his own players who want a semblance of economic justice.

I most certainly acknowledge that a level of uncertainty exists on my part around the sources of Swinney's statements/actions. However, the attempt to root out colorblind racism, as that which

is bandied about throughout the halls of elite college football offices, while laden with difficulty, is rewarded by the effort to explore these sources and make decisions. As scholars of religion, we are left with expressions of religion that we then must grapple with and interpret. I can only hope that I have interpreted Swinney's unique technique of putting a religious lens over his sport has, in turn, illuminated how race, religion, and sport can be analyzed and critiqued for future projects.

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