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Review of James Newton Poling's, *Deliver Us From Evil: Resisting Racial and Gender Oppression* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998).

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The Lord's Prayer grounds James Newton Poling as he seeks to understand the roots of evil in persons, families, churches, and society as well as to recognize evil as a force for good. In his book *Deliver Us From Evil: Resisting Racial and Gender Oppression*, Poling argues that a liberated and critical consciousness in the midst of struggle strengthens some to resist and survive the power of evil. Because of their personal and historical influence, Poling focuses on African American women and men during slavery and racism in the U.S. and European American women during centuries of patriarchal exploitation. From the perspective of communities of resistance, he identifies personal, social and religious dimensions of evil, all of which destroy bodies and spirits. Poling hopes that his project will result in courageous and healing practices in the church, which in turn will heal society. Poling divides his work into two parts. The first is concerned with resisting gender and racial oppression from various vantage points. The second focuses on resistance to evil in the name of Jesus. This means that Christology is central to his understanding of resistance. I read the text to benefit from his hope and to strengthen the white community's resistance to the evils of racism and sexism. I will ask whether he succeeds in providing us with useful tools with which to build up our resolve (xii-xvii).

Poling begins with two interesting case studies in the history of resistance. The slave Harriet Jacob resisted the cruelty of her serial rapist master in her everyday life. The evil system of slavery that tried to destroy her spirit, Poling argues, was "a creation of the White male religious imagination (6)." Harriet Jacobs resisted in silence, and sometimes by speaking out, but her most effective resistance came in the form of actions that exposed her slave master's sexism and racism. She tried to marry a free black man, she bore two children with a white lawyer, and she ran away from her master and hid in her grandmother's attic for seven years. All this, says Poling, showed "a critical and liberated consciousness that supported her resistance to the domination of racial and gender oppression (8)." Poling also examines the story of Dora, a victim of betrayal by her father and his sexually harassing friend, who was psychoanalyzed oppressively by Sigmund Freud. Dora resisted this experience of evil through action as well. She ran away from her father's friend, slapped him, revealed her family secrets and willingly announced her termination of services with Freud (24). Her case is renowned in the psychiatric and feminist fields for exposing Freud's psyche-damaging, patriarchal insights, for which he went without penalty (27).

Poling follows up these case studies with a rather scattered historical survey of racial and gender oppression and forms of resistance from colonial times through the latter half of the 20th century. The acts of resistance during the colonial period of black men and women to religiously justified slavery, and white women to paternalism and subordination disclose forms of social evil, Poling claims (41). The transition from agrarian to industrial capitalism between the Revolutionary and Civil Wars further fueled racial and gender oppression and violence. Black resistance leaders resisted by both appealing to the Constitution for relief and to the community for organized revolt (48). Poling describes four kinds of resistance among slaves in the nineteenth century: conversion stories, spirituals, autobiographies and trickster stories, all of which created alternative ways of being and acting that did not depend on the negative images given slaves by their white masters (49). During the same time, emboldened by the revival movements, white women began identifying systemic oppression and preaching on temperance, women's rights, and abolition and calling for systemic change. The "Cult of True Womanhood" placed white women in their own sphere, giving her maternal function higher significance. Poling argues that black women, however, were largely excluded from the society, emerging from slavery firmly enshrined in the consciousness of white America as 'Mammy' and 'child savage,' while white women were idealized for their piety, purity and loyalty (61).

After emancipation, despite some reforms, black men and women and black women continued to experience sexism and racism. Poling recounts how landowners and bankers in the South kept black families in debt, while efforts of industrialists frustrated unionizing efforts. (65). New economic, political, and social avenues opened up, however, for blacks to resist oppression, express their freedom, and call for change. Ida B. Wells, who was born into slavery, set out to research and support her thesis that the many lynchings of the time did not reflect white fears of black rapists, but "a terrorist activity aimed at destroying economic and political leadership in the black community (67)." White women were equally active during this period, Poling argues, resisting the exploitation of workers and the domestication and exploitation of women (69). Unfortunately their resistance yielded few positive results to what was a "God-given and natural" position women found themselves in and liberal men tolerated (80). When women did finally gain their right to vote, they did so by promising to support the class hegemony of the white male elite (81).

Poling locates in the mid-twentieth century a trajectory that moves through resistance by oppressed groups, liberal support, conservative backlash, and liberal betrayal (91). Although the civil rights and feminist movements made great strides in the 50s and 60s, the 80s brought conservative responses, such as Daniel P. Moynihan blaming poverty on the dysfunction of black families (92). In the wake of economic recession and institutional retrenchment of the Reagan years, the economic gains among black workers and white women diminished (85). Poling argues that black, white feminist, and womanist theology influenced

the church during this period. Unfortunately, he only touches the surface of these three movements: black theology taught black people to be both black and Christian (86); white feminist theology critically examined the role of religion in promoting patriarchy (88); and womanist theology exposed the constructions of race, class, and gender that dominate the lives of black women (90). He does explore the later two forms of thought later in his text. These advances, however, were undercut as liberal white church communities lost experienced a loss of membership and drastic fiscal cuts, which in the face of the increasing power of conservative communities, has led them to weaken their support for resistance efforts, which Poling calls betrayal (87).

Christology takes front and center in the second half of Poling's work. He begins by looking at how resistance to evil and suffering in the form of survival and activism requires a liberated and critical consciousness that is bound up in a community and rooted in dialogue, empathy, and mutual empowerment (106). In an odd interpolation, Poling reflects on his own implication in racial and gender evil as a white, male, middle class American. He believes it possible both to accept responsibility for and yet relinquish his conscious moral support of systems of domination and come to new forms of forgiveness, healing, and shared action for justice. An analysis of resistance to evil provides the hermeneutical perspective with which we can begin to define evil, as Poling does (108-09).

Poling defines evil as the abuse of power that destroys bodies and spirits and ruptures the relationality of communities (xix). He draws upon the incarnational view of body-mind unity and defines spirit as the goodness of relationships in human life. He develops this practical, working definition to provide support for resistance. Evil is often hidden, involving deception and lies that hide the truth. We often fail to denounce it out of fear of being moralistic and judgmental. Yet it is no less genuine, argues Poling. Poling identifies three levels of interlocking systems necessary for genuine evil to be fully actualized – personal, social, and religious. Evil is produced by personal actions and intentions, conscious or unconscious, that require us to be lucid and self-critical in times of denial and disassociation. Evil is also social, organized by economic forces (e.g., class), institutional arrangements (e.g., families in society), and ideologies (e.g., white superiority). It requires a social analysis that hermeneutically privileges the victims of evil, thematizes resistance, analyzes the matrix of race, gender and class, and commits to empowerment of dominated groups. Finally, evil is sanctioned by religion and theology, although masked by claims to God's sanction, virtue, love, and justice and hard to face because we turn to religious institutions and practices for freedom from evil (120-35).

Acknowledging racial and sexual violence raises questions about Christian doctrines such as obedience, servitude, and veneration of the crucified, male Jesus (135). Drawing upon womanist theologian Kelly Brown Douglas, Poling shows how white Christians use a "White Christ" to justify the violence of racism

and white supremacy. During slavery this spiritualization of Christ justified the slave trade, used baptism of blacks to stabilize slavery, and made Christianity compatible with its cruelty (139). Douglas cautions against simply re-imagining Christ as black, because this symbol ignores the black woman's story of struggle and the possibility of a "spirituality of resistance (141)." Jacquelyn Grant also cautions against the collusion of those in power in the church who adopt the oppressive use of the precious symbol 'servanthood.' The risk associated with servanthood remained hidden as slave owners and religious leaders preached it to African Americans to justify slavery, economic exploitation and second-class status for women (who are most often our domestics), even in the black church. Grant proposes that we adopt mutual, non-hierarchical symbols of leadership and community such as 'discipleship' (142-45). Delores Williams raises similar concerns with the overemphasis of the surrogacy role of Jesus, which ignores the coerced surrogacy experienced by African American women. She advocates for images of Jesus' resistance and survival in its place (146). Feminist theologians also challenge our images of Christ. Joanne Carlson Brown rejects the misuse of the suffering of Christ, which some use to urge victims of abuse to offer up their suffering. Brown wishes to replace this emphasis on Christ's righteous suffering with his commitment to truth and justice, which was unshakeable even at death. Rita Nakashima Brock rejects the romanticization of Jesus as innocent, obedient and submissive, preferring to emphasize instead his willfulness and rebellion as equally biblical images for oppressed groups (146-48).

From this helpful exercise in womanist and feminist theology, Poling observes several hermeneutical principles that he argues must guide our conversations about suffering and resistance. First, all theologians must give hermeneutical privilege to the witnesses of African American and white women who have resisted racial and gender evil. In addition, theologians must be properly suspicious and critical of the White Christology, deconstructing the predominant Christ-symbol, which has been used to justify the dominance of white men. And lastly, theologians must suggest alternative visions of Christ that empower the oppressed and create safe places for them (149). The hermeneutic of suspicion and the confession of belief in the life of Jesus demand that we be suspicious of every individual and group who employ him to establish and maintain domination and evil. We can learn from the oppressed who experience Jesus as friend and co-sufferer.

Equally insightful are Poling's tentative proposals on Christology that white men might consider. Jesus is foremost a religious resister, argues Poling, who loved the victims of oppression enough to die in solidarity with them and who in so doing reveals authentic humanity in the face of massive dehumanizing evils such as racism, classism and sexism (158-59). Jesus also discloses the multiplicity and ambiguity of God and humans, argues Poling. The 'Otherness' of God and neighbor is irreducible, and if accepted, creates the possibility for resistance to evil. Although God's Otherness is co-opted by power elites to oppress the poor,

Jesus' spirit regularly overcomes these distortions (160). White, European American men have difficulties with multiplicity and ambiguity in their emphasis on the unity and perfection of God; this leads to a misuse of theology in support of racism and patriarchy (163). Poling claims that Jesus may be multiple and ambiguous as a symbol of humanity as well as a foundational manifestation of God. He writes that his research into racial and gender violence has forced him to question classical depictions of God, because oneness and perfection can be used to promote evil and because the witnesses of women, both African and European American raise the themes of multiplicity and ambiguity (170-71). He asks if he can face this fact. His answer follows quickly: the task of the White man at this time in U.S. history is to engage in a process of de-centering power arrangements. As a result, God is creating new work in which to empower those who are Other and ambiguous to him – the African American, the woman, the gay and the lesbian. Any desire he has to hold on to a definition of a patriarchal, white, straight society is idolatry, Poling admits. He concludes that he “will worship the God of multiplicity and ambiguity, with the help of [his] friend and co-sufferer, Jesus (172-74).”

In an epilogue, Poling proposes concrete practices of goodness to aid in forging partnerships that cross the chasms of privilege and power and create new possibilities for healing, community, and justice for all people (xix). He urges that we develop a spirituality of resistance by immersing ourselves in the stories and lives of Others to the point of conversion; live in solidarity with resistance communities, sometimes in violence and fear; take moral and material inventory and reorganize our lives; confront the abuser within and repent; confront persons of power by speaking truth and taking the consequences; and negotiate with institutions to move towards justice and love. “Long live God’s Revolution,” he cries.

Poling provides an important perspective here, despite a rather slow and rambling start to his book. Providing examples of resistance in Harriet and Dora and mapping out the historical trajectory of oppression and resistance are helpful, but not revelatory. His work takes on more significance in his exploration of the personal, social, and religious forms of evil and the oppressive images of the White Jesus that exacerbate racism, classism, and sexism. That he provides hermeneutical principles to counter these forms of evil is most useful to me. They provide a lens through which I might approach further work in white privilege. Poling’s discussion of the Other takes on new meaning as he pushes us to reexamine the nature of God as multiple and ambiguous. I felt his epilogue worked as such, mapping out some possible steps that we might take to bring about racial, economic, and gender justice. In the end, this text surprised me, by sneaking up on some powerfully helpful hermeneutical approaches to suffering, oppression, evil, and resistance. I would recommend this reading to social justice activists, undergraduates, theologians and church leaders all at once. A revolution by all means possible, I argue.

Substantive Questions for Discussion:

1. Poling emphasizes the importance of a liberated and critical consciousness. When we talk about white privilege, how best might we achieve this for ourselves? How do we confront the abuser within us and repent? How do we help others to do this as well?
2. Resistance to evil takes on the form of silence, words and actions in the examples Poling gives. He provides some helpful practices of goodness in his epilogue including speaking truth to power and taking on institutions. What other types of resistance might whites practice?
3. What are the implications of Poling's hermeneutical principles? How do I begin to catalogue other principles that I should be attentive to?
4. Poling highlights the fact that our conception of God matters, not just in how we imagine Christ, but also in regards to whether the Godhead can accommodate multiplicity and ambiguity. How do I follow up on this critical lead?