

RACE: A THEOLOGICAL ACCOUNT AN INTERVIEW WITH J. KAMERON CARTER

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Adam McInturf: The central claim of your book is that white supremacy is ultimately a cloaked version of supersessionism. Christianity became racialized as a religion of whiteness when it severed itself from its Jewish roots and reconceived Christianity as whiteness: the occidental race over against the oriental Jews. How is it that you came to view the problem of race in terms of Christianity's relation to Judaism?

J. Kameron Carter: It is a question that takes me back to my graduate student work, where I started reading a lot of general American literature, ante-bellum literature, and post-bellum literature. Authors included both African-American and Caucasian writers, such as Harriet Beecher Stowe and Frederick Douglass. The subject matter ranged from slave narratives to other writings in the aftermath of the Civil War, taking us ultimately to the Harlem Renaissance and things of that nature. It struck me particularly in the early material by African-Americans that there was this constant reference back to signal passages in the Old Testament of the Bible. A mainstay of reflection was the Exodus story. Another mainstay of reflection—at least of invocation—was the passage, which I believe is in Psalm 68, where it says “Princes shall come out of Egypt, and Ethiopia shall soon stretch forth her hands unto God.”¹ Passages of this sort from the Bible were leveraged politically to prophesy and even to motivate political action; and it struck me in combing over these references repeatedly to think about what theological imagination was going on there, what kind of Christian imagination was at work within them. However, as I continued to pull on the threads of that, and went on to explore secondary literature, I found that while the secondary literature was extremely helpful, it did little reflection on the religious significance. More specifically, it seemed to

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1. Ps 68:31.

have largely bypassed the key question of what kinds of theological resonances might be going on in these invocations of Scripture. That began to push me down the path of thinking about how race, or the terms of the racial arrangements of modernity typified in the U.S., were being recoded, bent, redeployed (any number of terms along these lines I might invoke) and weakened from within in order to create a kind of different space and to reconfigure the order of relations. In one respect, I started getting inside of those questions, while at the same time I was doing a lot of study in theology. I went to seminary, and eventually did a Ph.D. in religious studies and philosophical theology. And so the theological question was really the sort of intellectual home for me, the knowledge base from which I was doing my principal reflection. So, while I was reading American literature, I was also thinking through the ways in which Christian-Jewish relations have worked, the ways in which the figure of the Jew, the Jewish covenant, and the God of Israel had worked in the history of theology and in Scripture itself. Eventually, these two pathways of reflection—in literature on the one hand, and cultural studies and in theology on the other—cross-pollinated each other, and started to inform the nature of my questioning on either side of the divide, such that there no longer was a divide. They proved to become one path.

AM: *So it all points back for you to an original split with Judaism?*

JKC: Yes. In many ways what I started to ponder was how it came to pass that Christians began to think of themselves as independent from and intelligible apart from the Jewish people. This is a long-standing problem. It's not just a problem of modernity. It started to weigh upon the Christian community even in Scripture itself. It only increased as we entered into the immediate post-apostolic age and into that era of Christian history known as patristics: the first four to seven centuries of the unfolding of the Christian faith, and never really went away. It has in many ways proven to be—I invoke a phrase from the old 'King Jimmy'—it became "a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense,"² pretty early on, and continued to be so. What my book really tries to do is make sense of a particular phase of this problem: the phase in the problem that biologized itself, because it is that phase that we inhabit in the present.

AM: A great deal of your recovery of the Jewish roots of Christianity is prefigured in the work of James Cone. Yet, you aren't completely comfortable with Cone's famous assertion that Jesus is black because Jesus is a Jew.

JCK: You're right, and I try to make a point of this in the chapter in which I deal with Cone's work. Let me back up and just come at this by first slightly broadening the question, and then I am going to narrow it to your specific query here; namely,

2. 1 Pt 2:8.

how my work in some sense is prefigured by or has an antecedent in Cone. The wider scope is this: what I try to do is interpret Cone within the broader reach of how black intellectuals have tried to negotiate the problem that I try to specify in part one. That is, the problem around the biologization of the Jew-Christian distinction, which became the Jew-Gentile distinction. As the Christian church became predominantly Gentile, the break from Judaism became acutely felt as an issue—and in the biologization of that, how did black intellectuals attempt to negotiate the ramifications of that problem? I tend to argue that the full contours and specificity of this as a theological problem have eluded us. Nevertheless, it was the problem we were fighting, that we were trying to think our way out of. Well, James Cone has been a critical person in trying to decode the problem, to isolate its specific theological operations and offer a specific theological rejoinder to the problem. What I try to do is two things at once in my engagement with black theology and my engagement with Cone as a kind of symbol. This is hopefully not overly reductive, because I do recognize that there are many voices in black theology. Yet, because of his historical significance to this form of thought, I take him as a kind of symbolic figure. So on the one hand, I am trying to capture that aspect of his thinking in which he cuts into the marrow of the problem. And to the extent that he saw that the problem of whiteness was the problem of Jesus' no longer being conceived of as a Jew, but being aligned instead with that which is white—and indeed that split between Jesus and Jesus' Jewishness is part of the production of whiteness—I applaud Cone (early Cone, especially) for his profound theological insight. Yet, at the same time, I was also trying to isolate the pathway that black theology takes in building on Cone, especially the later Cone. This is important to me because one of the key gestures that I anticipated concerning my work was the potential for taking what I'm doing as just the latest phase of black theology, and thus to reduce and perhaps dismiss it. I needed to establish not only the continuity of what I'm doing to black theology, but also the important discontinuity between what black theology has become and what I'm doing. That's the broad space within which I'm trying to carve out the 'elbow room' for the work I do.

AM: One critique you continually return to in regards to black liberation theology, is that there is a tendency, in contesting white supremacy, to repeat the problem of whiteness, leaving the structures of power and domination intact, simply inserting the black identity in the place of white identity. This comes out particularly clearly in your engagement with the 1845 *Narrative* of Frederick Douglass. There you write that Douglass' salvific "rising up" against his master Covey implies "that violence is the deep structure...of the logic and practice of identity in America and in modernity" (291). How is it that Christians can think of liberated identity, though, in a way that is not violent?

JKC: That is the fundamental question. What I hope comes out in the book is that, at the end of the day, the gesture to constitute identity for ourselves rather than to receive it as constituted in the God-Man Jesus will in some sense bear the traces of violence. And you can fill in the blank as to the various modulations of identity

that we want to constitute for ourselves—race, gender, sexuality, political identity, class identity, so on and so forth—any gesture to constitute identity for ourselves rests in the assumption that we know ourselves, and that gesture will always have a kind of structure of violence to it. We must receive ourselves. Modernity, arguably, is the effort to constitute ourselves. It is an effort built into the entire architecture of the West. The West does not merely connote a geographical locus, a space on the map. The West connotes an idea, and not just an idea, but the ideal that is the West, where it is always positioned next to an exterior called “the rest.” Here I am playing with a notion that I am deriving from the cultural theorist Stuart Hall, where the West is always built out of, constituted as idea and ideal in relationship to another locus in space called the rest. And the rest is itself multi-faceted. The rest that is the non-Western Africa, the non-Western Americas, the non-Western Caribbean, so on and so forth. That notion of the West in relationship to the rest as an idea and an ideal that structures what we call “the world” is a ploy to make and to constitute a certain mode of identity. That is, Western peoples, who get racially constituted as ‘white’ in relationship to ‘non-white’, just like the West in relationship to the non-West, or the rest. That gesture of identity building is itself, at the level of idea, ideal, and political and social enactment, violent.

What I was trying to do in this book was to get inside of the theological underbelly of that production, to see it as a certain kind of Christian production. “What kind of Christian production is it?” is the question of my book. And what I was basically trying to do was lay out the idea and the ideal of the human that is inside of this. The racial imaginary is what allows the building out of that vision of the human. And my claim is that the specific theological production that allowed the West and the rest to emerge, so as to fill out what we mean by the world, was the supersessionist problem, biologized.

The other angle on what I’m trying to do in this book is ask the question: “How is it that Christianity became the cultural property of the West in relation to the rest? How did Christianity come to be the cultural, political, and social preserve of a Gentile Europe, for the most part, and Euro-America, in relationship to the non-Western, ostensibly non-Christian world of non-Europe?”

AM: Your inroads into a Christian understanding of identity have some profound incidental implications for the problem of gender. As you note, the struggle against white supremacy was often conceived of as a struggle against the feminization of blackness, so that for people like Douglass, reclaiming black identity is a grasping for masculinity. Yet, in the history of women’s liberation, there were a shocking number of early feminists who were also white supremacists, for instance, Bishop Alma White of the Church of the Pillar of Fire, who simultaneously wrote women’s liberation tracts and books in praise of the KKK. What connection do you see between the exclusionary logics at work in both gender and race, and how do we combat one without embracing the other?

JKC: Well, another thing that I am trying to do in the book—this comes up in

the Douglass chapter—is to show that the question of race and the question of modernity cannot just be attacked and approached as the question of race and the question of gender as if race and gender have some sort of ontological constitution in and of themselves. It is as if to say we know what they are apart from the way that they meet us in our social realities. No, we know the problems of gender and race as they confront us—in specific bodies, as specific people, under specific social and political conditions. And so what I was trying to do in the Douglass chapter was to say that, as the problem of race has presented itself in the world in which we live, as it has emerged historically, the race question and the gender question are one question.

One of the benefits of Douglass' work is that, if on one level his constructive argument fails, as a descriptive work of the problem we deal with, it succeeds masterfully. The 1845 Narrative, precisely in its failure, that is, in its replication of the problem of violence, specifies the problem of whiteness even more as the problem of the white masculine. Whiteness as the problem of the white masculine seeks to absorb everything into itself. What this means is that part of the way in which white women have historically tried to live into their respect as women, which is right, has been by means of a kind of entry into a white masculine posture. In other words, the white masculine has become the ideal for what constitutes freedom. If you want to be free, quite often it turns out that you replicate being a white man. Douglass—in an odd way, in the aspiration towards freedom—was entering into the subjective position of white men in domination of the black. But now we see something else, namely, that the apogee of what it means to be black redounds to the black feminine. And so black femininity was being framed as the absolute inverse of what true freedom is, which is the white masculine. Now, inside of this nexus, what we ultimately need is a new narrative of freedom. But let's say that you are trying to work and situate yourself within that given narrative. That means that your freedom in that narrative means that you have to try to replicate white masculinity. Even if you are in drag as a black man! So when Douglass gets inside of this, without another account of freedom at his disposal, his freedom replicates the denigration of the black feminine. And this is what often happens when white women struggle to live into freedom within this framework. Freedom proves to be a zero-sum game within this analysis—the freedom of some requires and necessitates the bondage of others. The question becomes, “who gets bound?”

Theologically, then, the task is to imagine another kind of freedom. We can think of this freedom as a Christological ladder, and the rungs on that ladder are rungs of freedom, now reconceived as constituted in the man Jesus. I attempt to do this in three parts: the prelude, interlude, and postlude of the book; all three are explicit Christological meditations, engaging one of the fathers of the church, with a view not to “save the tradition.” I am not invested in saving the tradition. I am invested in trying to give witness to the deep rupture who is the man Jesus. So I go back to these figures to try to pull them into our modernist moment, and see how they sound within our space. In doing that, I try to build a Christological account of freedom. I begin with Irenaeus, who I display as an anti-Gnostic theologian;

then I address Gregory of Nyssa in the interlude (who I interpret as an abolitionist intellectual); and finally, in the postlude, I engage Maximus the Confessor, the seventh-century Christologian who I read as an anti-colonialist intellectual. I profile the thread of Christology in each of their works, and try to create a link between the three. The result of this is a Christology that speaks back to the severing of Jesus from his Jewish roots, in the production of a racial imagination, whose ideal and archetype is the white masculine, and whose negative anchor becomes the black feminine—the sign of dark peoples around the world.

AM: Along those lines, I particularly appreciated this quote from your “Postlude on Christology and Race:”

Maximus conceives of human nature as being reopened in Christ, not simply to God but also to itself. Christ reopens humanity to embrace the many that is constitutive of created human nature, enacting it no longer within an order of tyrannical division but, rather, in an order of “peaceful difference,” the one-many structure of creation.³

JKC: That goes to the heart of my engagement of these figures. Modern theology is inside of a kind of theological *resourcement*. We see this within contemporary Roman Catholicism, particularly with the efforts to re-archive theology through Thomas Aquinas. There are others as well, but Thomas is a kind of apogee of this. We see this not only within Roman Catholicism, but also in Anglo-Catholicism. I am thinking, for example, of one of my own teachers, John Milbank. Again, it is a kind of *resourcement* of theology by a return to “the sources,” i.e., the tradition. In Milbank’s case, it is a kind of Platonized Thomas Aquinas. The analogy of being is a kind of code word for this *resourcement*. You see it as well within Protestant theology, with the Yale School, and in my own institution, the Duke School theology: where we have the same kind of turn to the tradition. What I try to do in this book is not merely reiterate that. It might seem in many respects that my book is trying to do that, but now for black people. That is wrong. What I am trying to do is think the depths of what happened to theology. How did theology become the handmaid of colonialism? How did theology become the handmaid of the geography, the idea, and the ideal of the West in relationship to the rest? How did theology become the intellectual aid and abettor of this process? What would it mean to think beyond this?

AM: Indeed, you have some fairly scathing comments regarding Milbank’s disregard of the question of race in his re-appropriation of the tradition scattered in a few footnotes. I was somewhat concerned that I might come off as a theological gossip columnist if I were to ask about your relationship to your old teacher, but there you go, you brought it up for me.

3. J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 351.

JKC: It is not just my former teacher: it is really a bigger issue. From the time I wrote those comments in the footnotes till now, I have actually deepened quite substantively my analysis of the problem. It is not just Anglo-Catholicism, nor is it just Anglicanism. I will just forecast the trajectories of my scholarship with the book I am working on now and the one that will be coming out after that. What I have really started to do is acquire a reading of late-modern theology—post-World War II. When decolonization efforts entered into full-throttle, how did theology recalibrate itself? How did theology enter into a kind of post-colonial melancholy? It is that wider, more expansive reading of late-modern theology that is of interest to me; this new Anglo-Catholicism is but a moment in a wider phenomenon about how theology recalibrates itself from its colonial status to a kind of post-, if not neo-colonial status. It proves to be the case that central to the recalibration is a certain kind of reclamation of the tradition. So, the turn to the tradition is actually symptomatic of a post-colonial melancholy, a malaise that has actually gained deep momentum in modern theology. I will try to lay this out in the book that is coming after the one I am completing now. That work has a tentative title called *The Melancholic Condition*. So, this present book on race is really part of what will be a trilogy when it is completed.

AM: A great deal of scientific work has gone towards demonstrating that any claims to a genetic basis for race are, at best, extremely tenuous; that the most we can gather from our DNA is that a certain percentage of our ancestors lived in a certain place for a certain amount of time—a far stretch from the identities our society has codified as blackness or whiteness. Hypothetically, though, would you be forced to revise anything if scientists were to hold a press conference next week and say, “yes, in fact we have found the race gene?”

JKC: Of course I would have to deal with that. I would have to engage it, but what I would confront it with is the inter-racial person. The inter-racial person is not easily able to be aligned as either black or white. The question becomes, “What are the social procedures at work that press them to choose?” That is what scientific discourses around race want to camouflage. It is the social work that is race that is what is at issue here. When we deal with that, we are dealing with how a people are formed to make a nation. We are dealing with how the international works in relation to peoplehood and the construction of a nation. We are dealing with all those kinds of questions, and that is what I am going after in this book. The question of race is the question of who we take, as Jesus says, to be “my mother and father”; who we take to be our sisters and brothers; which is to say, who we take to be our family of obligation. That is what the question of race is. Once I can build the border—whether it is the border going across southwest Texas, or the border that is the imaginary border that is race, which constructs the nation—once those lines are drawn, what I have effectively defined is to whom my obligations extend, and to whom they do not extend. The issue is not just the extension or withdrawal of obligations, but quite often, the extension or withdrawal of obligations based on some ideal picture of what constitutes the human. What I am trying to do is excavate the kind of genealogy underneath scientific claims.

To account oneself a Christian who is, in theological terms, a Gentile, that is, a non-Jew, but nevertheless accounts their salvation as coming from the Jew who is Jesus, who himself is the culmination of the story of Israel's relationships with their God, and therefore is the Messiah of Israel, is, in many ways, an *interracial claim*. What this means in effect is that as a Gentile, I am in the position of Ruth in the Bible, where my family of commitment is in a people who are not my people but who received me, and that is my salvation. What is a Gentile Christian? A Gentile Christian is one who echoes the promises of Yahweh to the people of Israel, which have redounded to the whole world. Now, in the racial terms of modernity, that sounds like *mulatto* existence.

AM: Another way of putting this, as you do in the book, is that to be a Christian is to follow in the steps of Abraham, to be called out of your identity to follow Yahweh, like you point out with Ruth, in order to be received by a people that is not your own. Yet somehow, somewhere along the line, Christianity came to be conceived of as the religion of White Europe, as an identity that you didn't need to be called out of if you were white.

JKC: Exactly. One of the things that I have already been fielding questions about, which I anticipated as a potential source of confusion in my argument, is that I could imagine someone saying, "Aren't the Jews a race group?" So, I tried to do two things in the book, both of which are very important. On the one hand, I am acknowledging that the very production of the racial imagination, the constitution of whiteness, entailed the conversion of the Jew into a race type, an inferior one, so as to constitute the ideal as superior. So, what we are dealing with in modernity is both the making of the Jew as non-white, so as to stratify the human as racial. But on the other hand, when we think about the Jew, particularly the story of Jewish existence as it emerges in Scripture, what we are getting there is the Jews as a covenantal people, not as a race type. That is to say that they do not conceive of themselves as having their ultimate origin in biology, in the so-called purity of blood. The ground of their identity as a people is the call from Yahweh and their obedience in following that call. It is from that they emerge biologically, not the other way around. That means, on the front end, that Jewish identity is an identity of openness. It must receive itself through its calling from Yahweh, which is precisely why it can receive non-Jews, or Gentiles, into its fold.

In fact, Abram himself is called, and it is out of that calling that his life story unfolds, such that his name undergoes a change. As he lives into the call of obediently following Yahweh, his name segues from Abram to Abraham.⁴ It is precisely that transformation that is tied to his obedient following out of Yahweh's

4. Gn 17:5.

call that constitutes him as the ground of this people. And in this precise way, for Abram to become Abraham, and for Jacob, his progeny, to become Israel,⁵ provides an analogy of creation as such, because creation doesn't have a ground in itself. This is the whole point of the doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo*: to say that the creature has no ground in itself. Its ground is in the divine fiat, "Let there be..." The same fiat that calls Abram out is an analogy of the fiat that calls creation into being,⁶ which is an analogy of the fiat that is extended to Mary of Israel, to which she responds, "Let it be unto me according to your word."⁷ In each of these gestures, the story of Israel's being carried out—with every step more deeply, more profoundly, and with each step it is opening out even more widely to the world.

AM: So our identity is our "Amen" to the fiat of the Lord?

JKC: Yes, in contrast to an identity that seeks to constitute itself, to claim itself, to believe that it has its origins from itself, that it can capture its origins, and in that sense to mimic God, to "be like God," in the language of Genesis. In contradistinction to that kind of vision of identity, which always encodes violence, you have the calling of God that brings forth creation, and within that calling we have Israel as the very echo of creation, and the carrying out of that calling culminates in the Messiah of Israel, Jesus of Israel, who is born forth from this people, from Mary of Israel, for the world.

Now, what I started to put together earlier is the profound politics of that. When black folks, in a world that says that you are nothing, that you are inferior, enter into Israel's story, it begins to narrate their identity inside of the narrative of Yahweh's ways and deeds and dealings with the people of Israel. So while the world says that you are nothing, inside Israel's story, they are somebody. What I wanted to do was capture the theological rupture that represented within a world structured by race, and thereby capture the theological intervention that is Afro-Christianity. My aim was not merely to read it as a cultural phenomenon—"that's a black thing and we can respect it as black"—but to actually lay claim upon the form of theological subjectivity that is at work in Afro-Christian life. In seeing the theological subjectivity that is at work in it, it now extends an obligation to anyone that will call on the name of Jesus. Not by pointing us to blackness as such, but inside of Afro-Christianity, pointing us to the absolute political rupture that is entailed in saying Jesus is the Lord. When black folk called on Jesus, was this just a cultural reflex, or was this a tectonic shift in the order of things?

AM: When 'Black theology', as popularly conceived of today, began in earnest in the late sixties, the felt effects of white supremacy were much more acute. The

5. Gn 35:10.
6. Gn 12; 1.
7. Lk 1:38.

reality of the situation may not have changed, but it seems that at least on the level of perception, a great deal has changed in the racial climate in America since then. How has the course of the last forty years affected the context of doing theology as a black theologian?

JKC: No doubt about it. In some respects, arguably, it has gotten more difficult, precisely because it has gotten better. Let me explain what I mean by that. To the extent that there has been progress, and there has been progress (all you have to do is head down to 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue and see Barack Obama in the *White House*, and you can see there has been progress), it becomes in some sense more difficult to call attention to the racial problem. But also, the complexity of the race problem, which was always complex, has become even more complex. The race question can never be, nor has it ever been, simply a problem of the white-black binary. You have the Asian component of this, and inside of Asian America, it is complex: Korean-Americans, Japanese-Americans, Vietnamese, Cambodian, so on and so forth, all of whom are then positioned in complex ways within racial space. This is to say nothing of immigrant questions surrounding Latino existence, which has one inflection if you are talking about Cuban Hispanics, and another if you are talking about Mexican Hispanics. And then you lay all of the gender questions inside of the race question—it is complex! So it is often difficult to talk about race. That's one of the reasons why it is difficult to do the work at hand because you have to have complex registers in order to talk about these matters.

I end the book by saying that race is *the* theological problem of our day, and I had wondered if maybe I was being too strong with that. But the more I think about it, the more I am convinced that it is not too strong an assertion—the question of race is the question of the human. It is the question of how we imagine human life, the intra-human dynamics that confront us (how we relate to one another) and the inter-human dynamics (how the human interfaces with God, as we will want to say as Christians). These matters go to the quick of what Christian intellectual life is about—and since 1492, the West has become global in relation to the rest, and the question of the human became the defining question confronting us. It has been ramified, grown, gotten more complex, and more subtle—many times stretching the limits of our conceptual powers to capture—but it is the problem confronting us. The race question is perhaps the deep analytic inside of the human that is confronting Christian theology.

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