

Black Secularism and Black Theology

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James Cone famously, or infamously, identified “white theology” as a major threat not only to black Christians but to Christianity in general. In 1970 he called it “a theology of the anti-Christ.” I want to suggest that, forty years later, another threat has emerged: black secularism.

White theology, purporting to be universal but actually representing the interests of a specific racial group, posed an especially potent threat because of the dearth of black theological writings. I am in complete agreement with Cone’s recent statements that black theology has been troublingly ignored. But I would add that this ignorance is rationalized, in part, by the existence today of black scholars talking about Christianity. The trouble is that in many cases those black scholars are committed to black secularism, not black theology. While a theological response to black secularism has been growing in recent years, it has not fully engaged the early insights of black theology.

What I mean by black secularism is illustrated by the recent, very public debate about the demise of “the black church.” Prompted by an online article by Princeton religion professor Eddie Glaude titled, “The Black Church is Dead,” the ensuing discussions were featured in, among other outlets, *The New York Times*, National Public Radio, and numerous Web sites. In his article, Glaude asserts that the black church no longer plays a preeminent role in the lives of many African Americans, black people are increasingly attending multi-racial megachurches, and the prophetic voice of the black church has become so familiar that it has lost its punch. For prophetic Christianity to be revived, Glaude insists, prophecy must be understood as “instances of men and women who grasp the fullness of meaning to be one with God,” something that cannot be inherited from previous generations. The complex contemporary (and historical) landscape of black America must be acknowledged. Glaude concludes by suggesting a shift from talking about *the* black church to talking about black *churches*.

What makes Glaude's article an example of black secularism is not a crude empiricism. Although he makes use of sociological analysis of shifting black social space, the "fullness of meaning" of which Glaude writes certainly moves beyond the empirical. Indeed, it aspires to the theological, describing the prophet as "one with God." But Glaude's theological vision is limited because it is harnessed to social facts. The black church is always the black church visible; there is no space for the black church invisible, the Black Church. While Glaude insists that a prophetic political voice cannot be passed down from one generation to the next, the Black Church names precisely that which perdures without inheritance. Prophecy is possible through participation in the Black Church, which is participation in the Body of Christ, not through grasping "fullness of meaning" under-defined as abstract unity with God. Moreover, the Black Church names that which is by definition *invisible*, that of which the complicated landscape of institutions calling themselves churches always fall short, always have and always will. In brief, black secularism usurps the place of black theology but takes away theological imagination, allowing the prophetic voice of the Black Church to be muted.

Secularism is not the lack of religiosity, or the state that results from secularization. Secularism is a dogmatic commitment to exclude the theological. The theological and not the religious: there are many who diagnose intellectual problems with secularism and prescribe making room for religious reasons, or religious language, or religious practices. The academic humanities have seen much of this recently: a realization in history, anthropology, literature, and cultural studies that the religious has been excluded without reason, and must now be attended to. But secularism as I mean it is the foreclosure of the theological imagination, of that blend of beliefs, languages, and practices that acknowledges a religious "cultural-linguistic system" – or rather its theological doppelganger – not as an object of study but as that in which we participate, wittingly or unwittingly. For the secularist, Christianity is reducible to beliefs, languages, and practices; from her perspective the theologian who speaks of something more speaks nonsense.

By black secularism I simply mean discussions of black religion that give cultural or political analysis primacy over theology, and so foreclose the theological imagination. There are two main strands of black secularism in the academy today: pragmatism and contextualism. Both are responses to the seminal work of Cone and others in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Both claim to avoid the dangers of secularism by attending to religious language, beliefs, and practices. But both actually have the effect of foreclosing theological imagination.

Pragmatists respond to the early work of black theology by criticizing its “essentialism.” There is no need to be committed to “ontological blackness” or, for that matter, to an ontological understanding of God-talk. We can still understand each other, understand history, and understand culture if we just look at how the word “black” (and “God”) is being used to address specific problems. We ourselves can strategically make use of this vocabulary to address problems that we are facing. Nothing of value is lost by supposing that some essence of these terms does not exist, or that the quest for necessary and sufficient conditions for their use is futile. Such suppositions are intellectual confusions. They only occur to those who think for a living, and ultimately they distort rather than illuminate.

Contextualists respond to early black theology by offering a more careful account of what seemingly essentialist language refers to. Blackness need not have an essence, or be definable with necessary and sufficient conditions, as long as we can offer a thick description of what it involves. Several thick descriptions may be needed of distinctive communities whose differences were obscured by the term blackness: black women, Africans, West Indians, and others. Complementing thick descriptions of communities are thick descriptions of their Gods – or, rather, of their religious languages, beliefs, and practices. These thick descriptions can substitute for the blunt instrument of words like “God” and “Trinity.” Contextualism does not just acknowledge that theology happens in cultural contexts. It sees theological reflection and thick description as intimately and inextricably

intertwined.

Pragmatic and contextual approaches are not in conflict. In fact, the difference could perhaps be described as one of emphasis. These two approaches have created academic space, in religious studies and theology departments respectively, for the inheritors of black theology. But in addressing perceived flaws with early black theology, these two approaches have eliminated what was most radical theologically (and politically, and racially) about black theology. They respond to a perceived problem of definition: the term “black” is judged defective. This judgment is based on secular reasoning: the word obscures complexity by unifying what is disparate. Yet the term “black” was used by early black theologians in a specifically theological sense. It was not meant to “accurately” refer to an empirical group of people. Rather, it was meant to effect a transformation from one way of perceiving and living in the world to another. The racial terminology of the day – Negroes and coloreds – was set aside in favor of a new idiom the reference of which was not fixed. Underdetermined, the term “black” takes on a paradoxical meaning. It both attempts to refer literally to specific historical individuals and attempts to refer symbolically to the oppressed as such. But these two referents cannot be held together. Ultimately, the term “black” does not signify worldly individuals or groups at all. It signifies paradox. The contradictions of black life, written of so eloquently by Cone, give black people privileged access to paradox. It infuses our lives. And the ultimate paradox is embodied in Christ: this is how, as Cone writes, “blackness and divinity are dialectically bound together as one reality.”

In other words, the linguistic shift from “Negro” to “black” endorsed by black theology effects a *theological* transformation. The performative effect of the label “black” is easy to forget from the perspective of the present. This amnesia, I suspect, makes plausible the pragmatist and contextualist projects. “Black” is taken literally, to signify certain people in the world; when it seems to signify wrongly, it must be modified. This amnesia makes possible, and is made possible by, secularism: the foreclosure of the theological imagination. It is precisely the same amnesia that allows us to forget that

the Black Church might mean more than a certain worldly institution. The early work of black theologians was so powerful because it wove a theological narrative together from knots of paradox: liberation at once historical and eschatological, freedom from oppression as servitude to the struggle against oppression, humanity itself as the willingness to die to preserve humanity. One could go so far as to suggest that the preeminence of black theology is justified by its superior aesthetic: the central paradox of the God-man echoes in every concept of black theology. In this way, black theology is supremely *theological*. These echoes of paradox can only be heard with a theological imagination. Secularism smoothes or contains paradox. This is precisely what Cone accuses white theology of doing (where “white” simply names one who is oblivious to paradox). In Cone’s idiom, black secularism is white theology repackaged by black folks.

The black theological imagination is beginning to reemerge. Two recent works – J. Kameron Carter’s *Race: A Theological Account* (Oxford, 2008) and Willie James Jennings’s *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Invention of Race* (Yale, 2010) –offer wonderfully creative, and self-consciously anti-secularist, reflections on race. For each, whiteness is heresy. It is, perhaps, the foundational Christian heresy because it is based on supersessionism. Race is invented to distinguish unmarked Christians from racially marked Jews. To overcome racism today we must revisit that theological heritage. We must find resources in the Christian tradition that avoid supersessionism. The project of race theory and of theology converge: the works of slaves, historians of race, and Church Fathers can be read together to tell the Christian story in a way that avoids the dangers of whiteness.

These recent works are heartening, but their potential is limited. Their use of race language focuses on whiteness (Carter writes of non-whites as “the darker races”). Rather than using “white” to refer to a certain group, even pragmatically, they use the word genealogically. Their projects tell the story of how whiteness came to be the seemingly natural entity which it appears as today. But anti-white theology is not black theology; blackness is not what is left over when the heresy of whiteness is

purged. Blackness, as the early work of black theologians demonstrated, names paradox, and it is precisely paradox that the recent works of Carter and Jennings do not fully appreciate. They veer towards Balthasar and away from Barth: towards participation in divine performance through explication of an aesthetic and away from the inadequacy of all human stammering about God, away from the paradox that is at the heart Christian faith.

What is needed today is to couple the emerging Balthasarian theological imagination of Carter and Jennings with the Barthian theological imagination of Cone's early work. When secularism is abandoned, tradition and paradox go hand in hand. Tradition without paradox degenerates into the secularist vocabulary of culture and history. Paradox without tradition degenerates into the secularist vocabulary of deconstruction. I am not sure exactly what a theological imagination harnessing paradox and tradition would look like, but I know that it would be *theological*. And it would be *black*. For it would grapple with the impossible problem of describing together generic oppression and specific oppressed communities in a way that makes us uncomfortable. The name "black theology" is less important than the performative effect: black theology is an aesthetics of paradox.