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## Review

**J. Kameron Carter,**

***Race: A Theological Account***

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Reviewer: Celucien L. Joseph, University of Texas at Dallas

[celucien\\_joseph@yahoo.com](mailto:celucien_joseph@yahoo.com)

In *Race: A Theological Account*, J. K. Carter argues that Christian theology has contributed to the roots of modernity's racial imagination when Western Christianity betrayed its Jewish roots and appropriated the Jews as a racialized body of people. Carter proposes a twofold process in which "racial imagination" came into being, resulting in "racist imagination" (or white supremacy). The Jews were "racialized" as a people of the Orient and thus Judaism was constructed as a "religion of the East" (4). Consequently, the racial imagination (the first step) proved as well to be a racist imagination (the second step) of white supremacy. Carter asserts

that, “within the gulf enacted between Christianity and the Jews, the racial, which proves to be a racist, imagination was forged” (ibid). The author suggests that the phenomena of racial imagination and white supremacy have been the nascent project of Western modernity. Further, imperial colonialism coupled with Christian theology were successfully implanted in the academic disciplines of social sciences, particularly in Western theological discourses, from the eighteenth-century Enlightenment to the present. Consequently, the concepts of ontological racial difference and cultural supercessionism were sketched and disseminated through the lens of a Eurocentric theological vision. Hence Western civilization claimed for itself the Christian religion, and as a matter of tradition, to talk about Christendom was to articulate whiteness and Western culture. Western Christianity has therefore created a white-race religion and espoused a racialized theology. Carter’s aim in the book is to undo this damage and rehabilitate Christian theology by reconceptualizing a new theological discourse for the twenty-first century, one that is centered not on a racial imagination, but rather on the identity of the covenantal Jewish fleshly Messiah, Jesus Christ.

The book is divided into three equal parts and contains eight lengthy chapters. The Prelude begins with a discussion of the intellectual debate between Irenaeus and a particular brand of Gnosticism over the issues of Christology and material existence. Carter’s narrative of this historical event is clear. Gnosticism was anxious over Jesus’ human flesh and divided human beings in three classes. Carter insists that this division is foundational to modern racialization and classification of humans. Unfolding Irenaeus’ argument, Carter posits that Irenaeus’s goal was to affirm the materiality of Christ in his incarnational state and his recapitulation of human material existence, respectively. This section of the book is important because it underlines the early polemic of “ethnic reasoning in early Christianity” and the Gnostics’ attempt to eject all things Jewish from the Christian vision. Consequently, Irenaeus affirms Israel as the people of God and Yahweh as the Sovereign God, which Gnosticism avowedly rejected. The rest of the

book narrates how Western Christian theology has incorporated the legacies of ancient Gnosticism, what Carter calls “the neo-Gnosticism of modern racial discourse.”

Part I: “Dramatizing Race: A Theological Account of Modernity,” engages the critical-theoretical work of Cornel West, Michel Foucault, and Immanuel Kant, on the genealogy of modern racism. For Carter, Western genealogy of modern racism is important because it considers the factors by which white supremacy as an idea of the West was constructed and embedded in Euro-American culture. The author notes that Foucault’s report on race, however, is linked with the critical moment in history when human beings conceived themselves as “sexual beings,” eventually as “racial beings.” Carter points out that Foucault’s engagement with the problem of race is decisive because the latter treats the modern politics and the genealogy of the nation-state. Notably, Foucault makes “important moves in opening onto a genealogy of religion—one that would identify how the *Judenfrage* (*the Jewish Question*) functions as the constantly ramifying inner mechanism that propels modernity and moves its discourse of race” (44). Accordingly, Foucault’s analysis of the problem of race is bound to “an analysis of the problem of the modern nation from—to the problem, that is, of how the modern state gives form, shape, and substance to the political” (43). In this framework, modernity is said to be a racial phenomenon; its continuous existence is dependent on the race struggle. While Carter praises Cornel West for his rigorous engagement with the issue, he nonetheless faults him for not discussing the convergence of the theological and the political inner workings of modernity’s racial dilemma. Next, Carter turns to Kant whom the author insists orchestrates the “edifice of the problem” of race. It is with Kant’s racial-anthropological theory, Carter suggests, that modern racial reasonings came into its initial maturation in a more coherent fashion and expression. Carter demonstrates with precision and careful exegesis how Kant espouses a racial-theological vision of the modern man, which inherently undergirds his philosophical, ethico-political discourses. In this way, Kant could claim in specific terms that Jesus and Paul framed a universal

religion outside of Jewish borders. In particular, Carter unveils Kant's triumphalist replacement vision of the Pauline idea of the "remnant race" in Romans 9—11 to the teleological perfection of a race type, the white race (81). Further, the author argues that this reasoning is fundamental to Kant's emergent political-cultural nationalism of whiteness, which articulates both the destiny and global perfection of whiteness and predicates on the extinction of Jewish flesh (81-120).

In Part II: "Engaging Race: The Field of African American Religious Studies" and Part III: "Redirecting Race: Outlines of a Theological Program," Carter engages the world of black religious academy of the 1960s and 1970s including painstaking interactions with black luminaries Albert J. Raboteau, James H. Cone, and Charles H. Long. Carter comments that each of these writers individually and collectively launched a religious critique of (white) culture, white theology, in particular. He also observes that these representative scholars attempted to disrupt in their epoch the very problem this book confronts; chiefly the problem of whiteness that is in essence a theological problem. In this framework, Carter is conscious that his study continues a similar vision; that is, the intricacy of race is a theological quandary. Considerably, the author acknowledges Cone's creative imagination, particularly in his insistence on the Jewishness of Jesus as the starting point for his black theology project. He praises the impressive scholarship of Raboteau in *Slave Religion* and Long's groundbreaking study in the discipline but later condemns them for their inability to transcend the racial framework of blackness that whiteness created and continues to shape and reshape.

Second, Carter brings into conversation a series of seminal figures and associated thought. These include the fourth-century century patristic father and slave abolitionist, Gregory of Nyssa, the theological narrative of the slave of Briton Hammon, the social activism and theological advocacy of Frederick Douglass, and finally the pneumatology of Jarena Lee. The author notes that the theological vision of each writer above is chiefly concerned with a Christological sensibility in which the person of Jesus is demonstrated as the Christ of the Jewish

covenantal flesh and not a racial-colonial flesh (7). Gregory insists on the Jewish Jesus as the *imago Dei* and human beings as bearers of the same divine image which establish human equality and dignity. Hammon, Lee, and Douglass, in their respective autobiographies, reconfigured their lives not in the light of a Jewish racial flesh, but instead of the Jewish covenantal fleshly Messiah.

Carter brings his essay to conclusion with a “Postlude on Christology and Race,” with an emphasis on the person of Maximus the Confessor whose theological anthropology and Christology, the author proposes, anticipates Hammon’s, Douglass’s, and Lee’s theological understandings of Scriptures. In this way they redirected Christian theology to the very identity of Jesus the covenantal Jew, whose obedient body was “a material arrangement of freedom that discloses the historical transcendence of God” (8). In the Epilogue, Carter calls for a new constructive discourse of theology in the twenty-first century—one that moves beyond white scholastic reasoning and incorporates the theology of the “other,” the margins. In this way, Carter’s theological vision for the twenty-first century might rightly be called “The Theology of the Nations.”

In conclusion, it is not arrogant to assert that Carter has written so far the most theological treatment on the dynamics of modern racism and Christian theology, and their relationship to Western modernity. His thesis is persuasive and intellectually rigorous. *Race: A Theological Account* is well researched, sophisticated, and elegant in style. I look forward to Carter’s future works.