

Race

A Theological Account

J. KAMERON CARTER

Epilogue

The Discourse of Theology in the Twenty-First Century

Because the present is continually changing, the theologian cannot be content with establishing and communicating the results obtained by some classical period; his reflection must be renewed constantly. For this reason, serious theological work is forced, again and again, to begin from the beginning.

—Karl Barth, *Protestant Theology
in the Nineteenth Century*

[The challenge before us is] trying to determine [how the scholastic condition] affects the thought that it makes possible and, consequently, the very form and content of what we think. . . . [The] vision of the world associated with the scholastic condition is not a gratuitous exercise. . . . [It] is a systematic principle of error—in the realm of knowledge (or science), the realm of ethics (or law, and of politics) and in the realm of aesthetics. . . . The three forms of fallacy, being founded on the same principle. . . . and thus linked by kinship, support and justify each other, and this makes them stronger and more resistant to critique.

—Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*

Long before Marx and Gramsci would remind me, I understood that consciousness is shaped by the material realm, that learning takes place in a world of trouble.

—Michael Eric Dyson, *Between God
and Gangsta Rap*

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The perennial though increasingly invisible theological problem of our times is not race in general but whiteness in particular. The modern racializing of bodies in social space is unintelligible, apart from how Christian identity was reimagined during the Enlightenment and how both the content and the disposition animating Christian theology shifted. Christianity was severed from its Jewish roots, lopped off from the people of Israel to facilitate Western conquest. Thus it came to pass that Christianity became the cultural-religious reflex of Western existence. But what enabled this to occur? A shift in theological sensibility: Christianity's central figure, Jesus Christ, came to be racialized ultimately as a figure of the Occident, though as regards his bodily status he was deemed to be not of the West. As regards his flesh he was of the Orient, an oriental Jew. Reconceived as an occidental (rational) religion, Christianity was transformed into the cultural property of the West. Christian civilization became Western civilization, and vice versa. Thus, embedded within the social imaginary of the civilizations of the West is the theological problem of the *Rassenfrage*: I say theological because buried within it, indeed animating it, is the vexed theological, which is very much the political matter, as Baruch Spinoza put it, of the *Judenfrage*.¹ Modernity/coloniality is quintessentially the product of an ideological usage of Jesus.

I argue throughout this book that overcoming this problem will require the audacity of theological imagination. It must be audacious because it will require that theology (be it orthodox, radically orthodox, liberal, postliberal, or what have you) no longer do its work in Kantian fashion. It can no longer do its work as the enterprise of a *Bildungsbürgerium* or as an enterprise of the religious elite functioning in the interests of power. Theology can no longer be done out of what I would like to call the religious disposition. This disposition is similar to what the French sociologist of the intellectual life, Pierre Bourdieu, has called "the scholastic disposition".

There is no doubt nothing more difficult to apprehend, for those who are immersed in universes in which it goes without saying, than the scholastic disposition demanded by those universes. There is nothing that "pure" thought finds harder to think than *skhole*; the first and most determinant of all the social conditions of possibility of "pure" thought, and also the scholastic disposition which inclines its possessors to suspend the demands of the situation, the constraints of economic and social necessity, and the urgencies it imposes or the ends it proposes. . . . [The scholastic disposition] is what incites people to enter into the play-world of theoretical conjecture and mental experimentation, to raise problems for the pleasure of solving them, and not because they arise in the world, under the pressure of urgency. . . . The scholastic situation (of which the academic world represents the institutionalized form) is a site and a moment of so-

cial weightlessness where, defying the common opposition between playing (*paizein*) and being serious (*spoudazein*), one can "play seriously" (*spoudaios paizein*), in the phrase Plato uses to characterize philosophical activity, take the stakes in games seriously, deal seriously with questions that "serious" people, occupied and preoccupied by the practical business of everyday life, ignore. And if the link between the scholastic mode of thought and the mode of existence which is the condition of its acquisition and implementation escapes attention, this is not only because those who might grasp it are like fish in water in the situation of which their dispositions are the product, but also because the essential part of what is transmitted in and by that situation is a hidden effect of the situation itself.²

While the entirety of this quotation is certainly important, I want to emphasize the last sentence, which is difficult to grasp because it is densely complex. There Bourdieu contends that a critique of scholastic reason (and so, of the religious mode of scholastic reason in theological and religious studies) entails rendering visible the invisible link "between the scholastic mode of thought"—the mode of thought of "*homo academicus*." Bourdieu says at another point in his critique—"and the mode of existence which is the condition of its acquisition and implementation." Bourdieu contends that the mode of thought of the scholar, the traces of which are left in his/her intellectual productions, and the mode of the scholar's existence *qua* scholar, that is, the scholar's way of being in the world, is precisely the "forgetting of being."

In this book I latch onto Bourdieu's insight, though in linking it to the issues of modern theology and the production of the modern/colonial world, I press Bourdieu's insight beyond what he was specifically addressing. I seek to identify the actual being that is forgotten in the "forgetting of being" that marks and indeed enables modernity. It is the forgetting or overcoming of the Jews as those whose very existence points to YHWH as God and Lord. In forgetting them, they are made to be the alien internal to the West, the figure through whom all dark people, as aliens external to the Western imaginary, are forgotten. What is it that is forgotten about them? It is the forgetting of the everyday practices of such people in their real worlds of pain, suffering, poverty, and death. This forgetting is the inner doxa out of which the theological work went forward to enact the modern world and to sustain it. And therefore there is a certain theological character to the entire process. Or better, the entire process is *pseudothological* in character in that its condition of possibility is a distortion of Christian existence so as to restrict such existence to the West. Out of this, Christian existence and Western civilization are rendered equivalent. (Western) religious consciousness is born of this mutual inscription. Such is the intellectual-theological *habitus* of modernity.

This book calls for a new *habitus*, a new Christian theological-intellectual practice, one that arises from the everyday practices of the very people the forgetting of whom is the condition of the scholastic universes of "homo academicus." Their lives and the practices through which they negotiate their real worlds of pain and suffering and life and death must become the locus or the disposition out of which theology does its work. For as Maximus the Confessor has said, "the poor one"—the very one homo academicus forgets in the forgetting of being—"is God," and this is due to "God's condescension . . . in taking upon himself by [Christ's] own sufferings the sufferings of each one. [Accomplishing this] 'until the end of time' and out of the mystery of the divine life itself, [Christ wills] always to suffer in proportion to each one's suffering" (CM 24; MCSW 212, trans. modified). In connection with the poor one, at the various sites of the underside of modernity, and, in short, from the places of suffering—this is the locus from which theology must be renewed. To use Karl Barth's language, such places are the places of theology's new beginning, the beginning at which theology must begin again. It must begin with a new disposition, a new theological-intellectual *habitus*.³

Theology beyond (White) Scholastic Reason

In a revealing passage in an autobiographical essay he wrote for the *New York Times Book Review* in 1995 ("Shakespeare and Smokey Robinson") and that reappeared in 1996 in *Between God and Gangsta Rap: Bearing Witness to Black Culture*, Michael Eric Dyson tells a story that in part points to the disposition in which theology must reorient itself if it would transcend white scholastic reason: that style of intellection is at the heart of the theological problem of whiteness and of how theology today most often is done by white and nonwhite intellectuals alike.⁴

Dyson recounts how as a teenager living in a Detroit ghetto he developed a twofold intellectual passion. These passions were dialectically held together, one might say, by the conjunctive "and" of his 1995 *New York Times Book Review* essay and its book title in which the essay reappeared in 1996. On the one hand, under the tutorship of a woman of the neighborhood named Mrs. James, a woman whom he describes as "full-checked" and "honey-brown-skinned," an adolescent Dyson was guided through a "vast ocean of black intellectual and cultural life."⁵ "We read," he says, "about the exploits of black cowboys . . . [and] studied great inventors like Jan Matseliger, Garrett Morgan and Granville T. Woods . . . She told us of the debates between W. E. B. Du Bois and Booker T. Washington."⁶ Moreover, he tells us that Mrs. James instructed him in

the poetry of importance of Paul Laurence Dunbar and Langston Hughes. In fact, I won my first contest of any sort when I received a

prized blue ribbon for reciting Dunbar's "Little Brown Baby." I still get pleasure from reading Dunbar's vernacular vision. . . . Mrs. James also taught us to read Margaret Alexander Walker. I can still remember the thrill of listening to a chorus of fifth-grade girls reciting, first in turn and then in unison, the verses to Walker's "For My People." . . . The girls' rhetorical staccatos and crescendos, their clear articulation and emotional expressiveness, were taught and encouraged by Mrs. James. . . . She taught us the importance of Roland Hayes and Bessie Smith. . . . Marian Anderson and Mahalia Jackson. . . . Paul Robeson and Louis Armstrong. . . . We were taught to believe that the same musical genius that animated Scott Joplin lighned as well on Stevie Wonder. We saw no essential division between "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" and "I Can't Get Next to You." Thus the postmodern came crashing in on me before I gained sight of it in Derrida and Foucault.⁷

On the other hand, Dyson tells us that as a result of a gift of a collection of books, a veritable assemblage of "Harvard Classics," from the widow of "a staunch Republican who had recently died," who in contrast to the full-checked, honey-brown-skinned Mrs. James is left nameless in his account, he was introduced to and developed a profound and sustained love for some of the most treasured works of English letters. To name just a few of the ones he lists: Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography*; the works of Marcus Aurelius and John Milton; Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*; the speeches of Lincoln; the works of the various metaphysical poets; Hobbes; Plutarch; the political philosophy of John Stuart Mill; and many others besides. The reading of these "Harvard Classics," Dyson says, "whetted my appetite for more learning and I was delighted to discover that it opened an exciting world to me, a world beyond the buzz of bullets and whiplash of urban violence." Understood in Bourdieuean terms, one might say that a scholastic universe was opened to Dyson. He, indeed, was being drawn into the scholastic disposition, the disposition in which learning is the escape from the worlds of pain, suffering, violence, and, if not actual death, then escape from that commuted death sentence that Orlando Patterson has called "social death."⁸

But then something quite arresting happens in Dyson's narrative. "One day," he says,

[this] learning led me right to the den of danger. Inspired by reading the English translation of Sartre's autobiography "Les Mots" (*The Words*) I rushed to the corner store to buy a cigar thinking that its exotic odor would provide a whiff of the Parisian cafe life where the aging master had hammered out his existential creed on the left bank. . . . Just then, I felt a jolt in my back; it was the barrel of a sawed-off shotgun and its owner ordered me and the other customers

to find the floor. . . . Long before Marx and Gramsci would remind me, I understood that consciousness is shaped by the material realm, that learning takes place in a world of trouble.⁹

Just as Dyson thought that there could be a somewhat easy replication of Sartre's Parisian world, he was dangerously reminded that his engagement with Sartre's work could not take place disengaged from the material reality in which he found himself. Rather, his engagement with Sartre—or, to make a substitution, with biblical texts and commentaries, or with historical, philosophical, and theological documents and ideas, or what have you—occurred under the specific material conditions of the traumatic and arresting realities of Detroit, Michigan.

There is as kind of "learning [that] takes place in a world of trouble," and thus a kind of learning that itself is caught in the crosshairs of crisis. It is just this crisis condition that Dyson frighteningly learned it was difficult to extract himself from, for these are the conditions under which dark flesh exists and labors. Indeed, crisis is the condition of the world, except for those places where such conditions are suspended precisely as the precondition of work itself. Bourdieu calls such places scholastic universes. What Dyson's story conveys is that when scholastic universes collide with material realities, the ideological separation of the two gets (potentially) unmasked for what it is. With this separation unmasked for what it is, his story points to the need to reconceive the very nature of intellectual work and discourses. On this latter point, Dyson's story cannot help us, for it is unable to help us understand how the Sartrean-Parisian world that evoked his aesthetic desire to thoroughly enter a scholastic universe, on the one hand, and the dangerous world of a corner store in a Detroit "hood, a world of dark flesh, which is where his mimetic desire sought to realize itself (*vis-à-vis* a cigar), on the other hand, were actually a singular reality of crisis. It is unable to help us understand precisely how the aesthetic imagination of the modern intellectual is conditioned on obfuscating the real world of pain and cultural trauma as the condition of thought.

Nor for that matter does his story offer a way beyond the aesthetic and cultural stranglehold that traps the nonwhite intellectual in that place of suspended animation and oscillation between scholastic universes (in Dyson's example, the Sartrean world of the Parisian café) and on-the-ground, non-scholastic material realities (again in Dyson's example, the world of "black culture" as embodied in a corner store in a Detroit "hood). But last, his story does not help us grasp how the attempt on the part of nonwhite intellectuals to escape the bind or the "crisis of the Negro intellectual" produced by scholastic reason reproduces itself in a gendered inflection, or why it is that in the case of Dyson's story the naming of the link between the Parisian café world and the material reality of a Detroit corner store entails the fusion of these worlds in the (phallic?) artifact of the cigar.

It is at precisely this point that we return to the problem I attempted to isolate around Douglass's 1845 *Narrative* and what importantly is *theological* about his conundrum. The theological question can no longer be deferred if the problem of modernity, in regard to which nonwhite flesh becomes a sort of miner's canary, is to be more deeply understood and reckoned with. But it is precisely in grasping what is theological about the modern condition generally and about the modern problem of whiteness in particular that one finds so little assistance in the work of so many that have taken on the modern problem of race. The tragedy is that whiteness continues to reign as the inner architecture of modern theology, and a fortiori theology continues to function as a discourse of death.

More positively, however, the value I want to take from Dyson's autobiography lies in how it illustrates the need for theology, insofar as it has functioned as a scholastic universe animated by the theological problem of whiteness, to reevaluate how it does its work, which from its modern founding has presupposed covering over its (violent) racial conditions of possibility. The analysis carried out in this book of how the racial imagination generally and the imagination of whiteness in particular theologically consolidated themselves (in part I) has in fact been a search (in parts II and III and the surrounding apparatus) for a new modality for Christian theology as an intellectual discourse, for at root this is the problem of modern theology. Theology must do its work no longer under the preconditions of the "forgetting of being." Rather, it must do its work in company with and out of the disposition of those facing death, those with the barrel of a shotgun to their backs, for this is the disposition of the crucified Christ, who is the revelation of the trine God. The question that must be addressed, then, is this: What does it mean to speak with theological imagination *from within* crises of life and death rather than in scholastic universes and out of the disposition of scholastic reason in the mode of the religious, the disposition whose condition of possibility turns from such painfully real worlds?

Dark Flesh and the Discourse of Theology in the Twenty-First Century

Doing theology from within crises of life and death requires that Christian theology reconceive itself as a discourse. Theological learning must be reconceived as a labor of life and death, a labor tied not simply to the resurrected Christ but to the Christ who was resurrected *from the dead* and in whose Jewish (nonracial) flesh, Christian thought claims, all of creation lives and moves and has being (cf. Acts 17:28). It is just such a vision that theology, functioning as racial discourse and in the intellectual modality of whiteness, has foreclosed. What I have started to do in this book is both name this problem and execute

such a reconceived practice of theology. Such a practice is not opposed to classically articulated theology, as my engagements in the prelude, interlude, and postlude with Irenaeus of Lyons, Gregory of Nyssa, and Maximus the Confessor, respectively, illustrate. Nor does it simply repeat them in fidelity to a “language game.” What I show is that what matters is the disposition out of which they, and for that matter scripture itself, are read. Rather than read such figures according to the protocols of the scholastic disposition, which can yield both “orthodox” and “liberal” pronouncements, I attempt to engage them and Scripture in such a way as to begin to reimagine that locus of Christian theology called Christology. I do this by having such figures as Irenaeus, Gregory of Nyssa, and Maximus the Confessor speak in relationship to the conditions of a dark reality, by having them speak in relationship to the “Holy Saturday” conditions of dark flesh in modernity. For such conditions are in fact the conditions that Jesus, as the one whose life is a life of fidelity to Israel’s covenant with YHWH, takes up.

Therefore, as a twenty-first-century discourse, Christian theology must take its bearings from the Christian theological languages and practices that arise from the lived Christian worlds of dark peoples in modernity and how such peoples reclaimed (and in their own ways salvaged) the language of Christianity, and thus Christian theology, from being a discourse of death—their death. This is the language and practices by which dark people, insofar as many of them comported themselves as Christian subjects in the world, have imagined and performed a way of being in the world beyond the pseudothological containment of whiteness. To the extent that they have done this, they mark out a different trajectory for theology as a discourse. The language and practices, therefore, of dark people who have lived into a Christian imagination can no longer be deemed theologically irrelevant nor made invisible, which is what white intellectuals in the theological academy have tended to do. Neither for that matter, as is the claim of a growing number of black intellectuals, ought such language and practices be understood either as so many “g-d” narratives that when subjected to proper, critical scrutiny reveal themselves to be “significations” upon the inexhaustibility of either “black religion” (in its churchly and extrachurchly, its theological and nontheological expressions), nor ought they be understood in terms of an all-embracing “black humanism” as the taproot of “black culture.”¹⁰

Instead, the languages and practices of dark people, most especially when they seek to comport themselves as Christians in the world, must be engaged precisely in their theological specificity: that is, as ways of narrating being beyond race, despite the surrounding world’s persistence in holding them and itself hostage to the metaphysics of race and its ontology of forgetfulness. (One sees this persistence, for example, in how Western societies in both Europe and the Americas are presently negotiating the immigrant question, on the one hand, and the related question of global labor and capital, on the other.) The

solution I have started to theologically develop here picks up on those moments when Afro-Christians in modernity sought to execute a new way of being in the world beyond the racial imagination and yet not as a religious feat or a cultural reflex. Rather, I have called attention to what has been *theological* about their effort to overcome the problem. Their effort—sometimes successful, other times not; sometimes consciously speaking in a Christian idiom, other times not—is important insofar as it calls attention to the need to rend theology from the hands of whiteness rather than concede theology to whiteness. Indeed, it points to the need to reconceive theology beyond the racial imagination that has become its inner architecture. Such a reconception of theology entails, as Barth said, beginning from the beginning, that is, from the underside of modernity. The early Afro-Christian effort, an effort I have sought to theologically think within, is one that seeks to inhabit the world beyond racial and theological—the two are bound together—closure. It is the effort to inhabit the world beyond the theological problem of whiteness.