

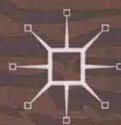
Black Religion / Womanist Thought / Social Justice



INDIGENOUS BLACK THEOLOGY

TOWARD AN AFRICAN-CENTERED
THEOLOGY OF THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN
RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE

JAWANZA ERIC CLARK



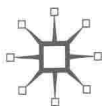
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Indigenous Black Theology: Toward an African-Centered Theology of the African American Religious Experience

By Jawanza Eric Clark

Series Editors' Preface

One of the most challenging Christian religious thinkers of the second half of the twentieth century was Albert B. Cleage Jr. (aka Jaramogi Abebe Agyeman). The creator of the Shrines of the Black Madonna, Cleage posited a simple, but still complex, Christological claim. The historical Jesus was not white; nor was he symbolically black. Cleage asserted, with evidence to support his claim, that the founder of world Christianity hailed from northeast Africa and was literally phenotypically black and African. In the twenty-first century, the overwhelming majority of global Christians continue to avoid and deny, at least by silence, Cleage's reality of the black phenotype, historical Jesus, who walked this earth.

Now, Jawanza Eric Clark resumes this line of scholarly inquiry. His impressive and academic journey signifies both a personal conversion and a compelling call for African American Christians to embrace a collective psychic conversion. Such a needed and radical metanoia, for Clark, moves the individual self and communal selves into a realm prior to Protestant Christianity, that is to say, reconversion back to a lost African heritage.

Along this journey of self-discovery and religio-cultural rediscovery, Clark poses nuanced questions. In the process of becoming new, how does one reconcile traditional African religions/cultures with being a Christian?

Clark, in this process toward new being, offers universal queries. How harmful are "orthodox" Christian doctrines such as original sin and Jesus as exclusive savior? These are certainly foundational dogmatics for the majority of Christians. Simultaneously, they unveil new horizons about the nature of G-O-D or various forms of Ultimates, globally. Exclusivity and inclusivity claims permeate religious conflicts worldwide. Any light shed on these notions would result in a better international neighborhood.

Clark's constructive proposal draws on the deep sources of Africa as substance and symbol. His positive project (indeed, gift) deploys the sense of "ancestors" to devise a "sacramental and practical theology."

If one is concerned about a healthy self, community, and tradition, the contours and implications of the ancestors open up new possibilities at the beginning of the twenty-first century. And that possibility is something worth reading about.

Jawanza Eric Clark's thought represents one definite dimension of the black religion/womanist thought/social justice series' pioneering conceptual work and boundary-pushing effort. The series will publish both authored and edited manuscripts that have depth, breadth, and theoretical edge and will address both academic and nonspecialist audiences. It will produce works engaging any dimension of black religion or womanist thought as they pertain to social justice. Womanist thought is a new approach in the study of African American women's perspectives. The series will include a variety of African American religious expressions. By this we mean traditions such as Protestant and Catholic Christianity, Islam, Judaism, Humanism, Daoism, Confucianism, African diasporic practices, religion and gender, religion and black gays/lesbians, ecological justice issues, African American religiosity and its relation to African religions, new black religious movements (e.g., Daddy Grace, Father Divine, or the Nation of Islam), or religious dimensions in African American "secular" experiences (such as the spiritual aspects of aesthetic efforts like the Harlem Renaissance and literary giants such as James Baldwin, or the religious fervor of the Black Consciousness movement, or the religion of compassion in the black women's club movement).

DWIGHT N. HOPKINS,
University of Chicago
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Theology at Chicago

Author's Preface

Cornel West describes Malcolm X as the prophet of black rage and argues that this rage is the product of Malcolm's great love for black people. "Malcolm believed that if black people felt the love that motivated that rage, the love would produce a psychic conversion in black people; they would affirm themselves as human beings, no longer viewing their bodies, minds, and souls through white lenses, and believing themselves capable of taking control of their own destinies."¹ This book takes up the theme of conversion and is the result of my own ongoing spiritual journey, my psychic conversion specifically, as manifested in my concern that mainstream Protestant Christianity, as professed and practiced by black people in America today, actually makes the need for psychic conversion as urgent as it was when Malcolm X first called for it. This work asks the question: What was lost, discarded, and rejected by the masses of black people in America who converted to Protestant Christianity? And what traditional African resources lie dormant, subjugated, and buried under the hegemony of Western religious knowledge that could aid in constructing an empowering religious faith for a people still in need of "taking control of their own destinies?"

My journey to this point began as a child in a black United Methodist congregation in Atlanta, GA. The seeming racial incongruity in an entirely black congregation and the white images of divinity and authority in the stained-glass windows that surrounded the church sanctuary always disturbed me. I often wondered and had questions about the assumption that not only was Jesus white, but God, the angels, and every biblical character of significance were all white. To my young mind, this was not necessarily a problem as much as it was a question as to how any of us could be certain that this was in fact the race and phenotypical characteristics of people who lived more than 2,000 years ago in an area of the world that bordered Africa.

Was this really an accurate depiction? And if this was inaccurate, perhaps foundational theological positions were also questionable and required revision. For example, how exactly can Jesus Christ be the *exclusive* incarnation of God in flesh on earth? And are there not some negative psychological consequences in an entirely black congregation deifying and worshipping a white Christ in a society that privileges white and disparages black identity? What became problematic later, however, was what I perceived to be the inappropriateness of asking such questions in the church. What ultimately drove me away from this community was the feeling that certain theological and even historical questions should never be broached, that these were theological givens that we simply inherit from the tradition that has preceded us and accept on faith. But I could not accept this on faith. Furthermore, I had inquiries for the hidden architects of this faith and why their seemingly invisible shaping of what mainstream Protestant Christianity has become was never examined in the church.

My spiritual wrestling led me to the Shrines of the Black Madonna of the Pan-African Orthodox Christian Church, founded by Albert B. Cleage Jr. (aka Jaramogi Abebe Agyeman). I was captivated by the mural of a Black Madonna and child and impressed by the provocative claim that Jesus was a black messiah, a spiritual and political leader, and not a white Christ. Long before I discovered Black theology in the academy, I somehow found my way to a vibrant community of black Christians open to, and calling for, radical revision of the Christian faith. It was a community that demanded the very psychic conversion that Malcolm X called for, a generation prior. But this psychic conversion was not a simplistic inverting of the racial hierarchy where black suddenly becomes privileged and normative and white is rendered inferior and vilified. There was no suggestion of black superiority or essentialist racial claims about black or white people. While the rhetoric of the church was steeped in the racist discourse common for the Civil Rights and Black Power era, the process for becoming a member within this fellowship called for a conversion back to something prior to Protestant Christianity, a reconversion to something that was lost when black people initially turned to and embraced Christianity in America. In turning to Christianity, this community inquired: Were we not also turning away from something else? This church called for a psychic, not simply a religious, conversion, not to blackness, but to a lost African heritage. It makes a unique attempt to combine Christian formation with the reclamation of an African identity. Such an effort is crystallized in a staple ritual of the church: the African naming ceremony.

After being baptized, a new member in this Christian fellowship enters a period of participation and study that culminates in the ritual of confirmation into the church. This ritual is called the African naming ceremony in which members are granted the honor of receiving an African name. Receipt of an African name is a symbolic act of reconnection with what the brutal transportation across the Atlantic Ocean, slavery, Jim Crow, and hundreds of years of racist discrimination in America took away. It is a symbolic reconnection with, and rediscovery of, a lost African past, an acknowledgment that black people in America are actually displaced Africans living in the Diaspora, and there is a legacy and a heritage upon which these Africans can draw if they seek it. The ritual also makes clear that black people in America have been conditioned to feel shame for and experience alienation from this African heritage, and, in fact, Protestant Christianity is complicit in promoting such shame and alienation. Before receiving an African name, each initiate confesses, "I am no longer ashamed to say we are an African people. I believe African people share in a covenant relationship with God and the acceptance of this truth is essential to my salvation." I am a product of this ritual transformation.

Conversion to African identity understood within a Christian framework, however, unquestionably belies the history of traditional "orthodox" Christianity's complicity in justifying and supporting systems of racial oppression in America. The Shrines of the Black Madonna's call for African American conversion to an African Christian identity makes a unique contribution to the black religious experience in America. It raises many questions regarding how it can be possible to affirm traditional African culture and religion and also be a Christian. It invites an interrogation of the history of black conversion to Protestant expressions of Christianity in America, and in particular, the way in which sin rhetoric and discourse contribute to the problem of black Christian shame for, and alienation from, Africa, or black Christian anti-African sentiment.

This work builds on the provocative insights of Albert Cleage, Jr. (father of Black liberation theology) and his call for psychic conversion to an indigenous African Christian faith. First, I attempt to explain how mainstream Protestant Christianity promotes and justifies black anti-African sentiment through an examination of two doctrines, the doctrines of original sin and Jesus as exclusive savior. I then suggest that instead of turning away from traditional Africa (which black conversion to Christianity initially required), we turn to Africa for the recovery of resources, idioms, modalities, and theological categories

that might be useful in constructing a progressive, pragmatic theology that works to empower those conditioned to accept black and African inferiority. I present the ancestor as a category of meaning that offers an alternative to mainline approaches to Protestant theological anthropology rooted as they are in the notion of ontological sin, or sin as the human condition. The ancestors provide a template for constructing a theology that jettisons notions of total depravity and connects the doctrine of salvation with ethics, or proper human relating. The exemplary life, the life worthy of emulation, emerges as the criteria for defining and achieving salvation in life after death: becoming an ancestor.

My effort to construct a doctrine of the ancestors is intended to make a contribution to the Black theology project and advance the discourse beyond endless critiques of ontological blackness. In so doing, I hope to extend the life of a theology presumed by some to be dying and also make clear Albert Cleage Jr.'s contribution to my project and to the continued development of Black theology. As a pastor and preacher, Cleage's approach unmask the true origins of Black theology as fundamentally a sacramental and practical theology. It is a theology initiated and cultivated by black Christians in black church spaces. As a result, it heralds the power of ritual and liturgy to inspire true conversion beyond intellectual, academic ascent. The type of psychic conversion Malcolm called for ultimately requires more than a rational affirmation but a true, heartfelt turning away from the old and an unequivocal acceptance of the new. Let the journey begin!

Acknowledgments

Writing a book is a painstaking and isolating process. There is a feeling that it can only be achieved in solitary confinement. But that feeling betrays the truth that this work was only made possible by the support, encouragement, and direction of so many people who participated in its development. I have to begin with my dissertation committee: Dianne M. Diakite, Noel Erskine, Wendy Farley, Emmanuel Larney, and Josiah Young. Their critical readings pushed and challenged me to sharpen and hone my arguments. Drs. Erskine and Farley provided critical, insightful, and timely feedback both in the process of writing the dissertation and in their seminars. Dr. Erskine blessed me with the encouragement to pursue doctoral work as a Candler student. I am forever in his debt. Dr. Larney was especially instrumental in helping me organize and plan my research trip and work in Accra, Ghana. His guidance helped to make that a successful endeavor. Dr. Diakite, my wonderful advisor, has truly been a source of inspiration and a model of scholarly excellence. Her PhD seminar, "Theoretical Issues in the Study of Black Religion," stands out as more than just the best course I ever had but also as a truly life-altering experience. Dr. Diakite's investment in my scholarship and professional development has gone far beyond what was required of her as my advisor. She is more than an advisor; she is also a dear friend.

I must also express my gratitude to The Fund for Theological Education, especially Sharon Watson Fluker, not just for providing the funds that made my matriculation through the PhD program at Emory University possible, but more importantly providing the intellectual dialogue and the scholarly interactions and peer relationships that are so critical to engaging in this type of work. It was by way of an FTE conference that Dwight Hopkins first became familiar with my work. This book is the result. I am also grateful to Matthew Williams, who perhaps does not even remember the inspiring words

he shared with me at an FTE dinner. When I was experiencing confusion about the project I would pursue in my doctoral studies, he challenged me to develop a doctrine of the ancestors. That word of affirmation stands out as a moment of clarity that was instrumental in my decision to pursue wholeheartedly this project. I must also thank Abraham Akrong, now an ancestor, and Mercy Oduyoye, both of whom granted me permission, while in Ghana, to pick their brains about the role of the ancestors in Akan religion and culture. They both contributed immensely to the development of the third and fourth chapters of this work. Additional thanks to Reverends Mark Lomax, Will Coleman, and Derrick Rice, each of whom were graciously willing to talk to me about the role the ancestors play in their respective churches in the greater Atlanta area.

I would be remiss if I failed to mention the black Christian community that has helped nurture my faith since I was a freshman in college at Morehouse: The Shrines of the Black Madonna of the Pan African Orthodox Christian Church. From the first time I heard Sondai Nyerere preach from the pulpit of Shrine #9, "Its Nation Time!," I have been devoted to the cause of recapturing the African essence of Christianity as articulated by the eloquent critique of Albert B. Cleage Jr. (Jaramogi Abebe Agyeman), the founder of this church. I thank Jaramogi Abebe for his courage, his vision, and his leadership. Also included in that great ancestral cloud of witnesses who left a particular imprint on my life are Olu Ufum, Binta, Kokayi, Tabia, and Khalfani. My thanks go out to Jaramogi Menelik Kimathi for consistently providing encouragement and support as I balanced ministerial duties with my professional and scholarly pursuits. Cardinals Mwenda Brown, Aswad Walker, and Mbiyu Chui have been constant conversation partners at preachers' meetings that go on until the early morning hours. Ayanna Abi Kyles perhaps provided the most insightful perspective as both an insider and an academic. Ayanna always pushed me to confront the androcentric tendencies of ecclesiastical institutions. My special heartfelt thanks go out to the Shrine #9 community in Atlanta, GA. They nurtured, supported, and protected me from my late teen years into adulthood, from OTG ("dripping with the slave culture") to pastor and member of the Assembly of Cardinals. I am truly indebted.

I have saved the most important thanks for last. My parents, Yvonne Ragsdale and Isaac Clark, have been my ultimate role models. I thank them for showing love, expressing support, providing direction, and exercising patience even as my life ventured in directions

they could not foresee or anticipate. Thanks for loving me regardless. Finally, words are inadequate to express my gratitude to my loving and supportive wife, Jennifer (Miniya). She put up with my moodiness with grace and held down the fort in Atlanta, GA, while I was doing research in Africa. Being separated from her and our son Jeremiah was the hardest part of the work for this book. Her unconditional love and devotion provides so much of the energy that fuels me. And my two sons, Jeremiah Maasai and Jordan Osei, teach me new things about myself every day. They reveal the depth of my capacity to love and make clear the true purpose of all this work.

Having complete control over Africa, the colonial powers of Europe projected the image of Africa negatively. They always project Africa in a negative light: jungle savages, cannibals, nothing civilized. Why then naturally it was so negative that it was negative to you and me, and you and I began to hate it. We didn't want anybody telling us anything about Africa, much less calling us Africans. In hating Africa and in hating Africans, we ended up hating ourselves, without even realizing it. Because you can't hate the roots of a tree, and not hate the tree. You can't hate your origin and not end up hating yourself. You can't hate Africa and not hate yourself!

Malcolm X¹

I am no longer ashamed to say, "We are an African people!" I believe African people share in a covenant relationship with God. The acceptance of this reality is essential to my salvation and upon it the survival of our people depends.

African Naming Ceremony/Pan African
Orthodox Christian Church²

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Introduction

The process by which people of African descent in North America became Christian, particularly after 1830, has been marked by accompanying feelings of shame, even revulsion, toward indigenous African religion and culture. I argue that such feelings of shame toward Africa, or black anti-African sentiment, are rooted in the acceptance of two orthodox Christian doctrines: the doctrine of original sin and the doctrine of Jesus Christ as exclusive savior. My purpose in this work is to construct an African-centered understanding of the human being that can address and correct oppressive features of established Protestant approaches to anthropology/sin appropriated by Black theology and the theology of African American Christians generally and thereby address and potentially eradicate this shame. For the person of African descent, the acceptance of “orthodox” notions of sin, particularly the conception of sin as human condition or ontological sin, and the doctrine of Jesus Christ as exclusive savior led to the formation of a Christian identity that is established and maintained at the expense of one’s African identity and religious heritage. However, the African concept of ancestor provides a theological category that is indigenous to traditional African religions, offers a doctrine of the human being that is consistent with the dictates of many postmodern and contemporary philosophies and theologies, and jettisons the traditional Protestant model’s emphasis on exclusivity and total depravity. In this way, I aim to contribute to the ongoing Black theology project and offer an innovative constructive theology for a postcolonial context.

The historical reality of the transatlantic slave trade, slavery in the Americas, colonialism in Africa, and hundreds of years of discrimination and racist oppression against all people of African descent has helped to produce the contemporary construction of a diminished and deracinated African personality. Africa, particularly Sub-Saharan Africa, is perceived as an undeveloped continent perpetually riddled by