The social gospel of Ta-Nehisi Coates: *Between the World and Me*

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August 4, 2015

> "…by the authority of Almighty God conferred upon us in blessed Peter and of the vicarship of Jesus Christ, which we hold on earth, do by tenor of these presents, should any of said islands have been found by your envoys and captains, give, grant, and assign to you and your heirs and successors, kings of Castile and Leon, forever, together with all their dominions, cities, camps, places, and villages, and all rights, jurisdictions, and appurtenances, all islands and mainlands found and to be found, discovered and to be discovered towards the west and south…"
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> -Pope Alexander VI, *Inter Caetera*

> "It can be objected that I am speaking of political freedom in spiritual terms, but the political institutions of any nation are always menaced and are ultimately controlled by the spiritual state of that nation."
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> -James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*

> "If I was not innocent, then they were not innocent. Could this mix of motivation also affect the stories they tell? The cities they built? The country they claimed as given to them by God?"
>
> -Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*

On its face, for me to talk about Ta-Nehisi Coates's social gospel is absurd. One, he is an unabashed atheist who [confesses](#) to not have any gospel of his own. Two, his alleged pessimism regarding U.S. progress beyond white supremacy seems to run

directly against the root meaning of *gospel*, which is good news. And yet, as a religious person reading *Between the World and Me*, I find his words to be deeply insightful and helpful for thinking not only about race, society, and U.S. history, but about the relationship faith has within that nexus.

Please read the book. Before reading, I had already seen a [slew](#) of accusations online about the book which ended up reflecting either a lack of homework or a projection of unfair expectations. To be sure, like any account, it will have its limits and leave room for legitimate critiques. As an intellectual—and spiritual, I might add—*autobiography* of a *writer*, I found it to be a powerful and highly nuanced take on life in the United States as told through the perspective of the black male experience.

Addressed to Coates's adolescent son, *Between the World and Me* displays a thoroughgoing physicality in its language. As he says to his son, "You must always remember that the sociology, the history, the economics, the graphs, the charts, the regression all land, with great violence, upon the body." That violence upon the body is something Coates presses upon the reader at every turn. He does not want you to *think* about slavery, West Baltimore, or the police violence of Washington, D.C., as much as to *feel* it in the gut while staring at the flesh, the human loves severed and fears provoked, behind the statistics.

A recurring theme throughout the book is "the Dream." For Coates, the [American] Dream is a useful myth about innocence, upward mobility, and safety which warps how people depict this country's history and present realities. The Dream is tied to whiteness and the people whom he describes as, "those who believe themselves to be white." With subtle language, Coates tackles whiteness as an evolving social performance in this nation's history. The way in which he ties whiteness to belief makes me think about theologian Brian Bantum's book *Redeeming Mulatto* in which he describes whiteness as a modality of faith, an assertion of belief grounded in false purity.

In recounting his transition from Baltimore to Howard University, Coates also addresses how he outgrew his black nationalism. Nevertheless, he upholds what may be described as a non-ontological blackness; in other words, although race is socially constructed and blackness is not biological, blackness is not to be abandoned in some "post-racial" quest. Coates describes his experience at Howard as traveling to "Mecca," an entrance into a more expansive notion of blackness

precipitated by greater exposure to the black diaspora. For him, blackness is more than simply that which whiteness created; blackness represents "the beautiful things, all the language and mannerisms, all the food and music, all the literature and philosophy, all the common language that they fashioned like diamonds under the weight of the Dream." Moreover, "… black power births a kind of understanding that illuminates all the galaxies in their truest colors."

Unfortunately, the initial reception of *Between the World and Me* became overly burdened by unproductive comparisons to James Baldwin. Who is the Baldwin of the 21st century? Baldwin is the Baldwin of the 21st century. And Coates is the Coates of the 21st century. Nevertheless, there are [productive comparisons](#) to be made between Baldwin and Coates. Both Baldwin and Coates stand outside of the church and perceptively see Christianity's entanglement with the white supremacy of western civilization in ways which can be illuminating for Christians if they allow themselves to look. Baldwin's vision here, perhaps due to having been a former preacher, goes farther. Yet, Coates, who candidly talks about his great distance from the church, also interrogates the scaffolding of this entanglement.

Coates is not shy about his lack of faith. For example, he writes: "I have no praise anthems, nor old Negro spirituals. The spirit and soul are the body and brain, which are destructible—that is precisely why they are so precious." Nevertheless, he is respectful and intrigued—as someone on the outside looking in—when confronted by black faith. We see this when he talks to Mabel Jones, the mother of Prince Jones. We see this when he describes looking at the faces of those doing sit-ins in the '60s: "I think they are fastened to their god, a god whom I cannot know and in whom I do not believe. But, god or not, the armor is all over them, and it is real."

Coates's atheism is fueled by questions about providence and theodicy, or the justification of God's goodness with human suffering:

> You must resist the common urge toward the comforting narrative of divine law, toward fairy tales that imply some irrepressible justice. The enslaved were not bricks in your road, and their lives were not chapters in your redemptive history. They were people turned to fuel for the American machine. Enslavement was not destined to end, and it is wrong to claim our present circumstance—no matter how improved—as the redemption for the lives of people who never asked for the posthumous, untouchable

glory of dying for their children. Our triumphs can never compensate for this. Perhaps our triumphs are not even the point.

In resisting a certain kind of theological, providential reading of black suffering in the United States, Coates's concerns are shared by womanist theologians such as Emilie Townes. For Townes, womanist ethical reflection rejects suffering as God's will and understands suffering as outrage.

To be clear, I don't want to claim Coates for "Christian faith" in some violent way. Neither am I practicing some thinly-veiled apologetics or evangelism in the manner that Baldwin describes his exchange with Hon. Elijah Muhammad in *The Fire Next Time*. Instead, what I want to emphasize is that Christians can learn from Coates's questioning of American theological myths. Maybe Coates's atheism, notwithstanding the reductive materialism, is precisely the type of atheism that Christians in America need. In fact, some eminent theologians have already been [arguing](#) this.

Many Christians have calibrated their God and their faith to the myth of the American Dream. We have confused tragedy for providence, conquest for destiny, man-made policies for natural law. While the Bible repeatedly says that liberation requires memory of bondage and torture (e.g. Deut. 5:15; Luke 22:14-22), the Dream simply shrugs that America focuses on the *future* and [transcends old sins](#). So, when Coates writes, "America understands itself as God's handiwork, but the black body is the clearest evidence that America is the work of men," it is good news. If God is not the author of American nightmares, then people are. And if people are, then we can, in principle, change it.

I'll admit that I have a non-pessimistic reading of Coates's alleged pessimism. Has anyone read the very end of Baldwin's *The Fire Next Time*? To be fair, there are times when Coates's language about white supremacy verges on a kind of determinism. For example, when he calls white supremacy "an intelligence, a sentience, a default setting to which, likely to the end of our days, we must invariably return," he comes close to ontologizing white supremacy and turning it into an immutable force of nature. Yet his "pessimism" lies in thinking change is unlikely, not that change is impossible. When discussing police brutality and criminal justice, he reminds his readers that "democratic will" has sanctioned and allowed the abuses that flow from these practices.

Coates's cold-blooded account of history may be short on providing hope and solutions, but I don't think that this should necessarily be his job as a writer. Perhaps going beyond him, we should continue to think about and act towards possibilities beyond white supremacy (and patriarchy, and capitalism). I do sometimes get the sense—when reading Coates—that a dashed nationalism leaves him with no alternatives.

Pessimism and nationalism aside, Coates's social vision can be instructive. Many persistent inequalities are the legacy of human engineering and aren't proofs of cultural pathologies or insufficient virtue. To understand this means to re-imagine the doctrines of "all are created equal" which, in practice, still require some people to be twice as good—even when that is not enough.

Between the World and Me paints a complicated picture of religion and its role in what Coates calls "the struggle." For those thinking theologically about America's social architecture, his words are a much needed challenge. With his atheism concerning many of America's Gods, Coates may be surprised to find some religious allies.