The new black theology: Retrieving ancient sources to challenge racism

by Jonathan Tran in the February 8, 2012 issue

Read Edward Antonio's review of Brian Bantum's Redeeming Mulatto *(subscription required)*

A couple years ago, when the *Century* asked some leading theologians to name five "essential theology books of the past 25 years," J. Kameron Carter's *Race: A Theological Account* (Oxford University Press, 2008) was one of the few books mentioned more than once and the only one that was published in the past five years. Last year, the American Academy of Religion gave its Award for Excellence in the Study of Religion to Willie J. Jennings's *The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race* (Yale University Press, 2010). These two influential works, together with *Redeeming Mulatto: A Theology of Race and Christian Hybridity* (Baylor University Press, 2010), by Brian Bantum (who studied at Duke with both Carter and Jennings), represent a major theological shift that will—if taken as seriously as it deserves—change the face not only of black theology but theology as a whole.

What is revolutionary about these three black theologians is that they rely heavily on dogmatic texts from the patristic period to the Reformation. Why is this novel? Because nonwhite male theologians have historically been hesitant to trust these sources—and for good reason. In the worst of times, classic theological texts have been used to oppress persons of color and women. In the best of times, the overwhelming attention given these particular voices obscured other voices, giving

the impression that the only Christians speaking and writing about God for the last 2,000 years were European men. Those who did not fit that description simply did not know how to relate to a tradition that claimed to speak for but did not reflect them.

James Cone, considered the father of contemporary black theology, expressed these frustrations four decades ago. "American theology," he wrote, "is racist. . . . It identifies theology as dispassionate analysis of 'the tradition,' unrelated to the suffering of the oppressed." The result, Cone observed, was that "an increasing number of black religionists are finding it difficult to be black and be identified with traditional theological thought forms." Disconnecting themselves from the Anglo-European white tradition, black intellectuals looked to other sources to describe how African-American Christians talked about and related to God.

Many Western theologians in the last few decades have returned to premodern theological sources, representing an intellectual renaissance of sorts as Christians look back to classical theologians from Augustine to Maximus the Confessor to Catherine of Siena for expressions of present-day faith. This was not entirely unexpected as Christianity tried to free itself from the hold the Enlightenment had on the church for so long.

However, what is quite surprising is that persons of color and women are increasingly finding their way to these sources. This shift in black theology's relationship to traditional Christianity means that the rest of the church can no longer ignore black theology's claims. So long as black theologians felt that they had good reason to pursue nontraditional and extra-Christian sources in such secular social theory as anthropology, cultural studies, sociology and political science, white theologians could keep black theology at arm's length. When black theology championed the black church as the location of God's preference and accused white Christianity of heresy, white theologians only saw secularism run amok. Or at least they could claim as much, allowing them to dismiss much black theology outright no matter how scripturally anchored it was.

Black theology's return to pre-Enlightenment sources is also surprising in that the Enlightenment has often been credited with overcoming oppression. In a fascinating reversal, Jennings, Carter and Bantum turn the Enlightenment's claim of liberation on its head, locating in that movement a basis of oppression and looking instead to ancient and medieval Christian theology to free us from contemporary racism.

In a claim characteristic of this new theology, Carter takes social theory's emphasis on difference and recasts it theologically: "Difference theologically understood arises from the positivity of the hypostatic distinctions [in the Trinity] within which the possibility and, according to the will of God, the actuality or concreteness of creation is located. It is precisely this understanding of difference—difference as witness to and participation within the Trinitarian hypostatic distinctions—that modern logics of race foreclose."

Carter's thesis is that modern racism is similar in form to the various heretical "isms" that emerged during the early church's controversies over its relationship to Israel (supersessionism and Marcionism) and over the relation of Christ's humanity and divinity (gnosticism, adoptionism, Nestorianism). Therefore a theological response to racism entails a more faithful articulation of the nature of the Trinity.

Key to both Carter's and Jennings's work is their deep concern with the Jewish identity of Jesus. In *The Christian Imagination,* Jennings insists that only by affirming Jesus' Jewish body can one comprehend the meaning of salvation. Gentiles were baptized into Jesus' Jewish body, which continues and fulfills (and never denies) God's covenant with Israel. Engrafted into God's salvation of the Jews, the gentiles were saved insofar as the Jews were saved. It was Christ's unique human-divine personage that integrated gentiles into Israel's covenant life with God.

Jennings and Carter both insist that bodies matter—and in a particularly Jewish-Christian way. Jewish flesh is most authentically itself when it welcomes the gentile. This hospitality enacts what Carter calls "the theodramatic constitution of existence." In the same way that God elects and receives Israel, elected Israel receives the gentiles as an extension of God's reception history. "Israel's meaning and significance," writes Carter, "arise out of its being related to the nations before whom the drama of the Jews' election unfolds. The drama of Israel thus is not insular, for it unfolds in such a way as to enfold the nations into its drama."

The church, insofar as it continues Israel's salvation, seeks inclusion rather than exclusion. Israel is elected by God for the specific task of blessing the nations; to speak of Israel's chosenness, then, is to speak of inclusion rather than exclusion—the very opposite of racism's infatuation with purity.

For the new black theologians, the sources of racism (and the resources for its repudiation) lie in Christianity's failure to live into its Jewishness. The problem is not

simply that Jewish Christians did not easily accept gentiles into the church. Rather, the problem is that after the gentiles were accepted, the question became: What now becomes of the Jews? For Carter, when Christians get this question wrong, they get everything wrong (including what it means for creatures to have the kinds of bodies they do), producing in the process the idea that bodies can and should be thought of in terms of race.

In European Christianity, the general question about difference settled on the specific question of Jewish difference—what came to be called *der Judenfrage* (the Jewish question). Attempting to espouse a universal conception of humanness independent of and over against the Jewish covenant of promise, European Christians crafted a rival discourse to help explain the Jews (and the non-European others whom the Jews exemplified): race. Speech about "race" helped construe the Jews as a people inordinately attached to their peculiar practices and outdated laws. The Jews become "the other" by which European Christianity defined itself. European Christians, in this view, are the universal race because they, unlike the Jews, are able to shed their religious particularity just the way Jesus superseded the particularity of Jewish law. Or so the story went.

When the Enlightenment sought to find the standpoint of universal reason, it could only look down upon people (Jewish and some other ethnic groups) who—it was thought— could not so easily transcend their bodies. In a vicious but unquestioned bit of circular reasoning, it was decided that only Europeans could achieve this universality of reason. According to Carter, this trumped-up notion of reason resulted in the universality of whiteness according to which non-Europeans comprise lesser hues of whiteness. Nonwhite people simply could not get out of their bodies in the way that white people had.

White people, according to this line of thought, "are not a race in the same way that the other human races have become races. The other races have become races in such a way as to be held hostage to their own particularity," says Carter. "Their particularity as race groups is excessive or out of balance inasmuch as it aims at only its own particularity. Indeed, they suffer under the entropy of their own particularity; they can't get over themselves." What makes white people "white" is their ability to get out of their bodies, to transcend bodily entrapment by way of reason's surpassing abilities.

"Whiteness" is not so much something as nothing—a mythic conception of nonparticularity, the achievement of genuine transcendence, true reason. It is purity, existence free of the blemishes that colored all other races. Thus race became the way Westerners came to understand people's differences and where people belong in the hierarchy of existence.

The power of race lies not only in its ability to license violence perpetuated within what Jennings calls "the colonialist logics." The further tragedy is that conquered non-European peoples came to think of themselves in terms of race. Slaves came to speak the language of their masters and see themselves through European eyes. The devastating violence of colonialism and slavery resulted in people being deprived of the homes and communities that had for generations provided the narratives for understanding themselves. In the absence of these grounding narratives, they adopted the only discourse available—the discourse of race.

That we all now speak the language of race demonstrates the depth and breadth to which our imaginations have been colonized in just the way Jennings lays out. Beauty, intelligence, piety and every other mark of personhood are indexed along a spectrum of whiteness. For example, nonwhite persons who want to be seen (by themselves and others) as physically attractive have to come up with ways to look white. In the 19th and 20th centuries a veritable industry emerged to supply the cosmetic techniques (from methods for hair straightening to skin lighteners to plastic surgery) for this passage into whiteness.

Carter and Jennings undercut racism by positioning Jewish particularity as the keystone, rather than the barrier, to salvation. One way we can account for the violence of European colonization is by interpreting it as a corrupted mission to the nations that required unprecedented amounts of violence to disguise its falsehood. By embedding the salvation of the nations in the particularity of Christ's Jewish flesh, Carter anchors salvation to its christological moorings in a way that demands that the church's missionary efforts resemble Christlike self-giving.

Instead of Christianity being expressed in a colonizing and slaveholding universalism, Christ is inscribed in the flesh of those whose slave narratives proclaim the good news. Rather than look for the triumph of the universal over the particular, the slave finds her particularity marked in the particularity of Christ's sufferings and resurrection, which universally gathers and heals those who suffer. This unity "reorders" humanity without overwhelming it.

By returning to the scene of racism's theological origins, the new theology outlines where things initially went wrong and charts an alternative course. A better option was there all along in the church's affirmation of Jesus' humanity (a particular, Jewish humanity) and divinity.

Debates in the early church about Jesus' identity featured two sides: one side prioritized Jesus' humanity at the cost of downplaying his divinity; the other prioritized Christ's divinity even if that meant disparaging his humanity. The church ultimately settled these matters at the councils of Nicaea and Chalcedon, where Christ's humanity and divinity were both affirmed within the trinitarian confession.

It is at this point that Bantum, Carter and Jennings reinvigorate the likes of Irenaeus, Athanasius and Maximus in their articulations of orthodox Christology. White supremacy (and its nonwhite versions) can be indicted as a modern perpetration of adoptionism (the early heresy that prioritized Christ's humanity over his divinity). Those who malign certain kinds of bodies (such as bodies different from one's own) or ignore bodily life altogether (as in the notion of "color blindness" popular among evangelicals) are guilty of a new strain of gnosticism (the early heresy that prioritized Christ's divinity over his humanity). The new theology finds a way forward by returning to what the church long ago affirmed: Christ's divine-human particularity and Christ's divine-human universality. The church's deep affirmation of corporality, reinstantiated in every celebration of the Eucharist, calls Christians to embrace rather than oppress the stranger.

Carter summons Maximus the Confessor from the seventh-century Eastern church to help us understand racism's victims: "In healing the human condition, Christ emptied himself (*kenosis*) to take the form of the slave, and one is led to conclude that the site of God's wealth is Jesus' poor and enslaved flesh. Having taken on the form of poverty and the form of the slave, God in Christ is the impoverished slave. As such, God enters into the hurts of those who suffer so that from inside those hurts, being fully identified with them to the point of communicating his divinity through them, he heals them. It is the poor slave, one might say, who is closest to God and so reveals God." By utilizing traditional sources like Maximus to attend to the suffering of the oppressed, the new black theology takes "the tradition" in a direction that Cone could only dream of four decades ago.

In *Redeeming Mulatto,* Bantum makes his own use of patristic formulations about Christ in order to address the promises and challenges of interracial existence. He

views mixed-race persons through the lens of "the hypostatic union," the early church's term for the union of divine and human in Christ. Amid the pains and confusions of what was once branded "mongrelization" stands the fullness of Christ's joining of humanity and divinity. For Bantum, the mulatto "participates in" Christ's fullness; biracial individuals "perform" the drama of redemption as scripted in the life, death and resurrection of Christ. In Christ's person, one confronts not only the mystery of divinity but the "impossible possibility" of humanity joined to divinity. Jesus "was mulatto not solely because he was a 'mixture,' but because his very body confounds the boundaries of purity/impurity and humanity/divinity that seemed necessary for us to imagine who we thought we should be."

Baptized into this body, the church in all of its differences offers the world a genuinely reconciled body of diverse persons, in contrast to political orders that exclude (the opposite of baptism) in the name of race, gender, nation, class, ethnicity and so on. According to Bantum, the church speaks the language attuned to this politics of difference: prayer. This is good news for each one of us who is "passing" through America's complex racial heritage, and it is an indictment of those seeking racial purity and the banishment of racial difference.

When Bantum uses creedal affirmations of Christ's humanity and divinity to uplift historically shamed biracial persons, he, like Carter and Jennings, speaks in terms that cannot be easily dismissed by white theologians. If Bantum is right about Christology, any Christian (white or otherwise) who affirms the Chalcedonian formula about Christ's two natures must rethink mulatto life. And if he refuses such rethinking, he cannot blame Bantum's alleged lack of orthodoxy.

In other words, black theology is reclaiming the theological tradition as its own and, under the banner of orthodoxy, taking on all comers. By rethinking the Enlightenment's promises of enlightenment and rearticulating racial existence in the language of the church's most sacred doctrines, black theology is now (or once again) making a case that cannot be denied. The debate is no longer fixed on racial identity politics (a quagmire from which none can escape); rather, it takes place on the level playing field of orthodoxy.

The new theology reminds us that it was a mistake to call black theology "black theology" in the first place. Consistency at least would have required that European theology equally bear the burden of qualifications ("colonizing theology"). To be sure, patronizing name-calling allowed black theology to develop its own voice in its

own time, just as the segregated black church developed its own styles, saints and stories. But because the margins were managed by white theologians, those voices were heard by whites, and when heard they were regarded as less than equal and so were not allowed to challenge white hegemony and help white theology be anything other than white theology.

Accordingly, the new black theology is best described as the new theology, no (dis)qualifying adjective necessary. In it we see Christian theology at long last incarnating the material conditions whereby the good news becomes good news.