

CHRISTIANITY CORRUPTED

The Scandal of White Supremacy

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Introduction

Between the Christianity of this land and the Christianity of Christ, I recognize the widest possible difference—so wide, that to receive the one as good, pure, and holy, is of necessity to reject the other as bad, corrupt, and wicked. To be friend of the one, is of necessity to be the enemy of the other. I love the pure, peaceable, and impartial Christianity of Christ: I therefore hate the corrupt, slaveholding, women-whipping, cradle-plundering, partial and hypocritical Christianity of this land. Indeed, I look upon it as the climax of all misnomers, the boldest of all frauds, and the grossest of all libels.

—Frederick Douglass

In 1845, African American abolitionist Frederick Douglass (1818–1895) published his autobiographical account of life as an American slave.¹ A major part of this account consists of Douglass reflecting on the disconnection between the Christian faith and the American institution of slavery. In his reflection, Douglass dichotomizes American Christianity, concluding that there existed two distinctly different brands of Christianity in the United States during the nineteenth century: one, reflective of the faith discovered in the gospel of Jesus Christ possessing the true Christian virtues of love, purity, peace, and impartiality, which he identified as the Christianity of Christ; the other, the religious tradition that dominated the British colonies and the early American republic and characterized as a “slaveholding religion.” Douglass expressed his utter disdain for the latter brand of Christianity and asserted that this religion of the American enslavers possessed the vices of corruption, abuse, oppression, partiality, and hypocrisy.

Douglass’s dichotomy demonstrates how slaveholding religion constituted a distortion of true Christianity, which reflected the teachings of Jesus Christ. This dichotomy exposes the effects of a scandalized Christian faith. Slaveholding religion indeed scandalized the Christian faith through the teachings and practices that were antithetical to those of Christ. The

1. Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 2014) [Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage, My Freedom* (Lexington, KY: Odin’s Library Classics, 1855)].

correlation between modern racism and oppressive Christian theologies is pivotal to this scandal.

In 1964, Fannie Lou Hamer declared, “I’m sick and tired of being sick and tired,” from the pulpit of Williams Institutional Christian Methodist Episcopal Church in Harlem, New York. In her speech, Hamer was expressing her extreme anguish over the pervasiveness of racial injustice in the United States and its failure to keep its beloved democratic principles and promises. Almost sixty years later, Hamer’s cry remains the cry of the African American community in the United States. After over four hundred years of the dehumanization of Blacks in this country, racism is still a chronic disease pervading the very fabric of American society. I’m sick and tired of feeling the clear and present danger of bringing a Black child into this world. I’m sick and tired of feeling that having black skin is a crime in America. I’m sick and tired of feeling that having black skin means having some form of leprosy. In Scripture, leprosy was a skin disease, and persons suffering from the disease were automatically considered social outcasts and socially destitute (see Lev 13:1–45). This reality is evident in the racist tropes that have become common nomenclature in American society. For example, following the historic election of the first African American president, “take our country back,” declared by adherents of the Tea Party movement, became a rallying cry for white people who viewed the election of a Black man as anti-American and a literal threat to their way of life—as if Black people had hijacked the United States through the election of President Barack Hussein Obama. Another racist trope, “Make America Great Again,” became the proclaimed sentiment that propelled the election of Donald Trump, translated in the African American community as “Make America White Again” because of the clandestine way that it asserts that the restoration of whiteness constitutes the restoration of greatness. Such racist tropes express the feelings of white supremacists in America, who see only lepers when they see people of color.

As a pastor, it grieves my heart that the racism in the United States is being perpetuated, aided, and abetted through spiritual wickedness in high places and religious hypocrisy. White evangelicals have cultivated a culture in America through which they claim to possess a monopoly on the Christian faith and morality. Yet they have scandalized the gospel of Jesus Christ and corrupted the Christian faith through their religious hypocrisy. The Gospel asks, “For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?” (Mark 8:36). While white evangelicals today pride themselves on belonging to Christ, the awful reality is that many of them have sold their souls to the cult of Trump. While some of these white evangelicals would argue that their undying loyalty to Trump results from their attempt to protect what they believe are endangered moral values in America soci-

ety, the reality is that there are covert and overt racial motivations that are just as prominent in their political allegiances.

In 1989, Trump took out \$85,000 in op-eds in the *New York Times*, *Daily News*, *New York Post*, and *New York Newsday* titled “Bring Back the Death Penalty, Bring Back the Police” and suggested that there was no more law and order in New York City. This was in response to five boys of color (four Black and one Latino) being made the prime suspects by two white women, one the assistant district attorney at the time and the other the head of the Sex Crimes Unit of the Manhattan District Attorney’s Office. The charges against these five boys of color were related to the case of a white woman jogging in Central Park who was attacked, raped, and beaten so severely that when she awoke from her coma, she had no memory of the attack. Even after a confession from the person who actually committed the crime and the exoneration of the five men of color, thirty years later Trump refuses to apologize and admit any wrongdoing. During the 2008 presidential campaign, Trump fostered the emergence of the birther movement—a racist attempt to perpetuate the myth and conspiracy theory that Barack Obama was not a natural-born citizen of the United States, which, based on constitutional law, would have invalidated his candidacy. Trump even had the audacity to question the intellectual capacity of Barack Obama, a Harvard trained constitutional lawyer, demanding that Obama release his college and graduate transcripts to prove his academic success after Obama had served as the head of the *Harvard Law Review*. In 2015, Trump announced his candidacy for the presidency, further promoting racist tropes. During the campaign, he characterized Mexicans as rapists and asserted that Blacks should vote for him because they had nothing to lose. Trump’s dehumanization of people of color was further solidified when he characterized African nations as “shithole countries.” Unfortunately, Trump’s racist tropes and behavior have refueled the evil spirit of white supremacy and antiblackness supremacy in the United States.

African American church historian Love Henry Whelchel Jr. often exclaims that African American history is “too painful to remember and too dangerous to forget.”² Exposing the trajectory of the theological scandal that resulted in white superiority and white privilege requires an examination and interrogation of history. At this writing, the United States is at a watershed moment in the wake of the multiracial and multicultural protests against racial injustice. Protests are occurring globally in the wake of the brutal killing of many Black people in America; most recently, the killings of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, Tony McDade, George Floyd, and Rayshard Brooks. The protests reflect an awakening to the truth of

2. Love H. Whelchel Jr., *The History and Heritage of African American Churches: A Way Out of No Way* (St. Paul, MN: Paragon House, 2011).

racial injustice. James Cone once said, “If we cannot recognize the truth, then it cannot liberate us from untruth.”³ I’m an alumnus of and currently teach at the Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC), which is a Christian Africentric ecumenical seminary committed to liberation theology and social justice. The curriculum at ITC is based on the symbolism of the Sankofa bird. Visually and symbolically, “Sankofa” is expressed as a mythic bird that flies forward while looking backward with an egg (symbolizing the future) in its mouth. This indicates that to understand our present and ensure our future we must know our past. Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) from racial injustice would be a luxury for Black people in the United States because, though stressed, it would suggest that racism has at least been eradicated. However, racism in America is still very much alive, and therefore the trauma of racism continues. It is imperative, therefore, that we look back and examine the theological scandal of Christianity that has produced antiblackness and white Christian supremacy.

In the sixteenth century, the Protestant Reformation developed in reaction to the theological superiority of Catholicism, in addition to its institutional corruption and abuses. French theologian John Calvin became the systematic theologian of the Protestant Reformation and popularized the notion of election. Calvin’s doctrine of election was pivotal in the development of covenantal theologies—the covenant between God and the elect—especially in the context of British colonial America and the early republic. Portrayed as covenants of grace but operating as theologies that oppressed and marginalized the nonelect, these covenants secured through supposed divine election proved that they were not grounded in grace but grounded in negative concepts of race.

In the eighteenth century, the Enlightenment emerged as a movement of ideas situated primarily in Europe. This era of intellectual inquiry formed in differing contexts, particularly British, French, and German. The Enlightenment has been identified as a continuation and enhancement of the philosophical and intellectual work of philosophers from the previous era, such as René Descartes, John Locke, Francis Bacon, and Baruch Spinoza. These philosophers fostered the emergence of Modernity, which attacked tradition and eradicated that which was considered old. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, religion was the only institution that emphasized the old over the new.

Due to the conclusion by thinkers of the Enlightenment that the attainment of truth was possible only through the source and norm of reason, the Enlightenment has been characterized as the “Age of Reason.” Most historians have situated the origins of Modernity in the work of French philoso-

3. James Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 28.

pher René Descartes (1596–1650), the father of modern philosophy. In 1637, Descartes published his essay “Discourse on Method,” in which he famously declared, “I think, therefore, I am,” which became central to the prioritization of reason.⁴ In other words, Descartes concluded that in order to think it was necessary to exist. This new epistemological focus, with its emphasis on doubt, became the major threat to the orthodox Christian church. To combat the impact of this new focus on certain theological concepts, the orthodox Christian church needed to develop oppressive theologies that, unfortunately, were grounded in negative concepts of race rather than covenants of grace.

Enlightened thinkers were European men who equated whiteness with perfection, and whiteness became the criterion for determining the individual thinker. Whiteness became transcendent because white was not a color; therefore, whiteness constituted the absence of color. African American philosopher Cornel West has asserted that the idea of white supremacy developed because of the powers within the structure of modern discourse.⁵

Enlightened thinkers saw a dichotomy between the epistemological capacity and ontological worth of human beings based on racial classifications. West contends that the initial basis for white supremacy was situated in these racial classifications. In 1648, French physician François Bernier (1625–1688) was the first to devise a classification of races through which he categorized humanity: Europeans, Africans, Orientals, and Lapps.⁶ Human beings, and particularly men with white skin color, therefore, were characterized as upper class, individual thinkers (*cogito*), and subjects. Human beings failing to meet this biological criterion were characterized as lower class, racial other, and objects. Consequently, the upper class were light, rational, self-sufficient, civilized, transcendental, and therefore possessed individual rights; the lower class were dark, emotional, dependent, uncivilized, immanent, and therefore lacked individual rights. In addition to these supposedly distinct differences in characteristics based on racial classifications, other theories based on skin color were presented about the cultural aspects and civilization of human beings.

Prior to the Enlightenment, race had been a political category rather than a natural category; however, the racial classifications devised during this period naturalized race. Enlightenment thinkers viewed Europe as the civilized continent in the Age of Light and simultaneously condemned

4. René Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations*, trans. Laurence J. Lafleur (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1952), 25.

5. Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002), 49.

6. West, *Prophesy Deliverance*, 55.

Africa as the Dark Continent.⁷ They considered Europe as culturally and racially superior to all other peoples and geographical lands. Therefore, other non-European continents besides Africa such as Asia—and even the American continent—were considered strange lands.⁸ African American religious historian Charles H. Long declared that the locus of the problem with Modernity and therefore Enlightenment philosophy was the dichotomy between the idea of primitives and the civilized. Long stated that “the primitives operate as a negative structure of concreteness that allows civilization to define itself as a structure superior to this ill-defined and inferior other.”⁹ He further contended that the civilization of Western Europe could not have been defined apart from the empirical existence and exploitation of the primitive cultures.¹⁰ African philosopher Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze argued that the European Enlightenment was built on Greek antiquity. The Greeks dichotomized human beings as either cultured and civilized or barbaric, primitive, and suffering from savagery.¹¹ Race was constructed to keep all other races subjected to one race (whiteness) through oppression. Thus, race was not so much a biological construction as a political construction.

Geography was a pivotal factor in these racial classifications. Enlightenment thought was the catalyst for determining geographical designations by race rather than by space. In 1748, the French naturalist Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon (1707–1788), published an essay in which he devised a geographical and cultural distribution of the human race based on climate and biological differences. Buffon suggested that the natives of the civilized cold climate countries are the most handsome and beautiful people of the world. He identified these civilized countries as “Georgia, Circassia, Ukraine, Turkey, Hungary, the south of Germany, Italy, Switzerland, France, and the northern part of Spain.”¹² German philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) also concluded that heat was the cause of blackness.¹³ Kant correlated the intellect of European dogs that immigrated to Africa with blackness. He asserted that “all dogs that are brought from Europe to Africa

7. Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, *Race and the Enlightenment: A Reader* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 1997), 5.

8. Eze, *Race and the Enlightenment*, 5.

9. Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 101.

10. Long, *Significations*, 101.

11. Long, *Significations*, 4.

12. Georges-Louis Leclerc, Comte de Buffon, “A Natural History, General and Particular,” in Eze, *Race and the Enlightenment*, 26.

13. Immanuel Kant, “On the Different Races of Man,” in Eze, *Race and the Enlightenment*, 62.

become dumb and bald and produce only similar offspring thereafter.”¹⁴ In his treatise on the geographical distribution of races, Buffon demonized the people of the African continent and condemned their blackness. He argued that Negroes are confined to the African continent due to the heat, which produced their blackness and preserved them in their blackness.¹⁵

With this brief historical background of the modern concepts of race, we will now set out to explore and expose the trajectory of the theological scandal that resulted in white superiority and white privilege. We will also examine the resistance to this theological scandal and the impact that it has had on religion in general, but in particular, in the United States of America. Our exploration will be benefitted by suggesting potential ways forward where a true understanding of Christianity can be restored and the corruption laid to rest.

The Scandal

Our first part begins by analyzing the roots of the scandal embodied in Enlightenment theories of race and demonstrates the continuity of these roots within Puritanism and Anglicanism. This continuity shows how the Puritans and Anglicans were progenitors of oppressive Christian theologies in British colonial America and the early republic. We will then outline the three factors that contributed to the corruption of American Christianity: (1) the integration of Enlightenment theories of race with the Reformed notion of election; (2) the belief in the ideal of Black inferiority; and (3) the development of proslavery Christian theologies. This theological scandal within the roots of the Puritans and Anglicans formed the praxis for the spiritual oppression of these Christian faith traditions and became a major catalyst for white supremacy and white privilege. Both Christian traditions possessed a distinct oppressive theological identity: Puritans possessed a theology of white superiority; Anglicans a theology of white privilege. Both these theological identities resulted in the adoption of the Enlightenment term “racial others” for those who were nonwhite and their condemnation as heathens.

In the first chapter, we examine the theories of race that developed within the three major European theaters of the Enlightenment era—Britain, France, and Germany. We analyze the philosophical views of British philosopher John Locke and Scottish philosophers David Hume and Adam Smith, demonstrating how Locke’s natural law theory, Hume’s notion of Black inferiority and destined enslavement, and Smith’s postulation of the invisible hand of God were situated in racist ideology and theological contradictions.

14. Kant, “On the Different Races of Man.”

15. Buffon, “A Natural History, General and Particular,” 23.

We also examine various racist philosophical notions. These include those of German philosopher Immanuel Kant that were designed to reduce the value of humanity to geography and climate conditions and the attempts of German philosopher G. W. F. Hegel to construct the ideology of racial superiority of Europeans over other human races. We focus on the dehumanizing definitions of blackness devised by French philosopher Denis Diderot, the notion of Black degeneration as proposed by French naturalist Georges-Louis Leclerc and Comte de Buffon, the notion of white intellectual superiority as postulated by French political philosopher Baron de Montesquieu, the attempts of French historian and philosopher Voltaire to dehumanize people of African descent as heathenistic and subhuman, and the classification of indigenous people (non-Europeans) as noble savages by Genevan philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Finally, we interrogate Thomas Jefferson's ideology of racial inferiority and the problem of otherness.

From this development, it is clear that the notion of white superiority becomes the theological identity of Puritanism. How this impacts the different branches of the Puritan faith related to enslaved Africans in early American history is our focus in chap. 2. Old Calvinists, in particular, regarded themselves not only as superior to racial others but also to people of other Christian traditions. Consequently, we consider the New Light revival tradition of Jonathan Edwards, which emphasized the experience of conversion and dominated the First Great Awakening. Finally, we consider the theology of disinterested benevolence and abolitionism of New Divinity theologians Samuel Hopkins and Jonathan Edwards Jr. that adopted the scheme of *Christianization-civilization-colonization* that lay the foundation for the formation of the American Colonization Society.

Just as the notion of white superiority became the theological identity of Puritanism, the notion of white privilege, which stemmed from the beliefs of British colonists in the antebellum South, became the theological identity of Anglicanism and is the focus of chap. 3. Here, we engage the work of American historian Rebecca Ann Goetz, who argues that Anglicans in early Virginia connected the skin color of enslaved Africans with the notion of hereditary heathenism, which, she suggests, was the catalyst for these Anglicans, concluding that enslaved Africans were incapable of Christian conversion. We also examine the work of American historian Katharine Gerbner, who argues that "Protestant supremacy" was the forerunner to white supremacy, which shifted the dominant concern of the Christian faith from religion to ethnicity. We analyze the scholarship of American historian Charles F. Irons on the development of proslavery Christianity in colonial Virginia and examine George Whitefield's imperial project in the southern colonies.

The Resistance

The second part of the book explores the scandalous dehumanization of Africans in the early American context that became the catalyst for their spiritual resistance and the development of Christian theologies of liberation. While there are different and competing theories of race, modern racism is the product of human beings whom the Enlightenment thinkers classified as racial others, particularly people of color, being categorized as irredeemable, redeemable and child-like, or redeemable with proper education. These classifications were most evident in certain Christian traditions of the Puritans and Anglicans who created a colonial church based on race as opposed to grace.

For example, baptism, the primary symbol and action of becoming a Christian, had a different significance for racial others in that it became the way through which they could achieve a form of whiteness by being washed in the white blood of Jesus. In other words, baptism made racial others honorary white people, yet it did not change their social status because race trumped grace. In response to such oppressive theologies, enslaved Africans devised a theology of spiritual resistance mediated through their liberative pneumatology that was empowered by grace.

Chapter 4 examines what led to the oppressive theological affinity of Black Calvinist evangelicals of the eighteenth century that was rooted in the integration of their religious training and the appeal of George Whitefield's revivalism. Phillis Wheatley, for example, was enslaved to New England Puritans, who encouraged her to condemn her African spirituality in exchange for Calvinist predestination piety; Jupiter Hammon was shaped by his Anglican enslavers who possessed a Calvinist understanding of divine sovereignty and providence; John Marrant experienced his conversion through the evangelical ministry of George Whitefield and became a Calvinist Methodist; and Lemuel Haynes, a New England indentured servant, was influenced by the New Divinity form of Calvinism and the republican ideology of the revolutionary era. Each of these Black religious figures was influenced by some form of Calvinism, possessed its view of what constituted freedom for enslaved Africans, and theologized from the perspective of the empire theology that shaped their spiritual resistance.

Unlike these Black Calvinist evangelicals, there were the Black radical evangelicals, such as David Walker and Nat Turner, who are the focus of chap. 5. These Black radical evangelicals possessed a liberative pneumatology that informed their theology of spiritual resistance. This liberative pneumatology is clearly evident in Walker's treatise, *An Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World*, where he urges enslaved Africans to listen to the Holy Spirit and concludes that they are the property of the Holy Spirit.

Turner's own pneumatic experiences and spiritual gifts, particularly the gift of prophecy, fuel his spiritual resistance against the oppression of white enslavers. The spiritual resistance of Black radical evangelicals mediated through their spiritual experience of the Holy Spirit functions as the foundation for the development of Black liberation theologies designed to combat oppressive forms of classical Christian theology that corrupt the Christian faith.

The Impact

The third part of the book focuses on the historical and theological impact of the scandal and the spiritual resistance to it. Chapter 6 considers the historical trajectory of the theological scandal evident in the theologies of antebellum evangelicalism. Chapter 7 then explores the theologies of post-bellum evangelicalism, such as the rise of Jim Crowism and the emergence of the Ku Klux Klan, and the 1896 landmark Supreme Court decision that legalized racial segregation in the United States. Chapter 8 examines the theological scandal of white American fundamentalist evangelicalism, including the revivalism of Dwight Moody, the rise of the Moral Majority and Religious Right, highlighting the anti-interracial relations policies of Bob Jones University, Jerry Falwell's opposition to the civil rights movement, and the Reagan Revolution fostered through the 1980 presidential election. Chapter 9 explores the racial motivations of the Tea Party movement, the bigotry behind the birther conspiracy, and the complicity of white Christian evangelicals in their loyal support in the election and presidency of Donald Trump, who has promoted and empowered white supremacy and legitimized white American Christian nationalism through racism, sexism, and xenophobia.

The Way Forward

Finally, in light of the theological scandal that has corrupted Christianity through white supremacy, and the resulting resistance and impact, we provide a way forward theologically and socially. Chapter 10 examines the theologies of the white social gospel, particularly in its systematized form, emphasizing the theology of Walter Rauschenbusch. We also explore the theologies of the Black social gospel, analyzing the theologies of Mordecai Johnson, Benjamin Mays, and Howard Thurman.

Chapter 11 explores the social resistance to the ongoing corruption of Christianity, especially the civil rights movement and the influence of Martin Luther King's theology. It also examines the influence of Black theology and the rise of the Black Power movement, which has given rise to the more recent social resistance of the Black Lives Matter movement.

Through this way forward, in Chapter 12 we note the contributions of current scholars. For example, American Catholic theologian and ethicist Katie Walker Grimes identified antiblackness supremacy as a form of racial evil and defined the ideology as the phenomenon through which “non-black people, especially white ones, amass both power and privilege at black people’s expense.”¹⁶ Antiblackness supremacy reflects the condemnation and criminalization of blackness through assimilation of non-Blacks to whiteness. Black theologian James Cone identifies whiteness as the symbol of the Antichrist, asserting that “whiteness characterizes the activity of deranged individuals intrigued by their own image of themselves, and thus made unable to see that they are what’s wrong with the world.”¹⁷ African American historian Ibram X. Kendi defines an assimilationist as “one who is expressing the racist idea that a racial group is culturally or behaviorally inferior and is supporting cultural or behavioral enrichment programs to develop that racial group.”¹⁸ We emphasize this phenomenon as the problem of neo-whiteness and explore the eradication of white Christian supremacy, which consists of both Catholic and Protestant supremacy and reflects the aesthetic, cognitive, ontological, and spiritual dimensions of racism.

We propose a theological solution for the eradication of antiblackness supremacy and white Christian supremacy. The nucleus of the solution stems from the Wesleyan doctrine of Christian perfection and “entire sanctification,” which consists of possessing perfect love of God and perfect love of one’s neighbor mediated through the sanctification of the heart. The proposed theological solution involves a *decolonial love* that eradicates the evils of imperial and colonial powers.¹⁹

Ultimately, this decolonial love is achieved through a liberative pneumatology—the theological solution to the corruption of Christianity by theologies of white superiority and white privilege—and results in the reawakening of Pentecost, the New Great Awakening, which is reflected in the multiracial and multicultural protests for racial equality and racial justice.

16. Katie Walker Grimes, *Fugitive Saints: Catholicism and the Politics of Slavery* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2017), xvii–xviii.

17. James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, Fortieth Anniversary Edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2010), 8.

18. Ibram X. Kendi, *How to Be an Antiracist* (New York: One World, 2019), 14.

19. American theologian Joseph Drexler-Dreis cultivated the soteriological nature of decolonial love embodied in the literary works of James Baldwin.