

## Excerpts from Chapter 1: The Roots of the Black Christ

During slavery the black Christ emerged in contradistinction to the oppressive white Christ. **The white Christ was the center of slaveholding Christianity, while the black Christ was the center of slave Christianity.** The terms “slaveholding Christianity” and “slave Christianity” are not used to convey that either all slaveholders or all slaves possessed the same religious beliefs. Instead, they signify that a number of slaveholders found a way to participate in the business of slavery without denouncing their Christian faith. Similarly, a number of slaves found a way to fight for freedom without surrendering their Christianity. As slaveholding Christianity and slave Christianity emerged and confronted each other, so too did the white and black Christs.

Slaveholding Christianity and the White Christ Slavery in the American colonies was a part of a wider ideological structure, which presupposed that hierarchal relationships between human beings were divinely ordered. This belief system began with the notion that human beings were created unequal (despite later refutation of this in the Declaration of Independence). Certain biological and social realities were considered representative of superior human qualities, while certain others were considered representative of inferior human qualities. According to this perspective, it was the divinely sanctioned duty of those persons presumed superior to “care” for and govern those persons presumed inferior. As imperialistically minded Europeans began to encounter the unique customs and culture of African people, they decided that dark skin was an unquestionable mark of inferiority.

This erroneous notion was soon supported by various segments of the “scientific” and political community. A prominent eighteenth-century naturalist Carolus Linnaeus developed a human classification chart that affirmed theories of black inferiority. On his chart he described Europeans as “*White, Sanguine, Brawny...Gentle acute, inventive...Governed by customs.*” But he described Africans as “*Black, Phlegmatic, Relaxed...Crafty, indolent...Governed by Caprice.*”<sup>5</sup> Eminent eighteenth-century American physicians like Benjamin Rush speculated that the “color of Negroes” was a disease. The case for African inferiority seemed clear. Members of the white ruling class considered themselves superior to African people. They were certain that they were destined to be masters, while the dark-skinned Africans were destined to be slaves.

Yet, in spite of their apparent beliefs in divinely sanctioned human inequality, many Christian slaveholders faced some potential contradictions. How could they espouse Christian justice and freedom while participating in the bondage of other human beings? Were they committing a grievous sin? Some believed they were.

Others from the slaveholding class did not believe that slavery was a sin. They developed a religious apology for the chattel system—that of slaveholding Christianity. **The white Christ was the center of this religion. The white Christ characteristically allowed for (1) the justification of slavery, (2) Christians to be slaves, and (3) the compatibility of Christianity with the extreme cruelty of slavery.**

Almost from the very beginning of the American slave trade, many slaveholders justified stealing Africans from their homeland—and enslaving them—with claims that they were introducing the “African heathens” to Jesus Christ. These slaveholders rationalized that the benefit the slaves received from Christianization—that is, the assurance of salvation—far outweighed the brutality of slavery.

This emphasis on introducing people, particularly Africans, to Jesus Christ is one of the marks of an interpretation of Christianity with the white Christ at its core. **The white Christ is grounded in an understanding of Christianity suggesting that Jesus of Nazareth was Christ, or the Messiah, because God was made flesh in him. The incarnation itself is considered the decisive feature of Christianity.** That God became human is the essential fact in what it means for Jesus to be Christ. It is God's act that is important to who Jesus is. What Jesus did on earth has little if anything to do with what it means for him to be Christ. His ministry to the poor and oppressed is virtually inconsequential to this interpretation of Christianity. While this emphasis on God's becoming incarnate in Jesus has several implications for Christians and their salvation, the following are especially important to understanding the significance of the white Christ for slaveholding Christianity.

**First, little is required of humans in order to receive salvation.** Christians are the passive recipients of God's grace. If persons believe that God has become “human” in Jesus, and thus Jesus is Christ, then they do not have to be anxious about their salvation. To believe God's act in Jesus is to become convinced

that through that act salvation has been secured. With salvation guaranteed through belief, white people could be slaveholders and Christian without guilt or fear about the state of their soul.

**Second, in order for humans to benefit from God's saving act, they must have knowledge of Jesus as the divine/human encounter.** Slavery supposedly provided the opportunity for Africans to attain this salvific knowledge. Apparently, to the minds of many slaveholders, enslavement was the only means Africans had for learning anything about Jesus. In general, an interpretation of Christianity that focuses on God's coming from heaven and becoming incarnate in Jesus, while sacrificing Jesus's ministry, unleashes the possibility for the emergence of the white Christ. Undergirded with such an understanding of Christianity, slaveholders were free to develop a notion of Christ that justified the enslavement of Africans. And so they did. **It was the white Christ, as the center of slaveholding Christianity, that allowed white slaveholders to engage in black slavery with religious impunity.**

Though slavery was justified as a means for the African “heathen” to be saved, Christianization of the slaves was a slow process. Before the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the number of slaves converted to Christianity was negligible. Slaveholders’ resistance to the idea of Christianizing the slaves was a major barrier. Some slaveholders were concerned that Christianity would make their slaves recalcitrant and difficult to control. Others were concerned about the “legally vague but widely believed” notion that if the slaves were baptized, they would have to be emancipated.<sup>11</sup> The major barrier to

Christianizing the slaves was the slave-holders' fears that the freedom that Jesus offered the oppressed during his own time, and the egalitarian themes present throughout the New Testament, might make slaves think that they should be free and equal to the white population.<sup>12</sup>

**The white Christ was the answer to this threat.** This Christ gained stature in slaveholding Christianity as proslavery evangelists continued to support the idea that Jesus's liberating ministry was irrelevant to the Christian religion. They did this by first highlighting Old Testament scriptures, which apparently supported human bondage. For instance, they frequently quoted from the story of Ham (Genesis 9:25) and the Leviticus code (Leviticus 25:44–46). Second, because the New Testament Gospels did not speak directly for or against slavery, proslavery evangelists argued that what was in the Old Testament was “authoritative in the Christian era unless it was abrogated in the New Testament.”<sup>14</sup>

Ignoring Jesus's liberating ministry to the oppressed as well as his commitment to “set the captives free,” apologists for slavery argued that if Jesus had considered slavery a sin, he would have spoken directly against it. One proslavery minister made his case for slavery this way: *Our Lord repeatedly spoke of slaves, especially in several of his parables, without the slightest intimation that he condemned slavery, and in such a way as plainly showed that he considered it lawful.... We are told, Matt. 8:23–35, that a Centurion came to Jesus beseeching him to heal his sick servant.... If the holding of slaves had been sinful, Jesus would, we doubt not, have so informed [the Centurion].*<sup>15</sup> The

white Christ is, thus, predicated upon an understanding of Jesus that disregards what he did do—that is, minister to the poor and oppressed—yet accents what he did not—that is, speak directly against slavery.

Finally, while proslavery evangelists had to rely upon the lack of antislavery statements when utilizing the New Testament Gospels to justify their position, they had what they considered direct support for slavery from the New Testament epistles.

One ex-slave witnessed to the frequency with which she would hear Ephesians preached: “[The white preacher] preached, ‘you must obey your masters and be good servants.’ That is the greater part of the sermon, when they preach to colored folks.”<sup>17</sup> The direct attention given to slavery in the epistles notwithstanding, slaveholding evangelists’ focus on the epistles—as opposed to the Gospels—is consistent with the religion of the white Christ. **The Gospels are unimportant, since they concentrate on Jesus's liberating activity in human history. The epistles are important because they stress knowledge of and belief in Jesus Christ as essential for human salvation.** The practical outcome of this New Testament selectivity in understanding Jesus is that it provided proslavery evangelists a way to quell the fears of slaveholders. **Evangelists were able to spiritualize the themes of Christian freedom and equality. They essentially reasoned that what Jesus did in human history was disconnected from the salvation that he offered. Subsequently, the salvation that he offered was unrelated to what took place in human history.** Jesus's salvation had nothing to do with historical freedom. The slaves

could be Christian without being freed. According to this version of Christianity, the only freedom Jesus offered was in “heaven,” not on earth.

To assure that the slaves understood baptism was not synonymous with earthly freedom, many white evangelists had slaves consent to declarations like the following: *You declare in the presence of God and before this Congregation that you do not ask for the Holy Baptism out of any design to free yourself from the Duty and Obedience you owe to your Master while you live, but meerly [sic] for the good of your Soul and to partake of the Graces and Blessings promised to the Members of the Church of Jesus Christ.*<sup>19</sup> Again, with an interpretation of Christianity and a reading of the Bible that trivializes Jesus's earthly ministry, the white Christ can flourish. It did so in slaveholding Christianity. **This Christ allowed for white enslavers to be Christians, and for black Christians to be slaves.** Again, enslavers are free to be as cruel as they want toward a slave, while at the same time being assured salvation. The religion of the white Christ places few demands on persons concerning how they should live their life in relation to others.

Slaveholding Christianity clearly reveals a major shortcoming of an interpretation of Christianity that emphasizes the incarnation at the expense of Jesus's earthly ministry. **It can lead to an understanding of Christ that supports an unjust status quo.** In America it produced the white Christ—the Christ whom “the angry children of Malcolm X” railed against. **This Christ allowed for the maintenance of an oppressive social-economic system and freed the white ruling class to act in**

**ways that benefited them—without fear for their salvation.**

Specifically, the white Christ provided for the religious justification of the chattel system, eliminated reservations about holding Christians as slaves, and obscured the tensions between Christianity and the cruelty of slavery.

**Fortunately, black slaves provided another understanding of Christianity and its Jesus.** Slaveholders tried to convince slaves to accept the slaveholding version of Christianity. Ex-slave Charlie Van Dyke explained: *“Church was what they called it but all that preacher talked about was for us slaves to obey our masters and not to lie and steal. Nothing about Jesus was ever said.”*<sup>25</sup>

Disgusted by slaveholding Christianity and its white Christ, some slaves held clandestine services—away from the watchful eyes of their masters and mistresses—where they had “real church” and heard what they considered Christian preaching. *“In the secrecy of the quarters or the seclusion of the brush arbors (‘hush harbors’) the slaves made Christianity truly their own.”*<sup>26</sup>

These hidden services nurtured slave Christianity. **The black Christ was center of this religion. The black Christ characteristically (1) reflected an intimate relationship between Jesus and the slaves, (2) radicalized the slaves to fight for their freedom, and (3) illuminated the contradiction between Christianity and the cruelty of slavery.**

Slave Christianity did not focus on the relationship between Jesus and God as did slaveholding Christianity. **The significance of Jesus for the slaves had little to do with God becoming**

**incarnate in him. Jesus's meaning had more to do with what Jesus did in their lives.** Jesus was a living being with whom the slaves had an intimate relationship. Refrains like “Jesus is my bosom friend,” “He will be wid us Jesus, / Be wid us to the end,” and “a little talk with Jesus makes it right,” echo through slave songs. To the slaves, Jesus was a trusted companion who understood their pain, sufferings, and sorrows.

Jesus's significance for the slaves was based upon an interpretation of Christianity that **stressed the centrality of Jesus's ministry and relationship to the oppressed during his own time.** The slaves were drawn, for instance, to Luke's birth narrative. For them this narrative established Jesus's bond with the outcast and downtrodden at the very beginning of his life. It told that Jesus was born in a manger, because there was no room for him in the inn. Luke's report of the circumstances into which Jesus was born seemingly assured the slaves that Jesus understood their experience of rejection. They sang: *Poor little Jesus boy Made him to be born in a manger World treated him so mean Treats me mean too.*<sup>27</sup>

**The crucifixion was, however, the event that most clearly demonstrated to the slaves Jesus's solidarity with them. It forged an inextricable bond between the two. Through the cross, Jesus's suffering and the slaves' suffering became one.** The slaves sang, “*Were you there when they crucified my Lord?*,” passionately implying that they were there. Essentially, through the cross the slaves' experience and Jesus's experience converged. The suffering of slavery and the suffering of the cross were synonymous. The crucifixion confirmed to slaves

that they were one with Jesus, and more importantly, that Jesus was one with them. James Cone explains: *Through the blood of slavery, they transcended the limitations of space and time. Jesus' time became their time, and they encountered a new historical existence. Through the experience of being slaves, they encountered the theological significance of Jesus' death: through the crucifixion, Jesus makes an unqualified identification with the poor and the helpless and takes their pain upon himself.*<sup>30</sup>

Fundamental to the slaves' belief that Jesus would meet their needs was the resurrection. The resurrection revealed that Jesus was not dead. The crucified one was the resurrected one—who was now acting in contemporary history.<sup>35</sup> The slaves gave witness: “Go and tell ev'rybody / Yes, Jesus is risen from the dead.”<sup>36</sup> An interpreter of slave songs, John Lovell, aptly observes, “*Without a doubt...the really powerful Jesus of the spiritual works on earth, in this life, in the here and now, today and tomorrow.*”<sup>37</sup>

**The resurrection also revealed that the death of the cross was not the last word—freedom was.** Since slave Christianity viewed the cross and slavery as synonymous experiences, Jesus's deliverance from the death of the cross meant they would be delivered from the death of slavery. Black people testified in song that “Jesus Christ, He died for me, Jesus Christ, He set me free.”

**The slaves forged an interpretation of Christianity that focused on Jesus's ministry to the oppressed, as well as the crucifixion and resurrection within the context of that ministry. Such an**

**interpretation allows for the emergence of the black Christ. And so it did with slave Christianity. The black Christ was the presence of Jesus in slave lives. He was for the slave a fellow sufferer, a confidant, a provider, and a liberator.**

*Douglas, Kelly Brown. The Black Christ. Orbis Books. Kindle Edition.*

Questions for Reflection:

What does the author mean by the term the “White Christ”?

Describe the faith or system of beliefs associated with the “White Christ.”

What does the author mean by the term the “Black Christ?”

Describe the faith or system of beliefs associated with the “Black Christ.”

Reflect on your understanding of the Christian faith today, both as you practice it and as you see/hear/read about the practice of others in the United States in particular.

- Where do you see the influence of the “White Christ” on today’s beliefs and practices?
- Where do you see the influence of the “Black Christ” on today’s beliefs and practices?

In what ways do mainline churches such as Saint Andrews preserve and continue the “White Christ?” What are the risks and benefits of this?

What does the “Black Christ” have to say to the white church today?