

WHAT SHALL WE SAY ABOUT THESE THINGS? A THEO-ANTHROPOLOGICAL REFLECTION

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Abstract—a discussion of COVID-19's effects on the African American community and the white supremacy integral to Donald Trump's administration. In responding to those events theologically, the essay suggests that anthropology, rather than "revelation," grounds theology and thus deprivileges the Christian fundamentalism that has supported Trump. That Black folks' future depends on their ethical praxis—qua "a love supreme"—rather than creation's eschatological renewal is integral to the argument.

Keywords: COVID-19, Trump, Baby Suggs, Maat, the breath of life, "God."

COVID-19 has shredded lungs and stopped hearts for millions forever. Their social status no longer matters. All return to nothingness, the great leveler. Yet this novel coronavirus aptly symbolizes white privilege as it has disproportionately and grimly reaped Black bodies, as have white supremacists. Consigned to service occupations and domiciled in decrepit and overcrowded ghettos, Blacks have been Petri dishes for diseases like COVID-19 because of the hatefulness of our pro-white republic. The republic's enmity toward Blacks has corralled them into corners, brutalized them, and saddled them with inferior services. As a result, breast and prostate cancers, hypertension, heart and lung disease, uncontrolled diabetes, and asthma disproportionately plague African Americans. David R. Williams and Lisa A. Cooper point out racism's connection to fatal illness in *The Journal of the American Medical Association*. They argue that Jim Crowism makes its victims sick because their impoverished living quarters breed diseases caused by environmental disadvantages, such as polluted air and water, an overabundance of vermin, and poor nutrition. Consequently, ghetto dwellers suffer "the earlier onset of multiple chronic conditions, greater severity of disease, and poorer survival ... than white persons." Morbidities such as high blood pressure and asthma, which are effects of air pollution, have thus issued in "more severe cases of and higher death rates due to COVID-19."¹

The 45th president's mendacious misrule helped spread the coronavirus exponentially. The storming of the Capitol; the white backlash over so-called critical race theory (the attempts to ban Toni Morrison's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *Beloved*, from white schools); the right wing's undermining of voting rights; the rise of the para-militarized white power movement are aftershocks of Trump's racist incompetence and attest to white supremacy's likeness to COVID-19. Illogical, "red in tooth and claw," driven by what Freud called "the death instinct,"² and virulently lethal, white supremacy, like COVID, is as helpful to humanity as the bubonic plague. Empowering Donald Trump's triggering of the hatefulness attached to the American DNA since 1619, the Republican Party gave that emperor in the buff permission to unleash sickness unto death. It only takes a dog whistle of the right pitch to summon Nazi- and Ku-Klux-Klan-like aggressiveness that breaks out in the republic like shingles. Remember Charlottesville, Virginia, in 2017 and Washington, DC, in 2021?

It bears repeating that COVID-19 and white supremacy are not identical. We may soon be able to pop a pill and stop COVID from killing us. White supremacy, however, is incurable. It even infects worldviews claiming to cure it. For instance, many conservative evangelicals are still Trump supporters for "God's" sake.³ The criminal justice system repeatedly exonerates whites like Kyle Rittenhouse, thus revealing this typical double standard: justice is blind for whites. The blindfold comes off hatefully when Black bodies are on the line. Four hundred years

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of anti-Black ethics and theology make it unlikely that white supremacists will abandon their hubris. What should I, a Black theologian, say about that?

WHAT I HAVE TO SAY: A THEO-ANTHROPOLOGICAL REFLECTION

I've freed myself from dogma and theologoumena through which scholars speculate about "God" as if Black lives do not matter. I hope to discover more effective methods to liberate Black consciousness from creedal symbols and biblical narratives that are not as universal as the Church has claimed. Origen's apokatastasis and Augustine's double predestination are imaginative, culturally determined takes on the future. Therefore, the Levantine mythoi and Hellenistic metaphysics integral to Christian eschatology originate from a particular region and epoch rather than the triune "God" who preexists "creation." I suspect, moreover, that the idea of the death of Death may be laid to rest long before the sun enters its red giant phase. In the future, cockroaches, scorpions, and a minority of nuclear-poisoned humans may inherit the earth. Wouldn't that undermine millenarianism? In the time I have left among the living, I prefer myths anchored in *verifiable* events and the numinosity they release like stars.

One doubts that YHWH-Elohim parted the Red Sea for millions of Hebrews in the second millennium BCE. Since Abraham isn't my "father," I can't credibly claim the Exodus as my ancestral inheritance. But Morrison's novel, *Beloved*, a ghost story set in the nineteenth century, is "true." Baby Suggs, an African-born woman, exhorts African Americans to love their hearts more than their "life-holding" uteruses and "life-giving private parts."⁴ For without heart love—the love of the black body and its cultural and spiritual manifestations—the unborn will inherit the self-hatred and communal dysfunction that shorten life. Baby Suggs teaches Black folk that it's up to us to make our lives matter—a point Minister Malcolm Shabazz made inimitably, a plea I hear in John Coltrane's artistry. I hear *Beloved's* Baby Suggs's Call in John Coltrane's composition, "Acknowledgement." Isn't this superlative love far more liberating than a tale spun yonder and long ago by people who never heard of African Americans?

The Exodus became normative for countless Black people because whites enslaved and colonized us. Blacks made the story their own in their Spirituals and hatred of enslavement. But the fact remains that it was a chained and maimed Black people who embraced the Exodus. Here, conversion and coercion are nearly identical and raise a couple of questions: Did the bullwhip or the Holy Spirit advance African Americans' faith in the Lord? Did convenient grace move Blacks to the Cross, or is whites' evisceration of the Africans' religious convictions behind Blacks' Christianization? One thing seems sure: When the old Africans passed away, memories of who they were and where they came from became fainter and fainter. Today, it's rare for African Americans to know something about their ancestral ethnicity, especially if they haven't spit in a tube. Western civilization was the catalyst for this erasure as it discredited Africa's rich, mnemonic resources, hubristically attempting to replace them with Jewish-Christian monotheism and the metaphysical speculation allegedly rooted in Aegean spaces. Furthermore, one might say that the *missio Dei*, as appropriated by Euro-American evangelicals from Jonathan Edwards to Franklin Graham, alienated Blacks from their hearts—their ancestors' wisdom and aesthetics. Wisdom and beauty were "white" and sanctified by the Holy Spirit, who blew where white enslavers and colonizers said it did, namely on whiteness. But spirituality doesn't have to work that way.

The Congolese theologian Kā Mana points out that myths mined from Black consciousness signify a "superabundance of meaning where the period of origins ... still constitutes an important point of departure for new possibilities of being and new prospects of self-creation in new contexts of life."⁵ He provides the example of the ancient tale of Isis and Osiris, which dates from the third millennium BCE at least, maybe even before then. Mana argues that the memory of those Kemetic gods is indispensable for Blacks who embrace the future with hope more salvific than the "kingdom of God" rightwing evangelicals envision. The Congolese linguist and philosopher Mubabinge Bilolo also reaches farther back than "Israel" and ancient Athens to draw out the implications of another memory of ancient Africa, namely Maat—the ancient Egyptian principle of harmony, justice, and truth. According to Bilolo,

The main meaning of the verb maâ is "to be true." There is primacy of 'Truth' (Ma'at) over the other senses. But what does it mean to be 'true,' 'to be real,' 'what is really, really' (wnnw maâ) as opposed to what is 'false,' to 'what is fictitious.' In its first meaning, to promote Ma'at is to promote 'Unu-maâ,' i.e., 'what is true.' To promote what is true is to promote Knowledge, Science; it is to contribute to reestablishing the Historical Truth (History) and the Natural Truth

(natural sciences). It should also be noted that the verb ‘maâ,’ also gives the expression ‘Maâ Kheru,’ that is to say, ‘right of voice.’⁶

The noted Egyptologist Jan Assman adds that “Maat designates the idea of a meaningful, all-pervasive order that embraces the world of humankind, objects, and nature—in short, the meaning of creation, the form in which it was intended by the creator god.”⁷ Time’s vicissitudes—disease, infirmity, cosmic catastrophe, homo sapiens’ chimpanzee-like aggressiveness, and cruelty—signify Maat’s antithesis, which is *Isfet*, which means “lack.” Assman writes, “Sickness, death, scarcity, injustice, crime, rebellion, war, and so forth,” qua *Isfet*, “had no meaning for the Egyptians.” If *Isfet* signifies meaninglessness, Maat epitomizes the nuances of a corrective and redemptive worldview.⁸ Professor Maulana Karenga writes, in addition, that “The understanding of Maat as an *interrelated order of rightness* in the course of its development in Kemetic intellectual history evolves from the conception of Maat as a constitutive part of creation itself, both as a goddess or divine spirit and as a conceptual personification of order, rightness, truth, justice, etc.”⁹

Despite Maat’s virtuousness, the Egyptians, an *African* people, come off poorly in the Exodus and the Black theologies that sublimate Pharaonic Egypt to “Israel.” According to the Hebrew Bible’s ethnocentric legends, the Egyptians are Ham’s progeny, whom YHWH disfavors. Hardening Pharaoh’s heart, “God” sadistically punishes the Egyptians with plagues, murders their firstborn (even the cows!), and drowns Pharaoh’s army. We are to understand that Moses delivered “God’s” word, but according to whom—the ancient Jewish elite and today’s fundamentalists? Bilolo argues helpfully that theologians absolutize “God’s” word to trump those who don’t “subscribe to the postulate of revelation.” But why swear by “revelation”? Do we *know* that a triune deity created the swiftly expanding cosmos *ex nihilo*? To understand our species comprehensively, to understand what makes us tick, why not study other “philosophical conceptions relating to God (theology) and the World (cosmology)”?¹⁰ None of them, it seems, is *the* truth. But don’t they signify that “God” has no alterity but the ancientness of our texts and rituals, which mirror what *we* love and hate? If one can live and die content with a “yes,” then the race—qua the history of homo sapiens and what we know of our hominid predecessors—comprise the only numinosity to speak of truthfully. It’s the proverbial question of the chicken or the egg. If the chicken is to the theologian as the egg is to “God,” the chicken came first. *A fortiori*, if yesterday’s must-read theologians (consider Augustine and the Cappadocians) generated the *Logos asarkos*, then theology is essentially anthropology. But who should I take to heart, the Trinity or Amun Ra? What makes my heart light—Maat or the Pentateuch? Neither is dispensable. Both are meaningful. But which will be liberating for those who will be born Black?

I’ve never seen an unburned bush all afire, but African people’s survival in the New World is *real*. And I suspect that our love of our own heart—an ardor that’s more Nile Valley-like than Levantine, if you asked me—is how we have survived. (That’s enough “enthusiasm” from me for now.) I respect how meaningful the Exodus has been to my grandmothers’ generations—and me, at one time—but I see no good reason for Israel to eclipse Ramesside achievements. I’ve never encountered the *mysterium tremendum* in the way Moses, the Levite, did while cowering in the rock’s cleft. After reading Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman’s book *The Bible Unearthed*, I wonder if Moses existed.¹¹ But the grace and dignity of my ancestors are as real as the light that overcomes darkness. The ancestors’ strength—remember Mamie Till-Mobley?—is *awesome*. To be in the fire and emerge with one’s soul intact is divine. *À se*.

Life—the time it signifies—is too mysterious to collapse the eons into The Book of the Dead or Genesis 1. Tomorrow is too uncertain for one to pigeonhole the future in Revelation 22. Poetic theologians penned those texts millions of years *after* our bipedal ancestors foraged in Africa. *Homo religious* can’t fathom the billions of years that preceded the species. I, for one, prefer to stay in my hominid lane and contend from there, to reiterate, that *our memories of the ancestors rather than the deity’s self-disclosure constitute the only numinosity to speak of truthfully*—a hardly original premise.

Ludwig Feuerbach put that bug in my ear decades ago. Consequently—since European thinkers have influenced Black consciousness, and since I take to heart whatever seems truthful—my sense of the ancestors’ numinosity is more rooted in Ludwig Feuerbach than Karl Barth. Feuerbach’s work isn’t sacrosanct to me—I don’t swear by everything he writes—but he persuasively argues that “God” mirrors humanity rather than the other way around. This is incontestable to me: “God,” whether construed as tripersonal (Moltmann) or as a single person

(Brightman), images homo sapiens. I can't entirely agree with Feuerbach's central argument that "God" is *nothing but* the apotheosis of the species. I'm far more edified by Rabbi Mordecai Kaplan's view that "God" is "the Life of the Universe."¹²

The so-called "father" of Reconstructionism, a wise professor who taught for years in New York City's Jewish Theological Seminary, Kaplan would have us "revaluate" Genesis 2:7, the ancient Yahwists' narrative in which "God" is *Spirit*, life's breath.¹³ *The breath of life* is a beautiful phrase and a beautiful reality. No wonder we can predicate "God" of Life. Whether fauna or flora breath, life's breath *is* precious, "Godly." We ought not to poison it, *but we have*. Our ailing ecology evinces that we are out of sync with the way things work, things that took eons to flow together for Life's sake. Kaplan avows, therefore, that it's "sufficient that God should mean ... the sum of the animating, organizing forces and relationships which are forever making a cosmos out of chaos."¹⁴ Rather than imagine the deity as the terrible "God" of fire and smoke, "we relate the ideal of holiness to the worthwhileness and sanctity of life as implicit in the God idea, we invest places, persons, and events with sacredness *only* as they contribute to our awareness of the sanctity of life as a whole, *only* as they symbolize the holiness that is in all things."¹⁵ I'm content to call Maat *a*—not *the*—manifestation of holiness. The same goes for biblical elements, Jesus' solidarity with the wretched of the earth, for instance. But Barth's *Prosligion*-influenced axiom that "God gave himself as the object" of our theological knowledge is, like Feuerbach's apotheosis of the secondary substance, "man," too exclusivist. In addition, Barth's claim that "the light" theology possesses "is not ... the theologian's faith" but "God's" self-revelation¹⁶ seems a bit solipsistic and dismissive of other ways of imagining "God," notably Kaplan's.

Let me add that the whiteness of many Barthians' views of revelation blinds them to the Church's complicity in the enslavement and colonization of people of color, especially Black people. That colossal problem should dominate systematics as it does in James Cone's oeuvre. He argues there's no way for the Church to be Christ's body *and* complicit in African people's brutalization—unless the *Logos ensarkos* is a white racist. Black consciousness would maim itself if it accepted such an apotheosis as the wisdom of creation. Feuerbach's *The Essence of Christianity* comes to mind once again. He recounts the story "of a dying negro-slave [sic] who refused baptism saying, "Je ne veux point d'une autre vie, car peut-être y serais-je encore votre esclave." ("I don't want no other life—I might still be your slave.")¹⁷ Feuerbach's point is that both the enslaved man and those who wanted to baptize him into the "kingdom of God" demonstrate that "Faith in a future life is ... only faith in the true life of the present." For Feuerbach, "the essential elements of this life are also the essential elements of the other: accordingly, faith in a future life is not faith in another unknown life; but in the truth and infinitude, and consequently in the perpetuity, of that life which already here below is regarded as the authentic life."¹⁸ In dogmatic Christianity, the new creation mirrors this creation. In a Central African religion, reincarnation is as sure as the sunrise.¹⁹ "Eternal" life is earthbound in either case. The enslaved African was thus correct to suspect that if the white man's religion sanctioned his enslavement here and now, he would be enslaved in "heaven."

Unfortunately, Feuerbach, in typical Hegelian fashion, albeit leftwing, deems African traditional religions "savage." He writes that the primitives' "limitation is the direct opposite of imaginative spiritualism, which makes man a vagabond, who indifferent even to the earth, roams from star to star."²⁰ Even so, the "savage" and the astronaut have this in common: "Man is what he is through Nature ... Be thankful to Nature! Man cannot be separated from it."²¹ I think Feuerbach is right on this score: "It is only when we abandon a ... theology ... distinct from psychology and anthropology, and recognize anthropology as itself theology, do we attain to a true, self-satisfying identity of the divine and human being, the identity of the human being with itself."²² Indeed, one need not believe that the universe's expansion from an infinitesimal mass was caused by an intelligent Being outside the spacetime continuum.²³ One can, however, understand why Jewish-Christian theologians think so. One can even value that perception if it does not become oppressively hegemonic.

Something Stewart Guthrie, a professor of anthropology, writes seems pertinent here. "Anthropomorphism by definition is mistaken."²⁴ What we humanize as "God" unfolds from our minds. Nonetheless, our species humanizes mysterious phenomena. "Choosing among interpretations of the world, we remain," Guthrie writes, "condemned to meaning, and the greatest meaning has a human face."²⁵ Sometimes, though, our anthropomorphizing—as in the *white* "God-man"—does unspeakable damage to non-white faces. Isn't that because the enslaving and colonizing image of God is white? Wouldn't that mean (if I may appropriate

Guthrie's contention here) that systematicians set too much stock in the hypostatic union? If the answer is yes, the anhypostatic humanity, iconographically Aryan, and the Son, homoousios with the Father, are identical despite the *communicatio idiomatum*. Yes: our theologies are *too* human when "we see a face where none is. Pursuing an uncertain course between too little meaning and too much, we chronically veer, mistaken but safe, toward too much."²⁶ As Feuerbach puts it, "there lies a malignant principle" in faith.²⁷ The history of the enslavement and colonization of African people attests to that malignancy and unveils that anthropomorphizing can be fatal.

The philosopher Sam Harris argues in his iconoclastic book, *The End of Faith*, "the history of Christianity is principally a story of mankind's misery and ignorance rather than of its required love of God."²⁸ Or, maybe one should say that misery and ignorance are deified with disastrous consequences for the non-whites whom the white "God" would redeem via enslavement and colonization. Something else Harris writes reminds one of Kaplan. He notes that our species is not the be-all and end-all of life. Regardless of our "race," we "are *not* the measure of all things. This universe is shot through with mystery." The humanization of cosmic enigmas goes too far when it is racist. When "God" is white, or Black for that matter, theologians have gone too far. For Harris,

No myths need to be embraced for us to commune with the profundity of our circumstances. No personal God need be worshipped for us to live in awe at the beauty and immensity of creation. No tribal fictions need be rehearsed for us to realize, one fine day, that we do, in fact, love our neighbors, that our happiness is inextricable from their own, and that our independence demands that people everywhere be given the opportunity to flourish.²⁹

That's partially true. We don't *have* to swear by anthropomorphic deities as the ancient Egyptians did, but we don't have to prescind of thought of them either. What do they mean, who do they hurt, and are they useful to the struggle for the fullness of *life*? That's the question. When "God" oppresses others—read the Book of Joshua lately?—theology has the force of a life-threatening pandemic.

Suppose the Republican Party—avowedly Christian for the most part—takes the House in 2022 and the White House two years later. In that case, we Black theologians and scholars of religion must be ready to help our people *intensify* the struggle for *our* lives. (Remember George Floyd and Breonna Taylor?) Solidarity with justice-loving, non-racists is always welcome. Still, as Baby Suggs reminds us, Black lives are Black folks' responsibility. The well-being of the unborn is undoubtedly at stake. Who will make a way for them if we don't? We must say *NO!* to white supremacists by any means necessary and protect ourselves from them like we take precautions against COVID-19. Life is short. We "ain't got long to stay here." Disease and death make that inevitable. We should make the best of the breath of life while we have it! May the ancestors' intrepidity strengthen our hearts toward that end by any means necessary. That's all I have to say about these things for now.

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¹³ "The LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man became a living being."

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