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# From *Logos* to *Sarx*

## Black Philosophy and the Philosophy of Religion

TIM GOLDEN

*The righteousness of God is not an abstract quality in the being of God, as with Greek philosophy. It is rather God's active involvement in history, making right what human beings have made wrong.*

—James Cone,  
**A Black Theology of Liberation**

### I.

Black philosophy, as I conceive of it in this essay (there are other ways to conceive of black philosophy), is a sort of critical reflection on the experiences of African Americans, Africans, and Afro-Caribbeans in Western modernity.<sup>1</sup> This sort of critical reflection arises from within epistemologically motivated and oppressive axiological, political, and religious conceptual schemes that maintain white supremacy. Black philosophy succeeds in turning such oppressive conceptual schemes against themselves by holding them accountable with rigorous standards of authentic moral, religious, and political praxis; standards that the epistemic motivations of oppressive axiological, political, and religious conceptual schemes ignore altogether. That there could be such a thing as black philosophy in Western modernity, given Western modernity's anti-black racism, is remarkable. For Western modernity and its attendant white supremacy, as

manifested through the horrors of chattel slavery, Jim Crow, lynching, colonialism, and mass incarceration, has demonstrated such dehumanizing behavior toward blacks that one would reasonably think it impossible for philosophical reflection to occur under such hostile conditions. But the resiliency of philosophical reflection is quite remarkable; for philosophical reflection on the experiences of blacks in the West has flourished in a dehumanizing environment. Black philosophy thus originates—indeed, thrives—in a hostile environment that purported to undermine its possibility. And black philosophy's function is as interesting as its origin; for black philosophy functions as both sentinel and savior. As sentinel, black philosophy stands watch over against the very same hostile environment that denied its possibility, providing powerful moral, religious, and political critiques of that same hostile environment that at once both—almost paradoxically—suppressed and birthed it, demanding justice. And as I

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will argue below, as savior, black philosophy saves the philosophy of religion from its moral disorder of epistemic addiction, giving both voice and face to the abstractions that ignore moral and political praxis, thus making the move from *logos* to *sarx*, or, to put it another way, making the word flesh.

There are many manifestations of anti-black racism in Western modernity—too many to enumerate here. So I emphasize a serious moral problem at work in Western modernity that both denies the humanity of blacks and also helps give rise to black philosophy: the moral problem of epistemic addiction. I have written of this moral problem elsewhere,<sup>2</sup> and I provide a brief definition of this moral problem here. Epistemic addiction is the Aristotelian “desire to know” run amok; it is the quest for knowledge without regard for ethics; the incessant intellectual gesticulation that is so preoccupied with rational justifications for beliefs, that it ignores pressing moral and political concerns. Perhaps nowhere is this phenomenon seen more clearly than in the philosophical sub-field that professional philosophers call the “philosophy of religion,” where it manifests itself in what Martin Heidegger termed the “onto-theological” constitution of metaphysics; the demand for the Deity to enter into philosophy only upon the conditions of rationality.<sup>3</sup> Narrowly construed here to refer to the hyper-analytic and overly conceptual accounts of God and his attributes, the problem of evil, theodicy, and proofs for God’s existence, the philosophy of religion is so focused on conceptual analysis that it ignores moral and political praxis. And as Charles Mills has argued in his critique of John Rawls, the same hyper-theorizations

and abstractions that are impotent against injustice will likely perpetuate injustice.<sup>4</sup> As it is with political philosophy, so it is with the philosophy of religion: the philosophy of religion, because of its epistemic addiction, not only omits pressing moral and political concerns at the level of praxis, but such omissions perpetuate the injustices that cause the moral and political concerns in the first place. Hence, the need for black philosophy to be a sentinel; to stand watch over against the very environment that denied its possibility; and to critique that very same environment on practical, moral, political, and religious grounds.

Since I deal with the philosophy of religion here, it is appropriate to employ a framework from the Judeo-Christian tradition in making my argument. I argue that black philosophy performs its function of sentinel of an epistemologically addicted philosophy of religion by demanding that the philosophy of religion make the word (*logos*) flesh (*sarx*). Whereas the epistemic addiction of the philosophy of religion uses abstraction to attain disembodiment for the sake of conceptual analysis, thus making the flesh into a word, black philosophy employs a critique of abstraction to make the word flesh. In section two, I frame my argument in terms of the biblical distinction between word and flesh, aligning philosophy of religion with *logos*, and black philosophy with *sarx*. In section three, I draw from Frederick Douglass’s *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave (Narrative)*, and David Walker’s *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in particular, and very expressly, to those of the United States of America (Appeal)*, to show how black

philosophy performs its functions of sentinel and savior, of making the word flesh, and of addressing deep and abiding moral, religious, and political concerns at the level of moral praxis through an embodied and concrete liberation hermeneutic, and also through aesthetics. I conclude in section four.

## II.

Since much of the philosophy of religion, as I conceive of it here, arises from the Judeo-Christian theological framework of scholasticism,<sup>5</sup> it is appropriate to make a biblical allusion to the distinction between word and flesh. *Logos* and *sarx* are the Greek terms for word and flesh, respectively. What is their relevance here? These terms are important because they establish a framework for my account of black philosophy and its relationship to the philosophy of religion. In Greek, the term *logos* implies word, reason, or language. Since the philosophy of religion suffers from epistemic addiction, its preoccupation with epistemic justification and hyper-theorization puts it squarely within the network of meaning implied by the term *logos*. A good example of this sort of epistemic addiction is Alvin Plantinga's essay "The Free Will Defense," where Plantinga, through a vast array of thought experiments and appeals to the abstractions of set theory, purports to refute John Mackie's claim that religious beliefs are "positively irrational."<sup>6</sup> Completely inattentive to moral praxis, the thought experiments and logical rigor occlude abiding moral and political problems like anti-black racism. One may object here

and argue that Plantinga and other philosophers of religion, in addressing the problem of evil and theodicy, are addressing moral concerns. My response to this objection is that although philosophers of religion do address moral concerns as they relate to theodicy and the problem of evil, those concerns are still addressed from an overly theoretical standpoint for the purposes of rational thematization and epistemic justification, rather than for moral action at the level of human praxis. God exists, on their accounts, as an onto-theological construct of rationality, utterly disconnected from the concrete experiences of human beings. I do not mean to suggest that logical rigor and epistemic justification are somehow expendable. I do not believe that they are. I do believe, however, that they cannot, standing alone, address the deep and abiding religious, social, political, and economic manifestations of anti-black racism. So the philosophy of religion, as epistemologically addicted, uses the *logos* for almost exclusively epistemological purposes.

Now according to the Christian theological narrative, if the word is never made flesh, there can be no salvation.<sup>7</sup> The same is true of the philosophy of religion: its epistemic addiction puts it in serious need of a savior, and it cannot be saved unless its epistemic addiction is cured, and it is given, to use Ralph Ellison's description, "flesh and bone, fiber and liquids."<sup>8</sup> Enter black philosophy.

The black experience in Western modernity exposes the abstraction of the philosophy of religion at the level of moral and religious praxis for what it is: an epistemologically driven, oppressive methodology that not only ignores anti-black racism—an

obvious moral, religious, and political problem—but also perpetuates it through its glaring omission of the moral problem of anti-black racism. But in the midst of anti-black racism, there arise powerful voices of moral and religious condemnation; voices that reveal that religious profession and epistemic justification mean very little except when accompanied by authentic moral and religious practice; voices that transform the abstractions of the philosophy of religion into living, breathing, and doing, concrete human beings. These voices remind us that the epistemic justifications of *logos* count for nothing except that they are embodied in the practices of the flesh. They remind us that philosophy of religion needs a savior. I now turn to two of these black voices: David Walker and Frederick Douglass.

### III.

David Walker's *Appeal* makes the word flesh through its extensive biblical references and its identification of the black experience of oppression in the United States during chattel slavery with the experiences of the children of Israel in Pharaoh's Egypt. In contrast to Plantinga's thought experiments and appeals to set theory that abstract all flesh and bone from religious and theological reflection, David Walker puts religion solidly within the realm of moral and political praxis, restoring flesh, bone, and perhaps most important, *faces* to the theorizations of religious belief. Walker's methodology in the *Appeal* can hardly be done justice here, so I focus on only a small portion of that magnificent work. In a footnote to Ar-

ticle I of *Appeal*, after articulating the plight of blacks and comparing it to the children of Israel, Walker, exhibiting a hermeneutic of suspicion as it relates to Christian missionary work, writes of the profound shortcomings of Christianity as whites practice it, and as blacks experience it:

If ever the world becomes Christianized . . . it will be through the means, under the God of the Blacks, who are now held in wretchedness, and degradation, by the white Christians of the world, who before they learn to do justice to us before our Maker—and be reconciled to us, and reconcile us to them, and by that means have clear consciences before God and man . . . they must learn to do justice at home . . . when they learn to do justice, God will accept their offering.<sup>9</sup>

In this passage, Walker makes the word flesh by reflecting on the hypocrisy of white slaveholding Christians; those who profess religion with their tongues yet deny it with their actions; a corrupt religious community that adheres to the letter of the law while denying its spirit. The theology of Christianity moved nineteenth-century white Christians to believe in its doctrines, but the word has never been made flesh in their lives.<sup>10</sup> White Christians thus never make the move to embodiment, and possess a form of godliness, but deny the actual power of godliness.<sup>11</sup> Black philosophy thus functions in David Walker's *Appeal* to critique oppressive philosophical doctrines and conceptual schemes because of their failed practical applications. Walker reminds us that the absence of moral and political praxis is itself profoundly immoral,

as it encourages form over matter; the appearance of religion without real moral and political commitments; and a hypocritical, corrupt religious community—in short, a community in which the word is never made flesh.

Frederick Douglass is likewise an example of how black philosophy makes the word flesh. Douglass's *Narrative* shows us how the experiences of those in chattel slavery, through art, breathed life into what can become stale philosophical and theological doctrine devoid of flesh and bone, as is the case with the philosophy of religion. Douglass recognized the importance of art in terms of its ability to shed light on the human condition in a way that theory alone cannot. In his *Narrative*, he wrote of the slaves and their use of song that:

They would sing, as a chorus, to words which to many would seem unmeaning jargon, but which, nevertheless, were full of meaning to themselves. I have sometimes thought that the mere hearing of those songs would do more to impress some minds with the horrible character of slavery, than the reading of whole volumes of philosophy on the subject could do.<sup>12</sup>

“Volumes of philosophy,” as Douglass uses that term here, refers to the hyper-theoretical moral and religious reflections that I associate with the philosophy of religion. No amount of theoretical musings—for example, theodicy and the problem of evil—could impress minds with the horrible character of slavery quite like a song. Nietzsche echoes Douglass nearly thirty years later in *The Birth of Tragedy* when he condemns

the naive Socratic optimism of the quest for knowledge for its forgetfulness of Dionysian tragedy in music, and nearly forty years later in *The Gay Science*, where the madman pronounces the death of God; the end of theology; the utter uselessness of theoretical abstractions to grapple with the problem of suffering.<sup>13</sup> Douglass understood that the suffering of the slaves was beautifully captured, not as “evil” in a theoretical, dialectical relationship to good, but rather as an aesthetic production in music that gave the word flesh.

#### IV.

As fallen humanity is in need of salvation from sin, according to the Christian narrative, the philosophy of religion is in need of salvation from its “sin” of epistemic addiction. And as there can be no salvation in the Christian tradition except that the word be made flesh, there can be no salvation for the philosophy of religion, except that the *logos* of the philosophy of religion is transformed into the *sarx* of black bodies as the sight of oppression, and white bodies as the sight of the oppressor. If we conceive of sin as moral evil, then we might say that the philosophy of religion is in need of a savior from the moral evil—the sin—of epistemic addiction. Through black philosophy as portrayed in David Walker's *Appeal*, and Frederick Douglass's *Narrative*, we see black philosophy functioning as both sentinel and savior: as sentinel, black philosophy stands watch to critique oppressive methodologies that exalt form over substance, and as savior, black philosophy gives voice, flesh, bone,

and face to epistemologically driven, axiological, political, and religious oppression. Black philosophy thus makes the word flesh.

## Notes

1. I qualify my definition of black philosophy with the notion of “Western modernity” because Eastern religions, too, have been interpreted as having elements of anti-black racism. For example, William R. Jones describes Thomas Gossett’s account of the *Rig Veda*, the Hindu scriptures of ancient India, where Indra, the god of the Aryans, hates black skin. Jones refers to the Hindu scriptures here as a “concrete” example of the “highly visible” phenomenon of “divine racism.” See William R. Jones, *Is God a White Racist?* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998), p. 3.

2. See my essay “Epistemic Addiction: Reading ‘Sonny’s Blues’ with Levinas, Kierkegaard, and Nietzsche,” *Journal of Speculative Philosophy* 26, no. 12 (2012): 554–571, where I reimagine the fall of humanity from the book of Genesis as a mistaken belief that good and evil can be “known” without being practiced. Eve was deceived in that she thought that she could simply “know” good and evil without doing them; it is this deception that caused Eve to “fall,” for as she sought the “knowledge” of “good and evil,” she did so in direct violation of an ethical command not to do so. Such is the nature of what I termed “epistemic addiction”: it ignores ethics for the sake of knowledge.

And in “Two Forms of Transcendence: Justice and the Problem of Knowledge,” in *Pursuing Trayvon Martin: Historical Contexts and Contemporary Manifestations of Racial Dynamics*, ed. George Yancy and Janine Jones (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2012), I tried to show how the racist imaginary transforms the semiotic structure of divine transcendence into a pernicious semiotic formation that facilitates the racist

imaginary’s violence against African Americans. Such was the case for George Zimmerman, who employed his overly aggressive, self-appointed neighborhood-watch tactics against a historical backdrop of a racist ontological and semiotic field that helps him to “know” Trayvon Martin prior to ever even seeing him.

These two essays show the trajectory of my research as moving, in part, in the direction of critiques of epistemological preoccupations and hyper-theorizations that occlude moral and political concerns; especially in the philosophy of religion as it relates to the treatment of African Americans. I first address such dangers in my essay “From Epistemology to Ethics: Theoretical and Practical Reason in Kant and Douglass,” *Journal of Religious Ethics* 40, no. 4 (December 2012): 603–628, where I argue that Reverend Godwin’s argument for Negro baptism was rooted in an overly theoretical Cartesian metaphysical dualism that renders Christian theology compatible with chattel slavery and also with white supremacy at the expense of African Americans. The end result of this “compatibility” is an onto-theological, ersatz version of the Christian Gospel that is fused into a thoroughly anti-black—and thus thoroughly racist—epistemological framework of oppression. Douglass cannot tolerate such hyper-theorizations; hence his rejection of Godwin’s solution to the “problem” of Negro baptism and his turn toward a view of the soul that is less theoretical and more attentive to one’s moral development.

3. Martin Heidegger, “The Onto-Theological Constitution of Metaphysics,” in *Identity and Difference*, trans. Joan Stambaugh (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), pp. 71–72.

4. Charles Mills, “Rawls on Race/Race in Rawls,” *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 47 (2009): 161–184.

5. That much of the epistemic justifications for God’s existence, his attributes, theodicy, free will, etc., arise from the writings of Augustine and

Saint Thomas Aquinas is undeniable. I do not intend to diminish the thought of either Augustine or Aquinas, but one can argue that the papacy demanded these sorts of epistemic justifications as part of its own program of oppression of those poor and illiterate persons within the jurisdiction of its coercive politics. Interestingly, however, the transformation of the word into flesh occurs even in this oppressive context, as Marsilius of Padua's *Defensor Pacis* affirms poverty—as contrasted with the wealth of the papal totalitarian regime—as a central Christological feature. Marsilius, then, in the *Defensor Pacis*, serves as a precursor to contemporary liberation theology in some of its various forms (i.e., black liberation theology, and Latin American liberation theology). See especially Chapter 13 of Discourse Two titled, "On the Status of Supreme Poverty, Which Is Usually Called Evangelical Perfection; And that This Status Was Held by Christ and His Apostles," Marsilius of Padua, *Defensor Pacis*, trans. Alan

Gerwith (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), pp. 196–215.

6. Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).

7. See *Holy Bible*, John 1:14.

8. Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Random House, 1995).

9. David Walker, *Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World, but in particular, and very expressly, to those of the United States of America (Appeal)* (New York: Straus and Giroux, 1995), p. 18.

10. See my analysis of the defect in the ecclesial formation of the slave-holding church in "From Epistemology to Ethics," pp. 608–620.

11. See *Holy Bible*, II Tim. 3:5.

12. Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave* (New York: Penguin, 1997), p. 29.

13. See my discussion of Nietzsche in "Epistemic Addiction."