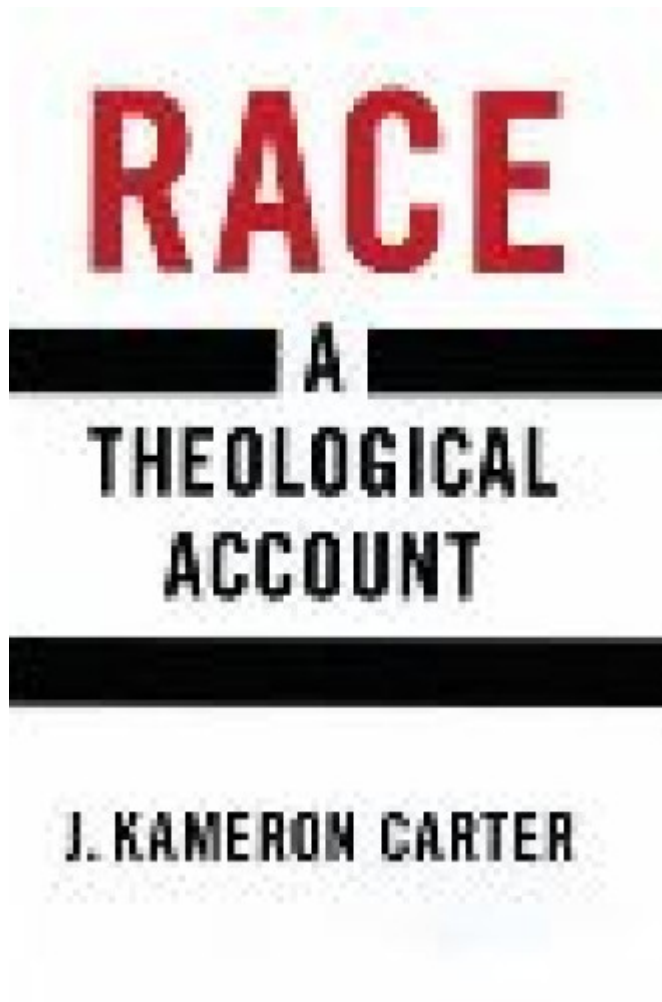


# Race: A Theological Account

reviewed by [Peter J. Paris](#) in the [March 10, 2009](#) issue

## In Review



## Race: A Theological Account

J. Kameron Carter  
Oxford University Press

J. Kameron Carter's book on race was published in the auspicious year of 2008, when Barack Obama was elected president of the United States. It could not have

come at a better time.

Despite its ubiquity in all dimensions of U.S. life, few scholars have explored the theological origins of race as a phenomenon. Carter's approach in his long-awaited treatise on the subject is quite different from what most of his readers might expect. Instead of beginning with a discussion of the European encounter with Native Americans and Africans, Carter begins with the discipline of theology.

Carter is primarily interested in how theology contributed to the process by which humans came to be viewed as racial beings, and thus was a willing ally in the modern project of empire building. He contends that theology reconstituted itself in order to establish race as the defining characteristic of modernity. This shocking claim establishes Carter's argument as a revolutionary critique of theology's affirmation of modernity as a racial project.

More specifically, Carter argues that modernity's racial imagination originated in the process by which Christianity was severed from its Jewish roots. The modern West began viewing Jews as an alien, inferior race and their religion as the nemesis of Christianity. This type of reasoning implied the natural supremacy of white European peoples and the corresponding superiority of Christianity over Judaism. Carter's thinking dovetails to some extent with Cornel West's critical race theory and Michel Foucault's theory of sexuality.

Carter views Immanuel Kant as the theorist who provided the philosophical grounding for modernity as a racialized theological project. By placing white Europeans at the apex of the human order, Carter claims, Kant constructed a worldview that substituted whiteness for the doctrine of creation, a viewpoint that Western theologians readily adopted. Yet Carter fully realizes that the political dimensions of Kant's worldview were set in motion three centuries earlier by both European colonial expansionism in the Americas and the enslavement of African peoples. He concludes that Kant's racial theory is unintelligible apart from those earlier conquests of nonwhite peoples.

Going yet farther back in history, Carter discerns parallels between contemporary struggles against "European whiteness" and Irenaeus's second-century struggle against the Gnostics. Both the Gnostics and modern racists were bent on extricating Christianity from the Jewishness of Jesus; both distorted the theology of God's incarnation in a Jewish body to exemplify the covenantal relationship between the

Jews and their God.

In short, Carter sees many similarities between the anti-Gnosticism of Irenaeus and the antiracism of African-American Christianity, as well as similarities between their respective Christologies. Both Irenaeus and African-American Christianity strive to dismiss all notions of Christian supersessionism and to restore God's covenantal relationship with the Jews as the anti-Gnostic and nonracist canopy under which all true Christians should live.

In his opening discussion of what he calls the drama of race, Carter lays out the modern problem of whiteness, discerning its genesis in the theopolitical wrestling of the Western world with the so-called Jewish question. He concludes that the modern problem of race cannot be understood apart from a full account of modernity's struggle to alienate itself from Jewish history, and that race, religion and the discourse about the modern state are thus integrally related. Any discussion of race and modernity, he contends, should give primacy to theological grounding.

Carter next analyzes appreciatively the scholarship of three African Americans who have engaged the problem of racism: Albert Raboteau, James Cone and Charles Long. He praises Raboteau's impressive insights in *Slave Religion* and other works, but notes the ambiguity that attends Raboteau's inability to move beyond the racial framework of blackness, which appears to be a cultural reflex of the problem of race that whiteness created.

Though Carter sees much to be admired in Cone's black liberation theology, he contends that his own approach goes beyond Cone's work, which leaves whiteness in place by converting blackness into a cultural power. Carter concludes that only a Christian theology of Israel grounded in the nonracial flesh of Jesus can overcome the theological problem of whiteness and transcend the binary categories of blackness and whiteness.

Carter's critique of black theology prepares the way for him to relate his own thinking to that of Charles Long, for whose "groundbreaking" thought he has the highest regard. Yet he finally concludes that Long's thought stands at odds with his own theology because Long's understanding of the opacity of blackness enables no encounter or conversation with the theology of whiteness. The aesthetic of black opacity, Carter concludes, simply mirrors the pseudo-theological aesthetic of whiteness.

After analyzing the work of Raboteau, Cone and Long, Carter pauses for what he calls an “Interlude on Christology and Race,” a discussion of fourth-century church father Gregory of Nyssa, who, much to the surprise of many in his day, called for the abolition of slavery. Carter undertakes a rigorous exploration of Gregory’s theological consciousness to account for his peculiar reading of scripture. Because Gregory recognized the Jewish Jesus Christ as the image of God, he viewed all humans as created in that image. He taught that existing in Christ entails being drawn into the covenantal relationship that God established with the Jews. That relationship is constitutive of human freedom and thus the basis for Gregory’s opposition to slavery.

Carter then proceeds to analyze the autobiographies of three African Americans: Briton Hammon (published in 1760), Jarena Lee (1836) and Frederick Douglass (1845). These writers interpreted their lives in relation to the historical person of Jesus Christ rather than the racial reasoning that dominated their environment; in Carter’s view, their identities were integrally tied to the economy of Jesus’ Jewish body. In their works one sees the historical specificity of Jesus Christ acknowledged as the concrete universal norm for all being. It is a claim that stands in opposition to the Kantian universal, which spiritualizes Christ by denying him his Jewish particularity. Hammon, Lee and Douglass understood their bodies as reinscribed in Christ’s body. This placed their thought wholly outside that of Western theology, which, Carter argues, is based on the hegemony of whiteness.

Autobiography releases its subject from the confines of the isolated self to an expanded and revised self, Carter observes. Thus African-American autobiography is not an isolated experience but a two-sided dialogue between the writer and the reader. These autobiographers’ way of doing theology represents the model for the new way of doing theology that Carter recommends.

Carter brings his massive study to a conclusion with a “Postlude on Christology and Race,” in which he discusses Maximus the Confessor as an anticolonial intellectual who seems to anticipate the theological anthropology of African-American Christian faith as represented in the work of the three African-American autobiographers. Maximus taught that the triune God is love, and Carter focuses on how that theological virtue can become a moral virtue in persons who live according to love. Conversely, humans who do not live in accordance with love sow seeds of tyranny and oppression, which leads eventually to the whole creation rising up in rebellion against its Creator. Both Maximus and the autobiographers read scripture against

rather than within the prevailing cultural ethos. Such an approach contains the key to the theological solution that Carter's argument seeks.

Clearly, Carter's endeavor to lift up the principle of love as both a theological and moral virtue has important implications for theological and ethical discourse in the 21st century. The type of theological imagination required for overcoming the pseudotheological problem of race and modernity can benefit greatly from such a renewed consciousness.

Carter's call for a new kind of theological imagination that moves beyond the traditional theology that strips Jesus Christ of his Jewishness is an insightful approach to the difficulty that confronts 21st-century theological discourse. Few scholars have demonstrated so convincingly how ancient theologians such as Irenaeus, Gregory of Nyssa and Maximus the Great can be helpful resources for current theological discussions about race, colonialism, slavery, tyranny and oppression—to mention only a few major problems we have inherited from the theology of race and modernity.

As an ethicist, I look forward to future writings by Carter that relate his theological enterprise to the thought and practice of the social gospel movement, the various African-American religious struggles for racial justice, and especially the work of Martin Luther King Jr. It is more than a little troubling that Carter did not discuss such figures and events in this major work. Nevertheless, it is a great book by any standard. Its breadth and depth are impressive beyond measure.