

Black Christology and the Quest for Authenticity: A Philosophical Appraisal, by John H. McClendon III. Lexington Books, 2019. Pp. viii + 207. \$95.00 (hardcover).

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Early in the introduction to *Black Christology and the Quest for Authenticity*, John McClendon III aptly observes: “Most works in mainstream philosophy of religion simply ignore the important contributions of Black thinkers and scholars” (5). By and large, Christian philosophical theologians and atheologists alike—a good many of those who read *Faith and Philosophy* anyway—tend to ignore Black Theology (or feminist/womanist theology, or Latinx theology, etc.) as the proper object of their philosophical attention. These streams of Christian theology are often regarded as derivative and marginal—a theological sideshow of identity politics as distinct from the mainstream and more dominant Christian consensus of the Western Christian tradition. As a result, when philosophers consider the meaning or truth of some bit of Christian theological reasoning, what interests them is almost always the reasoning that figures within mainstream European and American Christianity, which also just so happens to be predominantly the theology of white European and American people, and not the many substantively developed theologies of non-white people. Nevertheless, the distinctive theology of black Christianity remains largely outside the purview of Anglo-American philosophical theology (and atheology) usually due to a skepticism about the merits of any theology uniquely qualified by social identity, even while the theology of white dominant Christianity retains the unqualified status of “just plain old theology.” For just this reason, there are very few scholarly works in the philosophy of religion or philosophical a/theology literature that so much as attempt to analyze or assess the theological claims of Black Theology. Perhaps the last significant work in that genre—William R. Jones’s *Is God a White Racist? A Preamble to Black Theology* (Beacon Press, 1973)—was published almost fifty years ago. This new work by John McClendon III therefore promises to address a glaring lacuna in the literature by offering (as the subtitle indicates) a “philosophical appraisal” of Black Christology, a central locus of constructive proposals in Black Theology.

McClendon observes that black theologians have variously sought to identify both Jesus and the God he incarnates as in some sense “black” in order to identify a form of “authentic” Christianity that is capable of siding with the black oppressed over the white oppressor—and hence an authentic Christianity that can be authentically embraced by black



people. This black theological quest for a Christology that can jointly enable both black authenticity and Christian authenticity, McClendon argues, is fundamentally flawed. Black Christologies are in fact neither authentically Christian, nor authentically black, and the project of forging black Christianity from a distinctively black Christology ought therefore to be abandoned. McClendon's arguments purport to be secular and philosophical rather than theological, lodging objections primarily on grounds of logical coherence and evidential or explanatory adequacy: "while the object of our investigation is substantively theological in character, our *method of investigation* via philosophical inquiry, critically applies rational methods based on secular principles" (6, emphasis his). McClendon's objections raise many interesting questions that ought to push scholars working in or on black theology, and particularly black Christology, to more clearly articulate and defend the meta-theological commitments motivating their normative theological claims about the racialized meaning of Christian doctrines concerning Christ's humanity and divinity. But despite this provocalional usefulness, McClendon's arguments themselves exhibit deep difficulties. In my estimation the book fundamentally fails to establish the critique of black theology that it envisions, even while proving valuable for highlighting some neglected issues in the philosophy of theology along the way. After a brief overview of the book's contents I will turn to considering where I take its analysis to go wrong.

McClendon identifies Black Christology as a primary site for six key assumptions about authenticity in Black Theology, each of which serves as the main target of criticism for each successive chapter of the book. In Chapter 1, McClendon attacks the "Black Christology premise" that the historical Jesus can be legitimately identified within any sort of racialized framework that justifies aligning him with either side of the "Black versus white nexus" (22). Prior to the rise of Black Liberation theology, he argues, African-American Christian theologians such as J. Leonard Farmer and Howard Thurman recognized that it was anachronistic to suppose that Jesus was either black or white, since those racial categories developed much later. Rather, both attempt to identify an historically authentic Christianity that might also be anti-racist by contextualizing the universal inclusivity of the religion of Jesus and contrasting this with the European ethnocentric Christianity that eventually emerged from it. Still, it comes out clearly enough that an *historically* authentic Christianity could not be one founded on either a literally or figuratively "Black Christ."

Having argued that a black Christology cannot without anachronism be regarded as authentically Christian, McClendon goes on in Chapter 2 to question the assumption that it is authentically *black*. Black theology, he argues, is often mistakenly reduced to the black liberation theology of the late 1960's (34). But, in the first place, figures like Thurman were working out theologies of black liberation well before this which did not involve any racializing of Jesus or his religion as essentially "black" (36). The eliding of "authentically" black theology with the particular brand of theology

that prioritizes a norm of blackness is therefore illegitimate. Second, McClendon criticizes James H. Cone's black theology as an attempt to show how the Christianity of black Americans could serve as a religious vehicle for the more militant black nationalist wing of the Civil Rights era (41). Again citing Thurman's assessment, McClendon suggests that the implicitly universal dimension of Christian experience cuts against the necessarily partisan and ethnocentric character of black nationalism (42). Cone's pretensions to accommodating Christian universality fail, because he remains trapped in a "myopic Black/white dichotomy" (49) that worryingly defines authentic "blackness" according to a standard essentially marked by suffering (50).

In Chapter 3 McClendon draws on Richard McKinney's theology of Christian universality to criticize the assumption of black Christology that an anti-racist Christianity must be a distinctively black and anti-white Christianity. "Could it be," McClendon rhetorically asks, "that the defining feature of Black Theology . . . reduces to a theological form of color reversal?" (77). On the other hand, "for McKinney race has no theological significance" (71) since "Jesus's message is universal and available to white and Black people alike" (72). While McClendon finds counterevidence for a universal scope of Jesus's concern for humanity in the Matthean Jesus, where he seems more particularly focused on Jewish redemption (71), he also reiterates that a universalizing scheme remains the more clearly anti-racist vision of Christianity (76).

McClendon focuses most directly on Black Christology per se in Chapter 4, where he attempts to make sense of two distinct ways of understanding the claim that Jesus is a "Black Messiah," i.e., as a "biblical myth" versus as "real history" (83). He finds Geyraud Wilmore grounding claims about Jesus's blackness in the avowedly non-historical religious *meanings* made possible by the historical Jesus, making possible many possible "Messiahs" as distinct ways of imagining the religious significance of the real historical person (95). McClendon worries, however, that the religious meaning of Jesus as "black" that Wilmore identifies seems to be grounded in other religious meanings that are themselves not moored to any historical facts about a real person, such as Jesus's resurrection (96). Turning to Albert Cleage's attempt to defend a more literal notion of Jesus as black Messiah, McClendon criticizes his reduction of class, ethnic, and religious differences in antiquity to "present-day notions about race and racism" (103). The idea that Jesus is black, at best, is "no more than an alternative biblical myth" with "no empirical basis" (110) as well as no non-theological reason to prefer the Black myth of Jesus over, e.g., a white myth or even a white supremacist one. Black Christology reduces to "divergent faith claims" with nothing to adjudicate them (110).

Chapter 5 aims primarily to challenge the notion that there is any incompatibility in the relation of Christology to whiteness (113). McClendon's argument seems to be that Christian orthodoxy per se doesn't in and of itself preclude any particular allegiance to white supremacy or the

oppression and enslavement of non-white peoples. He suggests that even before European Christians began thinking of themselves as “white” and their religious ideology as privileging whites “the ancient ritual of Christian baptism steadfastly endorsed slavery” (126). Imposing ideals of liberation and freedom on Christianity amounts to a relatively recent invention (128). Moreover, “whiteness” is not the same as “white racism” (one can be genuinely white without being racist) and so to the extent that Christianity has been shown to be a universally inclusive religion, it implies an acceptance rather than rejection of at least some conception of white identity (136). If there is an incompatibility between whiteness and Christology, therefore, it can only be on the basis of an *ad hoc* assertion of faith, without any “philosophical” merits (142).

Finally, in Chapter 6, McClendon contrasts the partial God projected by black experience he finds in Major Jones with the notion of God as a transcendent and absolute being, and critiques a black Christological picture of a black Jesus as the authentic human incarnation of God. Jones’s “black God concept,” McClendon charges, is indefensibly anthropomorphic (161) and he fails to engage any plausible epistemological grounds for preferring such a conception of God over others (165), or ontological grounds for supposing that such a God actually exists (167). He goes on to claim that beliefs in the trinity and incarnation often assumed by proponents of black Christology are unintelligible and fideistic (182), and concludes that we have no reason to think that Christianity has any rational resources whatever to aid in a black quest for authenticity and liberation (186).

Despite its length, there are actually very few real substantive arguments in this book. The handful of reasons adduced for rejecting the theological project of a black Christology reduce to four: first, it is unsupported historically because Christianity predates modern racial formations; second, it is unsupported ontologically because if Christ’s blackness is not literal and historical then it is mythical and unreal, and even if we could make sense of its reality the notion of a transcendent or ultimate divine being anthropomorphized as black is incoherent; third, it is unsupported epistemologically because underdetermined—there are no non-theological reasons to prefer it to any other Christology and as such it can only express arbitrary faith commitments; finally, it is unsupported morally, because a religiously partisan approach to anti-black racism is just a reverse-racism of anti-whiteness. These four points are nowhere developed in any great detail. Rather, each serves as a ready-to-hand defeater for any particular point in the development of black Christology represented by the main figures McClendon happens to be considering. The result is a fairly shallow and repetitive treatment of the figures in question. What organizational clarity we might have discerned by way of the chosen selection of topics and figures is therefore lost once it becomes apparent that these distinct figures and topics are pretexts for (somewhat tediously) repeating these same arguments. Nor are the pretexts selected to bear these broad

criticisms particularly apt. Some of the most important theologians currently working in black Christology include J. Kameron Carter, M. Shawn Copeland, Kelly Brown Douglas, Karen Teel, Eboni Marshall Turman, and Reggie Williams. But none of these theologians come under any serious consideration in McClendon's assessment. Apart from one passing reference to Copeland their names don't appear at all, whereas the studies he does consider are for the most part dated or not representative of the mainstream literature.

What of the criticisms themselves—do they stick? It is hard to say, because they are largely underdeveloped, serving as blunt instruments designed for bludgeoning rather than precision work. If the book had been organized by the proposed defeaters for a black Christology then we might have been able to see more clearly how an argument for each might go and this might have presented proponents of black Christology with a basis for formulating some reply. But rather ironically, McClendon engages very little if at all with philosophical analyses of race-concepts. If, for example, (as most philosophers of race suppose) races are to be identified as social rather than natural kinds and if those social kinds are to be individuated by their social meaning, then showing that Jesus is "black" cannot be sufficiently ruled out by merely showing that he did not have "black skin." If, moreover, as some such as Theodore Bach have suggested, races are constituted by social histories or cultural genealogies—as evolving formations rather than fixed patterns—then the blackness of Jesus likewise might not be ruled out simply by noting any distinction between the forms of oppression marked by his ancient context and our contemporary notion of blackness. So whereas we cannot easily judge on the question of anachronism until we know what our race-terms pick out, McClendon offers no explicit or consistent analysis of what those terms pick out. Likewise, we cannot judge on whether the anti-whiteness expressed by black Christologies is morally problematic until we have a clearer conception of what whiteness *is*, and what sort of normative stance toward white people is entailed by its repudiation. Both philosophers of race and liberation theologians working on race have had much to say about these matters. But while the articulations of the theologians could certainly benefit from those of the philosophers, McClendon's work neither cites nor discusses any of these conversations.

When we turn to his criticisms about the alleged incoherence of the trinity and incarnation, as well as the irrationality or fideism in offering theological rather than properly "philosophical" justifications, we venture beyond the territory of black theology into terrain well-worn in analytic philosophy of religion. Given the past fifty years of analytic philosophical theology on the metaphysics of basic Christian doctrines and the rationality of religious belief, no serious philosopher of religion can responsibly make the simple charges of incoherence and irrationality that McClendon does without engaging that philosophical literature. But there appears in this book no evidence that any of that work exists, whether the (by now

old-fashioned) Swinburnian apologetics for the coherence of Christian beliefs and Plantingian responses to fideism or the more newfangled developments regularly appearing in issues of this journal. Attending to the literature might have staved off the many conflation and confusions in the book about the rational entitlements of Christians in their religious beliefs that forms the proper background against which to judge whether some putative theological justification can be judged to be a good or bad one.

Given these serious defects, I cannot commend McClendon's book as a worthwhile philosophical analysis or evaluation of black Christology. For those SCP readers who wish to become more familiar with that literature *Black Christology and the Quest for Authenticity* is an unreliable guide. For those readers of *Faith and Philosophy* who wish to constructively engage with the theological project of black Christology, we must await a more fruitful treatment to fill the gap identified by this book. That is not to say, however, that McClendon's book is wholly without merits. While underdeveloped, the four criticisms I've distilled above represent potentially pressing problems that merit careful reflection from advocates of black Christology. Teasing out the particular shape that such problems might take remains important work, but it is work that remains to be done.

The Design Argument, by Elliot Sober. Cambridge University Press, 2018. Pp. 94. \$18.00 (paperback).

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Elliott Sober's *The Design Argument* is, in many ways, a fine little book. I certainly enjoyed and benefited from reading it and thinking about the issues raised within. It's important to note, however, that the book is an *extremely opinionated* introduction to the biological and cosmic design arguments. The restrictive word limit for the Cambridge Elements series surely played a role here: when there's not space to cover everything, one's particular judgements about what is most worth covering make a bigger difference. Still, there are places where I think the perspective represented in the book is at odds with the state of the literature.

The brief introductory chapter was quite nice. Sober gives a quick but interesting history of design arguments and lays the terminological and conceptual groundwork for what follows. Two of Sober's choices here are

