

Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering. By Sherman A. Jackson. New York: Oxford University Press, 2009. 222 pp.

Sherman A. Jackson's *Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering* is a reply to William R. Jones's question, *Is God a White Racist?*¹ This cross-examination of historical Sunni Islam and Black theodicy is a brilliant follow-up to his *Islam and the Blackamerican* (2005). Jackson situates the Sunni-Muslim traditions into the theological debate on Black suffering, occupied exclusively by Christian theologians. This well-organized work is a significant contribution toward the expanding discourse on Islam among African Americans and religious studies scholarship. Jackson's use of classic and contemporary Islamic texts demonstrates that he is well-versed in the Arabic language and the philosophies of Islam. His use of secondary source material is beneficial to those who wish to advance research on liberation theology.

Jackson bridged the thirty-six-year gap between *Is God a White Racist?* with relative ease. By reexamining Black theodicy and the changing meaning of race and racial oppression, he critiques scholars like Victor Anderson, K.A. Appiah, and Paul Gilroy for eschewing the oppressor/oppressed paradigm in a move "beyond ontological blackness" that attempts to transcend racial essentialism. Instead, he says, "The problem is not race and race thinking, but white supremacy and its commitment to racial hierarchy" (20). Jackson believes that the issue for these scholars is neither racialized nor collective identity, per se, but the fact that Black collective identity has been monopolized by a part of the community—namely, "da brotha on da block" or the issue of "Black cultural authority" (22). Although Jackson agrees that many Blacks cannot identify with experiences of overt racial oppression, he explains that "postmodern black suffering" continues to marginalize Blacks as a racial group, despite shifts in how Black oppression persists.

With the claim of divine racism (God's omnibenevolence in the presence of Black oppression) unresolved for Jones, the solution lies in "the functional ultimacy of man," which establishes man as the valuator or principal agent in human history. In his book, Jones argues that Black liberation theologians James Cone's, J. Deotis Roberts's, and Joseph Washington's interpretations led to quietism. *Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering* picks up this claim, presenting the four classical schools of Muslim theology, Mu'tazilism, Ash'arism, Māturīdīsm, and Traditionalism, which not only defined God as omnibenevolent but afforded human beings the agency toward improving their condition.

In chapter one, Jackson discusses the formative development of Sunni Islamic theology and presents the origins of two camps—Traditionalism and Rationalism. The conflict, as Jackson explained, is not one of authority, reason, or revelation but which camp has the authority for Qur'anic exegesis—a conflict further compounded by the diverse meanings of "Arab" amidst the expansion of Islam. He differentiates between those born Arab and those who are Arab-speaking, with the latter, according to Jackson, rapidly becoming the majority and seeking to "reconcile scripture with a regime of sense that included elements that were unknown and unbecoming to the original Arabians" (33).

Chapters two through five are devoted, respectively, to the four classical schools of Muslim theology, presenting them as complementary as well as contrasting in their interpretations of God. In chapter two, Jackson explains the Mu'tazilism does not require one to retreat from theism. In fact,

¹ Jones, William R. *Is God a White Racist? A Preamble to Black Theology*. C. Eric Lincoln Series on Black Religion. Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1973.

“To rebel against the evil of suffering is to rebel not against God, but against humans” (64), revealing God as both omnipotent and omnibenevolent. Jackson emphasizes Mu’tazilism’s insistence on holding God to a regime of morality, grounded in the experiences and perspectives of human beings and in their “uncompromising affirmation that the human being, not God is the creator of human acts” (65). Jackson states that Mu’tazilism situates the person as the ultimate valuator or agent in human history.

The Ash’arism definition of God provides Jones with the criteria for finding a solution in humanocentric theism. However, Jackson comments that the “Ash’arites made a distinction between God’s will, as an ontological decree and deontological decree that does not leave God to prefer one over the other” (86), and he invokes the doctrine of Acquisition (*kasb*). For Ash’arites and Māturidītes, the doctrine of *kasb* affords human beings provisions to act as agents in the cause of their own oppression. “While humans remain contingent upon God for the power to perform their actions, that power is granted on the basis of a plainly acknowledged human choice” (93). Māturidīsm allows human beings free choice regarding their actions while maintaining God’s omnipotence, and the exegesis of Qur’anic scripture allows human beings to resist oppression. Though Traditionalism held God as omnibenevolent, it purports that God created beings with potential rather than as absolutes. “It is ultimately humans’ failure or refusal to will or prefer good to evil and to petition God for the ability to carry this preference out that sets in motion the cycle of acts and impulses that generate and sustain evil” (149). God will not unilaterally intervene with a special something. Traditionalism contends that God has placed within the essence of human nature the ability to overcome oppression.

Despite Jackson’s efforts to present a cogent cross examination of claims made in *Is God a White Racist?*, I have one reservation. First, while the author acknowledges the absence of the Islamic voice in the debate of Black theodicy, he professes that “Blackamerican Muslims have yet to exercise their agency” (6). Similarly, he indicts the Nation of Islam for casting “suspicion over the very move toward any theological thinking that is race or people sensitive” (6). I found this particularly disturbing. Eschewing the Nation of Islam’s theology may be a moot point; however, ignoring the impact that Elijah Muhammad had in fostering an intellectual tradition among African-American Sunni-Muslims makes it clear that he has privileged the Muslim experience through the orthodoxy of philosophical schools rather than considering how African Americans’ lived experiences have informed Sunnism. In other words, though Sunni-Muslims may prostrate toward the East, it does not follow that they repudiate their experiences as African Americans, which have served to inform their beliefs, identities, and scriptural interpretations. Despite this reservation, Jackson’s work has added a thought-provoking response by Islamic studies and is long overdue in the debate of Black theodicy.

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