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[APOLOGETICS AND EVANGELISM](#)

# Black Christians Are Confronting Black Lies About Christianity

How urban apologetics contends against the distortions promoted by “Black Conscious” movements.

ERIC MASON | DECEMBER 13, 2021



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When I went to college at Bowie State University in 1991, I—like many African Americans in the '80s and '90s—stepped into a new hotbed of identity ideologies. Many Blacks entering college at this time (historically Black colleges in particular) would be wearing some type of cultural accessory pointing out their connection to Africa, from African medallions made of leather to T-shirts depicting the continent of Africa using some African artistic pattern.

This was a significant time for Blacks wrestling with our ethnic and cultural identity. You would see brothers in the student union selling books and oils like Blue Nile, sandalwood, frankincense, and myrrh. These vending stands were filled with resources

promising to fill the void of our Black minds with the truth white men had suppressed to prevent us from knowing who we were.

As a Christian who is Black, I am sometimes led to feel as if I am following the religion of my oppressors. It's like Stockholm syndrome, a realization that everything you thought you knew to be right is wrong. There is a constant tension inherent in being Black and Christian in America, one etched into the psyche of many African Americans.

Consider the following quotes from proponents of what are commonly called "Black conscious" communities. According to Elijah Muhammad, the longtime Nation of Islam leader,

"The so-called Negro must awaken before it is too late. They think the white man's Christianity will save them regardless of what happens, and they are gravely mistaken. They must know that the white man's religion is not from God nor from Jesus or any other of the prophets. It is controlled by the white race and not by Almighty Allah (God)."

Or take Jabari Osaze, historian and self-styled priest of the ancient Kemetic (Egyptian) kingdom. As he states in *7 Little White Lies: The Conspiracy to Destroy the Black Self-Image*,

"I remember going to Sunday school class, and the teacher would pull these cardboard cutouts of Moses and Noah out of the box ... and they were invariably old, white men in robes. They looked like my next-door neighbor, but in robes. Imagine as a child to have that inculcated in me that all of the heroes of Christianity are white. I do think that's kind of wrong."

Commentary like this creates a cognitive dissonance for Black people that is difficult to overcome. As Christian apologists, we should not turn away from this challenge. It simply means we have a lot of work to do, and this is one of many reasons why an approach I call *urban apologetics* is needed today.

It is true that Western, white European Christianity has often worked hard to destroy Black identity. However, these Black

conscious communities have thrown the baby out with the bathwater by jettisoning the entire Christian faith. They have not done the necessary homework to look closely at the truth. An urban apologetic defuses the false origin stories these groups promote.

Black Christians are always being interrogated by representatives of Black conscious communities. We invariably get a mouthful about our acceptance of Christianity because whites who called themselves Christians played a central role in kidnapping and enslaving Blacks. Many Blacks have been taught that Africans' first contact with Christianity was through the slave trade. Many see Christianity's historical role in slavery as a key factor in the destruction of the Black mind. They view Christianity as a European creation used by white oppressors as a tool to keep Blacks in bondage.

And there is merit to this argument. During the era of slavery in the West, there was a false form of Christianity that justified the kidnapping of humans. Did proponents of this form of Christianity create an abridged Bible called "the slave's Bible" to prevent slaves from having a clear and comprehensive understanding of the gospel? Yes. Did certain so-called Christians make Blacks out to be less than human, thereby defiling the *imago Dei* that is within every human being? Yes.

For much of the past hundred years, the Black community has struggled to offer robust theological answers to the challenges our community faces. Not until recently have we seen a concerted effort to address the objections and questions raised by proponents of the Black consciousness movements. And in the present internet age, the game has changed. Objections spread more quickly. Falsehoods about Christianity have a longer lifespan. This is why we urgently need a uniquely urban apologetic that addresses Black conscious movements and other Black objections to Christianity.

## ***Answering revisionist narratives***

What is urban apologetics? *Urban* is a popular word today and has been steadily growing in usage for the past four and a half decades. It points to the city. Before it became a slang term, *urban* had the connotation of concentrated complexity—a landscape defined by thick settlements of people, buildings, and traffic, along with a diverse blend of culture, commerce, politics, and spirituality.

Somewhere along the line, however, *urban* became the code word for Black, brown, and poor. This is how much of the corporate world uses *urban* today. Urban divisions of companies are devoted to marketing their products to Black and brown people. Nowadays, of course, urban culture is no longer confined to the city, in large part because of the surging popularity of art forms like hip-hop. It is a mobile culture we encounter in rural and suburban areas as well.

*Apologetics* is a term coined from 1 Peter 3:15: “But in your hearts regard Christ the Lord as holy, ready at any time to give a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you” (CSB). The word translated here as “defense” comes from the Greek word *apologia*. In context, apologetics engages the mind, emotions, and will by showing others the transforming work of Christ. It is a reasonable defense of the gospel based on the eschatological and imminent hope one has in Jesus.

Jude verse 3 is another key text when it comes to explaining the biblical foundations of apologetics: “Dear friends, although I was eager to write you about the salvation we share, I found it necessary to write, appealing to you to contend for the faith that was delivered to the saints once for all” (CSB). The word *contend* translates a Greek word (*epagōnizomai*) that refers to athletic contests, such as wrestling matches. Paul hints at this association in 1 Corinthians 9:25: “Everyone who *competes* in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever” (emphasis added).

Apologetics comes in many varieties. *Classical* apologetics stresses arguments for the existence of God. *Evidential* apologetics

stresses the need for evidence in support of Christian truth claims, be they rational, historical, archaeological, or even experiential. *Historical* apologetics stresses the historical evidence supporting Christian truth claims. *Experiential* apologetics appeals to religious experience in general or special religious experiences, like apparent supernatural phenomena, as grounds for belief in Christ. *Presuppositional* apologetics typically presupposes the basic truth of Christianity and then proceeds to show, in several ways, why Christianity alone makes sense.

When I speak of *urban* apologetics, I'm referring specifically to a defense of the Christian faith against Black objections and an argument for how Christianity meets the unique needs of Black people. Urban apologetics uses several of the approaches listed above in a symphonic manner. We employ classical apologetic approaches when we are talking to Black atheists or agnostics, many of whom value scientific explanations over faith-based assertions. The evidential model is particularly helpful when facing challenges like "Prove to me that Jesus existed" or "Where are all the tombs of the characters in the Bible?" or "Christianity was created in Europe."

Underlying most of the statements or questions we encounter in urban apologetics are various revisionist narratives. These narratives appeal to and affirm the experience many Black people have with racism and injustice. To refute them, we can draw on elements of both historical and experiential apologetics. Our job in urban apologetics is to prayerfully engage these issues with humility and care.

## ***Speaking truth into a world of lies***

Urban apologetics is doing the work of sharing the gospel by giving a defense of Christianity to Black people in light of the intellectual, emotional, and ethnic-identity concerns of minority communities. It is giving Black people a reason for the hope of the gospel despite the cultural, historical, spiritual, and theological

barriers Blacks have to the Christian faith. And at the core of urban apologetics is a restoration of the *imago Dei*. Racial injustice and inequity have created a need to affirm humanity while challenging sinful human pride. Scripture demands that we treat all people as bearers of God's image (Gen. 1:26–27; James 3:9).

Urban apologetics also seeks to speak truth into a world that has become characterized by lies. We live in a world of bootleg truth promoted by Black Religious Identity Cults (BRICs). Because many people haven't learned to distinguish truth from error, the real from the fake, they believe the lies. Most of the ideologies or cults appealing to Black people have a foundation in the Judeo-Christian worldview. They approach their rejections of Christianity and their framing of so-called truth in light of the Christian story. Urban apologetics seeks to demonstrate that only Christianity proves to be reasonable and true as a worldview.

Urban apologetics also dispels a multitude of urban legends, historical myths, theological fallacies, scientific misnomers, and reductionist views of Christianity that exist in the Black community. Much of what we combat in urban apologetics are arguments that were popular in previous generations and are now reemerging with an ethnic slant. For example, we're seeing a reemergence of the theory that Christianity is a copy of an ancient Egyptian religion called Kemeticism—a theory that was disproven decades ago.

Because the Black community deeply distrusts white people and European ideas, many Blacks tend to be easily swayed by any suggestion of white corruption, and Christianity is an easy target. When BRICs suggest that Christianity is a white religion instituted by white Europeans, many Blacks believe them. Yet in reality, Christianity spread from Jerusalem to Africa and then to Europe. Well before Christendom formed in Rome, Christianity's headquarters was in Alexandria, Egypt.

The willingness of people to believe that Europeans spread Christianity to Africa highlights an even bigger issue. As the

theologian Thomas C. Oden explained in his 2010 book *How Africa Shaped the Christian Mind*,

Modern intellectual historians have become too accustomed to the easy premise that whatever Africa learned, it learned from Europe. In the case of seminal Neoplatonism, however, its trajectory from Africa to Europe (a south-to-north movement) is textually clear. But why is it so easy to forget or dismiss this trajectory?

Erroneous beliefs about the origins of Christianity in Africa can be traced to the undercurrent of racism we witness in both secular and Christian scholarship. In my own historical studies of Cush (the Black African kingdom along the Nile to the immediate south of Egypt) and the role that the Cushites played in the biblical world, I've encountered a lingering racial bias within the academy, which is still dominated by white scholars.

What do I mean by a racial bias? I am not referring to the blatant racial prejudice that was relatively common in the historical and religious scholarship of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Instead, what we encounter today is a subconscious or subtle racial bias—often unintentional, but real nonetheless. This racial bias is something that permeates all facets of society, including Christian historical scholarship, and it has created great challenges for African Americans' efforts to share the gospel with other Blacks. Subconscious and complicit racism has blighted the fields of harvests in the Black community.

Today we fight racism in the world and in the church, contend with Blacks who play into whiteness by denying racism, and resist the mystery cults and Black ideologies that are destroying our communities. We have our work cut out for us!

## ***Contending for souls***

When it comes to questions of truth versus falsehood, does color matter? Not particularly. Yet white people's efforts throughout

history to paint Christian history with a white and European brush have made skin color a problem. Instead of leading the way in confronting racism, Western Christian scholarship has followed in the footsteps of the secular revisionists. This whitewashing of history is repugnant to God. It is divisive to paint history with one's preferred color rather than researching the real ethnicities of people mentioned in the Bible and important figures from church history. It is an affront to the Good News itself to suggest that God only saved and worked through white Europeans.

I can't blame my Black brethren for their constant suspicion of Christianity. Apologetics exists because of the sinfulness of all men and women, and urban apologetics explores how that sin affects ethnic minorities in particular. It is necessary, sadly, because of the sinfulness of racism and injustice in our world. Can you imagine people rejecting the gospel because they believe it is only for white people? May it never be!

Our task is to give answers that respond to the psychological trauma that Blacks have experienced as Western Christendom has merged with the historic (non-Western) Christian faith. Since the time of the early church, Christianity has had to deal with the problem of one group of people wanting to exclude another. The question of whether Christianity is only for a particular ethnicity is not new—it goes all the way back to Peter's vision about the salvation of the nations (Acts 10) and to the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15). Galatians 2 further demonstrates that excluding people based on ethnic dividing lines is a core gospel issue.

In the end, we are called to preach the gospel to all people, regardless of race or background, and we do this in the power God provides. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians 2:1–4,

When I came to you, brothers and sisters, announcing the mystery of God to you, I did not come with brilliance of speech or wisdom. I decided to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ and him crucified. I came to you in weakness, in fear, and in much trembling. My speech and my preaching were not with persuasive

words of wisdom but with a demonstration of the Spirit's power.  
(CSB)

Paul here appeals to the Corinthians' own conversion. It was the powerful preaching of the weakness of the Cross, not humanly powerful rhetoric, that had saved them (1:18).

Apologetics isn't about winning the argument; it is about contending for the soul of the hearer. Make no mistake: Although we are dealing with the barriers of ethnic identity, racism, and injustice, ultimately we are trying to help people recognize their own sinfulness (John 16:8). Our desire is that the Holy Spirit will illuminate their need for the gospel.

We do not wish merely to speak about the atrocities that were committed against Black people. We will not ignore these atrocities, but we must not let them deter us from highlighting *every* person's need for the saving power of the gospel of Jesus Christ in our lives.

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