

The Eye of the Beholder

Religious Interpretation through Identity, the Un-objective Self, and Cultural Context

Interpretation is often in the eye of the beholder. A person's life experience and understanding will inform their own conceptions of people, ideas, and even religion. Like most people, I grew up with the religious understanding of my mother--a Christianity I now find too rigid to reconcile with my personal, more liberal ideologies. As I began to grow into my own self and have my own life experiences, I began to interpret my religion much differently than my parents interpret theirs.

As a black woman at a predominantly white university, I find that my racial and gender identities made the Christianity I grew up with insufficient. I need a religion that included my voice and my identity. This semester, my tweets (and the readings I found most intriguing) were centered around religion through alternative perspectives--that is, methodologies and scholars that interpreted religion through personal identity, through the experience of the self, and a religious view that was deeply engrained in a cultural context.

Identity & Religion--James Cone's Black Theology



jordie had a dream
@jordiemojordie

Cone: "I bring Martin and Malcom together in order to develop a Black theology." #REL300eu

A MONTH AGO

Reading James Cone inspired me. I began to see *identity* as a legitimate method of religious interpretation. Cone combines the message of black liberation with Christian theology in order to fill in "what's missing" from protestant Christianity. He declares that to find *truth* we must apply the Biblical stories of the past to today's social context (99). Cone makes the Bible a living text (his method of choice is deeply engaging with Biblical text), which gives Christians the freedom to come to a dynamic Christ--one that meets their needs today. He asserts the humanity of black people, and of black religion, and contends to legitimize the religious practices and interpretations of black Christianity. We must understand by first reaching for empathy. Second, Cone tells us to reach for scripture.



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Cone is deeply interested in scripture #REL300EU

A MONTH AGO



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Cone: "How are you gonna get a European white Jesus out of Palestine?"
[#REL300EU](#)

A MONTH AGO

He writes, "The question, "Who is Christ?" is not prior to faith, as if the answer to the christological question is the precondition of faith. Rather, our question about Christ is derived from Christ himself as **he breaks into our social existence**, establishing the truth of freedom in our midst" (100). Cone's interpretation gives Christians a chance to be a part of their faith and incorporate their experience (their own truth) with their religion. He hopes to "demythologize" the New Testament and address head on the purpose of Jesus Christ's life and integrate this truth with the lived experience of black people--which makes the utmost sense, as Christ was a champion of the downtrodden and not a servant of the interests of middle class, white America.



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"In blk religion, the ppl tell their story as they walked and talked w Jesus, telling how he ministered to their broken hearts and bodies."

A MONTH AGO

Cone emphasizes that with a direct, New Testament textual interpretation of Christ, Black Americans have been able to identify with the story of Christ, due to their own marginal status and freedom struggle in the United States. Cone marries the past and the present through "dialectical relation," connecting the historical experience of Christ with the truth of the present, and ultimately, hope for the future. Cone is a bit of Martin and Malcolm; that is, he recognizes the significance of peace and hope in Christianity, but he also "addresses his blackness" and the reality of being black in the United States.



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"Who is the god of the outcast, the violently excluded?" [#REL300eu](#)

A MONTH AGO



Samuel Moore
@Stmoore448

Ref: When Cone combines the social context and scripture about Jesus, he observes a symbol of freedom for those in need of it [#rel300eu](#)

A MONTH AGO

Further, Cone combines his religion with what he sees happening in his life. The systemic violence perpetuated against African Americans did not work with the professed nonviolent Christian religion of white America. Cone flipped the script in his own way--refusing to accept a God who made way for such violence. One might believe that this means Cone is interpreting the Bible in a way that is convenient and that makes his "brand" of Christianity more acceptable. Some may especially argue this in light of Cone's "Jesus is black" argument, wherein Cone asserts that Jesus **must** be black in today's context of white racism and Jesus's place in the present coupled with his identity as an outcast, a marginal person. Even so, Cone's interpretation of Christianity is deeply rooted in scripture and also cognizant of the often violent reality he and many other African Americans face. Cone claims that for him, and for black theology, Jesus must be black literally and symbolically in order to identify with oppressed peoples.

The Self--Abu-Lughod & James Cone's un-Objective Point of View from as the Other



Ally Peterson
@apeteey

JC: "Christ is the otherness in the black experience" Is this "otherness" similar to the "other" discussed by Abu-Lughod? [#rel300eu](#)

A MONTH AGO

Lila Abu-Lughod's method intersectional feminist ethnography also speaks to my reality as a woman of color. Similar to Cone's interpretation of Christianity through his racial identity, Abu-Lughod attempts to use her feminist identity as a type of anthropological ethnography in her essay "Can there be a Feminist Ethnography?" She discusses interpretation through a feminist lens as a step away from objectivity; however, she asserts that this is for good reason.



jordie had a dream
@jordiemojordie

as a SELF you can't take an objective position [#Lughod](#) [#REL300eu](#)

2 MONTHS AGO

Abu-Lughod claims that epistemology, the very process of knowing how we know, is not objective itself. Interpretation is rooted in identity, in the **self**, and Abu-Lughod and James Cone demonstrate that the self often determines orientation, religious or otherwise. She writes that men have created a point of view that becomes the "objective standard" and everyone must view the world from that stance lest their work be labeled subjective (14). As a result, some feminists denounce subjectivity or look for alternative definitions, basing their works on relationships.

This tactic is not always beneficial to feminist anthropologists, and Abu-Lughod notes that they may have to defend their professionalism by taking up such causes as the ordinary perspectives and experiences that they champion are not considered prestigious and not considered valuable by mainstream audiences. Cone is also aware of black people's status as "the other" and attempts to legitimize the un-objective black religious self. He contends that we cannot understand black religion through intellectual parameters created by white people, but

we must fully recognize the value and the validity of the black experience. Only then will we understand the *jumping*, the *shouting*, and the passion that characterize black Christianity (113).



[jordie had a dream](#)
@jordiemojorie

Who is self? Who is other? Abu-Lughod's questions surround gender, politics, and power [#REL300eu](#)

2 MONTHS AGO

On the other hand, Abu-Lughod integrates a new voice, a new *self*, into the discipline of anthropology by including a female voice. She bolsters the validity of these perspectives by claiming that the feminist anthropologist can view her work through a female perspective and perhaps better relate with her subjects on the grounds of shared identity and shared female experience. She writes that feminist ethnography shows that we (ourselves) are "always part of what we study and we always stand in definite relation to it" (27). This type of ethnography prevents the "othering" that is so prevalent in our studies of other cultures and people. As James Cone gets away from the "inordinate influence of the 'classical' tradition" by studying the black tradition from a black perspective, Abu-Lughod's feminist ethnography also crosses the boundaries between the ethnographer and their subject by leveling the two through a shared identity.



[jordie had a dream](#)
@jordiemojorie

To be a self is to be a woman. [#REL300eu](#)

2 MONTHS AGO



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"There is no such thing as singular feminism."--Bobbi Patterson such truth

2 MONTHS AGO

We must conclude then, that everything within us defines everything we experience outside of ourselves-- identity and the self, is integral to religion. Abu-Lughod writes that the admission of an identity based or feminist perspective is perhaps more honest, since we can automatically know that this interpretation is not something that claims to be objective, but grounded in an experience. Abu-Lughod reminds us that all knowledge is partial. Accepting people of a different perspective will simply add a different type of understanding to the world. As we hear other, alternative voices, new standards will arise for what constitutes a "self" and how this self views the world.



jordie had a dream
@jordiemojordie

"There cannot be a universal definition of religion bc the definition itself is the historical product of discursive processes" #REL300eu

2 MONTHS AGO



Marcus Ehrlich
@ehrllich_marcus

James Cone reminded me to focus on the particularities of the Biblical story itself...not just the universal/existential themes #rel300eu

A MONTH AGO

Abu-Lughod taught me that not only is singular, Western white feminism is insufficient for me and for the field of anthropology, but the very definitions behind religion are insufficient, as religion is beholden to certain historical processes and definitions of what we consider to be religion and what **we decide is not**. Both Cone and Abu-Lughod step away from singular, universal interpretations and definitions and develop methodologies that consider the unique cultural experiences of the racially marginalized and of women.

Cultural Context and Religion--Charles Long and James Cone

Lughod and Cone's methodologies and motivations give a voice to those who do not feel represented by mainstream religion or culture. Integrating a cultural context and the unheard voice is an important method that both of these scholars employ. To truly understand a people, a place, or a religion, one must strip away "traditions" and standards and accept people for who they are in the context of their culture. How can we practice Black religion in the context of a racist, white American culture? James Cone and Charles Long offer insight on this question.



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@jordiemojordie

James Cone: Impossible to speak about religion without speaking about violence #REL300eu

@avabinks7 · A MONTH AGO

Cone notes that Christianity has been used to perpetuate violence, at times, through a facade of "tradition," which he writes has often been how the Church can uphold the capitalistic American state which does adequately not care for its poor. Cone emphasizes that we cannot talk about religion with out also discussing violence. Both Cone and Long assert that we must first acknowledge the violence integrated into the American religious and economic system. Christianity was often used to maintain power and control over enslaved Africans. Cone continually asks how one can study or practice religion with this blatant disregard for the poor and downtrodden. He claims that this practice is simply a tactic to affirm the status quo (118).



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@jordiemojorie

Bc US was born of the Enlightenment & no particular religion per se, the nation needed a binding that religion provides #REL300eu

A MONTH AGO



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Whiteness was that binding force #REL300eu

A MONTH AGO

Long goes a step further and emphasizes that the American system was not rooted in Christianity at all, but whiteness. Since this system was not made for enslaved Africans, for the poor or downtrodden, but based around the binding force of whiteness, African Americans must make a difficult decision and "face two fundamental questions" (18):



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1: whether the status quo will acknowledge blk ppl and their traditions as a primordial structure of American reality #REL300eu

24 DAYS AGO



Marcus Ehrlich
@ehrich_marcus

"Any meaning of freedom or self or religion that doesnt take account of the events of formation of the Atlantic world is illusory" #rel300eu

23 DAYS AGO

First, Long states that Black people must discern if the status quo will fully acknowledge and accept Black people and the history of black slavery into its very structure. Long emphasizes that we must accept our history of the Atlantic slave trade and realize that the United States was formulated on a basis of inequality. He writes:

In the case of the Africans enslaved in the Americas, they must go "back into the water" for a reorientation. They must realize that the slave and the enslavers sailed on teh same boat, but they were making radically different journeys and defining radically different destinies. These fundamental differences arise because they are "on the same boat," and one must come to terms with them in this locus. (20)

We must acknowledge the Atlantic and the literal positioning of white men above Africans laid a foundation for an

American society that does the same. Long brings us full circle back to the American **self** which claims to be formed with freedom as its basis. Unfortunately, we find that this freedom did not exist in the formation of the African American self. Long exhorts us to acknowledge the **entanglement** of the black/white formation of the self and resist the binaries of the color line.



jordie had a dream
@jordiemojorie

2: To what extent should those who have endured systematic oppression with to become a part of and continue such a system?
[#REL300eu](#)

24 DAYS AGO

Now we return to the second part of Long's question. He wonders exactly how African Americans can practice their religion in a nation that was not built for them--in a system that is built on the binary of black and white.



jordie had a dream
@jordiemojorie

"While the Constitution and church are part of the tradition of blk Americans, they have been in a critical and prophetic manner"
[#REL300eu](#)

A MONTH AGO



Lizzie Howell
@lizzie_howell

Afr Amer have taken the Republic in "a critical and prophetic manner rather than as descriptive of the ideals that [it] enunciates"[#rel300eu](#)

A MONTH AGO

While Black Americans are certainly a part of American culture and American culture is a part of Black culture, Black people and the history of slavery stand as contradictions to the very promise of American freedom. Black people critique and interrogate the reality of America's promise of liberty and, as James Cone demonstrates, weave together America's dark past with hope for the future. Black people take American culture to task and reveal the truth (or lack thereof) in the Constitution and the American church.

By envisioning American culture and religion through a Black experience I can know who I am and how I should interpret American culture. Long's analysis grounded in Black American history sheds light on the ebb and flow of Black resistance of white American culture and acceptance into the fold.

Personal Reflections

This was the first religion course I have ever taken. I have spent my time in college primarily focused on political science, which always begins with the question, "Who gets what?" I believe I have approached religion with this question as well. As I have seen how intended political structures often determine people's social or economic position in a society, I believe religion can do the same. By engaging with authors who focused on interpreting religion through identity, the self, and through culture, I believe I have begun to understand the very politics of religion.

People design and envision the world according to their experience. As I reflect upon my semester and what I have learned from Charles Long, Lila Abu-Lughod, and especially James Cone, I realize that I'm interpreting the world as I experience it as a black woman. I do desire to learn from other perspectives and to see religion and God through other people's experiences; however, I know that I will always make decisions and choices rooted in my own experiences and the experiences of people like me.

