Faith, History, and Anti-Racism: Reclaiming Black Liberation Through Christianity and the Western Tradition

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Abstract: The rejection of the Western Tradition has often resulted in a rejection of Christianity, with many viewing the religion as intertwined with America's history of racism. Ibram X. Kendi's *How to Be an Anti-Racist* begins with his reflections on the difficulties he faced in Christian schools, an experience that led him to conclude that being anti-racist requires a rejection of anything tied to the West. This piece aims to demonstrate how both Christianity and the Western tradition are frequently misunderstood due to America's racist past, and it calls for a reevaluation of these concepts, as many figures in Black history have done. Investigating the role of Christianity and the Western tradition in the liberation of Black people can, in itself, be an act of anti-racism.

Keywords: Liberal Education, Ibram X. Kendi, Anti-racism, Western Tradition, Christianity

STORYTELLING AS METHODOLOGY

> *The story, then, is not just casual entertainment; it reflects a basic and powerful form in which we make sense of the world and experience.*
> — Egan 1989

Since the beginning of humanity, storytelling has been a tool to preserve the true hiSTORIES of our existence. Griots used storytelling to keep the stories of African people alive, stories that traveled across the ocean in the Middle Passage, helping us remember our true roots and origins. I follow this tradition in my writing and research through a methodology I call Academic Storytelling. This is different from simple storytelling, which is often used for entertainment and to spark the imagination. Academic Storytelling grew out of my training in phenomenology, which calls for dissecting narratives of lived experiences, zeroing in on one phenomenon within those experiences. Academic Storytelling doesn't focus on an individual's lived experience but instead centers on true stories of history and their connection to the present. While it may include the author's story and other modern stories, using primary sources and other credible sources, it's always interwoven with the stories of the past, revealing a truth that might otherwise remain hidden.

We must continue telling our stories, linking them to the past, to piece together the full tapestry of all human ex-

periences. In this piece, I will weave my story with that of Ibram X. Kendi and the ancestors who have sought to understand the best way to educate Black people. Ibram X. Kendi begins his book *How to Be an Antiracist* by recounting his experience with racism in Christian schools. Early on, he writes, "I cannot disconnect my parents' religious strivings to be Christian, from my secular strivings to be an anti-racist" (Kendi 2023, p. 17). This narrative serves as the foundation for the book's effort to dismantle racism by acknowledging the racism embedded in American Christianity, with Christianity being a clear symbol of Western influence. These early experiences with Christianity led Kendi to embrace a more African-centered faith, a journey that has profoundly shaped his perspective.

Despite our different life paths, I've found a deep kinship with Kendi's scholarship. Even though we have a generational gap of ten years, and even though our paths never crossed, both of us, as Black individuals, were shaped by Christian educational settings. We never exchanged narratives to reconcile our experiences, but, like Kendi, I remember teachers who perpetuated racial inequities by using biblical doctrines—such as the "Curse of Ham"—to justify beliefs in the inferiority of Black people. Their attitudes were evident in how they treated me and many of my peers. Because of this, I can easily understand, Kendi's eventual estrangement from the Christian faith.

American Christianity has played a central role in the debate over how to best educate Black people, perpetuating deeply ingrained beliefs that the supposed inferiority of Black people (due to the curse of Ham) and the supposed superiority of White people justify different educational treatment, and suggesting that our exposure to human history—past and present—should be unequal. By framing Christianity as the source of a hierarchy for mankind and positioning the White race as THE ethnicity of the Bible, a false narrative was created about a faith that began long before 1619. The Jesus of the West, or the Jesus of America, is not the Jesus of the Bible. The Jesus of the Bible was born in Bethlehem (close to Palestine) but spent his early years in Egypt before settling in Nazareth. These places are named in the Bible and reveal that the Western Jesus, often a figure who repels Black people and other people of color, actually comes from the Middle East and Africa, embodying all ethnicities within him.

I've always known that Jesus wasn't White. One of the first things my parents taught me was that Jesus was a man of color, a blend of every ethnic group. In fact, we weren't allowed to have pictures of Jesus in our home because my parents believed that no one truly knows what he looked like—he looks like all of us. They also taught me about Jesus' lineage, so I could see the many ethnicities woven into his family line. From this, it was clear to me that Jesus was a man of color, because only dark colors can produce light ones. This understanding shaped how I navigated the world, my country, and my faith. I saw the origins of humanity as coming from all of the continents, especially Africa. I was raised to have a raceless mentality when I thought of the Bible, the ancient world, and human history overall.

In his book *Before Color Prejudice*, Frank Snowden seeks to catalog Biblical texts and other ancient primary sources, documenting moments when races intersected and collaborated, even revealing an admiration for Black skin by Greeks and Romans. The ancient world did not look like the Jim Crow-scarred America that we live in today. He says:

> Color prejudice has been a major issue in the modern world. W. E. B. DuBois called it the "problem of the 20th century" and D. B. Saddington, among others, notes that racial difficulties are at their worst when associated with differences in skin color. Notable therefore, is the fact that the ancient world did not make color the focus of irrational sentiments or the basis of uncritical evaluations…nothing comparable to the virulent color prejudice of modern times existed in the ancient world (Snowden 1991, p. 63).

Unfortunately, Christianity, like other traditions appropriated by Western culture (i.e., the classical tradition), has become distorted, with its Whiteness being falsely seen as something that makes it irrelevant to Black people or other people of color. The purpose of my writing is to use my story, Kendi's story and the

stories of the Black ancestors to show that our misunderstanding of Christianity may also be the same misunderstanding that we have about the classical or Western tradition.

HOW WESTERN CHRISTIANITY SHAPED KENDI AND ME

In light of Kendi's and my parallel experiences, a poignant question arises: How did our paths diverge when it comes to faith and hope in America? Sadly, Kendi's negative experiences with faith in America diminished his hope for America. In contrast, I've learned to separate those racist Christian educational experiences from an authentic faith and to recognize that the schools I attended veered away from the orthodox Biblical worldview. Scripture itself speaks to the universal welcome of the Christian faith, and historical accounts show the early encounters of African people with the Gospel. One of the earliest recorded encounters is the story of the Ethiopian Eunuch and how he brought Christianity back to Ethiopia's Queen Candace, or the Kandake, as told in the book of Acts. Then there are the numerous African church fathers, like Augustine, Origen, and Tertullian (Hinson 2021).

However, Africa was not just the home of Christianity but also the birthplace of many other faiths. Contrary to common misconceptions, Africa's rich tapestry includes a diversity of beliefs and cultures, extending hospitality to Yahweh, Allah, Anyame, Jesus, Ra, and others. I reject the notion that the West or America exclusively shaped Christianity, as it's often portrayed by Kendi. His understanding of Christianity is limited, as it's tied only to slavery, racism, and imperialism without considering the broader historical perspective of Christianity before America. Some African church fathers were educated in Greece or Rome, but not through colonization. Christianity didn't begin in those spaces. There was a faith before the term "Christianity," born on the Day of Pentecost with a small group of Jesus' Jewish disciples—an ancient faith that welcomed Jews, Africans, Greeks, Romans, Asians, and many other groups. From this inclusivity, what we now call Christianity spread worldwide, reaching figures like Augustine, Origen, Tertullian, and others.

Understanding the history of Christianity, along with other elements of the Western tradition, like the classical tradition, is key to understanding African history. The two have been intertwined since the beginning of humanity.

Kendi quotes from a Christian leader named James Cone, who called Black Christianity, the Christianity of the enslaved, not the Christianity of the slaveholder (Kendi 2023, p. 17). Even though this seems like a noble definition at first, it does not reflect the Christianity of the ancient world, where it began in Africa and the Middle East. The Christianity I embrace aligns with the faith of my ancestors, alongside myriad other faiths that have found resonance in the Motherland. This perspective enables me to maintain hope in an America purporting to be a Christian nation, acknowledging that its history diverges from the teachings of the holy scriptures. Recognizing that American Christianity is based upon a false narrative, liberates me to view America through a lens of grace; my faith instills hope in its potential transformation, because I understand that its Christian roots are not Christianity at all, and once these truths are unearthed then we all can move forward in truth, healing and unity.

Kendi was intentional in opening his book *How to be An Antiracist* by reflecting on his experiences in America's Christian schools. For context, I had similar experiences in White Christian schools during the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s. These formative years were characterized by trauma and disillusionment, as overt racism pervaded the educational environment. From the moment I walked into the classroom, teachers and administrators unequivocally conveyed that people of color were not welcomed into the space, invoking biblical justifications for their prejudiced beliefs. The Christian schools I attended during the early 70s had been established to evade the court-mandated desegregation of the 1960s, only to be met with constitutional scrutiny (Blaiklock 2022). As we entered high school, my brother and I, despite our two-year age gap, shared a mutual disdain for Christian colleges' recruitment efforts within our schools, recognizing them as attempts to mask pervasive racism. Repeatedly, we declared, "There is NO WAY we are going to attend college in such a racist environment." At that juncture, my outlook lacked the grace and forgiveness that characterize my current perspective. I harbored a profound bitterness towards the Christianity I encountered

from pre-K through 12th grade, rejecting its presence within White communities and souring my perception of America.

But other messages also informed my growing-up years. Throughout my upbringing, my parents imparted knowledge of our African heritage, drawing upon biblical and world history. Thankfully, they equipped me to discern the flawed theology perpetuated by many White Christian churches. Anticipating the false narratives we would encounter within Christian schools, they provided us with an historical context of American Christianity's racist origins. They elucidated how the "Curse of Ham" was weaponized to justify our subjugation and oppression. Moreover, they illuminated scripture's affirmation of the universality of humanity, underscoring Christianity's intrinsic connection to Africa and the world prior to colonization. My experiences within Christian schools, though arduous to reconcile, helped me understand, and commit to rectifying, the historical wounds inflicted by racism within Christian theology.

Kendi's seminal work unveils his understanding of the entwined roots of racism and Christianity in America's past. America's first schools were "Christian" and formed a foundational framework for all of education in America. Denial of this historical reality only perpetuates the festering of old wounds. Acknowledgment of this past signifies a commitment to healing and progress, rather than an indictment of faith or country. Kendi's exploration of racism within Christian schools reveals the beginning of his critique of the West. He views Christianity as part of the Western tradition and uses his experiences to illustrate how the Western system of American education has harmed many. While many readers of his work might be tempted to reject all Western contributions based on Kendi's analysis, it's important to question whether this is a fair interpretation of his work. Is Kendi truly seeking to dismiss all Western achievements, or is he highlighting specific areas where the West has fallen short?

THE WOUNDS OF A WESTERN CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

Kendi's experiences with racism affected his ability to perform well in school, and it had a similar impact on me. In *How to Be an Anti-racist*, Kendi says:

> I could have studied harder. But some of my White friends could have studied harder, too, and their failures and irresponsibility didn't somehow tarnish their race…My problems with personal irresponsibility were exacerbated—or perhaps even caused—by the additional struggles that racism added to my school life, from a history of disinterested, racist teachers…to the daily racist attacks that fell on young Black boys and girls…(Kendi 2023, p. 93).

Throughout my years in K-12 Christian schools, I grappled with a pervasive sense of devaluation, which hindered my academic performance. I felt that my efforts went unrecognized and unappreciated, leading me to adopt a mindset of mere survival rather than academic excellence. Kendi's assertion that his personal irresponsibility was exacerbated by the additional burdens of racism rings true for me as well. The indifference and racism exhibited by teachers, coupled with daily racial attacks endured by Black students, only served to compound the challenges I faced in my educational environment.

My experience mirrored Kendi's sentiments of emptiness and dread throughout my school days. The anticipation of each school day filled me with anxiety and despair, a sentiment my mother vividly recalls as she feared finding me in tears upon picking me up from school. Consequently, my academic performance suffered, reflected in low SAT scores and a lack of ambition for college. However, my parents intervened, recognizing the detrimental impact of my schooling experience, and urged me to attend Howard University.

It was at Howard University that I experienced a transformative shift. Freed from the confines of K-12 Christian schools, I discovered a newfound sense of worth and purpose. Instantaneously excelling academically, I was inducted into the honor society and graduated cum laude. Reading Kendi's reflections, I found a mirror to my own life story, albeit with notable divergences. While I relate to his struggles against racism

in education, his departure from Christianity, rejection of Western influence, and loss of hope in America represented stark contrasts to my own journey. Nonetheless, the profound connection I felt with Kendi's narrative underscores the enduring impact of racism on the educational trajectories of Black individuals like me.

Kendi's scholarship sheds light on the interconnectedness of America's unresolved wounds and the racism inherent in Western Christianity. His firsthand experience in racist Christian schools serves as a tangible reminder of the dangers posed by Western influence to American progress. However, while Kendi's critique of the West identifies significant issues, he does not propose any viable solutions. It is crucial to recognize that the West, despite its role in oppressing Black people, remains an ancestral link intertwined with our collective history. To discount this connection risks severing the vital ties that are essential for collective healing. Octavia Butler's novel, *Kindred,* poignantly illustrates this interdependence through the metaphor of ancestral relationship, where the demise of one ultimately leads to the demise of the other. Kendi's tendency to dismiss all things associated with the West has led him to frame much of Black progress in America as mythical if it has its roots in the Western tradition.

For instance, in Chapter 17 of "The 1619 Project," entitled "Progress," Kendi outlines milestones in Black America's journey, such as the achievements of Thurgood Marshall, Martin Luther King, Jr., the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the presidency of Barack Obama as not authentic progress. He quotes Malcolm X, "How can you thank a man for giving you what's already yours?...You haven't even made progress, if what's being given to you, you should have had already. That's not progress (Hannah-Jones 2021, p. 503). While these achievements symbolize progress towards equality, they also highlight the ongoing struggle against racism. Without a thorough understanding of Kendi's broader context, demonstrating a skepticism of progress could be misinterpreted as discounting the sacrifices made by Black and White individuals who fought tirelessly to dismantle racism.

Although some passages in Kendi's work may appear to belittle the sacrifices of Black heroes, it's essential to consider the entirety of his arguments within their contextual framework to grasp their true intent. There is an interesting passage in his book that, to some, may appear to belittle the sacrifices of our Black heroes, but I do not agree, especially when you read the rest of the book and place this statement in context:

> I was not living up to my academic potential. As a Black teenager in the nineties, my shortcomings didn't go unnoticed or unjudged. The first to notice were the adults around me of my parents' and grandparents' generation. As legal scholar James Forman Jr. documents, the civil-rights generation usually evoked Martin Luther King Jr. to shame us. "Did Martin Luther King successfully fight the likes of Bull Connor so that we could ultimately lose the struggle of civil rights to misguided or malicious members of our own race?" Jesse Jackson told a group of Alabama prisoners, "... Dr. King died for you" (Kendi 2023, pp. 92-93).

Kendi discusses how reading about our heroes is necessary but insufficient. The book endeavors to unveil the persistent presence of racism deeply embedded within the fabric of our nation, advocating for its recognition as a crucial step towards addressing it. And in recognizing this, understanding giving equality to a human being is only the prelude to actually bringing about progress.

Regrettably, however, some interpretations of Kendi's work misconstrue its message, using it to argue against the vital role of sharing historical narratives of overcoming oppression with future generations. Instead, there is a tendency to interpret his work as advocating solely for the teaching of oppression and racism, neglecting to convey the agency of our people and the strategies they employed to combat it. Consequently, a generation of children risks being educated solely on despising racism and harboring anger towards it, devoid of an understanding of effective solutions gleaned from the experiences of those who came before them. It prompts reflection on whether Kendi comprehends the extent of this misunderstanding. Did he intend to foster a movement where young people are disconnected from their history, fail to honor its martyrs, and overlook the wisdom they imparted?

THOUGHTS ON HEALING THE WOUNDS OF WESTERN CHRISTIAN EDUCATION

I fear that many educators, with the best of intentions, use his work to undermine young people's sense of agency and the United States' promise - albeit a broken one. This is evident in my experience working with colleagues at the Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy, where we have analyzed social studies curricula in depth. An example of this is in my review of curricula for major school districts, where I observed a troubling pattern. The opening paragraphs of many curriculum guides discussed embracing anti-racism, which initially impressed me as a step towards inclusivity and acknowledgment of marginalized voices. However, upon further examination, I discovered that the lessons on US history solely focused on oppression, with no mention of Black activism or empowerment. Children cannot truly understand their history if they are only exposed to narratives of oppression; they also need to learn about the bravery and sacrifices of their ancestors who fought for change. Moreover, these curricula often excluded lessons on significant figures such as Fannie Lou Hamer, Mary McLeod Bethune, James Baldwin, Bayard Rustin or the Black Panther Party. They offered minimal coverage of the struggles and triumphs of other minority groups, such as the Latino population. Instead, the curriculum perpetuated a simplistic Black-and-White narrative that failed to recognize progress or improvement over time and excluded the struggle and agency of other marginalized groups.

In some instances, these curricula even disseminated misinformation, portraying historical figures such as Lincoln and Andrew Johnson in a distorted light. For instance, some curricula depict Lincoln as a racist and do not acknowledge his evolving views; others portray Johnson (incorrectly) as the sole architect of Reconstruction. Such narratives omit the contributions of Black politicians during Reconstruction and oversimplify complex historical events. Is this truly the message Kendi wants our young people to internalize? Using his work as a means to perpetuate ignorance about US history and the role of marginalized communities within it does not align with Kendi's intentions, I believe.

Another unfortunate curricular tendency I have seen is this: a pursuit of racial representation at the expense of quality. The inclusion of diverse characters is commendable, but the use of poorly written texts is not. Representation and quality are not mutually exclusive. A curriculum can and should strive to achieve both, without compromising one for the other. Does Kendi know that such decisions often purport to follow anti-racist methodology?

Kendi's straightforward approach often divides opinions, with some perceiving his work as a harsh critique of America's shortcomings, leading to a sense of despair about potential change. However, it may be more productive to view his work as a tool for addressing the gaps in our understanding caused by racist distortions of U.S. history.

The Christianization of slavery, which was part of early American education, resulted in an educational system with significant historical omissions. As American education split into public and Christian/private sectors, these false narratives about diverse human history persisted. Public schools were left to address the gaps with insufficient resources, while Christian and private schools continued to propagate incomplete histories, obscuring the painful truths of racism in America. Kendi's book aims to expose how this miseducation has impeded progress and racial healing. By blending historical evidence with compelling rhetoric, Kendi defends America's ongoing quest for a creating a more perfect Union by changing how we are educated. Nevertheless, his tone, marked by bitterness and guilt, can sometimes prevent readers from fully engaging with his message. Yet, when I think of students and how my bitterness from my K-12 experiences could be a hindrance to teaching the fullness of human history, I realize that I must see a much larger picture.

Many see Kendi as advocating for the rejection of the very educational systems that shaped his own intellectual prowess. This interpretation risks instilling a sense of hopelessness in children, portraying figures like MLK and Obama as ineffective and perpetuating a narrative of perpetual oppression. However, shouldn't we celebrate the possibility for progress, exemplified by individuals like Obama, irrespective of their background or ethnicity? Would Kendi deprive his own children of hope, or deny them access to a

knowledge-rich education that encompasses the wisdom of Black resilience and the universal insights of ancient thinkers? Obama and MLK may seem to be a myth, because the work remains unfinished. One obstacle to finishing the work is in how students are educated. Kendi, MLK and Obama, for example, all received an education that gave them an understanding of their own history AND the history of the rest of the world…even the history of their oppressor. This knowledge is imperative to finishing the work that our ancestors began.

IMPROVING, NOT CANCELING WESTERN EDUCATION

This paper began by examining the origins of American education within a Christian framework. Initially, Western Christian education was the dominant method of schooling in America. Over time, however, a division emerged: public education gradually distanced itself from Christian influence, while Christian schools developed as separate entities. Despite this shift, public education continued to be shaped by a fragmented approach to teaching, rooted in the Christianization of racism and slavery. Meanwhile, Christian schools persisted in fostering a form of Christian Nationalism, a legacy that endures today.

Christian Nationalism may trace its roots back to Martin Luther, who broke from the Catholic Church (Messinger 2015). The term "Catholic," meaning "universal," originally embraced the global nature of Christianity. However, the history of the Holy Wars and other efforts to spread Catholicism reveals a form of supremacy. In establishing Protestantism, Luther also became a champion of nationalism, taking pride in his German heritage. Nationalism has taken on various forms—some embodying a healthy love for one's country, while others promote supremacy over other ethnicities and groups. The Christian schools Kendi and I attended chose to embrace White supremacy over our Black heritage. This has led Kendi and many others to view Christianity—whether Catholic or Protestant—as racist or White supremacist, even though they overlook the original message of Christianity, where "all that believed were together, and had all things common" (King James Bible 1769/2019, Acts 2:44) and "there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus" (King James Bible 1769/2019, Galatians 3:28).

We should aspire to provide our children with a comprehensive understanding of their collective place in the world, inclusive of diverse perspectives and histories. How do we achieve this balance—teaching the truth of history and the present without succumbing to bitterness, while nurturing hope grounded in reality. It is a complex endeavor, one that demands a delicate equilibrium between acknowledging past injustices and inspiring future possibilities. Indeed, my own experience indicates that we are failing to prepare the next generation for both racial healing and also hope.

Here is an example. When teaching at Howard University, I often posed a fundamental question at the start of each semester: What did MLK accomplish? The response was often met with silence, punctuated by sighs of disbelief as students grappled with their lack of knowledge on the subject. Eventually, hesitant whispers emerged, offering vague notions such as "He wanted us all to get along," or "He marched," but none could articulate his political strategy or the legislative achievements resulting from his activism. This concerning trend among freshmen suggests a generation growing up with limited awareness of the individuals who paved the way for the freedoms we enjoy today.

Kendi's *How to Be an Anti-Racist* aims to illuminate how widespread miseducation has hindered progress toward racial healing. While it might seem that Kendi advocates for dismantling all forms of Western influence in America to advance, it is worth examining whether this interpretation aligns with his intent. Given how his education has shaped his influential scholarship, a closer look at his message is warranted.

We should strive to offer our children a well-rounded education that includes diverse perspectives and histories. The challenge lies in balancing the truthful presentation of history and current realities without falling into bitterness, while fostering hope based on realistic expectations. This is a complex task that requires a careful balance between acknowledging past injustices and inspiring future possibilities. My own

experiences suggest that we are not adequately preparing the next generation for both racial healing and hope.

However, this exercise in remembrance is not meant to shame anyone. As Kendi reflects on his upbringing, where he was taught to see himself as a descendant of the Civil Rights Movement, we recognize the importance of understanding our history to guide our future actions. Misunderstanding Kendi's intentions has led many to sever any connection to the West in education. Similarly, in many Christian schools, misinterpreting Kendi causes some to limit access to the stories of diverse people in America. Both misunderstandings stem from fear—fear of teaching a curriculum rooted in assimilation and White supremacy, leading to the cancellation of anything Western, or fear of viewing Kendi's work as hostile to America or anything Western, resulting in the cancellation of diverse narratives. Sadly, this fear on both sides is nurturing a new generation without an understanding of the educational foundations that facilitated our liberation, the effective strategies employed by our predecessors, or the significance of collective action in bringing about legislative change.

Through my teaching, I witnessed a transformation in my students' understanding of MLK and his legacy over the course of the semester. They gained insight not only into MLK's contributions but also into the classical inspirations of other activists, empowering them to become participants in our democracy rooted in classical ideals. The concept of Sankofa, an Adinkra symbol, urging us to retrieve the wisdom of our ancestors, resonates deeply here.

Yet, there exists a complexity in Kendi's critique, particularly regarding assimilationist ideas, which he deems inherently racist. This perspective risks overlooking the nuanced experiences of Black individuals navigating a foreign society post-slavery, striving for survival and adaptation. To label their pursuit of literacy and comprehension of American culture and heritage as embracing racism or assimilation is to disregard their historical context and the imperative of survival in an oppressive and volatile environment.

Martin Luther King was not the only person of color inspired by the Western Tradition. Malcolm X even saw value in the literature. He recalls:

> A story that I read in prison, when I was reading a lot of Greek mythology, flicked into my head. The boy Icarus' father made some wings that he fastened with wax. "Never fly but so high with these wings," the father said. But soaring around, this way, that way, Icarus' flying pleased him so that he began thinking he was flying on his own merit. Higher, he flew—higher—until the heat of the sun melted the wax holding those wings. And down came Icarus—tumbling… I silently vowed to Allah that I would never forget that any wings I wore had been put on by the religion of Islam (Malcolm X and Haley 1965, p. 331).

Malcolm X devoted much of his speaking and writing to urging Black people NOT to assimilate or integrate. He believed our community should maintain its own nationality while consciously separating ourselves from the oppressor. However, despite these beliefs, he read everything—even works from the Western tradition—and in his autobiography, he reinterpreted the story of Icarus as a reflection of his own journey. He used it to express his humility before Allah and to highlight how Islam had transformed his life.

Kendi's own literary contributions, including "How to be an Antiracist" and "Stamped from the Beginning," underscore the paradox of his stance. Why, then, would he advocate for depriving the next generation of the education that has shaped his own intellectual prowess? Has his racist experiences in American Christian and public education caused him to discount how it equipped him to author the books that are inspiring the world to rethink human history and race relations? Learning the language and literacy of a foreign land is not synonymous with embracing racism or assimilationism; rather, it reflects the inherent human instinct to adapt and thrive in challenging circumstances. Before the abolition of slavery, we were denied citizenship and prohibited from acquiring knowledge of America's language and governance—a reality James Baldwin poignantly acknowledges:

> I know, in any case, that the most crucial time in my development came when I was forced to recognize that I was a kind of bastard of the West; when I followed the line of my past I did not find myself in Europe but in Africa. This meant that in some subtle way, in a profound way, I brought to Shakespeare, Bach, Rembrandt, the stones of Paris, the cathedral at Chartres, and the Empire State Building, a special attitude. These were not my creations, they did not contain my history; I might search in them in vain forever for any reflection of myself. I was an interloper; this was not my heritage. At the same time I had no other heritage which I could possibly hope to use—I had certainly been unfitted for the jungle or the tribe. I would have to appropriate these white centuries, I would have to make them mine—I would have to accept my special attitude, my special place in this scheme—otherwise I would have no place in any scheme (Baldwin 1998, pp. 7-8).

Alain Locke, despite being hailed as the father of the Harlem Renaissance, infamously disparaged his own people by using the derogatory term if they failed to speak English to his exacting standards. Without considering the full context and understanding of the historical and literary nuances embedded in Kendi's writings, it's easy to misconstrue his stance as discounting any Black individual who contributed to the advancement of the Black community, particularly if their efforts were intertwined with Western influences. However, as Octavia Butler illustrates in Kindred, our connection to the West is undeniable—something Ta-Nehisi Coates further emphasizes by highlighting the entwined nature of the Black diaspora with the Western world itself (Coates 2015).

While we cannot deny this connection, we have the power to shape our narrative and elevate it alongside the Western tradition. Rather than teaching our children to reject our ancestors for embracing the language, literacy, and culture of this oppressive land, we should honor their efforts in utilizing that knowledge to fight for the freedoms we enjoy today. Their legacy calls us to continue their work and embrace our roots, reframing our perspective from one of burdened double consciousness to that of bilingualism. Unlike how Baldwin aptly puts it, we are not "bastards of the West" but individuals learning a language crucial for navigating this foreign terrain. In this bilingual existence, the texts of the Western tradition serve as invaluable tools, equipping us with the language and literacy necessary to navigate the world and share our story in a universal tongue. As Chinua Achebe aptly states:

> ...English was the language of instruction at Government College, Umuahia. It was at Umuahia that I first truly understood the power and importance of that unifying language…Nigeria had over 250 ethnic groups…While African languages and writing should be developed, nurtured, and preserved, how else…would I have been able to communicate with so many…from different parts of the country and ethnic groups, speaking different languages, had we not been taught one language...I continued the introduction to the work of William Shakespeare that my father had first made possible, as well as to Booker T. Washington's *Up from Slavery,* Swift's *Gulliver's Travels,* Dickenson's *David Copperfield,* and Stevenson's *Treasure Island*…Reading these books was a transforming experience, and I have written elsewhere about the influence Umuahia had in educating many of the pioneers of modern African literature (Achebe 2012, pp. 24-25).

Kendi's personal journey has given him a deep understanding of the ongoing struggles faced by his ancestors. His time in Christian schools exposed him to how Christianity became a breeding ground for racism in America. Our experiences were parallel, but they had different effects. Kendi's encounter with Christianity led him to reject it as irrelevant to his life and his work in anti-racism. On the other hand, the Christian faith shaped my perspective on fighting racism, as the Black church was central to most Black liberation movements, from the Underground Railroad to the Civil Rights Movement.

This isn't to say that Christianity is the only path forward, but it is part of an arsenal of tools our Black ancestors used to fight oppression. Christianity, Islam, and other belief systems all worked together to bring healing to the Black community, and none should be discounted, even if they were influenced by the West.

The same applies to the Western tradition. There is too much evidence to show that the Western tradition played an integral role in the Black Panthers, Chinua Achebe, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, and many other Black people who used their interpretation and translation of classical texts to give voice to their struggle and plight.

I do not reject my faith because it evolved under Western influence; I recognize that the Christianity of America is not the Christianity of the Bible. Christianity is the faith that on the day of Pentecost, the Christian faith was shared with every ethnicity at the same time:

> Then how is it that each of us hears them in our native language?[9] Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia, Phrygia and Pamphylia, Egypt and the parts of Libya near Cyrene; visitors from Rome···Cretans and Arabs—we hear them declaring the wonders of God in our own tongues! (Berean Standard Bible 2023, Acts 2: 8-11).

The inclusivity of the early Christian faith stands in stark contrast to what Kendi and I were taught in our Christian schools. In fifth grade, my teacher was sharing a lesson about why God does not allow Blacks and Whites to marry. I raised my hand and when she called on me, I said, "But Moses was married to an African (Cushite) woman!"—a comment that got me in trouble. At school, I wasn't allowed to explore how the stories of the Bible connected to my identity as a child of African descent. Just like in other ancient texts, the Bible includes a plethora of stories of African civilizations. I'm grateful that my parents liberated me at home, but what if all children of color were taught the story of their origins, from ancient times through all of human history? Kendi calls on us to uncover the truth about our history. Recognizing the African roots of Christianity, the African and Middle Eastern lineage of Jesus, and its relevance to Black people is an act of anti-racism because it liberates us from worshiping a god that supports racial supremacy, nationalism, or the belief in the inferiority of Black people or any people of color. Even the enslaved were inspired to write the Negro Spirituals because, once they learned the Bible for themselves, they saw that the faith of their masters was not the true faith of the Bible. It was this very faith that gave them the strength to persevere and provided strategies for healing—strategies that were effective, though the work remains unfinished.

Kendi's frustration with the persistent specter of racism sometimes colors his articulation of anti-racism, potentially glossing over vital historical nuances. Despite this, he has effectively advocated for anti-racism, even utilizing tools he acknowledges as having origins steeped in racism. However, it's crucial for both him and his followers to critically assess the implications of this approach. Acknowledging the intricate dynamics of navigating a society deeply entrenched in Western influences does not diminish the value of our own cultural heritage and literacy. Kendi embodies this principle, embracing his African identity through his adorned locks and his name (he changed his name from Ibram Henry Rogers to Ibram Xolani Kendi), while fervently championing anti-racism (Poser 2024). His education, albeit influenced by the West, has been instrumental in advancing his cause, mirroring the strategies employed by his ancestors in their quest for freedom. Underscoring the importance of embracing diverse knowledge systems, Kendi's work serves as a powerful reminder of the enduring legacy of our ancestors and the ongoing struggle for racial equity.

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