

The “Metaphysical Monster” and Muslim Theology: William James, Sherman Jackson, and the Problem of Black Suffering

SAM HOUSTON

Abstract

By placing Blackamerican Muslim theologian Sherman A. Jackson’s work, especially his *Islam and the Problem of Black*

Sam Houston, PhD, is an assistant professor of religious studies at Stetson University. He earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in history from Baylor University, a master of divinity degree from Princeton Theological Seminary and a master of arts degree in philosophy from Boston College. He earned his doctoral degree from Florida State University, specializing in Muslim ethics and comparative religious ethics. Prior to pursuing his doctorate, he lived for two years in Abu Dhabi, UAE, teaching English at Zayed University and traveling throughout the Middle East/North Africa region. While a graduate student at FSU, he was awarded a U.S. State Department-sponsored Critical Language Scholarship to study Arabic in Morocco. He is a member of the American Academy of Religion and the Society for the Study of Muslim Ethics.

Houston, Sam. 2023. “The “Metaphysical Monster” and Muslim Theology: William James, Sherman Jackson, and the Problem of Black Suffering.” *American Journal of Islam and Society* 40, nos. 3-4: 6–40 • doi: 10.35632/ajis.v40i3-4.3267

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Suffering, in conversation with the work of American pragmatist William James, I explore the pragmatic dimensions of Islamic thought through an examination of Jackson's account of classical Islamic theology put forward in response to the problem of Black suffering. In doing so, I argue that Jackson's account both parallels and challenges a Jamesian account of religion. It parallels James in that it speaks of the "practical effectiveness" of the "web of beliefs" constituting Islamic doctrines of God in inculcating certain habits of seeing and acting in the world that best deal with the challenges of "black experience"; however, in this process, the category of "experience" itself and its role in the verification of belief is thoroughly interrogated. In his critical engagement with Black philosopher of religion William R. Jones, Jackson exposes the uncritical role played by "experience" in Jones' thought, a charge which will be made of James as well. In making this argument about Jackson, I hope to provide an example of a Muslim theologian who makes explicit the pragmatic dimensions of religious doctrine, demonstrating that thick theological discourse can be practical.

There are some people—and I am one of them—who think that the most practical and important thing about a man is still his view of the universe.

—G.K. CHESTERTON, "HERETICS"

In his *Varieties of Religious Experience*, American pragmatist William James does not look fondly upon "dogmatic theology." In fact, he refers to the "God" produced by debates within Christian theology about such topics as the divine attributes as a "metaphysical monster" which he candidly describes as "an absolutely worthless invention of the scholarly mind."¹ This is because such debates are in reality only abstractions, which distract us from the "feeling" that is "the deeper source of religion."² Therefore, time spent on esoteric theological topics such as Christology or the nature of the Trinity is a waste of time.³ Moreover,

such speculation is to be avoided because these doctrines make no difference in terms of one's conduct, a *sine qua non* of legitimate belief.

Thus, it would seem that a pragmatic justification of a Jamesian kind for second-order theological discourse is not possible. However, I argue that in Blackamerican Muslim theologian Sherman A. Jackson's *Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering*, we find just this. That is, he provides a pragmatic account of classical Islamic theology in response to the problem of Black suffering. Although he does not describe his account in this way, there are both remarkable parallels and telling disjunctures with James' own discussions of religion. While pragmatic conceptions of God that highlight the inextricable nature of thought and praxis are a well-documented characteristic of Black theologies in the Christian tradition that confront the challenges of Black theodicy, little has been done to explore examples of this in Blackamerican forms of Islam.⁴ This paper attempts to fill this gap by examining Jackson's account of classical Islamic theology, and especially the tradition's doctrines of God, in light of the pragmatism of William James. In doing so, I argue that Jackson's discussion of this topic in relation to the problem of Black suffering both parallels and challenges a Jamesian account of religion. It parallels James in that it speaks of the "practical effectiveness" of the "web of beliefs" constituting Islamic doctrines of God in inculcating certain habits of seeing and acting in the world that best deal with the challenges of "black experience." However, in this process, the category of "experience" itself and its role in the verification of belief is thoroughly interrogated. In his engagement with Black philosopher of religion William R. Jones, Jackson exposes the uncritical role played by "experience" in Jones' thought, a charge which will be made of James as well.⁵ In making this argument about Jackson, I hope to provide an example of a Muslim theologian who makes explicit the pragmatic dimensions of religious doctrine, demonstrating that thick theological discourse can be practical.

I begin by presenting James' arguments for the dismissal of "dogmatic theology" along with the insights afforded by Christian theologian and ethicist Stanley Hauerwas' critical engagement with these arguments. Second, with a proper understanding of a Jamesian pragmatic account of "dogmatic theology" attained, I will examine some of the Jamesian

elements of Jackson's discussion of the relationship between divine omnibenevolence and omnipotence in Mu'tazilism and Māturīdism, two schools of classical Islamic theology. Thirdly, I will explore some of the issues raised by Jackson's analysis of Jones' reliance on "experience" in his book, *Is God a White Racist?*, a critique that can also be applied to James' uncritical use of "experience" in the process of verification. I will then conclude by presenting Jackson's comments on "experiential knowledge" and the limits of theology, comments that bear some resemblance to James' own belief that "*as soon as we deal with private and personal phenomena as such, we deal with realities in the completest sense of the term.*"⁶

James and the Possibility of a Pragmatic Doctrine of God

In his discussion of the possibility of a pragmatic justification of "dogmatic theology," James at times is inconsistent and at other times dismissive. In reference to the general task of theology, he writes, "I do believe that feeling is the deeper source of religion, and that philosophic and theological formulas are secondary products, like translations of a text into another tongue."⁷ This privileging of the emotive at the expense of the rational is made even more explicit when he states that "our passions or our mystical intuitions fix our beliefs beforehand. [Logical reason] finds arguments for our convictions, for indeed it *has* to find them."⁸ For James then, it is in our "feeling" and "our passions" that the true origins of the religious impulse are to be located, and the attempt to mask this reality behind claims of rational certainty or deductive universality only leads to confusion and futile debate.

In the passages of the *Varieties* dealing with "dogmatic theology," the doctrine most thoroughly discussed is that of the divine attributes as found in the Catholic theology of John Henry Newman. After excerpting a substantial portion of Newman's thoughts on the subject, James proceeds to engage in some philosophical therapy using the "pragmatism" of Charles Sanders Peirce as a curative. Specifically, he points to Peirce's claim that "[b]eliefs in short, are rules for action; and the whole function of thinking is but one step in the production of active habits."

Consequently, a belief's "meaning" is to be ascertained by "determin[ing] what conduct it is fitted to produce...To attain perfect clearness in our thoughts of an object, we need then only consider what sensations, immediate or remote, we are conceivably to expect from it, and what conduct we must prepare in case the object should be true."⁹ In other words, a belief is to be considered valued and meaningful to the degree that it produces a certain sensation and behavior, and if one cannot point to any such consequent sensations or behaviors following from such beliefs, then they are to be deemed as "after-effects, secondary accretions upon those phenomena of vital conversation with the unseen divine..."¹⁰

At this point, James assesses Newman's discussion of the divine attributes in light of Peirce's pragmatic account of belief. Beginning with what he refers to as the "metaphysical attributes" of God such as aseity, immateriality, indivisibility, and the divine relationship to evil (or theodicy), he asserts that their truth or untruth holds not the smallest consequence for individual action and being in the world. Not leaving it at that, he goes on to write that "the deduction of metaphysical attributes [is] but a shuffling and matching of pedantic dictionary-adjectives, aloof from morals, aloof from human needs..."¹¹ James has no patience for theological discourse dealing with divine attributes that have no apparent bearing on human behavior. However, he looks more favorably on the "moral attributes" of God, examples of which include holiness, omnipotence, lovingness, or unalterableness. James assigns a higher value to these types of attributes because they "positively determine fear and hope and expectation, and are the foundation for the saintly life."¹² That is, these attributes make an existential and practical difference in the lives of religious individuals.

Of interest in this distinction between the "metaphysical" and "moral" attributes of God is the arbitrary and somewhat haphazard way that James categorizes the divine attributes into one class or the other. If being "unalterable" is to be considered a "moral" attribute with consequences in human life because it leads one to believe that "we can count on [God] securely," why cannot God's aseity, or "necessariness," also be looked to as grounds for consolation in a world full of contingencies? And more obviously, how could one not consider the possibility that God's

relationship to evil might determine in substantial ways human behavior when confronting issues related to justice on a societal scale? Regardless, however, of his privileging the "moral" over the "metaphysical" in his discussion of "dogmatic theology" in the *Varieties*, James claims that in the end, one must "bid [it] a definitive good-by."¹³ Interestingly enough, he cites as justification for this categorical dismissal not the lack of pragmatic elements in what he has discussed, but rather the fact that the laborious theological discussions of the existence of God or the divine attributes "never have converted anyone who has found in the moral complexion of the world, as he experienced it, reasons for doubting that a good God can have framed it."¹⁴

In light of the above, it would seem as if a Jamesian pragmatic justification of "dogmatic theology" is indeed untenable. However, in his critical engagement with James, Christian theologian and ethicist Stanley Hauerwas argues for this very thing in regards to such theological topics as Christology, the Trinity, or ecclesiology. He does so first by pointing to a passage in James' 1907 lectures on pragmatism where he states that the truth of some ideas "will depend entirely on their relation to other truths that also have to be acknowledged." Hauerwas uses this insight to argue that Christian ideas about God and the world exist as an interdependent "web of beliefs."¹⁵ This emphasis on an interdependent "web of beliefs" is important to Hauerwas because it provides a response to the claims made by James that theological ideas have value only if they possess immediate pragmatic significance or "cash-value." As was mentioned above, James dismisses Newman's theological discussion of the divine attributes because they do not meet Peirce's pragmatic criteria for legitimate belief. That is, if beliefs are "rules for action," then how can discourse on the nature of the Christian Godhead be pragmatically justified when it apparently has no direct impact on human behavior? For Hauerwas however, theological doctrines about Christology and the Trinity that might not seem to function as "rules for action" are intimately tied to Christian beliefs about love, justice, and forgiveness, which do have immediate pragmatic significance. Using James' recognition of the necessary interdependence of some ideas, Hauerwas argues that all of these ideas hang together and thus cannot be disentangled

from one another.¹⁶ Or rather, to put it a more Hauerwasian way, one cannot separate Christian talk about God from the Christian moral life.

It is interesting to note the ease of tone found in some of James' later discussions of theology. At the conclusion of his second lecture in *Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking*, he writes:

[Pragmatism's] only test of probable truth is what works best in the way of leading us, what fits every part of life best and combines with the collectivity of experience's demands, nothing being omitted. If theological ideas should do this, if the notion of God, in particular, should prove to do it, how could pragmatism possibly deny God's existence?¹⁷

While James acknowledges here that "theological ideas" might lead one well through life and thus prove to be true, the question still remains as to what types of theological ideas he would consider as viable candidates for such a distinction.¹⁸ In other words, the statement above does not necessarily indicate that James would take a different view in regard to such theological topics as the attributes of God. However, in the same lectures he writes that "in every genuine metaphysical debate some practical issue, however conjectural or remote, is involved."¹⁹ Again, one should not take such statements as proof that James eventually came to view all "dogmatic theology" as pragmatic; however, the change in tone from the *Varieties* is undeniable. Here he does seem to go further in admitting that metaphysical debates, about possibly even such "conjectural or remote" topics as the attributes of God, have practical consequences.

Using these passages, it seems an even stronger case could be made within the Jamesian corpus for a pragmatic justification of "dogmatic theology." That is, on James' own reading, a pragmatic justification for thick theological discourse is possible because such discourse creates an interdependent "web of beliefs" which informs and directs the social practices of religious communities by inculcating certain habits of seeing and acting in the world. In his discussion of Islamic theology in relation to the problem of Black suffering, Sherman Jackson provides such a

pragmatic model of theological discourse. In doing so, he not only makes explicit the ways in which beliefs about the attributes of God inculcate certain ways of being and acting in the world which are advantageous to the "Blackamerican community," he also interrogates the uncritical use of "experience" to verify and assess theological claims about God and the world, namely William R. Jones' use of this category in his discussion of "black liberation." I will discuss these issues in turn, and begin by introducing Jackson's general theological project.

Jackson, Mu'tazilism, and Black Suffering

Sherman A. Jackson's work might best be described as the attempt to construct a form of Sunni Islam indebted both to its classical forms as well as those of what he terms a "Blackamerican" tradition.²⁰ In this process, Jackson calls for a "Third Resurrection" whereby "Blackamerican Muslims" seek to "reconcile blackness, Americanness, and adherence to Islam."²¹ This concern is made manifest in a focused and sustained manner in Jackson's *Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering* wherein he uses Islamic theological discourse to address the modern debate over Black theodicy, a *sine qua non* of any successful African American theological project.²² Comparing the need in Black religious communities to address questions of Black suffering with the need in white ones to reconcile religion and science, Jackson writes, "[j]ust as no religious movement that fails to come to terms with modern science can hope to perpetuate itself among American whites, no religious movement that fails to speak convincingly to the problem of black theodicy can hope to enjoy a durable tenure among Blackamericans."²³ When discussing black theodicy, Jackson admits that contemporary instances of Black suffering and racial injustice take many forms, some overt and others perhaps more subtle and elusive. He refers to these more understated though still pernicious forms as "postmodern black suffering" that he characterizes as "[t]he elusive quest for autonomous authenticity, the frustrating recognition of the all-pervasiveness of European thought, [and] the absence of avenues to self-validation and public respect over which white Westerners do not ultimately preside as owners..."²⁴

While attempts to address Black suffering are replete in Christian black theology, Jackson notes that “Islamic theology itself has had no say in the matter,” and so Jackson’s *Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering* serves as “an attempt to fill this gap.”²⁵ However, rather than attempting to look to the Sunni tradition’s past for perfectly corresponding precedents to confront the challenges of Black theodicy, Jackson argues that the “Blackamerican Muslim” must place her or his views “in dialogue with the accumulated wisdom of Islam’s ongoing conversation with itself.” In other words, “in negotiating its future, Blackamerican Sunni Islam will look to Sunni Tradition not as the end but as the *beginning* of religious deliberation.”²⁶ Thus, Jackson places the four classical schools of Sunni Islamic theology (Mu‘tazilism, Ash‘arism, Māturīdism, and Traditionalism) in conversation with Blackamerican philosopher and theologian William R. Jones in order to explicate and assess the theological responses offered by these schools to Jones’ criticisms.

Jones’ criticisms found their ultimate incarnation in his book, *Is God a White Racist?* Written in 1973, Jones’ book was a virtual bomb lobbed at the attempts by the Black church to reconcile belief in an all powerful and loving God with the realities of institutionalized racism. In the book, Jones argues that the doctrines of God found in the Black theologies of individuals such as James Cone, Joseph A. Washington, Jr., and others are guilty either of divine racism or the encouragement of human quietism. That is, when faced with propositions that claim both divine omnipotence *and* omnibenevolence in the face of the mass suffering experienced by the Black community at the hands of white domination, something has to give.²⁷ If God is omnipotent, God must also possess the power to eradicate black suffering, and so the continued existence of racial injustice can only lead to the conclusion that God has refused to alleviate the plight of Black men and women, hence the charge of divine racism. Or if God is held to be both all-powerful and loving, any suffering experienced by the Black community must in some way be for its ultimate good, meaning that those in the community should accept this suffering as beneficial in the end and therefore not oppose it. This leads then to the charge of quietism. However, Jackson believes that classical Islamic theology offers a compelling response to Jones’ accusations, and

his book serves as an attempt to argue that each theological paradigm put forth by these schools manages to uphold both divine omnipotence and human agency in such a way that none of them would permit the attribution of any unjust quality such as racism to God nor would any of them maintain a view of divine omnipotence which binds individuals to a piety of quietism.²⁸

Rather than attempting to foreground the pragmatic elements of each account of the four classical schools of Islamic theology provided by Jackson, I will focus on his discussion of two schools in relation to what Jackson takes to be the key issue. This issue, perhaps more than any other, spurred early theological debate: the relationship between God's omnibenevolence and omnipotence. According to Jackson, it was how the theological schools characterized this relationship that was primarily responsible for the fault lines that came to define them. From these characterizations stemmed other debates about such topics as the attributes of God and free will.²⁹ While the Mu'tazilites privileged divine omnibenevolence over omnipotence so that God's actions necessarily conformed to the norms of goodness and justice, the Ash'arites, Māturīdites, and Traditionalists placed divine omnipotence above omnibenevolence in order to secure God's power and sovereignty.³⁰ My discussion will focus on Jackson's presentation of Mu'tazilism and Māturīdism, each of which offer different perspectives on this relationship. I will begin with the Mu'tazilism which, as just noted, valued divine goodness over divine power.

Mu'tazilites took omnibenevolence not only to be the most important of the divine characteristics, they believed it was *the* characteristic with which all else about God had to be reconciled.³¹ Their conception of divine omnibenevolence was "humanocentric" in that it was predicated on the belief that one could gain knowledge of God by analogically applying to God what was known of the world from human experience (*al-shāhid*). Consequently, the Mu'tazilites argued that the same axiological logic and criteria that applied to humans also applied to God.³² This view was further anchored in the primacy of reason found in Mu'tazilism's theological paradigm. Reason was treated as the true ground of religious knowledge because it was the only basis on which revelation could itself

be established and its content understood, and as a result, reason was to be ranked first among the sources of religious knowledge in Islam.³³ This position is well summarized by Mu‘tazilite theologian al-Qāḍī ‘Abd al-Jabbār (d. 415/1024) who wrote that “[b]ecause God can be known through neither a priori nor sentient apprehension, systematic, formal reason [*al-tafakkur wa-al-nazar*] is the means by which we must seek to follow Him.”³⁴

The Mu‘tazilite emphasis on omnibenevolence meant that God was exonerated of all moral evil. This view held that God was the God of nature but not of history, and as such, while God might be responsible for natural disasters and other destructive forces not of human origin, God was in no way responsible for moral evil and human injustice. Such a perspective required that humans possess not only freedom of choice (*ikhtiyār*) but also the power (*qudrah*) to translate their choices into physical reality, a claim opposed by the other three schools, albeit in differing ways.³⁵ As a result, no evil committed by humans could be attributed to God, and God could consequently hold humans accountable for their decisions and actions.³⁶ In the end, it was its stance on free will and the power to actualize that will that came to characterize Mu‘tazilism more than any other single article of belief, especially in contradistinction to Ash‘arite and Traditionalist positions which denied humans the ability to create their own actions (*khalq af‘āl al-‘ibād*).

Thus, while Mu‘tazilites held God’s power to be complete, superior, and efficient, they also insisted that this did not necessarily translate into an understanding of omnipotence as an exclusive monopoly on *all* power. This was so because humans possess autonomous volition and the power to create their own acts; however, such a conception of human agency, the Mu‘tazilites claimed, did not necessarily threaten God’s omnipotence. Moreover, God’s power was further qualified by the fact that it was to be exercised according to certain norms. As a result, the Mu‘tazilite conception of divine omnibenevolence precluded them from asserting that God possesses an unqualified right to do as God pleases, such that all of God’s actions are to be considered good and just regardless of how they might be evaluated by human norms. Rather, Mu‘tazilites insisted that God “*must*, from the standpoint of wisdom [*ḥikmah*], act in the interest of humanity.”³⁷

With its characterization of the relationship between divine omnibenevolence and omnipotence and the consequent emphasis on human agency, the Mu‘tazilite doctrine of God, argues Jackson, offers a compelling response to Jones’ claims that the affirmation of both God’s goodness and power ineluctably leads to either quietism or a racist deity. In fact, as Jackson points out, Mu‘tazilism has much in common with Jones’ own “humanocentric theism” which he proposed as an alternative to the orthodox Christian theologies defended by much of the Black church.³⁸ This paradigm asserts that humans are both the authors of their own deeds and the ultimate agents of human history, and as such, the biblical conception of God as true creator and sovereign judge of human history must be discarded.³⁹ Put another way, God becomes the God, not of history, but of nature, and so while God might be omnipotent with regard to nature, when it comes to the realm of human meaning and action, divine power takes the form, not of coercion, but of *persuasion*. To assign to God a power beyond this would be to expose such a conception of God to the charge of racism for, according to “humanocentric theism,” an omnipotent God who chooses not to bring an end to black suffering in the form of institutionalized prejudice can only be construed as racist. Moreover, viewing Black suffering as resulting from *human* and *not* divine action enables Blackamericans to oppose all suffering as evil, thus preventing them from lapsing into quietistic forms of obedience to the status quo.⁴⁰

As Jackson argues, the Mu‘tazilite doctrine of God necessitates neither a conception of God as racist nor does it encourage quietism. As a result of Mu‘tazilism’s privileging of God’s omnibenevolence over God’s omnipotence, God can in no way be thought of as the author of black suffering because it is humans, not God, who are responsible for the creation of sociopolitical evil.⁴¹ Additionally, God’s sovereignty and power are not absolute for God’s actions must benefit humankind by conforming to standards of goodness, justice, and wisdom (*hikmah*). Along with the accusation of divine racism, the charge of quietism is repudiated as a result of the Mu‘tazilite claim that all evil understood as undeserved physical or psychological suffering is of human origin and therefore to be opposed. This position is further strengthened by the seriousness with which Mu‘tazilism takes the Qur’ānic injunction

to “command right and forbid wrong” (*al-amr bi-al-ma‘rūf wa-al-nahy ‘an al-munkar*).⁴² With this principle, not only are Blackamerican (or any other) Muslims justified in opposing oppression, in some instances it is their religious duty to do so.

In addition to adequately responding to Jones’ critique, Jackson states that Mu‘tazilism even significantly parallels Jones’ own proposed “humanocentric theism” which attempts to reconcile divine omnipotence with human agency. That is, both conceive God as the God of nature rather than of human history. As a result, if Jones argues that the value of his “humanocentric theism” resides in its ability to navigate between the Scylla of divine racism and the Charybdis of quietism, then it would seem that Mu‘tazilism too is able to meet the challenge.

Moreover, Jackson argues that, in fact, Mu‘tazilism offers significant benefits beyond those of Jones’ “humanocentric theism.” This is so because in Jones’ efforts to secularize Black theodicy, he fails to recognize the power of symbol and ritual in the formation of human virtue and community. In discussing this insight, Jackson approvingly cites Reinhold Niebuhr’s observation that “contending factions in a social struggle require morale; and morale is created by the right dogmas, symbols and emotionally potent oversimplifications.”⁴³ With its claim to the Qur’ān and Sunna along with the narratives, symbols, and institutions that have characterized Islamic history, Mu‘tazilism is able to create a powerfully motivating ethos in a way that far supersedes Jones’ proposed theistic paradigm. Jackson writes, “[g]iven the odds with which they are invariably confronted, Blackamericans would seem to have a far greater need for incentives and motivators that are potent and death-defying than they have for handsome doctrines that are rationally defensible...”⁴⁴ That is, the Qur’ān, perceived as a medium of divine speech, and the Sunna, with its examples of the Prophet Muḥammad and the earliest generations seeking to create a just community (*umma*) that honors God, are both capable of serving as resources which are more effective in cultivating individuals who strive for social justice than the rationally stream lined “humanocentric theism” of Jones. This point resonates well with that made above regarding the interdependency of concepts that constitute a “web of beliefs.” This is because not only may some ideas

exist in a logical relationship of mutual dependence, but also because some beliefs (e.g. that the Qurʾān contains the speech of God) may better and more effectively contribute to the formation of other beliefs (e.g., the duty enshrined in the Qurʾān to "command right and forbid wrong").

As briefly noted above, for Jackson, reliance on a set of powerful narratives and symbols as found in Islam generally, and Muʿtazilism specifically, is vital because Blackamericans face enormous challenges in combating black suffering. In his rush to place all earthly authority in human hands to avoid the sin of quietism, Jackson fears that Jones in fact "denies the most vulnerable members of society the psychological advantage of being able to appeal to a God of great power and influence, despite the paucity of their resources relative to those of the people identified as their oppressors."⁴⁵ It is crucial in such scenarios that faith be encouraged and maintained in an all-powerful and benevolent God who either comes to the aid of the marginalized in this life or guarantees one's just reward in the one to come. Otherwise, what would enable one to resist oppression when the aggressors possess far greater numbers and resources?

With such comments, Jackson demonstrates his own faith in the power of belief, a faith shared by James. Not only did James think that when it came to belief in God or anything at all, the "only test of probable truth is what works best in the way of leading us." James also believed that because "[t]here are...cases where a fact cannot come at all unless a preliminary faith exists in its coming..." there are instances when "*faith in a fact can help create the fact...*"⁴⁶ To be sure, James did not intend to apply this claim to all phenomena but only to "truths dependent on personal action."⁴⁷ As an example, he refers to the enhanced likelihood that an entire train car will rise up in opposition to a robber if action is instigated by a single brave individual. The "will to believe" found in such situations possesses the power to create new realities where, as James writes, "[i]n one sense you create it, and in another sense you *find* it..." and as such, it is not some irrational effort to make the world what it is not, but the rational acknowledgment that human beings are inevitably part of that which creates the world itself.⁴⁸ That is, beliefs are not only "rules for action" which are true to the degree that they possess for us

“cash-value,” they also inculcate certain habits of seeing and imagining both the seen and unseen world. Referring to this capacity for vision engendered by the “will to believe,” James writes that “[a] man’s religious faith...[is] essentially his faith in the existence of an unseen order of some kind in which the riddles of the natural order may be found explained.”⁴⁹

It is this power located within the “will to believe” to fashion new and alternative realities that Jackson believes Mu‘tazilism, and classical Islamic theology more generally, generates. This is vital for Jackson because as a minority group who still suffers from both overt and more subtle forms of racism, Blackamericans require a powerful set of beliefs and symbols to face an opposition with the advantage of numbers and resources. Jackson believes that Mu‘tazilism, in contradistinction to Jones’ “humanocentric theism,” offers the tools to achieve a complete liberation not only from ontological suffering in the form of legal or sociocultural forms of racism, but also from the universe of meanings and norms constituted by those who control society’s cultural capital. While Jackson would appear to share James’ faith in the power of belief to create new realities where none had previously existed, he would also seem to part ways with James in his assertion that the symbols and narratives provided by the Mu‘tazilite doctrine of God are necessary to generate and sustain such belief. Thus, Jackson argues that the “web of beliefs” about God’s omnibenevolence and omnipotence which constitute Mu‘tazilism more effectively equips marginalized groups such as Blackamericans to courageously face the forces arrayed against them by the dominant group(s) than the “humanocentric theism” offered by Jones.

Jackson, Māturīdism, and Black Suffering

While Mu‘tazilism privileges God’s omnibenevolence over God’s omnipotence, Māturīdism reverses the order, believing it essential to do so in order to protect God’s power and sovereignty. Māturīdites feared that if God’s unrestricted prerogative and absolute monopoly on power were attenuated in any way, God would be forced into a negotiated relationship with humanity. As a result, many came to see Mu‘tazilism as a

contaminating force which encouraged a set of sensibilities, including an emphasis on human agency, which threatened to undermine religion itself. Some Māturīdites went even so far as to refer to Muʿtazilites as polytheists (*mushrikīn*) because they ascribed secondary power to human agents to create their own actions.⁵⁰ Māturīdite omnipotence, like that of the Ashʿarites and Traditionalists, places God in complete control over nature *and* history. As a result, when it came to human agency, Māturīdites relied on their own unique version of *kasb*, or Acquisition, which held that God, who was responsible for all causation in the world, created each and every human act, while human agents, still retaining their freedom of choice, were considered responsible for their decisions of which the divinely created acts were an instantiation.⁵¹ The Māturīdite theologian Abū al-Muʿīn al-Nasafī described it in this way: “God has established as the normal order [*ʿādah*] that whenever a person who enjoys sound means and members intends [*qaṣada*] an act, God grants him the capacity [*qudrah*] with which to perform that act.”⁵²

This construal of God as possessing a monopoly on all power and causation raises a problematic issue that Muʿtazilism was able to avoid: the divine authorship of evil. The Māturīdites however have a number of responses to this challenge. First, while Māturīdism places great emphasis on divine omnipotence, it does also assert that there is one attribute which acts as a check on God’s power, wisdom (*ḥikmah*).⁵³ Consequently, God’s power always acts coordinately with God’s wisdom, which is defined as “placing everything in its proper place” (*wadʿu kulli shayʿin mawḍiʿah*) or “that which promotes a praiseworthy result” (*kullu mā lahu ʿāqibah ḥamīdah*). Wisdom in this sense is teleological and thus not immediately accessible to practical reason. In other words, while events in the world may bring about suffering and pain in the near term, and therefore be considered evil, those same events must also serve some ultimately good and wise purpose.⁵⁴ Māturīdites mention as concrete examples the suffering of children, the slaughtering of animals, and allowing minors to reach the age of accountability when it is known that they will not believe. Though these events may count as evil, God is still viewed as being responsible for all of them; however, what God *cannot* do is sponsor evil that serves no wise end.

Second, as a result of their teleological nature, the wisdom of God's actions may not be discernible to human faculties. And because Māturīdites did not tie wisdom to any human logic or criteria, they often singled out Mu'tazilism for criticism for taking human experience as the basis for assessing divine acts. In other words, wisdom in the Māturīdite sense contrasts with how goodness (*ḥusn*) and justice (*ʿadl*) were understood by Mu'tazilism because it is *theocentric* rather than humanocentric. Thus, even if events lie beyond the human ability to morally assess, they must be understood as wise for they emanate from God. However, the Māturīdites reject the position (held by the Ash'arites) that humans are incapable of making any objective moral judgments. Such a position, they argue, would threaten the foundations of revealed religion for if humans could not know by way of reason the evil of lying, for example, then they would have no basis for accepting the truthfulness of the prophets and likewise the message of Islam. And this, Jackson points out, is a wholly rational a priori judgment which people must possess prior to and independent of any revelation. This leads Jackson to describe Māturīdism's moral philosophy as having a "soft" moral ontology wherein human access to fundamental a priori judgments is recognized; however, some judgments are to be considered provisional for moral acts are assessed, not according to their immediate or practical effects, but according to their ultimate effects.⁵⁵

In his discussion of Māturīdism in light of Jones, Jackson argues that it manages to avoid both construing God as racist and inducing a quietism among its followers. On the basis of the distinction between God's ontological decree and normative preference, the existence of Black suffering cannot serve as proof of any divine ill-intention or suggest in any way that God approves of the suppression of African Americans. Moreover, Māturīdism cannot be said to encourage quietism for although its "soft" moral ontology renders moral judgments provisional, there is still a certain legitimacy to those moral judgments. Additionally, for the Māturīdites, the basis of human knowledge about God's pleasure is scripture, not the ontological reality that God sustains, and thus all that is needed to promote Black opposition to oppression is a scriptural mandate to resist – found in such Qur'ānic verses as "[f]ight them until there

is no oppression..." – regardless of whether evil is believed to originate with God or not.⁵⁶ Because such evil does not reflect God's preference, there is no reason why anyone resisting that evil should think she or he is resisting God.

According to Jackson, while Māturīdism is able to satisfy Jones' concerns by avoiding the charges of both divine racism and quietism, it comes into direct conflict with Jones' belief in the categorical evil of all unearned suffering.⁵⁷ That is, Jones refuses to consider the possibility that suffering might serve *any* positive function for Blackamericans. For him, all suffering should be regarded as an evil to be eliminated at all costs, otherwise he fears "the oppressed will not regard their suffering as oppressive and will not be motivated to attack it."⁵⁸ He likewise is extremely critical of those theories, such as the conception of "vicarious suffering" defended by Joseph R. Washington, Jr., which assert that the wisdom behind suffering might lie beyond human apprehension. In considering the extent to which the Māturīdite notion of wisdom (*ḥikmah*) is truly just another "pie-in-the-sky theodicy," Jackson notes that one's assessment will necessarily depend on the teleological assumptions which drive the assessment.⁵⁹ As Jackson points out, Jones argues that God's goodness and sovereignty can only be sustained to the extent that they result in Black liberation defined in terms of concrete, immediate effects.

However, Jackson asserts that in this particular understanding of "black liberation" lies an undergirding set of goods dictating what counts as "liberation" and "flourishing." According to Jackson, these terms are conceived by Jones according to ideals and possibilities that emanate from the universe of meanings and norms produced by the gatekeepers of white culture. "We know, in other words," Jackson states, "that blacks have achieved liberation when they arrive at the point where they enjoy the same social, economic, and political status, prerogatives, and presumptions as whites, not potentially but actually, here, now, today."⁶⁰ Interestingly, Jackson notes that Jones is occasionally ambiguous in his understanding of Black liberation, sometimes conceiving it according to the norms of the dominant white culture while at other times speaking of the need "to abandon the partial frame of reference of our oppressor

and to create...concepts that release our reality..."⁶¹ And it is on this latter understanding of "black liberation" that Jackson focuses, asserting that true liberation lies not only in freedom from overt forms of institutionalized racism, but also in freedom from the universe of values and meanings that sustain not only the social, economic, and political status quo, but, more importantly, the psychological and emotional status quo as well.⁶²

It is at this point, Jackson argues, that the Māturīdite notion of *ḥikmah* is most valuable because if the aim of Black liberation is to free Blackamericans from the "partial frame of reference" that contributes to their suppression, then anything that facilitates this process must be recognized as ultimately good. In other words, Black suffering may be accurately regarded as immediately evil, but if Blackamericans' ultimate good lies in forestalling the normalization of ways of thinking that render their domination beyond critique, then one must recognize the wisdom behind the suffering that prevents them from adopting the worldview and norms of those who dominate them.⁶³ Jackson writes that "[i]n this light—and perhaps only in this light—while the blackness that condemns Blackamericans to suffering and oppression may be considered a curse, it may ultimately constitute a 'blessed curse.'"⁶⁴

Moreover, the conception of *ḥikmah* as found in Māturīdism creates conditions for the recognition of a type of consciousness that is engendered by the experience of suffering and oppression. Such persecution, Jackson states while citing Indian social theorist Ashis Nandy, can have the effect of reinforcing one's humanity and fortifying it against moral corruption.⁶⁵ Additionally, such a consciousness can equip one with a reality, a way of imagining and being in the world, which overcomes the anesthetizing effects of wealth, power, and privilege. In support of these claims, Jackson quotes Qur'ān 2:183 which speaks of the benefits of suffering and self-denial, "O you who believe, fasting has been prescribed for you as it was for those before you that you might attain God-consciousness."⁶⁶ Such experiences and practices, Jackson maintains, aid in the prevention of suffering from the effects of wealth and privilege which often threaten to obscure the realities of connectedness with others and dependence on one's Creator.

For Jackson, just as Mu'tazilism demonstrated its ability, not only to parry the critiques of traditional theisms put forth by Jones, but also to supersede Jones' "humanocentric theism" as a result of its attention to the role of narrative and symbol in sustaining certain beliefs about God, so too does Māturidism perform in the same manner. As a result, it provides, Jackson argues, an interdependent "web of beliefs" including, among other things, a doctrine of God which plays a crucial role in inculcating certain habits of seeing and acting in the world which are advantageous to the Blackamerican community. Perhaps the most significant way it does this is with its emphasis on God's omnipotence and its concomitant notion of *ḥikmah* by which all of God's actions are viewed as serving an ultimately wise end. This account of Māturīdite *ḥikmah* and the insights brought out by Jackson into the complex and myriad ways that one's presuppositions determine what counts and does not count as "black liberation" raises a crucial question. That is, what is the role of the category of "experience" in the process of measuring and verifying the attainment of Black liberation? As has been observed in Jackson's critical engagement with Jones, this category, far from being a neutral signifier, can in fact be determined by any number of concepts and norms which give it a teleological flavor of one sort or another. And, as we will discover, this not only has repercussions for Jones' claims about Black liberation. It also has repercussions for the role of "experience" in James' conception of verification, a topic to which we now turn.

Jackson, Verification, and the Interrogation of "Experience"

When speaking of true ideas, James states that they "*are those that we can assimilate, validate, corroborate and verify. False ideas are those that we cannot.*"⁶⁷ This move from a correspondence theory of truth to a pragmatic one depends likewise on a paradigm shift wherein truth comes to be thought of, not as a property inherent in an idea, but as a status an idea comes to possess. In other words, truth is an event, not a property. Or as James puts it, "[t]ruth *happens* to an idea. It *becomes* true, is *made* true by events. Its verity *is* in fact an event, a process: the process namely of its verifying itself, its *veri-fication*."⁶⁸ But what does it mean to "verify"

something? How is such a thing accomplished? For James, an idea or set of ideas are verified and thus receive pragmatic justification if they “lead us, namely, through the acts and other ideas which they instigate, into or up to, or towards, other parts of our experience with which we feel all the while—such feeling being among our potentialities—that the original ideas remain in agreement.”⁶⁹ In other words, there exists a dialectic of idea and experience in which an idea receives the status of “truth” and “agreement with reality” to the degree that it successfully leads one through one’s experience of whatever reality it is describing. The dialectical process describes the way in which the idea, when not successful in leading one through some experience, is then either revised or discarded altogether in an attempt to find the one that best “fits.”

This account also leads to truth being understood as prospective because in helping one navigate experience, an idea may also “lead us towards other moments which it will be worthwhile to have been led to.”⁷⁰ And the degree to which an idea succeeds in leading one to future worthwhile moments, and, what’s more, the degree to which the idea prepares one to know when such a moment will occur, determines the “truth” of that idea. However, often the process of verification of the multiplicity of ideas that constitute one’s worldview takes time, and as a result, James speaks of truth as living “for the most part on a credit system.”⁷¹ That is, because it is impossible to verify every aspect of one’s reality (such an endeavor would take more than one life time), individuals must proceed in faith on the “credit” of those ideas they have good reason to believe are true.

As can be observed in this account of verification, the truth of an idea is determined according to whether or not it aids in negotiating the challenges posed by “experience.” If one finds that such an idea does in fact agree with one’s “experience” of “reality,” then that idea may be regarded as “true.” James also puts it this way when he writes that “[t]he only real guarantee we have against licentious thinking is the circumpressure of experience itself, which gets us sick of concrete errors, whether there be a trans-empirical reality or not.”⁷² “Experience,” it would seem, plays a crucial role in the process of verification yet, as we have seen in Jackson’s discussion of Jones’ understanding of “black liberation,” the category of

"experience" is not a neutral one. It is shaped by and filled with a host of concepts and norms which give it a teleological flavor of one sort or another. Interestingly enough, James provides indications throughout his corpus that he understands this such as when he declares that, "[h]uman motives sharpen all our questions, human satisfactions lurk in all our answers, all our formulas have a human twist."⁷³

As we have already observed, Jackson questioned the degree to which Jones' definition of "black liberation" succumbed to the norms of those in control of white culture such that "liberation" came to be understood as being achieved when Blackamericans arrived at the point where they could "enjoy the same social, economic, and political status, prerogatives, and presumptions as whites, not potentially but actually, here, now, today." Concerned with the possibility of normalized domination wherein marginalized groups adopt as their own the norms and values of the dominant group, Jackson believes that the classical schools of Islamic theology, especially those of Ash'arism, Māturīdism, and Traditionalism, offer a universe of alternative symbols and meanings which are more effective in preventing such subjugation.⁷⁴

Apart from what we have already discussed, another way these schools are more effective at sustaining an alternative universe of meanings is the way in which they provide conceptual tools with which to expose the illusory nature of the claims to moral objectivity made by the dominant white culture. For instance, the Ash'arite theologian Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111) argued that all moral judgments that are not based on scripture are unavoidably relativistic and determined by the motivations and perspectives of the agents or groups who make them. Ultimately, what people habitually identify as "good" (*ḥasan*) or "evil" (*qabīḥ*) is only what they deem to be contrary to their interests (*gharad*/pl. *aghrād*).⁷⁵ Thus an act will turn out to be "good" to one group or individual and "evil" to another.

Consequently, in al-Ghazālī's view, all moral judgments claiming an objective, ontological status that are not grounded in scripture are guilty of the fallacy of "universalizing the particular." Even the judgments anchored in scripture are universal only in the sense that God has declared them to be so. As a result, moral judgments are assessed

according to their conformity to the divine command ethic found in the Qurʾān and Sunna rather than according to some ontological index of right and wrong.⁷⁶ To al-Ghazālī, this “theistic subjectivism” and its concomitant rejection of moral objectivity best represent “Islamic morality” and offer themselves as compelling accounts of morality to all fair-minded, reasonable people who recognize the human tendency to abstract personal preferences into false universals or ignore the power of socialization to lead one to regard what is routinely considered right or wrong as *always* right or wrong. True moral judgments are ahistorical and attainable only to those who are able to transcend personal and group interests, a capability possessed only by God and likewise the revelation God chooses to impart to humankind.⁷⁷

Using al-Ghazālī’s insight into the human tendency to “universalize the particular,” Jackson points to the way in which the secular humanism which characterizes much of Jones’ thought determines both his understanding of “black liberation” and the philosophical tools with which to achieve it. Noting the “bourgeois character of the existentialist thought [of Camus and Sartre]” which Jones draws on in his work, Jackson writes that, “[i]n this context, the greatest threat to the individual becomes neither suffering nor oppression but the threat to individual autonomy represented by the heteronomous character and authority of religion.”⁷⁸ In other words, Jones’ secular existentialist thinkers do not oppose religion because it does not possess the requisite qualities to resist oppression; they oppose it because they believe it “challenges subjectivism (read humanism) and threatens the hedonism implied by (bourgeois) autonomy—the very autonomy, incidentally, that is denied to oppressed blacks not by religion but by the unchecked exercise of autonomy on the part of whites.”⁷⁹ Jackson thinks it interesting that Jones seems to recognize the “fatal residue of the oppressor’s worldview” in the Black theology he so fervently criticizes yet he fails to demonstrate an awareness of the anti-religious and secular biases which characterize the thinkers from whom he borrows “who also happen to hail from the ranks of the oppressor.”⁸⁰

For Jackson, Jones’ proposed strategies of either “black humanism” or “humanocentric theism” are not conducive to the achievement of

"black liberation" because these paradigms of thought from which he uncritically borrows are informed by a universe of secular norms and meanings. That is, the way in which Jones argues that "black liberation" is verified is thoroughly informed by the assumptions undergirding the secular existentialist thought that informs so much of his work. The question then becomes whether such a way of being and acting in the world offers itself as the one best suited for securing such an objective. Jackson argues that the proposals put forth by Jones fail in this regard when compared to the universe of meanings provided by classical Islamic theology understood in light of the plight of Black suffering. On a deeper level, Jackson exposes the ways in which the meanings of the categories of "black liberation" and "black suffering" are far from being self-evident and neutral because of the degree to which they are determined by one's worldview and its corresponding presuppositions.

The Limits of Theology and Concluding Thoughts

Having read Jackson's critical comments about the understanding and role of "experience" and verification in Jones' account of "black liberation," one may be left wondering what, if anything, Jackson might have to say about the evidentiary nature of his own claims. That is, does his conception of the theological task place his claims beyond critique? In addressing these issues, Jackson first states that what he has *not* done is present a doctrine of God that empirically proves God's power and goodness in an objective manner which definitively refutes the charge of divine malevolence toward African Americans. As he puts it, "[w]hat I have presented in this book—and all that can be asked of any *theological* tradition—is a *theological* response."⁸¹ However, rather than concede that theology is then an arbitrary or solipsistic enterprise, Jackson goes on to provide an account of what he believes it to be.

"Theology is ultimately a negotiated product, the medium through which religious communities conceptualize and talk about God *in the public space*, where the only valid form of knowledge is objective knowledge to which everyone has ostensibly equal access."⁸² Betraying some of his own presuppositions here, we find Jackson describing theology as

a dialogical and public practice for religious communities that enables those communities to settle on a conceptual framework, or “web of beliefs,” about God and the world that successfully creates a common religious identity. Moreover, the systematic and logical rigor which typify the theological endeavor bring a rational element to the religious tradition which Jackson believes is crucial in helping to “retard the drift of superstition and unwarranted syncretism.”⁸³ For all of these reasons then, theology plays an indispensable role in forming and sustaining religious communities.

However, Jackson admits that while theology can play a positive role for religious communities, it poses significant dangers as well. It does so by “freezing” doctrines and descriptions of God into strict and static categories such as omnipotent, benevolent, merciful, severe, etc. Though such descriptions have the advantage of generating stability by sustaining intergenerational and cross-cultural consensus, they are ultimately limited because “as public property with universal pretensions, theology is almost bound to indulge the subtle fiction that it is transcendent and speaks from beyond the pale of human history and the perspective of *any* particular group.”⁸⁴ Of course, by describing the theological task and its limits in this way, Jackson is forced to acknowledge that his own claims too are closely tied to his own historically and culturally conditioned set of concerns. However, as Jackson indicates throughout his work, he has no problem with such an observation. This is because it then frees him to reconceive the theological task as one in which the objective is to address the challenges faced by one’s community, and in his case, the Blackamerican one.

In addition to its tendency to indulge in the fallacy of “universalizing the particular,” theology encounters a further limitation in its claim to engender knowledge about God. Or at least, there is another type of knowledge about God which it cannot provide: experiential knowledge. According to Jackson, this “highly subjective, private, and hopelessly contingent” form of knowledge need not be viewed as a hostile competitor to theology’s “public reason.” However, it differs from “public reason” in that it depends on “a live and personal *relationship*.”⁸⁵ Experiential knowledge’s difference from “public reason” lies in the difference between

being aware of someone's generosity as a "conceptual *fact*," and knowing that such a person will share his or her wealth *with me*. Knowing in this sense is contingent on the kind of relationship one possesses with the object of knowledge in question. It is this type of knowledge, Jackson asserts, that best facilitates knowledge of God. That is, "[i]t is God's *relationship* with Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Pharaoh, the Children of Israel—even Satan—that informs God's actions toward them, not a fixed list of names and attributes, even if such a list might rightfully apply to God."⁸⁶ And while some knowledge produced from such an encounter may be expressed through the written or spoken word, "some of what one learns may simply reduce one to a calm and speechless knowing."⁸⁷ Thus, Jackson states, although theology strives to achieve *understanding* without lapsing into *superstition*, such an endeavor does not require the dismissal of *mystery*, a quality which tends to be viewed with suspicion in contemporary society.⁸⁸

Interestingly enough, James would find much that is compelling in Jackson's discussion of experiential knowledge. In the *Varieties*, James expresses skepticism toward science's claims to best capture the world through its identification of the laws by which the world functions. He writes that:

To describe the world with all the various feelings of the individual pinch of destiny, all the various spiritual attitudes, left out from the description—they being as describable as anything else—would be something like offering a printed bill of fare as the equivalent of a solid meal. Religion makes no such blunder.⁸⁹

Religion makes no such blunder because it does not describe the world in universal and impersonal terms which, because they deal in abstractions, keep one at arm's length from personal experience of the world. Thus, for James, the knowledge engendered by science which is communicated using symbols deals only with realities of the most general kind; however, "*as soon as we deal with private and personal phenomena as such, we deal with realities in the completest sense of the term.*"⁹⁰ As is the case with Jackson, James too asserts that knowledge of

a personal type holds a higher epistemological status because it traffics in particulars as opposed to the universals of “public reason” or scientific forms of knowledge. And, for James, it is in the particulars of religious “feeling” and “experience” that one is granted the greatest access, not to God as Jackson believes, but to a higher reality that is mediated by the human subconscious.⁹¹ While James refuses to go to great lengths to identify this reality, he admits that “God is the natural appellation, for us Christians at least, for [this] supreme reality...”⁹² Thus, both James and Jackson assign a greater level of authority to relational forms of knowledge because, it would seem, both deem the personally experienced dimensions of reality to hold a higher status. While the object of this personal knowledge differs for the two men in that James identifies it as the human subconscious while for Jackson it is God, both agree in favoring experiential and personal knowledge of particulars over abstract and general knowledge of universals. However, it is important to note that while James believes that this personal experience provides one with unmediated access to that higher reality in the form of the human subconscious, Jackson harbors no such illusions. Still, his acknowledgement of the mediated character of all knowledge does not prevent him from placing a high value on experiential forms of it.

It is both in his account of “experiential knowledge” as well as in the “practical effectiveness” of the “web of beliefs” constituting classical Islamic theology, which are drawn out by Jackson in response to the problem of Black suffering that we are able to find Jamesian elements. That is, Jackson believes not only that both the Mu‘tazilite and Māturīdite (along with the Ash‘arite and Traditionalist) accounts of divine omnipotence and omnibenevolence are able to evade the charges of divine racism and quietism laid out by Jones. Jackson also believes that they offer a universe of meanings which supersedes that presupposed by Jones’ “humanocentric theism” in being able to achieve Black liberation. This is so for numerous reasons, perhaps the most important being the ability of both schools of classical Islamic theology to provide resources that encourage the Blackamerican community to resist white domination in all its forms despite the lack of resources and numbers available to them. In this way, Jackson argues that the doctrines of God found

in both Mu‘tazilism and the Māturīdism constitute a “web of beliefs” that inculcate certain habits of seeing and acting in the world, which best deal with the challenges of Black experience. However, Jackson’s account of Māturīdite *ḥikmah* along with the concern he raises about “universalizing the particular” pushes back against the uncritical reliance on “experience” in both Jones’ conception of “black liberation” and in James’ doctrine of verification. As the above claims make clear, Jackson’s thought both parallels and challenges aspects of James’ account of religion throughout his writings, and as a result, Jackson demonstrates that despite James’ dismissive attitude, it is possible for “dogmatic theology” to be pragmatic.⁹³

Endnotes

- 1 William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, (New York, NY: Random House, Inc., 1994), 487.
- 2 Ibid., 470.
- 3 After presenting Cardinal John Henry Newman's discussions of the attributes of God, James concludes by writing, "I will not weary you by pursuing these meta-physical determinations farther, into the mysteries of God's Trinity, for example." Ibid., 482.
- 4 See James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1970); James Deotis Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation: A Black Theology*, (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971); Major Jones, *The Color of God: The Concept of God in Afro-American Thought*, (Macon, GA: Mercer, 1987); Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993); Dwight N. Hopkins, *Introducing Black Theology of Liberation*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999); J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account*, (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2008); and Kelly Brown Douglas, *Stand Your Ground: Black Bodies and the Justice of God*, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015), just to name a few.
- 5 It is important to note that Jackson's interpretation of Jones is a contested one. For example, scholar of Blackamerican religious thought William David Hart has challenged Jackson's reading of Jones, claiming that Jackson takes "humanocentric theism" to be Jones' normative position (as opposed to the "secular humanism" which Jones in fact prefers) as well as challenging Jackson's argument that Jones uncritically valorized secular Euro-centric conceptions of autonomy in his critiques of Black Christian theodicies. The former critique may be found in Hart, "One Percenters': Black Atheists, Secular Humanists, and Naturalists," *The South Atlantic Quarterly* 112/4 (2013), 681-82, while the latter critique was made at a panel at the 2014 American Academy of Religion conference. There, Hart specifically referenced Jones' concept of "multievidentiality" to demonstrate that his notion of experience was anything but uncritical. More will be said about both charges in what follows, but I should state that my primary objective in this article is the analysis of *how* Jackson draws on classical Islamic theology to address issues around Black theodicy raised by Jones rather than the assessment of Jackson's critical engagement with Jones. Such an adjudication lies beyond the purview of this article.
- 6 James, 542.
- 7 Ibid., 470. In the distinction between experience and language which seems to undergird this claim, James parts ways with the pragmatism of Charles Sanders Peirce. Louis Menand captures well this aspect of Peirce's thought when he writes that for Peirce, "[t]here are no prerepresentational objects out there. Things are themselves signs: their being signs is a condition of their being things at all....For

- Peirce, knowing was inseparable from what he called semiosis, the making of signs, and of the making of signs there is no end....There is no exit from the dictionary. Peirce didn't simply think that language is like that. He thought that the universe is like that." Louis Menand, *The Metaphysical Club*, (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2001), 364.
- 8 Ibid., 475.
- 9 Ibid., 484-485. It was in this passage that James first introduced the "pragmatic" thought of Peirce to wider audiences, and this mention along with other references to Peirce's work, ignited an interest in the thought of Peirce which had heretofore not existed. Although James gave his Gifford lectures, later to be published as the *Varieties*, in 1902, this quoted passage from Peirce's writings was taken from his 1878 essay, "How to Make Our Ideas Clear" published in *Popular Science Monthly*.
- 10 Ibid., 487. As will be discussed later in the paper, that "vital conversation with the unseen divine" for James takes the form of personal, mystical experience.
- 11 Ibid., 486.
- 12 Ibid., 487.
- 13 Ibid., 488.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 In making this point, Hauerwas admits that he is not claiming that James would have had such an example in mind when making such a statement. Stanley Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church's Witness and Natural Theology*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2001), 67. Quoted from James "Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking," *Pragmatism and Other Writings*, edited with an introduction and notes by Giles Gunn, (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 36.
- 16 Also key to Hauerwas' engagement with James is his critique of the implicit dualism found in the primacy of "feeling" found in James' account of religion which fails to adequately recognize the linguistic dimensions of thought and experience. It is this emphasis on "feeling" as the deepest source of religion that leads James to pronounce much philosophical and theological discourse a series of "formulas" or "over-beliefs" which are "secondary products." James, *Varieties*, 559. Although James admits that "over-beliefs" are "the most interesting and valuable things" about an individual, he still believes them to be unnecessary accretions that prevent one from grasping the true heart of religion which is grounded in "feeling." The dualism Hauerwas detects lies in this emphasis on "feeling" which leads to his attempts to extrapolate "kernels" of emotional experience from religious systems' socio-linguistically derived categories. Such a practice presents issues because this "distinction between religious experience and 'over-beliefs'...depends on a problematic distinction between 'experience' and language." Hauerwas, *With the Grain of the Universe: The Church's Witness and Natural Theology*, 55.
- 17 James, *Pragmatism and Other Writings*, 40.

- 18 We will return to this topic below in the discussion of the relationship between truth and “verification” in James’ thought. For James, an idea can be deemed true to the extent that harmonizes with one’s experience of the world and aids in the navigation of that world. As will be discussed, this raises the question of the status and nature of the category of “experience” itself, a category that is far from neutral.
- 19 Ibid., 47.
- 20 Sherman A. Jackson, *Islam and the Blackamerican: Looking Toward the Third Resurrection*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 17.
- 21 Ibid., 19.
- 22 Jackson distinguishes “traditional (white) theodicy” in which “suffering has been thought of in highly individualistic (if impersonal) terms and as being almost senselessly random” from “black theodicy” which “rejects this impersonal...random framework as being oblivious to and incapable of accommodating the reality of ‘ethnic suffering,’ where a ‘discrete and insular’ group is singled out for suffering that is at once ‘enormous, mal-distributed and transgenerational.” Sherman A. Jackson, *Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 5.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 Ibid., 23.
- 25 Ibid., 6.
- 26 Ibid., 4.
- 27 Ibid., 13-14.
- 28 Ibid., 14-15; 158.
- 29 Ibid., 52.
- 30 Although Jackson places Ash‘arites, Māturīdites, and Traditionalists in the same category as privileging divine omnipotence over divine omnibenevolence, it should be noted that both Māturīdites and Traditionalists, each in their own manners, affirmed elements of both in their doctrines of God, a point even affirmed by Jackson in his discussion of both schools (Māturīdites, 109-13; Traditionalists, 143-47). I am grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for bringing my attention to this point.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 In this discussion of Mu‘tazilite “reason,” Jackson subverts its claims to universal rationality by pointing out that “[t]o be sure, ‘reason’ did not refer to the plain dictates of the human faculties. It included a battery of assumptions, premises and circumscriptptions fashioned out of the legacy of late antiquity, especially Aristotle, alongside various ‘Middle Eastern’ and Central Asian complements and competitors.” Ibid., 49.
- 34 Ibid.

- 35 Ibid., 53.
- 36 Ibid., 52.
- 37 Ibid., 55.
- 38 Jones also offers "secular humanism" as another alternative for what he believes to be a viable black theodicy of liberation. While he prefers this model, he admits that theism is so heavily anchored in the Black community that a purely secular approach is futile. Thus, his belief that "humanocentric theism" is the next best option. Ibid., 14.
- 39 Ibid.
- 40 Ibid., 15.
- 41 Ibid., 64.
- 42 Ibid.
- 43 Ibid., 71. Quoted from Niebuhr's *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. It should also be noted that Niebuhr's own thought was greatly influenced by pragmatism. See Mark L. Haas, "Reinhold Niebuhr's 'Christian Pragmatism': A Principled Alternative to Consequentialism," *The Review of Politics*, 61/4 (1999), 605–36 and Mark Douglas, "Reinhold Niebuhr's Two Pragmatisms," *American Journal of Theology and Philosophy*, 22/3 (2001), 221–40.
- 44 Ibid.
- 45 Jackson, *Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering*, 71.
- 46 William James, "The Will to Believe," *Pragmatism and Other Writings*, edited with an introduction and notes by Giles Gunn, (New York: Penguin Books, 2000), 214.
- 47 Ibid. James also writes, "[b]ut in our dealings with objective nature we obviously are recorders, not makers, of the truth; and decisions for the mere sake of deciding promptly and getting on to the next business would be wholly out of place. Throughout the breadth of physical nature facts are what they are quite independently of us, and seldom is there any such hurry about them that the risks of being duped by believing a premature theory need be faced" Ibid., 211.
- 48 James, "Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking," 164.
- 49 James, "The Will to Believe," 233.
- 50 Jackson, *Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering*, 105.
- 51 Ibid., 106.
- 52 Ibid., 107.
- 53 Ibid., 109.
- 54 Ibid., 110.
- 55 Ibid., 115.
- 56 Ibid., 118. Quote from Qur'an 2:193.

- 57 Ibid., 120.
- 58 Ibid. Jackson quoting Jones.
- 59 Ibid., 121.
- 60 Ibid.
- 61 Ibid.
- 62 Ibid.
- 63 Ibid., 122.
- 64 Ibid.
- 65 Ibid., 123. Nandy even goes so far as to defend a preference for a consciousness produced by oppression over one produced by power. Jackson quotes him as stating, “[b]etween the modern master and the non-modern slave, one must choose the slave, not because one should voluntarily choose poverty or admit the superiority of suffering, not only because the slave is oppressed, not even because he works (which Marx said made him less alienated than the master). One must choose the slave because he represents a higher-order cognition which perforce includes the master as human, whereas the master’s cognition has to exclude the slave except as ‘thing.’” Quote taken from Nandy’s *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self Under Colonialism* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983), xv-xvi.
- 66 Ibid.
- 67 James, “Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking,” 88.
- 68 Ibid.
- 69 Ibid., 89.
- 70 Ibid., 90.
- 71 Ibid., 91.
- 72 James, “The Meaning of Truth,” 155. He also writes that “[a]ll the *sanctions* of a law of truth lie in the very texture of experience. Absolute or no absolute, the concrete truth for *us* will always be that way of thinking in which our various experiences most profitably combine.”
- 73 James, “Pragmatism: A New Name for Some Old Ways of Thinking,” 106. Elsewhere in his “Pragmatism” lectures, James writes that, “[t]emperaments with their cravings and refusals do determine men in their philosophies, and always will” and “[w]e measure the total character of the universe as we feel it, against the flavor of the philosophy proffered us, and one word is enough.” Ibid., 21. Of course this recognition of the role of “feeling” in the philosophic enterprise by James led him to develop strong sympathies for the “humanistic” conception of truth advocated by F.C.S. Schiller and John Dewey which thought of the “true” as the more “satisfactory.” James, “The Meaning of Truth,” 148.
- 74 Jackson, *Islam and the Problem of Black Suffering*, 91.

- 75 Ibid., 95.
- 76 Ibid., 96.
- 77 Ibid., 96-7.
- 78 Ibid., 66.
- 79 Ibid.
- 80 Ibid.
- 81 Ibid., 161.
- 82 Ibid., 161-62. This conception of theology as a publicly negotiated discourse resonates in interesting ways with Jackson's more recent discussions of what he terms the "Islamic secular." Jackson defines the "Islamic secular" as those forms of knowledge not grounded in "*the scriptural sources of Sharia nor their proper extension via the tools enshrined by Islamic legal methodology (uṣūl al-fiqh)*." Drawing on the Sunni intellectual tradition generally, and Egyptian Maliki jurist Shihab al-Din al-Qarafi (d. 684/1285) specifically, he distinguishes the *sharī* realm governed by legal rulings (*aḥkām*) from the non-*sharī* realm where legitimate judgments may be made according to a variety of epistemologies, from public administration to modern medicine to cultural production. This latter sphere is considered "secular" in the sense that its norms are not derived from incontrovertible legal rulings; however, this does not mean that it lies beyond the purview of Islam itself. Rather it means that judgments made in this "secular" sphere rely on Islamic or non-Islamic epistemologies and norms which may be contested. Thus, when it comes to public matters, non-*sharī* judgments may be challenged by the community (*ummah*) if they are not deemed to serve the common good. In highlighting this resonance, I do not intend to conflate Jackson's description of Muslim theology and his conception of the "Islamic secular," as if the latter were a form of theological discourse. I make this observation only to foreground the degree to which both may be characterized as public, dialogical, and within an Islamic framework, epistemically open. Sherman A. Jackson, "The Islamic Secular," *American Journal of Islam and Society*, 34/2 (2017), 1–38.
- 83 Ibid., 162.
- 84 Ibid.
- 85 Ibid.
- 86 Ibid.
- 87 Ibid., 163.
- 88 Ibid.
- 89 James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience*, 543.
- 90 Ibid., 542.
- 91 Ibid., 557. In his identification of the role played by the subconscious, James writes, "[l]et me then propose, as an hypothesis, that whatever it may be on its *farther* side,

the ‘more’ with which in religious experience we feel ourselves connected is on its *hither* side the subconscious continuation of our conscious life.” Here the subconscious mediates the “more” with which one feels connected in religious experiences by acting as the arena, psychological in this case, in which the “more” produces its effects.

92 Ibid., 561.

93 I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their encouraging words and insightful comments. As a result of implementing their recommended revisions, my article has been undoubtedly improved.