

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

## Woke Is . . .

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Yesterday a dear brother asked me, “What do you think about woke church?” Seems these days all my blogging is answering questions of one sort or another. And this seems like a good question to answer publicly, since there’s so much talk about being “woke” or “wokeness” from both advocates and opponents.

I’m not sure this adds much to the discussion, but it’s the gist of my answer yesterday.

### Woke: A Lineage

First, being “woke” isn’t at all new. I know Carl Ellis has been trying to help people understand that in some of his public talks. But it seems a lot of younger people think they’re experiencing something new. Solomon taught a long, long time ago, “there’s nothing new under the sun.”

What we call “woke” today is pretty close to the **Afrocentricism** of the 1980s. Afrocentricism, a word coined by Dr. Molefi Asante, professor of African-American studies at Temple University at the time, was about centering Africa and Africa-descended peoples in their worldview much the way Europe has always been at the center of the worldview of European peoples. Afrocentrism taught that Black people should see the world as Black people.

Of course, before Afrocentrism in the 1980s there was the **Black Arts Movement** and **Black consciousness** movement of the 1960s—a movement that both inspired and also drew strength from Pan-Africanism and its connections with independence movements in Africa and the Caribbean. That period gave us “Black” as an ethnic identifier. People don’t realize it today, but calling ourselves “Black” was not so much motivated by describing skin color as much as it was a *political* statement about what is beautiful and valiant, re-appropriating what had been a slur in the mouth of others and refusing to be erased in the world. The discovery of this “consciousness” was the discovery of a certain pleasure. “The pleasure of being black was a core part of the cultural revolution staged during the Black Power movement” (Margo Natalie Crawford, “What Was *Is*”: The Time and Space of Entanglement Erased by Post-Blackness, in Houston A. Baker and K. Merinda Simmons, [\*The Trouble with Post-Blackness\*](#), p. 36). To be “woke,” then, builds on this discovery: that being “Black” is something to take pleasure in.

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But we can go back even further. Before the Black Arts, Black Power, and Black Consciousness movements there was in the 1920s the **New Negro movement** of the Harlem Renaissance and the **Négritude Movement** in Africa. Alain Locke in Harlem with Aimé Césaire in Martinique and Leopold Senghor in West Africa were among the leading thinkers of these movements. Following the defeats of counter-Reconstruction and *Plessy v. Ferguson*, Negro artists and intellectuals began to give a more strident voice to the complaints, complexity, and beauty of Negro life and thought. This phase of the identity project featured an international awareness and exchange, and gave rise to a number of publications and outlets. The movement, like all historical iterations of what we call “woke,” sought to forge an identity both independent of white determinants and accepted by the wider world. In a 1923 essay entitled “The New Negro Faces America,” West Indian writer Eric D. Walrond described the New Negro thus:

He does not want . . . to be like the white man. He is coming to realize the great possibilities within himself. The New Negro, who does not want to go back to Africa, is fondly cherishing an ideal—and that is, that the time will come when America will look upon the Negro not as a savage with an inferior mentality, but as a civilized man.

Before the New Negro movement, there was **Ethiopianism** (1880s-1920s). On the African continent, African Christians broke away from the control of white Anglican and Methodist churches who would not share leadership of the church even on African soil. That church movement took place at the same time as a wider literary and political movement in British colonies and territories sprouted. The wider movement reclaimed Ethiopia as one of the oldest continuous great civilizations in the world. From the Bible, they drew inspiration from Psalm 68:31, “Princes shall come of Egypt; Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God.” You would find allusions to this text in everything from slave narratives to sermons to political speeches.

We could perhaps go further back. I think an essential thing to note is this: to be Ethiopian, Negro, Black, or African-American (choose your descriptor and time period) has always involved a massive project in self-definition, self-determination and self-affirmation in a national and world context characterized by anti-Black racism and oppression. That’s the one thing these periods have in common. That’s why some version of “woke” appears in nearly every generation. Each generation has to forge and reclaim a sense of self that’s healthy, affirming, and productive in order to withstand and resist the identity-twisting and person-debasing ideologies launched against us.

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## Woke Church?

This has massive implications for local church ministries in communities of color. Churches must understand the need to reconstitute the whole person with biblical teaching responsive to the lived realities of those communities. In simpler words, our approach to discipleship must simultaneously repair the psychic and social destruction done to the identities/personhood of Black people while recognizing and equipping them to counter the social and political realities that contribute to that destruction in the first place. We have to teach people how to be their ethnic selves in a way that's consistent with the Bible and how to live fruitfully in contexts that don't affirm their ethnic selves. Hence, we need a "woke church."

But it's not just African Americans who need a "woke church." All people need it. Even the cursory history sketched above reveals that we "are tied together in a single garment of destiny," as Dr. King put it. There's a mutuality to our existence. The only way for us to lower the necessity for a "woke church" is for the people and forces making "wokeness" necessary to wake up to their part in the dynamic. As long as there are racist forces at work in the world, the sufferers of that racism are right to find ways to express and affirm their identity and will need tools (spiritual, cultural, economic, and so on) to fight back against those forces.

We may need to find biblically richer and more careful ways of doing the work, but that the work needs to be done seems evident to me. Keep on Dr. Mason! There's a world of difference between people who want you to be better and people who want you to quit.

From where I sit, "woke church" continues in the tradition of Martin Delaney, Edward W. Blyden, Henry McNeal Turner, Alexander Crummell, and a great cloud of other witnesses who in the Spirit of God sought a more faithful way to live the faith as African Americans when the rest of the world despised them. The mockers mock. The haters hate. That's what they've been doing for the entire sojourn of Black people in contact with the West. By their mockery, scoffing, and hatred they make some form of being "woke" necessary. So may the church get woke and stay woke.

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