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KWANZAA: MORE THAN A CULTURAL CELEBRATION

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I vaguely recall participating in a Kwanzaa ritual once in the early 1990s. I remember the solemnity of the occasion. Fellow participants and I approached the ritual with the utmost seriousness, and it felt like prayer and worship, although I was not a Christian at the time and did not know what true prayer and worship were. I had not yet been ushered into the glorious body of Christ, so I certainly was not thinking about Christ as I reflected on “Black culture” and the continent of Africa, land of my forebears, which is the focus of Kwanzaa.

Kwanzaa is called a cultural celebration; beneath this seemingly harmless event, however, are religious beliefs that ought to give Black Christians more than serious pause when considering their involvement in this annual observance.

What is Kwanzaa? Kwanzaa is a so-called African American celebration that is observed from December 26 through January 1. Each day participants think about their African roots and light a candle on a *kinara*, which resembles a Jewish menorah, then reflect on one of seven principles called *Nguzo Saba*: unity, self-determination, collective work and responsibility, cooperative economics, purpose, creativity, and faith. An “elder” or “priest” pours “libations” of water, juice, or wine, which participants drink in honor of their ancestors. On the sixth day, participants feast and exchange gifts.

Kwanzaa was created in 1966 by a Black militant and Marxist named Ron Everett, who was also a convicted felon, and who changed his name to Maulana Karenga. *Kwanzaa* means “first fruits of the harvest.” The word is derived from the “Pan-African” language of Swahili, and the event is based on East African harvest rituals, according to Karenga.¹

Kwanzaa has gained acceptance in the mainstream media despite Karenga’s inaccurate rendering of history and geography (e.g., Swahili is not a Pan-African language; there is no evidence that East Africans held harvest festivals around the winter solstice; and most ancestors of Black Americans were from West Africa, not East Africa). “Happy Kwanzaa!” greetings often are heard alongside “Merry Christmas!” The U.S. Postal Service even issued a Kwanzaa stamp in 1997.

According to CNN, over 20 million people in the United States, Canada, England, the Caribbean, and Africa celebrate Kwanzaa.² On the Official Kwanzaa Web site, Karenga claims that Christians who celebrate Kwanzaa do so because it “provides them with cultural grounding and reaffirmation as African Americans” and that “it gives them a spiritual alternative to the commercialization of Christmas.”³

If it were not for Kwanzaa’s quasi-religious and spiritualized elements, it would be an innocuous Christmas-season event. Kwanzaa’s underlying philosophy and Karenga’s views of Christianity, however, are anything but innocuous.

Spiritual Elements. The Official Kwanzaa Web site notes, “There is a real and important difference between spirituality as a general appreciation for and commitment to the transcendent, and religion which suggests formal structures and doctrines. Kwanzaa is not a religious holiday, but a cultural one with an inherent spiritual quality as with all major African celebrations.”⁴

Karenga claims that he did not intend Kwanzaa to become a religion, a religious holiday, or an alternative to Christmas, but rather an alternative to the commercialism of Christmas. He intended it to be a time for Blacks to reaffirm themselves, their ancestors, and their culture.

Kwanzaa, then, is supposedly not religious; yet it is based on religious beliefs. Karenga admits that the seven principles, for example, were derived from African religion.⁵

Another religious belief Karenga claims is that Kwanzaa is a time of giving “reverence to the Creator.”⁶ Karenga also believes that Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection are myths.⁷ Christians should take note when someone who says he reveres “the Creator” rejects the biblical account of Christ; anyone who does so denies Christ as Creator and as God, and thus does not revere the true Creator.

Another Kwanzaa belief Karenga based on African religion is that ancestors are “spiritual intercessors between humans and the Creator.”⁸ The Bible teaches, however, that Christ alone—and *no created being*—is the intercessor between God and man (1 Tim. 2:5).

Christians who observe Kwanzaa may not realize that its inventor holds to such blatantly unbiblical beliefs. The Bible repeatedly warns Christians to beware of this kind of spiritual deception. The apostle Paul exhorts us to put on the “whole armor of God” so that we may be able to stand against such deception. We fight against “principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world,” and not against mere flesh (Eph. 6:12 NKJV).

Hostility to Christianity. Karenga’s views not only are unbiblical, they are outright hostile to the Christian faith. For instance, he says that “belief in spooks who threaten us if we don’t worship them and demand we turn over our destiny and daily lives must be categorized as spookism and condemned.”⁹ In his own words, “Jesus was psychotic. He said if you didn’t believe what he did you would burn forever...If you realize how human Jesus was you’d see he was no God...Christianity is a white religion. It has a white God, and any ‘Negro’ who believes in it is a sick ‘Negro.’”¹⁰

In *Kawaida Theory*, Karenga wrote, “Judeo-Christian religions deny and diminish human worth, capacity, potential and achievement...I am opposed to this white God...a spook Who threatens us. The missionaries poisoned the Black Man...Baptized him with the same Hocus Pocus that has bound white man to a corrupt religion for centuries. My hope is that those who believe in Holy Water will drown in it.”¹¹

In *Kwanzaa: Origin, Concepts, and Practice*, he wrote, “Spookism...is intense emotional commitment to non-human-centered principles and practices which place humans at the mercy of invisible and omnipotent forces and thus, deny the right and capacity of humans to shape reality and their future according to their own needs and desires.”¹²

Carlotta Morrow, who operates an invaluable Web site called The Truth About Kwanzaa, has conducted extensive research on Kwanzaa and its founder.¹³ After her sister denounced Christ to follow Karenga in the 1980s (though she later returned to the Christian church), Morrow decided to learn as much as she could about Kwanzaa. She discovered that it was a race-based ideology that is hostile to Christianity and Judaism. Around this time, Morrow also began to notice that Kwanzaa was growing in popularity. She recalls that her children were no longer allowed to say “Christmas” or to talk about Jesus in school, but they were allowed to talk about Kwanzaa.

Based on her research, Morrow concluded that despite Karenga’s contentions to the contrary, he created Kwanzaa with the intent to steer Blacks “away from what is believed to be the ‘white man’s’ celebration” and toward the quasi-religious celebration of themselves.¹⁴

Cultural vs. Spiritual Celebration. It is understandable that descendants of a people who were stolen from their African homeland and placed in bondage in a foreign land would be attracted to a so-called African culture-based celebration. It is not immoral or unbiblical for members of racial groups to gather and talk about the history of their people and their culture.

It is wholly understandable that Blacks in America would try to connect with their heritage. It is strange, however, that Black Christians would be drawn to the amalgamation of Marxist ideology, 1960s-style radicalism, pseudo-history, and spiritualized “African” rituals that constitutes Kwanzaa.

When discussing Black Christians and Kwanzaa, an obvious question arises: Are race and shared racial experiences relevant to worship? According to Anthony J. Carter, a Black Reformed pastor and author of *On Being Black And Reformed*, they are. He writes, “To deny African Americans the right to formulate and sustain a biblical theology that speaks to the cultural and religious experiences of African Americans is to deny them the privilege that other ethnic groups have enjoyed.”¹⁵

If we grant for the sake of argument that Carter is correct, that race is relevant to authentic Christian worship, mature Christians still should not be caught up with the rituals of pseudo-religions. Christians have allowed themselves to be carried away by all kinds of strange teachings over the past 2,000 years, and Kwanzaa is just one more sorry substitute for the truth.

Those who do not believe in God may fill the God-shaped vacuum in their hearts with spiritualized celebrations like Kwanzaa. For Christians, however, that vacuum has already been filled with the bountiful love of a Creator who died so that we could live with Him forever. We are to be living examples of that love and sacrifice and tell the world that empty rituals are not the cure for what ails them.

One of the few things that Karenga gets right is that Christmas has been commercialized. The manner in which culture observes it is patently materialistic and profit-driven. Christians would do well to avoid or to deemphasize this aspect of the holiday and focus on what it means that a Savior has come into the world. Doing so might reinvigorate the Christmas season and draw attention away from the problematic celebration of Kwanzaa.

— La Shawn Barber

NOTES

1. The Official Kwanzaa Web Site, “Kwanzaa: Roots and Branches,” <http://www.officialkwanzaawebsite.org/origins1.shtml>.
2. “The History of Kwanzaa,” CNN Interactive, CNN.com, <http://www.cnn.com/EVENTS/1996/kwanzaa/history.html>.
3. Maulana Karenga, FAQ #10 under “Can People Celebrate Kwanzaa and Christmas?” The Official Kwanzaa Web Site, <http://www.officialkwanzaawebsite.org/faq.shtml#10>.
4. Ibid.
5. Maulana Karenga, *Kawaida Theory: An African American Communitarian Philosophy* (Los Angeles: University of Sankore Press, 1980), 25, quoted in Carlotta Morrow, “Is Kwanzaa a Religion?” The Truth About Kwanzaa, <http://www.christocentric.com/Kwanzaa/religion.htm>.
6. Maulana Karenga, *Kwanzaa: A Celebration of Family, Community and Culture* (Los Angeles: University of Sankore Press, 1997), 19, quoted in Carlotta Morrow, “The Nguzo Saba: The Seven Principles of Kwanzaa,” The Truth About Kwanzaa, <http://www.christocentric.com/Kwanzaa/nguzosb.htm>.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Karenga, *Kawaida Theory*, 27, in Morrow, “The Nguzo Saba.”
10. Maulana Karenga, *The Quotable Karenga* (Los Angeles: US Organization, 1967), 25–26.
11. Karenga, *Kawaida Theory*, quoted in Edward J. Balfour, “I Need to Be Baptized by You,” Redeemer Lutheran Church, <http://www.forministry.com/USMELUCMSRRRRR/Sermons/2006/1806.dsp>.
12. Maulana Karenga, *Kwanzaa: Origin, Concepts, Practice* (Inglewood, CA: Kawaida Publications, 1977), 44–45, quoted in “What is Kwanzaa?” BelieversWeb.com, <http://www.believersweb.org/view.cfm?ID=731>.
13. The Truth About Kwanzaa, <http://www.christocentric.com>.
14. Carlotta Morrow, “Is Kwanzaa a Christmas Substitute?” The Truth About Kwanzaa, <http://www.christocentric.com/Kwanzaa/alternat.htm>.
15. Anthony J. Carter, *On Being Black And Reformed: A New Perspective on the African-American Christian Experience* (Phillipsburg, NJ: Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 2003). 6. I disagree with Carter’s thesis that the church needs a “Black theology,” but I highly recommend his book for its otherwise sound theological discussion of Reformed theology.