



**LEO XIV, FANON, AI, ENSLAVEMENT AND HUMAN DIGNITY:
RECONSIDERING THE QUESTION AND COURSE OF HUMANKIND**

Los Angeles Sentinel, 06-11-26, p. B-1

DR. MAULANA KARENGA

THE MORAL, SOCIAL AND ENVIRONMENTAL problematic that AI and digital culture pose for us as human beings and for the earth and our relationship with it has become an inescapable central moral issue of our time. Thus, one of the central and sustained tasks of our time is to do what Nana Frantz Fanon called “reconsider the question of humankind” in this context and to dare to resist and end this challenge and other realities and threats of oppression on every level of life. But it is important for us not to imagine this current problematic of AI and digital culture came into being by itself. For it is rooted in prior practices of exclusion, injustice, exploitation and oppression, in a word, in systems of unequal distributions of wealth and power in place and fully functioning for centuries. This applies especially to enslavement and colonialism and the capitalist, imperialist and racist rationalities, structures and practices, undergirding and informing these systems.

In his encyclical titled *Magnifica Humanitas: On Safeguarding the Human Person in the Time of Artificial Intelligence*, Pope Leo XIV recognizes these historical roots and critiques this current technological paradigm and process and its real and potential threat to human dignity and life. He notes that it exhibits new forms of exclusion, injustice, exploitation, “deprivation of freedoms” which resemble and reflect “new forms of slavery, ...fueled by economic chains and digital

infrastructures”. He also speaks of its structure and functioning as new forms of colonialism which “no longer dominates only bodies, but appropriates data, transforming personal lives into exploitable information”. And he speaks to the objectification of human beings in lawful and criminal enterprises, and again of reducing them to collected, recorded, useable and exploited data as was done to enslaved and colonized peoples.

Turning specifically to the enslavement of African peoples, Pope Leo offers an apology saying that the Church “intervened several times in order to regulate and legitimize forms of subjugation, and, in certain cases, the enslavement of ‘infidels’”. For this, in the name of the Church, I sincerely ask for pardon”. Given the increased emphasis on and deference to the global African demand for reparations and the important role of apology in the process, it could seem that the pope’s apology is a good and timely gesture of sensitivity if not clear support. Thus, without diminishing its reference as a reflection of the morally compelling nature of the claim and response and the work and struggle that achieved this, I want to point out some problematic areas that need to be addressed if the apology is to be appropriate, inclusive, effective and serve its moral purpose.

Clearly, the apology would have been more meaningful if the name of the injured people, African, was mentioned in the apology. Calling a victim’s or injured

**LEO XIV, FANON, AI, ENSLAVEMENT AND HUMAN DIGNITY:
RECONSIDERING THE QUESTION AND COURSE OF HUMANKIND**

Los Angeles Sentinel, 06-11-26, p. B-1

DR. MAULANA KARENGA

person's or people's name demonstrates respect and reaffirmation of their identity, dignity, humanity and uniqueness and centers the moral focus on them rather than engaging in generalized admissions of wrong doing and evil. Secondly, keeping the injured person or people as a central moral focus requires that they define their injury not the injurer. This of course requires a public dialogue in which Africans themselves define the injury, its ongoing effect and what is necessary for reparative justice. Thirdly, the pope's description of our enslavement is restrained and inadequate given the abundance of historical evidence of its radical evil and rupture in African and human history. In brief, it was a morally monstrous destruction of human life, human culture and human possibility. It is in light of this that many of us call it *Maangamizi*, the Great Intentional Destruction.

Furthermore, the pope in his apology acknowledges the active complicity of the Catholic Church in the enslavement of fellow human beings, but he does not offer the most historically accurate and morally required recounting and interpretation of its role in this radical evil designated recently by the UN General Assembly as "the gravest of crimes against humanity". Pope Leo uses the terms "regulate" and "legitimize" to characterize the Church's role in enslaving fellow human beings, but the Church did more than this.

With its papal bulls, *Dum Diversas* (1452), *Romanus Pontifex* (1455) and *Inter Caetera* (1493), it divide the world of dark, different and vulnerable peoples

into realms of Portuguese Spanish and by extension, European domination and exploitation, authorizing and legitimizing their conquest, subjugation, perpetual enslavement and exploitation. Moreover, the Church participated in and benefitted from these evil and dehumanizing enterprises through tithes, taxes and gifts, and practices of enslavement and human trafficking itself. Thus, through these edicts and practices and claiming it was "with the authority of Almighty God," the Church demonstrated and reaffirmed its commitment to both colonialism and the enslavement of Africans and Native Americans and other indigenous peoples, *authorizing, legitimizing, facilitating, participating in and benefitting from* these anti-human practices from its inception.

Nana Frantz Fanon had urged us to "reconsider the question of humankind" in the interest of maintaining and expanding our humanity. For the liberation struggles and aspirations of the peoples of color for a new world required a new vision and valuing of humankind and its potential to open a new horizon of history. Thus, he and other liberation leaders called for creating conditions and capacities of freedom that required decolonizing the heart and mind, restructuring political and economic processes and practices at home and remaking the world that enslavement and colonialism conceived and constructed to dominate, extract wealth and degrade the majority of the world. And it meant embracing a world-encompassing understanding and approach to

**LEO XIV, FANON, AI, ENSLAVEMENT AND HUMAN DIGNITY:
RECONSIDERING THE QUESTION AND COURSE OF HUMANKIND**

Los Angeles Sentinel, 06-11-26, p. B-1

DR. MAULANA KARENGA

the liberative task which, without erasing our particular selves, centers humanity, “whose affinities must be increased, whose connections must be diversified and whose communications must be humanized again”.

This Fanonian stress on rehumanizing our relations and communications in the face of systems of dehumanization finds current similar concerns in the challenge to intervene in the dehumanizing and enslaving effects of AI and digital culture. And the task is to halt and reverse its increasing commodification of human relations and communication, degradation of human labor and deleterious impact on human dignity, human learning and life and the earth itself. Thus, he calls

for a thorough decolonizing of African and human life.

FANON ASSURES US THAT “DECOLONIZATION ... focuses on and fundamentally alters being, and transforms spectators crushed to a nonessential state into privileged actors, with the grand glare of the floodlights of history on them. It brings a natural rhythm into existence, introduced by new men (and women), with a new language and a new humanity. Decolonization is actually the creation of new people”. For the people enslaved and colonized radically reject their “thingification”, objectification and oppression and come into the fullness of their humanity “through the very process by which they free themselves”.▲

DR. MAULANA KARENGA, Professor Emeritus of Africana Studies, California State University-Long Beach; Executive Director, African American Cultural Center (Us); Creator of *Kwanzaa* and the *Nguzo Saba*; and author of *Kwanzaa: A Celebration of Family, Community and Culture*, and *Essays on Struggle: Position and Analysis*, www.OfficialKwanzaaWebsite.org; www.MaulanaKarenga.org. www.AfricanAmericanCulturalCenter-LA.org