

The Hermeneutics of Protest: Reconciling Spiritual Faith with Political Reality in James
Cone's Black Liberation Theology

Caroline C. Dibble
Charlottesville, Virginia

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Preface

In the context of American democracy, the community of suffering interprets hope as a form of existential protest. Centuries of Black suffering in the United States is directly linked to the conditions imposed and upheld by a system endowed by white supremacy. Enslavement, lynching, rape, segregation, disenfranchisement, economic oppression, and police brutality are various manifestations of the legacy of white supremacy, whose common heritage in anti-Black racism works relentlessly to dehumanize Black existence and propagate social norms that affirm white superiority. Throughout his career as a scholar and theologian, James Cone reflects on the experiences, legacies, and traditions that shaped Black religion in a world that tried to render the Black body as meaningless. His theological contemplation was fueled by the following question: *How — throughout centuries of oppression and suffering — were Black people able to survive and sustain meaning in a world filled with white racism and hate?*¹

Known as, “the scholarly guide for understanding the political contributions of Black religion since slavery,”² James Cone understands spiritual solidarity as a communal response to the conditions of white racism in America. By effectively examining the spiritual dimensions of American democracy through historical analysis, Cone revisits the legacy of Black religion as a mobilizing source of hope within the community of suffering that is necessary to cultivate democratic change in society.

Historically, patterns of white violence work to deprive the African American community of meaning and self-determination. As a result, a lack of accountability

¹ Cone, James H. *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011

² Bryant, James. “The Poetics of Testimony and Blackness in the Theology of James H. Cone

enables white hegemonic order to propagate Black suffering while simultaneously relegating it to the periphery of socio-political concern. Therefore, accountability, when it is not readily accessible to the oppressed group, must be sourced from the truths of the community of suffering in order to legitimize their experience as a historical and present reality. James Cone's prophetic discourse works to uncover how spiritual solidarity acts as a transcendent guide towards truth in the community of suffering.

It is the legacy of suffering that informs the now. The historical implications of white supremacy undertake a special role in defining the conditions and boundaries in the search for accountability within the community of suffering. For example, in late May 2020, #BlackLivesMatter (BLM) protests erupted across the nation to protest police brutality after yet another death of an unarmed Black individual by members of law enforcement. His name was George Floyd. These protests effectively worked to uncover both the harsh realities of racism in the United States and the subtle yet potent role of society as a whole in disseminating the rhetoric, rational, and reasoning of a racist past into the mainstream.

Critical response to the George Floyd protests illustrates the power of white hegemonic order in dictating the discourse of justice and accountability in America. Furthermore, it brings to light the inherent contradictions between Black reality and white normativity. In the wake of the George Floyd protests, BLM protesters were quickly labeled as rioters and looters in an attempt to undermine and overshadow the very systemic injustices they were protesting against. "When the looting starts, the shooting starts," said then-President Donald Trump in a tweet, which was quickly flagged by

Twitter for violating its rules against “glorifying violence.”³ This statement mirrors the “law and order” rhetoric of many politicians and law enforcement officials during the Civil Rights movement.

The heavy police and National Guard presence at the Summer 2020 protests propagated an image of Black criminality that was used to justify a violent response by state and government forces and to apprehend the cries of “Black Lives Matter!” that rang through every major U.S. city. This strategic radicalization of Black protest is no stranger to the mainstream of American society. For example, in 2016, Colin Kaepernick, former quarterback for the San Francisco 49ers, was effectively dismissed by the NFL for kneeling during the national anthem in protest against racial injustice. Kaepernick’s peaceful attempt to use his platform to bring national attention to racism in America was disregarded as an unpatriotic pageantry of disrespect to the sacredness of American divinity. “I stand for the flag and kneel for the cross” was a popular phrase that mobilized critical response against Kaepernick.

The narrative of American patriotism propagated by critics of BLM and Kaepernick reveals the double standard of protest in American society that hinders accountability. For example, in August 2017, leaders such as Trump failed to condemn the unabashed racism, bigotry, and violence that defined the rhetoric of the *Unite the Right* rally in Charlottesville, Virginia. “You had some very bad people in that group, but you also had people that were very fine people, on both sides,” said Trump. “The following day it looked like they had some rough, bad people — neo-Nazis, white

³ Madhani, Aamer, and Rhonda Shafner. “Trump’s Tweet about Rioters Echoes 1960s Miami Police Chief.” *PBS*, Public Broadcasting Service, 29 May 2020, www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/trumps-tweet-about-rioters-echoes-1960s-miami-police-chief.

nationalists, whatever you want to call them. But you had a lot of people in that group that were there to innocently protest, and very legally protest.”⁴

The events of August 11-12th, 2017 point to the limits of American democracy. Furthermore, they are indicative of an overarching theme in American history that serves to undermine democratic practice in an attempt to propagate white hegemonic social order. Civil disobedience is okay — as long as it is white. It shows stark similarities to the aftermath of the Civil War, during which President Johnson overturned General Sherman’s Special Field Order 15 and effectively pardoned the white Southerners who fought for the Confederacy — individuals who declared a full-on war against their own country.⁵

⁴ Kessler, Glenn. “Analysis | The 'Very Fine People' at Charlottesville: Who Were They?” *The Washington Post*, WP Company, 10 May 2020,

⁵ “Jan. 16, 1865: Special Field Order No. 15.” 2021. *Zinn Education Project*. January 17. <https://www.zinnedproject.org/news/tdih/special-field-15/>.

Introduction

James Cone's Black Liberation Theology (BLT) understands the thematic interdependence of white violence and democratic accountability as forces that work against faith's spiritual guidance within the community: "In a culture that rewards "patriots" and punishes "dissenters," it is difficult to be prophetic and easy to perform one's duties in the light of the objectives of the nation as a whole," writes Cone.⁶ The reality of suffering within the community, and the contradictions of white normativity that work to distract from these realities, are what propels Cone to articulate a theology that is equipped to react to the socio-political realities of Black existence.

James Cone offers a lesson on political theology throughout his career as a writer of liberatory theology. This project will focus on the literary discourse of Cone's Black Liberation Theology, with particular attention to the development and evolution of his theological grammar, whose goal it is to re-historicize Black suffering and re-orient Christian identity to articulate a critical response to white supremacy. I will divide Cone's writing into four distinct yet interdependent phases to bring Cone's wisdom towards the role of racism and white supremacy that is ever-present in America today. Furthermore, this capstone looks at how spiritual solidarity, as defined by BLT, is used to define the parameters of the community of suffering through a shared experience found in the Gospel and other forms of existential expression, such as music. The spiritual solidarity found in BLT can be looked at as Cone's conscious response to the conditions from which he writes. Finally, this project looks at how Cone deconstructs binaries to navigate the tensions of conflict found in the Black experience in America.

⁶ Cone, James H. *Black Theology and Black Power*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2018, 93.

I will begin by providing background information on James Cone and the genesis of BLT. This will conceptualize the context from which Cone writes and highlight the formative experiences from childhood and seminary that shape his theological perspective.

Then, I will discuss the phases of Cone's theology. The first phase of Cone's literary discourse introduces a theology defined by accountability and resistance. Defined by the formative years of BLT, Cone's first phase identifies an urgent need to bring attention to the moral and ethical shortcomings of white Christian theology in America while simultaneously affirming a Christian narrative of liberation that identifies God with the community of suffering. This phase understands the birth of BLT as the convergence of the sacred Christian rhetoric of the Civil Rights movement and the secular message of the Black power movement, which work interdependently to inform and assert Black existence despite the dehumanizing conditions of white normativity.

The second phase of James Cone's literary discourse introduces a theology characterized by historical recovery and cultural criticism. In this phase, Cone extends his theological imagination beyond the methodologies of normative religious tradition to include cultural expressions of Black existence as legitimate theological testimonies. He wrestles with the dichotomies between the sacred and the secular found in Black music to reconcile their liberatory significance.

The third phase of Cone's literary discourse re-imagines the narrative of faith and culture in the liberatory agenda of Black religion. In this phase, Cone works to re-examine the spiritual, social, and political legacies of Martin Luther King, Jr. and

Malcolm X — two central figures in the modern liberatory narrative of Black religion who are often positioned as the antithesis of one another.

Finally, the fourth phase of Cone's literary discourse represents an era of spiritual reflection and renewal. The fourth phase understands how Cone engages with the post-racial narrative of the Obama era and beyond as a means to conceptualize the legacy of spiritual resistance.

Cone and the Genesis of Black Liberation Theology

Black Liberation Theology was first coined by James Cone in his 1969 book, *Black Theology and Black Power*, in which Cone articulates an urgent need to provide an analysis of Black Power from a theological perspective. His groundbreaking work sought to reconcile the dichotomies of the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement in the wake of ongoing cultural unrest in the United States by conceptualizing Black Power through the Christian rhetoric of Dr. King. To Cone, Black Power represented more than a political philosophy, but was a religious experience that provided testimony to the Black existence and addressed the urgent demands of the Black struggle under white oppression. The religiosity of Black Power is best understood by Cone as a Christian message of liberation: “It would seem that for twentieth-century America the message of Black Power is the message of Christ himself.”⁷

The father of Black Liberation Theology, James Hal Cone, was born in Fordyce Arkansas on 5 August 1938 and grew up in the nearby racially segregated community of Bearden. Cone’s childhood was shaped by the imminent threat of white violence that defined daily life in the Jim Crow South. Describing his home-state of Arkansas as a “lynching state,” Cone states that “the violent crosses of the Ku Klux Klan were a familiar reality, and white racists preached a dehumanizing and segregated gospel in the name of Jesus’ cross every Sunday.”⁸ Cone attributes both his Christian identity and the emergence of his Black consciousness to his upbringing in the rural South. Born into the African Methodist tradition, it was through attending Macedonia A.M.E. Church that

⁷ Cone, James. *Black Theology and Black Power*, 42.

⁸ Cone, James. *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, XV.

Cone was first exposed to the liberatory powers of Christ in the Black Church: “At Macedonia A.M.E. Church, the melody, rhythm, and style were black; the mood was black; and the people were black. Everything they did was a valiant attempt to define and structure the meaning of blackness – so that their children and their children’s children would be a little “freer” than they were.”⁹

Cone’s upbringing at Macedonia A.M.E. Church inspired him to pursue higher education in theology. After graduating with a B.A. from Philander Smith College, he received a Master of Divinity degree from Garrett Theological Seminary and later earned an M.A. and PhD from Northwestern University.¹⁰ His time in graduate school was formative in the development of Cone’s theological perspective. His theological inspiration was molded by his Christian upbringing and driven by the social activism of Reverend Martin Luther King Jr, who at the time was spearheading the Christian-centric doctrine of social equality at the forefront of national discourse. The systematic theology of white theologians such as Niebuhr, Tillich and Barth, the latter of whom Cone wrote his doctoral thesis on, failed to address issues of race. For example, Reinhold Niebuhr, who Cone understands as, “America’s most influential theologian in the twentieth century, and possibly in American history,”¹¹ was often silent on issues of race. Cone reflects on the apathy of leaders in Christian theology as a testament towards the overall amorality of white Christian theology: “How could anyone be a great theologian and not engage America’s greatest moral issue? Unfortunately, white theologians, then and since,

⁹ Cone, James. *Black Theology and Black Power*, 2.

¹⁰ “Biography of James Cone.”. *James Cone Symposium*. <https://jameshcone.northwestern.edu/biography-of-james-cone/>.

¹¹ Cone, James. *Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 32.

have typically ignored the problem of race, or written and spoken about it without urgency, not regarding it as critical for theology and ethics.”¹²

After years of studying the varying perspectives of Western theology, including liberalism and neo-orthodoxy, Cone completed graduate school disillusioned with what he had learned. His mastery of these traditions merely was merely reflected by a need to pass in order to obtain his doctorate. He did not believe that they accurately represented the truths of Christian theology. Rather, Cone felt that Christian theology historically excluded black suffering and therefore needed to be reoriented to remove black suffering from its periphery. Cone writes: "I had to deconstruct white theologies to destroy their effects on my mind so that I would be opened to listen to the black voices from slavery, emerging from the ashes of the black holocaust. I had to look back and *recover* the black heritage that gave birth to me."¹³

It was not Cone who first articulated the call for a theology of Black liberation, but it *was* Cone who fulfilled the prophecy. The call was first brought forth on 31 July 1966 by the National Committee of Negro Churchmen (NCNC)¹⁴, three years before the publication of Cone’s first book, one year before the Detroit Riots and two years before the assassination of Dr. King: the two events that ultimately shook Cone “out of his theological complacency.” The NCNC took out a page-long ad in the *New York Times* to communicate Christian solidarity with the Black Power Movement. Printed on a Sunday, the statement was signed by over forty leaders of the Black church. It was provocative in

¹² Ibid, 52.

¹³ Cone, James: *Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody: The Making of a Black Theologian* Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2018. Kindle 42.

¹⁴“Position Statement In Support Of Black Power,” *The Church Awakens: African Americans and the Struggle for Justice*, <https://episcopalarchives.org/church-awakens/items/show/183>.

that it offered the possibility of rapprochement between Black Power and Christianity, a step that Dr. King was notoriously hesitant to make out of fear of isolating white allies. The ad read: "We, an informal group of Negro churchmen in America are deeply disturbed about the crisis brought upon our country by historic distortions of important human realities in the controversy about "black power." What we see, shining through the variety of rhetoric is not anything new but the same old problem of power and race which has faced our beloved country since 1619.

Phase I: Seeking Accountability and Establishing Christianity's Liberatory Legacy

The first phase of the literary discourse of James Cone and BLT is defined by a theology that seeks both accountability and resistance. Born out of the rage, fury, and unrest that erupted across the nation after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr, Cone's Black Liberation Theology was a direct response to the system of anti-black racism in America; its objective was to articulate a growing concern over Christianity's moral apathy to black suffering. This period is understood by a need to harmonize the communal faith of Christian identity with the pride of Black identity.

The emergence of Black Liberation Theology in 1969 was catalyzed by two major historical events that reflected the tumultuous dynamics of Black liberation during the 1960s and the extreme polarization of Black Power and Christian Civil Rights. The first was the Detroit Riots of 1967. The second, as previously mentioned, was the death of King.

The Detroit Riots¹⁵, also known as the Uprising of 1967, are remembered as "the largest civil disturbance in 20th century America."¹⁶ Their significance within the context of BLT is connected to the greater legacy of anti-black violence that understands violence as an imminent threat to Black existence. The Detroit Riots were not an isolated event but were connected to a trend of civil disobedience that erupted over the blatant and unabashed racism of American policing and the need to defend Black life from white

¹⁵ The Detroit Riots are remembered for the extraordinary level of wide-spread violence that consumed the city of Detroit in 1967. Spanning a period of five days, the riots were a result of already high tensions between the Detroit Police Department and Detroit's Black citizens. DPD, a predominantly white police force, was well-known for its aggressive behavior towards the Black community, often exhibited through the use of excessive policing and force. After police raided an unlicensed bar in the area of Virginia Park in the early hours of 23 July 1967, violence and chaos erupted around the city which resulted in 43 deaths and upwards of 7,000 arrests.

¹⁶ Detroit Historical Society. *Encyclopedia of Detroit: Detroit Uprising of 1967*

violence. The riots represented a microcosm of a macrocosm that illuminated America's flagrant disregard for Black life and the climax of grievances towards white racism in America's cities. The images produced from the conflict, which spanned five days, brought national attention to the frustrations of urban Black communities. For Cone specifically, the Rebellion deeply troubled [him] and revolutionized [his] way of thinking."¹⁷

Following the Detroit Riots, the death of King shocked the entire world, but its effects were felt most deeply within the Black community. Cornel West verbalizes the historical significance of King's death and its role in catalyzing a certain spiritual awakening in the theological perspectives of many black Christians: "After 212 uprisings on the night that bullets went through the precious body of Martin Luther King, Jr., America can no longer deny the fact that either it comes to terms with the vicious legacy of white supremacy, or the curtain will fall on the precious experiment in democracy called America."¹⁸ King's violent death conceptualized the growing notion that democratic accountability through spiritual uplift, the main goal of King's nonviolent Christian rhetoric, was not enough to free Black existence from the bondage of white violence.

The death of King ultimately brought to surface the large theological tensions polarizing the United States at this time. On one hand, an emerging coalition of white evangelicals helped bring to fruition a normative Christian vision of obedience in Nixon's "law and order" campaign. "'Does America have the national character and moral stamina to see us through this long and difficult struggle?' said Nixon to *Reader's Digest*

¹⁷ Cone, James. *Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody: The Making of a Black Theologian*, 1.

¹⁸ Cornel West in *Black Theology and Black Power*, XVI.

in 1967. “We must face up to an unpleasant truth: A nation weakened by racial conflict and lawlessness at home cannot meet the challenges of leadership abroad.”¹⁹ White Christianity ultimately offered a moral standard that dismissed allegations against white violence as mere biased distractions from the greater goal of American exceptionalism abroad.

On the other hand, many young Black Christians felt disillusioned with the Christian rhetoric of the Civil Rights Movement championed by Dr. King and turned to growing secular calls of Black Power. For example, Rev. Kelly Brown Douglas, who would go on to be one of Cone’s students at Union Seminary in the 1980s, reflected King’s death as a defining moment of her Christian identity: “I was ready to give up Christianity, because if I couldn’t be Black and be Christian, then I wasn’t going to give up being Black.”²⁰ Rev. Douglas’ statement encapsulates the theological tension felt by many African Americans in the wake of King’s death and the ultimatum they faced between their understanding of competing Christian and Black identities. King’s untimely death was a testament to the enduring legacy of white supremacy in American discourse and signaled the incompatibility of mainstream Christianity and the Black experience. The Christian message was irreconcilable with the Black condition, and thus, Black Christians sought secular avenues of liberatory expression vis-à-vis the Black Power Movement.

The Detroit Riots and the death of Martin Luther King, Jr. occurred months apart, but are connected by their shared context rooted in white violence. They both illustrate the realities of white violence as performative measures of white power — licensed to

¹⁹ Richard M. Nixon, “What Has Happened in America?” *Reader’s Digest*, October 1967.

²⁰ Rev. Kelly Brown Douglas, PBS *The Black Church: This is Our Story, This is Our Song*

uphold a system of injustice. Furthermore, these isolated yet cooperative events articulate an urgent need to reconcile the divergent experiences of white oppression under a coherent and liberative spirituality that could sustain Black liberatory resistance against the imminent threats of white violence.

Written in just six weeks, James Cone's *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969) marked the birth of Black Liberation Theology in an attempt to reconcile Christianity and Blackness as combative forces against the powers of white Christian hegemonic order. It is the product of pure rage following the death of King, which Cone understands as the moment he was "shaken from his theological complacency" towards Black suffering. In other words, *Black Theology and Black Power* was a direct response to the conditions imposed by white Christianity that sought to remove Black suffering from the periphery of American theological thought. It encapsulates Cone's first phase, in which Cone draws on America's religious history to articulate the moral apathy of white Christianity and vocalize the institutional significance of the Black Church during the slavery era in redeeming the true Christian message.

Amorality of White Christianity:

In his first phase, Cone demands accountability for Christian apathy towards Black suffering. He understands the role of Black Liberation Theology as a vehicle used to reclaim Christianity from the oppressor by articulating the inherent contradictions found in white Christianity, namely the distortion of the Christian gospel as a means to legitimize oppressive forces.

Cone is straightforward when he says: “It does not take a seminary education to know that white missionaries and preachers were distorting the gospel in order to defend the enslavement of blacks.”²¹ The context by which enslaved Africans were introduced to Christianity, namely, how the Christian faith was used as an instrument of social control to produce obedient, meek, and docile slaves fit for economic exploitation, is important in understanding the historical context of white Christianity’s seemingly undemocratic practices. For example, Puritan Minister Cotton Mather brought forth the moral justifications for slavery in his 1706 work *The Negro Christianized*. Addressing his white Christian audience, Mather defended the baptism of slaves as a need to uphold the slave system:

The greatest Kindness that can be done to any man is to make a Christian of him...They are become amiable spectacles, such as the Angels of God would gladly repair unto the Windows of Heaven to look upon. Tho’ they remain your servants, yet they are become the Children of God. Tho’ they are to enjoy no earthly goods, but the small allowance that your Justice and Bounty shall see proper of them, yet they are become heirs of God, Joint-Heirs with the Lord Jesus Christ.²²

Mather’s statement clearly suggests that it is not a theological tension for a Christian to own slaves. His judgement instead recommends that enslaved Africans should not have access to the same earthly advantages as their fellow Christians who were white nor “should he or she be allowed access to social mobility unless the master deems it necessary and appropriate.”²³ Upon reflecting on the role of white Christian theologians on propagating moral justifications for slavery, Celucien Joseph is correct in

²¹ Cone, James. *The Spirituals and the Blues*, 23.

²² Joseph, C.. “James Cone and the Crisis of American Theology.” *Missionalia: Southern African Journal of Missiology* 46 2019, 202.

²³ *Ibid*, 203.

saying that, “the moral failure of colonial Christianity in New England lies in its inability to transform a (Christian) slaveowner to an (Christian) abolitionist.”²⁴

For the white slave master, the liberatory message of Christianity meant emancipation from the bondage of sin, not emancipation from the bondage of slavery. This theological disconnect between white Christianity and Black religion offered further moral justification of slavery. Furthermore, enslavement was reflective of the Christian truth and the fulfillment of a divine prophecy that whiteness transcends blackness. For example, historian Ibram X Kendi discusses the role of whiteness in building an inter-class coalition to uphold the dominance of white supremacy:

The Virginia legislature also denied Blacks the ability to hold office. Evoking reportedly the term “Christian white servant” and defining their rights, Virginia lawmakers fully married Whiteness and Christianity, uniting rich white enslavers and the non-slaveholding White poor.²⁵

Cone responds to the contradictions of early American Christianity by conveying an absolute difference between God and man that is not found in white Christian thought. Without this distinction, Cone believes that theology is misused to bring forth a Christian gospel that fails to incorporate the oppressive experiences of black suffering. “As long as there is no absolute difference between God and man, it is possible to view America as the “land of the free and the home of the brave,” despite the oppression of blacks. As long as theology is identified with the system, it is impossible to criticize it by bringing the judgement of God’s righteousness upon it.”²⁶ Cone’s statement suggests that white American Christian theology failed to make this distinction and instead created a

²⁴ Ibid

²⁵ Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning: The Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America*, cited by Celucien L. Joseph in *Theologizing in Black: On Africana Theological Ethics and Anthropology*, 156.

²⁶ James Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 98.

theology that did not only identify with the racist system but created its foundation and upheld its legacy.

Cone also traces the moral apathy of white Christianity to the institutional policies of white churches. During the era of slavery, white churches often integrated their congregations, but not to as indicative measures of equality before God. Cone writes: “Rather than being a demonstration of brotherhood or equality, the “integration” in the churches was a means of keeping a close watch on blacks.”²⁷ Integration, according to white Christians during the 18th and 19th centuries, was not the realization of democratic values of equality, but as the “lesser of two evils”. Uncontrolled Black churches posed a threat to the slave system because of their ability to articulate a liberatory narrative of God that defied the status quo of mainstream white Christianity, namely, the implications of race in Christian theology. This was seen in the slave revolt led by Baptist minister Nat Turner, whose unsuccessful charge towards freedom resulted in greater restrictions on the freedom and mobility of slaves to collectively assemble for events such as religious service. Integration was therefore weaponized to assert the dominance of white Christian thought as a spiritual guide for the Black individual.

Cone’s dedication to the amorality of Christianity is an attempt to relinquish the theological monopoly of white Christian thought on the spiritual existence of non-white individuals. By highlighting the contradictions upon which white Christianity was spread and the nature by which it was forced upon slaves, Cone does not wish to delegitimize the religious legitimacy of the Christian faith. Rather, Cone’s understanding of white Christianity as a vehicle of social control is used to bring attention to the oppressive

²⁷ Ibid, 87.

nature of white Christianity as an obstacle towards the possibility of liberation. In other words, liberation is not accessible for the Black masses by way of white Christian thought. Christianity is not the obstacle, but its whiteness is.

Slave Religion as a Religion of Liberation:

As Cone strives to emancipate the Christian Gospel from its whiteness by bringing attention to the amorality of white Christianity, he also works to make the Christian Gospel accessible to Black existence. He does this by articulating a theological history of slave religion and its role in the liberatory narrative of the Black experience and the ways it differed from mainstream white theology.

Cone's point of departure from white Christian thought is God's divine revelation. While white Christianity characterized revelation as an other-worldly experience, reserved for Heaven, Cone understands divine revelation as a this-worldly experience that serves as a testament to God's transcending presence in the daily realities of man. The realities of God's transcendence are found in his liberating presence in slave religion, whose theology was not informed by the teachings of white Christianity but rather was a product of the historical and cultural circumstances of the time. In other words, Cone conceptualizes the establishment of the first independent Black churches "as a counter religious movement to White Christian hegemony during the time of slavery"²⁸ "The birth of the independent black churches and the teaching of the free black preachers show clearly that Christianity and earthly freedom were inseparable for the black man."²⁹

²⁸ Joseph, Celucien. *Theologizing in Black: On Africana Theological Ethics and Anthropology*, 201.

²⁹ Cone, James. *Black Theology & Black Power*, 105.

Furthermore, Cone distances the Black theological experience from the white theological experience through the Gospel; he employs a hermeneutical consciousness to understand God's divine presence in the liberatory agenda of Black Christianity during the era of slavery. From the time the first slaves were baptized in the colonies, many were immediately aware of the hypocrisies of white theology. Slaves adopted Biblical scripture to fit their liberatory narrative of Christianity and understood the Bible as a living testimony to God's presence in the liberation of slaves. The hermeneutical consciousness allowed for enslaved Africans to not just make sense of their environment, but also to affirm their humanity under the perpetual conditions of white violence. For example, the story of Exodus provides convincing evidence of God's liberatory presence in this-world.

Cone writes:

By choosing Israel, the oppressed people among the nations, God reveals that his concern is not for the strong but for the weak, not for the enslaver, but for the slave, not for whites but for blacks. To express the goal of her striving, Israel spoke of the Day of the Lord and the Kingdom of God, in which God would vindicate his people from oppression and the rule of his righteousness would be recognized by all. This would be the day when the lion would lie down with the lamb and men would beat their swords into plowshares.³⁰

The story of Exodus suggests that revelation was not the product of redemptive suffering, rather that divine revelation was proof of God's solidarity in the liberation of Black people from the oppressive forces of white hegemonic order. Exodus, according to Cone, suggests that salvation does not mean reaching for Heaven as an other-worldly experience, rather, salvation took place in this-world, and it meant reaching for freedom.

These unique Biblical interpretations of present-day conditions by slaves affirmed the danger of slave religion to the slave system as a whole. For example, Cone stresses

³⁰ Ibid, 72.

the cultural, theological, and political significance of slave insurrectionists such as Nat Turner and Gabriel Prosser in connecting the liberatory agenda of God found in the Bible with the conditions of Black existence: “Through them we know that freedom is what happens to blacks when they decide that whitey has gone too far and that it is incumbent upon them as the victims of humiliation to do something about the encroachment of whiteness. Freedom is the black movement of a people getting ready to liberate itself, knowing that it cannot *be* unless its oppressors *cease to be*.”³¹

Finally, Cone understands the truth found in Christian faith as the source of a certain political and social consciousness that brings to light the realities and inconsistencies of human suffering with the Christian Gospel. God’s righteousness ultimately bestows a political responsibility upon the individual: “Men should be reminded of the awesome political responsibility that follows from justification by faith. To be made righteous through Christ places a man in the situation where he too, like Christ, must be for the poor, for God, and against the world...Therefore, whoever fights for the poor, fights for God; whoever risks his life for the helpless and unwanted, risks his life for God. God is active now in the lives of those men who feel an absolute identification with all who suffer because there is no justice in the land.”³²

In addition to a public vocation bestowed upon Black people by God’s grace to end Black suffering, Cone also understands theology as a communal responsibility that serves to articulate the experiences of the oppressed as legitimate sources of religious testimony. Cone argues that Christian “theology cannot be separated from the community it represents. It assumes that truth has been given to the community at the moment of its

³¹ Cone, James. *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 108.

³² Cone, James. *Black Theology and Black Power*, 53.

birth. Its task is to analyze the implications of that truth, in order to make sure that the community remains committed to that which defines its existence.”³³ As theology is defined by the community it represents, the experience of the people of God in the church therefore become the raw material for theological hermeneutics.

To conclude, Cone’s first phase, which articulates the contradictions of white Christianity and historicizes Black Christianity as a slave religion, understands an urgent need to preserve Christian spirituality. Cone does not wish to abandon Christianity after displaying his criticisms of white theology. Rather, he wants to *save* Christianity from the burdens of white supremacy that restrict the liberatory narrative of Christ in American society. Cone shows readers that while Christianity is weaponized to promote Black hate and intolerance by way of white supremacy, it also offers a source of empowerment for the oppressed that cannot be overlooked. This empowerment, found in the Christian Gospel, can be used to liberate the conditions imposed by white supremacy.

³³ Joseph, C. *James Cone and the Crisis of American Theology*, 198.

Phase II: Spirituals and the Blues

Cone's second phase, summed up by his shift in focus towards Black cultural expression in his 1972 work, *The Spirituals and the Blues*, is best described as a period of renewal, during which Cone seeks to provide both cultural criticism and historical recovery of the significance of Black musical expression within the liberatory agenda of Black theology.

Cone's work in the *Spirituals and the Blues* reconciles the tension between white theological tradition and Black reality; he breaks away from the methodologies of white theological tradition by turning to two forms of cultural expression that are uniquely descriptive of the experience of Black existence: the spirituals and the blues. The spirituals and the blues ultimately represent a dichotomy between sacred and profane, other-worldly and worldly forms of expression that are bound by the shared experience under which they were born: white oppression. Cone's tension of tradition is balanced by breaking with the mainstream and reconnecting with the roots of Black history.

Cone uses historical recovery to bridge the tensions between tradition and reality by turning to a socio-historical analysis of Black culture to guide his theological interpretation. Cone's Afro-centric approach is reflective of the greater context of Black culture in the 1970s. Pan-Africanism, an international movement that encourages transnational unity amongst people of African descent, emerged during the era of decolonization and sparked a worldwide demand for the historical recovery of African culture and tradition.³⁴ Pan-Africanism seeks to re-historicize Black existence by articulating a common history and common destiny for people of African descent. It is

³⁴ Asante, Molefi Keti. 2009. "Afrocentricity." *Asante*.

ultimately a rejection of Eurocentric thought and instead pursues historical inquiry of Black people under oppressive rule from the perspective of the oppressed.

Furthermore, Cone undertakes reconciling the tension between the sacred and the profane as legitimate theological testimonies of Black existence, which emerged from the earlier rejection of white Christian theology. This reconciliation comes in the form of cultural criticism. In the 1970s, Black religiosity and the Black church faced a new era of cultural upheaval. As previously discussed in Phase I, African Americans turned to secular forms of inquiry and expression that were largely reflective of the Black Power Movement. Some also adopted the secular message of Black power to express their Christian faith. For example, in 1968, the Edwin Hawkins Singers released their rendition of the eighteenth-century hymn, 'Oh Happy Day,' which became an international hit and "the first gospel song to hit the secular charts."³⁵ The song won the 1970 Grammy for Best Soul Gospel Performance and the Edwin Hawkins Singers were treated like rockstars.³⁶ With the success of 'Oh Happy Day,' the group also faced heavy criticism from the Black church. In a 1979 interview with the *Washington Post*, Edwin Hawkins reflected on the adverse reaction the group's success acquired from the church, which viewed the secular nature of this new era of contemporary gospel to be sinful: "We're talked about and ridiculed in our general area by the established churches...I don't know if they fear us or think we're a cult movement."³⁷

³⁵ Lewis, Alex. "The Story of the Edwin Hawkins Singers' 'O Happy Day'." *NPR Radio World Cafe: Essential and Emerging Artists*, July 30, 2018

³⁶ PBS: *The Black Church: This is Our Story, This is Our Song*

³⁷ West, Hollie I. "Gospel Singer Edwin Hawkins, Still Flush With 'Happy Day.'" *The Washington Post*, September 6, 1979

The historical context of ‘Oh Happy Day’ suggests two general themes of the era from which Cone wrote *The Spirituals and the Blues*. First, it illustrates the significance of both the sacred and the secular as interdependent forces of Black cultural expression. The revolutionary work of ‘Oh Happy Day’ introduced a new genre of music that was developed from the long-standing legacy of Black music, which Cone describes as “unity music.”³⁸ Contemporary gospel was innovative in that it introduced a form of rhythm and movement that ultimately attracted a secular audience, but it also remained committed to the religious and spiritual culture from which it was born. It exemplifies the atemporality of existence in cultural expression, while simultaneously understanding cultural expression as reflective of the environment from which it is derived. Second, it suggests a noteworthy presence of skepticism from within the Black religious community, which was reluctant to accept secular mediums of cultural expression as legitimate forms of religious testimony — an apparent acknowledgement and acceptance of an uncompromising strain between sacred and secular.

Historical Recovery:

Cone requires an understanding of the historical context that produced the spirituals in order to fully comprehend their greater impact on the liberatory agenda of Black theology: “No theological interpretation of the black spirituals can be valid that ignores the cultural environment that created them,” writes Cone.³⁹ It is through the cultural environment that one understands the multidimensionality of their presence in Black religion and the plurality of factors under the slave system that shaped their being. “There is a complex world of *thought* underlying the slave songs that has so far escaped

³⁸ Cone, James. *The Spirituals and the Blues*, 5.

³⁹ Cone, *Spirituals and the Blues*, 20.

analysis. Further theological interpretation is needed to uncover this thought and the fundamental worldview that it implies.”⁴⁰

Cone’s focus on the slave experience in shaping the foundations of Black music represents an attempt to re-historicize Black existence within the greater struggle against white oppression. Cone views the history and struggle embodied in the spirituals as testaments to the utter failures of white hegemonic order to dehistoricize Black existence under the slave system. Cone writes, “When white people enslaved Africans, their intention was to dehistoricize black existence, to foreclose the possibility of a future defined by the African Heritage.”⁴¹ White Christians used baptism as a weapon of cultural and historical extermination against slaves. They understood baptism as a way to instill a consciousness – both psychological and physical – into the minds of the enslaved that upheld the racial hierarchy of the slave system.

Amidst the exploitative conditions of white Christianity, the spirituals were committed to articulating a unique theological interpretation of existence that was based on a common African heritage and a shared experience under slavery. In other words, the spirituals assured that a unique culture defined by oppressive experiences was not lost to the imminent threats posed by white Christian theology. The spirituals were contingent on the slave experience and can best be understood as a form of theological, political, and cultural protest. Cone understands the spirituals as vehicles of rebellion that offered legitimate expressions of the quest for freedom. He writes, “Freedom, for black slaves,

⁴⁰ Ibid, 19.

⁴¹ Ibid, 23.

was not a theological idea about being delivered from the oppression of sin. It was a historical reality that had transcendent implications.”⁴²

The spirituals are a form of theological protest in that their legitimacy as avenues of religious expression refused to be defined by the burdensome rhetoric of white theology. This was done by understanding the human experience of the Black individual as a legitimate form of religious testimony: "The black slaves' investigation of the absurdities of human existence was concrete, and it was done within the context of the community by assuming a universal stance common to "all" people. In this sense, black reflections on human suffering were not unlike the biblical view of God's activity in human history. It was grounded in the historical realities of communal experience."⁴³

The spirituality of Black existence contested white theology by communicating the transcendence of God's righteousness and rejecting the constructs of this-worldly and other-worldly salvation. White theology propagated a vision of Black suffering that was regarded as divinely sanctioned by God's grace. This-worldly suffering was sanctioned by God on Black existence and was later redeemed by other-worldly salvation with God in Heaven. The faith that fueled the spirituals guided the rejection of redemptive suffering and affirmed the God's transcendent presence through rhythm and song.

Furthermore, spirituals were a form of socio-political protest because they offered an outlet of active rebellion against the slave system by affirming the redemptive presence of God. The liberative narrative of this-worldly emancipation confirmed that injustice was contradictory to God's will in addition to the foundations of American democracy under which "All men are created equal." Cone understands the spirit of

⁴² Ibid, 42.

⁴³ Ibid, 54.

rebellion found in the spirituals as conditional to the political consciousness of slaves, which is foundational to his theology. “The spirituals did more to free my people than all the guns of the union,”⁴⁴ wrote a freed slave in the aftermath of the civil war.

The spirituals are a form of cultural protest because they articulate a common existence under mainstream oppressive forces. Cone understands this common existence as the creation and preservation of the *community*, who affirms and legitimizes a collective understanding of Black existence encompassed through a shared faith. Cone understands that the singers of the spirituals held a concern “centered on the *faithfulness* of the community of believers in a world full of trouble.”⁴⁵ “They were concerned about the solidarity of the community of sufferers...Will the wretched of the earth be able to experience the harsh realities of despair and loneliness and take this pain upon themselves and not lose faith in the faithfulness of God? There was no attempt to evade the reality of suffering.”⁴⁶ It was the faithful community that affirmed the realities of injustice and saw preservation and survival as the immediate, temporary, solution to a greater and long-lasting issue of racial discrimination in America. “The actual physical brutalities of slavery were minor in comparison to the loss of the community.”⁴⁷

Furthermore, Cone understands an important theological significance in relation to the ‘existential “I”’ in Black religion, which is a reference to the frequent use of first person singular personal pronouns in the spirituals. For example,

Oh, Lord, Oh, My Lord!
 Oh My Good Lord! Keep me from sinkin’ down.
 Oh, Lord, Oh, My Lord!
 Oh, My Good Lord! Keep me from sinkin’ down.

⁴⁴ PBS: *The Black Church: This is Our Story, This is Our Song*

⁴⁵ Cone, James. *Spirituals and the Blues*, 57.

⁴⁶ *Ibid*, 57.

⁴⁷ *Ibid*, 59.

And,

Nobody knows the trouble I've seen
 Nobody knows my sorrow.
 Nobody knows the trouble I've seen,
 Glory, Hallelujah!⁴⁸

"The existential "I" in black religion, then, did not have as its content the religious individualism and guilt of white religion or refer to personal conversation in those terms, writes Cone."⁴⁹ In other words, the "I" in Black religion is formed out of a greater longing for the community, whose existence and historical circumstances were pre-determined by the white masses. The "I", who cries out in the spirituals is the self-affirmation of black existence individually and as a member of the community. The two are inseparable, for the struggle for Black existence exists even when one is away from the community. In these circumstances it is song that affirms the suffering of the lone individual, therefore reuniting them with the shared experiences of the greater community. "Protest assumes community — that the victim of injustice is a brother, a sister, a friend."⁵⁰

Cultural Criticism:

Furthermore, Cone's second phase can be understood as a period of cultural criticism as his theology develops a more fluid understanding of the sacred and the secular. This can be seen by the liberatory narrative of both spirituals (sacreds) and the blues (seculars); their paradoxical nature of divine origin are not contradictory, but rather complementary forms of Black expression that affirm Black humanity in an environment

⁴⁸ Ibid

⁴⁹ Ibid, 60.

⁵⁰ Ibid

defined by white supremacy. Cone defines the blues as representative of the “worldly” dimension of black existence: "The blues depict the "secular dimension of black experience. They are "worldly" songs which tell us about love and sex and about that other "mule kickin' in my stall."⁵¹

The blues are a form of religious protest that are informed by the rhythm of Black Christianity. Like the spirituals, the blues, "invited people black people to embrace the reality and truth of black experience,"⁵² but, the blues took this understanding of truth one step further in that they reject the Christian rhetoric of the spirituals. This rejection was fueled not by a lack of faith in the community, but a rejection of the white monopoly on Christianity that projected a distorted reality of Black existence. The blues undertook the secular path towards liberation while simultaneously remaining connected the faithful community of the past and the overall legacy of suffering.

To conclude, *The Spirituals and the Blues* embrace a period of renewal by way of historical recovery and cultural criticism. Cone undertakes the intersectionality of the conditions of Black music by reconciling tension by way of cultural inquiry. Cone understands theological testaments of Black Christianity as products of the environment from which they are born. They therefore provide a cultural outlet for the conditions of Black oppression. This environment is shaped by the legacy of slavery and informed realities of the present.

⁵¹ Ibid, 97.

⁵² Ibid, 98.

Phase III: Re-imagining Faith

The third phase in the development of Cone's Black Liberation Theology is best described as a period of spiritual development and is represented by his work in *Martin & Malcolm & America* (1992). Cone uses biographical analysis to communicate a juncture between divergent protest traditions within the Black experience under slavery and segregation: integrationism and nationalism.

Published in 1992, Cone understands *Martin & Malcolm & America* as an urgent and corrective response to the socio-political movements of the 1980s, namely the way the complex aspects of Martin and Malcolm X's lives and philosophies were misrepresented, oversimplified, and overgeneralized as their legacy became increasingly relevant in American society. It is important to note that the purpose of Cone's third phase is not to offer criticism on the specific philosophies and theologies of Dr. King and Malcolm X, rather, Cone employs the biographical approach to embark on a thorough analysis of how the perspectives of King and Malcolm X were in fact complementary to one another "in the light of these two different but interdependent streams of black thought."⁵³

The influence of two socio-political movements of the 1980s can be seen in Cone's corrective response to King and Malcolm X: the de-radicalization of King by white Americans and the resurgence of Malcolm X in African American pop culture. As both King and Malcolm X became increasingly relevant in American society, their images were bound by superficial understandings of their greater significance as representatives of the complex and diverse experience of being Black in a white

⁵³ Cone, James. *Martin & Malcolm & America*, 4.

hegemonic society. Often portrayed as the antithesis of one another, Cone's interjection works to challenge the mainstream view of democracy by portraying both Dr. King *and* Malcolm as heroes of American democracy, fundamental to articulating an image of a lived democracy.

The institutionalization of Martin Luther King, Jr. Day by President Ronald Reagan is one of the most defining examples of the de-radicalization of King. On 2 November 1983, Reagan addressed members of King's family, distinguished members of Congress, and a series of high profile guests at the White House as he laid out his plans for MLK Day "to remember [King] and the just cause he stood for."⁵⁴ While the establishment of MLK Day to memorialize King and his contributions to the progress of civil rights can certainly be viewed as an attempt give proper credit to King's profound influence on the trajectory of American (and international) civil discourse (as it was framed by Reagan and his conservative coalition), it is important to acknowledge Reagan's historically negative impact on the progress of civil rights in America, especially in regard to King. The King Holiday was ultimately an effective measure in undermining the entirety of King's political agenda. Cone specifically reflects on the hypocrisy of Reagan's MLK Day campaign, citing Andrew Young's critique of the Holiday: "When President Reagan and the Congress established the King Holiday, 'They voted for Martin's 'I Have a Dream speech,' Andrew Young correctly said. 'They didn't vote for his anti-Vietnam speech or his challenge to Lyndon Johnson about ending poverty.'"⁵⁵

⁵⁴ Reagan, Ronald W. "Remarks on Signing the Bill Making the Birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr., a National Holiday." Washington, D.C. 2 November 1983

⁵⁵ Cone, James. *Martin & Malcolm & America*, 101.

Throughout the 1960s, Ronald Reagan actively assumed the role of an anti-civil rights politician and placed heightened emphasis on “individual freedom,” viewing social justice as a communist infringement on American democracy. He was a staunch supporter of presidential candidate Barry Goldwater during the 1964 election, which Goldwater ultimately lost to Democratic nominee Lyndon B. Johnson.⁵⁶ In one of the most defining speeches of his pre-presidential and pre-gubernatorial career — *A Time For Choosing* — Reagan called on white conservative Americans to offer their full support to Barry Goldwater, citing the threat to American identity that was at stake: “There's only an up or down - [up] man's old-aged dream, the ultimate in individual freedom consistent with law and order, or down to the ant heap of totalitarianism. And regardless of their sincerity, their humanitarian motives, those who would trade our freedom for security have embarked on this downward course.”⁵⁷

Furthermore, Reagan’s anti-civil rights campaign carried on definitively into his presidency, despite his seemingly positive perspective of King. His administration’s policies “seemed to cater to Southerners still angry over the passage of the Civil Rights Act after 16 years.”⁵⁸ For example, Reagan was against busing and opposed affirmative action. He “even threatened to veto a proposed extension of the Voting Rights Act (the sequel to the 1964 Civil Rights Act passed a year later and focused on election participation).”⁵⁹ Despite the image Nixon portrayed while calling for the establishment of the King Holiday, it is clear that his decision to memorialize King was not a product of a changed outlook on civil rights. Professor Michael Fauntroy, author of *Republicans and*

⁵⁶ Williams, Daniel K. *God’s Own Party: the Making of the Christian Right*

⁵⁷ Reagan, Ronald W. “A Time for Choosing Speech” 27 October 1964

⁵⁸ Williams, Juan. 2004. “Reagan, the South and Civil Rights.” *NPR*, June 10.

⁵⁹ *Ibid*

the Black Vote, notes that Reagan was initially hesitant to approve MLK Day: “it should be noted that he opposed [the Holiday] initially and sort of had to come around, particularly after it was clear that there were veto-proof majorities coming out of both the House and the Senate. And to his credit, he sort of made lemonade out of lemons with the large rose garden ceremony and the eloquent speech and all of that.”⁶⁰

Nonetheless, Reagan established MLK Day as a day to commemorate King, citing his desegregation campaign as the fulfillment of American democracy, overcoming the final hurdle before democratic truth is actualized. “As a democratic people, we can take pride in the knowledge that we American recognized a grave injustice and took action to correct it. And we should remember that in far too many countries, people like Dr. King never have the opportunity to speak out at all.”⁶¹

Furthermore, the newfound interest in Malcolm X during the 1980s provided Cone with the platform to address his concerns with the portrayal of Malcolm’s legacy: “Twenty-five years after his assassination, there is a resurgence of interest in him, especially among the young who were not yet born when he died. Malcolm's name, words, and face appear on buttons, T-shirts, and the cover of rap records. His life has become the basis of films, plays and even operas.”⁶² For example, the epic biographical drama of Malcolm directed by Spike Lee, *Malcolm X*, was released the year following the publication of *Martin & Malcolm & America*. The film is not only demonstrative in illustrating a newfound appreciation of Malcolm, but also the multidimensional approach

⁶⁰ Martin, Michel. 2011. Remembering President Reagan's Civil Rights Legacy. Other. *National Public Radio (NPR): Tell Me More*.

⁶¹ Reagan, Ronald W. “Remarks on Signing the Bill Making the Birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr., a National Holiday.” Washington, D.C. 2 November 1983

⁶² Cone, James. *Martin & Malcolm & American*, 40.

Cone's Black Liberation Theology seeks to embody. Speaking to the *LA Times* shortly after the release of what was at the time an extremely controversial film, Spike Lee channels a similar level of socio-political inquiry as Cone in his attempt to redefine the public image of Malcolm: "What we really want to put out is what we feel is the true image of Malcolm because there have been so many misconceptions of what he stood for--Malcolm X hated white people, Malcolm X promoted violence, Malcolm X this, Malcolm X that."⁶³

"[Malcolm X] is now being quoted by mainstream black leaders, who once despised him. Some have even compared him to Nelson Mandela of South Africa and Martin King, saying that Malcolm's image embodies the best in both," writes Cone.⁶⁴ The resurgence of Malcolm is not so much a point of concern for Cone, but presents an opportunity to learn. Despite this newfound attention geared towards the life, work, and symbolism of Malcolm X in pop culture, Cone is convinced that Malcolm remains misunderstood. For example, Cone cites a quote from Malcolm's eldest daughter, Attallah Shabazz, on the shortcomings of the resurgence of interest in Malcolm: "[Young people are] inspired by pieces of him instead of the entire man."⁶⁵ Cone expands on Attallah's statement, saying the resurgence in interest in Malcolm has not reshaped his image, but has only contributed to him being misunderstood: "Both the lingering effects of the earlier negative attacks and the current popular interest encourage people not to

⁶³ Welkos, Robert W. 1992. Spike Lee Speaks Out on 'Malcolm X': Movies: In a talk in Whittier, the director is tough, humorous and defensive about his controversial film. Other. *Los Angeles Times*.

⁶⁴ Cone, James. *Martin & Malcolm & America*, 40.

⁶⁵ *Ibid*, 41.

take Malcolm seriously as a complete thinker and a major actor in the African American struggle for justice, instead allowing his true image to fade from memory."⁶⁶

The urgency of the moment ultimately provides Cone with the appropriate platform to undertake a radical re-imagining of Dr. King and Malcolm X. The purpose of his piece isn't simply to document the lives of Martin and Malcolm and reconfigure them to address their legacy in America today but rather, Cone hopes to understand their significance within the greater context of the integrationist and nationalist traditions and the commonality shared by both that was bound by the liberatory agenda of the Black religious experience: "No sharp distinction can be drawn between the traditions, because representatives of both were fighting the same problems — the power of "white over black" and its psychological impact upon the self-esteem of its victims."⁶⁷

Spirituality, Faith, and Experience:

Cone understands the integrationist tradition as the optimistic belief that white and black people can coexist equally under the law. It pledges allegiance to the Bible as well as historical documents such as the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence. In other words, Cone understands integrationsim as "The right to protest against mistreatment was both a constitutional right and a biblical principle, defined by sacred and secular law."⁶⁸

Cone traces the legacy of integrationism to the era of slavery. The establishment of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church and other independent Black churches of the time reconciled faith in the political realities of Black existence in a way that

⁶⁶ Ibid

⁶⁷ Ibid, 15.

⁶⁸ Ibid, 62.

envisioned an understanding of Christian humanism and universalism that was directly applicable to the language of equality found in American democracy. For example, the mission statement of the AME church reflects these calls for a shared understanding of equality: "God our Father, Christ our Redeemer, Man our Brother." "When these sentiments are universal in theory and practice," said AME Bishops in 1896, "then the mission of the distinctive colored organization will cease."⁶⁹

While Cone characterizes integrationism by its optimism, he understands Nationalism as a more pessimistic ideology regarding the moral aptitude of white people in America. This ideology argues for a separatist approach that did not cater its ideology to the political norms reflected in the Constitution and the Declaration of independence. Rather, the nationalist tradition rejects these documents as illegitimate doctrines of a fictitious justice whose sole purpose is to propagate the ongoing suffering of Black people under white domination. Like the integrationist tradition, nationalism's roots go back to the era of slavery, "when Africans, longing for their homeland, banded together in a common struggle against slavery, because they knew that they were not created for servitude."⁷⁰ Unlike the integrationist tradition, nationalist put strict emphasis on African identity.

While Cone notes the differences between the nationalist and integrationist ideologies reflected by King and Malcolm X, he argues that in order to understand the two at face value, one must understand their similarities, which can be traced to a shared understanding of faith. Cone writes:

⁶⁹ Ibid, 7.

⁷⁰ Ibid, 9.

"Despite the contrasts between the two religious traditions, they were also closely related by their common past, involving continuous struggle for justice in a white American society that did not recognize blacks as human beings. Both traditions were more *Black American* than either African or European, which means that one's search for an understanding of their meaning should begin in the rural South and urban North and not on the continents of Africa or Europe.⁷¹

In other words, Cone understands how despite the fact that these traditions articulate opposing definitions of protest, they are unified in a shared struggle against the forces of white supremacy. To highlight the differences between King and Malcolm only serves to undermine the role of white supremacy in heeding the call for these movements, and the role of faith that informs and sustains them. No sharp distinction can be drawn between the traditions, because representatives of both were fighting the same problems – the power of "white over black" and its psychological impact upon the self-esteem of its victims.⁷²

What can we learn from this?

In reconciling the protest traditions of integrationism and nationalism as displayed by Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, James Cone identifies the ways in which the language of protest is derived from the conditions experience, and while the conditions of experience produce varying languages of communication, the experiences themselves are rooted in a common understanding of what it means to be Black in America. In other words, Cone understands Malcolm and Martin not as representations of two opposing languages of protest, but as codependent forces of a common experience.

⁷¹ Ibid, 121.

⁷² Ibid, 15.

To conclude, Cone's third phase represents a period of spiritual development from which Cone seeks to dismantle the binaries that limit the impact and legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr, and Malcolm X in American discourse. Instead of highlighting the differences between the two, as is often done in society, Cone understands Martin and Malcolm as interdependent forces of resistance and liberation whose commitment to justice cannot be simplified by the traditions of Black resistance that they represented. Rather, their shared understanding of injustice in society and the role of white supremacy in propagating that injustice, reveals the impact and legitimacy of experience within the liberatory narrative.

Phase IV: Era of Spiritual Reflection

The final phase in the literary discourse of James Cone's Black Liberation Theology is a period of spiritual reflection and renewal during which Cone engages with the trajectory of liberation theology during the Obama era and beyond. The focus of this phase is not Obama himself, but rather, the threat of post-racial rhetoric used to characterize the conditions of race in twenty-first century America after the election of the nation's first African American president. Cone's final two books, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (2011) and *Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody: The Making of a Black Theologian* (2018), provide critical commentary on this era as literary outlets of self-reflection regarding the post-modern discourse of Black liberation. Specifically, these books serve to historicize Black suffering to articulate its relevance in society today.

Obama Era: How Did Obama Complicate the Legacy of Black Spiritual Resistance?

The election of America's first African American president brought the promise of a new future for American politics. The optimism that carried the Obama campaign with cheers of "Yes we can!" suggested a new trajectory for American discourse and filled Americans with a spirituality beacons by a hope that gave language and voice to the oppressed not just in America, but around the world; liberation from the powers of white supremacy seemed possible under the leadership of Obama. For example, Obama campaigned heavily against the Iraq War, which was viewed as taboo in the political climate of the heavily white-evangelical influence of the Bush administration. Furthermore, he was perceived to be very pro-Palestine during the campaign,

highlighting the need to address the humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip as a result of the Gaza War. These are just a few of the many of Obama's policies during his campaign that signaled a possible departure from US foreign policy's track in the region and ushered in a new vision of global democracy.

Often characterized as an "historic election," much of American discourse following Obama's victory suggested the start of a post-racial era, which ultimately undermined the deep-rooted tradition of institutional racism and dismisses it as simply cognitive dissonance. The day after the election, *The Wall Street Journal* stated that, "We can put to rest the myth of racism as a barrier to achievement in this splendid country."⁷³ Rudy Giuliani echoed this sentiment by suggesting that Obama's victory signaled that America had "moved beyond...the whole idea of race and racial separatism and unfairness."⁷⁴ In many ways, the language used to describe Obama's victory echoed the sentiment propagated by Regan in the 1980s when he established the King holiday. The notion that hundreds of years of government-sanctioned oppression could be miraculously overturned by these singular events distracts from the legacy of anti-black oppression and the forces that continue to work so diligently to uphold it. The end of the civil rights movement did not mean that racial equality and justice had been fully achieved in one swift motion, just as the election of America's first Black president was not the end of American racism.

⁷³ Love, Bettina L., and Brandelyn Tosolt. "Reality or Rhetoric? Barack Obama and Post-Racial America." *Race, Gender & Class* 17, no. 3/4 (2010), 20.

⁷⁴ Ibid

The fantasy of post-racial America was fashioned to distract from Black suffering. While Republicans boasted about an end to the “myth of racism”, many African Americans were painfully aware of the fallacies this language brought to the progress of racial equality in America. To classify America as post-racial implied that Obama’s election was made possible by Black America finally “pulling itself up by the bootstraps.” This reflects the longstanding myth upheld by white supremacy that racial inequality is non-existent and that the American Dream is attainable for anyone who sets their mind to it. Furthermore, it is an attempt to undermine the role of white supremacy in fostering systemic racism within American Democracy.

The Cross and the Lynching Tree is regarded by Cone as his favorite book yet most challenging book he ever wrote. It represents the "culmination of my life's work that engaged not only my mind but also the spiritual dimension of my whole being."⁷⁵ A book ten years in the making, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* is a space of spiritual reflection through historical examination. In it, Cone grapples with the long-standing effects of white supremacy on the American psyche and seeks to answer the following question: *How have African Americans survived four centuries of white terror?*

Through historical examination and spiritual reflection of the lynching legacy in America, Cone finds an answer to his question in the symbolism of the cross and the lynching tree in the history of African American religiosity. Cone argues that African Americans understand Christ through the shared experience of crucifixion on the Cross, an emphasis on his central claim that God is with and for the oppressed. Cone identifies a

⁷⁵ Cone, James. *Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody: The Making of a Black Theologian*, 126.

linear connection between the cross and the lynching tree and suggests that the biblical narrative of crucifixion operates as a tool of historical inquiry and recovery that responds to the now. Furthermore, Cone uses current events and experiences to inform and revisit the past on topics such as white disillusionment and apathy to Black suffering. *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* is ultimately an attempt by Cone to deconstruct the post-racial illusion and bring black suffering to the surface. Cone does this by turning to criminality of the Black body to show that America is not post-racial so long as it continues to ignore the conditions of Black suffering. In other words, Cone historicizes Black Christianity and its role in constructing a spiritual response to the brutal and violent conditions of white supremacy. “The lynching tree is a metaphor for white America’s crucifixion of black people,” writes Cone. “It is the window that best reveals the religious meaning of the cross in our land.”⁷⁶

Lynching was a form of extra-legal punishment sanctioned by the white community, which served to remind African Americans of their powerlessness in a white-dominated society. It was a physical and psychological reminder to African Americans of the imminent threats of violence and death should they fail to adhere to the standards of white hegemonic order. Cone writes that lynching was reserved for special instances so as to serve as more than just punishment, but an overt display of white authority: “Slaveholders whipped and raped slaves, violating them in any way they thought necessary, but they did not lynch them in the case of those who threatened the

⁷⁶ Cone, James. *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 168.

slave system itself, such as Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey, Nat Turner, and other insurrectionists.”⁷⁷

Cone writes that white Christians authorized the lynching terror as a religious crusade against the criminality of the Black body. Lynching was a public service announcement that ensured there was communal consensus regarding the idea that “America is a white nation called by God to bear witness to the superiority of “white over black.”⁷⁸ It was a religious experience, riddled with many different sacred symbols and motifs. Cone writes:

In those formative years the Klan was as active as ever, striking fear with their hooded night marches and burning crosses, a powerful reminder that not all crosses were liberating and loving, even when Jesus’ name was invoked. White ministers sometimes served as mob leaders, blessing lynchings, or citing the stories of Ham and Cain to justify white supremacy as a divine right.

Cone correctly describes lynching as a religious, cultural, political phenomenon which was used by whites to silence Black Americans with the imminent threat of death. These disturbing and tragic events attracted crowds in the thousands. Images of Black bodies hanging from trees were turned into postcards and sent to family members to describe the quant activities of a Sunday afternoon stroll that included a lynching. Lynching brought white people together in a unified drive towards white domination. In white Christianity, the cross and the lynching tree were symbols of terror and torture reserved for the lowest of the low in society. So, why were African Americans drawn to

⁷⁷ Ibid, 4.

⁷⁸ Ibid, 7.

the religious symbolism of the cross and the lynching tree and what was its role in constructing a community of faith?

Cone understands the context by which African Americans are drawn to the cross as signifying a direct response to the conditions of white hegemonic order in the form of spiritual/religious rebellion. “While the lynching tree symbolized white power and “black death,” the cross symbolized divine power and “black life” – God overcoming the power of sin and death.”⁷⁹

Cone establishes that it is the transcendent connection between the cross and the lynching tree that fuels the spirituality of the Black masses in the form of spiritual/religious rebellion. The conditions of Jesus’ crucifixion as well as the crucifixion of African Americans drew many similarities and gave African Americans a sense of belonging, understanding and solidarity with their cause. Jesus was exiled and persecuted by his community. Jesus was publicly humiliated on Golgotha, just as African Americans were under the conditions of white supremacy and despite the circumstances that lead to crucifixion, Jesus never gave up hope. So, just as the cross is a symbol of death, discrimination, and darkness, it is also a symbol of love, faithfulness, and solidarity with the oppressed in society. “Like Jesus, blacks knew torture and abandonment, with no community or government capable or willing to protect them from crazed mobs.”⁸⁰

The cross provided African Americans with existential relief. As white society tried to define the meaning of Blackness with brutal, discriminatory, and cruel acts of

⁷⁹ Ibid, 18.

⁸⁰ Ibid, 75.

violence aimed at perpetuating Black suffering by dehumanizing Black existence, African Americans adopted their own meaning of Blackness through their experiences and perspectives of the paradoxes of American Christianity. In other words, African Americans turned to Christianity to ensure that whites would not determine their final meaning on the lynching tree just as Pontius Pilate did not determine Jesus' final meaning on Golgotha. Rather, it was God whose final judgement determined all meaning. This can be understood as the redemptive significance of the cross and the lynching tree: "Redemption," writes Cone, "was an amazing experience of salvation, an eschatological promise of freedom that gave transcendent meaning to black lives that no lynching tree could take from them."⁸¹

Cone points to the redemptive meaning of the cross and the lynching tree to highlight the failures of white supremacy in discouraging the community of faith in their joint experience under white oppression. While lynching was used to incite fear and silence the Black masses, its redemptive effects can be seen in the mobilization of the community to demand justice. In other words, lynching failed to silence the Black masses, and this is a result of the redemptive experience introduced by Jesus' death on the cross. Cone best articulates this through the example of Mamie Till Bradley.

Cone argues that the connection between the cross and the lynching tree is the redemptive experience of Black suffering that inspires Black people to rise up in defiance of the conditions of white supremacy in accordance with the resistance heritage found in Black Christianity. He articulates this claim through historical examination of one of

⁸¹ Ibid, 74-75.

America's most famous lynchings — the lynching of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till. "If lynching was intended to instill silence and passivity, this event had the opposite effect, inspiring blacks to rise in defiance, to cast off centuries of paralyzing fear," writes Cone.⁸² African Americans fought to bring lynching into public discourse by drawing attention to the brutalities of white domination. Cone cites the actions of Mamie Till Bradley after the death of Emmett and the direct connection she made between the death of her son and the death of Jesus as a testament to the hope and faith that would endure despite the realities of the Black condition. For example, when Emmett's body was returned to Chicago, Mamie Till "insisted that the sealed casket be opened for a three-day viewing, exposing "his battered and bloated corpse" so that "everybody can see what they did to my boy." "Lord you gave your son to remedy a condition," she cried out, "but who knows, but what the death of my only son might bring an end to lynching."⁸³ "She exposed white brutality and black faith to the world, and significantly, expressed a parallel meaning between her son's lynching and the crucifixion of Jesus," writes Cone.⁸⁴ Cone highlights that Mrs. Bradley was "afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed but not unto despair; persecuted, but not forsake; struck down, but not destroyed."⁸⁵

Cone's undertakes historical examination of the lynching era to conceptualize the conditions of lynching in relation to the Gospel. His attempt to reconcile the cross and the lynching tree gives deeper meaning to the significance of white Christianity as well as the

⁸² Ibid, 67.

⁸³ Ibid

⁸⁴ Ibid

⁸⁵ Ibid, 69.

role of the Black community in adopting and reorienting the Christian faith as a form of spiritual and religious protest against the imminent threat of anti-Black violence that has defined Black existence for centuries. “Like Jesus, hanging on a cross, this nameless black victim, hanging on a Georgia tree, was left to die a shameful death—like so many other innocent blacks, completely forgotten in a nation that did not value his life.”⁸⁶

In conclusion, Cone’s final phase serves to remind readers that white supremacy and oppression are not memories of the past. While the 2008 election of Barack Obama was nonetheless a historic one, it did not eradicate anti-black racism and white violence, as the term “post-racial” suggests. Cone revisits the legacy of white violence to bring attention to Black suffering and to remind readers that “you can lynch people more than by hanging them on a tree.”⁸⁷

⁸⁶ Ibid, 77.

⁸⁷ Cone, James H. 2017. “The Cross and the Lynching Tree.” *2017 Fred D. Plenary Lecture in Human and Civil Rights*. Lecture presented at the Christian Scholars Conference, June.

Conclusion:

The genesis and development of James Cone's Black Liberation Theology represents the elasticity of his theological perspective and its socio-political consciousness to present-day conditions. As Cone travels through the four phases over the course his career, he is repeatedly informed and re-awakened by the realities of Black suffering. His awareness was ultimately shaped by the Black experience, a notion that is often excluded from the parameters of white theology as he works to inform current conditions by revisiting the legacy of resistance found in the community of faith.

While Cone understands the apathetic role of white Christianity in the context of Black suffering, he refuses to abandon Christianity entirely. Rather, his commitment to Christianity demonstrates the ways in which religious conviction is shaped and molded over time. It is not static, but dynamic and Cone's four phases are a testament to the dynamic nature of theological inquiry. Through Black Liberation Theology's flexibility, Cone bends and twists with the imminent threats to existence posed by white supremacy, but never loses sight of his liberatory narrative. It is the dynamic nature of Black Liberation Theology that compels Cone to deconstruct the binaries of Black existence such as sacred vs. secular, spirituals vs. the blues, and Martin vs. Malcolm in order to look beyond the oppressive role of white Christianity and conceptualize a Christian theology that identifies specifically with the oppressed.

In my opinion, James Cone's Black Liberation Theology provides an excellent structure for understanding the dynamic role of religion within conflict and specifically the ways in which religion functions as a tool for peacekeeping and peacebuilding in society. Black Liberation Theology works tirelessly to establish a more-just society that

is representative of the ideals of democracy and offers a necessary-critique of the dangers of white hegemony and the limited avenues of expression that follow. In a world that places increasing emphasis on the significance of secularization, James Cone's Black Liberation Theology confirms that religion has a lasting place in American discourse and should be embraced rather than ignored as a legitimate tool for navigating and understanding conflict. Through his rejection of binaries, James Cone's Black Liberation accepts no compromise on the status of Black existence and warns of the dangers of doing so as a means to undermine and oversimplify human experience. Rather than embrace compromise, Cone is unapologetically committed to a theology that emphasizes the multidimensionality and interdependence of competing entities and the need to understand them not as mutually exclusive, but mutually dependent. In the context of American democracy, James Cone's Black Liberation Theology confirms that religion can operate as a tool of empowerment for democratic truth.

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