

APOLOGIA FOR BLACK LIBERATION:
THE CONCEPT OF GOD IN JAMES H. CONE'S BLACK LIBERATION
THEOLOGY AND WILLIAM R. JONES' HUMANOCENTRIC THEISM

By

Brittany L. O'Neal

A DISSERTATION

Submitted to
Michigan State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

African American and African Studies - Doctor of Philosophy

2015

ABSTRACT

APOLOGIA FOR BLACK LIBERATION: THE CONCEPT OF GOD IN JAMES H. CONE'S BLACK LIBERATION THEOLOGY AND WILLIAM R. JONES' HUMANOCENTRIC THEISM

By

Brittany L. O'Neal

During the formative years of Black Liberation Theology in the 1960s there was a collective understanding that Black liberation was necessary, however there was not much agreement on the optimal way for liberation to be actualized in the lived reality of African Americans. This dissertation explores two factions of Black Liberation Theology; the conventional views of Black Liberation Theology through the auspice of James H. Cone and the philosophical theology of Williams R. Jones' humanocentric theism. The former is an avid supporter of a Christian, biblical-focused theology and the latter fills a theological position aligned with philosophical tendencies. The purpose of this dissertation is to examine the doctrinal shifts that have accompanied Black Liberation Theology (BLT) as a new conceptual position in Liberation Studies.

This dissertation explores the dialectical dimensions of concepts of God and whether the respective theologies of Cone and Jones undergird a system of oppression. Black Liberation Theology needs to be reassessed for two reasons; because we need to (re)examine our value systems to ensure they are in fact working in our favor and to ensure Black Liberation Theology includes theological perspectives outside the traditional confines of Christian theology. Other forms of theism and nontheism; including secular humanism and atheism are considered as relevant religious perspectives for African Americans.

As a way to forward an ideology of liberation, this study examines the potentiality of a philosophical framework as a viable and sufficient method for African Americans Studies. Consequently, this dissertation is descriptive and corrective in its examination of two unique concepts of God associated with Black Liberation Theology.

Copyright by
BRITTANY L. O'NEAL
2015

To Bree, for the sacrifices you've made on my behalf and for giving me the motivation to follow my dreams. And to my parents for never giving up on me. I love you.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation has been part of a long and arduous journey. I have enjoyed researching and writing this dissertation, and the process has given me much appreciation for the scholarly work that I have had the benefit of examining and engaging in over the last decade while in graduate school. Given the scope and depth of this dissertation there are many people who I want to recognize for their supportive role in my graduate education. First, I would like to acknowledge my advisor, Dr. John H. McClendon, III, for his dedication and support throughout this process. I am especially grateful for our intellectually stimulating discussions about Dr. Jones, Black Philosophy, and Black Studies. He has challenged me with sharp and insightful criticism, provided personal encouragement, and offered opportunities to participate and present my research at national conferences. I am deeply grateful to Dr. McClendon for his unwavering support and endless dedication to his students and commitment to philosophy of the Black experience. I would like to also thank Dr. Rita Kiki Edozie for serving as my co-advisor on my dissertation committee and also for advocating on my behalf for funding resources and dissertation completion enhancements fellowships. Without your support and mentorship, the completion of this dissertation would have been unlikely. Special thanks to Dr. Gloria S. Smith for unequivocal personal encouragement and for sitting on my committee since its inception. I thank Dr. James Roper for graciously agreeing to be on my committee at such a late stage of the dissertation process. Your philosophical insights are invaluable. Each person on my committee has contributed to my personal growth and intellectual development, and for that I am extremely grateful. I would also like to thank Dr. Stephen Ferguson, from North Carolina A&T for reading an advanced copy of my dissertation.

In addition, there are several other people that have contributed towards my completion of graduate school. I would like to thank Dr. Victor Okafor from Eastern Michigan University, for the opportunity to teach in the Department of Africology and African American Studies at EMU. Working at Eastern Michigan has afforded to the opportunity to teach in Black Studies and to use the knowledge obtained in graduate school in a practical way. I would also like to thank Bikram Yoga Capital Area for teaching me how to stay focused and for the physical and mental strength to ‘stay with it’.

This dissertation was partially funded by the African American and African Studies program, the College of Arts & Letters, and the Graduate School at Michigan State University, and I would like to thank those entities for their financial support for the completion of this project.

My parents have been a constant source of emotional encouragement, financial support and practical guidance. Your support is insurmountable and as such, this dissertation is dedicated to you. I want to thank my dad for reading early drafts and for always listening to my arguments and offering critical insights to strengthen my position. I want to thank my mom for never giving up on me, despite my lengthy tenure as a graduate student.

Finally, I would like to thank my daughter, Bree O’Neal, for her loving support and endless sacrifice. I hope your journey in philosophy at The Ohio State University is as rewarding as it was for me. You are the best daughter a mother could ask for and I dedicate this dissertation to you.

PREFACE

Several admonitions are necessary at this point. The language in this dissertation may appear to exclude a female qualifier. The words ‘man’ and ‘humanity’ are used interchangeable and both are inclusive of female participation and agency in the natural world. Both Cone and Jones employ this style of language in their respective writings, but I am certain that neither use these terms as a slight towards women. All attempts have been made to reference God as a gender neutral deity, but there are a few instances where a gender signifier is attached to God. I do not think this creates a problem with the overall analysis.

Additionally, the following initials are used as abbreviations in this dissertation:

BLT, Black Liberation Theology; and

ESP, Economic, Social, Political

And the following initials are used as abbreviations for James H. Cone and William R. Jones’ books:

BTBP, Black Theology and Black Power;

BTL, Black Theology of Liberation; and

IGWR?, Is God a White Racist?

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter 1: Introduction.....	1
Purpose and Scope.....	1
Thesis.....	32
Methodology: External Criticism.....	33
Historical Contextualizations of Black Liberation Theology.....	40
Contributions to African American Studies.....	44
Overview of Chapters.....	46
 Chapter 2: Contextualizations: Methodological Objectives in the	
Black Liberation Theologies of James H. Cone and William R. Jones.....	52
Defining Black Liberation Theology: Boundaries and Borders.....	52
Methodological Considerations.....	65
Cone's Biblical Criticism: Problems and Prospects.....	67
Jones' View of Biblical Scripture as Historical	
Text: Is God A White Racist?.....	79
Beyond the Bible: Jones' Break with Conventional Black	
Liberation Theology.....	87
 Chapter 3: A Criticism of Selected Critics: Transgressing	
Conventional Themes and Normative Boundaries.....	92
Exploring Conventional Themes in Black Liberation Theology.....	110
Canon.....	111
Creed.....	113
Church.....	123
Culture.....	131
 Chapter 4: Theology and Meta-Theological Considerations in	
James H. Cone's Black Liberation Theology.....	134
Biographical Background Contextualizations.....	134
Doctrine of God.....	135
Epistemology and the Source of Knowledge.....	140
God's Moral Attributes and Human Suffering:	
Omnibenevolence, Omnipotence, Omniscience.....	143
Metaphysical Nature of God.....	148
Aspects of Human Freedom and Divine Sovereignty.....	156
Summary and Conclusions.....	160

Chapter 5: Theology and Meta-Theological Considerations in William R. Jones' Philosophical Theology.....	162
Biographical Background Contextualizations.....	163
Epistemology and the Source of Knowledge.....	165
Doctrine of God.....	167
God's Moral Attributes and Human Suffering.....	178
Theodicy.....	180
Metaphysical Nature of God: The Nature of Being.....	186
Aspects of Human Freedom and Divine Sovereignty.....	187
Soteriology.....	190
Summary and Conclusions.....	193
 Chapter 6: Conclusion: External Criticism and Philosophical Materialism: Towards a Transformative Black Liberation Theory.....	 198
Summary of Analyses.....	198
Interpretation of Findings.....	205
Theory of Liberation.....	209
Limitations.....	212
Suggestions for Future Research.....	215
 BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	 218

Chapter 1: Introduction

O God? How long shall the mounting flood of innocent blood roar in Thine ears and pound in our hearts for vengeance?... Forgive us, good Lord, we know not what we say! Bewildered we are and passion-tossed, mad with the madness of a mobbed and mocked and murdered people; straining at the armposts of Thy throne, we raise our shackled hands and charge Thee, God, by the bones of our stolen fathers, by the tears of our dead mothers, by the very blood of Thy crucified Christ: What meaneth this? Tell us the plan; give us the sign!¹

Purpose and Scope

The purpose of this study is to consider the potential of Black Liberation Theology as an applicable liberation strategy for African Americans. Black Liberation Theology (BLT), as a theological perspective, elects to use certain conceptions of God and theological principles as a way to understand the reality of African Americans. The theological perspectives and ideological platforms are intended to employ a concept of liberation for African American communities. However, it is my claim that Black Liberation Theology needs to be reassessed for several reasons; we need to (re)examine our value systems to ensure they in fact are working in our favor of liberation; to determine if conventional Black Liberation Theology is the only theological viewpoint applicable to Black liberation; and in turn to question if theological perspectives outside the traditional confines of Christian theology should be included in the BLT canon.

This is a study of the philosophical implications of Black Liberation Theology on the material conditions of African Americans. This dissertation is concerned with examining the theological perspectives of James H. Cone and William R. Jones. Cone and Jones have been

¹ W.E.B. Du Bois, "Litany at Atlanta," in *Darkwater: The Twentieth Century Completion of "Uncle Tom's Cabin,"* (Washington, DC: Austin Jenkins Company, 1920), 27

chosen for this study because each scholar represents a foundational role in the formation of BLT in the twentieth-century. Cone is the leading architect in the conceptualization and argumentation in BLT. Cone challenged the normative interpretations of Western theology by interpreting the theological messages he received from the Black Church (A.M.E.) as a method for Black Liberation Theology. Jones' role within BLT is that of a protagonist and as such, he challenges the leading advocates to test their theological perspectives for their liberatory potential.

The concepts of God and theological methods employed are responsible for determining the type of instruments and tools applicable to the respective theologies. James Cone, of Union Theological Seminary, in New York, uses Biblical Theology as his methodological system. There are certain assumptions aligned with Biblical Theology as a method that prescribes a certain representation of God. The assumptions, and the implications of Biblical Theology will be discussed to determine if Black Liberation Theology is a viable ideological perspective that can logically and materially lead to Black liberation.² Jones' methodological platform rests upon Philosophical Theology rather than Biblical Theology. Accordingly, Jones' method of criticism rest upon philosophical methods and internal criticism that transcend theological commitments and doctrinal allegiances.

Black Theology can be decisively ambitious and complex, but if we describe Black Liberation Theology as a sub-category of Black Theology then a more nuanced description of BLT can be understood in juxtaposition to the general category of Black Theology. Black Liberation Theology incorporates the conceptual framework of the Black Power Movement

² The methodological platforms of Cone and Jones will be discussed in Chapter 2, "Contextualizations: Methodological Objectives in the Black Liberation Theologies of James H. Cone and William R. Jones"

through the auspice of Black self-love. I am distinguishing between Black Theology and Black Liberation Theology as the latter being part of a politicized movement that challenged theological interpretations to include an element of social and political liberation for the Black community.³ By differentiating between the two—Black Theology and Black Liberation Theology—I am denoting a historical, as well as an ideological difference as the main reason for this distinction between Black Theology and Black Liberation Theology.⁴ Black Theology is inclusive of Black Liberation Theology, whereas Black Liberation Theology is not necessarily exhaustive of all forms of Black Theology. The former specification is the prototype that includes the complex landscape of Black theological perspectives, even those that are not considered liberatory, i.e survival theologies. However, Black Liberation Theology is conceived as essentially different in ideological outlook and perspective. The practitioners of BLT argue that their theological perspectives are different than their predecessors because they offer a ideological outlook and perspective that attempts to reconcile the ideological differences between the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement, hence the reconciliation of Martin

³ Vincent Harding. "The Religion of Black Power." In *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-1979*, edited by James H. Cone and Gayraud Wilmore. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1968). For more on the influence of Black self-love in Black Theology see, James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: Seabury Press, 1969); James H. Cone, "Black Power, Black Theology, and the Study of the Theology and Ethics." *Theological Education* 6, no. 3 (1970). The evidence suggests that the theologies of pre-Black Liberation theologians, such as Howard Thurman, George Kelsey, Benjamin Mays, and Martin Luther King, Jr., among with others, influenced the emergences of BLT. This will be discussed further in this Introduction.

⁴ Black Liberation Theology has historically been contextualized as part of the Black Power Movement that had its rise during the late 1950s and early 1960s. According to the biographies of Cone and Jones, they both were influenced by the Civil Rights Movement. *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, 1954, altered the landscape of public education in the United States, including an increase in opportunities in higher education, not to say these rights was granted easily. The events of the 1950s and 1960s created an intellectual environment where philosophy and theology focused on the lives of African Americans.

Luther King, Jr.'s Christian-centric nonviolent movement and Malcolm X's Black nationalism.⁵

Cone, on several occasions, supports reconciling the traditional values of love in the Christian religious experience (agape) with the message of Black Power and a new Black consciousness (Black self-love).⁶ The era of Black consciousness played an essential role in changing the theological messages that we find in current trends of Black Theology.⁷ Although the Black religious tradition has known several radical faces during this period, (Malcolm X, Albert Cleage, Stokely Carmichael, etc), the ideological presence of Martin Luther King's 'love thy neighbor' message and Malcolm's love thy (Black) self, fostered in a new paradigm that attempted to merge the Christian precepts of love with the conceptual significance of Black

⁵ Cone states, in "Black Power, Black Theology, and the Study of Theology and Ethics," that "[i]t could be that what Black radicals are rejecting about Christianity has nothing to do with Jesus and his gospel but is distortion of his person and world. Just maybe what they are calling for in human life is not only consistent with the gospel but represents its essence and that without which true Christianity ceases to be." James H. Cone, "Black Power, Black Theology, and the Study of Theology and Ethics." *Theological Education* 6, no. 3 (1970): 203. Also see, William R. Jones, "Liberation Strategies in Black Theology: Mao, Martin, or Malcolm?" In *Philosophy Born of Struggle, Anthology of Afro-American Philosophy from 1917*, edited by Leonard Harris. (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing, 1982).

⁶ James H. Cone, "Christianity and Black Power." In *Is Anybody Listening to Black America?*, edited by C. Eric Lincoln. (New York: The Seabury Press, 1968); James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: Seabury Press, 1969); Cone, James H. "Martin Luther King, Jr, Black Theology - Black Church." *Theology Today* 40, no. 4 (1984); *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990); *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997); "Martin and Malcolm on Nonviolence and Violence." *Phylon* 49, no. 3/4 (Autumn-Winter 2001 2001).

⁷ National Committee of Negro Churchmen (now the National Conference of Black Churchmen), a group of ad hoc religious leaders, in 1968, came together to discuss the theological needs of the Black community. Also see, George D. Kelsey, "The Churches and Freedom." *Journal of Religious Thought* (January 1957); *Racism and the Christian Understanding of Man* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965); Martin Luther, Jr. King, "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence." *The Christian Century* 77, no. 16 (1960); "The Ethical Demand for Integration." In *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, edited by James Melvin (Washington: Harper San Francisco); William Stuart Nelson, ed. *The Christian Way in Race Relations* (Freeport: Books for Libraries Press, 1971); Benjamin E. Mays, *The Negro's God: As Reflected in His Literature* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1968); "The American Negro and Christian Religion." *The Journal of Negro Education* 8, no. 3 (July 1939): 530-38; "The New Social Order When Integrated." *Religious Education* 58, no. 2 (1963); Howard Thurman, "Good News for the Underprivileged." *Religion in Life* 4, no. 3 (Summer 1935); Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (New York Abingdon-Cokesbury Press 1949).

Power—self-love, Black consciousness, Black Nationalism—through the lens of a “prophetic concern for social justice.”⁸

For Jones, the historical progression of Black Theology was heavily influenced by the Christian notion of self-sacrificing love and Black self-love that is associated with Black Power.⁹ For Jones the concept of love is complicated because self-sacrificing love—when one loves without thought of return or reward—requires a pre-condition to determine who has the power to define the conditions that are considered oppressive.¹⁰ When the concept of love is defined by the oppressor, it allows them to commit crimes against humanity and still have the benefit of God’s love.¹¹ In this sense, love is a conceptual and ideological tool used for the maintenance of oppression and removes responsibility from the white oppressor. Jones is not bound to the same limitations or theological precepts as Cone, so Jones moves away from Christian doctrines and offers a non-Christian theological perspective as an alternative to conventional BLT. By examining the theological tendencies of Christianity within the precepts of the Civil Rights Movement, ‘love’ was an essential component. The concept of love is the cornerstone of

⁸ Harding, "The Religion of Black Power." 46.

⁹ William R. Jones, “Liberation Strategies in Black Theology,” 184; Harding, "The Religion of Black Power," 41. Also see Jones’ discussion of the hierarchal ontological structure of homicide or suicide—a eater-eater hierarchy that maintains either we commit homicide to sustain our nature lives, or we submit to suicide in Jones, *IGWR?* and William R. Jones, "The Religious Legitimation of Counter-Violence: Insights from Latin American Liberation Theology." In *The Terrible Meek: Revolution and Religion and Cross-Cultural Perspective*, edited by Lonnie D. Kliver (New York: Paragon Press, 1987).

¹⁰ Jones, "Liberation Strategies in Black Theology," 194, 196, fn. 34. Cone is also critical of self-sacrificing love because the oppressor can use the Christian message of God’s love for humanity as a tool to service and support oppression. “Since God has loved us in spite of our revolt against him, to be like God we too must love those who...enslave us. ... This view of love places no obligation on the white oppressors. In fact, they are permitted to do whatever they will against black people assured that God loves them as well as the people they oppress,” Cone, *BTL*, 71

¹¹ See, Jones, *IGWR?*, 7, 209. For Cone’s position of love see *Black Theology and Black Power*, 43-56, 139-140. Cone concludes that agape has poor antithetical fit for Black liberation because it protects oppression.

nonviolent direct action, it is only through the “law of love” that allows the victim to push for an ideological change in the conscience of the oppressor. According to King,

The nonviolent resister not only refuses to shoot his opponent but he also refuses to hate him.... In the struggle for human dignity, the oppressed people of the world must not succumb to the temptation of becoming better or indulging in hate campaigns. To retaliate in kind would do nothing but intensify the existence of hate in the universe.¹²

King, and proponents of King’s philosophy of nonviolence, necessitates a belief that there is an ethical norm that regulates societal phenomena—i.e. “law of love.”¹³ In accordance with the Christian doctrine of agape, King and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), proceeded with an objective of appealing to the moral compass of their oppressors through moral suasion.

In contrast to Martin Luther King’s idealistic perspective of nonviolence and the ambiguity surrounding the Christian concept of love, led advocates of Black Power towards a new worldview by (re)conceptualizing the concept of love within the respective historic-social landscape of the 1960s. Advocates of Black Power discussed the attributes of love within a powerless community; Vincent Harding states,

Healthy self-esteem has been seen in many traditions as a prerequisite to the establishment of community—whether with a spouse, a society, or a God. It has most often been the bedrock of love. It is surely this that comes through in the teaching of Jesus to love the neighbor as oneself. Black Power is a calling for black self-love, but it is not an unambiguous summons.¹⁴

¹² Martin Luther King, Jr. *Stride toward Freedom* (New York: Harper Row, 1964), 85. See also, Dennis C. Dickerson “Teaching Nonviolence: William Stuart Nelson and His Role in the Civil Rights Movement.” *The A.M.E. Church Review* 125, no. 415 (2009); William Stuart Nelson. “The Tradition of Nonviolence and Its Underlying Forces.” In *Ghandhi Research Foundation*.

¹³ Jones, “Liberation Strategies in Black Theology,” 186. Also see *Social and Political Philosophy*, ed. John Somerville and Ronald Santoni. (New York: Doubleday and Anchor, 1963), 543.

¹⁴ Harding, “The Religion of Black Power,” 41.

Distinguishing between the descriptions of love found in the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement suggests BLT must reconcile the meaning of love found in Black religious traditions. The value and idea of self-love propelled theologians like Cone to revisit their Christian upbringings and find a way to reinvent the concept of God within the radical position of Black Power.

Black Liberation Theology is used in this study to include theological perspectives that are grounded in the liberation of African peoples from economic, social and political oppression. The description most commonly attributed to Black Liberation Theology comes from the theological perspective of Cone. Cone's theological perspective is clearly positioned in the Christian theological canon. For Cone, Black Theology is a "Christian theology," that reinterprets, "the meaning of God's liberating activity so that those who labor under enslaving powers will see that the forces of liberation are the very activity of God." He continues, "Christian theology is never just a rational study of the being of God. Rather, it is a study of God's liberating activity in the world, God's activity on behalf of the oppressed."¹⁵ Cone's theological presuppositions maintains strict boundary lines that isolate the meaning of Black Theology to include only theological concepts that centralize the role of God, Jesus Christ, and the Christian faith.¹⁶ Cone characterizes Black Liberation Theology as a Christian Theology that interprets "God's liberating activities" in "the gospel of Jesus in the light of the black condition."¹⁷ By describing Black Theology as Christian Theology, Cone presupposes several meta-theological distinctions that are required to maintain a Christian-centric theology.

¹⁵ Cone, *BTL*, 3.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 1-2.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 2, 5.

In juxtaposition with Cone's definition of Black Theology, William R. Jones suggests that Black Theology is "engaged theology," which, consequently is engaged in eradicating oppression, but is not necessarily Christian in nature. Jones continues,

Liberation theology's point of departure is a context where oppression is already institutionalized and legitimated. It surfaces primarily as a *religious* protest against the misuse of religion to establish and maintain oppression; its method is customized for this purpose. Because its overriding purpose is to exterminate ESP [Economic, social, political] oppression, liberation theologians must follow certain guidelines for theologizing to avoid working at cross purposes with their goals. In particular they must identify those *beliefs, values, and attitudes* that inadvertently nurture oppression and keep it alive.¹⁸

Jones' Philosophical Theology is vital to BLT because it offers an apparatus to examine the conventional views of BLT by internal criticism.¹⁹ The Black Power Movement produced the necessary landscape for new theological perspectives to emerge as a religious response to the historical climate that enveloped the Black community.

The theological climate in the African American community prior to the 1960s was a combination of survival and elevation theologies, with a dose of liberation theology. The theological change that took place during this time was grounded in the wake of Malcolm X's assassination in 1965 and Martin Luther King, Jr.'s assassination in 1968. There was a push to denounce the 'love thy neighbor' message that was the ideological foundation of the Civil Rights Movement to a theology that was grounded in equalizing material resources based upon Black

¹⁸ Jones, *IGWR?*, 205-206.

¹⁹ Jones puts the beginning of first-wave Black Liberation Theology in 1964 with the publication of Joseph Washington's, *Black Religion: The Negro and Christianity in the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964). See *Is God a White Racist?* Jones entertains questions about the nature of theology and the consequences of Black Theology as a Christian theological phenomena. Why must Black Theology and specifically Black Liberation Theology be Christian in nature? This is further discussed in Chapter 3, "A Criticism of Selected Critics: Transgressing Conventional Themes and Normative Boundaries." Chapter 3 engages questions about the nature of theology and how certain conceptional frameworks drive the theological process.

Power rhetoric.²⁰ Theologians working in academia offered new approaches to King's "conciliatory Social Gospel" by considering the criticisms of Black Power advocates.²¹

It is during this historical period that theologians conceptualized and provided a method of theologizing that took the normative religious spirit of African Americans (Christianity) and imbedded a message of liberation that is part and parcel to the language of Black Power. Black Liberation Theology, in a sense, is part of a larger discussion going on throughout the Third World. Black Liberation Theology tends to prioritize race as the contributing factor of oppression, whereas Latin American theologians organize their theological perspectives on the dialectical structure of capitalism and the class dynamic.²² The conceptualization of BLT as champion of Black Power is demonstrated by its constant focus on changing the material conditions of the Black community through Black self-love and a Black nationalistic agenda.

This dissertation is interested in questions about the essential differences between slave theology, Post-Reconstruction theology, Civil Rights Theology and first-wave Black Liberation

²⁰ Dwight Hopkins suggests that Martin Luther King, Jr. is part of the vanguard of new theological perspectives that swept through the Black community. Hopkins credits Martin Luther King, Jr. with merging the three theological traditions (Survival, liberation, and elevation theologies). Positioning King as a religious practitioner rather than a theologian is misguided in my opinion. See, Dwight Hopkins and Edward Antonio, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Black Theology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012). Also see, John H. McClendon, III, "Is Our Belief That Martin Luther King Jr. Is a Black Philosopher Justified? Introductory Concerns About King and Philosophical Cartography." In *The Liberatory Thought of Martin Luther King Jr.*, edited by Robert E. Birt. (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2012).

²¹ In addition to the social climate in the United States, the 1950s and 1960s were a transformative period internationally as well. Noted Peruvian scholar Gustavo Gutiérrez and Uruguayan theologian Juan Luis Segundo conceptualized Liberation Theology during the 1960s in parts of South America. While anti-colonial efforts were underway that challenged the ESP status quo, Third World theologians attempted to provide a theological interpretation that supported the revolutionary efforts that were being staged across the international landscape, with an emphasis on class as the organizing factor.

²² Juan Luis Segundo, *Liberation of Theology* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1976); Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1979).

Theology.²³ It is important to be able to clearly distinguish why the theologies of Howard Thurman, Benjamin Mays, George Kelsey, William Stuart Nelson, and Martin Luther King, Jr. and others are viewed as outside of this tradition. Consequently, I am arguing that first-wave theologians were not necessarily prescribing a new strategy for material liberation, but were instead offering a message of survival wrapped in the cloak of Black radicalism and Black self-love, through the auspice of Black Power. It is argued, that the historical context is the only factor to distinguish between BLT and early Black theological practitioners, such as Thurman and King. We must then ask ourselves, what makes Cone and other first-wave theologians different than the likes of Martin Luther King, Jr., Thurman, Kelsey, and Nelson?

In his 1996 forward to Howard Thurman's *Jesus and the Disinherited*, Vincent Harding opines that Thurman is outside the boundaries of what constitutes BLT.²⁴ The differences between early Black theologians and Cone and his contemporaries is that the latter group operates within a contextual framework that appropriates theology "as a moral corrective for oppression," whereas the theology of Thurman and his contemporaries offer a more nuanced approach towards theology as "a creative means of discovering God and self amid the vicissitudes and volatility of the human condition."²⁵ Black Liberation Theology is supposed to be the practical application of corrective action that is directly related to the politics of God. Prior to first-wave Black theologians, Thurman, Mays, Kelsey, and Nelson were the primary

²³ Anthony Hopkins, *Introducing Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1999). Hopkins develops Black Liberation Theology of the late 1960s as first generation Black Theology [National Council of Negro Churchmen (NCNC), Black Power]; second generation [Womanist Theology, Academic Theology]; third generation [Third-World Theologies, Nontraditional theologies].

²⁴ Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996).

²⁵ Carlyle Fielding Stewart, III. *God, Being and Liberation: A Comparative Analysis of the Theologies and Ethics of James H. Cone and Howard Thurman* (New York: University Press of America, 1990), 136-137.

theological voice in the Black intellectual tradition. They theologized and philosophized about an abstract concept of God, while keeping in accordance with Christian convention by postulating a God for the purpose of self-discovery and self-reflection as a means of liberation. For Cone there is a predetermined relationship between God and the oppressed, which is supported by presuming *knowledge* of the nature of God and God's liberatory activities in the human world, which highlights the difference between the two camps.

For the first-wave BLT, and their Latin American counterparts, oppression was the undergirding concept that aided in the development of a comprehensive theory of oppression that positioned oppression within the context of the material world. First-wave theologians sought to assess oppression in primarily socio-economic and political terms. Accordingly, the theologies of Cone and his interlocutors occupied a *new* space within the theological discourse of Black Theology. I am arguing that first-wave BLT, beginning with Cone, Washington, Roberts, and Cleage attempted to be ideological and theologically different than the theologies of Thurman, Kelsey, Nelson, King, and Mays. However, the former group fails to completely disengage with the theological practices of the Civil Rights Movement. The point of distinction between Black Theology and BLT is not merely an exercise in semantics, but is grounded in an essential ideological difference that has its genesis within a specific historical period—Black Power. As stated above, the objective of BLT is to create a new, distinct form of theology that centers on matters of material inequality, and is not concerned with otherworldly notions of liberation. According to Carlyle Fielding Stewart, III, in his 1989 monograph on Cone and Thurman, entitled, *God, Being and Liberation: A Comparative Analysis of the Theologies and Ethics of James H. Cone and Howard Thurman*, the major difference between Cone and Thurman is how they conceptualized liberation (or eschatology);

For Cone, man himself must utilize the historical expedients at his disposal to effect his own liberation. His eschaton is realized in history and culminates in the freedom of humanity from the slings and arrows of dehumanization and servitude.... We have explored the central elements of both thinker's theological ontologies, and have discovered that Cone, while primarily using an *existential analytic* and a *sociological method*, stresses being in relationship to external and socially oppressive forces. His principal concern is the transformation of this external structures and cultural values that contribute to the oppression and dehumanization of human beings.²⁶

On the other hand, Thurman's theology utilizes a phenomenological method that provides a description of experiences, yet he does not make Blackness a necessary ontological category that determines being.²⁷ For Cone, as will be discussed in Chapter 4, Blackness becomes a precept for liberation, and God's liberation of the oppressed is not merely an abstract quality. Thurman's view of the disinherited, or oppressed, is grounded in "man's interior and creative search for wholeness in being, which is actualized mainly in community."²⁸ For Cone, God is *a* being that is able to intervene in the natural world. Whereas for Thurman, God is the ground for being, but God himself is not a being. God is not required to intervene from outside the natural world because God is not a being. This is precisely the reason for the distinction between the old avant-garde and first-wave BLT and its practitioners. The former group is notably concerned with personal spiritual growth that culminates in building a relationship with God that will lead to eternal liberation, whereas the latter group is concerned with confirmation and actualization of

²⁶ Ibid., 163-164.

²⁷ See, Howard Thurman, "Review of J. Deotis Roberts's *Liberation and Reconciliation: A Black Theology*." *Religious Education* 66, no. 6 (November-December 1971): 464-66. Thurman challenges Deotis Roberts' view of ontological Blackness because reconciliation between Black and white must precede reconciliation between man and God. The salvation of African Americans is contingent upon the relationship between whites and Blacks, and as such, whites have the power to determine if reconciliation will be actualized.

²⁸ Ibid., 166.

God's intervention in the liberation of the oppressed.²⁹ To clarify, the former group was not only concerned about building a relationship between man and God, but was also concerned about the material needs of the community. For example, Martin Luther King, Jr.'s involvement in the March on Washington is evidence that he was not solely concerned with matters of otherworldliness, but was heavily engaged in fighting for equal resources for the underclass. At the time of King's assassination in 1968, he was involved in organizing and supporting sanitary workers who were on strike in Nashville, Tennessee. The difference between first-wave BLT and Thurman and King is their perspective of God's intervening powers in the natural world—the ontological distinction between God as a being and God as ground for being.

First-wave BLT supports a conception of God that is bound within the ideals of Christianity, but also attempts to conceptualize a God that “will inevitably usher in a new kingdom by abolishing racism and oppression,” within our lived reality.³⁰ Although there has been considerable focus on racial politics within the scope of Black Theology, it is during the 1960s that Black theologians began to focus on the importance of class and race as parallel modes of oppression. For example, Herbert Edwards, in “Black Theology and Liberation Theology,” suggests, “the racial factor has been the most important single determinant in the responses...to the black American's demand for justice.”³¹ For contemporary Black theologians, BLT forced the question of relating race and class within the precepts of theological discourse. The methodological differences between the old vanguard and first-wave Black Liberation

²⁹ Caryle Fielding Stewart, III. "A Comparative Analysis of Theological-Ontology and Ethical Method in the Theologies of James H. Cone and Howard Thurman." PhD diss., Northwestern University, 1982

³⁰ Ibid., 171.

³¹ Edward Antonio, "Black Theology and Liberation Theologies." In *The Cambridge Companion to Black Theology*, edited by Anthony Hopkins and Edward Antonio. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 184.

theologians suggest that the two perspectives diverged once the latter realized the current trends in theological thought were antithetical to Black Power rhetoric—African Americans were experiencing oppressive conditions shaped by the social conditions qua the capitalist political economy. First-wave BLT attempted to consider the possibilities of espousing a renewed value towards the parallels of race and class in the nature of oppression as a methodological tool to examine and analyze the African American experience.³²

Black Theology is a theology born out of the struggles of slavery and oppression, thus Black Theology, as such, is often times considered a theology of liberation. However, the research suggests early forms of Black Theology acted as a Survival Theology by offering coping mechanisms for the conditions of slavery and oppression.³³ This is to say that Black Theology was not born out of the intellectual domain, but born from the lived reality of enslaved Africans as a form of resistance towards oppressive conditions. However, it is important to note that Black Theology, and its many sub-categories (Survival Theology, Elevation Theology, Liberation Theology) have not always operated in the liberatory interest of African Americans, via material liberation. Consider this claim:

Black theology is “related” to liberation theology, or is indeed a theology of liberation by virtue of its commitment to resist and eradicate all the injustices listed earlier, turns out

³² The nature of oppression is also critical to distinguishing between the predecessors of BLT and first-wave BLT. There is a focus on understanding and conceptualizing the source of oppression that goes beyond the scope of material oppression and considered the role of a supernatural in the oppressive structures that Blacks encounter. A discussion of oppression will be included in Chapter 4 and 5, on the respective theological perspectives of Cone and Jones.

³³ Cone argues that Black Theology is a new phenomenon in James H. Cone, "The Content and Method of Black Theology." *The Journal of Religious Thought* 32, no. 2 (1975). The phrase “Black Theology” was first used by an ad hoc group of black theologians within the National Committee of Negro Churchmen (now the National Conference of Black Churchmen) in 1968, the first published reference towards a systematic Black Theology is found in Cone’s *BTL*. Cone acknowledges the importance of previous religious traditions in the Black community, which influenced his own perspective of BLT. Also see, Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, ed. C. Eric Lincoln. (Garden City, NJ: Doubleday & Co., 1972).

both to be somewhat premature and fails to tell us anything about how black theology undertakes its struggles against various forms of oppression.³⁴

Making a claim that Black Theology is essentially liberatory fails to account for the compensatory theological positions discussed and outlined in Benjamin Mays', 1938 monograph, *The Negro's God*. To clarify, compensatory theological positions are those views that support an otherworldly view of liberation and adheres to a belief that all worldly problems will be made better in the next life. Compensatory Theology also encourages a belief that regardless of the turmoil and suffering in the world, all is right with the world and is in accordance with the will of God.³⁵

The name Jupiter Hammon comes to mind when exploring the historical forms of Black Theology, especially forms of Survival Theology and compensatory theologies. Jupiter Hammon's theological presence in the late-eighteenth-century is rooted in a message of Survival Theology.³⁶ Hammon urged enslaved African Americans to follow the law as God set forth through Christian missionaries and biblical scripture. To argue that Survival Theology is a Liberation Theology does not differentiate between spiritual liberation and physical (material) liberation. In explanation of Hammon's beliefs, Mays concludes, "It is far more important for

³⁴ Edward P. Antonio, "Black Theology and Liberation Theologies," 34. The injustices listed in Antonio's article are: "homelessness, unemployment, racism, sexism, homophobia, lack of access to healthcare and education, the marginalization of indigenous peoples, declining mortality rates, economic and other social impediments to ownership of property, hunger, economic inequality within and between nations, human rights violations, discrimination of religious minorities, malnutrition, and undernutrition, as well as environmental degradation and its impact on the poor" (p. 33).

³⁵ Mays, *The Negro's God*, 14-15.

³⁶ Anthony B. Pinn, ed. *Moral Evil and Redemptive Suffering: A History of Theodicy in African-American Religious Thought* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002), 32. How to qualify the intensity of the institution of slavery on the African body, culture, and mind? Anthony Pinn reminds us that all work on "one existential situation that has shaped all others within the context of the "new World." This work, and all work focusing on the middle passage must be sensitive to an experience of dehumanization that spread throughout the "new world" (p. 2).

Negroes to think of their bondage to sin and Satan and their soul's salvation than it is for them to worry about physical freedom. Hammon's idea of God are clearly compensatory and they serve as an opiate for the people."³⁷ To claim that this type of theology is liberatory fails to distinguish between otherworldly liberation and material liberation. When Hammon wrote "An Address to the Negroes in the State of New York," in 1786, his theological position was not confined to the role of material liberation, but instead provided an apologetic for the oppressive conditions in the material world. To consider Hammon's position as revolutionary, fails to distinguish between psychological form of liberation and liberation from material conditions in the natural world. To claim that all Black theological thought is synonymous with Black liberation is a misnomer. In order to clarify the different types of theology that are present in the Black historical record, I am suggesting that academic Black Theology produce a paradigm that provides ample proof of its liberatory potential. The theological thought of Hammon can be considered at best compensatory and at worst oppressive.³⁸ The nomenclature Black Liberation Theology requires that the theological enterprise remove any emphasis that liberation will be "otherworldly" or Divine in nature, even if not the intent.³⁹ Conflating the two terms is a misguided attempt to radicalize all Black religious traditions and instead promotes a compensatory view of the world. It follows that certain belief systems offer an apologetic response towards suffering and

³⁷ Mays, *The Negro's God*, 99. Burrow, in *James H. Cone and Black Liberation Theology*, defends that Black Theology from the period of slavery was not only 'otherworldly,' but actually had a transformation on the ESP reality of African Americans, p. 10. Also see, Henry J. Young, *Major Black Religious Leaders: 1755-1940* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1977); and *Major Black Religious Leaders since 1940* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979).

³⁸ Hammon tried to pursue enslaved Africans to live according to biblical tradition—"Respective obedience to masters" and "to think very little of your bondage in this life."

³⁹ Teleological is the theological concept that suggests that history moves with a purpose and God is the force behind that purpose. See Pinn, *Moral Evil and Redemptive Suffering*, 8. This will be discussed in regards to Cone in Chapter 2 when detailing Cone's methodology.

oppression by suggesting that oppression is redemptive. Divine suffering is a belief that the suffering endured on earth is necessary because 1). The fall of man (Adamic myth) and our suffering serves as punishment (pedagogical in nature)⁴⁰ or 2). Man has committed some sort of crime, as judged by God, and punishment is deserved.⁴¹ The former concludes that regardless of our moral consciousness, we are all sinners. Human have no choice in regards to sin; all people are sinners. The question Jones and other's before him asked is, why is it that African Americans seem to suffer disproportionately?⁴² A belief in certain conceptions of God satisfies the psychological afflictions of its oppressed congregates: 'heavenly compensation for earthly woes.'

Take for example Cone's interpretation of Black Theology; Black Theology is attempting "to give meaning, in the form of written language, to that symbol of God that the Black community has experienced for more than 430 years. It is an attempt to name God in human terms through the Black historical experience of that same God."⁴³ Cone's description of Black Theology is wedded to a historical record of African American enslavement and a presumed notion that Black Theology during the respective time period was essentially liberatory. Cone, and other theologians can claims there is a history of liberation in Black Theology, but the type of liberation is pivotal when theorizing for material liberation. The concept of liberation is not one and the same, for the purposes of this dissertation, liberation can be divided into two

⁴⁰ Pinn, *Moral Evil and Redemptive Suffering*, 8

⁴¹ This could include the story of Canaan and Ham as religious justification for the enslavement of millions of Africans. See, L. Richard Bradley. "The Curse of Canaan and the American Negro." *Concordia Theological Monthly* 42, no. 2 (February 1971); Rufus Lewis Perry, Sr., *The Cushite or the Children of Ham (the Negro Race) as Seen by Ancient Historians and Poets* (New York: The Literary Union, 1887).

⁴² Pinn, *Moral Evil and Redemptive Suffering*, 7 and fn. 12 of Introduction. The problematic with the concept of redemptive suffering is the attached assumptions and presumptions require an apologetic position be taken.

⁴³ Diana Hayes, "James Cone's Hermeneutic of Language and Black Theology." *Theological Studies*; (Dec 2000), 609, 617.

ontological categories; material liberation and spiritual liberation. I am arguing that liberation from ESP oppression is only actualized through material liberation. To claim that spiritual liberation and material liberation are one and the same leads to a quagmire of living in materially oppressive conditions while being spiritually liberated. By highlighting spiritual liberation and denouncing material liberation is consistent with Hammon's theology and other forms of compensatory theological beliefs. One critical components in conceptualizing a BLT is the removal of any theological perspective that enlists an "otherworldly" view of liberation. Black Power ideology was first and foremost a theoretical position that prioritized the function of parallel modes of oppression (race and class) in the Black community. It could be argued that Black Power was not solely concerned with the material considerations of African Americans, but also provided ideological support for changing or altering Black consciousness, with the presumption that consciousness precedes existence.⁴⁴

In "Black Theology and Black Liberation," Cone declares; "Black theology places our *past* and *present* actions toward black liberation in theological context, seeking to destroy alien gods; and to create value-structures according to the God of black freedom."⁴⁵ If we follow the prior distinction, Cone here conflates Black Theology with BLT and the historical paradigm is one of continuity going back to slavery. If we look at theological positions derived during

⁴⁴ Sebidi accuses the race analysts of idealism by putting too much emphasis on ideas; on the view that reality is a product of consciousness. Indeed Sebidi appears to include the entire Black Consciousness movement in this critique by attacking what is essentially the latter's strategy in the struggle. Strategically, says Sebidi, the idealist focus on changing the mind and ideas in the hope that this will result in social change; the race analyst employs the psychological tools for education, preaching, and persuasion to influence social change." Lebamang Sebidi, "The Dynamics of the Black Struggle And Its Implications for Black Theology." In *Black Theology and Liberation Theologies*, edited by Edward P. Antonio (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 39. Also, see Vincent Harding, "The Religion of Black Power," in *Black Theology*, vol. 1 (Second edition); Harding, "Black Power and the American Christ," in *Black Theology*, (First Edition); and Nathan Wright, Jr., "Black Power: A Religious Opportunity," in *Black Theology* (First Edition).

⁴⁵ Cone, "Black Theology and Black Liberation," in *Black Theology* (Second Edition) vol, 1, 109.

slavery and the theological views of Cone and his interlocutors, we find only minor differences in the theological starting point and the philosophical endpoint. Cone is building upon a theological outlook that centralizes a very specific concept of God. Cone's concept of God is a traditional Christian deity that is inherently omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent.⁴⁶ These divine traits must be judged according to the oppressive realities of African Americans. Cone attempts to make suffering something other than redemptive suffering, but inevitably the logical progression of his theological claims lead towards a position antithetical to liberation. In my estimation, Cone's theological perspective on liberation falls within the category of compensatory, although he stresses the need for material liberation, his position to wait on God for material changes, makes his theological position susceptible to critique. As stated above, the essential need for a 'new' theological perspective was necessary to find a balance between the theological and political messages of Martin and Malcolm.

Cone's definition of Black Theology is a direct attempt to extend theological interpretations to a concept of Black Power. In the early years of its conceptualization, Black Power was not attached to any notion of theological aspirations. Black Power was a political force used to demand fundamental changes to the ESP landscape of African Americans.⁴⁷ By presenting a theological interpretation "to the unexplored depths of black consciousness," Black Theology, in Cone's estimation, is an attempt to define/explore biblical texts and biblical doctrines in conjunction with a theory of liberation. The eradication of social inequalities is both

⁴⁶ These are considered traditional attributes of a Christian divine figure (i.e. God).

⁴⁷ For a treatment of Black Power rhetoric see, Kwame Ture and Charles V. Hamilton. *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992). In support of Cone's mission to reinterpret the Biblical Theology from a perspective of the African American condition, he attempts to dismiss the secular nature of the Black Power Movement by instilling a Christian perspective within Black self-determination and self-identity. He claims that Christianity, in its 'true' form is liberatory, therefore the Black Power motif already exists in a fundamental reading of the Christian Bible.

a primary component in Black Power and a key objective of Black Theology.⁴⁸ Harding describes Black Power as a civil religion, meaning there are similarities with religious ethos, although it is constructed and presented through a lens that is secular in scope. Harding describes Black Power as “the ground of being,” for community building that eventually leads to a collective force that challenges oppressive conditions.⁴⁹

Such breadth of concern for “the broken victims” in their struggle to be free is surely another of Black Power’s judgments upon American religion, especially the faith of those persons who claim a great tradition of prophetic concern for social justice, and those who claim a master who came to set all broken victims free. For while such religious respectables stand silently or march weakly protesting, the devotees of Black Power identify themselves unambiguously with the oppressed *and with the revolutions made by the oppressed*. So if only by sheer numbers—the numbers of the earth’s humiliated people—such identification actually brings Black Power into the orbit of a universality more authentic than the largely parochial sentiments of a “Judeo-Christian” western commitment.⁵⁰

This is essentially what Cone wants to include in his Christian perspective, yet he does not want to radicalize Jesus as a member of the Jewish faction known as Zealots.⁵¹ Contrarily, Black theologians like Albert Cleage (Jaramogi Abebe Agyeman) actualized a conception of Jesus as a prominent Zealot that revolted (in violence) by setting non-white people free.⁵² For Cone, this perspective takes the revolutionary precept that Jesus was for the oppressed to a level that promoted violence, which exceeds the boundaries of a Christian ethic. Harding continues, “Black Power may well suggest that religious concern for both sides does not mean neutrality in the face of injustice. Indeed, it reminds us that the world most often will not permit that

⁴⁸ Cone, “Black Theology and Black Liberation,” 08.

⁴⁹ Harding, “The Religion of Black Power,” 43.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 46.

⁵¹ A zealot is a religious revolutionary attempting to overturn the political structure of a particular government.

⁵² Ibid., 59.

questionable luxury even should it be desirable.”⁵³ We are confronted with a variety of perspectives that take Christian precepts and attach Black Power ideological views. However, we encounter a translation problem on the issue of love: Black Power views love differently than that of Christianity. Black Power requires Black self-love and Christianity requires a love everyone attitude, even your oppressors. We are forced to ask: Where do the two Kingdoms meet? BLT is essentially an attempt to find a theological interpretation of the Black experience within the conceptualization of Black Power. Unfortunately, for Cone and his Christian contemporaries, there are certain theological commitments (God’s traditional attributes) that must be adhered to. Again, Harding explains the religious connections between Black Power and a religious ethos:

There is a sense of religious ferment on the part of Black Power, a sense that is not easy to document. Mixtures of old and new approaches to the essential issues of life are being attempted. Allah and other gods of Africa enter into competition with Yahweh, Jesus, and Buddha. It is a joyously difficult time, but part of the affirmation of Black Power is “We are a spiritual people.” The institutional manifestations of that affirmation are still being tested. A people separated from their past now attempt to build bridges, create new realities, or search among the ruins for whatever remains of value there may be.⁵⁴

The challenges imposed by Christianity and conventional BLT requires Cone to defend Christianity, Black Theology and the Black Church because he is claiming the liberatory nature of Christianity despite the problematic that arise when God’s attributes are considered in light of African American suffering. It is essentially the theodicy issue that forces Cone to defend a Christian God and his position as a Black Power advocate. Similar to DuBois’ expression of “two warring ideals in one dark body,” Cone had to reconcile two different perspectives in order to develop a BLT that is different and distinguishable from earlier forms of Black Theology. If

⁵³ Ibid., 47.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 60.

there are no essential differences, why attempt to change or alter something that is not broken?

This dissertation will explore whether or not Cone's theological perspective is in fact liberatory and can be classified as Black Liberation Theology.

It is in this light that advocates of Black Liberation Theology sought justification for their theological methods of biblical interpretation and biblical hermeneutics of God's election of the oppressed with the conceptual framework of black self-love that is aligned with Black Power.⁵⁵ Early practitioners of BLT, such as Cone, J. Deotis Roberts, Joseph Washington, Albert Cleage (Jaramogi Abebe Agyeman), and Gayraud Wilmore, sought to reexamine the Bible through the lens of the oppressed and extrapolate those events that offer evidence of God's active role in the historical liberation of oppressed people.⁵⁶ When we look at the works of pre-BLT thinkers, such as Thurman and King, there is a similar focus of looking at the oppressed or disinherited, but like I stated before, BLT systematically examines oppression in the material reality and offers a transformative theological perspective that attends to material liberation. Take for example, Thurman's discussion on suffering in an article entitled, "Suffering," in *Disciplines of the Spirit*, draws attention to "the manner in which the gospel of Christ addressed the needs of the oppressed and despised."⁵⁷ After addressing the variety of perspectives on Christianity and Black Power, there is still a gap in clearly identifying the differences between early theological perspectives and Cone's theology. This is important for a number of reasons, first why is BLT

⁵⁵ Ibid., 41.

⁵⁶ Also see Juan Luis Segundo, *Liberation of Theology*; Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, Salvation*, for a treatment of Liberation Theology in South America. Albert Cleage (Jaramogi Abebe Agyeman) attempted to provide a foundation to support a God that is phenotypically Black. See Albert B. Cleage, Jr., *The Black Messiah* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968); and Cleage, Jr., *Black Christian Nationalism: New Directions for the Black Church* (New York: Morrow, 1972). Cleage argues for the need to conceive of a Black God to ensure that Black self-love is persistent and unchallenged.

⁵⁷ Pinn, *Moral Evil and Redemptive Suffering*, 228.

necessary if Black Theology is essentially liberatory in nature and secondly, is it accurate to describe Cone's theology as BLT? Lastly, if Cone's theology is not distinguishable from his predecessors, what is Cone's real contribution to Liberation Theology?

It is important to establish the criterion to determine how oppression operates in our current social system. In a 1987 article by Jones, in *Spirit Matters*, entitled, "Religion as Legitimator and Liberator: A Worm's Eye View of Religion and Contemporary Politics," he suggests that ESP oppression (Economic, Social, and Political oppression) creates a hierarchy between the oppressed and the oppressors—"superiors and inferiors, e.g., in-group, out-group; rich, poor; master, slave; male, female; black, white, etc."⁵⁸ Jones concludes that oppression is institutionalized to maintain an unequal distribution between the alleged inferior and superior groups. Jones challenges the value systems that are upheld as liberatory, may play a part in the oppressive conditions that African Americans encounter;

The oppressed are oppressed, in fundamental part, because of the beliefs, values and attitudes they hold. They adopt, or more accurately, are indoctrinated and socialized to accept a belief and value system that motivates them to conform to the social order, embrace its esp inequalities as good or inevitable, thus stifling their desire to attack the foundation of these disparities in privilege and power. Put in other words, the oppressor must persuade the oppressed to act in a way that preserves and conserves what is already present, to refuse to take corrective action where basic cultural patterns and institutional structures are involved. In sum, the inner logic of oppression requires an attitude of *quietism* and a philosophy of *anti-powerism for the oppressed*.⁵⁹

Quietism is a term used by Jones to explain a theological position that justifies suffering and oppressive conditions as part of God's will, therefore attempting to change the oppressive condition is contrary to divine purpose. Simply, quietism means that there is no reason or

⁵⁸ William R. Jones, "Religion as Legitimator and Liberator: A Worm's Eye View of Religion and Contemporary Politics." In *Spirit Matters: The Worldwide Impact of Religion on Contemporary Politics*, edited by Richard L. Rubenstein. (New York: Paragon House Publishers, 1987), 224.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 245.

purpose to change negative conditions, either due to redemptive suffering or because of divine election; every instance of suffering and oppression can be sanctified by a divine being for a supernatural (unexplainable) purpose. Some of the questions I plan to execute in this dissertation are: Do ideas of a supernatural being (i.e. God) negatively impact the possibility of material change for African Americans and social, political, economic equality? By including a supernatural being in the fight for liberation do we unknowingly position God as the responsible agent for human liberation, and therefore, assume that change is beyond human control? Do certain conceptions of God lead toward quietism?⁶⁰ These questions lend to the importance of analyzing whether certain theological claims and conceptions of God have adverse effects for the Black community and its collective liberation.⁶¹

Black Liberation Theology is a component of Black Theology, but the latter is limited in its scope and does not necessarily advance the liberatory edifices of African Americans. Take for example the edifice of salvation that God is for the oppressed. For Cone, liberation and personal salvation are related by self-identification with Blackness which leads to personal salvation and ESP liberation. This perspective is prevalent in the theologies of Cone, Washington, and Roberts. What ends up occurring is the oppressed are blamed for their own reality because they have failed to live according to God's plan, or worst yet, it is in God's plan to oppress his chosen people as a means to salvation. We are forced to determine the difference between soteriology (salvation) and material liberation. In this dissertation, liberation means the eradication of material inequality within the perspective of the lived realities of African Americans. This means

⁶⁰ Redemptive suffering will be expanded upon in the dissertation as it relates to the theologies of Cone and Jones, but is beyond the scope of the Introduction.

⁶¹ I am not suggesting certain conceptions of God and theological claims are detrimental towards liberation, I am suggesting in our fight for equality, we must be diligent and open to examine even our most personal values systems, regardless of the emotional attachment to determine their liberatory value.

that educational, economical, political, and social disparities are grounded in the material conditions of a capitalistic society that exploits certain groups of people versus a view that considers ESP disparities as part of a divine plan. This is precisely a core difference between Cone and Jones. Cone's theology takes ESP conditions into account, which he accounts as being part of the capitalistic social and economic order, yet he fails to propose that a solution to material inequalities are of this world and considers liberation to be under the control of the divine. These precepts for liberation and salvation are not so different than the conception of Jupiter Hammon's God which required innocent slaves to cope with a life of suffering.⁶² Although Cone rejects the model of vicarious suffering, his soteriology is linked to a similar message that God is for the oppressed, and through faith, God will liberate African Americans from an oppressive material reality. Black Theology is concerned with the "emancipation of black people," and this liberation is not an "otherworldly reality."⁶³ It is important to note that Black Liberation Theology, as described by Jones and Cone, is not concerned with liberation after death, nor is the BLT of the 1960s supposed to be a Survival Theology. Black Liberation Theology proposes a theology that creates a belief that "something can be done about this world...".⁶⁴ Cone continues, "In traditional eschatology, suffering is often interpreted as the means for heavenly entrance. Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evils against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for our reward is

⁶² Cone attempts to refute a position of vicarious suffering but see Jones, *IGWR?*, Chapter 7, entitled, "James Cone: God, Champion of the Oppressed."

⁶³ Gayraud Wilmore, "A Revolution Unfulfilled, but Not Invalidated." In *A Black Theology of Liberation*, edited by James H. Cone (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 145-156. Also see Cone, *BTBP*, 121.

⁶⁴ Cone, *BTL*, 141.

great in heaven.”⁶⁵ The eradication of material oppression is actualized through equalizing ESP resources, and has nothing to do with the after-world. The oppression we experience in our lived reality is not an otherworldly condition so why is God as an otherworldly entity necessary? This is precisely why certain conceptions of God can be a possible hindrance to liberation and why Jones carefully rejects the use of certain conceptions of God, especially concepts of God that require expansive justifications to make sense of the relationship between man and God. Cone’s theology, and the theologies of his contemporaries, tend to make the case for God through the most elaborate and complex assertions possible.⁶⁶

This dissertation is informed by several theoretical positions. It is necessary to understand the complexities of the theological positions in BLT from a holistic perspective to ensure that various theoretical approaches are considered. Because Black Liberation Theology has been deemed a branch of Christian thought, there is a precedence of challenging that claim. When Jones challenged Cone and other Black Liberation theologians in his 1973 book, *Is God A White Racist?*, he not only challenged the logical progression of their ideas, but he also challenged the notion that Black Liberation Theology is strictly a Christian phenomenon. Therefore, when discussing theology and theological concepts, this dissertation does not assume the position that BLT is narrowly confined to Christianity or a Christian-centered notion of liberation. Expanding the boundaries of BLT beyond the shadow of Christianity offers a nuanced approach towards understanding theodicy and the Black experience.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 123.

⁶⁶ The use of Ockham’s Razor applies viz. do not multiply the number of entities in an explanation beyond what is necessary. The most simplified explanation is best employed.

The Black philosophical tradition is concerned with assessing the fundamental issues that lay at the heart of oppressive standards.⁶⁷ Therefore the philosophical tradition is concerned with challenging mainstream scholarship that hinders progress towards liberation. A substantial group of Black philosophers contend that only through critical reflection of values and guidance systems can we begin to pinpoint the values and beliefs that are antithetical to liberation.⁶⁸ My intention in this dissertation is to discern which philosophical and theological beliefs and values may be a hindrance, as well as those ideas that undergird the notions of liberation.

As an examination of the central themes and concepts that inform Black Liberation Theology, I contend that philosophy of religion and philosophical materialism offers a non-theistic assessment of religious doctrine and theological claims as an external criticism. External criticism is a methodological process that depends upon the rationality and logical progression of the theoretical approach utilized. In other words, external criticism provides a viable alternative to a theological stance to determine if the progressions of theological views are antithetical to liberation. My goal is to provide ample evidence to support my claim that certain conceptions of God are incompatible with material liberation.

⁶⁷ Berkley B. Eddins, "Philosophia Perennis and Black Studies." *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 9, no. 2 (Summer 1971): 207; Charles Frye, "The Role of Philosophy in Black Studies." *Contributions in Black Studies: A Journal of African and Afro-American Studies* 4, no. 1 (2008); John H. McClendon, III., "The African American Philosopher and Academic Philosophy: On the Problem of Historical Interpretation." *The American Philosophical Association Newsletter* 4, no. 1 (2004).

⁶⁸ Broadus Butler, "In Defense of the Negro Intellectuals." *Negro Digest* 11, no. 10 (1962); Roy D. Morrison, II., "Black Philosophy: An Instrument for Cultural and Religious Liberation." *The Journal of Religious Thought* 33, no. 1 (1976). Butler believes that the role of the Black philosopher is to unabashedly critique white racism and all forms of oppression. Also see, Broadus Butler, "Frederick Douglass: The Black Philosopher in the United States: A Commentary." In *Philosophy Born of Struggle*, edited by Leonard Harris (Dubuque: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 1983).

The central themes and concepts found in Black Liberation Theology offers a unique interpretation that realigns core concepts that are attributed with mainstream Christianity.⁶⁹ However, philosophy of religion allows for a secular, non-doctrinal methodological apparatus to explore religious beliefs and practices, including the conceptualizations of God and God's relationship with man. Within the framework of BLT and philosophy of religion there are several key concepts that will be explored in order to fully understand BLT.

The issue of suffering can be viewed through a theological category known as theodicy. The etymology of theodicy is simply *theos*, meaning God, and *dike*, meaning justice, therefore theodicy is a branch of theology that attempts to understand human suffering in relation to God's goodness. Theodicy is "God's government of the world in relation to the nature of man. The problem is the justification of God's goodness and justice in view of the evil in the world."⁷⁰ This classic definition of theodicy challenges theologians, and especially Black Liberation theologians, to find a justification for human suffering while maintaining the attributes of God's goodness.⁷¹ Rufus Burrow suggests that an internal critique of the metaphysical question about God's attributes and suffering needs to be assessed from a methodological standpoint. Burrow states, "black theologians have failed to take a critical look at their doctrine of God and evil."⁷² In an attempt to aid in this process, I plan to assess the metaphysical assumptions of Cone and Jones. I should point out that Burrow insists that Jones is at the forefront of criticizing Black

⁶⁹ The Biblical representation of an imminent, active God is not challenged in conventional BLT, but the purpose of God's involvement in Biblical stories is reinterpreted to align with the lived reality of African Americans.

⁷⁰ William L. Reese, "Theodicy." In *Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion* (Sussex England: Harvester Press, 1980), 573.

⁷¹ Burrow, Jr., *James H. Cone and Black Liberation Theology*, 196-202.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 197.

theologians for failing to fully challenge certain conceptions of God and doctrines of evil.

Burrow concludes Jones is a philosopher, but includes Jones in the theological conversation in his critique. It is important to point out however, that Burrow does not understand Jones' method is philosophical theology, a branch of theology. Jones is both a philosopher and a theologian, hence his critique of Cone and others as an internal criticism. Theodicy attempts to understand the nature of good/evil in respect to God's divine attributes (omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent). Roy D. Morrison comments on the process of evaluating God and the problematic of theodicy;

If God does not have a period of development (becoming or evolution) i.e., if God is originally or eternally a fully differentiated person with centered consciousness, omnipotence, and omniscience, he cannot logically and honestly be absolved from causal and moral responsibility for the evil in the world. Neither can the notions of purpose, predestination and the consequent reduction of humanity be avoided.⁷³

Jones, on the other hand, redefines the concept of theodicy by not assuming God's attributes, but hypothesizes a God based upon occurrences of suffering found in the human world. In other words, Jones does not create a traditional Christian God, but creates a God that satisfies God's existence and human suffering, which is taken as the point of departure. A critical criticism of Black Theology is mostly concerned with the problem of evil in the world and God's traditional attributes. Theodicy, in the most basic sense, means God's justice in the world, or "justification of God's goodness in face of the fact of evil."⁷⁴ In "The Problem of Evil," by John Hick, he delineates between two forms of evil: moral evil and non-moral evil. Moral evil can be understood as human wickedness or, evil that is understood in "its relation to human freedom and responsibility." Non-moral evil is the suffering and pain that inflicts the mind and body.

⁷³ Roy D. Morrison, II., *Science, Theology and the Transcendental Horizon* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994), 125.

⁷⁴ Jones, *IGWR?*, 146.

These natural evils are not determinative on human wickedness, and “seems to be built into the very structure of our world.” But why would God allow these evils to occur in a world, which God created and still has effective control?

When we understand theodicy in light of moral and non-moral evils we are inextricably led to questions about God’s omnipotence and omnibenevolence. Hick concludes that moral evil is directly related to the freedom of man, which ultimately allows man to act “wrongly as well as to act rightly.”⁷⁵ Theodicy can also be understood as suffering from lack of faith in the divine, therefore punishment is necessary, but maintains God’s benevolent qualities. In *Is God A White Racist?*, Jones challenges the apologetic definition of theodicy by questioning God’s “intrinsic and ultimate goodness.” When suffering is considered a presupposition of God’s will, or as a way of providing justice for wrong doing, the subjectivity of the suffering must be explained. Deserved suffering (i.e, for those that have committed a crime, God’s enemies) can be understood as consistent with “God’s love and righteousness” and “His judgment and salvation” for punishment for prior sin. However, this idea is complicated when the innocent, with no record of prior sin, suffer without due cause. In other words, the suffering of the innocent is based on the faith that God is benevolent, without substantial evidence. Jones suggests that this leads to the multievidential character of God’s attributes and qualities, therefore begging the question of God’s goodness. In a sense, we have equal support showing God’s benevolence as we do showing God’s demonic character. Theodicy, more than just the benevolence of God and his work of justice, presupposes certain qualities that problematize the divine. Jones and Cone’s

⁷⁵ John Hick, "The Problem of Evil," in *Philosophy of Religion*, ed. Edgar Brightman (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1963), 464-466.

theodicies will be discussed in conjunction with theological assumptions and presumptions surrounding the concept of God.

Naturally, when theological concepts are central to the discussion, understanding the relationship between God and the human world elucidates the importance of religious concepts as key components in the construction of God.⁷⁶ Burrow, in *James H. Cone and Black Liberation Theology*, explicates the limitations of Cone's Black Theology by avoiding the metaphysical questions about God's attributes and suffering in the Black community:

If black theology is serious about making sense of God and God's relationship to the world it will have to be willing to *subject the classical idea of God to radical critique in light of the evidence of the continued systematic oppression of African Americans and other people of color*. This effectively means a reconsideration of the divine attributes of omnipotence and omnibenevolence, for any reasonable "solution" to the problem of evil turns on how one understands these. Since most theists believe that God must be perfectly good and loving in order to be worthy of worship, they are not willing to sacrifice this attribute. What is left, then, is the matter of divine omnipotence and how one understands it.⁷⁷

This inquiry into the theologies of Jones and Cone generates questions of theory, meta-theory, and meta-theology, which are concerned with the influence of God, our quest for understanding the human condition, and purpose of being.⁷⁸ A sketch of Jones and Cone's theologies demonstrates that certain theological and philosophical boundaries lead towards specific conceptions of God and God's relationships with humans, via degrees of human

⁷⁶ Burrow, Jr., *James H. Cone and Black Liberation Theology*, 196-202. Burrow concludes Jones is a philosopher, (p. 175) but includes Jones in the theological conversation in his critique. Also see, Pinn, *Moral Evil and Redemptive Suffering*; and Douglas Fieck, "Humanism: African American Liberation '(a)Theology'." *Free Inquiry*, (2001): 43-45.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 198. Emphasis added. It should be noted that Burrow is a personalist from Boston University and essentially reduces God's absolute powers to the most-powerful, therefore allowing room for God's inability to make certain changes that would improve the situation of evil in the human world.

⁷⁸ Chapter 4 and 5 will offer a criticism of Cone and Jones' respective meta-theological conceptions.

freedom.⁷⁹ The theological differences between Cone's Biblical Theology and Jones' Philosophical Theology are ontological and methodological in scope and context. Cone employs a Barthian version of liberal theology and Jones employs Sartrean existentialism. By utilizing theological and philosophical concepts Cone and Jones reinterpret these concepts in an attempt to better understand the Black condition so necessary corrective action can be taken. The ideological genesis of their theological and philosophical inquiries illustrate that Cone and Jones still had questions about divine attributes and the maldistribution of suffering for African Americans.

Thesis

When we address issues of values, beliefs, and cultural traditions, we are not afforded the opportunity to narrowly focus on one aspect of the Black experience. Therefore, both the philosophical implications of BLT will be discussed, but I will also address the complexities of understanding these values, beliefs and cultural traditions in conjunction with the Black historical record. It is impossible to understand Black Liberation Theology outside of the oppressive realities found in the Black community. The complex social reality of African Americans has created various ideological conceptualizations to serve the Black community. Black Liberation Theology is an extension of this tradition, but unlike other ideologies, theology is located in a conceptually unique space. This space traditionally operates as a place where suffering and injustices' are understood through the lens of the supernatural world, however, in the case of Jones, suffering and oppression are clearly positioned in the human world (functional ultimacy).

⁷⁹ This is further discussed throughout the dissertation, especially in Chapter 5, "Theology and Meta-Theological Considerations in William R. Jones' Philosophical Theology." For a quick reference, see Jones, "Theism and Religious Humanism: The Chasm Narrows."

This dissertation examines Black Liberation Theology, along with the doctrinal shifts that have accompanied this new conceptual position in order to determine whether or not it is philosophically and historically plausible to utilize a form of Black Liberation Theology as a viable means to acquire material liberation. Black Liberation theologians exhaustively denounce theologies that promote eschatological liberation as the only solution to the oppressive realities found in the African American community.⁸⁰

Methodology: External Criticism

For this dissertation external criticism is the *modus operandi* used to examine and analyze the subjects respective theology. Roy D. Morrison offers a poignant description of internal criticism;

[T]he inherited content and structure of Christianity (or some other religion) are subjected to the critique of a philosophical system that is not based upon, or obligated to, the authority of any formal religion. The religion being reinterpreted is fitted into the cosmology and the categories of the chosen philosophical system—a system that is selected on the basis of criteria that are essentially external to the religion that is being reconstructed for mediating and transitional purposes.⁸¹

The epistemological privilege is granted to the chosen philosophical system—not to the theological content. Jones filtered various theological conceptualizations through a philosophical sphincter to determine which components survive the philosophical assessment and have a high liberatory potential. Quoting Morrison again,

Philosophy is the cognitive endeavor in which the question of being is asked....Ontology is the center of all philosophy.... No theologian should be taken seriously as a theologian...if his work shows that he does not take philosophy seriously... In contrast to the saint, prophet, and poet, the philosopher's passion for the infinite pours into his

⁸⁰ In, *BTL*, Cone agrees that otherworldly eschatological perspectives are faulty (p. 137). For example, Black theologies that promote a message of eschatological liberation are termed 'survival theologies' see Benjamin E. May's, *The Negro's God: As Reflected in His Literature*. Survival theologies stress of message of the otherworld as the objective of life, thus decentralizing the importance of challenging oppressive conditions in our material reality.

⁸¹ Morrison, II. "*Science, Theology and the Transcendental Horizon*, 129.

cognitive function. He wants to know; he wants to know what being means, what its structures are and how one can penetrate into its mystery. He is a philosopher.⁸²

Philosophical materialism aligns my theoretical approach beyond the boundaries of theology; therefore this external criticism evaluates the systems of theological claims set forth in the respective theologies of Cone and Jones to determine the potential for material change. External criticism affords the opportunity to substantiate between theological arguments that mandate economic, social, and political change with those concepts that do not lead to material change. A materialist conception of Black Liberation Theology suggests a nuanced approach that illuminates a history in which human activity—or social material existence—determines a persons thinking and consciousness.⁸³ Rather than promoting a system of inquiry that suggests that consciousness is responsible for determining the social existence of a community, I am systematically analyzing whether or not BLT takes the social existence of African Americans as its primary point of departure.

The latter of these theological arguments is not conducive to effective change in the material condition of the oppressed. As a Black Studies scholar, I strongly believe that transformative ideologies must in fact transform the material condition of African Americans. Transformation of the material condition must adhere to finding solutions for economic, social, political inequalities that disproportionately effect African Americans. Thusly, this study will detail and illuminate how certain theological concepts, when understood from beyond the cloak of religiosity, do not necessarily lead towards the transformative objective that is foundational in Black Studies.⁸⁴

⁸² Ibid., 129-30

⁸³ Peter Singer, *Marx* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1980), 34.

⁸⁴ McClendon, III., "Materialist Philosophical Inquiry and African American Studies."

Edgar Brightman, the noted Boston Personalist⁸⁵ from Boston University, states, external criticism takes a “stand without the system [i.e. theology] and challenges the very postulates on which the system rests,” using different assumptions, “to judge them by my own criteria—the criteria of my point to view, not of the one under criticism.”⁸⁶ By using philosophical materialism as my theoretical framework, I am employing external criticism as my method of inquiry. External criticism considers points of inquiry outside the field under review. For instance, this study is the critical review of theological perspectives, but from a point of view that gives priority to philosophical materialism. Philosophical materialism attempts to investigate the natural world by considering first and foremost the material condition—the social, economic, and political realities. I argue that philosophical materialism accurately describes the Black condition better than a theological argument, including the theological position found in conventional views of BLT.⁸⁷ The argument proceeds from a logical presumption that the African American condition is grounded in the material world—the social, political and economic relationships that have been crafted and created from the modes of production and the impending social

⁸⁵ Boston Personalism is considered here as a sub-category of American Personalism, of which Borden Parker Bowne, from Boston University, and George H. Howison, of University of California-Berkeley, would also be included. For more on American Personalism and the tradition at Boston University see, Burrow, *God and Human Dignity: The Personalism, Theology, and Ethics of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006); Paul Deats and Carol Robb, ed. *The Boston Personalist Tradition in Philosophy, Social Ethics and Theology* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press. 1886). In addition to the Boston Personalism tradition at Boston, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Major Jones, and Wayman B. McLaughlin were both part of a student organization during their graduate education called the ‘Dialectical Society,’ where they discussed issues related to philosophy, theology and the African American experience. See Stephen C. Ferguson, II. “Understanding the Legacy of Dr. Wayman Bernard McLaughlin: On the Problem of Interpretation in the History of African American Philosophy.” *The American Philosophical Association Newsletter: Philosophy and the Black Experience* 13, no. 2 (2014).

⁸⁶ Edgar Sheffield Brightman, *A Philosophy of Religion*. Prentice-Hall Philosophy Series. edited by Arthur E. Murphy. 5 ed. (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1945).

⁸⁷ “Chapter 2: Contextualizations: Methodological Objectives in the Black Liberation Theologies of James H. Cone and William R. Jones,” discusses the problematic with normative views of BLT and offers a description of conventional BLT.

relationships that accompany these modes of production. The oppression that African Americans encounter is located concretely within the material world, it is therefore necessary that the proposed solution also be found within the material world.

External criticism allows me to investigate the theological concepts of Jones and Cone to determine if their arguments are reasonable and logically substantiated within the scope of philosophical inquiry. Although this is an external criticism, Jones' explanation of his own methodological standard is fitting for both internal and external critique. Jones contemplates that certain questions and issues define the process of evaluation:

[T]he threshold question or issue basically controls the theological enterprise.... Its answer commits the theologian to a certain methodology, a particular set of categories, or a specific position on the theological spectrum, and these features control and guide the theologian's task. This initial "taking of a position,"...gives the remainder of the system a particular shape. And clearly any discontinuity between the answer to the threshold issue and the system's superstructure leads to an internal contradiction.⁸⁸

Both internal and external criticisms are necessary modes of investigation to validate the effectiveness of certain positions—beginning with internal criticism and followed by external criticism.⁸⁹ I plan to critique "the theological enterprise" in order to "point out areas of experience which have not been included in the realm under investigation, and secondly, to suggest alternative hypotheses for the explanation of the facts."⁹⁰ Brightman concludes that external criticism is necessary because "the claims of religion must be subjected to the scrutiny of the claims of other types of experience," including the scientific experiences, since religious

⁸⁸ Jones, *IGWR?*, 63. By "threshold questions," Jones means core questions that aid in the inquiry into the existence and nature of God.

⁸⁹ Brightman, *A Philosophy of Religion*, 459.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 460.

beliefs are *hypothetical* theories that are open to examination.⁹¹ My intention is to assess the methodologies in Jones and Cone's theological enterprises by looking at the conceptual process and development of God in their respective theologies.

Cone and Jones offer distinct descriptions of their theological perspectives beginning at a definitive historical moment in the United States—the late 1960s and early 1970s.⁹² 1). Both are Liberation theologians, and are ultimately concerned with the liberation of African Americans. I contend they are both responding to the crises in the lives of the oppressed, during the respective time period.⁹³ 2). The difference between Jones and Cone is grounded in their respective theories and methodologies of investigation, particularly with regard to what constitutes Black Liberation Theology. a). By using a Christian-centric theological framework, Cone presumes the existence of God *and* offers insights into the relationship between God and man. This relationship, for Cone, grounds the material conditions of Black oppression and liberation. b). Jones, on the other hand, presumes the existence of God, but offers a critique of God's role in human liberation, which includes a philosophical approach to expose the fallacies (non-liberatory beliefs) with certain conceptions of God.⁹⁴

Philosophical materialism is a philosophical inquiry of the world and reality, and as such, the world and nature of reality exist independently of our consciousness (non-material) as the

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² Stephanie Y. Evans, *Black Women in the Ivory Tower, 1850-1954: An Intellectual History* (Gainesville: UP of Florida, 2007); Randolph Hohle, *Black Citizenship and Authenticity in the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Peniel E. Joseph, ed. *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era* (New York: Routledge, 2006).

⁹³ Cone, *BTL* and *BTBP*.

⁹⁴ These distinctions are further developed in "Chapter 2: Contextualizations: Methodological Objectives in the Black Liberation Theology of James H. Cone and William R. Jones," and in the respective chapters on Cone and Jones.

basis of reality. Dialectical Materialism views reality, such as historical phenomena, as intrinsically based in change. From this perspective materialism offers an explanation of the social realities during the 1960s and 1970s, therefore including the historical periodization of when Jones and Cone began their intellectual careers. Materialism as philosophical inquiry is concerned with values, myths, and culture, but begins with the nature of reality through material entities (mode of production) as foremost, then offers an explanation of the value of the non-material (values, beliefs, and ideas).

Philosophical materialism offers an explanation of how values and beliefs play a significant part in the lives of people, but only secondary to the importance of material reality, via social relations through modes of production. However, the concept of materialism undergirds the primacy of the material condition in the creation of values and beliefs.⁹⁵ I contend that the oppression in the Black community is not a result of God's election or disdain for African Americans, but a result of our material circumstances. The material circumstances of our reality are grounded in the material conflicts that are imposed within a framework of social relations of production.⁹⁶ To clarify, the oppression of African Americans is based on the social relations within a given reality, which can be assessed by empirical analysis of modes of productions, and not because of a fallacy of consciousness (i.e. God)—Consciousness is not the grounds for reality. The major difference between idealism and materialism is grounded in the primacy (point of departure) of the non-material and the material, respectively. The lived reality

⁹⁵ Knowledge, in the form of values, is a usable tool for manipulation and social control. The postmodernist approach to knowledge is concerned with the "liberation of knowledge from the foundation criteria that have driven modern Western philosophy; but when it comes to philosophy itself, they hold it to the standards of knowledge they themselves have prescribed" thus allowing certain people to have the control of the domain of knowledge production, and essentially the ability to control the definitive process of using knowledge as a basis for liberation. George Yancy, ed. *African-American Philosophers: 17 Conversations* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

⁹⁶ McClendon, "Materialist Philosophical Inquiry and African American Studies," 74.

of African Americans is not due to the non-material (i.e. values, ideas, and culture), but because of the material circumstances stemming from modes of production that inform class distinctions and the oppressive conditions found in society.

By using philosophical materialism as my critical apparatus I will be able to assess James H. Cone and William R. Jones' Black Liberation theologies for their liberatory capabilities.

Morrison argues, "Black philosophy analyzes a method or a theology for its decisions and intentions relative to such polar alternatives in order to identify its causal contributions to racism and to the dehumanization of man."⁹⁷ The framework for the entire dissertation assumes Black religious discourse is open to the process of a definitive philosophical assessment as part of the discourse to determine if our values and belief systems contribute to dehumanization.⁹⁸

⁹⁷ Morrison, "Black Philosophy: An Instrument for Cultural and Religious Liberation," 15.

⁹⁸ The Black philosophical tradition has a strong legacy of investigating core philosophical inquiries, including the process of understanding the conception of God in the Black religious tradition. These philosophers, both formally and informally trained, are integral in understanding the conceptual framework and empirical presence of religion in the Black community. For more on critical assessments of conventional norms of BLT, see, Norm Allen, Jr., ed. *African-American Humanism* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1991); *The Black Humanist Experience: An Alternative to Religion* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2003); Katie G. Cannon, *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (New York: Continuum, 1995); "Hitting a Straight Lick with a Crooked Stick: The Womanist Dilemma in the Development of a Black Liberation Ethic," in *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1980-1992*, ed. James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore. (New York: Orbis Books, 1987); *Black Womanist Ethics*. (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988); Katie G. Cannon, Emilie M. Townes, and Angela D. Sims, eds., *Womanist Theological Ethics: A Reader*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011); William R. Jones, "The Case for Black Humanism,"; Jones, "Theodicy and Methodology in Black Theology: A Critique of Washington, Cone and Cleage," *The Harvard Theological Review* 64, no. 4 (1971); Jones, "Theism and Religious Humanism: The Chasm Narrows"; Jones, "Religious Humanism: Its Problems and Prospects in Black Religion and Culture," *Journal of Interdenominational Theological Center* 7, no. 2 (1980); Pinn, *Why Lord?*; Pinn, *Moral Evil and Redemptive Suffering*; Pinn, *African American Humanist Principles: Living and Thinking Like the Children of Nimrod* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004); Pinn, *The African American Religious Experience in America*; Pinn, ed., *African American Religious Cultures*, 2 vols. (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2009); Pinn, "Jesus and Justice: An Outline of Liberation Theology within Black Churches," *Cross Currents* 57, no. 2 (2007); Delores S. Williams, "Womanist Theology: Black Women's Voices," in *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1980-1992*, ed. James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore. (New York: Orbis Books, 1987.)

Historical Contextualizations of Black Liberation Theology

The historical context is concerned with understanding the core beliefs as presented through a Christian perspective during specific realities. These systematic core beliefs are identified through core doctrines, creeds, and church rituals as representative of the theologies presented. Understandably, the core beliefs within the Black community are not monolithic and as such, have a diverse history that supports the evolution of religious thought. This is apparent in the development of humanism and Womanist Christianity, even though these views can be best understood as outside the normative viewpoint, they are also part of the larger phenomenon of religious teaching in the Black community. Regardless of the theological standpoint, the systematic core beliefs found in the Black tradition should be open to various modes of investigation and criticism. I am assessing the theological arguments of Cone and Jones from a philosophical perspective, which is concerned with the logical progression of ideas and concepts. Once these core beliefs are identified, they can be understood as part of a cultural practice within a definitive historical context, which was influenced by theological perspectives and ideologies.⁹⁹ This is a *conceptual* analysis about theological claims and therefore will only take the historical

⁹⁹ The historicity of philosophy is concerned with the historical (empirical) and the conceptualization of philosophy. Although philosophy can be understood as ahistorical, in the case of the African American tradition the basic presumptions are grounded in a “process of motion, change, and development.” See McClendon, III. “The African American Philosopher and Academic Philosophy: On the Problem of Historical Interpretation.” *The American Philosophical Association Newsletter* 4, no. 1 (2004): 3.

context within a specific time period into consideration as a influence on the theologies of Jones and Cone.¹⁰⁰

Black Theology and Black theologians were responding to a different context in the 1960s and 1970s than what was amidst during the “invisible institution.” The “invisible institution” is a reference that is symbolic of the religious landscape during slavery in the United Staes. Enslaved African Americans combined African religious beliefs with Christian ideals as a way to survive the atrocious conditions of slavery. Enslaved African Americans were forbidden by the White planter-class to practice their religious beliefs because of a fear that such beliefs would insight insubordination and resistance. Despite the legal restriction imposed by the planterocracy on religious worship by slaves, enslaved African Americans continued to participate in religious communion by secretly holding meetings at night, invisible to the eyes of their masters.¹⁰¹ During these secret meetings, slaves openly expressed their desire for liberation in this world and the next; a position that was forbidden while attending church with their master.

¹⁰⁰ The history and evolution of the Black religious tradition is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but the work of several scholars offer a historical conceptualization and basis for my understanding of the historical journey of African peoples in the United States. Additionally, the sources offer insight into the influences of religious phenomena that took place within the United states and beyond, specifically in its influence of Protestantism in the context of the United States, including the intersections of religious doctrines within the Black and white communities. These include the building of independent Black religious organizations, both informal and formal. African American religious traditions developed separately and uniquely than its white counterpart, but neither tradition existed in a vacuum, an important conceptualization to keep in mind when attempting to understand the evolutionary context of BLT, which in some instances is a reaction to white *Christian* ideologies. The problematic nature of conventional Christian BLT ideals is discussed in Chapter 2. See, Pinn, *The African American Religious Experience in America*; Pinn, ed., *African American Religious Cultures*; Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978); Raboteau, *Canaan Land: A Religious History of African Americans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

¹⁰¹ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*. Also see, Timothy Smith, “Slavery and Theology: The Emergence of Black Christian Consciousness in Nineteenth-Century America.” In *Church History* 41, no. 4 (Dec. 1972).

The ‘invisible institution’ is chronologically located during slavery, but seems to reach its peak during the Second Great Awakening (1790-1850s).¹⁰²

By challenging traditional interpretations of the Bible, Black theologians during the twentieth-century were building upon the theological views of earlier Black religious leaders to, “define, present, and explain” the revealed truths found in biblical text and church doctrine, while denouncing false (oppressive) theological perspectives.¹⁰³

What black theology did was place actions directed toward black socio-economic and political empowerment in a theological context. The significance of black theology is found in the conviction that the content of the Christian gospel is liberation.¹⁰⁴

Black Liberation Theology was born out of the political and economic turmoil that birthed the Black Power Movement of the 1960s and 1970s as a way to accommodate those with a religious affiliation to participate in the secular Black Power Movement. James Cone, in 1969 with his first book, *Black Theology and Black Power*, confirmed the radical approach of Black theologies intensity on liberatory qualities. In addition to Cone’s focus on Black Liberation Theology, we also see a change in Black theologians credentials as formally trained in theology and religious studies from accredited institutions.¹⁰⁵ Prior to the 1960s, the opportunities afforded to Black intellectuals were limited, but not non-existent. Within a theological framework Black scholars found ways to redefine the meaning of religion as a response to the needs of the Black community. Those early Black religious leaders, although having theological differences, were

¹⁰² Raboteau, *Canaan Land*, 42.

¹⁰³ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation*.

¹⁰⁴ Allison Calhoun-Brown, "The Image of God: Black Theology and Racial Empowerment in the African American Community." *Review of Religious Research* 40, no. 3 (1999): 198.

¹⁰⁵ John H. McClendon, III. "Charles Leander Hill: Philosopher and Theologian." *The A.M.E. Church Review* 119, no. 390 (Apr-June 2003).

mainly motivated to find new religious institutions to escape the racist environments of white churches and white seminaries. Essentially, Black Liberation Theology is a representation of Black Power through the auspice of theology.¹⁰⁶ In other words, Black Liberation Theology offers a theological perspective towards emerging Black political movements that emphasized Black political empowerment and social equality.¹⁰⁷

Beginning in 1964 with the publication of Joseph R. Washington's *Black Religion: The Negro and Christianity in the United States* we see a shift in Black theological thought and how it was conceptualized and presented to the Black community. Washington's theological perspectives built upon a notion of reconciliation between whites and Blacks as the mode for Black liberation.¹⁰⁸

However, Washington's second book, *The Politics of God: The Future of the Black Churches*, published in 1967, examines the institutionalization of the Black Church and the need for a serious theology that takes the fundamental issue of oppression as the centralized purpose of the Black Church. Washington contends that Black Liberation Theology reconciles Black Power and Christianity as a way to make it relevant for African Americans and the current socio-political developments in the Black community. The dynamic change in Black Theology post-Washington employs the use of new theological claims to support various concepts found in Black Liberation theologies. Not well received at the time, Washington advances a notion of Christianity that is separate from the Western (i.e. white) perspectives of Christian thought. Washington presents African Americans as the chosen people of God, as can be verified via

¹⁰⁶ Harding, "The Religion of Black Power." Also see, Vincent Harding, forward to *Jesus and the Disinherited*, by Howard Thurman (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996).

¹⁰⁷ Harding, "The Religion of Black Power."

¹⁰⁸ Hopkins, *Introducing Black Theology of Liberation*, 29.

biblical scripture. Washington argues that African Americans are God's chosen people in support of his objective to produce a religion that centralizes Black Power as a significant Black religion. Once Washington's critical critique of white Christianity was published, James Cone, Albert Cleage, and William R. Jones all published book-length studies within ten years of his influential books. The response by Cone and Jones suggests another shift in the theoretical framework of Black Liberation Theology by stressing the need for material change as a means for liberation. Earlier Black theologians fought for eschatological liberation, whereas Jones and Cone are specifically focused on material changes that can lead to ESP equalities.

Contribution to African American Studies

Because this is an apologia, it is necessary to explain the ideas and concepts I am defending. I am defending a principle of liberation that is open to internal and external forms of criticism. The primary reason for challenging the theological conceptualizations of Black Liberation Theology is to critically analyze the respective theologies and their corresponding theological claims for their liberatory potential. The normative ideas and values that have cultural acceptance in the Black community may not necessarily be helpful in our quest for liberation. Therefore, I believe that all beliefs and theological claims need to be evaluated in light of their liberatory qualities.¹⁰⁹

Secondly, this dissertation is important because it is actively challenging the rhetoric of a moderate/conservative political landscape that declares the United States as a 'post-racial' society, and therefore negating the need for Black liberation or the need for liberation theory.¹¹⁰ I

¹⁰⁹ Jones, *IGWR?*, ix-xiv, 41; Morrison, "Black Philosophy."

¹¹⁰ A post racial society indicates a society in which race and racism are no longer areas of concern. In this sense, race is no longer a controlling factor in oppressive conditions or unequal treatment. Therefore, a post racial society negates the need for liberation from institutionalized and structural racism.

simply believe that this ‘new’ society is not only a fictitious representation of our current social climate, but also fails to recognize the reality of the racialized landscape in the United States. Institutionalized racism, or what Jones calls *neo-racism*, has infiltrated the core of the economic and political foundation in the United States.¹¹¹ This latter type of racism is where my study has led me; a place where theological claims and beliefs are the focus of inquiry to ensure they do not support neo-racist qualities. My purpose in this dissertation is to challenge this neo-racist rhetoric that liberation is no longer necessary because we live in a race-neutral state. I refuse to believe that our current society is beyond the scope of using race as an influence towards making decisions that in turn affect the socio-economic and political conditions of certain peoples. This is why Black Studies and the Black intellectual tradition continue to challenge the false conceptions of a post-racial society that diverts attention away from the struggles at hand.¹¹²

Lastly, I am defending a philosophical position as a viable option for critiquing theories of Black liberation. As will be discussed below, the Black philosophical tradition is historically responsible for attacking irrational racial claims set forth by white intellectuals intended to diminish the intellect, character, and personhood of African descendent peoples.¹¹³ These oppressive claims are not only in the form of language, but also in the form of practice. It is our duty, as Black Studies scholars to assess if there are still remnants of oppressive practices still

¹¹¹ Jones, “Oppression, Race, and Humanism,” 7, 10. Jones defines neo-racism as “the mutant form of racism that is prevalent today. We mistake the disguise of racism for its decline and fail [sic] to recognize that racism has mutated.” Also see *IGWR?*, xvi.

¹¹² Manning Marable, “Black Studies and the Racial Mountain.” *Souls* 2, no. 3 (2000): 17-36.

¹¹³ Alexander Crummell, “Civilization, the Primal Need of the Race.” In *American Negro Academy*, edited by American Negro Academy. (Washington D.C.: American Negro Academy, 1898); Richard T. Greener, “The Intellectual Position of the Negro.” *The National Quarterly Review*, no. July (1880).

active and prevalent in our own communities. If so, we must destroy these ideas and practices so progress towards liberation is not inhibited.

Overview of Chapters

“Chapter 2: Contextualizations: Methodological Objectives in the Black Liberation Theology of James H. Cone and William R. Jones,” discusses the methodological structures of Cone and Jones. I explore the philosophical boundaries of biblical theological inquiries into the interpretation of how the Bible is understood—literally or symbolically—as the controlling principle in Cone’s work. I briefly explore the influence of other theological concepts found in Cone’s own theological framework.¹¹⁴ The Bible is the foundation of Cone’s theology; therefore I will assess its liberatory usefulness. This includes, in the case of Cone, the Exodus and the Resurrection of Jesus Christ, as verifiable forms of knowledge that can be used to inform the natural world.

Jones methodological apparatus uses Philosophical Theology to satisfy the problematic of theodicy through a de novo approach for examining religious doctrines that may be antithetical to liberation. The primary concern of this chapter is to describe Cone’s theological enterprise and to offer a brief contextualization of the challenges and limitations as part of the larger theological and philosophical conversation.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ For more information see Wilmore and Cone, *Black Theology*. Gustavo Gutierrez and James Cone were in conversation regarding Liberation Theology as early as 1973. See James H. Cone, “From Geneva to São Paulo: A Dialogue between Black Theology and Latin American Liberation Theology.” In *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1980-1992*, for more about the relationship between BLT and Liberation Theology in Latin America. See also, James H. Cone, “Black Theology and Third World Theologies.” In *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1980-1992*. Cone speaks to Barth’s influence on his own work in *BTL*, 21-39.

¹¹⁵ The conversation between Cone and other theologians are all different. Cone encourages dialogue between Liberation theologians to challenge the current theological viewpoints and continue to reinterpret theological views in regards to the liberation of the oppressed.

“Chapter 3: A Criticism of Selected Critics: Transgressing Conventional Themes and Normative Boundaries,” explores the legitimacy and validity of placing Jones within the boundaries of BLT. Additionally, this chapter serves as an analytical framework to explore the conventional strategies of BLT through the ancillary principles of canon, creed, church, and culture. Through this framework I will explore the shortcomings and limitations of a Christian-centric theological system as a possibility for a liberation theory. By redefining and reconceptualizing the importance of liberation and theodicy as controlling principles for a viable liberation theory, I challenge the notion that BLT is inherently Christian in nature.

“Chapter 4: Theology and Meta-Theological Considerations in James H. Cone’s Black Liberation Theology,” examines James H. Cone’s theological enterprise. A descriptive analysis of Cone’s theological concepts will explore the conception of God that is created based upon the theological assumptions present in his body of scholarship. Information on Cone has been collected from close readings of his scholarly works and scholarship related to his theological position.

Through biblical events, Cone challenges and reinterprets biblical scripture and Christian doctrine to highlight the liberatory qualities of God’s work in the human world. Cone claims that the presentation of Christian beliefs, via the mainstream white tradition, does not seriously engage God as a liberator for the oppressed and the downtrodden. By highlighting these two biblical events, Cone redefines how God is viewed within the Black community, by providing biblical proof that God is in support of African Americans, and hence a different conception of God is constructed based upon his biblical hermeneutic.

The fifth chapter, entitled, “Chapter 5: Theology and Meta-Theological Considerations in William R. Jones’ Philosophical Theology,” explores the concept of God in Jones’ theology

through a lens of Philosophical Theology. By using philosophical methods as the controlling mechanism, Jones builds a theology that explores the boundaries of theological claims and theological methods. Jones accepts the existence of God as methodologically necessary and self-evident in crafting a theology of liberation. I will descriptively explore Jones' theological framework by highlighting the task of creating a Philosophical Theology that ultimately positions God outside of the human world, but still within ontological reach. God has granted humans functionally ultimacy over human history, but God's 'moral DNA' may still be responsible for our ethical valuation.¹¹⁶ Included in this chapter is a brief assessment of the concept of theodicy and how it has grounded Jones' theological position of humanocentric theism.

Jones believed that philosophy is a tool for confronting the oppressive nature, and therefore dedicated his life to promoting a philosophy of liberation that eradicates racism and oppression.¹¹⁷ Jones' theological position is unique because he uses an interwoven combination of theological and philosophical frameworks as the core for his perspective. This interconnection, which is part of an early black intellectual tradition, is thoroughly acknowledged

¹¹⁶ Jones, "Theism and Religious Humanism: The Chasm Narrows."

¹¹⁷ John H. McClendon, III. "Dr. William Ronald Jones (July 17, 1933-July 13, 2012): On the Legacy of the Late "Dean" of Contemporary African American Philosophers." *American Philosophical Association Newsletter* 12, no. 2 (2013); Brittany L. O'Neal, "William R. Jones's Humanocentric Theism: Reconceptualizing the Black Religious Experience." *American Philosophical Association Newsletter on Philosophy and the Black Experience* 12, no. 2 (Spring 2013): 20; George Yancy, "The Honor Was All Mine: A Conversation with William R. Jones," *American Philosophical Association Newsletter* 12, no. 2 (2013).

in the work of Jones.¹¹⁸ For example, Jones is concerned with reconceptualizing Black Theology's claim to liberation by underlining the interest of African Americans, which is and has been unequivocal liberation from material oppression. Jones suggests that our interests have been served by Black theological means, but those means no longer support us in our current journey towards advanced liberation.¹¹⁹ Jones' assessment of Black Liberation Theology is not necessarily critical of God as such, but of God as presented and used by theologians as a method of liberation. Jones is challenging the fundamental theological claims that place a personal God at the center of human reality. Jones replaces God as the means of liberation with a humanist perspective of human accountability as the only way to human liberation, and therefore Black liberation. By using the methodological concepts of theodicy and functional ultimacy, Jones is challenging the legitimacy of Christian-centric Black Liberation Theology as a tool for liberation, and this challenge is part of the larger critical philosophical tradition found in the Black intellectual history.¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ Greener, "The Intellectual Position of the Negro."; Jones, "Towards an Interim Assessment of Black Theology." *The Christian Century* 89, no. May 3, 1972 (1972): 513-17; Jones, "Report of the Subcommittee on the Participation of Blacks in Philosophy." Paper presented at the American Philosophical Association, Chicago, 1973-1974; Jones, "The Legitimacy and Necessity of Black Philosophy: Some Preliminary Considerations." *The Philosophical Forum, A Quarterly* IX, 2-3, no. Winter-Spring (1977-78); McClendon, III., "Richard B. Moore, Radical Politics and the Afro-American History Movement: The Formation of a Revolutionary Tradition in African-American Intellectual Culture." *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History* 30 (July 2006): 7-46; Milton Sernett, *African American Religious History: A Documentary Witness*. (Durham: Duke UP, 1999).

¹¹⁹ Jones, *IGWR?*; "The Case for Black Humanism"; Jones, "Theodicy and Methodology in Black Theology"; Jones, "Theism and Religious Humanism"; Jones, "Oppression, Race, and Humanism."

¹²⁰ Jones' use of functional ultimacy clearly departs from the common held notion that God is involved in the human world. Essentially, the principle of *functional ultimacy* is concerned with the "radical freedom" of man. Thus man is accountable and responsible for the actions within the world. Functional ultimacy is a key component in Jones's humanocentric theism, which will be explored in my dissertation. See, Jones, "Theism and Religious Humanism"; Yancy, "The Honor Was All Mine," 5.

Black intellectuals have poignantly addressed these fallacies by presenting counter narratives to expose these fictitious claims and overtly racist stereotypes.¹²¹ Black philosophers and Black theologians have been concerned with renouncing these fallacies by promoting corrective action, through the method of recovering and reconstructing the intellectual contributions of African Americans. Black philosophers, in conjunction with Black theologians, have been at the forefront of Black thought and intellectual history. This tradition is part of a phenomenon that is the precursor to the institutionalization of Black Studies as an academic unit.¹²² The Black intellectuals of yesteryear were concerned with corrective action through rigorous scholarship and practical application, which remains our current focus in Black Studies today.

The last chapter, “Chapter 6: Conclusion: External Criticism and Philosophical Materialism: Towards a Transformative Black Liberation Theory,” concludes the dissertation and

¹²¹ William Augustus Banner, "Fundamentals of Christian Social Order." *Journal of Religious Thought* 6, no. 1 (Aut-Winter 1949): 6-17; Crummell, "Civilization, the Primal Need of the Race"; Greener, "The Intellectual Position of the Negro."

¹²² There is a long history in the Black intellectual tradition where African American philosophers had a direct connection in Theology or Religious Studies. This includes Black philosophers/theologians whom have earned academic credentials in the opposing field, and taught in both fields in the academy. Black intellectuals have maneuvered between the philosophy/theology thresholds as part of a prominent Black intellectual deliberation. These intellectuals includes: Martin Luther King, Jr and Major Jones--both from Boston University; Richard I. McKinney; and Robert C. Williams, among a long list of others. Take for example, Thomas Nelson Baker and Charles Leander Hill; both intellectuals had a comprehensive knowledge of theology and philosophy, and therefore had research interests in both disciplines. Baker was the first African American to earn a Ph.D in Philosophy from a university in the United States, in 1903, from Yale University. He was formally trained in philosophy, but was also active in the theological community. While completing his degree requirements in philosophy, Baker was also an active ordained minister at a local church in New Haven, Connecticut. From this brief description, we can see the connection between philosophy/theology in the Black intellectual record. The first African-American to earn a PhD in Philosophy was Patrick Francis Healy. However, he had to go abroad to the University of Luvaine in Belgium (1865). Healy went on to become the president of Georgetown University. Healy was also a Catholic priest. These includes, but is not limited to: Richard I. McKinney, Marquis L Harris, Samuel W Williams, William R. Jones, Roy Morrison, Carlton Lee, and Robert C. Williams, among others.; See, McClendon, "Richard B. Moore, Radical Politics and the Afro-American History Movement"; "Materialist Philosophical Inquiry and African American Studies."

will include an assessment of the theological claims presented by Jones and Cone from the context of philosophical materialism. My goal is to gauge the liberatory potential of both theological perspectives in light of their philosophical rationale. As stated above, I will assess the theologies of Cone and Jones through the philosophical framework of philosophical materialism. I will offer an assessment of which theological viewpoints offer a higher potential for liberation from material conditions. My current position leads me to assess theological claims for their usefulness in the eradication of oppressive conditions found in the material world. Using a combination of sources from Jones and Cone, published over the last 40 years, in addition to sources from other Black theologians and scholars of religion, I will provide a holistic account of the various arguments found within this discourse.

In conclusion this dissertation considers the liberation compatibility of the theologies presented and offers a nuanced response by presenting a philosophical assessment that challenges the prescriptive notion of liberation in Black Liberation Theology. I intend to offer further consideration for future research to continue the dialogue about liberation theories in Black Studies. In the end, I will attempt to satisfy my overriding thesis: how do the theological claims of Jones and Cone affect the socio-political liberation of African Americans.

Chapter 2: Contextualizations: Methodological Objectives in the Black Liberation Theologies of James H. Cone and William R. Jones

Defining Black Liberation Theology: Boundaries and Borders

The National Committee of Black (Negro) Churchmen (Christians), an institutionalized body that represents the concerns of Black clergy and religious leaders describe Black Theology as the humanizing principle in a world full of social inequality. The humanizing principle in Black Theology is aligned with a reinterpretation of religious doctrines and religious creeds to find a meaningful interpretation that considers the life experiences of African Americans. In this respect the National Committee of Black Churchmen, in 1969, defined Black Theology as:

Black Theology is a theology of black liberation. It seeks to plumb the black condition in the light of God's revelation in Jesus Christ, so that the black community can see that the gospel is commensurate with the achievement of black humanity. Black Theology is a theology of "blackness." It is the affirmation of black humanity that emancipates black people from white racism, thus providing authentic freedom for both white and black people. It affirms the humanity of white people in that it says No to the encroachment of white oppression.¹

The National Committee of Black Churchmen (NCBC) opined that Black Theology is concerned with the lived reality of oppressive conditions found historically in the Black community. As a priority, Black Theology must demarcate from a "this-worldly" approach in order to create positive changes in the socio-political reality of African Americans. In addition to the definition provided by the NCBC, some proponents of Black Theology expand the definition beyond the borders of Christian perspectives to include other religious and theological practices that

¹ "Black Theology: Statement by the National Committee of Black Churchmen." In *Black Theology: A Documentary History*, edited by James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore. (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993), 38.

challenge material oppression from a theological perspective.² Cecil Cone and C. Eric Lincoln offered a critique of the NCBC's definition as being too limited in scope and too narrow in focus, whereas conventional themes of Black Theology fail to account for the importance of non-Christian perspectives, most specifically traditional and syncretic African religious beliefs.³

The definition offered by the NCBC brings forth two additional concerns that will be discussed in this chapter: First, Black Theology offers a corrective theological approach that reinterprets traditional (racist) interpretations of Christian beliefs by suggesting that Black Theology allow the Black community to "see that the gospel is commensurate with the achievement of black humanity." To equate the Christian gospel with the reality of African Americans requires a connection be made between the liberatory acts in the Bible and the history of African Americans. As a member of the NCBC, James H. Cone draws a similar connection between the Bible and the Black experience by suggesting the Bible is a historical account of "God's mighty acts in history."⁴

² See Cecil Cone, *The Identity Crisis in Black Theology* and C. Eric Lincoln, *Race, Religion, and the Continuing American Dilemma* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1984); and Lincoln, *The Black Muslims in America* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973). Also see, John Mbiti, "An African Views American Black Theology" in Wilmore and Cone, *Black Theology: A Documentary History, vol. 1, 1966-1979*, (Second Edition), 379. In addition, Sylviane Diouf's *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas* (New York: New York UP, 1998), provides an in-depth examination of Islamic religious practices found in the slave communities in North America.

³ This dissertation does not focus on African religious perspectives. This dissertation is confined to the ideological thought of Jones and Cone. For African perspectives on theological claims, see John S. Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy* (New York: Praeger, 1969); Also see, Tokunboh Adeyemo, *Salvation in African Tradition* (Nairobi: Evangel, 1979); Kwesi Dickson and P. Ellington, eds. *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1969); John Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa* (New York: Praeger, 1970); Mbiti, "An African Views American Black Theology." *Worldview* 17 (1974): 41-44; Itumeleng J. Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989); Jacob Olupona. *African Traditional Religions in Contemporary Society* (New York: Paragon House, 1991)

⁴ Cone, "Biblical Revelation and Social Existence", in Wilmore and Cone, *Black Theology: A Documentary History, vol. 1, 1966-1979*. (Second Edition), 160. Cone's claim that the Bible is a history book will be discussed later in this chapter. This chapter will explore the methodological limitation of equating stories from the Bible as an accurate historical portrayal of the African American experience.

Next, the definition offered by the NCBC describes the objective of Black Theology as relevant to social issues: “It is the affirmation of black humanity that emancipates black people from white racism, thus providing authentic freedom for both white and black people.” The emphasis on liberation from white racism or institutional (structural) racism suggests that Black Theology must remain cognizant to the current social conditions, but from the cultural perspective of “Black consciousness,” and ontological Blackness.⁵

For William R. Jones, Black Theology as a theology of liberation reflects upon the theological implications that surround certain conceptions of God in relationship to the maldistribution of suffering in the African American community.⁶ Jones, whom is considered outside the conventional borders of Black Christian Theology, is not within the parameters of Christian doctrine, but instead aligns his theological system within Philosophical Theology.⁷ He is afforded the privilege of internal critique of theological arguments, while steering clear of

⁵ See Cone, *BTBP*, 19 and *BTL*, 25. Cone emphasizes the importance of affirming Blackness as a critical step in the liberation of African Americans, “...in order for the oppressed blacks to regain their identity, they must affirm the very characteristic which the oppressors ridicules—*blackness*. Until white America is able to accept the beauty of blackness there can be no peace, no integration in the higher sense. Black people must withdraw and form their own culture, their own way of life.” (p. 18). See also, Victor Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism* (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1995). An examination of ontological Blackness is covered in Chapter 4.

⁶ John Mbiti suggests that BLT is first concerned with Blackness and secondly is concerned with liberation. See “An African Views American Black Theology” in *Black Theology: A Documentary History, vol. 1, 1966-1979*. (Second Edition).

⁷ See Chapter 3: “A Criticism of Selected Critics: Transgressing Conventional Themes and Normative Boundaries.”

Christian-specific viewpoints.⁸ Roy D. Morrison, a close friend of Jones and a fellow philosopher states,

Jones is probably the only member of the family of thinkers who employs critical philosophical analysis to make a critique of the internal structures of traditional black religion... In other words, when all of the technical terminology and all the apologetic arguments have been explored, black theology asks what, if anything, does God do for black people... Jones goes further than any of his colleagues in pursuing this issue because he gives philosophical attention to the question of methodology in this context.⁹

The reason for Jones' critique of Christian theological positions is not grounded in atheism or Christophobia, but is part of his role as protagonist. Jones assumes a *de novo* approach towards examining religious doctrines that may be antithetical to liberation. In other words, Jones is not consumed by religious doctrines that *assumes* the totality of God's benevolence in the world, but instead considers the reflective conclusions of divine racism and requires us to ask: "Is God a White Racist?" The possibility of divine racism informs the methodological system in Jones' theology because "God's benevolence is not self-evident."¹⁰ Cone's theological system begins within a certain set of theological doctrines, associated with the Christian faith. While on the other hand, Jones proposes a non-Christian theological enterprise that is not bound to a specific set of conclusions to act as a prolegomenon to Black Theology.

⁸ Jones' methodology provides a comprehensive examination of the Christian tradition. Furthermore, Jones in "Theodicy and Methodology in Black Theology" states, "[w]e suggest, rather, that the theodicy question must control the theological enterprise. Christological and eschatological options, for instance, must be weighed in terms of their value to the theodicy problem. Black theology, we purport to show, must be an extended theodicy" (p. 142). See also, *IGWR?*, Part I and page 170 on internal criticism. Also See John H. McClendon, III, and Brittany L. O'Neal. "William R. Jones and Philosophical Theology: Transgressing and Transforming Conventional Boundaries of Black Liberation Theory." *American Philosophical Association: Philosophy and the Black Experience* 13, no. 1 (2013).

⁹ Roy D. Morrison, II. "Self-Transformation in American Blacks: The Harlem Renaissance and Black Theology." In *Existence in Black*, edited by Lewis R. Gordon. (New York: Routledge, 1997), 46.

¹⁰ Jones, *Theism and Religious Humanism*, 523.

This chapter will highlight the methodological structures in the respective theologies of William R. Jones and James H. Cone by constructing an analytical framework to determine if their theologies are controlled by the precepts of liberation and the eradication of oppressive conditions. The methodological practices of Jones (Philosophical Theology) and Cone (Biblical Theology) both claim to centralize liberation as the controlling factor. This chapter is a philosophical critique of the methodological strategies used by Cone and Jones to determine whether or not their respective theologies support Black liberation, and if so, what conceptual markers act as normative values for Black liberation.

Cone, through unabashed criticism, suggests *complete emancipation* from white oppression will only be served “through identification with God’s intention for humanity.”¹¹ God’s intention for humanity, which is ambiguous and unclear, requires the Black theologian to identify which theological doctrines undergird the conclusion that God is on the side of the oppressed. From this point, Jones’ methodological strategy requires that the Black theologian not presume God’s role in the liberation of African Americans, but first must question whether there is empirical evidence to support the claims propagated by Cone and others.¹²

Both theological systems rely on different modes of interaction with God, and each has a distinct understanding of God’s relationship with man, which informs their respective theological and methodological strategies.¹³ Being part of the Christian family of faiths implies certain

¹¹ Cone, *BTBP*, 29. To complicate the initiative for BLT and the liberation of African American’s see Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness*, 98-104. This will be further discussed in Chapter 4 when outlining the theological position of Cone.

¹² Jones, “Theodicy and Methodology,” 142-143; and Jones, *IGWR?*, 206. Jones discusses the importance of the virus-vaccine model for Black Liberation Theology.

¹³ The respective theological positions of Cone and Jones will be discussed in their respective chapter. The point of demarcation is significant in the theological structure because depending upon the point of departure (i.e. Christianity) certain presumptions must be considered before attaching a label of approval.

restrictive values and goals be present in the analysis.¹⁴ This includes consistently employing key Christian doctrines supported by religious documents, such as, “God is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent” and Jesus Christ as the Son of God, when trying to assess human reality.¹⁵ Presenting theological perspectives that are decisively liberatory, Cone decidedly employs these attributes, and others Christian doctrines as part of his liberation theology.¹⁶

Jones, on the other hand, incorporates a method that is not located within the Christian canon. Instead he employs a philosophical analysis of God, in light of Black suffering, and tactfully postpones using Christian religious doctrine until there is evidence to support its liberatory potential. Therefore, he does not presume certain religious claims such as God’s omnibenevolence, or God’s election for African Americans until they have been tested against “a

¹⁴ Theology does not necessarily assumes that knowledge of the supernatural can be known, it only assumes that the supernatural exist, other subfields of theology address issues of knowledge and intention. Theology operates from a distinct methodological stance that offers a certain ontological presupposition of a God. There are methodological and ontological distinctions that theology shares with other disciplines of knowledge, for example, epistemology of theology, metaphysics, ethics, logic, aesthetics.

¹⁵ The divinity of Jesus Christ varies depending upon religious doctrine. For our purposes, Cone’s A.M.E. background supports the divinity of Jesus Christ as understood through the Trinity. For a brief overview of Unitarianism and other unconventional conceptions of the divine see Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*. See also, J. Gordon Melton. "Unitarian Universalist Association." In *Religions of the World: A Comprehensive Encyclopedia of Beliefs and Practices*, edited by J. Gordon Melton and Martin Baumann. (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2011); Mays, *The Negro's God*; Mark D. Morrison-Reed, *Darkening the Doorways: Black Trailblazers and Missed Opportunities in Unitarian Universalism* (Boston: Skinner House Books, 2011); Pinn, *The African American Religious Experience in America*;

¹⁶ Jones also employs certain theological components in his presentation of humanocentric theism, one of the conditions Jones is able to maintain is God’s intrinsic goodness. Briefly, Jones is successful in answering his own controlling question: Is God A White Racist?, “I see the need to present the most accurate explanation of ethnic suffering, but not to prop up a sagging belief system, parts of which ought to be allowed to wither away because of their inadequacies as sound accounts of crucial human realities.” *IGWR?*, p. 186. By removing the sovereignty of God to ontological ultimacy, while preserving man’s functional freedom, which has been granted as the consequence of God’s (good) will, man is responsible for the oppression and suffering found in the historical record—God is not to blame for our human condition. Jones’ theological perspective of humanocentric theism will be the topic of Chapter 5.

precise theological method—a virus-vaccine model.”¹⁷ In *Is God a White Racist?*, antithetical fit is not sustainable on its own accord, but is used in conjunction with other methods of inquiry, specifically the idea of ‘praxis verification’ as it relates to the virus/vaccine model. Antithetical fit is a conceptual yardstick used to determine which ideas are helpful or harmful towards liberation. Praxis verification is a mode of inquiry that measures the practical reality of the theological principle through the antithetical fit paradigm. For example, Jones states, “theological statements contain as much truth as they deliver practically in transforming reality.”¹⁸ The combination of antithetical fit and praxis verification ensures that theological ideas meet a theological norm and maintain a value for social reality. Lastly, the virus/vaccine model is related to antithetical fit by defining the virus of oppression, or “infectious agent” so a specific vaccine can be developed to combat the virus. By using antithetical fit and praxis verification to determine what constitutes oppression, a specific vaccine can be developed to destroy the infectious virus of oppression. By using all three methods of inquiry—antithetical fit, praxis verification, and the virus/vaccine model—it is possible to explore which methodological approach of Black Liberation Theologies undergird oppression and which support liberation.

Additionally, Jones intends to demonstrate that God’s omnibenevolence is assumed *a priori* without first identifying specific events to support the assumption that God is “a “soul” brother.” Instead he poses a hypothetical question: Is God a white racist?¹⁹

Jones’ methodological structure cautiously examines the role of God in human history, most notably the claim that God is on the side of the oppressed;

¹⁷ See Jones, *IGWR?*, 152 and fn. 5 on p. 206, where Jones discusses the virus-vaccine model. . See also, Jones, *IGWR?*, p. 207-208; Dorothy Soelle, *Political Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1974), 76.

¹⁸ Jones, *IGWR?*, 208-209.

¹⁹ Jones, “Theodicy and Methodology,” in *Black Theology*, vol. 1, 143.

The appraisal must be total—not even God or Jesus Christ can *a priori* be regarded sacrosanct; they, too, must be jettisoned if they fail the test. Because Black theology suspects that the norms of the Christian tradition are racist, it must proceed, as it were, *de novo*. The entire tradition must be placed under a strict theological ban until each part demonstrates its orthodoxy, the enhancement of black liberation. And since from a *de novo* perspective, the claims God is a racist and God is a “soul” brother, are on equal footing, can consideration of the former claim, we ask, be avoided? Indeed, our previous discussion permits us to say that black theology methodologically contradicts itself if it both adopts a *de novo* approach and emphasizes black suffering, but fails to ask the troublesome question of divine racism. Once the issue is broached, the mandatory next step for black theology is to refute the charge, i.e., formulate a viable theodicy.²⁰

Jones provides additional detail regarding the problematic of presuming God is responsible for human history:

It is not our intent to establish deductive requirements for a viable theodicy. We contend that the issue of divine racism emerges from the events and crimes of history. The answer, likewise, must appeal to historical data and not a mere rational or theoretical formulation unsubstantiated by the actual history of blacks. It will become clear that the presupposition of the black theologians—the politics of God, the priority of the black experience, etc.—dictate that the actual black experience, past, present, or future, must be the arena for debate, and not abstract possibilities.²¹

What we gather from the theological differences between Jones and Cone is the absence of producing evidence of a liberation event—in respect to African Americans—to determine God’s nature. Because there is no evidence that God has intervened on behalf of African Americans, we mustn’t prematurely come to the conclusion that God *is* for the oppressed; to do so creates an environment where Christian religious claims control the theological enterprise instead of acknowledging the central role of material oppression.²² When religious themes are normalized and centralized there is a commitment to include them regardless of the liberatory potential they

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Jones, *IGWR?*, 20. “Without the exaltation event it is not possible to distinguish between the suffering servant and the rank sinner encountering his deserved punishment” (p. 19). Also see John Mbiti’s analysis of American Black Theology where he declares the main concerns of Black Theology are Blackness and liberation, in “An African Views American Black Theology,” 381.

possess. The criteria required to measure liberatory potential is based on first understanding the source of the suffering: what are the sources of suffering? Is the suffering in the Black community a source of divine punishment? Is suffering part of a divine agreement that signifies the oppressed are also God's chosen people? How do we differentiate between suffering and oppression? Is there such a category as positive suffering? These are the questions that drive the conversations we are engaged in.

The similarities between Jones and Cone are many; most importantly they agree that liberation is necessary and mustn't be jeopardized in order to appease the Christian antagonist. This is the premise of *IGWR?*. Jones' analyses of the logical inconsistencies that certain liberation theologians employ leads to a troubled ending when God's assumed election of African Americans intersects with a God that is responsible for Black oppression through the model of the suffering servant or deserved punishment—“[b]ecause its overriding purpose is to exterminate ESP oppression, liberation theologians must follow certain guidelines for theologizing to avoid working at cross-purposes with their goals. In particular, they must identify those beliefs, values, and attitudes that inadvertently nurture oppression and keep it alive.”²³

Jones initially remarks that certain aspects of Black theological discourse assumes prior truths about the Christian God by prioritizing church doctrine through an *a priori* interpretation of God's nature.²⁴ Prioritizing religious doctrine without first determining its liberatory potential runs the risk of promoting a conception of God that logically leads towards quietism— God's

²³ See *IGRW?*, 206. For more on Liberation Theology from Latin America see, Enrique Dussel, *Philosophy of Liberation*. Translated by Aquilina Martinez and Christine Morkovsky. (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1985); Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*.

²⁴ Jones, *IGRW?*, 180.

sovereignty becomes a tool of oppression because God is responsible for the conditions in the natural world and to challenge these conditions may be contrary to God's will. This puts all responsibility on God, without first considering the multievidentiality of God's character. Jones states, "The principle affirmed here is that the black theologian should not desire or expect to fit black theology into the customary Christian or biblical mold. Rather, [s]he should determine whether the biblical faith and the Christian tradition fit the needs of black liberation."²⁵

Theological methods and the process of applying these methods require determining whether or not the methods in question are indeed supportive and plausible for Black liberation.²⁶ Jones poignantly stresses that certain methodological structure and questions of inquiry are vital for a fair and accurate description of BLT. A viable methodology for BLT must consider the social, political, and economic inequalities found in the African American experience:

Its [Black liberation theology] own practitioners were still unclear about what it entailed for theologizing and even less clear about how to translate its theological theory in concrete strategies for economic, social, and political (ESP) reconstruction. Only as these prognostications were tested and verified through debate did liberation theology's underlying principles become clear. Given this muddled state of affairs, liberation theologians operated as pioneers and inventors, constructing a working model, often from scratch, that expressed *their* understanding of liberation theology's mission and method... Liberation theology's point of departure is a context where oppression is already institutionalized and legitimated. It surfaces primarily as a religious protest against the misuse of religion to establish and maintain oppression; its method is customized for this purpose. Because its overriding purpose is to exterminate ESP oppression, liberation theologians must follow certain guidelines for theologizing to avoid working at cross-purposes with their goals. In particular, they must identify those beliefs, values, and attitudes that inadvertently nurture oppression and keep it alive.²⁷

²⁵ Jones, *IGWR?*, 142.

²⁶ The method employed by Cone is biblical textual criticism and biblical hermeneutics. This chapter will examine the problematics in Biblical textual criticism as a methodological strategy for BLT.

²⁷ Jones, *IGWR?*, 205-206.

Jones stresses the need to examine all aspects of the theologians' methodological choices, including sources and norms that are used to construct a Black Liberation Theology. The trajectory of investigation is determined by a *de novo* approach specifying certain threshold questions as controlling principles in their theological system.²⁸ Jones continues,

[T]he threshold question or issue basically controls the theological enterprise can be easily shown. Its answer commits the theologian to a certain methodology, a particular set of categories, or a specific position on the theological spectrum, and these features control and guide the theologian's task. This initial "taking of a position," which the threshold question compels, gives the remainder of the system a particular shape. And clearly any discontinuity between the answer to the threshold issue and the system's superstructure leads to an internal contradiction.²⁹

For the Black Liberation theologian the controlling factor is the role of social oppression and suffering in the Black experience. The threshold question for Cone begins with a reinterpretation of biblical scripture to *find* answers explicitly concerned with the suffering of the oppressed, and a repudiation of racist interpretations of the Bible. For Jones the threshold questions begin through a critique of suffering and oppression—through a theological and philosophical lens—since Black Liberation Theology necessitates progression towards social, political and economic liberation.³⁰ It is therefore the Black Liberation theologian's task to find answers that satisfy the threshold questions before they are able to politicize the nature of God and conclude that God is one with the oppressed.³¹ Because religious doctrines, especially Christian religious tenets stress the personal, imminent nature of God in the human world, the burden of proof falls upon the

²⁸ Jones, "Theodicy and Methodology in Black Theology, 143.

²⁹ Jones, *IGWR?*, 63.

³⁰ See John S. Mbiti, "An African Views American Black Theology." Also see Robison B. James, "A Tillichian Analysis of James Cone's Black Theology." In *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, edited by Christopher Rowland. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

³¹ Jones, *IGWR?*, 73-74.

theologian to provide evidence of God's role in the liberation of the oppressed. Cone identifies several biblical references to support his claim that God is for the oppressed by calling attention to events of liberation (the Exodus, the Resurrection of Jesus, etc.). What is often times overlooked in Cone's theological enterprise is the presupposition that biblical scripture is evidence of documented historical accounts.³²

For Jones, theodicy is the controlling factor for building a viable methodology.³³ The controlling principle for BLT is a critical factor for determining how each theological apparatus shifts towards certain methodological slants. When suffering is the controlling factor, liberation becomes the core objective. However, Jones cautions us, theological systems that are controlled by the question of suffering, should logically lead the philosopher or theologian to a concept of theodicy. As a brief recap, theodicy is the theological category that deals with human suffering in the world in light of God's divine qualities.³⁴ Jones defines theodicy simply as God's justice in the world, (*theos*-"God"; *dike*-justice). Additionally, he offers a more nuanced description of theodicy as a controlling theological concept for BLT;

Once the purpose of theodicy is recognized, its alliance with oppression is further exposed. The aim of theodicy in Christian thought has been to exonerate God's purpose and governance in the face of some questionable and embarrassing features of the human condition. Its goal, in other terms, has been to rob suffering of its pernicious flavor. This is the import of Camus's charge that the Gospels vindicate in advance human suffering

³² See Cone, *God of the Oppressed*; and Cone, *BTL*. Also refer to Jones, *IGWR?*, 18-20. Jones' response to the liberation event is that it is not a specific event of liberation for African Americans. Cone's use of the Bible as a history book will be discussed in this chapter within the section on his respective methodological strategies.

³³ Theodicy is the view "to characterize the topic of God's government of the world in relation to the nature of man. The problem is the *justification* of God's goodness and justice in view of the evil in the world." quoted from *Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion: Eastern and Western Thought*, Edited by William L. Reese, (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1980), 573. [Emphasis added]; See also, Jones, "Theodicy: The Controlling Category for Black Theology."

³⁴ Jones, *IGWR?*, 40-60, but especially pp. 43-44. For Jones's interpretation of Camus' theodicy see *IGWR*, pp. 45-54.

and death. This is also what Marx, before him, meant in speaking of religion as an “opiate.” Marx, no doubt, would have been on safer grounds had he defined *theodicy*, rather than religion per se, as an opiate.³⁵

A theological explanation of justifying “God’s goodness and justice in view of the evil in the world,” is more than the apologetic response offered here, but is about the centrality of the *cause* of suffering. Jones is asking whether certain types of suffering (negative/positive) are justified, and therefore necessary?³⁶ Jones concludes that suffering must be defined as negative in order for it to be eliminated, I argue however that all suffering is inherently negative and there are no theological or supernatural reasons or causation for Black suffering and oppression. Jones maintains that suffering must be defined as negative in order for it to be eliminated.

Thus [the theologian of liberation] must provide an explanation that perceives the suffering as negative. He must show that the suffering that is oppression is not God’s will or sanctioned by nature. He must, in sum, desanctify the suffering in question, or else the oppressed will not regard their suffering as oppressive and will not be motivated to attack it.”³⁷

Death and pain are not conditions of suffering, but are part of the human condition. However, suffering and oppression as understood in the light of BLT is more than pain that is part of the natural human condition, but is ESP oppression and suffering caused by social forces, including the production of labor and inequality. The methodological system—biblical hermeneutics and Philosophical Theology—offers a distinct perspective on the causes and solutions to African American oppression, via BLT.

³⁵ Jones, *IGWR?*, 43.

³⁶ On the problem of evil see, John Hick, “The Problem of Evil.” In *Philosophy of Religion*, edited by Edgar Brightman. (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1963). For an early philosophical discussion of theodicy and the problem of evil see, Gottfried Leibniz’s *Theodicy*, 1709. Also see Michael Murray and Sean Greenberg, “Leibniz on the Problem of Evil.” In *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2013.

³⁷ Jones, *IGWR?*, xxv-xxvi.

Methodological Considerations

The theologies of Cone and Jones offer distinct descriptions of the theological perspectives during a definitive historical moment in the United States—the late-1960s and early-1970s.³⁸ The key methodological positions for Cone and Jones can be represented through a critical examination of two key points: 1). Both offer liberation theologies, and are ultimately concerned with the liberation of African Americans. They are responding to the crises in the lived realities of African Americans in the United States, and therefore the presentation of their theological enterprises are positioned within the social context of African American experiences.³⁹ 2). The difference between Jones and Cone is grounded in their respective theories and methodologies, particularly in the systematic developments of what constitutes Black Liberation Theology; by using a theological framework, Cone, in essence, presumes the existence of God, and offers insights into the relationship between God and man through the use of biblical scripture. This relationship, for Cone grounds the material conditions of Black oppression and liberation to the confines of theological thought. Cone is confined to using biblical hermeneutics and biblical criticism as the primary methodological tool in his Black Liberation Theology.

Jones, on the other hand, is offering a theological critique of God's role in human liberation, which includes *philosophically* analyzing Black Liberation Theology in light of

³⁸ Stephanie Y. Evans, *Black Women in the Ivory Tower, 1850-1954: An Intellectual History* (Gainesville: UP of Florida, 2007); Randolph Hohle, *Black Citizenship and Authenticity in the Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Routledge, 2013); Peniel E. Joseph, ed. *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era* (New York: Routledge, 2006); Joseph, "Black Liberation without Apology: Reconceptualizing the Black Power Movement," *The Black Scholar* 31, no. 3/4 (2001).

³⁹ Cone, *BTBP* and *BTL*. See also Hopkins, *Introducing Black Theology of Liberation*; James H. Evans, Jr., *We Have Been Believers: An African-American Systematic Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992); Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*; Harding, "The Religion of Black Power."

theodicy. In other words, Jones challenges church doctrine and biblical hermeneutics that promotes an apologetic theodicy, which attempts to explain human suffering while casting God in the traditional light of omnipotence, omnibenevolence, and omniscient.⁴⁰ Jones' Philosophical Theology allows for a hypothetical concept of God by undergoing a systematic process of logically (re)constructing a God that takes theodicy into account.⁴¹ Jones supports a view of human freedom/autonomy that "relieves God of the responsibility for the crimes of human history," by positioning humans as functionally ultimate in the natural world.⁴² The level of contact between God and humankind is limited to an ontological relationship. The ontological relationship in Jones' theology will be discussed in Chapter 5. Jones' Philosophical Theology and humanocentric theism realigns the centrality of man as functionally ultimate; creating a contrast in the theological systems of Jones and his interlocutors.⁴³

⁴⁰ Omnibenevolence suggests that suffering should not occur because an All-Good God would not allow pain and suffering. The traditional traits of God call for an omnibenevolent God that suggest there are limitations to God's power because God lacks the power to erase suffering from the human condition/natural condition. This suggests that God may be neither, because suffering continues to disproportionately present itself in the Black community, historically and contemporaneously. Or God could be a white racist with no intentions of liberating African Americans. Apologetic forms of suffering include: A). Suffering is from sinful act of others, suffering from god to those who commit sin; B). Divine or deserved punishment the sinful are punished; C). God's saving work/punishment motivates repentance on the part of those without sin; D). Reduces human arrogance and this humility in view of God's saving grace. Kurt Buhring's doctoral dissertation, completed in 2003, suggests that the concept of power must be challenged when conceptualized through the lens of the divine. Looking at God as weakened by the theodicy debate is questionable; rather looking at the characteristics of power is a viable alternative to attaching a negative quality to God. See Kurt Buhring, "Resistance and Redemption: Conception of God, Freedom, and Ethics in African American Theology and Jewish Theology." PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2003.

⁴¹ Jones, *IGWR?*, 66. Jones states that if one creates a theology by starting with suffering as the central marker, which lead to two distinct possibilities about God. God is a white racist or God is not active in the human world. I want to reiterate that Jones is not an atheist. During a panel discussion with Jones in October 2011, I asked Jones why he does not, theological speaking, removing God from his entire theology, therefore bringing forth an atheistic position in regards to humanocentric theism. Dr. Jones prefaced his comment by plainly stating that he was not an atheist, and therefore his theological claim is theistic in scope and nature.

⁴² "Theism and Religious Humanism: The Chasm Narrows," 522.

⁴³ Ibid.

The different methodological approaches for Jones and Cone offers an interesting and complex dynamic that employs different controlling categories (threshold questions) within their respective theological approaches. Since the controlling categories are different, the tools and instruments included in their toolboxes are equally unique. Cone's toolbox includes granting full authority to God, as substantiated through biblical scripture. For Cone, biblical scripture becomes a source of historical documentation.⁴⁴ Jones' toolbox does not include the Bible or biblical scripture; his toolbox is not filled with religious doctrines and theological commitments and remains consistent with "radical freedom/autonomy as the essence of human reality," as a means to establishing a theological system.⁴⁵

Cone's Biblical Criticism: Problems and Prospects

Biblical criticism and Cone's interpretation of biblical text, or biblical hermeneutics, has a place in BLT, especially within the canon of Cone's theological writings. Black Liberation Theology was born out of a tradition that challenged Western views of biblical interpretations and considered the social realities of African Americans historical realities.⁴⁶ Cain Hope Felder, Professor of New Testament Language and Literature at Howard University, suggests that biblical interpretations and the ideological approach used in biblical hermeneutics is based within

⁴⁴ A discussion on Biblical Scripture as a history book will be discussed below. Also see, McClendon and O'Neal. "William R. Jones and Philosophical Theology: Transgressing and Transforming Conventional Boundaries of Black Liberation Theory."

⁴⁵ Jones, "Theism and Religious Humanism," 522. Jones's concept of humanocentric theism and functional ultimacy will be examined in Chapter 4. Briefly, Jones does not remove or erase the concept of God in his theological position; he only realigns the source of authority in the human historical record from God to human beings.

⁴⁶ Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 162-166.

a certain cultural context.⁴⁷ For Cone this context is grounded within the turbulent 1960s.

Cone's "radical reading" of the Bible, offers an interpretive method of biblical hermeneutics and biblical criticism that is "rooted in the continuing struggle for justice and the attainment of equality."⁴⁸ For radical biblical scholars, an interpretation of biblical scripture through the lens of our current social climate includes an ideological shift from traditional/conservative readings of the Bible. A radical interpretation of biblical scripture extracts the meaning of equality that is visible in the Bible, but is commonly misconstrued to promote the oppressive conditions of the current social state. Cone establishes an interpretation of the Bible that applies the text to our current social climate.⁴⁹ This amended viewpoint offered by Cone is necessary to counter false interpretations of the Bible that fail to consider a message of liberation. Racist interpretations and readings of the Bible have been utilized to promote their own position as modern day oppressors.⁵⁰ As a criticism of Vincent Wimbush's article, "Historical/Cultural Criticism as Liberation: A Proposal for an African American Biblical Hermeneutic," I would argue that

⁴⁷ Cain H. Felder, "Cultural Ideology, Afrocentrism and Biblical Interpretation." Chap. 13 In *Black Theology: A Documentary History: Volume 2, 1980-1992*, edited by James H. Cone and Gayraud Wilmore, 184-95. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 185. Also see, Vincent L. Wimbush, "Historical/Cultural Criticism as Liberation: A Proposal for an African American Biblical Hermeneutic." *Semeia*, no. 7 (1989): 43-55; David Lochhead, *The Liberation of the Bible*. Student Christian Movement of Canada, 1977.

⁴⁸ Lochhead, *The Liberation of the Bible*, 8-17. See Wimbush, "Historical/Cultural Criticism as Liberation," where he states, "With regard to the interpretation of the Bible as part of a religious liberation agenda, every "reading" is, and must always be recognized as, culture-specific. Thus, even every potentially "liberating" hermeneutical construct must reflect the history of that people to be liberated" (p. 44). Also see, Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 230.

⁴⁹ For another perspective of biblical interpretation within a certain historical context see Lochhead, *The Liberation of the Bible*, 29-31.

⁵⁰ Wimbush, "Historical/Cultural Criticism as Liberation: A Proposal for an African American Biblical Hermeneutic," 44. See also, Anthony B. Bradley, *Liberating Black Theology: The Bible and the Black Experience in America* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2010). Bradley is overly critical of Cone's hermeneutical method of interpreting the Bible. He suggests that Cone's reading of the Bible, through a Marxist perspective, fails to clearly identify an economic position that is necessary for the African American community.

because the Bible was used as a tool of power for European ‘slavers,’ the use of the Bible for African Americans may be counterproductive—“It did not take the Africans long to associate “Book Religion” with power, with survival.”⁵¹ For example, Wimbush states that African Americans had to *appropriate* “Christian symbols, concepts and language, viz., the Bible, in their own way.” Using the Bible as a tool of liberation when it was used as a tool of oppression has been partly responsible for the dissent of religious (Christian) beliefs. Later, in the same article, in Wimbush’s defense, he states, “Since all readings of the Bible are political and have political implications, no community can afford to embrace any hermeneutic uncritically.”⁵² When the biblical hermeneutics is used in this manner, it fails to fully appreciate the economic and social positions that relate to the African American community.

African American biblical scholars have approached “[s]cripture with an interpretive angle that is radically different from that of their intellectual predecessors;” usually white men in the academy.⁵³ The interpretative methods, via biblical criticism, utilized by African American biblical scholars offers interpretations of liberation events that resonate with the African American community. The disproportionate level of inequality that African Americans experience inspired Black theologians to find new interpretations of biblical stories that spoke to

⁵¹ Ibid.

⁵² Ibid., 47

⁵³ Michael Joseph Brown. *Blackening of the Bible: The Aims of African American Biblical Scholarship* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2004), 2.

stories of liberation.⁵⁴ But we must consider *whether* the Bible is a viable method to understand the condition of oppression found in the Black community. In other words, “The question about the relevance or potential power of critical methods in the study of the Bible in any religious liberation strategy must be addressed ultimately in terms of a people’s history, and *how such methods could service that people in its present situation.*”⁵⁵

In “Biblical Revelation and Social Existence,” James Cone concludes that biblical scripture is a historical depiction of African Americans in the United States. He states,

Unlike the God of Greek philosophy, who is removed from history, the God of the Bible is involved in history. His revelation is inseparable from the social and political affairs of Israel...To know him is to experience his acts in the concrete affairs and relationships of people, liberating the weak and helpless from pain and humiliation. *The Old Testament is a history book.* To understand it and the divine revelation to which it testifies, we must think of the Old Testament as the drama of God’s mighty acts in history. It tells the story

⁵⁴ Brown, *Blackening of the Bible*, 2. See Robert A. Bennett, "Biblical Theology and Black Theology." Bennett discusses the limited perspectives of biblical hermeneutics in BLT, with the exception of Cone’s biblical hermeneutic. Bennett states that contemporary interpretations of biblical scripture “seeks to be able to deal with biblical interpretation and even proclamation, that it must engage and be engaged by black theology whose avowed purpose is to do “God talk” from a contemporary (black) perspective.” (p. 3) In a sense Bennett is asking ‘What does biblical interpretation mean for Black Americans?’

⁵⁵ Wimbush, "Historical/Cultural Criticism as Liberation," 44. See Vincent L. Wimbush, "Rescue the Perishing": The Importance of Biblical Scholarship in Black Christianity." In *Black Theology: A Documentary History*, edited by James H. Cone and Gayraud Wilmore. (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993), 212. Wimbush provides evidence that biblical interpretations, through historical and cultural criticisms, can be made useful to contemporary cultural perspectives that are part of a unique ESP reality.

of God's act of grace and of judgement as he calls the people of Israel into a free, liberated existence.⁵⁶

Claiming that the Old Testament is a history book of African American experiences brings to light two critical issues. First, the need to distinguish between historical claims contra theological claims. In other words, the conceptual divide between history and theological claims substantiates a problem with methodology and epistemology.⁵⁷ Describing the Old Testament as a history book evokes an interpretation of history that is tantamount with biblical revelation.⁵⁸ As a methodological approach, claiming that biblical scripture is equivalent to historical accounts, without empirical verification, undermines the process of historical research and methodology. To suggest that the Bible is a history book of "God's might acts in history," also

⁵⁶ Cone, "Biblical Revelation and Social Existence," 160. Emphasis added. See, "Black Theology and Black Liberation," where Cone states, "According to the Bible, the God of Israel is known by what he is *doing* in history for the salvation of man. It is this critical dimension of divine activity that makes history and revelation inseparable in biblical religion. To see the revelation of God is to see the *action* of God in the historical affairs of men. God is not uninvolved in human history, as in the Greek philosophical tradition; the opposite is the case. He is participating in human history, *moving* in the direction of man's salvation which is the goal of divine activity" (p. 110). The hermeneutical principles employed by Cone are coupled with the Black prophetic Christian tradition that highlights the importance of faith in determining outcomes for future change. Also, Cone's methodological process does not assume that "there is not radical distinction between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith." p. 175, in "Biblical Revelation and Social Existence." For a discussion on the Jesus of history see, Albert Schweitzer "The Quest of the Historical Jesus, (1906); David Friedrich Strauss, *Life of Jesus Critically Examined*, (1835); Russell Shorto, *Gospel Truth: The New Image of Jesus Emerging from Science and History, and Why it Matters* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1997); Albert Schweitzer's *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (1906) and Johannes Weiss', *Jesus' Proclamation of the Kingdom of God* (1892) See, Mark Allen Powell, *Jesus as a Figure in History: How Modern Historians View the Man from Galilee* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998); Robert W. Funk and Roy W. Hoover. *The Five Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997).

⁵⁷ Wimbush, in "Rescue The Perishing" where Wimbush reflects, "What was emerging was a change in the *understanding* of history itself, specifically, the manner in which educated women and men were beginning to understand the relationship between revelation and history. It was this new consciousness that gave birth to the conviction that divine things must be known *within* the realm of history or not at all. This conviction forced the acceptance of the historical-critical methods in the study of the Bible." (p. 211). Also see, E.H. Carr. *What is History* (New York: Random House, 1961).

⁵⁸ Cone, "Biblical Revelation and Social Existence." See also Vincent L. Wimbush, "The Bible and African Americans: An Outline of an Interpretive History." In *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation*, edited by Cane Hope Felder. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991).

considers the epistemological implications of how we understand history and obtain knowledge of history.

This second issue leads to questions about the method of constructing history and how we possess knowledge of historical accounts. To claim the Bible is a historical account of the African American experiences in the United States unabashedly suggests that historical documented source material is qualitatively similar to fictive accounts of past events, when disciplinary criteria suggests otherwise.⁵⁹ To claim the Bible is a history book and the events of the Bible, most notably the Exodus, are historical accounts of God's liberating activity, consequently supports a claim that leads to quietism. To position the Exodus as a historical event need not enter into the discussion about its theological importance. We must ask ourselves why Cone attempts to equate theological claims with history.

Cone's reference to past events is not based on empirically verified evidence. To maintain that the Bible is a history book provides Cone with the concrete liberation event that shows God is actively involved in the liberation of the oppressed. In summation, Cone claims the Bible is a history book and uses biblical mythology as a tool for identifying the historical reality of African American because his theology is dependent upon the actualization of theological claims.

In an early-published article by Cone, he appropriates biblical themes to the Black experience;

In view of their social situation of oppression, black people needed liberating versions so that they would not let historical limitation determine their perception of black being. Therefore, when Christianity was taught to them and they began to read the Bible, blacks

⁵⁹ Marc Zvi Bettler, "Historical Texts in the Hebrew Bible?". In *Thinking, Recording, and Writing History in the Ancient World*, edited by Kurt A. Raafalau. (Malden: John Wiley & Sons, 2014).

simply appropriated those biblical stories that met their historical need. *That was why some themes are stressed and others are overlooked.*⁶⁰

Because of the known inconsistencies within biblical scripture, Cone does not give absolute authority to the Bible, but still considers it to be the primary source of history to show the liberatory nature of God's election of the oppressed.⁶¹ With these inconsistencies it is even more important to understand the origins of the Bible, and how this claim on history presumes the biases for theological claims, historically as well as contemporaneously.⁶²

Even though Cone gives primacy to the Bible, other biblical scholars are not so easily sold on the function of the Bible as a tool for Black liberation. The issue stems from several sources of inquiry: the authenticity of biblical scripture (canonization); interpolation and interoperation of biblical text in discerning whether the Bible is an oppressive document or a instrument for liberation.⁶³ For example, biblical scholars cite examples of theological

⁶⁰ James H. Cone, "The Content and Method of Black Theology." *The Journal of Religious Thought* 32, no. 2 (1975): 96; Cain H. Felder, "Cultural Ideology, Afrocentrism and Biblical Interpretation." In *Black Theology: A Documentary History: Volume 2, 1980-1992*, edited by James H. Cone and Gayraud Wilmore. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), Felder states "[B]ut the Eurocentricism that has always guided American and Western history has consistently made precious little room for anyone but the dominant racial group in the United States..." to offer new interpretive methods that take into account the experiences of the oppressed. (pp. 184-95)

⁶¹ James H. Cone, *Speaking the Truth: Ecumenism, Liberation, and Black Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 5. Cone outlines his perspective on Scripture. In addition Cone poignantly stresses the import of Scripture to support claims of God's acts of salvation and liberation in the Old and New Testament.

⁶² See Lochhead, 31-40.

⁶³ Ron Liburd, "Like a House on Sand: African American Biblical Hermeneutics in Perspective." *The Journal of the I. T. C.* 22, no. 1 (Fall 1994): 72. For more critical analyses of the Bible as a history book see, John Ernest, *Liberation Historiography: African American Writers and the Challenge of History, 1794-1861* (Chapel Hill: 2004); Jason Long, *Biblical Nonsense: A Review of the Bible for Doubting Christians* (New York: iUniverse Inc., 2005); James M. Shopshire, "The Bible as Informant and Reflector in the Social-Structural Relations of African Americans." In *African Americans and the Bible*, edited by Vincent L. Wimbush. (New York: Continuum, 2001).

inconsistencies and historical scholars cite examples of historical inaccuracies.⁶⁴ Historical criticisms of biblical text warrants an investigation of the reasons why myths have been perpetrated as historical realities, regardless of the disciplinary guidelines that undergird historical truths. When analyzing biblical scripture without historical documentation, we are left with no evidence to support that such events occurred or that the events occurred as presented in biblical documentation.⁶⁵ Finkelstein and Silberman, in their 2001 monograph, *The Bible Unearthed*, suggest that the Exodus, as described in the Old Testament, lacks support from archeological research and from historical source documentation, requiring us to question the authenticity of Cone's claim about the historicity of the Bible.⁶⁶

When considering Biblical Theology, it is important to be aware of the process of proof-texting. Proof-texting is the process of interpreting biblical scripture as literal or symbolic, dependent upon certain needs. Besides the obvious notion of pragmatism, proof-texting exerts a level of certainty to theological claims that are then presented as historical truths. Additionally the translation of biblical texts as literal interpretations is based on a certitude grounded in idiosyncrasies and "counterfeit absolutes" superimposed on the Bible and historical documents. From the contradiction of orthodox Christianity and absolutism, the concept of God is based on the interpretation and interpolation of the individual or group, therefore compromising how we understand the authentic. Proof-texting is further understood by compiling biblical scriptures,

⁶⁴ Liburd, "Like a House on Sand". For additional sources on the implications and justifications of not using biblical hermeneutics as a source for liberation theology see, Felder, *Troubling Biblical Waters* and *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation*.

⁶⁵ Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origins of Its Sacred Texts* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001), 48-71.

⁶⁶ In addition to Finkelstein and Silberman, see, Karen. A. Armstrong, *History of God : The 4000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (New York A.A. Knopf 1993), 18-19. Karen Armstrong questions the magnitude of the Exodus. She concludes the Exodus, if a concrete historical event, was a successful peasant's revolt.

relating to a similar idea, from various points in the Bible, then combining those ideas to create theological claims. Jones confirms that as a licensed Baptist preacher, he would “unerringly exegete one passage symbolically and another literally, then skillfully and effortlessly splice from disparate and distant passages, paste them together, and label my production ‘the word of God.’”⁶⁷ These biblical compilations are not grounded in biblical scripture, but are grounded in the beliefs of the beholder to meet certain needs that, in turn, become part of a theological claims that influence the theological perspectives set forth by practitioners of Black Theology, and theology in general. By examining the theological claims presented by Black theologians, we can deduce the impact of these implications on the historical process of the Black experience and what these claims mean for the liberatory efforts of the Black community.

We are then left with a systematic process of interpretation, but without the evidence—and the necessity to concretely discover the historical evidence—the events and stories are used as a tool to politicize God. It is the responsibility of the investigator, through viable methods, to clearly delineate between claims that are supported by empirical evidence and those claims that are indeed mythological accounts of past happenings. Conflating myths and factual events runs the risk of creating a theological system built on fictive claims rather than historical truths, which when discussing the concrete evidences of material oppression in the Black community, creates an environment where fairy tales and idealism are fictitiously sought after, and leads towards an unattainable future.⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Jones, *IGWR?*, vii-viii.

⁶⁸ See, Jones, “Religion as Legitimater and Liberator.” Also see, Mbiti, “An African Views American Black Theology.” Mbiti confirms that with American BLT “One gets the feeling that Black Theology has created a semi-mythological urgency for liberation that it must at all cost keep it alive. As a result it seems that Black Theology is *avoiding* other major theological issues not directly related to ‘liberation’” (p. 381).

Other methodological practices and ideological perspectives may return more viable results that further identify the source of infliction (oppression) in the time and space of our lived reality, such as philosophical materialism and historical materialism. For Jones, the Bible as a normative source of BLT is problematic because in conventional BLT there is a perspective that promotes the Bible as an absolute in its liberatory potential; Jones, in an interview with George Yancy, in the *American Philosophical Association Newsletter*, special topics, “Philosophy and the Black Experience,” special edition on William R. Jones, further clarifies his position on Biblical criticism;

Take the development of modernism. Modernism attempted to critique supernaturalism, that is, revelation based on the Bible. Take Descartes, take all of them. It was an attack on the supernaturalism that informed the medieval church. Now they did an internal criticism which attempted to show that “supernatural epistemology” was not an absolute. It was contextual; it was not an absolute. So, what they did was to de-absolutize that absolute by a method of internal criticism using another norm. For instance, say you start out with the Bible as your single norm. The moment Catholics use that one norm, that one absolute to reach one conclusion, and Protestants use the same norm to reach a different conclusion, you have set up a situation where you have to go and pick and choose between those alternative definitions of a single thing. *The text doesn't enable you to do that, so you have to go outside the text.* Take any verse in the Bible. It can be interpreted either literally or symbolically. There isn't anyone who can disagree with that, even the most rabid infallibilist. If you go into the text itself and try to establish the basis for that choice, the text, that is, the absolute that you started out with, never tells you. The text doesn't say, “Interpret John I literally or interpret John I symbolically.” There is nothing in the text that tells you that. So in trying to make the decision you have already gone *outside of the text*, you have brought in a norm other than the absolute according to which you said you were operating. So people will use a norm to de-absolutize something else, but then they begin to treat that norm that they used to de-absolutize as an absolute.⁶⁹

Discerning between historical truths and mythical claims is included as a controlling factor in BLT to ensure that empirically verified truths are at the center of historical investigation. In other words, biblical myths have occupied a privileged place in the methodological landscape by

⁶⁹ George Yancy, “The Honor Was All Mine: A Conversation with William R. Jones,” 5. Emphasis added.

using extra-biblical claims as the norm for theological perspectives. There is a perceived notion that religious beliefs and religious doctrines are part of a closed system of belief; and therefore exempt from critical investigation. Therefore myths and biblical stories are not open to empirical scrutiny or verification and remain part of a systematic process that is viewed as sacrosanct. Removing the sacred privilege granted to biblical scripture creates a problem of interpretation that conflates myth with historical truths. How then do we discern between biblical myths and empirical truths when interpreting biblical scripture as a source for BLT?

In this regard, Liburd cautions African American biblical scholars and theologians that the Bible should be open to the same traditional method of criticism that informs other textual accounts of historical data. According to Liburd, the Bible:

[P]urports to address the problem of black suffering, it at the same time allows for other forms of oppression. It is precisely this application of traditional methods rooted in a patriarchal notion of the authority of the Word of God that marks black hermeneutics as essentially oppressive rather than liberating. The same tool cannot be our sin [in] the construction of our biblical hermeneutics “house”, because it has become patently clear to us not that ideological constraints were upon the architects of the biblical documents to pit the text against the powerless. Selling that text to blacks as the Word of God is farcical, on the one hand, and ineffective for our purposes of liberation, on the other.⁷⁰

The belief that the Bible is an authentic rendition of a historical past ignores the historical contradictions that are present in the Bible.⁷¹ The idea that the Bible is a history book requires an investigation in to the appropriate methods of defining and understanding the process of discerning what is history and what are fictive accounts of the past.⁷² In contention with Jones

⁷⁰ See Liburd, "Like a House on Sand," 89. Also see, Felder, *Race, Racism, and the Biblical Narratives*; and Felder, *Troubling Biblical Waters: Race, Class and Family*.

⁷¹ Liburd in "Like a House on Sand," suggests that the contradictions with biblical narratives hinders liberation and is not based on historical accuracy. Also see, Lochhead, *Liberating the Bible*.

⁷² The core of historical research and interpretation is grounded in the rejection of fiction as historical accurate. See Jacob Neusner, "How Judaism Reads the Bible." *The Journal of Higher Criticism* 8, no. 2 (2001): 210-50.

and Liburd, Cone stresses an interpretation of the Bible that draws attention to God's overruling and complete sovereignty in and over human history, through the story of the Exodus. I believe this extends beyond the boundaries of what is normatively applicable to historical research.⁷³

We must conclude that myths—by virtue of being myths—are not necessarily false, but myths are not necessarily true and shouldn't be considered as historical truths without first discerning what is historically accurate. Since biblical myths are not de novo falsehoods, it is up to the methodological paradigm to articulate which myths are grounded in historical truths contra those myths that are not ground in a historical reality. Myths are essentially fictional in character and therefore are not open to empirical verification in the same way that facts are subject to scrutiny and verification. What becomes problematic is that the conflation between what is historical truths and what is necessary to promote an ideology of liberation within the boundaries of theological commitments. Biblical myths, therefore, must not be excluded from empirical scrutiny simply because it holds a status of sacrosanctity; the controlling factor must be grounded in a reality that promotes empirically verifiable events as the basis for a system of liberation.⁷⁴

Jones and Liburd are not alone in criticizing the faults in Cone's biblical methodology. Cecil Cone commands "Cone has committed himself to an alien theological methodology, and that is why he asks questions his people are not asking. Even white theologians, the people whom Cone derived his concern for history, are beginning to recognize the futility and the dangers of the historical method."⁷⁵ It could be argued the problem is not with historical method,

⁷³ IGWR?, 107-108; Jacob Neusner, "History, Time, and Paradigm in Scripture and in Judaism." *The Journal of Higher Criticism* 7, no. 1 (2000): 54-84; Marc Zvi Brettler, "Historical Texts in the Hebrew Bible?". In *Thinking, Recording, and Writing History in the Ancient World*, edited by Kurt A. Raafalau. (Malden: John Wiley & Sons, 2014).

⁷⁴ Jones, "Religion as Legitimator and Liberator," 251.

⁷⁵ Cecil Cone, *Identity Crisis in Black Theology*, 110-111.

but is specifically assigned to Cone's method of analysis. Cone does not use a bona fide system of historical method, but instead uses biblical hermeneutics under the guise of historical methods. Attempting to circumscribe the problem of aligning the Bible with historical source documentation creates a problem with the historical inaccuracies when using the Bible. Cecil Cone identifies this problem with Cone's theology and specifically his methodology as a failure by giving too much credit to the historical validity of biblical scripture and the Bible. Cecil Cone suggests, "a self-conscious, "objective" history...is given *within* the framework of revelation, rather than being an alien discipline in terms of which revelation is approached."⁷⁶ Attempting to take the case of revelation a step further, Cecil Cone posits that an objective history of African Americans is determined by their history with respect to revelation, not to a theoretical vision of a historical Jesus. For Cecil Cone, African Americans are not concerned about the historical Jesus, but are concerned with how God has worked in their favor in the past, through the perspective of revelation.⁷⁷

Jones' View of Biblical Scripture as Historical Text: Is God A White Racist?

To further complicate the place of the Bible in BLT, conventional BLT has not fully grappled with the implications of how the concept of theodicy complicates Christian traditions and belief systems; especially within the textual contours of biblical scripture.⁷⁸ Jones concludes that any interpretive methodology must consider the *causality* of suffering in light of God's good

⁷⁶ Ibid., 111, Original emphasis.

⁷⁷ To the extent that James Cone argues for a historical Jesus, the historical Jesus is identical with the Jesus of faith. Hence, the historical Jesus becomes the biblical Jesus. For more on the myth of Jesus see, Kenneth Humphreys, *Jesus Never Existed* (Iconoclast Press, 2005). For a discussion of the historical Jesus see Albert Schweitzer, *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*; McDowell and Wilson, *He Walked among Us*. Unfortunately, Cecil Cone's theological perspective also descends towards theodicy. See Cecil Cone, *The Identity Crisis in Black Theology*.

⁷⁸ Jones, *IGWR?*, 15.

will—and how suffering is registered in the Bible. There is a necessity to distinguish between positive and negative forms of suffering, of which the Bible provides both types of interpretations. To distinguish between categories of suffering allows us to determine which type of suffering maintains oppression:

How do we determine in which class a given instance of suffering belongs; how do we differentiate between the suffering that evinces God's marvelous grace and that which signifies his terrible judgement; how do we determine if the sufferer is an agent of God's salvation or a sinner receiving his rightful punishment? The answer is inescapable: a standard or criteriology for separating negative from positive suffering must be formulated.⁷⁹

Biblical theologians are charged with the responsibility of providing a logical explanation that satisfies the concept of theodicy. This explanation must consider how Christian traditions are enacted in BLT, and how certain ideas of suffering are counterintuitive to reaching Black liberation.⁸⁰ Because of the multitude of different approaches towards suffering, Jones is able to categorize biblical scripture through a premise of localizing the multievidentiality of suffering. Concerned with the political nature of God's active involvement in the human world, Jones describes God's action in three succinct categories: 1) divine disfavor/deserved punishment; 2)

⁷⁹ Ibid., 17. Also see Jones discussion of positive and negative suffering in Jones, "Process Theology: Guardian of the Oppressor or Goad to the Oppressed." *Process Studies* 18, no. 4 (Winter 1989), 276-279.

⁸⁰ Jones, *IGWR?*, 142. "A primary reason for raising the question, Is God a white racist? is to force the black theologian to consider *every* theological category in his arsenal, and in the whole biblical and Christian tradition, in terms of its support for oppression" (p. 143).

divine favor; 3) neither disfavor or favor.⁸¹ Through careful analyses, Jones concludes that regardless of the biblical story/event, the stories collapse into one of these three categories.⁸²

Cone strongly rejects the last option as erroneous and strongly rejects the first claim because any theory proclaiming God's involvement in the oppression of African Americans appropriates a belief that the oppressed community has committed a crime and warrants some sort of punishment inclusive of the entire community (deserved suffering).⁸³ Because all Black liberation theologians must reject divine disfavor or deserved punishment in order to participate in the quest of liberation, there is a presumed belief, based on theological commitments, that God's omnibenevolence rules out the possibility of God's responsibility for human suffering. Deserved punishment is the act of divine punishment for an act committed against the will of God. God is punishing, through suffering, an individual or a community for some past or future wrongdoing. As you can see, this concept is laced with several problematic points of departure. First, the divine sanctions the suffering and any attempt to alter the status of suffering would be against God's will—another form of wrongdoing. What we have then is a system where any attempt to change the status of suffering is bound to fail. This category leads to quietism: the

⁸¹ Jones, *IGWR?*, 15.

⁸² Jones, *IGWR?*, 21. Jones provides a complete discussion on suffering and maldistribution. "John Bowker makes the cogent observation that the problem of the maldistribution of suffering is central in the OT. 'The problem in Scripture...is not why suffering exists, but why it afflicts some people and not others. The problem is not the *fact* of suffering, but its *distribution*.' Ethnic suffering underlines and gives emphasis to the same notion." (pg. 21.) In, *BTL*, (pp. 71-77, 81) Cone argues that God's love is grounded in liberation of the oppressed, which is witnessed through revelation. God is in favor of the oppressed and any suffering that arises in the Black experience is "that type of suffering that is inseparable from freedom, the freedom that affirms black liberation despite the white powers of evil. It is suffering in the struggle for liberation" (p. 81).

⁸³ See *IGWR?*, 45. BLT traditionally rejected any theology that promotes an interpretation and ideology that suggests African American oppression is warranted and necessary—either for salvation from a past sin (negative suffering) or because of God's good grace (suffering servant). Also see, Pinn, *Why Lord?*; Pinn, *Moral Evil and Redemptive Suffering*.

inability or lack of motivation to actively pursue liberation.⁸⁴ Secondly, the status of suffering serves as a reminder of an early theological view: “pie-in-the-sky theology.” Benjamin Mays in, *The Negro's God*, refers to this form of theological enterprise as support for:

[A]n other-worldly view are ideas that adhere to traditional, compensatory patterns, those ideas that encourage one to believe that God is in his heaven and all is right with the world, and finally, those that tend to produce negative goodness in the individual based on a fear of the wrath of God here or in the next world.⁸⁵

This is the viewpoint that the human world contains suffering and hardship, but because of God's intrinsic goodness, he will liberate us in the afterworld. Jones poignantly suggests we are still making presuppositions about God's status and will. There is an assumption of God's goodwill and omnibenevolence, yet we lack empirical evidence to support the validity of that claim.

Within the boundaries of theological commitments there are limitations in determining the historical accuracy and historical truths of theological claims, which lead to problems of historical inaccuracy and finally ends with historical falsehoods being presented as historical truths without empirical verification. Cone and Jones disagree on the stance of biblical truths and myths as accurate interpretations of history.

Conventional BLT rejects Jones' hypothetical conception of God as “a white racist.”⁸⁶ Contrary to Jones' theoretical framework, conventional Black Liberation theologians use biblical scripture and theological doctrines as a means to create a substantive claim to God's mighty actions in history. Jones is not so quick to agree with God's superlative traits, via biblical scripture, because the maldistribution of suffering African Americans encounter in the United

⁸⁴ Jones, *IGWR?*, 44, 55-57

⁸⁵ Mays, *The Negro's God*, 14-15.

⁸⁶ Jones, *IGWR?* For Jones the question is not about the reality of God or the Goodness of God, but he is concerned about the Christian theological explanations towards God's role in the lives of humanity.

States. The traditional precepts of God from the Christian Bible—All-Good, All-Knowing, All-Powerful—is brought under review. It is the conception of God as omnibenevolent, omniscient, and omnipotent that supports a presupposition that God is on the side of the oppressed. If the traditional attributes of God are challenged then the theological claim that God is on the side of the oppressed is also open to criticism. Jones illuminates upon the first category (divine disfavor/deserved punishment) in *IGWR?* by critically evaluating his colleagues' constructions of God and God's role in the human world.⁸⁷

Divine disfavor or deserved punishment describes the relationship between man and God as a system of punishments to amend for prior or future sins. In this context, “suffering...is evidence that corrective measures are necessary; suffering demands repentance.”⁸⁸ This form of suffering is contingent upon the idea that 1) God is punishing an individual or group of people for prior sins or 2) God's disfavor towards that group—the former is contingent upon the latter. When God's disfavor is the reason for suffering, changing the circumstances becomes problematic because God's will must prevail, sustaining the condition of suffering—leading to quietism. In regards to this form of suffering there is a belief that God's omnibenevolence will persist and liberation will be granted if certain conditions are met. Jones stresses that the concept of God is open to multiple theological interpretations in human reality and the Black Liberation theologian must not oversimplify or act in haste to determine the politics of God. Over-emphasizing God's involvement in the human condition leads to historical inaccuracies and logical missteps. By removing the theological commitments to Christianity, Jones supports a position of humanocentric theism that attempts to position God's involvement in the human

⁸⁷ This is discussed in Chapter 4.

⁸⁸ Jones, *IGWR?*, 15.

condition to the realm of a watchmaker—creating and initializing the process of life in the universe—whilst giving humans the ability to function as functionally independent of God.⁸⁹

I conclude, the examples of suffering found in the Bible do not offer sustainable proof of God's election of African Americans. Using inaccurate representations of historical truths is a faulty foundation for conceptualizing a theology of liberation that advocates eradicating material oppression (ESP oppression). This is understood through a materialist interpretation, and is also grounded in a theological outlook that considers the authenticity of religious doctrine.⁹⁰ For the theologian, [s]he is, by definition, obligated to include certain religious concepts (theological commitments) and positions as part of the methodological enterprise used in the theological interpretation. Cone, as a Christian theologian, must include certain religious categories into his theological enterprise. The core tenets of Christianity—the centralizing position of the Bible, a system of Christology, etc.—must be included as part of a Christian apologetic. Along the same

⁸⁹ See, Jones, "The Case for Black Humanism"; Jones, "Theism and Religious Humanism: The Chasm Narrows"; and Jones, "Religious Humanism: Its Problems and Prospects in Black Religion and Culture." Humanocentric theism will be discussed in Chapter 5.

⁹⁰ I am offering a materialist interpretation in this dissertation. Please see Chapter 1: The Introduction. I am critiquing, through a materialist perspective, the theological commitments of Williams Jones and James Cone. The materialist position addresses that the disproportionate amount of suffering in the Black community is not created by a theological position, but is solely grounded in the empirical world. Politicizing the nature of God creates a locality where God is positioned as the created and distributor of suffering. The oppression in the Black community is not neatly bound within a theological argument as Cone suggests, but is part of a social system that creates social hierarchies privileging some groups while oppressing others. The materialist would also say that the oppressive conditions in the African American experience have implications in the real world—race and class inequalities, which limit access to opportunity and resources—that transcend any discussion grounded in non-empirical judgments. The oppressive conditions are bound to this world, why then do the explanations for oppression and suffering exist in another? We must find a suitable answer because finding an explanation of oppression must be prior to an explanation into the solution. Here we arrive at the fundamental flaw with BLT and a theological argument to decipher the oppressive conditions of African Americans; if the cause of the oppressive conditions are supernatural then the solution must also be in the divine realm, and as stated above, challenging the will of God attaches another set of issues that must be overcome in order to promote a theology of liberation. This is precisely why Jones states; "theodicy is central because black theology defines itself as a theology of liberation. This becomes clear if some of the essentials of a theology of liberation are identified by considering some general observations about oppression and suffering" (Jones, *IGWR?*, xxv).

lines, the Christian theologian is prescribed to uphold certain tenants in a theological system that determines whether or not some religious interpretations hinder progress towards material change and Black liberation.⁹¹ When used as a literal account of history, the Bible becomes susceptible to false representations of an idealistic history.⁹²

Yet Cone does not fully consider the implications of calling the Bible a history book, with the exception of pointing out;

[W]e should not conclude that the Bible is an infallible witness. God was not the author of the Bible, nor were its writers mere secretaries. Efforts to prove verbal inspiration of the scriptures results from the failure to see the real meaning of the biblical message: human liberation!...It matters little to the oppressed who authored scripture; what is important is whether it can serve as a weapon against oppressors.⁹³

The implications of using the Bible as a history book, and yet contemplating the problems of authenticity, naturally coupled with biblical hermeneutics, suggests African American biblical

⁹¹ Jones, "Religion as Legitimator and Liberator," 149. Jones explains the mechanism of oppression is based on an interpretation of religion as "legitimator of anti-powerism".

⁹² Liburd, "Like a House on Sand," 78. In regards to the politicized landscape in early biblical communities Liburd suggests, "In all of this what has happened is that the human experience, that has given shape to the Bible, has been miraculously transformed by divine faith to the realms of the sacred, where it remains sacrosanct. The biblical community, at both the scholarly and the rustic level, has now misappropriated the role of human experience in the formation of scripture and biblical religion. The problem is this: no matter how much one claims divine authority for the Bible, its human stamp always remains patent as a contradiction to that claim. An African American biblical hermeneutic that relies on biblical authority in the sense of calling the Bible the Word of God is counterproductive, in that it has to allow for the oppressors' legitimate use of certain biblical texts to maintain their position of dominance" (p. 81). Rosemary Ruether states, "Human experience is both the starting point and the ending point of the circle of interpretation," in "Feminist Interpretation: A Method of Circulation," in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible*, L. Russell, ed. (Phil: Westminster, 1985), 111. Felder, in "Cultural Ideology, Afrocentrism and Biblical Interpretation" opines, "*Culture becomes a source for ideology and in a subtle way yields criteria for reading the Bible*. Historically, this ideological reading seems predicated upon the primacy of the dominant culture and the politico-cultural-economic identity of its "primary" constituents" (p. 185). Emphasis Added.

⁹³ Cone, *BTL*, 31. Cone continues, "It matters little to the oppressed who authored scripture; what is important is whether it can serve as a weapon against oppressors." But we must be careful not to assume that the Bible can serve as a weapon against our oppressors without first understanding the importance of canonization and authenticity.

scholars must be more diligent in critically analyzing the implications of using a text that may have oppressive components at its core.⁹⁴

Cain Hope Felder highlights various parts in the Old Testament that contain racist/oppressive undertones, of which must be considered when the methodological system functions as a purview to a lived reality. When the Bible is believed to be historically accurate we fail to disclose the implications of breathing truth into a document that is plagued with inconsistencies and mythical accounts. If the Bible is categorized as a history book we are forced to overlook the importance of historical methodological practices. The curse of Ham is evidence of this: “You have presented me from doing something in the dark (co-habitation), therefore your seed will be ugly and dark skinned” and “the descendants of Ham are cursed by being Black and are sinful with a degenerate progeny.”⁹⁵ To ignore the religious claims that upheld and promoted the racist perspectives used to support the institution of slavery, the implementation of Jim Crow, and the overall oppressive conditions found in the social formation of the United States, and to continue to accept biblical doctrines as historical truths is like participating in a theological game of Russian roulette. Because the Bible was constructed over several centuries, as part of a historical reality, any such claim that supports literal accounts of the Bible as evidence of God’s election of the oppressed, must seriously consider the implications of the racist and oppressive claims that are also found within the Bible. When using the Bible, how do we know which

⁹⁴ Liburd. “Like a House on Sand,” 79. Liburd continues, “The notion that the Bible is the Word of God, I argue, is in fact such an impediment to black Christians everywhere that it has also become the thorn in the flesh of black biblical hermeneutics” (p. 79).

⁹⁵ Cain H. Felder, *Race, Racism, and the Biblical Narratives* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 13. Also see, Stephen R. Haynes. *Noah's Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002); Sylvester Johnson. *Myth of Ham in Nineteenth-Century American Christianity: Race, Heathens, and the People of God*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004; Perry, *The Cushite or the Children of Ham (the Negro Race) as Seen by Ancient Historians and Poets*.

stories should be interpreted literally and which events should be taken as symbolic representations of human culture?

Beyond the Bible: Jones' Break with Conventional Black Liberation Theology

For the reasons offered above, Jones errors on the side of caution by not employing the Bible as an accurate representation of the historical realities of African Americans. Furthermore, Jones stresses dependency on the Bible is neither conclusive nor concrete, but is in fact multievidential of God's attitude towards the oppressed. In order to understand the position of God's election we must first understand the nature of suffering within the theological community.

Jones devises that we must first understand the source of the suffering in order to determine the route of execution. In order to present the nuances of Jones' approach, I quote him at length:

To return to the suffering-servant theme. Another feature points to the necessity of the exaltation event, and if it is missing, the suffering-servant model cannot be legitimately invoked. The suffering servant is claimed to be innocent; his suffering is not deserved punishment. But it is not the exaltation event which substantiates the sufferer's innocence? Without the exaltation event it is not possible to distinguish between the suffering servant and the rank sinner encountering his deserved punishment.

I would also argue, though I stand to be corrected here, that the designation of an individual or group as suffering servant must be executed *retrospectively*, that is, after the occurrence of the exaltation event. Prior to this event the designation of suffering servant is both gratuitous and without evidential grounds. The interpretation of deserved punishment is equally, if not more, probable.

The importance of this point for an eschatological theodicy cannot be overlooked. The eschatological option, in my view, is a theological dead end, for it leaves the issue unresolved until the distant future. *Prior to the exaltation event and given the multievidentiality of suffering, God's favor and disfavor remain equally probable.* Only the exaltation event appears to weigh the scale for the interpretation of God's favor. Further, one is inclined towards the explanation of divine disfavor or deserved punishment to the degree that the exaltation event carries.⁹⁶

⁹⁶ Jones, *IGWR?*, 19-20. Emphasis Added.

Jones is prescribing a new understanding of suffering from within the context of the African American experience by illustrating we have yet to encounter the *exaltation event* that would provide the necessary evidence to support the claim that God is on the side of the oppressed. According to Jones, “prior to the exaltation event and given the multievidentiality of suffering, God’s favor and disfavor remain equally probable,” therefore until there is an event of liberation for the Black community we mustn't leap to conclusions about the politics of God.

To complicate matters further, Black Liberation theologians that adhere to biblical scripture as the means of evidence for God’s favor towards the oppressed must first provide support of the exaltation-liberation event before making assumptions about the politics of God. Additionally, Jones cautions us that the exaltation event must include an element of liberation and must also be identified as an event of African American liberation.⁹⁷ Granted the definitive event(s) of Black liberation must be “grounded in concrete, i.e. actual, events in which the community of the faithful detect the liberating hand of God.”⁹⁸ According to Jones, these events must be situated within the African American community; “The event of liberation must involve the liberation of the particular group in question; that is an event of *Jewish* liberation cannot corroborate the claim that *black* liberation is part of God’s innermost nature.”⁹⁹ Prior to discussing the importance of establishing an event of Black liberation as a means to deciphering the nature of God, Jones outlines three methodological requirements that must be followed in order to determine the nature of God. 1) “God’s nature as favoring the oppressed must be

⁹⁷ Ibid., 112. Also see Mbiti, "An African Views American Black Theology." Mbiti suggest that American Black theology centers two critical points: Blackness and liberation. Focusing upon the experiences of African Americans is central to BLT, and therefore must present a source of confirmation of God’s liberating effects for African Americans.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 114.

validated.” It cannot not be granted at the outset that God is in favor of the oppressed or can the claim that God is for the oppressed be used to refute a claim to the contrary. 2) “[T]he theologian must identify actual events of liberation, concrete instance where the oppression in fact ceases, where, to use a metaphor of Cone’s, ‘the last become first.’”¹⁰⁰ The Exodus would be an example of when the oppressed were liberated by divine interference. Identifying a Black-specific liberation event is instrumental for determining knowledge of God. 3) Lastly, Jones identifies the importance of considering God as the sum of His acts.¹⁰¹ If God possess the traditional traits granted with contemporary Christianity, “in the face of human suffering, whatever its character, we must entertain the possibility that it is an expression of divine hostility.”¹⁰² Because of the multievidentiality of events in the Bible we mustn’t make haste in our conclusions about God’s will and God’s election for the oppressed.

Biblical language and biblical scripture have multiple interpretations so the text can meet the needs of various communities in a multitude of social contexts—it is from this point that the Bible finds its thread of universalism for the oppressed.¹⁰³ The Bible therefore has the literary ability to transform its meanings to meet the needs of various communities in their search for liberation; while at the same time embodies textual evidence that supports the continued oppression of African people. The major fallacy with biblical hermeneutics is the limitation of verifiable events in the Bible. Therefore, biblical scripture can be translated and reinterpreted to

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Ibid., 9. Also see p. 18, “Universal to the particular.”

¹⁰³ Cone, *BTL*, 3. See also, Robison B. James, “A Tillichian Analysis of James Cone's Black Theology.” In *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, edited by Christopher Rowland. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Caryle Fielding Stewart, III. “The Method of Correlation in the Theology of James H. Cone.” *Journal of Religious Thought* 40, no. 2 (1984).

meet the demand of a group, whether it is for African Americans liberation or in support of African American enslavement.¹⁰⁴ For example, Liburd expresses the problem of consistency and coherency of biblical scripture in regards to the African American experience:

In much the same manner African Americans in general have sought to apply this principle to scripture with one exception, viz., black slavery and its attendant injustices. Herein lies the first problem. It is impossible for blacks to deny the charge of picking and choosing from the Bible when they deny its applicability to their enslavement, but nevertheless accept other forms of oppression in the Bible as matter-of-fact. Their acceptance of the Bible as the Word of God carries with it implications for their understanding of slave ideology as it appears and is condoned in many biblical texts....¹⁰⁵

The lack of transparency in the Bible is the fundamental reason that biblical hermeneutics is not a viable method to formulate a comprehensive view of the oppressive conditions that have historically entrenched the Black community. Without conclusive evidence of God's liberatory powers, the Bible and biblical texts remain insufficient for a biblical hermeneutics that attempts to gauge the politics of God without accounting for the multievidentiality of suffering.

Essentially William Jones and James Cone are arguing about the causality of suffering and which methods are most appropriate for investigating the material condition in light of their respective theological commitments. Jones and Cone navigate the boundaries of Black Liberation Theology from distinct corners of the theological spectrum. Confined by the boundaries of their respective theologies, conventional boundaries in Black Liberation Theology are not always aligned with Christian theological themes (i.e. Resurrection, the Trinity, omnibenevolence, etc).¹⁰⁶ Jones, a secular humanist, engages a theological perspective that transgresses the boundaries of Christianity, suggesting that other theological systems must be

¹⁰⁴ Felder, *Race, Racism, and the Biblical Narrative*, 13.

¹⁰⁵ Liburd, "Like a House on Sand," 78.

¹⁰⁶ Howard Thurman's theology is an example of a nontraditional Christian perspective because he does not adhere to the doctrine of the Trinity, or the divinity of Jesus Christ.

tested for their liberatory potential. The next chapter examines the complexities of understanding the sources and norms in Black Liberation Theology. Thus, juxtaposing the theological perspectives of Jones and Cone, causing the boundary lines of what constitutes as an *authentic* Black Liberation Theology to be constructed by the methodological system employed; either biblical hermeneutics or philosophical theology. The power of defining what is authentic and what is heretical becomes an important factor in Jones' alienation from the table of Black Liberation Theology. Additionally, the next chapter challenges the normative definition of Black Libation Theology to include a wider-reaching audience, beyond the grasps of biblical text and church doctrine.

Chapter 3: A Criticism of Selected Critics: Transgressing Conventional Themes and Normative Boundaries

The purpose of this chapter is to demonstrate the legitimacy and validity of placing Jones within the locus of Black Liberation Theology (BLT). Within this capacity, I examine the conventional descriptions of Black Liberation Theology. Without the perspectives of non-Christian traditions, the Black Liberation theologian's master guidebook is incomplete and misguided. Additionally, this chapter also acts as a corrective to the current (limited) view of BLT as a Christian-centric theological system. By using Jones as a tour guide in this unfamiliar terrain, philosophical inquiry promotes an analytical reference to identify the problems in conventional BLT, including the lack of serious scrutiny into the liberatory potential of BLT and the eradication of oppression and injustices.

Simplistic and monolithic definitions of Black religions are not representative of the religious experiences of African Americans in the United States.¹ To understand the Black experience is to understand that African Americans have a variety of systematic religious traditions considered beyond Christian boundaries. We must include these theological systems in our discussion of liberation theologies.

¹ Jones, "Religious Humanism: Its Problems and Prospects in Black Religion and Culture." Jones cautions us that, "Afro-American religion must be approached as a multi-faceted phenomenon that comprises the full spectrum of theistic and nontheistic options" (p. 176). Anthony Pinn, *Why Lord?*, 95. BLT must be reassessed in light of the Black experience, as understood through scholarship on the Black religious tradition, see, Mays, *The Negro's God: As Reflected in His Literature*; Pinn, *Why Lord?: Suffering and Evil in Black Theology*; Pinn, *Moral Evil and Redemptive Suffering*; Pinn, *African American Humanist Principles*; Anthony B. Pinn, *The African American Religious Experience in America*. The American Religious Experience. edited by Philip Goff. (Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 2006); Anthony B. Pinn, "Jesus and Justice: An Outline of Liberation Theology within Black Churches." *Cross Currents* 57, no. 2 (2007); Anthony B. Pinn, ed. *African American Religious Cultures*. 2 vols. (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2009); Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion*; Albert Raboteau, *Canaan Land: A Religious History of African Americans* (New York: Oxford UP, 2001).

It is important to remember that religious traditions are not only influenced by doctrinal and ecclesiastical concerns, but have also been influenced by non-theistic perspectives. Although humanism and non-theistic perspectives have not been the fundamental religious view of African Americans in the United States, humanism offers a tool to examine the influences of theistic and non-theistic perspectives.² Christian theologies include various degrees of human freedom, from concepts of complete human freedom to a world of complete divine control where humans experience no free will and all is decided by God. Nontraditional theistic approaches can be viewed as an extension of progressive theological doctrines that offers an alternative perspective to satisfy theodicy.

A singular understanding of Black Liberation Theology fails to account for the rich history of early African Americans religious leaders that challenged the racist interpretation of traditional (white) Protestantism.³ The nature of God and God's involvement in human affairs produced an alternative religious corpus that examines theological claims based upon logical and rational expressions of God. Challenging the monolithic description of Black religion requires that all religious persuasions be included in the Black religious tradition, which may also offer a new, fresh perspective of Liberation Theology that goes beyond the scope of Jesus Christ and the

² Jones, "Religious Humanism: Its Problems and Prospects in Black Religion and Culture."; Kwasi Yirenkyi, "Atheism and Secularity in Ghana." In *Atheism and Secularity*, edited by Phil Zuckerman. (Santa Barbara, Calif: Praeger, 2010).

³ See Anthony Pinn's discussion on Richard Allen and early morality and temperance societies that sought to improve the conditions of African Americans, in, *Why Lord?: Suffering and Evil in Black Theology*, 39-56. Also see, Douglas R. Egerton, *He Shall Go out Free: The Lives of Denmark Vesey* (Madison, Wisc.: Madison House, 1999).

Christian perspective.⁴ This chapter challenges how certain religious affiliations are afforded a place of certitude because their position as a majority tradition provides additional institutional support and thus allocates additional allegiance to Christian/theocentric orientations as an authentic form of Black Liberation Theology, without including views from minority perspectives—this includes non-Christian and non-theistic traditions.⁵

Within Black Theology there is a history to conflate Black Liberation Theology with Black Christian Theology, as if the two terms are synonymous. Jones stresses the etymological significance of theology as a key factor in our holistic understanding of Black religious experiences.⁶ Theology is the study of the nature of God, and to support Jones' position and the position of non-theistic thinkers, it is important to address the reasons for an expanded theoretical rhetoric that is critical towards a belief system that espouses a personal, active God

⁴ In, "Religious Humanism," Jones states, "Because of what is at stake, it is important at this juncture to articulate the inner logic of a pluralistic approach as a means of testing the actual, in contrast to the espoused, theory of researchers. Pluralism, in this context, involves, first, the recognition of at least two discrete perspectives in black religion; neither can be reduced to the other; and each is regarded as co-valuable in the sense that if either is omitted, the phenomenon under discussion will be incomplete or inadequate" (p. 177). Also see Jones, "Theism and Religious Humanism: The Chasm Narrows." Jones is asking for a more open (liberal) understanding of BLT; suggesting that humanism and conventional BLT, and all other religious perspectives progress with the goal of reaching Ultimate Reality.

⁵ Jones, "Religious Humanism," 169; Jones continues, "the concern to uncover the rich past of the majority position should not obscure the full content and scope of black religion. Nor should the effort to honor the black church and its particular theological tradition obliterate the total spectrum of competing species of black religion, especially the nontheistic perspective. Unfortunately, this has occurred" (p. 169).

⁶ It is remiss to describe the various forms of theological perspectives in the Black community as "the" Black experience because as Jones and others have proven there is a multifaceted religious experience within the Black historical experiences within the United States.

(like what is commonly found in conventional BLT).⁷ Theological discourse is not narrowly focused on the pursuit of God, but also includes a discussion about how God is understood in light of suffering and oppression, or theodicy. Take for example, in “Religious Humanism: Its Problems and Prospects in Black Religion and Culture,” Jones states:

I must make the obvious point. If religion and theism are equated, nontheism, by definition, is excluded as a religious perspective. Add to this the common tendency, especially in the context of monotheism, to equate non-theism and atheism, and the possibility of a research apparatus that illuminates religious humanism is exceedingly remote. Nontheistic positions will either be ignored or mistakenly assimilated into the general theistic camp. The consequence is the same in either case: black religion becomes a *single* tradition of theism for research purposes.⁸

A clear delineation of the conceptual markers between theism and nontheism ensures *all* religious values and beliefs be exposed and investigated;

Much more is at stake than a recommendation for an accurate terminology. It should be clear to all that the case for black humanism both as an authentic religious perspective and a valid expression of the black religious tradition stands or falls on this seemingly innocuous issues about the meaning of theism and religion. In deciding about the parameters of black religion, one is in fact answering the fundamental question of the essence of religion itself, in particular the logical and phenomenological connection between it and theism.⁹

⁷ Pinn, *Varieties in African American Religious Experience*. Pinn examines and discusses a variety of theological perspectives found in the Black historical record, including Death of God theologies, pantheism, panentheism, deism, and even atheism. For a discussion of nonconventional religious perspectives in the African American tradition see Jones, *IGWR?*; Jones, “The Case for Black Humanism”; Jones, “Religious Humanism.” For more of death-of-God theologies see, Thomas J.J. Altizer, *Toward a New Christianity; Readings in the Death of God Theology* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1967); Thomas J.J. Altizer, and William Hamilton, *Radical Theology and the Death of God* (Indianapolis Bobbs-Merrill 1966); Lissa McCullough, and Brian Schroeder, eds., *Thinking through the Death of God: A Critical Companion to Thomas J.J. Altizer* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004); Thomas W. Ogletree, *The Death of God Controversy* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1966).

⁸ Jones, “Religious Humanism: Its Problems and Prospects in Black Religion and Culture,” 176.

⁹ Ibid.

To denote BLT as a strictly Christian phenomenon negates the history of non-Christian thought that is part of the Black community, both historically and contemporaneously.¹⁰

James Cone claims that Christian Theology is a theology of liberation. In fact, he begins his noteworthy book, *Black Theology of Liberation* stating just that; “Christian theology is a theology of liberation.” He continues, “It is a rational study of the being of God in the world in light of the existential situation of an oppressed community, relating the forces of liberation to the essence of the gospel, which is Jesus Christ.”¹¹ Cone’s description of theology makes it clear that Christian beliefs, values, and attitudes are fundamental in building Black Theology. In contrast, Jones advocates that Black Theology should be built from the ground up by first tearing down the existing structure and rebuilding it piece by piece with only those beliefs, values and attitudes that have been carefully scrutinized for their liberatory potential. To substantiate this point, Jones states,

Liberation theology’s point of departure is a context where oppression is already institutionalized and legitimated. It surfaces primarily as a *religious protest* against the misuse of religion to establish and maintain oppression; its method is customized for this purpose. Because its overriding purpose is to exterminate ESP oppression, liberation theologians must follow certain guidelines for theologizing to avoid working at cross purposes with their goals. In particular they must identify those *beliefs, values and attitudes* that inadvertently nurtured oppression and keep it alive.¹²

The key meta-theological differences between Cone and Jones are responsible for the boundary lines that are set in place to determine how Black Liberation Theology is understood within the

¹⁰ See Mays’ *The Negro’s God*. Mays, in Chapter 8, explains ideas of God that question the traditional attributes of God by African Americans as interpreted through their respective historical periods. Taking the scholarship of May, in addition to more recent scholarship on the various religious traditions that attempt to offer a liberatory theology, Christianity is only one of many. This chapter is an attempt to challenge the monolithic approximation of that BLT is synonymous with Black Christian Theology. Also see, Pinn, *The African American Religious Experience in America*.

¹¹ Cone, *BTL*, 1

¹² Jones, *IGWR?*, 205-206.

larger parameter of historical accuracy and philosophical assessment. The methodological position of Jones and Cone suggests different points of departure that claim to have the same final objective: a sustainable and viable BLT that can actively and persuasively eradicate ESP oppression.¹³

Describing Black Theology as a Liberation Theology requires that several questions be addressed to determine if our current description of Black Theology is actually a prescriptive account of how Black Theology *ought* to function, or if it is a descriptive account of how Black Theology actually functions. The threshold questions are: In response to the boundaries set forth by James Cone and his contemporaries, is Christianity inherently liberatory, and if so, do certain faith claims or presuppositions of religious doctrines hinder the resultant of liberation? How does Christianity, as the majority position for African Americans in the United States, determine which creeds and doctrines to abide by? How has conventional BLT emphasized certain aspects of the Christian canon while denouncing others? And is the type of BLT presented by Cone representative of “Whitenity”?—a theoretical description of, “a religion of oppression that functions as mis-religion for black folks.”¹⁴

This chapter will provide answers to the preceding questions as a corrective for the claim that all Black theistic interpretations are synonymous with Black Christianity. Jones is

¹³ Pinn, *Why Lord?: Suffering and Evil in Black Theology*, 92-93.

¹⁴ Jones, *IGWR?*, xi. Jones prefaces his discussion of Whitenity by emphasizing the importance of critical inquiry of conventional views of BLT: “Is it authentic liberation theology, or is it Christianity/Whitenity—a religion of oppression, a species of the slave master’s Frankenstein transmutation of biblical religion and Christianity that Carter G. Woodson labels mis-religion and Benjamin Mays, “compensatory beliefs”? Are we witnessing in the birth of black theology the wondrous vision of Whitenity’s timely demise, or is this vision a teasing mirage that gives the *appearance* of dismantling old master-servant theologies while actually preserving and perpetuating them in a new and disguised form? Does the praxis of postmodern black theism actually dismantle and disassemble Whitenity? Or does it *reassemble* Whitenity’s essentials in a more effective, high-tech theology that guarantees oppression’s successful disguise, not its demise?” (p. x)

responsible for conceptualizing a Black Theology that considers non-traditional theistic presentations. Jones' view of God is drastically different from a conventional concept of God. Other theistic frameworks that are not Christian in character are active components in the trajectory of Black religious thought. This chapter supports the inclusion of non-Christian perspectives to be included in the BLT canon. It is therefore important to identify those points of contradiction between conventional Christian Theology and other forms of theological discourse contra Jones' religious humanism or humanocentric theism. The analytical framework of canon, creed, church, and culture will provide a descriptive analysis of conventional themes within BLT. This includes the importance of methodological boundaries (discussed in Chapter 2); but also includes an interpretation of meta-theological considerations including the issue of ontological location of God in relationship to humans and human freedom. Unpacking the important attributes within the various degrees of human freedom leads to presumptions about the concept of God and God's liberating activities. Through the analytical framework of canon, creed, church and culture, I expose the shortcomings of conventional Black Liberation Theology as a Christian-centric project, via James H. Cone's BLT. I attempt to expand the boundaries of Black Liberation Theology to include non-Christian perspectives as a way exposing the oppressive nature of certain theological claims and religious doctrines.

In addition to using an analytical framework through the ancillary of canon, creed, church and culture, I will briefly outline the problem of historical accuracy when Black Theology is considered to be synonymous with Black *Christian* Theology. Additionally, the conceptual commitments affixed to Christianity via Cone's version of BLT will be expressed and its problematic will be exposed. This chapter attempts to respond to the problematic of positioning BLT as a Christian-only framework. Christianity is not the only theological perspective found in

the Black community. Failure to include non-Christian perspectives in the BLT canon potentially eliminates a possible contender for a viable liberation strategy. Using a non-Christian framework allows us to examine whether conventional BLT is in fact liberatory or if other theological perspectives outside the confines of Christianity can offer a more reliable position for liberation. In other words, why does the very nomenclature Black Liberation Theology become problematic if limited to the purview of a Christian (Protestant) theology? Are there certain aspects in BLT that limit its capabilities of offering a concrete form of material liberation? Are non-Christian theological perspectives evidence that Christianity does not satisfy the whole African American community, hence the rejection of Christian orientated religious beliefs and the reoccurrence of traditional African religious beliefs, Orthodox Islam, as well as the formation of religious beliefs that stem from syncretic religious traditions? Jones is attempting to pervade the very limitations set forth by conventional themes of BLT to build a BLT that is inclusive of non-Christian views. Jones' background in philosophy and theology influenced his interest to become an active member of the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA), a theologically diverse religious community.¹⁵

¹⁵ See, J. Gordon Melton, "Unitarian Universalist Association." In *Religions of the World: A Comprehensive Encyclopedia of Beliefs and Practices*, edited by J. Gordon Melton and Martin Baumann. (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2011), and Morrison-Reed, *Darkening the Doorways: Black Trailblazers and Missed Opportunities in Unitarian Universalism*, for more information on the progressive nature of religious tolerance in the UUA. Melton argues that the UUA has progressive religious politics, but there was a pervading racism that crippled the chances of recruiting a larger African American congregation. Also see, Dan Harper, "William R. Jones: A Brief Appreciation." *Unitarian Universalist Association*, 2012. Jones is not dismissive of Christian theology, as such; his gripe with conventional BLT is the lack of critical analysis from its practitioners in determining the liberatory potential. In a sense, Jones feels the need to determine the virus of oppression before we assume that we have a vaccine (BLT) to combat the oppressive (racist) nature of American society.

The different Black Liberation theologies to emerge during the 1960s reflected the political and social reality during the respective time period and from previous generations.¹⁶ This is the primarily reason that we do not see a monolithic Black experience or a singular vision for BLT.¹⁷ Take for example Benjamin Mays, in *The Negro's God: As Reflected in his Literature*, 1938, he states, "Not only have the ideas in the Spirituals developed along traditional, compensatory lines, but they have developed out of the social situation in which Negroes found themselves, at the point of social crisis."¹⁸ Within this "social crisis," African Americans were not completely satisfied with the answers provided by the Christian church in regards to the relationship between the God of the Bible and the suffering of African Americans.¹⁹ According to Jones, it is because of these inadequacies and inconsistencies in Christian theism that paved the way for Black religious humanism as a viable alternative.²⁰ This is also true for Cone, who was not satisfied with conservative interpretations of biblical scripture. This chapter discusses

¹⁶ This includes the theological positions of Howard Thurman, Martin Luther King, Jr., William Stuart Nelson, and Benjamin Mays, as well as others. See Chapter 1, "Introduction," for more on the theological differences between pre-Black Liberation theologians and Black Liberation theologians from the late 1960s.

¹⁷ Mays, *The Negro's God*, 26-28.

¹⁸ Ibid., 27.

¹⁹ See Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South*; Jones, "The Case for Black Humanism," 224.

²⁰ See Jones, "Religious Humanism: Its Problems and Prospects in Black Religion and Culture." Jones suggests that humanism and nontheistic traditions have historically been excluded from the Black religious tradition, because it has been labeled outside the purview of religion; "In the very limited cases where the presence of the nontheistic tradition is acknowledged, it is not labeled "religious," nor is it recognized as a legitimate part of the family of black religion. This is not primarily the consequence of its status as a numerical minority in black culture; rather, humanism itself is suspect as *something alien to the black psyche*. Both its opponent and champion can agree that religious humanism has not established itself as an indispensable perspective in black religion, the description of which is required from an accurate and adequate understanding of Afro-American religion" (p. 170). Jones continues by discussing the evolution of humanism in the human context suggests as a people gain more human freedoms they begin to cultivate a relationship where their dependency upon God begins to diminish over time (p. 174). Jones quotes Mays, "The other-worldly idea of God...finds fertile soil among the people who fare worst in this world; and it grows dimmer and dimmer as the social and economic conditions improve." Also see, Mays, *The Negro's God*, 28.

the limitations of conventional BLT and the overarching reasons that Jones transgresses those limitations in pursuit of a theology of liberation that seeks to be inclusive of Black religious experiences through an expression of liberation.²¹

J. Deotis Roberts in *Liberation and Reconciliation: A Black Theology*, supports a claim that theism is a naturally occurring phenomenon in Black culture;

The question of existence in reference to God is not the really issue for blacks. This does not preclude the fact that many blacks are nonbelievers. This is often true...of many older black intellectuals who are humanistically oriented and are greatly influenced by the position of Auguste Comte.... But the return to religion, often as blind faith in middle life, together with the spiritual strivings of their children, leads me to believe that religion is *native* to most blacks. *Religion in some form or other appears to be an Africanism.*"²²

Attached to this presumption is a claim that African Americans are naturally or innately a religious people, which has divinely evolved into a form of Christianity.²³ Jones, and other non-conventional theologians, challenges the precept that Christianity is the only theological response that supports a liberatory agenda. The humanist and non-Christian theological viewpoints are

²¹ Not all forms of liberation theology stem from a Christian basis.

²² J. Deotis Roberts, Sr. *Liberation and Reconciliation: A Black Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971), 83. Emphasis added.

²³ Also take for example, The National Committee of Black Churchmen's "Message to the Churches from Oakland," in 1969, "We black people are a religious people. From the earliest time we have acknowledged a Supreme Being. With the fullness of our physical bodies and emotions we have unabashedly worshipped Him with shouts of joy and tears of pain and anguish. We neither believe that God is dead, white, nor a captive to some rationalistic, and dogmatic formulation of the Christian faith which relates Him exclusively to the canons of the Old and New Testaments, and accommodate Him to the reigning spirits of a socio-technical age." For nonconventional views of Black Theology see, Jones, "Religious Humanism: Its Problems and Prospects in Black Religion and Culture," 176, provides a dissenting view on Christian theocentric perspectives of Black identity. Also consult Donald R. Barbera, *Black and Not Baptist* (New York: iUniverse, 2003); Anthony B. Pinn, ed. *By These Hands*; Also see, Yirenkyi, Kwasi. "Atheism and Secularity in Ghana."

present in the historical record of African Americans but have largely been overshadowed by Christian-centric scholarship.²⁴

Jones discusses a plethora of historical examples of Black non-theistic religious thinking. From slavery to postbellum critiques of Black theism, Jones concludes that Black humanism, as a religious entity, is an aspect of the historical development of Black culture.

To resurrect black religious humanism requires a second interpretive principle that current research in black religion do not sufficiently honor: *The actual origin as well as the current position of black religious humanism must be seen as a response to perceived inadequacies of black Christian theism, its theological rival.* Implicit in this principle is the hypothesis that black humanism emerges as part of a debate that is internal to black life and thought. It is not a spinoff of the enlightenment, the scientific revolution or, as Deotis Roberts has suggested, a borrowing from Comte.²⁵

Black humanism, and Jones' own theological position of secular humanism, is part of a concrete historical context in the Black religious experience. Black religious humanism is the dialectical (opposing) counterpart to Black Christian theism and together (in unity) they indeed form, what constitutes the broader spectrum for the composite experience.

When early interpretations of Black Theology (prior to 1960s) failed to promote a message of material liberation, a new variety of theology was introduced that could address the

²⁴ See Michael Lackey, *African American Atheists and Political Liberation* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2007); and Michael Lackey. "Franz Fanon on the Theology of Colonization." *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 3, no. 2 (2002).

²⁵ Jones, "Religious Humanism," 178-179. Original emphasis.

ESP limitations of the previous genres of Black Theology.²⁶ Through these new theological considerations, the religious message used an objective of liberation as the primary factor and made theological commitments secondary. This statement suggests ESP liberation is the overriding principle controlling the theological enterprise, however, it is argued that the rhetoric of liberation as the primary point of departure is actually more complicated when the actual theologies are analyzed. This was one of the valuable contributions of *IGWR?*, because the presupposition that conventional BLT used liberation as the primary point of departure was scrutinized. It is Jones' conclusion that Cone's BLT, as well as others, does not give primacy to liberation over theological commitments, but theological commitments are held up as liberatory in its own right. Cone's use of the Bible to support his liberatory claims suggests that theological commitments are reinterpreted to give them a liberatory message. Therefore the point of departure for Cone and Jones is very different. This is the process in which Jones utilizes oppression instead of prioritizing theological claims—the methodology strategy becomes primary.

This dissertation challenges the previous claim and argues that theological commitments are the overriding factor and liberation is pushed to the back burner in conventional BLT.

Through the multiple varieties Christianity presented as the sole proprietors of BLT, most, if not

²⁶ See, Rufus Burrow, Jr., *James H. Cone and Black Liberation Theology*. (London: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 1994). Burrow's discussion on Cone's influence to challenge traditional God-talk. Cone discusses the shortcomings of the Church during this period. He classifies the early formation of the church as a progressive, radical shift in racial politics and theological viewpoints. However, during Post-Reconstruction and into the early 20th century, the Black church gave way to a conservative path of religious leaders. In this regard, the change in racial politics during this period, resulting in the Nadir for African Americans also lead to seizing of religious autonomy and religious radicalism that was present during the early 19th century. Also see, James H. Cone, "Black Consciousness and the Black Church: A Historical-Theological Interpretation." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 387 (1970); Dwight N. Hopkins, ed. *Black Faith and Public Talk: Critical Essays on James H. Cone's Black Theology and Black Power* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007); Mays, *The Negro's God*; Raboteau, *Canaan Land: A Religious History of African Americans*; Anthony B. Pinn, "Jesus and Justice: An Outline of Liberation Theology within Black Churches."

all, are given this honor because they are the majority position, denouncing non-mainstream religious perspectives at the expense of institutionalized religious support. Overwhelming attention is given to the more popular choice of Christian theism than less popular views, like humanism and atheism. The choice is not grounded in its liberatory potential but is chosen because of its long connection with the institutionalized Black church, and the supporting religious institutions of Black Christian theism.

Theological perspectives have evolved towards a more secular view of religion that incorporates the nature of humanism. Humanism can be described as: theistic humanism and secular humanism, as well as a strong humanism that dismisses God or the existence of God (atheism). The nature of theology is open to multiple considerations and depends upon the ideological orientation of the beholder. When approached from the perspective of the Christian theologian, an emphasis on the presumed existence of God is nearly mandatory (a notable exception is German philosopher, Friedrich Nietzsche who promoted a 'Death-of-God' theology; A theology that presumes the existence of God, but after inquiry concludes that God must be dead).²⁷

Jones' variety of BLT is at root an instance of succession from conventional themes found in BLT by questioning whether certain theological commitments in Christian Theology are a mechanism for oppression. Jones seceded from his interlocutor because he decided to examine the theological claims before adding them to his toolbox of liberation. His criticism does not

²⁷ Lackey, *African American Atheists and Political Liberation*; Lackey, "Moses, Man of Oppression: A Twentieth-Century African American Critique of Western Theocracy." *African American Review* 43, no. 4 (2009). See Pinn, *Varieties of African American Religious Experiences*, 1998. Pinn examines and discusses a variety of theological perspectives found in the Black historical record, including Death of God theologies, pantheism, panentheism, deism, and even atheism. For more of death-of-God theologies see, Altizer, *Toward a New Christianity*; Altizer, and Hamilton, *Radical Theology and the Death of God*; McCullough, and Schroeder, eds., *Thinking through the Death of God*; Ogletree, *The Death of God Controversy*.

stem from a lack of respect for a Christian-centric theology, but is based upon a contextual analysis that forces “Black theologians and people in the Black church to look at the strategies of liberation they were operating on in terms of their effectiveness.”²⁸ Jones’ history as an ordained minister in the Unitarian Universalist Church provided him with the theological freedom to go beyond the religious limitations of his Baptist upbringing. Jones’ philosophical position is meant to critique and examine the existing theologies to determine if the objective outcome of liberation will be actualized.²⁹ Jones’ position as a philosophical theologian is based on a conceptual distinction between *criticism* and *antagonism*. This distinction is key to our understanding of (re)positioning Jones within the boundaries of BLT. Jones is not attempting to be an antagonist and dismiss theism, but wants to examine theological beliefs for their liberatory potential before adding them to the BLT toolbox. The criticism offered by Jones is not grounded in dismissing Christian beliefs as oppositional to liberation.

For instance, Jones’ presentation of Black Theology purposefully rejects Christian-centric theologies—including Christian theological categories, religious doctrines, and methodological approaches, because the theological claims have yet to be verified as liberatory. Therefore, Jones frames his BLT around liberation without being held to Christian theological commitments, both biblical and extra-biblical. On the other hand, Cone’s theological framework must maintain Christian theological categories, religious doctrines, and methodological approaches that are intertwined with a Christian framework. The commitment to the theological claims becomes

²⁸ Yancy, “The Honor Was All Mine: A Conversation with William R. Jones,” 8

²⁹ Jones, *IGWR?*, 172, “It has been argued, with some merit, that black religion is fundamentally theistic, and therefore any black theology that wants to be effective handmaiden of black liberation much adopt a similar theological stance.” Jones served as Assistant Minister at the First Unitarian Church, Providence, R.I., from 1958-1960. See, the biographical information in Jones’ dissertation, “Sartres' Philosophical Anthropology in Relation to His Ethics: A Criticism of Selected Critics.” PhD diss., (Brown University, 1969).

paramount in the theological system and acts as the controlling principles, regardless of their liberatory potential. The only way to successfully determine the liberatory potential within each respective concept is to first illuminate the liberatory event or action that gives credence to a material liberation. Unless liberation is in fact part and parcel to Christianity, liberation takes a secondary position while theological claims and church doctrine occupy the primary position of demarcation. Cone, by way of his variety of BLT, believes that Christianity and its ancillary categories are by nature liberatory, and therefore Christianity and liberation are different sides to the same coin.

Jones' efforts to legitimate his theology (humanism) as part of BLT tradition—separate from his interlocutors—is to create an ideological and methodological distinction that successfully moves away from conventional BLT towards a more inclusive and progressive view of Black Liberation Theology. One reason for the separation is because BLT is more complex than previously understood. Not only do we have the majority position of Christian theism as part of the Black religious tradition, but there is also a minority tradition of non-Christian theism that must also be included as a viable position for expanding views of BLT.³⁰

Jones' Philosophical Theology includes precepts of humanism and theism through his vision of humanocentric theism. By employing a method that locates theodicy as a controlling principle, humanocentric theism becomes a tool for investigating BLT. By starting from the vantage point of Jones' BLT, via a non-conventional BLT, we can demonstrate that his exclusion from the ranks of BLT is due to the fact that he transgressed the conventional boundaries that shape the popular and more customary views of what constitutes BLT. Philosophical Theology

³⁰ Jones, "Religious Humanism: Its Problems and Prospects in Black Religion and Culture," 173, 177; "Theism and Religious Humanism: The Chasm Narrows," 520; "The Case for Black Humanism," 215-217. Jones also confirms that there is a minority religious position that is non-theistic. This is discussed in further detail below.

is not bound to the same theological restrictions that the biblical theologian is held to, therefore the theological unfolding of Jones' view of BLT includes a theistic interpretation of theodicy. By broadening the view of BLT, Jones creates an inclusive model of BLT that includes non-Christian forms of liberation theology as well as non-theistic forms of theology.³¹ It is Jones' radical leap from Christian Theology to Philosophical Theology that has conceptually positioned him outside of BLT. His uncompromising diligence towards Black liberation causes us to question the reasons for his dismissal from the 'Black liberation theology' table. Take for example a definition by John Macquarrie, that highlights the traditional view that theology must centralize God as the normative value that defines the boundaries of theology,

Let us be quite clear at the outset that if anyone wants to construct a theology without God, he is pursuing a self-contradictory notion and is confusing both himself and other people. He may construct a philosophy of religion (and he may even do this brilliantly), or he may construct a doctrine of man (anthropology) or a doctrine of Jesus (Jesusology) or an ethic or a mixture of all of these, but whatever results from his endeavors, it will not be a theology?³²

The objection towards nontheistic theologies, especially in the Black religious tradition, negates the historical impetus that pushed forth a new conceptualization of God during times of despair and humiliation. Humanism and other forms of theism are evidence of "the actual origin as well as the current position of black religion humanism must be seen as a response to perceived inadequacies of black Christian theism, its theological revival."³³

³¹ The importance of non-theistic frameworks seems beyond the scope of theological studies, but in fact, Jones as well as others practitioners of non-theistic perspectives are influential in the forethought of conventional modes of theological investigations. Through the use of Philosophical Theology, Jones is able to use philosophical methodological tools to challenge and evaluate the rational and logical progression of various BLT, including Cone, Cleage, Washington, Major Jones, etc.

³² John Macquarrie, "New Directions in Theology Today", Volume III, *God and Secularity* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1967), 13.

³³ Jones, "Religious Humanism: Its Problems and Prospects in Black Religion and Culture," 179. Also see, Pinn, *Varieties of African American Religious Experience*.

Jones has either been ostracized because of his unpopular views of Christianity or because his theology is in fact outside Black theological thought. James Evans, in *We Have Been Believers: An African-American Systematic Theology*, provides a meaningful summary of Jones' theological thought by analyzing the implications of humanocentric theism. However, Evans concludes that Jones' theological position, although an important contributor to BLT, promotes an image of God that is too philosophical and abstract, and therefore fails to take the Black historical experience into consideration.³⁴ Evans states,

Jones emphasized the need for a *concept* of God that can provide a norm for believing and acting. The ambiguity—or what Jones call “the multievidentiality”—of African-American experience requires a concept of God that is the result of logical thinking and methodological consistency. However, the major flaw in Jones's argument is the failure to note that rules of logic and methodological procedures are contextual, not universal. They are, as Wittgenstein observed, operative only in the vocabulary of the specific “language games” from which they were derived. Jones's work is more of a philosophical treatise than a theological narrative because it seeks to establish a norm for African American theological discourse about God apart from the concrete historical experience and the religious affirmations of African-American Christians.³⁵

To suggest that Jones' concept of God is too logical and rational, and therefore more philosophical than theological fails to accept non-Christian forms of theism as part of the “African American theological discourse about God.” Humanocentric theism and religious humanism, as theological concepts, attempt to understand God from a point of view that is different from the religious affirmations of Christianity. The acceptance of faith claims as a way of claiming truths and as the basis for knowledge is the “epistemological underpinning of

³⁴ J. Deotis Roberts makes a similar remark: “The question of existence in reference to God is not the real issue for blacks. This does not preclude the fact that many blacks are nonbelievers. This is often true...of many older black intellectuals who are humanistically oriented and are greatly influenced by the position of Auguste Comte.... But the return to religion, often as blind faith in middle life, together with the spiritual strivings of their children, leads me to believe that religion is *native* to most blacks. Religion in some form or other appears to be an Africanism,” J. Deotis Roberts, Sr. *Liberation and Reconciliation: A Black Theology*, 82-83.

³⁵ Evans, *We Have Been Believers*, 65. Original emphasis.

Christianity,” and this epistemological basis is also present in conventional BLT.³⁶ As stated earlier, the liberatory potential offered in conventional BLT is grounded in a faith-based system that is open to philosophical critique in order to ensure that the concepts being used are not antithetical to liberation. The criterion for rational knowledge is indicative on three basic requirements for the application of knowledge to be actualized, belief: 1) must be based on evidence, 2) must not be self-contradictory, and 3) cannot contradict previously validated knowledge.³⁷ Using claims based strictly upon faith claims and not based upon actual evidence or previous knowledge is antithetical to the production of knowledge and rational forms of inquiry. Awareness towards the epistemological uncertainties in conventional BLT suggests that faith claims need to be evaluated before they are included as part of the BLT canon; especially if liberation is the fundamental factor for material change. Faith claims occupy a distinct position in BLT; especially since the Black liberation tradition is grounded in knowledge production as a way to understand the lived reality of African Americans. To use faith claims as the central tenets of a Liberation Theology fails to ground BLT in a concrete reality because faith claims are not held to the same epistemological standards of knowledge production.

According to Evans and Cone the normative boundaries as to what constitutes a normative BLT must include several core components to be considered a useful tool for liberation: 1.) Christian-centric, which centralizes God’s role in human affairs via biblical scripture (as was evident in the Exodus and the Resurrection of Jesus); 2.) Account for the historical experiences of African Americans; and 3.) Centralize the Black Church as an eternal

³⁶ George H. Smith, *Atheism: The Case against God* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1979), 60.

³⁷ Ibid. A detailed examination of faith and reason will be discussed in Chapter 5, where I provide an explanation of epistemology and the source of knowledge in regards to *knowing* God.

supporter of liberation. These core components provide the basis for building a conventional BLT yet they fail to account for nontraditional theological views. The presupposition that Black Liberation Theology is synonymous with Christian Theology, albeit of a Black sort, is a key element in understanding conventional boundaries of Black Liberation Theology. Attached to the notion that Black Liberation Theology is essentially Christian in nature are a host of conceptual commitments affixed to a number of theoretical problems.³⁸

Exploring Conventional Themes in Black Liberation Theology

The conventional views of Black Liberation Theology can be examined through four controlling principles that are linked to conceptual commitments adjoined to Black Liberation Theology as a specifically Christian perspective: canon, creed, church, and culture. These four principles provide an analytical framework for our discussion into the general tenets of Black Christian Theology. Once the conventional tenets of Black Liberation Theology are examined, a better understanding of Jones' construction of Black Liberation Theology is made more apparent.

By examining the conventional themes of BLT, it will become apparent that canon, creed, church, and culture are not inclusive of liberation theologies, but are instead the controlling principles for a Christian theism. To consider non-Christian theologies *outside* the conventional borders of Liberation Theology fails to provide a holistic presentation of the long, diverse experiences that makes up the Black religious tradition. The non-Christian theological perspectives in the Black community have an audience with African Americans who could not justify God's traditional attributes with their reality of oppression. African Americans

³⁸ McClendon, III and O'Neal, "William R. Jones and Philosophical Theology: Transgressing and Transforming Conventional Boundaries of Black Liberation Theology," 23.

participated in various non-Christian religions and theological viewpoints because they were not satisfied with the apologetic responses offered by Christian religious leaders.³⁹

Jones challenges the view that African American religious traditions have always been theistic and/or Christian. In concert with Jones, I argue that conventional Christian Theology proceeds from a principle of exclusion, and as such, restricts the possibility of a thorough discussion of its discursive practices. Historical evidence supports the existence and significance of non-Christian religious expressions in the Black community.⁴⁰ Black religious traditions in the United States have been dominated by Christianity and the institutionalized Black Christian Church, however that is not to say other religious traditions ceased to exist. The minority position of non-theism should not be dismissed as antithetical to Black religion or be banned from the theological table because the dominant voice is unwilling to value the liberatory potential in other religious expressions; including non-Christian and non-theistic perspectives.

Canon

At the forefront of the Christian canon is the centrality of the Bible. The use of biblical scripture is the normative *modus operandi* in conventional BLT. The customary approach of

³⁹ See, Jones, *IGWR?*, 24-39; Jones provides a radical interpretation of Black protest to traditional theological views that present God as omnibenevolent. Jones mentions, Countee Cullen and James Baldwin as being part of this tradition. This is also, evident with the popularity of the Nation of Islam during the 1950s, which is the most prominent response to non-Christian theological concepts. Also of significance is the influence of humanist theological thought that challenged the response of God's All-Good nature and the oppressive conditions that many African Americans were suffering through on a daily basis. For example, Mays in *The Negro's Idea of God*, states, "Prior to 1914, God is neither doubted nor is His existence denied. Doubt, lack of faith, and denial are definitely post-War developments. In other words, from 1760 to 1914 God's existence is not denied" (p. 252). However, Jones and other scholars through the presence of slave seculars and Daniel Alexander Payne's account of a God-defying slave has challenged this statement. See Jones, "Religious Humanism: Its Problems and Prospects in Black Religion and Culture," 170. More research is needed on this topic.

⁴⁰ Norm Allen, Jr., ed. *African-American Humanism* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1991); Norm Allen, Jr., ed. *The Black Humanist Experience: An Alternative to Religion* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2003); Lackey, *African American Atheists and Political Liberation*; Pinn, *The African American Religious Experience in America*; Pinn, ed. *African American Religious Cultures*; Raboteau, *Canaan Land: A Religious History of African Americans*.

Black Liberation Theology begins from a theological presupposition that connects devotional-faith-commitments with biblical scripture. As stated in Chapter 2, Cone employs a methodology that centralizes the Bible as the primary tool in his theological toolbox. The position of the Bible, and the importance of culture in Cone's theology requires him to reinterpret the meaning of the Bible and the events within the Bible to relate to the material conditions of African Americans.⁴¹ Cone's use of the Bible is central to his theology of liberation; as both a historical document of God's liberating work and as a testament to the revelation of God's work in humanity. For Cone, the Bible is the guiding principle for a Black Liberation Theology. Conventional Christian biblical theologians conclude that the Christian canon is the necessary place of demarcation because within this tradition there is a message of liberation.⁴²

The process of canonization is the process of establishing certain principles, through the means of textual analysis as fundamental and foundational to a specific religions or philosophies. Canonization does not only take place within the contours of religious perspectives but also includes philosophical perspectives. For example, this dissertation is an attempt to challenge the current canon of BLT by declaring Jones as a prominent participant in the core discussions of BLT, albeit through the non-normative approach of Black religious humanism. The process of deciding what, or who is to be included in the canon depends upon various stages of additions and redactions which are supported by institutional bodies, such as the Church.⁴³ The idea that

⁴¹ See Cone, *BTL*, 23-29, for Cone's normative sources for a Black Theology.

⁴² Major Jones, *Black Awareness: A Theology of Hope* (New York: Abingdon Press, 1971), 118.

⁴³ In the case of BLT, the canon has been developed through a process of adding and redacting the theistic claims that support the Christian canon. Those developments that are antithetical to the Christian composite of liberation then they are considered heretical during the respective historical time period. This is to say, that Jones' humanocentric theism may, in the future, be included in the BLT canon. For a critical discussion of the role of the scriptures in the development of Christianity see, Burton Mack, *Who Wrote the New Testament?: The Making of the Christian Myth* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995).

certain theological claims are authentic, or orthodox, and other claims are heretical is part of the process of canonization.⁴⁴

Creed

In addition to the importance of canonization in BLT, there is the additional process of using theological creeds to support theological claims and theological doctrines. A theological creed is a system of religious beliefs, or formal statements that are supported by the theological community and the institutionalized Church. The creeds and doctrines in each specific religious perspective include various theological commitments and extra-biblical sources as part of the credal pact that comprises the theological system. Creed is, “from the Latin *credo* (“I believe”).” Creeds are doctrinal formulas accepted by a religious group as binding. Creeds have been elaborated in many religions, invariably arising from situations containing disagreement or danger, for the sake of insuring unity among believers.”⁴⁵ The normative position for conventional BLT includes a dependency upon traditional attributes of God, such as, omnibenevolence, omniscience, and omnipotence. These doctrinal beliefs are responsible for conceptualizing and inaugurating a specific concept of God that in turn impacts the role of the divine in human activity. Jones has actively avoided using faith claims as the basis for a BLT because the various historical influences that have lead to the formation of certain creeds within Protestant Theology.⁴⁶ Accordingly, Jones attempts to address the ambiguity found in the credal

⁴⁴ McClendon and O’Neal, “William R. Jones and Philosophical Theology: Transgressing and Transforming Conventional Boundaries of Black Liberation Theory,” 18.

⁴⁵ William L. Reese, “Creed.” In *Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion* (Sussex England: Harvester Press, 1980), 112. As examples of Western creeds, the Apostle’s Creed and the Nicene Creed are examples. Also, “Credo ut intelligam,” (“I believe in order to understand”), is the position supported by St. Augustine “that belief must precede knowledge.”

⁴⁶ William E. Hordern, *A Layman's Guide to Protestant Theology* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1968).

systems employed in conventional BLT by stressing the particularity of Black oppression and the Black experiences. Jones observes that the theological claim ‘God is on the side of the Oppressed’ is based upon a trajectory that combines theological creeds with an image of God as omnibenevolent, omniscient, and omnipotent. The archetype of the divine, without first looking at the historical experiences of African Americans does not seriously take the African American condition into consideration. In short, when you figure in the concrete material position of African Americans, historical experiences do not provide any definitive evidence that God is on the side of the oppressed. In summation, the oppressive conditions found in the Black community aptly challenges an image of an All-Powerful God by offering a critique of the evidence that supports the possibilities of a demonic deity.⁴⁷

According to J. Deotis Roberts, theism “should have a concern for a god as an “idea,” if not as a personal reality.”⁴⁸ The belief that God can only be known through revelation leads Roberts and Cone to conclude that only those theologies that actively enlist revelation are viable, authentic sources for a Black Theology. This Barthian theological perspective that revelation is God’s activity in the human world has created a boundary-line of exclusion towards other forms of theistic expression. With Roberts there is a shift in the presumption that Jones’ humanism is

⁴⁷ Jones, *IGWR?*, 8-9.

⁴⁸ Roberts, Sr., *Liberation and Reconciliation: A Black Theology*, 233. According to the *Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion*, theism and deism were used as synonyms. “Eventually, however, the distinction was drawn that in deism God is creator but does not relate to His creation. In theism, by contrast God continues to sustain relations to His creation. Theism is distinguished from Pantheism in that for the latter alternative God, identified with the world, is wholly immanent. In theism God is both transcendent and immanent.” To continue, “Hartshorne has pointed out that in classical theism, i.e., the medieval conception of God as absolute, the feature of divine transcendence is overwhelming in its dominance. In this view, indeed, there is only a one-way relation between God and world, that is, the world is related to God but God is not related to the world. Hartshorne thus distinguishes between classical theism, stressing the divine absoluteness, and dipolar theism, preserving a balance between immanence and transcendence, absoluteness and relativity, in the conception of God” (p. 573—definition of Theism).

within “the nature of Black religion, but not a black theology.”⁴⁹ Accordingly, Roberts states, “When the term *theology* is used, there is not only the idea of God, there is *faith* in the God believed in.”⁵⁰ The theologies of Cone and Roberts force us to contemplate whether these theologies are actually theodicies since there is a trend towards justifying the suffering of African Americans, in light of God’s traditional attributes.

The reason Jones defines some Black Liberation theologies as Black theodicies in the first place, suggests conventional BLT attempts to rationalize the means of suffering. In Jones’ estimation, theodicy is the controlling principle in humanocentric theism. In regards to the concept of theodicy, Jones states:

In addition to examining the concept of God as a possibility for oppression, the black humanist would also painstakingly inspect the understanding of human suffering, especially as this relates to the oppressed’s beliefs about ultimate reality. That is, the theological method of black humanist elevates the theodicy question to first rank, and this is the consequence of the nature of oppression and the inner logic of a liberation theology.⁵¹

The prominence of theodicy as the controlling principle for Jones is *not* a matter of sabotaging Christianity and Christian thought, but is a matter of critiquing the controlling principles and theological commitments associated with Christian doctrines. In other words, theodicy forces oppression to be the central focus and bypasses theological doctrines and creeds.⁵²

⁴⁹ J. Deotis Roberts, "Liberation Theism." In *Black Theology II: Essays on the Formation and Outreach of Contemporary Black Theology*, edited by Calvin Bruce and William R. Jones. (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1978), 236.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Jones, "Religious Humanism: Its Problems and Prospects in Black Religion and Culture," 182. This quote brings to light the complexities of understanding suffering and oppression. In chapter 5, when examining the concept of God in Jones’ theology, I will discuss the implications of positive versus negative suffering in BLT.

⁵² For Cone’s response to theodicy see, *God of the Oppressed*, Chapter 8, “Divine Liberation and Black Suffering” Also see, James H. Cone, *Speaking the Truth: Ecumenism, Liberation, and Black Theology* (Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986), 14 for a brief discussion of theodicy in response to Jones.

Theodicy brings to light questions about the nature of suffering and the criteria used to determine if certain forms of suffering can be considered positive. Distinguishing between positive and negative suffering in theological doctrines in conventional BLT suggests that some forms of suffering are in accordance with God's will. According to Cone, the suffering African Americans encounter is in accordance with the meaning of God's liberation; "If God is a God of the oppressed of the land, as the revelation of Christ discloses, then wrath is an indispensable element for describing the scope and meaning of God's liberation of the oppressed."⁵³ For example, the concept of 'God's suffering servants,' can be viewed as a form of positive suffering, which guarantees that God is on the side of the oppressed but also presumes that effective change is in the hands of God. Jones distinguishes between positive suffering and negative suffering because in his purview any form of suffering that is viewed as positive (suffering servant) is the object of God's favor, reducing or eliminating the need to overcome the suffering. In fact, to personally challenge the reality of suffering may be antithetical to God's favor and may create a space where God's favor turns into God's wrath (deserved suffering). For example, Jones delineates between positive and negative forms of suffering;

Consider Jeremiah's plaintive question, "Why is my pain perpetual, and my wound incurable?" That the suffering is not replaced by its opposite, that the suffering is unrelieved, triggers the thought of the loss of God's favor in Jeremiah's mind. The book of Job is also illuminating in this connection. Through the epilogue is often considered an editorial addition, I would argue that it is necessary in order to make the text theologically correct. The suffering of Job demands restitution. Job must be vindicated if the interpretation of the prologue—God is testing Job to see if he is a fair-weather friend—is to be distinguished from deserved punishment.⁵⁴

⁵³ Cone, *BTL*, 71.

⁵⁴ Jones, *IGWR?*, 19. Jones highlights two forms of suffering; Ontological (natural/supernatural) suffering (hurricanes, earthquakes, etc) and suffering caused by human agents. Natural/supernatural suffering cannot be changed, and therefore must be accepted. The latter is suffering that leads to the maintenance of oppression--through economic, political and social means--needs to be combatted. Natural and ontological suffering results in quietism, because they cannot be challenged.

How do we declare which form of suffering African Americans are facing? Do we have evidence to support that the suffering African Americans encounter is a form of positive suffering and therefore, allows us to conclude that positive suffering supports a divine plan that is, in fact, for the oppressed? With the position of positive suffering there is no inconclusive evidences that suggests God is on the side of the oppressed. It is only once an event of liberation is actualized that we can determine the politics of God.⁵⁵ The doctrinal support for positive suffering remains a salient feature of Cone's theological enterprise and his vision of God's liberating activities is based on a position that centralizes the agency of God as the sole practitioner of all liberatory acts. Jones concludes that all suffering must be viewed as negative so there is a desire, and in fact, a determination to eradicate the suffering. If the suffering is understood to be positive, then there is little motivation to suppress it and overturn the suffering. Positive suffering leads to *quietism*, a term Jones emphatically uses to describe a lack of action on the part of the oppressed. The reason for this inaction is because of the strong emphasis on theological messages that endorses the suffering servant motif—that God will offer a liberating hand necessary to overcome oppression. The ontological nature of suffering—categorizing suffering as positive or negative—confirms ethnic suffering is a subclass of positive suffering; “It [positive suffering] describes a suffering that is without essential value for one's well-being. It leads one away from, rather than towards, the highest good.”⁵⁶ Subjugating African Americans, in a theological sense, to a form of positive suffering, persuades the oppressed that their suffering is deserved, good, and moral, “or necessary for their salvation, [and] in short redemptive,” and

⁵⁵ Ibid., 18-20.

⁵⁶ Jones, “Process Theology: Guardian of the Oppressor or Goad to the Oppressed,” 277.

creates an environment where suffering is justified through biblical scripture and doctrinal support.⁵⁷

Challenging the core theological doctrines that support a message of positive suffering brings to light the problematic perspectives of conventional theological commitments that promote a message of liberation through the auspice of suffering as a necessary and positive position for African Americans. In accordance with Jones, to suggest suffering is a necessary component for liberation centralizes the importance of *faith* in conceiving an image of God as omnibenevolent, and as the Liberator of the Oppressed. Challenging the doctrinal position of conventional BLT produces a theoretical platforms where theological claims and doctrines are isolated so the anti-liberatory aspects can be examined to determine its antithetical fit. In a sense, we must isolate those doctrines and creeds that question God's activity in supporting oppression and suffering, especially those beliefs that require knowledge of God and the politics of the divine.

To clarify, when God's traditional attributes and "the existential situation of black oppression" are presented through an apologetic lens, like the suffering servant motif, "the more inexplicable becomes the point of departure for a black theology of liberation: the designation of the black situation as oppressive." Jones continues,

From the humanist perspective, the crucial lens for black Christian theology is not that of original sin, but the original oppression that triggers the necessity of black liberation. To be extricated from this dilemma, the black Christian theologian will have to move towards a more radical eschatological doctrine or adapt a view of human reality that will relieve God of the responsibility for the crimes of human history. The former will push the black Christian theologian seriously close to a "pie-in-the-sky-eschatology," a point of view that has been denounced. The latter cannot be accomplished without endorsing

⁵⁷ Ibid.

the radical view of human freedom/autonomy that is the acknowledged core of the humanist anthropology.⁵⁸

“Pie-in-the-sky” theologies promote salvation and/or reward in the afterlife—this type of eschatological system has been clearly denounced by Cone and Jones.⁵⁹ Because “pie-in-the-sky” theologies do not attempt to change the present condition of a person/community; there is no need for people to strive for change. Oppression and liberation are pushed outside of human control into the hands of a morally sound divine figure. The transformation of salvation from ‘otherworldly’ to ‘this world’ is an important distinction in BLT for two reasons: 1.) If salvation is within this world, then questions of human freedom are bound to arise, and 2.) As a theological claim, any suggestion that the respective theology is “soteriological correct” requires it first to be open to critical examination before concluding that conventional BLT is indeed a radical theology capable of transformation and not a survival theology hidden under a cloak of radicalism.

Mays, in *The Negro’s God*, discusses the evolution of Black religious thought in the Black community through the genre of classical literature by examining the concept of God contrived during specific historical periods. Jones dismisses “otherworldly” theologies as part of a survival religion that doesn’t necessary lead to liberation. According to Jones in *IGWR?*;

I would also suggest that Roberts and others place too much emphasis upon black religion as “survival” religion, and this leads to an inevitable de-emphasis of its liberation impact. I grant that survival has its legitimate, its necessary place and role. It is obviously a necessary condition for liberation or anything else. I would also acknowledge that during certain periods, such as slavery, survival was by far the more pressing need than liberation. What I object to is the continuation of a survival model that in today’s context may be anachronistic, especially if this model is defended on

⁵⁸ Jones, “Religious Humanism: Its Problems and Prospects in Black Religion and Culture,” 179-180, fn. 20.

⁵⁹ For a detailed discussion of compensatory religious practices, see Mays, *The Negro’s God*. He discusses both survival religion and pie-in-the-sky theologies. In, Pinn, *Why Lord?: Suffering and Evil in Black Theology*, thoroughly examines the importance of Black religious thought and the early theological reflections on suffering.

grounds of its survival value for previous generations. The value of a theological category, I submit, should be gauged in terms of its liberation coefficient for the present and future, rather than its psychological comfort for a past, or even the present, generation. It would also appear that the black theologians themselves are committed to the same conclusion, once they define the systems as theologies of liberation.⁶⁰

Any religion that stresses liberation in the next life has been strongly discouraged as a Liberation Theology because a Liberation Theology must excite material change in our current reality. Any theology that leads to inaction or complacency of the oppressed group is counterintuitive towards changing the social conditions of the oppressed.

The main purpose for Cone and Jones is to (re)defined the borders and boundaries of Black Theology by recognizing the need for a new theological perspective that (re)centers the Black experience as the core instrument necessary for a theory of liberation:

Black Theology must take seriously the reality of black people—their life of suffering and humiliation. This must be the point of departure of all God-talk which seeks to be black-talk (source). When that man is black and lives in a society permeated with white racist power, he can speak of God only from the perspective of the socio-economic and political conditions unique to black people. Though the Christian doctrine of God must *logically* precede the doctrine of man, Black Theology knows that black people can view God only through black eyes that behold the brutalities of white racism. To ask them to assume a “higher” identity by denying their blackness is to require them to accept a false identity and to reject reality as they know it.⁶¹

It is from this perspective that Black Liberation Theology has been conceptualized to include theological markers that identify African American experiences within the scope of Christianity, which is narrowly aligned to the majority view of theism and Christian doctrinal support.

Although Jones’ theological concepts differ from Cone, Jones supports the notion that God must be viewed in light of the Black historical record. The distinction between Christianity and

⁶⁰ Jones, *IGWR?*, 149-150. Emphasis added.

⁶¹ Cone, *BTBP*, 117, emphasis added; also see, Roberts, “Liberation Theism,” for a discussion of the concepts necessary for a Black Theology. “Black theology must develop within the context of black religious experience. Black religious experience is “stuff” through which the Christian faith is sifted to provide a black theology. All theology is a reflection upon the faith-response for a religious ultimate” (p. 237).

theism is central to understanding the disagreements and differences that ensue between Jones and Cone, in addition to other Black Liberation theologians.⁶²

Examining traditional creeds and doctrines in BLT includes discussions about the freedom of man: What are the theological/philosophical implications of human freedom in BLT?⁶³ What does human freedom mean for theological discourse that promotes a concept of God as imminently involved in human affairs? With salvation as a key element in many religious doctrines, do aspects of salvation presume an assumption that human beings need saving? Is it punishment for past crimes? Does the original fall of man doctrine (Adamic myth) have an influence on our current state of salvation and oppression? How is salvation understood in humanism and nontheistic expressions? Eastern religious traditions are oftentimes considered atheistic because they lack a central God or Supreme Being; rather, salvation is reached through a process of reaching a balance within self and the Ultimate Being.⁶⁴ God's involvement in the process of salvation is limited in some way: either power is decreased to a point where God's existence has little bearing on salvation or salvation is obtained without God. In other words, humans can reach summum bonum by challenging and changing the lens in which values and history are understood. By challenging the theological doctrines that human beings are

⁶² Jones, *IGWR?*, 173-174; "Religious Humanism: Its Problems and Prospects in Black Religion and Culture"; McClendon and O'Neal, "William R. Jones and Philosophical Theology: Transgressing and Transforming Conventional Boundaries of Black Liberation Theory."

⁶³ This is covered in further detail in Chapters 4 and 5, detailing the theological systems of Cone and Jones, respectively.

⁶⁴ Not all theologians define Eastern religions as atheistic because there is no central God figure and this description is not exhaustive of Eastern religious traditions. Jones describes Eastern religious reflection as nontheistic because salvation is obtained when there is an ideal balance between man and Ultimate Reality, of which is not defined within the boundaries of Christianity. Ultimate Reality is a term to define both the concept of the divine as well as a term to incorporate a position of summum bonum. See Jones, *IGWR?*, 243, fn. 2, and chapter 12.

ontologically dependent upon God, creates an environment where God becomes politicized in the affairs of humans.

The concept of God as All-Knowing and All-Powerful leads to a discussion about the amount of freedom afforded to human beings, suggesting that humans have limited freedom depending on the degree of God's involvement. On the other hand, at the other end of the spectrum, humanism and other nontheistic religions rely upon human values and human history from a human-centered perspective by affording humans full autonomy in creating history and measuring values. This system is based upon our lived histories and is not held within the boundaries of an arbitrary system of divine intervention. To completely change the social system that promotes an egalitarian society, we must first accurately determine the source of our values and histories. If God is responsible then only God is able to execute change—this leads to quietism. If human beings are responsible then only humans can enforce change. Only by placing the relationship between values and history within the power of human beings can the prospect of change be considered. It is from this point that a critical examination of our values and histories can commence. When values and histories are in the hands of the divine there is little prospect of change; unless of course God is on the side of the oppressed.⁶⁵

The principle authority under conventional BLT is presumed to be God; man only has authority of *being* based upon the will of the divine. Man is living in sin if God's liberating activities are not recognized as an accurate portrayal of God's election of the oppressed. Man is not the principle authority of values or human history, but God, through active involvement shows that value in *being* is man's highest goal. According to Cone, being is only obtained by

⁶⁵ See Jones, *IGWR?*, 201, where Jones discusses the character of human history.

challenging the oppressive conditions. Cone refuses to contemplate a view of liberation that is positioned outside the “historical present;”

[N]on-existence in the context of existence that is characterized by oppression and liberation. *We know what the end is when we face it head-on by refusing, at the risk of death, to tolerate present injustice.* The eschatological perspective must be grounded in the historical present, thereby forcing the oppressed community to say no to unjust treatment, because its present humiliation is inconsistent with its promised future.⁶⁶

One common thread between Cone and Jones is their consistency on the importance of salvation being placed within this world. Although salvation is obtained in different forms, both theologians realize that focusing on salvation in the next world is contradictory to ESP liberation; “An eschatological perspective that does not challenge the present order is faulty.”⁶⁷ Challenging the message of “otherworldly” eschatological positions reduces the conceptual space between Jones and Cone, but messages of “otherworldly” eschatological perspectives are still present in the religious landscapes of conventional BTL, especially since the liberation event has yet to be actualized.

Church

The church, as an institutional body supports and disseminates theological doctrines and creeds. To speak of “the church” is a bit misleading. There are multiple churches that could be considered within this section, especially when the historical progression of churches includes various sects and traditions within the various branches of Christianity. Depending on the religious tradition followed, the reference to ‘the church’ is wavering. For the purpose of this project, ‘the church’ is used as the institutional body of religious thought that supports the theological practices found within the canon and credal doctrines of the Protestant tradition.

⁶⁶ Cone, *BTL*, 137. Original Emphasis.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

However, traditionally Protestant Churches use the Bible as the source of authority, rather than the church patriarchy or a church leader, such as the Pope. For BLT the church functions as a source of camaraderie and as a soapbox for the theological messages interpreted from the Bible.

As the major spokesperson for theological tenets and Black religious thought, the Black Church is a place where liberation and freedom are exemplified through its historical role in education, social services outreach, and benevolent societies, among other social programs.⁶⁸ These programs challenged the social conditions germane in the social climate of the United States. Through educational services, the church became the cornerstone of educational support and community betterment during a period when other public places that offered similar amenities legally prohibited African Americans from utilizing their services. The Black Church, as an institution, continues to promote liberatory activities through its contributions to educational services and social outreach programs as an ancillary for the documented failures of public education for African American youth, as well as a place to garner support for social change and political representation, historically and contemporaneously.

In addition to the role of the church as a cornerstone of African American betterment, the church also functions as a pillar of support for Christian doctrine and the primary source of dissemination for the Christian canon. Like many institutions dedicated to social change, the Black Church went through a number of ideological and philosophical changes. The climate of the religious community in the United States during the late-eighteenth-century was one of religious zeal and changing social landscape in the North. By the end of the Second Great Awakening in (1790-1815), the Atlantic Slave Trade was abolished to the United States in 1808,

⁶⁸ See, DuBois, "The Negro Church."

gradual emancipation had begun in northern states, and the number of independent Black churches began to increase.⁶⁹

The liberatory spirit of the Black churches from yesteryear are strikingly different than the church we encounter today. In an essay presented in 1977, "Black Theology and the Black Church: Where Do We Go From Here?," James Cone critiques the current state of the Black Church because he opines that the church has moved from being a progressive and radical partner for the Black community during its early period of inception in the mid-1800s to becoming a conservative institution that fails to promote a message of liberation. Cone's deep passion for the Black Church is built from his long relationship with the church beginning in his early childhood that climaxed when he became part of the ministry at the age of sixteen.⁷⁰ Looking back at the radical nature of the Black Church through the triumphs of Richard Allen, David Walker, Henry H. Garnet, and Henry M. Turner suggests that the Black churches of today are not focused on a message of liberation, but are content with raising money to finance the institutions survival.⁷¹ As part of the Black religious tradition, the Black Church has been charged with providing its congregation with the themes and tenets of the respective religious

⁶⁹ Cone contends that the church went through several ideological shifts since its inception. See, Cone, *BTL*, 127. Rufus Barrow categorizes Cone's view of the Black church into three distinct periods: The Antebellum Church; the Post-Civil War Black Church until the Civil Rights Era in the 1960s; and the Contemporary Black Church. This is not to suggest that the illegal smuggling of Africans into the United States completely stopped. See W.E.B. DuBois, *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade to the United States of America, 1638-1870* (Mineolo, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 1970).

⁷⁰ James H. Cone, "Black Theology and the Black Church: Where Do We Go from Here?". In *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-1979*, edited by James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 269.

⁷¹ Ibid., 271. Also see George Eaton Simpson, *Black Religions in the New World* (New York: Columbia UP, 1978), 222-223; Eddie Glaude, "The Black Church Is Dead." *Huffington Post*, 2010.

perspectives. Within this historical space, the theological commitments employed through the Black Church have served two contradictory roles: resistance and accommodation.⁷²

Albert Cleage, Jr., in, *Black Christian Nationalism: New Directions for the Black Church*, 1972, concludes that “the weakness of the black church is that it has been a survival institution. It has helped to maintain sanity, but has also destroyed the possibility of a united black liberation front. The black preacher has preached escapism and individualism. And in the process he has destroyed the real possibility for people to come together to change oppressive conditions.”⁷³

Jones seconds the conclusion offered by Cleage:

Moreover, once it is recognized that white slave masters attempted to foist their exegesis of Christian and bill faith on black believers, we must clearly and precisely determine where Whitenity ends and authentic black Christian theism begins. To ally oneself with either black or white Christianity prior to a root-and-branch cross-examination of both is to beg the question of the liberating potential of each.⁷⁴

The church’s role in fighting for freedom and liberation through educational programs, job training workshops, benevolent societies, and literary clubs are acts of resistance towards structures in society that prohibited upward mobility for African Americans. The mode of resistance found in the Black Church isn’t just localized in the early-twentieth-century, but has its roots in the antebellum South. Scholarship on the period suggest that the revolts led by Denmark Vesey and Nat Turner are evidence of a Black institution that ideologically promoted a message

⁷² For an early interpretation of the Black church see, W.E.B. DuBois, “*The Negro Church*.” In *Report of a Social Study made under the direction of Atlanta University* (UMass Amherst Libraries, 1903); E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (New York: Schocken Books, 1964); Carter G. Woodson, *The History of the Negro Church* (Washington, DC: The Associated Publishers, 1921).

⁷³ Albert Cleage Jr., *Black Christian Nationalism: New Directions for the Black Church*. (New York: William Morrow and Co., 1972), 89

⁷⁴ Jones, *IGWR?*, 221.

of liberation in the truest sense of the word.⁷⁵ George Eaton Simpson gives credit to the newly autonomous northern Black Churches as the inspiration for slave insurrections during the antebellum period:

Religion was one of the factors that contributed to some of the major slave insurrections, but the religious influence in the conspiracies cannot be attributed to the white churches in the North or the South, the Christian antislavery societies of the North, or the Methodist circuit riders. Inspiration for the revolts came from slaves themselves or from former slaves who had become ministers of or who had attended the new independent black churches in Baltimore, New York, Philadelphia, or other northern cities.⁷⁶

The evidence to support an early form of Black Liberation Theology suggests that African Americans did not accept the gospel of white religious leaders and missionaries as holistically true, but instead reinterpreted the gospel as a way to contemplate their current social situation of enslavement. It is from this tradition, according to Cone, that the Black Church was born.⁷⁷ Accordingly, Wilmore confirms that these syncretic fusions of religious perspectives were necessary to garner the kind of resistance necessary to fight against the institution of slavery; “It had to be enriched with the volatile ingredients of the African religious parts and, most important of all, with the human yearning for freedom that found a channel for expression in the early

⁷⁵ James H. Cone, "Black Consciousness and the Black Church: A Historical-Theological Interpretation," 49. Cone states, "The Christian Godspell is a gospel of liberation, The pre-Civil War black church recognized this, and that was why they refused to accept a interpretation of Christianity that was unrelated to civil freedom." Also see, Douglas R. Egerton, *He Shall Go out Free: The Lives of Denmark Vesey* (Madison, Wisc.: Madison House, 1999); Timothy Smith, "Slavery and Theology."

⁷⁶ George Eaton Simpson, *Black Religions in the New World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), 222.

⁷⁷ Manning Marable, *Blackwater: Historical Studies in Race, Class Consciousness, and Revolution* (Dayton: Black Praxis Press, 1981), 40-42. Marable provides a discussion of the early Black church.

black churches of the South.”⁷⁸ The Black Church has a record of liberation and the radical message of liberation executed by Vesey, Turner, and Walker are evidence of that; however, there is support to suggest the church also prescribed to a role of accommodationism.⁷⁹ This is practiced by disseminating and prescribing to religious doctrines and creeds of Western theological allegiances. By being the authoritative institution that undergirds Black theistic and religious thought, the Black Church is under extreme pressure to be the liberatory force that it is commonly perceived to be. For example, Jones’ maintains that the church is a “sleeping giant,” capable of liberation within the Black community, however, the reality of African American’s is too dire to wait on the institution to wake from its slumber.⁸⁰

Cone and other religious leaders give precedence to a reality of divine liberation; the church is the expression through the Holy Spirit. The New Testament church functions as an institution prescribed as an essential part of liberation. By “preaching the gospel of the New Testament; through proclamation of God’s liberating activity (Resurrection of Jesus) and an

⁷⁸ Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 27. In addition to the assertions of Cone on the Antebellum Black Church, Cone, “made the claim that having been born in protest the black church was fundamentally distinguished by its commitment to resistance and action in the quest for black freedom. It was very clear about the mission, which was cooperating with God in the fight against social injustice. There was no tendency to sit back and do nothing while expecting God to do for oppressed blacks what they could do for themselves.” in Burrow, *James Cone and Black Liberation Theology*, 151.

⁷⁹ Addressing the scope of accommodationism found in the early Black church tradition, Manning Marable in *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America*, 1983, states, “When one surveys the single organization that is closest to the masses of Black people, the Black church, one finds that the majority of Black religious leaders from the mid-nineteenth to late-twentieth-centuries have been pragmatic or accommodationist in their politics, integrationists, and at times, profoundly conservative. Few ministers would hold much credence in the exhortations of Thomas Sowell or Ronald Reagan, but not many would consider themselves the descendants of Nat Turner or Malcolm X.” See, Marable, *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America: Problems in Race, Political Economy, and Society* (Cambridge, Mass: South End Press, 2000), 181-182.

⁸⁰ Jones, “Theological Responses to ‘The Church and Urban Policy’,” *Journal of the Society for Common Insights* 2 (1978): 51; and, “Religious Humanism: Its Problems and Prospects in Black Religion and Culture”; Eddie Glaude, “The Black Church Is Dead.” *Huffington Post*, 2010.

outpouring of the Holy Spirit;" the gospel of the New Testament, provides a description of God's position as the champion of liberation.⁸¹

Additionally, according to Cone the function of the church is to "share in the liberation struggle," by telling the oppressors there has been a major change in the (old) social order: "The function of the church is to remind them that they are no longer in power."⁸² Lastly, Cone reminds us that conventional BLT reveals the gospel as a reality for salvation—"We can only lose our physical lives but can gain...eternal life and *what blacks call blackness*."⁸³ This description of salvation requires that liberation change our thinking and how we encountering our Blackness. Blackness has been hijacked by the "old order" and its characteristics have been distorted to meet the guidelines set forth to maintain systems of oppression. The problem with Cone's interpretation is that it is begging-the-question: for salvation to occur, Blackness must be realized, but oppression is necessary for divine election.

Unfortunately black churches are also guilty of prostituting the name of God's church. Having originally come into being because they knew that political involvement in societal liberation of blacks was equivalent with the gospel, it is a sad fact that in subsequent decades they all but lost their reason for being. Except for rare prophetic figures like Jesse Jackson and Albert Cleage, the black denominational churches seem to be content with things as they are, getting fat on the misery of their sisters and brothers. Although possessing the greatest potentiality for black revolution, the black churches satisfy themselves with white solutions to earthly injustice. That is why persons interested in justice in this world so often scorn the black church, saying that it is nothing but a second-rate-oppressor.⁸⁴

Part of the reason Cone may feel like the church is "a second-rate-oppressor" is because the church is not responding to the current problems within the Black community—the message of

⁸¹ Cone, *BTL*, 130.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 131.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 133.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 134.

liberation offered in churches is not a message of radical liberation that is the underlining theme of a Theology of Liberation.

Jones' position on the Black church differs from his interlocutors by avoiding glorifying the church until there is ample evidence to support the role of the church in the process towards liberation; Because the Black Church's history, as Cone and others have indicated, is checkered relative to liberation, black humanism wants to avoid the "all-the-eggs-in-one-basket" strategy implied in the black church as the avant-garde.⁸⁵ The Black Church has been appropriately characterized as "a sleeping giant," because the church does not effectively capitalize on its position of power and influence in the Black community. Instead the church is concerned with providing emotional support to its congregants as they navigate through a world plagued with social injustices. The messages of survival embedded in Black religious culture is still present in church doctrine because its members require a message of hope so they can keep on keeping. Black theologians conclude that survival theologies have limited liberatory potential because they support a message that is apologetic to their social reality. Suffering in this world is met with jubilation in the next world—"kept them submissive, humble, and obedient."⁸⁶ Conceptual markers in Black humanism suggests it is unwise for the fate of black liberation to depend upon whether the Black Church awakens from its slumber. The emergence of Black humanism as a

⁸⁵ Eddie Glaude, "The Black Church Is Dead." Huffington Post, (2010); C. Eric Lincoln, *The Black Church since Frazier* (New York: Schocken Books, 1974); C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya. *The Black Church in the African American Experience*; Anthony B. Pinn, "Jesus and Justice: An Outline of Liberation Theology within Black Churches." *Cross Currents* 57, no. 2 (2007).

⁸⁶ William R. Jones, "Theological Responses to 'The Church and Urban Policy'," *Journal of Society for Common Insights* 2 (1978); 51. Also see, Reginald F. Davis, *Frederick Douglass: A Precursor of Liberation Theology* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 2005), 110.

formidable opponent may successfully prod the Black church, as other secular movements have done, ‘to be about its father’s work.’”⁸⁷

Culture

Lastly, the normative description of BLT includes a presumption that African Americans are innately a religious people, and consequently, their religion will play a fundamental role in ESP liberation. Propagating a myth that African American’s are an innately religious or theistic people creates an environment where non-normative perspectives are viewed like a stepchild who does not belong in the family. Challenging the myth that all African Americans are Christian, is both unfounded and unproven through scientific inquiry. There is a tradition of non-theism in African Americans history and rightfully so, should be recognized as a pathway towards challenging theocentric ideologies and Christian doctrines used to explain theodicy.⁸⁸ The purpose of examining the assumption that African Americans are an inherently religious people relates to a history of oppression and unrest during specific points in history—this is most noticeable during the Transatlantic Slave Trade, and during the oppressive conditions linked with the institution of slavery in the United States.⁸⁹ The shared link of oppression during these various time periods warrants a discussion into the purpose of religious belief and whether or not we still see remnants of survival religion in BLT, in conventional forms and otherwise.⁹⁰

⁸⁷ Jones, “The Case for Black Humanism,” 221. Jones gives credit to Lucius M. Tobin of Benedict College for the “graphic description” of the church as “a sleeping giant.”

⁸⁸ Lackey, *African American Atheists and Political Liberation*.

⁸⁹ See Yirenkyi, “Atheism and Secularity in Ghana.” Jones asks a similar question, “Is the historical oppression of blacks in America more conducive to the development of certain forms of theism than humanism?” Jones, “Religious Humanism: Its Problems and Prospects in Black Religion and Culture,” 173. In a sense, does religion act as an opiate for the people?

⁹⁰ See Pinn, *Varieties of African American Religious Experience*.

To suggest Black Liberation Theology is only within the theistic camp fails to recognize:

a) the diversity of religious perspectives, including non-theistic traditions in the historical record;

and b) the focus of a Black religious tradition that is grounded in an historical evaluation that equally regards both traditions as self-serving and important to the creation of a holistic religious experience; both past and present. This includes the Judeo-Christian religious traditions; non-Christian religious systems (i.e. Nation of Islam, Orthodox Judaism, Orthodox Islam, Bahia's, syncretic religious traditions, etc.); Humanism and other forms of non-theism (secular humanism, atheism, agnosticism, etc.). Both non-Christian and non-theistic religious expressions haven't been invited to join in the ranks of Judeo-Christian because as the majority stakeholder, they possess the controlling power to determine who is afforded a seat at the BLT table. Although non-theism has a legitimate place in the historical record, it is often cast aside as an alien tradition—either considered as non-Black because humanism is viewed as part of the Western tradition or as too rational for the religious zealotry found in African American culture.⁹¹

In response to expanding the religious tradition to include non-theistic perspectives, there is a fear that multiple religious perspectives will threaten the unity of African Americans and create further divisions within African American society. African Americans are a minority group in the United States, and to move away from traditional Christian perspectives would threaten the cohesiveness of Black unity. In a sense, multiple perspectives would result in a thin dispersal of people across a variety of religious platforms, not giving any one perspective the

⁹¹ Jones, "Religious Humanism: Its Problems and Prospects in Black Religion and Culture," 170. In this article Jones outlines the historical support of a humanist perspective in Black culture. Jones recognizes the historical past that incorporates a perspective of humanist thought in Black culture as a point of view for a religious expression and a valid position for understanding theodicy and the lived realities of African Americans.

power of authority to dismiss nonconventional themes of theology. To worry about the popularity of religious perspectives has little, or no bearing on the potentiality of liberation found within each religious variety. Because a religious position is fortunate to have a large membership should not excuse or exclude that position from rigorous investigation and philosophical critique. A majority view does not necessitate an object or idea as valid or sacrosanct; therefore it is our function as scholars of the Black experience to question and examine all parts of our values and traditions to ensure that we are not working at cross-purposes with our objective of liberation.⁹²

⁹² Jones, "Religious Humanism: Its Problems and Prospects in Black Religion and Culture," 173; Roy D. Morrison, II., "Process Philosophy, Social Thought, and Liberation Theology." *Zygon* 19, no. 1 (March 1984).

Chapter 4: Theology and Meta-Theological Considerations in James H. Cone's Black Liberation Theology

This chapter examines the various conceptual factors found in James Cone's theology; including the God/human relationship; Biblical Theology; theodicy and God's election of African Americans; salvation; eschatology; and the potentiality for Black liberation within his theological framework. The meta-theological and the theological differences between Cone and Jones involves first causes (theology) but also includes meta-theological differences and similarities on a spectrum of theoretical approaches in Black Liberation Theology (i.e. humanism, Christianity, etc.). Jones and Cone agree that the objective of BLT is liberation, but different theological paths lead towards two distinct concepts of God. Questions about the relationship between God and man influence the respective viewpoints about Jesus and the salvation of man, via biblical scripture. This chapter is an analysis of Cone's conception of God.

Biographical Background Contextualizations

The concept of God in Cone's theological enterprise subsumes a God that is personally active in the trials and tribulations of the human world. Given his upbringing in the A.M.E. Church in the South, Cone's theological studies from his early years in the church has influenced his theological position and his conceptualization of God. The early part of Cone's childhood and teenage years were influenced by his exposure growing up in Bearden, Arkansas. Having been raised in the A.M.E. Church, Cone's theological perspectives throughout his career have been informed by the experiences he encountered while living in a small, southern town. The two influences, Bearden and the A.M.E. Church, have come to play a major role in Cone's academic pursuits as a theologian and his role as a Black intellectual.¹ Cone's intellectual and

¹ James H. Cone, *My Soul Looks Back* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1986), 18.

religious journey from Bearden, Arkansas to Union Theological Seminary in New York passed through several monumental moments in Black history.²

Doctrine of God

The concept of God that is prominent in Cone's theology is consistent with Christian biblical scripture. Consequently, the God in the Bible has underwent various transformations and changes depending upon the time period. Karen Armstrong, in *A History of God*, highlights the conceptual changes God has went through, beginning with a polytheistic representations of God and the representations of God during the various stages of monotheism—Judaism, Christian, Islam—and why certain social and political changes alter the perception of God. Stemming from the ancient idea of many gods, the current representation has led us to a concept of God that is presumed to be omniscient, omnipotent, omnibenevolent. The concept of God has changed during various periods in human history because depending upon the historic-political period, the image of God served as a pragmatic for dealing with life circumstances. As such, the pragmatism of God is not built from a place of demonstrated reason, but is conceptualized to serve the psychological needs of a community. Discussing the multifaceted dimension of God, Armstrong suggests that pragmatism and God are germane to the conceptions of God that we contemplate today;

Jacob had decided that if El (or Yahweh, as J calls him) could really look after him in Haran, he was particularly effective. He struck a bargain: in return for El's special protection, Jacob would make him his *elohim*, the only god who counted. Israelite belief in God was deeply pragmatic. Abraham and Jacob both put their faith in El because he worked for them: they did not sit down and prove that he existed; El was not a philosophical abstraction. In the ancient world, *mana* was a self-evident fact of life, and

² Cone received his B.A. in Religion and Philosophy from Philander Smith in 1958 and went on to earn a M.A. and Ph.D. from Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary (Northwestern University) in Systematic Theology in 1963 and 1965, respectively. See, James H. Cone, "The Doctrine of Man in the Theology of Karl Barth." PhD diss., Northwestern University, 1965.

a god proved his worth if he could transmit this effectively. This pragmatism would always be a factor in the history of God. People would continue to adopt a particular conception of the divine because it worked for them, not because it was scientifically or philosophically sound.³

The image of God that is representative in Protestant Theology is that of an All-Knowing and All-Powerful Supreme Being, able to descend upon the natural world and participate in human interactions. Through revelation and personal experience humans are able to obtain knowledge of the nature of God.⁴ The Protestant Reformation (sixteenth-century) is responsible for prioritizing experience and revelation as the means to know God and denouncing the reasonability of God; “[T]he Reformation reinterpreted the image to include the personal encounter between God and the human person, and deemphasized the capacity of reason to know God.”⁵ In classical theology, there is an emphasis that conceptual knowledge of God through reason is antithetical to theology and may even be viewed as blasphemous. Luther spoke of “reason as a “whore” that deceives persons by causing a creature to think that it is God. To say that humankind was created in the image of God meant, for Luther, “man was in a relation to God that was wholly based on and governed by God’s grace, to which man responded with faith.”⁶ Revelation refers to the “unveiling of truths which could not be reached by reason

³ Karen Armstrong, *A History of God*, 17. This quote suggests that a pragmatic conception of God may be necessary for a current social period, (i.e. slavery) but if the image of God remains stagnant then the material condition may remain monotonous.

⁴ In Protestant theology the concept of God shifted from the Old Testament to the New Testament, most notably for our purposes God shifted from a wrathful God to a God of love. For more on Protestant Theology see, Karl Barth, *The Doctrine of God* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957); *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century: Its Background and History* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1972); Frederick Herzog, *Understanding God: The Key Issues in Present-Day Protestant Thought* (New York: Scribner, 1966); John A. T. Robinson, *Honest to God* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963); Paul Tillich, *Dynamics of Faith* (New York: Harper, 1957).

⁵ Cone, *BTL*, 90.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 90.

alone” —Revelation stands in contrast to reason.⁷ In Carlyle Fielding Stewart’s, monograph examining the theological enterprise of Cone, entitled, *God, Being and Liberation: A Comparative Analysis of the Theologies and Ethics of James H. Cone and Howard Thurman*, 1989, he suggests revelation and experience are central to gainful knowledge of God; God can’t be known based solely on reason. Stewart suggests applied reason is not central to Cone’s BLT, and accordingly so, Cone does not include reason as a central principle in Black Liberation Theology. Stewart claims that Cone,

[D]oes not embrace reason as a principle source of Black Theology. Why? Because reason as a separate formative factor is too malleable and moot to be considered a reliable source of theology. In the black religious tradition, one cannot affirm the primacy of reason alone, without simultaneously emphasizing the importance of the heart and soul.⁸

Instead of relying on reason and logical thought, Cone maintains that the formative factors of Black Theology rest upon several normative principles. These includes: Black experiences; Black history; Black culture; revelation; scripture; and tradition.⁹ The importance of Black experience; Black history and Black culture rests upon a perilous history of oppression and racism. The problematic in Cone’s BLT is the normative functions of Black experience, Black history and Black culture rest upon the conviction that revelation and scripture are sufficient modes of inquiry into Black reality. The former three points (Black experience, Black history, and Black culture) serve as evidence that the reality of African Americans is contrary to Cone’s

⁷ William L. Reese, "Revelation." In *Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion* (Sussex England: Harvester Press, 1980), 491. Revelation can be understood within two categorical systems: Natural revelation and supernatural revelation. The former being reason derived from nature, and the latter being associated with biblical scripture, a Barthian ideology adopted by Cone. This chapter will briefly explore the philosophical and theological debate of reason and faith, as understood by Cone and those that influenced his theological conceptualization.

⁸ Carlyle Fielding Stewart, III. *God, Being and Liberation*, 23.

⁹ Cone, *BTL*, 35. Cone stresses that the list of sources and norms of Black Theology are not an any sort of chronological or hierarchical order.

hypothesis that God is on the side of the oppressed. Accordingly, the historical record of African Americans seemingly suggests that if God is on the side of the oppressed, African Americans must occupy a 'suffering servant' or 'co-sufferer' relationship with God as a way to satisfy or justify suffering within the community.

Knowledge of God's existence has been central to the discussion by philosophers and theologians dating back centuries, and 'knowledge of God's nature' (epistemology) has also been a central point of contention between philosophers and theologians. If we claim that God is on the side of the oppressed, what attributes are presupposed and which attributes are demonstrated? This chapter will examine the concept of God found in James Cone's Black Liberation Theology through the ancillary of revelation as understood through biblical scripture; the relationship between God and man; soteriology, and eschatology.

Cone's theology supports a synthesis between *scripture* and *culture* as a way to explain Black Theology. In Cone's estimation, scripture and culture are central to building a Liberation Theology.¹⁰ According to Cone, the former is required to know God's nature within the human world and the latter makes the former necessary. African American culture has created an atmosphere where liberation is related to the affirmation of God's election of the oppressed through divine presence (revelation).¹¹ Therefore revelation becomes affixed with an epistemological character, in addition to having an ontological nature. In other words, revelation is our gateway to gainful knowledge of God that is not built upon idolatry or human adaptations (anthropomorphic images of God). In such cases, revelation is confined to the borders of biblical

¹⁰ Cone, *BTL*, 21-23.

¹¹ Ibid., 59. God is revealed in the man Jesus. "We know who God is, according to Barth, because we know who Christ is" (p. 59). Revelation has several significant features in Cone's theology that a brief discussion of revelation is necessary; Also see, Cone, *Speaking the Truth*, 6-8.

scripture, which is considered the only true word of God.¹² From revelation, as portrayed in biblical scripture, God discloses knowledge about God (epistemology) and through building an understanding of God; human beings are also exposed to “the ontic nature of the believer.”¹³ It is from this relationship that man is made aware of God liberating activities; but it is also through this knowledge of God that human’s create a sense of *being*—“it is only through God’s liberating revelation that one can know one’s true self, which is essentially being in freedom.”¹⁴ The ontological nature of God in Cone’s theology is critical to our understanding of how God is conceptualized as the image of a God that is *for* the oppressed.

The conceptions of God conceived by humans throughout history is both long and complex.¹⁵ The discussion of resultant theological and philosophical inquiries have created concepts of God that range from completely personable and active in the human world to completely transcendent and beyond the scope of human knowledge—the idea of God is so vast and complex that there are as many concepts of God as there are different human cultures.¹⁶ Similarly, the quest to know God has led philosophers and theologians to contemplate God’s existence in a world where suffering is actualized (theodicy); God’s absoluteness and his

¹² See chapter 2 for a critique of biblical criticism and the problematic with claiming that the Bible is the word of God. See, Cone, *BTL*, 82-83. Also see Liburd, "Like a House on Sand: African American Biblical Hermeneutics in Perspective," for a critical examination of biblical hermeneutics.

¹³ Stewart, *God, Being and Liberation*, 31.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 32.

¹⁵ See, Armstrong, *A History of God*, 4. "...the idea of our God gradually emerged about 14,000 years ago" (p. 4).

¹⁶ For Cone the idea of a transcendence God is a necessary "to prevent us from deifying our own experience, which results in pantheism" (*BTL*, 77).

relativity; God as the “Ground of Being”¹⁷; and whether or not God has a physical nature that is discernible to human beings.¹⁸ Questions about the physical nature of God or the particular characteristics of God emanates from a Thomistic perspective of God; “God does not signify any particular form, but just being itself.”¹⁹ According to Cone, God is not a being like us, but a supernatural being that fits the image of God from the Bible, but a being nevertheless. For the biblical theologian, the Bible is the only credible source for knowledge of God; all other accounts of God, from personal experience or revelation are flawed because humanity is tainted and corrupted by the fall of mankind.²⁰

Epistemology and the Source of Knowledge

Before the core beliefs of Cone’s conception of God are discussed, it is important to briefly discuss the importance of epistemology and the process of determining what constitutes knowledge. Stories from the Bible are representative of historical events, and without corroborating empirical evidence are strictly based on faith, “faith the Christian claims to transcend reason and gain knowledge.”²¹ The presumptive argument that faith and faith-based claims constitute a form of knowledge, requires actual evidence to meet the criteria for what

¹⁷ Stemming from Paul Tillich’s idea of God; God is not personal because God is not equivalent to beings, God is being itself, and therefore, God is beyond a personal God. See Armstrong, *A History of God*, 382.

¹⁸ Friedrich Schleiermacher, in *Hermeneutics and Criticism and Other Writings* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), stressed that God is only known through human experiences and personal revelation.

¹⁹ Armstrong, *A History of God*, 205.

²⁰ For a description of St. Thomas Aquinas’ views on knowledge of God, see, Saint Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica* (New York: Benziger Bros., 1947-8). This includes theologies influenced by Karl Barth where gainful knowledge of God is known through biblical scripture. “God as ‘wholly’ other.” Any idea that are created by human beings about God are flawed, and worship of a *being* borders on idolatry. The Bible is the authority of divine revelation. The fall of mankind is a reference to the story of Original (or First) Sin as notated in Genesis, when Eve eats from the Tree of Knowledge, contrary to God’s will.

²¹ George H. Smith, *Atheism: The Case Against God* (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1979), 59.

constitutes knowledge. Knowledge is indicative on three basic requirements—belief: 1). Be based on evidence; 2). Not be self-contradictory; and 3). Cannot contradict previously validated knowledge.²² Our contemporary vantage point suggests that the claim: ‘God is for the Oppressed’ may not satisfy all three basic requirements to be considered knowledge. First, the evidence of God’s election of the oppressed is based upon the Bible. The problems outlined in Chapter 2 regarding the Bible, notwithstanding, offers that God intervened on the behalf of the oppressed, especially as recollected in the story of the Exodus; however, using methodological tools assigned to historical criticism, primary historical documentation fails to recall such events.²³

The doctrine of God conceived in Cone’s theological enterprise utilizes the Tillichian premise that God is the “ground of being,” but goes a step further and suggest that God is more than the “ground of being,” but God is also primarily *a Being*.²⁴ The primacy of experience utilized in Tillich’s theological reflection ensures that church doctrine remains relevant to a particular experience (i.e. the Black experience). The difference between Tillich and Cone is metaphysical in nature. Tillich’s conception of God is not God as a being, but God is the “ground of being.” In other words, Tillich argues that God is not a personal God that intervenes in human history; instead he promotes a concept of God that is impersonal and lacks

²² Ibid., 62.

²³ See, Armstrong, *A History of God*, 18-20, for an outline of the possible events that may support the biblical version of the Exodus. Also see, Yosef Ben-Jochannan, *The Myth of Exodus and Genesis and the Exclusion of Their African Origins* (Black Classic Press, 2002).

²⁴ Paul Tillich, *Theology of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1959), 129, “The concept of a “personal God” interfering with natural events, or being “an independent cause of natural events,” makes God a natural object beside others, an object among others, a being among beings, maybe the highest, but nevertheless *a being*. This indeed is not only the destruction of the physical system but even more the destruction of any meaningful idea of God.”

consciousness. For Tillich, the purpose for removing God's consciousness is not about decide, but to give credence to God as "wholly other": "God above the God of theism."²⁵

To claim that God is a being attaches certain characteristics of *being*—namely, consciousness.²⁶ An idea of a personal God affixes and contributes to two overriding problematics; 1) epistemological limits and 2) theodicy and questions of human freedom and moral valuation. Depending upon the point of departure for questions of epistemological verification, knowledge of reality remains a crucial point of contrast between Cone and Jones. Are there limits to human knowledge? Do certain supernatural postulates transcend or supersede human knowledge? Are faith and religious practices part of an inventive imagination that allows humans to make prophecies for the future and unexplainable? Is there a certain type of knowledge that is unattainable? If so, are we able to *call it knowledge*?

The assumption that some sort of knowledge of God is feasible, subsequently leads to conceptualizing a God that meets the prescription of how a 'God' ought to be—omnibenevolent, omniscient, omnipotent.²⁷ By advancing an image of a personal God, as described above, we are forced to the theodicy question once again: why does suffering (still) persist given God's

²⁵ Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*. 3 vols. Vol. 1, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951-63), 126.

²⁶ Roy D. Morrison, II, "Einstein on Kant, Religion, Science, and Methodological Unity." In *Einstein and the Humanities*, edited by Dennis Ryan. (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987), 264.

²⁷ There are some distinctions between God as All-Knowing versus God as most-knowing, but these distinctions are mostly confined to divine intervention in the human world, but despite the differences, the general consensus supports a personal God. For more on ideas of a 'most-powerful' God see Burrow, *God and Human Dignity*. The personalist movement at Boston University influenced Martin Luther King, Jr. To make up for the shortcomings of God's removal of the injustice in the human world, King put forth an image of God that possessed personal attributes, but his attributes were limited and not 'all-powerful'; God can't do whatever God wants, there are limitations to divine personalities. This allows for suffering in the human world without God being responsible or accountable. However, God is limited in some way. In Jones theology, God self-limits himself; the same could be suggested for personalism. For more on King's Personalism see, Rufus Burrow, Jr., *God and Human Dignity: The Personalism, Theology, and Ethics of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006).

traditional attributes of omnibenevolent, omniscient, omnipotent? To claim that God is for the oppressed, fails to provide factual historical documentation and does not promote the valid type of knowledge necessary for a transformative liberatory theology.

The inequalities experienced by African Americans in the United States creates far-reaching ESP implications, casting the net of inequality over larger segments of the African American community.²⁸ It seems self-contradictory to assume that the inequality we experience on a daily basis are a sign of God's elation for the oppressed. The problematic with Cone's Thomistic approach to knowledge; "faith the Christian claims to transcend reason and gain knowledge," is it fails to put limits on what constitutes knowledge and how certain faith-based claims are excluded from rational assessment.²⁹ Because Black oppression is located in the concreteness of our historical reality, it is important our knowledge production rest within the same reality. The importance of epistemology and knowledge are central to Cone's representation of God because in order to ordain God the champion of the oppressed, God must maintain certain attributes and traits, regardless of the trial and tribulations of African Americans in the United States, historically and in the present.

God's Moral Attributes and Human Suffering: Omnibenevolence, Omnipotence, Omniscience

The core beliefs presented by Jones and Cone are expressed through theological claims, via their conceptions of God. The traditional attributes of God (omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolence) are based on extra-scriptural interpretations of Christian systematic beliefs, including church doctrine and church ritual. When exploring these theologies we can see how

²⁸ See Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2010) for a discussion on the current plight of African Americans within U.S. legal justice system.

²⁹ Smith, *Atheism*, 59.

God's relationship to the human world directly effects the logical outcome of liberation. For example, the definition of an All-Powerful God has certain theological and philosophical implications, which in turn leads to complexities in the socio-political realities of liberation. An All-Powerful God requires a certain level of determination in response to the human experience. A most-powerful God, however, has limitations in divine command and allows for varying degrees of human freedom and human error (as in the case of suffering and evil). Depending on the concept presented, certain determinations can be made towards the position and expectation of God's relationship to the natural world, and therefore the relationship with the Black community:

According to the Bible the knowledge of God is neither mystical communion nor abstract rational thought; rather, it is recognizing divine activity in human history through faith. The biblical God is the God who is involved in the historical process for the purpose of human liberation, and to know him is to know what he is doing in historical events as they relate to the liberation of the oppressed. To know God is to encounter him in the historical liberation process as experienced in the community of the oppressed.³⁰

This dichotomy—God inside or outside the human world—presents another theological and philosophical challenge regarding the ontological relationship between the supernatural and the natural. This leads to the point of demarcation for the respective theologies: is it man or is it God? In other words, is the principle of functional ultimacy directly related to the “radical freedom” of man or to the normative affirmation of God?³¹ The normative belief in theological claims profoundly effects the conception of God produced and God's perceived involvement in

³⁰ Cone, "Black Consciousness and the Black Church: A Historical-Theological Interpretation," 51-52.

³¹ Jones, "Theism and Religious Humanism"; Yancy, "The Honor Was All Mine."

the human world.³² The image of God is transformed to satisfy the circumstantial changes within the human world.³³

According to Cone, the basic principle for *knowing* God is realized through biblical scripture and revelation;

The Christian understanding of God arises from the biblical view of revelation, a revelation of God that takes place in the liberation of oppressed Israel and is completed in the incarnation, in Jesus Christ. This means that whatever is said about the the nature of God and God's being-in-the-world must be based on the biblical account of God's revelatory activity. We are not free to say anything we please about God. Although scripture is not the only sources that helps us to recognize divine activity in the world, it cannot be ignored if we intend to speak of the Holy One of Israel.³⁴

Cone maintains the traditional attributes of God (omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence), and in essence suggests God will liberate the oppressed, as was evident in the Exodus and completed with the resurrection of Jesus. If this is the case, then the liberatory possibilities in Cone's theology must wait for God's intervening capabilities. Cone uses the Exodus and the Resurrection as support for God's liberatory powers within the human world and to support the claim of divine election of the oppressed.³⁵ God is therefore, not only imminent and active in human history, but also maintains positive attributes, keeping in accordance with Christian doctrine. But Cone fails to acknowledge the inconsistencies with God's positive

³² This is discussed in detail below and in the next chapter on William Jones.

³³ "Humans beings have always created a faith for themselves, to cultivate their sense of the wonder and ineffable significance of life," in Armstrong, *A History of God*, 397-398.

³⁴ Cone, *BTL*, 60.

³⁵ The Exodus and the Resurrection are both believed to be events of liberation, but have different modes of intervention. Yahweh intervened without self-manifestation in the liberation of the Hebrews. In the Resurrection, God chose to become an oppressed man; a clear example of self-manifestation. See Stewart, *God, Being and Liberation*, 42.

attributes, as recognized in biblical scripture, and the lived reality of African Americans which suggests that God may *not* be on the side of the oppressed, and may actually be a White racist.

Jones, on the other hand, redefines the concept of theodicy by not assuming God's Christian attributes, but hypothesizes a God based on the experiences of suffering in the human world, especially the lives of African Americans. In other words, Jones does not create a traditional Christian God, but instead contrives a God that satisfies the existence of a God and considers human suffering; which is taken as the point of departure. Therefore, God is not personally involved in the lives of human beings, and God is not accountable for the suffering that ensues on earth.³⁶ Jones' respective theology will be examined in Chapter 5, "Theodicy and Meta-Theological Considerations in William R. Jones' Philosophical Theology."

For Cone, God is not only Creator but God is also intimately imminent in the affairs of humans. Cone states:

The immanence of God is the infinite expressing itself in the finite. It is God becoming concrete in finite human existence. We are able to speak of the divine because the divine is revealed in the concreteness of this world. The immanence of God forces us to look for God in the world and to make decisions about the Ultimate in terms of present historical reality. We cannot postpone our decision about God or condition it in terms of a future reality. The finality of God is God's involvement in human now-experiences. For blacks this means that God has taken on blackness, has moved into the black liberation struggle.³⁷

God's active intervention in the "concreteness of this world," becomes problematic if we consider two key elements: the source of revelation and theodicy—the concept of accepting God's moral attributes (omnipotence, omniscience, omnibenevolence) in light of suffering and

³⁶ There is some conflation between Jones's notion of man's ontological dependency on God, therefore the interaction between man and God is limited to a relationship of Creator and created, but all other connections between God and man have been severed through the will of God.

³⁷ Cone, *BTL*, 76. A discussion about "future reality" and eschatology will be discussed below. A discussion of God as ontologically Black will also be discussed below.

oppression. In addition to the process of canonization and proof-texting, the Bible is not a viable source of documented historical material.³⁸ To use the Bible as the authoritative source to outline the historical experiences of African Americans means the Bible is to be held to the same standard of scrutiny as any other documented sources that claim historical accuracy.

The other problematic suggests God's moral attributes seemingly are contradictory to the maldistribution of suffering. To claim that God is imminent; omnipotence, omniscience, and omnibenevolence; and also a God of the oppressed, suggests God will actively intervene to change the current situation of inequality and oppression. God is either unwilling or unable to commence change, forcing questions about God's innate moral attributes. Consequently, to maintain this conceptions of God, the oppressed occupy a position in accordance with 'suffering servant' or 'redemptive suffering'; both of which require a state of oppression for an indeterminate amount of time, especially if God's participation is necessary for liberation to commence;³⁹

God cannot be the God of blacks *and* will their suffering. To be elected by God does not mean freely accepting the evils of oppressors. The suffering which is inseparable from the gospel is that style of existence that arises from a decision to *be* in spite of nonbeing. It is the type of suffering that is inseparable from freedom, the freedom that affirms black liberation despite the white powers of evil. It is suffering in the struggle for liberation.⁴⁰

³⁸ See chapter 2 for more on the Bible as a history book. Also see, John H. McClendon, III and Brittany O'Neal, "Biblical Scripture as Historical Text and the African American Experience: A Philosophical Assessment," Conference Presentation, *Philosophical Theologies & Philosophy of Religion in Africana Traditions*, (NYC, October 2014).

³⁹ A complete discussion of theodicy and suffering servant is covered in Chapter 5 on Jones. Chapter 5 discusses Jones' analysis of suffering and theodicy. Cone discusses suffering; however, I've concluded Jones' analyses of suffering and theodicy provide a better framework for a liberation theology.

⁴⁰ Cone, *BTL*, 81. This is evidence when suffering is endured and one recognizes their blackness, despite the challenges of the white world.

Cone addresses the problematic of how freedom is actualized and how suffering becomes a necessary agent of God's elected. Suffering is a necessary condition in order to be in God's good graces. It is only when Blackness is completely affirmed that *being* can commence, but *being*, for African Americans is defined within a state of suffering and oppression.

In addition to the attributes detailed above, knowledge of God emulates from a place of purpose and justification. In accordance with conceiving a certain image of God, Cone suggests, "God is Black."⁴¹ For Cone, God isn't necessarily phenotypically Black, like the God of Albert Cleage, but Blackness becomes an ontological category that synthesizes suffering and Blackness as characteristic for God's plan for the oppressed;

The blackness of God means that God has made the oppressed condition God's own condition. This is the essence of the biblical revelation. By electing Israelite slaves as the people of God and by become the Oppressed One in Jesus Christ, the human race is made to understand that God is known where human beings experience humiliation and suffering. It is not that God feels sorry and takes pity on them; quite the contrary, God's election of Israel and incarnation in Christ reveals that the *liberation* of the oppressed is a part of the innermost nature of God. Liberation is not an afterthought, but the essence of divine activity.⁴²

Metaphysical Nature of God

For Cone, the epistemological character of revelation suggests that God is *a* being, but not just any being, an oppressed being; which correlates with the ontological character of revelation—God is the "ground of being." These seemingly contrary point—God as *a* being vs. God as the "ground of being,"—aligns traditional theism and existential-ontological theism.⁴³

Existential-ontological theism stresses God as being or the *ground* of being as opposed to traditional theism's claim of God as *a being* that governs and intercedes in human affairs from without. The existential-ontological theism in Cone's theology germinates in his

⁴¹ Cone, *BTL*, 63; the subtitle of this section is "God is Black."

⁴² *Ibid.*, 64.

⁴³ Stewart, III. *God, Being and Liberation*, 40.

idea of God as *creator*. Although Cone primarily concedes the idea of God as a being, force or spirit that has created the world, he does not limit the idea of God as a creator to traditional theistic constructions.”⁴⁴

The conception of God in Cone’s theology requires humans to act as the *subject* of liberation and also as the *object* of liberation. In other words, Cone demands that man is the object of liberation so that liberation is something initiated by God. On the other hand, man is the subject of his/her own liberatory struggle because through the process of being, man was created in the image of God (*imago dei*), and as the *ground of being*, God, “internally empowers and approbates his self engagement in the liberation process.”⁴⁵ By positioning humans as the object of liberation, we have no say in the progression of our own history. It is therefore necessary for man to function as both a subject and an object of liberation. Avoiding participation in either form of *being* will negate liberation and further create an environment contrary to liberation (*sin*).⁴⁶

According to Cone, the Resurrection, as an event of liberation, epitomizes the nature of God as being one with the oppressed. Without a resurrection event there is no evidence that God is for the oppressed, but through interpretations of biblical scripture, a line of convergence confirms the politics of God is on the side of the oppressed. The Resurrection of Jesus Christ not only supports the claim that God is for the oppressed, but by choosing an oppressed Jew as Gods chosen person, God systematically was revealed in Jesus Christ, who’s social conditions align with the conditions of the oppressed African Americans in the United States—therefore God must also be for African Americans. Unfortunately, for Cone and other biblical theologians, the

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ According to Cone, sin is defined as any system that is contrary to communal liberation—“Sin is a theological concept that describes the separation of man from the source of his being...it is being in relation to non-being: It is a condition of estrangement from the source of meaning and purpose in the universe.” Cone, *BTL*, 187.

revelation of Jesus is grounded on biblical and extra-biblical faith claims, and is not dependent upon historical source documentation.

For Cone, the concept of God as *a Being*, through means of intervening in human history, becomes his *modus operandi*—without a concept of God that intervenes in human history, material liberation will not be actualized—man’s innate source of empowerment is not enough to ignite an “interiorization of God within man himself.”⁴⁷ In a sense, God’s ontic nature is external and internal; this dialectical image of God is built upon a relationship between God and man that is beyond Creator/Created dichotomies, but is part of our lived reality, as actualized in the lives of African Americans. Cone’s concept of God goes beyond the Creator/Created relationship to include a concept of God that “was not a ‘universal’ man in a tradition-generic sense, but a particular Jew who came to fulfill God’s will to liberate the oppressed.”⁴⁸ This process of divine intervention and motivator for liberation creates a depiction of a God grounded in biblical revelation that is the champion of the oppressed.

Freedom is only achieved by fighting the oppressive system and cultivating the divine-human relationship; only by engaging in this fight, will liberation be actualized. Cone states,

The biblical concept of image means that human beings are created in such a way that they cannot obey oppressive laws and *still* be human. To be human is to be in the image of God—that is, to be creative; revolting against everything that is oppressed to humanity. Therefore, whatever we say about sin and the human inability to know God because of the fall, it must not in any way diminish the human freedom to revolt against oppression.⁴⁹

By fighting against oppressive conditions, African American’s affirm their participation of being in the image of God. Through this image of God, man is able to do God’s will *and* participate in

⁴⁷ Stewart, III, *God, Being and Liberation*, 41.

⁴⁸ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 119.

⁴⁹ Cone, *BTL*, 93.

his own freedom by dismissing the oppressive qualities by becoming one with the oppressed in the fight against the oppressive systems of racism and inequality. Cone advances a concept that establishes the fight for liberation as a twofold process: divine intervention and divine empowerment. Divine empowerment requires humans take an active role in his/her own liberation by challenging the systematic structures of inequality. The fight for humanity is to fight against oppression by living in the image of God.

The universality of the gospel, according to traditional theism, stresses the universality of salvation; however Cone is trepidatious to conclude God is equally for the oppressors as God is for the oppressed. Cone emphasizes that God did not reincarnate as a *universal man* but God became an *oppressed man* in Jesus. Not only does the incarnation of Jesus suggest God is for the oppressed, per Cone's theological views, but God also reveals his moral attributes through a self-determinate choice to beget his only son as an oppressed Jew. Black Theology calls for the oppressed to be liberated, but this also includes a dimension of liberating the oppressor from their oppressive tendencies. Black Theology is particular because it focuses on the lived experiences of the oppressed; it emphasizes the lived reality of a particular group of people. Cone states, "the universal has no meaning independent of the particular."⁵⁰ The symbolic meaning of Blackness (the oppressed community) and the literal meaning of Blackness (historical oppression of African Americans) are codetermined. The literal (particular) historical oppression of African Americans leads to a universal understanding of oppressive nature and culture of certain people and the universality of the Christian message of liberation of the oppressed.⁵¹ The historical oppression of African Americans needs to be fully understood prior

⁵⁰ William Hordern, "Dialogue on Black Theology." *The Christian Century* 88, no. 15 (1971): 1080.

⁵¹ Ibid.

to “becoming Black.” In an interview with William Hordern, Cone states, “I do not contend that blackness is the appropriate term for all historical situations of oppression and liberation. I only contend that theology must be *particular* and thus indigenous with the oppressed community so that universal affirmations about liberation are relevant to the historical experience of the wretched of the land.”⁵² Blackness cannot be separated from experience and therefore Blackness is an ontological category in Cone’s theology: Scripture, Black history, Black culture, and Black *experience* are the most important themes in Cone’s conception of God.⁵³ To look at Black Theology devoid of experience creates a theological enterprise unrecognizable as a liberation theology, and instead is relegated to a survivalist theology. It is through experience that oppression is known and actualized, and it is the primary point of departure for any theology that is concerned with liberation.

There is no place in black theology for a colorless God in a society where human beings suffer precisely because of their color. The black theologian must reject any conception of God which stifles black self-determination by picturing God as a God of all peoples. Either God is identified with the oppressed to the point that their experience becomes God’s experience, or God is a God of racism.⁵⁴

Because Blackness is an ontological category, oppression becomes a necessary state of being. To equate Blackness with oppression suggests that either component must be present for the other to be actualized. Building a conceptual bridge between Blackness and oppression negates that Blackness can occur outside of suffering, unless supported and initiated by God. By equating *being-ness* to *suffering* requires that African Americans must occupy a place of suffering in order to maintain the election of God.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Cone, *BTL*, 21-39. Cone discusses the sources and norms of Black Theology—he clearly situates Scripture, Black history/culture, and experience as core components in BLT.

⁵⁴ Cone, *BTL*, 63.

Cone would surely propose that God's election of the oppressed is affirmed within the context of love—"the idea of love as essential to the divine nature."—the affirmation of God's moral attributes as just and righteous.⁵⁵ Cone makes revelation more than an epistemological exercise; he contends that revelation is synonymous with liberation. In a sense, every act of revelation is an event of liberation because through revelation God's politics can be known. Cone states:

Revelation is God's self-disclosure to humankind *in the context of liberation*. To know God is to know God's work of liberation in behalf of the oppressed. God's revelation means liberation, an emancipation from death-dealing political, economic, and social structures of society. This is the essence of biblical revelation.⁵⁶

Revelation is the only true source of self-knowledge administered by God. The Resurrection of Jesus gives credence to God revealing his nature to humans. According to Cone and other biblical theologians, it is through revelation that we are led to believe in the love and righteousness of God.⁵⁷ For Cone, love and righteousness are key attributes assigned to God, and he would also agree that these two terms are not dichotomous; instead God subsumes both righteousness (wrath) and love (agape) with equal emphasis.⁵⁸ Accordingly, to accurately identify Cone's conception of God, God is viewed through a lens of divine righteousness and

⁵⁵ Cone, *BTL*, 66. Revelation, in Cone's estimation is grounded in the notion that revelation is epistemological; liberatory; and transformative. We gain knowledge of God through revelation; through revelation that we have witnesses God's liberatory events (Exodus [by way of empowering Moses to lead his people out of bondage] and; through the incarnation of Jesus [by way of *becoming* an oppressed man]).

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 45. Original emphasis.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 66.

⁵⁸ Cone, *BTL*, 68. Cone continues, "Either we agree with him [Marcion] and his view of the two Gods, Righteousness and love, and that means that God's love is inexplicable without equal emphasis on God's righteousness and vice versa."

love. Divine righteousness and love becomes complicated when considering God's love for the oppressed and the oppressive conditions of African Americans:

This means that in a racist society, we must insist that God's love and God's righteousness are two ways of talking about the same reality. Righteousness means that God is addressing the black condition; love means that God is doing so in the interests of both blacks and whites. The blackness of God points to the righteousness of God, as well as to the love of God.⁵⁹

In order to solidify the discussion of love and righteousness, the relationship between God and man seemingly plays an important role towards interpreting God's nature and consequently the conception of God that is currently employed. Cone argues that the justice of God is the most prominent theme in Black religious thought and subsequently this concept is identified as a theological claim to suggest God will vindicate the oppressed and punish the oppressor. Cone, in *Speaking the Truth*, declares that love is intrinsically linked with God's election of the oppressed:

No theme has been more prominent in black religious thought than the justice of God. Blacks have always believed in the living presence of God who establishes the right by punishing the wicked and liberating their victims from the oppression. Everyone will be rewarded and punished according to their deeds, and no one—absolutely no one—can escape the judgement of God, who alone is the sovereign of the universe. *Evildoers may get by for a time, and good people may suffer unjustly under oppression*, but “sooner or later, ... we reap as we sow.”⁶⁰

This declaration of God's politics, Cone is certain, will lead to God ascending upon human beings and God will judge us by our actions on earth; specifically with respect to the oppressed versus the oppressor.

⁵⁹ Cone, *BTL*, 72-73. Also see Cone, *Speaking the Truth* where Cone states, “The idea of justice, liberation, and hope should be seen in relation to the important theme of love. Theologically God's love is prior to the other themes, but in order to separate black reflection on love from a similar theme in white theology, it is important to emphasize that love in black religious thought is usually linked with God's justice, liberation, and hope. God's love is made known through divine righteousness, liberation the poor for a new future”(p. 84).

⁶⁰ Cone, *Speaking the Truth*, 84. Emphasis added.

Not receiving a satisfactory response to the question of theodicy, Jones' asks what proof do we have that God is in fact on the side of the oppressed—What is the liberation event that serves as evidence of God's will? In response, Cone argues that African American religious traditions are not concerned with rational reflections about God, but believe in a righteous, just, and liberatory God grounded in *faith*.⁶¹ Taking us back to our discussion about faith as a form of knowledge, suggests that divine liberation is based on faith that the current social system of inequality and oppression are temporary acts of God's election. Divine election implies that "corrective action is unnecessary;" which leads to quietism. Theodicy and quietism are linked by the empirical reality of suffering in the African American community forces us to ask: "If [God's] love was so great, and if He loved all His children, why were we, the blacks, cast down so far?"⁶²

Cone argues faith in God's liberating activities is "the chief reason they could hold themselves together in servitude and sometimes fight back, even though the odds were against them."⁶³ Fighting the status quo of inequality and oppression is supported by a stronger sense of faith in God's liberatory powers. This is part of Cone's premise of the ontological character of *being*; it is through critical faith that life and *being* will be actualized. In a sense, the lack of liberation on God's part is due to the failure of African American's trust and faith in God.

Theology's task is to give reason for the Christian hope in the face of horrendous human suffering. How can Christians hope in the face of unspeakable evil? No one wants a

⁶¹ Cone supports this point in "God and Black Suffering: Calling the Oppressors to Account," when he confirms, "Faith in God's righteousness is the starting point of black religion" (p. 702). This article has similar language to another published article by Cone, "Black Religious Thought in American History, Part I: Origins," in Cone, *Speaking the Truth*.

⁶² James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (New York: Dell, 1964), 46.

⁶³ James H. Cone, "God and Black Suffering: Calling the Oppressors to Account." *Anglican Theological Review* 90, no. 4 (2008), 704.

hope that had not been tested in life's great agonies. Suffering precedes thinking, wrote the German philosopher Ludwig Feuerbach. It creates thought, forcing people to search their faith for a meaning and purpose in a world of deep contradictions. If the massive suffering of black people does not cause us to think deeply and critically about the reason for our absurd predicament, then what will shake us out of our spiritual complacency?⁶⁴

The downtrodden have lived in a state of oppression for so long that their suffering has effected their ways of thinking. The existence of suffering has led to deep contradictions and paradoxes about the reason for human suffering and God's loving character. Cone and Jones claim different responses to the question of suffering, mostly notably the difference between conceptualizing positive suffering and negative suffering. Cone stresses the positive nature of suffering—divine favor; whereas Jones stresses we are not privy to God's will and as such, suffering is either a sign of divine disfavor; divine favor; neither favor or disfavor.⁶⁵ Jones elaborates that suffering, when viewed as positive is, "one common strategy to keep the oppressed at the bottom of the esp [economic, social, and political] ladder" by persuading "them that their suffering is good, moral, valuable or necessary for their salvation, in short redemptive."⁶⁶ Suffering becomes a necessary characteristic of God's election and to challenge it suggests that the oppressed are not worthy of God's grace.

Aspects of Human Freedom and Divine Sovereignty

In accordance with Cone's theology, God and man are not interdependent, but the relationship that is actualized allows God to be *for* the oppressed. This relationship is built on the symbolic nature of how God is understood in Cone's theology. God is concerned with the

⁶⁴ Ibid., 710.

⁶⁵ Jones, *IGWR?*, 15, "The theological claims that present a concept of God that is personal, imminent and also for African Americans, implicitly is presented as a God that is for oppressive conditions, either for reward or disdain. Oppressive conditions are always negative. To speak of positive suffering, is oxymoronic. A favorable oppression is inconsistent with the message of liberation

⁶⁶ Jones, "Process Theology: Guardian of the Oppressor or Goad to the Oppressed," 277.

condition of African Americans because God has revealed to us that God is working for the oppressed through the symbolic transformation of Jesus Christ. Cone's major concern is the ontological significance of reinterpreting the symbolic nature of God's revelation in the world. The symbolic nature in Cone's theology explicates the significance of relating God with the African American condition. Through this relationship God is clearly located as the ontological source of *being*, in addition, God is symbolic of a reality of liberation, supported by biblical scripture.

The relationship between God and man is relegated to that of Creator-Created. Cone not only supports the traditional view of God as the Creator: "everything that is *is* because of the creative will of God," his concept of God suggests that human beings are creatures of God and therefore human beings are ontology dependent upon God.⁶⁷ This dependency allocates that the source of "meaning and purpose in the world is not found in oppressors but in God," which permeates the divine-human relationship.⁶⁸

Contradictorily, Jones suggests that human beings are not ontologically dependent on God, but instead maintain a level of autonomy from God—human beings are functionally ultimate, but not ontologically ultimate, giving credence to a Creator. Cone would venture to disagree and maintain that God is both transcendent and imminent, and as such, gives God a meaning and purpose within the universe. God's sovereignty over human affairs is immanent, although the physical (metaphysical) nature of God is both within and beyond our nature world. Because we are a creation of God (either in his image or by first cause) we possess a sense of meaning and purpose by fulfilling that relationship.

⁶⁷ Cone, *BTL*, 74.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 75.

Salvation is actualized once the relationship, through identifying with the oppressed, empowers man to challenge the oppressive systems, but this can only happen by embracing oppression as part of God's favor. However, for Cone, the relationship with God is based upon the conception that Blackness is the ultimate source of being. Take Victor Anderson's discussion of Cone's views of ontological Blackness, in *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism*, 1995. Anderson concurs that Cone's BLT requires "the ultimate end of black theology is the construction of a 'new black being'."⁶⁹ Anderson poignantly stresses the meaning of blackness is ontologically grounded in suffering and oppression;

The difficulty arises here: (a) blackness is a signification of ontology and corresponds to black experiences. (b) Black experience is defined as the experience of suffering and rebellion against whiteness. Yet (c) Whiteness appears to be the ground of black experience, and hence of black theology and its new black being. Therefore, while black theology justifies itself as radically oppositional to whiteness, it nevertheless requires whiteness, white racism, and white theology for the self-disclosure of its new black being and its legitimacy. In this way, black theology effectively renders whiteness identifiable with what is of ultimate concern. "Our ultimate concern is that which determines our being or not being," says Tillich.⁷⁰

Defining the process of suffering as part of the Black experience, *being* becomes contingent upon whiteness and the oppressive system of inequality and racism—Blackness is defined in terms of

⁶⁹ Victor Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness*, 87. Anderson poignantly critiques Cone's vision of blackness within the boundaries of BLT. Anderson states, "The sources of black theology are black history, black faith, and black cultural activities. And the ultimate end of black theology is the construction of a 'new black being.'" (pp. 86-87). He continues to criticize BLT for its construction of a new Black being "on the dialectical structures that categorical racism and white racial ideology bequeathed to African American intellectuals (notwithstanding its claim for privileging black sources). However, the new being of black theology remains an alienated being whose mode of existence is determined by crisis, struggle, resistance, and survival—not thriving, flourishing, or fulfillment. Its self-identity is always bound by white racism and the culture of survival. The motive of transcendence from this unresolved matrix of struggle and survival recedes into the background, as oppression is required for the self-disclosure of the oppressed. I suggest that as long as black theology is determined by ontological blackness, it remains not only a crisis theology but also a theology in a crisis of legitimation" (p. 87).

⁷⁰ Ibid., 91-92.

suffering and survival. For Cone, Blackness—Black experience, Black suffering, and Black resistance—determines a unique history and culture for African Americans that is opposed to whiteness. In contention with Anderson’s critique, Cone suggests that Blackness is a symbol of oppression, but by challenging the oppressive systems of whiteness, *being* is recognized in this response;

Because blackness is at once the symbol of oppression and if the certainty of liberation, freedom means an affirmation of blackness. To be free is to be black—that is, identified with the victims of humiliation in human society and a participant in the liberation of oppressed humanity. The free person in America is the one who does not tolerate whiteness but fights against it, knowing that it is the source of human misery. The free person is the black person living in an alien world but refusing to behave according to its expectations.⁷¹

In Cone’s theological system, Blackness is equatable to ontological *being* and as such, *being* is defined and codetermined by resistance and suffering in respect to white hegemony. One reason Cone’s theology is problematic is due to the conceptualization of Blackness. Black suffering determines Blackness, and there is no type of Blackness that is independent of whiteness or the system of oppression. In a sense we end up with a premise where, “liberation remains existentially a function of black *self-consciousness* (to see oneself as black, free, and self-determined).”⁷² Liberation, therefore is not grounded in a concrete material reality, but instead is a type of idealism that is located within the consciousness.⁷³ In other words, Blackness is equated with a concrete form of suffering, but liberation is a “function of black self-

⁷¹ Cone, *BTL*, 102.

⁷² Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness*, 92.

⁷³ This brings forth questions of idealism and materialism—essence vs. existence. Will a transformation in consciousness result in a change in material condition? Because the methodology for this dissertation is congruent with philosophical materialism, it stands that a change in essence will not concretely transform the material condition. The material condition is foremost and fundamental in determining consciousness.

consciousness.” Blackness, as an ontological signifier must not collapse into a reverse system of oppression where suffering becomes a necessary component of being.

The central thesis in Jones and Cone’s theologies are centered on the validity of God’s ontological primacy as the source of being. God is presumed to be the ontological source of being in the theological systems of Jones and Cone—“Ontologically speaking, man is and remains the subordinate creature in so far as his existence comes from a transcendent source.”⁷⁴ The existence of God and God’s ontological priority are equally valid within both theological systems; the point of contention is whether God is the ultimate source for liberation. In Cone’s theology, God is the ontological source of being *and* the ultimate source for liberation. For Jones, God is the ontological source of being, but soon thereafter, God’s overruling sovereignty is removed from human history.⁷⁵ In conventional BLT the ontological priority of God entails the ontological dependence of human beings. Here we must distinguish between ontological priority and ontological dependency, for the sake of philosophical inquiry. The former conceptualizes God as the ontological source of *being*; the latter requires a continued dependency by humans on God, diminishing the value of human free will. Ontological dependence constricts human freedom because human freedom is limited by God’s will.

Summary and Conclusions

In summation, Cone’s theocentric enterprise leads towards specific conclusion about God’s metaphysical nature and the nature of Blackness. Cone claims that knowledge of God suggests God is on the side of the oppressed but the source of this claim is grounded in biblical

⁷⁴ Jones, *IGWR?*, 193.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 195. Jones elaborates on his distinctive notion of ontological hierarchy in contrast to theocentric theology in George Yancy’s, “The Honor Was All Mine,” 8.

text. Because the oppressive conditions of African Americans are clearly positioned within the material world, the source of liberation will also be within the material world. To equate divine election with oppression circumscribes a condition where oppression becomes a necessary factor that is not challengeable. Furthermore, Cone establishes a perspective that aligns Blackness with a state of oppression, creating an environment where a lack of self-consciousness explains the current plight of African Americans. It is because of their lack of consciousness that African Americans suffer disproportionately, negating the impact of the material condition. Aligning Blackness with ESP oppression suggests that African Americans are responsible for the oppression they encounter and if they alter their consciousness the material condition will change.

Blackness as an ontological category is determined by oppression from white oppressors. Blackness is granted a position of ontological priority but is still grounded in a position of oppression. In other words, oppression is the sign of God's election and without oppression, Blackness does not hold the same position of election. Anderson challenges Cone's interpretation of the ontological relationship between Blackness and oppression because there is more at stake than a lack of consciousness and self-determination. The totality of meaning in Blackness conflates liberation with Black collective consciousness, and shifts the responsibility from oppressors to oppressed. Jones concludes, "Black theology's promise of liberation remains existentially a function of Black self-consciousness (to see oneself as black, free, and self-determined)"⁷⁶ To equate liberation with Black self-consciousness suggests the oppressed are to blame for their current plight. Consequently, the nature of Cone's theology supports a positions where Blackness is bound to oppression, non-being, and survival.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 92.

Chapter 5: Theology and Meta-Theological Considerations in William R. Jones' Philosophical Theology

This chapter examines William R. Jones' Philosophical Theology. Jones' Philosophical Theology is often misunderstood, so it is my purpose in this chapter to clearly and succinctly outline the details of humanocentric theism and its relationship to the Black experience and the objective of material liberation. Jones's meta-theology differs from his contemporaries, which is the primary reason Jones has been left without a seat at the table. As outlined in Chapter 3, Jones' dismissal from the BLT table is not grounded in his lack of theism, but is due to his failure to utilize a Christian-centric theological framework for his BLT. Because Jones presents a viable BLT, he is included in this study.¹ Jones' Philosophical Theology, via humanocentric theism, implies that normative views of Black Liberation Theology fail to actively engage in theodicy.

The existence of God is presumed in Jones' theological position, but God has little, or no direct impact on humans. Although Jones' theology includes the existence of God, he is hesitant to attach any human/anthropomorphic traits to God.² Philosophically we cannot know the nature of God (epistemologically), therefore we cannot assume that God is omnibenevolent or personal. Jones challenges the theological community to provide evidence of God's goodwill towards African Americans, or what he refers to as the liberation event;

¹ Using Jones as a contrasting figure to Cone offers a significantly different view of God, but still within the realm of Black Liberation theological thought. Jones preemptively stretches the spectrum of BLT to include non-Christian theism as a viable Black Liberation Theology.

² Jones states that "black religion is fundamentally theistic, and therefore any black theology that wants to be an effective handmaiden of black liberation must adopt a similar theological stance.... Disregarding for the moment the issue of theological accuracy, the black theological, for pragmatic reason, should develop initially a theistic framework for theodicy." (*IGWR?*, 172) Jones also clarifies that a Black theodicy of liberation framework, "must be theistic, more precisely, monotheistic. In addition, it must incorporate the omnipotence and benevolence of God." (*IGWR?*, 174)

This principle obviously presents apparently insurmountable difficulties for the black theologian, for it forces him to identify the actual events in which he sees the benevolent and liberatory hand of God at work not for man in general, *but for blacks*. This is not easily accomplished in light of the long history of oppression that is presupposed by each black theologian.³

Simply by engaging as a theology of liberation, oppression in BLT is a condition that is already actualized.

Biographical Background Contextualizations

In my examination of Jones, I take into account his role as a Black philosopher/theologian in juxtaposition to his role as solely a theologian.⁴ This is supported on several accounts; first, Jones began his academic career by securing a Bachelor of Arts in Philosophy from Howard University in 1955, under the guidance of Eugene C. Holmes and Winston McAllister.⁵ Secondly, his doctoral dissertation at Brown University, entitled "Sartre's Philosophical Anthropology in Relation to His Ethics: A Criticism of Selected Critics," while ostensibly in Religious Studies, was substantially a work in Philosophy.⁶ Furthermore, in a

³ Jones, *IGWR?*, 11

⁴ Yancy, "The Honor Was All Mine."

⁵ Alain Locke retired as the Chair of the Philosophy Department in 1957. Holmes challenged the presumed existence of God's traditional attributes by complicating the image of God in light of the Black historical record. Black Americans continue to face disproportional oppression; therefore Jones does not presume or assume God's benevolence towards the Black community. See John H. McClendon, III, "Eugene C. Holmes: A Commentary on a Black Marxist Philosopher," in *Philosophy Born of Struggle*, ed. Leonard Harris (Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 1983); III John H. McClendon, "The African American Philosopher and Academic Philosophy: On the Problem of Historical Interpretation," *The American Philosophical Association Newsletter* 4, no. 1 (2004). McAllister joined the Philosophy Department at Howard University in 1946 and upon the retirement of Alain Locke, McAllister served as the Department Chair from 1966-1976. See William A. Banner, "Winston Kermit McAllister (1920-1976)" Paper presented at the Proceeding and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association, 1976.

⁶ William R. Jones, "Sartre's Philosophical Anthropology in Relation to His Ethics: A Criticism of Selected Critics" Doctoral Dissertation (Brown University, 1969). Jones's use of Sartre's humanism existentialism is undergirding the central arguments of his humanocentric theism. Jones, *IGWR?*, xxi-xxii, Jones continues to emphasize the centrality of theodicy as the controlling theological category in his idea of humanism.

interview with George Yancy in 1996, Jones states his dissertation is actually philosophical in nature, but because of a National Defense Education Act fellowship which supported career options in the minister, he pragmatically chose Religious Studies instead of Philosophy.⁷ Thirdly, Jones was also a professional philosopher and long-time member and supporter of the American Philosophical Association (APA). Fourthly, Jones was a major contributor in conceptualizing Black Philosophy as a legitimate and necessary position in the academy.⁸ Jones has a long history of defending Black Philosophy and the pursuit of philosophical inquiry as a basis for legitimizing the Black lived experience. Eventually, Jones established a Committee on Blacks in Philosophy within the American Philosophical Association as a way to legitimize Black Philosophy as a distinct tradition. From this perspective, Jones highlights the importance of Black Philosophy as a specific ethnic and cultural tradition through the examination of the Black experience from a particular historical context, just as we discover with Greek philosophy, German idealism, French existentialism or British empiricism.⁹ Jones necessitates the importance of author and audience when discussing Black Philosophy. His distinction of Black Philosophy is dually concerned with the contextual angle of perception and a description of the experiences of a group of people that is “related to the contextual, economic, social, political situation which dictates a certain kind of choice.”¹⁰ In short, Black Philosophy is not concerned with a “chromosomal project.” This is where Black Philosophy and Black Liberation Theology converge—both traditions are concerned with reconceptualizing the false representation of the

⁷ Yancy, "The Honor Was All Mine: A Conversation with William R. Jones," 9.

⁸ Jones, “The Legitimacy and Necessity of Black Philosophy.”

⁹ See Jones, "The Legitimacy and Necessity of Black Philosophy.”

¹⁰ Yancy, "The Honor Was All Mine: A Conversation with William R. Jones," 7

Black experience presented in the intellectual work of white/European scholars that have a direct impact on the social consequences of African Americans. Black Liberation Theology and Black Philosophy are concerned with accenting the role of African Americans in the intellectual enterprise that has been misconstrued, deficient, or incorrect in the scholarship of the white mainstream intellectual tradition.¹¹

William R. Jones' theological position is unique because there is an interwoven combination of theological and philosophical frameworks within his body of scholarship. This interconnection, although part of an early Black intellectual tradition, is thoroughly acknowledged in the work of Jones. For example, Jones is concerned with reconceptualizing Black Theology as a Liberation Theology by underlining the focus on unequivocal liberation from material oppression. Jones suggests that the material interest of African Americans has been historically (de)valued by conventional trends in Black Theology.¹² Jones is not necessarily critical of God as such, but he is critical of conceptions of God that are antithetical to liberation. By offering a critical examination of theodicy and functional ultimacy, Jones challenges the legitimacy of Christian-centric theologies as a tool for liberation. This challenge is part of the larger critical philosophical tradition found in the Black intellectual history.

Epistemology and the Source of Knowledge

Jones centralizes his methodological system on theodicy because God is unknowable. In a sense, our knowledge is generated based upon what humans perceive God should be. Roy D.

¹¹ Richard T. Greener, "The Intellectual Position of the Negro." *The National Quarterly Review*, no. July (1880).; William Augustus Banner, "Fundamentals of Christian Social Order." *Journal of Religious Thought* 6, no. 1 (Aut-Winter 1949).

¹² Jones, *IGWR?*; "The Case for Black Humanism"; "Theodicy and Methodology in Black Theology: A Critique of Washington, Cone and Cleage,"; "Theism and Religious Humanism: The Chasm Narrows,"; "Oppression, Race, and Humanism."

Morrison suggests that religion and theological thought does not support facts about the supernatural world, but instead hypothesizes a connection between our worlds, regardless of the evidence that supports or denies a relationship between humans and God:

Religion does not deal with facts or with relationships between facts. Rather it deals only with evaluations of human thought and action. Religion evokes aspiration toward truth and understanding. Religion generates “faith” in the intelligibility of the empirical world. In turn religion is nurtured by the reverence and awe which accompany our discovery of the order and harmony in the universe.¹³

The importance of understanding the epistemological value of BLT is necessary because knowledge is related to the prospect of material change. If the information cannot be verified epistemologically, via philosophical materialism, the claim cannot be rendered as knowledge and used to make judgements upon human reality. If it is not considered knowledge, then the claim should not necessarily be disregarded, but should be used within the parameters of non-knowledge.

For example, if we attempt to describe Santa Claus, we would have a difficult time trying to configure an image based upon empirical evidence. Santa Claus might be a white middle-aged man that lives in the North Pole with reindeer, and one-day every year he delivers presents to every (good) little boy and girl in the world, (or United States, depending on the story). Maybe Santa has a different name, depending on the place. Regardless, the many attributes associated with Santa Claus and other mythical (fictive) characters cannot be verified because we have no empirical evidence of non-natural materials. When we lack empirical evidence to support a claim, we must address that limitation in our study, in order to verify our claims are not biased. To suggest that God cannot be known through the auspice of acquirable knowledge, but to presume God can be known through faith means faith is an equal representative of garnering

¹³ Roy D. Morrison, II., "Einstein on Kant, Religion, Science, and Methodological Unity." 260.

knowledge. Certain strands of BLT concur that faith demonstrates knowledge and there is no distinction between knowledge based on faith and knowledge based on empirical methods.

Jones, and other philosophical theologians, take issue with the concept of faith constituting a form of knowledge. Not having a method to determine or verify the particular nature of an assertion, brings into question whether the claims constitute a form of knowledge. The conception of God throughout history has created and crafted various divine figures that are representative of God. The concept of God from the Christian Bible is plagued with inconstancies and inaccuracies, yet it is the primary text in the Christian canon and the central methodological tool in conventional forms of BLT. It is precisely for this reason that Jones doesn't promote an anthropomorphic deity.¹⁴

Doctrine of God

Jones' methodology differs from traditional theological arguments because he is presenting a hypothetical conception of God. Jones generates a concept of God with a primary focus on one specific variable: oppression. It is from this perspective that Jones creates a Black theodicy of liberation, or what Jones calls, humanocentric theism. Humanocentric theism requires certain boundaries be set in order to be logically compatible with a framework of Black oppression *and* God's existence. Jones limits the perquisites of his theology to include these two central concepts, and from here Jones creates a conception of God that maintains the traditional

¹⁴ C. Dennis McKinsey, *The Encyclopedia of Biblical Errancy* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1995). See especially chapter 1, "The Composition of the Bible: Inerrancy, Canon, Excluded Literature, Authorship, Originals, Variances, Versions, Greek and Hebrew, Interpretations"

attributes of omniscience, omnipotence, and omnibenevolence.¹⁵ Through this abstract position of an hypothetical conception of God, Jones cautions against using a theological perspective that presents God through false pretenses. Jones illuminates on the oppressive nature of certain theological concepts found in the Black community, specifically within a Christian-centric framework through a hypothetical representation of God.

Black Liberation Theology, as we can see from the previous chapters, is not a monolithic or stagnant theological enterprise, but a diverse set of applications that are valued for their liberation potential and overall function in the process of liberation for the African American community. Jones' theological enterprise, although not conventional, is still within the framework of BLT. It is within this non-conventional theological framework that I examine Jones' BLT and how he offers a drastically different approach to BLT that stands outside the normative boundaries prescribed by other Black Liberation theologians.

The conventional boundaries of BLT (discussed in Chapter 3) have been elected as the prescribed theoretical benchmark for understanding BLT within the confines of a Christian perspective. Jones offers an alternative approach to BLT through the disciplinary guidelines of Philosophical Theology. Philosophical Theology is the application of theological discourse within the conceptual framework of philosophy. This includes using the logical (rational) argumentation that satisfies philosophical inquiry through empirical evidence. Jones' theological enterprise is a descriptive account of theological methods that additionally meet the criteria of

¹⁵ In essence, Jones's God is not active in the human world, therefore humans are responsible for our state of affairs. God's lack of intervention in the human world is not grounded on God's lack of power or a limitation in power, but is granted by God's own determination. As will be detailed below, Jones' humanocentric theism maintains God's attributes while positioning the suffering of humans within a separate realm, devoid of God's intervention. See, Jones, "The Case for Black Humanism."; Jones, "Functional Ultimacy as Authority in Religious Humanism."

conceptualizing a BLT. In other words, BLT is cognizant of the need for liberation; however, the pathway to understanding the oppressive agents is still open for debate.

To begin, it is important that we revisit the meaning and importance of BLT, from the perspective of Jones and other Black theologians that are outside the confines of conventional BLT. Jones and Roy D. Morrison argue that value systems, regardless of the traditional/cultural importance, need to be open to debate and dialogue.¹⁶ Both stress that all beliefs and value systems be open to debate simply because we need to know how these systems impact the African American community. Through a philosophical assessment, BLT is open to satisfying the requirements of philosophical thought. Philosophy is contingent upon satisfying the logical and (practical) needs of rational thought. In a sense, philosophical thought assesses the argumentation employed in theoretical ideas. This argumentation is then rendered compatible with logical/rational thought or antithetical to logical propositions. For Jones, Philosophical Theology is understood in more practical terms, especially for the plight of African Americans, through the potentiality of liberation. Jones uses a philosophical theological foundation to defend and denounce certain theological claims and theoretical ideas as non-liberatory, or those ideas that induce quietism.

Jones, as part of the discussion on BLT, clearly aligns himself within the field of theology through two crucial components. First is the presumption of God existence and God's

¹⁶ Roy D. Morrison was a contemporary of Jones and also a close friend. They exchanged ideas and commentary on philosophical theology and Liberation strategies within their respective fields of epistemology and theodicy, respectively. See, Morrison, Roy D., II. "Black Philosophy: An Instrument for Cultural and Religious Liberation." *The Journal of Religious Thought* 33, no. 1 (1976); Morrison, "Black Enlightenment: The Issues of Pluralism, Priorities and Empirical Correlation." *Journal of The American Academy of Religion* 46, no. 2 (1978); Morrison, "The Emergence of Black Theology in America." *The A.M.E. Zion Quarterly Review* 94, no. 3 (October 1982); Morrison, "Process Philosophy, Social Thought, and Liberation Theology." *Zygon* 19, no. 1 (March 1984); Morrison, "Self-Transformation in American Blacks: The Harlem Renaissance and Black Theology." In *Existence in Black*, edited by Lewis R. Gordon. (New York: Routledge, 1997).

ontological being.¹⁷ These two theological premises are grounded in theological claims, but are not strictly identified with Christian perspectives. Jones' liberation theology is not concerned with God's ability to make changes in the human world, and therefore God, in all regards, is taken as an entity that has little, if any, bearing on the human condition. It is important to note that Jones is not presuming the existence of God to maintain a theological status, but recognizes the theistic component as a relevant and important factor to a Black Liberation Theology. The existence of God, as a divine being, is not grounded in how God manipulated the human world, but instead challenges the ontological quality of God. Jones stresses the importance of noting that God's traditional attributes are still intact, but through divine power, God has placed self-limitations on intervening on behalf of humans, regardless of the material conditions.

Non-theism does not centralize God, but God is not necessarily excluded or removed from all consideration. For example, humanocentric theism does not dismiss God as the ontological ultimate; God is still considered Creator. However, the relationship between God and man is reduced to that of a watchmaker and a watch. God created man but thereafter granted—through divine self-command—humans the ability to function as sole valuers of human history. Similar to how a watch is able to function without constant manipulation by the creator.¹⁸ An examination of God becomes necessary to determine how the concept of God impacts the potential for liberation.

¹⁷ The Title of Jones' book, *Is God a White Racist?*, explicates a presumption in the existence of God, regardless of how unorthodox his overarching question: Is God a white Racist? This claims presumes there is a God, Jones is asking whether or not God is a racist.

¹⁸ Jones' conception of God aligns with deism. This is covered below. Theodicy and suffering become key concepts in the creation of Jones' Humanocentric Theism. The humanism of Jones is different than the humanism of Norm Allen and Paul Kurtz. Jones is not an absolute humanist. "This stance puts me in opposition to those humanist who regard religion as an illusion, who seek to negate the divine reality as the necessary precondition for affirming the humanist gospel of human freedom, and who interpret the history of religion as only an instrument of oppression and dehumanization." See, Theism and Religious Humanism, 2

Philosophical Theology is theoretically different than Biblical Theology:

[T]he inherited content and structure of Christianity (or some other religion) are subjected to the critique of a philosophical system that is not based upon, or obligated to, the authority of any formal religion. The religion being reinterpreted is fitted into the cosmology and the categories of the chosen philosophical system—a system that is selected on the basis of criteria that are essentially external to the religion that is being reconstructed for mediating and transitional purposes.¹⁹

Epistemological privilege is granted to the chosen philosophical system—not to the theological content. Jones' Philosophical Theology examines conventional BLT to see which theological components meet the standard for liberatory thought.

Jones' theology is identified within a category of deism, a theological principle that accepts the existence of God as the creator of man, and nature, but God is no longer a controlling force in the natural world (material world). God created the natural world and set everything in motion, and then stepped back. So in a sense, God is a watchmaker of the natural world. The watchmaker does not continue to manipulate the hands of the watch in order for the correct time to be displayed.

In addition to reducing God's position in the natural world, deism, in the classical (traditional) sense, do not prescribe to church doctrine or biblical scripture. Socinus, the Sicilians (1525-1562), and Laelius (1539-1604) first introduced the concept of deism in the sixteenth-century. Deism is "from the latin *deus* ("god")". Deism is described as a theological view that;

[C]haracterize their view in contrast to atheism. But the term is now taken to apply to a movement of thought in 17th and 18th century, predominantly English, which attempted to replace revelation with the light of reason. In sum—although the summary will not reflect exactly the views of every member—the movement held to a belief in: *one God who created the world but does not intervene in its present functioning, either by way of revelation or miracle*; an objective difference between right and wrong; the duty of life as

¹⁹ Morrison, *Science, Theology and the Transcendental Horizon*, 116-7.

support for the right of the immortality of the souls; and our condition in the life to come as related to ethical conduct in this life.²⁰

Jones challenges the claim that Black Christian theologians are able to adhere to the idea that God's moral attributes of perfection and benevolence continue to hold true *while* accommodating a vivid picture of human suffering, especially among African Americans. There is a belief that suffering in the human world does not result from "blemishes in emanating from God's character or mistakes in God's actions," but from a standpoint that 'God works in mysterious ways.' According to Cone, suffering in the material world is real, but because of God's omniscience and imminence, suffering is (re)conceptualized as a sign of election. Suffering is explained as either a position of praise through a partnership as co-suffer, or a form of deserved suffering for past crimes. For the purposes of this dissertation, this leaves us with two options, especially when trying to understand the African American condition in light of the high occurrences of oppression found in the Black material condition: 1) To maintain God's attributes, God remains All-Good, and suffering persist, and the suffering must be legitimized as positive. The other position is, 2) God is demonic, or a White racist? Since the latter option is not aligned with traditional theism, Jones challenges the presuppositions that God is imminently active in the human world.

Theoretically, James Cone puts God on the side of the oppressed by focusing on biblical events in order to gain knowledge of God's nature. This is achieved through the stories of the Exodus and the Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Following the model put forth by Cone, African Americans are the chosen people because the divine connection with the oppressed through God

²⁰ William L. Reese, "Deism." In Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion. (Sussex England: Harvester Press, 1980), 121. Emphasis added.

becoming a man as an oppressed Jew. Cone uses 'the Cross,' and Jesus Christ as his point of departure toward a liberation theology by stating:

*The finality of Jesus lies in the totality of his existence in complete freedom as the Oppressed One who reveals through his death and resurrection that God is present in all dimensions of human liberation. His death is the revelation of the freedom of God, taking upon himself the totality of human oppression; his resurrection is the disclosure that God is not defeated by oppression but transforms it into the possibility of freedom.*²¹

Cone justifies human oppression by transforming suffering into a positive through a connection between God and the oppressed. He rejects that God is punishing African Americans for a sin. Cone rejects "otherworldly" theologies as being antithetical to material liberation, and stresses the need for liberation now, in this world. Theodicy is the underlying issue that supports Jones' criticism of conventional Black Liberation Theology, and as such, Jones presents humanocentric theism as a comparable theology that removes God's involvement in the world as a way to sidestep the problems associated with theodicy.²² Jones warns us that theodicy, especially when understood in the context of African American oppression, must be conceptualized differently so it does not lead to quietism.

A concept of classical theodicy does not satisfy the theological argument of oppression for African Americans so through humanocentric theism, Jones prescribes a theology that maintains the essential qualities of God, but removes God's sovereignty from human history. In a sense it is the best of both worlds; God is still benevolent yet *not* responsible for Black oppression. Jones satisfies the problems of theodicy by removing God as the responsible agent

²¹ Cone, *BTL*, 118. Original emphasis

²² G. Stanley Kane. "The Failure of Soul-Making Theodicy." *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 6, no. 1 (1975): 1-22.

in the oppression found in the human world. For Jones, oppression is the consequence of man and the material issues that accompany modes of production.²³

Judeo-Christianity necessitates that certain godly attributes be identified with God. According to Cone, God is believed to possess the moral attributes commonly associated with God from the Christian Bible, and from Protestant theological perspectives—omniscience, omnipotence, and omnibenevolence. Jones argues, because the event of liberation has yet to be fulfilled in human history; we are skirting the bounds of knowledge by presuming God's attributes without first acquiring verifiable evidence. The Exodus event is a liberatory event for the Jews, but not specific to the Black historical record—that is, if it was an actual event.²⁴ The Exodus is argued to be evidence of God's participation in the liberation of the oppressed, per the liberation of the Israelites from Egyptian slavery. The Exodus story offers a concept of God that is not only concerned with justice, which implies his benevolence, but also speaks to God's ability to intervene in the natural world, suggesting God's omniscience and omnipotence. God is protective of the oppressed, but God also has the ability to introspectively influence change. Given the challenges associated with prescribing certain attributes to God, Jones avoids the pitfalls of a personal deity by granting God the power of creating a self-imposed divide between God and the natural world after creation—the divide “is the consequence of God's will.”²⁵

²³ As will be discussed below, Jones' concept of God does not necessitate God as a *being*. In Jones' theology; God's characteristics are subtly different than Cone.

²⁴ Israel Finkelstein and Neil Asher Silberman, *The Bible Unearthed: Archeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origins of Its Sacred Texts* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001), 48-71; Armstrong, *History of God*, 18-19. Karen Armstrong questions the magnitude of the Exodus. She concludes the Exodus, if a concrete historical event, was a successful peasant's revolt.

²⁵ Jones, *IGWR?*, 187.

Jones' doctrine of God is assessed by utilizing three essential points: 1) God's sovereignty; 2) God's ontological status; and 3) functional ultimacy/freedom of man. The major difference among humanism and other theological presentations is the importance of man's control and primary function in human reality, or the *functional ultimacy* of man. In other words, the traditional theological concept of "God as active in and sovereign over history" is removed to give ultimate function to man in this presentation of humanocentric theism.²⁶ Jones interprets functional ultimacy to mean:

[M]an can only act as if he were ultimate in the realm of values or history or both. It may well be the case that, ontologically speaking, he is not ultimate, but nonetheless it is necessary for him to choose, to value, regardless of the character of the rest of reality. This situation of man does not change, whether God exists or not.²⁷

In this case, God has purposefully limited his control over the human world, by allowing humans to participate in the pleasures and evils of the world.²⁸ Human freedom is *not* controlled by God's election or by being part of the 'in group', which is assumed in Cone's theology, but human freedom is simply granted based on man's "ontological statues by virtue of his *creation*."²⁹

The divine remains All-Powerful in Jones' theology and the pains of suffering are contingent upon the human world, which is completely under the sovereignty of humankind. Functional ultimacy of man is not code for the destruction of God or the deification of man, but

²⁶ William R. Jones, "Theodicy and Methodology in Black Theology," 541.

²⁷ Jones, *IGWR?*, 243. Also see, Jones, "Functional Ultimacy as Authority in Religious Humanism" and, Jones, "Religious Humanism: Its Problems and Prospects in Black Religion and Culture."

²⁸ Jones, "Process Theology: Guardian of the Oppressor or Goad to the Oppressed," 12.

²⁹ Jones, *IGWR?*, 188. Jones is arguing that man has exalted status because of his creation, not because of a covenant with God. The key difference is contingent upon the former does not require any religious affiliation, but is concerned with being, whereas the latter is determinative on a relationship with the divine, therefore only those that are part of a certain group receive exalted status.

bypasses the “objective uncertainty” of God.³⁰ God alone is not self-evidently benevolent in humanocentric theism, actually the traditional attributes of God (omniscience, omnipotence, and omnibenevolence) cannot be confirmed or denied, so by removing God from human history prevents God from being responsible for suffering in the human world, thus making God indifferent to the events of human history.

The morality of man within the parameters of functional ultimacy creates a problem with the moral improvement and the superlative traits of God. Because we are still ontologically dependent upon God as a product of Gods creation, it is argued that our moral behavior is based on the valuation of God’s characteristics, which becomes problematic if God is evil or demonic. However, to evade this problem Jones argues that a predeterminate function of the ontological to ethical is *not* likely given the functional ultimacy of man. In other words, “ontology itself cannot formulate ethical precepts.”³¹ If humans are in complete control, then decision-making is based upon the social powers of the current sociopolitical environment in human history. Therefore, oppression is identified within the social precepts of the material world and not with any divine congenital traits.

Removing the ultimate/divine reality in Jones’ humanism and producing a secular humanism alleviates the aforementioned issues, but Jones warns that he is concerned with presenting a “theistic option” viable for a theology of liberation.³² What Jones has explicitly done is positioned humanocentric theism on the theological spectrum with the possibility of

³⁰ Jones, “Theism and Religious Humanism: The Chasm Narrows,” 525. Jones makes the same conclusion in Jones, “Functional Ultimacy as Authority in Religious Humanism.”

³¹ Quoting Jean- Paul Sartre from Jones, “Theism and Religious Humanism: The Chasm Narrows,” 525.

³² Jones, *IGWR?*, 172.

adding additional nontraditional theological perspectives as possible options for a BLT. Jones states,

[P]roviding an entree for its immediate neighbor, secular humanism, into the theological arena where the presence of God is not brought into consideration because all human activity is based solely on human doing, removing the possibilities of ontological dependency of moral priority. In this way, the discussion of humanocentric theism helps to pave the way for secular humanism as an appropriate complement for contemporary black religion.³³

However, I would argue that Jones has ample justification to present secular humanism as part of Black religious discourse because it is clearly part of the holistic religious experience.³⁴ Secular humanism, Jones' personal theological belief, is overshadowed by prescribing to a certain image of God. Jones concurs that Black religion is predominantly theistic, so any "black theory that wants to be an effective handmaiden of black liberation must adopt a similar theological stance."³⁵

In conclusion, humanocentric theism is logically practicable and the existence of God (i.e., good or bad) becomes a secondary issue that is overpowered by the problem of oppression and suffering for African Americans. God is not granted complete sovereignty in human history, and in fact is completely exonerated from being the responsible agent in suffering. Jones concludes;

The concept of divine persuasion and the functional ultimacy of man leads to a theory of human history in which the interplay of human power centers and alignments is decisive. In this context, racism is traced, causally, to human forces. Divine responsibility for the crimes of human history is thus eliminated. In fact, this appears to be the only way to avoid the proposition that Cone finds fatal for a black theodicy, which is the acceptance

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Norm R. Allen, ed. *African-American Humanism: An Anthology*; Douglas Fieck, "Humanism: African American Liberation '(a)Theology'." *Free Inquiry*, 2001, 43-45; Jones, "The Case for Black Humanism."; Pinn, *The African American Religious Experience in America*; Pinn, ed. *African American Religious Cultures*.

³⁵ Jones, *IGWR?*, 172.

of any view that even indirectly places divine approval on the sufferings of man, particularly black man.³⁶

Humanocentric theism contends that “the situation of man does not change, whether God exists or not” because man’s freedom is the fundamental principle in dealing with human history. Man becomes responsible for events in human history and God is not held accountable for the suffering and pain inflicted upon humans.

God’s Moral Attributes and Human Suffering

Jones withholds speculative claims about the nature of God and the politics of God. In fact, Jones candidly recalls a time when he would extract passages from various parts of the Bible as support for God’s liberating presence in the human world. Jones generates a concept of God by using one overarching variable: oppression. It is from this perspective that Jones creates his version of a Black Liberation Theology—humanocentric theism. Humanocentric theism requires God to be logically compatible within the conceptual bounds of two central themes: *Black oppression* and *God’s existence*. In other words, Jones is careful not to be overly generous with his conception of God because of the limitations imposed by equating God as an agent with control over human history. Jones examined the historical experiences of African Americans and concluded that we can not necessarily presume that God is omnibenevolent, especially when we look at the historical records from the Black experience. Jones asks of his contemporaries; what events of liberation have been extrapolated from biblical scripture directly relates to an event of Black liberation?³⁷ When we conceive a God based on biblical scripture, we are aligning our religious beliefs within a contextual basis of the historical context and the social condition during

³⁶ Ibid., 195.

³⁷ The discussion on Cone’s methodological system is covered above, in Chapter 2. That chapter provides an in-depth examination of Cone’s use of biblical scripture and biblical hermeneutics, and the critical assessments of using the “Bible as a history book.”

periods of biblical evolution. Jones suggests that we do not have empirical historical evidence to support a claim that God is omnipotent and omniscient, which is a central doctrine in Christianity. Jones' hypothetical God underwent a critical examination in order to logically reconstruct a God that takes theodicy into account.³⁸ For example, Jones understands that God is not only non-personable, but God is also not active in any aspect of the human world, therefore God's divine goodness is no longer an issue of contention because God's qualities have no bearing on the human condition.³⁹ Jones is not presenting a Christian specific theology, but a theology beyond the confines of Christian theistic thought.

The process of philosophically examining the religious claims and theological doctrines presumed in Christianity suggests that certain propositions may have been created within a specific socio-political agenda. Russell McCutcheon in, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia*, assesses the theological constructions of religion and how manufactured religious ideas "function in, and contribute to, the maintenance of certain socially and politically charged associations."⁴⁰ In a way, McCutcheon is answering whether certain religious ideologies and practices confirm, not deny, the socio-political and economic oppression in a society. McCutcheon's main objective throughout is to address the implications of "producing and reproducing discourse on sui generis religion" as they relate to

³⁸ Jones, *IGWR?*, 66. Jones states that if one creates a theology by starting with suffering as the central marker, which lead to two distinct possibilities about God. God is a white racist or God is not active in the human world.

³⁹ Jones supports the view of human freedom/autonomy that "relieves God of the responsibility for the crimes of human history," and I would also add and events of liberation, therefore humans are ultimate in the human world. The level of contact between God and humans is limited to an ontological relationship that is open to further discussion. Briefly, Jones confirms that human freedom is a divine boundary set forth by God. See Jones, "Theism and Religious Humanism: The Chasm Narrows," 522.

⁴⁰ Russell McCutcheon, *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 18.

the “social production of human beings as political subjects.”⁴¹ In other words, how do particular forms of religion impact certain groups of people, in our case the African American community, in maintaining a certain socio-political status quo that reconfirms oppression and inequality?

Suffering and oppression are not analogous terms, but have varying degrees of stratification. As human beings living in a natural world, we suffer from intermittent pain during our lives, ... and eventually we die. This type of suffering, although not necessarily positive, is inevitable and necessary.⁴² Oppression is a condition that increases the amount of suffering for a given community; the suffering is localized to a certain people depending on a specific set of precepts or conclusions. In BLT, the suffering experienced is an increase from the normal, average amount of suffering that accompanies being part of the natural world, (death, sickness, pain, etc.).

Theodicy

Theodicy, in the most basic sense, means God’s justice in the world, or “justification of God’s goodness in face of the fact of evil.”⁴³ John Hick, in “The Problem of Evil” in *Philosophy of Religion*, delineates two forms of evil: moral evil and non-moral evil. Moral evil can be understood as human wickedness or, evil that is understood in “its relation to human freedom

⁴¹ Ibid., 24.

⁴² Jones highlights two forms of suffering: Ontological (natural/supernatural) suffering (hurricanes, earthquakes, etc) and suffering caused by human agents. Natural/supernatural suffering cannot be changed, and therefore must be accepted. The latter is suffering that leads to the maintenance of oppression--through economic, political and social means--needs to be combatted. Natural and ontological suffering results in quietism, because they cannot be challenged. See Jones, "Process Theology: Guardian of the Oppressor or Goad to the Oppressed," 9-10.

⁴³ John Hick, "The Problem of Evil," 464.

and responsibility.”⁴⁴ Non-moral evil is the suffering and pain that inflicts the mind and body. These natural evils are not determinative on human wickedness, and “seems to be built into the very structure of our world.”⁴⁵ But why would God allow these evils to occur in the world, if God still has effective control over human history?

When we understand theodicy in light of moral and non-moral evils we are inextricably led to question why an omnipotent and omnibenevolent God would allow either kind of evil in the world. Hick concludes that moral evil is directly related to the freedom of man, which ultimately allows for man to act “wrongly as well as to act rightly.”⁴⁶ Non-moral evil, as part of the natural world, is within the domain of God’s jurisdiction; therefore God allows natural evils to exist in the world.

Theodicy can also be understood as suffering from lack in faith in the divine, making punishment necessary for sinful behavior, all the while maintaining God’s benevolent quality. In *Is God A White Racist?*, Jones challenges the apologetic definition of theodicy by questioning God’s “intrinsic and ultimate goodness.”⁴⁷ When suffering is considered a presupposition of God’s will, as a way of providing justice for wrong doing, the subjectivity of the suffering must be explained. Deserved suffering (i.e, for those that have committed a crime, God’s enemies) can be understood as consistent with “God’s love and righteousness” and “His judgement and salvation” for punishment for prior sin.⁴⁸ However, this idea is complicated when the innocent,

⁴⁴ Ibid. Also see, Richard Schoenig. "The Free Will Theodicy." *Religious Studies* 34 (1998).

⁴⁵ Ibid., 466.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 464.

⁴⁷ Jones, *IGWR?*, 46.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 47.

with no record of prior sin, suffer without due cause. Jones suggests this leads to the multievidential character of God's attributes and qualities, therefore begging the question of God's goodness. In a sense, we have equal support showing God's benevolence as we do showing God's demonic character. Theodicy, more than God's benevolence and justice, presupposes certain qualities that problematize the divine.

Anthony Pinn historicizes the theological concept of theodicy in light of the African American experience in *Moral Evil and Redemptive Suffering: A History of Theodicy in American-American Religious Thought*, and in, *Why Lord?: Suffering and Evil in Black Theology*.⁴⁹ Similar to Jones, Pinn problematizes the concept of God's traditional attributes and the suffering found in the Black experience.⁵⁰ Pinn concludes that the suffering found in the Black experience is inconsistent with God's omnibenevolence; therefore suffering can only be understood as redemptive punishment for a prior or future crime. Pinn is concerned with theological claims being presented as historical truths. By highlighting the historical path of African Americans in the United States, both enslaved and free, God's action in the natural world

⁴⁹ Pinn, ed. *Moral Evil and Redemptive Suffering*. For more about the issue of theodicy, see Pinn, *Why Lord?*; Pinn, *African American Humanist Principles*; Pinn, *The African American Religious Experience in America*.

⁵⁰ The humanism promoted by Jones is different than the humanism promoted by Paul Kurtz and Anthony Pinn. Paul Kurtz embraces humanism from the standpoint of the enlightenment and the debate over faith versus reason and religious in contention with science, which accompanied the scientific revolution. Jones is adamant that his humanism is a direct product of the Black cultural experience and more particularly a crucial segment in the tradition of Black religious thought. Yancy, "The Honor Was All Mine," 9.

did not ensure liberation. Pinn offers a unique look into the evolution of theological claims to satisfy the issue of theodicy.⁵¹

The traditional attributes of God have been outlined and discussed above. The attributes of omnibenevolence, omniscience, and omnipotence are among the most prominent qualities assigned to God's character. Judeo-Christianity offers a conception of God that prescribes to a doctrine of God that is culminated in an All-Perfect *being*. The prescription of an All-Perfect being does not sufficiently satisfy the evils found in the world.

Theodicy can be explained through the concept of strong theodicy and weak theodicy. Strong theodicy includes the perfection of God's nature within the creation of the universe. Our current world is the best actual world God could create. If evil is removed from our world, our current world would not be the best possible world; it would be lacking the necessary condition of evil, which is (obviously) part of our world. Basically, God created the best possible world, but regardless of God's perfections, the world, with its suffering and evil, is still the best possible world available. Therefore, evil and suffering are necessary conditions, and for God to intervene and remove/reduce evil would result in a world that is less than the best; "Remove even one insignificant evil and the resulting world will be a different world and it will be less than the best. Thus God's reason for permitting evil is through his desire to create the best possible world.

⁵¹ For more information on Black humanism please see Douglas Ficek, "Humanism: African American Liberation '(a)Theology'"; Jones, "Theism and Religious Humanism: The Chasm Narrows"; Jones, "The Case for Black Humanism"; Jones, "Religious Humanism: Its Problems and Prospects in Black Religion and Culture"; Jones, "Oppression, Race, and Humanism"; Allen, Jr., ed. *African-American Humanism*; Jean-Paul Sartre, "Existentialism Is a Humanism: Lecture Given in 1946." Translated by Philip Mairet. In *Existentialism from Dostoyevsky to Sartre*, edited by Walter Kaufman. (Meridian Publishing, 1989); Juan Floyd-Thomas, *The Origins of Black Humanism in America* (New York: Palgrave, 2008). Black humanism is not a monolithic community, but a diverse community that has different ideological and philosophical perspectives.

God, Leibniz argues, even has an obligation to permit evil.”⁵² Because God is All-Perfect, God must create the best possible world. Anything less than perfect would be contrary to God’s natural perfections. The strong theodacists:

[A]rgues that while there are evils whose removal would as such improve the world, there are no evils whose removal *by God* would improve the world. God has made the world as good as *he* can make it. Although the world can be improved, God is not the one who is able to make it better. Perhaps we should think of this strategy as neo-Leibnizian.... Implicit in such reasoning is the following argument: 1) If God is omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly good, then the actual world is the best world God is able to actualize. 2) God is omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly good. 3) Utilitarianism is true with respect to God. 4) Therefore, God is morally justified in the permitting of evils which the actual world contains.⁵³

A concept of God that created the best possible world for the majority of people is ironic and troublesome. Much of the world’s population is confined to a certain material condition based upon the world economy as well as a structural and social system of inequality. Does God then allow suffering and evil within these communities, while promoting happiness to the other portion of the people that are not materially oppressed? If this is the case, then Jones’ poignant questions about the will of God and God’s attitudes towards African Americans affirms a racist and/or anti-black deity. If this is the case, then the concept of a strong theodicy does not satisfy the needs of African Americans and the liberation of the African American community from ESP oppression. Strong theodicy suggests that God created a world where certain people, the majority of people will not suffer due to God’s utilitarianism. God’s actions to allow the oppressed to suffer can be justified as long as the majority are not effected by oppression. The majority can benefit economically, socially, and politically from the oppressive conditions of

⁵² Henry J. Schuurman, "Two Concepts of Theodicy." *American Philosophical Quarterly* 30, no. 3 (1993), 209. Schuurman is referring to the German philosophical theologian, Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz.

⁵³ Ibid., 210. Also consult Jones, "Theodicy and Methodology in Black Theology," 544-548.

certain groups, especially if the minority group has a long history of living within oppressive conditions. It is not God that is responsible for the oppression of African Americans, but instead it is the responsibility of humans and human institutions that explicitly and implicitly are oppressive towards certain groups of people. A utilitarian God that wants to provide the greatest amount of good to the largest proportion of population is considered to be the best available deity, but unfortunately is not sufficient for African American.

Strong theodicy requires that God is omniscient, omnipotent, and perfectly good (omnibenevolent) which introduces a moral obligation that requires God to be necessarily morally; “God has a morally sufficient reason for permitting an evil in a possible world, *W*, iff *W* is the best world God is able to actualize.”⁵⁴ Some strong theodacists appeal to the Greater Good Principle; “God is justified in permitting an evil just in case that evil is an logically necessary condition for the presence in the world of a greater good which outweighs or defeats it.”⁵⁵ Strong theodacists consider a “gratuitous evil,” an evil that does satisfy the greater good.⁵⁶ For our purposes, an evil that provides a greater good to the majority of people needs to be questioned to determine if the concept allows for certain communities to suffer disproportionately, while allowing others groups to benefit from this oppression. This presentation of theodicy and suffering suggests that suffering must be preserved for African Americans to be the elected people of God.

To satisfy the precepts of conventional BLT, the concept of God must remain consistent with the theological doctrine that God is for African Americans. According to the strong

⁵⁴ Ibid. Also see Schuurman’s article on strong theodicy, “The Concept of a Strong Theodicy.” *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 27, no. 1/2 (1990).

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

theodist, African Americans suffer disproportionately in comparison to other groups in the United States, but as long as the suffering serves the greater good, God is justified to permit suffering and evil in the world, even if it is narrowly confined to the African American community. The reasons for suffering are unknown, but because God is required to permit evil for the greater good, the suffering is classified as positive, and consequently endured by the oppressed. The weak theodists conclude that God does not initiate suffering for a particular purpose, but suffering still exists in our world, so God permits it to occur and then fits it into his plan.⁵⁷ The oppressive conditions found in the Black community, is justified as long as a the majority of people benefit, while the minority may continue to suffer, at least for the time being. The racialized climate in the United States is therefore supported and sanctioned by God.

A concept of God that prescribes to “the greater good,” allows certain people to suffer in order to help another group succeed. The Greater Good Principle may offer a justification for non-oppressed groups, but for the Black community, a concept of God that accepts evil for certain groups, as long as the majority is not at risk, or if the suffering can lead to a greater good, fails to address the continuing plight of Black oppression. The oppressive conditions are overshadowed by the justification of God and God’s will, regardless if humans are capable of gainful knowledge of God’s will or not.

Metaphysical Nature of God: The Nature of Being

Ontological priority does not necessarily mean ontological dependency on God—Jones makes this point clear.⁵⁸ Jones suggests God is ontologically prior, but God’s ontological priority does not necessarily support a claim of human beings as ontological dependent upon God, which

⁵⁷ Schuurman, "Two Concepts of Theodicy," 213.

⁵⁸ Yancy, "The Honor Was All Mine: A Conversation with William R. Jones," 8-9.

forces humans to yield to the will of God. Ontological dependency suggests God and man have an ongoing relationship, requiring man to be dependent upon God. This dependency, for Jones is obsolete if understood in the terms of humanocentric theism. The dependency on God is limited, and in a sense, removed from his theological enterprise. God remains the ontological priority, but ontological dependency is subject to dismissal because we, as humans, do not have (empirical) knowledge of God, henceforth, we cannot assume the politics of God. The theological enterprise of Jones redirects our attention to the priority of God in the human condition, but dismisses ontological dependency because God's will is ambiguous at best, since the theological claims are without the support of empirical evidence.⁵⁹

Jones' theodicy was influenced by Sartre's view of existence: Existence precedes Essence (*L'existence précède l'essence*).⁶⁰ Ontological priority, without ontological dependency does not predicate atheism. Atheism is the removal of ontological priority and therefore negates the use of ontological dependency. Jones maintains the use of a theistic framework by maintaining the ontological priority of God, although Jones, after philosophically considering the concept of God and ontological dependency, decided that humanocentric theism can not rest on the ontological *dependency* on God, because of the methodological and epistemological problems with not knowing the nature of God.

Aspects of Human Freedom and Divine Sovereignty

Jones' theological position of humanocentric theism contributes to the controlling principle of functional ultimacy of humans. Giving functional ultimacy to humankind suggests

⁵⁹ Jones, *IGWR?*, 194-200 and 213-214.

⁶⁰ Jones completed his doctoral dissertation on Sartre; William R. Jones, "Sartre's Philosophical Anthropology in Relation to His Ethics: A Criticism of Selected Critics." Doctoral Dissertation, (Brown University, 1969).

that man is in control of human history and in determining values. Therefore, there is no room for ontological dependency on God, and God does not intervene in human history. Opposed on epistemological grounds, as well as philosophical grounds, Jones gives no credence to promoting a personal God—a God that has *being*—in humanocentric theism.⁶¹ Because there is no irrefutable evidence whether the attributes assigned to God are correct, Jones aptly replies that humanocentric theism is built upon a structure that refrains from using theological claims as a foundation of knowledge. Jones declares,

Thus, rather than building its theological superstructure on the ashes of a rebutted theism, religious humanism grounds itself in a principle that obtains whether God is or is not, whether the Transcendent is good, indifferent or demonic, and whether God is or is not the creator of humankind.⁶²

By removing all aspects of divine sovereignty in humanocentric theism there is no place for theologically failed positions that leads to quietism, as is the case with conventional BLT.⁶³ Man is not ontologically superior to God—God is still ground of being—but man functions as the controlling principle of human history. God isn't responsible for the actions of man; man has freewill by the consequence of God's self-limitation.⁶⁴ Human freedom is the “consequence of our *ontological* superiority vis-à-vis the Transcendent.”⁶⁵

⁶¹ See above discussion about epistemological limits of the traditional Christian God and Jones.

⁶² Jones, "Theism and Religious Humanism: The Chasm Narrows," 522.

⁶³ Jones, *IGWR?*, 98-120.

⁶⁴ Jones, "Theism and Religious Humanism: The Chasm Narrows," 524. Jones provides several examples of humanism that vary in their location of human freedom/autonomy—William Daniel Cobb, Eliezer Berkovits, and Gordon Kaufman. These theologians assigned ultimacy to mankind, but still maintained God's existence. “Each advances an exposition of divine sovereignty that accommodates the extension of human freedom to such areas as history and to values that one were wholly under the direct sway of the divine....”

⁶⁵ Jones, "Theism and Religious Humanism: The Chasm Narrows," 523.

Jones establishes a necessity to “remove God from anyone’s side,” because we do not know the divine and cannot know God’s objectives. Jones emphasizes that the divine may be wholly other in its view of the human world. God’s view of the good may “be diametrically opposed to our own” ideas of humanity.⁶⁶ In other words, how do we know if our traditional understanding of God is not really Satan, or even that “God is and Satan is not?”⁶⁷ Because we do not know the divine, we are not in a position to deconstruct the views for the world and decide what is good and what is bad, but can only examine man as the moral creator, and create a criterion for moral principles based upon the valuation of man.⁶⁸

The morality of man within the parameters of functional ultimacy creates substantial problems in the scope of moral improvement of man and the superlative traits of God. As our creator, does God’s moral attributes pass to us? If so, how do we discern which are positive and which are negative to our personal interests? “Does ontological priority—the transcendent—still establish moral priority?”⁶⁹ Jones offers that a predeterminate function of ontology to ethics is not likely given the functional ultimacy of man. In other words, “ontology itself cannot formulate ethical precepts.”⁷⁰ So this leaves us with the question of who is the moral creator and moral valuator? If man is totally in charge, then the moral decision-making is contingent upon the social power of the oppressor versus the limited social power of the oppressed. Therefore,

⁶⁶ Ibid., 525.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ This leads to a discussion about the ethics of man based on the goodness of God, but if we do not know God’s purpose and attributes, following in the morality of God may reestablishing the attributes of Satan or a malevolent God.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Quoting Jean- Paul Sartre from Jones, “Theism and Religious Humanism: The Chasm Narrows,” 525.

oppression is identified with the social precepts of the material world. Jones' religious humanism satisfies many of the obstacles found in other Black theologies, but is still plagued with the ontological precedence of a divine creator.

Human freedom, for Jones, is not extended to the bounds of atheism, but human freedom is "described as a finite freedom, even a created freedom."⁷¹ In an interview with George Yancy, in the *American Philosophical Association Newsletter* on "Philosophy and the Black Experience," special edition on William R. Jones, Spring 2013, Jones elaborates on humanocentric theism as a theological system that operates within the context of Black oppression;

Humanocentric theism gives Black people the right, the authority, and the power to take the angle of reality that emphasizes their inequalities and so forth and to make that the point of the discussion, the master concept that has to be answered at some point. What humanocentric theism does is to establish the coequality of human power relative to God at the level of human history. It is based upon giving or granting coequal power and authority to human beings by God. So, this position enables theists to hold onto their concept of God if they want. It allows them to hold on to their concept that God does this out of his benevolence and so forth, but it forces them to avoid the situation where whatever is, is what ought to be.⁷²

Functional ultimacy, as described above, is drastically separated from the traditional position of human freedom in Cone's theology. Functional ultimacy is significant in Jones' concept of God because God is held unaccountable for human suffering.

Soteriology

Functional ultimacy for mankind is extended to the scope of history and values, but Jones also extends it to the sphere of soteriology (salvation). Jones makes humanism a practical option

⁷¹ Ibid., 525.

⁷² Ibid.

for soteriology—a concept that regards the material liberation of African Americans.⁷³ According to traditional views in theology, sin is not just for individual action, but also includes the doctrine of original sin. Briefly, humans, because of Adam and Eve, are inevitable sinful. Our humanness is contingent upon committing sin. By way of our humanness we are bound to sin, which is partly why suffering is even present in the natural world. Original sin, as a religious doctrine, offers that human sin is the cause for human suffering—supporting a claim that God’s justice is necessary.⁷⁴

Jones offers a perspective that reduces theodicy to two general principles in classical theology: suffering as punishment for those that have committed a sinful act and suffering for those that are innocent, usually through natural catastrophes and/or social phenomenon (Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade, The Holocaust, etc.). Jones highlights two forms of suffering; Ontological (natural/supernatural) suffering (hurricanes, earthquakes, etc) and suffering caused by human agency. Natural/supernatural suffering cannot be changed, and therefore must be accepted. The latter leads to the maintenance of oppression--through economic, political and social means. When God is actively present in the human world, “every *alleged* instance of divine agape can also be interpreted as divine malice for humanity, humanism permits but does not dictate a

⁷³ Ibid., 520. Because transformation of the material condition is the ultimate objective, and this dissertation reflects the position of philosophical materialism by defining the Ultimate Reality as the lived reality of man. “Once it is established that X is ultimate reality, the conclusion comes as a matter of course,” see “Theism and Religious Humanism”, 523.

⁷⁴ See Hordern, *A Layman's Guide to Protestant Theology*, 20. Augustines influence on Original sin; “Augustine located the source of original sin, that is, the *inherited* weakness or inability to do good, in man’s pride. Turning to the story of Adam, Augustine pointed out that Adam was free; he had everything he could desire in the Garden of Eden. But Adam desired one more thing: he desired to be free from God; he resented his dependence upon God; he wished to take the place of God. So, at the lure of the serpent that he might become as God, he ate the fruit tree. That is, man’s refusal to accept his position as a creature, to be what he was made, leads him to seek to be equal with God, his creator.... Adam’s sin was passed down to his descendants. Because each descendent is procreated through sex, there is a twofold source of sin. The sexual origin of each man is sinful, and the tendency to sin is also inherited as a congenital weakness,” (pp. 21-22).

human response of rebellion as soteriologically authentic.”⁷⁵ In other words, divine agape has poor antithetical fit to eliminate oppression, because we cannot assume God is good and on the side of the oppressed, therefore this component of theology needs to be removed because it is responsible for supporting the status quo of oppression. Jones posits, “are not the interpretations” of divine agape eligible for God as “benevolent, indifferent demonic/evil--equally probable?”⁷⁶

Biblical references and theological doctrines are used to construct a conception of God, yet we have no empirical evidence to suggest God actually possess certain attributes and qualities. Jones is concerned that if we try to create a God that meets our needs, we may mistakenly claim certain attributes are (naturally) assigned to God. In other words, we make assumptions about God’s attributes depending on the biblical reading (interpretation) we make and our social experiences. We read our experiences and needs into biblical scripture to extrapolate what is necessary to make our theological enterprise practical for a BLT. Signaling a Barthian theological position, experience is bound within a pragmatic reading of the Bible. Making the Bible relevant to current social situations leads to the possibility of attributing characteristics to the divine without first having evidence to support these propositions. This is why conventional Liberation Theologies have been criticized as being overtly pragmatic.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Jones, "Theism and Religious Humanism: The Chasm Narrows," 523.

⁷⁶ Jones, "Process Theology: Guardian of the Oppressor or Goad to the Oppressed," 12.

⁷⁷ Armstrong, *A History of God: The 4000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity, Islam*, 17. Manning Marable in *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America*, 1983, states, “ When one surveys the single organization that is closest to the masses of Black people, the Black church, one finds that the majority of Black religious leaders from the mid-nineteenth to late-twentieth- centuries have been *pragmatic* or accomodationist in their politics, integrationists, and at times, profoundly conservative. ” See, Marable, *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America*, 181-182. Emphasis added.

Summary and Conclusions

Jones' concept of God does not follow traditional forms of Christian Theology or BLT, but is aligned with a traditional form of deism that is heavily influenced by the doctrine of humanism prescribed by Protagoras — "Taking men as the measure, stands in contrast to various types of absolutism, especially of an epistemological nature."⁷⁸ Jones prescribes to a concept that includes a supernatural deity that created the human world—God is the creator and man is the creature. The existence of God is not the point of contention in the theological discussion presented by Jones. Jones does not argue for atheism, but argues for a philosophical rational for God. Jones is not defining God in these absolute terms, or through his own theological perspective, but is presenting a concept of God that meets the requirements of theodicy and the Black experience. But when asked during a conference preceding, why he does not prescribe to an atheistic viewpoint as a way to alleviate the humanocentric predicament, he replied that his theological enterprise is neither a form of atheism, nor are his personal views aligned with atheistic notions.⁷⁹

The theological enterprise of Jones is not atheistic, but is clearly aligned within a theistic framework. Briefly theism is the ideology of belief in the existence in an entity commonly called God. Religion, in the theological connotation, is commonly understood to be the implementation of certain practices, creeds, doctrines, beliefs, which are aligned with a specific religious organization/institution. Religion is the institutionalized support of certain beliefs and claims demonstrated through creeds and doctrines. Many of these creeds and doctrines have oppressive

⁷⁸ Jones, "Theism and Religious Humanism: The Chasm Narrows," 523

⁷⁹ I want to reiterate that Jones is not an atheist. During a panel discussion with Jones in October 2011, I asked Jones why he does not, theological speaking, removing God from his entire theology, therefore bringing forth an atheistic position in regards to humanocentric theism. Dr. Jones prefaced his comment by plainly stating that he was not an atheist, and therefore his theological claim is theistic in scope and nature.

tendencies and have infiltrated the regulatory and governing bodies of governments and institutions. In other words, certain belief systems and creeds can have an alternative effect on certain people depending on their ESP status in society. Echoing Karl Marx, religion further divides society into different classes based on religious affiliation, and with each religious distinction, we create a deep disconnection in humanity. In Christianity, there are various branches of Christianity, most commonly since the early sixteenth-century, primarily lead by Martin Luther. The Protestant Reformation's genesis can be dated to the Renaissance movement of the fifteenth-century. The Renaissance was a movement to challenge the theocratic system of government and the infiltration of religious bodies into the decisions made by heads-of-states in Europe. This time period also lead to the discovery and expansion of science, which lead to the expeditions of Portugal and Spain, as the pre-cursor to the forced enslavement of millions of African people, via the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade.

Reformation is “used to describe movements seeking to correct abuses in an established order, often by reverting to the principles and customs of an earlier period.”⁸⁰ The Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth-century opposed the centralized institutionalized structure of the Catholic Church and the power that came from within—“Protestant churches generally agreed that the principle authority should be the Scriptures rather than the Church or the pope.”⁸¹ By removing the authority from the church in Rome, Protestantism turned back to the fundamental instrument of doctrinal beliefs from the Bible. The word of God, as commonly understood from the Bible, is believed to be the authentic history of the world. The various Protestant

⁸⁰ William L. Reese, "Reformation." In *Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion* (Sussex England: Harvester Press, 1980), 484.

⁸¹ William L. Reese, "Protestantism." In *Dictionary of Philosophy and Religion* (Sussex England: Harvester Press, 1980), 465.

denominations offer various interpretations of biblical scripture, leading to multiple denominations available to meet personal (spiritual) objectives and needs.

Theological concepts, although intended to answer the unknown questions, often leads to overshadowing the social reality of real-life situations.⁸² To understand the classification of religion we must first understand the social *need* for religion, because then we can begin to see the “sociological connection between religious belief and practice on the one hand, and poverty on the other.”⁸³ The importance of religion in the Black community is involved in a complex social and historical context because the longevity of suffering with the implementation of religious content. The dialectical connection between oppression and religion is part of a continuous sphere, where oppression is combatted with religion, but then religion undergirds oppression. The cycle reinforces the role of religion in the oppression of people while there is a common conception that religion proffers the liberatory event, yet it never comes to fruition. In short, we must realize that the social landscape is imperative to the overt oppression of certain people, while religion is simply the tool used to deal with that oppression.

Jones commits that the theological community, outside the walls of the church, can meet the socio-political needs of the Black community through “rigorous criticism” to find “an effective way for black America to affirm its humanity in a environment of racial oppression”

⁸² Stephen C. Ferguson, II. "Teaching Hurricane Katrina: Understanding Divine Racism and Theodicy." *APA Newsletter on Philosophy and the Black Experience* 7, no. 1 (Fall 2007); Also see, Mike Davis, "Who Killed New Orleans?" *International Socialist Review* 44 (November-December 2005); Eric Michael Dyson. "Supernatural Disasters? Theodicy and Prophetic Faith." In *Come Hell or High Water Hurricane Katrina and the Color of Disaster*, edited by Eric Michael Dyson. (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2006); Louis-Charles Harvey. "Another Look Theodicy and the Hurricane Katrina Event." *A.M.E. Church Review* 122, no. 402 (Summer 2006); August Nimitz. "Natural Versus Social Phenomena: Cuba and the Lessons of Katrina." *Black Scholar* 36 (2006); Betsy Reed, ed. *Unnatural Disaster: The Nation on Hurricane Katrina* (New York: Nation Books, 2006).

⁸³ Kwame Nkrumah, *Consciencism: Philosophy and Ideology for De-Colonization and Development with Particular Reference to the African Revolution* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970).

that “best serves our common goal and our partisan interests as well.”⁸⁴ Lewis Gordon, in the dedication of his book, *Existential Africana*, informs us:

At the heart of Jones’s analysis was the conviction that oppression must be overcome, but no such overcoming can emerge without a critical understanding of human reality. Jones emerged, in other words, as an existential revolutionary. He took very seriously the existential insight that struggle involves negotiating the relationship between institutions and situated human beings.⁸⁵

The specific *context* of the Black community, as part of the modern society, requires that specific *content* be utilized.⁸⁶ This general statement carries over into the religious and theological experiences of a people. The Black community has a specific relationship with human oppression, but in traditional Black Theology the human factor as the cause of oppression is overlooked and replaced with a theocentric position that God is the primordial *cause* of suffering. In other words, we need to emphasize the disproportional and long-lasting suffering in the Black community in the context of class exploitation and material wealth—relating the human factor as the context for suffering.

For the African American community, understanding how theological claims can effect Black liberation is a primary concern. Certain theological claims do not promote liberation, but speak of a God that supports liberation, but when analyzed through the lens of philosophical materialism, a God that undergirds oppression can be used as a means to maintain the current status quo. God’s election of Black people, which is a prominent component in conventional BLT, stresses the importance of God’s actions in the world, but does not offer an explanation of

⁸⁴ Jones, *IGWR?*, xxi.

⁸⁵ Lewis Gordon, ed. *Existential Africana: Understanding African Existential Thought*. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 5.

⁸⁶ Robert AcAfee Brown, "Liberation Theology: Paralyzing Threat of Creative Challenge?". In *Mission Trends No. 4: Liberation Theologies in North America and Europe*, edited by Gerald H. Anderson and Thomas F. Stransky. (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 13.

God's support for oppressive conditions in the Black community. According to conventional BLT, God has elected African Americans as his chosen people, but God's election is shown through an oppressive standard that requires the continuation of Black oppression to remain unhindered.

Black Liberation Theology, for Jones, is not grounded in any specific theological doctrine or religious creeds, but is concretely grounded in the liberation of African Americans from the oppressive nature in contemporary society. Jones is hesitant to include a specific religious doctrine into his BLT because, as he points out in *IGWR?*, we have little empirical evidence of God's active participation in human history. The information we have includes a concept of God that can be used to support the quest for liberation, and depending on the theological interpretation, God can also be responsible for the oppression of African Americans. The interpretation and the current social context of biblical scripture can meet the needs of the oppressor or the oppressed. Jones is aware of the ambiguity of biblical scripture so, as a theoretical and methodological practice, avoids using documents that have an oppressive edge and also have the ability to be extrapolated to meet various needs, which may be antithetical to liberation. Only those ideas and documents that have a firm ground in the liberation of African Americans should be considered. The Bible is open to various interpretations and historically has been used as a document of oppression against African Americans. Black Liberation theologians offer an interpretation of the Bible to extrapolate the liberatory message, but multiple messages of liberation and subservience makes the Bible an undesirable source for Black liberation.

Chapter 6: Conclusion: External Criticism and Philosophical Materialism: Towards a Transformative Black Liberation Theory

Summary of Analyses

The purpose of this study is to examine the liberatory potential of Black Liberation Theology (BLT). James H. Cone and William R. Jones' theological perspectives were used to analyze how certain conceptions of God influence the potentiality for material liberation. This study was designed to address two research questions:

1. Do certain value systems, such as religious beliefs, impact/influence liberatory action?
2. Are certain theological beliefs antithetical to liberation and what is the liberatory potential in Cone and Jones' theological systems?

In addition to these two overarching questions, this dissertation was also informed by a series of questions that relate to the practicality of BLT as a viable liberation strategy:

1. Does the existence of a supernatural being (God) negatively impact the possibility of liberation?
2. By including a supernatural being in the fight for liberation do we unknowingly position God as the responsible agent for our liberation, therefore assuming liberation is beyond human control?

The theologies of Cone and Jones were analyzed because each offers a unique perspective towards an understanding of God's nature in the natural world, specifically the African American community. James H. Cone's theological enterprise falls in-line with conventional standards in Black Liberation Theology. Cone follows a Protestant theological perspective that centralizes biblical scripture as a major source in understanding the nature of God. Cone uses the Bible to support his claim that God is for the oppressed and therefore God will act on behalf of African

Americans, just as God did in the Exodus. William R. Jones' theological system is not part of conventional Black Liberation Theology, but falls within the parameters of Philosophical Theology and Black Liberation Theology. Through Philosophical Theology, Jones is able to provide an expansive conception of God that is not bound to certain theological commitments, whereas Cone is forced to adhere to Christian theological commitments.

The theoretical platform used in this dissertation is philosophical materialism. Philosophical materialism allows the investigator to critique the philosophical inconsistencies in BLT. Because my point of departure is philosophical materialism my methodological system is external criticism. External Criticism provides the necessary freedom to examine and critique theological claims without adhering to theological commitments associated with certain religious perspectives. To practice external criticism, the materials collected are categorized depending upon methodological system (Cone: Biblical Theology and Jones: Philosophical Theology) as an organizing principle. The methodology used is not the only organizing principle, but the questions that stems from the respective methodologies also provides a roadmap of the impending journey.

The theological systems of Jones and Cone can be reduced to the objective of finding a new and provocative way towards understanding the relationship between man and God. For Cone the relationship is described through the lens of biblical scripture. The Bible offers evidence that God has historically shown election towards the oppressed and in time, God will participate in the liberation of African Americans, the oppressed of the present-day. Contrary to Cone, Jones offers a concept of God that does not require a active relationship between humans and God. Jones' Philosophical Theology complicates whether certain Christian claims are antithetical to liberation.

Cone's contribution to Black Theology and theological thought must be recognized as a pillar in challenging white hegemonic ideals in theology. The reinterpretation of biblical scripture supported by Cone bears witness to an unprecedented period in American history when Black theologians sought to identify God with the disinherited and the oppressed. The periodization of Cone's influence is noteworthy because during this turbulent period, the Black Church and Black theologians were attempting to find a theological message that accurately interpreted the realities of African Americans.

The plethora of published material by Cone provided the bulk of data for my analysis of his theological system. In addition to Cone's work I also utilized published materials by scholars in Theology and Religious Studies that specifically respond to Cone's theological system and have a relevancy to Black Liberation Theology. In my analysis of Cone, I discovered the following major elements in his Black Liberation Theology: biblical hermeneutics; Doctrine of God; Metaphysical nature of God, including God's moral attributes and ontological nature of God; and Divine Sovereignty. Chapter 2 provides an in-depth discussion of the different elements associated with Cone's biblical hermeneutics and the problems attached to using biblical scripture as a source of historical experience for a Liberation Theology. For Cone, I discovered the Bible becomes a literal source of understanding the oppression found in the Black community. Because his theology rest upon the authenticity and actualization of the Bible, Cone is bound to Christian theological doctrines and as such, constructs a God that is omnibenevolent, omniscient, and omnipotent. What becomes problematic is not necessarily the absolute nature of the superlative traits assigned to God, but the relationship between God and suffering in the natural world. The problem is exacerbated when biblical scripture is presented as a source of historical realities, yet we lack empirical evidence that supports a claim that the Bible is a history

book of the material conditions. In a sense, Cone is conflating the conditions of material suffering with stories from the Bible that are believed to be faithful accounts of past events. Presenting the Bible as a literal account of history becomes dangerously close to making oppression and liberation a condition solely determined by God. Claiming God is for the oppressed as demonstrated in biblical scripture removes the role of human participation in the role of oppression and liberation.

The substantive and philosophical implications of Cone's BLT is the problem of theodicy. Cone tries to maintain God's traditional attributes along with the existence of oppression in the natural world by relating oppressive conditions to events of liberation as depicted in biblical scripture. This is why the Bible is a critical component in Cone's theology. Because Cone builds his theology from biblical scripture, the element of oppression is not clearly located as the responsibility of humankind, creating an environment where oppressive conditions are the result of God's will. A concept of God that promotes a personal God with the traditional attributes assigned within Christian thought, are confronted with justifying God's benevolence with human suffering.

Once human suffering is associated with divine intent, the potentiality of inciting change based upon human intervention is severely decreased. Biblical Theology and conventional BLT claim to have knowledge of God's intentions, and therefore are able to claim God is on the side of the oppressed, yet every instance of divine favor can also be a sign of divine disfavor, since we have no inconclusive empirical evidence of God's will. To claim God is on the side of the oppressed and that God is omnibenevolent leads towards a conclusion that satisfies the theodicy issue by reducing the oppressed to a status of suffering servant. Cone tries to escape the claim of vicarious suffering, but without an event of liberation there is no evidence to support Cone's

claim that God is for the oppressed. From the concluding chapters on Cone's methodology, through biblical scripture, regardless of the path Cone uses to satisfy the theodicy issue, he ultimately ends up positioning African Americans as the suffering servant, a position that is antithetical to liberation.¹ The only way to resolve the issue of theodicy is to reconsider the personal characteristics of God and to reevaluate God's omnibenevolence, omnipotence, and omniscience.

In my analysis of William R. Jones' theological platform, several themes are highlighted to support his position of humanocentric theism: Theodicy; Doctrine of God; Religious Humanism; Metaphysical nature of God, taking into account theodicy; Human Freedom and Divine Sovereignty, including functional ultimacy. Jones' contribution to BLT acts as a yardstick to measure the logical progression of theological claims supported by conventional BLT. Jones challenges elements of vicarious suffering, deserved punishment, and the suffering servant motif that implicitly run through the theoretical perspectives of Cone and his interlocutors.

Human beings are freed from the control, rules, and limitations self forth by God. Challenging apologetic responses for theodicy, Jones challenges the relationship between God's traditional traits and the suffering of African Americans as incoherent and irreconcilable. For Jones, theodicy becomes the overarching identifier in determining the potentiality for liberation. When a theological platform is associated with deserved punishment, suffering servant, and vicarious suffering, the expectations and presumptions about God's benevolence are brought under review. Because Jones was not able to reconcile the disproportionate amount of suffering in the African American historical record with the traditional attributes of a Christian God, he

¹ Cone and Jones agree that a position of suffering servant, or blaming the oppressed for their condition, is antithetical to a Black Liberation Theology.

tactfully repositioned God's power outside of the natural world. Jones introduced humanocentric theism as a theological platform that logically satisfies theodicy by removing God's involvement in human history. For Jones, the major problematic with conventional BLT is its failure to account for theodicy. I agree, but would also add that the methodological system plays an essential role in the proficiency of certain theological systems to be liberatory.

Jones' theology rests upon a notion that God is not responsible for oppressive conditions or for liberation from material inequality. The oppressive conditions are clearly located in the natural world, from start to finish—humans create oppression and humans will actualize liberation. However, a critical concern against Jones is the theistic nature of humanocentric theism. He maintains the ontological priority of God as the creator of being, but soon thereafter, Jones severs all interaction between God and the human world. As a challenge to Jones' position of humanocentric theism, I would argue that the connection between ontological being and God as the creator confounds issues of valuation and the degree of ontological dependency that may naturally exist between creator and creature. The humanocentric predicament stresses whether or not God is still the moral creator and valuator of human ethics. Jones is consistent in his theology to promote a position of the natural world where human freedom can openly operate.

Jones challenged the current trends in BLT by offering a different view of liberation and God's role in the human world. As his controlling principle, Jones used oppression as the starting point, and thusly positioned oppression as a manmade phenomenon. Jones' focused on oppression and liberation, within the ancillary of theism, substantiated his place within the BLT locus. In contrast to other Black Liberation theologians, Jones begins to construct his theology with the human element of oppression, whereas his contemporaries begin with a concept of God that has an active role in intervening in the human world and thus has control over suffering.

Jones challenges the traditional precepts of BLT by producing a space where nontraditional forms of theism are discussed as an option for a Liberation Theology.

Adding religious traditions besides a Christian, Protestant view to BLT demonstrates its practitioners are serious about its objective of liberation, and therefore, theological claims must subsume a secondary role so liberation from material inequalities can take center stage. This of course requires that we examine the nature of oppression. If we understand oppression to be controlled and resolved in the supernatural world we are absolving responsibility from humans for the atrocious conditions found on earth by placing blame on God. When analyzing Jones' discourse, I discovered his theological apparatus contained a formula to discern the ontological nature of suffering. By offering a virus/vaccine method of investigation, the researcher must first properly diagnose what kind of virus is detected so an adequate vaccine can be produced. Jones' examination started with oppression as the result of the material world which provided an alternative method that squarely positioned oppression as the responsibility of humans beings. Jones' contribution to BLT is highlighted because he challenged conventional BLT, but what is possibly more meaningful is Jones' exposure of oppression as an institutional system designed to give one group power over another group.²

² Jones, "Religion as Legitimator and Liberator: A Worm's Eye View of Religion and Contemporary Politics, 242-244. Jones states, "Liberation theology adopts a virus-vaccine—or more precisely, a toxin-anti-toxin— strategy to abolish oppression. The toxin-anti-toxin strategy is a two-phase model. In Phase One, attention is focused on isolating the infectious agent and acquiring as much knowledge as we can about its biological composition and processes. The objective in Phase Two is to develop a specific antibody or anti-toxin that can neutralize or destroy the noxious agent. Obviously, if our findings in Phase One are inaccurate, Phase Two will be a hit-and-miss operation. Translated into the categories of our discussion, oppression is the toxin for which liberation theology is formulated as the effective anti-toxin. Accordingly, it is particularly important to decipher the inner logic and operation of oppression to comprehend the content of liberation theology and its strategy of social change." Also see, Jones, "Oppression, Race, and Humanism." *The Humanist* 52, no. 6 (1992); Jones, "The Disguise of Discrimination: Under Closer Scrutiny, Gains Were Ephemeral." *Forum, The Magazine of the Florida Humanities Council* 18, no. 2 (Summer 1995); Jones, "Toward a New Paradigm for Uncovering Neo-Racism." In *Soul Work: Anti-Racist Theologies in Dialogue*, edited by Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley and Nancy Palmer Jones. (Boston: Skinner House, 2003).

Interpretation of Findings

Cone and Jones' Liberation theologies present very unique conceptions of God as a way to navigate the philosophical presumptions associated with their respective methodological systems. However, the conceptions of God formulated in this dissertation has a profound effect on the processes of actualizing liberation within their respective theologies. The theologies that include a concept of a personal God, as is the trend in conventional BLT, struggle to reconcile God with the suffering of human beings.

By attaching personal qualities to a god-figure, consciously or unconsciously, the finished product is susceptible to error because a figure capable of intervening in the human world is also capable of change, which inherently requires consciousness. Classical theodicies, including the theodicies of Christian theologians, such as Cone's, posit that God, as an entity has the ability to actively change the social systems to reestablish the lines of social oppression. Roy D. Morrison offers that:

(I)f God does not have a period of development (becoming or evolution) i.e., if God is original or eternally a fully differentiated person with centered consciousness, omnipotence, and omniscience, he cannot logically and honestly be absolved from causal and moral responsibility for the evil in the world. Neither can the notions of purpose, predestination and the consequence reduction of humanity be avoided.³

Within these traditional boundaries, God actively participates in the human world, not only because of God's greatness, but also because God is able to change, a necessary process that accompanies consciousness and thought. The argument offered by Morrison, and other philosophical theologians, is how can God, with a moral conscience, allow the oppressed to suffer and continue to suffer without intervening on their behalf?

³ Morrison, II, *Science, Theology and the Transcendental Horizon*, 125.

The traditional representations of God associated with Christian Theology is presumed to include an active agent in both the causality of oppression and the source of liberation. By granting full authority to God for the plight of humankind there is little chance, if any, for humans to change their current situation. This is further exacerbated when the ontological relationship between oppression and God's election is based on faith, since no event of liberation for African Americans has actualized. To challenge oppression is to essentially challenge the will of God, since oppression is viewed as a sign of election. In agreement with Jones, the oppression of African Americans must not be located within the supernatural world because we do not have empirical evidence of God's nature, at least not until there has been an event of liberation. To claim God is on the side of the oppressed creates an environment where challenging the oppressive conditions borders on blasphemous, but to maintain the current state of oppression leads towards a Survival Theology, of which has been discredited by most Black Liberation theologians. What is problematic is that many of the Liberation theologies that claim to be focused on material liberation are actually survival theologies that give its congregant a sense of hope in times of tribulation.

A theory of liberation must engage in a message of empirical change that is grounded in the concrete material condition of African Americans. Having belief in God is not necessary detrimental to a liberatory mindset, but a theology that imposes an image or concept of God as intervening and transformative does not necessary substantiate change in the material condition. It is Jones' aspiration to propose a God that is set outside the human world in order to account for the disproportional amounts of suffering that African Americans experience. In contrast to Jones' view, a God that is located within the human world, either epistemological or through ontological dependency, requires knowledge of God's nature. As outlined in Chapter 2,

knowledge of God is supported through biblical scripture (Cone's view) and/or through personal experience (also Cone's view), however, both sources are problematic. The process of canonization, proof-texting, interpolation, and falsified knowledge creates a problem for Biblical Theology as a viable epistemology. The latter position lacks empirical evidence to support a claim that revelation occurs outside of biblical scripture. In other words, personal experiences is valued as a form of knowledge in some aspects of theological thought, but without a system or method of investigation that is based on empirical evidence, we are left with a nagging feeling of falsehoods and exaggerated stories.

Cone concludes that a personal God is necessary because it is God who will liberate the oppressed. The conception of a personal God consequently supports a position that assigns certain anthropomorphic characters to God, all of which are granted to God based upon the subjectivity of the interpreter. In addition, positioning God as a personal deity suggests God has consciousness and therefore has the capacity to think. Once this is accomplished, the theologian is at a loss to find sufficient evidence of God's election of the oppressed, and even of God's involvement in the political situations of human beings. By promoting a concept of a personal God, Cone inadvertently supports an idealistic and pragmatic view of human history. A concept of a personal God suggests that the non-material (i.e. God) can bring about material changes, via modes of production. The consequence of adhering to a conception of a personal God runs the risk of presenting false information as valid truths. The result is a theological system that encourages an unattainable standard for the fulfillment of an unsubstantiated prophecy.

A theory of liberation, theistic or nontheistic, is concerned with liberation from material oppressions. Oppression is a condition that is already actualized and legitimized as part of the material world. The causality of oppression must operate within the scope of the natural material

world by locating modes of production and capitalistic stratifications as the causes of oppression. As a contribution to BLT, Jones positions the causality of oppression within the natural world and oppression is no longer associated with supernatural entities in any form or fashion. To argue otherwise requires an ontological examination of oppression to determine if there is empirical evidence to support a claim that God has control in the human world.

Jones contributes to our understanding of oppression by exploring the anatomy of oppression. By using Jones' method of investigation for determining the causalities of oppression, I conclude that divine oppression is a possibility in Cone's theology and as such reduced material liberation to a mechanism controlled by God. It is from here that Cone attempts to develop an anti-toxin to challenge the oppressive conditions, but inevitably fails because his analyses of the ontology of oppression is flawed, therefore leading to a deficient vaccine for oppression. Cone misdiagnosed the virus of oppression and as a result, proscribed the wrong antidote as the remedy. Situating oppression in the supernatural world leaves the researcher without any recourse because our knowledge of the supernatural world is unknowable and unattainable.

Finally, through writing this analysis, I also have discovered that the application of the existence of God accounts for potential inconsistencies between the supernatural world and the natural world. To account for the existence of God in BLT, there must be a point of distinction between human responsibility and God's role in the human world, whether it be ontological priority or ontological dependency. The theology of Jones provides a path of delineation between a personal God and an impersonal God, and Jones expands the spectrum of theological thought found in Black Liberation Theology by including religious humanism. Jones is successful in this regard, and effectively removes the problematic within the concept of theodicy

by reducing the involvement of God to the supernatural world. As a result of Jones' progressive theological position, God is no longer responsible for oppression or liberation.

The combination of these two contributions to BLT—the autonomy of oppression and oppression being accountable to the natural world—has major implications for critically analyzing our belief systems and cultural values that have been key elements in African American theological thought. Black Liberation Theology and Black Philosophy are both concerned with defining and classifying core Christian beliefs and theological claims as tools for social control and the continued dehumanization of the oppressed.⁴ Both Jones and Cone are concerned with theological claims being misrepresented and used as instruments of oppression, yet Cone's required dependency on Christian theism is bound to historical inaccuracies and logical errors that hinder progress towards liberation.

Theory of Liberation

My analyses of Jones and Cone exposes the importance of using oppression as the conceptual marker that undergirds a theory of liberation. The norms for BLT include Black culture and Black history as necessary components in building a liberation theory relevant to Black Studies. A theory of liberation for African Americans is located in a unique historical space where racism and material inequalities are built into the legal foundation of the country. A successful Liberation Theology, as suggested above, is empirically based and focused on the objective history of African Americans. A personal God complicates the source for history by forcing an ontological dependent relationship between God and man that results in the potential

⁴ Morrison, "Black Philosophy: An Instrument for Cultural and Religious Liberation,"; Jones, *IGWR?*. Jones is overtly concerned with theodicy and the traditional attributes of God being oppressive to the Black community and thus, need to be reevaluated. But Jones focuses on evaluating the "intrinsic or essential property" of beliefs on Part I of *Is God A White Racist?*

for divine responsibility for oppression and places blame on the victim for their condition. Consequently, to claim God is for the oppressed prior to providing empirically-based evidence confirms that theories grounded in faith are not acceptable sources for a theory of liberation. A personal God, as prescribed by Christian apologetics, is problematic because dependency on God creates a system where partial or full responsibility of oppression can be placed on God which requires the antidote to also be within the supernatural world. A theoretical approach that puts the responsibility of oppression on God, suggests God has a reason for allowing certain people to suffer, either for redemptive reasons or as punishment for past or future crimes (deserved suffering).⁵ Because there is no empirical evidence, all conceptions of God's involvement in the human world are based on subjective claims.

This is not to suggest that a theistic framework is doomed to fail. In a sense there are two options for a theistic liberation theory: humanocentric theism/religious humanism or jeopardize the superlative traits of God. The latter is demonstrated in Personalism; when God's absoluteness is challenged by theodicy and God becomes most-powerful instead of All-Powerful. God is reduced to a deity that has restrictions to its personality and cannot command absolute authority in the human world. Personalism, however, is not a viable theology either because God's attributes are susceptible to reductionism; ultimately God's power becomes insufficient by

⁵ Ferguson, "Teaching Hurricane Katrina." Those living in opposition to God's will were punished for being sinful. We are all born into sin, yet some can escape falling into sin by following the prescribed belief of Jesus Christ. Yet what becomes of interest is the interpretation of the New Testament towards the principle of love and giving. Cone's contribution becomes important in this regard because he forces the theological community to fathom with the acts of liberation in the Bible and God's election of the oppressed. Within the halls of the university, Cone's platform has served as a corrective to academic theology by equating the oppressed from the Bible with African Americans. Ferguson offers a rebuttal to the claim that Hurricane Katrina is a sign of God's involvement in the natural world. Logically the progression of claiming God is an active participant in the natural world leads to a perspective that God is punishing those involved in Katrina (redemptive punishment) or God doesn't care about African Americans. For more on the theological debate surrounding natural disaster and theodicy see, Dyson, "Supernatural Disasters?"; Harvey, "Another Look Theodicy and the Hurricane Katrina Event."; Nimitz, "Natural Versus Social Phenomena,"; Reed, *Unnatural Disaster*.

reducing the certitude of divine qualities to a state of insignificance.⁶ To echo Jones, “a movement away from theism should come only if it is convincingly demonstrated that it is a hindrance to black liberation,” and my analysis shows that a conception of a personal God does promote a theoretical approach that *is* a hindrance to black liberation.⁷

Philosophical inquiry becomes a primary tool to explore and develop liberation theories that account for the objective history of African Americans. Black Philosophy, as defined by Jones, is the critical inquiry into causality, “Black experience, history and culture are the controlling categories for a black philosophy.”⁸ Black Philosophy informs a critical analysis by informing the systematic process of a *de novo* approach that is built around the particularity of the Black perspective. Black Philosophy extends the self-critical task of expressing African American’s cultural perspectives as the foundation undergirding the entire enterprise. Black Philosophy is the primary tool for building a liberation theory because it takes the particularity of the Black historical record as legitimate and necessary through empirical evidence, yet does not accommodate undemonstrated accounts as an authentic source for history.

In addition to the prospects of Black Philosophy listed above, it is also concerned with reconceptualizing and correcting the false portrayals of the Black experience presented in the intellectual work of white/European scholars that have a direct impact on the social consequences of African Americans. Black Philosophy is concerned with accenting the role of

⁶ Burrow, *God and Human Dignity*; Willis King, "Personalism and Race." In *Personalism in Theology: A Symposium in Honor of Albert Cornelius Knudson*, edited by Edgar S. Brightman. (Boston: Boston University Press, 1943); Warren E Steinkraus. "Martin Luther King's Personalism and Non-Violence." *Journal of History of Ideas* 34, no. 1 (1973).

⁷ Jones, *IGWR?*, 172.

⁸ Jones, "The Legitimacy and Necessity of Black Philosophy"; Jones, "Crisis in Philosophy: The Black Presence," *Radical Philosophers' News Journal* (August 1974); Morrison, "Black Philosophy."; McClendon, "The Afro-American Philosopher and the Philosophy of the Black Experience."

African Americans in the intellectual enterprise that have been misconstrued, deficient, and/or incorrect in the scholarship of white scholars.⁹

Limitations

This dissertation offered a detailed analysis of Cone and Jones' respective conceptions of God. By expanding the study to include more recent Black theologians, the overall analysis would have benefited by offering a systematic view of the evolution of BLT since the late-1960s. By including more theologians and their respective theological views, I may have isolated another theoretical view that satisfies the theodicy issues. However, from the conclusions discussed above, the problematic with using a position that centralizes a personal view of God would have plagued other theological systems as well. My study would have been enriched by including non-Christian theistic traditions as a point of comparison. Because I was limited in time, space, and resources, I chose to limit my study to Cone and Jones, but I have intentions to expand my research to include perspectives outside of Jones and Cone's canon, partly as a way to add to the canon of Black Liberation Theology. This research would include the Nation of Islam, Rastafarianism, Santeria, Judaism, theology from the Coptic Orthodox Church, Bahia, etc. The purpose of this research would be to build a theory of liberation that centers on a centralized position of God from a variety of religious perspectives. These religious traditions are part of Black religious experiences, so by extrapolating components that present a common themes of liberation, will aid in determining if certain concepts of God are antithetical towards liberation. This research would draw from a larger sample set, and would include various social and

⁹ William A. Banner, "Fundamentals of Christian Social Order." *Journal of Religious Thought* 6, no. 1 (Aut-Winter 1949); Richard T. Greener. "The Intellectual Position of the Negro." *The National Quarterly Review*, no. July (1880); Broads Butler, "Frederick Douglass: The Black Philosopher in the United States: A Commentary." In *Philosophy Born of Struggle*, edited by Leonard Harris. (Dubuque: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 1983); Charles Frye. "The Role of Philosophy in Black Studies." *Contributions in Black Studies: A Journal of African and Afro-American Studies* 4, no. 1 (2008);

geographical locations and moments in history. In my defense, I decided against expanding my research partly because I would have not been able to provide a detailed presentation of Jones and Cone's work.

Another limitation of this work is the scope of its analysis. Future research would include research on the intellectual tradition that interrelates Black Studies, Black Philosophy, and Black Theology as a method of inquiry. This would serve as a platform for examining the connections between Theology and Philosophy within the Black intellectual tradition. This research would include Jones' role as an active participant in the intellectual relationship between Black Studies, Black Philosophy, and Black Theology. As part of all three communities, Jones would offer a framework to research the intellectual history and the conversations that scholars were engaged in during several points during the twentieth-century. An intellectual history from a cultural-specific and discipline-specific direction would push for more research on Black Philosophy and add to the limited, but growing research on Black philosophers and their intellectual journey through the academy and the social world.¹⁰

¹⁰ See, Eddins, "Philosophia Perennis and Black Studies."; Frye, "The Role of Philosophy in Black Studies."; McClendon, "The African American Philosopher and Academic Philosophy."

Another limitation in my research is the absence of the Black Womanist's voice.¹¹ Black Womanist have established a set of concepts that challenge the current perspective of Black Theology by using a framework that is inclusive to the experiences of Black women and the Black family, yet is not exclusive to Black women's experiences. Early BLT scholarship failed to address the theological concerns related to the Black woman, partly because the conceptual framework was new, but also because Theology and Philosophy have been male-dominated disciplines. Black women were excluded from first-wave BLT because the limited educational opportunities available to Black women and also because Black women, similarly to women in Black Studies, did not factor into the processes of theorizing. As in Black Studies, Womanist's found their own voice and sense of agency by developing a unique position that takes the whole Black experience under consideration, including the family and community.¹²

Womanist theologians have taken the matter into their own hands and have created a body of scholarship dedicated to the enhancement of Black Womanist theologies. Katie G. Cannon, Delores S. Williams, and a host of other women have worked diligently to fill the void

¹¹ For an examination of Womanist theology see, Katie G. Cannon. "Hitting a Straight Lick with a Crooked Stick: The Womanist Dilemma in the Development of a Black Liberation Ethic." In *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1980-1992*, edited by James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore. (New York: Orbis Books, 1987); Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988); Cannon, *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (New York: Continuum, 1995); Katie G. Cannon, Emilie M. Townes, and Angela D. Sims, eds. *Womanist Theological Ethics: A Reader* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011); Jacquelyn Grant. *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989); Grant, ed. *Perspectives on Womanist Theology* (Atlanta: ITC Press, 1995); Pauli Murray, "Black Theology and Feminist Theology: A Comparative View." *Anglican Theological Review* 60, no. 1 (1978); Renita, J. Weems, *Just a Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women's Relationships in the Bible* (San Diego: LauraMedia, 1988); Weems, "Womanist Reflections on Biblical Hermeneutics." In *Black Theology: A Documentary History*, edited by James H. Cone and Gayraud Wilmore. (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993); Delores S. Williams, "Womanist Theology: Black Women's Voices." In *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1980-1992*, edited by James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore. (New York: Orbis Books, 1987); Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1993).

¹² Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics*, 3.

overlooked by the previous male-dominated theological enterprises by “claiming their roots in black history, religion and culture.”¹³ This includes looking at the Black woman’s literary tradition as a intercept between the private sector of Black women’s lives and the cultural values in the Black community. Womanist ethics and Black Womanists’ are committed to a theology that includes the complexity of the Black experience, including such taboo topics as homosexuality and promoting female-male equality. In other words, Williams suggests, Womanist Theology is “multidialogical” that advocates “dialogue and action with many diverse social, political, and religious communities concerned about human survival.”¹⁴ As Womanist theologians continues to conceptualize and develop their ideas, Black women’s interests and theological achievements will build upon our understanding of the Black religious experience by adding a voice that, historically, has been overlooked.

Suggestions for Future Research

The most recent and directly related full-length study to my research project is *African American Atheists and Political Liberation*, by Michael Lackey (2007). This full-length study presents various explanations from African American authors about the concept of God and the ultimate goal of liberation.¹⁵ The growing scholarship on African American atheism and secular humanism suggests that the Black community, especially younger generations of African

¹³ Williams, "Womanist Theology," 265.

¹⁴ Ibid., 269.

¹⁵ For scholarship on Black atheists and the nonreligious tradition see, Center for Inquiry. “Black Nonbelievers Speak out in a New African Americans for Humanism Campaign.” (Accessed March 20, 2012); Douglas. "Humanism: African American Liberation '(a)Theology'"; Juan Floyd-Thomas. *The Origins of Black Humanism in America* (New York: Palgrave, 2008); Sikivu Hutchinson. *Moral Combat: Black Atheists, Gender Politics, and the Values Wars* (Los Angeles: Infidel Books, 2011); Hutchinson. *Godless Americana: Race and Religious Rebels* (Los Angeles: Infidel Books, 2013); Hutchinson, "Out of the Closet'-Black Atheists." *L.A. Watts Times*, (May 28, 2009); Kwasi Wiredu. "Morality and Religion and Akan Thought." In *African-American Humanism: An Anthology*, edited by Norm R. Allen. (Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1991).

Americans, are moving away from religious insight and choosing to explore nontraditional perspectives. The Black religious tradition is evolving to include people self-categorizing themselves as nonreligious and/or not part of an organized religious institution. Studying the shifts in religious perspectives among the post-Civil Rights generation, informs how people understand the role of religion in their existence during the twenty-first-century. As the social climate of the United States continues to grapple with inequality and oppression, a study about how new generations of freethinkers and atheists cope with the world will provide insights into the reality of African American religious perspectives that reach beyond the confines of theist interpretations of the Black experience.

Another recommendation for further research would be to examine other theological systems outside of the Christian tradition that claim to be liberatory. Examining theological perspectives outside of Christianity may offer superior results for liberation. Not confined to the United States, this research would include theological perspectives throughout the Diaspora that claim to offer material liberation. Although part of the religious experience in the United States, the Nation of Islam is a primary example of a theological perspective that supports a claim to material liberation. The NOI is concerned with the material conditions of its community, but do the presuppositions that undergird the theological system inform a liberatory function? Forms of religious nationalism may offer insights into the primacy of culture and experience within a theological framework.

The daily occurrences of injustices and inequalities in our current reality leads to the need for more research on the ontology of oppression. Jones was engaged in a dialogue by examining the inner properties of oppression. If we hope to eradicate oppression from the social and material reality, our first task is to properly determine if oppression is human in origin. A

methodology of oppression provides a platform so oppression can be put in the proper context by causality. If we mislabel the cause of oppression there is the chance that our work will not produce viable results. This is important to Black Studies and philosophical inquiry because depending upon how oppression is defined, we may unknowingly place the cause of oppression on the victim.

Previous research on the nature of oppression has attempted to determine the nature of suffering, which includes a distinction between negative and positive oppression.¹⁶ By continuing to build upon Jones' model, I plan to provide more examples of its effectiveness. A research design that is similar to that used by Jones, but within the scope of Black Studies, could be employed to better understand the relationship between causality of suffering and the effects of suffering. Specifically, an understanding of the rhetoric used in public spaces about the causality of police brutality against African Americans suggests that they are to blame for their own oppressive conditions. Respectability politics have emerged in the lexicon of mainstream media and has reemerged in the dialogue within African American Studies, especially following Mike Brown's murder in Ferguson, Missouri. By understanding the nature of oppression, we can clearly locate the cause of oppression to a system of institutionalized inequality and not place blame on the victim because of a perceived lack of respectability.

This study of the conceptions of God in James Cone and William Jones' theology is valuable not solely because it presents challenges to conventional boundaries in Black Liberation Theology but also because it illuminates the role of certain theological concepts as antithetical to material liberation for the Black community.

¹⁶ Jones, "Oppression, Race, and Humanism."; "Process Theology"; Religion as Legitimator and Liberator." Randolph. Miller. "Process Thought and Black Theology." In *Black Theology II*, edited by Calvin Bruce and William Jones. (Lewisburg: Bucknell Press, 1978).

BIBLIOGRAPHY

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Adeleke, Tunde. *UnAfrican Americans: Nineteenth-Century Black Nationalists and the Civilizing Mission*. Lexington: Lexington University Press of Kentucky, 1998.
- Adeyamo, Tokunboh. *Salvation in African Tradition*. Nairobi: Evangel, 1979.
- — —. *Africa Bible Commentary: A One-Volume Commentary*. Zondervan Publishing, 2010.
- Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. New York: The New Press, 2010.
- Ali, Ayaan Hirsi. *Infidel*. New York: Free Press, 2007.
- Allen, Norm R., Jr., ed. *African-American Humanism: An Anthology*. Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1991.
- — —. "Religion and the New African American Intellectuals." *Nature, Society, and Thought* 9, no. 2 (1996).
- — —. *The Black Humanist Experience: An Alternative to Religion*. Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2003.
- Altizer, Thomas J. J. *The Gospel of Christian Atheism*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1966.
- — —. *Toward a New Christianity; Readings in the Death of God Theology*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1967.
- — —. *The New Gospel of Christian Atheism*. The Davies Group, 2002.
- — —. *Godhead and the Nothing*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003.
- Altizer, Thomas J.J., and William Hamilton. *Radical Theology and the Death of God*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill 1966.
- Anderson, Douglas R. "Bowne and Peirce on the Logic of Religious Belief." *The Personalist Forum* 6, no. 2 (Fall 1990): 107-22.
- Antonio, Edward. "Black Theology and Liberation Theologies." In *The Cambridge Companion to Black Theology*, edited by Anthony Hopkins and Edward Antonio. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Anyabwile, Thabiti M. *The Decline of African American Theology: From Biblical Faith to Cultural Captivity*. Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2007.

— — —. *The Faithful Preacher: Recapturing the Vision of Three Pioneering African-American Pastors*. Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2006.

Aquinas, Saint Thomas. *Summa Theologica*. New York: Benziger Bros., 1947-1948.

Armstrong, Karen A. *The Bible: A Biography History of God : The 4000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*. New York: A.A. Knopf, 1993.

— — —. *The Bible: A Biography*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press, 2007.

— — —. *The Case for God*. New York: Knopf, 2009.

Arnal, William E. "Definition." In *Guide to the Study of Religion*, edited by Willi Braun and Russell McCutcheon. New York: Cassell, 2000.

Avalos, Hector. *Fighting Words: The Origins of Religious Violence*. Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2005.

— — —. *The End of Biblical Studies*. Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2007.

Avey, Albert E. *Historical Method in Bible Study*. New York: C. Scribner's Sons, 1924.

— — —. *Religion Versus Superstition*. 1934. Reprinted from *Religion in Life*, copyright, 1934.

— — —. "A Philosophy for Martyrs." *The Negro Journal of Religion* 40, no. 2 (March 1940): 10.

— — —. "[Review of] a Philosophy of Religion by Edgar Sheffield Brightman." *The Philosophical Review* 50, no. 4 (July 1941): 451-52.

— — —. "Perspective--Scientific Humanism." *The Journal of Higher Education* 22, no. 2 (February 1951): 111.

Babinski, Edward T. . "The Cosmology of the Bible." In *In the Christian Delusion*, edited by J. W. Loftus. Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2010.

Bailey, Randall. "Reviews of Stony Road We Trod." *The Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* 22, no. 1 (1994).

Bailey, Randall C. "Academic Biblical Interpretation among African Americans in the United State." In *African Americans and the Bible: Sacred Texts and Social Textures*, edited by Vincent L. Wimbush. New York: Continuum, 2001.

Bailey, Randall C. and Jacquelyn C. Grant, eds. *The Recovery of Black Presence: An Interdisciplinary Exploration*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1994.

Baker, Thomas Nelson "The Ethical Significance of the Connection between Mind and Body." PhD diss., Yale University, 1903.

Banner, William A. "[Review] Philosophical Understanding and Religious Truth by Erich Frank." *The Journal of Religious Thought* 4 no. 1 (Aut-Winter 1946-1947): 113-14.

— — —. "The Transmission of Our Religious Heritage: Christian Ideas of Human Equality and Social Justice." *Journal of Religious Thought* 4, no. 2 (Spring-Summer 1947): 152-66.

— — —. "Fundamentals of Christian Social Order." *Journal of Religious Thought* 6, no. 1 (Aut-Winter 1949): 6-17.

— — —. "Some Historic Aspects of Relations of Church and State in America." *The Journal of Religious Thought* 8 no. 2 (Spring-Summer 1951): 97-104.

— — —. "Christian Ethics and the Moral Life." *Journal of Religious Thought* 14, no. 1 (Aut-Winter 1956-1957): 7-16.

— — —. "Winston Kermit Mcallister (1920-1976)." Paper presented at the Proceeding and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association, 1976.

Barbera, Don. *Black and Not Baptist: Nonbelief and Freethought in the Black Community* Lincoln: iUniverse, 2003.

Barth, Karl. *The Doctrine of God*. 2 vols. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1957.

— — —. *Protestant Theology in the Nineteenth Century: Its Background and History*. Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1972.

Bassard, Katherine Clay. *Transforming Scriptures: African American Women Writers and the Bible*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2010

Bediako, Kwame. *Christianity in Africa: The Renewal of a Non-Western Religion*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997.

Ben-Jochannan, Yosef. *A Chronology of the Bible: Challenge to the Standard Version*. Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 1991.

— — —. *African Origins of the Major Western Religions*. Baltimore: Black Classical Press, 1991.

— — —. *The Myth of Exodus and Genesis and the Exclusion of Their African Origins*. Baltimore: Black Classic Press, 2002.

Bennett, Robert A. "Biblical Theology and Black Theology." *The Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* 3, no. 2 (spring 1976): 1-16.

Bentley, William H. and Ruth Lewis Bentley. "Reflections on the Scope and Function of a Black Evangelical Black Theology." In *Evangelical Affirmations*, edited by Kenneth S. Kantzer and Carl F.H. Henry, 299-333. Grand Rapids: Academie, 1990.

Bettler, Marc Zvi. *The Creation of History in Ancient Israel*. New York: Routledge, 1998.

— — —. "Historical Texts in the Hebrew Bible?" In *Thinking, Recording, and Writing History in the Ancient World*, edited by Kurt A. Raafalau. Malden: John Wiley & Sons, 2014.

Birchett, Colleen. "Black Theology and Black Power." *The Philadelphia Tribune*, March 4 2007.

Blassingame, John W. *The Slave Community: Plantation Life in the Antebellum South*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1972.

Blier, Suzanne Preston. *African Vodun: Art, Psychology, and Power*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996

Blyden, Edward Wilmont. *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1967. 1887.

— — —. *The Jewish Question*. Liverpool: Lionel Hart and Co., 1898.

Boer, Roland. *Criticism of Earth: On Marx, Engels and Theology*. Boston: Brill, 2012. doi: 10.1163/9789004225589.

Boesak, Allan and Edited by Leonard Sweetman. , ed. *Black and Reformed: Apartheid, Liberation, and the Calvinist Tradition*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984.

Bowen, John Welsey Edward. "The Historic Manifestations and Apprehensions of Religion as an Evolutionary and Psychological Process." PhD diss., Boston University, 1887.

Boyd, Herb. "Black Liberation Theology Discussed." *New York Amsterdam News*, May 22-May 28 2008.

Bradley, Anthony B. *Liberating Black Theology: The Bible and the Black Experience in America*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2010.

Bradley, L. Richard. "The Curse of Canaan and the American Negro." *Concordia Theological Monthly* 42, no. 2 (February 1971): 100-10.

Brandon, George. *Santeria from Africa to the New World*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997.

Braun, Willi, and Russell McCutcheon, eds. *Guides to the Study of Religion*. New York: Cassell, 2000.

Braxton, Brad Ronnell. *Preaching Paul*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2010.

— — —. *No Longer Slaves: Galatians and African American Experience*. Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 2002.

Brightman, Edgar Sheffield. *A Philosophy of Religion*. Prentice-Hall Philosophy Series. edited by Arthur E. Murphy. 5 ed. New York: Prentice-Hall, 1945. 1940.

Brown, Hubert L. *Black and Mennonite: A Search for Identity*. Scottdale, PA: Herald, 1976.

Brown, Michael Joseph. *What They Don't Tell You: A Survivor's Guide to Biblical Studies*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000.

— — —. "The Blackening of the Bible: The Aims of African American Biblical Scholarship." *The A.M.E. Church Review* 120, no. 396 (October-December 2004): 65-78.

— — —. *Blackening of the Bible: The Aims of African American Biblical Scholarship*. Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2004.

Brown, Raymond. *An Introduction to New Testament Christology*. New York: Paulist Press, 1994.

Brown, Robert AcAfee. "Liberation Theology: Paralyzing Threat of Creative Challenge?" In *Mission Trends No. 4: Liberation Theologies in North America and Europe*, edited by Gerald H. Anderson and Thomas F. Stransky. New York: Paulist Press, 1979.

Bruce, Calvin E., and William R. Jones. *Black Theology II: Essays on the Formation and Outreach of Contemporary Black Theology*. Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1978.

Bryant, Ira T., and William Decker Johnson. *Book of Discipline of the African Methodist Episcopal Church*. Nashville: A.M.E. Sunday School Union, 1928.

Buck, Christopher. *Alain Locke: Faith and Philosophy*. Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 2005.

Buhring, Kurt. *Conceptions of God, Freedom, and Ethics in African American Theology and Jewish Theology*. New York: Palgrave, 2008.

— — —. "Resistance and Redemption: Conception of God, Freedom, and Ethics in African American Theology and Jewish Theology." PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2003.

Bultmann, Rudolf Karl. *Theology of the New Testament*. New York: Scribner, 1951.

- Bundy, Walter E. *The Religion of Jesus*. Indianapolis: Bob's-Merrill, 1928.
- — —. *Jesus and the First Three Gospels: An Introduction to the Synoptic Tradition*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1955.
- Burkle, Howard. *The Non-Existence of God*. New York: Herder and Herder, 1977.
- Burrow, Rufus, Jr. *James H. Cone and Black Liberation Theology*. London: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 1994.
- — —. *God and Human Dignity: The Personalism, Theology, and Ethics of Martin Luther King, Jr.* Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006.
- Butler, Broadus. "A Pragmatic Study of Value and Evaluation." University of Michigan, 1952.
- — —. "In Defense of the Negro Intellectuals." *Negro Digest* 11, no. 10 (1962): 41-44.
- — —. "Frederick Douglass: The Black Philosopher in the United States: A Commentary." In *Philosophy Born of Struggle*, edited by Leonard Harris. Dubuque: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 1983.
- Calhoun-Brown, Allison. "The Image of God: Black Theology and Racial Empowerment in the African American Community." *Review of Religious Research* 40, no. 3 (1999): 197-212.
- Cannon, Katie G. "Hitting a Straight Lick with a Crooked Stick: The Womanist Dilemma in the Development of a Black Liberation Ethic." In *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1980-1992*, edited by James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore. New York: Orbis Books, 1987.
- — —. *Black Womanist Ethics*. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988.
- — —. *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community*. New York: Continuum, 1995.
- Cannon, Katie G., Emilie M. Townes, and Angela D. Sims, eds. *Womanist Theological Ethics: A Reader*. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2011.
- Carr, E.H. *What Is History*. New York: Random House, 1961.
- Carriere, Robert. "Why the Resurrection Is Unbelievable." In *The God Delusion*, edited by J. W. Loftus. Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2010.
- Carson, Clayborn, ed. *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* New York: Warner Books, 1998.

Carson, Clayborn, Peter Holloran, Ralph E. Luker, and Penny Russell. "Martin Luther King, Jr., as Scholar: A Reexamination of His Theological Writings." *The Journal of American History* 78, no. 1 (June, 1991): 93-105.

Carson, Sharon. "Shaking the Foundation: Liberation Theology in 'Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass.'" *Religion & Literature* 24, no. 2 (1992): 19-34.

Carter, Lawrence Edward Jr. *Walking Integrity: Benjamin Elijah Mays, Mentor to Martin Luther King, Jr.* Macon: Mercer University Press, 1998.

Carter, Richard. "The Pastor Disaster: Barack Obama and Rev. Jeremiah Wright." *New York Amsterdam News*, (March 27 2008).

Center for Inquiry. "Black Nonbelievers Speak out in a New African Americans for Humanism Campaign." Accessed March 20, 2012. http://www.centerforinquiry.net/news/black_nonbelievers_speak_out/.

Chilton, Bruce. "Paul and the Pharisees." In *In Quest of the Historical Pharisees*, edited by Jacob Neusner and Bruce Chilton. Waco: Baylor University Press, 2007.

Chilton, Bruce, and Jacob Neusner. "Paul and Gamaliel." In *In Quest of the Historical Pharisees*, edited by Jacob Neusner and Bruce Chilton, 175-224. Waco: Baylor University Press, 2007.

Chireau, Yvonne, and Nathaniel Deutsch, eds. *Black Zion: African American Religious Encounters Judaism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2000.

Cleage, Albert B. Jr. *The Black Messiah*. New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968.

— — —. *Black Christian Nationalism: New Directions for the Black Church*. New York: Morrow, 1972.

Cobb, John B. "Point of Contact between Process Theology and Liberation Theology in Matters of Faith and Justice." *Process Studies* 14, no. 2 (1985): 124-41.

Cobb, John B., and David R. Griffin. *Process Theology: An Introductory Exposition*. Philadelphia: Westminster, 1976.

Colston, Freddie C., ed. *Dr. Benjamin E. Mays Speaks: Representative Speeches of a Great American Orator*. Lanham: University Press of America, 2002.

Cone, Cecil. *The Identity Crisis in Black Theology*. Nashville: The African American Methodist Episcopal Church, 1975.

Cone, James H. "The Doctrine of Man in the Theology of Karl Barth." PhD diss., Northwestern University, 1965.

- — —. "Christianity and Black Power." In *Is Anybody Listening to Black America?*, edited by C. Eric Lincoln. New York: The Seabury Press, 1968.
- — —. *Black Theology and Black Power*. New York: Seabury Press, 1969.
- — —. *A Black Theology of Liberation*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990. 1970.
- — —. "Black Consciousness and the Black Church: A Historical-Theological Interpretation." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 387 (1970): 49-55.
- — —. "Black Power, Black Theology, and the Study of Theology and Ethics." *Theological Education* 6, no. 3 (1970): 202-15.
- — —. "The Content and Method of Black Theology." *The Journal of Religious Thought* 32, no. 2 (1975): 90-103.
- — —. *For My People: Black Theology and the Black Church*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984.
- — —. "Martin Luther King, Jr, Black Theology—Black Church." *Theology Today* 40, no. 4 (1984): 409-20.
- — —. "Black Theology in American Religion." *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 53, no. 4 (1985): 755-71.
- — —. *Speaking the Truth: Ecumenism, Liberation, and Black Theology*. Grand Rapids, Mich: W.B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1986.
- — —. *My Soul Looks Back*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986.
- — —. "Professor Examines Martin and Malcolm." *The New York Amsterdam News*, 1991.
- — —. *Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream of a Nightmare*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993.
- — —. "Biblical Revelation and Social Existence." In *Black Theology: A Documentary History*, edited by James H. Cone and Gayraud Wilmore, 159-76. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993.
- — —. "From Geneva to São Paulo: A Dialogue between Black Theology and Latin American Liberation Theology." In *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1980-1992*, edited by James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993.
- — —. "Black Theology and Third World Theologies." In *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1980-1992*, edited by James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993.

— — —. "Epilogue: An Interpretation of Debate among Black Theologians." In *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-1979*, edited by James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore, 425-39. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993.

— — —. "Black Theology and the Black Church: Where Do We Go from Here?" In *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-1979*, edited by James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993.

— — —. *God of the Oppressed*. New revised edition ed. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997. Seabury Press 1975.

— — —. *Risks of Faith: The Emergence of a Black Theology of Liberation, 1968-1998*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1999.

— — —. "Black Liberation Theology and Black Catholics: A Critical Conversation." *Theological Studies* 61, no. 4 (2000): 731.

— — —. "Whose Earth Is It Anyway?". *Cross Currents* 50, no. 1/2 (Spring 2000): 36-48.

— — —. "Martin and Malcolm on Nonviolence and Violence." *Phylon* 49, no. 3/4 (Autumn-Winter 2001 2001): 173-83.

— — —. "God and Black Suffering: Calling the Oppressors to Account." *Anglican Theological Review* 90, no. 4 (2008): 701-712.

Cone, James H., and Gayraud S. Wilmore, eds. *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-1979*. 2nd ed. Vol. 1. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993.

— — —, eds. *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1980-1992*. Vol. 2. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993.

Connor, Tim. "Thurman, Howard 1900 – 1981." In *Contemporary Black Biography*, edited by Barbara Carlisle Bigelow. Detroit: Gail Virtual Reference Library, 1993.

Copher, Charles B. *Black Biblical Studies: Biblical and Theological Issues on the Black Presence in the Bible*. Chicago: Black Light Fellowship, 1993.

— — —. "Three Thousand Years of Biblical Interpretation with Reference to Black Peoples." In *African American Religious Studies: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*, edited by Gayraud Wilmore. Durham: Duke University Press, 1989.

— — —. "Blacks/Negroes: Participation in the Development of Civilization in the Ancient World and Their Presence in the Bible." *Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* 23, no. 1 (1995): 3-47.

Craig, Clarence Tucker. *The Beginning of Christianity*. New York: Abingdon Press, 1943.

Crockett, Joseph V. *Teaching Scripture from an African-American Perspective*. Nashville: Discipleship Resources, 1990.

Crummell, Alexander. *The Greatness of Christ and Other Sermons*. New York: Thomas Whittaker, 1882.

— — —. "Civilization the Primal Need of the Race." Paper presented at the *The American Negro Academy*, Washington, D.C., 1897

— — —. "Solution of Problems the Duty and Destiny of Man." *A.M.E. Church Review* 14, no. 4 (1898): 399-412.

Cunningham, George. *Decoding the Language of God*. New York: Prometheus Books, 2010.

Dagbovie, Pero Gaglo. *African American History Reconsidered*. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2010.

Daly, Mary. *Beyond God the Father: Towards a Philosophy of Women's Liberation*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1973.

Davies, Brian. *The Reality of God the Problem of Evil*. London Continuum, 2006.

Davis, Mike. "Who Killed New Orleans?" *International Socialist Review* 44 (November-December 2005): 11-13.

— — —. *The Atheist's Introduction to the New Testament*. Denver: Outskirts Press, 2008.

Davis, Reginald F. "African-American Interpretation of Scripture." *Journal of Religious Thought* 57/58, no. 2/1-2 (2005).

— — —. *Frederick Douglass: A Precursor of Liberation Theology*. Macon: Mercer University Press, 2005.

Dawkins, Richard. *The Blind Watchmaker: Why the Evidence of Evolution Reveals a Universe without Design*. New York: Norton, 1986.

Dawson, Clanton C. W. Jr. "The Concept of Hope in the Thinking of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr." In *The Liberatory Thought of Martin Luther King Jr.*, edited by Robert E. Birt, 341-56. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2012.

Deats, Paul and Carol Robb, ed. *The Boston Personalist Tradition in Philosophy, Social Ethics and Theology*. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press. 1886.

Derrett, J. Duncan M. . "He Descended into Hell." *The Journal of Higher Criticism* 9, no. 2 (2002): 234-45.

Dickerson, Dennis C. "African American Religious Intellectuals." *Church History* (2005): 225-27.

— — —. "Teaching Nonviolence: William Stuart Nelson and His Role in the Civil Rights Movement." *The A.M.E. Church Review* 125, no. 415 (2009): 16-27.

Dickson, Kwesi , and P. Ellington, eds. *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1969.

Dickson, Kwesi A. *Theology in Africa*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984.

Dilliard, Angela Denise. "From the Reverend Charles A. Hill to the Reverend Albert B. Cleage, Jr.: Change and Continuity in the Patterns of Civil Right Mobilizations in Detroit, 1935-1967." PhD., University of Michigan, 1995.

Diouf, Sylviane. *Servants of Allah: African Muslims Enslaved in the Americas*. New York: New York University Press, 1998.

Doak, Mary C. "Cornel West's Challenge to the Catholic Evasion of Black Theology." *Theological Studies* 63, no. 1 (2002).

"Does Christianity Handicap the Negro?" *The York Amsterdam News*, April 13, 1927.

Doherty, Earl. *The Jesus Puzzle: Did Christianity Begin with a Mythical Christ?*. Ottawa: Canadian Humanist Publications, 1999.

Dotterer, Donald W. "James and Bowne on Philosophy of Religious Experience." *The Personalist Forum* 6, no. 2 (Fall 1990): 123-41.

Drake, St. Clair. *The Redemption of Africa and Black Religion*. Chicago: Third World Press, 1970.

Du Bois, William Edward Burghardt. *The Souls of Black Folk*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications. 1994. 1903.

— — —. "The Negro Church." In *Report of a Social Study made under the direction of Atlanta University*. UMass Amherst Libraries, 1903.

— — —. *Darkwater: Voices From Within the Veil* New York. Harcourt, Brace and Howe, 1920, <http://solomon.bltc.alexanderstreet.com.proxy1.cl.msu.edu/cgi-bin/asp/philo/bltc/getvolume.pl?S7888>.

— — —. *The Negro Church*. New York: AltaMira, 2003.

— — —. *The Suppression of the African Slave Trade to the United States of America, 1638-1870*. Mineolo, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 1970.

Dyson, Eric Michael. "Supernatural Disasters? Theodicy and Prophetic Faith." In *Come Hell or High Water Hurricane Katrina and the Color of Disaster*, edited by Eric Michael Dyson. New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2006.

— — —. *Come Hell or High Water: Hurricane Katrina and the Color of Disaster*. New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2006.

Eaton, David H. "Racism Is Alive and Well: A Sermon." In *Unitarian Universalist Association*, edited by All Souls Church Unitarian. Boston Massachusetts: Unitarian Universalist Association, 1985.

Echeruo, Michael J. C. "Edward W. Blyden, 'The Jewish Question,' and the Diaspora: Theory and Practice." *Journal of Black Studies* 40, no. 4 (March 1 2010): 544-65.

Eddins, Berkley B. "Empiricism, Necessity and Freedom." *The Review of Metaphysics* 16, no. 3 (March 1963): 556-58.

— — —. "Historical Data and Policy-Decisions: A Key to Evaluating Philosophies of History." *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 26, no. 3 (March 1966): 427-30.

— — —. "Communication." *The Journal of Conflict Resolution* 11, no. 4 (December 1967): 523-24.

— — —. "Speculative Philosophy of History: A Critical Analysis." *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 6, no. 1 (Spring 1968): 52.

— — —. "Philosophia Perennis and Black Studies." *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 9, no. 2 (Summer 1971): 207.

Edgell, Penny, Joseph Gerteis, and Douglas Hartmann. "Atheists as 'Other': Moral Boundaries and Cultural Membership in American Society." *American Sociological Review* 71, no. 2 (2006): 211-34.

Egerton, Douglas R. *He Shall Go out Free: The Lives of Denmark Vesey*. Madison, Wisc.: Madison House, 1999.

Ehrman, Bart. *Orthodox Corruption of Scripture: The Effect of Early Christological Controversies on the Text of the New Testament*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

— — —. *Jesus: Apocalyptic Prophet of the New Millennium*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.

— — —. *Lost Christianities: The Battles for Scripture and the Faiths We Never Knew*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2003.

— — —. *Misquoting Jesus: The Story Behind Who Changed the Bible and Why*. New York: HarperOne, 2005.

— — —. *Jesus, Interrupted: Revealing the Hidden Contradictions in the Bible and Why We Don't Know About Them*. New York: HarperOne, 2009.

Eller, David. "The Cultures of Christianities." In *The Christian Delusion*, edited by J. W. Loftus. New York: Prometheus Books, 2010.

Ellerbe, Helen. *The Dark Side of Christian History*. Windermere, Florida: MorningStar and Lark, 1995.

Ernest, John. *Liberation Historiography: African American Writers and the Challenge of History, 1794-1861*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004.

Evans, James H. Jr. *Black Theology: A Critical Assessment and Annotated Bibliography*. New York: Greenwood Press, 1987.

— — —. *We Have Been Believers: An African-American Systematic Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992.

Evans, Robert A., ed. *The Future of Philosophical Theology*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971.

Evans, Stephanie Y. *Black Women in the Ivory Tower, 1850-1954: An Intellectual History*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2007.

Farmer, James Leonard. "The Origin and Development of the Messianic Home in Isreal with Special Reference to Analogous Beliefs among Other Peoples." PhD diss., Boston University, 1918.

— — —. "Review of the Beginning of Christianity." *The Journal of Religious Thought* 1, no. 2 (Spring-Summer 1944): 163-64.

Felder, Cain H. *Troubling Biblical Waters: Race, Class and Family*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1990.

— — —. *Stony the Road We Trod: African American Biblical Interpretation*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991.

— — —. "Cultural Ideology, Afrocentrism and Biblical Interpretation." In *Black Theology: A Documentary History: Volume 2, 1980-1992*, edited by James H. Cone and Gayraud Wilmore, 184-95. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993.

— — —. *Race, Racism, and the Biblical Narratives*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002.

Ferguson, Stephen C., II. "Teaching Hurricane Katrina: Understanding Divine Racism and Theodicy." *American Philosophical Association Newsletter on Philosophy and the Black Experience* 7, no. 1 (Fall 2007): 1-5.

— — —. "The Philosopher King: An Examination of the Influence of Dialectics on King's Political Thought and Practice." In *The Liberatory Thought of Martin Luther King Jr.*, edited by Robert E. Birt, 87-107. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2012.

— — —. "On the Occasion of William R. Jones's Death: Remembering the Feuerbachian Tradition in African-American Thought." *American Philosophical Association Newsletter on Philosophy and the Black Experience* 12, no. 2 (Spring 2013): 14-19.

— — —. "Understanding the Legacy of Dr. Wayman Bernard McLaughlin: On the Problem of Interpretation in the History of African American Philosophy." *The American Philosophical Association Newsletter Philosophy and the Black Experience* 13, no. 2 (2014): 2-11.

Ferm, D.W. *Liberation Theology: North American Style*. New York: International Religious Foundation, 1987.

Feuerbach, Ludwig. *The Essence of Christianity*. New York: Barnes & Nobles Books, 2004.

Ficek, Douglas. "Humanism: African American Liberation '(a)Theology'." *Free Inquiry*, 2001, 43-45.

Fields, Bruce L. *Introducing Black Theology: Three Crucial Questions for the Evangelical Church*. Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001.

Finkelstein, Israel, and Neil Asher Siberman. *The Bible Unearthed: Archeology's New Vision of Ancient Israel and the Origins of Its Sacred Texts*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001

Flechtheim, Ossip K. "History and Theodicy." *Phylon* 2, no. 3 (1941): 238-49.

— — —. "History and Theodicy: Some Critical Remarks on the Theories of Hegel and Marx: Part II." *Phylon* 3, no. 1 (1942): 46-65.

Flew, Anthony. *God and Philosophy*. Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2005.

Floyd-Thomas, Juan. *The Origins of Black Humanism in America*. New York: Palgrave, 2008.

Fluker, Walter Earl ed. *The Papers of Howard Washington Thurman* 2 vols. Columbia, SC: Columbia University of South Carolina Press, 2009.

Foner, Philip S., ed. *Black Socialist Preacher: The Teachings of Rev. George Washington Woodbey and His Disciple, Rev. Gw Slater, Jr.* San Francisco: Synthesis Publications, 1983.

Frazier, E. Franklin. *The Negro Church in America*. New York: Schocken Books, 1964.

Frey, Sylvia R. "The Visible Church: Historiography of African American Religion since Raboteau." *Slavery and Abolition* 29 (March 2008): 83-110.

Frey, Sylvia R., and Betty Wood. *Come Shouting to Zion: African-American Pentecostalism in the American South and British Caribbean to 1830*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998.

Friedman, Richard Elliot. *Who Wrote the Bible?* New York: Summit Books, 1987.

Frye, Charles. "The Role of Philosophy in Black Studies." *Contributions in Black Studies: A Journal of African and Afro-American Studies* 4, no. 1 (2008): 1-10.

Fullinwider, S.P. *The Mind and Mood of Black America: Twentieth Century Thought*. Homewood, Ill: Dorsey Press, 1969.

Gager, John G. *The Origins of Anti-Semitism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1985.

Gandy, Samuel E., ed. *Common Ground, Essays in Honor of Howard Thurman on the Occasion of His Seventy-Fifth Birthday, November 18, 1975*. Washington DC: Hoffman Press, 1976.

Genovese, Eugene. *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1974.

George, Carol V. R. *Segregated Sabbaths: Richard Allen and the Rise of Independent Black Churches, 1760-1840*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1973.

Glaude, Eddie. *Exodus: Religion, Race, and Nation in Early Nineteenth-Century Black America*. Chicago: University Press of Chicago, 2000.

— — —. *In Shade of Blue: Pragmatism and the Politics of Black America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.

— — —. "The Black Church Is Dead." *Huffington Post*, 2010.

Gordon, Lewis. "Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism: A Study in the Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre." PhD diss., Yale University, 1993.

— — —. *Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism*. Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1995.

— — —, ed. *Existential Africana: Understanding African Existential Thought*. New York: Routledge, 2000.

— — —. "Remembering William R. Jones (1933-2012): Philosopher and Freedom Fighter." *American Philosophical Association Newsletter on Philosophy and the Black Experience* 12, no. 2 (2013): 12-13.

Gordon, Vivian V. "The Coming of Age of Black Studies." *The Western Journal of Black Studies* 5, no. 3 (1981): 231-36.

Grant, Jacquelyn. *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response*. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989.

— — —. "Subjectification as a Requirement for Christological Construction." In *Lift Every Voice: Constructing Christian Theologies from the Underside*, edited by Susan Brooks Thistlethwaite and Mary Hodder Engel. New York: HarperSan Francisco, 1991.

— — —, ed. *Perspectives on Womanist Theology*. Atlanta: ITC Press, 1995.

Green, J. Everet. "William R. Jones: Philosophical Theologian Extraordinaire of the Twentieth Century." *APA Newsletter on Philosophy and the Black Experience* 12, no. 2 (2013): 19-20.

Greenberg, Gary. *The Bible Myth: The African Origins of the Jewish People*. New York: Citadel Press, 1996.

Greener, Richard T. "The Intellectual Position of the Negro." *The National Quarterly Review*, no. July (1880).

Gutiérrez, Gustavo. *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation*. Translated by Caridad Inda and John Eagleson. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1986. 1971.

Gutman, Herbert. *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom: 1750-1925*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1976.

Haile, James B. III. "Dr. King as Liberation Theologian and Existential Philosopher." In *The Liberatory Through of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, edited by Robert E. Birt, 61-85. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2012.

Hakola, Raimo , and Adele Reinhartz. "John's Pharisees." In *In Quest of the Historical Pharisees*, edited by Jacob Neusner and Bruce Chilton. Waco: Baylor University Press, 2007.

Hamilton, William. *A Quest for the Post-Historical Jesus*. New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 1994.

Hanks, Thomas. *God So Loved the Third World: The Bible, the Reformation, and Liberation Theologies*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983

Harding, Vincent. "The Religion of Black Power." In *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-1979*, edited by James H. Cone and Gayraud Wilmore. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1968.

Harper, Dan. "William R. Jones: A Brief Appreciation." *Unitarian Universalist Association*, 2012.

Harris, Kimberly A. "The Legitimacy of Black Philosophy." *American Philosophical Association Newsletter on Philosophy and the Black Experience* 12, no. 2 (Spring 2013).

Harris, Marquis Lafayette. "Some Conceptions of God in the Gifford Lectures During the Period 1927-1929." PhD diss., The Ohio State University, 1933.

Hartlich, Christian. "Historical-Critical Method: In Its Application to Statements Concerning Events in the Holy Scriptures." *Journal of Historical Criticism* 2 no. (2 (1995): 122-39.

Harvey, Louis-Charles. "Another Look Theodicy and the Hurricane Katrina Event." *A.M.E. Church Review* 122, no. 402 (Summer 2006): 63-73.

Hayes, Diana L. "James Cone's Hermeneutic of Language and Black Theology." *Theological Studies* 61, no. 4 (2000). 609-631.

Hayes, Floyd W. III. "Hope and Disappointment in Martin Luther King Jr.'s Political Theology: Eclipse of the Liberal Spirit." In *The Liberatory Thought of Martin Luther King Jr.*, edited by Robert E. Birt, 299-319. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2012.

Haynes, Stephen R. *Noah's Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Henry, Charles P. "Delivering Daniel: The Dialectic of Ideology and Theology in the Thought of Martin Luther King, Jr." *Journal of Black Studies* 17, no. 3 (1987): 327-45.

Herskovits, Melville J. *The Myth of the Negro Past*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1958.

Herzog, Frederick. *Liberation Theology*. New York: Seabury Press, 1972.

———. *Understanding God: The Key Issues in Present-Day Protestant Thought*. New York: Scribner, 1966.

———. *Justice Church: The New Function of the Church in North American Christianity*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1980.

Hick, John. "The Problem of Evil." In *Philosophy of Religion*, edited by Edgar Brightman. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1963.

———. *Evil and the God of Love*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010.

Hill, Charles Leander "An Exposition and Critical Estimate of the Philosophy of Philip Melancthon." PhD. Diss., The Ohio State University, 1938.

— — —. "American Democracy." *The Negro Journal of Religion* 6 no. 2 (March 1940): 9.

— — —. *A Short History Modern Philosophy from the Renaissance to Hegel*. Boston: Meador Publishing Co, 1951.

— — —. "William Ladd, the Black Philosopher from Guinea: A Critical Analysis of His Dissertation on Apathy." *The American Philosophical Association Newsletter on Philosophy and the Black Experience* 2, no. 2 (2003).

Hitchens, Christopher. *God Is Not Great*. New York: Twelve Hachette Book Group, 2007.

Hoffmann, Joseph. *Jesus Outside the Gospels*. Buffalo: Prometheus, 1984.

Hohle, Randolph. *Black Citizenship and Authenticity in the Civil Rights Movement*. New York: Routledge, 2013.

Holmes, Eugene C. "Social Philosophy and the Social Mind: The Study of Genetic Methods of J.M. Baldwin, George Herbert Mead, and J.E. Boodin." PhD diss., Columbia University, 1942.

— — —. "The Main Philosophical Considerations of Space and Time." *American Journal of Physics* 18, no. 9 (December 1950): 560-70.

— — —. "A General Theory of the Freedom Cause of the Negro People." In *Afro-American Philosophies: Selected Readings from Jupiter Hammon to Eugene C. Holmes*, edited by Perry E. Johnson. Upper Montclair, NJ: Montclair State College Press, 1955.

Hood, Robert E. *Begrimed and Black: Christian Traditions on Blacks and Blackness*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994.

Hopkins, Anthony. *Introducing Black Theology of Liberation*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999.

Hopkins, Dwight N. "Black Theology USA and South Africa: Political and Cultural Liberation." PhD diss., Union Theological Seminary, 1988.

— — —. Reviewed Work: *Why Lord?: Suffering and Evil in Black Theology*, by Anthony B. Pinn. *African American Review* 31, no. 3 (1997): 514-16.

— — —. *Down, Up, and Over: Slave Religion and Black Theology*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000.

— — —, ed. *Black Faith and Public Talk: Critical Essays on James H. Cone's Black Theology and Black Power*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007.

— — —. *Black Theology, USA and South Africa: Politics, Culture, and Liberation*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1989.

Hopkins, Dwight N., and Anthony Pinn, eds. *Loving the Body Black Religious Studies and the Erotic*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004.

Hopkins, Dwight, and Edward Antonio, eds. *The Cambridge Companion to Black Theology*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012.

Hordern, William. "Dialogue on Black Theology." *The Christian Century* 88, no. 15 (1971): 1079-80,85.

Hutchinson, Sikivu. *Moral Combat: Black Atheists, Gender Politics, and the Values Wars*. Los Angeles: Infidel Books, 2011.

— — —. *Godless Americana: Race and Religious Rebels*. Los Angeles: Infidel Books, 2013.

— — —. "Out of the Closet'-Black Atheists." *L.A. Watts Times*, May 28, 2009.

Huxley, Thomas. "The Evolution of Theology: An Anthropological Study." *The Nineteenth Century* 19, no. 109 (1886): 346-65.

— — —. "The Coming of Age of "the Origin of Species"." In *Collected Essays*, edited by Thomas Huxley New York: Appleton, 1912.

Hyers, Conrad. "Biblical Literalism: Constricting the Cosmic Dance." *Christian Century* (August 4-11 1982): 823-27.

Jackson, John G. "The Black Atheists of the Harlem Renaissance: 1917-1928." *American Atheists*.

— — —. *Pagan Origins of the Christ Myth*. Austin: American Atheist Press, 1988.

James, Robison B. "A Tillichian Analysis of James Cone's Black Theology." In *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, edited by Christopher Rowland, 260. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

Johnson, Henry Theodore. "Philosophy Religiously Valued." *A.M.E. Church Review* 7, no. 4 (April 1891).

— — —. *The Preacher: Special Talks to Students of Payne Theological Seminary, Containing Valuable Suggestions to Those Seeking Self-Improvement as Ministers*. Philadelphia: A.M.E. Book Concern, 1894.

— — —. *Tuskegee Talks. Ministerial Training and Qualification*. Philadelphia: Press of International Printing, Co, 1902.

Johnson, Sylvester. *Myth of Ham in Nineteenth-Century American Christianity: Race, Heathens, and the People of God*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

Jones, Major. *A Philosophy of Cooperation between the Negro Church and Community Organizations in the City of Atlanta, Georgia*. 1950.

— — —. "Reconciliation in the South." *Christian Century* 73, no. 18 (1956): 550-51.

— — —. "Black Awareness : Theological Implications of the Concept." *Religion of Life* 38, no. 3 (1969): 389-403.

— — —. *Black Awareness: A Theology of Hope*. Nashville: Abingdon Press 1971.

— — —. *Black Christian Ethics*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1974.

— — —. *The Color of God: The Concept of God in Afro-American Thought*. Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1987.

— — —. "Ethical Criteria, Principles, and Guidelines for One's Stance against Evil." *Annual Of The Society Of Christian Ethics* (1989): 3-24.

Jones, William R. "Sartre's Philosophical Anthropology in Relation to His Ethics: A Criticism of Selected Critics." PhD diss., Brown University, 1969.

— — —. *Is God a White Racist?: A Preamble to Black Theology*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1998. 1973.

— — —. "Theodicy and Methodology in Black Theology: A Critique of Washington, Cone and Cleage." *The Harvard Theological Review* 64, no. 4 (1971): 541-57.

— — —. "Towards an Interim Assessment of Black Theology." *The Christian Century* 89, no. May 3, 1972 (1972): 513-17.

— — —. "Reconciliation and Liberation in Black Theology: Some Implications for Religious Education." *Religious Education* 67, no. September/October (1972): 382-89.

— — —. "Toward a Black Theology." *The Christian Century* May 89 no. 3 (1972).

— — —. "Theodicy: The Controlling Category for Black Theology." *Journal of Religious Thought* 30, no. 1 (Summer 1973): 28-38.

— — —. "Recent Trends in Black Theology." *Religious Education* 68, no. 2 (1973).

- — —. "Crisis in Philosophy: The Black Presence," *Radical Philosophers' News Journal* (August 1974): 40-45. Reprinted in, "Crisis in Philosophy: The Black Presence." *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association* 47 (1973-74).
- — —. "Theism and Religious Humanism: The Chasm Narrows." *The Christian Century* 92, no. 18 (May 1975): 520-25.
- — —. "The Legitimacy and Necessity of Black Philosophy: Some Preliminary Considerations." *The Philosophical Forum, A Quarterly* IX, no. 2-3 (Winter-Spring 1977-78): 117-148.
- — —. "The Case for Black Humanism." In *Black Theology II: Essays on the Formation and Outreach of Contemporary Black Theology*, edited by William R. Jones and Calvin E. Bruce. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1978.
- — —. "Functional Ultimacy as Authority in Religious Humanism," *Religious Humanism* 12 (Spring 1978): 28-32.
- — —. "Theological Responses to 'The Church and Urban Policy,'" *Journal of the Society for Common Insights* 2 (1978): 49-57.
- — —. "Religious Humanism: Its Problems and Prospects in Black Religion and Culture." *The Journal of Interdenominational Theological Center* 7, no. 2 (1979): 169-86.
- — —. "Liberation Strategies in Black Theology: Mao, Martin, or Malcolm?" In *Philosophy Born of Struggle, Anthology of Afro-American Philosophy from 1917*, edited by Leonard Harris. Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing, 1982.
- — —. "The Religious Legitimation of Counter-Violence: Insights from Latin American Liberation Theology." In *The Terrible Meek: Revolution and Religion and Cross-Cultural Perspective*, edited by Lonnie D. Kliver. New York: Paragon Press, 1987.
- — —. "Religion as Legitimator and Liberator: A Worm's Eye View of Religion and Contemporary Politics." In *The Worldwide Impact of Religion on Contemporary Politics*, edited by Richard L. Rubenstein. New York: Paragon Press, 1987.
- — —. "Process Theology: Guardian of the Oppressor or Goad to the Oppressed." *Process Studies* 18, no. 4 (Winter 1989 1989): 268-81.
- — —. "Oppression, Race, and Humanism." *The Humanist* 52, no. 6 (1992): 7-10, 32.
- — —. "The Disguise of Discrimination: Under Closer Scrutiny, Gains Were Ephemeral." *Forum, The Magazine of the Florida Humanities Council* 18, no. 2 (Summer 1995): 22-27

— — —. "Toward a New Paradigm for Uncovering Neo-Racism." In *Soul Work: Anti-Racist Theologies in Dialogue*, edited by Marjorie Bowens-Wheatley and Nancy Palmer Jones. Boston: Skinner House, 2003.

— — —. "Purpose and Method in Liberation Theology: Implications for an Interim Assessment." In *Liberation Theology: North American Style*, edited by Deane William Fenn. New York: Vertizon, 1987.

Jordan, D. J. "The Philosophy of Progress." *A.M.E. Church Review* 10, no. 1 (July 1893).

Joseph, Peniel E. "Black Liberation without Apology: Reconceptualizing the Black Power Movement." *The Black Scholar* 31, no. 3/4 (2001): 2-19.

— — —, ed. *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era*. New York: Routledge, 2006.

Kane, G. Stanley. "The Failure of Soul-Making Theodicy." *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 6, no. 1 (1975): 1-22.

Karenga, Maulana. "Jaramogi, Social Justice and Church: Black Liberation Theology and Struggle." *Sentinel*, 2011, A.7.

Kaufmann, Walter. *Critique of Religion and Philosophy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1958.

Kee, Alistair. *Marx and the Failure of Liberation Theology*. Philadelphia: Trinity, 1990.

Kelsey, George D. "The Social Thought of Contemporary Southern Baptists." PhD diss., Yale University, 1946.

— — —. "Protestantism and Democratic Intergroup Living." *Phylon* 8, no. 1 (1947): 77-82.

— — —. "Review of What's on This Rock." *Phylon* 9, no. 2 (Second-quarter 1948): 186-87.

— — —. "The Churches and Freedom." *Journal of Religious Thought* 14, no. 1 (Aut-Wint 1956-1957):17-26.

— — —. *Racism and the Christian Understanding of Man*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1965.

— — —. "The Racist Search for Self." *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 6, no. 2 (Fall 1978): 240-56.

King, Martin Luther, Jr. "The Ethical Demand for Integration." In *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches of Martin Luther King, Jr.*, edited by James Melvin Washington: Harper San Francisco.

— — —. "A Comparison of the Conceptions of God in the Thinking of Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman." PhD diss., Boston University, 1955.

— — —. "Pilgrimage to Nonviolence." *The Christian Century* 77, no. 16 (1960): 439-41.

— — —. *Stride toward Freedom*. New York: Harper Row, 1964. 1958.

King, Ursula, ed. *Feminist Theology from the Third World*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994.

King, Willis J. "The Book of Habakkuk from the Standpoint of Literary and Historical Criticism." PhD diss., Boston University, 1921.

— — —. *The Negro in American Life: An Elective Course for Young People on Christian Race Relationships*. New York: Methodist Book Concern, 1926.

— — —. "Personalism and Race." In *Personalism in Theology: A Symposium in Honor of Albert Cornelius Knudson*, edited by Edgar S. Brightman, 204-24. Boston: Boston University Press, 1943.

Klein, Herbert S. *Slavery in the Americas: A Comparative Study of Virginia and Cuba*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967

Krueger, Douglas E. *What Is Atheism?: A Short Introduction*. Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1998.

Lackey, Michael. "Franz Fanon on the Theology of Colonization." *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 3, no. 2 (2002).

— — —. *African American Atheists and Political Liberation*. Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2007.

— — —. "Moses, Man of Oppression: A Twentieth-Century African American Critique of Western Theocracy." *African American Review* 43, no. 4 (2009).

Lamb, Matthew. "Liberation Theology and Social Justice." *Process Studies* 14, no. 2 (1985): 102-23.

Larsen, Nella. *Quicksand*. New York: A.A. Knopf, 1928.

Lawson, Bill E. "The Aporia of Hope: King and Bell on the Ending of Racism." In *The Liberatory Thought of Martin Luther King Jr.*, edited by Robert E. Birt, 321-47. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2012.

Lee, Carlton, L. "Black American Studies." *Negro History Bulletin* 34 (1971).

— — —. "Toward a Christian Critique of British Socialism." *The Journal of Religious Thought* 6 no. 1 (Aut-Winter 1949): 18-32.

— — —. "Patterns of Leadership in Race Relations: A Study of Leadership among American Negroes." PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1951.

— — —. "Review: How Black Is Black Church?". *Phylon* 33, no. 4 (Fourth-quarter 1972): 389-95.

Lee, Spike "When the Levees Broke: A Requiem in Four Acts " In *HBO Documentary Films*. United States: HBO Documentary Films, 2006.

Lewis, J. Lowell. *Ring of Liberation: Deceptive Discourse in Brazilian Capoeira*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.

Liburd, Ron. "Like a House on Sand: African American Biblical Hermeneutics in Perspective." *The Journal of Interdenominational Theological Center* 22, no. 1 (Fall 1994): 71-91.

Lincoln, C. Eric, ed. *The Black Experience in Religion*. Garden City: Anchor Books, 1974.

— — —. *The Black Church since Frazier*. New York: Schocken Books, 1974.

— — —. *The Black Muslims in America*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1973.

— — —. *Race, Religion, and the Continuing American Dilemma*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1984.

— — —. *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretations of Religion*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986.

Lincoln, C. Eric, and Lawrence H. Mamiya. *The Black Church in the African American Experience*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1990.

Loftus, John W. *Why I Became an Atheist*. Amherst Prometheus Books, 2008.

— — —. ed., *The Christian Delusion*. Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2010.

Long, Charles H. "Prolegomenon to a Religious Hermeneutic." *History of Religions* 6, no. 3 (February 1967): 254-64.

— — —. "The Black Reality: Towards a Theology of Freedom." *Criterion* (September 1969).

— — —. "Perspectives for a Study of Afro-American Religion in the United States." *History of Religions* 11, no. 1 (August 1971): 54-66.

Long, Jason. *Biblical Nonsense: A Review of the Bible for Doubting Christians*. New York: iUniverse Inc., 2005.

Lucas, Lawrence. *Black Priest White Church: Catholics and Racism*. Trenton: Africa World Press, 1992.

Maccoby, Hyam. *Revolution in Judaea: Jesus and the Jewish Resistance*. New York: Taplinger Pub. Co., 1980.

— — —. *The Mythmaker: Paul and the Invention of Christianity*. New York: Harper & Row, 1986.

— — —. *Jesus the Pharisee*. London: SCM Press, 2003.

Mack, Burton. *Who Wrote the New Testament?: The Making of the Christian Myth*. San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1995.

Marable, Manning. *Blackwater: Historical Studies in Race, Class Consciousness, and Revolution*. Dayton: Black Praxis Press, 1981.

— — —. "Black Studies and the Racial Mountain." *Souls* 2, no. 3 (2000): 17-36.

— — —. *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America: Problems in Race, Political Economy, and Society*. Cambridge, Mass: South End Press, 2000.

Marsh, Charles. *God's Long Summer: Stories of Faith and Civil Rights*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997.

Martin, Michael. *Atheism: A Philosophical Justification*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1990.

Martin, Michael, and Ricky Monnier, eds. *The Impossibility of God*. Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2003.

Marx, Karl. "Introduction, Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right." In *Collected Works of Karl Marx and Frederick Engels*. New York: International Publishers, 1975.

Mays, Benjamin E. "The American Negro and Christian Religion." *The Journal of Negro Education* 8, no. 3 (July 1939): 530-38.

— — —. "The New Social Order When Integrated." *Religious Education* 58, no. 2 (1963): 155-60.

— — —. *The Negro's God: As Reflected in His Literature*. New York: Russell and Russell, 1968. 1938.

— — —. *The Negro's Church*. New York: Arno Press, 1969. 1933.

Mbiti, John S. *African Religions & Philosophy*. New York: Praeger, 1969.

— — —. *Concepts of God in Africa*. New York: Praeger, 1970.

— — —. "An African Views American Black Theology." *Worldview* 17 (1974): 41-44.

McClendon, John H., III. "The Afro-American Philosopher and the Philosophy of the Black Experience: A Bibliographical Essay on a Neglected Topic in Both Philosophy and Black Studies." *Sage Race Relations Abstracts* 7, no.4 (November 1982).

— — —. "Eugene C. Holmes: A Commentary on a Black Marxist Philosopher." In *Philosophy Born of Struggle*, edited by Leonard Harris. Dubuque, Iowa: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 1983.

— — —. "Charles Leander Hill: Philosopher and Theologian." *The A.M.E. Church Review* 119, no. 390 (Ap-Jn 2003 2003): 81-105.

— — —. "The African American Philosopher and Academic Philosophy: On the Problem of Historical Interpretation." *The American Philosophical Association Newsletter on Philosophy and the Black Experience* 4, no. 1 (2004): 1-9.

— — —. "Richard B. Moore, Radical Politics and the Afro-American History Movement: The Formation of a Revolutionary Tradition in African-American Intellectual Culture." *Afro-Americans in New York Life and History* 30 (July 2006): 7-46.

— — —. "Materialist Philosophical Inquiry and African American Studies." *Socialism and Democracy* 25, no. 1 (2011): 71-92.

— — —. "Nkrumah's Consciencism: Philosophical Materialism and the Issue of Atheism Revisited." *Journal of African Philosophy* no. 4 (2012).

— — —. "Dr. William Ronald Jones (July 17, 1933-July 13, 2012): On the Legacy of the Late 'Dean' of African American Philosophers." *American Philosophical Association Newsletter on Philosophy and the Black Experience* 12, no. 2 (Spring 2013): 21-29.

— — —. "An Essay-Review of Mark David Wood's Cornell West and the Politics of Prophetic Pragmatism." *American Philosophical Association Newsletter on Philosophy and the Black Experience* 2, no. 1 (Fall 2002): 65-69.

— — —. "Is Our Belief That Martin Luther King Jr. Is a Black Philosopher Justified? Introductory Concerns About King and Philosophical Cartography." In *The Liberatory Thought of Martin Luther King Jr.*, edited by Robert E. Birt. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2012.

McClendon, John H., III, Stephen C. II Ferguson, and Malik Simba. *Beyond the White Shadow: Philosophy Sports and the African American Experience*. Kendall Hunt Publishing Company, 2012.

McClendon, John H., III, and Brittany L. O'Neal. "William R. Jones and Philosophical Theology: Transgressing and Transforming Conventional Boundaries of Black Liberation Theory." *American Philosophical Association Newsletter on Philosophy and the Black Experience* 13, no. 1 (2013): 19-34.

McCullough, Lissa, and Brian Schroeder, eds. *Thinking through the Death of God: A Critical Companion to Thomas J.J. Altizer*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004.

McCutcheon, Russell. *Manufacturing Religion: The Discourse on Sui Generis Religion and the Politics of Nostalgia*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

— — —. "'They Licked the Plates Clean': On the Co-Dependency of the Religious and the Secular." *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion* 19 (2007): 173-99.

McDaniels, Jay B. "The God of the Oppressed and the God Who Is Empty." In *God and Global Justice: Religion and Poverty in an Unequal World*, edited by Frederick Ferre and Rita Mataragnon. New York: Paragon House, 1985.

McDowell, Josh, and Bill Wilson. *He Walked Among Us: Evidence for the Historical Jesus*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 2000.

McKinney, Richard I. . "The Cosmology of Alfred North Whitehead and Its Bearing on Religion and Theology." PhD diss., S.T.M. Andover Newton Theological School—Yale University, 1937.

— — —. "Religion in Negro Colleges." *The Journal of Negro Education* 13, no. 4 (August 1944): 509-519.

— — —. *Religion in Higher Education among Negroes*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1945.

— — —. "Existentialist Ethics and Protest Movement." *Journal of Religious Thought* 22, no. 2 (1965 – 1966): 107-20.

McKinsey, C. Dennis. *The Encyclopedia of Biblical Errancy*. Amherst: Prometheus Books, 1995.

McLachlan, James. "The Idealist Critique of Idealism: Bowne's Theistic Personalism and Howison's City of God." *The Personalist Forum* 13, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 89-106.

Miller, George Frazier. "The Sacredness of Humanity: Annual Sermon of the Conference of Church Workers (Episcopal) among Colored People at St. Philip's Church," New York, October 6-9, 1914. Brooklyn: Frank R Chisholm, 1914.

Miller, Randolph. "Process Thought and Black Theology." In *Black Theology II*, edited by Calvin Bruce and William Jones. Lewisburg: Bucknell Press, 1978.

Mitchell, Mozilla G. *Spiritual Dynamics of Howard Thurman's Theology*. Bristol: Wyndham Hall Press, 1985.

Montgomery, William. *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1993.

Moore, Moses N. *Orishatukeh Faduma: Liberal Theology and Evangelical Pan-Africanism, 1857-1946*. Lanham: Scarecrow, 1996.

Morreall, John. "Is God in Heaven?" *The Journal of Higher Criticism* 9, no. 2 (2002): 217-33.

Morrison, Roy D., II. "Ontology and Naturalism in the Ontologies of John Herman Randall and Paul Tillich," PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1972.

———. "Black Philosophy: An Instrument for Cultural and Religious Liberation." *The Journal of Religious Thought* 33, no. 1 (1976): 11-24.

———. "Black Enlightenment: The Issues of Pluralism, Priorities and Empirical Correlation." *Journal of The American Academy of Religion* 46, no. 2 (1978): 207.

———. "The Emergence of Black Theology in America." *The A.M.E. Zion Quarterly Review* 94, no. 3 (October 1982): 2-17.

———. "Process Philosophy, Social Thought, and Liberation Theology." *Zygon* 19, no. 1 (March 1984): 65-81.

———. "Christian Culture and Sa: Racism, Philosophy, and Theology." *A.M.E. Zion Quarterly Review* 98, no. 1 (April 1986): 2-11.

———. "Einstein on Kant, Religion, Science, and Methodological Unity." In *Einstein and the Humanities*, edited by Dennis Ryan. New York: Greenwood Press, 1987.

———. *Science, Theology and the Transcendental Horizon*. Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994.

———. "Self-Transformation in American Blacks: The Harlem Renaissance and Black Theology." In *Existence in Black*, edited by Lewis R. Gordon. New York: Routledge, 1997.

Morrison-Reed, Mark D. *Black Pioneers in a White Denomination*. Boston: Skinner House Books, 1980.

———. *Been in the Storm So Long*. edited by Jacqui James. Boston: Skinner House Books, 1991.

— — —. *Darkening the Doorways: Black Trailblazers and Missed Opportunities in Unitarian Universalism*. Boston: Skinner House Books, 2011.

Mosala, Itumeleng J. *Biblical Hermeneutics and Black Theology in South Africa*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989

Moses, Wilson Jeremiah. *The Golden Age of Black Nationalism: 1850-1925*. Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1978.

— — —. *Alexander Crummell: A Study of Civilization and Discontent*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989.

Moyd, Olin P. *Redemption in Black Theology*. Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1979.

— — —. *Preaching and Practical Theology: An African American Perspective*. Nashville: Townsend Press, 1994.

— — —. *The Sacred Art: Preaching & Theology in the African American Tradition*. Valley Forge: Judson Press, 1995.

Murray, Pauli. "Black Theology and Feminist Theology: A Comparative View." *Anglican Theological Review* 60, no. 1 (1978): 3-24.

Nelson, William Stuart. "The Tradition of Nonviolence and Its Underlying Forces." In *Ghandhi Research Foundation*. http://www.mkgandhi.org/g_relevance/chap01.htm

— — —. *Bases of World Understanding, an Inquiry into the Means of Resolving Racial, Religious, Class, and National Misapprehensions and Conflicts*. Calcutta: Calcutta University, 1949.

— — —, ed. *The Christian Way in Race Relations*. Freeport: Books for Libraries Press, 1971

Neusner, Jacob. "The Rabbinic Traditions About the Pharisees before 70 AD: An Overview." In *In Quest of the Historical Pharisees*, edited by Jacob Neusner and Bruce D. Chilton. Waco: Better University Press, 2007.

— — —. "The Anglo-American Theological Tradition to 1970." In *In Quest of the Historical Pharisees*, edited by Jacob Neusner and Bruce D. Chilton. Waco: Baylor University Press, 2007.

Nicolson, Adam. *God's Secretaries: The Making of the King James Bible*. New York: HarperCollins, 2005.

Nimitz, August. "Natural Versus Social Phenomena: Cuba and the Lessons of Katrina." *Black Scholar* 36 (2006): 43-51.

Nkrumah, Kwame. *Consciencism: Philosophy and Ideology for De-Colonization and Development with Particular Reference to the African Revolution*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1970.

Norment, Nathaniel, Jr. *The African American Studies Reader*. Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2001.

O'Connor, June. "Process Theology and Liberation Theology: Theology and Ethical Reflection." *Horizon* 7, no. 2 (1980).

O'Neal, Brittany L. "William R. Jones's Humanocentric Theism: Reconceptualizing the Black Religious Experience." *American Philosophical Association Newsletter on Philosophy and the Black Experience* 12, no. 2 (Spring 2013): 20.

Ogletree, Thomas W. *The Death of God Controversy*. New York: Abingdon Press, 1966.

Ogormegbunem, Dibia Emmanuel. "Myth and Mystery from an Igbo cosmological Worldview and her Relation to Them." *International Journal of Philosophy and Theology* 2, no. 2 (June 2014): 240-252.

Olupona, Jacob. *African Traditional Religions in Contemporary Society*. New York: Paragon House, 1991.

Page, Hugh R. "Biblical Studies: Insurgency, Darkness and the Reconfiguration of Biblical Studies." Response to *African Americans and the Bible: Sacred Texts and Social Texture*, by Vincent Wimbush's (Ed). *The A.M.E. Church Review* 120, no. 394 (April-June 2004): 76-82.

Pagels, Elaine. *The Gnostic Gospels*. New York: Vintage Books, 1989. 1979.

— — —. *Adam, Eve, and the Serpent*. New York: Random House, 1988.

— — —. *The Origin of Satan*. New York: Random House, 1995.

Paley, William. *Natural Theology: Evidence of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity, Collected from the Appearances of Nature*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. 1802.

Parenti, Michael. *God and His Demons*. Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2010.

Perry, Jeffrey B. *Hubert Harrison: The Voice of Harlem Radicalism, 1833-1918*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2009.

Perry, Rufus Lewis, Sr. *The Cushite or the Children of Ham (the Negro Race) as Seen by Ancient Historians and Poets*. New York: The Literary Union, 1887.

— — —. *Man: Viewed from Science and the Talmud*. New York: R. Hamilton, 1916.

— — —. *Sketch of Philosophical Systems*. New York: Columbia University Libraries, 2008. 1918.

Petrosyan, M. *Humanism: Its Philosophical, Ethical and Sociological Aspects*. Vol. 1972, Moscow: Progress Publishers.

Pinn, Anthony B. *Why Lord?: Suffering and Evil in Black Theology*. New York: Continuum, 1995.

— — —, ed. *Moral Evil and Redemptive Suffering: A History of Theodicy in African-American Religious Thought*. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2002.

— — —. *African American Humanist Principles: Living and Thinking Like the Children of Nimrod*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

— — —. *The African American Religious Experience in America. The American Religious Experience*. edited by Philip Goff Westport, Conn: Greenwood Press, 2006.

— — —. "Jesus and Justice: An Outline of Liberation Theology within Black Churches." *Cross Currents* 57, no. 2 (2007).

— — —, ed. *African American Religious Cultures*. 2 vols. Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2009.

Pippin, Tina. "On the Blurring of Boundaries." In *Yet with a Steady Beat: Contemporary U.S. Afrocentric Biblical Interpretation*, edited by Randall C. Bailey, Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2003.

Pitt, Richard. "Killing the Messenger: Religious Black Gay Men's Neutralization of Anti-Gay Religious Messages." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 49, no. 1 (2010): 56-72.

Pojman, Louis P., ed. *Philosophy of Religion: An Anthology*. Belmont: Wadsworth, 2003.

Pojman, Louis P., and Lewis Vaughn, eds. *Classics of Philosophy*. 3rd ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.

Price, Robert M. *The Incredible Shrinking Son of Man: How Reliable Is the Gospel Tradition?* Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2003.

— — —. *Deconstructing Jesus*. Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2000.

Prust, Richard C. "Soul Talk and Bowne's Ontology of Personhood." *The Personalist Forum* 13, no. 1 (Spring 1997): 69-76.

Raboteau, Albert. *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1978.

— — —. *Canaan Land: A Religious History of African Americans*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2001.

Ragland, C.P. "Descartes's Theodicy." *Religious Studies* 43 (2007): 125-44.

Reddie, Anthony. *Black Theology*. London: SCM Press, 2012.

Reed, Adolph Jr. "Classifying the Hurricane." *Nation*, October 3 2005.

Reed, Betsy ed. *Unnatural Disaster: The Nation on Hurricane Katrina*. New York: Nation Books, 2006.

Reese, Laura A., Ronald E. Brown, and James David Ivers. "'Some Children See Him...': Political Participation and the Black Christ." *Political Behavior* 29, no. 4 (2007): 517-37.

Reeves, Gene. "Process and Liberation Theologies." In *Liberation Theology: North American Style*, edited by Dean William Fenn. New York: Verizon, 1987.

Rhodes, Ron. "Black Theology, Black Power, and the Black Experience." *Reasoning from the Scriptures Ministries*. Accessed July 2011. <http://home.earthlink.net/~ronrhodes/BlackTheology.html>.

Richardson, Marilyn. *Black Women and Religion: A Bibliography*. Boston: G. K. Hall, 1980.

Riggins, Earl R., Jr. "Toward a Black Christian Ethic: A Study of Alexander Crummell and Albert Cleage." PhD diss., Vanderbilt University, 1978.

Roberts, J. Deotis. *Liberation and Reconciliation*. Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1971.

— — —. "Black Consciousness in Theological Perspective." In *The Black Experience in Religion*, edited by C. Eric Lincoln. Garden City: Anchor Books, 1974.

— — —. "Black Theological Ethics: A Bibliographical Essay." *The Journal of Religious Ethics* 3, no. 1 (1975): 69-109.

— — —. "Liberation Theism." In *Black Theology II: Essays on the Formation and Outreach of Contemporary Black Theology*, edited by Calvin Bruce and William R. Jones. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 1978.

— — —. *Black Theology in Dialogue*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1987.

Roelofs, H. Mark. "Liberation Theology: The Recovery of Biblical Radicalism." *American Political Science Review* 82, no. 2 (1988).

Rohrbaugh, Bruce J. Marina and Richard L. *Social Science Commentary on the Synoptic Gospels*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992.

- Roman, Charles Victor. *The Horoscope of Prince Ham*. Southern Christian Recorder.
- — —. *A Knowledge of History Is Conducive for Racial Solidarity*. Sunday School Union Print, 1911.
- — —. "Philosophical Musings in the by-Paths of Ethnology." *A.M.E. Church Review* 28, no. 1 (July 1911).
- — —. *American Civilization and the Negro: The Afro-American in Relation to National Progress*. Philadelphia: F.A. David Company, 1916.
- Ronnick, Michele V. *The First Three African American Members of the American Philological Association*. Philadelphia: American Philological Association, 2001.
- Rowland, Christopher and Mark Corner. *Liberating Exegesis: The Challenge of Liberation Theology to Biblical Studies*. Louisville: Westminster/ John Knox Press, 1989.
- Russell, Bertrand. *Why I Am Not a Christian*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1957.
- Salley, Columbus and Behm, Ronald. *What Color Is Your God?: Black Consciousness and the Christian Faith*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1981.
- Sanneh, Lamin. *Encountering the West: Christianity and the Global Cultural Process: The African Dimension*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. *The Devil and the Good Lord*. New York: Vintage, 1962.
- — —. "Existentialism Is a Humanism: Lecture Given in 1946." Translated by Philip Mairet. In *Existentialism from Dostoyevsky to Sartre*, edited by Walter Kaufman: Meridian Publishing, 1989.
- Schaper, Donna, and Howard Thurman. *40-Day Journey with Howard Thurman*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Books, 2009.
- Schlagel, Richard H. *The Vanquished Gods: Science, Religion, and the Nature Belief*. Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2001.
- Schoenig, Richard. "The Free Will Theodicy." *Religious Studies* 34 (1998): 457-70.
- Schuurman, Henry J. "The Concept of a Strong Theodicy." *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 27, no. 1/2 (1990): 63-85.
- — —. "Two Concepts of Theodicy." *American Philosophical Quarterly* 30, no. 3 (1993).

Schwarz, Hans. *Responsible Faith: Christian Theology in Light of 20th Century Questions*. Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986.

Schweitzer, Albert. *The Quest of the Historical Jesus: A Critical Study of Its Progress from Reimarus to Wrede*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press in association with the Albert Schweitzer Institute, 1998.

— — —. *The Mysticism of Paul the Apostle*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998.

Schweitzer, Albert, and William Montgomery. *Paul and His Interpreters: A Critical History*. London: A. and C. Black 1912.

Scrivens, Darryl. *A Dealer of Old Clothes: Philosophical Conversations with David Walker*. New York: iUniverse Incorporated, 2004.

Sebidi, Lebamang. "The Dynamics of the Black Struggle And Its Implications for Black Theology." In *Black Theology and Liberation Theologies*, edited by Edward P. Antonio. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Seely, Paul H. "The First Four Days of Genesis in Condordist Theory and in Biblical Context." *Science in Christian Perspectives* 49 (1997): 85-95.

Segundo, Juan Luis. *Liberation of Theology*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1976.

Sekine, Seizo. *A Comparative Study of the Origins of Ethical Thought: Hellenism and Hebraism*. Translated by Judy Wakabayashi. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2005.

Sernett, Milton. *African American Religious History: A Documentary Witness*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1999.

Shanks, Niall. *God, the Devil, and Darwin: A Critique of Intelligent Design Theory*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Shorto, Russell. *Gospel Truth*. New York: Riverhead Books, 1997.

Signil, Christopher. *Race, Faith, and Politics: 7 Questions Every African American Christian Must Answer*. Lake Mary, FL: Creation House, 2012.

Simpson, George Eaton. *Black Religions in the New World*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1978.

Simpson, Robert Mark. "Moral Antitheodicy: Prospects and Problems." *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 65 (2009): 153-69.

Singer, Peter. *Marx*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1980.

Singleton, Harry H. *Black Theology and Ideology: Deideological Dimensions in the Theology of James H. Cone*. Collegeville, Minn: The Liturgical Press, 2002.

Smelser, Neil J., ed. *Karl Marx: On Society and Social Change*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973.

Smith, George H. *Atheism: The Case against God*. Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1979.

— — —. *Why Atheism?*. Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2000.

Smith, Luther E. *Howard Thurman: The Mystic as Prophet*. Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1981.

— — —, ed. *Howard Thurman: Essential Writings*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006.

Smith, Timothy L. "Slavery and Theology: The Emergence of Black Christian Consciousness in Nineteenth-Century America." In *Church History* 41, no. 4 (Dec. 1972): 497-512.

Sneed, Roger Alex. "Virtually Invisible: The Representations of Homosexuality in Black Theology, African American Cultural Criticism, and Black Gay Men's Literature." PhD diss., Vanderbilt University, 2006.

Stairs, Allen, and Christian Bernano. *A Thinker's Guide to the Philosophy of Religion*. New York: Pearson/Longman, 2007.

Staples, Robert "Racial Ideology and Intellectual Racism: Blacks in Academia." *The Black Scholar* 15, no. 2 (March-April 1984): 2-17.

Steel, David Ramsey. *Atheism Explained: From Folly to Philosophy*. Chicago: Open Court, 2008.

Steinkraus, Warren E. "Martin Luther King's Personalism and Non-Violence." *Journal of History of Ideas* 34, no. 1 (1973): 97-111.

Stenger, Victor J. *Has Science Found God?: The Latest Results in the Search for Purpose in the Universe*. Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2003.

— — —. *God: The Failed Hypothesis: How Science Shows That God Does Not Exist*. Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2007.

— — —. *The New Atheism: Taking a Stand for Science and Reason*. Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2009.

— — —. *The Fallacy of Fine-Tuning: Why the Universe Is Not Designed for Us*. Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2011.

— — —. *God and the Folly of Faith: The Incompatibility of Science and Religion*. Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2012.

— — —. *God and the Atom*. Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2013.

Stewart, Caryle Fielding, III. "A Comparative Analysis of Theological-Ontology and Ethical Method in the Theologies of James H. Cone and Howard Thurman." PhD diss., Northwestern University, 1982.

— — —. *God, Being and Liberation: A Comparative Analysis of the Theologies and Ethics of James H. Cone and Howard Thurman*. New York: University Press of America, 1989.

Strother-Jordan, Karen "On the Rhetoric of Afrocentricity." *The Western Journal of Black Studies* 26 (2002).

Surin, Kenneth. "Theodicy?" *The Harvard Theological Review* 76, no. 2 (1983): 225-47.

Tanner, B. T. "The Higher Criticism." *A.M.E. Church Review* 10, no. 1 (July 1893): 113-18.

Temme, Jon M. "Jesus as Trailblazer: The Christology of Martin Luther King Jr." *The Journal of Religious Thought* 42, no. 2 (March 1985): 75.

Thurman, Howard. "Good News for the Underprivileged." *Religion in Life* 4, no. 3 (Summer 1935): 403-09.

— — —. *Deep River: An Interpretation of Negro Spirituals*. Oakland: Eucalyptus Press, 1945.

— — —. "Review of Richard I. McKinney's *Religion in Higher Education among the Negroes*." *Religion in Life* 15 no. 4 (Autumn 1946): 619-20.

— — —. *The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death*. New York: Harper, 1947.

— — —. *Jesus and the Disinherited*. Boston: Beacon Press. 1996. 1949.

— — —. *Mysticism and the Experience of Love*. Wallingford, PA: Pendle Hill, 1961.

— — —. *The Inward Journey*. New York: Harper, 1961.

— — —. *Disciplines of the Spirit*. New York: Harper, 1963.

— — —. *The Luminous Darkness: A Personal Interpretation of the Anatomy of Segregation and the Ground of Hope*. New York: Harper, 1965.

— — —. *Why I Believe There Is a God: Sixteen Essays by Negro Clergymen*. Chicago: Johnson Pub. Co, 1965.

— — —. "Review of J. Deotis Roberts's *Liberation and Reconciliation: A Black Theology*." *Religious Education* 66, no. 6 (November-December 1971): 464-66.

— — —. *A Strange Freedom*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1998.

Thurman, Howard, and Luther E. Smith. *Howard Thurman: Essential Writings*. Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 2006.

Thurman, Howard, and Ann Spencer Thurman. *For the Inward Journey: The Writings of Howard Thurman*. San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984.

Thurman, Sue B., and Howard Thurman. *Pioneers of Negro Origin in California*. San Francisco: Acme Publishing Company, 1952.

Tunstall, Dwayne Alexander. "Being Persons in a Depersonalizing World: Marcel and Gordon on the Human Condition in Late Western Modernity." PhD diss., Southern Illinois University-Carbondale, 2007.

— — —. "William R. Jones's Philosophy of Religion." *American Philosophical Association Newsletter on Philosophy and the Black Experience* 13, no. 1 (Fall 2013): 11- 15

Vermes, Geza. *The Changing Faces of Jesus*. New York: Penguin Compass, 2000.

Victor, Anderson. *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism*. New York: Continuum, 1995.

Walker, Theodore, Jr. *Empower the People: Social Ethics for the African-American Church*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1991.

— — —. "Hartshorne's Neoclassical Theism and Black Theology." *Process Studies* 18, no. 4 (Winter 1989.): 240-58.

Walters, Ron. "The Vicious Attack on Black Theology." *Chicago Defender*, April 16- April 22, 2008.

Washington, Joseph R. *Black Religion: The Negro and Christianity in the United States*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1964.

— — —. *The Politics of God: The Future of the Black Churches*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1967.

Weems, Renita, J. *Just a Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women's Relationships in the Bible*. San Diego: LauraMedia, 1988.

— — —. "Womanist Reflections on Biblical Hermeneutics." In *Black Theology: A Documentary History*, edited by James H. Cone and Gayraud Wilmore. Maryknoll; NY: Orbis, 1993.

White, L. Michael. *From Jesus to Christianity*. San Francisco: Harper, 2004.

— — —. *Scripting Jesus : The Gospels in Rewrite*. New York: HarperOne, 2010.

Williams, A. Roger. "A Black Pastor Looks at Black Theology." *The Harvard Theological Review* 64, no. 4 (1971): 559-67.

Williams, Delores S. "Womanist Theology: Black Women's Voices." In *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1980-1992*, edited by James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore. New York: Orbis Books, 1987.

— — —. *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*. Maryknoll; NY: Orbis Books, 1993.

Williams, Joseph J. *Hebrewisms of West Africa: From Nile to Niger with the Jews*. Toronto: Longmans, Green & Co., 1930.

Williams, Robert C. "Moral Suasion and Militant Aggression in the Theological Perspective of Black Religion." *Journal of Religious Thought* 30, no. 2 (Paul-winter 1973-1974): 27-50.

— — —. "A Study of Religious Language: Analysis/Interpretation of Selected Afro-American Spirituals, with Reference to Black Religious Philosophy." PhD diss., Columbia University, 1975.

— — —. "Ritual, Drama, and God in Black Religion: Theological and Anthropological Views." *Theology Today* 41 no. 4 (January 1985): 431-43.

— — —. "Paul's Message of Freedom: What Does It Mean to the Black Church." *Horizons* 12, no. 2 (Fall 1985): 374-76.

— — —. "Prophesy Deliverance: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity." *Horizons* 12, no. 1 (Spring 1985): 189-91.

— — —. "Worship and Anti-Structure and Thurman's Vision of the Sacred." *Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Center* 14 no. 1 (Fall-Spring 1986-1987): 161-74.

Williams, Samuel W. "Review of Introducing the New Testament." *The Journal of Religious Thought* 3, no. 2 (Spring-Summer 1946): 202-03.

— — —. "Communism: A Christian Critique." *The Journal of Religious Thought* (1949): 120-35.

Wilmore, Gayraud S. *The White Church and the Search for Black Power*. New York: Council Press, 1967.

— — —. *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of Afro-American People*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983.

— — — . "A Revolution Unfulfilled, but Not Invalidated." In *A Black Theology of Liberation*, edited by James H. Cone. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990.

— — — . *Pragmatic Spirituality: The Christian Faith through an Africentric Lens*. New York: New York University, 2004.

— — — ., ed. *African American Religious Studies: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1989.

Wilmot, Edward Blyden. *Christianity, Islam and the Negro Race*. London: W.B. Whittingham. 1994.

Wimbush, Vincent L. "Historical/Cultural Criticism as Liberation: A Proposal for an African American Biblical Hermeneutic." *Semeia*, no. 47 (1989): 43-55.

— — — . "Rescue the Perishing': The Importance of Biblical Scholarship in Black Christianity." In *Black Theology: A Documentary History*, edited by James H. Cone and Gayraud Wilmore, 210-15. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993.

— — — , ed. *African Americans and the Bible: Sacred Texts and Social Textures*. New York: Continuum, 2000.

— — — . *The Bible and African Americans: A Brief History*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003.

— — — . *White Men's Magic: Scripturalization as Slavery*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2012.

Wiredu, Kwasi "Morality and Religion and Akan Thought." In *African-American Humanism: An Anthology*, edited by Norm R. Allen. Buffalo: Prometheus Books, 1991.

Woodbey, George Washington. *The Bible and Socialism. A Conversation between Two Preachers*. New York: A. Falconer, 1904.

Woodson, Carter G. *The History of the Negro Church*. Washington, DC: The Associated Publishers, 1921.

— — — . *The Mis-Education of the Negro*. Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1998. 1933.

Wooten, Alexander "On the 'Not Necessarily Atheist' Nature of Kwame Nkrumah's Philosophical Consciencism." *The Howard University Journal of Philosophy* 1, no. 1 (Summer/Fall 1990): 49-55.

Wright, Leon E. "Black Theology or Black Experience." *Journal of Religious Thought* 26 (Summer 1969): 46-56.

Wright, Richard R. *Centennial Encyclopedia of the African Methodist Episcopal Church*. Philadelphia: Book Concern of the A.M.E. Church, 1916.

Wynn, Mark. "Knowledge of Place and Knowledge of God: Contemporary Philosophies of Place and Some Questions in Philosophical Theology." *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 62 (2007): 149-69.

Yancy, George, ed. *African-American Philosophers: 17 Conversations*. New York: Routledge, 1998.

— — —. "History: On the Power of Black Aesthetic Ideals: Thomas Nelson Baker as Preacher and Philosopher." *The A.M.E. Church Review* 117, no. 384 (2001): 50-67.

— — —. "Black Women's Experiences, Philosophy of Religion and Womanist Theology: An Introduction through Jacquelyn Grant's Hermeneutics of Location." *The American Philosophical Association Newsletter on Philosophy and the Black Experience* 2, no. 1 (Fall 2002): 56-65.

— — —, ed. *Christology and Whiteness: What Would Jesus Do?* New York: Routledge, 2012.

— — —. "Dr. King's Philosophy of Religion: Theology of Somebodiness." In *The Liberatory Thought of Martin Luther King Jr.*, edited by Robert E. Birt, 43-59. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2012.

— — —. "The Honor Was All Mine: A Conversation with William R. Jones." *American Philosophical Association Newsletter on Philosophy and the Black Experience* 12, no. 2 (Spring 2013): 1-12.

Yates, Elizabeth. *Howard Thurman, Portrait of a Practical Dreamer*. New York: John Day Company, 1964.

Young, Henry James. "Black Theology and the Work of William R. Jones." *Religion in Life: A Christian Quarterly of Opinion and Discussion* 44 (1975): 14-23.

— — —. *Major Black Religious Leaders since 1940*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1979.

Young, Henry J., and Howard Thurman. *God and Human Freedom: A Festschrift in Honor of Howard Thurman*. Richmond, Ind: Friends United Press, 1983.