TOWARD A UNIVERSAL THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION: A CROSS-CULTURAL DISCOURSE FOR THE EMPOWERMENT OF THE MARGINALIZED AND THE TRANSFORMATION OF SOCIETY

by

TERRY MOORE

(Under the Direction of Sandy Dwayne Martin)

ABSTRACT

This thesis explores a universal theology of liberation that is inclusive of all religions and cultures, derived from the plight of the poor and oppressed, whereby the consciousness of the ruling factions of the world is awakened to transform the social, cultural, economic, and political policies and strategies of oppression. This language of liberation has been spoken throughout the evolution of American history. This theology is derived from the gospel of Christ in protest against racism, slavery, and the oppression of the disinherited of the world. From the forerunner of liberation language against racial oppression, Frederick Douglass, the abolitionist, spoke against the abominations of slavery. Howard Thurman, the mystic, advocated the love ethic of Jesus to engage the oppressor. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. emphasized the mission of the church as a force for social change in the challenge to racism. Malcolm X proclaimed the pursuit of justice by whatever means were necessary. Dr. James H. Cone declared the gospel of Christ as a message of liberation. Womanist theologians Delores S. Williams and Jacquelyn Grant declared the legitimacy of Black women's experiences and theological voices in the church. Mary Daly, the feminist theologian, argued for equality in church and society, free of gender and racial bias.

INDEX WORDS: Christianity, Theology, Liberation, Gospel, Christ, Oppression, Universality

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by

TERRY MOORE

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TERRY MOORE

Major Professor:	Sandy Dwayne Martin
Committee:	Alan Godlas
	Carolyn Medine
	Lesley G. Feracho

Electronic Version Approved:

Ron Walcott
Vice Provost for Graduate Education and Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Nature of the Project

This study examines the concept of a universal, cross-cultural theology of liberation that interrogates and challenges the intersectionality of religion, race, class, gender, and Christian theological discourse. It is a universal theology of liberation that embraces all religions and cultures, rooted in the plight of the poor and oppressed, through which the consciousness of the world's ruling factions is awakened to transform the social, cultural, economic, and political policies and strategies of oppression. This universal theology of liberation reaffirms the gospel of Christ as a gospel of liberation—one that is grounded in the struggle for the liberation of the poor and oppressed, who are victims of the global exploitative structures and institutions of economics and politics. It is a universal Christian theology of liberation, affirmed in the gospel of Christ, that identifies the victims of oppression with the suffering Christ and challenges the dominant structures of oppression by reaffirming the true mission of the suffering Christ as revealed in the gospel.

This dissertation posits that a universal theology of liberation—articulated in a dialectical language that is cross-cultural and inclusive of all religious traditions—must emerge from the lived experiences and plight of the poor and oppressed who face the world's exploitative economic and political powers. Furthermore, it argues that the religious and theological tradition of African Americans offers a strong resource for constructing this universal theology of liberation, grounded in the gospel of Christ, to serve the liberation needs of all humankind.

To illustrate the above thesis, this study will explore select historical and theological scholarly figures whose voices echoed the principles of liberation theology in the struggle for justice and equality. I will examine the liberative theological contributions of Frederick Douglass (1818–1895), the abolitionist; Howard Thurman (November 18, 1899–April 10, 1981), the mystic whose insight into the religion of Jesus shaped nonviolent spirituality; Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. (1929–1968), the civil rights leader and Baptist minister; Malcolm X, born Malcolm Little (May 19, 1925–February 21, 1965), the civil rights activist; and Dr. James H. Cone (August 5, 1938–April 28, 2018) of Union Theological Seminary, the leading proponent of Black Theology. Additionally, this study will reflect on the thoughts of leading womanist theologians and religious thinkers such as Delores S. Williams, Jacquelyn Grant, and Katie G. Cannon, who affirmed that the plight, lives, experiences, and voices of African American women must be included in any theology of liberation, as articulated by Cone.

Significance of the Project

This project is important because academic scholarship and humankind, in general, continue to wrestle with the issues of global oppression of millions across all cultural lines, as well as the reality of multicultural pluralism in diverse religious doctrines, articles of faith, and various religious customs and practices that are not all concerned with or do not all embrace the concept of a theology of liberation as advocated and taught by Dr. James H. Cone. There is a diverse, multicultural perspective of religion and what its primary objective should be. This project is essential to the development of a universal theology of liberation that affirms the gospel of Christ as a gospel of liberation, whereby the oppressed and the ruling powers of the world can meet and engage in theological dialogue cross-culturally. It is important because it

facilitates continued academic study, research, and development toward a universal, cross-cultural theology of liberation that all people can embrace and understand.

A number of points about Cone's Black Theology are essential for this study. First, Cone's Black Theology moved us a great deal in the direction of a universal theology of liberation. Second, his thinking was influenced by those who came before him. Third, there is a need to make his theology more universal. Dr. James H. Cone's profound work in his interpretation of Christian theology challenged the traditional theological language of Christianity that emerged from the old world of Euro-American theological discourse, which was largely silent on the issues of race, racism, White supremacy, and the oppression of African Americans. Dr. James H. Cone was angered by the racial oppression of Black people in North America at the close of the Civil Rights Movement. Cone was influenced by the lives and theologies of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X.

Methodology of the Project

I will utilize the writings of Frederick Douglass, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., and James H. Cone, and other relevant thinkers and leaders regarding the concepts of liberation and their relationship to religion, especially Christianity. This thesis will proceed in three major stages. First, it will examine the liberationist thoughts of selected individuals who were active before Cone's public career as a Black theologian, such as Frederick Douglass, Martin Luther King Jr., and Malcolm X. Second, the work will examine the thoughts of Cone as an exponent of Black Theology. Third, I will provide a critique of Cone's theology and set forth some general arguments that draw upon the tradition of Black religion and Cone's theology to help form a universal theology of liberation.

Outline of Chapters

Chapter 1: More specifically, the dissertation will contain the following projected chapters. Chapter 1 will introduce the definition, significance, and methodology of the work.

Chapter 2 will synthesize the thoughts of the historical abolitionist Frederick Douglass, who was a forerunner in the fight and struggle against racial oppression and slavery in the Americas. Frederick Douglass was a man born into slavery and later rose to the status of a free Black man. He became one of the first recognized Black leaders in North America. Douglass lectured extensively against the barbarity of slavery and racial oppression and became a shining and much-needed example of a Black diplomat advocating equality and justice for African Americans. He laid the groundwork for the Civil Rights Movement and the ongoing struggle for equality for African Americans.

He wrote and spoke out against the perversion of Christianity that was used to justify the human bondage of Black people. During Douglass's time as a political activist, he laid the groundwork for challenging the Westernized version of Christianity and Christian theology in both content and mission for its tolerance of racial oppression in America. Frederick Douglass's voice resonated with liberation theology as he reminded all Americans that slaves had no reason or cause to celebrate the Fourth of July. Douglass's voice and methodology aligned with a theology of liberation that paved the way for the mystic Howard Thurman, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and Dr. James H. Cone.

Through Douglass's life work as a political activist, abolitionist, author, and lecturer against slavery and racism, for justice and equality, he laid the foundations for the theological voice of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and Dr. James H. Cone in challenging the nation on the matters of Christianity, race, oppression, poverty, and the equality of all

humankind—truths that the gospel of Christ and the cross of Christ have affirmed. Therefore, I will synthesize Douglass's voice in his life's work as a political activist who truly embodied a theology of liberation, as Douglass lived, wrote, and spoke it in ways that challenged the nation.

Chapter 3: Howard Thurman was a powerful theological mystic who spoke a language of liberation for the disinherited, whereby the poor and oppressed were called to affirm human dignity through the teaching of Jesus, and the privileged and powerful were engaged on the plane of existence in the application of love and equality as exemplified by Jesus Christ in His teachings.

Chapter 4: I will examine the theology of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as the powerhouse theologian, academic, and political civil rights leader that he was. It was Dr. King who affirmed the true mission of the church and the gospel of Christ as a theology of liberation. Dr. King's ministry, lectures, and speeches affirmed that the church has a responsibility to address the social, cultural, economic, and political forces of oppression in society. As the civil rights leader of the 1950s and 1960s, Dr. King affirmed the need for the salvation of a racist society that exists under the system of a democratic republic. Therefore, Dr. King's voice and theology were a formidable force in liberation theology. I will also focus on Malcolm X, who emerged as a powerful civil rights activist and spokesperson for the Nation of Islam in the 1960s. He was a highly intelligent man who came forth from the hard knocks of life—from a broken and scattered family, to life as a street hustler, and later an incarcerated criminal, to his rebirth as a political civil rights activist and a member of the Nation of Islam. Malcolm X developed a form of liberation theology that resonated with Douglass, King, and Cone. He rejected Christianity as the White man's religion that was used in the oppression of Black people in the Americas. He embraced the philosophy taught to him by the Nation of Islam, with the Honorable Elijah

Muhammad as his teacher, spiritual guide, and mentor. Malcolm's mission, in compliance with the Nation of Islam, was to promote Black solidarity, Black pride, Black self-respect, and Black self-determination through identification with Black ancestry and the rebuilding of Black America in the struggle for justice, equality, and resistance to racial oppression.

Chapter 5: I will focus on Malcolm X, who emerged as a powerful civil rights activist and spokesperson for the Nation of Islam in the 1960s. Malcolm X was not soft-spoken regarding racial oppression. He did not agree with Dr. King's nonviolent resistance to racial segregation and forced integration. Malcolm X advocated separation and the rebuilding of Black pride and Black solidarity, through which Black people made decisions to address the plight of racial oppression. Black nationalism and "by any means necessary" became major components of Malcolm X's liberation theology as he challenged the system of racism in the Americas. Dr. James H. Cone synthesized the theology of Dr. King's nonviolent protest and integration and Malcolm X's Black nationalism and call for action "by any means necessary" to give birth to a Black Theology of Liberation.

Chapter 6: I will examine the thoughts of Dr. James H. Cone, who emerged as a challenging academic and revolutionary voice in his interpretation of the gospel of Christ as a gospel of liberation. In Cone's written texts *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969) and *A Black Theology of Liberation* (1970), Cone asserts that the gospel of Christ is a gospel of liberation, whereby Christian theological discourse must reflect on the plight of those who are the victims of social, economic, and political oppression.

It is within these two texts that Cone affirms that traditional Western and American theological discourse, as well as European theological discourse, have been blatantly silent in their theological reflection regarding victims of oppression—particularly from the perspective of

Black oppression—which is also relevant to the oppressed victims throughout our world, regardless of culture or ethnicity. It is in the writings of *Black Theology and Black Power* and *A Black Theology of Liberation* that Cone asserts that traditional American and European theological discourse require revision. There is a need for a universal theological dialogue that is cross-cultural and complementary to all religious faiths, whereby the victims of oppression and the oppressors can be united in a universal theological dialogue of discussion and reconciliation that includes the poor and oppressed as well as the rich and powerful.

Chapter 7: I will examine the womanist perspectives of liberation theology in the context and development of a universal theology of liberation through the womanist perspectives of Delores S. Williams, Jacquelyn Grant, and Katie G. Cannon, who affirm that Black women's lives and experiences are essential to the dialogue of liberation theology.

Chapter 8: I will present my analysis of these aforementioned Black thinkers and leaders, including Cone, as I incorporate my own thoughts on the necessity of a universal theology of liberation derived from my years of research and study of liberation theology as taught and affirmed by Frederick Douglass, the forerunner of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and Dr. James H. Cone, according to the gospel of Christ. My final thoughts and analysis will reflect on what this academic endeavor has taught me and what it can mean for further development in the academic study of religion. This dissertation aims to develop a universal theology of liberation that encompasses a dialectical language and engages with diverse religious traditions. This theological discourse seeks to address the plight of the poor and oppressed while simultaneously challenging the ruling economic and political powers of our world that perpetuate oppression. By drawing inspiration from the foundations of liberation theology as guided by the

gospel of Christ, this universal discourse can serve as a means of salvation for all humankind, fostering social justice, empowerment, and transformation on a global scale.

CHAPTER 2

FREDERICK DOUGLASS

The Forerunner of a Universal Theology of Liberation

Frederick Douglass is an important figure in American religious history. He experienced a spiritual rebirth in his flight from captivity and became a political activist against the institution of slavery and an advocate for equality for Black Americans. He became a public spokesperson and a minister of liberation theology for all people. He was a self-made man, a writer, a diplomat, a family man, and an exceptional statesman without compromise. He set an example for all leaders and emerged within his time as a man of principle, which allowed him to cross international boundaries and redefine what a true patriot was. It also redefined what humanity could be when the image and likeness of God were recognized and acknowledged in all people. Born to a Black slave mother and a White man, whom he never knew as his father, Frederick Douglass lived a life that spanned the bonds of chattel slavery to the status of a free man. This is a theological message of liberation that speaks to the soul and the salvation of a nation.

Frederick Douglass was a believer in the resurrected Christ, but he did not use Christianity as a crutch or leave the struggle entirely to God in the fight against racial oppression and the pursuit of equality for African Americans. He embraced the gospel of Christ as it is written and redefined that gospel from the reality of the enslaved and oppressed. Douglass is a forerunner of Howard Thurman, Dr. Martin Luther King's nonviolent approach (with modification), Malcolm X's more militant approach to the fight against racialized oppression by any means necessary, and Dr. James H. Cone's *Black Theology of Liberation*. In the Antebellum

South, White Christian missionaries had a goal of creating a perfect community of the enslaved and the enslaver. It was to be a community of compassion and mutuality with the gospel of Christ as the instrument to achieve it. Frederick Douglass was one of many who discerned the true concepts of Christianity. Douglass would affirm through his life as a social and political activist in the antislavery movement that the gospel of Christ was incompatible with chattel slavery.[1]

Dr. James H. Cone, a century later, would incorporate the words and thoughts of Douglass in his concept of a *Black Theology of Liberation*. In *A Black Theology of Liberation*, Cone affirms that "theology is not only a rational discourse about ultimate reality; it is also a prophetic word about the righteousness of God that must be spoken in clear, strong, and uncompromising language. Oppressors never like to hear the truth in a socio-political context defined by their lies."[2] Douglass understood this principle from the plane of existence that came from having been enslaved. He would spend the rest of his life as a free man working as a political activist, giving many speeches for the emancipation of slaves in which he would expose the true horrors of the institution of slavery and the destruction of the humanity of Black people in North America. Douglass tried to convey a message to White America and its government—a message that Howard Thurman, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and Dr. James H. Cone would carry forward as a continuation of his voice in modern America and in the struggle against racial oppression, discrimination, and its dehumanizing and debilitating effects on both White and Black Americans.

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[1] David E. Blight, *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2018), 1–2.
[2] Ibid., 25.

David W. Blight reveals a Black prophet of incredible integrity and perseverance, whose eloquent statements resonated with a theology of liberation against the destructive racist ideology that had come to define America's way of life under the guise of Christianity, whereby life for Americans became a four-hundred-year struggle that would give rise to the revolutionary voices of Thurman, King, Malcolm X, and Cone in the quest for liberation.

Frederick Douglass was born into the slaveholding society of the antebellum South, in which the slaveholders' rule was absolute. Douglass witnessed the dehumanization of Black humanity within the institution of slavery in the American South. White supremacy ruled with a cruel hand, without mercy, through the exchange and dominance of Black bodies traded, used, and brutalized with impunity. As a young lad, he lived in the grandeur of the beauty at the Wye plantation and the darker interior of the horror of slavery. Douglass's great intellect, through his keen senses, absorbed the brutality of the institution of slavery supported by the perversion of Christianity. He witnessed a Black woman fight viciously for her dignity and virtue against her White oppressor to prevent him from taking her liberty with her body, though she was ultimately overpowered and assaulted. It was then that it was affirmed in Douglass's mind that this formed foundation of legitimate resistance and the necessity of confronting violence: "He who is whipped often, is whipped easiest."[3] In this statement, Douglass asserts the necessary measure of resistance against racial oppression as an effective strategy of liberation. Douglass's voice and the language he used resonated as a discourse of liberation, affirming the right and the necessity of the oppressed to renounce the passive acceptance of racial oppression and assume responsibility for self-determination and liberation, thereby reaffirming one's right as a human being with free agency.

[3] Blight, *Prophet of Freedom,* 25.

Through Douglass's intellect, he internalized his feelings about the world in which he was born. While on the Wye plantation, Douglass was exposed to many extreme cruelties within slave society. He refused to be turned into a brute beast, and he realized that acquiring knowledge would be the key to survival. Blight notes that in 1855, Douglass wrote in *My Bondage and My Freedom*: "When pressed to extremes, it often avails itself of the most opposite ends. Extremes meet in the mind as in matter."[4] Douglass's thoughts resonate with the voice and thoughts of Howard Thurman, particularly regarding the struggle both internally and externally—to contend with one's own personhood, humanity, and survival in an inhumane racialized society in which one's humanity is not considered, and one's back is against the wall with the religion of Jesus being sanctioned as a tool of support, to be expounded upon in Chapter 1.[5]

Regarding his captivity at the Wye Plantation when he was between eight and nine years old, Douglass realized the necessity to protect his sanity from the external evils of slavery. The lonely existence of hunger, isolation, nudity, and coldness did not break the great mind or body of Douglass. He found compassion in his boyhood friend, Daniel Lloyd, and kindness in Miss Lucretia, who tended to his wounds. The survival techniques of the Wye slaves, expressed through their musical liberation and their vision of a better tomorrow, gave Douglass moments of strength and strategies for growth, independence, and survival.[6]

As a boy, Douglass experienced his people's use of music as a form of survival and an expression of happiness. This was what Blight affirmed as "absolution and redemption."[7] I assert

[4] Blight, *Prophet of Freedom*, 27–28.

[5] Ibid., 29–31.

[6] Ibid., 33.

[7] Ibid., 59.

that this is when Douglass experienced his first lessons in liberation theology as a form of resistance that all enslaved people employed in the hope of a better tomorrow. As the young Black future prophet progressed toward manhood, his living arrangements changed once again, moving to Baltimore with the slaveholding Christian Auld family. It is here that Douglass experienced a great disdain for the White slaveholding Christian establishment. Blight conveys with clarity that Douglass saw the Aulds as nothing more than cruel "Christian capitalists" whose prayers, worship, and praise among the White ministers of the Methodist faith were a sham.[8] Douglass experienced and witnessed whippings with a cowskin and saw a crippled girl being repeatedly brutalized without mercy. Was this the example of religious, slaveholding piety for which they all should have been thankful?[9]

Religious scholar Albert J. Raboteau in *Slave Religion: The Invisible Institution* affirms the apathy of many slaves felt toward the White religious establishment of the antebellum South. Charlie Van Dyke, a slave, recalled, "Church was what they called it, but all that preacher talked about was for us slaves to obey our masters and not to lie and steal. Nothing about Jesus was ever said, and the overseer stood there to see the preacher talk as he (the overseer) wanted him to talk."[10] This testimony affirmed Douglass's lack of interest in the slaveholders' version of Christian religion. This apathy inspired the emergence and development of the invisible institution of Black religious worship, as chronicled by Raboteau in *Slave Religion: The Invisible Institution.* "Slaves were frequently moved to hold their own religious meetings out of disgust

[8] Blight, *Prophet of Freedom* 59.

[9] Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 213–14.

[10] Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 214.

for the vitiated gospel preached by their masters' preachers. Sermons urging slaves to be obedient and docile were repeated ad nauseam."[11]

Therefore, Frederick Douglass could never be convinced of the compatibility of chattel slavery and Christianity. Douglass underwent a Christ-like experience of human suffering under a master named Edward Covey, as described in the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*. Douglass testifies that Covey was considered a professional "slave-breaker." He was a professor of religion, a pious soul, and a member, as well as a class leader in the Methodist church. All of this added weight to his role as a "Negro breaker."[12] It was under Covey's tyranny that Douglass developed an even greater contempt for the Christian slaveholder. In the text Frederick Douglass: *Prophet of Freedom*, Blight notes that Douglass experienced "religious hypocrisy" that he found sickening, as the Covey family gathered morning and night for Covey's display of religious sanctity.[13]

Douglass was tortured mercilessly by his sadistic slaveholder. Douglass's back was cut open from flogging with a switch that left his back permanently scarred. Douglass affirmed that Covey's goal was to strip him down and rebuild him into an obedient slave, which Douglass recognized as something that was far more sinister. Douglass wrote, "I was broken in body, soul, and spirit."[14] Douglass asserts, with an even more profound sense of internalized anguish, "My

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[11] John Chua, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* (Lincoln, NE: Cliffs Notes, Inc., 1998), 69.

[12] Blight, *Prophet of Freedom*, 60.

[13] Ibid., 63.

[14] James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 50th ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 74.

natural elasticity was crushed, my intellect languished, the disposition to read departed; behold a man transformed into a brute beast."[15]

Douglass's testimony of the horrors of slavery at the hands of a Christian slaveholder gives legitimacy to the thoughts of Howard Thurman and Dr. James H. Cone regarding the religion of Jesus as it was applied and taught to Black people who were enslaved in the antebellum South. Thurman asserts, "To those who need profound succor and strength to enable them to live in the present with dignity and creativity, Christianity often has been sterile and of little avail."[16] Cone would later give even stronger support in his conceptual analysis of Christianity and the oppression of Black people in the Americas when he stated, "Where Christ is, there is the church. Christ is to be found, as always, where men are enslaved and trampled underfoot; Christ is found suffering with the suffering; Christ in the ghetto, and there is also his Church."[17]

Given Frederick Douglass's Christ-like experience under the tyranny of Master Covey, Dr. Martin Luther King's methodology of nonviolent resistance would be questioned and challenged. Douglass himself took acts of self-preservation in fighting Covey defensively. Douglass's actions in stopping the abuse that he was being subjected to under Covey's rule resonate more with the thoughts and ideology of Malcolm X. However, Dr. King himself would later justify the actions Douglass took to preserve his humanity. King asserted, "One gets weary of being treated as if one is less than human and devoid of human feelings. This is the dehumanizing treatment of always being pushed out of the sun into darkness and public

[15] Cone, *Black Theology*, 80–81.

[16] Clayborne Carson, *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (London: Abacus, 2009), 60.

[17] Marshall Frady, *Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Waterville, ME: Thorndike Press, 2002), 130.

humiliation," which Douglass experienced under the cruel brutality of Covey while being held in captivity. Dr. King affirmed that resistance and protest to such treatment are a God-given right and a legal right.

Therefore, Douglass's defensive fight against Covey was a form of psychological warfare against slavery. In the final confrontation, Douglass recounted that when he began to speak as an abolitionist to the public, he stopped Covey's physical abuse. Douglass proclaimed his manhood against what he described as "ritualized violence," in which Douglass had to engage Covey to preserve a sense of "male dignity and power."[18] There is a dialectical language that is essential to the conceptual understanding of liberation theology and to the development of a universal theological dialogue that is cross-cultural and encompasses all religious faiths. Douglass's words and thoughts on racial oppression, slavery, and the misuse of Christianity as it was applied in the antebellum South positioned him as a major forerunner of liberation for African Americans. His language resonated with future voices, methodologies, and theologies of Thurman, King, Malcolm X, and Cone. Douglass was the Black antebellum prophet who revealed the horrors of slavery to the world with the tone of a liberation theology that sought to restore the image and likeness of Black people back to the image and likeness of God.

In 1845, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, *an American Slave* was published. This was the moment when Douglass officially became a writer as well as an active international voice of liberation in the antislavery campaign. The narrative became a personal indictment against the White religious establishment in America, as well as a direct challenge to the Constitution of the United States and the Declaration of Independence. Douglass's objective on his tour of Great Britain and Ireland was to spread the voice of liberation. Douglass felt it was

[18] Blight, *Prophet of Freedom,* 28, 65.

prudent to express the hypocrisy of Christianity under the rule of the slaveholders of the American South. It was in Belfast, Ireland, that Douglass lectured on the hypocrisy of Christianity as it was utilized in the inhumane treatment of African Americans. Douglass branded the southern religious establishments as "proslavery churches."[19]

In Douglass's speeches, he compared the oppression of Black slavery in America to the oppression of the poor Irish in Ireland. Blight asserts that "Douglass claimed that many of the Irish lived as slaves."[20] Douglass affirmed the reality of British imperialism, but Blight believes that Douglass was also defining a distinction between the poverty in Ireland and the slavery in America. The question was, "What is slavery, really?"[21] Douglass pointed to the reality of slavery to his Irish audiences, as he would do in many speeches to come after returning to America—"Slavery was not what took away any one right or property in man: it took man himself, and from himself, doomed him to be a degraded thing, ranking him with the bridled horse and muzzled ox, and making him a chattel personal, a marketable commodity."[22] Douglass argued to his audiences in Ireland that there was a difference between extreme poverty and not being a slave. Blight states that not all the Irish agreed with Douglass on his analogy that being a slave was worse than being poor, hungry, and in rags in Ireland.[23]

Douglass's tour of Britain and Ireland gave him the affirmation of the global issue of oppression and poverty. As a result, during Douglass's first overseas tour, he became a voice that acknowledged that the oppression and poverty of Black people in America were not exclusive to

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[19] Blight, *Prophet of Freedom,*149.

[20] Ibid., 149.

[21] Ibid., 149.

[22] Ibid., 149.

[23] Ibid., 150.

Black people alone. Thurman, Cone, King, and Malcolm X would later build upon the liberating voice of this early Black American prophet. Douglass affirmed vehemently that the suffering of African Americans within the institution of slavery of the American antebellum South was sanctioned by the perverse use of Christianity. In Douglass's book *My Bondage and My Freedom,* Douglass writes, "I am a slave—a slave for life, a slave with no rational ground to hope for freedom. It rendered me a living embodiment of mental and physical wretchedness."[24] The inhumanity of slavery was emphasized in Douglass's speeches throughout his life. In a speech given in Rochester, New York, on December 18, 1850, he delivered one of his strongest indictments against slavery—supported by laws of slave codes and the Christianity of the slaveholder—and, in his dialectical language, affirmed the necessity of a theology of liberation whereby the gospel of Christ is interpreted as a gospel of liberation. This supports my thesis that a universal Christian theological dialogue that encompasses all religions and cultures is a necessity.

Douglass states, "The slave finds more of the milk of human kindness in the bosom of the savage Indian than in the heart of his Christian master. He leaves the man of the Bible and takes refuge with the man of the tomahawk. He rushes from the praying slaveholder into the paws of the bear. He quits the homes of men for the haunts of wolves. He prefers to encounter a life of trial, however bitter, or death, however terrible, rather than dragging out his existence under the domination of these kind masters."[25] This is the language of liberation and a call for the re-evaluation of Christian scripture that speaks with the universality of the gospel of Christ as a gospel of liberation.

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[24] Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (New York, NY: Barnes & Noble, 2005), 334.

[25] Douglass, *My Bondage*, 334.

Furthermore, the dialogue that Douglass used in his speeches and lectures was not only an earlier form of liberation language but also a revelatory language, as he publicly refuted the common belief of White Americans, North and South, that chattel slavery was an acceptable part of God's divine providence for people of African ancestry. In the text *Religion of the Old South*, written by Donald G. Mathews, he writes on this matter in a chapter entitled "We Who Own Slaves, Honor God's Law."[26] James Furman was a Baptist clergyman and slaveholder in South Carolina. He wrote a letter regarding the abuse of a slave by his master. In it, he states that "all slaveholders had a moral obligation to exercise proper authority in managing slaves."[27] Furman emphasized that it was truly the authority and will of God that demanded fair and proper treatment of slaves. Mathews interprets this letter as an example of the firm belief in what he calls "the Evangelical Slaveholding Ethic."[28]

Therefore, from a traditional Southern cultural perspective that accepted the institution of slavery, the Evangelicals felt more obligated to Christianize slaves, not to abolish slavery. In doing so, they believed they would create a more acceptable "orderly and benevolent social system."[29] It was in Belfast, Ireland—before an audience of Catholics and Protestants—that Douglass vehemently attacked slavery in America as an alliance of what Blight described as "religious corruption."[30] Douglass argued to his audience that the very principles of Christianity were being used to support the institution of slavery in America, a system rooted in racial

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[26] Donald G. Mathews, *Religion in the Old South* (Chicago: Chicago Univ. Press, 1977), 136.

[27] Ibid.

[28] Mathews, *The Old South*, 136–137.

[29] Ibid., 137.

[30] Blight, *Prophet of Freedom*, 150.

oppression. Blight asserts, “Douglass used those same principles as weapons against proslavery religious factions.”[31]

Therefore, Douglass paved the way for future scholars and theologians in the mainstream of America, such as Howard Thurman, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and Malcolm X—each with their distinct voices in the struggle against racial oppression, discrimination, equality, and justice, and the re-evaluation of Christian theology that is a theology of liberation inclusive of all religions and cultures. It was in Rochester, New York, on July 5, 1852, that Douglass gave one of his most decisive speeches in a dialectical language of freedom and equality for people that resonated with the substance and tone of a universal theology of liberation for all humankind. Douglass’s speech was an indictment against the continuation of slavery in America within a country that professed itself to be a Christian nation with a written document of the Declaration of Independence that declares all men to be equal and free. This was a powerful moment of declaration, an eloquent language of indictment, and a call for liberation, using Christian syntax that made Douglass’s speech memorable with a powerful tone of liberation theology.

Douglass states, “The rich inheritance of justice, liberty, prosperity, and independence, bequeathed by your fathers, is shared by you, not by me. The sunlight that brought life and healing to you has brought stripes and death to me.”[32] He underscores that his humanity and free agency were smothered by chattel slavery. He then adds, “This Fourth of July is yours, not mine.”[33] African Americans in the antebellum South were being held in slavery at the time of Douglass’s speech. Douglass delivered a powerful rebuke upon his audience when he stated, “To

[31] Ibid., 150.

[32] Douglass, *My Bondage*, 341.

[33] Ibid., 341.

drag a man in fetters into the grand illuminated temple of liberty, and call upon him to join you in joyous anthems, is inhumane mockery and sacrilegious irony."[34] Douglass made his boldest claim in this speech—an appeal for an appropriate theology of liberation for all religions and cultures—when he proclaimed:

> By the rivers of Babylon, we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion.
>
> We hung our harps on the willow trees there,
>
> for our captors demanded that we sing.
>
> They asked us for songs of joy, saying,
>
> "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"
>
> But how can we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?
>
> If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
>
> may my right hand lose its skill.
>
> If I do not remember you,
>
> may my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth.[35]

In Douglass's eloquent speech given on the Fourth of July, he publicly cried out in a form of theology, saying to his White audience in Rochester, New York, "Free my people!" This celebration was about White Americans, not African Americans who remained in human bondage in the antebellum South. Douglass was establishing and affirming the legitimacy of the argument of my thesis—that there is a necessity for the development of a universal theology of liberation that encompasses all religions and cultures, whereby the poor, the oppressed, the marginalized, and the outcast of society are theologically included and liberated, and the ruling

[34] Ibid., 341.

[35] Ibid., 341.

factions of global politics, economic, and resources are consciously awakened to change their politics and economics that make some rich and keep many others poor. Douglass was a major forerunner in laying down the foundations for a change in Christian theology—that is, in fact, the gospel of Christ, the universal gospel of liberation

CHAPTER 3

HOWARD THURMAN

Howard Thurman (November 18, 1899–April 10, 1981) was an exceptional scholar of religion and is viewed as a mystic. He was an educator, theologian, philosopher, and major intellectual pioneer in the campaign for civil rights. Thurman makes a profound statement that resonates with a universal perspective of those who are poor, oppressed, marginalized, and pushed to the perimeter of society. Thurman states, "Many and varied are the interpretations dealings with what the teachings and life of Jesus have to say to those who stand, at a moment in human history, with their backs against the wall."[36] In this statement, Thurman supports the thesis of this paper—that it is a universal theology of liberation, inclusive of all religions and cultures, from which the theological dialogue emerges out of the plight of the disinherited and awakens the conscience of the ruling factions of economics, politics, and culture, whereby the ruling factions awaken to change the policies and systems of oppression. It is Frederick Douglass, the forerunner of great modern voices like Howard Thurman, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and Dr. James H. Cone, who gives testimony and validity to Thurman's thoughts on "the religion of Jesus and the disinherited."[37]

From the text *My Bondage and My Freedom* by Douglass, he gives a powerful testimony of the plight of those who are the chattel property of another human being. Douglass gives a detailed description of the lives of disinherited Black bodies on Colonel Edward Lloyd's

[36] Howard Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2022), 1.

[37] Ibid., 1–2.

plantation in St. Michaels, Maryland. Douglass affirmed that the issue of religion and politics were of little concern for the enslaved at Colonel Lloyd's plantation. The slaveholding class of people were beyond the Christian word of the preacher, and the other class was so low and demanding that they were of little concern to the preacher. The poor would hear the gospel when they were able to make a financial contribution, and as for slaves who were without money, they were also without the gospel.[38] From the plane of existence of the slaveholder, politics was something that they had and discussed in their own right as the ruling class of the antebellum South, and as far as religion, Douglass affirmed that religion was not something "necessarily needed."[39] Douglass states that, in its isolation, seclusion, and self-reliant independence, Colonel Lloyd's plantation resembles what the baronial domains were during the Middle Ages in Europe: "Grim, cold, and unapproachable by all genial influences from communities without, there it stands; full three hundred years behind the age, in all that relates to humanity and morals."[40] Douglass thus affirms an existence in which Black lives were reduced to a status of nonbeings without human rights; therefore, even when Christianity and the teachings of Jesus were allowed, it was a complex dilemma in which the disinherited must contend to affirm their own humanity and the rights of free agency while at the same time wrestling with the issue of being chattel property of a people who were teaching the religious principles brought to humankind by Jesus of Nazareth. This internal and external struggle, as affirmed by Thurman, lies at the very heart of the theology of the disinherited.

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[38] Ibid., 60.

[39] Douglass, *My Bondage*, 60.

[40] Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 1.

The imposing and profound thought of religion (Christianity) as taught by Jesus, as put forth by Thurman, is a "varied and complicated issue for those who stand, at a moment in human history, with their backs against the wall."[41] The transcendent reality is assumed to be far removed from the plight of the suffering slave or freeman. How would the illiterate victims of human bondage come to know that their Jesus of Galilee shares in their suffering when the liberating gospel of Christ that is being taught to them is also from the one who owns and oppresses them—bond and free? The hermeneutics of scripture and theology are derived from the cultural perspective of the oppressor.

Therefore, Thurman affirms that there is a moral responsibility on the part of those who profess the Christian faith regarding those who are less fortunate.[42] Thurman asserts, "The impulse at the heart of Christianity is the human will to share with others what one has found meaningful to oneself, elevated to the height of a moral imperative."[43] Frederick Douglass reminds us that the "moral imperative" as put forth by Thurman was not something that the slaveholding class of the antebellum South—or even the post-emancipation society—considered in dealing with the disinherited, despite the fact that it was in fact the gospel of Christ that was the profession of faith for the majority of Christians in America from its infancy into modernity.

Douglass gives testimony to the inward and outward struggle of the disinherited who live as chattel property and must contend with the tension between their earthly suffering and the existence of a transcendent reality—a hope for a better tomorrow—that gives insight into

[41] Ibid., 2.

[42] Ibid., 2.

[43] Douglass, *My Bondage*, 76.

Thurman's reflections on a faith understood as the faith of Jesus himself. Douglass speaks of the plight of enslaved women and men in relation to the Holy Other, writing,

> The fear of God and the hope of heaven are found sufficient to sustain many slave women amidst the snares and dangers of their strange lot; but, this side of God and heaven, a slave woman is at the mercy of the power, caprice, and passion of her owner. Slavery provides no means for the honorable continuance of the race. Marriage, as imposing obligations on the parties to it, has no existence here, except in such hearts as are purer and higher than the standard of morality around them. It is one of the consolations of my life that I know of many honorable instances of persons who maintained their honor where all around was corrupt.[44]

Thurman asserts that the greater issue for the disinherited regarding religion is, "What does religion offer to meet their own needs?"[45] This statement supports my thesis that a universal theology of liberation derived from the plight of the oppressed, is inclusive of all cultures and religions and speaks to both the oppressed and the ruling powers of society regarding the necessity of change, whereby all are equal with full participation, acknowledged, and recognized members of society. Frederick Douglass was a major forerunner and voice of liberation theology that spoke to the world regarding slavery and the misuse of the "religion of Jesus" to sanction slavery against Black humanity. Douglass and Thurman give powerful testimony to why Christianity became a yoke of iron for Black people in the Americas.

Douglass professed that the religion of the antebellum South was not Christianity as exemplified and established by Jesus of Nazareth. He spoke of the captivity of Black humanity

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[44] Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited,* 3.

[45] Douglass, *My Bondage*, 194.

that was dehumanized by the Christian slaveholding class, which revealed extreme suffering under a faith in which the suffering Christ himself identified with the poor, the oppressed, and outcasts of the world. Douglass writes, "I assert most unhesitatingly, that the religion of the South, as I have observed it and proved it, is a mere covering for the most horrid crimes; the justifier of the most appalling barbarity; a sanctifier of the most hateful frauds, and a secure shelter under which the darkest, foulest, grossest, and most infernal abominations fester and flourish. Were I again to be reduced to the condition of a slave, next to that calamity, I should regard the fact of being the slave of a religious slaveholder the greatest that could befall me."[46]

The Christian slaveholder was considered to be the cruelest and most debased of the slaveholding class, as affirmed by Douglass. Douglass categorizes the religious slaveholder as being extremely violent in nature. The Reverend Daniel Weeden was a slaveholder of the Protestant Methodist denomination who engaged in the sacred rituals and ceremonies of Christianity. Douglass asserts that Weeden did not spare the whip and believed it was to be used often to remind enslaved people of the rightful authority of their masters over them. There was a female slave whom Douglass identifies as Celia. She was sparsely clothed, and her back was raw with the lash, like Christ's. Mr. Weeden believed that "the good slave must be whipped to be kept good, and the bad slave must be whipped to be made good."[47] It is most prudent to assume that a beaten-down slave would ponder in their minds many days and nights regarding the slaveholder's version of Christianity, as scripture was used as the rightful authority of the slaveholder to punish slaves with impunity. The religion of Christ could not explain their

[46] Ibid., 194.

[47] Ibid., 195–196.

captivity and inhumane treatment. There was no Christian theology that related to or addressed their unending suffering as witnessed and experienced by Douglass.

There was the Reverend Rigby Hopkins, who resided in Talbot County, Maryland. Douglass states that the utter severity of the man in his methods of managing his slaves made him a man to be feared by all the enslaved people residing in the area. Douglass writes,

> The peculiar feature of his government was his system of whipping slaves, as he said, in advance of deserving it. He always managed to have one or two slaves to whip on Monday morning, so as to start his hands to their work, under the inspiration of a new assurance on Monday, that his preaching about kindness, mercy, brotherly love, and the like, on Sunday, did not interfere with, or prevent him from establishing his authority, by the cowskin. He whipped for the smallest offenses, by way of preserving the commission of larger ones.[48]

Here is the language of inhumanity under the guise of Christianity that demands the reinterpretation of the religion established and practiced by Jesus Christ.

Thurman notes, as Douglass asserts, that the perversion of Christianity was not born into the world by Jesus, as he explains in his book *Jesus and the Disinherited.* Thurman affirms that African Americans' forefathers were transported to the Americas as a Black commodity from the West Coast of Africa. Thurman asserts that those who were involved in the transportation of Africans to the Americas were members of the Christian faith. It was also John Newton, a writer and minister of the Christian faith, who profited from slave trafficking to the Americas, and one of the ships used by the British to transport Africans was named *Jesus*.[49] Thurman, along with

[48] Ibid., 196.

[49] Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 4.

others, went on a pilgrimage of friendship to India, Burma, and Ceylon in 1935. After a lecture given by Thurman at the Law College of the University of Ceylon in Colombo, titled "Civil Disabilities Under States' Rights in the United States," he reflected on the global implications of oppression and faith.[50]

Thurman was questioned by the principal of the law school about his reason for coming. The principal reminded Thurman of the atrocities committed against Black people by Whites under the Westernized version of Christianity. The principal stated, "The men who bought the slaves were Christians. Christian ministers, quoting the Christian apostle Paul, gave the sanction of religion to the system of slavery."[51] Thurman noted further that African Americans were emancipated by a man who did not proclaim Christianity as a profession of faith for himself but acted on a moral conviction. Since emancipation, the principal further asserted that African Americans have endured the violent tyranny of White supremacy manifested in the form of violence against Black bodies through "segregation, lynching, and burnings."[52]

For Thurman, the statements made by the principal became a critical moment in understanding the historical Jesus and the teachings of Jesus. Thurman describes the historical Jesus as a poor Jew in Palestine, born of low degree among the common masses. He was neither Roman in heritage nor culture, nor was he a part of the powerful Jewish religious elite of his time. Thurman offers an excellent comparative analysis of Jesus, his life mission, and ministry in relation to the cultural, political, and economic plight of Black people in the Americas. Thurman asserts that those who are among the "socially and politically disinherited" are faced with the

[50] Ibid., 4.

[51] Ibid., 4.

[52] Ibid., 11.

major issue of both physical and psychological survival—of life, culture, and religious heritage—while living under the rule of a powerful regime in which their people face isolation and oppression within that society.[53] Thurman uses the life and ministry of Jesus as the exemplar in the methodology that the disinherited must employ to survive socially, culturally, politically, and economically.

Thurman affirms that Jesus directed his life and his message primarily toward the "House of Israel," because they were disenfranchised people living within a Greco-Roman society, in which their status as a culture and nation of people had been compromised—similar to that of African Americans.[54] Therefore, Thurman asserts, Jesus's "message focused on the urgency of radical change in the inner attitude of the people. He recognized fully that the hearts are the issues of life and that no external force, however great and overwhelming, can for long destroy a people if it does not first win the victory of the spirit against them."[55] Thurman affirms that it is the inner life that Jesus emphasized and concentrated on within the person, because it is where the struggle takes place in relation to the outer struggles and difficulties of life that the disinherited must constantly battle; therefore, affirms that Jesus "placed his finger on the inward center as the crucial arena where the issues would determine the destiny of his people."[56]

Thurman asserts that it is Jesus as the exemplar with whom the disinherited must identify and whose teachings they must follow. Jesus's life, social status, and plight are representative of the outer and inner struggle that the marginalized and oppressed people of society have always had to contend with. Therefore, it is the teachings of Jesus and the strategy that the disinherited

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[53] Ibid.

[54] Ibid., 11

[55] Ibid., 1–11.

[56] Ibid., 132–133.

must employ as tools of survival when they have their "back against the wall."[57] This supports the thesis of my argument: that the development of a universal theology of liberation—derived from the plight of the poor and oppressed, encompassing all religions and cultures, and awakening the conscience of the ruling powers to transform global economics and politics so that all humankind are acknowledged and made equal—is necessary.

Thurman's pilgrimage of friendship became a major revelation through his meeting and conversation with Mahatma Gandhi, which provided a major revelation and insight into the struggle against oppression. Thurman asked Gandhi why India had failed to rid its country of British imperialism. Gandhi told Thurman that "the effectiveness of creative ethical ideals such as nonviolence, ahimsa, depends upon the degree to which the masses of people are able to embrace a notion and have it become a working part of their total experience."[58] This is a critical point that Gandhi made to Thurman regarding the failure to extricate India from British imperial rule.

Frederick Douglass, one of the forerunners in the struggle against racial oppression and slavery, gives testimony that echoes the counsel Gandhi had with Thurman regarding the effectiveness of a mass movement whereby people resist collectively to neutralize the contagion. In 1836, Douglass was purchased by Mr. William Freeland from his previous owner, Captain Thomas Auld. Douglass reflected on his past life and his current situation. He affirms that Mr. Freeland was in fact a much kinder slaveholder, of whom he said that improved significantly; however, it remained a condition of human bondage. Douglass longed for freedom of mind,

[57] Douglass, *My Bondage*, 132–133.

[58] Ibid., 207.

body, soul, and spirit. He wanted to exercise his rights as a human being, to live life as intended by his creator. He decided to devise a plan for freedom.[59]

As Douglass affirmed within his own mind his right to live as a free man, he recalls the toxic psychological impact of the "slaveholding priestcraft" that was used on slaves every Sunday, which gives credence to the words Gandhi spoke to Thurman in their meeting. Douglass recalls the typical sermon delivered in the church at St Michael's in Talbot County, Maryland (1833–1836). Douglass writes,

> The duty of obedience to our master; to recognize God as the author of our enslavement; to regard running away as an offense alike against God and man; to deem our enslavement a merciful and beneficial arrangement; to esteem our condition in this country a paradise compared to that from which we had been snatched in Africa; to consider our hard hands and dark color as God's mark of displeasure, and as pointing us out as the proper subjects of slavery; that the relation of master and slave was one of reciprocal benefits; that our work was not more serviceable to our masters than our master's thinking was serviceable to us.[60]

Therefore, slaves had been psychologically programmed within a slaveocracy to believe that their plight or human bondage was a natural component of God's divine providence. Slaves serving under a kinder, more humane slaveholder would therefore feel a concern and fear when planning a flight to freedom with anyone who had known only captivity—deprived of the power of literacy, intellectual development, individual autonomy, and the right to fight and resist institutionalized oppression, all reinforced by a perverted Christian theology that served the

[59] Ibid., 217

[60] Ibid., 217

oppressor. Thus, Douglass, being a literate man, used the power of the mind and words to persuade a group of slaves to join him in his flight for freedom. He was the leader, and his literacy gave him the power of persuasion among a group of people who had only known the culture, politics, economics, and religion of the slaveocracy. Douglass was the right leader, and he presented his plan to Henry Harris, John Harris, Sandy Jenkins, Charles Roberts, and Henry Bailey. They informed Douglass, "Show us how the thing is to be done," said they, "and all else is clear."[61] They gave Douglass their full assurance. They were in solidarity with their flight to the promised land. However, until their day of departure, Douglass wrestled with many thoughts and emotions as he recollected the full effects of institutionalized slavery and its impact on those who had only known captivity.

There was the hatred of human bondage complemented by a lifetime of fear, deception, and that rare component and experience of love, which Douglass experienced throughout his captivity as a southern slave, and Douglass did express the great love he had for his own people and his personal friends.[62] The day flight came, Douglass stated, "it is all over with us, thought I, we are surely betrayed" and Douglass decided to stand steadfast for the coming judgment.[63] When the reality of the failed attempt to run for freedom set in, Douglass would later make a prophetic utterance: "The day of the oppressor will come at last."[64] He took full responsibility for what happened, and none of the slaves that were a part of the plan to take flight for the right to

[61] Ibid., 221.

[62] Ibid., 221.

[63] Ibid., 133.

[64] Ibid.

freedom condemned or blamed Douglass for the failed attempt to risk everything for their freedom; they were his friends to the end.[65]

For Douglass and his companions to reach freedom, their effort had to be taken up by the broader community of enslaved people—even by those outside his immediate group—so that it could "become a working part of their total experience."[66] This, Gandhi informed Thurman, was necessary in the resistance against oppression. Douglass and his friends had been betrayed. This is related to "the creative push" and the "vitality" zeal that oppressed masses must have in solidarity to effectively challenge the political and economic structures of oppression.[67] Gandhi informed Thurman that the Indian people had failed in their attempt to free themselves from British imperialism because the masses of India had become bankrupt in vitality as a result of hunger—a condition Gandhi affirmed was due to being "poverty stricken," caused by India's prohibition from manufacturing cotton cloth, the loss of cottage industries, and the decline of the spinning wheel. Gandhi sought to revive industry and self-sufficiency in India by encouraging people to raise their own food and live off the land. [68]

Furthermore, the lack of vitality among the people in India was due to a lack of self-respect arising from "untouchability in Hinduism," of which they comprised a large portion of India's population and are categorized as outcasts.[69] They were sentenced to a life of poverty on the periphery of Indian society, which resulted in a lack of vitality as well as a loss of self-respect. African Americans have had to contend with similar issues in the Americas for four

[65] Ibid., 133.

[66] Ibid., 33.

[67] Ibid., 168.

[68] Ibid., 169.

[69] Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 1–5.

hundred years. Frederick Douglass, one of the forerunners in the struggle against racial oppression and for liberation and equality, gave powerful statements that support the words of Mahatma Gandhi regarding what happens when a culture of people loses their vitality and self-respect in combating racist imperialism. Douglass came under the rule of a new Master who had a fierce reputation as a Negro-breaker. Douglass writes,

> Mr. Covey succeeded in breaking me. I was broken in body, soul, and spirit. My natural elasticity was crushed; my intellect languished; the disposition to read departed; the cheerful spark that lingered about my eye died; the dark night of slavery closed in upon me; and behold, a man transformed into a brute beast.[70]

Covey's extreme brutality and constant flogging reduced Douglass to a nonbeing, one who could no longer acknowledge the humanity or the image of God within. The victim or victims of such inhuman treatment would ask "Where is God?" Douglass elaborates further under Covey's rule,

> I was completely wrecked, changed, and bewildered; goaded almost to madness at one time, and at another reconciling myself to my wretched condition. Everything in kindness which I had experienced at Baltimore; all my former hopes and aspirations for usefulness in the world, and the happy moments spent in the exercise of religion, contrasted with my then-present lot, only increased my anguish. I suffered bodily as well as mentally. I had neither sufficient time in which to eat nor sleep, except on Sunday. The overwork and the brutal chastisement of which I was the victim, combined with that ever-gnawing and soul-devouring thought—I am a slave, I am a slave for life. A slave with no rational

[70] Ibid., 1–99

ground to hope for freedom rendered me a living embodiment of mental and physical wretchedness.[71]

Covey was successfully crushing all reason and purpose for being out of Douglass. Covey was causing Douglass to lose his self-respect, vitality, and the "creative push for life" spoken of by Gandhi to Thurman—to fight or resist oppression any longer. Thurman's meeting with Gandhi would fuel Thurman's theology from an intellectual and spiritual perspective, regarding "the religion of Jesus and the disinherited."[72] Thurman's thoughts would be forthcoming on how the disinherited must combat oppression through the perspectives of fear, deception, hate, and love. This is a very complex analysis and methodology for understanding how the disinherited have their "backs against the wall."[73] There is a universal dialectical theology derived from the gospel of Christ that is inclusive rather than exclusive toward all religions and cultures, whereby the disinherited and oppressed are liberated and the ruling factions of world economics and politics are consciously awakened to the language of universal liberation. Thurman developed an intellectual theology that explicates the strategies of life for the disinherited, one that empowers inwardly and strengthens the disinherited to contend with the larger society and the outer struggle of oppression while embracing a religion practiced and exemplified in Christ himself.

Thurman affirmed that fear is a constant companion in the lives of the disinherited. This fear permeates every area of life, from family life, community, school, sacred space, and educational institutions, and most certainly in various social encounters. However, the fear most

[71] Ibid., 26.

[72] Ibid., 27.

[73] Ibid., 27–28.

prevalent among the disinherited is one derived from various "aspects of experience and detailed states of mind."[74] Thurman also affirms that the disinherited are typically isolated and helpless within a system of inequality. There is a component of violence that accompanies the disinherited like a black shroud of expectancy. Violence is an ever-present threat that disinherits them, creating an element of fear that pervades the lives of those who are socially, economically, and politically disadvantaged. Thurman describes the fear as "terrifying" because all of the power and resources needed to fight and protect rest with those who are part of the advantaged class. Because this is true in America from colonial times to modernity, it is an all-consuming fear that has become an intricate component of the daily lives of the disinherited.[75]

Thurman asserts, "in a society in which certain people or groups, by virtue of economic, social, or political power, have dead weight advantage over others who are essentially without that kind of power, those who are thus disadvantaged know that they cannot fight back effectively, that they cannot protect themselves, and that they cannot demand protection from their persecutors."[76] Thurman's thoughts here are supported by Douglass in *My Bondage and My Freedom* in his testimony of the brutality and fear in which he lived while under Edward Covey's rule as his master.[77] It is this sort of "naked physical violence" that Thurman asserts the disinherited must contend with, which debases the disadvantaged without a legitimate means of defense.[78] This leads to a complete loss of "self-respect and personal dignity" without which "a

[74] Douglass, *My Bondage* 158–174.

[75] Thurman. *The Disinherited,* 28.

[76] Ibid., 28.

[77] Douglass, My Bondage, 187.

[78] Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited,* 28–29.

man is no man."[79] As exemplified by Douglass, the day he fought Covey, he defensively stopped the violence against his body and personhood and declared himself to be a man.[80]

Because the threat of violence blankets the lives of the disinherited, they must live with the constant fear that there is no regard for the protection of their personhood and for their rights as human beings. They must live in what Thurman described as a "war of nerves," which is prevalent among the underprivileged in any society where power distribution is grossly unequal and the urgent issue is "physical violence," of which, Thurman states, the disinherited cannot allow to permeate their inner being.[81] Therefore, fear becomes a component that serves the disinherited as a mechanism of safety. It helps shield the disinherited from a complete breakdown.[82] The fear is accompanied by the constant threat of violence that establishes specific safety patterns of behavior in their interaction with the privileged and empowered class. This fear, with the threat of violence, places restrictions on the disinherited that help protect their lives.[83]

I assert that this restriction is best exemplified in the evolution of the lives of Black people in the Americas—from slavery to emancipation, Jim Crow, the lynching era, and into modern-day police brutality against African Americans. Therefore, Thurman affirms that "the threat of violence within the framework of well-nigh limitless power is a weapon by which the weak are held in check."[84] Because the threat of violence can have a "constitutional authority,"

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[79] Ibid., 30.

[80] Ibid.

[81] Ibid., 31.

[82] Ibid.

[83] Ibid., 36.

[84] Douglass, *My Bondage*, 9.

violence can take place at any moment and in any setting in which the disinherited may find themselves in contact with the empowered ruling faction.[85] Therefore, it must be asserted, how can "the religion of Jesus" be of service to a people that must live in constant fear in a society that was not created for them?[86] This is the pivotal question Thurman asks, just as it was at Corinthian Hall in Rochester, New York, on July 5, 1852, when Douglass delivered his speech, "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July."[87]

Thurman affirms that those who believe in following the doctrine of Jesus are, in fact, children of the Most High, and that the Creator of all things is concerned with the affairs of humankind.[88] Thurman asserts, "In this world the socially disadvantaged man is constantly given a negative answer to the most important personal questions upon which mental health depends: who am I? what am I?"[89] When a person feels disconnected as well as isolated from the larger society, a feeling of not really belonging anywhere can develop which can affect one's self-esteem and foster the development of an "inferiority complex."[90]

Therefore, religion as it was put forth and applied by Jesus becomes a critical application for the survival of the disinherited, both psychologically and physically, in contending with fear and the threat of spontaneous violence. When a person has a strong conviction in their relationship with and knowledge of God, it serves as a mechanism to reconfigure relationships and interactions with all other people.[91] Thurman affirms that to live in fear of others despite the

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[85] Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited,* 39.

[86] Ibid., 39

[87] Ibid., 59–40.

[88] Ibid., 41.

[89] Ibid.

[90] Ibid.

[91] Ibid., 41.

level of power that they may have over you and others, can lead to "a basic denial of the integrity of life."[92] There is a plane of existence in the being of all people where the Holy Other has preeminence.[93] To live in constant fear would be a pathway to destruction, Thurman affirms.[94]

For the disinherited who follow the religion of Jesus, the sense of morals, values, and self-worth is firmly established in that one's existence has meaning and purpose, despite oppression. Therefore, the constant threat of violence, through which death can occur, will be seen for what it is. Thurman affirms that there are other realities that can be considered worse than death.[95] Thurman writes, "to deny one's own integrity of personality in the presence of the human challenge is one of those things."[96] Therefore, in one's relationship with Jesus, it is the inner being that is strengthened because the disinherited know that they belong to God. Thurman asserts, "If a man's ego has been stabilized, resulting in a sure grounding of his sense of personal worth and integrity, then he is in a position to appraise his own intricate powers, gifts, talents, and abilities."[97] The disinherited no longer see themselves through the eyes of their oppressors. This is the dialectical language of Thurman that gives strong support for my thesis on the development of a universal theology derived from the plight of the disinherited—one that is inclusive of all religions and cultures whereby the disinherited's right to be is affirmed and the ruling factions of global oppression that are social, economic and political are awakened to

[92] Ibid.

[93] Ibid., 41.

[94] Ibid., 43.

[95] Ibid., 52.

[96] Ibid.

[97] Ibid., 83.

change their pattern of behavior that oppress others and to identify with the gospel of Christ whereby liberation can be achieved for all humankind.

For the disinherited, Thurman affirms that the art of deception is the second methodology strategically employed to preserve some semblance of life and liberty while contending with Christianity as taught by Jesus of Nazareth. Thurman did not see the issue of deception between the weak and strong as a matter of academics, but as "profoundly ethical and spiritual, going to the very heart of all human relations."[98] In the practice of deception by those who are disinherited, Thurman poses a profound question: "Does the fact that a particular course of action jeopardizes a man's life relieve him of the necessity for following that course of action?[99] There is the issue of one's soul as well as one's sense of values and worth when deception occurs.[100] However, deception becomes the rule by which the disinherited must conduct their lives in the assurance of survival. The disinherited lack the power and resources of the dominant advantaged group to such severity that one's speech is rendered ineffectual. The inequality that exists between those who are disinherited and the dominant ruling powers makes a contest or protest by the weak null and void because there is "no sense of community" between the weak and the strong, rendering the prospect of honesty nonexistent.[101]

This assertion by Thurman is strongly supported by events during the time of slavery in the antebellum South and afterward, into modern times in America. However, deception as explicated by Thurman on behalf of the disinherited has fueled the legacy of the fear of honesty between the weak and strong. Frederick Douglass affirmed the truth regarding the necessity for

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[98] Douglass, *My Bondage*, 200.

[99] Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited,* 53–54.

[100] Ibid., 5.

[101] Ibid., 57.

the lack of honesty between the empowered and the disinherited. From the text *My Bondage My Freedom,* Douglass undertook the teaching and reading of the Bible to fellow slaves in secret at St. Michael's Church in Talbot County, Maryland. Douglass states, "Had anyone asked a religious White man in St. Michael's twenty years ago, the names of three men in that town, whose lives were most after the pattern of our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, the finest three would have been as follows: Garrison West, class leader, Wright Fairbanks, class leader, Thomas Auld, class leader."[102] It was these gentlemen who intruded on Douglass's class with firearms and stopped him from holding the classes again; he and the others were threatened with violence if the classes were held again. It was forbidden for slaves to be taught to read and write.

Therefore, the art of deception and the lack of honesty between the empowered and the disempowered are a current and lasting legacy. This continuous strategy of deception, orchestrated by the disinherited, is justified as a means of acquiring greater dimensions of power—socially, economically, and politically—and it becomes an issue of ethics, morality, and values for the disinherited.[103] Thurman asserts that anyone who constantly engages in the strategy of deception becomes a liar in and of themselves, and the issue of morality is eradicated.[104]

Also, the disinherited are known to incorporate compromise as part of the strategy of deception to ensure survival and the continuation of life itself. Thurman writes,

> Compromise then takes on a very special and highly differentiated meaning. It is less positive than ordinary deception, which may be regarded as a deliberate strategy. If the

[102] Ibid., 59.

[103] Ibid., 59.

[104] Ibid.

> assumption is that survival with some measure of freedom is at stake, then compromise is defined in terms of the action that involves one's continued life. It is a matter of behavior patterns. Many obvious interferences with freedom are ignored completely. Many insults are cast aside as of no consequence. One does battle only when not to do battle is to be vanquished without the recognition that comes from doing battle.[105]

From the plane of moral existence, the practice of deception or constant compromise of this nature can become an unpleasant and degrading matter. [106]

The strategy of deception or compromise goes far beyond the issue of mere survival or the avoidance of violence; it is a major issue of avoiding being killed for the disinherited while contending with "the religion of Jesus."[107] Thurman affirms that the issue of avoiding death is the ultimate challenge and goal for the disinherited, and "not to be killed becomes the great end, and morality takes its meaning from the center."[108] The disinherited must reconfigure their position from the perspective of being disadvantaged, whereby those who are advantaged and empowered are able to hinder the disinherited from participating in the mainstream of society, thereby creating a new dimension and empowerment within that society.[109] Thurman asserts, "For if the disinherited get such a new center as patriotism, for instance, liberty within the framework of a sense of country or nation, the aim of not being killed is swallowed up by a

[105] Ibid.

[106] Ibid., 69.

[107] Ibid., 60.

[108] Ibid.

[109] Ibid.

larger and more transcendent goal."[110] In contending with the religion put forth by Jesus, humankind can kill the physical body, but it is the human soul over which God has all authority.

Thurman affirms that sincerity is the last resort in the strategy of deception through which the disinherited may contend with the disadvantage of a lack of empowerment.[111] In the application of sincerity, the disinherited are putting forth that which is the truth in the absence of fear.[112] Thurman received a copy of a letter written by Mahatma Gandhi to the British social reformer and nonconformist regarding the strategy of speaking the truth on the part of the disadvantaged. The letter states,

> Speak the truth, without fear and without exception, and see everyone whose work is related to your purpose, you are in God's work, so you need not fear man's scorn. If they listen to your requests and grant them, you will be satisfied. If they reject them, then you must make their rejection your strength.[113]

The assumption here is that even the empowered oppressor can discern when the truth is, in fact, being presented just as the oppressed can discern the truth.[114] Therefore, it is asserted that when sincerity is the methodology that is being applied, it is assumed that such a person must have a relationship with the transcendent entity known as God, "not with man's relation to man."[115] Thurman affirms that all of humankind has its existence in God's being, whatever their

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[110] Ibid., 63.

[111] Ibid.

[112] Ibid., 48–63.

[113] Ibid., 65.

[114] Ibid.

[115] Ibid., 63.

civil status in this world, and in passing from this world into the presence of the divine, all will be laid bare in His divine presence, the rich and powerful as well as the poor and oppressed.

Thurman asserts, "hypocrisy on the part of the disinherited in dealing with the dominant group is a tribute yielded by those who are weak. But if this attitude is lacking, or is supplanted by simple sincerity and genuineness, then it follows that the advantage due to the accident of birth or position is reduced to zero."[116] Therefore, the disinherited and the strong and powerful can enter the plane of existence as people engaged in human relationships, with the issue of the weak and disadvantaged versus the strong and powerful nullified, and "supreme human dignity" begins.[117] Thurman affirms that the disinherited engage the art of deception as a tool of survival to stop violence and avoid death for those who "stand with their backs against the wall" in the face of the strong and powerful. "The religion of Jesus" is the central issue for the oppressed; however, it is the affirmation of the necessity for the development of a universal theology that is inclusive of all religions and cultures and speaks a dialectical language of liberation for the weak and oppressed, as well as the strong and powerful oppressor.[118] Hate is another coping mechanism and strategy employed by the disinherited in contending with their marginalization in society—particularly in the face of a nation that is known for its acceptance and practice of the religion founded by Jesus. Thurman asserts that "hatred cannot be defined," but is rather derived from various societal and cultural situations.[119]

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[116] Douglass, *My Bondage*, 65–66.

[117] Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited,* 67.

[118] Douglass, *My Bondage*, 7–364.

[119] Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited,* 67.

Thurman asserts that in these various societal situations where there is a lack of sincere, genuine, and warm social interactions or contact, this can facilitate the development of hate.[120] This is a profound insight into human relations because there is an issue of acknowledgment, integrity, and human dignity at stake. Frederick Douglass gives a powerful and profound testimony that resonates with Thurman's thoughts on human interactions and the lack of true fellowship amidst people who are in constant contact. Douglass explains the "inhumanity of slavery" at a lecture given in Rochester, New York, on December 8, 1850. Douglass's words move one to a deep realization of the concept of human contact, void of warmth, kindness, and love, thereby affirming the strategy of hate as a tool to reconcile the inhumanity of racism and slavery. Douglass writes,

> Now, if the foregoing be an indication of kindness, what is cruelty? If this be parental affection, what is bitter malignity? A more atrocious and bloodthirsty string of laws could not well be conceived of. And yet I am bound to say that they fall short of indicating the horrible cruelties constantly practiced in the slave states. I admit that there are individual slaveholders less cruel and barbarous than is allowed by law, but these form the exception. The majority of slaveholders find it necessary to ensure obedience, at times, to avail themselves of the utmost extent of the law, and many go beyond it. If kindness were the rule, we should not see advertisements filling the columns of almost every Southern newspaper, offering large rewards for fugitive slaves, and describing them as being branded with irons, loaded with chains, and scarred by the whip. One of the most telling testimonies against the pretended kindness of slaveholders is the fact that uncounted numbers of fugitives are now inhabiting the Dismal Swamp, preferring the untamed

[120] Ibid., 67.

> wilderness to their cultivated homes, choosing rather to encounter hunger and thirst, and to roam with wild beasts of the forest, running the hazard of being hunted and shot down, than to submit to the authority of kind masters.[121]

Douglass affirmed that the inhumanity of slavery created the situation for the birth of hate between Whites and Blacks in the Americas. Thurman asserts, "Where there are contacts devoid of genuine fellowship, such contacts stand in immediate candidacy for hatred."[122] Furthermore, contact without fellowship facilitates a cold and unsympathetic understanding, particularly on the part of the advantaged and empowered in their relations with the weak and disinherited. Thurman affirms that in this situation of contact without fellowship, the empowered and strong are aware of their power to injure the weak because the weak are made dependent on the empowered.[123] Frederick Douglass brilliantly affirmed this perspective in his text *My Bondage and My Freedom* on the inhumanity of chattel slavery and what will happen in any situation where the contact between people is not allowed by law and the normal social and cultural interactions do not take place.[124]

Thurman asserts that understanding has an entirely different meaning for the empowered than for the disinherited, "When the Southern White person says, I understand the negro, what he really means is that he has a knowledge of the Negro within the limitations of the boundaries that

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[121] Ibid., 67.

[122] Ibid.

[123] Ibid., 68.

[124] Ibid.

the White man has set up."[125] The African Americans whom the Whites say they understand do not really exist at all, but rather only in the minds of the White Americans.[126]

This hatred derived from contact without genuine fellowship, produced an unpleasant situation lacking sympathy for Thurman on a train. Thurman was bound for Chicago to Memphis, Tennessee. Thurman sat in an area where an elderly White woman was seated. When the conductor asked for their tickets, she replied in reference to Thurman, "What is that doing in this car?" The conductor answered, with a touch of creative humor, "That has a ticket."[127] The woman, out of an ignorance rooted of racism, was able to reduce Thurman to a non-being in the presence of others in the most cruel and unsympathetic manner. Thurman refers to the situation and the woman's racist attitude as an "ill will" that is toxic and contagious in its application, which "becomes hatred walking on the earth."[128]

Thurman asserts that the typical assumption in relations between Blacks and Whites is that "many White people hate Negroes, and that Negroes are merely victims."[129] Thurman sees this assumption as a fallacy. However, it is the traumatic history of Blacks in the Americas that fuels the assumption that Whites have a natural hatred for African Americans. The hatred that the disinherited have for the advantaged and empowered class, particularly in Black and White relations in the Americas, Thurman defines as "a bitterness that is made possible by sustained

[125] Ibid., 69.

[126] Ibid., 71.

[127] Ibid.

[128] Ibid.

[129] Ibid., 72.

resentment, which is bottled up until it distills an essence of vitality, giving to the individual in whom this is happening a radical and fundamental basis for self-realization."[130]

The disinherited see themselves in a world in which their victimization is the result of being oppressed and discriminated against within a system that has repeatedly denied them human and civil rights. Thurman asserts that from the plane of existence of the disinherited and the environment in which they live, "its power controlling and prestige bearing representatives have announced to them that they do not rate anything other than that which is being visited upon them. If they accept this judgment, then the ground of their self-estimate is destroyed, and their acquiescence becomes an endowment of the judgment of the environment. Because they are despised, they despise themselves."[131]

The disinherited can reject dehumanization and the debased judgment of those who have all the power and who control the system. Hate turns into a mechanism whereby the disinherited can reaffirm their own existence and their right to be with a sense of self-worth and human dignity, regardless of the debasing judgment of those who are the advantaged and empowered.[132] This rejection of society's judgment is reconfigured in the minds of the disinherited, as it establishes a dimension of self-realization hammered out of the raw materials of injustice.[133]

Self-realization is born out of the hatred that the disinherited develop, and thereby, righteousness on the part of the disinherited can become possible.[134] Thurman asserts that "the logic of the strong-weak relationship is to place all moral judgment of behavior out of

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[130] Ibid., 72.

[131] Ibid., 73.

[132] Ibid.

[133] Ibid., 77.

[134] Ibid.

bounds."[135] The development of hate, which the disinherited use to protect themselves, prevents the total annihilation of self-respect and "moral disintegration."[136] The discipline of the use of hatred exercised by the disinherited in their relations with the strong and powerful serves as a form of immunization that preserves the human dignity of the disinherited.[137]

Those who are the dominant and ruling powers of society and the world at large are oblivious to the corrosive effects of hatred on the disinherited due to living in an oppressed society where one's human dignity is challenged every day.[138] Thurman writes, "Hatred knows nothing about the extenuating circumstances growing out of a period of national crisis, making it a necessity to discipline men in hatred of other human beings. The logic of the development of hatred is death to the spirit and disintegration of ethical and moral values."[139] Therefore, religion, as affirmed by Jesus, is the theological language that will liberate the weak and the strong. The disinherited must contend with fear, deception, and hate as a tool of survival and maintain human dignity in embracing the concepts of religion as put forth by Jesus of Nazareth.[140] Therefore, Thurman's analysis of fear, deception, hate, and love supports the premise of my thesis in the necessity of the development of a universal theology that is inclusive of all religions and cultures and is derived from the plight of the oppressed, which liberates the disinherited as well as the rich and powerful, through a theological dialogue that serves as salvation for all.

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[135] Ibid., 1–78.

[136] Ibid., 1.

[137] Bible, Matt. 5:43–44 (KJV).

[138] Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited,* 78.

[139] Ibid., 79.

[140] Ibid.

In the concluding analysis of Thurman's theology, the question arises: "What do the teachings and the life of Jesus have to say to those who stand, at a moment in human history, with their backs against the wall?"[141] Jesus said, "Ye have heard that it hath been said, 'Thou shalt love thy neighbor, and hate thine enemy. But I say to you, love your enemies, bless them that curse you, do good to them that hate you, and pray for them which despitefully use you, and persecute you.'"[142]

Love is the ultimate antidote; Thurman affirms that hatred could not be the tool used to contend one's enemies because hatred serves as a corrosive agent of mind, body, soul, and spirit, through which neither Jesus nor the followers of Jesus could ever have a legitimate relationship with the Heavenly Father.[143] Jesus is representative of life, and to employ the emotion of hate would be contrary to all that is representative of the kingdom of God. Therefore, it is "the love ethic" that is the ultimate tool by which the disinherited can face the oppressor on common ground in the preservation of the human dignity of all participants in life.[144] "The love ethic" applied by Jesus crosses all the borders of racism, classism, sexism, and all social and cultural conditions of oppression and injustice.[145] In Jesus's methodology of love, He reached out to the disinherited and marginalized of his time. He refused to be defined or limited by vain, racist, sexist, or any social, cultural, or religious traditions of his time. The Samaritan woman informed Jesus that Jews had no dealings with Samaritans; however, Jesus enlightened the woman with a great truth and showed her love. He was able to move beyond the social and cultural constraints

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[141] John 4: 7–29 (NKJ).

[142] Matthew 8:5–13 (NKJ).

[143] Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited,* 81.

[144] Ibid.

[145] Ibid.

and approach the Samaritan woman with respect and establish the commonality of mutual human dignity and acknowledgment despite the differences in their ethnicity. The Samaritan woman walked away with a new vitality and hope in life.[146]

Jesus was sought out by a Roman soldier in need of healing for a sick servant. The Roman soldier was representative of the powers and authority that ruled the Roman state, and Jesus was a poor Jew in Palestine—representative of the marginalized. In Jesus's encounter with the all-powerful Roman soldier, He applied "the love ethic" as they met on common ground in the engagement of human dignity.[147] The Roman soldier entered the plane of existence of a poor Jew who had love and compassion for others without regard to race, class, gender, or social condition. Thurman asserts that it is challenging when one must contend with enemies while bringing about a greater good for the empowered as well as the disinherited.[148] Jesus had to be careful in his encounter with the Roman soldier, Thurman writes, "to hate him in a way that caused action was to invite the wrath of Rome. To love him was to be regarded as a traitor to Jesus's own people, to Israel, and therefore to God."[149]

This is a critical analysis that resonates with the plight of oppression and difficulties throughout the evolution of the Black presence in the Americas. Many African Americans who are well-educated and charismatic engage the empowered class in America and become public figures of influence as leaders, dating back to the life and times of Frederick Douglass, Howard Thurman, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and Dr. James H. Cone. They must contend

[146] Ibid.

[147] Ibid., 84.

[148] Ibid., 87.

[149] Ibid., 90–91.

with this issue of not hating those who are the empowered rulers, whether by their actions or words, in America, while contending with the issue of not being a traitor to one's own people.[150]

In the final analysis, Thurman affirms that the disinherited from ages past do not have to approve of the way of life and standards of those who are the dominant ruling factions of the world. However, there is a necessity to extend love toward the advantaged and empowered. Thurman affirms, "To love them means to recognize some deep respect and reverence for their persons," while rejecting their methodologies of oppression.[151]

In the appropriate application of love, Thurman affirms that the disinherited must neutralize the status of the enemy. The privileged and the underprivileged must move beyond the social status and context that defines each group. In providing a normal range of experiences between the privileged and the disinherited, genuine fellowship can take place.[152] Therefore, Thurman affirms that "the religion of Jesus says to the disinherited" that it is to embrace and extend love to those who have made themselves your enemy. This is accomplished in the mutual application and acknowledgment of human dignity and the value of all of humankind. Within the "mutual discovery," the privileged and the underprivileged are seen as people, and White and Black people are all human beings, and the oppressive barriers of race, gender, class, and social conditions of all types are transcended.[153] "What, then, is the word of the religion of Jesus to those who stand with their backs against the wall?"[154] Thurman affirms that the disinherited, "must recognize fear, deception, and hatred, each for what it is. Once having done this, they must

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[150] Ibid., 98.

[151] Ibid.

[152] Ibid., 98–99.

[153] Blight, *Prophet of Freedom*, 59–66.

[154] Carson, Martin Luther King, Jr., 121–134.

learn how to destroy these forces or render themselves immune to their domination."[155] Therefore, it is the development of a universal theology of liberation that encompasses all religions and cultures through a theological dialogue that liberates the disinherited as well as the privileged and powerful in the application of love as implemented by Jesus Christ himself, which is the religion that teaches love for all humankind, and is "a spirit at work in life and in the hearts of all people which is committed to overcoming the world."[156]

[155] Carson, Martin Luther King, Jr., 60.

[156] Lewis V. Baldwin, *The Voice of Conscience: The Church in the Mind of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 119.

CHAPTER 4

DR. MARTIN LUTHER KING JR., THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT, AND THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH: A THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. became one of the most important theologians and civil rights activists in American history. From the moment King took the public platform in the 1950s and 1960s as a minister and civil rights activist, he affirmed the true mission of the church in its responsibility to the people according to the gospel of Christ. Dr. King made profound statements that resonated with nonviolent resistance in fighting racial oppression, segregation, discrimination, and the plight of the disinherited living within a democracy where the church remained silent. King held that the church must unite communities in peaceful, nonviolent resistance to oppression that divides the nation along racial lines—and must not embrace a theology that accommodates injustice or stays silent about the poor, the oppressed, and the marginalized.

Given Frederick Douglass's legacy of the Christ-like experience of violence, suffering, pain, and humiliation at the hands of the slaveholder, Edward Covey, resistance—whether offensive or defensive—became a matter of contention.[157] Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s theology of liberation in the methodology of nonviolent resistance against racism and segregation would be questioned and challenged. [158] King's voice established a language and theology derived from his concern for the poor and oppressed that affirmed the very soul of the gospel of Christ as a

[157] Baldwin, The Voice of Conscience, 52.

[158] Ibid.

gospel of liberation. Dr. King stated, "One gets weary of being treated as if one is less than human and devoid of human feelings. This is the dehumanizing treatment of always being pushed out of the sun into darkness and public humiliation. It is one's God-given right to protest oppression rooted in race and all manner of injustice. It is a legal right."[159]

In uniting the Black Church during the Civil Rights Movement, for the purpose of fighting oppression rooted in race, King felt it necessary to employ "the philosophy and method of Mohandas Gandhi with the Negro's Christian tradition, thereby affording both a philosophical, rational, and practical method by which the people's faith could be translated into a mass movement."[160] Dr. King had a view of the church as being part of society, an ecclesial arm that reached into the very institutions that govern society. Lewis V. Baldwin writes on King's view of the church in its mission and functionality. Baldwin writes that for King, the church had to represent certain values and cultural ethos that reflect the true mission of the church. What is asserted here is that "any ecclesial body or structure that presumes to represent and speak for God must struggle daily to understand not only human sinfulness and divine grace, but also the social, political, and economic realities that gather at their intersection."[161]

Baldwin's analysis of King's mission for the church supports the argument of my thesis in that the development of a universal theology of liberation derived from the plight of the poor and oppressed is inclusive of all religions and cultures and awakens the consciousness of the ruling powers of world economics, politics, and trade. This universal theology of liberation is spoken, taught, and written from the gospel of Christ as implemented by Dr. King in his vision

[159] Ibid., 69.

[160] Ibid.

[161] Ibid., 70.

and mission of the church. Therefore, in King's vision of the church in its mission, the church had to be a living and functioning reality of what it professed to be, which is the appropriate form of discipleship. [162]

Dr. King had a vision of the church that resonated with universality in the belief that the church, which is the body of Christ, is for all people. In the text, *The Voice of Conscience*, Baldwin affirms that Dr. King's view of the church is quite revolutionary in his vision of the role of the church in society, as well as clerical authority within the church. King's view of the church moves far beyond elegant structures and formal gatherings of religious traditions, ceremonies, and rituals. In King's vision, the church was at the center of all life and concerns in the community, with an obligation to reach its ecclesial arm into "the cultural, social, intellectual, economic, and political concerns and needs of the masses."[163] This is why Dr. King worked closely in solidarity with powerful organizations such as the NAACP, the interracial Alabama Council on Human Relations, and other city and state-wide social and political action groups."[164]

Baldwin asserts that King affirmed that clergy authority within the church has its origins in divine appointment. Therefore, all leading pastors' authority is of divine appointment rather than of just human approval. [165] Furthermore, King saw the authority of all pastors as being rooted in the people of the church's acceptance of the pastor as their leader; meaning that "the leadership never ascends from the pew to the pulpit, but it invariably descends from the pulpit to the pew."[166] Therefore, in King's vision of the church, he saw the church as being more

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[162] Ibid.

[163] Ibid.

[164] Ibid., 71.

[165] Ibid., 74.

[166] Ibid.

democratic in its functionality. Thus, the clergy, in its authority within the church, should not be absolute or without limitations.[167]

For King, the church was a sacred temple and a body of believers rooted in life-giving faith, embodied by the Holy Spirit in the fellowship of community.[168] Therefore, the concepts of fellowship and community resonate with the ideology of a universal theology of liberation in that it demands the fellowship of all humankind for a theological dialogue of liberation to work. Furthermore, King's vision and mission of the church went far beyond the spiritual nurturing of all Christian believers.[169] In Baldwin's interpretation of King's view of the church, Baldwin affirms that King saw the church as being defined and established by "what and how it teaches."[170] King believed "engagements with scripture, creeds, liturgical statements, the mechanisms of doctrine, and the biblical imperative to proclaim the gospel (kerygma) were only a part of what should be expected of the church as an educative force in society.[171] The church is also an incarnate community which receives the word of God in Jesus Christ and demonstrates, in practical ways, its values of love, mercy, nonviolence, justice, forgiveness, and reconciliation."[172]

The Holy Bible and the Scriptures found therein were the foundation of Dr. Martin Luther King's agenda in the use of direct nonviolence against racial and social injustice and segregation in the southern states of America. Dr. King was the Moses of the Civil Rights

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[167] Ibid.

[168] Ibid.

[169] Ibid.

[170] Ibid.

[171] Ibid.

[172] Ibid.

Movement of the 1960s. He challenged the nation on the very religious principles and ethical values upon which America was founded. He stood boldly before White-privileged America and its democratic government and asked, "Why?" King faced misguided men like Governor George Wallace of Alabama and Police Commissioner of public safety Eugene "Bull" Connor of Birmingham, Alabama, and forced them to hear the cries of racial social injustice and the evils of segregation. Dr. King used scripture as his staff and rod and stretched it across racial lines that would rally a nation to rethink the structural evil of segregation. This modern-era Moses would stomp all over the roots of racism in America, face American White supremacists who were supposed to be officers of the law, and serve all people without regard to race. King would walk the road of sit-ins, jail-ins, high-pressure water hoses, bombings, and death threats, and he would march on with the staff of righteousness and equality in his hand, leading thousands of oppressed Black Americans in the fight against segregation and social injustice of all kinds.

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. used the Bible to challenge and awaken the conscience of a nation and its leaders on the issues of racial injustice and oppression against twenty million Negroes. White supremacy in America would not deter him in the 1960s. Rather, King would employ the strategy and principles of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi to weaken the fortress of racism, segregation, poverty, and oppression that divided a nation into two separate nations. As the long-awaited Moses, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. stood ready to transform the face of a nation through direct nonviolence, thereby creating a nation of brotherhood and civility without regard to race. Dr. King's vision of the true mission of the church was one with an overarching responsibility to be socially, culturally, economically, and politically concerned with oppressive matters and structures of the state, which made the yoke of iron an even heavier burden for the disinherited of our world. Therefore, Dr. King's objectives during the Civil Rights Movement,

through his methodology of nonviolence and civil protest, resonated with the strategies of liberation theology and supported the argument of my thesis. It is the development of a universal theology of liberation derived from the plight of the poor and oppressed, one that is inclusive of all religions and cultures, and that will awaken the consciousness of those who rule the world socially, politically, and economically.

There was an essential and urgent need on the part of Dr. King in the fight against racial oppression. There was another oppressive rule in India caused by British imperialism, where the reality of oppression from a global perspective was related to Black oppression in America. From the text, *Martin Luther King Jr. and the Holy Bible*, King identified with Gandhian principles, namely the strategy of the avoidance of excessive materialism in India.[173] Gandhi put forth an effective ideology based on the practice of self-denial and suffering in fighting against British capitalistic imperial rule. He stated, "the vindication of truth is achieved not by the infliction of suffering on the opponent but on oneself."[174]

The Montgomery Engagement

Dr. King went forward with urgency as he engaged segregationists in Montgomery, Alabama, one of the most racist and segregated cities in the South. In this town, White supremacists like Eugene "Bull" Connor, Commissioner of Public Safety, and Governor George Wallace strongly enforced the doctrine of segregation. Dr. King was prepared to deal with them equally on their own battlefield. On December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks was arrested for violating segregation laws when she refused to move to the back of the bus from the seat she occupied at the front. Her actions would spark a decisive movement on the part of Dr. King in the staging of

[173] Luke: 18–19 (KJV).

[174] King and Carson, *Autobiography,* 60.

a citywide boycott of the Montgomery public transit system. Dr. King gave a definitive speech regarding the Rosa Parks incident and the successful Montgomery bus boycott. He stated that as an American citizen, one has the right to participate in the fullness of the American way of life in all rights and privileges thereof. A democracy is best represented when all citizens of that democracy are fully recognized and are privileged to walk on the same plane of existence as all others who live within that democracy. Equality for all Americans will make for the greatest example of democracy there is. There comes a moment in life when people become weary of being walked over by the "iron feet of oppression" [175]

Dr. King's speech reverberates with the tone of liberation theology, as it did with Frederick Douglass, a forerunner of liberation language, in a speech given May 11, 1844. From the text, *Frederick Douglass Prophet of Freedom,* written by David Blight, Blight defines Douglass as a "Black demagogue" who speaks to the people of his discontent and his lack of love for America.[176] Douglass stated, "I have no love for America, as such," he jarringly announced. "I have no patriotism. I have no country."[177] Blight asserts that "Douglass let his righteous anger flow in metaphors of degradation, chains, and blood."[178] Douglass continued, "The institutions of this country do not know me, do not recognize me as a man, except as a piece of property. Three million of my fellow creatures are groaning beneath the iron rod, with stripes upon their backs, only their clanking chains and their warm blood making fat the soil of Maryland and of Alabama."[179] Douglass was willing to confess to his audience that he desired to

[175] King and Carson, *Autobiography,* 60–61.

[176] Ibid., 61.

[177] Ibid.

[178] Ibid.

[179] Ibid.

see America's "overthrow as speedily as possible, and its Constitution shivered in a thousand fragments."[180]

Therefore, when Dr. King spoke using the phrase "iron feet of oppression," he was speaking of African Americans who have known racial oppression from the times of chattel slavery into modernity, committed with impunity and in the presence of Christianity, amid the stronghold of White supremacy. Whether or not Douglass, Thurman, Malcolm X, or Dr. King used the actual word "liberation," the language they spoke in their public speeches affirmed that liberation theology, derived from Scripture, was essential in addressing the plight of the disinherited. The coming of Dr. James H. Cone would affirm this.

There are moments in life when one gets tired of being humiliated and subjected to constant despair, when a person is pushed from the warm light of the sun to the cold marches of desire. Dr. King went on to say that if we are wrong in standing up against racial oppression and societal injustice, then our nation's Supreme Court is wrong, as well as the Constitution of the United States. Dr. King reiterates, "If we are wrong, then the very God who created us all is wrong. If we are wrong, then Jesus of Nazareth was nothing more than an ordinary man with a utopian-like dream of a better humanity. We are determined to take a stand so that justice will overflow among us with the righteousness of a mighty stream."[181] Dr. King affirms the mission of the church in the language stated here because he links the protest with the true purpose and mission of the church, which is the body of Christ.

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[180] Ibid.

[181] King, Martin Luther Jr. *Stride toward Freedom: The Montgomery Story.* New York: Harper, 1958.

The gospel of Christ is a gospel of liberation; therefore, the theological language that one speaks, in which Jesus is the center, must be derived from the plight of the disinherited. Jesus proclaimed,

> The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor. He has sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to preach the acceptable year of the Lord.[182]

By the words of the living Christ, the mission of the church is affirmed by Christ himself and supports the thesis of this paper, in that the development of a universal theological language that is inclusive of all religions and cultures, derived from the plight of the poor and oppressed, speaks to the rich and powerful about social, economic, and global politics to inspire changes in their politics that make some people poor.

The Montgomery, Alabama movement was critical in the agenda of the assault against segregation and inhumane treatment against African Americans as they exercised their native-born civil rights by riding the buses alongside their fellow White citizens. Therefore, the church was central to the staging of Black resistance against the debasing White supremacy that made being Black a sin. Dr. King's language of liberation theology was one of nonviolent resistance and the push for integration. King continued to expound that through unity and perseverance within the community as a whole, the movement would achieve all they desired and more. "We must be one in all that we do" he encouraged the people, reminding them not to be afraid

[182] Ibid.

because all their actions were within the realm of the law, clarifying that to protest against racial and social injustice is not a social wrong but a legal right.[183]

Dr. King's powerful language resonates with the legacies and mission of Frederick Douglass and Howard Thurman that came before him. However, Dr. King's mission, in its objective, would be similar to that of Malcolm X, but by a different methodology, and to that of Dr. James H. Cone, who would come later, in combating the psychological, cultural, economic, and political consequences of White supremacy. Dr. King proclaimed, "We, the disinherited of this land, we who have been oppressed so long, are tired of going through the long night of captivity. And now we are reaching out for the daybreak of freedom and justice and equality. May I say to you, my friend, as I come to a close, that we must keep God in the forefront. Let us be Christian in all of our actions. But I want to tell you this evening that it is not enough to talk about love. Love is one of the pivotal points of the Christian faith. There is another side called justice. Standing beside love is always justice, and we are only using the tools of justice. Not only are we using the tools of persuasion, but we've come to see that we've got to use the tools of coercion. Not only is this a process of education, but it is also a process of legislation."[184]

> As we stand and sit here this evening, and as we prepare ourselves for what lies ahead, let us go out with a grim and bold determination that we are going to stick together. We are going to work together. Right here in Montgomery, when the history books are written in the future, somebody will have to say, 'there lived a race of people—a Black people—with fleecy locks and Black complexion, a people who had the moral courage to stand up

[183] Ibid., 134.

[184] Ibid.

for their rights. And thereby, they injected a new meaning into the veins of history and of civilization.[185]

Dr. King's methodology was motivational in its ability to mobilize African Americans in solidarity from the platform of the church, which resonated with liberation in action, and in the dialectical language used by Dr. King to make the mission work, he was willing to take Christ with him, and he used the language of God as his sword.

The Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott was decisive in achieving its agenda against the evils of segregation. The bus boycott was a movement of liberation under the direction of a leader who sprang forth from the lineage of the Black American masses of the South, the disenfranchised within the American democracy. The movement was the essence of liberation and reflected in the language that Dr. King used to address the urgency and tragedy of racial oppression in America, which was prevalent throughout the entire country and beyond. Dr. King taught the disinherited to refuse to cooperate with legislated oppression that fostered the ignorance of racial hatred and led to separation, isolation, and the mistreatment of one's fellow brothers and sisters, whoever they might be.

Dr. King reflected on his own mind the success of the Montgomery boycott, which resulted in a three-point resolution. Dr. King recalled the words of older ministers who stated, "Open your mouth and God will speak for you."[186] Dr. King came to the complete understanding of how God can "transform man's weakness into His glorious opportunity."[187]

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[185] Ibid.

[186] Luke 22: 41–45 (NKJ).

[187] King, *Stride Toward Freed*om,134.

(1) African Americans would return to riding the buses when the bus operators agreed to treat African Americans in a civilized and humane manner.

(2). Also, "passengers were seated on a first-come, first-served basis, Negroes seating from the back of the bus toward the front, Whites from the front toward the back;"

(3). Furthermore, Negro bus operators were employed on predominantly Negro routes.[188]

For Dr. King and all participants in the Montgomery bus boycott, December 5, 1955, was a major victory over the racist Jim Crow system of the South. For African Americans, the disinherited had finally materialized as real people who must be seen, heard, acknowledged, and accommodated. It was a moment in which the winds of change were blowing far beyond the transit system of Montgomery. As stated in *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr*., "the real victory was in the mass meeting, where thousands of Black people stood revealed with a new sense of dignity and destiny."[189] It was reflective of an action in solidarity, whereby liberation from the oppressive structure of segregation had begun, facilitated by Dr. King's liberating language and effective strategy of protest in the refusal to cooperate with the legislated structures of oppression. The success of the Montgomery bus boycott was an exemplification of liberation.

Dr. King continued to stand firm against the segregationists and their scare tactics in Montgomery, Alabama. After the successful boycott of the Montgomery transit system, various White supremacists and hate groups, such as the Ku Klux Klan (KKK), began to threaten Dr. King and his supporters in hopes that they would surrender the cause and leave Montgomery forever. Dr. King remarked, "I began to weaken with fear in the face of the threats being made

[188] Luke 22: 41–45 (NKJ).

[189] King*, Stride Toward Freedom*, 134.

against my family and me. A White man whom I considered a friend, informed me that a plan was being engineered to end my life. I have now come to the realization that they could really end up killing my wife, my child, and me. At one of the mass meetings, I made a statement to the people there: 'If one day you find me sprawled out dead, I do not want you to retaliate with a single act of violence. 'I urge you to continue protesting with the same dignity and discipline you have shown so far.'" [190]

Dr. King also said, "I tried to lighten the air by making a statement, that words did not spring forth as the results of any particular causal event, but were a simple statement based on potential possibilities of my own fatality in the fight against racial and social injustice. My friend Ralph Abernathy, being of shrewd discernment, sensed that something was wrong and inquired about it after leaving the mass meeting. I informed Ralph that I was afraid because of the harassing phone calls made to my home and the death threats made against my life. In addition, I even told him about the phone call I received from a friend who was White. I admitted that my fears had intensified and had begun to shake me deep within my soul. How could I continue? How could I continue? Numerous people informed me that a definite plan was being implemented to terminate my life, and I heard these comments on a daily basis. I am faced with much uncertainty in life from one day to the next. I have looked at my wife and child, and I now realize that I could end up losing them in the fight against segregation and racial injustice. My wife and child could easily lose me at any given moment, and I did not bother to share any of these thoughts with my wife. [191] King continued:

[190] Ibid.

[191] Ibid.

> After retiring to bed one night, I received a very terrifying phone call. The man on the line had a very angry voice with intense meaning in his words. The man stated, 'Listen, nigger, we've taken all we want from you; before next week you'll be sorry you ever came to Montgomery.' The phone call ended, and I was not able to sleep. I became gripped with fear at the threat and the sound of the man's violent and threatening words that seemed more like a promise because of my actions and presence in Montgomery, Alabama. I had reached a point of no return. I decided to get out of bed and go into the kitchen. My mind was perplexed with many worries and fears because of the threatening phone call.[192]

Like Jesus of Nazareth, Dr. King entered into his own type of Gethsemane in his kitchen, where he struggled in a similar fashion to Jesus of Nazareth, who had struggled in Gethsemane. While Jesus knew the cross was his future, Dr. King was acquainted with suffering because of his Blackness. Dr. King struggled with continuing his campaign against racial and social injustice and the dangers it presented to his family. He began to question whether he should pick up his cross and continue.[193] The Bible records Jesus entering Gethsemane as follows: "And he was withdrawn from them about a stone's throw, and he knelt down, and prayed, saying, 'Father, if it is your will, remove this cup from me; nevertheless, not my will, but Yours be done.' Then an angel appeared to him from heaven, strengthening him. And being in agony, He prayed more earnestly. And his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down to the ground. When he rose up from prayer and had come to his disciples, he found them sleeping from sorrow."[194] This

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[192] Ibid.

[193] Martin Luther King Jr., ed. Alex Ayres, *The Wisdom of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Penguin Group, 1993), 38.

[194] King and Carson, *Autobiography*, 187.

is a critical moment in the life of anyone who comes into the world with a revolutionary purpose in life. It means a great personal sacrifice whereby a major transformation takes place that ushers in a new era and will change the lives of many.

While in the kitchen, Dr. King wrestled with his thoughts. He recorded in his writings, "I entered the kitchen and put some coffee on. I was ready to withdraw from the battle. I needed a plan to withdraw that did not reflect cowardice on my part. In a state of exhaustion, I decided to take my problem to God."[195] He continued, "I began to pray with my head lowered toward the floor. 'I am here, taking a stand for what I believe is right. Now I am afraid. The people are looking to me for leadership, and if I stand before them without strength and courage, they too will falter. I am at the end of my powers. I have nothing left. I've come to the point where I cannot face it alone.'" [196]

It is at this moment that Dr. King began to feel the presence of God. He wrote of "a still, small voice of assurance" that told him to get up and move forward for truth and righteousness. Encouraged that God would be with him until the end, Dr. King's strength was renewed, and his fears abated. He was ready to take on the segregationists, no matter what the outcome. [197] Dr. King embraced the teachings and promises of the Bible more firmly as he continued his efforts on a broad scale of demonstrations, marches, sit-ins, and jail-ins, as well as all-out protests in Montgomery, Alabama. His forward leaps against racial and social injustices would lead to his arrest and the arrest of many others. From the start of the march across the South, he knew of the heavy burden and task set before him. Dr. King was aware of the old, fearful, and passive Black

[195] Ibid., 187–188.

[196] Ibid.

[197] Jonathan Rieder, *Gospel of Freedom: Martin Luther King, Jr.'s Letter from Birmingham Jail and the Struggle That Changed a Nation* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2014), 32.

Southerner who would need transformation if the Civil Rights Movement was to succeed. Fear of White-privileged America was something Dr. King would have to confront himself, to show other Black Americans of the 1960s how to peacefully yet effectively contend with racial and social injustice. Through a direct and nonviolent manner, aggressive spiritual diplomacy, and social activism, Dr. King understood and knew how to use Scripture as his guide in self-determination to confront segregationists on the battleground of brotherly love. Dr. King possessed a keen awareness of the need for individual salvation of the soul; however, he also recognized the need for the salvation of the system. He explained, "The Christian gospel is a two-way road. On the one hand, it seeks to change the souls of men and thereby unite them with God; on the other hand, it seeks to change the environmental conditions of men so that the soul will have a chance after it is changed."[198]

This is a powerful dialogue in which Dr. King defines the mission of the church. King articulates the broader mission of the church as extending beyond mere instruction and guidance for the salvation of the soul. This is revolutionary theological thought regarding the mission of the church. It is individuals who make up all societies of various types throughout our world; however, if those societies impose oppressive, social, cultural, economic, and political strategies that create reservations (Native Americans), Southern plantations (enslaved Africans), urban ghettos of poverty, (African Americans), Jim Crow, lynching, police brutality, mass incarceration, and a racially biased judicial system against certain ethnic groups and caste systems that keep others poor wherever they might be globally, then Dr. King is appropriate in his analysis that the system that regulates the societies under which all people live is in need of salvation as well as the human soul. Therefore, Dr. King's idealism in the mission of the church

[198] Rieder, *Gospel of Freedom*, 48.

supports the thesis of this paper. It is the development of a universal theological dialogue that is inclusive of all religions and cultures, that speaks to the plight of the poor and convicts the conscience of the rich and powerful who rule the world through oppression, social, cultural, economic, and political policies.

The Letter from Birmingham–Church Mission

Dr. King wrote regarding the "Letter from Birmingham Jail," "I remember saying in the letter that so often I have been disappointed because we have not received the cooperation of the church. I remember saying that so often the church in our struggle had been a taillight, rather than a headlight. The church had so often been an echo, rather than a voice."[199] Dr. King asserts again the mission and responsibility of the church to be concerned and active in the social, cultural, economic, and political issues that affect all people throughout society. He affirms what the theological language of the church should say about the current issues and social and cultural problems that are current at all levels of society

The "Letter from Birmingham Jail" was the revolutionary language of liberation that King used in his writing. Dr. King addressed the plight of the disinherited African Americans living in North America, where Christianity was the dominant faith. Dr. King responded to an ad in the newspaper that had been published by "eight clergymen from Alabama: Bishop C. C. J. Carpenter, Bishop Joseph A. Durick, Rabbi Milton L. Grafman, Bishop Paul Hardin, Bishop Nolan B. Harmon, the Reverend George M. Murray, the Reverend Edward V. Ramage, and Reverend Earl Stallings."[200] The clergymen accused Dr. King and his followers of being

[199] Ibid.

[200] Ibid., 49.

extremists, and they condemned the protest demonstrations as a violating of the law and as promoting anarchy.

Dr. King, grounded in Scripture, prepared to violate the injunction secured by Eugene "Bull" Connor to prevent demonstrations of protest on a large scale, including sit-ins, parades, picketing, and kneel-ins at churches. Regarding the injunction as unconstitutional, Dr. King decided to violate it, which led to his arrest and sparked the "Letter from Birmingham Jail."[201] Dr. King made a bold statement to the southern White clergymen regarding why he and all the participants of the Civil Rights Movement had to move against the social injustice of segregation in the South. King referenced the Bible in the letter to facilitate understanding of the sense of urgency within the Civil Rights Movement and why he could not wait or stop. King informs them that Apostle Paul received a vision to travel to Macedonia, where he was needed to preach the gospel; Paul answered the call of God. In *The Gospel of Freedom,* Jonathan Rieder notes that King's use of biblical aphorisms helped clearly convey the message to the Southern clergy about why Dr. King could not wait to move against the acute establishment of racism and segregation in the state of Alabama. He wanted the clergymen to understand that Black people in the South were suffering and actions needed to be taken immediately to liberate African Americans from the inhumane and racist policies of segregation.[202]

African Americans were fighting for freedom, justice, and equality and for the full participation in the American way of life without restrictions imposed by racism. Dr. King proclaimed to the Southern clergymen, "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."[203]

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[201] Ibid., 48.

[202] Luke: 18–19 (KJV).

[203] Rieder, *Gospel of Freedom*, 49.

In further use of biblical aphorisms in the "Letter from Birmingham Jail," Rieder compares Dr. King's sermon to the parable of the rich man (Dives) and Lazarus. Rieder indicates that Dr. King emphasized to the Southern clergy that the real sin of the rich man was not due to the fact that he had great wealth; rather the rich man never recognized that poor people, such as Lazarus, were all part of God's children. The rich man was in a position to help when he was alive, but he ignored poor beggars like Lazarus. Rieder states the sin is "in failing to recognize any of God's children."[204]

Dr. King was reaching out to the Southern clergy through Scripture in his explanation of much-needed and humanitarian efforts of the civil rights marches in cities like Montgomery, as the Good Samaritan on the "Jericho roads" of life.[205] For it was the Son of God, Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, who at Jacob's well took the time to minister to the needs of a Samaritan woman without regard to the reality that Jesus was Jewish and the woman was Samaritan. Dr. King responded to his brothers' needs in the "Letter from Birmingham Jail." Rieder notes that in the opening letter, Dr. King constructs two key ideas that he wants the Southern clergy to understand. Dr. King embodied the slaves who responded to the question in their spirit, "And did not my Lord deliver Daniel?" with another question, "And why not every man?" Dr. King then reiterates in the letter that he and the civil rights advocates gathering at Ebenezer Baptist Church in meetings and talking will simply not be enough. It will never be sufficient to say that freedom is for all of God's children, but rather that it requires direct nonviolent action through

[204] Ibid.

[205] Ibid.

demonstrations and sit-ins. Dr. King considered this to be "the Gospel of Freedom, in the format of the existential version of deliverance."[206]

Dr. King wanted the Southern clergy to fully realize that the purpose of the direct nonviolent demonstrations was indeed to create social crises in Birmingham, which would facilitate peaceful negotiations with the White power factions in the city and throughout the state. Dr. King stated, "Too long has our beloved Southland been bogged down in a tragic effort to live in monologue rather than dialogue."[207] Dr. King, the modern-day Moses of the Civil Rights Movement, was ready to walk through that Red Sea of racism with his Bible in hand as his staff, as the Spirit of the Lord was upon him. Dr. King's powerful language of liberation used in the "Letter from Birmingham Jail" defined not only the true intent of his actions and the mission and responsibility of the church, but it was a brilliant and revelatory liberation language that challenged White Southern clergymen and questioned their role as ministers of the gospel of Christ living in a racist society.

In the "Letter from Birmingham Jail," Dr. King paints a bold and graphic picture of White, privileged America's mistreatment of Black people in the South. He clearly shows the Egypt-like bondage that Black Americans experience daily in the South in numerous ways of humiliation and degradation at the hands of segregationists and their agenda. In his written explanatory synopsis of what it is like to be Black in the South, Dr. King displays an ugly picture of southern Whites' attitude and treatment of southern Blacks, which is contrary to the Great Commandment given by Jesus Christ in the Biblical text of Matthew 22:36-40. The

[206] Rieder, *Gospel of Freedom*, 49

[207] King and Carson, *Autobiography*, 191.

commandment states that we are to love God with all our being and to love our neighbor as we as ourselves. Dr. King wrote these words in the "Letter from Birmingham Jail":

> But when you have seen vicious mobs lynch your mothers and fathers at will and drown your sisters and brothers at whim; when you have seen hate-filled policemen curse, kick, brutalize, and even kill your Black brothers and sisters with impunity, when you see the vast majority of your twenty million Negro brothers smothered in an air-tight cage of poverty in the midst of an affluent society; when you suddenly find your tongue twisted and your speech stammering as you seek to explain to your six-year-old daughter why she cannot go to the public amusement park that has just been advertised on television, and see tears welling up in her little eyes when she is told that Fun Town is closed to colored children, and see the depressing clouds of inferiority begin to form in her little mental sky, and see her begin to distort her little personality by unconsciously developing a bitterness toward White people; when you have to concoct an answer for a five-year-old son asking in agonizing pathos, 'Daddy, why do White people treat colored people so mean?' [208]

Dr. King adds:

> When you take a cross-country drive and find it necessary to sleep night after night in the uncomfortable corners of your automobile because no motel will accept you; when you are humiliated day in and day out by nagging signs reading 'White' and 'Colored'; when your first name becomes 'nigger' and your middle name becomes 'boy,' however old you are, and your last name becomes 'John'; and when your wife and mother are never given the respected 'Mrs.'; when you are harried by day and haunted by night by the fact that

[208] King and Carson, *Autobiography*, 191.

> you are a Negro, living constantly on tiptoe, never quite knowing what to expect next, and plagued with inner fears and outer resentments; when you are forever fighting a degenerating sense of 'nobodiness'; then you will understand why we find it difficult to wait. [209]

The "Letter from Birmingham Jail" became a decisive tool built on Scripture, in which Dr. King challenged the Christianity of the Southern clergy who called him an extremist. Dr. King referenced powerful historical figures in conveying the sense of urgency and immediacy of the Civil Rights Movement. In so doing, he was able to speak to the Southern clergy from the Bible and from humanity's past to demonstrate to them the actions that would be needed to bring about a revolution in standing up for justice and righteousness everywhere for all of humankind. Dr. King reiterated to the Southern clergy that his actions of civil disobedience have been common throughout the evolution of humanity with regard to standing up for what one believes is justice and righteousness. King wrote,

> It was evident, sublimely, in the refusal of Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego to obey the laws of King Nebuchadnezzar, on the ground that a higher moral law was at stake. It was practiced superbly by the early Christians, who were willing to face hungry lions and the excruciating pain of the chopping blocks rather than submit to certain unjust laws of the Roman Empire. To a degree, academic freedom is a reality today because Socrates practiced civil disobedience. In our own nation, the Boston Tea Party represented a massive act of civil disobedience. We should never forget that everything Adolf Hitler did in Germany was legal, and everything the Hungarian freedom fighters did in Hungary was illegal. It was illegal to aid and comfort a Jew in Hitler's Germany. Even so, I am

[209] King and Carson, *Autobiography*, 191.

sure that, had I lived in Germany at the time, I would have aided and comforted my Jewish brothers. If today I lived in a Communist country where certain principles dear to the Christian faith are suppressed, I would openly advocate disobeying that country's anti-religious laws.[210]

Dr. King expressed his disappointment with the inaction and passiveness of the Southern clergy in regard to the segregation issue. He was more saddened by the inactions of White Christian moderates than he was by the actions of Citizens' Councilors or the KKK. The White Christian moderates were more concerned with maintaining a peaceful status quo of oppression under segregation. A timetable cannot be set upon the freedom of another race of people in hopes that the passing of time will cause social and civil justice to someday materialize on its own, without aggressive, direct action on the part of those who are oppressed. King communicates his message effectively to the Southern clergy when he states, "I hope that the White moderate will understand that law and order exist for the purpose of establishing justice and that when they fail in this purpose, they become the dangerously structured dams that block the flow of social progress."[211]

The Sin of the Southern Clergy/Church Mission

With the Bible in tow, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. is able to fight for social justice through nonviolent action as the modern-day Moses of the Civil Rights Movement and shame the inactions of the Southern clergy and White moderates. Dr. King successfully parallels his so-called "extreme" actions with those of various other historical figures who took up the cross of

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[210] Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years 1954–63*. (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988.

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[211] King and Carson, *Autobiography,* 194.

the gospel of truth and justice throughout history, without regard to the constrains of civil disobedience. Dr. King pointed out that segregation was nothing more than a social and structural evil that was economically, socially, and politically destructive and unsound. Dr. King stated that "Paul Tillich has said that separation is sin," for it is sin that separates all sinners from the divine. Therefore, Dr. King concluded, "Is not segregation an existential expression of man's tragic separation, his awful estrangement, and his terrible sinfulness?"[212]

Dr. King was pointed out to the Southern clergy the sinful and immoral consequences of segregation. He used Reinhold Niebuhr's theological insight when he stated that Niebuhr had informed us that people who reside within groups have the tendency to be more immoral as part of a collective than as individuals alone. He was letting the Southern clergy know that segregation and the oppression of Black Americans had come about through the collective actions of the people who ruled America. He emphasized that these same people were responsible for making all public policies and laws, even when those laws were unjust law and served to restrict one's fellow brothers and sisters and socially stigmatizes them as "the other."

Dr. King was able to reach far into the past of human philosophy and enlighten the Southern clergy on the sinfulness of segregation through the scholarship of Thomas Aquinas. According to Aquinas, "an unjust law is a human law that is not rooted in eternal and natural law."[213] Dr. King conveyed the message that segregation laws were psychologically damaging to both White and Black Americans alike. Segregation laws exalted the human spirit of the segregator and gave him a false and inflated sense of superiority over those who are segregated. He saw it all as spiritually destructive and as a cause of racial conflict within the identities of

[212] Ibid., 195.

[213] Ibid., 193.

both Black and White Americans. Therefore, Dr. King felt justified in his so-called "extreme" actions as the modern-day Moses of the Civil Rights Movement to abolish segregation throughout the South.

The actions of extremists are geared toward social revolution; this is a form of redemption that affects the whole. Dr. King resurrected the cause and purpose of the life of Jesus of Nazareth in his correspondence to the Southern clergy. He asked them whether they were condemning him, like Jesus, because "his unique God-consciousness and never-ceasing devotion to God's will precipitated the evil act of crucifixion."[214] Jesus, Dr. King noted, was an extremist for the salvation of humanity. Abraham Lincoln was an extremist in his actions to maintain one America, and Thomas Jefferson was an extremist in his determination to help frame a nation and to affirm the equality of all of humankind. Therefore, Dr. King validated his actions by refusing to wait for equality for all Americans to gradually come into existence through the passive and peaceful passing of time.[215] In his "Letter from Birmingham Jail," Dr. King wrote a powerful appeal in liberationist dialogue, emphasizing the urgency of affirming the mission and function of the church. He also educated the Southern White clergy on why extreme situations regarding the rights to preserve one's human dignity in combating the evils of racial oppression require equally extreme but nonviolent action of protest. The letter was brilliant in a variety of perspectives—theological, sociological, economic, political, and psychological—in its description of the plight of the disinherited African Americans living in the United States.

Christianity, in its Westernized version, was the dominant faith among the majority of American Christians at the time Dr. King wrote the letter. The letter was decisive in its message,

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[214] Ibid., 195.

[215] *Ibid.,* 196.

describing the inhumane treatment and discrimination that African Americans endured in America as a result of having Black skin in a racist society that had not been written for Black people. Dr. King's letter reaffirmed the functionality and responsibility of the church to stand up for justice against racist cultural, social, economic, and political systems that ruled the American democracy and permitted segregation—a condition that affected the church itself.

Dr. King's letter was written in a liberation dialogue that spoke of the injustice that African Americans had endured since the time of Frederick Douglass, when slavery ruled the antebellum South. Douglass himself was one of the first public forerunners and speakers in the struggle against the oppressive methodology of White supremacy under which Black people had been reduced to non-beings. From Douglass to Howard Thurman and Martin Luther King Jr., and later to Dr. James H. Cone, serious questions arose regarding Christianity in the Americas and the development of a Christian theology that evolved within a society marked by the presence and tolerance of racist White supremacy—an ideology incompatible with the religion of Christianity as founded by Jesus Christ himself. Therefore, the thesis of this paper is supported by the recognition of the need for the development of a universal theology of liberation, one grounded in dialectical dialogue concerned with the plight of the poor and oppressed. Such a theology must be inclusive of all religions and cultures, whereby the consciences of ruling factions on a global scale are moved to change their oppressive strategies that affect the lives of the disinherited socially, culturally, economically, and politically.

Nonviolent Direct-Action Methodology: Identification with Jesus, Thoreau, Gandhi

Dr. King continued to use the Bible to build the fundamental ideology of engaging segregationists in confronting their determination to limit the roles and participation of Black people in mainstream America. In the book *Crusader Without Violence*, Reddick notes that Jesus

of Nazareth, Thoreau, and Gandhi as men with whom Dr. King identified deeply, sharing with a fundamental belief in the humanitarian and divine will of God that calls all people to love their neighbor. Regarding Dr. King's ideology of nonviolence as a means to bring about social change, Reddick explains that King viewed Jesus embodying more than a natural in the love of humanity—his love was combined with an element of the supernatural. The very appeal of Jesus and the essence of his mission and philosophy in dealing with humanity are best expressed in Jesus's Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5–7), according to Reddick, who also categorizes this sermon as a "love ethic." It is the foundation of Christianity, in which many answers are given on how to respond in all human relations. Reddick describes it as the written conscience of Western civilization, urging humankind to embrace brotherly love, humility, and forgiveness, and to forsake all elements of unrighteousness and sin. This was the foundational elements and philosophical foundations of Dr. King's nonviolent actions in the Civil Rights Movement. [216]

Therefore, Reddick's conclusion of Jesus's Sermon on the Mount supports Howard Thurman's assertion that the love ethic, as put forth and practiced by Jesus in establishing the very foundations of Christianity, is the principle that the disinherited should employ in all human relations—from the most privileged to the most disadvantaged—as the tool of survival and as an affirmation of the equality of a universal brotherhood. Thurman writes, "The religion of Jesus makes the love ethic central. This is no ordinary achievement. It is evident that Jesus began with the fundamental teachings on love, as reflected in the timeless traditions of Israel."[217] Thurman emphasizes the essential unity of humankind in love, referencing scriptures from the Old

[216] Lawrence Dunbar Reddick, *Crusader without Violence: A Biography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Harper, 1959), 15.

[217] Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited.*

Testament: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God is one Lord; and thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might, and thy neighbor as thyself.’[218] Thurman affirms, “Once the neighbor is defined, then one’s moral obligation is clear. In a memorable story, Jesus defined the neighbor by telling of the Good Samaritan. With sure artistry and great power, he depicted what happens when a man responds directly to human need across the barriers of class, race, and conditions. Every man is potentially every other man’s neighbor. Neighborliness is non-spatial; it is qualitative. A man must love his neighbor directly and clearly, permitting no barriers between.”[219]

Therefore, the argument of my thesis is affirmed in the necessity of developing a universal theology of liberation—derived from the plight of the poor and marginalized—that is inclusive of all religions and cultures, that speaks to the rich and powerful, that addresses the global economics of commerce, goods, services, and politics which make some people rich and others poor. It is, in fact, a universal theology of liberation born out of the plight and concern of the poor, the oppressed, and the outcast of our world—one that is inclusive of all religions and cultures and that is spoken, written, and implemented with love, as affirmed by Jesus himself. It is the theological language that will equalize, unite, and liberate all of humankind.

In Dr. King’s mission as the nation’s modern-day civil rights leader, he identified with the idealism of Henry David Thoreau. Reddick observes that Thoreau did not intend to transform society but rather sought to free himself from the obligations that society has the tendency to impose on human existence. Thoreau wanted to confront the issues of life without always conforming to some preconceived standard of social order. This is aligned with Dr. King’s

[218] Deuteronomy 4: 4–15 (KJV).

[219] Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited,* 1.

philosophy of refusing to cooperate with the structural evil of society and with oppressive, governmental-sponsored policies and laws of inequality, such as the doctrine of "separate but equal." Thoreau stated in *Civil Disobedience*, "The standing army is only an arm of the standing government; and the government itself, which is only the mode which the people have chosen to execute their will, is equally liable to be abused and perverted before the people can act through it."[220]

Here lies the fuel and foundation of Dr. King's direct methodology of nonviolence in the Civil Rights Movement. Segregationist laws and their implementation allowed for a distorted social reality throughout the South under the U.S. Constitution. Therefore, Dr. King challenged the establishment through scripture, seeking to tear down the structural evil of segregation—an evil that exalted one race of people to a false sense of natural entitlement and superiority while degrading another race to a position of inferiority and limited entitlement, based purely on race and embodied in the social constructs of Black and White America.

Therefore, through his theology and methodology in challenging oppressive laws and public policies—whether local, state, or federal—such as segregation, which marginalized other cultures and reduced people to non-beings and outcasts on the perimeter of society, Dr. King firmly reaffirmed the mission and function of the Church. He was instrumental in demonstrating that the gospel of Christ is, indeed, a gospel of liberation, affirming that the Church has a moral responsibility to help tear down the oppressive social, cultural, economic, and political structures of society.

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[220] Henry David Thoreau, "Civil Disobedience," accessed September 29, 2025, http://xroads.virginia.edu/~HYPER2/thoreau/civil.html.

Furthermore, the methodology and philosophy of Mohandas K. Gandhi were another major source of inspiration and application in Dr. King's successful implementation of direct nonviolence. Gandhi appealed to the common masses, just as King did. His strategy was not aimed at putting the British imperial power in a vulnerable position but rather encouraging people living under the British oppression to strive toward a higher standard of existence—one free from excessive materialism and consumerism and grounded in greater moral conduct. This was to be achieved through a higher state of desirelessness, as the resistance of material goods was the core of Gandhi's teachings."[221]

Gandhi's methodology of contending with British Imperialism affirmed that truth can be vindicated when one is willing to endure suffering when fighting for a just cause—to counteract various forms of oppression that exploit marginalized people as a result of economic exploitation.[222] This doctrine parallels the thoughts and strategies of Dr. King, who sought to shame the oppressor through a willingness to endure the public humiliations and afflictions experienced by Black Americans during the freedom marches in Alabama, in defiance of an oppressive governmental structure and the evil of society. In this willingness to endure suffering, Dr. King firmly believed that greater community grounded in brotherly love would be the fruit of transformation, despite the bitterness of the cup. In applying the methodology of nonviolence, he was not seeking to slay White America but to awaken its conscience—to bring it into unity with its Black brothers and sisters in the making of a better America.

Dr. King carried his staff of scripture in a direct assault on the structural evil of segregation in the South—without ever raising a physical sword. He delivered powerful, Bible-

[221] Reddick, *Crusader Without Violence*, 19.

[222] Ibid.

rooted speeches that spoke out not merely against the White-dominated order that ruled America but, more importantly, against the oppressive social and administrative government policies that hindered true democracy. This oppression under the doctrine of "separate but equal" was maintained with the approval and endorsement of the all-White establishment that governed America. At the Lincoln Memorial on August 28, 1963, Dr. King mesmerized the nation, reminding the world that the Emancipation Proclamation was a document that ushered in a new era of hope for Black Americans.

The chains of segregation and the heavy hand of discrimination had shaped the lives of Black Americans. They lived in a province of poverty and oppression in a land of milk and honey—of which they drank little. Although enormous material wealth existed in abundance, Black Americans possessed little to show for it. Dr. King stated, "The Negro is still languishing in the corners of American society and finds himself in exile in his own land."[223]

The promissory note of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States was signed in good faith, affirming that all Americans were equally entitled to the American way of life, regardless of race. Dr. King stated that the marchers came to awaken the establishment to the reality of the shameful reality of the condition and mistreatment of the Black American. They came to the nation's capital with a check that needed to be cashed—a check representing the rights, privileges, and entitlements that had been denied. King remarked that the promise of equality had not been achieved, for when Black Americans attempted to cash the check of equality, it came back marked "insufficient funds."[224]

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[223] King, *The Words of Ma*rtin,102.

[224] Coretta Scott King, *The Words of Martin Luther King, Jr.* 1992, William Morrow & Company, 102.

In Dr. King's speech, "I Have a Dream," he encourages the American people to continue to stand up for social justice and resisting oppression everywhere in a civilized, dignified, and disciplined manner. He renounced all forms of bitterness and hatred that could lead to violent means of bringing about social change. He advocated meeting physical force with soul force, emphasizing that the freedom and destiny of Black and White Americans are intertwined.[225]

In the March on Washington, led by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and fellow civil rights activists, a decisive moment in American history unfolded—one in which the world witnessed the forces of liberation and the theological language of freedom expressed through Dr. King's words, launched from the church with the gospel of Christ as his sword. Dr. King affirmed the mission and function of the church. His speech at the Lincoln Memorial, "I Have a Dream," resonated with the liberating power of the gospel of Christ. As Dr. King spoke, he articulated a universal theology of liberation—one in which the poor, the oppressed, and the outcasts of society were acknowledged, lifted up, and affirmed as equal in the eyes of the Creator, while the rich and powerful who ruled America were called to awaken their consciences to the human and civil rights of all humankind. Dr. King affirmed this best when he stated:

> But there is something that I must say to my people who stand on the warm threshold which leads into the palace of justice. In the process of gaining our rightful place, we must not be guilty of wrongful deeds. Let us not seek to satisfy our thirst for freedom by drinking from the cup of bitterness and hatred. We must forever conduct our struggle on the high plane of dignity and discipline. We must not allow our creative protest to degenerate into physical violence. Again and again, we must rise to the majestic heights of meeting physical force with soul force. The marvelous new militancy which has

[225] King, *The Words Martin*, 103.

> engulfed the Negro community must not lead us to a distrust of all White people, for many of our White brothers, as evidenced by their presence here today, have come to realize that their destiny is tied up with.[226]

In this passage, Dr. King affirms that the struggle for justice must include all people, regardless of ethnicity. He emphasized that it is not a mission African Americans must fight alone but a shared human endeavor. He envisioned the transformation of society, whereby all humankind can stand and gather at the crossroads in brotherly love, as proclaimed by Howard Thurman in his text *Jesus and Disinherited*. It is a mission that must include all people standing in accord for equal rights and justice for all, wherein human dignity is both acknowledged and affirmed. Dr. King concludes by saying,

> And we allow freedom to ring, when we let it ring from every village and hamlet, from every state and city, we will be able to speed up that day when all of God's children—Black men and White, Jews, and Gentiles, Catholics and Protestants—will be able to join hands and to sing in the words of the old Negro spiritual, 'Free at last! Thank God Almighty, we are free at last.[227]

I assert that Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech most powerfully supports the thesis of this paper: affirming the need for the development of a universal theology of liberation, one derived from the plight of the poor and disinherited and inclusive of all religions and cultures. This theology speaks to the ruling factions of our world, calling for the transformation of the oppressive social, cultural, economic, and political systems that have entrapped millions in

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[226] Martin Luther King Jr., ed. James Melvin Washington, *I Have a Dream: Writings and Speeches That Changed the World* (New York: HarperOne, 1992), 218.

[227] King, *I have a Dream*, 218.

poverty and oppression while allowing others to monopolize the wealth of material goods, money, resources, and power.

Dr. King was one of the most significant theologians in human history. He stepped onto the public platform, as did Frederick Douglass in his triumphant speeches against slavery, and spoke of liberty, freedom, and justice for African American people. Howard Thurman affirmed that even while living under the shroud of oppression, it is love—as exemplified in the life and teachings of Jesus—that affirms the human dignity of all people, even in the face of unequal power structures. Dr. King spoke the language of a universal theology of liberation, one that affirmed the true mission and function of the Church in addressing the social, cultural, economic, and political structures of society.

CHAPTER 5

MALCOLM X, BY ANY MEANS NECESSARY: A THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION

Malcolm X's theological and political thought was influenced by the teachings of Elijah Muhammad, who was the founder of the Nation of Islam in America. This teaching was rooted in the Yakub myth, which proclaimed that the White race came forth from an experiment by a Black scientist called Yakub. Whites, by nature, were devils and totally lacking in empathy or morality toward people of color. They would reign for a certain period of time; thereafter, Allah would restore the kingdom to the hands of the Blacks, who were the original people of the earth. Elijah's teachings emphasized to Malcolm that Black people in America had been scientifically brainwashed because of a lack of true knowledge of their own origins, true Black history and culture. As a result, Blacks in America had no identity due to the White man's deceptions.[228]

Civil Disobedience

Malcolm X differed greatly on the issues and strategies employed by Dr. King regarding civil disobedience as a means to bring about the downfall of segregation. Malcolm believed that Black Americans, in their struggle to fight racism, should be the ones to implement the rules alone without being dependent on White Americans' decision-making. Malcolm did not believe White Americans would view racism and segregation in the same manner because White Americans had implemented racism and segregation. Malcolm's reaction to King's strategy of

[228] Alex Haley and M. S. Handler, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Grove Press, 1965), 142–43.

civil disobedience was a positive one; however, he advocated a revolution to bring about legitimate social change. He believed that real revolutionaries would disregard the laws of the establishment. Malcolm was not impressed with the March on Washington. He felt the Black leadership of that time allowed the White leaders in Washington to set guidelines on how the March on Washington should be done. The original plan in the March on Washington was to bring the entire capital to a paralyzing halt, which Malcolm felt would have been a more effective strategy than taking orders from White liberals like John F. Kennedy and all the other White liberals serving in Washington at the time of the march. Malcolm's allowance of Whites to integrate into the March on Washington was in error. He felt the original plan of the march was to put fear into the hearts of the ruling White liberals in Washington. In getting the approval of the Whites in Washington through the government, churches, and other organized establishments, the March on Washington turned into just another Washington event organized by the establishment itself. Malcolm felt that Black civil rights leaders like Dr. King had killed the power of militancy of the event and the anger of Black Americans against racial segregation and oppression. In the March on Washington, Malcolm stated that those who supported and actively participated in racism against Black Americans were in violation of the law itself. He said, "When one is a victim of another's violation of the law, that person is justified in exercising the 'natural law of self-preservation.'"[229] Malcolm's language here is the language of liberation theology, in that he firmly emphasized that African Americans had to fight for recognition, acknowledgment, and human dignity in America by whatever means it would take to achieve

[229] Peter J. Paris, *Black Leaders in Conflict: Joseph H. Jackson, Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Adam Clayton Powell Jr.* (New York: Pilgrim Press, 1978), 158–59.

this. His push for African Americans' fight for liberation resonates with one of the forerunners of liberation theology.

Frederick Douglass was outraged over the passing of the Fugitive Slave Act in September 1850. Douglass's words of resistance to former slaves who had fled the captivity of the antebellum South were a language of liberation, to be maintained through the use of violence, if necessary, even if it resulted in the death of anyone assisting the slave catchers to return them to a life of bondage. David Blight writes in the text *Frederick Douglass: Prophet of Freedom* about the stance Douglass takes regarding the Fugitive Slave Act, affirming Douglass's encouragement of slaves to use violence to maintain their freedom. "Douglass made it clear, whether with firearms or other lethal weapons, he was prepared to greet the slave catchers with hospitality befitting the place and occasion."[230]

At a speaking engagement on October 14, 1850, Douglass moved the audience to cheers when advocating the use of violence by Black people in the North to prevent being returned to slavery. Douglass stated, "Be resolved rather to die than to go back."[231] Douglass continued to speak the language of liberation for former slaves to preserve their God-given and ordained right to human liberty. Douglass stated, "If a slave catcher seeks to take the slave back," shouted Douglass, "he will be murdered in your streets."[232] Blight discerns this advocacy of violence by Douglass as addressing what Douglass perceived as a new situation to contend with in counteracting the Fugitive Slave Act.

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[230] Paris, *Black Leaders,* 240.

[231] Blight, *Prophet of Freedom*, 241

[232] Ibid.

Douglass affirmed his stance regarding former slaves' use of violence to prevent being returned to slavery in another speech titled "Resistance to Blood-Houndism," delivered in 1851 in Syracuse, New York. "I am a peace man," Douglass announced somewhat disingenuously, "but this convention ought to scare slaveholders, for they are in danger of bodily harm if they come here and attempt to carry men off to bondage."[233] Therefore, when Malcolm X advocated violence if it was necessary to preserve life and the human dignity of what it means to be a Black human being in the struggle for equality against White supremacy strongholds, Malcolm X was speaking the language of liberation with the possibility of having to resort to violence to preserve Black human dignity in the full right to live, work, and participate in a system that African Americans ancestors helped to build. It is Dr. James H. Cone, in *Black Theology and Black Power* (1960), who gives critical insight into the mind and thoughts of Malcolm, whereby one gains in-depth understanding of the man in his perspective on race, religion, Christianity, White supremacy, and the difficulties Malcolm had with Dr. Martin Luther King's methodology of direct nonviolent resistance in the push for integration and in combating racism in America.

From the text *Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream or a Nightmare*, Cone affirms that Malcolm X had conflicting issues with Christianity rooted in "the role of European Christianity in the politico-economic exploitation and cultural-spiritual degradation of Black people."[234] Cone affirms that Malcolm X spoke from the perspective of being a "grassroots activist" in his identification with all those who had become victims of Whites proclaiming the gospel of Christ.[235] Cone asserts Malcolm's indictment of Christianity was powerful and resonated with

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[233] Ibid.

[234] James H. Cone, *Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream or a Nightmare?* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2012), 166.

[235] Cone, *Martin and Malcolm,* 169.

truth, as Malcolm spoke without apology. Malcolm X stated, "Our slave masters gave us a blond, blue-eyed, pale-skinned God to worship and admire. The religions of other people make them proud of what they are, but Christianity," he said, "was designed to make us look down on Black and up at White. It made Blacks feel inferior because we were taught that God cursed us Black. This meant that we are supposed to feel honored while serving the White race of Christians. Christianity was nothing but White supremacy, completely designed to fill Black hearts with the desire to be White. A White Jesus. A White virgin. White Angels. White everything. But a Black devil, of course."[236]

Cone asserts that Christianity was rejected by Malcolm X because he saw it as a religion that had served the White man. Therefore, in Malcolm's assessment, Christianity was a "White controlled religion." Hence, he accepted Islam as the true or natural religion of the Black man.[237] Therefore, when it came to speaking what would be considered the theological language of liberation—whereby you unite a nation of people in reference to the gospel of Christ—a major dilemma arose because of the conflicting methodologies and theologies of Malcolm X and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. The thesis of this paper argues that the development of a universal theology of liberation is derived from the plight of the oppressed and is inclusive of all religions and cultures, awakening the consciousness of the ruling dominant factions of our world to radically change the oppressive social, cultural, economic, and political policies that sentence people throughout our world to a life of poverty and hardships. Dr. King implemented school boycotts as a direct strategy of nonviolence based on the strict segregation imposed throughout the South, despite the Supreme Court ruling in 1954 that declared segregation in public schools

[236] Cone, *Martin and Malcolm*, 170–171.

[237] Ibid., 171.

unconstitutional. Dr. King supported the school boycotts because he did not believe children should be encouraged to support or cooperate with the structural evil of racism, which brought forth the doctrine of separate but equal. Dr. King saw it as a positive thing for children participating in the "moral struggle," even if it meant that they would go to jail—a consequence King saw as a "manifestation of morality itself."[238]

However, Malcolm X expressed skepticism about the effectiveness of legislation aimed at improving the lives of Black Americans. There were some contradictions noted in Malcolm's words. On one hand, Malcolm had called for the separation of races yet gave his approval for actions intended to bring about integration. He seemed conflicted. He affirmed that Black people would cooperate with Whites on the problems and social evils in American society in a nonviolent manner, specifically regarding voter registration and issues related to rent, strikes, and boycotts. Malcolm put forth these sentiments regarding integration, saying, "I'm not even worried about it because I know you're not going to get it anyway... but we will still work with you on the school boycotts because we're against a segregated school system."[239]

Black children in a segregated school system would only end up with a crippled intellect. He saw the segregated school system as one in which the people who controlled it were not interested in any form of integration. Malcolm did not believe that a school system lacking a diverse population was the true definition or example of segregation. He stated, "Just because a school is all Black, it does not mean that it is segregated."[240] The mind's psychological framework **determines** whether a system is segregated, based on the thoughts and internalized

[238] Paris, *Black Leaders,* 90–91.

[239] Ibid., 161.

[240] Ibid.

feelings of its creators about race. Malcolm X's stance against boycotts and integration was influenced by his experiences in the school system he attended during his childhood.

He started school at the age of five at the Pleasant Grove School in Omaha, Nebraska, which taught kindergarten through eighth grade. Malcolm experienced the dehumanizing treatment of being referred to as "nigger," "darkie," and "Rastus" as a normal part of the language and communication that Whites used when referring to Black people in the area where he lived. Malcolm recalled, "They did not think of it as an insult; it was just the way they thought about us."[241] Malcolm internalized the pain, but it did not cripple him intellectually. This dehumanizing language and these experiences continued when Malcolm X entered Mason Junior High School in Mason, Michigan. Malcolm recalls the experience of his history teacher regarding American Negro History, which was only a paragraph in length. Malcolm recalled the teacher saying, "The Negros had been slaves and then were freed, and how they were usually lazy, dumb, and shiftless."[242] The teacher laughed when he further emphasized his racist, dehumanizing remarks about the aloofness and lack of intellect of Negro people in their real contribution to the evolution of civilization in any area. Another teacher said, "Negroes' feet were so big that when they walk, they do not leave tracks—they leave a hole in the ground."[243]

Malcolm's conflicted thoughts on integration and boycotts are deeply rooted in what he experienced as a Black male in a predominantly White school system, where the psychological effects of racism were culturally accepted as a form of social interaction, without the awareness of the offender. It is here where I believe his objection to Dr. King's strategy of universal

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[241] Ibid.

[242] Haley and Handler*, The Autobiography of Malcolm X,* 29.

[243] Ibid.

boycotts and integration is most likely to be misunderstood by many of that time and even now. Malcolm was able to move forward and work with other civil rights advocates in the area of instituted boycotts, but he continued to have reservations regarding the effectiveness of boycotts and forced integration in the school system. Malcolm firmly stressed the necessity of Blacks having their own schools. Malcolm's political opinion was that if Blacks controlled their own institutions, then they would control their own destiny.[244]

Black Nationalism

Malcolm X advocated strong Black nationalism as an appropriate tool to fight in the struggle against segregation and racism. This was an alternative position to Dr. King's nonviolent, direct approach. The principles endorsed through Black nationalism would become a formidable force in the Black power movement in America. Malcolm emphasized the need for Black-owned institutions and organizations under the complete control of Black Americans and the exclusion of Whites. He advanced the push for the recovery of the identity and self-respect of Black Americans.[245]

Malcolm emphasized the need for Black Americans to focus on self-development and actions in the battle against racial oppression on every level. Malcolm X stressed the importance of Black Americans acquiring knowledge because that is the true source of power—the only element that an oppressor is willing to acknowledge, particularly when it rivals his own. Malcolm X believed that the right form of reasoning on the part of all Black Americans would create the psychological and mental process for devising an effective plan to increase Black economic and political power. He explained further that the "power does not back up in the face

[244] Ibid., 160–161.

[245] Paris, *Black Leaders*, 166.

of a smile, or in the face of a threat, or in the face of some kind of nonviolent, loving action," and those living in Congo, Southeast Asia, and Cuba have come to realize this great truth regarding power and nationalism.[246]

In Malcolm's use of the theological language of Black nationalism he connects the struggle against White supremacy across the globe in his reference to Southeast Asia and Cuba thereby affirming and supporting the premise of the thesis of this paper in the necessity of developing a universal theological language derived from the plight of the poor and oppressed that is inclusive of all religions and cultures that awakens the conscience of the ruling factions of the social, cultural, economic and politics across the world that serves as a yoke of iron for the forgotten and disinherited.

In the 1967 publication, *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?* Dr. King took a stand in response to voices like Malcolm X in their push for Black nationalism and the Black power movement. King affirmed his opposition to the militant voices of Black nationalism and the Black power movement and continued to advocate nonviolence through the element of love. He considered it his moral obligation to avoid violence because it defeats the whole purpose of a nonviolent Civil Rights Movement, whose intent was to bring all people together in the "blessed community." Malcolm X, on the other hand, did not seem to understand King's ideology or methodology from a perspective of nonviolence.[247] Dr. King saw the element of Black power out of Black nationalism as a reflection of the failures of Black Americans' experience with the White establishment in America.

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[246] Ibid., 166–167.

[247] Paris, *Black Leaders*, 95.

Malcolm X's alternative voice to Dr. King in the Civil Rights Movement was one based on human rights principles. Malcolm felt that White liberals in America deceived Black Americans into believing that Black Americans' greatest problem was the denial of their civil rights and participation in America equal to that of White Americans. Malcolm X proclaimed that Black Americans' humanity had to be acknowledged by White Americans before Black Americans could be equal citizens.[248] Malcolm X spoke a theological language of liberation in the universality of the equality of human rights, which resonated differently from Dr. King's emphasis on civil rights. Malcolm affirmed that until Whites were willing to acknowledge the humanity of Black people in America—and the equality of the human existence as American citizens—the battleground for the civil right to be equal and participate within the system that African Americans had helped to build seemed to be a futile endeavor when one was not being received or acknowledged in one's human dignity as an equal to all others. Therefore, Dr. King's nonviolent stance in transforming the system seemed too soft a protest for equality.

Malcolm's statement reflects the true basis of racism in America. Black Americans were being treated as second-class citizens because White Americans had never really seen people with Black skin as being totally equal to Whites since the days of the institution of slavery in America. The greatest threat to Blacks living in America, Malcolm believed, was the threat of human rights rather than civil rights. Therefore, he stressed the issue of Black Americans placing more emphasis on the matter of the denial of human rights and channeling that appeal through the United Nations to facilitate a global response from nations around the world. Malcolm felt that the White establishment in Washington would be far more sensitive to world opinions on

[248] Ibid., 165.

race relations than to pressure from within by Black Americans. He believed the United Nations could be an instrumental agency in bringing about better treatment for Black Americans.[249]

For Malcolm X, Black nationalism and the development of a strong Black power structure in America were the tools he felt would be more effective than Dr. King's nonviolent direct action. When Malcolm had the opportunity to speak to the Organization of African Unity in Addis Ababa, he seized the opportunity to solicit its help in confronting the issue of acute racism against Blacks in America before the United Nations. Malcolm X was so impressed by the Organization of African Unity that he created the Organization of Afro-American Unity, through which Black Americans could become a part of America's power faction. It was Malcolm's desire that this advocacy would aggressively unify Black people on what he considered a matter of human rights rather than civil rights.[250]

Malcolm was hardly moved by Dr. King's emphasis on civil rights violations. He felt that the racist oppression that Black people in America were being forced to live under was more of an issue of human rights violations, which was a global issue. For Dr. King, civil rights legislation was of the utmost importance in the strategy of nonviolent direct action and in working with the White establishment and rulers of America. However, Malcolm X was not pleased with the civil rights struggle that focused solely on seeking civil rights legislation. He criticized the March on Washington as a "one-day picnic."[251]

Malcolm's Black nationalism and Black power had a militant tone of Black separatism, which was the antithesis of the goals King wanted to achieve in the Civil Rights Movement

[249] Ibid.

[250] Ibid., 165–166.

[251] Ibid., 165.

through the use of nonviolent direct action. Dr. King found an error in Black America that tried to isolate itself in a pluralistic nation like America. King thought advocates of this type of strategy could not reasonably expect to achieve equal rights for all people. To the contrary, Dr. King emphasized Black Americans could achieve an equal share in political, economic, and social power only by all races working together for America's common good through "constructive alliances." King stressed working with the majority. This is a strategy that Malcolm's Black nationalism and Black power agenda simply would not consider, much less embrace. [252]

Dr. King stressed the coming together of all humankind in the universality of the greatest good. Dr. King's theology and methodology resonated with a powerful push for a theology of liberation in his willingness to have Blacks and Whites work together to dismantle the racial barriers that had existed in America from its infancy. However, Malcolm X's theology of Black nationalism—in asserting Black pride, self-determination, and total control by Black people—limited or restricted Whites from dictating to blacks what was to be done and how it is to be done.

It is Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. whom I assert had a vision of the commonality of human dignity in all people, whereby the image and likeness of God are recognized and acknowledged in all people, so that the racial divide becomes nullified. This supports the premise of the thesis of this paper: that the development of a universal theology of liberation, derived from the plight of the poor and disinherited and inclusive of all religions and cultures, awakens the ruling powers of the world to transform their oppressive political and economic strategies.

[252] Ibid., 165.

Malcolm X: The Goodness of America

Malcolm X saw very little in America that could be categorized as "good" because of the way the nation was founded, its stained history of slavery, and the continued mistreatment of Black Americans. Malcolm proclaimed that America's founders were nothing more than common street criminals originating from English society. He posited that the founding fathers had created a nation born out of crimes committed against humanity with regard to Native Americans and the enslavement of Black people from Africa. Malcolm X saw the founding fathers as liars, thieves, and murderers, whom he described as "prostitutes from the dungeons of England."[253] He saw them as having created a nation whose society was more criminal than patriotic, and he challenged the Black man to go home and look in the mirror at the victim of American criminal society.[254]

Malcolm's dialogue on the criminality of White supremacy in America resonates with the dialogue of Frederick Douglass, one of the forerunners of liberation dialogue in defense of Black people held in chattel slavery, particularly in a speech regarding the criminal nature of slavery in American society. His words were rooted in the tone of liberation. He spoke with a theology that defined the inhumane evil of slavery against Black people under the guise of Christianity, which supported Malcolm's indictment of American society as criminal.

Douglass's speech on the "Nature of Slavery," in Rochester, New York, December 1, 1850, echoed the crimes against Black humankind. Douglass wrote, "I will state, as well as I can, the legal and social relation of master and slave. A master is one who speaks in the vocabulary of the southern states, claims and exercises a right of property in the person of a fellow man. This

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[253] Malcolm X, "Afro-American History," *International Socialist Review* 28, no. 2 (March–April 1967): 3–48.

[254] Paris, *Black Leaders*, 98.

he does with the force of the law and the sanction of southern religion. The law gives the master absolute power over the slave."[255] Douglass continued, elaborating on the absolute power of the master over the person of the slave, which defines the utter hopelessness and depravity of the institution of slavery, in which the very human rights of another individual, as emphasized by Malcolm X, were not considered. Malcolm's description of American society as criminal is more clearly understood in reference to America's infancy. Douglass writes,

> He may work him, hire him out, sell him and, in certain contingencies, kill him, with perfect impunity. The slave is a human being, divested of all rights, reduced to the level of a brute, a mere chattel in the eye of the law, placed beyond the circle of human brotherhood, cut off from his kind, his name, which the recording angel may have enrolled in heaven, among the blessed, is impiously inserted in a master's ledger, with horses, sheep, and swine. In law, the slave has no wife, no children, no country, and no home. He can own nothing, possess nothing, acquire nothing, but what must belong to another. To eat the fruit of his own toil, to clothe his person with work of his own hands, is considered stealing. He toils that another may reap the fruit; he is industrious that another may live in idleness; he eats unbolted meals that another may eat the bread of fine flour; he labors in chains at home, under a burning sun and biting lash, that another may ride in ease and splendor abroad; he lives in ignorance that another may be educated; he is abused that another may be exalted; he rests his toilworn limbs on the cold, damp ground that another may repose on the softest pillow; he is clad in coarse and tattered raiment that another may be arrayed in purple and fine linen; he is sheltered only by the

[255] Frederick Douglass, *Frederick Douglass: Selected Works* (New York: Fall River Press/Sterling Publishing, 2021), 149–55.

> wretched hovel that a master dwell in magnificent mansion; and to this condition he is bound down as by an arm of iron.[256]

Douglass affirmed that the captivity of those held in chattel slavery in the Americas was total. Therefore, Douglass speaks of a lived experience, his words affirmed and verified by his spoken and written truth—a theology of liberation that must be spoken and obtained by sharing the truth and awakening the conscience of White America to its crimes against humanity.

Douglass, as Malcolm X would later do, asserted without doubt that the slaveholder used his whip as the tool to affirm the reality of slavery and the lifelong duties expected of the Black chattel property. Human rights, mercy, compassion, and understanding were not considered in affirming and maintaining the institution of slavery, thereby assuring the criminality inherent in the daily enforcement of total annihilation of human rights for slaves in America. Douglass reiterates further in his dialogue that the institution of slavery was a reality of "revolting cruelties" that were without end.[257] The criminality and images that Douglass uses in defining the nature of American slavery give credibility to the language Malcolm X himself would later use in validating American society as criminal in its crimes, mistreatment, and oppression of Black Americans from its foundations. A theological language of liberation must be concerned with and derived from the plight of the oppressed, and it must speak the truth to the oppressor in graphic terms, so that the oppressor reevaluates the social, cultural, economic, and political policies and methodologies that are causing the oppression. Douglass comments further,

> The very accompaniments of the slave system stamp it as the offspring of hell itself. To ensure good behavior, the slaveholder relies on the whip; to induce proper humility, he

[256] Douglass, *Selected works*, 159.

[257] Ibid., 157.

> relies on the whip; to rebuke what he is pleased to term insolence, he relies on the whip; to supply the place of wages as an incentive to toil, he relies on the whip; to bind down the spirit of the slave, to imbrute and destroy his manhood, he relies on the whip, the chain, the gag, the thumb screw, the pillory, the bowie knife, the pistol, and the blood-hound."[258] In his speech of persuasion regarding the true nature of the institution of slavery, Douglass emphasizes that "wherever slavery is found, these horrid instruments are also found. Whether on the coast of Africa, among the savage tribes, or in South Carolina, among the refined and civilized, slavery is the same, and its accompaniments are one and the same. It makes no difference whether the slaveholder worships the God of the Christians, or is a follower of Mohomet; he is the minister of the same cruelty, and the author of the same misery. Slavery is always slavery; always the same foul, haggard, and damning scourge, whether found in the eastern or in the western hemisphere.[259]

Douglass affirmed the physical cruelty of chattel slavery but stresses even more the devastating psychological effects on the inner person, which resonate with and help explain Malcolm X's speech in his characterization of the criminality of American society.

This also gives credence to Malcolm's approach to liberation from racial oppression by whatever methodology was necessary for African Americans to achieve and affirm human dignity in their right to be equal in the system their ancestors helped to build. Therefore, Douglass states, "The physical cruelties are indeed sufficiently harassing and revolting; but they are as a few grains of sand on the seashore, or a few drops of water in the great ocean, compared with the stupendous wrongs which it inflicts upon the mental, moral, and religious nature of its

[258] Ibid., 150–158.

[259] Ibid., 151.

hapless victims. It is only when we contemplate the slave as a moral and intellectual being that we can adequately comprehend the unparalleled enormity of slavery and the intense criminality of the slaveholder."[260]

Douglass affirmed the criminality of American slavery from America to Africa and asserts that it is a horrid institution regardless of the hemisphere of the world in which it occurs. He affirms the perversion of religion, whether it be Christianity as taught and practiced by Jesus or the followers of Mohammed. Therefore, this level of criminality is an assault on the very essence of a person or culture of people—mind, body, soul, and spirit—in which the image and likeness of God in humankind are being eradicated. Here lies the support and understanding of Malcolm X's perspective on liberation theology, defined through Black nationalism, solidarity, and self-determination in the fight against racial oppression. Douglass's indictment of the criminality of American slavery under the guise of Christianity facilitates understanding of Malcolm's rejection of the Westernized version of Christianity, despite Howard Thurman's strategy of challenging the Black oppression of Americans by reevaluating Christianity through the fundamental concepts of Jesus's teachings as a strategy for survival and acknowledgment in preserving human dignity. Thurman "believed Jesus recognized that no external force, however great and overwhelming, can at long last destroy a people if it does not first win the victory of the spirit against them."[261] Dr. King was able to understand and embrace this concept as defined by Thurman; however, it was foreign to Malcolm in his methodology of liberation theology in addressing racial oppression because of the erroneous way in which Christianity had been used

[260] Ibid.

[261] Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 11.

to sanction the enslavement of Black people in America. In Malcolm's mind, American society was guilty of crimes against its own people.[262]

Malcolm X and Dr. King: Religion and Theology—Conflicting Perspectives

In the development of a decisive theology of liberation contending with religious and cultural pluralism, in which the disinherited are represented and the conscience of the ruling factions of society is awakened to the oppressive, racist social, cultural, economic, and political strategies, it becomes very difficult to define a universal theology of liberation that speaks to all humankind when conflicting religious beliefs and theologies are major components of contention in a highly racialized society. One must speak a dialogue of liberation that is inclusive of all people, religions, and cultures. This was not any easy task for either Malcolm or Dr. Martin Luther King, just as it was not for Frederick Douglass, the abolitionist against slavery, or Howard Thurman, the mystic.

Dr. James H. Cone highlights the challenges of discussing theological liberation in a racist society, where opposing religious, cultural, and political ideologies hinder efforts for the greater good. Cone affirms that Malcolm X was not always fully understood in his theology because of the hate-filled and violent language that Malcolm often used in his theology to motivate African Americans to become more aggressive in the fight against racial oppression in America. As a result, Cone affirms that Malcolm's public image was marred and his religious comments distorted in the eyes of the public.[263]

Cone asserts that Malcolm X was a man of religious commitment and a "minister of God." From this perspective, Malcolm viewed the issues of religion as being separate from those

[262] Ibid.

[263] Cone, *Martin and Malcolm*, 164

matters that are in the arena of conflict involving questions of justice.[264] It is these opposing religious issues regarding the mission of all churches that pose a serious problem when religious institutions take on the social, cultural, and political matters of the day. Cone affirms that this is why Dr. King encountered extreme difficulties in getting the White religious establishment involved in the agenda of the Civil Rights Movement, and why the concept of a theology of liberation is problematic and controversial in Third World nations.[265] A dialogue of universal theology of liberation must be inclusive of all religions and cultures, derived from the plight of the poor and oppressed, and must awaken the conscience of the ruling factions of our world globally to eradicate the economics and politics of oppression.

Cone affirms that, for Malcolm X, the fight for social justice on behalf of the disinherited was the "central religious act." Malcolm was not fully understood and was often seen as a demagogue perpetuating "hate and violence."[266] In moving toward a universal theology of liberation that resonates with all people from every facet of life, Cone defines the similarities and differences in the theological dialogue that moved the nation during the Civil Rights era.

Malcolm X and Dr. Martin Luther King, Theological Perspectives

When Malcolm spoke as a major spokesperson in representing the Nation of Islam, "justice, love, and hope" were major components of his theology within the concept of Black nationalism, as they were for Dr. King in his agenda of nonviolence and integration. [267] In Dr. Cone's analysis, Dr. King emphasized the element of love in the engagement of his theology in

[264] Ibid.

[265] Ibid.

[266] Ibid.

[267] Ibid.

relation to the cross of Christ. However, Malcolm X placed greater emphasis on the concept of justice and "interpreted the three themes in light of his views of blackness, the dominant symbol in his theology."[268] Dr. King engaged and practiced a theology in which one would achieve justice through loving one's enemies and engaging in nonviolence against the barriers of White supremacy. Malcolm understood the necessity of Black people having love and appreciation for their own people and ancestry; however, justice was a primary concern in his theology. Malcolm also understood the devastating effects that White supremacy had had on African Americans. Cone asserts further that Dr. King's theology was rooted in the life of Christ as exemplified in the cross on which Jesus was willing to die as the sacrificial lamb in paying the penalty for sins and in Christ's resurrection, which embodies the love of Christ for humankind.[269]

Cone affirms that an essential component of Malcolm's theology was the hope he reflected in his speech regarding the love he knew God had for African Americans and the eventual judgment that White Americans would face for their oppression and mistreatment of African Americans. Dr. King did not label White Americans as demonic entities; he recognized the image and likeness of God in White Americans, despite their error in mistreating African Americans. Dr. King was willing to recognize the humanity and goodness that he believed the White race possessed. Therefore, there was an element of expectancy in Dr. King's efforts and aspirations that White Americans would partake in the Civil Rights Movement along with African Americans as brothers in Christ Jesus, tearing down the debilitating social construct of racism and striving for justice.[270]

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[268] Ibid.

[269] Ibid., 165.

[270] Ibid.

Malcolm X's perspective on White Americans, in relation to the concept of Black–White relations and Whites doing good, was not as hopeful as the high expectations that Dr. King had of Whites doing what was right in addressing the oppression and mistreatment of African Americans. Cone asserts, "Malcolm's Black Muslim theology and commonsense historical observation convinced him that Whites were devils, incapable of doing good. Thus, it was useless to try again for freedom, justice, and equality for Blacks by appealing to the religious convictions of Whites. In Malcolm's view, Christianity was proven both false and wicked by its age-old association with White people."[271]

Therefore, the conflicted theological perspectives of both Malcolm X and Dr. King, as well as those of the past—reflected in the liberation dialogue of Frederick Douglass, the abolitionist, and Howard Thurman, the spiritual mystic—support the premise of the thesis of this paper: that there is a need for the development of a universal theology of liberation that is inclusive of all religions and cultures, derived from the plight of the disinherited, and that awakens the privileged dominant factions of our world to change the strategies and policies of oppression, whereby all can share and participate equally as brothers in Christ Jesus. It is the diversity of religious beliefs and cultural differences under diverse forms of government that serve as a hindrance to the formation of a universal theological dialogue that will speak to all nations, creeds, and ethnicities—despite the fact that this is, in fact, the mission and purpose of the gospel of Christ.

Malcolm X's critique of Christianity resonated with great truth and was a crushing indictment of the Westernized version of Christianity and the White religious establishment in America. The dialogue of liberation that Malcolm spoke regarding White Christians and

[271] Ibid.

Christian theology in the Americas calls upon the White religious establishment in America to reevaluate the fundamental concept and doctrines of Christianity in relation to White supremacy and racial oppression in America. This is critical when one lives, exists, and teaches the gospel as exemplified and taught by Jesus himself. There is a scriptural directive that commands all followers and believers in Christ and his teachings are to "Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost: teaching them to observe all things whatsoever I have commanded you: and, lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world."[272] This directive affirms and supports the thesis of this paper: that there is a universal gospel of liberation of which the theology of that gospel must speak and include all people without exception or exclusion. Malcolm X stated,

> The Christian world is usually what we call the Western world. Now, what do I think? What is my image? The exploitation and colonization of the dark nations or lands were done by nations that today are known as Christian powers. Christians made slaves here in America out of twenty million Black people in Africa and today are trying to get free from countries that represented themselves to the Africans as Christian nations. Wherever you find dark people or non-White people today trying to get freedom, they're trying to get freedom from the people who represent themselves as Christians; and if you go to them and ask them their picture of a Christian, they'll tell you: an exploiter, a slave master. In America, the definition would be one who promises you equal rights for a hundred years and never gives them to you.[273]

[272] Matthew, 28;19–20 (KJV).

[273] Cone, *Martin and Malcolm*, 169.

Malcolm's powerful dialogue against the perversion of Christianity in the Americas, in its tolerance and accommodation of racism, affirms that a universal theology of liberation rooted in Christian principles can only be achieved when all people, of all cultures and religions, are awakened to the true mission of liberation theology as it applies to the equality of all humankind.

CHAPTER 6

DR. JAMES H. CONE: A THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION

James H. Cone Interpretive Analysis of Dr. King and Malcolm X

James H. Cone is another Black theologian born during the era of civil rights, social, and racial unrest. As a contemporary of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X, Cone offers an interpretive analysis of the civil rights strategies of both alternative voices—Dr. King and Malcolm X. His analysis is presented from the theological and political perspective of a Black liberation theologian. Cone was born in Fordyce, Arkansas, on August 5, 1936, and grew up in Bearden, Arkansas. Like Dr. King and Malcolm X, Cone found his greatest influence and inspiration in his father, Charley Cone. James Cone wrestled with the structural evil of racism and injustice while trying to reconcile his Christianity. Like King, Cone questioned how the invisible God could allow such evil to exist. James H. Cone faced these challenges from the Black experience of theology and liberation in confronting societal racism. He took a strong stand against the dehumanizing experiences of racism in America. Like his father, Cone demanded respect—to be treated as a man and not a boy—as did King, Malcolm, and their fathers. Cone understood the social ethos that White Americans used to dominate Black Americans, which often led to feelings of dehumanization. Like Dr. King and Malcolm X, James Cone experienced the rigid caste system of racism in America that demeaned all Black Americans. However, Cone was well trained by his father to renounce the unequal and dehumanizing relations that existed between Blacks and Whites in America and to defy oppression within the structural injustice of racism.

James Cone speaks on the voice of Dr. Martin Luther King and Malcolm X about the sin of White supremacy and racism. Cone saw King as more of a prophet of God, sent to wage war against the structural evil of racism in America. Cone recalls one of King's statements that gives clarity and defines King's policy on the use of nonviolent direct action in the Civil Rights Movement. King stated, "If physical death is the price I must pay to free my White brothers and sisters from the permanent death of the spirit, then nothing could be more redemptive."[274]

Cone felt that more clergy like Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. were needed to revolt against the structural evil of racial oppression. Cone considered racism to be a major problem for the religion of Christianity, which asks one to love one's neighbor as oneself. Cone reiterates that over a period of about five centuries, Europeans, along with Whites in the United States, traveled throughout many ethnic lands. As they went, they took what they wanted without wrestling with their consciences or taking into consideration issues of ethics or religion—exploiting people and seizing their resources through immoral actions across the globe.

James H. Cone identifies with Dr. King and Malcolm X in his explicit analysis of the sin of racism and what it does to both oppressors and victims. Cone stressed that the actual death of the body is one form of the effects of racism, as well as the theological issues and questions it raises. There is also the spiritual death that accompanies the structural evil of racism. Cone considers racism to be a violent act against one's own person and soul. He blames Europeans for their racist norms, values, and customs of natural superiority and for the self-loathing and hatred that germinated within numerous ethnic cultures with which Europeans interacted throughout history. Cone stressed that European colonialism fostered among ethnic peoples the belief that humanity was clearly defined as having White skin and practicing the White man's version of

[274] Hopkins and Antonio, *The Cambridge Companion*, 143.

Christianity. It caused the victims of this form of racism to develop a low self-image and the desire to be something that they could never be—or should not even want to be—more like the White man. Cone supported Malcolm's voice when Malcolm proclaimed the "self-hatred" that the White man had caused in Blacks in North America.[275]

Cone uses the words of James Baldwin to support the sense of urgency Dr. King felt in moving forward with nonviolent direct action against the sin of segregation and racism. Baldwin's words clarify the ideology of Malcolm's militancy and angry voice directed at White America concerning the victims and the psychological assault and effects of White supremacy. Baldwin wrote, "It is a terrible, inextricable law that one cannot deny the humanity of another without diminishing one's own: in the face of one's victim, one sees oneself."[276] Cone believed that any injustice committed against another is ultimately committed against oneself, and that this is one of the primary reasons Dr. King was so committed to challenging segregation—because it was facilitated further racism on the part of Whites against Black Americans. Racism was just as injurious for White Americans as it was for Black Americans.[277]

James H. Cone understood the more militant voice of Malcolm X against racism in America, as opposed to Dr. King's more diplomatic voice of nonviolence. Malcolm preferred to deliver his message to the White establishment on racism as "the naked truth" about White America.[278] Malcolm X spoke aggressively and with a militant tone about White America—often

[275] Ibid., 143.

[276] Ibid., 143–144.

[277] Ibid., 144.

[278] Ibid.

with a demeaning and insulting connotation—using harsh adjectives to refer to the White race as devils that had once lived in caves in Northern Europe.[279]

Cone emphasized that Malcolm used this harsh level of language in speaking about White America because it paralleled the same tone of harsh, racist language that Whites had always used in reference to Black people. Whites constantly used demeaning and dehumanizing words directed at Black people's humanity. Malcolm X did not see a difference between his tone of voice and that of White racist supremacists. Malcolm stated, "When I was a boy, they called me 'nigger' so much I thought that was my name."[280] Cone stresses that Malcolm X wanted White Americans to know how it truly feels to be treated as second-class citizens and how it feels to be referred to in such an insulting and dehumanizing manner. Cone reiterated that Malcolm X did not think that the softer tone of civil rights leaders like Dr. King was aggressive enough when speaking to White America. Malcolm X believed that anger should be shown when one's people have been lynched and enslaved. Cone wrote that Malcolm felt civil rights leaders like Dr. King were more concerned about "White America's emotional comfort" than they were about Black Americans' suffering. Cone believed that Malcolm's tone became militant toward other Black leaders because he felt they were being too soft on the White establishment in their speech, trying not to offend them.[281]

The militant Black liberation theology and its strategy seemed to be too aggressive for White theologians. Cone commented that White theologians were simply unwilling to engage an aggressive, militant voice like Malcolm X, but were far more comfortable with the language and

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[279] Ibid.

[280] Ibid., 150.

[281] Haley and Handler, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 1–466.

methodology of Dr. King. Cone admitted that he was difficult and demanding toward them because he wanted Whites to hear the truth without sugarcoating it to lessen the impact. Dr. King's voice of nonviolent direct action in fighting the structural evil of segregation and racism in America was one form of strategy in confronting racism. However, Malcolm X's militant Black nationalism and Black power strategy was an alternative call for a greater show of emotion and direct militancy in the form of self-defense if necessary. Both Dr. King and Malcolm X called for Black Americans to rise against the oppressive tide of racism and segregation that dehumanized Black America and damaged the spiritual nature of White Americans' souls in its application. Cone emphasized that Malcolm X was a man committed to telling the truth. Malcolm X saw the hypocrisy of the White establishment in both the North and the South. Each engaged in a different type of strategy, but he directed much of his wrath toward the White liberals of the North, whom he saw as "shrewdly camouflaged racists."[282]

Malcolm saw their so-called friendships as pretentious. They had no problem pointing the finger at the White Southern establishment in their mistreatment of Black Americans; however, they seemed to be oblivious to their own racist agenda. Malcolm X branded the Northern White liberals as "foxes" and their southern counterparts as "wolves."[283] Cone reiterates that Malcolm X was not shocked by Southern White racism—he expected it. Malcolm was truly repulsed by the Northern White integrationists because he knew they really did not mean it. Cone stressed that Malcolm X was adamant about the Northern White integrationists' two-faced was in contrast to the Southern Whites' overtly racist attitudes. Malcolm stated, "These Northern foxes pose as your benefactor, as your employer, as your landlord, as your neighbor merchant, and as your

[282] Hopkins and Antonio, *The Cambridge Companion,* 150.

[283] Ibid., 144.

lawyer trying to help you. They are hypocritical and even more cruel and vicious than the White wolves in the South."[284] Malcolm saw their strategy in embracing Black people only to cool the wrath of militant voices in the struggle and to lessen Black people's efforts in achieving full equality and justice in America.[285]

Cone stressed that Martin Luther King walked with a strategy of persuasive effort in his nonviolent direct approach to persuade White America, whereas Malcolm X did not try to appease White America on any level or through persuasion with evidence. He simply stated the facts of oppression, racism, and injustice in America that had affected the lives of Black people living in America. Malcolm spoke words that came forth from his own life and the experiences of Black people in America. Cone analyzed Malcolm's voice as being harsh and forceful, noting that Malcolm wanted to anger White Americans about the two realities of existence—White and Black—in America. Malcolm blamed the White American establishment for the deplorable conditions of poverty and disenfranchisement that most Black Americans faced daily in America.[286]

Dr. King spoke of the same harsh realities and hardships that Black Americans were forced to endure, but he did so with a less militant voice and without derogatory insults directed at White Americans. With his diplomatic letter written while detained in a Birmingham jail, Dr. King was able to make the same point as Malcolm X did. Dr. King informed the Southern White clergy why his nonviolent strategy could not wait. The *Letter from Birmingham Jail* maintained

[284] Cone, *Martin and Malcolm,* 95.

[285] Ibid.

[286] Ibid., 96.

dialogue in which the liberating actions against racial repression and segregation were firmly defined.

I assert that Dr. King used a more diplomatic tone to explain to White America the purpose of his actions and the true meaning of his words—words that White Americans could understand without the need to insult them in expressing the truth. Dr. King and Malcolm X spoke of the same issues and the structural evil of racism from different planes of existence. King spoke from the perspective of a well-trained theologian, with love and the mind of Christ. Malcolm X spoke from a plane of existence rooted in the difficult life and early childhood experiences of racial poverty and hardship that he had endured. Malcolm and King could identify with each other through the lens of their early family experiences. They were also able to identify with each other in civil rights activism, crying out for the ruling establishment in America to take aggressive action and make America a truer reality of her creed of freedom, equality, and justice for all Americans, regardless of race. This is where all voices of the Civil Rights Movement agreed—and where both Dr. King and Malcolm X were the same.

Each brand of liberation theology spoken by Dr. King and Malcolm X, in their opposing and conflicting methodologies and dialogue of liberation—tracing back to Frederick Douglass, the abolitionist, and Howard Thurman, the mystic—supports the premise of the thesis of this paper: that there is a need for the development of a universal theology of liberation derived from the plight of the poor, one that is inclusive of all religions and cultures, and that moves the dominant ruling factions of our world to change their economic and political policies and strategies of oppression. What is being affirmed is that the language of the theology of liberation must resonate as a language understood and interpreted for all people of all religions and cultures, from the poorest to the most powerful and wealthiest. It must be a liberation dialogue

that unites humankind into one cohesive whole, whereby the human dignity of all people is acknowledged and made equal across the world.

Robert E. Terrill makes a decisive point in his analysis of the two alternative voices—Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X—in his book *Malcolm X: Inventing Radical Judgment.* I reason that this book is appropriate for summarizing the alternative strategies and voices of both men during the Civil Rights Movement. Malcolm spoke often and loudly, with tones of anger and disillusionment about the standard of life for most Black Americans. He spoke with fire and an accusatory finger pointed at White America, without compromise or fear. However, Malcolm X failed to put forth an objective, realistic plan to move the ruling establishment in Washington to bring about effective change, as Dr. King did. Malcolm X made many powerful speeches with a venomous tongue directed at White America. Unfortunately, very little happened that was significant—or what one would consider valid—in reshaping the nation's laws and public policy, as Dr. King achieved through his nonviolent direct strategy. In the eyes of many historians, political strategists, social scientists, and theologians, Malcolm X's campaign or voice in the Civil Rights Movement might be considered a failure when compared to the legitimate accomplishments of Dr. King.[287]

Bayard Rustin, chief organizer of the 1963 March on Washington, has suggested that Malcolm had to be seen above and beyond the pull and tug of the struggle for concrete objectives. King had to win victories in the real world; Malcolm's were the kind you can create oneself.[288] Malcolm did not seem to put forth a legitimate political ideology that people could

[287] Ibid.

[288] Ibid.

relate to, as Dr. King did; however, Malcolm did show many how to engage in political discourse in order to be heard.[289]

Malcolm X did not leave behind the same legacy of Dr. King, who effectively changed the ruling powers of America and brought about legitimate civil rights legislation that began to change the lives of all Americans and caused the walls of racism and segregation to begin to crumble. Malcolm X showed Americans how to come out of the shadows of fear, despite being raised in an oppressive system that silenced voices and denied resources based on race. The journalist Peter Bailey, who was affiliated with Malcolm X, makes this comment regarding the true legacy and voice of Malcolm X: "Malcolm's words 'point' us, instead, toward an understanding of rhetoric that features its power to shape audiences and their perceptions; rhetoric, in this view, is appreciated not merely for its service to external ends but as being substantive and formative in its own right. This view understands rhetoric as action."[290]

Malcolm X may have been a little too harsh in calling all Americans to take action against the sins of segregation, racism, and the mistreatment of people based on their cultural heritage. However, Malcolm X's voice was effective in helping people see the sins of segregation rooted in the concept of a so-called difference based on race, and the repercussions of refusing to recognize the humanity in all people of all nations. It is here that the synergy of intent between Malcolm X and Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. meets hand in hand—whether through nonviolent direct protest or through the Black power movement that called for more Black Americans to stand up with self-respect, defend themselves through sociopolitical activism, and empower themselves through education. Malcolm X and Dr. King asked all Americans to face the nation's

[289] Terrill, *Inventing Radical Judgment*, 2.

[290] Ibid.

challenges and improve America through collective efforts—efforts that Dr. King believed would make America as great as it could be, as proclaimed in his "I Have a Dream" speech at the March on Washington.

Dr. James H. Cone: Christian Theology and Liberation

Dr. James H. Cone, a Black liberation theologian, was a new voice at the close of the Civil Rights Movement. He was born in Fordyce, Arkansas, on August 5, 1938, and earned a B.A. from Philander Smith College (1958), a Master of Divinity from Garrett Theological Seminary (1961), an M.A. from Northwestern University (1963), and a PhD from Northwestern University (1965). He was an ordained minister of the African American Episcopal Church. However, his primary social location and function were as an academic and Black liberation theologian at Union Theological Seminary, where he was a Distinguished Professor Emeritus of Systematic Theology. He died on April 28, 2018.[291]

In the aftermath of the assassinations of Malcolm X (February 21, 1965) and Martin Luther King Jr. (April 4, 1968), America was in need of a new voice to speak to the struggles and oppression of Blacks living in America from a theological perspective. This voice was needed to challenge the dominant White theological narrative, which was tolerant of—and even supportive of—the oppression of African Americans from colonial America to modernity. In this context, Dr. Cone's first book, *Black Theology and Black Power*, provides a definitive explanation of the origins and purpose of his new theological voice. Cone affirms that Black theology and Black power emerged out of the tribulations of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Cone's theology, therefore, reflected on what he considers to be the Civil Rights Movement's strengths

[291] Ibid.

and weaknesses and was expressed in his own analytical, sociological, and—most of all—theological voice in a new era of liberation.[292]

While Dr. Cone recognizes the superb liberating work of Dr. King's nonviolence, he felt that King's efforts fell short regarding the European dominance over Christianity and its theological and cultural influence and values. As Cone asserted, "It was hard to distinguish between the theologies of White and Black churches and the images of God and Jesus they used to express them.[293] Malcolm X's angry denunciation of Christianity as a religion that the White man constructed for himself moved Cone from complacency to formulating a theology that was related to the struggles of Black humanity in the Americas. Cone's question was, "How could he reconcile Christianity and Black power, Martin Luther King Jr.'s idea of nonviolence, and Malcolm X's by-any-means-necessary philosophy?"[294] Therefore, Cone's writing of *A Black Theology and Black Power* (1969) was the official start of the journey to resolve the dilemma.[295]

Because of the social and political upheaval of the sixties, Cone interpreted Christianity as Black power. Cone affirmed that theological dialogue is derived from human reasoning and speech; he asserted, "it is not God speaking."[296] Therefore, "all attempts to speak about ultimate reality are limited by the social history of the speaker. Cone's insight gives a greater depth and understanding of the theological, sociological, and political dialogue of liberation from Frederick Douglass the abolitionist, to Howard Thurman the spiritual mystic, to the controversial and conflicting civil rights leaders Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X. Because humankind is

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[292] Cone, *Black Theology,* xvi.

[293] Terrill, *Inventing Radical Judgement,* 2–3.

[294] Cone, *Black Theology*, xxv.

[295] Ibid., xvi.

[296] Ibid., xxvi.

ever evolving in each time period, the theological language must evolve as well to remain relevant to current social and cultural problems of the day.[297]

In Cone's second book, *A Black Theology of Liberation (1970),* it was to African Americans as to Whites. The book addresses Cone's own question: "What has the gospel of Christ to do with the Black struggle for justice in the United States?"[298] Dr. Cone appropriately affirms that his second book can only be fully understood with a preexisting historical knowledge of the oppression of Black people in the Americas—from the bonds of chattel slavery to Jim Crow laws, civil rights, and the surge of the Black power movement of the sixties. This oppression was entirely government-sanctioned and supported, from colonial America into modernity, by the White religious establishment and White theologians, many of whom asserted that Black people's subordination to Whites was ordained by God.[299]

James H. Cone and Theological Dialogue

From the onset of Cone's academic career, he emphasized his own works *Black Theology and Black Power* and *A Black Theology of Liberation,* which are racially focused on blackness and its relationship to oppression in the Americas and which spawned various scholarly responses that addressed this matter. In this paper, I begin by examining Cone's own dialogue on blackness and oppression. Cone argues, from his earliest publications, that White theologians must realize that it is impossible to continue ignoring the question of what the gospel has to do with oppressed blacks in their struggle for liberation. The oppression of Black people in the

[297] Ibid.

[298] Ibid.

[299] Ibid., xxv–xxvi.

Americas was not challenged by White theologians, he asserted, as it fell outside the dominant White theological agenda of the times.

Cone felt that even after two hundred and fifty years of chattel slavery, Jim Crow laws, lynching terror, and the turmoil of the Civil Rights Movement, White theologians, for the most part, were silent in their theological reflection on Black oppression or, at most, made sporadic, mild statements without any real intent or genuine concern.[300] Thus, Cone affirms that White theologians did not put forward meaningful theological dialogue on the subjects of Black history and religion that would contribute to the search for some correlation between Black oppression and the gospel of Christ. Rather, White theologians concentrated most of their theological concern on the intellectual endeavors coming forth from Germany.[301] Cone stresses that White seminary schools and universities were not known to use theological sources written by Black scholars or to engage with those sources regarding the religious history of African Americans in their discussions, lectures, and seminars. Cone attests that even during the most turbulent periods of the Civil Rights Movement, under Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s leadership, it was not enough to move White professors to discuss issues of theological reflection on the oppression and struggles of Blacks in the Americas. White professors were even stunned when Black students tried to assert the experience of Blacks in the Americas as a topic worthy of theological reflection.[302]

Cone affirms that the omission of the Black experience on the part of White intellectuals, professors, and ministers was not always a sure sign that they were racist in the truest meaning of

[300] Cone, *Black Theology,* xxv–xxvi.

[301] Ibid., xxv.

[302] Wilmore and Cone, *A Documentary History,* 135.

the term, but that some were indeed racist. Cone suggests that most were simply uncertain about what should be done to incorporate the Black experience into theological discussions. The greater question for Black students at mostly White seminary schools concerned the possibility of White professors' willingness to redefine their emotions and perspectives surrounding their theological interpretation and understanding to incorporate the Black experience. Cone did not believe that White professors were willing to give this question significant thought or consideration, stating: "All White seminaries ignored the Black experience as a serious object of theological reflection and neglected to define the theological task in terms supportive of justice and equality for Black people."[303] Moreover, Cone testifies that the best Black students at White seminary schools could never expect to teach at a White seminary school; only a select few would actually be accepted for doctoral studies. Cone saw this as evidence of White professors' lack of interest in or consideration of the Black experience as being worthy of theological reflection.[304] The 11 a.m. hour on Sunday spoke the truth in regard to the White religious establishment in America: White theologians were in their own world of theological reflection in their "ivory tower." Their theological reflection simply did not relate to the struggles and racist oppression that accompany the Black experience in the Americas.[305]

Cone affirmed that legitimate Christian theological reflection must contain language that is concerned with the poor, the oppressed, the marginalized, the downtrodden, and the outcasts of society. Theological language must be an embodiment of the gospel of Christ in which faith, hope, and love are the language of liberation as taught and proclaimed by Jesus Christ himself.

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[303] Wilmore and Cone, *A Documentary History*, 135.

[304] Ibid., 135.

[305] Ibid., 136.

Cone asserts, "the task of theology is to show what the changeless gospel means in each new situation."[306] Therefore, theological dialogue must address the plight of the oppressed with a perspective of universality that is global and concerned with all of humankind across all religious and cultural lines without omission. Cone affirms further that "Christian theology is a theology of liberation. 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."[307] Cone's theological dialogue supports the premise and thesis of this paper regarding the necessity for the development of a universal theology of liberation that is inclusive of all religions and cultures, whereby the consciousness of the ruling factions throughout the world may be moved to change social, cultural, economic, and political policies and strategies of oppression. In Cone's academic endeavor to redefine the essence of Christian theology, he made the oppression of African Americans in the Americas the point of departure, which seemed to have made his theological reflection too Black-centered. I must interject here and affirm that Cone's theological reflection on the oppression of African Americans is valid and legitimate in its inception and is a theological reflection that is relevant to all who are poor, oppressed, marginalized, and outcast peoples on a global scale.

Albert J. Raboteau

For Cone, theological reflection is not only legitimate and appropriate in its point of departure regarding Black people's oppression in the Americas. Cone's theological reflection is supported by the notable scholar of African and African American religions, Albert J. Raboteau. Raboteau gives a powerful testimony to the duality and complexity of the development of

[306] Ibid.

[307] Cone, *Black Theology*, 35.

Christianity and theology between Whites and blacks in the antebellum South and what it meant from the perspective of enslaved blacks in the development of Christianity and Christian theological reflection from the plane of existence of enslavement, whereby the enslaver's religion and God were also their religion and God. From the text *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution*" in the antebellum South, Raboteau writes, "In mixed churches, too, there was tension between fellowship and slave status. It affected seating patterns, the distribution of communion, the application of church ordinances, and participation in church meetings, but most importantly, it affected the experience of being Christian. This tension revealed the irreducible gap between the slave's religion and that of his slave master." Raboteau affirms the complexity of master and slave serving and acknowledging the same God in the same sacred space that had restrictions and parameters that regulated Christian fellowship in a slave society. Raboteau states, "the division went deep; it extended as far as the interpretation of the Bible and the understanding of the gospel,"[308] which was a major concern and problem that Frederick Douglass had with the Christian slaveholder. Raboteau affirms further that "slaves did not simply become Christians; they creatively fashioned a Christian tradition to fit their own peculiar experience of enslavement in America."[309]

Raboteau affirms that Cone's theological reflection, derived from the plight of Black oppression in the Americas, is valid and legitimate in the academy of religion, thereby affirming Cone's thoughts in that the language of liberation is essential in the dialogue of the content of Christian theology.[310] The spiritual "Steal Away" told them all to meet for a secret religious

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[308] Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 208.

[309] Ibid.

[310] Ibid., 209.

service. Walsh Wilson gives a slave testimony: "When de niggers go round singin' Steal Away to Jesus, dat mean dere gwine be a ligious meetin' dat night. Sometimes us sing and pray all night."[311] Furthermore, enslaved blacks of the antebellum South had to contend with the psychological perspective of Christianity that was being taught to them, derived from the teachings of Jesus, which was being used to sanction the institution of slavery regarding Black people. This reaffirms the thoughts of Howard Thurman for those who must live "with their backs against the wall" while contending with the teachings established by Jesus.[312] Thurman writes, "to some God and Jesus may appeal in a way other than to us: some may come to faith in God and to love, without a conscience attachment to Jesus. Both nature and good men besides Jesus may lead us to God. They seek God with all their hearts must, however, someday on their way meet Jesus."[313] This was a lived reality every day for all slaves who embraced the teachings of Jesus, as was taught to them within the institution of slavery.

The sermons that were preached to slaves were a major tool used to psychologically persuade slaves that the institution of slavery was ordained by God as an acceptable cultural institution. Slaves were tasked with reinterpreting those sermons in relation to their captivity. From the text *Slave Religion: The* "*invisible Institution*" in the antebellum South, Lucretia Alexander gives testimony regarding the typical dialogue of preaching that slaves had come to expect: "The preacher came and… he'd just say, 'Serve your masters. Do not steal your master's turkey. Do not steal your master's chickens. Do whatsoever your master tells you to do. Same old thing all the time.'"[314] This testimony affirms that it was the slaves in the invisible institution of

[311] Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation and Black Theology and Black Power, 1.

[312] Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 213.

[313] Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 1.

[314] Ibid., 214.

free Black religious expression who developed Black theological interpretation of the gospel at its beginning. It was a gospel of liberation; slaves believed that God's active hand would be in their ultimate liberation. Therefore, Cone's racially centered Black theology of liberation is a revelation rooted in the historical context of Black people's experience in the Americas.

Cone makes a profound statement that gives one a deeper in-depth understanding of the Black-centeredness of his theology of liberation in reference to Black oppression in the Americas, and also makes it relevant worldwide for those who are categorized as the disinherited. Furthermore, his statement supports the thesis of this paper. Cone makes a sociological and psychological analysis of African Americans in a White society that gives credence to his argument that theological dialogue must be derived from the plight of the poor and oppressed as reflected in the gospel of Christ. Cone affirms that one must have an understanding of the concept of "Black Power and existential absurdity" in relation to the civil status of Black people in the Americas.[315] Cone writes, "It is necessary to describe a prior mood of the Black man in a White society. When he first awakens to his place in America and feels the absolute contradiction between what is and what ought to be, or recognizes the inconsistency between his view of himself as a man and America's description of him as a thing, his immediate reaction is one of absurdity."[316]

Cone explicates further, "the absurd is basically that which man recognizes as the disparity between what he hopes for and what seems in fact to be. He yearns for some measure of happiness in an orderly, rational, and reasonable predictable world; when he finds misery in a disorderly, irrational, and unpredictable world, he is oppressed by the absurdity of the disparity

[315] Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation and Black Theology and Black Power*, 9.

[316] Ibid., 10.

between the universe as he wishes it to be and as he sees it."[317] Cone affirms that this is what African Americans feel in a society that is White and ruled over by Whites.[318] This would be relevant for all those who are from classes and cultures of people worldwide that must contend with being marginalized, poor, and oppressed because of their cultural heritage and due to oppressive global economic and political policies and strategies.

James H. Cone: Revolution, Black Theology, Violence and Reconciliation

I restate the thesis of this paper: there is a need for the development of a universal theology of liberation derived from the plight of the poor and oppressed that is inclusive of all religions and cultures, and that awakens the conscience of the ruling factions of our world to change their oppressive social, cultural, economic and political policies and strategies that oppress and sentences millions to a life of poverty and shame. Therefore, in facilitating the development of a universal theology of liberation, one must incorporate the theological thoughts of Dr. Cone on the issues of revolutionary actions derived from the concept of Black Theology, violence, and reconciliation. Cone affirms, "because Black theology is biblical theology seeking to create new value-perspectives for the oppressed, it is revolutionary theology."[319] Black theology is a dialogue that engages the racism that has always been prevalent in White American society, which Cone has categorized as the Antichrist. One must assume Cone is implying that it is the spirit of Antichrist behind the nature of racism in America.[320] Therefore, in the struggle for freedom for all people, it cannot be achieved without compromise.[321] Cone has affirmed that this

[317] Ibid.

[318] Ibid.

[319] Ibid., 153.

[320] Ibid.

[321] Ibid.

is a perspective that is antithetical to "White theology" and is more in alignment with "the religionist of the Third World."[322] It is here that Cone affirms that simple discussions are not enough when contending with oppression that is rooted in racism. Cone asserts that the meetings and discussions between White American liberals and African Americans from the middle-class civil status have already taken place. It is time for more aggressive actions of liberation in addressing the relations of race, whereby others are disenfranchised and oppressed.[323]

As Cone has defined it, "Black Theology believes the problem of racism will not be solved through talk but through action. Therefore, its task is to carve out a revolutionary theology based on relevant involvement in the world of racism, which is directly related to all the disinherited on a global scale.[324] Cone's thoughts affirm the argument of the thesis of this paper in that it is revolutionary action that brings about social, cultural, economic, and political change that will allow all people to be full participants in society and experience the equality of human dignity. Therefore, it may take revolutionary action that will facilitate the development of a universal theology of liberation derived out of the plight of the poor and oppressed that is inclusive of all religions and cultures that awakens the conscience of the ruling power of our world to change their social, cultural, economic and political policies and strategies of oppression that allow the disinherited to only exist.

Cone affirms that Black theology entails a revolution; it means confronting the structures of societal racism in which physical conflict becomes a real possibility in the annihilation of "the structure of White racism."[325] Therefore, this concept must hold true for all those who are

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[322] Ibid.

[323] Cone, *Black Theology,* 153–154.

[324] Cone, *Black Theology,* 154.

[325] Ibid.

oppressed and disinherited on a global scale. Cone affirms that all human beings have the God-ordained right to exist and live in this world as people who are acknowledged as participants in the world as equals to all others. The revolution demands that action be taken to eradicate the social, cultural, economic, and political structures of oppression worldwide.[326] Cone categorizes these structures as "established evil."[327] A revolution entails challenging the very principles of authority whereby others are deprived and oppressed. The revolution will not allow one to be silent or accommodating in the face of established oppressive policies and practices of politics and economics. The objective of the revolution is to change oppressive laws and to awaken the conscience of the oppressor. This was the power and message of *Black Theology and Black Power* in confronting White racism in America, but it is also valid and legitimate in its application to a universal theology of liberation regarding the disinherited worldwide.[328]

Also, Cone affirms that a revolution's objective is to replace the old, established, and corrupt system. Cone asserts that "the power of the revolution is coercive" in that Black ministers encouraged slaves prior to the start of the Civil War to rebel against the oppressive system and institution of slavery because it was evil in its inception.[329] Therefore, for the disinherited and oppressed people on a broader scale of resistance to worldwide oppressive systems of structural oppression—whether social, cultural, economic, or political, it needs to be resisted in a defiant and revolutionary fashion in order to replace them.

Cone affirms that Black power is the embodiment of revolutionary zeal because it is a demand for Black people to love themselves and transform the Black community in the struggle

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[326] Ibid.

[327] Ibid.

[328] Ibid.

[329] Ibid.

against racism. The revolutionary zeal of Black Theology entails African Americans defending themselves against White supremacy and its "identity with biblical theology."[330] Cone asserts here, "like biblical theology, it affirms the absolute sovereignty of God over his creation. This means that ultimate allegiance belongs only to God. Therefore, Black people must be taught not to be disturbed about revolution or civil disobedience if the law violates God's purpose for humanity. The Christian person is obligated by a freedom grounded in the Creator to break all that contradicts human dignity."[331] This must be applicable for the poor and oppressed worldwide in their objection and defiance of cooperating with a system of laws that keep them oppressed and marginalized on the periphery of society, as if their existence and human dignity are secondary to those who rule the system to the disadvantage of the disinherited. Civil disobedience must be applied in any society where racism is ingrained in its very fabric. Therefore, all those who are oppressed and marginalized in any and all societies must engage in the universal revolutionary actions of change to liberate themselves from oppression wherever it might be. Cone notes that "Camillo Torres said, 'Revolutionary action is a Christian, a priestly struggle.'"[332] Cone affirms that African Americans cannot allow the African American existence in America to be defined by White Americans because one's freedom has been defined by the Creator in the truest meaning of "imago Dei."[333] Cone asserts that the essence of humankind in its identity is "directly related to the Creator."[334]

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[330] Ibid.

[331] Ibid.

[332] Ibid., 156.

[333] Ibid.

[334] Ibid.

Because humankind has been created in "the image and likeness of God," to be treated as if one is an "it" is not acceptable. In this analysis, Cone affirms that because of the dehumanizing mistreatment that African Americans have always encountered in the Americas, "it makes Black rebellion human and religious." In one's defiance through civil disobedience against an oppressive system and laws, one affirms that the oppressed are saying yes to their identification and relation to the Holy Other, and even yes to the humanity of those who are the oppressors.[335] This is a relevant theological dialogue that supports the premise of the thesis of this paper. Cone affirms that in his theological reflection, which is centered on the Black oppression in the Americas, it is a theological reflection that must be developed universally regarding the disinherited and oppressed from a global perspective.

Cone affirms that coercion is an intricate component of a revolution; therefore, violence may have to be employed to bring about that universal liberation for the oppressed. Cone's point of departure here is the fact that Black people in America have endured centuries of violence and oppression as facilitated by White supremacy. In Cone's theological language of Black Theology, "violence is not the primary question but a subordinated and relative question."[336] The subordination is relevant to what it takes to bring about change; therefore, violence is the component that must be weighed in relation to the "revolutionary situation."[337] Throughout the evolution of the presence of African Americans in the Americas, violence was an ever-present reality of "injustice, slave labor, hunger, and exploitation," all of which are different realities of violence.[338] This has always been the reality for those who are the disinherited and oppressed

[335] Ibid., 156.

[336] Ibid., 161.

[337] Ibid.

[338] Ibid., 162.

throughout world, which demands universal theological liberation in whatever methodology, strategy, or language may liberate. Cone affirms that the perspective of the Christian, "the Christian does not decide between violence and nonviolence, evil and good. He decides between the lesser and greater evil. He must ponder whether revolutionary violence is less or more deplorable than the violence perpetrated by the system."[339]

In Cone's analysis, he affirms that the acceptance of the methodology of nonviolence in addressing oppression and systems of systemic violence that oppress, "it is saying that revolutionary violence is more detrimental to humanity in the long run than systemic violence. But if the system is evil, then revolutionary violence is both justified and necessary."[340] Cone's theological reflection regarding Black oppression in the Americas and understanding the concepts of *Black Theology and Black Power* is relevant on a broader worldwide scale regarding the systemic oppression of the poor and the marginalized people of our world. Cone affirms that if White America does not respond in some manner to addressing Black oppression in America, then he believes that a violent response is inevitable, as it will be worldwide for all those who are marginalized, oppressed, and forgotten throughout the world. Cone's theological reflection on the concepts of *Black Theology and Black Power* in revolutionary actions supports the argument of this paper, which states that there is a need for the development of a universal theology of liberation derived out from the plight of the poor and oppressed, so that the consciences of the ruling factions of the world may be awakened to change their oppressive social, cultural, economic, and political policies and strategies that oppress and sentence millions to a lifetime of poverty and hardships.

[339] Ibid., 162.

[340] Ibid.

Reconciliation and the Black Theology of Liberation: It is an essential component in the universal theology of Liberation

In *Black Theology and Black Pow*er, Cone gives the definitive defense of the focus of his first two books on the concept of a Black theology of liberation. From the text of *Black Theology and Black Power*, Cone asserts that the concept of Black theology is embodied in the redemptive work of Christ, whereby God reconciled the world unto himself.[341] Cone affirms that the partition between White and Black is eradicated; therefore, the pigmentation of one's skin is nonessential. Thus, Cone affirms that through Black theology, reconciliation is possible when Whites embrace Black people as fellow brothers and sisters without requiring Black people to abandon their blackness.[342]

The process of reconciliation is only possible through the eradication of the racist, White supremacist structure through which "blackness becomes the central focus of dialogue." Thus, Cone affirms, "the task of Black Theology is to make the biblical message of reconciliation contemporaneous with the Black situation in America."[343] Cone concludes that through God's work of taking on humanity in Christ, reconciliation (which Cone defines as humanity being reconciled to one another and to God) is fulfilled, redeeming humankind from its depraved condition.[344] The image of Black people, therefore, must be understood as a part of their interaction with all humanity and God, understanding that through Christ, the image of blackness has been restored. Therefore, for Whites to have a relationship with God, "they must enter by

[341] 2 Cor. 5–19 (KJV).

[342] Cone, *Black Theology,*166–167.

[343] Ibid., 167.

[344] Ibid.

means of their Black brothers, who are a manifestation of God's presence on earth.[345] Therefore, Cone asserts that one must enter into a relationship with other races before reconciliation can become a reality.[346] It is here in Cone's conceptual analysis rooted in the concepts of Black theology, Black power, violence, and reconciliation that the thesis of this paper is supported for the development of a universal theology of liberation derived from the plight of the poor and oppressed, one that is inclusive of all religions and cultures whereby the conscience of the ruling powers of the world are persuaded to change the economic and political policies and strategies of oppression that oppress many people across the world who are the disinherited humanity of all nations.

[345] Ibid., 156.

[346] Ibid., 161.

CHAPTER 7

THE FEMINIST THEOLOGICAL VOICE IN THE UNIVERSAL THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION

From Frederick Douglass, the outspoken abolitionist, and Howard Thurman, the mystic, to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X, civil-rights advocates for a better world, and to Dr. James H. Cone, the liberation theologian, these voices have articulated a theological dialogue for a universal theology of liberation grounded in the gospel of Christ—one that unites humankind in dignity and includes women's theological voices, especially the womanist perspectives of Delores S. Williams and Jacquelyn Grant and the feminist theology of Mary Daly. Women's voices in theological reflection have been essential and critical since the beginning of time. Women's lives and experiences must be heard in their theological reflection, as their lives are relevant as human beings created in the "image and likeness of God" and in their Christian service throughout society, within the sacred spaces of churches, and within all institutions of education.[347] When one speaks of a universal theology of liberation as related to the gospel of Christ, we speak of a powerful theological language that is inclusive of people from all nations, whoever they might be. Therefore, women's theological reflection is essential in the universal language of liberation theology.

Cone's Black theology of liberation in his first two books lacked analysis, however, of the experience of Black women in society and the Church, and of how women and non-Hebrews

[347] Genesis, 1:26 (NKJV)

are portrayed in the biblical text. Delores S. Williams gives a strong argument to this effect in her explicative analysis against Cone's Black theology of liberation. In this paper, I affirm that the question Williams asks is not addressed by Cone's first two books: "Does Cone's Black theology of liberation relate to all who are oppressed?" I draw from Williams' text *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of God Talk*, wherein Williams presents her analysis of Cone's statement that Christian theology is a theology of liberation. It is a rational study of the being of God in the world in light of the existential theology of an oppressed community, relating the forces of liberation to the essence of the gospel, which is Jesus Christ.[348] Cone further relates his Black theology of liberation to God and His actions in the history of the Israelite people, who are the embodiment of the oppressed. Cone asserts, "There can be no Christian theology that is not identified unreservedly with those who are humiliated and abused, who labor and are heavy-laden."[349]

Williams argues against Cone's Black liberation theology on the ground that, from the Old Testament view of God's liberation and compassion for women and non-Hebrews, Cone's arguments do not seem to apply. To illustrate, Williams points to the lives of Hagar and Sarah, relating their stories to the experiences of African American women, questioning the biblical witness of oppression in the case of the mistreatment of women in the Old Testament. Williams looks at the story of Hagar and Sarah, as cited in Genesis and Galatians, and sees God showing partiality or favoritism to Sarah, while Hagar is commanded to yield to Sarah.[350] Williams does not see liberation for Hagar in this story, only the favor shown to the Hebrew Sarah.[351] Thus,

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[348] Cone, A *Theology of liberation,* 1.

[349] Ibid.

[350] Ibid.

[351] Ibid.

Williams proclaims, "the oppressed and abused do not always experience God's liberating power."[352] The basis of Williams' argument is that "if one reads the Bible identifying with the non-Hebrews who are female and male slaves ('the oppressed of the oppressed'), one quickly discerns a non-liberative thread running through the Bible."[353] Thus, Williams sees a God who is partial toward some and blatantly unconcerned with discrimination toward others. In this sense, I assert that Williams challenges one to grapple with the issue of whether the gospel and God's liberating activity apply to all. Williams is also concerned by the fact that slavery is not outlawed by God in Exodus, pointing out that "the male slave can be part of Israel's rituals, possibly because he has no control over his body as Hagar had no control over her body."[354] Williams also refers to God's communication to Moses and Aaron: "This is the ordinance of the Passover: no foreigner shall eat of it; but every slave that is bought for money may eat of it after you have circumcised him,[355] but no sojourner or hired servant may eat of it."[356] Williams interprets this edict as God's allowance of the institution of slavery over others, in which she does not see the liberating strand of Cone's Black theology of liberation being applied to all. Williams also points out covenant codes in the book of Exodus that deal with rights concerning Hebrew male slaves and the codes of holiness that allow women to be maintained as slaves, granting all the rights of power, privilege, and ownership of female slaves to Hebrew men.[357]

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[352] Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 128.

[353] Ibid.

[354] Ibid.

[355] Exodus, 12: 43–44 (KJV).

[356] Exodus, 12:45 (KJV).

[357] Exodus, 20:22–23:13 (KJV) Leviticus, 19:20–22 (KJV).

Thus, there is an allowance of human oppression and ownership of other people through the holy laws, in which Williams does not see a liberating God for all people. In other words, in reference to Cone's Black theology of liberation, she does not see a God who speaks for all those who are oppressed with a liberating spirit, but rather an allowance of oppression with favor shown toward those of Hebrew ancestral heritage.[358] Here, Williams makes a trans-cultural comparison of oppression between those who are chosen (in the Old Testament, the Jews) and those who are not (non-Jewish people and females). Williams states, "When non-Jewish people, like many African women who claim themselves to be economically enslaved, read the entire Hebrew Testament from the point of view of the non-Hebrew slaves, there is no clear indication that God is against their perpetual enslavement."[359] Williams thus proclaims that the written word of God does not speak against the institution of slavery. Williams argues, using Paul's orders for Onesimus to return to his master as an example, that "the Bible presents slavery as a natural and unprotested institution in the social and economic life of ancient society, except on occasion when the Jews are themselves enslaved."[360]

Williams makes a declarative statement concerning the gospel of liberation that applies to Cone's *Black Theology and Black Power* and *A Black Theology of Liberation*. In Cone's first book, *Black Theology and Black Power*, Cone's purpose is to define the gospel of Christ as a liberation gospel and blackness as symbolic of God's presence.[361] Additionally, in *A Black Theology of Liberation*, Cone makes reference to scripture that he claims indicates a gospel that liberates, but which Williams finds confounding, considering how women and non-Jews are

[358] Leviticus, 19:20–22 (KJV).

[359] Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness,* 129.

[360] Ibid.,130.

[361] Cone, *Black Theology*, xxv.

treated in both the Old and New Testaments. Luke 4:18-19 states, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."[362] Cone sees this as an affirmation that the Christian community is the embodiment of the oppressed, connected with Christ in the ongoing battle for humankind's liberation. Therefore, he argues, theology fulfills its purpose by "explicating 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."[363]

Williams, therefore, is concerned with how those of modern times who are the oppressed in all categories of life, particularly African Americans, as well as the very poor, those who are without shelter, and those enslaved under capitalist oppression. Williams questions how James H. Cone's *Black Theology of Liberation* could be authentic when it seems God and His written word allow such oppression to be. I conclude that Cone's *Black Theology of Liberation* does not answer this question adequately for Williams, and neither does she grasp God's concept of the allowance of evil and suffering. Additionally, she seems oblivious to the suffering that the Hebrews were forced to endure throughout the biblical text, as well as those moments of mercy and blessings given to Hagar and her son as promised by God. Likewise, Jesus took counsel with the Samaritan woman in the New Testament,[364] offered forgiveness and salvation to the thief on the cross,[365] and healed a Roman centurion's servant because of the soldier's faith.[366] Williams'

[362] Luke, 4:18–19 (KJV).

[363] Cone, *A Theology of liberation*, 3.

[364] John 4:4–26 (KJV).

[365] Luke 23: 32–46 (KJV).

[366] Matthew 8: 5–13 (KJV).

critique of Cone's Black theology as a gospel of liberation is thus lacking in understanding of God's activity in human affairs, "for we know that God works all things together for the good of those who love Him, who are called according to his purpose."[367] Therefore, I conclude that Williams does not have this revelatory perspective of the workings of God in human activity.

When Cone conceived his theological dialogue derived from the Black oppression in the Americas, he wrote and spoke about Black oppression that was inclusive of men, women, and all on a global scale of the disinherited. His Black theology of liberation was born out of his own personal experiences and the history of Black people in the Americas in combating racism while relying on religion—specifically Christianity, as it has always been taught in the Western world. He affirmed the necessity of theological reflection that should emerge from the intellectual thoughts of African American theologians regarding the lives, cultural heritage, and experiences of Black people, both male and female, forming a universal theology of liberation with Black theology as the point of departure and representative of all the oppressed and disinherited worldwide.

Jacquelyn Grant's Contribution to Black Theology

Jacquelyn Grant viewed Cone's Black theology as a broad, androcentric approach to Christology, reflective of universals. Cone identifies the historical Jesus and the parallels of Jesus's life to the Black experience of oppression in the Americas. Grant interprets that "there is a dialectical relationship between the Black experience and Scripture, which is the point of departure for Black Theology's Christology. Therefore, by stressing that it begins from the perspective of the Black experience, it cannot end there. Grant thus declares that the traditional

[367] Romans 8: 28 (KJV).

and cultural foundation of "doing theology" must be challenged by the thoughts, voices, and cultural experiences of women, which will facilitate the generation of a more adequate "feminist Christology."[368] Grant affirms that women must incorporate their own personal experiences as part of their reflection in Christology. Christology cannot, she feels, rely on the traditional androcentric theology and its "male language," which incorporates the male cultural and universal experience of theology and Christology.[369]

Grant asks the question: "Does the absence of Black women in the circles producing Black theology necessarily mean that the resultant theology cannot be in the best interest of women?" Grant asserts that even in Cone's *Black Theology of Liberation*, it does not incorporate the Black women's experiences or experiences of women of any type or culture, which she finds in disagreement. Cone's *Black Theology of Liberation* emerged from a Black intellectual voice of systematic theology, for which Black oppression in the Americas is the point of departure. However, Cone's Black theology of liberation is representative of all the disinherited, poor, and marginalized worldwide.

Grant is emphasizing that theological reflection typically serves patriarchal interests, even if that theology is coming from a Black male such as James H. Cone. Grant postulates that if Black males have assimilated into the White male structures of society, as well as its theology, why should ethnic women expect a Black theology of liberation to be more accepting of the Black female theological voice or their liberation than White men's theology is of accepting of White women's theological voice and liberation? To test this, Grant uses one of Cone's statements from *A Black Theology of Liberation*: "the task of Black theology is to analyze the

[368] Grant, "Black Theology and the Black Woman," 11.

[369] Grant, "Black Theology and the Black Woman," 11–12.

nature of the gospel of Jesus Christ in the light of oppressed Black people so they will see the gospel as inseparable from their humiliated condition, bestowing on them the necessary power to break the chains of oppression."[370] This statement has the tone of the universality of liberation in the gospel of Christ, in which oppression comes in various forms across all cultural and gender perspectives, which gives support to the thesis of this paper, stating that there is a need for the development of a universal theology of liberation derived from the plight of the poor and oppressed, one that is inclusive of all religions and cultures, whereby the consciences of the rich and powerful ruling factions of the world will be awakened to change the social, cultural, economic, and political policies and strategies that oppress the disinherited and marginalized people throughout the world.

Grant assesses this statement and concludes that the struggles that African Americans face cannot be restricted to the plane of racism, either in the communities where Black people live nor in the churches they attend. Grant affirms that there are other oppressive forces that Black people must contend with; racism is only one oppressive shroud in America. Sexism also limits the Black woman in society and in her theological voice.[371] Grant, therefore, argues against Cone's *Black Theology of Liberation* for its lack of acknowledgment of Black women's theological voice. Grant calls upon Cone's own test of legitimate and responsible theology (i.e., Black theology must entail an objective criticism and evaluation of the White Church and classical theological perspectives). She argues that the same criteria hold for the Black Church and its theology. It is the duty of the church to proclaim God's divine liberation of truth to all. The good news needs to be delivered globally; there is a mutual sharing in relationships inherent

[370] Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation and Black Theology and Black Power*, 5.

[371] Wilmore and Cone, *A Documentary History*, 423.

in the church's fight against oppression. The church cannot live by the standards of the old society. Therefore, the Black Church must consider whether or not it is fulfilling the objectives affirmed by Cone, Grant asserts. The church, its actions, and its language regarding a divine being and liberation must be consistent, Grant clarifies. Grant is not convinced that Cone's Black theology in the Black Church is complete in its liberative mission when it comes to women.[372]

Grant is correct and appropriate in her affirmation that women's voices are legitimate and necessary in theological reflection, as well as in Black women's lives, experiences, and their intellectual theological dialogue. Jacquelyn Grant, as well as Delores S. Williams, fail to discern that in Cone's *Black Theology of Liberation*, he does address the issue of what is true Christian theology as derived from the gospel of Christ. He also addressed matters of both the Black and White Churches in their mission and responsibilities, all incorporated and connected with ultimate liberation in alignment with God's divine providence and all truth according to the gospel of Christ. Grant's theological reflection is legitimate, as is all theological reflection by women—whatever race, culture, or ethnicity they might be. Cone's *Black Theology of Liberation* comes forth from the history and culture of Black oppression in the Americas, and in so doing he connects the concepts of Black theology and liberation with the gospel of Christ, which is concerned with the poor, oppressed, and marginalized people throughout the world—those who live on the periphery of society. Therefore, Cone's theological reflection is rooted in the universal dialogue of the gospel of Christ, with Black oppression in the Americas as the point of departure.

[372] Ibid.

Mary Daly, Feminist Philosopher and Theologian: Universal Liberation

Lastly, I draw upon the thoughts of feminist Mary Daly in her book *Beyond God the Father*: *Toward a Philosophy of Women's Liberation*, specifically her words on the incompleteness of Cone's Black theology of liberation. Daly asserts that Cone's Black theology is somewhat vindictive in its tone and resonates with the same androcentric elements that are biblical in nature, and just as patriarchal. Daly summarizes Cone's Black theology of liberation by stating, "It transcends religion as a crutch—the separation and return of much old-fashioned Negro spirituality—but tends to settle for being religion as a gun."[373]

Daly affirms that Cone's Black theology is manufactured with the particulars of racism and oppression, facilitating one to move toward vindication. Daly feels that Cone fails to explore all possibilities in his conception of Black theology and liberation. Daly perceives Cone's Black theology as being too narrowly defined by the condition of the oppression of Black people in the Americas, affirming that Cone's Black theology does not transcend the sexism that Christian theology is known for. Daly's most declarative criticism of Cone's Black theology offers strong support to her claims: "Cone's Black theology of liberation does not go beyond the sexist modesty internalized by the self and controlling society models that are at the root of racism and that perpetuate it. The Black God and Black Messiah apparently are merely the same patriarchs after a pigmentation operation, their behavior unaltered."[374] In this statement, Daly affirms her criticism that Cone's Black theology of liberation contains the same patriarchal sexism of traditional theology, as well as "stereotypical male symbolism."[375]

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[373] Ibid.

[374] Daly, *Beyond God the Father*, 25.

[375] Ibid.

Daly fails to see the universality of Cone's *Black Theology of Liberation* because it is a theological reflection that has its point of departure in Black oppression in the Americas, not realizing that Black theology is symbolic of all those who are oppressed throughout the world. If Cone had written extensively on the oppression of women in society and in the church, and used more theological reflection from women's voices, as well as being less Black-centered in his conception of *Black Theology of Liberation*, the accusations of sexism and "stereotypical male symbolism" would not have been forthcoming.[376]

Daly fails to grasp that Cone was affirming the true gospel of Christ as a gospel of liberation, in which theological reflection on the oppression of Black people in the Americas is a form of intellectual theological reflection that is worthy in the academy of religion, and therefore a necessary dialogue toward developing a universal theology of liberation from the plight of the disinherited, whomever and whatever race or ethnicity, whereby humankind can unite in human dignity to end oppression. Therefore, the thesis of this paper stands supported by the forerunners—Frederick Douglass the abolitionist, to Howard Thurman the mystic, to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., and Malcolm X the civil rights leaders and Dr. James H. Cone—whose dialectical dialogue of liberation theology supports the premise of the thesis, affirming that it is a universal theology of liberation that is inclusive of all religions and cultures, derived from the plight of the poor and oppressed, and whereby the consciences of the ruling factions of the world are awakened to transform the social, cultural, economic, and political policies and strategies of oppression.

[376] Ibid., 26

CHAPTER 8

UNDERSTANDING BLACK THEOLOGY IN THE CONTEXT OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF A UNIVERSAL THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION

In the conceptual analysis of Black theology and the development of a universal theology of liberation that is inclusive of all religions and cultures, the theological dialogue derived from the plight of the disinherited awakens the conscience of the ruling factions of economics, politics, and culture, prompting the ruling factions to change the policies and systems of oppression on a global scale. From the text *Black Religion: The Negro and Christianity in the United States,* Joseph R. Washington Jr. affirms that the Black Church in the Americas was born out of the racial oppression of the institution of slavery. As a result, the religion of Black people in the Americas became a tool of resistance and relief. Therefore, religion became an essential component through which Black people could bond in their assertion for the "ultimate goal of freedom and equality by means of protest and action."[377]

This brand of Black folk religion was influenced by components of the White religious establishment through White Christian missionaries who knocked on the doors of the slaves in the antebellum South.[378] Washington affirms that the "Negro slave" was more concerned with aspirations of freedom in the present world and less concerned with religion in the world to come. The slaves had the concepts of Christianity and moral teachings taught to them by the White oppressor, while the minds of the slaves were contending with their aspirations for freedom. Washington asserts, "the slave was resourceful enough to perceive that the best way to

[377] Joseph R. Washington, *Black Religion: The Black Person and Christianity in the United States* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 30–32.

[378] Ibid.

freedom in the world was through the religion of Whites, sanctioned by their masters and overseers as a means of harnessing his energy for production."[379] Washington's thoughts on Christianity connect with the liberation dialogue of Frederick Douglass the abolitionist, Howard Thurman, the mystic, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the nonviolent integrationist, Malcolm X, the civil rights advocate by whatever means necessary, Dr. James H. Cone's Black theology and the womanist perspectives of Delores S. Williams, Jacquelyn Grant and feminist Mary Daly's on analysis of Black theology and its importance in the development of a universal theology of liberation. Washington affirms that the Christianity taught to slaves by their oppressors was the planted roots and production of the eventual concept of Black theology as put forth by Dr. James H. Cone. Thurman affirmed that those who are the disinherited of society must embrace religion as put forth by Jesus of Nazareth in the loving of the enemy, despite the oppression. Dr. Martin Luther King, engaged in nonviolent protest, cemented in the teachings of Jesus, as Malcolm X encouraged Black solidarity through the actions of Black nationalism in contending with the burden of White supremacy—a struggle that included the productive voices, actions, and theological perspectives of both Black and White women.[380]

I assert that this connected strand of liberation dialogue supports the argument of the thesis for the development of a universal theological dialogue whereby humankind can connect through the gospel of liberation as put forth by Christ and as affirmed in Dr. Cone's concepts of a *Black Theology of Liberation*. Washington gives profound insight into the concept of Dr. Cone's Black theology as it moves toward the development of a universal theological dialogue that speaks to all people regardless of religion or culture. Washington affirms that as slaves gathered

[379] Ibid., 33

[380] Ibid., 30–32

in the presence of their masters during religious services, the Black Church developed and Black theology began to evolve through the "Negro spirituals," whereby the Black slave ministers could orchestrate an insurrection of resistance.[381] Washington affirms that "the fermentation of folk religion began in the shadow of the plantation."[382] Therefore, it is logical to conclude that Christianity in America from America's infancy would evolve in the midst of the development of a multicultural and religiously diverse nation of people. The Africans were brought to the Americas as Black chattel property to serve for generations, and Amerindians would be removed to reservations as Europeans continued to come.

The original thirteen colonies came into existence with Christianity as the major religion of contention. Christian theology was formulated and cemented in the White-European cultural context. Therefore, the enslaved Black people in America, through their own expression of worship and the singing of spirituals, began to redefine Christianity from the plight of their enslavement. They were confronted with the major concern of reaffirming the human dignity of Black humankind. They experienced the internal turmoil of affirming the image and likeness as expressed in Black people being enslaved in a foreign land. What was their relationship with the transcendent reality known as God while being taught the fundamental doctrines of Christianity and the love of Christ while contending with human bondage?

It is within the assertion of worship, singing of spirituals, and the counterattack of the Black slave preachers that the concept of Black theology began to develop and was affirmed as the most effective methodology of a theology of liberation, in what would become a long-fought battle against the dehumanizing effects of White supremacy. Christian theological development

[381] Ibid., 34

[382] Ibid.

must be concerned with and derived from the plight of the poor, oppressed, and marginalized and disinherited of society. Joseph R. Washington Jr.'s analysis in the development of the Black church and Christian theological reflection supports Dr. Cone's concept of Black theology in its forthcoming emergence in the quest for the development of a universal Christian theology that encapsulates all religions and cultures derived out of the plight of the poor and oppressed, whereby the consciences of the ruling factions of the world are awakened to transform the social, cultural, economic, and political strategies and policies of oppression.

Washington writes, "the Black stream of the Black folk religion was given leadership by the free Black ministers of the North who had instituted Black congregations independent of their White sponsors. This independent movement was a response to segregation in, and, later, exclusion from, White congregational communions, first in the North and then in the South. Frustrated by their inability to express in open ways the militant drive for freedom, which in slavery was channeled through escapes to the North, post-Civil War Negro folk put their trust in and merged with the independents, who, like the folk, were instructed by Whites, but, unlike the folk, brought to this union the institutional procedures of Whites. The independents intended and conducted no innovations in ecclesiology, doctrine, ritual, polity, or theology that distinguished them from White denominations; instead, they assumed the names of White denominations, prefacing them with African. Direction came from Negroes who had long yearned for freedom and equality; their folk religion supplied the independents with a needed, unique, inner dynamic." The concept of Dr. Cone's Black theology stands affirmed in the development of and moving toward a theological reflection in which the liberation dialogue is inclusive of all religions and cultures, whereby all people can come to an understanding of the true meaning of the cross, in which all are made equal and all are liberated from the dehumanizing effects of sin,

poverty, oppression, and discrimination. Therefore, Black theology stands fully affirmed as a belief that theological reflection must be grounded in its content and derived from the plight of the oppressed. Therefore, the term Black in Black theology itself, I assert, is representative of all the oppressed worldwide regardless of religious beliefs or cultural practices. Washington's reflection on the development of the religion of Christianity among the oppressed in the Americas affirms and connects the essentiality of liberation dialogues as taught and spoken of by Frederick Douglass the abolitionist, Howard Thurman, the mystic, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the nonviolent integrationist; Malcolm X, advocate of Black Nationalism and self-determination; Dr. James H. Cone's *Black Theology of Liberation*; and the womanist perspectives of Delores S. Williams and Jacquelyn Grant, as well as the feminist critique of Mary Daly, emphasizing the essentiality of feminine theological reflection.

Dwight N. Hopkins: Christianity and Slavery—The Roots of Black Theology, Moving toward a Universal Theology of Liberation

I reaffirm the analysis of Black theology as interpreted by Dwight N. Hopkins in the development of a universal theology of liberation that is inclusive of all religions and cultures, in which the theological dialogue derived from the plight of the disinherited awakens the conscience of the ruling factions to transform the oppressive strategies of social, cultural, economic, and political oppression. Hopkins affirms that the practice of Christianity for slaves in the antebellum South was a conflicted hell that they would endure for some two hundred and forty-six years. In the face of such traumatic events of being stolen from the homeland of Africa, the dehumanizing bondage of chattel slavery, and being repeatedly sold away from family

members, they were able to develop their faith and affirm their humanity in hopes of a better tomorrow through their own spiritual connection with the suffering Christ.[383]

Enslaved Africans in the antebellum South were able to forge "a new religion" that comprised traditional homeland religious elements, the new American way of life under slaveocracy, and the Christianity that was taught to them by their owners, which was reformatted and interpreted according to the condition of being enslaved in America. Hopkins asserts that "the cornerstone of a Black theology of liberation was thus a slave religion of freedom."[384] Hopkins gives support to the liberation dialogue of Frederick Douglass, who affirmed the barbarity of slavery and the hypocrisy of the Christian slaveholder who perverted and misinterpreted Scripture to sanction chattel slavery against Black people as divinely ordained. I assert that Hopkins words support the theology of Howard Thurman in affirming that the enslaved and the disinherited worldwide must contend with the teachings of Jesus and affirm a sense of value and self-worth, which can be affirmed in an ongoing relationship and understanding of the divine Creator and through the revelation of Scripture that affirms that Christ's gospel is a gospel of liberation whereby Christ himself is concerned with and shares in the suffering of the poor, the oppressed, the marginalized, the outcast, the downtrodden, the enslaved, the lynched, and the incarcerated.

Hopkins gives validation to the thesis of this paper. He states, "the cornerstone of Black theology of liberation was thus a slave religion of freedom." This statement gives support and credence to the theologies and actions of the civil rights activists and theologies of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., in his vision of bringing into existence a community where all of humankind can

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[383] Dwight N. Hopkins, *Introducing Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 16.
[384] Ibid.

live, work, and participate in a fully integrated society void of the violence and oppression, and unite in exemplary brotherhood under one God. Hopkins's thoughts validate Malcolm X's command to acquire one's human rights to be and live in this world as an equal with all others, by whatever methodology is necessary for the oppressed to achieve it. Also, I affirm that Hopkins has cemented the credibility of Black theology and of the womanist theologians, such as Delores S. Williams and Jacquelyn Grant, whose demands assert that Black theology must include Black women's lives and experiences if it is to be a true theology of liberation. This is also true regarding the criticism of Mary Daly, in that Cone's Black theology is as androcentric as traditional White Christian theology. What Hopkins affirms is the validity of the argument of the thesis itself: There is a necessity for the development of a universal theology of liberation that is inclusive of all religions and cultures, in which the theological dialogue derived from the plight of the disinherited awakens the conscience of the ruling factions of economics, politics, and culture, and transforms their strategies of oppression worldwide. Therefore, the concepts of Black theology as asserted by Dr. James H. Cone are essential in the development of a universal theology of liberation that will break the yoke of oppression across all religious and cultural lines globally.

Hopkins writes, "African Americans forged the foundational outlines of a Black theology within the invisible institution, a name given to the secret times and spaces where Black people worshiped God by themselves. These underground worship meetings of African Americans eventually surfaced as the public Black Church at the end of the Civil War (1865). It was on their own time and in their own spaces that Black people in chains recreated themselves with God."[385]

[385] Hopkins, Dwight N. 1999. *Black Theology of Liberation* 16–17.

J. Deotis Roberts: Analyzing Black Theology and A Universal Theology of Liberation

J. Deotis Roberts asserts that Black theology is a theological reflection whose audience is the disinherited and oppressed. The contagion of this oppression is White supremacy. Roberts has affirmed that African Americans are 'victimized by the undisciplined and unchecked power grip of White America."[386] Therefore, there was a natural progression in the development and rise of the Black power concept and its action. African Americans were not equal to Whites, socially, culturally, economically, or politically. As a result, Roberts affirms that White America would not transfer any power to African Americans regarding the right of "self-determination for minority groups."[387] He believes that it is a "contextual approach," one that is required to have insight into and comprehension of the holy Other and humankind. Roberts encourages the perspective of "Christian humanism" in that it is human intellect and reasoning that are required, along with religious teachings and faith.[388]

Roberts makes a statement that ratifies the concept of Black theology in the development of a Universal theology of liberation that resonates with the liberation dialogue of Frederick Douglass, Howard Thurman, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, Dr. James H. Cone, and the womanist and feminist perspective of Delores S. Williams, Jacquelyn Grant, and Mary Daly. There is a necessity for an all-inclusive theological language of liberation, of which the argument of the thesis is supported. Roberts writes, "rather than dealing with the silence and absence of God who is present in power and can bring strength out of weakness.[389] Roberts's statement affirms that it is the development of a universal theology of liberation that is inclusive of all

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[386] James Deotis Roberts, *Black Religion, Black Theology* (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2003), 38.

[387] Ibid.

[388] Ibid.

[389] Ibid.

religions and cultures, in which the theological dialogue derived from the plight of the disinherited awakens the conscience of the ruling factions of economics, politics, and culture, whereby the ruling factions change the policies and systems of oppression on a global scale. Christian theological reflections must speak to the hearts of all people across all religious and cultural lines without regard to social class or status to unite humankind in the community of a united brotherhood in which all can participate, and all are equal.

Vincent W. Lloyd: Black Theology and Universal Theology of Liberation

Vincent W. Lloyd gives an explicative analysis of the concept of Black theology and asserts that the development of a universal theology of liberation must be inclusive of all religions and cultures, through which the theological dialogue derived from the plight of the disinherited awakens the consciences of the ruling factions to transform the social, cultural, economic, and political strategies and policies of world oppression. Vincent provides an analysis of Black theology that explicates why Dr. James H. Cone needed to make Black theology the point of departure in his theological reflection on the plight of Black oppression in the Americas. Lloyd's analysis defines why the dialogue of theological reflection must evolve toward a universal theology of liberation that is derived from the gospel of Christ, which speaks to the poor and marginalized people as well as to the ruling powers of government, commerce, and industry throughout our world.

Theological language must be concerned with and inclusive of all humankind, and the dialogue must identify with those who are dehumanized and pushed to the perimeter of society. Lloyd writes that Black theology suggests something much more radical: "An account of Black humanity is an account of humanity as such, and humanity itself has been distorted by racism. Humanity is invisible in the world today, and it is only by making visible Black humanity that

any humanity becomes visible. What does it mean to make visible Black humanity? It means to recognize the paradox that constitutes the human, the image of the ultimate paradox that makes a human being human. It is to acknowledge that who we are is never exhausted by what we are, and yet each is necessary for the other. The White world attempts to provide an exhaustive description, but it is dependent on a blatant omission of Black people. Every such attempt fails. Black humanity names that failure, names the impossibility that distinguishes humans, and individuates each human."[390]

I assert that Lloyd affirms the existence of Black life is, in fact, a paradoxical one in America. White supremacy, rooted in racism in the Americas from its infancy, has facilitated the horrific, dehumanizing treatment through enslavement, segregation, lynching, discrimination, incarceration, and a second-class existence of nonbeing in the land of a democratic republic that has always claimed to stand for equality and liberty for all Americans. Yet, African Americans have endured and lived lives of such gross mistreatment that four hundred years of oppression have categorized African Americans as nonbeings and raised the question of whether African Americans should remain in the Americas.

Dr. Cone's statements affirm my analysis. Cone states, "to be human is to find something worth dying for. When the Black man rebels at the risk of death, he forces White society to look at him, to recognize him, to take his being into account, to admit that he is"[391] Lloyd supports Cone's analysis in his explanation, Lloyd writes, "from the location of one excluded from humanity, the starkest means of demonstrating one's existence as human is to demonstrate the capacity to become nonhuman: to die" Therefore, I asserts that this is clearly defined and

[390] Vincent W. Lloyd, *Religion of the Field Negro: On Black Secularism and Black Theology* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018), 34.
[391] Ibid.

exemplified in the life and times of Frederick Douglass the abolitionist when he stepped on the public platform and renounced the inhumanness of the institution of slavery that reduced Black people to non-beings. The strand is further connected in alliance with the liberation dialogue of Howard Thurman, the mystic, and his encouragement of the disinherited to apply the teaching of Jesus in their interactions with the empowered oppressor, and affirm the human dignity of the right to be. Therefore, in Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s actions as a nonviolent integrationist in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s, King and all those who followed him affirmed the humanity of Black people in their willingness to fight and risk death. Malcolm X, as a national spokesperson for the Nation of Islam, encouraged Black nationalism in the methodology of fighting White supremacy by whatever means were necessary, with Black pride and Black self-determination, in demonstrating that Black people are human and not nonbeings.

Furthermore, Cone and Lloyd's assessments affirm the criticisms of Black theology by womanist theologians Delores S. Williams and Jacquelyn Grant, who argue that unless Black theology is inclusive of Black women's lives and experiences, it cannot be quantified as true Christian liberation theology, which aligns with the criticisms of feminist theologian Mary Daly who asserts that Black theology is just as androcentric, and male dominated as White male traditional theological reflection that is male dominated.

Therefore, the Black womanist theologians and White feminists are demonstrating that their humanity and existence are relevant as women in their rejection of nonbeing regarding legitimate Christian theological reflection. In understanding the "paradox of humanity" as relevant to the Black existence, the Black religious experience, and Black theological reflection are essential to the development of a universal theology of liberation.[392] Lloyd's words give

[392] Ibid.

credence to the concept of Black theology in the development of a universal theology of liberation, whereby all people across cultural and religious lines can come to an understanding, that will facilitate actions to transform the world and makes everyone human. Lloyd writes, "here we have humanity without content. The only characteristic of such humanity is that it is not nonhumanity. While the White person who risks death does so for a reason, for a cause, in terms explicable according to White (secular) discourse, there is no vocabulary to describe the Black person risking death, no reason or cause to which one can point. And yet one does have to point out that risking death cannot be ignored. The only thing to which one can point is humanity itself, Black humanity, the "paradox of humanity."[393] Therefore, the concept of Black theology must be understood as the point of departure whereby Black humanity is relevant and legitimate in the development of a universal theology that recognizes and acknowledges all humankind.

Charles Long: Black Theology and the Black Religious Experience in Moving toward a Universal Theology of Liberation

The concept of Black theology is relevant in the development of a universal theology of liberation that is inclusive of all religions and cultures, in which the theological dialogue derived from the plight of the disinherited awakens the consciences of the ruling factions of economics, politics, and culture to transform the policies and systems of oppression on a global scale. Long asserts, "Professor Cone's book *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969) is unique in several ways. He is not, however, the first one to make the point that Jesus or God might be Black; many Black people have asserted this slogan, from Bishop William McNeal Turner to Marcus Garvey. Cone is distinctive in that his understanding of the blackness of the godhead is executed within

[393] Ibid.

the context of a systematic apologetic theology that argues from within the theological tradition for its cogency. This work should be seen as part of the Civil Rights Movement and of the change of context from the civil rights integrationist movement to Black power."[394]

I assert that Long affirms the thoughts of Vincent W. Lloyd in that Cone's life's work is rooted in a Black theology of liberation, as a clear example of action, in which Black people are the point of departure. Cone has affirmed that the lives and racial struggles against White supremacy reflect theological reflection rooted in the gospel of Christ. It validates the existence of African Americans as human beings that can connect their existence in faith, hope, and in identification with the suffering Christ, as affirmed in the gospel of Christ, which is concerned with those who are trampled under, enslaved, and pushed to the perimeter of society.

Long quotes Cone as a validation of the importance of the concept of *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969) in its development, which affirms the existence of Black humankind in its struggle against the dehumanization strategies of White supremacy. Cone states, "Black Power is the most important development in American life in this century. There is a need to begin to analyze it from a theological perspective. In this work, an effort is made to investigate the concept of Black power, placing primary emphasis on its relationship to Christianity, the Church, and contemporary American theology."[395]

Long, as well as Cone, in their thoughts on the complexity of the issue of Christianity, the Church, and theological reflection, affirms the argument for the necessity of the development of a Christian theology that speaks to all people in its identification with the suffering Christ. Therefore, Cone's Black Theology is relevant in the academy of religious studies, as well as its

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[394] Charles H. Long, *The Collected Writings of Charles H. Long* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018), 213.

[395] Ibid.

mission to contend with the issues of inequality in a racialized society, in which Christianity and theological reflection must evolve in a world that is divided against itself through different forms of government with diverse cultural and religious beliefs and varying degrees of economic and political ideologies that are not in the best interests of those who live on the perimeter of society and are among the poor and oppressed worldwide, who have been categorized as nonbeings.

Therefore, I assert that Frederick Douglass, the abolitionist, stands affirmed in his liberation dialogue as he lectured and affirmed the inhumanity of the institution of slavery, which the White religious establishment of that time accommodated either in their silence within their Christian theology or sanctioned with approval. Douglass developed an extreme disdain for all Christian slaveholders. The reality and situation of receiving the gospel of Christ as taught to him by someone who holds your humanity in the captivity of chattel slavery were incomprehensible to Douglass. Therefore, Douglass's liberation dialogue in renouncing the institution of slavery was appropriate and courageous during his lifetime.

Douglass's actions as an active speaker against the institution of slavery affirmed the existence of Black people as human beings who mattered. To be held in captivity with the gospel of Christ being used as a tool to sanction racial oppression was a gross perversion of Christian doctrine. Douglass set a precedent for Howard Thurman to realign Black humankind with the gospel of Christ and to engage the component of love from the disadvantaged civil status to reaffirm self-worth and human dignity in the face of the oppressor. Thurman set an example for Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., affirming that the disinherited must become accountable for taking actions to transform society and be acknowledged as a people, as was accomplished by Dr. King during the Civil Rights Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. Black humanity matters. Malcolm X spoke a language of liberation that encouraged the development of Black pride and self-

determination in solidarity to overcome the inhumanity of racial oppression by whatever means necessary, establishing equality and eliminating racial discrimination for all African Americans. The realignment of Christian dialogue includes the Black feminist and womanist perspectives, affirming that Black women's lives and experiences matter and are essential in Christian theological reflection, as affirmed by Delores S. Williams and Jacquelyn Grant in moving toward a true theology of liberation. Feminist theologian Mary Daly affirms that Black theology is as male-dominated as traditional theological reflection. She objects to the Black-centered racial oppression in Cone's theology and to what she perceives as sexism in his *Black Theology of Liberation*.

Charles Long quotes Cone in one of Cone's most relevant statements that define Cone's concept of Black Theology and affirm its legitimacy as Christian theological reflection moving toward a universal theology of liberation that speaks to all people. Cone states, "Black Power, even in its most radical expression, is not the antithesis of Christianity, nor is it a heretical idea to be tolerated with painful forbearance. It is, rather, Christ's central message to twentieth-century America. And unless the empirical denominational church makes a determined effort to recapture the man Jesus through a total identification with the suffering poor as expressed in Black power, that church will become exactly what Christ is not."[396]

Long asserts that what Cone is emphasizing in the concept of Black theology is also found in the dialogue of Eric Lincoln and Joseph Washington, as well as Howard Thurman. Long states, "So the theme of blackness as the oppressed in Cone's work is not novel. The distinctiveness of his work is in the sustained systematic exposition, but there is yet another distinction: Cone, through acknowledging the oppression, mounted a theological critique of the

[396] Cone, James H. 2018. Black Theology and Black Power, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books), 1.

oppressors from the stance of power! To be sure, the power, as far as the text is concerned, is present in its rhetorical style, its open accusation, and its prophetic pronouncements. It issued a challenge, a challenge to Black and White churchmen, and a challenge to American theology, and, for that matter, all Christian theology."[397] Therefore, the argument for the necessity of the development of a universal Christian theology of liberation that speaks to all people across religions and cultures is relevant and supported.

I assert that what Long is implying here is that Cone's Black theology was a major challenge to the entire American religious establishment, both Black and White. Cone's theological reflection exposes the problem of traditional White Euro-American Christian theology, which was silent and accommodating toward racial oppression in the Americas. Cone's Black Theology was derived from the plight of racial oppression and dehumanization in the Americas and rooted in the gospel of Christ. It raised serious questions regarding the traditional White Euro-American theology, questioning whether its centrality lies in identification with the suffering Christ as proclaimed by Christ himself when he stated in Luke 4:18 (KJV): "The Spirit of the Lord *is* upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised." Therefore, I affirm that Long has appropriately affirmed that Cone's Black Theology demands a critical reevaluation of the traditional Christian theology, in its alignment with the mission and gospel of Christ, whereby the church itself and all members must function within the guidelines as established by Christ and affirmed in the Christ event of the cross.

[397] Charles H. Long, *The Collected Writings of Charles H. Long* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018), 214.

Frederick Douglass, the abolitionist, was one of the major forerunners of liberation theology in America. He delivered a lecture on the inhumanity of slavery at Rochester on December 8, 1850, in which his words resonated with a challenge to all Christians, Black or White, as well to the Christian theology of that time. Douglass's language in the lecture was a challenge to the Christian teachings of that time as interpreted from the Bible itself. Douglass states, "I have shown that slavery is wicked, wicked, in that it violates the great law of liberty, written on every human heart wicked, in that it violates the first command of the decalogue wicked, in that it fosters the most disgusting licentiousness wicked, in that it mars and defaces the image of God by cruel and barbarous inflictions wicked, in that it contravenes the laws of eternal justice, and tramples in the dust all the human and heavenly precepts of the New Testament."[398] Douglass was urging his audience to rethink and reevaluate the White religious establishment and its compliance with the true gospel of Christ regarding the toleration of slavery in the antebellum South. Douglass's lecture was a theological liberation dialogue derived from the plight of the enslavement of Black people in America. It was Christ's liberating gospel that was not being considered for those in chains. Douglass's language of liberation dialogue against racial oppression was the torch that would continue to be carried forward in liberation theology, as Howard Thurman, the mystic, would later address the critical emphasis of race, religion, Christianity, and the teachings of Jesus regarding the poor and oppressed with the theological perspective that God is on the side of those who are the downtrodden, the poor, and oppressed and pushed to the perimeter of society without concern.

[398] Douglass, Frederick .2021. *Frederick Douglass: Selected Works.* New York, NY, Fall River Press, 158.

Therefore, Douglass and Thurman established the foundations and legitimacy of Dr. Martin Luther King's mission as a nonviolent integrationist toward a more idealized community that could rise above racism, classism, sexism, and Jim Crow during the Civil Rights Movement, which complemented the liberation efforts and the volatile dialogue and strategies of Malcolm's agenda of Black nationalism in the struggle against White supremacy and in deconstructing the devastating effects of dehumanizing racism. Malcolm encouraged strategies necessary to achieve equality through Black pride and self-determination to rise above the criminality of racial oppression. He encouraged an internalized awareness of self-worth, value, and identification with one's cultural heritage. Douglass, Thurman, and Dr. King laid the foundation for the liberation dialogue that paved the way for Dr. James H. Cone's Black liberation theology. Douglass, Malcolm, Thurman, Dr. King, and Cone affirmed the legitimacy of Black life and the legitimacy of the Black American experience as worthy of theological reflection. As Cone established the necessity of a Black theology as a theology of liberation, the womanist feminists Delores S. Williams and Jacquelyn Grant affirmed that Black theology can only be true liberation theology if it is inclusive of Black women's lives and experiences, which gives credence to feminist theologian Mary Daly and her critique that Black theology is equally androcentric and riddled with components of race and sexism.

I assert the argument for the necessity of the development of a universal theology of liberation that is inclusive of all religions and cultures, in which the theological dialogue derived from the plight of the disinherited awakens the conscience of the ruling factions of economics, politics, and culture, whereby the ruling factions change the political and economic policies of oppression on a global scale. The premise of the thesis of this paper stands fully affirmed within

the concepts of Black Theology as assessed in Charles Long's critical analysis in the text *Ellipsis: The Collected* Writings of *Charles H. Long.* Long asserts further,

> Major critical alternative statements on the definition of Black theology were contributed by Major Jones and Deotis Roberts. The most trenchant critique of Black theology is probably that of William Jones's *Is God a White Racist? A Preamble to Black Theology* (1973). This work by Jones raises the essential issue of theodicy: Is suffering—Black suffering—crucial for the Black theologian? To regard liberation as the summum bonum (the highest good) and sine qua non (the essential condition that is necessary) necessitates the opposite—suffering as oppression—as an aspect of the summum malum (the greatest evil). The precondition for Black liberation as the objective of Black theology is the prior affirmation of Black suffering as oppressive.[399]

Long asserts that the argument is critical regarding questions of Black Theology and asks, "Can the Christian existence define or express freedom for those who suffer."[400] I assert that the answer to Long's assessment of Black theology is affirmed within the scripture in Luke 4:18 when Jesus states, "The spirit of the lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor."[401] I assert that this is confirmation that Black theology affirms the liberation message of the Christ for the oppressed.

Cone defines it: "Black theology is a theology of liberation because it is a theology which arises from an identification with the oppressed Black people of America, seeking to interpret it in the light of the Black condition. It holds that the liberation of the Black community is God's

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[399] Long, Charles H. 2018. The Collected Writings, 215.

[400] Ibid., 214

[401] Luke 4:18

liberation."[402] What Cone affirms is that theological reflection must be relevant to current issues regarding the disinherited and be representative of all those who are oppressed worldwide, because oppression, in and of itself, is present throughout the world in a variety of forms and types. Furthermore, Cone affirms, "The task of Black theology is to analyze the nature of the gospel of Jesus Christ in the light of oppressed blacks so they will see the gospel as inseparable from their humiliated condition and as bestowing on them the necessary power to break the chains of oppression."[403] This affirms the concept of Black theology in the evolution of Christian theology and its movement toward the development of a universal theology of liberation that is inclusive of all religions and cultures, in which the theological dialogue derived from the plight of the disinherited awakens the consciences of the ruling factions of economics, politics, and culture, whereby the ruling factions transform the policies and systems of oppression on a global scale.

Cone gives two reasons why Black theology is a legitimate theology within the Christian faith. Cone emphasizes that a legitimate theology of the gospel of Christ must be the point of departure for the poor, oppressed, downtrodden, and marginalized people of society, and that Black theology is legitimate theology within Christianity because Jesus is the center of Black theology of a theology of liberation.[404] Therefore, the strand of legitimacy of a universal theology—from Frederick Douglass the abolitionist, to Howard Thurman the mystic, to the Civil rights advocates Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X in their mission to tear down the barriers of White supremacist segregationists—extends to the Black womanist's voices of

[402] James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2020), 5.

[403] Ibid.

[404] Ibid.

Delores S. Williams, Jacquelyn Grant who validates the lives and experiences of Black women as essential in the dialogue of Black Theology of liberation and feminist theologian Mary Daly that is critical of the androcentric sexist and race centered perspectives of Black Theology in moving toward a universal theology of liberation that speaks to Christian theology of liberation.

Finally, regarding Black Theology in its significance in progressing toward a universal theology of liberation, J. Kameron Carter argues for the significance of Cone's Black Theology of liberation as revealed in Christ. Carter writes,

> I argue that the brilliance of Cone's thought—indeed, its underdeveloped apex—is in its analysis of being's concreteness, which is revealed in Jesus of Nazareth. A concrete conceptualization of being stands over against abstract conceptualizations of being, along with their attendant racial politics. Central to Cone's analysis is the place he accords, especially in his early thought, to Jesus's Jewishness. Hence the breakthrough in his thought: the humanity that the God of Israel assumes in Jesus of Nazareth is the location from which God secures and affirms all of creation in its historical infoldings. Therefore, contrary to the logic of modern racial reasoning, Jesus's Jewishness is not racially arrayed against non-Jews but, rather, is the perpetual sign of God's embrace of Jew and non-Jew (or, in scriptural parlance, Gentile) alike.[405]

Carter affirms the universality of the gospel of Christ by asserting that the gospel of Christ is a universal theology of liberation in which the principles of Black Theology are inclusive of all people who are oppressed and disinherited members of society who live their

[405] Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2020), 158

lives on the perimeter of society worldwide. They are comprised of all cultures, religions, ethnicities, and genders within the lower echelon of society.

I affirm that the argument for the development of a universal theology of liberation is supported by the very principles of Cone's Black theology, whereby the dialogue of a universal theology is a language that will unite humankind regardless of social, cultural, racial, religious, economic, or political differences. The mission of a universal theology of liberation is to facilitate solidarity among humankind in contending with the poor, the oppressed, and the injustices of inequality worldwide, and to move with compassion to transform the world through the preservation of human dignity among all people. Therefore, the development of a universal theology, grounded in the principles of Cone's Black theology, engages in a liberation dialogue whereby the causes of global oppression are addressed in the mission to transform the world—to create a more equal and just world socially, culturally, economically, and politically—where all people can thrive and transcend the social, cultural, economic, and political barriers of oppression.

Carter gives a critical analysis of the theological significance of Black Theology derived from Black oppression in the Americas that challenges all forms of traditional theological dialogue. Carter asserts, 'thus Black Theology, understood from this vantage point, gestures toward a theology of the nations—one that emanates from and is consonant with a Christian theology of Israel. Indeed, it is a theology of a nation within a nation, a theology that is of Black existence in its diasporic wanderings through the strange land of late modernity. Cone's Black Theology comes to the threshold of an intellectual program that theologically disrupts modernity's analytics of race."[406] I assert that Carter has given a definitive analysis of Black

[406] Long, *The Collected Writings*, 158.

Theology and its essentiality in the evolution of Christian Theology in the Americas, whereby race, gender, class, Christianity, and theological reflection intersect cross-culturally in contending with the inequality of human existence. It is a search for a viable solution to develop a Christian theological dialogue that will awaken the ruling factions of the world to transform the oppressive strategies of economic and political policies that disempower millions worldwide.

The Ruling Factions: The Awareness of Global Oppression

In the development of a universal theology of liberation wherein the dialogue awakens the conscience of the ruling factions of global economics and politics in the matters of commerce and trade, the ruling factions are made more aware of the poverty and oppression caused by the current strategies of profit, which will facilitate change. The transformation of the global system of economics and politics can be facilitated. However, the theological dialogue of liberation must speak to all people regardless of religion and culture, or government policies. The dialogue of liberation must remind everyone of the interconnectedness of humankind. Everyone must be made aware of the oppression and poverty that affect the entire community of humankind. The ruling factions of the global community, such as the leaders of politics and economic elites, as well as those who influence the cultural development of all nations, must be addressed directly. The ruling factions on a global scale must be made conscious of the inequality and the injustices that are inflicted on the poor and disinherited, perpetuated by their oppressive policies and practices of trade and commerce. This awakening for the ruling factions can be embarked upon by speaking the truth through a universal theology of liberation that is inclusive of all people and relevant in its acknowledgment of those who do not share equally in the current system, thereby bringing about a global transformation of the system.

Therefore, it is through the advancement of education and the creation of massive grassroots movements that seek to highlight the experiences of global oppression and discrimination, as was implemented and achieved by Frederick Douglass, the abolitionist, in his antislavery campaign through the eloquent language of liberation. Douglass spoke to White audiences on the evils of slavery without apology. Howard Thurman spoke throughout the world on the plight of the disinherited, encouraging the discriminated and marginalized people of the world to embrace true Christianity as founded and taught by Jesus through the application of love that Jesus implemented throughout his ministry, which established and affirmed human dignity with Jews, non-Jews, and Gentiles alike.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. engaged the grassroots through the Civil Rights Movement by affirming the mission of the Church in responding to the injustice of a racialized system through the liberating action of nonviolence and an integration aimed at dismantling the contagion of segregation. Malcolm X spoke a dialogue of liberation by promoting Black nationalism in the struggle against White supremacy, and in the uplift of African Americans by whatever methodology it could be achieved. Dr. Cone asserted a Black theology of liberation derived from the plight of Black oppression, whereby he challenged traditional Christian theology and demanded a reevaluation of the gospel of Christ as the gospel of liberation. The African American womanists Delores S. Williams and Jacquelyn Grant could not find Black women's lives, experiences, or voices in Cone's Black Theology of Liberation. Therefore, Williams and Grant affirmed that it must include the voices and experiences of Black women in its theological reflection to be a true liberation theology that speaks to all. Mary Daly questioned Cone's Black theology of liberation, which she viewed as race-centered and bearing a traditional, theological, androcentric tone. She did not comprehend that Black oppression in the Americas was the point

of departure for Cone's Black theology of liberation, thereby affirming for the religious establishment in the Americas that the existence and life experiences of Black people in the evolution of the Black existence in the Americas were worthy of theological reflection as cemented in the gospel of Christ and amplified by Christ in the life and times of his ministry and in all that he accomplished in the redemption of humankind. I affirm that it is a revelation of the true historical Jesus in his mission and purpose that will facilitate clarity for all theologians in understanding that theology must be concerned with the oppressed and disinherited of the world. Therefore, theological reflection must be cross-cultural across all racial, ethnic, social, and cultural lines in affirming Christ as the fleshly embodiment of the kingdom of God that came into this world to set all those who are held captive by various bonds of oppression free.

Transformation of the Social, Cultural, Economic, and Political Policies of Oppression

It is through the development of a universal theology of liberation that is inclusive of all religions and cultures, from which the theological dialogue arising from the plight of the disinherited awakens the conscience of the ruling factions, thereby transforming the social, cultural, economic, and political policies of oppression on a global scale. In speaking of the universal Christian theology of liberation, the ruling global factions are awakened to a deeper identification with the disinherited. This universal Christian theology will resonate with the language of inclusion, cultural diversity, equality, and human dignity among all people worldwide. From the human plane of existence, the disinherited will receive greater acknowledgment of the struggles they face daily, as well as recognition of the contributions that the poor and marginalized people make to the functioning of our world systems. The universal theological reflection will address the economic inequality that exists between the extraordinarily rich and the poor, and ensure that the disinherited gain access to all available resources, which

will facilitate equal opportunities for participation and prosperity on a global scale. Politically, the language of a universal theology of liberation will be a dialogue of total equality among all people that will politically mandate the protection of the rights of everyone without discrimination or bias on a global scale.

CHAPTER 9

CONCLUSION

As a scholar of religious studies, this research project has been transformative, particularly regarding religious history in America. The research is critical in the continued development of liberation theology in the academy of religion. From the text *Religion in America* by John Corrigan and Winthrop S. Hudson comes a profound statement that resonates with the complex issue of religious pluralism and culture in America, and it legitimizes and affirms the importance of this dissertation. The authors write, "In this land of minorities, in addition to Scots, Welsh, English, and Irish from the British Isles, major segments of the population were drawn from every area of Europe."[407]

Europeans gravitated to the Americas with new hope, faith, and a mission to create a New World. They came from Eastern Europe and the Balkans, Germany, Portugal, Italy, the Netherlands, Scandinavia, and France, with hopes of starting a new nation, living as free people, and determining their own destiny, religious or not.[408] Furthermore, over twenty-five million Americans are descended from East and South Asia and the islands of the Pacific, and the number keeps increasing: Asian Indians, Chinese, Filipinos, Japanese, Koreans, and Vietnamese, to name the largest groupings. A medley of people also comes from what technically should be regarded as part of Asia and Africa, but is more commonly labeled the Near East or Middle East. And then, to return to the beginning, half forgotten by many are the three million survivors of the

[407] Corrigan and Hudson, *Religion In America*, 4.

[408] Ibid.

Native Americans of the forests and plains who were displaced and isolated and yet continued to exist, as did African Americans for so many years, on the periphery of the White man's world.[409] And it is this peripheral existence of African Americans that has helped define the civil status of African Americans and has brought forth many voices demanding a reevaluation of the system and liberation for all people in pursuit of the equality of human dignity.

Furthermore, Corrigan and Hudson affirm that the tolerance of religious differences in America from the colonial period into the modern era, facilitated religious diversity in granting independence and voice to all who would come to America, though there would be exceptions for others. Hudson and Corrigan write that the story of religion in America, like the broader history of the nation, includes the themes of commonality, like-mindedness, and unity. The constitutional guarantee of freedom of religion has made possible the coalescence of an American culture that has manifested, over two hundred years, a strong inclination to accept, at least in principle, religious difference as a fact of democratic social order.[410] However, this commonality and like-mindedness were not extended to Native Americans nor those who were enslaved in the antebellum South, despite Christianity the mainstay of religious practice in America's infancy. Frederick Douglass was born into slavery and rose to great prominence as an abolitionist and as one of the first forerunners of a dialectical dialogue on a theology of liberation.

Douglass took the public platform in North America and abroad, speaking on the horrors of human bondage in the antebellum South. Douglass was not an official minister of the gospel of Christ. However, he was familiar with the perversion of the gospel of Christ that was used to

[409] Ibid., 7.

[410] Ibid.

sanction slavery against Black people who were taken by force from their homes on the continent of Africa. Douglass spoke the language of liberation for all people. He challenged the conscience of America by affirming the inhumanity of slaveholding that debased Black people held in chains. Douglass renounced slavery and the false version of the slaveholders' religion. He spoke convincingly on the barbarism of slavery and the perversion of the gospel of Christ. Douglass's presence and exceptional oratorical skills redefined the true nature, character, and substance of Black people in America. He did not allow his identity to be defined by White supremacy nor by the dehumanization of the institution of slavery. He lived and protested through the powerful dialogue of liberation for African Americans and became an exemplary African American statesman for a better America where all people are free and acknowledged as equals in full participation within the system.

Howard Thurman wrote, spoke, and moved with a theology of liberation cemented in "the religion of Jesus" as the methodology of engagement for the disinherited of the world to "love your enemy."[411] This means that the poor and oppressed throughout the world must engage the elite populace who rule the world in the "context of a common humanity" in which human dignity is established.[412] If a universal theology derived from the gospel of Christ is to be developed and implemented for the common good of all humankind, there must be an engaging dialogue that takes place between the privileged and empowered people and the disadvantaged people of our world. If the disinherited remain at a distance on the priphery of all societies throughout the world without conversation between the rich and privileged and the poor and oppressed, the poor will continue to be foreign and misunderstood in their situational condition

[411] Thurman, *Jesus and the Disinherited*, 90.

[412] Ibid.

of poverty and disenfranchisement. The disinherited can interact with the love of Christ and speak a common dialogue of liberation whereby all humankind can unite in true brotherhood and sisterhood and change the conditions of oppression for the common good of all.

Frederick Douglass stepped onto the public platform as an abolitionist and spoke a language of liberation for African Americans to White audiences. He enlightened the White audience with the truth of what it means to be human chattel-property without human rights in a democratic republic, in which the formal documents, such as the Constitution of the United States and the Declaration of Independence, do not apply to you and your people. Therefore, you exist, but your existence is without the acknowledgment of human dignity among all others in the experience of being equal and human. Douglass spoke the language of liberation against slavery in the Americas. He affirmed that the westernized version of the gospel of Christ was not being extended to enslaved Black people in the Americas. Because Douglass spoke a dialogue of liberation against chattel slavery, he met the enemy of oppression in an exemplary manner with human dignity, bringing hope as an African American statesperson for equality and freedom for all humankind. He spoke the universal theology of liberation and affirmed the true mission of the gospel of Christ because he was able to take flight from human bondage and speak to his fellow White American citizens as a diplomat and as an American citizen, moving toward that ultimate destiny of conveying what the cross of Christ truly represents for all believers and followers of the gospel of Christ. Douglass was one of the first true Black prophets of liberation theology, and he paved the way for all others to come and speak of liberation theology in the love of Christ.

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. spoke the universal language of liberation theology in reaffirming the true mission of the church. Dr. King was one of the most important theologians of modern times. He reaffirmed the true mission of the church as he spearheaded the Civil Rights

Movement of the 1950s and 1960s. King launched the Civil Rights Movement from within the Black religious establishment by advocating nonviolent protest against the racist, oppressive laws of segregation that divided the nation. He taught the world that the church has a responsibility to society and must be concerned with social, cultural, economic, and political laws and policies that oppress, discriminate, and marginalize any sector or culture of people in society. Dr. King's universal language of theology was demonstrated through the church's actions to transform and unite all people of society in the spirit of Christ because the Church is the body of Christ. Also, Dr. King affirmed the mission of the Church in demonstrating that the Church needs to pick up the cross, take positive nonviolent action to bring about the salvation of society and to create a more loving, cohesive community unified by the love of Christ.

Malcolm X was an exceptionally misunderstood leader who spoke a language of theology and liberation when he encouraged his fellow African Americans to become active in changing the plight of racial oppression. He spoke the language of Black self-determination and human dignity with a strong identification with his Black ancestry. Malcolm encouraged African Americans to be proud of their ancestry and to step forward with Black pride in the struggle against White supremacy, urging them to renounce Black self-hatred.

Malcolm X promoted Black solidarity, thereby affirming the necessity for African Americans to take responsibility for rebuilding Black culture and developing Black independent leadership and institutions, through which African Americans could make the decision to determine what happens in the lives of African Americans. Malcolm's dialogue of liberation theology demanded that African Americans renounce dependency on White Americans to change their status and lives. Malcolm's words demanded that African Americans employ whatever methodology was necessary to rise out of the depths of racism, oppression, discrimination, and

degradation. Malcolm's brief time as a civil rights and political activist was important in that he overcame a horrific, disadvantaged beginning and moved beyond the circumstances of a disadvantaged Black male from a broken home. He took the necessary steps to change the course of his life to become a highly respected—though not always understood—political activist, which opened doors and allowed him to speak to the American people. Malcolm became an exemplar of how to be seen and how to speak to the people on behalf of the poor and oppressed, challenging the ruling elite on the public platform for crimes against humankind without fear or apology. Malcolm rose above the element of fear and spoke a dialogue of liberation that awakened the consciousness of the ruling factions of the American system of government to reevaluate the entire social, cultural, economic, and political system of the United States of America. America has tolerated racism, which has divided the nation on the issue of race, with Christianity as the dominant religious faith. Malcolm spoke the dialogue of liberation against racial oppression, as did the forerunners Frederick Douglass, Howard Thurman, and fellow contemporary Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., as well as the forthcoming Dr. James H. Cone, Delores S. Williams, Jacquelyn Grant, and Mary Daly. Malcolm challenged the disinherited to fight for human justice, equality, and total liberation by whatever means were necessary to achieve it. He was willing to die for the cause of justice, equality, and solidarity with his people. I assert that Malcolm X was never a demagogue but rather a courageous, outspoken Black prophet who spoke an aggressive language of liberation that resonated with the truth of taking actions to change the situation and conditions of oppression. The liberation of the disinherited is more contingent upon what the disinherited are willing to do to change the situation, not just in words but in action.

Malcolm's language of liberation theology in combating racial oppression defined who he was and what others could be when one moves with a purpose and mission to demonstrate to the people that you matter, and that your life and existence matter in that transformative journey that one must make to make a difference when the very system of government and society in which you live has misused you and has failed to acknowledge you and your people as a people of God with the divine right of being and purpose for living. Malcolm X was an exemplary statesman who spoke a theology of liberation, which called for people to step forward, redefine and reconstruct their culture of people, and reaffirm self-respect and human dignity as ordained for all of humankind.

Dr. James H. Cone affirmed that legitimate Christian theology is derived from the gospel of Christ, whereby the language of liberation is concerned with the disinherited of the world. Cone's Black Theology of Liberation is symbolic of the poor and oppressed who have always existed since the time of Christ, because Christ himself shares in the suffering of those who have been trampled upon and dehumanized throughout the evolution of humankind's existence. Therefore, Cone affirmed that the gospel of Christ must be reaffirmed as a gospel of universal liberation.

Therefore, the language of theology must be a theology of liberation such as that which Christ himself spoke to the people in words and in liberating actions. Christ enlightened people with truth through love. Therefore, Cone provides appropriate instruction regarding the legitimate content and construction of theological dialogue that speaks to those who are marginalized, oppressed, and disenfranchised throughout the world. Thus, the theology should point to the cross of Christ, where He shared in and identified with the disinherited of the world. Furthermore, the disinherited have hope, faith, and love in Christ, which affirms all people's

right to life, freedom, and human dignity. Dr. Cone's theology of liberation directs those who believe and follow Christ to speak the universal language of liberation through which the oppressed are lifted and renewed in Christ Jesus.

Women's feminist theology is an essential part of the universal language of liberation for all humankind. Delores S. Williams, Jacquelyn Grant, and Mary Daly all affirmed that women should have a strong voice in the church and in scriptural hermeneutics. They affirm that the universal dialogue of liberation theology must be inclusive of both genders, free from gender or racial bias, and attentive to the plight of women's lives and experiences in theological dialogue. The universal theology of liberation must be written and spoken in a dialogue that is inclusive of all people and addresses the poor, the oppressed, the discriminated against, and the marginalized people of the world. The universal theology of liberation arises from the plight of the poor and oppressed and must be inclusive of all religions and cultures, whereby the consciences of the ruling factions of the world are awakened to change the social, cultural, economic, and political strategies and policies that sentence millions to a life of poverty, hardships, and disenfranchisement. This project is legitimate and essential in the academy of religion, and I am certain it will further the continued development and interest in the study of liberation theology.

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