

James H. Cone: The Vocation of Christian Theology and the Christian Church Today

by

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“Men were not created for separation, and color is not the essence of man’s humanity.”
—James H. Cone, *Black Theology, Black Power*, p. 17.

Abstract

This essay investigates the role of Christian theology and the Christian church in the (politico-) theological writings and ecclesiological hermeneutics of James H. Cone. In Cone’s work, Christian theology is portrayed as a public discourse and testimony of God’s emancipative movements and empowering presence in society with the goal (1) to set the oppressed and the vulnerable free, (2) to readjust matters of this world toward divine justice and peace, and (3) to bring healing and restoration to the places in which volitional agents have inflicted pain, suffering, oppression, and all forms of evil. This essay is an attempt to imagine creatively with new hermeneutical lenses and approaches—liberative, postcolonial, and decolonial—the task of Christian theology and the vocation of the church as public witnesses to carry out the liberative agenda and reconciling mission of God in the world. The basic argument of this essay is twofold. First, it contends for the essential role of liberation theology in redefining Christian theology and ecclesiology in general. Rather than being a “special interest” or merely a political theme in theology, it suggests that Black liberation theology has a special role to play in “freeing” Christian theology and the church from racism, oppression, and imperialism. Second, by promoting some new understanding of Cone’s work and applying it in some new context, this article is deploying Cone’s theology to critique or awaken dominant white theology to a new way of thinking about the whole field of theology and church in the twenty-first century.

Introduction

James H. Cone articulates a Black theology of liberation in the context of the history of Black suffering and white domination in the United States and frames it as a corrective response to American (white) theology that is silent on Black pain and suffering and the alienation of Black people from white theological accounts about God's involvement in human history. He defines Black Theology as a "radical response from the underside of American religious history to the mainstream of white Christianity."¹ In his second and seminal work, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (1970), Cone argues that Christian "theology cannot be separated from the community it represents. It assumes that truth has been given to the community at the moment of its birth. Its task is to analyze the implications of that truth, in order to make sure that the community remains committed to that which defines its existence."² The relationship between theology and ecclesiology is intertwined in Cone's theological language and reasoning. The concerns and experiences of the people of God in the church are the raw material for theological hermeneutics and the reading of God's liberating actions among his people.

While Cone prioritizes God's revelation as the beginning point of theological inquiry, correspondingly, he contends that the culture of a people is another fundamentally adequate source to think theologically about the redemptive movement of God in the world—through the agency of his church, his emissary in the local culture. Consequently, Cone establishes that theology has both a communal function and public vocation in relations to the needs of the Christian community and the needs of the people in society that contextualize and inform theological imagination and hermeneutics. Because of the complexity of human relations in society and the multifaceted functions of the church in culture, if Christian theology and the Christian church are going to be faithful witnesses to God's active involvement in human affairs, they must contribute to the wholistic transformation of the human condition in society and the reconciliation of all things through Christ the Liberator. Christian theology as an academic discipline and the Christian church as God's chosen agent in the world must not remain unresponsive to the plot of the oppressed and the vulnerable in society.

The objective of this essay is to investigate the interplay between Christian theology and the Christian church and their engagement or disengagement in society in the (politico-) theological writings and ecclesiological hermeneutics of James H. Cone. In Cone's work, Christian theology is expressed as a public discourse and testimony of God's continuing emancipative movements and empowering presence in society with the goal (1) to set the oppressed and the vulnerable free, (2) to readjust the things of the world toward divine justice and peace, and (3) to bring healing and restoration to the places in which volitional (human) agents have inflicted pain, suffering, oppression, and all forms of evil. This essay is an attempt to imagine creatively with new hermeneutical lenses and approaches—liberative, postcolonial, and decolonial—both the task of Christian theology and the vocation of the church as public witnesses to carry out the emancipative agenda and reconciling mission (salvation, healing, hospitality, wholeness, reconciliation, and peace) of God in contemporary societies and in our postcolonial moments.

The basic argument of this essay is twofold. First, it contends for the essential role of liberation theology in redefining Christian theology and ecclesiology in general. Rather than being a “special interest” or merely political theme in theology, it suggests that Black liberation theology has a special role to play in “freeing” Christian theology and ecclesiology (globally) from racism, oppression, and imperialism. Second, by promoting some new understanding of Cone’s work and applying it in some new context, this article is deploying Cone’s theology to critique or awaken dominant white theology to a new way of thinking about the whole field of theology and church in the twenty-first century.

Broadly, the essay is divided in five parts. Briefly, the first part discusses the complexity of race in the history of American Christianity; particularly, it provides some historical examples of how white supremacy completely distorts theology and race relations in America. By providing three main examples, the second part of the essay demonstrates the bankruptcy of white American theology and Cone’s constructive criticisms to white theological discourse. Particularly, it showcases how an “other worldly” Christianity consistently dehumanizes the Black other but also mangles Christian theology itself into a mere cover for human oppression. The third part discusses the task of Christian theology in the quest for human flourishing. It demonstrates how Cone’s project of Black liberation affirms the humanity and agency of the oppressed and has the potential to redefine Christianity for ALL people as this-worldly, engaged, situated, and attuned to the healing of suffering in the present, rather than Christianity as other worldly ideology covering racism, oppression, and imperialism. While the fourth part of the essay makes some propositions about the true vocation of the Christian church, the final division of the essay provides some suggestions on how theology should inform the practices of the church. Cone’s rich ecclesiology supplies both intellectual resources and practical examples about the role of theology in the life of the church in contributing to a prophetic and postcolonial church in the twenty-first century. As we learn in Cone, when Christian theologians and the church “spiritualize” sinfulness and oppression, they provide justification for the depredations of racism and exploitation and deprive their oppressed of their humanity.

Fragments of American History: Theology and Race in “Christian America”

The introductory article of The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) that bears considerable political ideologies and linguistic parallels with The Constitution of the United States and The Bill of Rights (1791) and France’s Declaration of the Rights of the Man and of the Citizen (1789) begins with the following declaration: “Whereas recognition of the inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom.”³ Both historical documents were written in the blossoming era of the transatlantic slave trade and the flourishing of the institution of slavery in the slaveholding North American and French Caribbean colonies. The practice of racial slavery in the newly-independent and republic of the United States violated the very inalienable rights of the enslaved African population the U.S. Constitution and its Bill of Rights promised to all people.

Not only the systemic oppression of Black people through the institution of slavery robbed the enslaved of their honor and humanity; anti-Black racism equally demoralized and culturally alienated them in the American society. Unquestionably, racism is a question of human respect and honor. Ghanaian-born philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah interprets American racial slavery as “the subordination of one race by another and it entailed the systematic subjection of Black people to dishonor.”⁴ Unfortunately, the history of racism as America’s great moral failure and the dishonor of Black lives is linked to America’s theological conviction and religious habitus.

The American experience is captured within five central “American ideologies” that tell a distinctive story of American Christian expression, the country’s theological development, and the interplay between Americans’ attitude toward race and the triumph of American freedom and unfreedom. These ideologies also explain the history of internal wars, oppression, violence, and dehumanization that have marked the life of America’s people of color and the disfranchised poor. The complex relations between Black and White Americans and the people of European descent and those of non-European ancestry living in America correspondingly provide an important window to make sense of the triumph of white supremacy, racial segregation in American churches and society, and the economic injustice toward the poor and the mistreatment of racialized Americans. Below, I highlight the five cardinal American ideals and beliefs already signaled above:

1. Election of God: The idea that America is a Christian nation distinctively chosen and called by God to protect and bring American freedom to the developing nations, and to bear witness of God’s blessings in America to the world.
2. Racial Purity: The concept that America is a white nation, and for many white Americans, it entails the natural separation of the two major races, the Black and White races, and the maintenance of the supremacy of the white race in all human affairs and transactions.
3. Slavery: for many white Christian Americans and non-Christian white racists, the enslavement of African people in the country of America was a divine sanction and the institution of slavery should be construed as God’s predestining choice of the African people to be brought to America, so they could be exposed to the light of the Gospel and receive the grace of Christ’s forgiveness and salvation.
4. White Christianity and White Theology: the belief in the white version of Christianity and white articulation of Christian theology is prominent among both white American Christians and white American theologians; it is connected to the ideology of the divine election of America as a white and Christian nation, and that the “white church” and the theological reflections done by white religious thinkers are the best models to imitate and to think theologically and Christianly.

5. Jim Crow segregation (the 1896 Supreme Court doctrine of “separate but equal”): the American legal system of racial segregation, similar to the South African apartheid, was a means to purify the white race and control the Black race, and to keep each race in its God-ordaining roles and functions in public spaces; racial segregation flourished through various invented systems and institutions including (1) the legal prohibition of interracial relationships and marriage between White and Black Americans, (2) the lynching era (1889-1940) in which Black bodies were publicly and unashamedly displayed in Southern trees, and (3) the separation of Black and White Christian churches in worship and other religious activity, and the defense of this religious attitude through the reproduction and dissemination of an idiosyncratically-American white theology framed by the race question, and the disfranchisement of America’s Black population.

As a result, historically, white supremacy in the American life has manifested itself in three broad traumatic events: the harshness of slavery, Jim Crow segregation, and the public lynching of Black people. The five underlying factors outlined above would lead to a web of complex relations: the emergence of various protest and cultural-political movements throughout American history, from the eighteenth to the first-half of the twentieth-century, and the creation of African American Christianity (“The Black Church”), what we may call “Black religious tradition,” as a counter-religious movement to White Christian hegemony during the time of slavery; subsequently, the development of the Civil Rights Movement, the social-political and moral activism of Martin Luther King, Jr., the emergence of Black Power Movement, and the birth of Black Theology could be traced historically to the 1960s—an era in which Black people proclaimed their humanity in the midst of cultural despair, white terror, and existential alienation.

These major events and ideologies are watershed moments in Black theology and American history. They represent very specific historical contexts to understand the politico-theology and intellectual ideas of James H. Cone and the fortification of American Christianity and White American theology. Because of our limitation in this essay, we will not develop these five topics but will concentrate on Cone’s interaction with American theology and the American church in these fragile moments. Yet Black religious tradition, and Black liberation theology, would modify the content and contours of American religious thought and social history.

Blackness as Symbolic Curse and Emptiness in the American Society

People who live in the United States and who do not share a European lineage have also experienced immensely the oppression and evil of the American empire, which historically changed their relationships with the American state. For example, the Native American people were tragically tortured and dehumanized in the era of the Trails of Tears (1831–1850); those from China bravely endured The Chinese Exclusion Act (1882); and the Japanese were brutalized and tortured in the Japanese internment camps (1942 to 1945). The American empire is an empire of death and human annihilation. Not only is it the case that “Empire is life denying,”⁵ according to South African Liberation Theologian Vuyani Vellem, but for the victims of the American and European empires, “Living against the logic of Empire is rebellion against the life killing order of Empire.”⁶

The validity and worth of Black life in America has always been a matter of cultural curiosity, contestation, and intellectual uncertainty. The racial structure of the nation and the anti-Black narrative inherent in the American psyche make Black identity as a curse and a symbolic void. Working within the rhetoric of existential philosophy (i.e., Sartre, Camus, and Fanon), James Cone describes the dialectics of Blackness and whiteness in this powerful language:

The structure of white society attempts to make “black being” into “nonbeing” or “nothingness.” In existential philosophy, nonbeing is usually identified as that which threatens being; it is that ever-present possibility of the inability to affirm one’s existence. The courage to be, then, is the courage to affirm one’s being by striking out at the dehumanizing forces which threaten being.”⁷

The fundamental binary opposition between Black and White can be traced to the history of the early Republic. In 1706, the influential New England Puritan Minister Cotton Mather published an ambivalent pro-slavery pamphlet titled *The Negro Christianized*, a Christian pedagogy on the spiritualization of American racial slavery. Although he published the religious essay anonymously, it was well known among the people in the colony that Mather had authored the work; Mather and many Christians in his New England congregation were merchants of African people and enslavers of African people. One of the central propositions he makes in this evangelistic work was for Christian enslavers to educate enslaved African people in the Christian religion and to treat them kindly as their spiritual brethren.⁸ Nonetheless, Mather’s central argument is that the Christian enslaver has “a moral responsibility for the souls of those in danger, and the Christianized servant is more profitable to his master.”⁹

The puzzling issue about Mather's pro-slavery Christian ideology was his belief that it was God who had sovereignly ordained the servitude of the African people in the newly-conquered land of the Native Americans. Second, it was also God who had appointed freely the enslaved African population, whom he termed humorously "Rational Creatures," to be the "Servants" of white (Christian) enslavers.¹⁰ Having established a close rapport between American Christianity and American slavery, Mather instructed Christian enslavers in these well-crafted religious precepts:

The greatest Kindness that can be done to any Man is to make a Christian of him. Your Negroes are immediately Raised unto an astonishing Felicity, when you have Christianized them. They are become amiable spectacles, & such as the Angels of God would gladly repair unto the Windows of Heaven to look upon. Tho' they remain your Servants, yet they are become the Children of God. Tho' they are to enjoy no Earthly Goods, but the small Allowance that your Justice and Bounty shall see proper for them, yet they are become Heirs of God, and Joint-Heirs with the Lord Jesus Christ.¹¹

For Mather, to be a Christian and an enslaver was not a theological tension. He also reminds the Christian enslavers in the colony of their role as enslavers and of the unfreedom and constraints of their enslaved as servants.

Tho' they are your Vassals, and must with a profound subjection wait upon you, yet the Angels of God now take them under their Guardianship, and vouchsafe to tend upon them. Oh! what have you done for them ! Happy Masters, who are Instrumental to raise their Servants thus from the Dust, and make them objects for the Nobles of Heaven to take Notice of! But it will not be long before you and they come at length to be together in the Heavenly City.¹²

Mather employs various epithets to establish a sense of connection between the enslavers and the enslaved; the latter are called "your servants" and "your vassals," which intended to convey a relationship of domination and subjectivity between the two entities. In the same rhetorical pattern, he uses different felicitous terms for the Christian enslavers including "happy masters," "pious masters," and "our masters." These titles aimed at conveying the dignity of the New England Christian community that was engaged actively in the selling of human (Black) flesh for profit—with the blessing of the colonial American church. He assures Christian enslavers that enslaved African people will render better service if they are indoctrinated in the Christian religion: "Be assured, Syrs ; Your Servants will be the Better Servants, for being made Christian Servants."¹³

According to Mather's judgment, enslaved African people should not be granted access to earthly advantages or privileges nor should he or she be allowed access to social mobility unless the enslaver deems it necessary and appropriate. The welfare and happiness of the enslaved is determined decisively by the sovereign will of the enslaver. While Mather proposes that the enslaved population could be denied of earthly goods, enslavers should not withhold from them the blessings of the spiritual world.

Evidently, Mather exploited Christianity to make the enslaved docile and obedient to their enslavers so that they could remain in their God-assigned role as enslaved in colonial America. His version of Christianity did not provide any corrective and moral teachings that could radically transform the darkened soul of the Christian enslavers who had put their brothers and sisters in Christ in chains. The moral failure of colonial Christianity in New England lies in its inability to transform an (Christian) enslaver to an (Christian) abolitionist. Writing from a Calvinistic-theological viewpoint, Mather reminded Christians that "God has brought a Servant unto thee, and said, Keep that Soul, Teach it, and Help it, that it may not be lost."¹⁴ Accordingly, Christian enslavers should never lose sight of this divine providence and kindness toward them; yet, Mather reassured them that the alleged stupidity of the enslaved African people was a 'discouragement' and that the purpose of the individual Christian enslaver was "to teach, as to wash" the African people.¹⁵ Teaching and washing in reference to the enslaver's duty to the enslaved implies both the full integration of the enslaved population to the Christian faith and complete assimilation into the white-European culture and worldview—which may infer the suppression or eradication of the imported cultural values and religious practices of enslaved African people in the colony.

Moreover, in 1701, the colonial New England Christian merchant, politician, and judge John Saffin published *A Brief and Candid Answer to a late Printed Sheet Entitled the Selling of Joseph* in response to the Boston lawyer Samuel Sewall's *The Selling of Joseph*, the first anti-slavery tract published in New England in 1700. Sewall's central thesis is that slavery was immoral and unlawful; it was unbiblical (for Christians) to own, buy, and sell enslaved people. Because of this (abolitionist) conviction, Sewall called upon the representative governing officials and authority to emancipate the enslaved population. In his counter-response, Saffin has eloquently argued that slavery as a system was "the constant practice of our own and other Christian Nations in the World"¹⁶ and that the institution of slavery should not be "condemned as irreligious... which is diametrically contrary to the rules and precepts which God hath given the diversity of men to observe in their respective Stations, Callings, and Conditions of Life, as hath been established."¹⁷

Moreover, he also added, “God hath set different orders and degrees of men in the world, both in Church and Common weal”¹⁸ and that it was not an “evil to bring [African people] out of their own heathenish country”¹⁹ and to convert them to the Christian religion. Like Mather, Saffin interprets the enslavement of African people theologically and construes this aberration as an essential facet of God’s providence in human history, especially in the history of white rule and hegemony in human civilization. About the outcome of the slavery debate, historian Ibram X. Kendi concludes that “Samuel won the battle—Adam was freed in 1703 after a long and bitter trial—but he lost the war. America did not rid itself of slavery or of Black people.”²⁰ He also points out the bewildering correlation between white supremacy, slavery, and American Christianity, for example, in the legal system in the colonial state of Virginia.

The Virginia legislature also denied Blacks the ability to hold office. Evoking reportedly the term “Christian white servant” and defining their rights, Virginia lawmakers fully married Whiteness and Christianity, uniting rich White enslavers and the non-slaveholding White poor.²¹

Hence, the godliest and gracious duty Christian enslavers could render to the enslaved is not emancipation from the bondage of slavery, but spiritual emancipation from the bondage of sin through dispensing effective religious instruction to the enslaved. For Saffin and pro-slavery Christian theologians and (Puritan) ministers, slavery “was a positive good, for it enabled Africans to accept Christian truth.”²² Historian Sydney Ahlstrom’s observation is quite insightful about this great American paradox, the dialectic of American slavery and American Christianity:

That the United States—the first new nation, the elect nation, the nation with the soul of a church, the great model of modern democracy—moved into the nineteenth century with one of the largest and cruelest of slave systems in its midst with full constitutional protection is surely one of the world’s greatest ironies.²³

It is in the same historical perspective that the editors of *Religion and the Antebellum Debate Over Slavery* could come to a similar conclusion:

The reformist impulse inherent in evangelical religion did not lead inexorably to an opposition of slavery. Rather, the tenets of evangelicalism, in a different social and cultural context, could be channeled into a slaveholding ethic for masters... In denominations in which evangelicalism's impact was weak, there was usually a conservative element that declared slavery a secular matter toward which religious bodies should remain neutral...Both popular revivalists and local ministers complained that preaching against slavery would interfere with their missionary and other purely religious work.²⁴

In short, slavery challenged Black dignity and reduced the self-worth of Black folk to non-being while White theologians and clergy correspondingly declared unapologetically and theologically the equal self-worth of every person, or as they say it in Haitian Creole "*tout moun se moun*" ("Every Person is a Person"). The idea that "every person has the same worth as every other is a revolutionary principle" in both (James Cone's) Black liberation theology and Third World Liberation theologies.²⁵ African American ethicist Peter J. Paris asserts that white American Christianity experienced no conflict between its theological thought, white Christian action, and the mistreatment of Black people in America—including Black Christians who share with them a common spiritual heritage; certainly, white American Christianity is less concerned about the practice of true biblical ethics or the biblical notion of justice for the advancement of the Black population in society. Paris explains further, "Rather, in that respect, the white churches actually experienced no alienation between their thought and practice. This is evidence by the fact that any attempt to preach racial equality in the pulpits of white churches has always been viewed as an act of hostility against their prevailing ethics."²⁶ The great divide between theology and ethics, thought and action, is a serious delinquent in contemporary American Evangelicalism.

The Dignity and Struggles of Black Folk

It is within the cultural memory of racial slavery coupled with America's systemic racism and oppression towards its Black and Brown population that James Cone could introduce the theory of "Black Power" in the 1960s as a warning sign and theological account to the problem of whiteness and white hegemony in the American society. Black Power offers an alternative discourse to reason theologically, intellectually, and morally about the omnipresent perils associated with white privileges and the plight of Black people in America. Cone explains that Black Power is a humanizing force because it is the Black person's attempt to affirm her or his being, and her or his attempt to be recognized as "Thou," in spite of the "other, the white power which dehumanizes him."²⁷ Further, influencing by Fanon's positive anthropology as the quest for (Black) recognition and (Black) agency, Cone elaborates on the ontological meaning of Blackness and the predicament of Black people in this overwhelmingly-white world in America:

To be human is to find something worthy 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*. And in a structure that regulates behavior, recognition by the other is indispensable to one's being...Black Power, in short, is an *attitude*, an inward affirmation of the essential worth of blackness...and the power of the black man to say Yes to his own "black being," and to make the other accept him or to be prepared for a struggle.²⁸

The South African political-theologian Allan A. Boesa brilliantly explains the problem of Black existence, space, and White supremacy.

The right to live in God's world as a human being is not the sole right of whites that eventually, through the kindness of whites, can extended to "deserving" (obsequious?) Blacks as a "special privilege." Human dignity for all is a fundamental biblical right. Nevertheless, many whites seem to think that Blacks live by the grace of whites.²⁹

As it were in South African apartheid and American Jim Crow, it took extreme courage to be Black and to exist in White spaces in the white world. It took more resilience to proclaim unapologetically that Black was/is beautiful and that the color of our skin was/is not a curse from God. Race both as a theological problem and a form of social dysfunction in the American cultural fabric is arguably a central theme in Cone's theology of culture and race; as he keenly observes,

If whites are honest in their analysis of the moral state of this society, they know that all are responsible. Racism is possible because whites are indifferent to suffering and patient with cruelty...White America's attempt to free itself of responsibility for the black man's inhuman condition is nothing but a protective device to ease her guilt.

Not only there exists an intellectual irregularity and epistemology crisis regarding White interpretation of Black life in the American society, Cone points out among white theologians and American Christians there's an intentional ignorance or the refusal to know about the Black experience, as that false memory may serve in the suppression of the white conscience and guilt. As it were the case when Cone penned the powerful words of indictment in *Black Theology*, *Black Power* in 1969, the attitude of whites regarding police brutality toward Black people, and the violence and pain inflicted upon them in the twenty-first century American society, is still a matter of moral and ethical issue.

This was especially true in the emergence of the Black Power Movement in the 1960s and the emergence of the Black Lives Matter Movement in 2013; both freedom movements campaigned to make sense of the countless political demonstrations of Black people in the streets of America and to seek racial justice against the cruelty of America's police forces, white terrorist groups, anti-Black public policies, as well as lawmakers and politicians who supported the racist ideologies and actions of white supremacists. As Cone reminds us:

White Americans do not dare to know that blacks are beaten at will by policemen as a means of protecting the latter's ego superiority as well as that of the larger white middle class. For to know is to be responsible. To know is to understand why blacks loot and riot at what seems slight provocation. Therefore, they must have reports to explain the disenchantment of blacks with white democracy, so they can be surprised. They must believe that blacks are in poverty because they are lazy or because they are inferior. Yes, they must believe that everything is basically all right.³⁰

Cone is correct to state, "What is at stake is the credibility and promise of the Christian gospel and the hope that we may heal the wounds of racial violence that continue to divide our churches and society."³¹ The tragic history of racial violence against Black people and the lynching of the Black man, woman, and child, and periodically an entire Black family was lynched, compels Cone to write prophetically and relationally, "Until we can see the cross and the lynching tree together, until we can identify Christ with a 'recrucified' Black body hanging from a lynching tree, there can be no genuine understanding of Christian identity in America, and no deliverance from the brutal legacy of slavery and white supremacy."³² Yet faith in God the Liberator does not simply contemplate the world; it changes it and radically alters the human condition and social structure. This is the idea of Christian conversion, a *metanoia*—that Christian faith is revolutionary because it orients us to action.³³ The gruesome history of American lynching has informed Cone's theology of the cross, and his Christology is deeply influenced by a creative reinterpretation of the history of Black suffering through the American lynching project. The Southern lynching tree was inevitably the cross in the United States.

Accordingly, the American society and American Christianity must reckon with the trauma of race and the crushing narrative of whites terrorizing Black people for seemingly white preservation and the fear of Black people. Lynching as a form of white terror, as Cone puts it, is "an unspeakable crime and a memory that most White Americans would prefer to forget."³⁴ The famed American theologian and ethicist Reinhold Niebuhr has voiced his own criticism about the dilemma of whiteness in America: "The white race in America will not admit the Negro to equal rights if it is not forced to do so."³⁵ In his seminal work *Moral Man & Immoral Society*, Niebuhr explains sociologically the complex nature of group interest grounded on racial solidarity of (whiteness) and (white) middle class unity.

The limitations of the human mind and imagination, the inability of human beings to transcend their own interests sufficiently to envisage the interests of their fellow-men as clearly as they do their own makes force an inevitable part of the process of social cohesion. But the same force which guarantees peace also makes for injustice...The individual or the group which organizes any society, however social its intentions or pretensions, arrogates an inordinate portion of social privilege to itself...The moral attitudes of dominant and privileged groups are characterized by universal self-deception and hypocrisy. The unconscious and conscious identification of their special interest with general interests and universal values, is equally obvious in the attitude of classes.³⁶

The attitude to white people toward Black progress in the history of race relations and the problem of racial privileges and economic unfairness in the American society between white and Black Americans are moral and theological problems of paramount weight. As Niebuhr reasons fairly:

Southern whites in America usually justify their opposition to equal suffrage for the Negro on the ground of his illiteracy. Yet no Southern State gives equal facility for Negro and white education; and the educated, self-reliant Negro is hated more than the docile, uneducated one...Sometimes a dominant group feels itself strong enough to deny the fitness of a subject group to share in its privileges without offering any evidence of a lack of qualification.³⁷

Niebuhr was also convinced that “it has always been the habit of the privileged groups to deny the oppressed classes every opportunity for the cultivation of innate capacities and then to accuse them of lacking what they have been denied the right to acquire.”³⁸ Niebuhr, who had had an enormous intellectual impact on Cone’s theological ethics and anthropology, offers an indictment on the white Christian practice and thought in the American society.

The Bankruptcy of American White Theology

For Cone, the pivotal question concerning the relationship between American white theology and Black oppression in the American society is this: “how to reconcile the gospel message of liberation with the reality of black oppression.”³⁹ In the American experience, it is unfortunate that “the public meaning of Christianity was [is] *white*.”⁴⁰ American white theology is bankrupt in many ways as it maintains its silence on matters of life and death in the contemporary culture, especially life-threatening issues that confront the welfare and happiness of people of color in the United States. As Cone has remarked, “Consequently there has been no sharp confrontation of the gospel with white racism.”⁴¹

Notably, Cone describes the bankrupt nature of American theology in this striking and powerful paragraph:

Throughout the history of this country, from the Puritans to the death-of-God theologians, the theological problems treated in white churches and theological schools are defined in such a manner that they are unrelated to the problem of being black in a white, racist society. By defining the problems of Christianity in isolation from the black condition, white theology becomes a theology of white oppressors, serving as a divine sanction from criminal acts committed against blacks.⁴²

Also, he establishes a pivotal rapport between God's exercising his righteousness in society and vindicating the cause of the helpless against their enemies, oppressors, and the morally-wicked:

Theologians and churchmen have been of little help in this matter because much of their intellectualizing has gone into analyzing the idea of God's righteousness in a fashion far removed from the daily experiences of men. They failed to give proper emphasis to another equally if not more important concern, namely, the biblical idea of God's righteousness as the divine decision to vindicate the poor, the needy, and the helpless in society.⁴³

Besides, Cone outlines specifically seven characteristics of white theology correlating with the social fabric of America and the chronology of American history and Christianity. First, white theologians are silent about Black pain and suffering and do not confront the moral evil of anti-Black racism in America. Second, white theologians seem to hold a neutral position on social, economic, and political issues concerning the oppressed and the poor; when white theologians fail to be in solidarity with those who are victimized by the dominant class, they're directly or indirectly siding with the individuals in positions of power and influence in society. Third, the language of white theology does not challenge the oppressive structures of society and systems of power that dehumanize the poor and the vulnerable. Fourth, American white theology and American white Christianity have been overwhelmingly patriotic and in solidarity with the racist government instead of siding with the poor and God to radically transform systems of inequality and injustice to structures of equity and justice, callous hearts to sympathetic hearts.

Moreover, American white theology is unable to define human nature in the light of the Gospel for the poor and the experience of the weak in society. Rather, the human nature or human identity is defined within the structures of whiteness and white values. As Cone puts it, "The human person in American theology is George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Abraham Lincoln."⁴⁴ Sixth, white theologians are reluctant to address or confront directly the pressing issues of this age: human poverty and greed, physical deprivation and destitution, economic dispossession and income inequality, oppression and injustice, child and sex slavery, suffering and hunger, white supremacy and racial discrimination, imperialism and capitalism.⁴⁵ Finally, American white theology has also been unsuccessful in the fight to champion better race relations and economic uplift programs for the poor and the lower-class, to support protest activism for racial and social justice politics, and to sustain Gospel-centered peace and reconciliation conversations. As Cone thunders in this insightful and provocative paragraph:

The sin of American theology is that it has spoken without passion...When it has tried to speak for the poor, it has been so cool and calm in its analysis of human evil that it implicitly disclosed whose side it was on. Most of the time American theology has simply remained silent, ignoring the condition of the victims of this racist society. How else can we explain the theological silence during the period of white lynching of black community in this nation? How else can we explain the inability of white religionists to deal relevantly with the new phenomenon of black consciousness? And how else can we explain the problem white seminaries are having as they seek to respond to radical black demands? There is really only one answer: American theology is racist; it identifies theology as dispassionate analysis of "the tradition," unrelated to the sufferings of the oppressed.⁴⁶

Elsewhere, Cone questions the exclusive content and particularity of white theological curriculum suggesting that white religious education is not adequate and universal for all people, contrary to the traditional belief. In so doing, seminaries in America emphasize the need for appropriate tools in doing theology, which always means white tools, i.e., knowledge of the language and thought of white people. They fail to recognize that other people also have thought about God and have something significant to say about Jesus' presence in the world. My point is that one's social and historical context decides not only the questions we address to God but also the mode or form of the answers given to the questions.⁴⁷

The overwhelming emphasis on a white theological education and white representation in the Faculty-staff body in America's theological schools demeans the significance of theological contextualization in the classroom and the necessity for more inclusive and multicultural religious training to serve non-Anglo churches and faith communities. To strengthen his claim, Cone's remarks on the racial identity and deficiency of white theological expression is worth noting further:

Theology is always identified with a particular community. It is either identified with those who inflict oppression or with those who are its victims. A theology of the latter is authentic Christian theology, and a theology of the former is a theology of the Antichrist...American white theology is a theology of the Antichrist insofar as it arises from an identification with the white community, thereby placing God's approval on white oppression of black existence.⁴⁸

The lack of ethnic and racial diversity in America's seminaries and divinity schools give the false impression that one size fits all. As Cone has asserted, "In a racist society, God is never color-blind. To say God is color-blind is analogous to saying that God is blind to justice and injustice, to right and wrong, to good and evil."⁴⁹

Cone goes further to denounce the irrelevance of theological guilds and (American) theologians who are indifferent to the existential crises of the community named above: "It seems that much of this abstract theological disputation and speculation—the favorite pastime for many theological societies—serves as a substitute for relevant involvement in a world where men die for lack of political justice."⁵⁰ By contrast, the attentive theologian must see it as a Christian responsibility to address "what the gospel has to say to a man who is jobless and cannot get work to support his family because the society is unjust."⁵¹

Similarly, it is a moral duty for the Christian thinker to discuss openly the relevance of the Gospel to the woman who has been abused, beaten, raped, and oppressed in the hands of evil people. What does the Gospel have to say to the innumerable Black and Brown boys and girls who have no economic standing in society and who are orphans because of the repressive structural systems and societal-political arrangements against them that do not recognize their humanity and dignity simply because of the color of their skin and that they do not belong to the dominant white culture? What is the meaning of Christian theology for the undocumented immigrants and illegal refugees from the Caribbean and Latin American countries currently incarcerated in American prison cells just because they are here to seek a better life in America? Does the Christian Gospel have any relevance to the thousands of refugee children American Border Patrol have illegally snatched away from their parents' hands at the U.S.-Mexican borders? What does Christian theology have to say to the oppressed communities in earnest search for economic mobility, political rights, and social equality in their own land? How should Christian theologians help the oppressed community cope with and overcome police brutality and the burden of racial injustices, hunger, and poverty in the "Land of Freedom" and the "Land of the Braves"? Cone interrogates the problematic nature of American theology, and it is a legitimate and relevant concern Christian theologians and clergy should contemplate in their contemporary times:

Unless there is a word from Christ to the helpless, then why should they respond to him? How do we relate the gospel of Christ to people whose daily existence is one of hunger or even worse, despair? Or do we simply refer to them to the next world?⁵²

To move forward in our analysis, in his seminal text, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, Cone attempts to recapitulate the American narrative of terror and viciousness toward the country's Black citizens and the inadequacy of white theologians to address constructively with the wisdom of the Christian gospel and the terrific message of the cross the crisis of Black death and Black dehumanization motivated by white (aggressive) rage and (intense) hatred. Writing with deep personal anguish and discontent, he reflects profoundly on the historical trajectories of his life:

I found my voice in the social, political, religious, and cultural context of the civil rights and black power movements in the 1960s. The Newark and Detroit riots in July 1967 and the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. in April 1968 were the events that shook me out of my theological complacency, forcing me to realize the bankruptcy of any theology in America that did not engage the religious meaning of the African American struggle for justice...Silence on both white supremacy and the black struggle against racial segregation made me angry with a fiery rage that had to find expression. How could any theologian explain the meaning of Christian identity in America and fail to engage white supremacy, its primary negation?"⁵³

For Cone, the three great historical heresies and antitheses to the Gospel in America are anti-Black racism, the silence of white churches about social justice issues and the plight of the poor, and the silence of white theologians on Black death and alienation in the American society. Cone suggests, however, that "self-interest and power corrupted their understanding of the Christian gospel"⁵⁴ and motivated many white theologians and many whites who confessed the Christian faith to support the social evils of three-and-a-half-centuries of slavery and a century of racial segregation. It is within these historical trajectories and particularly the history of Black suffering that Cone could write reactionally, "If theology had nothing to say about Black suffering and resistance, I could not be a theologian."⁵⁵ To substantiate Cone's above thesis, we shall provide various forms and articulations of America's cultural and theological predicament.

The Crisis of White Theological Discourse

The prominent Swiss-born American church historian Philip Schaff (1819-1893), a proponent of white supremacy and pro-slavery theologian, articulated an ambivalent view on race relations. He defended the institution of slavery through his publications. Schaff energetically contended that slavery would one day be recognized in the American society as “no doubt an immense blessing to the whole race of Ham;”⁵⁶ he was also convinced that “The negro question, lies far deeper than the slavery question.”⁵⁷ Unquestionably, Schaff strongly believed that “The Anglo-Saxon and Anglo-American, of all modern races, possess the strongest national character and the one best fitted for universal domination.”⁵⁸

Similarly, the eminent 19th century Reformed theologian and Professor of Theology at Princeton Theological Seminary Charles Hodge (1797-1878) was an enslaver and therefore did not view slavery as a sin or America as an enslaving Christian nation as contrary to biblical ethic.⁵⁹ In the “Slavery” article, which he penned in 1836, he claimed that nowhere in the New Testament have Christian enslavers been commanded to emancipate the enslaved: “If we are right in insisting that slaveholding is one of the greatest of all sins; that it should be immediately and universally abandoned as a condition of church communion, or admission into heaven, how comes it that Christ and his apostles did not pursue the same course?”⁶⁰ Notably, antebellum proslavery theologians established their theological conviction and hermeneutical interpretation on slavery and the subjugation of African people on the seemingly proslavery Biblical passages, found in both Old and New Testaments.

1. Genesis 9:25-27, for the sin of Ham, who exposed his father Noah’s nakedness, Ham’s descendants through his Son Canaan were to be enslaved by descendants of Noah’s other sons.
2. Genesis 17:2, God sanctioned and regulated the slavery system of the patriarch Abraham, father of all believers.
3. Deuteronomy 20:10-11, God sanctioned the enslavement of Israel’s enemies.
4. 1 Corinthians 7:21, while an enslaved Christian may welcome emancipation, that the enslaved should not chafe if emancipation is not given.
5. Romans 13:1, 7, the Apostle Paul urged Christian believers to conform to the Roman imperial system, which practiced a harsh form of slavery.
6. Colossians 3:22, 4:1, The Apostle regulated the enslaver-enslaved relationship, but did not question it.
7. 1 Timothy 6:1-2, the apostle explicitly taught that the conversion of the enslaved did not provide cause for even Christian enslavers to emancipate those enslaved Christians.⁶¹

White theology coupled with the question of race in antebellum America indicates that the system of enslavement in America was morally bankrupt and that the nation must undergo a radical evaluation of ideals and values. It also signals that, in principle, slavery contributed to the moral failure of Christian America and American Christianity, equally. The French philosopher Diderot, in his anti-slave trade article and argument against the institution of slavery, correspondingly, which he co-published with Alembert in the first modern encyclopedia (*Encyclopedie*, 1751-77), denounces, "If a trade of this sort can be justified by some principle of morals, there is no crime, however atrocious, that one could not legitimate."⁶² When a particular theological expression articulates such a conviction or a theological system promotes such as a (human) practice, it invites us to assess the seriousness of its message and its relevance to human flourishing. Cone, however, reminds us, "The black church in America was founded on the belief that God condemned slavery and that Christian freedom meant political emancipation."⁶³ How can a society flourish when one group progresses and the other group suffers oppression and exploitation and is deprived of its goods?

Incontestably, human suffering is too urgent in our contemporary times, and the omnipresence of evil in our cities and the modern world threatens every area of human existence for theologians to focus exclusively on theological jargons of Christian theology and to be disengaged with the realities of the moment. The fragility of human life, the uncertainty of the present, and the vacillation of future possibilities should be sufficient reasons for theology to be the most relevant guide to our existential troubles and challenges. It is critical for Christian religious thinkers to use their craft aptly to foster hope and healing. About this pivotal matter, Cone could write convincingly, "With clever theological sophistication, white theologians defined the discipline of theology in the light of the problem of the unbelievers (i.e., the question of the relationship of faith and reason) and thus unrelated to the problem of slavery and racism."⁶⁴ White theologians do not question the system that produces the subjugation and abuse of the poor and people of color and the culture of despair that engenders hostility in society. Human domination is taken for granted in American theological inquiry, resulting in a theology that is incapable to respond adequately to the needs of the people and the demise of American civilization.

The issue at stake is that American white theologians have turned off the economic, political, or social concern at will in most human contexts, as if it were not part of their lifeblood.⁶⁵ The pressing matter is that human suffering should be interpreted as a profound theological problem, and theologians must provide hope to the abused, the exploited, and the damned; theologians must speak of God's liberating presence to the common people in society. Likewise, they must confront the moral matters of their culture and this age. Christian theology must provide an adequate answer to individuals trapped in the socio-economic difficulties and political uncertainties in society.

Finally, Cone makes a resounding case for moral and ethical reform within American Christianity and the practices of American churches. He declares, “If white Protestant churches failed to be a beacon of leadership in America’s racial crisis, part of the responsibility for the failure was due to the way its leading religious spokespersons ignored race in their interpretation of the Christian faith.”⁶⁶ To put it simply, weak churches may have devastating effects on the life of the people in society. Evangelical historian Mark Noll, who traces the causes associated with Christianity in the mid-nineteenth century American culture, writes observably, “One momentous by-product of religious expansion was the fact that the institutional life of the major Protestant churches worked an echoing effect on the body politic.”⁶⁷

In his acclaimed text, *Theology in America*, historian E. Brooks Holifield highlights some of the major shortcomings associated with White American theology including the inability of white theologians to mobilize the American people toward better race relations (i.e., unity and reconciliation) and to transcend the cultural pitfalls and political differences between white and Black Christians. These concerns are thus followed: (1) “the theological impasse meant that theology could no longer articulate the moral vision that held that culture together;”⁶⁸ (2) for others, theology is unable “to unite Americans or to help them transcend the pull of economic and political interests;”⁶⁹ and finally, (3) “The cultural language that supposedly united Americans proved itself able to contribute even more forcefully to their division.”⁷⁰ What should then be the task of theology in the life of the church and in culture in the twenty-first century?

The Task of Christian Theology

One of the major theological questions in Western theological tradition has been the concern for proper theological method and structure. Many theologians trained in the Western theological canon have focused their theological analysis on abstract ideas when attempting to elaborate on the major Christian doctrines of divine revelation, God (theology proper), the Word of God, humanity (anthropology), sin (hamartiology), Jesus Christ (Christology), the church (ecclesiology), the Holy Spirit (pneumatology), and the doctrine of the last days (eschatology). Theologians have not arrived at a consensus on the underlying role of Christian theology.

Equally, various propositions about the task of Christian theology in the church and society that have been suggested often conflict each other. For example, Reinhold Niebuhr construes the chief role of theology as “an effort to construct a rational and systematic view of life out of the various and sometimes contradictory myths which are associated with a single religious tradition.”⁷¹ In the introductory page of his well-praised *Systematic Theology (Volume One)*, Paul Tillich establishes a strong rapport between theology and the life of the church; he interprets theology as a function of the Christian church, that is, theological conversations must emerge from the practices and experiences of the people of God, and the basic task of theology is to respond satisfactorily to the needs of the church.⁷² Hence, theology is simply “the statement of the truth of the Christian message and the interpretation of this truth for every new generation.”⁷³

The content, shape, and method of theological discourse is created within the ideological worldview of the given culture as well as in the socio-political and the historico-cultural trajectories of the associated generation. Karl Barth in *Church Dogmatics* articulates a similar perspective that Christian theology is an impossible enterprise without the active participation and experience of humanity and that divine revelation enlists men and women into service. The idea of theology as service in Barth is central in Cone's theological development; the notion denotes that God has chosen the church in society to be a community that fosters healing, care, comfort, and hospitality and that "the work of theology is thus wholly related to the task of the Church which is that of every Christian."⁷⁴ Therefore, divine revelation has called followers of Christ to work collaboratively to restore the broken humanity and to integrate men and women into the beloved community of Christ Jesus toward a better humanity, as God himself continues to effect renovation in society through the cooperation and submission of his ambassadors (the church as people of God) in the world.

Moreover, in *Towards Christian Political Ethics*, Liberation theologian Jose Miguez Bonino advises that the engaged theologian should carefully examine the dialectic of praxis and theory in theological analysis, and the end of such endeavor is not to produce a perfect harmonization between these two poles; "on the contrary, instead of a balanced harmony we must think in terms of two poles that challenge each other, making change and movement possible."⁷⁵ For Bonino, human action should challenge the theory that has informed it, and human thought should drive action to new explorations; to put it another way, the reality individuals create should transform human (their) action, and action is oriented toward and by that reality.⁷⁶

From this vantage point, the conscious theologian should be mindful that every human act has both a social and political content and that "a theology of the historico-political development of man is only possible in so far as it relates to an ethic of change, and in so far it accepts political action as a means of transforming society."⁷⁷ In the words of Clodovis Boff, Black and Liberation theologies (i.e., Womanist, Feminist, Third World, Postcolonial, indigenous) call for "a positive, contextual, and concrete knowledge of society...the theology of liberation pleads for a reading of scripture in continual mindfulness of and orientation to concrete challenges and problems...it appears as a demand of the praxis of faith, to the extent that this faith seeks to be incarnate."⁷⁸

In addition, James Cone and the religious thinkers who labor from liberationist and constructive theological angles find some serious shortcomings within the contours and workings of the Western theological canon; in the words of Cone:

There is no “abstract” revelation, independent of human experience, to which theologians can appeal for evidence of what they say about the gospel. God meets us in the human situation, not as an idea or concept that is self-evidently true. God encounters us in the human condition as the liberator of the poor and the weak, empowering them to fight for freedom because they were made for it. Revelation as the word of God, witnessed in scripture and defined by the creed and dogmas of Western Christianity, is too limiting to serve as an adequate way of doing theology today.⁷⁹

Cone has advanced that the goal of Christian theology, whether confessional or public theology, is “the liberation of man”⁸⁰ and woman. By providing a succinct definition of the discipline, he asserts clearly, “Theology is not only 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.”⁸¹ Cone questions the validity and relevance of Western theological tradition that often seeks to supply “the rational justification of religious belief in a scientific and technological world that has no use for God”⁸² while ignoring the problems of this age and the urgent care for the poor in society. With personal conviction, he declares unapologetically, “When I thought about the long history of Black suffering and the long silence of white theologians in its regard, I could not always control my pen or my tongue. I did not feel that I should in any way be accountable to white theologians or their cultural etiquette.”⁸³ Understandably, Cone’s theology is a political theology that is concerned primarily with the personhood and dignity of Black people. Critics often find shortcomings in Cone’s Negritudinist theology and the absence of theo-political analysis on the economic disfranchisement of the poor and Black people.

Cone’s political theology has two dimensions: the human aspect and the political consciousness coupled with social action. He construes the role of liberation theology as a revolutionary force in society that should not accept the “established order;” it must disturb it, alter its content, and deracinate its unjust structures. To put it simply, “such a political theology has to desacralize not only nature, but all the institutions of the status quo. It also has to put the new institutions brought about by change in a human perspective. It must never accept the ethics of the ‘establishment.’”⁸⁴ The great impetus of Cone’s theological corpus is human flourishing and wholistic shalom in society, the welfare and freedom of the poor and the sweeping renovation of societal powers and forces in which they live.

Theology and the Quest for Human Flourishing

Theology must always be an on-going exercise as time changes and society evolves for good or bad. The theological task emerged from “the covenant community with the sole purpose of making the gospel meaningful to the times in which men live.”⁸⁵

The essence of the Gospel message is unchanged, and it remains the same regardless of the crisis of the time; nonetheless, as Cone proposes, “every generation is confronted with new problems, and the gospel must be brought to bear on them. Thus, the task of theology is to show what the changeless gospel means in each new situation.”⁸⁶ However, since theology is always contextual and the message of the Gospel is transcultural and transracial, Christian theology, shaped by the redemptive news of Christ, must respond directly to the Black condition in America and the living and economic situations of the vulnerable in their respective country—especially individuals in the developing world living under the constant threat and ruse of American-European imperialism and neo-colonial and economic global capitalism. Theologians should not ignore the real nature of society—the rapport between infrastructure and superstructure, the socioeconomic determinations, cultural and political ideologies, the nature of the state—and the ways that social dynamics have shaped theological language and exposition, as well as theological praxis.⁸⁷

Toward the quest for human flourishing, Christian theologians must participate enthusiastically in public advocacy and render satisfactory civic service toward the common good. Because the Gospel is about human liberation, salvation, and optimism, when the oppressed of the world “begin to hear Jesus’ message as contemporaneous with their life situation, they will quickly recognize that ‘political hermeneutics of the gospel.’⁸⁸ Christianity becomes for them a religion of protest against the suffering and affliction of man,”⁸⁹ which Jesus came to eradicate. This Jesus now dwells in the community of the world’s poor, the afflicted, and the outcast who lodge in the ghetto of human despair and labyrinth of death; correspondingly, Jesus the Liberator lives among the postcolonial exploited individuals and families which American military forces and European interventionist powers have pushed in the margins of society. Cone teaches us that the relevance of Jesus’ liberating message is not only good for the Black and Brown people in America; the person and work of Jesus is a life-changing experience to the orphan in the streets of Cape Town, South Africa; the widow in the shanty towns in Haiti and Jamaica; the mine worker in Ghana and Kenya; the sugar cane workers in the sugar industry in Dominican Republic and Cuba; the undocumented African immigrants in the ghetto of Paris and Tel Aviv; and the single mother in the war zone in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

If we can believe the New Testament witness which proclaims Jesus as resurrected and thus active even now, then he must be alive in those very men who are struggling in the midst of misery and humiliation. If the gospel is a gospel of liberation for the oppressed, then Jesus is where the oppressed are and continues his work of liberation there. Jesus is not safely confined in the first century. He is our contemporary, proclaiming release to the captives and rebelling against all who silently accept the structures of injustice. If he is not in the ghetto, if he is not where men are living at the brink of existence, but is, rather, in the easy life of the suburbs, then the gospel is a lie.⁹⁰

On a personal level, Cone, reflecting on the tragic collective experience of Black Christians in the segregated Bearden, Arkansas in the 1950s and 1960s who came face to face with white terror and white supremacy, writes optimistically and courageously about the meaning of Jesus in their everyday life; Jesus was a trusted friend who understood their trials and tribulations in this unfriendly world. Jesus was always there, as the anchor of life, giving it meaning and purpose and bestowing hope and faith in the ultimate justice of things. Jesus was that reality who empowered Black people to know that they were not the worthless human beings that white people said they were.⁹¹

Consequently, contemporary theological reasoning must promote a Christology that empowers the weak toward self-liberation and collective agency, as well as a doctrine of Christ that boasts about the enduring presence of Jesus the Deliverer among the economically-disfranchised poor and the disadvantaged races and ethnic groups in the world. In Cone's Christology, the oppressed is always the protagonist and actor by the virtue of Jesus' intentional closeness and solidarity with them. The Christian theologian should commit to the struggle and deliverance of the underrepresented individuals and families in society; he or she must attempt to create a new theological language that prioritizes the plight of the underserved population and the historical fight of the poor for justice, equity, and rights.

In addition, in *A Black Theology of Liberation*, Cone introduces the threefold tasks of Christian theology:

1. The task of theology is to explicate 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 the being of God. Rather it is a study of God's liberating activity in the world, God's activity in behalf of the oppressed.⁹²
2. The task of Christian theology is to analyze the meaning of hope in God in such a way that the oppressed community of a given society will risk all for earthly freedom, a freedom made possible in the resurrection of Jesus. The language of theology challenges societal structures because it is inseparable from the suffering community.⁹³
3. The task of (black) theology is to analyze the nature of the gospel of Jesus Christ in the light of (the experience of the) oppressed (Black people) 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.⁹⁴

In *God of the Oppressed*, Cone articulates three complementary tasks and roles of the Christian theologian as an exegete, a teacher, and a preacher, and each function relates to his work in the church and responsibility in society:

1. The task of the theologian, as a member of the people of God, is to clarify what the Church believes and does in relation to its participation in God's liberating work in the world. In doing this work, the theologian acts in the roles of exegete, prophet, teacher, preacher, and philosopher.⁹⁵
2. The task of the theologian is to probe the depths of Scripture exegetically for the purpose of relating that message to human existence...this task involves, as Abraham Heschel said, the "exegesis of existence from a divine perspective," disclosing that God is not indifferent to suffering and not patient with cruelty and falsehood.⁹⁶
3. The task of theology is to show the significance of the oppressed's struggle against inhuman powers, relating the people's struggle to God's intention to set them free. Theologians must make the gospel clear in a particular social context so that God's people will know that their struggle for freedom is God's struggle too.⁹⁷

On the other hand, he interprets the discipline of theology as a cross-cultural dialogue and intellectual activity in which the theologian engages energetically the lived-worlds and lived-experiences of the people living in the periphery of postcolonial nation-states; as he notes below:

I am convinced that no one should claim to be doing Christian theology today without making the liberation of the Third World from the exploitation of the First World and the Second World a central aspect of its purpose. There is an interconnectedness of all humanity that makes the freedom of one people dependent upon the liberation of all.⁹⁸

Liberation theology as a subset of Biblical theology allows the Christian thinker or theologian to always be in connection with the subject and object of his or her inquiry. Biblical theology as the theology that liberates and connects with the poor calls for genuine relationship with the community of faith. One cannot work toward the integral liberation of the poor and the dispirited while separating oneself from their real presence or social reality. Liberation theology is a theology of proximity, interconnectedness, and relationship. It is plausible for Cone to assume, "Theology is always done for particular times and places and addressed to a specific audience. This is true whether theologians acknowledge it or not. Although God is the intended subject of theology, God does not do theology, *human beings do theology*."⁹⁹ Elsewhere, he clarifies that "if theology is to be relevant to the human condition which created it, it must relate itself to the questions which arise out of the community responsible for its reason for being."¹⁰⁰ Because human liberation is the telos of Christian theology, Cone could define the discipline of theology as *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*.

This means that its sole reason for existence is to put into ordered speech the meaning of God's activity in the world, so that the community of the oppressed will recognize that its inner thrust for liberation is not only *consistent with* the gospel but is the gospel of Jesus Christ. There can be no Christian theology that is not identified unreservedly with those who are humiliated and abused. In fact, theology ceases to be a theology of the gospel when it fails to arise out of the community of the oppressed.¹⁰¹

Theology and Social Activism

In the most fundamental Barthian dialectics, Cone's theology begins with God's revelation to the needs of humanity and maintains that theological inquiry should not start from human needs to God. Therefore, the ethos of the incarnation is that God has intervened in the human situation as to deliver humanity from the predicament of sin and human oppression.¹⁰² The God of the Bible, he contends, "stands against the culture of the oppressors"¹⁰³ and social injustice and inequality that often delay human flourishing and the common good. To borrow a central principle from the Latin American Theology of Liberation, "Protestant theology needs to recover not the one history, but the one just God as the radical counterforce of all unjust history,"¹⁰⁴ including the history of women's oppression and abuse in the church and in society. Further, Cone also suggests that theology should address contemporary problems of sexism in the church, classism in society, the downsides of capitalism and globalization, and the exploitation of the developing nations by the developed nations. Correspondingly, the task of Christian theology today is to denounce the quandary of poverty, world hunger, colonialism, human rights abuse, and the monopoly capitalism of the United States and the (Western) European nations in Latin America, Africa, the Caribbean, and Asia.¹⁰⁵

Concerning the question of sexism in Christian churches, Cone believes that "sexism dehumanizes and kills, and it must be fought on every front... Anyone who claims to be fighting against the problem of oppression and does not analyze the exploitive role of capitalism is either naïve or an agent of the enemies of freedom."¹⁰⁶ Therefore, the critical theologian must not analyze the race question apart from the effects of capitalism on race, class, and gender; racism, classism, sexism, and capitalism are the worst antagonists of human deliverance and self-determination. Sexism postpones women's freedom and agency and undermines Christian women's use of their gifts in the church to empower the community of faith.

Particularly, as much as racism is America's original sin that has affected millions of American poor and specifically the Black and Brown (oppressed) population, Cone reckons that American theologians should examine the human condition and not simply the issue of American racism. It is from this viewpoint that he could make this declaration: "We must the not allow racial solidarity to distort the truth.

Without class analysis, a global understanding of oppression will be distorted and its domestic manifestations seriously misrepresented.”¹⁰⁷ While racial solidarity can be effective at certain moments of struggle, human unity is the transcendent value that outdoes the problem of race, sexism, and classism in the church and society.

Cone’s stated claim above is justified in that it is necessary for the Christian theologian to be both a nationally and internationally-minded and culturally and transculturally-concerned thinker as the issues he or she analyzes engulf the human condition in the world.

[Theologians] must be concerned with the quality of human life not only in the ghettos of American cities but also in Africa, Asia and Latin America. Since humanity is one, one cannot be isolated into racial and national groups, there will be no freedom for anyone until there is freedom for all. This means we must enlarge our vision by connecting it with that of other oppressed so that together all the victims of the world might take charge of their history for the creation of a new humanity...Liberation knows no color bar; the very nature of the gospel is universalism, i.e., a liberation that embraces the whole of humanity.¹⁰⁸

The clarion call for contemporary Christian theology is to be a theology for the people and from the people. Theology from below should never be the articulation of theoretical ideas that can’t reach the ear of the poor and the uneducated and are inaccessible to their understanding. The theology of tomorrow must remain true to its never-ending search for comprehensive justice and steadfast commitment to the good of the poor, the orphan, the widow, the abused, the victim, and the exploited. The global perspective in theology would enable the engaged Christian thinker to take seriously the struggles of the troubled population in his or her own country and be proactive about the cries for justice from the lips of mistreated racial and ethnic groups in other parts of the world. Within this line of reasoning, Cone offers some words of wisdom and exhortation:

The Christian theologian, therefore, is one whose hermeneutical consciousness for an interpretation of the gospel is defined by the oppressed people’s struggle of freedom, seeking to adhere to the delicate balance of social existence and divine revelation. In this situation, the theologian must accept the burden and the risk laid upon him or her by both social existence and divine revelation, realizing that they must be approached dialectically, and thus their exact relationship cannot be solved once and for all time.¹⁰⁹

Evidently, Christian theology is a commentary on the life and experience of the church in relation to God and society; it is a conscious analysis on the daily interaction of the community of faith. Theology done for the sake of the church must empower the church as the people of God to identify with the whole of people's misery and suffering, not what they suffered yesterday and may know tomorrow, but the suffering that they are experiencing at the moment; as Bigo warns us, "A Christian begins at that point and always comes back to it for two reasons: misery goes on propagating itself without end and it reappears in forms ever new."¹¹⁰ Therefore, the work of the Church in doing acts of compassion and service and in demonstrating the love of God in Christ through hospitality (that is welcoming the stranger, the unknown, and the immigrant), feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting the prisoner, and caring for the orphan and widow does not have an end. The Church's duty in improving the human condition in society and transforming people's lives for better through serving, loving, and connecting people in its community is the greatest manifestation of divine hospitality, love, and justice in public.

The Vocation of the Church Today

Cone's ecclesiology is an important category in his theological corpus, which he connects with the theme of human liberation and human flourishing. Hence, we must begin with Cone's concept of the church before we undertake the task of exploring the vocation of the church in contemporary society. Cone advances the proposition that the church consists of a new people which the New Testament calls the *ekklesia* (church). Like the people of Old Israel, they are called into being by God himself—to be his agent in this world until Christ's second coming. Unlike Old Israel, their membership is not limited by ethnic or political boundaries but includes all who respond in faith to the redemptive act of God in Christ with a willingness to share in God's creative activity in the world. Its sole purpose for being is to be a visible manifestation of God's work in the affairs of men. The Church, then, consists of people who have been seized by the Holy Spirit and who have the determination to live as if all depends on God. It has no will of its own, only God's will; it has no duty of its own, only God's duty. Its existence is grounded in God.¹¹¹

His proposal about the vocation of the church in the world is linked to God's initial purpose in Christ Jesus to call out an inclusive community into existence to forge a new human race empowered by the Spirit of God. For Cone, the church as God's redeemed people exists in society to carry out God's sovereign desires and objectives—which may include the trinitarian ministry of reconciliation, unity, fellowship, and peace. Cone provides further analysis about the vocation of the church by accentuating its philosophy of inclusion, democratic values, non-discriminatory character, and its ecumenical nature:

The Church of Christ is not bounded by standards of race, class, or occupation. It is not a building or an institution. It is not determined by bishops, priests, or ministers as these terms are used in their contemporary sense. Rather, the Church is God's suffering people. It is that grouping of men who take seriously the words of Jesus: "Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account" (Matt. 5:31). The call of God constitutes the Church, and it is a call to suffering.¹¹²

The inclusive content of Cone's ecclesiology intends to be a counter response to white American ecclesiology that is racially selective and whose foundation is built on the exclusion of non-white Christian members of other races and ethnic groups. White churches in America are bound both by race and class, cultural ideologies and political consciousness. In his important work, *King and Malcolm and America*, Cone substantiates his thesis that Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, "two master critics of American Christianity," believed that racism is a fundamental characteristic of American Christianity and society.¹¹³ King once said, "Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in Christian America" and that the church fails to be a true witness of the message of the Gospel in the public sphere. King challenged White American Christians to embody the Gospel in their quotidian dealings with Black people because of his conviction that God is not a color-blind deity; the universal message of the Gospel is transracial and transcultural, but contextual, ethnically sensitive. He proclaimed that God created all people in his image to be one human family; before God, we are brothers and sisters to one another, and we are one race. For King, the tragic failure of the White church in America is its intentional ignorance and practice of racism and equally its implicit support of the power-structure of the oppressive state. King sustained the notion that although racism was the fundamental moral dilemma in the American society, Black and White American Christians should not ignore it and concurrently maintain their Christian identity and announce the message of reconciliation, unity, and the Gospel of peace.¹¹⁴ In addition for Malcolm, as Cone has argued:

The public meaning of Christianity remained almost exclusively identified with the cultural values of white Americans and Europeans...Malcolm's race critique of Christianity is as important for genuine Christian living in the world as Marx's class critique. In clear and forceful language, Malcolm's life and thought tell us about the great difference between Christianity as preached and taught, on the one hand, and about the practice of white and black Christians in their communities, on the other.¹¹⁵

Accordingly, what contemporary American churches and Christians should learn from both King and Malcolm about public Christianity include their fierce activism to challenge America's inequality and injustice system and their robust campaigns against the racist structure of American Christianity. Both Malcolm and King "supposedly" believed that Christians should be the guiding conscience of this nation. Disappointedly, that was not true and always the case in their America. The white church has also failed King and Malcolm's moral expectations.

In his harsh criticisms of the "White Church" in America, Cone has consistently demonstrated that the White church is intrinsically a racialized-and-power-hungry institution that has fallen from grace and short of the New Testament vision of the *ekklesia* of God.

If the real Church is the people of God, whose primary task is that of being Christ to the world by proclaiming the message of the gospel (*kerygma*), by rendering services of liberation (*diakonia*) and by being itself a manifestation of the nature of the new society (*koinonia*), then the empirical institutionalized white church has failed on all counts. It certainly has not rendered services of reconciliation to the poor. Rather, it illustrates the values of a sick society which oppresses the poor.¹¹⁶

Furthermore, he laments with great sorrow and grief that

The white church has not merely failed to render services to the poor, but has failed miserably in being a visible manifestation to the word of God's intention for humanity and in proclaiming the gospel to the world. It seems that the white church is not God's redemptive agent but, rather, an agent of the old society. It fails to create an atmosphere of radical obedience to Christ...The society is falling apart for want of moral leadership and moral example, but the white church passes innocuously pious resolutions and waits to be congratulated.¹¹⁷

While we have highlighted in previous analysis Cone's criticisms toward the White church in America, this same Cone is calling upon the Black Church to be an active force and revolutionary church in society that will do in practice what is theologically confessed or preached. The Black Church, according to Cone's assessment, does not mobilize its people for social justice and to care for the Black poor and economically-disadvantaged Americans:

Our church is an impostor, because we no longer believe the gospel we proclaim. There is a credibility gap between what we say and what we do. While we may preach sermons that affirm the church's interests in the poor and the downtrodden, what we actually do shows that we are committed to the "American way of life," in which the rich are given privileged positions power in shaping the life and activity of the church and the poor are virtually ignored. As a rule, the church's behavior toward the poor is very similar to the society at large: The poor are charity cases.¹¹⁸

At this juncture, Cone condemns both the white and Black churches/christianities in their negligence to engage in transformative projects of social justice and integral liberation, to make a *preferential option for the poor and the disadvantaged*, and to alter their present situation toward one that is more humane, optimistic, and sustaining. This could be well due to the absence of a strong theological conviction, what we may call "an aggressive justice theology system;" the latter pertains to the lack of robust commitment of these American churches to actualize in the practical sense what the people of God have traditionally professed theologically and ethically.

The Role of Theology in the Church

Christian theology must not only commit to peace and justice in society. Theology in the church should propose practical and concrete ways for doing effective pastoral ministry and fulfilling the public role of the church toward a fuller humanization of life. On a parallel note, theology in the life of the church should help mature the laity by stressing the importance of incarnating the professed faith in the reality of social and political conflict.¹¹⁹ On the other hand, theologian Leonardo Boff laments that "there are practices that limit basic human rights, justified by their corresponding theological theories."¹²⁰ Theological education and praxis in the life of the church thus must promote, sustain, and guarantee human flourishing, deliverance, mutuality, reciprocity, interdependence, fraternity, and service; "these are the imperatives that foster our hope and lead us to shape practices that strive toward those ideals."¹²¹

Cone places great emphasis on the experience of *the community of the oppressed* as the source of Christian theology and ecclesiology because "God is the God *of* and *for* those who labor and are over laden."¹²² Cone goes on to bring greater clarity on the role of theology in the life of the church and its interface with Scripture:

What is certain is that the theologian brings to the scripture the perspective of a community. Ideally, the concern of that community is consistent with the concern of the community that gave us the scriptures. It is the task of theology to keep these two communities (biblical and contemporary) in constant tension in order that we may be able to speak meaningfully about God.¹²³

His reasoning is that the biblical communities that produced the Scriptures should shape contemporary churches' practices and values; reciprocally, the experiences and realities of today's churches impact scriptural interpretation and the relevance of the Bible in those congregations. The South African Liberation theologian Itumeleng J. Mosala advises that we should cultivate a healthy attitude toward the biblical texts and construes them as "ideological products of social systems and of the configurations of social relations internal to these systems."¹²⁴ Cone underscores that "the real Church of Christ is that grouping which identifies with the suffering of the poor by becoming one with them."¹²⁵ How does Cone conceive the function of theology in the life of the church? In what ways should theology inform the activities and doings of the church? According to Cone, theology is a corrective mechanism to prevent the church from committing grave sins—moral, cultural, economic, political, etc., as theology itself "functions within the Church. Its task is to make sure that the 'church' is the Church."¹²⁶

In other words, theology is a (symbolic) purifier for the church, and its role is to fortify the redemptive mission of the church by declaring and acting out "the gospel it has received."¹²⁷ Christian theology has a central responsibility to continually examine and reexamine "the proclamation of the Church of Jesus Christ."¹²⁸ Because the church is in the world and must engage it perpetually, the role of theology, then, "is to serve the need of the Church"¹²⁹ as the church should become "worldly church theology." By this concept, Cone insists that the thrust of Christian theology, in relations to its ecclesiastical practices and traditions, is to make sure that the Church is in the world and its word and deed are harmonious with Jesus Christ. It must make sure that the Church's language about God is relevant to every new generation and its problems. It is for this reason that the definitive theological treatise can never be written. Every generation has its own problems, as does every nation. Theology is not, then, an intellectual exercise but a worldly risk.¹³⁰

The shortcoming of American theology is and has been its failure to guide adequately the church in accomplishing its divinely-appointed mission in society, that is by truly being the catalyst of change and the defender of the poor and the oppressed. Cone laments that churches in America have not produced a theology of risk to confront this culture at risk associated with the actuality of the poor.

American theology has failed to take that worldly risk. It has ignored its domestic problems on race. It has not called the Church to be involved in confronting this society with the meaning of the Kingdom in the light of Christ... The lack of a relevant, risky theological statement suggests that theologians, like others, are unable to free themselves from the structures of this society.¹³¹

Within the same logic, he believes that theological education in America has also been tragically influenced by this said theological tradition above. He calls upon theologians to develop a theology of risk as a possible hope to engage the world of uncertainty and despair. In this respect, theological schools and seminaries in the United States have not only failed the church, they also failed the church's poor and the disfranchised Christians. Cone is more specific that the white curriculum of religious education or theological schools in the United States has ignored the Black experience in history and the contributions of Black religious scholars and theologians in the discipline of theology and biblical studies.

The seminaries in America are probably the most obvious sign of the irrelevance of theology to life. Their initiative in responding to the crisis of black people in America is virtually unnoticeable. Their curriculum generally is designed for young white men and women who are preparing to serve all-white churches...Most seminaries still have no courses in black church history and their faculties and administrators are largely white. This alone gives support of the racist assumption that blacks are unimportant.¹³²

Therefore, ineffective churches could be construed as a by-product of a deficient theological education that is selective, exclusive, and racially-biased. As Cone has remarked, "For the sickness of the Church in America is intimately involved with the bankruptcy of American theology."¹³³ Cone justifies this claim by providing three examples. First, "When the Church fails to live up to its appointed mission, it means that theology is partly responsible. Therefore, it is impossible to criticize the Church and its lack of relevancy without criticizing theology for its failure to perform its function."¹³⁴ Second, when the Church fails in its appointed task to glorify God and empower the weak, it would accomplish its own selfish agenda and becomes subservient to other cultural forces that counter the Gospel of liberation.

Third, in the intriguing text titled *The Good Society*, the authors suggest that contemporary churches in America have lost their moral vision and sense of social mission due to observable theological symptoms; in particular, they maintain, "Mainline Protestant theology fails to map a course for socially concerned Christians, to move them to follow it, and to guide them along it because it fails to ring true to their actual experience of social life."¹³⁵ Perhaps one of the contributing factors to this bankrupt nature of contemporary churches is that current theological discourses do not emerge from the experience of the people of God, and thus, the conveyed messages of theologians do not connect with the (ordinary) people in the church.

Contemporary theological discourses should empower the people in the church to serve and care for one another, practice hospitality to strangers, and care for the poor and the socially-disadvantaged and the economically-disfranchised. In the same line of thought, contemporary theological thought should help churches to cast new vision for overcoming poverty, hunger, and infant mortality in contemporary society.

Orlando E. Costas employs the phrase the “missionary-liberation issue” of theology to designate especially the all-encompassing activities of the church.¹³⁶ Toward this goal, the practices of contemporary churches would be grounded on the ethic of Jesus, which is the realization and telos of prophetic religion and the kingdom of God on earth. Complementarily, Vuyani Vellem calls for the articulation of a vigorous Prophetic Theology in which the Christian theologian can make use of “other modes of moral discourse so as to include rational, apologetic modes of argumentation between prophets and policy makers in public life.”¹³⁷

Envisioning the Church of Tomorrow

The goal of the church in Cone’s understanding is to create a new community of freedom and new humanism in which the poor could experience their full potential in life. Cone construes the true role of the church as a faithful witness to God’s kindness and emancipating movement in society; as he declares firmly, “If the church is to remain faithful to its Lord, it must make a decisive break with the structure of this society by launching a vehement attack on the evils of racism in all forms. It must become prophetic, demanding a radical change in the interlocking structures of this society.”¹³⁸ For example, in the context of American racism, Cone boldly declares that

The White structure of this American society, personified in every racist, must be at least part of the New Testament meant by the demonic forces.... these powers can get hold of a man’s total being and control his life to such a degree that he is incapable of distinguishing himself from the alien power. This seems to be what has happened to white racism in America. It is a part of the spirit of the age, the ethos of the culture, so embedded in the social, economic, and political structure that white society is incapable of knowing its destructive nature.¹³⁹

The proper response to the various cultural and political expressions of “the demonic forces of white racism,” according to Cone, is to resist them and fight their allies in society. Cone interprets the church as a new community that actively participates in Christ’s liberating work in history; as a result, the church should never endorse public policies and ‘law and order that causes suffering or the exploitation of individuals.¹⁴⁰ Rather, the Christian church should be the voice of reason in society. Assman proposes that followers of Christ need to see the Church not just as a place for spiritual healing and reformation but “as an institution of social criticism, an institution of the critical freedom of faith.”¹⁴¹

Moreover, Cone highlights three major functions of the Church, as observed in the New Testament: preaching (*kerygma*), service (*diakonia*), and fellowship (*koinonia*):¹⁴²

1. First, it proclaims the reality of divine liberation. This is what the New Testament calls preaching the gospel. The gospel is the proclamation of God's liberation as revealed in the event of Jesus *and* the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. It is not possible to receive the good news of freedom and keep it to ourselves; it must be told to the whole world.
2. Secondly, the church not only proclaims the good news of freedom, it actively shares in the liberation struggle. Though the battle against evil has been won, old rulers pretend that they are still in power...The function of the church is to remind them that they are no longer in power...The church is the community that lives on the basis of the radical demands of the gospel by making the gospel message a social, economic, and political reality. It has the courage to take the risk, knowing that, at this early state, it lives in a society that refuses to believe the gospel message. It thus goes against the grain of societal existence because its sole aim is to share with Jesus Christ in his liberating activity.
3. Thirdly, the church as a fellowship is a visible manifestation that the gospel is a reality. If the church is not free, if it is a distorted representation of the irruption of God's kingdom, if it lives according to the old order (as it usually has), then no one will believe its message.¹⁴³

Cone advances his claim forward by placing accent on the international dimension of the work of the church as the people of God partake in the mission of God in all cultures; the God-church joint-partnership places "the church squarely in the context of the world. Its existence is inseparable from worldly involvement."¹⁴⁴ As the Head of the Church, the mission of Christ in the world is to liberate those in chains, restore the brokenhearted, reinstate the outcast into the beloved community, and deliver hope to the hopeless. Ultimately, the great hope of Christianity is that Jesus Christ will eradicate death and evil in the world.

Because the church knows that the world is where human beings are dehumanized, it can neither retreat from the world nor embrace it. Retreating is tantamount to a denial of its calling to share in divine liberation. It is a complete misunderstanding of the Christ-event, which demands radical, worldly involvement in behalf of the oppressed.¹⁴⁵

Arguably, the church in action must continue maintaining a constant presence among the weak, the vulnerable, and the disfranchised in society. As Cone interprets:

If the white and black churches do not represent Christ's redemptive work in the world, where then is Christ's church to be found? As always, his church is where wounds are being healed and chains are being struck off. It does not matter in the least whether the community of liberators designate their work as Christ's own work. What is important is that the oppressed are being liberated.¹⁴⁶

The Christian church in America looks too much like the American culture and is entrapped in American political games. It needs to exit from this cultural predicament, the political Babylon of this age. Yet, the Christian church should be an engaged and dynamic church by responding creatively and constructively to the human condition and in particular to "the problems which are unique to this country."¹⁴⁷ The American Church should be a servant to the culture by relating the transforming impact of the Gospel to life situations of individuals and families and by addressing the cultural, economic, political, and social factors that affect their daily lives.

If the central message of the church is the proclamation of the good news of God's reign, peace, and liberation through Jesus Christ and by the empowering presence of the Holy Spirit, this same message should be the center of the church's missionary project in the world. The goal of humanization should be an integral part of the church's missionary endeavor, which should advance the cause for "social reform, health, education, welfare, relief, technology, and development"¹⁴⁸—especially in the underserved and developing nations.

Because the message the church announces is about God's Kingdom in the world, and human liberation, it is important for the church to help create communities of freedom and places of healing in society by challenging structures of human oppression and systems of human degradation. Toward this end, the church will be true to its vocation in fostering human flourishing and enhancing human freedom.¹⁴⁹ The duty of the church of today and tomorrow entails the clarion call for various Christian communities and churches to join hands together to emancipate our own community from its own internal destructiveness so that we will be free to fight against oppression in the larger society. Accordingly, the test of the authenticity of our commitment to freedom is found not only in what we say about freedom generally, but in what we do about the liberation of victims within our community.¹⁵⁰

The Prophetic and Postcolonial Church

In the context of global Christianity in the developing world and postcolonial nations, new postcolonial congregations must be formed to reflect the indigenous culture and the religious habitus of the people, not to be a replica of American and Western church practices. Non-Anglo Christian theologians and parishioners have a vital role to play in the urgent project of decolonizing Christian churches in their land; likewise, they must create new expressions of Christian piety that is relevant to their postcolonial condition and a decolonized faith that sustains the values and identity and the cultural heritage of their people. They also have a tremendous charge to decolonize the imported ecclesiastical rituals of Western Christianity in their respective culture and correspondingly to deracinate the irrelevant Western values embedded in Christian tradition in their own postcolonial context. Toward this aim, non-Anglo Christian thinkers and clergy would be able to produce a veritable decolonial faith of indigenous agency and determination that is true to their cultural identity in Christ as well as to their religious worldview compatible with the Christian religion.

The vocation of the (postcolonial) church in the twentieth-first century should also include a robust campaign toward better social justice theology, equitable forms of economic fairness, and the alleviation of poverty and hunger in society. Correspondingly, the church should commit its resources and power to constructive social actions contributing to healthy and productive individuals and families in society; this could be done in the church's relentless support of government-sponsored programs and uplift projects to ameliorate the condition of the unfortunate and economically-challenged people.¹⁵¹ As previously noted, the church as a teacher of the nation's moral conscience of right and wrong, and the protector of the poor, should encourage individual men and women to keep their promises to each other and stay close to a spouse in moments of sickness and health; to raise morally-responsible children and compassionate future citizens; to reach out to the hungry; to respect the rights of others; and to offer hospitality to strangers and immigrants.¹⁵² These propositions represent some of the prophetic roles of the church in the twentieth-first century global culture. A prophetic church is a church in emancipative action and a revitalizing Christian community in which its members assume their leadership role in transforming the culture of oppression and despair into a culture of optimism as well as in contributing to the wholistic transformation of the unfortunate condition of the wretched and poor of the world. In summary, the characteristics in the paragraph below may also be inclusive to the vision and role of a prophetic church of tomorrow:

church friends could provide emotional and economic support in times of unemployment, sickness, and death...Faithful Christians not only care for the poor and call them to forsake sinful choices and destructive behavior, Christians also ask why people are poor—and advocate change. A faithful church will issue a ringing summons to the middle class and rich to transcend their self-centered materialism and change what is unjust.

A faithful church knows that great imbalances of power foster injustice and, therefore, acts to strengthen honest unions and encourage grassroots community organizing. A revitalizing Christian church—truly understanding that God measures societies by how they treat the poor and that the Bible demands economic justice for all—could provide the critical leadership necessary to dramatically reduce poverty.¹⁵³

Boff comforts the church, whose hope is in Christ and his wealth, not to be subservient to the power and authority of the state or be dependent upon the riches and resources of the dominant class that subjugates the poor and economically exploits underclass workers.

There is also another, of the Gospel, upon which the Church stands, that constantly criticizes and denounces every abuse of power and calls for respect and service. Jesus' message does not favor the domination of some over others or the curtailment of their rights; the same holds true for the Church that exists because of the message and that incarnates him in the world.¹⁵⁴

Conclusion

Contemporary churches must reckon with the idea that everything in society has a political dimension and that there's a political dimension of faith that should compel followers of Christ not to remain indifferent to the suffering of the poor and the disinherited.¹⁵⁵ Sharing possessions and gifts with the needy is a tremendous shortcoming in contemporary churches because of the absence of a genuine theology of possession and giving in today's churches. New Testament scholar Luke Timothy Johnson writes compellingly about the performative role of theology in character formation of the Church and the individual Christian toward the cultivation and embodiment of moral virtues of sharing, distribution, (alms-) giving, and hospitality:

Theology can discover and contemplate this: the sharing of possessions is an essential articulation of our faith in God and of our love for our fellow humans. But how and in what fashion that sharing is to take place is not the task of theology but of the obedience of faith...One of the reasons the Jewish ideal of almsgiving (doing justice) recommends itself to our meditation and implementation is, beyond the fact that it is communal without being communistic, beyond the fact that it deals with humans in concrete rather than ideal terms, is the simple fact that is rooted in God's commanding Word and has been subject to the most critical and searching reflection for thousands of years. Christians need only pay attention.¹⁵⁶

As previously observed in Cone's theology and ecclesiology, the marriage between theological imagination and ecclesiastical practices cannot be divorced. Theology, informed by the life of the church, must give serious consideration about the predicament and welfare of the poor and the vulnerable in society, such as the liberating message we encounter in James Cone's.

Notes

¹ Wilmore, "A Revolution Unfulfilled, but not Invalidated," in Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 147.

² Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 9.

³ Universal Declarations of Human Rights, http://www.un.org/en/udhrbook/pdf/udhr_booklet_en_web.pdf

⁴ Appiah, *The Honor Code*, 104.

⁵ Vellem, "Black Theology of liberation: A theology of life in the context of Empire," 2.

⁶ Ibid., 1.

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

⁸ Mather, *The Negro Christianized*, 2
<https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1028&context=etas> . Prior to this publication, in 1702, Mather wrote the seminal text and perhaps the greatest literary articulation of New England's intellectualism, *Magnalia Christi Americana*.

⁹ Mather, *The Negro Christianized*, 2-3.

¹⁰ Ibid., 3.

¹¹ Ibid., 12.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid., 12.

¹⁴ Ibid, 11.

¹⁵ Ibid., 15-6; also see Kendi's careful analysis of the contradiction between early American Christianity and the slavery system which it supported in colonial America, *Stamped from the Beginning*, 47-76.

¹⁶ Staffin, "A Brief and Candid Answer," in Myriam Jehlen and Michael Warner (eds) *The English Literatures of Americas*, 823.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Qtd in Kendi, *Stamped from the Beginning*, 67.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 68.

²² Holifield, *Theology in America*, 495.

²³ Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 635.

²⁴ McKivijan and Snay, *Religion and the Antebellum Debate Over Slavery*, 5-9.

²⁵ Bigo, *The Church and Third World Revolution*, 5.

²⁶ Paris, *The Social Teaching of the Black Churches*, 76.

²⁷ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 7.

²⁸ Ibid., 8.

²⁹ Boesak, *Black and Reformed*, 6.

³⁰ Ibid., 25.

³¹ Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, xiii-xiv.

³² *Ibid.*, xv.

³³ Bigo, *The Church and Third World Revolution*, 9.

³⁴ Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, xiv.

³⁵ Qtd in Burrow, *Extremist for Love*, 120.

³⁶ Niebuhr, *Moral Man & Immoral Society*, 6-7, 117.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 119.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 118.

³⁹ Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, xiv-xvi.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, xvii.

⁴¹ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 31.

⁴² Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 9.

⁴³ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 43.

⁴⁴ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 86.

⁴⁵ Johnson, *Sharing Possessions*, 116.

⁴⁶ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 18.

⁴⁷ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 14.

⁴⁸ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 6.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

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- ⁵⁰ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 43.
- ⁵¹ Ibid.
- ⁵² Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 43-4.
- ⁵³ Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, xvi-xvii.
- ⁵⁴ Ibid.
- ⁵⁵ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, xii.
- ⁵⁶ Qtd in Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis*, 51.
- ⁵⁷ Ibid.
- ⁵⁸ Qtd in Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 6.
- ⁵⁹ Torbett, *Theology and Slavery: Charles Hodge and Horace Bushnell*, 79.
- ⁶⁰ Qtd in Gutjahr, *Charles Hodge: Guardian of American Orthodoxy*, 172.
- ⁶¹ Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis*, 34-35.
- ⁶² Qtd in Appiah, *The Honor Code*, 109.
- ⁶³ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 35.
- ⁶⁴ Ibid., xiii.
- ⁶⁵ Assmann, *Theology for a Nomad Church*, 9.
- ⁶⁶ Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 57.
- ⁶⁷ Noll, *The Civil War as a Theological Crisis*, 27.
- ⁶⁸ Holifield, *Theology in America*, 503.

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- ⁶⁹ Ibid., 504.
- ⁷⁰ Ibid.
- ⁷¹ Niebuhr, *An Interpretation of Christian Ethics*, 9.
- ⁷² Tillich, *Systematic Theology. Volume One*, 3.
- ⁷³ Ibid.
- ⁷⁴ Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, 81-2.
- ⁷⁵ Bonino, *Toward a Christian Political Ethics*, 39.
- ⁷⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷⁷ Assmann, *Theology for a Nomad Church*, 33.
- ⁷⁸ Boff, *Theology and Praxis*, xxi.
- ⁷⁹ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, xiv.
- ⁸⁰ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 39.
- ⁸¹ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, xii.
- ⁸² Ibid., xiv.
- ⁸³ Ibid., xv.
- ⁸⁴ Assmann, *Theology for a Nomad Church*, 33.
- ⁸⁵ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 31.
- ⁸⁶ Ibid.
- ⁸⁷ Bonino, *Toward a Christian Political Ethics*, 37.

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- ⁸⁸ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 36.
- ⁸⁹ Ibid.
- ⁹⁰ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 38.
- ⁹¹ Cone, "Looking Back, Going Forward," 247, in Hopkins (ed), *Black Faith and Public Talk*.
- ⁹² Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 3.
- ⁹³ Ibid., 4.
- ⁹⁴ Ibid., 5.
- ⁹⁵ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 8.
- ⁹⁶ Ibid.
- ⁹⁷ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 90-91.
- ⁹⁸ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, xvii.
- ⁹⁹ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, xix.
- ¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 36.
- ¹⁰¹ Ibid., 1.
- ¹⁰² Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 90.
- ¹⁰³ Ibid., 89.
- ¹⁰⁴ Assmann, *Theology for a Nomad Church*, 7.
- ¹⁰⁵ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, xvi-xx.
- ¹⁰⁶ Ibid., xvi-xvii.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., xviii.

¹⁰⁸ Cone, “Black Theology and the Black Church,” in Cone and Wilmore, *Black Theology: A Documentary History*, 271-4.

¹⁰⁹ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 89.

¹¹⁰ Bigo, *The Church and Third World Revolution*, 10.

¹¹¹ Cone, “The White Church and Black Power,” in Cone and Wilmore, *Black Theology: A Documentary History*, 68.

¹¹² Ibid.

¹¹³ Cone, *Martin and Malcom and America*, 295.

¹¹⁴ Ibid.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 296.

¹¹⁶ Cone, “The White Church and Black Power,” in Cone and Wilmore, *Black Theology: A Documentary History*, 72-3. Cone’s theological vindication against the White American church is more pronounced in the paragraph that follows below:

It is a sad fact that the white church’s involvement in slavery and racism in America simply cannot be overstated. It not only failed to preach the kerygmatic Word but maliciously contributed to the doctrine of white supremacy. Even today all of the Church’s institutions—including its colleges and universities—reveal its white racism character. Racism has been a part of the life of the church so long that it is virtually impossible for even the “good” members to recognize the bigotry perpetuated by the church. Its morals are so immoral that even its most sensitive minds are unable to detect the inhumanity of the Church on the black people of America... To be racist is to fall outside of the Church...If there is any contemporary meaning of the Antichrist (or “the principalities and powers”), the white church seems to be a manifestation of it. It is the enemy of Christ. It was the white “Christian” church which took the lead in establishing slavery as an institution and segregation as a pattern in society by sanctioning all-white congregations.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

¹¹⁸ Cone, *Risks of Faith*, 111.

¹¹⁹ Boff, *Church: Charism and Power*, 31.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 43.

¹²¹ Ibid., 43-44.

¹²² Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 1.

¹²³ Ibid., 36.

¹²⁴ Mosala, *Biblical Hermeneutics*, 45.

¹²⁵ Cone, "The White Church and Black Power," in Cone and Wilmore, *Black Theology: A Documentary History*, 78.

¹²⁶ Ibid., 80.

¹²⁷ Ibid.

¹²⁸ Ibid.

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Cone, "The White Church and Black Power," in Cone and Wilmore, *Black Theology: A Documentary History*, 80-1.

¹³¹ Ibid., 81.

¹³² Cone, "The White Church and Black Power," in Cone and Wilmore, *Black Theology: A Documentary History*, 81.

¹³³ Ibid., 78.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 80.

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- ¹³⁵ Bellah, Madsen, and Tipton, *The Good Society*, 192-3.
- ¹³⁶ Costas, *The Church and its Mission*, 221.
- ¹³⁷ Vellem, "Interlocution and Black Theology of liberation in the 21st century: A reflection," <http://www.scielo.org.za/pdf/she/v38s1/02.pdf>
- ¹³⁸ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 2.
- ¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 41.
- ¹⁴⁰ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 130.
- ¹⁴¹ Assmann, *Theology for a Nomad Church*, 31.
- ¹⁴² Cone, "The White Church and Black Power," in Cone and Wilmore, *Black Theology: A Documentary History*, 69.
- ¹⁴³ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 130-2.
- ¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 132.
- ¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 132-3.
- ¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 134-5.
- ¹⁴⁷ Cone, "The White Church and Black Power," in Cone and Wilmore, *Black Theology: A Documentary History*, 81.
- ¹⁴⁸ Costas, *The Church and its Mission*, 175.
- ¹⁴⁹ Cone, *Risks of Faith*, 118.
- ¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁵¹ Bellah, Madsen, and Tipton, *The Good Society*, 188-9.
- ¹⁵² Sider, *Just Generosity*, 100.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 101-102.

¹⁵⁴ Boff, *Church: Charism and Power*, 43.

¹⁵⁵ Assmann, *Theology for a Nomad Church*, 31.

¹⁵⁶ Johnson, *Sharing Possessions*, 116, 139.

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