

Incommensurable Paradigms: The Competing Theological Claims of Black Pietism and Black
Liberationism

By

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In honor of my father. Dad, I feel your absence profoundly. I will see you again, soon.

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INTRODUCTION

Background

On March 17, 2015 a group of six pastors part of an organization called The National Baptist Fellowship of Concerned Pastors staged a press conference to protest Bishop Yvette Flunder's role as a main speaker at American Baptist College's Garnett Nabrit Lecture Series. Flunder, a lesbian woman married to her longtime partner, Shirley Miller, pastors City of Refuge United Church of Christ and presides over the Fellowship of Affirming Ministries, a coalition of Christian churches dedicated toward supporting churches who are moving toward a theology of radical inclusivity.¹ The pastors at the press conference accused Forrest Harris, president of American Baptist College, of violating his conferred duties by extending the invitation to Flunder. Furthermore, they considered the invitation to be an especially disconcerting breach of National Baptist Convention doctrine because American Baptist College is affiliated with and financially supported by the National Baptist Convention which affirms the infallibility and inerrancy of the Bible.

Each of the pastors reading prepared statements appealed to the authority of the Bible to support their claims. In one particularly illustrative example, Pastor Robert White from Freedom Church in Bedford, Texas stated these words:

First of all we have a concern for the truth. The Bible, with the aid and assistance of the Holy Spirit, is mankind's guide into all truth. It gives us our basic standards for living, our moral direction, our revelation of God, his purposes and his ways...Without the Bible as our standard for truth, we step onto a slippery slope of immorality and inconsistency that spans far beyond the issue of same-sex relationships.²

¹ "The Essence of the Fellowship," n.d., <http://radicallyinclusive.com/content.cfm?id=200>.

² Star Parker, *The National Baptist Fellowship of Concerned Pastors Live News Press Conference 3-17-2015*, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hoYrabpzceo&t=946s>.

Harris' indirectly accused the group of using "idolatry of the Bible" to discriminate against gays and lesbians in an article published in the *Tennessean*.³ When asked by the reporter how he defines idolatry of the Bible, Harris answered, "When people say the Bible is synonymous with God and the truth...We can't be guided and dictated by a first-century worldview."

Harris' demonstrates his approach to interpreting scripture in an essay entitled, "The Children Have Come to Birth: A Theological Response for Survival and Quality of Life."⁴ He employs a biblical metaphor derived from 2 Kings 19:3 in order to depict the precarious nature of the black poor who are trapped between two worlds. The verse states, "Thus says Hezekiah, 'This day is a day of distress, rebuke, and rejection; for children have come to birth and there is no strength to deliver.'" Harris envisions two worlds in conflict: one world is beset by black suffering, dehumanization of black life, and structural forces inimical to black flourishing. The other world, into which "the least of these" are being born, heralds the promise of justice and equality. Harris applies this verse analogously to the situation of black children who are at the point of birth, ready to realize a new era of justice and wholeness.⁵ However, encumbered by racism, black middle-class apathy, the prosperity gospel, and the forces of American individualism and capitalism, black life has become too weak to birth this era into reality.

Harris, adopting Hezekiah's ritual of lamentation, bemoans "the near absence of a prophetic commitment to justice" in many Black churches, which he claims was the distinguishing trait of the black church in America, and he reprimands black churches for

³ Jordan Buie, "President Defends Baptist College Inviting Lesbian Bishop to Speak," *The Tennessean*, March 11, 2015, Main edition.

⁴ Forrest E. Harris, "The Children Have Come to Birth: A Theological Response for Survival and Quality of Life," in *Walk Together Children: Black and Womanist Theologies, Church and Theological Education*, ed. Dwight N. Hopkins and Linda E. Thomas (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010).

⁵ Harris, 29.

adopting “fundamentalist pieties that privatize, depoliticize, and de-radicalize the Christian message of liberation.”⁶ In his observation, the voice of black theologians and womanists are mandatory for understanding liberation, and it cannot occur when theologians and the communities with whom they identify are isolated from one another.⁷

Harris, a former pastor himself, is also Director of Vanderbilt’s Kelly Miller Smith Institute on Black Church Studies. One of his primary goals as an educator and administrator has been to bridge academic Black theology with the black church⁸ and he views the perspectives of black and womanist theologians as necessary for improving the quality of life of at-risk populations.⁹ Harris also views the contributions of black and womanist theologians as necessary because they critique the black church’s conformity to capitalist norms and individualist tendencies. In his vision of an inclusive community, “Black theologians, women and male pastors, Black laity in all their diverse realities and sexual orientations...join together in the birthing/labor room of sacrifice and prophetic hope to deliver children ready and ripe to be born in a new age of liberation.”¹⁰

In light of Harris’ essay, one gains better insight into the biblical understanding and theological motives that actuated his decision to invite Flunder to speak at American Baptist College in spite of impending opposition. For Harris, The National Fellowship of Concerned Pastor’s protests encapsulate the parochial attitudes that liberation theologians endeavor to reform in order to increase participation in efforts to guarantee justice and inclusion for all

⁶ Harris, 34.

⁷ Harris, 34.

⁸ Harris, 38.

⁹ Harris, 27.

¹⁰ Harris, 37.

people, including homosexuals. Those scholars and pastors that situate themselves within the black liberation theology tradition, like Harris and Raphael G. Warnock, view these pastors as inordinately shaped by a biblical fundamentalism that in its pretensions at universality, undermines immensely the hermeneutics that black people have deployed historically in the face of slavery and dehumanization. Warnock believes that these pastors, wedded as they are to notions of “authoritative claims to biblical truth,” need a critical theological principle that black liberation theology and womanism are uniquely positioned to effectively provide. Without this principle, Warnock states that the church will be left “appealing to the most conservative tenets of evangelical Christian culture and reactionary, hermeneutical modes of biblical interpretation when it comes to addressing the concerns of women, gays, and lesbians within its own ranks.”¹¹

One of the problems that black theology has faced, however, is its lack of success in fostering engagement of black churches with its perspectives. James Cone acknowledges that “the major weakness of the relationship between black theology and the black church in the past was the departure of black theology to white seminaries, universities, and churches.”¹² Gayraud Wilmore states, “By the end of the 1970s many of us were aware that the promise of this new way of doing theology was not being realized in the grassroots church.”¹³ This lack of cohesion and dialogue continues presently. Black and womanist theologians write for the church, but as Jeremiah Wright observed, “Womanist theology. . .is not even on the radar

¹¹ Raphael G. Warnock, *The Divided Mind of the Black Church: Theology, Piety, and Public Witness* (New York: NYU Press, 2013), 189.

¹² James H. Cone, *For My People: Black Theology and the Black Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1984), 112.

¹³ Gayraud Wilmore, “A Revolution Unfulfilled, but Not Invalidated,” in *A Black Theology of Liberation: Twentieth Anniversary Edition*, by James H. Cone (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1990), 152.

screen of most Black pastors and most Black parishes. This is painfully true in the historic Black church, and this is especially true if there is any talk of same sex inclusion; and Womanist theology keeps raising that issue.”¹⁴ Warnock and Dale P. Andrews believe that the issue lies in the fragmentation of piety and liberation in the ecclesiological views of black churches and black theologians; for them, reconciling the two dimensions of religious life will lead to a more faithful depiction of the practices and ideals to which black churches have always subscribed. Others, like Cecil Wayne Cone and Cheryl J. Sanders, discern prevalent theological differences between the two theological perspectives, but they believe differences can be overcome through radical reorientation of black theology and womanism toward the traditional theological themes that historically constituted black churches.

Purpose

This dissertation postulates a third alternative to evaluating the rift between black churches and black theology/womanism. It argues that the theology of black churches and black theology/womanism represent two competing religious paradigms that are not merely incompatible, but also ultimately incommensurable. By applying heuristically Thomas Kuhn’s theories of paradigm shift and incommensurability, this project argues that the emergence of black liberation theology constitutes the creation of the black Liberationist paradigm which represents a radical departure from the Pietist paradigm that traditionally comprised the black church. The black Pietist paradigm affirms a belief in personal regeneration from sin as the

¹⁴ Jeremiah A. Wright, Jr., “Black Theology/Womanist Theology in Dialogue,” in *Walk Together Children: Black and Womanist Theologies, Church, and Theological Education* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2010), 262.

highest good that individuals and the black church should pursue. New birth, or regeneration from sin through acceptance of Jesus' blood represents the answer for the problem of sin, and it also constitutes the fundamental norm through which all other concepts and perspectives are evaluated. The corollaries of this fundamental norm that constitute the Pietist paradigm are 1) belief that all people are born with a sinful nature in need of redemption, 2) belief in the infallibility of the Bible as God's divine Word, 3) belief in a broad conception of sin that includes its personal and social dimensions, and 4) belief in sanctification as an ongoing process of obtaining Christlikeness through prayer and devotional reading of the Bible, but also through avoidance of immoral acts forbidden by God.¹⁵

The Liberationist paradigm inaugurated by James Cone promotes liberation from oppression as the highest good that individuals and the black church should pursue, and it also constitutes the fundamental norm through which all other theological and ethical concepts are ranked and evaluated. The major principles that constitute the Liberationist paradigm are, 1) A revisionist approach to any orthodox or traditional Christian doctrine that detracts from liberation of the oppressed, 2) a liberalist biblical hermeneutics that promotes liberationist readings of scripture and denies biblical infallibility. Therefore, scripture must be interpreted provisionally and not absolutely. 3) Liberationists deny the obligation to obey biblical codes relating to personal morality, including proscriptions regarding sex and drunkenness, by

¹⁵ Four more principles comprise the Pietist paradigm, but none of them are essential for establishing the incommensurability of Black Pietist and Black Liberationist paradigms of Christianity.

identifying these “personal” aspects of religion as “white”. Included in this last characteristic is the identification of biblical literalism with white fundamentalism.¹⁶

This dissertation also rigorously contests two claims that have become virtually axiomatic within black liberation theology and womanism. First, it refutes the liberationist conception of pre-Civil War religion initiated by Joseph Washington and uncritically adopted by James Cone that distinguishes pre-Civil War religion from the contemporary black church, claiming that pre-Civil War religion displayed liberationist impulses that have since waned. Included within this claim is the identification of the new birth and submission to biblical moral codes as post-Civil War intrusions of white fundamentalism. This dissertation shows that regeneration from sin, with sin being defined as innate moral degeneration, constituted the central thrust of pre-Civil War religion, and the attempts of its exemplars at actualizing justice and freedom emerge from that religious experience. Later post-Civil War expressions of black religion may have attenuated the commitment to sociopolitical resistance, along with the more supernatural and experiential elements of pre-Civil War religion, but they merely carried over the core theological beliefs that already constituted the paradigm.

Secondly, it dispels the idea that black liberation theology represents the rehearsal of a radical, liberationist strand that has always been present within black Christianity. Exemplars of

¹⁶ To be sure, the most ardent white fundamentalists have also been some of the most vehement racists. See Carter Dalton Lyon, *Sanctuaries of Segregation: The Story of the Jackson Church Visit Campaign*, Reprint edition (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2017); Carolyn Renée Dupont, *Mississippi Praying: Southern White Evangelicals and the Civil Rights Movement, 1945-1975* (New York: NYU Press, 2013); Charles Marsh, *God’s Long Summer: Stories of Faith and Civil Rights*, (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2008). James Cone is right in suggesting that there is often a correlation between religious conservatism regarding the Bible and morality and political conservatism regarding race. This does not necessarily lead to the logical conclusion that personal moral codes are wrong, or that the Bible should not be interpreted literally. This correlation may show that racists choose to concentrate on those areas of the Christianity that do not challenge or convict them, thus distorting the gospel.

the radical, liberationist strand within early black Christianity, including Richard Allen and Harriet Tubman, adopted belief in God's Word as infallible, and the new birth experience consistently occupied the central role in these radical practitioners' conceptualizations of religion. Furthermore, these radical reformers embraced personal morality as a fulfillment of the biblical mandate to imitate Christ. In other words, they adhered to the Pietist paradigm. The version of radicalism proffered and encouraged by black liberation theologians and womanists denies or severely constricts each of these three features of earlier radicalists, thus rendering claims of resuscitation dubious. To be sure, black liberation theologians and womanists do direct their attention to liberation, wholeness, survival, and actualization of human potential against hegemonic constraints as primary goals¹⁷, but such objectives, in isolation from Pietism's core traits, should not be thought of as an instantiation of this type of black Christian religion.

Rationale

Most academic examinations of the black church have tended toward sociological or historical inquiry. The black church, existing for most of its history as the central institution within black life, and being one of the few owned and governed by blacks, bore responsibilities for organizing and sustaining the community's religious, economic, political, social, and familial life. It also assumed a prominent role in resisting racist practices, laws, and institutions. These manifold functions adopted out of necessity by the black church naturally led to functional or

¹⁷ I subsume womanism under the goal of liberation from the oppressed because all objectives within womanism, including survival, wholeness, and liberation, ultimately aim toward the elimination of hegemony and oppression as the prerequisite for full realization of human freedom.

historical approaches to understanding the church in all of its dimensions. Landmark texts include W.E.B. DuBois' *The Negro Church*, Benjamin E. Mays' *The Negro's Church*, Carter G. Woodson's *The History of the Negro Church*, E. Franklin Frazier's *The Negro Church in America*, and C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya's *The Black Church in the African American Experience*.¹⁸ Each of these texts increased significantly understanding of the black church's social roles. However, a paucity of theological interrogations of black church beliefs remains.¹⁹

This study focuses specifically on the characteristic theological beliefs of the black church and the ways that the distinctive theological beliefs of black theology/womanism represent an incommensurable departure from them. To my knowledge, it is one of the only book length studies that attempts to juxtapose black church beliefs and those of black theology to underscore dissimilarity instead of compatibility. As such, it provides a welcome introduction to scholars seeking to understand the major theological differences between the two traditions. To be sure, this dissertation concerns itself with two traditions within black religious history that only constitute part of the black religious experience in America. There are many black non-Christian traditions and unorthodox belief systems that are not included

¹⁸ W. E. Burghardt DuBois, *The Negro Church: Report of a Social Study Made under the Direction of Atlanta University; Together with the Proceedings of the Eighth Conference for the Study of the Negro Problems, Held at Atlanta University, May 26th, 1903*. (Atlanta, Ga. Atlanta University Press, 1903); Benjamin E. Mays, *The Negro's Church* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2015); Carter Godwin Woodson, *The History of the Negro Church*, 2nd edition (The Associated Publishers, 1945); E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America*, Studies in Sociology (New York: Schocken Books, 1964); C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, First Edition (Durham: Duke University Press Books, 1990).

¹⁹ Thabiti M. Anyabwile states, "While the works of W.E.B. DuBois, E. Franklin Frazier, C. Eric Lincoln, and other have been particularly well received and useful for understanding the church in historical and sociological terms, the seminal work of these writers and others has stopped well short of tracing the *theological* understandings and contributions of African Americans and the African American church. In other words, what should be studied as the most central characteristic of the church—its theology—has been for the most part neglected by scholarly research and writing."

within this dissertation.²⁰ The black religious experience in America is not monolithic, and in recognition of that, this project only engages two strands within what can be described as a multicolored and richly diverse religious tapestry.

Methods

This dissertation, being interdisciplinary in nature, makes use of multiple methodologies in order to argue successfully its thesis. In contributing to black church studies, it relies heavily on historical analysis through the use of primary sources, including slave narratives, speeches, sermons, newspaper articles, and official denominational records to ascertain the character of black Christianity throughout its history. In contributing to the discipline of theological ethics, it engages in philosophical and theological analysis regarding the concepts of paradigms and incommensurability, dialoguing with leading interlocutors on concepts that are essential for understanding the nature of ethical disagreements and for recognizing paths by which rational inquiry can proceed. Often, scholars reading interdisciplinary texts come away disappointed. Historians may find too few historical sources and an incomplete historical narrative, theologians may find the theological discussions too thin conceptually, and social ethicists may bemoan the lack of attention to social problems and issues. The broad methodology, however, means that methodological depth will be sacrificed in favor of a more comprehensive methodology that can encompass the manifold dimensions and depths of black church history, theological beliefs, ethics, and practices.

²⁰ See Anthony Pinn, *Varieties of African American Religious Experience* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1998); Hans A. Baer and Merrill Singer, *African American Religion: Varieties Of Protest & Accommodation*, 1 edition (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2002).

Scope

The point of departure for my definition of the black church comes from C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya's *The Black Church in the African American Experience*. Similarly to their study, it includes the seven major historic black denominations, including the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church, the African Methodist Episcopal Zion (A.M.E.Z.) Church, the Christian Methodist Episcopal (C.M.E.) Church, the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Incorporated (NBC), the National Baptist Convention of America, Unincorporated, the Progressive National Baptist Convention (PNBC), and the Church of God in Christ.²¹ It also includes those other historic black denominations and fellowships that subscribe to the culture, theological and ethical beliefs, and practices inaugurated by these seven denominations.²² Furthermore, it includes the black independent and non-denominational churches that are situated within this tradition. This study oscillates between terms like black churches, black church, black church tradition, and black Christianity for mostly aesthetic reasons, with each term in this grouping having relatively the same meaning. Although the African American church is comprised of varying types of religious expressions, organizations, worship styles, and ecclesiological self-conceptions, the terms used here are not meant to flatten the diversity that exists within the African American church. Rather, it is important, in this study, that the tradition be defined by the center and not the margins, because it is clear that those on the margins, like black theologians in the mid-twentieth century, were reacting *against* a center, which for them, was

²¹ Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, 1.

²² Examples include the National Primitive Baptist Convention of the U.S.A., United Holy Church of America, and Full Gospel Baptist Church Fellowship.

well defined and recognizable. It is that well-defined and recognizable center that constitutes the essence of black Christianity that has been defined here.

The first chapter reviews four major works of literature that explicitly investigate the nature of the conceptual relationship between black churches and black theology/womanism. Classifying them into two types, compatibilist and incompatibilist, it shows that two of them interpret the two traditions as compatible, while the other two identify incompatible theological difference between the two entities while still envisioning compatibility as a contingent possibility. The chapter enters into critical dialogue with each text to show that none of them ascertain completely the incommensurable nature of black church theology and black liberation theology/womanism.

In chapter two, Thomas Kuhn's concepts of paradigm, paradigm shift, and incommensurability are explicated and analyzed. Kuhn's descriptions in tandem with Charles Taylor's description of frameworks and hypergoods provide a conceptualization of paradigms applicable to the religious beliefs and methodology of black churches and black theology/womanism. The chapter proffers a tripartite definition for incommensurability, thus explicating its perceptual, methodological, and semantic dimensions. Alasdair MacIntyre and Victor Anderson serve as key interlocutors in the chapter's attempt to defend incommensurability as a concept that can depict accurately the nature of irresolvable ethical disagreements.

Chapter three engages in historical analysis of the theological beliefs of the black church, beginning with a historical and typological discussion of pietism. Drawing upon the work of scholars including Albert Raboteau and Cheryl Sanders, conversion is described as the

essential belief and experience of black Christianity. Based upon its close reading of slave narratives, a black Pietist paradigm is constructed that has conversion and regeneration from sin as its nucleus. This paradigm is then traced throughout antebellum, postbellum, early and mid-twentieth century manifestations of black Christianity to argue that the black Pietist paradigm constitutes the core theological belief system of black churches.

Chapter four analyzes historically the emergence of black theology in the twentieth century by applying Kuhn's concept of paradigm shift heuristically to the events and circumstances that contributed to James Cone's construction of his theological system. Cone was affected deeply by the racial upheaval of the 1960s, including the failure of civil rights to significantly impact Northern poverty, the outbreak of riots in multiple cities, the rise of Black Power, and the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. Cone, confronted with the promise of Black Power for attaining black liberation but stymied by its renunciation of non-violence, sought to fuse the Christian activism of Martin Luther King, Jr. with the black radicalism of Malcolm X to formulate a new theological system. The result was the creation of black liberation theology and the identification of liberation from oppression as its major thrust.

The chapter attributes many of Cone's perspectives to his roots in the white theological academy, and it argues that liberalism helped him construct the Black Liberationist Paradigm that defines the theological perspectives of black liberation theology. The paradigm is then explained through Cone's early theological texts that defined it and contrasted with the black Pietist paradigm which preceded it. Next the chapter narrates the birth of womanism as a theological response to the feminist movement's racism and to black theology's sexism. It analyzes womanist hermeneutics and theological methods in the thought of Renita Weems and

Delores Williams to demonstrate the incommensurability of womanism's black Liberationist paradigm with black Pietism.

The fifth chapter critiques Kelly Brown Douglas' conclusions regarding womanist sexuality to gesture toward resolution of incommensurability through rational persuasion based upon internal rational critique. Nearly twenty years after its publication, Kelly Brown Douglas' text *The Black Church and Sexuality* remains the definitive womanist response to conservative black church sexual norms. This chapter takes seriously MacIntyre's suggestion that adherents of a viewpoint can come to recognize their own theoretical system or paradigm as "rationally inferior to some other rival and incompatible tradition" when "in trying to frame adequate solutions to its problems...it lapses into irreparable incoherence."²³ He allows that this rational incoherence may be recognized by someone external to the tradition who has been able to inhabit conceptually that tradition's paradigm, thereby understanding its beliefs and methods. The aim of this chapter is to explicate precisely the overall rational inconsistencies of Brown Douglas' arguments in *Sexuality and the Black Church* and some of her other works to invite adherents of black theology/womanism to reevaluate critically the black Liberationist paradigm.

²³ Alasdair MacIntyre, "Incommensurability, Truth, and the Conversation between Confucians and Aristotelians about the Virtues," in *Culture and Modernity: East-West Philosophic Perspectives*, ed. Eliot Deutsch (University of Hawaii Press, 1991), 117.

Chapter 1

BLACK SCHOLARS ASSESS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE BLACK CHURCH AND BLACK LIBERATION THEOLOGY

Introduction

This chapter reviews in detail four texts that are foundational for the argument of this dissertation. All of them are highly significant to this project because the thesis for this dissertation arises out of the meticulous research, precise analysis, and comprehensive explanations that each author applies to the nature of the longstanding tension and disagreement between the black church and black liberation theology/womanism. These four texts can be categorized according to two differing approaches, called compatibilist and incompatibilist, regarding how they conceive of the relationship between black churches and black liberation theology.²⁴

The compatibilist approach views black churches and black liberation theology/womanism as compatible forms of religious belief and expression, but with divergent emphases. These scholars argue that black churches have oscillated between two poles, sometimes being predominantly oriented toward pietist activity, defined as observation of personal moral codes, focus on individual salvation, and pursuit of subjective religious experiences. At other times in their collective history, they have been predominantly

²⁴ Throughout this chapter black liberation theology and black theology will be used interchangeably to refer to the academic tradition inaugurated by James Cone that identifies liberation for the oppressed as the central message of the Christian faith.

liberationist in their pursuit of justice, defined as overt resistance to oppression through violent and nonviolent resistance, political involvement and activism, denunciation of racism and oppression, and creation of systems and organizations meant to subvert white hegemony. For compatibilists, bringing the two traditions into harmony requires greater emphasis by one or the other tradition on the theological and ethical values that the other considers deficient. Another type of compatibilism involves black theology's analysis of historical black religion, most commonly slave religion, to show that this early expression of Christianity reflects predominantly its current value of liberation in order to implicitly or explicitly encourage black churches' to pursue liberation as their primary mission.²⁵ The compatibilist writings interrogated in this chapter are *Practical Theology for Black Churches: Bridging Black Theology and African American Folk Religion* by Dale P. Andrews and *The Divided Mind of the Black Church: Theology, Piety, & Public Witness* by Raphael G. Warnock.²⁶

Incompatibilists consider the black church and black liberation theology/womanism to be inharmonious and incompatible expressions of black religiosity. Black liberation theologians and womanists most often view themselves as restorers of the radical liberative dimensions of the black church tradition while also acknowledging the importance of black church pietistic beliefs and practice, thus highlighting compatibility. This means that most incompatibilists

²⁵ For arguments supporting this type of historical compatibilism, see James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1975); Dwight N. Hopkins, *Shoes That Fit Our Feet: Sources for a Constructive Black Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993); Dwight N. Hopkins, *Down, Up, and Over: Slave Religion and Black Theology*, 1st US-1st Printing edition (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999); Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Press, 1973).

²⁶ Dale P. Andrews, *Practical Theology for Black Churches: Bridging Black Theology & African American Folk Religion*, 1 edition (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002); James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1975); Dwight N. Hopkins, *Shoes That Fit Our Feet: Sources for a Constructive Black Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y: Orbis Books, 1993); Dwight N. Hopkins, *Down, Up, and Over: Slave Religion and Black Theology*, 1st US-1st Printing edition (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1999); Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press, 1973).

more readily identify with the black church and view black theology/womanism as a significant departure from its norms, values, and practices. Incompatibilists argue that resolution of the tension between the black church and black liberation theology/womanists occurs when the side viewed as in error agrees to reformulate its theological beliefs and methods to more faithfully resemble the religious beliefs and practices of the tradition offering the critique. The incompatibilist texts being summarized and analyzed are *Identity Crisis in Black Theology* by Cecil Wayne Cone, and “Roundtable Discussion: Christian Ethics and Theology in Womanist Perspective,” by Cheryl J. Sanders and other womanist authors.²⁷

While informative and persuasive in their arguments, this chapter argues that neither compatibilists or incompatibilists understand completely the ongoing tension and disagreement that characterizes the relationship between the black church and black theologians. Both are too optimistic regarding possibilities of reconciliation and agreement. This is because neither interprets the rift between the two traditions as a problem of incommensurability. This chapter argues for incommensurability of paradigms as the best lens for understanding the existing breach between black church beliefs and practices and black liberation theology/womanist thought.

²⁷ Cecil Wayne Cone, *The Identity Crisis in Black Theology* (African Methodist Episcopalian, 1975); Cheryl J. Sanders et al., “Christian Ethics and Theology in Womanist Perspective,” *Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion; Chico, Calif.* 5, no. 2 (Fall 1989): 83. Other examples of incompatibilist texts include Anthony B. Bradley, *Liberating Black Theology: The Bible and the Black Experience in America* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway, 2010); Anthony Tyrone Evans, “A Biblical Critique of Selected Issues in Black Theology” (PhD diss. Dallas Theological Seminary, 1982), <https://search.proquest.com/pqdtglobal/docview/303088471/abstract/9EDA6D47B49A4700PQ/6>. Evans states, “Black Theology then must be about the business of interpreting what the biblical revelation says about the future as it relates to oppression and then begin to activate the black church to comply, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, with what the future is to be about. Apart from this approach it will constantly run the risk of being a sort of black social humanism with a theological label.” Here one can see that he advises black theology on what it must do to become compatible with traditional black church beliefs. He assumes that in its current state, it is incompatible and thus needs to change dramatically in order to avoid being a “black social humanism.”

Incommensurability refers to a state of irreconcilable disagreement that ensues when two rival traditions or perspectives differ at the level of their premises, and there exists no shared logical or rational framework that can help decide which point of view is true. The proponent of each perspective can only offer arguments from *within* the framework that they support and defend. There exists no neutral or objective standpoint from which to judge which framework or belief system is in error. What exists then, are attempts to convert the other to one's own tradition or worldview, or the rejection of and withdrawal from the other framework.²⁸ This is the nature of the rivalry between black churches and black liberation theology/womanism. A fuller treatment of incommensurability will be presented in the next chapter.

Compatibilists

Dale P. Andrews and the Chasm between Black Theology and the Black Church

Dale P. Andrews attempts to bridge the chasm that divides academic black theology and black churches by reconciling the sites of theological disagreement between the two. According to Andrews, the fissure opened soon after the emergence of black theology as an academic discipline when black theologians accused black churches of “otherworldliness” and political apathy concerning the plight and oppression of black people. Some black churches recoiled against what they perceived to be a lack of Christian love and conciliatory intent in the postulates of black theology. Others scarcely noticed the existence of black theology, and its

²⁸ For an example of an incommensurabilist statement regarding black theology, see Joseph H. Jackson, “The Basic Theological Position of the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Inc.,” in *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-1979*, ed. Gayraud S. Wilmore and James H. Cone (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), 257–61.

emergence was met with either indifference or ignorance. In either case, black theology represented a peculiarity that did not influence substantially the beliefs and values of most black churchgoers.

Andrews lays responsibility for the chasm at the feet of both black theologians and black churches. He discovers that “black theology’s sweeping disparagement of the ‘otherworldliness’ of black churches indicates a misdiagnosis, which actually exposes a glaring “missed-diagnosis”—American individualism.”²⁹ In other words, instead of accusing the black church of misplaced theological faith and hope, he thinks that black liberation theologians should find fault with American society for propagating the unfettered individualism that disrupts African-American community and solidarity.³⁰ The gains of the Civil Rights Movement, which included economic advancement and expansion of opportunities for working-class and middle-class black people “regenerated and reinforced the domination of personal salvation and religious piety in American Christianity,” thus underscoring the importance of individual acquisition and success for black Christians.³¹ Andrews believes that the paucity of black theological studies regarding the influence of individualist capitalist values and norms upon black church people contributes to the “missed-diagnosis.”

Further implicating black theology in the widening of the chasm is its overreliance on liberation in describing the mission, function, and purpose of the church. While liberation is vital and necessary for human flourishing, Andrews finds that its conception has been too narrowly and restrictively implemented within black theological thought. Instead, black

²⁹ Andrews, *Practical Theology for Black Churches*, 7.

³⁰ Andrews, 67.

³¹ Andrews, 7.

theology should properly recognize the value, significance, and meaning of the “refuge” paradigm. This paradigm refers to the particular expression of black church life emerging from an ecclesiology grounded within the practices of preaching and pastoral care. Black church leaders and practitioners have always been acutely aware of black oppression, and they counteracted its demeaning and destructive aspects by holistically meeting “the emotional, spiritual, and sociological needs of an alienated people.”³² Andrews observes,

The American slave system, overwhelming segregation known as Jim Crow, as well as economically and socially systemic racism created the need for a protective community, which thereby provided the support necessary for survival. The slaves’ and free Blacks’ adaptation of American Christianity aided in the transmutation of their experiences under Western racial subjugation into a religious folk community offering strength and growth. Preaching became a primary vehicle in this evolution...The African slaves and early free Blacks came to establish communal care through the worship life of black religious folk practices and eventually black churches.³³

The refuge paradigm nurtured by black preaching and pastoral care responded to the denigration of self-worth and community actuated by the brutality and oppressiveness of slavery. However, the refuge model was not merely geared toward fostering emotional, spiritual, and psychological wholeness. It also included the presence of strong commitments to liberation from slavery, advocacy of human rights, and resistance to oppression. The refuge paradigm adopted a *both-and* approach to spiritual care and social liberation. Such a distinction is important due to black theology’s disparagement of the refuge approach as entirely otherworldly or escapist. While black churches implicitly understand the liberative aspects of the refuge paradigm, Andrews argues that successfully bridging the gap between its practitioners and black theologians requires a shared ecclesial paradigm that encapsulates both

³² Andrews, 37.

³³ Andrews, 35.

of their core commitments and values. This revised ecclesial model, called *faith identity*, would foster dialogue and rapprochement between black theologians and their demands for sociopolitical resistance, and the black church, with its need for pastoral care and spiritual nurturance.³⁴

Andrews realizes that in order for faith identity to become a paradigm that black theologians and black church laypersons endorse, it needs to be grounded in scriptural themes that reflect the high value that both traditions place upon the Bible. He derives four shared themes or tenets that are definitive for both black theology and the black church that lay the foundation for the faith identity paradigm that he proposes. They include, 1) Creation and *imago Dei*, 2) the Exodus narrative, 3) the suffering of Jesus and conversion, and 4) eschatology and the kingdom of God.³⁵ For Andrews, each of these themes resists reduction into categorizations of spiritual consolation *or* sociopolitical impetus. They contain an excess of meaning that defies the dichotomization that frequently accompanies discourse regarding the function of the black church. Each of the tenets speaks to the salvific, restorative nature of God's love and the personal, spiritual, wellbeing that ensues. Each also demands resistance to racism and oppression in accordance with the nature and plan of God, which ultimately includes liberation and wholeness for all of God's people.

While chiding black theology for critiquing black churches via categories, schemes, and theological motifs foreign to their praxis and self-understanding, Andrews is sympathetic to the critique itself. He believes that although black churches have always been vociferous in

³⁴ Andrews, 37.

³⁵ Andrews, 40–49.

condemning social injustice, they have often also adopted an anemic and complacent posture regarding resistance to oppression and liberation efforts on behalf of the oppressed. For Andrews then, the critique is valid, but black theologians incorrectly target religious piety and revivalist spirituality as the causes for this neglect. Conversely, Andrews argues, “my point is that black churches sought to confront social racism by morally counteracting racist devaluation and characterizations of black humanity. Religious piety functioned along with the revivalist spirituality of black evangelical Christianity in both the survival and liberation of black personhood.”³⁶

Andrews lays the blame for black churches’ sociopolitical apathy at the feet of American individualism, a redoubtable influence upon every segment of American society to which even the black church has not been immune. This American individualism shaped religious piety and evangelicalism so that individual flourishing and economic wellbeing became preeminent. The individualism encouraged by the ethos of American capitalism ruptured the bonds holding together black churches and their communities. The gains of the Civil Rights movement, including desegregation of schools and businesses and the outlawing of discrimination regarding employment opportunities and educational admissions, immediately impacted the middle and working class and offered tantalizing access to the rewards of prosperity that had previously been denied. The displaced black lower classes, confined to inner cities and largely restricted from meaningful participation in the economic system, still struggled to understand the significance of nonviolence and protest marches for their existence. According to Andrews, the fragmentation of the African-American community has also led to distrust of the church by

³⁶ Andrews, 57.

young African-American men and women. They have observed its conspicuous courting of the middle and upper classes alongside its recalcitrance in responding to the needs of the least of these. He agrees that churches' pursuit of prosperity and personal fulfillment underscores the need for black theology's prophetic critique to be heard within black churches.

Andrews suggests that bridging the chasm requires black churches and black theology to reassess their prophetic tasks. This reassessment can facilitate dialogue as both traditions adopt a shared liturgical/covenantal model of theology that unifies piety and worship with the insistent denunciation of oppression and exploitation of the most vulnerable within the community. He writes,

The prophetic task, then, of black theology is in reestablishing its liberation ethics within the pastoral praxis of black churches. The personal spirituality common to contemporary black religious life is not rejected by the biblical covenant traditions. A spirituality that lacks attention to social justice is the point of redress. Therefore, the covenant traditions present an important biblical source of prophetic inspiration in black theology and black churches.³⁷

Andrew's compatibilist objective is central throughout the text. He is concerned that black theologians' portrayal of black folk religion as escapist and otherworldly has been rejected by black churches because they, the churches, see themselves as pursuing liberation, but in a more holistic manner. However, he affirms the validity of black theologians' critique of black churches, since many black churches too often relish personal conversion and emotional expression, but neglect protest and effective social ministries. For Andrews, black liberation theologians need to emphasize the theological beliefs and values that it shares with the black church, allowing its critique to be heard as one that emerges from within black folk religion and

³⁷ Andrews, 113.

not from outside of it. He concludes, "Prophetic ministry unites worship and praxis, salvation and social justice."³⁸ On the other hand, black churches need to be more attentive to the liberative aspects of their piety, seeking to remain committed to the prophetic spirituality that favors the "least of these" modeled by Christ and the Old Testament prophets.

While laudable in its efforts to bridge a longstanding gap between black churches and black theology, Andrew's project is stifled by its own "missed-diagnosis." Like most scholars who explore the estrangement between the ecclesiology of black churches and black theologians, Andrews' compatibilism assumes a shared theological foundation that can provide a point of departure for further dialogue and compromise. The problem, in his view, emerges from differing notions regarding what liberation entails. The refuge paradigm of black churches includes emotional, spiritual, and social liberation within its paradigm, while the prophetic paradigm of black theologians favors sociopolitical liberation as the major impetus for its critique of black churches. Andrews suggests that attenuation of certain theological principles and amplification of others allows the critique of black theologians to be recast in ways that resonate within black folk religion. This is because his prioritization of the church's *function* over core theological methods, beliefs, and values obscures the role of paradigmatic theological differences in explaining the chasm's intractability.

One can see Andrews' oversight in his attempt to invoke a model of hearer-response criticism as a means of reinterpreting texts to extract new meaning. He writes, "Black theology functions in the prophetic office when it helps the hearer cocreate new meaning between text-

³⁸ Andrews, 130.

driven religious traditions and historical challenges.”³⁹ He attempts to show that biblical precedence exists for reader-response criticism, in which later readers reinterpreted earlier texts based upon new experiences. He refers to Deutero-Isaiah to demonstrate that “the inheritors of Isaiah’s prophetic office sought to reinterpret and even adjudicate the text and tradition of First Isaiah within unfolding new experiences.”⁴⁰ This allows him to conceive of womanist theology as a successful example of hearer-response criticism in which “the deconstruction of theological and ideological traditions is part of a larger process of creating new modes and methods of inquiry and religious praxis.”⁴¹

A correct diagnosis would observe the chasm between black churches and black theologians as arising from paradigmatic differences concerning core theological values, beliefs, and methods including the role and use of the Bible itself. For example, Andrews’ training within the liberal theological academy predisposes him to rely upon liberal scholarship that takes for granted a distinction between Second Isaiah and the first thirty-nine chapters of Isaiah and which attributes them to differing authors. Most black churches, evangelical in core theological beliefs and untrained in liberal biblical scholarship, would reject such a distinction. Moreover, Andrews, who has embraced the postmodern methodologies of the liberal academy, views womanist theology’s deconstruction of theological traditions as helpful. This is because his pursuit of postmodern approaches to biblical interpretation press him beyond “location and extraction of content or truth,” a method that he admits can end in subjectivism or relativism.⁴²

³⁹ Andrews, 126.

⁴⁰ Andrews, 123.

⁴¹ Andrews, 127.

⁴² Andrews, 127.

Black churches, being mostly evangelical in theological beliefs, do not share the postmodern approaches to scriptural interpretation that allow for broad reworkings of scripture based upon historical presumption. The folk life of black churches embrace piety not only as a form of church action and cultural community, but as the foundation for a supernatural and abiding understanding of God, the Bible, and sin. To elide such distinctions between black churches and black theologians is to pursue a superficial reconciliation that cannot be sustained. Ultimately, Andrews' compatibilism categorizes the chasm between the black church and black liberation theology as a problem of emphasis. By reformulating its values in the theological language of the folk religion of the black church, he believes that black liberation theology can build a bridge toward reconciliation. The problem with Andrew's view is that black liberation theology embraces beliefs, values, and methods that are incommensurable with the beliefs and methods of most black churches.

Raphael G. Warnock and the Black Church's Divided Mind

Raphael Warnock also adopts a compatibilist approach in evaluating the tension between black liberation theologians and the black church. His objective in this incisive and comprehensive text is to analyze what black theologians, womanist theologians, and black church pastors believe to be the mission of the black church. Expecting to find substantial tension and manifold perspectives among these responses, Warnock wades into the diversity according to a conceptual framework comprised of a "double consciousness" evinced by black Christianity. This "double consciousness" addresses the influence of white evangelicalism on one hand, and the desire for liberation expressed in protest and resistance on the other. The

following question animates Warnock's investigation: "As an instrument of salvation through Jesus Christ, is the mission of the black church to save souls or to transform the social order? Or is it both? As it would seek to be faithful to the gospel message and mission of Jesus Christ, is it called to be an evangelical church or a liberationist church?"⁴³ The title of his book shows that Warnock perceives the black church to have been frequently divided on this issue. By his observations, at certain moments within its history, the church embraced its liberationist identity to pursue justice and freedom. During other periods, the black church seemed to recede into a state of otherworldly piety and bureaucratic focus.

Warnock does not purport to be a neutral observer in the course of this study. As the pastor of Ebenezer Baptist Church, the church where Martin Luther King served as assistant pastor to his father for most of his civil rights career, Warnock is informed by the legacy of activism and protest exhibited by Ebenezer Baptist Church and declares his commitment to continued embodiment of this liberationist ethos in his own ministry. Furthermore, his advisor at Union Theological Seminary, where he completed his dissertation from which this text is derived, was James Cone, the father of black theology. The text illustrates a historical divide between various pastors and theologians regarding the role and mission of the black church, but it is ultimately committed to a defense of black theology as a necessary critical enterprise that the black church must embrace and value for the black church's own wellbeing.

To advance this argument for black theology's necessity in relationship to the black church's self-understanding, Warnock identifies four successive moments within black

⁴³ Warnock, *The Divided Mind of the Black Church*, 3.

Christianity that evince a “subterranean unity of black resistance to racism.”⁴⁴ He analyzes the history of black Christianity as a “complex continuum of moments in which black people have endeavored to work out an antiracist appropriation of the Christian faith and black churches have wrestled through the dilemmas of their own theological double-consciousness in search of their distinctive mission.”⁴⁵ The four moments are these: 1) The formation of a liberationist faith, which describes the invisible institution founded by slave religion, also referred to as Christianization. 2) The founding of a liberationist church, defined as the emergence of the independent black church movement. This moment is represented by the term institutionalization. 3) The rise of a church-led liberationist movement, which refers to the eruption of the civil rights movement, which Warnock describes as conscientization. 4) The forging of a self-conscious liberationist theology, which refers to the birth and ascendance of black theology, also referred to as systematization.

The first moment narrates the ways that slaves fashioned Christianity to fit their existential reality as a racially oppressed people living under the yoke of slavery. Warnock shows that both personal piety and a desire for liberation from oppression animated the faith of exemplars like Harriet Tubman. Slave religion was characterized by a union between “revivalistic piety and radical protest” in which “the two were held together in tandem and in a remarkably creative tension.”⁴⁶ Warnock also exposes the stark fundamental difference between white Christianity and slave religion. White Christianity was most often committed to

⁴⁴ Warnock, 20.

⁴⁵ Warnock, 20.

⁴⁶ Warnock, 25.

upholding the slave system, thus bifurcating personal and social salvation, while slave religion viewed the two as inextricably linked.

The next moment institutionalizes that which came to initial expression in the “invisible institution” of slave religion. Seen as an overt act of resistance to slavery and institutional racism, Warnock describes the formation of independent black churches in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as “none other than the institutional expression of the desire of black slaves in the South and free blacks in the North to have...’a real meetin’ with some real preachin’.”⁴⁷ The black church, as it became institutionalized, exhibited active commitment to overt resistance of slavery and racism through its abolitionist efforts, involvement in the Underground Railroad, missionary work among freed slaves in the South, and the creation of black schools. However, one can distinctly observe the “divided mind” of the black church in operation. He elaborates, “This is to say that the black church has been both radical and unradical, the most prominent instrument of liberation within the African American community and the foremost conservative custodian of an uncritical evangelical piety that undermines the aims of liberation.”⁴⁸ Warnock gives two reasons for this double consciousness. First, the influence of the First and Second Great Awakenings and the Azusa Street Revival helped to foster an otherworldly focus and uncritical piety that often patiently endured the hostility of white society in expectation of future, eternal gain. Warnock never disparages piety and evangelical theology tout court, but is wary of the extensive influence they exert in undergirding the black church’s reticence toward political and social activism. The second

⁴⁷ Warnock, 26.

⁴⁸ Warnock, 29.

reason traces the ambivalence toward resistance to the lack of a theology of liberation that could help the church interrogate and engage its oppressive context while also reflecting on its own role and mission. In highlighting the lack of pertinent theological reflection as a reason for the black church's divided mind, Warnock again underscores his argument for the indispensability of black liberation theology for the black church's correct understanding of itself and its context.

The third moment, which Warnock calls "the fomenting of a church led liberationist movement", celebrates the contributions of the civil rights movement for helping the black church comprehend what a balanced focus on liberation and piety resembles in practice. He focuses on the ministry and leadership of Martin Luther King, Jr. as revolutionary in its adroit integration of piety and liberation, both theologically and in praxis. He states, "No single factor has contributed more to the rising political consciousness of the black church and the search for the radical side of its mission than the ministry of Martin Luther King, Jr."⁴⁹ For Warnock, King's theological perspectives encompassed both personal and social dimensions, including his definition of true worship, his theology of the cross, his ecclesiology, and his eschatological vision.⁵⁰ By being formed and nurtured by the black church, with its emphases on exuberant spirituality, conversion experiences, and intimacy with God, King was able to speak in ways that garnered the commitment and support of black churchgoers. Simultaneously, due to the black church's longstanding commitment to justice and his extensive theological training and education, he was able to vigorously challenge the church, American society, and the world to

⁴⁹ Warnock, 31.

⁵⁰ Warnock, 41.

live up to the highest ideals of Christian love and justice. For Warnock, it is this synthesis that sets King apart from his forebears and successors because “unlike anyone before or after him King gave creative voice to a dialectical appropriation of the personal and social dimensions of salvation.”⁵¹ Moreover, King and the civil rights movement set the stage for the emergence of black theology, which constitutes the fourth moment. By conscientizing a generation of black clergy, the movement provided a lens of interpretation for comprehending the black church’s mission that would eventuate in a more radical posture of black power and rejection of any racial integration that did not also include economic restructuring and comprehensive institutional reform.

The fourth moment, the forging of a self-conscious liberationist theology, describes the radical rupture of both black pastors and theologians with the social conservatism of the white church as they sought to reinterpret black faith based upon their own history and experience. According to Warnock, the consequence, the emergence of black theology, becomes the first time in the black church’s existence that it recognized theologically and systematically its distinctiveness from the white church with which it shared much of its theological foundation.⁵² Warnock credits a litany of black intellectuals for their groundbreaking and important scholarship regarding the black church. He includes W.E.B. DuBois, Booker T. Washington, Carter G. Woodson, St. Clair Drake, Benjamin E. Mays, and E. Franklin Frazier in his list of black scholars who treated seriously the question of the role of the black church in society.⁵³ However, he finds that their work was more sociological or historical than theological. Black

⁵¹ Warnock, 41.

⁵² Warnock, 61.

⁵³ Warnock, 78.

theology is different from these in that it “offers an analysis of the black church that takes into account the distinctive theological norms, sources, biblical hermeneutics, and culture that constitute the complex development of the black church as a historical community of faith.”⁵⁴ Warnock is careful not to separate black theology from the life and theology of the black church. In fact, in his estimation, black theology fulfills an important need for the church since it ensures that the black church remains cognizant of and committed to its liberationist roots and heritage. He quotes James Evans, who asks, “How can the dialogue between professional black theologians and other members of the African American churches be strengthened so that it becomes clear that black theology is rooted in the faith of the church and that the faith of the church is given intellectual clarity and expression in black theology?”⁵⁵

After presenting his four part historical categorization of African American Christian existence in America, Warnock devotes the rest of this text to explicating what black pastors and black theologians have considered the mission of the black church. Utilizing fine-grained analysis and meticulous description, he summarizes and engages the work of canonical authors within the black theological tradition such as James Cone, Gayraud Wilmore, J. Deotis Roberts, Joseph Washington, Dwight Hopkins, and Anthony Pinn. He also enumerates the diversity of opinions represented by black pastors such as Joseph Johnson, Joseph H. Jackson, Leon Watts, A. Roger Williams, Samuel DeWitt Proctor, J. Alfred Smith, Sr., Adam Clayton Powell, Nathan Wright, Anthony Evans, Jeremiah Wright, Prathia Hall-Wynn, Karen Mosby-Avery, and Dennis Wiley. Warnock uses their insights to prove the presence of a divided mind in the

⁵⁴ Warnock, 84.

⁵⁵ Warnock, 116.

contemporary black church. These theologians and pastors differ amongst themselves as to whether the black church should pursue a pietistic focus or liberationist focus. Certainly, the diversity of opinions is greater amongst the pastors than the black theologians. However, most troubling to Warnock is that the two constituencies are often not in productive conversation with one another. He writes,

“Yet decades after black theology’s birth, black pastors and black theologians, caught up in the institutional silos of professional expectations and trapped by the comfort of their respective enclaves of academic and ecclesial privilege, have yet to have a serious and sustained conversation with one another about the mission of the black church. . . . Absent that serious and sustained conversation, black theology has been left without a robust public witness within the very institution that gave birth to its prophetic voice, and the black church has been left without the critical tools necessary for probing the theological meaning of its black identity and what that might mean, in this moment, for a nation in crisis.⁵⁶

Warnock dedicates a chapter to womanist theology to excavate what its theologians have to say concerning the black church and its mission. He does not subsume womanist theology under the umbrella of black theology by categorizing simply it as a variant of black theology, but prefers to conceptualize womanist theology as “theology in its own right.”⁵⁷ Yet, he also views its emergence as historically related to the black theology movement since it critically responds to the patriarchal perspectives and approaches evinced by black theologians. Warnock believes that black theology needed to be evangelized by the insights of womanist theology.⁵⁸ He describes it as “a distinctive theological discourse” that is “sourced by the raw materials of black oral tradition, sacred and secular, and is informed by the intersectionality of the concerns

⁵⁶ Warnock, 142.

⁵⁷ Warnock, 157.

⁵⁸ Warnock, 156.

raised by white feminists, black theologians, and other marginalized peoples.”⁵⁹ He credits womanists with nuancing the complex interrelationship between piety and liberation. By returning their gaze and ears to the practices and voices of church women, womanism often recovers the potential for resistance and societal critique encapsulated within seemingly ordinary acts of worship and communal organization. He presents, summarizes, and engages the theology of womanists like Karen Baker-Fletcher, Delores Williams, Emilie Townes, Kelly Brown-Douglas, Jacquelyn Grant, Daphne Wiggins, and Teresa L. Fry Brown. As with black theology, his hope is that the black church would enter into a serious and sustained conversation with womanists since “the black church is not one thing and womanism another.”⁶⁰

Having examined historically the divided mind of the black church, and carefully mapped its liberationist core into four distinct but interrelated moments throughout its lifespan, Warnock concludes that a fifth moment is needed. He calls it “the flowering of a self-critical black liberationist community.”⁶¹ This moment is integrative insofar as it brings together black theologians, womanist theologians, and black pastors to develop a “full-orbed pastoral and public theology of black liberation” that is sophisticated in its biblical hermeneutics, attentive to its liberationist heritage, and aware of the immense value and meaning of the black church’s evangelical piety.⁶² For Warnock, such a moment would benefit black theology because it would provide it with the church audience necessary to test the truth of its claims, especially

⁵⁹ Warnock, 157.

⁶⁰ Warnock, 159.

⁶¹ Warnock, 185.

⁶² Warnock, 185.

because the church is the object of its critiques and remonstrations. He argues that the black church would benefit from a critical and self-conscious theological principle which could prevent it from lapsing into an uncritical and complacent evangelicalism that is more influenced by white conservatism than its own liberationist history. He concludes that the black community would benefit from an organized public voice composed of black church leaders and black academic theologians who could address the reality of pervasive black suffering in the world.

Despite arguing that black liberation theology provides the church with a critical and self-conscious theological principle, Warnock's observations remain tethered to the domain of sociological analysis, which causes him to flatten and elide the theological differences between the black church and black liberation theology. He advances a similar argument as C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya who explicitly state their reliance upon social analysis and sociology as the method and discipline to which they are committed.⁶³ Lincoln and Mamiya propound a "dialectical model" of the black church that envisions the black church as an institution characterized by a series of six dialectical tensions.⁶⁴ They argue that throughout history, the black church has oscillated between poles comprised of six pairs of polar opposites. The pairs listed include priestly and prophetic functions, other-worldly versus this-worldly orientations, communal and privatistic approaches to ministry, charismatic versus bureaucratic organizational styles, universalism versus particularism regarding racial identity and identification, and resistance versus accommodation in reference to cultural norms.⁶⁵ Lincoln

⁶³ Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, 2.

⁶⁴ Lincoln and Mamiya, 11.

⁶⁵ Lincoln and Mamiya, 13–14.

and Mamiya state, “the dialectic holds polar opposites in tension, constantly shifting between the polarities in historical time,” thus proffering a similar description of the black church’s function that Warnock later espouses.⁶⁶ Although claiming to explore the issue theologically, Warnock’s compatibilism is more sociological in nature, concentrating on the church’s function and activity, and therefore ignoring the wide disparities in theological belief between the two traditions.

Like Andrews, Warnock’s compatibilism views rapprochement as an issue of shifting emphases set against the backdrop of a shared theological worldview. He considers black liberation theologians to be pivotal for testing the faithfulness of the church to its essential mission. He assumes that when disagreements exist regarding the essential nature of the church’s mission, theologians and practitioners draw upon a shared repository of theological beliefs to help adjudicate the dispute, thus underscoring Warnock’s assessment of these conflicts as ultimately being compatible and reconcilable. Warnock himself expresses this position, arguing that the disagreements between black theologians and black pastors are *“indicative of differences in theological emphases between the pietistic and liberationist dimensions of black salvific understanding.* In this way, the debates between...black theologians and black pastors have often been manifestations of themes dialectically related, shifting at different historical moments, in the saga of black faith (emphasis mine).”⁶⁷ In Warnock’s analysis, the “black salvific understanding” constitutes a shared theological outlook embraced by both black theologians and black pastors. Any differences are attributed to

⁶⁶ Lincoln and Mamiya, 11.

⁶⁷ Warnock, 76-77.

“emphases” regarding its modes of expression and not fundamental discrepancies regarding its meaning. However, as this dissertation will show, it is precisely the theological issue of salvific understanding that divides irreconcilably the black church and black liberation theology into incommensurable paradigms.

Incompatibilists

Cecil Wayne Cone and the Identity Crisis in Black Theology

Cecil Wayne Cone was one of the first scholars to articulate and analyze the disjunction between black religion as practiced by most African American Christians and the observations of Black Liberation Theology. Cone indicts Black Theology for suffering from an identity crisis of its own making, and he identifies two major points of tension within Black Theology that precipitate this crisis. First, he claims that Black Theology has too readily identified with the methods and norms of the white theological academy. Secondly, he argues that the ideology and praxis of the Black Power movement forms the basis for constructive theology and ethics within Black Theology. For Cone, both of these points of tension divert Black Theology from what should be its primary task. He avers, “Theology, whatever else it may be, is an orderly description of the faith of the church. Black Theology, accordingly, is rooted in the black religious experience; it is an analysis of black religion. Black religion is therefore its only appropriate point of departure.”⁶⁸ Insofar as each of these tension points distracts Black

⁶⁸ Cone, *The Identity Crisis in Black Theology*, 18.

Theology from its proper task, then an ensuing crisis of identity results that produces confusion and distortion.

Before tracing the threads of tension and crisis within black religion, Cone explicates what he perceives to be the fundamental and essential properties of black religion. He begins by enumerating the sources that gave rise to African-American Christianity. Siding with Herskovitz in the Herskovitz vs. Frazier debate, he views the black Christian religious experience in America as being predominantly African in origin and character.⁶⁹ According to Cone, traditional African religion, while differing widely in its particular manifestations, displays a uniformity of beliefs and practices manifested in a few important themes. Cone shows that African societies imbue all of life with sacred significance and they view religious life as interwoven and intimately involved in the entire fabric of individual and communal existence. The propensity of slaves to adopt a religious understanding of themselves, their existence, and their world, echoes this religious awareness observed within traditional African societies.

African religion's belief in an Almighty and Sovereign God constitutes another definitive characteristic that predisposed slaves to accept Christianity. Cone cites John Mbiti's *African Religions and Philosophy*, in which Mbiti studied 300 peoples from Africa and concluded that "in all these societies, without a single exception, people have a notion of God as the Supreme Being."⁷⁰ Moreover, Mbiti finds that "this is the most minimal and fundamental idea about

⁶⁹ The debate refers to opposing positions taken by Melville J. Herskovits and E. Franklin Frazier regarding the presence of African retentions in the United States. Herskovits argues that African retentions did persist during slavery, while Frazier, in response to Herskovits, argues that enslavement stripped black newcomers of their cultural heritage, and replaced it with Christianity. See Melville J. Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past* (New York: Harper, 1941); E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United States* (Chicago, IL: University Of Chicago Press, 1939).

⁷⁰ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy*, 2nd Revised & enlarged edition (Gaborone: Heinemann, 1990); Cone, *The Identity Crisis in Black Theology*, 30.

God, found in all African societies.”⁷¹ For Cone, it is the confluence of African traditional religion, the exigencies of the slave experience and the slaves’ exposure to the Bible that form the springboard from which black Christianity in America emerged.

Cone next depicts the existential conundrum within which slaves lived. On one hand, they were helpless and dependent, appealing to God for comfort and deliverance from the brutality of slavery. On the other hand, the same God that they sought was used by white masters to justify the slaves’ condition. Some slaves ridiculed the idea of God, while others discerned that their masters misconstrued the Bible to encourage their servility and bondage. Cone discovers, “But in this absurd situation, the slave encountered the Almighty Sovereign God. The God the slave encountered was not the God of white missionaries, but the God of his lost African heritage and of his own experience, who was more powerful than the slave traders and overseers.”⁷² In this encounter, slaves became aware of their own sinfulness and of the holiness of God. This recognition of one’s sinfulness led to conversion, which Cone identifies as the *sine qua non* of black religion.

He cites the conversion stories of different slaves to provide a phenomenological understanding of the conversion experience from the slaves’ perspective. One of the foremost effects of this conversion is the newfound sense of freedom that slaves experienced, regardless of whether their external condition changed. In his words, “The historical condition of slavery that had presented itself as an overwhelming power no longer controlled the inner being of the slave. God, the embodiment of the new level of reality, had set the slave free, and the slave

⁷¹ Cone, *The Identity Crisis in Black Theology*, 30.

⁷² Cone, 42.

was convinced that ‘whosoever the Lord sets free is free indeed’.”⁷³ Cone objects to the notion that this sense of freedom was escapist or an opiate that militated against resistance. Instead, the slave expected God to eventually overthrow the oppressors, but in the meantime, the oppressed gained strength and endurance to survive daily inhumanities while continuing to struggle for freedom.⁷⁴

Cone also disparages any attempts to bifurcate black religion into its political and religious components since “political struggle has seldom been carried on outside the religious world view, and religion has seldom been devoid of political expressions.”⁷⁵ Instead, he argues that all expressions of religious activity are grounded within the conversion experience, and he suggests that religious and political modes of religious activity should be renamed as “maintenance of community” and “struggle against evil” in order to show their historical interrelatedness within black religious expression.⁷⁶

In surveying pre-Civil War religion, Cone briefly recounts the exploits of such notable figures as Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Henry Highland Garnet, David Walker, Denmark Vesey, Gabriel Prosser, and Nat Turner to show how their resistance to oppression was based upon divine encounters with the Almighty Sovereign God. Whether expressed in a verbal attack on slavery, represented by Truth, acts of abolition, exemplified in Tubman, calls for rebellion, modeled by Garnet and Walker, or outright rebellion itself, illustrated by Prosser, Vesey, and Turner, each exemplar ultimately owed his or her resistance to a relationship with God. For

⁷³ Cone, 48.

⁷⁴ Cone, 49.

⁷⁵ Cone, 51.

⁷⁶ Cone, 51.

example, Tubman spoke to God frequently, and when unsure about impending danger, she often received instruction from God regarding how to lead her passengers safely to freedom.⁷⁷ He uses Turner's own words regarding his mystical and ecstatic religious experiences to demonstrate the origins of his violent resistance in an encounter with the Almighty Sovereign God.⁷⁸

Cone brooks no attempts to assign dichotomous qualitative distinctions to pre-Civil War and post-Civil War religion. Scholars like James Cone and Gayraud Wilmore oppose post-Civil War black religion—which they consider politically complacent, escapist, and otherworldly—to pre-Civil War religion, which they argue was animated by active resistance to and intolerance regarding racist oppression. To refute this narrative, Cecil Cone highlights the activism of Henry McNeal Turner and Marcus Garvey, who both verbally denounced oppression, and preachers like Reverdy C. Ransom, Adam Clayton Powell, and Martin Luther King, Jr., who acted in protest against injustice and racism. In King's case, after experiencing numerous death threats, his emotional strength was faltering and he doubted whether he could continue as leader of the civil rights movement. After praying for strength, King heard the voice of Jesus commanding him to stand up for righteousness and justice, and Jesus promised to never leave him alone. King's religious experience, cited in detail, helps to illustrate that the "main ingredient" of black religion is "the encounter with the Almighty Sovereign God."⁷⁹ For Cone, each of these post-Civil War leaders epitomized a synthesis of divine encounter and resistance that informed their acts of protest.

⁷⁷ Cone, 57.

⁷⁸ Cone, 60.

⁷⁹ Cone, 71.

The first half of Cone's text is devoted to establishing the African roots of black Christianity in America and arguing that its essence is defined as the encounter with the Almighty Sovereign God. This encounter, according to Cone, is epitomized by the conversion experience. The second half of the text analyzes the work of prominent black theologians to illustrate the nature of the "identity crisis" being suffered by black theology. In each case, the author departs from the essence of black religion as defined by Cone, and substitutes some other concept or trait as constitutive of black Christianity. For Cone, this departure from the crux of black religion leads black theologians down unproductive and self-defeating paths. By reducing the core of black religion to some political ideology or other social concept, scholars must consistently appeal to sources and methods extrinsic to the black religious tradition, which ends up causing their theological projects to suffer an identity crisis: they claim that their theology is black, but the methods used to communicate and construct it are decidedly white and academic in nature. When the scholar does attempt to use ideology like "Black Power" to explicate black theology, the project, while ostensibly remaining faithful to the black tradition, becomes insufficiently theological, since it departs from the actual confessional experience and divine encounter that structures and defines black religion. Such is the case with Joseph Washington, who identifies "the uniqueness of black religion purely with the *quest for freedom, justice, and equality* in this world."⁸⁰ Although Washington's later works painstakingly ground black Christian religion within the practices and sensibilities of traditional African religion, he still identifies freedom and equality as the essence of black religion. Cone states that he enthusiastically embraces the salience of freedom and equality for understanding black religion,

⁸⁰ Cone, 77.

but cautions that “freedom and equality in black religion must be interpreted in the light of God, and not God in the light of freedom and equality.”⁸¹

Cecil Cone next critiques the father of black theology, who happens to be his younger brother, James Cone. One of his major critiques of James Cone is that he uncritically endorses “Black Power as “the theological base for the development of Black Theology.”⁸² This identification with Black Power leads James Cone to divide black religious history into its pre-Civil War and post-Civil War components. Cecil Cone disputes James Cone’s characterization of post-Civil War religion as discontinuous with the pre-Civil War religion. He opines, “This difficulty results from the inability of Black Power to come to terms with any situation which does not blatantly call for liberation at any cost.”⁸³ According to Cecil Cone, James Cone’s embrace of Black Power as a foundation for black theological discourse disrupts the concatenation of consistent religious expression that characterizes black religion in America. While different modes arise at different moments within history, they are all representations of the same essence, or core. Furthermore, Black Power cannot fully come to terms with the religious nature of the resistance favored by leaders such as Nat Turner and Harriet Tubman. It reduces their acts to mere social, political, and economic expressions while eliding the ways that God’s directives “stand in judgment upon everything, including liberation.”⁸⁴ Regarding Nat Turner, Cecil Cone states, “We are prepared to argue that to understand Nat Turner *and* his rebellion, one must deal with the *religious experience* of the man.”⁸⁵ Cone’s opposition to

⁸¹ Cone, 84.

⁸² Cone, 96.

⁸³ Cone, 97.

⁸⁴ Cone, 99.

⁸⁵ Cone, 99.

James Cone's appropriation of Black Power derives from the competing loyalties of black religion and Black Power. In ultimately pursuing the good of his own human dignity, the Black Power exponent expresses ultimate loyalty to a human factor or characteristic. Black religion, however, understands God's transcendence to defy reduction to any act of human resistance, since, as Cecil Cone quotes, " 'God's ways are not our ways, nor are his thoughts our thoughts' ."⁸⁶

The identity crisis arising from attempts to use Black Power as a basis for black theology becomes exacerbated, in Cecil Cone's analysis, by James Cone's usage of theological methodology exogenous to black religion. James Cone, attempting to refute distortions that may have been introduced by later communities seeking to depict Christ in their own image, approves of the historical-critical method for locating the Jesus of history.⁸⁷ Cecil Cone's rejoinder decries this method, finding it relevant for white academic theologians, but not the community that James Cone seeks to engage:

It should be obvious to any one acquainted with black religion that Cone is not dealing with questions his community is able to ask and still be true to itself. As we saw earlier, the problem of the historical Jesus is not a problem in the black community, and cannot be in the nature of the case. Schweitzer, Bultmann, and their followers are dealing with problems that arose in a culture and from a perspective that is European, and not African or Afro-American. In effect, the quest for the Jesus of history represents an apologetic for Christianity on the part of those western theologians who are culturally committed to the historical critical method.⁸⁸

In Cecil Cone's estimation, James Cone seeks to recover an image of Christ that is normative for black liberation, but which has been excavated using the tools of the white academic

⁸⁶ Cecil Cone quotes Isaiah 55:8 from the Bible which states, " 'For My thoughts are not your thoughts, Nor are your ways My ways' declares the LORD." Holy Bible, New American Standard Bible.

⁸⁷ Cone, *The Identity Crisis in Black Theology*, 109.

⁸⁸ Cone, 109–10.

establishment. Neither approach embodies the essence of black religion, and leads to an identity crisis in which black religion is reduced to the secularism of Black Power or the irrelevant historical-critical method favored by the white theological establishment. Cecil Cone acknowledges James Cone's ensuing earnest attempts at addressing critiques alleging that he too readily relies upon white theological sources and methods. Cecil Cone finds James Cone's *The Spiritual and the Blues*, and *God of the Oppressed* to be noteworthy attempts at recovering the significance of the black religious experience for black theology.⁸⁹ Even here, however, Cecil Cone finds him too wedded to liberation as the norm for understanding these religious expressions. James Cone's analysis of encounters with God become subjugated to a sociopolitical focus that grant liberation primacy as the ultimate aim of black theology.

Finally, Cecil Cone engages the oeuvre of J. Deotis Roberts, a critic of James Cone who believes that liberation must lead to reconciliation in order to reflect the truth of the whole gospel. For Roberts, the universal character of the gospel cannot be ignored, and Cone quotes his statement that "The only Christian way in race relations is a liberating experience of reconciliation for the white oppressor as well as for the black oppressed."⁹⁰ Cone questions whether Roberts' universalism does not implicitly and unwittingly embrace "Euro-American categories that are in themselves alien to black religious history."⁹¹ As with the other two authors, Cone views Roberts' departure from the divine encounter that comprises the black religious experience as a crisis inducing flaw. For Cone, the pursuit of reconciliation through a

⁸⁹ James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation* (New York, NY: Seabury Press, 1972); Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 1975.

⁹⁰ Cone, *The Identity Crisis in Black Theology*, 137.

⁹¹ Cone, 137.

universal understanding of the gospel without fully exploring the *sine qua non* of black religion diminishes the salience of Roberts' theology for the black community, and seems more concerned with preserving a seat at the white academic theological roundtable.

In a terse yet riveting conclusion, Cone rehearses his central argument. He chides black theologians for abandoning the essence of black religion and describes an identity crisis in which black theologians are torn between allegiances to white theological methods and the sociopolitical commitments of Black Power. For Cone, these identity markers are foreign to the experiences of black slaves who experienced internal freedom through the power of God. This internal freedom was not escapist or compensatory, but enabled the slave to struggle against the brutal inhumanity of slavery. Cone clarifies the nature of this struggle:

Yet, although the slave participated with God in the destruction of the slave system, his meeting with the divine was not in its essence "political." That is to say, the black religious experience is not a political realization, though it has political consequences. Thus politics is not the starting point of black religion. Rather, God is! Black people did not resist slavery because they believed Jesus was a radical revolutionary. They resisted because Jesus encountered them and gave them new names wherein their identity was affirmed as children of the heavenly father. This experience was *specifically religious*. Political struggle happened as a consequence, and not as the point of departure.⁹²

Cecil Cone's text is groundbreaking in its critique of Black Liberation Theology's neglect of the true essence of black religion, identified as the conversion experience and encounter with the Almighty Sovereign God. He critiques the then leading progenitor of black theology, James Cone, and redirects his attention to the incompatibility between the historical-critical method that James Cone sometimes employs and the supernatural foundations of black religion. Furthermore, Cecil Cone highlights James Cone's undue stress on the concept of liberation,

⁹² Cone, 141.

which causes him to define it as the true meaning of black religion, thus underscoring another area of incompatibility. In order to make their projects compatible with black religion, Cecil Cone would have black theologians like Washington, Cone, and Roberts, embrace conversion and supernatural encounter as the core of black religiosity. They would also need to mitigate their defense of sociopolitical liberation as providing the best explanation for the primary meaning of black religion.

Cecil Cone underestimates the conceptual distance between his version of black religion and that of his interlocutors. This explains why James Cone recognizes the insightfulness of Cecil Cone's first claim about his overreliance on white sources, writing two books that respond to this critique, but conflates the conversion experience with liberation, thus ensuring that their theological approaches remain incompatible. Cecil Cone does not seem to realize that James Cone cannot lessen his attention to liberation without also changing the complexion of Black Liberation Theology itself. The compatibility that he seeks appears illusory in the face of James Cone's professed hermeneutical commitment to liberation as his preferred interpretive lens for evaluating and explaining black religion.

Cecil Cone's limited theological explanation for what distinguishes black religion only includes conversion and encounter with the "Almighty Sovereign God." The fact that Cecil Cone attaches this same belief to traditional African religions in order to assert continuity between slave religion and African religion prevents him from specifically identifying sites of Christian disagreement between himself and James Cone. Therefore, the Christian theological beliefs and methods that comprise this conversion and encounter are left largely unexplored. More in-depth interrogation of differences regarding Christian beliefs and methods in black liberation

theology and black church religiosity are required to unearth the types of incommensurability that characterize their relationship. It is only at this level of precision that their widely divergent views regarding salvation, the Bible, and sin, can be discovered.

Cheryl J. Sanders and the Role of the Womanist Concept for Christian Theology and Ethics

During the inchoate stages of womanist theology as an academic discipline, The Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion published a roundtable discussion between Cheryl J. Sanders and a group of black women scholars, most of whom identify themselves as womanists. Sanders believed that the term “womanist” needed further interrogation before it could be considered normative for circumscribing black women’s ethical and theological discourse within the church and academy.⁹³

Sanders, in researching the term, retrieves Alice Walker’s intentions for it from a book review Walker penned in 1981. In this review of Rebecca Jackson’s writings, Walker rejects another scholars’ suggestion that Jackson was a lesbian. After doing so, she states that to use the term lesbian in reference to loving sexual relationships between black women would be inappropriate because the word lesbian is derived from the island of Lesbos and signifies separation rather than connectedness. In Sanders’ understanding, “Walker offers her own word *womanist* as a preferred alternative to *lesbian* in the context of black culture.”⁹⁴

Sanders compares Walker’s longer and more elaborate definition of womanism in her 1983 volume of writings called *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* to her earlier one, and finds “a

⁹³ Sanders et al., “Christian Ethics and Theology in Womanist Perspective.”

⁹⁴Sanders et al., 84.

shift in emphasis.”⁹⁵ Whereas the first definition seemed to limit the term to black lesbians, the second appears to have black feminism in mind, although Walker does specify in the second definition that a womanist “loves other women sexually and non-sexually”. In Sanders estimation, both definitions applaud black women’s freedom to “choose her own labels and lovers.”⁹⁶ Sanders notes that most womanist writers invoking the term refer to the second more expansive definition, but do not acknowledge the first. She also observes that womanist ethicists and theologians have applied the definition to their projects in various but often dissimilar ways, most often shaping the definition to fit their individual thoughts and purposes. She asks several provocative questions to ascertain the suitability of the neologism for black women’s theological and ethical scholarship:

In our efforts to tailor Walker’s definition to suit our own purposes, have we misconstrued the womanist concept and its meaning? Is the word womanist being co-opted because of its popular appeal and used as a mere title or postscript for whatever black women scholars want to celebrate, criticize or construct? Are we committing a gross conceptual error when we use Walker’s descriptive cultural nomenclature as a foundation for the normative discourse of theology and ethics? On what grounds, if any, can womanist authority and authenticity be established in our work? In other words, what is the necessary and sufficient condition for doing womanist scholarship? To be a black woman? A black feminist? A black lesbian?⁹⁷

To pursue answers to these questions, Sanders proposes categories by which womanists can be evaluated based upon how closely they follow or diverge from Walker’s definition, which Sanders summarizes as a basic concern for black women’s freedom to name their own experience and to exercise prerogatives of sexual preference.”⁹⁸

⁹⁵ Alice Walker, *In Search of Our Mother’s Gardens* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983).

⁹⁶ Sanders et al., “Christian Ethics and Theology in Womanist Perspective,” 85.

⁹⁷ Sanders et al., 85.

⁹⁸ Sanders et al., 85.

The three categories she proposes include context, criteria, and claims. Based upon Walker's description, Sanders identifies the context for womanism as an intergenerational conversation between a mother and daughter. The daughter, trying to act like a woman, is being audacious, willful, and assertive. The word womanist is derived from the word "womanish" which the mother uses to describe the daughter's curious and courageous attitude. In Walker's definition, womanish is the same as the expression, "you trying to be grown."⁹⁹ For the criteria, Sanders' turns to the entirety of Walker's second definition as a lens for assessing appropriation of the term. She does not suggest that womanists include every facet of Walker's definition in order to employ it within their own work. However, she does find it problematic that writers and scholars label their work womanist on the basis of only one or two criteria from the definition. Furthermore, in considering the criteria as a whole, Sanders concludes that womanist "is essentially a secular cultural category whose theological and ecclesial significations are rather tenuous. Theological content too easily gets "read into" the womanist concept, whose central emphasis remains the self-assertion and struggle of black women for freedom, with or without the aid of God or Jesus or anybody else."¹⁰⁰ In scrutinizing the claims of womanism, Sanders discovers that it actually only makes one major claim: that black women have the right to name their own experience.¹⁰¹ She restates her earlier skepticism regarding the theological value of womanism for describing the practices and beliefs of black churchwomen, viewing it as an imposition meant to recategorize and rename the

⁹⁹ walker, *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens*.

¹⁰⁰ Sanders et al., "Christian Ethics and Theology in Womanist Perspective," 86.

¹⁰¹ Sanders et al., 87.

practices and experiences of black women who may have rejected the term had they been given the opportunity.¹⁰²

Sanders recognizes in womanism a leitmotif that encourages sexual autonomy, which includes the freedom to name and celebrate one's sexual experiences. For example, outside of Walker's explicit assertions, she finds it in the daughter's brashness and pursuit of independence where the desire to be grown "bears a hint of self-assertion in a sexual sense".¹⁰³ For Sanders, there are two central inseparable dimensions that make up womanist self-assertion: the personal-sexual, and the political-social. Based upon the fact that Walker does not apply the womanist designation to Rebecca Jackson, who pursued celibacy, she concludes that perhaps it is inappropriate to label a woman such as Sojourner Truth a womanist even though she was committed to the social liberation of her people from racist oppression, since asserting sexual freedom was not her goal.

The rest of Sanders essay critically evaluates womanism based upon her threefold scheme of context, criteria, and claims. Her arguments can be reduced to two points: 1) Womanism is primarily a secular concept that begins with black women's experience as a basis for theology. This means that "it is problematic for black women who are doing womanist scholarship from the vantage point of Christian faith to weigh the claims of the womanist perspective over against the claims of Christianity."¹⁰⁴ If one expects to be faithful to the beliefs, values, and practices that animated the activism and exploits of black women within history, then she suggests it is Christianity and not womanism that provides this foundation. 2)

¹⁰² Sanders et al., 87.

¹⁰³ Sanders et al., 88.

¹⁰⁴ Sanders et al., 90.

Womanism approves of sexual behavior, namely homosexuality (lesbianism), that does not safeguard the African-American community and family. While Sanders concludes by stating, “the womanist perspective has great power, potential and limitations,” the majority of her essay attempts to expose its limitations and the theological dilemmas that it creates.¹⁰⁵

Five womanist scholars respond to Sanders’ essay. This section will briefly summarize the responses of each author, realizing that some of their fine-grained analysis will be obscured by brevity. We will notice that some shared themes emerge in response to Sanders’ critiques. In the ensuing order of responses, Katie Cannon’s essay is first. She begins by stating, “In preparing to write this response, I found myself repeatedly stopped by waves of anger at Dr. Cheryl Sanders’ treatment of womanist as a secular terminological issue.”¹⁰⁶ After reflecting on the reasons for this anger, Cannon argues for womanism as a term that clarifies black women’s ethical values and practices in the face of patriarchy and racism within society and within the black church itself. Womanism enables black women to critically examine sermons, images, and themes employed by the church to assess whether they contribute to the flourishing of black women. It examines the power relations within the black church and contests the ways that the church often mimics the patriarchy of the wider society. For Cannon, womanist theology and ethics also reject heteropatriarchal norms that exclude gay and lesbian relationships from the accepted models of marriage and family. Ultimately, in Cannon’s words, “a womanist liberation theological ethic places Black women at the center of human social relations and ecclesiastical institutions.”¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁵ Sanders et al., 109.

¹⁰⁶ Sanders et al., 92.

¹⁰⁷ Sanders et al., 93.

Emilie Townes, whose essay immediately follows Cannon's, commends Sanders for fostering such important and timely dialogue but finds that she makes a critical error in her interpretation and appropriation of Walker's definition of womanism.¹⁰⁸ For Townes, Walker is not concerned with lesbianism *per se*, since she refers to black women who love other women "sexually or not" in her article about Rebecca Jackson. Instead, she is primarily concerned with "the survival and flourishing of the Afro-American community in its diversity: age, gender, sexuality, radical activity, accommodationist stance, creative promise."¹⁰⁹ Townes sees Walker as challenging the heterosexism of the African American community and she equates Walker's protection of the black community's diversity with Peter Paris' discovery of the black church's central message: "Human equality under God is categorical, absolute, unconditional, and universally applicable."¹¹⁰

Townes responds to Sanders' reservations regarding womanism's inattentiveness to the sacred by discovering Walker's understanding of the Spirit as "woven intricately into the very fabric of existence itself."¹¹¹ While she agrees that Walker's concept of the divine as accessible to anyone who searches for it within themselves is not traditionally found within the African-American Christian tradition, Townes finds that Walker's immanent theology can potentially foster the cultivation of healthy relationships with God and others. According to Townes, by positing an immanent view of the Spirit, Walker reveals the need for theologians and ethicists

¹⁰⁸ Sanders et al., 94.

¹⁰⁹ Sanders et al., 95.

¹¹⁰ Sanders et al., 95. See Peter J. Paris, *The Social Teaching of the Black Churches* (Philadelphia, PA: Augsburg Fortress Publishers, 1998).

¹¹¹ Sanders et al., "Christian Ethics and Theology in Womanist Perspective," 96.

to construct a theology of the Spirit that contributes to inclusivity, justice, and liberation of all people.

M. Shawn Copeland disapproves of Sanders' rigid demands for total or complete conformity to Walker's definition before it can be usefully and authentically employed. She also refutes Sanders' belief that womanism's secular roots limit its deployment within theological and ethical discourse, demonstrating that Christian thinkers have altered, reshaped, and modified secular feasts and festivals for their own uses. Moreover, she demonstrates that feminist theologians took the secular term "feminism", and imbued it with sacred meaning and application. She opines, "If it is possible to speak of secular feminists and Christian feminists, surely it is possible to speak of secular womanists and Christian womanists."¹¹²

For Copeland, the ground of the theological and ethical task is the mind of the scholar herself. She encourages the emergence and development of womanist scholars who are excoriating oppression in all of its forms while also confidently defining their worth and value. Such a task allows the sources of black women, including "narratives, novels, and prayers" to be equally recognized as viable resources for rigorous theological inquiry alongside the ruminations and pontifications of black and white men. Copeland's major point is that "The term womanist makes visible and gives voice to African American women scholars in religion who are in the midst of the struggle to shape a distinctive perspective that takes seriously the experiences and traditions of black women as a source for theologizing on the black experience."¹¹³

¹¹² Sanders et al., 99.

¹¹³ Sanders et al., 101.

bell hooks objects to a misplaced focus in Sanders' essay. She laments the marginalization of feminism within Sanders' discourse, and views womanism's relationship to feminism as a priority for meaningful discussion of the term. Whereas Sanders, according to hooks, prefers to concentrate on the cultural behavior and meaning of womanism, including the audaciousness of the daughter and her pursuit of sexual freedom, hooks discovers that womanism has enabled "black women scholars to do feminist thinking using a term that does not imply absence of concern for race or the survival of black people."¹¹⁴ By returning to the centrality of the feminist movement and its forceful critiques of patriarchy in all areas of society, hooks believes that womanism has opened a space for black women to engage in rigorous and radical feminist theorizing that can positively impact the black church.

hooks takes Sanders to task for reductionism, arguing that she collapses Walker's definitions into a single category, thus allowing her to portray womanism as something "inimical to Christian belief and practice."¹¹⁵ hooks argues that womanism enables the construction of new intellectual paradigms that enrich theological and ethical discourse and that are relevant to the lives of black women. For example, hooks suggests that the black church would do well to hearken to a feminist perspective, especially in regard to nontraditional family structures like single-parent homes or sexual partnerships that diverge from heteronormative models. Like Townes and Copeland before her, she discovers theological meaning in Walker's invocation of the spirit and encourages its appropriation for Christian use. She shows that a Christian scholar researching and commenting on mystical experience could

¹¹⁴ Sanders et al., 103.

¹¹⁵ Sanders et al., 103.

use Walker's definition without becoming less Christian or without Christology being foregrounded in the discussion.

The final response to Sanders is penned by Cheryl Townsend Gilkes. For Townsend Gilkes, Walker's term "fits" and just "feels right." It presents an "aha" moment for her, providing the same feeling that she felt when she first started wearing an "Afro." She states, "I was attached to Walker's term and her definition of it because I perceived that it was the most accurate distillation of the distinctiveness of the African-American female experience as I had both observed and partaken of it."¹¹⁶

Townsend Gilkes enumerates two ways that womanism is helpful for theologizing about black women's experience. First, the dominant theological image and agent within the African American religious tradition has been the Holy Spirit's work in everyday life. Walker seizes upon this historical and theological reality when she states that a womanist "loves the Spirit." For Townsend Gilkes, "It points to the Christian mysticism that undergirds the most radical actions of our foremothers and continues to spill over into the lives of the most secular of black women activists."¹¹⁷ Secondly, she cites love as mentioned in Walker's definition eleven times. Walker's love embraces healing, wholeness, and community, and advocates for the kind of "agape" love that Martin Luther King, Jr. extolled in his life and thought. Townsend Gilkes then examines Walker's emphasis on self-love, which is sorely needed among groups of people who exhibit destructive compensatory behaviors due to low self-esteem.¹¹⁸ In concluding, Townsend Gilkes speaks of Walker's emphasis on love in this way: "In my reading of

¹¹⁶ Sanders et al., 105.

¹¹⁷ Sanders et al., 106.

¹¹⁸ Sanders et al., 108.

Walker...this love is the greatest issue in human existence and the critical point of convergence between her creative thinking and the task of Christian ethics.”¹¹⁹

Sanders proffers a final rejoinder to the perspectives propounded by her womanist interlocutors and consolidates their responses around two major issues that characterize them: 1) whether womanist is a suitable term for theological expression and exploration in spite of Walker’s own non-Christian religious commitments, and 2) whether Walker’s attention to lesbianism within her definition diminishes its usefulness for the black church’s ethical commitments. To these two, one should add a third. Each womanist is careful to denote the meaning and relevance of womanism for the liberation of black women from patriarchal oppression and racism, and for the recovery of black women’s experiences and sources as resources for theological and ethical discourse.

After ascertaining that her respondents find the mere fact that she raised questions about the secularist nature of the term and its sexual connotations problematic, Sanders turns to her own personal narrative to account for the discrepancy between her position and the contrasting pole of her colleagues. In reflecting carefully on the nature of her responses versus her interlocutors, she discovers that more than any other factor, it is her identification with the holiness Church of God tradition that informs and actuates her critiques of womanism’s secularity and its acceptance of homosexual lifestyles. Sanders then makes a pivotal and pertinent observation:

...I sense that these major points of contention in the roundtable discussion are energized by the conflict between liberal and conservative theological perspectives

¹¹⁹ Sanders et al., 109.

more than by a lack of consensus regarding the appropriate terms, procedures and content of womanist ethics and theology.¹²⁰

She goes on to specify the ways that the Church of God impinges upon her theological beliefs in relationship to womanist discourse. For example, in explicating the role of scripture in her tradition and its significance for her interrogation of womanism, she states,

Our regard for the Bible as the supreme source of our understanding of the nature of divinity and the situation of humanity makes it difficult to ascribe independent revelatory authority to any other sources or concepts in doing theology apart from the light of Scripture. Thus, it is problematic for me to incorporate terms, concepts, practices and approaches into my own theological and ethical reflection that contradict my limited but growing understanding of the Word of God.¹²¹

Sanders closes her essay by reaffirming her commitment to justice and liberation for black women. She relishes the opportunity to utilize the insights, resources, and experiences of black women to contribute to their empowerment and wholeness. Her hope is that womanist theology does not become an academic enterprise, ensconced within halls of learning but alien to the oppressed members of society that it purports to liberate. Sanders believes that womanism can become instrumental in impacting and transforming the lives of black folk to the degree that both the church and the academy can embrace its liberative impetus and potential for engendering ethical praxis.

Sanders assumes initially that she and her colleagues share core fundamental theological commitments that can help ascertain the suitability of the term “womanism” for the collective projects that they pursue. She clarifies her trepidation regarding womanism by highlighting two questions that she hopes will cultivate rich dialogue regarding the relationship

¹²⁰ Sanders et al., 110.

¹²¹ Sanders, et al., “Roundtable Discussion,” 111.

of theological beliefs and methods to the practice of ethics. The first issue refers to whether womanism's explicit endorsement of lesbianism hinders its role as a normative concept within Christian ethics. The second issue is similar in that it questions whether a term that is grounded in non-Christian spirituality should be foundational for constructing an approach to Christian ethics.

Each of Sanders' respondents lend her claims little credence, and none appeal to biblical or traditional Christian authority to do so. Their rejoinders arise from an absolute commitment to liberation and wholeness, according them the same authority that Sanders ascribes to scripture. Sanders began the roundtable assuming compatibility between her theological values and those of her respondents. By the end of the discussion, however, she is keenly aware of the obtaining incompatibility on the issues that she raises. Sanders realizes that her theological views are incompatible with those of her colleagues, but she hopes that their collective interest in contributing to the wholeness and flourishing of black women will allow collaboration and cooperation to ensue. For example, she states, "I hope that our debate on the specificities of theological method and the relevance of sexual preference will not deter us from forthright consideration of the concrete concern that is at the root of these womanist ethical and theological statements, which is justice."¹²²

However, Sanders underestimates the consequences of theological incompatibility on ethical decision making. She concludes, "it is my hope that womanist ethics and theology can generate the practical enablement of oppressed persons in the society through the

¹²² Sanders et al., "Christian Ethics and Theology in Womanist Perspective," 111.

instrumentality of the church and the academy.”¹²³ Womanism views lesbians and gays as people in pursuit of flourishing and wholeness who are oppressed by heteronormativity. The notion that they are engaged in sinful activity, to the womanist community, is preposterous. Sanders’ view of the Bible as the supreme source of understanding the situation of humanity causes her to conceive of sex between people of the same sex as sinful. How does she propose that they will cooperate if one of the primary issues of oppression that concern womanists is interpreted as an issue of sin by Sanders? For Sanders, what does justice mean when lesbians and gays deny that justice exists for them within churches that deny them leadership positions or refuse to ordain their marriages? This question exposes Sanders’ incompatibilism as being too weak. The ethical solidarity she pursues is derailed by the disjunction between her colleagues’ liberal theological perspectives and her conservative views, particularly regarding sexuality, a stance that is grounded in views regarding salvation, sin, and the Bible that her respondents denounce. The problem is not one of incompatibility, but incommensurability.

Conclusion

In this chapter I reviewed comprehensively four landmark texts in the study of the relationship between the black church and black liberation theology/womanism. The close reading of these texts helps to give a comprehensive view of the various complexities, similarities, differences, assumptions, and allegiances that underlie the attempts at dialogue. These texts can be described as either compatibilist or incompatibilist in orientation. Compatibilists believe that both traditions share the same core theological perspectives, but

¹²³ Sanders, et al., 112.

identify the need to achieve better collaboration and agreement through emphasis on dispositions and activities that have been historically ignored by the tradition being critiqued. Incompatibilists view theological discrepancies between the black church and black liberation theology/womanism as distortions of black religion that prevent agreement and collective cooperation. However, they are hopeful that major changes in theological orientation can cause black liberation theology/womanism to more closely resemble the black church that theologians claim to love and serve. Both positions, while containing much truth, do not accurately represent the nature of the schism. This dissertation argues that the differences between the black church and black liberation theology are paradigmatic and incommensurable. This is to say that the black church traditionally exhibits a strong commitment to a Pietist theological paradigm, comprised of a set of beliefs, values, and methods regarding salvation, sin, and the role of the Bible. Black liberation theologians/womanists exhibit a strong commitment to a Liberationist theological paradigm, consisting of a set of beliefs, values, and methods regarding the primacy of liberation with their own attending beliefs and methods regarding sin, salvation, and the Bible. This dissertation will show that fundamental differences surrounding these core issues demonstrate the incommensurability of these two paradigms.

Chapter 2

EXPLORING SHIFTING PARADIGMS AND DIMENSIONS OF INCOMMENSURABILITY

Introduction

This dissertation argues that the theology of black churches and that of black liberation theology/womanism represent two incommensurable theological paradigms. The two competing paradigms, called respectively, the Pietist paradigm and Liberationist paradigm, currently battle for supremacy regarding how black churches should conceive of their role and mission in the world. This chapter will explicate theoretically the meaning of the term paradigm, also demonstrating how new paradigms emerge historically. This chapter will also explicate the meaning of incommensurability according to its three types, perceptual, methodological, and semantic, in order to examine the particular kinds of incommensurability that obtain between the two aforementioned paradigms. The chapter will derive most of its theoretical conclusions from the pioneering work of Thomas Kuhn, the leading figure in the philosophy of science, and the one most responsible for introducing the concepts of paradigms and incommensurability to contemporary academic discourse.

Paradigms and Paradigm Shifts

Kuhn's *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, responsible for the ubiquity of the term "paradigm shift" within fields such as business, law, medicine, education, and other

professional disciplines, continues to be one of the most cited academic books in history.¹²⁴

Having seemingly exhausted its application for a range of academic subjects, what use does it hold for this dissertation? Kuhn's thesis in this text provides a hermeneutical lens for historical and theological interpretation of the Liberationist paradigm of black theologians/womanists *vis a vis* the Pietist paradigm of black churches.¹²⁵ This is due to Kuhn's controversial and groundbreaking assessment of scientific progress. According to Kuhn, scientific knowledge is usually taught by science textbooks as a review of the exemplary scientific developments, techniques, facts, and events required for students to intellectually grasp the nature of their scientific field. According to standard assumptions, when scientists apply their learned techniques, facts, theories, and methods to actual problems and then solve them, scientific progress results. In this view, scientific progress is constituted by ongoing cumulative enlargements of prior knowledge based upon the continual efforts of scientists to apply experimentally their current knowledge to problems or puzzles. The resultant solutions expand the scientist's knowledge and lead to further scientific development and progress. Kuhn contests this standard view of scientific progress and considers it inaccurate for representing realistically the nature of ongoing epistemological change within science. In his estimation, scientific development can be envisioned as a succession of scientific revolutions.¹²⁶ A scientific revolution occurs when a scientific community rejects a paradigm that has structured and

¹²⁴ Bird, Alexander, "Thomas Kuhn", *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2013 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2013/entries/thomas-kuhn/>>. Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2nd edition (University of Chicago Press, 1970).

¹²⁵ For another application of Kuhn's theory to theology see Hans Kung, *Paradigm Change in Theology: A Symposium for the Future*, ed. David Tracy, trans. Margaret Kohl (New York, NY: Crossroad Publishing, 1989).

¹²⁶ Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure Of Scientific Revolutions*, Second, Enlarged, Enlarged (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 2–6.

defined scientific practice, and it consequently adopts a new paradigm incompatible with the former one. In his words, “they are the tradition-shattering complements to the tradition-bound activity of normal science.”¹²⁷

According to Kuhn, scientific activity generally proceeds according to *normal science*. Normal science refers to research that is based upon “past scientific achievements, achievements that some particular scientific community acknowledges for a time as supplying the foundation for further practice.”¹²⁸ These achievements are structured by and emerge from a particular paradigm, which comprises a community’s shared system of values, techniques, methods, and theoretical agreements. In other words, normal science can only proceed *via* a paradigm, a term that designates “the entire constellation of beliefs, values, techniques, and so on shared by the members of a given community.”¹²⁹ When a group of scientists are committed to the same paradigm, consensus and commitment to the same rules and standards results. This shared consensus is necessary for the practice of normal science to occur. In Kuhn’s analysis, most of the activity undertaken by scientists can be categorized as normal science. Kuhn states, “Paradigms gain their status because they are more successful than their competitors in solving a few problems that the group of practitioners has come to recognize as acute.”¹³⁰ However, the initial emergence of a paradigm means that it is necessarily rudimentary. Trailing in its wake are ambiguous concepts, incomplete explanations, and a need for further application to problems. Normal science, then, does not seek to invent new

¹²⁷Kuhn, 6.

¹²⁸ Kuhn, 10.

¹²⁹ Kuhn, 175.

¹³⁰ Kuhn, 23.

theories or usurp the established paradigm. Rather, its job is to further articulate and investigate “those phenomena and theories that the paradigm already supplies.”¹³¹

Kuhn, however, raises a pertinent question. If the problems that scientists investigate are merely to reinforce or clarify what they already know, why do they keep pursuing these problems? One reason is that the scientist’s solutions to these problems “add to the scope and precision with which the paradigm can be applied.”¹³² The other reason is that each problem provides a new way for a scientist to elaborate upon the existing paradigm. Scientists come to view problems as puzzles, or as significant tests of their skills, knowledge, and abilities.¹³³

The process inaugurating a paradigm shift begins when a scientist discovers an anomaly. An anomaly occurs when, in the process of experimentation or research, an unexpected phenomenon presents itself that the paradigm cannot account for. In other words, “anomaly appears only against the background provided by the paradigm.”¹³⁴ However, paradigms become paradigms because they are resistant to anomalies, and most anomalies can be explained or accounted for through subtle tweaks of the paradigm’s theory or method. When facing anomaly, the scientist’s first recourse is to check her work for mistakes or errors. If repeatedly finding the same unexpected outcome, the scientist tries to modify slightly the paradigm, because, in Kuhn’s observations, normal science “seems an attempt to force nature into the preformed and relatively inflexible box that the paradigm supplies.”¹³⁵ Since the paradigm receives its enduring and regulative status based upon its resilience to anomalies,

¹³¹ Kuhn, 24.

¹³² Kuhn, 36.

¹³³ Kuhn, 38.

¹³⁴ Kuhn, 65.

¹³⁵ Kuhn, 24.

which has caused it to remain stable and trustworthy in the face of unexpected discrepancies, it is only discarded as a last resort. A paradigm change occurs when the methods, theories, and concepts are then replaced with conceptual categories and procedures that allow the anomalous to become the expected.

When an anomaly represents a particularly formidable challenge to some aspect of normal science, such that it attracts attention from the field's most experienced and able minds, and when the anomaly is of such a magnitude that resolving it will lead to sweeping change regarding a widespread paradigm, crisis results.¹³⁶ Kuhn argues that this type of crisis must precede the invention of new scientific theories and it can be precipitated by external factors in addition to internal ones. Perhaps there are pressures upon the scientist from other professional disciplines to produce some desired product or outcome in conjunction with the internal demands of resolving some experimental anomaly. When scientists grapple with an anomaly that resists assimilation to the regnant puzzle-solving paradigm, "the transition to crisis and to extraordinary science has begun."¹³⁷ In every case, the switch from one paradigm must entail the concomitant adoption of a new one. Kuhn summarizes this crisis state and comments on its significance for instigating new paradigms:

The transition from a paradigm in crisis to a new one from which a new tradition of normal science can emerge is far from a cumulative process, one achieved by an articulation or extension of the old paradigm. Rather it is a reconstruction of the field from new fundamentals, a reconstruction that changes some of the field's most elementary theoretical generalizations as well as many of its paradigm methods and applications. During the transition period there will be a large but never complete overlap between the problems that can be solved by the old and by the new paradigm. But there will also be a decisive difference in the modes of solution. When the

¹³⁶ Kuhn, 82.

¹³⁷ Kuhn, 82.

transition is complete, the profession will have changed its view of the field, its methods, and its goals.¹³⁸

When crisis occurs, not everyone adopts the new paradigm, and the prerevolutionary and postrevolutionary paradigms may exist simultaneously although the two paradigms are fundamentally opposed to one another. Incommensurability results because the latter paradigm is only adopted after it takes what is anomalous and introduces new theoretical mechanisms that turn it into something predictable and taken for granted. Kuhn observes,

but if new theories are called forth to resolve anomalies in the relation of an existing theory to nature, then the successful new theory must somewhere permit predictions that are different from those derived from its predecessor. That difference could not occur if the two were logically compatible. In the process of being assimilated, the second must displace the first.¹³⁹

The shift from one paradigm to another often precipitates recategorization regarding a problem's significance. For example, problems that previously garnered substantial attention may begin to be considered "unscientific", and other problems that existed on the fringes of research agendas begin to constitute the core of research programs and scientific inquiry. Thus, the paradigm shift introduces a corresponding redefinition of the field's priorities.

Kuhn poses the question, "What is the process by which a new candidate for paradigm replaces its predecessor?"¹⁴⁰ He shows that usually the shift in conceptualization regarding a theory begins in the minds of one or a few individuals. These individuals are similar in two respects: First, they are "intensely concentrated" on the problems that provoked the crisis.¹⁴¹ Secondly, they are either relatively young or relatively new to the field. This means that they

¹³⁸ Kuhn, 85.

¹³⁹ Kuhn, 97.

¹⁴⁰ Kuhn, 144.

¹⁴¹ Kuhn, 144.

are not invested to the same degree as their colleagues in the methods, theories, and perspectives that comprise the paradigm being challenged for supremacy.

Kuhn wants to show that the dilemma regarding paradigm shifts cannot be grounded in logic and proofs, because undergoing the shift is more analogous to a religious conversion than a rational debate, especially since the paradigms express conflicting views regarding reality itself. Since each researcher has a persuasive and compelling reason for maintaining his or her position, and since the premises associated with the old and new positions are often not simply empirically derived, scientists must be converted from one to the other. In a passage that is worth quoting at length, Kuhn states,

In a sense that I am unable to explicate further, the proponents of competing paradigms practice their trades in different worlds. One contains constrained bodies that fall slowly, the other pendulums that repeat their motions again and again. In one, solutions are compounds, in the other mixtures. One is embedded in a flat, the other in a curved, matrix of space. Practicing in different worlds, the two groups of scientists see different things when they look from the same point in the same direction. Again, that is not to say that they can see anything they please. Both are looking at the world, and what they look at has not changed. But in some areas they see different things, and they see them in different relations one to the other. That is why a law that cannot even be demonstrated to one group of scientists may occasionally seem intuitively obvious to another. Equally, it is why, before they can hope to communicate fully, one group or the other must experience the conversion that we have been calling a paradigm shift.¹⁴²

The conversion of scientists to a new paradigm happens because scientists often become persuaded of the new paradigm's ability to solve the crisis affecting the field. Others view the paradigm as having superior ability to effectively confront future anomalies and crises that may arise. Sometimes aesthetic considerations play a role, and in other cases social and

¹⁴² Kuhn, 150.

professional pressure may induce the change in allegiance. In each case however, Kuhn demonstrates that the issue is ultimately one of faith and not mere rationality.¹⁴³

While scientific revolutions are common, they often remain hidden and invisible. Scientific progress is seen as a linear series of incremental accretions in knowledge due to repeated discoveries of new information instead of as shifts in entire paradigms due to attempts at resolving anomalies. This is due primarily to two reasons. First, the shift from one paradigm to another often means that they both employ the same language to describe the phenomena and the methods used to research them. Since the new emerges from the old, it often makes use of the same vocabulary, theoretical language, methods, and concepts as the prior paradigm. What differs, however, is the way that these are defined and interrelated within the new paradigm. This produces “a misunderstanding between the two competing schools” and hides the emergence of the new paradigm.¹⁴⁴ Secondly, successful revolutions have the tendency to “write history backward.”¹⁴⁵ In order to give the appearance that the newest development maintains continuity with all previous developments, later practitioners credit their predecessors with answers to questions that their paradigms did not permit to be asked.¹⁴⁶

¹⁴³ Kuhn, 158.

¹⁴⁴ Kuhn, 149.

¹⁴⁵ Kuhn, 136.

¹⁴⁶ Kuhn, 139.

The Emergence of Black Liberation Theology/Womanism as a Paradigm Shift

The foregoing summary allows for application of Kuhn's theory of paradigm shift to the events that instigated the creation of black liberation theology. Preliminarily, a number of conclusions can be briefly drawn from Kuhn's deductions and applied to the black church and black liberation theology/womanism. They are enumerated as follows: 1) Before the emergence of black liberation theology/womanism, the black Pietistic paradigm represented "normal theology." It presumed to resolve anomalies as they arose including issues of racial discrimination and oppression. The standard method of resolving issues of racism included nonviolent resistance, through protests, dissent, and prayer. 2) The emergence of Black Power, a movement of radical black self-empowerment that derided Christianity and ridiculed the failures of the Civil Rights Movement, represented a formidable anomaly that the church struggled to engage and embrace. 3) This development, alongside the death of Martin Luther King, Jr., produced external and internal pressures on the psyches of young black scholars and leaders who, frustrated with the intransigence of racial issues, applied their considerable intellect and resources to this problem. 4) The resulting black Liberationist theological paradigm that emerged, with womanism arising later but adopting this same paradigm, is incommensurable with the black church Pietist paradigm that preceded it, due to Liberationism's radical departure from the core beliefs that structured the Pietist paradigm. 5) The new Liberationist paradigm redefined the priority of problems and solutions that black churches traditionally engaged. The Liberationist paradigm abandoned evangelism and salvation of believers as its core mission, and began to pursue liberation of the oppressed as its major thrust. The church's earlier hesitance to engage in violence was replaced by the call to

remain open to all courses of action, including violent rebellion. 6) Black liberation theologians/womanists joined the movement through conversion, and not mere intellectual persuasion. 7) Both the black Pietist paradigm and the black Liberationist paradigm shared—and still share—much of the same theological language, using terms such as the church, spirituality, worship, sin, the Bible, salvation, resistance, liberation, oppression, fellowship, community, religious experience, conversion, and other concepts, thus obscuring that a new paradigm had emerged. The Liberationist paradigm, while using the same vocabulary as the Pietist paradigm, employs it differently, thus creating new relationships between the terms. 8) The Liberationist paradigm rewrites black church history, often asking questions of the Pietist paradigm that the Pietist paradigm would not have asked of itself. It also places black churches within a historical trajectory of radicalism that culminates in the emergence of black liberation theology/womanism. While the black church has engaged in radical resistance, its prioritization of personal regeneration, understanding of Christ's atonement as necessary for salvation, commitment to moral living, conceptualization of universal and personal sin, prominent discussion of heaven and hell, and reverence for the Bible as the revealed Word of God departs considerably from the theological concepts favored by the Liberationist paradigm.

Thus far in this dissertation, the term paradigm has been used, but without redefining it for the domain of theology and ethics. The next section will transpose the concept of a “paradigm” from science into the field of theological ethics, with the objective of applying it particularly to the beliefs and ethics of black churches and black liberation theology/womanism.

Paradigms as Frameworks

The ongoing debate regarding the black church and black church liberation/womanism has been cast predominantly in functional terms. This means that the question revolves around the nature of the church's role in the world. The question is usually presented somewhat like this: Should the black church view its mission as more liberationist, meaning it confronts and resists politically the encroachment of social problems such as racism and poverty, or more pietistic, which refers to the mission of caring for its members and pursuing their spiritual growth through worship and communal fellowship? This dichotomy assumes that either option can be accommodated to a stable system of beliefs, values, and commitments that structure the black church. In this view, the system does not change, but merely takes certain modes of action and foregrounds them or makes them more prominent. When arguing for the liberationist view, defenders of this view highlight the radical social and political perspectives and behavior that has characterized the black church historically. They do not deny that pietism and worship also figure prominently within the historical black church, but they view this mode as less important or definitive for describing their ideal of the black church. When supporting the pietist position, proponents accentuate the rituals and practices that have structured historically black church worship and pastoral care.¹⁴⁷ They do not negate the salience of protest and resistance within the black church's history, but they do not view this protest and resistance as definitive for understanding the essence of the black church. This dissertation has already argued in the first chapter that this approach is inherently flawed

¹⁴⁷ When used functionally, to refer to ecclesial behavior and practices, piety and liberation are in lowercase form. When used paradigmatically, to refer to a constellation of beliefs, practices, and methods that structure a framework or worldview, Piety and Liberation are capitalized.

because it attempts to interpret the black church's mission along a continuum that assumes a shared constellation of beliefs, values, and commitments. The debate over the black church's mission since the emergence of black theology does not detect within the disagreement the presence of two competing paradigms that jostle for supremacy. Piety is not merely a behavior or role, but refers to a paradigm that relies upon a set of beliefs, values, and commitments that give rise to a particular mode of behavior. The same can be said of liberation, which does not merely denote sociopolitical activity, but also a set of values and associated theological beliefs that give rise to certain types of activity.¹⁴⁸

To understand what is being meant by the term paradigm, Charles Taylor is helpful because he uses the term *framework* to describe what we have attempted to articulate thus far using the word paradigm. He states,

Frameworks provide the background, explicit or implicit, for our moral judgements, intuitions, or reactions...To articulate a framework is to explicate what makes sense of our moral responses. That is, when we try to spell out what it is that we presuppose when we judge that a certain form of life is truly worthwhile, or place our dignity in a certain achievement or status, or define our moral obligations in a certain manner, we find ourselves articulating inter alia what I have been calling here 'frameworks.'¹⁴⁹

A framework lays bare the presuppositions that inform a person's moral commitments and forms the background against which one's moral decisions are enacted.¹⁵⁰ Taylor

¹⁴⁸ This chapter does not argue that theory and theology give rise to practice, rather than vice versa. Both operate together and one informs the other. Praxis gives rise to theory/theology which then modifies practice which modifies theory/theology, etc.

¹⁴⁹ Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 26.

¹⁵⁰ When Taylor speaks of the domain of the moral, he has three "axes" in mind. The first pertains to the respect of human life and the obligation to preserve and protect it. The second considers what it means to live a full or worthwhile life. The third involves dignity, or what Taylor labels "attitudinal respect." Each of these three axes exist in every culture, but the prominence accorded to each and the corresponding relationship between them varies from society to society. See Taylor, 15.

categorizes these moral commitments and decisions within the domain of goods, recognizing that certain goods command our awe, respect, and admiration.¹⁵¹ According to Taylor, we do not merely choose these as our goods. In fact, these goods “stand independent of our own desires, inclinations, or choices” and also represent the standards by which we judge our desires and choices.¹⁵² The fact that they command respect and admiration is what allows them to function as standards for how we make and evaluate decisions. As an example, Taylor refers to the “honour ethic” of Ancient Greek society in which the life of the warrior was viewed as a higher and more worthy form of life than that of the private citizen. Awards, fame, and glory were especially reserved for warriors, and those who pursued this form of life are described as real men. He contrasts this framework with the opposing framework of Plato in which reason and contemplation were to be valued and pursued at the expense of other forms of life.

According to Taylor, a framework does not have to operate at the level of articulated theory. This means that a person can make moral decisions based upon a framework that he or she has never reflexively delineated or systematized. A person can act with a “sense” of the qualitative distinctions that comprise a framework, and it can often be left to the “observers, historians, philosophers, anthropologists, to try to formulate explicitly what goods, qualities, or ends are here discriminated.”¹⁵³ In the case of black theologians and womanists, a shared framework is in operation, and certain shared discriminations are obvious and prevalent. However, systematic delineation of what the Liberationist and Pietist frameworks entail,

¹⁵¹ Taylor, 20.

¹⁵² Taylor, 20.

¹⁵³ Taylor, 21.

beyond these shared discriminations, is imperative for evaluating the irreconcilable differences between the Liberationist and Pietist paradigms.

The incommensurability that obtains between the black church and black liberation theology/womanism paradigms occurs at the level of fundamental commitments that oppose one another. These moral and theological premises are basic and foundational for the related values, commitments, and ideas that emerge from them. How does a framework or paradigm make sense of the role of these foundational premises within a framework? To answer this question, Taylor speaks of different goods that people pursue which structure what they deem to be the good life. One person may value the cultivation of a strong and healthy family life, including marriage and attentive child rearing, as a life worthy of pursuit and veneration. Another person may value self-expression actualized in artistic creativity as that which is to be most esteemed for exemplifying what is good. Taylor demonstrates that most people pursue numerous goods in their lives, but they usually rank one of them higher than all of the others. He elaborates, “They recognize the value of self-expression, of justice, of family life, of the worship of God, of ordinary decency, of sensitivity, and a host of others; but they consider one of these—perhaps their relation to God, or perhaps justice—as of overriding importance.”¹⁵⁴ He continues, “For those with a strong commitment to such a good, what it means is that this above all others provides the landmarks for what they judge to be the direction of their lives.”¹⁵⁵ It is this good that is decisive for how one conceives of his or her identity and one’s sense of self. Taylor calls these higher-order goods, “hypergoods,” defined as those goods

¹⁵⁴ Taylor, 62.

¹⁵⁵ Taylor, 62.

which are incomparably more important than others, and which provide the standard for measuring and judging these other goods.

Hypergoods

Taylor describes hypergoods as a source of conflict. This is because the ones subscribed to most widely by societies arise as a result of supersession.¹⁵⁶ They replace earlier views that societies come to believe are inadequate and increasingly morally problematic. For example, many people in modern society hold as their highest good an idea of universal justice in which all humans are worthy of respect, regardless of race, gender, class, sexual orientation, or religion. Taylor shows that such a position replaced earlier ones, often through contentious and protracted struggles. The fact that the hypergood supplants less adequate positions also accounts for its ability to judge and rank other goods. Taylor explicates,

An ethical outlook organized around a hypergood in this way is thus inherently conflictual and in tension. The highest good is not only ranked above the other recognized goods of the society; it can in some cases challenge and reject them, as the principle of equal respect has been doing to the goods and virtues connected with traditional family life, as Judaism and Christianity did to the cults of pagan religions, and as the author of the *Republic* did to the goods and virtues of agonistic citizen life. And that is why recognizing a hypergood is a source of tension and of often grievous dilemmas in moral life.¹⁵⁷

Often, when two competing hypergoods exist, there is no rational way of adjudicating which good is superior because there is no standpoint or neutral position from which both can be judged. Each person who takes up a position takes it up from within the ethical outlook,

¹⁵⁶ Taylor, 64.

¹⁵⁷ Taylor, 65.

paradigm, or framework, that subscribes to the particular hypergood. Taylor, like Kuhn, uses the word incommensurable to describe this impasse.

For Taylor, the move from hypergood A to hypergood B can occur partially through practical reasoning. Practical reasoning does not seek to prove the absolute certainty or truth of a position, but that it is superior to another one.¹⁵⁸ It is a comparative venture by which the claim to superiority can be demonstrated as well-founded when the proponent of hypergood B can show that accepting it represents an epistemic gain over that of A. This happens when one can show that subscribing to B instead of A resolves a contradiction in A or clarifies some other ambiguities that comprised hypergood A. Alternatively, one's argument for B may acknowledge something that A elided entirely. In either case, the argument regarding the transition from A to B seeks to reduce error by disclosing the way that one hypergood understands human life better than another. Taylor shows that genealogies are compelling tools of argumentation for this very reason.¹⁵⁹ They provide historical evidence that undermines the persuasive force of prior hypergoods, thus leaving room for a new hypergood to supercede a prior one.

In explaining the epistemic deficiencies that accompany the transition from one hypergood to another, Taylor evokes Kuhn's concept of the anomalous. For Kuhn, anomalies precipitate a period of extraordinary science in which some phenomenon that the standard paradigm could not account for is rendered normal and consequential. The resultant shift in techniques, methods, and assumed knowledge required for such a shift—keeping in mind that

¹⁵⁸ Taylor, 72.

¹⁵⁹ Taylor, 73.

minor alterations to the standard theory cannot render the anomalous an expected and consequential occurrence—necessitates a change in paradigm. Like Kuhn, Taylor’s explication of the shift from one hypergood to another subsequent one also requires some persistent anomaly, or epistemic disruption, that the previous hypergood has trouble accounting for. He conceives of this anomaly in a variety of ways, stating that it may be an unresolved contradiction, an ambiguity in need of clarification, or an omission of some type. The fact that this epistemic rupture calls the hypergood into question means that another hypergood emerges as a viable candidate to replace the former. Just as Kuhn denies that science can proceed without a paradigm, Taylor denies that a person can operate in the world without a moral framework. If we take Taylor’s moral frameworks to be dependent on some type of hypergood that organizes the ranking of goods within that framework, we can conclude that there is no way to dispense with hypergoods altogether. The conflict is always over which hypergood amongst alternatives represents the superior choice.

Like Kuhn, Taylor also denies that rational proofs and logic constitute the primary methods that people use to choose one hypergood over another, instead preferring to speak of the replacement process as conversion. For Kuhn, the shift in paradigm accepted by practitioners does not occur because the new paradigm reflects how things really are. In Kuhn’s analysis, there is no neutral world that we have access to that offers an unbiased standard of measurement by which paradigms can be judged. Since every argument for a paradigm occurs from *within* a paradigm—including arguments that the world is really *this* or *that* way, the decision to change from one to another is not solely based upon factual evidence. Taylor echoes Kuhn by describing Neo-Nietzschean thinkers who excoriate hypergoods for

furthering social exclusion and domination while remaining themselves committed to a rival hypergood, often defined as the principle of universal and equal respect. In other words, even arguments against hypergoods occur within a framework committed to its own hypergood. Since rational adjudication between competing hypergoods is seemingly impossible, Taylor, when describing the conflict between two competing hypergoods, states that “our acceptance of any hypergood is connected in a complex way with our being *moved* by it.”¹⁶⁰ Taylor continues, “We are moved by it seeing its point as something infinitely valuable. We experience our love for it as a well-founded love. Nothing that couldn’t move me in *this* way would count as a hypergood.”¹⁶¹

Chapter four will illustrate the shift in paradigm from the Pietist hypergood of regeneration from sin to the Liberationist hypergood of liberation from oppression as a conversion that moved James Cone in the depths of his being. Many black liberation theologians/womanists were once active members of black churches who subscribed to personal regeneration from sin and its corollaries as the most important beliefs and values that structured their daily lives. The shift to a liberationist focus certainly includes the force of rational argumentation and persuasion, including academic biblical scholarship, knowledge of genealogies, and surveys of historical theology. However, such information alone, as Kuhn recognizes, is insufficient in and of itself for persuading the scholar to abandon his or her wholesale commitment to the former hypergood. As Kuhn explains,

The issue is which paradigm should in the future guide research on problems many of which neither competitor can yet claim to resolve completely. A decision between alternate ways of practicing science is called for, and...that decision must be based...on

¹⁶⁰ Taylor, 73.

¹⁶¹ Taylor, 74.

future promise. The man who embraces a new paradigm at an early stage must often do so in defiance of the evidence provided by problem-solving. He must...have faith that the new paradigm will succeed with the many large problems that confront it, knowing only that the older paradigm has failed with a few. *A decision of that kind can only be made on faith* (emphasis mine).¹⁶²

As Taylor inferred, faith in the new hypergood ensues as one is moved internally by the hypergood attempting to usurp the older one.

Based upon a synthesis of Taylor's concepts of frameworks and hypergoods with Kuhn's theory of paradigms, a paradigm can be defined as a constellation of beliefs, values, and methods that serve as corollaries of a hypergood. The hypergood indicates which theological and ethical principle a community or individual adopts as its highest good or as its standard for ranking, judging, and evaluating all other goods, principles, beliefs, and commitments. The foregoing discussion, however, does not yet explain the nature of incommensurability. Chapter three argues that the black church's hypergood consists of regeneration from sin and new birth through belief in Christ's death and resurrection while chapter four argues that black liberation theology/womanism's hypergood consists of the full liberation of the oppressed from the tyranny of racism, patriarchy, heterosexism, and every hegemonic imposition that seeks to constrain and curtail human flourishing. However, the question of how and why these hypergoods and their associated paradigms are defined as incommensurable remains. The theory of incommensurability will be treated in the next section.

¹⁶² Kuhn, *The Structure Of Scientific Revolutions*, 158.

Scientific Incommensurability

Thomas Kuhn invoked the concept of incommensurability to explain how successive paradigms become adopted on the basis of persuasion rather than rational proof. According to Kuhn, because there are no neutral standards constituting some universal scientific method that the paradigms can appeal to for adjudication, each paradigm is left to argue for itself based upon its own values, methods, beliefs, and techniques. Kuhn borrows the term from mathematics, in which the hypotenuse of a right triangle shares no common measure with one of its sides, and neither can be expressed in the same terms.¹⁶³ Thus, incommensurability implies a situation in which there is no common measure according to which a group of views, theories, methods, concepts, traditions, religions, or cultures can be assessed.

At this stage, it is important to distinguish between incommensurability, incomparability, and incompatibility. The hypotenuse and the side of the right triangle, although lacking a common unit of measure, can still be compared. One can still speak of a side as shorter than the hypotenuse or as more or less of some characteristic applied to both. This means that incommensurability does not necessitate incomparability.¹⁶⁴

Richard Bernstein's explanation of incompatibility is quite helpful for understanding the difference between incompatibility and incommensurability. Bernstein states, "The concept of incompatibility is a logical one. Two or more statements or theories are logically incompatible

¹⁶³ Richard J. Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism: Science, Hermeneutics, and Praxis* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1983), 82.

¹⁶⁴ Bernstein writes, "...Kuhn's (and Feyerabend's) remarks about incommensurability have been taken to mean that we cannot *compare* rival paradigms or theories. But such a claim...is not only mistaken but perverse. The very rationale for introducing the notion of incommensurability is to clarify what is involved when we do compare alternative and rival paradigms." Bernstein, 82.

if they entail a logical contradiction.”¹⁶⁵ He explains that Kuhn used the concept of incompatibility to contest the standard view of scientific progress as ensuing through the incremental accumulation of knowledge. Under this standard view, a less comprehensive theory can be logically derived from a more comprehensive theory, thus making them compatible, even though the less comprehensive theory will exclude certain information or conclusions that the more comprehensive one articulates. This view allowed scientists to conceive of Newton’s theory as derivable from Einstein’s, thus advancing their view that science proceeds through incremental expansion of knowledge. Kuhn tried to show that Newton’s dynamics cannot be logically derived from Einstein’s. He concluded in his analysis of both that there was no logical connection between the two, and that the two are therefore incompatible. Bernstein insightfully observes, “...it is also clear that if we are to speak of logical *incompatibility*, we are presupposing a common *logical* framework within which we can show that two theories are logically incompatible.”¹⁶⁶ He shows that Kuhn purposefully goes beyond incompatibility to embrace incommensurability because one can accept that two theories are logically incompatible without concluding that they demonstrate incommensurability. One could do this if there still remained some common standard of measurement according to which both theories could be evaluated with one being declared more “true” or “rational” than the other. This is because incommensurability rejects the idea, which was common within science, that there is “a permanent neutral observation language, or common framework of scientific standards by which we can evaluate rival and competing theories.”¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁵ Bernstein, 82.

¹⁶⁶ Bernstein, 84.

¹⁶⁷ Bernstein, 84.

An example of incompatibility that can be applied to religious beliefs is found in the late nineteenth century holiness controversies that significantly impacted southern black religion. In one such example, Charles Harrison Mason and Charles Price Jones, both black holiness ministers, in 1897 printed a pamphlet entitled “The Work of the Holy Spirit in the Churches.”¹⁶⁸ Already, national Baptist leaders such as J.H. Eason and Elias Morris, the president of the newly formed National Baptist Convention, had refuted the doctrine of entire sanctification, which taught that through a second divine encounter with the Holy Spirit after conversion the believer could be purified from all sin and empowered to live a sinless life.¹⁶⁹ Baptists believed that sinless perfection would not occur in the life of believers until they reached heaven. Baptist members were encouraged to live morally clean lives, understanding that they would still sin, and to repent when they did fall short. After the publication of their pamphlet, the General Mission Baptist Association of Mississippi reprimanded Jones and Mason for their heretical doctrine.¹⁷⁰

The disagreement over sanctification represents the confrontation of two incompatible views. The Baptist view and its denial of the believer’s ability to live without sin contradicts the Holiness view of instructing believers to seek the divine experience known as “sanctification” which results in a sinless life. Both views measure themselves by scriptural texts supporting their positions. While interpreting texts differently, they agree that the Bible has the authority to adjudicate their dispute.¹⁷¹ Although exercising different interpretive outcomes, Bernstein’s

¹⁶⁸ Calvin White, Jr., *The Rise to Respectability: Race, Religion, and the Church of God in Christ* (Little Rock, AR: University of Arkansas Press, 2015), 19.

¹⁶⁹ White, Jr., 19.

¹⁷⁰ White, Jr., 24.

¹⁷¹ I realize that a problem arises here regarding incommensurability. Even agreed upon standards, like the Bible, are interpreted differently, and this difference in interpretation has produced innumerable Christian denominations

point about incompatibility requiring a shared standard of measurement still applies, since at least theoretically, both the Holiness churches and the General Mission Baptist Association recognized the Bible as their rule of measurement for what constitutes true vs. false doctrine.

We can see that understanding incommensurability requires specificity and precision in distinguishing it from its closely related cousins. It is no surprise then, that of all the concepts elucidated by Kuhn, this one is arguably the most controversial. The flames of controversy have been fanned by difficulties that the term itself presents, because, for example, there is no single well-defined representation of what incommensurability means that all contributors to the discourse agree upon.¹⁷² Also problematic is the fact that Kuhn and Feyerabend's commentary on the term, with Feyerabend being one of the other major proponents of incommensurability, are "poor and misleading guides" of what it entails, often clarifying or nuancing it in ways that pose more problems than the ones they attempt to solve.¹⁷³ To grasp why incommensurability is an apt description for describing the chasm between black church Pietism and black theology Liberationism, we need to review Kuhn's initial usage of the expression in order to discover what features of the concept are applicable to our examination of the black church and black theology.

There are at least three relevant types of incommensurability that Kuhn discusses in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. They include the methodological, the perceptual, and the

all claiming to judge their beliefs and standards by it. It would seem, then, that incompatibility always entails some degree of incommensurability because there is no higher *interpretive* standard to adjudicate disputes over interpretation when contestants are appealing to the same standard of authority. I expect to analyze more fully and treat this problem in a later work.

¹⁷² Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, 80.

¹⁷³ Bernstein, 80.

semantic.¹⁷⁴ Kuhn does not himself ascribe this tripartite designation to incommensurability, but scholars who have analyzed his use of the term categorize its dimensions in this way. Their definition provides a useful framework for apprehending the layers of meaning hidden within the concept. Methodological incommensurability refers to the irresolvable differences regarding what counts as the problems and standards that competing paradigms pursue. It entails incommensurability of criteria because “In the first place, the proponents of competing paradigms will often disagree about the list of problems that any candidate for paradigm must resolve” because their “standards or their definitions of science are not the same.”¹⁷⁵ In this study, one can discover this type of methodological incommensurability around the questions of violence, whether personal or social ethical issues should exhibit prominence within church teaching and practice, the role of the Bible as a standard for theology and ethics, the meaning of the atonement, and the ways in which same-sex marriage and transgender issues pose problems or opportunities for the black church.

Perceptual incommensurability describes the state of affairs in which “observational evidence cannot provide a common basis for theory comparison, since perceptual experience is theory dependent.”¹⁷⁶ To speak of perception is to also speak of a worldview, or what one perceives as “the way things are.” Kuhn states,

Practicing in different worlds, the two groups of scientists see different things when they look from the same point in the same direction. Again, that is not to say that they can see anything they please. Both are looking at the world, and what they look at has not changed. But in some areas they see different things, and they see them in different relations one to the other.¹⁷⁷

¹⁷⁴ Alexander Bird, “Thomas Kuhn”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2013 edition), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2013/entries/thomas-kuhn/>.

¹⁷⁵ Kuhn, *The Structure Of Scientific Revolutions*, 148.

¹⁷⁶ Bird, “Thomas Kuhn”, 7.

¹⁷⁷ Kuhn, *The Structure Of Scientific Revolutions*, 150..

When two theorists look into the same environment and observe a configuration of objects, organisms, people, and ideas, and disagree about what this configuration represents such that both conceptions cannot be simultaneously held and such that there is no “actual world” or method of discovering it that exists to adjudicate the dispute, perceptual incommensurability results. Kuhn shows that holding one perceptual view or the other exceeds mere demonstration of logical deduction or application of reason by invoking the idea of “conversion” as the way that shifts between paradigms occur.¹⁷⁸

The third type of incommensurability has been responsible for most of the philosophical disagreement and misunderstanding surrounding the term. In Kuhn’s initial description, semantic incommensurability describes the difference in meaning that two competing paradigms ascribe to the same terms. Kuhn observes, “Since new paradigms are born from old ones, they ordinarily incorporate much of the vocabulary and apparatus both conceptual and manipulative, that the traditional paradigm had previously employed. But they seldom employ these borrowed elements in quite the traditional way.”¹⁷⁹ Therefore, the meaning of terms and the understanding of the relationship between them will vary between paradigms even when the exact same terminology is being used. Kuhn gives the example, “...the physical referents of these Einsteinian concepts [space, time, and mass] are by no means identical with those of the Newtonian concepts that bear the same name.”¹⁸⁰

In his postscript appended to the second edition of *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Kuhn acknowledges the intellectual controversy accompanying the concept of

¹⁷⁸Kuhn, 151.

¹⁷⁹ Kuhn, 149.

¹⁸⁰ Kuhn, 102.

incommensurability. He states, "Only philosophers have seriously misconstrued the intent of these parts of my argument."¹⁸¹ He refutes their insistence that incommensurability prevents communication when shared words exhibit divergent meanings. He states, "Briefly put, what the participants in a communication breakdown can do is recognize each other as members of different language communities and then become translators."¹⁸² He goes on to say that each theorist or community would need to translate the other theorist's or community's theory into his or her own language while being sure to describe the worldview to which that theory applies also in his or her own language.¹⁸³

Critics exposed what appears to be a glaring flaw in Kuhn's argument regarding semantic incommensurability.¹⁸⁴ Based upon their interpretation of incommensurability as conceptual disagreement that also entails untranslatability between two languages, they wanted to know how one could conceptually compare the theories or take an archaic theory and translate it into modern language.¹⁸⁵ For example, Hilary Putnam describes the incommensurability thesis as arguing that "terms used in another culture, say, the term 'temperature' as used by a seventeenth century scientist, cannot be equated in meaning or reference with any terms or expressions *we* possess."¹⁸⁶ He finds this argument to be incoherent, since it would vitiate the ability to translate languages at all. He observes, "To tell

¹⁸¹ Kuhn, 198.

¹⁸² Kuhn, 202.

¹⁸³ Kuhn, 202.

¹⁸⁴ The most prominent of these include Donald Davidson, "The Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme," in Davidson, *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford University Press, 2001), 183-198, Hilary Putnam, "Two Conceptions of Rationality," in *Reason, Truth and History* (Cambridge University Press, 1981), 103-126, and Philip Kitcher, "Theories, Theorists, and Theoretical Change," *Philosophical Review* 87 (1978), 519-547.

¹⁸⁵ Kuhn never argued against this point *per se*.

¹⁸⁶ Hilary Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History* (Cambridge University Press, 1981), 114.

us that Galileo had 'incommensurable' notions *and then to go on to describe them at length* is totally incoherent.¹⁸⁷ According to Putnam, we could only know other language speakers as animals uttering unintelligible sounds. Translation proceeds because even when the same word used by a contemporary community changes its meaning somewhat, there still exists an ability to, "as a matter of universal human experience...to interpret one another's beliefs, desires, and utterances so that it all makes some kind of *sense*."¹⁸⁸ Putnam turns Kuhn's semantic incommensurability on its head by arguing that "we could not say that conceptions differ and how they differ if we couldn't translate."¹⁸⁹

Kuhn responded to Putnam and his other critics in an essay entitled "Commensurability, Comparability, Communicability."¹⁹⁰ He did not deny their claims, stating, "Most or all discussions of incommensurability have depended upon the literally correct but regular over-interpreted assumption that, if two theories are incommensurable, they must be stated in mutually untranslatable languages."¹⁹¹ In suggesting that the untranslatability had been over-interpreted, Kuhn is consistent since he had argued in the second edition of *Structure of Scientific Revolutions* that there still exists a large shared reservoir of shared meanings and terminology between two rival theories that could help them better ascertain which issues induced disagreement.¹⁹² He modifies, but rehearses this same point in his rejoinder to his critics, stating, "Most of the terms common to the two theories function the same way in both;

¹⁸⁷ Putnam, 115.

¹⁸⁸ Putnam, 117.

¹⁸⁹ Putnam, 117.

¹⁹⁰ Thomas S. Kuhn, "Commensurability, Comparability, Communicability," *PSA: Proceedings of the Biennial Meeting of the Philosophy of Science Association* 1982 (1982): 669–88.

¹⁹¹ Kuhn, 669.

¹⁹² Kuhn, *The Structure Of Scientific Revolutions*, 201.

their meanings, whatever those may be, are preserved...".¹⁹³ He then states that problems in translation only apply to a small group of terms, thus making incommensurability a more modest theory than his critics have acknowledged. However, the question of how one translates an older, archaic theory, in which concepts—although using the same words—have changed meaning, into a more modern language remains. Kuhn's answer to this is that interpretation differs from translation, because interpreters learn a new language and attempt to understand concepts and objects from *within* that language itself. Like an anthropologist who intentionally lives with a group of people to adopt their way of thinking and acting, Kuhn suggests that the task of the researcher is to learn the cultural world and the language within which the original terms were employed. Here he describes the process of interpretation:

...he or she is teaching the language which eighteenth-century chemists used in describing, explaining, and exploring that world. Most of the words in that older language are identical both in form and function with words in the language of the historian and the historian's audience. But others are new and must be learned or relearned. These are the untranslatable terms for which the historian or some predecessor has had to discover or invent meanings in order to render intelligible the texts on which he works. Interpretation is the process by which the use of those terms is discovered, and it has been much discussed recently under the rubric hermeneutics.¹⁹⁴

The impact of the critiques was such that Kuhn devoted much of his latter career to clarifying what he meant by incommensurability, stating in 1990, "No other aspect of *Structure* has concerned me so deeply in the thirty years since the book was written...". He eventually began to propound a version of semantic incommensurability, already recognizable in

¹⁹³ Kuhn, "Commensurability, Comparability, Communicability," 670.

¹⁹⁴ Kuhn, 677.

“Commensurability, Comparability, Communicability,” that Howard Sankey calls taxonomic.¹⁹⁵

In this type of semantic incommensurability, shared taxonomic categories, defined by what Kuhn calls a lexical taxonomy or lexicon, structure communication and are necessary for evaluation of truth claims.¹⁹⁶ When two communities employ differing taxonomic schemes, incommensurability that also entails untranslatability results.¹⁹⁷ As he had stated since *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Kuhn maintained his belief that proceeding with communication meant that one had to become bilingual with respect to both lexicons in order to grasp and evaluate what is being asserted.¹⁹⁸

Kuhn’s attempts to refute philosophers within the realm of semantics led to ever more abstruse and complex delineations of incommensurability. Philosopher of science Daniel Garber laments Kuhn’s intellectual turn toward semantic incommensurability, finding that it caused him to cede the ground where his case was strongest. He opines,

Kuhn’s extended attempt to answer the philosophers has always struck me as one of the great tragedies in the history and philosophy of science. It didn’t have to be this way. There is much that was right in Kuhn’s idea of the incommensurability of paradigms at the very beginning, in *Structure*. The history of his later struggles with

¹⁹⁵ Howard Sankey, *Rationality, Relativism and Incommensurability* (Brookfield, Vt: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 1997), 66–80.

¹⁹⁶ Thomas S. Kuhn, “The Road Since Structure,” *PSA; Proceedings of the Biennial Meeting of the Philosophy of Science Association; East Lansing, Mich. [Etc.] 2* (January 1, 1990): 3–13.

¹⁹⁷ Kuhn, 5.

¹⁹⁸ To show how lexical taxonomies influence the meaning of statements and also of theories, Kuhn states the following: “The first volume of Lyons’ *Semantics* contains a wonderfully simple example, which some of you will know: the impossibility of translating the English statement, “the cat sat on the mat”, into French, because of the incommensurability between the French and English taxonomies for floor coverings. In each particular case for which the English statement is true, one can find a co-referential French statement, some using ‘tapis’, others ‘pasillasson,’ still others ‘carpette,’ and so on. But there is no single French statement which refers to all and only the situations in which the English Statement is true. In that sense, the English statement cannot be made in French. In a similar vein, I’ve elsewhere pointed out that the content of the Copernican statement, “planets travel around the sun”, cannot be expressed in a statement that invokes the celestial taxonomy of the Ptolemaic statement, “planets travel around the earth”. The difference between the two statements is not simply one of fact. The term ‘planet’ appears as a kind term in both, and the two kinds overlap in membership without either’s containing all the celestial bodies contained in the other.” Kuhn, 5.

incommensurability is a sad story of a great thinker who allowed himself to be led down a dead end.¹⁹⁹

What Garber found Kuhn to have gotten right was his notion of methodological incommensurability. While Garber does not use this nomenclature, it is clear he has this type of incommensurability in mind when he chides Kuhn for admitting that he moved away from incommensurability as difference in “methods, problem-field, and standards of solution.”²⁰⁰ Garber renders the conflict in terms of epistemic values. For Garber, values are what help stipulate which problems and solutions are important for constructing one’s scientific approach. He then compares Galileo and Descartes on the issue of free fall of bodies to show that the incommensurability between them did not surround difficulties in linguistic translation, but a conflict of epistemic values. The question that they both wrestled with was, “What is it important to know and explain?” In other words, why does Galileo value a mathematical explanation of free fall rather than a causal explanation while Descartes values the causal explanation over the mathematical? To analyze what a person values is to attempt to understand why certain ideas, things, relationships, beliefs, and methods, impart meaning or significance to that person based upon his or her interpretation of the world.

Garber’s critique of Kuhn provides the bridge from the scientific world, within which our discussion of incommensurability has been circumscribed, into the domain of ethics, which is where the remainder of our argument will proceed. To gain greater purchase on the concept, the foregoing discussion explored Kuhn’s development of it, and we discovered that Kuhn’s

¹⁹⁹ Daniel Garber, “Incommensurabilities,” *Historical Studies in the Natural Sciences* 42, no. 5 (2012): 506, <https://doi.org/10.1525/hsns.2012.42.5.504>.

²⁰⁰ Garber, 507.

initial writings describe three types of incommensurability, while his later writings elaborated on one type, the semantic. Daniel Garber demonstrates that Kuhn's pursuit of ever more detailed and in-depth explanations for semantic incommensurability constituted a critical mistake in judgment that undermined the persuasiveness and applicability of the concept. He finds that Kuhn's strongest arguments for incommensurability are regarding what we have described as the methodological type of incommensurability.

Ethical Incommensurability

Alasdair MacIntyre, adapting the idea from the philosophy of science, describes certain contemporary moral debates as incommensurable.²⁰¹ He mentions, for example, the debate regarding abortion, and provides three different arguments that comprise the debate: The first argument states that people have rights over their own bodies, and that an embryo still a part of the mother's body is subject to her right to decide regarding whether she will have an abortion. Therefore, abortion ought to be permitted by law. The second argument invokes the Golden-Rule in which one should do unto others as one wants others to do unto him or her. If a person cannot will that his or her own mother should have aborted him or her, because that person values his or her own right to life, then he or she cannot deny that right to others. Therefore, mothers do not have a general right to abortions. The third argument defines murder as wrong. Since an embryo is an individual that only differs from an infant in that it is at an earlier stage of life, abortion is murder just as infanticide is murder. Therefore, abortion is

²⁰¹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), 8.

morally wrong and should be legally prohibited.²⁰² In supplying these examples of competing arguments, MacIntyre demonstrates how incommensurability can be applied to ethical disagreement. He states,

Every one of the arguments is logically valid or can be easily expanded so as to be made so; the conclusions do indeed follow from the premises. But the rival premises are such that we possess no rational way of weighing the claims of one as against another. For each premise employs some quite different normative or evaluative concept from the others, so that the claims made upon us are of quite different kinds.²⁰³

Within MacIntyre's description of incommensurability one can discern both the perceptual and methodological strands at work. The premise that serves as the foundation for each argument is based upon a perception of the world adopted or held by the proponent of that premise. The Christian that invokes the right to life principle views humans as creations of God regardless of where that human exists on the continuum of life. Such a view probably also adopts a metaphysical view of human existence that accords each human a soul or immortal element that continues to persist after the body has ceased to live and exist. This view of the world leads to an evaluative schema that prioritizes the preservation of individual life *over* the preservation of individual rights. In a competing argument, one may view the government's denial of an abortion to a woman as a usurpation of the woman's right over her own body and as enactment of patriarchal hegemony over the woman. According to this person's point of view, subjugating a woman's right to make decisions regarding her body in favor of another's life simply reproduces a state of inequality according to which women's wellbeing has often been compromised for the sake others, with the others being those who wield power. This

²⁰² In addition to these arguments regarding abortion, MacIntyre also provides examples of rival arguments from debates regarding war and justice. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 6-7.

²⁰³ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 8.

view of the world prioritizes the preservation of the woman's right to be free from subjugation and state control *over* the preservation of the fetus' life. So then, the methodological aspect of incommensurability—represented by the evaluative schema that defines how the problem is to be resolved—is intertwined with one's interpretation or perception of the world to provide the resolution of the issue being debated. The perception itself *becomes* the method.

The implications for black church Pietism and black liberation theology/womanism should be clear, although the paradigms have not yet been defined entirely. If one sees the world as a battle between oppressors and the oppressed led by God who empowers humans to wage war against the sins of racism, classism, sexism, and heterosexism, one will view any rules and regulations that forbid same sex marriage or deny homosexuals leadership positions within churches to be sinful due to the heterosexist oppressiveness of the edicts and will vigorously contest such laws and policies. Conversely, if one looks out into the world and sees a cosmic struggle by Christians against demonic forces that manifest themselves in social battles, but also through internal sinfulness as defined by the Bible, then one will view behaviors and practices that transgress biblical injunctions as sinful, thus causing that person to view same sex marriage as sinful, thereby refusing to ordain those marriages and forbidding leadership positions to homosexuals. The two perceptions are incommensurable, and thus, the methods arising from the perceptions are likewise incommensurable.

Victor Anderson denies that incommensurability should be used to describe the nature of ethical disagreements. While his interrogation of the expression concerns the disagreement between pragmatists and academic theologians, his analysis is pertinent for examining philosophers' tendency to reduce incommensurability to its semantic definition. One can see

Anderson's dependence on the semantic aspect when he comments on his definition for incommensurability. He writes, "Incommensurability is governed by the principle of nontranslatability between two competitive theories. It presupposes that no terms are communicable between competitive theories without disrupting the one theory while asserting the other."²⁰⁴ Kuhn never states that there are *no terms* that exhibit shared agreement between two incommensurable paradigms. In fact, he allows that many terms along with their meanings, are shared between the two paradigms.²⁰⁵ He talks about two scientists who experience miscommunication due to differences in understanding terms, stating, "Those difficulties will not be felt in all areas of even their scientific discourse, but they will arise and will then cluster most densely about the phenomena upon which the choice of theory most centrally depends."²⁰⁶ Here I take Kuhn to be arguing that incommensurability need not affect all vocabulary within two competing theories since he admits that many terms will preserve meaning across a theory change. Kuhn wants to acknowledge that there are decisive terms which are indispensable for understanding two theories that shift in meaning, and thus lead to a breakdown in communication. Kuhn clarifies, "Only for a small subgroup of terms and for sentences containing them do problems of translatability arise."²⁰⁷

Anderson also blurs somewhat the relationship between incommensurability, incompatibility, and comparability. He writes "Incommensurability ought not to be confused with incompatibility, because incompatibility admits comparability. Therefore, where no

²⁰⁴ Victor Anderson, *Pragmatic Theology: Negotiating the Intersections of an American Philosophy of Religion and Public Theology* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998), 96.

²⁰⁵ Kuhn, "Commensurability, Comparability, Communicability," 670.

²⁰⁶ Kuhn, *The Structure Of Scientific Revolutions*, 201.

²⁰⁷ Kuhn, "Commensurability, Comparability, Communicability," 671.

possibility of translation exists between comparative terms, there also exists no possible basis for comparing the relative merits of the one paradigm by another.”²⁰⁸ Anderson rightfully assumes that lack of translatability means that two theories cannot be compared. This is because there is no way that one could understand what another was stating, and understanding is the prerequisite to comparison. However, he differentiates incommensurability from incompatibility by concluding that incompatible theories can be compared while incommensurable ones cannot. He does not compare the two expressions based upon their relationship to logic as explicated by Bernstein who argued that incompatible theories are not *logically* compatible while incommensurable theories do not even admit of a shared logical framework to which they both can be compared. Anderson’s delineation is inadequate for the same reason that his definition of incommensurability falters. His misconception of untranslatability as absolute does not consider the multiple sites of linguistic agreement that allow for comparison between two theories. Kuhn always allowed for comparability of theories, stating “...lack of a common measure does not make comparison impossible. On the contrary, incommensurable magnitudes can be compared to any required degree of approximation.”²⁰⁹ And later, “No more in its metaphorical than its literal form does incommensurability imply incomparability.”²¹⁰ Anderson concludes, based upon his formulation of the concept, that “establishing incommensurability of thought and world view is most difficult.”²¹¹ While this conclusion is valid based upon his premises, the conclusion is based

²⁰⁸ Anderson, *Pragmatic Theology*, 97.

²⁰⁹ Kuhn, “Commensurability, Comparability, Communicability,” 670.

²¹⁰ Kuhn, 670.

²¹¹ Anderson, *Pragmatic Theology*, 97.

upon a restrictive definition of incommensurability that equates it with complete untranslatability.

Having objected to incommensurability on the grounds that it entails untranslatability, and therefore, noncomparability, Anderson introduces a new type of incommensurability into the discussion. He speaks of incommensurable species, in which organisms are commensurable when they benefit from each other and can coexist. He describes a scenario in which a field rat thrives within its environment only when the boa constrictor does not enter this environment. When the boa constrictor enters the environment, the rat must either leave or be killed by the snake. In this case, the coexistence of both species is incommensurable. Anderson clarifies, "That is, the two animals cannot live together in the same environment without the one causing ultimate harm to the other's existence."²¹² Anderson asks whether our moral languages are "equally incommensurable at the rational level."²¹³

To investigate this question, he poses a similar example as Macintyre's illustration regarding abortion:

If I say that "abortion ought to be decided in the strictest confidence of a woman's elective rights," and you say, "No! notwithstanding all other things on which a woman has a right to decide on appeal to preference, abortion is impermissible because the right to life or the sacredness of life supercedes the woman's right to choice in this matter," the two positions appear to be completely oppositional and incompatible. The question is whether they also are incommensurable. That is, is it the case that holding the one position necessarily renders the other position nonreasonable, nonrational, untenable, and nonplausible? I think not.²¹⁴

²¹² Anderson, 97.

²¹³ Anderson, 97.

²¹⁴ Anderson, 97.

Anderson goes on to explain that the example above requires both participants in the debate to voice publicly reasons for holding their respective positions. In this debate, each contributor must be prepared to use translatable terms by which “agreement and disagreement may be reasonably established.”²¹⁵ In Anderson’s view, the two positions can both appeal to the issue of rights, since what is at stake are questions of which right supercedes the other. When there are no communicable terms that allow persons to persuade others of the superiority of their positions, then positions within the debate become “rationally incommensurable.”

Once again, Anderson’s argument proceeds based upon a conception of incommensurability that remains dependent upon assumptions of untranslatability. If rivals understand one another and can make sense of the other’s argument, Anderson seems to suggest that incommensurability cannot be the consequence. To be sure, Anderson is only taking possession of ground already ceded to him by Kuhn who contributed to these kinds of critiques by increasingly narrowing his conception of incommensurability so that it became increasingly abstruse, complex, and unwieldy by attempting to venture further and further into the territory of semantics and linguistics. MacIntyre, however, argues persuasively that incommensurability also operates at the conceptual and ethical level, a stance that Anderson denies. It is at precisely this conceptual level that Anderson’s metaphor of the rat and the boa constrictor holds much potential. If we take Anderson’s metaphor seriously, incommensurability can define the relationship between two (or more) rival positions existing within the same environment—whether academic, religious, regional, institutional or otherwise—in which the existence of one threatens to negate the very existence of the other

²¹⁵ Anderson, 98.

such that one will eventually be subsumed within the other, thus leading to its demise (unless one or the other vacates the environment to survive). Even here, Anderson seems highly skeptical, and states, “holding radically different religious beliefs does not mean that the believers (whether atheist or theist) will not get about life within the same environment without the one bringing harm to the other, except where such beliefs are held dogmatically.”²¹⁶ The issue, in my view, is not whether the believers bring harm *to each other*, but whether each belief system is destined to cause harm to the opposing belief system if the same systems exist in a shared environment. Is it the case that accepting a religious framework means that one’s own becomes mangled and unrecognizable? Must one completely abandon one’s own framework because the two cannot be conflated without damaging irreparably both conceptual systems? This vicious state of affairs occurs when in such an environment characterized by competing beliefs, one person exchanges one’s hypergood for another’s’. At this point, the prior viewpoint, or framework, becomes the rat that has been eaten by the boa, and the boa refers to the framework that becomes newly adopted. When an environment features this kind of competition at the level of hypergoods, then incommensurability characterizes the state of disagreement.

I make this claim because incommensurability, as we have defined it in its methodological and perceptual strands means that one cannot arrive at a viewpoint based upon logic and proof alone. This is because questions of values and worldview operate at the level of beliefs. While people may hold good reasons or evidence for their beliefs, the belief cannot be understood entirely within the realm of proof, especially because there exists no

²¹⁶ Anderson, 98.

neutral or arbitrating system of thought external to the belief systems themselves that can adjudicate the dispute. This means that people must be persuaded by or converted to a new paradigm. The process of persuasion and conversion means that two belief systems will necessarily come into conflict. It is often the case that two belief systems confront each other with the result being that both adopt some of the other's characteristics and are epistemically enlarged and enhanced as a result. I am arguing here that incommensurability forecloses this possibility, at least at the level of the respective hypergoods.

It is important to recall that the concept of incommensurability is initially introduced in relationship to scientific revolutions. This means that in its early forms, Kuhn conceived of the concept as thoroughly epistemological. Bernstein reminds us of this in stating, "...the main (although very brief) discussion of incommensurability occurs in the context of Kuhn's analysis of the resolution of revolutions."²¹⁷ Bernstein then quotes Kuhn in stating, "Kuhn seeks to clarify why proponents of competing paradigms 'may each hope to convert the other to his way of seeing science and its problems but neither may hope to prove his case'."²¹⁸ Critics of Kuhn charged him with irrationality, since he seemed to suggest that scientists choose theories for entirely subjective and "mystical" reasons.²¹⁹ He refutes these objections in the postscript appended to the second edition of *Structure*. First, he establishes the difference between logical proof and debates regarding theory-choice, ultimately showing that the debate "is about premises, and its recourse is to persuasion as a prelude to the possibility of proof."²²⁰ Kuhn

²¹⁷ Bernstein, *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, 81.

²¹⁸ Bernstein, 81.

²¹⁹ Kuhn, *The Structure Of Scientific Revolutions*, 199.

²²⁰ Kuhn, 199.

does not imply that there are no good reasons for adopting a theory, or that there exist no criteria that serve as boundaries for which candidates are admitted for consideration. He does argue that such reasons function as values, and that persuasion represents the process by which “a particular set of shared values interacts with the particular experience shared by a community of specialists to ensure that most members of the group will ultimately find one set of arguments rather than another decisive.”²²¹

The point here is that the later philosophical discussions surrounding incommensurability lose the emphasis on persuasion regarding contested theories and values. The philosophical critiques, and Kuhn’s own rejoinders, that cast the debate in terms of translatability and comparability obfuscate Kuhn’s initial concern. By adapting the term for differences and disagreement within ethics, MacIntyre retrieves its pertinence for addressing how choice between competing theories can rationally proceed.

Rational Inquiry and Paradigm Choice

If things are as Kuhn describes them, are we relegated to operating according to an interminable relativism according to which no theory is to be preferred based upon actual truth or superiority in describing the world or a subject better than another? Alasdair MacIntyre grapples with this problem in his exploration and comparison of the virtue theories of Confucians and Aristotelians.²²²

²²¹ Kuhn, 200.

²²² MacIntyre, “Incommensurability, Truth, and the Conversation between Confucians and Aristotelians about the Virtues.”

MacIntyre's earlier attempt to provide a universal, culturally neutral theory of virtues in *A Short History of Ethics* was challenged by George H. Mahood in an article entitled "Human Nature and the Virtues in Confucius and Aristotle."²²³ Mahood determined that any attempt to provide such a theory would be inadequate because radically differing cultures would proffer their own "conceptually idiosyncratic account of those features" that would comprise such a theory. MacIntyre rehearses and broadens Mahood's argument in order to correct his own presumptions regarding cultural neutrality while still attempting to provide a defensible method for rational adjudication of superiority or truthfulness when two rival systems conflict.

After scrutinizing both Aristotelian and Confucian virtue theories, MacIntyre discovers that they share several commonalities, including an approach to moral education that encourages learning about virtues such as courage or justice from exemplars. Both theories also encourage extrapolation of what is learned to different types of situations. Although they share many sites of resemblance similar to this, both moral systems differ in many other respects. For example, Confucius did not engage in the large scale theorizing about morality that Aristotle favored, and the moral life in Confucianism is primarily conceived in practical terms.²²⁴ Additionally, terms like *telos*, *psyche*, and *polis*, that function as foundational elements of the Aristotelian system and conceive of morality in terms of a unified whole have no corresponding analogues in Confucian theory.²²⁵ A Confucian concept like *li*, that denotes ritual formality and renders actions socially appropriate, is not recognized by neither Aristotle

²²³ George H. Mahood, "Human Nature and the Virtues in Confucius and Aristotle," *Journal of Chinese Philosophy* 1 (1974): 295–312.

²²⁴ MacIntyre, "Incommensurability, Truth, and the Conversation between Confucians and Aristotelians about the Virtues," 106.

²²⁵ MacIntyre, 106–7.

nor Aquinas. The discordance between these conceptual schemes is exacerbated by the “very different modes of discourse”, methods, and sources that each system favors.

In his investigation of both moral systems, he observes that “each system has its own standard and measures of interpretation, explanation, and justification internal to itself. And...there are indeed no shared standards and measures, external to both systems and neutral between them, to which appeal might be made to adjudicate between their rival claims” although there are many points of resemblance between the two systems.²²⁶ MacIntyre defines the two systems as incommensurable, and he credits Kuhn for familiarizing scholars with the concept. MacIntyre adds to the concept of incommensurability historical contingency, meaning that because conceptual schemes evolve over periods of time, often displaying internal changes as well as changes in external relationships, incommensurability must be defined in relationship to periods of time and not as an enduring, unchanging characteristic of two rival systems.²²⁷ In order for two systems of thought to be characterized as incommensurable, MacIntyre requires that two conditions be satisfied. The first condition is worth quoting at length:

During such a stretch of time it will be the case that those who inhabit each of the two or more rival schemes of thought and practice embody them in their beliefs, actions, judgments, and arguments in such a way that it is both the case that the members of the two or more rival parties can agree, each from their own point of view, that they are referring to, characterizing, and conducting their inquiries about what is indeed one and the same subject matter, and yet also in their characterizations of and questions about that subject matter employ, to some large and significant degree, concepts whose applicability entails the nonapplicability, the vacuousness, of the conceptual scheme or schemes employed by their rivals.²²⁸

²²⁶ MacIntyre, 109.

²²⁷ MacIntyre, 109.

²²⁸ MacIntyre, 110.

The second condition is that during this stretch of time, there exists no external, independent, standard that can adjudicate between the two theories.²²⁹

MacIntyre astutely recognizes that perceptual incommensurability has semantic implications. He describes how two theorists or practitioners both observing the same phenomena can arrive at radically differing perceptions. The Confucian and Aristotelian may both see a person giving generously to someone in need. The Confucian may identify the absence of *li* or formal rituality, which the Aristotelian cannot notice since he has no words within Greek to translate *li* that have an equivalent meaning. The Aristotelian will recognize that generosity as a part of the proper ordering of a person's *psyche* expected of a citizen of the *polis*, an observation that the Confucian cannot perceive since the ancient Chinese associated with Confucianism admits of no such words. With this example, MacIntyre indicates that "incommensurability may, but need not, be associated with and arise from untranslatability."²³⁰

For MacIntyre, as for Kuhn, semantic incommensurability does not necessitate an irretrievable loss of mutual understanding. His method of ameliorating incommensurability also resembles Kuhn's description of interpretation:

[Mutual] understanding is possible only for those adherents of each standpoint who are able to learn the language of the rival standpoint, so that they acquire, so far as is possible, that other language as a second first language. Inhabiting both standpoints, only such persons will be able to recognize what is translatable and what is untranslatable in the transitions from one such language to the other.²³¹

At this point of mutual understanding, neither perspective adopts the other point of view just because they can define the competing scheme in the terms of one's own language. It simply

²²⁹ MacIntyre, 110.

²³⁰ MacIntyre, 111.

²³¹ MacIntyre, 111.

means that “they can now in some sense understand what it is that they reject” because the opposing theory must still be rejected by the standards internal to one’s own framework.²³²

Mutual understanding is not MacIntyre’s ultimate objective and it only exists as a stage toward his desired objective, the discernment and detection of truth through rational inquiry. Since each rival viewpoint or scheme does more than claim that what its conclusions embody are true from within its own point of view, but that its perspective constitutes the way that things really are, he needs to develop a method that surmounts incommensurability to ascertain whether realization of truth among competing theories is indeed possible. He explains precisely this intellectual predicament:

Of course anyone who makes a claim to truth for a judgment or theory or conception or the relationship of mind to object expressed in these does so from one particular point of view, from within one particular tradition of inquiry rather than from that of its incommensurable rivals. But what is then claimed is *not* that this is how things appear in the light of the standards of that point of view (something which the adherents of a rival and incompatible point of view have no reason to deny), but how they are, a claim in terms of fundamental ontology. It follows that any claim to truth involves a claim that no consideration advanced from *any* point of view can overthrow or subvert that claim.²³³

The claim for truth must proceed through rational confrontation, dispute, and discourse with rival theories, otherwise how could one know whether one theory is to be preferred over another?

The quest for truth is often misrepresented as a provision of concepts or practices, among which, the serious inquirer must choose based upon which one evinces the most rational coherence. What this conception elides, according to MacIntyre, are the rich traditions

²³² MacIntyre, 112.

²³³ MacIntyre, 113.

that produce and undergird the conceptual and practical schemes that give rise to the concepts and practices. In each of his seminal monographs, MacIntyre underscores the indispensability of history and tradition for exploring and rationally encountering rival theories. Such theories and systems, when abstracted from the traditions that formed them and which they themselves formed, acquiesce to the ahistorical temptation of modernity to construe morality as an amalgam of individual choices selected in an *ad hoc* manner.

The ideal approach involves recognizing that moral and ethical systems or theories display “long and complex histories of internal development in which each has been confronted by successive sets of problems and difficulties, problems and difficulties identified by the standards internal to each of these developing modes of moral thought and practice.”²³⁴ Furthermore, each moral system, by its own standards, has been “more or less successful” at resolving the problems and issues that it has encountered, and in resolving these difficulties, the standards that govern the theory itself have been modified, transformed and even enlarged to better enable identification and resolution of future problems. With this centrality of history and tradition in mind, each body of theory and practice must acquire an “accurate representation” of the other. This can happen when one understands the other to have, like itself, developed historically and confronted and resolved throughout its existence issues, problems, and difficulties that tested it. To gain an accurate representation of a rival theory, one must acquire a history of the rival point of view, written and understood from the perspective of the rival system.²³⁵

²³⁴ MacIntyre, 117.

²³⁵ MacIntyre writes, “That is, what the Aristotelian will have had to provide for his or her own use will be a history of Confucianism, written and understood from a Confucian point of view, and what the Confucian will similarly

After being provided with a history of the rival viewpoint, MacIntyre presents two conditions upon which one theory can be declared rationally superior to another. In examining these histories, the evaluation of one theory's history must show that it at some points fails to overcome some problem or difficulty or becomes rationally incoherent in trying to explain and solve it. This does not have to be recognized by adherents from the tradition that fails or lapses into incoherence, but it must be the case that if they—the practitioners and adherents to the theory being evaluated—operated according to their own standards of rationality, they would come to that conclusion.²³⁶ Moreover, MacIntyre states that those external to this tradition but familiar with this history are qualified to point out this failure. Secondly, the rival point of view or tradition must be able to explain why and how the other tradition succeeded and failed at exactly those points when it did fail and succeed according to the failing tradition's standards, beliefs, and methods. MacIntyre states, "When both these conditions are satisfied then it is rational for the adherents of the tradition of inquiry which has failed to transfer their allegiance to that which has provided the explanation of its failure."²³⁷ The resolution of incommensurability only requires that a theory or conceptual system be judged according to *its own* standards. If it fails by its own standards, and the other conceptual system succeeds when facing its own problems and difficulties, then one may transfer allegiance to the other.

need will be a history of Aristotelianism, written and understood from an Aristotelian point of view." MacIntyre, 117.

²³⁶ MacIntyre, 118.

²³⁷ MacIntyre, 118.

Conclusion

This chapter argued for Thomas Kuhn's theories of paradigm shift and incommensurability as concepts that help accurately interpret the nature of the disagreement and tension between black theology/womanism and most black churches. First, the chapter explicated Kuhn's concept of a paradigm, defining it as a community's shared system of values, techniques, methods, and theoretical agreements. Using Charles Taylor's theory of moral frameworks, the concept of a paradigm was transposed into the language of ethics and theology. Taylor's concept of a *hypergood*, defined as the good that establishes and defines one's identity, thus ranking and judging all other goods, beliefs, and values, provided a point of departure for defining a theological and ethical paradigm. Simply, a paradigm consists of a hypergood and its corollaries. So then, to speak of a Pietist or Liberationist paradigm is to denote a constellation of theological and ethical beliefs, values, and methods that serve as corollaries of the overarching theological hypergood subscribed to by the community. Taylor showed that besides being converted to a new hypergood, people can move from one hypergood to another based upon practical reasoning that demonstrates one hypergood's superiority over another in solving a problem.

Next, the chapter engaged in a discussion on incommensurability to retrieve its practical meaning for defining the state of disagreement between black church Pietism and Black theological Liberationism. The concept of incommensurability was first distinguished from incomparability and incompatibility, and was then shown to have three dimensions: the perceptual, the methodological, and the semantic. Perceptual incommensurability refers to incommensurability at the level of worldview. Methodological incommensurability refers to

incommensurable differences between paradigms regarding what constitutes problems and solutions, and regarding what actions resolve the problems that have been defined. Semantic incommensurability occurs when a set of terms from one theory are used differently in another, and there exist little to no shared concepts that enable translation of how to understand those terms when employed in the rival paradigm. Most critics of Kuhn have attacked the possibility of semantic incommensurability, and Kuhn abetted these critiques by continuing to revise his concept of incommensurability linguistically and semantically into more abstruse versions of its semantic dimension.

Exploring Alasdair MacIntyre's thought in dialogue with Victor Anderson, the chapter defended the applicability of incommensurability for defining the irreconcilable nature of conceptual and ethical debates, like those persisting between black churches and black theology/womanism. Anderson's concept of the precarious existence of a rat sharing the same environment as a boa was invoked to provide a practical illustration of what incommensurability entails. Lastly, MacIntyre concluded that incommensurability need not entail relativism, stating, "Incommensurability, it turns out, does not after all preclude rational debate and encounter."²³⁸ When a paradigm lapses into rational incoherence in the face of a pressing problem or difficulty, or fails in its approach to resolving it, and when someone familiar with the tradition confronting the problem explains the nature of the failure using the paradigm's own standards of rationality, MacIntyre suggests that the person is rationally justified in transferring his or her allegiance to another paradigm.

²³⁸ MacIntyre, 118.

Chapter 3

BLACK PIETISM: A THEOLOGICAL EXAMINATION OF ITS HISTORICAL EXPRESSIONS

Introduction

In the two foregoing chapters, the term “Pietist paradigm” has been used to delineate the framework of beliefs, values, and methods that defines the theological worldview of most black churches since their inception and until the present. What comprises the Pietist paradigm, however, has not yet been comprehensively analyzed and explored. The purpose of this chapter is to explicate the particular beliefs, values, and methods that constitute the constellation that serves as the paradigm. This chapter also provides historical evidence drawn upon primary sources across the life of black churches from the late-eighteenth century to the mid-twentieth century to establish the consistent and perennial character of this paradigm.

The chapter begins with a brief overview regarding the treatment of piety within works that analyze the black church. The commentary of Warnock and Andrews makes up the majority of this summary. Next, the meaning of piety is examined and analyzed historically and typologically to establish its suitability for defining this paradigm. By drawing predominantly upon the research of Albert Raboteau and Cheryl Sanders, regeneration from sin is identified as the hypergood of the black Pietist paradigm. Next, the paradigm—informed by the theological and ethical expressions, perspectives, and thought of antebellum Christians—is constructed and delineated. Finally, a close reading of selected representative narratives, essays,

newspaper articles, and sermons over a span of more than one hundred fifty years demonstrates the centrality and normativity of this paradigm for black churches in America.

Piety in Black Church Studies

Black Church Studies: An Introduction defines broadly the meaning of piety in relationship to the black church, describing it as a way of understanding the contours of a faithful life. Such pieties can be either more concerned with material and earthly things or with spiritual and heavenly realities. Based upon categories devised by Benjamin Mays in *The Negro's God as Reflected in His Literature*,²³⁹ the authors in this text examine two types of piety. The first, called *compensatory/accomodationist* piety, concerns itself with the eternal fate of individual believers and emphasizes personal sanctification and holiness. It is analogous to Booker T. Washington's self-help philosophy in that it refrains largely from social and political activism and concentrates primarily on self-development. The authors locate the strength of this piety in its ability to endow "the believer with an agency and significance largely denied in the larger world."²⁴⁰

The second strand of African-American piety, called *constructivist*, "has largely focused itself on the ways Black moral agency should combat the material and social structures that deny the humanity of Black persons and further our oppression."²⁴¹ This type of piety aims at cooperation with God in order to overturn and eradicate sinful structures. By conceiving of

²³⁹ Benjamin E. Mays, *The Negro's God: As Reflected in His Literature*, Reprint of 1933 edition (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2010).

²⁴⁰ Stacey Floyd-Thomas et al., *Black Church Studies: An Introduction* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2007), 86.

²⁴¹Floyd-Thomas et al., 87.

piety as inclusive of confrontation with oppressive structures and institutions, the authors of *Black Church Studies* diverge from the definition of piety provided by other black church scholars such as Raphael G. Warnock and Dale P. Andrews who define piety as something more personalistic and individualistic and more in line with the *compensatory/accomodationist* view.

Raphael Warnock argues that piety and protest are essential to a comprehensive understanding of the black church, and that both are necessary to its mission. In crafting his definition, he equates piety with the *compensatory/accomodationist* strand proffered in *Black Church Studies*, while his discussions of liberative activity and social transformation echo what the aforementioned authors describe as *constructivist* piety. While he argues that piety and liberation are not mutually exclusive categories, and that liberation actually emerges *from* piety, he defines them separately.²⁴² Piety, for Warnock, refers to individual conversion and focus on survival in this world and salvation in heaven.²⁴³ He also finds the conversion experience, or the experience of God's presence as emblematic of this piety.²⁴⁴ Tracing the emergence of this piety to the Great Awakening revivals of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Warnock calls alternatively this emphasis on conversion and eternal life after death "evangelical" piety, "revivalistic" piety, and "personal" piety. The adjectives used by Warnock underscore the personal and otherworldly dimensions of the piety practiced by the black church, but the concept of piety as practiced by the black church remains somewhat conceptually impoverished. The concept seems to exist primarily as a foil for the acts of social transformation and resistance that he encourages. To be sure, Warnock's goal is to balance the

²⁴² Warnock, *The Divided Mind of the Black Church*, 37.

²⁴³ Warnock, 36–37.

²⁴⁴ Warnock, 40.

black church's emphasis on "the slavery of sin" with a corresponding emphasis on "the sin of slavery."²⁴⁵ He argues that "authentic piety and true liberation are inextricably linked."²⁴⁶

Similarly to Warnock, Dale P. Andrews employs the term piety to describe modes of practice and experience regarding the black church but he does not adequately specify what this term encompasses. While Warnock seems to equate it partially with the conversion experience, Andrews appears to view piety as related to conversion but as having a different meaning. He writes, "...black churches emphasized personal salvation and religious piety under the impact of American individualism."²⁴⁷ Elsewhere, he differentiates between conversion and salvation, stating, "a fundamental individualism within conversion and personal salvation still earmarks the identity conflicts between black churches and black theology...".²⁴⁸ Frequently preceded by the modifier "religious," piety for Andrews underscores the individualist and privatistic elements of African American Christianity. Like Warnock, Andrews recognizes the importance of religious piety within this faith tradition and sees a synthesis of liberation and piety as the most fecund course for the black church to pursue. By encouraging individual thriving instead of individualism, Andrews attempts to recover the salience of religious piety. He opines, "It is incumbent upon our churches to resocialize the realities of self-interest intrinsic to personal salvation and religious piety. Human fulfillment and individual thriving fit well within the corporate vision of liberation and black ecclesiology."²⁴⁹ He is arguing that self-interest itself is not inimical to a flourishing black church, and when grounded within

²⁴⁵ Warnock, 177.

²⁴⁶ Warnock, 189.

²⁴⁷ Andrews, *Practical Theology for Black Churches*, 56.

²⁴⁸ Andrews, 60.

²⁴⁹ Andrews, 65.

community can enhance liberation, thus enabling him to retrieve the importance of religious piety. The problem with Andrews' discussion of religious piety is that he assumes that the reader intuitively understands what practices and perspectives he has in mind in the absence of a precise definition for religious piety.

The ambiguity surrounding the concept of piety occurs, in part, because discussion of the term veers toward sociological analysis rather than theological explication. This is all the more surprising because two of the aforementioned authors, Warnock and Andrews, discuss the term within works whose subjects explicitly addresses theological themes. In spite of their theological subject matter, the authors subsume piety under a rubric of practice, action, and behavior, rather than as a paradigm constituted by a set of beliefs and an understanding of God and the world that impinges upon the black church's role in society. The goal of this chapter is to provide a "thick" description of piety as a theological and ethical paradigm that assumed a central role within black Christianity from slave religion until the emergence of black theology and womanism.²⁵⁰ While this paradigm remains arguably the regnant theological paradigm within the black church, I will make no attempts to defend this claim. Rather, I aim to show that a certain kind of piety characterized the black church's existence until the emergence of black liberation theology and womanism in order to show the incommensurability between these two paradigms that still compete for supremacy within the black church.

In being juxtaposed against social protest and activism, it is clear that the authors conceive of piety as subjective, individualist, and indicative of personal and private religious

²⁵⁰ For more on the meaning of thick description, see "Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture," in *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays*, by Clifford Geertz (New York, NY: Basic Books, 1973).

practices. The etymology of the word leads naturally to these conclusions. As a descriptive term for a set of actions, beliefs, and practices, the word is derived from the Latin word *pietas* which denotes “filial affection for the family of God”.²⁵¹ The most commonly cited synonym for it used within the New Testament is the Greek word *eusebeia*, which is often translated as godliness.²⁵² To describe a person as “pious” means that the person is devout in worship and conduct. The German word for piety, *fromm*, means “godly and devout” or “gentle, harmless, and simple.”²⁵³ In each of these translations, piety refers to a set of behaviors or practices that emerge from the heart, or one’s internal being. The emphasis is on love, practice of spiritual disciplines, and a calm and gentle demeanor. Such definitions, while helping us grasp the meaning of the word, do not provide much by way of paradigmatic construction. A pivotal question still remains: what are the specific theological and ethical beliefs, practices, and perspectives that can be said to constitute a Pietistic paradigm?

Historical Pietism

It would seem difficult to identify this paradigm without first defining what we mean by calling this paradigm Pietistic. There are two prevailing methods for defining Pietism, the historical and the typological, but both lead to the same type of ambiguity that black church scholars confront when using piety as a delineation of a certain mode of religiosity.

²⁵¹ Dale W. Brown, *Understanding Pietism*, Revised edition (Nappanee, IN: Evangel Publishing House, 1996), 12.

²⁵² Brown, 12.

²⁵³ Brown, 12.

Pietism, as a historical movement “represents one of the historic forms of piety which are a part of our Christian heritage.”²⁵⁴ Within most scholastic texts on the subject, it usually refers to a 17th century historical movement within Christianity begun in Germany by Philipp Jakob Spener and which matured under the leadership of August Hermann Francke. For many scholars, the theological beliefs, values, and practices prioritized by classical Pietists must be understood against the rigid Lutheran Orthodoxy that they were reacting against. In the late sixteenth century, the publication of the *Book of Concord* in 1580 valorized theological subscription to creeds as a chief expression of Lutheranism.²⁵⁵ Concurrent with this zealous adoption of creeds was an emphasis on outward acquiescence to theological truths at the expense of inward relationship with Christ himself. “Persons were left with the impression that Christianity consisted of the reception of God’s saving Word through preaching and the sacraments along with loyal adherence to the Lutheran confessions.”²⁵⁶ This inordinate emphasis on pure doctrine meant that “feeling in religion was practically ignored after Luther’s day.”²⁵⁷ The church’s emphasis on externality and doctrinal adherence restricted the activity of the Holy Spirit to the sacraments and the church’s leaders, such that “the Holy Spirit worked only in and through the Church and the means of grace.”²⁵⁸

In writing *Pia Desideria*, the definitive text associated with Pietism, Spener—who was senior minister at Frankfurt am Main—aimed to induce spiritual renewal within the church and society through an emphasis on personal regeneration and recovery of holy living:

²⁵⁴ Brown, 13.

²⁵⁵ K. James Stein, *Philipp Jakob Spener: Pietist Patriarch*, 1st edition (Chicago, IL: Covenant Press, 1986), 20.

²⁵⁶ Stein, 21.

²⁵⁷ Arthur Wilford Nagler, *Pietism and Methodism: The Significance of German Pietism in the Origin and Early Development of Methodism* (Nashville, TN: Publishing House M.E. Church, 1918), 20.

²⁵⁸ Nagler, 22.

Calling for a more heartfelt commitment to Christ, Spener championed the ‘priesthood of all believers’ and called for the creation of conventicles for the purpose of communal Bible reading, prayer, mutual support, and admonition. He deplored the contentious and controversial tone of contemporary church life, and urged Christians to commit themselves to the practice of love of neighbor, though without sacrificing a commitment to truth.²⁵⁹

Francke, Spener’s student, surpassed Spener in influence, becoming involved in Prussian politics and world missions, and he founded various schools—mostly focused on educating the poor—that had a total of two thousand students enrolled at the time of his death. He also founded an influential orphanage, and a Bible Institute devoted to making Bibles and other pietistic literature available at very little cost. Francke’s principal desire was to “awaken Christians throughout the world to become resolute Christians and active coworkers as well as to convert non-Christian peoples to Christianity.”²⁶⁰

Whereas black church scholars tend to be imprecise in defining piety, historians each attempt to provide a precise definition for Pietism, but they have disagreed over where to draw the “temporal and geographical boundaries” of this movement, and their attempts are fraught with conflicting accounts.²⁶¹ Some scholars, like Dale Brown and Arthur Nagler restrict Pietism to the “movement in the last quarter of seventeenth century and first half of eighteenth-century Germany which revolved around the reform activity of Spener and Franke,”²⁶² while

²⁵⁹ Roger E. Olson and Christian T. Collins Winn, *Reclaiming Pietism: Retrieving an Evangelical Tradition* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2015), 39.

²⁶⁰ Markus Matthias, “August Hermann Francke (1663-1727),” in *The Pietist Theologians*, ed. Carter Lindberg (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 102.

²⁶¹ Carter Lindberg, *The Pietist Theologians* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 2.

²⁶² Brown, *Understanding Pietism*, 15.

others, like F. Ernest Stoeffler²⁶³ favor a broader definition that is transcontinental and extends into the twentieth century.

The disagreement among historians led Arthur Nagler to opine, “Just what constitutes Pietism is still a matter of dispute and will probably always remain so.”²⁶⁴ Douglas Shantz, writing almost one hundred years after Nagler writes, “Historians still wrestle with issues of definition and scope as they seek to capture the phenomenon of Pietism,” which indicates that Nagler’s appraisal was accurate.²⁶⁵ Nagler’s classic *Pietism and Methodism* provides a case in point for the seeming arbitrariness associated with historical definitions of Pietism. Although the historical record clearly supports the influence of Francke’s Pietism on that of Count Nikolaus von Zinzendorf’s Moravian Church, whose followers helped facilitate Wesley’s conversion experience, Nagler—in opposition to Carter Lindberg, Stoeffler, and Hartmut Lehmann²⁶⁶—does not include Methodism under the historical rubric of Pietism. Yet, around major issues that would appear definitive, Methodism and the Pietism of Spener and Francke cohere.²⁶⁷

²⁶³ See “Introduction” in F. Ernest Stoeffler, ed., *Continental Pietism and Early American Christianity*: (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Pub, 2007), 8–13.

²⁶⁴ Nagler, *Pietism and Methodism: The Significance of German Pietism in the Origin and Early Development of Methodism*, 11.

²⁶⁵ Douglas H. Shantz and Peter C. Erb, *An Introduction to German Pietism: Protestant Renewal at the Dawn of Modern Europe* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013), 14.

²⁶⁶ See Hartmut Lehmann, “Pietism in the World of Transatlantic Religious Revivals,” in *Pietism in Germany and North America 1680-1820*, ed. Jonathan Strom, Hartmut Lehmann, and James Van Horn Melton (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2009).

²⁶⁷ See Chapter 9, “Pietism and Methodism: A Comparative Study,” in Nagler, *Pietism and Methodism*.

Typological Pietism

Typologies usually emerge from historically grounded research, thus causing the typological to be dependent upon the historical. It is appropriate to ascertain whether scholars studying historical Pietism have found central themes that differentiate the moment definitively from other historical religious trends. For example, Dale Brown identifies central theological motifs that characterized the Pietism of Spener, Francke, and their followers. They include, a love theology in which “Faith grasps God’s love through Christ which alone brings about holy actions,” reformation of the church through small group Bible studies and lay participation, an emphasis on devotional reading of the Bible that relies upon the Holy Spirit for illumination of meaning, orthopraxis—also called sanctification and right living, a theology of experience that prioritizes the role of repentance and conversion in the development of true faith, a rejection of worldliness, and transformation of the world through works of mercy.²⁶⁸

Roger E. Olson and Christian T. Collins Winn, in assessing the contributions of several leaders that they label Pietist, enumerate ten distinctive hallmarks or common motifs, of Pietism. They overlap with Brown’s but also differ in some respects. Theirs include, 1) an embrace of orthodox Protestant Christian doctrine, 2) experiential, transformative Christianity that reacts against a narrow emphasis on sacraments and doctrine as the preferred means of the Holy Spirit’s activity, 3) conversion, “the regeneration of the inner person,” 4) conversional piety, which describes “a strong devotional life and a personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ crucified and risen, 5) visible Christianity, 6) love of the Bible as a means of

²⁶⁸ Brown, *Understanding Pietism*, 11.

maintaining intimacy with God, 7) Christian life lived in community, 8) world transformation, 9) ecumenical Christianity, and 10) the common priesthood of believers.²⁶⁹

Although the motifs of Pietism listed by Brown and Olson and Winn are similar, Olson and Winn conclude that “There is no uniform scholarly consensus on who counts as a Pietist or on a definitive list of characteristics or hallmarks of Pietism as an ethos.”²⁷⁰ They respond to this pessimistic state of affairs by attempting to define Pietism based upon its strong center and not by its circumference. This strategy necessarily leads to the question, who defines the center, and by what means?

The solution emerges when a typological paradigm is created around the “hypergood” that has grounded historical expressions of Pietism and which also traditionally undergirds the black church. To determine this hypergood is to ask what particular good did early expressions of the black church consider as of overriding importance, such that it, more than any other good or belief, defined their Christian identity and became the standard by which other goods were judged and measured? It is to also ask, of all the goods that black Christians have sought, which one is most significant for structuring and defining the trajectory of their lives?

Before pursuing this arc of research, a contradiction would seem to emerge. Earlier, the slippery nature of the task of defining piety and Pietism was demonstrated through analysis of black scholars’ writings and through an investigation of historical and typological attempts to pin down such a definition. Historians and theologians both agree that this attempt is fraught with peril and ambiguity, and yet, this chapter argues for precisely this type of definition. This

²⁶⁹ Olson and Winn, *Reclaiming Pietism*, 85.

²⁷⁰ Olson and Winn, 81.

chapter does not suggest that all Christians believing in this hypergood are Pietist, nor that all Pietists (however that term is defined) necessarily believe in this hypergood. This chapter argues that black Christians can be defined as Pietist based upon the correspondence of their beliefs and behaviors with exemplars of historical movements that scholars have traditionally defined as Pietist.

Scholars have identified regeneration and conversion as a hypergood that emerges as foundational for the beliefs and practices of Pietists throughout history. Nagler claims that “both Pietism and Methodism built the whole superstructure of their systems” upon the new-birth experience.²⁷¹ Dale Brown states that “Martin Schmidt and others have maintained that the heart of Pietist theology is its focus on regeneration.”²⁷² Harmut Lehmann labels “the belief in renewal and rebirth” a distinguishing characteristic of Pietism²⁷³, and Douglas Shantz sees “the notion of new birth” playing a central role for Pietists as well as English and American evangelicals.²⁷⁴ Ted Campbell states that Pietism stressed religious experience, especially repentance, defined as sorrow over sin, and sanctification.²⁷⁵ Olson and Winn observe that “all Pietists highlighted salvation as experience of inward transformation by the Holy Spirit through faith as personal appropriation of God’s grace.”²⁷⁶ Perhaps W.R. Ward best underscores the centrality of regeneration through conversion as the essential, basic, and fundamental theological belief of the Pietists under examination. He claims that Pietists regarded the new

²⁷¹ Nagler, *Pietism and Methodism: The Significance of German Pietism in the Origin and Early Development of Methodism*, 126.

²⁷² Brown, *Understanding Pietism*, 22.

²⁷³ Lehmann, “Pietism in the World of Transatlantic Religious Revivals,” 16.

²⁷⁴ Shantz and Erb, *An Introduction to German Pietism*, 4.

²⁷⁵ Ted A. Campbell, *The Religion of the Heart*: (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Pub, 2000), 71.

²⁷⁶ Olson and Winn, *Reclaiming Pietism*, 89.

birth as the “decisive presupposition” for sound theology.²⁷⁷ He also calls the new birth Pietists’ “party badge...because of the prominence they gave it,”²⁷⁸ and he recognizes that the “message of the New Birth was common to the Pietist and revival movements everywhere.”²⁷⁹ Having established the centrality of regeneration or new birth as the key theological principle for the Pietists studied by these leading scholars, the next section will show that the black church also foregrounds this experience as its hypergood, but in a different way.

The Black Pietist Paradigm

In her landmark dissertation “Slavery and Conversion: An Analysis of Ex-Slave Testimony,” Cheryl Sanders states,

...slave religion represents a characteristically Christian response to the evil of slavery. The conversion experienced by the slaves is not distinctive in the sense of uniqueness, but is characteristic of how Christianity finds expression in culture. Conversion introduced the slave to a gospel of freedom which contradicted the gospel of submission they were taught by whites.²⁸⁰

In Sanders’ view, conversion and slave religion are inextricably linked. Conversion represents the point of entry into Christianity for black slaves and marks the threshold that all slaves had to pass through in order to experience divine assurance.

Albert Raboteau calls the conversion experience an essential element of slave religious life.²⁸¹ He writes, “For the only path to salvation lay through that ‘lonesome valley’ wherein the

²⁷⁷ W. R. Ward, *The Protestant Evangelical Awakening* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 47.

²⁷⁸ Ward, 57

²⁷⁹ Ward, *The Protestant Evangelical Awakening*, 290.

²⁸⁰ Cheryl Jeanne Sanders, *Slavery and Conversion: An Analysis of Ex-Slave Testimony* (Thesis ThD--Harvard University, 1985), 9.

²⁸¹ Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The “Invisible Institution” in the Antebellum South*, Updated edition (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2004), 66.

'seekers' underwent conversion, an experience which they treasured as one of the peak moments in their lives."²⁸² This conversion experience usually consisted of three parts: first, there was a feeling of sinfulness. Next, there was a vision of damnation, and lastly, an experience of acceptance by God in which one was assured that one had been reborn or made new. Raboteau describes this conversion as in inward and experiential realization of Christian doctrines such as human depravity, divine sovereignty, and unconditional election "made vividly apparent to the imagination and the emotions."²⁸³ That this experience is quintessentially Pietist is made clear by Olson and Winn's declaration that "All Pietists believe that *some* measure of feeling of Christ in the heart accompanies salvation. That is usually understood to be first a feeling of sorrow for sin and then a feeling of joy for forgiveness and a new beginning."²⁸⁴

The conversion experience of black slaves was not exactly the same as whites however. Lincoln and Mamiya state, "The core experience of the black sacred cosmos was the personal conversion of the individual believer."²⁸⁵ This conversion diverged from that of whites in its experiential dimensions, being expressed more overtly in observable bodily and emotional reactions, and becoming harmonized with the rhythmic spirituality that slaves imported from Africa. Not all scholars, however, believe that African retentions still existed within slavery.

This debate occurring in mid-twentieth century scholarship questioned whether slaves in the United States retained any of their African customs, worldview, practices, and religion —

²⁸² Raboteau, 66.

²⁸³ Raboteau, 268.

²⁸⁴ Olson and Winn, *Reclaiming Pietism*, 93.

²⁸⁵ Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, 6.

in short, their original culture, after being forcibly brought to the shores of America and made to acculturate to European norms, practices, beliefs, and religion. Cecil Cone attempts to define black religion based upon African beliefs in an “Almighty Sovereign God.” Others who have attempted to establish correlation between black Christianity and African religion regarding religious beliefs include Gayraud Wilmore and Henry Mitchell.

Black Piety and African Retentions

In his classic work on the black church, entitled *The Negro Church in America*, E. Franklin Frazier contends that slavery completely stripped Africans of their ability to transmit their culture and religion. He states, “the capture of many of the slaves in inter-tribal wars and their selection for the slave markets tended to reduce to a minimum the possibility of the retention and the transmission of African culture.”²⁸⁶ Frazier bases his thesis upon the disintegration of social cohesion that inevitably ensued after Africans were captured from their homeland. For Frazier, the annihilation of kinship and social structure severely hampered communication and transmission of treasured cultural values, mores, myths, and practices.

Frazier rebuts the argument that credits conversion of Negro slaves to Christianity to consonance between Christian practices and the African background of the slave. Instead, he maintains that slaves were converted during the Great Awakening and through missionary efforts of Baptists and Methodists because Christianity helped slaves rediscover the social cohesion and sense of moral inclusion stripped from them during slavery. Furthermore, Christianity expanded the social roles of slaves by allowing them access to the religious world of

²⁸⁶ Frazier, *The Negro Church in America*, 1.

their masters. They were often able to attend church with them, participate in family prayers, and converse with their masters regarding religious and moral matters.²⁸⁷

Herskovits disagrees with Frazier's assessment of black Christianity in the United States, and regards it as a representative example of the regnant explanation within early to mid-twentieth century scholarship that perceived the pervasiveness of Negro religion as a compensatory device meant to allay the social and economic frustrations engendered by the vagaries of postbellum life. For Herskovits, black Christianity does not arise *de novo* from encounters of slaves with Protestant proselytization, but builds upon the openness to the supernatural that characterizes African religiosity. He writes, "It must therefore be assumed that not only in particular aspects of Negro religious life to be pointed out in this chapter, but in the very foundations of Negro religion, the African past plays full part."²⁸⁸

How does one navigate the Scylla of Frazier's contention that nothing of significance in black Christianity arises from African origins versus the Charybdis of Herskovits' postulation that African retentions in black Christian belief systems are readily identifiable? Albert Raboteau adjudicates the debate by finding merit and flaws in both positions. He curbs Frazier's pessimism and attenuates Herskovits' exaggerations by finding two definitive areas concerning African and European religion in which African retentions occurred. When discussing ecstatic worship, which includes spirit possessed dancing in Africa and shouting in black Christian churches, Raboteau discovers,

. . . There is a discontinuity then, between the African heritage of spirit possession and the black shouting tradition in the United States. The African gods with their myriad characteristics, personalities, and myths do not "mount" their enthusiasts amid the

²⁸⁷ Frazier, 9.

²⁸⁸ Herskovits, *The Myth of the Negro Past*, 207.

dances, songs, and drum rhythms of worship in the United States. Instead it is the Holy Spirit who fills the converted sinner with a happiness and power that drives him to shout, sing, and sometimes dance.²⁸⁹

To explain the continuity and relationship between black Christian shouting, singing, and other forms of religious expression, and African spirit possession and drumming, Raboteau juxtaposes the behavior while eschewing ostensible continuities in content and beliefs. In his analysis, variants of embodied actions persist across time and region amongst African people, but they become imbued with new beliefs, meaning, and symbolism within a new religious and spiritual context. According to his perspective,

While the rhythms of the drums, so important in African and Latin American cults, were by and large forbidden to the slave in the United States, hand-clapping, foot-tapping, rhythmic preaching, hyperventilation, antiphonal (call and response) singing, and dancing are styles of behavior associated with possession both in Africa and in this country.²⁹⁰

Raboteau identifies the rhythmic practices shared by Africans and slaves within America as one of the most pronounced Africanisms permeating African American religion. While the manner in which the participant experiences the deity varies depending on the actual gods being worshiped and the specific methods by which people believe that their particular god encounters or reveals itself to them, Raboteau finds the means of invocation and response to the spiritual presence to be strikingly similar, such that they comprise a distinctive rhythmic repertoire that has African origins. It is this vibrant fusion of African embodied practices and dispositions with the biblical theme of regeneration and conversion that produced the distinctive brand of piety that came to constitute the black Pietist Paradigm.

²⁸⁹ Raboteau, *Slave Religion*, 64.

²⁹⁰ Raboteau, 65.

Enumeration of the Black Pietist Paradigm

So then, the pietism of black people is not the same as the European Pietism of Francke and Spener. As Cheryl Sanders demonstrates, the piety of black people was grounded within a recapitulation of biblical themes and thought, a source upon which they generously drew that was then fused with an African embodied spirituality. Based upon 42 interviews with ex-slaves, Sanders develops a composite typology of the slave conversion in which she aggregates the characteristic features of the conversion to illustrate its critical dimensions. She identifies fifteen elements that typically comprised slave conversions, and each of these elements has biblical precedent. They include, nurture and guidance by others, hearing of Scripture, prayer and fasting, supernatural trance, vision or voice, dreams, struggle with evil, repentance, acceptance, divine healing, divine call or commission, shouting and ecstasy, baptism, joining church, change in lifestyle, and testimony to others.²⁹¹ Sanders acknowledges that “every conversion account includes at least one of these critical dimensions, but no single account comprises them all.”²⁹² She concludes that “the conformity of the pattern of multiple dimensions to the biblical record should be regarded as further evidence that the ex-slave conversion accounts are not necessarily unique or distinctive in form or content.”²⁹³ In other words, Sanders wants to show that the conversion experience of slaves adheres to biblical representations and should therefore be evaluated as fundamentally biblical in shape and scope. By highlighting this correlation, she firmly establishes the biblical nature of slave religion. Sanders pares down this list to nine dimensions and constructs another typology for

²⁹¹ Sanders, *Slavery and Conversion*, 39.

²⁹² Sanders, 38.

²⁹³ Sanders, 64.

analyzing the ongoing religious lives of slaves. Using the same interviews as guides for understanding religious life, she retains nature and guidance by others, hearing of Scripture, prayer and fasting, struggle with evil, shouting and ecstasy, baptism, joining church, change in lifestyle and testimony to others. The other six dimensions were discussed by ex-slaves in regard to their conversion experience, but hardly at all when they discussed their ongoing religious life. Both of Sanders' typologies of slave conversions and religious practices provide a useful guide for investigating and reconstructing slave religion. However, she focuses on religious practices while the Pietist paradigm constructed here will examine the theological beliefs that provide the backdrop or framework within which religious practice takes place.

In adopting a similar methodology to Sanders, I examined primary sources to ascertain what theological beliefs and dispositions comprised the black church Pietist paradigm. The data analyzed consists of thirteen autobiographies and biographies of slaves and free black men and women written between the late eighteenth and late nineteenth centuries.²⁹⁴ These firsthand

²⁹⁴ Richard Allen, *The Life, Experience and Gospel Labors of the Rt. Rev. Richard Allen to Which Is Annexed the Rise and Progress of the African Methodist Church in the United States of America: Containing a Narrative of the Yellow Fever in the Year of Our Lord, 1793, with an Address to the People of Color in the United States* (Philadelphia, PA: Martin and Boden, 1833); Solomon Bayley, *A Narrative of Some Remarkable Incidents, in the Life of Solomon Bayley, Formerly a Slave, in the State of Delaware, North America: Written by Himself* (London: Harvey and Darton, 1825); Leonard Black, *The Life and Sufferings of Leonard Black, a Fugitive from Slavery, Written by Himself* (New Bedford, MA: Benjamin Lindsey, 1847); Sarah H. Bradford, *Harriet: The Moses of Her People* (New York, NY: Geo R. Lockwood & Son, 1886); Elizabeth, *Memoir of Old Elizabeth, A Coloured Woman* (Philadelphia, PA: Collins, 1863); Julia A. J. Foote, "A Brand Plucked from the Fire. An Autobiographical Sketch," in *Spiritual Narratives* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1988); Sojourner Truth and Olive Gilbert, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth, a Northern Slave, Emancipated from Bodily Servitude by the State of New York, in 1828* (Boston, MA: The Author, 1850); Andrew Jackson, *Narrative and Writings of Andrew Jackson, of Kentucky; Containing an Account of His Birth, and Twenty-Six Years of His Life While a Slave; His Escape; Five Years of Freedom, Together with Anecdotes Relating to Slavery; Journal of One Year's Travels. Sketches, Etc.* (Syracuse, NY: Daily and Weekly Star, 1847); John Jea, *The Life, History, and Unparalleled Sufferings of John Jea, the African Preacher, Compiled and Written by Himself*. (Portsea, England: The Author, 1811); John Joseph, *The Life and Sufferings of John Joseph, a Native of Ashantee, in Western Africa: Who Was Stolen from His Parents at the Age of 3 Years, and Sold to Mr. Johnstone, a Cotton Planter, in New Orleans, South America*. (Wellington, New Zealand: The Author, 1848); G.W. Offley, *A Narrative of the Life and Labors of the Rev. G. W. Offley, a Colored Man, Local Preacher and Missionary; Who Lived Twenty-Seven Years at the South and Twenty-Three at the North; Who Never Went to School a Day in His Life, and Only Commenced to*

accounts of black religiosity provide early in-depth accounts of theological beliefs and practices that become institutionalized within the black church and continue to be practiced until the present.

The priority that many scholars accord the experience of conversion and the new birth for understanding Pietism is also definitive for slave religion and the black church such that this experience represents a *hypergood* that arises to ultimate importance theologically within this tradition. This means that this hypergood, more than any other, defines the slaves' Christian identity, and represents the hermeneutic through which other goods are assessed and evaluated. In other words, it ranks and judges other goods, including liberation from slavery and oppression. The Black Pietistic paradigm, structured around the conversion experience and the experiential realities and theological beliefs associated with regeneration, comprises the basic theological and ethical foundation for the black church, and it emerged during slave religion and pre-Civil War revivalism. To ascertain what beliefs, practices, and perspectives also constitute this paradigm, one must identify those closely related goods that attended the hypergood during this period. Based upon the literature, eight characteristic features emerge.

First, early black believers displayed a keen awareness of *universal* sin, meaning, they believed that *both* the oppressor and the oppressed stood as sinners before a holy God and required individual regeneration. This belief concerns theological anthropology, or what it means to be human in relationship to God. It has two primary dimensions. One dimension

Learn His Letters When Nineteen Years and Eight Months Old; the Emancipation of His Mother and Her Three Children; How He Learned to Read While Living in a Slave State, and Supported Himself from the Time He Was Nine Years Old Until He Was Twenty-One (Hartford, CT: The Author, 1859); Maria W. Stewart, "Productions of Mrs. Maria W. Stewart," in *Spiritual Narratives* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1988); George White, *A Brief Account of the Life, Experience, Travels, and Gospel Labours of George White, an African: Written by Himself, and Revised by a Friend* (New York, NY: John C. Totten, 1810).

refers to all humans' equal worth and value before God since all are created in God's image.

The other dimension refers to all humans' innate sinfulness. Both dimensions operate in their fullest capacity at the level of the soul. Ancestry, skin hue, and culture exist as secondary characteristics that have no bearing upon the soul and its relationship to God.

The creation of all people in the image of God means that black Christians believe that all people share in the same rational, moral, and spiritual abilities. All have the ability to behave morally and use reason, emotion, and volition to navigate the world. Spiritually, all have the propensity to respond to the divine command to turn away from sin by believing that the death of Jesus Christ washes and regenerates the sinful soul, thus transforming it and rendering it righteous. That all people have a soul means that slaves or black people as a whole are not inherently *less* sinful than masters as a result of their oppression. To put it another way, righteousness and reconciliation with God cannot emerge *via* oppression, but only through acceptance of Jesus' sacrifice by placing faith in the efficacy of his blood.

To be sure, neither slaves nor black Christians embraced a theological anthropology in which persons considered themselves as "bodiless-souls."²⁹⁵ White Christian ministers and plantation owners adopted this view of slaves and it allowed them to mistreat slaves' black bodies while assuaging their own consciences by providing them with religious instruction purportedly meant to benefit their souls. The first dimension, creation in God's image, meant

²⁹⁵ Riggins R. Earl Jr, *Dark Symbols, Obscure Signs: God, Self, and Community in the Slave Mind* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 5–6. Earl argues that slaveowners either adopted a view of slaves as "bodiless souls" in which only their souls mattered, or "soulless bodies," in which they abused viciously black bodies, viewing the slave as having no conscience nor humanity.

that they knew that their black bodies were also considered worthy of respect, preservation, and care.

Secondly, because this deeply felt awareness of sin emerged supernaturally in response to the biblically based declaration—either heard from a preacher or read in the Bible—that every person was a sinner in need of redemption, the black pietist paradigm accorded the Bible singular authority as the definitive revelation of God for *all* aspects of human life, and it was interpreted literally. In exercising a similar hermeneutic, Black Pentecostals have been described by Cheryl Sanders as “liberal literalists”:

They are liberal because the exilic experience of being black in a racist society forbids them to follow uncritically conservative, fundamentalist readings fostered by the descendants of those who used the Bible to justify slavery. . .they are literalists because they are unwilling to surrender the present authority and power of the Scriptures to the forces of modernity and are generally resistant to liberal readings fostered by modern black and white exegetes.

Although Sanders proffers this compelling depiction of black scriptural hermeneutics, the term “liberal literalists” gets close to, but does not fully encompass the hermeneutic that arises from the new birth experience in black religion. Slaves *and* those black Christians who were free, shaped by the emotive and experiential elements within their African ancestry, *embraced* the text supernaturally in a type of circular process in which divine encounter attested to the truth of the Bible, the truth of the Bible then explained and interpreted the divine experience, and the process repeated itself continually throughout the slaves’ existence.²⁹⁶ For example, a slave would hear the gospel preached and read, and would then become seized by an overwhelming feeling of sinfulness. He or she would know that the feeling of sinfulness was not some

²⁹⁶ The term slave, as it is used here, is a type of shorthand used to denote any pre-Civil War black Christian, whether slave or free.

psychological delusion or medical ailment, but a state of guilt and remorse engendered by awareness of one's sinfulness before a Holy and righteous God as revealed to the slave in the initial sermon or text. After seeking God's grace through fervent prayer, the slave would experience a release of joy and peace. The slave would then use scripture to explicate those emotions of joy and peace as assurance from the Holy Spirit that he or she had been truly saved. This process repeated itself in reference to visions, dreams, and even seemingly natural events that slaves ascribed to God's providence and wisdom. Thus, a more appropriate designation for slave Bible reading would be "experiential literalists." Slaves "lived" the text by experiencing viscerally its truth. Such experiences underscored the Bible's truth and reliability, so that texts that seemed to contradict the slave's sense of inwardly revealed truth were interpreted against other biblical texts, and not simply discarded.

So then, experiential literalists resist a reliance on extrabiblical concepts or revelation for interpreting scripture, especially because these extrabiblical sources could not recreate the transformative religious experiences that shaped the slaves' life. Slaves and black believers subordinated admonitions for women to remain silent or for slaves to obey masters *to other scriptural texts and themes* that disclosed the cultural specificity of the texts in question. Slaves and black Christians, at least in this sample of narratives, did not consider texts commanding the preservation of certain social roles—i.e. obedience of slaves and silence of women—to be "wrong," but obeyed other texts that demonstrated that the texts in question were meant to be adhered to only within particular cultural contexts.

Thirdly, slaves and black Christians intuitively applied the concept of sinfulness to white slaveowners and to the system of slavery as a whole for their divergence from the love and

compassion commanded within the Bible. Thus, the concept of sin internalized by early black Christians was complex and multilayered. While sin universally applied to individuals, sin also applied at the social level to institutions and systems that rebelled against God's will and commands.

Fourth, there was a commitment to the theological principle that the Christian life entails ongoing avoidance of personal sin alongside a concomitant pursuit of traits and attributes intrinsic to the divine Godhead. This belief, called sanctification, is a byproduct of regeneration in that the transformation of the human life from sinfulness to righteousness is not merely forensic or declaratory, but constitutes actual *ongoing* changes in the thoughts, behaviors, perspectives, and beliefs of the person who has been born again. Through adherence to Christian principles alongside submission of one's will to Christ through prayer, fasting, and Bible reading, the slave and black Christian endeavored to lead a sanctified life.

Fifth, there existed a belief in heaven and hell as places of reward and judgment that ensure that justice occurs. Such a belief is correlated to the believer's trust in what scripture describes, and it is a consequence of religious experiences in which these places are depicted in visions and dreams. Sixth, there existed a supernatural understanding of the world in which angels and demons exist and miracles occur, because the same scriptural text that induces the feelings of repentance in the person also describes a world populated by spiritual beings and governed by a personal and loving God. Seventh, since the resolution of the feelings of sorrow over sin was usually replaced by feelings of joy and assurance after a period of passionate prayer and petition to God, the believer learned that God answers prayer and therefore approached God relationally, as one intimately involved in the world's affairs, and as one who

was sovereign over all events, developments, and occurrences, including acts of injustice, evil, and wickedness. Eighth, and particularly regarding slave religion, one will find that ethical decisions varied regarding injustice, and they were made through a process of scriptural discernment, dialogue with God, and interpretation of circumstantial factors. This last paradigmatic element corresponds to Sanders' conclusion that "the slaves adopted a variety of ethical styles in relation to the problem of slavery."²⁹⁷ She continues, "if a distinctive element is present in their collective ethical thought, it would be their unanimous refusal to defend slavery on the ground of Christian ethics."²⁹⁸ Of these nine paradigmatic beliefs, the first four are most important for ascertaining the ways that the Liberationist paradigm differs incommensurably from the Pietist paradigm, and they will be the ones emphasized in descriptions of postbellum and twentieth century black Pietist paradigm manifestations. While these facets of Pietism emerged within slave religion, they are perennial and continue to structure and define the black Pietist paradigm.

Pre-Civil War Black Pietism

John Joseph

The first theological belief that structures the Pietist paradigm consists of an awareness of universal personal sin. This means that all unregenerate people, independent of ethnicity, class, or gender, stand as individual sinners before a Holy God. John Joseph was born to a chief of the Ashantee tribes in West Africa around the year 1800, and was taken prisoner during a

²⁹⁷ Sanders, *Slavery and Conversion*, 203.

²⁹⁸ Sanders, 203.

tribal war at only three years old. Sold to slavetraders, he was forced aboard a slave ship headed for New Orleans. After an unsuccessful attempt at running away, he was sold to a Mr. Smith who allowed two men named Rev. Mr. Howard and Mr. Brown to religiously instruct the slaves. Joseph remembers,

“I was brought to see and feel myself a sinner in the sight of God, and look to the Lord Jesus Christ as my only Saviour and mediator; instead of bending, as I had been accustomed to do, to the Sun, Moon, and Stars. It gladden’d the hearts of the poor slaves, to hear that God was no respecter of person, but that he accepts the black as well as the white man; that he who cometh to him with a lowly and contrite heart, whatever be the colour of his skin or his condition in life, whether bond or free, he will in no wise cast out; he would gather his sons from the east and his daughters from the west, for all the nations of the earth shall see the salvation of our blessed Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ, through whose merits alone we can be saved, and adopted as the children of God, by faith, and made heirs and joint heirs with him in glory: Africans as well as Europeans.”²⁹⁹

Joseph, in realizing that he is a sinner, repudiates his former practice of worshipping the creation. He states that slaves found Jesus’ offer of salvation to be good news and rejoiced in the knowledge that salvation included them, although they were systematically dehumanized by the brutality of slavery. He expresses the significance of coming to God with “a lowly and contrite heart,” a phrase taken from scripture.³⁰⁰ Thus, Joseph recognizes the universality of sin and repentance as the remedy that applies to all people, including slaves, independent of skin color, class, or condition. Such identifiers do not constitute the essence of human existence, but highlight the eternal significance of the heart, which can be equated to the soul. Joseph exhibits awareness that all humans are made in the image of God by including “all nations of

²⁹⁹ Joseph, *The Life and Sufferings of John Joseph, a Native of Ashantee, in Western Africa: Who Was Stolen from His Parents at the Age of 3 Years, and Sold to Mr. Johnstone, a Cotton Planter, in New Orleans, South America* . . . , 5–6.

³⁰⁰ Isaiah 57:15 states, “For this is what the high and exalted One says—he who lives forever, whose name is holy: ‘I live in a high and holy place, but also with the one who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite.’”

God” within the eschatological event of the ingathering of all of God’s people. By stating that both Africans and Europeans share in Christ’s inheritance, he further emphasizes the shared dignity and value of humanity.

Frequently employing biblical terminology, including phrases such as “contrite heart,” “adopted,” and “heirs and joint heirs,” Joseph also exhibits profound respect for biblical authority found in the third dimension of the Pietist paradigm by interpreting his own conversion literally in accordance with biblical norms. His belief in heaven, described as “glory” is also evident in this passage, and further demonstrates the experiential literalist hermeneutic that he applies to scripture.

Joseph expresses theological insight in being able to discern the difference between the sermons preached to him by other slaveholders that cautioned him to “obey your masters and mistresses, or you shall have the rod.”³⁰¹ He exclaims, “How different the gospel of Jesus to the threats and menaces of our inhuman masters!”³⁰² Joseph, like many slaves who became Christians, recognized the sinful nature of slavery, the hypocritical nature of slaveowners, and he felt no compulsion to continue enduring its cruelty. Dr. Browne, the Virginia planter who bought Joseph from Mr. Smith, treated him savagely by withholding food and clothing, and he subjected him to merciless beatings. Exasperated with his master’s intransigent cruelty, he attempted to escape. During his first attempt at escaping, he was forced to climb a tree by bloodhounds sent to pursue him. In remembering this escape attempt, he writes,

“I came down, he immediately seized me, tied me, and dragged me home. I was then tied to the whipping post, received thirty-nine lashes, and as usual whilst the blood was

³⁰¹ Joseph, *The Life and Sufferings of John Joseph, a Native of Ashantee, in Western Africa: Who Was Stolen from His Parents at the Age of 3 Years, and Sold to Mr. Johnstone, a Cotton Planter, in New Orleans, South America* . . . 6.

³⁰² Joseph, 6.

running down to my heels the salt and water was applied to my lacerated back. I then had an iron collar with my master's name engraved on it, and long prongs fastened to it, put round my neck to prevent me from going into the bushes."³⁰³

Undeterred, Joseph attempted to escape again but his escape attempt proved "equally ineffectual" and he recalls, "for being again taken, I was flogged more severely if possible, than before, and paced in a dungeon, and fed for three days on bread and water."³⁰⁴ After being sent to work at a house a mile away from the others, Joseph embarked upon his third escape attempt. After being helped by an Indian in the woods who had compassion upon him, Joseph came to the Mississippi River. Standing at the bank of the river, Joseph was almost ready to commit suicide by casting himself into the river when he saw a boat tied to a tree. Climbing in the boat, he floated down the river "trusting in him who is able to preserve them that put their trust in him, as well on the mighty deep as on the land, even he who rules the sea, and whose will the winds obey, who also has declared that they that put their trust in him shall never be forsaken."³⁰⁵ Drifting in the boat for two days, Joseph eventually was discovered by a large English ship which picked him up and took him to England where he was declared a free man.

In the passage above, Joseph evinces a strong belief in God's providence and sovereignty. He credits the success of his third escape attempt to God's kindness and never blames God for the torture that he endured after his first two failed escape attempts. He proclaims, "blessed be God, that he has at length, in his own good pleasure, rescued me from the tortures I underwent, and above all, that he has enlightened my mind, to come to a saving

³⁰³ Joseph, 7.

³⁰⁴ Joseph, 7.

³⁰⁵ Joseph, 7.

knowledge of the truth as it is in Jesus Christ.”³⁰⁶ Here Joseph ascribes to God sovereignty in matters of earthly protection *and* in matters of spiritual transformation. While the belief in God’s election of some people versus others does not constitute a part of the Pietist paradigm, Joseph’s suggestion that enlightenment of one’s mind for saving knowledge originates in God’s will underscores how strongly he believes in God’s power to affect natural and supernatural change.

John Jea

Johnathan Joseph’s eight page narrative is rife with theological beliefs and perspectives that validate the applicability of the Pietist paradigm. John Jea’s narrative, over ten times longer, encompasses all dimensions of the Pietist paradigm, thus making his story optimal for exhaustive exploration. Like John Joseph, John Jea was born in Africa. He was born in 1773 in Old Callabar. At two and a half, his parents and his siblings were stolen and captured for transport to North America aboard a slave ship. He was purchased by Oliver and Angelika Triebuen, who treated them cruelly, nearly starving his family, also forcing them to work from two in the morning until eleven o’clock at night. He recalls, “they used us in a most cruel manner; and often they treated the slaves in such a manner as caused their death, shooting them with a gun, or beating their brains out with some weapon, in order to appease their

³⁰⁶ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920*, Revised edition (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), 22.

wrath, and though no more of it than if they had been brutes: this was the general treatment which slaves experienced.”³⁰⁷

The inhumane treatment endured by Jea at the hands of his supposedly Christian master caused him to “hate those who professed themselves Christians, and to look upon them as devils.”³⁰⁸ Jea, who angrily neglected his work and told his masters what he thought of them, was beaten severely. He responded that “instead of making me obedient, it made me the more stubborn, not caring whether I lived or died, thinking that after I was dead I should be at rest, and that I should go back again to my native country.”³⁰⁹ Jea, continuing to resist his masters by challenging their hypocrisy, was forced to go to church while the other slaves rested. He states, “I could not bear to be where the word of God was mentioned, for I had seen so much deception in the people that professed to know God, that I could not endure being where they were, nor yet to hear them call upon the name of the Lord.”³¹⁰

Jea hated going to church and he despised so much the people that attended that he desired to kill the minister and every person that was religious.³¹¹ He admits, “The more I went to hear him preach, the more I wished to lay in wait to take away his life,” and then, “My hatred was so much against going to the chapel, that I would rather have received an hundred lashes.”³¹²

³⁰⁷ Jea, *The Life, History, and Unparalleled Sufferings of John Jea, the African Preacher, Compiled and Written by Himself.*, 4.

³⁰⁸ Jea, 9.

³⁰⁹ Jea, 10.

³¹⁰ Jea, 10.

³¹¹ Jea, 10.

³¹² Jea, 11.

However, existing alongside Jea's contempt for religious people was an inner desire for true knowledge of God. After repeatedly attempting to pray in order to discover whether God actually existed, Jea went to the minister with his frustrations. The minister counseled him to continue praying in order to frustrate what the minister diagnosed as the devil's attempts to deter Jea from finding God. Jea acquiesced, stating, "I still continued praying, in order to find out whether there was a God or not, being determined to take the minister's life away, if I could not find God."³¹³

After continually seeking for God through prayer, Jea suddenly came to realize that he was a sinner. He remembers the realization in this way:

"I was led to see that I was a sinner; all my sins were brought to mind; and the vengeance of God hanging over my head, ready to crush me to pieces; which filled me with distress and anguish of mind, the sorrows of death now seemed to compass me, and the pains of hell got hold upon me; I found trouble and sorrow. My sins seemed like great mountains pressing on me, and I thought God would deal with me according to my sins, and punish me for my crimes."³¹⁴

Jea began to feel guilty for his murderous thoughts, and his distress became noticeable to his master and mistress. In response to their inquiries regarding his change in behavior, he stated that he now knew that he was a sinner. Thereafter, they forbade him to go to church and mercilessly beat him. Jea laments, "In this state I was forced to go to work, with my flesh torn to pieces by their scourging, having large lumps raised on my back; and my soul was grieved and troubled within me. In this situation I went from one friend to another, crying 'What shall I do to be saved?' But they, instead of comforting, ridiculed me, and said I was mad."³¹⁵

³¹³ Jea, 11.

³¹⁴ Jea, 13.

³¹⁵ Jea, 16–17.

Jea visited the minister nightly around ten or eleven o'clock to seek comfort and help. The minister encouraged him to keep praying, and to ask God for mercy. Jea followed his instructions, but continued to languish in overwhelming despair and terror regarding his sinfulness for five or six more weeks. To adequately describe the unbearable burden of sinfulness that plagued him, Jea quotes biblical verses from Daniel 4:3-6:

I set my face unto the Lord God, to seek by prayer and supplications, with fastings, and sackcloth, and ashes: And I prayed unto the Lord my God, and made my confession, and said, O Lord, the great and dreadful God, keeping the covenant and mercy to them that love him and to them that keep his commandments; we have sinned and have committed iniquity, and have done wickedly, and have rebelled, even by departing from thy precepts and from thy judgments: Neither have we hearkened unto thy servants the prophets, which spake in thy name to our kings, our princes, and our fathers, and to all the people of the land.³¹⁶

Here, and in numerous places throughout this narrative, Jea incorporates lengthy texts of scripture to interpret the meaning of the events, trials, and triumphs that he experiences. By inserting these passages, he shows that his life exemplifies scriptural realities, principles, and occurrences. Jea's life becomes an extension of scripture, in the same way that scripture is woven throughout the narrative so that it is difficult to ascertain when scripture begins and ends. This tactic is metaphorical and intentional, in that Jea's converted life only makes sense as a part of a scriptural understanding of the world and human life. The Bible becomes the lens through which all of Jea's life must be apprehended, and Jea even interprets his life, preconversion, through texts that illuminate the tragic nature of his sinful existence. In one instance, he compares himself, preconversion to those who perished in the flood, stating "My own heart suggested to me that there was no God, being so wicked and sinful; that I have since

³¹⁶ Jea, 17.

compared myself with those who were destroyed by the flood, Gen. viii. 21.”³¹⁷ Elsewhere, Jea compared his tears and sorrow at being unable to overcome his sinfulness to Jeremiah’s lament, writing, “For these things I weep, mine eyes runneth down with water; because the Comforter that should relieve my soul is far from me. Lament of Jeremiah i. 12, 13, 14, 16.”³¹⁸

At first, Jea was punished by being forced to attend church, and provision of his daily food allowance depended upon his submissiveness to his master’s orders regarding church attendance. In an entire reversal of the earlier scenario, Jea’s master now attempts to prevent him from going to church by beating him horrifically, but Jea obstinately attends anyhow, hoping to secure relief for his burdened soul:

Such was my desire of being instructed in the way of salvation, that I went at all times I possibly could, to hear the word of God, and seek instruction for my soul; while my master still continued to flog me, hoping to deter me from going; but all to no purpose, for I was determined by the grace of God, to seek the Lord with all my heart, and with all my mind, and with all my strength, in spirit and in truth, as you read in the Holy Bible. During five or six weeks of my distress, I did not sleep six hours in each week, neither did I care to eat any victuals, for I had no appetite, and thought myself unworthy of the least blessing that God had bestowed on me; that I exclaimed with the publican of old, ‘God be merciful to me a miserable hell-deserving sinner.’³¹⁹

After this protracted period of fervent prayer, Jea finally experienced conversion and the assurance of salvation. He recollects,

“And while I was thus crying, and begging God to have mercy on me, and confessing my sins unto him, it pleased God to hear my supplications and cries, and [he] came down in his Spirit’s power and blessed my soul, and showed me the clear fountain of living water, which proceeded from the throne of God, as you may read in Revelations; yea, a fountain of water and blood, which flowed from Emanuel’s side, to wash away my sins and iniquities...”³²⁰

³¹⁷ Jea, *The Life, History, and Unparalleled Sufferings of John Jea, the African Preacher, Compiled and Written by Himself.*, 13.

³¹⁸ Jea, 15.

³¹⁹ Jea, 17.

³²⁰ Jea, 17.

Jea rejoiced, having been delivered from the burden and bondage of sin. It is not clear whether Jea uses the word “showed” to refer to his phenomenological appropriation of a biblical concept, or to an actual vision in which he “saw” the fountain of living water. In either case, the fountain includes blood and water, a reference to Christ’s death on the cross and a reference to John 19:34, and Revelation 22:1.

Jea began to tell his master, mistress, friends, and family about his new birth, but they thought that he had “lost his reason.”³²¹ Although converted at the age of fifteen, around the age of seventeen Jea states that he experienced deliverance from the fear of death and a full and evident witness that helped him to love all men, women, and children. He began to “speak boldly in the name of the living God, and to preach...”³²²

He was sold successively to three different masters who discouraged his preaching as a threat to their slaves. After, unbeknownst to his master, being baptized, the city magistrates examined Jea, and satisfied that he had been saved, declared him free from his master. Jea’s master and his sons informed Jea that he was bound to obey them according to the Bible. They told him that the book talked with them. Jea, who could not read, held the Bible up to his ears hoping that it would talk to him also, but to no avail.³²³ Remembering the scripture that states, “Whatever ye shall ask the Father in my name, ye shall receive,”³²⁴ Jea began asking God for

³²¹ Jea, 25.

³²² Jea, *The Life, History, and Unparalleled Sufferings of John Jea, the African Preacher, Compiled and Written by Himself.*, 31.

³²³ Jea, 33.

³²⁴ Jea, *The Life, History, and Unparalleled Sufferings of John Jea, the African Preacher, Compiled and Written by Himself.*, 34.

knowledge of God's word so that he could prove that God had not told his master and his sons that he must remain enslaved to them.

Jea wrestled in prayer again, as fervently as he did when he was burdened with sin. He recalls, "I gave God no rest day nor night, and I was so earnest, that I can truly say, I shed as many tears for this blessing, as I did when I was begging God to grant me the the pardon and forgiveness of my sins."³²⁵ Again, after six weeks, Jea experienced a supernatural response to his petitions:

Thus the Lord was pleased in his infinite mercy, to send an angel, in a vision, in shining raiment, and his countenance shining as the sun, with a large bible in his hands, and brought it unto me, and said, "I am come to bless thee, and to grant thee thy request," as you read in the Scriptures. Thus my eyes were opened at the end of six weeks, while I was praying, in the place where I slept; although the place was as dark as a dungeon, I awoke, as the Scripture saith, and found it illuminated with the light of the glory of God, and the angel standing by me, with the large book open, which was the Holy Bible, and said unto me, "Thou hast desired to read and understand this book, and to speak the language of it both in English and in Dutch; I will therefore teach thee, and now read;" and then he taught me to read the first chapter of the gospel according to St. John; and when I had read the whole chapter, the angel and the book were both gone in the twinkling of an eye, which astonished me very much, for the place was dark immediately; being about four o'clock in the morning in the winter season.³²⁶

After the sun rose, Jea went to inform the local minister that he could now read the Bible. The minister listened to Jea read the Bible, and was astonished since he was a former slave and they were not allowed to learn to read nor write. When he gave Jea other books to read, he was amazed to discover that Jea could only read the Bible. The minister told the story of Jea's miracle all over New York, and people came to see if it was true. Others brought him before magistrates to prevent him from encouraging other slaves to pray, lest the same thing happen

³²⁵ Jea, 34.

³²⁶ Jea, 35.

to them. While others argued that Jea should not have his freedom, the magistrates ruled that he should retain it because no person could read in such a miraculous fashion unless it had been inspired by God.³²⁷

Jea became a successful preacher, traveling throughout Europe and America, inspiring hundreds of souls to become converted to Christ. The rest of his narrative provides accounts of his exploits as a preacher, and of the many situations in which God delivered him from danger, suffering, and persecution. Jea states, "From that hour, in which the Lord taught me to read, until the present, I have not been able to read in any book, nor any reading whatever, but such as contain the word of God."³²⁸

Jea's narrative is profoundly instructive for properly understanding the black Pietistic paradigm. This is particularly due to his initial repulsion from Christianity due to the cruelty and hypocrisy of white slaveowners. Jea, fully aware of his status as a slave, did not accord himself righteousness or moral goodness due to any inherent moral value associated with his oppression, but counted himself a sinner alongside his master. Jea, who engaged in prayer in order to discover to whether there was a God, discovered that God existed, but he was also gripped profoundly by an awareness of an internal sinfulness that separated him from God, and which was distinguishable from his oppression as a slave. The ironic reversal that observes Jea attending church in spite of savage beatings meant to deter him, testifies to the supernatural yearning for righteousness that transcended his temporal chains. Furthermore, it describes an

³²⁷ Jea, 38. He writes, "It was a law of the state of the city of New York, that if any slave could give a satisfactory account of what he knew of the work of the Lord on his soul he was free from slavery, by the Act of Congress, that was governed by the good people the Quakers, who were made the happy instruments, in the hands of God, of releasing some thousands of us poor black slaves from the galling chains of slavery." Jea, 39.

³²⁸ Jea, *The Life, History, and Unparalleled Sufferings of John Jea, the African Preacher, Compiled and Written by Himself.*, 38.

ethics of resistance that refuted the authority of his master in religious matters. In fully embracing the truth of scripture as the lens through which he views the world, others, and his own life, Jea ascertained the sinfulness of *both* his masters' family, in spite of their claims to Christianity, *and* his own family, and he preached the good news of his salvation to them both.

Jea's conversion led him to pursue a life of righteousness, and he bemoans the fact that many walk "contrary to God's will and commands; swearing, cursing, and abusing the holy name of God."³²⁹ He commanded other slaves to "hate sin, and to fly from it as from the face of a serpent."³³⁰ After traveling to New Orleans to preach, he compared the people there to those of Sodom and Gomorrah because they neither "feared God, nor regarded man."³³¹ Jea deplored their willingness to sing, dance, and play billiards, cards, and dice on Sunday, believing these activities to be sinful. Undergirding all of his beliefs, perspectives, and ethical commitments was his faith "that the Scriptures were wrote by inspiration and that they must be understood by the Spirit."³³²

In Jea's narrative, all facets of the black Pietist paradigm are discernible, but limitations of space prevent a complete enumeration of each element with corresponding examples. In the foregoing discussion, the hypergood of new birth has been identified, alongside the concomitant and closely related goods of awareness of universal sin, a view of the Bible as God's supernaturally inspired divine revelation for humanity, an understanding of slavery's sinfulness, a commitment to sanctification or right moral living, belief in heaven and hell, and a

³²⁹ Jea, 21.

³³⁰ Jea, 42.

³³¹ Jea, 66.

³³² Jea, 45.

supernatural worldview in which miracles occur and spiritual beings exist. While his belief in God's sovereignty was not examined in detail, his belief that God would hear the prayers of slaves to deliver them from bondage is encapsulated in his encouragement of other slaves "to seek the Lord, and to be earnest in prayer and supplication, for well I know that the Lord would hear and deliver them, if they sought him in sincerity and in truth, as the Lord delivered me."³³³ Jea's various strategies of resistance to his master also indicate that his ethical decisions regarding how to cope with injustice varied situationally, but remain grounded in scriptural faithfulness.

Maria Stewart

Thus far, the correlation between the conversion of the individual and that individual's literal understanding of the Bible, avoidance of personal sin, and conceptualization of sin as both individual and universal has been demonstrated through the narratives of Jonathan Joseph and John Jea. The same correlation exists in Maria Stewart's life, and these facets can be observed vividly in her public speeches. Believed to be the first woman of any race to give a political speech before an audience of men and women, Stewart confronted issues of race and gender in the mid-nineteenth century while remaining committed to the divine authority of the Bible. Valerie Cooper states, "although her work has been widely categorized as political speech, it also rings with evangelical religious fervor because it is liberally sprinkled with biblical

³³³ Jea, 40.

references.”³³⁴ Cooper also calls the Bible the “heart and soul” of Stewart’s message and “inseparable from her political thought.”³³⁵

Stewart was born free in Hartford, Connecticut in 1803, and was an orphan at five years old. She married James W. Stewart in 1826, and became a widow in 1829. She made a public profession of faith in 1831, and by 1833 she was giving public speeches. Five of these speeches given between 1831 and 1833 were initially published in the abolitionist newspaper *The Liberator*. Later, fourteen meditations were added to these speeches, and the collection was published as the *Productions of Mrs. Maria W. Stewart* in 1835.³³⁶ Stewart’s writings provide further evidence that the hypergood of pre-Civil War black religion was not liberation, but regeneration and conversion that conformed to its depiction within the Bible.

In a speech delivered in 1833, Stewart describes her conversion: “Borne down with a heavy load of sin and shame, my conscience filled with remorse; considering the throne of God forever guiltless, and my own eternal condemnation as just, I was at last brought to accept of salvation as a free gift in and through the merits of a crucified Redeemer.”³³⁷ In a prayer published as a part of her eighth meditation, Stewart, like Jea, demonstrates belief in the salvific nature of Jesus’ blood, praying, “were it not that there is sufficiency in thy blood to atone for the vilest, the view of my past sins and transgressions would sink me in despair.”³³⁸

In her meditations, Stewart repeatedly uses bible verses, biblical allusions, and imagery to caution the reader against the perils of sin. Constantly aware of God’s judgment, she

³³⁴ Valerie C. Cooper, *Words, Like Fire: Maria Stewart, the Bible, and the Rights of African Americans* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2012), 4.

³³⁵ Cooper, 8.

³³⁶ Stewart, “Productions of Mrs. Maria W. Stewart.”

³³⁷ Stewart, 72.

³³⁸ Stewart, 37.

intercedes on behalf of her African brothers and sisters through prayers that, due to their biblical imagery and evocative prose, are sometimes virtually indistinguishable from her innumerable scriptural quotations.

The central theme that is prevalent in all of her writings, both political and devotional, is the pursuit of Christian morality and virtue. This devotion to virtuous living springs from her conversion experience and future hope in eternal life. Stewart declares in her third meditation, "I am determined to resist the lusts of the world, the flesh and the devil, and to fight the good fight of faith, and win the crown and by my father's side sit down."³³⁹ Her approach to life and to ministry can be summed up in her words taken from the Introduction to her "Meditations." She writes,

I have borrowed much of my language from the holy Bible. During the years of childhood and youth, it was the book that I mostly studied; and now, while my hands are toiling for their daily sustenance, my heart is most generally meditating upon its divine truths. I am more and more convinced that the cause of Christ will never be built up, Satan's kingdom will never be destroyed, the chains of slavery and ignorance will never burst, and morality and virtue will never flourish, till pure and holy examples are set at home, and the professing followers of Christ arise and shine forth, and prove to the world that there is a reality in religion, and a beauty in the fear of the Lord.³⁴⁰

Interpreting the Bible literally, Stewart viewed Africans as having been made in the image of God. She quotes Psalm 8 in declaring, "He hath crowned you with glory and honor; hath made you but a little lower than the angels."³⁴¹ That this image is universally applied to all humanity is evident in her statement, "It is not the color of the skin that makes the man, but it is the principles formed within the soul."³⁴² While she does not negate the realities of suffering

³³⁹ Stewart, 28.

³⁴⁰ Stewart, "Productions of Mrs. Maria W. Stewart," 25.

³⁴¹ Stewart, 5.

³⁴² Stewart, 5.

endured by Africans, she focuses on the sinful habits that she believes keep them from experiencing amelioration of their social and economic condition.

Already, the foundational role of conversion in Stewart's theological activism has been noted. Furthermore, the closely related dimensions of the black Pietist paradigm, including an awareness of universal sin and belief in universal human worth, literal interpretation of the Bible as God's divine Word, and the commitment to growth in righteousness and holiness, have been demonstrated.

In each of her five speeches, she quotes Psalm 68:31, a verse that declares that "Ethiopia will stretch out her hands to God." The means by which this desired end will occur are thrift, diligence, virtue, piety, and solidarity. For instance, Stewart declares, "Never, no, never will the chains of slavery and ignorance burst, till we become united as one, and cultivate among ourselves the pure principles of piety, morality, and virtue."³⁴³ Moreover, she counsels the "fair daughters of Africa" to build wealth creating institutions of their own, counseling them to pool their money in order to build a high school or grocery store. She admonishes her fellow black citizens to "Possess the spirit of independence. The Americans do, and why should not you?"³⁴⁴ Stewart's corrective measures, however, constitute only one part of her message.

She also holds white America responsible for its abominable treatment of her African citizens:

Oh, America, America, foul and indelible is thy stain! Dark and dismal is the cloud that hangs over thee, for thy cruel wrongs and injuries to the fallen sons of Africa. The blood of her murdered ones cries to heaven for vengeance against thee. Thou art almost become drunken with the blood of her stain; thou has enriched thyself through her toils and labors; and now thou refuseth to make even a small return. And thou hast caused

³⁴³ Stewart, 6.

³⁴⁴ Stewart, 17.

he daughters of Africa to commit whoredoms and fornications; but upon thee be their curse.³⁴⁵

Stewart also combines a strong emphasis on self-help with a belief in a sovereign God who will act to rescue Africans from oppression. She warns America, "...for I am persuaded, that he will not suffer you to quell the proud, fearless and undaunted spirits of the Africans forever; for in his own time, he is able to plead our cause against you, and to pour out upon you the ten plagues of Egypt."³⁴⁶ This belief in a sovereign God endows Stewart with insuperable courage since she knows that God's power exists beyond the grave. Instead of fearing other people, she states, "We fear Him who is able, after he that killed, to destroy both soul and body in hell forever."³⁴⁷

The core political and theological themes that animated Stewart's writings are on display in "An Address" that she delivered at the African Masonic Hall on February 27, 1833. In this speech she chides her fellow black citizens for failing to achieve prominence in the areas of science, philosophy, or law. She then asks, "...where is the man that has distinguished himself in these modern days by acting wholly in the defence of African rights and liberty?"³⁴⁸ She then credits David Walker with being a man whose memory should inspire the type of achievement, protest and activism she deems as rare amongst African men.

Stewart invokes the history of Africa to remind the reader of the great knowledge, science, achievement, and wisdom that was displayed upon the continent. Revisiting her themes of morality and virtue, she attributes Africa's downfall to sinfulness, concluding that "it

³⁴⁵ Stewart, 18.

³⁴⁶ Stewart, 19.

³⁴⁷ Stewart, 20.

³⁴⁸ Stewart, 64.

was our gross sins and abominations that provoked the Almighty to frown thus heavily upon us, and give our glory unto others.”³⁴⁹ In mourning the current condition of her people, she encourages “true piety and virtue” as the means by which what had been lost could be regained.³⁵⁰

Stewart observes the lack of resources accorded Africans and articulates the injustice of white Americans gaining wealth on the backs of African slaves. She complains, “We have pursued the shadow, they have obtained the substance; we have performed the labor, they have received the profits; we have planted the vines, they have eaten the fruits of them.”³⁵¹ Immediately after diagnosing this imbalance in resources and opportunities, she admonishes men to abstain from visiting gambling halls or dance halls since this entertainment squanders needed money. Next, she exhorts men to “contend for the cause of God and the rights of man” by forming temperance societies, viewing them as a way to achieve honor and respectability.³⁵² Alongside temperance societies, she advocates for the creation of schools and seminaries for children and youth. She balances this emphasis on black achievement with a realistic appraisal of white sentiments toward Africans in writing, “But ah! methinks their hearts are so frozen towards us...and I fear, if they dared, like Pharoah king of Egypt, they would order every male child among us to be drowned.”³⁵³ Once again acknowledging God’s sovereignty, she concludes, “But the most high God is still able to subdue the lofty pride of these white Americans, as He was the heart of that ancient rebel.”³⁵⁴

³⁴⁹ Stewart, 65.

³⁵⁰ Stewart, 65-66.

³⁵¹ Stewart, 67.

³⁵² Stewart, 68.

³⁵³ Stewart, 69.

³⁵⁴ Stewart, 69.

Stewart interpreted her public speaking as a mandate commissioned by God. After one speech early in her career, she went home ashamed. She stated that “something” said within her heart, “press forward, I will be with thee.”³⁵⁵ Stewart, knowing that this was the Lord, replied to the Lord that if He would be with her, then she would speak for as long as she lived. She states that it is “the divine influence of the Holy Spirit operating upon my heart that could possibly induce me to make the feeble and unworthy efforts I have.”³⁵⁶ Therefore, Stewart’s public ministry was instigated by her experiential and divine knowledge of God. Knowing the difficult persecution that she would face as a woman public lecturer, Stewart still pressed forward, armed with the spiritual knowledge that God had called her to a holy vocation.

With Stewart’s admiration for the Bible’s divine authority in view, it is expected that she would wrestle with Paul’s text instructing women to keep silent within the church *vis a vis* her divine encounter, especially in the face of ardent opposition that confronted her ministry. In her last speech given before she retired from public speaking, Stewart provides a valuable glimpse into her biblical hermeneutics surrounding this pivotal issue. She begins by locating and rehearsing examples of women leaders in the Bible. She states,

What if I am a woman; is not the God of ancient times the God of these modern days? Did he not raise up Deborah, to be a mother, and a judge in Israel? Did not queen Esther save the lives of the Jews? And Mary Magdalene first declare the resurrection of Christ from the dead? Come, said the woman of Samaria, and see a man that hath told me all things that ever I did, is not this the Christ?³⁵⁷

Stewart maintains consistency in her experiential literalist interpretation of the Bible as God’s authoritative Word for human life by appealing to the Bible itself for divine approbation of her

³⁵⁵ Stewart, 74.

³⁵⁶ Stewart, 74.

³⁵⁷ Stewart, 75.

call to preach. Each example that Stewart includes tacitly supplies biblical approval for her public ministry. She addresses Paul's admonition, perceiving that "St. Paul declared that it was a shame for a woman to speak in public, yet our great High Priest and Advocate did not condemn the woman for a more notorious offence than this; neither will he condemn this worthless worm."³⁵⁸ Stewart remains inconclusive regarding how to evaluate Paul's injunction against women. She suggests, "Did St. Paul but know of our wrongs and deprivations, I presume he would make no objections to our pleading in public for our rights."³⁵⁹ Does this mean that Paul's instructions are contextually bound to the culture within which he gave them? Is she suggesting that public speaking is permissible *only* when one is attempting to right wrongs or eliminate injustice? Perplexed herself, Stewart admits, "Why the Almighty hath imparted unto me the power of speaking thus, I cannot tell."³⁶⁰ In spite of Paul's prohibition, Stewart finds in her experience with the Holy Spirit and in other scripture a divine command that permits her to resist injustice through public speaking.

In giving an apologetic for her capabilities and qualifications, Stewart turns to history to examine the role of women within different societies. She notes that some ancient nations believe that women could see the future. She argues that Germans, Britons, and Scandinavians thought women could more readily communicate with God. She speaks of Jewish prophetesses and the role of women within Greek and Roman cultures. In defending her ministry and the

³⁵⁸ Stewart, 75.

³⁵⁹ Stewart, 75.

³⁶⁰ Stewart, 76.

rise of other women who also publicly renounced injustice, Stewart warns, “No longer ridicule their efforts, it will be counted for sin.”³⁶¹

Stewart’s theological and ethical understanding encompass the core elements that constitute the Pietist paradigm. She is attentive to the demands of justice on behalf of black people, but she is also unsparing in her admonitions against personal immorality. Although being less confrontational toward the evil system of racism, Stewart prefers to address directly problems over which she believed herself to have greater influence. Stewart displays a panoramic view of sin that conceives of it as both personal and social, and this understanding of sin and God is grounded in her own regeneration from sin as initiated in her conversion experience. Her public exhortations provide evidence for the role of Pietism in both interpersonal and political black antebellum religion, and her dedication to public activism denotes the commitment to freedom and justice that are also embedded within the Pietist paradigm.

Andrew Jackson

Andrew Jackson begins his narrative published in 1847 by stating that he would have remained a slave “had not a kind Providence favored my efforts to gain my liberty by flight.”³⁶² Jackson provides evidence for Sanders’ claim that Christian slaves adopted a variety of ethical styles in relationship to slavery—some thought it sinful to escape, while others favored violent

³⁶¹ Stewart, 77.

³⁶² Jackson, *Narrative and Writings of Andrew Jackson, of Kentucky; Containing an Account of His Birth, and Twenty-Six Years of His Life While a Slave; His Escape; Five Years of Freedom, Together with Anecdotes Relating to Slavery; Journal of One Year’s Travels. Sketches, Etc.*, 3.

rebellion—and that slaves did not defend slavery based upon their acceptance of Christianity, but repudiated it.

Jackson was born January 25, 1814, in Bowling Green, Kentucky to a slave and a freedwoman. His mother had been emancipated by a deed from her master. Following his master's death, however, the master's heirs alleged that he had been insane and they revoked the deed, causing his mother to remain a slave and her children to be born into slavery. After being sold to various masters, his seventh master, Perry Claypoole, instructed Jackson to get married in order to provide him with more slaves. Jackson, knowing that resistance meant he would be sold to a slave trader, endeavored to escape. Hearing from another slave about the treacherous route through Kentucky and Ohio that led to Canada, he left one Saturday night in early August.

During his escape, Jackson had to use both deception and violence in order to succeed. Immediately after leaving, he tore up some of his old clothes and smeared them with animal's blood in order to make it seem as if he had been attacked and killed by wild beasts. At various times he had to mislead those who suspected him of being a fugitive by claiming that he was allowed to work at some distance from the plantation or by feigning to be a slave lagging far behind his master's carriage. At other times, Jackson was vigorously pursued by men attempting to recapture him. During his escape attempt, he hid in woods, ran to the point of complete exhaustion, and subsisted on blackberries. At one point during his harrowing journey, Jackson was ambushed, and was chased by a dog and two men. To remain free, he resorted to violent self-defense:

As the dog came up, I seized a stone and fortunately hit him in the head, leaving him stiff upon the ground. The man on the horse soon came up and uttering oaths which

made my blood chill, almost, commanded me to stop. I did so—but only to draw back my trusted hickory, and by a well directed blow sent him reeling from his unsaddled horse. He soon recovered, however, as the blow only stunned him for a moment, and renewed the pursuit. As he came up the second time, before he reached me he tried to fire upon me, but as fortune ordered it, his gun missed and left him in a rage. He then rode on, with the weapon raised in his hand, commanding me to stop. I had a round stone in my hand, and when he came near enough, I determined to give him what we used to call a ‘hard biscuit,’ and threw the stone, which, from the cry he gave, I knew had hit him somewhere, and caused him to halt until his companion came up with him.³⁶³

Jackson anticipates potential moral judgment by the reader for his acts of self-defense, and offers this response:

Some may think I did wrong in this, and I am very sure it was very hazardous, for the penalty is very severe upon slaves who strike a white man, but I was after a prize, for which I was willing to risk my life. And I doubt not, anyone who reads this, would have done the same. And if it was right for the revolutionary patriots to fight for liberty, it was right for me, and it is right for any other slave to do the same. And were I now a slave, I would risk my life for freedom. ‘Give me liberty or give me death,’ would be my deliberate conclusion.³⁶⁴

Jackson demonstrates that opinions regarding whether a given behavior was right and wrong, especially in regard to resistance against injustice, varied among Christian slaves.

Jackson’s willingness to defend himself arises from his belief that God was providentially caring for him, comparing his escape attempt to the Israelites who fled from Egyptian slavery.

Although escaping these pursuers, Jackson was soon recaptured, imprisoned, and sold to a landlord. Only staying with the landlord one month, he successfully escaped and went to Wisconsin to reunite with his brother, whom he had not seen for nine years. He remained there one year, working and earning money. Jackson frequently thought of the millions of slaves still bound by unyielding chains, even to the point of insomnia. He remembers, “But I

³⁶³ Jackson, 13–14.

³⁶⁴ Jackson, 14.

could not sleep, often, when I would turn my thoughts to my countrymen in chains. I would compare my situation with theirs, and often lie and weep bitter tears of sympathy for those I had left behind me. I would have dared and endured anything to have saved even one.”³⁶⁵

One day he was asked to speak publicly regarding his experiences as a slave. Invited to a large meeting by a gentleman who paid his traveling expenses, Jackson agreed. The reception was so overwhelmingly positive that he was invited to tour the county, and thereafter he embarked upon a vocation of becoming an abolitionist, preacher, and activist.³⁶⁶

Jackson’s narrative differs from many of the other slave narratives examined in this dissertation due to the omission of his conversion experience. After briefly discussing his childhood, the story passes immediately to his escape attempt. In spite of this, Jackson’s narrative exemplifies the black Pietistic paradigm due to the presence of the closely related goods that illuminate the centrality of the hypergood of conversion and regeneration. Jackson displays an awareness of universal sin, veneration of the Bible as God’s literal and authoritative Word for understanding human life, a commitment to sanctification and righteous living, and a relational approach to an immanent God who is also sovereign. The dimension of the paradigm most prominent in Jackson’s writings is his understanding of slavery as sin, thus providing an emblematic example of Pietism’s dual understanding of sin as pertaining to personal morality *and* to racial and social oppression.

That Jackson believes in personal regeneration and conversion as the hypergood of one’s existence is evident in his letter to his former master, Stephen Claypool. In this letter the

³⁶⁵ Jackson, 21.

³⁶⁶ Jackson, 22.

corollaries of the hypergood are evident and Jackson offers harsh denunciation of slavery and he exposes Claypool's hypocrisy through vivid description of slavery's horrors, condemnation of Claypool's immorality induced by intimate knowledge of his dereliction, and astute application of scripture to Claypool's sins and to the system of slavery as a whole.

One of the closely related corollaries of the Pietist hypergood includes the belief in universal sin and the efficacy of Christ's blood for forgiving this sin and regenerating the individual. In the preface to his letter, Jackson prays, "May God of his infinite mercy give you grace and save you by the application of Jesus' blood."³⁶⁷ He inquires of Claypool, "Is it right for you to treat us your brethren, with such contempt? Christ died for us. O how can you be so hard and oppressive to that Saviour who suffered so much for all mankind?"³⁶⁸ He warns Claypool that if he wants to be happy and make it to heaven with Jesus and the saints "who have washed their robes and made them white in his blood" then he must repent for owning and mistreating slaves.³⁶⁹ In envisioning himself and his former master as sinners standing in need of forgiveness before a Holy God, he reminds Claypool, "but remember, my dear friend, that blood was shed for us; for your sins and my sins, and for the sins of the whole world."³⁷⁰

Jackson, throughout the letter, also emphasizes the literal, supernatural truth of the Bible. He chides Claypool for denying slaves the opportunity to read the Bible, what Jackson calls "the Holy Bible of Divine truth." He states, "I find the Bible is what we need; it is without fault; the fault is in you, because ye refused to yield obedience to the law of God."³⁷¹ Jackson

³⁶⁷ Jackson, 46.

³⁶⁸ Jackson, 48.

³⁶⁹ Jackson, 56-57.

³⁷⁰ Jackson, 65.

³⁷¹ Jackson, 49.

uses scripture to reprimand Claypool for owning slaves, quoting Matthew 23:8, “But be not ye called Rabbi, for one is your Master, even Christ—and all ye are brethren.”³⁷² One notices that although Christ, in this passage, is speaking to his disciples and Jewish crowds, Jackson applies this text directly to the evil of slavery. He uses the same method of application in calling his former slavemaster a Pharisee, stating, “Ye are the very class that Jesus spoke of in Matthew 23:13-17...”³⁷³ Later, Jackson relies on biblical authority to demand that Claypool emancipate his slaves, reminding him, “you know it is your duty to let the oppressed go free, because God commands it. Isaiah 58:1-6...Is this not the fast that I have chosen, to loose the bands of wickedness, to undo the heavy burdens, and to let the oppressed go free, and that ye break every yoke?”³⁷⁴ Jackson is able to forgive his master because the Bible teaches him to imitate Christ’s spirit by exemplifying a spirit of love:

I must try to have the spirit of my Divine Master, that spirit of love, that kind and forgiving spirit, even when he was reviled he reviled not again. This spirit I know is of God, and I am determined to have that spirit; I will live by that spirit, and make it my theme to hold fast my confidence in this spirit, because I am taught that it is that spirit alone which led the Apostle to utter these words: ‘Cast not away, therefore, your confidence, which hath great recompense of reward.’ Hebrews 10:35.³⁷⁵

During a lecture in 1846, after hearing someone whisper that he was lying about the effects of alcohol, Jackson responded, “I have not undertook to establish the great temperance reform by lying. I have the word of God to bear witness against the use of strong drink.”³⁷⁶ Jackson goes on to quote verses from Isaiah and Proverbs condemning drunkenness, including

³⁷² Jackson, 47.

³⁷³ Jackson, 48.

³⁷⁴ Jackson, 51.

³⁷⁵ Jackson, 50.

³⁷⁶ Jackson, 94.

Isaiah 11:21, “Wo unto them that rise up early in the morning, that they may follow strong drink; that continue until night, till wine inflame them!”³⁷⁷

Jackson’s conception of sin did not include merely those sins usually associated with private morality, but broadened to include the sin of slavery itself. He speaks of slaveholding as an individual sin and simultaneously maintains the sinfulness of other moral violations. He expounds,

I have been giving a long course of new lectures, in which it is understood that I do not and will not admit that any person can be a true Christian and a slaveholder. Sir, this is my true position, and as soon as I am convinced that a human being can be a disciple of Christ and traffic in His image, then you have satisfied me that Heaven is inhabited with fornicators, liars, and horse thieves, and that all classes of licentious persons are upheld on the same principle, and are singing songs of praise to the Savior.³⁷⁸

Jackson lists sexual immorality, deceit, and theft as sins that his reader readily acknowledges as morally vicious, suggesting that one who does not consider slavery evil must not also consider these more widely agreed upon sins as evil. He challenges the narrative that claims black Pietism exclusively focuses on personal morality and not social sin. He underscores the relationship of piety to slaveholding, arguing that one can either be a slaveholder *or* pious, but not both.

I tell you plainly what I think of any member of the church who will consent to the right of any layman or any person to be the owner of any human being, they have not any piety unless it be in the tails of their coats. And when they go to flog their slaves, they run through the bushes and briars after us, and they lose the tails of their coats and all their goodness.³⁷⁹

³⁷⁷ Jackson, 94.

³⁷⁸ Jackson, 108.

³⁷⁹ Jackson, 42-43.

In the aforementioned letter to Claypool, Jackson points out the sins of white masters raping slave women, but also the sexual sin of fornication amongst black Christians, showing that he categorizes both acts as sinful. He writes,

I believe that I am right, though your slaves are all well near yellow or white as you may call them. I do not blame the poor little yellow things for being half and three-quarters white, neither do I condemn the helpless girls, for these things. I shall blight not the character of any person for these wretched acts which are practiced in your kitchens, and I am sorry to say that your colored man, Thomas, your exhorter, lived with a young single girl, and each of them members of the church. I know it made a great fuss once in the church, but it was soon hushed, and the wrong continued.³⁸⁰

To be sure, Jackson does not limit his denunciation of slavery to the appraisal of individual acts as sinful. He called the entire system of slavery unjust and ungodly, and advocated for resistance against it through voting methods that would put anti-slavery legislators into office. He asks, "I would like to ask you, my friend, with kindness, how you prove to the world your enmity towards slavery. You tell you pray against it and talk against it, and tell all your neighbors what a cruel thing it is. But when you vote do you speak?"³⁸¹ Jackson eventually became involved in the temperance movement, and he envisioned consumption of alcohol as an oppressive influence upon society, calling drunkenness "one essential branch of oppression that is tolerated under the sun."³⁸² He attacked both drunkenness and slavery with the same zeal, declaring "in all places and at all times, under all circumstances, we will speak out against the system of slavery, and against the use of Rum. These are two of the greatest antagonists we have ever been brought in contact with, and they must and shall be put

³⁸⁰ Jackson, 45.

³⁸¹ Jackson, 37.

³⁸² Jackson, 85.

down.”³⁸³ Jackson had seen many slavemasters go to slave cabins to rape slaves after a night of drinking, and he had also experienced the wrath of slaveowners and overseers who were drunk while punishing their slaves. Therefore, he viewed the two as inextricably linked. In one lecture given in 1847, Jackson states, “I asserted that the system of Slavery in the United States, as it is now practiced, leads to Rum drinking, and Rum drinking will lead to fornication, and licentiousness, and profligacy in all places under the sun, where it may be practiced among any color whether white or black.”³⁸⁴

Jackson demonstrates clearly the four pillars of the Pietist paradigm within slave religion which stand upon the hypergood of conversion and regeneration. These four definitive corollaries include a belief in universal sin that impacts black and white people, a view of the Bible as the divine authoritative and infallible Word of God, a broad conception of sin that includes personal morality and social and racial oppression, and a belief in personal sanctification and holy living.

This section has established the Pietist nature of pre-Civil War religion through the slave narratives of Johnathan Joseph, John Jea, the speeches and meditations of Maria Stewart, and the slave narrative and speeches of Andrew Jackson. The hypergood of conversion from sin and regeneration was the focal point of their religious understanding. While each of them denounced the horrors of slavery, none of them identified religious experience, conversion from sin, belief in the atonement, or the pursuit of personal morality as inherently white or oppressive. Instead, each perceived the gospel message of regeneration from sin to be

³⁸³ Jackson, 76.

³⁸⁴ Jackson, 90.

universally true, and to be applicable to all humans born into the world regardless of ethnicity, class, or gender. The next section of this chapter will show that the Pietist paradigm remained ascendant after the post-Civil War institutionalization and pluralization of the black church.

Post-Civil War Black Pietism

Following emancipation, the invisible institution known as slave religion crystallized into the independent black church movement. Whites who had previously desired to supervise black worship in order to minimize slave rebellion and restrict opportunities for educational advancement continued to insist upon segregated worship services. African Americans, now freed from forced supervision of their worship, chose to form congregations in which they could express themselves freely and explicitly address the issues of racial oppression that continued to permeate their lives. The black church, the only institution owned and governed by African Americans, represented the hub of social organization for Southern communities consisting of freed slaves and their families. Missionaries from the North seized upon opportunities to convert newly freed African-Americans, and the numbers of African Americans attending Christian churches swelled. Between 1890 and 1906 African American church membership increased from 2.6 million to 3.6 million.³⁸⁵ Two million were Baptists, half a million were African Methodist Episcopal, one hundred eighty-five thousand belonged to African Methodist Episcopal Zion, and one hundred seventy three thousand comprised the Colored Methodist Episcopal church.³⁸⁶

³⁸⁵ Paul Harvey, *Through the Storm, Through the Night: A History of African American Christianity*, Reprint edition (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013), 72.

³⁸⁶ Harvey, 72.

In addition to rapid gains in church membership, churches formed denominations, schools, associations, and publishing houses to better respond to the needs of African American Christians. Atlanta Female Baptist Seminary was founded in 1881, later becoming known as Spelman University and Morehouse University was founded as Atlanta Baptist College in 1867.³⁸⁷ Baptists, A.M.E., and A.M.E. Zion churches published periodicals that exerted widespread influence amongst African-Americans. “In 1900 Black Baptists at the local and state levels published forty-three newspapers, the great majority of which were located in the South.”³⁸⁸ The increased opportunities for literacy and education denied previously to African Americans introduced distinctions in earning power and exposure that led to class divisions. As racial opposition to African American advancement hardened and terrorized communities, African Americans pursued “respectability” to gain acceptance by whites. This pursuit discouraged the emotional and expressive embodied worship practices, including shouting, wailing, and clapping and stamping, that characterized African American religiosity during slavery.³⁸⁹ Yet, in spite of the institutionalization and bureaucratic progression of African American Christianity, the core beliefs associated with the Pietist paradigm continued to undergird the black church.

In a sermon on Sanctification given to the Arkansas Baptist State Convention in 1899, E.C. Morris, the President of the National Baptist Convention states,

It is the sinful nature that imprisons our soul, etc. Having received the sanctifying influence of the Holy Spirit in our hearts, we set about a cultivation of it with an anxious

³⁸⁷ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), 22.

³⁸⁸ Higginbotham, 11.

³⁸⁹ See David Douglas Daniels, “The Cultural Renewal of Slave Religion: Charles Price Jones and the Emergence of the Holiness Movement in Mississippi” (Union Theological Seminary, 1992) for an argument of how Baptist churches sought to rid the black church of the vestiges of slave religious expressions.

desire that we may become more and more like Christ each day. The deformity which sin has brought on us will only be lost in the regeneration of the world. Like the doctrine of baptism, sanctification implies a resurrection of the body.³⁹⁰

In this sermon, Morris responds to the doctrine of sanctification propounded by the Holiness movement, a refashioning of Methodism that had been rapidly gaining African American converts in the South. Holiness adherents transformed the Wesleyan doctrine of perfection into a second blessing—a religious experience—subsequent to initial conversion that signified the believer’s attainment of sinless perfection while on earth. Morris refutes this doctrine by emphasizing sinless perfection as a spiritual state that the believer receives only after the resurrection of the body, when Christ creates a new heaven and a new earth. Until then, Morris taught that the believer must imitate Christ through avoidance of immoral behavior and cultivation of Christian virtues. Morris demonstrates in this sermon the Pietistic beliefs that the Christian life begins at conversion and includes regeneration from sin. Furthermore, Morris shows that the Baptist church at the beginning of the twentieth century viewed sanctification, or growth in Christian conduct, which included imitation of Christ and ongoing avoidance of immoral acts, as a byproduct of the regenerated life.

In the late nineteenth century, Henry McNeal Turner emerged as a prominent radical voice of black liberation. Turner, a bishop in the AME church, stated that “God is a Negro”, staunchly opposed Jim Crow laws and black disfranchisement, and he advocated self-defense in regard to the rampant lynching that plagued the South.³⁹¹ Some scholars view his militance as

³⁹⁰ E.C. Morris, *Sermons, Addresses and Reminiscences and Important Correspondence, With a Picture Gallery of Eminent Ministers and Scholars* (Nashville, TN: National Baptist Publishing Board, 1901), 35.

³⁹¹ Stephen Ward Angell, *Bishop Henry McNeal Turner and African-American Religion in the South* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 1992), 252.

a precursor of black liberation theology.³⁹² Gayraud Wilmore, in surveying post-Civil War black religiosity, esteems Turner's liberationist focus as highly impactful, stating, "More than any other single individual, Bishop Turner not only made a Black theology of liberation central to his preaching and writing, but also helped to implant the spirit of revolutionary religion in the independent churches of Africa which took up the struggle against colonialism and racism."³⁹³

Stephen W. Angell argues that Turner moved from a conservative stance regarding divine inspiration of the Bible to a more liberal one later in his career, in the 1890s. He cites evidence showing that in 1862 Turner vigorously defended the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch against John W. Colenso, an Anglican bishop of South Africa. By 1900, however, Turner called Colenso "the greatest scholar of the day."³⁹⁴ In the 1890s, Turner claimed that the white man had "colored the Bible in his translation to suit the white man, and made it, in many respects, objectionable to the Negro," and went on to say that "We need a new translation of the Bible for colored churches."³⁹⁵ Angell concludes that by 1900, Turner's view of divine inspiration and biblical authority matched liberal theologians such as Henry Ward Beecher.³⁹⁶

While beliefs surrounding sin, conversion, and the Bible undoubtedly differed amongst black Christians in the late nineteenth century, the central beliefs expounded by the denominations claiming the overwhelming majority of African American Christians evinced uniformity. In 1885, the AME published Turner's *In the Genius and Theory of Methodist Polity*,

³⁹² Angell, 274.

³⁹³ Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 169.

³⁹⁴ Angell, *Bishop Henry McNeal Turner and African-American Religion in the South*, 254.

³⁹⁵ Angell, 256.

³⁹⁶ Angell, 256.

or the Machinery of Methodism. In the text, Turner defends the call to ministry as a viable method for ascertaining those believers who should begin the ordination process. In answering the question as to why some object to the divine call as a reliable method for distinguishing ministers from non-ministers, Turner in *The Polity* gives this reply:

“The cause is simple. They have never been born again, as our Lord enjoins, and therefore know nothing about the operations of the Holy Spirit. Their Christianity is only intellectual formalism, which worships through forms, abstractions and speculations, and retires from service none the more enlightened than if they were respectable people outside of any church.”³⁹⁷

The Pietistic dimensions in Turner’s response are evident. While there is no explicit mention of his biblical hermeneutics, he foregrounds regeneration as the prerequisite experience for apprehending the operations of the Holy Spirit. He denounces intellectualism that is devoid of supernatural enlightenment. That this regeneration is connected to ongoing sanctification, described partially as avoidance of personal immorality is entailed in Turner’s commitment that “We covenant to renounce the devil and all his works, the vain pomp and glory of the world, with all covetous desires of the same, and the carnal desires of the flesh, and that we will not follow, nor be led by them.”³⁹⁸ Furthermore, Turner’s reverence for the Bible’s divine authority appears explicitly in his warning that “the church is directed only by the Bible. Whatever is not written therein, nor proved thereby, is not required to be believed as an article of faith nor a matter of duty.”³⁹⁹

³⁹⁷ Henry McNeal Turner, *The Genius and Theory of Methodist Polity, or the Machinery of Methodism. Practically Illustrated through a Series of Questions and Answers* (Philadelphia, PA: Publication Department, A.M.E. Church, 1885), 87.

³⁹⁸ Turner, 2.

³⁹⁹ Turner, 2.

Angell argues that into the 1880s, Turner still opposed liberal methods of scriptural interpretation which would explain Turner's conservatism in *The Polity*. By the 1890s, he claims that Turner had embraced liberal views of scripture, although he did not adamantly defend them as he did his earlier evangelicalism. Even if that is true, Angell supplies little evidence for claiming that Turner favored a liberal approach to the Bible in his later years. If Turner in fact did so, such a position was tempered by his ongoing belief in God's providence, with Turner believing that God brought Negroes to America through slavery "to a heaven-permitted if not a divine-sanctioned manual laboring school."⁴⁰⁰ Even in 1895, Turner expressed core tenets of the Pietist paradigm, believing that God could only be discovered through belief in Christ. More provocatively, he seemed to view slavery as a necessary precursor for Africans' regeneration and faith in God. He argues, "we remained in slavery as long as it was necessary to learn that a God, who is a spirit, made the world and controls it, and that that Supreme Being could be sought and found by exercise of faith in His only begotten Son."⁴⁰¹ In this same essay, entitled "The American Negro and the Fatherland," Turner's unabashed support of black freedom is also on display as he chides the church for its identification of virtue, purity, innocence and heaven with things that are white, while all that is satanic, corrupt, and devilish is called black. Turner demonstrates Pietism's belief in the supernatural efficacy of Christ's blood for salvation and its commitment to justice through his advocacy of a radical form of black liberation in which black people could build a nation of their own and create a language in keeping with their own color.⁴⁰²

⁴⁰⁰ Angell, *Bishop Henry McNeal Turner and African-American Religion in the South*, 195.

⁴⁰¹ Angell, 195.

⁴⁰² Angell, 197.

Both Morris and Turner, two leading figures in the two largest black Protestant denominations of the post-Civil War era adhered firmly to Pietist beliefs regarding the sacred authority of scripture, the centrality of regeneration and conversion for the Christian life, pursuit of sanctification through righteous moral living, and belief in universal sin therefore evincing continuity with the beliefs and perspectives of pre-Civil War black religion.

Early Twentieth Century Black Pietism

The Rise of Black Pentecostalism

The early years of the twentieth century introduced monumental shifts in the complexion of black Christianity. Two of the most significant shifts were the emergence of Black Pentecostalism and the Great Migration. The rise of Black Pentecostalism began with an African American preacher named William Seymour.⁴⁰³ Seymour attended a Bible school in Houston, TX founded by a white man named Charles Parham. Parham taught that the baptism of the Holy Spirit included evidence of speaking in tongues. Seymour had learned about Parham's teaching from Lucy Farrow, a fellow black holiness preacher and former servant of Parham's who Seymour heard speak in tongues. Parham, a Ku Klux Klan sympathizer who endorsed the segregationist views of the South, required Seymour to sit outside and listen to his lectures through an open door.⁴⁰⁴ For almost six weeks Seymour voraciously ingested

⁴⁰³ Gastón Espinosa, *William J. Seymour and the Origins of Global Pentecostalism: A Biography and Documentary History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014).

⁴⁰⁴ Paul Harvey, *Through the Storm, Through the Night: A History of African American Christianity*, Reprint edition (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013), 72.

Parham's teachings and was thoroughly converted to the belief that speaking in tongues demonstrated that one had received the baptism in the Holy Spirit.

After moving to Los Angeles in 1906 to pastor a church, Seymour encountered opposition to his newly adopted views concerning Spirit baptism. Soon after his arrival, when he arrived for an evening service, he found the doors padlocked.⁴⁰⁵ Seymour, with no other vocational options available, began holding prayer meetings at the home where he was staying. By mid-March, the group had outgrown its confines and moved to the larger home of Richard and Ruth Asberry on 214 Bonnie Brae Street, where he continued to preach about Spirit baptism and to lead prayer services. The core prayer group at the Asberry home was comprised of about fifteen African-Americans, but whites occasionally visited.⁴⁰⁶

The second revival identified as the genesis of the American Pentecostal movement began on the night of April 9, 1906 when several members of Seymour's prayer group began praising God and speaking in tongues. Over the next three days, news spread quickly and some visitors came to witness the spectacle and others came seeking the blessing. Seymour himself received the baptism in the Spirit with tongues on April 12. The Asberrys turned their front porch into a makeshift platform, and Seymour and others preached, testified, and sang from the porch while addressing large crowds.⁴⁰⁷ Aware that larger quarters were necessary, Seymour rented an old African Methodist Episcopal church building at 312 Azusa Street that had been converted into a stable. It is from the revival beginning here that the Azusa Street revival receives its name.

⁴⁰⁵ Cecil M. Robeck, *The Azusa Street Mission and Revival* (Thomas Nelson, 2017), 64.

⁴⁰⁶ Robeck, 65.

⁴⁰⁷ Robeck, 69.

The Pentecostal revival spread throughout Los Angeles, across the nation, and to other countries aided by missionaries who had received the baptism and hastened to share the good news. Seymour's periodical, *Apostolic Faith*, at its height had 50,000 subscribers with a maximum of 405,000 copies in print at one time. It disseminated his theology and teachings alongside news and testimonies of those attending the revival. The expansion of Pentecostalism overseen by Seymour was rapid and far-reaching. Historian Cecil Robeck notes that "by early 1907, missionaries from the Azusa Street Mission had entered Mexico, Canada, Western Europe, the Middle East, West Africa and several countries in Asia. By 1908, the movement had spread to South Africa, Central and Eastern Europe, and even Northern Russia."⁴⁰⁸ Within two years of its eruption, the rapidly traveling flames of the Azusa Street experience had already scorched the entire globe.

When the Azusa Street Revival began, two black Southern holiness preachers, Charles H. Mason, and Charles P. Jones, led the Church of God in Christ. Founded in 1897 and based in Mississippi and Arkansas, Mason and Jones formed this Holiness denomination after withdrawing from the Baptist church due to Baptists' denial of the experience of entire sanctification. Having heard about the tongues experience and other spiritual phenomena occurring on the West Coast, Mason set out for Los Angeles. According to Calvin White Jr.'s interpretation, "The trip would mark the turning point in the ministry of Charles H. Mason...and the history of African American religion in America."⁴⁰⁹ Mason received his baptism in the Spirit soon after arriving to the Azusa Street Mission. He describes the experience as follows:

⁴⁰⁸ Cecil M. Robeck, *The Azusa Street Mission and Revival: The Birth of the Global Pentecostal Movement* (Nashville: Nelson Reference & Electronic, 2006), 8.

⁴⁰⁹ White, Jr., *The Rise to Respectability*, 34.

. . .The sound of a mighty wind was in me and my soul cried, Jesus, only, none like you. So there came a wave of glory into me, and all of my being was filled with the glory of the Lord. So when he had gotten me straight on my feet there came a light which enveloped my entire being above the brightness of the sun. When I opened my mouth to say glory, a flame touched my tongue which ran down in me. My language changed and no word could I speak in my own tongue.⁴¹⁰

Mason returned home to Lexington after five weeks in Los Angeles and immediately began to preach the new doctrine of the baptism of the Holy Spirit with evidence of speaking in tongues. Mason's ministry grew and expanded with numerous followers who were attracted to and experienced this new phenomenon. Eventually his newfound doctrine brought him into confrontation with Jones, who "felt that Pentecost occurred once and modern Christians need not bother looking for a third blessing in the form of baptism by the Spirit accompanied with speaking in tongues."⁴¹¹ In November 1907, Mason and a group of thirteen Holiness pastors agreed to sever ties with Jones, and they elected Mason as their chief apostle, calling themselves the General Assembly of the Churches of God in Christ.

Mason's brand of religion excited black Southerners who rejected the staid and reserved worship of the mainline black denominations who struggled to gain "respectability." The Church of God in Christ represented a return to slave religion and the loud exuberant worship that characterized the invisible institution. Of all the African American religious strands, the Church of God in Christ is a quintessential representation of the Pietist paradigm through its devotion to prayer and fasting, literalist biblical hermeneutics, pursuit of sanctification through adherence to strict moral codes, and pursuance of supernatural encounter. Among these

⁴¹⁰ Leonard Lovett, "Black Holiness-Pentecostalism: Implications for Ethics and Social Transformation." (Ph.D. diss, Emory University, 1979).

⁴¹¹ White, Jr., *The Rise to Respectability*, 39.

traditions, it also bears the most responsibility for the accusations of quietism and political indifference due to its uneven history in regard to protest and resistance on behalf of black freedom. The Church of God in Christ proliferated throughout the South, but due to the Great Migration, this denomination and other independent Pentecostal and Holiness churches soon transformed the character of Northern black Christianity.

The Great Migration

Determined to flee racial terrorism and buoyed by the prospect of better economic opportunities, approximately 1.5 million African Americans moved from the South to the North between 1910 and 1930. Eddie Glaude Jr., observes, “In 1890...90 percent of the African American population resided mostly in the rural South. By 1930, 44 percent lived in cities.”⁴¹² This influx of migrants, called the Great Migration, caused many Northern black churches to serve as “welcoming stations, relief agencies, and employment bureaus.”⁴¹³ Pastors often had to supply local factories with letters of recommendations on behalf of their parishioners, and the “institutional church” worked to address the needs of the large numbers of poor African-Americans who struggled in their new unfamiliar environment. The pressure to adapt to changing social conditions strained many churches who resisted the more informal and unstructured styles of worship that black migrants favored. In order to accommodate the tastes of southern migrants and preserve their preferred type of religiosity, many black

⁴¹² Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., *African American Religion: A Very Short Introduction*, 1 edition (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 58.

⁴¹³ Harvey, *Through the Storm, Through the Night*, 95. For one of the most comprehensive analyses of the effects of the Great Migration on Northern black religion, see Wallace D. Best, *Passionately Human, No Less Divine: Religion and Culture in Black Chicago, 1915-1952* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

religious leaders opened “storefront” churches, in which small congregations gathered in leased commercial spaces. These churches were often unorthodox in their Christian beliefs, were led by black women, and synthesized elements of traditional doctrine with voodoo practices and other esoteric rituals. The pluralism of Northern black religion included the rise of other non-Christian religious organizations like Father Divine’s Peace Missions, begun in Long Island in 1919, but headquartered in Harlem in 1933, and Elijah Muhammad’s Nation of Islam, headquartered in Chicago.

Bishop C.H. Mason

In spite of the demographic shifts and increasing plurality that altered the composition of Northern African American religion, as a whole, black Christians remained predominantly Pietist in their theological beliefs. An instructive example is found in the *Year Book of the Church of God in Christ for the Year 1926*. This book was created as a resource for attendees of the 1926 annual COGIC Convocation and included within it are a selection of Bishop C.H. Mason’s sermons. One sermon, entitled “The Sonship of Jesus” illustrates the theological orthodoxy of the Church of God in Christ and its similarity to the other major African American Christian denominations in regard to core Pietistic beliefs. Moreover, Mason displays sophisticated theological thinking in regard to Christology, although Pentecostals were most known for their pneumatological emphasis.

E.C. Morris’ response to the Holiness movement’s conceptualization of sanctification disclosed other areas of his Pietistic thinking, and in the same way, Mason’s sermon, a rejoinder to the Oneness Pentecostal movement, also illumines other Pietistic strands of his thought.

Oneness Pentecostals deny that there are three persons in the Trinity comprised of Father, Son, and Holy Spirit and they attribute each of these personas to modes or roles that Jesus adopts.⁴¹⁴ Thus, they believe that Jesus encapsulates the entirety of the nature of God and they baptize in Jesus' name only. Mason defends baptism according to the Trinitarian formula of "Father, Son, and Holy Ghost," claiming, "Our baptism in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Ghost shows that while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of His Son, so being reconciled we shall be saved by his life. Rom. 5:20."⁴¹⁵ Mason implicitly refers to regeneration and rebirth as the transformational reality attested to by baptism. The state of universal sin that all humans find themselves in before regeneration is here described as being "enemies" of God who were reconciled to God by the death of Jesus Christ. That this new birth is achieved by Christ's crucifixion is also mentioned in Mason's observation that "John was taken up in the Spirit while on the Isle of Patmos and saw Him and heard Him say that He had washed us from our sins in His own blood and hath made us kings and priests unto God his Father. Rev. 2:18."⁴¹⁶ Mason invokes John's vision to show that Jesus called God his Father, but he also depicts regeneration as a washing from sin by Jesus' blood, a conceptualization of Christ's blood that is associated with the notion of universal sin.

Throughout the sermon, following each declarative theological statement, Mason appends a scriptural reference, demonstrating a view of the Bible as authoritative for adjudicating disputes about truth. In response to another COGIC member who stated that

⁴¹⁴ For the history and theology of Black Oneness Pentecostalism, see Estrela Alexander, "God and Christ Are One: The Rise and Development of Black Oneness Pentecostalism," in *Black Fire: One Hundred Years of African-American Pentecostalism* (Downer's Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2011).

⁴¹⁵ C.H. Mason, "The Sonship of Jesus," in *A Reader in Pentecostal Theology: Voices from the First Generation*, ed. Douglas Jacobsen (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2006), 221.

⁴¹⁶ Mason, 222.

Jesus no longer remained God's Son after being put to death, Mason states, "but after he heard the Scripture read which showed that he was wrong, he went away without correcting his saying that he was wrong."⁴¹⁷ Mason continues, "Now, let us see what sayeth the Scripture."⁴¹⁸ In Mason's view, the Bible occupies ultimate authority to settle disputes, and when scripture exposes error, it is the responsibility of the disputant to acknowledge and correct his or her faulty understanding. That this approach to the Bible relies predominantly on literal interpretation of scripture is evident in Mason's discussion of the proper method of baptizing:

He said in Matt. 28:19, "Go ye therefore and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and Holy Ghost." This is the only way that Jesus commanded it to be done, or said while he was on earth, and He never did say after He went to heaven for it to be changed by anyone or at any time, for it was Given to Him from God, His Father, just like it should be said. John 12:49-50.⁴¹⁹

Bishop A. J. Gaines

Around this same time, a prominent dissenter to the Pietist paradigm, at least regarding literal interpretation of the Bible, seemed to emerge within the African Methodist Episcopal Church. The ensuing public debate makes clear the importance of Pietistic theological beliefs to the black church. Developments occurring during this time also depict a black church that was not unaware of fundamentalist vs. modernist controversies particularly concerning issues of authority in regard to science and the Bible. On September 10, 1927, approximately one year after the dissemination of COGIC's 1926 yearbook, *The Baltimore Afro-American* published an

⁴¹⁷ Mason, 219.

⁴¹⁸ Mason, 219.

⁴¹⁹ Mason, 220.

article entitled “Bishop Gaines Modern Views Stir Church.”⁴²⁰ The article describes a sermon delivered by Bishop A.J. Gaines at a A.M.E. Bishop’s Council held in Pittsburgh. The author writes, “When delivered originally, conservative pastors of the denomination declared that Bishop Gaines had gone too far from the old-time tenets of the church. The great majority of the ministers, however, applauded the sermon declaring it in line with what the present day Christian is thinking.”

According to the author, Bishop Gaines identifies currents of controversy that have swelled throughout the church’s history and claims that the Nicene Creed came into existence out of controversy and that the canon was created out of controversy. The author states, “Some of the books in the New Testament barely escaped controversy. Some of the books in the New Testament barely escape condemnation. Others failed by a narrow margin to become a part of the canon.” The author suggests that Gaines views the interpretive debates surrounding the Bible and science as the latest instantiation of a pattern of controversy that has helped define the church’s history. The author understands Gaines to be adopting an illuminationist stance on contemporary questions based upon the illumination theory that states that all scripture is not equally inspired and that there are degrees of inspiration. The author also states that Gaines deciphers between devotional versus scientific readings of the Bible, arguing that “When we read the Bible devotionally we read it for edification,” but “when we read the Bible scientifically, we study it as a scientist does” distinguishing between genres and the writing conventions that each employs. According to the author, Gaines stated that each individual must decide for him or herself whether Genesis represents “legend, fable, or

⁴²⁰ “Bishop Gaines Modern Views Stir Church,” *Afro-American (1893-1988); Baltimore, Md.*, September 10, 1927.

myth.” Based upon a translation of the word virgin as “marriageable woman” in Isaiah 7:2, the author states that Gaines also denies the Virgin Birth.

On October 1, 1927, the *Baltimore Afro-American* published an article entitled “A Heretical Bishop A.L. Gaines.”⁴²¹ On October 5 the *New York Amsterdam News* published the same article, written by Dean Kelly Miller, the first black graduate student in mathematics and former dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Howard University.⁴²² In this article Miller pens a scathing critique of Gaines and derides him for departure from the doctrinal and theological principles that have traditionally constituted the AME church. Miller writes,

The settled belief and accepted principles of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, of which the good Bishop is one of the chosen chief pastors, is based upon the infallibility of the Bible as the guide of faith and conduct of its baptized membership. Relying upon the blessed assurance of this orthodox belief. In the Bible, millions of its members have lived and died in the faith. The half-million now living have based their hope on no other foundation than that which has been laid.

Miller calls Gaines’ perspectives “foreign to the normal feeling, belief and doctrine of the great bulk of African Methodist adherents,” and he cautions him to refrain from sharing his beliefs whenever they diverge from official church doctrine. Miller states, “I take it for granted that what Bishop Gaines says is about what most men of his education and learning in and outside of the clergy believe.” He draws a correlation between education achievement and liberal theological beliefs, thus drawing attention to existing biases that exist within the church. He closes his letter by blaming Gaines for adding to the anxiety of black church people caused by a recent report of alleged corruption within the AME Zion in Chicago.

⁴²¹ “A Heretical Bishop A. L. Gaines,” *Afro-American (1893-1988); Baltimore, Md.*, October 1, 1927.

⁴²² Kelly Miller, “A Heretical Bishop: The Dean Takes Bishop Gaines to Task,” *The New York Amsterdam News (1922-1938); New York, N.Y.*, October 5, 1927, sec. Editorial Letters.

On October 8, 1927, the following letter from Gaines to Miller was published in the *Baltimore Afro-American*:⁴²³

My dear Dr. Miller:-

I was shown your article sent to the representative of the Negro Press of this Country; and also as it appeared in the *Afro-American* of Baltimore, Md. I showed the representative of the Negro Press the original copy of my sermon and I feel quite sure that if you read the original copy, you will find that my position was only to state the position of modernists and then to make a feeble effort to show that their position was not tenable. The original sermon, when read, will show that I still remain extremely orthodox as to the inspiration of the scriptures, evolution and Virgin Birth.

A.L. Gaines
Bishop of Chicago

Three weeks later, both the *New York Amsterdam News* and the *Baltimore Afro-American* published another article by Kelly Miller entitled "Bishop Gaines Vindicated."⁴²⁴ Miller begins his article by stating, "I want to apologize to Bishop A. L. Gaines for my release of three weeks ago referring to him as 'A Heretical Bishop.' I was misled into this ascription by the partial and misleading report of his discourse as it appeared in the columns of the *Afro-American*." After reading Bishop Gaines' letter, Miller asked Bishop Gaines to send him the entire copy of the sermon discussed in the initial article, and Bishop Gaines replied by sending Miller the July issue of the AME review containing the complete sermon. Upon reading the full text, Miller, in reference to the *Afro-American's* excerpts stated, "In my judgment, these extracts wholly misrepresented his position." In Miller's estimation, the reporter had probably heard only a portion of the sermon and mistook Bishop Gaines' description of the modernist position as his own theological perspective. Miller concludes, based upon his perusal of the full

⁴²³ A. L. Gaines, "Open Letter by Bishop A. L. Gaines to Dr. Kelly Miller, Howard University, Washington, D. C.," *Afro-American (1893-1988); Baltimore, Md.*, October 8, 1927.

⁴²⁴ Kelly Miller, "Bishop Gaines Vindicated: An Apology for the Article, 'An Heretical Bishop,'" *The New York Amsterdam News (1922-1938); New York, N.Y.*, October 26, 1927, sec. Editorial Letters; "Kelly Miller Says: Bishop Gaines Vindicated," *Afro-American (1893-1988); Baltimore, Md.*, October 29, 1927.

sermon, that Bishop Gaines “fervently avers his belief in the Virgin Birth and in all of the essential doctrines set forth in the Apostles’ Creed...”

The initial article incited passionate reactions on behalf of black Christians. Their commitment to the Bible as the revealed Word of God offers insight into a religious perspective that did not renounce the significance of theological orthodoxy and personal regeneration. These clergy rejected the conclusion that whites’ belief in universal sin, biblical orthodoxy, and commitment to personal holiness, while still denigrating and oppressing African-Americans, automatically rendered the beliefs false. They bypassed the faulty logic that attributed falsity to biblical tenets simply because their oppressors adopted these beliefs. Recognizing that these beliefs did not emerge from white society but from the Bible itself as attested to them through their religious experiences, they defended the authority and validity of the same book that had imbued them with the supernatural understanding that their souls were infinitely valuable before God. The commitment to justice advanced by the AME, in the minds of its advocates and leaders, was in no way undermined by fidelity to Pietistic theological beliefs. In fact, the former emerged from the latter, and neither could exist without the other.

Mid-Twentieth Century Black Pietism

A.M.E. Bishops, Piety, and Social Liberation

In *Proclamations from the Bench: Sermons by African Methodist Episcopal Bishops*, the preachers exhibit a strong commitment to social justice as a part of the Pietistic paradigm.⁴²⁵ In his sermon given in February 1954 at the Bishop's Council in Savannah, Georgia, D. Ward Nichols observes the encroaching perils of atomic weaponry and the uncertainty of worldwide class and ethnic revolutions, concluding that the Church needs to be "reborn in righteousness."⁴²⁶ While reaffirming African Methodism's commitment to the priesthood of all believers, the worth of the individual soul, and the sufficiency of scriptures, Nichols also advocates for the rights of preachers to speak freely on social issues. Knowing that America confuses "treason with dissent" and that fighting for fair employment, housing, and equal access to opportunities invites opposition and vilification, Nichols believes that freedom to assert one's opinion in speech should be considered an inviolable right.⁴²⁷ In defining the meaning of African Methodism, Nichols describes it as "an unbarred thoroughfare for freedom."⁴²⁸ To withstand the social turbulence affecting the church, in his conclusion, Nichols urges his audience to embrace the power of the gospel for changing the world declaring, "This is the hour to preach the Gospel of Salvation."⁴²⁹ He explicates, "...only God can take a

⁴²⁵ Vinton R. Anderson, ed., *Proclamations from a Bench: Sermons by African Methodist Episcopal Bishops* (Nashville, TN: AMEC Sunday School Union, 1987).

⁴²⁶ D. Ward Nichols, "This Is the Hour," in *Proclamations from a Bench: Sermons by African Methodist Episcopal Church Bishops*, ed. Vinton R. Anderson (Nashville, TN: AMEC Sunday School Union, 1987), 13.

⁴²⁷ Nichols, 15.

⁴²⁸ Nichols, 18.

⁴²⁹ Nichols, 20.

worthless, sinful life, wash it in the blood of Christ, put His Spirit into it and make it a blessing to humanity—that is salvation.”⁴³⁰ Nichols seamlessly shifts between social commentary and enjoyment of moral virtue, adopting the Pietistic approach of viewing liberation and personal salvation as inextricably woven together. Nichols understands that the social problems that plague human life emerge from the spiritual deficiencies caused by sin, observing that “the problem of human personality still awaits the dynamic of divine love.”⁴³¹

In his sermon entitled “A Defense of Depth” given at the Summer Convocation in 1968, Henry W. Murph conceptualizes current social problems as needing a social *and* spiritual solution. He analyzes the proliferation of riots that had seized the attention of the nation and attributes the frustration and anger that produced the outbursts to injustice and racism. However, he also condemns the destruction of property and violence as ineffective for instigating lasting change. He implicates the entire nation for being complicit in fostering racism and inequality, and he advises the nation to repent of its sins against God and against one another.⁴³² To be sure, Murph, like Maria Stewart, seems to reserve most of his opprobrium for the victims and not for the white perpetrators who created the adverse conditions. This may be due to the Pietist belief in universal sin in which all people are guilty of sin before a righteous and holy God, and to the reality that *his* audience was comprised almost entirely of African-Americans.

⁴³⁰ Nichols, 20.

⁴³¹ Nichols, 20.

⁴³² Henry W. Murph, “A Defense of Depth,” in *Proclamations from a Bench: Sermons by African Methodist Episcopal Church Bishops*, ed. Vinton R. Anderson (Nashville, TN: AMEC Sunday School Union, 1987), 27.

Murph remains hopeful that God will intervene within the life of America to bring about new life. Taking his text from Isaiah 54:2, Murph paraphrases the verse, “Enlarge the place of your tent...lengthen your ropes and strengthen your stakes.” Lengthening of the ropes refers to expansion of the church’s mission because “the curtain must enfold those suffering from injustice, war and poverty.”⁴³³ Strengthening the stakes means that Christian men and women, identified by Murph as the stakes, “must be driven deep into the Christian faith, into prayer, into responsible stewardship.”⁴³⁴ He summarizes what he views as the most faithful response of the church in the face of encroaching opposition by proclaiming, “The Church must and should keep the balance between the outreach of her mission and the depth of her life in God.”⁴³⁵ Murph is aware that the church’s fulfillment of its mandate to address the needs of the least of these cannot occur without the cultivation of inner piety that invites God’s love and power into the soul.

The sermons by Nichols and Murph had not been touched by the emergence of Black liberation theology, although Murph was probably aware of the rise of Black Power. By 1973, however, Frank M. Reid’s sermon, “Mission: Moulded or Mobilized,” invites the church to opt for the theology of liberation in its confrontation of injustice and oppression. He discerns, “Yes, we are content to feed on the survival theology of pre-World War II days when we ought to be using the theology of liberation to free our Black brothers and sisters in the United States and around the world.”⁴³⁶ Reid’s interpretation of black liberation theology, however, retains the

⁴³³ Murph, 28.

⁴³⁴ Murph, 28.

⁴³⁵ Murph, 29.

⁴³⁶ Murph, 31.

Pietist beliefs in personal sin, salvation through Christ's sacrifice, and literal interpretation of the Bible that comprise the paradigm.

In expounding on the fourth chapter of Ephesians, Reid observes,

In the scripture it says he descended into the lower parts of the earth. Now there are people who are better Biblical scholars than I am and they say this passage suggests that Jesus came down to earth. I don't believe it. I'm just old fashioned enough to believe that we made a mistake when we took "the descended into hell" out of the creed. If He had never descended into hell He would have never ascended into heaven.⁴³⁷

Reid rejects the metaphorical and figurative interpretation that modern biblical scholars apply to passages that denote spiritual and metaphysical realities such as a literal heaven and hell.

He agrees that there are "better" biblical scholars than he, but he illustrates the insufficiency of intellectualism for grasping spiritual truth. He states that he is old fashioned enough to "believe," highlighting the primacy of faith and belief over rational criticism. He demonstrates his commitment to the Pietist paradigm by affirming his belief in hell, a belief that is provincial to liberal biblical scholars.

After affirming the literal truth of scripture, he then affirms a strong commitment to justice for the oppressed, and applies the concept of hell to social conditions that constrain human freedom in calling the church to prophetic action:

I challenge African Methodism in this hour to descend into the hell of the ghetto where Black boys and girls can't read, help them to ascend into the heaven of literacy through reading clinics. I challenge you to go into the hell of the ghetto where alcoholism threatens the destruction of the family structure and annihilates people of great skills and capacities. I beg you to descend into the hell where drugs have caught up our young people...We ought to descend into the hell of drugs to witness that if you want to turn on and take a trip, why not try Jesus?⁴³⁸

⁴³⁷ Frank M. Reid, Jr., "Mission: Moulded or Mobilized?," in *Proclamations from a Bench: Sermons by African Methodist Episcopal Church Bishops* (Nashville, TN: AMEC Sunday School Union, 1987), 32.

⁴³⁸ Reid, Jr., 33.

Reid also affirms the Pietistic belief that accepting Jesus as one's savior leads to power over temptation and sin, and therefore finds the gospel message to be a powerful antidote for temptation and addiction. However, Reid's commendation of the gospel also includes the social programs and strategies necessary for pragmatic amelioration of urban ills. For Reid, the power to overcome obstacles ensues when the Church fulfills its mission to break down its walls and evangelize. He states, "Every man, woman, child whose heart has been touched by the Holy Spirit ought to be an evangelist."⁴³⁹ It is Reid's Pietism in conjunction with his concern for the least of these that represents the AME's longstanding commitment to the Pietistic paradigm.

Conclusion

This chapter argues for the Black Pietist Paradigm as the predominant theological perspective for black churches from slave religion until the twentieth century. It begins by surveying the definitions proffered by scholars regarding black church piety before turning to historical European Pietism to ascertain the kind of characteristics which are suggested by the appellation of Pietist. Pietism, also referring to a historical movement beginning in Germany in the late sixteenth century, was found to recognize regeneration from sin, also referred to as the new birth, as its hypergood. Based upon African American scholars' analysis of black religion, black churches have also identified historically conversion and regeneration from sin as their hypergood. However, their piety differed from that of white Europeans in that they included

⁴³⁹ Reid, Jr., 34.

their African embodied and emotive styles of worship in their conversion experiences, thus leading to heightened experiences of the Holy Spirit that distinguished them from whites.

Based upon the hypergood of regeneration from sin, eight corollaries that also comprise the Pietist paradigm were identified. They include 1) A keen awareness of universal sin, 2) an experiential literalist approach to interpreting the Bible that views the Bible as infallible and supernatural, 3) a broad conception of sin that includes its personal and social dimensions, 4) a belief in sanctification enacted through imitation of the divine nature by adherence to personal moral codes, 5) belief in heaven and hell, 6) a supernatural understanding of a cosmos that includes angels and demons, 7) belief in a sovereign God who responds to prayer, and 8) an ethical approach to overcoming injustice that is not fixed or absolute but varies individually.

Although all eight paradigmatic expressions were discovered in pre-Civil War religion, the second part of the chapter focused on the first four dimensions. By using a variety of primary sources from black church practitioners, pastors, leaders, and exemplars, including narratives, sermons, newspaper articles, and denominational documents, the black Pietist paradigm was seen to have exhibited centrality throughout black church history, including the antebellum, post-emanicipation, Great Migration, and mid-twentieth century eras.

Chapter 4

JAMES CONE, THE EMERGENCE OF BLACK LIBERATIONISM AND WOMANIST INTERPRETATIONS

Introduction

This chapter argues that the creation of black theology by James Cone introduces a Liberationist paradigm that is incommensurable with the Pietist paradigm that structures and still defines the professed theological beliefs and ethics of most black churches. To argue this point, both historical and theological analysis will be used to indicate the disparity between black theology's Liberationist paradigm and the black church's Pietist paradigm. By applying heuristically Thomas Kuhn's theory of "paradigm shift," one will observe historically surrounding the creation of black liberation theology the conditions that Kuhn suggests precede the creation of a new paradigm. The rise of Black Power represented a formidable anomaly that Cone had to address, and he also reacted to a confluence of national events that spurred his construction of black theology and the Liberationist paradigm. Historical analysis will also show that the Liberationist paradigm, emerging as it did out of the white theological academy, is more informed by white theological methods than by the beliefs and practices of the black church. This analysis will also show that the usage of "slave sources", black religious experience, and other data drawn from black church life occurred *after* black theology's core themes and tenets had been developed.

Next, the presence of the Liberationist paradigm will be traced throughout Cone's first two major works in black theology, *Black Power and Black Theology* and *A Black Theology of*

Liberation to identify the presence of those themes that constitute the paradigm. The chapter will then examine the emergence of womanism as a reaction to the failures of feminism and black theology. The thought of Renita Weems and Delores Williams, two womanist scholars who were part of its early years, will be theologically analyzed to provide evidence that womanism also adopts the Liberationist paradigm. Throughout the chapter, by referring back to slave narratives, theological analysis will be used to show that the Liberationist paradigm and the Pietist paradigm are incommensurable. They oppose each other at the foundational level, which necessarily includes their respective hypergoods, and there exists no standard of measurement that can rationally argue for which one is true. By examining contemporary instantiations of the Liberationist paradigm in black theology/womanism in comparison to the Pietist paradigm, the perpetual and irreconcilable incommensurability of these two paradigms will be evident.

Black Pietism and Non-violence

Kuhn defines normal science as “research firmly based upon one or more past scientific achievements, achievements that some particular scientific community acknowledges for a time as supplying the foundation for its further practice.”⁴⁴⁰ To transpose this into theological terms, normal science can be reconceptualized as normal religion. Normal religion refers to the established form of religion that a community acknowledges as foundational for its worldview and worship. Following the Great Awakening revivals in America and the conversion of slaves through these revivals and through later missionary efforts, the Pietist paradigm provided the

⁴⁴⁰ Kuhn, *The Structure Of Scientific Revolutions*, 10.

exemplary form of religion to which the vast majority of African Americans subscribed. In fact, since its inception until the present, most black Christians have embraced the Pietist paradigm as their primary theological orientation. Of all African Americans who identify with some religious organization, the overwhelming majority of them belong to a black evangelical church and have done so from the dawn of the independent black church movement. Black churches over the years have fiercely resisted the racial tyranny of slavery, post-Reconstruction lynching and racial terrorism, Jim Crow laws, and other concerted attempts at dehumanization of black life. Each new problem of racism represented a problem that black churches and their Pietist paradigm had to solve. Throughout their history, however, the black churches, as part of their doctrine of human equality, have advocated non-aggression in the face of systematic state sanctioned violence. Peter Paris observes, “The black Christian tradition has tended in the main, though not always, to refrain from justifying any acts of violence against other human beings. This dominant strand of the tradition has most always viewed violence as self-contradictory, as a logical deduction from the idea that all persons are equal under God.”⁴⁴¹

The conclusion to E.C. Morris’ Presidential Address at the National Baptist Convention in 1900 is instructive:

And finally, permit me to say, if there was ever a time when our race...should draw near to God, and when we should draw near to each other, that time is now. We should bear with patience all the indignities heaped upon us, by those who have apparently lost all respect for the fundamental laws of our great country. And yet, we should contend with manly courage, in a Christian way, for every right enjoyed by any other people under the flag of our nation.⁴⁴²

⁴⁴¹ Paris, *The Social Teaching of the Black Churches*, 14.

⁴⁴² Morris, *Sermons, Addresses and Reminiscences and Important Correspondence, With a Picture Gallery of Eminent Ministers and Scholars*, 121.

The belief in God's providence, one of the tenets of the Pietist paradigm, led black Christian leaders to urge church members to refrain from violent retaliation and to pray fervently for God's intervention to eliminate the injustice that assailed black lives. Henry McNeal Turner, the AME bishop most known for his black nationalism and emigrationism, penned a letter in response to the Supreme Court's overturning of the 1875 Civil Rights Bill. He asked his readers to pray, "that we may be able to learn what lesson Providence designs to teach us, if any," and "that the God of all mercies be invoked, upon bended knees, to reorganize the Supreme Court, and that the same be made a subject of fasting and prayer."⁴⁴³ He also called for widespread meetings to discuss this matter and for petitions to be sent to Congress demanding the passage of another Civil Rights Bill. This twofold strategy of prayer and non-violent resistance typifies historically the black church's response to confronting racism.

It found its apotheosis in the leadership of Martin Luther King, Jr., who broadened the use of non-violent resistance, employing it as his preferred weapon against segregation and legalized oppression in his leadership of Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) during the Civil Rights Movement. For the first ten years of his civil rights career, non-violence and prayer had produced multiple national victories embodied in creation of impactful legislation.⁴⁴⁴ By 1967, while his commitment to nonviolence remained fierce, his faith in white

⁴⁴³ Henry McNeal Turner, *Civil Rights. The Outrage of the Supreme Court of the United States upon the Black Man. Reviewed in a Reply to the New York "Voice," the Great Temperance Paper of the United States.* (Philadelphia, PA: Publication Department, A.M.E. Church, 1889), 15.

⁴⁴⁴ Martin Luther King, Jr. remained committed to the power of prayer for sustaining his hope and faith. He learned the importance of prayer from his nurturance within the black church tradition. See Lewis Baldwin, *Never to Leave Us Alone: The Prayer Life of Martin Luther King Jr.* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2010); Martin Luther

American goodwill to foster social and economic equality for African Americans had drastically waned. King states, “White America was ready to demand that the Negro should be spared the lash of brutality and coarse degradation, but it had never been truly committed to helping him out of poverty, exploitation, or all forms of discrimination.”⁴⁴⁵ King’s experiences in Chicago—he moved to Chicago with his family to a slum apartment as part of his Chicago civil-rights campaign to end segregated housing—had taught him firsthand the differences between African American life in the North versus the South. The extreme poverty, overpopulated ghettos and slum conditions, segregated and deprived school systems, and lack of meaningful job opportunities brought him face to face with the ineffectiveness of the Civil Rights Movement for ameliorating poverty and transforming living conditions African Americans in Northern cities. This ineffectiveness was underscored by urban riots that had broken out across the country from 1963-1968, and which invited the opprobrium of white political conservatives and other racist factions. Furthermore, King was fighting one of his most intense battles against the younger, more radical arm of the Civil Rights Movement, SNCC, which had embraced the slogan “Black Power!” as the basis of their political and social agenda. His attempts at persuading them to abandon the slogan had fallen on deaf ears, and Black Power was steadily gaining momentum.

King, Jr. and Julius R. Scruggs, *“Thou, Dear God”: Prayers That Open Hearts and Spirits*, ed. Lewis V. Baldwin (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2014).

⁴⁴⁵ Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?*, Reprint edition (Boston: Beacon Press, 2010), 3.

Black Power Confronts Black Pietism

One of the foremost challengers to the role of normal religion held by the Pietist paradigm involved the Nation of Islam formally led by Elijah Muhammad, but publicly represented by the charismatic and brilliant Malcolm X. Throughout the 1960s Malcolm X unleashed a vicious attack against Christianity and regarded Northern storefront churches as his most fertile recruiting opportunities. More than any other individual, Malcolm directly contributed to the emergence of Black Power, a secular liberationist approach to black self-determination that offered the sternest challenge to the Pietist paradigm's normative status within the black religious community.

In discussing the reasons for black liberation theology's emergence, James Cone recalls, "The cry of Black Power by Willie Ricks and its political and intellectual development by Stokely Carmichael and others challenged the Black Church to move beyond the models of love defined in the context of white religion and theology."⁴⁴⁶ As Cone observes, Black Power emerged out of frustration with "King's continued emphasis on nonviolence and Christian love."⁴⁴⁷

Stokely Carmichael, chairman of SNCC and the leading proponent of Black Power in the 1960s, credits Malcolm X with catalyzing the embrace of black nationalism within SNCC as early as 1962. According to Carmichael, Malcolm X, who won a debate against Bayard Rustin at Howard University in 1962, "gave us all intellectual arguments and opened up the way for us to show clearly an intellectual basis for a nationalism and an ability to smash all ideas that were in contradiction to it. Malcolm opened up the way and more importantly, he opened up the way

⁴⁴⁶ James Cone, *Risks of Faith: The Emergence of a Black Theology of Liberation, 1968-1998* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2000), 10.

⁴⁴⁷ Cone, 41.

for violence as a legitimate weapon in a struggle for human rights.”⁴⁴⁸ For Carmichael and SNCC, violence was merely a tactic and not a philosophy, proven by Carmichael’s claim that by 1963 ninety percent of SNCC field staff in Alabama and Mississippi carried guns for protection.⁴⁴⁹ After being elected chair of SNCC in 1966, Carmichael began implementing his vision for the organization. He remembers, “Our direction was clear. A heavy emphasis on nationalism. Strong, as strong as Malcolm had it, as strong as we could get it.”⁴⁵⁰ The eventual public proclamation of Black Power was not haphazard or kneejerk, illustrated by Carmichael’s education strategy associated with the Meredith March, which had already planned on staging the public demand for Black Power.⁴⁵¹

The Meredith March against fear began when James Meredith, the first black person admitted to the University of Mississippi in 1962, set out on a solitary march from Memphis, TN to Jackson, MS, in order to encourage African American voter registration. The day after he started, June 6, 1966, he was shot in the back by an unknown gunman. Martin Luther King and Floyd McKissick, director of the Congress of Racial Equality, visited Meredith at Municipal Hospital in Memphis and promised him that they would continue the march. Stokely Carmichael later arrived at the hospital, and the three African American leaders agreed that their organizations would sponsor jointly the march.⁴⁵²

⁴⁴⁸ Stokely Carmichael, *Eyes on the Prize II: America at the Crossroads 1965 to 1985*, November 7, 1988, Henry Hampton Collection, Washington University Libraries, Film and Media Archive.

⁴⁴⁹ Carmichael.

⁴⁵⁰ Carmichael.

⁴⁵¹ Carmichael.

⁴⁵² King, Jr., *Where Do We Go from Here*, 25.

Soon after the meeting, the march recommenced. As they walked, King overheard some marchers renouncing their commitment to nonviolence.⁴⁵³ During the singing of “We Shall Overcome”, others suggested that a change in lyrics to “We Shall Overrun” was necessary.⁴⁵⁴ At a meeting later that evening at a motel in Memphis, participants from the march, along with its leaders, vigorously debated the issue of non-violence and inclusion of whites in the march. King reaffirmed his absolute commitment to nonviolence and interracial activism, and threatened to withdraw from the march if his co-leaders could not support his position. McKissick and Carmichael reluctantly acquiesced to his demands.⁴⁵⁵

Ten days into the march, after passing through many towns along the route, the throng approached Greenwood, Mississippi. Carmichael recalls that SNCC had already agreed to use the term in Greenwood.⁴⁵⁶ By this time, the organization had fine-tuned a strategy of grassroots mobilization, voter registration, and political participation that had empowered Mississippi residents in the summer of 1964 during formation of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party. Black Power represented a declaration of what had already been percolating within SNCC and in Mississippi, especially because the people in Greenwood were familiar with SNCC. Before the marchers arrived there, Willie Ricks, a SNCC member, sent field members to the plantations to meet with sharecroppers to prime and prepare them for the public unveiling of the slogan.

⁴⁵³ King, Jr., 25.

⁴⁵⁴ King, Jr., 26.

⁴⁵⁵ King, Jr., 29.

⁴⁵⁶ Carmichael, *Eyes on the Prize II: America at the Crossroads 1965 to 1985*.

On Thursday, June 16, 1966, at a large evening rally in Greenwood, Carmichael, who had been arrested earlier in the day, exclaimed, "I ain't going to jail no more. The only way we gonna stop them white men from whuppin' us is to take over. What we gonna start sayin' now is Black Power!"⁴⁵⁷ Ricks took over, shouting, "What do you want?" The crowd responded, "Black Power!" Over and over Ricks led the enthusiastic crowd in this call and response chant that grew ever louder until the crowd "had reached fever pitch."⁴⁵⁸ Immediately, the news media seized upon this development and broadcast and reported the night's events to the nation. Black Power emerged from Greenwood, MS to become a rallying cry for black activists and a polarizing force in the American cultural imagination. Black Power also produced the anomaly that threatened to destabilize the Pietist paradigm, and which led to the creation of the Liberationist paradigm by James Cone.

James Cone Confronts Crises; The Black Liberationist Paradigm is Born

The anomaly that Cone sought to overcome can be defined as his confrontation of the limitations of the Pietist paradigm for including black Christians within one of the most exciting and empowering developments that black youth had ever encountered. The role of violence versus non-violence in the struggle for black freedom had been a topic of discussion amongst followers and critics of King alike since the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement.⁴⁵⁹ The advocacy of self-defense and revolutionary violence by radical segments of the black struggle

⁴⁵⁷ Peniel E. Joseph, *Dark Days, Bright Nights: From Black Power to Barack Obama* (New York, NY: Civitas Books, 2010), 119.

⁴⁵⁸ King, Jr., *Where Do We Go from Here*, 29.

⁴⁵⁹ The debate certainly begins within slavery, but the focus here is on the immediate context that led to the anomaly to which Cone responded. The immediate context that contributed to the formation of Black Power as a movement was the left-leaning strand of the Civil Rights Movement's favorable reaction to black nationalism.

bifurcated loyalties during the civil rights movement between Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X. It polarized factions within the civil rights movement, particularly within SNCC, and it forced black young Christians to evaluate honestly their own commitment to nonviolence. King had identified Christianity with love, and he had also equated love with nonviolence. As the most famous black representative of Christianity, black Christians were expected to follow his lead by also committing to nonviolence. Many black Christians sympathized with the rioters reacting against the state-sanctioned violence of police brutality, and with the rebellious actions of youth trapped by the stifling poverty of slums. They supported the black power mantra that blacks should gain their freedom “by any means necessary.”⁴⁶⁰ The other issue was that most of the leaders of the movement tended to be non-Christian. Like Malcolm X, supporters of Black Power, including its leaders, university students, and practitioners of African religion, openly denigrated Christianity as “the white man’s religion.”⁴⁶¹ Cone saw that in order to remain Christian while also supporting black power, he and other black preachers needed a theology “that was distinctly black and also accountable to our faith.”⁴⁶²

To be sure, the black Pietist paradigm had faced similar anomalies before. The difference, however, is that the slave rebellion of Nat Turner and the provocations by David Walker developed from *within* the Pietistic paradigm, and were either grounded in supernatural phenomena such as visions and dreams, or in interpretation of scripture—even when the interpretation veered away from established views. The Black Power movement was essentially secular, but its influence among urban youth was widespread due to the influence of

⁴⁶⁰ Cone, *For My People*, 58.

⁴⁶¹ Cone, 59.

⁴⁶² Cone, 59. Also see Cone, *Risks of Faith*, 40–43.

the national media in successfully propagating Malcolm X's message. The media had also assumed a prominent role in broadcasting King's failures in Chicago—which underscored the ineffectiveness of nonviolence in the North, and which contributed greatly to the implicit understanding that recalcitrant racism and economic exploitation would not bend to the will of non-violence.

Cone was aware of the revolutionary events of the 1960s, but felt excluded from them due to his role as a professor teaching at Adrian College in Adrian, Michigan. Adrian boasted of fewer than seventy-five African Americans out of a total of twenty-five thousand people living in the city.⁴⁶³ The college fared no better, with only ten African Americans within a student population of twelve hundred.⁴⁶⁴ Cone, lonely and isolated, felt deeply the irrelevance of his position at Adrian in relationship to the black struggle. He recalls, "The apparent irrelevance of theology created a vocational crisis in me, and I did not know what to do about my future as a theologian. I began to develop an intense dislike for theology because it avoided the really hard problems of life with its talk about revelation, God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit."⁴⁶⁵ Cone thought of returning to graduate school to earn a Ph.D. in Literature, but forty-three people were killed in the summer of 1967 in the Detroit riot which forced him to imagine ways that he could lend his voice to black freedom's cause. He grew upset at "the comments of white theologians and preachers who condemned black violence but said nothing about the structural white violence that created it."⁴⁶⁶ It was during this time that Cone became familiar with the

⁴⁶³ James H. Cone, *My Soul Looks Back*, Revised edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985), 42.

⁴⁶⁴ Cone, 42.

⁴⁶⁵ Cone, 43.

⁴⁶⁶ Cone, 44.

work of the National Committee of Negro Churchmen and he wished that he could join them.⁴⁶⁷

Cone's personal crisis intensified with the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. He states, "Although I had already embraced Black Power before King's murder, that event intensified my conviction and made me more determined to write an extended essay equating Black Power with the Christian gospel."⁴⁶⁸

Underlying Cone's vocational crisis was his unresolved frustration at being unable to refute intellectually Joseph R. Washington, Jr.'s book entitled *Black Religion: The Negro and Christianity in the United States* published in 1964.⁴⁶⁹ In this text, Washington argued that black people practiced an impoverished version of Christianity bequeathed to them by whites. Whites provided black people with moral codes, biblical literalism, and catechesis, but denied them access to the European tradition from which Protestantism emerged, and withheld from them the creeds that comprise proper theology. Washington accused black churches of turning to social protest and individual economic advancement as their core Christian pursuits, which, in his view, were ultimately not Christian at all. Cone recalls,

Although I did not like his conclusions any more than any black person, they seemed logical, given his premises. In order for me to challenge Washington, I had to challenge the entire white theological establishment, and I was not ready to do that. But the problems he raised stayed on my mind constantly, and I knew that I would have to challenge his identity of the Christian faith with the faith of white churches. The problem was how to do it on theological grounds and in a manner consistent with my intellectual training in theology.⁴⁷⁰

When describing how new paradigms emerge Kuhn states, "The new paradigm, or a sufficient hint to permit later articulation, emerges all at once, sometimes in the middle of the

⁴⁶⁷ Cone, 44.

⁴⁶⁸ Cone, 46.

⁴⁶⁹ Joseph R. Washington, Jr., *Black Religion: The Negro and Christianity in the United States* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1964).

⁴⁷⁰ Cone, 39.

night, in the mind of a man deeply immersed in crisis."⁴⁷¹ Cone was enveloped within a *multiplicity* of crises, including his own vocational crisis exacerbated by his employment in Adrian, an internal intellectual crisis instigated by Washington, the crisis of being geographically and socially alienated from the rise of Black Power, the crisis of needing to verbally defend black victims of state suppression within riots, the crisis over his grief regarding the assassination of King, and the crisis of needing to theologially justify Christian involvement in Black Power. One of the effects of Cone's crises is that he became overtaken by anger due to the suffering of black people, stating that "By the summer of that year, I had so much anger pent up in me that I had to let it out or be destroyed by it."⁴⁷² Throughout the summer of 1968, Cone wrote assiduously and he states that "I could feel in the depth of my being a liberation that began to manifest in the energy and passion of my writing."⁴⁷³ The Liberationist paradigm was born with the completion of *Black Theology and Black Power*. Cone views the writing of this text as his conversion experience, recalling that "it was like experiencing the death of white theology and being born again into the theology of the black experience."⁴⁷⁴ Cone's turn to blackness, in his words, represented "an even deeper conversion-experience than the turn to Jesus. It was spiritual, transforming radically my way of seeing the world and theology."⁴⁷⁵ The new worldview espoused by Cone became the basis of his Liberationist paradigm that sought to unite the black radicalism of Malcolm X with the Christian struggle for justice.⁴⁷⁶

⁴⁷¹ Joseph R. Washington, Jr., *Black Religion: The Negro and Christianity in the United States* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, n.d.).

⁴⁷² Cone, *My Soul Looks Back*, 46.

⁴⁷³ Cone, 47.

⁴⁷⁴ Cone, *My Soul Looks Back*, 48.

⁴⁷⁵ Cone, *Risks of Faith*, xxi-xxii.

⁴⁷⁶ Cone, xxi.

Liberal Theological Perspectives in the Making of the Black Liberationist Paradigm

Cone understood the articulation of his new theological position to be not just Christian, but biblical as well. He asserts, "I was audacious enough to think that my understanding of the gospel was a simple truth, available to anyone who opened his/her heart and mind to the God revealed in the scriptures and present in the world today."⁴⁷⁷ However, as this chapter will show, the dramatic shift to the liberationist paradigm inaugurated a reconstruction of the way that black religion is defined. Kuhn described this type of paradigm shift as "reconstruction of the field from new fundamentals, a reconstruction that changes some of the field's most elementary theoretical generalizations as well as many of its paradigm methods and applications."⁴⁷⁸

James Cone argues persuasively, "The term 'black theology,' therefore, did not emerge from the ivory tower of black university and seminary professors. It emerged as the black clergy was compelled by the urgency of the time to make theological sense out of the struggle for black freedom."⁴⁷⁹ Elsewhere, he writes, "Black theology, then, was not created in a vacuum and neither was it simply the intellectual enterprise of black professional theologians."⁴⁸⁰ Again, he makes the same claim, stating, "Black theology...has emerged out of and is accountable to a Black Church that has always been involved in our historical fight for justice."⁴⁸¹ Raphael Warnock proffers a similar argument, locating black theology's "earliest incarnation" in pastors who were members of the National Council of Black Churchmen. For Warnock, the

⁴⁷⁷ Cone, xxiii.

⁴⁷⁸ Kuhn, *The Structure Of Scientific Revolutions*, 85.

⁴⁷⁹ Cone, *For My People*, 24.

⁴⁸⁰ Cone, *Risks of Faith*, 43.

⁴⁸¹ Cone, 45.

revolutionary nature of black theology caused it to operate on the ecclesiastical margins, thus explaining why black caucuses in white denominations embraced it first.⁴⁸² To argue comprehensively here against Warnock and Cone would diverge too substantially from the thesis of this chapter. Briefly, however, it is important to note that the public statements of the NCBC did not exhibit the hallmarks of black liberation theology until Cone became involved with them in 1969. One could argue that their statements, before James Cone, should not properly be considered as part of the tradition known as “black theology.” What is clear is that the NCBC did not impact substantially the black denominations whose institutional life and theological persuasion bore little similarity to it. Albert B. Cleage, Jr., one of the most radical black pastors in Detroit, called this expression of black theology “Black schoolmen’s theology...written for white acceptance.”⁴⁸³

Cone himself had been formed theologically by the liberal methodology and Neo-Orthodox precepts of the mid-twentieth century theological academy. The publication of *Black Theology and Black Power* represented a “reconstruction of the field from new fundamentals, a reconstruction that changes some of the field’s most elementary theoretical generalizations as well as many of its paradigm methods and applications” because Cone relied heavily on

⁴⁸² Warnock, *Divided Mind of the Black Church*, 70. Although both Cone and Warnock trace the origin of black theology to the NCBC and the white caucuses, Gayraud Wilmore, in 1972 gave a reason for why “the great Black denominations stood aloof and regarded it [the NCBC] with suspicion.”⁴⁸² Wilmore, one of the progenitors of black theology alongside Cone, writes, “In the first place, NCBC was too closely identified with men who served in the white denominations—particularly the United Presbyterians, Episcopalians and Unitarian-Universalists—whose congregations were largely composed of the top layer of the Black bourgeoisie and whose training and work habits were conspicuously under the influence of white norms.” Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 274. Thus, Wilmore shows that one of the reasons that the mission and pronouncements of the NCBC barely registered with the black denominations that comprised the majority of the black church arose because the NCBC was too influenced by white religion.

⁴⁸³ Gayraud S. Wilmore, “Introduction to Part II: The Attack on White Religion,” in *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-1979*, ed. Gayraud S. Wilmore and James H. Cone (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), 67.

theological beliefs and procedures external to the black Christian community that he claimed to speak for.⁴⁸⁴ The primary critique against Cone from black theologians and religious scholars after the publication of his first two books was that he relied too heavily on white sources, with the question being posed as to whether he was doing black theology or white theology that was painted black.⁴⁸⁵ Cone's critics charged him with using conceptual categories derived from Europe and not from Africa, leading to an overreliance on white theological methods and sources. Cone states, "To find out from my black colleagues that I was still held captive by the same system that I was criticizing was a bitter pill to swallow."⁴⁸⁶ He admits that his methodological dependence upon the neo-orthodoxy of Karl Barth occurred because it was the only theological system with which he was comfortable and because he did not have the time to develop a new perspective in theology.⁴⁸⁷ Cone adjusted, stating, "Since I was absolutely sure that I was right about liberation being the central motif of the gospel and one of the most creative elements of black religion, what I needed to do was to rethink the content and shape of black theology in that light."⁴⁸⁸

While in graduate school, Cone was aware that the white theologians that he studied offered limited usefulness for understanding and explaining black religion. He indicates,

The curriculum at Garrett and Northwestern did not deal with the questions black people were asking as they searched for the theological meaning of their fight for justice in a white racist society. And as individuals and isolated students within a demanding educational system, neither I nor the token number of black students had the intellectual resources to articulate them. I found myself grossly ill-prepared, because I

⁴⁸⁴ Kuhn, *Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 85.

⁴⁸⁵ Cone states that versions of this critique were offered by Carleton Lee, Charles Long, Gayraud Wilmore, and Cecil Cone. Cone, *My Soul Looks Back*, 60.

⁴⁸⁶ Cone, 61.

⁴⁸⁷ James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation: Fortieth Anniversary Edition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2016), xxiii.

⁴⁸⁸ Cone, *My Soul Looks Back*, 61.

knew deep down that I could not repeat to a struggling black community the doctrines of the faith as they had been reinterpreted by Barth, Bultmann, Niebuhr, and Tillich for European colonizers and white racists in the United States. I knew that before I could say anything worthwhile about God and the black situation of oppression in America I had to discover a theological identity that was accountable to the life, history, and culture of African-American people.⁴⁸⁹

On the one hand, Cone felt that he could not speak persuasively to the black community because his methodology and sources had been derived from white European theologians. On the other, he desired to contribute to the academic discipline of theology something of importance regarding the black struggle because the academic theological canon completely ignored the salient issues affecting black people. While critiquing the post-Civil War black church, *Black Theology and Black Power* was addressed “primarily to the white liberals in the church and society because they were the loudest in denouncing Black Power.”⁴⁹⁰ His second book, *A Black Theology of Liberation* was designed to “address head-on white theology, the intellectual arm of the white church” especially because Cone knew that he was leaving Adrian College to teach at Union Theological Seminary.⁴⁹¹ White liberals are comprised of educated and highly-educated individuals and the white theological community is also comprised of highly-educated scholars. Cone’s training within these circles equipped him to speak to these audiences in the academic dialect using the theological sources that this audience would respect. However, after recognizing in graduate school the limitations of Barth, Bultmann, Niebuhr, and Tillich, aside from scant references to African Americans, they represent the bulk of the sources from whence he derives his theological ideas in his first two books. Outside of

⁴⁸⁹ Cone, *Risks of Faith*, xvi.

⁴⁹⁰ Cone, xxiii.

⁴⁹¹ Cone, xxiii.

Black Power itself, and the contemporary events that Cone observed transpiring daily, he admittedly developed his perspectives in a cultural vacuum, thus explaining why his methodology owes more to white liberalism than the beliefs, practices, and perspectives germinating from within the black church community itself.

The question that needs to be posed is this one: How was James Cone absolutely sure that he was right about liberation being the central motif of the gospel, if he formed that conclusion in the absence of concerted reflection on black religious sources, and if he admits that he was still beholden to the white theological tradition by the time he had finished his first two books? He states that after accepting the critiques offered by his colleagues, he sought to rethink black theology in the light of black religion itself. However, his conclusions did not change substantially from the first two texts to *Spirituals and the Blues* and *God of the Oppressed* according to Cecil Cone, who accused Cone of reducing the meaning of black religion to the acquisition of sociopolitical liberation. Perhaps the most compelling evidence suggesting that Cone's black Liberationist paradigm diverges considerably from the black Pietist paradigm is the fact that when his interlocutors and sources were comprised almost exclusively of white Neo-Orthodox and liberal theologians and white existential philosophers, his conclusions did not differ substantially from when he used almost exclusively slave sources, songs, and black sermons as his sources. That he appended the black sources to a theology of liberation already worked out within the parameters of the white theological academy will be demonstrated by the core tenets associated with the Liberationist paradigm that he created.

Cone's reconceptualization of black Christian religion inaugurated a Liberationist paradigm grounded in overt resistance to oppression but also in theologically liberal

methodology. This claim requires further explanation, especially because James Cone states that he identified with the Neo-Orthodoxy of Karl Barth precisely because Barth's emphases on Jesus as the revealed Word of God echoed the black church's theological sentiments.⁴⁹² To speak of Cone's methodology as liberal is not to try and situate him within a specific liberal tradition, like the German liberal tradition originating in Friedrich Schleiermacher or the American social gospel tradition pioneered by Washington Gladden. Rather, it is to describe the method by which he establishes his theological framework, understanding that such a task is a fraught endeavor because liberalism "can cover a wide range of different and sometimes quite incompatible methodologies."⁴⁹³ Still, it is important to specify the relationship of Cone's theories and methods to Gary Dorrien's observation that "from its beginning liberation theology sharply challenged the priorities, racism, and classism of modern theology, *while employing its critical methods and theories* (emphasis mine)."⁴⁹⁴ The question that this chapter seeks partially to answer asks what critical methods and theories contributed to the construction of Cone's Liberationist paradigm?

Dorrien, author of the magisterial three-volume history of American Liberal Theology⁴⁹⁵, proffers this definition of liberal theology:

Fundamentally, liberal theology is the idea of a Christian perspective based on reason and experience, not external authority, that reconceptualizes the meaning of Christianity in the light of modern knowledge and ethical values. It is reformist in spirit

⁴⁹² Cone, *My Soul Looks Back*, 80.

⁴⁹³ Mark D. Chapman, ed., *The Future of Liberal Theology* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Pub Ltd, 2002), 4.

⁴⁹⁴ Gary Dorrien, "American Liberal Theology: Crisis, Irony, Decline, Renewal, Ambiguity," *Cross Currents*, Winter 2005-06, Vol. 55, No. 4.

⁴⁹⁵ Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Imagining Progressive Religion, 1805 - 1900*, 1805-1900 ed. edition ed. (Louisville, Ky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001); Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Idealism, Realism, and Modernity, 1900-1950*, 1 edition (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003); Gary Dorrien, *The Making of American Liberal Theology: Crisis, Irony, and Postmodernity, 1950-2005* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006).

and substance, not revolutionary. Specifically it is defined by its openness to the verdicts of modern intellectual inquiry, especially historical criticism and the natural sciences; its commitment to the authority of individual reason and experience; its conception of Christianity as an ethical way of life; its advocacy of moral concepts of atonement or reconciliation; and its commitments to make Christianity credible and socially relevant to contemporary people.⁴⁹⁶

Keith Ward gestures toward what may be considered the *sine qua non* of liberalism, discovering the heart of liberalism in “not accepting the authority of humans or of scriptural texts as unquestionably binding.”⁴⁹⁷ He clarifies this approach in regard to interpretation of theological and ethical issues in the Bible, postulating that

What a liberal would say on such issues is that there is nothing, either in the Bible or in any set of statements by any human being or group of human beings, which declares the truth so reliably that it must be accepted by all Christians. In this they oppose those who say that either the Bible itself, or some teaching body, has the authority to declare the truth on such matters...without error.⁴⁹⁸

Defining the Black Liberationist Paradigm

Cone’s corpus evinces all of the characteristics enumerated by Dorrien and Ward. His six years spent within the white theological academy influenced his theological approach in conjunction with his endorsement of Black Power to inaugurate a new paradigm comprised of the following elements: 1) Identification of liberation from material oppression as the meaning of the gospel, thereby judging all other Christian doctrine as to whether it contributes to or detracts from liberation. 2) A revisionist approach toward any orthodox or traditional Christian doctrine that detracts from liberation of the oppressed. 3) A liberalist biblical hermeneutics that prioritizes

⁴⁹⁶ Dorrien, “American Liberal Theology.”

⁴⁹⁷ Keith Ward, “The Importance of Liberal Theology,” in *The Future of Liberal Theology*, ed. Mark D. Chapman (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2002), 49.

⁴⁹⁸ Ward, 41.

liberationist readings of scripture and denies biblical infallibility. Therefore, scripture must be interpreted provisionally and not absolutely. 4) Definition of sin as predominantly social, with personal moral codes often interpreted as “white”. Included in this interpretation is the identification of biblical literalism with white fundamentalism.⁴⁹⁹

Just as the black church organizes its Pietist paradigm around the hypergood of regeneration and conversion from sin, the Liberationist paradigm likewise foregrounds its hypergood of liberation from oppression, with the other tenets acting as its corollaries. Although Cone retains much of the same vocabulary and concepts regarding the black church, to the extent that Wilmore called Cone’s black theology “an essentially classical interpretation of the Christian faith,”⁵⁰⁰ the incommensurability between its hypergoods, or foundational principles should be evident. Person A, a Pietist, exclaims, “I have been set free by Jesus Christ from the sin of homosexuality!” Person B retorts, “The *belief itself* is oppressive and therefore sinful, and it limits your God-given freedom and sexuality.” In this case, what higher authority can both appeal to resolve this dispute? If Person A responds, “Well, the Bible says that it is wrong.” Person B can respond, “Well, the Bible itself is sometimes oppressive and encourages women to be silent and submit to men, views that our society views as outdated and harmful.” If Person B responds, “The nature of humans is to be free and to pursue one’s own projects and goals free of oppression,” Person A can respond, “That may be true, to an extent, but since the Bible calls the human heart sinful, we need God’s law to constrain us so that we do not use our

⁴⁹⁹ To be sure, some of the most ardent fundamentalists have also been the most vehement racists. Cone is right in suggesting that there is often a correlation between religious conservatism regarding the Bible and morality, and political conservatism regarding race. That does not mean that personal moral codes are wrong, or that the Bible should not be interpreted literally. It simply means that racists choose to concentrate on those areas of the Christianity that do not challenge or convict them, thus distorting the gospel.

⁵⁰⁰ Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 246.

freedom inappropriately.” In much the same way as this fabricated but plausible dialogue ensues, Cone’s Liberationist paradigm opposes incommensurably Pietist beliefs in the interest of actualizing the liberation of the oppressed.

To recapitulate, the conundrum that Cone needed to solve pertained to the reconciliation of two diametrically opposed approaches to black liberation. One approach, Black Power, was admittedly hostile toward Christianity and repudiated its nonviolent tactics. The other, the black Christianity of the historically black denominations, bristled at Black Power’s approval of violence, and maintained a skeptical distance. Cone sought to Christianize Black Power so that Christians could freely embrace Black Power without abandoning their faith. The Liberationist paradigm was born when Cone declared, “To put it simply, Black Theology knows no authority more binding than the experience of oppression itself. This alone must be the ultimate authority in religious matters.”⁵⁰¹

The Black Liberationist Paradigm in *Black Theology and Black Power*

In the initial pages of *Black Theology and Black Power*, Cone provides this definition for Black Power: “It means *complete emancipation of black people from white oppression by whatever means black people deem necessary.*”⁵⁰² He continues, “Black Power means black freedom, black self-determination, wherein black people no longer view themselves as without human dignity but as men, human beings with the ability to carve out their own destiny.”⁵⁰³

⁵⁰¹ James H. Cone, *Black Theology & Black Power*, Reprint (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 120.

⁵⁰² Cone, 6.

⁵⁰³ Ibid. Sexist Cone’s non-inclusive language is retained as well as his particular nomenclature for African Americans (blacks) in order to represent the context within which Cone writes. It is to also show the degree to which discussions of Black Power were circumscribed by conceptions of masculinity that did not invite the contributions of women.

For Cone, Black Power included such strategies of resistance as selective buying, boycotting, and marching, but also outright violent rebellion. Later in the text, Cone describes the task of Black Theology, stating that it is *“to analyze the black man’s condition in the light of God’s revelation in Jesus Christ with the purpose of creating a new understanding of black dignity among black people, and providing the necessary soul in that people, to destroy white racism.”*⁵⁰⁴ Related to the anomaly that he seeks to resolve, Cone’s thesis argues that “the goal and message of Black Power” is “consistent with the gospel of Jesus Christ.”⁵⁰⁵

For Cone, the gospel of Jesus Christ refers to the reality that God comes into the depths of human existence to free humans from the chains of slavery.⁵⁰⁶ Citing Luke 4:18-19, Cone defines Jesus ministry as a ministry of liberation by which God enters into human affairs through Christ and takes sides with the oppressed.⁵⁰⁷ Jesus now provides the poor man with the freedom “to rebel against that which makes him other than human.”⁵⁰⁸ Cone is careful to specify that Jesus’ mission prioritizes the poor. The Kingdom of God, now associated with the poor, becomes a place of divine encounter in which they are released from all human oppression, including racism.⁵⁰⁹ Cone declares, “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.”⁵¹⁰

⁵⁰⁴ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 117.

⁵⁰⁵ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 48.

⁵⁰⁶ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 35.

⁵⁰⁷ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 36.

⁵⁰⁸ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 36.

⁵⁰⁹ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 35-36.

⁵¹⁰ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 38.

Another essential part of the gospel, in Cone's analysis, is the freedom of humans to realize their humanity through self-determination. This means that those forces that subvert black freedom must be destroyed. Citing I John 3:8, Cone demonstrates that Christ came into the world to destroy the works of Satan. He reminds the reader that Christ confronted Satan in the wilderness, and he provides scriptural references from the gospels that narrate this conflict. Cone describes the battle between Christ and Satan as a battle between Christ and the demonic forces of racism, calling white racism 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."⁵¹¹ If white racism is demonic, and Christ desires demonic systems to be defeated, Cone concludes that Christ is present in the radical movement of Black Power, a movement predicated upon the defeat of white racism and oppression.

Love

Cone realizes that suggesting "that Black Power is doing God's work in history by righting the wrongs done against his people will, of course, provoke the response that Black Power is a contradiction of Christian love."⁵¹² Before attempting to resolve the tension, Cone gives two reasons for why answering the question poses difficulty. First, he states that it is difficult to make first-century New testament language relevant to the contemporary world.⁵¹³ Secondly, he states that the problem arises from failure to interpret the New Testament

⁵¹¹ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 41.

⁵¹² Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 47.

⁵¹³ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 49.

according to the needs of the black oppressed. He argues that a new approach to theology is necessary for breaking the barrier between Black Power and Christian love.⁵¹⁴

To explicate the nature of Christian love, Cone quotes the entirety of Matthew 22:34-40, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the first and great commandment. And a second is like it. You shall love your neighbor as yourself. On these two commandments depend all the law and the prophets.”⁵¹⁵ For Cone, loving God means that a person regards God as the ground of her being and that she exemplifies total dependence on God. Love for God also means joining God in the activity of liberating the oppressed.⁵¹⁶ Furthermore, to love our neighbor as oneself means that all people are included in the concept of “neighbor” without exception.⁵¹⁷ Cone explains that it means being prepared to confront the neighbor as a “Thou,” doing what is necessary because she is a creature of God.⁵¹⁸

Cone asks, what does this interpretation of love “mean to the black man in America today?”⁵¹⁹ He responds with the reminder that God’s love exonerates black people from hating themselves for their blackness, and they can now view their blackness as characteristic of being special creations of God. Through God’s love for them, they receive infinite value, and “Through God’s love, the black man is given the power to *become*, the power to make others recognize him.”⁵²⁰ To love the white neighbor means that “the black man *confronts* him as a

⁵¹⁴ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 50.

⁵¹⁵ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 51.

⁵¹⁶ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 51.

⁵¹⁷ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 52.

⁵¹⁸ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 52.

⁵¹⁹ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 52.

⁵²⁰ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 52.

Thou without any intentions of giving ground by becoming an It. Though the white man is accustomed to addressing an It, in the new black man he meets a Thou” since “profound love can only exist between two equals.”⁵²¹ Cone draws upon the thought of Paul Tillich to explain the inseparability of love, power, and justice. Citing Tillich, Cone shows that love conflicts with compulsory power only “when it prevents the aim of love, namely the reunion of the separated.”⁵²² He implies that Black Power is aimed at reuniting blacks and whites, but only after blacks are empowered to meet with whites as equals. Confrontation, in Cone’s mind, must come before reunification. Cone decries the type of sentimental and emotional love that whites display in charitable acts that keep black people powerless. Instead, black people, now redeemed in Christ and aware of their value, must demand to be confronted as persons. They must show whites that true love means working to achieve the political, social, and economic justice which leads to the redistribution of power.⁵²³

Cone then elucidates what he takes to be the true essence of love, regarding it as the motive or rationale of an action rather than the act itself. Based upon this definition, “The attempt of some to measure love exclusively by specific actions, such as nonviolence, is theologically incorrect.”⁵²⁴ In Cone’s estimation, although love means that the Christian behaves as if God is the ground of his existence, he is still finite, and thus subject to existential doubt in decision making. Although love includes self-acceptance and neighbor-acceptance, it must always be balanced with the “existential threat of nonbeing,” with Cone arguing that the

⁵²¹ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 53.

⁵²² Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 54.

⁵²³ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 55.

⁵²⁴ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 55.

possibility of nonbeing means that love can never fully escape the “the possibility of self-annihilation and destruction of the neighbor.”⁵²⁵ Cone does not specify why love may entail the destruction of the neighbor, but seems to suggest that this is because the participation of the white neighbor in an unjust system may include his destruction as black people’s love of self leads them to overturn the oppressive system. He concludes,

The violence in the cities, which appears to contradict Christian love, is nothing but the black man’s attempt to say Yes to his being as defined by God in a world that would make his being into nonbeing. If the riots are the black man’s courage to say Yes to himself as a creature of God, and if in affirming self he affirms Yes to the neighbor, then violence may be the black man’s expression, sometimes the only possible expression, of Christian love to the white oppressor.⁵²⁶

Cone here engages in the redefinition of love in light of his hypergood. If the meaning of Jesus Christ for black people is that he overturns their oppression, and that wherever black people are liberating themselves Jesus is there, it stands to reason that any kind of love that contributes to that oppression through weakness or inaction must be eradicated and redefined. For Cone, love begins with acknowledging oneself as free through active resistance against oppression. That resistance may harm the neighbor, but even this harm comes as result of a loving action meant to prepare the oppressed for a “meeting of equals” in which reconciliation can truly occur.

Violence

The issue of love in Black Power is closely related to the issue of violence. The anomaly that forces Cone to develop his Liberationist paradigm consists partially of the tension between

⁵²⁵ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 55.

⁵²⁶ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 55.

Black Power's affirmation of violence as a viable strategy for gaining freedom versus black Christianity's traditional disavowal and repudiation of violence. Cone raises the problem of violence plainly, asking "is Black Theology a theology of violence?"⁵²⁷ He blames Western morality for the opprobrium that the oppressed receive when they respond in violence and takes issue with the type of logic that supports state-sanctioned violence, including police repression of riots and America's involvement invasion of Vietnam, but condemns victims who rebel against oppression.⁵²⁸ He then identifies the New Testament itself as the "chief difficulty" in defending the Christian possibility of violence.⁵²⁹

Cone recognizes the implications of Jesus' nonviolence in the New Testament, and he concedes that Jesus taught his followers to "turn the other cheek," thus causing violence to seem inimical to biblical Christianity. He asks, "is it not true that the power of love as expressed in the life and death of Jesus eschews the use of violence and emphasizes the inward power of the Christian man to accept everything the enemy dishes out?"⁵³⁰ For Cone, this stance is epitomized in Jesus' prayer to God, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do." He answers this question in the same manner as he did the question regarding Christian love: he first acknowledges that the answer is complex and not easily found. He then takes aim at the literalism that underlies the question, equating it with fundamentalist views of interpreting scripture that assume ethical questions can be answered by simply referring to the Bible. He declaims against literalism and fundamentalism, stating, "We cannot solve ethical questions of

⁵²⁷ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 55.

⁵²⁸ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 55.

⁵²⁹ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 139.

⁵³⁰ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 139.

the twentieth century by looking at what Jesus did in the first.”⁵³¹ Cone denies that contemporary Christians can follow exactly in Jesus’ steps, thus concluding that one cannot know what Jesus would do in a given situation. Rather, the person must attempt to identify where Jesus is currently working. This process is one of discovery in which the believer in each situation must “think through each act of obedience without an absolute ethical guide from Jesus.”⁵³² Definitive guides for conduct curtail and deny human freedom such that Jesus’ renunciation of violence provides “no evidence relevant to the condition of black people as they decide on what to do about white oppression.”⁵³³ Moreover, according to Cone, the question of violence should not be viewed as an issue of right or wrong. Categorizing it in this way renders it too abstract, and ignores the suffering of black people who are being lynched, beaten, persecuted. In his analysis,

“It is this fact that most whites seem to overlook—the fact that violence already exists. The Christian does not decide between the less and the greater evil...He must ponder whether revolutionary violence is less or more deplorable than the violence perpetuated by the system. There are no absolute rules which can decide the answer with certainty. But he must make a choice. If he decides to take the “nonviolent” way, then he is saying that revolutionary violence is more detrimental to man in the long run than systemic violence. But if the system is evil, then revolutionary violence is both justified and necessary.”⁵³⁴

Love, Violence, and Incommensurability

In redefining the black Christian perspective on love and nonviolence, Cone arrives at a position that is methodologically incommensurable with that of the black Pietist paradigm. To

⁵³¹ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 139.

⁵³² Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 140.

⁵³³ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 140.

⁵³⁴ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 143.

permit violent resistance by the Christian, Cone simply denies that the Bible is useful for dictating the boundaries of moral behavior. By limiting its authority to the first century audience that heard Jesus' teachings, Cone opens up the avenue for black Christians to respond violently to oppression, urging them to understand that moral certainty is impossible. The methodological incommensurability does not arise because Cone advocates for the possibility of violence. David Walker did the same, but he used the Bible to buttress his demands. Methodological incommensurability enters at the point where Cone denies the ethical application of the Bible for guiding contemporary moral action. Cone argues that "A Christian must think through the question of revolution on the basis of his faith and he must express this interpretation in the concrete situation and translate it into action," explaining that "the Christian is placed in a situation in which he alone makes the choice."⁵³⁵ Such a view is diametrically opposed to that of George White, a preacher and former slave who stated, "The holy scriptures, which reveal the divine character and government, *our duty to God and one another...are an inexhaustable [sic] source of joy and rejoicing to the Christian...*" (emphasis mine).⁵³⁶

Because Cone's world is viewed through the binary of oppressed and oppressor, this adversarial state of affairs determines how all of his theological concepts are assessed and constructed. Insofar as the Bible supports the overturning of oppression, then the Bible is valid and can be employed within the theological task. When the Bible contributes to oppression, then it can be reinterpreted, set aside, and replaced with information derived from modern

⁵³⁵ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 142.

⁵³⁶ White, *A Brief Account of the Life, Experience, Travels, and Gospel Labours of George White, an African: Written by Himself, and Revised by a Friend*, 58.

theological or philosophical thought. For example, Cone interprets Jesus mission in Luke 4 as a “literal” liberation from oppression and bondage, therefore challenging its spiritualization by other scholars. He also interprets other first century proclamations of Jesus literally, and views them as guiding contemporary ethical action. For example, he finds Matthew 25’s commands to cloth the naked, visit the sick, and feed the hungry to be literal commands of Christ that must be obeyed.⁵³⁷ In taking the ethical perspective that pursuit of earthly wealth cuts against the grain of Christ’s teaching, he relies upon Luke 6:20.⁵³⁸ Only when the Bible contradicts or militates against liberation of the oppressed does Cone resort to its exclusion. For example, to argue for the decidedly unscriptural view that “Love without the power to guarantee justice in human relations is meaningless,” he relies upon the thought of Paul Tillich.⁵³⁹

Cone does not ignore the Holy Spirit in *Black Theology and Black Power*, finding it necessary to speak of the Holy Spirit in order to provide a total picture of the triune God. He describes the Holy Spirit as “nothing but the Spirit of God and Christ working out his will in the lives of men.”⁵⁴⁰ The Holy Spirit is also, “the power of God in the world effecting in the life of his people his intended purposes.”⁵⁴¹ Cone cautions against pietistic views of the Spirit, finding that the modern church has mistakenly identified the work of God’s Spirit with “private moments of ecstasy” or “with individual purification from sin, particularly from a short list of ritual pollutants, such as alcohol and tobacco.”⁵⁴² Cone calls this view “hopelessly

⁵³⁷ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 59.

⁵³⁸ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 45.

⁵³⁹ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 53-54.

⁵⁴⁰ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 57.

⁵⁴¹ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 57.

⁵⁴² Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 58.

impoverished,” asserting that the Holy Spirit works to empower people to overcome the suffering of the oppressed.

In chiding Post-Civil War religion for its reticence to protest injustice, Cone echoes Washington’s claim that the moral codes adopted by black Christians represented white attempts to control black behavior. Cone argues that under the preaching of the Post-Civil War black preacher, “The passion for freedom was replaced with innocuous homilies against drinking, dancing, and smoking; and injustices in the present were minimized in favor of a Kingdom beyond this world.”⁵⁴³

In both of these examples, it is not clear whether Cone inveighs against the *emphasis* on inward and personal expressions of religion both moral and experiential, or whether he thinks that they are problematic entirely. In one sense, he could be castigating the black church for ignoring the social dimension of the Holy Spirit and for focusing on personal morality to the detriment of liberation of the oppressed. Included in Cone’s skepticism is the belief in heaven.

Cone considers the idea of heaven as irrelevant for Black Theology, stating that “the Christian cannot waste time contemplating the next world (if there is a next).”⁵⁴⁴ For Cone, freedom demands that a person throw themselves into the world’s evil in order to realize liberation wherever it is needed. In his view, the Christian looks to the future in order to be dissatisfied with the present, not because she expects a reward of heaven or punishment of hell.

⁵⁴³ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 104.

⁵⁴⁴ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 125.

In the three examples briefly explicated above, Cone challenges traditional belief in the Holy Spirit's role in religious experience and sanctification, and undermines the black Christian's belief in heaven and hell. It is understandable that Cone's passionate desire to help black Christians acknowledge the urgency demanded by pervasive suffering leads him to diminish the importance of piety. However, following the publication of this text, the suspicion of personal morality and metaphysical dimensions of Christianity became a perennial part of the Liberationist paradigm.

The Black Liberationist Paradigm in *A Theology of Black Liberation*

In 1969 when *Black Theology and Black Power* was published, Cone was already at work on *A Black Theology of Liberation*, his second book. In *Black Theology and Black Power*, the experience of oppression occupied the role of central authority for how theological concepts were to be formulated, modified, and discussed. The idea for making liberation the central theme in *A Black Theology of Liberation* occurred to Cone in Adrian, Michigan while he was reading scripture "in the light of African-American history and culture."⁵⁴⁵ For Cone, this text represented a new way of doing theology using both the Bible and the black struggle as its main sources.⁵⁴⁶ The book, organized according to the format of texts in systematic theology, schematizes the insights and concepts that Cone introduced in *Black Theology and Black Power*. Cone's conclusions also further elucidate the incommensurability between Pietist beliefs and methods and Liberationist beliefs and methods.

⁵⁴⁵ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation: Fortieth Anniversary Edition*, xxiv.

⁵⁴⁶ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, xxiv.

Cone begins this text by proffering a novel definition for Christian theology. He claims that “it is a rational study of the being of God in the world in light of the existential situation of an oppressed community, relating the forces of liberation to the essence of the gospel, which is Jesus Christ.”⁵⁴⁷ He argues that an oppressed community’s pursuit of liberation is not merely consistent with the gospel, but that it is the gospel of Jesus Christ.⁵⁴⁸ Thus, “the goal of black theology is to interpret God’s activity as related to the oppressed black community.”⁵⁴⁹ Cone rehearses his ethical stance from *Black Theology and Black Power* in which all acts that participate in the elimination of racism are Christian, and all acts which hinder the struggle for black self-determination are Satanic.⁵⁵⁰ Moreover, he again denies that there are right or wrong answers to identifying the ethical course of action in a given situation, basically leaving those choices up to the black community that is seeking to “define its existence in the light of God’s liberating work in the world.”⁵⁵¹

Cone explains the roles that the norm and sources occupy in systematic theology. Sources consist of the data used in the theological task, while the norm states how that data is to be used and applied, providing “the criterion to which the sources...must be subjected.”⁵⁵² He identifies six sources for black theology: 1) Black experience, comprised of suffering and oppression, but also self-determination and resistance. 2) Black history, which refers to those achievements, events, and stories that depict the character of black life in America. 3) Black culture, referring to the way that black people live and move in the world. It also includes those

⁵⁴⁷ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 1.

⁵⁴⁸ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 1.

⁵⁴⁹ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 5.

⁵⁵⁰ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 10.

⁵⁵¹ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 11.

⁵⁵² Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 22.

writers, artists, and musicians that give creative expression to the black experience. 4)

Revelation, which refers to God's activity in the world, and is a black event comprised of what blacks are doing about their liberation. 5) Scripture, with Cone again stating, "Black theology is biblical theology. That is, it is theology which takes seriously the importance of scripture in theological discourse."⁵⁵³ 6) Tradition encompasses the theological reflection of the church from its inception until the present. Cone specifies what aspects of tradition are valuable, stating "Black theology is concerned only with the tradition of Christianity that is usable in the black liberation struggle."⁵⁵⁴

After introducing scripture as one of six vital sources for black theology, Cone distinguishes between his view of scripture and the conservative view. He views the biblical witness as a description of God as liberator of the oppressed, and of Jesus as God becoming human, thus making freedom a reality for all people.⁵⁵⁵ He cautions that the Bible should not be viewed as infallible, arguing that "efforts to prove verbal inspiration of the scriptures result from the failure to see the real meaning of the biblical message: human liberation!"⁵⁵⁶ He correlates biblical conservatism and political conservatism, observing that biblical literalism causes people to impose their views upon society and "justify all kinds of political oppression in the name of God and country."⁵⁵⁷ To support this view, he also cites Paul's admonishment of slaves to obey their masters, and the curse of Ham which was invoked by slavemasters to defend mistreatment of black people.⁵⁵⁸ He identifies white Christian remonstrations for

⁵⁵³ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 32.

⁵⁵⁴ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 37.

⁵⁵⁵ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 33.

⁵⁵⁶ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 33.

⁵⁵⁷ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 33.

⁵⁵⁸ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 33.

nonviolence as a continuance of this hegemonic use of the Bible. As he did in *Black Theology and Black Power*, Cone denies that scripture provides a literal guide for morality and ethics. He argues that treating it in such a way therefore “destroys Christian freedom, the freedom to make decisions patterned on, but not dictated by, the example of Jesus.”⁵⁵⁹

After defining his sources, Cone introduces the norm of his theology. He defines the norm as “the hermeneutical principle which is decisive in specifying how sources are to be used by rating their importance and by distinguishing relevant data from irrelevant.”⁵⁶⁰ A norm and a hypergood are similar in that each provides the lens through which all other competing principles, tasks, and data are judged and ranked. While acknowledging that the Bible is important for theology, Cone demonstrates that identifying which of the sixty-six books will be selected for inquiry, analysis, and application, requires a method. He argues that the theological norm provides the method that guides interpretation of the Bible.

Cone views each theologian as bringing with him or her the perspective of a community. Theology, which seeks to be relevant to the human condition, must be relatable to the community inquiring about God. Because black theology arises out of the concerns of the black community, then it must be relevant to “oppressed people generally and blacks particularly.”⁵⁶¹ He states, “Blacks have heard enough about God. What they want to know is what God has to say about the black condition.”⁵⁶² The norm that considers the importance of the black community must also include revelation, defined as God’s disclosure in Jesus Christ, in its

⁵⁵⁹ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 34.

⁵⁶⁰ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 37.

⁵⁶¹ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 38.

⁵⁶² Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 38.

purview. Based upon these two realities, the liberation of blacks and the revelation of Jesus Christ, Cone states, “*The norm of all God-talk which seeks to be black-talk is the manifestation of Jesus as the black Christ who provides the necessary soul for black liberation.*”⁵⁶³ The rest of his text applies the theological norm to the classic subjects of systematic theology, including revelation, God, the human being, Jesus Christ, and church, world, and eschatology.⁵⁶⁴

Theological Anthropology

Perhaps the fifth chapter of this text best encapsulates the ways that early expressions of the Liberationist paradigm diverge from the Pietist paradigm. Entitled “The Human Being in Black Theology,” Cone seeks in this chapter to explain black theology’s view of theological anthropology. He begins this chapter by again denouncing the doctrine of biblical infallibility and inerrancy: “If the basic truth of the gospel is that the Bible is the infallible word of God, then it is inevitable that more emphasis will be placed upon ‘true’ propositions about God than upon God as active in the liberation of the oppressed of the land. Blacks, struggling for survival, are not interested in abstract truth, ‘infallible’ or otherwise. Truth is concrete.”⁵⁶⁵ His search for the concrete leads him to the concrete human being as the point of departure for analysis of human existence.⁵⁶⁶ Turning to Jean Paul Sartre’s existentialist philosophy, Cone agrees with Sartre’s claim that there is no universal humanity independent of people who are concretely

⁵⁶³ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 40.

⁵⁶⁴ In *Black Power and Black Theology* Cone included a well-developed section on the Holy Spirit. In this subsequent work, the Holy Spirit is absent.

⁵⁶⁵ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 87.

⁵⁶⁶ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 87.

involved in the world.⁵⁶⁷ Instead, “all persons define their own essence by participating in the world, making decisions that involve themselves and others.”⁵⁶⁸

Cone is not interested in establishing universal conceptions of what it means to be human, thinking that this allows oppressors to ignore black oppressed communities while they construe humanity as a broad and faceless category. For Cone, “Jesus is not a human being for all persons; he is a human being for oppressed persons, whose identity is made known in and through their liberation.”⁵⁶⁹ Based upon Cone’s belief that liberation represents the meaning of the gospel, being human is to be understood as “being in freedom.” To be human is to be free, and to be free is to be human. Those who are free define themselves as free by siding with the oppressed and struggling against all opposition to freedom.⁵⁷⁰ Having defined humans as free, the question of the role of sin within black theology’s approach to theological anthropology remains. The importance of the question cannot be understated, especially because regeneration from sin and new life in Jesus Christ constitute the hypergood of black Christianity traditionally. Does Cone discard or embrace the notion of sin that funds this concept?

Sin

For Cone, sin is a theological concept that describes separation from the source of being. “Sin is thus a definition of being in relation to nonbeing; it is a condition of estrangement from the source of meaning and purpose in the universe.”⁵⁷¹ The conception is

⁵⁶⁷ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 89.

⁵⁶⁸ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 89.

⁵⁶⁹ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 91.

⁵⁷⁰ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 93.

⁵⁷¹ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 110.

not entirely clear, and is cast in the language of existential philosophy. Following the provision of this definition, Cone provides two ways of understanding sin. The first refers to sin as a community concept. He stipulates that when approached biblically, sin does not refer to rules for behavior for all people at all times, but defines the human condition when it is separated from community. Sin, for Cone, does not refer to disobedience to laws that originate outside of the community. He states, "Quite the contrary, failure to destroy the powers that seek to enforce alien laws on the community is to be in a state of sin."⁵⁷² When a person lives according to his or her private interests and not according to the goals of the community, that person is living in sin.⁵⁷³

Cone further underscores his particularist understanding of sin by rejecting the universal claims of sin propounded in Genesis 3:

It is human existence in community that defines the meaning of sin. To be in sin means to deny the community. Nor does this definition of sin ignore the biblical claim that the fall describes the condition of *all* human beings. Indeed that is the very point: Genesis 3 is *Israel's* analysis of universal sin and thus is comprehensible only from its perspective. It is not likely that other communities, defining their being from other sources, will take too seriously Israel's condemnation of them as sinners. Genesis 3 is meaningful to those who participate in Israel's community and to no one else.⁵⁷⁴

Cone postulates that Genesis 3 was probably written more than three hundred years after the exodus during the reign of Solomon, in which the writer, viewing Israel as having abandoned the covenant given by God, creates this myth to symbolize their apostasy. Through the exodus, Yahweh appears as the liberator of Israel from its oppressors. At Sinai, Yahweh promises to maintain the freedom of Israel as long as she defines her existence in reference to divine

⁵⁷² Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 110.

⁵⁷³ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 110.

⁵⁷⁴ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 110.

liberation. Cone concludes, "Sin, then, is the failure of Israel to recognize the liberating work of God. It is believing that liberation is not the definition of being in the world."⁵⁷⁵ Cone concludes that sin consists of denying God's liberating activity through Jesus Christ, accepting slavery and denying the freedom that comes from God.⁵⁷⁶

The second way of understanding sin resists the equal application of the concept of sin to both black and white people. Finding it a concept that is only meaningful within an oppressed community reflecting on its liberation, he claims that constructing a universal analysis would not have meaning for white people. He states, regarding black people, "They know what nonbeing (sin) is because they have experienced being (black power)."⁵⁷⁷ In white theology, according to Cone, sin refers to abstract theory and not concrete reality. He states that white fundamentalists have identified sin with moral impurity, and that Billy Graham warns people to turn from their wicked ways, with these wicked ways merely referring to the failure to live by the rules of white society.⁵⁷⁸ What then is the nature of sin for whites? In Cone's analysis, it is "the definition of their existence in terms of whiteness...It is believing in the American way of life as defined by its history."⁵⁷⁹ Sin, for Cone, *is* whiteness, representing whites' desire to play God "in the realm of human affairs."⁵⁸⁰ Whenever black people confront white racism, Cone sees it as Jesus Christ providing whites with the opportunity for reconciliation. Because the oppressors are blind to their own sin, and because sin is related to

⁵⁷⁵ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 110.

⁵⁷⁶ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 112.

⁵⁷⁷ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 113.

⁵⁷⁸ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 113.

⁵⁷⁹ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 114.

⁵⁸⁰ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 115.

specific communities, they cannot comment on the sin of black people.⁵⁸¹ Cone closes his chapter with this assessment of sin's relationship to black people:

If we are to understand sin and what it means to blacks, it is necessary to be black and also a participant in the black liberation struggle. Because sin represents the condition of estrangement from the source of one's being, for blacks this means a desire to be white. It is the refusal to be what we are. Sin, then, for blacks is loss of identity. It is saying yes to white absurdity—accepting the world as it is by letting whites define black existence. To be in sin is to be contented with white solutions for the “black problem” and not rebel against every infringement of white being on black being.⁵⁸²

As much as any other text penned by Cone, this chapter represents his radical departure from the Christian orthodoxy that has constituted the majority of the black church across the span of its temporal existence and his explication of sin is perceptually incommensurable with that evidenced in the pre-Civil War church that Cone uplifts. When Cone views the world, he sees a material struggle appearing before his eyes between blacks, who are oppressed, and whites, their oppressors. However, because what he “sees” and experiences constitutes the interpretive mechanism that he employs to understand all of reality, he can never look beyond or outside of what he can physically see to ascertain whether deeper realities exist. Because the existence of certain concepts is foreclosed from the start, he is constrained rigidly by his method. His method is exhausted by the limitation of his sight, because by rendering liberation from oppression absolute, Cone cannot follow the biblical text where it leads. He must again and again force each concept into the mold of oppression and liberation. Besides causing much of his writing to lapse into redundancy (because each concept finds its fullest meaning in liberation of the oppressed), the absolutization of oppression leaves no Christian doctrines and

⁵⁸¹ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 115.

⁵⁸² Cone, 115.

beliefs, not even its central ones, exempt from radical reinterpretation. This means that even the bedrock of the Christian faith, the salvific nature Jesus' death, becomes subject to elision if it is interpreted as contributing to oppressive conditions, as this chapter will show.

Alternatively, the black church perceptually opens its vision through the Bible to include all of humanity and acknowledges that although particular communities speak from within the Bible, the words left behind have universal significance, because they are God's words. As Cecil Cone acknowledges, historical criticism and academic biblical scholarship ask questions of the Bible that the black community is not asking. These tools, while valuable to some extent, attempt to limit the vision of the text such that its supernatural dimensions are attenuated in favor of historical attempts to ascertain its trustworthiness. The expansive vision of the black church retains the Bible's universal salvific dimensions that include the personal *and* the social in its understanding of sin, and exhibits faith in the Bible's infinite ability to never exhaust its pertinence to all human sin and failure. This connection established between the text and the person occurs within the realm of religious experience, in which the person is seized by the truth of the text and by the spiritual realities that it discloses, and then responds to the revelatory message that they both speak simultaneously and without contradiction.⁵⁸³

Sin and Incommensurability

George White, for example, born a slave in 1764, provides an understanding of sin that emerges from the Bible and is attested to within his religious experience. After obtaining his

⁵⁸³ The omission of religious experience from his chapter on Revelation, the primary site of revelation for Black Christians, reveals the lack of black sources in earlier expressions of James Cone's theology.

freedom, White recalls that “I began to think, that, as God in his providence had delivered me from temporal bondage, it was my duty to look to him for deliverance from the slavery of sin; that I might be prepared to make him suitable returns for so great a favour.”⁵⁸⁴ In 1791, after hearing a sermon by a man named Rev. Stebbens, White states that “I experienced such a manifestation of the Divine power, as I had before been a stranger to: and under a sense of my amazing sinfulness in the sight of God, I fell prostrate on the floor, as one wounded or slain in battle; and indeed I was slain by the law, that I might be made alive by Jesus Christ.”⁵⁸⁵

White, in a sermon for the funeral of a woman named Mary Henery, expressed this conception of sin:

Whoever would go to heaven then, must repent, and believe in Jesus Christ, who is the only door of salvation, the way, the truth, and the life; and as our Lord said to Nicodemus, must be born again, or they cannot see the kingdom of God: for except renewed by the grace of God, in the very nature of things, no man can be happy; for the very nature of sin prevents the enjoyment of God, the only source and fountain of all happiness; so that, whoever dies without being renewed, must meet the just reward of their ungodliness, in the awful day of judgment, when the secrets of all hearts shall be revealed.⁵⁸⁶

Sin, according to White, is universal, for when White states, “whoever,” he refers to any person that desires to be saved irrespective of race, gender, or social standing. He also states that the “nature of sin” prevents the enjoyment of God, showing that human fallenness affects everyone and that the disobedience in Genesis 3 applies to all people everywhere, thus creating “dispositions of corrupt nature.”⁵⁸⁷ For White, his apprehension of the gravity of sin proceeded from the effect of the preached Word of God on those who he exhorted. He recalls, “At one

⁵⁸⁴ White, *A Brief Account of the Life, Experience, Travels, and Gospel Labours of George White, an African: Written by Himself, and Revised by a Friend*, 6–7.

⁵⁸⁵ White, 8.

⁵⁸⁶ White, 50.

⁵⁸⁷ White, 50.

meeting where I was exhorting a numerous body of people, many of the aged of both sexes, fell prostrate under the divine power; acknowledged themselves sinners, and there remained until the Lord converted their souls, and gave them the witness of his Spirit.”⁵⁸⁸ The inclusion of both genders, and even children, as White later mentions, caused his heart to glow with “inexpressible joy” and engendered within him “renewed resolution” to continue exhorting people to repentance.

White’s narrative provides an opportunity to juxtapose the “radical” pre-Civil War religion favored by black liberation theology against the theological commitments that black liberation theology espouses. The disjunction between the two, particularly regarding ideas of personal sin and individual regeneration, is vast. To simply call this belief “white” does not fully account for the hermeneutical process that slaves employed. Although taught by their masters that slavery was acceptable by God, they intuited spiritually and discerned biblically that slavery was sinful. However, they preserved the personal moral aspects of sinfulness due to their religious experiences during which they were convicted supernaturally of their sin. Such an observation further underscores the conceptual distance between the Liberationist paradigm and the Pietist paradigm.

The Origins of Womanism

Although basing its entire project in liberation from oppression, black theology itself was soon implicated for contributing to another type of oppression than the one it claimed to

⁵⁸⁸ White, 19.

abhor. In 1979, Jacquelyn Grant published an essay called “Black Theology and the Black Woman.” In her essay, Grant noticed the the omission of black women’s contributions within black theology, and she concludes that either Black women have no place in it, or that black men think that they are capable of speaking for black women. She questions how a system of theology that confronts radically the racist nature of American structures unquestionably accepts its partriarchal structures.⁵⁸⁹ For Grant, liberation cannot be a partial enterprise. She indicts Cone and black theology, claiming, “The failure of the Black Church and Black Theology to proclaim explicitly the liberation of Black women indicates that they cannot claim to be agents of divine liberation. If the theology, like the church, has no word for Black women, its conception of liberation is inauthentic.”⁵⁹⁰ The inordinate focus on racism led Grant to accuse black theology of dereliction, especially concerning its lack of support and advocacy regarding women in ministry within black churches.

Kelly Brown Douglas also discovered the insufficiency of black theology for adequately addressing the oppressiveness of both sexism and racism in stifling black women’s flourishing. Brown Douglas regards James Cone’s *A Black Theology of Liberation* as her introduction to systematic theological reflection. She recalls, “Reading Cone’s book plucked a chord within me that changed my life. Empowered by the God of the oppressed I was able to fight against White racism with a firm and determined resolve.”⁵⁹¹ As she herself encountered sexism, she realized the limitations of black theology for addressing black women’s oppression,

⁵⁸⁹ Jacquelyn Grant, “Black Theology and the Black Woman,” in *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-1979* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), 421.

⁵⁹⁰ Grant, 427.

⁵⁹¹ Kelly Brown Douglas, “Womanist Theology: What Is Its Relationship to Black Theology?,” in *Black Theology, A Documentary History, Volume Two: 1980-1992*, ed. Gayraud S. Wilmore and James H. Cone (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 291.

understanding that in confronting racism, it neglected other forms of social oppression, including racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism.⁵⁹² Her recognition of this limitation inspired her to find a theology that better reflected the realities of black women's experiences. As she and other black women sought a theology that could adequately represent their history and experience the possibility of a womanist theology emerged. In her assessment, "Essentially, the role of Black theology in the emergence of womanist theology is twofold. First, by linking God to the black experience Black theology gave Black women access to systematic theological reflection. Secondly, by ignoring Black women's experience black theology forced black women to develop their own theological perspective."⁵⁹³

At the same time that black women in the academy felt disregarded within black liberation theology, they also felt the acute sting of racism and marginalization within the predominantly white feminist movement. According to Stacey Floyd-Thomas, "Feminism, in its politics and scholarship, was firmly enmeshed in an all-white, bourgeois context that had little to no relevance to Black women."⁵⁹⁴ Delores Williams identifies five other reasons that black women struggled to embrace feminism. 1) There was tension between how they and white women defined women's experience, with white feminists not being concerned about racial issues. 2) Black women did not identify patriarchy as the primary source of all oppression that women experience, desiring a more comprehensive and multilayered analysis that also implicated upper class women and economic systems. 3) Black women had different cultural

⁵⁹² Douglas, 291.

⁵⁹³ Douglas, 292.

⁵⁹⁴ Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, "Womanist Theology," in *Liberation Theology in the United States: An Introduction*, ed. Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas and Anthony B. Pinn (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2010), 41.

foundations that needed to be affirmed, although the statements of resistance may have been shared. 4) The association of many black women with impoverished communities mandated that they have the appropriate theological vocabulary and concepts to reflect this context, which feminism did not provide. 5) African American women did not limit the object of their theorizing to women alone, but included the entire black community in their pursuit of survival and wholeness.⁵⁹⁵

With the publication of the definition of “womanist” in *In Search of Our Mothers’ Gardens* by Alice Walker in 1983, black women encountered a delineation of the experiences, concepts, and values that spoke profoundly to the theological and ethical realities of their existence.⁵⁹⁶ Cheryl Townsend Gilkes remembers being “enveloped and enthralled” by Walker’s definition, and she attributes it with providing “for me and for many of my sisters whose professional lives were lived both in the pulpit and the academy, a new way of seeing ourselves and the historical and cultural experience that had shaped us.”⁵⁹⁷ The term “womanist” began to percolate throughout the theological community of black women after Katie Cannon used it in 1985 to describe its promise for articulating a theological principle that accurately described a set of beliefs and concepts that were “native” to black women.⁵⁹⁸ Groundbreaking works in womanism soon followed that would constitute a “first-wave” of womanist scholarship, including Katie Cannon’s own *Womanist Ethics*, Jaquelyn Grant’s *White Women’s Christ and Black Women’s Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response*, Renita

⁵⁹⁵ Delores Williams, “Black Theology and Womanism,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Black Theology*, ed. Dwight N. Hopkins and Edward P. Antonio (Cambridge University Press, 2012), 61–62.

⁵⁹⁶ Write out definition of womanism

⁵⁹⁷ Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, “Womanist Ways of Seeing,” in *Black Theology, A Documentary History, Volume Two: 1980-1992*, ed. Gayraud S. Wilmore and James H. Cone (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), 321.

⁵⁹⁸ Floyd-Thomas, “Womanist Theology,” 47.

Weems *Just a Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women's Relationships in the Bible*, Delores S. Williams' *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, and Emilie M. Townes' *Womanist Justice, Womanist Hope*.⁵⁹⁹ Mark D. Chapman observes that "While white feminist and male theologians focused on sexism and racism respectively", womanist theologians and ethicists highlighted "the interrelatedness of race, sex, and class as multidimensional factors in the reality of black women's oppression."⁶⁰⁰

Williams articulates a fourfold methodological concept that explicates how womanism fulfills its mandate to actualize survival and wholeness for the black church, community, and larger society. First, it embodies a multialogical intent, meaning that it engages in conversation with diverse communities who are also concerned about survival and liberation of the oppressed. Secondly it proceeds with a liturgical intent, meaning that it reflects "the thought, worship, and action of the black church," but simultaneously challenges the church to evaluate what sources comprise its liturgy. Williams explains, "The question must be asked: 'How does this source portray blackness/darkness, women, and economic justice for nonruling-class people?' A negative portrayal will demand omission of the source or its radical reformation by the black church. The Bible, a major source in black church liturgy, must also be subjected to the scrutiny of justice principles."⁶⁰¹ Thirdly, its didactic intent insures that its

⁵⁹⁹ Renita J. Weems, *Just a Sister Away: A Womanist Vision of Women's Relationships in the Bible* (San Diego, CA: Publishing/Editing Network, 1988); Jacquelyn Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus: Feminist Christology and Womanist Response*, 1 edition (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1989); Delores S. Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, Anniversary (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013); Katie Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics* :, Reprint edition (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Pub, 2006); Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Justice, Womanist Hope* (Atlanta, GA: Oxford University Press, 1993).

⁶⁰⁰ Mark L. Chapman, *Christianity on Trial: African-American Religious Thought Before and After Black Power*, Reprint edition (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Pub, 2006), 149.

⁶⁰¹ Williams, "Black Theology and Womanism," 64.

teaching function remains central, teaching the black church and community what the principles of justice require and demand. Lastly, these intents “yield a theological language” whose form and structure is not limited by reason, but is also poetic, rife with female imagery, metaphor, and story.

The Black Liberationist Paradigm and Womanist Biblical Hermeneutics

One would expect that womanism, emerging as it did from the nexus of white feminism and black liberation theology, would exhibit the same commitment as black liberation theology to the Liberationist paradigm. One can recall that the Liberationist paradigm commits itself to liberation from oppression, or, in the case of womanism, the goods of survival and flourishing, as the good(s) that rank and judge all other values, goods, beliefs, and pursuits. One of the major goods traditionally associated with the black church regards the Bible as infallible divine authority, because regeneration from sin and conversion only truly occurs if the inner conviction brought about by the preached or read Word of God refers to spiritual realities and entities, including the Holy Spirit, demons, Satan, sin, heaven, and hell, that really exist. Cone was careful to state his objection to biblical infallibility and he also diminished and elided the personal nature of sin, preferring to interpret it as acquiescence to structures of oppression and denial of freedom. He assumed that adherence to personal moral codes was tangential to the gospel, a view that directly opposes the black church’s pursuit of sanctification defined as avoidance of personal sin and growth in Christlikeness. Cone stated that moral choices cannot be made reliably based upon Christ’s first century actions, and that the Christian must choose, because she is free, what to do in a given situation. Womanist pioneer Renita J. Weems

demonstrates a similar departure from black church values and beliefs derived from the Bible due to their perceived role in fostering and enabling oppression.

Weems views her work as a religious scholar as “accountable ultimately to grass-roots African-American women, women struggling for voice and representation in institutional circles, ecclesial circles especially.”⁶⁰² Having been rejected for ministry by the church because of their gender, Weems states that she and her colleagues earned graduate degrees as “the next best thing.”⁶⁰³ Asking herself why she has remained associated with the black church, although considering herself in many ways “post-Christian”, she replies that she chooses to stay in order to remain in conversation with the community that she cares deeply about, and because her vision of a just world is highly influenced by her Judeo-Christian upbringing.⁶⁰⁴

Weems echoes Cone in establishing the point of departure for her reflections from experience and not the Bible. Cone states,

I still regard the Bible as an important source of my theological reflections, but not the starting point. The black experience and the Bible together in dialectical tension serve as my point of departure today and yesterday. The order is significant. I am *black* first—and everything else comes after that. This means that I read the Bible through the lens of a black tradition of struggle and not as the objective Word of God.⁶⁰⁵

Blackness comes first, because the experience of oppression and the associated struggle for liberation comprise the hermeneutical lens through which he evaluates all theological knowledge or God-talk. Weems makes a similar claim, stating,

Like feminist biblical hermeneutics, womanist biblical hermeneutical reflections do not begin with the Bible. Rather, womanist hermeneutics of liberation begin with African

⁶⁰² Renita J. Weems, “Re-Reading for Liberation: African-American Women and the Bible,” in *Feminist Interpretation of the Bible and the Hermeneutics of Liberation*, ed. Sophia Bietenhard and Silvia Schroer (New York, NY: Sheffield Academic Press, 2003), 22.

⁶⁰³ Weems, 22.

⁶⁰⁴ Weems, 22.

⁶⁰⁵ James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), xi.

American women's will to survive and thrive as human beings and as the female half of a race of people who live a threatened existence within North American borders. The interest of real flesh-and-blood black women are privileged over theory and over the interests of ancient texts, even 'sacred' ancient texts.⁶⁰⁶

Weems argues that the Bible's role in promoting slavery and racism cannot be ignored. She resists the notion that the Bible is some "universal, transcendent, timeless force" to which readers must "meekly submit."⁶⁰⁷ She wants to unmask the hidden political and social agendas that authors of the Bible defended and supported *via* their writings, calling the Bible "a politically and socially drenched text" that legitimizes and delegitimizes viewpoints based upon authors' interests. Weems demystifies the supernatural nature of biblical texts by explaining that people with vested interests produced and transmitted the Bible, and "real flesh-and-blood readers are behind all modes of interpretations and readings" on behalf of agendas and commitments that cause them to favor certain texts over others.⁶⁰⁸ For Weems, this means that texts do not wield power, but people do, and the meaning of a text does not reside in the text itself, but in the convergence of the conditioned text, with the equally conditioned reader.⁶⁰⁹

Weems argues that African Americans have always interpreted the Bible differently than the dominant culture by often ignoring texts that supported slavery or by drawing variant conclusions. Transmitted orally amongst the slave community in songs, sermons, and teaching, she postulates the idea that infallibility did not govern the creative methods that slaves used to understand and appropriate its contents. She states,

⁶⁰⁶ Weems, *Just a Sister Away*, 24.

⁶⁰⁷ Weems, 24.

⁶⁰⁸ Weems, 26.

⁶⁰⁹ Weems, 26.

“for black women that meant that we could elect either to reject totally those portions of the Bible we considered misogynistic, to elevate some portions over others depending upon one’s interests, to offer alternative readings in order to counter the dominant discourse, or to supplant biblical teachings altogether with extra-biblical (i.e. cultural) traditions that (in their thinking) offered a fuller, more just vision of the way things ought to be.⁶¹⁰

Weems ultimately views womanist biblical scholars as responsible for enabling readers to develop new more liberating ways of reading texts, including the choice to bypass those texts that encourage harmful perspectives and oppressive actions towards women. Delores Williams’ exercised an interpretive method resembling Weems’ scheme ten years before Weems’ essay was published. Williams’ earlier implementation of a similar method illustrates that Weems’ methodology cannot be thought of as idiosyncratic or extreme, but should be considered a recognized and established interpretive principle within the womanist community.

Womanist Liberationism and Departure from Black Pietist Orthodoxy

In her seminal text *Sisters in the Wilderness*, based upon exegesis of Hagar’s story in Genesis, Williams develops the concept of surrogacy and applies it to the recurring roles that black women were forced to accept during slavery. During slavery, they were assigned roles as mummies, and had to serve as surrogate mothers, nursing their master’s children, and were often required to manage their master’s household. Forced surrogacy caused them to have to stand in sexually for the wife, and they had to become instruments of pleasure for masters who held their wives to Victorian ideals and thus refrained from certain sexual acts with them. Slave women were even forced to substitute their energy for men’s energy by being driven to engage

⁶¹⁰ Weems, 25.

in hard agricultural labor and complete arduous tasks that American society traditionally reserved for men. Williams sums up coerced surrogacy in this way:

All forms of coerced surrogacy evidence the exploitation of the slave woman by the slavocracy. Like the slave system among the ancient Hebrews (Abraham and Sarah), slavery in the United States demanded that slave women surrender their bodies to their owners against their wills. Thus African-American slave women (like the Egyptian Hagar) were bound to a system that had no respect for their bodies, their dignities or their motherhood, except as it was put to the service of securing the well-being of ruling-class families.⁶¹¹

Williams believes that the history of surrogacy among African American women has serious and unavoidable implications for the traditional doctrines of atonement traditionally taught within black Christianity. In the standard view, Jesus dies on the cross in place of the sinner, taking sin upon himself, and thereby freeing the sinner from sin. For Williams, Jesus represents here “the ultimate surrogate figure,” thus making it appropriate to ask whether there is any salvific value in this model of the atonement, or whether accepting it contributes to further acceptance of surrogate exploitation that black women have already endured. The main question Williams asks is “Can there be salvific power for black women in Christian images of oppression meant to teach something about redemption?”⁶¹²

Williams answers the question negatively, and proposes a reinterpretation based upon the Christian community’s historical willingness to translate biblical ideas into understandable concepts. She describes Origen’s first century creation of the ransom theory, in which “Jesus’ death on the cross represented a ransom paid to the devil for the sins of humankind.”⁶¹³ Due to society’s belief in demons and spirits, Origen’s view was accepted and propagated for almost

⁶¹¹ Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness*, 71.

⁶¹² Williams, 162.

⁶¹³ Williams, 162.

one thousand years. In the same way, societies displayed traits that corresponded to Anselm's satisfaction view in the eleventh century, Abelard's moral view in the eleventh century, and Calvin's substitutionary view of the sixteenth century.

Using the gospels as her guide, Williams constructs a model of redemption that can speak "meaningfully" to black women derived from Jesus' ministry of healing. The gospels show, according to Williams, that Jesus came to bring life and redemption through his perfect ministerial vision that aimed at righting relations of body, mind, and spirit. Jesus raised the dead, thus restoring those separated from community, cast out demons, which destroyed those forces inimical to human flourishing, and transformed religious tradition toward the objective of abundant life.⁶¹⁴ Jesus invited others to participate in his ministerial vision, and the response by the "human principalities and powers" was to kill this vision. Therefore, as Williams explains, "The resurrection does not depend upon the cross for life, for the cross only represents historical evil trying to defeat good. The resurrection of Jesus and the flourishing of God's spirit in the world as the result of resurrection represent the life of the *ministerial* vision gaining victory over the evil attempt to kill it."⁶¹⁵ In reframing conceptually her theory of redemption, Williams avoids ascribing value to a role of surrogacy that could offend or further oppress black women. For her, "it seems more intelligent and scriptural" to think that redemption refers to God giving humans new vision for abundant relational life.⁶¹⁶ Williams again explains that Jesus' ministry, including his words, healing touch, exorcism of demons, prayer, and compassion, exemplified a vision of restored relationships so that humans become

⁶¹⁴ Williams, 165.

⁶¹⁵ Williams, 165.

⁶¹⁶ Williams, 165.

redeemed through Jesus' ministerial vision of life, and not by his death. She concludes, "There is nothing divine in the blood of the cross. God does not intend black women's surrogacy experience. Neither can Christian faith affirm such an idea...As Christians, black women cannot forget the cross, but neither can they glorify it. To do so is to glorify suffering and to render their exploitation sacred."⁶¹⁷

Williams epitomizes womanist adherence to the Liberationist paradigm by subjugating the biblically grounded theological principle of sacrificial atonement to its role in whether it diminishes or resuscitates black women's surrogacy. Such a position stands in incommensurable relationship to Julia A. J. Foote's pronouncement that "The blood of Jesus will not only purge your conscience from the guilt of sin, and from dead works, but it will destroy the very root of sin that is in the heart, by faith, so that you may serve the living God in the beauty of holiness."⁶¹⁸

Foote exhibited behaviors extolled by womanists, including resistance to strictures concerning women preachers, condemnation of racism, and an insuperable self-determination. Yet, her ministry and life oppose fundamentally the liberal methodology by which womanists recreate the doctrines of the church in the interest of liberating women and the oppressed. Foote, oppressed by society and the church *via* three axes, her race, gender, and poverty, embraced more tenaciously the truth of the scriptures, and their truth was attested to by her vivid religious experiences that she interpreted through the Bible.

⁶¹⁷ Williams, 167.

⁶¹⁸ Foote, "A Brand Plucked from the Fire. An Autobiographical Sketch," 4.

Foote was well aware of the cruelty of slavery, having seen her mother brutally beaten and tortured for refusing to submit to the sexual advances of her master. One day, Foote's mother and another black woman were approaching the table for Communion when two poor whites began to go toward the table. An older black church member, whom Foote called "a mother in Israel," caught hold of her dress and warned her against also continuing toward the table. Foote provides sagacious theological reflection on the issue:

Although professing to love the same God, members of the same church, and expecting to find the same heaven at last, they could not partake of the Lord's Supper until the lowest of the whites had been served. Were they led by the Holy Spirit? Who shall say? The Spirit of Truth can never be mistaken, nor can he inspire anything unholy. How many at the present day profess great spirituality, and even holiness, and yet are deluded by a spirit of error, which leads them to say to the poor and the colored ones among them, "Stand back a little—I am holier than thou."⁶¹⁹

Foote's evaluation of the events that transpired demonstrates hermeneutical complexity and sophistication as she preserves the importance of personal holiness, while also including the role of discerning the truth within her pneumatological conception. She considers racism to be produced by a "spirit of error," thus maintaining belief in supernatural realities that undergird natural and material phenomena. Unlike black liberation theologians and womanists, Foote condemns racism, but still maintains a belief in the Bible as the literal word of God, and of sin as an offense of God's will and commandments. She asks, "Why was Adam afraid of the voice of God in the garden? It was not a strange voice; it was a voice he had always loved. Why did he flee away, and hide himself among the trees? It was because he had disobeyed God. Sin makes us afraid of God, who is holy; nothing but sin makes us fear One so good and so kind."⁶²⁰ Like Andrew Jackson, Foote's belief in God's holiness and righteousness

⁶¹⁹ Foote, 12.

⁶²⁰ Foote, 17.

did not predispose her to refrain from giving political opinions or urging involvement in the political process. After her teacher killed a woman with whom he was having an affair, the teacher was executed. Foote, based upon literal interpretation of the Bible, including “Resist not evil; but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also,” admonished Christian men to “vote as you pray, that the legalized traffic in ardent spirits may be abolished, and God grant that capital punishment may be banished from our land.”⁶²¹

Foote’s belief in the holiness of God originates in the attestation of her religious experiences to what is contained in the Bible. Her earnest pursuit of conversion began after she was confronted by the Holy Spirit at a dance. Attempting to dance, she felt what seemed to be a heavy hand pulling her from the dance floor. She recalls, “I was so frightened that I fell.”⁶²² When people asked her what was wrong, she told them that it was wrong for her to dance, thus leading them to mock her by laughing loudly. They called her a “little Methodist fool” and pressed her to try again. Foote states that after trying again to dance, “I had taken only a few steps, when I was seized with a smothering sensation, and felt the same heavy grasp upon my arm, and in my ears a voice kept saying, ‘Repent! repent!’” This religious experience impelled Foote to pray daily for mercy. One day after hearing the minister preach from Revelation 14:3, about the new song being sung before the throne, Foote states that “I beheld my lost condition as I never had done before,” because something kept telling her that she could not sing that new song.⁶²³ Foote fell to the ground, unconscious, and continued in that state for twenty

⁶²¹ Foote, 23.

⁶²² Foote, 29.

⁶²³ Foote, 32.

hours, neither eating nor drinking. In that state, she cried out, “Lord have mercy on me, a poor sinner!” Immediately, she testifies,

a ray of light flashed across my eyes, accompanied by a sound of far distant singing; the light grew brighter and brighter, and the singing more distinct, and soon I caught the word: ‘This is the new song—redeemed, redeemed!’ I at once sprang from the bed...and commenced singing: ‘Redeemed! redeemed! glory! glory!’ Such joy and peace as filled my heart, when I felt that I was redeemed and could sing the new song. Thus was I wonderfully saved from eternal burning.⁶²⁴

Against Weems, who denies the supernatural power of the text, and against Williams, who denies the efficacy of Jesus’ death for cleansing from sin, Foote encountered the truth of the Bible in the divine encounter in which the Spirit that breathed the words of the text imparted to her inner assurance through “joy and peace”. Foote believes that Revelation 14:3 depicts a heavenly scene in which a song of redemption is being sung. Whether the song exists, for Foote, cannot be subjected to the sociopolitical conditioning of the author, nor to her own sociopolitical conditioning. Perhaps she was unaware of her context and the way that her racial, gendered, and economic realities impinged upon her religious sensibilities. However, she still believed that somewhere, in heaven, an actual song was being sung independent of the biblical author’s agenda or biases. The difference between Williams, Weems, and Foote, is that for Foote, the supernatural dimensions of the text attested inwardly to the fact that the song was indeed real, and not merely the product of someone’s imagination. The joy and peace that she received following her conversion verified, for Foote, that she had been saved and was now able to sing the song of redemption.

⁶²⁴ Foote, 32.

Foote accepted her call to preach based upon the vision of an angel with the word ‘Thee have I chosen to preach my Gospel without delay’ written on a scroll in his hand.⁶²⁵ Foote, considering herself weak and ignorant refused, exclaiming, ‘Lord I cannot do it!’ Two months later, the angel returned with a message from God: “You have chosen to go in my name and warn the people of their sins.”⁶²⁶ Foote agreed that she would preach, but was once again discouraged and doubtful. After having another vision too involved to fully relate here, she submitted to the call to preach. The transformative power of Foote’s vision is embodied in her resistance to the condescension and derogation displayed by her minister Jehial C. Beman after he learned of her decision. In describing his conduct, Foote states, “He looked very coldly upon me and said: ‘I guess you will find out your mistake before you are many months older.’ He was a scholar and a fine speaker; and the sneering, indifferent way in which he addressed me, said most plainly: ‘You don’t know anything.’” Foote boldly replied, “My gifts are very small, I know, but I can no longer be shaken by what you or any one else may think or say.”⁶²⁷

Following this exchange, Mr. Beman vehemently resisted Foote’s attempts at preaching. When asked by Beman and a church committee if she was willing to comply with the rules of the discipline, Foote responded, “Not if the discipline prohibits me from doing what God has bidden me to do; I fear God more than man.”⁶²⁸ Foote’s religious experience does not override or negate the centrality of biblical revelation and authority for guiding her conduct. She lists several scriptures that she interprets as supporting women in the preaching ministry. In

⁶²⁵ Foote, 66.

⁶²⁶ Foote, 68.

⁶²⁷ Foote, 72.

⁶²⁸ Foote, 74.

refuting Williams and Weems contention that the Bible exacerbates oppression, Foote finds freedom within the text itself. She insists,

I could not believe that it was a short-lived impulse or spasmodic influence that impelled me to preach. I read that on the day of Pentecost was the Scripture fulfilled as found in Joel ii. 28, 29: and it certainly will not be denied that women as well as men were at that time filled with the Holy Ghost, because it is expressly stated that women were among those who continued in prayer and supplication, waiting for the fulfillment of the promise. Women and men are classed together, and if the power to preach the Gospel is short-lived and spasmodic in the case of women, it must be equally so in that of men; and if women have lost the gift of prophecy, so have men.⁶²⁹

Foote associates a woman's obedience to God's call with intimacy with God, viewing disobedience as the reason for relational distance. She advises women, "How much easier to bear the reproach of men than to live at a distance from God. Be not kept in bondage by those who say, 'We suffer not a woman to teach,' thus quoting Paul's words, but not rightly applying them." Foote does not state that Paul's injunction should be excised from sermonic discourse, but rather, suggests that there is a correct application for his words. She remains silent on what constitutes this correct application, and conjecture would merely detract from what she *does* say. Her interpretive approach, however, indicates a high view of scripture in which troublesome passages are not discarded, but retained with the hope of understanding the method of correct application.

Lastly, Foote, before preaching in Albany, NY to a packed house, where "the entire audience seemed moved to prayer and tears by the power of the Holy Ghost," a few nights earlier had exhibited the same type of resistance to racism that catalyzed the civil rights movement. After boarding a boat, Foote went to the ladies' cabin to sleep. A white man came

⁶²⁹ Foote, 78.

to the cabin stating that he was going to sleep in the ladies' cabin because the gentlemen's cabin was full. He pointed to Foote, stating, "That nigger has no business here. My family are coming board the boat at Utica, and they shall not come where a nigger is." Foote states that "they called the captain, and he ordered me to get up; but I did not stir, thinking it best not leave the bed except by force. Finally they left me, and the man found lodging among the seamen, wearing vengeance on the 'niggers.'"⁶³⁰

Foote, continuously confronted with oppression from church and society, courageously defied social norms, condemned racism and prejudice, and did so while interpreting the Bible through her hermeneutics of experiential literalism. Her interpretive stance and approach to resisting oppression rebuts the stance of womanists who defend the prerogative to dismiss, reinterpret, or ignore texts that undermine the survival and wholeness of all people.

Conclusion

In James Cone's latest monograph, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, Cone states that he is in agreement with Delores Williams and that he rejects the traditional theories of atonement, including substitution and ransom, because there is nothing redemptive in suffering itself.⁶³¹ The gospel, for Cone, is not an abstract theory to be explained, but a narrative concerning Jesus' solidarity with the oppressed, which as Williams argues, led to his death. While sympathetic to Williams' perspective, however, Cone states that he more closely identifies with womanist theologians such as Shawn Copeland, JoAnne Terrell, and Jacquelyn Grant who each view the cross as an essential part of Christianity.⁶³²

⁶³⁰ Foote, 91.

⁶³¹ James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2012), 150.

⁶³² For an excellent comparison of womanist atonement theories, see Joanne Marie Terrell, "Our Mothers' Gardens: Rethinking Sacrifice," in *Cross Examinations: Readings on the Meaning of the Cross Today*, ed. Marit Trelstad (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 2006), 33–49.

He then seems to temper his earlier suspicion of metaphysical or supernatural understandings of salvation, perceiving that “the transcendent and the immanent, heaven and earth must be held together in critical, dialectical tension, each one correcting the limits of the other. The gospel is *in* the world, but it is not *of* the world; that is, it can be seen in the black freedom movement, but it is much more than what we see in our struggles for justice.”⁶³³ Cone powerfully declares that the cross is a symbol of liberation and new life, and that it is the most powerful sign of God’s solidarity with the least of these. He goes on to write that understanding salvation through the cross “is a mystery” that can only be “apprehended through faith, repentance, and humility.”⁶³⁴ He then gives examples of salvation as broken spirits being healed, the voiceless courageously speaking out, and black people being empowered to love themselves.⁶³⁵

Cone had already announced his rejection of the ransom theory of atonement in his 1997 preface to *God of the Oppressed*. However, in that preface, he also explicitly acknowledges its biblical foundations, himself citing Mark 10:45, as he gives his rationale for its repudiation.⁶³⁶ He states his agreement with feminists and womanists that any atonement theory that represents God as patriarch and Jesus as a passive surrogate does not empower the oppressed, but provides justification for enduring oppression. In this preface, he also abandons his view of Jesus as God’s primary means of revelation. He clarifies his stance, stating, “Rather he is an important revelatory event among many.”⁶³⁷ Cone’s qualifications of his theological

⁶³³ Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 156.

⁶³⁴ Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 158.

⁶³⁵ Cone, 158.

⁶³⁶ James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), xv.

⁶³⁷ Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, xiv.

position reveal an ongoing issue regarding the dialogue between the black church Pietist tradition and those theologians and womanists that adopt the Liberationist paradigm. The theological language used by Liberationists can obscure the everpresent reality that deep and irreconcilable differences abound, especially regarding the authority of scripture.

This chapter has shown that these differences are encapsulated within the Liberationist paradigm inaugurated by James Cone as he wrestled with an anomaly regarding the role of love and nonviolence within the Christian faith. After facing a number of personal crises simultaneously, including internal pressure to reconcile Black Power with Christianity and external pressure to respond intellectually to James Washington, Cone radically reinterpreted the meaning of the Christian faith while retaining the biblical vocabulary, theological terms, and appeal to the Bible that he and the black church shared. Hidden in this paradigm shift was Cone's reliance upon methods and sources drawn from the white theological academy. One may wonder why Cone's texts that utilized black religious sources, like *Spirituals and the Blues* and *God of the Oppressed* are not engaged at length in this chapter. The reason for this is that the conclusions drawn from these later texts did not diverge considerably from the conclusions drawn in the first two, thus calling into question the substantive significance of the turn to black sources. Had Cone actually researched thoroughly the narratives, songs, and sermons of the pre-Civil War tradition that he extols, he would have found that liberation was not the highest pursuit of black Christians. He would have discovered that salvation and regeneration from sin constituted the highest good that interpreted all others, including liberation, because black Christians needed to resolve first their sense of personal sinfulness before a holy God, which then imbued them with the transcendent value that enabled them to prioritize the

actualization of liberation using biblical foundations. Cone states that during slavery, “blacks simply appropriated those biblical stories that met their historical need,” an opinion that resembles Weems’ claims about slaves, but which avoids their belief in the centrality of salvation from sin as defined in biblical texts and attested to by their religious experiences.

Cone inaugurated a new paradigm that introduced four enduring changes to the study of black Christianity. First, realization of liberation from material oppression became the core meaning and objective of black Christianity. Secondly, this allowed any other good, theme, perspective, belief, or practice to be redefined if it was interpreted as militating against this liberation. For example, this chapter illustrated Cone’s eschewal of the doctrine of original sin for its complicity in distracting theologians and Christians from the plight of suffering black people and described Delores Williams denial that Jesus’ death contains any salvific significance due to its implicit sanction of black women’s surrogacy. Next, the Liberationist paradigm denies the infallibility of the Bible, which Cone demonstrated repeatedly and Weems echoed in her description of womanist hermeneutics. Lastly, the idea of personal moral sins are effaced in favor of a conception of social sin that accords with the Liberationist social conception of salvation.

What the chapter has shown is that womanists and black liberation theologians, while different in many respects, share the same paradigm, thus underscoring its derivation from the liberal academy. This is because womanists have also been influenced heavily by the feminist movement, which had already begun radically interpreting and disposing of Christian doctrines that they considered detrimental. Finally, this chapter adumbrates the perceptual and

methodological incommensurability that exists between black Liberationist paradigm and the black Pietist Paradigm that characterizes the majority of the black church.

Chapter 5

A CRITIQUE OF KELLY BROWN DOUGLAS' WOMANIST THEOLOGY OF SEXUALITY

Introduction

Until now, relatively little has been said regarding the possibility of rational dialogue between the Liberationist and Pietist paradigms. This is because the preceding chapters needed to unmask the differences in meanings regarding vocabulary and terms that both paradigms share in order to disclose why adherents to the Black Pietist paradigm “talk past” adherents to the Black Liberationist paradigm, and vice versa. The National Baptist Fellowship of Concerned Pastors *and* Forrest Harris *both* value the Bible and appeal to it to undergird their insights. Perceptually and methodologically, there exist incommensurable differences.⁶³⁸ Whereas the group of pastors view the Bible as a universally applicable, divinely inspired, infallible repository of truth, Harris views it as God’s revelation through Jesus Christ regarding the sin of oppression, but also as a text that has itself also contributed to the oppression of slavery and sexism, thus rendering it questionable for proscribing all personal areas of moral life. The perception one holds engenders the method one uses. For Harris, the Bible becomes a tool for instigating an ethics of resistance against hegemonic influences and institutions. For the National Fellowship of Concerned Pastors, the Bible exists as an authority that can adjudicate all matters of human life, including determination of the sinfulness or sanctity of sex.

⁶³⁸ Part of the goal of this dissertation is to translate for Black Pietists the change in meaning that often accompanies terms that Liberationists share with Pietists.

This dissertation, in revealing the nature of divergence regarding the two paradigms, *allows* dialogue to ensue, because “we have to begin by disagreeing even on how to characterize that about which we disagree, if we are to make any movement, even a stumbling and halting one, in the direction of rational agreement.”⁶³⁹

The agreement may simply involve shared knowledge of what concepts and methods are being contested so that dialogue can proceed knowing that “progress in rational inquiry...need not lead toward any kind of agreement, any convergence of views, between the adherents of rival and incommensurable traditions.”⁶⁴⁰ In spite of this, it is important to note that both Black Pietists and Black Liberationists believe that they are asserting ontological truth. When Weems denies that the Bible is somehow transcendent and universally applicable, she is making a statement about the way that things are. When Jea accepts the death of Christ on the cross as a sacrifice that frees him from sin, he believes that Jesus’ blood actually has cleansing power that miraculously applies to his soul. Even when James Cone asserts that all statements of truth are fallible, that is still a statement of truth about statements of truth.

Due to the truth claims that each tradition makes, each tradition must adhere to the conventions of rationality, so that the truth claims make sense. These standards include the use of evidence and logical reasoning to draw conclusions from premises. While Black Pietism uses different standards from Liberationism, Black Pietism must still be coherent by its own standards, and Liberationism must remain coherent by its own standards and methods. Charles Taylor suggests that moving from one hypergood to another, from A to B, can occur when one

⁶³⁹ MacIntyre, “Incommensurability, Truth, and the Conversation between Confucians and Aristotelians about the Virtues,” 122.

⁶⁴⁰ MacIntyre, 113.

identifies or resolves a contradiction in the first, A, which allows an “error-reducing” transition to occur when another hypergood, B, is selected. MacIntyre makes a similar claim stating that a paradigm can be viewed as inferior to a rival when it “in trying to frame adequate solutions to its problems and an adequately comprehensive account of the subject matter with which it deals...lapses into irreparable incoherence.”⁶⁴¹ A person external to the tradition who has “incorporated within their own structures of understanding an accurate representation of that standpoint and its history” may be qualified to recognize this failure and incoherence.

The writer of this dissertation, having been trained in the liberal academy and immersed in a milieu shaped by the tenets of liberationism and womanism, but also firmly committed to the Pietist paradigm, is qualified, based upon MacIntyre’s criteria, to recognize such a failure. To be sure, the account of rational coherence that this chapter provides emerges from within the Pietistic paradigm, and is not offered from a neutral, independent standpoint. So then, just as womanists proffer a critique of black church moral standards regarding sexuality from within their Liberationist paradigm, this chapter operates from within the Pietist paradigm. However, those who are contemplating conversion from one paradigm to another can use this chapter as a source for strengthening their faith, or as a challenge that can only help sharpen and buttress their perspective. Toward that end, the rest of this chapter will critique the rational grounds upon which Kelly Brown Douglas builds her case, revealing them to be tenuous and unsubstantial.

Amongst womanists, many of the most persistent and passionate critiques of conservative black churches stances on sexuality are proffered by scholar Kelly Brown Douglas,

⁶⁴¹ MacIntyre, 117.

whose seminal work, *Sexuality and the Black Church* prods clergy and members of these African-American churches to engage in honest dialogue regarding their own homophobia and uneasiness surrounding sex. In many of Brown Douglas' subsequent essays and articles she elaborates and broadens this theme, arguing that conservative black churches are unwitting purveyors of a sexuality that has been grossly distorted and misrepresented since slavery by a white culture bent on perpetuating its own ascendancy through sexual caricatures of black relationships and identity. She thus argues for a reconceptualization of sexuality within these black churches that in its faithfulness to an African worldview endorses same-sex marriages and abandons sexual norms that restrict sexual intercourse to the confines of marriage.

Douglas does not intend for her argument to remain ensconced within the annals of academia, and she openly affirms her accountability to the black women in the pews who stand to gain most from her demands for change and liberation. She writes, "That these women have epistemological privilege means that what we as womanist scholars say must ring true to their struggles and dreams for a free, liberated, whole life. Our work must make sense to their lives. Hence, what we do here in the academy is truly—at best—a second step."⁶⁴²

A womanist like Kelly Brown Douglas desires to speak to Pietist black churches on behalf of members within these institutions who are treated unjustly, meaning, she must at least gain a hearing within these institutions. By opening herself to accountability Douglas inhabits a discursive space where the "pew warmers" can judge the relevance of the argument to their beliefs, lifestyle, and experiences. Douglas endeavors to speak for the least of these, including women and homosexuals, who are frequently marginalized within Pietist black churches. While

⁶⁴² Kelly Brown Douglas, "Doing Womanist Work," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 58, no. 3–4 (2004): 171.

she rightly condemns the vituperation that homosexuals frequently endure within these black churches, her argument regarding *why* Pietist black churches should adopt new sexual norms and values is shot through with internal contradictions, overgeneralizations, and reductionist presuppositions that render it both academically and theologically unpersuasive even by its own internal logic.

This chapter advances this critique in four distinct sections. In section one, it explicates Douglas' argument that the sexual ethics of contemporary black churches have their origin in pagan philosophy. The body/soul dualism that they inherited from Paul causes the exaltation of the soul and the denigration of embodied sexuality. This leads Douglas to retrieve a "black faith tradition" that in turn recovers an African worldview that resists distinctions between the sacred and secular. Section two presents strong evidence that Paul's sexual ethics were primarily influenced by Jewish Scriptures—the Christian Old Testament—that predated the advent of Platonism and Stoicism. Section three, illustrates the futility of Brown Douglas' attempt to revive a "black faith tradition", because this tradition is only intelligible against the backdrop of *Platonized Christianity*. It is a vacuous concept without sufficient evidence formed as a counternarrative to the narrative of *Platonized Christianity*. Next, in section four, the chapter shows that presuppositions in womanism lead Douglas to privilege an African worldview that consolidates both sacred and secular realms to render all of life sacred. However, this section then demonstrates that based upon historical evidence, it is doubtful that such a worldview exists, and that even if it does exist, that the African worldview has no practical bearing on the type of sexual ethics that it constructs.

Allegations of Platonist Infiltration

In her rapidly expanding corpus of writings, lectures, and speeches regarding sexuality and the black church, Kelly Brown Douglas argues that sexuality has been instrumentalized by white culture to marginalize, control, and subjugate black people within American society. Early in *Sexuality and the Black Church*, Douglas declares, “indeed the violation of Black sexuality by White culture is about nothing less than preserving White power in an interlocking system of racist, classist, sexist, and heterosexist oppression.”⁶⁴³ By systematically inculcating African-Americans with negative sexual images of themselves, including black women as mammies, jezebels, and welfare queens, and men as violent bucks, white culture set the stage for violent control of black bodies through lynching, castration, and rape. To elucidate the theoretical contours of this relationship between sex and power, Douglas leans upon the work of philosopher Michel Foucault who describes the use of sexuality as a vehicle that creates distinctions of value between classes and groups of people and thus calls into question the very humanity of the people being maligned.⁶⁴⁴

For Douglas, the black church has assumed this role of perpetuating injustice against people based solely upon their sexual orientation and proclivities. This has caused “homosexuality” to be excoriated and demeaned from the pulpits of black churches across the nation, and it has led to resistance—like the protests of the National Fellowship of Concerned Black Pastors—toward accepting same-sex marriage as approved of by God. However, Douglas

⁶⁴³ Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999), 48. One can see the Liberationist paradigm at work in framing the issue of sexual morality as a white vs. black issue to negate the supposed “universality” of biblical sexual norms.

⁶⁴⁴ Kelly Brown Douglas, “The Black Church and Homosexuality: The Black and White of It,” *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 57, no. 1–2 (2003): 37.

partly sympathizes with conservative black churches, for she believes that they too have been unwittingly assimilated into ideological perspectives that distort and devalue human sexuality. A major task in Douglas' project is helping these black churches to see that their view of sexuality has been corrupted by a white Christian tradition which itself propounds sexual norms and values that are extrinsic to the original thought and practice of Jesus Christ. In other words, the boundaries erected around approved sexual behavior are not intrinsic to the teachings of Jesus himself, but are rather later false constructions of Christian theologians who succumbed to a confluence of cultural, philosophical, and political components in early Christian society. In quoting Foucault, Douglas writes, "We must concede that Christianity did not invent this code of sexual behavior. Christianity accepted it, reinforced it, and gave it a much larger and more widespread strength than it had before. But the so-called Christian morality is nothing more than a piece of pagan ethics inserted into Christianity."⁶⁴⁵

Douglas describes this mutation as *Platonized Christianity*, and she elucidates Greek philosophy's calamitous infiltration into Christian thought. This amalgamation produced intractable dualisms that still govern conservative black church dogma. The dualisms imported from pagan philosophy are conducive to codifying sexual mores that debase embodied sexual acts while favoring purity of the soul.

Essentially, both Platonic and Stoic philosophies project a dualistic paradigm. Platonism proposes a dualistic worldview that exalts transcendent/divine reality and disparages mundane/human reality. This worldview accompanies a Platonic theology that reveres the human soul and dismisses the body. Stoicism shares the Platonic approach to the human person, as it too devalues the body for its "innate" extravagances, namely, passion. . . Thus both Stoic and Platonic thought thereby argued that sexual pleasure must be controlled, if not eliminated, in order for a person to ascend to the highest level

⁶⁴⁵ Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, 27.

of human living, one that approximated the transcendent/divine realm. Both philosophies held antisexual/antibody attitudes.⁶⁴⁶

For Douglas', the adulteration of Christian virtue with philosophical dualisms is a touchstone that explicates and interprets the other facets of her claims. Platonized Christianity explains the ideology of white culture that privileges the conversion of the soul and denigrates the passions of the body. Platonized Christianity also "defies the very incarnational identity of the Christian religion because it allows for the degradation of what the incarnation establishes as sacred—the human body."⁶⁴⁷ This leads Douglas to advocate for a new theology of sexuality that better embodies an African worldview by collapsing the sacred/secular distinction. According to Douglas, in African traditions, dualistic splits are nonexistent, and reality is constructed as unified whole.⁶⁴⁸ Therefore, she advocates for a theology that preserves the harmony of spiritual, communal, and interpersonal relationality.⁶⁴⁹ Douglas declares, "When sexuality is expressed in a way that provides for and nurtures harmonious relationships—that is, those that are loving, just, and equal—then it is sacred."⁶⁵⁰

If Douglas is right about the platonization of Christianity in regard to sexual norms, then the black Pietism needs to reevaluate not just its ethical stance on sexual issues, but the entire meaning of its faith. However, her argument would have to succeed on many different levels to be rationally persuasive. 1) She must show evidence that Hellenist scholars/philosophers influencing contemporaneous Jews like Paul were dualists in the way that she describes. 2) She

⁶⁴⁶ Kelly Brown Douglas, *What's Faith Got to Do with It?: Black Bodies/Christian Souls*, Edition Unstated edition (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2005), 27.

⁶⁴⁷ Douglas, 215.

⁶⁴⁸ Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, 132.

⁶⁴⁹ Douglas, *What's Faith Got to Do with It?*, 214.

⁶⁵⁰ Douglas, 214.

must present historical evidence that Paul was influenced by this dualism *and* that his sexual norms were derived from this association. 3) She must show that the Hebrew Christian ethic that preceded Paul's ethics did not restrict sexual practices and allowed for permissiveness. 4) She must prove that there exists a univocal African worldview that gives rise to an African sexual ethic that is permissive like the pre-Christian Hebrew sexual ethic, and 5) She must show that there are a set of identifiable ethics associated with a "black faith tradition."

Douglas has invested extensively in this claim—in fact, she recapitulates a version of this *platonizing* process in each of her books or articles that address sexuality researched for this dissertation. This should be expected, since Douglas requires this concept to do so much work. Without asserting this claim, she can *only* prove that white culture and the black church both employ Christian sexual norms and values as tools of repression and victimization of people groups. Proving this does not necessarily lead to the conclusion that the values and norms themselves are inherently flawed, just as a hammer used as a murder weapon does not necessitate the design of a new and safer hammer. Douglas needs to show that there is something inherently wrong—tainted, even—about these sexual norms.

Paul's Sexual Ethics

Douglas and the black churches she addresses differ on what constitutes their sexual ethics, and this is evident where their opinions on the reliability of Paul differ. Douglas believes that a sacred disdain for the sexual body pervades the Christian theological tradition, and she identifies the Apostle Paul as the culprit, alleging that,

The apostle Paul is perhaps the earliest and certainly most influential representative of this Platonized tradition. Though no doubt informed by Jesus' teachings on sexuality

and the body, Paul goes beyond Jesus in developing a sexual ethic that in effect disavows 'passion' and places the body and soul in relationship of duality. These Pauline attitudes toward the flesh provide the biblical foundation for Platonized Christianity.⁶⁵¹

However, as John Wright Buckham notes, "repeated attempts have been made to resolve Paul's duality into metaphysical dualism. He does indeed make flesh and spirit hostile to one another, but never body and spirit."⁶⁵² Buckham makes a claim that is borne out by closer biblical exegesis. The distinction, for Buckham, is that "sins of the flesh" do not arise from the flesh, but are rather sins connected with the flesh that arise from elsewhere. The force of Buckham's argument is attenuated, however, by his assumption that the word flesh always refers exclusively to some physical or material body.

Howard Marshall, in fact, finds at least seven distinctive meanings for the Greek word for flesh, *sark*, in the New Testament.⁶⁵³ In some cases, it applies to the physical substance that covers the bones of animals and human beings or the the human body. Yet, it can also signify the collective physical frailty and finitude of human beings as in "all flesh is like grass." Marshall hones in on what the term means for human nature as *not divine* and as subject to moral and spiritual weakness that is potentially corruptible by sin. As Peter Brown discovers, "Paul crammed into the notion of the flesh a superabundance of overlapping notions."⁶⁵⁴ Thus, *sark* also conveys the idea of rituals, festivals, circumcision, and food laws, things that Paul denounced for being tethered to the Law of Moses and antagonistic to freedom in Christ.

⁶⁵¹ Douglas, 30.

⁶⁵² John Wright Buckham, "Dualism or Duality?," *Harvard Theological Review* 6, no. 2 (April 1913): 159.

⁶⁵³ I Howard Marshall, "Living in the 'Flesh,'" *Bibliotheca Sacra* 159, no. 636 (October 2002): 387–403.

⁶⁵⁴ Peter Brown, *The Body and Society: Men, Women, and Sexual Renunciation in Early Christianity*, 2nd edition (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2008), 48.

Marshall summarizes, “*sark* is that aspect or constituent of humankind that is not in itself necessarily sinful but which is weak and cannot resist sin.” At the risk of oversimplifying Marshall’s research, it is a moral dualism that the flesh versus spirit dichotomy is designed to illuminate—of right and wrong, sin and righteousness—and not a denouncement of the body versus the soul. Marshall hopes that his investigation into the meaning of *sark* demonstrates “the need to examine words in their contexts rather than to assume one single meaning for them.”⁶⁵⁵

Certainly Paul should be charged with being a dualist, but in an apocalyptic sense.⁶⁵⁶ Paul appraises the cosmos as the scene where God and Satan are waging a perpetual battle that will eventually lead God’s victory, and to the transformation of the world. Embodied in this worldview is an ethical dualism that enacts moral prerogatives to distinguish between what behaviors best engender faithful Christian witness to the life of Christ. This dualism puts the stress on human living, and not on human being. Insofar as the resurrection that Paul envisions will be a resurrection of the body, Douglas’ portrayal of his anthropological dualism is rendered largely inaccurate.⁶⁵⁷

⁶⁵⁵ Marshall, "Living in the 'Flesh'," 403.

⁶⁵⁶ Gordon Zerbe, “Paul on the Human Being as ‘Psychic Body’: Neither Dualist nor Monist,” *Direction* 37, no. 2 (September 2008): 177.

⁶⁵⁷ Douglas cites Paul’s admonition that “he who sins sexually sins against his own body” in I Corinthians chapter 6 as evidence that Paul devalues the body. However, it seems that the Corinthian texts serve to produce the exact opposite outcome—a *valuing* of the body and sex as positive. Douglas begs the question by alleging that Paul’s views of the body and sex are not positive based upon an antecedent perspective regarding what constitutes positivity. Attributing a *negative* view of the body to Paul’s exhortations in this same chapter seems tendentious: “The body, however, is not meant for sexual immorality but for the Lord, and the Lord for the body. By His power God raised the Lord from the dead, and he will raise us also. . . therefore, honor God with your bodies.” Paul here exalts the body into a dimension that illumines its value to God. Paul, believing that God as creator can exert claims upon human life, urges the church at Corinth to conform to these standards as embracing the body’s intrinsic created worth.

Peter Brown observes that “the hierarchy of body and soul, which linked man both to the gods above and to the animal world below in the benign and differentiated order of an eternal universe, concerned Paul not in the slightest.”⁶⁵⁸ Brown observes that Paul viewed the universe as about to be transformed by the power of God, thereby vanquishing the laws of sin, death, and the flesh that he viewed as enemies to the Christian life. This apocalyptic expectation, pitting the forces of good against evil, was reflected in the tense battle waged between the flesh and the spirit, not the body and soul. Brown succinctly sums up Paul’s apocalyptic dualism, stating,

“Thus, the human person, divided between *the spirit* and *the flesh*, was not primarily a being torn between body and soul. Rather, with Paul, we see human beings caught in a hurried instant, as they passed dramatically from a life lived *in the flesh*, tensed against the Law because subject to the tyranny of half-seen powers reared in rebellion to God, to a life of glorious freedom lived *in Christ, in the spirit*.”

It is also doubtful that Paul’s directives to the church at Corinth indicate, as Brown Douglas believes, that “Paul’s views toward the body and sex were certainly not positive.”⁶⁵⁹ Douglas begrudges the possibility that Paul may not have meant to construe the body and soul as incompatible forces.⁶⁶⁰ Yet, she concludes that his sexual attitudes place them in an antagonistic relationship. For Douglas, “Paul’s unrelenting valuation of nonmarriage over marriage, celibacy over noncelibacy, devotion to God over bodily obligations, strongly implied a palpable tension, if not dualistic relationship, between the body and soul.”⁶⁶¹ However, Paul’s writings on the type of sexual behavior Christians should exhibit were taken directly from the

⁶⁵⁸ Brown, *The Body and Society*, 48.

⁶⁵⁹ Douglas, *What’s Faith Got to Do with It?*, 33.

⁶⁶⁰ Douglas, 34.

⁶⁶¹ Douglas, 34.

practices of the Jewish married household.⁶⁶² Also, parallels to many of Paul's exhortations regarding marriage occur in the folklore invoked by the rabbis in favor of early marriage.⁶⁶³ Moreover, Pauline texts from which she draws many of her assumptions, like I Corinthians 6 and 7, are found to share coherence with the Jewish scriptures.

Although there are many scholars that argue that Jewish scripture did not heavily influence Paul's ethics, scholarship presenting evidence for or against this claim remains sparse. Most biblical scholarship that researches the significance of Jewish scripture on Pauline thought attends to the question of doctrine and beliefs, instead of ethics and behavior.⁶⁶⁴ To address this glaring lacuna in biblical scholarship, Brian S. Rosner uses Paul's most thorough and vigorous ethical teaching, I Corinthians 5-7, to ascertain to what extent Paul relies upon Jewish scripture for his ethical tenets. Ultimately, Rosner finds that "the Scriptures are . . . a crucial and formative source for Paul's ethics."⁶⁶⁵

To avoid the charges of 'parallelomania', defined as the practice of jumping from similarity of thought to a theory of dependence without sufficient evidence to buttress the claim, Rosner describes the criteria of assessment that undergird his research. They include searches for verbal agreement between Paul's letters and the Scriptures, recurrence of the Scriptural passage in Paul's other writings, evidence of textual shifts explained by the presence of a 'scriptural echo', analysis of the effect that early Jewish moral teaching may have had on

⁶⁶² Brown, *The Body and Society*, 52.

⁶⁶³ Brown, 55.

⁶⁶⁴ Brian S. Rosner, *Paul, Scripture, and Ethics: A Study of 1 Corinthians 5-7* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1999), 9.

⁶⁶⁵ Rosner, 24. Rosner uses "Scripture" to refer to the books comprising the Christian Old Testament.

Paul's exegesis of a text, thematic coherence, and whether alternative sources could have led Paul to the same conclusion.⁶⁶⁶

Rosner explains that Paul's injunctions against fornication in I Corinthians 6:16-17 quote a part of Genesis 2:24 to prove the idea that any type of sexual intercourse creates a significant bond. The same verb for "cleave" used in an unquoted portion of Genesis 2:24 is the same verb used by Paul in I Cor. 6:16-17 to describe a believer's relationship to God.⁶⁶⁷ Paul thus sets up an implicit dichotomy between cleaving to a prostitute and cleaving to the Lord to illustrate the preferred alternative. Paul's command in I Corinthians 6:18 to "flee sexual immorality" is traced back to Joseph's flight from Potiphar's wife in Genesis 39. Gregory of Nyssa's homily on I Corinthians 6:18 also uses this scriptural narrative of Joseph to illustrate the meaning of fleeing immorality.⁶⁶⁸

I Corinthians 7 is the site of Paul's most resolute defense of his celibacy. However, Peter Brown finds that Paul was most likely opposed to the *entire* church of Corinth adopting his celibacy. To have done so would have been to demolish the structures of the pious household, thus undermining Paul's authority in distant cities.⁶⁶⁹ Brown also observes that a community that was separate from its neighbors due to group-celibacy would not have attracted many pagans into its fold—which was Paul's primary mission. Rosner's view comports with Brown's: "Paul states from the outset that it is his personal preference and not obligatory for others. He leaves room for personal choice on the matter. . .".⁶⁷⁰ Rosner explicates strands of Judaism that

⁶⁶⁶ Rosner, 18-19.

⁶⁶⁷ Rosner, 131.

⁶⁶⁸ Rosner, 139.

⁶⁶⁹ Brown, *The Body and Society*, 54. Brown notes that Paul was dependent upon the authority of local householders for passing on his teachings to local communities.

⁶⁷⁰ Rosner, *Paul, Scripture, and Ethics*, 152.

exhibit ascetic behavior, including prophetic celibacy in Numbers 11:26-30 when the seventy elders abstained from intercourse for a time, and Nazirite vows, which were probably undertaken in Second Temple times.⁶⁷¹ Douglas admonishes that, “one must always bear in mind that Paul was responding to the concerns of particular congregations, like that of Corinth.”⁶⁷² It is this reminder that accounts for the areas where Paul diverges most from traditional Jewish teaching on marriage and sex in I Corinthians 7.⁶⁷³ “Nonetheless, Paul’s teaching throughout the chapter, including the ‘ascetical’ notes, is fully comprehensible in terms of contemporary Jewish interpretation of Torah.”⁶⁷⁴

The importance of Rosner’s study to the topic at hand cannot be underestimated. Douglas claims that “Pre-Christian Hebrew life showed little tendency toward seeing the body as an impediment to spirituality. Sexuality apparently was appreciated as a gift from God, as evidenced by the Hebrew scriptural references to persons as flesh rather than spirit or by the celebration of sensuality in the Song of Solomon.”⁶⁷⁵ It is her contention that Paul invalidates the preceding more holistic Hebrew sexual ethic by tainting it with Stoic and Platonist influences. However, if Paul’s sexual ethics, as has been argued, show dependence on the ethics of the Jewish scriptures, Douglas’ comparative venture falls apart, as there is no longer any practical reason to reach outside of the Christian biblical canon to retrieve an ‘African worldview.’ Because Paul’s ethics derive their content and shape from Jewish scripture, then

⁶⁷¹ Nazirites abstained from wine and meat. This is not an example of sexual celibacy, but how Jewish tradition displays traces of bodily ascetism overall.

⁶⁷² Douglas, *What’s Faith Got to Do with It?*, 34.

⁶⁷³ Rosner, *Paul, Scripture, and Ethics*, 176.

⁶⁷⁴ Rosner, 176. For another article regarding Paul’s dependence on Jewish sources for his ethics, see Traugott Holtz, “The Question of the Content of Paul’s Instructions,” in *Understand Paul’s Ethics: Twentieth Century Approaches*, ed. Brian S. Rosner (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1995), 51–71.

⁶⁷⁵ Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, 25.

platonized Christianity rapidly reveals its identity as a straw man. As Rosner concludes, “In the search for the sources of Paul’s thought, Paul’s scriptural inheritance may thus be regarded as having the priority over other sources, such as pagan law, Stoicism, Iranian religion and Graeco-Roman mystery religions.”⁶⁷⁶

The Black Faith Tradition

The next problem to be addressed involves recovering—or articulating—a black faith. Victor Anderson’s devastating and now canonic critique of black theology thoroughly deconstructs the race based assumptions interwoven throughout the arguments of black theologians like James Cone and womanist theologians like Jacquelyn Grant.⁶⁷⁷ To summarize, Anderson’s argument defines categorical racism as an appropriation of species logic in which each member of a species shares essential traits that identify a member within that species. He alleges that the task of Enlightenment and cultural philosophy was to define the essential features that differentiated European consciousness from everyone else. European philosophers defined this consciousness in terms of rationality, morals, aesthetics, and race. The racial ideology ensuing from these attempts justified the exclusion of African peoples from citizenship within their societies. This “white racial ideology” in turn caused these African peoples, such as African-Americans within the United States, to develop a counter-discourse challenging these claims through a racial apologetics that asserted the value of “blackness” and

⁶⁷⁶ Rosner, *Paul, Scripture, and Ethics*, 17.

⁶⁷⁷ Victor Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism* (New York, NY: Continuum Intl Publishing Group, 1995).

created a black cultural genius that mimicked, yet also confronted the European cultural genius espoused by white intellectuals such as Immanuel Kant and Thomas Jefferson.

Anderson describes how African-American cultural philosophers such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, and Martin Luther King, Jr., employed a racial apologetics designed “. . .to overturn the negative prejudices under which white racial ideology defined black identity and to advance positive black cultural qualities in defense of African-Americans’ cultural assimilation.”⁶⁷⁸ However, this counter-discourse about “blackness”, elides the variety of subjectivities that exist among African Americans, and attempts to exhibit a “cult of black heroic genius” that defines the worth of the achievements, roles, and activities of African-Americans on the basis of a mythic blackness. Anderson calls for the subversion of this binding of black subjectivity to racial identity.

The critique broadens to include the black liberation theology founded by James Cone, which constructs its new being on the structures that categorical racism and white racial ideology handed over to African American intellectuals. In constantly responding to or challenging the oppression of white theology, black theologians exist in a constant state of struggle, resistance, and survival, but never thriving, flourishing, or transcending. The self-identity of black theology is bound by and methodologically in debt to white racism—which makes “blackness” need “whiteness” in order to be intelligible. Hence, black theology is mostly concerned with doing theology by privileging black history, black experience, and black culture as constitutive of its core beliefs and tenets as an act of protest against the methodology of

⁶⁷⁸ Anderson, 78.

Western theology. This is the reason for academic black theology's rejection by most conservative African-American churches. Anderson notes,

Early critics, particularly those who pressed internal criticism as black church theologians, asked how black theology could be a theology of the black churches if it fundamentally disentangles itself from the creeds and confessions, as well as the liturgical practices that structure the black churches. To some, black theology appeared to posit within itself a revolutionary consciousness that looked more like the mirror of white racism and less like an expression of the evangelical gospel that characterized most black churches. Was black theology then, an academic project in theology rather than an ecclesiastical project?⁶⁷⁹

In answering this question, Anderson recounts James Cone's predicament. Cone, the father of black liberation theology, could choose to surrender his claims for black exceptionalism by acknowledging the dependence of black churches upon Western sources for their theological formation, or he could maintain black theology's independence from these sources, thus leaving it alienated from the evangelical roots of black Protestant churches. Anderson states that Cone chose the latter, but tried to mitigate his exclusion from black churches by prioritizing the necessity of black sources for the construction of black theology—a task fraught with its own contradictions. The subsequent generation of black theologians, including Dwight Hopkins and James Evans, and womanists like Katie Cannon, Dolores Williams, and Kelly Brown Douglas, attempt the same maneuver to insure the relevance of their theological projects.

Douglas deploys a "hermeneutics of return" that favors a return to distinctively black sources for the purpose of proclaiming a black theology that critiques the hegemonic and individualist tendencies of the larger society.⁶⁸⁰ For black theologians these sources usually include elements from traditional African religion, slave narratives, and in the case of

⁶⁷⁹ Anderson, 90.

⁶⁸⁰ Anderson, 93.

womanism, fictional literature, movies, and music that emphasize the experiences of black women. For example, Douglas admonishes that “integral to reclaiming and affirming an African religious heritage, as well as to being conscientious stewards of the Black faith tradition, Black churches are obliged to restore the unity of the sacred and secular realms.”⁶⁸¹ Douglas alleges that in America’s 18th century religious revivals, a large population of black men and women were converted to Christianity by evangelical Christian movements. In their African religious heritage, these people envisioned sexuality as a sacred gift from God, since secularity has no life in many African traditions. Thus, she concludes that through conversion to Protestant Christianity during the Great Awakenings, *Platonized* views were introduced into the black faith tradition.⁶⁸²

As was noted in the critique of Douglas’ methodology, for Douglas, the answer to the problem of sexual mores and values that categorize and portray homosexuality as sinful is the recovery of a black faith whose valuing of embodied sexuality is distinctly opposed to these *Platonized* norms. She then describes core themes that reflect “the black *identity* of the faith tradition,” such as theological historicity.⁶⁸³ One presupposition of theological historicity is that “the meaning of God in black faith always has implications for black life,” and the black faith tradition “evolves out of black life and speaks to black life. It is this interdependent relationship to black life that ensures the very black identity of the tradition.”⁶⁸⁴ However, what is this black faith tradition that she valorizes? How is this tradition not simply her essentialized depiction of

⁶⁸¹ Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, 132.

⁶⁸² Douglas, “The Black Church and Homosexuality,” 39.

⁶⁸³ Douglas, *What’s Faith God to do With It*, 204.

⁶⁸⁴ Douglas, 206.

elements of African religious and African American Christian practices and beliefs conscripted into the work of negating and overcoming her straw man of *Platonized* Christianity?

As Anderson rightly discerns, this heroic black faith is simply a racialized inversion of the attempts of European intellectuals to espouse a heroic white genius. One can easily substitute “white European Christianity” for “*platonized* Christianity” in any and all of the writings where Douglas discusses Platonized Christianity, for it only discovers its salience in contradistinction to this “black faith tradition” that eschews the dualisms that Platonized Christianity supposedly cherishes. The term *Platonized* frequently seems to serve as a surreptitious racial modifier that simply belittles the Western Christian tradition and juxtaposes it against an untainted African cosmology that black Pietism should recover. Just as ontological blackness needs the opposition of whiteness for intelligibility, since it cannot overcome oppression without the presence of the oppressor, Douglas’ black faith tradition needs *Platonized* Christianity as a foil for its successful self-definition.

Perhaps most importantly, Douglas’ goal of black churches remaining faithful to a black faith tradition that has its origins within an African worldview assumes that being ideologically “black” or “African” is what constitutes the highest value and priority for churches expressing a conservative moral theology and predominantly comprised of African-Americans. Even if the sort of ontological blackness that Douglas has in mind were to be the highest value pursued by these churches in regard to sexuality, it is not clear how according sexuality this sacred value outside of marriage would now render more “black” a theological system founded upon a European manuscript tradition partially owing its development to the Protestant Reformation.

In Search of an African Worldview

Douglas privileges an African worldview because it does not make a distinction between sacred and secular realities, and all that is of the world is of God. Thus, the dualisms found in *platonized Christianity* are collapsed because the sacred and the secular are ultimately unified, and ethical polarities involving sexuality are dissolved. In recovering its African religious heritage, Douglas sees black Pietism as casting off restraints imposed upon it by Western Christianity to inhabit a space of liberation and boldness. She suggests that once the sacred and secular are unified “what are traditionally considered secular resources may be used within the Black church to foster discourse on sexuality.”⁶⁸⁵ Included in these resources are Black fictional literature, and the music and movies of Black culture.⁶⁸⁶

According to Douglas, to esteem embodied sexual practices between loving and equal partners is intrinsic to African traditional religious practices and the black faith tradition. For example, “reflective of many African cultures from which they came, enslaved women were not ostracized for having engaged in premarital sexual activity or for having children outside of marriage.”⁶⁸⁷ Douglas cites John Blassingame’s observation that “because Africans so highly valued children, they could neither conceive of the European concept of celibacy nor, like the European, regard sexual intercourse as dirty, evil, or sinful. Puberty rites in West Africa, for instance, were either preceded or followed by training of the young in their sexual

⁶⁸⁵ Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, 132.

⁶⁸⁶ Douglas, 132.

⁶⁸⁷ Douglas, 65.

responsibilities.”⁶⁸⁸ While this may be true, Douglas’ propensity for generalization shrouds many of Africa’s variegated and protean marital and sexual practices from view.

In spite of Douglas’ claim, I maintain that a search for *an* African worldview that can define sexual ethics for an entire “black” community is a mythological search of epic proportions. In Africa there exists a variety of religious forms and cultural practices regarding marriage and sex that are derived from particular—and often divergent—cosmological understandings. For example, John Mbiti writes that fornication, rape, seduction, homosexual relations, and children watching the genitals of their parents all constitute sexual offences in a given community, and that African peoples are quite sensitive to any departure from accepted norms concerning all aspects of sex.⁶⁸⁹ Conversely, he describes the Maasai as having an arrangement where members of the same initiation group could have sex with the wives of fellow members.⁶⁹⁰ Mbiti describes how the Batoro in Central Africa beat up the body of an unmarried person after death to show that the unmarried receive no respect in the eyes of society. Moreover, for the Batoro, “virginity symbolizes purity not only of the body but also of moral life; and a virgin bride is the greatest glory and crown to her parents, husband and relatives.”⁶⁹¹ This veneration of virginity is also found within the East African Bantu society where the *kungwi* (a young woman’s lifelong mentor) insures that the bride is a virgin before marriage. If no hymen is found, she puts chicken blood on the cloth of virginity that she places under the bride to prove that the bridegroom was her first sexual partner.⁶⁹²

⁶⁸⁸ Douglas, 65.

⁶⁸⁹ Mbiti, *African Religions & Philosophy*, 193.

⁶⁹⁰ Mbiti, 192.

⁶⁹¹ Mbiti, 185.

⁶⁹² Noel Quinton King, *African Cosmos: An Introduction to Religion in Africa*, First edition (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Pub Co, 1985), 45.

In the Akan society of Ghana, “the distinction between the sacred and the secular is not neatly drawn: all is one bundle of life with the religious postulate.”⁶⁹³ While this worldview resembles Douglas’ description of an African worldview, the Akan’s concomitant mandate that marriage must precede sexual intercourse diverges from Douglas depiction of African sexuality. A man acquires the right to have sex with his impending bride by “paying compensations to the parents of the girl and to her brothers whose role is said to include protecting her against seducers,” because sex outside of marriage is labeled as seduction.⁶⁹⁴ Similar to Mbiti’s description, in Akan society virginity is highly extolled, and marriage is viewed as the fullness and apotheosis of life.⁶⁹⁵

The preceding instances of African marriage and sex practices were selected not to propose that they be taken as the ‘true’ representations of African views of marriage and sex, but to problematize the notion that an African worldview exists. If one can be proved to exist, it still does not embody a univocal sexual ethic that inveighs against Christian proscriptions of sex outside of marriage. Therefore, the desirability of virginity before marriage is not merely a phenomenon resulting from European Christian influence—for it can be found in many African societies. Insofar as many of these African social systems focus almost exclusively on curtailing and monitoring only female sexuality, recovering an African worldview means also retrieving the gender based injustice also enclosed therein—a notion that Douglas would decidedly reject.

⁶⁹³ John Pobee, “Aspects of African Traditional Religion,” *Sociological Analysis* 37, no. 1 (1976): 18, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3710065>.

⁶⁹⁴ Pobee, 16.

⁶⁹⁵ Pobee, 16.

When placed on the ground, Douglas' abstractions are not congruent and numerous contradictions emerge that render her premises irresolute and unstable.

Conclusion

Douglas constructs a rhetorically persuasive, but ultimately weak Liberationist argument for eschewing black Pietist sexual norms in favor of a more holistic approach to sexuality. The problem is that Liberationism, like Cone's attempt to baptize Black Power, attempt to use Christian concepts that do not fit, in order to draw conclusions that can be perfectly drawn without the use of the Bible or Christian principles. Douglas attempts to repudiate Paul's sexual ethics as Platonic, but Paul's exaltation of the body's value and goodness do not render him Platonist. The fact that he expresses a high view of bodily holiness does not automatically entail bodily denigration. But it is here where Douglas' argument is actually strongest, because her other postulates are undergirded by insufficient evidence. Concrete representation of the abstract conceptions of a holistic "African worldview" or "black faith tradition" simply do not exist. If they do exist, then she bears the responsibility of providing evidence as to where they can be found.

Ultimately, this chapter shows that Douglas' conclusions are rationally inadequate because they rest upon unstable premises. The foundations of her project are based upon historical reconstructions drawn from other scholars and she does not provide substantial evidence to support them. This allows womanists to examine the black Pietism tradition to ascertain whether it is more internally consistent in confronting and resolving the issue of same-sex relationships.

CONCLUSION

Cone's original conclusions from *Black Power and Black Theology* and *A Black Theology of Liberation*, especially his depiction of God and Jesus as black, do not carry the same epistemic and theological weight as they did within earlier academic contexts where black power and black consciousness movements inspired a generation of theologians to wrestle with the meaning of theology for black people. However, in this dissertation I have tried to show that the Black Liberationist Paradigm that he inaugurated remains the predominant perspective adopted by black liberation theologians and womanists. Interestingly enough, many of these Liberationists were formerly Pietists.

This is because most black churches, although evangelical, send their ministers and aspiring pastors to liberal seminaries and divinity schools that draw upon the work of postmodern scholars and liberal theologians as the major contributors to their theological perspectives. The seminaries that remain theologically orthodox are usually associated with white denominations that did not traditionally welcome black students, including the Presbyterian Church of America and Southern Baptist Seminaries, or they are Pentecostal seminaries that draw the boundaries of their theology too narrowly for most black Protestants. So then, many black students pursue theological degrees in order to be ordained, but in the process of matriculation, they become converted from the Pietist paradigm to the Liberationist paradigm, and then return to their churches and preach messages that employ the same terms, but now with different meanings. The role of the Bible, sin, and salvation shift

within the new framework, but congregations, impressed with the theological acumen of the newly hired pastor, embrace the new teaching with enthusiasm.

This is the ethical issue that provides the overarching backdrop for this dissertation. The issue of sexuality foregrounds the paradigmatic incommensurability that exists between black liberation theologians and womanists, and black orthodox pastors and clergy. The issue of sexuality in the past few years has provided a public forum in which ethical incommensurability occurs whenever a prominent black singer, pastor, or preacher makes a public statement regarding the sinfulness of homosexuality, or whenever a law is passed expanding the rights of same-sex couples. The battle lines become immediately drawn, and on facebook, twitter, and personal blogs, each side attacks the other with vehemence and zeal.

On one side, there are the pastors, like the National Fellowship of Concerned Black Pastors, who extol the Bible as the definitive guide for all matters of life. On the other, liberation theologians like Forrest Harris or womanists like Renita Weems defend the rights of same-sex couples to enjoy liberation, wholeness, and freedom from oppression and discrimination. Lost in the rancor of the debates are two important issues that my dissertation has tried to illustrate. First, black theologians and womanists, in attempting to critique black church leaders presume that they operate from within the same tradition and trajectory, but without the white fundamentalist baggage. This dissertation shows that Pietism comprised early black Christianity—the very same pre-Civil War religion that black liberation theologians view as the precursor of their liberationist paradigm. However, these theologians and womanists disavow major constitutive elements of the tradition that they claim as inspiration. These include the belief in personal sin and the idea that all human beings stand as sinners

before a holy God and are in need of salvation and redemption through the blood of Jesus Christ. They reject the belief that the Bible is the Word of God and carries infallible authority. They also question the belief that sin is both personal and social, and concentrate on its social dimensions. Lastly, they challenge the belief that adherence to biblical moral codes and imitation of Christ through a process of sanctification is central to the Christian life, thus leading to the major issue that this dissertation attempted to address.

The major claim that this dissertation makes is that the two paradigms are incommensurable. Meaning, their differences cannot be synthesized at the level of their premises or hypergoods without violently altering one or the other's identity. Also, there exists no way of deciding through an external rational standard who is right or who is wrong because both paradigms can only proffer arguments based upon their own internal theological standards. Furthermore, the public debates are destined to end in disagreement because the two sides are not entirely clear regarding the ways in which they disagree. For example, Forrest Harris claims that the Bible's first century worldview is not applicable to issues of contemporary sexuality, but the conversation regarding why black pastors still view it as regulative, while he does not, does not occur. Has he changed his mind based upon modern biblical scholarship? Do the pastors still attest to the truth of the Bible through their religious experience? Without conversations that address issues of methodological and perceptual incommensurability, each side speaks more and more loudly until conversation stops, or until offense sets in.

What is needed, in my view, is a new black orthodox theological tradition that is academically rigorous, embraces orthodox theological principles, and maintains a commitment to justice on behalf of black people and which can create space for academic conversations

outside of the womanist and black liberationist discourse. Examples of this kind of scholarship includes Theodore Walker's *Empower the People* and virtually the entire corpus of Cheryl Sanders. Due to the fact that the black academic guild is now composed primarily of liberationists or those engaging liberal and post-Christian kinds of scholarship, the marginalization of orthodoxy is not surprising. However, there needs to remain theological space for the simple gospel, the gospel believed by slaves and assented to by generations of black church practitioners. That gospel is simply this: All have sinned, and are separated from God. The only way to be reconciled to God is by believing that the blood of Jesus cleanses us from sin. By believing that Jesus rose we gain victory over sin and death, we gain eternal life, and we are empowered to defeat Satan in all of his manifestations, whether personal or social.

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