

Is African American Christianity, as Traditionally Understood,
Spiritually Detrimental to African Americans?¹

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§ 1. Introduction

This paper can be interpreted as an exercise in regional ontology from the vantage point of Husserlian phenomenology, even though I am not technically a Husserlian phenomenologist. (If I had to identify myself by the phenomenological tradition in which I belong, I would identify myself as being a hermeneutically-sensitive Africana phenomenologist.) *I* regard this paper as an investigation of African American Christianity using the conceptual apparatus of Africana phenomenology to examine how African American Christian identities have been constituted in an antiblack society.² More specifically, this paper investigates whether or not traditional African American Christianity and black liberation theology can constitute African American Christian identities in any way that does not trap African American Christians in nihilism, and, if so, how can African American Christian identities be constituted in a non-nihilistic manner. This presupposes that constituting one's identity along nihilistic lines is spiritually unhealthy.

In order to answer the question posed in the title of this paper, I first should answer the following questions: (1) Is first-generation black liberation theology, as represented by such theologians as James Cone, a reactive, nihilistic movement? (2) And

¹ I thank Tanya Jeffcoat for reading and comment on an earlier draft of this paper.

² Here I am indebted to the phenomenological work done by Lewis Gordon throughout his career and Paget Henry's description of Africana phenomenology.

is traditional African American Christianity passively nihilistic? (3) Are more recent manifestations of black liberation theology (e.g., Dwight Hopkins' "theology of return") that attempts to establish a genuine continuity between Christian slave religion and contemporary black liberation theology passively nihilistic? In fact, these preliminary questions are all just components of a more general question: Is it possible for African Americans to constitute themselves as Christians in an antiblack, North American context without those identities being manifestations of a deeply-rooted nihilism, making them not the result of beneficial identity-formation but a *reaction* to antiblack racism and white supremacy? If I can answer that question, then I will have answered the question posed in this paper's title.

However, before I answer any of the above-mentioned questions, I will examine how African American Christian identities have been constituted by analyzing a few representative oral testimonies and writings that provide leading clues for us to unearth some of the general features of African American Christian identities. Such an examination also enables us to see how these identities are constituted in relation to specific theological contentions.

Unlike most academic philosophy papers, this one will not announce its conclusions at the outset. I will wait until the last section to answer the above-mentioned questions. That way, the reader can work through the paper, access the evidence on their own, and answer the questions before reading my answers to them.

§ 2. Defining Concepts, Clarifying Method

2.1. What, Exactly, is Nihilism?

In the Introduction, I mention nihilism in relation to African American Christianity. But what, exactly, do I mean by *nihilism* in this paper? Maybe it will be easier for me to define what I mean by *nihilism* by stating what I *do not* mean by the term. By *nihilism*, I *do not* mean Nietzsche's conception of nihilism.³ While Nietzsche's nihilism is rooted in an existential approach, it is insufficiently phenomenological. That is, it is too rooted in a genealogical approach that cannot transcend the natural attitude in any way. There is something in Nietzsche's conception of nihilism that could be incorporated into a more phenomenological understanding of nihilism, though: namely, his distinction between active and passive nihilism. However, phenomenologically speaking, nihilism is not about *power*, which is an empirical concept, but is concerned with describing the *motivation or the lack thereof* in a person or group of people, both of which describe non-empirical features of human existence.

So when I make the distinction between active nihilism and passive nihilism, I am distinguishing between, say, a motivation to do something simply as a reaction against something or someone else and a lack of motivation to respond to something or someone, respectively. Stated differently, active nihilism can be interpreted in this paper as being motivated to act based on a reluctance or outright failure to constitute one's own identity, and instead act in response to something or someone else – in the case of this paper, that something else would be antiblack racism and social institutions that enshrine it and that someone else would be European and Euro-American people. Passive nihilism, on the

³ Two representative descriptions of Nietzsche's conception of nihilism are in Book 1 of his *Will to Power*. They are presented in sections 22-23 of that section (pp. 17-18). I was reminded of these passages by reading Lewis R. Gordon, "Of Tragedy and the Blues in an Age of Decadence: Thoughts on Nietzsche and African America," in *Critical Affinities: Nietzsche and African American Thought*, eds. Jacqueline Scott and A. Todd Franklin (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2006), 88, 97n39.

other hand, would be Christianity acting as something that enables African Americans to avoid confronting the reality of their existence in America. As a facilitator of passive nihilism, Christianity lets African Americans indulge the ideal of the beloved community while not equipping them with the political wherewithal to combat the oppressive conditions in which they live as a result of antiblack racism and the entire sociopolitical system that reinforces it.

Nevertheless, there is something missing even in this more phenomenological conception of nihilism. I think Cornel West describes what is missing when he links *nihilism* to the phenomena of *hopelessness*, *meaninglessness*, and not being loved by anyone (or what West calls *lovelessness*) in *Race Matters*. In the chapter entitled, “Nihilism in Black America,” West defines *nihilism* in relation to these three phenomena as follows: “*Nihilism is to be understood here not as a philosophic doctrine that there are no rational grounds for legitimate standards or authority; it is, far more, the lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and (most important) lovelessness.*”⁴ While West complains that many of his commentators and critics have attached too much importance to that chapter on nihilism in *Race Matters*,⁵ I consider his analysis of the existential dimensions of nihilism to be one of his lasting contributions to Africana existential philosophy. All that we need to concentrate on for

⁴ Cornel West, *Race Matters*, 22-23.

⁵ West protests the emphasis placed on “Nihilism in Black America” chapter of *Race Matters* because he thinks that it has been misinterpreted by critics. He writes:

[D]espite claims in the chapter about the centrality of corporate market institutions and racist stereotypes in shaping nihilistic responses or how these responses are not forms of pathological behavior but rather efforts “of people bereft of resources in confronting the workings of US capitalist society” (p. 25), critics insist on characterizing my position as a conservative blaming-the-victim perspective. (Cornel West, “Afterword,” in *Cornel West: A Critical Reader*, 357-58)

the purposes of this paper, however, is how both active and passive nihilisms can be understood in a Westian sense as expressions of and responses to hopelessness, meaninglessness, and lovelessness.

Active nihilism, then, would be a proactive response to the hopelessness fostered by living in American society as an African American, especially as an African American who lives in an economically depressed urban neighborhood or rural area and is subject to the dehumanizing effects of antiblack racism (and increasingly a global neoliberal capitalist economic order). Active nihilism would lead African Americans to embrace a militant nationalism. In Christianity, active nihilism could lead African American clergy and laypersons to adopt a racialized Christianity that excludes anyone who is not oppressed from being a fellow sibling in Christ. It could also lead African American clergy and laypersons to value issues of liberation and love of the oppressed over any other ethical or religious value. Passive nihilism, in contrast, would lead African Americans to embrace a more quietist or, better yet, status quo Christianity. Such a Christianity is one that teaches its adherents that all people will earn their otherworldly reward for tolerating earthly injustices while they are alive.

2.2. What Phenomenological Method Is Being Used in This Paper?

Or, Less Politely, How in the Hell Is This Phenomenology?

By now, there should be at least a few readers who have asked themselves the question: How in the hell is what I'm doing phenomenology? I would like to answer that question before we move on to our examination of African American Christianity. As I mentioned in the Introduction, I am not a Husserlian phenomenologist. So one should not expect me to envision phenomenology "as a philosophy whose method and basic

principles [are] sufficiently cogent to warrant the designations ‘rigorous science’ and ‘first philosophy.’”⁶

If I am not a Husserlian phenomenologist, then how do I envision phenomenology? I think of phenomenology as a way of philosophizing that examines the valuations, cognitions, and presuppositions of human experiences. So far, so good. Yet, unlike Husserlian phenomenology, my approach to phenomenology does not think that there is anything like a direct, unmediated experience of a phenomenon. Every phenomenon we experience is direct in its immediacy; however, any epoche, whether it be the phenomenological epoch or the transcendental (eidetic) epoche, is a mediated analysis of the phenomenon in question. It is mediated because every act of reflection – as Kierkegaard, William James, Charles S. Peirce, and Gabriel Marcel have taught us – is retrospective, and thus mediated. For the phenomenologist, our descriptions of experienced phenomena are mediated by phenomenological concepts, i.e., concepts that seek to convey the sense of the described phenomena in such a way that they cause us to recollect our lived experience of those phenomena.

Moreover, no approach to philosophizing, even phenomenology, can escape all of the presuppositions, valuational preferences, and personal biases that constitutes the inquirer. Hence, there is no such thing as a pure, unmediated phenomenological intuition of essences that can be presented to us through a retrospective description. Even Husserlian imaginative variations seeking to uncover the essences of a phenomenon in individual instances of experiencing it at most only approximate the structure of the phenomenon as experienced by conscious persons sufficiently like ourselves. The closest

⁶ Burt C. Hopkins, “Phenomenology,” in *Edinburgh Dictionary of Continental Philosophy*, 448.

“objects” that we can intuit its invariant structure without that structure depending on our sociohistorical and cultural circumstances are formal logico-mathematical objects.

Additionally, my approach to phenomenology, then, has me in agreement with Heidegger that there is something more experientially basic than intentionality, but I differ with Heidegger with how that something is experienced by us. Intentionality is the necessary starting point for uncovering the well spring of intentionality, namely being, or, more accurately, being-with-others-in-the-presence-of-that-that-makes-it-possible-for-any-of-us-to-be-in-the first-place. However, this whatever-it-is cannot be experienced apart from our experiences of the lifeworld. That is why I work almost exclusively within the first level of phenomenological reductions, but do not perform them universally, i.e., on each and every act of intentionality and world-constitution we perform. Rather, I bracket only a certain region of the lifeworld, perform the first reduction(s) on that region, and then take the results of the reduction(s) and construct a phenomenological (regional) ontology.

And as an inquiry performed within the tradition of Africana phenomenology, I will concentrate on the constitution of African American Christian identities. This means that I will necessarily simplify the diversity and complexities of African American Christian identities and emphasize what they have in common: namely, each of these Christian identities were constituted and accepted by persons who live with the legacies of the Middle Passage, antebellum slavery, segregation (both de jure and de facto), and a Europeanized Christianity (or what some have called Whitenity) that embraced antiblack racism. Even for those African American Christian identities that were constituted in opposition to Europeanized Christianity, they were constituted within a

sociohistorical context in which antiblack racism permeated the American landscape and affected those persons of African descent who became Christians.⁷

§ 3. Depicting Antebellum African American Christianity Phenomenologically

This section tries to satisfy Will Coleman’s injunction that the testimonies of African American slaves (and freepersons) about their lived experiences of Christianity “should be taken as they are recorded without any attempt to Christianize them or make them comply with our presuppositions of what they ought to say. They should be allowed to speak for themselves, from the reality found in the text.”⁸ Yet, it does not seek to faithfully translate these testimonies into narratives “that contribute new insights into the language of liberation.”⁹ Nor does it aim to enter into their world, come to understand how it was constituted, “and ultimately make [it] our own.”¹⁰ Rather, it seeks to see how some African American slaves constituted various forms of Christian identities in relation to, and often times in conflict with, Europeanized Christianity.

3.1. Methodological Clarification: Handling Historical Evidence and Their Scholarly Interpretations Carefully

This epistemic humility on my part is due to the level of difficulty of my constituting the meaning of a historical text (record of an oral testimony) that expresses

⁷ For a representative example of how African American Catholic identities were constituted within the sociohistorical context of a Europeanized Christianity and the legacies of the Middle Passage, antebellum slavery, segregation, and antiblack racism, see Joseph Brown, S.J., [cite book]. For some representative articles on the diversity of African American Christian identities from the eighteenth-century to the present, see Cornel West and Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., eds. *African American Religious Thought: An Anthology* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003). For how African American Christian identities were constituted in the crucible of North American (i.e., U.S.) slavery, see Dwight N. Hopkins and George C. L. Cummings, eds. *Cut Loose Your Stammering Tongue: Black Theology in the Slave Narratives*. 2nd ed. Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003.

⁸ Will Coleman, “Coming through ’Ligion,” 49.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

an experience I can “know” at best only second-handedly without embracing historicism and remaining in the natural attitude (i.e., interpreting the texts without questioning how they were constituted by the one who wrote the text and, in the cases of those texts that were not written by the one whose testimony has been recorded, the one who gave the testimony).

Here the question arises: Does my own lived historicity enable me to at least partially re-constitute the meaningfulness of past persons’ testimonies? This becomes an even more difficult question to answer once one asks this question: How can I be sure that I am re-constituting past persons’ testimonies in such a way that it is a plausible expression of the phenomena experienced by those persons that remains faithful to the modalities of lived experience in which those phenomena were initially experienced? And how can this be possible, given that every act of re-construction is not the original, but involves an act of interpretation on the part of the one who re-constitutes the experience?

This is where I have to take a leap of faith that some fellow phenomenologists could interpret as non-phenomenological, or even worse *outside the boundaries of any respectable phenomenology*. The leap of faith is ontological in nature. It can be stated philosophically as follows:

All embodied human persons – whether or not these persons are our ancestors, are alive now, or will be our descendents – are united because they all experience the world in similar modalities of (human) existence. These modalities of human existence include hunger, sex, lust, pride, greed, love, friendship, honor, hate, joy, shame, fragility, mortality, and natality. Ontologically speaking, these modalities of existence serve as *the* condition for anyone to interpret historical evidence (including written texts) at all. That is, before one can ask the epistemic question – how can humans understand the meanings of historical evidence, and thus have access to those meanings in a way similar to the ones who originally

experienced them? – one would have to presuppose that all human persons and their actions, at least some of them, are similar enough regardless of differences in culture and in time that they are intelligible to someone in the present. In short, these modalities of human existence are transcultural and transhistorical nature, serving as the basis for lived human experience and as the unifying link between human persons in the past and in the present. Yet, each persons is also irreducibly unique and experiences the world in his or her own idiosyncratic way – manifesting these transcultural structures of lived human experience differently depending on one’s particular gender, personal circumstances, temperament, educational level, intelligence, ethnicity identity, religious affiliation, historical epoch, etc.¹¹

This requires an obvious ontologization of phenomenology, an ontologization of phenomenology in the tradition of the Heidegger of *Being and Time*; Gabriel Marcel in the second half of his *Metaphysical Journal* and his Gifford Lectures, *The Mystery of Being*; and arguably William Ernest Hocking in *The Meaning of God in Human Experience*.¹²

This means that while I am significantly different than those African Americans who were slaves, lived through the Reconstruction Era, and suffered the indignities of Jim Crow, it is still possible for me to encounter them and have a meaningful interpersonal relationship with them via historical artifacts, documents, and oral narratives, even though they have died long ago. It also means that their lived experience is similar enough to mine for me to recollect (in the sense of co-constituting the meaningfulness of past persons’ lived experience by an act of constitution in the present)

¹¹ Excerpt from an unpublished paper I presented at the 2004 New Mexico/West Texas Philosophical Society’s conference in San Antonio entitled, “A Prolegomenon to a Phenomenological Philosophy of History.”

¹² For more on how Marcel ontologizes phenomenology, see my dissertation, *Being Persons in a Depersonalizing World: Marcel and Gordon on the Human Condition in Late Western Modernity*, Introduction and chaps. 1-3. For a concise description of how Hocking ontologizes phenomenology in *The Meaning of God in Human Experience*, see Bruce Wilshire, “Passing for Meaning: W. E. Hocking’s Religious-Philosophical Views,” in *A William Ernest Hocking Reader*, eds. John Lachs and D. Micah Hester (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2004), 231-44.

the socio-cultural circumstances and the intentional structures of the historical persons and their interpersonal relations with their contemporaries. To recollect, then, is to be placed in the position of a historian. That places the responsibility on me to stand in the phenomenological “gap” where the historical moment becomes an identifiable event, subject to re-interpretation and re-constitution. It also requires me to walk the tightrope of ambiguity and uncertainty when interpreting historical evidence, e.g., authenticated documents recounting oral testimony. Despite the always questionable ontological and epistemic status of historical evidence,¹³ I still have to accept responsibility for whatever I accept as legitimate from various African American religious scholars and religious historians. Engaging in a phenomenological analysis of the lived experiences enslaved and newly freed African Americans had of Christianity, then, not only let us be faithful to historical “phenomena,” but also requires us to discern the reliability and truthfulness of my interpretation of their lived experiences.¹⁴ That is why for the remainder of this section, I will based my phenomenological outline of the testimonies from formerly enslaved African American primarily on the work of several African American religious

¹³ This uncertainty concerning the authenticity of historical evidence is called “the problem of the document.” It is a phenomenon examined by Michel Foucault.

¹⁴ R. G. Collingwood’s answer to problem of the document is articulated in the following excerpts from *The Idea of History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1969):

Whether he accepts or rejects or modifies or reinterprets what his so-called authorities tell him, it is he that is responsible for the statement which, after duly criticizing them, he makes. The criterion that he justifies him in making it can never be the fact that it has been given him by an authority. (244)

The critical historian has to discover and correct all these and many other kinds of falsification. He does it, and can only do it, by considering whether the picture of the past to which the evidence leads him is a coherent and continuous picture, one which makes sense. (245)

scholars who specialize in African American religious thought, antebellum African American Christianity, or both.

Despite these differences, though, it is still possible for us to encounter persons and have a meaningful interpersonal communication with them, even though those who are “speaking” to us, via historical artifacts and documents, might have died long ago. Because of the possibility for those in the past to tell us in the present via historical evidence, the most significant implication of Collingwood’s philosophy of history for historical studies is that other persons, even in previous historical periods,

3.2. Understanding the Testimonies of Antebellum African Americans Who Experienced Europeanized Christianity and African American Christianity

One of the testimonies that Coleman features in his essay is the testimony of Charlotte Sherold, a former slave of Charleston, South Carolina. Here is an excerpt from her testimony:

Charlotte Sherold: Spirits, White Jesus, Black Devil

The writer here told Charlotte about the “paly, green gestures,” and asked her if she believed the Lord was a black man. She was both shocked and amused.

Charlotte: “How can we believe it; the Lord must be white, because I never saw any other kind of people rise and redeem!” Then Charlotte began to laugh: “If the Lord was a big black man, white people would sure haf to run from him – for I one would run from him.” Charlotte continued, “God made two nations, the white and the black, and when we go to heaven we are all alike....

“We have a play in our church, ‘Heaven Bound,’ and everybody dresses in white like angels – the devil is a black man dressed in red. I believe that if you go to the devil with badness, you get pitched over to the devil to stay.”

Writer: “Does the devil make you work?”

Charlotte: “No, ma’am, you got to go in that fire and keep rolling over and over, burning.”

Writer: “What do you think Heaven is like?”

Charlotte: “Heaven is everlasting rest.”¹⁵

Coleman sees in her testimony “the deep tension some individuals experienced between non-Christian beliefs regarding the spirits [of the ancestors] and orthodox Christianity.”¹⁶ Her testimony also “reveals an internalized hatred of her own ethnicity.”¹⁷ Nevertheless, she thinks that “Christianity makes her life easier and eradicates the fear of death.”¹⁸ Christianity, for her, is a conservative religion, a religion of survival in a lifeworld in which she is scarred by oppression. Identifying as Christian, even though she holds antiblack prejudices against her own ethnic-racial group, she constitutes her religious identity in opposition to blackness. Indeed, she identifies Jesus as a white man, because, from her experiential vantage point, the only persons who have experienced genuine freedom are white persons. She identifies so strongly with the notion that Jesus is a white man that if he was not actually a white person, then she would no longer maintain her Christian identity. That is because only a white person can free anyone in her lifeworld. She cannot imagine the Son of God being any other racial identity than white and any other ethnicity than a Western European one. She is the unwitting victim of Europeanized Christianity, a Christianity that identifies whiteness with holiness.

She identifies blackness with the devil. To lessen their identification with blackness, Charlotte’s church occasionally performs a play where everyone other than the devil wears white clothing.¹⁹ Wearing white clothing places them ontologically closer to

¹⁵ Qtd. in Coleman 57.

¹⁶ Coleman 57.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid. 58.

the divine, or as Charlotte puts it “like angels.”²⁰ Due to the Manichean dichotomy between blackness and whiteness on earth, she yearns to be in heaven one day, since that is the only “place” where blacks and whites can live together and where she can rest and be liberated from her oppressive sociohistorical circumstances. In short, she embraces a passive nihilistic form of African American Christianity. However, there are many other forms of African American Christianity that were adapted from the antebellum period to the present period.

Another testimony that Coleman recounts is from Berle and Mariah Barnes of Seaboard, South Carolina. In these two excerpts, Mariah is the spokesperson for the narrative:

Berle and Mariah Barnes: “De Grace O’ God”

I sets here ’mongst my rags ans soot and gits so happy sometimes I jes ’bound to shout. I shouted de other night in bed. In de kitchen cookin’ my little piece o’ flour bread, in de gyarden workin’ out my greens, in de bed – wherever de grace of God swells up inside me I git so overjoyed I bound to praise my God....

Now I and Berle is 83 apiece. I got high blood pressure. De doctor told me a summer ago not to shout no more, but when I feels de grace o’ God steal over me I’s gwine to praise my God, don’t keer what de doctors say!²¹

Some of the marsters was good, and some was mean....And dey [i.e., slaves] wa’n’t ’lowed to meet to pray and shout neither; so dey’d have to slip off atter dark to one o’ de houses and hold de prayer meetin’s. Dey turned a big wash pot over close to de door, a little off’n de floor, so it’d ketch all de sound. Den de slaves’d shout and pray all dey pleased; every now and den one would slip out side to see if de pot was ketchin’ all de sound. Sometimes when one would git so full o’ the grace o’ God and raise de shout too high, de other slaves’d throw him down on de bed and kiver up his head so he couldn’t be hearn outside.²²

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid., 62.

²² Ibid.

Coleman considers Mariah Barnes' ecstatic worship of God to be paradoxical; she praises the Most High sitting in soot and rags, poor and oppressed. He also notes how her faith is sustained not by elaborate theological doctrines or Christian dogma, since she neither has any theological education nor can she read the Bible, but by "her direct experience of both God and human nature."²³ What Coleman seems not to appreciate is the fact that her worship of God is not paradoxical; rather, it is the outward expression of her gratitude for living with others like her who appreciate her in a world that dehumanizes and her love for a God who loves her in a world that despises her existence. That is what fuels her faith and gives her the strength to continually (re)constitute herself as a Christian. By worshipping God she affirms the meaningfulness of her existence in a world that perpetually asks her to justify her existence. Her Christian identity seems to be the "existential armor" that enables her to survive in an apparently absurd, antiblack world.

Berle and Mariah Barnes' testimony alerts us to the importance of kinesthetic worship and songs to the constitution of antebellum (and even many contemporary) African American Christian identities. One's piety is embodied in lively, and sometimes ecstatic, worship of God. To the extent that one is affectively and kinesthetically unresponsive to the Spirit of God, one is not conducting oneself as a true Christian. This runs counter to dominant models of European and Euro-American Christianity at that time. These testimonies show that elements of Western African practice of "spirit possession" were still operative in a North American context, but at least with its North American Christian practitioners it is reinterpreted as being "filled with the Holy Spirit" or "drunk in the Holy Ghost/Spirit," that is, as a sort of joyous spiritual intoxication.

²³ Ibid.

While the importance of kinaesthetic worship and songs to the constitution of African American Christian identities is obvious, the remainder of this paper will not examine how they contribute to the constitution of African American Christian identities. Such a task would involve my performing in depth phenomenological analyses of how certain common ego-displacing techniques in many African American congregations (e.g., shouting, style switching, and praise dancing) constitute one's religious identity, i.e., how it constitutes an identity which, if lost or destroyed, would make one's life no longer worth living.²⁴ Since I am not in a position to do such analyses at this time, this paper will restrict itself to an interpretation of selected testimonies and writings of African American Christians and scholars of African American Christianity.

The two above-mentioned testimonies, of course, do not exhaust the varieties of lived experiences that antebellum African American Christians underwent, had, or performed. However, these two testimonies provide us with a leading clue for how African American Christian identities were constituted by antebellum African American Christians. To supplement these testimonies, I will describe the larger theological frameworks available to African American Christians during the antebellum period and also mention some of the theological contentions that they asserted through their religious worship and their testimony (and witness)²⁵ to others about their lived experience of

²⁴ I thank Lewis Gordon for defining religious identity along these lines in a personal email correspondence. For an example of a study of African American Christianity that is broadly phenomenological and appreciates the kinaesthetic dimension of African American Christian praxis, see Theophus H. Smith, *Conjuring Culture: Biblical Formations of Black America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). For a scholarly, yet personal, study of African American Catholic identity that appreciates the significance of kinaesthetic and musical worship in the formation of African American Christian identities, see Brown, *To Stand on the Rock*.

²⁵ I reserve the term *witness* for those testimonies that are given with the expressed purpose of proselytizing, or at least testifying about why the divine is worth worshipping.

Christianity. This will involve my shifting from a more recognizable existential phenomenological treatment of actual testimonies to a more hermeneutic phenomenological examination of their testimonies. This is in an effort to place African American Christian identity formation in a large sociohistorical context, hence making it easier to offer a very general description of how African American Christian identities were constituted, i.e., a description that is appreciative of how antebellum African American Christians might have constituted the meaningfulness of their lifeworld.

This is how George C. L. Cummings interprets the recorded testimonies of former African American slaves who were Christians: That racialized slavery in the Americas, especially in North America (USA) was “ungodly and wrong, and...that God’s righteousness and justice meant that the wicked would be the recipients of divine retribution.”²⁶ Moreover, one’s individual salvation “is intimately interwoven with the slaves’ capacity for heroism, courage, and hope in the midst of despair. To be assured that God has called your name – elected you as one of God’s children – was to *know* that you were somebody; to *know* that you were not alone in the midst of evil; and to *know* that God would vindicate that which is right in the world.”²⁷

One way to understand antebellum African American identities, then, is to regard them as personal acts of identity formation in a sociohistorical circumstance where one has to imaginatively re-constitute various (Europeanized) Christian narratives in such a manner that African Americans in general and the enslaved African American communities in the South after the 1820s in particular view themselves “as the recipient

Testimony is meant to be a theologically neutral term whereas *witness* is a thick theological term indicating that testimony about one’s lived experience of the divine is normative for others.

²⁶ Cummings, 103.

²⁷ Ibid.

of God's gracious Spirit, who would ensure ultimate liberation."²⁸ Of course, what "ultimate liberation" meant varied among antebellum African American Christians. Many thought of it as an earthly social and political, as well as spiritual, liberation; in fact, they did not distinguish between social, political, and spiritual liberation, for liberation from sin and evil is a total liberation. Others regarded liberation as an other-worldly phenomenon, for the existential realities of white supremacy, as manifested in the institution of slavery, were seen as too entrenched to be overthrown by social and political means.

To see if the Christianity of the free African American Christians in the Northern states is sufficiently similar to that of antebellum African American Christianity in the South, I will examine excerpts from the writings of two notable nineteenth-century African American religious figures – Maria W. Stewart and Edward Wilmot Blyden (circa 1862). Given that Northern antebellum African American Christianity could publish and distribute their writings legally after the 1820s, they had more opportunities to write their own testimonies in the form of autobiographies, addresses, articles, and essays than enslaved African Americans in the Southern states, the Border States, and in the District of Columbia. Accordingly, the phenomenological portrait of the African American Christian identities constituted by antebellum African American Christians in the North can be constituted based on their writings.

We can further simplify the task of sketching the phenomenological portrait of antebellum African American Christianity by concentrating on one of the central themes crystallized in the writings of Stewart and Blyden, the idea of redemptive suffering. Each

²⁸ Ibid.

religious figure mentioned in the last paragraph accepted some version of redemptive suffering as a feature of their Christianity. The idea of redemptive suffering has been defined historically in one of two ways: “(1) suffering has redemptive benefits because it is pedagogical in nature; (2) suffering has redemptive benefits because it is punitive in nature and this punishment is deserved.”²⁹ Anthony B. Pinn notes that both ways of defining redemptive suffering historically “embrace a doctrine of God in which God is loving, kind, just, compassionate, righteous, concerned about humanity, and involved in human history....salvation in both cases involves a reuniting with God in which the divine will reigns supreme.”³⁰ Moreover, “with respect to salvation, history is understood as teleological in nature.”³¹ This element of African American Christianity has survived from the antebellum period to the present era. Of course, it did not survive in the same form after the end of de jure slavery, the Reconstruction era, and the legalized racial segregation of Jim Crow. It changed with the times and sociohistorical circumstances. Nevertheless, African American Christianity still, for the most part, conceives of God in terms of God’s omni-benevolence, omni-potency, and omnipresence. Furthermore, African American Christianity, as traditionally understood, still conceives of God as an active agent in human history, seeking to intervene in human affairs for the purpose of fulfilling His plans for humanity. A philosophically interesting implication of the idea of redemptive suffering is that it leads to a sort of moral perfectionism in the sense that God enables those who suffer to perpetually improve themselves morally.³²

²⁹ Anthony B. Pinn, “Introduction,” *Moral Evil and Redemptive Suffering*, 8.

³⁰ *Ibid.*

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.* 9.

At this point, we should examine excerpts from the writings of Stewart and Blyden for clues showing how the idea of redemptive suffering can be central to the identity of African American Christians in the antebellum period. For Stewart, redemptive suffering is a prominent theme in her February 27, 1833, “Address Delivered at the African Masonic Hall.” In that address, she states that the enslavement of Africans in North America and throughout the Western hemisphere was providential and pedagogical:

[I]t was our [African ancestors’] gross and abominations that provoked the Almighty to frown thus heavily upon us, and give our glory unto others. Sin and prodigality have caused the downfall of nations, kings and emperors; and were it not that God in wrath remembers mercy, we might indeed despair; but a promise is left us; “Ethiopia shall again stretch forth her hands unto God.”

But it is no use for us to boast that we sprung from this learned and enlightened nation, for this day a thick mist of moral gloom hangs over millions of our race. Our condition as a people has been low for hundreds of years, and it will continue to be so, unless by true piety and virtue, we strive to regain that which we have lost.³³

In short, she thought that African Americans were enslaved or, for the minority who were legally free, regarded as unwelcome guests in a hostile land because they have not learned sipped enough of the nectar from the cup of (European) Christian moral instruction and scientific knowledge.³⁴ Once her fellow African Americans learnt the lessons of Christian morality and could receive a solid education in the arts and sciences, she felt that their collective lot would improve tremendously.

While Stewart thought that racialized slavery was divinely ordained and an instrumental good for those enslaved, she condemned Euro-Americans for oppressing African Americans. She seemed to think that racialized slavery was not intrinsically evil;

³³ Maria W. Stewart, “Address Delivered at the African Masonic Hall,” *Moral Evil and Redemptive Suffering*, 69-70.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 70-71.

however, she thought that the injustices suffered by slaves were evil and warranted divine punishment on the perpetrators of such injustice. Her belief in the injustice of North American slavery led her to equate America with the biblical city of Babylon of Revelation 18. Stewarts described the America circa 1833 as follows:

She is, indeed, a seller of slaves and the souls of men; she has made the Africans drunk with the wine of her fornication; she has put them completely beneath her feet, and she means to keep them there; her right hand supports the reins of government and her left hand the wheel of power, and she is determined not to let go her grasp.³⁵

America, as it stood then, was an abomination in the sight of God. It was a land that could have taught Africans how to be civilized and morally upstanding (i.e., Christian). Yet, it neglected the spiritual needs of its entire African population, both slave and free, and, actually, contributes to their moral decline. If only Euro-Americans would extend the fruits of Western civilization to North American Africans, then both groups would be improved by the act.³⁶

Besides the idea of redemptive suffering, Stewart's address is an example of a common feature of antebellum African American Christianity, namely the reinterpretation of typology³⁷ so that it inverts the relationship between Europeanized Christianity and biblical narratives. Accordingly, antebellum African American

³⁵ Ibid., 73.

³⁶ Ibid., 73-74.

³⁷ By *typology*, I mean "the hermeneutic (interpretive) tradition that links biblical types or figures to postbiblical persons, places, and events. Moreover, it is crucial for this hermeneutic that each particular dyad of a biblical 'type' and its postbiblical 'antitype' should be understood to represent a fulfillment of prophesy" (Smith, *Conjuring Culture*, 55-56). Antebellum African American religious typology, or as Smith calls it "Black religious figuralism," could be understood as the systematic inversion of North American Puritan typology (Ibid., 56). For more on how African American typology is the inversion of North American Puritan typology, see Ibid., chap. 2, and Albert J. Raboteau, "African-Americans, Exodus, and the American Israel," in *African-American Christianity*, ed. Paul E. Johnson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 1-17.

reinterpretation of biblical typology places enslaved African Americans in the metaphorical, and less often literal, position of the ancient Israelites and places the U.S. in the metaphorical (and, again, less often literal) position of such sinful locals as Egypt during the enslavement of the Hebrews and the Babylon portrayed in Revelations. Such acts of reinterpretation were direct assaults on Europeanized Christianity and its pretenses. For example, Stewart assaults Europeanized Christianity in an 1831 address by reinterpreting the Puritan typology and how it regards the U.S. as a new Israel. In that address, she inverts that typology and identifies the Puritans and other Euro-Americans not as a new Israel, but as an oppressive Egypt. That interpretative reversal serves a damning indictment of America by exposing the hypocrisy involved in the Euro-American identification of America with Israel:

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....You may kill, tyrannize, and oppress as much as you choose, until our cry shall come up before the throne of God; for I am firmly 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 upon you the ten plagues of Egypt.³⁸

These reinterpretations also served as means of spiritually uplifting an oppressed people who, for the most part, had lost their indigenous languages, their cultures, and their gods within a few generations of enslavement in North America.

Blyden takes this phenomenon of reinterpreting Christianity to spiritually uplift African Americans to its logical conclusion: Africa is the Promised Land. In this spirit, he declares in his 1962 address, “The Call of Providence to the Descendants of Africa in America”:

³⁸ Qtd. in Raboteau 12.

It is theirs [i.e., the Africans in America's duty] to betake themselves to injured Africa, and bless those outraged shores, and quiet those distracted families with the blessings of Christianity and civilization. It is theirs [i.e., Africans in America's responsibility] to bear with them to that land the arts of industry and peace, and counteract the influence of those horrid abominations which an inhuman avarice has introduced-to roll back the appalling cloud of ignorance and superstition which overspreads the land, and to rear on those shores an asylum of liberty for the down-trodden sons of Africa wherever found. This is the work to which Providence is obviously calling the black men of this country.³⁹

He thinks that the providential signs that African Americans are supposed to be evangelized Africans and to create a genuine African Christianity are fourfold:

1. God has placed them in an environment “where they could receive a training fitting for them for the work of civilizing and evangelizing the land whence they were torn”⁴⁰ and has preserved them in the midst of their centuries-long oppression.
2. Being strangers in a hostile land, God placed them in a situation in which they would “long for some refuge from their social and civil deprivations.”⁴¹
3. “[B]y bearing a portion of them across the tempestuous seas back to Africa, by preserving them through the process of acclimation, and by establishing them in the land [namely, Liberia], despite the attempts of misguided men to drive them away.”⁴²
4. God has allowed the African American settlers of Liberia to establish a place in Africa for their fellow Africans in America to establish a genuinely African

³⁹ Edward Wilmot Blyden, “The Call of Providence to the Descendants of Africa in America,” *Moral Evil and Redemptive Suffering*, 83.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 84.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*

Christianity, which in turn will enable them to create an African nation on par with the other nations on the earth.⁴³

As we can see, the idea of redemptive suffering is a central feature of Blyden's formulation of African American Christianity. African Americans have been divinely ordained to suffer for the sake of creating a Christianity that is the basis for an African nation. African American suffering is justified, then, because it is only through African American Christians immigrating back to Africa that the entire continent be 'Christianized.'⁴⁴ His nationalistic African American Christianity is a well-articulated version of the Christianity held by some Northern African American Christians at the time and existed alongside more socially reformist forms of African American Christianity, i.e., forms of African American Christianity that understood African Americans not as a nation within a nation, but as neglected members of the American nation.

Blyden's formulation of African American Christianity unfortunately has some of the same vices as other forms of nationalistic African American Christianity, including a Christian chauvinism could be interpreted as a form of (well-intentioned, yet still problematic) imperialism, an inversion of Europeanized Christianity's imperialism. Pinn describes the imperialistic nature of Blyden's Christian chauvinism, and mid-nineteenth-century African American Christianity, this way: "Blyden argues that divine providence allowed Africans to be brought to North America as slaves to equip them with civil forms

⁴³ Ibid. 84, 86.

⁴⁴ See Ibid., 93-95.

of government and the Christian gospel. These skills and theology are then to be used for the redemption of Africa.”⁴⁵

Given the above outline of the contours of Northern antebellum African American Christianity, the question arises: What are some of the implications of Northern antebellum African American Christianity for the identity formation of African American Christians? Here are at least six implications:

1. African Americans have to constitute Euro-American people and their Christianity as an “alien world” that, paradoxically, they are familiar with.
2. Europeanized Christianity is spiritually detrimental to African American Christians, and for those African American Christians who accept a Europeanized Christianity they are psychologically and spiritually sick.
3. An African American Christianity, whether it be nationalistic or assimilationist, regards God as the God of the oppressed, and it is God’s providence that will liberate enslaved Africans in America someday.
4. North American slavery is a necessary evil that civilized an entire racial group and prepared them to civilize their fellow Africans by initiating them in the ways of an Africanized *and* Americanized Christianity. That is, redemptive suffering is an essential feature of how an African American Christian ought to view his or her oppression.
5. The biblical figure of Moses and the biblical narrative of the Hebrew exodus from Egypt is one of the founding mythopoetic symbols of African American Christian

⁴⁵ Ibid., 81.

identity formation. That is, to be an African American Christian is to be enslaved in a hostile, oppressive land and to await God's promise of liberation.

6. God is the One who suffers with those who suffered.

These implications seem compatible with antebellum African American Christianity in the Southern states, at least in theological content. In practice, they often differed from each other, as any religious practice would differ between people who created their own independent religious institutions and formal ecclesiastical structure and people who were legally barred from creating their own religious institutions and could only legally worship, if at all, under a (normally) white pastor who preached sermons that promoted their subjugation.

Now that we can see how antebellum African American Christianity, in both its Southern and Northern manifestations, is sufficiently similar to be regarded as one tradition, we can regard African American Christianity of the antebellum period as advancing the following theological contentions: "(1) God is both transcendent and immanent [i.e., beyond human experience and the realm of history yet also intimately involved in the affairs of humans on a historical level]; (2) God is present in the midst of the existential experience of absence encountered by suffering humanity; and (3) there is no evidence that antebellum African Americans made an ontological distinction between God as Father and Jesus Christ as God's beloved Son."⁴⁶ These theological contentions imply "that as Jesus suffered in his death and as humans go through the extremities of human suffering, God suffers with God's creation."⁴⁷ Yet, the forsakenness of African Americans is tempered, like the forsakenness of Jesus, by the Father's providence. More

⁴⁶ Goatley 156.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

specifically, as Jesus' crucifixion is *the* paradigmatic event for redemptive suffering (at least as understood by Christians), living in an apparently absurd, antiblack world as an African American Christian during the antebellum period is the embodiment of redemptive suffering, just on a less theologically significant scale. Indeed, many African American Christians of that period thought of redemptive suffering as their gift to God and as an opportunity to contribute something religiously significant to humanity, namely, a way to embody, and even perfect, Christian virtue in even the most degrading and dehumanizing circumstances. In other words, African American Christians can teach the rest of humanity about the perfectibility of humans when they live in accordance with divine providence, even in the worst of circumstances.

3.3. Sketching Post-Antebellum African American Christianity

The central elements of antebellum African American Christianity were preserved, in varying degrees, in post-antebellum African American Christianity. However, the collective frustration of African American Christians with the lost promise of the post-Reconstruction era led to the reemergence of a nationalistic African American Christianity, which originated in the thought of Nat Turner and other revolutionary African American clergy in the early nineteenth-century. At times, nationalistic African American Christianity affirms the worthiness of African American Christians to the exclusion of European and Euro-American Christians. In its extreme form, it conflates the individual and collective sins committed by European and Euro-American Christians with their being ontologically irredeemable. Two examples of nationalistic African American Christianity that excludes European and Euro-Americans from the salvific grace of God are the theologies of R. R. Wright, Jr., and Reverdy C. Ransom. For

Ransom, Christianity retained an ideal of brotherhood, “but only the Negro was Christian.”⁴⁸ Indeed, African American Christians are required to reclaim the teachings of Christ and the salvation of humanity from the “infidel Christianity” advanced by those “incarnate devils,” namely white persons.⁴⁹

Yet, there are dangers in non-nationalistic African American Christianity. African American religious scholars and religious ethicists such as Jacquelyn Grant, Michael Eric Dyson, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, Kelly Brown Douglas, Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, Cornel West, Eugene Genovese, and Victor Anderson have recognized the sexism, classism, and homophobia embedded in the practices of many African American clergy and laypersons. This is not the occasion to document how these forms of unjustified discrimination manifested themselves historically. What I am interested in philosophically is how these forms of discrimination close certain possibilities of being an African American Christian, or at least marginalize certain ways of being Christian to such an extent that they are feasible ways of being Christian. Following Lewis Gordon, one could describe this state of affairs as cases in which one’s chosen form of life is actively contested by others. Often times, others’ contestation of one’s chosen form of life is so strong that person’s choice is not an *option* from him or her, i.e., a choice that can be actualized in one’s life.⁵⁰ For example, an African American woman who has been called and chosen to accept her call to ministry cannot exercise that option as a member of the Church of God in Christ. While she can be an evangelist or a missionary, she cannot be ordained as a minister of the Church. Her felt identity as one-called-to-be-

⁴⁸ S. P. Fullinwider, “Racial Christianity,” *African American Religious Thought*, 492.

⁴⁹ Qtd. in *Ibid.*

⁵⁰ Lewis R. Gordon, “Fanon and Development: A Philosophical Look,” *Africa Development* 29.1 (2004): 85-87.

a-minister is not acceptable in this context. African American Christians who are homosexual, bisexual, and transgendered encounter similar phenomena in relation to their “problematic” identities, at least from the vantage point of African American Christianity, as traditionally understood. In order for them to participate in African American Christian forms of life, they normally have to sacrifice a significant element of their identity, e.g., their sexuality.

Nevertheless, there are worthwhile aspects of post-antebellum African American Christianity that should be mentioned. Higginbotham summarizes several of these worthwhile aspects of post-antebellum African American Christianity as follows:

The black church represented the realm where individual souls communed intimately with God and where African Americans as a people freely discussed, debated, and devised an agenda for their common good. At the same time that church values and symbols ordered the epistemological and ontological understandings of each individual and gave meaning to the private sphere of family – both as conjugal household and as “household of faith” – church values and symbols helped to spawn the largest number of voluntary associations in the black community.⁵¹

Many of these religious voluntary associations in turn served as the means of introducing African American women, along with men, to public life. Moreover, these associations fostered a sense in African American congregations that women’s spirituality is integrally connected with social activism and community uplift.⁵²

In terms of identity formation, participating in a congregation that affirms one’s existence in a world that systematical degrades makes it possible to constitute an African American identity in which one is a meaningful actional being, i.e., a doer of actions. African American Christianity, whether it be in its nationalistic or more assimilationist

⁵¹ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, “The Black Church: A Gender Perspective,” in *African American Religious Thought*, 200-01.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 201.

forms, is to constitute oneself as an African American Christian who *experiences* himself or herself as a co-constituter with God and other Christians of the divine significance of his or her existence *as an African American in an antiblack world* and of the meaningfulness of every human being, Christian and non-Christian, African American and non-African American. Furthermore, African American Christianity enables one to co-constitute the meaningfulness of his or her world as a servant of a God who acts for the liberation of oppressed people, particularly those who happen to be African Americans.

Given the sketch of post-antebellum forms of African American Christianity above, we can say that it has transformed the six implications for Christian identity formation of antebellum African American Christianity in the following ways:

- 1'. African Americans are a permanent part of American society, even though they are often marginalized socially and politically.
- 2'. African American Christianity is part of the religious landscape of America, with all of the social weaknesses of any other American religious tradition.
- 3'. An African American Christianity, whether it be nationalistic or assimilationist, regards God as the God of the oppressed, and it is God's providence that will liberate those who are oppressed.
- 4'. Redemptive suffering is still an essential feature of how an African American Christian ought to view his or her oppression.
- 5'. The biblical figure of Moses and the biblical narrative of the Hebrew exodus from Egypt continues to be one of the founding mythopoetic symbols of African American Christian identity formation. Even in a post-Civil Rights era America,

to be an African American Christian is to *still* live in an antiblack world, even though many African Americans are economically and socially prosperous.⁵³

6'. God is the One who is on the side of those suffering economically, socially, politically, and spiritually.

§ 4. Black Liberation Theology as a Continuation of African American Christianity⁵⁴

While black liberation theology is not considered to be African American Christianity as traditionally understood by many contemporary African American Christians, it has enough similarities to antebellum and more contemporary forms of African American Christianity to be classified as a theologically radical manifestation of African American Christianity. For its founding theological mission – i.e., to identify God as the God of the poor and the oppressed – is perhaps the oldest articulations of African American Christianity.

Black liberation theology's contemporary origins, though, can be traced back to some African American clergy's support of the black power movement in the mid-1960s, as evidenced in the National Committee of Negro Churchmen's theological statement on the Black Power movement published in the *New York Times* on July 31, 1966.

Academically, black liberation theology can trace its origins back to the first sustained attempt of some African American theologians in the 1960s to develop a theological language that supports the liberation of poor African American communities. The first

⁵³ For my analysis of how this is the case, see chap. 4, section 2, of my dissertation, *Being Persons in a Depersonalizing World: Marcel and Gordon on the Human Condition in Late Western Modernity*.

⁵⁴ This section is a revised and extended version of my article, "Liberation Theology," in *Routledge Encyclopedia of American Philosophy*, eds. John Lachs and Robert Talisse, forthcoming, 2008.

systematic expressions of black liberation theology were James H. Cone's *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969) and *A Black Theology of Liberation* (1970).

Following Dwight N. Hopkins periodization of black liberation theology in *Introducing Black Theology of Liberation*, this section concentrates on the two-staged development of contemporary black liberation theology.

4.1. The First Stage of Black Liberation Theology's Development

The pioneers of black liberation theology (e.g., James Cone, Gayraud S. Wilmore, and Major J. Jones) sought to interpret biblical Scripture in such a manner that Jesus's earthly ministry revealed God as God of the oppressed. Accordingly, a central motif of the gospel for their theology is Jesus's mission to uplift the downtrodden and the social outcast. In 1960s America, the African American poor qualified as the most downtrodden and socially outcast. Additionally, these early black liberation theologians sought to re-imagine the Christian tradition so that it could properly portray the beauty, dignity, worth, and humanity of African Americans, especially in a socio-historical milieu where "being black" was regarded as ugly, debased, unworthy, and inferior. That is why these first-generation black liberation theologians often built their theologies upon the sermons, prayers, music, and folktales of the very African Americans they purport to represent. In this vein, William Jones notes that "black liberation theology demands a de novo approach to Christian faith and its theological offspring, embracing only those aspects of the tradition whose pro-liberation potential has been clearly certified."⁵⁵ This is obviously a continuation of early African American Christians' Herculean hermeneutical efforts to reinterpret biblical scriptures in order to forge a life-affirming black *and* Christian existence in an antiblack world.

⁵⁵ William R. Jones, "Afterword," *Is God a White Racist?*, 210.

This project has led some first-generation liberation theologians, e.g., James Cone, to question the legitimacy of most Christian theologies in the West. Indeed, in *God of the Oppressed* (1975), Cone argues that the failure of most traditional Christian theologies to advocate on the behalf of the oppressed is not only an ethical lapse that does affect their core theological contentions; it is also a failure in their core theologies to formulate their theological concepts in accordance with God's will. Cone put the point this way:

When church theologians, from the time of Constantine to the present, failed to see the ethical import of the biblical God for the liberation of the oppressed, that failure occurred because of defective theology. To understand correctly the Church's ethical mistake, we must see it in connection with a prior theological mistake. The basic problem with theological ethics cannot be solved through a debate of the deliberative, prescriptive, and relational motifs of ethical norms.... Rather, we must unmask this error by analyzing its theological origin. The matter may be put this way: *Theologians of the Christian Church have not interpreted Christian ethics as an act for the liberation of the oppressed because their views of divine revelation were defined by philosophy and other cultural values rather than by the biblical theme of God as Liberator of the oppressed.*⁵⁶

He justifies his controversial judgment by contending that liberation is the central content of Christian theology. He defines Christian theology along those lines in first paragraph of *A Black Theology of Liberation*:

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

⁵⁶ James Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 199-200.

Israelite history, who is the God revealed in Jesus Christ, without recognizing that God is the God *of* and *for* those who labor and are over laden.⁵⁷

Defining Christian theology, thusly, black liberation theology, given that it is rooted in a community of people who have been oppressed for centuries, should work for the liberation of African American people, along with anyone else who is oppressed by the powers that be. We should remember, though, that black liberation theology must operate from an African American context, because that is where it originated and that, accordingly, like any other theology, it has to formulate its theological concepts in such a manner that it remains solidly rooted in its particular sociohistorical milieu.⁵⁸ Yet, this does not mean that biblical scripture can be interpreted willy-nilly. Black liberation theologians contend that their interpretations of Scripture, while always conditioned by social and historical factors, accord well with how God has revealed God's Self to humanity through the witness of the ancient Israelites and the ancient Christian Church.

Given this historicist sensibility (dare I say, "foundation") of black liberation theology, African American history is seen as "constitut[ing] a reservoir of meanings that form the basis of a kind of black piety, where we express loyalty to the sources of our existence (God, black ancestors, communities, a tradition of struggle), which makes us who we are and provide [sic] us with the tools to become who we are destined to be."⁵⁹ This entails that every African American Christian seek to embodied a religious solidarity with other African American Christians, whether they be past, present, or even future African American Christians.

⁵⁷ James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 1.

⁵⁸ See *Ibid.*, xi.

⁵⁹ Glaude, *In a Shade of Blue*, 69.

Nevertheless, these pioneers did not limit their attention only to the plight suffered by poor African Americans. During the 1970s, they allied themselves with Third World theologians, especially African theologians, as participants in the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT). They also critiqued what they regarded as American imperialism in Vietnam and attacked South African apartheid. Black liberation theology, then, could be considered a particular manifestation of the decolonization movements and struggles of oppressed people worldwide.

4.2. The Second Stage of Black Liberation Theology's Development

Like first-generation black liberation theologians, second-generation black liberation theologians have continued cross-cultural dialogues with liberation theologians from the Third World by participating in such forums as EATWOT. Unlike many first-generation black liberation theologians, though, many second-generation black liberation theologians have willingly used numerous European and Euro-American philosophical approaches and concepts to construct their theologians. These philosophical approaches include pragmatism (Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., Anthony B. Pinn), Whiteheadian process metaphysics (Henry J. Young), Foucauldian poststructuralism and genealogical approach (Dwight H. Hopkins), and phenomenology (Will Coleman, Theophus Smith).

I would like to single out Hopkins' approach to black liberation theology because it is perhaps the most influential version of second-generation black liberation theology in the U.S. and is one of the most influential positions in African American religious thought. Hopkins thinks that black liberation theology can have a fruitful dialogue with European and Euro-American postmodernism since both black liberation theology and postmodernist theorists are efforts to deconstruct the illusory universalism of Western

religious and political thought, which masks the white supremacy operative in American society. He also thinks that postmodernism is beneficial to black liberation theology because it opens a conceptual space for black liberation theologians to delve into the traditions, folklore, and music of the formerly voiceless and, in many cases, illiterate African American poor. Hopkins's own black liberation theology, as articulated in *Shoes That Fit Our Feet* (1993), is a testament to the possibilities available to black liberation theologians to construct a viable theology in a postmodern and pluralistic America. Indeed, the first section of this paper depends, in large part, on the scholarly work that Hopkins and other second-generation black liberation theologians have done in reigniting the theological vitality of antebellum slave religion and narratives in our present historical period.

What are the phenomenological consequences of black liberation theology in my account of African American Christian identity formation? Like antebellum African American Christianity, an African American Christian ought to battle for the liberation of fellow African Americans suffering from the detrimental consequences of antiblack racism and white supremacy. Yet, it places the Old and New Testament biblical injunction to liberate the oppressed to a central place in Christian dogma. It refuses to interpret Christianity in any way other than as a force of liberation. In that sense, its theological sensibilities are closer to antebellum African American Christianity than more contemporary forms of traditional African American Christianity. Any Christian identity constituted from a black liberation theology standpoint would have to regard acting for the cause of liberating oppressed people, especially African American people, as one of the most important, if not the most important, dimensions of one's existence. One's

aesthetic preferences, temperament, intellectual capacities, biases, and presuppositions must be ordered in such a manner that liberating oppressed people is the highest ideal from which one acts. In short, liberation is the practical and theoretical lens from which to interpret the goodness and rightness of one's actions and the actions of others.

§ 5. Is Traditional African American Christianity Nihilistic?

I have avoided answering the questions posed at the outset of this paper long enough. The short answer is, yes, I think that, on balance, traditional African American Christianity is passively nihilistic in the sense that I defined *passive nihilism* in Section 2.1. If one includes black liberation theology as a legitimate offspring of traditional African American Christianity, as I do, then it is actively nihilistic in the sense that I defined *active nihilism* in Section 2.1.

Traditional African American Christianity is passively nihilistic because it clings to the idea of redemptive suffering.⁶⁰ That is, it attempts to justify unjust circumstances by decreeing that they are divinely ordained and that we ought to learn from those circumstances. I have no problem with learning from unjust circumstances and becoming a better person for it. In that case, the unjust circumstances functioned as an *instrumental* good; yet, the circumstances themselves are still *intrinsically* evil. What I find problematic, though, is that one has to undergo unjust treatment for pedagogical reasons. That is the sort of idealization of injustice that African American Christians ought to reject, because it beguiles African Americans into believing that an intrinsic evil has been divinely sanctioned. I cannot imagine any spiritually healthy Christian identity that can

⁶⁰ The following critique of traditional African American Christianity is inspired by Anthony B. Pinn's critique of the idea of redemptive suffering in *Why, Lord? Suffering and Evil in Black Theology* (New York: Continuum, 1995).

be constituted based on such a masochistic religiosity. On this matter, I agree with contemporary black liberation theologians.

Contrary to traditional African American Christianity and its idea of redemptive suffering, African Americans are better off spiritually interpreting injustice and the suffering arising from it as being intrinsic evils. It follows that we should not only learn lessons from undergoing such intrinsic evils; we should actively work to eliminate them. Moreover, saying that God is not the cause of evil, but God's providence ordains these evils befall upon us, is theologically problematic. It is theologically problematic, at least for African American Christianity, because it flirts too closely with the notion that God willingly sanctions evil. That is something that African American Christianity cannot accept, for the God of African American Christianity is precisely the God *of* and *for* the oppressed and the godforsaken. Such a God cannot will for the oppressed to undergo oppressive circumstances. (It is an open question whether God is actually on the side of the oppressed, however. Some African American philosophers of religion, e.g., William Jones, have seriously questioned whether the idea of God entails the divine attribute of omni-benevolence, and, if so, what orthodox divine attributes would one have to sacrifice to maintain the view of God as omni-benevolence.)

As I stated earlier in this section, it is not only African American Christianity, as traditionally understood, that is nihilistic. Black liberation theology is also nihilistic, but in a sense different than traditional African American Christianity. Whereas traditional African American Christianity is passively nihilistic, black liberation theology, like its nationalistic ancestors, is actively nihilistic. Regardless of its intentions, black liberation theology tends to be spiritually detrimental for African American Christians because its

theological contentions often unwittingly invert the white racist logic, making them *reactionary* in nature and the African American Christian identities constituted based on them *parasitic* on Europeanized Christianity's racialized norms.⁶¹ Hence, if Europeanized Christianity asserts that Jesus is on the side of whiteness, then African American Christianity ought to assert that Jesus is on the side of the oppressed and constitute African American identities accordingly. Unfortunately, that assertion is made in a resentful tone, not in a way that spiritually uplifts those who are oppressed. That does not mean that it cannot be uttered as a celebration of life, more specifically, a celebration of being black, affirming the beauty of a non-European phenotypes and cultural practices.

Yet, even this life-affirmation constitution of African American Christian identity seems, more often than not, to be reactive, and not genuinely constructive. It still expresses what Victor Anderson calls "ontological blackness." In this case, an active nihilistic African American Christianity tends to reduce African American Christian identity to one that embodied a heroic blackness that is constructed in direct opposition to Europeanized Christianity. It does not effectively enable African Americans who co-constitute themselves with others as Christians to identify with religious norms that do not derive from liberation struggles against the antiblack racism of Europeanized Christianity in particular and of modern Western societies in general. Indeed, it often neglects how a religious identity can be constituted beyond the confines of liberation. Nor does it allow people to appreciate adequately how other dimensions of religious experience are often more valuable in the constitution of one's religious identity than the

⁶¹ The following critique of black liberation theology is inspired by Victor Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism* (New York: Continuum, 1995), esp. chap. 3.

struggle for liberation, e.g., piety, agapic and erotic love towards other persons, self-transcendence/ego-displacement for the sake of communing with others and with God. That is not to say that these extra-liberatory dimensions of religious experience are absent in actively nihilistic African American Christianity; however, it does mean that they are neglected for the sake of liberation, which is a worthwhile social and political goal, but can become an idol if it is not attached to other religious values.

Here is another way to critique the active nihilism of black liberation theology that fits into the interpretative framework of this paper better than the above critique. Any theology that is obsessed with liberation and struggle, even though those goals are often worth pursuing, can easily degenerate into idolatry, in this case into a radical politics masquerading as a full-blooded religious tradition. We have already mentioned two African American clergy whose theological positions succumbed to this form of idolatry. We also mentioned a few passages and theoretical articulations in Cone's theology that strongly flirt with that form of idolatry. The idolatry, real or apparent, of many formulations of black liberation theology negatively impacts the constitution of African American Christian identities in that if any African American Christian tries to live a form of Christianity that is not centered on liberation, that person is condemned as less than authentically Christian. This restriction of what it means to be a Christian cannot help but be spiritually detrimental for many African Americans who yearn to worship God as *more than* a liberator. Besides, it is often spiritually detrimental to those who accept those restrictions willingly, because it unnecessarily limits how they relate to God and to other people.

Yet, black liberation theologians are correct in arguing that liberation is a legitimate, and in fact indispensable, theological concept and focus of theological identity formation, especially in a sociohistorical environment that unjustly discriminates against African Americans. This is the lasting value of black liberation theology.

Let me end this paper by answering the questions raised in the Introduction, as they were initially posed there:

- 1) For the most part, first-generation black liberation theology is a reactive nihilistic movement; however, that is not necessarily a bad thing. Indeed, sometimes it is necessary to confront oppression with a single-mindedness of purpose. Nevertheless, it is detrimental when one constructs an entire theology based on a single concept, in this case liberation.
- 2) For the most part, traditional African American Christianity is passively nihilistic; however, like black liberation theology, its nihilistic status is not necessarily a bad thing. It is dangerous, however, to have one's religious identity foster a sense of contentment in a world that still questions the legitimacy of one's existence.
- 3) No, second-generation black liberation theology, as represented by Dwight Hopkins, is not passively nihilistic. Rather, they are closer to the active nihilism of the first-generation black liberation theologians.
- 4) Yes, it is possible for African Americans to constitute themselves as Christians in an antiblack, North American context without those identities being manifestations of a deeply-rooted nihilism. However, I am not sure what such an African American Christian identity would look like in practice. I only see intimations here and there in certain African American religious figures and scholars, e.g.,

Howard Thurman. Besides, maybe it is not possible for us contemporary persons, Christian or otherwise, to escape our nihilistic age.

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