OVERCOMING WHITENESS: A CRITICAL COMPARISON OF JAMES CONE’S BLACK LIBERATION THEOLOGY AND SHINRAN’S JÔDO SHINSHÛ BUDDHISM

Peter Herman, M.Div.

Dissertation Advisor: Peter C. Phan, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

“There is no truth in Jesus Christ independent of the oppressed of the land—their history and culture... Indeed it can be said that to know Jesus is to know him as revealed in the struggle of the oppressed for freedom.”¹ James Hal Cone challenged mainstream theology to start from the point of view of the oppressed and their central concern for liberation since his arrival in academe in the 1960s. This dissertation seeks to find an appropriate and affirmative response to Cone’s challenge. It seems difficult, if not impossible, to do so strictly within the bounds of Euro-American theology. In other words, if white theologians are to respond positively, we must first gain some purchase on our “whiteness”. This must be done both in the straightforward context of understanding what it means to be doing theology in white bodies in the 21st century and in the more complex sense of Cone’s construction of “white” and “black” in which “white” is that which assents—implicitly or explicitly—to a hegemonic paradigm of domination and subjugation while “black” is that which resists such a paradigm. It is, of course, in this latter sense that Cone claims “blackness” for God.

Cone proposed a project of dying to whiteness to be reborn in blackness, and this is examined in conversation and comparison with Shinran’s understanding of “foolishness” and “evil” in Shin Buddhism. Additional analogies can be made to the working of Amida Buddha’s Primal Vow in the Buddhist believer and to God’s ability to effect existential change in the Christian. The life and ministry of St. Oscar Arnulfo Romero and the political/theological work

of Dietrich Bonhoeffer are examined in relation to Cone’s dying/rebirth dynamic. Further examination is given to the early thinkers of the Frankfurt School and their attempts to theorize a kind of intellectual jacobinate that might be seen as analogous to the dynamic Cone seeks. Ultimately, Cone’s demand of white theologians can be seen as a call to an existential—as opposed to affective or performative—realignment of priorities in Christian community.
This work would have been impossible without the support of my partner and spouse, Dr. Janine Calabro; the mentorship of my advisor, Dr. Peter C. Phan; my friends and colleagues from Union Theological Seminary, Georgetown University, and Marymount University; or the life, example, and teaching of Rev. Dr. James Hal Cone.

This is dedicated to all of them,

Peter C. Herman
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Orthography and Text Abbreviations

The following abbreviations will be used throughout the text in referring to Cone’s work:

- *Black Theology and Black Power* will be abbreviated BTBP
- *A Black Theology of Liberation* will be abbreviated BTL
- *The Spirituals and the Blues* will be abbreviated SB
- *God of the Oppressed* will be abbreviated GOTO
- *My Soul Looks Back* will be abbreviated MSLB
- *Risks of Faith* will be abbreviated RF
- *Malcolm and Martin and America: A Dream or a Nightmare* will be abbreviated MMA
- *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* will be abbreviated CLT

Japanese terms (e.g. *burakumin*) will be rendered in italics.
Introduction

“There is no truth in Jesus Christ independent of the oppressed of the land—their history and culture…Indeed it can be said that to know Jesus is to know him as revealed in the struggle of the oppressed for freedom.” 2 James Hal Cone challenged mainstream theology to start from the point of view of the oppressed and their central concern for liberation since his arrival in academe in the 1960s. This dissertation seeks to find an appropriate and affirmative response to Cone’s challenge. It seems difficult, if not impossible, to do so strictly within the bounds of Euro-American theology. In other words, if white theologians are to respond positively, we must first gain some purchase on our “whiteness”. This must be done both in the straightforward context of understanding what it means to be doing theology in white bodies in the 21st century and in the more complex sense of Cone’s construction of “white” and “black” in which “white” is that which assents—implicitly or explicitly—to a hegemonic paradigm of domination and subjugation while “black” is that which resists such a paradigm. It is, of course, in this latter sense that Cone claims “blackness” for God.

State of the Question

White theologians have begun to engage Cone’s work and the question of white supremacy more broadly. To date, however, there have been few theologians willing to take up Cone’s challenge. My contention is that the difficulty of de-centralizing one’s own experience when engaging in theological reflection is at least partly to blame. A comparative examination therefore provides the necessary “breathing room” in which to think about an experience which is not one’s own. In other words, doing Liberation Theology from a social location of privilege requires Comparative Theology. A positive note of exception here is the work of James

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Perkinson who has worked toward constructing a theology of solidarity with blackness. Perkinson follows Cone, and film critic Richard Dyer, in declaring “whiteness” a fraught theoretical category “…because it is simultaneously everywhere and nowhere, everything and nothing.”\(^3\) Perkinson further notes that, especially relevant to our context here, “In its first theological meaning, then, whiteness necessarily signifies a history of oppression and a politics of exclusion and fear. It is a meaning that demands public confession as long as it remains publicly virulent.”\(^4\) Theodore Allen’s work on the public face of “whiteness” will also come to shape this discussion.

Henri De Lubac has previously examined Shin Buddhism in a comparative light. De Lubac’s aim, however, was never to find a way to respond positively to the oppressed within the Christian community. His concern was to find and map similarities between Shin Buddhism and Catholic thought.\(^5\) This gap is exacerbated by the fact that to date, Shin Buddhism remains comparatively under-studied in relation to Zen Buddhism, Theravada Buddhism, or Tibetan/Vajrayana Buddhism. Treatments of Shin thought generally fall into historical and ethnographic categories. James Dobbins is a major thinker in this mode. More specific contemporary issues are also discussed, especially in their social context in modern Japan, for example volumes edited or authored by Elisabetta Porcu,\(^6\) Ugo Dessi,\(^7\) and Dennis Hirota.\(^8\) None

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\(^4\) Perkinson, “Rage”. 441.  
\(^5\) For an attempt to rescue the notion of direct comparison from charges of reductionism, see especially Amstutz, Galen. “Shin Buddhism and Protestant Analogies With Christianity in the West.” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 40, no. 4 (1998): 724–47.  
of these works, however, address the possible relationship of Shin Buddhism to Liberation
Theology.\textsuperscript{9}

Further, the explicit aim of the following is not a recitation of the extant difficulty in this
question but a constructive program to overcome “whiteness” itself. While various strategies to
attain “accompliceship” or “allyhood” might be pursued, no amount of solidarity-building will
answer Cone’s demand that we die to whiteness and be reborn to blackness.\textsuperscript{10} It is not the job of
a theologian who benefits from whiteness to somehow live in whiteness in a nonviolent mode of
solidarity—if such a thing is even possible—but to overcome, overthrow, or die to that very
identity in order to be reborn in blackness, subject to the same fate as those born within that state.

\textbf{Limitations of the Question}

As will be discussed in depth, any comparative study brings with it understandable
limitations. Chief among these is the potential for flattening differences. It must be understood
that, even though the present study is centrally concerned with Christian theology, real and
important distinctions remain between Christian thought and Buddhist thought. It would be
bitterly ironic to attempt a theological program by which oppressive habits and behaviors may be
overcome only through the callous exploitation of a religious other. In this regard, it is crucial to
remember that, whatever our comparative aims, Christianity remains Christian and Buddhism
remains Buddhist. Buddhism does not exist solely as a foil to Christianity, nor do the two exist in

\begin{itemize}
\item[9] The legitimacy of Liberation Theology in the contemporary world has been questioned, notably in Petrella, Ivan. \textit{The Future of Liberation Theology: An Argument and Manifesto}. New York: Routledge, 2006.; however, more recent trends have seen a return to these themes, marking Petrella’s concern as perhaps premature. For such examples, see: Cooper, Thia, ed. \textit{The Reemergence of Liberation Theologies: Models for the Twenty-First Century (New Approaches to Religion and Power)} New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.
\item[10] An excellent compilation of those who have achieved “allyhood” in the struggle for black liberation can be found in Boyd, Drick and C.T. Vivian (Foreword). \textit{White Allies in the Struggle for Racial Justice}. Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2015. None of the authors, activists, or scholars featured in this volume, however, can be said to have fully died to whiteness in the way Cone demands. These are, nonetheless, excellent examples of individuals who have attempted to use their whiteness and privilege to undermine and subvert the kyriarchical system that benefits them.
\end{itemize}
a competitive relationship by which only one may be proven true. The problem under study here requires a fresh perspective, and it is this perspective that we seek in comparison to Buddhist ideas. The salvation offered by Amida Buddha is not the same as the salvation offered by Jesus Christ, and, therefore, the soteriological aims of the two faiths in question cannot be reduced to one.

Beyond the possible flattening of soteriological distinction, there is the objection that dogged Cone throughout his career: that he proposes a social movement that is not a proper theology. To be sure, Cone was heavily influenced by the Black Power movement and sought support from social activists throughout his career. This objection, however, does not address Cone’s theological program on its own terms. By proposing a hermeneutic which reads scripture as a story of divine liberation of the oppressed, Cone demands that those who would object first propose a better hermeneutic or, failing that, describe how the Bible does not say what he says it does. If neither side of this debate will agree to the hermeneutic of the other, we are left talking past one another. This is nothing new in the history of Christian theological disputation. At some point, opposing sides end up talking past each other without the possibility of coming back together in an improved understanding of the faith. To read all disputation as potential schism is, however, cynical and pessimistic in the extreme. It is a challenge to white—that is, European-descended—theologians to hear about the blackness of God. It should be. The hermeneutical disposition appropriate to this challenge is humility as suggested by the servant-leader model of Christ himself.

Therefore, while it is possible to object that this theological program is more social than theological, it is possible to answer that suggestion that Christian salvation is collective and not individual. This may introduce an impasse in the discussion, but such an impasse must not be a
stopping point. Indeed, reaching this impasse is a compelling reason to discuss this problem in a comparative light. If our progress is stalled by looking only to Christian resources, then a comparative look aside may indeed break us free to understand what Christianity demands of its followers.

Finally, this theological study is—as any—inherently limited inasmuch as it is not a complete systematic theology. That work may follow this, but we must first determine whether it is possible to meaningfully speak of overcoming whiteness before proposing the entire scaffolding of a theological system that starts from that point. This is ultimately the answer to Cone’s now 50-year-old challenge that white theologians begin their theology with a deep acknowledgement of the suffering of black people throughout history. Cone has worked out how that theology might exist from the perspective of the historically subaltern, and his work has been challenged and expanded by further work in Womanist Thought and other liberation theologies. It has not, to date, caught nearly as much traction among white theologians, and is thus the purpose of the present study to determine whether and how to overcome the initial block of whiteness itself.

**Structure**

The dissertation follows in five main chapters which move between analysis and history of both Cone’s theology and Shin Buddhism. The purpose of this follows Clooney’s notion of comparative theology as a dynamic, back-and-forth learning across borders. It is not enough to simply stay within Christianity and make presumptions about Buddhism. Buddhism must speak for itself. We are, however, still involved in the project of *fides quaerens intellectum*: faith seeking understanding. Therefore, the ultimate purpose of the comparison is to understand

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something about Christianity. In the present case, that “something” is James Cone’s proposed dynamic of overcoming the sinful burden of whiteness.

Chapter 1 deals with social history and biography. In this case, the relevant histories are the history of people of African descent in the United States of America (and its precursor colonies) and the history of the Kamakura Era of Japanese history. We will pay special attention as well to the history of the burakumin people of Japan. Shinran was not a member of this group, nor did he do much to explicitly address their plight during his lifetime. What becomes clear in studying their history, however, is the influence their plight has had both on Shinran’s own thinking and on the social engagement of Shin Buddhism in the following centuries. Burakumin are the outcast and out-caste population of Japan, hereditarily linked to the hamlets in which they historically lived and loathed for the trades they practiced which were and are ritually unclean. George DeVos and Hideki Wagatsuma’s landmark 1966 sociological study Japan’s Invisible Race immediately and explicitly links the history of the burakumin with the history of black people in America. Shinran’s exile brought him into close contact with the burakumin and may well have influenced his understanding of the existential state of evil and the grace of Amida in overcoming this state. Inasmuch as this existential state is a reasonable parallel to Cone’s understanding of whiteness, the social history of the burakumin is deeply relevant to the present study.

Chapter 2 delves deeply into Cone’s construction of Black Liberation Theology. We will especially examine his Doctrine of God, Christology, Theology of the Cross, and his theological understanding of both “blackness” and “whiteness” as categories. Cone was not always met with universal approval, nor is he met with such today. Joseph R. Washington, Jr. responded to Black Theology and Black Power “…with less than affirmation, though with great affection and
expectation.”¹² His review doubts the possibility of what he terms “ethnic theology” positing that we might instead have theology informed by ethnic study. This response is typical—indeed paradigmatic—of the early negative response to Cone.

Chapter 3 discusses the development of Jōdo Shinshū Buddhism, especially as expounded by Shinran himself. This chapter begins, however, with a discussion of Shinran’s teacher, Honen. Shinran himself claimed that he only ever taught what he had learned from Honen. We will see within this chapter how this is not actually the case. It is immaterial whether Shinran dissembled or thought that he truly was teaching Honen’s own thought—whether or not he was invincibly erroneous in other words—as we still need to understand Honen to understand Shinran. The specific emphases that Shinran brought to his Buddhist practice become clearer for understanding his predecessor. We will discuss the salvation of women and burakumin as well in the thought of Shinran and his successor Rennyo. While we are less concerned with Rennyo’s own thinking, he also claimed to be teaching only what he’d learned. There is a difficulty of timing here, inasmuch as Rennyo was not alive to receive teaching directly from Shinran. Still, he is far more explicit in dealing with the problem of salvation for the subaltern than Shinran was. Whether he taught precisely what Shinran believed or not, Rennyo’s interpretation of Shinran has been broadly accepted as authoritative within the religious tradition.

Chapter 4 returns to Cone, when his major interlocutors are then discussed. One of the principal interlocutors here is J. Deotis Roberts who proposed a different view of black liberation theology as a contemporary of Cone. Roberts comes very clearly from the liberal theological

tradition of the Social Gospel and Boston Personalist philosophy. By contrast, Cone was shaped by the neo-orthodox thinking of Karl Barth. Their dispute sets out the shape of black liberation theology. Following after that is the work of Dolores Williams, an early expositor of Womanist Thought. Her work in *Sisters in the Wilderness* directly critiques Cone’s masculine language surrounding the divine. Cone ultimately accepted her critique but preferred to leave his early oversight of gender dynamics intact as a kind of act of contrition and acknowledgement of the narrow scope of his original vision. Victor Anderson’s critique of what he termed “ontological blackness” in Cone is also addressed. Briefly, Anderson believed that by setting blackness and whiteness in dialectical opposition to one another, Cone made it impossible to be black and free. For Anderson, Cone’s theology is limited to the oppressed and fails to anticipate their freedom.

Chapter 5 concludes and proposes a constructive program by which we might overcome the power of whiteness in Christian theology. First, we examine the concept of race as a social construct which should allow a nuanced view of race in which biology is not determinative. We also examine Cone’s understanding of the terms “black” and “white” in his theology in depth. We look to Dietrich Bonhoeffer as a possible example of one who has died to whiteness. Though he is not the only possible example, Bonhoeffer represents someone who was born to privilege, rejected that privilege, and potentially overcame the burden of whiteness. He was additionally an influence on Cone, even from his earliest days. Following this example, we will examine parallels for Cone’s concept of whiteness and Shinran’s concept of evil as an existential state. We then seek a further parallel in examining whether Cone’s notion of being reborn to blackness can be understood in terms of Shinran’s understanding of other-power.

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Chapter 1: Historical Context and Biography

Black History in America: Arrival

In late August of 1619, approximately a full year before the landing at Plymouth, 20-odd people of African origin by way of the West Indies arrived on the shores of Virginia in a Dutch ship. These were the first permanent black inhabitants of what is now the United States of America. They did not, intriguingly, arrive as slaves but as indentured servants. The distinction is important, as it clearly indicates a terminus of their servitude and thus stands in clear contrast to the endless, generation-spanning term of service expected of a slave. At this point, the term limitation would seem to be the only real difference between “slavery” and “indentured servitude”. The conditions we refer to as “slavery” were indeed unique on the American continent.

In West Africa, being a slave did not mean losing all rights. Slaves could marry, won property, and act as witnesses. Also, slaves were not social outcasts. They were adopted into the families that owned them, and they became members of the community…[some] held important positions as government officials and military officers. Some slave men married their masters’ daughters; more often, slave women married their masters.  

What is clear is that the first Africans to make their permanent home in North America were not chattel. Indentured servitude provided a period of labor without pay as repayment of a moving debt. As such, it knew of no racial distinction between Europeans and Africans. It is crucial to reiterate that this was a limited period of service. This was not a condition that could be passed from generation to generation, nor could such a servant’s body be sold to a different master. At the end of the period of service, the servant was free, and was sometimes granted a plot of land of their own to farm.

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15 Levine. 6.
How, then, did Africans come to be chattel in the American colonies? Their time as indentured servants, subject to the same treatment as Europeans, lasted roughly twenty years. Though slavery was not apparently part of the English plan for the development of their colonies, as it was for Portugal and Spain, labor-intensive crops like tobacco required cheap—or better, free—labor. A decline in the birth rates in England around the middle of the 17th century added pressure on the tobacco planters of the mid-Atlantic to import more Africans. “To compensate, the colonists imported more blacks into Virginia…the black population increased from 950 in 1660 to 16,000 in 1700. In 1730, blacks numbered 30,000. Thirty years later, the figure was 141,000 (around 41 percent of the entire population).” These importations were coupled with the realization that a person uprooted from her cultural and linguistic surroundings was more easily exploited than one who was comfortable with the language, dress, religion, and food of her master. “In sum, masters had the financial motive, the power, and the excuse to manipulate blacks into longer service than whites.” Black indentured servants were forced to sign new and longer contracts of service when their original agreements expired. Virginia became the first colony to recognize lifetime servitude in a legally binding fashion. While religious reasons would later be used to justify the perpetuation of slavery, it seems at worst arguable that the primary motivation for slavery in the colonies was financial.

Controlling a group of people as livestock required both philosophical and legal gymnastics. “Using the argument that blacks were more ‘barbarous’ (more violent and irrational) than whites, the colonists claimed that special steps had to be taken to control slave crime.”

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10 Levine. 17.
17 ibid.
18 Levine. 21. Note also the parallel reasoning from the early 18th century to the present day regarding harsh measures for the control of crime. The longstanding, though thankfully now overturned, sentencing discrepancy between the sale or possession of powder cocaine and crack cocaine is nothing short of a 20th century continuation of the belief that black people require stricter punishment than whites.
While Maryland did not set up separate, parallel, criminal courts to try slaves without a jury, they did speed up capital trials for slaves.\textsuperscript{19} Such legal maneuvering was justified on a specious belief that an entire continent of people hailing from different ethnic, religious, and political groups shared something endemic that made them less than human. The erasure of difference among African populations certainly had a deleterious psychological effect, as mentioned above. Taking this trauma as foundational, it can easily be seen that slave revolts were a response to—and not a justification for—such harsh treatment.

**Early Slave Revolts**

Within the first 100 years of servitude on the American continent, enslaved Africans began to resist and rebel against their captors and enslavers. In April of 1712, approximately two dozen Akan slaves attempted to gain their freedom by force in New York City. They killed nine and wounded seven whites. Their revolt lasted only a day, ending in capture or suicide for all rebels.\textsuperscript{20} This rebellion is notable for two main reasons: it is relatively early, indicating that enslaved people were not willing to endure their treatment for generations before resisting, and it occurred not in the rural southern colonies, countering the notion that the north was always more civilized and hospitable for enslaved people. We will see later that this distinction is largely part of the white, post-Civil War imagination.

Of special note, too, is the 1739 Stono Rebellion of South Carolina. Again, this action recruited fewer than 30 slaves seeking their freedom:

Led by a slave named Jemmy, they broke into a storehouse and stole guns, ammunition, and other military supplies. They then began to move southward on the road to Georgia and St. Augustine, the capital of Spanish Florida. Along the way, they attacked whites, killing 10, and burned buildings. Apparently, they were trying to damage the slave system while escaping to Spanish-controlled territory.\textsuperscript{21}

\textsuperscript{19} ibid.  
\textsuperscript{20} Levine. 33.  
\textsuperscript{21} ibid.
While they marched southward, the slaves gained both willing participants and conscripts forced to join to ensure that they would not alert whites to the ongoing escape. This rebellion lasted longer than its northern predecessor, but ultimately ended in the death of twice as many slaves as whites.\textsuperscript{22}

Rebellions of enslaved people of course feed the fears of their enslavers. The enslavers then react harshly to the rebellion, imposing ever harsher conditions, which results ultimately in more rebellions. It is fully beyond the scope of the current discussion to delve too deeply into the history of uprisings of the enslaved in the North American colonies. What bears note here is that the enslaved population was never quiet and content to bear their burden. Such a vision—that at some point slavery was tolerable, but later it got worse—is purely the product of white imagination. Enslaved people did attempt to petition for their freedom in non-violent ways during the Colonial era.\textsuperscript{23} Once the enslavers decided to throw off their own metaphorical shackles, things became even more complicated for the enslaved.\textsuperscript{24}

\textbf{American Revolution}

It is no hidden fact that the first person killed in the American Revolution was a black man, Crispus Attucks. The relationship of enslaved and freed people to this particular conflict requires some attention. In the early years, there were very few black soldiers among the revolutionaries. “Americans were reluctant to put guns in the hands of slaves. Also, most white

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{22} ibid.  \\
\textsuperscript{23} Levine. 38.  \\
\end{flushright}
Americans believed that blacks lacked the courage and discipline to make good soldiers.”25 This was met with a canny offer by the British: “Lord Dunmore, the British governor of Virginia, issued a proclamation…offering freedom to all slaves who would join his forces…They were organized into a unit known as Lord Dunmore’s Ethiopian Regiment.”26 Dunmore outfitted these men in sashes promising liberty to those who would join. He recruited some 800 enslaved people by August of 1776.

Colonial responses to slavery were varied. It would be simplistic to cast the division of the American Civil War back over the original 13 colonies and suppose that northern colonies were abolitionist while the southern colonies were enslavers. Northern states banned the import of enslaved people by the late 1780s, but this only applied to enslaved people brought in through the ports. Enslaved people could still be brought in over land routes. Enslaved people in Pennsylvania could be tried in the same courts as whites, but they could only give testimony against other enslaved people. Pennsylvania also prohibited the sale of family members to new owners more than 10 miles distant, but we must bear the reality of transportation in the late 18th century in mind when assessing how kind this prohibition actually was. Some states required enslavers to obtain permission from the enslaved for the sale of the latter. Again, the power of coercion cannot be overlooked here.27

Efforts at increasing manumission and restricting the trade in human beings did bear some fruit. “By 1790, 78 percent of New England’s blacks were free…In the middle states (New York, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania), 72 percent of all blacks were still slaves in 1790, but by 1820 that figure was only 20 percent…Of the more than 1.5 million slaves in the United States in

25 Levine. 39.
26 ibid.
27 Levine. 42.
1820, only 18,000 lived in the North—just 1.2 percent of the total.”²⁸ None of this is to excuse or mitigate the role of slavery in the north. Even though the north held a mere 1.2 percent of all enslaved people in the United States, that still amounted to 18,000 people held in involuntary bondage and servitude as property.

Meanwhile, in the northern reaches of the south—i.e. Virginia, Maryland, and Delaware—manumission and abolition moved slowly. In part, this had an economic justification. The economies of those states relied on slave labor more heavily than the economies of the north. In part, this has its roots in the racial fears of whites. “Between 1790 and 1810, the number of free blacks in the Upper South increased from 30,000 to 93,000, or from 5 to 13 percent of the region’s blacks…The result was a reversal of the trend toward making manumission easier and expanding black rights.”²⁹ The Haitian revolution stoked such fears, as did the much more geographically proximate rebellion of Gabriel. Gabriel planned to march into Richmond, Virginia, set fires, seize weapons, and kill whites in order to inspire a widespread rebellion. While his uprising was betrayed by informants, and Gabriel himself arrested and executed, the scope of the proposed action terrified whites in Virginia and throughout the south.³⁰ The reaction, unsurprisingly, was a tightening of restrictions on free and enslaved blacks both.

Blacks were barred from specific trades, or in other cases needed exceptional documentation to participate in trade. “Maryland in 1805 required every free black vendor of wheat, corn, or tobacco to obtain a certificate of good character from a justice of the peace and to renew it each year.”³¹ Poll taxes, vote suppression, prison servitude, and other exclusions associated with the Reconstruction era all started prior to the Civil War. Virginia barred free

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²⁸ Levine. 43.
²⁹ Levine. 47.
³⁰ ibid.
³¹ Levine. 48.
blacks from moving into the state in 1793; North Virginia required slaves to post bond prior to manumission in 1795. This hostility was not limited to the legal realm. Social opprobrium was another part of life for both free blacks and those whites with whom they might associate. “Racially mixed congregations, which had often existed among Methodists and Baptists in the late eighteenth century, were condemned and ridiculed in the early nineteenth century. Racial segregation was usually not a matter of law but of custom or of rules laid down by the owners of public accommodations such as inns and theaters.” As we shall see in greater detail later, these customs led to the fracturing of American congregations and the rise of historically black churches.

**Antebellum America**

Two of the most famous slave uprisings occurred in the early 19th century. Denmark Vesey’s and Nat Turner’s rebellions both sought freedom through armed resistance to the slave economy. Vesey had purchased his own freedom with lottery winnings and made his living as a tradesman. In 1822, an army of enslaved people Vesey had raised for rebellion was to attach strategic points in and around Charleston, SC. His plan was betrayed, and he was arrested, tried, and hanged as were more than 30 co-conspirators. Vesey, like Gabriel before him, was unable to complete his rebellion, but was still able to strike fear into white enslavers by plotting for rebellion. Nat Turner would outdo both these men in planning and executing a rebellious insurrection.

Roughly ten years after Vesey’s attempted uprising in South Carolina, a previously-docile man—Nat Turner—carried out a bloody attack against his enslavers. “No ante-bellum Southerner could ever forget Nat Turner…He was a pious man…apparently as humble and

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32 Levine. 49.
33 Levine. 64.
docile as a slave was expected to be…If Nat Turner could not be trusted, what slave could? That was what made his sudden deed so frightening.”  

Turner came to believe that he had been chosen to deliver his people from bondage by God. He quietly recruited followers, and in the early morning of August 22, 1831, killed the family who had enslaved him. They went on for two days, killing nearly sixty whites in Southampton County, VA. “Swiftly mobilizing in overwhelming strength, the whites easily dispersed the rebels. Then followed a massacre during which not only the insurrectionists but scores of innocent bondsmen were slaughtered.”

Space prohibits a full examination of the resistance movements of enslaved people during the early days of the American republic. What is important to note is that these uprisings were irregular in their appearance, yet they held great sway over the imagination of white enslavers. Black deaths always outnumbered white, no matter how the uprising began. Mass executions, ghastly displays of body parts, and the sight of heads on pikes were part of the suppression of these freedom movements. Uprisings seeking freedom resulted in the cruelest kind of reprisals. It is valuable to ask why the freedom of African people was such a threat to whites. A satisfactory answer is unlikely to be found quickly, but it is crucial in studying the relationship between religion and freedom to ask such a question. How can adherents of a religion that promises freedom to all its followers be so terrified of granting that freedom? Quakers and Methodists were known among the abolitionists and advanced specific religious arguments for manumission, but they were never in the majority of Christians.

35 Stampp. 133.
36 Stampp. 135.
Christianity as Social Control in Antebellum America

Christianity was as much a source of uplift as of oppression in the pre-Civil War years. The missionary aim of Christianity was itself often subverted in favor of the social control of enslaved people. “When the first Africans were imported in the seventeenth century, some purchasers opposed covering them to Christianity lest baptism give them a claim to freedom.”37 Christian baptism would have to be legally excluded as a basis of a freedom claim, and it was. Colonial legislatures explicitly removed Christian belonging as a potential source for manumission as early as 1667.38 Once assured that obeying the Church’s command to encourage conversion would not result in a loss of property, enslavers proceeded to proselytize the people now in their possession.

Of course, if we recall that Nat Turner was originally a slave preacher, we discover the uneasy relationship that Christianity and social control enjoyed in America in this era. On the one hand, Christianity could possibly mollify their charges, if enslaved people heard enough sermons about taking up one’s cross39 or obeying one’s earthly masters40. On the other, slave preachers like Turner might mine a different message from the gospels. Some owners worried of the potential for those they had enslaved to commiserate and plot when unsupervised at worship times.41 While some Protestant churches were initially opposed to slavery, most of their unease was eventually assuaged. By 1845, Christianity was being encouraged by slave owners for the perpetuation of the institution itself. “The master class understood, of course, that only a carefully censored version of Christianity could have this desired effect…Church leaders

37 Stampp. 156.
38 Levine. 21; Stampp. 156.
39 Matt 16:24 NRSV
40 Col 3:22; Eph 6:5; 1Pet 2:18 NRSV
41 Stampp. 157.
addressed themselves to this problem and prepared special catechisms and sermons for bondsmen, and special instructions for those concerned with their religious indoctrination.”

Space here prohibits an exhaustive survey of African religiosity in American history. Suffice it to say, the issue is complex and worthy of deep study. Further attention will be paid to specific African influences on African American religious practice in a later chapter of the present work.

**Free Blacks and Abolition in Antebellum America**

It is not, of course, the case that every person of African origin in the American colonies and republic was held in bondage. There were always some free blacks in America. What is clear, however, is that their lives were not always completely distinct from the lives of the enslaved. Antislavery actions among both free blacks and sympathetic whites were viewed dimly in agrarian areas of the young republic. “When they pressed their case in North Carolina, emancipationists glumly discovered that the public viewed their petitions with ‘an indignant an jealous eye’ and considered ‘the preservation of their lives, and all they hold dear on earth, as depending on the continuance of slavery.’”

By the close of the 18th century, abolitionists were increasing their organizational activity and effectiveness. “They petitioned legislatures more frequently, prosecuted freedom suits more forcefully, helped protect free Negroes from re-enslavement, and occasionally founded schools for newly emancipated blacks.”

It should certainly be highlighted here that re-enslavement was a very real possibility for an emancipated person.

As much as Christianity was deployed as a means of social control against enslaved people, as noted above, there were some Christian groups who advocated for the abolition of

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42 Stampp. 159-60.
44 Berlin. 81.
slavery. Among the early abolitionists were the Methodists and Baptists. These churches, however, were not steadfast in their resistance to slavery. “In 1796, the Methodist General Conference again condemned slavery, but retracted its strong antislavery rule of 1784. Eight years later, the Methodist antislavery façade collapsed as the Conference ordered the publication of a separate Southern *Discipline* with the antislavery rules deleted.”45 The Baptists and Presbyterians found themselves divided within their denominations. The former group “refused to see slavery in moral terms”, while the latter equivocated on the desirability of freedom even in its absence.46 The Quakers remained steadfast, but in much smaller numbers than the other Christian churches.

It is not difficult to discern how these churches came to reverse or weaken once principled stands. “Against the real benefits slavery gave these whites, the antislavery argument fared poorly. Slave society successfully provided economic prosperity and controlled what was considered a dangerous if not inferior caste.”47 When pressed on the question of following a religious scruple or bowing to social and economic pressure, more white Christians chose money and respectability over principle. Some in the Upper South remained uncomfortable with the presence of chattel slavery. “They complained bitterly that the British had foisted slavery on their unwilling ancestors... But the alleged cultural inferiority of blacks, their inability to work without white direction, and their threat to white dominance made emancipation impossible. Slavery was thus a necessary evil, and the leaders of the Upper South bemoaned the terrible burden whites

45 Berlin. 83.
46 Ibid.
47 Berlin. 85. Berlin’s use of “caste” language here echoes some of the treatment of *burakumin* in Japan. While it is debatable whether Japanese or American society have ever employed a strictly-defined caste system, the evocation of a rigid and tightly controlled social hierarchy is appropriate, if not even too generous, here.
had to bear.” Attitudes about racial superiority, in other words, shifted the burdensome nature of slavery from the enslaved—who bore the literal burden—to the enslavers.

Deeper in the South, the attitude of whites toward slavery was not one of lament. The emerging cotton trade required bodies to work the fields, and economics demanded that they be provided as cheaply as possible. This led to discord between the Upper and Lower South for a time.

Growing economic differences widened the rift within the South. While an excess of slaves crowded Upper South plantations owing to the change from tobacco to wheat culture, the Lower South, with its expanding cotton culture, desperately needed black laborers. These complementary interests would ultimately knit the South together, but the possibility of importing slaves directly from Africa put the Upper and Lower South temporarily at odds. Closing the African trade would assure Virginia and its neighbors a market for their surplus slaves and would fatten the prices they would fetch in Charleston. Opposition to the trade not only brought real rewards, but it also allowed the Virginia statesmen to stand, for once, with “enlightened” world opinion against chattel bondage. Not surprisingly, Virginians saw heinous immorality where South Carolinians saw only cold economic necessity. Yet the differences between the Upper and Lower South transcended crude calculation. South Carolinians began to defend the trade with the same moral ardor as Virginians used to condemn it…While the Upper South toyed briefly with emancipation, the Lower South continued to import Africans.

Ultimately, the Upper and Lower South were united by the overlap of white supremacy and economic convenience.

The existence of free blacks during a time of chattel slavery appeared dangerous to the slaveholding majority. “Whether the Negro was culturally or innately inferior, whites would not tolerate free Negroes living among them. Once freed, Negroes degenerated into unproductive, irresponsible vagrants and quickly became a burden on the white community.” Further, “in a slave society the free Negro was an incorrigible subversive.” The successful slave revolt of Haiti stoked fears in the American slave states that those they held in bondage would not be

48 Berlin. 86.
49 Berlin. 87.
50 Berlin. 88.
51 Berlin. 89.
content to be livestock forever. In order to stanch this bleeding, slave states enacted severe restrictions on free blacks. Virginia permitted manumission but allowed that freed former slaves could be re-enslaved for failure to pay income taxes. “Southern lawmakers systematically sealed the leaks in the colonial black codes which allowed Negro freemen a measure of equality with whites.”

Enslavers feared that the free movement of black people would encourage rebellion and escape. “To prevent slaves from passing as free and to control free Negroes, Southern legislatures…established a system of registering Negro freemen…A 1785 North Carolina law…ordered all urban free Negroes to register with the town commissioners and to wear a shoulder patch inscribed with the word ‘FREE.’”

If one could not prove one’s freedom upon demand, either by special clothing or by documentation, one was treated as a fugitive slave. Free blacks were restricted in the trades they could pursue, in their movement to and through entire states, and in any way the majority could devise to keep their lives as indistinct from the lives of the enslaved population as possible.

**Civil War and Reconstruction**

Given the proven willingness of enslaved people to fight violently for their freedom, it comes as no surprise that blacks enlisted on the side of the Union in the American Civil War. “Nearly 180,000 black troops served in the Union Army during the Civil War, almost three-quarters from the slave states. They served in 166 all-black units: 145 infantry, 7 cavalry, 12 heavy artillery, 1 light artillery, and 1 engineer.” Generally, these units were led by white officers, with black officers rising no higher than non-commissioned officer in the ranks. The

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52 Berlin. 91.
53 Berlin. 93. Note here the horrible precursor to the yellow star or the pink triangle of Nazi Germany. Indeed, when examining how best to register, control, and monitor their own “undesirable” populations, the Nazis looked to American slavery and segregation as a model.
54 Indeed, it could be argued that these restrictions were not even ended in a de jure sense until the 1967 Loving v Virginia case that finally declared anti-miscegenation statutes unconstitutional.
55 Levine. 86.
North was impressed with the black soldiers’ ability to die for their cause. Robert Shaw’s attempt to capture Fort Wagner—dramatized in the film *Glory*—cost 247 black lives of a total 1,515 soldiers lost. While the ability to die for freedom was never questioned, black soldiers received substantially lower pay than whites of the same rank. “Under the Enlistment Act of July 1862, blacks received $10 a month, $3 of which was paid in clothing, leaving $7; whites received $13 a month *plus* clothing. In protest, the men of the 54th Massachusetts Regiment [Col. Shaw’s regiment, above] refused to accept any pay and on at least one occasion went into battle shouting ‘Three cheers for Massachusetts and $7 a month!’”56 Blacks were also employed as spies by the Union, either through intelligence gathering from black refugees to the North or by sending free blacks to pass as slaves.57

The South, of course, also received contributions to their cause from blacks. This was not, as a rule, voluntary service. “With whites off to war, slaves assumed additional responsibilities in the Southern economy; on the plantations, for example, they sometimes acted as overseers, in fact if not in name.”58 Enslaved workers had no choice in the cause or product of their labor, but some free blacks did in fact fight for the Confederate States. “One reason for this spirit of generosity may have been a sense of local patriotism. Another may have been a hope that helping the rebel cause might lead to better treatment.”59 We will never know for certain whether the enslavers of the Confederacy would have softened their hold on the enslaved population. It seems unlikely, however, given the general attitude toward the institution of slavery, that they would have done so. Far more likely, these individuals’ service to the

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56 Levine. 87.
57 Levine. 88-9.
58 Levine. 89.
59 ibid.
Confederate cause would have been greeted as proof that African people required and did not object to slavery as an institution.

Following the defeat of the Confederacy, whites who had allied with the cause of secession carried out reprisals against the now-freed black population of the South. While the North was able to dictate the terms of Reconstruction overall, the South elected members of the planter class—that is, large-scale landowners who ran plantations—to high office. Andrew Johnson ended the initial Reconstruction act by December of 1865 in order to seat individuals like Alexander Stephens, who had been Vice President of the Confederacy, in the United States Senate.\footnote{Levine. 95.} “The Johnson state governments tried to restore blacks to virtual slavery through laws known as Black Codes. The codes legalized marriages between blacks and permitted blacks to buy, own, and sell property and to sue or be sued, but prevented them from sitting on juris and from testifying against whites.”\footnote{ibid.} Blacks, who were now citizens and not property, saw no great increase in their standards of living or treatment from their white neighbors.

The United States Congress, however, refused Johnson’s call to end Reconstruction, establishing a Joint Committee and ultimately rejecting the seating of representatives and senators elected just months earlier.\footnote{Levine. 96.} Part of the fallout from the Civil War was, of course, the ratification of three amendments to the Constitution. The Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments establish the abolition of slavery; rights to due process, the prohibition on former Confederate officials serving in the United States government, and the reversal of the \textit{Dred Scott} decision declaring blacks ineligible for citizenship; and eliminating any prohibition on freed slaves participating in elections, respectively.\footnote{Of course, as the recent documentary film \textit{13th} makes quite clear, the inclusion of a loophole in the Thirteenth

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\footnotetext[60]{Levine. 95.}
\footnotetext[61]{ibid.}
\footnotetext[62]{Levine. 96.}
\footnotetext[63]{Of course, as the recent documentary film \textit{13th} makes quite clear, the inclusion of a loophole in the Thirteenth

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Reconstruction Act. “The 10 unreconstructed ex-Confederate states…were to be divided into five military districts, each governed by an army officer. Each district commander was to register voters, including blacks but not including those Confederate supporters barred from holding public office under the Fourteenth Amendment.”  

Reconstruction established the *de jure* equality of black and white citizens, but efforts to establish *de facto* equality were stymied by moderates within the Congress who believed strongly in individual property rights and individualistic economics. “Giving blacks legal equality and the right to vote was the outer limit to which Congress would go.” This legal outer limit has, as we shall see, proven insufficient to overcome the legacy of slavery in very concrete economic terms, to say nothing of the deleterious effect of that institution on the less-tangible aspects of life.

**Skipping a Century: On to the Civil Rights Era**

Space in the present work demands that we move quickly to an era of history closer to our present moment. Doing so gives short shrift indeed to the contributions of Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. DuBois, Marcus Garvey, and many others in the struggle for black freedom. Their influence, however, is explicitly acknowledged by Cone himself throughout his career. Therefore, while the era between the Civil War and the 20th century Civil Rights movements was an important one, we will not spend time reviewing it at present. It is to that latter era that we now turn.

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Amendment shifts slavery from a hereditary burden to one that can be enforced as legal punishment. The specific wording of that amendment states “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude, except as punishment for a crime whereof the party shall have been duly convicted, shall exist in the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction.” The film argues, much in line with Michelle Alexander in *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, that after the ratification of this amendment, whites simply criminalized being black and continued to hold blacks in servitude, often on specious charges of vagrancy, loitering, trespass, etc.

64 Levine. 97.
65 Levine. 98.
The mid-century Civil Rights Movement did not have a discreet beginning moment; rather, it should be seen as the continuation of a long struggle that began in 1619. The watershed moment referred to as the genesis point of this movement, however, is much easier to define. August 31, 1955 was the morning the body of Emmett Till was discovered. His murder touched off greater public knowledge and understanding of the black freedom struggle in the United States. Till was lynched by two men who believed he had harassed Carolyn Bryant in a grocery store. The 14-year old’s body was discovered after several days in the Tallahatchie River:

As they brought the body to land, they discovered that barbed wire had been wrapped around the neck and tied to a cotton gin fan in an obvious attempt to weigh the body down. As they placed the body in a boat, part of the skull fell off onto the floor... What the authorities saw in the boat was ghastly. The body was naked, had been badly beaten, and, due to the effects of the river, was heavily decomposed and bloated... The river and the force of debris obviously caused some damage to the body, and the weight of the gin fan may have caused many of the fractures to the head, yet there was no mistaking that the victim had been tortured.66

There could be no doubt of the savagery involved in Till’s murder after his mother insisted on an open-casket funeral. Till’s murderers were acquitted by an all-white, all-male jury. They later confessed to his murder in an interview with Look magazine. More than sixty years later, Carolyn Bryant confessed that her account of Till’s behavior was false, and that the boy was neither lewd nor threatening, puncturing the notion that her own safety had ever been at risk.

While Till’s murder was and remains shocking for its brutality, this was not the only major event in the struggle for black freedom in 1955. The same year saw the beginning of the Montgomery bus boycott and the emerging leadership of the young Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. King would later refer to Till as one of the struggle’s “sacred martyrs,” noting that “[w]hile

66 Bryant has now recanted that Till menaced or was crude to her. She has not been charged as an accomplice for his murder. See “Woman Linked to 1995 Emmett Till Murder Tells Historian Her Claims Were False” (https://www.nytimes.com/2017/01/27/us/emmett-till-lynching-carolyn-bryant-donham.html?_r=0) or Timothy B. Tyson’s The Blood of Emmett Till for a more in-depth account of this aspect of Till’s murder.
the blame for the grisly mutilation of Till has been placed upon two cruel men, the ultimate responsibility for this and other tragic events must rest with the American people themselves. It rests with all of us, black and white, who call ourselves civilized [people].”68 While King is often remembered for his powerful oratorical skill and his insistence on non-violent action on the part of protestors, this view of King removes him from the radical struggle for black freedom of which he was a part and for which he ultimately died, proving himself among the very same sacred martyrs as Till.

King, of course, had castigated moderates early in his career—his famous “Letter from Birmingham City Jail” is the paradigmatic example—but it was his engagement with the economic strife faced by nominally more-free blacks in the North that led most directly to his death. When faced with Richard Daley instead of Bull Connor, King found that the white moderates to whom that missive had been directed could, in fact, do more damage than he had anticipated. When King went to Chicago in 1967, “…the Chicago mayor was much too intelligent to create martyrs the way Connor, Clark, and others had done in the Deep South. There was no national outpouring of support for King’s campaign, as there had been after the violence in Birmingham and Selma.”69 His attempt to win housing integration in Chicago stalled and ultimately failed. King would go on to criticize the war in Vietnam, calling the conflict there “madness” and remarking that he could no longer cry out “…against the violence of the oppressed in the ghettos without having first spoken clearly to the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today—my own government.”70 King’s turn from advocacy for participation in

69 Levine. 205.
economic systems to a critique of those systems can easily be read as a factor in his assassination.

If Till and King are paradigmatic of the Civil Rights struggle in the South, Cone’s other major influence—Malcolm X—can be seen as paradigmatic of the struggle in the North. King and X famously only met once, and the latter’s death preceded the former’s by several years. Before their deaths, both men were converging upon a middle space between the nationalism of the Nation of Islam on the one hand and the integrationist approach of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference on the other. “Gradually both Malcolm and Martin moved away from the extremes of their original positions and began to embrace aspects of each other’s viewpoints, without denying the validity of their own central claims.”71 One of Malcolm X’s early moments in the spotlight came with the Hinton Johnson incident.

Johnson “…happened upon a couple of white policemen billy-whipping a black suspect on a Harlem street corner and protested, ‘You’re not in Alabama—this is New York!’ For this impertinence, the police told Johnson to go away, then—when he refused—clubbed him down and arrested him.”72 Malcolm X and the Nation of Islam heard of Johnson’s beating and that he was being held apart from medical attention. Malcolm X ordered a peaceful mobilization of some 2,000 men and women. They did not march, nor did they chant. They simply lined the streets of Harlem, waiting further instruction for the evening. On the order of the police, Malcolm X was allowed to see Johnson. The beaten man was sent to Harlem Hospital, and Malcolm X was asked to clear the streets. He did so without a word: a simple wave sent his followers back from the police precinct to their homes. “For white New Yorkers, those who heard of the confrontation at all, it was a chilling glimpse of a world we didn’t know existed; a

71 Cone. MMA. 253-4.
world of unblinking, unforgiving black men and women who weren’t afraid of our police or our
guns or death itself; an army…of people nobody wanted.”\textsuperscript{73} That army would, eventually, turn on
Malcolm X as he drifted away from the Nation of Islam and toward reconciliation with the
mainstream Civil Rights movement represented in the public consciousness by Martin Luther
King, Jr.

These two examples do nothing to give a sense of the breadth and depth of the $20^{th}$
century struggle for black freedom. Their purpose here is to show two paradigmatic responses to
the violence faced by blacks nearly 100 years after their legal emancipation. In the case of King,
the tactic deployed for resistance was fundamentally Christian, appealing to the better nature of
the oppressor. In the case of X, the tactic deployed was of a more nationalistic bent. The display
of discipline and restrained power in the response to Hinton Johnson’s beating showed those who
had eyes to see it that black people were ready, not to beg for, but to take their freedom if it
would not be granted. They further display the breadth of Cone’s dependence on both men.
Without King’s example of Christian exhortation, his writing would be far less persuasive than it
is. Without X’s example of unflinching courage, his work would be less meaningful and direct
than it is.

\textbf{James Hal Cone}

Before moving too deeply into his work, it bears examining Cone’s life experiences.
Theology, as he reminds us, is intensely contextual, and no context matters quite so much to the
content of that theology as does the life of the theologian writing it. Fortunately, Cone has
written not just autobiographical theology but also memoirs. Born in Fordyce, AR in 1938, Cone
was raised in Bearden. As he puts it himself, “Two things happened to me in Bearden: I

\footnote{73 Goldman. 59.}
encountered the harsh realities of white injustice that was inflicted daily upon the black community; and I was given a faith that sustained my personhood and dignity in spite of white people’s brutality.” 74 He goes on to point out that despite the passion with which he writes on such issues, he did not have personal experience with rape, lynching, police harassment, or many of the other tragedies that come to mind when thinking of the deep south in the middle 20th century. Rather, the whites of Bearden “…regarded the social and political arrangements that they maintained as an expression of the natural orders of creation.” 75 As Genovese might remind us, this seems quite inescapably to be the result of an ideology of paternalism. Cone reacted to this ideology not by accepting it, but by referring to it as “…an ethos that was inherently dehumanizing for black people.” 76

Cone’s family was not wealthy. In fact, they were quite poor. This fact does not mark him as in any way unique in the Arkansas of the wartime and post-war years. His father Charlie, however, imbued a sense of integrity and pride in the family despite their mean economic condition. When white politicians would offer poor blacks a small sum to post advertisements on the blacks’ homes, Charlie Cone habitually refused. He explained this refusal to his son, saying “Don’t ever let anybody buy your integrity, especially white people. Tell them that it is not for sale. Do what you do because it is right and not because of the money involved.” 77 His father’s insistence on personal integrity in the face of economic privation made a great impression on Cone. This life advice received as a child can be easily inferred from his later work’s strident challenge to the theological establishment. Whether refusing a politician’s money or an

75 ibid.
76 ibid. 19.
77 Cone. MSLB. 21.
institution’s security, Cone placed a high value on this integrity and would never moderate his call for liberation in favor of job security.

Such integrity does not come free or cheap. In the early 1950s, Cone’s father sued the Bearden School Board over segregation. “After the Supreme Court decision of 1954 [Brown v Board of Education], my father’s suit became a case for the integration of the schools…For the first time, to my knowledge, Bearden whites began to talk about lynching Charlie Cone because he refused to take his name off the lawsuit.”78 The threat of lynching has long been used as a form of terroristic suppression against black people in the Americas. The Cones stood up to such threats and pressures both through their father’s personal strength and the strength of their religious faith. Indeed, Cone refers to such faith by noting that “God was that reality to which the people turned for identity and worth because the existing social, political, and economic structures said that they were nobody.”79 By the time he wrote this memoir, Cone had of course come into contact with the theology of Paul Tillich. These early experiences, however, gave him an understanding of how God could truly be the ground of being and existence. If blacks also have their existence in and through God, then whites—as creatures and not creators—could do nothing to erase that real existence. The body might be destroyed, but the real existence of black people as people is guaranteed by God.

This identity with God was in large part the source for Cone’s own resistance to white racism. This point creates tension with classically Marxist revolutionary movements. While Marx famously called religion the opiate of the masses, Cone counters that “…labeling religion a mere pain-killer ignores the black church as the source, not only of identity and survival, but of the sociopolitical struggle for liberation. During my childhood, every fight for justice and civil

78 ibid.
79 Cone. MSLB. 23.
rights was initiated in and led by the church.”\textsuperscript{80} Cone’s church experiences led him initially to believe that blacks’ and whites’ common religious affiliation—it is hardly controversial to presume that affiliation to be Christian in Arkansas in the 1950s—could or would cause whites to cease their mistreatment of their black sisters and brothers in Christ. Cone now refers to this belief as a kind of naïveté.

Such naïveté would be dashed by increasing contact with whites when, in 1954, Cone left Bearden for Shorter College in North Little Rock, and then Philander Smith in Little Rock itself. He recounts an unpleasant experience with an elderly woman on a public bus, in which an apparently churchly white lady refuses to sit near him while spewing racist epithets in his direction. Cone summarizes the before-and-after of these experiences and his changing beliefs:

Once confronted with the gospel and the demands that it lays upon all Christians, then whites would cease their racism, I thought, because their Christian identity was more important to them than their humiliation of blacks…I began to realize that even if people know the truth, they will not necessarily do it. I also began to realize that religion did not automatically make people sensitive to human pain and suffering. Perhaps black people were right. What white people needed was a conversion experience.\textsuperscript{81}

From his disappointment in meeting white racism face-to-face, Cone began to consider Richard Allen, founder of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church as a reformer akin to Martin Luther.\textsuperscript{82} We can see here the beginnings of his radicalization which, frankly, may not seem so radical at all. To put it another way, Cone’s positions seem radical if we are dedicated to preserving white hegemony in political and religious matters. If we do not have such a commitment, then his calls for liberation are frankly no less than we might demand for ourselves.

\textsuperscript{80} Cone. \textit{MSLB}. 24. This is, of course, not a unique observation for Cone. The black church has a long history of civil rights engagement. What is of particular use here is the tension with Marxist aphorisms about the usefulness of religion: that is, for whom it is useful. Marx and other, predominantly white/European thinkers have a distance from religious identity, while Cone draws heavily on Martin Luther King, Jr. and finds the strength—indeed the demand—to fight for justice because of religious identity.

\textsuperscript{81} Cone. \textit{MSLB}. 26.

\textsuperscript{82} Cone. \textit{MSLB}. 27.
Paralleling Allen and Luther makes all the sense in the world, if we can stand for a moment outside the perspective of Anglo-European theology.

At Shorter and Philander, Cone began to read the classics of Western philosophy—Plato, Kant, et al.—but it was also here that he was introduced to Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. DuBois, and Carter G. Woodson, among others. Of his studies in black history, Cone relates that “I was not interested in the mere study of the past as a body of information and facts. Rather, I was interested in a study of the past in order to analyze the present, so that black people would know how to make a different future.” Cone left Philander for graduate school in Evanston, Illinois, at Garrett Biblical Institute, now Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary.

**Graduate Studies in the North**

Upon arrival in the North, Cone was quickly disabused of his expectation that whites would behave differently in Illinois than in Arkansas. He recalls going to a white barbershop to have his hair cut, when “…as soon as I sat down, one of the barbers came over to me and said: ‘We don’t cut niggers’ hair in this place.’” Cone blames this humiliating experience more on his own naïveté than anything else, stating that “Garrett was not only ‘up North’ but was a Christian institution. One would think that, having experienced the contradiction of faith and injustice in the white churches of Arkansas, and having had a humiliating experience in an Evanston barber shop…I would have been ready for a few contradictions at Garrett as well.”

We can see in his own recollection the clear contradiction between the Christian sense of community—the emphasis in the above quote is Cone’s—and the social dislocation of racism in

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83 Cone. *MSLB*, 29.
84 Cone. *MSLB*, 30.
85 ibid.
both the North and the South. At Garrett, Cone’s academic ambitions ran afoul of the expectation of his instructors’ lower expectations of black students, and he wound up making all C’s in his first marking period. “The drop from being an A student in college to a C student in seminary was very humiliating,” but when Cone spoke with his professors about this problem, “All contended that I deserved less, and that it was out of their Christian spirit that I received the grades that I did. Also all said in their own way that they did not expect blacks to do any better than C.”

Cone’s experience at Garrett underscores a double-bind: on the one hand, the subtle racism of lowered expectations is at play from his professors; on the other hand, it is quite possible that his prior colleges—one of them unaccredited—may not have prepared him for Garrett. This second hand, of course, relies in part on the first as well as the disadvantage built into an inherently unequal system of education.

In the face of such obstacles, Cone redoubled his efforts at Garrett, doing his own remedial work in writing skills through a ninth-grade English textbook, and turned from Cs to As by his senior year. “With these academic accomplishments, I felt that I had shown my professors that their early evaluation of my intellectual ability was totally wrong.” At the urging of William Hordern and Philip S. Watson, Cone applied for the PhD. He would be the first black PhD student at Garrett. Cone’s difficulty with institutionalized racism continued throughout his graduate studies. One bright moment came during his application to the PhD when Hordern assured him that if Cone was not accepted to the PhD, then he would quit his teaching post.

Despite such support from individual faculty, the institution was not as accommodating and denied Cone the financial support granted to other, white, students in the program.

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86 Cone. MSLB. 31.
87 Cone. MSLB. 33.
88 Cone. MSLB. 34.
For Cone, however, the greatest problem he faced during his PhD was not directly related to either the content of his studies or the attitudes of his instructors. He recalls “my most difficult problem in graduate school was learning how to stay in school during the peak of the civil rights movement.”

He faced pressure both from his own conscience and from his peers to do something more than study ancient church doctrines and European theologians. He found no easy ground in reconciling these pressures while a student at Garrett. This tension would in fact come to define Cone’s career as a theologian. In January of 1964, before completing his dissertation, Cone accepted a teaching position at his alma mater, Philander Smith. He completed his dissertation and graduated with his PhD in 1965.

Returning to Philander was not an unalloyed good. “I returned to Philander Smith with added enthusiasm. But what did Barth, Tillich, and Brunner have to do with young black girls and boys coming from the cotton fields of Arkansas, Tennessee, and Mississippi seeking to make a new future for themselves? This was the major question for me.” Cone found his entry point to doing theology professionally through critique. Specifically, he was called upon to critique Joseph Washington’s *Black Religion*, a volume he referred to as “…combining poor scholarship and bad taste.” Cone found that, at this early stage of his career, he was not yet prepared to challenge Washington. Indeed, he recalls that doing so would mean challenging the entire white theological establishment. Cone’s discomfort at Philander Smith was certainly noted by the board of trustees, and he left for Adrian College in Adrian, Michigan, in 1966.

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89 Cone. *MSLB*. 36.
90 Cone. *MSLB*. 38.
91 Cone. *MSLB*. 39.
Adrian College and Finding a Voice

At Adrian College, Cone began to find his theological voice. “Although I had thought about it as early as my college days at Shorter and Philander Smith, I had no name to specify my concern and no intellectual structure in which to state it.”92 As much as his thoughts had been developing this entire time, Cone still needed something more to push out his life’s work. That turned out to be time. Adrian did not require the emotional investment of working at a school he had attended or dish out the intellectual pressure he’d found at Garrett-Northwestern. “All I had to do was to teach a few basic courses in religion and theology to mostly white students who were eager to learn information about the world but not interested in changing it.”93 The distance Cone gained from his teaching responsibilities allowed him to immerse himself in both Existentialist philosophy and the writings of the Black Power movement. These studies had Cone ready to return again to graduate school to pursue another PhD, this time in literature. He was dissuaded from doing so by the Detroit Riots of 1967. Cone felt there was no time to return to graduate school.

In February of 1968, Cone began to work on his essay “Christianity and Black Power”. This was to be the first step in finding his critical voice:

My first priority was my black identity, and I was not going to sacrifice it for the sake of a white interpretation of the gospel that I had learned at Garrett…The issue for me was not whether Black Power could be adjusted to meet the terms of a white Christ, but whether the biblical Christ is to be limited to the prejudiced interpretations of white scholars94.

With this move, Cone out-Barthed Barth. Barth rebelled against the intellectualized liberalism of his day by insisting that theology is based on divine revelation, not human reason. Cone outdid

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92 Cone. *MSLB*. 41.
93 Cone. *MSLB*. 42.
94 Cone. *MSLB*. 44.
this by insisting that such a God as would reveal Godself to reality must be concerned with the liberation of God’s people. Barth was not the only target of Cone’s theological rebellion. “I no longer was going to allow privileged white theologians to tell me how to do theology.”

Cone gave further lectures on the topic at Colgate Rochester Divinity School, although he turned down a faculty appointment there inasmuch as it was not in systematic theology. By the summer of 1968, following the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., Cone was nearly ready to explode with rage himself.

“My anger stretched back to the slave ships, the auction block, and the lynchings…Racism is a deadly disease that must be resisted by any means necessary. Never again would I ever expect white racists to do right in relation to the black community.” Not only explicit and avowed racists like George Wallace or the KKK came under Cone’s scorn here: “A moral or theological appeal based on a white definition of morality or theology will always serve as a detriment to our attainment of black freedom.”

It is worth pausing here to unpack a bit of what Cone is driving at. White theologians of his day—and indeed of today in many cases—were not concerned with such applied matters as the theological implications of white-on-black violence (e.g. King’s assassination) or even of the control by whites of theological discourse. The entire weight of black history, from 1619 until 1968, was at this point pressing upon Cone to write. Cone himself would never claim that his early works—potentially any of his works—are “unbiased”. He will, however, insist that there is no such thing as an “unbiased” theology. All theology, per Cone, is contextual, and that context is inseparable from the theologian’s life and

95 Cone. MSLB. 45. This is the crucial point to which this dissertation hopes to return. If Cone is correct that white theologians cannot tell a black theologian how to do theology, how can we find a place of communion? Where is the Christian community? We must take Cone seriously when he argues that God identifies with the oppressed and seek our community there.

96 Cone. MSLB. 47.
experience. We meet God in the world, and our disparate paths through the world mean that God does not, and cannot, meet all people in the same precise fashion. Following the publication of his first book, *Black Theology and Black Power*, Cone left Adrian College for Union Theological Seminary in New York City, where he remained for the rest of his career, ending as the Charles Augustus Briggs Distinguished Professor of Systematic Theology.

**Major Influences**

It is impossible to speak of Cone’s early work without noting the profound influence of Karl Barth. Indeed, Cone himself refers explicitly to the thought of Barth and Tillich throughout his early works. Barth’s influence has led Cone to reject the possibility of being mentioned in the history of American Liberal Theology.⁹⁷ Rather than spending time unpacking the theologies of Barth and Tillich, we will look briefly at Cone’s own statements of their influence. To their number, we should also add Jürgen Moltmann as one of the very few European theologians of whom Cone retained a positive impression.⁹⁸ The final Euro-American thinker to examine here will be Reinhold Niebuhr, about whom Cone taught a seminar at Union Theological Seminary.

In Cone’s own estimation, it is unlikely that any two black thinkers have had a greater impact on his work than Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. “I am an African-American theologian whose perspective on the Christian religion was shaped by Martin King and whose black consciousness was defined by Malcolm X.”⁹⁹

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⁹⁷ Gary Dorrien’s masterful trilogy *The Making of American Liberal Theology* looks to Cone’s interlocutor/rival J. Deotis Roberts to speak of Black Theology as a product of Liberalism.

⁹⁸ Anecdotally, when I took a course on the theologies of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. from Dr. Cone, I approached him about the possibility of writing a paper on J.B. Metz’s ideas of “dangerous memory” as applied to Malcolm and Martin. Cone felt that Metz was not a properly “major” theologian and counseled that I might consider something from Moltmann instead. Ultimately, I wrote on neither European thinker and, again per Cone’s urging, kept the topic restricted to Malcolm and Martin more directly.

Martin & Malcolm & America

His major work throughout the 1980s, Cone published Martin & Malcolm & America: A Dream or a Nightmare in 1991. This was, in some respects, a labor of love. From his earliest writings, Cone made no secret of his debt to these two figures. He opens this work with an explicit acknowledgement of their influence as quoted above, going on to say that “[t]his book is an examination of the meaning of justice and blackness in America in the context of the lives and thought of Martin King and Malcolm X.”100 These two figures can easily stand—and Cone has remarked that they do—as the figureheads of his Christianity and his blackness, respectively. The tension between them is not only illustrative of Cone’s own worldview, but indeed necessary to understand his work.

Cone immediately identifies the two poles of thought exemplified to a degree by Martin and Malcolm as integrationism in the former case and nationalism in the latter. Neither man stands as the first or the final advocate of these positions. Martin King’s family tree here stretches back to Frederick Douglass, Richard Allen, Henry Highland Garnet, Adam Clayton Powell (Sr. And Jr.), Reverdy C. Ransom and others. This is a list most notable for its reliance on church figures and preachers. Malcolm X, on the other hand, is linked to Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey, Nat Turner, Marcus Garvey, and—of course—Elijah Muhammad.101 Note here that the nationalists are often those viewed as far more radical by the majority culture in America. History, to some extent, decided the central figures already for Cone. Malcolm and Martin cast heavy shadows over the era of Cone’s own rising consciousness. It is clear, however, from how he frames their intellectual genealogies precisely what comes from each. The “blackness” and a great measure of the “liberation” are from the branch of Cone’s intellectual

100 ibid.
101 Cone. MMA. 5-9.
family tree that includes leaders of rebellions and nationalists. The “theology,” and nearly all of
the Christianity for that matter, come from the branch more concerned with integration. These
two are both necessary. “King’s life represented only one side of the African-American
experience, the American side. The African side was represented by the life of Malcolm X.”

One can split this any of a number of ways—Liberation/Theology; Black/Theology;
African/American—but the point remains that Cone is keenly attuned to the “twoness” described
by DuBois: “One ever feels his two-ness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two
unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps
it from being torn asunder.” It is in the DuBoisian mode that Cone views his two influences.
This is a work that stresses their similarities and refuses to pit them against one another as so
many histories of the 1960s are apt to do. “The most important similarity between Martin and
Malcolm was the goal for which they fought…they both sought the unqualified liberation of
African-Americans from the bonds of segregation and discrimination to self-determination as a
people, from a feeling of inferiority and nobodyness to an affirmation of themselves as human
beings.” These are not two ideological opposites. Rather, they represent two different tactics
deployed toward the same end. “Respect as human beings’ was the central theme of both
Malcolm and Martin in the black freedom struggle.” Cone is hardly alone in his assessment of
these two as more similar than different. Indeed, their biographies indicate not only a
fundamentally similar aim, but also an increasing proximity toward each other’s position.

“Martin and Malcolm knew their own limitations and knew also that the limitations of
one were the strengths of the other…Gradually both Malcolm and Martin moved away from the

102 Cone. MMA. 37.
104 Cone. MMA. 246.
105 Cone. MMA. 247.
extremes of their original positions and began to embrace aspects of each other’s viewpoints, without denying the validity their own central claims.”\textsuperscript{106} This is not to say that Martin advocated armed resistance to the police nor that Malcolm suddenly began preaching nonviolent resistance as a primary tactic in the freedom struggle. What is clear, however, is that by the time of his assassination, Malcolm was moving more toward the mainstream of the Civil Rights movement. A few years later, and just prior to his own assassination, Martin was moving further away from the fight for racial integration and toward a broader concept of racial and economic justice.

As Cone considers these two figures in their capacities as figureheads in the struggle for black freedom, it is appropriate for him to note that “Martin and Malcolm served not only as a complement to each other, but each also served as a necessary corrective against the other’s false reading of what was needed in the black freedom struggle.”\textsuperscript{107} While Martin urged love, Malcolm suggested that force should be met with force. Nonviolent resistance to violent actions was speaking the wrong language.\textsuperscript{108} Martin King, among other leaders of the movement for black freedom, was keenly aware of the statements Malcolm X made. Malcolm, however, was not the only voice suggesting that loving one’s enemies into justice was the best path to victory. Others included James Baldwin and Ossie Davis. Baldwin handily characterized Malcolm X’s northern audience as people who were unchurched and facing the struggle of “integrated” existence.\textsuperscript{109} This interplay is not the simplistic binary of love/hate or nonviolence/violence. Rather, it indicates that there was a sophisticated way to take both men at their word, even if those words seemed to be in conflict with one another.

\textsuperscript{106} Cone. \textit{MMA}. 253-4.
\textsuperscript{107} Cone. \textit{MMA}. 259.
\textsuperscript{108} Cone. \textit{MMA}. 262.
\textsuperscript{109} Cone. \textit{MMA}. 263.
This characterization of the non-opposite opposites of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. belies something of Reinhold Niebuhr in Cone’s thinking. Niebuhr loved to rest in the tension of an otherwise Hegelian dialectic and call it paradox. That is, rather than rushing to the synthesis of opposed ideas, Niebuhr found the greatest sense of possibility in the moment that thesis and antithesis both existed. This is Cone’s model for Malcolm and Martin: they both exist at once, and we do not have to choose between their different plans. Indeed, Cone is insistent that we needed—and still do need—both of them for freedom. Cone’s conflict had been how to be both Christian and black in a time when the former meant the oppression of the latter. He found a route through the paradox of these two towering figures.

Cone never finished working or wrestling with the meaning of these two men. They sat with him in all his endeavors. He taught on their legacies and the theological interpretation of them. As long as the discussion of Cone lasts, so too must the discussion of Malcolm and Martin be present. Even so, we must now turn to Cone’s latest work to see how far he has gone in his project of uniting these two thinkers in his own method.

**Cone on Niebuhr**

Cone describes black America as being caught in the tension and paradox of hope and oppression, thereby recalling another one of his influences: Reinhold Niebuhr. Niebuhr was

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111 Reinhold Niebuhr was one of the major theologians of both the Liberal and Neoconservative movements in 20th century American theology. As the son of German immigrants to the midwest, he initially struggled with acceptance into the English-speaking cultural majority of the United States. Niebuhr was widely published in his time, and his touchstone ethical work of his earlier career, *Moral Man and Immoral Society* has never been out of print. While his brother, Richard, taught at Harvard Divinity School, Reinhold Niebuhr taught his entire career at Union Theological Seminary in the City of New York. Niebuhr was instrumental in securing Paul Tillich’s escape from Germany in the early days of the Nazi regime. For further information about Niebuhr, the reader is kindly referred to Richard Wrightman Fox’s excellent *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography*; entries on Niebuhr in Gary Dorrien’s *The Making of American Liberal Theology* trilogy; Langdon Gilkey’s *On Niebuhr*; Niebuhr’s own works *Moral Man and Immoral Society: A Study of Ethics and Politics* (1932), *Interpretation of Christian Ethics* (1935), *Beyond Tragedy: Essays on the Christian Interpretation of History* (1937) *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation* (1943), *The Children of Light and the Children of Darkness* (1944), *The Irony of American History* (1952) among others.
keenly attuned to the nature of paradox in Christian theology. However much Cone appreciates his work, however, Niebuhr is in no way immune from criticism or critique.

Among white theologians he was particularly sensitive to the evils of racism and spoke and wrote on many occasions of the sufferings of African Americans. Few theologians of the twentieth century focused as much attention on the cross, one of the central themes of his work. And yet even he failed to connect the cross and its most vivid reenactment in his time. To reflect on this failure is to address a defect in the conscience of white Christians and to suggest why African Americans have needed to trust and cultivate their own theological imagination.\footnote{CLT. 32.}

We should understand Cone’s critique of Niebuhr here as a nuanced and appreciative one. He does not dismiss his predecessor as complicit in the racism of his time. To Cone, much of Niebuhr’s failure—and we will see shortly that it is indeed failure—is part of the latter’s conditioning and social location more than an embrace of evil.

Part of the attraction to Niebuhr for Cone is that Niebuhr rejected absolutist ethical positions, e.g. pacifism, perfectionism, because human finitude cannot bridge the divide between sinful nature and the absolute of divine love. Justice is therefore a balance of power, and not a standard in and of itself.\footnote{CLT. 33.} While Cone will strike out a distinction over the concept of justice, he nevertheless appreciates his predecessor’s attention to the necessity of dealing with reality as we find it. Niebuhr’s legacy can largely be discerned when Cone deals with practicality, irony, and paradox. Where Niebuhr falls short, to Cone, is generally in the area of what we might call applied empathy. Niebuhr certainly felt sympathy for the plight of blacks. He very likely felt some degree of empathy, owing to his early life in an ethnic-white community that experienced social exclusion. Where he fails is in applying this to the plight of blacks in America, and specifically in the work before us at present, in the connection between the lynching tree and the cross.
For his own part, Niebuhr sees the cross as the heart of the gospel. “‘Transvaluation of values,’ a term derived from Nietzsche…is the heart of Niebuhr’s perspective on the cross…We find its meaning whenever he speaks about God’s mercy and love in relation to Jesus Christ, especially in his sermons and several of his books.”¹¹⁴ This transvaluation means that the values of the world—material prosperity, longevity, conquest—are changed into demerits, while that which the world despises—powerlessness, sacrifice, surrender—is turned to a value. Cone and Niebuhr agree on this much. Cone, however, goes further than Niebuhr. The cross of Rome is the lynching tree of America. To find love and salvation there is the inversion of worldly values.¹¹⁵ This is not to lionize the act of lynching; that is still abhorrent. It is to point to a deeper connection between the suffering of Cone’s oppressed people and the suffering of Jesus of Nazareth.

Cone sees Niebuhr’s main failing in his writing on race to be one of imagination, wondering if “[f]or all his exquisite sensitivity to symbols, analogies, and the moral dimensions of history, was he ultimately blind to the most obvious symbolic re-enactment of the crucifixion in his own time?” Niebuhr decried the horrors of racism in terms nearly as strident as Malcolm X, yet he also sought to rescue good out of the slaveholding past of America’s founders and even the Plessy v. Ferguson, with its establishment of “separate but equal”.¹¹⁶ This is not to put an undue or over-large burden on Niebuhr. “It has always been difficult for white people to empathize fully with the experience of black people. But it has never been impossible.”¹¹⁷ Cone singles out Dietrich Bonhoeffer as a theologian who was able to make such an imaginative leap. During his time at Union Seminary, Bonhoeffer engaged with the spiritual life of Harlem,

¹¹⁴ Cone. CLT. 34-5. ¹¹⁵ Cone. CLT. 35-6. ¹¹⁶ Cone. CLT. 37-8 ¹¹⁷ Cone. CLT. 41.
attending church services there on a regular basis. “Niebuhr, in contrast, showed little or no interest in engaging in dialogue with blacks about racial justice, even though he lived in Detroit during the great migration of blacks from the South and in New York near Harlem, the largest concentration of blacks in America.”

Niebuhr’s engagement with black Americans was always done at a distance, and his concern for racial justice was subordinated to his concern for class equality. “Like most whites, Niebuhr did not realize the depth of black despair because he did not listen to Malcolm X and other Black Nationalists, who were speaking at Temple No .7 and in the streets of Harlem, only a few blocks away.” Niebuhr was engaged with the Delta Cooperative Farm and was troubled by the spectacle of lynching in the south when he visited there. “While spectacle lynching was on the decline in the 1950s, there were many legal lynchings as state and federal governments used the criminal justice system to intimidate, terrorize, and murder blacks.” Cone has the moral and imaginative better of Niebuhr here, as the use of the criminal justice system in America—and its racial disparities—are the most obvious and literal parallel to the crucifixion of Jesus. Was Jesus not executed by the licit government of his own day? This is a troublesome connection: the state exercises its monopoly control over legitimate violence to police the actions of a troublesome minority. Such a description could apply to either the disparate rate of incarceration and execution between blacks and whites—especially in the middle of the 20th century, but indeed also today—or the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. For a theologian so attuned to irony, Niebuhr’s oversight here is a grave disappointment. Indeed, Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. called Niebuhr’s attention to this very oversight in a manuscript comment when reviewing *The Irony of*

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118 Cone. *CLT.* 42.
119 Cone. *CLT.* 48.
120 Cone. *CLT.* 49.
American History, yet Niebuhr remained unmoved, and did not deal with the savage treatment of blacks in that volume at all.121

This is not to say that Niebuhr was completely uninterested in issues of race, nor that he was entirely unsympathetic to treat such topics seriously. Following the September 1963 bombing of the Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, AL, Niebuhr engaged in a public dialogue on race and religion with James Baldwin.122 He agreed with Baldwin that the bombing represented a moral crisis and a failure on the part of White Christianity. Their disagreement was a close and nuanced disagreement over details. “Although the Baldwin-Niebuhr dialogue did not reveal sharp disagreements, it did reveal different levels of passion in their responses, a gulf of emotional orientation to the racial crisis, reflected in the bombing.”123 Baldwin felt the violation of this terroristic attack more deeply than Niebuhr and was accordingly less willing to treat the discussion as an abstraction in moral terms. Real blood had been shed. Niebuhr was surprisingly indifferent to the reality of the situation, calling for calm and steady response.124

Cone stays with this exchange for some time, which ought to draw our attention to it as a crucial point in this work. Here he has a recorded exchange between two figures who loom large in his work overall. Not only that, but they are debating the value of black lives in a theological and ethical context. No wonder at all that he gives this exchange attention. Cone draws the reader’s notice to Niebuhr’s inattention to the importance of race. Pressed by Baldwin on the issue, Niebuhr retreats to an economic analysis and suggests that class should be considered

121 Cone. CLT. 50.
122 Cone. CLT. 53.
123 Cone. CLT. 54.
124 One could, without difficulty, consider this a precursor or antecedent to the current eruption of passionate disagreement when one group cries that “Black Lives Matter” and is answered that “All Lives Matter”. Niebuhr is better than those who implicitly suggest the erasure of black concerns into a too-soon colorless humanism. However, he is not so much different in kind as in degree on this question. His concern is still with the abstractions of philosophical morality.
before race. Baldwin refuses to concede this point, tying race and economics together through the complicating factor of chattel slavery.  

In Cone’s estimation, Baldwin has the better of Niebuhr. Further, this episode underscores his early point—made as early as *Black Theology and Black Power*—that white theologians often lack the empathetic imagination to centralize the concern and suffering of black people. Discussing the theology of the cross, Cone acknowledges Niebuhr’s influence, going on to remark that “I have never questioned Niebuhr’s greatness as a theologian…What I questioned was his limited perspective, as a white man, on the race crisis in America.”

A one-time engagement with Baldwin that failed to spark Niebuhr’s empathetic imagination is insufficient to free him from this legitimate critique.

While Niebuhr never publicly came around to the kind of full-throated support of black liberation that Cone would like, he was favorably impressed by the latter’s work. John Bennett, president of Union when Cone was called to a professorship there, sent a copy of *Black Theology and Black Power* to Niebuhr, who was in his retirement. Niebuhr wrote back thanking Bennett for the book and referred to black people as the “most genuine proletarians” of the middle class. Cone reflects, “I was surprised that Niebuhr had such a clear and sympathetic understanding of the meaning of black rage, something few whites ever grasp.” Niebuhr’s letter continued with praise for Cone’s hire at Union. The two disagreed—intellectually, though not in direct conversation—over the nature of progress and integration, which Cone would still deride as “tokenism” by another name.

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125 Cone. *CLT*. 55.
126 Cone. *CLT*. 60.
127 ibid.
None of this means that Cone is able to forgive or overlook Niebuhr’s “failure to express prophetic rage against racial injustice and his silence on lynching.” While it is laudable that Niebuhr’s imagination could encompass and affirm black rage at injustice, it is all the more damnable that he could not extend that imagination to oppose lynching in a public fashion. Some early white preachers and theologians did oppose lynching, and Cone is certain to name Quincy Ewing, Andrew Sledd, and E.T. Wellford among their number. However, Niebuhr’s insistence on the theology of the cross marks him out for special attention. He knew the real, political, consequence of Jesus’s preaching was his crucifixion at the hands of Rome. “If the American empire has any similarities with that of Rome, can one really understand the theological meaning of Jesus on a Roman cross without seeing him first through the image of blacks on the lynching tree?” For Cone and Niebuhr both, the implicit question—whether America and Rome are similar empires—is answered in the affirmative. The failure of the latter to see the former’s point about the symbolic nature of the cross in America is a failure of the empathetic imagination.

**Kamakura Japan**

Much as we just did above with Cone and the social context of being a black man in the United States in the 20th century, we must now examine briefly what social structures and pressures existed for Shinran. We must examine what it meant for Shinran to be Shinran in his own time. Accordingly, we must examine the social and religious landscape of Kamakura Era Japan (1185-1383CE). By doing so, we may excavate some of the implicit factors that drove Shinran to not only accept but evangelize the nembutsu practice he learned from Honen.
explicit influence on Shinran’s thinking will be examined in a later chapter. For the moment, let us turn to medieval Japanese society.

At the close of the 12th century, Japan was entering into a feudal period following a longer monarchical one. While the feudalism of Japan is in many ways distinct from its European counterpart, enough parallels remain to retain the terminology.

Like its Western counterpart, Japanese feudalism was to be distinguished by fiefs, vassalage, and a marked military ethos in culture as well as politics. However, fiefs, in the sense of compact areas of land held under the authority of a military overlord, were not a feature of its early development. It was the institution of vassalage, and, above all, the conduct and loyalty of individual vassals that enabled the heads of military houses in the fullness of time to govern Japan, displacing the civil aristocracy. 132

This change, while massive in its own right, was not an immediate one. Vassalage did not replace civil aristocracy overnight. “Even in their fully developed stage, feudal institutions were to remain contained within, and in some ways vitally dependent on, the older monarchical framework.” 133 This was not, however, a peaceful and calm time in Japanese history.

It is commonly theorized that political turmoil breeds millenarian/eschatological fervor in religious life. This is, of course, especially true in Christianity, but also in diverse religious contexts. 134 Shinran’s time was certainly one of tenuous political stability. The Kamakura Era of

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133 ibid.

134 See e.g. Mircea Eliade *A History of Religious Ideas, Vol. 2: From Gautama Buddha to the Triumph of Christianity*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982). pp. 270ff and 311ff for Eliade’s discussion of millennial expectation in Judaism and Iranian religious traditions; *Vol. 3: From Muhammad to the Age of Reforms*. pp. 87-88 for his discussion of the millennium in Christian thought. Venezuelan sociologist Graciela Acevedo finds aspects of religious millenialist thought in Marxist revolutionary mythology (see e.g. her article “La Religiosidad Popular Expresada En Lo Político: El Mito Del Reino Feliz.” *Espacio Abierto. Cuaderno Venezolano de Sociología* 21, no. 3 (July 2012): 519–42.) She discusses the role of religious ideas in the political sphere and the myth of a “Happy Kingdom”, while finding support from Manuel Garcia Pelayo that military trauma can give birth to millenialist thinking in the political masses.

Japanese history in which Shinran lived and taught was birthed by conflict and battle. The Hōgen and Heiji Disturbances of 1156 and 1160 brought the house of Taira into prominence.\(^{135}\) Although these brief rebellions were celebrated and mythologized, “[t]he confusion and bloodshed were real enough, and serious political strife persisted in the court until the death of Emperor Nijō.”\(^{136}\) During Shinran’s own life, the Taira were undone by the Minamoto in a series of conflicts including the Genpei War of 1180-1185. This conflict grew slowly but surely and changed the structure of Japanese society as “…alliance with the Minamoto clan was to lead to an innovative, locally based system of land confirmations for traditional holdings.”\(^{137}\)

Shinran was born, and grew up within, a society profoundly shaped by war. “Far from being a dispute between two great warrior clans, as it is so often depicted, the Genpei War was a national civil war involving substantial intraclan fighting and also pitting local against central interests. Indeed, the character of the violence was responsible for the type of regime that was created.”\(^{138}\) It was this world that Shinran sought to escape when he entered the monastery. It was this world to which he returned and in which he dwelled and preached. Political and dynastic succession troubles formed the symbolic backdrop of the Genpei War; however, as alluded to above, economic security for participants also played a role. To secure allies, “[t]he Minamoto chieftain [Yorimoto] promised what had never before been contemplated: a regional security system that bypassed Kyoto and guaranteed the landed holdings of followers.”\(^{139}\) This created a disruption to the economic base of the imperial court of the day. Yorimoto promulgated a document in 1180 in which he “…asserted prerogatives over the land and tax system which,

\(^{135}\) Mason & Caiger. 123.
\(^{136}\) ibid.
from the viewpoint of the Taira and the court, clearly constituted an illegal seizure of Kyoto-based powers.”

Not only was civil life altered during this period, but religious life came along with it. By decentralizing certain authorities from Kyoto to the provinces, the Kamakura Bakufu also allowed a system by which the Buddhist monasteries and local landholders could be of mutual economic use to each other. “The Buddhist church played a crucial role in enforcing property rights in medieval Japan. It was not a role born of theology, much less of devotion. It was a role born of its tax exemption, an exemption that the major temples and monasteries swapped for land commendations.” This may well have added to Shinran’s sense of despair in his times. Neither he nor indeed the monasteries and temples of his faith could be extricated from the sociopolitical and economic ties of the day.

History is not contemporarily divided into neat categories and eras. These are almost always a retrospective assignation by historians. The Heian Era which immediately preceded the Kamakura also bears on our understanding of Shinran and of the religious motivations of his day. Especially as we seek to understand why and how Pure Land teaching was so popular with both Honen’s and later Shinran’s followers, it bears looking to the rise of that thinking in the tumultuous last days of the Heian period when “[i]t might be said that, for all but members of the rising military class, anxiety was the keynote of the times.” This anxious time became fertile ground first for Honen’s and then for Shinran’s preaching on the “easy practice” of Amida Buddha.

It is no wonder that the invocation of Amida spread through the country in a powerful flood. Pure Land teaching naturally had a special appeal to the poor and the wretched, but

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evidently it was congenial to the native temperament, for it was eagerly accepted by
many whose temporal situation was high and fortunate...Evidently, then, there was
something in the Pure Land teaching the harmonized with the emotional needs of the
people not only in those disturbed times when it began to make headway but in
subsequent periods of relative calm, when great political and social changes had taken
place.\textsuperscript{143}

The “poor and the wretched” are indeed a group of special concern in the present study. Indeed,
“[a]s the weak have always known when life is ‘solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short,’
subservience to a protective power may be a lesser evil, even if it is a deeply resented one.”\textsuperscript{144}
This may explain some of the anachronistic affinity between the community in which Shinran
lived and the one to which Cone wrote. As the quote above mentions, however, the poor were not
the sole community for whom Shinran was concerned.

As we will shortly see in his biography, Shinran developed a concern for the wellbeing of
the marginalized within his society. The degree to which this became a specific concern for him
is certainly debatable, with some scholars arguing for a greater or a lesser degree of concern.
What is clear in any case is that Shinran decided to remain in rural provinces after his official
exile had ended. It was in these provinces that he first came into contact with the individuals
called \textit{burakumin}. This encounter certainly colored his further development as a religious thinker
concerned with universal salvation for all humans. Before examining Shinran’s life in greater
detail, we should first examine the case of the \textit{burakumin} population of Japan.\textsuperscript{145}

\textit{Burakumin/Out-caste Japanese}

From where did discrimination against \textit{burakumin} originate? They are not a conquered
indigenous people, subjected to colonial rule.\textsuperscript{146} They are not an immigrant community within a

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\textsuperscript{143} Sansom. 225.  \\
\textsuperscript{144} Ferejohn, John A. and Frances McCall Rosenbluth, eds. \textit{War and State Building in Medieval Japan} Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010. 4.  \\
\textsuperscript{145} This population has largely become Jōdo Shinshū Buddhists, and indeed the hierarchy of Honganji became
involved in their liberation struggles in the middle 20th century.  \\
\textsuperscript{146} One popular, but now discredited, theory of the origin of \textit{burakumin} was that they were actually Korean prisoners
\end{flushleft}
larger cultural context. They are, by all outward appearances, simply Japanese. Yet, until the Meiji Restoration, they were legally subject to discrimination in housing, employment, and even marriage.\textsuperscript{147} Though the burakumin were once thought to be ethnically distinct from other Japanese,

it is now widely believed that these people came to be discriminated against as a result of conscious political decisions reflecting social and religious beliefs of the past. That is, the archetype of these people is to be found in the \textit{eta-hinin} system of the Tokugawa period during which the Bakufu, regarding the \textit{eta-hinin} as the lowest status of the population, placed them below the commoners in rank.\textsuperscript{148}

Even the characters used to spell the term “eta” can be alternately read as “abundant filth”, alluding directly to the belief that the people in this classificatory stratum are indeed beneath the lowest of the low.\textsuperscript{149}

Galen Amstutz advances a theory, which supports Nagahara, that the origin of discrimination against burakumin is rooted in political and economic decisions. Of more direct interest is the notion that it is crucial to understand that pre-modern record keeping in Japan was no more precise or orderly than anywhere else. One potential aid in tracing family lineage through this era is the funerary register system, known as \textit{danka}. As a means of assessing taxation and census data, families were compelled to register with a local Buddhist temple for funerary rites.\textsuperscript{150} Unfortunately for the present study, it seems that such registration was not compulsory in areas where Shin Buddhism thrived.

\textsuperscript{149} Neary, Ian. “\textit{Burakumin} in Contemporary Japan” in Michael Weiner, ed. \textit{Japan’s Minorities: The Illusion of Homogeneity}. New York: Routledge, 1997. 61. This is by no means the only moment in which a scholar makes the direct linguistic connection between the very term “eta” and the connotation of filth and defilement. The insight is not original to Neary, nor unique in his analysis. It is, however, worth noting the degree to which the former term is offensive, derogatory, and literally de-humanizing.
Nevertheless, it is clear that Shinran—the founder of Shin Buddhism—was aware of some level of social discrimination in his time. “An often-cited fragment from Shinran’s texts demonstrates an awareness of them [social marginals/burakumin]: this is a passage from the interpretive work *Yuishin-shō mon‘i*...which notes that certain *gerui*... (lowly people) called to...are recipients of Amida’s light like all others.”151 While this religious egalitarianism is wonderful in theory, it was not always followed as such. We will re-visit this ambivalence later. Amstutz reminds us that “the topic is hardly a main concern of Shinran’s, and it is ambiguous in its social implications.”152

The touchstone study of *burakumin* in English remains George DeVos and Hiroshi Wagatsuma’s 1966 volume *Japan’s Invisible Race.*153 This text gives an unsurpassed sociological and anthropological view of the outcaste people of Japan. Further reflections will build upon this work in particular. For the moment, it is well worth looking closely at this landmark study. Given the present concern for the relationship of Shin Buddhism to *burakumin*, this will be a somewhat attenuated look, and will specifically concentrate on those chapters and sections which discuss religious identity.

*Burakumin*, to transliterate the term, could quite simply be known as “hamlet people” or “villagers”.154 As is readily apparent, however, this hardly does justice to the concept of their status in Japanese society. The stratification of an agrarian society into castes is by no means

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152 Amstutz. 65. The notion that this discrimination was known to Shinran yet was not a locus of activity for early Shin Buddhism is precisely the point at which comparison to a white response to Cone can first become fruitful.
153 The authors of this study are forthcoming in their cross-cultural view of social discrimination and its applicability to the discrimination seen by African-Americans in the United States, stating “Our interest in the Japanese outcaste as an ‘invisible race’ arose out of our ongoing comparative research on delinquency and social deviancy in Japan and the United States...Negro [sic] Americans have not been thoroughly accepted since slavery was legally abolished as a result of the American Civil War.” (vii)
unique to Japan. Such a stratification appears to have both played a role in the establishment of an outcaste community in Japan and also have been strongly influenced by religious ideas of purity and pollution. It is beyond the particular scope of the present essay to tease out which strain of religious ideology led to what social discrimination throughout Japanese history. DeVos and Wagatsuma caution that while the “cultural diffusion of Buddhism of Indian proscriptions against taking life played a major role in establishing the outcaste tradition in Japan…one must not overlook indigenous religious features…that made concepts of pollution and contamination particularly acceptable through Japanese cultural history.”

Inasmuch as heredity plays an important role in the common conception of “caste” (especially when “caste” is compared with “class” in terms of social organization and mobility), it is particularly worth exploring precisely how caste might be constructed in this context.

As we unravel the interwoven concepts of status and untouchability, we must note that there are often subtle shades of distinction between such notions.

The Japanese Hinin, or “non-people”—itinerants, beggars, prostitutes, castoff commoners—were not “untouchable” as were the Eta, nor in the strictest terms were the Hinin considered as hopelessly polluted. They could gain commoner status under unusual conditions. Hence, in the sense in which we are considering caste, they were not true hereditary outcastes…

Whether the burakumin as we will come to know them later were originally traced only to the eta or to both the eta and the hinin (or, as above some conglomerative eta-hinin), what is inescapably clear is that they were involved in work which entailed some level of ritual pollution. In the discussion of ritual pollution in Japanese society, DeVos and Wagatsuma are very much a product of their scholarly era. Scholars of Indian religious thought in general, and of Buddhism

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155 DeVos, 3. In a contemporary milieu, it is tempting to refer to these “indigenous religious features” as some type of Shinto or proto-Shinto belief system. Later, and more current, analysis will question whether it is accurate to refer to pre-Buddhist kami worship as “Shinto” or not.
156 DeVos, 6.
in particular, no longer refer to the Vedic practices from which Buddhism grew as “Hindu”.157 The anachronism notwithstanding, they are keen to point out that “the Chinese considered pollution to be a temporary condition rather than a hereditary taint.”158 If we consider that the transmission of Buddhism came through China to reach Japan from India, we are left with something of a puzzle. Why would untouchability regain its hereditary status?

Outcaste status and attitudes about untouchability developed within medieval Japanese culture because of a complex set of economic, social, political, and ideological conditions. And once established, outcaste status has had great staying power. The formal rational explanations and protests on the parts of members of the majority society, or by the outcastes themselves, have had little effect on hastening change in outcaste history. The official emancipation proclamation and later liberation movements “…are comprehensible as products of Japan’s mode of social revolution in general, but they have not resulted in any rapid shift in deeply rooted emotional attitudes toward outcaste individuals.”159

Untouchability, then, can be read as alternatively a religious phenomenon that gives rise to social structure or as a social structure seeking religious legitimation. The untouchability of the *burakumin* appears to be of the latter sort. “The first fairly well-documented origins of caste in Japan can be traced to the development of occupational specializations in the ninth and tenth centuries [CE].”160 Pre-Buddhist ritual practices could include animal sacrifice, which would

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157 This is not to deny the actual existence of such practices. Rather, their classification as “Hindu” seems to be at least partly due to the taxonomic efforts of European scholarship. For a full discussion of this issue, please see David N. Lorenzen “Who Invented Hinduism?” Comparative Studies in Society and History, Vol. 41, No. 4 (Oct., 1999), pp. 630-659. Lorenzen is of the opinion that there was certainly an internally-professed unity to several schools of Vedic thought comprising a “we” as opposed to the “you” of Islam or nascent Buddhism (or Jainism, etc.). He therefore disagrees with the notion that there was nothing behind the signifier of “Hindu” or that such religious unity was imposed from without. Nevertheless, the notion stands that the classificatory system was foreign to the people described by it.
158 DeVos, 7.
159 DeVos, 13.
160 DeVos, 14.
have been carried out by religious practitioners. However, “Buddhism…brought with it a strong prohibition against disrupting the cycle of life and death and proscribed the killing of animals and the eating of meat. Thus, Buddhism contributed to the separation of occupations associated with animal slaughter and processing from the general body of commoner and slave occupations.”

Buddhism, then, has a contributing role in the stratification of Japanese society.

To further complicate matters, once the outcastes were established in their ritually polluted occupations, a very minor sort of economic benefit accrued to this status.

Since the Eta developed around occupational specializations that were taboo for non-Eta, they essentially held monopolies of their trades. Given the general Japanese trends of inherited occupation, a rigid socio-economic hierarchy, occupationally specialized communities, and ritual pollution, it was just this monopolistic character along with a sedentary life that maintained the Eta as an outcaste group for thousands of years. During the Ashikaga period the Eta were the most fortunate of the pariah classes…they held special skills and economic monopolies, owned property, and had a stable community life; albeit this very stability assured their continuity as an outcaste population.

As alluded to above, this will prove to be a proverbial “double-edged sword.” While the ability to meet a need for leather goods (saddles, sandals, etc.) and bowstrings provided a steady income, the monopolies on these industries were not permanent. The very industries which could keep a community afloat could also sink it. DeVos and Wagatsuma further highlight the confusion of the categories of Eta and Hinin, noting that “…records and even laws from the Tokugawa period maintain that the Eta are outcasts permanently by inheritance whereas the Hinin are outcasts only by occupation and social status.” It is not surprising, then, that individuals subject to existence at the very bottom of a social hierarchy would seek out whatever meager mobility they might be able to find.

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161 DeVos, 18.
162 DeVos, 21.
163 ibid.
The mobility of *eta-hinin* people was at least in part predicated on their ability to “pass” as majority Japanese. This was obviously not an option available to many blacks in the United States, although the phenomenon of “passing” has indeed received some scholarly scrutiny.

There\(^{164}\) were, of course, those who stayed in one location as well:

The Eta migrants out of the Inland Sea region in the fifteenth through seventeenth centuries tended to retain their traditional occupations longer and so were more often identified as Eta by craft. Those who stayed behind more often emphasized the high-status occupation of agriculture and were more easily identified by place of residence than by occupation. Since agriculture, particularly land ownership and control, holds a position of high status in the traditional sector of Japanese culture, of which the Eta are a part, an occupation emphasis on agriculture became an alternative to “passing” as non-Eta into the majority society.\(^{165}\)

As long as discrimination against the *eta-hinin* was officially sanctioned, then, there were few appealing alternatives for life in Japanese society: acceptance of one’s status as out-caste, an attempt at passing into majority society by various schemes (e.g. marriage to an unknowing majority Japanese person, falsification of birth records, etc.), or insistence on one’s relatively high status as a farmer or landowner. The last of these possibilities carries with it the social shame of owning land in a known *eta-hinin* area. It is at least in part from this option that we can derive the more modern term *burakumin*: “hamlet people”.\(^{166}\)

**Shinran**

While Cone founded a theoretical approach to a problem in theology, Shinran (1173-1262) is acknowledged as the founder of a particular religious confession. As such, these two

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\(^{164}\) Perhaps the most famous instance of this phenomenon is John Howard Griffin’s reverse-passing (i.e. white passing as black) experiment recounted in his book *Black Like Me*. Griffin’s work was subsequently and famously satirized by Eddie Murphy in the short film “White Like Me”, aired as part of *Saturday Night Live* on 15 December, 1984. Beyond racial passing, the phenomenon is discussed in terms of sexuality in Kelby Harrison’s *Sexual Deceit: The Ethics of Passing*. (Lanham: Lexington Books) 2013.

\(^{165}\) DeVos, 22.

\(^{166}\) While the present essay is concerned with the potential for constructive comparison with a theological affirmation of Black Liberation in mainstream white churches, there is also a very suggestive connection between majority Japanese attitudes to rural *Burakumin* and majority American views of the predominantly white poverty seen in Appalachia (i.e. “poor white trash”).

figures are not precisely one-for-one matches in their traditions. In this section, I will endeavor to
give a brief biographical sketch of Shinran. A discussion of the applicability of comparing Cone
and Shinran as figures in their traditions follows this sketch. One main point on that comparison,
however, is worth noting even in introduction. While the impact of Shinran on the religious
development of Japan would be difficult to overstate, his written output is somewhat paltry in
comparison to Cone. This can be attributed to many factors, among them the preservation of
texts from the 12th and 13th centuries, and the distinction between the written output of a
religious leader and that of a scholar of religion.

Shinran is indisputably understood to be the founding thinker of the Jōdo Shinshū school
of Buddhism, although he himself maintained that he was merely passing along truths revealed
by his own teacher, Honen. “During the last few years of his life he was aware that his teachings
had attracted a dedicated following, and he was tantalized by the prestige and influence they
 accorded him…In moments of deepest introspection he felt himself unworthy and unqualified for
such a position of esteem.”167 This ambivalence often resulted in Shinran’s disavowal of his own
importance in the foundation of Shin Buddhism. His own objections notwithstanding, Shinran
quickly became the central figure around whom the school coalesced.

Unfortunately, “for all Shinran’s religious importance, the historical details of his life are
obscure. Late sectarian biographies are so interlaced with legend that they have little historical
credibility.”168 Within thirty years of Shinran’s passing, his biography had slipped into pious
hagiography. “Even the Godensho (“The Biography”), the oldest and most reliable one…must be
used with caution, since its primary objective is to portray Shinran as a manifestation of Amida

168 ibid.
Buddha, a characterization that Shinran would have decried.”\textsuperscript{169} This historiographical instability led to the critique of the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century that perhaps Shinran was entirely a pious fiction and never had existed as a real person.\textsuperscript{170} Fortunately, in 1921, a cache of letters written by Shinran’s wife, Eshinni, was discovered and put to rest any doubts about whether there had really been a historical Shinran. Accordingly, we may proceed cautiously to uncover something of the life of Shinran.

Shinran may or may not have been the son of a Kyoto aristocrat. Kakunyo, in the \textit{Godensho}, claims this for his ancestor, but independent historical corroboration does not currently exist. His family, however, was clearly tied with the Hino house of the aristocracy. Further, “Shinran himself, whether or not a scion of the Hino, did not come from humble origins. The level of education reflected in his writings and the ownership of servants (\textit{genin}) in his family suggest that he was a product of at least the lower aristocracy.”\textsuperscript{171} Of course, “As is natural in the case of influential personalities, stories grew up which have the purpose to stress his greatness in overt ways. In the case of religious teachers, it is not uncommon to illustrate points of doctrine in events of the teacher’s life. Thus, numerous tendentious tales may appear.”\textsuperscript{172} Indeed, much of the biographical material we have related to Shinran seems to contradict itself as often as confirm any details of his life.

\textsuperscript{169} ibid.
\textsuperscript{170} In this way, but largely only this way, one might be reminded of the roughly contemporary debates on the historicity of Jesus Christ. Following Schweitzer’s \textit{Quest of the Historical Jesus}, it would be possible to speak of a “Quest of the Historical Shinran” within Shin Buddhism. It should be strongly noted, however, that this comparison extends only to the debate over history and not to any parallels in soteriology or theology. In other words, this is not a suggestion that Shinran was himself a salvific figure within Shin Buddhism. Rather, it is only to say that he was a central figure whose historical attestation came under question.
\textsuperscript{171} Dobbins. \textit{Jōdo Shinshū}. 22.
One thing that is indisputably clear, however, is that Shinran became a monk at the temple at Mount Hiei. Precisely when and why he did so is, unfortunately, also lost to legend. He may have turned his back on a courtly position, or have gone to the monastery at nine years old, or have been moved by the death of his parents to consider the transience of existence, or his mother may have asked on her death bed that he become a monk. It is less important to know precisely why he entered the monastery than to understand that any of the traditional tales are fairly normal reasons for someone of the minor aristocracy to have departed that life for the monastery. What they all point to, in other words, is the understanding that Shinran was not himself a peasant or of a warrior family. Precisely why he entered monastic life is far less important than the fact that he did so. We have slightly more insight into Shinran’s life at the monastery than into his early life, in part because the life of a monk is attested in other, non-Shin, sources.

**Shinran at Mount Hiei**

No matter what visibility we may or may not have to Shinran’s early life, “there is no doubt about Shinran’s presence of Mount Hiei and his involvement in the religious discipline of that institution. The traditional accounts, however, provide us with little reliable material on the basis of which to give an objective view of the character of his study there and the sources of his spiritual dissatisfaction.” We do know that his career as a monk there lasted roughly twenty years. During that time, he served as a priest in one of the nembutsu halls of the temple. “The responsibility of hall priests in these ceremonies ranged from chorus chanting of sutras and the nembutsu to collecting offerings, thereby indicating a relatively low status in Mt. Heir’s scholar-

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monk (gakushoo) class.” During his time as a hall priest, Shinran’s dissatisfaction with the Tendai monk’s life grew.

His wife, Eshinni—about whom more will be said shortly—at test to this dissatisfaction in the third of her extant letters: “[Long ago] when he left Mt. [Hiei] he secluded himself for a hundred days at the Rokkakudo [chapel] to pray concerning his next life. At dawn on the ninety-fifth day, Shotoku Taishi appeared in a revelation and composed a verse for him. Straightaway he went out that dawn seeking to establish a karmic bond that would save him in the next life, and he thus encountered Master Honen.” Unfortunately, we no longer have the specific verse that Eshinni sent to her and Shinran’s daughter, Kakushinni in this letter. What we do know, however, is that this experience in the Rokkakudo was transformative. Indeed, to Eshinni’s recollection, it was the signal event that sent Shinran off the path of a Tendai monastic life and into the orbit of his master, Honen.

There is a second description of Shinran’s vision in the chapel, which is recorded in a text known as “Record of Shinran’s Dreams”. This text differs in both the content and Shinran’s reaction to it, recording a dream of Kannon giving a charge to Shinran to go and spread a message of the Pure Land. Whether these are two separate dreams or two different accounts of the same vision is unclear. “What is clear is that during this period Shinran was in a state of religious turmoil. He was distressed over his fate in the next life, and he was apparently tormented by sexual impulses…abandoning his priestly celibacy would jeopardize any hope of salvation, for it would constitute a violation of the Buddhist precepts which Tendai monks were sworn to obey.” At any rate, whichever dream is accepted as the real one, the early years of

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175 Dobbins. Jōdo Shinshū. 23.
the 13th century were tumultuous ones for Shinran. Traditional references to his time at Mt. Hiei “…emphasize his great knowledge and understanding of doctrine in order to make it clear that he had thoroughly weighed Tendai thought and practice and found that salvation could not be achieved through it.”\textsuperscript{178} Whether he was given a secret (or lost) verse or was advised in a dream by Kannon to spread the message of Amida’s Pure Land, it is nevertheless the case that Shinran did indeed leave Mt. Hiei and join with Honen.

It is important, of course, to have some understanding of why he would leave this monastic life behind. “There are evidences that his rejection of Mount Hiei was grounded in a deep sense of defilement which must have developed through the years of his training. The very nature of his thought indicates that it was an attempt to face up positively to his corrupt nature.”\textsuperscript{179} The depravity and corruption to which Shinran felt himself susceptible centered around sexual urges. He would ultimately leave not only the monastery but indeed the monastic vows he had taken behind. It bears noting that this was not necessarily the suggestion of Honen. Rather, Shinran himself felt it necessary to abandon the celibacy of a monk and enter into a layperson’s life. He would refer to himself often as neither priestly nor lay, which can be read as a version of Buddhist non-duality or as a simply descriptive statement. Whichever reading one prefers, this change borders on the ontological for Shinran.\textsuperscript{180} Such change is both necessary to the eventual development of the Jōdo Shinshū school of Buddhism and it would not have occurred without Shinran’s encounter with Honen.

This meeting “…symbolized the rejection of the decadent, aristocratic, confusing religion of the age and his identification with the virile, vital and popular teaching of Honen which

\textsuperscript{178} Bloom. \textit{Life}. 5.
\textsuperscript{179} Bloom. \textit{Life}. 8.
\textsuperscript{180} Such an ontological change opens a very intriguing point of comparison and contact with Cone’s own demands of the white theologian. We will certainly return to this point.
brought clarity to religious thought and faith through the stress on the singlehearted recitation of the name of Amida Buddha.\textsuperscript{181}\footnote{Bloom. \textit{Life}. 9.} Shinran was attracted to a teaching in which “…individuals burdened with guilt and sin could devote themselves to the simple recitation of Amida Buddha’s name in the faith that they would gain birth in the Pure Land despite their spiritual incapacity.”\textsuperscript{182}\footnote{Bloom. \textit{Life}. 10.}

It would be difficult to overstate the distinction between the striving of the Tendai life he left behind and the singular devotion offered by Honen’s interpretation of Pure Land teachings. This distinction is key to understanding Shin Buddhist doctrine and relies on the further clarification that salvation is due to the “other power” of Amida Buddha and never the “self-power” of the believer. Even faith is to be seen as a gift of Amida. Shinran would go on to be one of Honen’s disciples, but how close he really was to the master is not entirely clear. Internal sources portray Shinran as a close and trusted disciple, but there is little independent corroboration of this, even within Honen’s own writings.

Kakunyo, Shinran’s great-grandson, relates a telling anecdote in the official biography. While many people have been attracted to Honen’s teachings, few are following them correctly. Shinran devised a test of faith, so to speak:

Shinran divided the disciples into two groups by asking them whether they believed that faith or practice was the foundation of salvation. As a result, three hundred persons revealed their misunderstanding, because they sought salvation in practices. However, Seikaku, Hōrembō, Shinran and the lay disciple, Hōriki, placed themselves on the side of faith. The climax of the incident came when Hōnen took the side of faith and confirmed Shinran’s view.\textsuperscript{183}\footnote{Bloom. \textit{Life}. 13. Parallels might be noted here to the Christian discussion around so-called “works righteousness.” If we were to apply Christian analysis to this situation, it would seem to leave Shinran—and therefore Shin Buddhism after him—aligned with the Lutheran position that salvation is through faith alone and never through works. This is, of course, an inaccurate reading of the situation within Buddhism. It has nevertheless been noted that there is an apparent morphological sympathy between Shin Buddhism and Protestant Christianity as early as the first Jesuit encounters with Shin.}

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Such an incident would speak to Shinran’s high status among Hōnen’s disciples. This is indeed the narrative advanced by Shin Buddhist officials. The record, however, is cloudy on this matter.

During a time of controversy, but prior to the suppression of Honen’s teaching and his followers’ exile from Kyoto in the early 1200s, Honen was required to make the “Seven Article Pledge”, denouncing fractious actors and actions within the larger Buddhist community. His disciples likewise signed the pledge: “Among the 190 names listed there, Shinran’s appears in eighty-seventh position…This would place Shinran in the intermediate ranks of Honen’s following…from Honen’s point of view, Shinran was probably a trusted disciple but not his leading protégé, whereas in Shinran’s eyes, Honen was the foremost religious personage of the period.” Nevertheless, Shinran was exiled along with Honen in 1207, which would indicate that he was both known to authorities and considered close enough to Honen to be a danger to stability if allowed to stay in the capital region.

Exile and Marriage

From 1207 through 1212, Shinran was based in Echigo. It was here that he met and married Eshinni, with whom he had at least four—and possibly six—children. Her letters to their daughter serve as perhaps one of the greater insights into both Shinran’s life and character and the actual lived practice of early Shin Buddhism. While Shinran’s doctrinal writings are of course invaluable in setting out what the faith might teach, Eshinni’s letters give us a much greater understanding of both how a believer ordered her or his life and how someone close to this charismatic religious leader viewed him in the early years following his death.

In a letter thought to be written shortly after Shinran’s death, Eshinni retells a dream she had about him.

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185 Dobbins. Jōdo Shinshū. 27.
I recall a dream I had while we were at a place called Sakai village at Shimotsuma in Hitachi [province]. It seems that there was a dedication ceremony for a temple building. The building stood facing east, and it was apparently on the eve of the ceremony. In front of the building there were lanterns [burning] bright, and to the west of the lanterns in front of the building there were [two] Buddhist images suspended from the horizontal part of what seemed to be a shrine gate (torii). In one there was no face to the Buddhist image, but only a core of light, as if it were the radiance of the Buddha’s head…In the other, there was a distinct fact to the Buddhist image. I asked what Buddhist images these were and the person…said “The one that is only light is none other than Master Honen. He is the bodhisattva Seishi.” When I asked who the other was, he said, “That is [the bodhisattva] Kannon. That is none other than the priest Zenshin [i.e. Shinran].”…I have heard that such things are not to be spoken to other people, for they may not think such things spoken by this nun [i.e. Eshinni] to be true…I did tell my husband [Shinran] the part about Master [Honen]…I did not say anything about my husband being Kannon, but in my own mind I have never looked upon him from that time forward in any ordinary way.186

What does such a dream tell a contemporary individual interested in the life of Shinran?

Principally, we can learn that Eshinni held him in such astounding regard as to think, literally subconsciously, of an analogy to Kannon, the much-revered bodhisattva of compassion. It should be noted as well that such dreams and portents were held in different regard in a pre-modern context. It is likely that Eshinni believed in the dream as a kind of truth. Shinran, then, as a manifestation of Kannon, becomes a bringer of compassionate teaching. Through his teachings on the nembutsu practice, he could lead others out of suffering. It is further noteworthy that she did not report sharing this part of the dream with Shinran. We might guess as to why, but one likely argument would be to insulate him against detractors and defamers. By revealing this only after his death, Shinran could not be accused of committing any kind of self-aggrandizing acts.

Such protection would have been important, given the fact that Shinran was only in Echigo because he’d been exiled from the capital region, along with his teacher and many other followers. During his time in Echigo, “the insights which he had gained in association with Hōnen were given the opportunity to develop freely…it was here that the interpretation of Pure

Land doctrine which has given Shinran his lasting religious significance began to mature as he faced the problems of establishing a new life in the northern area of Japan.”\(^{187}\) This time in a more rural area “…brought him face to face with the hard realities of the life of the common people which he had not known when he lived apart as a monk pursuing the path of Buddhist studies.”\(^{188}\) It will be fruitful to look later at the change this wrought in Shinran’s own life and in the life of the religious movement he left behind. While it does not seem that he was a member of the aristocracy prior to exile, it is clear that his time among the rural people of medieval Japan had a lasting impact on Shinran’s religious outlook. We will see more of that development later, when examining Shin Buddhist belief and thought.

It was in this time that he began to refer to himself as “neither priest nor layman.”\(^{189}\) Such a description belies the difficulty he must have had in making this change. “He had to merge his religious life with his new secular existence. He had lost his priestly privileges in the eyes of the state, but he could not entirely cast aside his religious training and interests because he was now merely a layman. Just as he was a priest without privilege, he was a layman without experience.”\(^{190}\) The Buddhist analysis of reality—that existence is marked by dissatisfaction, that this dissatisfaction has a cause, and that this dissatisfaction can be overcome—became Shinran’s lived experience and was no longer limited to academic treatises. “Shinran rejected completely the duality of religious and lay life. He took the principle ‘Samsara is Nirvana’ as something to be applied concretely to the common life. Existentially and philosophically Shinran united the secular and religious life.”\(^{191}\) A large part of this unity was, of course, his marriage.

\(^{187}\) Bloom. *Life*. 19-20
\(^{188}\) ibid. 20.
\(^{191}\) ibid.
We have some information about Eshinni, but ultimately not as much as we might like. Much of what we know of her life comes, as stated above, in her surviving letters. “According to the *Hino-ichiryu-keizu*, she was related to Miyoshi Tamenori. Umehara observes that this family had considerable influence in both Echigo and Kanto. The relation may have affected Shinran’s decision to go to Kanto.”¹⁹² It may or may not have been the case that Eshinni was from a wealthy family. What is more important than her economic status is her literacy and intelligence. Without those traits, we would not have the letters she composed. These letters are key to understanding both the lived experience of the earliest Shin believers and to understanding Shinran in non-autobiographical and non-hagiographical ways.

In the fifth of her surviving letters, Eshinni recalls a seemingly trivial episode from Shinran’s life. Shinran fell ill with something like the flu and, during this illness, prayed and chanted for healing. While seemingly quotidian, this episode gives insight into his religious development. As such it is worth quoting at length.

I [i.e. Eshinni] asked, “What is it? Are you talking gibberish?” He [i.e. Shinran] responded, “It is not gibberish. From the second day of my illness I have been chanting the Larger [Pure Land] Sutra without a break. Whenever I happened to close my eyes, the letters of the sutra would appear brilliantly and in detail, without a single character missing. This [chanting] indeed is senseless, I thought, for outside of faith [which comes] with the *nembutsu*, what is it that should command my attention so? As I carefully reflected on this, [I recalled] a time seventeen or eighteen years ago when I set out to chant the three [Pure Land] sutras faithfully a thousand times for the benefit of all sentient beings. Then wondering what this was for, [I brought to mind the verse] ‘To have faith oneself and to cause others to have faith is by far the most difficult among [all] difficult things.’…With faith in this, what outside of the *nembutsu* could possibly be lacking that would make one feel the need to chant the sutras? Having reflected on this, I did not [continue] chanting them…One should ponder well the attachments of human beings and the faith they have in their own power (*jiriki*).”¹⁹³

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The realization she recounts is that faith and self-effort stand in opposition to one another. This is in no sense the first time Shinran has had this realization, but it is nevertheless an important moment in his religious development. If one has faith in the saving power of Amida Buddha, then one need not chant sutras for purification. If one is chanting sutras, it indicates a lack of faith in the other-power (tariki) of Amida. This incident gives us purchase on not only Shinran’s religious development, but indeed the way in which his non-dual (i.e. neither priestly nor lay) existence has helped to shape it. If he were still living in a monastery, he would not have had a devoted wife tending to him during his illness. If, on the other hand, he was simply a layman, he would not likely have had the religious insight that Eshinni recounts above. By existing in this non-dual space, Shinran is both able to gain this insight and pass it along to future generations.

Shinran’s time in Echigo was also crucial to his evangelistic movement. “Although Shinran avoided direct propagation of his Pure Land faith for political or economic reasons in Echigo, it is quite clear from his activity on the way to Kanto that he had not at all forgotten his initial religious impulse, and his desire to help all beings gain enlightenment.”194 While his time in this rural area was indeed marked by material hardship, the religious component of his stay there was far more important. His “neither priest nor lay” identity deepened, as “…he had lived close to the common people. He nurtured a desire to share his faith with them. Unable to return to Kyoto and unwilling to compromise his convictions, he turned his eyes to the newly developing religion.”195 During this time, he endeavored to recite the entirety of the Pure Land sutras for the benefit of others. While practices for the karmic benefit of one’s family or community are indeed common across different schools of Buddhist thought, Shinran was particularly concerned for the largely illiterate population with whom he now lived. If they could

not even read the characters which comprised the sutras, how could they benefit from the wisdom contained therein?

This practice, however, became a foundational moment in the religious orthopraxis of Shin Buddhism and its reliance on the nembutsu practice. After beginning his recitation of the thousand parts of the Pure Land sutras, Shinran “…reconsidered it and came to the conclusion that the true way to requite the compassion of Amida Buddha was to cause others to believe what he believed himself.”196 In other words, it would be of greater benefit to others to evangelize his understanding of the Pure Land sutras and of nembutsu practice than to carry on chanting for the benefit of others. Bloom points out that the time in Echigo, finally, gives us two main components of Shinran as a thinker: the evangelism that results from his own intense faith, and his full rejection of any practice subsidiary to the nembutsu, be it chanting, meditation, the taking of precepts, or—indeed—the keeping of them.197

**Political Outlook**

By the middle 20th century, Shin Buddhism aligned itself with the Buraku Liberation Leagues. It is possible to read something of a proto- or at least anticipatory Marxist sympathy into Shinran’s time in Echigo. It is of course a fraught enterprise to make such an assignation, especially if the thinker in question does not espouse particularly political views in her or his own time. Such is the case with Shinran. “Shinran’s teaching does not evidence particular class consciousness, but his teaching of the universal compassion of Amida Buddha and the requirement of faith alone naturally attracted followers from the lower classes who had nothing to offer except their devotion.”198 In other words, we are in an odd space between exegesis and

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196 Bloom. Life. 28.
197 ibid.
198 Bloom. Life. 34.
eisegesis when applying later political understanding to Shinran’s own thought. We do, however, retain some warrant to do so—albeit in a kind of *ex post facto* validation—by the acceptance of this political reading by the Shin hierarchy. Even if we disallow an anachronistic reading of political motivation, the point still stands that Shinran’s interpretation of his faith was attractive to those lower classes who could not sponsor the construction of temples or the recitation of sutras.\(^{199}\)

Whether Shinran consciously intended his teachings to do so or not, their appeal to the lower classes and castes of Japan could stand as revolutionary in its historical context. Egalitarianism in the midst of a feudal society is always a revolutionary action. It does not ultimately matter whether Shinran himself was fully cognizant of the political implications of his religious view. The implications are there regardless. This does not make him a revolutionary, of course; rather, it marks him as a seed-planter, as one who notices that the poor and overlooked are not excluded from salvation. He need not have anticipated Marx to have been disruptive to his own social order.

**The *Kyōgyōshinshō***

While Shinran certainly wrote other letters, exegetical tracts, and texts, the *Kyōgyōshinshō* stands above all others as his major work. “No specific date can be attached to it…however, scholars have generally agreed that the date 1224…must have an intimate relation to the production of the work itself.”\(^{200}\) The work is a largely exegetical compilation of various texts. It is organized into six sections, expounding on True Teaching, True Living, True Faith,

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\(^{199}\) In fact, the lower classes, including the *burakumin*, were sometimes kept from livelihood by the temples themselves. See Mass, Jeffrey P. *The Kamakura Bakufu: A Study in Documents*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1976. pp 106-111 for several documents (especially documents 86 and 87) that relate to the prohibition of hunting and gathering timber on temple grounds. The temple prohibition maintains the ritual purity of the monks at the literal expense of the poor who need both food and heating/cooking fuel from the same land.

\(^{200}\) Bloom. *Life*. 35.
True Realization, True Buddha-land and Land of the Transformation Body. The major hermeneutical device employed is Shinran’s own understanding of the vows undertaken by Amida Buddha. While the singular devotion to Pure Land practices marks Honen’s teaching—and Shinran’s by extension—as novel in the history of Buddhist thought, it is unlikely that either teacher thought that he was making a break with Buddhist tradition.

As an author, Shinran’s humility shines through much of the Kyōgyōshinshō. Naturally, some of this can be discounted as affectation. On a less cynical reading of the text, however, we find an author deeply conflicted about his own achievements as a practitioner of Buddhism. “As I humbly reflect, Amida’s Prayer for universal deliverance is beyond my understanding. It is the great boat that crosses the ocean of impassability. Amida’s Light knows no hindrance.”

The true meaning of this gracious gift of Amida’s Prayer remains, in his own telling, beyond Shinran’s capability and comprehension. Without an intellectual toe-hold on the concept, we cannot reason and discern our way through salvation. It is a gift given freely and ultimately accepted with gratitude, but it remains ever mysterious. His presentation of this gift takes on such a primary role, that Shinran further deduces that the very appearance of Śākyamuni in our world was the result of Amida’s saving prayer, noting “…when the conditions were maturing for the Pure Land, Devadatta succeeded in persuading King Ajātaśatru to commit a deadly crime. Thereupon, Śākyamuni came into the world to make the mind of Vaidehi turn toward the land of Peace and Happiness.”

If we tease out the implications of this statement, we find that Śākyamuni is an instrument of Amida’s salvation. This has led to the charge from opponents of

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202 ibid.
Shin Buddhism that they have venerated Amida above Śākyamuni, and in doing so committed a grave error.

It can appear that Shinran’s stress on the primary action of Amida Buddha and its attendant denigration of “self-power” are antithetical to more traditional Buddhist understandings of karma, the law of cause-and-effect.

It is, indeed, a rare event, however many lives one may go through, that one happens to find oneself so happily situated as to be taken up in Amida’s Prayer for universal deliverance!...If not for the most favorable karmic combination in one’s past lives, how could one ever come to cherish a faith in the Pure Land and live it accordingly?”

Shinran here seems careful not to upset a more traditional understanding of the benefit of achieving a human birth. He seems reluctant to appear too radical, at least on the surface. Whether this was a canny evangelistic proposition or a genuine impulse on his part is unclear.

What is indisputable is the structure of the Kyōgyōshinshō. It is largely a compilation of extended quotations from various sutras and śāstraś with interjections from Shinran to re-frame these canonical works as supportive of Shin doctrine.

These interjections provide slim documentation on their own; however, it is crucial to understand the central role of this document in the framing and development of Shin doctrine.

For example, while Honen stressed the principal efficacy of nembutsu practice, he did not necessarily dispense with all other aspects of Buddhist practice. Shinran pushes beyond this to suggesting that “The right practice is no other than the nembutsu. The nembutsu is no other than

203 Kyōgyōshinshō. 43.
204 This benefit, of course, is that only through human birth can one come to hear and practice the dharma. Non-human births, be they as animal or spirit, are substantially less advantageous. Shin Buddhism does critique the “self-power” by which one is normally said to achieve awakening. However, it is clear here and elsewhere that Shinran still finds both that there is an operative cycle of re-birth and that it is the coming-to-fruition of positive karmic actions that generates a human birth. The Shin innovation here is that, unlike a pre-Shin Buddhist, a practitioner of Shin Buddhism must turn over the reins of her or his will in performing meritorious actions to the saving power of Amida Buddha. In other words, all of one’s own actions are moot; we are in a degenerate age, during which it is impossible to generate enough positive karma for oneself to achieve escape from the cycle of rebirth. Only Amida’s other-power through his effective vow can save a being from the cycle of rebirth.
‘namu-amida-butsu’. ‘Namu-amida-butsu’ is no other than the right thinking. This should be known.”205 In other words, the sum total of “right thinking” is the nembutsu practice itself. No other practice is necessary, inasmuch as no other practice can possibly be successful in achieving liberation. Honen's nembutsu was principally effective, but Shinran’s is exclusively so. Shinran acknowledges that there are “…other Buddhas, and other great bodhisattvas, whose names, when held firmly in mind, may lead one to the attainment of non-retrogression.”206 The state of non-retrogression does not, however, imply the actual attainment of enlightenment or nirvana. Non-retrogression means what it implies: that once this stage is reached, one will never again be reborn in a less-advanced state. It is a backstop on the way to full enlightenment, but it is not enlightenment itself.

Throughout this work, Shinran is insistent that only reliance on the name of Amida Buddha will result in birth in the Pure Land. Discussing the work of Vasubandhu, and the question of the reality of birth, he remarks:

There are two interpretations given to the statement, ‘All beings are unborn, like space’: One is that…there is in ultimate reality no such thing as birth-and-death...The second is just because all things are born of karmic causation they are unborn, and like space, are non-existent...The Bodhisattva Vasubandhu, desiring to be reborn, understands ‘birth’ in the sense of karmic causation. This birth is not a birth meant in the sense as understood by ordinary people who imagine there are real beings, that there is really birth-and-death.207

If birth is the same thing as karmic causation, then one is not waiting necessarily on a bodily rebirth in the Pure Land. The bodhisattva is able to lead others to the Pure Land by turning over the karmic fruits of his or her labors. The bodhisattva’s “…mind never leaves all beings alone in their painful sufferings [and] has prayed to save them; he has made his first consideration to turn-over to them all the merit accruing from his deeds…The outgoing way is to turn-over the merit

205 Kyōgyōshinshō. 54.
206 Kyōgyōshinshō. 60.
207 Kyōgyōshinshō. 64.
produced by oneself to all beings and to give expression to the desire that they all be born
together in Amida Nyorai’s Pure Land of Peace and Happiness.” Karmic causation therefore is
the “birth” in the Pure Land, but it is not necessarily dependent on the karmic achievements of
the practitioner. Indeed, it is still through the grace and action of Amida Buddha that anyone is
born into the Pure Land at all.

Shinran’s insistence that the nembutsu practice is the only effective practice draws also
on canonical sources for reinforcement.

A number of the Mahayana sutras reveal the inconceivable power of the nembutsu-
samadhi. For instance, in The Avatamsaka Sutra we are told that when a man plays on a
lute of lion’s sinews, the sound produced will render all other lutes ineffectual. In like
manner, when a man exercises himself in the nembutsu-samadhi with the mind awakened
to Enlightenment, all the evil passions as well as all hindrances will be destroyed."

The analogy we are to draw here is that recitation of Amida’s name is the lute of lion’s sinews. It
renders all other methods of attaining enlightenment—all other figurative lutes—ineffectual.
This particular example is indicative of Shinran’s creative use of canonical scriptures to make
theological points that might seem extreme or even radical. It is important at this point for
Shinran to defend against the claim that he has overridden Śākyamuni Buddha’s teaching by
focusing too much on the efficacy of Amida’s vows.

Shinran defends against accusation of heresy here by stressing that “Uniform
Enlightenment is in all Buddhas, and in appearance they are not differentiated…The
Enlightenment attained by Buddhas is all one and uniform. Yet, each particular Buddha has his
certain definite prayer and practice, which karmic significance is to be taken into
consideration.” He is making a point about the universal and particular aspects of
enlightenment, but more importantly that the universal resides in the particular. He does not deny

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208 Kyōgyōshinshō. 66.
209 Kyōgyōshinshō. 67.
210 Kyōgyōshinshō. 70.
that the teachings of other Buddhas were ever effective. Indeed, this is an affirmation that the true dharma is taught by all Buddhas. What Shinran makes clear here is that it is Amida’s teaching that is effective for us now and in this place. “If a man continues pronouncing the Name of Amida to the end of his present life, or if he does so only ten times, or even once, he could easily be born in Amida’s Land, owing to the virtue of Amida’s Prayer.” It is never the individual’s efforts that are effective. If it were, then the number of recitations of the name would be important. That number is clearly refuted here. It could be constant, or ten times, or only once. What bears on salvation is the power of Amida Buddha’s prayer, not the believer’s.

The distinction between “self-power” and “other-power” is, of course, a major development in Shin doctrine. Here, Shinran quotes the patriarch of the Ritsu school, Ganjo, who clarifying that: “All those samadhi devotees exert themselves by solely relying on their self-power. Because of this, they already have something of the evil spirits within themselves, which then becomes decidedly stirred up by the devotees and reveals itself in various ways…As regards practicing the nembutsu-samadhi, however, we just rely upon the Buddha’s powers.”

Not only is other practice unhelpful, but it is also indicative of the presence of evil spirits. Shinran, however, could easily be misunderstood in this stress. In the first case, this section is a quotation from another master and not his own words. It would therefore be ill-advised to hold him too closely to the intent of the author quoted. In the second, it should be understood that Shinran is not advancing an argument that other samadhi practices are in and of themselves evil. Rather, he advances this argument to underscore the impossibility of impure beings committing pure actions. It is only through Amida’s pure actions that birth in his land can be obtained.

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211 Kyōgyōshinshō, 83.
212 A useful parallel here might be to a Christian concept of sin. We are tainted by sin and need the forgiveness of God, but we are not fully debased by the presence of sin. To Shinran, the gift of Amida is indeed a gracious gift. It is unearned and unmerited as regards its recipient. So too is God’s forgiveness unearned and unmerited to the
The other-power of Amida is so pervasive and powerful in Shinran’s rendering that all can be saved, even the icchantika. With Amida’s other power, “…all the river-waters of merits accumulated since the unknown past by ordinary beings as well as the wise, hence waters of mixed nature, and also all the sea-water of ignorance amassed since the unknown past by grave criminals, blasphemers of the Dharma, and those who were abandoned as unstable are now transformed into the waters of the great treasure-ocean of merit.” Note that in this water metaphor, Shinran chooses the river to represent the karmic fruition of merit, the sea to represent ignorance, and the ocean to represent the grace of Amida. Self-power is therefore the least effective of these things: it is the river. The sea, representing bad actions, is also subsumed into the ocean, representing the saving grace of Amida Buddha.

**Latter Days and Return from Exile**

Shinran returned to Kyoto in his early sixties. “The precise reasons for his return were probably various and now obscure…The literary output of these years suggests that he envisioned such activity in contrast to the direct teaching which had absorbed his time in Kanto.” There is debate over whether he returned in poverty or comfort; however, it is clear that he was able to survive on the generosity of his disciples. He seems to have lived out his days in relative, but certainly not superlative, comfort. During this time, Shinran was obliged to

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Christian. In this analogy, the removal of sin requires the “other power” of God, just as enlightenment requires the “other power” of Amida. Of course, Amida does not fulfill an analogous role of divine creator and judge as does God in Christian theology. Nevertheless, the mechanism of forgiveness and other power is appropriately analogous on the whole.

213 In Buddhist thought, these are people who have no knowledge of the dharma and no will for improvement. They are therefore outside the possibility of enlightenment. There is some debate as to whether this can be considered a “permanent” condition that might follow to another rebirth, whether this means the total destruction and annihilation of that being upon death, or whether it means that the individual is beyond the possibility of enlightenment in this life.

214 Kyōgyōshinshō, 97.


disown his eldest son, Zenran, for some disruption of the Shin fellowship.\textsuperscript{217} It is clear that this caused no small amount of pain for Shinran himself, but the preservation of the fledgling community clearly outweighed familial bonds, especially in the face of scandal. Shinran devoted much of his time in Kyoto to clarifying doctrines he had laid out previously. As seen above in the \textit{Kyogyoshinso}, there was some lack of clarity over how many recitations are required to reach Amida. Clarifying this to a follower, Shinran “…rejected the extreme of single recitation versus multiple recitation of the name of Amida Buddha, maintaining that deliverance takes place with one thought or recitation, but it is not limited to that alone. Whatever practices a person undertakes, they all are to represent one’s gratitude to Amida Buddha for his salvation.”\textsuperscript{218}

Shinran spent his latter days with his brother, who was a Tendai priest. He was attended by his daughter Kakushinni, as is attested in the letters from his wife, Eshinni. He lived to nearly ninety years and is reported to have died reciting the name of Amida Buddha.\textsuperscript{219} What is clear from the above is that Shinran was a man of deep religious devotion and no small amount of charisma. In this, he is very much like James Cone. There are, however, important distinctions to attend to, and that is where we now turn our attention.

**Did Shinran Overcome “Whiteness”?**

The anachronism between the lives of Cone and Shinran seems, at first glance, unbridgeable. What can a 13\textsuperscript{th} century Japanese Buddhist have to say to a 20\textsuperscript{th} century African American Christian? Figures such as Henri DeLubac have attempted to compare Shin Buddhism to Christianity with results ranging from deep engagement to schematic understanding.\textsuperscript{220}

\begin{footnotes}
\item[217] Bloom. \textit{Life}. 46.
\item[218] Bloom. \textit{Life}. 50.
\item[220] De Lubac engaged deeply with Shin Buddhism, ultimately discovering some very keen parallels with Christianity. It would be fair to critique his studies, however, as somewhat eager to prove the value of Shin Buddhism inasmuch as it resembles Christianity. His principal work on the subject is \textit{Amida: Aspects du bouddhisme}. (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1955). This work has been translated into English as \textit{The History of Pure
Similarly, one might easily imagine Cone somewhat confused by the desire to compare his socio-politically engaged understanding of Christianity with a religion frequently accused of quietism. Yet, there is something compelling in the biographies of these two men that encourages a comparison. At a minimum, both presented a radical understanding of their traditions. Indeed, one of the more fruitful points of comparison between these two apparently disparate thinkers is what I will call their “conservative radicalism.” In religion “radicalism” often implies innovation and novelty. The radical changes proposed by both Cone and Shinran, however, in no way indicate the introduction of a novel element to either thinker’s tradition. Rather, they both follow a remarkably conservative path of “radicalism” that is far more Latin—that is to say dealing in the sense of radix, or a return to the “roots”—than it is novel. Inasmuch as both thinkers characterize their apparent innovation as a return to the basic meaning of their traditions, they are marked by a certain conservative impulse. The social implications of both thinkers are indeed not conservative—at least not in a 21st century sense of socio-politics—yet both are squarely focused on a fundamental component of their traditions.


See, e.g. Bernard Faure. "In the Quiet of the Monastery: Buddhist Controversies over Quietism." Common Knowledge 16, no. 3 (2010): 424-438. for a rather extensive list of Christian critics of Buddhism on these grounds. This criticism is largely based in a misunderstanding of Buddhist doctrine on the one hand and a desire to critique a Western philosophical or religious analog on the other. Buddhism in this sense becomes an exotic “straw man” fallacy. For further discussion of the problematic dimension of Jesuit and missionary response to Japanese Buddhism as quietism, see e.g. Jürgen Offermans “Debates on Atheism, Quietism, and Sodomy: The Initial Reception of Buddhism in Europe” Journal of Global Buddhism [Online], Vol. 6 (20 February 2005).

It is, to be sure, nearly a cliché in political and theoretical circles to invoke the etymology of “radical” in order to prove the bona fide connection between apparently novel thought and tradition. I do not, however, intend to make the connection in this fashion. Neither Cone nor Shinran appear at any point interested in the kind of word games this rhetorical maneuver accomplishes. They both appear, as shall be demonstrated, to genuinely be concerned with a return to a root concept of their religion with such fervor that it appears novel.
Both of these thinkers, furthermore, are absolutely attuned to the theological meaning of their age. For Shinran, this means that Buddhism only makes sense in the context of *mappo*, the age in which the dharma is degenerating. In such an age, self-power is fruitless and therefore the believer must rely on the other-power of Amida. For Cone, the notion that “Christianity is essentially a religion of liberation,” this means that “the function of theology is that of analyzing the meaning of that liberation for the oppressed so they can know that their struggle for political, social, and economic justice is consistent with the gospel of Jesus Christ.” While the liberation struggles that became apparent in the 1960s and 1970s have largely been framed as “left-wing” in nature, Cone’s engagement with them is from the perspective that his faith is fundamentally, at its root, about liberation and freedom. The freedom granted by God will not, of course, perfectly mirror earthly notions of “freedom” as such. Nevertheless, what Cone proposes is no more in the spirit of libertinism and radical freedom than Shinran’s insistence on the transformation of evil to good. Both push to a radical conclusion of their religious ideas through an insistence that the materials necessary are in fact already present. For Cone, the insistence that God is a God of history and is personally involved in the lives of humans pushes us not to understand where God is at work, but that God is always and everywhere at work for liberation. We must, therefore, discard that which resists liberation in our own minds/hearts/souls. For Shinran, the focus on Other Power and the radical reworking of Pure Land doctrines about mixed effort lead to a totally different stress on Self/Other Power. In both cases, however, there is nothing new introduced. The religious form is reworked by its own component parts.

We should here raise the question of whether or not Shinran himself overcame whiteness. As we will soon see in Cone’s thought, “whiteness” may be used to signify not a skin tone but an

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223 Cone. *BTL.* v.
alignment with the kyriarchical powers of the world. Shinran’s rejection of monastic and priestly privilege, and his decision to continue to dwell among the lower classes of Japanese society, inspire the temptation to see him as an example of someone who rejected the kyriarchy of his era in favor of liberation, thereby providing an example of how Cone’s proposed dynamic of dying-to-whiteness might work. We should have reservations, however, about this assignation. For one, Shinran’s behavior was certainly norm-breaking, but can we see in his theology the willingness to not just acknowledge but to center the humanity of the downtrodden? If this is our criterion, Shinran’s ambiguity on the question places him in the position of one who has committed only in partial measure. While he speaks often of the “evil person” being the locus of Amida’s salvation, it is never clear that—for him—this means that especially the burakumin are the locus of that salvation. Rather, it appears often that Shinran’s teaching speaks loudly in autobiographical terms and softly in social ones.

In this regard, he is remarkably distinct not only from Cone but from one who might perform the dying-to-whiteness Cone requires. Shinran’s rejection of priestly privilege does not appear to be a decision made in solidarity with the oppressed of the land. It appears, rather, that his main concern is the “pie in the sky by and by” Cone derides as insufficient for liberation. More charitably, we can certainly surmise that for Shinran the reform and/or redemption of the current world is not part of his soteriological program. This world is to be escaped and not to be redeemed or renewed. The rejection of priestly privilege, then, does not read as a rejection in favor of redemption but a rejection in favor of escape. The privileges afforded to those in the priesthood are not undesirable because they indicate an imbalance of power in society but because they indicate a tie to this-worldly prestige and concern. Further, they are part of a system
which cannot deliver its promise of escape. They are therefore to be rejected not because of inequality but because of inefficacy.

Pure Land soteriology has often served as a focal point for alternative socio-religious visions that articulated the religious concerns of the non- or semi-literate masses. However, because of the challenge they posed to the existing monastic and political orders, such movements have usually been greeted with animosity from the Buddhist elite and outright suppression by the government.224

The conflict with this-worldly powers experienced by Shinran was not endemic to his soteriological program but accidental to it. Nevertheless, we should not underestimate the power of simply being concerned for the well-being of the masses of humanity. Whether such a concern is expressed to redeem or to escape the world, it still results in the unseen being seen and the ignored being cared for.

Chapter 2: Black Liberation Theology

Black Liberation Theology

In the preface to the 1997 edition of *God of the Oppressed*, Cone opens by stating that he undertook the project of writing this, his third book, in order “…to deepen [his] conviction that the God of biblical faith and black religion is best known as the Liberator of the oppressed from bondage.” This assertion is key to Cone’s understanding of God. God is the one who frees the slaves and comforts the downtrodden. God is never on the side of the mighty but is always found through the lives of the lowly. Indeed, “…the God of biblical faith and black religion is partial toward the weak.” Through God’s partiality, Cone argues, the weakness of the oppressed is transformed into freedom. While Cone has always worked as a systematician and developed theories in orthodox doctrinal categories (e.g. Doctrine of God, Christology, etc.), *God of the Oppressed* offers the most fully systematized version of his thought.

Hermeneutics

Two hermeneutical keys are of great aid in understanding Cone’s doctrine of God. The first is the aforementioned stress on God-as-Liberator. This understanding of God becomes especially clear in Cone’s writing on Jesus Christ. The second is the centrality, for Cone, of the Exodus/Sinai events in the Old Testament. “In the Exodus event, God is revealed by means of acts of behalf of a weak and defenseless people. This is the God of power and of strength, able to destroy the enslaving power of the mighty Pharaoh.” It is this liberating God who makes a covenant with a chosen people in the Sinai event. For Cone, these events set before the theologian an unsurpassable understanding of God’s purpose in history. God wills God’s people

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226 Cone, *GotO*, xi.
227 Cone, *GotO*, 58.
to be free not only in a spiritualized sense but in a real, material, historical and political sense: God’s election of oppressed Israelites has unavoidable implications for the doing of theology. If God had chosen as the ‘holy nation’ the Egyptian slave masters instead of the Israelite slaves, a completely different kind of God would have been revealed. Thus, Israel’s election cannot be separated from its servitude and liberation. Here God is disclosed as the God of history whose will is identical with the liberation of the oppressed from social and political bondage. In the election of Israel as God’s people, Cone sees God’s identification with the downtrodden and oppressed in all history. Not only Israel and the Christian community which came after it, but the wretched of the land in all ages are the elected people of God. As such, Cone argues, it is from this subaltern position that theology must start in order to avoid a lapse into heresy or ideology.

On the question of a particular hermeneutic for Black Theology, Cone is remarkably explicit, stating:

Black Theology’s answer to the question of hermeneutics can be stated briefly: *The hermeneutical principle for an exegesis of the Scriptures is the revelation of God in Christ as the Liberator of the oppressed from social oppression and to political struggle, wherein the poor recognize that their fight against poverty and injustice is not only consistent with the gospel but is the gospel of Jesus Christ…Any starting point that ignores God in Christ as the Liberator of the oppressed or that makes salvation as liberation secondary is ipso facto invalid and thus heretical.*

As to the specifics of formal heresy, Cone is primarily concerned with Docetism. He argues that white/European theologies have too long stressed the transcendent and divine in Christ and have lapsed into docetic Christology. It is fitting for Cone to stress the potential of docetic thought in his rhetorical opponents, as Liberation Theology is often painted as a form of Nazarean heresy.

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228 Cone, *GotO*, 60.
229 Cone, *GotO*, 74-5.
In F.D.E. Schleiermacher’s four Christological heresies, we find Docetism and Nazareanism an opposite pair arguing over the primacy of the divine or human nature of Christ, respectively.230

Heresy

Heresy carries one of two meanings. In addition to employing “heresy” as a simple synonym for “Docetism,” Cone defines it as “…any activity or teaching that contradicts the liberating truth of Jesus Christ.”231 Following from this definition, he states that “Any interpretation of the gospel in any historical period that fails to see Jesus as the Liberator of the oppressed is heretical.” Further than even that: “Any view of the gospel that fails to understand the Church as that community whose work and consciousness are defined by the community of the oppressed is not Christian and is thus heretical.”232 For Cone, the message of the Gospels concerns a socio-political liberation which is temporally prior to the restoration of human relationship to the divine. Liberation, in other words, precedes salvation.

Cone is keenly aware of the tension between theology and ideology as regards this last point. “While divine revelation takes place in history, God’s reality can never be reduced merely to human goals and struggles in the historical sphere.”233 In a Barthian moment prior to the quote above, Cone clarifies that “God’s revelation is never static and neither is God’s Word ever at the mercy of human subjectivity. God’s Word remains God’s Word, and not that of the oppressed.”234 “Word,” to Cone as to Barth, is not synonymous with Scripture. Rather, it encompasses the lived historical reality of Jesus Christ coming as Logos, as the Second Person of the Trinity, and is transformative of history rather than subject to it.

231 Cone, GotO, 33.
232 Cone, GotO, 35.
233 Cone, GotO, 87.
234 Cone, GotO, 87.
Jesus Christ/Christocentrism/Incarnation

That Jesus Christ is transformative of history is central to Cone’s understanding of the Incarnation and the centrality of Christ in the black experience. We will revisit the larger question of the immanence or transcendence of God shortly. For the moment, Cone’s assertion of Christ’s transcendence is crucial to understanding the distinction between theology and ideology mentioned above. “It is this affirmation of transcendence that prevents Black Theology from being reduced merely to the cultural history of black people. For black people the transcendent reality is none other than Jesus Christ, of whom Scripture speaks.”235 The Scripture testifies to Jesus Christ as God’s self-revelation in history. The testimony of Scripture is important, in that it sets a check against the ideological usurpation of the figure of Jesus Christ.

Cone’s initial concern, however, is less for the possible ideological abuse of Christ by black theology but the historical abuse of Christ by white theology. “Scripture established limits to white people’s use of Jesus Christ as a confirmation of black oppression. The importance of Scripture as the witness to Jesus Christ does not mean that Black Theology can therefore ignore the tradition and history of Western Christianity.”236 The dialectical tension between the rejection of white Christian theology and the necessity of standing within that longer tradition marks one of several important tensions in Cone’s thought. Theologians cannot simply declare their own truth but must always be aware of the tradition which precedes them.

Christ, however, must not be understood as limited by the testimony of Scripture. Neither, then, can an orthodox interpretation of the gospel be claimed as the definitive once-and-for-all-time meaning of Scripture. “As the meaning of Jesus Christ is not to be identified with the words of Scripture, so the meaning of Scripture as the witness to the Word is not defined exclusively by

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235 Cone, GotO, 29.
236 Cone, GotO, 29.
Cyprian, Anselm, and Thomas. As theologians, we must interpret the latter in light of the former.”

Our theological reflections and our reflections on earlier theology must always return to the testimony of Christ given by Scripture. This is in some ways a radicalization of the Reformers’ principle of *sola scriptura*. Without lapsing into an idolization of the text as such, Cone insists that the meaning of Christ is found—but never contained—within the Scripture. Scripture testifies to but does not define or limit Christ.

What then can be said about Christ in Cone’s theology? “There is no truth in Jesus Christ independent of the oppressed of the land…indeed it can be said that to know Jesus is to know him as revealed in the struggle of the oppressed for freedom.”

He bases this reading squarely in the supposition that Jesus Christ is the prophesized messiah of Israel. Reading from this supposition, Jesus Christ is the fulfillment of the promise of the Exodus/Sinai narrative. More than just the fulfillment of this promise, however, Cone’s Christocentrism extends to the understanding of Christ-as-Logos in a Trinitarian mode. “Jesus is not simply a doctrine or even a particular event limited by time. He is the eternal event of liberation in the divine person who makes freedom a constituent of human existence. There is no existence apart from him because he is the ground of existence without whom nothing is.”

We can see the influence of Tillich on Cone in his assertion that Christ, being part of the triune God, is the “ground of existence.” Christ, as part of the Trinity, is eternal and exists “now” as surely as the Jesus-of-history existed “then.”

Christ is inescapably identified as the Liberator. “Without exception, the New Testament writers believe that the God present in Jesus is none other than the God of Abraham, Isaac and

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*Cone*, *GotO*, 30.
*Cone*, *GotO*, 31.
*Cone*, *GotO*, 32.
Jacob, and that through the divine act in the man from Nazareth something radically new has happened.”

Rejecting a Nazarean heresy, Cone remarks that “From the outset, the Gospels wish to convey that the Jesus story is not simply a story about a good man who met an unfortunate fate. Rather, in Jesus God is at work, telling God’s story and disclosing the divine plan of salvation.”

The Christ event is revelatory. We can see here the lingering influence of Barth’s theology of the Word as active presence in Christ. While Barth does not make the same conclusion as Cone regarding the content of the divine message disclosed in Christ, the initial move is the same between the two thinkers.

Christ’s incarnation has specific meaning for the black community in the United States and, by extension, the oppressed of any socio-historical context.

The convergence of Jesus Christ and the black experience is the meaning of the Incarnation. Because God became human in Jesus Christ, God disclosed the divine will to be with humanity in our wretchedness. And because we blacks accept God’s presence in Jesus as the true definition of humanity, blackness and divinity are dialectically bound together as one reality.

This connection and participation of the divine in history is the locus of Cone’s thinking on the immanence and transcendence of God. God chooses to participate in human wretchedness and suffering on the side of the downtrodden. Recall Cone’s reflection on the choice of Israel as God’s people: God did not choose Egypt, the powerful, but Israel, the lowly, as God’s own people. As we read this choice into the present context of Christian theology, it becomes clear that, by analogy, Cone conceives of white America as Egypt and black America as Israel.

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240 Cone, GotO, 66.
241 Cone, GotO, 67.
242 Cone, GotO, 33.
Immanence and Transcendence

As mentioned above, we must deal with the connection of immanence and transcendence in Cone’s theology no less than in any other source. Cone’s Christocentrism, examined above, gives us a clue to understanding his expression of God’s simultaneous immanence and transcendence. God’s *being as such* is not something given to human, and especially black, experience.

Black people did not devise various philosophical arguments for God’s existence, because the God of black experience was not a metaphysical idea. God was the God of history, the Liberator of the oppressed from bondage. Jesus was not an abstract Word of God, but God’s Word made flesh who came to set the prisoner free. He was the ‘Lamb of God’ that was born in Bethlehem and was slain on Golgotha’s hill. He was also ‘the Risen Lord’ and ‘the King of Kings.’ He was their Alpha and Omega, the One who had come to make the first last and the last first. \(^{243}\)

God’s *effective* presence is known in history as the coming Liberator. God’s *existential* presence, as discussed in the proofs of Aquinas or Anselm, is immaterial and removed from the lived experience of the people. In this way, Cone prioritizes immanence over transcendence. Given his stress on the Christocentric nature of revelation, this should not be surprising.

As for the transcendence of God, Cone has comparatively little to say. What he does stress comes through the lens of the preached tradition in the black churches. Through this tradition, Cone sees transcendence as again related to liberation, however “…liberation is also beyond history and not limited to the realities and limitations of this world. God is the sovereign ruler, and nothing can thwart God’s will to liberate the oppressed.” \(^{244}\) The stress here on the sovereignty of God establishes the transcendent pole of the immanence/transcendence dialectic. God is immanent in working through history, and especially in Christ. God is transcendent in

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\(^{243}\) Cone, *GotO*, 51.

\(^{244}\) Cone, *GotO*, 145.
power and divine will, and therefore not subject to nor equivalent with historical aims of liberation.

J. Kameron Carter appreciates the concreteness of Cone’s christology in his own work, *Race: A Theological Account*. Carter tells us:

> Central to Cone’s analysis is the place he accords, especially in his early thought, to Jesus’ Jewishness. Hence, the breakthrough in his thought: the humanity that the God of Israel assumes in Jesus of Nazareth is the location from which God secures and affirms all of creation in its historical unfoldings. Therefore…Jesus’ Jewishness is not racially arrayed against non-Jews but, rather, is the perpetual sign of God’s embrace of Jew and non-Jew (or, in scriptural parlance, Gentile) alike.245

This concrete grounding, in Carter’s understanding of Cone, both affects his christological reasoning and, by extension, his understanding and treatment of whiteness. For Carter, Cone does not go far enough in his critique of the abstractness of white theological thought. Indeed, at this point he is close to agreement with Victor Anderson, whose critique of “ontological blackness” will be examined below. In Carter’s analysis, Cone’s insistence on the concreteness of Christ stands in distinction to his understanding of the abstraction of white theology.246

The concreteness of Christ thus stands in distinction to the abstraction of academic theology. Cone, however, is enough of a Niebuhrlian to relish the dialectical tension here. While Carter is correct in assessing Cone’s resistance to the abstract nature of much of white theology, it is not always the case that the concrete Christ of blackness is opposed to the abstract Christ of whiteness. “As God’s definitive Word, Christ brings blacks and whites liberation from its [read: racism’s] dehumanizing ideology.”247 For Cone, Christ’s concreteness stands in opposition to white racism more than to white theological abstraction. Theological abstraction is indeed

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problematic for Cone, but Carter’s critique misattributes its oppositional partner as christological concreteness. For Cone, the concreteness of Christ is opposed to the racism of whites, not to theological abstraction.248

**Theology of the Cross**

One of the most surprising aspects of Cone’s thought—to white theologians, at least—is the degree to which he is a profoundly orthodox thinker. Cone’s theology of the cross is predicated on the notion that the cross itself is an inversion of worldly values, echoing both Paul of Tarsus and Martin Luther.249 From this remarkably unremarkable initial position, however, Cone pursues the meaning of the cross in an unblinking review of American history. “The cross was God’s critique of power—white power—with powerless love, snatching victory out of defeat.”250 The inversion here begins in the very act of the crucifixion: Jesus is not a military or political savior, but a sacrificial lamb whose disgraceful death serves to disgrace the powers of the Earth. The poignancy of the crucifixion is played out in black history in America.

The paradox of cross and lynching tree relates as well to the hope inherent in Christianity. Black Christians maintain a simultaneous hope in salvation while facing a very real absence of it. Cone attends to this history, remarking “At no time was the struggle to keep such hope alive more difficult than during the lynching era (1880-1940). The lynching tree is the most potent symbol of the trouble nobody knows that blacks have seen but do not talk about because the pain of remembering—visions of black bodies dangling from southern trees, surrounded by jeering

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248 For a trenchant examination of the art-historical and iconographic meaning of both black and white images of Christ, see Young, Josiah. “Envisioning the Son of Man.” *Black Theology: An International Journal* 2, no. 1 (2004): 11–17.

249 Cone. *CLT*. 2.

250 ibid. NB: Here, as before, Cone’s use of “white” should never be taken as simply signifying “of Western/Northern European genetic descent”. He still means that system of oppression known to Jesus as the Roman occupation and in our present context as white supremacy when he uses the term “white”.

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white mobs—is almost too excruciating to recall.” His allusion here is to the spiritual song “Nobody Knows”, a tune that is at once familiar and yet also somewhat obscure. Many know the couplet “Nobody knows the trouble I’ve seen/Nobody knows my sorrow”, but the following lines open out some greater understanding of what it is to be both black and Christian in a nation where the former is unforgivable, but the latter expected. One arrangement returns to the first line and appends a closing “Glory Hallelujah”, while another inserts “Nobody knows but Jesus”. Cone unpacks this tension by noting that:

…the dialectic of doubt and faith is expressed with a focus on Jesus’ solidarity with the one in trouble…In the first version…hope is carved out of a tenacious spirit, the stubborn refusal to be defeated by tragedy. The source of the hope carved out of ‘trouble’ and ‘sorrow,’ expressed in the ‘Glory Hallelujah,’ although not clearly identified is assumed. In the second version…the source of the hope is Jesus, for he is a friend who knows about the trouble of the little ones, and he is the reason for their ‘Hallelujah.’ His divine presence is the most important message about black existence.

Doubt and faith form the spiritual dimension of the dialectic of black existence. The political dialectic is between being and non-being, or more bluntly life and death.

Cone returns to the terrain covered in The Spirituals and the Blues while discussing how blacks could exist within and resist the lynching era. Sunday morning was for church, but “At the Saturday night juke joint, bluesmen like Robert Johnson…spoke back in defiance, refusing to be defined by death’s brutal reality—the constant threat of the lynching tree.” Again, we see a dialectical dimension between the secular and spiritual. Cone suggests as much in the title of his earlier work, referenced above. All of these twisting and turning options and dead ends are centered on the question of being. How can one exist in a world hostile to her or his own existence? Where can one find hope and validation? “If the blues offered an affirmation of

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251 Cone. CLT. 3.
252 Cone. CLT. 21.
253 Cone. CLT. 12.
humanity, religion offered a way for black people to find hope.” In other words, through music and community. This is where Cone sees the possibility of life for blacks in America. It would not be disingenuous to suggest that this is where he sees black Christians stuck even today.

**The Passion of Emmett Till**

While the next chapter ostensibly deals with Martin Luther King, Jr., it is also the space in which Cone suggests a passion narrative for the death of Emmett Till. Till’s murder was the watershed event that began the mid-20th century Civil Rights Movement that brought King to the national spotlight. That Till, a 14-year-old boy, was the victim of this kind of horrific violence was not, sadly, unique. “If anything was remarkable about the Till lynching, it was not so much the callousness of the deed as the militant response it evoked.” As crucifixion served the Romans in humiliating and silencing political dissenters, so too did lynching serve Americans to humiliate and silence blacks who had the audacity to demand treatment as human beings. Mamie Till Bradley, the mother of Emmett, demanded an open casket viewing for her son’s body and drew out her own parallel to the crucifixion of Jesus, hoping that her son’s death might mean the end of lynching.

The public suffering of Mrs. Bradley provided a moment for the galvanization of black Christians. “What was it that cast out black people’s fear of death and sent them flowing into the streets—defying mob violence? Many reasons certainly…but for poor southern blacks…it was religion that offered the only resource—and the language—to fight against segregation and lynching.” Cone does not suggest either here or later that Emmett Till served the same and

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255 Cone. *CLT*. 66.
256 Cone. *CLT*. 66-7. Sadly, Mrs. Bradley’s cries were only partly answered. While lynchings have declined, they have not disappeared from the American landscape. Both extra-judicial lynchings and the legal lynching-by-another-name problem of mass incarceration still plague our nation.
257 Cone. *CLT*. 69-70.
exact soteriological function as Jesus Christ. To do so would, of course, be heretical. What we can draw in analogy, however, between the two deaths does treat with salvation. If we can consider the work of King’s movement and those it has inspired as work toward the salvation of a broken nation, then we can see Till’s death as a type of crucifixion. Without that death, it is likely that the Montgomery boycott and the Selma marches would still have happened. This death, however, does reveal something of God to us. It does not—as Jesus did—reveal the Trinity or reveal God’s plan of salvation. It reveals to us both the human brokenness of sin and the hope of resurrection into a beloved and healed communion with God. Lynching is an especially grievous form of murder, which we know to be sinful. While the passion of Emmett Till may not carry the same metaphysical weight as the passion of Jesus Christ, we must attend to these parallels to see Cone’s meaning in drawing the cross and lynching tree closer together in our theological imagination. In both cases, we see a cruel punishment designed by the powerful to silence the oppressed fail spectacularly to do so. Rome’s empire has fallen, and the Pope sits in the center of that city today.

Cone identifies a key distinction between two major influences—Niebuhr and King—in their estimation of the possibility of love. “Unlike King, Niebuhr viewed agape love, as revealed in Jesus’ cross, as an unrealizable goal in history—a state of perfection which no individual or group in society could ever fully hope to achieve.”258 By making the cross an “absolute transcendent”, Niebuhr relegated the achievement of justice—love by another name—to a proximate, moderate goal. True justice could only be achieved by the one who had suffered on the cross. True justice—true love in society—was God’s purview. “In contrast to Niebuhr, King never spoke about proximate justice or about what was practically possible to achieve…Instead,
King focused on and often achieved what Niebuhr said was impossible.” King, in other words, “lived the meaning of the cross and thereby gave an even more profound interpretation of it with his life.” Through the radical insistence that love and justice were not only possible in the present—rather than removing them to an eschatological future—King followed Jesus onto the cross and gave his life seeking freedom and justice. This, too, was presaged by the passion of Emmett Till. Without that young man’s suffering and death that served to ignite greater and more immediate revolutionary spirit among black churches, the temperate and moderate call of Niebuhr may have been heard more clearly. Niebuhr’s focus on the practical and possible was—if we recall Aristotle’s archer who must overshoot the target to hit it—destined to always fall far short of the very justice it proposed.

**Black Literary Imagination**

As was made explicitly clear in his earlier work, Cone finds much of his theological inspiration outside the bounds of traditional theology. Accordingly, it comes as no surprise that he gives a chapter to the presence of Christ as a symbol in the black literary imagination. Chapter 4 of this work takes its title from a poem of Countee Cullen’s: “Christ Recrucified”. Cullen opens the piece declaring that “The South is crucifying Christ again/By all the laws of ancient rote and rule.” In setting this poem as an epigraph above the chapter, Cone signals both its importance and its agreement with his thesis. Cullen’s immediate parallel of the crucifixion to lynching resonates deeply with Cone’s own view of the cross. Here we should note as well that there is a difference between Cullen’s recrucified Christ and the passion of Emmett Till discussed

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259 Cone, *CLT*, 72.
260 Cone, *CLT*, 73.
above. Principally, the Cullen poem allows Cone the room to discuss the collective victims of lynching in parallel to Christ rather than trying to fit each one into a passion narrative.

This shift from individual to collective parallel allows for a more nuanced conception of the parallels between the cross and the lynching tree. If we suppose that black people collectively are the victims of this new crucifixion, then there is a different tone to the discussion of how the new crucifixion matches the old. We are forced to look not only at the collective suffering of black people but at the collective complicity and guilt of white people. Crucifixions and lynchings do not simply happen. They are committed by one person or group upon the bodies of another person or group. Emmett Till gives us a focal point to see how lynching can be crucifixion in the particular, but Countee Cullen gives us the tools to see lynching as crucifixion in the collective. Further, the literary imagination on which Cone draws underscores the bitter hypocrisy of good white Christians visiting torture upon their darker sisters- and brothers-in-Christ. Cone draws a second line under the first by insisting that he only needs to turn to the literary world because the world of white theology has been so silent on both the horror of lynching and on its parallel to the crucifixion.

**Cone on Blackness and Whiteness**

One of the signature contributions James Cone made to theology was his attention to the elision of moral language and racial description in theology; Cone called out boldly for the inversion of the association of “white” with “good” and “black” with “evil” that has been baked into theology. From the very start of his output in 1969, Cone identified “white” with the structures of hegemony and authority in the world, stating that “There is, then, a need for a theology whose sole purpose is to emancipate the gospel from its ‘whiteness’ so that blacks may
be capable of making an honest self-affirmation through Jesus Christ.”

Cone would spend the next 50 years expressing that theology. It is here that we look to his understanding of “blackness” and “whiteness”. Most crucially, any analysis of Cone will fail if it does not comprehend that he does not mean only “European in appearance” or “African in appearance” when he uses the terms “white” and “black”, respectively. Neither can “dying to whiteness” and being “reborn to blackness” mean dropping one stereotypical set of behaviors for another. Becoming black with God, we shall see, does not in any way mean “acting black” but, rather, entails an existential realignment away from the support of kyriarchy and toward the oppressed.

In the midst of the turmoil of the late 1960s, Cone spent five weeks in his brother Cecil’s church writing his first work, *Black Theology and Black Power*. He wrestled here with joining the two driving halves of his thought: his blackness and his Christianity. Later, in explaining the draw of both Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr., Cone ascribed his love of blackness to Malcolm and his love of the church to Martin. Yet his early work is marked by an unease with Christianity as practiced in the United States. He wonders, “Is it possible to strip the gospel as it has been interpreted of its ‘whiteness’, so that its real message will become a live option for radical advocates of black consciousness?”

This is not an idle, rhetorical question. Numerous leaders in the nascent Black Power movement questioned whether the slave-owning religion that birthed the Ku Klux Klan could be a useful and positive spiritual home for black people. In addressing this question, Cone begins to define his understanding of “white” and “black” as they relate both to Christian ethical concerns and to race.

Idiomatically, United States English has long associated “white” with goodness and “black” with evil. Cone sought to reverse this, seeing instead that an enslaving people could only

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263 BTBP. 33.
be evil in the eyes of the God of Exodus. Such a God becomes incarnate not for the continuation of an unjust status quo, but explicitly for the liberation of an oppressed people. “Jesus’ work is essentially one of liberation. Becoming a slave himself, he opens realities of human existence formerly closed to man [sic].”264 Of course, as Allen has already reminded us, economic exploitation undergirds racial oppression. Therefore, for Cone, “he Kingdom is for the poor and not the rich because the former has nothing to expect from the world while the latter’s entire existence is grounded in his [sic] commitment to worldly things.”265 With these equivalencies, Cone begins to establish his dynamic of blackness as allied with God and liberation against oppressive whiteness.

For those of European descent, Cone brings a note of liberation as well. It is not, however, the same note he sounds for the oppressed. “If the work of Christ is that of liberating men [sic] of alien loyalties, and if racism is, as George Kelsey says, an alien faith, then there must be some correlation between Black Power and Christianity.”266 Whites must be liberated from their own racism, while blacks will be liberated from the oppression of whiteness. “The white structure of this American society, personified in every racist, must be at least part of what the New Testament meant by the demonic forces.”267 Whites, for Cone, must be liberated from the demonic structures that they themselves have either created or been complicit in continuing. This is all at once a call to repentance and to liberation.

\[264\] BTBP. 35.
\[265\] BTBP. 36.
\[266\] BTBP. 39.
\[267\] BTBP. 40-41.
The Blackness of God

Cone has little patience or need for proofs of divine existence. “The reality of God is presupposed in black theology.”\(^{268}\) We can then set aside the endeavors of apologetics and get to one of the more controversial claims Cone makes: God is black. “To speak of God and God’s participation in the liberation of the oppressed of the land is a risky venture in any society.”\(^{269}\) Very few in comfortable and powerful positions appreciate the critique of their power and comfort.

Because blacks have come to know themselves as *black*, and because that blackness is the cause of their own love of themselves and hatred of whiteness, the blackness of God is the key to our knowledge of God. The blackness of God, and everything implied by it in a racist society, is the heart of the black theology doctrine of God. There is no place in black theology for a colorless God in a society where human beings suffer precisely because of their color. The black theologian must reject any conception of God which stifles black self-determination by picturing God as a God of all peoples. Either God is identified with the oppressed to the point that their experience becomes God’s experience, or God is a God of racism.\(^{270}\)

This is a breaking point for many “white” theologians—theologians of European ancestry and heritage. We are ill-equipped to confront a God in whose image we say we are made, but yet who is identified with a clear racial other. We must pay close attention to how Cone is working with the question of race and ethnicity in relation to God. He is not heterodox in his thinking here: God is not said to possess a physical body. The charge here is that our racist society has erected an idol in the form of whiteness and forced our theology to pay it worship and reverence. The blackness of God is both a shocking challenge to those used to considering God in their own, white, image and an indictment of that very idolatry. God freed Israel from Egypt. God later became human, not in the form of the Roman centurion, but in the body of a Jewish peasant.

\(^{268}\) Cone, *BTL*, 55.
\(^{269}\) ibid.
\(^{270}\) Cone, *BTL*
What Cone draws a bright line underneath here is precisely the Incarnation. God could have been born into the role of a Roman governor and advocated for gradual reform from within an oppressive regime. This was not, however, the way Christians testify God became incarnate. Just as the choice to enter our world for the sake of our redemption was inextricably linked with the sociopolitical underclass of first-century Palestine, so—to Cone—is the continued presence of Christ linked with every sociopolitical underclass always and everywhere. Christ continues to seek the crucified, making their struggles his. Cone is clear that he equates blacks in the United States with the “oppressed of the land” in the Exodus narrative. Such people are the lineage and ancestors of Jesus of Nazareth. By analogy, Cone insists, we must see American blacks as the same people who walked with Jesus.

Further, the blackness of God means that God is irrevocably linked to liberation as the essence of divine activity. “Taking seriously the Trinitarian view of the Godhead, black theology says that as Creator, God identified with oppressed Israel…as Redeemer, God became the Oppressed One in order that all may be free from oppression; as Holy Spirit God continues the work of liberation.”271 The blackness of God in this context is thus inescapable. Cone displays little patience for white theologians who would seek a colorless or color-blind God. For him, the nature of liberation is the nature of divine activity in the world. We cannot skip directly over the reversal of oppression into a post-racial utopia. We must first address and take very seriously the damage that has been wrought by an idolatrous vision of God as white. We must attend to what that has meant in the real world and in actual lives of black people. To the inevitable question of what whites must do to continue in the liberating work of God, Cone’s answer is direct: become black. He equates this to the conversation between Paul and Silas and their jailor in Philippi, in

271 Cone. BTL. 64.
which the latter asks what he must do to become saved. “But the misunderstanding here is the failure to see that blackness or salvation (the two are synonymous) is the work of God, not a human work. It is not something we accomplish; it is a gift. That is why Paul and Silas said, ‘Believe in the Lord Jesus and you will be saved.’” 272 This belief is a conversion experience and a gift which utterly transforms the recipient. We join in God’s work of liberation and become black with God.

Cone’s final crucial argument about the blackness of God regards the distinction between love and righteousness. In other words, we must attend to the corrective aspect of God’s love as well as the supportive. We must understand God’s disapproval, even God’s wrath, in order to understand God’s love. “Black theology agrees that the idea of love is indispensable to the Christian view of God. The exodus, the call of Israel into being as the people of the covenant, the gift of the promised land, the rise of prophecy, the second exodus, and above all the incarnation reveal God’s self-giving love to oppressed humanity.” 273 Note especially the continued identification of God with oppressed humanity. Bearing this identification in mind, Cone asks: “What could love possibly mean in a racist society except the righteous condemnation of everything racist?” 274 Here is the negative reproving aspect to God’s positive love for the oppressed. Indeed, “Black theology will accept only a love of God which participates in the destruction of the white oppressor,” and therefore “…God’s love and God’s righteousness are two ways of talking about the same reality.” 275 This love comes as uplift to the oppressed and correction to the oppressor. What parent does not know what it is to lovingly correct their child

272 Cone. BTL. 66.
273 Cone. BTL. 68.
274 Cone. BTL. 69.
275 Cone. BTL. 72.
in a way that might appear to be wrathful to that child? Do we not, after all, call ourselves God’s children?

This suggests a particularly refined concept of justice. For Cone, following Tillich, “…justice is the structure necessary for the human expression of human freedom.”276 Love cannot be reduced to sentimentality or emotion in this sense. It is an expression of power and justice. Crucially, Cone gives us the following definition of God’s blackness: “Using blackness as the point of departure, black theology believes that God’s love of humankind is revealed in God’s willingness to become black.”277 Finally, “To love is to make a decision against white racism. Because love means that God meets our needs, God’s love for white oppressors could only mean wrath—that is, a destruction of their whiteness and a creation of blackness.”278 It would be a dangerous misunderstanding to read this latter statement as Cone advocating the physical or bodily destruction of whites. It is their whiteness—their assent to the structures of oppression and the denial of both their own humanity and the humanity of blacks which that entails—that is to be destroyed. In its place, Cone suggests an identification with blackness as a fuller being-with-God.

While we can still concede Anderson’s point that Cone’s definition of personal blackness relies heavily on an opposite force of personal whiteness, we need not follow through to his conclusion that Cone’s project is inherently flawed. Anderson’s complaint gives short shrift to the theological traditions of apophasis and the via negativa. Cone has not made blackness ontologically dependent on whiteness any more than Aquinas made God ontologically dependent on humanity. He is defining a thing by its opposite. Cone tells us what blackness is not by telling

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276 Cone. BTL. 73.
277 ibid.
278 Cone. BTL. 74.
us what whiteness is. He tells us that blackness is not evil, is not craven, is not corrupted, but it is life-affirming, joyous, celebratory, and godly. Through the continued pairing of whiteness-as-opposite, Cone delivers us a definition of whiteness that agrees with both Malcolm X’s view of whites as the devil and with the gospel account of earthly powers as those opposed to the rule and love of God. American political power is deeply “white” in this sense, but also in the sense that it is principally shaped and held by people of European descent, i.e. white people.
Chapter 3: Jōdo Shinshū Buddhism

Honen’s Teaching

Any discussion of Shinran’s thought should start with an overview of his teacher, Honen’s, thought. Shinran maintained that he never taught anything more or less than what he himself had learned from Honen. Cursory analysis reveals this to be untrue, but it still bears noting the origin of some of Shinran’s understanding of Buddhism. We need not, at this or at any other point, participate in the full tracing of a lineage stretching back to Śākyamuni Buddha himself. While Shinran and the Jōdo Shinshū school both situate Honen as one in a lineage of patriarchs, Shinran particularly stressed the importance of Honen’s teaching in his own understanding. It is in Honen’s own awakening that we find the seeds of Shinran’s connection to Cone.

Honen’s teachings were based largely on another of Jōdo Shinshū’s patriarchs, the Chinese monk Shan-tao. Prior to Shan-tao’s systematization, Pure Land practices were known but were subsidiary to other practices. That is, there is not much indication that they were considered a separate means of achieving nirvana.

Hōnen paid respect to the forms of Buddhism that existed in his day, and he recognized antecedents to his views, most notably the great Chinese Pure Land teacher Zendō [Shan-tao], but fundamentally his message was a departure, a new beginning…We live, to quote a recur phrase of Hōnen’s, in “these latter degenerate days,” when man [sic] is no longer up to the discipline and teachings of past doctrines.279

This egalitarian impulse certainly undergirds Shinran’s teaching as well. Enlightenment is for all, and monastic practice is for the few who can afford to engage therein. The material conditions in which we live dictate the degree to which we can follow difficult practices.

As we saw above in the historical setting of Shinran’s life, his teacher also responded to the times in which they lived. “Hōnen’s teaching struck a chord in people’s hearts because the turmoil of the age made them more aware of their own defilements, the brevity of life, and anxiety for their welfare after death.”280 This focus made a deep impression on Shinran. While Hōnen’s own sect does not necessarily recognize Shinran as a key disciple of his master, Shinran’s historical relationship has been well established. The shift in focus to the internal—from practice to faith—begins with Honen and becomes ever more explicit in Shinran. “Hōnen’s teaching focused on the most elemental aspect of religion. What saves people is not the elaborate doctrines, organizations, rituals, and institutions of traditional religion, but the basic attitude of the heart.”281 The master, however, is sometimes more explicit than his famous student when it comes to egalitarianism in religion.

Hōnen’s concern for the ritually unclean can be seen easily and readily in his discussions that appear to obviate the need for ritual purity:

Some people were conversing about the future life, some saying that fish-eaters will be born into the Pure Land, others that they will not. Hōnen overhearing them said, “If it is a case of eating fish, cormorants would be born into the Pure Land; and if it is a case of not eating them, monkeys would be so born. But I am sure that whether a man eats fish or not, if he only calls upon the sacred name, he will be born into the Pure Land.”282

This equalization of all believers is not, of course, completely novel or original to Hōnen. His stress on this equality, however, does mark a shift in Buddhist thinking. Notably here he speaks with the presumption that cormorants or monkeys could not be born in the Pure Land. To suggest that they could is to suggest that it is possible to achieve nirvana as a non-human animal. This directly contradicts prior Buddhist teaching that only a human birth is the necessary condition of

282 Fitzgerald. 38.
The innovation here is the stress that it is not a specific—that is, monastic—birth that sets the stage for the attainment of nirvana. Through the power of Amida’s Primal Vow, all humans have the ability to attain nirvana, albeit not directly from this life.

For Hōnen and for Shinran, nembutsu practice could be distinct. It seems that for the teacher, the practice itself has some form of efficacy:

It should now be clear that for Hōnen the repetition of nembutsu is a sign that a man is placing his full trust in Amida…at the same time, paradoxically, nembutsu and not faith is that which effects man’s salvation, and it is still a work dependent upon human activity…It appears that faith is not a total gift of grace from Amida to man, but is a work of man depending upon “selfpower,” or jiriki. This is perhaps the key distinction between these two thinkers, and the point on which we can see that Shinran did indeed change his teacher’s teachings. For Shinran, as we shall shortly see below, nembutsu practice is indeed given by Amida to humanity and is not actually an act of self-power.

**Reformulation of the Pure Land Path**

Prior to Honen, Shinran’s teacher, Pure Land practices were a sub-set of Buddhist religious experience. That is to say, they were not a “path” in and of themselves. Shinran came into contact with Honen while they were both monks at a Tendai monastery, after all. While he routinely denied that he had added anything to his teacher’s thought, it will become clear that Shinran was actually a remarkably novel thinker within his tradition. He achieved this by

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283 Space prohibits an in-depth discussion of the concept of nirvana in Buddhist thought. Suffice it to say that “nirvana” is not a place, but a state of non-rebirth attained by the spiritual adept. For a detailed discussion of nirvana, see Collins, Stephen. *Nirvana: Concept, Image, Metaphor.* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010.


285 It is worth noting that while Pure Land practitioners do indeed understand their path to be the superior one in a degenerate age of the dharma, there has not been an effort to set these practices apart as a new “way” in Buddhism. Pure Land practitioners understand themselves to be engaged in a Mahayana (“Greater Vehicle”) practice, as opposed to so-called Hinayana (“Lesser Vehicle”, though this term is rarely used any longer), Vajrayana (“Lightning Vehicle”, also thought of as Tibetan Buddhism) or Theravada, which more appropriately refers to a particular lineage of Buddhist ordination than to an overall school of thought.

286 Cone has made similar arguments about his theology not necessarily representing a radical break with prior
reformulating doctrine while re-emphasizing particular aspects thereof. The novelty, then, is not the addition of new data to the theological project. It is, rather, a reorganization of extant data. While defenders of a religious status quo might object to the particular emphasis, they cannot argue as effectively by objecting to the presumed eisegesis of the thinker’s novelty.

“In the Pure Land tradition prior to Shinran, the conception of practice tended to be twofold. It was taught that through the Pure Land path, one enters the realm established by Amida after death in this world and there accomplishes the practices leading to one’s own enlightenment.”287 The Pure Land practices that Shinran learned placed the locus of soteriological efficacy in the Buddha-Land established by Amida. The bodhisattva practices of Mahayana Buddhist teachings were to be carried out there and not here. The only effective action one could undertake here would be to bring oneself into relationship with Amida, thereby receiving the benefits of his compassion. “Practice in this world did not necessarily, as in other Buddhist paths, have the direct aim of eradicating blind passion and accumulating merit for oneself and others through virtuous action; its goal was birth in the Pure Land through the working of Amida’s Vow.”288 While Shinran certainly never refuted this key element of Pure Land thought—that one cannot escape birth-and-death through one’s own efforts and merits—he certainly brought novelty to its expression. “Shinran’s role in the development of the Pure Land teaching is best seen not as the clarification of particular elements, but as a thorough re-casting of all the major concepts, bringing them into new alignment and imparting significance.”289

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288 ibid.
elements of practice remain unchanged, but their organization and significance is reworked into a new teaching.

His alterations to the prior understanding of the Buddhist path out of samsara can be seen as more structural shifting than qualitative distinction. “He shifted attention away from practices to attitude” [emphasis in original]. He criticized traditional practices because they were essentially egoistic in being aimed at gaining salvation. He even criticized the practice of Nembutsu in the Pure Land school because it was used to gain merit.” This distinction bears out in his notion of shinjin to be discussed below. The change from practice to attitude, however, details an extrinsic-to-intrinsic movement that additionally serves to aid those who cannot devote either time or material resources to the extrinsic practices of prior expressions of Buddhism. If your livelihood is made by killing sentient beings as a hunter or as a leather-worker, you simply will not have the ability to both eat and become extrinsically pure.

Shinran could have expressed himself as one in a long line of Mahayana teachers, each subsequently refining the transmission of the Buddha’s teachings and stressing that this version of practice was more effective than the last. However, “Shinran asserts that the ‘true teaching, practice, and realization of the Pure Land way’ is not merely another form of Mahayana Buddhism, but its ultimate fulfillment, the true Mahayana.” This is to be seen as the teaching that not only surpasses but encompasses all prior teachings. It would be more customary, perhaps, to claim that this teaching supersedes all other teachings, but to claim that they are contained within Pure Land is a two-part move. In the first, it is a claim of supremacy, as the inferior cannot encompass the superior. In the second, however, it is a reassertion of the

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291 Hirota/Ueda. 140.
correctness of prior teachings. They are not discarded but included herein. This move establishes Pure Land not as one of many schools that one might choose as the best medicine to treat one’s illness, but as the one true—and literal—panacea.

Shinran accomplishes this move not by altering course but by insisting that the present course of action be taken all the way to its logical extreme. “By probing deeply into the pervasive nature of self-attachment, he finds that human existence is inevitably dominated by delusional thinking and feeling, so that even activity usually considered beneficial in the cultivation of spiritual life is tainted by an intractable egocentricity…” The standard Mahayana stress on Other Power—that is the effective power of the Buddha as opposed to the ineffective power of the practitioner—does not go far enough in abolishing the actual reliance on Self Power. To Shinran, this attachment is pre-thematic: we cannot even access the part of our psyche in which this attachment resides. If we cannot even conceive of how deep this attachment is, how can our own efforts eradicate it? In this radical stress on Other Power, Shinran “swept away both the ambiguity of traditional Pure Land thinking, which viewed practice as a fusion of one’s own efforts and Other Power, and also its indecisiveness and inherent uncertainty whether one’s practice was genuine or not.” Inasmuch as prior Pure Land thinkers relied somewhat on a hybrid efficacy of Self- and Other Power, they muddied their own message. By doing away with the blend and insisting instead on the exclusive efficacy of Other Power, Shinran brought greater clarity to his message.

Shinran’s Concept of Practice

Inasmuch as Shinran’s stress on Other Power alters the effective actor in practice, so too does he alter the understanding of what “practice” entails in Pure Land tradition. Again, his

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292 Hirota/Ueda. 141.
293 Hirota/Ueda 142.
departure from tradition is of a remarkable sort: it is a radical conservatism rather than a novel
introduction. “Shinran’s major contribution to the Pure Land path was to show that both the
entrusting of oneself to the [Eighteenth] Vow and the saying of the Name [of Amida Buddha] are
given—unfolded in beings—through and as the activity of the Buddha and to delineate the
significance of this for the practicer’s life.”294 The Eighteenth Vow of Amida Buddha holds that
those who faithfully295 recite the name of Amida Buddha will be born in his Pure Land, from
which they will easily attain enlightenment. This is the only practice which can be effective in an
age of degenerate dharma. Recitation practice—nembutsu— “presupposes an attitude of faith in
the Vow and Dharmakara’s fulfillment of it.”296

Other interpreters of Pure Land teaching would have taught the recitation of nembutsu as
a type of spiritual cultivation or contemplative exercise. To Shinran, however, the practice must
not originate in the self. If this practice is driven by Self Power, then it is ineffective. Only the
practice that originates in the Other Power of Amida is effective.297 It is impossible for beings to
initiate anything more than “an ordinary human exercise and not the cause unfailingly resulting
in birth in the Pure Land.”298 The apparent hopelessness of this arrangement, however, is not an
accurate reading of the outcome. Shinran insists that such practice as will gain birth in the Pure
Land is not only possible but easy. It is easy because its ease is ordained by the coming-to-pass
of Amida’s Buddhahood. Practice, then, is marked by Amida’s effort and not our own. It is
entered into not by conscious decision-making but by faith.

294 Hirota/Ueda. 144.
295 We will treat the concept of “faith” carefully in the following section. It is, to be sure, a fraught term when any
tradition is in conversation with Christianity.
296 Hirota/Ueda. 144.
297 Hirota/Ueda. 145.
298 Ibid.
Structure of Shinjin

As we have seen above, in Shinran’s reading of Pure Land thought, “it is impossible for beings to accord with the Vow through their own resolution and devices, which are invariably manifestations of egocentric attachments and concerns.”299 At the core of effective great practice—the practice that will indeed lead to birth in the Pure Land—is the concept of shinjin. “Shinjin is perhaps the central term in Shinran’s thought, so important that it is sometimes said that in his teaching, ‘birth through the nembutsu’ became ‘birth through shinjin’.”300 To call his teaching “birth through shinjin”, however, misunderstands what shinjin is to Shinran. “It is not an attitude assumed by practicers, but Amida’s wisdom-compassion unfolding itself in them.”301

Shinjin is not an action of the practicer at all. Rather, “Amida awakens his mind of wisdom-compassion in beings in the form of the realization of shinjin…In the realization of shinjin, beings are given the Buddha’s mind not only as shinjin, but also as great practice, for their saying of the Name is the natural manifestation of the Buddha’s mind in them.”302

The crucial development here is that shinjin is not related to human effort. The practicer does not influence, nor can she or he call upon, shinjin. Shinjin unfolds within the practicer through the effective power of Amida Buddha. One does not simply hear the name of Amida and decide intellectually to practice. One is instead penetrated by and infused with the power of Amida’s Vow. Shinjin is given in the sense that it is not human-generated. It then expresses itself in the practice of calling upon Amida’s name. “The utterance of ‘Namu-amida-butsu’ is not

299 Hirota/Ueda. 147.
300 Hirota/Ueda. 148.
301 ibid.
302 Hirota/Ueda. 149. There is a tempting similarity here between shinjin on the one hand and grace on the other. Following Rahner, we might call grace God’s own irresistible self-communication and strengthen the parallel. It is not clear, however, that this is an apt point of comparison given the divergent soteriological aims of Buddhism and Christianity. While God seeks to save humans from suffering, the only way to see “grace” and “shinjin” as equivalent concepts is to imagine Heaven as nirvana. This alone should be sufficient to cause us to pause in this comparison and determine whether this is a parallel we wish to—indeed can—draw.
merely an ordinary act but an act given by the Buddha because it arises from the Buddha’s mind in beings.”  

Beings who achieve this level of practice, however, are not necessarily or immediately changed into non-egocentric beings.

On the one hand, they have become aware of themselves as beings whose ignorance, egocentricity, and delusional perceptions prevent them from performing any act that is genuinely good… the practicer and the Buddha come to stand in total, mutual opposition… this is the opposition between samsara and nirvana, or blind passions and enlightenment. On the other hand, Amida’s mind has been given to them, so that the working of their minds and the Buddha’s are one. This oneness is rooted in the nonduality that characterizes true reality in Mahayana thought, and does not obliterate the mutual opposition between sentient beings and Buddha.

This complexity deserves further attention. It is of paramount importance to understand both the opposition and nonduality of this new relationship. To the former point, the total opposition of these two minds—the practicer’s and the Buddha’s—is not necessarily an adversarial opposition. One should not picture this as a struggle for domination in the mind of a practicer. The latter point buttresses this former one. The Buddha’s mind and the practicer’s mind are not-two and yet also not-one. This is not a substitution of the Buddha’s mind for the practicer’s. They both continue to operate. The Buddha’s mind continues to call forth practice and shinjin, while the practicer’s mind becomes aware of its own shortcomings.

Mahayana Buddhisms often instruct practicers that they must overcome or pass through obstacles. These obstacles are generally described as existential states or mental delusions. Samsara—the cycle of death and rebirth—must be negated in order to become united to

303 Hirota/Ueda. 150.
304 ibid.
305 It is tempting to turn here to Romans 7 and Paul’s own struggles with human morality, especially his statements that “I do not do what I want, but do the very thing that I hate” (Rom 7:15) or even the much-referenced “For I do not do the good that I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.” (Rom 7:19). Indeed, some of Shinran’s own struggles with human morality strike a decidedly Pauline note. It may be better, however, to draw an analogy from the world of psychoanalysis and think of the Buddha’s mind aiding the practicer’s mind in achieving an observing ego. The practicer is now no longer bound to the doing of an experience, but can observe it as well.
transcendent wisdom. “In Shinran’s thought, however, this realization is attained without passing through the complete negation of samsaric existence or deluded passions. Thus, emptiness…is not a crucial term in Shinran’s teaching.” The concept of “emptiness”—roughly that things are “empty” of permanent non-dependent existence—is indeed a central concept of Mahayana thought. To Shinran, however, it is neither central nor necessary. It is part of a difficult practice that is now impossible. Only the Other-Power of Amida’s Vow is effective for salvation from samsara.

It is crucial at this point in the discussion to explore Shinran’s concept of “evil”, as it has great bearing on the type of transformation implied by shinjin. Mahayana Buddhism generally teach that through practice one can overcome egocentricity, attachment, diversion—in other words, the evils that keep one from realizing one’s potential as an awakened being. One becomes cleansed. To Shinran, this is a different process entirely. Evil is not overcome, destroyed, or cleansed from the self. Evil, rather, is transformed by Amida into good. It is not “evil” in the general moral sense, but in the specific religious context of achieving or failing to achieve awakening. “Evil, for Shinran, describes the nature of the self that one becomes aware of only at the level at which one can encounter Amida’s working, and only with the light of the Buddha’s wisdom. It is on the basis of this self-awareness that he speaks of the transformation of evil, while remaining evil, into good.”

**Developments in Shin Buddhism: Salvation of Women and Outcasts**

The crucial historical point of our present study is the allegiance of Jōdo Shinshū Buddhism and the Buraku Liberation League. To arrive there, we must pay some attention to how Shinshū Buddhists came to believe that both burakumin and other “lowly” human beings...

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306 Hirota/Ueda. 152.
became soteriological subjects. Kanji Matsuo provides us with a brief look at the legends surrounding Shinran’s supposed salvation of hinin. While the term “hinin” (literally non-people) has been applied to *burakumin* in the past, it is not definitively clear that in the legends surrounding Shinran’s engagement with them, the term referred to the out-caste people of our study. It was also applied to individuals suffering from leprosy or other skin ailments.

Matsuo looks to a scroll painting of Shinran’s death to surmise the following:

At the scene of Shinran’s cremation in the Shinran eden 親鸞絵伝 (completed in 1486 (Bunmei 1)) which has been handed down in Joguji 上宮寺 in Okazaki, Aichi prefecture, six *inujinin* 犬神人 (one of the groups that were taken as *hinin*, and who engaged themselves with such things as funerals and executions) are depicted, grieving over his death. It is thought that these *inujinin* were converted by Shinran, and therefore they grieved at his death…as regards the story concerning Shinran’s salvation of *hinin*, some have argued that the image of the *inujinin* grieving over the saint’s death in the Joguji scroll is a change in the picture, based on a new meaning added by the story-tellers, because it cannot be seen in the version of the same from Senjuji 専修寺 whose original is thought to have been compiled between 1295 (Einin 3) and 1343 (Koei 2). Quite simply, the salvation of *inujinin* and *hinin* by Shinran is found to be a fable. To be sure, no sources are known which say that Shinran and his adherents carried out the salvation of *hinin* at the end of the Kamakura period and during the Nanbokucho period (1336–92). However, one must recognize the importance of the fact that legends relating to Shinran’s salvation of *hinin* were ascribed to him as well.308

His caution is noteworthy. We do not have independent verification of Shinran working to save the outcasts. It does appear from the description of *inujinin* supplied that these may well have been *burakumin* individuals. The description of their work certainly fits the necessary-but-unclean purview of the *burakumin*. On the other hand, the historicity of Shinran’s involvement with *burakumin* and *hinin* populations may well be entirely beside the point. We may, in other words, be involved here in something of a Quest of the Historical Shinran, to borrow a title from Albert Schweitzer. Whether or not Shinran Shonin actually engaged these populations in the way that the scroll painting depicts, the understanding that he did has formed a continued response by

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the religious community to a subaltern population. Just as it does not matter particularly whether Jesus of Nazareth literally dined and drank with the lowest outcasts of his society for Christians to decide that welfare programs designed for the “least of these” are part of their religious purview, it does not particularly matter whether Shinran actually undertook legendary actions to determine that particular dispositions are in keeping with the ongoing interpretation of his doctrine.

We are left, at any rate, with a somewhat unclear picture of the earliest Shinshū teachers and their views of the “unclean” among the population. We do have more direct information on their thoughts on the salvation of women. It is worth remembering that, in many Mahayana schools of Buddhism, to be born in a female human body is less advantageous—perhaps even a barrier—to the attainment of enlightenment and escape from samsara. Rennyo, as a case-in-point, actively preached on the possibility of female salvation. His beliefs on the potential salvation of women are multi-faceted. He held that Shinran did not distinguish between men and women in the possibility of attaining birth in the Pure Land; he held that the obstacles and submissions of women and the grave offenses of an evil person are synonymous; he held that women are burdened by possession of the five obstacles and three submissions and cannot in that condition be saved; he held women openly in contempt.309

Naoko Matsumura remarks on Rennyo’s thoughts as preserved in his letters, stating that “The difference in the various letters is thought to derive from the objective in each letter. Moreover, the fact that so many letters show Rennyo to be extremely conscious of women reflects upon his deep concern for the salvation of women.”310 She notes that much of what strikes a modern reader as condescending is indeed anachronistic and ought to be taken in the

310 Naoko, 60.
context of his time. Condescension aside, Rennyo was indeed dedicated to the salvation of women. It is unsurprising, to say the least, to find that the women of Rennyo’s day were deeply subordinate to the men in their lives, often leaving paternal control for the embrace of spousal control. “Rennyo’s letters emphasize repeatedly that if women realize their karmic evil through the five obstacles and three submissions and if they without a doubt take refuge in Amida Buddha, then they will all be saved.”

These supposed obstacles and defilements are indeed related to the occupational and geographic impurities imposed upon burakumin.

When the ideas on the five obstacles and three submissions of women came together with the spreading idea of defilement and impurity, the female biological features of menstruation and childbirth came to be labeled the “red impurity” and the “white impurity,” which only women possessed, thus reinforcing the view that women were defiled and must be excluded from sacred places of purity.

Just as burakumin were thought impure and unclean due to their contact with dead human and non-human bodies, women were thought impure due to the bleeding that accompanies both menstruation and childbirth. Yet Rennyo is able to connect this purported defilement with Shinran’s teaching that the grace of Amida Buddha is primarily—even preferentially—for those who are utterly unable to attain enlightenment on their own. One who is so materially severed from purity and blessing—a woman, a burakumin—would certainly fall into this category.

We are unlikely to recover a “feminist Rennyo” from his letters. His attention to the possibility of the salvation of women is itself a break from other traditions. In this, Matsumura follows other scholars in finding Rennyo to be someone who deals in both the sacred and profane.

If we were to go by this description, we could then understand that because Rennyo considered the sacred to mean shinjin (faith, and by extension, the revival of Shinran’s

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311 Matsumura. 64.
312 Matsumura. 65.
teachings), the most important theme in his life, he firmly confronted the secular or profane, which to him was reality, and used this scheme effectively. Thus, for the sake of the sacred, Rennyo was not afraid of being covered in the profane. In other words, his lifestyle was the fulfillment of living a dialectic between sacred and profane.\(^{313}\)

This is not a uniquely Buddhist use of such a dialectic, however. We can see its echo easily in the Johannine literature of the Christian New Testament, instructing followers to be “in” but not “of” the world. This is not to make a too-quick parallel between Rennyo and John the Evangelist. It is merely to note that the necessity of navigating a universal soteriological claim in a socio-historical context that would mark some outside the bounds of salvation is a common need to both Christianity and the Shinshū.

\(^{313}\) Matsumura. 68.
Chapter 4: Critiques of Cone

Disputes in Black Liberation Theology: J. Deotis Roberts’s Reconciliation

To a great extent, Cone set the parameters of Black Liberation thought by being the first out of the gate. It is difficult, therefore, to discuss much of the content of such theology absent it being a review of either Cone's own thought or of the reactions to his thought. J. Deotis Roberts stands ahead of many others with a strong claim to being Cone's theological interlocutor. "J. Deotis Roberts was a black pioneer in American theology before black theology existed."314 Unlike Cone, Roberts comfortably exists within the tradition and trajectory of Liberal Theology in the United States. In further distinction, "Roberts was slow to imagine himself as a theologian of the black experience,"315 and called as much for reconciliation as for liberation.

Cone and Roberts both began to write publicly about the black experience in theology in the late 1960s.316 For Roberts, this charge came through a common theological influence: Jürgen Moltmann. Following a 1968 lecture at Duke University, "Roberts asked Moltmann what his theology [Moltmann's "theology of hope"] had to say to black Americans such as himself, whose hope had been smashed. Moltmann replied that his theology had been forged in the context of Germany's reconstruction after World War II and that Americans had to rethink the meaning of Christianity for themselves."317 From this charge, Roberts began to deal with liberation and reconciliation, with the latter term becoming the focus of much of his work.318

315 Dorrien. 162.
316 The dialogue between these two thinkers has been the subject of study for some time. See especially Allen, Jr., Jack Miller. “Affirmative Action in Light of a Comparative Study of the Theme of Black Liberation in J. Deotis Roberts and James Cone,” diss., Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, 1997.; (James Cone’s brother) Cone, Cecil Wayne. “The Identity Crisis in Black Theology: An Investigation of the Tensions Created By Efforts to Provide a Theological Interpretation of Black Religion in the Works of Joseph Washington, James Cone, and J. Deotis Roberts,” diss., Emory University, 1974.
317 Dorrien. 163.
318 This is not to say that Roberts, when he wrote in more strident terms, was received any more warmly than was Cone. See Ross, A.C. “Review of J. Deotis Roberts a Black Political Theology.” Religious Studies 12, no. 1 (1976):
Reconciliation and Christology are the two main points of dispute between Roberts and Cone. To Roberts, “[t]he goal of Black theology determines its means. If the Black theologian addresses only Black people, he [sic] is limited by that end. His [sic] concern will be liberation. Whites will be considered only in a negative frame of reference—they are oppressors.”³¹⁹ Here, he has Cone in mind, stating further that “Cone’s program is Black liberation from White oppression. All of his reflection moves between the oppression/liberation poles.”³²⁰ Roberts finds Cone to be one-sided and polemical in his rebuke of white theology. This is not to say that he finds no use for Cone. To the contrary, Roberts cites Cone as a founding voice, stating further that “[t]he anger of the Black Christian against racism in religious institutions was expressed and the necessary justification for a new departure in theology based upon the Black experience was given.”³²¹ Clearly Roberts finds that Cone focuses only on liberation, yet he does not at this point offer an adequate rebuttal to why that focus is insufficient.

Roberts tries to stake out a position that includes both liberation and reconciliation. To Roberts, “Liberation is personal and social…I do not accept Black liberation versus White oppression as an adequate formula to cover the human condition of estrangement…Reconciliation is a theological way of seeing the essential nature of this interracial society. We must not only co-exist; we must in-exist in a pluralistic society.”³²² Whereas Cone’s notion of “liberation” is in opposition to “reconciliation”, Roberts brings the two together. We must pay careful note here to how the two are deploying these notions. For Cone, they are largely political terms employed in service of a theological problem. That problem, of course, is racist oppression.

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¹²⁰–²¹. for one such example of the rejection of Roberts as too strident.
³¹⁹ J. Deotis Roberts. “Black Theology in the Making” in Black Theology. 117.
³²⁰ ibid.
³²¹ Roberts “Black Theology”. 118.
³²² Roberts “Black Theology”. 119.
both in civil society and in the church. For Roberts, the political must be in service of the theological, here insisting that the reality of a pluralistic society in which Blacks and Whites both live demands some degree of reconciliation as a practical matter.

Christ, for Cone, is the liberator. For Roberts, unsurprisingly, Christ is both liberator and reconciler. “God was in Christ setting us free and God was in Christ reconciling the world unto Himself.” While Cone may not quarrel with this, his Theology of the Cross, as we have seen, is markedly different here. Cone emphasizes the dual facets of God’s love in this matter: that love is comfort to the oppressed and rebuke to the oppressor. Roberts takes a different view of liberation, stating that "Liberation is tied to a rapid, even a revolutionary social transformation. The setting free of the oppressed from various types of bondage is usually meant when the word is used." Roberts seems skeptical of the socio-political aspect of liberation here. He declares his own theology as a mediating position between Cone's christocentrism and William Jones's humanism.

Remarking on Cone's view of divine/human interaction, Roberts states that "In Cone one encounters a leap of faith which places great weight upon God's commands and promises and has little to say about human ability and responsibility in bringing about the liberation of the oppressed." This is his skepticism of Cone: that Cone "talks a good game" but has little in the way of concrete or constructive plans to carry out God's command. Roberts argues for a more involved humanity and a less removed God:

Isn't it possible to see God as concerned about human liberation without denying His transcendence and omnipotence? Is it necessary to minimize God in order to accept the dignity of the human? The deification of man is as serious a problem as the iconization of God. Man without God is unable to save himself or redeem the social order.

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323 Roberts. “Black Theology”. 120.
325 ibid.
God and laboring with God is ennobled and empowered to do the good and be a co-laborer in the humanization of man. Man in relation to God and through His grace is allowed to be a co-creator and co-laborer with God.\textsuperscript{327}

Of course, it would be difficult to miss Roberts's implicit critique of Barthian neo-orthodoxy and its stress on a radically transcendent God that seems to have seeped into Cone's work. Roberts sees this as a limiting weakness in Cone's arguments. Not only does it appear to lock Cone into some variety of Christian exclusivism or, at best, triumphalism, but it also appears to foreclose on Cone's ability to be creative in his application of theological concepts.

Roberts does credit Cone with accurately pulling from the black experience, stating that "When Cone asserts that to be Black is to be blue, he reaches into the experience of us all...The phenomenon of the Black experience needs proper analysis and interpretation. This is the province of the history of religions."\textsuperscript{328} Unfortunately, this is also where Roberts sees Cone's christocentrism as a scholarly liability. "James Cone imposes ready-made theological structures on this material which do not fit. Cone does not have the skill and the investigative knowledge needed to do the anthropological, literary and historical interpretation necessary."\textsuperscript{329} Cone does make regular use of both hymnody and secular music, as well as folklore, in his work; however, Roberts finds his use of these materials sorely lacking.

It is, to Roberts, a problem of the centrality of Christ in Cone's thinking coupled with an adherence to an often remote, though supremely powerful, God.

Cone's Christo-centric understanding of revelation does not allow him adequate room for growth even after the research on the Black sources has been done. Without a reexamination of the foundations of his program, I cannot see the possibility for an openness to Black religious experience necessary to relate to non-Christians in the Black community or to Africans. Once Cone limits his understanding of the revelation of God to God's revelation in Jesus Christ he cuts off conversation with all those who do not accept this affirmation as normative. Add to this the dogmatic manner in which he asserts

\begin{footnotes}
\item[327] Roberts. "Theism". 26
\item[328] Roberts. "Theism". 29.
\item[329] ibid.
\end{footnotes}
the finality of God's revelation in Jesus Christ and his insistence upon the identity of blackness and this revelation and one becomes aware of the inadequacy of Cone's position to move in the direction we need to move.330

It is not that Cone had never made any overtures to correct what Roberts decries above. Indeed, in 1975's God of the Oppressed, Cone remarks that "Because the Christian gospel lays a claim upon us that pushes us into relation to others, we must also be open to stories not specifically of the biblical tradition, to the stories for other religions from Africa, Asia, and elsewhere."331 It is highly unlikely that Roberts would have been unaware of this work, especially considering his complaint that Cone was producing work faster than scholarship could absorb it. More likely, Roberts saw this as a gesture without much substance. Cone could see the "log in his eye" but was unlikely to remove it.332

**Disputes in Black Liberation Theology: Dolores Williams’s Womanism**

While Roberts and Cone have continued to disagree and push each other to greater clarity, perhaps nothing stands out so obviously as a dispute in Black Liberation Theology as the relationship between Womanism and Cone. Addressing Cone's assertion that Genesis specifically reveals God as a God of Liberation, Dolores Williams notes that "...the oppressed and abused do not always experience God's liberating power. If one read the Bible identifying with the non-Hebrews who are female and male slaves ("the oppressed of the oppressed"), one quickly discerns a non-liberative thread running through the Bible."333 Williams finds Hagar, Sarah's slave, to be a figure of deep connection. She exists as the "oppressed of the oppressed": an outsider and a minority among outsider minorities. Picking up the thread of Cone's talk of God's

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331 Cone. GotO. 95.
partiality to the oppressed, Williams counters that "God is clearly partial to Sarah. Regardless of the way one interprets God's command to Hagar to submit herself to Sarah, God does not liberate her. In Exodus God does not outlaw slavery." Williams has identified a painful oversight on Cone's part.

She goes on to describe how neither covenant nor holiness codes allow women full personhood. While male slaves are to be freed in their seventh year of bondage, if his master had given him a wife, that wife and any children still belong to the master. If a man were to bed an enslaved woman who was betrothed to another man, they would not be found guilty of adultery. The woman was not a being, she was property. This does not differ substantially, of course, from the denial of personhood experienced during American slavery. What Williams demonstrates in the Sarah/Hagar example is that Cone has overlooked the ways in which the God of Exodus has failed to bring liberation to all people.

"Womanist theologians, especially those who take their slave heritage seriously, are therefore led to question James Cone's assumption that the African-American theologian can today make paradigmatic use of the Hebrews' exodus and election experience as recorded in the Bible." In other words, if the God of Israel and Exodus allowed his chosen people to keep slaves themselves, we must attend to the cruel irony of using this story as a text of liberation. It carries within itself the seed of oppression and domination all over again. To Cone's insistence

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334 Williams. 145.
336 ibid.
337 Williams. 147.
that "It matters little to the oppressed who authored scripture; what is important is whether it can serve as a weapon against oppressors,\textsuperscript{338} Williams answers that "Equivocal messages and/or silence about God's liberating power on behalf of non-Hebrew, female slaves of African descent do not make effective weapons for African Americans to use in their 'wars' against oppressors."\textsuperscript{339} Williams is right to call out Cone’s inattention to the violence that can be done within an oppressed community. Women and LGBTQIA people are often the victims of a kind of Girardian mimetic violence within oppressed communities.\textsuperscript{340}

Williams suggests that Cone’s oversight is not an absolute disproof of his theology. Noting that Cone requires that the community of the Black Liberation theologian should be consistent with the community that gave us the scriptures (i.e. ancient Hebrews), she reminds us that “The African-American community’s identification with the non-Hebrew, female slave Hagar (rather than with Abraham and Sarah), is not consistent with the community that gave us the scriptures.”\textsuperscript{341} Her careful attention to the social structures of the Hebrew community call attention to a central irony in Cone’s use of Exodus as a liberation text: the Hebrews kept slaves. “If black liberation theology wants to…speak in behalf of the most oppressed black people today…theologians must ask themselves some questions. Have they, in the use of the Bible, identified so thoroughly with the theme of Israel’s election that they have not seen the oppressed

\textsuperscript{338} Cone. BTL. 31.
\textsuperscript{339} Williams. 147-8.
\textsuperscript{340} Rene Girard famously describes the human instinct toward violence through the concepts of mimesis and scapegoating, creating a triangular structure in which negative feeling is expiated through violence enacted on another. He bases his theory of conflict on mimicry rather than aggression and applies this notion to religious ritual specifically. In a Girardian context, then, a male of an oppressed group carries out violence against a female scapegoat in mimicry/mimesis of the oppressor. Girard would, of course, find the scapegoat mechanism at work in the ritual of a lynching as well, with the white community re-establishing order through the destruction of an individual. While this is an excellent tool for description, it should be used with caution as Girard exhibits a tendency to reduce all conflict to triangular mimetic violence. The reader is directed to “Mimesis and Violence” in \textit{The Girard Reader}. James G. Williams, ed. (New York, Crossroad Publishing, 1996). pp 9-19. Also, Leo Lefebure \textit{Revelation, the Religions, and Violence} (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2000) for a critical application of Girard in the light of comparative theology.
\textsuperscript{341} Williams. 148.
of the oppressed in scripture?” Her admonishment of Cone carries particular value for any theologian who wishes to take up the cause of the oppressed as a theological matter.

Williams suggests that theologians “…must assume an additional hermeneutical posture—one that allows them to become conscious of what has been made invisible in the text and to see that their work is in collusion with this ‘invisibilization’ of black women’s experience.” It is not enough to be a single theologian accounting for her or his own faith journey. We must also look to the journey of the community or communities with which we associate ourselves. She refers to this as a “womanist hermeneutic of identification-ascertainment that involves three modes of inquiry: subjective, communal, and objective.”

Engaging in this hermeneutic allows a theologian to actively investigate her or his own implicit and explicit biases. With whom have you identified? Who have you overlooked? These questions must be part of analysis.

For Williams, this new hermeneutic is proof against error. It is not that this provides some magical bulwark against hermeneutical violence, but:

By engaging this womanist hermeneutic of identification-ascertainment, black liberation theologians will be able to see the junctures at which they and the community need to be critical of their way of using the Bible. Engaging this hermeneutic also allows black theologians to see at what point they must be critical of the biblical text itself, in those instances where the text supports oppression, exclusion and even death of innocent people…In the exodus story there are violent acts of God against Israel’s oppressors, the Egyptians…There are violent acts of the Hebrews, sanctioned by God, as they killed every person in the land of Jericho except Rahab and her family. God is supposed to have sanctioned genocide in the land of Makkedah, in Libnah and in the Promised Land of Canaan. This kind of reflection upon exodus as a holistic story rather than as one event allows black theologians to show the black community the awful models of God projected when the community and theologians use the Bible so that only Israel’s or the Hebrews’ understanding of God becomes normative for the black community’s understanding of how God relates to its life.

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342 Williams. 149.
343 ibid.
344 ibid.
345 Williams. 150-1. Robert Allen Warrior’s “A Native American perspective: Canaanites, Cowboys, and Indians” in
She cautions that this does not mean an abandonment of identification with Israel’s story. Rather, Williams cautions prudence and a long-range view of the text. Too close an identification with the liberation of the Hebrew people can turn us from seeing the oppression within their society. Williams cautions that Cone has not allowed for growth of the black religious experience since the Civil War, and she may well be correct.

Disputes in Black Liberation Theology: Victor Anderson and "Ontological Blackness"

In 1999, Victor Anderson issued a fundamental charge against Cone's reckoning of theology in his volume *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism*. While Anderson undertook enough in that volume to be worthy of his own dissertation, space limits us to a brief examination of a few central and salient points.346 In this work, Anderson coins the term "ontological Blackness" to call attention both to the way in which he feels Cone both binds African American Christians to their race and to the ways in which he finds Cone bound to the very white philosophers and theologians against whom the latter purports to rebel. Cone's views of race are tied to the European construction thereof, making "Blackness" and "Whiteness" necessarily mutually-exclusive markers. "In such a view, racial identity is something that is established prior to experience. Cultural and communal forces simply amplify what is already present in the self and do not do the actual work of inscribing an individual with a racial identity."347 Blackness and Whiteness are given, *a priori*, components of

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346 Anderson addresses Dwight Hopkins, Katie Cannon, Delores Williams, James Evans, and others in his book. Anderson has been included here due to the direct and fundamental challenge to Cone’s thought. Others, such as Hopkins (who was Cone’s PhD student), have sought largely to build upon Cone’s work. There is greater value here in finding the challenges to this work and seeing Cone’s response thereunto.

any discussion of race or racism in Anderson's view of Cone, a too-steady category which allows little room to move constructively in overcoming the burdens of a racist past.

Anderson classifies race as a species of "metaphysical ontology" noting that in this case the term "denotes essential properties (essences), such that to lack any one property renders one a member of a pseudospecies." If "race" is both immutable and necessary, can it even be transcended in the way Cone suggests? A more pertinent question may be whether Anderson and Cone are using "Blackness" and "Whiteness" in the same way at all. Anderson certainly has a point if we concede that Cone often deploys these terms to describe skin tones. If we see, however, that Cone does not do so in any singular way, then we may have to take Anderson's critique at something of a slant. Certainly, Cone can indulge in less-than-subtle critique of his rhetorical opponents. Anderson is likely correct in his analysis of the Cone of 1969, but it remains to be seen whether Cone added sufficient nuance to his use of Black/White oppositions in the three decades that elapsed between his early work and Anderson's reaction.

Cone's early work was, of course, informed by both his own experiences of anti-Black racism in Arkansas and the nascent Black Power movement throughout the United States. These experiences led Cone to understand that Whiteness and Blackness were, if not de facto opposites, at least de jure opposites. The practice of Whiteness Cone experienced--Klan threats, exclusion from the barber shop, academic denigration--were linked intimately to his own Blackness. As such, it is unsurprising to find that his initial conception of Blackness is indeed self-worth in the face of Whiteness. Anderson, however, finds this to be a limiting factor of Cone's thought, noting that "Blackness has become a totality of meaning. It cannot point to any transcendent meaning

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beyond itself without also fragmenting."\textsuperscript{349} While Cone may intend for Blackness and Whiteness to occupy a symbolic space that is both connected to but distant from biology, Anderson refutes this symbolism in declaring that "Because Black life is fundamentally determined by Black suffering and resistance to Whiteness...Black existence is without the possibility of transcendence from the Blackness that Whiteness created."\textsuperscript{350} One is of course reminded here of Audre Lorde's dictum that "the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house."\textsuperscript{351} If Blackness only exists in opposition to Whiteness, as Anderson interprets Cone, then it is in itself a tool of a racist master.

We must, however, be attendant to the manner in which Cone deploying these terms. While it is true that Cone works with "Whiteness" and "Blackness" as binary opposites, it seems that Anderson may be in the midst of the same error Cone's European-descended critics commit. If we are too ready to conflate the theological terms of "Whiteness" and "Blackness" with lighter and darker skin tones, we are certainly in the midst of Anderson's dilemma. This is not, however, the only way in which Cone plays with these same terms. Blackness for Cone is identified with life, meaning that Whiteness is death. As a symbolic system, in Cone's preferred Tillichian mode, this may be still too simple. Yet it is the case that even our idioms reinforce the opposite of Cone's assignations.\textsuperscript{352}

Anderson asserts that Cone's Blackness cannot exist without Whiteness, thereby making Whiteness the actual ground of Blackness.\textsuperscript{353} This may be true of the oppressor/Oppressed

\textsuperscript{349} Anderson. 91.
\textsuperscript{350} ibid.
\textsuperscript{352} We refer in computer security to “white hat” and “black hat” hackers as those who respectively seek to increase or subvert security measures. To be sure, this is a callback to old black-and-white Western movies/serials in which a cowboy’s hat was shorthand for his heroism or villainy. It remains the same assignation, however, that white equals good and heroic where black equals the opposite of these qualities.
\textsuperscript{353} Anderson. 92-93.
dynamic in a social sense: without someone to oppress, the oppressor is not an oppressor. Yet this critique necessarily extends to any and all discussion of opposites. Without death, what is life? Does good exist without a counterpart in evil? It seems here that Anderson's issue is less with the way in which Cone uses Whiteness and Blackness but in the very act of creating an opposing narrative. He does not adequately attend to the subversive—as opposed to the inverted—nature of Cone's use of these terms. Cone does not suggest a simple inversion, but rather a realignment of existing symbolic language around life and death, white and black.354

Anderson's point that Cone does not allow Blackness to define itself but that it must take on Whiteness to find definition is well made and well taken. "If it is, in fact, the case that one of the signs of liberation is the ability to define one's terms for one's self, the Black theology project, according to Anderson's rationale, does not help the Black community in its drive toward liberation as it remains bound and constrained by Whiteness for its own self-understanding and communal identity."355 This is a difficult bind for Cone. What is missing, however, from Anderson is an indication of where to go from this point. His critique is indeed thin on positive, programmatic suggestions for the project of Black Liberation Theology. It is not necessarily every critic's responsibility to answer the questions she or he raises for another's work. Even so, some signal from Anderson about how to extricate ourselves from this bind would be welcome. Absent such a signal, we are left searching for a better and non-static metaphorical understanding. Anderson is right that Cone's use of Whiteness and Blackness introduce static categories; what goes unacknowledged, unfortunately, is that these categories play out in

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354 For a vision of what a simple inversion might look like, see the 1995 film “White Man’s Burden” in which John Travolta plays a white worker in an America in which black people are the social elite. He loses his job due to a racialized misunderstanding and proceeds to take a CEO played by Harry Belafonte hostage. It is noteworthy here that the writer and director of the film is a third-generation Japanese-American man, placing him socially outside both groups he seeks to examine in the film.
355 Eppehimer. 95.
predictably static ways in society. While we must be cautious about how we theorize Whiteness and Blackness in seeking liberation, Anderson risks losing the forest of liberation for the trees of symbolic syntax. In this, he anticipates the desire to call racism dead following the election of Barack Obama. Until society can react in dynamic ways to dynamic categories, there is still a use for the static ones.

William R. Jones and Theodicy

Cone’s contemporary, William R. Jones, critiqued many of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century’s prominent black theologians on grounds that they presented unclear theodicies. “They have painstakingly drawn a theological road map to guide the black faithful from distorted conceptions to prophetic enlightenment. But the road is full of logical potholes, theological washouts, and elaborate but unsound detours.”\textsuperscript{356} To this end, Jones asks that we consider whether or not God is, in fact, a white racist. This is indeed a provocative claim, and to address it specifically from Cone’s own theological viewpoint, one that we would do well to consider. Jones frames the problem of a racist God thusly, “To undertake the construction of a black theology of liberation requires the prior conclusion that black suffering is oppressive or negative. God disapproves of it; He does not demand that blacks should endure it.”\textsuperscript{357}

Here Jones discusses the possibility that black suffering is indeed an aspect of divine disfavor:

By virtue of his task, the black theologian of liberation is committed to the view that black oppression is not evidence of divine disfavor. Accordingly, he is required to show—if he is to avoid the indictment of begging the question—that the general class of divine disfavor, of which divine racism is a subclass, does not accurately describe the black situation...It has already been established that ethnic suffering raises the question of divine racism. Accordingly it is necessary only to demonstrate that the black theologians describe black suffering as a variety of ethnic suffering. It will become clear


\textsuperscript{357} Jones. 74.
that each affirms that black suffering is maldistributed, enormous, dehumanizing, and transgenerational. At this juncture, however, it is sufficient to note that to define the black situation as *oppressive* is actually to affirm the essentials of ethnic suffering; and the definition of the black situation as oppressive…is the consequence of the black theologian’s own definition of his task as a theology of liberation.\textsuperscript{358}

Granting Jones his point about question begging, we must still answer whether his own distinction between “ethnic suffering” and “racism” is a meaningful distinction. Further, while the possibility of divine disfavor must be acknowledged by any and all people, there is a problematic aspect to applying it to black people. Cone’s identification of blacks in America with the people of Israel seems to deny the possibility of divine disfavor. In this argument, Jones is acting in the place of Job’s friends asking a righteous man what he has done to earn manifest divine disfavor.

The problem is not as simply resolved as choosing whether to believe Cone or Jones on this point. Jones’s critique indeed carries further into the possibility of God’s election of a people.

Each black theologian affirms the doctrine of the politics of God as an essential plank. Man must decide where God is working for human liberation in our midst and join Him in the struggle…But given ethnic suffering and the multievidentiality of suffering, certain restrictions are placed on the theological employment of the politics of God…It goes without saying that Cone and others advocate joining God because they presuppose that He is on the side of blacks. This is to say that where God is active in human affairs He is engaged for the (a) good of (b) blacks—if not all mankind. But ethnic suffering and the multievidentiality of suffering call both (a) and (b) into question. The excessive amount of black suffering and its enormity, both of which are admitted by calling the black situation oppressive, make it risky if not foolhardy to affirm that God is at work for the liberation of blacks. Must not the black theologian first explain how their plight came about in the first place in the face of God’s alleged activity in their behalf? In sum, it is not possible to make the politics of God the second floor of the edifice of black theology without a foundational theodicy that decisively answers the charge of divine racism.\textsuperscript{359}

\textsuperscript{358} Jones. 74-5.
\textsuperscript{359} Jones. 75.
Rather than starting with liberation, Jones would first have us explain how blacks came to be oppressed if God is working for their liberation and to ground any future claims of divine liberation in a thorough theodicy. For Jones, we cannot claim election without accounting for the possibility of both divine racism and divine disfavor. This appears fair, yet does it accurately describe the ways in which we hear of Israel as God’s elect in the Hebrew Bible?

Jones’s concern about divine disapproval is well-made if we start the timeline of Israel’s election in the era of the judges. However, when Moses first encounters God, we hear the following:

Then the Lord said, ‘I have observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters. Indeed, I know their sufferings, and I have come down to deliver them from the Egyptians, and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land, a land flowing with milk and honey, to the country of the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites. The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have also seen how the Egyptians oppress them.’

This is where Cone’s association of blacks in America with the ancient Israelites begins. God has elected a suffering and oppressed people to be God’s own. God promises deliverance to these people not purely as a celestial fiat, but by sending one of their own—Moses—as a liberator. The oppression of Israelites in Egypt is explicitly described as beginning with the decision of a single human being. “Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph. He said to his people, ‘Look, the Israelite people are more numerous and more powerful than we. Come, let us deal shrewdly with them, or they will increase and, in the event of a war, join our enemies and fight against us and escape from the land.’” Further, the condition of the Israelites in Egypt is, in verses 11 and 12, specifically described as “oppression.”

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360 Ex 3:7-9, NRSV
361 Ex 1:8-10, NRSV
362 Without diving too deeply into the specific exegesis of terms in Hebrew-to-English translations of scripture, it is clear that the translators and exegetes who worked on the New Revised Standard Version are in agreement that the...
The time in Egypt predates the cycle of disapproval and liberation of the time of the judges. The time of election Cone described by analogy is not the same as the time of election about which Jones is concerned. The notion of divine disapproval of Israel enters scripture after the liberation from Egypt. Granted, it does so quite swiftly, yet we must pause and ask whether Cone’s analogy to Israel is meant to follow the story of Exodus through the time of the judges so closely as Jones seems to argue. In other words, could Cone not have intended to demonstrate that God’s election of Israel was an instance of grace that is not bound to human reason for an explanation? If Cone had relied on the latter chapters of Exodus—or Judges, 1&2 Samuel, etc.—then the problem of divine disfavor would weigh more heavily. His concern is, however, for God’s initial election, seen as a gracious and inexplicable gift of the divine. His reading of God as one opposed to human bondage follows the broader arc of the story of Israel through the Hebrew Bible, and it certainly aligns with the story of the crucifixion.

Responding to Cone’s claim that blacks are oppressed against their will and that God has chosen their oppression as the milieu in which to work divine liberation, Jones states:

Two different claims can be extracted from his statements here, and Cone appears to endorse both. Blacks are not chosen to suffer for the other, that is, the white oppressor. The other-directed impulse of the suffering servant is replaced with a self-sacrificing love for oneself and the black nation. There is no hint of the duality of black suffering in Cone’s analysis. In fact, suffering for the other, in his understanding, can only be regarded as a feature of God’s disfavor…The statements also yield the interpretation that blacks are not chosen to suffer. Rather, the exact opposite must be affirmed: their election signifies their eventual liberation from the suffering that defines oppression. Indeed it would appear that the continued suffering of blacks, from Cone’s perspective, is tantamount to the claim that God is a white racist.363

This is not, on its face, an interpretation with which Cone would quarrel too greatly. Cone retained some of the Neo-Orthodox insistence on the radical otherness of God from his early

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Hebrew text describes a situation we might best understand in contemporary English as “oppression” or as “oppressive”.

363 Jones. 99-100.
days. Therefore, Cone allows for the possibility that what we say about God does not in any way define, determine, or limit who or what or how God is. If our beliefs about God turn God into a white racist, for Cone, we must discard those beliefs and that idea about God. Much of Jones’s critique rests on how he presumes Cone to be bound to some negative interpretation or another. Cone, however, does not see human speech about God as having any effect on who God is. Exodus does not make God a liberator; it reveals God’s nature as liberator.

Jones is principally concerned, as mentioned, with the theodicy Cone presents. He argues that God’s supposed goodness and power must be reconciled with the existence of suffering in the world. To this end, he finds that Cone rejects “…any treatment of black suffering that appeals to God’s inscrutable will or transports the rationale for black oppression to a sphere beyond human comprehension. He also rejects any appeal to an eschatological compensation for earthly suffering, though there may be an inconsistency on this point.” 364 Here Jones is concerned with Cone’s stress on the sovereignty of God. He finds it to be logically untenable that Cone might hold both to God-as-liberator and God-as-sovereign given the conditions of oppression Cone describes and decries. This, of course, is the central problem of theodicy. Jones’s critique of Cone, it appears, is largely that he doesn’t believe Cone provides an adequate theodicy.

In critiquing Cone’s definition of blacks as “the oppressed”, Jones commits to the most troubling of his misunderstandings of Cone’s program.

Unless he is willing, like Cleage, to make the Exodus an event of black liberation on the grounds that Jews are black, the Exodus is not available as evidence for his position. Indeed it would appear that the whole history of the Israelite nation as the object of God’s liberating work is not relevant for his argument that God is involved in black liberation.365

364 Jones. 105.
365 Jones. 118.
Here Jones has committed to an absolutely materialist reading of Cone’s use of “blackness” and “whiteness”. As we have already seen, however, Cone is not materialist in this reading. Cone would indeed accept the consequence that he defines the Israelite people as “black” and the Egyptians holding them in bondage as “white.” It is just this metaphorical reading of race that allows the possibility of dying-to-whiteness with which we are principally concerned.

Cone, for his part, responded to Jones’s critique, identifying his position as affirming that “[t]he persistence of suffering seems to require us to deny…the perfect goodness…of God.”

To this, Cone responds, “It is a violation of black faith to weaken either divine love or divine power. In this respect Black Theology finds itself in company with all of the classic theologies of the Christian tradition.” Cone is concerned principally—in Cone’s reading and perhaps clearly in his own intentions—with sussing out the logical coherence of a theological position. While reason must obviously be brought to bear on theological reflections, there is a limit to human reason in the investigation of faith. This is not to propose a logic-free dodge; rather, it is to affirm the creedal language that reminds us that some things are not comprehensible by reason alone.

Cone acknowledges that theodicy leads us into the realm of paradox and conflict. Rather than seeing that which is paradoxical as purely illogical or unreasonable, he remarks:

Whatever else may be said about the philosophical difficulties that the problem of evil poses, whether in the traditional definition of classical philosophy or in Albert Camus’s humanism or even in the black humanism of William Jones and Anthony Pinn, faith arising out of the cross and resurrection of Jesus renders their questions (“Is God evil?” or “Is God a white racist?”) absurd from the biblical point of view. The absurdity of the question is derived from the fact that its origin ignores the very foundation of biblical faith itself, that is, God becoming the Suffering Servant in Christ in order that we might be liberated from injustice and pain.

366 GotO. 150.
367 ibid.
368 GotO. 162.
For Cone, the being of God expressed in God’s liberating activity is a matter of faith which of itself entails a degree of unknowability. Again, this is not to say that we might simply wave away inconvenient inconsistencies with a fallacious appeal to mystery. It is to say that by Cone’s understanding of God, Jones demands the impossible: a fully logical accounting for God’s very being. To Cone, this is an absurdity in the face of the Bible that teaches victory-through-defeat and exaltation-in-humiliation with the story of Christ.

Cone additionally addresses one of Jones’s more concise criticisms. Jones would require that Cone define the decisive moment of liberation in order to continue with a logically cogent argument.

Therefore, to William Jones’s question, What is the decisive event of liberation? We respond: the event of Jesus Christ! He is our Alpha and Omega, the one who died on the cross and was resurrected that we might be free to struggle for the affirmation of black humanity. I know that this answer will not satisfy Jones or others who view black humanity from another vantage point that Jesus Christ. But for many blacks during slavery and its aftermath, Jesus was not a clever theological device to escape difficulties inherent in suffering. He was the One who lived with them in suffering and thereby gave them courage and strength to “hold out to the end.”

Cone’s defense is unlikely to be persuasive in a strictly humanistic mode of philosophy, and he acknowledges as much. Theology must be mindful of logic and reason but cannot be bound only to these things. Cone does not seek to simply wave away reason as insufficient here. He has grounded his claims about liberation in specifically theological terms. These theological claims, moreover, appear to have an historical basis. Cone marshals spirituals and hymns to show how reliance on Christ-as-liberator is more than a measure of pacification. “The meaning of black suffering remains a part of the mystery of God’s will. But the presence of Jesus in their social existence did reveal that God was at work liberating them from bondage.”

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369 GotO. 177.
370 ibid.
objection that this theodicy is unanswerable relies in part on an implicit impatience. If something is to be achieved through divine will—that is, a miracle—then let it be done now. Cone’s reliance on the Exodus narrative, and indeed his grounding all of his theology in historical circumstance, reminds us that God does not often work in our own sense of immediacy. God’s plans are worked out through history, and the fact that bodily liberation has taken time to come into effect in the world does not disprove that it is through divine will and work.
Chapter 5: Overcoming Whiteness

Coming Together

Having examined the social histories of Black Americans and of Kamakura Japan, the biographies and religious thought of Cone and Shinran, and the subsequent disputes and clarifications of Black Liberation Theology and Jōdo Shinshū Buddhism, we come now to the question at the heart of the entire study: can we indeed overcome Whiteness? To answer this, we will need a more robust examination of "Whiteness" and "Blackness" both as racial categories and in the theological imagination of Cone. We will also review the encounter of the Shinshū with the Buraku Liberation League to see if any lessons may wait there for the allegiance of a religious community and a sociopolitical liberation movement. We will additionally investigate two possible theoretical frameworks for our comparison: whether Cone's understanding of Whiteness is parallel to Shinran's understanding of evil, and whether Cone's understanding of Whiteness is parallel to Shinran's understanding of Self Power.

We must also ask a further question of alignment. Can we, having looked so closely into what both Cone and Shinran discuss as transformative religious imperatives, be satisfied with building a theology that is only allied with, or even an accomplice to, black liberation? Must we, rather, follow through with the necessary openness to divine transformation and become instead theologians who have become Black with God? While the theoretical framework offered by Adorno and the Frankfurt School investigated in the first chapter are indeed helpful for determining a course of "sympathetic bourgeois" action on the part of the privileged class/caste for the subaltern, this may indeed be insufficient for the project of black liberation laid out by Cone.
Several important figures will aid this study. First, the protestant theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer offers a study in a life turned to blackness. Being German in the 1930s and 40s, Bonhoeffer’s context for “blackness” as “the oppressed of the land” was certainly the Jewish population of Germany. We will see, however, that his time in Harlem at Abyssinian Baptist Church was formative to his ability to see the plight of the Jewish people as something Christ would call him to disrupt. We will look also at St. Oscar Romero of El Salvador as an example of someone whose given “whiteness” was converted and who also paid the ultimate price for allegiance to the downtrodden. Following these two, we will examine the possibility of reading Cone’s concept of whiteness with Shinran’s concept of evil, and then Cone’s concept of the gift of blackness with Shinran’s concept of Other Power.

“Black” and “White” in Racial Consciousness

In Cone’s writings, it is clear that “Black” and “White” are antonyms in the utmost. Yet, as has already been mentioned, Cone is being deliberately playful with these categories. We must endeavor first to unpack a bit more what they may mean in terms of racial consciousness in order to more fully understand the way in which Cone plays with these terms. To this end, the work of Theodore Allen will be indispensable. In his landmark two-volume book *The Invention of the White Race*, Allen explicitly ties the notion of ethnic or racial “whiteness” to not just social inclusion, but indeed to being a master class enforcing its will on a subaltern. Allen begins his study in the English occupation of Ireland, noting:

> From the standpoint of the ruling classes generally, the imposition on a colony of racial oppression afforded a dual advantage. It relieved the colonial regime of encumbering social forms unsuited to its purposes. Free of such impediments, it could exploit the wealth and the labor of the country with a minimum of interference or embarrassment.

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371 For a view of this transition as more of a tale of social inclusion, the reader is referred to Noel Ignatiev *How the Irish Became White*. (New York: Routledge, 2008). For a view which agrees both with Cone’s and Allen’s views of whiteness, see e.g. Baldwin, James. “On Being White…and Other Lies.” *Essence*, April, 1984.

Note here that this is a view of race that is distinct from more modern conceptions thereof. We would look now upon both the English and the Irish as White. Earlier European concepts of “race” as a national identity have collapsed into the broader sense of race as White, Black, or Asian, generally speaking. These broad categories flatten ethnic distinctions in ways that privilege particular hegemonic notions of world history.\(^{373}\)

Throughout the first volume of his study, Allen lays out a case for how this apparently intra-white oppression has been framed as racial oppression. Economic exploitation is a key and foundational point in this exposition. Referring to the Protestant Plantation of in the north of Ireland, he notes that:

Under this new plan the English capitalists were to finance the settlement of English tenants in Ireland in numbers sufficient to provide a self-supporting militia to guarantee the eventual subjugation of the entire country. Title to the lands to be settled would be transferred from Gaelic Irish and Old English to New English, by confiscation of Church lands, by challenge to defective titles, and especially by the escheat of lands of Irish and Anglo-Irish resisters. The English tenants would supplant Irish tenants for the most part, although laborers were to be mainly native Irish; for the rest, the Irish would to some considerable degree be displaced and transplanted beyond the advancing areas of English settlement. Under the rules laid down for the ill-starred first Ulster plantation (1572-73), for instance, no member of the Celtic Irish owning or learned classes was to be admitted. Within the plantation boundaries, to be Irish was to be a “churl,” a laborer “that will plow the ground and bear no kind of weapon.” It was even proposed by some of these early English colonialists that the Irish be enslaved \textit{en masse}.\(^{374}\)

Three important points need to be acknowledged here. First, this adventure in Ulster preceded all North American adventures by England by nearly 50 years. To presume that this kind of acquisition-by-subjugation was uncommon or unknown to England would be preposterous.

Second, this event establishes a precedent for the use of servitude as political subjugation. While

\(^{373}\) For example, both Japanese and Korean people under this system are classed as “Asian”, which ignores the Japanese subjugation of Korea, along with the fact that neither the Japanese nor the Koreans particularly think of themselves as belonging to one overarching racial category, unless they are forced to choose a single check-box on a form inquiring after demographic information.

\(^{374}\) Allen. 59.
the English certainly did not invent such a phenomenon, they nevertheless absolutely participated therein prior to any colonial adventures in North America. Third, and perhaps most intriguing, is that the plantation of Ulster can be seen as a precursor to the problem of gentrification. While it is utterly beyond the scope of the present essay to delve into such an issue, it bears mention as a consequence of—and here as a precursor to—America’s slaveholding past.375

Allen further roots his analysis of racial oppression in terms of colonialism. The English, Spanish, and Portuguese are all regarded here as colonial powers with aspirations of controlling both Africa and the Americas. The fruit of the English endeavor to be part of this conquest is, of course, the Triangular Trade of people and goods between Africa, the Caribbean, North America, and Europe. As late as 1662, well into the period of English colonial enterprise in North America, English politicians still pursued slavery as a possible punishment for theft. It is important here to recall that bond-labor and chattel slavery are remarkably different issues. The indentured servitude endured by whites in English colonies ended after either the death of the individual or the term of the contract. Unlike slavery for African people in America, it was not a heritable trait.

English colonialism in the Americas then imported this distinction among races. Virginia led the establishment of “race” as the defining social distinction for English colonists.376 It is here that the race laws that originally targeted the Gaelic Irish of Ulster turn against people of African descent:

375 To be sure, the clearer parallel may well be to Manifest Destiny and the treatment of indigenous people by European colonizers in North America, but it does bear noting that such a dynamic persists not on an external frontier but on an internal one. The current frontier of gentrification and displacement is, of course, in the heart of American cities where once-affordable neighborhoods populated by black and brown people become chic neighborhoods for whites to “reclaim”, pushing out previous generations of community.

376 Allen. 81.
In Ireland, Catholics who might have succeeded in bourgeois terms had ready access to labor, but they were by law forbidden to acquire land…In Virginia (the pattern-setting colony), the African-Americans who might have succeeded in bourgeois terms could, by virtue of the headlight system, have had access to land, but by a law enacted in 1670 they were forbidden to acquire any bond-laborers except those of African ancestry. Being necessarily persons of small means, African-Americans were thus put at an almost insurmountable competitive disadvantage, since the capital outlay for each African or African-American bond laborer was about two or three times as high as that required for each bond-laborer from Europe. After 1691, African-Americans who sought to enter the competitive struggle as newly emancipated persons were not (except by express official leave) allowed to remain in Virginia.\(^{377}\)

African-Americans in Virginia were further subject to anti-miscegenation statutes preventing the acquisition of property through marriage. These systems that originally were intended to distinguish between “Irish” and “English” as races were readily and enthusiastically applied to African laborers in the English colonies.

While race theory once distinguished between different nations and ethnicities as “races”, we can see as early as the seventeenth century the coming collapse into continent-level distinctions among “races.” This collapse led to the establishment of European whiteness as a default norm that required no further examination. While the Ulster laws imported to Virginia initially dealt with what might be now called intra-white race discrimination, they quickly turned toward the conglomereration of all European races as “white.” The presumption of European supremacy over African people followed. That presumption attracted the attention of no less an intellectual force than W.E.B. DuBois.

**DuBois on Race**

DuBois was, as we have already discussed, a key influence on Cone’s conception of what it means to be black. For what DuBois means by blackness, we can turn to his seminal 1897 essay “The Conservation of Races”, which we will now briefly review followed by a critical

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\(^{377}\) Allen. 83.
assent from Chike Jeffers. DuBois can, with this essay, be credited as an early expositor of a social construction theory of race, as opposed to a purely biological theory. While we take this for granted presently, it was by no means the norm in 1897 or earlier. DuBois begins by asking, “What is the real meaning of Race; what has, in the past, been the law of race development, and what lessons has the past history of race development to teach the rising Negro people?”378 In the course of pursuing the last question, DuBois proposes an academy to train up members of his race to face new challenges.

To define “race”, DuBois first looks to biology. Finding that an insufficient lens, he turns to sociology and history, noting that in prior studies on race:

At all times, however, they have divided human beings into races, which, while they perhaps transcend scientific definition, nevertheless, are clearly defined to the eye of the Historian and Sociologist. If this be true, then the history of the world is the history, not of individuals, but of groups, not of nations, but of races, and he who ignores or seeks to override the race idea in human history ignores and overrides the central thought of all history. What, then, is a race? It is a vast family of human beings, generally of common blood and language, always of common history, traditions and impulses, who are both voluntarily and involuntarily striving together for the accomplishment of certain more or less vividly conceived ideals of life.379

His concept of race here is social. Indeed, one might extrapolate that the collective nature of race is an irreducible necessity: there cannot by definition be a “race” of only one person. His intention here is to set out a social model of the world, one not defined by great individuals carrying out heroic acts but, rather, one of groups striving together for their “more or less vividly conceived ideals of life.”

DuBois also highlights the potential for a conflicted identity regarding one’s race and one’s nation. While earlier theories of race used these two more or less interchangeably, there is

379 DuBois. 53.
an especially poignant difficulty in figuring out one’s race when one has been forcibly removed from the nation of one’s birth or, as generations pass, one’s ancestry.

No Negro who has given earnest thought to the situation of his people in America has failed, at some time in life, to and himself at these cross-roads; has failed to ask himself at some time: What, after all, am I? Am I an American or am I a Negro? Can I be both? Or is it my duty to cease to be a Negro as soon as possible and be an American? If I strive as a Negro, am I not perpetuating the very cleft that threatens and separates Black and White America? Is not my only possible practical aim the subduction of all that is Negro in me to the American? Does my black blood place upon me any more obligation to assert my nationality than German, or Irish or Italian blood would?

It is such incessant self-questioning and the hesitation that arises from it, that is making the present period a time of vacillation and contradiction for the American Negro; combined race action is stifled, race responsibility is shirked, race enterprises languish, and the best blood, the best talent, the best energy of the Negro people cannot be marshalled to do the bidding of the race. They stand back to make room for every rascal and demagogue who chooses to cloak his selfish deviltry under the veil of race pride.380

As DuBois implies here, the only sensible reading of “race” in America collapses into a continent-level distinction between Europe and Africa, with some attention spared for Asia.

DuBois’s language and terminology are, of course, of his time and would not be taken up uncritically today. Yet the crux of the problem remains: how does one conceive of one’s racial identity when it is divorced from other cultural signifiers such as language, dress, religion, or diet? When one is forced into a polyglot tangle sorted only by the physical characteristics which cannot fully account for racial distinctions, there is a painful erasure of identity.

Chike Jeffers, who works on the Philosophy of Race, offers us a newer view of DuBois’s essay. Jeffers notes that “Against the political focus that is dominant in contemporary social constructionist thought, DuBois demands that we pay greater attention to race’s cultural dimension.”381 DuBois, Jeffers argues, does not line up specifically with a view of race as

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380 DuBois. 57.
biologically real or purely socially constructed, but with a view of race as a cultural phenomenon. As such, it incorporates both biological heritage and social norms. He further notes that “Contemporary philosophy of race has developed in a disciplinary context characterized by the growing consensus that, from the perspective of biology and physical anthropology, there are no such things as races.”

In this, he echoes DuBois who noted that physical distinction cannot reliably account for differences in race.

Early in his essay, DuBois remarks on the reality of race as a kind of thought-form. Whether there is any biological or anthropological scaffolding to support it, we reify race by dividing into races. We categorize ourselves:

Now, within these opening moments, DuBois has, I believe, already introduced us to and then critically evaluated a theory of race. The view that he considers—which he ascribes, abstractly enough, to “the American Negro”—rejects, first of all, the hierarchy implicit or explicit in most mainstream nineteenth-century discourse about race. More fundamentally, this view rejects the biological assumptions of this discourse, emphasizing the “one blood” that flows through the veins of all humans over their superficial physical differences.

So DuBois does not assent to the ranking of races which places one ahead of another as more or less advanced. Neither does DuBois ascribe to a biologically essentialist theory of race. His concept is cultural. It is broader than a particular social norm yet distinct from biology.

Once we divorce race from biology, the temptation arises to declare it purely fictional and move rapidly toward some “post-racial” world. Yet there are differences in how we might call out race as a social construct. Calling it a construct does not, after all, mean that it is a fable. Jeffers again notes:

That being said, what a social constructionist chooses to emphasize about race makes a difference. If power relations are what matter above all in understanding what race is and how we should react to its existence as part of our social reality, then we should all look

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382 Jeffers. 405.
383 Jeffers. 408.
384 Jeffers. 412.
forward to the day when race disappears once and for all. The main role of race in social life, from this perspective, is our division along lines of dominance and subordination, superiority and inferiority. It is, in short, the evil we call racism. If the political theory is right that this is what lies at the heart of race, then the ultimate defeat of racism, toward which we should all be constantly striving, necessarily means the defeat and total abolition of race itself. Something like this thought would seem to be behind the strong appeal to many of the notion of a “postracial” society.385

We might read Jeffers here as being somewhat aligned with Cone’s insistence that Whiteness should die away into Blackness for the full liberation of humanity. Whether this is possible in any pre-eschatological moment is beyond the point at present.

Much as Cone would insist in theology, the philosopher has a responsibility to her- or himself when she or he engages in public discourse. Jeffers implicitly acknowledges this:

What it means to be a black person, for many of us, including myself, can never be exhausted through reference to problems of stigmatization, discrimination, marginalization, and disadvantage, as real and as large-looming as these factors are in the racial landscape as we know it. There is also joy in blackness, a joy shaped by culturally distinctive situations, expressions, and interactions, by stylizations of the distinctive features of the black body, by forms of linguistic and extralinguistic communication, by artistic traditions, by religious and secular rituals, and by any number of other modes of cultural existence.386

Here we might read a refutation of Victor Anderson’s protest that Cone only defines Blackness as “that which is oppressed by Whiteness”. Reference to oppression is not sufficient to define Blackness, but it is—in our present historical moment—necessary to that definition. What Jeffers, in discussing DuBois, highlights is the positive valence of this dialectic. Here, I believe Cone would assent to this emphasis. Just as oppression is a necessary but not sufficient criterion for defining “Blackness”, so too is its dialectical partner joy both necessary and insufficient.

In speaking to that negative definition—Anderson’s insistence that Cone sees Blackness merely as the absence or opposite of Whiteness—Jeffers offers the following:

385 Jeffers. 421.
386 Jeffers. 422.
If the notion of “racial whiteness” …turned out to be nothing more than a reference to appearance, then race in this future might be socially meaningless, but as I have said, it strikes me neither as necessary nor even probable that white identity as a cultural reality will disappear just because racism ceases to exist.\textsuperscript{387}

Indeed, here we can find that “Whiteness” is entangled in two different dialectical struggles. In the first, we have Anderson’s charge regarding Ontological Blackness that cannot somehow exist without its opposite Whiteness. This entanglement is related to the second in which Whiteness is both definable as a racial identity group (insofar as anything is so definable) and as a hegemonic system of power. Cone engages both of these tensions throughout his work, sometimes playfully and sometimes obliquely.

**Transformation as Divine Action in Human Mind**

We briefly looked into the problems of good, evil, and transformation in the closing of the last chapter. These concepts merit more careful consideration here. Recall that the transformation for Cone is becoming black while for Shinran it is the attainment of *shinjin*. How do these two transformations occupy similar space in very different systems of thought? I propose that these transformations share substantial, comparable similarities in two main areas: 1. the fact that they are divine action in the human mind; 2. that both of these transformations are moral in their disposition, leading to an epistemological shift in the believer. We will address these two areas of comparison below.

Cone likens becoming black to the conversion of the Philippian jailer in Acts 16. The jailer asks Paul and Silas what he must do to be saved, to which they reply that he should believe in God and be saved. Cone here explicitly remarks that “the misunderstanding here is the failure to see that blackness or salvation (the two are synonymous) is the work of God, not a human

\textsuperscript{387} Jeffers. 426.
work. It is not something we accomplish; it is a gift.” The jailer will not be saved by doing something for Paul or Silas or any other apostle. He will be saved by conversion. This conversion is not a willful act on his part but is the acceptance of a divine gift. The conversion of the jailer, appropriately, is intermixed with a story of liberation.

Turning to Acts 16, we recall that Paul and Silas were being followed on their journey by a slave girl who had a spirit of divination within her. This girl was exploited by her masters for the masters’ financial gain. Paul, annoyed, called the spirit to come out of the slave girl. Recognizing that their easy money was now gone, the girl’s masters had Paul and Silas beaten and jailed. In answer to their prayers in the middle of the night, all of the prisoners were loosed from their bonds and the doors flew open. Their jailer was about to throw himself on his sword in disgrace when Paul called out to stop him (Acts 16:16-28, NRSV). It is at this point, seeing the captives freed, that the jailer asks to be saved. The discharge of Paul and Silas deserves additional attention here:

Then he brought them outside and said, “Sirs, what must I do to be saved?” They answered, “Believe on the Lord Jesus, and you will be saved, you and your household.” They spoke the word of the Lord to him and to all who were in his house. At the same hour of the night he took them and washed their wounds; then he and his entire family were baptized without delay. He brought them up into the house and set food before them; and he and his entire household rejoiced that he had become a believer in God. When morning came, the magistrates sent the police, saying, “Let those men go.” And the jailer reported the message to Paul, saying, “The magistrates sent word to let you go; therefore come out now and go in peace.” But Paul replied, “They have beaten us in public, uncondemned, men who are Roman citizens, and have thrown us into prison; and now are they going to discharge us in secret? Certainly not! Let them come and take us out themselves.” The police reported these words to the magistrates, and they were afraid when they heard that they were Roman citizens; so they came and apologized to them. And they took them out and asked them to leave the city. (Acts 16:30-39 NRSV)

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388 Cone. BTL. 66.
What we see in the above is the revelation of God’s plan for freedom in the miraculous freeing of the captives. This is followed by the desire for conversion to God by a member of the oppressor class. His conversion is through faith, not actions as attested in verse 31. As a result of his conversion, this man cares for the bodily needs of his former prisoners: he feeds them and washes their wounds. Finally, when the authorities wish to discharge Paul and Silas without acknowledging their wrongful treatment, Paul refuses to let them sweep their misdeeds away and demands justice in the form of a face-to-face apology. There is no mystery as to why this story is so important for Cone’s understanding of the translation of whiteness to blackness. We see in this that Paul and Silas are treated as black men, subject to the caprice and whim of earthly authority that will not offer its own apology unless such is demanded. We see further that God is allied with blackness and against hegemonic whiteness. We see finally that it is God’s reaching out through miracle and through faith that effects conversion within the jailer, not the preaching or actions of any human agent. We will deal shortly with the ethical implications of this action.

Turning to see how Shinran also relies on divine action in a human mind, we are immediately called to consider jiriki and tariki, or self-power and other-power respectively. Shinran is not unique among Mahayana thinkers in deprecating self-directed effort as soteriologically effective. He is unique in the particular way he stresses this action. In his "Hymn of True Shinjin" we see him define it thusly:

Know that shinjin is the true intent of the Pure Land teaching. When one has understood this, then as our teacher Master Honen declared, "Other Power means that no selfworking is true working." "Selfworking" is the calculating heart and mind of each practitioner. As long as one possesses a calculating mind, then, one endeavors in self-power. You must understand fully the working of self-power.\(^{389}\)

\(^{389}\) in Hirota/Ueda 206.
Having discussed the concept of shinjin above, we will not belabor its repetition here. Suffice it to say that the possibility that salvation can be the result of one's own effort is utterly proscribed in this system.

In "Notes on 'Essentials of Faith Alone'", he further describes the ways in which self-effort is ineffective for salvation:

*solely making beings turn about and abundantly say the nembutsu...*

*Turn about* means to overturn and discard the mind of self-power. Since those people who are to be born in the true fulfilled land are without fail taken into the heart of the Buddha of unhindered light, they realize diamondlike shinjin. Thus, they "abundantly say the Name."

*Abundant* means "great" in the sense of great in number, "exceeding" and "supreme" in the sense of excelling and surpassing all good acts. This is because nothing excels the Primal Vow embodying Other Power.

"To abandon the mind of self-power" admonishes the various and diverse kinds of people--masters of Hinayana or Mahayana, ignorant beings good or evil--to abandon the conviction that one is good, to cease relying on the self; to stop reflecting knowingly on one's evil heart, and further to abandon the judging of people as good and bad.390

Again, the only effective agent of salvation is Amida Buddha. For Shinran, we must abandon the mind of self-power and rely solely on Amida. Not even our decision to do this, however, is our own. If that fundamental decision were ours, then self-power would be necessary for the salvific action of the Primal Vow to activate in a believer's life. We cannot even conceive of calling upon Amida Buddha through our own self-effort; even that desire to turn to Amida is responsible for turning us to say the name in abundance.

**Moral Aspect of the Transformation**

Returning to the example of Cone's interpretation of Acts 16, we can quickly ascertain what the transformation that God directs becomes in human actions. Paul and Silas are taken from jail and given medical care, food, and water. They are taken into a space of caring and

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healing. Following this bodily healing, they are to be released from prison, yet they insist on further restorative justice from their captors. They demand not only their release but the additional acknowledgment that their capture was unjust to begin with. The transformation has both personal scope, insofar as the jailer and his family are converted and become followers of Jesus, and societal scope, insofar as the magistrates are humbled and made to apologize for their ill treatment.

Continuing the allegorical read of this passage and what it has to say about whiteness in society, we can read it as follows. It is in the first place unjust and injurious to the people of God that white supremacy exists. Recall that Paul and Silas were jailed not as much for preaching a different religion but for threatening to disrupt the dominant and exploitative hegemony of the wealthy in Roman society. The current dominant and exploitative hegemony of the United States is nothing more and nothing less than what Cone calls Whiteness. Inasmuch as Whiteness is the support scaffolding of the new empire, it is inherently opposed to the work of liberation in Christ.

Cone goes on to discuss this saving work, stating:

The resurrection means that God’s identity with the poor in Jesus is not limited to the particularity of his Jewishness but is applicable to all who fight on behalf of the liberation of humanity in this world…His presence with the poor today is not docetic; but like yesterday, today also he takes the pain of the poor upon himself and bears it for them…If Jesus’ presence is real and not docetic, is it not true that Christ must be black in order to remain faithful to the divine promise to bear the suffering of the poor?

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391 Space prohibits an extended analysis, yet I would be remiss if I did not tie this to the contemporary trend of white people calling the police for perceived infractions by black people. Such incidents as Sarah Braasch reporting Lolade Siyonbola to Yale Campus Police (https://www.cnn.com/2018/05/09/us/yale-student-napping-black-trnd/index.html), the arrest of Donte Robinson and Rashon Nelson at a Philadelphia Starbucks (https://www.cnn.com/2018/04/14/us/philadelphia-police-starbucks-arrests/index.html), or the fiasco of Jennifer Schulte’s attempt to call the police on a black family for having a cookout in an Oakland park all show a similar dynamic of a dominant culture threatened by the presence of a culture it has itself oppressed.

392 Cone. GotO 125-5.
He acknowledges that “blackness” as a christological title is historically contextual, yet so too are the biblical titles bestowed on Christ, along with every possible depiction of Christ throughout history. “But the validity of any christological title in any period of history is not decided by its universality but by this: whether in the particularity of its time it points to God’s universal will to liberate particular oppressed people from inhumanity.” Cone identifies the necessity of Christ’s blackness with the “least of these” in Matthew 25:45.

This becomes a part of the necessary moral change God graciously initiates as above. By point of negative comparison, Cone remarks on how theologians continue to do their work absent this necessary transformation, asking:

Why is it that white theologians in America have interpreted God’s relation to black suffering in such a manner the the divine empowerment of the oppressed to fight actively against the evils of racism is absent from their analyses? Can this be due to anything else than the fact that the social existence of the oppressors inevitably distorts the biblical message?

Theologians who cling to their whiteness, thereby implicitly or explicitly denigrating the suffering of their black sisters and brothers, have not received the transformative gift of grace which Cone describes as “becoming black with God.” They are too bound to the earthly structures of social hegemony to be agents of liberation, and they therefore stand athwart salvation itself.

Once we receive the gift to become black with God, however, we become like the jailer above. We offer material aid to the oppressed. We can no longer be bystanders watching in silent complicity as empire carries out its too-real destruction of the bodies of the oppressed. This is not, to use Niebuhr’s phrase, the construction of individual ladders to heaven. Becoming black

393 Cone. GotO 125.
with God entails an understanding of salvation as communal. Indeed, “…God’s election involves the responsibility to struggle with God in the fight for justice.”\textsuperscript{396} Central here is the concept of justice, which cannot be distinct from salvation or from freedom. Here we recall Paul and Silas’s demand that the magistrates recognize not just that they are free to go but that indeed they were unjustly imprisoned. This struggle is not a pie-in-the-sky delivery of salvation but a call to a just social order here and now.

For Shinran, we first must understand that certain aspects of Christian moral thinking are not applicable to Buddhist thinkers. Cone spends a large amount of time discussing ethics in terms of justice, but “justice” language is often an awkward fit for Buddhist ethical systems that do not rely on the oppositional logic of oppressor/oppressed or unjust/just pairs. These axes present difficulty for the non-oppositional and non-dualistic thinking of Buddhists, who would disagree with “…the ‘righteous’ or supposedly justified anger supported by the idea that right is entirely on my side and wrong entirely on the other side.”\textsuperscript{397} Accordingly, we cannot expect to see a direct parallel in the moral discussion from Shinran. Prophetic denouncement, which is often both central and stirring in Christian moral argumentation, does not have a proper place within Buddhism. What, then, can we say of the moral transformation of the Shinshū practitioner?

While the oppositional logic of Christianity is not operative within the Shinshū, morality still exists. Actions are deemed good or evil, and karma enacts itself as a result of each.

Shinran distinguishes between a deliberate wrongdoing and one that is committed by our being “maddened beyond control by blind passion,” that is, by our unavoidable karmic influence…when we commit a wrongdoing with conscious thought, it is no longer an act committed in uncontrollable blind passion (major premise); karmic determination, when aware, is no longer a determination; it is a deliberate wrongdoing. Being aware means

\textsuperscript{396} Cone. GotO 168.
being controllable and hence being responsible. Now, the antinomian excuse is certainly a form of consciousness or awareness (minor premise)—that evil action does not hinder birth in the Pure Land. Therefore, it follows (conclusion) that the antinomian excuse is incompatible with a genuine karmic determination, i.e., being “maddened beyond control by blind passion.” Hence, it is invalid as an excuse for immoral action. We are responsible for our immoral acts, so long as they are done with an antinomian “excuse.”

The grace of Amida does not, in other words, excuse one from the morality of her or his actions. How might we then see this grace having a positive effect in the moral life of the believer? Such transformation is not thought to be instantaneous, but “for Shinran, faith (and nembutsudo) is followed by a gradual change in one’s moral life; faith, in this sense, provides believers with the psychological force for moral transformation.” Yet this psychological force would, of itself, be self-effort. Here we find a tension bordering on the dialectical in Shinran’s moral thinking. “The ethical tension arising from the unbridgeable gap between the absolute and the relative, the Buddha and sentient beings, is intrinsic to Shinran’s concept of faith.” For his part, Shinran discusses ethical behavior as a kind of result of faith, which—in Christian terms—imbues it with something of a sacramental dynamic as the outward sign of internal grace. However we can conceive of it, it is clear that for Shinran ethical behavior follows as a result of shinjin and is not prior to it.

Hee Sung Keel, quoted above, gives us a window into the struggle of appropriately appreciating Shinran's understanding of morality in Christian or Christian-influenced terms. Indeed, he far exceeds prior interpreters such as Henri DeLubac in his ability to take Shinran principally on Shinran's own terms. Keel notes, in discussing the contextuality of Shinran's thought, that:

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399 Keel. 145-6.
400 Keel. 147.
Its doctrine of pure grace sharpened human conscience and deepened moral consciousness beyond the conventional moralism of the world. Overall, however, we cannot avoid the impression that it is difficult, if not impossible, to find in the life of faith that Shinran envisaged the ethical will and vision to shape the affairs of the world to improve it...Indeed, the deterministic view of karmic evil, like the Christian doctrine of original sin, may explain the deep-rooted nature of sin and evil in human beings and lead one to surrender oneself thoroughly before the "supernatural" grace of Other Power, but this religious self-surrendering often seems incompatible with the sense of moral freedom and responsibility that is required by an ethical will to grapple with the massive presence of evil in ourselves as well as in society.\(^{401}\)

Here we find a Christian theologian at odds to apply the appropriate categories of moral thought to Shinran.

Yet, even if we are not trying to immediately read Shinran in a Christian light, there are difficulties in applying the idea of transformative ethics to shinjin. Ugo Dessi provides an intriguing look into the workings of shinjin as ethics. He refers to the 50\(^{th}\) anniversary of the foundation of the Fellow Companion’s Movement (Dobo Undo), noting in a speech given by the head priest of the Honganji that “On that occasion, emphasis was laid on the social dimension of shinjin as opposed to those ‘abstract’ doctrinal interpretations according to which faith alone is sufficient to put an end to the practical reality of discrimination in society.”\(^{402}\) So we have, then, something of a foothold to consider the social morality and social-ethical dimension of Shinshū Buddhism from the community itself. Further, Dessi finds in Kikufuji Myodo the notion that:

…in Shinran, contrarily to his successors Kakunyo and Zonkaku, the morality of those how have attained shinjin is not characterized in terms of the “five constant virtues” …of Confucian ethics. Kukufuji notes that, in fact, Shinran’s rejection of the five constant virtues is all the more apparent when one considers his reference to the fact that Laozi and Confucius followed “wrong paths” …their teachings being concerned only with “mundane good” …and, for this reason, “Through them, one cannot part from the worldly and attain the sacred.” According to Kikufuji, the realization of shinjin opens up the way, instead, to a spontaneous ethical approach to live, whose features are apparent in various passages of Shinran’s writings.\(^{403}\)

\(^{401}\) Keel. 152-3.
\(^{403}\) Dessi. 95-6.
This is all in opposition to the understanding that “…the basis for ethical action in a Shin Buddhist context has been traditionally explained as a response in gratitude to the Buddha, and this interpretation presupposes the realization of shinjin on the part of the practitioner.”

Shinran’s own letters, however, find him discussing the possibility of followers who have not attained shinjin; the traditional rendering of causality, then, becomes problematic. Unfortunately, “…though shinjin is generally assumed to be the source of morality, the actual occurrence of this shift in the life of the practitioner remains somewhat undecided and obscure.”

Absent the oppositional language of Christian ethics, is it possible to speak comprehensively of parallels in ethical thought between the two thinkers before us? To be sure, the focus of Shinshū is primarily internal and secondarily external. We have, however, ample evidence of Engaged Buddhism that seeks to better society through Buddhist means. What we require at present is a theoretical framework which allows for the comparison of these ethical means without reducing them to simplistic morphological parallels. Inasmuch as the aim of this study is indeed to propose a model by which one might overcome the force of Whiteness that Cone decries in his earliest work, this will require particular care. It is to that construction that we now turn.

**Dietrich Bonhoeffer and the Blackness of Christ**

Beyond the obvious institutional connection through Union Theological Seminary, Reggie Williams points us to a deeper connection between Cone and Bonhoeffer. Obviously, Bonhoeffer preceded Cone in his time at Union, but it is Bonhoeffer’s time in Harlem that is our

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404 Dessi. 99.
405 Dessi. 104.
406 Space precludes a full discussion of this phenomenon, but the reader is referred to the work of Christopher Queen and Sallie King, specifically *Engaged Buddhism: Buddhist Liberation Movements in Asia* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1996) which they co-edited; King’s *Being Benevolence*, cited above, Queen’s more recent edited volume *Engaged Buddhism in the West* (Somerville: Wisdom Publications, 2000); or especially Thich Nhat Hanh, *Interbeing: Fourteen Guidelines for Engaged Buddhism* (Berkeley: Parallax Press, 1993).
focus at present. Prior to his time at Union, Bonhoeffer was not the earnest preacher we remember from the Confessing Church. Indeed, without Union and Harlem, it is possible he could have been a member of the German Church of the 1930s. Through his worship experience at Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem and friendships with such classmates as Albert Franklin Fisher, Bonhoeffer underwent something like the conversion to blackness that Cone suggests. While he was certainly a theological influence on Cone, we must also raise the question of whether or not Bonhoeffer’s example provided an archetype of the kind of theologian, activist, and Christian Cone might approve of in the desire to overcome whiteness. Williams’s study of Bonhoeffer’s Christology gives us some purchase on this question.

Reminding us that the climate in white churches of the 1930s was not too much different from what Cone would lament nearly 40 years later, Williams writes that “Most liberal whites failed to see white supremacy as a matter for Christian attention, and as a consequence they ignored the constant dangers of daily life in America for black people.”407 This description fits the younger Bonhoeffer as well. Prior to his time in New York, Bonhoeffer subscribed to a theology that had little to no room for ethics. Post-WWI German theology was under the sway of a particularly Darwinian interpretation of Luther. “Bonhoeffer’s system was no exception to the norm; in his early years, his creative theology was seduced by the predominant expression of Christianity in Germany.”408 The interpretation of “orders” here would ultimately become the groundwork of the German Church that supported the Nazi regime.

Bonhoeffer, however, would not stay under that sway for too long. “For Bonhoeffer, Christianity centers totally on Jesus…Jesus as Stellvertretung [empathetic, vicarious

408 Williams. 10.
representation] makes him a guide for our social action, in addition to providing concrete interaction with Jesus, who is presently experienced within the communion of saints.”

His understanding of the empathetic, co-suffering nature of Christ deepened during Bonhoeffer’s stay in Harlem and through the influence of friends like Fisher. That friendship “introduced him to Christian worship with an inherently different view of society. With Fisher, Bonhoeffer encountered Christians aware of human suffering and accustomed to living with the threat of death in a society organized by violent white supremacy.”

While Bonhoeffer studied at Union on a Sloane Fellowship, the infamous Scottsboro Boys case played out in Alabama. The case had a profound impact on Bonhoeffer. “Bonhoeffer wrote a letter home, petitioning a German church leader to join the international protest over the Scottsboro case, but the church leader wrote back, citing a theological argument as a reason for denying his request.” This kind of casuistry would become a focus of Bonhoeffer’s later writings and sermons related to the Christian moral life. Indeed, it rather aptly represents the notion of “cheap grace” itself. Williams highlights Bonhoeffer’s time in Harlem at Abyssinian as central to his conversion and later understanding of the plight of the Nazis’ victims in Germany. “The transformation that was inspired by his incarnation experience in the ‘church of the outcasts of America’ became the lens through which the Sermon on the Mount was seen, mobilizing it as commandments to obey from within the context of solidarity in suffering.” Bonhoeffer’s conversion was one out of what Cone will later deem whiteness: the conversion away from tacit support of an oppressive hegemonic structure through living solidarity with the oppressed.

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409 Williams. 11.
410 Williams. 21-22.
411 Williams. 22.
From his prison back in Hitler’s Germany, Bonhoeffer continued to write both letters and sermons. He remarks:

We are not Christ, but if we want to be Christians, we must have some share in Christ’s large-heartedness by acting with responsibility and in freedom when the hour of danger comes, and by showing a real sympathy that springs, not from fear, but from the liberating and redeeming love of Christ for all who suffer.\(^{413}\)

By 1943, when Bonhoeffer wrote the above, he was awaiting trial and execution by the Nazi regime. “Bonhoeffer remembered the plight of African Americans, and his experience of observing white Christianity from their hidden perspective became for him a shared understanding of the Jewish plight.”\(^{414}\) It was his conversion to the Black Jesus of Abyssinian Baptist that allowed Bonhoeffer to see what the hegemonic and oppressive regime of his beloved homeland was doing, and it was that Jesus who allowed him to stand against it. “Bonhoeffer’s identification of Jesus with the marginalized and the oppressed became a perspective from which prophetic insight would make him one of the most impactful theologians of the twentieth century.”\(^{415}\) Cone often remarked upon Bonhoeffer in approving tones, indicating that he was doing theology that was not intended to support the structures of whiteness but to overturn them.\(^{416}\)

Bonhoeffer, however, may not fit the mold of one who died to whiteness. Cone’s approval notwithstanding, the question remains whether Bonhoeffer and Cone saw the same solution to the same obvious problem. Bonhoeffer certainly had the opportunity to stay in Harlem and devote more of his time to the black people suffering there. He had already become part of the Abyssinian Baptist community. He returned to his own martyrdom, to be sure. The


\(^{414}\) Williams. 32.

\(^{415}\) Williams. 33.

\(^{416}\) Bonhoeffer is mentioned repeatedly in *BTL, GotO, CLT*, etc. Each time, Cone recommends that Bonhoeffer supplies a reasonable example for what a European theologian should do with their unearned power and privilege.
question remains whether he sought to save the oppressed by conversion to their being or whether he thought to save his beloved Germany from a madman. It is tempting to see the Jewish plight during the Holocaust as being the equivalent of the suffering of blacks in America, at least in theological terms. They are not, however, the same suffering. Not only that, but it does not seem that Bonhoeffer underwent a conversion to their being either before or after his return. We then have a heroic figure on our hands in Bonhoeffer. He was absolutely and inarguably marked by his time in Harlem. It is fair to doubt whether he would have returned to Germany to face the fate he faced without that time. It is not, however, as apparent that he underwent anything like the conversion Cone demands. In other words, Bonhoeffer understood to a great extent the blackness of God and the blackness of Christ but did not himself die to whiteness. Rather, it appears that he returned to Germany to use the whiteness he possessed to enact justice. While a laudable goal, he nevertheless does not fit as an example that predicts Cone’s dynamic.

**Oscar Romero and Legitimate Violence**

If Bonhoeffer does not fit the bill, perhaps another figure in the history of Theologies of Liberation can give us some additional purchase on the mechanism by which the re-birth Cone demands can be achieved. Oscar Arnulfo Romero was Archbishop of El Salvador until his assassination in 1980.\(^{417}\) During his time there, Romero became radicalized and began to preach a theology of liberation in his homilies. While he was always clear that sociopolitical liberation was not the end goal of such a message, nevertheless he provides an excellent interlocutor at this point. Romero himself came from a privileged class and racial background in El Salvador.

\(^{417}\) This assassination was carried out as Romero was celebrating Mass. His assassins were trained by the United States military at the School of the Americas (now WHINSEC). The overtly political and anti-Marxist nature of his assassination for a long time blocked his obvious progress toward sainthood. Pope Francis has, however, declared that Romero’s assassination was in fact an act *in odio fidei* allowing Romero to officially be acknowledged as “Blessed” and, ultimately as of October 14, 2018 (38 years after his martyrdom) to be counted among the canonical saints.
Through his contact with liberationist priests, and further through their murders at the hands of the right-wing government of his time, Romero underwent a kind of death and rebirth of his own. In other words, he gives us something of an example of how to imagine such deaths of identity might work.

In a homily preached on Palm Sunday of 1978, Romero addressed the destruction of a violent and oppressive identity in ourselves and the possibility of the construction of a liberative identity:

Holy Week is a call to follow Christ’s example of austerity, the only legitimate violence, the only violence that Jesus accepted. He invites us to do violence to ourselves: Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me [Matt 16:24]. We must do violence to ourselves, repress pride and destroy the seeds of avarice, greed and haughtiness. We must destroy these roots in our heart. This is what must be destroyed and this is the violence we must undertake so that the new person might come to life — for the new person is the only one who can build a new civilization, a civilization of love.  

Romero’s interpretation of Christ deserves repeating here. To follow Christ, we must “do violence to ourselves” a violence which we are told Jesus accepted. This violence, to Romero, bears great similarity to Cone’s death-and-rebirth mechanic by which white theologians and believers are to become black with God. It is additionally worth noting that Romero himself underwent precisely this kind of self-violence. What could the destruction of an identity be except violent? It is, however, the interplay of agency and subjectivity that legitimates this particular violence. This is a violence in service of solidarity, to be sure, but more importantly it is a violence to which the subject can assent. The violence of oppression—be it state or individual in its nature—is abhorrent in part because it creates a victim: a subject who does not assent to the action. If it is we ourselves who commit a violent act and we ourselves who are

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subjected to that same act, then we can assent to this destruction. This is a markedly different
dynamic than the destruction of black identity to fit in a mainstream white identity, in other
words, this is the opposite of the phenomenon of racial “passing.”

It would be possible at this point to raise the problem of authenticity. At what point can
one be called “re-born” into blackness? Recalling that blackness, in Cone’s sense, is not
essentially phenotypical, but rather has to do with one’s total identity with the oppressed, we
begin to have some kind of a goal. Applying the ego-negation implied by Romero’s call to
destroy the roots of avarice, greed, and haughtiness, we begin to see more clearly that this goal is
linked even more concretely to the oppressed as a subaltern class. In other words, dying to
whiteness and being re-born into blackness has less to do with behaving as Rachel Dolezal and
more to do with behaving as Romero.419 As a member of a privileged social class, Romero’s
identification with the poor—up to and including his martyrdom—definitely fits within both his
own concept of violence legitimated by Christ and Cone’s understanding of rebirth into
blackness.420

Did Romero’s radicalization to the cause of Liberation Theology and the campesinos of
El Salvador’s socioeconomic resistance meet Cone’s criteria for rebirth in that it caused both a

419 Dolezal was a professor of African and African American Studies at Eastern Washington University whose
“reverse-passing” as a black woman (her biological parents are of European descent) caused what can only be called
an absolute media fracas. The distinction here is that Romero’s change in identity was conscious and public.
Dolezal’s, for all her good works and good intents, was a largely private affair. Some have raised the critique that
she courted positions of privilege and prestige based on an assumed racial identity. This assumption was the
collaborative work of both her implication and others’ inference. While on one level, her identification with the
black experience was apparently total, on the other, the lack of transparency struck many commenters—both black
and white—as disingenuous.

420 I would be remiss if I did not also note that there is a racial undertone to much of the socioeconomic division in
Central America. El Salvador is no exception. Wealthier and more privileged families refer to themselves often as
“ladino” in distinction to the “mestizo” population. This distinction can carry as much weight as a white/black
distinction in the United States. Indeed, ladinos are colloquially understood to be more Spanish than indigenous,
while mestizos are more obviously people of mixed racial/ethnic heritage. Romero was, in other words, a ladino
who died to this identity and was reborn as mestizo. In the racial consciousness of El Salvador, especially among the
ladino elite, this is as great a transgression as Cone suggests white North Americans must undergo.
personal identification with the oppressed and a theological re-evaluation of the categories of sin, justice, mercy, and community? Cautiously, it may have done so. There remains, however, a missing piece. While Romero allied himself to the oppressed of his land, and while he absolutely suffered unto death for so doing, it is less clear that he retained the particularity of Cone’s call. Ever a pastor, Romero called for repentance and conversion but rarely invoked anything like the sense of God’s righteousness we see from Cone. His call remained principally universal, whereas Cone’s call is inescapably particular. Romero called on the elites and the powerful of El Salvador to cease from oppressing their brothers and sisters in Christ, but he did not call for them to renounce their identity as elites. The missing renunciation separates Romero and Cone at this point.

**Critical Theory and Comparative Theology**

Through the exposition of the Negative Dialectic and their analysis of culture and interest, the Frankfurt School seems to provide an alternative path to overcoming whiteness that may not involve the epistemic shift or personal risk detailed by Cone’s proposed dynamic of dying to white identity. The Frankfurt School thinkers were well versed in Christian and Jewish social mores and in this context discovered a dialectic which did not progress ever forward to the great Prussian Republic as Hegel suggested. Their dialectic progresses ever downward to greater debasement and despair. The input of Buddhism—in this case as a tempering influence from Shinran—with its attendant stress on the conditional nature of truth and being, helps to break out of an otherwise pessimistic and fatalistic structure.421

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421 It could be argued that theorists of the Kyoto School would make better interlocutors here, especially from the Japanese side of our discussion. While thinkers such as Nishida Kitarō certainly have much to offer in terms of general “East-West” philosophical discussion, and certainly Shin Buddhism is a component of many of the Kyoto School’s discussions, I believe that the Frankfurt School belongs in this place for two main reasons. First, there is the genealogical connection from the Frankfurt thinkers to Cone through Moltmann as is demonstrated in the text. Secondly, their inclusion here is largely—as mentioned above—due to the potential alternative route to creating the kind of “racial jacobinate” that Cone seems to ask for.
Further than this, Critical Theory allows the unmasking of human interest and will-to-power behind truth claims. To claim that “I have the truth” is to claim that if we disagree, then you do not. Rather than a positive statement, this becomes a marker of exclusion. Critical Theory is thus helpful in unmasking the power structures behind religious claims to exclusivity. Unmasking power structures is only a half-measure. These same structures can—indeed ought to—be subverted in favor of fuller universal flourishing. We must admit that European and United States political hegemony has carried with it a component of Christian hegemony in the colonization of the world. While post-colonial theory has much to commend it, Liberation Theology’s stress on praxis fits better with both the sense of urgency evoked by the Critical Theorists and the stress on alleviating material suffering of Engaged Buddhists.

This affinity alone does not make Comparative Theology, nor the very task of comparison, a part of Liberation Theology. Comparative Theology when performed with a self-critical gaze (borrowed from Critical Theory) and with an historical and this-worldly insistence on the alleviation of suffering (borrowed from Engaged Buddhism) can nevertheless partner with and be part of Liberation Theology. If the goal of Liberation Theology is the uplift of the oppressed, and if Christianity is or has been an agent of that oppression, the mutual critique of Comparative Theology will assist in alleviating suffering caused by those aspects of Christianity which are of themselves oppressive.

To trace out a lineage of influence leading from Critical Theory to Liberation Theology, one cannot simply suggest that there are mutual affinities between these two constellations of thinkers. A proper genealogical analysis of the ideas deployed in Liberation Theology should show that Critical Theory and its influence were indeed on the metaphorical radar screen for Liberation thinkers. Aside from a mutual hostility towards laissez-faire quietism of social elites,
we can discover some actual thinker-to-thinker links between key figures in both Critical Theory and Liberation Theology. Surprisingly, the keystone figure in this lineage is theologian Jürgen Moltmann.

It would be possible to argue for a connection between Adorno and Moltmann around the image of Auschwitz as the absolute breaking point of human social progress. Adorno stated that “Auschwitz confirmed the philosopheme of pure identity as death.”\(^{422}\) That is to say that philosophy must exercise a critical capacity vis-à-vis structures of power in the world and ought to be “a process of thinking about how our concepts, as we apply them, distort the object of which we are attempting to gain knowledge.”\(^{423}\) For his own part, Moltmann has argued that theology must take on an analogous self-critical task in the wake of the same disastrous tragedy. Neither philosophy nor theology can be the same in the face of Auschwitz, but this is not the sole reason to argue for an historical connection between Critical Theory and Liberation Theology nor is it the primary reason to believe that Adorno’s work was influential on Moltmann.

In the first of his core trinity of works, *Theology of Hope*, Moltmann directly cites Adorno’s work three times.\(^{424}\) Among these is an extended citation from *Minima Moralia*:

> Philosophy, in the only form in which it can still be responsibly upheld in face of despair, would be the attempt to regard all things as they present themselves from the standpoint of redemption. Knowledge has no light save that which shines upon the world from the standpoint of redemption: all else exhausts itself in imitation and remains a piece of technique. Perspectives must be created in which the world looks changed and alien and reveals its cracks and flaws in much the same way as it will one day lie destitute and disfigured in Messiah’s light. To attain such perspectives without arbitrariness of force, entirely out of sensitiveness towards things—that alone is the aim of thought.\(^{425}\)

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424. The other two works are *The Crucified God* and *The Church in the Power of the Spirit*.
Moltmann interprets Adorno in stating that “this would surely mean that the historian’s aim can be neither a theodicy of history nor a self-justification of past or present history.” Further, “the glory and misery of past ages do not require to contain the justification of God or of reason. Nor can they abide the positivistic dictatorship of present subjectivity.” In other words, the historical reality of despair and tragedy militates against justification through philosophical, theological, or other academic abstraction. Suffering is pushed to the forefront of theoretical consideration.

As visible as Adorno’s influence is on Moltmann on this point, the influence of Ernst Bloch looms perhaps larger on the work in question. Moltmann has acknowledged that Bloch’s opus *The Principle of Hope* was foundational in the former’s understanding and formulation of “hope” as a theological concept. Bloch’s eschatology provided the blueprint for Moltmann’s insistent view that history is interrupted and judged by the in-breaking future moment of utopian justification. While Bloch himself was not a formal member of the Frankfurt School, his friendship with and mutual admiration of Walter Benjamin and Adorno, as well as Georg Lukács, are far from secret. Moltmann has further acknowledged the direct influence of Benjamin’s interpretation of Marx on his own economic and moral thinking.

To return for the moment to the question of history in Adorno and Moltmann, we can see deeper parallels in their approaches. The centrality of suffering in the work of both men has its roots, as mentioned above, in the experience of being German through the Second World War. The two thinkers, however, had radically different experiences of “Germanness” at this moment. Adorno had been forced out of Germany into exile in England and later the United States in 1933, while Moltmann was conscripted into the German army. Moltmann, however, surrendered

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quickly to Allied troops and spent end of the war in detention. He began reading the Bible primarily out of boredom but was struck with Psalm 39. He later recalled:

I didn’t experience sudden illumination, but I came back to those words every evening. Then I read Mark’s Gospel as a whole and came to the story of the passion; when I heard Jesus’ death cry, “My God, why have you forsaken me?” I felt growing within me the conviction: this is someone who understands you completely, who is with you in your cry to God and has felt that same forsakenness you are living now. I began to understand the assailed, forsaken Christ because I knew that he understood me.427

The “assailed, forsaken Christ” became Moltmann’s Christian iteration of Adorno’s notion of “damaged life.” Through different experiences of the alienation, desolation, and destruction of Nazi Germany, both thinkers came to understand that the givenness of reality as we have understood it is forever broken and irretrievable.

Moltmann gives us a Christian version of some of the key notions of Bloch, Benjamin, and Adorno, but what does this mean for Liberation Theology and Critical Theory? At this point, we should turn from the influences upon Moltmann to Moltmann’s influence on others. While Moltmann himself has at times been categorized as a thinker within the constellation of Liberation Theology, he is not generally considered purely a Liberation thinker along the lines of James Cone. Cone is widely regarded as the father of Black Liberation Theology, a notion first expressed in his volume *Black Theology and Black Power*. As we have seen above, Cone steadily unpacked the core concepts of his initial work and maintained that he never changed his position as expressed in *Black Theology and Black Power*, but only made it clearer.

Moltmann is a key figure in Cone’s understanding of “hope theologians”, a group of German and American theologians who almost “get it,” but usually fall short of the kind of empathy and solidarity with the oppressed Cone advocates. Referring to Moltmann and the hope theologians’ eschatology, Cone explains that “it is the grounding of hope in God’s liberating

work in this world, which thus becomes the foundation of the divine promise to liberate the oppressed from human captivity.” Cone’s stress on this-worldly liberation is resonant with Adorno’s opposition to metaphysics. Brian O’Connor reminds us of Adorno’s critique, remarking that “this anti-metaphysical position emphasizes both the essential role of history in the evolution of meaning…and the material basis of our experience (human action, in contradistinction to the preordained determinations of a spiritual or non-human realm).” It would be tempting to read the final parenthetical qualification as ruling out substantial dialogue between Adorno and Cone on this issue. This need not be the case. Cone’s God does indeed act in history, but the kind of fatalism Adorno worries about is not part of that action. Liberation is not accomplished simply because God wishes or wills it to be so. Human action, based in history and materiality, must alter and prepare the world for God’s ultimate liberation.

Cone stressed that material, historical reality must be the basis for spiritual appraisals of reality, especially where social interests are concerned:

When therefore the question is asked, ‘Are not all oppressed?’ one can easily discover the function of the question by unmasking the social interests that the questioner represents. If the person is white and wants to find a justification for the continued existence of white suburban churches that obviously contradict the essence of Jesus’ gospel of liberation, then the asking of the question and its implied affirmative answer is nothing but a clever theological trick to blur important material distinctions in social existence itself. For it is material reality (social, economic, and political existence with the poor) that makes for the proper understanding of spiritual reality (“all are oppressed”).

Bearing the above in mind, we must ask whether Cone’s understanding of a material basis for spiritual reality fits within Adorno’s own understanding of the division between materiality and spirituality. Cone is arguing for a new theological paradigm in which materiality takes priority over abstraction and generalization. Christopher Craig Brittain reminds us that “One cannot,

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429. O’Connor. 87.
430. Cone. 137.
Adorno insists, simply return to the traditional words and structures of theology in contemporary society. Doing so can only be accomplished by means of a leap outside of history.”

Cone’s new paradigm, based in historical and particular experience, avoids this ahistorical leap.

We can see at this point a direct chain of influences from Adorno through Moltmann to Cone. In terms of specific concepts which carry through this lineage, it seems that a Frankfurt School version of Marxist critique of economy and history has come forward. This is in no way to say that Cone should be understood as a distant second- or third-generation member of the Frankfurt School. He is not, nor would he claim to be. It is, however, to say that certain constellations of ideas initiated by Adorno and the Frankfurt School have been transmitted through interpretation and adoption and have found a home in Liberation Theology. Neither the transmission nor the adoption has left these ideas totally unmolested, but to argue for the necessity of their not being changed is to do violence to the very kind of historicism Adorno would want to establish. The cultural contexts have changed, and the theories must meet this challenge. If we cannot say that Liberation Theology is a form of Critical Theory, what should we now make of the relationship? To answer this question, we will return to Cone and the problem of identity politics in Liberation Theology.

Cone’s insistence on the blackness of God and of Jesus Christ has met with the criticism that he is ontologizing race, per the discussion of Victor Anderson’s work above. If God must be “black”, can Cone possibly mean this in a phenotypical, biological sense? Cone has never held this view. Against the criticism that he has made Christ exclusive by arguing for his blackness, Cone states that “the validity of any christological title in any period of history is not decided by its universality but by this: whether in the particularity of its time it points to God’s universal

will to liberate particular oppressed people from inhumanity." While this removes the necessity of God being a physical being of African ancestry, it is still possible to see identity politics as a stumbling block in Cone’s vision of liberation.

If it is the experience of being black which gives a privileged epistemological position to some and not others in interpreting God’s will, there is less than ample space in the struggle for liberation for those who have not had this direct experience. Brittain highlights this same issue in the thought of Gutierrez:

Yet, this invocation of right-practice, and the corresponding defence of an epistemological privilege of the marginalized, are vulnerable to Adorno’s concern with the capacity of the social totality to distort all spheres and activities in society. Gutierrez is seeking to ground a liberative praxis on a solid foundation: the experiences of the poor, which are correlated with certain themes found in Christian theology (the Exodus liberation from Egypt, the love of neighbour taught by Jesus of Nazareth, and the denunciation of poverty and oppression among the Hebrew prophets). An immediacy between theology and practice is on display here, which recalls, at least in its formal arrangement, the style of political engagement that Adorno finds problematic in Brecht.

Cone’s emphasis of the epistemological privilege of African-Americans in United States history militates for the same kind of immediacy between theology and practice that Gutierrez would see in Latin America.

It seems, at this point, that we have run aground in an effort to find the proposed space for a bourgeois actor in the project of liberation. At best, Cone and Gutierrez seem to be saying that the sympathetic bourgeois can only appreciate and stay out of the way of the liberation-seeking poor and oppressed. Fittingly to Adorno’s own penchant for allowing a glimmer of utopian hope in an otherwise pessimistic appraisal of reality, Cone leaves the door open for a more active engagement by the bourgeois oppressor class. “For the oppressors to understand

433. Brittain. 123.
liberation, they must be liberated from being political oppressors.” Cone does not suggest much in the way of a program for how this liberation is to be achieved. It is into this space that I wish to inject Adorno’s program of Critical Theory.

First, however, let us briefly discuss Cone’s understanding of “liberation” to be sure that this is an appropriate place for Critical Theory to enter the project.

History is the immanent character of liberation; it is the project of freedom…Liberation then is not merely a thought in my head; it is the sociohistorical movement of a people from oppression to freedom—Israelites from Egypt, black people from American slavery. The status of the oppressor as oppressor, to Cone, is analogous to the status of an Israelite in Egypt or a black woman or man in America. A key difference, one which Cone would readily admit, is that the “enslavement” of the oppressor is not physical but epistemological and moral. While not as directly material as the status of the oppressed, the enslavement of the oppressor has its dimension within history. Cone is no more a fan of transhistorical or permanent ideas than Adorno.

If we then have a situation in which the oppressor must be liberated from oppressing, we can begin to see where the positive project of Adorno comes to bear in the context of Cone’s Liberation Theology. We can no longer view the world in the same epistemological space as we once did. A transformation is keenly necessary. This transformation is to be undertaken in order to relieve and eliminate the suffering and oppression of the broken people of the earth. Such a transformation must take place in history and through human action. Plutitudes about a better life later will not suffice. Indeed, nothing less radical than a complete reconstruction of the human mental apparatus will do to perform this work.

434. Cone. GotO. 137.
Adorno was notoriously cagey about what his project of transformation might look like. He famously differed with the student activists of the 1960s about whether his project truly demanded particular, direct action. The insertion of his theory into Cone’s larger project of direct liberative action here assuages Adorno’s own concerns about historical instantiation of thought rather than aggravating them. In order for the post-oppressive bourgeois actor to claim a legitimate space in Cone’s project of liberation, she or he must first be liberated from the epistemological shackles of being an “oppressor”. It is not necessary for such an actor to have actually owned slaves to wear these shackles. It is enough that she or he has experienced the accident of birth into the privileged class. Epistemological shackles are forged in the nursery. To remove them, and the damage they do in history, one must deconstruct them. This deconstruction of damaged epistemology is nothing short of the project of Critical Theory: the removal of philosophical and cultural blockage to human freedom.

Neither the arguments above nor the work of the first generation of the Frankfurt School has plotted a particular and specific program for this resistance. Close affinity between the projects of Critical Theory and Liberation Theology is found in Cone’s suggestion that the oppressors are themselves oppressed by oppression. The question remains, however, whether or not the project of Critical Theory can achieve an overcoming of whiteness. It appears that it is close to doing so, and indeed the influence of Moltmann on Cone’s own thinking carries great weight.

The Frankfurt thinkers above map out a kind of “sympathetic bourgeoisie” position by which one might be part of a Marxist/socialist program without necessarily being born into or existing as the proletariat. The relentless critique of one’s own location in pre-socialist society serves as a further analogical point to the idea of overcoming whiteness, as if we might critique
whiteness into either non-existence or—at least—a place where it can do less harm. This is ultimately, and unfortunately, to fail at Cone’s program. There is no need, or is there any possibility, of maintaining whiteness as a harmless and accidental position in society. The position of whiteness is always and everywhere a position in support of the kyriarchical structures we should seek to eliminate. Cone’s call is not to critique whiteness into submission but to die to it and be reborn into blackness. Whiteness cannot therefore be philosophized into support of black liberation. It must be overcome, even if that creates existential risk for those who would seek to overcome it.

Cone’s “Whiteness” as Shinran’s “Evil” or “Foolishness”

If whiteness can indeed be overcome, how does one do it? Cone is notoriously quiet on this point, referring generally to this transformation taking place via some kind of divine action. We “become Black with God” to Cone, but how we do so is not spelled out explicitly. Due to Cone’s playfulness with terminology as examined above, it is further confusing to consider how a person born of European heritage might become black. While Cone does state that “blackness” is not a skin tone, we are still left with the possibility of an impossible attempt at justice. When Cone claims that white Christians will not change the kyriarchical social order radically, he is clear that he does not make this claim because of an inherently evil nature to white people. “I do not make this claim because I think that whites are by nature more evil than any other group of

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437 Anecdotally, whenever Cone was pushed on this problem, he generally referred the question back to the questioner. The problem of overcoming whiteness is a problem for white people. Cone’s struggle was for the liberation of blacks. If whites could become liberated and partner with blacks in this pursuit, all the better. It was not, however, his desire to lead whites past their own whiteness.
people. I make this claim because of the Christian doctrine of sin which says that individuals or groups will claim more than what they ought to, if they can get away with it." This Niebuhrian read on sin can, in a limited sense, bring us to a point of fruitful comparison with Shinran.

Cone never hesitates to name the evil of whiteness, either in the abstract or in the particular and historical notion of white brutality against black bodies:

> What is most amazing about the black community as a whole and the Black Church in particular is their willingness to forgive whites their brutality during slavery, lynching, and even oppression today in the ghettos of the urban cities. But despite our willingness to extend the right hand of fellowship, whites continue their massive assault upon the humanity of our people and get angry with us if we say we don’t like it. It seems that whites have been allowed to do what they wish to us so long that they regard such inhumane invasion of black humanity as synonymous with their freedom.\(^\text{439}\)

The evil Cone decries here is distinct from the way in which Shinran uses the term “evil”. For Cone, and indeed for Christianity writ large, “evil” connotes a greater sense of moral opprobrium than it might in Buddhist thought. Peter Harvey reminds us that “A synonym for \(\text{apuñña is pāpa}\), which, while often translated as ‘evil’, really means that which is ‘infertile’, ‘barren’, ‘harmful’ or ‘ill-fortuned’.”\(^\text{440}\) When Shinran discusses “evil” actions and “evil” beings, it is much more in the sense of actions which do not bear positive karma than in the sense Cone uses the term directly.

> Yet it is still possible to build a fruitful comparison here between Cone’s and Shinran’s moral calculations. To do so, we must of course see what both have written about evil paying special attention to its role in their respective soteriologies. Whether or not one can be saved while still being under the thrall of evil is indeed the main question here. For Cone and Shinran both, we will see that evil actions are not as such a permanent soteriological dead end. While

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\(^\text{439}\) ibid.

Cone’s conception of evil is, finally, Christian, this does not prevent the idea from functioning in a similar way as Shinran’s Buddhist concept of evil.

Masako Keta of the Kyoto School gives us excellent insight into Shinran’s understanding of the problem of evil. She does so through comparison with the ethical framework of Immanuel Kant. In discussing Shinran’s interpretation of the story of Ajātaśatru, she delves into how Shinran can conceive of the function of evil in the theoretically most evil person ever. In the Kyōgyōshinshō, Shinran recounts this story from the Nirvana Sutra, following it with a brief exegesis. Keta remarks:

…one can deduce that Shinran intended to resolve the difficult problem of the salvation of the most evil person by way of the story itself. Ajātaśatru is here the epitome of the evil person; his patricide is the epitome of sin. Shinran’s study of this evil points to the goal of Pure Land Buddhism as a religion for the abjectly ordinary person: the salvation of the evil person.

Ajātaśatru marks out an extreme of evil, to be sure, but Shinran “…discovered that he himself was the person of evil transcending ordinary judgments and appearances, the person destined by his acts for hell even as he listened to and sought to accord with the teaching.” In other words, Shinran’s reflexive view on evil found that Ajātaśatru was not a cautionary tale but, rather, a reminder that such evil could be—and likely was—at work in his own life.

While Cone was never a Kantian, the kind of deontological ethics proposed by Kant are definitely present in Cone’s own work. To that end, it is necessary to distinguish further a Buddhist ethical framework from a Western/deontological framework. “First, Buddhist morality

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441 Ajātaśatru was a prince who was destined to kill his father. Upon hearing of this destiny at his birth, his father, Bimbisāra seeks to avoid this destiny by casting his son out. Ajātaśatru later returns, fulfills this destiny and is overcome by remorse for his action. As a patricide, he is marked as one destined for the worst of Buddhism’s many hells. He is relieved of this burden after speaking with Šakyamūni Buddha.


443 Hirota/Ueda. 142.
is essentially tied to the idea of karmic retribution; second, the concepts of pleasure (raku 楽) and pain (ku 苦), when connected with good (zen 善) and evil (aku 悪), have a meaning that differs from the concepts of happiness and unhappiness in Kant. Karmic retribution—that good actions return as good events and so too evil as evil—differs greatly from the more linear sense of time expressed in Christian morality.

Keta goes on to explain the connection of “karmic retribution” to the metaphysical concepts of good and evil:

We should note here that the connection between the concepts of good and evil and the idea of karmic retribution was widely established in ancient India and found not only in Buddhism. This connection acquires a truly Buddhist character when the mode of being (arikata あり方) in which good and evil are seen in terms of an inter-dependence with their consequences is extended to an interdependence with Buddhism’s ultimate consequence—that is, when good and evil are made to relate to liberation in the Buddhist sense. Good then comes to include the sense of “a nature that works to encourage birth in the Pure Land and becoming a buddha”; evil then comes to include the sense of “a nature that works to inhibit birth in the Pure Land and becoming a buddha.”

The functionality of “good” and “evil” here is distinct from a Christian understanding of the same terms. Deontological ethics, such as those found in Cone’s Christianity, confer a more concrete metaphysical sense to good and evil. The Buddhist sense evoked above shows that things are good and evil inasmuch as they help or hinder a being’s path toward enlightenment and the end of birth-and-death. Christian ethics are less instrumental; things are good or evil depending in part on whether they accord with God’s design for humanity. They are weightier, metaphysically-speaking, to the point of being nearly ontological concepts.

Keta continues to unpack the Shin Buddhist understanding of good and evil in a comparative light deploying Kantian language:

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444 Keta. 203.
445 Keta. 204.
To use Kantian terms, a Buddhist understanding of morality places the moral will within the realm of experience, which is then the basis for the qualitative change in the concepts of good and evil. If one were to accept from Kantian morality a model of pure moral nature, then one would say that Buddhist morality, because it includes morally impure elements, has an essential limitation. Among the various forms of Buddhism, Pure Land Buddhism is particularly conscious of this limitation.\textsuperscript{446}

We need not necessarily accept the Kantian framework here to see that morality for Shinran works differently than it does for Cone. The distance, nevertheless, can be bridged to some extent. If we concentrate on each thinker in his own context, we may still recover a useful point of comparison on the notion of overcoming evil while still living within its grasp.

We might further note the role of remorse in both Christian and Buddhist ethics. The story of Ajātaśatru centers around his feelings of remorse for having killed his father. For Shinran, this would have been a poor point to expound upon, as Keta reminds us that “in Pure Land Buddhism, remorse is the moral world’s thoroughgoing power of self-destruction.”\textsuperscript{447} Cone has little time for the potentially hollow remorse of whites, often deploying Bonhoeffer’s concept of “cheap grace” to deride such hand-wringing attempts to do better. Remorse is insufficient to spur the kind of total change required by both Shinran and Cone. Neither posits that we might be the agents of our own change, insisting that change is worked within us by a divine other. Remorse, then, is an ego-centered response to the awareness of evil. It requires only the abstract bad feeling of regret and not the concrete change of transformation.

Much as Cone does not have time for idle hand-wringing in remorse, “Shinran does not see us as capable of a remorse that includes expiation. Indeed, in Buddhism, the activity of remorse did not originally include the function of expiation; expiation was no more than a benefit to be hoped for out of the anguish of remorse.”\textsuperscript{448} This is the key for both of them:

\textsuperscript{446} ibid.
\textsuperscript{447} Keta. 207.
\textsuperscript{448} Keta. 211.
remorse does not necessarily include expiation. Without it, remorse is useless both as a moral posture and as a component of soteriology. We might remark briefly here on the nature of time in morality in both Buddhism and Christianity. The Buddhist sense of time as cyclical and interdependent stands in distinction to the Christian notion of time as linear and teleological. Accordingly, we can read the story of patricide Shinran has used to demonstrate a theory of remorse as unfolding in all three modes of time at once. The king’s past action—killing a holy person on the return trip from a hunt—is also causal in his own death. This linkage would not be sensible in Christian terms.

Keta gives us a final insight into Shinran’s understanding of good and evil as ethical and existential markers of human lives. As mentioned above in his biographical section, Shinran spent a considerable portion of his active years in the company of those who, through no particular action of their own, worked in “unclean” jobs such as fishing or leatherwork. Remarking on the complexity of needing to earn a living in an “evil” occupation, she notes:

That is, one’s lot in life decides in advance the evils one will do. This is no longer a problem of moral action. Inquiring into the evil that is indivisibly connected to every one of these livelihoods forces one to gaze upon the evil that lurks at the root of living itself. Of course, Shinran is not rejecting moral good and evil, but moral good and evil are always seen in terms of the evil that is the mode of being of life itself.449

Here we return to one of the most important linkages between Cone and Shinran: the understanding of life from the social position of the subaltern. Shinran’s experience with burakumin communities allows us to see dynamics of both blackness and whiteness in Cone’s understanding. On the one hand, the burakumin are absolutely the “oppressed of the land” and therefore black. They have been prohibited from social, geographic, or even trade movement. They have been excluded from education. Yet, they also come to represent whiteness. The

449 Keta. 214.
*burakumin* cannot but do evil in Shinran’s understanding. Their very existence must move and breathe within this limitation. As such, they are also a stand-in for those marked by whiteness that cannot be expiated.

Shinran’s, and the further Shin Buddhist, perspective on evil as an existential state aligns well with Cone’s ideas about structural racism. Just as the *burakumin* of Shinran’s day could not be absolved of evil actions—understanding “evil” of course as “that which precludes birth in the pure land”—due to their occupations, neither can people who benefit from white supremacy be absolved of their participation in the systems of whiteness. They cannot, that is, without transformation. Remorse and guilt, just as for Ajātaśatru, serve no expiatory function. Cone does acknowledge the role of “allies” in the struggle for racial justice; however, their participation in systems of whiteness provides a mitigating factor in his approval. “The Left Wing tradition of the Protestant Reformation and the Quakers’ stand on American slavery are possible exceptions [from sponsorship of state racism]. Prominent examples in our century are Reinhold Neibuhr’s *Moral Man and Immoral Society*...and particularly the noble example of Deitrich Bonhoeffer.”  

We have already seen Bonhoeffer as a possible example of someone who overcame whiteness, so his appearance in this list is expected.

Cone reminds us that “It was Bishop Henry M. Turner who, in 1898, said that ‘God is a Negro,’ thereby separating black religion from white religion and connecting the AME Church with the black struggle of freedom.”  

Here again, Cone is using “white” and “black” in a complex, non-dual fashion invoking both ethnic identity and one’s status as cooperator with or disruptor of the kyriarchy at the same time. He does not always do so, lamenting during the 1990s that “if we could get a significant number of white theologians to study racism as seriously

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450 Cone. *RF.* 31.  
451 Cone. *RF.* 127.
as they investigate the historical Jesus...they might discover how deep the cancer of racism is embedded not only in the society but also in the narrow way in which the discipline of theology is understood." To Cone's understanding of whiteness as kyriarchy, it is as fruitful for one to try to lift oneself out of it as it would be for a burakumin to lift her- or himself out of their own reality. It is not only the actions one commits but also the existential status in which one exists that determines the side of the good/evil divide on which one lives.

Cone discusses the conversion of whites to blackness quite explicitly in God of the Oppressed, and it bears quoting him at length on this dynamic at this point to see how much his view of this conversion is like Shinran's view of conversion from evil:

When whites undergo the true experience of conversion wherein they die to whiteness and are reborn anew in order to struggle against white oppression and for the liberation of the oppressed, there is a place for them in the black struggle of freedom. Here reconciliation becomes God's gift of blackness through the oppressed of the land. But it must be made absolutely clear that it is the black community that decides both the authenticity of white conversion and also the part these converts will play in the black struggle of freedom. These converts can have nothing to say about the validity of their conversion experience or what is best for the community or their place in it, except as permitted by the oppressed community itself...white converts, if there are any to be found, must be made to realize that they are like babies who have barely learned how to walk and talk...For if whites are truly converted to our struggle, they know that reconciliation is a gift that excludes boasting. It is God's gift of blackness made possible through the presence of the divine in the social context of black existence. With the gift comes a radical change in life-style wherein one's value system is now defined by the oppressed engaged in the liberation struggle.453

There are several key marks to this most explicit description of conversion. First, Cone stresses that whites can only convert to blackness through a gracious gift of God. Nowhere in any of his writings is it suggested that whites can earn this conversion or do enough work to warrant it. This conversion is a gift, just as shinjin is a gift in Shinran's understanding of the Pure Land path. So too, like with Shinran, this gift is from a divine other, with the Christian God in this case taking

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452 Cone. RF. 133.
453 Cone. GotO. 222.
the same role as Amida Buddha as giver of divine conversion. Second, Cone denies that the
convert can immediately testify to the validity of their own conversion, if they ever can. This
lines up well with Shinran's insistence that one may not ever know which, if any, nembutsu was
the true nembutsu born out of shinjin. That is, just as a Shin Buddhist may believe that she or he
is truly possessed by shinjin and her or his nembutsu is therefore truly the working of Amida,
states so too clearly is not in accord with the reality of evil that still exists in the believer's life.
For Cone, that evil is the whiteness in which white people invariably continue to exist. We may
be reborn from this identity into a liberative, black, identity through God's grace, but we will
never fully be rid of the system of whiteness in this world. Neither, though, could a low-born
person of Shinran's time escape the sociopolitical reality of their life. In this sense, then,
"whiteness" for Cone functions as "evil" does for Shinran. Third and finally, for Cone as for
Shinran, there remains a non-dual good-yet-evil identity that persists even though the divine
working of grace (either Amida's or God's) compels a change in one's lifestyle. Whereas for
Cone this is equated to wholehearted commitment to the liberation of black people, for Shinran
this takes the form of devotion to Amida through Amida's grace.

Blackness Through Other Power

If we conceive of Cone’s notion of whiteness as parallel to Shinran’s notion of evil, then
we must now ask how one, in fact, overcomes this state. We have seen already some of how
Cone conceives of this as conversion. Without delving too deeply into the history of conversion
in Christian thought, we must make a distinction here. For Cone, this is not the conversion one
might undergo from non-belief to belief or from one religion to another. This is a deeper and a
more existential conversion, akin to being “born again” in the sense intended in John 3, when
Jesus tells Nicodemus “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God without being
born of water and Spirit. What is born of the flesh is flesh, and what is born of the Spirit is spirit." Yet, recalling Cone’s words above, if this conversion is “God’s gift of blackness through the oppressed of the land,” how is this achieved? For Cone, this is a process initiated by God and validated by the suffering community. In this sense, then, perhaps we can speak of the conversion to blackness as being carried out through Other Power.

The concepts of Self Power and Other Power are, of course, an import to Cone’s thinking from Shin Buddhism. It appears, however, that he shares a concern with Shinran over the possibility of a practitioner unduly claiming to have experienced a conversion to blackness/goodness. For Cone, European-descended people cannot proactively claim their conversion to blackness. This action can only be performed by God and validated by the black community. What, then, is the parallel to Self-Power that Cone would shun? It is, simply put, laziness on the part of whites seeking an easy way out of their sinfulness. Speaking against J. Deotis Roberts, Cone remarks that “He seems to think that merely through proper theological analysis, according to white rules, white people would come to see the truth of what he was trying to say. He apparently did not realize that in his call for reconciliation alongside the theme of liberation, whites would hear only the former but completely disregard its connection with the latter.” His dismissal of Roberts is of less interest here than what Cone has to say about the disposition of whites if left to their own devices: “white oppressors are not prepared to hear the truth, much less do it, because the truth would condemn them.” They will dissemble, prevaricate, and use any and all means to escape the painful transformation that is required. They are, in other words, unable to improve themselves through their own power.

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454 Jn 3:5b-6, NRSV
455 Cone. GotO. 222-223.
456 Cone. GotO. 223.
The inability to change oneself through one’s own efforts, however, should not be seen as a license to abandon a religious life. Shinran defines the working of Self Power as:

…the effort to attain birth, whether by invoking the names of Buddhas other than Amida and practicing good acts other than the nembutsu, in accordance with your particular circumstances and opportunities; or by endeavoring to make yourself worthy through amending the confusion in your acts, words, and thoughts, confident of your own powers and guided by your own calculations.\(^{457}\)

We can draw a parallel between Shinran’s notion that those who would seek salvation through Self Power through making themselves worthy and being “confident of [their] own powers and guided by [their] own calculations” and Cone’s understanding of white oppressors who seek to avoid actual conversion for an easier path. Ignorance and self-confidence are the central motivators in both sets of people. Ignorance of the divinely ordained path, which is available only through the action of the divine within the practitioner, and unearned self-confidence that one may do right prior to such a conversion both drive human suffering. Neither Cone nor Shinran would assent to the notion that we could achieve a true conversion through our own powers or calculations.

The problem of so-called “licensed evil” was one that pursued Shinran throughout his lifetime. Those who accused Shinran of promoting this idea fundamentally misunderstood what he said about the transformation of the believer. It is worth quoting some of his own writing on this transformation here:

In people who have long heard the Buddha’s Name and said the nembutsu, surely there are signs of rejecting the evil in themselves. When people first begin to hear the Buddha’s Vow, they wonder, having become thoroughly aware of the karmic evil in their hearts and minds, how they will ever attain birth as they are. To such people we teach that since we are possessed of blind passions, the Buddha receives us without judging whether our hearts are good or bad. When, upon hearing this, their trust in the Buddha has grown deep, they come to abhor such a self and to lament their continued existence in birth-and-death; and then they joyfully say the Name of Amida Buddha deeply entrusting

themselves to the Vow. That people seek to stop doing wrong as their hearts move them, although previously they gave thought to such things and committed them as their minds dictated, is surely a sign of their having rejected this world. Moreover, since shinjin that aspires for attainment of birth arises through the encouragement of Śākyamuni and Amida, once the true and real mind is made to arise in us, how can we remain as we were?

In applying this through an analogical lens to Cone’s concepts of whiteness and blackness, and the attainment of the latter from an initial position of the former, we can see the following dynamics at play.

First, Shinran discusses the notion of “rejecting the evil in themselves”, which is not an accomplished matter but one that is in the midst of transformation. This coheres with Cone’s notion that blackness is a gift of God that compels internal transformation. Here the act of hearing the name of Amida is one of receptivity to divine action. Similarly, the gift of blackness is one of receptivity to divine action. In both cases, the hearer then begins to reject the evil in themselves. In the Shin Buddhist example, this is the notion of karmic evil referenced above. Karmic evil here refers to the accumulation of negative results and outcomes. Karma functions more as a kind of ethical Newtonian physics in which cause and effect are inexorably and directly bound together. It is not a laundry list of deeds and misdeeds. Karmic evil is further linked to the “three poisons” of greed, hatred, and delusion. It is not at all difficult to apply this to anti-blackness when we note that, in the American context, it has its roots in economic greed and division, the hatred of the other, and the delusion of white supremacy. Indeed, these are the three poisons of whiteness. Analogically, then, we can see Shinran and Cone discussing a very similar phenomenon in which the believer/practitioner awaits internal transformation through

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divine action. This internal transformation then serves as a rejection of one of two sets of three poisons that are themselves understood through analogy.\textsuperscript{459}

Second, the believer/practitioner comes to a state of lament for the past. For Shinran, this is the abhorrence of a self possessed by the three poisons and the lamentation of continued existence within the realm of birth-and-death. This, of course, is linked to the soteriological aim of Buddhism: the escape of samsara. This is in no way the same soteriological aim as the Christian hope for Heaven. Buddhism, after all, has many heavens—and as many hells—but these are all impermanent. Nobody stays forever in such a place. The Christian Heaven is utterly distinct inasmuch as it is a place of eternal existence. The notion of lamenting the present realm of existence, however, is quite familiar to Christianity. Christian language around this lament comes largely from Romans 12 and John 17. Paul writes “Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God—what is good and acceptable and perfect.”\textsuperscript{460} The author of John quotes Christ in stating of the followers that “They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world.”\textsuperscript{461}

While Billy Graham may have most famously spoken of Christians being “in, but not of, this world”, there is a place for this understanding in Cone as well. When we understand “this world” to be one run on white supremacy—indeed on the three poisons thereof—then we have a different call from both Paul and the author of John. It is one echoed in Shinran’s words of lament for continued existence in samsara. We must remain within the structures of white

\textsuperscript{459} It bears noting here that the Buddhist conception of the three poisons is more expansive than the application of the framework specifically to anti-black racism. The parallel to economic dispossession, racial hatred, and supremacist delusion is too rich to avoid.
\textsuperscript{460} Rom 12:2, NRSV
\textsuperscript{461} Jn 17:16, NRSV
supremacy while seeking to dismantle them. Their downfall is surely, for Cone, an eschatological aim yet it is one that must be undertaken within history.

Finally, whether we see Cone’s eschatological end of the kyriarchy or Shinran’s nirvana as the result, the process is remarkably similar. In both Cone’s version of Christianity and Shinran’s version of Buddhism, we see a human being in need of salvation. This human being must then be receptive to divine action. This divine action causes an internal change in the human being. This internal change is externally visible through a dispositional shift toward the divine aim of liberation. Of course, the nature of this liberation is remarkably distinct and should not be confused between the two thinkers. Shinran’s “liberation” is the escape of birth-and-death or samsara. It is the experience of nirvana, poetically expressed as the blowing out of a candle. Cone’s “liberation” is far more material and historical in its nature. It is the sociopolitical liberation of an oppressed people from subjugation to freedom. The content of “liberation” differs between the two, and, indeed, they would not likely uphold the other’s understanding of the term. For Shinran, Cone would be far too bound to the world of samsara. For Cone, Shinran’s understanding of liberation as other-worldly would be just more “pie in the sky by and by” hope without necessary change in the present world. Part of this dispositional shift involves a lament of the present frame of existence. For Shinran, this is the lament that we remain in samsara. For Cone, this is based in the Christian resistance to “this-worldliness” but with a nuanced understanding of what it means to be “of this world”. For Cone, contra Graham, it is not that this world is full of concupiscence, but rather that it is built on the backs of black bodies. Resisting this world for Cone has nothing to do with moral issues, unless those issues are the exploitation and oppression of black people. For both men, the grip of the divine actor is irresistible. If we allow that Amida and God serve parallel roles here, then Shinran’s closing question—“once the
true and real mind is made to arise in us, how can we remain as we were?”—parallels Cone’s assertion that the divine action of God turns one from whiteness to blackness. In other words, once God has made us black, how can we remain as we were?

**Overcoming Whiteness**

Whiteness that needs to be overcome is not a biological thing. It is the very nature of a sinful world structured to protect the powerful at the expense of the powerless. When Cone decries whiteness in his work, however, he does have European-descended theologians in mind. Whiteness is a non-dual both/and proposition: people are both born into systems of whiteness and socialized into those same systems. Following with Allen, we can acknowledge that economic exploitation sits at the root of the very notion of "whiteness", especially when it is deployed in intra-European contexts (e.g. the English against the Irish). Cone is adamant that well-meaning whites are not capable of solving the problem of white exploitation of blacks. In this, he follows King's famous "Letter from Birmingham City Jail". Where, then, does this leave the call to overcome the difficult power of whiteness? Biology and heredity cannot be changed, but--fortunately--this is not a necessary component of the present answer to Cone's call.

Whiteness that needs to be overcome is a sociopolitical nexus of oppression that Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza first named kyriarchy. The nature of this nexus means that participation in the kyriarchy is not limited to those who are of any particular ethnic/hereditary background. Neither does it mean that any person who inhabits any privileged position within the pyramidal structure is guaranteed an easy life. What it does mean is that those who are

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materially wealthy, male-bodied, able-bodied, heterosexual, cisgendered, non-Jewish Europeans are in the proverbial catbird seat of privilege. This privilege serves to bind such individuals to the preservation of its excesses while simultaneously blinding them to its existence. It is no more and no less than this which must be overcome. This presents a daunting task, indeed. How might human beings extricate ourselves from this endemic structure of intertwined oppressions, and how might it benefit those of us who are Christian to look to Japan to determine how this can work?

A principal, foundational, suggestion taken from Cone is that the ability to overcome whiteness is itself outside the grasp of the human will. While we may wish to extricate ourselves from this system, we are unable to do so fully. Here, the biological component of whiteness is crucial. One can certainly align oneself with the liberation of black people but never shake the privilege of whiteness. Police routinely capture white killers alive while unarmed black children, men, and women are shot and killed.  

This, too, is whiteness at work. To escape whiteness itself seems almost like escaping the very world in which we live. Such an escape is not given to human power. Here, then, is a powerful connection between Cone and Shinran. The human being is unable to extricate her- or himself from an oppressive world through her or his own power. Such liberation requires divine action. For Cone, this is called the gracious gift of blackness. Whites must be receptive to God's working within them to change their hearts from those that would support the extant kyriarchy to those that would oppose it. In this, he often quotes Bonhoeffer saying that "When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die."  

Bonhoeffer goes

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463 Dylann Roof was taken into custody on June 17, 2015 after killing 9 African-American church members at Emmanuel AME Church in Charleston, SC. James Eagan Holmes was taken into custody alive on July 20, 2012 after killing 12 people at a movie theater. Philando Castile was killed by police on July 6, 2016, after informing them that he had a firearm which he was licensed to carry. Michael Brown was killed by police on August 9, 2014 in Ferguson, MO. His killing sparked days of unrest in the St. Louis suburbs. Space prohibits a more extensive list of those killed by police.  

on from this famous quote to distinguish between the bodily deaths of the early martyrs and the existential death of Luther leaving the monastery. One is not privileged over the other, and Cone intentionally means to invoke both. Dying to whiteness may mean dying in body.

We might at this point acknowledge that whiteness must be overcome but still wonder whether a comparative perspective on religion is necessary. As detailed methodologically in the introduction, it is necessary to employ something of the technique of comparative theology to engage fully with the religious experience of an other, even if—and perhaps especially when—that other is joined in religious confession but separated by social reality. Frank Clooney reminds us that comparative theology “is inter-religious and complex in its appropriation of one’s own and another tradition in relation to another.” We engage another tradition to seek insight into our own. The move to an appreciation of alterity in religious experience may bring us back to something native to our own religious life that we have overlooked, or it may offer a fresh perspective.

The story of the centurion Cornelius in Acts 10 and 11 is one such story within Christianity. This text speaks on one level of ritual purity within the nascent Jesus Movement, including the vision Simon-Peter experiences which seems to tell him that Levitical dietary prohibitions are no longer required of him. Accordingly, he takes on a mission to visit a gentile convert, the centurion Cornelius. There is much to say about the language around purity in Luke-Acts, especially as it pertains to this story, but purity is not necessarily our concern here. What concerns us is the image of Cornelius as a convert both inter-religiously and—more to the

466 Acts 10:15 reads “The voice said to him again, a second time, ‘What God has made clean, you must not call profane.’” NRSV
point—intra-religiously. Cornelius is described thusly: “He was a devout man who feared God with all his household; he gave generously to the people and prayed constantly to God.” Due to this external devotion, God has Cornelius send for Simon-Peter who, following his prior experience with a vision related to purity, agrees to come. When he arrives, Cornelius states “So now all of us are here in the presence of God to listen to all that the Lord has commanded you to say.” Peter proceeds to preach about Christ, the crucifixion, and resurrection, referring to this message later as “a message by which [Cornelius] and [his] entire household will be saved.” Cornelius was already observing the external piety of the Jesus Movement, yet he was still in need of salvation.

The status of Cornelius comes to stand for the status of white Christians. Unless we are saved from whiteness itself, we are only observing external forms. These forms may indeed be purifying, but are the expiatory? If Cornelius already had attained salvation, would God have sent Simon-Peter to him to tell the story of Christ? When white Christians imagine ourselves in the stories of the gospels and of Acts, we often imagine that we are the apostles who have heard the word of God. It is a better fit by analogy to imagine that we stand in the place of the Phillipian jailer or of Cornelius. We must still be converted from one understanding to another; whether it is inter- or intra-religious in nature, the conversion is still necessary. Yet it is difficult to hear these stories in this way while remaining only Christian. If, however, we seek to understand the dynamics of Other Power, Self-Power, and shinjin in Shin Buddhism, we can hear these familiar stories in a new way. We are reminded that attaining external mastery of religious

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468 Acts 10:2, NRSV  
469 Acts 10:33b, NRSV  
470 Acts 11:14, NRSV reads in full “he will give you a message by which you and your entire household will be saved.”  
471 Acts records these events as preceding the first use of the term “Christian”, which is itself internally attributed to the community in Antioch in Acts 11:26.
ritual is not sufficient for salvation. We are reminded that faith cannot be achieved through any mechanism other than the gracious outreach of the divine. We are further reminded that, being grasped fully by this faith, we are held safely by the divine and must not fear the end of this life. Indeed, the end of this life leads to salvation itself.

To address an additional definitional point of Clooney’s, we can state definitively that the work of a white theologian seeking to overcome whiteness itself and affirm black liberation is an act of “faith seeking understanding which [is] rooted in a particular faith tradition but which, from that foundation, venture[s] into learning from one or more other faith traditions.”

Namely, we are—as alluded to above regarding Cornelius—a great distance apart in the experience of Christianity depending on whether we are under the sway of whiteness or under its oppression. White Christianity and black Christianity are more different than Roman Catholicism and Lutheranism, if the Catholic or Lutheran congregations do not also cross racial lines. While the act of comparison across faiths—i.e. Christian and Buddhist—is clearly an act of comparative theology, the act of comparison across the racial divide is no less so. White Christianity does not make its own connection to the power of empire clear; black theology does that for whites. White theology does not acknowledge the need for continued conversion away from the powers, structures, and ideologies of the world. Black theology reminds us that this is necessary. Again, Cornelius may well have been God-fearing and upright within his community, but God recognized his need of further conversion and sent Simon-Peter. We can address this difference in a number of different ways.

First, we might address this difference by seeking the largely philosophical and social attitude of the Frankfurt School. As discussed earlier, such thinkers as Adorno engaged in

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472 Clooney. 10.
Marxist economic and cultural critique while realizing that they were, in fact, members of the bourgeoisie. Adorno’s effort to create a space for a sympathetic bourgeois actor in philosophy can describe a reasonable space in which a white Christian might act. Yet this white Christian would not actually be undoing the work of whiteness. To exist as a sympathetic bourgeois actor in this sense is to continue to participate in whiteness by attempting to bend its aims to justice and away from exploitation.

Second, we might address this difference as purely a difference between two religious experiences. We could conduct intra-religious comparative theology. This is also unsatisfactory. Engaging with the black religious experience reifies the distinction between black and white Christianity. While we must be attendant to the different ways in which people experience Christianity and therefore always be engaged in something like intra-religious comparative theology, doing so in such an explicit fashion risks putting black and white Christians into competition for who can claim the mantle of a “Real Christian”. We have seen how this works in the context of one group claiming to be the “real Americans” or even the “real whites” in previous chapters. Suffice it to say, it does not lead ultimately to unity. Treating black and white expressions of Christianity is akin to suggesting a speciation event where there is only biological diversity. Black Christians and white Christians do share a religion just as Chihuahuas and Great Danes are the same species of animal, despite their remarkably different physical attributes. It is tempting to call the embrace of whiteness within white Christianity a speciation event that turns the religion from the love of God and neighbor to the love of power and authority, but this distinction is not so far gone that it cannot be reversed.
To truly become unified as the Pauline promise of Romans 10, Galatians 3, and Colossians 3 alleges, we must look to Cone’s dynamic of dying and being reborn. While Christianity possesses a storehouse of texts and theological reflections on this dynamic of dying and rising, Cone reminds us that we are not solely or even principally concerned with abstract theological principles. We must be attendant to the social reality of the world in which we live. We turn, therefore, to the words of Shinran and the dynamics described in his expression of Shin Buddhism to remind us of what should be familiar. We cannot achieve blackness on our own any more than one can achieve shinjin through one’s own efforts. Blackness is a gift of God, freely given in grace, just as shinjin is a gift of Amida Buddha freely given and solely efficacious in salvation. We must seek rebirth not in the pure land of Amida Buddha to be better Christians. We must seek God’s gift of rebirth into blackness to become unified and to truly—indeed for the first time—become one in Christ. This will not be an easy transition, and the language of death is duly evocative. As Cone and Bonhoeffer remind us, however, the call of Christian life is to die.

473 There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male or female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus (Gal 3:28 NRSV); For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and is generous to all who call on him. (Rom 10:12 NRSV); In that renewal there is no longer Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave and free; but Christ is all and in all! (Col 3:11 NRSV)
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