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Solidarity and Suffering: Liberation Christology from Black and Womanist Perspectives

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Kelsi Watters

The author, Kelsi Watters, is a recent Master of Divinity graduate of Saint John's School of Theology and Seminary, writes with a deep passion for liberation theology and pastoral care, which she feels called to incorporate in her work as a hospital chaplain. As an individual without sight, the author is committed to radical acceptance of and liberation for marginalized groups, as well as a commitment to deep solidarity with womanist theology. This piece focuses on a God whom we know and love is actively, sacramentally, eternally present in Jesus Christ, whose self-emptying reflects radical solidarity with the oppressed. The author seeks to bring to light a Christological perspective that identifies with the marginalized Jesus - namely, black and womanist liberation theology. Black theology centralizes Jesus as Liberator of the oppressed. It is only in solidarity with the oppressed that we will ourselves be liberated; it is only in feeling the depths of sorrow that we will know the fullness of redemption; and it is only in walking through the darkness that we emerge into the shining light of eschatological hope.

SOLIDARITY AND SUFFERING:

Liberation Christology from Black and Womanist Perspectives

Part I: Introduction

Liberation Christology

The God whom we know and love is actively, sacramentally, eternally present in the world. Perhaps the most fundamental theological task of Christians is to find the God who is simultaneously immanent (within us) and infinite (limitless) in the finite reality of human history and culture. This is the essence of Christology, for the greatest manifestation of God's activity in and through our lived experience is God becoming incarnate in the person of Jesus Christ. It follows, then, that the goal of Christology is to examine the person, presence, participation, and purpose of Christ. There are several cultural lenses and theological perspectives which have contributed to the Christological quest to know Jesus. One perspective within Christology is liberation theology. Liberation theology, originally developed by Roman Catholics in Latin America, is a large umbrella encompassing the theologies of many cultures that focuses primarily on freedom of the oppressed.¹ The premise of liberation theology is identifying with the oppressed. In recognizing Christ as a God of liberation, this theology seeks to reflect on the experience and meaning of the Christian faith based on the commitment to abolish injustice and for freedom of the oppressed.² For this reason, liberation theology is typically practiced from the standpoint of those who are oppressed and seeking liberation. One culture for whom liberation has been fundamental is African Americans. The understanding of Jesus as liberator is realized in God's liberating action in their lived experience of centuries of oppression.³ Black theology, similar to any other branch of theology, includes a wide range of perspectives, each addressing different concerns. It is just

1 Thomas Bohache, *Christology From The Margins* (London: SCM Press, 2008), 67-80.

2 James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1990), 1-20.

3 Id., 101-105.

as expansive and fraught with simultaneous tension and dialogue as any theological discipline. The first section of this paper will examine traditional black theology and womanist theology, as well as how they compare to their white European and white feminist counterparts. The next section will explore the identity of Jesus in black and womanist theology. The final section will discuss a theology of suffering and the cross from the perspectives of traditional black liberation theology and womanist theology.

The Premise of Black Theology: A Traditional Perspective

Black (African-American) theology was developed through the lens of African-American experience from the time of slavery to the present. Though traditional black theology and womanist theology differ in several areas, they emphasize similar points: ontological blackness as it pertains to the identity of Jesus Christ, oppression and liberation, and affirmation of the dignity and worth of black people. In black theology, blackness is an ontological symbol that demonstrates God's solidarity with black people. The symbol (God/Christ) participates in making up the metaphor (Black God/Christ). This ontological symbol/metaphor becomes part of a narrative (the Black story) that is a testimony to a faith in the God who creates the beings who profess this faith (the Black Church and community).⁴ The purpose of traditional black theology is two-fold: (1) to engage with white theologies and address white oppression; and (2) to affirm the dignity and worth of black people.⁵

A Womanist Perspective: The Centrality of Love

Within the larger branch of black theology is the womanist perspective. Womanist theology, derived from the context of black women's experiences, is a relatively new discourse that is still taking shape.⁶ Womanist theology is similar to traditional black theology in its rejection of oppression and the quest for liberation through Jesus

4 Id., 101-105.

5 Chigor Chike, "Black Christology for the Twenty-First Century," *Black Theology* 8, No. 3 (2008): 357-378.

6 Elaine Crawford, "Womanist Christology: Where have we come from and where are we going," *Review and Expository* (1998): 95.

Christ. The two disciplines are not separated due to animosity; rather, they work in tandem despite differences in methodology. The affirmation of the dignity and worth of black people is central to both perspectives as a means to survival and liberation; however, traditional black theology approaches this through an emphasis on refuting conceptions that could be considered oppressive, whereas womanist theology approaches this through principles of community-building and social change grounded in love. The term “womanist” has been defined in regard to these principles by African-American women such as Jacqueline Grant, Alice Walker, and Delores Williams. These definitions capture fundamental aspects of womanism: survival, love, community-building, and social change. In womanism, survival manifests itself as strength in African-American women, especially as it pertains to resisting oppression and looking out for one’s family and community. According to Jacqueline Grant in her book *White Women’s Christ and Black Women’s Jesus*: “A womanist, then, is a strong black woman who has sometimes been labeled as a domineering castrating matriarch. A womanist is one who has developed survival strategies in spite of the oppression of her race and sex in order to save her family.”⁷ Alice Walker describes womanists as being “responsible, in charge, outrageous, courageous and audacious enough to demand the right to think ... independently of both white and black men and white women.”⁸ Walker’s definition of womanism captures an essential aspect of the affirmation of black people - teaching African-American women to embrace who they are. In the spirit of affirming her identity, a womanist loves to question more deeply than is considered good, embraces being and acting out who she is, and loves herself regardless.⁹ According to Joanne Marie Terrell in her book *Power in the Blood*: “To be a womanist is to love music, dance, the moon, the Spirit, love, food, roundness, struggle, the folk, herself. Regardless. It is to be both creation-affirming and God-affirming. It is to celebrate who black

7 Jacqueline Grant, *White Women’s Christ and Black Women’s Jesus* (American Academy of Religion Academy Series, No. 64. Atlanta, Ga.: Scholars Press, 1989), 205.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

women are and who they can be in community and in God.”¹⁰ In this regard, womanist theology emphasizes the essential role of love - for God, oneself, others, and for life itself - as a way to transcend and endure oppression. The emphasis on love is affirmed by Delores Williams, another significant voice in womanist thought. Williams maintains that self-love is the epitome of womanist thought, because black women’s roles as nurturers and sustainers of the black family and community implicate them in sexist oppression by black men. The struggle to appropriate self-love as essential is difficult, because black women often respond to the many needs of the African-American community. It is essential for African-American women to love themselves as Christ would love them, regardless of whether or how they participate in the quest for justice and dignity.¹¹ Lastly, womanism is a social change perspective rooted in women of color’s everyday experiences, extended to the problem of ending all forms of oppression for all people, restoring the balance between people and the environment, and reconciling human life with the spiritual dimension.¹² All in all, the womanist discourse on oppression and liberation is similar to traditional black theology. There are two primary differences: (1) womanist theology emphasis on self-love and positive social change as a means of survival; and (2) womanist thought brings to the table the voice of African-American women, which cannot be achieved by any other theology. In this way, the womanist perspective is an invaluable and irreplaceable discipline within the larger treasure chest of black theology.

10 Joanne Marie Terrell, *Power in the Blood?: The Cross in the African American Experience*, The Bishop Henry McNeal Turner/Sojourner Truth Series in Black Religion, V. 15 (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1998), 138.

11 *Id.*, 120.

12 Dwight N. Hopkins and Edward P. Antonio, *The Cambridge Companion to Black Theology*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 167.



On October 8, 2017, a major forest fire broke out in Redwood Valley, CA. The fire burned 70% of the forest around the monastery, but the monastery itself suffered only minimal structural damage. Unfortunately, 9 of our neighbors lost their lives and 450 of our neighbors' homes were destroyed.

This Buddha image is from one of our neighbors who lost her house. The hands and one of the knees were burned off, and the image was encased in ash. This painting says to me, "Yes, we can be scarred, but we can also be beautiful." Or, the scars might be the thing that makes us beautiful.

Jotipālo Bhikkhu

Jotipālo Bhikkhu is a Buddhist monk, starting his training at the Abhayagiri Buddhist Monastery in Redwood Valley, CA in June 1998. Jotipālo is a graduate of Wabash College where he majored in Art and Classics. During his year-long residency at the Collegeville Institute, Jotipālo is working on a project titled "What can Buddhist Artistic Traditions Learn from Christian Iconography." The images of icons in this issue are a part of that work.

Part II: Comparing Perspectives

Black and White Theology

There are several differences between black theology and its white European counterpart. Black theology differs from white European theology in its portrayal of Jesus. The portrayal of Jesus as simultaneously oppressed and the Liberator is, according to most black theologians, incongruent with the portrayal of Jesus in white American theology. According to James Cone, the stark contrast lies in oppressive images that have functioned negatively for black and white people.¹³ The differing images are reflected in language - black theology uses Healer, Victor, and Provider as titles for Jesus, while white European and American theology uses Teacher, Lamb, and Forgiver.¹⁴ Cone believes Jesus is an abstract in white theology whereas He is actively at work as a liberator for the oppressed in the black community. Another difference is the assumption in white theology, albeit perhaps well-intentioned, that Jesus is “color-blind.” This assumption is analogous to saying that God is blind to justice and injustice, to right and wrong, thus eliminating the liberating actions of Jesus against the racial injustice that has been the source of oppression for African-Americans. The greatest tension for Cone is that the Christ of white theology seems to identify only with the white community, thereby placing God’s approval on white oppression of black existence.¹⁵ Cone believes white theology is racist because white people claim God as spirit and Jesus as being for all, yet Jesus is most often represented as white. In the name of the white Christ, the most vicious forms of racial oppression are condoned and supported. According to Cone, the portrayal of Jesus as an “easy-going white American who can afford to mouth the luxuries of love, mercy, and long-suffering” does not align with the oppression faced by African-Americans for centuries, so is ineffective in the realm of liberation.¹⁶ The image of Jesus as servant has been used to reinforce enslavement among black people, who were often relegated to servant

13 Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 5-10.

14 Chike, 360.

15 Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 7-10.

16 *Ibid.*

duties and told that it was their Christian duty to obey.¹⁷ Lastly, all traces of Jesus' Jewishness and His pain and suffering have been erased in the white Jesus, creating a "sweet Jesus" who does not suffer. However, in black Christology the pain of the crucified Jesus is reflected in the pain, agony, and suffering on the faces of black people. The denial of the redemption and solidarity of Jesus as co-sufferer reduces His liberating action for those who are oppressed.¹⁸

The contrast between black and white theology is apparent in the differences between slaves' and slaveholders' religion. During the time of slavery, it seemed that the God whites were preaching to black people was one who found blacks inferior, while white men were the anointed Jesus who had come to judge black people. It was previously taught that black people were not made in the image and likeness of God. Yet, black theology recognizes that Jesus is on the side of the oppressed rather than the oppressor. African-Americans from the time of slavery to the present have understood Jesus as the one in whom true freedom abounds.¹⁹ Due to the oppressive portrayal of Jesus in white theology, Cone argues that the white Christ must disappear from the black experience to be replaced by a black Messiah. Perhaps one of Cone's strongest arguments is that white theology is a theology of the Antichrist due to its oppression of black people. As a radical figure in the field of black theology prone to provocative statements, Cone does not disappoint in this regard when he says: "If Jesus is white, then He is an oppressor and we must kill Him!"²⁰ Furthermore, whites must deny whiteness as evil and instead affirm blackness. It must be acknowledged that in referring to whiteness and blackness, Cone was not speaking of skin color, but the ontological identity associated with the races as oppressor and oppressed. Cone's arguments against a white Christ are not referring exclusively to skin color, but to the oppressive conceptions of Christ borne of white

17 Jacqueline Grant, "'Come to My Help, Lord, For I'm In Trouble': Womanist Jesus and the Mutual Struggle for Liberation," in *Reconstructing the Christ Symbol: Essays in Feminist Christology*, ed. Maryanne Stevens (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 63.

18 Id., 64.

19 Cone, *Black Theology*, 290-299.

20 Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 10.

supremacy. It is not clear whether Cone's arguments are derived from his own experiences of oppression, thus strengthening his refusal to accept any portrayal of Jesus Christ that eliminates the liberating action so central to the black community's understanding of Jesus as their God and Savior. Even so, the argument that white theology is a theology of the Antichrist is undoubtedly startling and hurtful to white people who are making an earnest, intentional effort to empathize to the extent that they are able with their black brothers and sisters. It is worthwhile then to acknowledge Cone's position among the radical perspectives on the continuum of black theology. At the same time, this is not to dismiss Cone's arguments or the painful reality of his experiences as a black person in America, for he was one of the most prominent thinkers within the black theology movement as well as the catalyst for womanist perspectives.

Comparing Womanist and Feminist Theologies

The common ground between womanist and feminist theology is their attention to oppression and liberation as it pertains to women. However, the main difference or point of tension is that womanists argue that white feminist theology cannot properly speak to black women's experiences.²¹ Black women find it difficult to swallow the argument that all women have dealt with the same suffering, thus disregarding the additional level of oppression black women have to contend with.²² Second, womanists believe that white feminist theologians minimize the saving work of Christ in favor of a Christology of personal empowerment to wholeness through Jesus' example. This detracts from the liberation that is so central to black women's understanding of Jesus. Womanist theologians prefer to see the saving work of Christ and the cross in more traditional terms. Rather than seeing the incarnation of Christ as limiting their personhood due to His maleness, they instead view it as the empowering of African-American women, in that the goal of the incarnation was, in a sense, for God's Son to "make a way out of no way."²³

21 Chike, 365.

22 Grant, 205.

23 Bohache, 128-135.

A second topic of discourse in both perspectives is Christ's maleness. However, whereas feminists portray the Christ/Sophia figure (Christ as Woman Wisdom), womanist theologians emphasize Jesus' humanity in order to demonstrate His solidarity with poor, oppressed black women. The multiple levels of oppression (sexism, racism, and classism) are so interconnected that it is sometimes impossible to escape trouble. Jesus, for many black women, has been the force that enables them to both survive and face their suffering with hope. It is argued that the historical Jesus was placed within boundaries set by the socio-political oppressors as a tool for supporting oppression.²⁴

Though the patriarchal obsession with maleness has tried to limit the saving work of Jesus, challenges by womanist and feminist theologians have broken through the obscure patriarchal barriers and led to a more inclusive revision of Biblical and Christological interpretation.²⁵ The significance of Christ is not His maleness, but his humanity.²⁶ Sandra Schneiders contends that Jesus' maleness reveals nothing about the sexuality of the Godhead and cannot be used to deify or divinize males.²⁷ According to M. Shawn Copeland, the fact that Jesus as a human male carried out His Passion for the reign of God poses another challenge. Despite His maleness, Jesus acted in ways that defied the patriarchal expression of masculinity through coerciveness, power exploitation, and exclusion of others. He stretched solidarity to the point of challenging us to love our enemies, choosing women as disciples, overturning patriarchal male structures, and practicing masculinity through kenosis (self-emptying). He emptied Himself of all that would subvert authentic human liberation. In other words, his maleness undermined typical patriarchal oppression. Thus, a challenge is necessary to Christian theology for its racist, sexist, and "servant" language, all of which are contrary to the real message of Jesus Christ.²⁸

24 Grant, "Come to My Help, Lord, For I'm In Trouble," 56.

25 Id., 57.

26 Terrell, 104.

27 M. Shawn Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 63.

28 M. Shawn Copeland, "Marking the Body of Jesus, the Body of Christ" in *The Strength of Her Witness: Jesus Christ in the Global Voices of Women*, ed. Elizabeth A. Johnson (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2016), 274.

The feminist theologians Letty Russell and Rosemary Ruether are more in line with womanist thought in that Jesus' humanity is given more attention than His maleness. According to Letty Russell, feminist theology is written out of an experience of oppression, and the goal is to help men and women embrace their humanity. Russell interprets the search for salvation as a journey toward freedom, or self liberation in community with others in the light of hope in God's promise for all.²⁹ This emphasis on our common humanity and community building is in alignment with womanist theology. One major difference, however, is that in Russell's Christology, Jesus is the passive figure, in that God acts by handing over Christ while human beings act by receiving Christ. Because Christ has been handed to all of us, we must all participate in the search for truth, which is also the search for true humanity. The new and true representative of humanity is Jesus Christ, who is the manifestation of God's liberating action. Jesus as liberator is the first sign of God's new creation, in which death and suffering are overcome by love so that we are liberated.³⁰ Although womanists would agree with Russell's discourse on liberation through the sacrificial love of Christ, they would by no means consider Him a passive figure, for He has been present and active as the Liberator through the centuries of oppression. Rosemary Ruether's Christology of liberation involves creating a new humanity of wholeness by freeing ourselves from the various forms of oppression.³¹ Jesus elevated many who were at the bottom of the social hierarchy to a new level of equality, especially in his relationship to women. Ruether shares womanism's emphasis on social change in suggesting that we emphasize the redemptive, liberating actions of Jesus in working to liberate others as we have been liberated.³² Because this redemptive liberation was intended for both men and women, we may simultaneously experience Christ as the historical Jesus, God incarnate as a human male, while also imagining Him in non-traditional ways, such as a sister. Ruether's advocating for non-traditional conceptions of Jesus differs from Russell, who holds to the unique lordship of Jesus. *Id.*, 145.

29 Grant, 122.

30 *Id.*, 123.

31 *Id.*, 139.

32 *Id.*, 143.

Though the white feminist analysis of Christology and theology is inadequate for the salvific efficacy of black women, it is not irrelevant to black women's needs. Feminists have demonstrated that exclusive language regarding church, theology, and Christology with masculine language and imagery contribute significantly to the oppression of women. Black women have recognized some of this oppression in the church and the symbols that do not align with the black experience. However, the identification of Christ with the poor, the outcast, the oppressed, and the stranger, makes Jesus' maleness in itself less significant. Id., 220.

A Common Ground: Christ in Solidarity

The common element in traditional black and womanist theologies is that Jesus is in solidarity with the oppressed. Just as Jesus has an implied universality in standing with various groups of oppressed people, black and womanist theologians identify with the lived experiences of Jesus. As such, the goal of black theology is to find God's action of liberation in the black community, to bestow upon them the necessary power to break the chains of oppression.³³ In fact, James Cone argues that this is the sole reason for theology, for the liberation of the black community is God's liberation. In Cone's theology, black people describe this God of liberation as a black God who throughout history has freed them from oppression.³⁴ Jacqueline Grant and Kelly Brown Douglas support Cone on this point. For them, the evidence of Jesus' solidarity with the oppressed is the activity of His ministry, incarnation, sacrificial death and resurrection.³⁵ Jesus was the embodiment of divine compassion for those who were poor, outcasts, sick, or suffering. His life and ministry demonstrate what it means to be in solidarity with the oppressed regardless of the cost.³⁶ Naturally, womanists differ from Cone's traditional black theology in that they address black women's perspectives. Grant and Douglas claim that the experiences of black

33 Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 1-20, 55-82.

34 Cone, *Black Theology*, 101-105, 304-314.

35 Terrell, 101-110.

36 Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 85-106.

women in slavery replicated Jesus' experience.³⁷ In resisting oppression and finding ways to express themselves despite constraints, black women encountered in the stories about Jesus One who identified with and empowered them in His kenotic Incarnation, ministry, death, and victorious resurrection. In modernity, Jesus' story is seen as a message of freedom for black women, inspiring hope in their struggle for liberation from the burdens of race, class and gender oppression.³⁸

In the womanist perspective, M. Shawn Copeland discusses a more physical, embodied approach to Jesus' solidarity with the oppressed. In her article "Marked Bodies," Copeland points out that Jesus did not heed the boundaries of marked bodies. He handled, touched and embraced those who were displaced, marginalized, disabled, ill, sinners, and persecuted. In solidarity, Jesus befriended these women and men with their marked bodies in recognition that they were human beings whose social status did not lessen their dignity.³⁹

Jesus' solidarity with the oppressed is reflected in the language of black liberation theology. Black Christology had to consider what it means to be a Savior of the oppressed. Jesus' solidarity with the oppressed is reflected in his discussion of the reign of God. Jesus envisioned life lived under the reign of God as a realization of truth and love, justice and peace, holiness and grace, and most of all, freedom from oppression. His disciples were to pray for the reign of God, that reign of justice and peace which is rooted in the present, though not fully realized.⁴⁰ Particularly, the phrase "the kingdom of God is at hand" meant the end of enslavement and that God is on the side of the enslaved.⁴¹

Womanist christology also demonstrates the reciprocity in liberation, a reciprocity which exists only because African-American women can identify so fully with Jesus' suffering from their own experiences. Jesus liberated and redeemed African-American women as they liberated and

37 Terrell, 106.

38 Id., 108.

39 Copeland, "Marking the Body of Jesus," 273.

40 Id., 284.

41 Chike, 364.

redeemed Him. Two symbols demonstrate this reciprocity: (1) Jesus as co-sufferer; and (2) Jesus as equalizer. First, one of African-Americans' foremost experiences of Jesus was that He was a divine co-sufferer who empowered them in situations of oppression. Their cross experience was the daily abuses, dehumanization, pain, suffering, and the loss of family, friends and community. Second, they experience Jesus as equalizer. Black women have been told they are an inferior servant class. However, Jesus served as an equalizer both in the white and black world in that He renders all human oppression invalid. Freedom was central to the message of the Gospel, in that being a follower of Jesus involves a commitment to the struggle for freedom. The liberating activities of Jesus empowered African-American women to be significantly engaged in the struggle for freedom.⁴²



The shrine of the Virgin of Guadalupe is the most visited Catholic pilgrimage destination in the world. On Friday, December 11 and Saturday December 12, 2009, a record number 6.1 million pilgrims visited the Basilica of Guadalupe in Mexico City to commemorate the anniversary of the apparition.

The Virgin of Guadalupe is considered the Patroness of Mexico and the Continental Americas. She is also venerated by Native Americans on the account of the devotion calling for the conversion of the Americas. Replicas of the tilma can be found in thousands of churches throughout the world, and numerous parishes bear her name.

42 Grant, "Come to my help Lord," 69.

Part III: The Identity of Jesus

Traditional Black Theology: The Black Messiah

As demonstrated above, various theological perspectives (i.e., white European theology, white feminist theology, and black and womanist theology) differ in some regard in their understanding of the identity of Jesus. Jesus Christ is the eternal Logos, the seed of the Word, who pervades all cultures. As such, those who know Jesus understand, to some extent, the ontological truth of who He is. Yet, each culture and tradition differs in its lived experience, and thus expression, of these truths.⁴³ Expressing this understanding of Jesus' identity involves finding a continuity between who the historical Jesus was in the past and how God in Christ is at work in the present context of black people. From the standpoint of black and womanist theology, this continuity lies in the similarity between the existential identity of Jesus and the present situations of black people, specifically oppression and liberation.⁴⁴ In black liberation Christology, Jesus, as God incarnate who Himself was oppressed and liberated, has been and continues to be the source of liberation for oppressed African-Americans through all the ages just as He identified with the lowly of His day.⁴⁵ Indeed, Jesus resonates with them so fully that black people not only identify with Him as the source of their liberation, but also the embodiment of their lived experience of oppression. Cone has argued that blackness is associated with oppression but is also synonymous with salvation, love, and righteousness; thus, he argues that Jesus, who Himself experienced oppression but is the source of liberation, is ontologically, symbolically black.⁴⁶ These arguments of Cone are commendable in that he has become a voice of the marginalized, and has expanded His view of Jesus so that the Lord may be any gender, race, sexual identity, or social class.⁴⁷

43 Bohache, 67-80.

44 J. Kameron Carter, "Christology or Redeeming Whiteness: A Response to James Perkinson's Appropriation of Black Theology," *Theology Today* 60 No. 4 (2004): 533.

45 Grant, "Come to my help Lord," 213.

46 Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 121-124.

47 Carter, 533.

Jesus' ontological blackness is reflected in His solidarity with the oppressed. His baptism, birth, and ministry show that Jesus was someone intimately acquainted with the symbolic experience of blackness.⁴⁸ Because of the direct connections between the cross and the black experience of suffering, Cone argues that the identification of Jesus as the black Messiah is validated not by its universality, its significance for all people, but rather its particularity, whether it reflects God's will to liberate particular oppressed peoples.⁴⁹ The ontological blackness of Jesus is also reflected in the mutuality and reciprocity of His humanity and Jewishness. Not only is Jesus' humanity central, but also His Jewishness, which involves openness to being embraced by God. The divine-humanness transforms the meaning of humanity, so that Christ is open to receive humanity and thus places upon us a new identity in Himself. God holds nothing back from Himself in his positive disposition to receive the world, and the world finds its own proper identity only in receiving Him.⁵⁰ In addition to the Black Messiah, Cone argues that those who are oppressed are also black in an ontological sense. Being ontologically black is not exclusively about skin color, but about being oppressed, whether because of race, gender, class, or other factors, or the willingness to stand in solidarity with the oppressed.⁵¹ Despite the convincing likeness of Jesus to black people, Cone encourages black theologians to address the question of whether the classification of Jesus as the Black Messiah is relevant or simply the working of the minds of oppressed people.⁵²

Womanist Perspective: Jesus as A Black Woman

On the other hand, womanists have a somewhat different perspective of Jesus as the Black Messiah. While identifying Jesus as black is intended to be an affirmation of the dignity and worth of black people, womanists view it as an affirmation of male blackness. The black male

48 Hopkins, 168.

49 Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus*, 215.

50 Carter, 533.

51 Cone, *Black Theology*, 110-128.

52 *Ibid.*

Christ encompasses a single-dimensional understanding of the social oppression of racism, but fails to acknowledge the multi-dimensional oppression experienced by African-American women. Black women must acknowledge that their theology comes from the context of tridimensional oppression (racism/sexism/classism), for to ignore any aspect of this experience is to deny the reality of black womanhood.⁵³ To locate Christ in black people is a radical and necessary step, but an even more radical and necessary move is locating Christ in black women's experience. Jacqueline Grant believes the declaration that Christ is a black woman carries a step further the affirmation that Christ is black, broadening black women's capacity to imagine God in their lived experience.⁵⁴ Specifically, Grant contends that God has manifested Himself for the past 450 years in the black woman "as mother, as wife, as nourisher, sustainer and preserver of life, the Suffering Servant who is despised and rejected, a personality of sorrow who is acquainted with grief." In other words, Grant's portrayal of Christ as a black woman is based on His identity as the divine co-sufferer. Jesus' birth, life, suffering and death among the poor was a struggle black women could appropriate. Thus, His empowerment of black women lends greater universality to the themes of oppression and liberation in the Gospel, since black women embody these realities.⁵⁵

Kelly Brown Douglas challenges Grant's assertion that Christ is a black woman, not because it is not true but because it does not address other dimensions that are necessary for wholeness in the African-American community. Instead, Douglas' theology includes the intentionality not to oppress based on race, gender, or class. This is consistent with the black community's commitment to continue Jesus' ministry in the margins and Douglas's proposition that God is revealed through the actions of Christ.⁵⁶ Delores Williams emphasizes a Christ who is shrouded in poverty, a relational Jesus both male and female, regarded

53 Grant, *White Women's Christ and Black Women's Jesus*, 211; Terrell 105-115.

54 Terrell, 107.

55 Id., 132.

56 Id., 145.

as “poor Mary’s Son.” At the same time, she questions the adequacy of this approach, since it fails to address the needs of Mary’s daughter. Williams emphasizes the need for womanist theologians to reframe the image of Jesus’ story for the empowerment of women.⁵⁷ As reflected in the emphasis on community-building in womanist theology, black women have an existential desire to be in right relationship, which makes the experiences of sexism and patriarchy doubly frustrating.⁵⁸

Part IV: A Black Theology of Suffering

In black liberation theology, perhaps one of the most fundamental areas of discourse is a theology of suffering and the cross of Jesus Christ. Suffering is an inescapable fact of the human condition that afflicts both the just and unjust, causing pain and separation. M. Shawn Copeland’s definition of suffering is “the disturbance of our inner tranquility caused by physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual forces that we grasp as jeopardizing our lives, our very existence.”⁵⁹ A black theology of suffering is found in the roots of the African-American religious tradition, culture, and experiences.⁶⁰

Black theology distinguishes between two kinds of suffering: oppressive suffering and redemptive suffering. Oppressive suffering is the suffering endured by black people due to racism and discrimination. Because oppressive suffering is wrong, it is not to be endured but must be resisted. In contrast, redemptive suffering occurs for the sake of liberation. Similar to other aspects of black liberation theology, the black theology of suffering also reflects the importance of solidarity. Jesus is a primary example of how to live in communion with God and neighbor in the context of oppression.⁶¹ Black theology speaks to the

57 Id., 115.

58 Id., 119.

59 M. Shawn Copeland, “Wading though Many Sorrows’: Toward a Theology of Suffering in Womanist Perspective” in *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil and Suffering*, The Bishop Henry McNeal Turner Studies in North American Black Religion, V. 8, ed., Emilie Maureen Townes (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993), 135.

60 Ibid.

61 Terrell, 104.

experience of God being active and present in our suffering, entering deeply into our grief and pain just as He grieved with the suffering of Jesus. In black theology, grieving with God in our faith is the way of Christ. True Christian solidarity involves making the conscious choice to stand with the oppressed in their suffering. When we fail to stand with them, we fail to stand with God, because God is hand in hand with the suffering.⁶²

The Cross of Christ has been analyzed by black theologians as both oppressive and redemptive suffering. As indicated by M. Shawn Copeland, the cross is oppressive because it is the mark of shame. Crucifixion was intended to intimidate by example and subdue by witness, and called for the public display of a naked victim in a public place.⁶³ The cross is not the sign of God's violence toward Jesus, but rather a sign of human violence against Jesus by the evil forces in the world that could not handle his healing, liberating powers.⁶⁴ The suffering and death of Jesus took place at the hands of a system of oppression.⁶⁵

Furthermore, the lived experiences of slavery, racial oppression and violence, which have been the source of African-Americans' physical, psychological, social, and spiritual suffering, allow them to identify more fully with the suffering of Christ in an embodied way.⁶⁶ These lived experiences of oppression in the black community taught black people about the death and resurrection in a more concrete way than theology, for their own persecution allowed them to identify more deeply with the suffering of Jesus. In this way, the death of Jesus was life-giving for black people.⁶⁷

62 Hopkins, 162.

63 M. Shawn Copeland, "The Cross of Christ and Discipleship" in *Thinking of Christ: Proclamation, Explanation, Meaning*, ed., Tatha Wiley (New York: Continuum, 2003), 184.

64 Hopkins, 163.

65 Copeland, "Marking the Body of Jesus," 279.

66 James H. Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2011), 1-15; Terrell 112; Copeland, "Wading Through Many Sorrows," 135)

67 Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree*, 65-80.

The Blood of the Cross

A womanist theology of the cross repels any tendency toward a spiritualization of suffering, pain and oppression. Jacqueline Grant challenges us to be cautious about glorifying servanthood, because there is a monumental difference between the forced, oppressive servitude of black women versus the sacrificial, redemptive servanthood of Christ. The glorification of servanthood is inappropriate, for it is this type of oppression which has undergirded the structures of pain and suffering, specifically for African-Americans in their socioeconomic marginalization. African-American Christians can neither forget nor glorify the cross, for to do this would be to exploit their suffering and to glorify sin. Terrell agrees with Delores Williams' claim that "there is nothing of God in the blood of the cross," if she means that there is nothing of God's sanction in violence. At the same time, there is something in the blood of the cross in that the act of self-sacrifice in Jesus' crucifixion and death was not an act of forced servitude, but of service borne of God's love and mercy. Thus, the cross reflects God's love for humanity in a profound way. Therefore, the crucifixion of Christ was rooted in salvific love. It does not in any way reflect or condone suffering from forced servitude, which is oppressive rather than redemptive or salvific.⁶⁸ Terrell, 123.

Suffering as Redemptive

Although the cross was oppressive in many ways, it is also redemptive in that it has saving significance. The original imagery of the cross was that of a scandal, that nothing good could come out of such an event. Seen in this way, Jesus' sacrificial act was not the objective, but the tragic outcome of His confrontation with evil.⁶⁹ While suffering for its own sake should not be immediately glorified, God's power and glory are present in our human condition even through our suffering, because in Christ's suffering God chose to be in solidarity with us. This power and glory in human life is most clear in those who refuse to be dehumanized by suffering. Therefore, we are empowered to reject

68 Bohache 128-153.

69 Terrell, 142.

the dehumanizing aspects, for we know that humans are destined not for suffering but for partnership with God.⁷⁰ At the same time, all Christians must bear the cross until it leaves marks upon us and redeems us to that more excellent way of life.⁷¹

The cross reflects Jesus' solidarity with the poor, the outcast, the ill, and the dysfunctional.⁷² The crucified Jesus is the cost of identification with poor, outcast, abject and despised women and men in the struggle for life.⁷³ Cone believes the cross completed God's identification with the world's suffering, for it reveals the completeness of God's solidarity with the suffering.⁷⁴ As Copeland states: "In his suffering and death on the cross, he showed us the cost of integrity, when we live in freedom, in love, and in solidarity with others."⁷⁵ Jesus endures death by crucifixion, but the sufferings of the crucified Christ are not his alone. In his own body, Jesus, in solidarity, shares in the suffering of the poor and weak. Because God was in Christ, through his passion Christ brings into the history of the world the eternal compassion of God and divine justice.⁷⁶ Thus, the cross demonstrates both the way of Jesus and what the disciple must do to follow Jesus. The way of Jesus is a way of suffering and vulnerability but also the development of desire and capacity for life with God. The cross incarnates the love with which God has taken up our lives and sufferings to redeem them.⁷⁷ The cross is a symbol of God's love for humanity and strength.⁷⁸ By embracing the cross as a loving

70 Grant, *White Woman's Christ*, 124.

71 Terrell, 76.

72 Copeland, "Wading Through Many Sorrows," 279.

73 Copeland, "The Cross of Christ and Discipleship," 185.

74 Hopkins, 162.

75 Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 81.

76 Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 85-106.

77 M. Shawn Copeland, "To Live at the Disposal of the Cross: Mystical Political Discipleship as Christological Locus" in *Christology: Memory, Inquiry, Practice*, The Annual Publication of the College Theology Society, 2002, V. 48, ed., Anne M. Clifford and Anthony J. Godzieba (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2003), 200.

78 Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 79-95.

sacrifice and by their own understanding of themselves as sacramental witnesses, many African Americans from slavery to the present have found the power to survive, to be free and to express themselves. In so doing, they affirmed their innocence, refuted the claims of white supremacists, sanctified their own suffering and found victory where they were once victims.⁷⁹ For many Christians, the image of a crucifix signifies the awareness of a God who suffers with us in our suffering, the image of an empty cross signifies faith in our own resurrection. Delores Williams disagrees with this because she argues that too often Christians take this to mean that something good can result from violence. However, the reality of violence in black women's lives informs their attempts to ascribe meaning to their suffering and to affirm divine assistance to overcome it.⁸⁰

In addition, the cross of Jesus represents a symbol of struggle for liberation. Easter becomes the fulfillment of that struggle.⁸¹ In order to understand the liberating, redemptive nature of the cross, Terrell argues that Christocentric approaches should emphasize both high Christology (focusing on the incarnation) and low Christology (Jesus' liberating works). Both Terrell and Kelly Brown Douglas contend that incarnation alone provides no binding moral standard upon Christians, because it emphasized God's action in Christ but not Christ's own agency or that of humans. This balance increases the significance of Jesus' story for African-Americans. Terrell indicates that suffering is the way for holiness as agency, of enduring, resisting and overcoming the pain.⁸² Just as Christ was innocent, the community highlights its innocence to take into account the nature of the sins against them, God, and Christ and affirms their liberation. Thus, in liberationist perspective, the cross was taken because Jesus was God incarnate, who suffered and died in solidarity with society's victims.⁸³

79 Terrell, 68.

80 Id., 125.

81 Copeland, "Marking the Body of Jesus," 280.

82 Terrell, 112.

83 Ibid.

On behalf of the African-American community it serves, a theology of suffering seeks to clarify the meaning of the liberated Word and deed of God in Jesus of Nazareth for all women and men who resist forces of evil.⁸⁴ One way of clarifying the meaning of the liberated Word in Jesus is to examine suffering through narrative - specifically, remembering and retelling the stories of those who have gone before us, as well as honoring ancestors and victims of slavery.⁸⁵ This allows African-Americans to see more clearly the similarity between the martyrdom of Jesus with their own narrative. For example, Jesus' death by crucifixion reflected African-Americans' death by circumscription. This circumscription involves an ongoing experience of brutality at the hands of white people and institutions.⁸⁶ In other words, black people see the identification of Jesus' suffering with their own as they relive His painful narrative at the hands of white oppressors. The narrative of the suffering Jesus highlights His liberating activity for African-Americans. As suffering Lord He has victory over His enemies, and the enemies of the ones whom He has identified Himself, for He carries their wounds in His body. In their affliction, He is afflicted; in their oppression, He is oppressed; despite His Resurrection He is not removed from their suffering. The suffering Christ still bleeds for and with His people, which is why the black faith explodes with joy, but through encountering the liberating power of God through suffering. Their suffering is for the sake of freedom, justice, humanity, and God.⁸⁷

Though black theology places a great deal of emphasis on suffering, the Resurrection is just as significant. The Resurrection is an event for Jesus, in that something radical has happened to Him. It is also an event for the disciples in that Jesus' post-resurrection appearances awaken for them a bold witness of the gifts the Spirit will bring. The Resurrection characterizes a destiny for Jesus, yet it was not

84 Id., 65.

85 Copeland, "Wading Through Many Sorrows," 136.

86 Terrell 60-75.

87 Hopkins, 165.

His destiny alone but the beginning of the absolute transformation for humankind.⁸⁸ Just as the cross of Jesus reflects the condition of black people today, the resurrection of Jesus reflects the hope that liberation from oppression is immanent.⁸⁹ Black theology finds hope in the resurrected Jesus. It is not just a hope of listening, but one that requires transformative action, as well as by proclaiming the liberated Word (kerygma). The idea that the kingdom is “here but not yet” reflects the hope of the Resurrection that keeps black people going.⁹⁰ The most significant events were His life and ministry, the Crucifixion, and the Resurrection, because through them God became concrete in Christ. Jesus came for life, to show humans a perfect vision of ministerial relation that humans had forgotten long ago.⁹¹ Furthermore, the Resurrection signals eschatological healing and binds a creation broken by the disorder of sin back to the heart of God. The resurrection of Jesus indicates God’s own struggles against the powers of this world and manifests His desire to free those caught in psychological, social, cultural, or religious oppression.⁹² From the womanist perspective, the Resurrection for Jesus signified that there is more to life than the Cross. For black women, it signifies that their tri-dimensional oppression is not the end but rather the context in which a particular people find hope and liberation.

88 Copeland, “The Cross of Christ and Discipleship,” 184.

89 Grant, *White Women’s Christ*, 215.

90 Cone, *Black Theology*, 290-299, 304-314.

91 Terrell, 104.

92 Copeland, “The Cross of Christ and Discipleship,” 185.



Saint Mary Magdalene was called the “Apostle to the Apostles” because she brought them news of Christ’s Resurrection. She was one of the Myrrh-Bearing Women who came to the tomb to anoint Jesus’ body with fragrant oils and spices, but found him gone and the grave clothes still lying there. She met Jesus early that same day, but didn’t recognize Him, thinking He was just the gardener until He called her by name.

I first saw this image at the Russian Icon Museum in Clinton, MA in July 2018, and decided to attempt my own icon. In the original, everything that was not Mary’s face or clothing was covered by an engraved gold sheet. The practice of using metalwork dates to the 12th century but didn’t become widespread until the 16th century, and then mainly in Russia.

The Eucharist: Solidarity at Table

The themes expressed in black theology - liberation and oppression, solidarity, identifying with Jesus, and the cross and resurrection of Christ - are reflected in the Eucharist, which itself embodies liberation and solidarity. The Eucharist demonstrates the great mystery of the very presence of Christ in the sacrament. Through the compassionate love of the Father and the power of the Holy Spirit, the body and blood of Jesus Christ are present with us and to us. Thus we pledge to incarnate the triune love of God through acts of concrete compassion in our present reality. The Eucharist signifies the Body of Christ raised up for Himself within the body of humanity, the mystical body. M. Shawn

Copeland explains that racism is inherently evil because it contradicts the solidarity and liberation of the Eucharist, thereby insinuating the reign of sin. Because it is deeply structured and systemic, it binds negative attitudes to power. Since the first Eucharist, a “hurting body” has been the symbol of solidarity for Christians; therefore, Copeland contends that the relation of Eucharist to hurting black bodies must be viewed in the context of white racist supremacy.⁹³ Because the Eucharistic meal celebrates the redemption of the body, the sign and reality of the solidarity and liberation in the Eucharist contests the marginalized condition of black bodies. A Christian praxis of solidarity denotes the humble and complete orientation of ourselves before Jesus, whose shadow falls across the table of our sacramental meal.⁹⁴ The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ constitutes Eucharist, racism, and black bodies as His own body raised up and made visible in the world. As the Body of Christ, we embrace with love and hope those who, in their bodies, are despised and marginalized, even as we embrace with love and forgiveness those whose sins contribute to the conditions for the suffering and oppression of others.⁹⁵ Eucharistic solidarity orients us to the cross of the lynched Jesus of Nazareth, where we grasp the enormity of suffering, affliction, and oppression as well as apprehend our complicity in the suffering, affliction, and oppression of others. Eucharistic solidarity sustains our praxis of discipleship as we stand the ground of justice in the face of white racist supremacy, injustice, and domination; take up simplicity over comfort; hold on to integrity in the face of corruption; contest agitation for social justice.⁹⁶ Copeland, *Enfleshing Freedom*, 107-128.

The intention of black and womanist theologies is not to alienate or incriminate white people, but to speak to the realities of the African-American experience. Indeed, black theology has a vast capacity for harmony. Despite the preferential option for the oppressed in

93 Ibid.

94 Ibid.

95 Ibid.

96 Ibid.

black liberation theology, it also seeks to affirm the inclusiveness of Christology, the realization that all people can identify with Christ, the Word made flesh incarnate. M. Shawn Copeland indicates that the distinction of “other” is not a cause for alienation, but that it is what marks us as Christ’s flesh. Copeland reframes our unity in Christ, as reflected by the Apostle Paul in Galatians 3:28, to fit the modern context of Christianity: “In Christ, there is neither brown nor black, neither red nor white. ... In Christ, there is neither male nor female, neither gay/lesbian nor straight, neither heterosexual nor homosexual. We are all transformed in Christ: we are his very own flesh.”⁹⁷ Furthermore, Christ’s self-disclosure constitutes the paradigm for all human disclosure in the midst of oppression, exclusion, alienation, and death. Although suffering is a major component of black theology based on the pain of oppression inflicted upon African-American people, there is potential for healing. In the context of racism in white America, Cone believes reconciliation between blacks and whites is possible under two conditions: (1) liberation of the oppressed and (2) affirming black dignity. Thus reconciliation is God’s gift of blackness to whites, and liberation is God’s gift to oppressed African-American people.⁹⁸

Part V: Conclusion: The Black Face of God

The God whom we know and love is actively, sacramentally, and eternally present in Jesus Christ. It is in Jesus that God became incarnate in human form, engaging in a painful, grace-filled act of kenosis because of His infinite love for humanity. It is this act of kenosis that allowed Jesus to identify with the least of these through His own lived experience of oppression in the flesh. It is His saving goodness and loving sacrifice that continues to bring liberation to the oppressed, hope to the hopeless, strength to the weak, and the joyful promise of everlasting life in the reign of God. These fundamental truths are the essence of the Gospel message, especially as it pertains to the saving work of Jesus Christ. Yet, so often these aspects of the Gospel are neglected in Western Christianity, where the God who has Himself

97 Copeland, “Marking the Body of Jesus,” 281.

98 Terrell, 98.

endured the greatest depths of suffering is replaced by a civilized, mild-mannered God, a “sweet Jesus” who knows no sorrow. Such a portrayal of our God is incongruent with the Gospel message, for the face of Jesus was not always clean-shaven and smiling, His body was not without blemish, and His hands and feet bore the marks of violence and oppression in the world. Hence, the recognition of the suffering face of Jesus is what makes black theology so significant today.

Black theology serves as an invaluable voice in the field of Christian theology and praxis. The voices of black theologians (such as James Cone, M. Shawn Copeland, and Jacqueline Grant) enrich the theological conversation, and their legacy will live on even when they have spoken their last words. James Cone, who is considered by many the father of black theology, passed away while this essay was being written. While Cone’s death was a devastating loss to the theological community, he will always be remembered as the catalyst of the black theology movement, the one who revealed the black Jesus to Christianity. Now, the voices of black theologians will continue to recall the somewhat suppressed narrative of the saving, liberating activity of Jesus who suffers in solidarity with the least of these. In this way, black theology is a deep, rich well-spring of wisdom and insight whose treasures we have only begun to discover. Without this perspective and others that examine the suffering Christ, our theology would be severely compromised.

Though black theologians make it clear that suffering cannot be glorified, they warn of the even greater danger of denying this reality altogether. Black theology does not shy away from the weakened, bleeding, exhausted, weeping, angry, tormented, poverty-stricken Jesus, whether running from a mob, crouched shivering in the streets, or crying out desperately: “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?” Instead, black people look directly into His eyes, for there they see reflected their own reality. They see the pain on His face etched in the faces of the oppressed, feel the marks of His body in the violence inflicted upon their people, and hear His cries in the cries of our poor brothers and sisters in a way that cannot be so with a civilized

Christianity that does not enter into the painful part of the reality of human experience. Yet, in His eyes they also see the light of hope in the midst of suffering, feel the wounds of the divine healer, and hear the voice of the God and Savior who alone offers true freedom. As painful as it is to enter so deeply into the wellspring of such anguish, having the courage and capacity to enter into the suffering of our Lord and others is a true grace. All in all, black theology is a little-known but beautiful gift, for our black brothers and sisters have all spoken of a fundamental truth: It is only in solidarity with the oppressed that we will find true liberation; it is only in feeling the depths of sorrow that we will know the fullness of joy; it is only in redeeming the pain-filled face of our world that we are redeemed; and it is only in walking through the darkness that we may emerge into the shining light of eschatological hope.



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