

Die Seite der Redaktion 3

Beiträge zum Thema: Rassismus und Rassismuskritik

Astrid Messerschmidt: Rassismusbegriff und Rassismuskritik
im Kontext zeitgeschichtlicher Reflexivität –
mit Geschichtsbewusstsein gegen Ausgrenzung 5

Alena Höfer: Dear White Theology! Über Weißsein und
rassistische Strukturen in der Theologie sprechen 22

Eske Wollrad: Das Fleisch lieben – Inkarnation postkolonial 43

Claudia Jahnel: Rassismus ist Sünde. Von Desmond Tutu
für eine rassismuskritische Theologie der Körperlichkeit lernen 56

Karolin Wetjen: Almost Christian but not quite.
Der Begriff des »Heidenchristen« und die protestantische Mission 77

Dana L. Robert: The Birth of the International Missionary Council
and the Discourse of Race Relations 97

Scotty J. Williams: Telling Better Stories:
Black Theology from an Inside Perspective 113

Weitere Beiträge

Joseph Bosco Bangura: African Theology Conceptualized
by Non-African Voices. An African Intercultural Theology Engagement
with Parratt, Stinton and Hock 141

Tianji Ma/Szu-Chin Chen: Momentaufnahme.
Eine explorative Untersuchung über die chinesischen
Migrationsgemeinden in Deutschland mit Fokus auf ihre
multidimensionale funktionale Bestimmung 161

Joachim Schnürle: »... der das Basler Missionsmagazin auf seine Höhe gebracht«. Die Verwissenschaftlichung der Missiologie durch Albert Ostertag (1810–1871) im Evangelischen Missionsmagazin 185

Rezensionen

Mariano Delgado/Gregor Emmenegger/Volker Leppin (Hg.), Apologie, Polemik, Dialog. Religionsgespräche in der Christentumsgeschichte und in der Religionsgeschichte (*Ulrich Dehn*) 197

Redaktion/Verfasser_innen und Rezensent_innen 200

Telling Better Stories: Black Theology from an Inside Perspective

Scotty J. Williams

One theology that is often misunderstood, and sometimes goes unknown, is that of the Black community in the United States of America. Many wrongly assume that it began during the Civil Rights era of the 1960s, and that it preaches a Socialist Gospel with a Marxist rebel Jesus.¹ These incorrect assumptions affect me on a very personal level, for I am a Black American whose faith was shaped by Black Theology (BTH). In this article I will offer an insider's perspective into BTH, and explain its roots, practices, and ultimate goal of liberation. I will also show that it is not solely about fighting racism, but getting away from a discourse of the oppressed to give all people, including oppressors, meaning, hope, and love. To achieve these aims I will consult traditional Black American religious sources and the works of leading Black American clergy and theologians.

1. The Roots of Black Theology

1.1 New Beginnings

BTH is commonly defined as a theological perspective from the 1960's that was crafted for Black Christians and their churches in the United States of America. Both the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements had presented Black congregations with a series of critiques and concerns, which led some clergy to see the

1 Robert A. Morey, *The Christian Student's Survival Guide*, Maitland 2010, 166.

need for a new »black theology«.² Before this African American Christianity had a rich tradition of theological reflection, but there had never been a formal theology formulated from this tradition. Furthermore, classical Christian interpretations had become insufficient for modern Black life, for, as James Cone wrote, they were too Eurocentric and often separated love from justice and religion from politics.³ What was needed was an alternative perspective that was rooted in the historic Black freedom struggle, and reflected its call for social, economic, political, and religious liberation. The Gospel of classical interpretations was more spiritual with a salvation for the soul, which conflicted with Black Christianity's understanding of the Gospel as entailing a physical salvation for life on earth.⁴

Upon seeing that a formal black theology was required for modern times, a small group of radical African American clergy gathered in 1966. They called themselves the National Committee of Negro Churchmen (NCNC), and they reflected on the question of what it means to be Black and Christian. Through their reflections they observed a constant in the Old and New Testaments, where God showed a special care for the downtrodden and marginalized. Furthermore, they concluded that though all power belongs to God in heaven, the downtrodden and marginalized must be empowered on earth.⁵ In their »Black Power Statement« the NCNC declared:

»From the point of view of the Christian faith, there is nothing necessarily wrong with the concern for power. At the heart of the Protestant Reformation is the belief that ultimate power belongs to God alone and that men become most inhuman when concentration of power lead to the conviction – overt or covert – that any nation, race, or organization can rival God in this regard. At issue in the relation between Whites and Negroes in America, is the problem of inequality of power.«⁶

From the conclusions reached while observing Scripture together, the NCNC began crafting a new theological perspective for Black Americans. This perspective emphasized divine care and empowerment for the downtrodden and mar-

2 James H. Cone, *Black Theology and the Black Church: Where do we go from Here?*, in: *Cross-Currents* 27/2 (1977), 147–156, here: 147.

3 James H. Cone, *For My People: Black Theology and the Black Church*, 5.

4 Allison Calhoun-Brown, *The Image of God: Black Theology and Racial Empowerment in the African American Community*, in: *Review of Religious Research* 40/3 (1999), 197–212, here: 197.

5 Patrick Allitt, *Religion in America Since 1945: A History*, New York 2005, 111.

6 The National Committee of Negro Churchmen, *Black Power Statement*, New York 1966.

ginalized with a salvation that was both spiritual and physical. It also went beyond the Black American context and pointed to the global struggles of people of African descent.

While critiquing the Black Church, the Black Power Movement asserted that it had made Black Americans too inward focused on their parochial concerns⁷, and a suitable theology had to be Pan-African. With this in mind the NCNC reached out to African theological fellowships and began an ongoing dialogue with African theologians. In 1969 it sent two delegates to the assembly of the *All Africa Council of Churches* in Abidjan, Ivory Coast, and established the *Round Table Discussion on African Theology and Black Theology*.⁸ From this global exchange, the NCNC's work extended to countries such as South Africa and Namibia where it inspired the creation of local black theologies that spoke against Apartheid.⁹

In addition to using Scripture as they reflected on the question of being Black and Christian, the NCNC, and other groups like it, made use of religious sources from the slave era.¹⁰ After the Civil War many notable Black leaders shunned these old sources, and called for a faith that was more »rational« and less »primitive« in appearance. For such leaders the spiritual beliefs and practices of the slave era were things of the past, and they hindered future social and spiritual progress for the Black American community. One example of this is the early African Methodist Episcopal Bishop Daniel Payne, who referred to the use of slave worship traditions as »heathenish«.

»About this time I attended a »bush meeting«, where I went to please the pastor whose circuit I was visiting. After the sermon they formed a ring, and with coats off sung, clapped their hands, and stamped their feet in a most ridiculous and heathenish way. I requested the pastor to go and stop their dancing. At his request they stopped their dancing and clapping of hands, but remained singing and rocking their bodies to and fro. I then went, and taking their leader by the arm requested him to desist and to sit down and sing in a rational manner. I told him also that it was a heathenish way to worship and disgraceful to themselves, the race, and the Christian name.«¹¹

7 Cone, *For My People*, 239.

8 Dwight Hopkins, *Black Theology: Essays on Global Perspectives*, Eugene 2017, 78.

9 Sandiswa Kobe, *Black Theology of Liberation: Thing of the Past? A Theological Reflection on Black Students' Experiences*, in: *Missionalia* 42/6 (2014), 288–303, here: 291–294.

10 Cone, *Black Theology and the Black Church*, 147.

11 Daniel Payne, *Recollections of Seventy Years*, Nashville 1888, 253–257.

Contrary to those like Payne, the NCNC and its counterparts saw slave era faith as the authentic voice of Black theological reflection and moreover Black religion (BR) itself. BR is the spiritual beliefs and practices of enslaved Africans in the United States, which have been passed down for generations among their descendants.¹² These beliefs and practices are not static, have been adapted and changed overtime, and bear the influence of spiritual systems outside of Christianity. W. E. B. Du Bois once wrote that the ancestors of Black Americans were religiously diverse, and though most embraced Christianity, vestiges of their African religious life remained.¹³ One vestige can be found in Black Church music, which Du Bois saw as coming from the African continent.

»The Music of Negro religion is that plaintive rhythmic melody, with its touching minor cadences, which, despite caricature and defilement, still remains the most original and beautiful expression of human life and longing yet born on American soil. Sprung from the African forests, where its counterpart can still be heard, it was adapted, changed, and intensified by the tragic soul-life of the slave, until, under the stress of law and whip, it became the one true expression of a people's sorrow, despair, and hope.«¹⁴

One could say that BR is interfaith and pluralistic, and the new perspective from the NCNC reflected this diversity. While making use of religious sources from the slave era, they brought about a Christian theology that was not solely Christian. Their work made use of the full voice of authentic Black theological reflection and gave birth to a theology that could speak beyond the Church to Black Americans of other faith traditions.

In the end, the critiques and concerns presented by the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements in the 1960's were sufficiently addressed. For the first time Black Americans had an alternative to classical Eurocentric interpretations of Christianity that was rooted in their historic struggle and their indigenous religious sources. To be clear, this alternative was not an end-all solution, for there were pitfalls to the NCNC's innovative work that others would later improve. Nevertheless, this work was a new beginning in Black theological reflection, which enabled Black congregations, clergy, and parishioners to engage new challenges facing their community. They could transcend the discourse of enduring and

12 This definition comes from the author of this article.

13 William Edward Burghardt Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folks*, Oxford 2007, 132.

14 Du Bois, *The Souls*, 129.

overcoming racial oppression and use their faith to enter the discourses of other pressing freedom struggles (e. g., women's liberation). What is more is that, as was previously shown, they could transcend their context in the United States, and use their faith to address freedom struggles throughout Africa and the African Diaspora.

1.2 Old Beginnings

Though the perspective crafted by the NCNC was a new beginning in Black theological reflection, BTH itself was born centuries before the 1960's.¹⁵ It began with enslaved Africans taken by force to the Western Hemisphere and was forged in the cargo holds of crowded ships and the harsh fields of pristine plantations. These captives were men, women, and children from a variety of people groups such as the Wolof, Igbo, Mbundu, Lunda, Makua, and Malagasy.¹⁶ They also practiced a variety of African spiritual traditions, and among them were Muslims who prayed to Allah and Christians who prayed to Jesus.¹⁷ Each one had a name, family, and unique personal story, but they all, as Cornel West points out, faced a common threat in bondage.

»The first African encounter with the New World was an encounter with a distinctive form of the absurd. The initial Black struggle against degradation and devaluation in the enslaved circumstances of the New World was, in part, a struggle against nihilism.«¹⁸

Enslaved Africans struggled against a nihilistic threat, or a constant deep belief that life was void of meaning (a sense of identity), hope (a sense of purpose), and love (a sense of belonging). With brutal acts slave owners sought to thrust nihilism upon them, but they came together in their differences to make sense of their experience. As a community they worked together across ethnic, linguistic, and religious lines, and engaged the reality of suffering and its questions that often extinguish faith. To the question of »Where is God?« they came to a radical

15 Cornel West, *The Cornel West Reader*, New York 1999, 435–436.

16 Ibrahima Seck, *Bouki Fait Gombo*, New Orleans 2014, 35–52.

17 David D. Daniels, *Kongolese Christianity in the Americas of the 17th and 18th Centuries*, in: *Polycentric Structures in the History of World Christianity* 25/25 (2014), 215–226, here: 221.

18 Cornel West, *Race Matters*, Boston 1993, 15.

conclusion; their Creator had not remained in Africa, but was present with and among them in the New World.¹⁹ Furthermore, God's presence was more than comfort for their sorrows, it was the companionship of a deity Who²⁰ identified with their deepest pain. In short, the Divine was a fellow sufferer beside them, and they saw, as others did centuries later, that God is a God of the downtrodden and marginalized.²¹

The radical conclusion that Africans reached in the New World was not something self-manufactured. It was based in Biblical stories that mirrored their experience,²² such as the conversion of Saul who persecuted early Christians.²³ As he ravaged the ancient Church the risen Christ called out to him and asked through a blinding light, »Why do you persecute Me?« In that moment Saul realized that God was not with the high and powerful, but the lowly wayward outcast group that he was persecuting. While hearing stories like this, enslaved Africans came to a similar realization. Just as Jesus identified with the first Christians in Damascus, God had identified with them in the New World. From this insight they found a source of meaning, hope, and love, and discovered truths that warded off the threat they faced together.²⁴ These truths were:

a. *Black people are human beings made in the image and likeness of God.*

The institution of slavery stripped people of their humanity and made them into products that could be treated as the buyer wished. This stripping was seen in how African woman were inspected at auctions blocks, and how African men were referred to as »bucks« (a term used for livestock) on posters for slave markets.²⁵ The message was that enslaved Africans were not people with their own agency, but possessions created inferior to be driven and traded like cattle. Yet, through stories like the creation accounts of Genesis 1 and 2, they saw that they were human beings made in the image and likeness of God.

19 Howard Thurman, *Deep River and the Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death*, Richmond 1975, 11.

20 Throughout this article the author will follow the Christian tradition of capitalizing titles for God and Christ (e. g., Who, He, His, etc.).

21 James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, Maryknoll ²1992, 1.

22 Dale P. Andrews, *Practical Theology for Black Churches*, Louisville 2002, 18–19.

23 Acts 9,1–9.

24 Andrews, *Practical Theology*, 24–30.

25 Charles Johnson/Patricia Smith, *Africans in America. America's Journey through Slavery*, San Diego 1999, 273.

Upon seeing their humanity, Africans in the New World boldly proclaimed it, and one example of this was the sermons of the Rev. Peter Randolph. Randolph was a former slave and respected Baptist minister who called out the hypocrisy of slave owners with Church membership. In an open-air sermon at a slave market, where a young man named Emmanuel had been sold, Randolph cried aloud for all to hear: »See the slave-holder who has just bought the image of God, come to his victim, and take possession of him [...]. He [Emmanuel] must leave all to follow his Christian master, —a member of the Episcopal Church,— a partaker, from time to time, of the Lord’s Sacrament!«²⁶

b. *Black people are cared for by God on earth and in heaven.*

As enslaved Africans found solace in Biblical stories, their owners tried to alter the Christian message to better control them. Instead of being saved from sin, slave owners preached salvation from Africa, and freedom was a reward from God that would come to slaves at the hour of death. In other words, salvation was only a spiritual matter in heaven, and it had no effect on the physical matters for Africans on earth. To promote this soteriology owners consulted Church leaders, who created special catechisms that told slaves their sole purpose was servitude. One such catechism from South Carolina, which Frederick Douglas mentions, said that God gave slaves their masters and mistresses whom they were to obey, and this was a divine law that came from the Bible itself.²⁷

In summary, slave-owners told their captives that their souls belonged to God in heaven, but their physical bodies were the property of their masters and mistresses on earth. This was a dualism that presented a God Who was sovereign over the spiritual world but left oppressive people with sovereignty over the material world. To counter this dualism Africans looked to Biblical stories of Providence, a concept which also existed in their traditional spirituality.²⁸ For example, in the Igbo religion called *odinala*, a key belief is that God governs all events including those that are negative such as suffering and death.

26 Robert Kellemen/Karole A. Edwards, *Beyond the Suffering. Embracing the Legacy of African American Soul Care and Spiritual Direction*, Grand Rapids 2007, 64.

27 Leslie H. Fishel, Jr./Benjamin Quarles (eds.), *The Black American. A Documentary History*, Glenview 1976, 69.

28 Eric Washington, *Olaudah Equiano’s Argument Against Slavery Was His Life Experience*, <https://www.christianitytoday.com> (14.5.2019).

At first glance this view of Providence could be seen as deeming slavery God's will, but to Africans it simply meant that God did not abandon them on slave ships. The Creator was with them as they crossed the Atlantic and entered the New World and cared for their physical state while identifying and suffering with them.

c. *Black people are called by God to resist oppression.*

While altering the Christian message, slave owners altered Scripture, and created »Slave Bibles« to encourage complete submission. Throughout the Old and New Testaments are numerous stories of resistance, which had the potential of inspiring rebellion among Africans in the New World. With the help of Church leaders, slave owners removed all verses mentioning freedom and escape, and left the verses that talked about obedience and submission.²⁹ The end result was a Bible missing 90 % of the Old Testament and 50 % of the New Testament.³⁰ Nevertheless, enslaved Africans learned about the redacted and hidden verses, and found stories within them that compelled them to resist their oppression. They also learned about passages that openly condemned slave owners, such as 1 Timothy 1,10 which counts them among the lawless.³¹

The greatest example of Africans feeling a divine call to resistance was the slave rebel Nat Turner, who led the 1831 Southampton Insurrection. With more than seventy enslaved and free Blacks, Turner took the lives of sixty White men, women, and children in the Commonwealth of Virginia. What motivated this shocking rebellion were Bible passages that spoke of resistance, such as Ezekiel 9,6 which mentions the slaughter of old men, young men, mothers, and children.³² Furthermore, Turner owned a complete copy of the Bible, and was holding it when he was captured after the rebellion was crushed.³³ In addition to overt or open acts of resistance, like the Southampton Insurrection, enslaved Africans felt that Scripture called them to covert or hidden resistance.

29 Bielport Portius, *Select Parts of the Holy Bible for the Use of the Negro Slaves in the British West-India Islands*, London 1807.

30 Joseph Lumpkin, *The Negro Bible – The Slave Bible: Select Parts of the Holy Bible for the Use of the Negro Slaves of the British West-India Islands*. Blountsville 2019, vi.

31 Katy E. Valentine, *Slavery in the New Testament*, <https://www.bibleodyssey.org> (20.4.2022).

32 Sarah N. Roth, *Slave Revolution*. Bible Verses referenced in *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, <https://www.natturnerproject.org> (2019).

33 Victoria Dawson, *Nat Turner's Bible Gave the Enslaved Rebel the Resolve to Rise Up*, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com> (13.9.2016).

Covert resistance was more common and bore less risks and entailed things from working slow and breaking tools to injuring animals and damaging buildings.

d. *Black people are empowered by God to speak out against injustice.*

Through the creation of altered Bibles and special catechisms, slave owners attempted to silence the prophetic voice of the Scriptures. This voice spoke out against their oppressive works of brutality and showed them as living counter to the Christian faith that they often claimed. However, the true witness of the Bible could never be silenced, and as Africans learned the verses hidden from them, they began to be its mouthpiece. Biblical stories that mirrored both their collective story and individual stories empowered them to speak out for justice and to call their masters and mistresses to repent of unjust ways. Looking back to Peter Randolph, who preached boldly at slave markets, he was empowered by accounts like the story of the prophet Nathan standing up to King David.³⁴ When David took Uriah's wife Bathsheba and had him killed, Nathan used creative confrontation and told a parable of a rich man stealing a poor man's lamb. Randolph, at the sale of Emmanuel, also used creative confrontation, and echoed Nathan's heavy words that exposed David's actions. As Emmanuel was led away, Randolph shouted for all to hear: »You are the men and women! You have committed the horrible sin of enslaving God's image-bearers.«³⁵

Another example of Africans being empowered to speak against injustice was Frederick Douglass in his autobiography. In the appendix he makes a sharp distinction between the false religion of slave holders and true religion of Jesus which he calls the *Christianity of Christ*. Like Randolph, Douglass was inspired by a host of Biblical stories, such as Jesus confronting the scribes and Pharisees who did works of injustice. In fact, he quotes from the seven woes in Matthew 23, and says, »they [slave owners] attend with Pharisaical strictness to the outward forms of religion, and at the same time neglect the weightier matters of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith.«³⁶

34 2 Samuel 12,1-15.

35 Kellemen/Edwards, *Beyond the Suffering*, 64.

36 Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass and American Slave*, Boston 1845, 122.

From the radical conclusion that God was with them in their oppression, enslaved Africans found a shield to ward off nihilism in the New World. This shield is the truths which they drew from engaging Biblical stories, and which gave them meaning, hope, and love in a context filled with suffering. These truths are the heart and the essence of BTH, which defines the Gospel as more than being saved from sin and death. In BTH the Gospel is the presence of God in the here and now which, as Peter Sarpong once wrote, is the Good News for people of African descent.

»The Good News for Africans today is not, »He is risen«. Life after death and the living dead are old hat. The really Good News was and is, »God with us – Immanuel!«³⁷

2. The Practices of Black Theology

Despite being born in the West, BTH is not solely Western; in fact, it is also global South in spirit and belongs to the African Diaspora. While having systemic elements that are centred on orthodoxy [right belief] like most Western theologies, BTH has a strong practical emphasis that centres on orthopraxy [right practice].³⁸ It asks, »What is happening? Why is it happening? and What should be done about it?«³⁹, and it approaches all issues of human life with these three questions at the forefront. Like those who first expressed it centuries ago, BTH has no time to inhabit the past and the future, or to be fixated on what once was and what might one day be. Instead, it focuses on the present and its problems, and it aims to find solutions for these problems in the here and now. This focus comes from the radical conclusion of enslaved Africans in the New World, that God is present in the here and now and identifies with people in their current condition.

In addition to being practical and orthopraxic, BTH is a local theology that speaks to a specific context. It was meant to address the issues of Africans taken from their homeland, and the issues their descendants have faced overtime in what is now the United States. BTH first and foremost speaks to Black Americans and seeks to answer the three questions mentioned earlier in their context.

37 Henry H. Mitchell, *Black Church Beginnings. The Long-Hidden Realities of the First Years*, Grand Rapids 2004, 28.

38 Cone, *A Black Theology*, 75.

39 Richard R. Osmer, *Practical Theology. An Introduction*, Grand Rapids 2008, 4.

According to BTH what is happening is Black suffering, and one of the reasons for this suffering is the nihilistic threat. Therefore, the solution in part is giving Black Americans meaning, hope, and love, which their ancestors did through a cultural armor that Cornel West calls *buffers*.

»The genius of our Black foremothers and forefathers was to create powerful buffers to ward off the nihilistic threat, to equip Black folk with cultural armor to beat back the demons of hopelessness, meaninglessness, and lovelessness [...]. This armor constituted ways of life and struggle that embodied values of service and sacrifice, love and care, discipline and excellence. In other words, traditions for Black surviving and thriving under usually adverse New World conditions were major barriers against the nihilistic threat.«⁴⁰

Some traditions, as West points out, were religious and civic institutions such as Churches, businesses, social clubs, trade schools, and universities. BTH itself is a part of these powerful traditions, and it has buffered Black Americans for centuries through affirming their humanity, destiny, and community.

2.1 Affirming Humanity

In regard to humanity, BTH affirms it through dispelling othering, or the negative labels and depictions that are often used to exclude Black Americans. For centuries they have struggled to make their true story known while fighting a barrage of misconceptions aimed at making them feel inferior. For their foreparents, these misconceptions were stereotypes such as the Sambo, Mammy, and Picanniny, which depicted Black men, women, and children as caricatures to be mocked.⁴¹ There were also misconceptions endorsed through academia, from the *drapetomania* of Samuel Cartwright⁴² to the *polygenism* of Louis Agassiz.⁴³ Such voices, including voices today, have worked to show Black Americans as outside of the norm, and in response BTH calls for putting down this othering.

40 West, *Race*, 15.

41 Fishel/Quarles, *The Black*, 217.

42 Christopher D. E. Willoughby, *Running Away from Drapetomania*. Samuel A. Cartwright, *Medicine, and Race in the Antebellum South*, in: *Southern History* 84/3 (2018), 579–614, here: 579.

43 Jack Eckert, *This Abominable Traffic*. *Physicians on Slavery*, <https://www.collections.countway.harvard.edu> (4.2017).

Before their collective race and particular life experiences, Black Americans are human beings with all other people groups on earth. They are, as Peter Randolph preached, image-bearers of God like everyone else,⁴⁴ and they share a common value and worth that comes with being human. In short, the human identity is the norm that Black Americans are shown to be outside of, and BTH radically rejects the voices that promote this. One expression of this radical rejection is Afrocentric sacred spaces, or houses of worship where Black Americans can freely tell their story. While writing about Christian Afrocentric sacred spaces, Christopher Hunter says this about their function:

»The construction of these Church houses provided African Americans with the ability to control and self-determine themselves, a quality not accessible to Black people. In America, however, the exercise of this quality by African Americans came under threat. The most treasured thing these Black Church houses represented was a place to call home.«⁴⁵

Historically Black houses of worship have been spaces against Othering, and places where Black Americans can cast off negative labels pushed upon them. In their mosques and synagogues Black men are not criminals lacking ambition, and Black women are not an angry force or something deemed exotic. In their churches and temples Black childhood is not synonymous with being troubled, and Black adolescence is not characterized by the words of damning statistics. Within their houses of worship Black Americans are simply people, and the events within these sanctuaries affirm their God-given humanity. Moreover, these houses let them joyfully experience having full control of their bodies on their terms by enthusiastic actions in corporate prayers and services. Black Americans clap to feel their hands, sing to hear their voices, dance to feel their feet, and shout to show their presence. Just as Black worship is about God, it is also about Black people, and the declaration of their identity as equal members of humanity.

44 Kellemen/Edwards, *Beyond the Suffering*, 64.

45 Christopher Hunter, *The African American Church House. A Phenomenological Inquiry of an Afrocentric Sacred Space*, <https://www.mdpi.com> (12.3.2022).

2.2 Affirming Destiny

In regard to destiny, BTH affirms it through dispelling victimology, or a belief that the sole lot of Black Americans is a life of oppression beyond their control.⁴⁶ Victimology gives the message that they are perpetual victims to be rescued and denies their agency and ability to rescue themselves and change their fate. Though Black Americans have faced great hardships since their foreparents arrived in the New World, their history is more than brokenness with stories of survival. It is also stories of people overcoming daunting odds (e. g., Harriet Tubman), and thriving, even in the worst of times, while enjoying the human experience. For example, through moments like slavery, Southern Reconstruction, and the Jim Crow era, Black Americans have known laughter, happiness, delight, and the warmth of relationships. These joys have moved them to make progress in the present, and to gift upcoming generations with the chance of a bright and positive future.

While being sufferers of oppression in a broken and imperfect world, Black Americans are simultaneously celebrants who know the blessings that can be found in it. The same is also true for God in BTH, Who does more than identify with oppressed people in their sufferings. As well as a co-sufferer, BTH presents God as a co-celebrant Who identifies with people in the blessings that they receive. God is the source and giver of these blessings, and the enslaved ancestors of Black Americans proclaimed this through their songs. In the Spiritual, *The Lord's Been Here*, the first verse says:

»The Lord's been here, and blessed my soul,
The Lord's been here and blessed my soul,
O glory!
The Lord's been here and blessed my soul,
The Lord's been here and blessed my soul.«⁴⁷

To be clear, enslaved Africans did not see God as the source or giver of pain, and for them suffering was merely a part of life that had to be accepted and endured.⁴⁸ They looked rather candidly at the reality of human suffering and saw

46 Anthony Bradley, *Liberating Black Theology: The Bible and the Black Experience in America*, Wheaton 2010, 14.

47 Nicole Beaulieu Herder/Ronald Herder, *Best-loved Negro Spirituals. Complete Lyrics to 178 Songs of Faith*, Mineola 2011, 82.

48 Kellemen/Edwards, *Beyond the Suffering*, 61.

God as a companion (not a coping mechanism) Who journeyed with and led them through it. This perspective continues among Black Americans today, and it gives BTH a theodicy that is centred on hope. It does not ask, »why has God allowed?«, but »where is God leading?«, and the answer is a destiny that is not shaped by despair. In spite of countless troubles in the past and in the present, Black Americans have kept a belief in a future that is better. The basis of this belief is the historic progress that they have made, and their national hymn, *Lift Every Voice and Sing*, speaks of this in its third verse.

»We have come over a way that with tears has been watered,
We have come, treading our path through the blood of the slaughtered,
Out from the gloomy past,
'Til now we stand at last
Where the white gleam of our bright star is cast.«⁴⁹

Through affirming their destiny, BTH gives a powerful message that the purpose of Black Americans is not to only suffer and survive. Their purpose in this world is to become better to and to make things better, for they are not without agency and the ability to change their fate.

2.3 Affirming Community

BTH affirms community by dispelling apathy, or a lack of care for the well-being of others. What has helped Black Americans the most with surviving and thriving in the face of constant oppression is a practice from their African ancestors called *extended kinship*.⁵⁰ During slavery Black families were frequently torn apart, and to deal with this dispersal they informally adopted one another. For example, when children were sold and taken away from their parents, any relatives on the plantations where they were sent to would act as surrogate parents. If there were no relatives, strangers would claim and protect them, and these informal adoptions created a unique solidarity. Black Americans began to see themselves as an extended family network and treated one another with the same care that they would give to blood relatives. Furthermore, they called one another by strong

49 James W. Johnson, *The New National Baptist Hymnal*, Nashville 1977, 477.

50 Mitchell, Church, 167.

familial titles, which can be seen today when unrelated Black people refer to each other as »Brotha« and/or »Sista«.

Overtime the practice of extended kinship became a pillar of BR, and it made Black houses of worship into an extended family network. Maya Angelou mentions this in, *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes*, where she highlights the care for travelers in the segregated American South.

»In the United States, during segregation, Black travelers, unable to stay in hotels restricted to White patrons, stopped at Churches and told the Black ministers and deacons of their predicaments. Church officials would select a home and inform the unexpecting host of their decision. There was never a protest, but the new host relied on the generosity of their neighbors to help feed and even entertain their guests. After the travellers were settled, surreptitious knocks would sound on the back door.

In Stamps, Arkansas, I so often heard,

»Sister Henderson, I know you've got guests. Here's a pan of biscuits.«

»Sister Henderson, Mama sent half a cake for your visitors.«

»Sister Henderson, I made a lot of macaroni and cheese, maybe this will help with your visitors.«⁵¹

In Angelou's account, the travelers are claimed by their hosts through extended kinship, which has a similar place in BTH to the place it has in BR. Extended kinship is also a pillar of BTH, and it emphasizes selfless solidarity through claiming those in need with a familial care. Another gesture of kinship among Black Americans is moaning, which began with kidnapped Africans on ships in the Atlantic.⁵² Their linguistic differences were a communication barrier, but they overcame it by moaning improvised tunes in unison. They would also add groans as they wept through somber melodies, and this became a language without words that enabled them to care for one another. Whilst expressing their individual grief they could offer compassion and understanding, and this unique form of support can be found today in Black American worship.

In traditional Black worship gatherings, one will hear moaning during prayers and see worshippers placing hands on the shoulders of others who are weeping. This wordless language created during the Middle Passage is still used by Black Americans, and like their foreparents it reminds them of their duty to one another. They are not just people of African descent with the same struggle, they

51 Maya Angelou, *All God's Children Need Travelling Shoes*, New York 1986, 94.

52 Kellemen/Edwards, *Beyond the Suffering*, 61.

are family with a responsibility to care for one another. Cornel West defines love as a »steadfast commitment to the well-being of others«⁵³, and BTH fosters this commitment through acts of extended kinship.

By affirming the humanity, destiny, and community of the context that it speaks to, BTH gives meaning, hope, and love to stop the nihilistic threat. It pushes back othering, victimology, and apathy, and makes room for Black Americans to find solutions for their suffering in the here and now. Some solutions have been handed down from generations before them, and others are being discovered and have yet to be discovered. Nevertheless, Black Americans are agents of rescue in their own story and walk with a God Who knows their losses but also knows their victories. A suffering and celebrating God Who is leading them to better days, and Who, as an old proverb from their Elders says, compels them to seek progress.

»God makes three requests of His children:
Do the best you can, where you are, with what you have, now.«

3. The Goals of Black Theology

3.1 A New Theme

Like all other theologies BTH is not static and is in constant need of critical reflection and reform when the occasion arises. One moment that required reform, which was mentioned earlier, was in the late 1960's, when the NCNC responded to critiques and concerns from the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements.⁵⁴ As the Civil Rights Movement grew, Black Americans wanted full equality and an end to the unjust systems that made them second class citizens. In other words, the Divine companion Who had guided them was no longer suitable and effective, and what they needed was a vision of God working to end the causes of their suffering. BTH required a new theme that went beyond endurance, and even thriving, and that theme came from James Cone as he looked through the Bible and Black history.⁵⁵

53 Matt Lilley, *Why We Love. The Science of Affection*, Oxford 2020, 45.

54 James H. Cone, *My Soul Looks Back*, Maryknoll 1986, 54.

55 Cone, *A Black Theology*, 23–35.

Like those in the NCNC, Cone observed a constant throughout the Bible, but it was more than a special care of God for the downtrodden and marginalized. Cone saw a God who sided with the oppressed, and in so doing stood with them in their fight against oppressors. For instance, in the Old Testament God sided with Israel against the Canaanite occupation of Palestine, and in the New Testament Jesus sided with the outcasts of Israel instead of pious and devout leaders.⁵⁶ Such stories showed Cone a theme of liberation running through the Bible like a red thread, and Black Christianity also had this theme in its old tradition of Spirituals.⁵⁷ These prayer-hymns from enslaved Africans contained more than petitions for comfort; many were declarations of a firm belief that God had sided with the enslaved.⁵⁸ One well-known Spiritual that expressed this belief said:

»Well I read about the streets of gold
And I read about the throne
Not everybody callin' ›Lord, Lord‹
Is gonna see that heavenly home

Everybody talkin' 'bout heav'n that ain't goin' there
Everybody talkin' 'bout heav'n that ain't goin'
Everybody talkin' 'bout heav'n that ain't goin' there
Oh my Lord‹⁵⁹

At first glance the »Everybody« could be understood as religious hypocrites, but many Spirituals had coded lyrics that conveyed secret messages through religious imagery.⁶⁰ Behind a facade of common Christian terms these songs carried double meanings, and the double meaning of this hymn was the oppressors of the enslaved. As it was with the man who purchased Emmanuel mentioned earlier, most slave owners were Church members and thought that God was on their side. In fact, some saw their fortune gained from injustice as God's blessing, but those they oppressed countered this by singing, »Everybody talkin' about heav'n that ain't goin' there«. The enslaved wanted their captors to know that the Creator was

56 Cone, *A Black Theology*, 6.

57 Cone, *For My People*, 63.

58 Brian K. Blount, *Can I get Witness? Reading Revelation through African American Culture*, Louisville 2005, 42-43.

59 Gregory G. Ogle, *Let the Men Fight. A Frank Discussion of African-American Men and Christianity*, Bloomington 2006, 33.

60 Cone, *For My People*, 63.

not on their side but sided with those who worked in fields and saw their loved ones sold away.

Throughout the Bible and Black Christian traditions, Cone saw the Divine's approval of the downtrodden and lowly. Furthermore, he saw this approval when it came to their desire to be free from the ills that brought them grief. From these observations he found a new theme for BTH, which could meet the needs put forth by critics like the Black Power Movement. This theme was liberation which presented a liberating God Who worked for and with the world's oppressed to set them loose from bondage. Cone writes:

»The task of theology then, is to explicate the meaning of God's liberating activity so that those who labor under enslaving powers will see that the forces of liberation are the very activity of God. Christian theology is never just a study of the being of God. Rather it is a study of God's liberating activity in the world, God's activity on behalf of the oppressed.«⁶¹

By way of the theme of liberation Cone transformed BTH, and created a new perspective known as Black Liberation Theology (BLTH). To be clear, BLTH is not a replacement of BTH, but a reform that enables it to better address the needs of the context that it speaks to. It also clarifies the goal of BTH, which is firstly the full emancipation of Black Americans and the dissolution of the forces against them. One of these forces is the nihilistic threat, and the theme of liberation does more than ward it off; liberation is like a sword that cuts it down, and in the process gives meaning, hope, and love. It gives Black Americans meaning through God not siding with their oppressors, hope through God's liberating activity in the world, and love through God's liberating activity on their behalf.

3.2 A New Norm

When it was first expressed BLTH was, as Anthony Carter writes, a balm to the ravaged souls of Black Americans⁶², but overtime its effectiveness was lessened by a series of weaknesses.⁶³ In essence, Cone's reform of BTH needed to

61 Cone, *A Black Theology*, 3.

62 Anthony Carter, *On Being Black and Reformed. A New Perspective on the African-American Christian Experience*, Philipsburg 2003, 16.

63 Cone, *A Black Theology*, xi-xx.

be reformed, and he recognized this after several shifts in his theological and social perspectives. One shift was the original norm that he had used in BLTH, which was a Christ Who deeply identified with the Black American experience. Contrary to White depictions Cone declared that Jesus was Black and stated that God is whatever color God needs to be that the oppressed might know that they matter.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, he identified Christ too deeply with the Black experience, which led to an exclusion of the sufferings of other oppressed groups. The focus of Cone's initial norm was too narrow in scope, and it gave the impression that God only cared for the liberation of Black Americans.

In its narrowness the Black Christ led to a narrow focus in BTH and made it a potential source of othering for non-Black oppressed people. Its affirmation of Black humanity was not meant to cause exclusion, and it stemmed from a view of salvation that is radically inclusive. Enslaved Africans in their belief that God was present and identified with them, did not see themselves as the focal point of God's redemptive work. They believed that anyone could receive the gift of salvation, and this included slave owners who dehumanized and degraded them. As they wafed between anger and fear while suffering in the New World, enslaved Africans somehow managed to pray for their owners to find salvation. One former slave from Virginia named Silas Jackson spoke of such a prayer.

»I have heard it said that Tom Ashbie's father went to one of the cabins late at night, the slaves were having a secret prayer meeting. He heard one slave ask God to change the heart of his master and deliver him from slavery so that he may enjoy freedom. Before the next day the man disappeared, no one ever seeing him again [...]. When old man Ashbie [Tom's father] died, just before he died, he told the White Baptist minister that he had killed Zeek for praying and that he was going to hell.«⁶⁵

The prayer that cost Zeek his life shows the radical salvation of slaves, and this inclusive redemption runs counter to the exclusive nature of the Black Christ. Since its birth BTH has had a broad soteriology, and to be consistent with it Cone began to seek an alternative norm. Moreover, his original norm was not meant to be permanent,⁶⁶ and he recognized its limitations by the end of the 1970's.⁶⁷

64 Ron Rhodes, *Black Theology, Black Power, and the Black Experience*, <https://www.equip.org> (9.6.2009).

65 Norman R. Yetman, *Voices from Slavery: 100 Authentic Slave Narratives*, Mineola 2012, 177.

66 Carter, *Reformed*, 16.

67 James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, Maryknoll 1997, 215.

At that time a Black Christ was needed as Black Americans sought full equality, but as their situation began to improve, this Christ was no longer needed. During the 1990's they came into more positions of power, such as political offices where they could create just laws and shape public policies. There was also the election of Barak Obama to the presidency, which for the first time put a person of African descent in the highest office of America.

At the advent of the 21st century the Black Christ was effectively outdated and needed to be replaced by a norm that better fit new times. In response, some clergy and theologians, the author of this article included, presented a Cosmic Christ which comes from Eastern Christianity and the ancient Patristic tradition (e. g., St. Maximos the Confessor).⁶⁸ This Christ was not limited to a particular race and its concerns, and was not bound to the issue of race in the work of redemption. The greatest problem with the Black Christ was an overemphasis on White racism that kept other issues and forms of oppression (e. g., climate change and sexism) from being properly engaged.⁶⁹ But the Cosmic Christ entailed a universal salvation that was more inclusive and fit with BTH's radical soteriology. It embraced all people, including oppressors, and showed concern for all human struggles while simultaneously calling humanity to have the same concern.

Ultimately, the Cosmic Christ was a suitable alternative to Cone's original norm, and it had the potential to help BTH speak beyond its original context. As a theology of the African Diaspora it had already spoken to the struggles of other Black groups (e. g., Apartheid in South Africa and Zambia), but the Cosmic Christ could help to address the issues of groups outside of the Diaspora. It could also enable BTH to engage issues of oppression beyond racism, and to stop the nihilistic threat in other social contexts. Nihilism is not a problem only faced by Black Americans and the African Diaspora; it is a human problem that is found in all societies. There is currently a global need for meaning, hope, and love, and a norm like the Cosmic Christ could aid BTH in joining the efforts to meet it.

68 Jonathan Tran, *The New Black Theology. Retrieving Ancient Sources to Challenge Racism*, <https://www.christiancentury.org> (26.01.2012).

69 Willis Jenkins, *The Future of Ethics. Sustainability, Social Justice, and Religious Creativity*, Washington 2013, 209.

3.3 A New Liberation

Jürgen Moltmann, whom Cone often cited, said that oppression has two sides and destroys the humanity of both through one victimizing the other. Additionally, reconciliation is not a one-sided activity, and has to entail a freedom that is also for oppressors.

»The liberation of the oppressed from their suffering must lead to the liberation of the oppressors from the evil they commit; otherwise, there can be no liberation for a new community in justice and freedom. The goal of these reciprocal liberations cannot be anything less than a community of men and women, free of fear, in which there are no longer any oppressors, and no longer any oppressed.«⁷⁰

This view of liberation from Moltmann is not alien to BTH, which presents the gift of salvation as being for all of humanity and for the transformation of all people. This belief can be found in the prayers of slaves for a change in their owners' hearts, and in the Spirituals that they sang such as, *Deep Down in My Heart*.

»Lord, You know I love everybody,
Deep down in my heart.
Lord, You know I love everybody,
Deep down in my heart.
Lord, You know I love everybody,
Deep down in my heart.
Amen, Amen, Amen.«⁷¹

Unlike »Everybody Talkin' 'Bout Heav'n«, the Everybody in this Spiritual is positive, and can be changed with the names and terms of specific people by the singer. One can say, »Lord You know I love my preacher/mother/father/friend/etc.«, and it is possible that some slaves would add the names of those who owned them. This Spiritual has no double-meaning or coded secret message, and it speaks plainly of a genuine care that the Christian faith requires. In the New Testament Jesus commands His followers to love their enemies⁷², and enslaved Africans tried their best to keep this challenging commandment. For instance, Frederick Douglass, who bore great anger towards slavery, told his former owner that he

70 Jürgen Moltmann, *Experiences in Theology*, Minneapolis 2000, 183.

71 W. M. Billy Givens, *Deep Down in My Heart*, <https://www.loc.gov/>.

72 Matthew 5,43–44.

entertained no malice in his heart. He even invited him to visit his home and stay with him, and to receive the hospitality of a guest and fellow human being.

»There is no roof under which you would be more safe than mine, and there is nothing in my house which you might need for your comfort, which I would not readily grant [...]. I am your fellow-man, but not your slave.«⁷³

Douglass' words reflect the liberation that Moltmann spoke of, where fear is gone and the oppressed and oppressors stand in a new relationship. There is a dual transformation that takes place, where both sides are changed in heart and find meaning, hope, and love together. There is no othering, victimology, or apathy, for all involved are affirmed in humanity, destiny, and community. This type of liberation is constantly found throughout the Bible, and especially in the story of Saul who persecuted the early Church. After encountering the risen Christ he was unable to see, and a Christian named Ananias was commanded by God to heal him. In spite of deep caution and fear Ananias goes to the Pharisee, and while laying hands upon him in prayer says: »Brother Saul, Christ has sent me«.⁷⁴

At the meeting of Ananias and Saul, both oppressed and oppressor are brought together and are set free from a mutual bondage in the chains of hatred and fear. They are also changed and enter a new relationship, where they go from religious enemies to family in faith. Inspired by this and other Biblical stories, enslaved Africans desired this liberation in the midst of their own sufferings. Since their time this desire has lived on through their descendants and is the ultimate goal of the theology that they first articulated in the New World. For centuries Black American Christians, while angry about injustice, have sought to change the relationship with people who mean them harm. Even those who have left Christianity have kept this desire for dual liberation, such as the writer and activist James Baldwin who advised his young nephew:

»But these men [White oppressors] are your brothers, your lost younger brothers, and if the word »integration« means anything, this is what it means, that we with love shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it [...]. We cannot be free until they are free.«⁷⁵

73 Frederick Douglass, *Selected Speeches and Writings*, Chicago 1999, 111.

74 Acts 9,10–19.

75 James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, New York 1963, 10.

4. The Future of Black Theology

4.1 A Broader Vision

Eight years after the release of his first book, *Black Theology and Black Power*, Cone discouraged Black Christians from using his early vision of liberation. This vision had an intense focus on the racial injustice of the 1960's, and freedom from its oppressive systems that promoted inequality. But as social progress was made in the years following the Civil Rights Act, some found that Cone's early vision, like the Black Christ, was outdated. By the 1970's Black Americans had made great strides for equality, and the discourse of oppression had widened to problems beyond that of race. Certainly, racism was still a central part of the Black experience, but other pressing issues had emerged in Black American life. Two issues, as Essau McCaully points out, were sexism and patriarchy, which Womanist scholars had found were excluded in BTH.

»Womanist scholars critique White feminism for its failure to examine its own privilege and for its neglect of racial issues. It [Womanism] also critiques Black theology because it focused on the exclusion of sexism and patriarchy.«⁷⁶

In response to the Womanist critique Cone reassessed his early vision and found that it put BTH on the road to a future irrelevance. With its intense focus on the racism of the 1960's, the vision made BTH a one issue theology crafted solely for a specific era. It had become unable to look at other parts of Black life and move along with the times as racial justice became more realized.⁷⁷ Furthermore, Cone's vision made BTH unable to reach beyond its context and achieve its ultimate goal of a liberation for more than Black Americans. Much of this was due to a limited range of resources, which he mentions as he looks back on the weaknesses of his early work.

At the time of writing a *Black Theology of Liberation*, I had not travelled to Asia, Africa, Latin America, or even the Caribbean; and unfortunately, I had done little reading about the problems of poverty, colonialism, humans rights, and monopoly capitalism. Largely due to my involvement in the

76 Essau McCaulley, *Reading While Black*, Downers Grove 2020, 180.

77 Forrest E. Harris, *What Does it Mean to be Black and Christian?* Volume 2, Nashville 1998, 73.

Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians, meeting many Third World persons and seeing for myself the enormous gaps between rich and poor nations. I am convinced that no one should claim to be doing Christian theology without making the liberation of the Third World from the exploitation of the First World and the Second World a central aspect of its purpose.«⁷⁸

Previous to his travels, Cone mainly engaged with resources from his context that kept him in a narrow discourse centred on racial issues in the United States. But after encountering theologians and literature from non-Western contexts, he was brought into a broader discourse that expanded his perspective. He came to abandon the idea that humanity was fragmented into isolated ethnic and national groups and embraced a view of humanity as a whole despite its many differences. Cone also came to view Blackness as a human and not a racial identity and believed that because of this Black Americans had a responsibility to more than Africa and the African Diaspora. They had an obligation to seek the liberation of all people.

»There is an interconnectedness of all humanity that makes the freedom of one people dependent upon the liberation of all. No one can be free until all are set free.«⁷⁹

After entering a broader discourse, Cone realized that if BTH were to have a good future, where it spoke relevantly to Black life and reached its ultimate goal, then it had to have a broader vision. A vision that got away racism and showed that the historic Black struggle was more than simply reacting to it.⁸⁰ For too long White Supremacy had been at the center of the Black theological discourse, which led BTH to foster the very things that it was meant to put down. Anthony Bradley writes that Cone's initial vision encouraged victimology and caused BTH to present Black Americans as nothing more than »the oppressed«. ⁸¹ To be fair, they have been victimized by the ills of White Supremacy, but oppression is not their only fate or the core of their identity. African Americans, as was previously mentioned, have known more than constant sorrow; they have known joy while making great strides in the quest for freedom and equality.

78 Cone, *A Black Theology*, xvi–xvii.

79 Cone, *A Black Theology*, xvii.

80 James H. Cone, *Risks of Faith: The Emergence of a Black Theology of Liberation*, Boston 2000, 46.

81 Bradley, *Liberating*, 15.

Though not intentional, Cone's early vision had ultimately overemphasized Black pain, and downplayed the progress that Black Americans have achieved. And despite the call that he gave for a broader new vision at the end of the twentieth century, BTH still faces the problems of the old in the twenty-first century. At a public panel discussion of Black theologians hosted by the Jude 3 Project⁸², Ekemini Uwan had this to say about BTH's current discourse:

»I resent the fact that we have to have a conversation about White Supremacy in conversation with Black Christianity [...]. I am tired of talking about White people, White Supremacy, and Whiteness [...]. I know we have to talk about the negative things, but we have better stories and more rich stories to tell about our faith.«⁸³

4.2 Better Stories

At present there is a tension within BTH between the old narrow vision and the new broader vision that Cone called for. As Black theologians, and Black Christians in general, seek to rightly address racial issues, they desire to do so in a way that goes beyond racism and its ills. They want, as Uwan pointed out, to tell the better stories and get to a point where they can speak about Blackness without referencing oppression. Another thing that is desired is to get BTH more connected with the Black community, for it eventually became institutionalized in predominantly White spaces of learning. Instead of being in the context it is meant for as the NCNC and its counterparts had intended, much of the dialogue of BTH has taken place in White seminaries and become more academic in nature.⁸⁴ Consequently, this has led to a continued struggle of getting beyond racism, for White seminaries are currently emphasizing anti-racism initiatives to help White congregations and denominations to actively confront prejudice and discrimination against people of color.

82 The Jude 3 Project is an organization founded in 2018 by Lisa Fields, which works to address current issues and the intellectual struggles of Christians of African descent in the United States and abroad.

83 Uwan made this statement during the Jude 3 Network's Courageous Conversations conference in 2021. Courageous Conversations is an annual gathering that pairs black voices trained in conservative and progressive spaces to discuss topics that are relevant for the church and culture.

84 Elonda Clay, *A Black Theology of Liberation or Legitimation. A Postcolonial Response to Cone's Black Theology and Black Power at Forty*, in: *Black theology. An international Journal* 8/3 (2010), 307–326, here: 320.

Though there are many Black theologians taking part in anti-racist work (e. g., Jemar Tisby)⁸⁵, most wish to move away from making BTH all about fighting racism in its various forms. They want to show, as Anthony Bradley recently expressed, that BTH can give the Church and Academy far more than content on justice and can speak to a variety of subjects ranging from ecclesiology to public health.⁸⁶ Looking back to Cone's new perspective after traveling to and engaging with theologians from non-Western contexts, BTH has the potential to not just counter prejudice and discrimination. In fact, it has lived and is living out this potential and has brought and is bringing liberation outside of its original context and around the world.

In the end, BTH has not yet arrived at the place that Cone hoped it would, and it still struggles with being directed by a narrow vision from the past. Nevertheless, progress has been made since the 1960's, and Black theologians continue to answer the call for a broader vision. Despite their differences and points of disagreement, each one is working diligently to tell the better stories. Stories that push back victimology and othering, give Black Americans a sense of purpose beyond their pain and suffering, and put meaning, hope, and love at the center of BTH. There are professors like Vince Bantu of Fuller Theological Seminary, who teaches on the history of the Black Church and ancient African Christianity. There are pastors like Neichelle Guidry, who is the chapel Dean at Spelman College and has established her own coffee company while encouraging Black entrepreneurs. There are curators like Teddy Reeves who works at the Smithsonian Institution, and is filming a documentary titled *God Talk* which looks at the religious life of Black Millennials. And there are writers like Candice Benbow, whose recent book »Red Lip Theology« is bringing healing to women and girls through words of faith and beauty.

Each aforementioned person is a part of a great communion of storytellers who are bringing BTH closer to the future that many desire for it. Again, there is still the task of speaking out against racism, but the NCNC, Cone, and those who have come after them are looking forward to the day when it cannot be mentioned. A day when they, in the words of the Spiritual, can lay down the burdens

85 Tisby's latest book, which was published in 2021 is titled, *How to Fight Racism: Courageous Christianity and the Journey Toward Racial Justice*.

86 Bradley made this remark in a Facebook post on July 17, 2022. He wrote: »We have to move beyond the idea that the ›only‹ content contribution ethnically Black Christian scholars can offer to churches & the academy is content on race & justice.«

of racial justice, study war no more, and speak of God and Blackness independent of oppression.

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ABSTRACT

Die Schwarze Theologie wurde geschaffen, um den Kontext der schwarzen Amerikaner:innen anzusprechen, die sich einer nihilistischen Bedrohung durch verschiedene Formen der Unterdrückung ausgesetzt sahen. Sie sollte ihnen durch die Vision eines Gottes, der ihnen als Mitleidender und Mitfeiernder gegenwärtig ist, ein Gefühl von Sinn, Hoffnung und Liebe vermitteln. Dennoch bleibt die Frage, ob die Schwarze Theologie über ihren Kontext hinaus Bedeutung hat und anderen Gruppen, die mit Unterdrückung konfrontiert sind, Sinn, Hoffnung und Liebe bieten kann. Kommt sie nur den Unterdrückten zugute, oder kann sie auch für die Unterdrücker von Nutzen sein? Dieser Artikel gibt einen detaillierten Einblick in die Schwarze Theologie aus der Insiderperspektive bzw. aus der Sicht eines schwarzen amerikanischen Theologen, dessen Glaube von ihr geprägt wurde. Er untersucht die afrikanischen Wurzeln, Praktiken und Ziele der Schwarzen Theologie und zeigt auch, wie sie über ihren ursprünglichen Kontext hinaus zu Freiheitskämpfen generell etwas zu sagen hat. Schließlich wird aufgezeigt, wie die Schwarze Theologie eine doppelte Befreiung anstrebt, d. h. die Freiheit und Transformation der Unterdrückten wie der Unterdrücker.