

‘Mis-religion of the Negro and Oppression’: William R. Jones, Theodicy, and Black Theology

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Introduction

In thinking about a Post-Cone Black theology, I think it essential that we consider one of James Cone's contemporaries who not only pushed him but the entire Black theology enterprise on the issue of Black oppression and suffering. The problem of Black oppression was raised by William R. Jones in his monumental work, *Is God a White Racist? A Preamble to Black Theology* (IGWR) in which he problematized Black liberation theology's assertion that Black suffering possessed redemptive ends. The title of this paper comes from a never published work attributed to William R. Jones, a philosophical theologian.

This paper seeks to build on the work of John H. McClendon III's analysis in *Philosophy of Religion and the African American Experience*, (2017) of William R. Jones as a philosophical theologian, by explicating Jones' conception of mis-religion as a form of oppression that exist as a part of religious traditions intersection with anti-Black racist systems. Finally, I set out to offer some prescriptions for a Black theology that is not rooted in theological colonialism or what I will refer to throughout this essay as "mis-religion"

The concept of *mis-religion* was William R. Jones' distinction between non-oppressive religious thought and his identification of oppressive features of religious thought that infiltrated the consciousness of oppressed peoples. However, Jones' critique was not singularly targeted at Black liberation theology or the Christian tradition. I argue that Jones' concept of *mis-religion* can be expanded to other constellations in the Black religious cosmos to uncover oppressive features of cosmologies and theologies that purport themselves to be liberation discourses. In this paper I concentrate my analysis on what I have termed the Black Abrahamic religious tradition (BART), meaning the collection of African American Jewish, Christian, and Islamic religious traditions and communities. Understanding these religious traditions possess immense diversity it is still possible to discuss underlying traits common across religious boundaries. I am arguing that these religious communities are bound together by beliefs, values, and attitudes that are rooted in an attachment to the Abrahamic tradition and cosmology but essentially possess oppressive features that conceal anti-Black beliefs, values and attitudes. By considering a wider swath of African American religiosity outside of the Christian tradition I believe I am keeping with the spirit of Jones who argued that there are only two types of religions "those that undergird oppression and those that undermine it."¹

William R. Jones and the Question of Oppression

William Jones is often overlooked as an important interlocutor of James Cone and Black liberation theology due to his dismissal of the Christian-centric assumptions of normative Black liberation theologians. In distinction to Cone and other Black liberation theologians Jones argues that God that has little, or no direct impact on humans. Although Jones' theology included the existence of God, he resisted attaching any anthropomorphic traits to God. Jones challenged Black liberation theologians to provide evidence of God's beneficence towards African Americans, or what he refers to as the liberation event.

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¹ William R. Jones, "Oppression, Race, and Humanism." P.7

This principle obviously presents apparently insurmountable difficulties for the Black theologian, for it forces him to identify the actual events in which he sees the benevolent and liberatory hand of God at work not for man in general, *but for Blacks*. This is not easily accomplished in light of the long history of oppression that is presupposed by each Black theologian.²

Jones' methodology was rooted in philosophical theology. Rather than taking theological arguments at face value he offered a hypothetical conception of God. In what could be easily designated as Black deism instead he argued for a humanocentric theism. Humanocentric theism required certain boundaries be set in order to be logically compatible with a framework of Black oppression *and* God's existence. Jones set up oppression as the defining characteristic of the Black theological enterprise. Any theological assertion had to withstand the existence of Black suffering and oppression, the lack thereof Jones opined opened Black theologians to the charge of divine racism. By divine racism, Jones argued that by associating God with any particular notion of "chosen" people set up a binary of "in-group/out group" which would require Black theologians to demonstrate that God was indeed on the side of the oppressed rather than the God of the oppressor who actual sanctioned the suffering of Black people. Hence he raised the provocative question, "Is God a White Racist?"

According to Jones IGWR served as an internal criticism of Black theology rather than an external critique. John McClendon III has provided an outline of the basic contours of Jones methodological importance of as a Black theologian. He identified several areas that Jones had broken away from normative Black liberation theology. He argues that Jones identifies four principles as the controlling principles of Black liberation theology: canon, creed, church and culture.³

According to McClendon, Jones viewed "all theological beliefs, values, and attitudes, even those that serve as the groundwork for Black Christian theology- that is to say theologies within the conventional BLT boundaries lines-were also open to rational assessment and critical self-inspection".⁴ This means that all conceptions of Black theology as produced within the constellation of Black religion should be regarded as potential sites for the presence of mis-religion operating as liberation discourse.

While Black liberation theology is generally regarded as a Christian enterprise, African American religious traditions outside of the confines of the Black Church have also offered liberatory discourses that require critical engagement. For the purposes of the paper I will discuss Black non-Christian religious traditions that purport to offer African Americans liberation from economic, social and political (ESP) oppression. These religious movements much like Black Christian liberation theologians have asserted that Black liberation is the ultimately the goal of God's work with human history.

I argue that this also serves as a form of internal criticism. I am locating myself with the realm of Black theology, however like Jones I make no commitments to a Christocentric conception of Black theology. Likewise, I argue that oppression must be at the center of theological introspection. Jones outlines his method of internal criticism as the following,

This process dictates a precise theological method- a virus vaccine model, so to speak. Methodologically, the virus-vaccine design comprises two phases: Phase one gives dedicated attention to the infectious agent- the virus of oppression"- acquiring as much knowledge as possible about its composition and vital processes-in other words, an accurate phenomenology (grid) of oppression. Phase two develops a specific vaccine or antitoxin that neutralizes or destroys the noxious agent...A similar connection exist between liberation theology's purpose.⁵

Therefore, to correctly identify "infection" in Black religious thought I offer a framework for what oppressive religion looks like when masking itself as a liberation discourse through the concept of *mis-religion*.

² IGWR, pp. 18-20

³ McClendon, *Philosophy of Religion and the African American Experience*, 302.

⁴ McClendon, p. 289.

⁵ Jones, "Oppression, Race, and Humanism," p.9

What is Mis-Religion?

Mis-religion is the theological dehumanizing of African Americans by appeals to redemptive suffering which places Black people in the position of justifying their humanity through cosmologies of wretchedness. Mis-religion is an extension of Carter G. Woodson's articulation of "mis-education" in that it focuses on the inner working of oppression which requires a set of values, beliefs, and attitudes. Woodson like Jones realized that ESP oppression is rooted in how the oppressed are instructed by the oppressor both directly and indirectly:

Taught the same economics, history, philosophy, literature and *religion* [emphasis mine] which have established the present code of morals, the Negro's mind has been under the control of the oppressor. The problem of holding the Negro down, therefore, is easily solved. When you control a man's thinking you do not have to tell him to stand here or go yonder. He will find his "proper place" and will stay in it. You do not need to send him to the back door, he will cut one for his special benefit. His education makes it necessary.⁶

Woodson's concept of miseducation includes religion as a tool of oppression of the oppressed. In his interrogation of the relationship between miseducation and religion, Reginald F. Davis employs the term "misreligion" to describe the oppressive ethics and worldview that African Americans inherited from their indoctrination in American society.⁷ In highlighting the criticism of antebellum Christianity by Frederick Douglass, Davis writes,

Miseducation and misreligion have caused the oppressed to become "otherworldly-quietistic." They have been taught "what is ought to be," which predetermines that change is inappropriate and unnecessary. Once this teaching is embraced, the oppressed are not motivated to cancel their economic, social, and political oppression. If liberation is to become reality, the misreligion of the oppressed must be dumped or discarded, and this principle is evident in [Frederick] Douglass's religious odyssey.⁸

The influence of Jones on Davis's work is clear, misreligion is effectively a symbiotic relationship between spiritual and ESP oppression. The relationship between religious and ESP oppression requires that enslaved and colonized people recognize and justify how the material conditions of enslavement and colonization generate and perpetuate the conditions of misreligion. Engelbert Mveng, an African theologian, has analyzed the correlation between poverty and religious worldview. Mveng argues that,

when persons are bereft of their identity, their dignity, their freedom, their thought, their history...they sink into a kind of poverty which no longer concerns only exterior or interior goods or possessions but strikes at the very being essence, and dignity of the human person. It is this poverty that we call anthropological poverty. This is an *indigence of being* the legacy of slavery and colonization.⁹

I argue that this anthropological poverty or indigence of being is at the root of the liberation discourses of African American religion. To understand how the ESP conditions of enslavement were transformed into religious worldview that undergirded the emergence of a Black Abrahamic religious identity and worldview requires that delineation of the defining beliefs, values, and attitudes as a composite system rather than disparate and competing traditions.

Defining Black Abrahamic Religion Traditions (BART)

The autonomous forms of the Abrahamic religions developed by African Americans will be collectively referred to as Black Abrahamic Religious Traditions (BART). Rather than concentrating solely on the Black liberation theology of the Black Christian tradition I have decided to expand Jones's critique of Black theology to the wider BART.

As with the Black Church, the four principal elements of BART are: canon, creed, community, and culture. However, for the purposes of this paper I will concentrate on two of these elements: canon and culture. At the foundation of the BART is a belief that the Bible represents a history book that is evidence of God's activity in human activities. This belief is

⁶ Woodson, *Miseducation* p. xxxiii

⁷ Reginald Davis, "Frederick Douglass: A Precursor of Liberation Theology," p. 115.

⁸ Davis, p. 116.

⁹ Engelbert Mveng, "Impoverishment and Liberation: A Theological Approach for Africa and the Third World," pp. 156-157.

held across the spectrum of BART.

Ancillary to this acceptance of the Bible as history book is the desire to “uncover” the African or Black presence in the Bible text. Neither Jones nor McClendon are challenging the geographic factors that would necessitate that the people who inhabited the lands that encompass the biblical narratives were what we would call “people of color” in contemporary parlance. Rather what McClendon through Jones seeks to problematize is the evidentiary nature of such beliefs as proof of God’s relationship to people who are racialized as Black. The blurring of the mythic nature of biblical narratives with African antiquity to transform the Bible into a “Black” history text has deep roots in the African American tradition. This is particularly so for non-Christian formulations of Abrahamic religion such as Black Judaism which casts the Bible, particularly the Exodus narrative as a historical prelude to the events of the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and New World enslavement. Enslaved Africans of the western hemisphere are regarded as the descendants of the biblical Israelites through an appeal of prophetic typology. This is only possible if sacred writ can be invoked as historical text.

This is closely followed by the Black Islamic traditions of the Moorish Science Temple and Nation of Islam although Muslim incarnations rely heavily on the biblical text as historical (albeit tampered in their belief) work. The MST and NOI reworking of biblical narratives still heavily depend on historical certainty attached the Bible. The Moors (descendants of Canaanites) and Tribe of Shabazz are still rooted in a worldview in which the Bible represents a historical epoch in African history. However, even “orthodox” African American Muslims have not been immune to this worldview. The Quran along with the Bible has led to the construction of Black Abrahamic identities such as Bilalians (spiritual descendants of Bilal the first muzein of Islam) which is distinct from the historical West African Islamic heritage that accompanied enslaved Africans across the Atlantic to the Americas. The assertion of Bilalian identity like the lost tribes of Israel is an attempt to locate African American identity in a cosmology and theological frameworks that purports pre-enslavement Abrahamic monotheistic lineage.

Essentially the issue I am raising is the *semiticization* of African American culture and self-consciousness. The adoption of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam is accompanied by a conversion of the African self-consciousness from traditional African religious cosmologies (read: heathen) to an African religious identity located within the Biblical worldview (monotheistic). This framing of the semiticization or what Ronald Neal discusses as the “Abrahamic ideal”¹⁰ in his analysis of the impact of Abrahamic religions on the masculinity of African American men means that the conversion and adoption of new religious consciousness goes beyond the simple adoption of creeds and doctrines to the reformulation of the self. In effect, the sons and daughters of *orishas*, *loas*, and *abosom* have become the “sons” of Abraham, Isaac (or Ishmael), and Jacob.

In conjunction with the adoption of Abrahamic religious identities are liberation discourses based on the Abrahamic God. Across the Abrahamic spectrum particularly in non-Christian manifestations of BART we see a robust theodicy based on redemptive suffering. The God of the Bible is viewed as the guarantor of liberation although Black suffering is pervasive. Black Judaism and Black Islam has been even more explicit in their portrayal of God as identifying with the plight of Black people considering the historic transgenerational suffering experienced by people of African ancestry. Perhaps no other Black religion has had more to say about the condition of Black people and the nature of God than Nation of Islam. Considered to be a heterodox version of Islam at best and heretical at worse, the NOI doctrine consciously addressed the condition of Black people in imaginative an origin myths and cosmology that situate Black people as the “original Man” but as a consequence of disobedience fall from grace and suffer at the hands of inferior devilish whites who are allowed to rule over them for a set time.

What we witness in the elevation of biblical (and possibly Quranic) canon and the culture as determinants of Black theological authority is the residue of theological oppression that has been transformed and articulated now as path for liberation. These discourses were born in response to ESP oppression whether it was the scripturally inspired “curse of Ham” or later scientific racism of the early 20th century. Therefore, theological colonialism distorted both the sacred and secular senses of self in the African consciousness and provide the fertile environment for mis-religion to sprout within BART.

¹⁰ Ronald Neal

Oppression and Theological Colonialism as the Basis for Misreligion

The African American encounter with modern European religion is a history of theological colonialism. The “theological” aspect of the European colonial project is a set of beliefs, values, and attitudes related to the role of the divine in a world full of distorted and asymmetrical social relations, a world where an elderly Black man could be a “boy” by virtue of his skin color. Therefore, theology from the underside of history should not strive to be only what the authors of European religious colonialism intended. Instead, it should be a discourse that functions in harmony with the “spirituality” of the oppressed. Unlike the more popular and ultimately Eurocentric understanding of the term, spirituality here does not mean something removed and completely set aside from economic, social and political life. Instead, it refers to the importance of beliefs, values, and attitudes constructed based on lived experience. For BART, to posit God’s existence has meant to conceive of a deity who works and acts in the everyday reality of history. But as Jones makes clear, this idea represents a problem for not only systematic Black liberation theology but BART as a whole, not only because it suggests that God is subject to historical forces, but also that God is incapable of addressing all of the suffering found throughout Black experience. In short, compared to the god of enslavement and Jim/Jane Crow segregation the god of BART appears rather weak and ill-suited for the task of liberation.

Despite this seemingly appearance of divine impotence, collectively BART continues to trust in a deity that will someday deliver them from bondage. It is interesting to note how this essential component of God’s nature has not been eliminated from the discourse of the oppressed instead BART recognizes God’s propensity to function on behalf of the oppressed. This immediately raises a problem, for if the God of liberation can act in history, one wonders why those he is liberating cannot act. Has God told them not to fight for their freedom? How would such a God view Black folks he allegedly protects? What type of perspective on God will tolerate such divine apathy?

The first element of liberation emerges from a close inspection of how ESP oppression results in a fractured appreciation of self. This often takes the form of shame. Shame is the historical precondition for theological colonization. Revisiting the Mveng’s notion of *indigence of being*, shame, the “awareness of oneself as devalued, inadequate, [or] repugnant,” is the route by which the Black sacred self becomes questioned, abandoned, and ultimately, forbidden. It is this anthropological poverty that lends itself to what Karl Riezler, terms “disgrace-shame.”¹¹ Disgrace-shame carries the historical weight of others’ knowledge of one’s moral violations. Shameful behavior that is publicly acknowledged often leads to the response of self-sanctioning or communal sanctioning. Disgraceful shame requires a need to re-order behavior to avoid continued transgressions. In disgraceful shame, God presents himself to consciousness as a transforming agent. For Africans who were overwhelmed by white European Christian accusations of collective sinfulness and wretchedness as the disgraced “sons of Ham”, disgrace shame lead to the re-ordering of African sacred consciousness away from the “heathenish” *loas, orishas, abosom* of West Africa directly into the development of an Hamitic/Semitic/Afro Asiatic Blackman identity at the foundation of BART. God was to be found “out there,” and not within. God was “with them,” not “with us.” The stage was now set for the drama of God’s transformation of Black folks into acceptable humans.

The acceptance of God assistance in BART self-transformation begins the process of divine colonization, and usually the first action of a colonizing God is the erection of laws in order to streamline the process of altering one’s theological consciousness. This readily seen in the Christianization of African Americans in which “heathenish” ways were to be exorcised from Black communal religion such as Bishop Daniel Alexander Payne’s campaign against the ring shout and the emotionalism of rural Black religion in the post-Civil War era. However, this re-ordering is present within all BART manifestations. Perhaps one of the most visible during the mid-twentieth century was disciplining of Black bodies by the Nation of Islam through strict dictates covering their how they were to dress, eat, and behave. Scholars of Black religion such as Anthony Pinn and Edward Curtis IV have offered detailed analyses of the aesthetic practices of the Nation of Islam as evidence of breaking with their slave religion and culture. Note the direct assault by the Honorable Elijah Muhammad upon the traditional Southern diet of Black

¹¹ Gilbert Bond, *Paul and the Religious Experience of Reconciliation: Diasporic Community and Creole Consciousness*, p.37.

southerners, such as himself who were migrating North during the Great Migration. His “Eat to Live” program represented the need to colonize and reorder the practices of “shameful” slave ancestry in need of reconstructing to be acceptable to Allah. This is at the foundation of mis-religion, the idea that the descendants of enslaved Africans are spiritually defective therefore a mundane meal containing sweet potatoes and collard greens is signified as evidence of spiritual defect and failure.

Though not immediately apparent, this means that within BART God has declared war on our thought processes. Within BART, God dictates what does or does not constitute correct action which severely hampers our ability to imagine new forms of correct activity or erase old forms of incorrect activity. This is evident throughout BART, in the form of religious conservatism and fundamentalist scriptural interpretations amongst many of the communities under discussion. Often incorrectly assumed to simply be a carryover of Protestant Christianity, the binding of the imagination for the sake of rigid conformity can be seen in the behavior of Malcolm X as new minister within the Nation of Islam who insisted on meticulous adherence to the dictates of the organization even as others sought loosening of the more stringent moral dictates.¹² Similarly, the emphasis that Black Hebrews place on adhering strictly to the Biblical dictate as a way to end transgenerational suffering which is believed to be a divine punishment also follow this line of reasoning.

Because our very imagination is in bondage, our pass to the promised land remains blocked and difficult to map. Along with the binding of our imagination, a discursive shift takes place concurrent with the spiritual change mentioned here. BART articulates God’s work on the African consciousness with rhetorical phrases such as “living in the truth”, “completion”, “lost-found”, “healing”, “growth”, “salvation”, “victory”, etc., hidden behind this discourse is the reality of violence done to Black communal consciousness. A new spirituality that results in one’s “completion” suggests that one’s soul was formerly deficient. A divine “healing” entails one being sick. Our spiritual “growth” means that one was spiritually immature. “Salvation” and “victory” both imply that without the Black Abrahamic religious tradition, one’s soul is lost. The erasure of divine violence becomes a central feature in mis-religion. God’s role in creating tragedy, suffering and despair remains hidden. His attempt to destroy the life he allegedly created becomes an invisible element of salvation.

At the root of all this lay a very sophisticated system of deception and dehumanization. Interestingly enough this condition was summed up succinctly by the words of Malcom X when he stated that Black folk have been religiously “bamboozled,” for in a state of theological colonialism, whites really do not care how “religious” and/or “spiritual” Blacks may be. This is because their original concern was never Black spirituality in the first place. It was colonialism, and until recognition of this fact becomes a mundane feature of BART, Black folk will continue to be subject to divine colonization. Therefore, BART, cannot merely exist. They must exist in relation to white religions through a Manichean matrix of institutional legitimation. The response to this becomes the creation of a series of “orthodoxies” in religious life not necessarily by name, but by practice. Not only must Blacks, for example, be Muslim. They must be Muslim in the way non-Black Muslim immigrants proclaim “correct” Islam should be practiced. The same is true for other religions in the Black Diaspora. Blacks cannot merely be Christian or Jewish; they must be so in accordance with white understandings of Judaism.

But let us suppose a group of Blacks decide they are not going to abide by the divine colonist’s processes of legitimation, that their practice of Judaism, Islam, Christianity or even African traditional religions will be an expression of their own relationship to the divine. If this takes place, at least two things will result. The authors of this new faith will inherent damnation and exclusion from the legitimized community of faith, yet they will begin a process of resistance, of theological decolonization. When orthodoxies begin to lose sway and religious racism becomes absurd instead of mundane, the consciousness of colonized Blacks begin to adopt new divinities, new gods that will remain with them in their struggle against spiritual nihilism. Symbolically, this space may be referred to as the “wilderness” component of theological decolonization. It is not an area where liberation is truly understood and worked for. Liberation from historical slavery may have already passed, but the remnants of spiritual slavery

¹² See: Les Payne and Tamara Payne’s *The Dead are Rising: The Life of Malcolm X*. The author explains that Malcolm X’s level of adherence far outpaced even that of his mentor Elijah Muhammad.

remain in the consciousness of the free. According to womanist theologian Delores Williams, Black people caught in this realm concern themselves mostly with survival and not liberation at all.¹³ The resources of the desert are few, and in all probability, a generation or two must die out before the historical consequences of freedom are totally grasped. When one begins to decolonize in a theological fashion, there always remains the option of going back into slavery and colonialism. The route to liberation is not easy, nor will all those who have begun the journey survive the trek through the wilderness. However, with a clear focus on the goal of leaving the gods of slavery in the past, anti-colonial activity can come about, even in our discourse about the divine.

Many BART have been the explicit about calling for the end of divine colonization. White gods, according to them, have proven themselves to be false gods. Oppressed Black people need gods who will necessarily support them in their cause for justice. If such gods are unwilling or incapable of doing so, then these gods should be abandoned as racist idols. From its beginning, most BART has taught these principles as a basic response to theological colonialism.

Mis-Religion and the BART Consciousness

The relationship between spirituality and religion is very close, but they are not identical. "Spirituality" has to do with how phenomena are valued and connected to each other in the stream of meaning-constituting activities in human life. "Religion" pertains to the ways in which humans are bound to behave when drawing distinctions between meaning-constitutions. However, one need not be spiritual in order to be religious. One can participate in the social construction of meanings without embedding those constructions with an overarching value schema. On the other hand, my assertion here does not allow one to consistently argue that he or she is "spiritual," but not "religious" -- a common way people evade responsibility for religious choices. With this distinction in mind, we can now return to our discussion of BART as a manifestation of theological colonialism and therefore a form of misreligion.

In the African encounter with European faith traditions, Europeans posited their religion as being necessary for human salvation. A by-product of this position was not simply the marginalization of African religiosity it also entailed a *de facto* spiritual equating of "European civilization" with the divine. And many Africans eventually discovered, via misreligion, that in the throne room of heaven sat "The (White) Man."

For if the result of European theological colonialism was the creation of a chasm between the *theos* (God) and the *logos* (speech) in the religious consciousness of non-Europeans, then BART must show how individuals in its communities of faith may once again reconnect their inner speech, their unspoken desires, with their ESP situation. I am suggesting that theological colonialism in the form of racial segregation necessarily resulted not only in a consciousness of segregation on the part of those oppressed, but also a segregated consciousness. In essence the rhetoric of life was separated from the natural activities needed to sustain life. For example, in Black Judaism and the Nation of Islam, a most significant manifestation of mis-religion came in the form of their willingness and choice to completely withdraw themselves from playing a more politically active role in their liberation from oppression. This aspect of mis-religion is reminiscent of a criticism Jones call for Black theologians to support their theological statements about God's liberating activity with evidence in the lives of Black people. Although these religious groups have worked tirelessly at articulating alternate origins myths, cosmologies and disciplining the Black body against the polluting effects of white culture why are Black people still oppressed? If God's will is Black liberation, then why is liberation not a reality for most Blacks?

Thus far, my critique of BART may sound like an appeal to root its discourses in the historical experiences of Black people. And to some extent, this is correct. After all, the effort to indigenize Abrahamic religions in relation to African American culture serves some good and important purposes. However, it remains difficult to see how this strategy avoids the original crisis of Black Christian theology alluded to by William R Jones, the discrepancy between the stated liberatory goals of Black theologians (and as a consequence BART) and the increasingly conservative quietism of institutionalized BART. In short, the BART cannot sustain itself as a relevant theological force in the African American community without cultivating constructive

¹³ Note: See Delores Williams' *Sisters in the Wilderness* for a more thorough account of this problem.

ways to institute changes in the religious life of African Americans. This task amounts to nothing less than digging deeply into the wells of Black spirituality. As a rule, religions tend to change very slowly, but when they change, they do so because the center of spirituality, the central beliefs, values and attitudes exhibited by the community of faith, demand a change in religious form in order for the worshipping community to liturgically express the implications of their spiritual imagination.

Conclusion: The Need for Renewed Black Spiritual Imaginations

The rhetoric involved in convincing Black people to fight on behalf of their liberation is a needed one. However, it is not and cannot be the primary mode of resistance to theological colonialism. After all, people who have been theologically colonized find themselves fighting gods, not humans, in their revolutionary struggle. And who wants to fight an unfair battle-- a battle that, even if you win, you still lose? From whatever angle we look at this problem, fighting gods turns out to be a pointless struggle. The gods will always win. This is the point of the well-known phrase "Arms too short to box with God". Even if we're convinced that victory is on the horizon, that the deities in our violent encounter have been vanquished, gods have a habit of resurrecting themselves anew. Furthermore, when the gods resurrect themselves, they tend to be more powerful warriors than they were in the original battle. All seems hopeless for Black folks, and the only thing they can do, it seems, is vie for the favor of divinities more powerful than those against which they battle. As we see from the religious worldview of antiquity or even the mundane sporting contest, battles between humans not uncommonly turn out to be battles between gods. We must simply hope that our god is the most powerful god on the mountain. What does all this have to do with BART and Black theology?

To make the link between *imagining* one's gods destroying other gods and *seeing* the other gods destroyed requires an uncanny degree of spiritual sophistication. The power of being able to witness what one dreams about is immense, particularly if the witnesses are oppressed people. Whether it was Malcolm X or James Cone their most influential speeches and writings were those in they were able to speak what countless Black people *thought*, but were desperately afraid to *say* hence their efforts came to the joy of Black revolutionaries and the shock of white Christians. Whereas Jones not only talked about the need for a Black theology; he spoke about Black liberation in connection to the present ESP situation. But what are the alternatives for Black people today? Where are the gods that are more powerful than the white, racist ones?

Fantasy, our popular culture leads us to believe, belongs in the realm of childhood fascinations. It is more apt for describing Star Wars and Marvel Cinematic Universe fans than for theologians. However, such a reductionist approach to human phenomena may hide complex truths about what human development and progress in the creation of a more humane world may mean. I raise this issue because *theo-logia* rests on a set of principles connected to both human consciousness (i.e.- the belief or faith in a *theos* or a controlling entity) and political activity (belief or faith in the *logos* or speech). In this sense, then, it is redundant to speak of "political theology," as though *theologia* is not inherently political. But this insight also suggests that the distinction between religion and spirituality I mentioned earlier is accurate. Religion deals with our ability to draw boundaries. Spirituality has to do with our connection to the distinct phenomena that emerge within those boundaries.

I find it difficult to maintain how the imagination can remain segregated from any spiritual worldview embraced by African Americans. And if God was more imagined than believed, then would this not explain why people who don't believe in God can talk convincingly about God? The fact is that most people have imagined God or some other transcendent reality that seems to play a similar role in their consciousness. And if this is the case, then what kind of God should BART address? So if Black people want a deity that relates to them and stands by them and struggles with them in their cause for liberation, it is imperative that such a God (whether Black or not) refuse to be identified solely with Blacks. Ultimately, the Black must intend to be human (=open possibility, ambiguity), and if God is Black, then God must also intend to be human (=open possibility, ambiguity). What this amount to is a liberation theology that takes seriously the project of *spiritual fulfillment* in the search for African American ESP fulfillment. The difference now, however, is that the locus of concern may shift from a desire to protect god to a desire to protect human life.

The reason we can make this leap of faith rests in the role the imagination plays in the construction of spiritual worldviews. The premise that I have been working with until this point

is that the spiritual imagination of Blacks leads to the throne room of gods more powerful than the gods of enslavement, racism and colonialism. Freedom, hope, action, change-- these are qualities of Black spirituality that have always been essential components of African American religious life in both a philosophical and historical sense. As an act of consciousness having a particularly close relationship to the imagination, one wonders why Black leaders and Black theologians do not memorialize the narrative of Black liberation from slavery as a politically liturgical act. Such phenomena capture the imagination of people who otherwise would remain silent and not articulate the content of their faith. For example, the recent attention paid to Juneteenth in the aftermath of the protest of the deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor provided an opportunity to ritualize and sacralize African American history. In response to any project designed to capture the imagination of Black folks who dream of a liberation from ESP oppression I propose the birth of new gods.

This means the adoption and use of a more, not less, radically theistic discourse. For BART purposes, maintaining the traditional modality of trusting in God is important because in African American religion, hope, faith, etc. are rooted in the premise that human possibilities can *only* be legitimate extensions of human encounters with the divine. But why is this the case? Do not possibilities, by definition, exist with no evidence other than what is presented to consciousness. And it is not at all apparent that God is presented to everyone's consciousness. Is this not especially true in the case of God, for with the divine, what is presented to consciousness emanates from human beings. In BART, it is not only clear that people imagine God's presence, but God also sustains and maintains *their* presence as trusting participants in a historical drama of God's self-disclosure. This is what one might call "revelatory faith", or trust based on imagining the possible. Defined, revelatory faith means actions rooted in a belief in the transcendent, also understood as deeds based on the belief that what one thinks is possible will come to pass, *also* understood as action based on a belief maintained by confidence in the truthfulness of that belief. God's presence is one of the great rational contradictions in modernity. Although there is no evidence for God's existence, most people still express their faith in the divine. This is BART's most prescient manifestation of a potentially prophetic and politically liberationist trajectory embedded in its core spiritual worldview. This simple fact, which one might believe is a hindrance to political action, may turn out to be the single most powerful spiritual force available to BART in the present and the future. As it has been witnessed, religious people hate because they believe God hates. In the same respect, religious people will fight for their freedom when they *know* (as opposed to "believe" or "hope" or "are convinced that") God is fighting for their freedom. I believe this provide believers with religious and intellectual tools to make an informed decisions about how to live one's religious life with an eye towards ESP liberation and this indicates the possibility of building a unique body of Black theology that is not bound by theological methods that uses scripture, church (or community), faith, God, and commandments as the only legitimate sources for constructive religious thought.