

## **Black Liberation Theology and the “Black Manifesto:” Reflections on Race, Racial Injustice, and Religion a Half-Century Later**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The year 2019 marked several significant and substantially intertwined anniversaries. The same year that marked the 400th year since the earliest arrival of “Twenty and more negroes” were brought by force and sold into bondage as human chattel into the floundering Jamestown colony in 1619 was also remembered as the 50th anniversary of the debut publication of late theologian James Cone’s *Black Theology and Black Power* and, to no lesser extent, the “Black Manifesto,” a boldly prophetic document that sparked a landmark debate about the nexus of race, religion, and reparations. This paper explores the common ground between Cone’s Black liberation theology and Forman’s presentation of the “Black Manifesto.” On the one hand, Cone’s *Black Theology and Black Power* was the first academic treatise to merge the contemporaneous struggles for racial, political, and socioeconomic equality with the critical concerns of Christian systematic theology. By offering a forcefully prophetic call for a theology rooted in the Black experience, this pioneering work established Black liberation theology as an undeniable force within theological education and Black church praxis. On the other hand, prepared largely by James Forman in conjunction with the League of Black Revolutionary Workers, this statement endorsed by the National Black Economic Development Conference (NBEDC) on April 26, 1969 in Detroit, Michigan. Reflecting its genesis at the tail end of the 1960s within that sociopolitical crucible, the “Black Manifesto” called on white religious institutions across the theological and denominational spectrum to pay \$500 million in reparations for the historic ravages of Black chattel slavery in the United States as well as the ensuing structural oppression that still impacted people of African descent contemporaneously. Within this legendary statement, the manifesto outlined a visionary programmatic agenda for how this money would be used to redress the systematic and systemic forms of oppression that plagued Black women, men, and children as a result of centuries of both enslavement and segregation. In an effort to recognize and engage the importance of both cultural artifacts, this paper will compare and contrast the theo-historical significance and impact of Cone’s and Forman’s respective contributions to Black religious thought as well as the lessons to be gleaned from their mutual legacies within the ongoing scope of Black Church Studies and the broader Black theology project.*

Keywords: Black liberation theology; James H. Cone; Black Power; Black Manifesto; James Forman; reparations

### **INTRODUCTION**

The year 2019 marked several significant and substantially intertwined anniversaries. The year marked the 400th year since the earliest arrival of Africans were brought by force and sold into bondage as human chattel as a last-ditch effort in 1619 to salvage what historian Edmund Morgan termed “the Jamestown fiasco.”<sup>1</sup> It is with this infamous event that colonial American society and eventually this nation began its long, twisted experience with the “peculiar institution” of American slavery. The year 2019 also marked the 50th anniversary of both the debut publication of late theologian James Cone’s *Black Theology and Black Power* as well as activist James Forman’s presentation of the Black Manifesto. This paper explores the common ground between Cone’s Black liberation theology and Forman’s Black Manifesto. On the one hand, Cone’s *Black Theology and Black Power* was the first academic treatise to merge the contemporaneous struggles for racial, political, and socioeconomic equality with the critical concerns of Christian systematic theology. By offering a forcefully prophetic call for a theology

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<sup>1</sup> Edmund S. Morgan, *American Slavery, American Freedom: The Ordeal of Colonial Virginia* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1975), 71-91.

rooted in the Black experience, this pioneering work established Black liberation theology as an undeniable force within theological education and Black church praxis. On the other hand, prepared and championed largely by Forman and reflecting its genesis at the tail end of the 1960s the sociopolitical crucible defined largely by Cone's *Black Theology and Black Power*, the Black Manifesto called on white Christian and Jewish institutions across the theological and denominational spectrum to pay \$500 million in reparations for the historic ravages of Black chattel slavery in the United States as well as the ensuing structural oppression that still impacts people of African descent contemporaneously as the result of centuries of both enslavement and segregation, thus making it a boldly prophetic document that sparked a landmark debate about the nexus of race, religion, and reparations. This paper will illustrate the theo-historical significance and cultural impact of the respective contributions to Black religious thought by Cone and Forman as well as their mutual legacies within the ongoing scope of Black Church Studies and the broader Black theological project.

### JAMES CONE'S BLACK THEOLOGY AND BLACK POWER

Without a doubt, the foremost leader in the development of Black Liberation Theology was theologian James H. Cone whose *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969) was the first academic treatise to merge the contemporaneous struggles for racial, political, and socioeconomic equality with the critical concerns of Christian systematic theology. In 1965, Cone earned his Ph.D. from Garrett Biblical Institute (now known as Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary) in systematic theology as a Barthian scholar. However, by his own account, he sought to engage in the Black freedom struggle for human liberation against white supremacist domination both domestically and globally. Like so many other great and influential Black writers of the era, Cone made his theological focus on ending the conjoined evils of Black oppression and white supremacy yet he felt ill equipped for this formidable task.<sup>2</sup> Bereft of any serious, scholarly interaction with the Black intellectual canon during his sojourn at Garrett, theologian Ben Sanders III states that Cone "struggled to relate European theology and philosophy to the maddening reality of American racism."<sup>3</sup> Yet, despite his own diagnosis of this alienating setback, Cone even as young scholar was self-aware enough to recognize the vast but previously ignored wealth of resources at his disposal in terms of Black literature, music, and religious culture that would ultimately fuel his passion for decades to come. Reflecting on this epiphany, Cone describes his realization by stating, "My salvation was found in black music (spirituals, gospels, blues, and jazz) combined with a disciplined program of reading black literature and other writers concerned about human suffering."<sup>4</sup> Alternately, Cone deeply lamented the whitewashed nature of his graduate theological education as he bemoaned the fact, "When I compared [James] Baldwin, [Richard] Wright, [Ralph] Ellison, and Leroi Jones (now Amiri Baraka) with [Karl] Barth, [Paul] Tillich, [Emil] Brunner, and Reinhold Niebuhr, I concluded that I was in the wrong field."<sup>5</sup> To state it plainly, this creeping fear of his own colonized mentality as a direct consequence of theological miseducation was so intense that Cone had even contemplated seeking a second doctorate in theology and literature. Instead of pursuing this option, Cone chose to use the resources he had at hand in order to begin forging a new theological vision that merged his academic training as a theologian as scholarly endeavor with his actual commitments to Black liberation as societal experience. Cone's first book, *Black Theology and Black Power*, was the result of this feat of alchemy.

It is important to note that, contrary to conventional academic norms, *Black Theology and Black Power*, was not a revision of Cone's doctoral dissertation but was, in fact, a fresh new manuscript drafted during his early professional years split between his time as an assistant professor of religion at Adrian College in Michigan and scholarly fellow in residence at Colgate Rochester Divinity School circa the 1968-69 academic year. The mood of many civil rights activists gradually became more militant in their outlook towards ending racial oppression and inequality. In most regards, King was quite among Black ministers. In response to the bloody, unfettered attacks against the more moderate, multicultural coalition that comprised the growing

<sup>2</sup> James H. Cone, *My Soul Looks Back* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1985), 36-37.

<sup>3</sup> Ben Sanders III, "'Traditioning' Blackness: A Theo-Ethical Analysis of Black Identity in Black Theological Discourse," (PhD diss., University of Denver, 2018), 12.

<sup>4</sup> Cone, *My Soul Looks Back*, 42.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 42-43.

masses of nonviolent civil rights protests, a younger generation of Black activists such as Kwame Ture (Stokely Carmichael), Huey Newton, H. Rap Brown, Angela Davis, and other younger, more radical leaders led protesters with clenched fists raised in the air while chanting “Black Power!” What was uttered as a catchy slogan during a protest march, “Black Power” quickly became recognized nationally as the symbol of a new spirit of Black militancy.<sup>6</sup> For a growing number of Black Christians, the chants of “Black Power” were increasingly embraced alongside talk of God’s judgment upon America for the injustices done to Black people as well as the imminent moment of divine retribution for such oppression. By 1967, leaders of the National Committee of Negro Churchmen changed their group’s name to the National Council of Black Churchmen (NCBC). Conventional wisdom amongst many Black leaders had long since recognized that economic freedom was one of the main keys to ending racial oppression so that American society could move beyond good intentions and towards meaningful transformation. As one of the progenitors of Black liberation theology in terms of ministerial praxis, the Jaramogi Abebe Agyeman (formerly Reverend Albert Cleage Jr.), the pastor of Shrine of the Black Madonna (Pan African Orthodox Christian Church) in Detroit, Michigan, became a passionate advocate of Black Christian Nationalism as defined in his books, *The Black Messiah* (1969) and *Black Christian Nationalism* (1972). Out of the interracial conflicts and internecine tensions emerged various Black theologies that critiqued racism and other social injustices within modern society. Black liberation theology asserted the importance of conjoining religious practice and faith with political activism and social change for the betterment of the Black community.

It is important to note that, contrary to conventional academic norms, *Black Theology and Black Power*, was not a revision of Cone’s doctoral dissertation but was, in fact, a fresh new manuscript drafted during his early professional years split between his time as an assistant professor of religion at Adrian College in Michigan and scholarly fellow in residence at Colgate Rochester Divinity School circa the 1968-69 academic year. By offering a forcefully prophetic call for a theology rooted in the Black experience, this pioneering work established Black liberation theology as an undeniable force within theological education and Black church praxis. To be sure, Cone’s theological awakening was a catalytic process that initiated a vital and vibrant critique of the explicit endorsement and implicit entanglement represented in the unity of white Christianity and white supremacy. Rather than grounding his insurgent volume in any of the tried-and-true themes that most typically frame mainline theological interpretations of Christian faith—e.g. doctrine(s) of God, Christology, soteriology, ecclesiology, etc.—Cone begins *Black Theology and Black Power* with a timely and trenchant assessment of Black Power as a sociological and psychological phenomenon. Like many of his young, gifted, and Black counterparts in the late 1960s and early 1970s, Cone was drawn to Black Power because it provided a cognitive realm for aesthetic redemption, cultural renewal, and existential resources intended to rejecting white supremacy in an outright fashion while upholding Black liberation as a worthy and workable goal. In fact, the salvific experience Cone found with Black music, writing, and religiosity (in broad terms) as he labored to synthesize the Black Christian faith of Martin Luther King to the revolutionary Blackness of Malcolm X should be viewed as a clear manifestation of Black Power’s insurgent vision that a proper understanding of Black culture can heal and empower Black people living in a white supremacist world.<sup>7</sup> Echoing Malcolm X’s famous words, Cone interpreted Black Power to mean the “complete emancipation of black people from white oppression by whatever means black people deem necessary.”<sup>8</sup> As he outlined the contours of Black Power’s radical commitment to Black liberation, Cone also embraced and endorsed what he viewed as a strong relationship between Black liberation and the dawn of

<sup>6</sup> Kwame Ture (formerly known as Stokely Carmichael) and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power: Politics of Liberation in America* (1967; New York: Vintage, 1992). For a comprehensive survey of the history of the Black Power Movement, see Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar, *Black Power: Radical Politics and African American Identity, Reconfiguring American Political History* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), and Peniel E. Joseph, *Waiting 'Til the Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power in America* (New York: Henry Holt, 2007).

<sup>7</sup> See: William L. Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon: The Black Power Movement and American Culture, 1965-1975* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992); Jeffrey O.G. Ogbar, *Black Power: Radical Politics and African American Identity, Reconfiguring American Political History* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 5–6; Malcolm X, *By Any Means Necessary* (New York, NY: Pathfinder Press, 1992).

Jesus's prophetic ministry upon having been anointed with the Holy Spirit "to set the oppressed free."<sup>9</sup>

It might seem difficult to imagine nowadays, but prior to the debut Cone's *Black Theology and Black Power*, white theologians regardless of denominations rarely made any mention of the myriad modalities of anti-Black racism. Quite frankly, subjects such as chattel slavery, colonial conquest, lynching, segregation, white supremacist terrorism, and so forth were neither part of any sustained and sober theological analysis for the benefit of church, academy and society. With fierce and fiery prose that would not be out of step in the context of the Trump era's racist wretchedness, Cone wrote presciently in 1969: "On the American scene today, as yesterday, one problem stands out: the enslavement of black Americans. But as we examine what contemporary theologians are saying, we find that they are silent about the enslaved condition of black people. Evidently, they see no relationship between black slavery and the Christian gospel. Consequently, there has been no sharp confrontation of the gospel with white racism. There is, then, a desperate need for a black theology, a theology whose sole purpose is to apply the freeing power of the gospel to black people under white oppression."<sup>10</sup> However, Cone challenged many of those assumptions, as he was one of the first to argue for a contextual reading and understanding of theology. Towards this end, rhetorician Andre Johnson highlights Cone as the first theologians in our contemporary era who advanced a theology that "arises from the contexts in which people live. Thus, Cone recognized that theology speaks to the people within a certain context."<sup>11</sup> Making this point even more explicit, Cone reflected on the publication of his seminal text at the end of his life, saying how the book "save[d] my life as a theologian, allowing me to fulfill the true purpose of my calling." Articulated in this knowing and loving fashion, the correlation of self and vocation as a theologian is made even clearer in Cone's writing as he proceeds to diagnose, deconstruct, and dismantle the sinful synergy of white supremacy and white Christianity that once blinded him to the "rich treasure in the Black religious tradition."<sup>12</sup> For Cone, writing *Black Theology and Black Power* not only centered Blackness in powerful and prophetic ways of envisioning Black faith, politics, and culture *in situ*, but in so doing, opened whole new pathways for theological reflection and religious thought.

Although Cone was the first of the professional Black theologians to tackle the subject of liberation in a direct fashion, he was not alone in this endeavor. Within the first decade and a half of Black theology's existence, Joseph Washington, J. Deotis Roberts, Charles Long, Gayraud Wilmore, William R. Jones, Katie G. Cannon, Jacquelyn Grant, Delores Williams, and even Cone's own brother, Cecil Cone, were among a varied constellation of Black theologians and religious scholars who provided divergent and sometimes dissenting visions of liberation in theological terms. By way of illustration, Cone's position on reconciliation in *Black Theology and Black Power* has been notably contentious. Cone first places reconciliation in its proper context when he claims "reconciliation on white terms is impossible since it would crush the dignity of black people." Without the advancement of freedom, justice, and equality for Black humanity, Cone argues white people are "incompetent to dictate the terms of reconciliation because they are enslaved by their own racism and will inevitably see to base the terms on their right to play God in human relationships." Ultimately, Cone argues that "reconciliation cannot happen until full emancipation has become a reality for all black people."

In his 2004 essay, "Theology's Great Sin: Silence in the Face of White Supremacy" (based on his AAR keynote address a year earlier), Cone called on white theologians to break the silent complicity about white supremacy within their shared academic discipline. Since the debut of *Black Theology and Black Power* decades earlier, Cone crafted this essay as his effort to probe the four key reasons he felt most greatly contributed to and perpetuated this silence amongst his white colleagues. First, based on his experiences, whites declined to address racism simply because they do not have to. Second, white theologians avoided dialogue about race because talking about white supremacy aroused deep feelings of guilt. Next, whites avoid talking with African Americans about race and racism because whites fear engaging Black peoples' rage.

<sup>9</sup>Luke 4:18-19 NRSV

<sup>10</sup> Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 31.

<sup>11</sup> Andre Johnson, "The Prophetic Persona of James Cone and the Rhetorical Theology of Black Theology," *Black Theology*, 8:3 (2010), 266-285.

<sup>12</sup> James H. Cone, *Said I Wasn't Gonna Tell Nobody: The Making of a Black Theologian* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2018),

Finally, whites do not say much about racial justice because they are not prepared much less willing to make moves towards the radical redistribution of wealth and power demanded as the logical extension of such a rapprochement. Embedded within this fourfold reflection, Cone was able to distill his many decades of being stigmatized and stonewalled in both academic and ecclesial circles. Throughout American society, we often find it incredibly difficult to engage in conversations much less resolve conflicts based on matters of human difference and cultural diversity. Confronting these realities gives theologians an opportunity to develop antiracist theologies that go beyond simply condemning racism because they engage the histories, cultures and theologies of people of color. This is the work of love and justice because it is work that enhances our humanity.<sup>13</sup>

### JAMES FORMAN'S BLACK MANIFESTO

Let's turn our attention to the Black Manifesto, a boldly prophetic document intended to address the structural and spiritual injustices spawned by the genesis of the slave system several centuries earlier. This revolutionary document, infused with the religious commitments to social justice and revolutionary Marxist critique that permeated a great deal of civil rights activism during the 1960s, sparked a landmark debate about the nexus of race, religion, and reparations. Written largely by former SNCC activist James Forman in conjunction with Mark Hamlin and John Watson, leading organizers of the League of Revolutionary Black Workers, this statement endorsed by the NBEDC on April 26, 1969 in Detroit, Michigan. In quick fashion, the activists from the League of Revolutionary Black Workers took over the more liberal conference proceedings.<sup>14</sup> According to historian Robin D.G. Kelley, they succeeded in shifting the vision of the NBEDC by "creating what was essentially a black socialist agenda."<sup>15</sup> On the gathering's second evening, Forman announced to the participants that "We must begin seizing power wherever we are, and we must say to the planners of this conference that you are no longer in charge.... The conference is now the property of the people who are assembled here... We demand \$500 million for reparations" to African Americans. Forman further warned those gathered that day "if the white Christians and Jews are not willing to meet our demands through peace and good will, then we declare war and we are prepared to fight by whatever means necessary."<sup>16</sup>

Reflecting its genesis at the tail end of the 1960s within the sociopolitical crucible defined largely, in the words of the late theologian James Cone, by the confluence of "Black Theology and Black Power," the Black Manifesto called on white religious institutions across the theological and denominational spectrum to pay this sum in reparations for the historic ravages of Black chattel slavery in the United States as well as the ensuing structural oppression that still impacted people of African descent contemporaneously. Within this legendary statement, the authors of the manifesto outline a visionary programmatic agenda for how this money would be used to redress the systematic and systemic forms of oppression that plagued Black women, men, and children as a resulting legacy of centuries regarding both enslavement and segregation. As an attempt to constructively remedy this crisis, the NBEDC sought to establish a fund that would underwrite various projects intended to benefit Blacks, including the establishment of a southern land bank, four television networks, and a Black university. Moreover, the manifesto indicted white religious organizations for their historic complicity in white supremacy in America while also calling on Blacks to bring any and all pressure that they deemed necessary in order to force churches and synagogues to comply to their demands. As Robin Kelley contends, "Half a billion dollars is a paltry sum... but Forman and fellow drafters of the Black Manifesto considered their

<sup>13</sup> James H. Cone "Theology's Great Sin: Silence in the Face of White Supremacy", *Black Theology*, (2004): 2:2, 139-152.

<sup>14</sup> See James Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries* (1972; Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1986); Juan M. Floyd-Thomas, "The God That Never Failed: Black Christian Marxism as Prophetic Call to Action and Hope," Jin Young Choi and Joerg Rieger, Eds., *Faith, Class, and Labor: Intersectional Approaches in a Global Context* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick Publications, 2020), 44-68.

<sup>15</sup> Robin D.G. Kelley, *Freedom Dreams: The Black Radical Imagination* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2008), 121.

<sup>16</sup> James Forman, *The Making of Black Revolutionaries* (1972; Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1986), 54-55; "The Black Manifesto" 26 April 1969; Elaine Allen Lehtreck, "'We Are Demanding \$500 Million For Reparations': The Black Manifesto, Mainline Religious Denominations, and Black Economic Development," *Journal of African American History*, Vol. 97, No. 1-2, (Winter-Spring 2012), 41.

request seed money to build a new revolutionary movement and to strengthen black political and economic institutions.”<sup>17</sup>

The authors of the Black Manifesto had agreed upon May 4, 1969 as the date that they would begin an active campaign of disrupting religious institutions to advance their cause. It was in this spirit that Forman stood at the pulpit in the middle of Sunday worship services at the renowned Riverside Church and read this lengthy demand for reparations to the congregation. Forman ostensibly represented the NBEDC, itself an outgrowth of the ecumenical Interreligious Foundation for Community Organization (IFCO), which had approved the Manifesto only a few weeks earlier yet moved forward with an irrepressible degree of holy boldness. The IFCO, an interfaith group established in late 1966 in the wake of nationwide insurrections in numerous U.S. cities with the goal of seeking remedies to the problem of urban poverty in America.<sup>18</sup> The IFCO concentrated its various funding projects and related efforts were aimed at confronting what the National Council of Churches (NCC) termed in 1967 as “the crisis in the nation.”<sup>19</sup> In vivid, often inflammatory rhetoric even by the standards of 1960s radicalism, the Manifesto’s demand for \$500 million dollars “from the Christian white churches and the Jewish synagogues” and while also detailing in grand fashion how it was to be spent on a range of revolutionary programs and services for the Black community. Even more, the IFCO Projects used money raised by the Manifesto for a number of projects, including the funding of Black Star Publications, a Detroit-based Black owned and operated publishing house to which James Forman was connected.

In the wake of the Black Manifesto’s debut, the impact of fiery language and the level of increasingly audacious activism it sparked for both religious and irreligious activists alike was matched only by the heated discussions within and among religious groups over what was the Manifesto’s original intent and how was the church and society supposed to respond to it. To their credit, some predominantly white churches expressed some sympathy with the aims of the Black Manifesto but their response to was essentially to increase aid they already allocated to new or existing programs of their own denominations rather than providing money for the reparations fund as prescribed by the Manifesto’s authors.<sup>20</sup> Robin Kelley notes, “Forman... felt that Christianity had been a source of oppression; by teaching passivity and acceptance of the dominant order, he argued, Christianity had kept black people from embracing revolution.”<sup>21</sup> Even though many religious leaders and organizations dismissed the Manifesto’s demands without reservation, many others saw the document and the activism it generated as speaking directly to a pernicious as well as persistent complicity in the vast web of racist structures and strictures at the core of America’s mainline religious institutions. Therefore, it can be argued that the disruptions and demonstrations spurred by the Manifesto intersected with the longer, broader liberation struggles mounted by progressive activist in addition to prophetic religious groups who sought to compel their denominations, institutions, and leadership to engage with and confront the key issues of the era. As a result of these internecine conflicts, the swirling controversies prompted by the Manifesto were feverishly debated in church and denominational board meetings, seminary classrooms, religious publications, and numerous other settings. Whether by choice or by force, many of America’s largest religious organizations were forced to issue statements addressing the demands of Black Manifesto as credible and reasonable.

<sup>17</sup> Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, 121.

<sup>18</sup>The IFCO was comprised of denominational bodies such as the American Baptist Convention, the American Jewish Committee, the Lutheran Church in America, the National Catholic Conference Committees, the Presbyterian Church USA, the Protestant Episcopal Church, the United Church of Christ, the United Methodist Church, “Investment Committee for Ghetto Community Development” of the National Council of Churches (NCC) and other missionary societies brought together to pool their funds and resources in an *ad hoc* fashion to ameliorate the ravages of high unemployment and meager economic opportunities prevalent in impoverished urban neighborhoods.

<sup>19</sup>“Administrative History,” IFCO Records Finding Guide; “Attendance at Board Meeting, 17 October 1967, box 1, folder 1, IFCO Records, “Report of Investment Committee for Community Development of the National Council of Churches,” 21 February 1968, box 1, folder 1, IFCO Records.

<sup>20</sup> Arnold Lubasch, “Pastor at Riverside Pledges a Fund for the Poor,” *New York Times*, 10 May 1969, 40: 1-2; *New York Times*, 10 May 1969, 37: 3; Peter Paris, et al., *The History of the Riverside Church* (New York, 2004), 89; Elaine Allen Lechtreck, “‘We Are Demanding \$500 Million For Reparations’: The Black Manifesto, Mainline Religious Denominations, and Black Economic Development,” *Journal of African American History*, Vol. 97, No. 1-2, (Winter-Spring 2012), 49.

<sup>21</sup> Robin D G Kelley, *Freedom Dreams*, 122.

When asked bluntly whether he believed the Black Manifesto could succeed during a September 5, 1969 interview, NBEDC vice-chairman Muhammed Kenyatta rebuffed that loaded question by explaining in a forthright fashion why he believed "the Black Manifesto cannot fail" by drawing a distinction between religious conviction and political action. "My viewpoint is that ...the Black Manifesto cannot fail because it speaks to historical matter of fact and it speaks to the real needs of Black people. It speaks to historical matter of fact that Black people had suffered economic exploitation, that slave labor of black people was a source of capital for the development of America, and that Black people after slavery were further exploited economically. Thus, we have back capital—back pay—owed to us collectively by the institutions of this country." As Kenyatta further elaborates, "Our historical basis is sound. More important, perhaps... is the fact that our programs and our analysis speaks to the needs of the Black community and Black people—rich and poor, clergy, secular people, young and old—are beginning to move around the Manifesto. It's becoming a national mass movement. When I say that we can't fail, it's because I think the black community cannot and will not fail in its struggle for liberation, of which we are a part, a significant part but only a part." The interviewer then poses what admits is a "possibly cynical question" by asking "do you feel there's going to be that much moral change within the Church?" "No... I have been largely disabused of that notion," Kenyatta states flatly but then admits "what we have found is this, though, and this is real, that there are individuals in the Church, especially Black people, Black clergymen, in the Church who are serious about their ethics, who are serious about their morality. And morality, ethics, religious convictions, faith in God, belief in [personhood], transcendent ethics has been a motive force behind individuals and small groups of people. But that we have found is the only way we can deal effectively with the Church is take that motor force [sic], that moral force, organize it and move politically." To demonstrate his case in point, he cites the fact that the Black Episcopalian clergy recently had to "go further than preaching and praying" to their white counterparts in the denomination and had to actually "organize a union of Black clergy and laity."<sup>22</sup>

Furthermore, this action was an attempt to exhort African Americans nationwide to follow Forman's example and do what he had done, namely to disrupt religious services across the country in support of the Manifesto's appeals. And so many did. For example, Forman went before the NCBC in Atlanta and read his list of demands on May 7, 1969. It should be noted that there were numerous NCBC members who were present in Detroit at the NBEDC planning sessions that helped give rise to the Manifesto in the first place. Shortly thereafter, the organization issued a statement of support: "There is no question that the American religious establishment, along with almost every other institution in the society was the conscious beneficiary of the enforced labor of one of the most inhumane forms of chattel slavery the world has ever known."<sup>23</sup> At the earliest surge of the movement, the organizers printed numerous copies of the Black Manifesto and either distributed them to ordained and lay religious leaders or read aloud the document to congregations of churches both large and small, often interrupting Sunday worship services unapologetically. The executive director of NCBC, J. Metz Rollins, and the board of directors immediately called for the creation of "Black caucuses" within the predominantly white mainline denominations as well as asked for the historically African American denominations to develop unified strategies deemed necessary to facilitate the distribution of funds if the reparations were ever paid.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, there was an interracial group of students who were inspired by Forman and the NBEDC and proceeded to occupy the offices of New York's fabled Union Theological Seminary roughly a week later. Likewise, similar occupations of various other denominational offices followed suit. Union eventually donated start-up funds of \$500,000 for Black-owned economic enterprises in Harlem, \$100,000 to NBEDC, and ultimately pledged to raise \$1 million for future economic projects in Harlem.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>22</sup> "Muhammed Kenyatta, Community Organizer (September 4, 1969)," *The Church Awakens: African Americans and the Struggle for Justice*, accessed December 15, 2020, <<https://www.episcopalarchives.org/church-awakens/items/show/321>>

<sup>23</sup> Statement of the Board of Directors of the National Committee of Black Churchmen, 7 May 1969, box 16, folder 2, IFCO Records.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> "Message to Alumni and Friends from Dr. John C. Bennett, President, Union Theological Seminary, n.d., box 16, folder 5, IFCO Records; Elaine Allen Lechtreck, "'We Are Demanding \$500 Million For Reparations': The Black Manifesto, Mainline Religious Denominations, and Black Economic Development," *Journal of African American History*, Vol. 97, No. 1-2, (Winter-Spring 2012), 51.

What's more, Riverside Church's relatively new pastor, Rev. Ernest Campbell, not only supported the Manifesto in the burgeoning phase of the movement by allowing Forman and others access to the church's pulpit and facilitated funding for the growing initiative but also delivered his own sermons and even a book, *The Christian Manifesto*, in which he strenuously called on churches nationwide to become more deeply committed to reparations as a means of confronting social problems.<sup>26</sup>

For many American religious historians have frequently interpreted the circumstances surrounding the Black Manifesto as a shining symbol of the ongoing fragmentation of the religious establishment in the United States in the late 1960s and 1970s, especially regarding the Protestant mainline churches. Mounting schisms over the proper role of churches and larger ecclesiastical institutions, most notably the National Council of Churches (NCC), in civil rights activism as well as increasing advocacy for feminism and antiwar protests against the Vietnam War in the broader society grew increasingly heated and contentious throughout the 1960s. Yet the rising cries for "Black Power" and the advent of Black liberation theology from both within and from outside of religious institutions pushed religious leaders to reconsider their proper place in debates over race and civil rights, even as anti-war activists challenged the church to clarify or rethink its position on the Vietnam war. In ways that are undeniable, the Black Manifesto mirrored the bold declarations of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King in his fabled "Beyond Vietnam" sermon from Riverside Church in April 1967 in which he illuminated the two issues of his time, civil rights and Vietnam, were hardly distinct. However, in an ironic development, some supporters of the Black Manifesto actually criticized the NCC for giving too much attention to Vietnam War. Nor were they the only issues that the establishment had to address, as the Sixties offered more than its share of challenges to traditions of religious authority, moral conventions, and the general relationship between religion, culture, and politics. The Black Manifesto, then, often appears as one significant debate amidst an endless series of other, related debates, a symbol of the infighting that ultimately led to the decline of mainline Protestant establishment.

This is not to suggest that public support for the Black Manifesto was either unanimous or uncritical in nature. Numerous copies of the Black Manifesto were printed and either distributed to ordained and lay religious leaders or read aloud to congregations of churches both large and small, often interrupting Sunday worship services unapologetically. Initially there were numerous whites who wanted to disregard the whole discussion of reparations altogether, dismissing Forman as a lone figure with few supporters for his radical demands within the Black community.<sup>27</sup> The editorial board of Harlem's *Amsterdam News* was largely unwelcoming to Forman's tactics and generally dismissive of the Manifesto on the whole. In fact, opposition and criticism to the growing fervor surrounding the Black Manifesto became more frequent in various sectors of the Black community. It should be noted many of the foremost Black organizations, most notably the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the National Baptist Convention (NBC), quickly formulated a contradictory position towards the Black Manifesto. Previously occupying great prominence in the Civil Rights Movement more than a decade earlier, both the NAACP and NBC effectively distanced themselves from the Black Manifesto's radical agenda and yet urged that any money generated by the call for reparations summarily be given to their respective coffers for related purposes instead. Meanwhile, by mid-May 1969 both the FBI and the Department of Justice had begun targeted federal investigations into the NBEDC.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, Rev. Dr. Joseph H. Jackson, the conservative president of the National Baptist Convention U.S.A., compared the document to Marx and Engel's *Communist Manifesto*. As an outspoken foe of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. as well as Black Power advocates, Jackson never identified with the Manifesto's programs and methods.<sup>29</sup> In a letter dated July 2, 1969 to Rev. Frank Wilson, a good friend and longtime Presbyterian Church official, renowned

<sup>26</sup> Peter Paris, et al., *The History of the Riverside Church* (New York, 2004), 88-89; Elaine Allen Lechtreck, "'We Are Demanding \$500 Million For Reparations': The Black Manifesto, Mainline Religious Denominations, and Black Economic Development," *Journal of African American History*, Vol. 97, No. 1-2, (Winter-Spring 2012), 48-50; Ernest T. Campbell, *The Christian Manifesto* (New York, 1970).

<sup>27</sup> Jennifer Harvey, "White Protestants and Black Christians: The Absence and Presence of Whiteness in the Face of the Black Manifesto," *Journal of Religious Ethics* 39:1 (2011), 125-150.

<sup>28</sup> "Black Manifesto," Encyclopedia.com < <https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/biographies/historians-us-biographies/black-manifesto>

<sup>29</sup> Robert S. Lecky and H. Elliott Wright, eds., *Black Manifesto: Religion, Racism and Reparations* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1969), 4.



theologian Howard Thurman ridiculed Forman's demand for reparations from churches, claiming "who am I to compete with the prophet of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, Foreman [sic]?" Later, Thurman jokingly remarks to Wilson that Forman's "cohorts invaded [the Presbyterian Church's] headquarters while [Forman] himself was 'manifestoing' on the floor of the General Assembly."<sup>30</sup> Previously occupying great prominence in the Civil Rights Movement more than a decade earlier, both the Black Press, the Black Church, and civil rights organizations effectively distanced themselves from the Black Manifesto's radical agenda and yet urged that any money generated by the call for reparations summarily be given to their respective coffers for related purposes instead. By mid-May 1969, both the FBI and the US Department of Justice had begun targeted federal investigations into the NBEDC.<sup>31</sup>

While the roughly two-month period of church-based efforts by Forman was met with wildly kaleidoscopic responses, the main setback that the Manifesto encountered could be somewhat blithely summarized as "death by a thousand caucuses." Many mainline religious denominations—most particularly Protestant groups—earnestly admitted their complicity in and benefits from the historic enslavement and contemporary exploitation of African Americans and offered some sort of reparations but not all the money that was originally sought in the Manifesto. More often than not, however, they directed those funds into hands other than those of Forman and the NBEDC. As a keenly critical observer of events surrounding the Manifesto, religious scholar and prominent Black Presbyterian minister Gayraud S. Wilmore offers a pretty scathing critique of the entire situation indicating that the Black Manifesto represents "the most serious crisis in the American religious establishment since the bitter polemics and antagonisms, which divided it prior to the Civil War."<sup>32</sup> One of the first critical failures Wilmore notes is Forman's inability to negotiate directly with white denominations, dealing with Black caucuses as intermediaries instead. This shortcoming, he argues, revealed Forman's "lack of knowledge and experience in dealing with white church structures."<sup>33</sup> Oddly enough, this scenario replicated the kind of segregation and racial subordination that the Manifesto was intended to halt. Moreover, Wilmore notes that Forman's lack of finesse in dealing with the racialized hierarchies of the mainline denominations was compounded by deeply ingrained problems inherent to these church bodies across racial lines. On the one hand, the mainline churches reflected what Wilmore calls "unreconstructed conservatism and a dismal failure of creative imagination" that "are to be blamed for the depressing performance" in response to the Manifesto's demands.<sup>34</sup> On the other hand, the brewing controversy around the Manifesto's faltering implementation also illustrated that there was a deep-seated "naivete and vulnerability of black clergy when they are in competition for scarce resources—the lingering divisive effects of welfare mentality... within the NCBC."<sup>35</sup>

In the half century since the advent of the Black Manifesto, we have witnessed a great many ways in which the church has retreated from the challenging mandate to pursue economic justice in our time. During the intervening half century, we have seen not only a turning away from such revolutionary rhetoric and utopian imagination in most of our church sanctuaries and theological schools but this move was also accompanied by the swift and steady emergence of the "prosperity gospel" in the sacred sphere as well as neoliberalism in the secular sphere. To put an even finer point on this criticism, the mere fact that the existence and evolution of the Black Manifesto are new, previously unknown facts to many contemporary readers is suggestive of the truly disturbing extent that normative thought and praxis in the academy, church, and society have internalized the exploitative logic of capital to the exclusion of any radical alternative, especially if it originates from faithful people of color. In 1969, it was suggested by *The Christian Century's* Albert Vorspan that the Black Manifesto may have saved the Church as a whole from

<sup>30</sup> "Letter to Rev. Frank Wilson (2 July 1969)" in Walter E. Fluker, et al. eds. *The Papers of Howard Washington Thurman: The Wider Ministry, January 1963-April 1981*, Vol. 5 (Columbia, SC: University of South Carolina Press, 2019), 202-203.

<sup>31</sup> "Black Manifesto," Encyclopedia.com < <https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/biographies/historians-us-biographies/black-manifesto>>

<sup>32</sup> Gayraud S. Wilmore, "A Black Churchman's, Response to the Black Manifesto," 30 June 1969, box 6, folder 2, IFCO Records.

<sup>33</sup> Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of African Americans*, 3 ed., rev. (1972: Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2012), 240.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 241.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

becoming irrelevant.<sup>36</sup> In her examination of the African American reparations' debate *longue duree*, historian Mary Frances Berry suggests that, even though it was "lambasted by most whites" when it debuted, it kept the movement alive.<sup>37</sup> More recently, historian Elaine Allen Lehtreck notes, "The Black Manifesto can be understood as an expression of rebellion rooted in the despair of a people who had given up hope of 'integrating' into the mainstream socioeconomic systems and structures in the United States."<sup>38</sup>

To this end, this exploration of historic as well as contemporary examples of the Black Christian-Marxist perspective must be reinvigorated by those striving for worldwide aspirations for racial equality, radical democracy, and economic justice. Emphasizing the need to merge divine faith with conscious human action in the transition to a new social order, the presentation will demonstrate that the influence and embrace of Marxist ideology among numerous African American preachers, theologians, and religious scholars over more than a century has been a greatly overlooked facet of Black Christianity. Even more, the Manifesto's calls for reparations were so forceful that the statement's resonance with a greater quest for economic justice even encouraged other marginalized racial ethnic minority groups such as Latinx peoples and Native Americans who appealed to mainline churches for financial support if not outright reparations.

On the whole, it is important to recognize how the Black Manifesto transformed the interplay of race, religion, and reparations as an equal yet alternate framework for overcoming racial injustice. The debates that were provoked by the Manifesto's demand for reparations challenged mainline Christian and Jewish denominations to view themselves differently as sacred institutions in a secular world. In many ways, this Black prophetic statement emerged as a "holy writ" that challenged the clergy and laity of the nation's religious organizations to reassess their societal as well as spiritual priorities in order to reinterpret their core principles. When Rev. Calvin B. Marshall III, pastor of Varick Memorial AMEZ Church in Brooklyn New York, became NBEDC chairman in 1970, he was asked, "Why did [the NBEDC] single out the church?" Without a moment's delay, Marshall replied "Because the Church is the only institution claiming to be in the business of salvation, resurrection, and the giving and restoring of life... General Motors has never made that kind of claim."<sup>39</sup> Whereas one might contend that Marshall's claim could be interpreted as letting CEOs and corporate America "off the hook" for their history of racial subordination and economic exploitation, nothing could be further from the truth. Instead, advocates of the Manifesto were holding accountable white Christian leaders and mainline churches to their own declared moral standards despite silent complicity with profitability rather than prophetic action. In light of Marshall's comments, the Manifesto during its height was making a prophetic hue and cry that the Church should reorient itself in keeping with its broad-based mission: feeding the hungry; sheltering the homeless; offering hospitality to strangers and refugees; fostering peace among adversaries; providing educational and employment opportunities for the disadvantaged; giving compassion to the bereaved; and advocacy on behalf of the disinherited regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, and nationality.

## CONCLUSION

In closing, this retrospective of James Cone's *Black Theology and Black Power* and James Forman's Black Manifesto has been an effort to not just reflect upon but, more importantly, recontextualize these two documents that fomented dual yet parallel movements for the emancipation and empowerment of Black people worldwide. I find this work especially necessary as a religious historian driven by the fact that too much historical legacy is hidden from those who desperately need to know it by those who definitely fear its potential to unlock new possibilities. This present effort seeks to address the problem of a history hidden in plain sight in a fourfold manner. First and foremost, it is important to acknowledge that the seeming schism between these two James—Cone and Forman—is arguably a false binary imposed by defenders

<sup>36</sup> Albert Vorspan, "How James Forman Lost His Cool but Saved Religion in 1969," *Christian Century*, 6 August 1969: 1042-43.

<sup>37</sup> Mary Frances Berry, *My Face Is Black: Callie House and the Struggle for Ex-Slave Reparations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 239.

<sup>38</sup> Elaine Allen Lehtreck, "'We Are Demanding, \$500 Million For Reparations': The Black Manifesto, Mainline Religious Denominations, and Black Economic Development," *Journal of African American History*, Vol. 97, No. 1-2, (Winter-Spring 2012), 40.

<sup>39</sup> Thomas A. Johnson, "Blacks Press Reparations Demands," *New York Times*, 10 June 1970.

of the status quo in opposition to the possible trajectories for radical human transformation rather than anything inherent to either of their respective projects. Finding their independent origins not just in the common ground of the tumult of 1960s radicalism but also their respective attempts to redress (if not fully remedy) the deep pain and paradoxes arising from historic, horrific birth of our nation in 1619, we must not treat their relative contributions to Black life and religiosity as diametrically opposed and mutually exclusive. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. Second, if and when we study the academic insights of Cone and the activist intervention of Forman outside the confines of Black theology, Black Church Studies, and religious studies, they have to live and breathe in intellectual spaces beyond supplemental reading lists and extracurricular conversations that continually segregate and marginalize these prophetic works from our collective consciousness. Next, as we have witnessed with the multiple crises of the COVID-19 pandemic, economic panic, racial pandemonium, and countless of problems explode on local, national, and global levels from the veritable Pandora's box known as the Trump era, many of us have become more aware how the pernicious and pervasive nature of white supremacy has threatened to decimate every institutional structure in modern life in ways that both Cone and Forman prophesied roughly a half century earlier. The great worry for me is whether there will have to yet another panel composed fifty years from now where yet another esteemed group of scholars, activists, leaders, and practitioners gathered once again to muse and meditate about how deadly and deleterious white supremacist terrorism and anti-Black violence still threatens the lives of our successors and descendants. The possibility of both social justice and human progress demands that we heed these lessons now so that we can claim a better, bolder future. Finally, the vital work James Baldwin famously called upon us to "achieve our country" entails current and future academics, advocates, and activists focused on Black faith, life, and culture to bring these two trajectories—Black liberation theology and reparations for Black America—into greater focus within our historical purviews and theological perspectives.<sup>40</sup> To be frank, the reason so much of the critical debate and substantive analysis around human rights and social transformation is frustrated is not because we have never broached these issues before but rather because we find ourselves forced into a hermeneutical feedback loop of perpetual rediscovery; one of the greatest, most substantial obstacles to our struggle for freedom is the perpetual trap of having to always rediscover fire or reinvent the wheel. Conversely, we cannot be satisfied to sequester any and all progressive individual or collective efforts (no matter how potentially problematic both then and now) as if it were proverbially trapped in amber without leaving room for their evolutionary prospects and revolutionary promises. Thus, as we contemplate the restorative work of racial justice in the broadest sense imaginable via the definition of Black liberation theology or the demand for Black reparations, it will be necessary to seek what's next as well as what's best for Black humanity will depend both on the redemption of our stigmatized souls and recovery of our stolen substance. Let us begin this work here and now for the good of one and all.

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<sup>40</sup> James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time* (1963; New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing, 1993), 97.