

“Nothing Is More Sacred Than the Liberation of Black People:” Albert Cleage’s Method as Unfulfilled Theological Paradigm Shift in Black Theology

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ABSTRACT

I argue that Albert Cleage offers an alternative theological methodology that is worthy of reexamination and engagement in Black theology. His central tenet that “nothing is more sacred than the liberation of black people,” reflects a pragmatic theological method that is guided by the lived experiences of everyday Black people in America. In this way, it differs from academic Black theology, because it does not seek validation within the academy or conform to theology’s presumed universal imperative. Cleage’s approach is practical, malleable, and adaptable to the current situation of black people in America making it as relevant now as ever.

INTRODUCTION

This is the weakness of the Black church. It was a survival instrument. It helped maintain sanity, but it destroyed the possibility of a united Black Liberation Struggle. The Black preacher preached escapism and individualism. He destroyed the possibility of Black people’s fighting together to change oppressive conditions.

Albert B. Cleage, Jr.

Albert B. Cleage, Jr.’s 1967 unveiling of a mural of a black Madonna and child on Easter Sunday morning at Central United Church of Christ launched the Black Christian Nationalist Movement in America. This unveiling was not only the symbolic genesis of Cleage’s construction of Black theology, it also marked an often unacknowledged theological paradigm shift, a methodological transformation with radical ecclesiological ramifications. Cleage attempted to restructure the black church in such a way that the black church could become the engine fueling the black revolution in America. “The black church,” he asserted, “must free the minds of Black people from psychological ‘identification’ with a white society which seeks in every way to destroy them. Black people who dream of integration perpetuate the mechanism of their enslavement. They have been programmed to destroy themselves. The Black church must fight to free the black man’s mind so that he can fight to restructure or destroy the institutions which perpetuate his enslavement.”¹ Such a restructuring, however, required liberating black churches, pastors, and theologians from the tyranny of the traditional Protestant theological method. It required instituting a new method informed by a new norm and ethic.

In Black Christian Nationalism, Cleage makes clear that the Black Christian Nationalist Movement is guided by the singular principle that “nothing is more sacred than the liberation of black people.” In fact, he determined that which is ethical must be judged solely by the extent to which it contributes to the current liberation struggle of black people. “If it supports the Liberation Struggle of Black people, then it is good. If it is in opposition to the Liberation Struggle of Black people, then it is bad. If it supports the Liberation Struggle of Black people, then it is moral. If it

1 Albert B. Cleage Jr, “The Black Christian Nationalist Manifesto,” church document.

opposes the Liberation Struggle, then it is immoral.”² In launching Black Christian Nationalism, Cleage also established a radically pragmatic theological method, a method that makes our contemporary experience the ultimate judge by which we measure the truthfulness, effectiveness, and righteousness of our actions. Cleage established a type of theological pragmatism that continues to be misunderstood and underappreciated by black theologians and religious scholars today. A more thorough analysis of his approach, however, offers insight into ways of rescuing, or extending the life of, academic Black theology, a theology presumed by many to be dying or even already dead. Cleage’s methodological innovations invite a revival of his thought in the early decades of the 21st century.

In 1972, Albert B. Cleage, Jr. called our attention to his concern that “Black schoolmen’s theology is written for white acceptance.”³ Essentially, Cleage claimed that Black theology suffers because of its pursuit of academic theological validation. His contention was that oppressed black people in America are participating in a movement, a black liberation struggle, and this struggle is not concerned with “appreciating blackness but with Black survival.”⁴ His statement was prescient in that it foreshadowed a forty year fixation and preoccupation with ontological blackness in Black theological discourse. A vigorous reengagement with Cleage today, I argue, will provide much needed vitality to this discourse, which heretofore has been stifled and impeded by an inability to overcome the burden of ontological blackness and redemptive suffering. Cleage’s theological pragmatism offers us a way around these problems, and even given its limitations, points toward a constructive and innovative approach to ensure the relevancy and practicality of Black theology into the future.

The Problem of Ontological Blackness

Throughout the decade of the 1960’s in Detroit, Albert B. Cleage, Jr. was already experimenting with and developing Black theology through the preached word. In his sermons from his United Church of Christ pulpit in Detroit, he initiated the first Black theological salvo when he claimed that Jesus was literally a black person who was himself engaged in a liberation struggle. “Jesus was the non-white leader of a non-white people struggling for national liberation against the rule of a white nation, Rome. The intermingling of the races in Africa and the Mediterranean area is an established fact. The nation, Israel, was a mixture of the Chaldeans, the Egyptians, the Midionites, the Ethiopians, the Kushites, the Babylonians and other dark peoples, all of whom were already mixed with the black peoples of Central Africa.”⁵ In claiming that Jesus was literally black, Cleage also argued that he was a member of a black nation Israel struggling for independence from the white colonial power, Rome. While other black theologians were undoubtedly inspired by the boldness of this assertion, it’s also fair to say that they were aghast at the theological implications of such a claim.

James Cone immediately begins to distance himself and his theology from Cleage’s emphasis on Jesus’ literal blackness. In his only published reference to James Cone, Cleage acknowledged him as a good friend. It was also clear to Cleage that their projects are different. Cleage remarked, “Cone drags white Christians as far as they are willing to go (and then some) in interpreting Black theology within the established framework which they can accept and understand.”⁶ It is the “established framework” that later presents conceptual and methodological problems for Black theology. For Cone, the racial optics that Cleage establishes makes theology exclusive, too particular, and essentially nationalistic. It robs theology of its universal appeal and value. Cone realized such a theology would lack credibility and not be taking seriously at a time

2 Albert B. Cleage, Jr. *Black Christian Nationalism*, New York: William Morrow and Company Inc., 1972, pg. xviii.

3 Ibid., pg. xv.

4 Ibid., pg. xvi.

5 Albert B. Cleage, Jr., “An Introduction to Black Christian Nationalism,” unpublished essay.

6 Albert B. Cleage, *Black Christian Nationalism*, pg. xvii.

in which he, and others, were attempting to legitimize the Black Power movement as a Christian movement in America. One difference between Cleage and Cone centers on the question of audience. For Cone, blackness should not be understood literally but must function as symbol. “The focus on blackness does not mean that only blacks suffer as victims of oppression in a racist society, but that blackness is an ontological symbol and a visible reality which best describes what oppression means in America.”⁷ Blackness functions symbolically, not literally, and stands for “all victims of oppression who suffer from whiteness”, or the ideology of white supremacy.

Cone’s view of ontological blackness is fueled by two concerns: the black experience in America and the revelation of Jesus Christ. Cone establishes the black experience as one of the primary sources for Black theology. And he defines the black experience as “a life of humiliation and suffering.”⁸ This definition ultimately becomes the locus of the criticism of ontological blackness, because it describes black existence in a way that makes it dependent on the reality of white racism or white oppression. But what has received less attention by other black theologians and scholars of religion is the other concern that lies at the heart of ontological blackness: the revelation of Jesus Christ. In his discussion of the norm of Black theology, Cone first states that Black theology “must take seriously two realities,” then he clarifies that he means, “two aspects of a single reality: the liberation of blacks and the revelation of Jesus Christ.”⁹ For Cone, “the norm of all God-talk which seeks to be black-talk is the manifestation of Jesus as the black Christ who provides the necessary soul for black liberation.”¹⁰ The error and correction is noteworthy, because I argue Cone’s theology is plagued by the methodological incompatibility that exists within these two realities merged into one. The liberation of blacks requires a protean, pragmatic approach that is ultimately precluded by the static absolutism of the doctrine of revelation. James Cone’s brother, Cecil, pointed out this problem when he argued that James’ Christology is inconsistent with the full range of the black religious experience. While James Cone obviously had a number of critics, from Cecil Cone, Gayraud Wilmore, Charles Long, and William Jones to the various womanist theologians, Delores Williams, Jacquelyn Grant, Kelly Brown Douglas and others, who point out the sexist inadequacies of Black theology, I want to focus on the critique of Victor Anderson, whose argument against ontological blackness has had a particular resonance among current assessments of Black theology.

Victor Anderson argued Black theologies are crisis theologies and remain “theologies in a crisis of legitimation”¹¹ precisely because of their dependency on the concept ontological blackness. Anderson suggests the problem lies in the fact that ontological blackness is steeped in Cone’s definition of the black experience, an experience of humiliation and suffering in a world of white racism. Suffering becomes constitutive of black existence and black identity. Ontological blackness then provides a divine canopy over this existential situation of suffering foreclosing the possibility of “cultural transcendence over white racism.”¹² According to Anderson, “If suffering and resistance and white racism are ontologically constitutive of black life, faith, and theology, then transcendence from ontological blackness puts at risk the cogency of black theology.”¹³ In other words, Anderson claims that ontological blackness is defined in such a way that the act or possibility of liberation from white oppression would actually dismantle Black theology. Thus it is a crisis theology because it requires oppressed existence to maintain and justify itself and its categories. Anderson puts it succinctly, “Where there exists no possibility

⁷ James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, New York: Orbis Books, 1970, pg. 7.

⁸ Ibid., pg. 23.

⁹ Ibid., pg. 38.

¹⁰ Ibid., pg. 38.

¹¹ Victor Anderson, “Ontological Blackness in Theology,” in *African American Religious Thought*, eds. Cornel West and Eddie S. Glaude Jr., Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003, pg. 894.

¹² Ibid., pg. 898.

¹³ Ibid., pg. 907.

of transcending the blackness that whiteness created, African American theologies of liberation must be seen not only as crisis theologies; they remain theologies in a crisis of legitimation.”¹⁴ This claim, made fifteen years ago, that Black theology depends upon “a blackness that whiteness created” is a criticism that continues to confound and follow the project. It is why many current engagements of Black theology inevitably bring up this problem. Anthony Pinn asserts that even after three generations of black theologies, “God remains ontologically Black, with few exceptions.”¹⁵ Alistair Kee, in the questionably named *The Rise and Demise of Black Theology*, essentially reiterates Anderson’s criticism and announces the death of Black theology. But Kee adds little to the discourse since he merely reappropriates critiques made earlier by black religious scholars themselves. Gayraud Wilmore, for example, inquired whether we should announce Black theology dead in 1999. Current black religious scholars take up Anderson’s criticism in one way or another and agree that indeed the problem of ontological blackness is a major stumbling block.

I want to add my voice to this chorus. However, I think Anderson’s critique misses the reason for ontological blackness’ essentialism of suffering. The problem Anderson correctly identifies is at heart a theological problem. It is really a problem of theological method rooted in the absolute and exclusive nature of Christology and the doctrine of revelation. Eddie Glaude, in criticizing Anderson, claims there is something not quite right about “the blackness that whiteness created” claim. Glaude argues that blackness does not rely simply on white racism for its existence but also on the God we see in Jesus Christ, the second aspect of Cone’s norm. “Black liberation theologians take themselves to be addressing the difficulty of being both black and Christian. The reality of being black foregrounds the ways in which race has overdetermined what Christianity might mean in the United States and in the world. But God intervenes here, and the powerful message and life of Jesus Christ, it is argued, stand as a profound negation of these political realities.”¹⁶ The God in Jesus, it seems, offers the possibility of transcendence from white racism. But what if the fundamental problem in fact lies with this God we see in Jesus? I would extend Glaude’s point to insist that it is not whiteness as culturally or politically defined that is the problem, but that ontological blackness depends upon theological whiteness for its existence. In other words, Cone’s ontological blackness is hampered fundamentally by its dependency on the doctrine of revelation and a theological method that derives from a European paradigm. Thus the problem lies not in “the blackness that whiteness created” as much as the blackness that Jesus, through the doctrine of revelation, creates, which is prior to the political production of whiteness.

Here is where Albert Cleage’s pragmatic approach, at the very least, invites a reconsideration of methodology within Black theology and provides an escape from the trap of ontological blackness. When Cleage states, “Nothing is more sacred than the liberation of black people,” he encourages a deconstruction of the discipline of theology itself. For Cleage there are no sacred cows or absolute theological constructs or categories to which we are beholden. What informs this theological approach is only that which affirms our present experiences and advances the cause of black liberation from white oppression. As such he presents a method that is innovative, adaptable, and open to constant reexamination and reconstruction. He contends, “We want to know: How does God work in the world, and how does God relate to the Black Liberation Struggle? Is either God or Jesus really relevant to the Black Liberation Struggle? And what should be the role of the church in the Black liberation struggle?”¹⁷ Cleage understands that his theology is fundamentally rooted in a partisan anthropology. It is we, black human beings, who are engaged in this God-talk, and we are also the ones struggling for liberation. Thus, our existential reality,

¹⁴Ibid., pg. 917.

¹⁵Anthony B. Pinn, “Black Theology,” in *Liberation Theologies in the United States*, New York: New York University Press, 2010, pg. 24.

¹⁶ Eddie Glaude, *In a Shade of Blue: Pragmatism and the Politics of Black America*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007, pg. 72.

¹⁷ Albert B. Cleage, *Black Christian Nationalism*, pg. xvi.

our current experiences, must establish the basis or criteria by which the liberation of black people is advanced as opposed to a static theological history or absolute truth claims. For Cleage, it is even fair to ask: Do we really need God or Jesus Christ to accomplish this task?

Ontological blackness, however, is conceptually hindered by the theological category revelation. As a result, it is imprisoned by a historically bound, static conception of the truth we see in Jesus Christ. For Cone, who is persuaded by the imperative established by Karl Barth, revelation is necessary to eradicate the problem endemic to natural theology. But the critique Dietrich Bonhoeffer posed to Karl Barth might also be posed to James Cone if what results is not “a positivism of revelation.”¹⁸ In the case of Cone, this positivism of revelation is really the heart of the ontological blackness trap because it suggests a conception of blackness that absolutizes the oppressed existence Cone argues is manifest in the ontology of Jesus Christ. Christ’s being and mandate are static and overwhelming. It is fixed and bound by the representation of Jesus Christ given to us by the gospel writers. So while the black experience might be capable of establishing itself independently of white racism, the question is: can it establish itself independently of the static norm set by Jesus in the biblical text? It would seem then that the ideology of white supremacy is not as big a conceptual hurdle to ontological blackness as are the pages of scripture and revelation as a theological category.

J. Kameron Carter is attentive to this problem within Cone’s theology and offers an analysis of the theological meaning of blackness. He calls it “Theologizing Race.” Carter shows the depths of Cone’s dependency on Karl Barth, yet commends Cone’s awareness of Barth’s theological shortcomings for Black theology and willingness to depart from him. The question remains, however, if the departure is sufficient. It is certainly not a radical break. According to Carter, Cone “has not broken far enough away either from Tillich’s immanent dialecticism or Barth’s transcendent dialecticism.”¹⁹ Carter’s concerns lie in the problem of theology’s heavy reliance on metaphysical abstraction which is symbolized in his engagement with the Gnostic heresy. Christology is the locus for the problem. He argues for theological concreteness: “a Christian theology of Israel” that emphasizes embodiment and will not rob Jesus of his Jewishness in favor of his Christian divinity. Carter agrees with Victor Anderson that Cone makes blackness abstract, which is to say essentialist, through its connection to revelation. Thus in creating a pure blackness, he leaves whiteness in place. “Yet here is where Victor Anderson’s critique is most powerful, because [Cone’s] settlement with blackness is a settlement with the blackness that whiteness created. And therefore, the settlement with the blackness that whiteness created is a settlement with whiteness, albeit in the idiom of cultural blackness or cultural nationalism.”²⁰ I understand Carter to condemn efforts to establish any type of “pure” body or entity, a deleterious abstraction, which he correctly identifies as a fundamentally theological problem that encroaches upon political constructions of race. For him, this theological problem undergirds the idea of whiteness. But ontological blackness is essentially the same thing and is provided divine sanction through the doctrine of revelation. For Carter, the goal therefore is to do theology in a way that affirms some type of “mulattic or miscegenized” embodied existence and “therefore Jesus himself as the Israel of God is Mulatto.”²¹ Carter contends, “As a theological problem, whiteness names the refusal to trade against race. It names the refusal to enter into dependent, promiscuous, and, in short, ‘contaminated’ relations that resist an idolatrously false purity...What is needed is a vision of Christian identity, then, that calls us to holy ‘impurity’ and ‘promiscuity,’ a vision that calls for race trading against the benefits of whiteness so as to enter into the miscegenized or mulattic

¹⁸ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. Eberhard Bethge, New York: Simon and Schuster, 1953, pg. 280.

¹⁹ J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2008, pg. 191.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 190.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 192.

existence of divinization.”²² Carter’s miscegenized existence (the diluting of the mythical pure whiteness with blackness or blackness with whiteness) offers a theoretical frame for transcending the racial hierarchy and the idea of race generally. “Miscegenized existence” is an appropriate description since it valorizes impurity and hybridity and establishes them as fundamental to embodiment. It discloses Whiteness and Blackness as abstractions, as myths, stories we tell ourselves about human origins that contradict the reality of embodied existence. Carter, however, is still working within the established theological frameworks which include classical Christology, even if he endeavors to adeptly reinterpret them.

A Pragmatic Theological Method

What Albert Cleage, Jr. offers Black theology is an opportunity to reevaluate the theological task and theology as “power/knowledge.”²³ He encourages Black theologians to push beyond the discourse itself and construct a different framework for God-talk. It’s a move that Charles Long, pioneering black theorist and historian of religion, called for in his analysis of opaque theologies, an analysis to which I now return.

In Long’s assessment of black theologians, he claims that James Cone and Albert B. Cleage are both “essentially apologetic theologians working implicitly and explicitly from the Christian theological tradition.”²⁴ I am arguing that in fact Cleage is not an apologetic theologian but a pragmatic one. Long refers to Black theology as a theology opaque because of his contention that European methodological tools and modalities are incapable of making translucent the black religious experience in America. These tools obscure and obstruct more than they make transparent or lucid. The good news is that “the opaque ones deny the authority of the white world to define their reality, and deny the methodological and philosophical meaning of transparency as a metaphor for a theory of knowledge.”²⁵ Long suggests that the potential of Black theology is not just as a critique of traditional Protestant theology’s complicity with racial oppression but of the nature of theological discourse and method itself. His argument calls for a reassessment of Cleage’s theology, especially since Cleage was the one black theologian of his generation willing to do this work of deconstruction. According to Long, “In every case, the claim of these theologies is more than an accusation regarding the actions and behaviors of the oppressive cultures...it is an accusation regarding the world view, thought structures, theory of knowledge, and so on, of the oppressors.”²⁶ He maintains that “theologies are about power, the power of God, but equally about the power of specific forms of discourse about power.”²⁷ Theological discourse centers power in the modern Western world and in the hands of the creators of that world. Theologies opaque then will remain opaque to the black religious experience, even as they call into question the power of the white world to define reality, as long as they continue to rely on the theological idioms, categories, and modalities that derive from that discourse. What is needed is a radical theological departure, a theological paradigm shift. “It is at this point that theologies opaque must become deconstructive theologies—that is to say, theologies that undertake the destruction of theology as a powerful mode of discourse.”²⁸

The claim that “nothing is more sacred than the liberation of black people” points towards “the destruction of theology as a powerful mode of discourse.” While it is true that Cleage continued to frame his movement in the veneer of Christian categories, these categories carry a radically different meaning than that of the mainstream Protestant black church and even that of

²² Ibid., 192.

²³ Michel Foucault

²⁴ Charles Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion*, Aurora: The Davies Group, 1986, pg. 187.

²⁵ Ibid., pg. 207.

²⁶ Ibid., pg. 208.

²⁷ Ibid., pg. 209.

²⁸ Ibid., pg. 210.

other versions of Black theology. Cleage is asking us to consider what theology and the church could manifest if the quest for freedom for blacks was the sole criterion upon which our pursuit and understanding of the sacred was judged. How might the church, still the primary and most powerful institution in the black community, be restructured so that this institution actually serves the needs of a growing black liberation struggle? What would it mean to make the concerns of black people struggling to be free, and not professional or academic legitimization, the priority of Black theology? According to Cleage, Black theology has always been “more important to black people than Black theologians suspect.”²⁹ Freed of its Eurocentric methodological shackles, which are theology’s universal imperative and the abstract absolutism central to the revelation of Jesus Christ, black church theology becomes a pragmatic discourse focused on the goal of black liberation in America and ultimately all of the African diaspora.

Cleage presents a theological methodology that is self-consciously constructive and pragmatic by his willingness to foreground our present experiences in pursuit of solving the problem of black subjugation and the declaration of black inferiority in America. While he argued that Jesus was literally a black Messiah, he also claimed that even if the historical Jesus was not black, or even if Jesus never existed, black people would either have to make him black or construct a new faith. His questions about the relevancy of Jesus Christ to the Black liberation struggle convey a similar sentiment. These comments suggest a pragmatic, as opposed to an apologetic, approach. Inspired by John Dewey’s pragmatism, Eddie Glaude wants us to consider that “sometimes our habits and beliefs fail us. In the course of our transactions with our environment—transactions that result in the irritation of doubt—our experiences may lead us to conclude that some of our inherited beliefs are not for us. We then tinker and experiment and, as we grope for resolution, we determine, as best as we can, when it is appropriate to forget and when to remember.”³⁰ For Cleage, the idea of “making Jesus black” gestures towards such theological experimentation. His efforts to restructure the black church, and construct a new black theology informed by a pragmatic methodology, is an admission of the failure of the black church and specific inherited beliefs. Undoubtedly the black church was vital in sustaining black existence and ensuring survival in a hostile white supremacist culture, but the black church, as constituted, is inadequate as a sufficient tool for black liberation in the revolutionary context of the Black Power movement in America. Glaude, however, is critical of many proponents of Black power for “looking to the past in search of greatness, or venerating all that is old to the detriment of the new or attempting, a posteriori, to invent a past for themselves—one they would prefer to the past from which they actually are descended.”³¹ While it is true that the early Cleage touted the mythic glories of black people’s African past and such an invention makes him susceptible to this critique, Cleage also creates a framework through which we can judge the truthfulness of our claims by what we are able to build in the present and future. And his view of the black church is certainly not retrospective but prospective. How can this institution best serve the needs of a people currently involved in a struggle for freedom in this specific, socio-historical moment?

In this way, Cleage parted ways with other black theologians of his generation, since he is not motivated by a need to defend the black church or make the case that Black theology derives from Black church theology or even is consistent with the historical black religious experience in America. Cleage subverts the problem with history that Glaude contends plagues Black theology. Dwight Hopkins, for example, makes the case that there is a theological bridge or link between Africa, slave theology or bush arbor theology, and Black theology. The argument that Black theology and slave theology contain African remains suggests a theological and cultural line of continuity between Black theology and the ways in which black people in America have always practiced Christianity in America. Victor Anderson calls this a “hermeneutics of return” that he

²⁹ Albert B. Cleage, *Black Christian Nationalism*, pg. xvii.

³⁰ Eddie Glaude, *In A Shade of Blue: Pragmatism and the Politics of Black America*, pg.86.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pg.83.

implies is really just an effort to legitimize Black theology as not just academic theology but consistent with black religious experiences in America. “In other words, the return to black sources is attributive to an ideological function that is culturally apologetic.”³² Thus, Hopkins’ work essentially is an exercise in seeking legitimation, not with the white academy but with the guardians of black religious history.

Recall that Gayraud Wilmore earlier raised questions about James Cone’s own efforts at seeking validation from white systematic theology. The universal imperative implicit in ontological blackness was necessary, Wilmore claims, in order “for any systematic theology to be taken seriously.”³³ We could ask, taken seriously by whom? Who is the intended audience? Wilmore goes on, “The question subsequently raised in this discussion, however, was whether the black religious experience requires such a validation by white systematic theology before it can be commended to African Americans who are being socialized away from their traditions, and whether the strain toward universality does not ipso facto rob black religion of the freedom to be one approach to God’s revelation in Scripture.”³⁴ Perhaps responsive to this criticism, Hopkins’ project attempts to justify Black theology within African American religious history by drawing from sources that are consistent with the religious experiences of black people in America. However, whether the audience is academic white systematic theologians or the black church tradition and/or African American public life, both Cone and Hopkins pursue projects whose goal is to validate, defend, and render legitimate the project itself, Black theology as valid theological engagement. What undergirds the efforts of both is to authenticate Black theology as valid discourse within the scope of what counts as acceptable. This is to be lauded, not condemned, yet the Black theology project ultimately can only maintain its vitality by encouraging a diversity of theological and methodological approaches and theological alternatives. Cleage’s thought is of urgent necessity, primarily because the experiences of everyday black people are the sole criterion and judge of the validity and relevancy of the project or movement. He shifts the locus of concern by asking: Can we actually get the black church to work for black liberation? It is an approach that is forward-looking and shows a willingness to engage in the experimental. Validating the project as academic discourse is a professional, intellectual pursuit that fails to centralize the demands of everyday black people struggling in the street for social and even revolutionary change. These everyday black people need the institutional power, support, and resources that only the black church can provide. Wilmore suggests that legitimacy efforts by Black theology require conforming to the mandates of an already established discourse in a way that is restrictive and “robs,” or takes something away from, black religion. This cultural and spiritual robbery is what makes Black theology opaque. Something is missing, denied, rejected. What is needed is improvisational theological construction and experimentation that can adapt, adjust, scrutinize, and reconstruct in response to failure. From Cleage’s perspective, Black theology could be “one approach to God’s revelation in scripture” or perhaps it should not be one approach to God’s revelation in scripture. The existential and practical demands of the movement itself, the new ecclesia, determine the ultimate usefulness even of the category revelation and scripture.

Cleage’s willingness to foreground the stated objective of black liberation makes him less defensive about the black church, black Christian experiences in America, and ultimately Black theology itself. It reflects an openness and ability to be responsive to new challenges, for example, what LGBTQ people might add to the notion of “Black” people. Cleage’s project is not apologetic, because there is no theological idea or construct that is inviolate, and his is not a project about historical recovery or discovery. Cleage explicitly states that his goal is to reconstruct the black church. He initiated practical theological, liturgical, and structural innovation. It is truly a work of constructive theology that situates him as a type of renegade theologian, since he is not

32 Victor Anderson, “Ontological Blackness in Black Theology,” in *African American Religious Thought*, ed. Cornel West and Eddie Glaude, pg. 903.

33 Gayraud Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, New York: Orbis Books, 1972, pg. 250.

34 Ibid. pg. 250.

bound by the same rules of engagement established by those accomplished and sanctioned by the field. Cleage becomes subversive and in fact a threat, because his approach calls into question the “authenticity” of all Black theology. “Theologies are about the power of specific forms of discourse about power.” His theology therefore is reduced to a type of “subjugated knowledge” within the field, and he risks erasure, his thought subject to historical amnesia, even within the project and sub-discipline that he helped to establish.

The traditional Black church has failed black people by being more a mechanism of their oppression than an instrument of liberation. Cleage’s desire then is to transform it into an instrument of liberation; thus even the Christian faith itself is potentially subject to radical revision and reconstruction, because what matters most is not some idyllic theological past or inviolate view of God but black people’s present pursuit of freedom. His method is symbolized in the renaming of the church from Central United Church of Christ to The Shrines of the Black Madonna and recasting the church as the Black Christian Nationalist Movement (later renamed Pan African Orthodox Christian Church).

My contention is that Cleage’s efforts to situate his theological and ecclesiological project based solely on the guiding principle that nothing is more sacred than the liberation of black people remains an unfulfilled theological paradigm shift that deserves renewed engagement. He is the one black theologian that sought to truly prioritize the objective of liberation for black people in a way that incorporates a pragmatic approach attentive to present human experiences instead of a reified theological and mythological past. The fact that he was a pastor and community organizer attentive to a specific, socio-historic context (1960-1970’s Detroit) and not a professional academic theologian is emblematic of his emphasis on a radically different methodology because of his audience and practical objectives. Cleage’s approach remains unfulfilled, however, for two reasons. First, as has already been stated, Black theology as academic discourse tacitly determined Cleage’s theology unfit, since it fails to conform to the mandates outlined by the discourse itself. Second, Cleage and his community, his church, failed to continuously subject this protean theological posture to examination and scrutiny. It is to this second reason that I now turn.

As stated previously, Eddie Glaude argues that Black theology has a problem with history. He uses John Dewey and Friedrich Nietzsche to help him argue that “with such a pragmatic conception of experience, the black theological project can escape the problem of history.”³⁵ This problem is derived from a conception of history as monumental, which provides us with “models of excellence” that inhibits our acting in the present. When one adds the tendency to view African American history through the lens of biblical history the problem becomes even more entrenched. The pragmatic approach that Glaude offers however allows us to take the current experiences of African Americans seriously and make them the priority over a reified past. What is instructive about Glaude, however, is the way in which he rightly identifies that what undergirds this fixation with the past is a longing for “permanence, totality, the real essence, and God.”³⁶ In other words, he calls our attention to our inclination towards static existence, or the delusion of permanence, because of “the fear of contingency and its tragic implications.”³⁷ Cleage’s pragmatic approach evokes this fear. His approach is Dewey like, yet it remains unfulfilled because of his (and perhaps more importantly his community’s) inability to overcome this fear of contingency and constantly revise and adapt this theology in response to the changing existential realities.

The claim “Nothing is more sacred than the liberation of black people” demands continuous examination and interrogation of what these concepts, “sacred,” “liberation,” and “black people,” mean in new situations of concern. In 1967, liberation was conceived in a particular way by Black Nationalist groups. Cleage defined liberation as building “a nation within a nation.” He prioritized building, and maintaining control of, the various institutions upon which black life

³⁵ Eddie Glaude, *In a Shade of Blue*, pg. 87.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pg. 87.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pg. 87.

depends. Liberation is a state in which black people, in America and throughout the Diaspora, are truly a self-determining people. Yet how has the idea of liberation evolved in the last fifty years? Has BCN theology continually updated itself in order to be responsive to changing existential realities or did this protean ethic become calcified and entrenched in a way that made it obsolete and disconnected from the everyday concerns of black people in post-revolutionary times? Cleage's Black Christian Nationalism assumes a black liberation struggle, but how does it continue to remain relevant when there is no clear movement or struggle? In the absence of a liberation struggle, did BCN theology devolve into a rigid orthodoxy that belies its stated pragmatic method? How does it respond to the emergence of womanist theology and black feminist thought rooted as they are in the claim that Black theology is essentially male theology that is alienated from the experiences of black women and their efforts to confront and resist, not only racism, but black men's sexism? How does it respond to the critique that the experiences of all black people were conflated and made essential to suffering derived from white racism? While Cleage jettisons ontological blackness, is he not working from a similar definition of the Black experience as James Cone, a definition that reduces the black experience as perpetually reactive and responsive to white racism? What room does this leave for discussion of black women's experiences, and black LGBTQ people? What about an analysis of class and capitalism? The claim that BCN is the answer might have failed to consider whether or not the questions black people are asking themselves have changed in the last fifty years.

That said, Cleage did demonstrate a clear openness to theological innovation and change in significant ways. He certainly continued to struggle to answer the question: how does God work in the world? And he was not settled on this matter after the publication of Black Christian Nationalism. One must read Cleage's later writings to fully appreciate the evolution of his doctrine of God from the belief that God was black to a conception of God as cosmic energy and creative intelligence. This evolution evinces the way his conception of God manifests his pragmatic method since this new conception discloses a God that is useful to black people in their search to attain power and overcome a pervasive and corrosive black inferiority complex.

Cleage's Doctrine of God—Cosmic Energy and Creative Intelligence

When Albert B. Cleage initiated the Black Christian Nationalist Movement, he articulated a doctrine of God that explicitly affirmed the blackness of God. In a sermon preached in 1967, "An Epistle to Stokely," Cleage expounds on the biblical claim that "God made man in his own image." He points out that if indeed God made humans in God's own image then the fact that the majority of the people on the planet are people of color is relevant to the image of God. It means that God is non-white, which Cleage often conflates with black; thus God is black. "If God created man in his own image, then we must look at man to see what God looks like. There are black men, there are yellow men, there are red men, and there are a few, a mighty few, white men in the world. If God created man in his image, then God must be some combination of this black, red, yellow and white. In no other way could God have created man in his own image."³⁸

This quote has often been used by other black religious scholars as an articulation of Cleage's doctrine of God. While this is unfair since this excerpt from one sermon was not necessarily intended to be a developed doctrine of God, it is also true that Cleage never wrote a systematic or constructive theology. It is true, however, that his theology evolved as the needs and existential realities of his community evolved; thus, all his sermons were articulations of his theology in process, his theology to that point. Black and womanist theologians, however, in works published in the last twenty years, continue to use the aforementioned quote as representative of Cleage's thought and fail to acknowledge the evolution of his doctrine of God, which began as early as 1979. In fact, Cleage was responsive to William Jones critique of him. Jones described Cleage's doctrine of God as "the combination approach" and declared it self-

³⁸ Albert B. Cleage, Jr., *The Black Messiah*, Trenton: Africa World Press, Inc., 1989, pg. 42.

refuting.³⁹ Jones points out as problematic Cleage's attempt to combine all the races of the world to determine the image of God. He notes that to do so focuses exclusively on race and ignores the other particularities of human beings. If, for example, one applied that logic to gender or sex, would Cleage then say God is androgynous or hermaphroditic? Is God a combination of all the heights and weights of human beings? Do we apply this logic to figure out God's eye color and the width and shape of God's nose and face? When one endeavors to discern other specific human characteristics of God, the "combination approach" is difficult to rationally defend.

As early as 1979, however, Albert Cleage evolved and developed a doctrine of God that was consistent with modern physics, African and many Eastern religious traditions, and some postmodern Western theologies, like Process theology. Cleage began to articulate a conception of God as cosmic energy and creative intelligence. He developed this concept based on his awareness of the paradigm shift that had taken place in modern physics; thus in his new conception of God he shows his willingness to develop theology in a way that is responsive to new scientific discoveries and advances. Fritjof Capra, noted physicist, makes clear that the universe is not comprised of separate building blocks but is a unified whole. "Gradually, physicists began to realize that nature, at the atomic level, does not appear as a mechanical universe composed of fundamental building blocks, but rather as a network of relations, and that, ultimately, there are no parts at all in this interconnected web."⁴⁰ This interconnected web is not comprised of matter or independently existing particles but are networks of energy patterns and processes. Thus, on a subatomic level all things are comprised of the same energy, but the energy processes and patterns differ.

The recognition that mass is a form of energy eliminated the concept of a material substance from science and with it also that of a fundamental structure. Subatomic particles are not made of any material stuff; they are patterns of energy. Energy, however, is associated with activity, with processes, and this implies that the nature of subatomic particles is intrinsically dynamic. When we observe them, we never see any substance, nor any fundamental structure. What we observe are dynamic patterns continually changing into one another—a continuous dance of energy.⁴¹

Such a "dance of energy," led Cleage to conclude that all that is in the universe is connected to, and exists within, a field of energy. This energy field then is synonymous with God; thus, as human beings we actually "live, move, and have our being in God (Acts 17:28)." For Cleage, "God continues to be the energy field in which all the forces of nature are united...All the forces of nature are united in one single energy field. The energy field is God which permeates everything, the spiritual foundation of the universe."⁴² We are energy beings and if we could open up our energy pathways or channels, we might be able to access more energy at greater levels of intensity. In theological terms, this means the human being possesses an inner divinity, the God incarnate. The point of religion and spirituality is to activate that inner divinity and have it connect with external divinity, the God transcendent. Consequently, Cleage began to muse that the worship of God, the experience of God, is an effort to open the seeker, and increase his/her access, to more energy and power (intelligence) unavailable to him/her otherwise. Worship is not performed then to please, pacify, or ingratiate oneself to a Supreme Being, but worship serves a practical function for human beings: to increase the community's collective access to divine power, or higher levels of energy and consciousness. Cleage argued that this was in fact what Jesus was trying to teach his disciples and would often quote the words ascribed to Jesus in the gospel of John 14:12, "The one who believes in me will also do the works that I do and, in fact, will do greater works than these, because I am going to the Father." Cleage formulated a doctrine

1973, pg. 125.

40 Fritjof Capra, *The Tao of Physics*, Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1975, pg. 330.

41 Ibid., pg. 330.

42 Albert B. Cleage, Jr., "The Divine Reality," a sermon, preached June 30, 1991.

of God that merged the insights of modern science, with the description of the creation of the world in the book of Genesis.

“In the beginning nothing existed but the power and creative intelligence of God. Out of a mystical explosion of divine energy, the cosmos and everything in it was created. This act of creation provided an orderly unification of the four fundamental forces of nature in a Unified Field controlling the functions and interaction of all things. It took some 15 billion years from the moment of divine creation for mankind to evolve into a recognizable human form on the continent of Africa. Whether or not a similar evolutionary process produced human beings on other planets or in other galaxies we have no way of knowing.”⁴³

Such a pantheistic conception of God is a conception unlike those articulated by other black theologians and makes a unique contribution to the Black theology project. My contention is that the evolution of his doctrine of God was made possible by a pragmatic theological method, one that promises to add vitality to a Black theology project that is in earnest need of revitalization.

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⁴³ Albert B. Cleage, Jr., “Introduction to BCN Theology, unpublished essay, 1984.