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Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel? An' Why Not Every Man? Black Theodicy in the Antebellum United States and the Problem of the Demonic God

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Black Theodicy in the Antebellum United States and the Problem of the Demonic God

by
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Forward

The concept of *theodicy,* the conjunction of "*theos*" (meaning God) and "*dikē*" (meaning justice) coined by eighteenth-century German philosopher Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, has always intrigued me. How can people affirm God's goodness in spite of such suffering in the world? While studying the response to this question in class called "The Problem of Evil: African American Engagements in Western Thought," we read elegantly juxtaposed excerpts from William R. Jones' *Is God a White Racist?* and James Cone's *The Spirituals and the Blues.* A combination of ethics, biblical interpretation, and the emancipatory power of singing, I knew then that I had found a topic that could sustain my interest throughout an entire year of thesis writing.

My childhood home in Washington, D.C. was kitty-corner to a Catholic church called Blessed Sacrament. The bells rang every fifteen minutes from seven in the morning until seven at night, and they would really go wild on Easter. From my bedroom window I spied on people milling around in appropriately colored clothing, looking especially happy or especially sad (and always especially awkward.) It may have been this voyeuristic perspective on the workings of the church, combined with a sporadic attendance of services at synagogue, that ignited my initial intrigue towards religion.

As I grew up, my father would periodically tell the story of his Conscientious Objector status during the Vietnam War. He would describe how he had been studying at Joan Baez's Institute for the Study of Non-Violence in Northern California and was rejected by the draft board upon presenting them with a briefcase overflowing with research on

pacifism. It was my father's exasperated eye-rolling as the Mormons left our doorstep that made me suspicious of evangelizing people of all genres.

I was in middle school when I got the chance to exercise my own non-violent protest against the war in Iraq. As I got older I began to engage people in conversations about their personal religious beliefs. I noticed how easily the conversation between me and a stranger, say a taxi driver or the lady sitting next to me at a bus stop, would slip into a discussion of God.

During high school I sang in the jazz band and became involved with Queer activism. In the challenging experience of starting my school's first Gay Straight Alliance I saw hypocrisy and corruption within the education system. I met "educators" who did not want to support me and my friends because our desire to have a safe space where we could explore personal and social issues having to do with Queer identity was too controversial and went against their personal (read: religious) beliefs. Since then, I have been involved in many organized efforts to promote equal civil and social rights for Queer and otherwise marginalized communities, and I know that as I enter into the "adult" world, those who do not support my beliefs will become even more of a threat to my personal freedom.

In studying Black theodicy, I have learned how the Black community navigated dehumanizing systems of oppression by adapting, rejecting, and transforming that oppression into tools for their own liberation. As I listened to the sweet, deep voice of Paul Robeson singing "All Gods Chillun Got Wings" and watched videos of non-violent protests during the civil rights movement, I thought about a recent act of hate and ignorance that was directed at my local Queer community. It is important to revisit history to find the inspiration to change our present and future. This thesis is dedicated to people across the generations who have

fought and continue to fight against prejudice, whatever that may look like.

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Introduction

Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel? An' Why Not Every Man: *Black Theodicy in the Antebellum United States and the Problem of the Demonic God* is an ambitious attempt to construct a coherent narrative that spans many centuries and connect numerous historical persons and figures in recent scholarship. I set out to understand how an enslaved person could have faith in the goodness of god despite their oppressed condition. I learned that most enslaved Africans first encountered Christianity when they became the "property" of Christians. Then, in a revolutionarily creative move, the Black community re-signified Christianity from a religious system synonymous with oppression to a theology of liberation. The Black community claimed they knew the *real* Christ, embodied by Jesus, the suffering servant. They discovered an intimate spiritual connection with the Children of Israel, delivered from slavery by the grace of God. Black people of the Christian faith created thousands of Spirituals lamenting their suffering and celebrating the promise of a liberated future on Earth and in God's heaven. Not everyone accepted Christianity, however. Many enslaved or otherwise oppressed people found much to be cynical of in those who claimed to be Godly; corruption, hypocrisy, violence, inhumanity. These skeptical voices speak to us through Slave Narratives and records of preachers who documented a certain humanistic doubt in the antebellum Black community. The lyrics of the Seculars, non-theistic music produced at the same time as the Spirituals, express humor and irony in reaction to the absurd nature of life as experienced by a Black person during slavery. I went on to explore contemporary critiques of the emancipative potential of theodicy, ending up mostly won over

by secular humanist ideologies that encourage humans to take charge of their potential to be instigators of social change instead of remaining inactive, waiting for God's eschatological promises to be realized.

This thesis is divided into three chapters. In the first chapter entitled "Religion in the Encounter of Black and White" (named after an essay by David W. Wills,) I provide a general overview of West African religious tradition, taking most of my information from Albert J. Raboteau's masterful book *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South*. I will also suggest that most Whites in the North American colonies justified associating Black Africans with slavery because of a narrow biblical interpretation. The chapter concludes by examining the significant interpretations of the biblical stories, the Mark of Cain and the Curse of Ham, in relation to their influential position in North American slavery. I use quotations from the King James version of the bible for historical appropriateness, and I cite research done by historians David M. Goldenberg and Stephen R. Haynes on the social implications of these two important stories. The function of this chapter is to construct a theoretical foundation for the internalization, rejection, and hybridization of religion that subsequently occurred in the antebellum Black community.

The next chapter, "The Religious Humanism of the Spirituals," addresses theodicies of early Black theology as expressed though music. These theodicies uphold the omnibenevolence of God in spite of the oppression of the Black population (free and enslaved) in the antebellum United States. This chapter is not a systematic study of Black theodicy, but is rather thematically focused on certain theodicies of redemptive suffering, theodicies of emancipation, a Christological theodicy that emphasizes the human embodiment of Jesus, the theodicy of life beyond death, the theodicy of eventual justice, and

the theodicy of the Transcendent Present. Many scholars have turned to the Negro Spirituals as illustrations of Black religious interpretation, and this chapter follows in that tradition, focusing on Lawrence W. Levine's essay *Slave Songs and Slave Consciousness* and James Cone's *The Spirituals and the Blues* as the main analytical sources. This chapter's purpose is to illuminate the humanistic potentialities of Black theodicy.

The third and final chapter, entitled "Critique of Theodicy and the Secular Reclamation of Human Potential," is a compilation of critical perspectives on the emancipative potential of theodicy. These include a number of international historical figures from various cultures in addition to an internal critique from critics Benjamin E. Mays and William R. Jones. The chapter ends with Jones' proposal of humanocentric theism, a sort of mid-way point between a theodicy and a secular humanist ideology.

In conclusion, I suggest that the current discussion of "functional theodicies" lacks a thorough exploration of the creative process as a life-affirming spiritual experience. I argue that the creative process, especially the process of creating a song or other art, can bring us into contact with the divine in a similar, but possibly more humanistic, way than traditional religious structures.

I would like to acknowledge at the get-go that this is an incomplete treatment of a multifaceted and endlessly provocative combination of topics. I am fully aware, for example, that the female interpretation of theodicy is almost left out of this thesis, save a brief mention of female preachers and a summary of Womanism that does it little justice. As much as I hate to be another guilty actor in the silencing of the female psyche, I still believe that this thesis adds to a rich and continuing, if male dominated, discourse.

Wherever possible, I tried to avoid using the terms "slave" and "slave-master"

because to me, employing these terms would be perpetuating the inequality that they represent. I did, however, use these words in instances when it was absolutely necessary for grammatical fluidity or when they were the most effective for communicating the social structure and particular perspectives being discussed. I also took issue with the term "African-American" as I feel that it is not for me to decide whether the person or group I am discussing has an equally strong identification with both geographical locations. I usually use "Black" and "White," and choose to capitalize both. Another intentional, linguistic choice is refer to God using a gender-neutral pronoun. I use "They" and "Their" only when I am speaking with my personal voice in the last chapter and conclusion.

I intend this thesis to serve as an introduction to an important part of American history that is rarely discussed in the mainstream. I hope it will illicit a number of reactions from its readers- outrage, triumph, and self reflection to name a few, because these represent the most frequent emotions that I have been privileged enough to experience throughout my researching and writing process.

Religion in the Encounter of Black and White

> ...whether Negroes borrowed from whites or whites from Negroes, in this or any other aspect of culture, it must always be remembered that the borrowing was never achieved without resultant change in whatever was borrowed, and, in addition, without incorporating elements which originated in the new habits that, as much as anything else, give the new form its distinctive quality.[1]

West African Religious Traditions and the Transmigration of Culture

Over the almost four-century span of the Atlantic Slave Trade, approximately ten million Africans were enslaved.[1] The first documented group of enslaved Africans were brought to Jamestown in 1619,[2] and Africans were still being illegally smuggled into the United States until the late 1880s.[3] Though the original homes of most of the enslaved population are unknown due to inexact records,[4] a large percentage were West African from the Congo-Angola region, which extends from the coast of Senegambia to Angola to hundreds of miles inland. This large regional sprawl encompassed (and still encompasses) many distinct societies and a great diversity of cultures.[5]

When abducted in order to work in the mines, homes, and plantations of the "New World," enslaved Africans were severed violently from every familiar aspect of their previous lives. Enslavers destroyed the unifying threads of African culture that could potentially enable resistance and rebellion, thus members of tribal and linguistic groups were scattered while family and kinship ties were broken. However, in spite of the enslavers' attempts to utterly dehumanize and eradicate African identity, still many elements were

retained, reshaped and modified into customs and beliefs capable of surviving the forced African Diaspora.

Raboteau describes how the languages, folklore, music, and religion of African cultures transferred to American soil were profoundly affected by the intermingling of African groups, the traditions of the colonial Europeans, Islam, and, to a lesser extent, Native American traditions.[6] It is important to note that many enslaved Africans may have encountered Christianity prior to their arrival in the Americas on account of European establishment along the West African Coast dating back to Portuguese missionaries in the early sixth century. Catholicism, for example, had been the official religion of the Congo kingdom since the fifteen hundreds.[7] Many of the enslaved may have been exposed to Islam through Muslim cultural centers in Africa like the ancient regions of Ghana and Mali in the Western Sudan, as well as through Muslim conversion, conquest, and trade.[8]

Due to their incredible diversity, it is impossible to make an all-encompassing categorical description of West African Religious traditions. Scholars Sidney W. Mintz and Richard Price wrote,

> If we define 'culture' as a body of beliefs and values, socially acquired and patterned, that serve an organized group (a 'society') as guides of and for behavior, then the term cannot be applied without some distortion to the manifold endowments of those masses of enslaved individuals, separated from their respective political and domestic settings, who were transported, in more or less heterogeneous cargoes, to the New World.[10]

Despite this fact, there were similar rituals, principles, and perceptions in the variety of West African religious beliefs held by those brought to the New World. Some of this discernible "structural unity"[11] can be seen in "'cognitive orientations,' on the one hand, basic assumptions about social relations (what values motivate individuals, how one deals with others in social situations, and matters of interpersonal style), and, on the other, basic

assumptions and expectations about the way the world functions phenomenologically (for instance, beliefs about causality, and how particular causes are revealed."[12] Additionally, consistencies in attitudes toward sociocultural change, like "orientations toward 'additivity' in relation to foreign elements, or expectations about the degree of internal dynamism in their own culture"[13] can also be traced in the cultures of the enslaved from West Africa. As pointed out by Mintz and Price, "the notion of a shared African heritage takes on meaning only in a comparative context."[14] A shared identification was to develop from the Diaspora, that of the "other," with Africa promoted to a common point in the comparative context of the North American slavocracy. Interestingly, allusions to Africa are prevalent in much Black music of the antebellum period, a point we will return to later on.

Though this analytical structure is inherently problematic, there are certain consistencies revealed in a general study of the religious traditions of the geographic areas in West Africa. One shared element is the belief in a High God or Supreme Creator of the world. The parental figure to numerous lesser gods and ancestor spirits, this deity was associated with the sky and was thought to be relatively removed from human activities. The lesser gods and ancestors, sometimes considered mediators between the High God and humans, constantly interacted in human affairs and generally received the majority of ritual focus since they were more immediately present in everyday life. These gods have different names depending on their cultural origin; "the Ashanti know them as *abosom*; the Ewe-speaking Fon of Dahomey name them *vodun;* the Ibo worship them as *alose*; and the Yoruba call them *orisha*."[15] The pantheons included divinities who were both broadly and locally worshipped and were associated with natural phenomena, like thunder, lightening and floods. Unfortunate yet unsurprising in their ethnocentricity, some early European travelers

interpreted the West African gods as devils and demons and accused Africans of devil and fetish worship,[16] an interpretive trend that would continue through the era of North American slavery.

The West African gods had the capacity for both benevolence and malevolence, and devotees could affect their personal and communal relationship with the gods through praise, sacrifice, shrines, temples, and by observing the gods' preferences of food, colors, and taboos.[17] Typically, each god had a priest that would lead its group of devotees. This priest was also a diviner and herbalist. During ritual ceremonies, devotees would go into states of ecstatic trance, becoming possessed by a specific god or spirit that was identifiable through the dance and acting out of the devotee.[18] Each god was associated with their own songs and rhythms, and Raboteau asserts that one could call West African religions "danced religions" because dancing, singing, and drumming play such an important and pervasive role in worship.[19]

In addition to deities, ancestors were also generally considered to be powerful spirits who could act as mediators with the gods and control the health and fertility of the living. It was believed that ancestors could be reborn in future generations, and resemblances to those who had passed were the giveaway. Ancestors were worshipped because their spirit status made them closer to the gods, while the elderly were respected for their chronological proximity to the spirit world. It was vital that proper burial rights be observed or else an individual or community would risk negative consequences, like a spiteful ghost.[20]

Magic also would have been a major aspect of religious life for many West Africans of this time period. Magic was directly linked to medicine because some illness and death

were thought to be a result of supernatural causes. Priests had the ability to make diagnoses and recommend preventative charms or amulets to defend against witchcraft and curses.[21]

It is fascinating to trace the retentions, adaptations, and transformations of West African religious traditions in Central and South America. Although much African tradition was trampled out by the dominant cultures of the New World, the continuity of many rituals and African modes of perception can be seen in the *Candomblé* of Brazil, *Santeria* of Cuba, *Shango* of Trinidad, Haitian *Vaudou,* and the *Voodoo* of the Louisiana area.[22] Similar ritual performance in the form of rhythmic drumming that summons gods, a climactic point of possession, uniform choreography and singing and dancing marks a relevant group of continuities that can be clearly seen in these heavily African-influenced religions.[23] Some of these carried-over elements are more apparent in some cultures than others; according to Raboteau's sources, "the *orisha* and the *vodun* are worshiped in Brazil in essentially the same manner as in Africa."[24] The survival of African gods through their association with the iconography and specific powers of Catholic saints is apparent in the traditions of *Santeria*, *Candomblé*, and *Shango*; it is thought that what initially appeared to be the veneration of Christian saints actually disguised the worship of African gods.

In some areas this process of acculturation was a two way street. Raboteau says:

> African religions have traditionally been amenable to accepting the "foreign" gods of neighbors and of enemies. It has not been unusual for one people to integrate the gods of another into their own cult life especially when social changes, such as migration or conquest, required mythic and ritualistic legitimation. Furthermore, Catholic popular piety has long been open to syncretism with "pagan" belief and practice. No fundamental contradiction existed between veneration of the Virgin Mary and the saints in Catholic piety, on the one hand, and devotions to the *orisha* and *vodun* in African religions, on the other.[25]

A completely different kind of religious innovation took place in the communities of the enslaved in North America. Even those scholars like W.E.B. DuBois and E. Franklin Frazier who do not give much weight to the retentions of African religions in North America must acknowledge certain elements of these danced and sung religions that persisted and became a part of African American culture, to eventually pervade the entire American consciousness in one way or another. Irrespective of whether one regards retentions of African culture to be easily visible in North American culture or not, it would be wrong to look at this as some kind of failure of African heritage. In the next section, we will see the attitude that the Colonists of North America took toward Black Africans, and later, in the discussion of Black music during slavery, we will once again return to theories of spiritual and creative retentions from Africa.

Puritanical Slavery

A reductionist Christian dogma was used as a justification for North American slavery from the very beginning. In rebelling from their English Catholic and reformed Protestant religious heritage and building their "City upon a Hill,"[26] the European settlers, known as Puritans, rationalized the abuse of groups like enslaved Africans and indigenous North American peoples under the auspices of a Christian mandate.[27] Slavery was thought of as divinely sanctioned and fit conveniently into the broad context of manifest destiny. Not only was this a widely held sentiment, but three major religiously-based convictions afforded the general Puritan acceptance and propagation of slavery: self defense, a concept of "charitable responsibility," and the fulfillment of biblical prophecy.

In contradiction to the traditional textbook presentation that many North American elementary students are given which amount to a group of people wearing funny hats and gold-buckled shoes, sharing a turkey with the locals, the Puritan settlers of the sixteen and seventeen hundreds were intolerant and repressive toward other religious expressions. Puritan leaders like the patriarchs of the Cotton family were responsible for the hangings of Quakers, as well as the brutal killings of many accused of witchcraft.[28] The Puritans' central reason in coming to North America was to establish the "one true faith where corrupt versions of it could not intrude."[29] According to historian Garry Wills, "the dominant religious culture of the colonies, in both the Congregational North and the largely Anglican South, was Calvinist."[30] While there were significant differences between the intense religious fervor of White settlers in North, the more "pluralistic" middle colonies and the somewhat less religiously unified southern Protestant colonies,[31] "an Augustinian-Calvinist picture of the fallen human condition, of merciful divine sovereignty in redemption, and of the self-authenticating all-sufficiency of divine revelation still prevailed."[32] The Puritans defined the "true faith" as following the Covenant of Grace. This document said that they were God's chosen people, a congregation of "visible saints" predestined to be saved. The experience of individual faith was a central tenet of Puritan dogma, and those who could not prove the legitimacy of their conversion were neither allowed to have influence in the church nor partake in the community vote.[33]

Puritan politics and religion were both guided by the same all-encompassing, supernaturalistic world view. As Wills puts it, "the Puritans tended to see all events as (on the one hand) divine blessings or punishments, or (on the other hand) as diabolical temptations."[35] The Puritan mindset was also strongly infused by the character of the Devil,

and they attributed negative happenings to the work of the Devil. The killing of a heretic could be explained under the auspices of self defense: it was either do away with threatening people or risk the demise of the one "true faith."[36]

In the settlements of New England, three major social themes presided: the focus on cultural rebirth, societal unification, and "the church as the central link between personal religious and national freedom."[39] As the scholars Mark A. Noll, George M. Marsden, and Nathan O. Hatch assert, "behind all the practical confusion of church and state was the overriding presumption that New England was the New Israel."[38] The Puritans sought to metaphorically replace the Jews as the Chosen People in their "New Jerusalem."[40] They believed that they were on special assignment from God to strike out into the "wilderness" and to think of any opposition as satanic obstacles to be overcome with piety. Puritans associated the religions practiced by Native Americans with heresy and Paganism, an ignorant misinterpretation that can be attributed to their unfamiliarity with the theosophical cosmologies connected to a landscape and history that were clearly beyond the Colonists' knowledge.

The offensive attitude toward people of unfamiliar religions and cultures can be partly explained by the notion of self-preservation in the name of manifest destiny. This same reasoning can be applied to the Puritan attitude toward enslaved Africans. From the Puritan perspective, the superiority of Christianity justified the violent repression of African religious traditions and supported what they perceived as the divinely sanctioned duty of conversion. Charles II urged the Council for Foreign Plantations to:

> consider how such of the Natives or such as are purchased by you from other parts to be servants or slaves may best be invited to the Christian Faith, and be made capable of being baptized thereunto, it being to the honor of our Crowne and of the Protestant Religion that all persons in any of our dominions should

> be taught the knowledge of God, and be made acquainted with the misteries of Salvation.[42]

The following excerpt from *The Negro Christianized* (published in 1706) by Cotton Mather (1663-1728), the influential minister and author popularly associated with the Salem Witch Trials, epitomizes the view that enslaved Africans needed Puritan support for reasons of both charity and self defense:

> A roaring lion who goes about seeking whom he may devour [1 Peter 5.8] hath made seizure of them. Very many of them do with devilish rites actually worship devils, or maintain a magical conversation with devils. And all of them are more slaves to Satan than they are to you [slaveholders], until a faith in the Son of God has made them free indeed. Will you do nothing to pluck them out of the jaws of Satan the Devourer?[43]

Despite the encouragement by authorities like Charles II and Cotton Mather, the task of conversion proved to be complicated and intensely challenging. In fact, an overwhelming majority of the enslaved population never received Christian instruction during the first one hundred and fifty years of North American Slavery.[44] The slaveholders themselves acted as a major obstacle because of another kind of suspicion- they thought that the inclusion of slaves in the Christian faith would inherently necessitate that person's legal emancipation. The majority of southern slave-holders refused to let missionaries interact with their slaves for fear that "if slaves were baptized, 'they should, according to the laws of the *British* nation and the canons of its church' be freed."[45] It was not in the enslavers best interest to promote an enslaved person's equal status in the eyes of God lest it threaten their inferiority in the civil hierarchy of human rights. They were afraid that granting them membership into the Christian club would make the enslaved rebellious and ungovernable.[46] Curiously, this thought process circumvents the inkling that slavery might be antithetical to Christian morality. "He [the Black person]," says Long, "was brought to America in chains, and this

country has attempted to keep him in this condition in one way or another. His very presence as a human being in the United States has always constituted a threat to the majority population."[47] This issue highlights an important contradiction between the traditionally Christian notion of God's equal love of all humankind and the institution of slavery. Indeed, this would end up being a key factor in the disintegration of the White monopoly over the Christian faith in North America. It should be mentioned that there were anti-slavery voices, mostly from the Quakers and later from Christians of numerous denominations, but these voices were not widely entertained until the abolitionist movement of the mid to late 1800s. The debates between White abolitionists and pro-slavery advocates provide a whole arena of rich analysis that this thesis will not detail.

North American slaveholders viewed the Christianization of their slaves to be economically, in addition to spiritually, detrimental. From the perspective of the slaveholders, teaching catechism and setting aside time for the enslaved to worship would have taken too much time away from crop production, especially in light of the shortage of ministers available to cater to the White settlers. Since "the economic profitability of his slaves, not their Christianization held top priority for the colonial planter,"[48] the process of converting the enslaved would have directly contradicted the slaveholder's central interests.

Another level of difficulty was added by the widespread feeling that the enslaved were too "brutish" and savage to receive religious instruction. Raboteau attributes this impression to the language barriers and cultural differences between the planters and the enslaved Africans, but the sheer ignorance at the center of this racism stems from another place: because of their dark skin and foreign culture, enslaved Africans were thought of as "creatures of another species," leading many slaveholders to believe that the Christian

education of slaves was impossible because of their sub-human status.[49] As the scholar David W. Wills says, "since the encounter of black and white occurred within the context of a slave system that broadly and consistently subordinated blacks to whites, the previously existing cultural gap was transformed into a gap that involved power as well as meaning- and above all the relationship between the two."[50]

The Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts was organized in London in 1701 as an attempt to address conversion of the enslaved in the colonies,[51] and by 1706, six colonial legislatures had created acts denying that baptism affected the condition of a slave in relation to their freedom. Missionaries tried to prove that converting slaves would "do better for their Masters profit than formerly for they are taught to serve out of Christian Love and Duty." [52] Though the slaveholders felt they had the bible and the Protestant religion to support their role in the slave system, this was a turning point in the application of theology in North American slavery; these missionaries were "propagating the Gospel by presenting it as an attractive device for slave control."[53] The idea became to convince the enslaved that they should embrace their instrumental role in the fulfillment of biblical prophecy- their status was sanctioned by *their own* God.

Scriptural Interpretation of Black Skin

One of the most prominent theological issues of the White North American Christian community during the antebellum period was scriptural interpretation.[54] As noted by a British traveler in 1857, "not just the Bible, but 'a literal interpretation of the Bible' and a belief that 'every direction contained in its pages [is] applicable at all times to all men' was winning for proslavery the palm in exegetical battle with its foes."[55] There are many

instances of slavery in both the Old and New Testament that were capitalized on by the propagators of the slave system to support their conviction that it was divinely sanctioned. One example of this is found in Ephesians, verses 6:5-9:

> Servants, be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ; Not with eyeservice, as menpleasers; but as the servants of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart; With good will doing service, as to the Lord, and not to men: Knowing that whatsoever good thing any man doeth, the same shall he receive of the Lord, whether he be bond or free. And, ye masters, do the same things unto them, forbearing threatening: knowing that your Master also is in heaven; neither is there respect of persons with him.[56]

The presence of slavery in the bible does not explain why African-Americans as a specific community received such a disproportionate degree of suffering. In summarizing many of the main arguments made in scholar David M. Goldenberg's book *The Curse of Ham* (published in 2003) and Stephen R. Haynes in his book *Noah's Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery* (published in 2002) we will see that the equation of "slave" with a person of African descent is not necessarily implied in the actual text of the Bible. There is no clear textual explanation in the Bible for the inferiority of dark skin. Rather, this association was result of a distinct hermeneutical interpretation.

The translation of the word *kush* or *kushi* as Ethiopia or Ethiopians can be traced back to early Greek and Latin versions of the Hebrew Bible. These references do not distinguish between locations in East Africa, Southwest Arabia, South Israel, and Mesopotamia, and instead group them all under the name *kush*.[57] These regions symbolized the most remote reaches of the earth, and this association is key to the antebellum understanding of Ethiopia and Africa. Amos 9:7 is one verse out of many that iterate this sentiment:

> Are ye not as children of the Ethiopians unto me, O children of Israel? saith the Lord. Have not I brought up Israel out of the land of Egypt? and the Philistines from Caphtor, and the Syrians from Kir?[58]

Acts 8:26-40 are biblical verses that tell of the first gentile converted to Christianity, and it so happens that this convert was "Ethiopian."[59] The conversion depicted in these verses became a symbol of Christianity's goal of international evangelism and was used to justify worldwide voyage and conquest. Augustine explained: "By the Ethiopians, as by part the whole, He signifies all nations, selecting that nation to mention especially by name, which is at the ends of the earth."[60] The Ethiopians" geographical distance implied a less direct relationship with God[61] and the idea of Kush being a remote, inaccessible, and unfamiliar contributed to the perceived "otherness" of the Ethiopians. This perception is revealed in negative interpretations of passages like Jeremiah 13:23:

> Can the Ethiopian change his skin, or the leopard his spots? then may ye also do good, that are accustomed to do evil.[62]

Though Goldenberg views Jeremiah 13:23 as "a proverb about immutability drawn from the permanent genetic dark skin of the African as opposed to the temporary dark skin acquired from the sun or from dirt...[implying] no value judgement about the African's skin color,"[63] the notion of black-as-inferior can be seen throughout patterns of interpretation dating back to Ancient Greek and early Jewish culture. Ancient Greeks believed that the climate of Ethiopia's remote location was responsible for differences in Africans' physical appearance as well as perceived differences in character. Aristotle wrote "an excessive black color signifies cowardice" and "those governed by black bile are indolent, timid, ailing, and, with regard to the body, swarthy and black-haired." In first-century Jewish philosopher Philo of Alexandria's etymology, he relates the word Ethiopia to "lowness," which symbolized cowardice[64]

Philo also perpetuated the common metaphorical connection between blackness and evil in his explanation of Kush, the father of Nimrod, in Genesis 10:8-9, saying that Nimrod's evil nature was reflected in his father's black skin.[65] This notion would later influence the views of Christian patriarch Origen (185–254CE) and begin the patristic hermeneutical tradition that would associate biblical Ethiopians with "any person who, not having received a Christian baptism, is black in spirit and without divine light."[66] This allegorical interpretation often appears in patristic literature, referring to people of African descent as unconverted people or demons.[67]

The Mark of Cain and The Curse of Ham

The story of Cain, which appears in Genesis, was the basis of the interpretive connection between "dark" skin and inferiority.

> And Adam knew Eve his wife; and she conceived, and bare Cain, and said, I have gotten a man from the Lord. And she again bare his brother Abel. And Abel was a keeper of sheep, but Cain was a tiller of the ground. And in process of time it came to pass, that Cain brought of the fruit of the ground an offering unto the Lord. And Abel, he also brought of the firstlings of his flock and of the fat thereof. And the Lord had respect unto Abel and to his offering: But unto Cain and to his offering he had not respect. And Cain was very wroth, and his countenance fell. And the Lord said unto Cain, Why art thou wroth? and why is thy countenance fallen? If thou doest well, shalt thou not be accepted? and if thou doest not well, sin lieth at the door. And unto thee shall be his desire, and thou shalt rule over him. And Cain talked with Abel his brother: and it came to pass, when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother, and slew him. And the Lord said unto Cain, Where is Abel thy brother? And he said, I know not: Am I my brother's keeper? And he said, What hast thou done? the voice of thy brother's blood crieth unto me from the ground. And now art thou cursed from the earth, which hath opened her mouth to receive thy brother's blood from thy hand; When thou tillest the ground, it shall not henceforth yield unto thee her strength; a fugitive and a vagabond shalt thou be in the earth. And Cain said unto the Lord, My punishment is greater than I can bear. Behold, thou hast driven me out this day from the face of the earth; and from thy face shall I be hid; and I shall be a fugitive and a vagabond in the earth; and it shall come to pass, that every

> one that findeth me shall slay me. And the Lord said unto him, Therefore whosoever slayeth Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold. And the Lord set a mark upon Cain, lest any finding him should kill him.And Cain went out from the presence of the Lord, and dwelt in the land of Nod, on the east of Eden.[68]

Goldenberg attributes the interpretation of the Mark of Cain as a signifier of black skin to being the result of a linguistic confusion,[69] while Allen Callahan notes this theme in early Hebrew commentary: "the rabbis had speculated long ago that Cain had been made black by the back draft of soot from his unacceptable sacrifice."[70] Either way, the connection between the black Mark of Cain and a person "marked" with dark skin has had widespread and destructive ramifications over the course of history.

Though there was never any textual reference to Ham being dark-skinned, the story of the Curse of Ham was the section of the bible used the most in justification of the enslavement of Black Africans. According to Goldenberg, "It didn't matter whether one supported the institution of slavery or not, or whether one was Black or not; everyone in nineteenth century America seemed to believe in the truth of Ham's blackness...No one did doubt it; Ham was the progenitor of the black African."[71] The story goes like this:

> And Noah began to be an husbandman, and he planted a vineyard: And he drank of the wine, and was drunken; and he was uncovered within his tent. And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brethren without. And Shem and Japheth took a garment, and laid it upon both their shoulders, and went backward, and covered the nakedness of their father; and their faces were backward, and they saw not their father's nakedness. And Noah awoke from his wine, and knew what his younger son had done unto him. And he said, Cursed be Canaan; a servant of servants shall he be unto his brethren. And he said, Blessed be the Lord God of Shem; and Canaan shall be his servant. God shall enlarge Japheth, and he shall dwell in the tents of Shem; and Canaan shall be his servant. [72]

Many Southerners identified the etymological origin of the name "Ham" to mean "black," "dark," or "hot"[73] (in reference to climate), though the origin of this name has yet to

be resolved. In relation to this point, Goldenberg concludes that "One thing is, however, absolutely clear. The name Ham is not related to the Hebrew or to any Semitic word meaning 'dark,' 'black,' or 'heat'..."[74] Various theories exist as to exactly how these words became synonymous, but it is possible that a trend in the mistranslation of the Old Testament could be a tenable response, placing the linguistic combination between the second and fourth centuries.[75]

The interpretation that Black Africans were descendents or incarnations of Ham developed over many centuries of theological thought, with participation from Josephus (first century C.E.), Origin, Augustine (354-430 C.E.),[76] and other rabbinic and non-rabbinic writers.[77] Since Noah was typically thought of as a righteous forerunner of Christ, many church fathers viewed his Curse as a recapitulation of the "fall" of Adam,[78] linking Ham to the concept of sin. John Calvin, central patriarch of the Puritans, followed in this same interpretive tradition.[79]

There have been various descriptions of Ham's transgression against his father, ranging from sexual assault to grave disrespect at witnessing his father's vulnerability and nakedness. Some contend it was castration and "rendering [Noah] impotent with a magic spell," or having incestuous relations with his mother, Noah's wife.[80] Out of all of these interpretations, some form of perverted sexuality is the most common.[81]

Though it is hard to know to what extent antebellum North America was influenced by pre-existing interpretive traditions surrounding the Curse of Ham, by the 1830s equating Ham's Curse with darker skinned people had become a dominant tool for pro-slavery apologists.[82] They viewed people of African descent as descendants of Ham, the "lecherous and dishonorable son who is fit only for servitude."[83] Most pro-slavery writings do not delve

into the specific nature of the crime that Ham committed toward his father, but those that do skirt the issue of sexual perversion and instead share the conviction that Ham's sin was one of fundamental dishonor.[84] According to these writers, his conduct demonstrates the deserved and self-imposed punitive nature of slavery. One anonymous pro-slavery pamphlet entitled *African Servitude* (published in 1860) reads:

> ...In refusing to honor his parent, he refused to honor all governors, natural civil, ecclesiastical, human and divine. The sin was a representative one, and, under the circumstances, it was no light one in Ham and his son. It manifested in them no love for their parent, but an evil heart of unbelief toward God.[85]

In another text, *The Great Question Answered* (1857), author James A. Sloan shows the extravagant extent to which one could interpret the Genesis 9:20-27:

> instead of concealing the matter [of his father's nakedness], as both decency and respect for his father should have directed, his bad disposition led him to give vent to his sinful feelings, and wishing his brothers to have a part of his unseemly enjoyment, he "told it to his two brothers without." Shem and Japheth did not enter into this improper and sinful sport of their brother, but took means to hide the shame of their father, and adopted a plan to accomplish that end which manifested the greatest respect for their parent, and at the same time, the feelings of refined delicacy toward their erring father...[86]

The focus on the Curse of Ham in these pro-slavery writings seems to imply that this filial misconduct was far worse, far more damning, than Cain's fratricide. Haynes connects this interpretation with the widespread cultural emphasis on Southern honor at the time of these writings.[87]

The disrespect highlighted in the interpretation of Ham's action was taken to another level in defense of slavery. Beyond filial dishonor, Ham's transgression was read to symbolize a threat to the entirety of social order. According to Haynes, "The servitude of Ham's descendants functions to protect the social order from the sort of disorderly conduct that Ham brought to the postdiluvian community. Subordination is necessary, in other words, to restrain the rebellious Negro character to accurately depicted in Genesis 9:20-27."[88] This

motif is evident in multiple aspects of the proslavery Christian mindset, including the pervasive belief that the Bible was the only true delegator of social law and the idea that slavery was necessary to control "Africans' predisposition to lascivious and socially disruptive behavior."[89]

The most frequent interpretation of Genesis 9:20-27 was mockery.[90] Ham, according to these interpretations, was laughing upon exiting the cave where he had seen his father in a compromised position. Ham's brothers distinguished themselves as the honorable sons in their refusal to participate in Ham's depraved celebration of their father's nudity and vulnerability. This was not a solely North American imaginative; Josephus wrote on this topic, and it was later adopted by Christian and Muslim writers.[91] Unique to the North American mindset, however, was the conviction that the immorality of Ham's laughter was misdeed *enough* to merit such a curse all on its own. While speaking before Congress in 1860, Confederate leader Jefferson Davis proclaimed, "the low and vulgar son of Noah, who laughed at his father's exposure, sunk by debasing himself and his lineage by a connection with an inferior race of men, he doomed his descendants to perpetual slavery."[92] Haynes asserts that the use of Ham's supposed laughter as the reason for punishment was probably fostered by the hysteria and paranoia that accompanied the periodically elevated fear of slave rebellion.[93] This introduces the key theme that Black laughter, humor, (and the human capacity for intelligence and personal affirmation that these emotions symbolize) posed a threat to the superiority of the White intellect in the social hierarchy in the fact of its very existence. This theme has important implications for the interpretation of secular song lyrics written by enslaved musicians that will be discussed in the last chapter.

Another pernicious result of this interpretive tradition was the image of the African as the "perpetual child in the human family"[94] as well as the enslaved person being compared to the wife in a domestic relationship. This mentality was supported by the widespread opinion that people of African descent were "naturally unintelligent, morally underdeveloped, and imitative."[95] In an interesting echo of their early Puritan counterparts, these pro-slavery thinkers of the 1800s took on the double responsibility to both control and, in a sense, protect, those who they perceived as sub-human beings. In the next chapter, we will see the ways in which African-Americans internalized and rejected the sentiments of White oppressors in uniquely humanistic religious and non-theistic musical expressions.

Chapter 1 Notes

[1] Mintz and Price, *African-American Religion*, p41

1 Raboteau, Albert J. *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South*. United States: Oxford University Press, 1980. Print. p4

2 Cone, James H. *The Spirituals and the Blues*. New York: Orbis Books, 2009. Print. p11

3 William H. Long in Fulop, Timothy E. and Raboteau, Albert J. *African-American Religion: Interpretive Essays In History and Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1997. Print. p25

4 Curtin, Phillip D. The Atlantic Slave Trade: A Census. Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1969. Print. p16

5 Raboteau, p7

6 Ibid, p4

7 Callahan, Allen Dwight. *The Talking Book: African Americans and the Bible*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006. Electronic resource. p2

8 Ibid, p6

10 Ibid, p40

11 Long, *African-American Religion*, p26

12 Mintz and Price, *African-American Religion*, p41

13 Ibid

14 Ibid, p43

15 Raboteau, p10

16 Ibid, p9

17 Ibid, p10

18 Ibid, p11

19 Ibid, p15

20 Ibid, p13

21 Ibid, p14

22 Ibid, p16

23 Ibid, p36

24 Ibid, p19

25 Ibid, p22

26 David W. Wills, *African-American Religion,* p11

27 Pinn, Anthony B. *Moral Evil and Redemptive Suffering: A History of Theodicy in African-American Religious Thought*. Florida: University Press of Florida, 2002. Print. p3

28 Wills, Garry. *Head and Heart: A History of Christianity in America*. New York: Penguin Books, 2007. Print. p18

29 Ibid

30 Ibid, p5

31 Ibid, p13

32 Noll, Mark A. *America's God: From Jonathan Edwards to Abraham Lincoln*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. Print. p21

33 Wills, p19

35 Ibid, p29

36 Ibid, p33

39 Noll, p38

38 Ibid, p28

40 Wills, p41

42 Raboteau, p97

43 Wills, p43

44 Raboteau, p125

45 Ibid, p98

46 Ibid, p102

47 Long, *African-American Religion, p*27

48 Raboteau, p98

49 Ibid, p100
50 Ibid
51 Raboteau, p114
52 Ibid, p99
53 Ibid, p103
54 Noll, p368
55 Ibid, p370
56 biblegateway.com
57 Goldenberg, Mark M. *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003. Print. p20
58 biblegateway.com
59 Goldenberg, p25
60 Ibid
61 Goldenberg, p22
62 biblegateway.com
63 Goldenberg, p39
64 Ibid, p47
65 Ibid, p48
66 Ibid, p49
67 Ibid, p49
68 biblegateway.com
69 Ibid, p182
70 Callahan, p26
71 Ibid, p142
72 Goldenberg, p142
73 Ibid, p143
74 Ibid, p149
75 Ibid, p156
76 Haynes, Stephen R. *Noah's Curse: The Biblical Justification of American Slavery*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002. Print. p7
77 Goldenberg, p167
78 Haynes, p28
79 Ibid, p33
80 Ibid, p35
81 Ibid, p67
82 Ibid, p8
83 Ibid, p10
84 Ibid, p72
85 Ibid
86 Ibid, p73
87 Ibid, p82
88 Ibid, p87
89 Ibid, p88
90 Ibid, p94
91 Ibid, p95
92 Ibid
93 Ibid, p96
94 Ibid, p89
95 Ibid

The Religious Humanism of the Spirituals

"The antebellum Negro was not converted to God. He converted God to himself."

- Paul Radin[1]

In many ways, Black theology's reinvention of Christianity affirms the humanistic strength that lies in the "involuntary and transformative nature of the religious consciousness."[2] As many scholars stress, Black theology was never a simplistic co-optation of White Christianity, so it follows that Black Christian music does not owe entire formative credit to the White Christian musical tradition. Black Christians during slavery incorporated themes and images from White Christianity into their theological, religious, and musical structures because that was the available vocabulary, but they did so in a way that re-signified Christianity toward their community's goal of liberation. As seen in the previous chapter, most White Christians viewed Black slavery as an intrinsic part of the divinely sanctioned social order. Those Black people who incorporated Christian elements into their personal and communal religious consciousness had to navigate and reinterpret many deeply rooted oppressive norms. In the "peculiar" context of North American slavery, most theorists celebrate the Black theologian's immense creative triumph in rejecting the notion of Christianity as a "device for slave control," veering away from the White enslaver's emphasis on a slave's obedience toward their masters. Christianity became a means through which members of the Black community could find existential and, some argue, temporal emancipation.

The emotional endurance that this new form of Christianity encouraged as well as the rebellious message of emancipation involved in certain Black theological formulations is none other than religious humanism in a very basic sense of the term. The Black Christian reclamation of Biblical

themes opposed the dehumanizing religious system of the enslaver. This religious humanism is reflected in the lyrics of the Spirituals, which reveal the "social consciousness of Blacks who refused to accept White limitations placed on their lives."[3] In the words of scholar Charles H. Long:

> The slave had to come to terms with the opaqueness of his condition and at the same time oppose it. He had to experience the truth of his negativity and at the same time transform and create *an-other* reality. Given the limitations imposed upon him, he created on the level of his religious consciousness. Not only did this transformation produce new cultural forms, but its significance must be understood from the point of view of the creativity of the transforming process itself.[4]

The Great Awakening and the First Black Preachers

Black people in the United States did not begin to convert to Christianity on a mass-scale until the first Great Awakening. Led by preachers Jonathan Edwards (1703-1758) and George Whitefield (1714-1770) the Great Awakening was a wave of religious revivals that took place during the 1730s and 1740s throughout the Colonies. The Great Awakening was an ecumenical movement that briefly broke down class and racial barriers to a novel degree. Itinerant lay preachers, both male and female, would travel from town to town, preaching in unconventional places and at unheard of times- outside, on weekdays and the sabbath, and at night so that working people were able to attend.[5] Various Christian sects including Presbyterians, Separate Baptists, and Methodists successfully converted droves of people, both Black and White.[6]

The explosion of conversions during the Great Awakening (as well as the other Revivals that would sweep the country in decades to come) was the result of several major influences. The mobility of the itinerant preachers was well suited to the rural geography of the Southern colonies, and with the increased access to religious instruction, the planters became less ambivalent toward getting themselves and their slaves involved.[7] The Revival's inclusiveness was based on the notion of all people as equally in need of salvation from their sinful nature and emphasized the personal experience of conversion and

relationship to God; "while the Anglican clergyman tended to be didactic and moralistic, the Methodist or Baptist exhorter visualized and personalized the drama of sin and salvation, of damnation and election."[8] Education, memorization, and complicated explanations of doctrine were set aside and replaced by the emotional atmosphere of Revivalist camp meetings where somebody with excellent oratory skills was applauded over one with superior theological education.[9] Since most of the enslaved population as well as the rural planters were illiterate, this reorientation was well received among both groups.

Demographic factors also affected the increase in Black converts in the second half of the eighteenth and early decades of the nineteenth century. Though a comparable number of enslaved Africans were brought to the Unites States as they had been over the previous one hundred and sixty years, the significant growth of the locally born enslaved population meant that cultural and linguistic barriers were more easily overcome for both the Black and White populations.[10]

Records of Blacks preaching to Whites in the South begin to appear in the late 1700s.[11] Among all of the denominations, Baptists gave Blacks the greatest amount of leverage in terms of allowing them to preach. Until numerous state legislatures made it illegal, Baptist churches licensed and ordained Black men into a high level of religious authority (though enslaved preachers could still only preach with permission from their master.)[12] According to Raboteau, these early Baptist preachers, in addition to those of other denominations,

> acted as crucial mediators between Christian belief and the experiential world of the slaves. In effect they were helping to shape the development of a bicultural synthesis, an Afro-American culture, by nurturing the birth of Christian communities among blacks, slave and free. In this sense the sociologist Robert Park was right when he commented that "with the appearance of these men, the Negroes in America ceased to be mission people. At least from this time on, the movement went on of its own momentum, more and more largely under the direction of Negro leaders. Little Negro congregations, under the leadership of Negro preachers, sprang up wherever they were tolerated. Often they were suppressed, more often they were privately encouraged. Not infrequently they met in secret." In at least two towns, Petersberg, Virginia, and Savannah, Georgia, black Baptists organized churches *before* white Baptists did so.[13]

The increase in Black converts led to mixed but segregated congregations with the Black attendants generally sitting in the back pews or galleries. When the Black membership became overwhelming, they would attend separate services or sometimes split off into new churches.[14] Some African churches were created before 1800 (usually in urban settings,) but these autonomous situations were short-lived and rapidly returned to the supervision of White ministers.[15] Still steeped in slave culture, early Black churches in the United States were seldom ever completely independent. The growing fear of slave rebellion and the mounting egalitarianism of the Revivalist mindset were major threats to the social and religious hierarchies dominated by Whites. The first separate Black church was founded between 1773 and 1775 in Silver Bluff, South Carolina.[16] A Second and Third African Church grew in the first decade of the 1800s.[17]

Religious leaders of the first Great Awakening began to realize that in order to gain maximal numbers of Black converts they would have to concentrate on bringing Christianity to the homes of the enslaved. As in previous years, these missionaries encountered a myriad of obstacles. The abolitionist movement expanding from the North divided Methodist and Baptist church administrations over the controversial issue of whether slavery had a place in Christian morality.[18] There were also the age-old problems- shortage of ministers, lack of funding, and inadequate facilities.[19]

Despite the challenges, the plantation Mission was organized during these formative years with monetary support from denominational missionary organizations, local churches, and individual slaveholders. Missionaries were employed who could focus on the Christianization of the enslaved,[20] and these missions were advertised through speeches and widely circulated pamphlets.[21] Raboteau discusses the motivations for these efforts on the parts of the missionaries and planters:

> The desire to evangelize the poor, the desire to make slaves docile, the desire to create a model plantation, and the desire to defend slavery against abolitionist attacks were all reasons for supporting plantation missions...Not only was Christianization of slaves a rationale for slavery, but it was, as it had been from the beginning, a balm for the

> occasional eruptions of Christian conscience disturbed by the notion that maybe slavery was wrong.

More important to the study of Black conversion, however, is the phenomena of Black preachers preaching (many without a license) to the enslaved on the plantations in the off-times of the day and night.[22] Many slaves risked the consequences and held secret religious meetings in the woods, ravines, and other "hush harbors," out of the earshot of repressive masters. An enslaved person caught worshipping illegally could face severe physical punishment. Very influential in the community of the enslaved, slave preachers presided over weddings, funerals, and baptisms.[23] These preachers were usually dynamic characters, eloquent, charismatic, and though illiterate, able to memorize biblical passages by ear. According to Raboteau,

> The style of folk sermon, shared by black and white evangelicals, was built on a formulaic structure based on phrases, verses, and whole passages the preacher knew by heart. Characterized by repetition, parallelisms, dramatic use of voice and gesture, and a whole range of oratorical devices, the sermon began with normal conversational prose, then built to a rhythmic cadence, regularly marked by the exclamations of the congregation, and climaxed in a tonal chant accompanied by shouting, singing, and ecstatic behavior.[24]

In her article entitled *Black Women's Spiritual Autobiography,* Clarice J. Martin celebrates the Black female religious leaders who "refused to permit the Black male clerical establishment's insistence on male dominance and female subordination to overrule the higher calling of God in their lives" including "Jarena Lee, an unordained but licensed minister of the African Methodist Episcopal Church; Zilpha Elaw, a minister of the Methodist Episcopal faith, Rebecca Cox Jackson, who established a Black Shaker sisterhood in Philadelphia, a Quaker named Elizabeth (with no last name), born into slavery in 1766."[25]

Christianity would pervade the Black community, enslaved and free, by the beginning of the Civil War.

Theodicy in the Spirituals

Many theodicies were creatively expressed in what we commonly know as the Negro Spirituals.[26] The majority of the Spirituals were probably composed around the year 1760 and reached the peak of their popularity between 1830 and 1865. They were collected between 1865 and 1880[27] with censorship and selectivity on the part of the collector; most frequently "men and women who had little understanding of the culture from which [the Spirituals] sprang, and little scruple about altering or suppressing them."[28] This selectivity went both ways; according to James Cone, there is evidence that enslaved musicians would only let White collectors hear certain songs because "the slave knew that a too obvious reference to political freedom in the presence of white people could mean his or her life."[29] In this way, the Spirituals are representative of belief on the general level and are characteristic depictions of ideas about God, but they could not represent the entire spectrum of theistic beliefs of the Black community.[30]

Moving beyond the antiquated debate over the so-called "originality" of the Spirituals in respect to whether they were the result of the Black community's particular genius or simply derivations of White music, contemporary scholarship focuses on the hybridization of West African musical traditions with Anglo-American music apparent in the Spirituals. Lawrence W. Levine asserts that there were multiple conditions conducive to the synthetic growth of Black music during slavery, including the common African musical background of most of the enslaved, their somewhat secluded living environments in the New World, the toleration from enslavers in regard to musical activities, and "the fact that, for all its differences, nothing in the European musical tradition with which they came into contact in America was totally alien to their own traditions."[31]

A "distinctive cultural form…created or constantly recreated through a communal process,"[32] Black music of this time period is an example of resourceful invention and re-invention as spiritual

survival tactic. There are numerous documentary accounts of the spontaneous and collaborative way in which songs were born. Usually in the context of a religious meeting, one person would improvise the lyrics and structure of a song and those present would join in, creating a new song as well as an instant sense of community. Stanzas would be left out or repeated, existing melodies would be appropriated or combined. Many times the initial lyrical base of these songs would be biblical:

> The English musician Henry Russell, who lived in the Unites States in the 1830's, was forcibly struck by the ease in which a slave congregation in Vicksburg, Mississippi, took a "fine old psalm tune" and, by suddenly and spontaneously accelerating the tempo, transformed it "into a kind of Negro melody."[33]

The relationship between spontaneous creation and Christian subject matter forms an important link between the religious and musical consciousness of the enslaved. Despite all of the crushing effects of slavery, the Black community maintained an irrepressible creative flexibility and functionality. The "Africanisms in the Spirituals are directly related to African music because of its *functional* character,"[34] functioning, among other ways, as a line of continuity between the traditions of two continents. Social expression through song is rooted in African heritage; verbal expression such as songs, stories, proverbs, music, and games were pervasive in West African culture and served social as well as spiritual functions.[35] The Spirituals were *shouted* (danced in the ring shout) a style of singing directly traceable to African musical tradition. The leader would start by calling out a verse while the "shouters" would respond by circling the leader.[36] "When the singers who stood outside the ring took up the chorus, the shout proper would begin with the ring band shuffling rapidly to the beat announced by the hand-clapping and foot-tapping of the chorus of singers who were said then to be the 'basing' shouters."[37] These shouts could go on for hours.

The music born of this cultural intersection mirrors the re-signification process of Black theology. As noted by Allen Callahan,

> The practice of starting a song with several leading lines that in turn elicit a choral response was an oral pattern that approximated traditional forms of West African

> musical composition. African-American singers plied this ancestral musical form in setting biblical phrases and stories to spontaneously improvised songs raised in worship. It was through the human voice, then, and not the printed page, that the Bible came to inhabit the slave's inner world. The slaves' Bible became musical, even as the slaves' music became Biblical.[38]

Redemptive Suffering and the "Reason For All This"

In the Black reinvention of Christianity, the notion of God as omnibenevolent, omniscient and omnipresent remained. However, the God of the Black community was distinct from that of the White community in His intentions, goals, and valuation of His Black children. It is clear in the Spirituals and antebellum religious literature that Black Christians located themselves in a narrative that started at the beginning of time and would continue until the eschaton. They had intimate spiritual relationships with the characters, events, and God of ancient Israel, finding evidence of divine support for the liberation of slaves in the bible. God would act for the Black people as He had for the Jews, but at some point in the future. As one Spiritual says:

> Children, we all shall be free
> When the Lord shall appear…[39]

Looking to past events and investing faith in future events helped the oppressed maintain a tolerable present. Levine invokes Mercia Eliade's designation of sacred space while discussing the spiritual worldview of the enslaved:

> …the slaves created a new world by transcending the narrow confines of the one in which they were forced to live. They extended the boundaries of their restrictive universe backward until it fused with the world of the Old Testament, and upward until it became one with the world beyond. The spirituals are records of a people who found the status, the harmony, the values, the order they needed to survive by internally creating an expanded universe, by literally willing themselves reborn.[40]

Theodicies of "redemptive suffering"[41] played an axial role in the intellectual formation of Black theology by promoting the idea that the oppression the Black community suffered was wrong yet simultaneously and necessarily imposed by God as a vehicle for their betterment. These theodicies inspired the belief that there was a particular *use* for suffering even though that suffering *should* not continue. The duality of pedagogical usefulness of suffering and its nature as deservedly punitive can be traced to a Christian tradition predating North American slavery. In comparing Black theology's conception of God with the European Christian tradition as first articulated by St. Augustine, Anthony B. Pinn highlights the general similarities between the two:

> Both embrace a doctrine of God in which God is loving, kind, just, compassionate, righteous, concerned about humanity, and involved in human history. According to both, humans are created in the image of God, given to misdeeds, and in possession of limited knowledge and insight in contrast to God's complete knowledge. By extension, salvation in both cases involves a reuniting with God in which the divine will reigns supreme. Finally, with respect to salvation, history is understood as teleological in nature. That is to say, history moves with purpose toward a particular outcome.[42]

Most antebellum Christians (both Black and White) believed that God did not intend His will to be fully understood by the human intellect. However, this did not affect the believer's certitude concerning God's goodness. "God for [the Black] community," says Charles H. Long, "appears as an all powerful and moral deity, though one hardly ever knows why he has willed this or that. God is never, or hardly ever, blamed for the situation of man, for somehow in an inscrutable manner there is a reason for all this."[43] Taking after the biblical character of Job, many enslaved people saw hardship as a test of faith.

The "reason for all this" did not go unanalyzed: what was to be made of the clear imbalance in God's distribution of suffering? Some proponents of Black theology were convinced that though slavery was a seriously tough-love way to introduce Africans to Christianity, God had a method to the madness. Without an encounter with White enslavers, how else would Africans have been introduced to the Christian God? This was a conviction that Phyllis Wheatley, the first Black female poet to

publish in English, expressed with fervor in much of her work. This poem, entitled "On Being Brought From Africa to America" is a prime example of apologetic thought:

'Twas mercy brought me from my Pagan land,
Taught my benighted soul to understand
That there's a God, that there's a Saviour too;
Once I redemption neither sought nor knew.
Some view our sable race with scornful eye,
"Their color is a diabolic die."
Remember, Christians, Negroes, black as Cain,
May be refin'd, and join th'angelic train.[44]

The notion that "God allows evil in order to achieve a larger purpose, but God does not *create* evil,"[45] and the idea that certain kinds of evil were not always ultimately negative, placed slavery in a context that helped justify the suffering of enslaved Africans and their descendants in North America to both White and Black Christians. This attitude also aligns in some sense with the traditional African notion that misfortune was a result of human incapacity to maintain the cosmic harmony with the gods.

If it was God's hand that placed Black people in the grip of slavery, He had not intended them to remain there indefinitely. God was still good and was propelling them toward liberation.

> …God's providential plan did not remove the guilt of sin from Europeans. God intended slavery as a temporary "training" process for African-Americans by which they would receive the skills and knowledge necessary to redeem Africa (if not the United States as well). However, Europeans sinned in that they attempted to make slavery a permanent institution.[46]

With the abolitionist developments in the 1830s and 1840s came "not only an anti-slavery movement but a movement to abolish slavery on the ground that it was a *moral evil and contrary to the law of God*."[47]

The notion of deliverance is the central theme of Black theodicy. Many Blacks believed that "God in His good time and in His own way would protect and deliver"[48] them. This was exemplified in the story of Exodus (found in the Hebrew Bible) which tells of the Jewish people's escape from slavery in ancient Egypt. The Puritans were not the only people who saw themselves as the new Israelites;

many African-Americans found solace in identification with the Children of Israel and internalized the struggles and eventual triumphs of the chosen people as their own. The association with the chosen people was a claim on the humanity and dignity, on the *somebodiness*, that was denied them society.[49] Black Christianity declared: "You are created in God's image. You are not slaves, you are not 'niggers': you are God's children."[50] It was what the early European planters had feared- the Black population was able to uplift the equalizing and liberating potential of Christian dogma that was once shrouded by the interests of the dominant class. In the lyrics of the Spiritual "Go Down Moses," one can see the archetype of deliverance from Egyptian oppressors:

When Israel was in Egypt's Land,
Let my people go,
Oppressed so hard they could not stand,
Let my people go.

(Chorus)
Go down, Moses,
Way down in Egypt's Land.
Tell ol' Pharoah,
Let my people go.

Thus saith the Lord, bold Moses said,
Let my people go,
If not, I'll smite your first-born dead,
Let my people go.[51]

The Exodus was not the only story that revealed God's capacity for deliverance. The spiritual "Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel" articulates several situations in which God showed His children that He was watching, aware of their suffering, and, if He so chose, could rescue them.

Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel
Deliver Daniel, deliver Daniel
Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel
An' why not-a every man.

He delivered Daniel from de lion's den
Jonah from de belly of de whale

An' de Hebrew chillun from de fiery furnace
An' why not every man

De moon run down in a purple stream
De sun forbear to shine
An' every star disappear
King Jesus shall-a be mine
De win' blows eas' an' de win' blows wes'
It blows like a judgement day
An' every po' sinner dat never did pray'll
Be glad o pray dat day

Deliver Daniel, deliver Daniel
Didn't my Lord deliver Daniel
An' why not-a every man.

I see my foot on de Gospel ship
An' de ship begin to sail
It landed me over on Canaan's shore
An' I'll never come back no mo' [52]

The logic is clear; if God emancipated the enslaved Jews, then He will emancipate the enslaved Blacks.

Another major theme of Black theodicy as expressed through the Spirituals is a specific characterization of Jesus. Jesus was both divine and human,[53] a supernatural embodiment of liberation who was unified with the poor, oppressed, and downtrodden. As seen in the Spiritual "A Little Talk With Jesus Make It Right," Jesus was personable, intimate, and accessible,[54] a companion in the roughest of times.

O a little talk with Jesus make it right, all right
Little talk with Jesus make it right, all right
Troubles of ev'ry kind
Hank God I'll always find
That little talk with Jesus make it right.

My brother, I remember when I was a sinner lost
I cried, "Have mercy, Jesus"
But still my soul was tossed
Till I heard King Jesus say,
"Come here, I'm on the way"
And little talk with Jesus make it right.

Sometimes the fork lightning and muttering thunder, too
Of trials and temptations
Make it hard for me and you
But Jesus was a friend,
He'll keep us to the end
And little talk with Jesus make it right.

My brother and my sister, you have trials like me
When we are trying to serve the Lord
And win the victory
Old Satan fight us hard
Our journey to retard
But little talk with Jesus make it right.[55]

Jesus was a deity who understood the pain and suffering of slavery. Many enslaved or otherwise oppressed Black people identified with the persona of Jesus as the "man of sorrows," a biblical reference to Isaiah 53 that describes Jesus' endurance of suffering, rejection, oppression, and death. The form of Jesus' death by brutal crucifixion was also relatable for the enslaved, since Christ's "suffering was real and his pain was great. He died the death of a natural man."[56] Since God controls everything on both heaven and earth, one should not fear the possibility of death at the hands of enslavers- death was not "the master of life."[57]

Oh Freedom! Oh Freedom!
And before I'll be a slave,
I'll be buried in my grave,
And go home to my Lord and be free.[58]

This interpretation of Jesus is a theodicy because the story of his life, death, and resurrection represents triumph at the end of struggle, the epitomizing example of God's prevailing goodness.

Black theodicy sustained a trust that God would redeem and reconcile everything that was unjust in this world in the next life, thus heaven (often characterized as a location in Africa or the free North) represented another theodicy of deliverance. This affected the worldview of the faithful; "Life is looked on as a temporary affair—their real home is beyond Jordan."[59] The emotional reassurance provided by the thought of a future life in heaven is illustrated in the Spirituals through references to

robes, slippers, and other items of luxury which signify the opposite of physical labor.

I got a robe, you got a robe
All o' God's chillun got a robe
When I get to heab'n I'm goin' to put on my robe
I'm goin' to shout all ovah God's Heab'n
Heab'n, Heab'n
Ev'rybody talkin' 'bout heab'n ain't goin' dere
Heab'n, Heab'n
I'm goin' to shout all ovah God's Heab'n

I got-a wings, you got-a wings
All o' God's chillun got-a wings
When I get to heab'n I'm goin' to put on my wings
I'm goin' to fly all ovah God's Heab'n

I got a harp, you got a harp
All o' God's chillun got a harp
When I get to heab'n I'm goin' to take up my harp
I'm goin' to play all ovah God's Heab'n

I got shoes, you got shoes
All o' God's chillun got shoes
When I get to heab'n I'm goin' to put on my shoes
I'm goin' to walk all ovah God's Heab'n[60]

Many Spirituals communicate in one way or another the notion that "ev'rybody talkin' 'bout heab'n ain't goin' dere;" there would be comeuppance in regards to both the enslaver and the enslaved because "God was a just God- just to the point of cruelty."[61] The solution to the Problem of Evil is not always peaceful; the God who freed the ancient Israelites was a warrior. Aside from the promise of heaven, compensation also meant revenge on sinners.[62] According to John Lovell's analysis, a fixation on freedom, the desire for justice or revenge upon those who had done them wrong, and a description, however abstractly, of the battle tactics they would use to attain their free destiny are three of the main lyrical topics of the Spirituals.[63] The Biblical story of the Israelites' forceful entry into Jericho during their conquest of Canaan is described in Joshua 6:1-27:

> So the people shouted when the priests blew with the trumpets: and it came to pass, when the people heard the sound of the trumpet, and the people shouted with a great

> shout, that the wall fell down flat, so that the people went up into the city, every man straight before him, and they took the city. And they utterly destroyed all that was in the city, both man and woman, young and old, and ox, and sheep, and ass, with the edge of the sword… And they burnt the city with fire, and all that was therein: only the silver, and the gold, and the vessels of brass and of iron, they put into the treasury of the house of the Lord.[64]

In the Spiritual "Joshua Fit de Battle ob Jerico," the story went something like this:

> Joshua fit de battle ob Jerico, Jerico, Jerico
> Joshua fit de battle ob Jerico
> An' de walls come tumblin'down.
>
> You may talk about yo' king ob Gideon
> You may talk about yo' man ob Saul
> Dere's none like good ole Joshua
>
> At de battle ob Jerico
> Up to de walls ob Jerico
> He marched with spear in han'
> "Go blow dem ram horns", Joshua cried,
> "Kase de battle am in my han'."
>
> Den de lam' ram sheep begin to blow,
> Trumpets begin to soun'
> Joshua commanded de children to shout
> An' de walls come tumblin' down
> Dat mornin'
>
> Joshua fit the battle ob Jerico, Jerico, Jerico
> Joshua fit de battle ob Jerico
> An' de walls come tumblin'down.[65]

The line between spiritual and temporal liberation was very much intertwined. "Heaven" in the Spirituals was not only an abstract, otherworldly space, but was sometimes used as a code word to signify Canada, the Northern United States, and Africa. "Steal Away" was used to alert people to sneak off to the hush harbors for a secret meeting, and "Follow the Drinking Gourd" was encouragement to follow the celestial Big Dipper to the Ohio River toward freedom.[69] Harriet Tubman was able to transport over three hundred people to free territory and used Spirituals as communicative devices to inform friends and family that she was heading north.[70] According to one of Tubman's biographers,

> "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," referred to the "idea of escape by 'chariot,' that is, by means which a company could employ to proceed northward." When black slaves sang "I looked over the Jordan and what did I see, Coming for to carry me home," they were looking over the Ohio River. "The band of angels was Harriet or another conductor coming for him; and 'home' was a haven in the free states of Canada.[71]

Many thousands chose to run away to "free" territories in Canada or the Northern United States, and hundreds succeeded.[66] Many participated in day-to-day resistance toward slavery by committing theft, arson, and purposely injuring themselves.[67] They also "protested by shirking their duties, injuring the crops, feigning illness and disrupting the routine."[68]

The Transcendent Present

> …the physical revolts are not so important as the mental revolts. Uprising slaves were shot or hanged and that was the end of them physically; but the mind of a slave seethed ceaselessly, and was a powerful factor in the abolition movement.[72]

In this quote, John Lovell articulates the popular scholarly opinion that that the enslaved were spiritually liberated far before the Emancipation Proclamation made its impact on the lives and imaginations of North Americans. James Cone's term "the Transcendent Present," describes his perception of the dynamic religious mindset of the enslaved regarding freedom, God, and the relationship between the two as expressed through the Spirituals. According to Cone, the Transcendent Present was an attitude toward time and space that "permeated [slave religion] with the affirmation of freedom from bondage and freedom-in-bondage."[73] As such, the Transcendent Present is an example of theodicy in practice.

Seeing beyond their societal and physical chains, enslaved people living in the Transcendent Present had faith that God, in His omnibenevolence and omnipotence, intervened in human history to keep His scriptural promise of deliverance. The temporal reality of slavery was one and the same with a liberated future, in Cone's words, "a reality that has already happened in Jesus' resurrection, and is

present now in the midst of the black struggle for liberation."[74] This is a complicated view of "historical reality"[75] in which the biblical past mingles with the present to create the event of future liberation. Cone says that the freedom of those living in the Transcendent Present should not be described as spiritual, but rather as eschatological because it was "...freedom grounded in the events of the historical present, affirming even now God's future is inconsistent with the realities of slavery."[76]

James Cone asserts that God's liberating actions were played out in the lived experience of the enslaved through the mode of music creation. This confidence in God's eschatological liberation allowed the enslaved person to "sing songs of joy and happiness"[77] even while they remained in bondage. "Freedom," says Cone, "was the mind and body in motion, emotionally and rhythmically asserting the right to be."[78] He argues that the enslaved Christian did not ask the epistemological question of *how they knew* that God was in the process of liberating them- instead of testing Him, "they *ritualized* God in song and sermon. That was what the spirituals were all about- a ritualization of God in song."[79]

I am a poor pilgrim of sorrow
I'm tossed in this wide world alone
No hope I have for to morrow
I've started to heav'n my home

Sometimes I am tossed and driven, Lord,
Sometimes I don't know where to roam
I've heard of a city called heaven
I've started to make it my home[80]

Chapter 2 Notes

1 Lawrence W. Levine, *African-American Religion*, p73
2 Long, *African-American Religion*, p28
3 Cone, p14
4 Long, *African-American Religion,* p27
5 Wills, p102
6 Raboteau, p129
7 Ibid, p132
8 Ibid, p132
9 Ibid, p133
10 Ibid, p149
11 Ibid, p134
12 Ibid, p136
13 Ibid, p136
14 Ibid, p137
15 Ibid, p137
16 Ibid, p139
17 Ibid, p142
18 Ibid, p160
19 Ibid, p173
20 Ibid, p153
21 Ibid, p154
22 Ibid, p136
23 Ibid, p231
24 Ibid, 237
25 Townes, Emilie. M. *A Troubling in My Soul: Womanist Perspectives on Evil & Suffering.* New York: Orbis Books, 1996. Print. p.20
26 The term "Negro spiritual" first appears in print in 1867 by Thomas Wentworth Higginson, *The Atlantic Monthly*, published in June, 1867. Here, enslaved Blacks are described as using *spirituals* for religious songs sung sitting or standing in place, and *spiritual shouts* for more dance-like music." http://www.theatlantic.com/past/docs/issues/1867jun/spirit.htm
27 Katz, Bernard. *The Social Implications of Early Negro Music in the United States*. New York: Arno Press and The New York Times, 1969. Print. p129
28 Levine, *African-American Religion*, p59
29 Cone, p40
30 Mays, Benjamin E. *The Negro's God as Reflected in His Literature*. New York: Russel & Russel, 1968. Print. p20
31 Levine, *African-American Religion*, p62
32 Ibid, p66
33 Ibid, p64
34 Cone, p30
35 Levine, *African-American Religion,* p67
36 Raboteau, p245
37 Raboteau, p245
38 Callahan, 12
39 negrospirituals.com ("Children, We All Shall Be Free)
40 Levine, *African-American Religion.* p67
41 Pinn, *Moral Evil*, 8
42 Ibid
43 Long, *African-American Religion,* p30
44 Callahan, p26
45 Pinn, *Moral Evil*, p9
46 Ibid, p11
47 Mays, 2 (Italics added)

48 Pinn, *Moral Evil*, p7
49 Cone, p16
50 Ibid
51 negrospirituals.com
52 Ibid
53 Cone, p44
54 Levine, *African-American Religion ,* p74
55 negrospirituals.com
56 Cone, p44
57 Cone, p17
58 negrospirituals.com, "Oh, Freedom"
59 Mays, p247
60 negrospiritual.com, "All God's Chillun Got Wings"
61 Mays, p21
62 Ibid
63 Lovell, *The Social Implications of Early Negro Music in the United States,* p134
64 biblegateway.com
65 negrospirituals.com
69 Cone, p81
70 Cone, p80
71 Cone, p81
66 Cone, p24
67 Cone, p25
68 Cone, p25
72 Lovell, *The Social Implications of Early Negro Music in the United States,* p131
73 Cone, p28
74 Cone, p84
75 Cone, p42
76 Cone, p42
77 Cone, p52
78 Cone, p44
79 Cone, 66
80 negrospirituals.com, "City Called Heaven"

Critique of Theodicy and the Secular Reclamation of Human Potential

James Cone makes many bold claims about the emancipative reality of theodicy in the lives of the enslaved peoples of the United States. Yet for each nicely packaged answer to existential and theological questions that he provides, certain critical questions surface. What is potentially dehumanizing about faith in the specific version of the Christian God as He is characterized in the Spirituals? Is there really such a historical reality in which the eschatological future converges with the present because of an event of the past? Is faith an opiate or the key to freedom? This chapter will attempt to respond to these broad questions by discussing the Seculars, heavy-hitters in the secular humanist intellectual tradition, and William R. Jones' critique of theodicy.

Black Skeptics In the Era of Slavery

> Our father, who is in heaven,
> White man owe me eleven and pay me seven,
> Thy kingdom come, thy will be done
> And if I hadn't took that, I wouldn't have none.[1]

The Black church has arguably been the most powerfully unifying institution for the Black community in the United States, "an agency of social control, a source of economic cooperation, an arena for political activity, a sponsor of education, and a refuge in a hostile white world...[and] the social center of Afro-American life."[2] Nonetheless, the view that the Church represents the only perspective towards Christian theism is false. Though dissenters may have been of numeric minority, not all enslaved or otherwise oppressed people of

African descent living in the antebellum United States had wholehearted faith in the benevolence or existence of the Christian God.

Frederick Douglass (who was born circa 1818 and died in 1895) is one of the most well known skeptics of antebellum Christian religious practice. Douglass, who was born into slavery and escaped as a young man, wrote plentifully and spoke often condemning the way enslavers and other pro-slavery apologists manipulated "Christian morality" to support their inhumane crimes. In his famous *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass,* he writes, "I should regard being the slave of a religious master the greatest calamity that could befall me. For of all slaveholders with whom I have ever met, religious slaveholders are the worst. I have found them the meanest and basest, the most cruel and cowardly, of all others."[3]

Daniel Payne (1811-1893), a bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, documented skepticism toward Christianity from other members of the Black community:

> The slaves are sensible of the oppression exercised by their masters; and they see these masters on the Lord's day worshipping in his holy Sanctuary. They hear their masters praying in their families, and they know that oppression and slavery are inconsistent with the Christian religion; therefore they scoff at religion itself – mock their masters, and distrust both the goodness and justice of God. Yes I have known them to even question His existence. I speak not of what others have told me, but of what *I have both seen and heard from the slaves themselves*. I have heard the mistress ring the bell for family prayer, and I have seen the servants immediately begin to sneer and laugh; and have hear them declare they would not go into prayers; adding if I go she will not only just read, "Servants obey your masters," but she will not read "break every yoke, and let the oppressed go free." I have seen colored men at the church door, *scoffing at the ministers,* while they were preaching, and saying you had better go home, and set your slaves free. A few nights ago...a runaway slave came to the house where I live for safety and succor. I asked him if he were a Christian: "no sir" said he, "white men treat us so bad in Mississippi that we can't be Christians."[4]

Along with personal testimonies like those of Bishop Payne and Frederick Douglass, the Seculars, also called "Devil Songs," affirm that a skeptical mentality was alive and well

among the enslaved population at the same time that the Spirituals were being produced. Even secular songs that did not directly reference religious themes were considered profane, especially the upbeat ones that encouraged dancing and enthusiastic participation.[8] These songs have fallen victim to historical selectivity in a way similar but more exaggerated than the Spirituals, thus making it "very possible that a great body of songs of secular social comment, too difficult to disguise for white ears, stayed underground...and would surface later in the blues and other forms."[5] In his description of what a Christian missionary might have encountered upon his foray into the realm of the religiously untamed, Reverend Charles C. Jones wrote in his book *The Religious Instruction of Negroes in The United States* (published in 1842) "He discovers deism, skepticism, universalism...the various perversions of the Gospel, and all the strong objections which he may perhaps have considered peculiar only to to the cultivated mind, the ripe scholarship and profound intelligence of *critics* and *philosophers*."[6]

In his sampling of Seculars and ballads, Sterling Brown highlights the cynicism toward biblical themes:

> Other-worldlyness was mocked: "I don't want to ride no golden chariot; I don't want no golden crown; I want to stay down here and be, Just as I am without one plea." "Live a humble to the Lord" was changed to "Live a humbug." Bible stories, especially the creation, the fall of Man, and the flood, were spoofed. "Reign, Master Jesus, reign" became "Rain, Mosser, rain hard! Rain flour and lard and a big hog head, Down in my back yard." After couplets of nonsense and ribaldry, slaves sang with their fingers crossed, or hopeless in defeat: "Po' mourner, you shall be free, when de good Lord set you free."[7]

Many Seculars allude to slavery itself:

> My ole Mistis promise me
> Fo' she died, she'd set me free;
> She lived so long that her head got bald
> And she give out de notion dyin' at all.[9]

One notices that humor and sense of irony toward life's hardships figure majorly in the lyrics of the Seculars and early blues. This counter-cultural attitude can be compared, in a certain sense, with the paradigm of Ham's laughter as representing a critique of sacred, patriarchal, hegemonic culture that took itself very seriously despite the absurdity of its convictions. Ham, the person who subverted a situation in which he should have been exhibiting piety, was living more *in the moment* than his brothers- he was just trying to make it though another night stranded with only his family in the post-diluvian world. Maybe for Ham, laughter was a survival tactic, an awareness of non-metaphysical occurrences, a coping mechanism similar in ethos to the Seculars..

Even James Cone offers decidedly mixed messages about his opinion of the relationship between not-overtly-theistic music and theodicy. On the one hand, he cites their theological parallels by denying that the blues are very different from the Spirituals in essence, arguing that both perspectives are necessary to artistically reflect Black life. He even goes so far as to say that the blues are "secular spirituals"[10] and likens blues men and women to priests of the Black community.[11] On the other hand, he says that the blues and their cynical precursors signify the refusal to accept the promises of the scripture, and as such, these non-theistic songs are about "black life and the sheer earth and gut capacity to survive an extreme situation of oppression."[12] Whether the Seculars are skeptical of the notion of transcendence or of God Himself, even Cone cannot avoid the tone in the Seculars that, if not rejects God completely, at the very least doubts His omnibenevolence. The lyrics of these songs rarely glorify a paradise-infused future. They are about getting swindled by White folks, drinking, having sex, falling in love, current events and tribulations; the good and the

bad of this life here on earth.

A point that calls for further attention in relation to the Seculars revolves around this mysterious space called the Transcendent Present. Is it really possible to live in a dynamic time-space in which in which one is oppressed, enslaved even, yet fully liberated? Can faith in a metaphysical future liberation actually change the physical reality of the present? Are these even relevant questions for people of faith?

Cone claims, following LeRoi Jones, that the blues confront a different sort of existential and literal absurdity. He recalls the notion of Black music as a function of life that began in Africa, saying that it is "not an artistic creation for its own sake,"[13] but was a coping mechanism in which describing the reality of oppression "honestly"[14] lessened the burden of oppression. Cone enters dangerously hypocritical territory by flirting with the notion that the blues are somehow more "honest" and than the Spirituals because their subject-matter is located within *concrete reality*. Cone concedes, to a certain extent, that there is a difference between the "historical reality" of the Transcendent Present as expressed in the Spirituals and the "historical reality" as expressed through non-theistic music of the same time period and directly following the Civil War. Could this be an unwitting nod to the possibility of spiritual pluralism?

Secular Humanism in Other Contexts

Why would some people have faith in supernatural deities while others resisted? Many humanistic thinkers (religious and otherwise) have dealt with variations of this same dilemma throughout recorded history. The following survey can help us place Black

skepticism toward the omnibenevolence or existence of a supernatural being in a international historical context.

The Rig Veda, the Sanskrit religious script composed in India around the year 1500 BCE includes the lines, "Who really knows?...Perhaps the universe formed itself. Perhaps not- the one who looks down on it, in the highest heaven, only he knows. Or perhaps he does not know." This early example of doubt and expression of the mystery of the metaphysical eventually grew into the first recorded school of humanistic thought in the central and early years of the first millennium BCE: the Lokayata and Carvaka philosophers of Southern Asia. These early "Hindu" thinkers analyzed the supernatural claims of local religious systems and ruffled the feathers of their surrounding theists by constructing a philosophy with the essential values of critical thinking and basing ones beliefs on empirically gained facts as opposed to miraculous claims.[15] The idea that living in a morally and socially responsible way during *this* life meant being kind, humanitarian, and deconstructing social hierarchies like the priesthood and the caste system of the time.

In the Western world, schools of philosophical doubt existed as far back as ancient Greece with well known skeptics like the philosopher Epicurus (341–270 BCE.) Epicurus and his followers believed that the world was made up of atoms that followed the laws of nature, and that even if the universe had once been created by a supernatural being, that god was absent from current human life. One of Epicurus' statements can be thought of as a summary of the basic tenets of humanism to this day:

> "Nothing to fear in God;
> Nothing to feel in Death;
> Good can be attained;
> Evil can be endured."[16]

Here we see the optimistic or neutral view of the divine, the notion that the personality ceases after death, the potential for human goodness, and the triumph of the human spirit over evil. Epicurus also offered one of the most resonant articulations of a skeptical response to the Problem of Evil:

"Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able?
Then he is not omnipotent.
Is he able, but not willing?
Then he is malevolent.
Is he both able and willing?
Then whence cometh evil?
Is he neither able nor willing?
Then why call him God?"[17]

In his famous *Euthyphro*, Plato (428-348 BCE) depicts Socrates' (469-399 BCE) accusation by his peers of being "a poet or maker of gods, and that I invent new gods and deny the existence of old ones"[18] and corrupting the youth. In that dialogue, Socrates raised a point that would challenge theists to this day when he asked whether something is pious because God made it so or if God made it so because it was pious, exposing the possibility that the nature of God's morals could be arbitrary. Philosophers like Epicurus and Socrates were concerned with reason and how one conducts their life here on earth, so they questioned the ethics of believing in the ancient Greek pantheon.

Humanist thought did not completely die out during the rise of imperial monotheism in the form of Christian, and later Muslim, dogma. It is a widely acknowledged fact that humanist ideals were maintained by Islamic intellectuals over the "Dark Ages" by figures such as Ibn Al-Rawandi (827-911) who expressed anti-theistic thoughts in the ninth century,[19] and Abu Bakr al-Razi (865-925), known as "the most creative genius of medieval medicine" and "the greatest 'agnostic' of the Middle Ages, European or Oriental."[20] An important character in Muslim and Persian heritage, al-Razi was a doctor, chemist,

philosopher, and was as skeptical about religion and supernatural claims of the afterlife as his humanistic predecessors. Another influential Muslim figure was a contemporary of al-Razi; Abu'l Walid ibn Ahmad ibn Rushd (1126-1198), latin name Averroes, who lived in Spain and North Africa. ibn Rushd played a vital role in the translation and commentary on Aristotle's work, enabling its successful transfer from ancient Greece to the modern world.[21]

Movements fueled by humanistic thought would later resurface in the West with figures like the Dutch philosopher of Portuguese Jewish origin Benedict (or Baruch) de Spinoza (1632-1677.) Accused of heresy and banished from his Jewish community in Amsterdam at the age of 23, he was far ahead of his time in believing that the bible was written by multiple authors and "that there is no such thing as a 'single' chosen people; that reason is more important than faith and tradition and that God is the universe itself- all encompassing but unfeeling, utterly impersonal, and unconnected to human affairs."[22]

In the centuries following Spinoza's death, the Enlightenment redefined the Western world's valuation of knowledge with its focus on the potential of science over literal scriptural reading. Deism, the belief that a God once existed who set the laws of nature into motion and then left the world to its own devices, was born during the Enlightenment. The current government of the United States was founded by deists who purposefully left out direct references to theism and protected the right to religious pluralism in important documents such as the United States Constitution. Building on the foundation set by philosophers such as Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Heidegger, the French Existentialists Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986), Albert Camus (1913-1960) and Jean Paul Sartre (1905-1980) shook up the field of philosophy and popular culture in the 1940s when they

introduced their unique response to the absurdities of life, encouraging people to create meaning for themselves in this life's human interactions.

In *Humanist Manifesto II*, published in 1973, author Paul Kurtz (b. 1925) specifically addresses the secular humanist's problems with religion by saying:

> We appreciate the need to preserve the best ethical teachings in the religious traditions of humankind, many of which we share in common. But we reject those features of traditional religious morality that deny humans a full appreciation of their own potentialities and responsibilities. Traditional religions often offer solace to humans, but, as often, they inhibit humans from helping themselves or experiencing their full potentialities...Too often traditional faiths encourage dependence rather than independence, obedience rather than affirmation, fear rather than courage...No deity will save us; we must save ourselves...Promises of immortal salvation or fear of eternal damnation are both illusory and harmful. They distract humans from present concerns, from self-actualization, and from rectifying social injustices.[23]

There are now organized secular humanist groups in multiple African Nations such as the Congo, Kenya, Nigeria, Senegal, Ghana, and Uganda,[24] and supporters of Kurtz's *Secular Humanist Declaration* (issued in 1980) live in the U.S., Canada, France, Great Britain, India, Israel, Norway, and Yoguslavia.[25]

Critique of Theodicy by Black Intellectuals

Though we cannot know exactly how the creators of the Seculars would have responded to questions about their theistic beliefs, the Seculars and the blues can be interpreted as critiquing the ultimate emancipative potential of theodicy. The existence of the Seculars seem to suggest that some people deemed it worthy of their time to respond to their worldly predicaments in song, in addition to or in lieu of singing to glorify God.

During the twenty-first century, numerous North American Black writers have made a powerful impact on secular humanist understanding in the United States. Among these many

talents are W.E.B. DuBois, Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, Ralph Ellison, Alice Walker, and Zora Neale Hurston. In the theological realm, Womanism, a term introduced by Alice Walker in her book *In Search of Our Mother's Gardens* (published in 1983) is a movement spearheaded by Black female leaders like Delores Williams and Dr. Jacquelyn Grant that integrates the critical analysis of gender, race, and class arising from a need to combat the limitations of traditional Black theological (as represented by theologians such as Cone) and feminist (White/Upper-Middle class) discourse.[26]

We can also look to scholars like Benjamin E. Mays and William R. Jones to further articulate internal critiques of theodicy. In his book *Is God a White Racist? A Preamble to Black Theology* (first published in 1973) Jones, a Unitarian Universalist clergyman, challenges the heart of Black theology by giving plurality of interpretation a fighting chance against the monolithic theodicies that have been historically dominant. He asks "Is it an authentic liberation theology, or is it Christianity/ Whiteanity- a religion of oppression, a species of the slave master's Frankenstein transmutation of biblical religion and Christianity...?"[27] He warns that Black theology has propagated a "faulty understanding of the causality of our plight"[28] and agues that "black Christianity was a form of mis-religion that fulfilled a vital role in keeping blacks oppressed."[29] From Jones' perspective, humanocentric theism shares the same goal as Black theology: to find "an effective way for Black America to affirm its humanity in an environment of racial oppression."[30] Jones does not see God's omnibenevolence as a closed matter and stresses the importance of revisiting fundamental pillars of Black theology in an attempt to rid it of the stains that remain from oppressive biblical hermeneutics imposed on the Black mindset in antebellum North America.

Though Jones acknowledges the danger in framing the theodicies posed by Black theology in the context of Western philosophical tradition of the Problem of Evil,[31] he sees divine racism, ethnic suffering, and oppression as being inextricably connected with theodicy. Anthony B. Pinn explains:

> If suffering (for example, a unique combination of racism, sexism, and classism, as well as intracommunity homophobia) had come to a definable end, the need for a theodicy might have disappeared. The same would be true if the African-American community were by and large nontheistic. However, the continuation of this moral evil in mutated forms, combined with a strong theism, keeps the problem of moral evil in the forefront of theological discourse. In other words, how does one reconcile a belied in a kind, loving, just, and "powerful" God with the presence of profound human misery?[32]

Jones is a proponent of humanocentric theism,[33] which he identifies as a subset of secular humanism. The term "secular," coined by the British philosopher George Jacob Holyoake in 1851, comes from the latin word for "of the age," and was meant to distinguish between the transcendent nature of religion doctrine and things that are of the current time instead. Holyoake, who was agnostic, wrote,

> Secularism is not an argument against Christianity, it is one independent of it. It does not question the pretensions of Christianity; it advances others. Secularism does not say there is no light or guidance elsewhere, but maintains that there is light and guidance in secular truth, whose conditions and sanctions exist independently, and act forever. Secular knowledge is manifestly that kind of knowledge which is founded in this life, which relates to the conduct of this life, conduces to the welfare of this life, and is capable of being tested by the experience of this life.[34]

Making the effort to avoid dogmatism, the contemporary Black secular humanist perspective maintains an appreciation for African American religiosity and recognizes the cultural importance of Black theology without accepting or glorifying a supernatural authority.[35] According to Pinn, Black humanism recognizes humanity as fully and solely responsible for the state of the human condition, finding the need to correct the mistakes of

the past and make progressive choices that will effect the future in a way we can be proud to take ownership of.[36] Theistic humanists like William R. Jones provide some of the strongest criticisms of monotheism and theodicy while still holding their belief in God, but many secular humanists completely deny the existence or significance of a God who can intervene in human history but chooses not to, even in dire situations like slavery.

Agreeing with Camus that "at the heart of oppression is a statement of theodicy,"[37] Jones is suspicious of theodicy on two main counts. First, he remains skeptical towards the legitimacy of maintaining traditional Black theodicies while confronted with injustices like slavery. None of the traditional theodicies (as articulated by other black theologians active in the 1970s to whom Jones is responding) can stand up to Jones' theory of divine racism, a conclusion at which he arrived after a systematic breakdown of his colleague's apologetic stances. This theory is comprised of several core points: God does not value all people equally, therefore He treats them differently or is indifferent toward the hostility that befalls these unlucky "out-groups." In fact, given God's omnipotence, He is responsible for the atrocities that cause the out-groups to suffer. Jones also finds it evident that the designation of the out-groups are directly correlated with ethnicity, hence it is only logical that God must be a member of the in-group.[38]

Jones goes on to discuss the "multievidentiality of suffering," showing that any event which has been held up as an example of God's goodness and intervening work could be just as easily understood as an instance of His malevolence, for God had to first create the initial cause of the suffering in question.[39] Jones is problematizing the taken-for-granted notion of God's intrinsic goodness, asking "whether there is a demonic streak in the divine nature. The charge of divine racism, in the final analysis, is a frontal challenge to the claim of God's

benevolence for all."[40] If the oppressed continually experience suffering, then they must determine whether that suffering is negative and should be annihilated or whether is it a necessary and inescapable part of their existence. Often an individual's summation of the nature of their suffering is based on what they believe to be the cause of their suffering in addition to how they view its ultimate purpose.[41] Jones takes inspiration from Sartre's doctrine of man and suggests that if we judge God by the same method that we judge humans (by assessing His character by the sum of His acts) then we would have less reason to put faith is His eschatological promise of liberation. This perspective brings us into closer touch with the reality of the present versus a "historical reality" made possible only through faith.[42]

Secondly, Jones does not believe that most traditional theodicies inspire *legitimately* emancipative action or an emancipated state of mind. Jones recalls Plato's observation that, simply put, what we believe influences our actions. If we have inaccurate or misguided beliefs then our consequent actions can be dangerously flawed.[43] One of Jones' key points, and one that he and Mays have very much in common, is that the oppressed must desanctify their suffering, "or else the oppressed will not regard their suffering as oppressive and will not be motivated to attack it."[44] If people feel that they deserve to suffer, regardless of whether they designate that suffering as a blessing or a curse, the fear is that they will resign from acting in their own best interest. If taken to an extreme, people could believe that, "Whatever happens is 'permitted' by God and there is nothing we can do about it."[45]

The compensatory nature of the eschatological position presents a two-fold danger. If one is convinced that a supernatural being holds full responsibility for the creation of a just world, this trust could become more like reliance. Total reliance on a supernatural force would be detrimental to progress toward social equality because those oppressed would

simply remain silent. Norm R. Allen, Jr. says, "many Black religionists in particular are still attracted to a quietistic eschatology. Rather than seek rational solutions to the world's problems, they prefer to wait for the apocalypse and the divine rapture. In reality, however, they have been victimized by one failed prophecy after another."[46] In the context of early Black theodicy, divine justice was often located in the after-life, orienting the mind away from the present situation and toward an otherworldly liberation. In his book *The Negro's God as Reflected in His Literature* (first published in 1938) Benjamin Mays describes the issue of compensatory eschatology:

> Since this world is considered a place of temporary abode, many of the Negro masses have been inclined to do little or nothing to improve their status here; they have been encouraged to rely on a *just* God to make amends in Heaven for all the wrongs that they have suffered on earth. In reality, the idea has persisted in some areas that hard times are indicative of the fact that the Negro is God's chosen vessel and that God in disciplining him for the express purpose of bringing him out victoriously and triumphantly in the end. The idea has also persisted that "harder the Cross, brighter the crown." Believing this about God, the Negro, in many instances, has stood and suffered without bitterness, without striking back, and without trying aggressively to realize to the full his needs in this world.[47]

Mays' and Jones' critical judgment of faith in eschatological deliverance is both supported and debunked by historical personalities. On the one hand, some members of the enslaved Black community internalized the oppressor's ideals, in some senses affirming "the deeper the piety of the slave, the more valuable he is in every respect."[48] Usually, however, even those enslaved people who were somewhat complacent with their position rejected the notion that slavery was divinely sanctioned. Jupiter Hammon (who was born between 1720 and 1730 and died around 1800) was the first Black person to publish a poem in the United States. His writings express this willingness to remain enslaved even though he was not convinced that God sanctions slavery. Hammon believed that it was in their own best interest

for the enslaved to be obedient:[49]

> 1st. Respecting obedience to masters. Now, whether it is right and lawful, in the sight of God, for them to make us slaves or not, I am certain that while we are slaves, it is our duty to obey our masters in all their lawful commands, and mind them unless we are bid to do that which we know to be sin, or forbidden in God's word...It may seem hard for us, if we think our masters wrong in holding us slaves, to obey in all things!...As we depend upon our masters for what we eat, and drink, and wear...we cannot be happy unless we obey them. Good servants frequently make good masters...Let me beg of you, my dear African brethren, to think very little of your bondage in this life; for your thinking will do you no good. If God designs to set us free, he will do it in his own time and way...[50]

In one of his sermons, Richard Allen (1760-1831), the founder of the first African Methodist Church, echoes some of Hammons' sentiments as he preached on the subject of how piety and obedience could lead one's master to sympathize and eventually grant them freedom:

> ...you may put your trust in God, who sees your condition, and as a merciful father pitieth his children, so doth God pity them that love Him; and as your hearts are inclined to serve God, you will feel an affectionate regard towards your masters and mistresses, so called, and the whole family in which you live. This will be seen by them, and tend to promote your liberty... [51]

On the other hand, religiousness did not make all of the enslaved complacent. The reason why numerous state legislatures made laws restricting Black religious gatherings that were not chaperoned by Whites was an acknowledgment of the connection between rebellion and religious ideology.[52] Many found inspiration for physical rebellion in their religious conscience, including, no doubt, a percentage of the estimated 60,000 enslaved people who escaped to freedom,[53] people involved in small-scale insurrections, and organizers of major slave revolts like Denmark Vesey (who was born circa 1767 and was executed in 1822) Nat Turner (1800-1831) and Gabriel and his brother Martin, of Gabriel's Rebellion. All of these leaders were “called” by the Christian God to advance toward physical freedom, basing their actions in scriptural interpretation and revelatory experiences. These figures challenge Mays'

and Jones' proposed causal relationship between faithfulness and passivity and illuminates the immense power of interpretation.

Humanocentric Theism

In his description of humanocentric theism, William R. Jones proposes a compromise between a theodicy that necessitates faith in God and a philosophy that values worldly reality. Jones' humanocentric theism emphasizes the human capacity for freedom, choice, and activity,[54] attributes that have traditionally been deemed as essentially theistic.[55] He says that this granting of power is a result of reinterpreting Christian sovereignty, "by becoming a man in Jesus of Nazareth, God affirms that his activity in human history from then on is played out in the activities of particular men. Man, then, is functionally ultimate relative to human history."[56] This interpretation recalls the "Jesus embodied theodicy" once threatened by Jones' assertion that God must be a member of the in-group.

In its letting go of God's omnipotent and constant control over human history, Jones' humanocentric theism also combats the problem of divine racism by showing that the source of racism is in human choices made independently of God's influence.[57] This can almost be seen as a type of deism because humanocentric theism encourages humans both in the position of oppressed and oppressor to hold themselves accountable for their actions while it still maintains that there is a God.[58] This view minimizes the importance of believing in a specific religious narrative or figure. It is up to humans to determine the quality of their suffering as positive or negative, consequentially "[removing] God from anyone's side. History becomes open-ended and multi-valued, capable of supporting either oppression or liberation, racism or brotherhood."[59]

Chapter 3 Notes

1 Sterling Brown in Pinn, Anthony B. *By These Hands: A Documentary History of African American Humanism*. New York: New York University Press, 2001. Print. p107
2 Raboteau, xi
3 Frederick Douglass in Gates, Jr. Henry Louis. *The Classic Slave Narratives*. New York: Penguin Group, 2002. Print. , p398
4 William R. Jones, By These Hands, p28
5 Ibid, 31
6 Ibid
7 Brown, By These Hands, p105
8 Ibid
9 Ibid, 106
11 Ibid, 102
12 Ibid, 97
13 Cone, 98
14 Cone, 116
15 Epstein, Greg M. *Good Without God; What a Billion Nonreligious People* Do *Believe*. Unites States: HarperCollins, 2009. Print. p41
16 Ibid, 43
17 http://thinkexist.com/quotation/is-god-willing-to-prevent-evil-but-not-able-then/411189.html. thinkexist.com, n.d. Web 22 April 2010
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19 Epstein, p46
20 Ibid
21 Ibid, p47
22 Ibid, p48
23 Kurtz, Paul. *In Defense of Secular Humanism*. New York: Prometheus Books, 1983. Print. 41
24 Allen, Jr., Norm R. *The Black Humanist Experience: An Alternative to Religion*. New York: Prometheus Books, 2003. Print. p10
25 Kurtz, p22
26 Townes, 1
27 Jones, William R. *Is God a White Racist? A Preamble to Black Theology*. Boston, Beacon Press, 1998. Print. pix
28 Ibid, pxiv
29 Ibid, pxv
30 Ibid, pxii
31 Ibid, pxxiii
32 Pinn, *By These Hands*, p7
33 Jones, pxxviii
34 http://www.norwichandnorfolkhumanistandseculargroup.com/index.asp?pageid=103408, n.d. Web. 22 April. 2010.
35 Pinn, *By These Hands*, p9
36 Ibid, p10
37 Jones, p42
38 Ibid, p4
39 Ibid, p7
40 Ibid, p6
41 Ibid, pxxiv
42 Ibid, p11
43 Ibid, p40
44 Ibid, pxxvi
45 Mays, p246
46 Allen, p11
47 Mays, p24

48 Cone, p23
49 Mays, p97
50 Mays, p98
51 Ibid, p34
52 Harding, *African-American Religion*, p111
53 Gates, Jr. Henry Louis. *The Classic Slave Narratives*. New York: Penguin Group, 2002. Print. p1
54 Jones, p193
55 Ibid, p187
56 Ibid, p190
57 Ibid, p195
58 Ibid, p195
59 Ibid, 196

Conclusion: The Creative Act as an Act of Liberation

Over the course of this paper we have journeyed from West Africa to the New World, throughout the era of slavery, in and out of the bible, and have ended up peering through a critical lens onto the historical uses and abuses of theodicy as it relates to the Black community in North America. In 2010, theodicy is still at the forefront of theological and philosophical conversation. With the steady flow of violence in the name of religion, a consistent onslaught of both natural and preventable disasters, as well as a rise in the popularity of secularism, it is doubtful that human questioning of God and Their omnibenevolence will stop anytime soon. As much as Jones' humanocentric theism may be the most convincing as a "functional theodicy" for our current society, he does not eliminate all of the questions that always return to haunt theists of all persuasions. If God is so removed from our affairs, then what exactly, if anything, can we ask of Them? And how can we locate existential meaning if God is as good as on permanent vacation?

In speculating more thoroughly about the inner lives of those responsible for the Seculars and early blues, we can potentially offer some answers to these enduring questions. People who chose to create art but not have that art be in veneration of the supernatural deity of Christianity make us question the spiritual function of art. If a singer does not believe, for example, that their song is a ritualization of God (as Cone defines the Spirituals) then there must be some other reason why a person, especially a person oppressed to the degree of the Black community in North America, chooses to write and sing a song. I would like to suggest that the creative act of making music is still a devotional act, but not necessarily directed

toward God in the traditional sense.

In his essay *Richard Wright's Blues*, Ralph Ellison poetically describes the blues as an "impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one's aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near comic-lyricism. As a form, the blues is an autobiographical chronicle of personal catastrophe expressed lyrically."[1] The blues singer moves beyond life's pain not by ignoring or escaping it, but by transcending it *through creative expression*. Describing one's life here on Earth, the trials, joys, failures and triumphs is a cathartic and emotionally liberating action. It is creative in that it takes an experience, however upsetting, as "grist for the mill" for positive expression. This can be seen as metaphorical mirror of the process of re-signification of an oppressive dogma into a source of liberation. Later in his essay, Ellison brings up the humanistic and functional value of art:

> The function, the psychology of artistic selectivity is to eliminate from art form all those elements of experience which contain no compelling significance. Life is a sea, art a ship in which man conquers life's crushing formlessness, reducing it to a course, a series of swells, tides and wind currents inscribed on a chart. Though drawn from the world, "the organized significance of art," writes Malraux, "is stronger than all the multiplicity of the world...the significance alone enables man to conquer chaos and to master destiny."[2]

A person does not have faith in "God" per se to transcend the present. They can transcend the present by valuing their experiences, taking them in, and singing them back out to the world. In the act of articulation we can discover existential fullness, the process of making art can be both an emotional outlet and our connection to a greater creative energy. Numerous authors propose that the Revival camp meetings as well as the secret religious meetings between the enslaved were such a powerful space in Black culture because these situations, filled with singing, yelling, and dancing, provided the opportunity for creative,

physical, and emotional expression that was usually suppressed on pain of punishment. This creative energy is related to creativity energy on all levels, from art to intellectual productivity to scriptural interpretation to the physical processes of conceiving and giving birth. Writer Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan begins an essay by saying, "African-American spirituals are the product of a maieutic or midwifery process. These cultural artifacts helped incubate and deliver the souls of Black folk from total despair."[3] Creating is an essential part of living, living is enduring, enduring is resisting, and enduring is, in a sense, overcoming.

This logic leads to the conclusion that creating is a triumphant action. The human capacity to create is "identical in essence"[4] to a religious process. A creative act is an act of liberation just by virtue of its being creative because the creative process is a type of religious process. Especially in the case of enslaved or otherwise oppressed people, John Dewey's definition of "religious" can be used to describe any creative act, Christian in subject or motivation as well as secular. To create in any sense is to affirm one's humanity, and this in itself is a protest against oppression. Dewey says,

> any activity pursued in behalf of an ideal end against obstacles and in spite of threats of personal loss because of conviction of its general and enduring value is religious in quality. Many a person, inquirer, artist, philanthropist, citizen, men and women in the humblest walks of life, have achieved...such unification of themselves and of their relations to the conditions of existence.[5]

The creative process, which I define as a combination of the realization of personal capacity, imagination, and a channeling of a metaphysical and internal energy can foster an interaction with a life-affirming force (creativity) but not through necessarily "theistic" means. In this way, creativity can replace the need for traditional theodicies.

Conclusion Notes

1 Ellison, Ralph. *Shadow and Act*. United States: Quality Paperback Book Club, 1994. Print. p78
2 Ibid, p 83
3 Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan in *A Troubling in My Soul*, 150
4 John Dewey in Cahn, Steven M. *Exploring the Philosophy of Religion: An Introductory Anthology*. United States: Oxford University Press, 2009. Print. , p319
5 Ibid, p322

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