

Breaking the Chains of Chattel Teamwork: The Future of Black Liberation Theology

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“No one built this country on their own. This Nation is great because we built it together. This Nation is great because we worked as a team. This Nation is great because we get each other’s backs. And if we hold fast to that truth, in this moment of trial, there is no challenge too great; no mission too hard.”

—President Barack Obama, 2012 State of the Union Address¹

President Barack Obama closed his address with “God bless America,” thereby giving divine sanction to the myth of U.S. American exceptionalism, that the people of the United States compose “the one indispensable nation in world affairs.”² Before you write off this explicit mention of God’s blessing as stock presidential rhetoric, note that Obama offers this affirmation in the context of his citation of the prevalent “cynical”³ mood among the U.S. American public. He attributes this cynicism to lagging faith in U.S. American economic and political institutions. Obama characterizes the people of the United States as struggling to find meaning in a country that is disappointing their hopes and falling short of their values. These issues of faith and meaning warrant theological reflection. The President seems unable to grasp the religious question hiding behind these issues. President Obama’s characterization of U.S. American history as an extended exercise in teamwork required a blatant whitewashing of history. To offer solace to the wayward people of the United States, Obama recast more than three hundred years of chattel slavery, Reconstruction, and Jim Crow segregation into the mold of chattel teamwork.

We must say that chattel teamwork, which is chattel slavery disguised as teamwork, is not teamwork. This obfuscation of histories of suffering is more than just an inadequate answer to the insufficiently understood religious question posed by the U.S. American populace. It is a violent exercise of tyrannical power to

1 Barack Obama, “State of the Union Address,” White House video, January 24, 2012, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/photos-and-video/video/2012/01/25/2012-state-union-address-enhanced-version#transcript>.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

rewrite U.S. American history. Two theologians stand out as offering challenges to such a rewriting of U.S. American history: Reinhold Niebuhr and James H. Cone.

The theological perspective of Reinhold Niebuhr, Christian realism, is particularly relevant to a critique of President Obama’s glossing of exploitation as teamwork, given Obama’s stated admiration for Niebuhr as a philosopher.⁴ In assessing the potential for human reason to promote societal harmony, Niebuhr asserts that even the noblest goals and projects of people are “tainted” by their self-interest.⁵ This is particularly true of the powerful who, finding themselves in “a position of perilous eminence,” are driven to secure their position by extending their power ever further.⁶

We ground a Niebuhrian rejection of Obama’s national pride in Niebuhr’s critique of power as inherently self-interested. Niebuhr theologially categorized this will to exert power as sin, which he defines as pride and self-love.⁷ Sin is what Niebuhr observes to be the human reaction to anxiety, which itself arises from our awareness of our paradoxically finite and free nature: we are limited but able to imagine deeds beyond our limits, which are never quite defined.⁸ Humans react to this anxiety by either denying finitude or freedom through the seeking of power over oneself and others.⁹

Two manifestations of sinful pride are particularly relevant to a critique of chattel teamwork: spiritual pride and collective pride. Spiritual pride is the claiming of divine sanction for human purposes and accomplishments.¹⁰ Collective pride is the nation seeking to make itself the defining feature of the individual’s reality.¹¹ Obama’s speech demonstrates both forms of sin: spiritual in his claiming of divine blessing for U.S. American policies and collective in his redefining, in relation to the nation, the exploited as “teammates.”

The flaw in Niebuhr’s critique of U.S. American national pride is his lens of irony. Niebuhr used irony to describe regrettable historical situations for which a nation is responsible but were unconsciously produced through the pursuit of noble or innocent ends.¹² Such a situation represents, for Niebuhr, the laughing judgment (that is, non-hostile response toward human aspirations) of God upon

4 David Brooks, “Op-Ed: Obama, Gospel and Verse,” *New York Times*, April 26, 2007, <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/26/opinion/26brooks.html>.

5 Reinhold Niebuhr, *Moral Man & Immoral Society*, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), 45.

6 Ibid., 42.

7 Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, Volume 1, (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 188.

8 Ibid., 182–183.

9 Ibid., 185.

10 Ibid., 200.

11 Ibid., 213–214.

12 Reinhold Niebuhr, *The Irony of American History*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008), xxiii–xxiv.

the sinful pride of humans. This judgment resolves into mercy if it inspires repentance in the judged.¹³

Although we use Niebuhr's critique of collective spiritual pride, we reject Niebuhr's understanding of irony because it validates Obama's whitewashing of history. The underlying presumption in Niebuhr's understanding is that the powerful are often well-intentioned. Niebuhr's emphasis on irony signals Niebuhr's theological concern with the meaning of God in relation to the powerful. Niebuhr was driven by a desire to understand the roots of evil because of the unprecedented rate at which he saw evil unfolding on the world stage (e.g., World War I). Because he discerned that the powerful are best positioned to effect change, he sought a theological account that could motivate the powerful to act against evil. Thus, he ended up concerned primarily with how God judges and forgives the dominant rather than how God acts to save and sustain the marginalized. Niebuhr persuasively articulated his Christian Realism in terms that gained the attention and buy in of his target audience, the dominant. His doctrine of sin provided a credible account for why good, powerful people produce less than good results. It also offered a way for these good-intentioned powerful people to repent for their sin by rededicating themselves to striving toward justice through their good if unfortunately flawed applications of power.

Niebuhr's prioritization of power has the unacceptable result of silencing voices in much the same way as Obama did in his State of the Union address. For example, Niebuhr attributes innocence to early U.S. American foreign policy because the United States was unable to harm *powerful* nations. In this claim of innocence, Niebuhr disregards early U.S. American foreign policy against Native American nations.

As we mentioned, Niebuhr's main historical concern was the exponential proliferation of evil, which led him to contemplate on the cause of evil. His reflections led him to focus on the exercise of power and how this power might be ethically managed. This position is possible only by removing the Jesus from Jesus Christ. Christ has to be dehistoricized to make this tenable. As soon as you look at the historical Jesus or in anyway use the historical Jesus as a referent for the Christ, you have to talk about his relationship with the oppressed, his identification with the oppressed, and his solidarity with the oppressed as gratuitously demonstrated by the way he died—on the cross. Reflection on evil might lead us to analyze the socio-political causes of suffering, but to understand how to mitigate or alleviate suffering, one must understand how that evil causes real, concrete people to suffer. Such knowledge of suffering can arise only by listening to those who are forced to suffer: "Only the oppressed know what is wrong, because they are both the victims of evil and the recipients of God's liberating activity."¹⁴ What Niebuhr's Christian realism lacks is the influence of oppressed peoples' voices. In reading Niebuhr's writings, it would seem he believes that if the right doctrine of sin humbles the powerful, the judgment of God leads them to repentance, and if the dominant just

13 Ibid., 155.

14 Ibid., 107.

work hard enough—among themselves—they can achieve whatever modicum of justice is possible to achieve in this world.¹⁵ Although his "ethical orientation made such an impact on liberalism that we are likely never to see it again the way it used to be," an attention to evil must be secondary or at least balanced with an attention to the suffering it rends.¹⁶

In spite of his desire to challenge the pride and self-love of the powerful, Niebuhr's theology makes asymmetric power relations part of an assumed structure of human experience. Given this universal human experience, Niebuhr's America is still assumed to be a team, captained by the dominant. Niebuhr sought to whip our captains into shape. Niebuhr's work on power is a theological legacy, but one that needs to be evaluated for both its gifts and limits. To go beyond a critique of chattel teamwork vis-à-vis the dominant to address the problem of the nonperson, we turn to the black theology of James H. Cone.

The corpus of Cone's work demonstrates that whites have something essential to learn from blacks; something to learn about being human and being Christian. Black experiences, history, and culture are necessary—but not the only—sources for knowledge about God's salvific activity of liberation in the lives of the oppressed. The norm that determines how these sources are to be weighed "is the manifestation of Jesus as the black Christ who provides the necessary soul for black liberation."¹⁷

Cone includes these sources for knowledge of God not simply as an affirmation of black pride or a privileging of personal experience. Theologians cannot excise the sources and norm of black theology and attempt to use them separately from the black community as the community of accountability. These sources cohere. This coherence structures the black theological perspective that discerned the question of the nonperson.¹⁸ A person who has not lived the black experience, been a part of its history, or known the power of its cultural forms cannot purport to make decisions with the black community, much less for it: "being around people doesn't make you one of them; it only makes you a spectator."¹⁹

Cone argues that unlike white theologians whose wondering about the purpose of life had raised the question of the non-believer, the black community's historical experience of forced suffering raises the question of the nonperson.²⁰ What he found is that faith enabled black people to survive chattel slavery by defining the "*somebodiness* of their being...even though they were treated as things."²¹

15 Ibid.

16 James H. Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1990), 92.

17 Ibid., 38.

18 Ibid., 23.

19 Jane Jeong Trenka, *Fugitive Visions: An Adoptee's Return to Korea*, (St. Paul: Graywolf, 2009), 66.

20 James H. Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 63.

21 James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues*, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1991), 17.

In his passion to affirm black experience over against the white supremacy that defined black people as nonpersons, Cone overextended his particular knowledge of the black experience. As a black man, he presumed his knowledge of black experience accounted for black women's experience. According to Delores Williams, it did not.²² Williams argued that Cone's centralizing of the cross and redemptive suffering in black theology resulted from his failure to "be receptive to the problem of sexism in the black community and society as a whole."²³

Cone received her critique, and in the preface to the 1990 edition of *Black Theology of Liberation*, Cone acknowledged his failure. Cone has spent the past twenty years listening, engaging, reflecting, and metabolizing that critique. In *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* he responds. In chapter five, "Oh Mary, Don't You Weep," Cone is claimed by the experience of black women who found sustenance in the cross as they suffered and resisted that suffering. If you go looking in that chapter for Cone's conversion to the womanist theology of Williams, you won't find it. What you'll find is an apologetic for redemptive suffering and a list of other womanists who would agree with him, in particular, M. Shawn Copeland.²⁴

Many readers will be disappointed by the continued tension between the theologies of Cone and Williams. We argue, however, that this tension is invaluablely constructive. What Cone and Williams performed was honest witnessing of both shared suffering and laterally inflicted suffering. Such witnessing does not have to lead to consensus to be authentic and transforming.

Throughout *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, Cone mediates such sharing of suffering both within the black community and between the black and white communities. He shows through a particular experience shared by U.S. American whites and blacks that an exclusive attention to white religious experience in the United States cannot reveal the true spiritual meaning of the cross for white or black Christians. Cone argues that in the United States, the cross and lynching tree necessarily interpret each other. It is only from the side of the oppressed and their lived experiences of the terror produced by the lynching tree that U.S. Americans can recover how the terror of the cross frames God's "snatching victory out of defeat, life out of death, and hope out of despair."²⁵ Only from the perspective of the oppressed with their need for meaningful survival is theological imagination driven beyond the tragedies of crucifixions and lynchings to find redemption not only in the cross, which was a lynching, but also for the lynching tree, which is a modern re-enactment of crucifixion.

When the cross and the lynching tree interpret each other, new truth is revealed. The experience of terror, Cone points out, might be a relatively new experience for white U.S. Americans. He cites the shock and surprise many white U.S. Americans felt after September 11, 2001, and when the news broke about

22 Delores S. Williams, "James Cone's Liberation: Twenty Years Later," in James H. Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 190.

23 Ibid., xv.

24 James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2011), 150–151.

25 Ibid., 150.

abuse in Abu Ghraib prison.²⁶ In comparing this relatively new experience of terror for whites against the centuries-long experience of terror for blacks, Cone proclaims to all the salvation and meaning revealed only in the light of black people's experience of forced, sustained and, omnipresent terrorization. This proclamation can lead to salvific healing only if the particular history of black experiences is acknowledged as the strand of U.S. American history apart from which blacks and whites cannot find God's liberating action. This acknowledgment cannot happen in a context in which particular histories are overwritten to manufacture a myth of chattel teamwork.

Niebuhr's critique of national pride allows us to reject the narrative of chattel teamwork as errant in Obama's claim of U.S. American innocence. However, Niebuhr's emphasis on the experiences of the dominant prevented his theology from offering an analysis of the religious question to which Obama's narrative is a poisonous response. This is the value of Cone's prioritization of the experiences of marginalized people: his work identifies the problem of the nonperson as the religious question of the marginalized. Further, Cone points us to sites of divine revelation in search of answers to this religious question. Where Obama assigns divine sanction to empire and Niebuhr locates God working to bring the powerful to repentance, Cone urges us to look to those who face the problem of the nonperson in order to find where God is at work in the world. Where we see resistance and struggle for liberation, we see the work of God.

The problem of the nonperson is multifaceted and God's liberating activity cannot be captured within the experience of one community.²⁷ This awareness is central to the future of black liberation theology. Maintaining this awareness of plurality, we will briefly look at two related issues: the increasing complexity of marginalized identities and the possibility of a solidarity that can realize the potential for unity that chattel teamwork mocks.

It is becoming increasingly unclear to what extent the sort of fixed identity that Cone took for granted in his early career reflects the internal lived experiences of marginalized people. The inability of identity categories (e.g., black, woman, or transgender) to map precisely onto how people understand their own identities challenges the notion that "black experience," as such, can be meaningful in orienting theological reflection. What must be remembered, however, is that marginalization according to these socially constructed categories continues to condition how people are received in the world, regardless of how they themselves articulate the complexities of their identities. Because people are targeted for discrimination, exploitation, torture, and murder based on these categories, the question of the nonperson continues to arise. While these categories should not restrict our theologies, we still must account for them.

The tension between addressing race, gender, and sexuality and attending to particularities not accounted for by these categories highlights the importance of

26 Ibid., 164.

27 James H. Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 156.

solidarity in the future of black theology. In order to express and explore the question of the nonperson in such a way that we gain the broadest possible view of the liberating activity of God, theologians must work with one another. How we will work together without competing against each other or marginalizing each other's concerns remains unresolved.

There are two challenges inherent in theological and practical cooperation. The first is exemplified by chattel teamwork, in which the marginalized are called to swallow their suffering and to press forward as though they and those who marginalize them are in right relationship. Through such a call as Obama's the unwillingness of many people to identify themselves as, and, more to the point, with the oppressed, can only forestall movement toward solidarity and liberation. In the present situation, predatory corporations (now persons in their own right) and an imperialistic government treat ever-increasing segments of the U.S. American population (not to mention that of the world at large) as expendable, to be exploited, impoverished, tortured, and killed with impunity. We can see the widespread use of 99 percent language as a sign that many more today recognize that people are still asking the question of the nonperson.

The second danger in theological and practical cooperation became clear during the 2011 American Academy of Religion annual meeting. Many of the sessions we attended allocated time to addressing the need to bring together the various identity groups into super-sessions. Participants voiced concerns that organizing groups around discrete identities is anachronistic because it no longer reflects the context of plurality through which people come to form ever more complex identities. The goal was to consolidate the efforts of each group so that together marginalized groups could address common issues. Such cooperation is desirable. However, it must not come at the expense of an appreciation for the particularity of experiences of suffering and the different ways groups are marginalized, especially such marginalization and suffering as are caused laterally from one marginalized group to another. This appreciation for particularity lies at the core of black liberation theology and witnesses to its enduring relevance.

We are connected in the midst of difference not because we are all members of a team but because humans suffer. Like Cone, we believe people suffer differently and that one experience of suffering cannot be substituted for another. For example, the existential suffering that arises out of contemplating one's purpose in life is a categorically different type of suffering than the forced material suffering of chattel slavery and its many inheritances. However, what we suggest is that the person who struggles to find meaning in her otherwise unperturbed life, can use her awareness of her suffering to affect a posture of humility and vulnerability toward those who know the reality of unmerited unmitigated suffering. One's own suffering creates the possibility of recognizing the suffering of others and, consequently, respecting their description of that suffering and learning from the ways in which they have survived their suffering. In the space of engagement, the shared connection through suffering humanizes all participants and conditions a common commitment to justice and liberation. Through this connection, God makes community around liberation where there was only alienation and judgment. Such

community would not require any member to sacrifice her distinct concerns for the sake of holding up a myth of unity.

The future of black liberation theology is in its demand that all people honestly face suffering. Cone demonstrates the courage to face suffering and work through the tragedy while in community and conversation with others. Although Cone does not describe it as such, one can see the importance of honesty in suffering through his discussions in spirituals and blues, which so often express deep suffering and wrestling with the problem of the nonperson. Denial of either one's own suffering or that of others prevents one from engaging with the problem of the nonperson, recognizing one's own experience of that problem, and learning from others' survival of marginalization and suffering. The future of black theology lies in solidarity; honesty in suffering is what will make that future a reality.