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Beyond Fundamentalism:
Reconstructing African American Religious Thought

Ronald B. Neal
rneal@claflin.edu

This paper is concerned with the reconstruction of African American religious thought. It seeks the reconstruction of African American religious thought in light of historical and cultural change. In this paper, I question the efficacy of the most dominant and normative mode of religious thought among African American intellectuals and seek to transcend this paradigm in light of African American culture today. In the end, I call for novel and heterogeneous forms of religious thought that attend to the nuanced lived experiences of African Americans in the early 21st century.

Historicism, Religious Thought, and Reconstruction

The reconstruction of African American religious thought begins with one basic premise: that all forms of human thought, philosophical, religious, and otherwise are bound by space and time. Such reconstruction is fundamentally historicist in sensibility and attends to the fact that history and context are inescapable factors that inform the nature and scope religious thought; that the conception and alteration of any mode of religious thought is conditioned by the historical moment that surrounds it.[1] In this regard, African American religious thought is no exception. The challenge to reconstruct African American religious thought is informed by this very moment (early 21st century America) in the history of the United States and the cultural history of African Americans. The challenge to engage in reconstruction is invoked and symbolized by epoch changing events which are unprecedented in nature. One such event took place two years ago.

The 2008 election of Barack Obama to the American presidency symbolized a significant historical and cultural shift in the United States. Obama's election to the presidency was an unprecedented moment which reflected a significant shift in the racial, cultural, and political history of the United States, as well as a psychological shift among many citizens in the United States, including African Americans. Obama's popularity and support among large numbers of

[1] Historicism as an intellectual sensibility and virtue is connected to the emergence of modernity and a variety of postmodern intellectual movements. For the last four decades it has been quite influential in informing all forms of knowledge and thought production, from the humanities to the social sciences to the natural sciences. Also, liberation movements that pertain to race, ethnicity, class, gender, and sexuality have benefited from and employ historicist modes of thought with respect to their ethical concerns. For an excellent account of historicism as a method and its application to human thought, particularly religion and theology, see Sheila Greeve Davaney's *Historicism: The Once and Future Challenge for Theology* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2006).

African Americans were indicative of cultural and moral changes which have taken place among African Americans since the late 1960s. In relation to African Americans, Obama symbolizes a different mood in black America, a mood which does not conform to the dominant modes of religious and political thinking which have governed religious and political thinking among African Americans over the last four decades.[2] This was not only evident in his electoral victory on November 4, 2008; it was strikingly evident in the highly visible and dramatic tensions, before the election, which surrounded his candidacy, particularly his relationship to the politics of his highly scrutinized former pastor, Jeremiah Wright. The tensions that emerged between the oppositional politics of Jeremiah Wright and the presidential campaign of Barack Obama had larger implications, not only for American politics, but for African American religious thought. As I will demonstrate in the pages ahead, they are indicative of the tensions between the dominant mode of African American religious thought, black liberation theology, and contemporary African American culture today. In this vein, contemporary African American culture stands as a highly complex enterprise that challenges and explodes the cultural, moral, and religious assumptions that have governed black liberation theology since its inception in the late 1960s. In many respects, Barack Obama's life, presidency, and popularity in America, encompasses the ironies, ambiguities, and moral complexity that are found in contemporary African American culture. Such complexities are evident in highly visible arenas of contemporary African American culture, arenas which include popular religion and popular

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[2] For an insightful look at the 2008 presidential election and Barack Obama's effect on African Americans, see William Jelani Cobb, *The Substance of Hope: Barack Obama and the Paradox of Progress* (New York: Walker and Company, 2010).

culture.[3] Overall, Obama is a public symbol of moral and cultural complexity, and his biracial background, eclectic personality, and life journey confounds, at a symbolic level, the cultural and epistemological assumptions of black liberation theology.

The Dominant Paradigm

In a groundbreaking study, *Methodologies of Black Theology*, theologian Frederick L. Ware identifies three trajectories of African American religious thought and houses them under the single rubric *Black Theology*.[4] Among these three trajectories is the dominant and normative paradigm among African American religious thinkers. He identifies this trajectory as the *Hermeneutical School* of black theology. This school is represented by male religious thinkers (liberationists) and womanist theologians. The remaining trajectories are the *Philosophical School* and the *Human Sciences School*. It is from the *Hermeneutical School* that one of the most creative and original expressions of theology emerged in the history of theology in the West, black theology.

Black Theology

In 1969, James H. Cone's seminal text, *Black Theology and Black Power,* ushered in a creative and groundbreaking moment in theological construction.[5] It was a clarion call that a

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[33] The hybrid nature of Obama's life is graphically depicted in his autobiography, *Dreams from My Father: A Story of Race and Inheritance* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2004). Also see "Obama's Family Tree," *New York Times,* January 20, 2009.

[4] Frederick L. Ware, *Methodologies of Black Theology* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 2002)

[5] James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1989).

new spirit and generation in theology had been born. Cone's work was monumental in that it was the first systematic attempt by an African American theologian to speak to the then rising aspirations and rage of generations who had been systematically excluded from the dominant institutions in American society, including the American theological establishment. It was also significant in that it was the first systematic theological expression in the Western world to take black communities as its point of departure. It was indeed a watershed moment in the history of theology in the West. What is more, it opened the door and paved the way for a variety of theological discourses that would take oppression and social exclusion and translate them into theological discourse. Feminist theology, womanist theology, and liberation theologies worldwide are in one respect or another indebted to Cone's formal and pioneering efforts. Similar to way the 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* impacted American society, impacting not only public schools but also higher education, government, and the American corporation, *Black Theology* opened doors for a new era and a new generation in American theology. Overall, Cone was a demolition man who exploded the epistemological and cultural assumptions of the then American theological establishment. Since the publication of *Black Theology* no single religious or theological perspective, forwarded by an African American, has impacted theology and religious thought in America as has James H. Cone. Through an extraordinary outpouring of books and articles, James H. Cone became the most vocal spokesperson for what is today, the dominant African American perspective in theology

and religious thought broadly speaking.[6] His male and female students, who developed theological perspectives related to, yet distinct from his perspective, are not fathomable without his contributions. Today, black theology is taken for granted as an integral feature of the American theological establishment. It is such an integral part of the American theological establishment that the image and work of James H. Cone and their impact, are inescapable when one queries the nature and scope African American theological discourse and religious thought broadly speaking.

Historicizing Black Theology

Black Theology and Black Power was unprecedented in it is impact on religious and theological discourse in America, especially African American religious thought. However, like all forms of theological and religious thought, black liberation theology is a product of the historical moment which gave it birth. Black liberation theology is unique to the late 1960s, an era where Jim Crow laws, ghetto slums, economic disenfranchisement, poverty, the language of revolution and black power, and social chaos were fodder for the national news. The late 1960s was a highly polarized era where white signified evil and black symbolized virtue. It was a time when African Americans had virtually no political representation (at all levels of American

[6] Although James H. Cone stands out as the leading representative of black theology, he was not alone in its emergence and subsequent development. The National Committee of Negro Churchmen, Albert B. Cleage, Jr., Cecil Cone, Gayraud S. Wilmore, and J. Deotis Roberts were among the contemporaries of Cone who articulated ideas and concerns, from the late 1960s to the early 1970s, who were integral to the development of black theology as an intellectual movement. For an account of the contributing forces related to the formation and growth of black theology, see *Black Theology: A Documentary History, Volume I 1966-1979* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993). Also see Dwight N. Hopkins, *Introducing Black Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Book, 1999).

politics). It was a time when the professional options for the majority of African Americans were structurally limited, where the arenas of higher education, corporate law, media, and the Fortune 500 were restricted.[7] The educational development, levels of income among African Americans and the opportunity structure in the late 1960s necessitated the kinds of radical politics and ideological activity that characterized the period. By and large, African American activists and intellectuals, through rhetorical oratory and writing painted a homogeneous portrait of African Americans, typified by poverty, exclusion, and totalizing oppression. Given the tenor of the times and the nature of African American disenfranchisement, it was a plausible picture that could hardly be refuted.

More than four decades after the inception of black theology, the portrait of African Americans has changed. African American culture has changed significantly since black theology was first conceived in the late 1960s, and it has changed significantly since the 1980s when the students of Cone began writing.[8] To be sure, there are enduring cultural conditions and ethical challenges from the Jim Crow era and late 1960s. The vestiges of Jim Crow exist in America today, albeit in a different form. However, in significant respects, the black America of the late 1960s, the black America that James H. Cone knew as a 30 something year old Ph.D. has disappeared. The portrait of black America in the late 1960s is analogous to a black and white

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[7] Affirmative Action policies as they are understood today were initiated during this era by then President Lyndon B. Johnson. The absence of African Americans in the power sectors of American life led to the inception of such policies. See Orlando Patterson, *The Ordeal of Integration: Progress and Resentment in America's Racial Crisis* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 1998). Also see Charles J. Ogletree, *All Deliberate Speed: Reflections on the First Half Century of Brown v. Board of Education* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004)

[8] Ibid.

photo, a two dimensional image of black America. However, the portrait of African Americans today is multi-dimensional and is in living color. The portrait of African Americans in the early 21st century is more nuanced, layered, and complicated. The black and white photo has been displaced by a collage, a heterogeneous collage of people with a variety of interests, talents, aspirations, and social circumstances. What is more, this collage includes varying levels of development in terms of education, income, social capital and access to opportunity.[9] A significant portion of the African American population remains disenfranchised from the mechanisms of opportunity and development that the white ruling class and privileged African Americans take for granted. However, a significant portion of the African American population participates in the mainstream of American life (though not without restrictions), pursuing and accessing the mechanisms of opportunity that the white ruling class takes for granted.

Mythic Religion and Ahistorical Theology

Although the African American situation is more complicated and colorful than it has ever been, the theological musings of black liberation theologians (the dominant voices) do not reflect the historical changes which are reflected in contemporary African American religion and culture. In profound ways, black liberation theologians proceed as though history has not changed; that African American culture today is the same as it was in 1969. What is more, the dominant voices in black liberation theology revel in mythic conceptions of religion and culture,

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[9] For sobering accounts of the changes that have occurred with the black population over the last forty years, see Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s *Behind the Color Line: Dialogues with African Americans* (New York: Warner Books, 2004) and Sheryll Cashin's *The Failures of Integration: How Race and Class Are Undermining the American Dream* (New York: Public Affairs Book, 2004).

with respect to African Americans, that are unpersuasive and disingenuous, especially when juxtaposed against the actual religious and cultural practices of African Americans.[10] For the most part, what black liberation theologians articulate with respect to African American religion and culture is an unchanging expression of the politics of the late 1960s. Such an expression exists at a significant distance from African American culture in the early 21st century. As I will demonstrate in greater detail shortly, the nature of their theological musings, in relation to contemporary African American culture is ahistorical in content and form. More pointedly, their insistent articulations of mythic conceptions of religion and culture mimic the kind of static theological musings that one finds among religious fundamentalists.[11]

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[10] One of the hallmarks of black liberation theology as a movement is its prophetic interpretation of religion, Christianity in particular, among African Americans. According to this view, religion among African American is fundamentally prophetic, geared toward the elimination of injustice with respect to African Americans. This view was enshrined by the work James H. Cone and given strong articulation by Gayraud Wilmore in his classic text, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1996). Prior to the rise of black liberation theology, such interpretations, especially among religious and secular black intellectuals, were non-existent. In fact, the vast majority of religious and secular thinkers, which included Carter G. Woodson, James Weldon Johnson, W.E.B. DuBois, Howard Thurman, Benjamin Elijah Mays, and E. Franklin Frazier, were highly critical of religion, Christianity in particular, among African Americans. For the most part, the view of black religion purported by black liberation theology was a response to the critique of black religion that secular and religious intellectuals directed toward Christianity among African Americans. This response was conditioned in profound ways by perhaps the most ardent critic of Christianity among Africans Americans, Elijah Muhammad. In fact, in his work on Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X, *Malcolm, Martin, and America: Dream or Nightmare* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992), James H. Cone acknowledges that it was the critique of Christianity on the part of Elijah Muhammad, whose chief spokesperson was Malcolm X, which compelled him to rethink his understanding of religion, Christianity in particular. Apart from Elijah Muhammad's critique of Christianity among African Americans, there is no black liberation theology. For an account of the critique of Christianity before the rise of black liberation theology see Mark L. Chapman's *Christianity on Trial: African American Religious Thought before and after Black Power* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996). For the most part, the prophetic interpretation of black religion, black religion as an inherently political and prophetic enterprise, is unique to black liberation theology.

[11] See Dwight N. Hopkins' *Introducing Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1999). Even as late as the late 1990s, the politics of the Black Power era continued to govern black liberation theology, despite the changing context of the African American situation.

In recent times, the mythic conception of religion and culture, championed by black liberation theology, was given serious public attention. In what is perhaps the most important year in American politics in a generation, black liberation theology was, for the first time in its short history, the object of unprecedented public scrutiny. It was during the historic presidential campaign of Barack Obama that countless numbers of black and white Americans, and Americans across the board, were exposed to the ideas of black liberation theologians. These ideas were channeled through audio and video recorded sermons of Jeremiah Wright, who was then the pastor of then Senator from Illinois and United States presidential candidate Barack Obama. Through sermons that surfaced on the Internet and television, Wright criticized, in racial and religious terms, U.S. domestic and foreign policy. His prophetic denunciations drew the ire of conservative white media, who responded in outrage to what they interpreted as un-American Christian preaching. Under the weight of tremendous public scrutiny, both Wright and Obama were pressured to explain their positions on race and respond to what was perceived as un-American speech. Wright was pressured to explain his views regarding America and Obama was pressured to explain his association with Wright. Yet it was Wright's theological and political views which were the center of attention. The attention he drew gave him a public forum to express his views. The media outlets that he appeared on included *Fox News*, the Bill Moyers hosted program, *Now,* and *C-Span* (at the *National Press Club)*.[12] In all of his appearances, Wright articulated his theological and political views in relation to single paradigm, black

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[12] See Sean Hannity and Alan Colmes interview, "Obama's Pastor: Rev. Jeremiah Wright," Fox News, March 2, 2007, www.foxnews.com/printer_friendly_story/0,3566,256078,00.html; Bill Moyers Journal, Jeremiah Wright interview, April 25, 2008, www.pbs.org/moyers/journal/04252008/transcript1.html.

liberation theology. In his interviews, Wright invoked the names of James H. Cone and his protégé Dwight N. Hopkins. He spoke of an enterprise called the prophetic black church. In the interviews, he located himself on the militant side of the politics of the 1960s, which for him has roots in slave religion and the Hebrew prophets. For Wright, America was the biblical equivalent of the nation of Babylon and he viewed himself as a post-exilic Hebrew prophet, prophesying in a strange land. After appearing in these public forums, Wright's views were given further explication and validation by the father of black liberation theology, James H. Cone and his student, Dwight N. Hopkins. Both Cone and Hopkins were sought out by national media outlets. Cone appeared on *Now* with Bill Moyers, and Hopkins appeared with Cone on *National Public Radio*. Both explained the roots and rationale of black liberation theology.[13]

Both Cone and Hopkins served as expositors of black liberation theology and apologists for the theological and political views of Jeremiah Wright. In defending Wright, they gave an elaborate explication of prophetic religion, its nature and function in the history and culture of African Americans. This included a prophetic view and portrait of Jesus within the New Testament and a similar portrait with respect to the ecclesial expressions of Christianity within African American culture. This prophetic understanding of religion stands as the basis and rationale of black liberation theology. Among the two theologians, Hopkins gave the most extensive account of prophetic religion and black liberation theology, especially as it relates to

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[13] Interview: Reverend James Cone on Black Liberation Theology, March 31, 2003 from Fresh Air, http://nl.newsbank.com/nl-search/we/archives?p_action=doc&p=123AD585A543F; Interview: Dwight Hopkins Discusses Black Liberation Theology, March 31, 2008 from Fresh Air, http://nl.newsbank.com/we/Archives?p_action=doc&p_docid=123AD585CB053.

African American religious culture today. In the following NPR interview, which I quote at length, Hopkins explains black liberation theology.

> TERRY GROSS: Dwight Hopkins, welcome to FRESH AIR. How would you describe black liberation theology?
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> Professor DWIGHT HOPKINS: Black liberation theology for me can be described in a couple of ways. First, I usually break down the meaning of each of the three words. For example, the theology part speaks to the rootedness in the Christian message and the Christian tradition. The liberation part speaks to the mission and words of Jesus--that is, Jesus came primarily for liberation, liberation from internal oppression and liberation from external systemic oppression. And then the black part of black liberation theology basically says that, rooted in the Christian faith, focused on Jesus' message of liberation, how do these things express themselves in African-American culture? So hence we have black theology of liberation.
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> GROSS: And how do they uniquely express themselves in black culture?
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> HOPKINS: The black theology of liberation goes back to the period of slavery in this country, roughly 1619 to 1865. And as we all know that history, lots of Africans were brought over through the slave trade to the southern part of the United States and to the North, to a certain degree. And these Africans who were enslaved, who eventually became African-Americans, were given Christianity as a way to be spiritual and to be religious. But the type of Christianity that was introduced to them did not speak to, really, their spiritual or their material needs. In fact, the Christianity that was introduced to them said that, "Well, your bodies are enslaved on earth but your spirits are free."
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> So what they did was they use to hold secret meetings late at night after work, and they began to combine various parts of their memory of African spirituality, on the one hand with, on the other hand, the type of Christianity that was introduced

to them. And so in these underground late meetings, secret societies, they forged this thing called black religion in America and the black church as an institutional manifestation of that.

There's a couple of things that are important about the origin of black religion and the black church is that the church was a reality for the whole community. It wasn't just for one segment. So the church was the center and the hub. And, two, the black church in America was born under slavery and held together issues of faith and politics, issues of spirituality and civic life, you know, religion and public policy. In other words, the very foundation of today's black church, originating from a period of slavery, never separated sacred and secular or politics from the pulpit. That's very important.

What's happened now is that many people don't, apparently don't really have an understanding of the history and the origin of the black church and the specific tradition of linking religion, faith, politics and public policy. And I think that's something that's a story that needs to be retold over and over again for contemporary America.[14]

After laying out what he views as the foundation of religion among African Americans, slave religion, the interview then shifts to a discussion of black liberation theology and black churches today.

GROSS: Where do you see black liberation theology now as fitting into the larger community of black churches in America?

HOPKINS: I think that black liberation theology is a very strong trend within the larger community of African-American churches today. I think we have to put this in historical perspective--that is, the last eight years. In the last eight years,

[14] Ibid.

America has seen the face of one very small group of perhaps maybe five, no more than six, prosperity gospel black preachers. They've had access to the White House, they've met with President Bush. We've seen them on television. They've had, you know, full page spreads in *The Wall Street Journal.* And so people sort of get the impression that the black church has shifted to this prosperity gospel, "name it and claim it, the purpose of Christianity is to make wealth for me and my family." That's the prosperity gospel movement. But those five people have overshadowed the everyday reality of those unrecognized black clergy men and women who still deal with the issues of both survival in the black community and social justice. They just talk...

GROSS: Can I ask who those prosperity preachers are that you're referring to?

HOPKINS: You've got Creflo Dollar, you've got Eddie Long, you've got T. D. Jakes, and a couple of others who are carrying out their interpretation of their call as ministers of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I think the point I was really trying to make was to say that because the president and the Republican government have promoted them in the last eight years, somewhat overshadows these, you know, thousands, if not hundreds of thousands of black folk who are on the ground as pastors, male and female, who deal with the issues of everyday survival and also social justice and social gospel movement.

So I think what's happening now is the recent outcry or firestorm around Senator Obama and Dr. Wright, this firestorm has brought back a re-examination of contemporary black church. And then when we talk about the overall black communities across the US, we will see the overwhelming majority of those who have to deal with issues of how do you keep the lights on and how do you fight for social services for our people in the downtowns of America. That's the root and really the foundation of black theology liberation. Now, there's also a smaller group of people in the black churches who are even much more intentional about

> prophetic theology, and there you have people like, you know, Dr. Wright, he would fit in that, and a whole host of people, particularly from his generation.[15]

In explicating the nature and tasks of black liberation theology and then making connections between black liberation theology and contemporary black churches, Hopkins revels in a mythic and prophetic conception of religion, a view of religion that is informed by a mythic reading of the antebellum experience of African Americans. While upholding a historically specific view of slave religion which is mythic in expression, Hopkins dismisses conservative and anti-prophetic elements within African American religious culture. He regards them as recent developments when viewed against a larger prophetic history with deep roots in slave religion and even deeper roots in biblical history. For Hopkins, the conservative and anti-prophetic element pales in comparison to the prophetic impulse as evident in black liberation theology, an impulse that is strong, vibrant, and influential among African Americans, especially black churches. Though Hopkins concedes that the conservative and anti-prophetic element has tarnished the collective memory of prophetic religion, slave religion in particular, among African Americans, this element remains marginal and insignificant, even when it is demonstrably influential and reflective of unprecedented cultural change among African Americans. What is more, it remains marginal and insignificant despite its high visibility in America's mass mediated religious culture. Overall, Hopkins maintains an antebellum view of prophetic religion despite the presence and impact of religious and cultural forces, specific to this historical moment, which is conservative and anti-prophetic.

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[15] Ibid.

Although conservative and anti-prophetic religious elites are caught up in socially conservative Christian ideologies and exploit technological processes, specific to this historical moment, it signals no real acknowledgement, on the part of Hopkins, of cultural change among African Americans. Even the highly visible efforts of such conservative and anti-prophetic religious elites, to communicate a socially conservative religious message (through the use of technology) to reach as mass audience, should not be attended to. In the large scheme of things, the presence of conservative and anti-prophetic elements with African American culture, do nothing to alter Hopkins' view of what is normative and dominant with respect to African American religious culture, even when such elements rival his view of religion. Overall, Hopkins offers a mythic conception of religion and culture among African Americans, which is consistent with the moral outrage of the 1960s.[16] This kind of religiosity is consistent with the theological and political expressions of Jeremiah Wright, whom he defends, whose sermonic and public orations seemingly give credence to the reach and influence of black liberation theology among African Americans.

Notwithstanding Hopkins's defense of black liberation theology and Jeremiah Wright, the mythic conception of prophetic religion which he espouses is distant from contemporary expressions of religion, Christianity in particular, among African Americans. His dismissal of conservative and anti-prophetic elements in African American religious culture ignores and minimizes the extent to which this element pervades African American culture in early 21st

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[16] Throughout his career, Hopkins has been quite consistent in maintaining this prophetic view of religion. For fuller accounts of this perspective, see his *Shoes That Fit Our Feet: Sources for a Constructive Black Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993), and his *Being Human: Race, Culture, and Religion* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress Press, 2005).

century America. Overall, his portrait of religion with respect to African Americans is deceptive and disingenuous and in no way conforms to the dominant religious impulses among African Americans today. With good intentions, the basic underlying assumption of Hopkins and black liberation theology is that religion and theology among African Americans are fundamentally prophetic and that the conservative and anti-prophetic aspects of the African American situation make no discernable difference in how religion and theology are to be interpreted with respect to African American culture. Moreover, the culture of African Americans has not changed since the 1960s, even with the ascension of Barack Obama.

After listening intently to Cone, and especially Hopkins, I was left with the impression that African Americans (and America for that matter) are stuck in a time warp, an inescapable matrix of slavery and Jim Crow. Part of me was compelled by their portrait, for part of it is true. The vestiges of slavery and Jim Crow are still present in America. However, part of me was not compelled, for there is much about their accounts of African American religion and culture that is missing from their perspectives. What is absent from their perspectives is the state of African American contemporary culture. Their theological articulations gave no place to the significant religious, cultural, and psychological shifts which have taken place among African Americans over the last forty years. In light of the aforementioned absence it is instructive to probe contemporary African American culture and juxtapose it with the norms and cultural assumptions of black liberation theology. To this end, I elaborate upon the conservative and anti-prophetic forces already mentioned. I will also highlight secular popular culture among African Americans.

Both of these arenas of African American cultural life challenge the norms and assumptions of black liberation theology.

The Contemporary Scene

The most profound changes that have occurred within African American culture over the last four decades are evident at the levels of popular religion and popular culture. The norms and assumptions that guide these arenas are far removed from the norms and assumptions that guide black liberation theology. As arenas that are guided by different norms and assumptions, they are fundamental challenges to the norms and assumptions that guide black liberation theology. The challenges presented by popular religion and popular culture are tied to American capitalism and consumerism. Both popular religion and popular culture exude a profound faith in and commitment to the mythological American dream.

Similar to the masses of Americans, masses of African American Christians and Africans American churches have been seduced by the religion of American capitalism. The morality of communalism which African American scholars have attributed to Christianity within African American communities, has in large respects, been unsettled by individualism and materialistic consumption.[17] The emergence of a new class of charismatic and entrepreneurial African American ministers, who proclaim a gospel of prosperity, have eclipsed a traditional class of ministers, practitioners of traditional forms of Christian ministry, some of whom advocate for social justice. What is more, this new class of ministers is more inspired by the image of the

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[17] For a recent account of this new state of affairs, see Robert M. Franklin, *Crisis in the Village: Restoring Hope in African American Communities* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2007).

American CEO than that of the political revolutionary. Sociologists of religion such as Shayne Lee and Milmon Harrison and religious ethicist Jonathan L. Walton are among an emerging generation of religion scholars who are just beginning to document what is a strong, popular, and growing force among African American Protestants.[18] Hugely popular, wealthy, and successful celebrity African American ministers such as T. D. Jakes in Dallas, Texas, Eddie L. Long in Lithonia, Georgia, and Creflo A. Dollar in College Park, Georgia have built religious empires and have forged a model of Christian ministry that is now duplicated all over the United States. This capitalistic and Christian impulse, which advocates a theology of American success, unsettles the assumptions and norms that guide the dominant voices among African American theologians, black liberation theology.

At the level of popular culture, the global phenomenon of Hip Hop presents additional moral challenges to the norms and assumption of black liberation theology. Similar to popular religion among African American Protestants, American capitalism and consumerism are integral features of global Hip Hop culture. A very complex youth driven culture, Hip Hop is secular aesthetic and a way of being which exudes a hedonistic spirit and oppositional outlook which challenges conventional Christian morality. Uninhibited expressions of sexuality, confrontational human behavior, and outlaw identities are dominant aspects of global Hip Hop culture. The gangster, the street hustler, the strip club, the bohemian, and the good life all, in one way or another, challenge the norms and assumptions of black liberation theology. The lived

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[18] Shayne Lee, *T. D. Jakes: America's New Preacher* (New York: New York University Press, 2005); Milmon F. Harrison, *Righteous Riches: The Word of Faith Movement in Contemporary African American Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); and Jonathan L. Walton, *Watch This: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Black Televangelism* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

experiences, music, and capitalistic aesthetic of artists such as Shawn "Jay-Z" Carter and Curtis "50 Cent" Jackson, and the cultural impact of a pornographic Hip Hop entrepreneur such as Luther "Luke" Campbell vigorously promote ends that are not consistent with the assumption and norms of black liberation theology.[19] The impact of Hip Hop on the socialization of African American youth is enormous, and its long-term impact (which is unknown) stands as a significant ethical and theological dilemma for black liberation theologians.

What makes contemporary African American culture such a challenge to the norms and assumptions of black liberation theology is that the dominant values and practices of contemporary African American culture unsettles the very foundations upon which black liberation theology rests. Overall, the forces of the free market drive prosperity churches and Hip Hop, and such forces have greater weight among African Americans than the normative values of identity and political liberation in black liberation theology. The unsettling reality of contemporary African American culture is that oppression is hardly visible as a starting point for organizing human life, particularly the lives of African Americans. If one were to take contemporary African America culture as a gauge for measuring self-understanding among Africans Americans, this gauge suggests that liberation and totalizing oppression do not stand at the center of African American identity as it does in the articulations of black liberation theologians. To be sure, there is profound awareness among African Americans of racial inequality and racial exclusion, yet such awareness is secondary to other concerns and values, the

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[19] See T. Denean Sharpley-Whiting: *Pimps Up, Ho's Down* (New York: New York University Press, 2007); and Kitwana Bakari, *The Hip Hop Generation: The Crisis in African American Youth Culture* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2002).

concerns and values cited above. So, contemporary African American culture is a moral and cultural challenge to the very logic of black liberation theology.

Epistemological and Cultural Fundamentalism: The Hermeneutical Dilemma of Black Liberation Theology

If black liberation theology is out of sync with contemporary African American culture it is because black liberation theologians have theological and epistemological commitments which impede them from engaging contemporary African American culture. Their theological commitments impede them from revising or reconstructing their respective theological visions in light of new cultural realities. This unwillingness to engage in theological reconstruction despite significant cultural change situates black theologians as conservative theologians. As conservative theologians they are analogous to religious fundamentalists.[20] As a brand of religious fundamentalism, black liberation theology is at odds with the very communities which they purport to represent. The centrality of cultural identity, oppression, and the theme of liberation in black liberation theology limits their ability to engage worlds beyond their immediate theological concerns. In a word, the possibility of dialogue and cultural engagement outside of their immediate circle is closed. Their commitments are so firm that any concession to human fallibility and change would be tantamount to heresy.

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[20] The kind of fundamentalism that I have in mind is specific to Protestant Christianity in the United States, especially as it thrived between the early and the middle of the twentieth century. For provocative accounts of Christian fundamentalism in particular and Protestant conservatism in general, see Carl F. Henry's *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1947); and Mark A. Noll's *The Scandal of the Evangelical Mind* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1995).

One illustration of the unwillingness of black liberation theologians to engage differing theological perspectives and to even reevaluate their own assumptions and norms, involved a recent event where James H. Cone and a popular and theologically conservative minister, Eddie L. Long, were invited to share the same platform. Both were invited to participate in the 2006 graduation activities of the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta, Georgia. Cone was invited to receive an honorary doctoral degree by the ITC and Long (who is the senior pastor of the 25,000-member New Birth Baptist Church in Lithonia, Georgia) was invited to be the commencement speaker for the graduating class. The selection of Long as the commencement speaker was met with much opposition by members of the faculty and members of the graduating class and student body. His theological conservatism was viewed as being inconsistent with the mission and educational aims of the institution. The tensions which attended the ITC's graduation activities were indicative of a significant theological rift among African Americans and symptomatic of the religious and cultural changes which have been highlighted in this paper. In what presented itself as a significant opportunity for two differing theological agendas to interact, became an evaded opportunity where no exchange took place. James H. Cone chose not to participate in the graduation ceremony. He aligned himself with the internal opposition (faculty and students) to Long's presence. What is more, it was incomprehensible for Cone and his theological perspective to share the same stage with a prominent, popular, influential, and theologically conservative minister such as Eddie L. Long. Instead of bringing his theological commitments to bear on the perspective and influence of this popular minister, he engaged in a distant and abstract protest. In a word, he chose the path of

least resistance. In relation to the concerns of this paper, the ITC affair was indicative of the fundamentalism endemic to black liberation theology.[21]

Overall, the parameters around which black liberation theologians do theology are fixed. These parameters are epistemological and cultural. At the level of epistemology, fundamentalism is related to knowledge claims and the levels of certainty with regards to such claims. In relation to religious fundamentalism, authentic knowledge is cast in terms of revelation, special revelation in particular. Sacred texts, particularly those which are a part of a received canon or tradition are typically viewed as infallible sources of absolute knowledge.[22] Usually, such knowledge is transmitted to a special receiver through a special means. In a word, one has to be an insider in order to interpret and understand a closed and infallible system of revelation. As far as epistemological fundamentalism is concerned, black liberation theologians operate within an orbit of theological claims and an approach to human knowledge, which defy questioning and human fallibility.

Cultural fundamentalism has to do with the freezing of space and time. It involves taking a moment in time, a particular culture, and geographic location and turning it into absolutist religion. One example of cultural fundamentalism in America is the reverence paid to the Confederate flag in the American South and other parts of the United States. Confederate

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[21] For accounts of the theological tensions that surrounded the graduation activities of the Interdenominational Theological Center, see journalist John Blake's article, "Long Rebuts Criticism at Graduation: Bishop's Defense Gets Both Cheers and Eye Rolls at Seminary," *The Atlanta Journal Constitution,* Sunday May 14, 2006. Also see Jonathan L. Walton's groundbreaking text, *Watch This: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Black Televangelism* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 229-233.

[22] *The Uneasy Conscience of Modern Fundamentalism*.

heritage groups throughout the country treat the Confederate flag and the history that surrounds it as a sacred text worthy of eternal human reverence. A defeated South and the Civil War era are always points of reference for an unchanging southern identity.[23] Black theologians engage in this sort of fundamentalism with reference to the continent of Africa, the history of slavery in the United States, black identity, and the institutional experiences of women and men within African American communities. For black liberation theologians, these features of the African American sojourn in America are all determining cultural forces in the lives of African Americans.[24]

For the most part, fundamentalists are oppositional and separatist in their outlook. As a mode of fundamentalism, black liberation theology resists bodies of human thought and cultural arenas that challenge their theological identities in the same manner that Christian fundamentalists in the United States have resisted many aspects of modernity. Perhaps the most striking feature of this fundamentalist posture is the limited manner in which African Americans with different theological perspectives have contributed to the development of black liberation theology.

At the levels of epistemology and culture, the overarching dilemma of black liberation theology is that it is captive to the radical politics and cultural nationalism of the 1960s and

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[23] The cultural fundamentalism that I am referring to and its expression in the American South is captured in a recent text by a prominent historian of the South. See David R. Goldfield's *Still Fighting the Civil War: The American South and Southern History* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002). For an older account of cultural fundamentalism in the South, see W.J. Cash's *The Mind of the South* (New York: Vintage Books/Random House, 1991)

[24] See "The Development of Black Theology," in Dwight N. Hopkins, *Introducing Black Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1999), 15-48; and *Being Human: Race, Culture, and Religion* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005).

1970s. In a word, radical politics and fixed cultural identities constitute the fundamentalism inherent in black liberation theology. To reiterate an earlier point, there is very little in Cone's and Hopkins' formulation of black liberation theology that accounts for the significant changes, in terms of life conditions and circumstances, that reflect the diverse lives of African Americans at the end of the 20th century. Black liberation is articulated in ways that suggest that the African American culture is the same in the early 21st century as it was during the 1960s and 70s. In other words, black people and black culture have not changed. Overall, the orientation of black liberation theology renders it an unchanging theology.

Hermeneutical Critiques of Black Liberation Theology

What I am calling cultural and epistemological fundamentalism is connected to an ongoing critique of black liberation theology which began at its inception. Since its inception, the epistemological and cultural content of black liberation theology has been the subject of intense criticism. Since the 1970s, scholars such as Charles Long, William R. Jones, Charles Shelby Rooks, and Riggins R. Earl, Jr., have questioned the methodological orientation of black theology, its efficacy as a hermeneutic and the extent to which it is connected to the actual histories and circumstances of African Americans.[25] In one way or another they point to an epistemological and cultural dilemma with regard to black liberation theology. During the early 1990s, this dilemma was captured in a profound way by ethicist Riggins R. Earl, Jr. In the 1992 volume, *Black Theology: A Documentary History,* edited by James H. Cone and Gayraud S.

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[25] See the Black Philosophical School and the Black Human Sciences School in Frederick L. Ware's *Methodologies of Black Theology* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2002) pp. 28-144.

Wilmore, Earl raised concerns regarding the future of black liberation theology in light of the methodological spirit which governed it.[26] By giving thought to the then impending 21st century, Earl expressed concerns regarding the survival of black theology. He was concerned specifically about its survival in institutions of higher education, particularly those institutions that are governed by a white majority. In an article entitled *Black Theology and the Year 2000*, Earl argued that black liberation theology stands as a marginal form of discourse in the predominately white academy.[27] He maintained that its marginalization is due to the manner in which it has functioned as a discourse of protest without an accompanying pedagogical apparatus. That is, black liberation theology has functioned as political rhetoric at the expense of critical methodological reflection. For this reason, black liberation theology stands at the margins of the white academy, an academy whose modes of theological discourse are typified by disciplined and methodological reflection. Because such modes of reasoning shape the criterion by which academic discourse is measured, legitimated and given visibility, it stands to reason that black liberation theology's standing in the academy is marginal. For Earl, black liberation theologians are challenged to reconstruct the terms upon which they do theology, that as long black theology functions as protest, at the expense of critical pedagogy, it will remain a marginal discourse. In this regard, Earl asserts the following:

> …there is an inevitable need for Black theology to serve as a balancing corrective to its social protest side. This is necessary in the academy where the science of instruction takes precedence over social protest. Black protest theology will

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[26] James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore, eds., *Black Theology: A Documentary History, Volume II 1980-1992* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1997).

[27] Ibid.

> always be needed as long as racism, sexism, classism, and militarism continue to devalue the sacred worth of any persons. Given this undeniable fact, Black theologians must remain critically conscious of the dual need for Black theology to function both prophetically and pedagogically. Black protest theologians must rely on the critical thought of pedagogues of the academy for assistance in the rational clarification of their social goals.[28]

In very basic terms, Earl pushes the question: Can black theology grow and change? Is it possible for black theology to be lively, attractive, and viable apart from its function as an oppositional mode of discourse? For the most part, Earl has a difficult time seeing the survival of black liberation theology apart from the task and challenge of reassessment and reformulation. For Earl, such reassessment begins analytically with black liberation theology tempering its protest side with critical rigor. In order to move beyond cultural and epistemological fundamentalism, black liberation theologians must assume a dialogical posture, engaging other pedagogues within the academy. Such a dialogical posture would only result in the "rational clarification" of the ends of black theology. The end of this reconstructive enterprise is relevance, methodological and otherwise.

During the mid to late 1990s, Earl's concerns, as well as other concerns, surfaced in the work emerging black scholars. In very profound ways, these scholars questioned the political and cultural content of black liberation theology and called for different approaches towards theological and religious reflection with regard to African Americans. To this end, major shifts in methodological outlooks occurred among African American theologians. This shift signified new

[28] Ibid., 54.

possibilities for the future development of African American theology and religious thought broadly speaking. Then new voices such as Cheryl J. Sanders, Victor Anderson, and Anthony B. Pinn significantly challenged and departed from the dominant hermeneutical method, which has characterized black liberation theology since the late 1960s. Their combined efforts, particularly the ends of their work pointed to the methodological limitations of black theology and to the virtues of change and reconstruction as a methodological challenge for African American theologians. Through groundbreaking texts such as Cheryl Sanders' *Empowerment Ethics for Liberated People: A Path to African American Social Transformation* (1995), Victor Anderson's *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay is Religious and Cultural Criticism* (1995), and Anthony Pinn's *Why Lord: Suffering and Evil in Black Theology* (1995), these scholars transcend the hermeneutical dilemma endemic to black liberation theology.[29] By promoting cultural change and reconstruction as vital intellectual values, the works of Sanders, Anderson, and Pinn unsettle the *Hermeneutical School* of black liberation theology as the normative mode of African American religious thought. What is more, the differences among Pinn, Sanders, and Anderson, especially as they relate to the dominant liberation stream within African American religious discourse, suggests that no single mode of African American religious thinking encapsulates religious thinking among African Americans and the changing circumstances of African Americans.

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[29] Cheryl Sanders, *Empowerment Ethics for a Liberated People: A Path to African American Social Transformation* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995); Victor Anderson. *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay in African American Religious and Cultural Criticism* (New York: Continuum, 1995); and Anthony B. Pinn, *Why Lord? Suffering and Evil in Black Theology* (New York: Continuum, 1995).

Hybrid Hermeneutics: A Different Way of Looking at African Americans

For the remainder of this essay, I will lay out a different approach to hermeneutics which takes into consideration the concerns expressed at its outset. As I indicated at the beginning of this essay, a world of cultural and theological distance stands between black liberation theology and contemporary African American culture. Given the dominance of black liberation theology as a mode of formal religious discourse among African Americans, there is a need to make room for other modes of theological and religious reflection that take into account and take seriously the changes that have taken place in African American culture. To this end, I wish to forward an approach to hermeneutics that is similar to Cheryl Sanders, Victor Anderson, and Anthony B. Pinn. This approach to interpretation posits the values of change and reconstruction. This approach is very much concerned with attending to those dimensions of African American culture which do not conform to the norms and assumption integral to black liberation theology. Moreover, it is concerned with social change of epochal proportions which call for unprecedented religious, cultural, and political thinking especially where the lives of African Americans are concerned. What I have in mind are recent changes, of epochal proportions, which were invoked at the outset of this paper, the election of Barack Obama, being the most dramatic and recent change. As far as hybrid hermeneutics is concerned, the life and presidency of Barack Obama symbolizes the profound changes that have occurred in America and within the African American population since the 1960s. As was indicated earlier in this paper, Obama symbolizes a different mood in America, black American in particular, which does not conform to the norms and assumptions and overall hermeneutical approach characteristic of black liberation theology.

The hermeneutics of hybridity that I advocate is a hermeneutic of pluralization, moral, cultural, and theological pluralization. In very profound ways, contemporary African American culture is the result of the end of Jim Crow, particularly its *de jure* form. The incorporation of thousands of African Americans into predominately white institutions: public schools, universities, churches, corporations, etc., the interactions between African Americans and the global economy, including mass media and technology has altered the epistemologies and cultures of African Americans. In a word, the civil rights movement, multinational corporations, and globalization have served as pluralizing forces in the lives of African Americans. Consequently, heterogeneity, migration, and fluidity have become constitutive features of a hybrid condition that now pervades the lives of African Americans. This condition of hybridity has unsettled and disrupts the homogenous and unchanging cultural and epistemological impulses that are characteristic of African American cultures, and white culture for that matter, which existed under conditions of *de jure* segregation.

Hybridity as a hermeneutic explains the huge gulf that exists between black liberation theology and contemporary African American culture. In many respects, African Americans have migrated from the culture of segregation, which form the identities of all institutions and African Americans who were born, raised, and came of age under segregated conditions. James H. Cone is a child of Jim Crow. He grew up in a segregated community in Bearden, Arkansas, attended segregated schools, and was baptized and ordained in a segregated church. Up until the time that he enrolled in graduate school, he lived a segregated life. The segregated world that shaped him

(the segregated US South) was seemingly homogeneous and unchanging.[30] It was world that was conditioned by values and ends that were seemingly universal, permanent, and necessary. Although James H. Cone migrated away from the Jim Crow South and made his home and the base of his work in New York City, he did not escape the intellectual impact of segregation, Jim Crow. Consequently, with a passion for freedom, good intentions, and a love for African Americans, Cone founded a hermeneutical school in theology that replicated segregation, Jim Crow. The hybrid conditions under which many African Americans now live are not synonymous with the segregated conditions that Cone knew as a young person. In significant ways, the assumptions and interpretations that were made in relation to African Americans, before and during the late 1960s cannot be made today, especially not on a universal level. To be sure, African Americans, and all Americans for that matter, have not escaped, completely, America's history of Apartheid, Jim Crow segregation. Segregation still exists in the United States. However, the hermeneutics of segregation does not explain the hybrid conditions that inundate the lives of African Americans today, including those African Americans who continue to live in segregated conditions. Overall, the hermeneutical dilemma of black liberation theology is no different from the hermeneutical dilemmas of all formal expressions of theology, regardless of race and culture, which are remote from the lived realities of human beings.

Notwithstanding the cultural and epistemological dilemmas endemic to black liberation theologians, the hybrid conditions which explain the lives of African Americans have not been lost on African American intellectuals, religious and otherwise. In addition to Cheryl Sanders,

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[30] See the memoir of James H. Cone, *My Soul Looks Back* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2000).

Victor Anderson, and Anthony B. Pinn, an entire generation of younger scholars, groomed and educated during the desegregation era or the post-civil rights era, have given much intellectual energy to the hybrid conditions that concern this paper. Most of these intellectuals have aligned themselves with the postmodern movement in America and abroad. Most of these intellectuals are products of Northeastern universities with social origins in American cities. Intellectuals such as cultural critics bell hooks, Michael Eric Dyson and Todd Boyd, and historian Tricia Rose are among a cadre of intellectuals who attend to the hybrid conditions that permeate the lives of African Americans.[31] The concerns and dispositions of these scholars reflect a departure from their immediate predecessors, most of whom are members of the black side of the boomer generation, and many, like James H. Cone, are direct products of the Jim Crow South and Civil Rights era segregated communities. What is more, all of these scholars have been impacted, directly or indirectly, by perhaps the most influential, public, and hybrid of all African American intellectuals in America today, Cornel West. A philosopher and religious thinker, whose intellectual base is in the Northeastern United States, Princeton University, Cornel West is symbolic of the hybrid religious and philosophical hermeneutics that I champion.[32]

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[31] During the early to late 1990s, these scholars emerged on the scene with groundbreaking works in Cultural Studies. Dyson emerged in 1993 with his ground breaking book, *Reflecting Black: African American Cultural Criticism* (American Culture, Vol. 9) (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1993). Rose entered with a pioneering analysis of the origins and politics of rap music, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1994). And Boyd entered with his provocative, *Am I Black Enough for You? Popular Culture from the 'Hood and Beyond* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1997).

[32] For an account of the impact of West's work on American intellectual life, including its impact of African American intellectuals, see George Yancy's edited volume, *Cornel West: A Critical Reader* (Malden: Blackwell Publishers, 2001) and Mark David Wood's *The Politics of Prophetic Pragmatism* (Urbana and Chicago: The University of Illinois Press, 2000)

The kind of epistemological and cultural fundamentalism which I have associated with black liberation theology cannot be associated with the hybrid intellectuals mentioned above, particularly a hybrid intellectual such as Cornel West. In works such as *Prophesy Deliverance: Toward an African American Revolutionary Christianity* (1982), *Keeping Faith: Philosophy and Race in America* (1993), *Race Matters* (1993), and *Democracy Matters: Winning the War Against Imperialism* (2005), West has attended to the heterogeneous and changing conditions and circumstances which characterize hybridity among African Americans.[33] Over a twenty year career, with an astonishing catalog of texts, West has exuded a spirit of change and has engaged in religious and philosophical reconstruction. He is an intellectual who has changed his mind as times and circumstances have changed. To be sure, like all human beings he has been impacted by the times and circumstances which formed him. In fact, he has held on to values that are rooted in his formative years. However, at a contextual level, he has adapted those rooted values and has discarded contingent philosophical values in light of changing circumstances. At a hermeneutical level, his work in philosophy and religious thought as a young scholar, during his mid-twenties and early thirties, is not the same as his work as a scholar over the age of fifty. A shifting approach to philosophy and religion have characterized his career, a shifting approach which takes hybridity seriously. In fact, the changing nature of his work has been subject to serious philosophical criticism. He has been criticized for changing his mind regarding cultural and political life in America, especially where African Americans are concerned.

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[33] A bibliography of West's work as well as representative pieces from his corpus can be found in *The Cornel West Reader* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

The hybrid hermeneutics that I champion values the changing mind. It values change and reconstruction because such values are integral to human growth and development. It sees such change, reconstruction, and growth as parallel to the kind of growth that one sees in the human organism, growth that characterizes human development from infancy to late adulthood. This kind of growth is instructive and integral to the growth of African American religious thought. From my perspective, there is room for much growth and maturity. However, such growth and maturity occurs as change, reconstruction, and hybridity are embraced as positive intellectual and moral values. Epistemological and cultural fundamentalism are impediments to growth and maturity.

The politics and conditions of the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, which gave rise to liberation theologies should in no way shape, permanently, the work of African American religious thinkers. Moving beyond cultural and epistemological fundamentalism insures that no final voice or perspective determines the content and methodologies employed by African American religious thinkers. The differentiation of African American religious thought would mean that the dominant stream among African American theologians would become one stream among many.

The new challenges in African American communities are new and exciting challenges for the future of African American religious thought. They are challenges that demand new thinking and new programs of investigation. Both popular religion and popular culture are global phenomena which challenge the cultural and ethical essentialism so endemic to black liberation theology. Unlike black liberation theology, popular religion and popular culture are wrought with irony and moral ambiguity. The irony and ambiguity connected to these expressions of

contemporary African American culture are what makes contemporary African American culture an exciting challenge for philosophical and religious thought among African Americans.

Overall, the ironic and morally ambiguous nature of popular religion and popular religion invoke questions about the basic dispositions and openness to change among black liberation theologians. It cannot be said, unequivocally, that black liberation theology will reconstruct itself in light of the theologically conservative nature of popular religion and the morally ambiguous nature of secular popular culture, Hip Hop. Nor can it be said that black liberation theology will reconstruct itself in light of the enormous influence of a celebrity preacher such as Creflo A. Dollar, who preaches a universal gospel of prosperity. As far as the reconstruction of black liberation theology is concerned, popular culture and popular religion challenge in significant ways the method, norms, and assumptions of black liberation theology. However, they present windows of opportunity for different kinds of religious thinking among African Americans.

Notwithstanding the limitations of black liberation theology with regards to its ability to address the contemporary changes in African American culture, there is a greater sense of fluidity among African American religious thinkers whose perspectives are philosophical and open to change. Such thinkers were cited earlier and have been classified as hybrid voices among African American religious thinkers. These thinkers are among the *Philosophical* and *Human Sciences* schools of hermeneutics and embrace hermeneutical orientations that are different in terms of interdisciplinary resources employed, and the scope of inquiry pursued.

Conclusion

Formal theological and religious reflection among African Americans is a recent phenomenon. James H. Cone's seminal text, *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969), which opened the possibility of formal theological reflection among African Americans, was published only forty years ago. It was an unprecedented work in theological construction. However, compared to other theological streams and intellectual disciplines, what is now known as black liberation theology is a young enterprise. Forty years is not a long time for an intellectual discipline to grow and mature, particularly if it has been governed by a single hermeneutical perspective and a single set of concerns. Forty years after its inception, this essay seeks to transcend its dominance in African American religious thought. It calls for the expansion of African American religious thinking, especially as the lived experiences of African Americans undergo continuous change. It contends that no single hermeneutical lens can speak to the complex realities that permeate the lives of African Americans, particularly in early 21st century America. Further, knowledge production is limited when there is no growth in knowledge and self-understanding when all interpreters hold the same views. Overall, the complex lives of African Americans demand a multiplicity of hermeneutical approaches.

Overall, black liberation theology is to be appreciated for the possibility of African Americans religious thought and doing theology in formal academic setting or doing theology in print. This essay and countless books and articles have been made possible in part by black liberation theology. All African American religious thinkers have been impacted by the irreversible impact of the work of James H. Cone. At one level or another, all African American

religious thinkers stand on his shoulders. However, no African American religious thinker is obliged to replicate or pursue the hermeneutical approach pioneered by Cone nor that of his progeny. What is more, African American religious thinkers are not obliged to be uncritical of and adhere to any hermeneutical paradigm, theological or religious, that claims to champion the interests of African Americans, especially if such a paradigm is remote from the lived realities of African Americans. For this reason, the reconstruction of African American religious thought is a lively challenge that will benefit all African American religious thinkers.