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## Redemptive Suffering and Christology in African American Christian Theology

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*In this paper, based on a presentation delivered at the 2009 Annual Meeting at the Atlanta University Center, Holmes engages the debate over the redemptive nature of suffering in Christianity. Are evil, suffering, and oppression redemptive, thereby bringing us closer to the divine? Or, are suffering and oppression detrimental to the salvific nature of Christ's liberation? Holmes explores the religious and philosophical literary tradition of redemptive suffering, especially as interpreted in African American religious thought, and shows us that the answers to these questions are complex and multifaceted.*

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Over the past few decades, *suffering* has become the *de facto* litmus test for theological engagement.<sup>1</sup> Human experience is a fundamental source of theology, and theologians from all walks of life have sought to relate the Christian tradition to struggles of liberation, equality, and social and environmental justice. The language of suffering is used frequently in religion and politics.<sup>2</sup> Suffering, as terminology, has no functional or operational quality apart from religious, theological, and philosophical frameworks. Thus, any adequate understanding of suffering must include its religious and theological dimensions. Theologians have always struggled with the complex cluster of questions and queries regarding the meaning and value of life in light of issues such as the problem of evil, misery and suffering. One aspect of theodicy that is prevalent (and for some problematic) in Christianity is that evil and

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur C. McGill, *Suffering: A Test of Theological Method* (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminster Press, 2007), p. 7.

<sup>2</sup> See for example, Peter Dews, *The Idea of Evil* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), pp. 1-17.

suffering are redeemable, or evil and suffering serve a divine purpose.

Some theologians (e.g., Delores Williams, Anthony Pinn) reject the idea that suffering can be redeemable in any possible way. I believe, however, that this leads to a christological problem. If we reject the principle of redemptive suffering, how do we interpret the death of Jesus the Christ? How can we both affirm with the Christian tradition that Christ's death was to redeem humanity from sin, while at the same time deny that any suffering is redemptive? The African American Christian theological tradition is an excellent theological apparatus to reflect on the notion of redemptive suffering. African American religious thought is essentially a response to the atrocities Black people have faced because of our subjugation, enslavement, and dehumanization.<sup>3</sup> Redemptive suffering has a long and deep history in African American theology.

The purpose of this paper is to reappraise the notion of redemptive suffering, in light of a central Christian symbol, i.e., the suffering of Jesus Christ as achieving a divine aim/goal, within African American Christian theology. After outlining some of the salient theological and sociological positions both for and against redemptive suffering, and indicating the chief biblical texts employed to substantiate each position, I will show how christological potholes have been created and/or glossed over by both those who support and those who outright reject redemptive suffering. On the one hand, Christ stands against all forms of oppression and suffering, demonstrated as he tried to alleviate suffering through his ministry (via healing, providing food, etc).<sup>4</sup> At the same time, though, Christ constantly maintained that his own suffering was an essential element of divine means for human salvation. In light of the salvific character of christological witness,

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<sup>3</sup> Charles Long, "Perspectives for a Study of African American Religion in the United States" in Larry G. Murphy, ed., *Down By the Riverside: Readings in African American Religion* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2000), pp. 10-11.

<sup>4</sup> James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1971), p. 116.

can we normatively say that there is *no* value in suffering? Or are all claims of redemptive suffering detrimental to any theology of liberation and re-humanization? I hope to do two things: 1) reopen provocative and critical discussion about how we define and employ “suffering” in theology (and politics), particularly with regard to redemptive suffering; and 2) show that blanket statements for or against redemptive suffering are largely inadequate and erroneous.

### **The Problem of Evil in Christian Thought**

Questions regarding the meaning and value of life in light of evil, misery and suffering, are long-standing, especially as it relates to religious beliefs.<sup>5</sup> The religious problem of evil arises from the seeming contradiction in affirming both the existence of an omnipotent, omnibenevolent God along with the existence of evil and suffering in the world.<sup>6</sup> David Hume argued that the existence of evil in the world is inconsistent with the existence of God.<sup>7</sup> Evil and suffering, Hume maintained, presents compelling evidence against the existence of God. Theodicy is the attempt to validate the goodness, power, and/or providential care of God in the face of horrendous evils. Generally, theologians and philosophers have distinguished between two types of evil: moral and natural. Moral evil comprises all “bad” things for which human beings are morally responsible. Natural evil signifies the events that occur “in nature” of their own accord that cause devastation for human beings, such as, hurricanes or diseases.

A prevalent notion in some Christian theologies is all evil and suffering in the world exists because of the “fall” of humanity. In

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<sup>5</sup> Michael L. Peterson, “The Problem of Evil” in Phillip L. Quinn and Charles Taliaferro, *A Companion to Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 1997), p. 393.

<sup>6</sup> Epicurus expresses the problem of evil succinctly when he says “Is he (God) willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?”

<sup>7</sup> David Hume, *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, Edited with an Introduction by Richard H. Popkin* (Hackett Publishing Company Inc, 1998), pp. 58-76.

fact, for some thinkers “to speak of human redemption necessarily presupposes the fall of [humanity].”<sup>8</sup> Adam and Eve transgressed the divine command given in the Garden of Eden, fell from the “state of innocence” in which God created them, and through them, the entire human race has been affected by this transgression. The position that posits human sin as the source of evil and suffering is called the free-will defense and it tries to show that it is logically possible that an all-powerful and all good God is responsible for the existence of this world and that all evil may ultimately result from misuse of creaturely freedom. This standpoint is grounded in the Augustinian notion of a “Fall” from grace by free, perfect finite creatures – angels and human beings – that affected the physical world as well. For Augustine, God created Adam (and more pointedly Adam’s soul) in God’s own image and placed in him the souls of all human beings that were going to exist. God created Adam in righteousness and in freedom and because of the misuse of this freedom the image of God in Adam –and subsequently, in all humans –was distorted. “[The] man was willingly perverted and justly condemned, and so begot perverted and condemned offspring...man could not be born of man in any other condition. Hence from the misuse of free will there started a chain of disasters.”<sup>9</sup> The chain of disasters included the natural world. A problem that is inherent in Augustine’s theodicy is that evil is self-created “ex nihilo.”

Modern treatment of the free-will defense can be seen in the work of Stephen Davis. He argues that the attempts to portray the notions of an all-powerful, all loving God and the existence of evil as being logically inconsistent are false. He rejects any solutions to the theodicy issue that deny the existence of evil, the perfect goodness of God, or God’s omnipotence. Davis distinguishes between two aspects to the problem of evil: the logical problem of evil (LPE) and the emotive problem of evil (EPE). The logical

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<sup>8</sup> James Theodore Holly, “The Divine Plan of Human Redemption” in Anthony Pinn, *Moral Evil and Redemptive Suffering: A History of Theodicy in African American Religious Thought* (Gainesville, FL: University of Florida Press, 2002), p. 133

<sup>9</sup> Augustine, *City of God*, Book 13, Chapter 14.

problem strives to show that God's omnipotence, God's omnibenevolence, and the existence of evil exists are logically consistent. According to the free-will defense God had two main aims. First, God wanted to create the best universe possible, i.e., the best possible balance of moral and natural good over moral and natural evil. Second, God wanted to create a world in which rational beings freely choose to love and obey God.<sup>10</sup> The quandary with God creating human beings in freedom is that the possibility for doing evil is unavoidably incorporated. Davis acknowledges that God is indirectly responsible for evil in that God created the circumstances by which evil could come into being. However, the existence of evil was not necessary. Humans chose to disobey God and the result was sin and evil. God is vindicated because this is the best possible world that could be created with free moral agents.

For John Hick the theodicy "project" is an exercise in metaphysical thinking, in the sense that it consists in the development and analysis of all-encompassing hypotheses concerning the nature and process of the universe. There are two criteria that a theodicy has to meet: 1) it must be internally coherent and 2) it must be consistent with the data both of the religious tradition on which it is based, and of the world, i.e., evidence revealed by scientific excavation and specific facts about moral and natural evil.<sup>11</sup> Hick argues from the Irenaean tradition instead of the Augustinian tradition.<sup>12</sup> Irenaeus did not develop a theodicy himself, but he did, according to Hick, provide a framework for a theodicy that does contain the idea of a "Fall" and is consistent with modern scientific theory concerning the origins of the human race. Irenaeus distinguished between the image of God and the likeness of God in humanity. The "image" resides in a human's bodily form and represents one's nature as an intelligent being capable of fellowship with God. The "likeness" represents the perfecting of human beings by the Holy Spirit. Irenaeus believed that human

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<sup>10</sup> Stephen Davis, "Free Will and Evil", in Stephen Davis, ed., *Encountering Evil* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2001), p. 74.

<sup>11</sup> John Hick, "An Irenaean Theodicy", in Stephen Davis, *Encountering Evil*, p. 38.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, p. 39.

beings were created as immature entities that needed to grow until they became perfectly like the creator.<sup>13</sup>

The fundamental theme of the Irenaean theodicy is divided into two-stage conception. The first stage was “the gradual production of homo sapiens, through the long evolutionary process, as intelligent ethical and religious animals.”<sup>14</sup> This perception of early humanity does not include the Augustinian vision of a harmonious period between humans and God. Instead, life of early humanity was filled with exertion against a hostile environment, necessitating the capacity for savage violence against fellow human beings, especially outside of one’s immediate community.<sup>15</sup> Humanity was created only with the *potential* for knowledge of and relationship with the creator. Because of this the second stage consists of the intelligent, ethical, and religious animals being brought through their own free consciousness into what Irenaeus called the divine likeness. An important factor of the second stage is that humanity participates in this process.

Irenaean theodicy argues that human beings were created imperfectly for a divine purpose, namely, so that human freedom could be fully actualized. “For what freedom could finite beings have in an immediate consciousness of the one who has created them, who knows them through and through, who is limitlessly powerful as well as limitlessly loving and good, and who claims their total obedience?”<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, the premise that God created human beings at an epistemic distance from God’s self in order that we may gradually achieve the likeness of God through our own moral and spiritual faculties, necessitates that the physical environment (the world) to be one that is filled with challenges, pain, dangers, as well as, success, happiness, and progress.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> John Hick, *Evil and the God of Love*, (San Francisco, CA: Harper and Row Publishers, 1978), pp. 211-212.

<sup>14</sup> Hick, “An Irenaean Theodicy”, p. 40.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid, p. 42.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p. 47.

The divine intention in relation to humanity is to create perfect finite human beings in filial relationship with their creator. It is not logically possible for human beings to already be created in this perfect state because, from a spiritual aspect, a perfect finite being includes coming freely to an uncoerced consciousness of God from a situation of epistemic distance, and in a moral aspect, freely choosing the good. Human beings were created through the evolutionary process, as spiritually and morally immature creature, as part of a religiously ambiguous and ethically demanding world. Therefore, moral and natural evil are necessary aspects of the present stage of the process through which God is gradually creating perfect finite human beings.

I see Irenaean theodicy as a foundation for redemptive suffering. Moral and natural evil exist for a divine teleological aim for human existence, namely that humans become perfect finite creatures. Suffering, then, is instructive and edifying. Indeed, human beings can only achieve union with the divine through evil and suffering.

### **Redemptive Suffering**

*“As he walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, ‘Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?’ Jesus answered, ‘Neither this man nor his parents, that he was born blind so that God’s works might be revealed in him.’”<sup>18</sup>*

An aspect of theodicy that is prevalent and problematic in Christianity is that evil and suffering are redeemable, or evil and suffering serve a divine purpose. In some theological traditions, redemptive suffering is the belief that human suffering, when offered with the sufferings of Jesus, can remit the just punishment of one’s sins or those of another.<sup>19</sup> Still others appeal to the notion

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<sup>18</sup> John 9:1-3 in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible, New Revised Standard Version, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition* (New York, NY: Oxford university Press, Inc, 2001).

<sup>19</sup> See Richard P. McBrien, *Catholicism: New Study Edition* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1994), pp. 345-346.



that unmerited suffering will be compensated through some heavenly reward to be received in the Day of Judgment.<sup>20</sup> In this essay, redemptive suffering is the idea that suffering is employed for a divine purpose or aim, i.e., God creates or permits instances, situations, of suffering with the intent of securing some greater good.<sup>21</sup>

Christian understandings of evil and suffering stem from first century Jewish religious thought. Response to evil and suffering in first century B.C.E. Judaism was connected to the ways in which Jews perceived the significance of the coming of the Messiah.<sup>22</sup> The coming of the Messiah was God's assurance that Israel had not been abandoned to a world of injustice and affliction. In essence, Christ (Messiah) was the solution to the problems of evil and suffering. It is the Christ who eventually brings an end to suffering and evil when he ushers in the new eschaton.<sup>23</sup> The focus, though, is towards the future. We anticipate the time when the eradication of evil and suffering will occur. Therefore, we must tolerate suffering in the present. This line of thinking influences the Christian tradition. In keeping with the Jewish tradition of his day, the Apostle Paul viewed suffering as something we must "endure for the present, with the hope that relief would be provided by the coming eschaton."<sup>24</sup>

Again, we see seeds of redemptive suffering. It is not simply the fact that suffering is a current and pervasive reality; rather it is the attitude that one *must endure* suffering until some future eschaton. Over time, the tradition developed rewards and incentives for those who are able to endure faithfully, supported with the belief

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<sup>20</sup> Leslie Montgomery, *Redemptive Suffering: Lessons Learned from the Garden of Gethsemane* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2006), p. 35.

<sup>21</sup> Anthony Pinn, *Why Lord? Suffering and Evil in Black Theology* (New York, NY: Continuum Press, 1995), p. 15.

<sup>22</sup> Telford Work, "Advent's Answer to the Problem of Evil" in *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 2, no. 1 (March 2000): 100-111.

<sup>23</sup> John Swinton, *Raging With Compassion: Pastoral Responses to the Problem of Evil* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2007), p. 37.

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

that suffering is for a purpose.<sup>25</sup> Characterizations of redemptive suffering tend to fall into two general categories: 1) suffering is redemptive because it is pedagogical in nature (i.e., human beings learn, experience transformation, and gain wisdom through suffering), and 2) suffering is redemptive because it is punitive in nature (i.e., suffering is deserved punishment for sin).<sup>26</sup> Each of these categories operates with the assumption that suffering is to be endured and it is for divine purposes (regardless of our capacity to discern what these purposes may be).

Redemptive suffering has been given philosophical justifications as well. Leibniz, for example, argued that the world (with all its instances of evil and suffering) could not have been created better than it has been.<sup>27</sup> This would be to deny the complete omnibenevolence of God. Consequently, Leibniz said, the causal connections between moral and physical evils that are unknown would be explicated with the progress of science. Thus, we would eventually discover that suffering is ultimately the effect of human sin. We would also determine that suffering itself is the “cause of some greater good.”<sup>28</sup>

More importantly, redemptive suffering is very much active in popular religious belief. The fundamental aim is to find, discern, or make *meaning* from the reality of suffering. As one person frames it, finding the “yes” in suffering is the work of redemptive suffering.<sup>29</sup> In other words, we must find strength in weakness,

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<sup>25</sup> This is reinforced by a doctrine of God that views God as in complete control of the happenings of the world. Classical Christian orthodoxy adopted the Greek metaphysical models of God. Among them is the perfection of God. Perfection includes categories such as omnipotence. The traditional understanding of omnipotence has been a problem for theodicy because it suggests that God determines and controls all events that occur, including evil. It also implies that God is unwilling to alleviate suffering and eradicate evil instantaneously.

<sup>26</sup> Anthony Pinn, *Moral Evil and Redemptive Suffering*, p. 8.

<sup>27</sup> See Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, *Theodicy Edited by Austin Farrar, Trans. by E. M. Huggard* (BiblioBazaar, 2007).

<sup>28</sup> Susan Neiman, *Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), p. 30.

<sup>29</sup> Juliana Cooper-Goldenburg, “Redemptive Suffering” at [www.stripedrock.org/all\\_for\\_seniors/pdf/articles/RedemptiveSuffering.pdf](http://www.stripedrock.org/all_for_seniors/pdf/articles/RedemptiveSuffering.pdf)

power in powerlessness, and life in death. Suffering becomes a mystery, an unexplainable reality that one must endure with faith intact.

Finally, for the present task, redemptive suffering finds its greatest power (in the Christian tradition) in the sufferings and death of Jesus Christ. Though the crucifixion of Christ is interpreted in various ways, one common theme is that Christ's sufferings were for the benefit of others and his death and resurrection defied the demonic forces of sin and oppression. James Mohler, for example, argues that suffering is holy to Christians because suffering is "sanctified" by the cross.<sup>30</sup> He goes as far as to claim Jesus himself is the sacrament of suffering.<sup>31</sup> Since the church is Christ's body we must also suffer. We are reminded that Christ commands his disciples to take up their crosses and follow his example.

### **Redemptive Suffering in African American Religious Thought**

Redemptive Suffering is the dominant conceptualization concerning suffering among African Americans.<sup>32</sup> African Americans continue to affirm the iniquitous character of suffering (i.e., slavery, disenfranchisement, etc.) while maintaining that God can, and will, bring about a more beneficial and blessed situation for African Americans *through* their sufferings. The primary image that has persisted is that of God as a liberator. This image developed out of the condition of slavery as one of the buffers to dehumanization. Liberation means both freedom from this present life to an 'otherworldly' existence (heaven), and freedom from oppression and bondage.<sup>33</sup> During American slavery, enslavers preached that

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<sup>30</sup> James Aylward Mohler, *The Sacrament of Suffering: The Meeting of God and Man in Suffering Can Be A Way to Complete and Final Fulfillment* (Notre Dame, IN: Fides/Claretian, 1979), p. vii.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>32</sup> Anthony Pinn, *Moral Evil and Redemptive Suffering*, p. 8. See Also Quinton Dixie and Cornel West, *The Courage to Hope: From Black Suffering to Human Redemption* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1999).

<sup>33</sup> J. Deotis Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation: A Black Theology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), pp. 8-11. See also J. Deotis Roberts,

the condition of African-Americans was the will of God. The enslaved, on the other hand, rejected this claim, and opted for the belief that God's will was for them to be free.

In the theology of enslaved African Americans, Jesus as the Christ is the crucial manifestation of the divine presence that standardizes God's nature as liberator and savior. Jesus played an important role in the religion of the enslaved (not the religion that the enslavers wished the enslaved to adopt) because of his own contextual condition. Jesus was a Jew – a part of a nation of people that had been enslaved but God delivered, Jesus was a poor Jew, and he was a member of a minority group in the midst of a larger dominant controlling group (the Romans).<sup>34</sup> Basically, what African-American women and men in bondage saw in Jesus was someone who had lived under conditions of oppression, proclaimed the divine message of liberation in spite of oppression, was crucified by his oppressors, but gained victory over them through his resurrection and the power to liberate others who are in bondage.

Jesus was considered as a friend (the one who would never forsake you in trials and tribulation), converter in conversion, mother (the one nurtures and takes care of you), and the very incarnation of the divine purpose of human freedom. These characteristics of Jesus are significant in the religion of the enslaved because they repudiated the Christ preached by the dominant society encouraging them to be good, faithful, and honest – obeying their masters and accepting that their enslavement was divinely sanctioned. Nevertheless, the liberation from slavery would be gradual. The present condition of slavery was something that had to be endured. Entrenched in slave religion was the belief that God had plans for the enslaved beyond slavery, and that they “only had to wait on God, trust in God and persevere.”<sup>35</sup>

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*Black Religion, Black Theology: The Collected Essays of J. Deotis Roberts* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 2003), pp. 43-47.

<sup>34</sup> Howard Thurman, *Jesus & the Disinherited*, (Boston, MA: Beacon Press 1976), pp. 15-18.

<sup>35</sup> Anthony Pinn, *Why Lord? Suffering and Evil in Black Theology*, p. 29.

David Walker saw the depiction of God as just and righteous and the continued subjugation of African Americans as mutually exclusive realities. For him, God was unequivocally against the brutal treatment of African Americans.<sup>36</sup> It is unthinkable that the enslavement and oppression of African Americans was divinely sanctioned since God is indeed kind, just, loving, and righteous.<sup>37</sup> Thus, God works towards the liberation of the enslaved and oppressed, and establishing justice and equality in society. In certain respects, however, Walker suggests that slavery was permitted for pedagogical reasons.<sup>38</sup> He asserted that while God is not the cause of slavery, there was value in slavery.

A strong “other-worldly” emphasis existed among the masses of Black America, particularly as expressed in African American literature from the mid-nineteenth to early twentieth century.<sup>39</sup> Historical evidence suggests that the mass of Black Americans did work for social equality, especially through support of their local churches and national church conventions. Yet, it is not surprising to see expressions of hope mainly in a world to come, rather than complete hope for a better world in this life. After all, there were no grandiose signs of the dominant white culture and society repenting of its propagation of racial oppression and overwhelmingly eradicating the structures that kept African Americans in poverty, uneducated, etc. Hope had to be in God and in a world where equality and justice was assured.

The idea was that God would bring about complete liberation in God’s own time. Everything will eventually work out, maybe in this world, but if not, then the next world. God was preparing a “home in glory” for those who were faithful in their lives despite the

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<sup>36</sup> See David Walker, *David Walker's Appeal: To the Coloured Citizens of the World* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2002). For an exposition on the life and thought of David Walker see Rufus Burrow, *God and Human Responsibility: David Walker and Ethical Prophecy* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2004).

<sup>37</sup> Anthony Pinn, *Why Lord? Suffering and Evil in Black Theology*, p. 41.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 42-43

<sup>39</sup> See Benjamin Mays, *The Negro's God*, (New York, NY: Atheneum Publishing, 1938).

horrible afflictions of existence. For much of Black America it was futile to expect good from American society and hope of rectifying their situations themselves because they were powerless. Only God had the power and God's will was seemingly that Blacks suffer in this life to receive greater rewards in the next.

Earl Carter suggests the enslavement of Africans and African Americans was the will of God in order for them to encounter the gospel of Jesus Christ. This enslavement was also punishment for the idolatrous practices of ancient African civilizations (specifically Egypt and Ethiopia).<sup>40</sup> Carter predicates this upon the God's behavior with Israel as delineated in the Book of Judges and several other passages of Scripture. The point is that God is the source of African American enslavement (and by extension African American suffering).<sup>41</sup> European Americans were simply instruments of divine actions.<sup>42</sup> One can conjecture from Carter's claims that suffering can serve both as divine punishment for sin and idolatry (even if the punishment is upon a future generation for the transgressions of a past generation), as well as, a means to develop a deeper relationship between God and a group of people. In either case, evil and suffering serve a divine purpose.

According to Anthony Pinn, African-Americans have engaged in discourse concerning the problem of evil in a manner corresponding to three propositions, namely, rethinking the nature of evil, rethinking the power of God, and rethinking God's goodness or righteousness. This is seen in Black theological thought suggesting that: 1) unmerited suffering is intrinsically evil, yet can have redemptive consequences, 2) God and humans are coworkers in the struggle to remove moral evil, or 3) Black suffering may result from God being a racist.<sup>43</sup> Position number one posits that suffering is a temporary evil known to and manipulated by God for the Christian's ultimate benefit. This is the notion of redemptive

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<sup>40</sup> Earl Carter, *No Apology Necessary* (Creation House, 1997), pp. 35-41.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 115.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>43</sup> Anthony Pinn, *Why Lord? Suffering and Evil in Black Theology*, p. 15

suffering. Unmerited existential adversity is evil, but it can have resulting remuneration. These rewards may entail correction of character flaws, obtainment of invaluable skills and talents, or a future reward from God in an afterlife. Basically, evil and suffering in this life serves a divine aim. Redemptive evil and suffering is purported because people wish to maintain the traditional religious symbols of God. Pinn argues that human liberation and life quality are more important than maintaining a religious symbol. Any theological symbol that does not coincide with a theodicy that takes evil and suffering seriously, as well as, provide a basis for countering evil and suffering in the world must be discarded.

Rejecting a religious symbol because of its (potential) oppressive connotations is a hallmark of strong humanism.<sup>44</sup> Pinn says that strong humanism offers a viable solution to the problem of evil because it does not privilege theological categories over the reality of suffering.<sup>45</sup> Theodicy, for example, can play no role in strong humanism because theodicy assumes the omnibenevolence of God and necessitates that we discern value in suffering.<sup>46</sup> Strong humanism unequivocally maintains that there are no redemptive qualities in suffering.<sup>47</sup> Although strong humanism questions (and in the work of some thinkers denies) the existence, or at least the benevolence of God, Pinn sees this position as a crucial heuristic tool for Black theology. For him it brings the Black experience to the fore of the conversation, allowing experience/reality to critique

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<sup>44</sup> Pinn offers two types of humanism: weak humanism and strong humanism. Weak humanism questions the theological assertion of God's omnipotence. It concludes that God does not possess "all-power" and human beings should not rely solely on God's ability to eliminate suffering, evil, and oppression. We must work with God to bring achieve liberation. Strong humanism, however, questions the very existence of God and the validity of any theological propositions that are contradictory to the reality of the Black experience of suffering and the quest for Black liberation.

<sup>45</sup> Anthony Pinn, *Why Lord? Suffering and Evil in Black Theology*, p. 18. Pinn sees strong humanism as a religious system in itself as it provides a framework that guides human conduct and connects to a larger reality, particularly the reality of African Americans. He grounds this claim in the Clifford Geertz's definition of religion.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 157.

conventional religious symbols and beliefs. It is this claim (i.e., the privileging of Black experience over any religious symbol) that leads to a Christological problem for Christian thought – especially African American Christian thought.

### The Christological Problem

*“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”<sup>48</sup>*

This popular passage from the Gospel of John (along with several others) has been frequently interpreted as portraying the sufferings and death of Jesus as redemptive. God sacrificed God’s only unique son in order to secure salvation for humanity. The necessity of Christ’s suffering for redemption seems to be an undeniable fact of Christianity. The idea of “necessity” indicates the suffering of Jesus as intricate to God’s plan of salvation, i.e. there seems to be a connection between suffering and glory.<sup>49</sup>

What can be gained from death, suffering, and pain? How do we relate to and worship a God who either permits or causes atrocities? My students and parishioners constantly asked questions like these when they experience instances of suffering, such as the loss of a loved one. On numerous occasions I have witnessed clergy consoling parishioners after the tragic death of a loved one by saying, “this was God’s will” or “God did this for a reason.” This kind of reasoning can be detrimental to spiritual growth and recovery after adversity.<sup>50</sup> Some theologians seek to develop a Christology that rejects the idea of redemptive suffering.<sup>51</sup> However,

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<sup>48</sup> John 3:16 in *The New Oxford Annotated Bible, New Revised Standard Version, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition*

<sup>49</sup> William J. O’Malley, *Redemptive Suffering: Understanding, Suffering, Living With It, Growing Through It* (New York, Y: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 1997), p. 117.

<sup>50</sup> We must acknowledge that for some the notion of redemptive suffering poses no crisis of faith. This present work, though, is for those who do find the notion of redemptive suffering troubling.

<sup>51</sup> Examples include Anthony Pinn and Delores Williams.



this leads to a christological problem. If we reject the principle of redemptive suffering, how do we interpret the death of Jesus the Christ? The essence of Christian faith seems to suggest Christ's death was to *redeem* humanity from sin.

### **An Adequate Alternative/Contemporary Understanding of Christology, Redemption, & Suffering**

Both those who support and those who outright reject redemptive suffering have overlooked crucial christological themes. Both positions emphasize their particular aspect of Jesus' ministry and suffering that support their distinctive claims. For those who support redemptive suffering, the ministry and sufferings of Christ are chiefly about God's plan of salvation and/or Jesus' perfect fulfilling of God's will. Jesus suffering is extended to suffering in general. Suffering, then, is justified by the attribution of divine purpose. In one sense, this is essentially to provide meaning to suffering, i.e., people do not want to "suffer in vain." In another sense, this is to encourage faithfulness among believers in the face of inexplicable suffering. Those who reject the principle of redemptive suffering tend to emphasize the political and liberative aspect of Jesus' ministry and sufferings. While one would be hard-pressed to deny these political and liberative implications, an overemphasis can lead to the neglect of the salvific quality of Christ's life, death, and resurrection.

I wish to offer a three-prong solution to this Christological problem. Firstly, part of the problem lies in the interpretation and emphasis of Jesus' death by some Christian thinkers. There are those who focus on only this one element of Christ's saving work. The salvific work, however, encompasses the incarnation, life, ministry, death, burial, and resurrection of Jesus. We find evidence of this within the Christian tradition. Although Paul scarcely mentions explicit events, activities, or teachings from the ministry of Jesus, it is important to note that the teachings and actions of Jesus play a significant role in Pauline theology (including his

soteriology).<sup>52</sup> For Irenaeus the incarnation is as important for salvation as the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.<sup>53</sup> Through the incarnation, Christ fully identified with humanity and restored humanity to God by incorporating us into his obedience to God.<sup>54</sup> In essence, we participate in Christ's life, ministry, death, and resurrection.

It was through the incarnation, Jesus' teachings, ministry, death, and resurrection that a new covenant was established – one which included both Jews and Gentiles. Jesus was seeking the reconciliation of all humanity with God through his life, ministry, and even with his death. “When threatened with the cross, Jesus did not run or hide, attempting to avoid such an accursed death, but instead offered himself and his life to God with the implicit petition that what he had lived and died for might come to pass through him”<sup>55</sup> The salvific understanding of Jesus' death is shaped by this understanding as well. Jesus' death (and blood) was redeemed and justified, i.e., reconciled humanity to God, in the sense that it was because of Jesus' faithfulness, even unto death, along with his subsequent resurrection, that unquestionably obtained salvation for those who believed.<sup>56</sup> The emphasis on (and glorifying of) suffering is removed with a more comprehensive view of Jesus' saving work.

Secondly, we can recognize redeemable aspects from *instances* of suffering without maintaining that suffering (as a general category) is redemptive. In other words, we can work with God to try to produce some good out of malevolent and sinful instances of suffering. This is not to say suffering is a requirement of God for, say, spiritual growth or liberation. No instance of suffering is good or divinely inspired for pedagogical reasons. People seek to

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<sup>52</sup> See David Wenham, *Paul: Follower of Jesus or Founder of Christianity?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Press, 1995).

<sup>53</sup> Irenaeus, *Against Heresy* (Kessinger Publishing, 2004).

<sup>54</sup> Donald McKim, *Theological Turning Points: Major Issues in Christian Thought* (Atlanta, GA: John Knox Press, 1988), p. 80.

<sup>55</sup> David A. Brondos, *Fortress Introduction to Salvation and the Cross* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2007), p. 44.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid*, p. 45.

construct meaning and give reasons for suffering. They also seek to provide reasons that go beyond the immediate causes of suffering. Spiritual or divine value is assigned in order to sustain the notion that one does not or has not suffered in vain. We justify suffering by suggesting a divine *telos*. I see such justifications as mere constructions that are antithetical to the gospel and will of God. While I reject all such attempts to produce meaning and value in unmerited suffering, I realize liberation is possible in spite of suffering if we work with God to attain it. The effects of suffering can be surmounted when one engages in praxis against (and in spite of) evil and suffering.

There is nothing intrinsically good or redeemable in suffering. Instead, we have the capacity to shape and curtail the circumstances of suffering such that “some good” may come out of an unwarranted situation of affliction. This is possible only if those who are experiencing suffering participate in this transformation (to the best of their ability). We can say that suffering is redeemable in the sense that we act, in cooperation with God, to transform situations of suffering into situations of peace and the alleviation of suffering. In this sense, I concur with Anthony Pinn that “victories are not won because of or through suffering, but in spite of suffering.”<sup>57</sup>

Emilie Townes helps us in this regard. Townes’ womanist ethics outright rejects any claim that suffering is God’s will. The continual existence of suffering is an outrage. The aim of womanist ethics is the eradication of suffering based on the proposition that *the removal of suffering is God’s redeeming purpose*. Embracing suffering diminishes the richness of the liberating love of God. Any discussion of suffering as good is a tool of oppression.<sup>58</sup> Based on the conceptual framework of Audre Lorde, Townes argues that one should move from the reactionary and powerless position of suffering to the transformative power of pain.<sup>59</sup> Lorde defined

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<sup>57</sup> Anthony Pinn, *Why Lord? Suffering and Evil in Black Theology*, p. 158.

<sup>58</sup> Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Justice, Womanist Hope* (The American Academy of Religion, 1993), p. 197

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 195-196.

suffering as “unscrutinized and unmetabolized pain.” Suffering removes the capacity of any oppressed individual or group to examine the conditions of their oppression.<sup>60</sup> Pain, on the other hand, is “an experience that must be recognized, named, and then used for transformation.”<sup>61</sup> Lorde sees suffering as evil because it inhibits an individual’s or a group’s freedom to participate in means of liberation.<sup>62</sup> Pain substantiates those who are oppressed as loved children of God, names suffering as sin, and develops means to surmount it. If the resurrection of Jesus Christ is to be taken seriously, then this means that “true suffering” has been removed through the redemptive event of the resurrection – of which the empty cross and tomb bear witness.<sup>63</sup>

How is this expressed in terms of the cross and salvation? It is important to remember that nothing about Christ’s suffering and death was pedagogical in nature. There was nothing for Jesus to learn through his sufferings. This fact eliminates all attempts to use Jesus’ suffering and death as justification of other instances of suffering as pedagogical in nature. Christ’s aim is the elimination of suffering. God removes suffering out of the world through the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus. It is because of and through God’s love that these actions are made available to all. All people can embrace the victory of the life, ministry, death, and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus’ life and actions “moves the oppressed past suffering to pain and struggle.” God has entered into history to “transform suffering into wholeness.” Suffering is evil and is not representative of God’s will or divine justice.<sup>64</sup> Transformation (via the movement from suffering to pain) is the divine act of moving a person or group from victim(s) to change agent(s).

Lastly, we can frame Christ’s suffering and death on the cross as *the singular instance of redemptive suffering*. This proposition is acceptable with the caveat that it becomes non-operational outside

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid, pp. 196-197

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, p. 194

<sup>62</sup> Ibid, p. 195

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, p. 195

<sup>64</sup> Ibid, p. 197

of this singular instance of Jesus Christ's suffering and death for atonement (the reunion of God and humanity). Jesus' death has multiple dimensions and purposes, thus, it becomes operational in various ways. On the one hand, it is an example of oppressive powers seeking to crush a movement of liberation. Thus, Jesus' suffering is an appropriate and relevant model for the political and social realities of African Americans. On the other hand, Jesus' suffering and death is a component of the salvific act of God. There are redemptive qualities to Jesus suffering vis-a-vis the salvation and liberation of humanity. Jesus conquers death and suffering and evil by taking it onto himself. Jesus' suffering and death, however, does not supply justifications for forms of oppression and propagation of evil and suffering. The Christian tradition is consistent in the idea that Christ endures the cross so that others do not have to. Moreover, the death and suffering of Christ is non-operational as justification for oppression because only Christ had to endure that singular instance of suffering. For only the God-human can provide salvation.

The problem comes when theologians try to apply Christian metaphors to contemporary experiences, and the metaphor is extended further than it should. Metaphor refers to "understanding that is transferred 'over' from one thing to another."<sup>65</sup> A metaphor is possible when one thing has a similarity with another. The weight of the metaphor is based on the "is like" characteristics. We must remember, however, that the "is not like" is as important as the "is like."<sup>66</sup> A metaphor suggests something *is like* something but the two things are *not* identical. To lose sight of this can cause interpretive problems. When applying the metaphor of the Cross and/or the suffering of Jesus to African American experience of oppression the "is like" character is the political and socially oppression aspects surrounding Jesus' suffering and death. The crucifixion of Jesus Christ, for instance, has gained new meaning in the recent work of James Cone. His juxtaposition of the cross and

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<sup>65</sup> Bernard Lee, *Jesus and the Metaphors of God: The Christs of the New Testament* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1993), p. 20.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

the lynching tree offers a renewed model of how Black experience of suffering is mirrored in the gospel story.<sup>67</sup> Nonetheless, there are no redemptive qualities in this aspect of Jesus' sufferings.

The "is not like" aspect has to do with the salvific function of Jesus death. Christ's reconciliation of humanity to God has salvific connotations. The enslavement, torture, rape, and dehumanization of African Americans contain no salvific value. The continued racial aggressions through unjust political and social structures provide no redemptive qualities. If anything, the salvific nature of Jesus' suffering and death can serve only as a metaphor for reconciliation and establishing right (just) relations.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> A full –text version of Dr. Cone's lecture is available at <http://larryjamesurbandaily.blogspot.com/2007/11/james-cone-cross-and-lynching-tree.html>.

<sup>68</sup> Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Press, 1993), pp. 164-165.

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