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Thesis:

An Examination of Liberation and Justice in the Theologies and Ethics of James H. Cone and Reinhold Niebuhr in an Age of the Black Lives Matter Movement

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In a world where justice is still not a reality for the downtrodden, I hope that all that has gone into making this thesis possible will inspire me to reflect even more deeply on the motifs of liberation and justice. Further, I hope that those who come across this work (Christians and non-Christians alike) will find within its pages useful theological and ethical tools for both reflection and praxis in the continuing struggle for the liberation of the oppressed and marginalized.
DEDICATED

This thesis is dedicated to my entire family and to the cherished memories of my brother Julian, my aunt Felicia, and my cousin Earl.
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Introduction

The main purpose of this thesis project is two-fold: first, to explore and analyze the theoethical norms of justice and liberation in the theologies and ethics of James H. Cone and Reinhold Niebuhr. This investigation also includes a discussion of interest, resistance, equality, and power as particularly relevant subthemes in the works of both men. Second, the project determines the extent to which the aforementioned themes are relevant to and shape our thinking about the Black Lives Matter Movement (BLM).

Central to this project are the collection of short essays by Reinhold Niebuhr collected in D. B. Robertson’s Love and Justice (1992) and crucial aspects of The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation (1939). Then, I will discuss James H. Cone’s God of the Oppressed (1975) and The Cross and the Lynching Tree (2011). I argue that although Niebuhr and Cone stand in different theological and ethical traditions (Niebuhr, in Christian realism; and Cone, in Black liberation theology) through their discussions of liberation (or freedom), justice, and related subthemes, both men provide ethical and theological insights that constitute a useful lens through which to view the ongoing struggle for justice and equality in society.

I chose to focus on the themes of justice and liberation (or freedom) for two vital and interrelated reasons. Before I state those reasons, I should mention that I use the word freedom, largely, when discussing the writings of Niebuhr. On the other hand, for Cone, the word liberation is a key term in his theology and ethics. First, liberation and justice constitute fundamental principles—whether as means or end—on the basis of which scholars have come to understand so much of what Cone and Niebuhr proposed in confronting social injustice and the political and economic imbalances of power on the
national landscape. Second, the age of the Black Lives Matter Movement has—with more than usual intensity—revived broad social interest in the themes addressed by this thesis. In this connection, the fundamental nature of the main themes of this discussion makes them vulnerable to assumptions that either impose meanings on them or give them greater reach than possible in application. Although the idea of deciphering meaning signals abstraction, this examination is not simply an abstract engagement with the writings of these renowned figures, but a conscious effort to ultimately situate both men in an age of the Black Lives Matter movement.

**Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971)**

Reinhold Niebuhr was a twentieth century theologian and ethicist. Teaching for more than thirty years at Union Theological Seminary in New York, he played an enormously influential role in shaping the larger tradition of social ethics in the United States. This fact makes his understandings of liberation and justice worthy of careful investigation. In *Social Ethics in the Making: Interpreting an American Tradition*, Gary Dorrien writes: “To the generation that experienced two world wars, the Great Depression, and the Cold War, Niebuhr was the one who made sense of the ‘ought’ questions. Always he sought to influence the course of social and foreign policy from the standpoint of a realistic Christian ethic. By mid-century his influence over American Protestantism was enormous.”[^1] Dorrien concludes this point by stating that Niebuhr

“towered above social ethics”² and Niebuhr is often remembered as the father of American Christian social ethics.

Structurally, Niebuhr’s Christian realism to which Dorrien alludes constitutes the ethical and theological framework within which he constructs his understanding of justice and freedom. Substantively, this Niebuhrian Christian realism is a response to a Protestant ethic that reduced to the level of emotion or feeling what he referred to as “the law of love.”³ For him, love is the highest human value and unreachable by human beings because of the self-interested nature of social groups. In this vein, Jenny Anne Wright suggests that, compared to other theorists of justice, Niebuhr was more pessimistic about human nature and the realization of justice in society.⁴ She argues that the conception of justice intrinsic to Niebuhr’s Christian realism is “closely connected to the impossible possibility offered by the ideal of love.”⁵ Thus, society has to settle for justice which, though also a high moral value, is imperfect.

Niebuhr’s critique of the sentimentalization of love in American Christianity is clearly articulated in many of the essays in Love and Justice. For instance, in “The Spirit of Justice,” Niebuhr states:

American Christianity tends to be irrelevant to the law of justice because it persists in presenting the law of love as a simple solution for every communal problem. It is significant that the ‘social gospel,’ which sought to overcome the excessive individualism of the Christian faith in America, never escaped this sentimentality and irrelevance because it also preached the same ethic that it pretended to criticize. It insisted that Christians should practice the law of love not only in personal relations but in the collective relations of mankind. In these relations love as an ecstatic impulse of

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self-giving is practically impossible. Nations, classes, and races do not love one another. They may have a high sense of obligation to one another. They must express this sense of obligation in the desire to give each one his due.”

This critique of a sentimentalizing ethic takes not only American Christianity to task, but even the social gospel movement that had a considerable emphasis on a collectivist outlook on the Christian faith, de-emphasizing individualism. Yet, even the social gospel is deemed less than germane to the “law of justice” because it, like the whole of American Christianity, reduced the “law of love” to mere emotionalism.

In the above passage, Niebuhr’s justice theme is self-evident in the phraseology, “law of justice.” By this he meant a relative justice, a workable alternative to love which is unattainable. In other words, American Christianity is not striving for justice that is possible, but pretending to be practicing a love that is impossible. An attendant theme to justice in Niebuhr’s thought is that of human freedom. Religious studies scholar Ahao Vashum asserts that, for Niebuhr, “The law of love is thus the requirement of human freedom.” However, it is not so obvious that his notion “law of love” necessarily points to freedom. But assuming that, for Niebuhr, freedom and liberation are synonymous terms, then, the “law of love” does point to liberation.

Critical for understanding Niebuhr’s critique is that he did not believe that the law of love could be practiced by groups. Love, in his view, could only be practiced by individuals. Hence, his insistence that “Nations, classes, and races do not love one another.” If groups do not love one another and if love is required for freedom, then, one can deduce that, groups cannot be totally free. Notably, Niebuhr’s people categories

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(nations, classes, and races) include both the dominant and oppressed groups. By the aforementioned reasoning, then, the fact of their collective status means that neither oppressed groups nor dominant groups can be totally free. This dimension of Niebuhr’s Christian realism reveals the distance between Christian realism and the idealism of the liberal sentimentalists. This point about the elusiveness of freedom for dominant and oppressed groups alike notwithstanding, Christian realism articulates an understanding of justice that critiques oppression and contains liberative content. Yet as will become clear in the following chapters, Niebuhr’s Christian realist view is not a liberation theology or ethics in any strict sense.9

**James H. Cone (1938 -)**

James H. Cone is the Charles Augustus Briggs Distinguished Professor of Systematic Theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York and the founder of Black liberation theology in the United States. Cone’s view of justice and liberation plays a crucial role in articulating a widely influential theological response to the African American struggle against injustice in the last four decades. In *God of the Oppressed*, Cone writes of a God for whom justice is tied to liberation, which is steeped in the subjective reality of the oppressed community. In *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, he presents a community sharing in the suffering of God and where, because of the cross, hope is found beyond the lynching tree.

While Cone’s Black Theology of liberation is a *particularized* discourse rooted in Black life and culture, it is important to state that this theology is not a morally myopic

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9 I am using the nomenclature “liberation theology and ethics” to refer to theologies and ethics that proceed from the margins of society.
one that lacks the capacity for reflection on the struggles of human beings—all God’s children—with injustice regardless of race or culture. Cone’s theological framework is one that attends to both individual and communal struggles and triumphs.

It is noteworthy that in his preface to the 1986 edition of *A Black Theology of Liberation*, Cone highlights his previous failure to address sexism and “to incorporate a global analysis of oppression” as “serious limitations” of the book’s initial edition. He attributes these omissions to his own “moral blindness” (with respect to sexism) and “lack of knowledge and personal exposure” (regarding a global analysis of oppression). This self-reflection evinces a dogged commitment to liberation and justice as non-negotiable, despite persons or institutions that might be involved. In this way, he demonstrates his belief in the value of confronting injustice whether caused by personal omission, commission, or structural sin.

In *A Black Theology of Liberation*, Cone writes that the purpose of theology is not abstract reflection on God but “that of analyzing the meaning of …liberation for the oppressed community so that they can know that their struggle for political, social, and economic justice is consistent with the gospel of Jesus Christ”. This understanding of theology is a reflection of the way Cone understood the essence of Christianity. “Christianity is essentially a religion of liberation,” he proclaimed. If Christianity is a religion of liberation, then theology is reflection on the meaning of liberation for particular groups, communities, and individuals.

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11 Ibid., xv-xiv.
12 Ibid., v.
13 Ibid.
Consistent with this view of theology is Cone’s definition of the task of Black Theology. He explains:

The task of black theology, then, is to analyze the nature of the gospel of Jesus Christ in the light of oppressed blacks so they will see the gospel as inseparable from their humiliated condition, and as bestowing on them the necessary power to break the chains of oppression. This means that it is a theology of and for the black community, seeking to interpret the religious dimensions of the forces of liberation in that community.  

Here, the theological task and its inherent ethical mandate of interpreting the gospel as essentially tied to the humiliation of Black lives and Cone’s conviction about the inevitability of liberation make Black Theology an interpretive agent whose job it is to declare that Black people are suffering children of God. Further, its task is also to clarify what, why, and how the gospel makes sense because of this. In this connection, Cone asserts the “black condition as the primary datum of reality to be reckoned with.” This way of naming the condition of the black community as the primary reality with which theological reflection must wrestle has, for some, raised concerns that Cone’s Black Theology is not a properly Christian theology. Cone addresses such concerns by affirming “the absolute revelation of God in Jesus Christ.” He states plainly his view that “There can be no Christian theology which does not have Jesus Christ as its point of departure.” It is clear that Cone’s theology is, indeed, “a theology of and for the black community.” Black people and black experiences are at the center of Cone’s theological and moral reflection.

This culturally contextualized theological and ethical liberationist approach, according to Christian ethicist Miguel A. De La Torre, is “Christianity as forged from the
underside of the dominant culture, by those who exist on the margins of society.”  

De La Torre’s justification for this approach is that the formation of liberation theology and ethics pushes against the dominant center whose interpretation of ethical reality is oppressive to those who are not part of the dominant group.

**Black Lives Matter**

The appellation “age of the Black Lives Matter movement” speaks to the broad impact and intensity of a contemporary social and political movement, and its struggle against social injustice experienced by the Black community in the United States. Alondra Nelson puts it this way: “Black Lives Matter was first articulated as an affirmation, a declaration, and an exclamation just a few years ago, but it has been the leitmotif of antiracist struggles for generations.”

In one sense, the statement, “Black lives matter” itself is a fresh articulation of the value of Black humanity while, thematically, the movement functions in a mode of continuity with the struggles of preceding generations in their resistance to racial oppression and their active moral opposition to social injustices that have resulted in and perpetuated Black suffering in American society.

Central to the Black Lives Matter movement’s stances and praxis is a vision that contains demands, one of which is to end the “criminalization, incarceration, and killing”

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of Black people. The whole atmosphere of frustrating marginalization and current demands for justice keep the spotlight on injustice and place the theo-ethical norms of justice and liberation at the center of this discussion.

The Black Lives Matter movement is a direct result of the brutal attacks on Black bodies by law enforcement. Prior to the killing of Trayvon Martin by George Zimmerman in 2012, there had been many other instances of arbitrary police violence against Black people, especially African American men—going all the way back through American history to the enslavement of Africans on American plantations. There have been many protest movements in the United States, the most well-known of which is the mid-twentieth century Civil Rights Movement. However, the killing of Michael Brown by the Ferguson police in 2014 brought young African Americans into the streets in staggering numbers alongside fellow White American and Hispanic protesters. A moral outrage that had not been seen since the 1960s has been rekindled.

The Black Lives Matter phrase appeared in July 2013 after the Zimmerman acquittal verdict. Alicia Garza, a workers’-rights activist, in an attempt to console a community distraught over the acquittal of George Zimmerman, posted her famous love message on Facebook. Affirming the lives of Black people, the message read: “Black people. I love you. I love us. Our lives matter.” Garza’s friend, Patrisse Cullors, added a hashtag: “#BlackLivesMatter.” Rather than a game of words, these women were pouring out social analysis encased in raw emotion at a time when, to many, it seemed

23 Ibid.
that the Justice Department was sending a very familiar but heart-wrenching message, loudly and clearly, that Black Lives were worthless in the eyes of the law.

Cullors, who had organizing experience in the LGBTQ community, along with Garza, sought to promote not just the phrase “Black Lives Matter,” but the truth it conveyed. Opal Tometi, a writer and immigration-rights organizer helped to build their social media platform on Facebook and Twitter as a connecting point for activists. They saw and grabbed the opportunity to turn the phrase into a movement. Many others joined them.

By the time eighteen-year-old Michael Brown was killed near the end of the summer of 2014, the Black Lives Matter phrase had exploded into a rallying cry for many who were angry, frustrated, enraged and felt utterly betrayed by an unjust justice system that never really cared about them anyway. Activists and activist groups coordinated transportation for throngs of people headed to Ferguson to protest the injustice that had taken place there. The Black Lives Matter rallying cry emerged as a social movement in the intensity of the Ferguson moment.

Subsequent to Ferguson and in the ongoing climate of police violence and various forms of racial injustice in America, a coalition of several dozen groups across the country now boast of affiliation with the Black Lives Matter movement. They remain active and socially engaged organizing and conducting social action campaigns at both the local and national levels on a variety of fronts where injustices are present, ranging from situations involving police brutality to holding politicians accountable. During the campaigns for the 2016 presidential election, Black Lives Matter activists were present at some campaign rallies holding candidates accountable.
In 2016, a number of groups affiliated with the Black Lives released a number of major demands connected to police and criminal justice reform. They are as follows:

1. An end to criminalization, incarceration, and killing of Black people.
2. A demand for community control in which people most harmed by arbitrary police violence, especially in cases of use of deadly force, should have control hiring and firing of police who are meant to serve the community.
3. A demand for full and independent Black political power and Black self-determination in all areas of society.
4. A demand for economic justice for all and reconstruction of the economy to ensure Black communities have collective ownership, not only access.
5. A demand for reparations for harms inflicted on Black people; from colonialism to slavery through food & housing redlining, mass incarceration and surveillance.
6. A demand for the education, safety, health of Black people, instead of investment in the criminalizing, caging, and harming of Black people.²⁴

Using both the frameworks of Niebuhr and Cone, I will analyze these demands and aspirations of the Black Lives Matter movement in the concluding chapter of this project.

Outline of the Thesis

To build my argument that both Niebuhr’s and Cone’s theological and ethical frameworks on justice, liberation, and the related subthemes are valuable as lenses through which to think about the ongoing issues of injustice and inequality in society, in Chapter 1, I begin by examining Niebuhr’s conception of justice. The discussion will highlight Niebuhr’s distinction between perfect justice (or love) and relative justice. I argue that Niebuhr sees relative justice as the only realistic alternative to love in a world where injustice is still present.

In Chapter 2, I take up Niebuhr’s conception of power, arguing that the power struggle among groups which Niebuhr demonstrates offers no lasting hope of justice. I accomplish this by discussing the nature of power, forms of power in community, two critical human traits, and the balance of power. In Chapter 3, I explain Cone’s conceptions of liberation and justice, and their crucial interplay, introduce Black theology as Cone’s methodology, discuss his view of eschatology, and, then, analyze his three dimensions of liberation and justice, respectively. There, I argue that God’s relationship with the oppressed in the concreteness of social oppression is the dominant theme and central to Cone’s Black liberation theology.

In Chapter 4, I discuss Cone’s conceptions of resistance and power. Concerning resistance, I argue that Cone’s analysis of resistance changes from one period of oppression and/or liberation to the next. In this way, I show the complex character of resistance in the collective life of oppressed people. Then, I demonstrate that Black
power, for Cone, is an uncompromising tool of self-determination and collective empowerment that existed in the intensity of a liberative moment.

In my concluding chapter, I will apply aspects of Niebuhr’s and Cone’s frameworks of liberation, justice, and the subthemes to the demands of the Black Lives Matter movement (BLM). As to Niebuhr, I argue that his thought is useful in identifying forces of oppression and naming oppressive practices antithetical to justice. As to Cone, I demonstrate that although some aspects of his liberation theology might not be appealing to BLM (e.g. justice as co-suffering with God) yet his concepts of justice as dismantling oppressive power, the social dimension of liberation, his passionate understanding of Black power, and his articulation of the “black condition” should find particular relevance.

Before concluding this introduction, I should state that heavily male gendered language is present in the writings of Niebuhr and Cone (especially Niebuhr). This inclination suggests that both men were part of the times in which they wrote. For Cone who is alive and still writing today, I am referring to his earlier books. Forgiving this tendency toward male biased language, one is still able to see the usefulness of their insights as they grapple with the motifs of liberation and justice.
Chapter 1
Reinhold Niebuhr’s Conception of Justice

This chapter will discuss Niebuhr’s understanding of justice as one that relates to love which, for him, is the highest human value. The discussion will highlight that justice, in its most complete sense, constitutes love—or “perfect justice”—which is unattainable. Then, the analysis of justice will demonstrate that the type of justice Niebuhr sees as possible on the social landscape is “relative justice” which is an incomplete form of justice, but a realistic alternative to love (or perfect justice). The purpose of this discussion is to examine Niebuhr’s theological and ethical insights that elucidate the kind of justice possible in a social and cultural milieu where injustices are present. To this end, first, I will discuss Niebuhr’s dialectic of love and justice. Then, I will briefly explain Niebuhr’s notions of perfect and relative justice. Next, I will elaborate his conception of relative justice and its connection to human sin. Finally, I will analyze the following conceptions as aspects of Niebuhr’s relative justice: rights-centeredness, self-interest, resistance, equality, non-simple equality, and freedom.

In Six Theories of Justice, theological ethicist, Karen Lebacqz writes that for Niebuhr, justice is a multifaceted concept that functions in at least four different ways.¹ These four ways are: the spirit of justice, rules and structures of justice, calculating rights, and balancing forces or competing interests.² Readers might be tempted to conclude that

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¹ Karen Lebacqz, Six Theories of Justice: Perspectives from Philosophical and Theological Ethics (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1986), 85.
² Lebacqz, Six Theories of Justice: Perspectives from Philosophical and Theological Ethics, 85. It is noteworthy that in Human Nature, Interest, and Power, Niebuhr scholar Tex Sample makes a similar point. While Lebacqz’s observation may be limited to the challenges of connotative multiplicity, Sample is concerned with Niebuhr’s “‘hesitation’ to define rigorously and to adhere to definitions in respect of some
Niebuhr had no firm conception of justice. Such a conclusion may or may not be warranted; however it seems clear that Niebuhr’s multiple connotations of the concept of justice is a by-product of his willingness to wrestle with difficult concepts that arise in his work. Yet Niebuhr’s hesitation to define terms might have adverse consequences in his conceptions of people groups on the social spectrum, especially oppressed minorities.

**Niebuhr’s Dialectic of Love and Justice**

To avoid a truncated view of justice in Niebuhr’s work, it is necessary to discuss his dialectic of love and justice (i.e., the juxtaposition of both ideas as apparently contradictory yet tending toward some resolution) which, in a crucial way, illuminates his understanding of justice. In “The Spirit of Justice,” Niebuhr commences his discussion by asserting that love, ultimately, completes every other law in Christianity. Here is an unmistakable declaration of the ultimacy of love. Yet, Niebuhr is clear that the law of love does not cancel out the laws of justice. But he notes that love is on a higher level than justice. In this sense, Niebuhr highlights the insufficiency of justice and love’s higher demand for the full participation of all people in the common good.

The tension between love and justice points to the inadequacy of justice, but implicitly acknowledges its necessity. Yet, love’s superior position causes love to make greater demands of human beings: to reach heights yet unattained in the day to day affairs of community. Therefore, Niebuhr writes that “The ordinary affairs of the community,

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4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.
the structures of politics and economics, must be governed by the spirit of justice and by specific and detailed definitions of rights and duties.\(^6\) Although his idea of the “spirit of justice” is undefined, it still captures the indispensable need for an intense social awareness of justice. Further, by implication, he couples the spirit of justice with the concrete reality of justice by emphasizing the importance of having great specificity and a careful delineation of rights and duties.

**Perfect Justice vs. Relative Justice**

Niebuhr’s framing of justice leads us to two basic understandings: those of perfect and relative justice. Perfect justice is a state he identifies with love, arguing that love is perfect justice.\(^7\) This framing makes love the highest form of justice: perfect justice. Lebacqz illuminates this point: “perfect justice would be a state of ‘brotherhood’ [sic] in which there is no conflict of interests.”\(^8\) The notion of an absence of conflict of interest in any human context provides justification for Niebuhr’s use of the word “perfect” as a descriptor for his ideal reference to love as justice.

By contrast to perfect justice is Niebuhr’s notion of relative justice which is something less than perfect justice. In the essay “The Conflict Between Nations and Nations and Between Nations and God” he explains that relative justice, “involves the calculation of competing interests, the specification of duties and rights, and the balancing of life forces.”\(^9\) Relative justice thus involves a computational analysis. Yet relative justice is not just a neutral, mechanistic equation. According to Niebuhr, relative

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\(^6\) Ibid.

\(^7\) Ibid.

\(^8\) Lebacqz, *Six Theories of Justice: Perspectives from Philosophical and Theological Ethics*, 86.

\(^9\) Ibid.
justice is intimately connected to and bound up in the reality of sin. In fact, he argues that “every definition of justice actually presupposes sin as a given reality. It is only because life is in conflict with life, because of sinful self-interest, that we are required carefully to define schemes of justice which prevent one life from taking advantage of another.”

Niebuhr is arguing that justice as understood in the day to day affairs of community cannot escape its purpose as a response to conflict that flows from human self-interest. In this way, justice presupposes sin.

Niebuhr’s assertion that justice presupposes a sinful reality does more than render justice a kind of neutral mechanistic antidote to the problem of sin. In my view, this assertion evaluates justice as part of the reality of sin. In this sense, justice itself is mired in the condition of sin. Therefore, against the backdrop of the ideal of perfect justice, human beings must settle for relative justice, which constitutes an imperfect solution in a world of sin. That is, relative justice is justice in the absence of a full realization of love (or perfect justice, per above).

According to Niebuhr, Christians have a duty to strive for relative justice in a world of sin. Niebuhr’s computational way of thinking about interests (as calculable) appears to assign quantitative value to the idea of competing interests. The immense importance of economic justice, for example, emphasizes the potency of computational language that often lends the necessary gravitas to meanings of justice. Further, specifying duties and rights in the areas of legal, social, political, and economic justice is

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11 It is noteworthy that although self-interest appears self-explanatory, Sample maintains that Niebuhr’s conception of “interest” is undefined. See generally, Sample, Human Nature, Interest and Power, 35.
critical. However, there is no language of implementation or of just enforcement—in this
definition of relative justice—of specified rights and duties. In other words, although
Niebuhr characterizes relative justice as something that can be calculated, specified, and
balanced; and even though he insists that Christian duty requires striving to enact relative
justice, the lack of discussion about the calculations, specifications, and balances relative
justice ostensibly involves is a notable gap in his work.

**Relative Justice as “Rights-Centered Justice”**

As evident in the previous discussion, one major element of Niebuhr’s conception
of relative justice is what Lebacqz calls the “specification of duties and rights.”\(^\text{13}\) Thus, it
is not implausible to state that relative justice is a rights-centered conception of justice. In
his book, *A Christian Justice: For the Common Good*, Church and Society specialist and
Niebuhr scholar, Tex Sample, argues that a rights-centered conception of justice is
problematic. According to Sample, “when justice is reduced to human rights, there seems
to be an unexamined faith in a pre-established harmony of outcomes if people merely
pursue their individual choices and expressive whims.”\(^\text{14}\) He explains the underlying
presumption that if people just follow their individual desires things will be fine.\(^\text{15}\) In a
sense, Sample invokes Adam Smith’s notion of the invisible hand that quietly coordinates
society’s needs and interests to achieve the best possible outcome.\(^\text{16}\) What is lost in such a
conception, however, is any substantive notion of a corporately held common good.

\(^\text{13}\) Ibid.
To clarify, Sample is not questioning the importance of human rights as stated, for instance, in the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights Charter. Rather, he is critiquing the preoccupation with and uncritical acceptance of a rights centered conception of justice which, almost like a calculus, can seem to presuppose that a certain result or set of coherent results for individuals is automatically guaranteed, while simultaneously ignoring the common good. To corroborate this point, Sample highlights Martin Luther King, Jr.’s leadership in the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s. He notes that King’s idea of the common good was evident in his vision of the *Beloved Community* which went beyond a rights-centered conception of justice. Here, Sample is suggesting that any abstract, quantitatively couched discussion of or struggle for rights should go deeper, specifying the qualitative collective significance of individual rights, which is the common good. Although the definition of Niebuhr’s relative justice suggests a rights-centered justice, his whole conception of justice (including his notion of “the spirit of justice”) implies some balance between rights and common good.

**Relative Justice as Self-interested Justice and a Requirement of Balance**

Not only is relative justice a rights-centered justice, it is also a self-interested justice which balances interests between self and other. Explicating Niebuhr’s view of relative justice, Lebacqz asserts that justice, in a pragmatic sense, must take on the power of self-interest, especially collective self-interest. Niebuhr writes that justice is required to distinguish between conflicting claims and determine the legitimacy of some claims

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18 Ibid.
19 Karen Lebacqz, *Six Theories of Justice: Perspectives from Philosophical and Theological Ethics*, 86.
over others. This task is, in one sense, the inescapable assumption of the power of self-interest. Niebuhr captures the meaning of relative justice as arbiter of competing claims between the self and other and “upon the self by various ‘others.’” Despite the role of justice as arbiter, Niebuhr’s relative justice does not avoid its moral obligation of critiquing claims based on the dominance of the self.

On its face, the notion of balancing interests between the self and other assumes a kind of equality of claims, or reciprocity, or the existence of something akin to a claim-counter-claim legal procedural modality which suggests that the parties (or groups) either enjoy rights equally or are similarly situated, at least procedurally. In respect of various others asserting claims against the self, justice recognizes the multiplicity of others and their competing assertions against the self of what they—the others—deem to be rightfully theirs. On this particular point, what is owed to others emerges as the duty of the self (to others). Niebuhr states that justice, indeed, determines “what I owe this segment as against that segment of the community.” On this view, although Niebuhr does not give absolute moral priority to one segment of community over another, he gives some moral priority to the claims of others against the self.

Regarding justice as arbiter of competing claims between self and other, Niebuhr states that “A Christian justice will be particularly critical of the claims of the self as against the claims of the other, but it will not dismiss them out of hand. Without this criticism, all justice becomes corrupted into a refined form of self-seeking. But if the claims of the self (whether individual or collective) are not entertained, there is no justice

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21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
at all.”  

Here, Niebuhr highlights the moral obligation of a Christian justice whose object of critique which, on one level, is the dominant group and power structure (the economic, social, and political systems, the criminal justice system, etc.) in seeking justice for the other (racial and ethnic minorities, the poor, etc.). However, on another level, he states without equivocation that a Christian justice cannot dismiss the claims of the self; it must engage with it or risk corruption or its own disintegration into a state of injustice.

Niebuhr’s inclination to balancing interests point to a pragmatism which Mark Douglas argues helped Niebuhr escape “the subjectivist assumption” or the giving of absolute moral priority to the experiences and claims of the other over the self. In this way, Niebuhr continues to emphasize the connection of justice to love—the tension between them (and even within justice itself) notwithstanding. He states that although justice is less than love, “it cannot exist without love and remain justice.” For him, “without the ‘grace’ of love, justice always degenerates into something less than justice.” From this standpoint, the grace of love is present in love’s connection to justice and thereby demands a consideration of the interests of the self.

**Relative Justice as Resistance**

While Niebuhr’s understanding of justice insists that the interests of the self not be by-passed or dismissed, he argues for resistance of self-interests. Hence, Niebuhr’s relative justice seems to go beyond mere rights-centeredness, to being by nature self-

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23 Ibid.
26 Ibid.
27 Ibid.
interested; and then from there, to resistance of self-interest. In this regard, Niebuhr’s articulation of justice as balance employs the language of resistance. Such language demonstrates that he was very much interested in uncovering the powerful structures controlled by the dominant group, and the immense power of self interest in creating and maintaining those dominating structures.

Crucially, Niebuhr distinguishes between legitimate and illegitimate self-interest. For instance, referring to the power of self-interest, he writes, “this power will express itself illegitimately as well as legitimately.” Further, he advises that individuals must be ready to confront self-interest that is illegitimate. Although Niebuhr does not immediately clarify his notion of illegitimate self-interest, by stating that it should be resisted, he implies that illegitimate self-interest is some violation of standards of balance or approximations of the law of love.

Illegitimate interest is to be resisted in pursuit of relative justice. But what does resistance entail in Niebuhr’s thought? Niebuhr sees resistance in terms of a deep Christian obligation. For instance, he criticizes as inadequate what he calls a “simple Christian moralism” that focuses innocuously on teaching people not to be selfish. Instead of this simple Christian moralism, Niebuhr states that “A profounder Christian faith must encourage men to create systems of justice which will save society and themselves from their own selfishness.” In effect, a sentimentally moralistic Christianity that offers mere rhetorical chiding of selfishness is inadequate to change society’s powerful and complex structures of sin. The moral mandate to put just systems

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28 Ibid.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid.
in place so society would be saved from selfishness demands a deeper commitment and engagement with the resources of faith. Therefore, the concept of resistance in Niebuhr’s conception of justice has to do with implementing structural change.

**Self-Interest**

At this juncture, it is clear that although Niebuhr sees self-interest as part of justice, he also sees self-interest as a threat to justice. In response to this threat, he urges resistance, thereby situating resistance as part of the structure of relative justice. I have already mentioned that Niebuhr does not immediately clarify what he means by “illegitimate self-interest.” In his book, *Human Nature, Interest, and Power*, Sample goes further to say that not only is Niebuhr’s narrower category of illegitimate self-interest unclear; but that the larger category of interest itself is dubious. Sample’s critique, however, does not undermine the significance of Niebuhr’s notion of illegitimate self-interest in his analysis of relative justice.

Before turning attention to Niebuhr’s conception of self-interest, it is important to consider what Sample gleans from Niebuhr’s use of the concept of interest. According to Sample, interest is a complex concept in Niebuhr’s thought that resists “universally valid ideals and norms.” Sample identifies multiple uses of interest in Niebuhr’s thought. Among them, Sample mentions “higher/lower interests,” “self/general interests,” and “creative/constructive interests/selfish interests.” Sample expresses uncertainty about

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33 See pgs 22-3.
35 Ibid., 37. Sample also highlights power as another concept in Niebuhr’s Christian realism that functions in similar fashion. I will discuss power in chapter two.
36 Ibid.
how Niebuhr’s uses of the word interest resist established norms. He argues that Niebuhr’s categories of interest—for example, those categorized as higher and larger interests—signify interests that are in “concert with established norms rather than posing resistance to them.” But he concedes that in Niebuhr’s thinking, the category of self-interest could be considered as a force of resistance to established norms. It is in this sense that I noted that interest can be understood as internal to, or a constituent element of, relative justice. It is in this way that justice is self-interested. There I emphasized that Niebuhr’s conception of justice critiques the claims of the self as against those of the other. In other words, the self-interests of the other resist established norms.

Resistance entails self-interest, but Sample astutely notes that self-interest is not just resistance because he (Sample) claims that even self-interest can be integrated into the normative order. Sample points out that Niebuhr shows that the narrow self-interest of privileged groups is not infrequently integrated into the established system. For this reason, oppressed minorities cannot blindly assume that justice will be done if the system is simply allowed to work, but insist that justice is adulterated by the self-interests of the dominant group on whose interpretation of established norms and values justice is administered. Still, in Sample’s explication of Niebuhr’s view of interests, there is a “distortive effect” to interest evident in both dominant and oppressed groups. Sample argues that, from Niebuhr’s perspective, the distortion occurs through “pride and pretension, personal deception and the deceit of others, overestimation of the self”

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37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid.
40 See pg 23.
42 Ibid.
43 Ibid., 42.
virtue, conscious and unconscious factors, self-worship, etc.”  

This understanding of Niebuhr’s conception of interest sees all groups as equally affected by conditions that register theologically as sin. Paradoxically, this picture which ultimately represents a distortion of justice, also balances the distortion which is a form of justice, evincing a common struggle with sin.

Niebuhr’s claims about the most common ways interest is distorted—namely, the “overestimation of the self’s virtue,” and “self-worship”—these point to idolatry, or a partially conscious or unconscious act of turning oneself, and one’s racial and cultural group into God.  

Idolatry thus conceived will be prevalent in a social context where the dominant culture wields excessive power. And, indeed, he argues passionately in “Christian Faith and the Race Problem” that idolatry accounts for a great deal of human misery.  

In this sense, Niebuhr understands suffering as a product of self-worship which proceeds from distorted self-interest.

This raises the question of how to confront the perennial human sin of idolatry. Niebuhr writes, “The idolatry is not broken until man is confronted with the real God, and finds his pride broken by the divine judgment, and learns that from this crucifixion of the old proud self a new self may arise, and that this new self has the ‘fruits of the spirit,’ which are ‘love, joy, and peace.’”

Although Niebuhr is known for his unrelenting Christian realism that highlights the collective-self, self-centered norms and ideologies, self-justifying behaviors, and repressively and oppressively destructive conduct, in the

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44 Ibid.
46 Ibid., 129.
47 Ibid.
aforementioned statement, he asserts that the prideful self is broken by God’s judgment. It is not immediately clear what Niebuhr means by this assertion; however, he seems to be suggesting persistent struggle against structurally pervasive conceit resulting in social transformation. Theologian and Niebuhr scholar, Richard Harries declares: “Niebuhr was a ‘realist’ in that he always tried to take cognizance of the uncomfortable facts about human nature and human society.”48 The force of Niebuhr’s realism notwithstanding, he posits the possibility of breaking the hold of idolatry, which he sees as the possibility of the transformation of the old prideful collective-self. When idolatry is broken, the new self as bearer of love, joy, and peace better aligns its interests with the interests of all God’s children. God’s action in destroying pride with “divine judgment” calls for newness. This newness, not the law of love (i.e., perfect justice, which is unattainable in this world of sin), involves a moral stretching of the capacity of relative justice which is imperfect.

To sum up this far, I have been discussing interest (and self-interest) as an aspect of Niebuhr’s view of relative justice. I have discussed Niebuhr’s relative justice as a self-interested justice that balances interests between the self and other. Further, I showed that, in Niebuhr’s view, self-interest is both legitimate and illegitimate. In Sample’s critique of Niebuhr’s thought, I noted that Niebuhr’s conception of interest is complex. Yet, this complexity does not undermine his view of illegitimate self-interest which violates standards of balance or approximation of the law of love. Then, I noted that Niebuhr urges resistance of narrow and/ or illegitimate self-interest as a Christian obligation and part of the structure of relative justice. Through the self-interest and claims

of the other, relative justice resists established norms and critiques the narrow interests of the self. Yet, I elucidated that Niebuhr argues for a common internal susceptibility of the dominant self and oppressed groups to a distortion of their interests.

**Equality**

At this point, I will turn to equality as a principle of justice. Equality is the requirement of equal treatment for all persons in respect of status, rights, and opportunities. In *Reinhold Niebuhr and Christian Realism*, Christian ethicist, Robin W. Lovin asserts that human beings are not equal; therefore, when equality is considered on its own, it is illusory. However, when considered as part of relative justice, in Niebuhr’s thought, Lovin states that equality demands a system which regulates resources that affect the well-being of people and guarantees equal treatment, leaving no one without a good quality of life. Implied in this conception is a serious challenge to systemic injustice and inequality. According to Lovin, this Niebuhrian understanding of equality opposes privilege that is unjustifiable on the basis of the demands of authentically divergent needs and social roles. Here, equality opposes and disrupts the inequalities represented by morally unjustifiable privilege.

Lebacqz writes that equality functions as the highest standard of justice in Niebuhr’s thought. In *Christian Ethics* he writes, “a religion which holds love to be the final law of life stultifies itself if it does not support equal justice as a political and

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51 Ibid., 223.
economic approximation of the ideal of love.” Niebuhr emphasizes equality with respect to political and economic justice. The reference to religion places the struggle and attainment of this form of justice squarely in the domain of religious goals. He argues that religions that are based on love frustrate their own teachings when they neglect to be faithful to the equality principle of justice. In effect, Niebuhr here demands that religion display a social conscience.

Not only is equality a crucial principle of justice in Niebuhr’s thought; it also functions as a regulative principle of justice; that is, “a principle of criticism under which every scheme of justice stands.” Hence, the calculation of rights and the balancing of competing forces that Niebuhr references in “The Spirit of Justice” are processes that function on the equality principle. According to Lebacqz, Niebuhr understands equality (‘equal justice’, in her words) as “the best approximation of ‘brotherhood’[sic]—or love—under the conditions of sin.” Importantly, the phrase “best approximation” admits a limitation. Equality and love do not fully merge. Yet, he characterizes equality as, “the most rational social goal.” More concretely, Lebacqz notes “The rule of equality includes both concerns for process (e.g., impartiality in the calculation of needs) and also for equality as a substantive goal (e.g., civil rights).” In short, equality is the nature of justice, the goal towards which justice aims, and the standard by which justice is measured.

52 Reinhold Niebuhr, as quoted by Karen Lebacqz, Six Theories of Justice, 87.
53 Niebuhr as quoted by Ibid., 87.
55 Lebaqcz, 87.
56 Niebuhr as quoted by Ibid.
57 Ibid. I should note here that even the equality principle is subject to modification. In some instances “in historical societies, differences of need and social function make inequality a necessity.”
The notion of fairly calculating needs referenced above might lead readers to envision a conception of justice that is blind or indifferent to particularity. However, impartiality need not preclude the consideration of unique needs that may weigh heavily in favor of those who have, for instance, been victims of historic oppression. Equality as a substantive goal speaks to a critical objective demanded by the cause of justice on various levels of social engagement—as embodied by, for example, small-scale and mass movements, laws enacted, policies adopted, and judicial precedents. In situations where both present and historic oppression have thrived on a deeply entrenched social logic of inequality, the demand for justice is a demand for equality.

Niebuhr calls attention to the way equality functions as a substantive goal in context of Supreme Court decisions involving school desegregation and desegregation in public transportation, writing:

Recent Supreme Court decisions, forcing Southern states to grant Negroes equality in interstate transportation and in college education, prove that law may be a potent weapon in enforcing rights. Within limits it is possible for a total national community to insist legally that every portion of the community observe its minimal standards of justice.58

Niebuhr’s main point here is the power of the law based on the will of the whole national community. But of even greater importance than this point is his insistence that the substantive goal of equality be realized in every area of community. Thus, law functions as a robust means that serves the equality principle. He notes: “It is clear, in other words, that the power of the law is considerable in raising democratic standards of a community.”59 This assertion acknowledges the considerable power of law, and suggests

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59 Ibid., 143.
that such power derives its highest significance in a democratic system from its role in mandating the minimum standards of justice like equal rights.

Simultaneous with Niebuhr’s observation about the power of law is a note of caution. He states quite poignantly, “the law is not omnipotent.” The theological significance of this admission is that Niebuhr contradistinguishes God’s omnipotence from the falleness, and thus limitations, of humanity. He elaborates two critiques of law, a theological critique and a practical critique.

Theologically, Niebuhr insists, following St. Augustine, that human beings find their true security not in the power of the law (which even in its impressive effectuation of equal rights is imperfect), but only in God. Nonetheless, Niebuhr believed that the sin of pride constantly tempts human beings to refuse to acknowledge or admit that they have no final security apart from God. Law cannot fix this basic human failing.

Practically, Niebuhr acknowledges that laws are violated all the time. He cites the way the Emancipation Proclamation did not result in the absolute abolition of slavery. Additionally, he notes that states in the South were able, for a significant period, to avoid abiding by Federal legislation which granted African Americans the right to vote. These critiques of law function on two levels. Not only do they seem to suggest that law as an instrument of relative (or imperfect) justice (even though enacting the equality principle which is the “best approximation of brotherhood,” is still limited); they also suggest that local communities have to be prepared socially and culturally for the law mandating

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60 Ibid., 146.
61 Ibid.
64 Ibid.
equal rights. Without this readiness, a judicial decision or legislative enactment is impotent.

As to the readiness of local communities for change in law, Niebuhr observes that, “The majority of the community must accept a law without enforcement if it is to be enforceable. But if individual recalcitrance has the support of a local community, if the ‘conscience’ of the community aids abets defiance, no amount of enforcement by coercion avails.”\textsuperscript{65} A legal mandate—even where it means achieving the substantive goal of guaranteeing equal rights—will not be successful if the mandate is not first accepted by a majority of the community. No amount of enforcement of the law will make that mandate common practice if opposition to such enforcement is supported by the community’s conscience.

In the 2014 book, \textit{Our Declaration: A Reading of the Declaration of Independence in Defense of Equality}, American classicist and political theorist, Danielle Allen argues the ideals of equality and liberty are not only the twin foundations of democracy; they represent “the summits of human empowerment.”\textsuperscript{66} Yet these ideals are not equally strong. Citing the decline of invocations of equality in presidential rhetoric over the past twenty years Allen argues that “Equality has always been the more frail twin…”\textsuperscript{67} Allen’s claim echoes Niebuhr’s own observations about the frailty of the goal of equality in America. According to Niebuhr, the inability to conform racial sensibilities to the “basic presupposition of American democracy”; namely, the Declaration of Independence’s assertion that all people are created equal, is a “universal characteristic of

\textsuperscript{65} Ibid., 147.
\textsuperscript{67} Allen, \textit{A Reading of the Declaration of Independence in Defense of Equality}, 21.
the nation.” Keeping this inability or shortcoming constantly in view is a key aspect of Niebuhr’s realist perspective.

At the same time, Allen’s acknowledgement of the relative frailty of equality calls into question Niebuhr’s willingness to subsume law to the recalcitrant will of the dominant community that may be unable to accept the principle’s enforcement (i.e., equality) as a matter of law. Allen reminds readers that the will of the dominant community neither exists in nor arises out of a vacuum. The will of a community, in other words, is itself a social process in which equality (or inequality) functions as both principle and outcome.

Non-Simple Equality

So far, the discussion of equality has focused on Lebacqz’s notion of “simple equality,” or equality as a regulatory principle and substantive goal of justice. Niebuhr argues that “the principle of equality does not exhaust the possibility of the moral ideal involved in even the most minimal standards of justice.” This is where Niebuhr breaks with basic understandings of equality. Beyond simple equality, Niebuhr’s view of equality also involves what he terms, “imaginative justice.” According to Lebacqz, imaginative justice “goes beyond simple equality to note the needs of the neighbor.”

Niebuhr states:

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69 Lebaqcz, Six Theories of Justice, 87.


71 Niebuhr as quoted by Lebaqcz, Six Theories of Justice, 87.

72 Lebaqcz, Six Theories of Justice, 87.
Imaginative justice leads beyond equality to a consideration of the special needs of the life of the other. A sensitive parent will not make capricious distinctions in the care given to different children. But the kind of imagination which governs the most ideal family relationships soon transcends this principle of equality and justifies special care for a handicapped child and, possibly, special advantages for a particularly gifted one.73

The logic of this assertion moves beyond the arena of an ordinary conception of balancing rights, and imagines a common good that takes seriously the vicious conditions of frustrating marginality and their impact on the quality of life of people who are left out.

As Lebacqz points out, imaginative justice involves a kind of ‘option for the poor.’74 Indeed, this aspect of Niebuhr’s view of justice resonates with an orientation to the common good that, as we have seen, is central to Sample’s conception of justice.75 In Niebuhr’s view, the ideal that imaginative justice projects has a higher moral vision that ties the achievement of justice for the marginalized to the heart of what it truly means to be a neighbor within the meaning of the Christian Gospel. He explains that the achievements of imaginative justice are “logically related, on the one hand, to the most minimal standards of justice and on the other to the ideal of perfect love—i.e., to the obligation of affirming the life and interests of the neighbour as much as those of the self.”76 In this way it is clear that imaginative justice is, indeed, related to the equality principle (part of relative justice) and the ideal of love (perfect justice). Yet, ever the realist, Niebuhr nevertheless calls attention to the limits of this view of justice: “The ‘right’ to have others consider one’s unique needs and potentialities is recognized legally

73 Niebuhr, An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, 66.
74 Lebacqz, Six Theories of Justice, 87.
75 See pg 19.
76 Niebuhr, An Interpretation of Christian Ethics, 66.
only in the most minimal terms.“77 Although this approach to justice keeps in full view the affirmation of the life and interests of others, its quest still falls far short of the standard of love.

To summarize, I have argued that equality and non-simple equality are components of relative justice. I showed that, in Niebuhr’s thinking, equal treatment for all people requires systemic change that guarantees a good quality of life for all persons. Also, I asserted that this understanding of equality counters privilege that cannot be justified on the basis that people have different needs and social roles. Then, I emphasized that, for Niebuhr, equality is the highest standard of justice. In this connection, religions whose basis is love fail to act consistently with the love principle if they are unfaithful to the equality principle of justice. Furthermore, I showed that as a regulative principle of justice, equality must be impartial. However, the impartiality of equality, for Niebuhr, does not suggest a blind justice that ignores unique needs. Niebuhr emphasizes that the substantive goal of equality is indispensable in all communities. In this vein, he acknowledged that the law can accomplish this goal. However, he points to the law’s limitations and emphasizes that final human security is not in the law, but in God. Still emphasizing the limitations of the law, I stated that Niebuhr asserted the need for community assent even in the face of a legal mandate. Ultimately, Niebuhr seems to surrender equality to community assent.

In respect of non-simple equality, I discussed Niebuhr’s move beyond simple equality to imaginative justice which takes into consideration the special needs of the individual. I showed that this form of equal justice moves Niebuhr even closer to what it

77 Ibid.
truly means to be one’s neighbor within the meaning of the Gospel. Moreover, this view of equal justice is in agreement with Sample’s understanding of the common good. Then, I stated that although Niebuhr highlights imaginative justice, he pinpoints that the law’s consideration of unique needs is applied with great caution.

**Freedom**

In addition to equality, freedom is the other critical standard of justice in Niebuhr’s thought. Niebuhr starts his discussion of freedom by contrasting spirit with reason.\(^{78}\) He writes that freedom is more than the basic freedom of choice. In this sense, freedom constitutes the quest of the human spirit to go beyond its limitations making itself and the entire world its focus of knowledge.\(^{79}\) Niebuhr renders it this way:

Man is self-determining not only in the sense that he transcends natural process in such a way as to be able to choose between various alternatives presented to him by the processes of nature but also in the sense that he transcends himself in such a way that he must choose his total end.\(^{80}\)

Human beings are capable of grappling with comprehension of themselves as spiritual beings. In this regard, Niebuhr sees human beings as self-determining in a way that goes beyond simple or basic choices to the point of self-transcendence—that is, evidencing an almost limitless ability and capacity to completely choose and shape goals and outcomes. Niebuhr uses the concept of self-transcendence to mean an even greater freedom than the freedom to make basic choices.

Niebuhr further elucidates his conception of human freedom, explaining that the task of self-determination confronts the individual with “endless potentialities and he can

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\(^{79}\) Ibid.

\(^{80}\) Ibid., 162-3.
set no limit to what he ought to be, short of the character of ultimate reality.” Niebuhr’s emphasis on the human responsibility for self-determination highlights what he saw as the inescapable vastness of human potential. Yet this emphasis also implies a contrast inherent in the human person between potentiality and actuality. This contrast does not diminish the expansiveness of human potential; rather, it hints at limitation that Niebuhr explicitly expresses in the phrase, “short of the character of ultimate reality.” For Niebuhr, human beings still fall far short of the reality of God as the final and fundamental power in all reality. God-self (expressed as the “character of ultimate reality”) creatively establishes the limits of the vastness of human potential. Niebuhr writes:

Yet this same man is a creature whose life is definitely limited by nature and he is unable to choose anything beyond the bounds set by the creation in which he stands. This paradox of human freedom is succinctly stated by Kierkegaard: ‘Truth [in the human situation] is exactly the identity of choosing and determining and of being chosen and determined.’

While divine freedom is absolute and, hence, non-paradoxical, Niebuhr understands human freedom as limited and therefore inherently paradoxical.

Three points are vital here. First, created boundaries beyond which human beings cannot exercise choice point to an actuality reserved for a transcendent creator. The created order constitutes the boundaries of human freedom within which human beings exercise choices, affecting one another, and creation. Second, the “paradox of human freedom” embodies Truth that places a profound emphasis on human agency and

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81 Ibid.
82 Ibid. Douglas critiques this Niebuhrian contrast as a dualistic mindset. See generally, “Experience and Relevance: Continuing to Learn From Niebuhr and Saiving,” 103.
83 Niebuhr, Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation, 163.
limitations. Hence, human freedom is at once defined by a high emphasis on agency and the fact that human beings are not God—that is, inasmuch as people make choices and determinations in dealing with one another, they are also chosen and determined, therefore, they are limited. Third, an awareness of the “tension between the responsibility for our actions and the inevitability of our sin” is a hallmark of Niebuhr’s conception of freedom. With freedom comes responsibility, in other words; yet sinfulness falls upon the individual even without the exercise of choice and action. Moreover, God’s relationship to human beings is one in which God chooses and determines human beings.

In summary, Niebuhr’s conception of freedom as a standard of justice highlights reason, or the human ability to make basic choices. For Niebuhr, reason is a core aspect of freedom. In his conception of justice, I argued that human freedom includes a striving to go beyond human limitations. For all people, justice demands that freedom include this striving. According to Niebuhr, human beings have almost limitless potential and responsibility to determine their lives. For him, the realization of this potential and the fulfillment of responsibility in both self and other determines the quality of justice. In Niebuhr’s thought, God, not human beings, is the ultimate reality. Therefore, human potential for self-determination is still limited. Hence, Niebuhr’s understanding of freedom is characterized by both a high emphasis on human agency and its limitations, on one hand, and a tension between human responsibility and sin, on the other.

Niebuhr’s conception of freedom articulates both the limits of human freedom and its connection to the character of God. Niebuhr states: “In Christian faith the place of

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Christ as both the revelation of the character of God and of the essential nature of man (the ‘second Adam’) does justice to the fact that man can find his true norm only in the character of God, but is nevertheless a creature who cannot and must not aspire to be God.85 In this regard, although Niebuhr argues the human standard of freedom exists only in the character of God, he also insists that humankind neither can nor should aspire to divinity.86 Human freedom is inextricably connected to God and divine character, but is limited in that humans are limited by the inability to become God.

The simultaneous humanity and divinity of Christ is significant for Niebuhr’s view of human freedom. He writes that Jesus is “at once an historical character and more than an historical character.”87 The sense in which Christ exceeds history reflects the freedom of God, with reference to which human aspirations are rendered both sinful and futile. According to Niebuhr, Christ’s “life transcends the possibilities of history but it remains relevant to all historical striving, for all historical goals can be expressed only in supra-historical terms.”88 The claim of transcendence notwithstanding, Niebuhr is careful not to disconnect Jesus’ life from history.

The transcendent quality of historical goals, for Niebuhr, eschews limitations on the human spirit. He writes: “If stated in purely historical terms [historical goals] will embody some contingency of nature and history and set a false limit for the human spirit.”89 In other words, the human spirit cannot be reasonably constrained by goals whose historical and natural occurrences ignore the even greater potential for freedom in the human spirit. Niebuhr demonstrates this dimension of his understanding of freedom:

85 Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, 163.
86 Ibid.
87 Ibid.
88 Ibid.
89 Ibid., 163-4.
The perfect love of the life of Christ ends on the Cross, after having existed in history. It is therefore supra-historical, not in the sense of setting up a non-historical eternity as the goal of human life; but in the sense that the love which it embodies is the point where history culminates and ends.  

For Niebuhr, the crucifixion and its goal of Christ’s self-giving love evidence the transcendent potential of the human spirit that breaks through the false limits of finite, purely historical goals, and becomes the quintessence of love and the culminating point of history. It is on this basis that Niebuhr critiques what he calls “naturalistic versions of the Christian faith” in which the significance of Jesus is identified as the moral norm demonstrated in his life and teaching. “These versions do not understand the total stature of freedom in which human life stands,” Niebuhr argues, “and are therefore not able to appreciate the necessity of a trans-historical norm of historical life.” For Niebuhr, the “trans-historical norm of historical life” that Jesus, as the Christ, was (and is) is the ground of human freedom. In this way Niebuhr’s conception of human freedom may be aptly characterized as a Christological conception of freedom.

The Human Situation of Freedom

Having discussed some aspects of Niebuhr’s Christological view of freedom, it is crucial to analyze his idea of the problem of meaning as central to the human situation of freedom. In The Nature and Destiny of Man Niebuhr writes

Implicit in the human situation of freedom and in man’s capacity to transcend himself and his world is his inability to construct a world of meaning without finding a source and key to the structure of meaning which transcends the world beyond his own capacity to transcend it. The problem of meaning, which is the basic problem of religion,

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90 Ibid., 164.
91 Ibid.
92 Ibid.
transcends the ordinary rational problem of tracing the relation of things to each other as the freedom of man’s spirit transcends his rational faculties.\textsuperscript{93}

Here both the human inability to construct a world of meaning without resorting to a transcendent source and the implication of the ability to look beyond human limitation point to the location of what Niebuhr calls the “problem of meaning” at the heart of his theology of human freedom. He is clear that the problem of meaning is “a basic problem of religion” that goes beyond rational problems of relationality. In other words, the problem of meaning goes beyond how things relate to one another in an abstract sense. Niebuhr is suggesting that wrestling with the problem of meaning is inevitable to the continued unfolding of human freedom. In this regard, he states that “This problem is not solved without the introduction of a principle of meaning which transcends the world of meaning to be interpreted.”\textsuperscript{94} The word “transcends” disqualifies any principle invented or originated by human beings. Indeed, nothing short of divinity is capable of this task.

Because Niebuhr insists that the problem of meaning can only be solved by God, he identifies as idolatry all other meaning-making attempts: “If some vitality of existence, or even some subordinate principle of coherence is used as the principle of meaning, man is involved in idolatry.”\textsuperscript{95} He defines the impulse of idolatry as “lift[ing] some finite and contingent element of existence into the eminence of the divine.”\textsuperscript{96} Thus the attempt to identify the meaning of human existence in terms of something intrinsic to or inherent in human existence is idolatry and a fundamental betrayal of God. God alone answers the question of meaning. Here, Niebuhr alludes to the contrivance of oppressive systems that

\textsuperscript{93} Ibid., 164.
\textsuperscript{94} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{95} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{96} Ibid.
presume to create meaningful social realities, but actually create social misery and meaninglessness through logics of dominance.

Elaborating on the concept of idolatry, Niebuhr insists that “The most obvious forms of idolatry are those in which the world of meaning is organized around a centre of natural or historical vitality, such as the life of a tribe or nation, which is patently contingent and not ultimate.” This explanation points poignantly to racism as a form of group-idolatry in which a particular racial group’s existence defines and controls the dominant reality, including, for instance, a society’s laws, norms, values, customs, and mores.

Tribalism, nationalism, and racism are large, macro-level forms of idolatry, but Niebuhr also acknowledges less grand forms of idolatry; what he refers to as “more covert forms of idolatry.” He explains that, “the world is perceived in terms of mechanistic coherence which has no place for the freedom which reveals itself in human consciousness.” Here, he is pushing against the “deification of reason.” Moreover, in Niebuhr’s thought, although the deification of rational coherence constitutes a hidden or micro-level form of idolatry, it also serves the construction of racist nationalist ideologies that view the advancements of science as the products of superior cultures and nationalities.

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97 Ibid., 165.
98 Ibid.
99 Ibid.
100 Ibid.
Niebuhr profoundly critiques the presumptiveness of Enlightenment liberal Christianity that reduced rationality to a demi-god. In other words, reason becomes the exclusive standard by which to establish meaning. He explains:

Every effort to identify meaning with rationality implies the deification of reason. That such an identification represents idolatry and that the laws of reason and logic are incapable of fully comprehending the total meaning of the world, is attested by the fact that life and history are full of contradictions which cannot be resolved in terms of rational principles.¹⁰¹

For Niebuhr, the mass of contradictions in human life defy logical and/or rational resolution and are, therefore, evidence that deifying reason is an idolatrous obstruction to the human being, (being fully imago Dei), and that rationality cannot exclusively solve the problem of meaning. Hence, it becomes clear that the freedom which reveals itself in human consciousness, according to Niebuhr’s earlier observation, demands a transcendent principle, in wrestling with meaning, that does not eschew, but responds to the contradictions of life that hang over freedom as revealed in human consciousness. While Niebuhr avers that “rational principles of coherence” are higher principles, he insists on their inadequacy as a system of meaning nonetheless.¹⁰²

Niebuhr also argues that the fact of self-transcendence (i.e., the human mind which goes above and beyond normal physical human experience) “leads inevitably to the search for a God who transcends the world.” Whereas an ordinary coherence principle might find the fact that human life is beset with contradictions fundamentally incompatible with existence of meaning; in Niebuhr’s thought, the tension generated by contradictions between joy and sorrow, hope and despair, death and life, etc., culminates,

¹⁰¹ Ibid.
¹⁰² Ibid.
paradoxically, in a meaningful response to the contradictions of life. Thus, rather than render human freedom incoherent; in Niebuhr’s thought the contradiction of life and death embodied by Christ in the events of the Cross and the resurrection, seem to actually *enlarge* human freedom.\textsuperscript{103}

Niebuhr characterizes the “real situation” of human freedom as follows: “The real situation is that man who is made in the image of God is unable, precisely because of those qualities in him which are designated as ‘image of God,’ to be satisfied with a god who is made in man’s image.”\textsuperscript{104} He continues, “By virtue of his capacity for self-transcendence he can look beyond himself sufficiently to know that a projection of himself is not God.”\textsuperscript{105} The human capacity for self-transcendence is, for Niebuhr, never a vehicle to an assumption of the status of divinity. Be that as it may, this capacity is indispensable to the very idea of what it means to be free. It is what allows human beings to escape the illusion of their own omnipotence—or self-imprisonment in a grandiose delusion.

However, Niebuhr warns that “This does not mean that he will not commit idolatry and make God in his own image. Man is tempted to the sin of idolatry and constantly succumbs to it because in contemplating the power and dignity of his freedom he forgets the degree of his limitations.”\textsuperscript{106} Here, a classic sense of Niebuhr’s realism about the human condition of sin, the unavoidable preoccupation with self-interest, and,

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\item Notably, Niebuhr’s view of contradiction does not escape the Kierkegardian paradox of human freedom mentioned earlier (see pgs 20-21), where “‘Truth [in the human situation] is exactly the identity of choosing and determining and of being chosen and determined.’” Niebuhr, *The Nature and Destiny of Man: A Christian Interpretation*, 163.
\item Ibid., 166.
\item Ibid.
\item Ibid., 166.
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self-worship implicit in which is a relentless desire for power is evident. From the very emphasis on temptation to idolatry, we see a critical reminder of a profound human weakness and the futility of resistance as humankind remains submerged in the illusion of power beyond “the power and dignity” of human freedom. Also, being less than divinity, humankind’s contemplation of the closeness of the proximity of human freedom to the power and dignity of God’s freedom remains a significant challenge that leaves human beings either in the abyss of idolatry or tittering on the edge in ostensible perpetuity.

Summary and Assessment

In this chapter, I have discussed the major components of Niebuhr’s understanding of justice, including love (or perfect justice), and relative justice (and its concomitants of rights-centered justice, self-interest, resistance, equality, non-simple equality, and freedom). For Niebuhr, the justice that is possible in this world is multifaceted and relative (i.e., it stands in relation to love) bringing justice closer to love yet struggling to achieve balance between the interests of the self and other.

The strengths of Niebuhr’s conception of justice in my view include the following. In particular, I find valuable his insight that although relative justice is not perfect justice (love), by its relative nature, it is capable of amelioration as it exists in connection to love and ceaselessly strives to balance interests. Also, although Niebuhr posits that self-interest manifests both legitimately and illegitimately, he points to an ethical and moral obligation to confront and /or resist illegitimate self-interest. Importantly this assertion avoids moral ambiguity by distinguishing between types of
self-interest which characterize the relationship between the dominant self and oppressed minorities.

Another important aspect of Niebuhr’s conception of justice is his notion of equality. Equality challenges privilege which cannot be justified on the basis of authentic differences in needs and social roles. Particularly compelling is the implication that privilege should not escape moral justification.

Still another remarkable aspect of Niebuhr’s relative justice is imaginative justice (advancing a notion of non-simple equality). What is particularly invaluable about this understanding of relative justice is the courage of its moral imagination that prioritizes special needs in a way that goes beyond a narrow calculation of rights. Hence, Niebuhr’s imaginative justice converges with Sample’s notion of the common good. Then, his conception of freedom as a standard of relative justice points cogently to the vastness of the human capacity for self-determination. However, Niebuhr’s insistence on human limitations crucially demonstrates that although freedom allows human beings to reach their highest potential, it does not validate dominance and oppression.

The strengths of Niebuhr’s conception of justice notwithstanding, there are several critical points that I want to call into question. In his definition of relative justice, Niebuhr stated that relative justice involves the “specification of rights and duties and the balancing of life forces.” In a world preoccupied with the specification of rights and duties on paper, but less so with respect to the implementation and enforcement of the substantive rights of people, especially those in the margins of society, the specifying of rights and duties, ultimately, becomes meaningless. The idea of the “balancing of life forces” conjures an image of the scales of justice, which in the Black imagination, for
instance, suggests the partial nature of justice. However, the scales of justice implicitly communicates a profound striving to fulfill, even if imperfectly, the promises of love in a world of sin.

Niebuhr’s notion of the “deceit of others” as a distortion of interest is problematic where “others” are oppressed by the structures of power controlled by a dominant “self.” I am not claiming that oppressed persons are exempt from deceit; rather, I am suggesting that the category of deceit itself, when applied to the oppressed, is a judgment against them that is tainted by the interest of the dominant self. Put another way, the interest of the dominant self defines deceit.

The bedrock of the problem is that where the oppressed is the “other” and the “self” is the oppressor, there is such a staggering imbalance in social position and power that the criteria implied in a judgment about the “deceit of others” is profoundly suspect. In light of such a massive imbalance, it makes little sense to bring judgment (or judge as deceitful) a group that is already trampled over by an oppressive system and corrupted norms. Indeed, what is perceived as deceit in and by this system may be the only justifiable countermeasure against the crushing effects of said system. To judge the interest of an oppressed minority as “distorted,” and particularly to assume that it is as distorted as the interests of dominant groups is always premature. Such a judgment is greatly obscured by the persistent denial of justice and the perpetuation of an oppressed group’s marginalized status.

As we have seen, Sample interprets Niebuhr as suggesting that there is a distortive effect to interest.\textsuperscript{107} This point raises crucial questions about whether this distortion arises \textit{internally} (within the group/individual) or \textit{externally} (i.e., from other sources). Indeed,

\textsuperscript{107} See pg 25.
the examples given by Sample suggest internal distortion (pretension, deceit, etc.). If the sources of distortion are internal, the implication is that interest could be properly aligned with common good, but, in fact, is distorted by group and even individual susceptibility to sin (the internality of selfishness, etc.). My argument is that this Niebuhrian understanding of interest does not take into consideration that interest can be distorted externally.

The following discussion in “The Negro Issue in America” is illustrative. Niebuhr states: “The Negroes have more rights in this war than in the last one. Yet they are more resentful of the injustice done them. The reason for the increasing resentment undoubtedly lies in the fact that a much larger number of Negroes have by education and other advances achieved the ability to resent and to resist injustice than in the past.”

First, if resentment is conceived as bitter indignation at being treated unjustly, to suggest that the unjustly treated group has “achieved the ability” to be resentful (and resistant) sounds like patronizing condescension. Such a view ignores the fact that resentment, in this sense, is not an achievement or something realized, but an organic response active in the awareness of an oppressed community. As such, resentment concerning unjust treatment vigorously presents even in the first hour of oppression.

Second, Niebuhr’s proposition that education and other advances account for “increasing resentment” on the part of African Americans about injustice further indicates indifference on the part of white Americans to the African Americans’ organic resentment. White Americans’ indifference is external. This is not to say education

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contributed nothing to African Americans’ resentment or partially accounts for an expanded awareness of injustice; rather, my point is that neither education nor other advances account for an intense resentment of racism and injustice. That resentment has been in the Black community, historically and presently. African American slave rebellions were evidence of a wider and deeper resentment among enslaved Africans in America, and the 1960s Civil Rights movement and I argue that the current Black Lives Matter movement evidence more contemporary manifestations of resentment of and resistance to injustice.

In my view, Niebuhr’s apathy to organic resentment of racism and injustice, and the attribution of such resentment to factors like education and “other advances,” not only questions the group’s capacity to respond to oppression, but distorts its interest which constitutes the focus of its claims against the self (or dominant culture). The distortion occurs in the sense that the group’s interest—one component of which is its right to survive—is misrepresented or implicitly presumed to be non-existent. In Niebuhr’s thinking, interest is divorced from Black identity and experiences. This divorce amounts to an external distortion of interest (or legitimate self-interest) of the oppressed. Hence, instead of the interest of African Americans being a robust aspect of the calculations of justice, such group interest becomes a mere taxidermy of concepts that is disconnected from the living reality of the Black experience.

A view consistent with Niebuhr’s ostensible apathy to Black organic resentment and its consequence of externally distorting interest is evident in another statement Niebuhr makes about African Americans in *Moral Man and Immoral Society*. To set the context, Niebuhr is arguing one of the central theses of his Christian realism; namely, that
while a morality of unadulterated selflessness may be present in individual life, it is improbable in the collective/social group. In other words, he believed that groups are inherently self-interested when interacting with other groups. Thus Niebuhr claims, “Every effort to transfer a pure morality of disinterestedness to group relations has failed.”¹¹⁰ From this statement, Niebuhr goes on not to demonstrate the veracity of his thesis in the African American community, but to assert that the “Negro of America have practiced it [disinterestedness] quite consistently since the civil war.” He continues, “They did not rise against their masters during the Civil War and remained remarkably loyal to them. There social attitudes since that time, until a very recent date have been compounded of genuine religious virtues of forgiveness and forbearance, and a certain social inertia which was derived not from religious virtue but from racial weakness.”¹¹¹ This assertion seems to suggest an authentic yet questionable devotion to religious principle and social passivity based on collective cultural weakness.

My point is not just that Niebuhr’s idea of an authentic yet, implicitly, questionable Black religiosity and collective cultural deficiency distorts Black interest (or self-interest); it is that his conclusion that African Americans practiced a morality of disinterestedness actually eclipses it. Such an interpretation implies that by failing to hold on to their own interest/self-interest, African Americans accepted injustice or would not fight for justice. Indeed, Niebuhr goes on to actually charge African Americans with “social inertia” and racial weakness.¹¹² In essence, then, Niebuhr appears to believe that African Americans shut themselves out of the possibilities of relative justice. In my view,

¹¹¹ Ibid.
¹¹² Niebuhr, Moral Man and Immoral Society, 268.
this thinking ignores the complexities of oppression and disregards the plight and experiences of the powerless under immense structures of domination.

Also, another point of concern is Niebuhr’s argument that for law to be effective in a community, a majority of the community must give its assent. In one sense, Niebuhr can be understood as arguing that the will of the community takes precedence over the rule of law, or that in a democratic society, law should not overlook the will of the people, or that even equality requires communal assent. On this point he argues that the ‘separate but equal’ doctrine in the Supreme Court’s 1896 *Plessy versus Ferguson* decision was good for its time.\textsuperscript{113} Although he goes on to state his support for the 1954 *Brown versus The Board of Education* decision which overturned *Plessy*, he maintains that the *Brown* decision would not have been a good decision in 1896. He explains: “for we must remember that the present Supreme Court decision would, at the beginning of the century, merely have prompted revolt. And revolt that is so widespread that police power cannot suppress it represents the defeat both of the law and the ideal.”\textsuperscript{114} Niebuhr was cautious about laws to mandate equality when social practices and social conscience are so wildly out of step with this ideal.

It appears that Niebuhr gives little consideration to the fact that the effect of the ‘separate but equal’ doctrine was, in fact, separate and *unequal* treatment of White and Black Americans. The fact is that Black children did not have access to high quality schools like their White counterparts. The segregated schools that Black students attended were grossly underfunded. According to Kamina A. Pinder and Evan R.


\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., 150.
Hanson, racial inequality in allocating educational resources for schools was the norm in this country well into the 1930s. The disproportionate allocation by white school boards of state education monies to white schools was common practice. The consequences of this practice were particularly pronounced in the south since funding levels were calculated according to the total number of school-aged children and 90% of Black Americans still lived in the south at that time.\textsuperscript{115} The “separate but equal” doctrine successfully implemented separation between Blacks and Whites, but by no standard of any kind did it ever implement, enforce, or even encourage equality. Niebuhr misses this.

Further, Niebuhr seems to suggest that the dangerous possibility of white segregationist revolt against a judicial mandate of equality is better avoided at all costs, even though such avoidance very clearly meant the continued oppression, degradation, and dehumanization of African Americans. Better an unequal status quo that continued centuries of racist oppression than risk the discomfort and rage provoked by legislating equality, Niebuhr argues.

Niebuhr’s understanding of justice posits the inadequacy of human efforts to achieve perfect justice (or love) in society. Yet he maintains that relative justice is still possible through conscious social engagement to contend with the threats posed by powerful groups in their quest to perpetuate dominance. Relative justice therefore does not ignore the claims of the powerful but, because of its connection to love, calls for resistance of the illegitimate-self interests of groups.

Chapter 2

Niebuhr’s Conception of Power

Having explored Niebuhr’s conception of justice in chapter one, the purpose of this chapter is to elucidate Niebuhr’s conception of power. Niebuhr depicts power as a neutral phenomenon which God uses with perfect benevolence and human beings are inclined to use corruptly. This particular focus in Niebuhr’s understanding of power is important because it reveals the nature, forms, and function of power which, I argue, have profound implications for order and the struggle for justice. First, I will consider four factors that illuminate Niebuhr’s understanding of the nature of power, and how God and human beings use it. Second, I will discuss Niebuhr’s forms of power in community. Third, I will analyze two human characteristics that evidence the importance of power as an organizing force. Last, I explicate Niebuhr’s conception of the balance of power which he asserts is a principle of justice. My argument is that the power struggle among groups which Niebuhr demonstrates—rooted in group susceptibility to use power corruptly—offers no lasting hope of justice.

Defining Power

In the opening pages of *The Nature and Destiny of Man* Niebuhr posits that

To recognize that only God can perfectly combine power and goodness is to understand that power is not evil of itself; but that all power in history is in peril of becoming an instrument of injustice because it is itself one of the competing powers in human society,
even while it seeks to become (as is in the case of the power of government) a transcendent power through which subordinate conflicts are harmonized.¹

Four factors are critical in this statement. First, power is a neutral force. Second, humans are capable of only imperfect combinations of power and goodness; that is to say, in human hands, power always corrupts goodness to some degree. Third, God’s mergence of power and goodness evidences the neutrality of power. Fourth, the competitive nature of power in history exposes power’s existence on the edge of becoming a servant of injustice, and still seeking a place in the service of justice.

The significance of the neutrality of power in Niebuhr’s view seems to underscore the instrumentality of power. If power is instrumental, then Niebuhr seems to take a utilitarian approach to the use of power that views power as incapable of being appropriated to only a single side of the moral equation. This idea is consistent with Niebuhr’s Christian realism in that groups are always engaged in a struggle for power. In this sense, power can be used either positively or negatively.

The second factor, that human beings can only combine power and goodness imperfectly, echoes Niebuhr’s insistence that the human aspiration to divine status is futile.² This view cautions against misplaced confidence in the human ability to use power well. It seems, for Niebuhr, the imperfect use of power is part of being human.

However, God’s mergence of power and goodness, the third factor, suggests the way in which God’s goodness itself becomes an expression of power without being corrupted by power in the process. Niebuhr describes divine coincidence of power and goodness like this: “The God who is both powerful and good by reason of being the

¹ Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, 22.
² See pgs 39-41.
source of all power, and not some particular power in history, cannot remain good if he becomes a particular power in human society.”³ At the same time, Niebuhr argues that “Perfect goodness in history can be symbolized only by the disavowal of power.”⁴ Here it appears that goodness stands, in Niebuhr’s understanding, as a kind of power-non-power paradox. In other words, to embody unadulterated goodness in history, God who is the origin of power, through Christ, rejects corrupt power in human history.

Yet, the notion of disavowal of power does not categorically separate power from goodness. If that were the case, the power-non-power paradox would collapse. Rather, the disavowal of power to which Niebuhr refers is the denial of power in the context of history in order for “perfect goodness” to be manifested. To Niebuhr, Jesus is evidence of this denial of power, whom he describes as “the One appeared who rejected all concepts of Messianic dominion and became ‘a suffering servant.’”⁵ While, for Niebuhr, the combination of goodness and power in divine action is not a problem, the misuse and abuse of power in human societies show that not even God can embody goodness in human history without distancing God-self from power.

The fourth factor, the idea that power is competitive, speaks to a deep struggle for power’s appropriation and expansion; a struggle which itself makes use of power. This means power functions as both means and end. As compared to a schema in which power is the means and justice the end, power expressed as a means-end schema is more likely to result in power being used as a tool of injustice than of justice. This is not to suggest that power as means-end schema cannot be used in the service of justice; rather,

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³ Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, 22.
⁴ Ibid.
⁵ Ibid.
following Niebuhr’s insight about human inability to combine power and goodness, it is
to recognize that power as means and end is still power in the hands of human beings.
Crucially, Niebuhr recognizes that, “The very power which organizes human society and
establishes justice, also generates injustice by its preponderance of power.”⁶ Power
establishes justice as easily as it generates injustice.

Niebuhr conceives of power as neutral which means that power does not belong
to any particular side of a conflict. For him, corrupt uses of power are rooted in the
human condition of sin. Therefore, to embody goodness in the world, Jesus avoids the
human preoccupation with and nefarious uses of power. Further, Niebuhr’s conception
insists that human group interaction is characterized by an ongoing struggle for power. In
this context, power sometimes serves as both means and end. While, for Niebuhr, this
scheme does not suggest that power is exclusively a tool of injustice, it implies that
power is more susceptible to being an instrument of injustice than of justice.

Forms of Power in Society

Niebuhr recognized that power plays a role in community life that is as
unavoidable as it is indispensable. He argues that power is the governing force in all
communities.⁷ He points to the two strands of social power: first, the “coercive and
organizing power” of government, and second, “the equilibrium of power” or a balancing
kind of power.⁸ He avers that both types of power are indispensable and, moreover, that

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⁶ Ibid., 21.
⁷ Ibid., 257.
⁸ Ibid., 257.
neither social nor moral progress on any level can end society’s reliance on either type of power.\textsuperscript{9} Here, Niebuhr points to the absolute necessity of power and emphasizes society’s critical dependence on it as an organizing and social balancing force.

Although Niebuhr neatly classifies forms of power, he quickly admits that power can easily sink into tyranny, attempting to create a coerced social unity. Because of the way tyranny impairs “the freedom and vitality of all individual members,” he characterizes tyranny as “a travesty on brotherhood [sic].”\textsuperscript{10} It is not governmental power alone that is subject to corruption. Niebuhr writes that balancing power, too, is replete with the potential for anarchy\textsuperscript{11} In neither of its appendages does power escape Niebuhr’s assertions about the dangers they involve. Indeed, he characterizes tyranny and anarchy as “The twin evils,…the Scylla and Charybdis between which the frail bark of social justice must sail.”\textsuperscript{12} Just communities are thus constantly imperiled by the overreach of power in each of its social forms.

However, to avoid a narrow understanding of power, Niebuhr submits that power in human society exists in infinite variety. “The spiritual and physical faculties of man are able, in their unity and interrelation, to create an endless variety of types and combinations of power, from that of pure reason to that of pure physical force,” he writes. In this statement Niebuhr cautions against the tendency to limit the forms power takes to the most visible and obvious ones, especially in societies mired in the complexities of racial, social, political, and economic oppression; xenophobia, and religious intolerance.

\textsuperscript{9} Ibid., 258.
\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 258.
\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 258.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid. 258.
Here, I am arguing that although Niebuhr pinpoints the dominant forms that power takes, he strongly cautions against overly simplistic perspectives of power that do not reflect reality where injustice exists in many forms.

Two Characteristics in Human Nature and the Use of Force

A key feature of Niebuhr’s thought is the justification he proffers for the legitimate use of force. Niebuhr elaborates the consequences he feared would follow from abandoning the threat of force: “it would upset whatever equilibrium of social forces existed at the moment; it would thereby increase the possibility of successful recalcitrance or resistance on the part of the group or interest, prepared to use every available resource.”¹³ Social researcher, Andy Ulrich explains Niebuhr’s attachment to the use of force in terms of the high value Niebuhr places on social order. In Niebuhr’s mind, justice is not possible in the absence of order.¹⁴ Maintaining order, in turn, requires the possibility of recourse to force. In this way, order and justice are not the absence of power, but a balance of power.

In his articulation of a necessary recourse to force, Niebuhr states that “Pure physical force is always a last resort in individual relations.”¹⁵ This statement is true in some respects, especially in a world of equals or of privileged people who, at least, under the law are treated as equals. However, as Niebuhr’s discussion of equality suggested,

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¹³ Ibid., 260.
there are many who are not treated equally under the law and against whom arbitrary physical force like law enforcement violence is a daily reality.

While Niebuhr does not equate power with force (admitting that power is “always much more than physical compulsion”), he nonetheless sees the two as closely connected. “Power,” he argues in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, “never exists without an alloy of physical force.”\(^{16}\) Niebuhr identifies two characteristics of human nature that evince the importance of power as an organizing force. The first characteristic is “vitality and reason, of body and soul.”\(^{17}\) The second characteristic is “the force of human sin, the persistent tendency to regard ourselves as more important than anyone else and to view a common problem from the standpoint of our own interest.”\(^ {18}\) I will treat each characteristic in turn.

What, exactly, Niebuhr means by *vitality*, the key theme of the first characteristic of human nature in which he grounds his justification for the use of power, is not self-evident to the modern reader. Therefore, I turn to Tex Sample’s exploration of the meaning of this concept for Niebuhr in *Human Nature, Interest, and Power*. Sample refers to Christian ethicist Ronald Stone’s observation that Niebuhr understood power as “the vitality of human life and is almost synonymous with energy.”\(^{19}\) By *vitality* Niebuhr means something that closely approximates energy. Sample thus concludes that “power is bound up with the vitalities of human being as both spirit and nature.”\(^{20}\) In sum,

\(^{16}\) Ibid., 20.
\(^{17}\) Ibid., 258-9.
\(^{18}\) Ibid., 258-9.
\(^{20}\) Ibid.
Niebuhr’s idea of vitality refers to the energy and/or force that is the natural byproduct of humanity’s unique nature-spirit combination.

Niebuhr does not directly connect human vitality to the problem of sin; yet he insists that this energy still constitutes a justification of power and, hence, relates to the justification he offers for retaining the possibility of the use of force. His rationale is as follows: “The first characteristic, the unity of vitality and reason in human nature, guarantees that egoistic purposes will be pursued with all vital resources which an individual or collective will may control. Thus social restraints upon these anti-social purposes must be equally armed with all available resources.”21 In essence, human vitality can be harnessed to serve egoistic purposes. Thus, even though human vitality is not sinful, it can be used in ways that resist, corrode, or undercut justice.

Niebuhr appears to view the second characteristic of human nature as the most crucial justification of power. Sin, he writes, is “so stubborn that mere moral or rational suasion does not suffice to restrain one person from taking advantage of another.”22 By arguing that moral and rational means are insufficient to prevent people from exploiting one another, Niebuhr is implying that sinful stubbornness is so persistent in human nature that the use of force is permissible to prevent the rampant exploitation that would otherwise occur without such a check on human proclivities.23

For the purposes of this project, my interest is less in the second characteristic of human nature that Niebuhr views as the primary justification for the use of force than it is in his discussion of vitality, the first characteristic of human nature. He writes that in a

22 Ibid., 259.
23 Ibid.
social situation in which a group is contemplating the possibility of waging some form of resistance to power, reasonable calculations are made “of the powers and vitalities, involved in a social situation.” The higher the likelihood that resistance will be successful, the higher the probability that resistance will take place. He concludes by musing that, “The invariable correlation of the two [probabilities] is a nice symbol of the unity of vitality and reason in all social existence.” Beyond just being what Niebuhr calls a “nice” illustration of “the unity of vitality and reason,” this discussion alludes to a profound and noteworthy complexity of resistance to power.

On the surface, Niebuhr could be read simply as saying increased chances that a group’s resistance will be successful can lead to actual resistance against the legitimate power of the state. Niebuhr was especially concerned about situations in which such resistance goes against the common good. I argue that the spirit and fervor of the powerful strategically invested in estimating and advancing their rights and interests over those of the powerless may *themselves* be embodied by structures of power in favor of the dominant group. In such a scenario, not only are resisters not threatened by force, they are actually *protected by* force, unlike the vulnerable against whom their interests are guarded. In this situation, resistance to justice is disguised in such a way that power defends recalcitrance.

With respect to Niebuhr’s two characteristics in human nature that I have discussed, Niebuhr considers human sin to be the most important justification for power functioning as restraint. However, Niebuhr’s discussion of the unity of vitality and

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24 Ibid., 260.
25 Ibid.
reason reveals a formidable neutral capacity in groups and individuals that either resists oppression and produces justice or resists justice and produces oppression. For Niebuhr, it appears that power as a check on the unity of vitality and reason probably inclines such unity to the former rather than the latter.

Although power serves as a check on reason, powers can emerge based on the way human faculties like reason are used. Niebuhr points to the intermingling of reason and power. The faculty of reason is often regarded as inherently impartial. Yet, Niebuhr notes that when reason is used egoistically (i.e., “the instrument of the ego in advancing its claims against another”), it loses its impartiality. In such cases, reason is used as a “‘power’ which supports the claims of one life against another.”²⁶ Reason is not an incorruptible moral faculty that is inherently either kind or just.

This understanding of reason as a form of power is not merely a reference to the abstract individual capacity or the functioning of reason in individual interactions. It is also a reference to aspects of the machine of government or state apparatus whose roles are supposed to be performed and functions executed according to criteria of impartiality and rational objectivity (e.g., the justice system, and specifically, the courts) in a democratic society. In some instances, components of the machine of government (e.g., the courts) may be appropriated by parties who are part of the dominant social group and who permit partiality and/objectivity to be perverted. In such cases, the judicial apparatus, symbolic of the power of reason, is misused to support or defend the arbitrary claims of “one life against another.”

²⁶ Ibid., 260-61.
Reason is not the only faculty that co-mingles with and generates power. Another faculty, this one spiritual in nature, that Niebuhr discusses is soul force. He explains that soul force “may consist of spiritual vitalities of various kinds, mental and emotional energy, the possession or pretension of virtue, the prestige of an heroic life, or of a gentle birth.” If reason is often regarded as an impartial and incorruptible moral faculty, how much more so this spiritual power. Yet, in a footnote, Niebuhr opines that “Gandhi’s identification of ‘soul force’ with non-egoistic motives and ‘body force’ with egoistic ones is almost completely mistaken.” To this end, he writes that it is possible for one person to enslave another “purely by ‘soul’ force.” Thus for Niebuhr, even soul force, insofar as it is a form of power can be put to just as well as unjust ends.

Of course slavery—whether literal or spiritual—was the last thing Gandhi had in mind. Gandhi’s notion of soul force, or satyagraha, involves a deep spiritual openness to truth, self-renouncing love, and the cultivation of a non-violent way of being in the world that is not egoistically driven. Niebuhr is less trusting than Gandhi of any human capacity, even at the soul-level, to extricate oneself from the influence of the ego. Hence, he rejects Gandhi’s dichotomy between the ego-driven body force and the non-ego-driven soul-force.

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27 Ibid., 261.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid., 261.
Niebuhr’s Conception of the Balance of Power

At this point, I turn to Reinhold Niebuhr’s discussion of the balance of power. To understand Niebuhr’s conception of the balance of power, it is first necessary to review the features of human social life that, in his view, make achieving and maintaining such a balance so imperative. In *The Nature and Destiny of Man* Niebuhr identifies two such features. The first is the will to power, which he describes simply as “Will seeks to dominate will;” and the second is the conflict of interests. In *The Nature and Destiny of Man* Niebuhr identifies two such features. The first is the will to power, which he describes simply as “Will seeks to dominate will;” and the second is the conflict of interests. In *The Nature and Destiny of Man* Niebuhr identifies two such features. The first is the will to power, which he describes simply as “Will seeks to dominate will;” and the second is the conflict of interests. In *The Nature and Destiny of Man* Niebuhr identifies two such features. The first is the will to power, which he describes simply as “Will seeks to dominate will;” and the second is the conflict of interests.30 In the face of these features, Niebuhr argues that power must be balanced: “The domination of one life by another is avoided most successfully by an equilibrium of powers and vitalities, so that weakness does not invite enslavement by the strong.”31 The only way to prevent injustice and enslavement is to establish a “tolerable equilibrium”.32 Notably, this characterization of balance of power ties it closely to Niebuhr’s conception of justice (see generally, chapter one). He writes that the principle of the equilibrium of power is “a principle of justice in so far as it prevents domination and enslavement.”33 At the same time, insofar as a balance of power contains potentially perpetually unresolved covert conflicts that, if the balance is even slightly disturbed, can result in overt conflicts; he notes that it can also function as a principle of anarchy.34

What does Niebuhr mean by equilibrium or balance? In basic terms, it means the “will-to-power” of one member of community is checked by the “counter-pressure of

30 Ibid., 265.
31 Ibid.
32 Ibid.
33 Ibid., 266.
34 Ibid.
power” from another.35 Indeed, ethicist William Schweiker notes that in Reinhold Niebuhr’s Christian realism, it “is clear that within history, power must meet power.”36 Niebuhr characterizes the “equilibrium of vitality” that a balance of power achieves as “an approximation of brotherhood within the limits of conditions imposed by human selfishness.”37 He is adamant to keep ‘brotherhood’ and the equilibrium that a balance of power achieves conceptually distinct, insisting, “equilibrium of power is not brotherhood.”38 Because of the limitations imposed by human selfishness, all that can be hoped for in Niebuhr’s understanding of the balance of power is something close to, but not quite, human brotherhood. In this regard, Niebuhr’s realism eschews hope that seeks to look beyond real social conditions.

Although Niebuhr confidently calls for an “organizing center” (like government) to impartially arbitrate conflicts and prevent injustice in the balancing of power, he does not ignore the fact that government itself is subject to moral ambiguity.39 He highlights two corruptions of government: government expressing the “imperial impulse” of the dominance of one group within a community over the rest of the community, and/or government generating its own “imperial impulses” toward the whole community.40 He describes the manner in which government might enact such corruptions:

It would be tempted to destroy the vitality and freedom of component elements in the community in the name of ‘order.’ It would identify its particular form of order with the principle of order itself, and thus place all rebels against its authority under the moral

35 Ibid., 265.
37 Niebuhr, The Nature and Destiny of Man, 265.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid., 266-7.
40 Ibid., 267.
disadvantage of revolting against order *per se*. This is the sin of idolatry and pretension, in which all government is potentially involved."

In this way Niebuhr calls attention to the danger of uncritical trust in government and political power structures. Yet, implicitly, Niebuhr urges individuals and groups opposed to such abuses not to give in to either active government violence or to what he calls “uncoerced submission.” By the latter, Niebuhr advises against acquiescence to what a government wants based on political expediency. He insists, “It is the highest achievement of democratic societies that they embody the principle of resistance to government within the principle of government itself. The citizen is thus armed with ‘constitutional power’ to resist the unjust exactions of government.” This assertion is a powerful reminder to the racially oppressed, the economically disadvantaged and exploited, and the politically disenfranchised that United States citizens are clad in constitutional armor that prepares them for battle with government injustice. Yet, standing by without legal armor are non-citizens—for instance, the Dreamers who are children of immigrants (non-citizens) born in the United States who are threatened with deportation. To them, Niebuhr says nothing.

In one sense, it is probably not be surprising that, as a White male who was limited by his historical context of White cultural dominance and White male hegemony, Niebuhr’s concern about government abuse of power is limited to United States citizens. However, as a theologian and ethicist, Niebuhr engages with themes of power and justice as theological and ethical norms. These standards—as articulated by Niebuhr—although addressed in a particular historical context are not limited to that context. Therefore,

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41 Ibid.
42 Ibid.
43 Ibid., 268.
Niebuhr’s understandings of power and justice will continue to be tested for their relevance to moral and ethical problems (like the fairness of government policy toward Dreamers at both the national and state levels).

**Summary and Assessment**

To summarize, in this chapter I have discussed the major components of Niebuhr’s discussion of power in *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, including the neutral nature of power, its corrupt uses by people, the forms and function of power, and their implications for the struggle for justice in society. For Niebuhr, while God uses power for good, because of sin and egoistic purposes, human beings are inclined to appropriate power for corrupt and unjust ends. Yet, he understands power to be a neutral force that is both necessary and unavoidable in human society. Therefore, Niebuhr maintains that order and justice require not the elimination of power, but its use as an organizing and balancing force.

The strengths of Niebuhr’s conception of power in my view include his critique of reason as corruptible, his definition of the balance of power, and his explication of the imperial impulse. In particular, I find valuable his insight that reason is not immune from being misused, especially when reason as a form of power embodies arbitrary systems that perpetuate injustice. This point is crucial because it exposes the illusion that standards of impartiality, for instance, cannot be perverted. Hence, even rational manifestations of dominant power are subject to moral challenge.

Second, in defining the balance of power, Niebuhr states that the “will-to-power” of one is checked by the “counter-pressure of power” of another. This understanding of
power denies the cultural logic that the powerless are inherently incapable of acquiring the power necessary to successfully struggle against injustice. Third, Niebuhr’s discussion of the imperial impulse shows that in spite of his high regard for the indispensable role of government, he was willing to confront the proverbial dangers of oppression posed by the most powerful entity in an organized society. This idea is helpful because government, as an entity wielding enormous power—through a Niebuhrian lens—can be kept from presenting itself as one whose actions, laws, and policies should be uncritically accepted.

The strengths of Niebuhr’s conception of power notwithstanding, there are several critical points that I want to call into question and/or push back against. First, Niebuhr states that “Pure physical force is always a last resort in individual relations.”44 This statement is true in some respects, especially in a world of equals or of people who, at least, under the law are treated as equals. However, Niebuhr’s statement is questionable when one considers the American landscape and its history of social and economic inequality. In the historical context of slavery in America, enslaved Africans were daily subjected to pure physical violence. Today, in the criminal justice system, and the epidemic of arbitrary police violence against Black men, pure physical force, contrary to Niebuhr’s suggestion, is far from being “a last resort in individual relations.”45 Too often, physical force seems to be the tool of choice.

In his discussion of the “frail bark of justice,” not only does Niebuhr call attention to the precarious position between tyranny and anarchy through which social justice must navigate in society; he paints a picture of a far less than robust life of social justice which

44 Ibid., 261.
45 Ibid.
will perpetually travel between the two potential threats in both the power of government and the social balance of power. Niebuhr is convinced that: “No possible refinement of social forces and political harmonies can eliminate the potential contradiction to brotherhood which is implicit in the two political instruments of brotherhood—the organization of power and the balance of power.” This assertion makes no room for an ultimate resolution of the tensions and conflicts between forces of social, political, and economic injustice, on the one hand, and the ethical forces of justice, good, and right, on the other. In Niebuhr’s thought, there is no opening up to the emergence of some utopian state to which society may have evolved because of political, social, or educational refinement. Niebuhr remained adamantly critical of what he saw as ‘liberal romanticism’ that failed to grapple with the reality of power and human nature.

Niebuhr’s “frail bark of social justice” is a compelling image; yet, not all compelling images accurately represent reality. I believe that while Niebuhr correctly points to anarchy as the potential offspring of the unsuccessful social balancing of power, he does not make a necessary initial distinction between tyranny and anarchy. The crushing and pervasive reality of tyranny in human social life has so often threatened the mere survival of the less socially, racially, and economically powerful. Consequently, anarchy has been the end result of an active—and even violent—cry for social, political, and economic justice in some instances.

Niebuhr’s representation of anarchy as an alien and disruptive force, equally abhorrent as tyranny, obscures how anarchist movements might involve an active cry for justice. Of course, anarchist movements may well be pulled into the moral and ethical

46 Ibid., 258.
corruption of tyranny and, in the process, become the very injustice they oppose. All power is subject to corruption, as we have seen. My point is that, unlike tyranny, anarchy is not necessarily “against” justice and, as such, anarchy does not represent an inherent threat to Niebuhr’s “frail bark of social justice” in the same way that tyranny so threatens it.

Niebuhr further states: “The shrewd do take advantage of the simple. A rational solution of a conflict may be a very unjust one, if the more robust has ‘overpowered’ the weaker intellect.” Indeed, on one level, the foregoing example of the corruption of courts can be viewed as properly demonstrative of situations in which “A rational solution of a conflict may be a very unjust one.” However, I take exception to Niebuhr’s language of strong and weak intellect because he seems to be making highly questionable assumptions about intellectual capacities and capabilities on a cultural and social landscape that is fraught with injustice and inequality. In other words, it appears that Niebuhr accepts some of the dominant assumptions about the oppressed (as intellectually weak) which play key roles in perpetuating oppression. Nonetheless, in a significant sense, Niebuhr is still being critical of the injustices perpetrated by those in positions of social, racial, and economic dominance.

Notably, Niebuhr’s negative assessment of the Hindu concept of satyagraha as “almost completely mistaken” is based on Niebuhr’s own Western understanding of the ego. My point is not to suggest that Gandhi’s Hindu conception of soul force cannot be analyzed in juxtaposition with a Western understanding of ego; rather, I am arguing that

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47 Ibid., 261.
48 Ibid.
to categorically discount the validity of the Hindu conception of soul force as a form of non-egoistically driven moral suasion because such a configuration is impossible in Western conceptions smacks of cultural and religious imperialism. It reproduces something akin to the elitist arrogance that characterized centuries of British imperialism that held India in subjection, and comes dangerously close to dictating to the oppressed what should be its method for fighting oppression. Indeed, it might be useful to ponder whether Niebuhr is really talking about Gandhi’s understanding of soul force when he asserts that “One man may keep another enslaved purely by ‘soul’ force,” or his own western understanding of this concept.\(^4^9\) Although Niebuhr would have understood his statement about soul force as a reference to Gandhi’s Hindu conception, I believe it is useful to pay some attention to the broader implications of Niebuhr’s critique of soul force.

The idea of soul force is one that is shared by other oppressed people, including African Americans. Not only did the Civil Rights leaders of the 1960s adopt Gandhi’s philosophy of nonviolence generally; they adopted Gandhi’s particular idea of satyagraha as a method of struggle. This was not just a tactical choice. The idea of soul force has been part of the Black experience going back to enslaved Africans in the New World. In *Soul-Force: African Heritage in Afro-American Religion*, Leonard E. Barrett defines soul force as “that quality of life that enabled Black people to survive the horrors of their diaspora.”\(^5^0\) For African Americans, soul force is a force of liberation. This conception stands in direct opposition to Niebuhr’s characterization of soul force as a

\(^4^9\) Ibid., 261.

potential power of enslavement. Hence, a Niebuhrian conception of ego does not fit the
reality of the oppressed, whether among Hindu people or African Americans. The
character of suffering among the oppressed is one that views life from a bottomless
reality; an abyss that resists elitist conceptualizations of the reality of racial, cultural, and
imperial oppression.

Also, it’s worth pausing to note Niebuhr’s use of the word “weakness” (i.e., “so
that weakness does not invite enslavement by the strong”\textsuperscript{51}) in his rationale of the balance
of power. Here Niebuhr seems not to accept the underlying assumptions about the
inferiority of oppressed groups because he speaks against enslavement by the strong.
Nonetheless, his ascription of weakness to some and strength to others still makes this
usage vulnerable to criticism.

In conclusion, I emphasize that, for Niebuhr, power, like oxygen, is a God-given
reality which only the divine exercises without corruption. Power does not belong to any
particular social group. Yet, it is necessary and indispensable to social existence. Indeed,
in human hands, power is perpetually vulnerable to abuse; however, there is equally
sufficient room to challenge abuses of power and their resulting perversions of justice. In
this sense, the struggle for power and its vulnerability to abuse reveal both the potential
for justice in society and the fragility of that potential. In my view, Niebuhr’s
understanding of power affirms a power-struggle as the inescapable route to justice and
as such guarantees no lasting resolution of conflicts between social groups.

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 265.
Chapter 3

James Cone’s Conceptions of Liberation and Justice

This chapter will explain Cone’s conceptions of liberation and justice in his Black Theology and further explore the relationship between them. The main purpose of this discussion is to lay bare what Cone believes about liberation and justice and assess the viability his conceptions in the ongoing fight against oppression. First, I introduce Black Theology as Cone’s theological method. Then, I explore Cone’s conception of liberation as trinitarian in character. Next, I will discuss Cone’s eschatology and the three dimensions of liberation: spiritual, social, and transcendent. Finally, I will analyze the three components of Cone’s conception of justice: the hope of justice in the moment of liberation, co-suffering with God, and dismantling oppression. Altogether, my argument in this chapter is that Cone’s understandings of liberation and justice are informed by a Black Theology of survival. This conception of God establishes that God’s relationship with the oppressed exists, fundamentally, in the concreteness of social oppression. Although Cone develops robust conceptions of spiritual and transcendent liberation, I will show that neither can exist apart from social liberation.

Black Theology

In *A Black Theology of Liberation*, Cone defines Black theology as a theology that “arises from the need of blacks to liberate themselves from white oppressors.”¹ Here, he is asserting that Black theology is, fundamentally, a result of the basic longing of the

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Black community to free itself from oppression. This aspect of Cone’s definition posits that Black Theology is a theology of survival through liberative action. Hence, the main purpose of this theology is to liberate African Americans from the system of racial oppression in the United States.

Moreover, Cone writes that Black Theology is “a theology of liberation because it is a theology which arises from an identification with the oppressed blacks of America, seeking to interpret the gospel of Christ in the light of the black condition.”

Here, the basis on which Cone explains Black Theology as a theology of liberation constitutes a reference to Christian Theology’s own recognition (in the Black experience) of its inextricable connection to the oppression of Black humanity. In other words, he is pointing to an understanding of Christianity from the perspective of Black history, culture, and experience, not Christianity as linked to the dominant power structure. For Cone, this understanding of Christianity tries to make sense of the Good News in the face of what he refers to as the “black condition.”

The “black condition,” for Cone, is characterized by a “tension between life and death.” The tension itself constitutes an inner striving that reflects the existential crisis which Black Theology addresses. The main question for African Americans is: “How are we going to survive in a world which deems black humanity an illegitimate form of human existence?” For Cone, this question is not an abstract one, but one that takes

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2 Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation, 4-5.
3 Ibid., 11
4 Ibid.
5 Ibid.
seriously the concrete reality of oppression and elicits a response from Black Theology as a theology of survival.⁶

Then, Cone turns to the task of Black Theology. He states that by analyzing the nature of the gospel, Black Theology helps the oppressed to see that Jesus’ gospel cannot be separated from Black humiliation and that the gospel empowers African Americans to free themselves from oppression.⁷ Also, he argues that not only does Black Theology “do theology in the light of the concreteness of human oppression as expressed in color,”⁸ a vital role of Black theology is to interpret the “religious dimension of the forces of liberation” in the Black community.⁹ In this respect, Cone discusses the Black experience as the primary source of Black Theology.

Cone locates God’s activity in the Black community. He states, “The goal of Black theology is to interpret God’s activity as related to the oppressed black community.”¹⁰ Indeed, a hallmark feature of Cone’s entire corpus is the way he identifies Black experience as a source of, and even starting point for, Black liberation theology. Black Theology is theology of the Black community, by the Black community, and for the Black community.

Black theology starts with the experience of the Black community. At the same time, to assuage concerns that a theology thus grounded may not be adequately Christian, Cone affirms that Black Theology embraces “absolute revelation of God in Christ.”¹¹

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⁶ Ibid.
⁷ Ibid., 5.
⁸ Ibid., v-vi.
⁹ Ibid., 5.
¹⁰ Ibid.
¹¹ Ibid.
Indeed, he rejects the idea that these two are contradictory: Black Theology both begins in the black condition and affirms the primacy of Jesus as the Christ. In fact, Cone even claims that not only is Black Theology a Christian theology, but perhaps the only form of Christian theology in America. This assertion, for Cone, is based on the premise that Black Theology embodies the central commitment of the Christian gospel to liberate the oppressed. Consequently, Black Theology raises questions about what God means in the face of racist police violence or what church means when Christians remain apathetic to the need to actively oppose and eradicate racism. In this way, Cone’s theological project grapples with the meaning of the gospel in the context of the Black experience.

In addition to using Black experience as its starting point, another crucial feature of Cone’s formulation of Black Theology is the location of liberative agency squarely in the social context. God’s act of liberation is not just spiritual (although it does have spiritual dimensions, as we will see), but takes place in concrete, actual experience. Cone regards the liberation of black people as God’s liberation. This assertion involves another crucial claim Cone advances in A Black Theology of Liberation; namely, the “blackness of God.” According to Cone, “The blackness of God means that God has made the oppressed condition God’s own condition.” In this vein, God is not just the God of oppressed people, but God-self is participating in the condition of black oppression.

If God is black and thereby participates in the condition of black oppression, then the concrete, actual experience of Blackness therefore becomes a space in which we

12 Ibid., 9.
13 Ibid.
14 Ibid., 63.
witness the suffering of the triune God alongside Black people. On this point, Cone writes: “This is the essence of the biblical revelation. By electing Israelite slaves as the people of God and by becoming the Oppressed One in Jesus Christ, the human race is made to understand that God is known where human beings experience humiliation and suffering.”  

Yet, just as the concrete, actual experience of Black suffering is shared with the triune God so is the experience of liberation. This is one sense in which Cone considers the liberation of Black people God’s liberation. Cone argues that “liberation is not an afterthought, but the essence of divine activity.” By this statement, Cone means that where God is active in the concrete experiences of oppression, God is, essentially, moving the oppressed community toward liberation.

**Examining Cone’s Meaning of Liberation**

For the purposes of this project, I focus on Cone’s conception of liberation in *God of the Oppressed*. There, I trace the way he grounds his conception in a triunitarian understanding of God. To this end, I explore the Christological, theological, pneumatological, and eschatological dimensions of liberation in this text.

Despite Cone’s clear desire to ground liberation as theological concept (and, hence, struggles for liberation as theological practices); it is important not to overlook the importance of the role social existence plays in his conception of liberation. Crucial to Cone’s perspective is the idea that theology and social existence exist in a dialectical relationship. He explains, “Because Christian theology is human speech about God, it is

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15 Ibid., 64.  
16 Ibid.
always related to historical situations…”

In other words, all theology is grounded in the social and historical experience of its speakers.

Social existence is a broad category, inclusive of every race and culture. Recognizing the expansiveness of this category disabuses misconceptions of Cone’s theology that accuse it of reflecting a too narrow approach to theological thinking with its focus on the Black American experience. When Cone speaks of the Black cultural context as a source of Black liberation, it is crucial to understand that he is talking about only a slice of the broader human social existence, and nothing alien or crassly subjective. Cone cites H. Richard Niebuhr’s point that “there is no such thing as disinterestedness in theology.” Hence, Cone sees Black liberation as a question of human liberation and, as such, he sees Black liberation as evidenced by the salvation of God granted to all human beings through Jesus.

Liberation Through a Christological Lens

Cone’s conception of liberation is thoroughly Christological. For example, he writes, “Jesus Christ, therefore, in his humanity and divinity, is the point of departure for a black theologian’s analysis of the meaning of liberation.” In this way, Cone characterizes the salvific work of God in the world as human liberation and, furthermore, explicitly links liberation to Jesus. Jesus is the ground of liberation in Cone’s thought.

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18 H. Richard Niebuhr as cited by Ibid., 36.
20 I should note that Cone is not just speaking of Black liberation in this passage, but of human liberation as a whole, intrinsic to which is the liberation of Black people.
Not only is liberation thoroughly Christological in Cone’s thought; even stronger, he argues that liberation is exclusively Christological. He writes, “There is no liberation independent of Jesus’ past, present, and future coming. He is the ground of our present freedom to struggle and the source of our hope that the vision disclosed in our historical fight against oppression will be fully realized in God’s future.”

Cone argues that through Jesus, liberation is a past, present, and future reality.

*The Past*

Cone ties liberation to Jesus’ past coming in terms of the liberation he achieved through his historical existence, particularly his incarnation as an oppressed person and his death on the cross and subsequent resurrection. In Cone’s words, the significance of Jesus’ past or historical dimension is that “God is revealed in history as freedom for us.”

At this juncture, Cone is discussing liberation as, essentially, an existential reality. In his view, liberation is rightly understood as a gift from God in Jesus. He argues “liberation is not a human possession, but a divine gift of freedom to those who struggle in faith against violence and oppression.” Insofar as liberation is the prerogative of God granted by Christ, liberation cannot be understood as ‘property.’ In turn, if liberation is not a human possession, then human beings who are the subject of liberation are not property. In this way, Cone critiques the historical and legal absurdity of the pretention to enslave and claim to own people (i.e., the practice of chattel slavery and its progeny) as

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21 Ibid., 127.
22 Ibid., 128.
23 Ibid. This does not mean that liberation is a gift to some and not others, but rather that liberation is actively engaged, and to a fuller extent in those who struggle against violence and oppression while holding on to their faith against even the most discouraging odds.
antithetical to the Gospel of Jesus. The significance of the historical work of Jesus is that the freedom of a human being cannot be granted, owned, or conferred by another. Instead, liberation emerges as a divine prerogative that is “owned” and granted by Christ.

*The Present*

In claiming Jesus as “the ground of our present freedom to struggle,” Cone defines the purpose of the present as the fight against oppression.24 His notion of “our present freedom to struggle” points to the existence of a present liberation enjoyed by those struggling for liberation; namely, the spiritual liberation given by Christ. This reference focuses on a fortified state of spiritual liberation that equips the oppressed for social, political, and economical liberation.

Be that as it may, Cone is not concerned exclusively with spiritual liberation but with liberation in people’s material lives. Cone is keenly aware of the nature of his theological project as one that involves existential analysis that takes the daily present realities and experiences of oppressed people seriously. Indeed, the manner in which Cone connects liberation to Jesus’ presence within the social and material realities of the oppressed communities speaks from within the reality of Black suffering to the existential reality of the human struggle with bondage. As Cone articulates the universality of human suffering, he is always speaking from within the agonizing yet hopeful reality of Black suffering. Thus he claims “For black people…Jesus is their freedom.”25

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24 Ibid., 127.
25 Ibid., 129.
Cone declares that the purpose of Jesus’ future coming is to finally definitively end oppression. He puts it this way: “From his past history with the weak and his present existence with them, black people received a vision of his coming presence to fully heal the misery of human suffering.”26 Jesus’ concrete historical experience of being with the weak and vulnerable—and of being a weak and vulnerable person himself—not only shapes and informs the manner in which Jesus struggles with the Black community in the midst of present suffering, but produces a robust hope in Jesus’ coming presence. This hope avoids half-measures in ending oppression and its destruction of Black bodies. In others words, for Cone, the liberation signaled by Jesus’ future coming is a complete liberation that tackles both obvious and complex forms of racism. Also, Jesus’ coming exposes and condemns insidious yet destructive forms of racist policies and practices, hence, restoring the full humanity of the oppressed.

Therefore, Cone insists that Jesus is “not only the crucified and risen One but also the Lord of the future who is coming again to fully consummate the liberation already happening in our present.”27 In effect, the present struggle for liberation is a becoming. This statement suggests that the struggle is in progress, but it is not yet what it is to become. For Cone, only in Jesus’ future presence can the present struggle culminate in full liberation. This point ascribes immense significance to a completing future event in Cone’s thought.

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26 Ibid., 121
27 Ibid., 116.
Liberation contains within it past, present, and future dimensions in Cone’s thought. However, to keep actual present reality in focus, Cone reminds us:

To be sure, [Black people] know that they must struggle to realize justice in this world. But their struggle for justice is directly related to the coming judgment of Jesus. His coming presence requires that we not make any historical struggle an end in itself. We struggle because it is a sign of Jesus’ presence with us and of his coming presence to redeem all humanity. His future coming is therefore the key to the power of our struggle.  

Indeed, Cone looks to Jesus’ future coming, but he asserts that African Americans must continue their present struggle. In this way, Cone, implicitly, cautions against passive anticipation of Jesus’ coming presence which is a mode of inaction into which the powerless fall under the allure of quiet conformity.

Additionally, for Cone, the future coming presence of Jesus itself demands that no historical struggle be treated as “an end in itself.” In a crucial sense, he is making the point that no historical struggle is self-justifying. This means that the struggle is not waged for its own sake, but because it leads to a future of liberation and justice. For Cone, what justifies the present struggle is, first, the fact that Jesus, the future liberator, participates in the present struggle for liberation. He elaborates: “Black people can fight for freedom and justice because the One who is their future is also the ground of their struggle for liberation.”  

So, not only does Jesus participate in the present struggle of the oppressed, but is the very basis of the struggle for liberation.

Second, the coming presence of Jesus culminates in a redemptive future for not just the oppressed, but all people. “Black people’s faith in Jesus’ future coming,” Cone posits, “is the basis of their continued struggle against inexplicable evil in their present

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28 Ibid., 122.
29 Ibid., 129.
existence.” In Cone’s Black Theology, this promised future is the power with which the powerless struggle for liberation.

**Liberation Through a Theological Lens**

Despite the clear Christological emphasis of Cone’s conception of liberation, the notion of liberation he develops throughout *God of the Oppressed* also contains a clear theocentric dimension. For instance, he writes

According to Scripture, the human freedom to hope for a new heaven and a new earth is grounded in God’s freedom. Divine freedom is not merely an affirmation of the self-existence and complete transcendence of God over creaturely existence. It also expresses God’s will to be in relation to creatures in the social context of their striving for the fulfillment of humanity. That is, God is free to be for us. This is the meaning of the Exodus and Incarnation. The biblical God is the God whose salvation is liberation.

Human freedom is thus grounded in and reflects God’s freedom. God is not simply a God who liberates, but one whose very being is characterized by liberation.

Equally crucial is Cone’s characterization of the purpose of divine freedom. Cone argues that divine freedom is an expression of God’s desire to be in relationship with humanity. However, the relationship God desires is not only a spiritual relationship, but one that takes shape in human social relations. God desires to relate to human social affairs. Affirmation of the immanence of God signals a critical axiom of Cone’s Black Theology of liberation: that God is in the world with the oppressed.

This affirmation of God’s presence with oppressed people eliminates a lingering supposition that Cone’s belief in God’s transcendence aligns his theology with those that,

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30 Ibid.
31 Ibid., 128.
32 Ibid.
rooted in the philosophical speculations of Greek metaphysics, accept the complete transcendence of God. The key here is: “God is free to be for us.”33 Divine freedom does not separate or alienate God from humanity in Cone’s thought. Rather, divine freedom is the basis of God’s relationship with humanity in general and oppressed people in particular.

Indeed, Cone works from a conception of God in which the defining attribute or activity of God is liberation. In *God, Being and Liberation*, Carlyle Fielding Stewart III writes of Cone’s conception of God:

> The Being that intercedes on behalf of the oppressed is conceived primarily in terms of its *moral* attributes. Cone implicitly emphasizes these attributes above all others. This means that if God is liberator of the oppressed, he [sic] is inherently a God of *justice, righteousness and love*. It is because God liberates the disinherited from oppression that he [sic] is righteous and just, and because he [sic] loves his [sic] people, liberates them from suffering, and oppression.34

Stewart’s framing of this point demonstrates the power of the theme of the God of liberation in Cone’s thought. For Cone, if God does not liberate, then God cannot be a God of justice, righteousness, and love. God’s liberating activity serves as the basis for the rest of the important divine characteristics: justice, righteousness, and love.

Although this logic makes the God of liberation an indispensable starting point and foundation for the other attributes of God, Cone’s conception of God’s attributes is a fluid one in which divine love can be said to precede divine liberation. As Stewart explains, “because [God] loves his [sic] people, he [sic] liberates them from suffering,

33 Ibid.
Thus, not only does God’s liberation serve as the basis for justice, righteousness and love; divine love serves as the foundation for God’s liberation. In Cone’s thought, God’s liberation is preceded, surrounded, and enveloped by divine love.

To recap, the moral characteristics of God in Cone’s thought include liberation and love as the foundation, from which flow justice and righteousness. Thus understood, it can be said that justice follows God’s liberating act, thereby making liberation a precondition of justice. Indeed, he argues that “there is no freedom independent of the fight for justice.” Pointing to the close association of civil justice with divine justice in the 1960s Civil Rights Movement, Cone deems this connection “consistent with the black religious tradition and with the Bible.” Indeed, he notes that “Liberation as the fight for justice in this world has always been an important ingredient in black religion.” A crucial implication of this statement is that the formation of Black religion or the evolution of Black religious consciousness in America has always been defined by the struggle for liberation.

Liberation Through a Pneumatological Lens

In A Black Theology of Liberation, Cone writes: “The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of the Creator and the Redeemer at work in the forces of human liberation in our society today.” However, in God of the Oppressed, Cone invokes the Holy Spirit in his

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35 Ibid.
36 For instance, Cone writes of divine liberation as the foundation of justice, arguing, “It is because God liberates the dispossessed from oppression that he [sic] is righteous and just” (God of the Oppressed, 145).
37 Ibid., 163.
38 Ibid., 142.
39 Ibid., 141.
40 Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation, 64.
discussion of Black religious thought. For example, he describes what happens when the message of liberation is preached in the Black church. “The message was in the feeling of the Spirit that moved from ‘heart to heart and from breast to breast’ throughout the congregation as the preacher hummed and moaned the story.”\textsuperscript{41} For Cone, through inspiration, the Spirit functioned as mover, carrier, and interpreter of the liberation message to the heart. Furthermore, Cone asserts, “The truth of the story was dependent upon whether the people received the extra strength to go on one more mile in their struggle to survive.”\textsuperscript{42} What Cone describes here is the liberative role of the Holy Spirit in inspiring the heart and energizing body, soul, and spirit to continue fighting the injustices that characterize a system of racial oppression. In effect, the role of the Spirit evidences the liberative work of equipping the heart with courage expressed in the external responses of oppressed communities to the forces of domination and control.

However, in discussing the meaning of liberation itself, Cone focuses largely on the other Persons of the Trinity; although, in his discussion of God and liberation, he develops an understanding of spiritual liberation which I will discuss later. Yet, the short thrift given to the Holy Spirit as Third Person of the Trinity appears not to be because Cone underplays the spiritual significance of liberation. It seems that his focusing less on the Holy Spirit in \textit{God of the Oppressed} allows Cone to place even greater emphasis on the roles of God and Jesus in the concreteness of social oppression.

**Liberation in Eschatological Perspective**

Having explored the grounding of Cone’s conception of liberation in a Trinitarian understanding of God, I now turn to exploring the role of liberation in his eschatology.

\textsuperscript{41} Ibid., 54.
\textsuperscript{42} Ibid.
Some of these themes have already been touched on in previous sections; here I will flesh them out more thoroughly.

At the outset, it is important to note that Cone’s eschatology is clearly a product of the black religious context and presumes a Black ontology. A key feature of Black ontology includes a collective experiencing of God that flows seamlessly from past to present to future. For example, in the 1997 Preface to God of the Oppressed Cone describes the conception of Jesus he presents there:

The Jesus about whom I speak, however, is not primarily the one of Nicea and Chalcedon, nor of Luther, Calvin, and Barth. Though the dominant western theological tradition is an important dialogical partner, it is not the main source for my thinking about Jesus. For Christological reflections, I turn to the Jesus of Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, and Paul and of the Spirituals and Gospel Music, Fannie Lou Hamer, and Martin Luther King, Jr. This Jesus of the biblical and black traditions is not a theological concept but a liberating presence in the lives of the poor in their fight for dignity and worth.43

The sources of Cone’s Christological reflections include Scripture but, notably, also contemporary “saints” whose lives bore witness to “a liberating presence.” It is this liberating presence that Cone identifies with Jesus.

Jesus’ prophetic declaration of liberation in Luke 4:18-19, “The Spirit of the Lord is on Me, because He has anointed Me to proclaim deliverance to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor,” holds great eschatological significance in the black religious context. This declaration represents “the promise of God’s Word of liberation, disclosed in God’s future, breaking into our present, and overthrowing the powers of evil that hold people in

43 Ibid., xiii.
The black religious tradition emphasizes Christ as liberator across the three dimensions of time. It is for this reason that my discussion of the past, present, and future presence of Jesus as regards liberation in Cone’s work bears the marks of a Black ontological view of reality insofar as his conception of each of these dimensions bleeds fluidly into the others.45

Cone argues that the central meaning of the cross is “God suffering for and with us so that our humanity can be liberated for freedom in the divine struggle against oppression.”46 He explains, “God not only fights for [the oppressed] but takes their humiliated condition upon the divine Person and thereby breaks open a new future for the poor, different from their past and present miseries.”47 In this way, the cross represents a transformative convergence of the humiliation of the oppressed with divine personhood that opens a new liberated future on the social horizon.

In Cone’s eschatology, God is completely committed to the oppressed. He reflects at length on the theological significance of this fact. Cone writes:

But because [Jesus] was one with divinity and humanity, the pain of the cross was God suffering for and with us so that our humanity can be liberated for freedom in the divine struggle against oppression. This is why Ernst Kasemann says that ‘Jesus means freedom,’ and why Moltmann is correct in his contention that ‘the Christian faith not only believes in freedom but is already freedom itself. It not only hopes for freedom but, rather, is itself the inauguration of a free life on earth.’48 God, through Jesus’ suffering, taking on the humiliated condition of the oppressed on the cross is a moment of profound divine-human connection.
But suffering is not the end of Cone’s eschatological conception. The suffering God who participates in human misery is the God who declares an end to that suffering. “When God is revealed in history as freedom for us, he is disclosed as the God of hope,” writes Cone.49 On this view, the hopelessness and despair produced by oppression do not have the last word. For Cone, the revelation of God in history as the embodiment of freedom conveys a concrete hope that structures of domination can be challenged and overcome.

**Liberation: Spiritual, Social and Transcendent**

An important dimension of liberation in Cone’s work is that of spiritual liberation, already briefly mentioned.50 He describes this dimension of liberation, explaining, “Liberation is the knowledge of the self; it is the vocation to affirm who I am created to be.”51 Such self-knowledge is not an end in itself, however. He writes, “Fellowship with God is the beginning and end of human liberation. The liberated person is the one who encounters God in faith, that is, in conviction and trust that one’s true humanity is actualized in God. This vertical dimension of faith is the essential response to the gospel and is thus the heart of liberation’s meaning from the human side.”52 Spiritual liberation is the freedom to be in relation to God. Relationship with God follows encountering God with the conviction that living into and out of true humanity is born of relationship with God. In this way, true humanity and relationship with God are tightly

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49 Ibid.
50 See pg 82.
51 Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 134.
52 Ibid., 130.
linked. Furthermore, they are part and parcel of liberation. The ability to deepen one’s conviction and trust in God in the face of oppression, and therefore to see that the racism by which society has been so conditioned and the resulting violence and injustices against oppressed people are but human creations, and that one’s “true humanity” in God is what is really real, is spiritual liberation.

Spiritual liberation, or “fellowship with God,” as Cone describes it, is grounded in faith. Apart from such faith—the conviction that human beings find their true reality by being properly oriented to and responding to the divine reality—spiritual liberation is not possible. Trust and belief in God are essential to spiritual liberation. Yet, Cone does not conceive of spiritual liberation as an individual or solitary endeavor. Such liberation has an inextricable social character. He argues, “authentic liberation of self is attainable only in the context of an oppressed community in the struggle of freedom.”53 The importance of the community for spiritual liberation is why Cone emphasizes the vital role played by community worship in Black people’s relationship to God.54 Spiritual liberation happens in the midst of oppression and in the context of community.

Cone does not go so far as to argue that the oppressed have a monopoly on liberation; nevertheless, he cautions against the imposition of definitions and concepts about liberation from outside the community of the oppressed because some have not struggled against oppression such that they have had, of necessity, to actualize their humanity through encountering God in faith. Rather, he argues the dominant themselves need to be liberated to understand liberation. “For the oppressors to understand liberation,

53 Ibid., 134-5.
54 Ibid., 132.
they must be liberated from being political oppressors,” Cone explains. To understand liberation, one must first experience it.

Cone’s insistence that both the oppressed and the oppressors require liberation is a prominent theme in his work. The liberation each group requires is not identical; yet, he is adamant that all human beings stand in need of liberation. No one is exempt. This is a theme Cone develops in his earliest work. In *A Black Theology of Liberation*, Cone declares: “In a society that defines blackness as evil and whiteness as good, the theological significance of Jesus is found in the possibility of human liberation through blackness.” In Cone’s thought, the activity of Jesus as the incarnate God liberates oppressors from conceit that results in the dehumanization of oppressed people and from the mindset of racial and cultural superiority. By contrast, he suggests that God’s liberative work through Jesus is to free the oppressed from the social evils of racism, especially from the forces that perpetuate the myth of Black criminality and inferiority. Further, for him, God’s liberation dismantles sinful structures and their degradation of Black existence.

To recap, spiritual liberation consists in the self-understanding of one’s true reality as a human being in God. Such understanding constitutes fellowship with God. The context of this relationship is the oppressed community’s struggle for freedom. And, indeed, this struggle for freedom is essential for liberation in all its dimensions. Cone argues, “Those whose consciousness is defined by the oppressors cannot understand what

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55 Ibid., 137.
57 Ibid., 117.
liberation is." Liberation on the social/physical plane requires a priori spiritual liberation. Absent spiritual liberation, genuine social liberation is not possible and the cycle of oppressor-oppressed relations continues.

Of course liberation is not just spiritual in Cone’s work. As he points out, struggles for social justice have long been the hallmark of black religion in the U.S. This social dimension of liberation he characterizes as the project of freedom in history, writing, “There is no liberation independent of the struggle for freedom in history. History is the immanent character of liberation; it is the project of freedom.” According to Cone, spiritual liberation and social liberation are related but not identical. For one, spiritual liberation precedes social liberation, as we have seen. He explains the difference between them as follows: “When the dialectic of change in social existence meets the idea of liberation, liberation’s content and form are thus radically changed. What was once merely spoken is now actualized history, enabling the former oppressors to know that truth is embodied in the historical movement of the liberation and not in theology textbooks.” When liberation is realized on the social plane of reality—that is, in history—the Word becomes flesh, so to speak. Put another way, spiritual realities become concrete social realities on the historical plane.

Finally, it is possible to discern a third, transcendent dimension of liberation in Cone’s work; a dimension that calls from beyond history. He asserts, “There is a transcendent element in the definition of liberation which affirms that the ‘realm of

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58 Ibid., 137.
59 Ibid., 139.
60 Ibid.
61 Ibid.
freedom is always more than the fragments of a free life which we may accomplish in
history.” Hence, despite history’s indispensable role with respect to liberation and the
struggle of freedom, liberation goes beyond its historical significance. Thus he concludes,
“While the meaning of liberation includes the historical determination of freedom in this
world it is not limited to history.” In this way there is a dimension of liberation that
beckons from beyond the realm of history.

Thus, it seems that, for Cone, the highest value of liberation is in the hope it offers
beyond the limitations of human life and society. He writes, “the oppressed have a future
not made with hands but grounded in the liberating promises of God. They have a
liberation not bound by their own strivings.” The transcendent dimension of liberation
in no way diminishes the importance of social liberation as a historical project. Instead,
the promise and hope of the transcendent boundlessness of a liberated life becomes the
basis of the freedom to struggle against systemic evil.

In sum, my discussion of the three dimensions of Cone’s conception of liberation
includes spiritual, social, and transcendent liberation. Spiritual liberation is defined by an
understanding of the self as being in relationship with God. In Cone’s thought, this
relationship, for the oppressed, does not and cannot exist outside the fight for liberation.
A struggle to defeat the forces of oppression characterizes liberation. Yet, spiritual
liberation comes before true social liberation. In Conian thought, true social liberation
presupposes the emergence of a social conscience that evidences a consciousness of
being in relationship with God—for both oppressor and oppressed. And, indeed, such a

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62 Ibid., 145.
63 Ibid., 145.
64 Ibid.
relationship with divine Personhood, for Cone, is impossible without a belief in justice for all people. Further, fellowship with God demands genuine effort to achieve justice. Also, Cone’s spiritual understanding of the self in communion with God, socially, suggests belief and action that preserve the dignity of human beings with a particular focus on the oppressed and the marginalized people.

For Cone, the social dimension of liberation speaks to the disclosure of God’s freedom in the context of history. In his thinking, the social dimension functions in two stages: it involves the articulation of the message of freedom in history; then, it points to radical social transformation and the concretization of spiritual truths in and through the liberation and social uplift of the oppressed. Hence, Cone’s emphasis on freedom as historical sets the focus on the actualization of social liberation, the reality of oppressive conditions, and the concrete suffering of Black people.

Last, transcendent liberation neither overrides nor obscures the significance of social liberation as a historical project. Transcendent liberation expresses an understanding of liberation that does not make history the be-all and end-all. Freedom, in this sense, goes beyond the limits of human history. Cone’s notion of transcendent liberation does not diminish concrete experience, but admits the fallibility of human conceptions. Thus, in addition to social and spiritual liberation, he sees liberation in terms of the mystery of God.
Cone’s View of Justice

In this section, I turn to Cone’s conception of justice. As was the case in the preceding section on liberation in which it is impossible to discuss Cone’s conception of liberation without reference to justice; so too it is not possible to discuss Cone’s conception of justice without reference to liberation. Thus, the concepts of liberation and justice lie in the same plane. The close proximity of liberation and justice in Cone’s thought reveals a reciprocal relationship between these concepts, such that each requires the other for its full realization. For instance, Cone claims, “It is because God liberates the disinherited from oppression that he [sic] is righteous and just.”65 Liberation involves justice and justice involves liberation.

To unpack Cone’s conception of justice, I begin with his epistemology of justice which involves two crucial sources: the Black experience and the Word of God. Then I discuss the three dimensions of justice as core elements of Cone’s view of justice. The three dimensions include: the hope of justice in the moment of liberation, God and the oppressed as co-sufferers, and dismantling oppressive power.

The Epistemology of Justice

The key sources for Cone’s conception of justice are Black experience and the Word of God. As to the Black experience, Cone writes: “There is no truth for and about black people that did not emerge out of the context of their experience.”66 In other words, truth that speaks in any way to the social and existential realities that Black people face in America cannot be independent of the Black experience. According to Cone, truth for

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65 Ibid.,
66 Cone, God of the Oppressed, 16.
and about African Americans is contained in the “stories, tales, and sayings” of the Black community. While the story of slavery, racial oppression, and the ongoing fight for justice in the Black experience involved mass social movements, the following section will mention perspectives of justice from Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcom X. Both men were major influences in Cone’s social and intellectual formation.

Justice in Black Experience

Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929-1968) and Malcom X (1925-1965) are two of the greatest intellectual influences on Cone’s work. In King, Cone sees an “accent on God’s righteousness [that] led him into exhausting efforts to establish justice in the world.” In Malcolm X, Cone sees the conviction that “the ‘solution’ to the problem of racial injustice ‘will never be brought about by politicians,’ but ‘it will be brought about by God.’” He explained at the American Academy of Religion’s 2009 Marty Forum that with these two ideas (and others), “Malcom X spoke to my blackness. Malcom spoke to my spirit;” while “King tells me what the world demands of us all.” Both influences shaped Cone’s understanding of justice in different ways.

King and Malcolm X were contemporaries—prophets, activists, and leaders in the 1960s Civil Rights Movement whose ideas indelibly shaped Cone’s writings in the 1970s

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67 Ibid.
69 Cone, Malcolm & Martin & America, 55.
70 James Cone, Malcom & Martin & America: Dream or Nightmare (Maryknoll: Orbisbooks, 1991), 55.
and beyond. As Carlyle Stewart explains, “At the time of Cone’s writing, in America, one could clearly see the tidal waves of justice sweeping the nation. It was not difficult to see God’s liberating activity in the Civil Rights and Black Muslim movements or the mass conflagrations of city slums or the torrential unrest fomenting in mass movements for justice and equality.” Great social change was afoot in American during the mid-twentieth century. Justice was afoot and liberation for African Americans seemed a historical possibility.

*Justice in the Word of God*

The Bible, conceived as the Word of God, also plays a crucial role in Cone’s understanding of justice. He devotes great care to grounding *God of the Oppressed* in scripture. For Cone and the Black community, the Bible testifies to God’s revelation in Jesus Christ. Yet demonstrating the influence of Karl Barth and the Black community, Cone does not understand the Word of God as confined to scripture. The Word of God also consists of experience. “The Word and its proclamation in the black Church,” he explains, “is more than the conceptualization of theological doctrine. The Word is more than *words* about God. God’s Word is a poetic happening, an evocation of an indescribable reality in the lives of people.” Thus, for Cone the Word of God is found in Scripture, as well as beyond the pages of the Canon, anywhere where the Spirit of God is alive and active in the world.

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73 Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 29.
74 Ibid., 17.
African Americans are the interpreters of who Jesus is in the Black experience. In other words, the Word of God is not just Scripture as viewed through the lens of the dominant culture; rather, it is what God is saying and how God is being experienced through Jesus in and beyond the Black experience. On this view, the Word of God is a Word of justice that goes beyond Scripture; it does not and cannot support oppression.

Both the Black experience and the Word of God as the main sources for Cone’s understanding of justice call attention to the Black struggle for justice and the dynamism of the Word of God as not only words about God, but profound experience in the lives of individuals and community, and in the world as a whole. In respect of the Black struggle, perspectives that shaped Cone’s conception of justice bifurcates into Malcom X’s uncompromising demand for God’s justice and King’s broader universal appeal to conscience. Both strands complete each other in Cone’s understanding of justice. The Word of God, for Cone, is God speaking through and beyond Scripture.

Cone’s Dimensions of Justice

With the key sources of Black experience and Scripture clearly in view, we are now ready to examine three of the dimensions of justice of which Cone speaks in God of the Oppressed. In the first dimension, I show that, for Cone, the moment of liberation itself does not exist without the hope of justice. Next, I argue that, in Cone’s thought, the oppressed are fellow sufferers with God in their oppression. Third, I demonstrate that Black Theology’s call to dismantle oppression is a call to truth-telling that is often exemplified by social action campaigns where truth-telling combines words and action to undo the unjust structures of power.
In this first dimension of justice, Cone demonstrates that the hope for justice is alive in the moment of liberation. The key to Cone’s conception of a living hope for justice in the moment of liberation is evident in his discussion of liberation and hope. In his conception, liberation is essentially freedom from the power of oppression.\(^75\) According to Cone, for the communities of the oppressed, freedom has already “broken into the present.”\(^76\) In this connection, he writes that “Liberation as a future event is not simply other worldly but is the divine future that breaks into social existence, bestowing wholeness in the present situation.”\(^77\) For Cone, this wholeness starts with deliverance from the chains of oppression. He states: “To be liberated is to be delivered from the state of unfreedom to freedom; it is to have the chains struck off the body and mind so that the creature of God can be who he or she is.”\(^78\) On this view, Cone’s conception of wholeness—in both mind and body—in the present involves the process of breaking the chains of oppression, healing of the self and community, the emergence of the oppressed, and continued self-affirmation.

For Cone, wholeness in liberation cannot exist without the hope for justice in the present because this hope constitutes the yearning and aspiration to gain the full extent of one’s freedom. In contrast to the hope for justice, justice that is realized as a consequence of liberation involves God’s promise of freedom that is “fully available.”\(^79\) This Conian notion of the full availability of freedom by signaling complete emancipation suggests the

\(^{75}\) Ibid., 139-40  
\(^{76}\) Ibid., 146.  
\(^{77}\) Ibid.  
\(^{78}\) Ibid., 210.  
\(^{79}\) Ibid., 74.
enactment of just laws, the protection of rights, and definition of duties and responsibilities. But before the realization of justice, Cone posits a “present hope for justice” that empowers people to continue the fight against injustice.\textsuperscript{80} Therefore, the moment of liberation as a present reality necessarily contains the hope for justice. But let me be clear: here, Cone is not talking about transcendent liberation which involves an understanding of freedom that calls from beyond the confines of history. Rather, he is talking about the process of liberation which starts in the present and contains the hope for justice.

In this dimension of liberation in the present, Cone’s understanding of the hope for justice speaks from the deepest recesses of Black social and religious consciousness. “Liberation as the fight for justice in the world,” Cone says, “has always been an important ingredient in black religion.”\textsuperscript{81} In other words, the Black religious contribution to Black-led movements for racial justice is the notion that without liberation there is no justice and; conversely, without justice there is no liberation.

The life of justice as hope intrinsic in the revolutionary moment is seen vividly in Cone’s words. He argues: “There is no liberation without the commitment of revolutionary action against injustice, slavery, and oppression.”\textsuperscript{82} Clearly, for Cone, revolutionary action that opposes injustice acts on the basis of a present hope of justice.

Cone goes on to assert: “Liberation then is not merely a thought in my head; it is the sociohistorical movement of a people from oppression to freedom—Israelites from

\textsuperscript{80} Ibid., 146.
\textsuperscript{81} Ibid., 141.
\textsuperscript{82} Ibid., 139.
Egypt, black people from American slavery.”

This insistence that liberation is action—or social movement—suggests a Conian conception of living revolutionary justice. For Cone, this movement for complete freedom is not just a possibility, but a reality evident in the ongoing fight against injustice in which the hope for justice is seen in powerful demonstrations and protest marches by people—as agents of God—who are rising up and refusing to be deterred from their commitment to undo unjust structures of power.

*Justice as Co-Suffering*

In Cone’s thought there is a dimension to justice that is suffering. In particular, he conceptualizes the suffering dimension of justice as co-suffering with God. In this second dimension of justice, Cone conceives of justice as mutual self-giving in participation with God as fellow sufferer. Co-suffering—and its concomitant of mutual self-giving—is not a call to accept oppression, but is part of the process of realizing justice. In Cone’s thought, realizing justice culminates in the rescuing of the oppressed from hurt, pain, and despair. Cone states explicitly: “For the oppressed, justice is the rescue from hurt; and for the oppressors it is the removal of the power to hurt others—even against their will—so that justice can be realized for all.”

This Conian conception of justice as co-suffering offers a direct challenge to retributive conceptions of justice. Cone by no means denies the retributive model of justice found in scripture, particularly the Old Testament, according to which suffering is just punishment for displeasing God (sin, breaking the law, etc.). Yet, he highlights the frequency with which this formula was contradicted and points to the many stories that

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83 Ibid., 139-40.
84 Ibid., 159.
attest that God did not always punish Israel to the extent that it was merited.\textsuperscript{85} Furthermore, in a point he could draw from his own experience as an African American living in a racist society as well as from Scripture, he writes, “It was not difficult for the people to see that wicked persons did not always suffer for their wrongdoings, and neither did the righteous always prosper. The opposite often occurred.”\textsuperscript{86} For this reason, Cone rejects the idea that prosperity is a mark of God’s favor and election, or that hardship and suffering evidence divine displeasure.\textsuperscript{87} Cone’s challenge to retributive justice is especially poignant in the community of the oppressed where personal despair and white racist ideology sometimes lead people to the conclusion that Black suffering is a result of some collective wrong-doing or divine disfavor. Also, by implication, Cone critiques those who use the retributive model as justification for slavery and oppression.

The logic of Cone’s model of justice as co-suffering is just the converse of the retributive model. On this view, God’s favor does not manifest in prosperity and a life of ease. Rather, he argues, “Election…is a call to serve, to suffer with God in the divine realization of justice in the world.”\textsuperscript{88} So, central to Cone’s second dimension of justice is the call to suffer with a suffering God. Answering this call participates in the process of realizing justice. This notion takes a step back into the moment of oppression and places the relationship between God and the sufferer under examination. Thus, the question emerges: “Who is God to us in our suffering?” The divine realization of justice, here, makes God and the oppressed co-sufferers.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{85} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{86} Ibid., 153.
\item \textsuperscript{87} He makes this point unequivocally. Echoing the words of Roland Bainton, Cone states, “‘prosperity and adversity have no necessary connection with goodness and wickedness.’” Ibid., 156.
\item \textsuperscript{88} Ibid., 159.
\end{itemize}
However, Cone’s conception of God and the oppressed as co-sufferers does not mean the oppressed become divine. Instead, he posits the self-giving of the oppressed in oppression is a sharing in the self-giving of God.\footnote{Ibid., 158-59} On closer examination, this idea takes away the arbitrary burden of self-blame from the back of the oppressed and goes beyond retributive conceptions of justice in which suffering is understood as just punishment for disobedience. The burden of the oppressed becomes the burden of God; the shame becomes the shame of God (albeit God is always free).

In \textit{God of the Oppressed}, Cone devotes a full section to questions of theodicy connected to the persistent reality of Black suffering. He argues that Black Theology finds the traditional options for answering the question of why God permits suffering unacceptable; as tantamount to “a violation of black faith”.\footnote{Ibid., 150. He argues that to conclude that God is unwilling to deliver the oppressed weakens divine love, while concluding that God is unable to deliver the oppressed weakens divine power. Ibid.} Instead, citing a great swath of God’s liberating activities in Scripture, Cone posits the liberation of the oppressed as Black Theology’s starting point for resolving this question.

Cone places this second understanding of justice in the context of Jesus’ death and resurrection. In this regard, for Cone,

\begin{quote}
Suffering therefore is reinterpreted in the light of Jesus’ cross and resurrection and of our call to become liberated suffers with God. There is joy in our suffering in so far as we have to suffer for freedom. There is joy not only because we know that God has defeated evil but also because God is present with us in our fight against suffering and will come again fully to consummate the freedom already given in Jesus Christ.\footnote{Ibid., 163.}
\end{quote}

For Cone, joy is a reality in the midst of suffering. The coherence of joy in suffering is grounded in the meaning of Jesus’ past, present, and future.\footnote{See pgs 75-77.} In other words, Black
Theology maintains that, in the whole frame of time God is victorious over evil through Jesus. As a result, the liberation of the oppressed means God’s work is complete. The possibility of joy in suffering demonstrates the completeness of God’s work.

**Justice as Dismantling Oppression**

The third dimension of Cone’s conception of justice is the active dismantling of the power structure that oppresses, that hurts, shames, and humiliates oppressed people. The dismantling of injustice takes a variety of forms of social action campaigns.\(^93\) In Cone’s view, dismantling oppression is fundamentally about a willingness to “speak the Truth to the people.”\(^94\) It is a matter of truth-telling. Also, Cone continues to stress his theme of liberation as the act of “breaking the chains” or taking one’s freedom.\(^95\) Cone’s particular emphases on truth-telling and the act of taking one’s freedom suggest that truth-telling goes hand-in-hand with social action that exposes and dismantles sinful structures and liberates the minds of both oppressed and oppressors. In this sense, removal of the oppressors’ power to hurt the oppressed is “so that justice can be realized for all.”\(^96\) In other words, Cone’s understanding of how justice removes oppression evidences a crucial commitment to justice that includes and encompasses all of God’s children.

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\(^93\) Notably, Cone’s reference to Martin Luther King Jr.’s involvement in “exhausting efforts to establish justice” (see page 24) seems to suggest that Cone himself appears less inclined to focus his energies on this dimension of justice as compared to the first dimension of justice about which he extols with great rhetorical flourish. No doubt this reflects the collective distrust and historic fatigue of African Americans in their journey through “exhausting” struggles with institutional forces and the social, political, and economic power structure that never delivers true and lasting justice for the oppressed.

\(^94\) Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 35.

\(^95\) Ibid., 142.

\(^96\) Ibid., 159.
In this section, I discussed Cone’s conception of justice. As was the case in the preceding section on liberation, I here demonstrated the interplay of justice and liberation. The hope for justice in the moment of liberation shows that liberation without the hope for a realized justice is but a conceptual shell. As co-sufferers with the oppressed, mutual self-giving defines the relationship between God and human beings. But rather than acceptance of oppression, co-participation with God in oppression signifies the realization of justice. The third dimension, dismantling oppression, emphasizes a tradition of truth-telling that characterizes the African American journey from slavery to freedom. Yet, this truth-speaking is not about words alone, but about action—even mass mobilization of people—in the cause of justice. This action is not just for the oppressed, but for all people. All three dimensions underscore the vital relationship between liberation and justice.

Summary and Assessment

In this chapter, I have discussed Cone’s conceptions of liberation and justice. I commenced with Black Theology as Cone’s theological method. Then, I explored Cone’s conception of liberation as Trinitarian. Next, I elucidated his eschatology and discussed the spiritual, social, and transcendent dimensions of liberation. Finally, I analyzed the three components of Cone’s conception of justice: the hope for justice in the moment of liberation, co-suffering with God, and dismantling oppression. In each aspect of the discussion, Cone proffered a Black Theology of survival whose conception of God remained grounded in the reality and concreteness of human suffering. In other words, even in aspects of the discussion that dealt with spirituality and transcendence, the concreteness of suffering remained indispensable.
The strengths of Cone’s conception include Black Theology itself as methodology, his description of the “black condition” which Black Theology addresses, his epistemology of justice, his Christology of liberation, his conceptions of social liberation and spiritual liberation, and his whole conception of justice. Cone’s description of the “black condition” as part of his methodology is an immediate reminder of the reality of suffering. It quickly brings to mind that Black Theology is fundamentally different from mainstream Christian theology in method and in content because it eschews abstractions. By analyzing God’s response to racism which created the “black condition,” Black Theology maintains its purpose and commitment to the liberation of African Americans and all oppressed people.

Cone’s epistemology of justice emphasizes the importance of the Black experience and the Word of God. In fact, Cone’s references to Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcom X show that Black Theology understands justice in a way that cannot be divorced from the struggle for justice. Additionally, the conception of truth as story in the Black experience gives justice in Black Theology a compelling personal and collective experiential edge that moves further away from a mere conceptual orientation about what justice is.

Cone’s Christology focuses on God incarnate in Jesus and on Jesus’ story, especially the event of the cross and the resurrection as ways in which to understand Black suffering and liberation. These are cogent ways of reinterpreting suffering to capture and hold on to hope. Cone’s conception of social liberation as a project of history is the hallmark of his theology because it encapsulates what he must get at for human suffering not to be dismissed by the powerful as insignificant. He makes the point
convincingly that God cares about and participates in human social suffering. Then, his spiritual conception of liberation properly articulates the need for the self to be in fellowship with God—which involves concern for human beings—even before being able to live into the social realm and embrace the humanity of others.

All three of Cone’s dimensions of justice articulate a powerful understanding of justice (or the hope of justice) as present with liberation, co-suffering with God as the highest hope for liberation and the realization of justice, and the dismantling of oppressive power with truth-telling that involves action and words. In each case, Cone reaches for the best of what’s possible in the struggle for liberation and justice: hope of justice in the liberative moment, God as the highest in suffering, and action and words to challenge injustice. Each of these elements affirms the dignity and humanity of oppressed people.

The strengths of Cone’s conceptions of liberation and justice notwithstanding, there are two critical points about which I want to raise questions. First, it seems to me that Cone’s response to questions of theodicy as constituting violations of Black faith might discourage or foreclose the possibility of Black theologians and members of the Black church asking questions about God and human suffering. Questions are crucial, because questioning opens the possibility for new ways of knowing God and understanding relationship to and with God.

Another challenge involves the dimension of Cone’s third aspect of justice that has to do with dismantling oppressive power. While in *God of the Oppressed* Cone talks about removing oppressive power that hurts people, it is notable that he does not make any programmatic recommendations for dismantling oppressive power. While truth-
telling is a key-factor, it remains the case that without concrete strategies, organizing efforts, and mass mobilization techniques, oppressive power is not likely to be successfully dismantled. Truth is essential, but it is not the same as a plan or a program to eliminate oppression.

In this chapter, I have presented Cone’s conceptions of liberation and justice, focusing specifically on Black Theology as Cone’s method, the triunitarian character of liberation, Cone’s eschatology, the three dimensions of liberation (spiritual, social, and transcendent), and the three components of justice (hope of justice in the moment of liberation, co-suffering with God, and dismantling oppression). Strengths of Cone’s conceptions of liberation and justice included Black theology as method, description of the “black condition,” his epistemology of justice, his Christology of liberation, his conceptions of social liberation and spiritual liberation, and his understanding of justice.

One the whole, Cone’s understandings of liberation and justice stay true to the basic character of his Black Theology of liberation which is survival theology. The various aspects of his conceptions of justice and liberation are grounded in the knowledge of a God who is thoroughly relational and whose relationship to human beings is understood crucially, although not exclusively, in the concreteness of social existence. In other words, Black Theology rejects the presumption that human beings can be properly in fellowship with God without embracing freedom for all people and seeking to be in just relationships with others.
Chapter 4:

Cone’s Conceptions of Power and Resistance

This chapter discusses Cone’s conceptions of power and resistance which are both at the core of his theological and ethical understanding of the struggle for liberation. Therefore the purpose of this chapter is to examine the roles played by power and resistance in the struggle against oppression that Cone’s Black Theology addresses. First, I discuss Cone’s understanding of power which, in his formulation, is Black Power. Second, I analyze his conception of resistance in the contexts of the lynching era in the United States and Martin Luther King, Jr.’s nonviolence resistance during the Civil Rights era of the 1960s. Third, I explain the way Cone deals with the contradictions of faith faced by Black religion in the midst of suffering.

I argue that, for Cone, in the late 1960s to early 1970s, Black Power was a morally and ethically justifiable response to oppression and a collective assertion of the right to freedom, human dignity, and self-determination. I further argue that in Cone’s *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969), Black Power advocated various methods of struggle including rebellion against the white power structure. However, by the mid-1970s Cone’s book, *God of the Oppressed* (1975) explicated the suffering of the oppressed as co-suffering with God in a way that is very different from the outright rebellion he posited in his book on Black Power in the milieu of the late 1960s. Cone’s most recent book, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (2011) discusses largely implicit forms of resistance against oppression that are grounded in the stance that God is co-sufferer with the oppressed.
Power and the Black Experience

As a liberation theologian and ethicist, Cone’s theology and ethics clearly start with and are for the oppressed. As discussed in chapter three, he is clear that his theological starting point is the experience of the oppressed, specifically, the Black experience.¹ Thus, for Cone, the issue of power is not one for the powerful who already have power and whose oppression of others is the problem. Working out of the theological tradition of Black Theology, Cone’s understanding of power is grounded in the Black experience. Cone makes the Black experience, Black culture, the community of the oppressed his starting point for his reflections on power. Cone’s approach to power is the revolutionary empowerment of the oppressed.

Cone’s Explication of Black Power

In Black Theology & Black Power Cone writes that the term ‘Black Power’ was first used in the civil rights movement by Stokley Carmichael during the spring of 1966 to designate “the only appropriate response to white racism.”² Although the meaning of this concept has been the subject of protracted debate, Cone defines Black Power as follows: “It means complete emancipation of black people from white oppression by whatever means black people deem necessary.”³ He continues, “Black Power means black freedom, black self-determination, wherein black people no longer view themselves as without human dignity but as men [sic], human beings with the ability to carve out

¹ See pages 70-3.
³ Ibid., 6.
their own destiny.” In short, Black Power means that Black people should rise up and be free and determine who they are and, as human beings, what their place is in God’s creation, and who they want to be as free people, embracing, and protecting their God-given agency.

There is much to unpack in the concept of Black Power as Cone presents it. First, I note the dissonance between Cone’s conception of Black Power and Niebuhr’s conception of power as self-interest. In Cone’s hands, Black Power is about the right of Black people to exist and live freely as part of God’s creation; that is, it is a response to the reality of oppression. As such, it does not reduce to mere self-interest. Furthermore, Black Power does not signal a self-consumed interest in arbitrary, oppressive power. To the contrary, human survival—the survival of Black people—is the subject of Black Power, and, in Cone’s capable hands, Black Power is wielded as a powerful tool for the survival of African Americans.

Second, the way Cone frames his definition of Black Power in relation to Carmichael’s invocation of the term in 1966 presents Black Power as a specific response to the reality of oppression; specifically, one surfacing in the liberative social matrix of the historical moment of 1966. In the previous chapter we saw that Cone argues that the hope for justice emerges out of the moment of liberation itself. Here, Black Power is an example of what such an eruption of the hope for justice in the moment of liberation can entail as a spiritual reality (the fundamental humanity of Black people) powerfully

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4 Ibid.
5 See pg 59.
6 See pg 94.
transforms, erupting on the historical plane (in the affirmation of Black Power). Formed in the crucible of Black oppression, Black Power emerges as a substantive reality in the historical liberative moment (1966 and following) as a powerful tool for articulating and affirming Black humanity.

The wide variety of methods that Black Power employs—Cone specifically mentions “selective buying, boycotting, marching, or even rebellion”—underscore Cone’s conception of Black Power as coming into unique and particular existence at the moment of liberation. Put another way, the methods of Black Power are not set in abstract principle, but vary as needed to meet the concrete historical need of the specific moment. In this way, Cone’s conception of Black Power conforms to his conception of liberation as an actual, concrete project of history.

Third, Cone’s formulation of the meaning of Black Power echoes Malcolm X’s 1964 call at the founding rally of the Organization of Afro-American Unity for freedom, justice, and equality for African Americans in the U.S. “by any means necessary.” It is the expansiveness of these means—including the potential of violence—that struck, and continues to strike, fear in the hearts of many white people. Cone’s inclusion of “even rebellion” as a method of asserting Black Power stoked these fears.

Cone, however, argues that it is a distortion of Black Power to understand it as inherently violent and negating. Rather, Black Power contains within it both negating and

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8 Ibid., 6.
affirming dimensions. In its negating dimension, Black Power says “No” to the oppressor, telling the oppressed “that [the] oppressor has overstepped his [sic] bounds, and that ‘there is a limit beyond which [the oppressor] shall not go.’ It means that oppression can be endured no longer in the *style that the oppressor takes for granted.*”

Cone continues, “To say No means that death is preferable to life, if the latter is devoid of freedom. *Better to die on one’s feet than to live on one’s knees.* This is what Black Power means.” In other words, Black Power is a refusal of life without dignity. In certain situations when the oppressor has overstepped their bounds, the form of that refusal may be rebellion. This is not rebellion for rebellion’s sake, or rebellion motivated by selfish desire for power that seek one’s own aggrandizement at the expense of justice. It is not even the anarchy Niebuhr so feared as corrosive of social order and therefore of justice. Rather, here Cone is referring to morally and ethically justifiable rebellion; rebellion for the ability to live in the freedom of one’s God-given dignity.

The affirmative dimension of Black Power is already evident. Black Power affirms the right and ability of the human person, starting with the *Black* human person, to live in the full dignity of their God-given freedom. In refusing to cooperate with oppression and recognizing that a life without one’s proper human dignity is not a life worth living, Cone argues that a person also, simultaneously, “says… Yes to that

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10 Ibid., 6. Notably, Cone’s work in *Black Theology & Black Power* is an early discourse of power. At that time Cone had not yet come to the understanding evidenced in *God of the Oppressed* where he explicates the oppressed as sharing in the suffering of God. Nonetheless, this prior exposition on Black Power, specifically, seems to make room for the later notion that the oppressed share in the suffering of God in the sense that while Black Power may not mean immediate liberation, by the fact that oppression is no longer being endured as before—as Black Power is now being asserted—the seeds of liberation are sown in oppression whose approaching end is signaled by the assertion of Black Power.

11 Ibid.

12 See pg 62.
‘something within him [sic] which is worthwhile’…and which must be taken into consideration.”¹³ This affirmation is an announcement of spiritual liberation becoming historical liberation; of God’s justice in history.

To sum up this section, Black Power asserts full and complete freedom from oppression. Black Power is a call to action, on the part of Black people, to exercise choices freely—no longer accepting arbitrary compulsions that prevent the Black community’s ability to determine its human, social, and political destinies. At core, Black Power also means the gaining of one’s freedom in whatever way possible. This element of Cone’s explication of Black Power implies a rejection of racist assaults on the God-given freedom and human dignity of the oppressed.

Moreover, unlike Niebuhr’s concept of illegitimate self-interest, Black Power, as Cone discusses it, is not consumed with the desire to acquire oppressive power; rather, it is a specific response to oppression whose goal is Black survival. As an eruption of the hope for justice in the moment of liberation, the instantiations of Black Power (boycotting, marching, rebellion, etc.) demonstrate the concreteness of the project of freedom in history. Yet, that Black Power seeks the emancipation of the oppressed “By any means necessary” and Cone’s mention of rebellion caused fear in the minds of members of the white community. But what Black Power mandates, in Cone’s thought, is not violence but a refusal to be further dehumanized and denigrated. In the hearts and minds of oppressed people, this refusal translates to the preservation and affirmation of their God-given dignity and sense of self-worth.

¹³ James Cone, Black Theology & Black Power, 211.
Cone’s View of Resistance

In the early years of his career, and certainly in *Black Theology and Black Power*, Cone’s vision of justice was clearly indebted to and shaped by the Black Power movement. In part, Black Theology can be understood as providing a Christian theological grounding to this movement for Black freedom in the U.S. In the late 1960s Cone gave his implicit assent—theologically as well as pragmatically—to Black Power’s “by any means necessary” approach. As we have seen, selective buying, boycotting, marching, and rebellion are among the tactical strategies he lists as potential options in the struggle for Black freedom in America.

And yet by 1975, Cone strikes a markedly different tone in *God of the Oppressed*. To recap, the crux of his argument there is that justice and liberation demonstrate that God is thoroughly relational. Thus, the oppressed are not isolated or hopeless in suffering, but are participants with God in the reality of oppression. In short, from arguing for the possibility of outright rebellion against white social and political power structures in 1969, Cone offers a vision of justice predicated on a God who co-suffers with humanity in 1975. How are readers to account for the radically different visions and prescriptions in these books?

Cone’s most recent book, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, provides a framework for understanding the intellectual and theological growth in Cone’s thought in the period between these two books. The historical era on which Cone focuses his analysis in *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* are the years between 1880 and 1940; what
he refers to as “the lynching era.” He describes the deterioration of the Black social situation following Reconstruction and the removal of Federal troops from the south in 1877. During this period whites sought to “redeem” the south from so-called “Negro domination.” “Redemption” tactics included, “excluding Blacks from politics, arresting them for vagrancy, forcing them to work as sharecroppers who never got out of debt, and creating a rigid segregated society in which being black was a badge of shame with no meaningful future. A black person could be lynched for any perceived insult to whites.”

Cone recounts the sentiments of a white man from Florida: “‘The people of the South don’t think any more of killing the black fellows than you would think of killing a flea...’” In this situation of racist degradation, attacks on Black human dignity, and the destruction of Black life, Cone writes that “the black dream of freedom turned into a nightmare ‘worse than slavery,’” This dire situation clearly demanded Black resistance.

The Black social situation of the lynching era demanded Black resistance; yet Cone recognizes the real limitations of the situation. “Self-defense and protests were out of the question,” he acknowledges; even, “tantamount to suicide.” In light of these limitations, one way to understand the question at the center of The Cross and the Lynching Tree is: What does the struggle against oppression, or what I refer to as resistance, look like when the methods Cone identified in 1969 (i.e., self-defense, selective buying, protests, revolution, etc.) are not realistic options?

Put in the theological terms of God of the Oppressed, another way to phrase this question is, What does resistance to oppression look like in the midst of co-suffering with

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15 Ibid., 5-6.
16 Ibid., 6.
17 Ibid., 5.
18 Ibid., 11-12.
God? This section of the chapter explores Cone’s answers to these questions. In the process, I attempt to show that even as Cone’s understanding of resistance and the possibilities of God’s justice expand throughout his career, a conviction bridging his positions is the idea that the nature of the circumstance and times should dictate the mode of struggle/resistance.

Before proceeding, it is important to emphasize that Cone’s point in exploring how southern Blacks resisted oppression during the lynching era, and in formulating a theological understanding of their suffering as sharing in the suffering of God is not to suggest either that African Americans passively accepted the oppression to which they were subjected as permissible, deserved or just (i.e., nonresistance), or that the conditions during the lynching era were such that they could not resist. To the contrary, this inquiry expands perceptions of the repertoire of tactics and strategies oppressed people use to resist oppression in different social and historical contexts. Resistance is not just violent revolution, but takes many forms according to the situation.

Waging Resistance in the Lynching Era

Cone identifies the blues and religion as the Black community’s primary strategies of resistance to oppression in the lynching era. He argues that the blues offered an affirmation of Black humanity while religion provided a much-needed source of hope: “Both black religion and the blues offered sources of hope that there was more to life than what one encountered daily in the white man’s world.” I will treat each strategy in turn, starting with religion.

19 Ibid., 12.
20 Ibid., 12.
Religious Resources of Resistance

Cone invokes the image of “cool springs of hope” to depict the role religion played in sustaining resistance during the lynching era. He draws on Richard Wright’s characterization of Black religion in *Twelve Million Black Voices* (1941): “Our churches are where we dip our tired bodies in cool springs of hope,…where we retain our wholeness and humanity despite the blows of death.”21 Church was a place where, through song, sermon, and prayer, Black Christians “spoke back …against” the violent and dehumanizing messages and actions of white power.22 In the face of brutal degradation and humiliation, corporate worship was a prophetic act that insisted in the face of all evidence to the contrary, that “trouble and sorrow would not determine final meaning.”23 In this way, church functioned as a space where Black people were refreshed in body, soul, and spirit as they continued to face oppression.

The fact that religion provided a much needed source of hope did not absolve Black Christians from the necessity of struggling with the paradox of faith. As Cone writes, African Americans “struggle to reconcile their faith in God’s justice and love with the persistence of black suffering.”24 Cone puts it bluntly: “[in] the lynching era… God the liberator seemed nowhere to be found.”25 The theology of the cross that Cone develops in *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*—specifically, that the lynching tree is the gospel of Jesus’ cross revealed today—seeks to speak to the contradictions that slavery,

22 Ibid.
23 Ibid.
24 Ibid., 28.
25 Ibid., 27.
segregation and lynching pose for Christian believers. In other words, the lynching tree as the incarnation of Jesus’ cross symbolizes suffering caused by various forms of social evil, and by Jesus’ act of taking on suffering, suffering and death on the lynching tree is not finally determinative even when oppressed people wonder why God has not yet ended their suffering.

*The Cross and the Lynching Tree* builds on the ideas Cone first advanced in *God of the Oppressed*, that in their oppression, the oppressed are sharing in the suffering of God. The theological symbol of the cross is central to his argument. He explains, “The cross is a paradoxical religious symbol because it *inverts* the world’s value system with the news that hope comes by way of defeat, that suffering and death do not have the last word, that the last shall be the first and the first shall be the last.”27 The inversion dispenses with the notion that defeat (in suffering and death) means hopelessness. In fact, in Cone’s theology of the cross, it is precisely because of defeat that hope is alive. The story of the cross is a story of death and life, despair and hope, defeat and victory. Cone is saying that without the whole story of the cross—including its paradoxes—the oppressed could not see what is beyond defeat, death, and despair.

The emphasis Cone places on co-suffering with God means the oppressed share in the divine refusal to be stagnant, passive, and inactive. Co-suffering with God means resisting non-resistance and actively resisting structures of oppression. Participating in the divine refusal to do nothing, the resolve to say no to the allure of conformity, and effectively opposing systemic evil are what Cone means by suffering and death not having the last word. That Christ’s brutal death culminated in resurrection means that, in

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26 Ibid., 26.
27 Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 11.
Christ, suffering and death are always an incomplete story. The inversion of the cross—that out of suffering and death comes life—is why Cone speaks of the cross and announces that defeat is, indeed, a route to hope.

Cone implies that God, through Christ, stands daily in the gap between despair and hope; and along with the oppressed, absorbs the seeming perpetual tension of opposition. “That God could ‘make a way out of no way’ in Jesus’ cross was truly absurd to the intellect,” writes Cone, “yet, profoundly real in the souls of black folk.”  

It is in this way of absurd reality that the cross and the lynching tree are routes to hope.

The Black Church was the target of racist assaults, physical and theological alike, during the lynching era and beyond. The theological assaults waged against the Black Church are too numerous, not to mention too constant, to recount. Nonetheless it is worth highlighting that whites’ claim that they were justified in attempting to control Blacks, whether through legalized chattel slavery, Jim Crow laws, or extralegal forms of mob violence such as lynching were grounded in interpretations of Christian theology according to which, “America is a white nation called by God to bear witness to the superiority of ‘white over black.’”  

In itself, such racist theologies constitute a theological assault.

As for physical assaults against the Black Church, perhaps the most well known is the bombing of Sixteenth Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, AL on September 15, 1963 in which the lives of four young girls were snuffed out. But physical assaults on the Black Church are by no means a thing of the past. On June 17 2015, white supremacist

28 Ibid., 2.
29 Ibid., 7. For an in-depth exploration and analysis of the religious grounding of the racist construction of America as a white nation in possession of a divine mandate in the world, see also Kelly Brown Douglas, Black Bodies and the Justice of God (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2015).
Dylann Roof gunned down and killed nine Black church members during an evening prayer service at Mother Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina. Yet, despite these assaults, the Black Church remains a space of resistance to white oppression and source of hope for those who continue the struggle.

**Resistance in the Blues**

The blues were another source that sustained Black resistance during the lynching era. Cone writes “At the juke joints on Friday and Saturday nights…blacks affirmed their humanity and fought back against dehumanization.”^30^ He explains that the Blues, “lifted African Americans above their troubles by offering them an opportunity to experience ‘love and loss’ as a liberating catharsis.”^31^ According to Cone, Black people “found hope in the music itself—a collective self-transcendent meaning in the singing, dancing, loving, and laughing. They found hope in the stoic determination not to be defeated by the pain and suffering in their lives.”^32^

Cone’s analysis of how the blues functioned as source of resistance for the African American community draws on Ralph Ellison’s characterization of the blues as “an impulse to keep the painful details and episodes of a brutal experience alive in one’s aching consciousness, to finger its jagged grain, and to transcend it, not by the consolation of philosophy but by squeezing from it a near-tragic, near comic-lyricism.”^33^ A hallmark feature of the blues is its refusal of escapism. Indeed, a crucial aspect of the lyrical genius of blues composers and musicians is the ability to hold at bay the

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^30^ Ibid., 12.
^31^ Ibid., 12.
^32^ Ibid., 13
temptation, especially in a brutal world of lynch mobs, to give in completely to the melodic sweetness of sound; while at the same time acknowledging, confronting, and even interacting with pain and agony. Still, Ellison says one’s dealings with agony are transcended by acting intentionally to face the tragic and the comic in the lyrics. Cone illustrates this point in the following lyrics:

Good morning, blues.
Blues how do you do?
Blues say, ‘I feel all right but
I come to worry you.’

In these lyrics, there is no hesitation or distancing in greeting the blues. The lyrics evidence bold and courageous engagement. The singer knows how the blues will respond, but she or he does not retreat. The singer is facing anxiety, fear, horrors of death, and even the terror of the threat of lynching with a sense of both the tragic and the comic. The tragic points to death, agony, pain whereas the comic sensibility considers and takes seriously the ultimate futility of the tragic.

In short, the blues were an avenue through which African Americans could converse with, or speak back to, tragedy as well as to their social situation more generally. Three blues musicians in particular are worthy of note: Robert Johnson (1911-1938), Bill Broonzy (1893-1958), and Billie Holliday (1915-1959). Cone writes that Robert Johnson’s music was characterized by his refusal to “be defined by death’s brutal reality—the constant threat of the lynching tree.” He sang

I got to keep movinnnn’,
I got to keep movinmn’,
Blues fallin’ like hail

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35 Ibid., 12.
And the day keeps on worryin’ me
There’s a hellhound on my trail.36

Johnson’s music voices anxiety, a heightened awareness of social evil (“a hellhound on my trail”), and a need to remain in motion. The movement of the Back body constitutes a response to life, a struggle with fear, and resistance against death and humiliation. Johnson’s lyrics, for Cone, exemplify implicit Black resistance in the blues which, through lyrical symbolism, expresses the resolve to remain alive—in life-preserving motion, while being pursued daily and threatened by violence.

Big Bill Broonzy is another compelling blues musician who Cone references as an example of a more explicit form of resistance in the blues. Broonzy’s music is “bolder and more explicit” than Johnson’s. For instance, the lyrics of Broonzy’s song “When Will I Get to Be Called a Man?” are as follows

When I was born in this world, this is what happened to me:
I was never called a man and now I’m fifty-three…
I wonder when I will be called a man.
Or do I have to wait ’til I get ninety-three?37

This song explicitly protests the patronizing, infantilizing treatment African American men experienced from whites. Cone acknowledges, “When an adult black male is treated like a child in a patriarchal society—with whites calling him ‘boy,’ ‘uncle,’ and ‘nigger’—proclaiming oneself a ‘man’ is bold and necessary affirmation of black resistance.”38 Indeed, Cone suggests that Broonzy’s lyrics are “analogous to the Memphis garbage workers carrying large signs saying ‘I’M A MAN’ in defiance of white city

37 William Broonzy, Big Bill Blues: William Broonzy’s Story as Told to Yannick Bruynoghe (New York: Oak Archives, 1955), 70, as quoted by Ibid., 17.
38 Ibid., 17.
government during Martin Luther King Jr.’s last march in 1968).”

Broonzy’s song exemplifies how the human fears, trepidation, agony, despair, etc., which haunt the life of the oppressed are the subject of the blues.

Cone also mentions the significance of Billie Holiday’s music, specifically praising the fearlessness and courage of her 1939 recording of “Strange Fruit.” Cone calls this song “the most powerful resistance song against lynching.” Holiday sings

Southern trees bear strange fruit,
Blood on the leaves and blood at the root,
Black body swinging in the Southern breeze,
Strange fruit hanging from the poplar trees.

The figurative language of the title, “Strange Fruit” avoids the obviousness of a literal protest, but, powerfully, calls attention to the horror of violence and death produced as fruit by a living tree. So powerful was the effect of Holiday’s performance that, according to Cone, “Just as the old slave spiritual, “Were you There?” placed Black Christians at the foot of Jesus’ cross, “Strange Fruit” put them at the foot of the lynching tree.”

In a sense, Johnson, Broonzy, Holiday, and other blues musicians who spoke back against what they experienced through the blues functioned as secular prophets. Indeed, Cone lauds the lyricist of this song, Abel Meeropol, who, after viewing photos of lynching in Marion, IN, in 1930, wrote the song to express his outrage and grief. States Cone, “Meerpol said in the lyrics of ‘Strange Fruit’ what Reinhold Niebuhr and other white theologians and religious leaders should have said if they had the heart and courage

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39 Ibid., 17.
40 Ibid., 134.
42 Ibid., 138.
to say what Jesus’ cross means for American Christians.”\textsuperscript{43} Cone pointedly criticizes white Christian theologians like Reinhold Niebuhr for their silence in the face of the brutal atrocities that the practice of lynching visited on Black bodies and communities. Niebuhr’s concern for maintaining ‘the balance of power’ as constitutive of justice blinded him, as we saw in chapter one, to grave injustices he should have recognized and condemned. Thus, Cone treats resistance not as an optional part of Christian practice, but as a mandate. When the social evil of White racism incites and legitimates violence that destroys Black lives, the Gospel of Jesus demands resistance, speaking back/out against oppression.

Cone pointedly critiques Niebuhr and other white theologians who were his contemporaries for their failure to adequately interpret the meaning of the cross in America during the lynching era. At the same time, his praise is effusive of blues musicians for their courage in articulating a humanity-affirming response back to the oppression they experienced and saw around them. Yet Cone acknowledges that their courage and articulation of black experience and humanity notwithstanding, “Unlike the spirituals and the church, the blues and the juke joint did not lead to an organized political resistance against white supremacy.”\textsuperscript{44} Indeed, the blues and the juke joints empowered the individual to lyrically express and contend with the pain experienced during the period of lynching. Yet, I fully concur with Cone’s assessment that it was “the spirituals and the church, with Jesus’ cross at the heart of its faith, gave birth to the black freedom movement that reached its peak in the civil rights era during the 1950s and

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., 28.
This point does not underplay the importance of the role the blues played in the
day to day lives of African Americans in the lynching era.

The blues gave individuals a voice to express cultural defiance against white
supremacy and prepared them to fight for justice. However, it was the spirituals and the
religious message of Jesus’ cross that “sent people protesting in the streets, seeking to
change the social structures of racial oppression.”

It was resistance nurtured from
spiritual sources that formed the soul of the movement. Therefore in the final section of
this chapter I turn my attention to the religious leader of the civil rights movement,
Martin Luther King, Jr. to explore his conception of resistance against racist oppression.

**Martin Luther King, Jr. and Resistance in the Civil Rights Movement**

Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. is most well-known for his leadership of the
mid-twentieth century civil rights movement in the US. It is arguable that the facet of his
leadership for which he is known most widely is his embrace of nonviolent resistance.
King’s nonviolence was rooted in his faith in Jesus, especially in the salvific power of
Jesus’ death. According to Cone, King’s understanding of the significance of the cross
was not the result of his formal academic training in white institutions; rather, “His view
of the cross was shaped by his reading of the Bible through the black religious experience
and his ‘personal suffering’ in his fight for justice.”

Therefore, Cone argues, “When
King thought about Jesus hanging on the shameful cross, he also saw God transform a
tragic situation into something redemptive.”

King believed that the cross bore witness

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45 Ibid.
46 Ibid.
47 Ibid., 86.
48 Ibid.
to the redemptive capacities of love, demonstrating that God’s love was capable of redeeming humanity and, furthermore, that this same love was also capable of working redemption "even for the whites who committed the unspeakable crime [of lynching]." 49 So great was the redemptive power of love that it did not turn even the oppressor away. In this way, King understood Jesus’ suffering on the cross as the answer to the question of the meaning of the suffering of Black bodies on lynching trees. 50 In sum, Jesus’ death on the cross gave meaning to suffering and death on the lynching tree.

King’s philosophy of non-violence is thoroughly theologically grounded. Yet at the same time, I contend that he also understood non-violence to work pragmatically. In his 1957 sermon, “Loving Your Enemies,” King writes that “the command to love one’s enemy is an absolute necessity for survival.” 51 In this statement, King is asserting that the love command is a reality that cannot be avoided if people are to live together in society. If this is so, then how does love function?

In this sermon King makes his famous argument that, “love is the only force capable of transforming an enemy into a friend.” 52 Love, in this sense, is a transformative agent evident where people respond positively to the practical need for an enemy to become a friend rather than remain an enemy. In part, the idea that an enemy should become a friend is rooted in King’s conviction that responding to hate with hate does not eliminate the enemy. 53 In that scenario, hate increases only leading to greater enmity and destruction. “Hate destroys and tears down; by its very nature, love creates and builds

49 Ibid.
50 Ibid.
51 Martin Luther King, Jr., “Loving Your Enemies” in Strength to Love: Martin Luther King, Jr. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2010), 44.
52 Ibid., 48.
53 Ibid.
up,” King continues.\textsuperscript{54} By necessary implication, for King, the violence which goes along with hate is destructive; whereas non-violence which goes along with love is constructive. For King, nonviolence and love are the proper modes of resistance in fighting for justice.

Although Cone highlights King’s nonviolent approach to struggle and the acceptance it enjoyed in the black freedom movement, he acknowledges the diversity of perspectives among activists in the movement. “Indeed many activists in the Black freedom struggle did not share King’s faith in Jesus, especially in the salvific power of Jesus’ death,” writes Cone.\textsuperscript{55} Some could not accept King’s religious faith, even if they accepted the strategy of nonviolence he proposed as the best strategy for African Americans to fight white supremacy. But to genuinely understand King, it is crucially important to keep in mind that he did not embrace nonviolence for its strategic potential. Nonviolence was more than a strategic calculation for King; rather, he saw it as the way of life modeled by Jesus’ rejection of violence and acceptance of suffering and death on the cross.\textsuperscript{56} Nonviolence, in other words, was \textit{the} way of Jesus; the only option for those who claimed to follow him. Moreover, King believed that life defined by love for others—including for the most heinous oppressors—was “the only way to heal broken humanity.”\textsuperscript{57} So for King, nonviolence was more than an approach; it was the way through which God’s love revealed itself in the struggle. On nonviolence as central to the gospel Vincent Harding, a Mennonite, was a decisive influence on King.

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., 85.
\textsuperscript{56} Ibid., 85.
\textsuperscript{57} Ibid., 85.
In chapter three I noted the profound influence King had on Cone’s conception of justice. The Cross and the Lynching Tree contains an entire chapter devoted to King, further evidencing the depth of Cone’s appreciation for King’s philosophy of nonviolence or resistance in love. Therefore, it is clear that although Malcom X’s “by any means necessary” approach was deeply impactful on Cone, especially in the early years of his career; over time and as his own theological perspective matured through struggles with the contradictions of Black faith and Black experience, he came to align much more closely with King’s approach.

Summary and Assessment

This chapter has explored Cone’s answers to the question he poses at the outset of The Cross and the Lynching Tree of how Blacks in the rural South survived the terrors of the lynching era—a social situation in which, as we have seen, the more overt and radical methods of resistance to racist oppression that Malcolm X, and even Cone himself, would endorse in the 1960s and 70s were not (yet) possible. Black religion and the blues were modes of protest and resistance that nurtured and sustained Black people in the midst of seemingly intractable oppressive circumstances.

But before concluding this chapter I also want to underscore the theological answer that Cone offers to the question he poses about Black survival during this time. Indeed, it was not only the physical survival of Black individuals and Black communities that was on the line during the lynching era, but their spiritual survival as well. What was the meaning of this suffering? The oppression Black people experienced in slavery,  

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58 See pg 91.
59 Cone, The Cross and the Lynching Tree, 12.
segregation, the lynching era, and beyond posed profound contradictions for their faith. How could faith in God’s justice and love, on the one hand, be reconciled with the persistence of black suffering on the other?\textsuperscript{60}

To fully understand Cone’s answer to this question, it is necessary to return to the theological perspective he presents in \textit{God of the Oppressed}. To briefly recap, a core theme of the understanding of justice in the liberative process that Cone develops there is the idea that God invites the oppressed to suffer with God. Cone argues that the predominant theme of justice in the biblical witness is not retributive justice (according to which God rewarded those who kept the covenant and punished those who disobeyed), but the model of the Suffering Servant. According to this model of justice, God, through Jesus, enters the human situation as “the Elected One who takes Israel’s place as the Suffering Servant” and suffers both with and for humanity.\textsuperscript{61}

The Suffering Servant model of justice reveals that God’s call to the oppressed during the time between Jesus’ resurrection and the final defeat of suffering that is the Second Coming of Christ is to “fight against suffering by becoming God’s suffering servants in the world.”\textsuperscript{62} “Our call,” writes Cone, is “to become liberated sufferers with God.”\textsuperscript{63} As applied to the situation and experiences of African Americans in the US, Cone’s theological construction means that on the lynching tree and through other forms of suffering to which they are subjected, African Americans are sharing in the suffering of God who suffered with Jesus on the cross. Thus, like the cross, the southern lynching tree must be understood not just in terms of oppression, pain and suffering, but also in

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 18-28.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 124.
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., \textit{God of the Oppressed}, 163.
\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., 163.
terms of the possibilities of life and hope. The God who resurrected Jesus’ crucified body will resurrect the lynched Black body.

This affirmation of faith in the resurrection is a theological affirmation of faith as well as a socio-political affirmation on the level of social change. The culmination of African Americans’ intense suffering during the lynching era was the Civil Rights movement of the 1950s and 60s. The close attention Cone pays in *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* to Black religion and the blues as the primary forms of resistance African Americans’ waged against oppression as they co-suffered with God during the long brutal years of the lynching era corroborates his argument in *God of the Oppressed* that the invitation to co-suffer with God as a dimension of justice is not tantamount to expecting the oppressed to suffer passively or asking them to acquiesce to oppression. Rather, it is to affirm that there is more going on in suffering than immediately meets the eye; or, put another way, to insist that Spirit of God is actively at work in all circumstances acting in accordance with the fundamental nature of God which is liberation.

To briefly summarize, I have discussed the major components of Cone’s understanding of power and resistance. Cone understands Black Power as a morally and ethically justifiable response of oppressed people to reclaim their God-given freedom and dignity. In the context of the lynching era, Cone discussed resistance as largely implicit in the blues and Black religion involving co-suffering with God. Theologically, Cone grounds this understanding of resistance in his conception that the lynching tree was the incarnation of Jesus’ cross and that God suffers with the oppressed. For him, resistance takes on different forms from one period of struggle to the next. Consistent with modes of resistance during the lynching era, especially religious ones, Cone points to King’s
understanding of the cross and nonviolence as a powerful mode of resistance adopted during the Civil Rights era of the 1960s. Ultimately, he posits his Suffering Servant response to the contradictions presented by the persistence of Black suffering in the face of a loving and faithful God.

Four strengths of Cone’s conceptions of power and resistance are noteworthy. First, Cone’s understanding of Black Power makes a strong distinction between Black Power and oppressive power. In this sense, the impact of Cone’s conception of power lies, fundamentally, in how it functions to empower the oppressed. Not only does Cone start by grounding Black Power in the Black experience, he discusses it as a call for the oppressed to rise up and collectively assert their God-given right to freedom, dignity, and self-determination. Cone’s understanding of Black Power eschews the critique that Black Power is a self-consumed illegitimate form of power that seeks the same ends as the dominant power structure that it opposes.

Second, as evidenced by Cone’s discussion in The Cross and the Lynching Tree, Cone’s conviction is that resistance and methods of struggle in general are dictated by time and circumstances. This belief is, indeed, a strength of Cone’s presentation because it does not only avoid suggesting non-resistance as a response to oppression, but allows for the creative flexibility of oppressed people to respond to different sets of historical and social circumstances in different ways at different times. This way of thinking prevents those who continue to fight for justice from lingering in the past and getting stuck in old assumptions about how to approach new situations albeit dealing with old problems.
Third, resistance as co-suffering with God is also a strength of Cone’s conception of resistance because the concept of co-suffering locates God’s activity in the very site of oppression. The efficacy of this notion starts, at once, with the message that God is not some distant reality, but One who is at the side of the oppressed. In this regard, more critically, Cone’s assertion that the lynching tree is the incarnation of Jesus’ cross today brings into play a profound theological lens through which to understand God’s participation with the oppressed.

The lynching tree as the incarnation of Jesus’ cross in a modern context brings to the aid of the oppressed the logic of reversals that characterized Jesus’ life and ministry and which culminated in his death on the cross. In discussing the lynching tree, Cone shows that in indescribably difficult years of the lynching of African Americans, the cross was not merely a symbol of defeat, but of hope. In other words, Cone’s powerful conviction that the lynching tree (as Jesus’ cross) dared to declare that the situation was not as it appeared: where there seemed only to be death and tragedy there was also life and hope. Moreover, the notion of co-participation with God in suffering is not only hopeful, but profoundly empowering in that death suffered in the violence of oppression by the inverted logic of Jesus’ cross portends life, liberation, and justice.

Fourth, Cone’s discussion of Martin Luther King Jr.’s philosophy and practice of non-violent resistance in *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* contributes significantly to the strength of Cone’s conception of resistance. The effectiveness of King’s philosophy of nonviolence in resisting injustice during the Civil Rights era of the 1960s is evident in both theological and pragmatic considerations. Theologically, the emphasis on the redemptive capacities of God’s love symbolized by the event of Jesus’ cross reaches
beyond the limitations of the human mind and conventions to include both the oppressed and oppressors. Then, a compelling pragmatic consideration of King’s nonviolent resistance is that hate and violence do not transform enmity, but replicate themselves and lead to more enmity, injustice, and oppression.

The strengths of Cone’s conceptions notwithstanding there are two points I want to push back against. First, Cone effectively demonstrates the moral and ethical character of Black Power as a response to oppression. However, his shift from the possibility of direct rebellion (with both its negating and affirming dimensions) as one of the strategies by which to struggle against injustice to the stance that the oppressed suffer with God, it seems, could be problematic. The point of concern is that if co-suffering with God still means active resistance against racist assaults, but in a way that excludes direct confrontation with oppressive forces, then, in some ways, self-defense is excluded. Indeed, Cone mentions that self-defense was not an option during the lynching era. If Cone is suggesting that self-defense, which was a crucial dimension of the Black Power response is sometimes not available as a mode of resistance, he might be foreclosing an ethically and morally justifiable way of defending one’s God-given freedom and human dignity. I argue that this strategy should be available in any historical period to all people.

Secondly, from a contemporary perspective, there is a critical point I want to raise about the notion of the Suffering Servant model as a response to some of the contradictions of Black faith in the midst of oppression. Cone’s Suffering Servant model asserts that God calls the oppressed to fight against suffering and become God’s suffering servants between the time of Jesus’ resurrection and His Second Coming. For Cone, Jesus’ resurrection theologically and socio-politically affirms that Black lynched bodies
would be resurrected. At Jesus’ Second Coming, according to Cone, suffering will be finally defeated. This view points to the final defeat of oppression and injustice in the future.

It seems younger generations of activists today that are becoming increasingly impatient with the persistence (and even proliferation) of injustices like police brutality, the prison industrial complex, delays in criminal justice reform, racial profiling, structural domination, etc., may be less inclined to accept Cone’s theological answer because it places the final defeat of oppression and suffering at what might appear to be a too distant time in the future. Thus, the theological outlook of oppressed people as God’s suffering servants (fighting for justice) until Jesus’ return may be deemed less cogent to younger generations’ efforts to understand God’s apparent silence in the face of Black suffering.

In the final analysis, it is important to approach Cone’s conceptions of power and resistance as crucial aspects of his Black Theology of liberation which is a theology of the oppressed and marginalized. Within this theological perspective, Cone’s concept of power is purely about restoring and preserving human freedom and God-given dignity. This approach avoids the misconception that Cone’s understanding of power (Black power) involves a quest for dominant and oppressive power. Thus understood, Cone’s later conception of co-suffering with God functions not as means to alleviate anxieties about Black Power, but constitutes the fruit of Cone’s later reflections on the multiplicity of ways in which God is working in the world at different times and under different circumstances to empower and liberate the oppressed.
Chapter 5

Cone and Niebuhr in an Age of the Black Lives Matter

My purpose in this chapter is to analyze how aspects of Niebuhr’s and Cone’s frameworks apply to the demands and aspirations of the Black Lives Matter movement. This analysis is crucial because it illuminates a major question of usefulness with which younger generations of activists are preoccupied. They ask how useful the theological and ethical resources of past generations are to them today as they continue the struggle for freedom and justice. In this regard, I address one key question, What resources from Niebuhr’s and Cone’s intellectual corpuses could be mined to contribute to the resistance and demands for change articulated by the BLM? In other words, how useful could Niebuhr’s and Cone’s ideas be to the BLM movement’s demands and aspirations?

To answer this question, first, I discuss the Black Lives Matter movement’s demands and aspirations based on its particular vision of freedom, justice, and Black Power. Second, I apply Cone’s and Niebuhr’s understandings of justice, freedom/or liberation, power, and resistance to BLM’s demands, respectively. This discussion will be situated in BLM’s thematic categories of freedom, justice, and Black Power. Altogether, I argue that in this age of the Black Lives Matter movement, Niebuhr’s thought is useful in identifying forces of oppression and naming oppressive practices antithetical to justice. Then, I demonstrate that Cone’s articulation of Black Power, his description of the “black condition,” his conception of dismantling oppressive power, and the social dimension of liberation are useful in confronting white supremacy. I will argue that although Cone’s later conception of resistance might be less appealing to the BLM movement, his Black
Theology of Liberation as a whole could be particularly useful to the BLM movement’s struggle for justice.

**Black Lives Matter: Demands and Aspirations**

To recap, once again, the BLM formed in 2012 following the shooting death of Trayvon Martin by George Zimmerman in Sanford, Florida, and erupted into the streets with a renewed passion following the murder of 18-year old Michael Brown by police officer Darren Wilson in Ferguson, Missouri in August, 2014. After Ferguson and in the ongoing climate of police violence and various forms of racial injustice in America, a coalition of several dozen groups across the country now boast of affiliation with the Black Lives Matter movement. They remain active and socially engaged, organizing and conducting social action campaigns at both the local and national levels on a variety of fronts where injustices are present.

In 2016, a number of groups affiliated with the Black Lives Matter movement released a number of major demands that dealt with areas that reveal the reality of oppression and injustice against African Americans in the United States. “A Vision for Black Lives: Policy Demands for Black Power, Freedom, & Justice,” presents six major demands. The demands are:

7. An end to criminalization, incarceration, and killing of Black people.

8. A demand for community control in which people most harmed by arbitrary police violence, especially in cases of use of deadly force, should have control hiring and firing of police who are meant to serve the community.
9. A demand for full and independent Black political power and Black self-determination in all areas of society.

10. A demand for economic justice for all and reconstruction of the economy to ensure Black communities have collective ownership, not only access.

11. A demand for reparations for harms inflicted on Black people; from colonialism to slavery through food & housing redlining, mass incarceration and surveillance.

12. A demand for the education, safety, health of Black people, instead of investment in the criminalizing, caging, and harming of Black people.¹

In the following sections, I discuss the BLM movement’s demands as focused on justice, freedom, and Black Power. Although each demand arguably deals with all three themes; I will discuss each demand as being, particularly, centered on one of the three themes.

**Black Lives Matter and Niebuhr: Justice**

In an age of Black Lives Matter, the demand to end the “criminalization, incarceration, and killing of Black people” on its face highlights a problem with the criminal justice system which is a problem of structural injustice. In connection with this demand, the Movement of Black Lives website points to several examples of the criminalization, incarceration, and the unjust killing of Black people. The first example noted is, for some, perhaps the most critical: the “school-to-prison pipeline.”² This phrase describes an injustice in under-funded schools where Black students are taken off the

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² Ibid.
academic path and placed on a track to prison.\textsuperscript{3} The “school-to-prison pipeline” functions on zero-tolerance school policies that exclude students from school through disciplinary actions such as suspension, expulsions, and arrests made through the school.\textsuperscript{4} The result is that Black youth are tracked from school directly into the prison system rather than into college, trade school, or gainful employment. In this process they are saddled with criminal records that mark them permanently as second-class citizens.\textsuperscript{5} The egregious nature of this injustice should, indeed, shock the conscience.

What resources—analytical, theological, and ethical—can a Niebuhrian analysis bring to the challenge of resisting and dismantling the criminalization and incarceration of Black youth? For one, Niebuhr insists that resisting, challenging, and effectuating change in an oppressive system starts with recognizing the forces of oppression. Further, as we have seen in chapter 1, he argues that human selfishness is a real moral limitation and that the impact of this individual limitation is amplified in groups. Thus, dealing with the forces of oppression to which selfishness gives rise cannot, he argues, be left to a “simple Christian moralism” that only cautions people against selfishness, individually.\textsuperscript{6} Rather, for Niebuhr injustice is a systemic problem. That is, the issues of justice and injustice that Niebuhr attempted to tackle did not reduce to Christian platitudes or exhortations to kindness and charity. He knew that justice was serious and difficult business, and his framework attempted to articulate words, concepts, and theories that would make it possible to talk about and, in turn, work on issues of justice and injustice.

\footnotesize{\textsuperscript{3} Ibid.  \textsuperscript{4} Ibid.  \textsuperscript{5} Michelle Alexander, \textit{The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Color Blindness} (NY: The Free Press, 2012) 12-14.  \textsuperscript{6} Ibid., 23.}
In the face of injustice, Niebuhr responded that, “A profounder Christian faith must encourage men [sic] to create systems of justice which will save society and themselves from their own selfishness.” For us, this raises the question of what such systems might look like and entail. As pertains to interrupting the “school-to-prison pipeline,” a specific suggestion endorsed by The Movement for Black Lives is for people of conscience along with the Black Lives Matter movement to press for the enactment of non-punitive legislations that are just and fair to govern the behavior of school children. Non-punitive measures encourage accountability while resisting the unjust and cruel impulse to criminalize black and brown children and young people by the institutions charged with educating them.

**Black Lives Matter and Niebuhr: Freedom**

The BLM movement’s sixth demand calls for investment in education, health, and safety of Black people and a divestment in the “criminalizing, caging, and harming of Black people.” Although this demand clearly deals with issues of justice, it raises a fundamental concern about freedom and the right to self-determination. Education, health, and safety are indispensable to the freedom of oppressed communities and individuals in those communities. On its website, the BLM movement emphasizes that investment in jobs and education result in safer and stronger communities while there is no evidence that enormous spending on incarceration translates to safer communities and

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8 It is noteworthy that punitive laws which govern juvenile conduct make it possible for under-resourced schools to adopt punitive policies that support this structural injustice of the “school-to-prison pipeline.”
a reduction in crime.\textsuperscript{9} For BLM, without education, health, and safety, the choices for social and economic mobility are drastically limited. Thus, bolstering the demand for education, health, and safety is the BLM movement’s call for the reallocation of federal funding from policing and incarceration to “educational, community restorative justice and employment programs that have been shown to improve community safety.”\textsuperscript{10}

Educational opportunity, health, and safety give human beings the ability to make choices freely to live a quality life. The ability to make choices is a defining element of self-determination. For Niebuhr, self-determination is a central concept in his understanding of freedom. He asserts that self-determination as central to human freedom goes even beyond “ordinary choices” to the point of self-transcendence—that is, evidencing an almost limitless ability and capacity to completely choose and shape goals and outcomes.\textsuperscript{11}

One of Niebuhr’s central themes as regards the positive aspect of human nature is the expansiveness of human freedom.\textsuperscript{12} Of course, in oppressed communities, the desire and capacity for freedom still remains, but the full realization of freedom is systemically quelled. Niebuhr’s articulation of the vibrancy of the “human spirit” (i.e., the spirit that makes choices freely and transcends itself) exposes institutional forces that, through discriminatory policies, practices, attitudes, and beliefs, function in ways that are antithetical to the fostering of a vibrant human spirit and a thriving life. The particular usefulness of the way in which Niebuhr conceptualizes the essential freedom and

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{11} See pg 23.
\textsuperscript{12} See generally chapter 1.
uncontainability of the human spirit in connection with BLM’s demand for education, health, safety and ending the criminalization and unjust imprisonment of Black people is that oppressive practices like the excessive funding of unjust policing and prisons cannot be excused or otherwise explained away in the face of this moral and ethical insistence that freedom is a reality to which all communities—including Black communities—are entitled.

**Black Lives Matter and Niebuhr: Black Political Power**

The Black Lives Matter movement’s third demand is for full and independent Black political power and Black self-determination in all areas of society. By Black political power, the BLM movement means Black power that dismantles the present political order in the United States and creates what it refers to as a “real democracy.”¹³ A major aspect of this demand is the call for an end to the criminalization of Black political activity, including the release of Black political prisoners. In this regard, the BLM movement reports that the criminalization of Black freedom fighters and activists in the United States has led to the incarceration of hundreds of people.¹⁴

Of course, Niebuhr’s conception of power is very different from the BLM movement’s conception of Black political power. As we have seen, Niebuhr understands power as a neutral phenomenon which only God uses with complete goodness. He was convinced that human beings—whether as individuals or in groups—are inclined to use power corruptly. Notably, Niebuhr exempts neither oppressors nor the oppressed from this inclination to the corrupt uses of power. He deems the struggle for power to be

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¹³ Ibid.

inherently tainted by illegitimate self-interest. He would thus consider even the BLM’s struggle to attain political power as tainted by self-interest.

Given that BLM is engaged in a struggle for Black political power, Niebuhr’s usefulness in discussing Black political power is limited. Yet, bearing in mind that the criminalization of Black freedom fighters, protesters, and activists in the United States involves abuse of government power, I believe that Niebuhr is useful in exposing different forms of the abuses of power by the dominant power structure. For instance, in my discussion of power in Chapter 2, I stated that although Niebuhr confidently calls for an “organizing center” (like government) to impartially arbitrate conflicts and prevent injustice in the balancing of power, he does not ignore the fact that government itself is subject to moral ambiguity.\textsuperscript{15} This point suggests that along with his emphasis on the organizing function of government, Niebuhr is equally as interested in highlighting the potential for abuse of government power.

As one of the corruptions of government, Niebuhr notes that government expresses the “imperial impulse” of the dominance of one group within a community over the rest of the community.\textsuperscript{16} One manifestation of the imperial impulse is the abuse power by police. By using the phrase “imperial impulse,” Niebuhr not only exposes an oppressive force, he names an oppressive practice. While the structural domination which Niebuhr refers to is rife in the United States, at both the local and national levels, it was on full display in Ferguson, Missouri during the BLM movement’s protests in the aftermath of the killing of Michael Brown.

\textsuperscript{15} Niebuhr, \textit{The Nature and Destiny of Man}, 266-7.
\textsuperscript{16} See generally, chapter 2.
As part of the Black Lives Matter campaign, people from all walks of life—rich and poor; religious and non-religious; Christian and non-Christian—went to the City of Ferguson in Missouri to protest the killing of Michael Brown. Keeanga-Yamahatta Taylor writes that members of the 95 percent white male Ferguson police department had on wristbands that declared their solidarity with Darren Wilson (the officer who shot Michael Brown). Moreover, the officers concealed their identities by covering their badges and pointed loaded weapons at unarmed protesters engaged in lawful protest activities. This action by the Ferguson police constitutes an abuse of police power. In choosing to hide their identities, the officers publicly sided with the accused officer against the gathered civilians whose role it was for them to protect, even before an investigation had been completed. The civilian protesters were engaged in legal protests, and yet the officers positioned themselves against them rather than in protection of them, and pointed live weapons at them.

For officers serving the public to side in such a manner with an officer who killed a member of the public before the investigation was complete is an ethical breach. It is also an ethical breach for said officers to take such a stand against the public while hiding their identities. Further, to point live weapons at protesters who are civilians exercising their First Amendment right is also a violation. First, if an ordinary citizen pointed a live weapon at another intentionally to cause “imminent apprehension of bodily harm” and, in fact, caused that one to have an “imminent apprehension of bodily harm,” that would

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18 Ibid.
constitute criminal assault.\textsuperscript{19} It is highly likely that some protesters were in fear of immediate bodily harm. To clarify: My point is not to draw a conclusion about criminal assault; rather, it is that the way the Ferguson police department responded and conducted itself exemplifies the “imperial impulse” of which Niebuhr speaks. Their conduct in relation to the civilian protestors breached the boundaries of legitimate police power.

Not only is abuse of police power evident in the way Ferguson police officers treated the protesters, but in the many arbitrary arrests of activists and freedom fighters by Ferguson police department during the protests. Hence, arbitrary police violence against protesters was compounded by arbitrary arrests (criminalization of protesters and activists). It is in these ways that I find Niebuhr’s thought useful in identifying and naming oppressive forces and practices.

\textbf{Black Lives Matter and Cone: Black Political Power}

In addition to Black political power, the Black Lives Matter movement demands Black self-determination in all areas of society. The notion of Black self-determination subsumes the BLM movement’s other demand for direct community control by which Black communities would be able to make choices about hiring and firing police officers who serve their communities, the second demand. The underlying premise of this demand is that such control prevents the callous and excessive use of force against Black people by law enforcement. Hence, when juxtaposed with the demand for Black Political Power, the BLM movement’s demand for community control is also a demand for Black

Political Power.

I argue that Cone’s explication of Black Power is a powerful resource from Cone’s Black Liberation Theology for the BLM movement. Indeed, that Cone’s unapologetic about his engagement with the concept of Black Power—which has been controversial since its formulation by Stokley Carmichael in the spring of 1966—is itself an example of self-determination that the BLM movement itself embodies. The profound rejection of institutional dictates and the articulation of power as “Black power” are both a naming and claiming of Black Power—the power of self-determination, on the one hand, and a resistance to the racist power structure on the other.

Cone’s work on Black Power allows contemporary interpreters to understand the BLM movement as standing in the tradition of a prior moral rebellion that took young people to the streets in the late 1960s and 1970s. While Rev. Osagyefu Sekou argues that BLM is an extension of the radical legacy of King and the Civil Rights movement, I see it as a contemporary manifestation of Black Power. The BLM movement’s contemporary

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20 This emphasis on the controversial nature of Black Power is not to suggest a greater distance than really existed between the Black Power Movement and the Civil Rights Movement. Although different in terms of their approaches to the struggle for freedom and human dignity, both movements shared similar goals and objectives.

21 Osagyefu Uhuru Sekou, “Martin Luther King’s Radical Legacy, From the Poor People’s Campaign to Black Lives Matter” Dissent, January 15, 2017. Accessed 7/15/2017, https://dissentmagazine.org/online_articles/martin-luther-kings-radical-legacy-poor-peoples-campaign-black-lives-matter-socialist. Here, because of BLM’s zest and passion for justice and Black empowerment, I highlight BLM as a present day embodiment of the Black Power Movement. Like the Black Power Movement, BLM is less concerned about conforming its passionate protest activities to conventional norms and is more concerned about achieving justice. Unlike the Black Power Movement, the Civil Rights Movement’s approach to protest was more in agreement with conventional standards. Yet, this view does not ignore the radical legacy of the Civil Rights Movement as expressed by Rev. Sekou. The Civil Rights Movement was a radical movement. King and other leaders of the Civil Rights Movement made the same demands that Black Power activists made. In The Radical King, Cornel West attests to King’s radical commitment to the struggle. Referring to the FBI and the US government, West writes: “They knew Rev. King was a revolutionary Christian, sincere in his commitment and serious in his calling.” Martin Luther King Jr., The Radical King, ed. Cornel West (Boston: Beacon Press, 2015), x.
call/or demand for the decriminalization of Black bodies and increase of Black communities’ control over local government institutions and agencies is rooted in a historical memory of the Black Power movement which confronted similar issues of freedom and self-determination.

The appellations, “Black Lives Matter” and “Black Power” are moral equivalents in their quest to demonstrate that power as a way to express oneself in the world and uphold Black human dignity is the same as affirming the whole life on which the power depends. Indeed, Cone’s voice in defining “Black Power” functions in the same way as the BLM movement in demonstrating “Black Power.” In fact, another way to think about this is that the BLM reincarnates the Black Power movement of the 1970s in a more multiethnic/multiracial coalition of young people whose affirmation of Black life signals the affirmation of all life. Through a Conian lens, then, to decode the slogan “Black Lives Matter” is to encounter human life as part of God’s creation. BLM affirms that black lives are human lives whose dignity and self-respect is God-given. But the BLM movement’s demand for the protection of Black bodies insists on the importance of paying attention to who is suffering, to who is being oppressed.

Cone first articulated his view of resistance as co-suffering with God in *God of the Oppressed* and later in his discussion of the significance of the lynching era in the U.S. in *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. Co-suffering with God is evidenced in subtle ways of dealing with suffering in a very brutal time of lynching in American history. The blues songs and spirituals that became vehicles for protest and emotional release might be
less consistent with the more brazing style of resistance engaged in by the BLM. With respect to resistance, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* demands an interpretation of “staying alive” and resisting through the use of figurative language as one way to engage with a world in which the ultimate call of one’s life is not to hate, but to love. In this vein, Cone spends an entire chapter discussing the work of Martin Luther King, Jr’s nonviolence campaigns.

To the BLM movement, the subtlety of resistance during the lynching period may not be deemed as effective, especially against police violence during protest marches today. Such subtle resistance it might even be considered one stage in the evolution of the African American struggle for freedom. In this logic, subtlety is no longer necessary in this age of the Black Lives Matter movement. Black self-determination thus may involve a protester exercising the morally and ethically justifiable choice of self-defense. However, the idea that subtlety is no longer necessary is not without its dangers. One of the dangers in this thinking is that it might subconsciously adopt an arrogance that dispenses with compassion and thoughtfulness. At the same time, the spiritedness, zest, and fervor of the BLM movement should be given just as much weight as the subtlety and nonviolence of resistance that Cone describes in his book, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*.

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22 Although resistance to racism and brutality during the lynching era is different than BLM’s resistance to white supremacy in the US today, like the reliance of Black resistance on the Blues and the Spirituals in the lynching era, the BLM generation relies on Hip Hop, R&B, and Jazz as vehicles of protest and emotional release. Socially conscious rap music, for instance, its lyrics, beats, images, and fearless truth-telling inspire resistance and provide sustenance as young people resist the violence of racism. Also, BLM movement leaders mention a number of sources of self-care, as they fight injustice, and music stands out as vital. *Colorlines*, “Self Care in the Multiracial Movement for Black Lives,” https://www.colorlines.com/articles/self-care-multiracial-movement-black-lives (accessed December 20, 2017).
Black Lives Matter and Cone: Freedom and Justice

Here, I discuss two of BLM’s demands: First, the demand for economic justice which entails Black collective ownership in community not just access; and second, the demand for reparations for injury caused to Black people for colonialism, slavery, mass incarceration, etc. Although both demands seem to be issues of justice, freedom is intrinsically a part of both of them. Also, the interplay of Cone’s themes of liberation and justice require that I discuss them simultaneously.

The first problem of economic injustice against Black people highlights the growing wealth gap between white and Black families. The average white family owns above 7.5 times as much as wealth as the average Black family.\(^{23}\) Also, the BLM movement also notes on its website that when public services are not passed on to poorer residents of a community, the services are eliminated altogether.\(^{24}\) This leaves Black populations at a serious disadvantage. There are many other effects of economic injustice. Both demands for economic justice and reparations are highlighting egregious harm done to African American people historically and presently. Indeed the solutions are considered in economic terms: redoing the tax code (economic injustice), guaranteed livable wage (reparations), and full and free educational opportunity.\(^{25}\)

While the BLM’s demands are well-stated, the problem presented, and the solutions stated, the BLM needs a way to name and describe the impact of both economic injustice and the historic social evils of slavery, colonialism, mass incarceration. Here, I

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\(^{24}\) Ibid.

\(^{25}\) Ibid.
am maintaining that Cone’s description of the “black condition” in *Black Liberation Theology* is a potentially helpful resource for this task of describing the real condition of an oppressed people. Cone’s description of the “black condition” as a “tension between life and death” is highly descriptive language. This tension was present in slavery, colonialism, and, these days, mass incarceration which has been called a new form of slavery. The tension itself constitutes an inner striving that reflects the existential crisis which Black Theology addresses. Thus, the question is asked: “‘How are we going to survive in a world which deems black humanity an illegitimate form of human existence?’”

That Cone’s description of the “black condition” employs theological language about suffering, but this does not disqualify its potential usefulness for the BLM movement, despite the fact that BLM is not a traditional religious movement. While it is true that the BLM movement is a secular social movement in the sense that it is not identified with any one particular religion, this does not mean it is purely of social character. Notable clergy persons have been supporters of the BLM movement: Rev. Osagyefu Sekou, Rev. Traci Blackmon, Rev. Dr. Valerie Bridgeman, etc. Also, when Bree Newsome took down the confederate flag in North Carolina in 2015, she used religious language to justify her action, stating that the confederate flag was a symbol of “‘racial intimidation and fear’” and that she would not be controlled by fear. She further

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28 Ibid.
stated: “‘The Lord is my light and my salvation, whom shall I fear.’”\textsuperscript{30} While the BLM movement does not conform to traditional Christianity, it nonetheless exhibits certain spiritual dimensions which would accommodate religious language as a way of responding to economic and social oppression.\textsuperscript{31} Therefore, in the face of continued economic deprivation in poor Black communities, talking about the “tension between life and death” communicates the Black suffering that is still alive and well in this age of Black Lives Matter.

The BLM’s demands for economic justice and reparations can be read in terms of Cone’s call for social liberation, which is a call to face the concrete realities of oppression in the context of history.\textsuperscript{32} When BLM’s demands are read side by side with Cone’s concept of social liberation, it is clear that there can be no economic justice or reparations without social liberation because social liberation presupposes economic justice and reparations. In other words, social liberation comes before economic justice and reparations. This kind of thinking inspire the BLM movement to hold-on to its movement-liberation mindset (involving protest activities, massive rallies, campaigns, 

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.


\textsuperscript{32} Cone, \textit{God of the Oppressed}, 138.
etc.) rather than be domesticated into a reformist movement mind-set that is content only with internal reforms not social and economic liberation/transformation.

The demands that are put forward by the BLM movement signal liberation on a transformative scale. In order to achieve them, the BLM could benefit from one of Cone’s conceptions of justice which is the active dismantling of the oppressive system. Although this dismantling process takes many different forms; Cone maintains that an essential characteristic is that it involves speaking the truth to the people (active truth-telling) and social action. From the demands on the BLM movement’s website and other publications, it is clear that the BLM movement is engaging in truth-telling and social action. However, it is crucial that it remain uppermost in the minds of movement leaders that the dismantling is to realize justice for all people.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I presented the BLM movement’s demands and I applied aspects of Niebuhr’s and Cone’s understandings of justice, liberation (or freedom) and Black Power to the BLM’s movement’s demands. As a way of demonstrating the applicability of their thought to the BLM, I highlighted Niebuhr’s thought as useful in identifying and naming oppressive forces and practices; and Cone’s views of Black Power to dismantling oppressive systems, articulating the “black condition,” and offering social liberation as a concrete historical aspiration.

The Black Lives Matter Movement is facing a different challenge today than it did during the Obama Presidency when the movement came to national prominence. During the Obama years, clear social and political norms of public engagement created
the space for protest and disruption in the face of injustice and abuses of power. However, in a post-Obama world and the rise of white supremacy and white nationalism in the United States, social and political norms of public engagement are corruptly manipulated by forces of power and, as a result, narrowing the space for protest and legitimate moral outrage against injustice and oppression. Given the level of manipulation engaged in by structural forces, especially against the oppressed and the marginalized, the BLM movement should continue to reflect on the best strategies for resistance and public engagement in the present social and political climate.
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