A Socratic Approach: An Examination of Existential Blackness and Its Contribution to the Black Church.

A thesis presented to 
The faculty of 
the College of Arts and Sciences of Ohio University 
In partial fulfillment 
of the requirements for the degree 
Master of Arts

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June 2012

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This thesis titled

A Socratic Approach: An Examination of Existential Blackness and Its Contribution to

the Black Church

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ABSTRACT

RUSH, CHRISTOPHER A., M.A., June 2012, Political Science

A Socratic Approach: An Examination of Existential Blackness and its Contribution to the Black Church.

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This essay examines three critiques that are broadly focused on the dimension of the black church: The identity of black folk through the lens of Christianity; the subjective content of what a black Christian constitutes that is often distorted; the objective significance of the Black Church that’s been polluted.\(^1\) With an amalgamation of political theory and philosophy of religion, it is important to redefine what Christianity means for those who take the Cross seriously. That is, the Cross is meant to symbolize a calling that reconciles suffering and sacrifice to the plight of black folk. In light of these critiques, I offer two reconstructive practices that may contribute to the discourse of black Christianity. The first is known as “Shalom,” raised by Presbyterian Minister Timothy Keller. The second prescription is a term I am coining called “Faithful Suicide.” This project contributes to the discussion of normative political theory which not only reckons infinitude in Christian theology but also in a way welcomes humility, orientation to judgment, and the possibility of Shalom in the face of the finite.

\(^1\) The use of ‘subjective’ primarily refers to the belief system that the individual commits the self to. In this case, it’s how the belief system of Christianity is interpreted with the way Christians live. When I use objective in this context, it is suggesting not how the Black Church is independent from thought but how it is independent from the subject which renders unconscious results that leads the congregation into a loss of identity for the church itself.
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CHAPTER 1: THE POLITICS OF IDENTITY: THE THEOLOGICAL REALM IN THE BLACK CHURCH

The church is a form of unity in which all, no matter the race, can give praise and thanks to the Holy Father, the Creator—God. It is the congregation that enables one to experience the dire need of self-worth that is possibly not present in the everyday life of everyday people. This is because the congregation allows us to experience this missing component of self-worth which can only be treated as a spiritual state rather than a secular one and thereby only being addressed spiritually. In particular, in a social and historical context structured by genocidal racism, black folk have been searching for their worth ever since the black exportation from Africa to the United States took effect. Commentators as diverse as Shelby Steele, William Julius Wilson, and Patricia Hill Collins have suggested that black folk are wrestling with self-doubt, self-flagellation, and self-destruction which all not only undermine their worth but also de-construct the building blocks of a collective identity. With this in mind, black existentialism—the philosophy of what it means to be black—is often manifested though the lens of what is known as “mirrored nature” (Eppenheimer 89). This nature is defined according to the following: “Cultural and communal forces simply amplify what is already present in the self and do not do the actual work of inscribing an individual with a racial identity.”2 The presumption in such a view is that racial identity is a priori; that is prior to experience legitimizing judgment on the basis of a shared and “objective” attribute—skin color—rather than looking at the uniqueness of the individual.

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2 Ibid.
Thus, the scope of this paper is to examine the identity of black people through the scope of the black church. First, I will outline the conception of “blackness” in order to illustrate the conjunction between black folk and oppression. James Cone is a significant figure here because his concern for black Christian existence leads us to believe that he is an advocate of justice; in his concern for justice Cone productively brings together theology and a normative political project. Furthermore, by tying oppression to Christian faith, Cone believes that the faithful are connected to oppression in a world where abstract, rationalist approaches of self-worth are not enough.

Next, I examine the possibility of intersectional identity. Intersectional identity allows the self to be composed of more than just one identity. This raises a concern as to how an individual can have an identity that seems to be in tension within itself. In other words, the identity that the individual possesses can (or cannot) be compatible with another building block that reinforces who they are. For the focus of this project, is it possible for a Christian to be homosexual? It seems that this potentiality does not exist when we take into consideration what the Bible says. However, I approach this in another manner which makes the self more compatible with the Bible, deterring them from sin.

Thirdly, I will describe Christian Theology as essentially a theology of liberation and connect it to black folk. Cone is vital as he thoroughly examines liberation as it pertains to both African Americans and Christian Theology. Furthermore, Christian Theology not only features liberation but also connects the gospel of Jesus with the oppressed community in a way that allows all three to have overlapping tendencies. This view holds a certain existential relation that enables the oppressed and the gospel to be
relatable in overlapping ways. That is to say, the oppressed and the gospel are connected with existential implications.

I then will draw upon “black power” which is used in black communities and the black church. “Black power” as I deploy the term is a view that is rooted in Cone’s black theology of liberation. Objections are invited to my reliance on Cone. His work can be radical with strong racial undertones.\(^3\) It is important to note that I am not referring to “black power” that was once advocated by the Black Panther Party. It is easily to get Cone’s definition of “black power” confused with the Black Panther Party’s notion of “black power.” Cone is not advancing Black Nationalism.

Next, I offer critiques of the black church, specifically identifying “black liberation as too readily consistent with the continued oppression of black gay identities. Although I do buy Cone’s argument, it seems that the radical feat of black power at best becomes inconsequential for the project of gay liberation, at worst a tool for exclusion, and a justification for disgust. Black theological essentialism, rooted as it is in the primacy of racial identity as defining the experience of oppression, presuming as it does, and the givenness of heterosexuality to that black identity remains limited too for liberation. Not everyone has the same identity (i.e. homosexuality, Christian, etc.) and that is a caveat that I wish to address. Finally, I will sum up what I have sought out to do in what I have found spellbinding and yet, disturbing.

\(^3\) I think in the context that Cone uses black power, he is using it to fight against white oppression since black people need to be able to find their own sense of “being.” In other words, whites should not create an identity for blacks since black power is used as a means to do so.
Black Existentialism

“Blackness” is a socially constructed term that is ambiguously defined and then redefined in a variety of ways. It is possible for one group’s conception of “blackness” to be defined differently from another group’s definition. What seems to be consistent is the idea that “blackness” is what “whiteness” is not. Socially and politically, blackness and whiteness are different in such a way that aligns whites in their relation to systems of privilege and the experiences structured by privilege. Whites are privileged with access to better resources and the opportunities and experiences that such resources afford. These experiences may leave whites unfamiliar with the kind of sacrifice and suffering that Cone positions at the center of the story of Christ, as central to the meaning of the cross, and as the defining feature of black experience. Reverend Al Sharpton advocates black entrepreneurship as one strategy of resistance consistent with this understanding of blackness in a larger Christian theology and the implied liberation for liberation. Another strategy is to create a space for resistance against white oppression. If such spaces for resistance collapses, the tools needed to resist oppression will be shelved and opportunities for a more meaningful “survival” diminishes.

Racism is what makes race, not the other way around. As already mentioned above, racial identity is a priori. Since racism reinforces judgment based on skin color, or in this case “blackness,” race only becomes miniscule when the experience of racial identity is beforehand. Racial identity comes first before one’s skin color is taken into consideration. Blackness cuts deeper when we think about how blacks define themselves within their race. In her paper Contested Membership: Black Gay Identities and the Politics of AIDS, Cathy Cohen (1996) argues this position more accurately:
“…Indigenously constructed definitions of black group identity seek to redefine and empower blackness to the outside world by policing the boundaries of what can be represented to the dominant public as “true blackness” (363). What boundaries is she discussing here? This will come up later but for now, being black means to have “membership” within the black community. The criteria for “membership” are “men and women, who meet basic dominant ideas of what black people look like and “act” like…” (Cohen 364). On this logic, as long as they fit the “norm” for blackness, then others will not be evaluated. However, what if men and women can act black but possesses a gay identity?

If we glance at history, ever since the rise of Europe black folk has always been victims of oppression. The unequal landmark case of *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the disturbing reality of Jim and Jane Crowism, the brutal death of Emmett Till, and staggering mass incarceration rates are only a few examples of how white supremacy shaped the lives African Americans. These are instances of social injustice that scholars such as Cornel West have centered in their accounts of black identity and the American national identity more accurately. For West (2008): “To be human, you must bear witness to justice. Justice is what love looks like in public—to be human is to love and be loved” (p. 181). When you love someone, the onlooker cannot bear to just stand there and watch. They muster the courage to fight for those who are being treated unjustly, rich or poor. Victims of costly suffering are those who go unheard because not only does not America want to face truth but they also do not want to look at their reflection.

“Black identity is about survival” (Cone, 1997, p. 19). For black identity to be about survival, blacks are entitled to create an identity that must be demarcated from the
identity that white oppressors imposed on blacks. As Cone (1997) says: “Black people must withdraw and for their own culture, their own way of life” (p. 18). It is important for blacks to concoct their own identity because we must remember that black identity was constructed in a way that white oppressors saw fit. Today, they are still impaired to the point where many enforce hate onto others within their own race. The only difference, as opposed to slaves, is that as blacks find their identity, they oversimplify their worth. Oversimplifying their worth, in this context, means letting worldly manifestations develop who they are. For example, materialism has reinforced a narcissistic condition in which black people tend to almost treat materialism as if it was an idol. Their worth becomes superfluous because blacks never received or earned what white privilege had offered. I find nothing wrong with having nice things but when there is a “want” or “need” mentality, those nice things become them. This impairment of overly distorting their identity becomes, in theory, a judgment rather than a state. A state is the ability to determine one’s identity through one’s own interpretation of how to find oneself. Judgment is when it is a certain fate which precludes impaired qualities to one’s identity done by white privilege; the influence that white privilege has on blacks is to want what blacks never had. This encourages a “follower” mentality.

In this way, black folk are still oppressed even when an identity has been partially created. West calls this the “Paraphernalia of Suffering” or the “attempt to distance yourself from the suffering because you had so much of it” (West, 2008, p. 56). A better picture would be to compare an eagle to a peacock. “Peacocks strut because they cannot fly. In America, they shoot eagles and applaud peacocks” (p. 55). Black people have adopted this paraphernalia. As mentioned above, blacks have wanted what whites have
always had. The materialism, mansions, and status all resonate in the mind of a
“peacock.” Blacks want the same privilege of obtaining a peacock state-of-mind which
in-turn undermines their journey of creating their own identity. It is a necessary trait to
have that is of use for the identity of black people. The constant pressure that blacks face
seems to be predominantly portrayed by the influence of whiteness which is why it is
important to create an identity separate from whites. Nothing has ever come easy for
blacks. Nonetheless, there is a solution that may be able to gain back (if there ever was
any) the worth of black folk looking through the lens of the Cross.

Rendering an identity away from the Cross, away from the centrality of suffering
and inevitability of sacrifice, is not the way to gain worth back. To do this is to engage in
what is known as “Cosmic Significance.” It is the view that “our need for worth is so
powerful that whatever we base our identity and value on we essentially deify” (Keller,
2008, p. 169). This is a very significant point because when our identity aligns itself with
a worth that is being more un-Christian-like, we are in sin. As every Christian knows,
worshipping an authentic God is the first commandment that we all should abide by.
Worshipping an idol that is considered to not be Jesus deters the self away from God
which is the nucleus of Soren Kierkegaard’s definition of sin: “Sin is [when an
individual] is in despair not wanting to be oneself before God” (Hong p. 361). That is, if
we build our identity apart from God, we build an identity that is inauthentic. This is
both from a Christian perspective and I will argue from a political perspective troubled.
In the limelight of the political, we must recognize that when we embrace an identity that
fails to take into consideration that we too are contaminated by sin, we then overlook our
own role in perpetuating injustice. Therefore, we must go down the other pathway which
is to seek God and we can do this by means of Christian Theology, a subject that is soon to come.

Intersectional Identity

In considering the place of black identity as a way of naming the position of the oppressed, we may be inadequately attentive to the role of intersecting identities that shape oppressive practices. Arguably the politics of homophobia play out in ways internal to the black community such that "straight" black folk marginalize and/or exclude gay members of their own race. This is suggestive of the problem of a purist identity politics. I suggest Kierkegaard's Christian existentialism as a kind of remedy for this problem.\(^4\) For in locating oppression within the Christian experience of anxiety and sin, Kierkegaard's subject is constantly and vigilantly attentive to the “dizzying power” of freedom.\(^5\) And such vigilance calls subjects to judge one another with the humility for which their finiteness calls.

To be black, a Christian, and a homosexual, the individual is composed of more than just one identity. Intersectional identity is what reinforces the self to compose such attributes. More precisely, intersectional identity emphasizes multiple identities at one time. Underlying this view, certain identities can possibly become salient. These identities demonstrate an empirical fact of difference that possesses certain finite aspects of the self. For these certain aspects, intersectional identity creates a space for the identities to become one which are the building blocks for the self. Nonetheless, that space can be invaded with power and domination from the ethical that does not accept the

\(^4\) Kierkegaard’s Christianity is chapter 2 with how sin resonates with the identity of an individual.
\(^5\) Kierkegaard’s concept of the “dizzying power” is discussed more in chapter 3.
individual for the attributes that makes them who they are, as witnessed in the black congregation. That space then becomes a symbol for oppression.

This then raises a question we must address: Can we all be in Christianity with intersectional identity? It is important to keep in mind that multiple identities is not only restricted to one’s religious belief, sexual orientation, or skin color. Furthermore, I previously discussed the inescapable reality of sin. For the Christian, the process is only a matter of becoming. Christian identity is not a finite reality, for, as mentioned earlier, we are a spiritual being and not a human being. Our spirit can be infinite but our material finitude resonates with the body. It is not impossible to have an intersectional identity because sin is what negatively impacts the identity. In other words, since we are born into sin and we are becoming through the lens of Christianity, then intersectional identity that is materialized has little relevance.

**Christian Theology**

Christian Theology is a discourse that is considered to be the foundation of Christianity. Many argue that this theology is used synonymously with philosophy of religion. They may be partners in certain doctrines but they are qualitatively different. Theology “assumes that truth has been given in the moment of the community’s birth” (Cone, 1970, p. 30). During this process, communities find their worth and identity through analyzing truth in order to remain consistent with their practices and ideals.\(^6\) Philosophy of religion, on the other hand, does not have a community. It is a discipline that uses empirical and rational thought alone to examine a certain reality to seek truth. What truth? Cone uses Kierkegaardian truth to determine what truth is: “An objective

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\(^6\) Ibid.
uncertainty held fast in an appropriation process of the most passionate inwardness is the truth, the highest truth attainable for an existing individual” (p. 48). Uncertainty is very crucial because this will help explain the complexities of others and ourselves as well as injustice. Theology can be based on one dominant religion while philosophy of religion looks at the whole spectrum of religious disciplines. Thus, on Cone’s account, Christian Theology is a “theology of liberation [that is] a rational study of the being of God in the world in light of the existential situation of an oppressed community, relating the forces of liberation to the essence of the gospel which is Jesus Christ” (p. 17). That is to say, it exists to inquire a firm understanding in God’s meaning in a way that allows the oppressed community to relate to the gospel of Jesus Christ since Jesus was oppressed Himself.

The gospel of Jesus Christ is a necessary condition for black folk that enables them to seek a sense of justice which will only be reinforced by the gospel. I must be clear that it is not only black people. To have a sense of justice is to not put up boundaries due to skin color. John Brown, a white individual who led one of the largest abolitionist revolts on American soil in Harpers Ferry, violently showed that possessing a sense of justice eliminates the tone of one’s skin color. Oppression is considered to be immoral and without the gospel, this immorality will eventually overcome the struggle for justice and the gospel becomes illegitimate. However, Christianity allows us to see that oppression as being potentially remediable since oppression here is not considered to be a natural state but rather something the Christian community is called to condemn and resist. Therefore, what Cone calls “Black Theology,” it is the view of theological liberation “which arises from identification with the oppressed blacks of America” (p.
23). This viewpoint looks at God, framed by the condition of blacks in America. If God is a God of love and justice, then “God is never colorblind.” He recognizes that blacks have been the oppressed group ever since they came to America. What this presumes is that black theology can never be separated from the experience of oppression. Black Theology’s emphasis on the centrality of the community regarding the oppressed has critical convergences with the attention to injustice that frames the work of contemporary political theorists like Judith Shklar, Charles Mills, Carole Pateman and others. But in what follows, I will argue that a broader Christian Theology may provide a useful emphasis to this concern.

Cone suggests that in the search for spiritual meaning, we must reckon within our own very human limitations; a finite mind cannot grasp an infinite existence. Our access to divinity is always symbolically mediated. Cone describes the Tillichian idea of “symbolic nature in all theological speech.” Certain dimensions of reality cannot be examined directly. Therefore, symbols are used to explain these realities that are spoken literally. Cone expands on this point: “The focus on blackness does not mean that only blacks suffer…but that blackness is an ontological symbol and a visible reality which best describes what oppression means in America” (p. 27). Other groups in America were oppressed such as Jews and Native Americans which help demonstrate this point.

Black theology recognizes that the community of African Americans is loosely described as “self” or “one.” Self-determination is an elementary feature in black theology. Everything that blacks do is done by blacks themselves within the African American community. Everything outside of their communities is alien to black people.

7 Ibid.
Both views weaken the paternalistic view that whites have once had over blacks. The oppressors, by this logic, have no position or say to dictate the actions of blacks. At the same time, blacks realize that ideas and concepts will be “irrational” to white onlookers (p. 33). It would only be rational to whites if they thought of ideas and conceptions for the black community. This is because as whites are situated as onlookers from outside the black theological discourse which reinforces the African American community’s identity, they want to have control over what blacks are doing for themselves. In simpler terms, it is either the “whites” way or no way. Nonetheless, as already stated, this is a form of paternalism that undermines “Ontological Blackness.” This particular form of blackness is defined as the following: “…Cultural fulfillment and self-reintegration through “Africa” and “Pan-Africanism”…constitute two essential ingredients of “ontological Blackness” [which are] the essentialized, fixed notion of black reality and identity, and as alienated, fractured and struggling selves, and the return to “Africa” as the means by which those selves can be healed” is the way to get their sense of identity back. (Eppehimer 2006, p. 89). As a reminder, it is important to recall that I am only theorizing a space of identity formation that recognizes power but is not limited nor reduced to the meaning of blackness to only non-whiteness.

The idea of God being black is one of the central characteristics of Black Theology. For the black theologian, they are identifying God as being black insofar as identity is concerned. The skin color for Jesus as being black is not the message they are trying to portray. God being black is an implication of Him sympathizing with the oppressed and bearing the suffering of the weakened. The oppressed condition of blacks means that God is embracing this condition which lies at the center of liberation. This is
no different than from the days when Jesus embraced the condition that the Israelites were in. Drawing back on the days of the Israelites, these were God’s people (Cone, 1970, p. 121). The Israelites were an oppressed group as Biblical evidence portrays. Biblical texts exemplify how “God discloses to men that he is known where men experience humiliation and suffering.” As God sides with those who were oppressed, the innermost nature of God is liberation.

Black Power

Because this thesis takes the experience of oppression to be both a spiritual and a political concern, in this section I draw out these connections more explicitly by exploring the relationships between Black Theology, “Black Power,” and the politics of recognition. The politics of recognition is a strategy that blacks have been emphasizing that is both inside and outside the black church. Cone addresses black folk building their own identity, Sharpton situates this as both a spiritual and political struggle for self-determination, and in my turn to the politics of recognition I locate this struggle for self-determination across identities shaped by the practices of oppression. Whites, at one time, only viewed blacks as chattel, nonpersons without a sense of worth. When blacks are not recognized, they stand forth against the status quo, wanting their voice to be heard that can bring about a sense of justice. While the oppressed are struggling for justice, they fight for recognition, whether it is politically or socially, and will not rest until they achieve their desired results.

In order to be considered human, one condition must be met as Cone illustrates:

“In...Man is human only to the extent to which he tries to impose his existence on another

8 Ibid.
in order to be recognized by him” (Cone, 1997, p. 8). For existentialist philosophy, the essence of being precedes existence. Briefly, this means that “man first of all exists, encounters himself, surges up in the world—and defines himself afterwards” (Bohlmann, 1991, p. 47). Blacks first view themselves as human but when they assess the world’s whiteness with its values they then conclude that the world is absurd (p. 11). Instead of letting the world control what blacks are capable of doing, black power allows blacks to straighten their back and muster the courage to overcome the absurdities that the world has to offer. Black power underscores black theology which is needed to find that recognition or worth blacks desperately seek.

Affirming existence is a major feature that black power entails. With the help of Cone, he describes black power according to the following: “Black power is a complete emancipation of black people from white oppression by whatever means black people deem necessary” (Cone, 1997, p. 6). This emancipation is a form of rage that blacks adheres to when they are relatively conscious of the world around them. Kierkegaard would even consider this to be angst or anxiety.9 Anxiety creates a self-conscious that becomes pre-rational. Self-consciousness is pre-rational because rationalist approaches are contaminated by the secular organization of power by white supremacy; it would only be rational to reinforce white supremacy and secularism since both deter blacks from their identity. It is a moral calling that means “Freedom Now;” it is a philosophy of “All or Nothing;” it is a humanizing force that allows black to feel their existence. Without self-affirmation, one is considered as weak and de-valued as being less than human.

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9 I heavily focus on anxiety in the last chapter.
When black folk are exercising black power and practicing black theology, we must keep in mind that it is not a form of racism. At the same time, the integration of whites is held at arms length. Whites are invited to contribute to the struggle for black folk. Paul Tillich was a white theologian, for example, who was an influence to Cone’s black theology. Boneheffer and Barth was also an influence. Whites do not need to face the black experience *per se* but they are conscious of the oppressed, fighting against the evils and injustices manifested by those who are in power. White allies with thought and struggle must embrace black theology, for “white theology must cease being white theology and become black theology, denying whiteness as a proper form of human existence, affirming blackness as God’s intention” (Cone, 1970, p. 33). In other words, black theology overcomes white theology in a manner that undermines whiteness as the “only way” to live as a human being.

*The Church*

Before showing the linkage between black power and the black church which underscores black theology, I will briefly discuss the church as a generalization. I realize the dangers of making such an attempt but this is for the sole purpose of framing the church as a congregation because semantically, “church” can have different connotations to different people. That is, church for blacks is not the same church for whites. The Word of God is taught differently along with praise and worship between the churches. This difference should not divide congregations among the practice of Christianity. Notwithstanding, church is deeper than just attending Sunday worship for two hours. It is not embedded only in the teachings of the gospel. There is more to the church than
using dogmatic rationales to determine one’s service to God. The church entails three functions: Preaching, service, and fellowship. I will frame these accordingly.

The first function of the church is preaching. “Preaching (kerygma) means proclaiming to the world what God has done for man in Jesus Christ” (p. 66). The often hostile (and sometimes secular) forces are experienced through the context of preaching. Preaching calls attention to the oppressors and the suffering that is been perpetuated. The message that is preached is geared towards both the suffering and oppressors. The suffering relates to Jesus with how he was oppressed while the oppressors can be more conscious of the injustice that is opposed to the gospel. Once described, preaching is then used as a way to advocate freedom since Christ has already won the battle against those particular evil forces. In a way, it is a rhetoric that effectively narrates the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Next is known as service (diakonia) which “not only preaches the word of liberation [but] it joins Christ in his work of liberation” (p. 67). In service, the church is made to follow “the opening” that Christ provides. “He meets black [people] where they are and becomes one with them” (Cone, 1970, p. 68). As mentioned earlier, the elements of God is that He sides with the oppressed, not the oppressor and so should his followers. The oppressed are axiomatically visible in the run-downed ghettos. Following this logic syllogistically, God must be in the ghettos. Cone agrees: “Where is “the opening” that Christ provides? Where does He lead His people? Where indeed, if not in the ghetto?”

The last characteristic of the church is known as fellowship (koinonia). “This means that the church must be its own community about what it preaches and what it

\[10\text{Ibid.}\]
seeks to accomplish in the world” (p. 70). The church is thus a space apart from the injustice in the secular world and on this account racism should have no place in the church. Furthermore, fellowship requires that the church is responsible for interpreting and defining God’s act in Christ. This is particularly important because in order to interpret and define God’s act in Christ, the church must practice what they preach. If the church does not practice what they preach, then it belies the fundamental quality each and every congregation should possess, an important point that is soon to come in this paper.

How are black power and the black church connected? As stated before, one connection is the conception of God being “black.” Blackness is inseparable from oppression and, as Cone argues, God is for the oppressed. It is important to remember that “the black church was born into slavery” (p. 91). There was a time when death was preferable over the demands of the “white Christian.” What made blacks develop an identity away from the slave owner’s Christianity is a need of freedom and equality. Black power sprouted when freedom and equality become paramount to the foundation of the black church. The influence of white “Christianity” was so powerful that even black preachers built their congregations around the teachings of the white oppressors. Furthermore, they received favors in their congregations if they did what white Christianity demanded.

White slave owner’s interpretation of freedom was the freedom of the soul, and not the body. This is why the black church rejected white Christian teachings. Whites emphasized the Nietzschean view called the “Illusion of Worlds-Behind-The-Scene.” It is the idea of trying to “convince the slave that the Christian gospel was concerned about pietistic moralities in this life as a means of gaining eternal life upon death” (p. 101).
What this amounts to is a Christian eschatological doctrine. Eschatology is simply concerned with how the world would end. What blacks wanted was meaning now, not in the after-life. White slave owners believed that the body did not have any value, only the soul. This form of hegemonic Christianity is a space where the rationalized system of value and exchange created by whites is concrete in its content.

When the black church was created back in the early 1800s, black ministers feared for their own life if they did not preach the “white Word.” Rather than having the courage of a Nat Turner who led one of the largest slave revolts and died for truth as a result, they cooperated with the system. They did not fight the status quo. They were the status quo. What is even more disturbing is that they fed into the obedience that the white oppressors advised, as Cone demonstrates: “But the real sin of the black church…is that they convinced themselves that they were doing the right thing by advocating obedience to white oppression” (p. 107). The black church was only to be a complicit black church according to what white oppressors “preached” as opposed to a resistant black church. The errors of the black church are continuous.

The black church even received favors including “lining their pockets with gold.” Churches were untouched and new architecture was apportioned to the structure of the church. Under one condition, it could happen: “…Blacks preached about heaven, [telling] Negroes to be honest and obedient… [and] God would straighten things out.”

The black minister was then considered an “Uncle Tom,” who collaborated with the white oppressors by being a messenger of white Christianity rather than a prophet of

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11 Ibid.
12 Ibid.
God. This act of paternalism was independent from churches that included preachers such as 1848’s Rev. Highland Grant and today’s Rev. Jeremiah Wright.

**Critiques**

If we look at the church today, the church is repeating history, although, white supremacy may (or may not) influence the black church. The black church has only relative autonomy from white supremacy. It is not as evident as it was back in the 1800s with the influence of white supremacy polluting the church with their misinterpreted teachings. There are preachers that are still wrestling with materialism in the church. Some, such as R.L. Jordan, believe that the black church has limitations. He raises the question: “Do we need a black theology?” (Jordan, 1982, p. 8) When we discuss black theology, we are discussing black power. He argues that black theology composes a “local God, who is a racist and is limited in its influence” (p. 5). This argument can be convincing. Jordan is essentially saying that God is for all, regardless of one’s skin pigmentation. Black theology fails to recognize that we are equal and that “most blacks are a breed of people” (p. 6). If anything, black congregants is doing more harm than good by marginalizing itself from others in order to determine who they are with the liberation of Christ. According to this logic, blacks need others while others need blacks. For this to be possible, the order to fulfill the gospel’s call to attend to the suffering of others must be fruitful. Black theology needs to recognize Blackness as both a location of real and acute suffering in a white supremacist society and a symbolic position from which to attend to the suffering of others.

Black theology is also a form of radical cultism. Creating a “Black Church” undermines the purpose of Christ’s church. Jordan explains: “Christ established the
church. Listen to what is said by Him to Peter: “Upon this race, I will build my church” Matthew 16” (p. 14). Matthew 16:17 emphasizes: “And I tell you that you are Peter, and on the rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades will not overcome it” (Yancey, Stafford, 1996, p. 1016). This passage clearly states that Christ is the only one that had the power to build the church. Black theology is building their own church which is to equate their doings with Christ and this is absurd since we are human and Christ is above humanness.

Jordan also criticizes Cone’s assumptions about “togetherness” in the black community. For example, Jordan argues, rather than embracing the ghetto as he argues Cones theology calls for, blacks instead reject the ghetto (Jordan, 1982, p. 30). They are there because of various reasons ranging from “making ends meet” to city law regulations. Not to mention, blacks “protest vigorously where their children are confined to schools in segregated areas!”13 As one of its main premises, black theology pushes for separation. Therefore, there is a paradox in black theology: How can black communities (which include segregated schools) side with black theology when black theology is put onto a higher level of importance or significance? How is it possible that black theology is underpinned by separation when Christ calls for “understanding, wholeness, and togetherness?” (p. 31).

Jordan’s (1982) concern for endorsing a black theology is that it does more harm than good when we discuss the gospel of Jesus. He has 7 reasons as to why it is misleading:

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13 Ibid.
First, it fails to teach the love revealed and demonstrated by Jesus for all people. Second, it rejects the principle and instead promotes and teaches a love for blacks, among blacks and for blacks alone Black theology also impedes progress by striving to stifle growth, development and understanding by individuals of the race. Third, it not only plants the seed of violence but cultivates the weed and spreads the venom of racial distrust and prejudice. Fourth, it seeks to re-erect the barriers and hurdles blacks and whites have almost removed between them by calling anew for separation. Fifth, black theology establishes a cult with a racist Christ who is humanistic and narrow and interested in blacks and blacks alone. Sixth, black theology seeks to destroy the concept of the fatherhood of God and brotherhood of mankind. Seventh, it seeks to capture the minds and hearts of people discrediting the bible and the theology of Jesus by deifying and enthroning a black messiah (p. 74).

It seems to me that black theology, for Jordan, should just be abandoned altogether. I do not think he wants to shift attention from suffering and the plight of the oppressed because as mentioned already, Jesus Himself was oppressed. Christianity embraces unity for one another, no matter the color of our skin. Black theology undermines the basic framework that Christianity wants to convey. For those who take the Cross seriously, they know that Jesus was oppressed and a black theology, for Jordan, does not need to demonstrate how blacks alone were in that same condition. Thus, the criteria needed for the Cross is met in the liberation that Jesus has already established. That is to say, black theology overlooks the point of Christian emphasis on action. Jordan (1982) illustrates this clearly: “Those believing that Christianity or the theology advocating Christian principles calls for ineptness and inactivity miss the central core of Jesus’ message! How can any person follow Jesus and digest His teachings without seeking justice for others (and him or herself)?” (p. 74)

These critiques are not exhaustive with Jordan. I have my own qualms with the black church as well. I will only address a few here and the first one is the black church’s misinterpretation of the Bible. In particular, homosexuality is viewed as a sin throughout
many black congregations. “Members of black churches assert that homosexual behavior is immoral and in direct contrast to the word of God” (Cohen, 383). It is indeed true that homosexuality is a sin in the Bible. I do not question this fundamental teaching in the Bible but I do question the meaning behind Leviticus 18:22 which are where many confuse this scripture of it saying that homosexuality should be forbidden (depending on the version of the Bible that one uses). In the New International Version of the Bible, Leviticus 18:22 states: “Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable” (Yancey, Stafford, 1996, p. 146). Basically, what this means is that homosexuality itself is a sin. However, on a Christian account God created us all and the evidence increasingly suggests the importance of biological explanations for homosexuality. The sin can exist without the individual. If the possibility of being sinful is present, then the sin does not need to be attached to a particular individual, since we are born into sin. Sin is all around and our bodies restrict us to being victims of sin.

Also, to understand homosexuality as a sin by itself does very little in advancing the argument when it is also that we are all sinners, homosexual or not because every human is born into sin. The struggle to resist sin however is no easy task. As mentioned above and also fleshed out more in chapter 3, if an individual musters the courage to be their true and authentic self before God, acknowledging homosexual identity as authentic identity then embracing this authentic identity, is actually a deterrent from engaging in sin. The argument then lies in the challenges of morality. For blackness, it is not moral for black men to be homosexuals according to many. On such an account of Black identity, black identity is inconsistent with homosexual identity. This is because “there is no tradition of homosexuality in our African history” (Cohen 379). Since there is no
African history of blacks possessing a homosexual identity, blacks can only be influenced by white oppression. These are the boundaries that I had mentioned earlier with the help of Cohen. A myriad of problems arise and the first basic one is the misreading of the Word as I have just shown.

If we take Cone’s argument seriously with God siding with the oppressed, then logically, God sides with homosexuals and gays who are of any color. What Cohen considers as “secondary marginalization,” it is the reality of a “subgroup” that has been ostracized from the already known oppressed group (p. 364). That is, blacks are already oppressed as a racial group. Within their oppression is another “mini-group” that is oppressed, which are the concern for homosexuals. I find this morally and religiously disturbing because two possibilities are at work, experiential suffering and structural marginalization. Both will eventually lead to the same moral response in terms of their finiteness. Both include an experiential suffering in the sense of what type of suffering is being casted upon them as individuals. Furthermore, they are structurally marginalized with respect to how each are being oppressed in some way. It is as if the dictum, “I suffer, so you should too” is at work. Homosexuals either vanquish their sexual orientation which does not meet community standards, or they will join the margins with their comrades that share the same sexual preference turning for acceptance to friends and family members. Even then, these individuals are not guaranteeing that they will accept them for their sexual identity.

The black church’s identity is paradoxical at its core. Throughout the church, it is often noted that black homosexual males are in high positions. As long as “they abide by a quiet acceptance without advocacy” (Cohen 380), then their sexual orientation will not
only go unnoticed but it will not be seen as problematic. In these terms, identity is accepted but with limited restrictions. One can reasonably raise the question: How are those in power mutually accepted with their sexual identity but the church is rejecting homosexuals within their congregation? To engage in this paradoxical nature is to not only subvert “ontological blackness” but to use their hierarchical status in the church to overlook the sexual orientation of the male. Since the clergy is hegemonic in the sense of holding power by determining who and who is not invited into the church, then the congregation is being chauvinistic to attending homosexuals. We are reminded with the help of Timothy Keller (2008) that “the Bible teaches us that our treatment of them (homosexuals) equals our treatment of God” (p. 63). If we mistreat homosexuals, then we mistreat Jesus. Black theology overlooks this fundamental learning.

Another contradiction is the idea of having a concern for the well-being of others but rejecting their sexual identity. The black clergy would ask for prayer over a certain individual who has been diagnosed with AIDS but they would despise their attraction to the same sex. There is only one justification for the clergy to pray over a certain individual and that would be only for the disease. I ask: If the individual did not have AIDS, would he be accepted? I would remain skeptical of this acceptance because the disease is only used as a disguise to show sympathy for the individual rather than the individual himself. The physical bodily disease is a recognizable source of suffering but living with homosexualism is not recognized as a kind of suffering to which the story of Christ calls upon. If the disease was not present, the individual would not be recognized. The church is hooked on sin but they are sinners themselves by not looking at every individual as equal since God made no human better than the other.
Those who have been diagnosed with AIDS are also a secondarily marginalized group. “For most in black communities, AIDS is still a disease of individuals, usually irresponsible, immoral, and deviant individuals, some of whom happen to be black” (Cohen 374). When someone thinks of AIDS, they automatically presume that it is connected to homosexuality when this is not the case. The argument collapses when we take into consideration children who were unfortunately born with AIDS. Homosexuality is not the only way to capture AIDS. HIV can be transmitted by many actions such as sharing needles, multiple sex partners without any protection, just to name a few. Is it then “irresponsible, moral, and deviant” for kids who are innocent of not engaging in such acts? I doubt it.

The last problem I will address is the crisis of essentialism. Essentialism is a concept in which assumes that all possess the same characteristics for a specific entity. Ontological blackness which underemphasizes black theology is essentialized as I described earlier. The conundrum with this is that although blacks are seen as a group, it fails to take into account the diverse identities among members of the same race. Regarding the black church, to presume that black churches disparage homosexuals is to put at large every church in the same essentialized realm. Not every black church finds homosexuality as a sin because these clergies recognize that God is a God of love and justice.

Therefore, since the black church lives by the black theological doctrine which possibly rejects homosexuals and preaches misconstrued doctrines, then black theology should be abandoned. It would be radical to claim that those doctrines are irreligious but this is not far from the truth. I do not mean irreligious in the sense of being antireligious
or withdrawn from religion. Instead, irreligious in this context means embracing humanism which is a secular philosophy. Ethics and reason become the decision makers for morality. The question then becomes, is it likely that Christianity should be abandoned as well since it too is inconsistent with homosexuality? In order to answer this question, we must remember that there is a difference between religion and the gospel. The gospel teaches salvation through grace while religion is salvation through moral accomplishment. Even though liberation theology attempts to advocate the gospel as its main framework, black liberation theology tends to shift the focus towards oppression and marginalization which are bounded by moral standards. Christianity in general focuses more on teaching the gospel instead of moral accomplishment, although, morality is important.

The black church is also essentialized as a whole by presuming that every black church preaches the same black theological Word. Once again, the black ministry may use black theology as a guiding principle but what is being taught is not always the same in another black congregation, since the identities of each church may be different. To avoid the confusion of dogmatic biblical instruction among different black theological teachings, why not forsake the doctrine?

I propose a solution along the same lines of Jordan. An alternative might be a theology that nurtures a black church with strong leaders who will preach teachings in a way that would recognize the differences and diversities throughout the church. A certain number of individuals are not what I am proposing but rather tacit acceptance that recognizes everyone as equals. It should be just that; the Church. The church would not view homosexuals as sinners since everyone in the church is born into sin. An
appropriate response to oppression is Christianity. Ontological blackness resists essentialism in a way that becomes more about the individual’s identity rather than the group’s identity. Black theology reinforces essentialism by resisting the group’s identity such as the case with homosexuals.

Black theology is a doctrine that serves the purpose of black folk, siding with the Cross through the lens of oppression. I find black ontology more suitable as a framework for thinking about the recognition and remedy of injustice since it will give a potential for inclusion in the black church. It will move towards a moral, political, and religious togetherness that has the potential to address injustice with real and meaningful inclusion. Black ontology offers an understanding of what blacks should be aiming for in regards to the mission of the gospel of Jesus Christ. On my understanding of Christianity, I sympathize with the Universalist God, where race, color, and sexual orientation are of less importance. What is important is that the theological realm of black identity does not entail one sound solution but a multitude of critiques that include the need for a black church, black theology as a form of cultism, the concern for “togetherness,” the interpretation of homosexuality in the Bible, and the crisis of essentialism which illustrate normative implications of the call to attend to suffering from the perspective of blackness as both the material and symbolic location of oppression. I have attempted to describe black theology in its empirical manifestation in the black church, offering critiques that remain unanswered to onlookers who may see black theology though different viewpoints.
CHAPTER 2: WHAT DOES A BLACK CHRISTIAN ENTAIL?

I begin this chapter by outlining two criminal cases involving clergy. I use these cases to suggest the complexities of either a theology or an ontology that positions “Blackness” as a morally privileged standpoint that necessarily resists rather than participates in oppressive practices.

Eddie Long, an African American mega church pastor, is nationally known. In September of 2010, he was accused of using his pastoral influence to coerce three men, Maurice Robinson, Anthony Flagg, and Jamal Parris, into having a sexual relationship (Boone and Moore, 2010). Long used getaway trips, flashy cars, and monetary means from the congregation to imbue his three victims. As a result, he resigned from his position a month later. The next story concerning another “pastor” did not end in the same fashion as Long but he too was African American.

A “preacher” that goes by the name of Abraham Kennard was not a “preacher” as all of his followers believed. Instead, he was a scam artist who used the church for idolatrous greed. Over 1,600 churches across the United States were prey to his tricky antics. Kennard embezzled over $9 million, promising churches big returns for small investments (Ross, 2008). He thought, ironically, that he did not do anything wrong. In February of 2010, he was found guilty of 116 counts of fraud and theft. Seeking for a plea deal, 3 months later, he received 17 years for his crimes that included $7.9 million in restitution to all of the victims and $598,000 owed to the Internal Revenue Service (Ross, 2008). Kennard also claimed that God was with him throughout this whole process.

Why these two stories? What makes these two significant? From the perspective outlined in the first chapter - - one which draws on Black liberation theologies and
situates “Blackness” as both the symbolic and material location of the oppressed, these cases suggest a complicity with the oppressor role on the part of black Christian leadership. Long and Kennard participated in what Cornel West calls, Constantinian Christianity, a view rooted in the Roman Empire during the reign of Constantine. More precisely, Constantinian Christianity is when practice and faith become “well-adjusted to greed, hatred, and fear” (West, 2010, p 219).

One can argue that such abuse of power is widely evident for all those who take the Cross seriously. Given my focus here however, I am particularly concerned with these abuses as they play out in the Black Church. What does it mean to be a black Christian? Certainly, it is not the pathway that Long and Kennard chose to walk down. Rather, their behavior undermines aspects of the gospel considered central to any theology of liberation.

Therefore, my plan for this chapter is the following: First, it is important to discuss the concept of Christianity. I draw on the work of Timothy Keller to complement the argument framed by West. The discussion of morality needs brief attention as well in order to illuminate how it can benefit according to what the Bible states. Here, I am particularly referring to religious morality. Western modern moralities tend to exclusively focus on rights and responsibility in contractual terms. Compassion, self-sacrifice, and the suffering are all considered to be defense mechanisms against western modern moralities. These same moralities have very little to say about strangers or self-sacrifice. The inevitably of sin however may have an appropriate response to modern moralities.
Second is the inevitably of sin. In the previous chapter, I only gave a very brief definition of sin. There will be a more thorough examination of what sin is. I will draw upon two conceptions that overlap one another. Christians think that sin is just what the Bible says to do or not to do. While some Christians hold to a doctrinal understanding of sin, this normative definition is not satisfactory to sin itself, as it underscores more than just what the Christian doctrine states. A fundamental teaching of the Bible is that we are all born into sin; a state that our mortal bodies cannot escape. Critically, my interest in sin should not be confused with a broader interest in evil. Evil and sin must be kept distinct in order to examine the nature of sin. Sin does not necessarily mean to be “evil” in the modern sense of the word. Although evil is defined as a moral code that has been broken, the conception of sin I will examine deals with an existentialist implication that deals with the question of how to be a Christian.

Thirdly, I will outline the concept of ‘faith.’ Any faith that is discussed presumes a belief in something, whether an individual is religious, spiritual, or both. For Paul Tillich and Soren Kierkegaard, it cuts deeper. These two prominent philosophers nicely lay out the foundation of faith. Tillich discusses faith and its dynamics on a much more broader, philosophical and theological scale. I also find the audacity to raise the question: Can the ethical potentially undermine faith? I believe that this question speaks to the reality of how the ethical and faith are often juxtaposed to one another. For the religious, it is beneficial for the universal theme of Christianity to not allow homosexuals in the church since they are committing an abomination according to the Bible. This in-turn undermines faith because those same individuals are now attentive to worldly sin when they should be focused on God.
Finally, I will use these amalgamated elements to actualize what the subjective black Christian is. This will have existential implications, for being an authentic self before God is what it means to be a black Christian. Furthermore, it will segue into the next chapter which includes attributes I briefly touched on in chapter 1. That is, to illuminate how sin is committed throughout the congregation even with the leaders of the church.

*What is Christianity?*

“The name Christians was first given at Antioch (Acts 11:26) to ‘the disciples, to those who accepted the teaching of the apostles’” (Lewis, 1952, p. 10). Christianity, on the ground, can fall into two categories, prophetic and Constantinian. We have described Constantinian Christianity; by contrast prophetic Christianity is: “Christian faith maladjusted to greed, hatred, and fear that bears the fruits of justice, love, and hope” (West, 2010, p. 221). It requires a particular freedom for the individual which is considered as “existential freedom.” In the words of West (2002), existential freedom is the “…divine gift of grace which promises to sustain persons through and finally deliver them from death, despair, and disease” (p. 18). In other words, when the self has received grace from God, grace becomes a deterrent from sin, centering the self on God. The attention is then geared towards justice, love, and hope which are then reinforced by the grace that has been received.

“A nominal Christian is someone who is a Christian in name only, who does not practice it and perhaps barely believes it” (Keller, 2008, p. 58). Belief is not enough to be a Christian; it is more than just believing in God and in doctrines to rationalize or make an individual feel better. One does not necessarily need to suffer or be unhappy to
be a Christian. Identifying the self as a Christian is a contingent matter with a deep, passionate commitment that does not depend upon any observable manifestation. Action is indeed central to Christianity. However, if we take Christ as a model, an example we all need to follow for living righteously and as long as the focus is on Him, one should not worry about proving or determining their faith to anyone. On the other hand, those who need evidence to show one’s faith should not worry about being proven wrong about one’s own religious belief.

It is not a prerequisite for an individual to have their Christianity witnessed to the authorial eye. In a way, this is along the lines of “absolute faith” which is what I will discuss later. An individual’s practice of Christianity is privatized in a way that allows them to have private time with God. This view does seem be to Protestant and it is but we must keep in mind that many Christian denominations features protestant practices. During an individual’s time with God, this can include prayer, reading the Bible, or even watching a sermon. “Reading” faithfulness due to other actions is not needed to show one’s faith. I also do not think this is a plausible way to demonstrate if one is a Christian or not.

Timothy Keller (2008), a Presbyterian pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian church in Manhattan sums it up satisfactorily:

I’ll define Christianity as the body of believers who assent to these great ecumenical creeds. They believe that the triune God created the world, that humanity has fallen into sin and evil, that God has returned to rescue us in Jesus Christ, that in his death and resurrection Jesus accomplished our salvation for us so we can be received by grace, that He established the Church, His people, as the vehicle through which He continues His mission of rescue, reconciliation, and salvation, and that at the end of time Jesus will return to renew the Heavens and earth, removing all evil, injustice, sin, and death from the world (p. 123)
This is the structure of the Christ story that animates Christian belief and action. This should not be treated as exhaustive, for Christianity has more attributes that consists of truth, faith, and morality.

While Christianity is the religious identity in the U.S. context, Christian conceptions of morality have shaped American culture more broadly. For Christians, the Golden Rule states: Do unto others as if want done unto you. Americans have reduced this rule’s understanding in a way that becomes compatible with western moral theory. Furthermore, we have also reduced the meaning of Christian morality to the Golden Rule standard. Allowing Christian morality to be compatible with the Golden Rule is not necessarily a bad outcome since this can be an expression of it. Making the Golden Rule more suitable for western moral theory is putting ethics and reason on equal grounds with one another which are not acceptable for the Christian.

**Morality**

A Christ-Like morality exceeds the standards of western moral theory. How can we determine what is right from wrong? Keller calls this “free-floating morality.” Keller (2008) describes more accurately: “People still have strong moral convictions…but they don’t have any visible basis why they find some things to be evil and other things good. It’s almost like their moral intuitions are free-floating in midair—far off the ground” (p. 150). Free-floating morality, in other words, is simply the view of we do not know how to decide what is right or what is wrong. Moral standards are “free-floating” in the sense of having no place for judgment because they are just “out there.” To have a place for judgment, moral obligation significantly undermines this view.
“Moral obligation is a belief that some things ought not to be done regardless of how a person feels about them within herself, regardless of what the rest of her community and culture says, and regardless of whether it is in her self-interest or not” (Keller, 2008, p. 152). Moral obligation forfeits the individual’s temptation to do the wrong (or right) thing that pushes them away from their own rational self-interests. This view is subjective since what ought not to be done varies from person to person. In chapter one, I mentioned how the black Christian should turn their attention to the Cross rather than to one’s sexual identity. Moral obligation forces them to realize that casting judgment on an individual or treating them as pariahs is not healthy for being a Christian or for the congregation. It is a moral sacrifice for the black Christian to abide by Christian values rather than what others may think or say.

If we hold the view that religion is salvation through moral accomplishment, this may undermine a more complete understanding of grace. Nonetheless, if we use the gospel instead of religion, it becomes clearer. The gospel is simply the idea of salvation through grace. Grace recognizes that “I am so flawed that Jesus had to die for me, yet I am so loved and valued and that Jesus was glad to die for me” (2008, p. 187). Keller (2008) continues: “I cannot feel superior to anyone, and yet I have nothing to prove to anyone. I do not think more of myself nor less of myself. Instead, “I think of myself less.” Grace encourages about our own role as judges - - a humility that is missing in the highly rationalized approach to morality that is dominant in the west.

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14 Ibid.
Sin/Despair

Existentialist approaches like those of Soren Kierkegaard shore up this humility suggesting that the authentic self; the self that escapes despair is authentic because it recognizes its deepest and most enduring identity that is found in relation to the infinite and understands the infinite as an expression of the divine. “Sin is this: Before God, or with the conception of God, to be in despair at not willing to be oneself, or in despair at willing to be oneself” (Kierkegaard, 1954, p. 208). Keller (2008) confirms: “Sin is the despairing refusal to find your deepest identity in your relationship and service to God. Sin is seeking to become oneself, to get an identity, apart from Him” (p. 168). Despair and sin for Kierkegaard, are companions. The spirit is what makes the individual be itself. Otherwise, we would all be robots without any identity, emotion, or cognitive faculty. Therefore, the spirit is in despair when in sin. Kierkegaard (1954) suggests: “Philistinism is spiritlessness…; determinism and fatalism are spiritual despair; but such spiritlessness is also despair” (p. 174). Lacking spirit puts the self in the realm of sin.

Whether or not the self is aware is irrelevant because in order to obtain the self, the focal point is to become. In order for the self to become more authentic for Christ, the self only should be conscious of becoming. The process of becoming is a task that requires the individual to be attentive to sin, Christian doctrine, faith, humility, and commitment.

“Well, if we can never be ourselves, is it safe to say that we are not only living a lie but also we will always be in sin?” Not necessarily. Kierkegaard (1954) provides an answer that I wish to expand on: “If…the self does not become itself, it is in despair, whether it knows it or not. However, a self, every instant exists, is in the process of becoming, for the self potentially does not actually exist, it is only that which is to
become” (p. 163). “Becoming” is the key word that one should take from this quote. While producing the self, we will be in sin as the process continues to move forward. It is not until we commit our spirit to God in which our, presumably, finite self is becoming free from sin. All worldly manifestations that is not involving God is attributes that only sinks the self deeper into sin. In the same process, while we move towards God, we should not be taking God for granted.

Many Christians have one foot in and out foot out the door of Christianity. For example, as we look around today, we see Christians who go to the club or a party on Saturday but attend church on Sunday to give praise and worship to our Savior Jesus Christ. We all have been granted free will but I wish to not make this a free will argument as it would be out of scope for this project. Nonetheless, we have been given this will to do as we please because if God interacted all the time, He would not only undermine His teaching but also God is not a dictator who wants to control everyone. My conviction does not resonate with the individual having fun because Christian clubs do exist. Instead, my caveat resides with the substance that reinforces the “fun” for the individual. What is it doing to the individual’s religious practice? Is it good to execute ones free will with an individual’s finite capability? Or, is it considered a worldly epiphany that distracts the self from recognizing Jesus as their Savior and therefore undermining the individual’s religious belief?

In his book, Democracy Matters, West (2004) soundly argues a similar point: “How ironic that in America we’ve moved so quickly from Martin Luther King Jr.’s “Let Freedom Ring!” to “Bling! Bling!”—as if freedom were reducible to simply having material toys, as dictated by free-market fundamentalism” (p. 5). Although free-market
fundamentalism is not a religious claim per se, I think it reinforces the argument as to how we can lose ourselves through worldly temptations. The human condition with reference to the finite (the worldly) is considered to be normative. America’s culture has become a nation in which the focus is shifted to “things” that only results in undermining our journey of becoming. The despairing refusal to find our deepest identity before God, the attempt of becoming, loses its purpose when we have a “free-market” mentality. Our self that is committed to becoming is allowing the worldly weaken an individual’s attempt of salvation with Jesus.

The approach that Kierkegaard musters is a radical claim; either the self commits to God or it is in despair which leads to sin. There is no doubt that it is a radical proposition but just because we commit to God does not mean we are not “in” sin. The Bible teaches that we are made in God’s image. We are not and never will be perfect, even if we escape the reality of sin. Christians are still in sin with their thoughts, temptations or prevaricated teachings. Similar to how our bodies can be sick, our spirit can be nauseous, suffering from spiritual malnutrition or a “sickness unto death” (Kierkegaard, 1954). For Kierkegaard, despair is a sickness unto death.

Going deeper, there are three types of sin which not only reinforce sin but also can be traced back to the stories of Long and Kennard. I will consider only one of the forms that are most suitable for this essay. Kierkegaard finds this form of despair the most common among Christians and non-Christians. He calls it, “The Despair which is Unconscious that it is Despair, or the Despairing Unconsciousness of having a Self and an Eternal Self” (Kierkegaard, 1954, p. 175). In basic terms, the self is unconscious of its self being in despair, refusing to go beyond immediacy of the finite.
Immediacy of the finite is recognized in finite realities. An identity that is not centered on God, that is not being authentic, is only capable of the finite. With the stories of Long and Kennard, they used God’s name in order to curtain an identity that’s demarcated from God. One of the 10 Commandments are “Thou shall not put any gods before me.” When the self “worships” an ultimate thing, it is reified as idolatry. For Kennard, greed became the worshipped, with the use of his legerdemain tactics that resulted in millions of dollars being misused. Although he was in despair and unconscious of this despair, he was aware of the dirty deed he executed. His crime, on Kierkegaard’s account should be understood deeper and more troubling than theft and deception; it was the crime was self-deception, of inauthenticity in relation to his Christian identity.

Kierkegaard does have a reply for despair or sin. Despair does not necessarily mean that the spirit is malnourished, or better known as spiritual malnutrition as stated above. Spiritual malnourishment is when the self has not been receiving the food the spirit desperately needs—God’s Word. Black Christians can be given God’s word, whether it is in the congregation or even before they go to bed. But true receptivity to the Word depends on an authentic relation to the self. Although the Word helps supplement the spirit, sin is a power that overcomes the spirit. The Verbum Dei can be absorbed as a teaching but not an enforcer of finding one’s identity. This is because the teaching can be misinterpreted in such a way that will possibly deter, paradoxically, the self from God. Referring back to Leviticus 18:22, if an individual is a homosexual but the teaching is construed as homosexuality being an abomination, then becoming is inevitably undermined. One’s identity depends on finding the authentic self before God and if
being a homosexual is an ingredient to becoming, then the self is one step close to finding their true self. That is why it is essential to grasp a sound understanding of the Word in order to lead the self out of despair.

Faith

What is Kierkegaard’s solution to the problem of sin? Craving a relationship with the divine while recognizing this relationship, as a consequence of our very own imperfection, a consequence of sin, can never be fully achieved. An individual must feel and “see through” himself with its limits, its finitude, while and that awareness at the same time reinforces their personal relationship with God. The response to his caveat is faith. For Tillich (1957), “faith is the state of being ultimately concerned” (p. 1). From Tillich’s conception of faith alone, it presumes that, for Christians, God exists. A common, misleading view is the notion that faith is just simply a belief in something. This does not do enough for Tillich. After all, how can something be of ultimate concern without a belief that legitimizes the ultimate concern? Nothing would be ultimate concern, in this case God, unless the belief in God was presumed.

For the black Christian, God is the ultimate concern, or at least, should be. It entails a “total surrender to the subject of ultimate concern” (Tillich, 1957, p. 2). While surrendering to God, faith becomes a “centered act” that revolves around the personal life of the individual. The self’s “rational and nonrational elements are being transcended.”15 This is called “ecstasy,” which means “standing outside of oneself” and in turn, still remain oneself. However, when the ecstasy of faith is present, it is only an element of faith, not the cause of faith.

15 Ibid.
Linguistically, “ultimate concern” holds both subjective and objective innuendos, for both are united in the act of faith; *fides qua creditor*” and *fides quae creditor* respectively. The former focuses on faith being *through* which one believes while the latter is geared towards faith which is *believed* (p. 11). In other words, subjectively, faith is the centered act of personality that is the ultimate concern. Objectively, the act is directed towards God, which is “the ultimate itself expressed through symbols of divine” (p. 11). What makes God as divine is not only ultimacy but the unconditional which undergirds the quality of divinity.

Faith also positions God as holy. Where there is ultimate concern, there is holiness. The presence of the divine establishes the content of the ultimately concerned. Tillich (1957) emphasizes: “It is a presence which remains mysterious in spite of its appearance, and it exercises both an attractive and a repulsive function on those who encounter it” (p. 14). “Holy” is usually accepted as “moral perfection.” Moral perfection is what finite realities strive for but in this striving they recognize the impossibility of actually obtaining the “holy.” Holy goes beyond what the world can produce as worldly which is always contingent and conditional.

The risk involved in faith is doubt. Faith and doubt are inseparable in the discourse of faith. It is not a doubt that determines whether or not God exists. If this meaning of doubt was accepted, then faith would have a basis for facts and conclusions *for something*, or in this case, God. Faith instead focuses on a *belief in something* of ultimate concern. The other doubt is skeptical doubt which is “an attitude that rejects any certainty” (p. 22). Skeptical doubt is not an affirmation but a settled, comfortable way of
thinking. This too is not the doubt that faith demands. The doubt I wish to allude to is what Tillich considers as “existential doubt.”

Existential doubt excludes the refusal or acceptance of a certain proposition. “It does not reject every concrete truth, but it is aware of the element of insecurity in every existential truth” (p. 23). Tillich (1957) proceeds: “It is the doubt of him who is ultimately concerned about a concrete content.”16 The doubt in himself is accepted with the awareness of the insecurity. Another risk is included but the courage that is underlying faith declares the idea of insecurity and doubt. Alone, the risk can be daunting which is why courage is needed for faith. Courage is defined as “an element of faith that [sic] is the daring self-affirmation of one’s being in spite of the powers of nonbeing which are the heritage of everything finite” (p. 19). Without courage, faith is absent.

There are different types of faith such as moral and ontological which may even be united. I want to only briefly discuss ontological faith, since it relates heavily, not exhaustively, to the holy. One may ask, “How can we experience the holy (God) while living in a finite world if it transcends all possible finite manifestations?” The only answer that is possible is the depth of the human soul. This is the only place that the infinite and finite can be in contact. As Tillich (1957) argues: “Man must empty himself of all the finite contents of his ordinary life…He must go beyond the pieces of reality in which sacramental faith experiences the ultimate. He must transcend the division of existence, even the deepest and most universal of all divisions, that between subject and

16 Ibid.
object” (p. 70). Mentioned earlier, the need for ecstasy is indispensable along with contemplation and mediation in order to surrender to the ultimately concerned.

A leap of faith, as coined by Kierkegaard, complements Tillichian faith. The leap is needed to recognize the ultimately concerned for black Christians. Although the leap is taken, it is not required to fully understand the contents of what to leap for. It is acknowledging something greater that allows the self to initiate the leap. Therefore, if black Christians make the leap, surrendering is totally weighed on perceiving that God is greater than them. Once again, faith is a risk so therefore, the leap is a risk as well. When one takes the leap, its still “jumping” into something unknown in which finite beings will not understand. Even if they attempted to understand, the finite cannot grasp the workings of the infinite.

Referring to Kennard and Long, both had faith but it was not faith as either Kierkegaard or Tillich invites us to understand faith. Both pastors not only made their selfish desires into ultimate things but both transformed their doings into ultimate concerns. When ultimate concerns are not focused on God, this is called idolatrous faith. Idolatrous faith penetrates the personality which disrupts the personality and hence the center is lost. It is not true faith—“a concern for the truly ultimate; while in idolatrous faith preliminary, finite realities are elevated to the rank of ultimacy” (p. 13). Even though this is faith, it is a sinful faith, since the self is lost, connecting it back to Kierkegaardian sin.

**Ethical and Faith**

I would like to take a moment to raise the following: Can the ethical undermine faith? Recall what I have argued in chapter 1; that is, when others are marginalized for
their sexual orientation, the ethical or universal wins. This is because, according to Kierkegaard (1985), “to do what would normally count to your duties can only be justified if there is some wider benefit to the universal at stake” (p. 16). In other words, if an action is to be ethical, it must contribute to the benefit of society or the universal. ‘Ethical’ and ‘universal’ are ambiguous for Kierkegaard: “…’universal’ is related to the notion of ‘whole’ as opposed to ‘part or at most to what applies generally within a concrete domain, e.g. a society or nation” (p. 15). By casting out others who are not of the same identity in the church, the ethical prevails over the Christian faith. The leaders on the congregation are also on the front lines of the ethical but those who serve as a purpose for the church such as a choir member or a deacon who practice homosexuality are silenced which undermines their identity, taking a step back from becoming.

Everyone in the church, presumably, makes God their ultimate concern. Their concern should be beyond finitude but with the case of homosexuals, their ultimate concern is finitude. Therefore, the church is enforcing marginalization for those who are shunned. One the same token, this finitude is shifting the focus away from God. If God is a God of love, justice, and hope, then logically, inclusiveness should spill throughout the congregation. Sexual orientation does not exhaust the view of inclusivity.

Take, for example, fornication. Fornication is a sin, for sexual intercourse should only occur within the bonds of marriage. That is a fundamental, elementary teaching that does not induce any authorial conflict. Notwithstanding, we witness this phenomenon with everyday life in relationships, temptation, and lust. We then might ask with respect to the sin of homosexuality whether it differs fundamentally from the status of other sins: Are fornication and homosexuality any different from one another with respect to sin? If
not, can there be a meaningful justification for the exclusion of homosexual couples from the black Church? Moreover, these practices of exclusion, justified by a visibly queer identity, reveal an obsession on the part of the Church and its congregants with aspects of selfhood, that at least from the perspective of Kierkegaard and Tillich, are our most finite, not reflective in our true identity in the eyes of God.

In the black church, being a homosexual is not what blackness is ontologically about. It is about being marginalized, oppressed out of the 244+ years of slavery that labeled African Americans as chattel. Homosexuality is not the sexual identity that constitutes “being” for the black individual. One could even argue that it is not normative. Norms are only valid with the “status quo” but entailing attributes to the black church supersedes those norms which is why sexual orientation needs no attention. The Word of God is absolute, not the normative although it is treated as such.

*Ethical-Political*

For the context of this project, the ethical is simply defined as human reason. The “ethical-political” is the view of how human reason is reinforced by the political in such a way that treats Christianity as being inferior. The political implication for the black congregation is the rationale behind exclusion. Excluding individuals based on either a portion or all of their identity is a political praxis. When the ethical-political undermines Christianity, it becomes a “sweat;” the struggle to be a Christian with an identity that does not seem ethical puts the self at an impasse with a tension between the authentic self before God and being “above” Christianity. What I mean by “above” is choosing a pathway that makes Christianity insignificant but also goes “beyond” the religious practice. The ethical-political view overlooks Christianity which determines who is
either excluded or included in the black church. Therefore, the individual must ask, would they rather be homosexual, black, and a Christian whom is included in the process of becoming or build an identity which was influenced by the ethical-political that is not homosexual where their blackness is undermined and their religious belief is trivial? If the former is the authentic self, then the latter is a self that does not know how to become; the self only knows one identity.

What does the ethical-political do for an individuals Blackness? The ethical-political supersedes Blackness but this does not mean Blackness is not important. As stated previously, African history lacks the evidence to illustrate homosexuality throughout the race which means it was influenced by white supremacy. The ethical-political makes Blackness recognizable for those in the black congregation, bypassing other identities that may undermine Blackness.\footnote{In the proceeding chapter, I find ontological blackness as the most suitable solution for not only making God the focal point since He too was oppressed but also deterring others from casting judgment upon others.} Many see homosexuality as doing harm to Blackness but this could be said across the board for all races. With regard to this aspect of identity, the symbolism for oppression makes Blackness more prominent, identifying the self more explicitly with the story of Christ.

**Conclusion**

The black Christian subjectively appeals much attention to God; a deep awareness that will allow them to take Christianity seriously. It is not just one but a myriad of qualities that the black Christian includes. The black Christian would be this: *An individual that first commits to Jesus as their savior. He/she is aware of their existential and ontological misdeeds that were once bestowed upon them rooted deeply in their*
history. Once oppressed, oppressing others on the basis of any identity that's not aligned with God within their own race speaks volumes to the reality of secondary marginalization and should be avoided. They direct their concentration towards God as their ultimate concern, weeding out the bodily temptation that their mortal bodies are prone to. Sin is available everywhere, internally and externally, but they cut against the grain, carving out any attempt to fall into a deep despair that is difficult to overcome. Their understanding of the Bible is substantial, concrete, and robust in their subjective and objective interpretations for it is imperative to not confuse what God does and does not want. They follow the image of God in every footstep, becoming more like Him, fully accepting the truism that the self will existentially never become perfect.

In this chapter, I outlined an account of black Christian identity which included elements such as an understanding of sin, the basic structure to Christianity, and a commitment towards faith. This is not the last word on Christianity, as some tenets of Christianity were left out such as grace, truth, and evil just to name a few. There is more attention needed to Christianity that will help re-define what is required of the black Christian. In the following chapter, I offer two prescriptions that will help the black Christian stay on the pathway of Christianity until they are invited into Heaven. The task is usually left up for a theologian or a pastor but as an attempt to grasp Christianity more, a label is not in dire need. One prescription involves the church objectively while the other includes the individual subjectively. As finite black Christians, we are flawed but we should not settle for being flawed, as our goal in life is to defeat death and join our Holy Father in the kingdom of Heaven.
CHAPTER 3: THE CURE FOR BLACK CHRISTIANS

The black church prima facie seems to be serving the needs of black people. In the previous chapter, I argued that everyone should be included in the black congregation, regardless of any identity that may view “other” individuals as pariahs.

There is a sense in which that some sin is greater than the other and this is humanly impossible. R.L. Jordan (1983) explicitly believes that the black church serves no purpose because all are the same color in the eyes of God. This is a fair assessment but I do believe that the black church helps all of us understand the Christian doctrine, regardless of skin color. That is to say, the black church serves a purpose but it has been altered in a way that goes unnoticed. There is a need for cleansing in the black church that would help reinforce the idea that the congregation can help illustrate how to live with others, steering away from the notion of conditional acceptance (i.e. being “silent” about homosexuality to sing in the choir) that it comfortably advocates.

The task of this project attempts to answer one intrinsic question: How do we treat the symptoms of the black church that has lost itself, becoming well-adjusted to avarice, greed, and fear? My plan is the following: First, I would like to examine the dismaying effects that undermine one’s identity. The self becomes paralyzed with fear, an anxiety or as Kierkegaard would call it, angst. When one is in anxiety, they tend to lose themselves but it can also muster a certain self-awareness of our choices and responsibility that each individual possesses. The term that he uses is coined as “dizziness of freedom.” Anxiety can do both harm and good for Kierkegaard. I will relate this to the case of homosexuality as being a problem in the church. Those who are
oppressing homosexuals are not acknowledging the existential determent that is bestowed upon those who are secondarily marginalized.

Next, “God is dead” is not only witnessed in humanity as Friedrich Nietzsche rightly argues but a lack in “Shalom” is implicitly discovered in the black church. “God is dead” does not literally mean the actual death of our Savior because as all Christians know, Jesus defeated death after he was resurrected. I will discuss a term that in Hebrew, it means “absolute wholeness.” With the help of Timothy Keller, he pushes for what’s known as “Shalom.” While the church is suffering from a deep partition, there are implications in which “Shalom” or “absolute togetherness” can be reestablished, crippling the argument that Nietzsche has posited. The act of Shalom is a political act, since it reinforces contention.

Then, I will discuss how to reach Shalom with a term I coined that is very similar to baptism and paideia. I call this “faithful suicide.” Linguistically, the term seems to be an oxymoron that seems to not exist. The term I create is radical and existential in nature. The conversation of sin will be brought up very briefly since “faithful suicide” is triggered by sin. Neither baptism nor paideia is enough, for both can be limited in their respective processes for the self. My term will also include a concept of Tillich’s “absolute faith” which encompasses three parts that will be helpful.

Finally, I will conclude with the overarching reparation to the black church. Here, I will sum up the entire project as a whole, elaborating on the process that the black church must go through, starting with the individual. In the development, a few quandaries will be addressed that may have been ignored before. I have to simplify what many may assume this project is advancing, which is fanaticism. Fanaticism is a radical
approach that over-exaggerates the act of becoming a black Christian. I am not treating anything I say as a necessity but as a recommendation for those who would like to take the Cross vigorously.

_Angst_

As finite humans, we are inevitably vulnerable to certain psychological processes which may strike a certain feeling into us all. Depending on what part of the identity has been struck, it all leads to the same dread through different pathways. As a result, a certain shudder is bestowed upon us. Kierkegaard calls this _angst_, or anxiety. Anxiety is normatively accepted as a term that breeds negative consequences. However, for Kierkegaard, it can also be a positive awakening for the self. When the self is experiencing _angst_, it is a paralysis that overcomes the psyche of the body and spirit. It undermines one’s identity based on the social structures that are considered to be moral, acceptable and normative.

Kierkegaard frames the beginnings of anxiety nicely with the story of Adam and Eve. He considers it to be the “Presupposition of Hereditary Sin” (Kierkegaard, 1980). For verbatim: “To explain Adam’s sin is therefore to explain hereditary sin. And no explanation that explains Adam but not hereditary sin, or explains hereditary sin but not Adam, is of any help” (1980, p. 28). Hereditary sin and Adam are necessary conditions, for one cannot succeed without the other. What is hereditary sin however? Simply put, it is considered to be the Fall of Man. This answer is not acceptable, for it merely begs the question. Hereditary sin is only the _consequence_ of the Fall of Man. Therefore, the Fall of Man is considered to be the intellectual faculty that enables mankind to fall into a state of disobedience, which God forbade. Instead of using the tool of intuitive perception to
decide which Laws of God to follow, the intellect led the collective majority of mankind to determine which decisions were tolerable. The story of Adam of Eve demonstrates the Fall of Man perfectly in the Book of Genesis.

Before Adam ate from the Tree of Knowledge, there was no conception of what good and evil entails. Since God told Adam to not eat from the tree, it was considered as evil. “Sin came into the world by a sin” (1980, p. 32). It is however wrong to assert that sin came into the world by Adam. Rather it is the opposite, which sinfulness appeared before Adam. Kierkegaard (1980) demonstrates: “That sin came into the world is quite true. But this does not really concern Adam. To express this precisely and accurately, one must say that by the first sin, sinfulness came to Adam” (p. 33). How does this presuppose anxiety? What’s the difference between Adam’s sin and first sin?

Briefly, the first sin and Adam’s sin holds different attributes. The first sin of man is none other than a state, a quality that depends on the nature in which it constitutes. Adams sin is different in a way that has resulted as a consequence. A consequence of Adams sin came into fruition due to committing what is considered to be evil on the contrary of what God said to not do. Kierkegaard (1980) spots the difference: “According to traditional concepts, the difference between Adam’s first sin and the first sin of every other man is this: Adam’s sin conditions sinfulness as a consequence, the other first sin presupposes sinfulness as a state” (p. 30). One of the main differences is that the first sin did come into the world. As mentioned above, Adams sin was brought to him.

As hereditary sin being the underlying aspect of anxiety, the two cannot be polarized against one another. Anxiety, therefore, precedes sin. Anxiety had set in at the
very moment that Adam was told not to eat from the tree. God’s prohibition gave Adam the “freedom” to choose to eat from the tree or listen to God’s advice. This “freedom” is no different from a man having the opportunity to either jump off a building or stay put. The incentive to be able, the possibility, is what is needed to trigger anxiety: “However, freedoms possibility is not the ability to choose the good or the evil…The possibility is to be able. In a logical system, it is convenient to say that possibility passes over into actuality. However, in actuality it is not so convenient, and an intermediate term is required. The intermediate term is anxiety” (1980, p. 49).

The potentiality of “enabling” is an impulse that is provoked by a particular feeling. When that particular feeling has been activated, it becomes a desire. “Innocence is ignorance” (1980, p. 41). How so? When the individual is experiencing anxiety, they are gaining knowledge because knowledge is needed to awaken the desire. Nonetheless, when one is innocent, no knowledge has been obtained since the desire is only a possibility, not an actuality. Before the possibility becomes the actual, there is a lack in the content of the possible. “When it is assumed that the prohibition awakens the desire, one acquires knowledge of ignorance…” (1980, p. 44).

Anxiety can be divided into two sorts, objective and subjective. Thus far, I have been discussing subjective anxiety. Kierkegaard considers this as the “dizziness of freedom,” which emerges when the spirit wants to posit the synthesis, and freedom looks down into its own possibility, laying hold of finiteness to support itself” (1980, p. 61). I think that objective anxiety is just as significant when we discuss identity. Objective anxiety is simply this: “By coming into the world, sin acquired significance for the whole creation. This effect of sin in nonhuman existence I have called objective anxiety.”
(1980, p. 57). Furthermore, which I think is indispensable, is how Kierkegaard (1980) characterizes the individual vis-à-vis objective imperfections: “A person is not in this state of expectation by accident, so that he finds himself a total stranger to it but he himself is at the same time producing it” (p. 58). Individuals weigh themselves in accordance to what is objectively sufficed or impermissible. They not only reflect their existential subjective “being” but also determine what is objectively sinful through the lens of the black church. Despite efforts of still remaining themselves, anxiety, both subjectively and objectively, hampers onto their identity through both gauges.

Anxiety does not necessarily have a negative tone attached as what it is known to be. It can also be used as a vehicle to become more conscious of certain realities that influence their identity. An individual’s self-reflection becomes more prominent, being conscious of the choices we make and the responsibilities that we must carry out. Anxiety becomes an enforcer of the potential that one can obtain. Whether they strive for that potential is dependent upon the individual but certain freedoms become in-reach. Kierkegaardian anxiety creates a place that exercises the will, absorbing the consequences of action which leaves open the possibility of sin as ever present.

In relation to the ethical-political, anxiety allows the individual to become more aware of their conscious self. This may be a good attribute underlying anxiety to recognize one’s finite capability. It becomes ongoing to critical self-consciousness requiring humility. However, for the authorial eye, it reinforces their judgment that they cast on the oppressed. The authentic self before God is in anxiety but that anxiety allows them to reinforce their attempt of becoming. As mentioned earlier, the ethical-political
does prevail over Christianity but for the subjective individual, they can prevail over the ethical-political by only focusing on God.

The question now becomes: How does anxiety relate to the black church more explicitly? Referring back to the previous chapter, the black Christian should avoid being in sin—the despairing refusal to seek God in one’s identity. Those who are distorting the teachings of the Bible are in sin. Those who are in anxiety are ‘potentially’ about to commit sin. For a marginalized group such as homosexuals, they are conforming to the churches standards as individuals who are paralyzed with fear, losing their identities in the process. Homosexuals do not even need to lose their identities because when anxiety sets in, “being able” to lose the self is a precursor for the unfocused fear. If the self is wrestling with the adversities of the black Church, the desire to change the self only reinforces sin. The self cannot be in sin on the basis of homosexuality because their identity is built on God with an ultimate concern for God. The church being divided leads to the conclusion that both inside and outside the church, God is dead.

God is Dead

“God is dead,” devised by Friedrich Nietzsche, is a phrase that many translate as God literally being dead. That is, the human, bodily make-up of God is dead but this is a complete fabrication of what Nietzsche meant. He uses the story of a madman to convey the term: “Haven’t you heard of that madman who in the bright morning lit a lantern and ran around the marketplace crying incessantly, ‘I’m looking for God! I’m looking for God!...The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. ‘Where is God?’ he cried; ‘I’ll tell you! We killed him—you and I! We are all murderers” (Nietzsche, 2001, p. 120). Humanity has “killed” God: “Do we still smell nothing of the
God being “dead” in the black church seems to be paradoxical at the core. After all, how can God be dead when we are supposed to give Him praise and receive His grace? Again, “dead” here is not literal but dialectically rational. If we examine the black church, there are instances in which it is more detached rather than collected. The church may recognize God as existing but that is where it stops. It needs to not only recognize God but be aware of Christian values, teachings, and morals. As the famous axiom states, “practice what one preaches.” The preaching needs to be re-evaluated however so the practice can be executed the righteous way. Although I would not go as far as Nietzsche who believed Christianity is nihilistic, Christianity needs an awakening to mutually include all instead of just some.

The awakening I am referring to has two prescriptions, one advanced by Timothy Keller while the other is a term I contrived. Keller’s solution is more objective in its content while mine is radically subjective in its essence. First, I would like to take a moment to add Tillich’s conception of “Absolute Faith.” Absolute faith is a logic that will reinforce my term that is soon to follow. His term includes three features that will succinctly be examined.

**Absolute Faith**

Absolute faith is faith that goes “beyond mysticism and human-divine encounter” (Tillich, 1952, p. 177). In chapter 2, I attempted to lay the basic blueprint of faith. The difference is that absolute faith cuts deeper than just an ultimate concern. Three elements underpin absolute faith:
The first is the experience of the power of being which is present even in the face of the most radical manifestation of nonbeing... The second element in absolute faith is the dependence of the experience of nonbeing on the experience of being and the dependence of the experience of meaninglessness on the experience of meaning... There is a third element in absolute faith, the acceptance of being accepted.¹⁸

What does all of this mean? It is important to note that absolute faith holds strong existentialist implications. The first trait amounts to how the power of “being” rests on any given presence even if nonbeing is absent. The power of “being” is sufficient to solidify “being,” regardless if the actuality is fruitful. The second trait says that on the experience of being and meaning, nonbeing and meaninglessness respectively depends on their counterparts. Without being and meaning, nonbeing and meaninglessness cease to exist. The last trait advocates the accepted of welcoming acceptance. Tillich in his analysis is discussing despair but I think there is a connection with the vindication I will prescribe.

*Faithful Suicide*

The term I coined is similar to baptism, paideia, and what Vincent Jungkunz calls “political suicide” if all three were to be amalgamated. My term however is religious, existential, and even radical in nature. I call it *Faithful Suicide*. Faithful Suicide prima facie seems absurd and can even be considered an oxymoron. After all, every black Christian knows that God does not want His creation to commit suicide. As Jungkunz posits, “The potential of such suicides has nothing to do with a killing of the body itself. When a depressed human being attempts to leave this world entirely via terminating their very physicality, it speaks to the fundamental failure within the community in which such

¹⁸ ibid
an act of desperation occurs” (Jungkunz, 2011, p. 3). That is, I am not advocating, recommending, or encouraging a physical death. It is something much different and now my intention is to elucidate how it is different.

Faithful Suicide is defined as this: *It is the attempt to “die” in such a way that allows the spirit to be resurrected which will sacrifice their previous self for a new self, reinforcing and creating their absolute faith towards God.* This spiritual death destroys a self that use to be. It cannot be done by another party, as the individual can only vanquish what they once were. There is a deep, passionate commitment to God that will resurrect a self that will take the Cross very seriously. The act of Faithful Suicide is subjective in its content which will contribute to the objective foundation of the black Church. There is the experience of reaching deeper to find the Christ self, guiding the individual to walk closer behind God.

This view is radical and discouraging but promising. The self is conscious of the limitations for what they can and cannot do as a Christian. They surrender their attention they once had for the self, transforming the self in a soft altruistic way, treating it as a new dynamic. They muster the courage to abide by God’s word through any circumstance. Their meaning is rich with much impetus, molding into a concrete being of God. Being accepted is an implicit act that requires no experimental manifestation. In other words, their acceptance for themselves must come first before being able to accept anyone else. It does not need to be witnessed because the experience is always guided by the teachings of God.

There are some qualms surrounding this term that deserve attention. One may ask: What is the difference between faithful suicide and baptism? Baptism is not enough
and here is why. When the self is baptized, they are submersed in a water ritual. A water ritual itself is not necessary for Faithful Suicide. The baptism is seen as not only of being cleansed but also being “saved.” With Faithful Suicide, if ones identity is resurrected, no cleansing is needed. Being “saved,” is a prerequisite of Faithful Suicide that is being reinforced in the black church. There are many Christians who are not saved but baptized and baptized but not saved. Faithful Suicide fills this loophole.

Baptism can only happen once. That is to say, if the self is in need of baptism again, it would not hold much purpose as many traditional Christian doctrines contend. Once baptized, the self cannot be re-baptized or re-cleansed. Faithful Suicide allows the identity to be denounced but this is not a reincarnation of the spirit like Buddhism teaches. Everyone deserves a second chance on committing to God. Faithful Suicide recommends the individual to not take the resurrection for granted by repeatedly committing this act. It should be carried out if the self is in desperation for a new self, being aware of their mistakes that are not any more. This does not qualify as a reincarnation because the new self is resurrected in such a manner that defeats the previous doings of what had been carried out beforehand. Reincarnation only allows individuals to live again while keeping the previous.

Another characteristic is that Faithful Suicide can be availed across all denominations. Black Christians do not all practice the same denomination. Since, for example, the Apostles conception of baptism is different from Lutheranism, there is no way of distinguishing the consistency across denominations. Faithful Suicide deploys that consistency for all denominations. There is no conflict of which way is more acceptable than the other. This also helps avoid the distortion in the power of baptism. I
am not advancing a view that says baptism should be obliterated because it is just as important. What I am advancing however is an act that can be upheld, no matter the Christian practice, denomination, or belief.

West (2008) recommends an idea that is rooted in the Greeks. He calls it “paideia.” In his words, “paideia means “deep-education”—learning how to die to live more intensely, critically, and abundantly” (p. 27). West (2008) was aiming for a “higher level of maturity” (p. 27) of the self as a whole. I am only concerned about the substantiality that is sought in the black Christian which already precludes a more mature self. It is unclear whether West was only referring to the worldly substances that our bodily make-up accesses or to our spirit which every human inherits or both. Faithful Suicide is only dealing with the spirit since we are, in the end, a spiritual being, not a human being.

What is needed for Faithful Suicide? What is the first step? The first step is a deep self-reflection that must be critical which allows the self to accept God as their Savior, repenting for what has been previously committed. Allowing and surrendering the heart to God is an engagement, an exchange of resignation with the heart and the acceptance of His grace. Circumventing all worldly realities, it becomes a personal, existential, subjective encounter with God. Both feet are in the door for attempting Faithful Suicide. The self becomes positioned in a way that its meaning and “being” are now constructed around God. The anxiety that overcomes the individual is no longer the unfocused fear, for God becomes the focused. That is what Faithful Suicide is at the core.
Faithful Suicide is not proclaiming fanaticism. “A fanatic is someone who is thought to over-believe and over-practice Christianity” (Keller, 2008, p. 58). The individual is not overly-devoting themselves to Christianity. Taking this route would sink the individual into an invaluable hard form of chauvinistic bigotry. A fanatic becomes superficial and shallow on the surface for the tides of Christianity. It is not a necessity for Faithful Suicide to be immediate for the individual, although, it is highly recommended. This is because when the self uses Faithful Suicide as a vehicle for something anew, they contribute to the objective prescription of what Timothy Keller calls Shalom.

Shalom

Shalom is a certain woven interdependence that resonates throughout the congregation. Keller (2008) depicts Shalom for us: “The Hebrew word for this perfect, harmonious interdependence among all parts of creation is called Shalom. We translate it as “peace,” but the English word is basically negative, referring to the “absence of trouble or hostility” (p. 176). Keller is applying this to the well-being of humanity broadly speaking but we can parallel this with the black church. Keller (2008) continues: “The Hebrew word means…”absolute wholeness”—full, harmonious, joyful, flourishing life” (p. 177). The black church is in need of what Shalom exhorts. One may even call it “Black Shalom.” It is in dire need of harmony, joy, and prosperity. The black church does not perpetuate those qualities if teachings are misconstrued, individuals are marginalized, and preachers are dysfunctional.

Faithful Suicide and Shalom are mutual companions. Drawing on application, all Christians including the marginalized (i.e. homosexuals) can initiate both solutions.
Faithful Suicide is at the level of the subjective and Shalom is at the level of the objective. Through this deed, God becomes the focus. With Shalom, they reinforce the robustness of the black church, drastically undermining contention. God comes alive again because humanity is making God their ultimate concern. I would argue that Faithful Suicide and Shalom are not exhaustive. These are only two remedies that will contribute to the dialectical discourse of black Christianity. I recognize that Faithful Suicide has featured some quandaries, linguistically, that may seem to weaken Christianity. This interpretation clearly overlooks the fundamental comprehensive practice of Christianity, especially black Christianity.

**Political Implications**

Faithful Suicide and Shalom are not only prescriptions that can be done through the lens of the gospel. These two practices are also political in a way that contributes to democratic theory more broadly. Both require a certain silence that is imperative to the oppressed and the oppressor. The oppressed is silenced prima facie in a manner that disables them from being heard. The oppressor should be able to listen to those who are being casted out of the congregation that is reinforced by Shalom. Even though Faithful Suicide and Shalom are political, these are transformative practices that underlie the self and the congregation. There must be a form of deliberative theory in order to have a mutual dialogue regarding how a humble disposition towards others is possible. A conversation would not only allow those who are marginalized to be heard but can resolve any confusion with biblical teachings, on individuals who are apart of the church that possesses a homosexual sexual identity that are silenced, and the gospel message that Christianity righteously teaches.
Faithful Suicide and Shalom reinforces the possibility of inclusion and undermines exclusion. These practices are not just for the oppressor however. Those who are being looked down upon may be angry in a manner that will see the oppressor as an individual who will never change or be conscious of the injustice they advocated. This anger cannot be an anger in which the self is potentially lost. For inclusion to occur, that anger must be instead a righteous indignation. What is the difference between anger and righteous indignation? A righteous indignation is anger but it is an anger that is not sinful. It is acting in accord with, in this case, divine law. If it is not transformed to this particular anger then tension will resonate and inclusion will cease.

Conclusion

A practice of judgment that calls for a politics of inclusion contributes to the discussion of normative political theory. The application used for this text (i.e. homosexuality) resides in the sphere of judgment. It is a judgment that is not systematic however. Kierkegaard himself did not see systematic judgment as an embracement. Instead, we must go to the other pole which is the experiential. The suffering that a marginalized group struggles through is experiential in a way that speaks volumes about the possible extension of tolerance put onto those particular groups. For a politics of inclusion, it must recognize that those who are casted out of membership, in this case, homosexuals, deserve the same treatment as all others. A group that was once marginalized cannot marginalize a group within their own race, especially on the basis of something they may or may not have control over. This would be a politics of exclusion and I am not advancing that here.
This project was simply created to contribute to the overall discussion of normative political theory through the lens of religious practices. Although there were instances which was shifted to the discipline of philosophy of religion, the content is what is more important. We must remember that political theory fundamentally examines what ought to be rather than how things actually are. With that said, the black church is exemplifying how things are and my attempt was to muster a theory in which how things ought to be.
REFERENCES


