

## **Mythic Symbolism and Tradition in James Cone's Criticism of the White Church**

## Introduction

Johnathon Tran once wrote, “What is quite surprising is that persons of color...are increasingly finding their way to [premodern] sources. This shift in Black Theology's relationship to traditional Christianity means that the rest of the church can no longer ignore Black Theology's claims.”<sup>1</sup> Tran says, “By utilizing traditional sources...to attend to the suffering of the oppressed, the new Black Theology takes ‘the tradition’ in a direction that [James Cone] could only dream of four decades ago.”<sup>2</sup> Tran’s statement assumes Black Theology and traditional Christianity have no previous relationship. Some scholars like Tran assume Black Theology depends too little on tradition.

We should note Tran’s assumption, but not accept its simple view of Black Theology. Black Theology is not simple enough to go off of its mere appearance. It is a theology that people can view from many angles. So, instead of questioning the credibility of Black Theology, people should ask, “What role could traditional Christianity play in Black Theology?” This question acknowledges the depth of Black Theology. Similarly, this essay recognizes this depth and examines Cone’s criticism of the white church. I argue that Cone’s criticism of the white church adheres to traditional Christianity.

In doing so, I examine Anthony Bradley’s criticism of Cone's black theology. I then discuss how myths of oppression relate to Cone's black theology. Next, I compare Cone’s criticism of the white church to Augustine’s criticism of poetry. I compare these criticisms because 1) both their criticisms reject myths of oppression, 2) Augustine’s criticism typifies traditional Christianity, and 3) this comparison shows Cone's adherence to traditional Christian

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<sup>1</sup> Jonathan Tran, “The New Black Theology: Retrieving Ancient Sources to Challenge Racism,” *The Christian Century* 129, no. 3 (February 8, 2012): 24. EBSCOhost, Atla Religion Database with AtlaSerials.

<sup>2</sup> Tran, “The New Black Theology,” 26.

values. Finally, I conclude that failing to see the significance of myths of oppression cause people to misinterpret Cone's criticism of the white church.

### **Against a Black Interpretation**

Cone's work challenges the white church. The white church, to Cone, twists Scripture to oppress black people. Challenging this oppression, Cone asks, Who is God for? What does God or Jesus look like to blacks? Should blacks believe in a God who is not for the oppressed? These questions cause some people to discredit Black Theology. One who discredits Cone's black theology, for example, is Anthony Bradley. To Bradley, Cone's questions show that Cone discards traditional Christianity to make Black Theology. Nevertheless, Bradley's conclusion typifies a superficial examination.

Bradley argues Black Theology should start not with Black people, but with biblical interpretation. Biblical interpretation, for him, should bring context to black people. He calls this process "contextualization," which he defines as the activity of contemplating God's humiliation and communication with humans and applying insight from this contemplation to specific human situations.<sup>3</sup> Bradley's contextualization stresses blacks should apply Scripture *to* themselves instead of interpreting it *as* themselves. Hence, Bradley rejects a black measuring bar for theology.

From this view, Bradley says most black theologians mistake "application with interpretation."<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, this mistake causes black theologians to use blackness to understand God. But contextualization, according to Bradley, guards against this mistake and "allows us to avoid absolutizing a particular formulaic presentation of theology in such a way

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<sup>3</sup> Anthony B. Bradley, *Liberating Black Theology: The Bible and the Black Experience* (Wheaton: Crossway Books, 2010), 144-145.

<sup>4</sup> Bradley, *Liberating Black Theology*, 145.

that it becomes identified with the biblical message.”<sup>5</sup> Thus, we can, to Bradley, avoid formulas like, “If you are physically white, you are not Christian.” Or, “If you are physically black, God is automatically on your side.” Bradley calls these formulas unbiblical. As a result, he dismisses interpretation conducted through a black lens.

To solve the mistake in Cone's black theology, Bradley suggests a solution. To him, the problem is that “Cone’s presupposition of black consciousness construed as victim, supplies a fundamentally flawed theological anthropology for later developments in black liberation theology.”<sup>6</sup> Because of this flaw, discarding traditional Christianity becomes too easy and damaging. For instance, Bradley wants to avoid a theology like Cone’s, which rejects “orthodox evangelical theology that maintains the infallibility and inerrancy of the Scriptures and the Creator/creature distinction and holds the Scriptures as the final authority for all matters of faith.”<sup>7</sup> In this case, he believes Cone rejects traditional Christianity because “the sole reason for the existence of” Cone's black theology is to “[assist] the oppressed.”<sup>8</sup> But, for Bradley, Cone’s starting with black people to create theology is wrong.

Nevertheless, Bradley gives broad solutions to issues he finds in Cone's black theology instead of asking how Cone addresses a black context. For example, Bradley attempts to fix Cone’s interpretation of Scripture, sin, redemption, and anthropology without investigating past the surface of Cone’s method of interpretation. Above all, Cone's black theology (as the name

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<sup>5</sup> Bradley, *Liberating Black Theology*, 146.

<sup>6</sup> Bradley, *Liberating Black Theology*, 14.

<sup>7</sup> Bradley, *Liberating Black Theology*, 61.

<sup>8</sup> Bradley, *Liberating Black Theology*, 38.

implies) is “of and for the black community.”<sup>9</sup> It is, consequently, neither eternal nor universal.

Cone affirms this point in the 1986 preface in his work *A Black Theology of Liberation*:

Theology is not universal language about God. Rather, it is human speech informed by historical and theological traditions, and written for particular times and places. Theology is *contextual* language—that is, defined by the human situation that gives birth to it. No one can write theology for all times, places, and persons. Therefore, when one reads a theological textbook, it is important to note the year of its publication, the audience for whom it was written, and the issues the author felt compelled to address.<sup>10</sup>

Again, theology is inseparable from time, place, or people. For example, according to Cone, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s theology in Alabama in 1960 will differ from the apostle Paul’s theology in Rome in 60. A.D. These differences, though, invalidate neither theology.

Given these points, Bradley’s criticism of Cone’s black theology is unwarranted for two principal reasons. 1) He judges Black Theology with an ideal theology in mind, and 2) he rules out different biblical interpretations. By way of contrast, Augustine, like Cone, offers a solution to this problem. He says people should permit various interpretations of the same Scripture.

Augustine says, “When...two or more interpretations are put upon the same words of Scripture...there is no danger if it can be shown from other passages of Scripture that any of the interpretations put on the words (Scripture) is in harmony with the truth.”<sup>11</sup> Augustine continues, “For what more liberal and more fruitful provision could God have made in regard to the Sacred Scriptures than that the same words might be understood in several senses.”<sup>12</sup> In brief, Augustine sees beauty in an infinite God who created Scripture with infinite interpretations. Cone and

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<sup>9</sup> James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, Fortieth Anniversary Edition (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2016), 5.

<sup>10</sup> Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, iv.

<sup>11</sup> Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, trans. J.F. Shaw, in *Great Books of the Western World*, vol. 18, ed. Robert Maynard Hutchins and Mortimer J. Adler (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1952), Bk. III, Ch. 27, p. 697-698.

<sup>12</sup> Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, III.27.

Augustine see Scripture similarly, when in fact, Bradley limits the meaning of Scripture. However, if we examine Cone's black theology, we can see its uniqueness and adherence to traditional Christianity. But although a failure to permit various biblical interpretations undermines Bradley's criticism, another failure exists. This is failing to see Cone's black theology as a myth of liberation.

### **The Mythic Consciousness**

For Cone, myths of oppression began during black slavery. During this period, the white church was oppressive. This oppression caused black slaves to have major concerns about God's role in their lives because, frequently, they heard sermons promoting themes of subjection and obedience to slave masters. These themes did not sit well with blacks. Namely, these sermons and themes sounded like myths of oppression. As a result, blacks thought it was necessary, according to Cone, "to wrestle with God about the deeply felt contradictions that slavery created for (their) faith."<sup>13</sup> Similar felt contradictions exist in Cone's black theology. For instance, Cone argues the white church promotes myths of oppression that blacks must wrestle with.

However, Cone responds to myths of oppression by creating another myth. Specifically, he creates a myth of liberation to make sense of black people's suffering. Black people's suffering is a myth Cone refuses to accept. Hence, in a pseudo-Platonic manner, Cone changes a "bad lie" into a "fine lie."<sup>14</sup> This means he changes a myth of oppression—the myth that says God approves slavery, segregation, and racism—into a myth of liberation that says God wants to liberate blacks from oppression. As a consequence, Cone responds uniquely, he corrects an old myth, and creates a new myth.

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<sup>13</sup> James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2016), 26-27.

<sup>14</sup> Plato, *The Republic*, trans. Benjamin Jowett, in *Great Books of the Western World*, vol. 7, ed. Robert Maynard Hutchins and Mortimer J. Adler (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., 1952), Bk. II, 377a-d, p. 320-321.

Black Theology as myth, thus, is a truer account of Christianity and a better option for blacks. Cone says Black Theology creates “a new cultural ethos among the oppressed blacks of America, so that they are no longer dependent on the white oppressor for their understanding of truth, reality, or—and this is the key—what ought to be done about the place of black sufferers in America.”<sup>15</sup> For Cone, blacks should be in charge of their future. As a result, Cone makes it his task to rewrite blacks' relationship to God and Jesus Christ.

On the whole, Bradley's and Cone's views revolve around differing biblical interpretations and emphases on oppression. For example, Bradley believes theologians should not go against tradition when they interpret Scripture. Theologians argue over the meaning of tradition, but I do not join such debates.<sup>16</sup> However, I stress Cone sees tradition mythically and contextually. In contrast, Bradley sees tradition as settled. only applicable to blacks. To better understand Cone's mythic view of Black Theology, I will describe myths of oppression.

Kwame Ture and Charles Hamilton help to define myths of oppression when they describe how oppressors attempt to control the minds of the oppressed. Ture and Hamilton state, “Psychological control” is “the attempt by the oppressor to have his definitions and his historical descriptions accepted by the oppressed.”<sup>17</sup> Here, Ture and Hamilton suggest oppressors create myths to persuade the oppressed to believe an oppressive interpretation of life. For our discussion, a myth of oppression has a similar definition. A myth of oppression is *an attempt by the oppressor to have his religious definitions and traditional descriptions of religion accepted*

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<sup>15</sup> James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997), 130.

<sup>16</sup> Tran, “The New Black Theology,”; Gayraud S. Wilmore, “Black Theology and Orthodoxy,” *The Christian Century* 129, no. 7 (April 4, 2012): 6. EBSCOhost, Academic Search Premier.

<sup>17</sup> Kwame Ture and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), 35.

*by the oppressed*. That is to say, oppressors create myths of oppression to control blacks' minds. The mind, thus, becomes the place of a mythic battle.

I now turn to examples of myths of oppression expressed through black literature to show how some blacks view this mythic battle. Myths of oppression are common in black literature and highlight the psychological conflict when blacks confront them. An example of literature addressing myths of oppression comes from W.E.B. Du Bois. In *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois distinguishes between black and white consciousnesses. He says blacks see themselves “through the revelation of the [white] world.”<sup>18</sup> This second consciousness—like the myth of oppression—causes psychological conflict because blacks want to overcome it by realizing “a better and truer self.”<sup>19</sup> As a result of this conflict, blacks can either accept the myth of oppression or fight against it.

Another example of black literature that addresses myths of oppression comes from Ralph Ellison. In *Invisible Man*, Ellison distinguishes between views of the oppressor and the oppressed. Accordingly, the narrator depicts a night when he bumped into a man who then called the narrator an “insulting name.”<sup>20</sup> Immediately, the narrator commands the man to apologize, but the man keeps calling the narrator insulting names. Furious, the narrator beats the man and right before killing the man, the narrator realizes the man cannot see him. The narrator calls himself invisible.<sup>21</sup> Here, Ellison materializes a myth of oppression by illustrating an oppressor's refusal to acknowledge the oppressed and insistence of the oppressor to get the oppressed to

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<sup>18</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, in *Three Negro Classics* (New York: Avon Books, 1999), 215.

<sup>19</sup> Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, 214.

<sup>20</sup> Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (New York: Modern Library, 1994), 4.

<sup>21</sup> Ellison, *Invisible Man*, 4.

accept an insulting name. This altercation represents the psychological conflict in blacks who confront myths of oppression.

Similarly, Charles Long examines myths of oppression from a historical and religious viewpoint and provides a more precise explanation of a mythic battle. He argues the psychological conflict caused by myths of oppression exists in religion. Considering Du Bois, Long states, “The desire for an authentic place for the expression of [Blacks’ independent and free selves] is the source of...revolutionary tendencies in...religions” of the oppressed.<sup>22</sup> Revolutionary tendencies in religions, according to Long, emerge when blacks attempt to free themselves from the definitions of myths of oppression.

Long argues the religions of the oppressed have true and false elements. “The hegemony of the oppressors,” Long states, “is understood as a myth—myth in the two major senses, as true and fictive. It is true as a structure with which one must deal in a day-by-day manner if one is to persevere, but it is fictive as far as any ontological significance is concerned.”<sup>23</sup> This statement stresses that myths of oppression are real, despite their fictive nature. For instance, although blacks are equal to whites, racism can affect blacks daily. blacks, for example, may struggle more than whites to find jobs because of racism. This genuine struggle to find jobs results from a fictive inferiority.

Under similar circumstances, the mythic struggle for a truer self carries mythic elements from the myth of oppression. That is to say, this mythic struggle is nonexistent without the fictive nature of the myth of oppression. Long calls the place of this struggle the “mythic consciousness.”<sup>24</sup> The mythic consciousness is where the oppressed are free to create and choose

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<sup>22</sup> Charles H. Long, *Significations: Signs, Symbols, and Images in the Interpretation of Religion* (Aurora: The Davies Group, 1999), 183.

<sup>23</sup> Long, *Significations*, 183.

<sup>24</sup> Long, *Significations*, 184.

their beliefs. Long states the purpose of the mythic consciousness is to “[dehistoricize] the relationship (between the oppressor and oppressed) for the sake of creating a new form of humanity—a form of humanity that is no longer based on the master-slave dialectic.”<sup>25</sup> Long suggests blacks who encounter myths of oppression develop mindsets of freedom to create new myths. For example, some blacks might imagine themselves as sheriffs or police chiefs to dehistoricize police brutality against blacks. These myths, according to Long, draw from the original consciousness of blacks.<sup>26</sup> Take the case of the black sheriff or police chief. This myth draws from a consciousness when blacks are equal and in authority. Similarly, Cone's black theology is where the mythic and original black consciousness meet—a place Cone claims freedom to create new religious symbols for blacks that relate to their original image. Consequently, the newly created myth and symbols carry fictive and true natures of the myth of oppression. Cone's symbols relate to fictive symbols of oppression, but assert truer symbols of liberation. Still, such symbols remain mythic, so much so that the new symbols are not yet realized but represent real hopes.

Although “Black” and “white” have social connotations, they are Cone’s symbols for religious attitudes. These symbols do not relate to skin color. These symbols, Long reminds us, come from “seeking a new beginning” and “[imagining] an original beginning.”<sup>27</sup> Therefore, Cone seeks a new relationship between blacks and whites and a new definition of “Black.” According to Long, a myth of the oppressed has “utopian and eschatological dimensions.”<sup>28</sup> That

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<sup>25</sup> Long, *Significations*, 184.

<sup>26</sup> Long, *Significations*, 184.

<sup>27</sup> Long, *Significations*, 184.

<sup>28</sup> Long, *Significations*, 184.

means the new myth projects ideal and futuristic symbols. In particular, Cone's new myth carries fictive and true elements different from the myth of oppression. Thus, his new myth is fictive because it represents a futuristic, idyllic but unrealized world. While Cone's counter-myth carries a true-fictive structure, it still represents the hopes of a truer and freer self. Symbols of Cone's black theology consequently represent struggles for power and characters within those struggles.

To illustrate this point more, Cone explains his usage of black and white symbols:

Being black in America has very little to do with skin color. To be black means that your heart, your soul, your mind, and your body are where the dispossessed are...Therefore, being reconciled to God does not mean that one's skin is physically black. It essentially depends on the color of your heart, soul, and mind...There seems to be enough evidence that though one's skin is black, the heart may be lily white. The real questions are: Where is your identity? Where is your being? Does it lie with the oppressed blacks or with the white oppressors?"<sup>29</sup>

As Cone emphasizes, black represents an attitude of people who identify with the oppressed.

Still, the relationship between "Black" and an attitude of people who identify with the oppressed is a new and mythic connection Cone is responsible for.

So, it is clear why Bradley—if he misunderstands symbols in Cone's black theology—would denounce Cone's criticism of the white church.<sup>30</sup> For Bradley, the white church represents physically white Christians and theologians. Yet Cone's white church represents the institution of unchristian attitudes. Thus, Bradley's criticism of Cone's black theology overlooks the mythic/symbolic and fictive/true nature of Cone's myth of liberation.

For this reason, Bradley's criticism is superficial. While he is correct to say Scripture should "serve as the ultimate ground for truth while recognizing the relevance of cultures in understanding and applying that truth," he omits the religious and mythic traditions of such

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<sup>29</sup> Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 151-152.

<sup>30</sup> Bradley, *Liberating Black Theology*, 121.

cultures.<sup>31</sup> Whereas his caution against non-scriptural based truth is welcome, his pleas for biblical authority and interpretation are in vain because he does not fully grasp the meaning of the symbols in Cone's black theology. If he understood such symbols, he would, for example, notice that “Black culture” stands for the poor and oppressed. Therefore, it is difficult to apply Bradley’s criticism to Cone's black theology judiciously.

Ultimately, Bradley says Cone abandons traditional Christianity. But this assertion comes from a misunderstanding of Cone’s symbolism. Yet for our purposes, this part of Bradley’s criticism is a point I will still address. In the next section, I examine how Cone’s criticism of the white church adheres to traditional Christianity. In doing so, I hope to show how both Cone and Augustine both criticize the “white church”—an institution of unchristian attitudes. At first, this connection might seem weak. However, we must remember Cone’s symbols represent not how the world is, but should be.

### **Poets and the White Church**

In what follows, I discuss how Cone's black theology compares to Augustine’s thought. While Augustine’s texts cover theology, philosophy, social-science, morality and many other topics, I focus on one aspect of his thought, his criticism of poetry. Furthermore, I compare Cone’s criticism of the white church and Augustine’s criticism of poetry. Yet one might ask, why compare these two criticisms? The key reason is both criticisms reject unchristian attitudes. Though I assume Augustine’s criticism of poetry adheres to traditional Christianity, I hope comparing these criticisms alongside Scripture helps to understand how Cone’s criticism of the white church mirrors traditional Christianity.

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<sup>31</sup> Bradley, *Liberating Black Theology*, 159.

That being said, one similarity between Augustine's and Cone's criticisms is how both see evil through discrimination. Their views on discrimination align with the Christian principle that people should not discriminate against anyone.<sup>32</sup> This principle even applies to God, making discrimination unquestionably a sin.<sup>33</sup> Therefore, it should not surprise us that Augustine criticizes poets who portray gods who discriminate against people. Augustine says, "The poets' fiction (is) to say that these are gods who are not gods and that, under the names of gods, they fight among themselves about the men whom they love or hate with keen partisan feeling."<sup>34</sup> Here, Augustine stresses that the gods' partisan feelings—their "loves and hatreds"—are "not justly formed, but formed in a [prejudice] spirit, as the spectators in races or hunts take...prejudices."<sup>35</sup> According to Augustine, poets should not praise gods if they discriminate against people. Certainly, Augustine's key point of concern is the false representation of godly behavior. Although Augustine believes such gods are demons, he still stresses that if these demons were gods, they would not discriminate against humans.

Similar to Augustine, Cone criticizes how the white church supports discrimination against the poor and oppressed. Because of this discrimination, Cone believes white Christians not only show unchristian behavior but falsely claim to be Christian. However, these are counterfeit claims because, according to Cone, white Christians show "values of a sick society which oppresses the poor."<sup>36</sup> Accordingly, white Christians are selfish and care only for white

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<sup>32</sup> James 2:9.

<sup>33</sup> Acts 10:34; Deuteronomy 10:17.

<sup>34</sup> Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. Marcus Dods (Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 2018), Bk. IX, Ch. vii, p. 255-256.

<sup>35</sup> Augustine, *The City of God*, IX.vii.

<sup>36</sup> Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 71.

people. An example of such selfishness, Cone states, is how the white church cares nothing about “children who die of rat bites or men who are killed because they want to be treated like men.”<sup>37</sup> Such behavior, to Cone, characterizes “antichrists” more than Christians.<sup>38</sup> Here, Cone, like Augustine, stresses how we should not consider discrimination as Christian behavior.

Another similarity between Augustine and Cone is that both point out the hypocrisy of evil beings who want to appear good. In this case, the evil beings are hypocritical demons and white Christians. Considering these evil beings, Augustine and Cone understand that God, according to Scripture, differs from these evil beings inasmuch as he is loving, compassionate, gracious, generous, and merciful.<sup>39</sup> Accordingly, God, Christians, and any divine beings should show similar morals. However, Augustine and Cone find fault with the poets and the white church for rewarding evil and ignoring the hypocritical characteristics in demons and white Christians.

Therefore, Augustine believes it is evil for the poets to encourage people to call demons gods. As Augustine says, “The gods are better than men and demons. Men have been placed below the gods and demons, both in respect of the order of the regions they inhabit, and the difference of their merits.”<sup>40</sup> But since these alleged gods, Augustine says, are “delighted with the obscenities of the theatre, and the fictions of the poets, since they are also subject to human passions, from which the gods are far removed,” they “are not gods...but demons.”<sup>41</sup> Augustine’s statement emphasizes the hypocrisy of the demons who want people to call them gods. He, thus,

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<sup>37</sup> Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 71.

<sup>38</sup> Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 73.

<sup>39</sup> 1 John 4:8; Ephesians 2:4-10; Psalm 103:8; John 13:12-17; Hebrews 10:25; Tobit 4:7; Matthew 10:5-8.

<sup>40</sup> Augustine, *The City of God*, VIII.xiv.

<sup>41</sup> Augustine, *The City of God*, VIII.xiv, II.xiii, xiv.

criticizes the poets who yield to the hypocritical demands of demons instead of truth. For example, Augustine says poets portray gods who experience “fear, anger, and lust.”<sup>42</sup> These emotions and other unjustly formed affections, cannot be in gods. Believing that a god lusts after power, riches, and sex, for Augustine, is absolutely absurd.

Like Augustine, Cone believes it is absurd for the white church to claim Christianity. According to Cone, the white church supports white Christians who are racist and “tolerate” racism.<sup>43</sup> But racism symbolizes the same hate, fear, and the lust to dominate another that Augustine condemns. Thus, similar to Augustine, Cone argues Christians should not fear or mistreat other human beings, but love them.

Otherwise, the white church’s support of segregation, slavery, and racism is hypocritical. Similar to the demons who Augustine says act wickedly and want to be called gods, Cone says white Christians want to separate themselves from blacks, dominate blacks, and not help blacks who are suffering. To illustrate this hypocrisy, Cone lists several characteristics that contradict the white church’s claim of Christianity. For example, “white only” signs, Cone says, were posted outside of white churches.<sup>44</sup> These white-only signs, Cone states, turned into “all-white congregations.”<sup>45</sup> This support of separation contradicts how Christians should support the “fellowship” of all people.<sup>46</sup> Cone, furthermore, lists several white ministers who wrote texts arguing God ordained slavery for the good of American society.<sup>47</sup> He believes this evil desire to

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<sup>42</sup> Augustine, *The City of God*, IX.vii, vi.

<sup>43</sup> Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 73.

<sup>44</sup> Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 74.

<sup>45</sup> Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 74.

<sup>46</sup> Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 73; Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 140.

<sup>47</sup> Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 74-76.

dominate others contradicts Christian principles. For the same reason, Cone suggests the white church is hypocritical today when it “[remains] silent as blacks are killed for wanting to be treated like human beings.”<sup>48</sup> So when the white church wants to be called Christian, but does not risk its life like Jesus would for the oppressed and poor, Cone sees the white church as hypocritical. To make this point clear, Cone describes hypocrisy:

We must say that when a (white) minister condemns the rioters and blesses by silence the conditions which produce the riots he gives up his credentials as a Christian minister and becomes inhuman. He is an animal, just like those who, backed by an ideology of racism, order the structure of this society on the basis of white supremacy. We need men who refuse to be animals and are resolved to pay the price, so that all men can be something more than animals.<sup>49</sup>

Here, Cone connects the hypocrisy of the white church to behavior shown by animals. Only animals, according to Cone, cannot acknowledge the suffering of blacks but still want to be Christian.

The last major similarity between Augustine’s and Cone’s criticisms is that they highlight how myths of oppression cause harm but do not relieve responsibility for such harm. Their viewpoints support biblical passages like the one that states, “each person is tempted when they are dragged away by their own evil desire and enticed. Then, after desire has conceived, it gives birth to sin; and sin, when it is full-grown, gives birth to death.”<sup>50</sup> This passage condenses Augustine's and Cone's views. Thus, for Augustine and Cone, people are responsible for both their death and believing myths of oppression.

Because of this view, Augustine believes evil people want to live like evil demons and believe the poets’ myths of oppression. This evil desire, consequently, makes a human mindset

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<sup>48</sup> Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 74-76.

<sup>49</sup> Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 80.

<sup>50</sup> James 1:14-15; 2 Thessalonians 2:11-12.

demonic. So the only defense for this demonic mindset, according to Augustine, is accurate knowledge of Jesus Christ.<sup>51</sup> Certainly, Augustine, like Cone, thinks that believing in myths of oppression has damaging spiritual consequences. Moreover, people's believing in myths of oppression, according to Augustine, has such a deep effect on humans that Jesus Christ must intervene. Be that as it may, Augustine says people are responsible for this demonic mindset. In *Confessions*, for instance, Augustine reveals his responsibility for his own depraved mind when he believed the Manichee myths.

Verses and poetry I can transform into real nourishment...Yet the other Manichee myths I did believe...In seeking for you I followed not the intelligence of the mind, by which you willed that I should surpass the beasts, but the mind of the flesh. But you were more inward than my most inward part and higher than the highest element within me...It was as if some sharp intelligence were persuading me to consent to the stupid deceivers."<sup>52</sup>

This statement stresses that the harm of believing myths of oppression is a consequence of someone not controlling undecided belief. That is to say, harm results from failing to have faith in the truth. Thus, although believing myths of oppression appears harmless, Augustine states believing in myths of oppression shows a lack of faith in the truth, inasmuch as it can eternally damn a person's soul.

Similar to Augustine, Cone sees the white church as a breeding place for evil minds. He, like Augustine, also asserts that people's believing in myths of oppression damage their minds and souls. As an illustration, Cone says that this evil mind cares more about church membership, high-tech presentations of sermons, and the length of services than blacks killed by police and vigilantes.<sup>53</sup> This evil mind, furthermore, does more to maintain its depravity than ensure blacks

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<sup>51</sup> Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967), 245; Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), III.vi.10, p. 40; Augustine, *The City of God*, XVIII.xviii.

<sup>52</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, III.vi.11.

<sup>53</sup> Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 72.

remain in existence. Equally important, Cone suggests, is the harm of this deception, which is “it never enters the minds” of those who “destroy human dignity” that “Jesus Christ does not approve of their behavior.”<sup>54</sup> This statement shows that when people believe myths of oppression, they damage their ability to believe the truth.

For example, Cone states, the white church’s support for racism causes white Christians to believe that God approves of racism. Looking at this, Cone states, “With its all-white congregations, [the white church] makes racism a respectable attitude. By remaining silent it creates an ethos which dehumanizes blacks.”<sup>55</sup> Obviously, this statement stresses the harm of dehumanizing blacks caused by myths of oppression. Nevertheless, Cone believes people are responsible for such a depraved mind. For instance, he says people’s believing in a myth of oppression is an act of spiritual denial. He states when white Christians refuse to care for blacks, they deny “the gospel” and “the Lordship of Jesus Christ.”<sup>56</sup> Cone’s statement emphasizes both the culpability and extreme consequences of not caring for blacks. Undoubtedly, such a denial, according to Cone, is a personal decision and affects one’s eternal judgment.

### **Conclusion**

I have shown that Augustine’s criticism of poetry and Cone’s criticism of the white church are similar and compatible with traditional Christianity. Because of this, we do not see Cone’s criticism conflict with Augustine’s thought or Scripture. Thus, several points of Cone’s criticism of the white church mirror Augustine’s criticism of poetry. Their compatibility confirms that Cone and Augustine critique the same oppressor. This oppressor, whether the “poet” or “white church,” attempts to convince people to believe in a myth of oppression. This myth of

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<sup>54</sup> Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 142.

<sup>55</sup> Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 74.

<sup>56</sup> Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 141-142.

oppression harms humans' minds with degradation. To be sure, Cone's criticism of the white church is a small detail of his black theology, and we could explore several of his works for related research. In any case, this research shows that Cone's criticism of the white church adheres to traditional Christianity. Nevertheless, Cone's mythic symbols in Black Theology cause some people to stumble over symbols meant for interpretation.

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