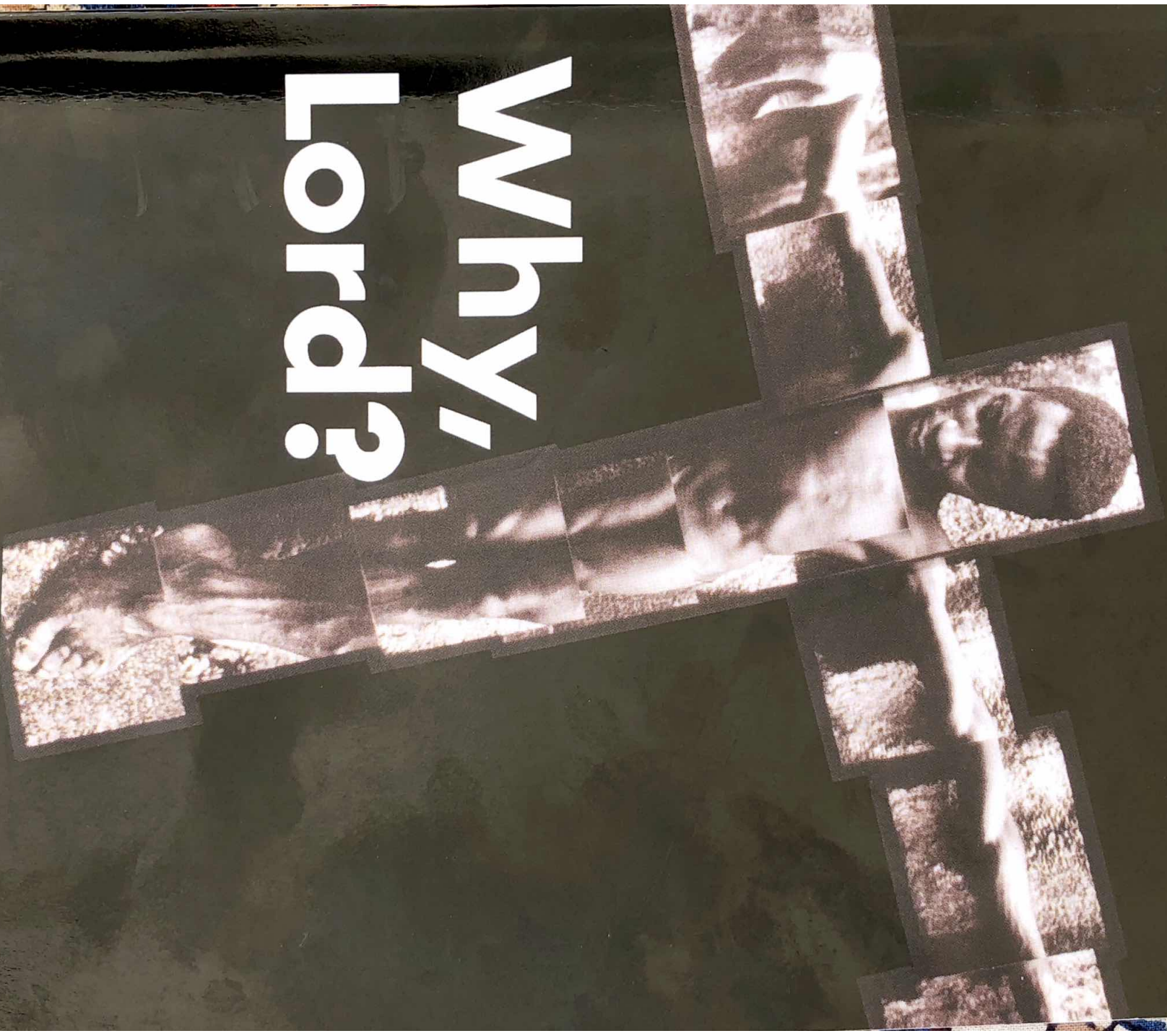


*Suffering and Evil  
in Black Theology*



# Why, Lord?

**Anthony  
B. Pinn**

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## PREFACE

**T**he theoretical framework and content of any book bespeak the concerns and values arising from the author's personal life journey, couched in academic language and categories. This is no less true for this volume. Such an acknowledgment alerts the reader to the complex nature of the author's viewpoints, the underlying assumptions and affirmations, and ultimately helps the reader assess the arguments presented in light of the interconnection between lived experience and thought. A reading of the text is, therefore, enhanced by a brief exploration of my personal motivations for and concerns in writing this volume.

My formative years were spent within the Black church tradition, specifically the African Methodist Episcopal denomination. Singing in the choir, participating in the Young People's Department activities, serving as an acolyte, and attending Sunday School formed the lion's share of my weekly interactions outside family and school. For me, at an early age, lay activity was no longer enough; I felt a "call" to Christian ministry, a need to serve the church through ministerial leadership. I started preaching at the age of fourteen, and the AME Church ordained me a deacon after my first year in college.

While in school, I worked as a youth minister in various AME churches and saw firsthand the efforts of Black Christians to make sense of their daily struggles in light of Christian theology and doctrinal structures. I will never forget hearing "church mothers" give testimony regarding the hardships of life and God's mysterious ability to "make a way out of no way." The words of Sunday morning prayers have stayed with me: "Lord, you never said it would be easy . . . and so, if I'm going to wear a crown, I must bear my cross." Experience in Black churches, where people struggle to make sense out of an apparently meaningless world and where I strove to help this process through sermons, prayers, and other ministerial functions, raised questions for me concerning the tension between lived reality and



Christian "truths." Does the Christian message say anything liberating to suffering humanity? Does theological conversation serve to make a positive difference in the way the oppressed respond to their existential plight? Do Christian explanations of human suffering make a "material" and concrete difference? I placed these questions within the framework of theodicy or, more generally, the problem of evil.

Undeniably aware of the existential hardship faced by African-Americans, I was and continue to be anxious to speak a liberating word to Black sufferers. An academic dimension was first added to my exploration as a Master of Divinity degree candidate at Harvard Divinity School. My master's thesis presents some initial thoughts on the paradoxical nature of God conceptions and human experience.\* I argued in this thesis that the key to easing the tension between Christian belief and human suffering is a reworking of the God idea that shifts "responsibility" for moral evil to human misconduct. Within my Ph.D. course work, the importance of this question lingered, and I decided to pursue further research on this evasive theological concern, exploring in the process the theological "potholes" (to borrow William R. Jones' phrase) created by my earlier perspective. I wanted to understand the development of this problem within my context, my cultural venue—the African-American religious traditions—while using the tools of my theological training. A revised version of that dissertation is here presented.

Through this book, I illustrate and evaluate the "theodical game" (i.e., redemptive suffering) in which African-American religious thinkers have historically participated. A theological pothole which emerged in my master's thesis is inherent in Black theodical arguments which ultimately resolve the paradox between the continuation of Black oppression and the basic Black theological stance on God as a proactive force in the world through the concept of redemptive suffering: that suffering is intrinsically "bad," but has a secondary benefit ordained by God. This bothered me. I could not accept the idea that the suffering of those I saw on a daily basis had any value at all. The oppressive circumstances church mothers discussed and stewards prayed about could not hold, for me, any merit in the struggle for "liberation." I needed to explore an alternative response that uncompromisingly affirms—at all costs, even the rejection of such concepts as the Christian view of God—the demonic nature of

Black suffering. I believe that human liberation is more important than the maintenance of any religious symbol, sign, canon, or icon. It must be accomplished—both psychologically and physically—despite the damage done to cherished religious principles and traditions. Holding to this belief, I will stand or fall.

I found a similar response to Black theodical questions in the literature-explored area of Black humanism. Black humanism, as found in Black oral tradition and later, Black literature, denies the existence of God and holds humans fully accountable for the existence and removal of moral evil in the world.

I realize that an invitation to dialogue with "nontraditional" religious perspectives may be uncomfortable for many of my readers. However, those concerned with human recovery from oppression must demonstrate a willingness to investigate all avenues showing promise for securing this liberation—the removal of injustice and inequality, and the promotion of full and healthy life options. The reader will also discover that Black humanism is not separate from Black religious tradition; it is a forgotten component. The task is to explore and discuss, openly and freely, the nature and ramifications of this broadened discussion of Black suffering. We owe this much to those who shall follow the theological trails we blaze.

Finally, I stress that I appreciate the theological and theodical efforts of those who came before me, and I realize that their patterns of activity and survival made the luxury of writing within the relative comfort of the academy possible. Accordingly, I work out of a great deal of respect and love; and thereby, my efforts are marked by recognition of and reverence for my ancestors' trials. Moreover, such reverence necessitates a serious examination of all possible resolutions to the evil they and we struggle(d) with. It demands a determined movement away from patterns of religious thought that lessen the impact and significance of Black suffering by finding a benefit within it. To allow such an attitude to go unchallenged is disrespectful.

This project, although an extension of my wrestlings and questions, could not have been completed without the assistance and support of many individuals. I thank my editor Cynthia Eller for her careful reading of the text, support, encouragement, and patience as I negotiated the demands and pressures inherent in the first year of teaching, and Watersign Resources was a pleasure to work with during the final stages of production. William R. Jones helped me to think through many of these ideas and I greatly appreciate his timely response to my many questions and requests. Emilie M. Townes and

\* "Cross and Crown: African-American Understandings of and Responses to Suffering," Harvard Divinity School, 1989.



James H. Cone read the full manuscript and provided many helpful suggestions and comments. Stephen Angell graciously offered access to his files on Bishop Henry McNeal Turner and responded with kindness to my many questions and concerns. Dennis Dickerson, Lewis Baldwin, and Cheryl Townsend Gilkes helped in numerous ways.

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Without this help, the securing of permission to reprint materials would have been impossible. I must also thank my colleagues in Macalester's Religious Studies Department for understanding my "closed office door" and helping me set aside the time needed to work on this text. Numerous colleagues and friends (especially Teresa Martinez-Vergne) outside the Religious Studies Department at Macalester College encouraged me and provided invaluable assistance; I thank them all. I must also mention two students in particular, Leif Johnson and Michael Vernon, who helped transcribe materials and cheerfully made numerous phone inquiries on my behalf.

The encouragement and guidance of Gordon D. Kaufman, David D. Hall, Kwame Anthony Appiah, and other members of Harvard's faculty were invaluable. Nisé Nekheba provided numerous hours of editorial assistance and encouraging words. Other persons, libraries, and organizations who assisted with the preparation of the dissertation and its later revised form are not mentioned here by name. However, they remain important, and I continue to appreciate their contribution to this project.

My family, immediate (Raymond, Joyce, and Linda) and extended (Frederick and Barbara Lucas), provided much needed encouragement and I will remain grateful to them. My mother, the Reverend Anne H. Pinn, to whom this volume is dedicated, is responsible for this project in countless ways: Thank you.

I owe a debt of gratitude to all those mentioned here. They helped me, in countless ways, to improve and refine the thoughts contained in the following pages. I, however, am alone responsible for any oversights or errors.

Anthony B. Pinn  
Macalester College  
St. Paul, Minnesota 1995

## INTRODUCTION

**A**mid world conditions and mounting calamities, the religious-minded are forced to confront certain questions, nagging tensions, and paradoxes. Because of the intimate connection between faith structures and a priori theological assumptions, such questions often threaten to topple the relevance of religious systems and world views. One such threat arises regarding the issue of human suffering—understood as an aspect of the problem of evil or "theodicy." Suffering and unmerited suffering are used interchangeably (with reference to African-Americans) to denote moral evil. Moral evil denotes oppression, injustice, inequality, and the resulting psychological and physical damage. The problem of evil and "theodicy" interchangeably connote attempts at resolving the contradiction between traditional Christian understandings of God as powerful, just, and good, and the presence of suffering (as defined above), without negating the essential character of the Divine. Liberation, because of my understanding of suffering and "theodicy," will mean a vision of life without the assumption of God or God-ordained and permitted moral evil (i.e., human responsibility for moral evil). Movement toward this goal of liberation entails, for example, the attainment of extended life options and a better-developed sense of healthy human worth. Liberation is distinguishable from the goal of survival in that survival is a prerequisite; it implies the necessities for life that do not include, but make possible the pursuit of, a full set of life options. In light of the above definition of terms, my methodological framework rests upon constructive theological appeals to context and strong ties between the doing of theology and pressing life issues.

The examination of African-American responses to the problem of evil begins with slavery, where the religious question of human

\* The term theodicy is used with quotation marks. This is to show from the beginning of this book the uncertain nature of this term as a proper category of investigation.



suffering first emerges for Black Americans. Brought here as chattel in the early 1600s, African-Americans have faced the brutalities of dehumanization through the destruction of their culture, the ripping apart of family units, rapes, beatings, and other actions that linked the control of Black bodies with the increase of plantation profits. All this, the Africans who encountered Christianity learned, was rightly done in the name of God. Some slaves accepted their lot in life. Others questioned the religious doctrine given to them and searched for an explanation of their plight beyond the plantation ministers' rhetoric. They faced the classic difficulty of reconciling God with the experience of evil: "... if God is perfectly loving, God must wish to abolish all evil; and if God is all-powerful, God must be able to abolish all evil. But evil exists; therefore God cannot be both omnipotent and perfectly loving."<sup>1</sup> The effort to understand God amid the contradictory messages of existential hardship and the Christian gospel continued during the movement from "hush harbors" to early Black churches, and into the late twentieth century. Continued oppression made this questioning inescapable.

As John Hick illustrates in *Philosophy of Religion*, the resolution to the problem of evil can take various forms: (1) a rethinking of the nature / purpose of evil; or, (2) the postulating of a "limited" God; or, (3) a questioning / denial of God's existence.<sup>2</sup> Although Hick does not address it, there is a fourth possible resolution that entails questioning God's goodness and / or righteousness. A traditional example of the first resolution is found in Augustine's "free-will defense."<sup>3</sup> In essence, Augustine argues that evil (both moral and natural) in the world results from perfect beings (i.e., angels and humans) freely deciding to turn away from God. Therefore, evil is a privation of the good, denoting the misuse of free will (i.e., "The Fall"). Furthermore, God remains unblemished by this privation of the good because God ultimately punishes this sin and by that restores a proper balance to the world.<sup>4</sup> In essence, evil in the world is either the result of sin or the result of punishment.

The Irenaean "theodicy" also rethinks the nature of evil while maintaining God's perfection. However, unlike Augustine, Irenaeus argues that humans exist at an "epistemic distance from God" which allows them to freely make choices.<sup>5</sup> God created humanity as imperfect beings. With this in mind, Irenaeus argues that the earth is a place of "soul making" where humans work to refine their character and by that develop into the "image" of God. Evil is a necessary part of this world because human development takes place, in part,

through trials and tribulations. Furthermore, God's perfection goes unquestioned because God did not intend the world to be free of evil.<sup>6</sup>

Some thinkers find the resolutions to the problem of evil offered by Augustine and Irenaeus faulty.<sup>7</sup> For example, some question whether Irenaeus' rethinking of evil is adequate to explain events such as the Holocaust and the Middle Passage (i.e., the transporting of Africans to the New World as slaves). In addition, the spontaneous "Fall" argued by Augustine does not put to rest questions concerning the ultimate accountability of God for this action. An alternate resolution to the problem of evil mindful of such dilemmas is process "theodicy." In this system, God must act in the world through "persuasion" because "God is subject to the limitations imposed by the basic laws of the universe, for God has not created the universe *ex nihilo*, thereby establishing its structure, but rather the universe is an uncreated process that includes the deity."<sup>8</sup> In short, God is not all-powerful. Furthermore, the developing world contains both good and evil (understood aesthetically as discord and triviality),<sup>9</sup> however, the good resulting from the unfolding of the world will outweigh the evil.<sup>10</sup>

Thinkers who find the rethinking of God's power or the nature of evil inadequate have the option of resolving the problem of evil through a questioning / denial of God's existence. As Hick notes:

The responsible skeptic, whether agnostic or atheist, is not concerned to deny that religious people have had certain experiences as a result of which they have become convinced of the reality of God. The skeptic believes, however, that these experiences can be adequately accounted for without postulating a God. . . .<sup>11</sup>

African-Americans have engaged in discourse concerning the problem of evil in a manner reminiscent of three propositions noted above, i.e., rethinking evil's nature, rethinking God's power, and attempts to rethink God's goodness/righteousness. One sees these resolutions in Black theological thought suggesting that: (1) unmerited suffering is intrinsically evil, yet can have redemptive consequences; (2) God and humans are coworkers in the struggle to remove moral evil; and (3) Black suffering may result from God being a racist. Using position number one, many spirituals understand suffering as a paradox and promote it as a temporary evil known to and manipulated by God for the Christian's ultimate benefit (i.e., some form of heaven). God works, in the Christ event, through unmerited suffering (or moral evil) to bring about good. Ministers and laypersons within



Black churches combined positions one and two by presenting suffering as inherently evil, yet usable by God to prepare Black people for their ultimate freedom. This freedom was secured through the joint efforts of God and humans.

Spirituals and church leaders, in many instances, have developed a theological approach centered on the notion of redemptive or fruitful suffering. These terms are synonymous and define oppression experienced by African-Americans as inherently evil yet holding secondary benefit. That is, the existential hardships endured by African-Americans display the presence of destructive "will to power." However, God manipulates this moral evil and causes good consequences. Benefits may entail needed pedagogical lessons such as the correction of character flaws, the obtainment of invaluable skills and talents, or some good which God will make clear in the future (benefits shrouded in divine mystery). In this way, suffering strengthens African-Americans, so to speak, for divine plans such as the betterment of American society, the reorganization of African society, or a combination of the two. One thing seems apparent: suffering in the here-and-now allows for the ultimate fulfillment of a divine teleological design.

Although this important aspect of theological inquiry is present in nascent and current Black theology, no one, to my knowledge, has published an extended documentation and analysis of its historical progression. *Why Lord?* seeks to cover some of this ground. African-American thought concerning human suffering, from slavery to the present, is critically examined in a manner allowing for fulfillment of several objectives. First, a comprehensive survey of currently available Black responses to the problem of evil is presented in the first several sections—beginning with the spirituals and moving through other important responses which came later. The spirituals reflect the earliest recorded account of African-American consciousness of human suffering as a religious paradox. In this manner, many spirituals, such as "De Ol' Sheep Done Know de Road," open the discussion of suffering as redemptive and a prerequisite for salvation. The continued presence of racism and other moral evils into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries resulted in the continuing relevance of the problem of evil. And so, building upon the spirituals as a base, nineteenth- and twentieth-century church leaders and laypersons tackled this question, providing an updated redemptive suffering argument in which suffering prepares African-Americans for the work of racial uplift and the redemption of Africa and/or the United States. Bishop Henry McNeal Turner's argument for slavery as an evil allowed by

God to introduce Africans to the beneficial influence of the Christian gospel and civil government demonstrates this point. A recent incarnation of this theological position is Martin L. King, Jr.'s philosophy of unmerited suffering. Using resources such as Gandhian philosophy, personalism, social gospel theology, neo-orthodox thought, and Black church tradition, King argues that the nonviolent acceptance of undeserved (i.e., racially motivated) suffering will afflict the American conscience and foster the end of societal discrimination.

The second objective of this study involves a defining and problematizing of human suffering as an organizing principle for life options and activities. I critically reflect on the work of William R. Jones and Delores S. Williams because of their attempt to rethink the nature of Black suffering as a "source" for Black theology. Jones in particular argues the centrality of suffering (therefore "theodicy") to the Black theological enterprise, and he seeks to give this question a full treatment, while avoiding "theological potholes" and unsubstantiated religious assertions. He begins by raising questions concerning God's goodness ("Is God a white racist?") and concludes by arguing for a humanocentric theism, which removes God from responsibility for evil and for liberation from evil. He argues that humans must work with God to cause liberation; this is because God's power within human history amounts to positive persuasion as opposed to proactive manipulation and shaping of historical events. Williams makes a similar move. Reflecting upon the biblical account of Hagar, she argues that God's role in history entails providing humans with the tools for survival. Hence, humans accomplish liberation using the materials for survival God provides. In this way, the problem of evil vanishes by denying the relevance of critiquing God for continued oppression. However, I shall argue that Jones and Williams fail to remove the trappings of redemptive suffering.

As part of the second objective, I assess the underexplored category of redemptive suffering, understanding it as a major strand of Black theological thought.<sup>12</sup> The final section of the book takes this task up. In this section I argue that the history of Black religious thought on suffering—Black "theodicy"—makes clear the dominance and unacceptability of redemptive suffering arguments. These arguments are unacceptable because they counteract efforts at liberation by finding something of value in Black suffering. In essence such arguments go against social transformation activity. Redemptive suffering and liberation are diametrically opposed ideas; they suggest ways of being in the world that, in effect, nullify each other. One cannot embrace suffering as redemptive



(as defined earlier) and effectively speak of liberation. The detrimental nature of arguments for redemptive suffering requires constructive work toward a more appropriate response to Black suffering.

The final section of the book expands the scope of resolutions to the problem of evil examined by Black theology. The goal is to encourage Black theologians to reflect upon a fuller spectrum of Black responses to the problem of evil and to allow for the full range of Black opinion. Therefore, it is necessary to extend Black theological inquiry and outline a fifth phase of Black theology's development. (The first phase entails the initial period, before the twentieth century; the second is the intellectualizing of Black theology during the civil rights era; the third entails globalization through crosscultural dialogue; the fourth is the inclusion of excluded voices calling into question the sexism and heterosexism of Black theology.) I define this fifth phase as the problematizing of Black theological arguments and the fostering of a more complex conversation regarding Black suffering, making use of a revitalized canon of Black religion, including nontheistic forms of expression. *Why Lord?* provides the initial construction of a resolution to the problem of evil positioned outside harmful redemptive suffering arguments. Here I will outline the third of the previously discussed resolutions to the problem of evil—questioning/denial of God's existence—namely, Black humanism.

A typology of humanism, including the first category is that of v argues for questioning God's power i humans must not depend upon God for God to achieve this goal. Weak huma church tradition and does not avoid the tive suffering; even a limited God can at ship. The other category—strong huma resolution to the problem of evil that d suffering argumentation because it doe logical categories above the reality of su ity. Everything else stands or falls based upon its correspondence to what is "known" about human life. The words of James H. Cone receive new life from strong humanism: Truth is experienced.

Is Black humanism a religious system? Undoubtedly, some will argue that strong humanism rests outside "Black traditional" thought and is therefore of limited use by the Black religious community. This argument is incorrect. As the last chapter explains, strong humanism is in keeping with Black tradition (although it is not

Christian), when one recognizes the breadth of Black religious expression—which includes the full spectrum of theism and humanism. Implied here is a rejection of the secular/sacred dichotomy that typically exists regarding theistic and humanistic forms of Black thought. Using Charles Long's definition of religion in *Significations*, both theism and humanism are religious to the extent they provide "ultimate orientation" and the framework for values, morality, and ethical patterns of conduct and activity. That is, strong humanism is a religious system because it provides a framework that guides human conduct and connects this conduct to the larger reality of Black community. Strong humanism fulfills a fundamental requirement of any religious system in that it defines, explains, and provides functional guidelines for reality. In this way, strong humanism, like other religious systems, keeps humanity from collapsing into a state of chaos. By providing a functional worldview, explaining "reality," and clarifying proper human conduct, strong humanism meets the basic definition of a religion. As Clifford Geertz asserts:

... a religion is: (1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive and long-lasting moods and motivations in [humans] by (3) formulating conceptions of a general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic.<sup>13</sup>

To the extent strong humanism projects an order larger than the individual (i.e., "cosmic order"), it does so through reference to the Black community and the need to connect with and operate for the good of this community. Note that I am not making a global statement about humanism's standing as a religion: I am strictly concerned with the religious connotations of humanism within African-American tradition.

The investigation of strong humanism cannot be addressed using "theodicy" as a methodological tool. "Theodicy" requires a compromise with suffering because it assumes the goodness of God and requires the finding of something useful in human suffering. Theodical games do not allow for a way out of the theological trap of redemptive suffering. And so, I outline nitty-gritty hermeneutics—present within Black cultural expressiveness such as the blues—which offers a more viable methodology. Nitty-gritty hermeneutics is an effective tool since it holds no allegiance to Christian doctrine or theological sensibilities. It is not contaminated with nostalgic feelings toward traditional ways