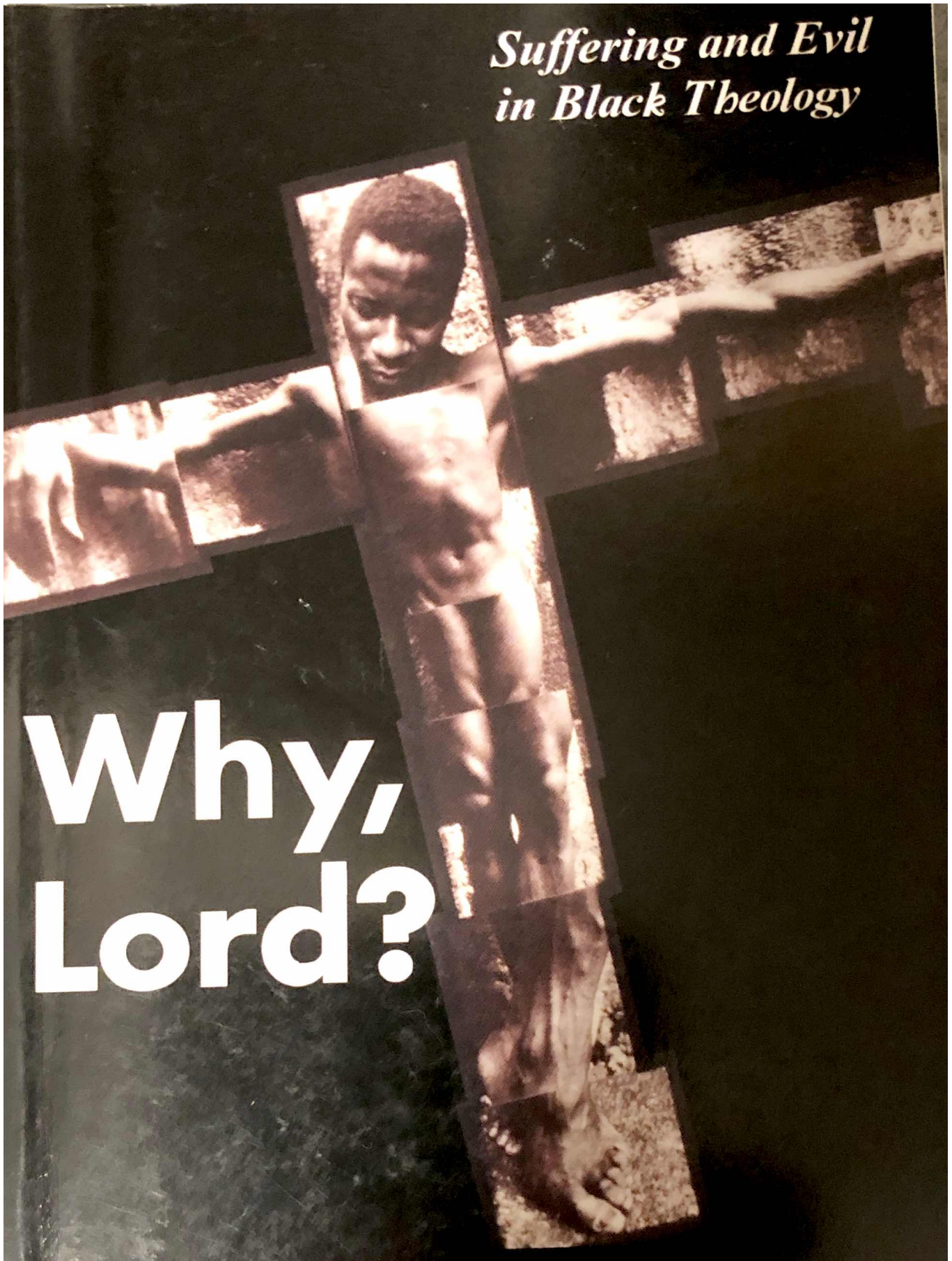
Suffering and Evil in Black Theology



Why, Lord?

Anthony B. Pinn

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INTRODUCTION

Amid 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 minister's 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."[1] 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.[2] 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."[3] 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.[4] 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.[5] 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.[6]

Some thinkers find the resolutions to the problem of evil offered by Augustine and Irenaeus faulty.[7] 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."[8] In short, God is not all-powerful. Furthermore, the developing world contains both good and evil (understood aesthetically as discord and triviality);[9] however, the good resulting from the unfolding of the world will outweigh the evil.[10]

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. . . .[11]

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 theodical 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 theodical thought.[12] 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 theodical 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 two essential categories, is presented. The first category is that of weak humanism. This position argues for questioning God's power in the world and declares that humans must not depend upon God for liberation; they must work *with* God to achieve this goal. Weak humanism is in keeping with Black church tradition and does not avoid the "theological pothole" of redemptive suffering; even a limited God can attach benefits to existential hardship. The other category—strong humanism—offers at least a provisional resolution to the problem of evil that does not collapse into redemptive suffering argumentation because it does not place (in importance) theological categories above the reality of suffering. Black existence has priority. 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 collasping 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.[13]

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

of viewing religious questions. Church tradition is less important than is the reality of oppression. Its only commitment is to what Peter C. Hodgson calls "hard labor"—strong and aggressive inquiry. Nitty-gritty hermeneutics maintains as its priority a sober look at life as it is, and it seeks hard truth unsoftened by theological obligations.

The following pages encourage a dialogical effort firmly entrenched in Black tradition. However, multidimensional dialogue does involve a rethinking of the location of the Black (Christian) churches in relationship to the larger Black religious community. Such an exploration does not lessen the importance of the Black church; rather, it serves to balance the Black churches' authority in light of other practices, perspectives, and organizations within the community. Traditionally, those who investigated Black religion did not venture beyond the boundaries of Black churches, acknowledging that Black churches have been the backbone of African-American religious expression. The age and relative stability of Black churches eclipsed the presence of alternate expressions of religious belief. Hans A. Baer, Claude Jacobs, and Andrew Kaslow have expanded this discussion beyond mainstream denominations by uncovering the importance of "Spiritual churches" within the Black community. Efforts like this have also been present in studies on Sweet Daddy Grace, Father Divine, and others. Scholars such as C. Eric Lincoln and Aminah B. McCloud expanded the boundaries by seriously studying the varieties of Islamic practice in Black America. And Joseph M. Murphy has helped scholars to recognize the importance of Santería for African-Americans, and other traditions in which the African Gods have survived. Nonetheless, Black (Christian) church centered dialogue dominates academic Black religious thought. Consequently, much additional religious ground needs to be covered in order to recognize Black religious expression's full complexity. *Why Lord?* presents a prolegomenon on one aspect of this religious ground—Black humanism. This, admittedly, is a first step. Exploration and dialogue must eventually encompass traditions beyond those presented here if a full spectrum of Black religion—in its broadest sense—is to surface. Only in this way will we understand the full complexity of Black responses to suffering.

For Black suffering is so massive and Black "theodicy" so detrimental that all possible alternatives need exploring. Black theologians must address themselves to the larger Black religious terrain rather then limit their discussion to the context of Black (Christian) churches and theistic alternatives. Dialogue, not monologues, is essential. Such an expansion of thought is vital to Black theology's self-critical stance and communal relevance.

1

Spirituals as an Early Reflection on Suffering

African slaves were not introduced to Christianity immediately upon arriving in the New World. Factors such as a strict concern with the economic utility of slave labor and fear that "conversion" would disrupt the status of slaves resulted in an ambivalence toward the spiritual condition of African chattels. However, weak attempts at conversion are traceable to religious bodies such as the Anglican Church and the Quakers. Prior to the nineteenth century, the Anglican Church's Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts engaged in unsuccessful attempts to "save" the enslaved Africans. Few of these early missionaries kept detailed records of their activity, but their proselytizing of the slaves undoubtedly was hampered by planters who felt threatened by the supposed "freeing" nature of religious instruction.

The energy of the nineteenth-century camp meetings created conditions which opened Southern plantations to the paternalistic efforts of missionaries and preachers. Of course, plantation preachers, evangelists, and missionaries were certain to emphasize the fact that religious instruction for the slaves would in no way hamper the benefits of slave holding. According to religious workers, God was concerned with the slaves' souls, not their physical circumstances.[1] With this guarantee and supporting legal structures, plantation owners lost some of their reluctance to provide spiritual instruction for slaves. Slave holders were not threatened by this revival brand of religion; it simply promised salvation without endangering the slavery-based system of economics. Spirituality, not social change, was on the mind of these mission zealots. With these qualifications, even

slave masters could pray for the eventual salvation of their slaves—once their work on earth was done.

The revival-fueled attention to the souls of slaves did not affect all slaves equally: only a certain few received direct attention. In short, the gospel reached the slave quarters by means of the "trickle-down" process. Clarence Walker provides some insight into the workings of this process. He records:

> Every Sunday the coachmen, footmen and body servants sat in the slaves' galleries of the churches and attentively drank up the sermons, prayers, and hymns intended for their masters in the pews. Then the house servants, who worked all day in the "big house," heard, with the masters' children, the old Bible stories. . . . These privileged ones, when the day's work was over, hurried to the slave quarters to share with the field hands the priceless treasures garnered in the churches and parlors of their masters.[2]

Although covered by a fog of paternalism and racism, the religious meetings encountered by "select" slaves mark a period of white and Black religious interaction. In fact, prior to the Civil War, there was a tremendous amount of joint Black and white religious activity. These services were far from equal, however. Blacks were frequently forced to listen to services in galleries (referred to as "nigger heaven"), or by means of open windows. Or, they had to wait until whites had been spiritually fed, and then the preacher turned his attention to them.[3] This type of joint activity allowed whites to maintain surveillance of Black activity, and in this way it prevented rebellious, "unorthodox," or "barbaric" activity among the slaves.

Although slave owners and their approved preachers controlled, to some extent, the location and content of worship, they were unable to fully monitor the coded musical articulation of an African-American worldview. That is, the slaves brought to religious services music heavily influenced by their African cultural patterns—which lyrically wove together enslavement realities, pieces of scripture, and folk wisdom. Even attempts by white missionaries to end these "barbaric" songs, "nonsensical chants," and "wild songs," as whites often called them, resulted in the alteration of their hymns into a musical expression unique to slaves. Accordingly, formal worship services echoed with the dissonant tones which arose out of the life conditions faced by enslaved Africans.

Secret meetings, known as hush harbor meetings, allowed for a certain amount of religious and theological freedom and thereby fostered the creation of lyrics by which to make sense of and endure daily sufferings. Although the encounter with Christianity provided an important matrix, the development of spirituals and other forms of musical expressivity is much older. Concerning this, Lovell writes:

> As soon as [they] made the transition from Africa to America and from [their] native language to [their] adopted language, the black creature[s] naturally continued what [they] . . . had been [doing] all along–making songs about [their] life and [their] religion.[4]

Although these spirituals, for the most part, were created by individuals, they narrated the community's collective physical and psychological experience and development. Accordingly, those who provided the creative and illustrative content of songs based such endeavors upon the feelings and activities common among the larger Black community. For example, spirituals often developed extemporaneously in response to a fiery sermon. As C. Eric Lincoln records:

> In the early days of the Black church the spontaneous creation of spirituals during the preaching event was a common feature of Black worship. These spirituals undoubtedly grew out of the preacher's chanted declamations and the intervening congregational responses. Little by little it became a song. . . . The oral nature of the spiritual's transmission meant that the spirituals were constantly recomposed and rearranged, so that a single spiritual might eventually have numerous musical and textual variations.[5]

The act of praying also inspired the creation of spirituals. The following account exemplifies this spontaneous and "prayerful" creation of song:

> Minutes passed, long minutes of strange intensity. The muttering, the ejaculations, grew louder, more dramatic, till suddenly I [Natalie Curtis Burlin] felt the creative thrill dart through the people like an electric vibration, that same half-audible hum arose, emotion was gathering. . . . [T]hen, up from the depths of some sinner's remorse and imploring came a pitiful plea . . . sobbed in musical cadence. From somewhere in the bowed

> gathering another voice improvised a response. . . . [T]hen other voices joined the answer, shaping it into a musical phrase; and so, before our ears, as one might say, from this molten metal of music a new song was smithed out, composed then and there by no one in particular and by everyone in general.[6]

The sense of "psychic oneness" expressed in this account is not uncommon. In fact, Dr. Benjamin Mays considers spirituals part of the "mass category of Negro literature" precisely because of this communality.[7] If this communal connection is missing, "a song is not likely to hold its audience and it probably will not pass into oral tradition, where acceptance means that consensus has taken place over and over again through time."[8] Those spirituals which did not meet with the approval of the community lost their place and have not been recorded. Additionally, the transference and assessment of spirituals was aided, when permitted, by inter-plantation visits. And so, by the mid-nineteenth century, a significant reserve of theological songs had developed within the slave community as a result of this creative and spontaneous "musicking."[9] These songs not only provided the musical base for worship, they also answered hard religious questions.

Amidst the brutal behavior of slave holders who claimed to be Christian and followers of the humble Christ, African slaves were faced with contradictions and a hypocrisy which profoundly troubled them. Accordingly, certain questions emerged: How could someone who claimed a relationship with Christ perform evil acts such as the enslavement of other humans? How could God allow this oppressive behavior to continue?

These and other fundamental issues reinforced themselves with each day and with each strike of the lash. As evidenced by the spirituals, many slaves responded to this irony with disdain for the world of slavery. In a conversation between J. Miller McKim and a slave, the process by which daily evils perpetuated against African slaves were turned into telling songs is described:

> Dey make 'em, sah . . . I'll tell you; its dis way: My master call me up an' order me a short peak of corn and a hundred lashes. My friends see it and is sorry for me. When dey come to de praise meeting dat night dey sing about it. Some's very good singers and know how; and dey work it in, you know, till dey get it right; and dat's de way.[10]

Of necessity, the slaves shaped and described their responses to these issues using the tools available to them, namely pieces of the Hebrew Bible, the New Testament, African cultural patterns, their reality as slaves, folk wisdom, and "the world of nature." Concerning this, Harold Courlander points out that there was interpolation taking place; Hebrew Bible figures often found themselves in conversation with the forces of nature and New Testament heroes.[11] In addition, churches were instrumental in the development of song among the slaves because they provided a place in which slaves could experiment with composition.[12] One clearly sees in the spirituals a modified version of the Christian faith—modified, that is, by traditional African melody. Several scholars acknowledge that some of the material incorporated into these slave songs is also found in white revivalist songs. This is particularly true concerning the songs sung by "oppressed" whites. Other scholars have argued that the Black spirituals are merely a variation on white spirituals, picked up during the camp meetings and other evangelical gatherings.[13] Regarding these issues, Albert Raboteau writes:

> [O]ppression was not slavery. The slaves' historical identity as a unique people was peculiarly their own. In the spirituals, the slaves affirmed and reaffirmed that identity religiously as they suffered and celebrated their journey from slavery to freedom.[14]

R. Nathaniel Dett confirms Raboteau's assertion and adds this question:

> . . . how otherwise shall one explain the strong, unwavering note of hope of final recompense, and the assurance of the perfectness of another life to come, unless one is willing to admit that the slave brought with him from Africa a religious inheritance which, far from being shaken in any way, was strengthened by his American experience?[15]

The exact location of spirituals within the slave community is a more complex issue. That is, thinkers such as John Lovell, Jr. argue that the spirituals are not strictly religious. Rather, they are religious to the extent they address the origins of life; yet, the spirituals extend beyond expressions of religiosity because they grew out of general life experience.[16] In fact, Lovell suggests that the first spirituals had nothing to do with religion, and had no connection with camp meetings because they dealt with life conditions (as if religion is devoid of these

concerns). He contends the melodies created by Africans during the Middle Passage—prior to contact with white churches—shaped the white spirituals, and served as the foundation of the Black spirituals. Moreover, Lovell asserts that the songs Blacks sang during the camp meetings were new only to white ears. They had been sung for some time by the slaves. During these meetings, however, the song was customized and adapted to the slaves' environment, which began to change—due to restrictions on preacher and missionary efforts.

With the restrictions placed upon Black preachers, including the fear of physical danger for the promotion of non-status-quo doctrines and the restrictions inherent in the slaves' very introduction to Christianity, the spirituals provided the safest means by which to discuss so-called "dangerous" religious themes and issues. Furthermore, Lovell maintains that the words of the spirituals frequently found their way into other forms of musical expression which were not in essence religious. As a result, the lyrics served many musical functions ranging from work songs and "hollers" to ring shout melodies. Consequently, the words to the spirituals were not always biblically based, but often arose out of personal (yet communal) experience. In short:

> The subject of a call or holler could well be addressed to the same God of the spirituals. . . . This uniqueness was caused by the fact that, unlike African traditionalism which restricted its music to appropriate functions and events, slaves were not allowed to freely participate in all aspects of life common to African notions. Consequently, worship, work and relaxation were often performed under identical surroundings.[17]

Apparently, some scholars are not convinced by Lovell's argument regarding the "mundane" grounding of the spirituals. For example, the discussion of Black spirituals by theologian James H. Cone suggests that the spirituals are religious songs which contain nuggets of theological truth that can be combined with other aspects of African-American culture, history, and experience to create a working Black theology. I suggest that the spirituals are not merely cogs; rather, they represent a complete, yet nascent, Black theology, from which the basic thematic framework of later Black theologies is gleaned. One can assess the validity of this claim by looking at the development of central theological categories within spirituals.

According to James H. Cone, Black theology is a contextual and particularized theology of liberation concerned with the "being of God

["ultimate concern"] 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."[18] Questionable aspects of this theistic/Christocentric perspective are implicitly addressed in the final chapter. Although the strong Christian tone of this definition is open to debate, it, at this point, provides a somewhat useful gauge for accessing theological formulations that are self-consciously Christian (theistic). According to this definition, it is reasonable to consider the following categories endemic to many formulations recognizable as Black (Christian) theology[19]: (1) the full reality of the oppressed—history, culture, and experience; (2) conception of God and Jesus Christ; (3) conception of heaven; and, (4) appeal to scripture. My understanding of this music suggests that all of these elements, beginning with existential awareness, are found in the spirituals.

The genius of the Black spiritual is seen in its profound expression of the world's complexities amid dehumanizing forces. As Benjamin Mays writes:

> [T]hese songs are the expressions of the restriction and domination which their creators experienced in the world about them. They represent the soul-life of the people. They embody the joy and sorrow, the hope and despair, the pathos and aspiration of the newly transplanted people; and through them the race was able to endure suffering and survive. Clearly, the Negro Spirituals are not songs of hate; they are not songs of revenge. They are songs neither of war nor of conquest. They are songs of the soil and of the soul.[20]

The cultural heritage and story of survival of African slaves in America is emotionally depicted within the music:

> I'm a rollin'
> I'm a rollin' through an unfriendly worl'
> I'm a rollin'
> I'm a rollin' through an unfriendly worl'.[21]

As a part of this descriptive process, the past is remembered, the present discussed, and the future planned. As Ralph Ellison suggests:

> Perhaps in the swift change of American society in which the meanings of one's origin are so quickly lost, one of the chief

> values of living with music lies in its power to give us an orientation in time. In so doing, it gives significance to all those indefinable aspects of experience which nevertheless help to make us what we are. In the swift whirl of time music is a constant, reminding us of what we were and of that toward which we aspired.[22]

In this respect, the spirituals present the misery of life as a slave and speak to the isolation and disjointedness resulting from physical bondage. In light of this, is there any wonder why the slaves sang:

> Sometimes I feel like a motherless child,
> Sometimes I feel like a motherless child,
> Sometimes I feel like a motherless child,
> A long ways from home,
> A long ways from home.[23]

The spirituals often speak to the bitterness of life and the sense of hopelessness this engenders:

> Sometimes I'm up
> Sometimes I'm down,
> Oh, yes, Lord;
> Sometimes I'm almos' to de groun'
> Oh, yes, Lord.
>
> Altho' you see me goin' 'long so,
> Oh, yes, Lord;
> I have my trials here below.[24]

These words express the uncertainty of existence for African slaves who could not be certain of life from one day to the next. It was quite possible that a misunderstood action or the whim of slaveowners would mean being sold away from family and friends. Furthermore, beatings and sexual assault were a constant threat. The spirituals are not totally defeatist. To the contrary, the spirituals qualified the hardships of slave life with exclamations concerning the rewards that awaited them in heaven or "Canaan."

Spirituals depicting hopelessness often conclude with a sense of hope and of God's ultimate righteousness. Along this line, Howard Thurman suggests that pessimism became material out of which to

create a desire to persevere.[25] That is, harsh reality (i.e., oppression) was juxtaposed to a notion of divine justice and equality (e.g., freedom). This message rings clear in "Go Down Moses":

> Go down, Moses
> Way down in Egypt land,
> Tell ole Pharaoh, to let my people go.
> . . . . . .
> When Isreal was in Egypt land:
> Let my people go,
> Oppressed so hard they could not stand,
> Let my people go.[26]

This spiritual illustrates the effort to locate a source of hope and strength outside of the immediate existential reality of the faithful. Moreover, this music outlines the basis and substance of hope—as present yet not always acknowledged by the physically perceiving. As a result, the spirituals illustrate a strong faith in the belief that hardships and pain do not escape God's gaze.

The imagery and symbolism of scripture and Christianity took hold among the slaves. And it was from these two elements that the slaves frequently sang of "a just God, just principles, a son of God who lived and died to see to it that justice would come to all people, including the poor and the untouchable and those who made mistakes and those who had little to offer besides their mere small selves."[27] Within many spirituals God stands out as the all knowing, powerful, and omnipresent creator, to whom those in need make appeal:

> We have a just God to plead-a our cause,
> To plead-a our cause, to plead-a our cause,
> We have a just God to plead-a our cause,
> We are the people of God.[28]

The slaves were convinced that God had something good in store for them beyond slavery, and that they only had to wait on God, trust in God, and persevere. Yet, it was recognized that victory often came with a heavy price. The community represented within the language of the spirituals realized that difficult days had to be endured. Nonetheless, God was understood to be strong, just, loving, righteous, compassionate, and powerful. All these attributes meant that God could be trusted.

God is a God!
God don't never change!
God is a God
An' He always will be God.[29]

The spirituals' portrait of God is supplemented by a deep connection with Christ. Jesus Christ is often portrayed as the crucified savior, who through his suffering provided a heavenly future for those who endured unjust treatment on earth. Christ was understood to be "a god of compassion and suffering, a promulgator of freedom and peace and opportunity, a son of an omnipotent Father"[30]:

Walk [Ride] in, kind Savior [King Jesus]
No man can hinder me!
Walk in, sweet Jesus,
See what wonder Jesus done,
O no man can hinder me![31]

The spirituals demonstrate a firm confidence in the ability of Jesus to conquer any of the slave's difficulties and triumphantly bring her or him to a better life.

Through his rupture of human time and history, Jesus represents the "already" status of freedom which is historically "immanent" as a result of the teleological nature of history. Accordingly, there is a closeness between Jesus and the slave; ontologically perceived, both are children of God. Epistomologically, both have a working knowledge of "unmerited" suffering. This connection is so intimate, that the spirituals even depict a physical proximity to the crucifixion event. One spiritual demonstrates this when saying:

Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
Sometimes, it causes me to tremble, tremble . . .
Were you there, when they crucified my Lord?[32]

Jesus is also viewed as the exemplar of conduct. And to the extent that Jesus' life and death seemed redemptive and fruitful, Christian slaves were able to see merit in their efforts. Furthermore, the spirituals encourage believers to follow Christ's example of self-giving as a means by which to gain the reward—the fruitful consequences of their suffering. In most cases, the reward is connected with heaven:

My Lord, I've had many crosses an' trials here
below;
My Lord, I hope to meet you in de manshans above.[33]

Others sang:

If you meet with crosses, an' trials on the way
Just keep your trust in Jesus,
An' don't forget to pray.
Let us cheer the weary traveler (3x)
Along the heavenly way.[34]

Heaven is often viewed as a new world in which the abused African is relieved of all earthly burdens and given the humanity and treasures her/his labor had provided. In addition, heaven serves as a critique of the hypocrisy and injustice experienced at the hands of slaveholders. This injustice, acknowledged as inconsistent with God's will, is ultimately corrected. The new equality is evident in the following song:

I've got a robe, you've got a robe,
All of God's chillun got a robe,
When I get to heab'n goin' to put on my robe,
Going to shout all ovah God's heab'n.[35]

Or according to these lines:

Let God's children have some peace,
I know de udder worl' is not like dis,
Swing low sweet chariot into de Wes'
I know de udder worl' is not like dis.[36]

At times, the reward is located on earth—a new earth constituted by humanity, equality, and a fulfilling existence, or a return to African soil.

It was through the idea of heaven, in whatever form found fitting, that Christian slaves were able to address their pain and suffering in a world which, at every turn, attempted to dehumanize them. The profound meaning of heaven is further explored by Cone when he remarks:

For Black slaves, who were condemned to carve out their existence in captivity, heaven meant that the eternal God had

made a decision about their humanity that could not be destroyed by white masters. . . . [T]hey believed that God nevertheless had chosen black slaves as his own and that this election bestowed upon them a freedom to be. . . .[37]

Their present condition was not the last word, nor the final measure of their worth. Their suffering at the hands of hypocrites would end and God, the judge, would ultimately adjudicate justice:

Sooner-a-will be done with the trouble of this world,
Sooner-a-will be done with the trouble of this world,
Going home to live with God.[38]

Others sang:

Dere's no rain to wet you,
O, yes, I want to go home.
Dere's no sun to burn you,
O, yes, I want to go home.
O, push along, believers.[39]

In the mind of the slave, the interconnectedness between their condition, God, Christ, and heaven implied a concrete and contextual response to the problem of evil. God, through Christ, made victory out of human suffering. One way or another, they knew their life would mirror Christ's life and that they would be free in heaven—"no cross, no crown":

Steal away, steal away home,
I ain't got long to stay here.[40]

Suffering was seen as a condition God would not only rectify, but also reward. That is, the evils experienced in life would be transformed into a humanized and fruitful existence:

O, Christians keep a-in-chin' along,
keep a-in-chin' along
Massa Jesus is comin' bye an' bye.[41]

In like manner, the God who provides heaven as the reward for a "good life," so to speak, also provides hell as proof of sin's destructiveness.

Biblical accounts of God's breaking into human history documented, for slaves, the perpetual presence of God with the oppressed. Through this contextualization of scripture onto Southern life, Christian slaves gleaned a consistency in God's dealings with humans. It was assumed that God's concern with and desire for righteous existence applies to the contemporary world of the slaves. Regarding this, slaves sang:

Daniel faithful to his God,
Would not bow down to men,
An' by God's enemy he was hurled
into de lion's den,
God locked de lion's jaw we read,
An robbed him of his prey,
An' de God dat lived in Daniel's time is
jus da same today.[42]

The process by which slaves made this juxtaposition of their condition and biblical accounts involves the use of a hermeneutic of suspicion and identification.

Slaves looked at their existential condition and were not satisfied with the so-called "Christian" explanations provided by slaveholders and their ministers. Many slaves could not believe that God condoned their condition and rejected their efforts at liberation. Obedience to unjust practices and laws could not be consistent with the divine design of a loving and just God. This suspicion resulted in slaves "looking into" scripture themselves in order to find the answers to the questions posed by the hardships of life, and treating with scorn practices which did not line up with biblical precedence.

When turning to scripture, the slaves naturally identified with the chosen people of God who encountered suffering at the hands of cruel task masters. This recognition of a similar existential condition extended to the assumption that God would work on behalf of African slaves as God had for the Children of Israel. God is consistent in God's dealings with humanity; and therefore, God is forever concerned with the liberation of the oppressed. This thinking is certainly in line with the theological outlook of contemporary Black theology.

Within *Spirituals and the Blues*, James H. Cone begins a constructive project, based upon experience and objective academic tools, which entails developing a Black theology of liberation based upon Black cultural resources and framed by Black history of oppression.

Within the spirituals, for example, Cone sees the "essence of Black religion" (i.e., the record of God breaking into human history) and he demonstrates this by outlining the concept of God, doctrine of Christ, and eschatology, exposed within the spirituals. In short, Cone argues that the spirituals understand God as involved in the world, liberating oppressed people. In addition, he notes within the spirituals an understanding of Christ as the risen savior who identifies with the oppressed because he has experienced their pain. And heaven is offered as the symbolic promise of a properly lived life. In short, spirituals take a theological position which suggest that any situation that does not amount to liberation is evil and therefore against the will of God.

Cone's analysis of basic theological elements within the spirituals differs little from the discussion of the same elements offered earlier in this chapter. My disagreement with him concerns his failure to see the way in which oppression forced an assessment of these theological categories in the form of "theodicy." Cone misses the crux of the spirituals' theological discourse—"theodicy." And as a result, he does not fully understand the self-contained and layered theological nature of the spirituals. That is, the spirituals not only speak of God, Christ, and heaven; they speak of God out of and in the context of Black suffering, using the language of "theodicy": What is God doing about our suffering? John Lovell, in *Black Song*, points to this by acknowledging the nagging question in the spiritual which forms the basis of "theodicy":

> Although the prevailing view is essentially optimistic, the spiritual is honeycombed with realistic doubts and fears. Sometimes, the poet is not sure he has what it takes, or that religion is strong enough to override evil . . . or that justice is not man's greatest illusion.[43]

Cone should see Lovell's point when Cone thinks about his own words: "the spiritual is the people's response to the social contradiction."[44] Yet this observation regrettably eludes him:

> The spirituals nowhere raise questions about God's existence or matters of theodicy, and it is safe to assume that the slave community did not perceive of theoretical solutions of the problem of evil as a felt need. Rather, their needs were defined by the existential realities which they encountered.[45]

Cone does not recognize the presence of the theodical question in the spirituals that harsh experience forces slaves to wrestle with. Yet, in all fairness, Cone does acknowledge the complex nature of thought within the spirituals. However, this recognition surfaces only with respect to the dual program of otherworldly and temporal liberation, a distinction he makes in response to Benjamin May's emphasis on the compensatory and otherworldly nature of the spirituals.[46]

Cone acknowledges the manner in which existential hardship raises questions concerning religion. Yet, he assumes only a certain class takes the time to philosophically and theologically formulate such questions:

> These are hard questions, and they are still relevant today. In the history of theology and philosophy, these questions are the core of the "problem of evil"; and college and seminary professors have spent many hours debating them. But black slaves did not have the opportunity to investigate the problem of suffering in the luxury of a seminar room with all the comforts of modern living. They encountered suffering in the cotton fields. . . . They had to deal with the absurdities of human existence under whip and pistol.[47]

The harsh conditions under which slaves reflected upon their religion and life does not negate the philosophical and theological nature of this thought. Their condition, in fact, makes such theodical questioning more vital and urgent than it is for the "leisurely" academics. Christian slaves faced a pressing crisis of faith which forces the existence of Black "theodicy"—"theodicy" grounded in the absurdity of Black oppression combined with Black faith.

In suggesting that spirituals do not speak to "theodicy," Cone limits the actual dimensions of theodical examination. He suggests an opposition between theoretical theism and a concern with existential reality. A defense of theism and existential reality are both necessary if the task is to reflect the content of "theodicy" defined as the justification of God in light of evil in the world. Although the former portion of theodical formulations (i.e., God) is often embedded in the latter (i.e., existential reality) both are implicitly present. In fact, moral evil is only a religious problem for the theist—the "faithful." Within the spirituals, one notices the assumed theism noted above.

Cone believes that the spirituals do not concern themselves with "theodicy" because they do not seek to blame God for evil.[48] His

argument involves a misinterpretation of the nature and objective of "theodicy." It is fundamentally concerned with justifying God, not condemning God. "Theodicy" seeks to understand the mystery of God's activity and presence in a world seemingly gone wrong. The spirituals do not deny God as a result of Black suffering because they see God working through pain. Nonetheless, this continuing belief in God's justice is not a denial of philosophical inquiry ("theodicy").

Even Cone, who appears to vehemently reject the existence of "theodicy" as a concern for slaves, is unable to maintain his staunch opposition to the actual existence of Black "theodicy." Within *The Spirituals and the Blues*, Cone outlines the spirituals' response to "theodicy". However, Cone fails to recognize that logically, the spirituals must pose the question of evil if they suggest a response. He writes:

> That this theme of God's involvement in history and his liberation of the oppressed from bondage should be central in black slave religion and the spirituals is not surprising, for it corresponds with the black people's need to know that their slavery was not the divine creator's intention for them.[49]

The response to this need to know is presented in spirituals such as "Didn't My Lord Deliver Daniel?":

> Didn't my Lord Deliver Daniel?
> Deliver Daniel, Deliver Daniel.
> Didn't my Lord Deliver Daniel?
> And why not every man?[50]

This spiritual is often considered an affirmation of God's liberating presence in human history. This is how Cone reads it. However, I would suggest that the question posed in this spiritual is not rhetorical in nature; rather it is a genuine and pressing question, carrying with it the weight of oppression due to skin color.

Concerning the origin of evil, the spirituals' canon attributes it to the fall of humanity, in keeping with traditional theological anthropology. This proclivity of humanity toward error is manipulated by the devil. Suffering is not the result of providential design. Accordingly, humans must constantly work to avoid evil and the devil's lure. Suffering is evil and remains so; however, this evil does not conquer God's ultimate plan. The theodical key is found in the words I heard as a child: "Lord, troubles of ev'ry kind, Thank God,

I'll always find, Dat a little talk wid Jesus makes it right." God transforms "troubles of ev'ry kind" into the promise of heaven. In this way, God's ultimate plan is not conquered by evil. In fact, the Christ event is used to illustrate God's transforming power and heaven is revealed as the reward for endurance. Hence, on one level and as was mentioned above, heaven illustrates the Christian slave's response to "theodicy":

> Mos' done toilin' here, O, brethren,
> I'm mos' done toilin' here.
> I ain't been to heab'n, but I been tol'
> Mos' done toilin' here.
> De street up dere am paved wid gol',
> Mos' done toilin' here.[51]

The complete response to "theodicy," however, is found in the suffering itself as opposed to the final reward given to those who suffer (i.e., heaven). That is, the passion of Christ taught slaves that suffering has the power to transform situations when handled properly. Suffering can be redemptive, and suffering's redemptive nature is the slave's final response to "theodicy." This line of reasoning, resulting from an identification with Christ's passion, suggests that suffering is a necessary prerequisite for redemption and in this respect it is fruitful. Regarding this, Cone argues that slaves saw themselves in the passion of Christ, and within their music they expressed this relationship.[52] That is, because the faithful can experience the reality of divine presence, they can endure suffering and transform it into an event of redemption.[53] This is played out, for example, in the following spiritual which highlights God's redeeming power relative to communication with Christ:

> Sometimes de forked lightnin' an' mutterin'
> thunder too,
> Of trials an' tem'tation make it hard for me
> an' you
> But Jesus, is our frien',
> He'll keep us to de en'
> An' a little talk wid Jesus, make it right.[54]

The sufferings of life are seen as a part of the growth leading to spiritual maturity:

De young lam's mus' fin' de way.
Wid crosses an' trials on ev'ry side,
De young lam's mus' fin' de way.[55]

Clearly, the spirituals provided an invaluable form of theological analysis and communication. They presented creative formulations for many "hush-harbor" religious activities. Yet, the spirituals had neither the sensibilities nor the structure appreciated by many Black clergypersons. Therefore, spirituals found an uneasy audience in many nineteenth-century independent Black churches. Consequently, efforts were made to forget the folk culture developed in slavery as a means by which to forge a future based upon imitation of mainstream spirituality, complete with singing by note. Bishop Henry M. Turner of the African Methodist Episcopal Church demonstrates this attitude when remarking that Blacks "have a widespread custom of singing on revival occasions, especially, what is commonly called *Spiritual Songs*, most of which are devoid of both sense and reason; and some are absolutely false and vulgar."[56] Although the spirituals found an uneasy audience in Black churches during the nineteenth century, their message remained. As Eileen Southern points out, the spirituals survived among Black worshippers who experimented "with composing all kinds of religious music, from the lowly spiritual to formal anthems and similar set pieces."[57] The musical content of the spirituals is not all that survived; the basic theological outlook contained in the lyrics repeatedly presents itself.

2

Nineteenth-Century Black Thought on Black Suffering

Early-to-mid-nineteenth century African-American religious thought was influenced in part by slave experience, abolitionist propaganda, and the fears of Southern planters. Most notably, planters feared the blurring of the line between economic productivity and the slave's humanity. And so, every avenue by which such ideas could enter the mind of Southern slaves had to be closed. This of necessity included the humanizing potential of the gospel. Therefore, in order to avoid contact between slaves and these dangerous ideas, religious instruction and activity for slaves were held to a minimum.[1]

Conditions for Black Christians in the North were not much better. However, in the North, free blacks took advantage of the surge in moral consciousness suggested in abolitionist rhetoric. In addition to the intellectual impetus provided, abolitionists also provided financial support for fledgling Black organizations. With this type of assistance and the determination of free Blacks to enjoy certain rights and privileges, independent Black churches (such as the African Methodist Episcopal Church) developed.

Black churches never restricted their activities to the realm of spiritual health. On the contrary, Black churches committed themselves to moral reform, sociopolitical change, and mission activity. For example, organizations such as the Society for the Suppression of Vice and Immorality (founded by Reverend Richard Allen and two others) sought to improve the moral condition of the Black community.