

**HANDBOOK OF  
U.S. Theologies  
*of* Liberation**



# **HANDBOOK OF U.S. Theologies *of* Liberation**

Miguel A. De La Torre, editor



ST. LOUIS, MISSOURI

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*To my daughter Victoria  
Whose in-depth questions make her the true theologian of the family.  
May you never lose your hunger for justice!*



# Contents

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Contributors		ix
Introduction		1
PART 1: THEMATIC ESSAYS		
1	God <i>JoAnne Marie Terrell</i>	6
2	Christ <i>Carter Heyward</i>	16
3	The Holy Spirit <i>Elizabeth Conde-Frazier</i>	31
4	Trinity <i>Luis G. Pedraja</i>	46
5	Church <i>Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas</i>	59
6	Anthropology <i>Andrea Smith</i>	70
7	Scripture <i>Miguel A. De La Torre</i>	85
8	Ethics <i>Darryl M. Trimiew</i>	101
9	Sin <i>Andrew Sung Park</i>	110
10	Spirituality <i>Karen Baker-Fletcher</i>	117
11	Eschatology <i>Luis N. Rivera-Pagan</i>	129

## PART 2: CONTEXTUAL ESSAYS

12	Latin American Liberation Theology <i>Phillip Berryman</i>	140
13	African Americans <i>Will Coleman</i>	154
14	Hispanics <i>Edwin David Aponte</i>	162
15	Asian Americans <i>Seung Ai Yang</i>	173
16	Black Theology <i>Dwight N. Hopkins</i>	185
17	Latino/a Theology <i>Justo L. González</i>	204
18	Asian American Theology <i>Fumitaka Matsuoka</i>	218
19	American Indian Traditions <i>Tink Tinker</i>	230
20	Feminist Theology <i>Karen K. Seat</i>	247
21	Lesbian and Gay Theologies <i>Daniel T. Spencer</i>	264
22	Theology of the Poor <i>Deborah W. Little</i>	274
23	Environmental Racism <i>Steven Bouma-Prediger</i>	281
24	Postcolonialism & Liberation <i>Musa W. Dube</i>	288
	Epilogue	295
	Bibliography	303
	Index	329



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# Introduction

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“Introduction to Theology” is the typical name for a course taught at most religious studies departments in colleges throughout the United States and Canada. Usually, it fulfills the humanities portion of the core courses needed for graduation. The college at which I teach is no different. When I was first asked to teach this course, I surveyed how my predecessors had taught the class. Not surprisingly, the theological concepts explored had one common denominator—they were based on the opinions and interpretations formulated by mainly Western theologians, specifically Eurocentric male theologians. It was as if other groups simply did not exist, and if mentioned, their contributions to the overall theological discourse were usually relegated to either the footnotes, or to other “interesting” perspectives. The canon was set! To deviate from Luther, Calvin, or Barth endangered the course, opening it to the accusation of lacking scholastic rigor.

In many institutions, a professor who wishes to teach a course on theology from a perspective other than white male European is forced to transform the subject of the course into an adjective. Hence, the subject Asian American, Native American, Black or Latino/a becomes an adjective before the topic “Theology.” Such courses are usually offered as electives, not a requirement for obtaining a degree. This means students of the dominant culture are able to be deemed properly prepared in the area of theological thought without ever having to listen to or consider the voices

## 2 *Handbook of U.S. Theologies of Liberation*

of scholars relegated to the margins of academia. The center is secured, for seldom is the subject “European” transformed into an adjective. Few schools, if any, offer an introductory course in “Eurocentric Male Theologies.” This is because the European male perspectives have become the norm for all cultures, legitimized as objective. Theological perspectives from other ethnic or racial groups are usually dismissed as an interesting view but regrettably, too subjective.

If every theological perspective is constructed from a particular social location, then the idea of theologizing from a position of complete “objectivity” is a myth constructed to protect the privileged space of those with the power to determine how the discipline is to be defined. In short, objectivity is the dominant culture’s subjectivity, cloaked as academically or spiritually purer than the theology produced from the periphery of power. Yet, theological thought does not occur in a social vacuum. All theologies are constructed by human beings attempting to understand the infinite; yet all are limited by their finite identities within a particular society, culture, and history. Every theology is contextual, a product of an ongoing communal process. Therefore, theologies constructed by Eurocentric men will substantially differ from the theologies done by women, African Americans, or Asian/Pacific Islander Americans. Yet Eurocentric theologies have historically positioned themselves as the “center” of worldwide theological thought, as though they were somehow more objective and thus more legitimate.

To see through the eyes of the dominant culture contributes to the ongoing error of relegating theologies as constructed by historically disenfranchised groups to the “special interest” courses of the curricula assuming such theologies are only relevant to the members of those specific marginalized groups. In reality the perspectives of marginalized groups contribute an often ignored voice to the current theological discourse. This voice challenges the Eurocentric perspectives presented as normative in our universities, colleges, and seminaries. Conventional authoritative paradigms are unmasked as these voices from “the underside” assert themselves in the general colloquy. For this reason, books such as this one expand the attempt to construct a systematic theological position as relevant to the Eurocentric reader as it is to the historically marginalized communities. A revealing window into a world fraught with the consequences of oppressive structures provides a fundamental basis for future works in constructing a theology relevant to all people. This new theology will empower the marginalized while challenging the theology of the dominant culture—the one usually highlighted in our academic and religious centers.

The purpose of this handbook is to introduce the reader to Christian concepts from the perspective of U.S. marginalized communities by surveying various manifestations presented by leading religious scholars. This task is accomplished through the process of surveying different

manifestations of liberation theology as conducted within the United States, specifically, the theologies rooted in the African American, Amerindian, Asian American, feminist, gay/lesbian, and Hispanic experiences. Special attention is given to the history, nature, sources, and development of these U.S. theologies of liberation and the theologians who contributed to the formation of each one. Prominent theologians are discussed, as are significant and recurring themes found in the different expressions of these theologies of liberation. Additionally, this work considers the relationship between these different theological concepts and the identity of the individual groups that gave rise to these perspectives. It explores the interrelationship among religion, community, and culture in the social context of different marginalized groups as well as their impact on the development and nature of theologies of liberation. One important factor of this study is that it clearly distinguishes both the differences and similarities between these U.S. theologies and their Latin American counterparts.

The handbook is divided into two major sections. The first part, “Thematic Essays,” consists of compositions that provide a general overview of a specific theological theme from the perspectives of different marginalized groups, highlighting the similarities and differences that exist among these groups. The second section of the handbook, “Contextual Essays,” attempts to focus on the specific contributions provided by scholars from various racial, ethnic, and gender backgrounds so that the reader can avoid the pitfall of perceiving the different theological perspectives as monolithic. Special care was given to the uniqueness of each separate theology.

It is important to note that the writers of these traditions are not, nor do they claim to be, the “official spokesperson” for their entire race, ethnicity, gender, or orientation. In effect, there is no such thing as one unified theological perspective arising from the marginalized spaces within the U.S. There are instead many variations, due to a number of diverse factors among and within marginalized groups. Hence, the contributors in this volume write of the perspectives they detect to be common among marginalized groups in the hopes that such observations resonate with others.

Although only my name appears as the editor, the reality is that this book was a joint project that cut across race, ethnic, and gender lines. The error should never be made that this book is solely the effort of one person. Rather it was birthed by a community of scholars who find solidarity due to the oppressive societal structures that presently exist. We are part of a larger community of religious scholars who find common purpose in our joint struggle for justice. Hence it would be reprehensible of me if I did not acknowledge the effort they exerted in getting the chapters to me on time. I am honored to work among those who have intellectually mentored me through the different books they have written and the many lives they have touched through the “doing” of theology.





PART 1

## THEMATIC ESSAYS

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# God

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JOANNE MARIE TERRELL

*God is love.*

(1 Jn. 4:8)

*God specializes in things impossible, and He can do what no other power can do.*

—GOSPEL SONG<sup>1</sup>

*We have as much right biblically and otherwise to believe that God is a Negro, as you buckra,<sup>2</sup> or white people have to believe that God is a fine-looking symmetrical and ornamented white man.*

—HENRY McNEAL TURNER (REDKEY 1971, 176)

*Christ [God] is a black woman.*

—JACQUELYN GRANT (1989, 219)

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<sup>1</sup>“God Specializes” is an African American Gospel song published on the Savoy Label. A Chicago-based group, the Roberta Martin Singers, popularized it in 1958, and several sources credit Gloria Griffin as the songwriter. Today it is a standard in many black congregations.

<sup>2</sup>“Buckra” is a post-Civil War Southern slang term for whites. According to my black elders, it was not a term of derision, but since in the post-slavery ethos social relations did not significantly change, it was rather a “hidden description” blacks used as a form of social resistance in order to talk about whites in their presence with impunity.

*God provided Hagar with a resource. God gave her new vision to see survival resources where she had seen none before. Liberation in the Hagar stories is not given by God; it finds its source in human initiative.*

—DELORES S. WILLIAMS (1993, 5)

*God is as Christ does.*

—KELLY BROWN DOUGLAS (1989, 7–16)

*God has got a lot of explaining to do.*

—JAMES H. CONE<sup>3</sup>

### The Aseity of God

Orthodox Christian doctrine affirms that God is, having no origin but having *aseity*. Aseity is “a characteristic of being self-derived in contrast to being derived from or dependent on another. It is a technical term for the judgment that the existence of God is necessary in contrast to contingent. Karl Barth (1886–1968) interprets aseity as ‘the freedom of God.’”<sup>4</sup> In the theism of orthodox and neoorthodox perspectives, God is frequently described as the One alone who has aseity, sovereignty, agency, ultimacy, and inexhaustible mystery.<sup>5</sup>

This understanding serves to highlight the woeful nonnecessity, irrelevance, powerlessness, bondage, and banality of human beings. These common features of human existence morally level us and point to the transcendence of God as the sovereign Creator. They show our ongoing need for God as an able Redeemer. They stress the immanence of God as our Companion/Sustainer all along our journey throughout the finitude, vulnerability, and meaninglessness that lend themselves to pride and sinfulness. Indeed this is the theological anthropology that Augustine systematized in his explication of the consequences of and remedy for original sin, which Christians have inherited, both to our blessing and detriment. Given this assessment of the Necessary Being<sup>6</sup> of God in contrast to the contingent character of human existence in orthodox and neoorthodox perspectives, it is easy to assent to Barth’s oft-cited claim that there is an “infinite, qualitative difference” between humans and God.

Nonetheless, human freedom, or capacity for transcendence, is self-evident in the independent thought, sensation, desire, and mobility that we as living beings possess. These discrete dimensions of our existence—relating to our knowing, being, and doing—owe their vitality to a Reality

<sup>3</sup>Per telephone conversation with Professor James H. Cone of Union Theological Seminary (New York) in October 2002. Quoted with permission.

<sup>4</sup>Van Austin Harvey, “aseity” in *A Handbook of Theological Terms*.

<sup>5</sup>See Kaufman, *In Face of Mystery*.

<sup>6</sup>Necessary Being is “traditionally defined as that being whose essence it is to exist or that cannot not exist,” in Harvey, “necessary being,” in *A Handbook of Theological Terms*.

## 8 Handbook of U.S. Theologies of Liberation

and a Power in and beyond us. That Reality and Power is commonly called God, upon whom we depend immediately for the breath and natural processes that quickened, and that sustain, our individual and common life. Although the Trinitarian formula for the Deity—Father, Son, and Holy Spirit—is commonplace in orthodox confession, the acknowledgment of God as our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer sheds light on the contingency of all creaturely existence: we owe the very idea of us, the fact of our coming into being and what agency we experience to One who is more than us. What capacity for transcendence or individuation we also experience is God’s gift to us. What initiative we demonstrate in discovering the length and breadth of that ability is our gift to God, to the world we inhabit, and to ourselves.

### Liberation Theology’s God-talk

Theology is God-talk, but it is not God talking; it is we humans who are doing the talking. Theology is a human enterprise filled with competing claims about who God is, about who we are, and about the world of vast resources God has created—it is presumed—for human companionship, stewardship, and consumption (Gen. 1:27ff.). Within the human family, there is splendid diversity of race, gender and sexual orientation. Christians are able to affirm God’s “foreseeing care” for and “guardianship”<sup>7</sup> of the finite, dependent creatures we happen to be in the gift of each other, and we certainly attribute to God’s providence the gift of God’s own son, Jesus, both as a sacrifice and as an exemplar of sacrificial love. This is perhaps the reason it is consistently signified within Christian scriptural and preaching traditions that God is, that “God is love,” and that God loves us.<sup>8</sup> The love of God for us (*pro nobis*) is at once transcendent and immediate, spontaneous and gratuitous (*ahabah*=Hebrew; *agape*=Greek), and produces a response of mutual (*phileo*) and embodied love (*eros*) in us.<sup>9</sup>

Orthodox perspectives that begin with the Bible are akin to theistic liberation perspectives that affirm the sovereignty of God over that of putative authorities. Liberation God-talk also speaks of God as Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer; as Giver and Gift. That is, liberation God-talk speaks of the love and providence of God, but it does so not only mystically and scripturally, but also *historically*. Liberation God-talk speaks of the ways in which humankind has experienced the gifts of God and interpreted the significance of both the giving and the given-ness. Liberation God-talk does *not* speak abstractly, apart from the concrete realities of people who are stratified favorably and unfavorably by the race, gender, sexual orientation, able-bodiedness, etc., with which they are endowed, and by the social class

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<sup>7</sup> *Webster’s Encyclopedic and Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language*, s.v. “providence.”

<sup>8</sup> See Deut. 7:8, 33:3; 1 Kings 10:9; 2 Chr. 2:11, 9:8; Sg; Jn. 3:16ff; 1 Jn. 4:8.

<sup>9</sup> Harvey, “Agape and Eros” in *A Handbook of Theological Terms*.

arrangements of the cultures and economies in which they live and work. Liberation God-talk from the lower tiers—the “underside”—of human history and experience attempts to demystify interpretations and arrogations of the Reality and Power in and beyond us that reify and contribute to the oppression of individuals and whole classes of people.

Black, Hispanic, womanist and feminist theologians therefore have not attempted to create logical proofs for the existence, essence, and activity of God as an object of abstract contemplation.<sup>10</sup> Rather, the survival and creative self-expression of theologies of liberation conducted on the margins of U.S. society emerged out of reflection on their people’s struggles for freedom and ontological recognition as beneficiaries, agents, and interpreters of God’s love and providence in the midst of their common experience of oppression.

#### Power for the Impossible

Consonant with orthodox faith in the Bible as a source of revelation, theologians from the underside of U.S. society begin with the affirmation that God *is*. For many, the radical personalism of the God of their experience at once comports with the evangelical heritage of, for example, the Black Church and flies in the face of the standalone God who is characterized by aseity and transcendence. In a variety of ways they attest to the character of their Ultimate Concern as creative, generative, relational, authoritative, ethical, transrational Power, who “can do what no other power can do.” Rooted in the faith traditions, and confessional utterances of their communities of accountability, they point to divine providence in, through, beyond, and despite the natural, social, economic, and political orders, and to divine empowerment to do “things impossible.” For them, “theology is the second step” in the experience, reflection, praxis model for doing theology. Thus the antecedent of the confession is the personal and collective experience of *requiring* the practically impossible—in managing, resisting, and overcoming, for example, the absurdities of the power dynamics in slavery and Jim-and-Jane-Crow America.

*God specializes in things impossible...* This theological understanding is consistent with the confessional posture of historically tyrannized groups like the Black Church<sup>11</sup> that was forged in oppression and in the evangelical

<sup>10</sup>See Hood, *Must God Remain Greek?*

<sup>11</sup>See Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church*. The book is the work of sociologists of religion. The authors define the Black Church as the seven historically black denominations, which are the African Methodist Episcopal Church, African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church, Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, the National Baptist Convention, National Baptist Convention-USA, Progressive Baptist Convention, and the Churches of God in Christ. I have not as narrowly construed the Black Church but rather include black congregations in white denominations and other bodies that are sourced by black culture and community.

## 10 *Handbook of U.S. Theologies of Liberation*

ethos of awakening, antebellum America.<sup>12</sup> While the management of evil and suffering (and the celebration of the good) lies in back of all religiosity, marginalized theologians construe their work as deeply theodical,<sup>13</sup> that is, inquiring of God concerning the remediation of the evil and suffering they experience personally and collectively. The primacy of experience in their theologies suggests that the most significant corollary doctrine for reflection on the idea of God is that of humanity.

### Liberation Theodicy

The classic formulation of the question of theodicy is, If God is perfectly good and perfectly just, then why does God permit evil and suffering to exist? This is the perennial question of humankind from age to age and culture to culture. It is a question about how to manage the vicissitudes of life and have some assurance about the place from where help will come. The human experience of living in the question of theodicy is responsible for the generation of myths to explain the origins of social structures and world orders that presently define us. Creation stories, for example, are theodicies, in that they seek to explain the origin of the good that exists, the ubiquity and intransigence of evil, and how to manage all of it intellectually and spiritually, individually and communally.

Any discussion of God—if it is to be liberating for humanity—must include the question of evil, addressing forthrightly the suffering and injustice that pervade human life. Evil involves the conscious and unconscious exercise of individual and/or systemic agency toward injurious consequences for others. Since such evil exercise involves intent, it is fundamentally unjust—a violation of human rights and an undermining of the respect each person is due in consequence of his and her finitude and vulnerability.

Suffering may be unrelated to the issue of justice (and therefore unrelated to evil), as in the case of illness, accidents, or natural disasters. But even so, such types of suffering may well be unjust, and therefore evil. Illness and accidents may stem from prolonged or brief exposure to structural oppression and to thought patterns that wreak havoc on the lives of individuals and classes of people, chronically debilitating and acutely delimiting their capacity for healthy development. In addition, the complexes of interdiction to which the poor of the world are subject comprise a system of “steal, kill, destroy.” In such a system advantaged classes take resources from communities and countries. In so doing they limit others’ life chances, destroy sub- and whole cultures, and exploit micro- and macroeconomies to promote their own interests. Although natural

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<sup>12</sup>To some extent, black faith in the God of the Bible gave to the emergent civil religion its emphasis on the experiential nature of religious truth.

<sup>13</sup>See Terrell, *Power in the Blood?*

disasters such as drought may not be averted, the way that first-world economies are structured to support dictatorial regimes or require debt repayment in the two-thirds world rather than provide resources for drought management promotes evil and suffering.

In any case, whatever precipitates it, pain—whether personal or communal, accidental or systemic—is part of the “*is-ness*” of life, a consequence of living under the conditions of mortality. Since pain *is*, what do we confess about God’s role in it? The questions of theodicy implicate the Creator God for the vulnerability to pain that fundamentally defines human existence. The liberationist asks: What does what we confess about God make us do about pain? How do we respond lovingly, creatively, ethically, and reasonably to the pain of oppression given the demands made on us by our relationship with a God whom we claim *is* love and who is also generative, ethical, and transrational? What does God’s own suffering (in Christ) speak to us about how we are to manage our own and others’ suffering?

Only sociopaths feel *only* their own pain. Liberation God-talk believes God is love. Such talk echoes what Charles Hartshorne, a process theologian, has affirmed, “God is the most affected being in the universe, the One who experiences everything”; indeed, “God is the one who matters to all things and to whom all things matter.”<sup>14</sup> Such belief makes it imperative for any theologian or preacher who purports to speak of and for God to address the causes and remedies for the suffering and pain in the world. And if God’s magnanimous and providential love evokes a response of mutual and embodied love in us, we must think not only of what it will take to remedy our pain but of what it will take to remedy others’ as well. Feminist theologian Susan B. Thistlethwaite avers that, “Good theology begins where the pain is.”<sup>15</sup>

Many U.S. theologians of liberation are confessing people with varying degrees and kinds of participation in both the work of the Church and the pain and struggles of the community. This makes them zealous to protect notions of the love of God for the people of God; of the inviolate nature of God’s justice in relationship to God’s love and in the working out of God’s purposes for creation; and of the sovereignty of God over the whole created order. In assiduously affirming God and tracing the roots of oppression to

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<sup>14</sup>I am grateful to my friend and colleague, Theo Walker, of Perkins School of Theology, Southern Methodist University for his insight on the ways process theology can benefit Black and Womanist theologies by helping to construct a concept of God that is attentive to the issue of theodicy at the same time it portends the deepened articulation of eschatological hope. I am also grateful to Tolonda Henderson, a graduate student at Chicago Theological Seminary, for pointing me to some other resources linking black theology and process thought. I have been open to this because of my long-standing, deep affinity with Taoism and Hinduism. My very inchoate reflections include a bent towards a kind of pantheism.

<sup>15</sup>Quoted from her university lectures.

## 12 *Handbook of U.S. Theologies of Liberation*

their human, systemic causes, these theologians have effectively reworked the questions of theodicy into questions of anthropodicy.<sup>16</sup>

### God as Liberator

Black theologians, in particular, have based their claims in the covenantal and prophetic traditions of the Bible, for they have seen in it a mirror image of their own world. Just as the Exodus from Egyptian slavery signaled the beginning of peoplehood for the children of Israel, so deliverance from American slavery was the beginning of peoplehood for African Americans. Just as the God of the Bible gave victory to David over Goliath, delivered Daniel from the lion's den, rescued the three Hebrew children from Nebuchadnezzar's fiery furnace, and raised Jesus from the dead, so black theologians attribute the personal and collective victories of black people from slavery to the present to the hand of God.

Because the God of the Bible made and makes impossible things possible, God continuously demonstrates love for God's people, asserts the justice of God beyond the will of their oppressors, and maintains for God's sovereignty over their enemies. The liberating activity of the God of the Bible and the experiences of God's people resonated with black theologians (as well as other theologians from historically marginalized groups), and they characterized their Redeemer from the structural sins of racism and classism as a Liberator. Through the prophets, this Liberator God preached woes to the rich, signifying a "preferential option for the poor" and marginalized.

For some marginalized theologians the correlation of the biblical stories and prophetic traditions with the history and experience of oppression justifies the belief that "God is on the side of the oppressed." They understand this faith-claim as a gift of divine assistance that also evokes the faithful and creative exercise of agency on the part of the oppressed. For blacks, this included the profoundly important task of reimagining the color of God in an attempt to wrest control of the commonly signified metaphor of a glorified white male from dominant art and the public mentality.<sup>17</sup> Kelly Brown Douglas traces this work of nascent black theologians to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, when Robert Alexander Young and African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Bishop Henry McNeal Turner argued for the ontological blackness of God, linking it to God's opposition to oppression (1994, 31). Bishop Turner's remarks (cited at the beginning of the chapter) are notable, not only because they are consistent with the Judeo-Christian tradition of anthropomorphizing God, but also because they are ontologically affirming and have the serendipitous effect of

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<sup>16</sup>See Terrell, *Power in the Blood?*, 143, in which I raise the question of anthropodicy in this God-affirming way: "Since God is good, why are people evil?"

<sup>17</sup>See Major Jones, *The Color of God*.



*theomorphizing* black people in their own assessment. In the context of late-1960s America, empowered by the reimagining, some black theologians affirmed the full range of humanly possible responses to the violence of race and class oppression.<sup>18</sup> Others agitated for civil rights and full participation in the American dream as part of a larger cosmic vision, while testifying to the hope of reconciliation that has been part and parcel of the love ethic and survivalist sensibilities of the African American community.<sup>19</sup>

Some womanist theologians have been reticent to identify God as a Liberator, in light of Delores S. Williams's explication of Hagar's story. Williams's study provides an alternative scriptural paradigm for understanding race, class, gender, and sexual oppression in black women's experience and God's response to it. Just as the biblical heroes Abraham and Sarah abused and exploited the Egyptian slave woman sexually, so whites abused and sexually exploited black children, women, and men, who were unable to resist fully on account of their status as slaves. Yet in and beyond slavery, black women have been and are subject to as unyielding and devastating a hierarchy within their own families, churches, and social and civic organizations on account of racism, poverty, sexism, and heterosexism. Just as Hagar did not experience God's deliverance but rather God's empowerment to endure, survive, and effect a meaningful "quality of life" for her son, herself and, ultimately, their community, so black women place a premium on this enabling.

In light of their lived experience of interstructured oppression<sup>20</sup> coming from outside as well as from *within* the African American community, womanists place into sharper relief the questions of theodicy/anthropodicy that have arisen out of black humanity's ongoing struggle against oppression. They question not only the aptness of the liberation motif in black theology but also the efficacy of the reworked image of God as black and *male* for black women to have a sense of themselves as being fully empowered by the Christian God. These questions are also being raised by women within the Hispanic, Asian, and Native American communities.

#### Liberation Theology and Christ

For black people generally, any discussion of Christ impinges on the doctrine of God, so closely held are the traditional, Trinitarian beliefs concerning the relationship between the Father (Creator), Son (Redeemer), and Holy Spirit (Sustainer). Jacquelyn Grant, Delores Williams, and Kelly Brown Douglas entered theological discourse by way of critiques of classical

<sup>18</sup>See James Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*; Cleage, *The Black Messiah*; Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*; and Wilmore and Cone, *Black Theology*.

<sup>19</sup>See King, *Stride Toward Freedom*, and *Strength to Love*. Also see Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation*.

<sup>20</sup>See Riggs, *Awake, Arise, Act*.

#### 14 *Handbook of U.S. Theologies of Liberation*

and black christologies and their deployment of Jesus'/God's maleness and color in furtherance of their strategies of domination and resistance. In so doing, the premier womanists identified with the exponentially charged significance of Jesus Christ who is "very God of very God" in the confession of black folks.

For Grant, the assertion that "Christ [God] is a black woman" radicalizes black women's conceptual apparatus for imaging God and carries a step further black theologians' notion of the blackness of God. Beyond black theology's signification of the Liberator God, she lifts up an additional image of Christ or God as the "divine co-sufferer." This recognizes the efficacy of the cross as a symbol of the pain and suffering in black life and acknowledges the Spirit's intercession on black humanity's behalf. Douglas's retort that "God is as Christ does" encourages Grant and other womanists to be ever more inclusive in defining the very humanity for whom God in Christ incarnated, lived, struggled, died, and presently intercedes. In so doing God in Christ provided a moral standard for believers that is paradoxically binding and liberative for all of humanity, even as it affirms the freedom of God.

Williams's survivalist paradigm and black women's lived experience offer insight on the ways that the Black Church and the African American community must really struggle to find appropriate images and God-concepts that do not ratify male oppression or mimic white power dynamics but that are accountable ultimately to the work of human liberation.

Other theologians from the United States margins stop short of indicting God for the pain of existence. Some embrace a radical humanism as an additional faith option that constitutes not so much a rejection of a divine principle but of the God-concept of the Christian church—its fantastical, often contradictory claims and exclusivist posture. William R. Jones was among the first to critique black theology's overreliance on the theme of theodicy, identifying it as a rhetorical prison that does not permit black theologians to question seriously the idea of God's goodness and power.<sup>21</sup> Anthony Pinn argues for the existence of a long-standing, deep-rooted humanist tradition<sup>22</sup> within black life and for an intellectual discourse that does not simply rely on the confessional posture of the predominantly Christian African American community, which sees itself as "churched" and "super-churched."<sup>23</sup>

Building on the cultural and religious heritage of Africa and displaced African cultures in the United States, the Caribbean, and other places, Pinn, Dianne Stewart<sup>24</sup> and others have begun to question the Christian

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<sup>21</sup>See William R. Jones, *Is God a White Racist?*

<sup>22</sup>See Pinn, *Why Lord?*

<sup>23</sup>See Lincoln and Mamiya, *The Black Church*.

<sup>24</sup>Stewart, *Three Eyes for the Journey*.

God-concept (its emphasis on a suffering God), that forces African Americans in particular to deal with questions of theodicy and agency in peculiar, often disempowering, ways. Moreover, we are faced with the pervasiveness of evil in human experience manifested in the genocidal conflicts in places around the globe, in terrorism and counterterrorism, and in the insatiable capacity of our nation, the last remaining superpower, to wage merciless war. These discussions of the place of theodicy in theology today provide the context for the last epigram, James Cone's quip: "God has got a lot of explaining to do."

With the people of their communities, disenfranchised by the present status quo, Christian theologians speak and act as sacramental witnesses to the Reality and Power in and beyond all of us. Attempting to be faithful signifiers of "God-with-all-of-us," they celebrate the love of God proclaimed in scripture, maintain the freedom of God illuminated in their inherited theological traditions, and defy the shameful arrogations of the sovereignty of God in their own lives and in the lives of others on the underside of human experience. Clothed, like the rest of creation, in mortality, they have experienced the extremes of vulnerability. Having accepted the ethical challenges respecting their own and others' finitude, they rigorously affirm the exercise of human agency in thoughtful, sustained interaction with the Bible and all the social, economic, and cultural tools at their disposal, to the ends of survival, liberation, and creative self-expression.