I Am Black and Beautiful: An Examination of the Black Coptic Church as the Manifestation of Liberation Theology

Leonard McKinnis
Loyola University Chicago

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LOYOLA UNIVERSITY CHICAGO

I AM BLACK AND BEAUTIFUL:
AN EXAMINATION OF THE BLACK COPTIC CHURCH AS THE
MANIFESTATION OF BLACK THEOLOGY

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

PROGRAM IN THEOLOGY

BY
LEONARD CORNELL MCKINNIS, II
CHICAGO, IL
MAY 2010
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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corner on a variety of issues including funding, teaching opportunities, and, of course, job prospects. I am blessed to have worked under his tutelage.

I am deeply grateful to my interview participants for making this project possible. We spent approximately 20 hours in interviews over a period of eight consecutive weeks. Their knowledge concerning the Black Coptic tradition is the only way this project was able to leave the launch pad and get underway. To Royal Priest Meshach, Candace Queen Rachel, Empress Selah, Prophet Hiram, Priest Stephen, Queen Huldah, Queen Marianne, Priest Eli, Queen Abigail, Empress Zion, Queen Mikel, and Prophet Hosea, I say thank you. Each of you provided substantive information for the completion of this dissertation. I am very grateful to have worked with all of you.

I want to express my sincere gratitude to the following persons for their support in the writing, formatting, and final binding of this dissertation. My Committee members, Dr. Dwight Hopkins, professor of Theology at the University of Chicago and leader in the field of black Theology, signed on to this project from the very beginning, and Sr. LaReine Mosely, agreed to work on my committee during her first year as a professor at Loyola University of Chicago. Vacera Morgan (Queen Huldah) and I spent many hours in Borders and her home engaging in critical dialogue about this dissertation. Her emails, long telephone calls, and private conversations helped me to formulate several chapters for this work.

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Although she is not a theologian, she is a “thinker.” Shaun Gholston, my editor, read every single word of this dissertation and provided wonderful suggestions for the final product.

My graduate school experience was funded by the State of Illinois Diversifying Faculty in Illinois Fellowships. Without the financial support of DFI, I am uncertain if I would have been able to complete this dissertation.

Over the course of this project, I have had the untiring support of my aunt Yolanda and uncle Rod. They have been a tremendous help to me. Their counsel, wisdom, prayers, and words of support truly helped me in this process. I would often call my aunt in times of stress and she always had the right words for the moment. She was faithful when I was not. My uncle Rod, with whom I share a wonderful relationship, has been the prayer warrior in my life; I am certain that his prayers have sustained me. My aunt and uncle are a constant sign of faith in my life. To be sure, they introduced me to a God Who is “mighty in battle,” and a God Who has “never lost a case.” When I doubted the ability of God to act in my life, both would remind me of a little story in Genesis, in which the moral of the story is: “God will provide.” And to be certain, God has been my Jehovah Jireh.

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And last but certainly not least, to the rock of my life, the stock from which I was made, and the person who loves in a way that I hope to one day love, my dear mother,
Cynthia Tate-Gardner. There are no words that can adequately express the gratitude I have for my mother. Since I set out on the road toward the PhD in 1999 when I enrolled in college, my mother has been the “well that hasn’t run dry.” I don’t think I have ever heard my mother tell me no. In fact, I wonder if she knows how to use the word! There was never a single moment when I called home in need of a word of prayer, encouragement, advice, and, of course, financial support, that my mother hasn’t made a way. My mother displays a type of love that must come from God. Her sacrifices are the only reason why this degree was possible. She has exhibited a sense of generosity that I hope to achieve one day. A God-fearing woman, my mother is certain of where her strength comes. Her faith in the God who is able to “make a way out of no way” has been the bridge in my life. People would often ask my mother, “Is your son going to ever finish school?” Well, mom, your son is done! Thank you for showing me the power of a mother’s love.
This dissertation is dedicated to Prophet Cicero Patterson; written in honor of my mother, Cynthia Tate-Gardner, and the memory of my father, the late Leonard C. McKinnis; and written for the Black Coptic Church.

The dissertation is composed in honor of the 40th anniversary of James H. Cone’s *Black Theology and Black Power*. James Cone is the reason why I love Theology.
Credo ut intelligam
Anselm of Canterbury
PREFACE

When I was five years old, my aunt and uncle asked my mother if I could attend their church service with them one Sunday morning. My mom agreed. I recalled the moment I walked inside True Temple of Solomon Coptic Church on Chicago’s South side. Although I was only five years old, I remember the splendor and majesty that immediately caught my eye. I saw black people wearing royal attire with crowns on their heads. In addition to the attire to which I was not accustomed, I heard the same black people addressing each other as prince, princess, queen, and king. For me it was like a fairytale. The only people that I had ever heard referred to as prince, queen, and other royal titles were members of the Royal family in Great Britain. But I was not in England. I was on the south side of Chicago in the heart of Englewood. Moreover, I heard the individuals in this church using a phrase which I had never heard: “Black Jesus.” This site intrigued me so much that at the very moment I arrived home, I told my mom I wanted to return.

Ever since I was a young boy, I have had a deep appreciation for the church, particularly the black church. However, I recall sitting in church with my mom one Sunday morning and thinking to myself, “where are all the black people in the Bible?” In the church I attended with my mother, there were various paintings around the church walls and even inside our Bibles. However, what interested me was the fact that everyone in the Bible did not look like me! I knew then, at four or five years old, that
something wasn’t right. If God created all people, then why were all the angels, all the disciples, all of the central figures of Scripture, and more importantly, God and Jesus only pictured as white people? Therefore, when I visited the True Temple of Solomon, it only seemed natural that I would have a connection with such an experience. I knew then, at five years old, that the church had some explaining to do. As a result, I asked the pastor of my mother’s church a very simple question: “where are all the black people in the Bible?” His answer did not satisfy me. I immediately (yes, at five years old) told my mother I wanted to leave her church and become a member of the Black Coptic Church. Such began my experience in the Black Coptic Church.

During the summer between my sophomore and junior years of college, I had the extraordinary privilege of serving as a White House intern under President George W. Bush. It was during this experience that I began to grapple with the question of faith and social justice. I believed in the gospel of Jesus the Christ. I was a Christian. It was His message of love of neighbor and love of God that I held central to the Gospel proclamation. However, during my tenure as a White House intern, I noticed a huge discrepancy in the government's response to issues such as poverty, racial discrimination, equal distribution of wealth, and the amount of educational funds that were used for inner city public schools in relation to more affluent suburban areas. I felt a trembling in my soul. The question I pondered during this experience was, “do I serve a government that ignores needs of the least of these? Or, do I return to the church and become a servant of my community?” It was suggested to me that I read James Cone’s God of the Oppressed.
I immediately ran to Borders and found a copy of this text. I read *God of the Oppressed*, and it changed my life. James Cone is the reason why I do Christian Theology.

After I finished my undergraduate studies, I applied to and was accepted at Harvard Divinity School. It was during my time at Harvard that I began to grapple with the question of faith and social justice. It soon dawned on me, however, that everything I was reading in black theological texts I had already heard as a member of the Black Coptic Church. In this regard, the theological principles and ideas contained in the academic study of black Theology were part and parcel of the theological program I had been engaged in since I was five years old. I was awe struck. I knew with certainty that my theological studies could not end at Harvard Divinity School. I decided, therefore, to pursue a Ph.D. in Systematic Theology.

This dissertation is my attempt at bringing together my faith background with my academic training in the area of Christian Systematic Theology. What follows is a yearning to move beyond the simple act of religiously professing a particular faith tradition without critical analysis and investigation. Although my spiritual formation began in the Black Coptic Church I am a committed student of Systematic Theology. Therefore, this dissertation is not an apologetic defense. On the contrary, it is a critical analysis of the Black Coptic Church, in an effort to demonstrate that this faith tradition laid the foundation for what would become black liberation Theology, and advances contemporary knowledge of said discipline.

Theology for me is like an adventure. It is in that spirit that I have composed this dissertation.
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# APPENDIX A: BLACK COPTIC CHURCH STATEMENT OF FAITH

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

What does the Black Coptic Church have to offer the study of Black Theology? This is the essential question this dissertation seeks to examine through a descriptive and constructive analysis. I submit the doctrinal formulation of black liberation Theology is locatable within the Black Coptic Church, which was founded, and still boasts its largest membership in Chicago. This is the tradition that has informed my own faith background and has played a tremendous role in my earlier theological convictions. In fact, I was attracted to this tradition as a young child because it seemed to offer its adherents a sense of dignity and pride coupled with spiritual development. Thus, I do not approach this project from an academically distant perspective. On the contrary, I am a participant observer who believes that this faith tradition nuances present explanations of Black Theology and promotes a theological program that makes it a viable candidate for the intersection of Black Theology and black religion. In my section on theological method, I will outline the challenges that I will come across as I seek to support this claim.

Stating the Problem

Black Theology is fundamentally a Theology of liberation. Its theological system is firstly, a double reflection on (1) the experience of social, political, economic, and
spiritual estrangement\(^1\) of black persons\(^2\) from their original state as Imago Dei, and (2) the essence of the Christian gospel, which is rooted in the resurrection of the self-revelation of God, Jesus the Christ. Secondly, in light of its reflective activity on black estrangement and the liberating power of the God who was made known in Jesus the Christ, Black Theology is committed to a program of *liberating Theology* from the center and relocating God-talk to the margins, where the oppressed are located. And lastly, Black Theology proposes a recapitulated vision of the church, its Theology and ecclesiology, and society, which advances the full dignity of black persons, thereby invalidating supremacists’ claims of black inferiority, which in essence, violate the principle of human beings as created in God’s own image.

As a theological venture, black Theology materialized on the slave plantations of North America. As Dwight Hopkins has suggested, “The African-American church begins in slavery; so, slave religion provides the first source for a constructive statement

\(\text{\cite{Cornel West}}\)

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\(^1\) Black liberation theologies are in agreement that oppression permeates every level of society (i.e., social,

\(^2\) I use black in this sense as a product of a historically socially constructed paradigm of race, which attached moral, ethical, intellectual, and religious values to “black.” It is inconceivable that prior to European invasion of Africa that Africans referred to themselves as “black Africans.” However, in light of the racial paradigms of race that permeated Enlightenment thought onward, the racial category “black” carried with it certain moral and aesthetic values that tested it against white, European constructions of beauty and truth. In this regard, that which was not white was not associated with beauty or truth. Therefore, when I say “black” persons, I am referencing the people of color throughout the globe whose moral, ethical, intellectual, and religious values have been deemed inferior and in need of conversion by those who dared to name and identify these “Black” people in ways that reflected the cultural assumptions of the powerful. Further, “black,” as a historical constructed paradigm of race, also assumes the consequences that kidnapped Africans have suffered and continue to suffer in light of the perceptions by those within the so-called dominant paradigm. These consequences include the myriad instances of injustices (e.g., social, economic, political, intellectual and religious) that blacks throughout the Diaspora (e.g., Latin America, North America, Africa, etc.) suffer daily. I, therefore, take for granted that where “blacks” are present in this world as a result of European invasion, including Africa, there one will find countless injustices that create a completely different racial paradigm in contrast to those groups that are the descendents of the powerful elite. See Cornel West, *Prophecy Deliverance: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity*, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002 (Anniversary Edition).
on black Theology of liberation.”\(^3\) From the clandestine meetings that birthed the religion of the slaves has emerged a Theology that takes seriously the black condition and various black experiences that define and form the foundation for North American black life and culture, including black religion. As a Theology that is primarily Christian, Black Theology problematizes white, western, abstract conceptions of Christian Theology that fail to relocate black suffering and misery from the footnotes of history to a valid theme in theological dialogue, thereby rendering liberation and freedom as the intention of the Gospel of Jesus the Christ. It is this movement within Christian Theology that forces a new way of understanding the Gospel message in light of inhumane social conditions.

While my research interest is broadly in the area of black Theology, this dissertation concerns itself with the theological development of the Black Coptic Church, and the ways in which this independent, free Christian church nuances our understanding of Black Theology. While Black Theology has been linked to certain social causes, such as the Civil Rights Movement, and even as its guiding principles gave birth to slave rebellions, there seems to be a lack of literature that exhibits the manifestation of Black Theology as constructed in the academy within the Black Church\(^4\) community. This

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4 In their *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya used the term “Black Church” as a descriptive category to describe the “sociological and theological shorthand reference to the pluralism of the black Christian churches in the United States.” However, in their own study, the term “Black Church” was limited “to those independent, historic, and totally black-controlled denominations, which were founded after the Free African Society of 1787 and which constituted the core of black Christians.” (See C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, eds., *The Black Church in the African American Experience*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1990, 1.) Therefore, Lincoln and Mamiya’s study was limited to the so-called seven major denominations which made up 80% of all black Christians. In light of Arthur Huff Fauset’s *Black Gods of the Metropolis*, which examines the emergence of smaller black religious “cults” of the urban north during the middle part of the 20th century, this dissertation project will broaden and problematize Lincoln and Mamiya’s definition. For the purpose
project examines the expression of Black Theology in the Black Coptic Church. Particularly, I seek to investigate how this religious community broadens the term “Black Theology,” and how its theological program renders it as an expression of not only what black theologians have been constructing, but as a theological venture that pre-dates the black theological project.

This dissertation explores the intersection of Black Theology academically conceived and liberation Theology as the heart of the theological framework in the Black Coptic Church, founded by Prophet Cicero Patterson. Ira Reid briefly mentioned this Church in his *In a Minor Key*; beyond this, however, there has not been any major scholarly research produced in relation to this black Christian denomination. It is my claim that this Christian church not only exemplifies the practice of Black Theology, but that its theological and ecclesiological foundations have something to offer the already pre-established understandings of Black liberation Theology. Thus, this dissertation first offers a descriptive analysis of the history, Theology, teachings, and practices of the Black Coptic Church that render this church unique and, second, offers an analytical construction of the ways in which this church furthers our understanding of black liberation Theology.

of this study, the “Black Church” includes not only the original seven major black denominations but also the religious cults which Fauset examined (e.g., the Moorish Science Temple, Daddy Grace, the Black Coptic Church), non-Protestant congregations with majority black congregants (e.g., St. Sabina Catholic Church, Chicago), historically white churches with black congregations that advance a social gospel (e.g., Trinity United Church of Christ), and also non-Christian religious organizations that advance a social ministry (e.g., Nation of Islam). This definition of the “Black Church,” therefore, seeks to make a connection between those black churches which arose as a result of racism in white churches, and also those churches or religious organizations, young or old, which make a direct linkage between the Christian gospel and the plight of blacks in North America.

5 Ira D. Reid, *In a Minor Key: Negro Youth in Story and Fact*, Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1940, 84.
Black Theology and the Black Church

This dissertation rests on the assumption that there is, indeed, a gap between Black Theology as an academic enterprise and the religion of North American blacks. To be sure, this is not an original thesis, yet one that is essential to this dissertation project. The chasm that currently exists between black Theology and the black church seems to lie in a mutual suspicion between the two groups. On the one hand, as Dale Andrews has pointed out, Black Theology, as articulated by James Cone and other earlier proponents, seemed to be suspicious of the Black Church “as spiritually removed or ‘otherworldly.’” This point was further advanced in 1966 by the National Committee of Negro Churchmen whose statement on Black Theology maintained: “Too often, the Negro church has stirred [sic] its members away from the reign of God in this world to a distorted and complacent view of an otherworldly conception of God’s power.” The prevalent idea implicit in these statements seems to suggest that the Black Church of the 1960s was an “escapist” church that advanced a disembodied Theology that prioritized the ‘not yet’ of Christian eschatology, and tragically ignored the ‘already’ of Christian hope. Black Theology, therefore, at least in its earlier stages, was suspicious of what Ira Reid called the “prayerful procrastinations” of the established Black Church.

On the other hand, however, the Black Church did not fully embrace the merging of the Black Church and the Black Power movement, which seemed to be the program of

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8 Reid. 86.
Black Theology. It is true that “the majority of black churches criticized the movement for its inherent reductionism and divisiveness. Black churches contested that black Theology advanced black power in a neglect of the gospel message of universal Christian love.”9 The church understood itself as the witness and symbol of God’s universal saving grace that was for all people at all times. James Cone, on the other hand, although not neglectful of the universality of God’s saving grace, was convinced that the sitz im leben of the 1960s demanded a gospel message that took seriously the particularities of black suffering and oppression, and therefore, articulated the Christian message as a good news narrative for the most oppressed of society. For Cone, the most oppressed were black people.

This reciprocated suspicion between Theology and the Black Church can be related to the theological “sources” for said communities. To be sure, the Black Church is a Western Church that grew out of the black social and religious experiences as exiles and strangers in the white church. Therefore, it is a church that, for the most part, accepts the creeds of the Christian Church and the Bible as valid sources for Christian Theology. While Black theologians do not disregard such sources as foundational for the formation of Christian Theology, they draw from other sources, including black cultural and art expressions (e.g., slave narratives, blues, jazz, poetry, art, etc.), in their theological development. In fact, black Theology in its earlier stages can be said to be the theological voice for the more secular Black Power movement.10 In building a bridge

9 Andrews, 4.

between Black Theology and Black Power, black theologians “claimed that Western Christianity was ideologically riddled with oppressive racial domination and images of superiority. Consequently, black Theology sought to liberate black religious thinking from the ravages of white ideology.”

Although James Cone contends that “black Theology is not academic Theology,” there is clearly a rift between theory and practice. James Harris, in his essay on “Black Church and Black Theology: Theory and Practice,” makes the argument that the conversation between black academicians concerning Black Theology is not the conversation taking place in black churches. He maintains, “Few ministers who labor in black churches are aware that black Theology is a discipline of study and reflection. Consequently, interest in and understanding of black liberation Theology barely exists among the majority of persons I have encountered in the black church.”

This gulf between these two communities presents a serious challenge to Black Theology, to the extent that the very community which it seeks to empower for liberation, has little to no knowledge concerning this theological venture. Yet, this dissertation will make the claim that within the Black Coptic Church, one will find a black church tradition that is, in fact, theologically grounded in liberation.

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11 Andrews, 3.


14 Ibid., 85.
The Black Coptic Church

The founding of the Black Coptic Church did not take place inside a vacuum. On the contrary, the historical situations of the middle twentieth century in the urban North provided the necessary framework for the evolution of independent black religious movements that sought to offer an alternative to mainline Christianity of its day. Alongside the Black Coptic Church, other smaller religious movements that saw a connection between spiritual identity and racial formation thrived and flourished. As Arthur Fauset points out:

With the migration of Negroes from the rural South to urban centers, a transformation in the basic religious life and attitudes also is observable. The church, once a sine qua non of institutional life among American Negroes, does not escape the critical inquiry of the newer generations, who implicitly and sometimes very explicitly are requiring definite pragmatic sanctions if they are to be included among churchgoers, or if indeed they are to give any consideration at all to religious practices and beliefs.

Therefore, in Chicago and Detroit, during the middle twentieth century, one sees the emergence of religious movements, such as the Nation of Islam, Moorish Science Temple, Black Jews, and the Black Coptic Church, that sought to address both the religious and the identity crisis of the black community. In others words, these groups, at least in their origin, seemed to define themselves against the prevailing religious ideas of their day, which they understood as offering little to no response to the social situation facing black America.

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16 Ibid., 7.
“Come one, come all, and learn about the Black Jesus, the Black Mother Mary, and all the Black Prophets,” are the words from a sign that hung in the window of the first Black Coptic Church in Chicago, located at 4724 South Cottage Grove Avenue, circa 1935. The organization’s first spiritual leader, Prophet Cicero Patterson, founded an organization that claimed its heritage in ancient Egypt and Ethiopia, with the intention of speaking to blacks in North America. Dissatisfied with mainline Christianity of his day, Prophet Cicero was convinced that the black church’s role was not only to “save souls” in preparation for the next life but, on the contrary, he contended that the Black Church must be an institution that aided in “saving” black people from social, economic, psychological, and political oppression that lingered from 400 years of chattel slavery and Jim Crow. Thus, Prophet Cicero’s emphasis on the “Black Jesus” and the black presence in the Bible are symbols that point not only toward spiritual salvation, but also toward the possibility of liberation in this temporal existence. Therefore, “black” in the theological affirmations of the Black Coptic Church is not a category of race nor is it an ontological category. On the contrary, “black” functions as a paradigmatic symbol which points to the divine act of liberation. I say divine because the claim in the Black Coptic Church is that God wills human liberation.

At the heart of the Black Coptic Church is a twofold liberation from spiritual estrangement that sought to define black persons outside of the image of God and also from social estrangement as a result of social, political, sexist, economic structures that


deem black persons as worthless. It is this twofold sense of liberation that is not only identifiable theoretically but also through proclamation and practice that renders the Black Coptic Church as an institution that advances black Theology beyond “academic,” abstract, and philosophical Theology that is mainly found in intellectual circles, to a practice, indeed a form of life, that shapes the spiritual and social life of its adherents.

**Theological Procedure**

As mentioned earlier, the lack of scholarly literature related to the founding of the Black Coptic Church presents several challenges for this dissertation project. In terms of theological procedure, therefore, I have relied on an oral tradition, church archives, the church’s statement of faith, and church writings, in order to get at the core of the Theology and history of the Black Coptic Church. My retrieval of the oral history and theological claims of the Black Coptic Church primarily took place via interviews with members of the Church who have been a part of this religious movement for 25 years and more. Over a period of 9 group sessions, I met with members via semi-structured interviews, which were geared toward a retrieval of history and theological claims. The predetermined topics of these interviews were history, Theology, teachings, practices, ecclesiology, pneumatology, and the role of women in the church. I fully recognize that within an oral tradition, there is a great possibility of various interpretations of theological claims and also various versions of church history. In an effort to resolve inconsistent statements, I included and took advantage of follow-up interviews in my IRB proposal. I am, nonetheless, aware that employing such a method will present its own set of problems.
With the absence of written material, I am aware that my construction and interpretation of the Theology of this tradition in relation to Black Theology may not be absolutely congruent with the ways in which adherents interpret this tradition. However, as the authority and expert of this dissertation project, I have sought to provide a presentation of this theological tradition with full integrity. Yet the absence of written sources renders it impossible to situate my arguments in relation to already-existing material.

A second challenge to this dissertation is my own set of personal biases. Theology is human language about God. Consequently, it is necessarily subjective and is always done from the situation of the theologian. Paul Tillich in his "Systematic Theology, Volume 1," speaks of the theological circle. The theologian, maintains Tillich, always stands within and outside the theological circle. This is my own situation. Inside the circle, I have known and practiced this tradition since my childhood years. Outside the circle, I am a trained theologian whose own understanding of Christian Theology has been influenced by my studies of Christian thought. As a result, I stand outside the circle, critically examining this tradition while seeking to construct an intelligible interpretation of the Black Coptic Church that takes seriously the modern situation and the many challenges of contemporary Theology.

19 Given the fact that I have been raised in this tradition, I am fully aware of the role that the oral tradition has played in this community. While the basic tenets of faith are coherent among the different churches that exist, the absence of written literature leads to different interpretations on certain theological and ethical issues which, in the end, will rest with the hermeneutical liberty of the author of this dissertation in terms of making concrete theological decisions.

A third and final challenge to this dissertation is related to the previously mentioned challenges, namely, given the lack of written material concerning this faith tradition. I had the task of constructing a historical analysis of this tradition, while not offering an exhaustive history of the Black Coptic Church. In my chapter descriptions section of this introduction, I explain a chapter that surveys the main historical points of the Black Coptic Church. However, the aim of this dissertation is not to write a historical narrative of the Black Coptic Church. On the contrary, I highlight what I consider to be the constitutive elements of the history of this church that are beneficial to the construction of this dissertation.

Throughout its history, the Black Coptic Church has kept an immense amount of material in its church archives that includes video footage and voice recordings of the church’s founders and earlier years. Included in these archives are recordings of past services, bible classes, and other important services, which help to shed light on the history and theological development of the Black Coptic Church. For the purpose of this dissertation, I focused my attention on archives that spoke to church history and church teachings as a theological source.

A second source for theological procedure was a close reading and interpretation of the church’s statement of faith. While there does not exist an explicit systematic theological manual of the Black Coptic Church, there does exist a statement of faith that

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21 While all Black Coptic Churches understand their foundation to be related to Prophet Cicero Patterson, the Black Coptic Church is separated by two major groups: Coptic, After The Order of Melchizedek (ATOM), founded in 2004, and all other Black Coptic Churches. Coptic ATOM is an association of Black Coptic Churches, seeking to unify the Black Coptic Church in doctrine, teaching and practice. For the purpose of this dissertation, I will utilize the Statement of Faith as adopted by Coptic ATOM.
adorns the walls of most churches. Where there might exist several interpretations of theological claims, I relied on the statement of faith as the authoritative instructive document concerning church beliefs and the way in which the church orders its systematic Theology. Therefore, the statement of faith was instrumental in determining the church’s Theology in relation to the wider Christian community, especially to the Creeds of the Christian church.

The theological method of this dissertation is firstly correlational and secondly constructive. In his *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism*, Victor Anderson writes that “Black Theology’s method is correlational. The task of the black theologian is to show the critical correlations existing between black life/experience and traditional theological categories (God, humanity, Christ, eschatology, and so forth), between black religion and black radicalism (Wilmore, 1983), and the correlations between black church and black Theology.” This dissertation’s methodological procedure consists of demonstrating correlations that exist between the Black Coptic Church and black theological categories (i.e., God, Jesus, eschatology). Yet, this dissertation is not simply correlational, but its second methodological move is constructive in that I seek to demonstrate the ways in which the Black Coptic Church nuances the term “Black Theology.”

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22 Here, I refer to Black Coptic churches ATOM.

23 In the dissertation, I will explain further my usage of the Statement of Faith as the authoritative document of the church.

24 Anderson, 86.
Chapter Descriptions

Part One: Descriptive

Chapter One: Laying the Groundwork: Toward a History of the Black Coptic Church

In Chapter One, I offer a historical overview of the Black Coptic Church. This chapter introduces the reader to this independent, free black church as an organization that does not take place inside a vacuum but rather as a religious movement flourishing as a part of the “new black church” in the 1930s. Indeed, this new church “arising among Negroes—[is] a militant church, one that is concerning itself with the problems of the masses.”

This “new church” that sociologist Ira Reid discussed was a church that was not content with the “next life” Theology of the mainstream church that neglected the situations of suffering and misery in this life. Reid suggests, “Today, Father Divine, Elder Michaux, Daddy Grace, Moslem sects, congregations of Black Jews, and the Coptic Church have been added to the church organizations existing among Negroes.”

This “new church” is one that “is more socially adapted to the … arduousness and bitter realities of race, than the prayerful procrastination of the church institutions they now supplant.”

I divide this Chapter into four major sections: The Early Black Coptic Church, The Black Coptic Church under the leadership of Prophet Peter Banks, The Black Coptic Church in search of an identity, and The Contemporary Black Coptic Church.

25 Reid, 84.
26 Ibid., 84.
27 Ibid., 84.
And lastly, a major and crucial move the Black Coptic Church has made is its reforming of the ecclesiological structure of its church to reflect the ancient identification link that relates it to the royal past of ancient Egypt. Therefore, congregants in this communion are not known as “Brother” or “Sister,” but rather each member holds a royal title such as princess, prince or queen. This chapter examines how these titles function in this brand of liberation Theology. This chapter makes the claim that these titles are part and parcel of the church’s mission as a church grounded in liberation Theology with one of its goals as a psychological transformation that impacts how congregants view themselves in relationship to this world, to each other, and in relation to God.

Chapter Two: A Theology of Liberation: Toward a Constructive Understanding of the Theology of the Black Coptic Church

At the heart of the Theology of the Black Coptic Church is liberation. This “liberation” of its theological program is not a one-sided understanding of liberation centered on race. On the contrary, the “liberation” of the theological program of the Black Coptic Church concerns itself with the internalized oppression ingrained in the consciousness of Blacks in North America that affects both black spirituality and social mobility. Accordingly, its Theology is one of “conscientization,”28 which seeks to undo the psychological damage of oppression. Therefore, its theological program, in many ways, can be said to be a “transformative Theology of liberation,” grounded in the idea that black Americans suffer from an oppressed consciousness that lends itself to other forms of oppression. Consequently, undergoing a transformation of consciousness allows for the possibility of other forms of liberation.

This chapter presents the Black Coptic Church’s theological program as one that is simultaneously Christocentric and anthropocentric—Christocentric in the sense that God’s plan for humanity has been made known in Jesus the Christ, and anthropocentric in that this plan for humanity as made known in Jesus the Christ makes urgent the need for human liberation. The implication of Chalcedonian Christology seems to be that as a human being Jesus the Christ identifies with the human condition, yet, as God he reconciles humanity back to himself. Consequently, there is always a relationship, a back and forth, between God and humanity and humanity and God. If, however, Jesus the Christ stands at the center of Christian Faith, then at the center is both God and humanity in a covenant relationship that has been revealed in the incarnation, and consummated in the resurrection. This understanding of Jesus the Christ and humanity plays a major role in the development of Black Coptic Theology.

Part Two: Analytical

Chapter Three Thank you, Black Jesus! From Christology to Jesusology

Chapter Three of the dissertation is an extension of Chapter Two. However, it singly highlights one of the central claims within the Black Coptic Church, namely, that that a “Black Jesus” offers the best hope for the possibility of liberation of black persons who historically have been “given” a Jesus who was in the image of their oppressor, thereby validating black suffering and oppression. The Council of Chalcedon declared Jesus the Christ is “the same perfect in divinity and perfect in humanity, the same truly God and

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29 The Black Coptic Church (ATOM) reads, “We believe in the incarnate Logos, the embodiment of ‘I Am’ in the flesh, the fulfillment of the law; The Christ, Black Jesus…”

truly man, composed of rational soul and body … like us in all things but sin.” However, this chapter raises the question, “How has Jesus the human being, who was perfect in his humanity, functioned in Christian Theology as a source of liberation?” The overall intention of this chapter will be to demonstrate how “black” functions as a symbol of identification and liberation in the naming of the “Black Jesus.”

To be sure, the risen Christ is none other than the crucified Jesus. This chapter pays particular attention to the ways in which the “Black Jesus’ has been employed in the Black Coptic Church, while situating such conversation within the context of Black Theology, particularly through the works of James Cone and Kelly Brown Douglass. This chapter advances Kelly Brown Douglass’ thesis that the presentation of Jesus as the “Christ,” the resurrected one who offers spiritual redemption, while undermining the significance of the historical Jesus, served to support the agenda of oppression. Brown-Douglass writes,

In general, an interpretation of Christianity that focuses on God’s coming from heaven and becoming incarnate in Jesus, while sacrificing Jesus’ ministry, unleashes the possibility for the emergence of the White Christ. Undergirded with such an understanding of Christianity, slaveholders were free to develop a notion of Christ that justified the enslavement of Africans. And so they did. It was the White Christ, as the center of slave-holding Christianity, that allowed white slaveholders to engage in Black slavery with religious impunity.

This chapter argues that the Black Coptic Church, since its inception, has laid claim to the image and functioning symbol of the Black Jesus in its Theology, thereby relating the qualifier “Black” to both the oppression (identification and solidarity of the Black Christ


32 Brown-Douglass, 14.
with black persons) and deliverance (liberation) of black persons. Further, the placement
of Jesus, at the center of its theological program, provides the framework for this tradition
to take seriously what information we have about the ministry of the historical Jesus as
found in the Christian gospels.

Chapter Four: History and Promise: Toward a Constructive Black Pneumatology

“But the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will
teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you,”33 was the promise of
Jesus to his disciples, who were afraid that he was leaving and would therefore orphan
them, concerning his presence with them after his forthcoming death. In the Black
Coptic Church, the Holy Spirit as advocate who “teaches” serves a tri-dimensional
purpose: to teach the “past, present, and future.” The relationship between the past and
the future and history and salvation is consummated with the coming of the promise of
the Holy Spirit. Therefore, in the Black Coptic Church, the Holy Spirit acts as memoria,
bridging, on one hand, the history of God as deliverer, thereby signaling the promise of a
better future, and, on the other hand, linking an ancient past (Egypt, which celebrated
black culture and life), to the present situations of life, allowing adherents of the Black
Coptic Church to see their history as affecting the present. In this case, while it is true
that the social conditions of black life in America provided the fertile ground for religious
organizations that blended the social and religious aspects, the claim in the Black Coptic
Church is that outside of social conditions such as racism, the Holy Spirit would,
nonetheless, serve the same function as bringing to memory the history of God and
humanity.

33 John 14:26
Although there is little development of Pneumatology in Black Theology, several black scholars (e.g., James Cone, Clifton Johnson, George Cummings and Will Coleman) have gone to lengths to demonstrate how the Holy Spirit was operative and functioned in the development of “Brush Harbor” Theology, which was developed by black slaves. To the extent that Black Theology begins on the slave plantations of North America, these efforts to trace an understanding of the Holy Spirit among the slaves are valid theological moves, which prove that slaves were not content with the “given” Christian Theology of slaveholding Christians. George Cummings posits that the Holy Spirit was a source of empowerment and agency, and also as that Spirit which engendered a transformative imagination of the future that broke with the present social order. Cummings maintains that the slaves’ “encounter/visions with the Spirit enabled them to have the courage and hope to translate their experiences of hope into concrete actions of escaping to freedom.” Further, the Spirit “entailed the affirmation of independence and selfhood … [and] served as the basis of love within the slave community …” In other words, the Holy Spirit was efficacious upon the slaves’ present and future.

One of the distinct characteristics of the Black Coptic Church, however, is its explicit assertion of the “Black Holy Spirit.” Jose Comblin offers an account of the ways in which the Holy Spirit functions in the development of Latin American liberation

36 Ibid., 52.
37 Ibid., 49.
For Comblin, the Spirit is at work by the “means of the enlightenment and prophetic charisma of mighty leaders, by means of the union and solidarity of living communities and by means of the enthusiasm of the multitudes that these communities and prophets succeed in arousing.” In a similar vein, this chapter offers an assessment of how “black” functions as a qualifier to the work and operation of the doctrine of the Holy Spirit in the Black Coptic Church. The Black Coptic Church proclaims that “We believe in the Holy Spirit, the comforter, the ever-present spirit of God …” The Holy Spirit as “black” Holy Spirit does not suggest an accidental quality such as race upon the Holy Spirit, but rather Holy Spirit as “black” was the solidarity presence of God which empowered former slaves to rebel against slavery, and is the continued presence of God among the poor and the oppressed, authorizing and approving them to take control of their destiny. This chapter advances the argument that this understanding of the Holy Spirit makes the move toward an authentic black Pneumatology, which is grounded in spiritual liberation that impinges upon our humanity.

In a further constructive move, highlighting a pneumatological nuance which the Black Coptic Church offers concerning the relationship between the Holy Spirit and epistemology, this chapter critiques the predominance of categorical experience as the starting point, and therefore as the primary epistemological source in the study of Black Theology. I argue the thesis that categorical experiences of suffering and oppression,

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39 Comblin, 147.

40 See Coptic, ATOM Statement of Faith
from which Black Theology makes its point of departure, should have, on all accounts, led slaves to reject the Christian message. However, to the extent that, by and large, enslaved Africans accepted and established their own understanding of the Christian gospel, which differed radically from the perverted gospel that was presented to them, I propose, through a retrieval of Karl Rahner’s transcendental anthropology, the reality of a transcendental experience within the slave community, which engendered an acceptance of Jesus as the Christ in spite of their initial encounter with Christianity. The Holy Spirit as a pneumatological source, as posited in the Black Coptic Church, provides the springboard for such a construction.

**Chapter Five: Singing and Teaching, But Dare Not to Lead: Women and Leadership in the Black Coptic Church**

Chapter Five of the dissertation offers a constructive criticism of the tradition through an examination of what I deem to be a failure and counterproductive theological stance within the Black Coptic Church and one that stands in direct contradiction to the church’s founding and claim to liberation Theology. This chapter advances Cheryl Townsend Gilkes’ claim that while women are able to sing, lead the usher board, teach Sunday school, and cook for the church, the glass ceiling to leadership represents one of the bigger barriers for women in the Black Church.  

41 This chapter offers an assessment of theological reasoning within the Black Coptic Church concerning women in leadership, while making the argument that such an ecclesiological structure undermines the goals and aims of liberation inherent in the church’s doctrine. This chapter places such an

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ecclesiology within the larger struggle of women to be viewed as equal in God’s sight, while advancing a discipleship of equals as posited by Elisabeth Schussler-Fiorenza.\(^{42}\)

**Chapter Six: A Look Backwards and a Glance Ahead**

The concluding chapter of the dissertation serves a twofold purpose. On the one hand, it offers a summary of the constructive elements which the Black Coptic Church adds to the study of Black Theology and Christian Theology in general. As a summation, this chapter has as its goal to re-emphasize the thesis of the dissertation while stating how the thesis was supported throughout the project.

On the other hand, this chapter will look ahead by raising a question that it deems to be necessary as the Black Coptic Church moves toward the future. In light of the historical context of the Black Coptic Church, Chapter Seven of the dissertation will situate the founding of the Black Coptic Church as a movement that sought to define itself against what it deemed to be the inadequacy of the Negro church of its day. Therefore, this chapter will maintain that historical conditions, namely racism and social disparities, rendered it possible for the founding of the Black Coptic Church, and will therefore raise the question as to whether or not the church can continue to survive as the social contextual chasm of its founding and present day grows larger. And finally, this chapter will offer suggestions for the future of the Black Coptic Church.

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CHAPTER TWO
TOWARD A HISTORY OF THE BLACK COPTIC CHURCH

As I discussed in the introduction, the history of the Black Coptic Church in North America is primarily an oral history. Therefore, the accuracy of this attempt at presenting, with integrity, a general history of the Black Coptic Church, is ultimately dependent upon the memory of those who participated in the project. Nonetheless, after several group meetings as well as individual interviews with church participants, I am satisfied with the history that is presented here. This chapter is not intended to present an exhaustive history of the Black Coptic Church. Instead, it is my intent to present a broad overview of the people and events that helped to shape the formation and lay the foundation for said organization. This chapter highlights the historical events that are essential to grasping the development of the Black Coptic Church, as well as those events that are fundamental to the central premise of this dissertation.

Who are the Black Copts?

When I began my research into the origins of the Black Coptic Church, one of the fundamental questions that I sought to answer was why Prophet Cicero Patterson chose to identify this congregation as Coptic. To the extent that there existed established black churches, and also a Coptic Church of Egypt, my quest was twofold: on one hand, I was interested in learning why the church’s founder saw a need to establish a new black
church; and, secondly, I was very interested in learning the connection, if any, that existed between the Black Coptic Church as founded by Prophet Cicero and the Coptic Church of Egypt. My interview participants suggested that, while there are some similarities between the Black Coptic Church and the Coptic Church of Egypt, the Black Coptic Church as founded by Prophet Cicero is not the Coptic Church of Egypt and, therefore, the church seeks to create its own identity in naming itself “The Coptic Church after the order of Melchizedek.”

To be sure, Prophet Cicero was aware of the existence of the Coptic Church of Egypt. In his booklet, *Black I am that I am God*, Prophet Cicero mentions, among other things, ancient Egypt and its influence upon early Christianity. Thus, the naming of this community as the Coptic Church was intentional and part and parcel of the church’s liberative theological program. My interviews with church participants lead me to make the claim that the naming of this community as Coptic expressed the idea of a church that seeks to resurrect the ancient heritage of black persons through the construction of a link between North American blacks and the oldest black Christian community. The church highlights the degree of disconnectedness that happened as a result of the slave trade, kidnapped Africans’ sojourn in North America, and the lasting legacy of the North American institution of slavery. Therefore, the naming of this community as Coptic expresses the attempt of the founder to reconnect African-Americans to an ancient heritage of ancient Egypt, in which black life, black culture, and black religion flourished.

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43 Melchizedek is the adopted name of Prophet Cicero Patterson

and were celebrated. The naming of this community, then, as Coptic creates a cultural, psychological, and religious link between the descendants of North American slaves as authentic descendants of ancient Egyptian kings and queens, and blacks in North America.\textsuperscript{45}

In the North American context, where the Black Coptic Church found its origin, the notion of connectedness plays a crucial role in the church’s history and foundation. Queen Maryann Martin suggested that “During the slave trade, we were not allowed to take our God with us,” and therefore, “we had lost our connection to our God, and so Prophet Cicero connected us back to the image of God so that we would not allow ourselves to be cut off from the root again.”\textsuperscript{46} She further articulated that by “naming us as Copts, Prophet Cicero took the tree back to its roots. Egypt is the beginning of civilization. So, by naming the organization as Coptic, he connected us to the origin of God's creation.”\textsuperscript{47} Royal Priest Meshach Gardiner suggested that Prophet Cicero found in Egypt “a civilization in which black men and women governed themselves independently, created science, math, and religion, which eventually converted to Christianity because they saw a connection between the principles of Jesus and their ancient ideas. As black Copts, we claim that same heritage.”\textsuperscript{48}

\textsuperscript{45} Priest Meshach Gardiner, The History of the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 22 June 2009.

\textsuperscript{46} Queen Maryann Martin, The History of the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 22 June 2009.

\textsuperscript{47} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{48} Priest Meshach Gardiner, The History of the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 22 June 2009.
Prophet Cicero's decision to identify this organization as Coptic represented a paradigm shift in the history of black religion in North America. To be sure, however, the paradigmatic shift in which Prophet Cicero operated was a paradigm shift that was burgeoning in the Urban North during the 1930s. Sociologist Arthur Huff Fauset maintains that:

The desire for freer self-expression than was possible in the prevailing white churches, plus an insistence on the part of certain Negroes, especially in the North, that the Christian philosophy of the universal brotherhood of man [sic] must include Negroes, did much to foster the separation which began to develop between white and Negro worshipers.⁴⁹

Fauset further maintains that in “northern centers, Negroes fought vigorously against segregation in church edifices and against other forms of racial discrimination.”⁵⁰ Consequently, in Chicago, Illinois, during the 1930s, one saw the emergence of several black religious institutions that sought to make a correlation between one's religious identity and the longing for black emancipation.

Prophet Cicero's organization, coincidentally, was one of several religious organizations in 1930s Chicago, which included the nation of Islam, the Moorish Science Temple, and the Black Jews, whose religious program was part and parcel of its program of identity formation. In naming his organization as Coptic, Prophet Cicero made a decisive break with the established black churches, and created a relationship between the adherents of the Black Coptic Church and the Coptic Church of Egypt, which traces its


⁵⁰ Ibid.
ancestry to the ancient Egyptian dynasties that were led by black kings in queens. Queen Maryann maintains that Prophet Cicero's decision to identify this organization as Coptic was not to isolate this community from the larger black church community, per se. On the contrary, she maintains that Prophet Cicero's decision to name the church as Coptic was precisely to inculcate an identity in a people whose heritage and culture had been stripped from them by a world that deemed them as inferior.  

The Origins of the Black Coptic Church as an Institution

The genesis of the Black Coptic Church as an institution in North America is traceable to Prophet Cicero Patterson, who began in his missionary ministry in Atlanta, Georgia. Very little information exists about the biography of Prophet Cicero prior to his religious engagement with the Black Coptic Church’s earliest converts. However, there are several elderly members of the church who were members of Prophet Cicero’s organization that are still active in the community. Queen Maryann Martin, who joined the Black Coptic Church in 1958, indicated that Prophet Cicero “was a missionary in Atlanta. While in Atlanta, he had people who joined his class, but he had not yet established a church.” Prophet Cicero's missionary efforts in Atlanta were not long-lived due to an apparent encounter with law enforcement. Although the circumstances of Prophet Cicero's encounter with officials in Atlanta are not well known, oral tradition of the church suggests that Prophet Cicero's teachings regarding a Black Jesus were not well

51 Queen Maryann Martin, The History of the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 22 June 2009.

52 Queen Maryann Martin, The History of the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 22 June 2009.

53 Ibid.
accepted by white law officials of the city.\textsuperscript{54} Queen Maryann reports that Prophet Cicero was taken to court because of his teachings. However, while he was in court, a mysterious act took place. Queen Maryann recounts, “At 12 noon, all the lights in the courthouse went dark. When the lights came back on, Prophet Cicero Patterson was told to be out of Atlanta, Georgia by 12 midnight the same evening.”\textsuperscript{55} Upon leaving Atlanta in 1928, Prophet Cicero relocated his ministry to Chicago, Illinois, where he established the first Black Coptic Church, called the Universal Prayer House and Training School, located at 4724 S. Cottage Grove Avenue.\textsuperscript{56} As founder of the Black Coptic Church, Prophet Cicero was primarily responsible for laying the foundation of the church’s Theology, its structure, its organization, and its early mission as a black church in North America. Priest Eli Burdo suggested that Prophet Cicero named himself “prophet” “because it was different than what black people had been used to. They were used to their church leaders being called teachers, missionaries, mothers, etc. However, he knew he was a prophet because of the revelation that God had given him to give to men and women. No one could do that except a prophet.”\textsuperscript{57}

At the Universal Prayer House and Training School, Prophet Cicero organized the Black Coptic Church as a black monarchy, which would consist of queens and prophets. The organization of the Black Coptic Church is directly reflective of the church’s

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{55} ibid.
\textsuperscript{56} Queen Rebekah Armstrong, The History of the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, October, 2003.
\textsuperscript{57} James Burdo, The History of the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 22 June 2009.
liberation Theology, which, since its inception, concerned itself with the ways in which the world viewed African-Americans, and the negative perceptions which African-American had internalized. By contrast, the established black churches of the 1930s were reflective in many ways of the churches from which they broke. The ecclesiastical titles which African-American churchgoers were accustomed to were a mere carbon copy of the Methodist and Baptist church titles from which their founders broke (brother, sister, elder, deacon). Prophet Cicero’s desire was to transform the black church experience so that it would not simply be a place of religiosity, but also an organization in which the identity of blacks would be reshaped and fashioned in a manner which instills a sense of dignity and pride in being black. Therefore, Prophet Cicero introduced a new ecclesiastical structure in which adherents would be known by royal titles to reflect an ancient royal culture. This invention is one of the foundations for a liberative ecclesiology.

In middle 1930s North American society, black Americans were viewed as absolutely less than human. In public, private and religious spheres, outside of black church traditions, black Americans were relegated to the margins of society. In realms of education, government, social progress, in the workplace, and in mainline white church Theology and practice, black Americans were seen as sub-par, lacking intelligence, and in most cases were simply referred to as “niggers,” “Negroes,” or “colored people.” However, in the Black Coptic Church, the same people who were the janitors, the factory workers, the domestic workers, and the nobodies throughout the week, were known as queens, prophets, and monarchs on Sunday mornings. Queen Huldah Morgan suggests
that this transformation of identity which took place in the church-house resonated into the daily lives of the churchgoers.\textsuperscript{58} In this regard, although adherents of the Black Coptic Church were socially marginalized by the dominant society, their entry into the Black Coptic Church and their subsequent taking on of a royal title fostered a sense of agency among the churchgoers, such that “they were psychologically able to transcend all that the world had said about them.”\textsuperscript{59} The genius, then, of Prophet Cicero, is that while some groups, such as the Marcus Garvey movement, were calling for a migration back to Africa, Prophet Cicero, in naming his organization as Coptic, brought an ancient African culture to North America, which eradicated the false identity that had been given to blacks in North America, and established a new identity that linked blacks in America to a royal ancestry.

While leading the Universal Prayer House and Training School, Prophet Cicero taught the converts in the tradition of the new faith. The Universal Prayer House and Training School was organized in the following way: a teacher, who was one of several queens in the church, taught new converts in the “School of Wisdom” (Bible class, new members’ class) for a term of no less than one year. In the School of Wisdom, new converts learned the church's history, its Theology, its structure, and its rules and regulations. After such time, new converts were baptized according to a Trinitarian

\textsuperscript{58} Queen Huldah Morgan, The History of the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 22 June 2009.

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid.
formula, and finally were sealed with the promise of the Holy Spirit, which took place on the pinnacle of the church's liturgical calendar, known as the Day of Pentecost.

Prophet Cicero led the Universal Prayer House and Training School until his death on February 11, 1961. After the death of Prophet Cicero, Queen Maryann reports that there was chaos in the church. She further attests, however, that even prior to his passing, “Toward the end of Prophet Cicero's life, many things were out of order in the church that made him dissatisfied with his queens, with whom he had worked and given positions.” Although Prophet Cicero had not directly installed a leader to assume the leadership of the organization upon his death, his final words before his passing were, “If you have any questions, ‘see Peter.’” Prophet Peter Banks was one of the prophets in the church who worked alongside Prophet Cicero. However, although these were the final

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60. The baptismal formula of the Black Coptic Church is as follows: “Obedience is the great Head of the Church. This candidate is baptized according to his/her own faith, in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost.”

61. The Day of Pentecost, which takes place annually on the fourth Sunday in July and the first Sunday in October, marks the most sacred days on the Black Coptic Church’s liturgical calendar. New converts and children, who were born in the tradition, upon reaching age 12, are referred to as “students.” For one year students are taught the basic principles of the church by a teacher, usually a queen. After one year of what some churches may call “new members’ class,” the students are baptized on the second Sunday in July, and then participate in the ritual of the Day of Pentecost, which is based on Acts 8:17, in which Peter and John laid their hand on new converts, and they received the Holy Spirit. On the Day of Pentecost, the spiritual leader, or Prophet, of each Black Coptic Church, lays his hands upon the head of each student who has been baptized, thereby sealing them with the Holy Spirit. The concept of “seal” is taken from Ephesians 1:13-14, which reads, “In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit; this is the pledge of our inheritance toward redemption as God’s own people, to the praise of his glory.” (NRSV).

instructions of Prophet Cicero, “after his passing, there was a battle in the church concerning who would assume the leadership.”

His sister-in-law, Queen Rebekah Armstrong (d. 2005), had first introduced Prophet Peter Banks to the Black Coptic Church. Prior to her passing, I had the opportunity to conduct an interview with Queen Rebekah that will be placed in the church archives of Coptic Nation Temple. Queen Rebekah recounts that, during the life of Prophet Cicero Patterson, he informed her that he was looking for a man whom he could train to lead the church upon his passing. Queen Rebekah informed me that during that time, she thought of her brother-in-law, whose birth name was Eddie Banks. In her own words, Queen Rebekah maintained, “Prophet Cicero told me to find him a man. I told Eddie Banks that prophet Cicero wanted to see him, so he came and met the prophet. Prophet Cicero [then] taught Eddie Banks in his office and laid hands on him many times.”

Eddie Banks was already an ordained minister in the spiritualist Tradition, and therefore already had possessed a foundation in the church and biblical knowledge.

Upon joining, Eddie Banks exhibited zeal and a desire to learn more about the Black Coptic tradition. Soon after joining the Universal Prayer and Training School, Prophet

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63 Queen Maryann Martin, The History of the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 22 June 2009.

64 Queen Rebekah Armstrong, The History of the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, October 2003.

65 Queen Maryann Martin, The History of the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 22 June 2009.
Cicero changed Eddie’s named to Peter. This was done in order to “remove the slave name,” and bestow upon Eddie a “biblical name that had meaning.”

As a result of his dedication, humility, and love for the people of God, “Prophet Cicero handed down the Black Coptic teachings to Prophet Peter in the same way that Moses handed down the law to Joshua.” Queen Rebekah suggests that Prophet Cicero’s role was to lead the people out of oppression, and it was Prophet Peter’s role to lead them into the Promised Land. Not everyone, however, accepted Prophet Peter as the legitimate successor of Prophet Cicero. As mentioned earlier, after Prophet Cicero’s passing, the community was at unrest because many other men thought they should have been chosen to lead the organization.

Queen Capernaum Banks, wife of Prophet Peter, because of apparent disrespect shown toward her husband, who was leading the church, eventually left the Universal Prayer House and Training School, and established her own prayer group in her home. Approximately one year after the death of Prophet Cicero, the community remained in chaos. Many congregants left the church and established their own churches. The Universal Prayer House and Training School was seemingly dismantled. Unsuccessful at garnering the support of the congregants, Prophet Peter resigned as leader of the

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67 Ibid.
68 Ibid.
69 Queen Maryann Martin, The History of the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 22 June 2009.
70 Ibid.
71 Ibid.
Universal Prayer House and Training School, joined with his wife, and together they established the True Temple of Solomon Coptic Church in Chicago, in August, 1965. Shortly thereafter, the Universal Prayer House and Training School slowly faded away as members dispersed and formed their own communities. Prophet Peter and his wife, Queen Capernaum, founded the True Temple of Solomon Coptic Church, which, until the death of Prophet Peter would serve as the flagship and headquarters of the Black Coptic Church.

The Years of Expansion

The Black Coptic Church, under the leadership of Prophet Peter Banks, grew from a small community to a large organization consisting, at its peak, of over 1,000 members. The Black Coptic Church, during these years, experienced not only a growth in membership, but also expansion in the economic, social, and political realms. Under the leadership of Prophet Peter, the Black Coptic church gained much prominence in the city of Chicago and nationwide. Prophet Peter's association with political figures and community organizers allowed the church to see an expansion that it was unable to experience under the leadership of the church's founder, Prophet Cicero Patterson. Queen Huldah Morgan maintains that Prophet Peter “wanted to expand from church to organization. The businesses he established and his desire to have the people purchase properties in Michigan for homes and businesses, attested to that.” In this regard, it was

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72 My interview participants indicated that notable Chicago politicians were frequent visitors of the True Temple of Solomon, including Maria Pappas, former governor Jim Thompson, Ed Vrdolyak, and former governor Rod Blagojevich.

73 Queen Huldah Morgan Morgan, The History of the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 22 June 2009.
during the leadership of Prophet Peter that the Black Coptic Church consolidated its true identity as a black church that nuanced then-prevailing ideas and understandings of African-American religion.

_Prophet Peter Banks: Leader of the Black Coptic Church, 1965-1990_

In founding the True Temple of Solomon Coptic Church, Prophet Peter’s vision was related to the vision of Prophet Cicero’s to the extent the “he wanted us to know that we were somebody and we [had a relationship] with God.” Prophet Peter’s vision was related to the vision of Prophet Cicero’s to the extent the “he wanted us to know that we were somebody and we [had a relationship] with God.” That is, “he wanted black people to know that we were somebody, which was the same mission of Prophet Cicero Patterson.” However, during the leadership of Prophet Peter, it became apparent that his vision would have to expand beyond the vision of Prophet Cicero’s. The changing racial landscape as society moved from the racial paradigm of 1950s into the Black Power or social consciousness movement of the 1960s, and eventually into the 1970s, meant the need for the Black Coptic Church to evolve. Therefore, in terms of the vision of Prophet Peter and the progression of the church, the changing social landscape and ever-evolving society called for a vision that was responsive to the way in which society was moving. According to church authorities, the vision of Prophet Peter, therefore, was not static, but rather fluid to the extent that it continued to develop in light of an ever-changing social context.

Throughout his 28 years of leadership of the Black Coptic Church, Prophet Peter built a relationship with his congregants that many cherish to the present day. When I

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75 ibid.
queried my participants concerning their memories of Prophet Peter and their analysis of his leadership, many spoke with a deep sense of reverence, love, and adoration for the leader whom they served under for nearly 30 years. Empress Selah Thomas maintains that Prophet Peter “was majestic, orderly, and benevolent. He had a familiarity with even the least of us. He can make an exchange as simple as blessing coffee an experience to be treasured.”

She further reflected, “For the most part, he spoke softly upon speaking. But he was an awesome preacher. He electrified the service. He was enigmatic.”

Although he wasn't well educated, maintains Prophet Hosea Belcher, Prophet Peter was highly anointed, and his presence demanded respect among all people. Queen Huldah remembers Prophet Peter in this way:

He was capable of miraculous acts of intercession in many departments of his people's lives. With little education or pedigree, he was able to amass a huge following of people who, in the era of the black race emerging from legal segregation and discrimination, received a spiritual awakening. While American and European history had placed the ‘mark of Cain’ and the ‘curse of Ham’ upon black people to justify their subjugation, King Peter continued Prophet Cicero's legacy and brought the message to many more people. It was a perfect complement to the social, civil, and political freedoms that were emerging.

Prophet Peter’s rapport with his congregation as a man of God who desired to see the Black Coptic Church grow and expand in areas beyond the religious realm led the

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77 Ibid.


79 Queen Huldah Morgan, The History of the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 22 June 2009.
church to bestow upon him the title of king. The coronation of King Peter took place in March of 1973, and was covered by the *Chicago Defender* which called the coronation “Coptic Heritage Seen in King Solomon’s Temple.”\(^{80}\) The event was well attended by several of Chicago's well-known ministers in the African-American community, as well as politicians and community workers. Queen Huldah maintains that the coronation “was a show of reverence for his position and demonstrative power as a spiritual leader. There were already many prophets; the king degree differentiated him from them and also more closely aligned our [Black Coptic Church] with Eastern rather than traditional Western Christianity.”\(^{81}\) In accepting the title as king, Prophet Peter essentially built a black monarchy that consisted of queens, princesses, princes, and the like, thereby instituting a Christian ecclesiological structure, which closely resembled the ancient heritage which the organization claimed its roots. An excerpt from the coronation papers reads: “Today, we proclaim a proclamation of coronation of Royal exalted Majesty. Your Excellency and Holiness, King Peter Banks, our father King of the Coptic Faith.”\(^{82}\)

**Areas of Expansion**

The years of expansion under the leadership of Prophet Peter can be understood in terms of four distinct categories: economics, politics, societal and interfaith relations. Economically, the Black Coptic Church under the leadership of Prophet Peter owned several grocery stores in the Englewood area, one of which, Vernadine’s Supermarket,

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\(^{81}\) Ibid.

\(^{82}\) See *The Proclamation of King Peter Banks*, Coptic Nation Temple archives, Chicago, IL, 1973.
was named after Prophet Peter’s and Queen Capernaum's daughter. Additionally, the church owned several banquet venues, including King Peter’s Banquet Hall on the East Side of Chicago in the Roseland community, and Capernaum’s Banquet Hall on the South Side of Chicago. The church also owned Solomon’s Security Service, Solomon’s Bus Company, a hand car wash, and a farm in Three Rivers, Michigan, which raised meat and produce that were sold in the church’s supermarkets, and were also available for various church functions.

The Black Coptic Church, under the leadership of Prophet Peter, was involved in several political campaigns, and was also frequented by several of the city's top politicians who were running for public office or who were acquaintances of Prophet Peter. When I queried my interview participants as to the political leanings of Prophet Peter, all agreed that he never explicitly acknowledged his loyalty to a single political party. However, during the 1980s, the church was frequented by several Democratic political figures who were seeking public office, which suggests that Prophet Peter was a major supporter of the Chicago Democratic Party. In fact, the Chicago Sun-Times and the Chicago Tribune report that several of Chicago's more familiar politicians, including Maria Pappas, mayoral candidate Edward Vrdolyak, and former Illinois Governor Rod Blagojevich, who was a campaign aide to Vrdolyak, were all either visitors to the Temple of Solomon Coptic Church, or had business relationships with Prophet Peter.

84 Ibid.
In 1987, the church’s participation in Chicago politics took an interesting and, to be sure, a paradoxical turn. During this time, the first black mayor of Chicago, Harold Washington, was running for a second mayoral term. Mayor Washington was a beloved figure in Chicago politics, but most notably, in the African-American community. One would think, then, that the Black Coptic Church, whose teachings were rooted in liberation and a desire to see the social and religious advancement of black Americans, would be an ardent supporter of one of the most racist cities in the United States’ first black mayor. On March 23, 1987, however, the Chicago Tribune published an article entitled, “Mayor, Vrdolyak Trade Turfs.” In this article, the Chicago Tribune reported that while Mayor Washington visited a predominately white congregation the previous Sunday, “Vrdolyak spoke at the True Temple of Solomon, a Coptic Church at 7138 S. Halsted St.”\(^85\) The article further reports that “King Peter Banks, leader of the church, called on his flock to support Vrdolyak, who is running on the Illinois Solidarity Party ticket in the April 7 general election.”\(^86\) The article reports King Peter as saying, “This is a great man … his job is to protect the city. My job is to save souls. We can work together. It is time that this city must come together.”\(^87\) The Chicago Tribune writes that Vrdolyak was “serenaded with several gospel songs from the 75-member choir,”\(^88\) before he spoke to the congregation. Concerning the relationship between Prophet Peter and Vrdolyak, the same article reports, “Vrdolyak met Banks because the church owns

\(^{85}\) Ibid.

\(^{86}\) Ibid.

\(^{87}\) Ibid.

\(^{88}\) Ibid.
several banquet halls near his Far South Side 10th ward. Banks’ former attorney, Rod Blagojevich, is a campaign aide to Vrdolyak.”

The True Temple of Solomon, under the leadership of Prophet Peter, gained a respectable place in the larger black community as a result of his efforts to engage all segments of society. Prophet Hosea Belcher maintains, “Among all people, Prophet Peter’s presence demanded respect, because he was very humbling [i.e., not arrogant].” Queen Huldah Morgan remembers that, “Prophet Peter had established rapport with some of the unsavory elements in the community and commanded their respect and eventual exit from the immediate area of the church.” Further, “he created a Masonic organization open to all, and established the Capernaum Blue Room as a rental for social gatherings.” Prophet Peter's engagement with the community, including those individuals who were further marginalized because of their relationships to gangs and drugs, created a reciprocal relationship of respect between the church and its surrounding area. The True Temple of Solomon, during this period, was a church that was not contained within its four walls. On the contrary, its prophetic ministry of engagement situated the church within a priestly-prophetic paradigm.

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89 Ibid.

90 Queen Huldah Morgan, The History of the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 22 June 2009.

91 Ibid.

92 C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya describe this as “the dialectic between priestly and prophetic functions,” in which they contend that “every black church is involved in both functions. Priestly functions involve only those activities concerned with worship; church maintenance activities are the major thrust. Prophetic functions refer to involvement in political concerns and activities in the wider community; classically, prophetic activity has meant pronouncing a radical word of God’s judgment. Some churches are closer to one end than the other. Priestly churches are bastions of survival and prophetic churches are networks of liberation. But both types of churches also illustrate both functions, which mean that liberation
Within the organization itself, the Coptic Church grew tremendously under the leadership of Prophet Peter. The congregation “was said to be a huge increase over Prophet Cicero's congregation,” maintains Queen Huldah.93 “Most Sundays,” she remembers, “the congregation seemed to be about 200 or more.”94 However, the Chicago Tribune, which reported that when it visited the True Temple of Solomon in June of 1987, well over 1,000 congregants attended the church.95 In terms of church structure, Prophet Peter expansion of the titles of church members reflected a growing ministry, which included a younger congregation. During the leadership of Prophet Cicero, the Black Coptic Church titles were limited to the rankings of queens and prophets. However, under the leadership of Prophet Peter, the church now included younger members who were not necessarily prepared to do the spiritual work such as teaching and preaching. Therefore, Prophet Peter instituted various degrees for a new generation of black Copts who were active in the church, but were not yet ready for full time ministry. These degrees included, for young women, various levels of princesses, depending upon one's age and, for young men, various degrees of princes, also related to one's age. In addition to the aforementioned church titles, a title of empress was instituted

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93 Queen Huldah Morgan, The History of the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 22 June 2009.

94 Ibid.

for young women who were too old to be a princess, but who are not as aged as the queens. These women were primarily in their 30s.96

The Turbulent Years: 1990-1997

Prophet Peter led the Black Coptic Church until his transition from this life in December of 1990. To be sure, the immediate year following the death of Prophet Peter was the beginning of what would be many years of turmoil, and a test of the will of the Black Coptic Church. During his lifetime, Prophet Peter Banks did not establish a procedure for transition of leadership that would take place upon his death. As a result, the True Temple of Solomon experienced many of the same problems that the Universal Prayer House and Training School faced upon the death of Prophet Cicero Patterson. Prophet Hosea Belcher maintains that “the absence of protocol led to years of confusion, internal fighting, and church politics which threatened the downfall of the Black Coptic Church in America.”97

For one year after the death of Prophet Peter, the True Temple of Solomon did not have an official leader who was governing the organization. Conflicting reports, based on each individual’s observance of the situation, renders the construction of a historical account, or at least one that would satisfy all parties of the True Temple of Solomon during the immediate year after Prophet Peter's death, almost impossible. On one hand, Queen Huldah Morgan argues that in following “King Peter’s ascension, there is

96 Queen Huldah Morgan, The History of the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 22 June 2009.

leadership provided by the Imperial Queens and the ministers in a kind of autocratic or
democratic framework. Services progressed as usual, since there is no need or desire to
change the fundamental practices of the faith." On the other hand, however, Queen
Rachel Gardiner recalls that the situation was not so democratic after all. Queen Monica
Banks, the only child of both Prophet Peter and Queen Capernaum Banks, "had a lot to
say about what happened and who became leader." In a similar vein, Prophet Hosea
Belcher maintains that "the church became a family church rather than a church of the
people, where that people could give voice. The board was able to coerce things their
way." The board, to which Prophet Hosea refers, was a newly-formed board of
directors that was led by Queen Monica. Royal Priest Meshach Gardiner referred to
this newly-formed board as a "heresy" that arose in the church.

In 1991, the board of the True Temple of Solomon appointed Prophet Joseph
Bailey as the successor of Prophet Peter as leader of the Black Coptic Church. The
selection of Prophet Joseph as leader "precipitates the exiting of other prophets to
establish their own churches, mainly because they believed that they should have been
chosen. Eventually, others left because they felt the call into leadership, not because they

98 Queen Huldah Morgan Morgan, The History of the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard
McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 22 June 2009.

99 Candace Queen Rachel Gardiner, The History of the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard
McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 22 June 2009.

100 Prophet Hosea, The History of the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL,
22 June 2009.

101 Empress Selah, The History of the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL,
22 June 2009.

102 Priest Meshach Gardiner, The History of the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard McKinnis,
Chicago, IL, 22 June 2009.
anticipated leading at True Temple of Solomon.”\textsuperscript{103} Prophet Joseph’s leadership, however, was short-lived, as he was “taken out of leadership by the Chairman of the Board, who was Queen Monica, Prophet Peter's daughter.”\textsuperscript{104} The removal of Prophet Joseph as leader of the True Temple of Solomon “caused a level of turmoil in the church,”\textsuperscript{105} which led to several divisions within the Black Coptic community. Queen Rebekah Armstrong, who was considered the mother of the Black Coptic Church, “leaves and joins members of her [class] in another church.”\textsuperscript{106} Additionally, several prophets left the True Temple of Solomon to establish their own churches in light of the internal fighting within the community. Following the leadership of Prophet Joseph, Prophet Andrew Williams led the True Temple of Solomon from 1992-1996, Prophet Abednego Willis led from 1996-1997, and when King Peter's grandson, Prophet John Robinson “reaches age 19, he is put into the leadership position, with advisers among the older prophets, queens and his mother.”\textsuperscript{107} Prophet John has been leading the true Temple of Solomon since 1998.

\textit{The Community Broadens}

The years since 1998 when Prophet John Robinson was officially named the leader over the True Temple of Solomon Black Coptic Church, represent a church in

\begin{footnotes}
\item[103] Queen Huldah Morgan, The History of the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 22 June 2009.
\item[104] Empress Selah, The History of the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 22 June 2009.
\item[105] Queen Huldah Morgan, The History of the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 22 June 2009.
\item[106] Ibid.
\item[107] Ibid.
\end{footnotes}
search of its own identity. Prior to the passing of Prophet Peter Banks, True Temple of Solomon was indeed the mother church and the central headquarters of the Black Coptic Church in the United States. Although their church website suggests that “True Temple of Solomon is considered the “mother church” of many [Black] Coptic churches in the United States,”¹⁰⁸ this is no longer the case. The disintegration of the Black Coptic Church as a single body led by a charismatic figure has caused a severe case of disunity and, in some cases, has threatened the life of a church that once thrived and flourished in Chicago. Many of the prophets who made the decision to depart the True Temple of Solomon did so precisely because they did not agree with the ways in which the church's board was handling the business, religious and secular, of the organization. In this regard, several of the prophets who broke away from the True Temple of Solomon have been on a quest to build their particular temples in a manner which they deem as more reflective of the organization’s founding. Therefore, the various perspectives of the prophets who have established their individual churches simply reflect the vision of that particular prophet. Accordingly, at first glance, there appears to be much diversity in terms of theological, ritual, ethical, and moral understandings of each particular temple. However, Queen Huldah Morgan maintains “King Peter often said ‘no two prophets ever saw God alike.’ This may account for the deviations from the rights, rituals and administration of True Temple of Solomon.”¹⁰⁹

¹⁰⁹ Ibid.
Since 1997, the Black Coptic Church, as a community, has grown to include well over 30 individual churches throughout Chicago, with branches also located in Detroit, Atlanta, Iowa City, Iowa, and parts of Indiana and California. However, as has been suggested, the disintegration of the Black Coptic Church community into several smaller churches has also introduced the issue of diversity of church teachings. Further, while there has been a growth in the amount of churches and property owned by the Black Coptic Church community since 1990, which marked the passing of Prophet Peter, the Black Coptic Church has experienced a staggering decrease in church membership (I will say more about this in my final chapter). Additionally, the presence of various individual churches that act as independent bodies unanswerable to a central bishop has led to disagreements concerning the way forward of the Black Coptic Church community.

Queen Rebekah, in one of her final interviews before her passing, cautioned that the absence of a central leadership in the Black Coptic Church would threaten the life of said community. 110 Although her argument for a central leadership of the Black Coptic Church has not been implemented, several attempts have been made toward building a unifying coalition within the church. The most audacious of these strides has been the Coptic (After the Order of Melchizedek) A.T.O.M movement, which began in 2004. Seven Black Coptic Church leaders and their wives, who are known as Candace Queens, started the Coptic ATOM Foundation in 2004. 111 The organization's bylaws states:

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110 *Living History: An Interview with Mother Rebekah*, videocassette, directed by Empress Selah Thomas (Chicago, IL: Coptic Nation Temple historical, 2003).

Coptic, After The Order of Melchizedek, Foundation (A.T.O.M.), is an organization of Coptic Prophets and Candace Queens devoted to the progressive advancement of the Coptic Faith as taught and understood by Prophet Cicero Patterson, who became King Melchizedek. Accordingly, the teachings of Melchizedek serve as the basis by which leaders involved in A.T.O.M construct said organization.

The creation of A.T.O.M is not to undermine nor question the individual character of each temple represented. Each leader who becomes a member of A.T.O.M remains autonomous and will not be governed by other ministers involved in A.T.O.M. It is neither the intent nor purpose of A.T.O.M to establish a supreme governing body which will assume authority over individual temples. Rather, it is the intent of A.T.O.M to create a space for dialogue whereby Coptic Leaders and Candace Queens can engage in positive and healthy communication, which will add to the further development of the Coptic Church as taught by King Melchizedek. It is our hope, however, that the dialogue, which emerges from our meetings and gatherings, will be instituted in the individual Coptic temples. The main purpose for establishing Coptic, A.T.O.M is to create a sense of continuity among Coptic Temples such that we are all on one accord as it pertains to temple matters, including Theology and qualifications for certain positions within the temple, i.e., ordained minister.\footnote{Organizational By-Laws and Constitution of Coptic ATOM, Coptic Nation Temple archives, Coptic Nation Temple, Chicago, IL.}

The churches involved in the Coptic, A.T.O.M movement have committed to unifying the practices of their individual churches, and also to supporting the educational and business pursuits of individual members within their churches. Additionally, the Coptic A.T.O.M movement has made available various funds which its members may access in times of economic distress. Between 2006 and 2008, the Coptic, ATOM movement has provided over $7,000 in educational grants to college students in need of additional financial support.\footnote{Prophet Hiram White, The History of the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 22 June 2009.} Further, this organization has provided over $3,000
through its benevolent fund for members facing strained financial situations. As of 2009, however, due to internal disagreement among church leaders involved, the Coptic ATOM movement has decreased from seven to five member churches.

While the Black Coptic community is currently a fragmented Church, the theological positions of the Church nonetheless render this congregation a manifestation of the black liberation Theology. The Church that Prophet Cicero Patterson founded and the Prophet Peters expanded was a Church of liberation. To be sure, the theological and social elements within this communion call for scholarly attention and, for certain, expand contemporary knowledge of the black church as an institution and African-American religious thought.

114 Ibid.
CHAPTER THREE
TOWARD A CONSTRUCTIVE UNDERSTANDING OF THE THEOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES OF THE BLACK COPTIC CHURCH

The founding of the Black Coptic Church in an environment that did not advance the humanity of Black persons, but instead deemed them as inferior, lacking intelligence, and without morals and values, is the context out of which one must interpret the theological program of this Black Church. Black Theology maintains that Theology as human language about God does not take place inside a vacuum. On the contrary, Theology is situational and emerges from a particular social milieu. Since the Patristic period through post-modernity, Christian Theology has reflected its environment. Therefore, any attempt to understand the founding of the Black Coptic Church must take seriously the social constructs of 20th century America that gave way to various social sins, most notably, racism. In this regard, the African-American experience as strangers in exile, kidnapped Africans, and as a people in search of identity while constantly striving to find a place in American society, is the beginning of the Black Coptic Church’s theological exploration.

In his essay “Black Liberation Theology and Black Catholics: A Critical Conversation,” James Cone asks how one can be both Christian and racist, as if the
Christian gospel does not demand some protest against social sin.\textsuperscript{115} The Black Coptic Church, in a similar vein, struggles with the long history of racism in Western Christianity.\textsuperscript{116} Throughout my interviews with Church authorities, it was evident that there exists an enduring struggle with the Church identifying itself as “Christian.” The Black Coptic Church is reluctant, although not unwilling, to be identified as “Christian.” However, there is a deep sense of uneasiness within a portion of the church with the term “Christian.”\textsuperscript{117} This tension does not suggest that the Black Coptic Church rejects Jesus. On the contrary, the church seems to take seriously the horrifying history of racism and imperialism in the Christian Church. Therefore, in identifying the Black Coptic Church as a Christian Church advancing a Christian Theology, it is crucial to understand that the adherents of the Black Coptic Church are not “comfortable with being lumped into a wide hemisphere of doctrines that don’t really adhere to what [they] understand [as Christian].\textsuperscript{118} In the words of one interviewee, Prophet Hosea Belcher, “We have seen people who called themselves Christians who were not very Christ like.”\textsuperscript{119} In this regard, the first task in delineating the Theology of the Black Coptic Church is to ground the term Christian in relation to said tradition.


\textsuperscript{116}Royal Priest Meshach Gardiner Gardiner, Theology of the Black Coptic Church, interview with Leonard C. McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 12 January 2009.

\textsuperscript{117}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{118}Ibid.

\textsuperscript{119}Prophet Hosea Belcher, Dissertation Research Interview, Coptic Nation Temple, Chicago, IL., January 12, 2009.
What does it mean to be a Black Copt and to be Christian? This is the essential question with which all my interview participants struggled in trying to come to some consensus concerning their religious identity. Nonetheless, to the extent that “the central canon of [the Black Coptic Church] is the Holy Bible,”120 that “Jesus’ message of healing, teaching, and prophesying are central to [the Black Coptic Church],”121 and the presence of other “Christian” rituals and performances, it seems quite obvious to me that this church, for all practical purposes, is a Christian Church. Yet, the question of identity (Black) and Faith (Christian) seemed to establish an extraordinary struggle for my interview participants. Consequently, the Black Coptic Church in its proclamation of Christian Faith and construction of a liberating Theology, since its founding, has posited an intersection of race and Theology that forms the base of its theological program, and thus articulates a working answer to question of being Black and being Christian.

Although race is not the center of the Black Coptic Church’s theological program, it is an essential category by which the Church’s first Prophet, Cicero Patterson, developed the liberating Theology which the church advances. It is significant to point out that the Black Coptic Church, since its inception, has maintained that, in the North American context, a social framework which has historically exaggerated and manipulated social constructions of race, there remains an inseparable relationship between race and Theology. The connection between the two lay in the fact that “when one entered the [Black Coptic] Church, [he or she] was taught that the deception of

120 Empress Selah Thomas, Theology of the Black Coptic Church, interview with Leonard C. McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 12 January 2009.

Euro-centric Christianity was that [blacks] had no place, no part, or no identity relative to God, the Bible or Jesus.”  Consequently, adherents were “directed to understand Jesus was and is a Black man…as a way of detailing the positive nature of ‘blackness,’ and therefore to dispel negative perceptions” that were attached to “black.”

In postulating an inextricable correlation between race and Theology, there are two factors that are part and parcel of the church’s Theology that deserve our attention. First, the Black Coptic Church operates under what I call a transformative Theology of liberation. Priest Meshach Gardiner maintains the idea that race is an important element in the Black Coptic Church, but not race as understood as an American social construct. The idea of race, contends Empress Selah Thomas, “was not important until it was necessary [for Europeans] to justify slavery of African people.” Therefore, the church begins, necessarily, within the social construction of race, but seeks to liberate the consciousness of its adherents through a radical transformation, which takes place via the church’s primary teaching arena called “The School of Wisdom,” and ends with the creation of a new Black man and woman who does not understand him/herself as a

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122 Empress Selah Thomas, Theology of the Black Coptic Church, interview with Leonard C. McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 12 January 2009.

123 Ibid.

124 See footnote on page 2 regarding “race.”

125 Empress Selah Thomas, Theology of the Black Coptic Church, interview with Leonard C. McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 12 January 2009.

126 Candace Queen Rachel Gardiner Gardiner, Theology of the Black Coptic Church, interview with Leonard C. McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 12 January 2009.
product of “race,” but a new creation with an “identity.” The transformation from a “racialized” person to a person with an “identity” means that the “Coptic Faith becomes [your] identity and [your] philosophy.

Secondly, the church recognizes the paradigmatic shift that has transpired in terms of race since the church’s founding, especially in light of a Barack Obama presidency, but maintains a focus on identity will remain a paramount element of the church’s liberative theological program. During the interviews for this project, the participants were queried whether, considering the social contextual chasm that separates the church from its origination, race/identity will continue to play a significant role in the church’s Theology. In referencing the church’s first prophet and his program, Queen Huldah maintained:

Prophet Cicero’s organization particularly directed its energy toward those who were not necessarily among the black middle class. His organization was meant to give a certain level of self-esteem to people who were the factory workers, the plant workers…people who came out of the agricultural South, people who were domestics. It was to give those people a title – a Queen, a Prophet, etc. It was to let them know that they had some historic roots that went far beyond and far earlier than the identity that they have been taught and given here in America….the bottom rail would come to the top.

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127 Victor Anderson critiques such an idea as “ontological blackness,” in which he maintains Black Theology is caught in an ontological trap because its system, or creation of a new Black person, is contingent upon the idea of racism and other social factors that Black Theology defines itself against, as a sort of “corrective.” The Black Coptic church seems to overcome this ontological blackness through its Pneumatology. I will address this idea further in chapter 4.

128 Royal Priest Meshach Gardiner Gardiner, Theology of the Black Coptic Church, interview with Leonard C. McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 12 January 2009.

129 Queen Huldah Morgan Morgan, Theology of the Black Coptic Church, interview with Leonard C. McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 12 January 2009.
Queen Huldah further articulated that the Civil Rights Movement helped to reshape what some people had thought about race and race relations. Nonetheless, Prophet Hiram White indicated that the church’s Theology of identity transformation “would always be a factor…because we must remember.” The prevailing idea in this regard seems to be a focus on the power of “remembrance” as a psychological function which first acts as a reminder of history as to prevent the possibility of erasing the past, and secondly as a conduit of personal agency that evokes a spirit of purpose and transformation among the adherents. Priest Meshach Gardiner suggested that this concept of “remembrance” is reminiscent of the Jewish Passover as a symbol of remembrance of God’s activity among the poor and the oppressed. Therefore, regardless of the day or age, the Black Coptic Church will retain some sense of a Theology of identity in its liberative program.

**Theological Sources of the Black Coptic Church**

There are several sources which ground the theological reflection of the Black Coptic Church. As a church that establishes itself in the ministry of the Jesus the Christ, Scripture is the primary and founding source of the Black Coptic Church. Although my interview participants regard scripture as a theological norm in the Black Coptic Church, the conviction that this tradition does not accept, without a critical evaluation, scripture or the history and tradition of the Christian church, was quite apparent. The Black Coptic Church is quite suspicious of the long history of Euro-centric domination as

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130 Ibid.


132 Priest Meshach Gardiner Gardiner, Theology of the Black Coptic Church, interview with Leonard C. McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 12 January 2009.
it relates to Biblical interpretation. Priest Meshach Gardiner maintains that “there have been many translations of the Bible that have not benefited [black people]. “ … We don’t reject [the Bible] as an authoritative guide, but understand that it is has been translated from those who lied to [black] people in order to benefit their gain.”¹³³

Employing a hermeneutic of suspicion allows the church to regard scripture as authoritative, but only after scripture has been critically analyzed for oppressive structures and domination. Elisabeth Schussler-Fiorenza maintains that “a hermeneutic of suspicion is so threatening because it challenges and demystifies the structures of domination that are inscribed in the Biblical text, in our experience, and in contemporary contexts of interpretation.”¹³⁴ To be sure, the Black Coptic Church acknowledges scriptural inspiration,¹³⁵ but also takes seriously the verity that the Bible is composed by human beings “who wrote the scriptures and may have interjected their own opinions.”¹³⁶

African-American Biblical scholar Thomas Hoyt, Jr. advances this argument in his contention that “we know that biblical writers were themselves interpreters, for the historical-critical method has shown us how writers in both testaments exercised a certain freedom in building upon traditions that they received.”¹³⁷

¹³³ Ibid.


¹³⁵ Priest Priest Eli Burdo, Theology of the Black Coptic Church, interview with Leonard C. McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 12 January 2009.


This questioning tradition has a long history within the Black Church as it pertains to interpretation of scripture and acceptance of scripture as authoritative. Without a doubt, however, scripture has provided a sense of empowerment and cause for protest in the lives of African-Americans. This is the case precisely because “it is within the context of an oppressive society—a society that in many ways diminishes the values of African-Americans—that the Scriptures have played an important role in helping African Americans to survive and maintain a healthy identity and hope.” Nonetheless, it is clear that those slaves who could read understood scripture differently from their enslavers and, in a similar vein, black preachers and theologians during the Civil Rights era interpreted scripture in a manner which reflected their desire for freedom and liberation. Vincent Wimbush explains:

For the great majority of the first African slaves, the first reaction was an admixture of rejection, suspicion, and awe. On the one hand, they seemed to reject or be suspicious of any notion of “book religion.” As is the case with most nonliterate peoples with well-established and elaborate oral traditions, the Africans found the notion of piety and world view circumscribed by a book to be absurd. On the other hand, the fact that those who had enslaved them and were conquering the New World were “Bible Christians” was not at all lost on the Africans: It did not take them long to associate the “book religion” with power. 139

Such a tradition informs the Black Coptic Church’s approach toward Scripture.

Although Scripture is the primary teaching source of the Black Coptic Church, the common North American black experience of servitude and oppression is the catalyst that


drives not only the Theology of the Black Coptic Church, but Black Theology writ large.

Priest Eli Burdo suggests that while Scripture is the principal theological source of the Black Coptic Church, the church reads and interprets scripture, and constructs its Theology “from our location...how we see it.”\textsuperscript{140} Theology is undeniably contextual. It is birthed from particular life experiences. Black Theology—and other forms of liberation Theology—take seriously the particular social milieu from which Theology evolves, which is often fashioned by violence, oppression, and other forms of subjugation. In essence, “conditions that are absolutely contrary to the Gospel—the degradation of people, oppression, racism—become provocations to the very heart of its message.”\textsuperscript{141}

Liberation Theology’s insistence on the subjectivity and radical situatedness of human thought calls into the question the Enlightenment’s demand for a value–free scientific-positivist way of knowing. The contextualization of Theology implies that we know from experience. The core of this implication argues that there is no value free objective way of engaging Theology and God’s relationship to humanity. Insofar as human beings are products of time, of history, and of social and geo-political locations, experience molds our theological sensibilities. Essentially, the contextualization of Theology posits an understanding of God from one’s location. Theology, then, is a human expression of one’s reflection upon God in light of various human experiences.

\textsuperscript{140} Priest Priest Eli Burdo, Theology of the Black Coptic Church, interview with Leonard C. McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 12 January 2009.

To de-philosophize God is to concretize God in such a way that human experience matters and aids in the construction of Christian Theology.

**The Black Coptic Church as a Theology of Liberation**

Liberation Theology is a theological response, in theory and in practice, to social sins and evils which systemically form the base of a given society. The Evangelist Mathew reports a dialogue between Jesus and a group of Pharisees who desired to “trap” him. When queried by the Pharisees as to what commandment was the greatest, Jesus declared that the entire law rests upon two commandments: Love God and love neighbor. Augustine advances this theme via a hermeneutical principal, which essentially maintains that biblical interpretation must reflect love of God and love of neighbor. In Christianity, therefore, sin is not simply personal, as in engaging in destructive behaviors which dishonor the body. Neither is sin merely a failure to give honor to God as in Anselm’s *Cur Deus Homo*. On the contrary, sin is both personal and social. It is an offense against God, against oneself, and against one’s neighbor. Liberation Theology, while not neglectful of personal sin, attempts to nuance simplistic notions of sin that singularly focus on pious living or so-called “holiness” living, through a critical examination and critique of systemic evils in society, which create social classes and divisions via a promotion of imperialistic structures that constantly question and belittle the humanity of some, while celebrating the humanity of others. Liberation Theology, then, commences with a premise that to be human is to be in the image of God. Any social construction (i.e., sexism, racism, heterosexism), therefore, that calls into

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142 Mathew 22:36-40 (NRSV)
question the full humanity of another human being violates the hermeneutic of love and is therefore anti-Christian and demonic.

At the center of the Black Coptic Church’s theological program is “liberation.” Albeit true that the Black Coptic Church historically has not categorized itself as “liberation Theology,” and several of my interview participants had never heard this term used prior to their conversations with me, after their own investigation of the phrase “Black Liberation Theology,” there was a general consensus that the church “emphasizes liberation Theology,”¹⁴³ and “in a very practical sense this is what [the church has] been doing—dispelling the idea that God created lesser people based on race.”¹⁴⁴ As one participant contended, “When we look at the nature of the teaching … it does liberate the mind and the spirit of the people from past or previous errors and bondage.”¹⁴⁵ Therefore, my argument posits, notwithstanding the fact that this Black Church has not publicly or privately referred to itself as following a doctrine of “liberation Theology,” its theological program renders this church as a good candidate for the intersection of Black Theology and the Black Church. However, one must bear in mind that what theologians have referred to as “Black Theology,” originating with James Cone, the Black Coptic Church has been actively engaged in since its foundation, which pre-dates the academic construction of “Black Theology” as an intellectual discipline.

¹⁴³ Prophet Hiram White, Theology of the Black Coptic Church, interview with Leonard C. McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 12 January 2009.

¹⁴⁴ Queen Huldah Morgan Morgan, Theology of the Black Coptic Church, interview with Leonard C. McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 12 January 2009.

The liberative theological character of the Black Coptic Church represents a “freeing” Theology, grounded in a hermeneutic of counter-indoctrination. William Jones maintains that

At the base of oppression lies a complex of beliefs that define the role and status of the oppressor and the oppressed, and this same complex of beliefs legitimates both. The oppressed, in part, are oppressed precisely because they buy, or are indoctrinated to accept, a set of beliefs that negate those attitudes and actions necessary for liberation. Accordingly, the purpose and first step of a Theology of liberation is to effect a radical conversion of the mind of the oppressed, to free his [sic] mind from those destructive and enslaving beliefs that stifle the movement toward liberation.

Accordingly, the Black Coptic Church assumes, given the interrelationship between identity and Theology which grounds the church’s teaching, that the consciousness of the blacks in North America must be redeemed, or set free “from what [they] have been exposed to previously.” This process of conscientization is rooted in a “doctrine of science…that is aimed at reversing or changing social, political, [and ] economic structures [that were] birthed in the American experience as Africans in this country

146 Empress Selah Thomas, Theology of the Black Coptic Church, interview with Leonard C. McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 12 January 2009.


149 In his A Theology of Liberation, Gustavo Gutierrez contends that through a process of conscientization, “the oppressed reject the oppressive consciousness which dwells in them, become aware of their situation, and find their own language. They become themselves, less dependent and freer, as they commit themselves to the transformation and building up of a society” (Gustavo Gutierrez, a Theology of Liberation, 57). Essentially, for Gutierrez, non-persons must foremost recognize that their oppression is oppression, and this is achieved through a process of conscientization/consciousness-raising. Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza defines conscientization as “a process in which an individual or group names and understands structures of internalized oppression and begins to become free of them” (ESF, Wisdoms Ways, 208). Having internalized this oppression and accepting it as God’s will, freedom requires “them to reject this image and replace it with autonomy and responsibility” (Paulo Freire, Pedagogy of the Oppressed, New York: Herder and Herder Books, 1970, 29). During this process of rejecting the oppressive consciousness, the oppressed are slowly recognizing that they are actually oppressed and are capable of throwing off the chains of oppression and domination and claiming their freedom as the people of God.
[and] deal with those constructs that were created to explain small brains…[and] to explain inferiority.”\textsuperscript{150} This brand of liberation Theology “deals with all the manifestations of very negative ideology [blacks] have been indoctrinated with, introduced to, taught, [and] promoted through blood lines [and] social teaching ….”\textsuperscript{151} Consequently, this church operates under what I call a transformative Theology of liberation, deliberately aimed at consciousness raising and spiritual development.

As a transformative Theology of liberation rooted in a hermeneutic of counter-indoctrination, the theological program of the Black Coptic Church advances an element of contradiction, which has as its goal the overturning of false images and ideologies that safeguard the social and theological foundations of North America as they relate to Black life, Black culture, and Black religion. The transformative characteristic of this program is rooted in the church’s attention to the materialization of religion, particularly Christianity, as a negative mark in the history of blacks in North America, but is consummated in the church’s construction of a \textit{new person} who affirms his or her creation in the image of God.

Karl Barth suggested that modern Theology is a Theology of the “time between the times.”\textsuperscript{152} In this assertion, Barth argues that Theology must address the situation of the human being. It cannot be a Theology of paradise, because we are not there. Nor can it be a Theology of the future, because we are not there yet. Therefore, Theology is that

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{150} Empress Selah Thomas, Theology of the Black Coptic Church, interview with Leonard C. McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 12 January 2009.
\bibitem{151} Ibid.
\end{thebibliography}
science which addresses the human being in this existential reality. Or, as Tillich posits, Theology is that subject which concerns itself with one’s “ultimate concern,” which is a matter of being and non-being.\(^{153}\) Herein lies the “contradiction” element inherent in the church’s Theology.

Contradiction has its roots in the Latin *contradicere*, meaning to speak against or to assert the contrary. In the Black Coptic Church, the element of “contradiction” arises from the church’s proclamation that to be black is to be created in the image of God. This radical assertion of black humanity intrinsically linked to creation was first decreed by the church’s founder, Prophet Cicero Patterson, who utilized Scripture to contradict social, political, economic, and most notably, theological constructions that denied full meaning and valuation to blacks in North America. Hence, the church rejects any “disembodied” Theology that fails to relate the Christian gospel to the lived experience of Blacks in North America. In a similar tone, Jürgen Moltmann argues that any Theology which advocates that “this earth is not our home,”\(^ {154}\) as in Augustine, runs the risk of neglecting not only the Christian responsibility to care for this earth, but also of disregarding the care and attention to the human being, both soul *and* body.\(^ {155}\) As one respondent indicated, the Black Coptic Church denounces any “pie in the sky” Theology

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\(^{155}\) Ibid.
that creates a radical distinction between lived experiences and the life to come. In the final analysis, to be created in the image of God encompasses both body and soul. Hence, the church’s attention to saving not only souls, but also saving bodies.

The Black Coptic Church’s concept of Liberation is fundamentally linked to the church’s understanding of salvation. In essence, to be liberated cannot be separated from the process of salvation, which results from the adherents’ encounter with the risen Christ, who is none other than the Black Messiah. This relationship of liberation and salvation, therefore, grounds itself in the ministry of Jesus the Christ, who “[said] he came to set the captives free. That is liberation.”

To be sure, this correlation of liberation and salvation is not unique to the Black Coptic Church. In his *Theology of Liberation*, Gustavo Gutierrez posits this interrelationship between liberation and salvation as realized in the church’s eschatological hope. For Gutierrez, the eschatological promise is “already but not yet.” To be sure, eschatology has classically, at least in dogmatic Theology, been regarded as the “Theology of the last things.” In political Theology of Europe (especially in the works of Metz and Moltmann), eschatology has been reworked to the extent that it is associated with the

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Prophetic tradition, in which the prophets “have ‘eschatologized’ Israel’s conceptions of time and history. However, for Gutierrez, what is characteristic of the prophets is, “on the one hand, their orientation toward the future and, on the other, their concern with the present.” Such a tri-dimensional paradigm of liberation, salvation, and eschatology is reflected in the Black Coptic Church’s interpretation of liberation.

As has been suggested above, salvation as liberation forces a nuanced elucidation of the history of the church’s eschatological vision. It is my contention that the Black Coptic Church’s Theology of liberation commences with an eschatological orientation that repudiates any theological construction that refuses to acknowledge the act of creation (imago dei) as the ground of Christian hope, which is consummated in one of the final promises of God, “Behold, I make all things new.” Queen Huldah Morgan described liberation as “the blessing in this world, not flying and dying to the next.”

This construction of salvation as liberation embedded in an eschatological posture, interprets Christian hope as having temporal ramifications. The goal in this development is not to obscure the “not yet” of Christian eschatology, but rather in the tradition of Irenaeus and Moltmann, wants to make the case that God’s salvific plan for humanity includes a restoration of the world and human beings. To be sure, the Black Coptic Church understands that in salvation, “There is a redeeming of the earth. […] There is a

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161 Gutierrez, 93.

162 Revelations 21:1-5 (NRSV)

163 Queen Huldah Morgan Morgan, Theology of the Black Coptic Church, interview with Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 12 January 2009.
new heaven and a new earth,‖"164 which leads to the end of systems of injustice. Further, “Because of the nature of the black [man and woman], and [his or her] experience under Euro-centric dominance… [The Black Coptic Church] wanted us to refocus from the afterlife to now. This is where we [will experience] the new creation.‖"165

This chapter began with the assertion that Theology is necessarily situational. The central premise of this claim does not intend to deny the possibility"166 of the universality of God’s saving grace, but, on the contrary, seeks to emphasize the particularism of the Gospel message as it is addressed to a particular group or culture at a particular time. The history of Christian Theology, especially within the context of the North American “academy,” assumed, to the extent that non-white voices were excluded from theological dialogue, a universal approach toward Theology. The limitations of this approach are many. However, my fundamental criticism is grounded in the fact that Theology, as a universal, remains a conceptual academic topic, which fails to concretize the meaning of the Christian gospel in a particular context. Such an approach is scandalous precisely because it advances a tradition of theological imperialism which assumes the dominant group has a monopoly on truth. The Black Coptic Church, however, denies such a proclamation and promotes an interpretation of the Christian gospel that demands the humanity of all persons.

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164 Royal Priest Meshach Gardiner, Christology, 20 January 2009
165 Queen Huldah Morgan Morgan, Christology, 20, January 2009
166 While God’s grace is universal, there must be an appropriate human response to God’s grace.
The “signs of the times” shape the context out of which theological programs arise.

To be sure, the Black theological project evolved within the framework of a racial paradigm which created a situation of what James Cone labels “existential absurdity”\(^\text{167}\) for black persons. In short, existential absurdity is recognized

when [the black man or woman] first awakens to [his or her] place in America and feels sharply the absolute contradiction between what is and what ought to be or recognizes the inconsistency between his [or her] view of him [or her] self as a [person] and America’s description of him [or her] as thing, his [or her] immediate reaction is a feeling of absurdity.\(^\text{168}\)

This claim does not suggest the absurdity of the black person. In contrast, “the absurdity arises as man [and woman] confronts the world and looks for meaning. […] Absurdity arises as the black man [and woman] seeks to understand his [or her] place in the white world.”\(^\text{169}\) The theological evolution of the Black Coptic Church sought to confront this existential absurdity with a theological teaching that rejected all things negative concerning black, and replaces the negative with positive proclamations and affirmations\(^\text{170}\) that gave meaning, pride, and dignity to being black and created in the image of God.\(^\text{171}\)


\(^{168}\) Ibid., 8-9.

\(^{169}\) Ibid., 9.

\(^{170}\) Once such document entitled “The Black Man,” is a scripture–based recitation of certain passages related to the presence of “black” in scripture. This call and response proclamation is recited each Sunday morning by the congregants. One stanza taken from the Song of Solomon 1:5, proclaims, “I am Black and Beautiful.”

A Black God’s Way

The origins of the Black Coptic Church as a religious movement which sought to thwart the pessimistic and dehumanizing constructions of race and class that stifled black progress in the early and middle parts of the twentieth century, necessitated what was described earlier as a hermeneutic of counter-indoctrination, which re-interpreted scripture and re-imagined theological statements in a manner which advanced that dignity of being black in America. Following such a hermeneutical and theological task, Prophet Cicero Patterson constructed a Theology of liberation which established a relationship between all things divine (God, Jesus, Holy Spirit, etc.) and “black.” This novel relationship between the divine and “black” nuanced theological, social, economic, and political understandings of what it meant to be black in North America, especially in theological and religious thinking, which for centuries throughout Europe and North America had built a religious empire which celebrated all things white via imagery and pictorial drawings, while virtually excluding anything “Black” as a part of God’s divine majesty. Therefore, the Black Coptic Church since its beginning has emphasized “black” in its doctrine, not in a nationalistic way, as in the Marcus Garvey movement, or in a necessarily political manner as in the Black Power movement. On the contrary, the “black doctrine” of the Black Coptic Church functions as a catalyst that counters demeaning perceptions of being black, interrupts the shame in being black, and annihilates any suggestion that God is not concerned about the well-being and the future of black people. In the end, this brand of Black Theology, which verbally declares the
blackness of things divine, “is an extreme proclamation for an extreme indoctrination,” \(^{172}\)
which “immediately dismantles … what was a violent many years of generational indoctrination.” \(^{173}\)

A distinct theological element in the Black Coptic Church is the church’s declaration that God is black. This proclamation of a “Black God” is not simply and intrinsic or conceptual belief, or a footnote in church doctrine. However, if one visits a Black Coptic Church on any given Sunday, one will immediately take notice of the verbal proclamation of the church’s adherence to a Black God. The theological meaning of this statement, coupled with the verbal proclamation of its adherents, can be related to the interrelationship between God and liberation which, in many facets, forms the theological foundation of the church’s program. In fact, Queen Huldah Morgan maintained that “[Prophet Cicero Patterson] declared the ‘blackness’ as a way of detailing the positive nature of ‘black,’” and therefore to dispel negative perceptions.\(^{174}\) The announcement of a Black God, therefore, is not an attempt obscure the “otherness” of God, or an attempt to place limitations on the essence of God as divine mystery. On the contrary, the church’s claim to a Black God serves as a method by which the church declares that to be black is to be a part of the “good creation,” that God is interested in the human condition, and that the universality of God is best seen in the particularity.

\(^{172}\) Empress Selah Thomas, Christology of the Black Coptic Church, interview with Leonard C. McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 20 January 2009.

\(^{173}\) Priest Priest Eli Burdo, Christology of the Black Coptic Church, interview with Leonard C. McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 20 January 2009

\(^{174}\) Queen Huldah Morgan Morgan, Theology of the Black Coptic Church, interview with Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 12 January 2009.
The postulation of a Black God in the Black Coptic Church is primarily recognition that to be human is to be in the image of God. Blacks are human. Therefore, to black is to be created in God’s own image. At the church’s founding, the declaration of black people as creatures who are in God’s image presented a challenge and a protest to prevailing perceptions of black people, who were deemed as non-human, inferior, and niggers and Negroes. Therefore, Prophet Cicero Patterson’s pronouncement that God is Black expresses an ideological and theological challenge to any Christian Church, or any religious order for that matter, which failed to advance a theological argument against racism and white supremacy. Therefore, the Black Coptic Church in its affirmation of the Black God makes a decisive break with any Christian church that used the liberating tradition of the Gospel stories as an instrument to advance an agenda of hate and degradation. The doctrine of a Black God, then, establishes an internal declaration of personhood and an external “no” to non-being or nothingness. It is an absolute definitive “yes” to the *Imago Dei* in which God created human beings.

The doctrine of a Black God is fundamental to the Black Coptic Church specifically because it symbolizes an objection to theological doctrines of God which render God as so “above” and so “transcendent” to the human condition that God seems to be disinterested in the struggles of the poor, the oppressed, and the least of these. James Cone articulates that “God is not “above” or “beyond” the world. Rather, “transcendence refers to human purpose as defined by the infinite struggle for liberation.”  

Further, “because God has made the goal of blacks God’s own goal, Black

175 James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 78.
Theology believes that it is not only appropriate but necessary to begin the doctrine of God with an insistence on God’s Blackness.176

The claim to the necessity of a Black God in Black Theology has served as the touchstone of the doctrine of God in the Black Coptic Church since its formation. Queen Huldah Morgan maintains that the “Black God is the acknowledgment of God within the human experience.”177 The postulation of the Black God within the human experience does not indicate that God’s essence as absolute Other is altered or changed.178 On the contrary, “this is what the Wholly Otherness of God means. God comes to us in blackness, which is wholly, unlike whiteness. To receive God’s revelation is to become black with God by joining God in the works of liberation.”179 God’s Blackness, then, is the realization and God’s self proclamation of God’s interestedness in the existential absurdities which black people encounter on a daily basis. The Black God is the God with and for black people manifesting God-self as liberator and redeemer.

The Biblical witness bears testimony to a God who, although mysterious, is not regarded as the excessively transcendent One who abandons God’s creation, existing in divine solitude absent from the dealings of human beings. The Black Coptic Church’s doctrine asserts a belief in “I Am That I Am a Black God,”180 the God who appears to

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177 Queen Huldah Morgan Morgan, Theology of the Black Coptic Church, interview with Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 12 January 2009.

178 Ibid.


180 See Statement of Faith, Appendix 1.
Moses first as mystery, but consummates this mysterious manifestation as the One who reveals God-self as an active participant and indeed the protagonist in Israel’s plight for freedom. To be sure, the “I AM” God is the God who pronounced Israel’s redemption as the One who has “observed the misery of my people who are in Egypt; I have heard their cry on account of their taskmasters … and I have come down to deliver them….”

Dwight Hopkins demonstrates the history of the Exodus narrative in the Black Church tradition through a retrieval of slave narratives and sermons. Hopkins writes, “African-American bondsmen and bondswomen discovered their own predicament and deliverance in the story of the Old Testament Israelites, who also suffered bondage. [...] And so they reached back into biblical times and appropriated Yahweh’s promise and accomplishments for their contemporary dilemma.”

Prophet Cicero Patterson, in his verbal declaration of a Black God, drew a parallel between the conditions of North American blacks in twentieth-century America, and the Biblical story of Israel. As “I AM,” God is the “One Who Is,” and as “Black God,” God is the One who is interested, concerned, and therefore implicated in the struggle of good versus evil.

The doctrine of a Black God in the Black Coptic Church does not function methodically as a paradigm which obscures or calls into question the universality of God as a God who is for all people at all times. However, this paradigm does call into question the manner in which the God of white Christianity, who is presumably a white God, has functioned in the Christian church, especially vis-à-vis black people. Priest

181 See Exodus 3

Meshach Gardiner, who is arguably one of the Black Coptic Church’s most ardent defenders of the verbal claim to a Black God, argues that the true essence of “who” God is, “what” God does, and how God should be conceived, is summarized in the phrase, “A Black God’s way.”

A Black God’s way, reasons Priest Meshach, is the purest manifestation of the scriptural explanation and interpretation of how human beings should consider God. He argues, “The Black God is the proto-type of the God of Whom scripture writes.”

In a similar tone, James Cone insists

The God of Black liberation will not be confused with a blood thirsty white idol. Black Theology must show that the Black God has nothing to do with the God worshiped in white churches whose primary purpose is to sanctify the racism of whites and to daub the wounds of Blacks. Putting new wine in new wineskins means that the Black Theology view of God has nothing in common with those who prayed for an American victory in Vietnam or who pray for a “cool” summer in the ghetto.

In essence, the doctrine of the Black God calls into question any theological interpretation of God that does not advance the interconnectedness of God and liberation. The Black God is the God who liberates.

As mentioned above, the Black Coptic Church’s claim to a Black God does not call into question the universality of God; however, the church advances the claim that the particularity of God discloses God’s universality. In other words, Queen Huldah Morgan argues that “every race and nation, and every physical manifestation of humanity

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183 Royal Priest Meshach Gardiner Gardiner, Theology of the Black Coptic Church, interview with Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 12 January 2009.

184 Ibid.

185 Cone, A Black Theology of Liberation, 63.
has an equal access … and the same opportunity to see God in their image."\(^{186}\) However, Priest Meshach Gardiner emphasizes that even within the possibility of the universalization of God, any group that depicts God in their own image, must replicate “A Black God’s Way [liberation],”\(^ {187}\) or else it fails to accurately identify with the God of whom Scripture testifies. Nonetheless, to the extent that God is not employed for oppressive or self-interested purposes, “every people should see God in themselves.”\(^ {188}\) Accordingly, the Black God is a symbol that first retrieves the Biblical witness to a God of justice, of compassion, and of liberation, and secondly, which celebrates the coming of the Black God as a contemporary redeemer to a dejected and dehumanized people.

\(^{186}\) Queen Huldah Morgan Morgan, Theology of the Black Coptic Church, interview with Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 12 January 2009.

\(^{187}\) Ibid.

\(^{188}\) Queen Huldah Morgan Morgan, Theology of the Black Coptic Church, interview with Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 12 January 2009.
CHAPTER FOUR
THANK YOU, BLACK JESUS! FROM CHRISTOLOGY TO JESUSOLOGY

Christology is not only an intellectual exercise for academic theologians to ponder. It is not only philosophical or abstract statements seeking to render intelligible the presence of God in Christ. On the contrary, Christology arises from communities of faith where the gospel is preached and the man Jesus the Christ is proclaimed as the revelation of God. Therefore, Christology necessarily begins as a faith claim that God has spoken through a Son, and that this Son makes real the presence of God with humanity. For Anselm, Theology is *fides quaerens intellectum*, faith seeking understanding. Accordingly, Christology in the first step commences with a faith in Jesus the Christ, and is secondly a reflection on the significance of the human experience with Jesus the Christ. It is, in fact, a response to the universal yet contextual question posed by Jesus to his disciples as reported by the Evangelist Mark: “But who do you say that I am?”\(^\text{189}\)

The Christological question invoked in the Markan account does not seek a conceptual or intangible response. Quite the contrary, the question is concretized by the pronoun *you*, thereby calling for a subjective response from the person(s) being queried. Jesus was, at first, interested in the secondary responses of his disciples concerning

\(^{189}\) Mark 8:29 (New Revised Standard Version)
However, the crux of this pericope transitions with the preposition “but,” indicating an intentional move from the abstract to the concrete—from the impersonal to the personal. The personal always indicates the subjective experience of the individual. In this instance, the subjective is the testimony bearing witness of the personal experience of the people of God with the one who stands at the center of Christian faith, Jesus the Christ. To be sure, Christology is always done within the community of the people of God.

The relationship between Christology and the experience of the believer cannot be overemphasized. The Age of Enlightenment’s call for objectivity in the pursuit of “truth” is shattered by the post-modern scholar’s refusal to submit to any “universals” or to any pre-conceived notion of truth. Post-modernity’s advocacy of the radical subjectivity of human thought recognizes the inherent dangers in any essentialist treatment of human experience and knowledge. The epistemological source of any claim to truth or reason lies in the experience of the individual. To be sure, “What we see depends on where we stand. One’s social location or rhetorical context is decisive for how one sees the world, constructs reality, or interprets biblical text.” This is the situation of Christology. Its proclamation or testimony is an expression of the lived reality of the faith community. As James Cone contends, “… from the New Testament times to present day, the answers to the Christological question have been offered from within the horizon of which the

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190 Mark 8:27 (New Revised Standard Version)

question has been raised.”¹⁹² Therefore, any attempt to generalize Christological statements will inevitably fail to the extent that it will not represent the variation of the human experience.

At the center of Black Theology is the proposition of liberation as an essential theological category. The theological justification for such a proposition is best found in the Evangelist Luke’s interpretation of the earthly ministry of Jesus the Christ who, reading a passage from the Prophet Isaiah, proclaimed that “the Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captive, and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.”¹⁹³ The liberative program of Jesus’ earthly ministry presented in this text juxtaposes Jesus with the tradition of the Hebrew prophets by declaring his mission as one which proclaims deliverance and liberation. Indeed, Luke attached a great importance to this episode, which he considered without a doubt as the official opening of the ministry of Jesus, which [Jesus] specified as the new period of history and salvation to the culture of the times.¹⁹⁴ Essentially, read from the location of an oppressed community, the Christology presented in Luke is an unambiguous statement concerning Jesus’ relationship to the “least of these.” Accordingly, Black Theology’s Christological position stands in opposition to any


interpretation of Jesus which does not make evident His commitment to liberation and the creation of a new society that is reflective of the Kingdom of God.

Liberation as a theological category implies the deliverance of the people of God from those structures, social, political and theological, which inhibit and stifle the authentic freedom of the people of God. Liberation is not uniquely the deliverance from physical bondage, but rather theological liberation is holistic insofar as it is concerned about the whole of God’s creation, not merely deliverance from sin or deliverance from a “sinful body.” Theological liberation takes seriously the “good creation” ethic as posited in Genesis 1, in which God declared all of creation as “very good.” In this regard, liberation as a theological category maintains as absolutely imperative both physical and spiritual liberation from human and spiritual (theological and religious) oppression.

Black Theology maintains that the history of Christianity in North America, especially as it was offered to formerly enslaved “kidnapped Africans,” is swarming with oppressive structures, including doctrine and imagery, which checkmated the freedom of the slaves and subsequently to slavery the authentic freedom of blacks in North America. Therefore, liberation in the black theological tradition functions first as a conceptual framework which identifies and deconstructs oppression where it exists. The process of identifying oppression as oppression means that the black theologian must be able to demonstrate why the identified structure is actually oppression, and subsequently, on


196 Genesis 1:31 (New Revised Standard Version)
theological grounds, must unravel the foundation of the oppressive structure; that is, to
demonstrate how the structure in question stands in opposition to God and God’s plan for
humanity. Secondly, liberation in the black theological tradition functions
constructively insofar as it establishes a theological vision which counters the former
oppressive elements, and creates a Theology that is freeing, life-giving and truly good
news for the least of these. It is in this light that Black Theology refuses to accept as
normative or valid any Christological construction that does not first ground itself in the
ministry of earthly Jesus. The Black Coptic Church’s announcement of the “Black Jesus”
inaugurates a “Jesusological” paradigm which posits a tri-dimensional relationship
between Black Jesus as “symbol,” the verbal proclamation of Black Jesus and salvation.
Such a paradigm calls into question abstract representations of Jesus as the Christ, bearer
of redemption and spiritual salvation, which fail to ground Jesus as a historical reality
who, in his “full” humanity, identifies with, suffers with, and is resurrected among the
poor and the oppressed.

**Implications of Chalcedon**

I often tell my students in Introduction to Christian Theology that the Council of Chalcedon (451) should be understood as a marriage, a sort of joining together of two
schools of thought: Alexandria, which tended to exaggerate the divinity of Jesus, and
Antioch, which seemingly exaggerated the humanity of Jesus. At stake is the proper or
orthodox understanding of the nature, or “kind of being” of the second Person of the
Trinity. While the tension between Alexandria and Antioch is historically traceable to
John of Antioch, whom Cyril charged with Nestorianism, and Cyril of Alexandria, whom John of Antioch suggested propagated an heretical Appolinarian Christology, the impetus of the Council of Chalcedon “arose from the necessity of countering both Nestorianism and Eutychianism.” Nonetheless, “despite all the difference … the moderate Antiochenes … and Cyril of Alexandria were moving towards one and the same goal, the expression of Christ as truly one … in the distinction of his Godhead and manhood.” The central objective then, of the Council of Chalcedon “from the imperial point of view, was to establish a single faith throughout the empire,” in order to prevent a theologically-divided church with several groups claiming orthodoxy.

On October 25, 451, the Synod of Bishops at the Council of Chalcedon approved a declaration of faith concerning Jesus the Christ which rejected both Nestorianism and Monophysitism, thus putting an end to internal feuding which had persisted since the Council of Ephesus, and subsequently threatened the unity of the universal church. In analyzing the outcome of the Council of Chalcedon, it is important to bear in mind that the Fathers at Chalcedon did not reject Nicaea (325), but rather strengthened and rendered explicit that which was implicit in the Nicene Creed concerning the humanity

197 Nestorianism is the doctrine that the two natures of Christ are joined together in conjunction rather than hypostatic union.

198 Appolinarianism is the Christological theory that Christ had a human body and soul, but no rational mind.


200 Eutyches taught that the human nature of Christ was overcome by the divine.

201 Grillmeier, 453.

and divinity of Jesus the Christ. In fact, the Chalcedonian creed begins with the declarative affirmation, “Following, then, the holy Fathers . . .”\textsuperscript{203} thereby declaring the creeds’ allegiance to the doctrine of Nicaea. Kelley maintains that the new creed achieved three goals:

First, after a preamble, it solemnly reaffirmed the Nicene Creed as the standard of orthodoxy, setting the creed of the council of Constantinople . . . beside it as refuting heresies which had sprung up since Nicaea. Secondly, it canonized Cyril’s two Letters and Leo’s Tome, the former as disposing of Nestorianism and as a sound interpretation of the creed, and the latter as overthrowing Eutychianism and confirming the true faith. Thirdly, it set out a formal confession of faith . . .\textsuperscript{204}

In essence, the Chalcedonian Creed asserted in no uncertain terms that Jesus the Christ is fully God and fully human, thereby satisfying both the Alexandrian and Anthiochene traditions. In its final formula, the creed acknowledged:

\begin{quote}
In agreement, therefore, with the holy fathers, we all unanimously teach that we should confess that our Lord Jesus Christ is one and the same Son, \textit{the same perfect in Godhead and the same perfect in manhood, truly God and truly man, the same of a rational soul and body, consubstantial with the Father in Godhead, and the same consubstantial with us in manhood}, like us in all things except sin; begotten from the Father before the ages as regards His Godhead, and in the last days, the same, because of us and because of our salvation begotten from the Virgin Mary, the \textit{Theotokos}, as regards His manhood; one and the same Christ, Son, Lord, only-begotten, made known \textit{in two natures without confusion, without change, without division, without separation, the difference of the natures being by no means removed because of the union, but the property of each nature being preserved} and coalescing in one \textit{prospon} and one \textit{hypostasis} - not parted or divided into two \textit{prosopa}, but one and the same Son, only-begotten, divine Word, the Lord Jesus Christ, as the prophets of old and Jesus Christ Himself have taught us about Him and the creed of our fathers has handed down.\textsuperscript{205}
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{204} Kelley, 339

\textsuperscript{205} Chalcedonian Creed as cited in J.N.D. Kelley, 1958, 339-340 (English emphasis is that of Kelley)
The decisive outcome of the Council of Chalcedon is the church’s affirmation that Jesus the Christ is no less than God, but also consubstantial with humanity. Yet, these two natures exist in perfect union, “without confusion,” and the property of each maintains its integrity, thereby fulfilling its purpose in the salvific process. To be sure, the distinctive theological legacy of Chalcedon lay in its ability to give insight into the church’s understanding of Jesus the Christ as the unity of God and humanity, while preserving the faculties of the dual natures. This theological legacy is achieved through the fusion of certain elements of both Alexandrian and Antiochene Christology. Kelly observes:

Clearly the divine Word … is regarded as the unique subject of the Incarnate, and this is reinforced by the sanction given to the controverted title, Theotokos. This is the essential truth which Alexandrian Theology had grasped. On the other hand, the long debate had proved that this truth could not be allowed to stand alone. Without an explicit acknowledgement of the reality of Christ’s human life, the Anthiochene tradition would remain unsatisfied at the point where its theological intuition was sounder, and door would be left open, as the emergence of Eutychianism had demonstrated, for dangerous forms of monophysitism. So, side by side with the unity, the Definition states that, as incarnate, the Word exists in ‘two natures,’ each complete and retaining its distinctive properties and operation unimpaired in the union.206

Although the Christological intention behind the Council of Chalcedon seeks to state emphatically that Jesus the Christ is fully divine and fully human, without confusion or separation, the theological interpretation of the Council’s definition of faith begs the question, “What kind of human being is Jesus the Christ?” The Council’s definition of faith seems more interested in locating the humanity of Christ, rather than the truly historicity of the man, the human being of whom the synoptic Gospels testify, Jesus the Christ. The Jesus of Chalcedon is quintessentially a divine Being who assumes a human

206 Kelley, 341.
nature, but it is the *Logos*, the Divine Word of God, who is the subject of this Jesus, therefore relegating the humanity of Jesus almost as an inferior nature. Without a doubt, “even though we have the doctrine of two natures, many Christians are really monophysites in practice, because the human nature has become a mitigated reality and does not define the person or ontological identity of Jesus integrally.” Accordingly, the doctrine of the Council of Chalcedon, although noteworthy for its recognition of the humanity of Jesus, is not without criticism.

Roger Haight criticizes the doctrine of Chalcedon for relegating the humanity of Jesus to the background of his Divine ontological structure. His criticism calls into question the abstract portrait of Jesus’ humanity which Chalcedon introduces in an attempt to satisfy Antiochene Christology, and to conquer monophysitism. Haight maintains:

A common criticism is that its doctrine, like the theological mode of thought that generates it, has abandoned Jesus as he portrayed in the synoptic gospels. It deals with Jesus in the abstract or general metaphysical categories of nature, person, substance, and being. When this kind of language controls the subject matter, it compromises an imaginative focus on Jesus of Nazareth. At some points the doctrine of person and natures even seem to contradict the vital, existential, and historical quality of Jesus’ union with God as this is displayed in the synoptic gospels.

The definition of faith as expressed in the creedal formula following Council of Chalcedon is certainly correct in its contention that Jesus the Christ is “truly man.” The humanity witnessed in the synoptic tradition, however, is not unambiguously expressed in the spirit of Chalcedon. While Jesus is declared to be *truly* man, “his human nature is

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208 Ibid., 280.
abstract in the sense that it is not the nature of a human person or a human being, but subsists on another, the Logos or Son who assumed this nature.” To be sure, however, Jesus the Christ was an integral human being whose earthly ministry as recorded by the synoptic authors has salvific implications which Black Theology has highlighted in its Christological development.

Chalcedon’s definition of faith certainly gives recognition to the humanity of Jesus the Christ, but its failure to make central said nature of Jesus in the process of holistic salvation rightly opens the possibility of theological exploitation of the poor and the oppressed. Because it is the assumption of a human nature by the Divine Logos, which is not only the subject, but the key operative function in the Chalcedon’s soteriology, the humanity of Jesus, which includes his earthly ministry, is essentially ignored as an essential element toward the prospect of holistic salvation. However, the works and ministry of Jesus of Nazareth renders possible an understanding of salvation that undeniably stands in contradiction to social constructions which call into question the liberty and freedom of the people of God. In the final analysis:

Christ understands himself as Liberator because he preaches, presides over, and is already inaugurating the Kingdom of God. The kingdom of God is a total, global and structural transfiguration and revolution of the reality of human beings; it is

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209 Haight, 289.

210 I define holistic salvation as an understanding of the saving power of God in Christ which has temporal and non-temporal salvific implications. It stands in opposition to any one-sided approach which focuses on one while neglecting the other. Holistic salvation is the saving of the body and soul as opposed to a theory of salvation that is concerned solely with the last things, in the ultimate sense.

211 Chalcedon refers to Mary as Theotokos, God-bearer, thus emphasizing the incarnation, or God becoming “other” than God, as critical in the process of salvation. The crucial element within this construction seems to suggest that it is God, the Divine Logos, who is the most pivotal, if not essential element in the salvific process. One is left wondering, even through a generous reading of Chalcedon, if the humanity of Jesus is a central aspect of salvation.
In essence, an authentic portrait of the humanity of Jesus will indisputably construct such a portrait that is reflective of the Synoptic tradition.

The New Testament witness unambiguously demonstrates Jesus’ love and bias toward the poor, the weak, and the humiliated of society. The life of Jesus the Christ, specifically His mission of liberation recorded by the Evangelist Luke, “to set the oppressed free,” is the starting point of an holistic soteriology grounded in the earthly ministry of Jesus the Christ. Indeed, a comprehensive reading of the synoptic gospels discloses an unequivocal conclusion that Jesus, as James Cone contends, is deeply interested in the anthropological “other”, or the downtrodden and the oppressed of society. Jesus’ identification with the least of these suggests an enduring confrontation between Jesus and earthly powers. His commitment to those who are castigated by the powers of this world symbolizes His acceptance of said group into the Kingdom of God. Cone maintains, “Jesus’ work is essentially one of liberation. Becoming a slave himself, he opens realities of human existence formerly closed to [humanity]. Through an encounter with Jesus, [humanity] now knows the full meaning of God’s action in history and [humanity’s] place within it.”

Jesus’ message is one of liberation where “the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, and the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have the good news preached to them” (Luke 7:22).

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The earthly ministry of Jesus of Nazareth is not expendable at the cost of a one-sided Christology which focuses its Christological lens on the Christ of Faith. The Christ of Faith is the crucified Jesus, the living human being who led a transformative movement of liberation, of hope and new life for those persons who had been relegated to the periphery of the first century’s social construct. Any Theology which creates discontinuity between the Risen Lord and crucified Messiah will lose the significance of the total life of Jesus the Christ. Kelly Brown-Douglass has masterfully argued that an intentional theological de-emphasizing of the Earthly ministry of Jesus the Christ has set the stage for a battle between the “White Christ,” whose salvific message renders inconsequential the ministry located in the synoptic gospels, and the “Black Jesus,” whose message of liberation as salvation calls into question any attempt to craft as invalid His earthly ministry in the process of salvation.

In her *The Black Christ*, Brown-Douglass challenges the history of Western Christianity’s attempt to relegate the earthly ministry of Jesus the Christ to the background, as having little to no significance in the Christian story. She argues this Christological move has laid the foundation for a “battle of two Christs,” the White Christ and the Black Christ.\(^{214}\) The White Christ, argues Brown-Douglass, was at the center of slave-holding America, and not only justified, but, participated in the dehumanization of kidnapped Africans. The confrontation emerges, however, when the White Christ is juxtaposed alongside the Black Christ, who is at the core of slave rebellions and other revolutionary struggles in which Black Americans have demanded

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freedom in a brutal and merciless world. The White Christ, reasons Brown-Douglass, “characteristically allowed for (1) the justification of slavery, (2) Christians to be slaves, and (3) the compatibility of Christianity with extreme cruelty of slavery.”

In an elucidation of her thesis, Brown-Douglass contends that by focusing on God becoming incarnate in the person of Jesus the Christ, slaveholding “Christians” opted to draw their attention to the soteriological function of God in Christ, essentially ignoring Jesus’ salvific work in the temporal realm. Such a one-sided reading of the life of Jesus allowed slave-holding “Christians” to conceive of their salvation as already achieved through faith, absent of any human response as a requirement to God’s grace.

Brown-Douglass maintains that:

The White Christ is grounded in an understanding of Christianity suggesting that Jesus of Nazareth was Christ, or the Messiah, because God was made flesh in him. The incarnation itself is considered the decisive feature of Christianity. That God became human is the essential fact in what means for Jesus to be Christ. His ministry to the poor and oppressed is virtually inconsequential to this interpretation of Christianity.

Therefore, slaveholders were free to construct a vision of Christianity and of Jesus which protected their interests and legitimatized, theologically speaking, slavery and the cruel treatment of enslaved persons. In sum, “with salvation guaranteed through belief, White people could be slaveholders and Christian without guilt or fear about the state of their soul.”

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215 Ibid., 12.
216 Ibid., 13.
217 Ibid., 13.
Slaveholders saw no problem in their fellow treatment of kidnapped Africans because they failed to comprehend the contradiction between the life of Jesus the Christ and a slaveholding society. The perpetuators of slavery did not fully embrace the whole story of Christianity, which includes a first century ministry of liberation aimed at deliverance of the captives. Brown-Douglass asserts, by “ignoring Jesus' liberating ministry to the oppressed as well as his commitment to ‘set the captives free,’” apologists for slavery argued that if Jesus had considered slavery a sin, he would have spoken directly against it. Therefore, the White Christ who stood at the center of slaveholding Christianity was a faux Christ whose earthly existence was a mere footnote in the history of slave Christianity. Fundamentally, Brown-Douglass’ analysis that “the White Christ is, thus, predicated upon an understanding of Jesus that disregards what he did do—that is, minister to the poor and oppressed—yet accents what he did not—that is, speak directly against slavery,” articulates in the most rudimentary fashion, the basic problem of demoting the Jesus of history in an effort to capitalize on the Christ of Faith.

**Toward a Constructive Understanding of a Hermeneutic of Counter-Indoctrination**

In the chapter, *Theology of the Black Coptic Church*, I introduced a “hermeneutic of counter-indoctrination,” which I posited as an essential strategy of the Black Coptic Church’s liberative theological program. During interviews with church authorities, I queried my participants on the necessity of the verbal proclamation of “Black Jesus” as a vital part of the church’s liturgy and homilies. One of my participants, Empress Selah Thomas, suggested that the necessity of the church’s verbal announcement of the Black

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218 Ibid., 15.
219 Ibid., 15.
Jesus arises from the “positioning of Black and Jesus together to counteract the immediate [theological] indoctrination”\textsuperscript{220} that has aided in the oppression of blacks in North America. She further suggested that it is an “extreme proclamation for an extreme indoctrination.”\textsuperscript{221} Empress Selah’s contention that the doctrine of the Black Messiah in the Black Coptic Church is rooted in an absolute need to contradict an oppressive doctrine of Jesus the Christ, which aligned Jesus with theological imperialism and White Supremacy, and thus failed to demonstrate the relationship of Jesus with the most vulnerable of society, opens the possibility for an exploration of what I call a hermeneutic of counter-indoctrination.

A hermeneutic of counter-indoctrination accentuates the possibility that not all interpretations of scripture and church doctrine are beneficial for the whole of society, especially the losers of history. It recognizes that those in power construct Theology and interpret scripture in such a way as to protect their interests and safeguard the status-quo. In essence, there are three guiding principles that structure a hermeneutic of counter-indoctrination: A hermeneutic of counter-indoctrination (1) uncovers scriptural and doctrinal interpretations that have functioned as tools of oppression and thereby violate that love ethic of the Christian Testament; (2) does not accept as valid any scriptural interpretation or doctrine that has not undergone a critical hermeneutic of suspicion; (3) and thematically reconstructs Christian doctrine from the vantage point of the vulnerable and the oppressed, thereby centering liberation as the goal of the Christian gospel.

\textsuperscript{220} Empress Selah Thomas, Christology of the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, January 20, 2009.

\textsuperscript{221} Ibid.
Indoctrination is the instruction of an ideology or doctrine in a biased or specific partisan manner for the purpose of inculcating a myopic perspective or vision. It is, pejoratively, the process of brainwashing or propagandizing. Methodically, the system of indoctrination is a top-down approach, originating with those at the top, while its manipulative outcome affects the powerless. It is, in the end, a system which seeks to control the thinking, the freedom, and the humanity, of those who are indoctrinated. Christologically, the Black Coptic Church maintains that indoctrination has occurred in the form of a “false symbol”, through the power imagery, which has manifested itself in a de-conscientization of Black Americans since the North American institution of slavery.

Empress Selah’s statement that the verbal proclamation of “Black Jesus” in the Black Coptic Church functions as an announcement which “counteracts the immediate indoctrination” that has aided in the suppression of African-Americans, emerges as a Christological challenge to interpretations of Jesus that not only frame but sustain a theological system of white supremacy, in which the false symbol of the white Christ stands at the center, acting as an imposter over against the true Christ, who is in a constant battle for truth, love, and justice. The struggle between the two Christs is grounded in the oppositional nature of each. The white Christ is a false symbol precisely

Paul Tillich describes a symbol as that which participates in the power which it symbolizes. Unlike a sign, which merely points to something above itself, a symbol not only directs our attention to something, but it shares in the life-force to which it points. Tillich maintains “A symbol has truth: it is adequate to the revelation it expresses. A symbol is true: it is the expression of a true revelation.” Tillich cautions, however, that religious symbols are true only if they partake in the power of the Divine. True symbols must steer the finite, the ontological other, toward the infinite, and the infinite toward the finite. Jesus the Christ is a true symbol of God because He not only points in the Triune God, but participates in the Divine life of the Godhead and, as symbol, He draws finite human beings toward God, and He reveals God to finite, grounded human beings.
because it does not point to nor does it participate in the acts of liberation of the God of Israel, Who is decisive in God’s position against human servitude and oppression. The white Christ as a false symbol, on the contrary, directs one’s attention to and participates in greed, power, and ultimately death. In the end, the symbol of the white Christ does not drive humanity towards God and, to be sure, does not reveal God to humanity, specifically because the white Christ is the antithesis of the power of love, which the true Christ demands as a requirement of His followers.

The Black Coptic Church contends that the White Christ, as a false symbol propagated through imagery, has functioned as a mode of psychological damage that can only be defeated by the materialization of the Black Jesus. The false symbol of the white Christ, as promulgated historically through pictures, media, and pop culture, as an image of a white man with long, white hair, attempted to depict a divine relationship between slave apologists and the Triune God of Christianity, while concurrently shattering any possibility of the enslaved as partakers in the Divine relationship. This model of theological exploitation is scandalous to the extent that it conceives a relational paradigm in which those who perpetuate violence and injustice are created in the image of the Triune God, while the victims are created antithetically to the Divine image.

Accordingly, the true symbol of God, Jesus the Christ, who seeks justice and demands love, is portrayed as a co-conspirator in brutal acts of injustice. In the Black Coptic Church, therefore, “as in advertising … Black Jesus helps us to debrief the consciousness from long-held images, both mental and environmental,” and “we emphasize Black

223 Queen Huldah Morgan, Christology of the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 20 January 2009.
Jesus so that we may show the relationship between Jesus and our black men, black women, and black boys and girls.”

**Thank You, Black Jesus!**

When one enters a Black Coptic Church, a resounding anthem of praise and celebratory worship will include verbal proclamations such as, “Thank you, Black Jesus!” As in many Black Church traditions, the Black Coptic Church has very much a Pentecostal vibe, in which adherents partake in “shouting” or the “holy dance.” In various black churches, believers accompany the “holy dance” or “shout” with a loud voice, exclaiming, “Thank you, Jesus!” as a way of demonstrating their belief in the one whom they proclaim “makes a way out of no way,” is a “bridge over troubling waters,” or is their “rock in a weary land.” The Black Coptic Church, as are several Black Churches, is a Jesus-centered church, whose theological and homiletical exhortations tend to focus on the man Jesus and the act of salvation that was achieved in and through His life. In the Black Coptic Church, there is a strong belief that “Jesus is the manifestation of God,” and because He was Divine, “He was able to do divine things like turn water into wine, raise the dead, [and] give sight to the blind.”

The Church’s founder, Prophet Cicero Patterson, constructed the Church’s Theology such that the

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communion would refer to the Jesus of the Gospels, the man who stands at the center of Christian faith, as “Black Jesus.”

In Chapter One, I examined how the historical conditions of 20th century America gave rise to a number of black religious traditions that were not, at the time of their origin, content with conventional Christianity. The central issue at stake for these smaller denominations seemed to be the inability of mainline black Christian churches to make a radical break, not only in name, from established white churches. The Black Coptic Church is one such church, whose founding indicated a desire to see a “new Black Church” emerge; one that would create an organic Black Church whose Theology imbued its members with a sense of agency and “belongedness” in terms of God’s divine plan for humanity. When Prophet Cicero Patterson erected a sign on the doors of the first Black Coptic Church, located at 4724 S. Cottage Grove Ave. in Chicago, IL, that read, “Come and learn about the Black God, the Black Jesus, and all the Black Prophets,” this signaled a decisive break with already-existing notions of God, Jesus, and the Prophets of the Hebrew Bible. The underlying message in this call to “come and learn” suggests that the evolution of a new Christian story was on the horizon; one that would challenge dominant religious culture, and force a new way of seeing the Christian story from the perspective of the least of these.

Black Jesus as the central figure in the construction of the Black Coptic Church’s liberative theological program posits the notion that former conceptions of Jesus, in the image of the dominant group, were not particularly helpful or liberating for previously oppressed persons. If the image of the white Christ was a symbol which pointed to
degradation, oppression, and at worst, death, the image of the Black Jesus is a symbol of the life giving and liberating acts of the Jesus of whom scripture bears witness. Prophet Hosea Belcher suggested that the former Jesus who was passed down from the prevailing culture to enslaved kidnapped Africans was a Jesus who virtually ignored the social conditions facing blacks in North America. However, maintains Prophet Hosea, Prophet Cicero Patterson emphasized Black Jesus because “when I say ‘Black Jesus,’ He has to stand up; He understands the unique condition we were under.” For Prophet Hosea, the white Christ who adorned church walls in 20th century America was a Jesus who did not come to the rescue of blacks in America. On the contrary, the Black Coptic Church’s paradigmatic shift to the verbal proclamation and doxological celebration of the Black Jesus in early 20th century America inaugurates the transition from a one-sided Christology which begins with the Christ of faith, to a liberating “Jesusology,” which rejoices the coming of God in the historical Jesus as one whose salvific office includes the deliverance from human separation and the restoration of the castigated and dejected.

Over the course of my interviews, I inquired as to how one who is not affiliated with the Black Coptic Church should comprehend the Church’s oral declaration of the “Black Jesus.” In other words, I was interested in understanding the intention behind the founders’ insistence that the Church break with established churches’ identification of Jesus, to the naming of the Black Messiah. Queen Huldah Morgan used the metaphor of a genius to elucidate a response. She articulates:

A genius is someone who can answer every question and solve every problem … A genius could bring about every kind of harmonious aspect of human

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consciousness. Black Jesus is the Prince of Peace who brings forth the idea of peace and who causes you to be at peace and harmony with your inner and outward world. If Black Jesus is a genius, then there will never be a question that is not answered or a problem that is not solved in your life ....

Queen Huldah’s usage of the “genius” metaphor suggests that, at the Church’s founding, Prophet Cicero Patterson understood the white Christ as one who was unable to answer the questions and solve the problems of blacks in North America. To be sure, however, the Black Jesus, as genius, was One who was not simply able to answer and solve, but One who would restore peace in the mind, body, and soul. She contends that as Black Jesus, there is “nothing too big or too small that He is not able to solve.”

The Black Coptic Church in its origin was seeking a savior, and in the Black Messiah, the Church understands that salvation has truly come.

The Black Coptic Church’s verbal decree of the Black Jesus does not suggest that Jesus is only concerned with the liberation and deliverance of Black Americans. On the contrary, Prophet Hosea Belcher contends that “although we call him Black Jesus, He is still Jesus, but we say Black Jesus because we identify ourselves with him.”

Nonetheless, throughout the course of my interviews with Church authorities, I sought to understand exactly how “Black” functioned in the declaration of the Black Jesus. To the extent that adherents in the Faith don’t simply theoretically conceptualize the idea of

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228 Queen Huldah Morgan, Christology of the Black Coptic Church interview, Chicago, IL, 20 January 2009.

229 Queen Huldah Morgan, Christology of the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 20 January 2009.

“Black Jesus,” it seemed quite obvious to me that there was a function or mode of operation which the Church attributed to the “Black” in Black Jesus. In the Black Coptic Church, there are four aspects to the functioning element of “Black” as it relates to the Black Jesus: Solidarity, Psychological, Biographical, and Universalism.

Liberation theologies make the claim that Jesus the Christ stands in solidarity with the poor, the bruised and the oppressed. From feminist Theology to Latino/a American Liberation Theology, Jesus is depicted as One who takes up the cause of the suffering and the weak, and works on their behalf to liberate them from inhumane and depredating positions in society. The Black Coptic Church’s usage of the Black Jesus signals a similar theme. Empress Selah Thomas pointed out the fact that most portraits of Jesus, God, angels, etc., are white depictions which are deceptive and therefore needed to be removed from the walls and psyches of Church adherents, and replaced with the image of a savior, a Jesus, Who looked like them. Similarly, Prophet Hosea argued that “when we proclaim Black Jesus … we are simply identifying ourselves with our Jesus.” The Black Jesus of the Black Coptic Church is a radically different Jesus and interpretation of the life of Jesus than the former symbol of the white Christ.

The focal point in this construction is not necessarily an emphasis on the color of Jesus, but what His becoming black necessitates as black people seek freedom and equality in a world where race still matters. In an attempt to undo the psychological damage of inferiority which was justified and exploited through the image of a white Christ, “Black theologians have called not only for a new departure in Theology but more

231 Empress Selah Thomas, Christology of the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 20 January 2009.
specifically for a new Christological interpretation. This white Christ must be eliminated from the black experience and the concept of a Black Christ must emerge.”  The blackness of Christ in this sense does not allege superiority of Black over white. Rather, “the blackness of [Christ] means that the essence of the nature of God is to be found in the concept of liberation.”

As Black Jesus, Jesus makes the suffering and the oppression of blacks His suffering. Christ, in His blackness, is a constituent of an oppressed community, and subsequently rejects racism and is understood as a co-sufferer with humanity.

The verbal proclamation of the Black Jesus does not simply create a sense of solidarity and identification with the Jesus to whom scripture bears witness. On the contrary, the Black Coptic Church’s Jesusological program of liberation incorporates the belief that there is a necessity to constantly undo psychological damage which transpired as a result of the false symbol of the white Christ. Queen Huldah’s suggestion that the belief in the Black Jesus helps to “debrief the consciousness” is rooted in the idea that identifying the savior of the world in the same image as those who have historically perpetrated violence and constructed systems of injustice produces a people who falsely conceive of their image as less than that of their oppressors, and subsequently internalize


their oppression. Consequently, the belief in the Black Jesus “is the beginning of your journey toward the self-actualization of God in you.” In essence the verbal proclamation of the Black Jesus is part and parcel of a radical process of conscientization.

The Black Coptic Church’s program of liberation theorizes that in the first instance the oppressed must recognize that their oppression is oppressive and against God’s will. In his *A Theology of Liberation*, Gustavo Gutierrez contends that through a process of conscientization, “the oppressed reject the oppressive consciousness which dwells in them, become aware of their situation, and find their own language. They become themselves, less dependent and freer, as they commit themselves to the transformation and building up of a society.” During this process of rejecting the oppressive consciousness, the oppressed are slowly recognizing that they are actually oppressed and are capable of throwing off the chains of oppression and domination and claiming their freedom as the people of God. Gutierrez understands that professional theologians can only do so much in the process of liberating the oppressed from internal and external oppressive structures. For him, before a Theology of liberation can manifest, the oppressed must gain a sense of agency and develop a consciousness which rejects sub-human statuses. In sum, rejecting an oppressive consciousness, for Gutierrez, is the first step toward authentic liberation.

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234 Queen Huldah, *Christology of the Black Coptic Church* interview by Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 20 January 2009.


236 Gutierrez, 57.
Conscientization as an act of rejecting an oppressive consciousness which translates to passivity and discourages social and internal revolution that leads to an awareness of the situation of oppressive structures, thereby creating a community of individuals, specifically the marginalized, who are committed to achieving their freedom. While the former consciousness encourages remaining in one’s state of oppression and accepting marginalization as the natural order, the new consciousness translates to a praxis which is determined to implement change. Praxis as a “reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it” requires a redefining of the Christian practice in the world. Gutierrez suggests that once theologians understand the nature of Theology as critical reflection, they will be involved in the struggle where people strive to overcome domination and oppressions. Essentially, once the oppressed have undergone the process of conscientization, they will develop a sense of awareness which will lead to praxis, thereby motivating the oppressed “to struggle against it [oppression], and to perceive the profound sense of liberation to which they were called.”

The final point of theological reflection as it concerns the verbal witness of Black Jesus is the universalist/prototype approach supported by a contingent in the Black Coptic Community. Although there is a biographical claim to the darkness of Jesus in the Black Coptic Church, when I questioned my interview participants as to whether or not this

237 Ibid., 33.

238 See Gustavo Gutierrez, A Theology of Liberation, 1990, pages 9-12 in which he defines Theology as critical reflection on Christian praxis in light of the Word.

239 Gutierrez, 1990, 10.

240 Ibid., 156.
biographical claim was simply a reversal of the false image of the white Christ, was a
resounding no. Royal Priest Meshach Gardiner was adamant in his belief that the Black
Jesus doctrine “is a claim to the biography of Jesus.” However, other participants,
although not in disagreement with Royal Priest Meshach in regards to the biography of
Jesus, opted to push for a more universal and inclusive understanding of Jesus. Prophet
Hiram White contended that “the belief in Black Jesus is our belief in the [Black] Coptic
Church … It is essential to our faith; however … this means that each race has a right to
see Jesus in their image,” because He is Lord and savior of all. Similarly, Queen
Huldah emphasized in the Black Coptic Church “there was never a rejection of the blond-
haired, blue-eyed Jesus” for people of the same hue. Nonetheless, maintains Priest
Meshach, although the Black Coptic Church accepts the right of every race of people to
identify with Jesus in their own image, it is crucial that they, too, recognize the historicity
of Jesus’ dark image. Royal Priest Meshach contended that the Black Jesus, who is the
Jesus of scripture, is the model from which any conception of Jesus must be derived.

The verbal proclamation and symbol of Black Jesus reaches its climax in the
Church’s theological program with the announcement that Black Jesus is the bearer of

241 Priest Meshach Gardiner, Christology of the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 20 January 2009.


243 Queen Huldah Morgan, Christology of the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 20 January 2009.

244 ‘Priest Meshach Gardiner’s concern with the universalist approach is that it allows for the possibility of denying the historical significance of Jesus’ African heritage. He argues that every race should be able to see Jesus in their image as long as they accept the Black Jesus as the prototype of any Jesus and therefore center liberation at the heart of the Christian gospel.'
salvation whose ministry is aimed at the creation of a new humanity in which the powerless and voiceless are resurrected with the new life. Priest Stephen Anderson relates the office and ministry of Jesus the Christ to the freeing of the people of God. He maintains that “Jesus came to set the captives free … to release their minds from bondage.” Prophet Hiram agrees with this interpretation of the office of Jesus in his claim that Jesus as liberator “helps the oppressed and the impoverished [by] lifting them from a dead state of consciousness to a living soul.” Therefore, the Black Coptic Church creates a necessary link between liberation, Black Jesus as symbol of God and salvation.

As we explored earlier, the Black Coptic Church rejects any notion of salvation that does not embrace the temporal aspect, in which the people of God experience salvation as the deliverance from systemic and social sins. Salvation as interpreted through the life and Jesus of Nazareth means “creation of a New Heaven and Earth,” where injustice no longer exists. However, the Black Coptic Church maintains the creation of a new humanity is the second step. The new humanity inaugurated by Jesus is only possible with the creation of a new person in Christ, which begins with “accepting Black Jesus as your personal savior.” What is truly essential in this concept of salvation is the notion that only a transformed person can build the Kingdom of God as taught by and demonstrated through the acts of the Jesus the Christ. Therefore, the

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246 Queen Huldah Morgan, Christology of the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 20 January 2009.

salvation found in Black Jesus commences with the transformation of one’s consciousness, in which one rejects the concept of death\textsuperscript{248} and accepts the possibility of new life.\textsuperscript{249}

In the final analysis, the Black Coptic Church relates the idea of salvation to the promise of the resurrection from death to new life as found in the resurrection of Jesus the Christ. To be certain, however, the Black Coptic Church questions and regards as suspicious interpretations of the resurrection which solely focuses its lens on the coming to life of the crucified Messiah. The Black Coptic Church does not “discount the resurrection,” however; “we have a unique way of seeing [the resurrection].”\textsuperscript{250} Queen Huldah suggested that there has always been a strong focus on the death and crucifixion of Jesus in the history of Christianity, which possibly contributes to passivity among believers.\textsuperscript{251} To this end, the Church “does not have a ministry about death; we focus on the living and the coming to life of those things that are dead or sleeping in the

\textsuperscript{248} Queen Huldah Morgan Morgan uses the metaphor of death to suggest “dead ideas, dead ways of thinking, and not being aware of one’s limitless possibility as found in God.” When I further questioned on her usage of the word death, she referenced the story of Lazarus. She maintains that Lazarus appeared to be dead by those around him, but he was simply sleeping. Many Blacks, argues Queen Huldah Morgan, are “sleepwalking, with no sense of who they are, who their God, and what their purpose is.” Black Jesus, she argues, is the beginning of a new way of living. Queen Huldah Morgan, The Interpretation of the Resurrection in the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 20 January 2009.

\textsuperscript{249} Queen Huldah Morgan, The Interpretation of the Resurrection in the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 20 January 2009.

\textsuperscript{250} Priest Meshach Gardiner, The Interpretation of the Resurrection in the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 20 January 2009.

\textsuperscript{251} Queen Huldah Morgan, The Interpretation of the Resurrection in the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 20 January 2009.
consciousness." Salvation, then, as it relates to the resurrection is the process of "being spiritually dead and then experiencing a rebirth." 

The promise of the resurrection as understood in the Black Coptic Church is related to what Jon Sobrino calls "rebuilding the hope of victims now," and what Jurgen Moltmann describes as "the life power of hope to stand up after defeat." Sobrino maintains that:

Jesus’ resurrection is hope, first of all, for those crucified in history. God raised a crucified man, and since then there is hope for the crucified. They can see the raised Jesus as the firstborn from among the dead, because they truly—and not just intentionally—see him as their elder brother. This gives them courage to hope in their own resurrection, and they can now take heart to live in history, which supposes a miracle analogous to what happened in Jesus’ resurrection.

Accordingly, Royal Priest Meshach posited that “we know there is a great significance in something being restored, being born again, [and] being restructured.” Therefore, the resurrection is the power to rebuild one’s life and begin anew. It is the power of “drunks, and people who had other life situations … resurrected” to a new

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256 Sobrino, 2001, 43.

beginning. For the Black Coptic Church, this radical transformation of a previously disregarded people is truly possible through the power of the Black Jesus who, although suffers with the oppressed, is the fulfillment of the promise of new life as witnessed in the resurrection.

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CHAPTER FIVE
TOWARD A CONSTRUCTIVE BLACK PNEUMATOLOGY

In Christian Faith the Holy Trinity is the symbol of the Triune God whom Christians adore and worship. To be sure, the Trinity is the Christian conception of God as God exists in God-self outside of human history as ontological other (Immanent Trinity), and as God reveals God-self in the process of creation and salvation (Economic Trinity). Although the word Trinity itself is not located in either the Hebrew Bible or the Christian Testament, the word does in fact describe the Christian idea of a God who is transcendent and not “historical,” yet, through the incarnation of the Divine Logos in the Person of the Jesus of Nazareth, enters human history, thereby choosing to become other than God, and out of God’s love for God’s creation, promises the continued presence of the Paraclete, the Holy Spirit, Who would abide with believers forever, as a “comforter” and as One who would “lead to all truth.” To be sure, however, each operation of the Trinity is God performing in distinct yet united roles, in order to achieve God’s divine will.

259 John 1:1-14

260 John 14:16

261 John 16:13
Theological legacy of the 3rd century Christian thinker Tertullian is his triumph at providing a clear and reasoned defense of the Christian understanding of the Triune God, which he called *Trinitas*. In his refutation *Against Praxeas*, Tertullian goes at great length in his desire to overcome the Modalist interpretation of the Trinity as propagated by Praxeas. Praxeas emphasized the unity of God and was unwilling to subscribe to a notion that the Triune God consisted of three distinct persons.\(^{262}\)

Tertullian’s reaction against Praxeas and Modalist Monarchianism is rooted in the position that Praxeas and his followers did not rightly understand the usage of the term “persons” as is related to the Triune God.\(^{263}\) Tertullian argued that such a misunderstanding of the Triune God was grounded in an inability to comprehend how the Selfsame God could emanate God-self in three *personas* yet remain truly one, indivisible, and without separation. Tertullian maintains especially in the case of this heresy, which supposes itself to possess the pure truth, in thinking that one cannot believe in One Only God in any other way than by saying that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost are the very selfsame Person. As if in this way also one were not All, in that All are of One, by unity (that is) of substance; while the mystery of the dispensation is still guarded, which distributes the Unity into a Trinity, placing in their order the three *Persons*—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost: three, however, not in condition, but in degree; not in substance, but in form; not in power, but in aspect; yet of one substance, and of one condition, and of one power, inasmuch as He is one God, from whom these degrees and forms and aspects are reckoned, under the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. How they are susceptible of number without division, will be shown as our treatise proceeds.\(^{264}\)

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\(^{263}\) *Against Praxeas*, chapter 2.

\(^{264}\) Ibid.
Tertullian’s position maintains that the three Persons of the Trinity should not be interpreted to suggest a differentiation of the Persons according to substance or essence. On the contrary, Tertullian’s repudiation takes from in an investigation of “fire.” Although the fire emits “heat” and “light,” the source of the heat and the light is the fire. In this regard, although there are three different emanations from the source, each distinction share in the same source, and without one the other does not exist. Argues Tertullian

the Father, and the Son, and the Spirit are inseparable from each other, and so will you know in what sense this is said. Now, observe, my assertion is that the Father is one, and the Son one, and the Spirit one, and that They are distinct from Each Other. This statement is taken in a wrong sense by every uneducated as well as every perversely disposed person, as if it predicated a diversity, in such a sense as to imply a separation among the Father, and the Son, and the Spirit. I am, moreover, obliged to say this, when (extolling the Monarchy at the expense of the Economy) they contend for the identity of the Father and Son and Spirit, that it is not by way of diversity that the Son differs from the Father, but by distribution: it is not by division that He is different, but by distinction; because the Father is not the same as the Son, since they differ one from the other in the mode of their being. For the Father is the entire substance, but the Son is a derivation and portion of the whole, as He Himself acknowledges.265

As regards the Holy Spirit, the third Person of the Triune God with Whom this chapter is concerned, Tertullian vehemently argues that the “Spirit indeed is third from God and the Son; just as the fruit of the tree is third from the root, or as the stream out of the river is third from the fountain, or as the apex of the ray is third from the sun.”266

Although the Spirit is the third Person of the Trinity, Tertullian maintains that nothing is

265 Against Praxeas, ch. 9.
266 Ibid., ch. 8
“alien from that original source whence it derives its own properties.”

Therefore, the Spirit in fact shares in the same substance as the Father and the Son, and rightly so, is referred to as God. However, one must bear in mind that the Unity of God does not connate unity of Person. Tertullian uses the word Person to suggest different roles or operations of the Selfsame God. Consequently, although the Holy Spirit shares in the same substance of the Father and Son, the Holy Spirit is indeed an individual own Person, fulfilling a role in achieving the will of God. Therefore, after the Father and Son

Then there is the Paraclete or Comforter, also, which He promises to pray for to the Father, and to send from heaven after He had ascended to the Father. He is called another Comforter, indeed; John 14:16 but in what way He is another we have already shown, He shall receive of mine, says Christ, John 16:14 just as Christ Himself received of the Father's. Thus the connection of the Father in the Son, and of the Son in the Paraclete, produces three coherent Persons, who are yet distinct One from Another. These Three are one essence, not one Person, as it is said, I and my Father are One, John 10:30 in respect of unity of substance not singularity of number.

In essence, the Trinity is the Christian expression of God. It is the articulation of a Triune God who is One in substance in Three in Persons, yet only differentiated in operation, not in mode of Being. The Holy Spirit as Third Person of the Trinity is the promised presence of God with believers, which comforts and leads to all truth.

In the Black Coptic Church, the Holy Spirit as advocate who “teaches” serves a tri-dimensional purpose: to teach the “past, present, and future.” The relationship between the past and the future and history and salvation is consummated with the coming of the promise of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, in the Black Coptic Church, the Holy Spirit acts as

267 Ibid.

268 Ibid., ch. 25.
*memoria*, bridging, on one hand, the history of God as deliverer, thereby signaling the promise of a better future, and, on the other hand, linking an ancient past (Egypt) which celebrated Black culture and life to the present situations of life, allowing adherents of the Black Coptic church to see their history as affecting the present. In this case, while it is true that the social conditions of Black life in America provided the fertile ground for religious organizations that blended the social and religious, the claim in the Black Coptic Church is that outside of social conditions such as racism, the Holy Spirit would nonetheless serve the same function as bringing to memory the history of God and humanity.

**The Holy Spirit in the Development of the Black Theology**

Although there is little development of Pneumatology in Black Theology, several Black scholars (e.g., James Cone, Clifton Johnson, George Cummings, and Will Coleman) have gone at lengths to demonstrate how the Holy Spirit was operative and functioned in the development of “Brush Harbor” Theology, which was developed by Black slaves, and also as the moving force behind the Black Theological project of the 1960’s. To the extent that Black Theology begins on the slave plantations of North America, these efforts to trace an understanding of the Holy Spirit among the slaves are valid theological moves, which prove that slaves were not content with the “given” Christian Theology of slaveholding Christians. George Cummings posits that the Holy Spirit was a source of empowerment and agency, and also as that Spirit which

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engendered a transformative imagination of the future that broke with the present social order.\textsuperscript{270} Cummings maintains that the slaves’ “encounter/visions with the Spirit enabled them to have the courage and hope to translate their experiences of hope into concrete actions of escaping to freedom.”\textsuperscript{271} Further, the Spirit “entailed the affirmation of independence and selfhood… [and] served as the basis of love within the slave community….”\textsuperscript{272} In other words, the Holy Spirit was efficacious upon the slaves’ present and future. It was the Spirit of the truth that urged slaves to see their existence as authentic human beings who were destined for freedom and liberation.

While there does not exist an exhaustive study of the Holy Spirit in the history of Constructive Black Theology, I have traced two distinct themes in pneumatological studies within Black Theology. One hand, Black scholars such as Clifton Johnson and George C.L. Cummings have utilized slave narratives in order to exhibit how the Holy Spirit functioned as that liberating power within the slave community, which assisted the slaves in transcending their positions of servitude, and experience, though ritual, dance, and performance, an interruption of time in which, for a moment, the slaves experienced a fragment of freedom while concurrently in bondage.\textsuperscript{273} On the other hand, in a shift of focus, James Cone articulates an understanding of the Holy Spirit in the development of Black Theology as that Person of the Triune God which leads to “authentic” living, in

\textsuperscript{270} Ibid., 54-66.

\textsuperscript{271} Ibid., 52.

\textsuperscript{272} Ibid, 49.

\textsuperscript{273} Ibid., 48.
which the will of the human being is unified with God’s will, and subsequently directs one to opt for liberation in an attempt to overcome human suffering. Such understandings of the treatment of the Holy Spirit ground the pneumatological trajectory of Black Theology.

George C.L. Cummings posits the idea that Holy Spirit allowed for the possibility of transcendence among slaves, in which they would encounter the “future in the present,” whereby their earthly existence of servitude was called into question as they momentarily escaped to freedom. Cummings maintains that “the Spirit possessed the physical being of the slaves, and as a consequence they shouted, spoke of great visions of God, heaven, or freedom, and engaged in physical activity that manifest the Spirit’s presence.” Spirit possession among the slaves revealed itself in several ways. One of which was the “shout,” which in the contemporary Black Church manifests itself in more Pentecostal traditions as the “holy dance.” As the slaves “shouted” or danced, they experienced an “ushering” out of this world to a place of freedom where human limitations were no longer present. To be sure, the “shout” was an experience with God that “humanized” the slaves apart from their dehumanized conditions of slavery and servitude. Cummings recounts the experience of one slave in which, through an encounter with the Spirit, she

had gone on a spiritual journey; like Jeremiah, Isaiah, Jacob and Jonah, she had been empowered by the Spirit to transcend her experience of being a slave.

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275 Cummings, 48.
working in the field and had been taken to a place where she “viewed de way in a vision” and discovered that her true home was as a child of God. Assurance and security concerning her identity as a human being, one of those redeemed by God, was guaranteed in her mind by means of an experience of the Spirit in which she travelled home, had a vision, and came to find “de way.”

Such an experience of transcendence typifies the liberating encounter of slaves with the Holy Spirit. The juxtaposition that Cummings highlights, “working the field” alongside being taken away to a place where the slave was assured of her “identity as a human being,” symbolizes a transcendental anthropology, wherein the slaves, although grounded in the reality of slavery and servitude, realized their potential to transcend such degrading conditions and proclaim their authentic selves as free and independent beings created for freedom. The possibility of a transcendental experience of time suggests that in “traveling to a Christian heaven, while yet alive, Afro-Americans made the future into the past, into an event that had already occurred. Thus they used the African time sense (of present and past) to encompass the Christian’s messianic sense of time and future to make it real.” This transcendental experience with the Spirit was not a passive engagement with the divine. On the contrary, such a spiritual encounter empowered slaves to protest against the prevailing social order, sometimes through rebellions and also in the construction of their own brand of Christianity which is best seen in the “brush harbor.” In the final analysis, “their encounter/vision with the Spirit enabled them to

276 Ibid., 49.

277 Ibid.

278 Ibid.
have the courage and hope to translate their experience of hope into concrete actions of escaping to freedom.\textsuperscript{279}

James Cone’s construction of the Holy Spirit is related to his insistence that the true manifestation of the Gospel is to be found in the work of liberation and freedom-fighting. Writing in the context of the American Sixties, Cone sought to develop a liberating Pneumatology which addressed the problem of race and class in North America. Thus, his treatment of the Holy Spirit is quintessentially a further development of the intersection of the Black Power movement and the Civil Rights movement. Cone asserts that “the Holy Spirit is the power of God at work in the world effecting in the life of [God’s] people [God’s] intended purpose,” of freedom and liberation.\textsuperscript{280} The Holy Spirit, maintains Cone, is active in the world where the people of God are treated unfairly and essentially have no security from violence and systemic evils. In this regard, argues Cone,

The working of God’s Spirit in the life of the believer means an involvement in the world where men are suffering. When the Spirit of God gets hold of a [wo/man] [s/he] is made a new creature, a creature prepared to move head-on into the evils of this world, ready to die for God. That is why the Holy Spirit is the power of God, for it means a continuation of God’s work for which Christ died.\textsuperscript{281}

In other words, the Spirit is not a passive Person in the divine Trinity. On the contrary, the Spirit is God’s \textit{action} in the world uprooting evil and planting goodness. This is the

\textsuperscript{279} Ibid., 52.

\textsuperscript{280} Cone, 57.

\textsuperscript{281} Ibid., 58.
case precisely because as God, the Holy Spirit is “active power, that is to say, it is the personal activity of God’s will, achieving a moral and religious object.”

It is important to bear in mind, however, that for Cone the Holy Spirit is not an abstract construction in Christian faith to which human beings can respond passively. On the contrary, Cone maintains that the Holy Spirit impinges upon one’s humanity, and the human being either responds authentically or erroneously. The human being who responds authentically to the presence of the Holy Spirit “means that one’s will becomes God’s will, one’s actions become God’s actions.” Cone refers to an authentic response as being “possessed” by the Spirit in order to achieve God’s will and plan for humanity. The human being who is “possessed by God’s Spirit has no time to ask abstract questions about how the poor got to be poor or why blacks are hated by whites.” On the contrary, he or she knows that the conditions of the world are antithetical to the Kingdom of God, “and he cannot close his eyes to it.” Authentic humanity, for Cone, therefore, entails “becoming the means through whom God makes [God’s] will known and the vehicle of the activity of God him [or herself].” In the context of the American sixties, Cone attests that the Black Power movement epitomizes the activity of the Spirit of God as agent for change. Cone nonetheless acknowledges that Black Power, “though not consciously seeking to be Christian, seems to be where men are in trouble. And to

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283 Cone, 59

284 Ibid., 58

285 Ibid., 58

286 Ibid., 58.
the extent that it is genuinely concerned and seeks to meet the needs of the oppressed, it is the work of God’s Spirit.”

A “Black” Holy Spirit?

One of the distinct characteristics of the Black Coptic Church is its explicit assertion of the “Black Holy Spirit.” Jose Comblin offers an account of the ways in which the Holy Spirit functions in the development of Latin American Liberation Theology. Comblin maintains through the Holy Spirit by the “means of the enlightenment and prophetic charisma of mighty leaders, by means of the union and solidarity of living communities and by means of the enthusiasm of the multitudes that these communities and prophets succeed in arousing.” For Comblin this is the Spirit at work. Like Comblin, the Black Coptic Church maintains that the Holy Spirit has functioned as “God’s active force that God employs to accomplish [God’s] will” of liberation of the oppressed. The Holy Spirit in the Black Coptic Church plays an intricate role in God’s plan for salvation and deliverance of the most vulnerable and weak in society. To be sure, the Holy Spirit as the presence of God in the world is that force or power which engenders among the oppressed and castigated the human agency and courage necessary to take control of one’s own destiny. As the “Spirit of truth,” the Holy Spirit is active at obliterating false symbols of God, in reinvigorating in the heart of the

287 Ibid., 59.


289 Comblin, 147.

people of God the necessary knowledge of the will of God towards liberation. In essence, the Black Coptic Church’s pneumatological construction of the “Black” Holy Spirit as that Spirit which “teaches past, present, and future,” and which functions as the “active force” of God in the process of liberation and deliverance nuances present understandings of the Holy Spirit in Black Theology, and makes a decisive contribution to liberative Pneumatology.

The pneumatological construction in the Black Coptic Church, which is internally known as the Black Holy Spirit is not proposed to obscure the mystery of God as divine Spirit that is formless and without the ontological structures of humanity (i.e., gender, race, etc.) On the contrary, the proclamation of the Black Holy Spirit is intended to “connect Black People with a divine nature.”

Priests Meshach Gardiner and Stephen Anderson suggested that the history of slavery in America represents an “interruption” in the history of Blacks in America. When I probed Priest Meshach as to how he understood “interruption” and its consequences on the lives of African Americans, he contended,

Had we remained in Africa… [history] would have shown that we were advanced. We had a unique understanding of God, of man and woman, and of culture. Slavery suppressed us and tried to dehumanize all that we understood. The [Black] Coptic Faith is trying to restore what we lost and what was taken, including our belief in God.

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292 Priest Meshach Gardiner, Women in the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 09 February 2009.
Priest Stephen maintained that the consequence of the interruption was that it “separated family members, groups that spoke the same language, and it separated us from our understanding of God and the divine.” The idea of interruption, as a result of slavery, in the Black Coptic Church inevitably leads to “disconnectedness,” which therefore requires a connecting element or force which serves the purpose of reestablishing broken relationships between human beings, and more importantly, between humanity and God. The Holy Spirit as “Black” Holy Spirit “comes to us in a form that we can recognize;” one, it seems, that is radically distinguishable from other constructions of the Holy Spirit that were implicated in slave holding Christianity.

To the extent that at the heart of the founding of the Black Coptic Church was the concept of liberation, its thematic constructions reflect a liberative theological program. The Black Holy Spirit is therefore an essential element of the Church’s liberation Theology. Priests Meshach and Stephen’s notion of “interruption” and “disconnectedness” provide a springboard from which the concept of a “Black” Holy Spirit emerges. Similarly to the “conflict” paradigm in relation to the black and white Christ’ that Kelly Brown-Douglas posited concerning the roots of the Black Christ, the Black Coptic Church’s understanding of the Black Holy Spirit is grounded in what I call a “connecting comforter” paradigm. On one hand, as Priest Meshach Gardiner maintained, as “Black” Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit is a “form we can recognize,” and

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293 Reverend Joel Anderson, Women in the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 09 February 2009.

294 Priest Meshach Gardiner, Women in the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 09 February 2009.
therefore a form in which “we can identify.” Recognition and identification with the divine presence of God, in contradistinction with a form of God, the god of slavery, racism, white supremacy, and oppression, who was alien and unconcerned with the black condition in America, through the Black Holy Spirit, links adherents of the Black Coptic Church to an understanding of God that restores and reconnects them with the an ancient past, a rich culture and meaningful history, thereby eradicating historical and contemporary perceptions of Black Americans as fashioned by the dominant culture.

On the other hand, however, the Black Holy Spirit is the “comforter” for the people of God. The idea of “comforter” is not unique to the Black Coptic Church. On the contrary, the roots of this idea are found in the Christian Testament. The evangelist John reports that after hearing Jesus inform them of his impending departure, the disciples were worried and indeed fearful. Their teacher and leader whom they had come to love spoke of a mysterious departure from the scene. Jesus, however, attempts to calm the fears of the disciples through a suggestion that He would not “orphan” them, but would “ask the Father and He will give you another Comforter to be with you forever - the Spirit of Truth.” At the founding of the Black Coptic Church, “the Black Holy Spirit was essential for liberation Theology, [especially] for the people that Prophet Cicero was dealing with,” as it related to the social context. Queen Huldah suggested

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295 Ibid.

296 John ch. 13.

297 John 14:16.

298 Queen Huldah Morgan, The Understanding of the Holy Spirit in the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 01 June 2009.
that in the context of the Black Coptic Church, the Black Holy Spirit is “Comforter” precisely because “comfort is the absence of conflict.” Accordingly, the Black Holy Spirit is “an indwelling Spirit of Truth” that comforts by putting to rest conflicting theological, social, and historical constructions, that have presented images and depictions of Blacks in America that deny the divine image in which they were created. Consequently, the personal knowledge and verbal proclamation of a “Black” Holy Spirit is critical to the church’s theological program which, through its insistence on liberation, aids in the process of restoring the original image which God intended for God’s creation, as opposed to false images which are the result of a gospel of suppression and oppression.

The “connecting comforter” paradigm which I labeled as the pneumatological paradigm of the Black Coptic Church serves as the basis by which one understands the proposition of the “Black” Holy Spirit. It is important to bear in mind that this paradigm does not suggest an accidental quality of the Holy Spirit, but rather the Church focuses on the power of symbolism in its appropriation of the Black Holy Spirit. In this regard, the Holy Spirit in the Black Coptic Church serves both a general and particular function, but is nonetheless oriented toward liberation and freedom as it relates to the people of God.

Therefore, while the Black Coptic Church proposes the construction of a Black Holy Spirit, the function is two-fold: The Holy Spirit is active in the world writ large transforming the hearts of men and women to act on the behalf of liberation, and, to be

299 Ibid.
300 Queen Huldah Morgan, The Understanding of the Holy Spirit in the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 01 June 2009.
sure, as Black Holy Spirit, the Holy Spirit is found among the Black poor and oppressed, identifying with their struggle for liberation, and thereby activating a spirit of freedom to rise within said community.

The Holy Spirit in a general sense is “God’s active force that God uses to accomplish [God’s] will,” noted Queen Rachel.\textsuperscript{301} God’s will in this sense is directed toward overcoming systemic and social sins or constructions which lead to the dehumanization of the vulnerable in society, while the dominant culture flourishes and enjoys, without limitations, the full meaning of what it means to be human. Queen Huldah Morgan maintained that God accomplishes God’s will through the Holy Spirit, but it is through the actions of everyday, ordinary people, that we see most clearly the visible sign of the Holy Spirit’s presence in the world.\textsuperscript{302} Similar to James Cone, Queen Huldah argues that the Holy Spirit is not passive, but rather it is through “the activities of people that the Holy Ghost is active.”\textsuperscript{303} To the extent that “every [human creation] is not worthy to be considered…led by the Holy Spirit,” it is necessary that the Holy Spirit enters the heart of man and woman and cause them to fight for justice and peace in a sometimes cruel and tortured world. The Holy Spirit is active then, in the areas of society where individuals and organizations join the cause of justice and equality in an attempt to create a society which honors the humanity of every person. Queen Huldah contends, “these are the things that most churches declare they are in the business of doing…it is all

\begin{footnotes}
\item[301] Candace Queen Rachel Gardiner, The Understanding of the Holy Spirit in the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL 27 January 2009.
\item[302] Queen Huldah Morgan, The Understanding of the Holy Spirit in the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 01 June 2009.
\item[303] Ibid.
\end{footnotes}
the things that are considered social welfare, the fact that we are concerned about the poor, we are concerned about the provision of basic survival to others who are unable to provide for themselves.”304 Such is the activity of the Holy Spirit in the world, in a general and universal sense, penetrating the hearts of human beings to create a world and society that is reflective of the Kingdom of God.

While the Black Coptic Church acknowledges a universal understanding of the function of the Holy Spirit, it is critical to keep in mind that the Black Coptic Church emerges within a very particular social context which engenders a theological vision and doctrine that spoke to the context from which it merged. The Church’s founder, Prophet Cicero Patterson, saw a need for a Theology in which the goal was both spiritual and earthly liberation. Accordingly, as the Black Coptic Church’s doctrine of God and Jesus are constructed within a liberative framework in which “Black” functions as a symbol pointed toward divine liberation, the doctrine of the Black Holy Spirit postulates the notion of a divine third Person of the Trinity who is deeply concerned with the social, spiritual, political, and economic situation of Blacks in America. To be sure, this is Theology within context. Thus, in a universal sense, the Holy Spirit is operative in the world, transforming society and working toward justice. In the Black Coptic Church tradition, the Black Holy Spirit comes to African-Americans, a group of people who

304 Ibid.
undoubtedly have experienced a very unique form of oppression and subjugation, connects them to God, serves as comforter, and reveals the “past, present, and future.”

During my interview with church authorities on the function of the Holy Spirit as understood in the Black Coptic Church, a phrase that surfaced several times throughout the discussion was that the Holy Spirit would reveal “past, present, and future.” The Holy Spirit was discussed as the Person of the Trinity who reveals truth to the hearts of man and woman. To be sure, the postulation of “revelation” as a function of the Holy Spirit is not a Pneumatological invention of the Black Coptic Church, but is set forth in the Scriptures. The evangelist John reports that Jesus informed His disciples that the Holy Spirit, “the Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything, and remind you of all that I have said to you.” Additionally, “When the Spirit of truth comes, he will guide you into all the truth; for he will not speak on his own, but will speak whatever he hears, and he will declare to you the things that are to come.” Thus, scripture bears witness that a critical function of the Holy Spirit is to reveal the truth of will of the Triune God as manifested in the Person of Jesus the Christ. In the Black Coptic Church, this function of disclosing present, past, and future,

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305 The Black Coptic Statement of Faith Reads, “We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, the ever-present spirit of God, the active power of God that directs the paths of man [sic] and leads to all truth. This Spirit of truth brings forth the past present and future. In this Spirit, there is no end.” Coptic Nation Temple, Statement of Faith, www.copticnationtemple.com (accessed June 24, 2009).


has liberative implications, in that it reveals God’s plan and desire for human beings to be free and to thrive. Consequently, the Black Holy Spirit “is a freeing Spirit.”

The Black Coptic Church maintains that the Black Holy Spirit is the Person of the Trinity which brings knowledge of the “past” to the people of God. The past in this sense serves a dual function in the process of interpretation. On one hand, the Black Holy Spirit is that internal structure, or transcendent Spirit which “brings all things back to your remembrance.” Queen Huldah Morgan maintained that to speak of the Holy Spirit as the bearer of the “past” is not necessarily a measurement of time. On the contrary, the Holy Spirit reaches back into the history of African-Americans, before they were enslaved, to an ancient past in Africa when “our ancestors were queens, kings, princes, the builders of pyramids, [and] the inventors of geometry,” and constantly brings to the remembrance of the people of God their history that is one of greatness, not to be compared in magnitude or scope with the commercialized and fabricated portrait of Blacks in America as mediocre, lacking intelligence, and “un-cultured.” In this regard, the Black Coptic Church’s understanding of the Holy Spirit is comparable to Coleman’s construction of the Holy Spirit in the religion of the slaves. As the Spirit of transcendence, the “Black” Holy Spirit aids the believers in escaping their contemporary existence, thereby enabling them to experience a history that contradicts their present.

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On the other hand, the Black Holy Spirit functions as a Spirit of *memoria* which constantly reminds the people of God “past conditions” in North America.311 In Chapter Two we examined the role of race in the Theology of the Black Coptic Church. Royal Priest Meshach Gardiner suggested that in some regard the Church will always posit a correlation between race and Theology, so that the people of God would never forget absurdities of racism in North America.312 The Black Holy Spirit therefore functions as the Spirit which aids the people of God in remembering the “God who brought them out of slavery and Jim Crow,”313 and also in remembering the “past conditions of North America.”314 Prophet Hiram White contended that this understanding of the Holy Spirit is significant because if North American Blacks forget their past in this country, then “they are subject to be enslaved again.”315 To be sure, however, the Black Coptic Church’s construction of the Black Holy Spirit signals the presence of God with and for Black Americans as they seek for authentic freedom and liberation humanity, thus constantly bringing to the present that past of kidnapped Africans as people with a history that extends beyond North America, and also the history of God as deliverer from the

311 Ibid.

312 Priest Meshach Gardiner, Theology of the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 12 January 2009.


314 Ibid.

harsh conditions of North American Black life, especially the history of slavery, lynching, and Jim Crow.

The second function of the Black Holy Spirit in the Black Coptic Church is to reveal the future to the hearts and minds of the believers. The interpretation of such a function operates between a duality of “speaking prophetically,” and “seeing the future as a different reality than the present circumstances,” or what Elisabeth Schussler-Fiorenza calls a “hermeneutic of imagination.” When I queried my participants as to how one should understand the Holy Spirit as functioning to reveal the future, Royal Priest Meshach maintained that “once can speak prophetically by the Holy Spirit,” into the lives of the people of God. Often times when people entered the Black Coptic Church historically, they came in with various situations and conditions which stifled their ability to progress and flourish, contended Queen Huldah. “Perhaps the condition was drugs or alcohol…or simply thinking lowly of yourself as a result of the images which has bombarded your mind,” she maintained. Regardless of the individual situation or condition, the Black Holy Spirit “uses live individuals – men and women, to

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320 Queen Huldah Morgan, The Understanding of the Holy Spirit in the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 01 June 2009.

321 Ibid.
prophecy into someone’s life and let them know that their future is in the Kingdom of God,” as a free and liberated person, who is not only freed from physical oppression, but from those substances and thinking patterns which paralyze one’s authentic freedom as a man or woman created in the image of God.

Queen Huldah’s articulation of the Black Holy Spirit as that Spirit which allows believers to see the future as a radical break from the present is part and parcel of the church’s theological focus on the promise of a New Heaven and New Earth as discussed in Chapter One. Prophet Hiram White contended that “if the world accepts the idea of a New Heaven and New Earth, then…the world can be different.” This acceptance of the New Heaven and New Earth, however, is contingent upon the Holy Spirit entering into the hearts of the believers and authorizing them to reject the present social order and work toward a social order rooted in justice and peace. The postulation of a future that is fundamentally different from the present is rooted in the Church’s liberative reading of Revelation 21:1, in which John who is secluded at Patmos declares “Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth; for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more.” To be sure, such a reading engenders a “hermeneutic of creative imagination.”

A hermeneutics of creative imagination is central to the Theology of the Black Coptic Church because it “seeks to “dream” a different world of justice and well-

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It allows adherents in the Black Coptic Church to first dream and imagine biblical texts in a constructive way which serve to stimulate a sense of meaning and pride in African-Americans. Moreover, “a hermeneutic of imagination retells biblical stories, re-shapes religious vision, and celebrates those who have brought about change.”

Drawing from a hermeneutics of creative imagination, members of the Black Coptic Church imagine themselves at the center of texts which speak to and for liberation from social constructs which advance an ideology of the strong over the weak. This hermeneutical strategy is instrumental in Black Theology more prominently, because from it black theologians have been able to create a “canon within a canon” in which African-Americans become the subjects of the text. Through historical imaginations black theologians have identified suffering black people with the Children of Israel, thereby, relating their struggle for freedom and independence to that of the Children of Israel in their coming out of Egypt and into a better place that the Lord had prepared. African-Americans, through a hermeneutics of imagination, place themselves at the center of Exodus-Sinai story because:

Yahweh is known and worshipped as the One who brought Israel out of Egypt…God is the political God, the Protector of the poor and the Establisher of the right of those who are oppressed. To know God is to experience the acts of God in concrete affairs and relationships of people, liberating the weak and the helpless from pain and humiliation. For theologians to speak of God, they too must become interested in politics and economics, recognizing that there is no


324 Ibid., 181.

truth about Yahweh unless it is the truth of freedom as that event is revealed in the oppressed people’s struggles for justice in this world.³²⁶

The Black Coptic Church, as does Black Theology writ large, understands the God of Israel to be a delivering God, and thus imagines their experience as exiled servants to that of the exilic situations as experienced by the Children of Israel. As Elisabeth Schussler-Fiorenza has so beautifully articulated, “Because of the imagination we are able to tell the story differently, to see history in a new light. Because of the imagination we are able to conceive of change, of how situations can be altered.”³²⁷

The theological significance of the Holy Spirit as that Spirit which reveals the past and the future is consummated in the present as a liberating Pneumatology. As the Holy Spirit reaches back into the past while concurrently revealing the establishment of a future that breaks with the present, adherents of the Black Coptic Church are empowered with a sense of agency to reject present social conditions of poverty, oppression, and subjugation as valid constructions of the Kingdom of God, and are therefore commissioned “to heal, to teach, and to prophecy,”³²⁸ in an effort to transform the world into the image of God.

The Black Holy Spirit as an Epistemological Source Concerning Jesus of Nazareth and the Possibility of a Transcendental Pneumatology in Black Theology: The Black Coptic Church in Dialogue in with Karl Rahner


³²⁷ Schussler-Fiorenza, 180.

³²⁸ Queen Huldah Morgan, Theology of the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 12 January 2009.
When I interviewed church authorities concerning the function of the Holy Spirit in the Black Coptic Church, Queen Huldah asserted that the Black Coptic Church believed that the “Black Holy Spirit is the life giving [Spirit] that gives knowledge concerning God and [God’s] will, and knowledge concerning Black Jesus and His will.” The postulation in her statement suggests an epistemological argument for the Holy Spirit as the source of knowledge, at least as it relates to one’s understanding and knowledge of theological matters. In Black Theology, however, there has been a tendency to correlate experience with knowledge. To the extent that our social location and social context lend themselves to understanding, the relationship between experience and knowledge is not invalid. In the case of Black Theology, however, I posit that the experience of kidnapped Africans’ first encounter with the God of Christianity should have, on all accounts, in fact engendered a rejection of Christian Faith writ large among slaves and their descendants. This is not the case, however. On the contrary, enslaved Africans in America, although not completely neglectful in regards their African memory, by and large accepted Jesus as the One who was with and for them in their positions as enslaved subalterns. The Black Holy Spirit as the source of knowledge concerning the person of Jesus the Christ nuances the dominant understanding of the relationship between Christology and Pneumatology in Black Theology.

Black Theology in the North American context has largely been a Christian investigation. Because of its foundation in the Christian tradition, James Cone contends

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329 Queen Huldah Morgan, The Understanding of the Holy Spirit in the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 01 June 2009.
that Black Theology commences and ends with the life of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus the Christ stands at the center of Christian faith. His life, death, and resurrection render possible the conditions for which Christian theologians partake in God-talk. Indeed, it is through Jesus the Christ that human beings encounter God in human history. James Cone contends “because God became human in Jesus the Christ, God discloses the divine will to be with humanity in our wretchedness.” To be sure, Jesus the Christ is the fullness of what God desires for God’s people to be and to become. He is the subject of Christian hope. It is in and through Jesus the Christ that the first converted Christian slaves understood what it meant to be human. He is the condition of possibility by which estranged and oppressed persons apprehend that God desires for God’s creation is to be free and accountable to themselves. Yet, through Jesus, Black Christians, from slave times onward, understand that they are perpetually situated in the face of absolute mystery, and although they are free, they belong to God, the source from which they come and the mystery toward which they move.

Although Jesus the Christ is central to Black Christianity, it is appropriate to ask the question, why did the slave community accept Jesus the Christ and the Christian Gospel as their religious choice? In spite of their initial experience with Christianity and Jesus the Christ, early Christian slave converts, in any case, believed untiringly that Jesus the Christ was the self-disclosure of God who entered human history as the absolute savior Who would deliver them from human estrangement and from their situation of languish. Many Black Theologians have painstakingly worked toward a construction that

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gives an account of the slaves’ unwavering commitment to and faith in Jesus as the Christ. Most, notably, James Cone has posited that it was the identification and connection which the early slaves understood as existing between their own situation as slaves in exile and Jesus’ life as an itinerant Prophet “on the run,” that was the bonding element between Black Christian slaves, their progeny, and Jesus the Christ. In other words, Cone understands solidarity to be critical.

James Cone has undoubtedly provided Black theologians with a framework and starting point for understanding Black Christological constructions. Yet, while Cone indeed understands Jesus the Christ to be the transcendent figure who acts in human history on behalf of the oppressed, his account for a belief in Christ is contingent on the categorical, sensory experiences of the first Christian slave converts. In order to facilitate a full account of the Black Christian’s faith in Jesus as the transcendent One Who encounters human beings in the categorical, thereby, Himself partaking in a grounded existence, a transcendental anthropology, which accounts for the conditions of possibility which allowed Black Christians to recognize the whoness of Jesus, is necessary.

The Inadequacy of the Focus on Categorical Experience in Black Theology

Methodically, there is an inherent claim within Black Theology that Jesus the Christ is a central figure who is absolutely essential in the Black Theological project. It is through Jesus the Christ that Black theologians make the claim that God is a God of

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331 Ibid., 99-122.

332 Ibid., 29.
justice who breaks into human history and acts on behalf of those who are most oppressed. In an attempt to substantiate this claim, Black theologians construct a turn toward the subject, centering “experience” at the heart of Black Theology. Thus, in terms of Black theological method, experience is the point of commencement, indeed the source that allows for a construction of said theological reflection. Black theologians such as James Cone, Dwight Hopkins, and Delores Williams attest that experience is that subjective element which allows for Black Christian to encounter Jesus “as an event of liberation, a happening in the lives of oppressed people struggling for political freedom. Therefore, to know him is to encounter him the history of the weak and the helpless.”

James Cone is correct in his contention that the first Christian slave converts and suffering persons encountered Jesus as the One Who acts on behalf of the oppressed. However, it is insufficient to suggest that categorical experiences are the only motivation for suffering slaves and oppressed persons to believe in and trust in Jesus as the Christ. The experiences to which Black theologians point are categorical experiences that suffering Blacks have experienced throughout their sojourn in North America. While it is true that social experiences of suffering and servitude are paramount for a comprehensive

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336 Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 32.
understanding of the Black struggle and the development of Black Theology, they cannot be the only nor the primary experience that Black theologians highlight in the Black theological constructions. A focus on the categorical experiences runs the risk of privileging the categorical over the transcendental, which, in actuality, allows for the conditions of possibility to interpret, and more importantly, “make sense” of the categorical. Thus, categorical experiences cannot be the sole starting point for Black Theological reflections on Jesus the Christ for the following reasons: (1) Categorical experiences of suffering provide a negative framework by which the slaves and oppressed persons hear the Christian message; (2) categorical existence of daily living are not the totality of the human being as both subject and person; (3) the categorical does not speak to the condition of possibility that allowed slaves and suffering blacks to “hear” the Christian message and (4) does not account for the internal structure or source that allow oppressed persons to question their situation outside of the categorical world.

Black theological reflection begins with the historical experiences of suffering and oppression that African-Americans experience, and their North American ancestors experienced from the outset of their arrival in 1611. In fact, as Cone argues, there is no Black Theology that does not begin with the history of Black oppression as a source for constructing Black Theology. Cone maintains “there can be no black Theology which does not take seriously the black experience – a life of humiliation and suffering.”\textsuperscript{337} He further articulates “that black Theology realizes that it is human beings who speak of God, and when those human beings are black, they speak of G-d only in light of the black

\textsuperscript{337} Cone, \textit{A Black Theology of Liberation}, 23.
I do not disagree with Cone fundamentally. It is true that within the social context of living and “being in the world,” Blacks encounter God. However, the question is appropriate: what renders it possible for Blacks to even conceive of God, and more importantly, conceive of Jesus as the subject of their hope and the end of liberation, while concurrently encountering humiliating circumstances that Cone discusses? Cone assumes that the Black experience of external suffering is the catalyst which allows suffering blacks to speak of God and realize the freedom that Jesus the Christ offers in hopeless situations. In a lengthy description of the Black experience, Cone writes

The black experience is existence in a system of white racism. The black person knows that a ghetto is the white way of saying that blacks are subhuman and fit only to live with rats. The black experience is police departments adding more recruits and buying more guns to provide “law and order,” which means making a city safe for its white population. It is politicians telling blacks to cool it or else. It is George Wallace, Hubert Humphrey, and Richard Nixon running for president. The black experience is the college administrator defining quality education in the light of white values. It is church bodies compromising whether blacks are human. And because black Theology is a product of the experience, it must talk about God in light of it. The purpose of black Theology is to make sense of the Black experience.339

Cone does not understand the Black experience to be identified with inwardness, and thus shuns the idea of absolute dependence.340 One is thus left wondering, then, what causes Blacks to understand Jesus as the one who is the source of hope? Surely it cannot be the categorical experience singularly that Cone mentions. Negative categorical experiences should lead one to reject the Christian message and Jesus. To be sure, Jesus as preached

338 Ibid.


340 Ibid., 24.
to the slaves was one who called the slaves to their state of humility, and justified inhumane treatment. Hence, the first problem with categorical experiences as being the cause of hope and faith in Jesus the Christ: negative experiences of betrayal are the cause of negative interpretations of the one betraying.

The second critique of categorical experiences as the sole source by which suffering Blacks and their ancestors arrive at the conclusion that Jesus is in fact opposed to situations of servitude and oppression is that human beings are not fully who they are as categorical, grounded subjects. In this regard, it is appropriate to question Cone’s claim that the “totality of Black existence in a white [is] world where babies are shot, women are raped, and men are shot.”341 This is a very narrow view of “experience” and “existence.” Such negative experiences are not the sum of Black existence. In fact, as human beings, African-Americans are centered between the categorical (experience in the world), and the transcendental (in the background). Every human being operates between this duality that is operative within him or herself. In this light, categorical experiences do not encompass the fullness of the human subject, and therefore cannot give a full account for one’s faith in Jesus as the Christ. On the contrary, there is “something within,” a transcendental structure which enables one to look beyond the categorical and recognize Jesus as the subject of hope, even when the circumstances of life appear dismal and murky.

Human beings are not reducible to an understanding of “human” that is totally categorical. On the contrary, human beings are transcendent beings who always and in

341 Ibid.
every way have an experience in the transcendence. In this light, categorical experience of Black suffering and estrangement only have meaning when juxtaposed to a transcendental ground, whereby human beings are open “to the unlimited expanse of all possible reality.” To the extent that human beings live within this duality, between the categorical and the transcendental, they are therefore open to the possibility of a reality that differs radically from the one in which they experience categorically. If we were to interpret the situations of Black suffering and estrangement absent a transcendental experience, we would fail to do justice to the transcendental dimension within every subject, and fail to have the condition of possibility for liberation, freedom, and hope. This is the danger inherent in Cone’s attention to the categorical and his rejection of “inwardness,” in which African-Americans understand their state of absolute dependence. Transcendence is the reason why the least of these are able to open themselves to the possibility of liberation, and the possibility that Jesus the Christ is the One who brings and offers liberation.

My final two objections to the privileging of categorical experiences independent of their transcendental ground as the account for Black people’s faith in Jesus as the Christ, the bearer of hope and redemption: categorical experiences do not speak to the conditions of possibility that allowed slaves and suffering Blacks to “hear” the Christian message, nor do they speak to the conditions that empowers suffering persons to question their situation outside of the categorical world. Karl Rahner poses the question, ‘what

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343 Ibid., 20.
kind of hearer will hear the Christian message?’ Unfortunately Cone does not adequately speak to the conditions that permitted former slaves and oppressed Black persons to conceive of the ideas of a liberating Christianity outside of the context in which they initially heard the Christian message in North America. Cone takes it for granted that somehow the slaves were able, simply by seeing Jesus as the One Who “lived with the poor” and was rejected by the world, to hear a message that differed radically from that of the slaveholder’s message. Moreover, Cone simply assumes that suffering and marginalized Blacks were able to consider the possibility of another reality outside the categorical world in which they lived.

This is not to suggest that categorical experiences are unimportant. On the contrary, as the history of Black Theology has maintained, Black Theology does in fact commence with experience. However, the categorical experiences of suffering, hopelessness, and helplessness must be discussed in conjunction with the transcendental experience that human beings can never escape, precisely because humans are forever in the presence of the transcendent Being that we call God. It is such transcendence that allows for one to experience God in God’s fullness, and hope beyond the categorical. In this regard, a transcendental anthropology and Christology in Black Theology is absolutely essential in order to arrive at the transcendental structures which allow for people of color to recognize the liberating and delivering office of Jesus the Christ. Yet, it is impossible to know or to even comprehend such knowledge, unless one opens oneself to the possibility of being engulfed by the Christ presence, and experience God

through Jesus the Christ. This experience is only possible to the extent that human beings possess within themselves transcendental structures that open human beings to a reality that is infinite.

**The Turn Toward the Transcendental**

Karl Rahner constructs a transcendental Christology in conjunction with a transcendental anthropology. For Rahner, every human being is both subject and person. Rahner understands “person” as “the self possession of a subject as such in a conscious and free relationship to the totality of itself.” The human being as subject and person “is someone who cannot be derived, who cannot be produced completely from other elements at our disposal. [The human being] is that being who is responsible to him/ [her] self.” Rahner understood other disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, and philosophy, among others, as an attempt to reduce the human being to the limits of their particular fields. While their work is important in understanding the social nature of the human subject, Rahner resisted the notion that human beings could be reduced to such data which resulted from these fields of study. On the contrary, Rahner hypothesized that the human being is a being who is beyond the existential natures of the above mentioned disciplines. The human being, for Rahner, is a being who is able to question him or herself in him or herself. The human being stands as a finite being facing

345 Rahner, 26-31.

346 Ibid., 30.

347 Ibid., 31.
an infinite horizon. In other words, the freedom of the human being allows him or her to question an infinite horizon in the midst of the finite.

Rahner vehemently emphasizes the point that the human being is a being who is transcendent yet grounded. Yet, for Rahner, “in spite of the finitude of [the human being’s] system, [the human being] is always present to him/[her] self in his/[her] entirety.” A serious investigation of Rahner’s transcendental structure of the human being helps one understand how, in the first instance, former enslaved and tortured persons can trust in Jesus as the Christ and liberator, and, more importantly, how they were able to conceive of emancipation in the face of horrific social conditions which they endured. The infinite horizon of possibility to which former slaves allowed themselves to be open, provided the opportunity to envision a world which differed radically from the existential categorical world in which they lived. In their encounter with the transcendence, slaves placed everything, including systems of injustices and human estrangement, in question. Rahner is thus accurate to assume that “in the case that [human beings] affirm the possibility of a merely infinite horizon of questioning, this possibility is already surpassed, and [human beings show [themselves] to be beings with an infinite horizon.”

To the extent that the human being is forever in the presence of an infinite horizon and unlimited “questioning,” he or she thereby encounters the mystery that we call God. Rahner suggests, “if the [human being] is really a subject, that is, transcendent, responsible, and free being who as subject is both entrusted into his/[her] own hands and

348 Rahner, 32.
always in the hands of what is beyond his/[her] control, then basically this has already
said that [the human being] is a being oriented towards God.”349 In this light, the human
being is a being who is always, inescapably, in the presence of the divine mystery that we
call God. Situated in the presence of the divine mystery, the human being is always
moving toward this mystery, yearning to know more about the mystery, even when he or
she is unaware of this desire. Therefore, the being “comes to the real truth about
him/[her] self precisely by the fact that he/[she] patiently endures and accepts this
knowledge that his/[her] own reality is not in his/[her] own hands.”350 To be sure, there
is a state of absolute dependence on the divine mystery that we call God.

The Pneumatological Nuance of the Black Coptic Church in conjunction with Karl
Rahner

The Black Coptic Church’s proposition that that Holy Spirit functions as an
epistemological source of knowledge concerning Jesus and the will of God provides a
framework by which we can understand the “why” and “how” concerning the slaves’
ability to hear the truth of Gospel, Jesus as liberator, even though their introduction to
Christian faith was a brutal one. Beyond the categorical experiences as suffered by
slaves and their offspring, there was “something within,” which inspired suffering
kidnapped Africans to nonetheless see Jesus the Christ as their absolute savior Who
would deliver from them categorical experiences of suffering and oppression. This
“something within” is the transcendental structure (Holy Spirit), that is present within
every human subject. The Holy Spirit permitted former slaves and their progeny who

349 Ibid., 31
350 Ibid., 48.
endured racism and Jim Crow America to question, within their limited finite system, their circumstances. This questioning tradition of the slaves can be related to none other than their transcendental structure, which aided in the process of envisioning a different world where “we all would be free.”

The transcendental structure that allowed slaves and their children to recognize Jesus as the Christ, and thereby reject systems of oppression and domination, is the promise of the comforter, the Holy Spirit. The promised Paraclete, which Jesus the Christ promised, serves as comforter, advocate, teacher, and intercessor. Indeed, the promised Paraclete is the ever-present spirit of God with and for humanity. Jesus promised his followers that He would not leave them orphaned, but that the “Advocate, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in my name, will teach you everything….”

This advocate is present in the world following the resurrection of the crucified messiah. The resurrection, maintains Rahner, affected every human being. To be sure, the Spirit in the world is omnipresent and never ceases to exist. Slaves and their descendents were touched by this Spirit and thereby knew that Jesus was in fact the Christ, and that justice would prevail.

The Holy Spirit as the source of knowledge concerning Jesus and the will of God, over against the categorical experiences, renders possible a new starting point in the field of Black Theology, which has typically posited that the Black experiences engendered the unwavering relationship between African-Americans vis-à-vis Jesus the Christ.

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351 John ch. 14
352 John 14:26
However, the Black Coptic Church’s insistence that the Holy Spirit is the source of knowledge, beyond categorical and other sensory experiences, concerning Jesus and liberation, ascribes a prominent role to the Holy Spirit in Black Theology. Slaves and freedom fighters were faced with life and death decisions, “something within” and “something beyond” what they could see in the immediate encouraged suffering Blacks to trust in Jesus the Christ as their liberator and redeemer. To the extent that Jesus is such a central figure in Black Christianity, it is obligatory that Black Christians are able to offer an account of their hope and trust in Jesus. Hence, the importance of understanding the Holy Spirit as the source of knowledge within the Black Christian experience.
CHAPTER SIX

TEACH AND PREACH, BUT DARE NOT TO LEAD: PROBLEMATIZING LIBERATION

The history of the Black Coptic Church is in great part a history of women. Since the church’s founding, women have played an intricate role in the development and the expansion of said organization. It is not uncommon to hear both men and women in the Black Coptic Church testify to how a particular woman in the church is responsible for their salvation. In many instances, the spiritual leaders of the Black Coptic Church, who are men, are overcome with emotion as they describe the relationship with the women whom they simply refer to as “my Queen.” In fact, although the Black Coptic Church is a male-led institution, and even though it is men who are the spiritual leaders of every church that stems from the organization founded by Prophet Cicero Patterson, these men were not taught the theological principles of the Black Coptic Church by a man. On the contrary, the spiritual leaders of the organization were taught by a woman. In this regard, women are the primary conduits by which individuals who joined the Black Coptic Church are educated on the organization. In essence, the educational department of the Black Coptic Church is female-led.

Over the course of this project, I watched several video recordings of previous services of the True Temple of Solomon. These tapes reveal that it is not men, but
women who make up the majority of the organization. Further, beyond teaching, women have played an immense role in the daily governing and maintenance of the Black Coptic Church. Because women make up the majority of the congregations, they are also the strongest economic bloc within the individual temples that comprise the Black Coptic community. In most cases, the women are the church cooks, the main source of fund raising, the choir directors, the child care providers during church services, and are also responsible for the beautification of the edifice. While it is true that women in the Black Coptic Church have shared a parallel role to that of men, to the extent that they are the main teaching arm of said organization, they nonetheless occupy a paradoxical location which I call parallel yet subjugated.

**Black Women in the Black Church: Ambivalent Sexism Examined**

In her text, *If It Wasn’t for the Women: Black Women's Experience and Womanist Culture in Church and Community*, sociologist Cheryl Townsend Gilkes traces the historical role of women in African societies, and attempts to demonstrate the continuity and discontinuity that exist between African-American women in America and their African female ancestors in sacred and secular spaces. Gilkes argues, “In Africa, the themes of female independence and self-reliance were reflected in the organization of economic, family, and political roles. In numerous West African societies, women were persons in their own right with responsibilities and privileges not derived from husbands and fathers.”353 Historian Letitia Woods Brown argues that, as a result, “African

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women achieved considerable economic independence; in religious ceremonies, women were priests, even leaders of some cults. Women also maintained their own secret societies.”354 In fact, argues Gilkes, “one African queen, Candace, led military campaigns of such ferocity that all later queens have born the same generic name.”355 However, in spite of strong, independent and critical roles that African women played in traditional African societies, Gilkes posits that gender relationships in the black church have taken on an ambivalent tone.356

To be sure, “women have emerged in every African-American religious tradition as persons with significant power in spite of overwhelming resistance of the largest church bodies to women's ordination.”357 An example of female figures in the black church with a considerable amount of power and influence are the women known as church “mothers.” As Gilkes shows in her research, “mothers” are well-respected women who, in light of their age or wisdom, or a combination of both, have gained the admiration and respect of those within community and church. Gilkes advances the idea that “the roles of church and community mothers represent impositions of familistic and pseudo-familistic ties upon social organizations and the process of social influence.”358

354 Letitia Woods, as quoted in Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, It if Wasn’t for the Women: Black Women’s Experience and Womanist Culture in Church and Community, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2003, 64.


356 Ibid., 75.

357 Ibid., 93.

358 Ibid., 63.
While the roles of these mothers are comparable in terms of their functioning within the community and church, there are contrasting elements that separate the community mother and the church mother. On the one hand, argues Gilkes, “Mothers in communities have carried on the roles of elders in traditional West African societies where accumulated wisdom is power. They have occupied positions of leadership in women’s organizations and local branches of national organizations.”

In essence, community mothers have been effective in helping to produce “real changes for ‘the race.’”

On the other hand, argues Gilkes, the place of the church mother is more complicated and paradoxical, to the extent that the ambivalence concerning “the appropriate roles of women in public life are more obvious within the churches.”

Further, the black church is not a monolithic institution, but, on the contrary, is comprised of various denominations in which the role of the church mother differs from church to church. Notes Gilkes:

Within larger Baptist and Methodist denominations, women are organized under a system of relatively unyielding male authority. Baptists and Methodist church mothers tended to be influential and venerable elders. Within the sanctified churches, those Pentecostal and holiness denominations which were founded and managed by black people and which have retained more of the traditional Southern African elements of black religious worship and liturgy, there is a broader range of attitudes and practices concerning the position of women. Church mothers are not only role models and venerable elders. According to some ministers, “women are important for moral guidance within our congregations” -

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359 Ibid., 66.
360 Ibid., 66.
361 Ibid., 68.
but also older, venerated, spirit-field women who hold considerable power within a nearly autonomous and well-organized, parallel women’s world.\textsuperscript{362}

Although the position of church mothers in a wide range of black churches vary from influential elders to women with great authority, Gilkes highlights a critical element that highlights a tremendous paradox within the black church. On the one hand, the Church of God in Christ, which Gilkes examined, seemed to recognize the talent, administrative and spiritual aspects of the church mothers, and the range of women’s groups within the churches. On the other hand, however, according to some of the bishops within the Church of God in Christ, “nowhere can we find a mandate to ordain a woman to be an elder, a bishop or pastor. Women may teach the gospel to others … have charge of the church in the absence of its pastor … without adopting the title of elder, bishop or pastor.”\textsuperscript{363} Nonetheless, Lucille Cornelius, who wrote a history of the Church of God in Christ, maintains that women have been a critical element in the history and development of said organization. She further argues that the history of the Church of God in Christ is, in fact, a history of women in said tradition.\textsuperscript{364} Such a paradox is reminiscent of the history of women in the Black Coptic Church.

The history of the Black Coptic Church is part and parcel to a study of women within said movement. When Prophet Cicero Patterson founded the Black Coptic Church, “he built the church on women. He did not start with seven men; he started with seven

\textsuperscript{362} Ibid., 68.

\textsuperscript{363} Ibid., 69.

women. These women were given the authority to teach women and men. The women were the first people to lay hands on the new converts. Priest Eli Burdo contends, in the Black Coptic Church, “Women have great power and authority. We see them as doctors, lawyers and teachers. They light the people’s minds. They even have the authority to teach and preach. If something happens to the leader, they have the authority to lead in his absence.” In fact, argues Royal Priest Meshach Gardiner, the Black Coptic Church is constructed on a matriarchal system, in which the pillars of the church, known as the “Head Queens,” play a critical role in maintaining governance and order within the church. These women, who are often pastors’ wives or women of great wisdom and spiritual knowledge, are considered the spiritual parallel of the male leaders of the church.

Two women prominent in the history of the Black Coptic Church as primary figures in the church’s evolution and development are Candace Queen Capernaum Banks, the wife of Prophet Peter Banks, and Imperial Queen Mother Rebekah Armstrong, the sister of Queen Capernaum. Queen Huldah Morgan posits that “Queen Capernaum’s and Queen Rebekah’s impact is interrelated and so complementary that it’s difficult to see them as separate entities. They were healers, they were teachers, and they were prophetesses. They worked together to carry forth the mission of our founder.”

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365 Priest Meshach Gardiner, Women in the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 02 February 2009.

366 James Burdo, Women in the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 02 February 2009.

367 Queen Huldah Morgan, Women in the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 02 February 2009.
Queen Capernaum is a trailblazer in the history of women in the Black Coptic Church. Queen Huldah, a student of Queen Capernaum, remembers her as a “spiritually in-tune woman” who was able to captivate anyone who entered into her surroundings. As the wife of Prophet Peter, she was instrumental in the transition of the Black Coptic Church from a small community to a thriving organization. Among the women in the church, Queen Capernaum was well-respected and well-received. Although Prophet Peter was the leader of the Black Coptic Church after the passing of Prophet Cicero, it was Queen Capernaum who paved the way for the founding of the True Temple of Solomon, which Prophet Peter led. Queen Huldah states:

After the passing of Prophet Cicero Patterson, many of the people wanted Prophet Peter as the leader, but did not necessarily want Queen Capernaum as the First Lady. Queen Capernaum left the Universal Prayer House and Training School and began ministering in her home to members of her class. After Prophet Peter left the Universal Prayer House and Training School to initiate his ministry, he joined with Queen Capernaum and together they built the true Temple of Solomon.

In this regard Queen Capernaum stands as the first female “leader” of a Black Coptic Church, but to a limited degree, however, because she was unable to behave in a leadership position in the full capacity.

There is no other woman in the history of the Black Coptic Church who has made as large an impact as Mother Rebekah. In the interview that I had with her before her passing in 2005, Mother Rebekah informed me of her first encounter with Prophet

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368 Ibid.
369 Ibid.
Cicero. She recalled that prior to joining the Black Coptic Church, she was searching for a religious institution that would benefit her and her children.\textsuperscript{370} Her path toward joining the Black Coptic Church was the result of a dream in which, she maintains, the spirit of God led her to the Universal Prayer House and Training School.\textsuperscript{371} Queen Rachel Gardiner recounts the story in this way:

Prior to her joining the church, Mother Rebekah was in a coma. While in a coma, Mother Rebekah had a dream about a man. After she awoke from her coma she went looking for this man that was in her dream. As she was walking down Cottage Grove Avenue in Chicago, she passed by the Universal Prayer House and Training School. As she looked inside, she saw the same man who was in her dream. The man was prophet Cicero Patterson. As she introduced herself to him, he told her, ‘I was waiting for you.’ So, I regard Mother Rebekah as the matriarch of the Black Coptic Church.\textsuperscript{372}

After she joined the Black Coptic Church, Prophet Cicero taught Mother Rebekah the fundamentals of the teachings that would ground the Theology of said organization.

During my interview with Mother Rebekah, she informed me that she was a “Moses” who had come to help deliver the people of God. She articulated that God had “sent me on a divine mission to assist Prophet Cicero Patterson in elevating the consciousness of black people”\textsuperscript{373} who had been rejected and dejected by mainstream society. Mother Rebekah was convinced that blacks in North America were in the condition they were in precisely because they had been led away from their God and the image of God in which

\textsuperscript{370} Queen Rebekah Armstrong, History of the Black Coptic Church interview with Leonard McKinnis, Coptic Nation Temple archives, October 2005.

\textsuperscript{371} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{372} Candace Queen Rachel Gardiner, Women in the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 02 February 2009.

\textsuperscript{373} Queen Rebekah Armstrong, History of the Black Coptic Church interview with Leonard McKinnis, Coptic Nation Temple archives, October 2005.
God created them. Therefore, she maintained that “black people needed to be told that they were somebody and that they were God’s chosen people.”

Mother Rebekah reported, during his lifetime, “Prophet Cicero taught me many things that he hadn’t taught other people because it was my job to teach the people, from the ‘nigger’ and ‘negro’ degree, to the truth that they were somebody.” In describing herself as a Moses, Mother Rebekah wanted to convey the idea that her role in the Black Coptic Church was to help set the people of God free from oppression and lead them into a promised land.

Mother Rebekah is considered one of the greatest teachers in the history of the Black Coptic Church. Queen Rachel bore witness “that there were many testimonies in her book" regarding people who were sick or who had been given a certain amount of time to live by doctors who were unable to heal them. God used Mother Rebekah as a vessel to do his work. God used her as a vessel to heal and to teach many people. As a teacher in the Black Coptic Church, Mother Rebekah was primarily responsible for teaching new converts the theological principles and biblical foundations of the organization. Throughout her lifetime, Mother Rebekah confessed to have taught well

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375 Ibid.

376 The book of which Queen Rachel speaks is a pamphlet called The Rise of a Black Woman, which is an biographical work on Mother Rebecca, which is part of the archives of the Black Coptic Church.

377 Candace Queen Rachel Gardiner, Women in the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 02 February 2009.
over 600 new converts who joined the Black Coptic Church.\textsuperscript{378} In actuality, argues Queen Rachel, “most of the leaders who are over churches today were taught by Mother Rebekah.”\textsuperscript{379}

Beyond her role as teacher, Mother Rebekah was a woman of great authority and indeed respect. Her official position during the leadership of Prophet Peter was that of “Head Queen.” During my interview with Mother Rebekah, I questioned her as to what it meant to be a “Head Queen.” Mother Rebekah informed me that as “Head Queen,” “I was in charge of them all.”\textsuperscript{380} Mother Rebekah reported that it was her position to keep order and governance in the church. In the absence of Prophet Peter and Queen Capernaum, Mother Rebekah was the leader pro tempore. Queen Rachel recalled that when Mother Rebekah spoke, her word was not challenged.\textsuperscript{381} Although Mother Rebekah was not the wife of Prophet Peter, Prophet Hiram White suggested that she was one of his most trusted advisers. Whenever confusion arose in the church, “Mother Rebekah would get things in order.”\textsuperscript{382} In the final analysis, Mother Rebekah enjoyed an unprecedented

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{378} Queen Rebekah Armstrong, History of the Black Coptic Church interview with Leonard McKinnis, Coptic Nation Temple archives, October 2005.
\item \textsuperscript{379} Candace Queen Rachel Gardiner, Women in the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 02 February 2009.
\item \textsuperscript{380} Queen Rebekah Armstrong, History of the Black Coptic Church interview with Leonard McKinnis, Coptic Nation Temple archives, October 2005.
\item \textsuperscript{381} Candace Queen Rachel Gardiner, Women in the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 02 February 2009.
\item \textsuperscript{382} Prophet Hiram White, Women in the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 02 February 2009.
\end{itemize}
amount of authority and respect within the organization that has yet to be matched by another female figure.

At first glance, it may appear that women in the Black Coptic Church, especially from the vantage point of Mother Rebekah and Queen Capernaum, are in fact parallel to the male leadership of this tradition. As Cheryl Townsend Gilkes suggests, however, in her analysis of the role of women in the sanctified and holiness traditions, the role that women have played in the Black Coptic Church are not as revolutionary as congregants within the Black Coptic community argue. During my interview with church authorities on the role of women in the Black Coptic Church, it was quite apparent to me that those who were being interviewed, especially the men, wanted to make the case that the role in which Prophet Cicero ascribed to women in this tradition was revolutionary and trailblazing, in terms of the history of black women in the Black Church. Royal Priest Meshach Gardiner maintained that in giving women a central role in the ministry, “Prophet Cicero did something beyond the feminist movements.”383 In her agreement with Priest Meshach, Queen Maryann Martin argued that the “roles of women in the Black Coptic Church were quite different from the roles of women in other churches. We were given a more active role.”384 The fact of the matter, however, is that women in this tradition enjoyed roles that were quite similar to women in other traditions, especially the black Baptist and the Church of God in Christ.

383 Priest Meshach Gardiner Gardiner, Women in the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 02 February 2009.

384 Queen Maryann Martin, Women in the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 15 June 2009.
Notwithstanding the fact that women in the Black Coptic Church have been instrumental in the church’s history and continued development and, at times, have played active roles in key points of the church’s history, there is, nonetheless, a glass ceiling in place which prevents the full and active role of women in the leadership ministry of the organization. My interview participants agreed that the central function of women in the Black Coptic Church is to “teach.” This phenomenon of being primarily relegated to teaching is akin to Gilkes’ research concerning women in the sanctified traditions. However, the ambivalence that surrounds the proper place and role of women in the Black Coptic Church represents a paradox which calls into question the “liberation” aspect of the church’s theological program.

Women comprise an overwhelming majority of the membership of the Black Coptic Church. As has been argued, this reality suggests that women are the economic engine which drives the organization. Those interviewed for this project, however, in full recognition of the role that women have played in said organization, revealed that women may not hold the office of spiritual leader/pastor of the Black Coptic Church as founded by Prophet Cicero. On the contrary, my respondents proposed the ordering of unique roles within the religious realm on account of one’s biology. Submits Priest Meshach: “There is something distinct about a man and a woman in terms of what God has given us. God has given women something and the man something. In our training and understanding, there is an essential part of certain key elements within healing and certain
kinds of spiritual work, that men are given and women are not.”

Queen Huldah argued that “role identification, provided that there is mutual respect for one another’s role, doesn’t necessarily undermine the value of women or the idea that they are liberated to be all that they can be.” Such defense, however, only stands if the “liberated” woman never desires the office of pastor. Therefore, in spite of the argument which my interviewees tried to submit for equality among men and women in the Black Coptic Church, the exclusion of women from church leadership in the same manner as men undermines such a claim.

**Enter Womanist Tradition**

The genius of womanist Theology is its articulation of the shortcomings of both feminist and black theologies. To be certain, however, womanist Theology is not simply a critique of racism within feminist Theology, or the negligence on the part of black male theologians to construct a truly wholistic liberating black Theology that reflected the various experiences within black life and culture. On the contrary, the development of womanist Theology represents a theological venture of black women in which the fullness of identity and gender are woven together in perfect harmony. Therefore, in womanist Theology, one encounters a reflection on God, humanity, and anthropology, in which the blackness of one’s identity is not prioritized over against the experience of

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385 Priest Meshach Gardiner, Women in the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 02 February 2009.

386 Queen Huldah Morgan, Women in the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 02 February 2009.
being a woman. The necessity of womanist theological reflection is, in fact, developed out of the deficiencies of black and feminist theologies.

Accordingly, womanist Theology is both corrective and constructive. As a corrective, womanist Theology first calls into question the primary structure in which black Theology is conceptualized. Black Theology gained prominence in North America in the midst of a social context that fostered and held together systemic forms of oppression, which denied basic human rights to a certain segment of the population, namely black people. The refusal on the part of white theologians to address the discrepancy between racism and the Christian gospel rendered urgent the birth of a theological reflection, which would highlight the original sin which formed the basis of the American experiment, that is, racism. Thus, in its earliest expression, black Theology is the attempt of black ministers and theologians to grapple with the paradox of being black and Christian in North America, a fundamentally racist society. The focus, then, of the first generations of black theologians, was the problem of racism in relation to the Christian gospel.

While the social context of the American Sixties necessitated the eruption of theological voices from below, the narrow focus of the earliest black theologians on the problem of racism suggested an essentialist understanding of oppression, thereby rendering other forms of oppression as invisible. Oppression is not simply the suppression of a group of people as a result of their racial identity. On the contrary, oppression is the dehumanization of an individual or a group as a result of one’s identity, gender, sexual orientation, social class or economic status. In this regard, when one
speaks of oppression, it is crucial to bear in mind that over the years and centuries, groups and individuals have been castigated and labeled as the anthropological other for more reasons than race. Therefore, the greatest contribution of both feminist and womanist theologians is their skillful articulation of the problem of gender in the history of Christian faith, and in the case of womanist theologians and ethicists, their ability to scrutinize the brutal history of oppression concerning black women in the Black Church. Therefore, although the American Sixties gave birth to theologies that called into question racism, black liberation Theology has come of age to the extent that its theological reflection now includes the oppressions of race, gender and class. As womanist theologian Jacquelyn Grant articulates:

Black women must do Theology out of their tri-dimensional experience of racism/sexism/classism. To ignore any aspect of this experience is to deny the wholistic and integrated reality of black womanhood. When black women say that God is on the side of the oppressed, we mean that God is in solidarity with the struggles of those on the underside of humanity, those whose lives are bent and broken from the many levels of assault perpetrated against them.  

In the final analysis, womanist Theology provides a wholistic black theological reflection, which liberates the entire African-American community.

Womanist theologians have provided, through their critique of early black Theology, the framework by which one is able to construct a holistic black Theology of liberation that expresses in no uncertain terms the hope of freedom and deliverance for all oppressed persons. Moving beyond the original social context from which black

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Theology emerged, which demanded a critique of North American racism, womanist theologians and ethicists seek to expand the vision of black Theology. Their critique of classical black Theology in the North American context, however, does not suggest a rejection of the principles and themes within black Theology. On the contrary, the womanist evaluation of black Theology broadens the category of oppression such that racism does not obscure other forms of social, economic, and, more importantly, religious and theological oppression. Christian ethicist and womanist Emilie Townes maintains that “black Theology has articulated a strong doctrine of sin in relation to racism and an equally strong doctrine of virtue on the part of those who oppose racism.”\footnote{388} However, she is careful to note that “womanist Theology cannot and must not merely accept methodologies or constructs of theological reflection that do not consider with ongoing rigor the experience of African-American women and the diversities found within black womanhood.”\footnote{389} Therefore, “race is only one consideration for womanist theo-ethical thought. Race is joined with a host of other materialities of black life in a hermeneutic of liberation and transformation.”\footnote{390}

Womanist theological ethicist Kelly Brown Douglas offers a unique critique of the black God and a black Christ that was prevalent in classical black theological writings. Her analysis of the construction of the black God and the black Christ in black Theology advances the notion that the image of God and Christ as black symbolizes a

\footnote{388}{Ibid., 209.}
\footnote{389}{Ibid., 211.}
\footnote{390}{Ibid.}
divine presence that stands in solidarity with those who are racially oppressed. However, she argues that the image of a black God and black Christ must move beyond the categorical oppression of racism and expand to a category that includes gender oppression for women who are both black and female. Contends Brown-Douglass:

Shaped by the Black Power/civil rights movement out of which it emerged, black Theology focused only on one dimension of black oppression—white racism. Its failure to utilize black women’s’ experience further prevented it from developing an adequate analysis of black oppression. It did not address the multiple social burdens, that is, racism, sexism, classism, and heterosexism, which beset black men and women. Consequently, it presented an image of God and Christ that was impotent in the fight for black freedom. A black God, one concerned only with the battle against racism, could not sustain and liberate the entire black community. This God could not affirm or empower black women as they confronted sexism.

Although Brown-Douglass is critical of the theological construction of the black God to the extent that the black God seemed to be interested only in white racism, she maintains that “black Theology opened the door for black people to further explore the richness of their own experience in their efforts to understand the meaning of God’s presence in human history.”

**Women Are Teachers, Men Are Leaders: Gender Roles in the Black Coptic Church as a Biological Consequence**

When I held my first group interview session on the role of women in the Black Coptic Church, I had no intention of conducting a second interview session. I noticed, however, that I was discussing women within said tradition but my audience was male.

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392 Ibid.
dominated, and that I had allowed the men to speak on behalf of the women. Therefore, not disregarding the material which I gained from the first interview session, I decided to hold a second group interview on the same topic, but this time only with women. My primary reason for holding a second session is because I was interested to see if the women, unencumbered by the male presence, would respond differently to the same set of questions with a few additions. The primary question, however, which engendered a lengthy discussion, concerned women and leadership in the Black Coptic Church. My question was the same in both sessions: “Are women able to lead/pastor a Black Coptic Church in the same manner as men? If not, does this undermine the concept of liberation inherent in the church’s doctrine?”

Although I attempted to put forward a direct question to my participants, the original answers in the first session revealed a deep sense of ambiguity among the participants’ responses. When I initially posed the question, Royal Priest Meshach Gardiner argued, “Yes, women are able to lead the Black Coptic Church.” My experience within the tradition, however, provided me the insight to know that he and I did not understand my question in the same way. I was fully aware of the role of women

393 This particular question reflected my position as participant/observer within the Black Coptic Church. As I mentioned in the introduction, I have been involved with this tradition since a very young age, and therefore, I possess a first-hand account of many propositions and ideals that were put forth during the interview session. This question, however, which emphasizes “same manner,” is directly reflective of the fact that I have often raised this question, outside of this dissertation project, and have witnessed several high-ranking men attempt a hermeneutical dance while proposing an answer to this question. Often times, the men would propose the idea that “women are the first leaders” because they are the teachers and have the first contact with new converts, or, the women can “step in” in the place of a man’s absence, but only in a temporary manner. Therefore, I wanted to be direct with the question in an effort to thwart a potential play on semantics or tautological conversation.

394 Priest Meshach Gardiner, Women in the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 02 February 2009.
in the Black Coptic Church as teachers and as assistants to the leaders. However, the crux of my question was related to the church’s most sacred day of the liturgical calendar, the Day of Pentecost, in which the leader lays his hand upon the newly-taught members as a symbol of their receiving the “seal” of the Holy Spirit. Therefore, I pressed him as to a biblical justification for his response in light of the Pentecost event, which only the male leader may perform. Priest Meshach suggested that, while “Prophets Peter and Cicero are our theological sources,” the ritual of the Day of Pentecost in the Black Coptic Church reflects a biblical tradition which was handed from Jesus to his Apostles.395

Priest Meshach employed the book of the Acts of the Apostles as his biblical witness for the role of women in relation to the Day of Pentecost within the Black Coptic Church. On this particular day in the church, explained Priest Meshach, male leaders perform the act of laying hands on the candidates, but the ritual is incomplete if there are not two women to assist the leader while he performs this act.396 He further argued that in Acts 1, the apostles entered a room in the upper part of the house, with two women, for the purpose of waiting for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Accordingly, on the Day of Pentecost within the Black Coptic Church, the male leader, assisted by two women, as a “symbol of the trinity,” performs the act of the laying of hands. I interjected, however, that the narrative in Acts does not suggest a particular number of women who were present in the upper room awaiting the coming of the Holy Spirit, but, on the contrary,

395 Priest Meshach Gardiner, Women in the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 02 February 2009.

396 Ibid.
states, "All these were constantly devoting themselves to prayer, together with certain women, including Mary the mother of Jesus, as well as his brothers." While Mary is the only woman who is named, the proposition of "certain women" makes clear that there were others there as active participants in this event. My interpolation, nonetheless, simply opened the door for further elucidation.

In a potential correlation between spiritual offices and human biology, Empress Selah Thomas argued that "women are receptors. I am that physically I am also that spiritually ... Men are projectors. They are that physically and they are that spiritually." To the extent that within the Black Coptic Church the Day of Pentecost involves the projecting the seal of the Holy Spirit upon candidates, men are thereby, in light of their physical and biological makeup, able to perform this task. Correlating the response of Empress Selah with scripture, Priest Meshach argued that "we do have the records to say that Peter gave the Holy Ghost; it has something to do with the genetic makeup." Therefore, "because the man was given the power to lay hands, like Peter of the scriptures, we follow this model." This model, however, is certainly contingent upon a Greco-Roman social context and cultural milieu which included certain understandings of the relationship between men and women that our modern society does not maintain. Unfortunately, however, the radical gulf between the ancient world and our

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397 See Acts 1:14.
398 Empress Selah Thomas, Women in the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 02 February 2009.
399 Priest Meshach Gardiner, Women in the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 02 February 2009.
400 Ibid.
world was not taken seriously by the participants in relation to their responses to my question.

In my second interview, exclusively with women, on the role of women in the Black Coptic Church, which I hoped would reveal some diversity in thought from my mixed-gender session, the women affirmed what was previously argued in the former session. I queried the participants as to the possibility of women leading an individual Black Coptic Church in the same manner as men, aside from the teaching function which appeared to be a ministry led by women. Queen Huldah affirmed the position of Priest Meshach, namely that “the physical nature of man and woman is reflective of the spiritual nature.”401 Accordingly, argued Queen Maryann Martin, “Prophet Cicero wanted men to be men and women to be women. He wanted men to take responsibility of [their] home and women to hold [their] role.”402 The physical nature of man, argued Queen Maryann, is to lead the home. Therefore, Queen Huldah’s attestation regarding the physical and spiritual nature of man and woman suggests that man as leader of the home is naturally head of the church.

Queen Michal Washington argued this point clearly: “Within the church, there are different bodies of leadership. The leader [who is male] is the leader over the temple. In his role, he delegates heads over different degrees and ministries within the church.”403

401 Queen Huldah Morgan, Women in the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 15 June 2009.

402 Queen Maryann Martin, Women in the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 15 June 2009.

403 Queen Michal Washington, Women in the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 15 June 2009.
When I posed the question directly, “Does a woman’s biology render her ineligible for church leadership?”, Queen Rachel asserted, “When Prophet Cicero set the organization up, he gave women critical roles. In the social order of his day, men were the head of the home, and he probably never thought that there would be a need for the woman to lead because there would always be a man.” She further insisted that the tradition of the Black Coptic Church is reflected biblically. Women, she argued, “were co-workers in the ministry,” which is essentially the delegated position of women in the Black Coptic Church.

Aside from church leadership, I was interested in the possibility of women’s ordination in the Black Coptic Church. Queen Huldah contended that in the case of the ordination of a woman, “it depends on the prerogative of the individual leader of a particular temple,” if a women can be ordained. Queen Rachel asserted that while many of the older leaders are against the ordination of women, “The leader is led by the Spirit, and if the leader sees a woman who is called to ordained ministry, he could ordain her.” However, when I asked if there were a contingent of ordained women in the church in the same manner as there were men, the answer was no. There is, nevertheless, an exclusive list of women who have been ordained, and they are primarily wives of the

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404 Candace Queen Rachel Gardiner, Women in the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 15 June 2009.

405 Ibid.

406 Queen Huldah Morgan, Women in the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 15 June 2009.

407 Candace Queen Rachel Gardiner, Women in the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 15 June 2009.
leaders; but even in this case, the instance is rare, and those few who have been ordained do not share in the responsibilities of ordained men, namely, the performance of sacraments and rituals.

**Liberation in Question: A Critique of the Role of Women in Black Coptic Church Through a Womanist Lens**

Womanist theological scholarship highlights the inadequacy of essentialist approaches toward oppression and liberation. Early proponents of black Theology constructed an interpretation of oppression which tended to focus on the problem of racism and the effects of racist structures within society on the victims of such structures. An examination of early black Theology from our current vantage point, in fact, yields sharp criticisms of such a myopic approach. However, the *sitz-im-leben* of the American Sixties necessitated a theological program that demonstrated the discrepancy between the liberating ministry of the Jesus the Christ and a racist culture. The social context of first century Christianity did not necessarily warrant a discussion on environmental Theology. In a similar, manner racism was the clear and present evil of the American Sixties and required prompt attention on the part of serious Christian theologians. Over recent history, however, womanist theologians remind us that it is no longer acceptable to limit black Theology to a discussion on race. On the contrary, black Theology as a Theology of liberation must include aspects of liberation that address the various forms of oppression which face black people (i.e., race, gender, class, economics, etc.) The critical analysis provided by womanist theologians provides the framework by which I will examine the contemporary role of women in the Black Coptic Church.
The Black Coptic Church was founded at a time when it was not widely accepted that black people were “human.” On virtually all accounts, the very foundations of what it meant to be human did not apply to the descendants of enslaved persons. To be sure, the roots of black inferiority and intellectual deficiency were reflected in the American Constitution. In fact, civil rights legislation was not signed into law until 1964, but in reality is still being enacted and realized. Therefore, the accepted cultural notion, as reflected in legislation and laws, that black people are fully human beings, worthy of dignity and respect, is a cultural phenomenon less than fifty years old in North America. The bitter reality of racism and the denial of basic human rights formed the social context that gave birth to the Black Coptic Church. In essence, the founding of Black Coptic Church’s theological program was inclusive of elements which sought to thwart false perceptions of black people and to instill a sense of dignity and pride in a people who were the bastard children of America.

In my chapter, “Theological Fundamentals of the Black Coptic Church,” I examined the historical role of race in the Black Coptic Church and whether or not race would always be a significant factor in the church’s Theology. My respondents acknowledged an awareness of the changing landscape of race relations in the United States, especially in relation to the social context of the church’s founding and contemporary American society. There was agreement among the participants that although the social context, then and now are not identical, race, would nonetheless maintain a significant status in the church’s Theology. This is the case precisely because the Black Coptic Church is not only concerned with the spiritual development of its
membership, but also with identity formation in a world that is precariously unfair in its treatment of black Americans. Further, at the heart of the Black Coptic Church is the concept of liberation for African-Americans. Therefore, the intersection of race and theological construction will continuously retain a space within the Black Coptic Church.

My critique of the previous proposition is not about the uniqueness of race within a theological paradigm. On the contrary, my criticism lies in the fact that the church’s centering of race alone as a theological starting point has so far crippled the contemporary Black Coptic Church from moving beyond racial oppression into other forms of human subjugation that are equally important as race (i.e., gender and human sexuality), thereby leaving the church contained within an old paradigm that was contingent on a social context of race which rendered black life and culture as absurd. Although a product of the North American social context of human degradation, the exclusive focus of the Black Coptic Church on race is no longer an acceptable starting point for a theological program which propagates liberation in the changed context.

In the modern world, a paradigm that is dependent on a particular point in human history is conditional, and can therefore become outdated, and not useful for a church that grounds itself in the process of liberation. To the extent that oppression is widespread within the African-American community, it is critical that liberation Theology or a liberative ministry expands its horizons such that oppressed persons are not faced with the question of which oppression takes precedence over another. In light of racial, gender, and economic oppression, black women in particular fall within the category of “triple jeopardy.” Accordingly, black women’s oppression cannot be considered only in
terms of their skin tone or their African ancestry. Conversely, a holistic black Theology will include in its definition of, and action toward liberation, the freedom of black women in both secular and sacred spaces.

Unfortunately, the Black Coptic Church has so far failed to broaden its liberative theological program to include the full and authentic liberation of black women who have experienced oppression on account of their race and gender. The Black Coptic Church, given its origins as a black church which sought to counter as well as respond to the silence of white Christians and other black churches that it deemed as inadequately addressing the intersection of race and religion, has constructed a program of liberation that is liberative in the sense that its goal is the creation of a new black man and woman and a new black community, that celebrates its identity as first beings who are created in the image of God, and secondly as a nation that is unashamedly black. However, the centering the problem of racism alone at the core of its liberative program has created a paradox within the Black Coptic Church that is only reconcilable with a renewed understanding of oppression and liberation.

The Black Coptic Church is rooted in a ministry of liberation. As mentioned previously, prior to their involvement in the interview process of this project, my respondents were not familiar with the phrase “liberation Theology.” However, after hearing an explanation of the aims and ideals of liberation Theology, my participants agreed that liberation Theology is what the Black Coptic Church has been doing since its inception. Nonetheless, the church’s founder, Prophet Cicero Patterson, was a man of his time who was responding to a particular dilemma: racism in light of the liberating
ministry of Jesus the Christ. In a similar vein as early black theologians, Prophet Cicero inaugurated a ministry of liberation with the intention of raising the consciousness of the blacks in America via a theological program of liberation. However, his analysis of the world in which he lived led him to primarily focus his ministry of black liberation in an essentialist manner that did not deal with the multifaceted nature of oppression. In this light, the so-called black experience of suffering and, subsequently “liberation,” did not entirely concern itself with the full liberation of black women, which is best evidenced in the glass ceiling of leadership in the Black Coptic Church.

The paradoxical situation with which the Black Coptic Church is faced is directly related to the concept of liberation. To the extent that my interview subjects agreed that the Black Coptic Church has been fully engaged in a liberative theological program since its genesis, the question is valid: who are the recipients of the church’s liberation Theology? While this project advances the idea that within the Black Coptic Church, one finds a genuine and authentic expression of black liberation Theology, that is, reasoning about God which centers liberation as the goal, until unconstrained liberation is achieved, that is, liberation without regard to gender or other accidental qualities within the human subject, there remains a paradox which threatens the principle of liberation that is so fundamental to the Black Coptic Church.

The ideal concept of liberation, if fully realized, would include the removal of barriers to leadership which prevent women from holding the highest office within the Black Coptic Church. On one hand, the Black Coptic Church understands the importance of oppressed persons being liberated from external ideas, objects, or persons that stifle
human progress. Many of my participants posited the Exodus event of liberation as the canon within the canon. Additionally, Royal Priest Meshach Gardiner argued the point that the Jesus of scripture is biased towards the oppressed and is the prototype by which Christian Theology must be judged for authenticity.\textsuperscript{408} However, when I raised the question to my participants as to whether or not a religious institution which prevents women from full participation in church leadership represented the church or society that Jesus was interested in building, Queen Huldah Morgan argued that members of the Black Coptic Church “were never taught to be concerned with the strong theological and biblical support”\textsuperscript{409} for their understanding of such matters. When pressed further as to a possible theological justification for the role of women in the Black Coptic Church, she simply stated, “No, this is our way.”\textsuperscript{410} Herein lies the heart of the paradox: the Black Coptic Church is a church of liberation which advances the full participation of black people in society and church as full human beings whose freedom comes from God, not human beings, yet, women, in light of their biology, are unable to ascend to the helm of leadership.

To be sure, Prophet Cicero Patterson was a man within a particular social context. Queens Rachel Gardiner and Maryann Martin confirmed that the social context of North America was part and parcel of the organizational structure of the Black Coptic Church. Further, the racial divide of Prophet Cicero’s era surely functioned as a catalyst by which

\begin{footnotes}
\item[408] Priest Meshach Gardiner, Women in the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 02 February 2009.
\item[409] Queen Huldah Morgan, Women in the Black Coptic Church interview by Leonard McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 02 February 2009.
\item[410] Ibid.
\end{footnotes}
he chose to construct the church. It seems to me that the social context was more vital than the biological argument that my respondents attempted to construct. However, the tradition of the church as it pertains to gendered roles outweighs the potential of an examination of such constructs, with the hopes of creating a modern church that truly and authentically celebrates equality before God. It is not liberative to relegate women to a particular place via a biological argument. In fact, the biological proposition problematizes the concept of liberation on which the Black Coptic Church is founded. If the Black Coptic Church desires to symbolize unconditionally the practice of black liberation Theology, it is critical that the place and function of women be equal to that of men.

The aforementioned criticism of the Black Coptic Church certainly complicates the ideal of liberation that is the foundation upon which this Church stands. To be sure, the place of women in the Black Coptic Church renders problematic the claim that the Black Coptic Church is the manifestation of Black Theology; contemporary Black Theology recognizes the full equality of men and women in theological considerations.

Therefore, while the theological foundation of the Black Coptic is in fact liberation, its stance on the position of women in the church is a cause for investigation. For that reason, we will now review the argument presented in this dissertation and offer a critical analysis of the Black Coptic Church from a contemporary vantage point.
A Look Back

This dissertation posits the claim that the Black Coptic Church as founded by Prophet Cicero Patterson is a precursor to the North American development of Black Theology, and within this independent Christian tradition we find an intersection of Black Theology and the black church. As discussed in Chapter 2, in his essay “Black Church and Black Theology: Theory and Practice,” James Harris argues that there is a gulf that separates Black Theology academically conceived, and the religious experience of African-Americans as seen and practiced in the black church.411 His argument rests upon the assumption that Black Theology is out of touch with the black church, and the black church out of touch with Black Theology. Harris argues, “Academic Theology is thought to be more meaningful and profound than the practical Theology that actually grows out of the black church experience.”412 For Harris, Black Theology has failed to reach the very people whom it claims to liberate because “Black Theology tends to be a concern only of


412 Ibid., 86.
Therefore, maintains Harris, contrary to James Cone’s postulation that Black Theology is a Theology of the people, Black Theology is, in reality, an academic field of study for professional theologians within the halls of academia.

In his *Practical Theology for Black Churches: Bridging Black Theology and African American Folk Religion*, Dale P. Andrews advances Gayraud Wilmore’s argument that the rift between Black Theology and the black church “evinces a lost synthesis between liberation and sanctification” or, as Wilmore contends, between “the radical message of black liberation” and “the message of healing and self-fulfillment through a saving faith in Jesus Christ.” In a similar manner to Cone, Andrews posits that “the end of the Reconstruction era gave way to an insidious form of racism in America. […] in questionable response, black churches uncritically assimilated moral interpretations of religious life dictated by the white majority. As a result, black churches sacrificed their prophetic voice of liberation and social ethics, in exchange for a gospel of personal piety and moral responsibility. Asserts Andrews: “It appears that after the Reconstruction era personal spirituality became an accessible form of practical empowerment. Black preaching and pastoral care focused on the liberation of individuals from the rancid power of personal sin and social racism.”

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413 Ibid.


416 Ibid., 54.
Andrews, Black Theology’s criticism of the post-Civil War black church lay in what he calls a “missed-diagnosis” of the situation.\textsuperscript{417}

At the heart of the criticism Black Theology levies against the black church is what Andrews cites as the “refuge function” of the black church, which seemed to dominate the activity of said institution during Reconstruction. Andrews maintains that “black churches grew from their ‘underground folk’ existence into conventional institutions as havens from racist practices in white churches.”\textsuperscript{418} Consequently, many black theologians “viewed these events culminating in a transmutation of black churches from an ecclesial form of protest into one of escapism.”\textsuperscript{419} Andrews contends, however, “the greatest oversight of black Theology has been in its underestimation of the impact American individualism asserts upon black churches, black religious folk life, and black secular life as well.”\textsuperscript{420} In essence, the black church was not able to escape the pervasive influence that individualism, which was so endemic to Enlightenment thought, had upon American culture. In the final analysis, the black church as institution constantly endured the raging battle of a “double-consciousness”\textsuperscript{421} between African-American folk religion

\textsuperscript{417} Andrews, 56.

\textsuperscript{418} Ibid., 52.

\textsuperscript{419} Ibid., 52.

\textsuperscript{420} Ibid., 56.

\textsuperscript{421} Here Andrews’ use of W.E.B. Dubois’ classic term “suggests an implicit role of double consciousness, therefore, in the assimilation of American religious life and, consequently, vestiges of Western individualism.” See Andrews, 56.
and culture and American culture. In the end, “black churches emphasized personal salvation and religious piety under the impact of American individualism.”\footnote{Ibid., 56.}

James Cone rightly argues that the black church began in slavery.\footnote{See James Cone, Black Theology and Black Power, New York: The Seabury Press, 1969, 91.} Slavery, therefore, and the social milieu of the slave era, provides the framework by which one must interpret the formation of the black church experience. From clandestine slave meetings in the “brush” of the slave plantation emerged an institution that rejected the notion that Christian faith supports and provides theological justification for the dehumanization of a group of people. The slave, maintains Cone, “was no-thing in the eyes of the master, who did everything possible to instill this sense of nothingness in the mentality of the slave.”\footnote{Ibid., 91.} Nonetheless, the slaves understood that their existence need not be determined by the prevailing social order. On the contrary, enslaved Africans reached back into history and made a connection between their own experience of suffering, dehumanization, and oppression, and with the life of Jesus of Nazareth. In this regard Jesus became the central figure in the slaves’ brand of liberation Theology. Born lowly and rejected by the powers of this world, the life of Jesus contained the necessary elements from which the slaves could draw their understanding of human existence.

In making Jesus their choice, the slaves essentially made a theological claim that in Jesus there was refuge from the wickedness of slavery, and that Jesus was on their side. Choices had to be made, undeniably. The slaves could either accept the “given”
Christianity of the slave masters which attempted to make them docile and passive. Or they could construct a version of their own Christianity which advocated freedom and justice. Some slaves opted for the former while a large majority opted for the latter.\footnote{See Albert Raboteau, \textit{Slave Religion: The Invisible Institution of the Ante-bellum South}. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978.} In choosing the latter, they rejected white Christianity precisely because they associated it with slavery and domination. However, “those who rejected it may have attended worship service held by slaveholding preachers, and listened patiently to the preachers’ messages, but they did not consider these services real church, nor did they think the preachers’ message was Christian.”\footnote{Kelly Brown Douglass, \textit{The Black Christ}, Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2004, 20.} The slaves were interested in ascertaining if Jesus supported human bondage and human relationships which relegated some to the margins of society while those at the center prospered. Via a re-interpretation of Christianity from their experience, the slaves constructed their Christian identity in light of the career of Jesus. Having full knowledge, as demonstrated in slave spirituals, that the ministry of Jesus was intended for the rejects, the slaves really did make Jesus their own. As Cone argues, there is no suggestion in the spirituals “that Christianity is merely private, isolated, and unrelated to the conditions of this life. Christianity has to do with fighting with God against the evils of this life.”\footnote{Cone, 1969, 94.} The slaves realized that Jesus, in “becoming a slave himself, [opened] realities of human existence formerly closed to [humanity].
Through an encounter with Jesus, [humans] now know the full meaning of God’s action in history and [humanity’s] place in within it.\textsuperscript{428} 

The question that faced the slaves was, “what does this Jesus mean to me?” For many the response meant rebellion, as in the case of Denmark Vessey, Nat Turner, and David Walker. For some it meant absolutely nothing. And for others it meant tailoring Christianity such that it was a reflection on the common black experience, but also true to their African roots. For those who rebelled and constructed their own interpretation, the message of Jesus meant equality and justice. Thus, those who were not satisfied with the slave-holders’ understanding of the Christian message attempted to define black/African Christianity against the oppressive Christianity of their slave masters.

The black church, therefore, emerges within the context of rebellion and contradiction. The religion of the slaves as an institution within the brush harbors of the slave plantations symbolizes the slaves’ rebellion against the prevailing social order, and a rejection of the Christian gospel as propagated by slave preachers. To be sure, those slaves who participated in the covert religious meetings had a choice to either participate or to remain passive servants in the institution of slavery. Those who chose to become active agents in the history of liberation and freedom made the decision that the Christian gospel provided the necessary theological formulations to support rebellious movements against the dehumanization of the people of God. Part and parcel to the spirit of rebellion that was present among those slaves who rejected “given Christianity” was the construction and development of a liberating Theology that contradicted the oppressive

\textsuperscript{428} Cone, 1969, 35.
theological program of slave owners. Argues Joseph Washington: “Born in slavery, weaned in segregation and reared in discrimination, the religion of the Negro folk was chosen to bear roles of both protest and relief. Thus, the uniqueness of black religion is the racial bond which seeks to risk its life for the elusive but ultimate goal of freedom and equality by means of protest and action.”

James Cone on the Pre-Civil War Black Church

James Cone, among other black theologians and historians of black church history, posits a clear distinction between the function of the black church prior to and after the Civil War. Although Cone recognizes a distinction between the functioning aspect of the black church in these periods, it is important to bear mind that Cone understands the existence and the raison d’être of the black church to be directly related to the protest of kidnapped Africans whose rejection of the Christianity of their slave-masters prompted them to construct their own vision of Christian faith, which took seriously human estrangement. Therefore, for Cone, the black church is that institution which is first and foremost prophetic in its critique of social orders that dehumanize and condemn the people of God as worthless objects. Posits Cone: “The black church was the creation of a black people whose daily existence was an encounter with the overwhelming and brutalizing reality of white power.”

In this regard the prophetic ministry, for Cone, is a measuring stick by which one is able to critique the existence of the black church in a particular period of history. For Cone, the pre-Civil War black

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430 Cone, 1969, 92
church was an institution which took seriously its function to announce the gospel of liberation.

The black church that was formed on the slave plantations of North America grew out of the slaves’ theological foresight that provided the vision and audacity to call into question the very system of white Christianity and the spurious interpretation of the life of Jesus and the gospels which accompanied it. The early black church knew very well the radical tension that existed between the institution of slavery and the freedom in Christ. However, as Cone argues, “White Christianity tried to reconcile the impossible: slavery and Christianity.” The heretical intersection between slavery and Christianity was a failed attempt on the part of slave masters to essentially rob kidnapped Africans of their humanity in an effort to control their earthly existence. The pre-Civil War black church, however, maintains Cone, “refused to accept an interpretation of Christianity which was unrelated to social change. They knew that though Christianity is eschatological, it must be related to the suffering of black men now.” Hence the pre-Civil War black church as a realized eschatologically-oriented institution.

One of the most scandalous aspects of the anti-Christian teaching and preaching of slave holding persons was its disregard for the social and political characteristics of the authentic Christian gospel. To be sure, however, it was necessary, if the slave experiment had any chance for success, for slave holding persons to fashion a portrait of Jesus as one Who was uniquely concerned with the future of humanity while deeming

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431 Cone, 1969, 103.

432 Ibid., 101.
earthly existence as insignificant to the Christian story. The attempted present/future separation paradigm of slave religion was not triumphant, however. Such a dualism was rejected by the materialization of black churches whose presence indicated a decisive break with demoralized Christianity. Highlighting, therefore, the protest nature of the black church, Cone argues that “the birth of the independent black churches and the teaching of the free black preachers show clearly that Christianity and earthly freedom were inseparable for the black man [sic].”\(^{433}\) In essence, the coming of the black church inaugurated a social eschatological movement which not only critiqued but revolutionized prevailing themes in North American Christianity.

The central message of the pre-Civil War black church announces an inseparable connection between Christianity and earthly freedom. In contradistinction to the religion of slave holding persons, the pre-Civil War black church was a church whose eschatological stance was not futuristic, but rather dealt with the existential absurdity that denied the presence of God in blacks. The propagation of a future-oriented eschatology within the construction of slave religion was not a coincidence of the slave system; indeed, it was purposeful. Argues Cone: “In an effort to dissipate the slaves’ passionate desire for freedom, white missionaries sought to interpret the meaning of Christianity in the light of a futuristic eschatology, trying to convince the slave that the Christian gospel was concerned with pietistic moralities in this life as a means of gaining eternal life upon death.”\(^{434}\) Therefore, white missionaries “taught the slave that to hope means to look to

\(^{433}\) Cone, 94.

\(^{434}\) Cone, 1969, 101.
heaven for a reward for being obedient to the master on earth. It meant accepting his present deplorable lot as a slave.\textsuperscript{435} Yet, the pre-Civil War black church understood that a futuristic eschatological interpretation of “Christian hope not only cheats the slave of the meaning of the present; it cheats God - the present reality of God and his \textit{sic} involvement in the world on behalf of man \textit{sic}.\textsuperscript{436}

\textit{James Cone on the Post-Civil War Black Church}

James Cone’s analysis of the black church in the post-Civil War era is a scathing critique of an institution that once burned with the fire of revolution and protest, to one which abandoned its prophetic ministry of liberation and therefore betrayed its foundation. The social context of slavery and the existential absurdity which resulted from said institution certainly provided the necessary environment for a burgeoning interpretation of Christianity that stressed human dignity and freedom. The context, however, of post-Civil War America, presented, in Cone’s analysis, a more pressing sense of urgency for the existence of a prophetic black church. Whereas slavery was overt and therefore racism was a clear and present threat, the period following the Civil War seemed to offer blacks freedom, but never really removed the shackles of slavery. Argues Cone: “The new Jim Crow structure had devastating effects comparable to slavery. In slavery, one knows what the odds are and what is needed to destroy the power of the enemy. But in a society which pronounces a man free but makes him behave as a slave, all of the strength and will power is sapped from the would-be rebel.\textsuperscript{435}

\textsuperscript{435} Ibid., 102.\textsuperscript{436} Ibid., 102.
The structures of evil are camouflaged, the enemy is elusive, and the victim is trained to accept the values of the oppressor. In such an environment of ambivalent racism, the prophetic arm of the black church should have been at its height in the deconstruction of racist Christianity and the continued development of the liberating gospels of Jesus the Christ.

Cone highlights a theological and ethical shift of the black church that existed prior to and post-Civil War. The paradigm shift to which Cone draws attention was a move from the socially prophetic gospel, one which, in an attempt to critique socially constructed sin, employs the public ministry of Jesus the Christ as one who challenged social norms and invited the castigated to participate in his ministry, to a church which now concerned itself with personal and pious theological ethics, while overlooking shameful aspect of America’s original sin: racism. Cone argues that “The passion for freedom was replaced with innocuous homilies against drinking, dancing, and smoking; and injustices in the present were minimized in favor of a kingdom beyond this world. Black churches adopted, for the most part, the Theology of the white missionaries and taught blacks to forget the present and look to the future. Some black ministers even urged blacks to adapt the morality of white society entirely, suggesting that entrance in the kingdom of heaven is dependent on obedience to the laws of white society.”

For Cone, such a theological modification represents a church that all but abandoned its

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437 Ibid., 105.

438 Ibid., 105
foundation, which was born against the harsh realities of white racism, rooted in a heretical interpretation of Christianity.

Cone’s analysis of the black church during the periods in question is critical for an understanding of Cone’s black theological project. Cone was convinced, as evidenced in the publication of his *Black Theology and Black Power*, that the black church had lost its fire for liberation and retreated to an escapist paradigm, which ignored the realities of this life while looking forward with great anticipation to the next life. Cone argued: “Undue concern about white injustice was thus a sign of a loss of faith, a failure to realize that patience and long suffering were more pertinent to the final judgment than zeal for the present.”

Several years prior to Cone’s publication, however, Joseph Washington had already advanced the thesis that the black preacher during reconstruction was radically different from his predecessor of the pre-Civil War era. Argues Washington: “In that era of decline in the quest for freedom, the Negro minister remained the spokesman for the people with this difference - faced by insurmountable obstacles, he succumbed to the cajolery and bribery of the white power structure and became its foil. Instead of freedom he preached moralities and emphasized rewards in the life beyond, in much the same manner as the white missionaries.” Hence Cone’s eschatological critique of the black church during Reconstruction and, subsequently, also of the black church of the American Sixties.

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439 Cone, 105.

440 Washington, 1964, 35.
Cone’s criticism is noteworthy and, to be sure, forces a new dimension in Christian eschatology which I call black social eschatology. Social eschatology rejects any notion of eschatology that, in its long-waiting for hope in the distant future, fails to take seriously the possibility of hope in the present. White heretical Theology built an empire on Earth for which its slave eschatological message demanded that blacks to wait for heaven and the good life to come laid the foundation. It encouraged blacks to accept the given circumstances as a natural part of life and attempted to destroy the spirit of prophetic vigilance. While whites enjoyed vacations on islands, played golf and lived in extravagant mansions, blacks were told to have faith that their mansion was waiting for them in heaven along with ruby slippers. Black social eschatology, however, answers with a resounding no! As Cone contends, “Unless the future can become present, thereby forcing blacks to make changes in this world, what significance could eschatology have for those who believe that their self-determination must become a reality now?”

Black social eschatology disregards any eschatology that accepts as satisfactory the predicaments of this life. Essentially, black social eschatology says “either we put new meaning into Christian hope by relating it to our liberation or drop it altogether.”

Black social eschatology, especially in the tradition of classically trained black theologians, is deeply indebted to Rudolph Bultmann, who realized that eschatology

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442 Ibid., 137.
absent of a hope for the present reality is imperfect and subject to scrutiny.\textsuperscript{443} Bultmann concluded that “human future cannot be separated from the being-in-the-present.”\textsuperscript{444} The belief in non-separation of the future from the present is reminiscent of the eschatological principles on which radical theologies of the American Sixties were based. A conviction that God was active in human history transforming the conscience of humanity and constantly involving God-self in human affairs is the foundation of such theologies as Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. Both dismissed any theological claim that attempted to separate the God of the future from the present. Bultmann’s contention that eschatology is allied with social justice and present hope directed black theologies of the sixties to take pro-active stances against oppression and dehumanization wherever they existed.

\textbf{An Assessment of Cone’s Criticism}

While James Cone’s 1969 critique of the black church is significant for the study of black Theology, it is not a complete assessment of the situation. My analysis, however, is not a judgment of condemnation upon Cone or his theological scholarship. On the contrary, the parameters and criteria concerning Black Theology as proposed by Cone form the starting point by which I measure constructive Black Theology.

Nonetheless, Cone’s thesis concerning the “black church” of the post-Civil War era as an escapist institution, and James Evans’ evaluation of Cone’s premise, which postulated the possibility of a gap between black Theology and the black church, warrants our


\textsuperscript{444} Cone, 2001, 138.
investigation. To the extent that Cone broadly named the black church as an escapist church that seemingly abandoned its foundational principles of protest and rebellion, and the apparent rift between the black church, as Cone conceived it, and the study of black Theology, this dissertation has sought to fill a void in our understanding of the development of Black Theology through a constructive analysis of the Black Coptic Church, which I maintain problematizes the perceived rift between Black Theology and the black church. Hence, the question of this dissertation: “Where does one locate the practice of black Theology?”

The Black Coptic Church as a Precursor to Black Liberation Theology

To be sure, elements of Black Theology are traceable back to North American slave plantations. The very moment kidnapped Africans made the decision to abandon slave-holding Christianity and reconstruct the Christian story from the vantage point of the poor and the oppressed, Black Theology was in its primitive stage of development. The genius of the initial phase of black religion and the black church is located in its irony. The founders of black religion who, on all accounts, most notably from the vantage point of the slavers, were expected to remain docile and lack a rebellious spirit according to the “Christian” gospel. However, the slaves located their cause of freedom, their freedom-fighter par excellence, and their unshakable hope, in the religion that was used to castrate any zeal for liberation they may have possessed. Accordingly, the origin of Black Theology did not commence with James Cone in 1969 or the Council of Negro Churchmen in 1968. On the contrary, the genesis of Black Theology is found with the slaves who made the decision, through sacrifices of life and limb, that it was better to die
fighting for freedom than to remain in slavery; hence, the beginnings of black liberation
Theology.

In his 1969 publication of *Black Theology and Black Power*, Cone, as the “father”
of Black Theology, challenged black churches to return to their foundation as a church
which not only rejected heretical interpretations of the gospels, but also utilized scripture
to critique social constructs that were antithetical to the message of Jesus the Christ.
Cone’s critique of the black church, however, is a wide-ranging claim that fails to do
justice to the complex and diverse identities which comprise the black religious
community. The black church, as described earlier, is a general term used to designate
the foundational black Christian communities that emerged in North America beginning
with the African-America Methodist Episcopal church founded by Richard Allen and
Absalom Jones in 1816.\(^{445}\) However, the black church is not a monolithic organization
consisting of a single set of beliefs. On the contrary, a wide range of religious
commitments characterize black religious life in North America. And even within
individual religious communities, there exists a degree of multiplicity of thought, thereby
shattering the possibility of an essentialist “black church.” Therefore, Cone’s broad-
sweeping contention regarding the “black church” is applicable only to those churches
that lost sight of the prophetic message inherent in black Theology.

Unfortunately, in 1969, Cone neglected to identify such churches, and one is thus
left with the apprehension that (1) the black church generally refers to all black Christian

\(^{445}\) See C. Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African-American Experience*,
communities and, (2) these churches were by and large escapist, non-prophetic, status quo institutions. However, the Black Coptic Church stands as a black church which, since its inception, has been liberative in its theological constructions and prophetic in its ministry.

As the “father” of the Black liberation Theology, Cone effectively systematized an integration of the Christian sensibilities that were present in slave religious thought, in its bridging of the black power and Civil Rights movements. The product of this integration was appropriately named “Black liberation Theology.” During this same period, however, the Black Coptic Church had long been flourishing as a religious movement in Chicago. In fact, what would become the touchstone philosophy in Cone’s first publication was already present as the central theological claims within the Black Coptic Church, founded some 30 years before Cone began his investigation of black liberation Theology. As mentioned earlier, while the Black Coptic Church has never identified itself a church grounded in “liberation Theology,” the absence of this term in relation to said community lay more in the church’s unawareness since it had not been coined yet, than a rejection or denial of liberation Theology. So my interview participants maintained that, given their new knowledge of liberation Theology, the Black Coptic Church has been engaged in liberation since its founding. Therefore, the principles of Black liberation Theology are not new ideas to this community, but give the church a frame of reference with which it can identify.

Cone’s lack of awareness of the Black Coptic Church reflects the fact that this community was largely uncharted territory in 1969. As a result of the lack of scholarly
attention to, and the absence of published documents in relation to the Black Coptic Church, Cone’s sweeping claims of an escapist black church, which seemingly abandoned its foundation, were not applicable to said tradition. Nevertheless, to the extent that as early as 1934 the Black Coptic Church had established itself as an organization rooted in the theological principles of black liberation, it styles as a precursor to the academic investigation of black liberation Theology. Whereas Cone constructed an intellectual systemization of black liberation Theology, the Black Coptic Church was already engaged in the religious practice, through doctrine and proclamation, of black liberation Theology.

**The Black Coptic Church as an Organic Black Church Grounded in Liberation**

To the extent that it does not grow out of a predominately white organization as did the majority of the original black churches, nor is it beholden to the widely-accepted Creeds of Western Christianity, as are most black Christian denominations, the Black Coptic Church is a religious organization whose mission since its founding has been directly related to the gospel of liberation. This does not mean that the Black Coptic Church has figured it out, so to speak, in terms of the *perfect* practice of black liberation Theology. However, the claim is advanced here that the theological principles presented in the dissertation concerning the Black Coptic Church represent the practical Theology about which black theologians have theorized. In essence, one cannot speak accurately of black liberation Theology or black Theology in practice without considering the contributions of this black church tradition.
Throughout this dissertation, I have correlated theological constructions within the Black Coptic Church with the history of the Christian Theology and also with certain theological aspects of Black Theology. At this juncture, I will highlight critical constructive theological advances that contribute to the unique nature of the Black Coptic Church.

*We believe: Liberation as the center of the Black Coptic Church’s Statement of Faith*

Unlike many black Christian churches that accepted the traditional creeds that have been handed down as part of the history of the Christian church, the Black Coptic Church makes a crucial break with said history through the establishment of its own creed, which takes seriously the fact that Jesus was an integral human being, and therefore the bearer of human salvation. As we explored in the chapters on Church Fundamentals and Christology, the Black Coptic Church rejects the brutal history of “given” Christianity as transmitted on slave plantations. My interview participants were adamant in their contention that the Black Coptic Church refuses to identify with a brand of Christianity that enslaves, tortures, lynches, or rapes. On the contrary, as Queen Huldah Morgan argued, to be Christian means to do as the Christ. Accordingly, the Christian teaching imparted on the slave plantations was not the Christian message of Jesus the Christ, but in contrast, to the extent that it contradicted the Gospel’s message of love and liberation, was in fact heretical Christianity. The Black Coptic Church, as Royal Priest Meshach Gardiner articulated, seeks to uncover the Jesus of the scripture and his
message, which was liberation. In a practical move, then, the Black Coptic Church proclaims a statement of faith that achieves two goals: (1) makes central the social gospel of Jesus as one who stands in solidarity with the weak and vulnerable and (2) deconstructs any idea which calls into question the biblical idea that all people are created in God’s image.

The creedal formula of the Black Coptic Church is constructed in a manner similar to established Christian creeds. The Creed begins with the Church’s affirmation concerning the ontological nature of God as “One,” “creator of all humanity,” and eternal. The conclusion of the creed, which states, “Blessed are they that do His commandments, that they may have the right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gates into the city,” concerns the final destiny of human beings. However, for the purpose of this dissertation, we will focus on two distinct features of the creedal formula: the statements concerning the nature of Jesus the Christ and the identity of African-Americans.

The second creedal formulation in the Black Coptic Church’s statement of faith concerns the person and nature of Jesus the Christ. An excerpt from the creed reads: “We believe in the incarnate Logos, the embodiment of "I Am" in the flesh, the fulfillment of the law; The Christ, Black Jesus. Born of a Princess, Empress and Queen, the Black Madonna, He taught truth, redeemed [humanity] in the flesh, liberated the oppressed and was tried before Pontius Pilate. He overcame death.” To be sure, the creed contains

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446 Priest Meshach Gardiner, Theology of the Black Coptic Church, Interview with Leonard C. McKinnis, Chicago, IL., 12 January 2009.

447 See Appendix A.
classical theological ideas reminiscent of the Nicene and Chalcedonian Christological formulas. As classical church creeds attest, the Black Coptic Church maintains that the eternal, pre-existent, Divine Logos of the triune God became incarnate in the Person of Jesus the Christ, thereby establishing his divinity. In its Chalcedonian structure, the creed also affirms the humanity of Jesus through the birth of Mary, upon whom the church bestows royal titles. However, in an authentic and organic constructive move, the creed of the Black Coptic Church breaks with established church creeds which seem to singularly focus the cause of the incarnation for the purpose of spiritual salvation as a result of a sinful humanity. Where Nicea and Chalcedon failed to make explicit, in no uncertain terms, the centrality of Jesus’ earthly ministry, the Black Coptic Church excels in its definitive affirmation that part and parcel of salvific ministry of Jesus the Christ is his active role in liberating the oppressed.

The theological advance achieved in this creedal construction is a significant contribution to the study of Black Theology. As we examined in the chapter on Christology, Kelly Brown-Douglass’ *The Black Christ* sharply criticized the history of Western Christianity for its apparent purposeful exclusion of the social ministry of Jesus the Christ from its classical and “normative” Christology. Her assessment maintains that the church’s elevation of the Christ of Faith over against the Jesus of History allowed slave owners to propagate a blasphemous Christian message with total impunity. Brown-Douglass was certainly right in her contention. The Black Coptic Church, then, in its explicit doctrinal formula that links the incarnation of the Word with a liberative ministry
on behalf of the weak and the oppressed overcomes the omission in classical Christological formulae.

The seventh line of the Black Coptic Church’s statement of faith concerns the identity of blacks in America who, historically, have been the victims of various discriminations and ill treatment. In the first several interview sessions I conducted with church authorities, one of the chief concerns articulated by my respondents was the loss of identity as a result of the slave trade. As we explored in the chapter on Church Fundamentals, Royal Priest Meshach Gardiner and Priest Stephen Anderson were persistent in their claim that slavery created a radical sense of disconnectedness that “interrupted” the progressive history of kidnapped Africans. The “interruptedness” that Priests Meshach and Stephen referred to was the loss of an ancient identity and royal ancestry, which was celebrated in many African civilizations. The mainstream black churches that were established at the time of the founding of the Black Coptic Church were ecclesiastical copies of the churches from which they broke, and therefore maintained similar church structures, polity rules, creedal formulas, and titles for believers. As we saw in the History chapter, however, the Black Coptic Church breaks with this trend.

The social context of 1930s America demanded a “new kind” of black religious institution. Ira D. Reid, in his *A Minor Key*, argued that the urban North of the American Thirties witness a burgeoning of black church traditions that took seriously the problem
Alongside the Nation of Islam, although not separatist, the black Jews, the Moorish Science Temple, and the Black Coptic Church sought to create an integral connection between its adherents’ spiritual identity and their natural identity. Therefore, the Black Coptic Church proclaims: “We believe that we are Black Egyptians, Black Hebrews, Royal Black Jews, the Royal Black priesthood who are the descendants of the Hamitic and Shemitic bloodlines, out of Egypt, Ethiopia and Israel, the "I Am" has made us unto our God kings, queens, and priests, and we shall reign in the kingdom of God on the earth… to order and establish the new heaven and the new earth.”

The construction presented in this stanza accomplishes three objectives: first of all, to the extent that this formulation is presented as an integral piece of the church’s creedal statement, it posits a divine-human relation, in which God has created blacks to be a people of dignity and worth, not “niggers” and “Negroes,” which they were called at the time of church’s founding. Secondly, it re-establishes a connection between North American blacks and the continent from which they were stolen, thereby shattering the disconnect. And lastly, it advances a social interpretation of the kingdom of God, which it declares as the governing principle of the Earth, via a social eschatological reading of Revelation 21.

This dissertation does not argue the thesis that the Black Coptic Church is a flawless manifestation of Black Theology. However, I do propose that this largely uncharted black church tradition, at least on scholarly grounds, is a critical missing link in


449 See Appendix A.
the investigation into the origins and development of Black Theology as a legitimate religious practice. The theological contribution of the Black Coptic Church to the study of Black Theology cannot be overlooked. For over 75 years in North America, the Black Coptic Church has been theologically and strategically engaged in what academicians theorize about liberation. From its theological and faith claims to its focus on the image of African-Americans, the Black Coptic Church is black liberation Theology. That is not to say that this tradition goes without criticism. On the contrary, the Black Coptic Church must translate its black liberation Theology further into praxis if it is to be considered, without question, a true and authentic manifestation of a modern black Theology of liberation.

A Glance Forward

To be sure, the Black Coptic Church successfully translates the prophetic origins of the black church into its contemporary religious expression. Since its founding, the Black Coptic Church has been engaged in a theological program which not only takes seriously black suffering and oppression, but uniquely constructs its theological program in response to the distinctive North American experience of estrangement and “non-being” that faced kidnapped Africans, and what it reasoned as widespread institutional failures of established churches to build an appropriate response to that experience. To the extent that the culture of slavery opened the door for the possibility of long-term objectification of Blacks in America, and therefore the likelihood of Black persons to be regarded as non-persons, the assault upon black life, black culture, and black civilization, manifested itself in the form of systemic and structural ideologies that rendered black life
as insignificant and therefore expendable. At stake, then, is the image of God within Black people. The Black Coptic Church as a religious movement seeks to return Blacks to the image of their Creator, thereby calling white racism into serious question. For that reason, the Black Coptic Church, at its origin, presented a double critique: first, on the established black church movements, and second, a judgment against American culture.

The Black Coptic Church, without a doubt, problematizes the notion that black Theology is purely an academic investigation of professional theologians. Prophet Cicero Patterson, although not a classically trained theologian in the Western theological tradition, was “doing” Theology in his assessment of the situation and the praxis that followed. To be sure, his was a program of liberation Theology. He employed scripture as a source by which to claim human freedom from constructed sin (estrangement). The Black Messiah that stood at the center of his program was a Jesus who stood in absolute solidarity with the least of these. Certainty, as early as 1937, Prophet Cicero Patterson proclaimed the theological idea of “preferential option for the poor.” For this reason, those who participated in the interview process understood their faith claims and Theology as not another “theological option,” but rather, as authentic Christian Theology.\(^{450}\) As Royal Priest Meshach argued, Christian Theology is liberation Theology, and therefore the adjective “liberation” is slightly redundant.\(^{451}\)

Although the Black Coptic Church stands as that institution which expresses institutional Black Theology of liberation, there are certainly areas within this tradition

\(^{450}\) Priest Meshach Gardiner, Theology of the Black Coptic Church, interview with Leonard C. McKinnis, Chicago, IL, 12 January 2009.

\(^{451}\) Ibid.
that deserve critical analysis. Therefore, in an effort to address those areas which must be examined internally if the church is to move beyond survival and to flourish in the twenty-first century, the final section of the dissertation will offer a constructive criticism of the said organization. In this capacity, however, I do not claim nor subscribe to any notion of so-called academic objectivity or distance. On the contrary, this section will reflect my position as a participant observer who, over the years, has witnessed a faith in decline. By this I submit that the Black Coptic Church stands as a tradition in trouble. Further, given the current state of affairs which comprise the contemporary Black Coptic Church, the tradition will continue to see a decline in membership, which, left unexamined, will contribute to the demise of this organization. In other words, unless there is an audacious and unified attempt to resuscitate the organization, the Black Coptic Church is preaching its own funeral.

A Tradition in Trouble

The Black Coptic Church has essentially seen four major movements in its history. What began as a missionary effort by prophet Cicero Patterson evolved into a bona fide religious movement in Chicago, Illinois. The Church transitioned from a religious movement to a well respected and well run organization under the leadership of Prophet Peter Banks. However, since the passing of Prophet Peter Banks, the Black Coptic Church can be characterized as a church seeking its identity. The disintegration from a single church headed by a charismatic figure to a broken community has produced several consequences for this organization. The most pressing of these issues, however, is the apparent lack of growth within the organization. Since the passing of Prophet Peter
Banks in 1990, the Black Coptic Church has not only experienced a lack of growth from new converts, but there has been a steady decrease in membership in the Church itself. Accordingly, the Black Coptic Church is functioning within a paradigm of basic survival.

The paradigm of survival illuminates the current state of affairs of the Black Coptic Church. The membership which Black Coptic Church maintains is not the result of an *ongoing conversion* of new members into the faith. On the contrary, the church’s membership is sustained by current adherents producing offspring who consequently comprise the next generation of the Black Coptic Church. However, if the Black Coptic Church seeks to remain a religious option for the African-American community in the years ahead, it is obligatory that the organization takes the proper steps that would allow it to transition from a paradigm of survival to a paradigm of sustainability and growth. A paradigm of sustainability and growth is only possible if the current leadership of the Black Coptic Church develops a unified front in order to examine the faith from within. That is, the leaders need to engage in the process of Theology as critical analysis; take a step back and ask the “tough” questions that are necessary for the Black Coptic Church to not simply survive, but to flourish. What follows are areas of constructive criticism in those matters which the church must consider in order to transition into a thriving black church that embodies a practical black Theology of liberation.

*Gender*

While the Black Coptic Church has successfully addressed the theological question of liberation relative to the issue of race, it is obligatory that the Church broaden its understanding of oppression and sin. Mainstream cultural views and assumptions
regarding women are not nearly the same as they were fifty or more years ago. Women are accepted to be just as intelligent and capable of leadership as men. Therefore, it is unacceptable for women, who comprise the overwhelmingly majority of Black Coptic Churches, to be denied the equal rights and privileges of the ministry as their male counterparts. The Apostle Paul reminds us in a letter to the Galatians community that “There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” Paul insists that one’s baptism into the fellowship of Jesus the Christ renders one’s biological characteristics insignificant before the divine mystery of God. To be sure, women were active participants in the early Church. While history has attempted to reduce their role to simply teachers and helpers, Harvard New Testament Scholar Karen King argues that at least one woman was an apostle. Therefore, if the Black Coptic Church really wants to align itself with the liberating Gospel of Jesus the Christ, then it is necessary to resume the radical ministry he inaugurated through his solidarity with the least of these, including women. Latina feminist theologian Maria Pilar Aquino demonstrates this point well.

Via a critical engagement with the Gospel of Luke, Aquino constructs a Christology which puts Jesus in solidarity with women as He identifies with them as a marginalized group within His society. For Aquino, “Jesus challenges institutionalized religion, which claims to honor God without involving any commitment to justice. Jesus

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452 Galatians 3:38 (NRSV)

453 See Karen King, Gospel of Mary of Magdala, The: Jesus and The First Woman Apostle,. Santa Rose, California: Polebridge Press, 2003
attacks the false gods whose legal prescriptions damage people lives. He sets the God of life within reach of those who hope to be freed from these imposed burdens,” (Lk 13:10-17). Aquino contends that women are members of the community of people who desire to be free from the ordinary constraints and burdens of life. Thus, in an effort to disprove any Theology which asserts the second-class status of women, Aquino focuses on the act of Jesus’ identification with women. Contends Aquino: “[women] are not merely accidental components, but active participants (Lk 10:38-42) and special recipients of his miracles (Lk 8:2).” Additionally, Aquino maintains that in feminist Christological constructions, it is just as important for women to understand themselves as the subjects of Jesus’ missions and not the object of oppression. This move from objectification to subjectification allows women to see themselves in the text as Jesus identifies with the women of His day.

Aquino’s portrayal of women as the subjects dismantles power relations built on gender and advances the true discourse of democracy in which Jesus was interested. Moreover, in her placement of women as the subjects via a focus on the Lukan stories which reveal Jesus’ interaction with women, Aquino recovers women’s place in the kingdom. For Aquino, the very fact that “women are the first witnesses of the resurrection and the first to meet the risen Christ (Lk: 24:5-8),” indicates the deep faith they had in Jesus of Nazareth and the important place he allowed them to play in the


455 Ibid., 144.
initial proclamation of the risen Christ. Luke’s emphasis on the role of women in the early Jesus movement and Jesus’ overall treatment of them follows the central theme of the Christology of Luke, namely, that Jesus is deeply concerned with the treatment of the powerless and voiceless of his society.

The Black Coptic Church focus on racial liberation must expand. If the Black Coptic Church claims to be a Church that closely aligns itself with the ministry of Jesus the Christ as proclaimed by the New Testament Witness, then it is crucial that the leadership of the Black Coptic Church “see” what Aquino sees in the scripture. The church must observe the special relationship that Jesus has with the women of His day, and therefore ally itself with that concept of liberation. A singular focus on racial liberation not only obscures oppression, but in a modern context is unacceptable and to be sure, will not appeal to the larger society.

Finally, it behooves the Black Coptic Church to engage the writings of ancient African societies to which the church claims allegiance. As we saw in Chapter 6, Cheryl Townsend Gilkes expressed well the central role that women enjoyed in African societies. If the Black Coptic Church wants to be faithful to that history, it is essential that women are granted the same access to church leadership as men. Until the Black Coptic Church achieves this goal, its liberation Theology will remain beholden to an expired paradigm that conceived oppression as inextricably linked solely to race, while ignoring the multifaceted and extremely complicated nature of oppression, especially in the history of black women.

456 Ibid., 148.
Structural Considerations

It is highly unlikely that the Black Coptic Church will survive another seventy years as an institution without a central governing structure which is responsible for the organization, the doctrine, and the general safeguarding of the faith. Under the leadership of Prophet Peter Banks, the Black Coptic Church enjoyed the advantage of being led by a charismatic figure to whom the church as a general body answered. Until the passing of Prophet Peter, members of the church did not conceive of the possibility of a disintegrated church. Prophet Peter, along with his assistants in ministry, held the church’s doctrine, practices, rules for ordination, and governance under control. However, with his passing, the Black Coptic Church faced what would prove to be the very daunting task of the preservation of unity in the absence of such a leader. In fact, a church which, until the passing of Prophet Peter stood as a single body of Christ, soon fell apart precisely because there lacked a governing structure responsible for the peaceful transition of leadership, and whose function would secure the continuity of practice and doctrine.

With the disintegration of the Black Coptic Church from a single institutional body to a widespread community with churches in various states and cities came diversity of thought and practice. Throughout my interviews, the suggestion was proposed that diversity among the leadership of the various Black Coptic churches is traceable to each leader’s own vision. While one’s vision is contingent upon where one stands, among individuals within the same religious body, who claim adherence to the same teacher, and who all claim to be practicing the “right” kind of faith, there should
nonetheless be present recognizable unity of thought in relation to the central questions of
the faith. However, this is not exactly the case. The same question posed to any number
of pastors may in fact yield an assortment of responses. The Black Coptic Church’s
circumstance as an institution in the years ahead is contingent upon the church leadership
moving in the direction of a unified doctrine and practice that is common to the
individual churches which make up the community.

The creation of a central governing body within the Black Coptic Church will also
decrease the possibility of a church divided after the passing of individual pastors. As it
stands, there is no system in place to determine the order of succession with the Black
Coptic Church. The absence of an order of succession has presented a number of
problems for said community since its origins. The period immediately after the passing
of Prophet Cicero Patterson was a tumultuous one. Internal fighting and the nonexistence
of protocols for succession truly created a sense of confusion within the early Black
Coptic Community. However, the church experienced similar, if not worse,
circumstances upon the passing of Prophet Peter Banks.

Prophet Peter issued no guidelines as to how the church was to proceed in his
absence from this life. As a result, the church which he led, the True Temple of
Solomon, over a seven year period, was pastored by three different men before the
current leader, Prophet Peter’s grandson, was installed as the leader. As reported in the
history section, the years between Prophet Peter’s death and the installation of his
grandson were quite turbulent. In fact, the confusion that ensued those years compelled
me to label them as “the turbulent years.” To be sure, however, such confusion which
almost took the Black Coptic Church to the brink of disaster could have been avoided. If
the proper steps are not taken to avoid such confusion in the future, the end is inevitable.

To be sure, out of chaos comes order. Organization is not solely for the creation of positions of power and prestige. On the contrary, organization is vital for maintaining order and structure among groups. In the absence of order, chaos will prevail and the Black Coptic Church will not flourish precisely because it will live in a perpetual state of overcoming chaos.

Education

The traditional belief in the black church that the “seminary is the cemetery” has yet to be completely overturned. I recall a conversation I had with a pastor of a Black Coptic church when I returned from the completion of my Masters of Theological Studies degree at Harvard Divinity School. The pastor and I were discussing the compilation of the New Testament. I informed him that the Christian Testament was not a set of eye-witness accounts from people who were at the scene recording every act that Jesus performed and every word that He spoke. On the contrary, I suggested that the Gospel narratives of the Christian Testament were a compilation of interviews, circulated testimonies, and hearsay. The pastor looked at me and said, “Boy, that school is messin’ you up.” The pastor’s response revealed a deep sense of suspicion with my formal education, and therefore my commitment to the Gospel of Jesus the Christ. Sadly, however, his response was not unique among some clergy in the Church. My reaction to his statement, however, soon turned from surprise to concern.
After my survey among the leadership in the Black Coptic Church, it became apparent to me that there were no formally trained clergy among the leadership. Often times I would hear statements such as, “We depend on the Spirit and not a book,” or, “You can’t find God in a book; God is Spirit.” Most certainly, however, neither biblical scholars nor theologians believe God can be reduced to a book. Theological training and biblical studies can in fact equip one with the necessary information to enhance one’s ministry. Knowledge of biblical history, biblical languages, the history of the Church, and basic theological trajectories will only serve to strengthen one’s teaching and preaching and, to be sure, help in the avoidance of proof-texting, which is a common problem I have noticed among clergy within this tradition. In this light, there must be a unified effort among clergy within the Black Coptic Church to not only pursue theological/ministerial education among themselves, but to encourage those seeking ordination to enroll in some type of basic theological and biblical training courses. The suspicion that arises in response to Western theological seminaries and universities must be overcome for the sake of a future leadership that is trained within the Christian theological tradition.

This transition from a non-educated ministry to an educated ministry will not only benefit individual teaching and homiletic exercises, but will encourage a necessary fusion of horizons in the Black Coptic Church: that of an oral with a written tradition. While the oral tradition has its place in the history of Black-Americans which is traceable to African societies, in a modern context the absence of a written history complicates not only continuity among groups, but renders historical construction an extremely difficult
Throughout the interview process for this project, I often was faced with the grueling undertaking of sorting out conflicting narratives concerning people, events, dates, etc. While theological disagreements are not uncommon among people who may belong to the same group, if a written document, which at least provided a baseline by which the discussion can commence, was present, the probability of extreme theological disagreements would be significantly lowered. Additionally, the larger the gap between historical periods, the more complicated oral history becomes. The fusion of oral and written traditions is not an option but a fundamental requirement for the future of the Black Coptic Church.

Theory and Praxis: Bridging the Gap

Liberation Theology is not simply a theoretical or doctrinal system of beliefs which encompass the Christian message. On the contrary, liberation Theology is not fully liberative until the message of liberation is transformed into a practical reality for the people of God. Gustavo Gutierrez ends his seminal *A Theology of Liberation* with the reminder that liberation Theology will not fully liberate until the people of God, the poor, the bruised, and the oppressed, lift their own voices and take control of their destiny; when they, for themselves, engage the Gospel of liberation. In other words, it is not enough for theologians to write about liberation, or for churches to confess liberation without a social engagement. The church must meet the people of God in their state of human misery and absurdity and be able to say to them, with integrity and meaning, that God loves them and that God stands in solidarity with them. The church which confesses liberation bears the responsibility of rescuing Jesus from church walls, from hymnals,
from empty homilies, and from a subject of pious contemplative reasoning. The church which confesses liberation takes the Gospel message of Jesus the Christ to a world that is in need of deliverance from social sin, and utilizes that message in order to empower the powerless, give hope to the hopeless, and offers life to the lifeless. Such a program is not strictly theoretical or doctrinal; it is practical.

The Black Coptic Church has introduced a Christian doctrine of liberation. To be sure, its message has empowered many who followed and still claim allegiance to said tradition. However, in the contemporary sense, the Black Coptic Church must move from doctrine to practice. It must demonstrate, in a very practical sense, the meaning and result of those who confess Black Jesus and the power of a “Black” Holy Spirit. This is achieved through the process of “doing” liberation Theology via social engagement. To this end it is compulsory that the Black Coptic Church create programs rooted in justice. The Black Coptic Church must seek to liberate more than its own membership or those who join the ministry. It is necessary to construct prison ministry programs, GED programs, HIV awareness and prevention programs, centers for abused women and children, alcohol and other addiction programs, food pantry ministries, and last but not least, the Black Coptic Church must promote and support the continued education of its younger generation. To achieve this, it is absolutely essential to include reading and arithmetic tutorials for children who do not fare well in school or may have learning disabilities. In the final analysis, the Black Coptic Church must close the gap between its doctrine and the purpose for its existence in the world.
The Christian expression in the Black Coptic Church is deeply rooted in a commitment to the ancient African heritage of those kidnapped persons who arrived on the shores of North America as human cargo, as well as to the religious experience of the descendents of former slaves. Therefore, it is the fusion of the ancient past coupled with the religious experience of blacks in America that form the foundation of the Black Coptic Church. As an organic religious institution birthed in the process of liberation and identity formation, the Black Coptic Church is not beholden to Western Christianity which employed the liberating Christian gospel in its declaration that to be black is to be less than human. On the contrary, the Black Coptic Church identifies with the Jesus of scriptures who was interested in the liberation of the oppressed. It is this foundation on which the Black Coptic Church stands and the norm by which the Church must ultimately and continually check its existence. To be sure, however, if the Black Coptic Church wants to remain true to its liberative foundation, then it is essential that its concept and paradigm of liberation is commensurate with contemporary human knowledge and speaks to the modern hearer of the word of God. In the final analysis, the Black Coptic Church will fully manifest itself as the total practice of liberation only when it moves from theological doctrine to theological praxis, and when male and female alike, in doctrine and practice, are seen as equal in God’s Kingdom.
APPENDIX A:

BLACK COPTIC CHURCH STATEMENT OF FAITH
We believe in One God, The True God, I Am That I Am God, the creator of all mankind, omniscient, omnipotent and omnipresent, giver and sustainer of life, God of the Universe. In "I Am" there is no end.

We believe in the incarnate Logos, the embodiment of "I Am" in the flesh, the fulfillment of the law; The Christ, Black Jesus. Born of a Princess, Empress and Queen, the Black Madonna, He taught truth, redeemed man in the flesh, liberated the oppressed and was tried before Pontius Pilate. He overcame death. Behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the root David, hath prevailed to open the book and to loose the seven seals. His spirit ascended into the Celestial realm and now resides in the heart of man and woman. The Christ mind is attainable by all. In "I Am" there is no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Comforter, the ever-present spirit of God, the active power of God that directs the paths of man and leads to all truth. This Spirit of truth brings forth the past present and future. In this Spirit, there is no end.

We believe in the words of the Prophets, King Melchizideck and King Peter, who were sent in earth by "I Am God", to resurrect the Tribe of Kemit (Copts), the Lost Sheep of the House of Israel. Embodying the Spirit of the Incarnate Logos, these spirits came in earth, taught, and ascended into the Celestial Realm and live in the consciousness of all believers. In "I Am" there is no end.
We believe in the baptism of the word, which takes place through the teachings of the "I Am" and the Prophets; the baptism through immersion into moving waters, that God ordained in the beginning, the baptism of the Holy Spirit, the 400 year Passover and the Pentecost through the laying of the hands, in accordance with the scriptures. This tri-baptism of word, water and spirit leads to the "I Am" in man. In "I Am" there is no end.

We believe in the conscious state of Heaven and of Hell and the unseen Celestial Realm, where all spirits abide. Man and Woman are judged daily and in the end will return to the Spirit of God in the Celestial Realm. In "I Am" there is no end.

We believe that we are Black Egyptians, Black Hebrews, Royal Black Jews, the Royal Black priesthood who are the descendants of the Hamitic and Shemitic bloodlines, out of Egypt, Ethiopia and Israel, the "I Am" has made us unto our God kings and priests, and we shall reign in the kingdom of God on the earth. The kingdom of God is within you and at hand, to order and establish the new heaven and the new earth. In "I Am" there is no end.

Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they have the right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gates into the city. In "I Am" there is no end.

-Amen
APPENDIX B:

ECCLESIOLOGICAL TITLES AND REQUIREMENTS FOR TITLE
Titles for Leaders/Pastors

Prophet or Priest: These are the basic titles for leaders of Black Coptic Churches. The title which a leader holds depends on the degree to which the leader was ordained prior to his role as leader.

Titles for the Leaders’ wives:

Imperial or Candace Queen: In the Black Coptic Church, the title Imperial Queen is usually reserved for women who have a long record of spiritual work, including teaching, preaching, and a spiritual gift such as healing or prophesy. The title Candace is an ancient Ethiopian title reserved for Queens of great nobility and prestige.

Titles for Women:

Queen (Supreme, Heaven born, and Heavenly): The various titles of queens in the Black Coptic church are reserved for women who have committed their lives to spiritual work. The queens, ranging from Heavenly to Supreme, are usually teachers, are well versed in scripture, and usually possess a spiritual gift. These are traditionally women 40 and older.

Empress (Supreme, Royal, Empress and Golden Empress): These women, who range in age from mid twenties to late thirties, are usually assistants to teachers in the church.
Princess (Supreme, Royal and Golden Princesses): These are young women in the church who are elevated within the various titles of princess according to their age.

Titles for Men:

Minister (Ordained): Ordained Ministers in the Black Coptic Church serve as assistants to their respective leaders. Their function is to assist in ritual performance (marriages, funerals, communion, etc). They also perform the task of pulpit preaching and teaching.

Elder, Prophet: The Elders and Prophets are assistants to the Ministers in the various Black Coptic Churches. These men are in training to be Ordained Ministers. They, too, assist their respective leaders in preaching and teaching.

Prince, Youth Prince, Bearer: These are young men in the church who are elevated within the various titles according to their age.
APPENDIX C:

BIOGRAPHICAL LISTING OF INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS
Priest Stephen Anderson

High Priest Stephen Thothmes Ra (Joel Anderson) is a native Chicagoan, raised partially by a grandmother who was an herbalist and shaman, accounting for his early exposure to spiritual teaching and healing. His professional life included over 20 years in the banking industry, as well as numerous entrepreneurial enterprises. The High Priest was a student of several types of Asian martial arts before entering the School of Wisdom at True Temple of Solomon in 1975. High Priest Stephen Thothmes Ra is one among the few Coptic men who has held all the male degrees of the order, as established by Prophet Cicero and Prophet Peter: elder, prophet, prince, and priest. He served as a teacher in the School of Wisdom at True Temple of Solomon and as an officer in Universal King Solomon’s Masonic organization. In 2003 he founded Coptic Temple of Kemet and serves as its leader and spiritual guide.

Prophet Hosea Belcher:

Biographical sketch not available.

Priest Eli Burdo

High Priest Eli (Rev. James L. Burdo) is a graduate of St. Anne Community H.S. He attended Joliet Junior College and served in the U.S. Armed Forces from 1961 to 1967. He joined the Black Coptic Church in 1974 under the leadership of Prophet Peter Banks, and was ordained at the True Temple of Solomon in 1976. At the True Temple of Solomon, he served as the Leading Prophet and also as head of the Men’s Ministry.
He is currently an Assistant Minister at the Coptic Church Of Faith. Priest Eli attributes his understanding of religion and Theology for most part to the teaching he received while attending the Coptic School of Wisdom.

**Queen Abigail Burdo**

Biographical sketch unavailable.

**Royal Priest Meshach Gardiner**

Royal Priest Meshach (Rev. Roderick V. Gardiner), was reared in the Englewood neighborhood of Chicago’s Southside, along with his brother and sister. His mother, Helen Thomas, joined the Coptic faith at True Temple of Solomon under the leadership of the King Prophet Peter in the mid 1970's. His spiritual teacher was Mother Ambassador Queen Rebekah. He began teaching his own Class School of Wisdom (Bible Class) in 1994. In February 1997, after much deliberation, Priest Meshach opened the doors of Coptic Nation Temple as its founder and leader. During these short twelve years, his ministry has grown to include various community programs, radio broadcast programs, investment projects, a website, etc. He is the husband of 23 years of Candace Queen Rachel with three wonderful children. He is the spiritual teacher, leader and advisor to the Copts A.T.O.M. first Ph.D. in Theology, Leonard C. McKinnis.
**Candace Queen Rachel Gardiner**

Candace Queen Rachel (Yolanda Gardiner) was born to Milton Tetter and Evelyn Tate. She was reared on the southside of Chicago in the Englewood neighborhood. She attended John P. Altgeld elementary school and Chicago Vocational High School. She joined The True Temple of Solomon in 1984 under the leadership of Prophet Peter Banks and was a student of Imperial Queen Mother Rebekah. She co-founded the Coptic Nation Temple with her husband Priest Meshach as the First Lady/Candace Queen in 1997. She has taught in the Class School of Wisdom since September, 1999, in the Coptic Nation Temple. She is an herbalist who practices natural healing as an alternative to traditional medicinal methods. Queen Rachel has completed her CDA along with several years of college courses in the area of child development. She is an entrepreneur who owns and directs a childcare facility.

**Supreme Empress Zion Jackson**

Supreme Empress Zion (Quizsanda Jackson-Muhammad) has been a member of the Black Coptic Church for 15 years; she fellowshipped with many denominations for several years prior to her conversion into the Black Coptic Church. Empress Zion’s main reason for joining the church is because the teachings were logical and relative to her life. She was tired of hearing sermons which suggested that she could experience happiness only after leaving earth. She continued to visit the True Temple of Solomon where a neighbor, Prophet Mark Patrick, attended faithfully. Although raised Baptist, she converted in her late twenties, seeking a personal relationship with God. She became a
Copt in January 1995 under her spiritual teacher, Prophet Meshach Gardiner. She received the seal of the Holy Spirit under the leadership of Prophet Andrew Williams in July 1996. She wrote the church's first newsletter, Solomon's Newsletter. In February 1997, she transferred her membership to Coptic Nation Temple under the leadership of her teacher, Prophet Meshach Gardiner. The name Zion was bestowed her in April 2001. Supreme Empress Zion works in many capacities as the reader of Candace Queen Rachel's Class School Wisdom where she assists in teaching as well; Priest Meshach's secretary; assistant in A.T.O.M. Foundation meetings; church announcement clerk and the Head Empress. She was recently married and is the mother of two children. Empress Zion holds Associate and Bachelor degrees in Accounting and Business. She is also an active union member of AFSCME, Local 2912 and Urban Prep High School Family Council.

Queen Marianne Martin

Biographical sketch unavailable.

Queen Huldah Morgan

Queen Huldah (Vacera Morgan) is a writer, educator, spiritual instructor, and a retired social services executive. She received her B.A. from City College of New York in 1967 where she was awarded a departmental assistantship in the Graduate Division (Speech Pathology and Audiology). She has been a member of the Coptic Church since April 1973, when she joined under the leadership of Prophet Peter at the True Temple of
Solomon. Queen Huldah began an eight-year teaching stint the same year at Central YMCA Community College, followed by four years at Illinois School of Commerce. She has been a program consultant for the national YMCA (YMCA of the USA); executive director, Austin YMCA, Chicago, which housed the second largest homeless SRO shelter in Chicago. Her spiritual teaching began in 1975 at True Temple of Solomon and continues today as Head Queen and Founding Trustee of Coptic Temple of Kemet. She has written two books based on Coptic principles and practices: Priests and Kings Unveil the Name and New Heaven Handbook. She currently continues church related activity in the music ministry and youth program development. Queen Huldah also serves as a frequent message bearer and lecturer. Her other activities include publishing a book of poems and a children's book, and is beginning a fifth year as an after-school reading tutor and curriculum development contributor with an educational consulting firm.

**Empress Selah Thomas**

Empress Selah (Kimberly Thomas) was born in 1974 to Earl Luckett and Helen Thomas (Queen Neferti). Selah is Priest Meshach's sister and was raised from infancy in the Coptic Church. Selah is an alumna of the University of Chicago Laboratory Schools and an honors graduate of Syracuse University with a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science. While attending Syracuse, Selah studied at the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs and participated in Syracuse's study abroad program, spending time in Zimbabwe. Selah studied in the Coptic School of Wisdom from 1985 to 1986 where her
spiritual teacher was Queen Rebekah. Selah resides in Chicago and works for a private law firm in the area of Labor & Employment. She is a member of Coptic Nation Temple and its administration.

**Candace Queen Mikel Washington**

Biographical sketch unavailable.

**Prophet Hiram White**

Prophet Hiram J. White was born and raised in Chicago, Illinois. After graduating from high school, he served in the United States Navy for four years. Upon his return to Chicago, he attended Chicago State University and received a Bachelors of Arts in Political Science. He continued his education and received a Masters of Arts in Community Counseling from Chicago State as well. Prophet Hiram has been employed with the Illinois Department of Transportation since 1997 as an Engineer Technician and Employee Assistance Coordinator. He was born and raised in the Coptic faith, True Temple of Solomon under the leadership of Prophet Peter Banks. Presently he serves as the Pastor/Leader of New Heaven Coptic Temple. Prophet Hiram is also a member and President of the Coptic A.T.O.M Foundation. Additionally, he serves as a member of Pastors United for Change as the Executive Secretary and is the President of Urban Prep family Council. He is an active member of NIEAPA (Northern Illinois Employee Assistance Professional Association), ICA (Illinois Counseling Association).
APPENDIX D:

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
History

1. Why did Prophet Cicero Patterson choose to identify this Faith as “Coptic”

2. Are there similarities between your understanding of “Coptic” and Coptic as practiced in Egypt? If so, what are they?

3. There were several Black churches that pre-existed the

4. Black Coptic Church. Why was there a need for this “new church?”

5. How does the Black Coptic Church compare to other Black denominations such as the Church of God in Christ, AME, etc?

6. Was the founding of the Black Coptic Church a rejection of mainline Christianity, much like the Nation of Islam?

7. Did Black Nationalism play any role in the early Black Coptic Church?

8. Did the social conditions play any role in the reason for the evolution of the Black Coptic Church? If so, does the Black Coptic Church still serve a purpose in a world that is different from its founding era?

9. What did Prophet Cicero Patterson understand as the function of the Black Coptic Church?

10. What do you think the Black Coptic Church added to the Black religious landscape during its founding?

11. Has the church changed/evolved/progressed since its founding? If so, in what ways?
12. After the death of Prophet Cicero Patterson what direction did the church take?

13. What is the current state of the Black Coptic Church?

A. Theology

1. Does the Black Coptic Church advance a Christian Theology? If so, how?

2. What are the theological sources of the Black Coptic church?

3. In the Black Coptic Church there is a focus on Exodus 3, particularly the encounter of Moses with God. Why is Exodus 3:14 so central to the church’s Theology?

4. How do you understand the phrase “liberation Theology?”

5. Is there a relationship between God and liberation in the Black Coptic Church? If so, what is that relationship?

6. Does the Black Coptic Church advance a liberative theological program? If so, how? Specifically, what aspects of the church’s doctrine advance “liberation?

7. How does the Black Coptic Church understand “liberation” from a biblical point of view?

8. What is the process of liberation in the Black Coptic Church? From what are the adherents delivered from and how does this take place?

9. The Council of Chalcedon declared that Jesus Christ is “perfect in His divinity,” and “perfect in his humanity.” How does the church understand this statement?

10. Does this understanding of Jesus have any bearing upon the church’s Theology?

11. Is race a central category in the church’s theological program?
Given the gulf that separates the contexts of the church’s founding to present day, is there still a need for such a Theology of liberation?

**B. Christology**

1. How important is Jesus to the liberating program of the Black Coptic Church?
2. How does “Black” function in the church’s proclamation of “Black Jesus?”
   a. Is is “symbolic?” Is it a claim to the biography of Jesus?
3. Is it necessary to verbally proclaim “Black Jesus” in church doctrine? If so, then why?
4. How does the Black Coptic Church understand the two-nature formula of Chalcedon?
5. How should others, particularly non-Blacks, understand the church’s verbal proclamation of “Black Jesus?”
6. How is salvation understood in the Black Coptic Church?
7. Is the proclamation of “Black Jesus” salvific? If so, how?
   a. Is this verbal proclamation essential to the church’s understanding of salvation?
   b. If the verbal proclamation of “Black Jesus” is essential, what then does this mean for the salvation of others, who might not verbally proclaim “Black Jesus?”
8. What is the relationship between the person of Christ and the work of Christ?

**C. Pneumatology**

1. How does the Black Coptic Church understand the Trinity?
2. What is the function of the Holy Spirit in the Black Coptic Church?

3. What does it mean to say that the Holy Spirit teaches “past, present, and future?”

4. What is meaning of the “Black” Holy Spirit?
   a. How does “Black” function in this construction?

5. Does attaching an accidental quality such as “Black” to the Holy Spirit obscure the divine nature of the Holy Spirit? If not, why?

6. Is this understanding of the Holy Spirit essential in this brand of liberation Theology? If so, why?
   a. If the Holy Spirit is pure essence, spirit, then what does one gain by proclaiming, “Black Holy Spirit?”

7. Is this language, “Black Holy Spirit,” universal to all Coptic Churches?

8. How is the “Black Holy Spirit” at work in the world and in the individual lives of adherents of the faith?

9. How is this understanding of the Holy Spirit helpful in Christian Theology, which proclaims the saving grace of Christ for all people at all times?

D. Church Structure

1. In the Black Coptic Church, adherents carry royal titles such as prince, princess, queen, etc. What is the purpose of these titles?

2. What is the basis for the titles?
   a. Scripture? History?

3. How do these titles function in this brand of liberation Theology?

4. How does one attain such titles?
a. Is there a process? Are the titles representative of a person’s position in the church?

5. Who determines the titles of the adherents?

6. Are there specific titles for pastors? If so, then what and why?

7. Are the titles universal in all Black Coptic Churches?
   a. If not, then why?

E. Women in the Church

1. What is the role of the women in the Black Coptic Church?

2. Are women able to pastor in the Black Coptic Church in the same manner as men?
   a. If not, why? And, if not, does this undermine the concept of liberation inherent in the church’s doctrine?
   b. If not, how does this construction of the church relate to Jesus’ vision of the church?

3. How does the church understand the phrase, “discipleship of equals?”

4. Does the church promote women in the ministry?
   a. If so, how?
   b. If not, why
APPENDIX E:

HISTORICAL TIMELINE OF THE BLACK COPTIC CHURCH
Prophet Cicero Patterson establishes the Universal Prayer House and Training School (UPHTS). 4724 S. Cottage Grove, Ave., Chicago, IL.

Prophet Peter Banks assumes leadership of UPHTS

Prophet Peter and Queen Capernaum Banks leave the UPHTS establish the True Temple of Solomon (Aug.)

Transition of King Peter Banks (Dec.)

Prophet Peter Banks assumes the title “King”

True Temple of Solomon appoints and unseats 3 different leaders (Prophets Joseph, Andrew, and Abednego). Disintegration of Black Coptic Church begins

Prophet John Robinson, grandson if Prophet Peter Banks is appointed as leader of True Temple of Solomon

Founding of Coptic ATOM, a movement within the Black Coptic Church seeking the re-unification of the community

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VITA

Leonard Cornell McKinnis, II, born August 17, 1981, is the son of Cynthia Tate-Gardner and the late Leonard Cornell McKinnis. After graduating from Robert Lindblom College Preparatory High School in 1999, he attended Lewis University in Romeoville, IL, where he graduated Cum Laude in 2003 with a double major in Government and History. During his second year of university, Leonard studied International Politics and British-US History at the University of Kingston in London, England. Upon graduation from Lewis University, Leonard completed his Master of Theological Studies degree at Harvard University in 2005, where his primary research focus was Theology and Culture and Liberation Theology. Leonard has taught at Lewis, Loyola, and DePaul Universities. His current research interests are theological anthropology in Black Theology and the future discourse on race in Black Theology in light of the Obama Presidency.