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**Seeing Red in the Black Church:
Marxist Thought and African American Christianity**

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As the frenzy of the 2008 U.S. presidential election reached its zenith, many observers were taken aback by the effectiveness of the Republican opposition's ability to frame Senator Barack Obama and the Democrats as Marxists. Even before the ideological attacks by the likes of Sarah Palin, Rush Limbaugh, Joe "the Plumber" Wurzelbacher, and Glenn Beck as well as the throngs of irate right-wing protesters started their efforts to brand President Obama as either a Communist or Socialist, there was a particular flashpoint that grabbed my attention pertaining to the controversy surrounding Obama's pastor, Rev. Dr. Jeremiah A. Wright Jr. During the heyday of that crisis in Spring 2008, there was a CNN news segment between news anchor Rick Sanchez

and Ken Blackwell, the former Ohio Secretary of State and Republican Party official, discussing the nature of Black liberation theology. It was rather astonishing that these talking heads proceeded to craft a fatally flawed syllogism that simply rehashed hackneyed criticisms of the Marxist bent found in Latin American liberation theology without any regard to the domestic, homegrown variety of Black theology. Although a full discussion of the Jeremiah Wright affair is beyond the scope of this article, that particular exchange on CNN sparked my recollection of Cornel West's observation many years ago:

Black theologians and Marxist thinkers are strangers. They steer clear of one another, each content to express concerns to their respective audiences. Needless to say, their concerns overlap. Both focus on the plight of the exploited, oppressed and degraded peoples of the world, their relative powerlessness and possible empowerment. I believe that this common focus warrants a serious dialogue between Black theologians and Marxist thinkers.¹

Sadly, such a dialogue has not taken place in the intervening years since West made this statement.

What the questionable reporting and punditry surrounding the matter of the significance of Black liberation theology within the Black Church tradition revealed the extent to which the mouthpieces of the political and religious Right in the United States simplistically compressed and reduced all variations of liberation theology as not just homogenous but also indistinguishable from one another in utter ignorance of the distinctive historic experiences,

¹ Cornel West, "Black Theology and Marxist Thought," in Gayraud Wilmore and James Cone, *Black Theology: A Documentary History* vol. 1 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1991), 409.

concerns and insights of the oppressed and marginalized peoples of this world. While such unfounded posturing recently typified right-wing ideologues, it also serves as an impetus to delve more fervently into the historic relationship between Marxism and Christianity within the African American experience.²

The common ground between Marxism and African American Christianity is charted in the pages that follow from the Gilded Age of the late nineteenth century to the ascendancy of hypercapitalism in the late twentieth century. In many senses, Marxism shares in good measure both the content and functions of the more radical aspects of African American Christianity (more accurately described as “the radical remnant” of the Black Church tradition). In the wake of the Cold War, there has been burgeoning research and critical debate regarding Black men and women who were involved in various forms of Marxism—particularly communism and socialism—in the U.S. context. In spite of this development, there is little focus on examples of Marxist political economic analysis and radical praxis within various expressions of the historic Black Church tradition. In his classic work *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, Gayraud Wilmore argues “Black radicalism, in contrast to the more classic model usually implied by the term, has been less political, less obsessed with ideology on the grand scale, and somewhat less

² Given my focus primarily on the classical theory of political economy expounded by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, I use the term “Marxist” and “Marxism” throughout this article in lieu of any of the various of Marxism at work in historical and contemporary terms. However, I will utilize the most notable modes of Marxist thought and praxis, namely socialism (reformist Marxism) and communism (revolutionary Marxism), when appropriate. Whereas I am aware of the term “Marxian,” I find it a bit too much like a semantic capitulation to conservative reaction to any radical interpretation of structural oppression so therefore I refuse to use the term altogether.

committed to violence as a revolutionary strategy.”³ In many regards, African American religious studies and Black Church Studies has largely failed to address either Wilmore or West in any sustained fashion regarding critical investigation about viable linkages between radical social democratic praxis and prophetic Black Christian witness.

While there has been minimal emphasis on Marxist theory and praxis in the Black Christian experience in America thus far, there is a critical paradox in this oversight.⁴ On the one hand, the Black Church tradition’s infrequent, albeit critical, engagement with Marxist political economy has provided it a richly textured, dynamic mode of class analysis that is sorely lacking in contemporary models of Black theology. On the other hand, Marxist political economy—long condemned in the United States for its materialist and atheist dimensions—enjoyed a revived and attenuated conversation with the creative intellectual, theological and moral force of Black Christian thought that would allow adherents of Marxism to rediscover its humanistic roots.

What’s Marxism Got to Do With It?:

The Search for Theories of Class Analysis within Black Church Studies

In order to fully understand the Black Church tradition in its historic as well as contemporary forms, it is important to recognize the ways in which both the Church and the

³ Gayraud Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism* (1973; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998), 197.

⁴The foremost texts in this regard are Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance! An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (1982; Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2002) and *The Ethical Dimensions of Marxist Thought* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1991). Also see Darryl M. Trimiew, *God Bless the Child That’s Got Its Own: The Economic Rights Debate* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997) and Joan Martin, *More Than Chains and Toil: A Christian Work Ethic of Enslaved Women* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000).

broader African American community have been held captive to the ravages of capitalism. Although African Americans perennially have been on a shaky economic foundation, every leading statistical indicator—wages and income, unemployment rates, accumulated wealth, educational attainment, bankruptcy, and liquid assets—reveals that the Black populace in the United States is currently facing an economic situation that is crumbling at a faster, more devastating rate than virtually every demographic sector in the U.S. population.⁵ Since its inception, the scholarly study of the Black Church in North America has been concerned with the material as well as the spiritual realities of the African American community. For instance, in his inaugural study of the Black religious experience, historian W.E.B. Du Bois asserted that the Black Church has had a complex mission tied to providing the means for human flourishing for

⁵ For further details and analysis regarding how African Americans as a whole are suffering disproportionately in this recessionary economic cycle across a numerous economic indicators, please see Meizhu Lui et al., *The Color of Wealth: The Story Behind the U.S. Racial Wealth Divide* (New York: New Press, 2006) Algernon Austin, “Reversal of Fortune: Economic Gains of 1990s Overturned for African Americans from 2000-07,” Economic Policy institute, EPI Briefing Paper #220, (September 18, 2008) [http://epi.3cdn.net/f205db387e418862d6_c5m6bhw0j.pdf]; Amaad Rivera, Brenda Cotto-Escalera, Anisha Desai, Jeannette Huezo, and Dedrick Muhammad, “State of the Dream 2010: Drained—Jobless and Foreclosed in Communities of Color.” (Boston, Mass.: United for a Fair Economy, 2010) [http://www.faireconomy.org/files/SoD_2010_Drained_Report.pdf]; Luke Reidenbach and Christian E. Weller, “The State of Minorities in 2010: Minorities Are Suffering Disproportionately in the Recession,” the Center for American Progress (January 2010) [http://www.americanprogress.org/issues/2010/01/state_of_minorities.html]; and the March 2010 report entitled “Understanding the Economy: Long-Term Unemployment in the African American Community” by the Joint Economic Committee chaired by Representative Carolyn B. Maloney (D-NY), Chair [http://jec.senate.gov/public/?a=Files.Serve&File_id=f7a324ea-4998-4a96-acea-0265a3a68aae].

the African American community in a myriad of ways.⁶ In recognition of its existence as a prime locus for the struggle for freedom, justice, and equality, critical examinations of the Black Church has been focused on its perennial commitment to linking the idealistic promises of divine justice with the material prospects of social justice here on Earth. When assessing the traditional functionality of the Black Church, historian Manning Marable notes that this venerable institution “became the way out, the forum in which each week’s mountain of frustrations and tragedies are eliminated from one’s consciousness, a holy place of peace in a world of utter madness and dark decay.”⁷ As the Black community made its historic transition from slavery to freedom, Black churches strove to fulfill the deepest yearnings of Black men, women, and children in terms of both their physical realities as well as their spiritual concerns. Put another way, in order to understand the sacred and secular experiences of African Americans in their totality, attention must be paid to the immaterial and material dimensions of Black life.

Given the Black Church’s vital role as a “refuge” and “surrogate world,” however, there was a troubling chasm between the conservative and prophetic dimensions of Black Christian

⁶ In his essay entitled “Of the Faith of the Fathers,” W.E.B. Du Bois argues that the Black Church “is a broader, deeper, and more comprehensive social organism than the churches of white Americans. The [Black] church is not simply an organism for the propagation of religion; it is the centre of the social, intellectual, and religious life of an organized group of people. It provides social intercourse, it provides amusements of various kinds, it serves as a newspaper and intelligence bureau, it supplants the theatre, it directs the picnic and excursion, it furnishes the music, it introduces the stranger to the community, it serves as the lyceum, library, and lecture bureau—it is, in fine, the central organ of the organized life of [African Americans] for amusement, relaxation, instruction, and religion.” [W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903; New York: Random House, 1994), 148].

⁷ Manning Marable, *Blackwater: Historical Studies in Race, Class Consciousness, and Revolution* (Niwot CO: University Press of Colorado, 1981), 43.

thought and praxis that developed during the twentieth century.⁸ During the 1930s, Benjamin E. Mays and Joseph W. Nicholson conducted research on the Black Church wherein they randomly analyzed the content of one hundred sermons by Black preachers. Their data found that 54 sermons were generally “pie-in-the sky,” otherworldly sensibility in nature while 20 sermons reflected identifiable theological doctrines, and the remaining 26 focused on contemporary social issues, thus suggesting a widening chasm between the Black clergy and the oppressed majority of the nation’s Black populace.⁹ At the height of the Civil Rights Movement, the sociologist E. Franklin Frazier observed, “the Negro Church has lost much of its influence as an agency of social control. Its supervision over the marital and family life of Negroes has declined. The church has ceased to be the chief means of economic cooperation.”¹⁰ Although written many decades ago, Frazier’s commentary could just as easily apply to the contemporary state of the Black Church tradition. Even now, an interesting paradox that has taken place in matters of Black faith and culture wherein there is a declining significance of the historic Black Church denominations on the one hand, while there is a startling level of growth amongst churches espousing “prosperity gospel” theology on the other. In this instance, making sense of how patterns of growth and decline within various expressions of Black Christianity resides in

⁸ In his classic survey of African-American religious history, Gayraud Wilmore argues that, by increasingly orienting themselves towards seeking acceptance into mainstream white society, the mainline Black churches largely ceded their concern for cultural pride, racial solidarity, and political leadership to secular activists and intellectuals. This phenomenon eventually resulted in what Wilmore deems the “deradicalization of the black church” and the “dechristianization of black radicalism” [Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism: An Interpretation of the Religious History of Afro-American People*, 3d. ed., rev. and enlarged (1973; Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1998)].

⁹ Benjamin E. Mays and Joseph W. Nicholson, *The Negro’s Church* (New York: Arno Press, 1969), 59.

¹⁰ E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (New York: Schocken Books, 1964), 51, 72-73.

examining discourses and dynamics of class as representing the Tillichian notion of “ultimate concern.”

In light of the ongoing economic downturn, there has been a lot of talk recently about "class" in terms of structural economic inequality within the United States, particularly in terms of the African American community. For instance, Black religious scholars and theologians presently have demonstrated a level of discomfort regarding the incorporation of a systematic and sustained analysis of economic concerns within contemporary manifestations of African American religious thought. While there has been some progress, class analysis still remains underdeveloped within religious studies and theological education writ large. In his insightful book *Divine Hierarchies*, religious studies scholar Sean McCloud contends that our efforts to focus on the socioeconomic and material dimensions of religiosity can neither overestimate nor underestimate the importance of class.¹¹ While the current economic crisis, most commonly referred to as the Great Recession, is certainly hurting Americans from all walks of life, people of color were already at a disadvantage by the time that the bank failures and stock market corrections began.¹² As the mounting statistical data indicates, Blacks and Latinos had already been suffering an economic depression of sorts throughout much of this first decade of the twenty-first century, it is undeniable that the Wall Street meltdown of 2008 has made them even more vulnerable to the travails of unemployment, foreclosures, bankruptcy, asset devaluation,

¹¹ Sean McCloud, *Divine Hierarchies: Class in American Religion and Religious Studies* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 29.

¹² The term "Great Recession" has been used in 14,592 different articles according to Google News at the time of this writing. The definition and origins of term “Great Recession” can be traced at the following website: <http://www.davemanuel.com/investor-dictionary/the-great-recession/>.

loan defaults, and other persistent dimensions of wealth inequality. Moreover, there is a dialectical tension within the broad context of religious studies and theological education that has to be mediated in order to speak directly to these concrete concerns.

While it ought to be clearly understood that people are not just sociopolitical constructs trapped in the throes of perpetual class struggle, we must also acknowledge that we also are not merely blithe spirits caught up in the morass of the material world. Historian John T. McGreevey is correct in contending that while scholars of political culture and class struggle move from every factory to neighborhood bar to baseball field in a quest for working-class radicalism but bypass churches altogether, conversely scholars of religion are still hesitant to articulate a systematic study of class and political economy within religious experience.¹³ To borrow Marx's own rhetoric, the reciprocal nature of studying the idealist and materialist dimensions of human experience denotes that "the criticism of heaven turns into the criticism of earth, the criticism of religion into the criticism of law, and the criticism of theology into the criticism of politics."¹⁴

Towards this end, it is necessary to highlight that the contributions Marxist economic theory (particularly in its classic iteration found in Marx's own writings) has made to the historic Black Church tradition in order to demonstrate its potential viability within the burgeoning field

¹³ John T. McGreevey, "Faith and Morals in the Modern United States, 1865-Present," in Louis B. Masur, ed. *The Challenge of American History* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999), 240.

¹⁴ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy* (Rough Draft) (1843), 244-245.

of Black Church Studies.¹⁵ This initiative is critical because this is one of the most neglected and underdeveloped areas within religious studies and theological education as whole but is a particularly urgent cause for alarm within the field of Black Church Studies which has sought to not only theorize but also make tangible the liberationist project and its materialized aspirations. However, before asking the obvious question—why Marxist theory?—there is a prior question that needs to be addressed: why do theory at all? Too often in conversations about Black Church Studies, especially in light of the influence of various philosophical and literary theories—the social sciences, Afrocentrism, Black feminism / womanism, post-structuralism, critical race theory, postcolonialism, queer studies, and so on—practitioners often retort that theory is somehow unnecessary or even irrelevant because it can neither be readily preached in the sanctuary nor practiced in the public square. There are even those who might contend that the need for theoretical frameworks is really not that important for a field such as Black Church Studies since much of its focus has been geared perennially towards matters of praxis. In light of such comments, this line of inquiry may be accounted for in a number of ways, such as a general shirking away from the immense amount of reading, thought, and work that needs to be done in order to aware of the various currents of a given theory, or the notion that Black Church Studies

¹⁵ By way of definition, Black Church Studies is the interdisciplinary investigation, analysis, and conceptual ordering of a wide variety of data examining the religious thought and experience of Christians of African descent within church, academy, and society with the ultimate objective of delineating how liberation might be lived out at the interstices of the sacred and the secular; the field typically consists of the following subfields: African American Religious History; African American Biblical Hermeneutics; Black Theologies; Black Church, Culture, and Society (Sociology of Black Religion); African American Social Ethics; African American Pastoral Care; Black Christian Education; African American Christian Worship; and Black Homiletics. For further details, see Stacey Floyd-Thomas, et al. *Black Church Studies: An Introduction* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon, 2007).

(or any other aspect of religious studies and theological education) has gotten along fine without the need for theory, however broadly conceived, thus far, or the foreboding sense that concerns of theory are seemingly alien to the work that is already under way within Black Church Studies. However, if we do not engage class concerns on even a theoretical basis, we run the serious risk of either surrendering the Black Church to a state of utter irrelevance on the one hand or leave the Black Church prone to the economic devastation and exploitation incumbent to the unfettered growth of prosperity gospel on the other.

The obvious point to raise at this juncture, however, is that such responses ignore or refuse to acknowledge the existent theoretical underpinnings evident in the supposedly agreed-upon questions and methods of theological disciplines. Speaking in the broadest disciplinary terms possible, why is it still important to cite the dates, authorship, and social contexts of various pieces of biblical literature, whether early or late? Why does study of the historical development and current manifestations of the Christian tradition continue? Why is it that theological concepts and concerns remain so important? Why do others attempt to wrest the study of moral formation away from the domain of ethics? All of these questions and the underlying methods used to answer them have their own complex historical and theoretical justifications that were once perceived as radical and hotly contested and yet now have been mostly forgotten. Given the relatively recent origins of Black Church Studies, there has been little to no opportunity to allow such debates to play themselves out to their logical conclusions.

One of the key implications of the need to consider Marxist economic theory in Black Church Studies, and one of its greatest underlying challenges, is that it makes increasingly clear

that religious studies and theological education are woefully lacking in theoretical approaches and research methods for addressing issues of socioeconomic class and the complex workings of the Market as the very forces that are crushing not only the spirit but also the bodies of people. The move toward a concerted study of the interplay of religion and economic forces is a vital and fruitful move for Black Church Studies to make, not least because of the continuing levels of discrimination, disadvantage, and deathfaced by African Americans in the context of our current economic recession. In a sermon at the National Cathedral in Washington, DC on March 31, 1968, Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. said “there is nothing new about poverty. What is new is that we now have techniques and the resources to get rid of poverty. The real question is whether we have the will.” Making this statement just a few short days before his assassination, Dr. King stood tall as a visionary leader by articulating two key truths about the contemporary context in which we live. First, contrary to the conventional wisdom about modern economic theory throughout the twentieth century, Dr. King asserts that the majority of hardships that humans endure such as transgenerational poverty, homelessness, unemployment, chronic illness, infant mortality, lackluster education, and imprisonment could be remedied by the affluence of American society if the will of the people acknowledged that we had the capability and capacity to end structural inequality and spiritual misery both here at home and abroad. Second and more importantly, Dr. King boldly asserted more than four decades ago that, regardless of how dreadful things might seem, impoverishment and scarcity of resources are human rather than divine creations. In other words, in a global context wherein practically anything can be grown, manufactured, or repaired on demand, poverty is much more about a maldistribution of the

world's resources due to wanton greed and reckless indifference of mortal beings instead of being some curse by a distant and indifferent God.

Presently, the current state of Black Church Studies must contend with the dual concerns of economic justice and globalization in a direct, thoughtful, and straightforward manner. In countless seminary classrooms and university lecture halls, we have a steady and valid condemnation of prosperity gospel, faith-based initiatives, compassionate conservatism, and the rise of “Christianity Light” megachurches as threats that pervade too much of the contemporary theological and ecclesial energies within the Black community. Conversely, however, there is a frightening scarcity of alternative notions of how to confront this “name it and claim it” spirituality in a truly formidable way.¹⁶ In essence, those of us committed to Black Church Studies have spoken about what we *are against* but have not said what we *stand for*. To counter this situation, it is my contention that it is vitally important for African American churches to infuse elements of political economy and greater global awareness into its broader consciousness.

Simply stated, when stripped of any ideological or philosophical jargon, economic justice is the understanding of *who gets what, when, where, and how*. As our current point in history illustrates, African American church leaders and congregations of the historic Black Church tradition have the greatest need for this knowledge yet are often ill-equipped to discuss what is at stake for Black people in an era that is being overwhelmingly defined by the rampant

¹⁶ For a rich and insightful primer on the theological and sociological impact of prosperity preaching within the Black Church tradition, see Stephanie Mitchem, *Name It and Claim It?: Prosperity Preaching in the Black Church* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2007).

consolidation of wealth and power in the midst of relentless misery and depravation. Moreover, even as Black Church Studies programs should position themselves to articulate the who, what, when, where and how regarding the ways in which political economy works, only concerted efforts within theological education would provide the means by which we could cultivate ethical leadership that would have the moral resolve to ask *why* the unjust exploitation of natural resources, amalgamation of corporate power, and the unfettered amassing of wealth worldwide has surpassed sound stewardship and fair distribution of the planet's plentiful blessings, both human and otherwise, and serve as a basis for renewed moral vision and social action.

It is my belief that contemporary Black churches can set up a progressive social agenda shaped by ordained and lay leaders in tandem with academic scholars in order to embrace the multiracial, multiethnic, and multicultural realities of our surroundings in ways that mainstream approaches have consistently failed. In light of this situation, the search for African American Christian leaders and scholars who have expressed Marxist political and theoretical commitments in their efforts to confront the economic problems facing people of African descent in the United States is key. This is made all the more urgent due to the persistence of economic woes that African Americans face in their daily existence. In this respect, a critical reintroduction to Marxist economic theory for Black Church Studies is needed in order to address these issues so that the African American theological enterprise is to move forward in any meaningful way.

As evident in the writings of selected Black religious leaders and scholars, there is a manifestation of Marxism within African American religious thought during the critical epoch of

American history that dates from the Gilded Age of the late nineteenth century to the Reagan-Bush era of the late twentieth century. In this vein, my focus is concentrated on the facility with and execution of Marxist ideas by the respective writers in their works as demonstrated by their effective uses of words, phrases, and imagery representative of critique of political economy in their texts. The goal of this interdisciplinary historical survey is intended to discover how, and how well, they work and how they shaped broader "discourse" of Black faith and politics in the context of that *longue duree* in general terms. Furthermore, my interest here is to see how the specific writers in order to instruct, inform, motivate, arouse, perform, convince and persuade the Black community including whether and how they this infusion of Marxist ideology. In short, rhetorical criticism seeks to understand how symbols act on people. For the purposes of this essay, a key group of leaders and thinkers within the Black Church tradition have been identified—W.A. Domingo, George Washington Woodbey, Reverdy Ransom, A. Philip Randolph, Martin Luther King Jr., James Cone, and Cornel West—to assess the ways in which Marxist theory has informed their respective iterations of prophetic Black Christian witness.

Raising the Blood Red Banner: Early Connections of Marxism and Black Christianity

After the end of First World War, the United States was in the throes of staggering fear of a potential Bolshevik revolt similar to the Russian Revolution of 1917 occurring on American soil. This era was known as the Red Scare of 1919, a historic moment marked by xenophobia against recent immigrants and the persecution of anyone suspected of being communists, socialists, or anarchists; although 1919 represented the zenith of this sort of repression, there are

many scholars who argue that this was actually the culmination of a longer period of anxiety about class warfare and radicalism attached to the emergence of workers' movements throughout much of Europe during the mid-nineteenth century.¹⁷ Despite having just fought and won a war that President Wilson declared would "make the world safe for democracy," the United States was reeling from numerous labor strikes, race riots, and anarchist bombings across the nation that sparked widespread panic in many citizens that the very essence of American society was under attack. As a consequence, President Woodrow Wilson manipulated heightened levels of patriotic zeal on one hand and deep-seated suspicion of individuals and groups perceived as potential enemies of the state on the other in order to justify major civil liberties violations by his administration such as the Espionage Act of 1917, the Sedition Act of 1918, and the Palmer Raids of 1919.¹⁸ Largely targeting liberal or leftist organizations that posed serious opposition to the Wilson administration such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Industrial Workers of the World (IWW), and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) amongst others, the gross overreaching and abusive exercise of power by the

¹⁷See William Preston, Jr., *Aliens and Dissenters: Federal Suppression of Radicals, 1903-1933*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1963); Nell Irvin Painter, *Standing at Armageddon: The United States, 1877-1919* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1989); Richard Gid Powers, *Not Without Honor: The History of American Anti-Communism* (New York: Free Press, 1995); Gary Marks and Seymour Martin Lipset, *It Didn't Happen Here: Why Socialism Failed in the United States* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2000).

¹⁸ The Espionage Act of 1917 effectively outlawed any workplace strike, large-scale labor dispute or interference with the U.S. military as activities that endangered national security and were punishable by law. Likewise, the Sedition Act of 1918 made it a crime in wartime to use disloyal or profane language about the military, the government, or the flag; information counter to the war effort was illegal and could not be mailed.

U.S. federal government created a stifling and repressive atmosphere for any one who dared to articulate alternate visions of social reality during that highly contentious era.

It was in this climate of extreme overreaction and intolerance that the Afro-Caribbean activist W.A. Domingo penned his classic essay “Socialism the Negroes’ Hope.” In this essay, Domingo argues that a possible synergy of Black Christianity and socialism would serve as the solid foundation for a doctrine of working-class radicalism. His argument begins by stating

in matters of religion [Black people] respond and react logically and naturally enough, for to them, the religion of Christ, the lowly Nazrene brings definite assurance of surcease from earthly pains and the hope of celestial readjustment of mundane equalities. Their acceptance of the Christian religion with its present day emphasis upon an after-life enjoyment of the good things denied them on the earth is conclusive proof of their dissatisfaction with their present lot, and is an earnest [sic] of their susceptibility to Socialism, which intends to do for human beings what Christianity promises to do for them in less material regions.”¹⁹

Domingo’s rhetoric—taking an increasingly decisive turn as he attempts to link the social justice incumbent to socialism with the divine justice inherent to Christianity—appears contrary to conventional wisdom. Nevertheless, he drives his point to its logical conclusion by conflating the two doctrines:

Socialism as an economic doctrine is merely the pure Christianity preached by Jesus, and practiced by the early Christians adapted to the more complex conditions of modern life. [Socialism] makes

¹⁹ W.A. Domingo, “Socialism the Negroes’ Hope”, *Messenger* 1 (July 1919), as quoted in Sandra Kathryn Wilson, ed. *The Messenger Reader* (New York: Random House, 2000), 332.

no distinction as to race, nationality or creed, but like Jesus it says ‘Come unto me all ye who are weary and heavy laden and I will give you rest.’ It is to procure that rest that millions of oppressed peoples are flocking to the scarlet banner of international Socialism.²⁰

Domingo’s attempt to position socialism and Christianity as equal partners in the Black freedom struggle illuminates a facet of Black working-class radicalism that has often been overlooked, namely past efforts to galvanize a model of Christian socialism within the historic Black Church tradition. But some Black radical thinkers and radical activists were intent upon rethinking capitalism as an economic system in light of Marx’s assertion in *Das Capital* that “labour cannot emancipate itself in white skin where in the black it is branded.”²¹ Thus, many of these social critics, motivated by religious and moral prerogatives, considered Christian socialism a viable alternative.

Amongst this small handful of early Black socialists in the United States, the most notable was Rev. George Washington Woodbey.²² Perhaps more than any other socialist operating in North America, Rev. Woodbey was wholeheartedly aware that many Black

²⁰ Ibid., 333.

²¹ Karl Marx, *Das Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Vol. 1 (New York: International Publishers, 1967), 301.

²² Although the majority of early scholarship on the relationship between Marxism and Black Christianity focused more prominently upon two Black Baptist ministers, George Washington Woodbey and George W. Slater Jr., the earliest known person of African descent to join the ranks of American socialists is Peter Humphries Clark. In the 1870s, Clark’s speeches and organizing efforts for the Workingman’s Party and its subsequent offshoot, the Socialist Labor Party, were steeped in his own painful personal experiences with the growing inequalities between the wealthy and the poor in addition to propagating an antiracist agenda under the auspices of socialism.

Christians would be resistant towards socialism yet he “never abandoned his Christian faith, for he saw no contradiction between his religious beliefs and his socialist politics.”²³ Moreover, Woodbey held significant regard for Karl Marx, often proclaiming him as a latter-day descendant of the Hebrew prophets. Woodbey rejected the conventional wisdom of his socialist comrades that it was “necessary to make atheists, infidels, or agnostics of the professed Christian before you can make a Socialist out of him.”²⁴ Viewing his own embrace of socialism as being akin to a religious conversion, he argued that the best way of persuading Black Christians was to demonstrate to them that the “economic teaching of the Bible and of Socialism are the same.”²⁵ During the first two decades of the twentieth century, Rev. Woodbey and his disciple, Rev. George W. Slater Jr., traveled extensively across the United States to educate the African American community about the merits of Marxist interpretation of Scripture yet their efforts to reach Black congregants with this message of egalitarian social relations and anticapitalist redistribution of wealth appeared to be a veritable uphill battle. According to historian Philip Foner, “there may have been little new for white religiously-inclined Socialists in Woodbey’s pamphlet since the Christian Socialists had already published a considerable body of literature demonstrating to their satisfaction that the Bible and Socialism were compatible. But to black church-goers much of what was in the pamphlet was new and certainly must have made an

²³ Winston A. James, “Being Black and Red in Jim Crow America: Notes on the Ideology and Travails of Afro-America’s Socialist Pioneers, 1877-1930”, *Souls* Vol. 1, No. 4 (Fall 1999), 48.

²⁴ Philip Foner, ed., *Black Socialist Preacher*, 260.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 261.

impressive impact.”²⁶ There was cold comfort to be found in this fact, however, since the failure of Christian socialism to take root within the Black church leaders and their members arguably forestalled significant theological and intellectual advances within the historic Black Church tradition.

Much like Rev. Woodbey and Rev. Slater before him, Reverdy Ransom stood as one of the foremost proponents within the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) Church for linking socialism and Black Christianity. Caught in the throes of intense labor upheavals and populist unrest fueled by the Gilded Age’s ascendancy of amalgamation and capital, Ransom believed that the only way forward for African Americans of his generation was to focus on a new vision of society that upheld a humanistic appeal to equality and the dynamism of modern industry. Viewing Christian socialism as a logical extension of the social gospel movement, he embraced a doctrine that promoted a new social order that was driven by democracy, altruism, and the elevation of collective human potential above individualism. In his essay, “The Negro and Socialism,” Ransom offers a quintessential defense of just such a vision in which he states

Socialism in a broad and general sense rejects the doctrine of selfishness which rules the present order and affirms that altruism is a principle sufficient to govern the relations of men in the sense it is opposed to individualism and does not regard society as composed of an army of warring atoms, but believes that social system to be the best in which the interests of the individual are

²⁶ Philip S. Foner, “Reverend George Washington Woodbey: Early Twentieth Century California Black Socialist”, *Journal of Negro History* vol. 61, no. 2 (April 1976), 146.

made subordinate to the interest of society, while allowing freedom for the highest development of his own personality.²⁷

Furthermore, when imagining the definitive virtue of socialism, he argues, “socialism places its chief value upon man. Socialism, like [Jesus] the inspired Carpenter of Nazareth, places more value upon man than it does upon riches. It believes that the rights of man are more sacred than the rights of property, believes...that the only sacred thing on earth is a human being.”²⁸ For Ransom, Christian socialism was a hopeful antidote to virulent racial prejudice and class exploitation. By envisioning Jesus Christ as a carpenter—a “working-class hero”—Ransom subtly aligns Jesus with the poor laborers, regardless of race, who actually built and sustained modern society. In this fashion, Ransom not only articulates a clear vision of God’s preferential option for the poorest in society but he also suggests the primacy of the oppressed Black workers within God’s creation, a statement that serves as a profound challenge to the legacy of slavery as well as the reality of segregation that pervades the modern African American experience.

Although Ransom’s views on Christian socialism would become more moderate in the latter years of his life, he never retreated from the thoroughgoing struggle to reform American society and economy in the hopes of making it more just and equitable. As Ransom’s ministerial assignments took him to other African American communities across the United States, these early experiences with the social gospel movement continued to shape his ministerial praxis.

²⁷ Stephen W. Angell and Anthony B. Pinn, ed., *Social Protest Thought in the African Methodist Episcopal Church, 1862-1939* (Knoxville, TN: University of Tennessee Press, 2000), 336.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 338.

Certainly, the legacy of his experimentation with social Christianity was especially important during his pastorate at Bethel AME Church in Harlem beginning in 1907.²⁹ Ransom continued to emphasize the importance of social outreach through church-sponsored youth and young adult programs, but under his leadership Bethel also became a central gathering place for African American radical activists, most notably A. Philip Randolph. Whereas the AME Church's long-standing insistence that opposition to racism and discrimination were integral components of its mission, Ransom also brought with him a clear sympathy for class analysis and profound understanding of the plight of African American workers that infused his outreach program with class consciousness that both welcomed and nurtured Harlem's African American socialists. By hosting groups such as Afro-Caribbean socialist Hubert Harrison's Liberty League, a regular forum that introduced class analysis and theories to African Americans, both Ransom and Bethel played important roles in fostering Harlem's small, but significant cadre of Black radicals in years leading to the First World War.

Ransom's long-standing concern for the working poor was especially important to the development of young African American radicals such as A. Philip Randolph.³⁰ Though Randolph had shed much of the religiosity he acquired attending churches in Jacksonville,

²⁹ See Judith Weisenfeld, "The Harlem YWCA and the Secular City, 1904-1945," *The Journal of Women's History* 6 (Fall 1994), pp. 62-78. In this article, Weisenfeld focuses on the role of African American women in transforming the Harlem YWCA into a "venue for religious work and for community activism that defied narrow definitions of religious' and 'secular' and yet upheld the black church tradition of religiously grounded social engagement"(63), but her discussion also sheds light on the philosophical and organization contributions Reverdy Ransom and his wife, Emma, made to this mobilization effort.

³⁰ Cornelius L. Bynum, "Fight for Identity: A. Philip Randolph and the Search for Class-Consciousness in the Age of the Harlem Renaissance," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Virginia, (2004), 104-105.

Florida, where he grew up, he arrived in New York City with a view of the church as an important resource for the community, in his early years in the city Randolph participated in many social gatherings at the Baptist Young People's Union of Mount Olivet Baptist Church and the Lyceum of Saint Mark's Methodist Church. He was also active in the Epworth League of Salem Methodist Episcopal Church and eventually found his way to the Allen Christian Endeavor Society of Bethel AME Church under Ransom.³¹

It was there that Randolph was first exposed to Ransom's sympathies for the working poor as well as his eagerness to adapt the progressive social reforms of the era to meet the needs of African Americans trapped in the throes of urban poverty. In turn, this helped to crystallize Randolph's own notions about the possibility of Black churches serving as institutional sites for social change. Randolph saw in Ransom's integration of progressive social welfare programs into the church's social ministry new and different ways of supporting African Americans' demands for social justice.³² Having experienced first-hand the exploitation and discrimination suffered by African American laborers as he worked in Jacksonville's lumber and railroad yards prior to his own migration to New York City, Randolph understood and consequently gravitated towards Ransom's social ministry precisely because it set out to address such issues in a programmatic fashion. Randolph eventually organized a radical discussion group, the Independent Political Council, which met at Bethel with Ransom's approval. This group held regular forums on political, economic, social, and religious issues but, as Randolph noted, the work of the Council

³¹ Jervis Anderson, *A. Philip Randolph: A Biographical Portrait* (New York, 1973), 71-75.

³² Cynthia Taylor, *A. Philip Randolph: The Religious Journey of an African American Labor Leader* (New York University Press, 2006), 50.

was primarily focused on “the fight for racial and social justice.”³³ Due in large part to Ransom's open embrace of socialism as well as his avowed commitment to engaged social activism and working-class solidarity, the mission of Bethel closely matched the Independent Political Council's underlying interest in addressing the key social and political issues that Black workers confronted.

Without a doubt, the sustained critique of industrial capitalism that informed so much of Ransom's ministry and politics directly overlapped with the growing disillusionment that many African American radicals felt over the pernicious nature of racism's structural modes. To be sure, the open dialogue that Ransom cultivated during his years as pastor at Harlem's Bethel AME Church, especially in terms of incorporating class analysis into his ongoing discussion of the plight of the working poor, had a profound influence on A. Philip Randolph's evolving conceptions of social holiness and economic justice.³⁴ While it might be a slight exaggeration to claim that Ransom was substantially responsible for the radical trajectory of Randolph's long public career, it is reasonable to state that Ransom's ministry, political consciousness, and commitment to social engagement undoubtedly influenced Randolph and other African American radicals in Harlem and elsewhere in important ways in the early twentieth century.

While Black socialist preachers such as Rev. Woodbey and Rev. Ransom were had their share of difficulties persuading members of Black churches to fully embrace their respective visions of merging Black religion and radical Marxism, it was arguably the labor organizer and

³³ African-American Labor History Center. Oral History Program, Interview with A. Philip Randolph, (6 June 1973), 3, box 42. A, Philip Randolph Collection, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture New York, NY.

³⁴ Anderson, *A. Philip Randolph*. 73.

civil rights activist A. Philip Randolph who offered one of the most salient and compelling examples of Black Christian Marxist thought during the early twentieth century. Whereas much scholarship has focused on his long and legendary career as a socialist to merge the struggle for civil rights and workers' rights, historian Cynthia Taylor's recent study of Randolph's religious background with the historic Black Church tradition has proven invaluable.³⁵ For example, it is seldom mentioned that Randolph was born and raised in a traditional southern Black family where his father was an itinerant AME preacher.³⁶ Raised in a household where matters of faith and spirituality were discussed regularly, the young Randolph's, "rich vocabulary sometimes took on scriptural accents; a word like 'verily' would not come unnaturally to one who had been a Bible reader since boyhood."³⁷ While there is no current evidence indicating the politics of his childhood home in his native Florida, it seems possible that Randolph's left-leaning views were bolstered by his youthful upbringing in a Black Christian home in the Jim Crow South. By the time he arrived in New York City and became wholeheartedly involved in the American socialist movement, his understanding of Black working-class life and folk culture was at the core of the

³⁵ See also Cynthia Taylor, *A. Philip Randolph: The Religious Journey of an African American Labor Leader* (New York: New York University Press, 2006).

³⁶ Cary D. Wintz, "Introduction", in Cary D. Wintz, ed. *African American Political Thought: Washington, DuBois, Garvey, and Randolph* (London: M.E. Sharpe, 1996), 14.

³⁷ Benjamin Quarles, "A. Philip Randolph: Labor Leader at Large", in John Hope Franklin and August Meier, eds., *Black Leaders of the Twentieth Century* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1982), 141.

historic Black Church tradition as well as an activism deeply steeped in Wesleyan notions of social holiness.³⁸

Possibly due to his intimate knowledge of the Black sacred realm, Randolph felt comfortable enough to indict the Black Church of his day. In his editorial “The Failure of the Negro Church,” he echoed the concerns of earlier Black socialist preachers who lambasted the Black Church for failing to recognize or address the economic roots of racial oppression and for its resistance to aligning itself with “progressive” (read radical) political allies. But, unlike his forebears, he strikes at what he sees as the corrupt core of the Black Church in modern America: emphasis on materialistic acquisition over humanistic ministry. Randolph proclaims the church to be a failure because “the church has been converted into a business and the ruling characteristic of a business is, that it is run primarily for profits. The interest is focused upon debits and credits, deficits and surpluses. This has been the Scylla and Charybdis of the Negro Church.”³⁹ He explicates the fact that Black churches, regardless of whether they are part of independent church movements or as outposts of white mainline denominations, are all governed by “the white ecclesiastical oligarchy” in the United States. In turn, Randolph viewed this white ecclesiastical oligarchy as being inextricably linked to the “money power” of his day.

³⁸ Although this concept was originally articulated by theologian John Wesley as a means of countering individualistic notions of Christian faith by emphasizing the necessity for Christian fellowship, even beyond ecclesial *koinonia*, to encompass the fuller socioeconomic and political dimensions of human society with the ultimate goal being the positive transformation of the world and the salvation of humankind.

³⁹ A. Philip Randolph, “The Failure of the Negro Church”, *Messenger* 2 (October 1919), 5.

Unlike his predecessors, many of whom were clergy themselves, Randolph had no qualms in suggesting that something intrinsic to the Black Church as an institution—rather than any particular confusion or shortcoming in Black people themselves—might have been the impetus for this aversion to radicalism. In the editorial, he offers numerous suggestions for ways the Black Church could possibly move forward. The first stage of Randolph’s constructive program was the development of a modern Black ministerial leadership that “must get the education of information instead of [simply] the education of inspiration”, stressing that these new ministers need “less Bible and more economics, history, sociology, and physical science.”⁴⁰ Next, he proposed that the church must become an “open educational forum” wherein congregations could be alerted to problems of national and international significance by specialists. In addition, he argued that the churches of the Black community should become bases of cooperative economic activity for the Black working-class. The final stage of his vision was that a generation of forward-looking Black men, women, and children “demands a new church—a church that is the center of [their] social, economic, and political hopes and strivings.” It was his ultimate assertion that with “an educated fearless and radical ministry,” the Black Church “must set its face against a philosophy of profits to a philosophy of service.”⁴¹ Following Randolph’s remarks, the situation of the Black Church began to change slowly. Although it is virtually impossible to discern with any precision how many churches and their leaders actually heeded Randolph’s message to redefine the historic Black Church tradition from 1919 onward, it is safe to assume that the numbers remained relatively small.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ Ibid.

It must be remembered that, at the height of the Great Depression, Black Communists and Socialists in parts of the United States as far-flung as Harlem, New York and Birmingham, Alabama drew extensively upon the Black Christian experience to support their radicalism.⁴² In spite of this, the Black Church tradition in North America has been involved in a particularly adverse struggle with the American Left throughout most of the twentieth century. In keeping with prevalent views within mainstream American society throughout much of the twentieth century, the leadership of the historically Black Protestant denominations promoted the notion that communism and socialism were antithetical to the Black community because they were unpatriotic and atheistic. However, Rev. Ethelred Brown and the Harlem Unitarian Church posed a direct challenge to the thought that radical politics and Black religion cannot mix.⁴³ By way of illustration, the Marxist bent shared by Rev. Brown and his activist congregation was so pronounced that one outraged observer informed an American Unitarian Association official that the church's Sunday worship service was akin to "a Bolshevist [sic] meeting."⁴⁴ Nonetheless, within his ministry, Rev. Brown directly challenged the most misunderstood critique of religion as attributed to Karl Marx, most specifically the oft-quoted statement that "religion is the opium of the masses." Yet, that infamous quote penned by Marx in 1844 states as follows:

⁴² Mark Naison, *Communists in Harlem during the Depression* (New York: Grove Press, 1983); Robin D.G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).

⁴³ See Juan M. Floyd-Thomas, *The Origins of Black Humanism: Reverend Ethelred Brown and the Unitarian Church* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).

⁴⁴ George F. Patterson to John H. Lathrop, November 20, 1930, in Ethelred Brown Papers, UUA Archives.

Religious suffering is at one and the same time the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.

The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the demand for their real happiness. To call on them to give up their illusions about their condition is to call on them to give up a condition that requires illusions.⁴⁵

Although Marx certainly had his intense problems regarding matters of faith, when viewed in its entirety, his description of religion necessitates a more sensitive and nuanced reading.⁴⁶ First, despite being one of the most repeated lines that Marx ever wrote, it has also been one of the most misconstrued. What has eluded many critics and adherents of Marxist views of religion alike is that, rather than simply reducing religion to a narcotic for making the people numb up and dumb down in the midst of their oppression, he seems to allude to religion's greater ability to humanize people in ways that political economy never can. Second, indicating that religion (as with other parts of society's ideological superstructure) is a product of underlying material realities, even Marx acknowledges that many oppressed and marginalized peoples might find the belief that they and their loved ones will find reunion and reprieve in the afterlife as a means of coping with the mundane pains and myriad injustices suffered in this world. Empowered by the Black Church tradition's implicit mission of linking divine justice and

⁴⁵ Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* [<http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1843/critique-hpr/intro.htm>]

⁴⁶ Howard L. Parsons, "The Prophetic Mission of Karl Marx", *The Journal of Religion*, 44: 1 (January 1964), 52-72.

social justice, Brown expressed his adamant belief that theology and political ideology could be regarded as one and the same. This point is made most poignantly when Rev. Brown insists that "religion really is...not an opiate, but a stimulant...an incentive to noble deeds and a sustaining power in the hour of crisis."⁴⁷

Martin and Marx and America: Merging Civil Rights Struggle and Class Struggle in America

When thinking about the prospects and promises of merging political economy and Black theology, it is necessary to examine the intellectual development and spiritual formation of Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Towards this end, it is important to consider how King's training and accomplishments provides an interesting paradigm for understanding the ways that infusing discourse on political economy into theological education can serve as a means for preparing an educated, activist and compassionate ministry for the structural as well as spiritual challenges facing the church, academy, and larger society alike. It is undeniable from my view that there are some paradigmatic issues about King's education, ministry, and activism germane to this discussion that often tend to be glossed over by his supporters and critics alike. In his book *Stride Towards Freedom*, King recounts how he made a deliberate point of reading *Das Kapital* and *The Communist Manifesto* during the Christmas holidays of 1949 in order to better understand the possible appeal of Marxism for many revolutionary thinkers both foreign and domestic.⁴⁸ In his

⁴⁷ Ethelred Brown, "Building the Church of Tomorrow," (sermon preached at the Harlem Unitarian Church, n.d.), Egbert Ethelred Brown Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York.

⁴⁸ Martin Luther King Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom* (New York: Harper & Row, 1958), 92.

rather pragmatic assessment, King made the following commentary about the value of Marx to him:

In short, I read Marx as I read all the influential historical thinkers —from a dialectical point of view, combining a partial yes and a partial no. In so far as Marx posited a metaphysical materialism, an ethical relativism, and a strangulating totalitarianism, I responded with an unambiguous “no”; but in so far as [Marx] pointed to weaknesses of traditional capitalism, contributed to the growth of a definite self-consciousness in the masses, and challenged the social conscience of the Christian churches, I responded with a definite “yes.”⁴⁹

Taken to the extreme, African Americans typically avoided any form of Marxism largely for fear of being condemned as “un-American” even as the Civil Rights Movement strove to use middle-class respectability to secure the benefits of full citizenship in America. As historian Vincent Harding helps us consider, it is important to recognize that for African Americans, much like the vast majority of Americans born, raised, and educated in the wake of the Cold War, there is abhorrence of anything remotely linked to Karl Marx’s theories, especially socialism and communism ingrained into the very fabric of our beings.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, King found that a refusal to recognize much less wrestle with Marxist concerns in a forthright fashion left a paucity in his own critical reflection that, if unchecked, threatened to make his thought and praxis virtually irrelevant.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 95.

⁵⁰ See Vincent G. Harding, *Martin Luther King: The Inconvenient Hero* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996).

A prime example of a synergistic point between Marx's original theory and King's subsequent creative re-imagining can be seen in the transformation of the worker's socialist state into the "Beloved Community."⁵¹ In outlining his materialist conception of history, Marx developed an elaborate analysis that cannot be reproduced here. But stated most succinctly, believing that the productive capacity of a given society defined in light of class struggle is its foundation and, towards this end, as said capacity increases over time, the social relations of production as well as class relations gradually evolve through this conflict and passes through definite stages ("primitive" communism, slavery, feudalism, capitalism, and socialism).⁵² Even after dissolution of the slave regime is complete, Marx's theory of history unfolds in such a manner as to illuminate the transition from the subjective dependency of pre-capitalist (feudal) society to the subjective independence but objective dependence (on the structures of capitalist production) of bourgeois society to the subjectively social and universal individuality of socialism as the highest and most ideal state of human interaction. Although largely rejecting the advocacy of working class revolution that Marx and many of his successors would later advocate as necessary for bringing forth the socialist state, King did articulate his vision of the "Beloved

⁵¹ The term "Beloved Community" was first coined in the early the twentieth century by Josiah Royce, the pragmatic philosopher-theologian who founded the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FOR), and later advanced by cultural critic and essayist Randolph Bourne, it was Dr. King (who was also a member of FOR), who popularized the term worldwide and invested it with a deeper religious and political meaning by the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

⁵² Since Marx's time, his materialist interpretation of history has been adapted and revised by literally thousands of Marxist thinkers. Although it now has many variants, I am more interested for the sake of this project with focusing on its earliest iteration.

Community” in compatible if not always comparable terms.⁵³ In King’s iteration of the Beloved Community, there is a globalized vision in which all human beings are inextricably bound to one another and share mutually in the planet’s bountiful resources wherein the multiple social ills plaguing humanity—racism, poverty, hunger, war and homelessness—will no longer occur because standards of human decency and morality will no longer tolerate since all are equally affected by social dis-ease. However, to be clear, King’s concept does not assert the creation of a mythic utopia inasmuch as conflict is inevitable within the human experience. Although never truly devoid of discord between any entities (persons, groups, nations, etc.), King’s conception of the Beloved Community holds steadfast to the core of Christian pacifism that believes conflicts can be resolved peacefully and adversaries could be reconciled through their mutually shared and determined commitment to nonviolence. By grappling with Marxist conceptual frameworks and infusing them with his own Black Christian thought and praxis, historian Manning Marable contends, “King represents the anticapitalist potential that is inherent within the Black clergy.”⁵⁴

Furthermore, in discussing his importance to shifting the inherent politics of the Black Church tradition at the height of the Civil Rights Movement, King suggests that his engagement with Marxist thought led to at least two major realizations. First, having spent much of his career

⁵³In a speech entitled “Birth of A New Nation” (1957), Dr. King said, “The aftermath of nonviolence is the creation of the beloved community. The aftermath of nonviolence is redemption. The aftermath of nonviolence is reconciliation. The aftermath of violence is emptiness and bitterness.” Later, in his first book *Stride Toward Freedom*, Dr. King reinforces the importance of nonviolence in striving towards and securing the “Beloved Community” wherein he states “our ultimate goal is integration, which is genuine inter-group and inter-personal living. Only through nonviolence can this goal be attained, for the aftermath of nonviolence is reconciliation and the creation of the beloved community.”

⁵⁴ Manning Marable, *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America* (Boston: South End Press, 1983), 197.

as a pastor and activist rebuffing conservative attacks that he was a fire-breathing communist, it was important that he knew what Marx said before he could honestly say whether he accepted or rejected such notions in the truest sense of intellectual freedom; if King's economic sense was radical, it was because he was Christian rather than communist. Because King believed in freedom, justice, and equality, he sought to piece together the means for struggle and survival the best way he could free of the encumbrances that come from ideological or political attachments like millions of other oppressed people of color around the world. Second, as King's notion of economic justice gradually evolved from the Montgomery Bus Boycott (Black economic might mobilized as a *means* of obtaining social justice) to the Poor People's Campaign (securing Black economic welfare as an *ends* unto itself) a decade later, he used the critical and often confounding dimensions of Marx's writings in ways that they sharpened and strengthened his focus on Jesus' own mandate that we address the needs of "the least of these." By this token, King echoes the Marxist concern that, rather than serving as another totalizing system for the alienated pursuit and accumulation of wealth, socialism will bring about a complex self-realization. As Marx states,

When the limited bourgeois form is stripped away, what is wealth other than the universality of individual needs, capacities, pleasures, productive forces, etc., created through universal exchange? The full development of human mastery over the forces of nature, those of so-called nature as well as humanity's own nature? The absolute working out of his creative potentialities, with no presupposition other than the previous historic development which makes this totality of development, i.e., the

development of all human powers as such the end in itself, not as a measured on a predetermined yardstick?⁵⁵

In light of this, one might wonder whatever happened to the Poor People's Campaign and why are there no prominent religious leaders or public theologians talking about reviving this sort of Christian challenge to endemic structural poverty in light of the current economic crisis we euphemistically refer to as the Great Recession?

Hegemony Matters: Black Liberation Theology and the Challenge of Marxism

In the formative period of Black liberation theology, the absence of Marxist analysis was a substantial critique of Cone's work. It is important to keep in mind that while James Forman's 1969 Marxist-inspired "Black Manifesto" made its debut, the publication of Cone's *Black Theology and Black Power* revealed that the influence of Marx had no relevance early in his career. For instance, in *God of the Oppressed*, Cone contends that Marx's dominant ideology thesis stating "The ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class...the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time the ruling intellectual force" is a great asset in drawing connections between, as Cone states, "the role of economics and politics in the definition of truth."⁵⁶ While recognizing the usefulness of Marx to address matters of social existence, Cone expressly rails against Marxism writ large:

⁵⁵ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundation of the Critique of Political Economy*, translated by M. Nicolaus (New York: Vintage Books, 1973), 488.

⁵⁶ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, ed., with an introduction by C.J. Arthur (New York: International Publishers, 1970), 60, 64; Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, 38.

When black scholars spend too much time and energy trying to show how “radical” or “revolutionary” black religion was or is, they fall into the trap of defining the content of these words in the light of Marxism or some other theoretical frame that did not arise from the social existence of black people.⁵⁷

As Cornel West argues in *Prophesy Deliverance*, the efforts of Cone and his contemporaries in the first decade of the Black liberationist project focused their critique upon white supremacy in the North American context. Whereas their pioneering scholarship largely arose from the critical interpretation of the Bible derived from the African-American experience of racism thus laying the groundwork of Black liberation theology, West faults the liberationist enterprise for its lack of “a systematic social analysis, which has prevented it from coming to terms with the relationship between racism, sexism, class exploitation and imperialist oppression,” as well as its “lack of a social vision, political program and concrete praxis which defines and facilitates socioeconomic and political liberation.”⁵⁸

Whereas Marx did not originally inspire Cone’s theology, his writings gradually reflect a conscious shift in which he begins to reexamine Marxism. Roughly a decade later, Cone discovers that Marxism could serve as an important analytical tool that helped to make his theology more alert to variables of class and socioeconomic forces. As he contends in *My Soul Looks Back*, Cone considers it an intellectual failure not to have dealt with Marxism and socialism in his early writings and contends that very fact documents the self-limiting nature of

⁵⁷James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1975), 146.

⁵⁸ Cornel West, *Prophesy Deliverance!: An Afro-American Revolutionary Christianity* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1982), 106.

his theology in its original iteration. As Cone gradually began to change his thoughts on Marxist analysis within Black liberation theology, he attributed this transition to a pair of factors. First, it was the dialogical engagement with Latin American liberation theologians that introduced Cone to the utility of Marx in ways that led him to begin rethinking his own theological enterprise. The second, even more significant factor contributing to Cone's thinking was much more up close and personal. When they were both colleagues at Union Theological Seminary, Cone and West were engaged in a deeply provocative conversation that not only had Cone studying Marx but also resulted in the duo offering a team-taught course on Black theology and Marxism for a number of years. Meanwhile, the emergence of political economy within Cone's writing during the late 1970s and early 1980s was just cause for celebration for West. In West's view, this represented the advent of a new stage within Black Christian thought that West called "Black Theology of Liberation as Critique of U.S. Capitalism" and credited Cone for rising to the challenge of promoting that more expansive vision. Cone argues that the economic realities of poverty, starvation, and the maldistribution of wealth in the world and the United States means

black churches cannot simply continue to ignore socialism as an alternative social arrangement. We cannot continue to speak against racism without any reference to a radical change in the economic order. I do not think that racism can be eliminated as long as capitalism remains intact long as capitalism remains intact. It is time for us to investigate socialism as an alternative to capitalism.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ James H. Cone, *My Soul Looks Back* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1985), 129-30.

Overcoming the indifference and hostility that have prevailed in the past, Cone's rediscovery and reconnection to the small yet prophetic stream of Marxist thought within the history of the African American Christian experience allowed him to enter into a creative and challenging dialogue with socialists. This exchange of ideas would enable the Black Church tradition to think about "the total reconstruction of society along the lines of democratic socialism"⁶⁰ not along the lines of the Soviet Bloc communist dictatorships vilified during the Cold War. He contends that just as African Americans and darker peoples of the Global South historically have had to remake the Christianity they first received from slavemasters, colonizers, and oppressors, they can also remake Marxism and socialism in light of their own history and culture.⁶¹ Much like Gutierrez and other contemporaries in the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT), Cone writes as a theologian, not as a partisan, policy wonk, pundit, or politician. Put another way, his work remains first and foremost a theologian and not merely the theological offshoot of the historic Black Power movement, a designation to which too many in the academy would still relegate him and his work. Whereas no explicit details are found in Cone's writings on the specific socialist economic and political arrangements he would support, there is hardly any such manifesto or treatise by the majority of theologians. As such, the absence of a sound and studied plan for a prophetic transformation of our current political economic order might therefore reflect a shortcoming of North American theology as a whole.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 135.

⁶¹ James H. Cone, *For My People: Black Theology and the Black Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1984), 187.

Conversely, while being an ardent proponent of deploying Marxist theoretical frameworks in the task of dismantling the structural modes of social oppression, Cornel West is careful to make it clear that it is possible to embrace such critical views of the dominant political economic realm while also sustaining his personal commitments to the Black Christian tradition. In *The Ethical Dimensions of Marxist Thought*, West asserts:

I am a non-Marxist socialist in that as a Christian, I recognize certain irreconcilable differences between Marxists of whatever sort and Christians of whatever sort... My Christian perspective—mediated by the rich traditions of the Black Church that produced and sustains me—embraces depths of despair, layers of dread, encounters with the sheer absurdity of the human condition, and ungrounded leaps of faith alien to the Marxist tradition... To put it charitably, Marxist thought does not purport to be existential wisdom—of how to live one's life day by day. Rather, it claims to be a social theory of histories, societies, and cultures. Social theory is not the same as existential wisdom. Those theories that try to take the place of wisdom disempower people on existential matters, just as those wisdoms that try to shun theory usually subordinate people to the political powers that be.⁶²

West's comment is illuminating in several regards. Although he was more intensely bound to democratic socialist convictions than his dialogical partner James Cone, West clearly demonstrates and articulates a hermeneutic of suspicion concerning the extent to which Marxist ideology can or should be adopted by the Black Church tradition. Even so, by eschewing the

⁶² Cornel West, *The Ethical Dimensions of Marxist Thought* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1991), xxvii-xxviii.

sort of knee-jerk negative reaction to Marxist theory because of its origins as a Eurocentric ideological system or its other perceived drawbacks, West exemplifies a heightened cultural awareness and critical sensitivity that is more concerned about the viability of these ideas as a means of augmenting prophetic Black Christian thought and praxis in our time. Whereas West's example might not be universally or instantaneously applicable, it does reflect ways in which the intersection of Marxist class analysis and Christian faith can be considered complementary rather than contradictory.

Conclusion

As an attempt to break this prolonged silence, the historical survey and analysis made here was to utilize primary and secondary sources in order to detail the religious attitudes and modes of belief that appear within the philosophies of Marx in order to illustrate how these various genealogical trajectories of Marxist thought were subsequently negotiated, translated, and revised by notable African American preachers, activists, theologians, and religious scholars such as Woodbey, Ransom, Randolph, King, Cone, and West in their hopes of achieving a just social order through various iterations of prophetic Black Christian witness. As such, this effort sets out how Marxism, no less than African American Christianity, has been subject to the historical relativity that affects all ideological systems and faith traditions. Through its exploration of primary and secondary sources, this article attempts to offer a critical reassessment of the Black Christian-Marxist dialogue in their comparable eschatological vision found within both Marxism and the Black Church tradition.

In thinking about how Marxist insights might help Black theological reflection and praxis in the future, here are a couple of illustrations. For example, a key weakness of the documentary evidence and resources thus far is that the historic insights of Black Christian women engaged in Black Christian-Marxist dialogue are conspicuously absent. While this shortcoming is a present reality (and a serious one at that), this calls for an inquiry of how Black women have worked on both individual and institutional levels to transform the exigent circumstances of class in the historic Black experience. From Callie House's ex-slave reparations movement to the Black clubwomen's movement exemplified by Nannie Helen Burroughs and Mary Church Terrell to the radical Harlem activists such as Grace Campbell and Queen Mother Moore to the work of civil rights movement mothers like Jo Ann Robinson, Ella Baker, and Fannie Lou Hamer, there are clear indications that Black women have been engaged in an ongoing confrontation with the prevailing economic order with a subversive force of faith.⁶³ More importantly, because of the chronic economic privation that plagues Black people due to the historic legacy of slavery and segregation in North America as well as colonialism and calamity across the globe, Black women throughout the African diaspora have been engaged in cooperative economic networks

⁶³ Mary Frances Berry, *My Face Is Black Is True: Callie House and the Struggle for Ex-Slave Reparations* (New York: Vintage, 2006); Marcia Y. Riggs, *Awake, Arise, & Act: A Womanist Call for Black Liberation* (Cleveland: Pilgrim Press, 1994); Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994); Vicki Crawford, et al. *Women in the Civil Rights Movement: Trailblazers and Torchbearers, 1941-1965* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993); Rosetta E. Ross, *Witnessing and Testifying: Black Women, Religion, and Civil Rights* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2003); Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2005); Chana Kai Lee, *For Freedom's Sake: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000) and Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994* (New York: Norton, 1999).

and assaults on the ravages of hypercapitalism on Black life and culture as counter-hegemonic communal change agents. The growing array of resources on Black women's religious history have illuminated ways in which they have seized control of the means of both production and reproduction (both literally and figuratively) from white supremacist and patriarchal domination as sociologist Cheryl Townsend Gilkes's text challenges all readers to consider deeply where the Black Church would be in any regard "if it wasn't for the women."⁶⁴

Although explicit documentation of Black women fusing Marxist views with Black Christianity has not become immediately evident, there is great reason to believe that such evidence awaits discovery. Moreover, the view of Black women as counter-hegemonic communal change agents provide an efficient means to get a grip on how *lived religion* truly

⁶⁴ Towards this end, the multidisciplinary perspectives derived from the likes of Katie G. Cannon, Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, Joan Martin, emilie m. townes, Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, Judith Weisenfeld, Tera Hunter, Deborah Gray White, and among others have contributed to my understanding of how Black women's persistently prophetic confrontation of the triple jeopardy of race, class, and gender oppression, See Katie G. Cannon, *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (Continuum, 1998), Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, *If It Wasn't for the Women...: Black Women's Experience and Womanist Culture in Church and Community* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2000); Joan Martin, *More Than Chains and Toil: A Christian Work Ethic of Enslaved Women* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000); Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994); Judith Weisenfeld, *African American Women and Christian Activism: New York's Black YWCA, 1905-1945* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); and Tera Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors after the Civil War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998); and Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves, 1894-1994* (New York: Norton, 1999), and Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2005).

takes hold.⁶⁵ This perspective points to realities and possibilities created by Black women that their Black male contemporaries failed to see and never attained. Moreover, this new interpretative framework also indicates that the oppositional resistance of Black women to perpetuate the survival of the Black community as a means of undermining the dominant society's superstructure that most research has failed inadvertently to point this out, often because they have acted so subversively and covertly. In other words, how might such project allow for a critical reimagining of radical African American women's leadership roles within church and community in light of a largely male and/or masculinist discourse? In the long run, by shifting our focus in this fashion, we can observe such social forces in Black women's musings and doings that they could not readily manifest due to their tripartite oppression. But what is ultimately of overriding interest to me is that they preserved what they experienced and understood with greater vividness, complexity, and durability.

Second and lastly, a Marxist-inspired critique of prosperity gospel would reveal that phenomenon for what it truly is: an ahistorical theological mode of false consciousness that is endorsed and doled out to millions of desperate Christians who cling to filthy lucre because they have been taught to fear full liberation. How might this project suggest possibilities for the role of political economy in contemporary Black Christian worship and liturgy? Moreover, how might this project illuminate a more empowering Black pastoral theology? An alternate Marxist

⁶⁵ See David D. Hall, *Lived Religion in America: Toward a History of Practice* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997); R. Marie Griffith and Barbara D. Savage, eds., *Women & Religion in the African Diaspora: Knowledge, Power, and Performance* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006); and Laurie F. Maffly-Kipp, Leigh E. Schmidt, and Mark Valeri, eds. *Practicing Protestants: Histories of Christian Life in America, 1630-1965* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006).

reading of Jesus' ministry reveals how the divine transformation of mundane elements into miraculous implements of God's salvation was the foundation of a sacred and beloved community that defied the commodification and alienation of the market.⁶⁶ Consequently, in order to confront and combat the creeping fog of prosperity gospel as a "theology of scale,"⁶⁷ prophetic Black Christian ministries must develop a "productivity gospel" that can merge a healthy, robust message of spiritual empowerment and economic wholeness that finds virtue in work and not just wealth, uplifts legacy and not just luxury, and recognizes that, as stewards of God's creation, we are called to be human partners with the Divine in order to further the peculiar economy of God in which we can make something out of nothing when we unite the labor of head, heart, and hand. How might such a theological project help create a homiletic turn away from "prosperity preaching" and what direction can or should that "turn" take? Furthermore, how might this theological project reinvigorate Marxist influences within Black biblical hermeneutics? These are glimpses of a way forward in reinvigorating the connections between Black religion and radical activism in the years to come.

Marxism, no less than African American Christianity, has been subject to the historical relativity that affects all ideological systems and faith traditions. Through such an exploration, a

⁶⁶ Dale T. Irvin, "Strangers and the Homecoming: Church and Community in the Grammar of Faith," in Quinton H. Dixie and Cornel West, eds. *The Courage to Hope: From Black Suffering to Human Redemption* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), 173-182.

⁶⁷ Much like "economies of scale" (the concept within the field of microeconomics that refers to a business model wherein a corporate entity obtains considerable cost advantages due to expansion), I employ the term "theology of scale" to describe a study of religious faith, practice, experience, and spirituality that is deeply wedded to the market-driven and consumerist aspects that to the contemporary televangelist and megachurch phenomena within the United States.

critical reassessment of the Black Christian-Marxist dialogue reveals their comparable eschatological visions found within both Marxism and the Black Church tradition. By exploring the relationship between Marxist thought and Black Christianity, it has become obvious that much of this story has been utterly left out of the historic record. Moreover, this effort broadly shifts our understanding of race, faith, and political ideology within African American religious history much further in the direction of materialism and economic determinism than the typical narrative of Black liberation theology. That said, it is important to note that material forces and economic determinants appear only to impose boundaries and limits—often rigid and durable ones—on the prospects for human freedom. Yet, if we are honest with ourselves, we know that they do not eliminate freedom altogether. What human beings do collectively, and sometimes even as individuals, within those imposed boundaries and limitations as well as the choices they make all along the way in spite of such structural impediments are vital parts of history from which we must learn. More to the point, it is the most important element missing from our contemporary modes of theological thinking and religious praxis.

In the final analysis, there are as many affirmations for the study of economic realities and material forces within Black Christian thought and praxis afforded by Marxist ideology as there are aversions to it, yet not all of the naysayers root their dissent in reason. As such, it remains truly difficult in this perplexing effort to separate wishful thinking from willful argument or a heartfelt desire from a hardheaded denial. However, this fracturing of critical and creative discourse, is more than an academic exercise or ideological posture, it is ultimately a political problem. Without at least some effort to seek new alternatives for our faltering economic order,

no effective remedies for the manifold crises confronting humanity in this late phase of modernity will be feasible. Matters of difference may be confronted if not altogether resolved—as they have been in the cases of affirmative action, global warming, abortion, and same-sex marriage—by opposing viewpoints at loggerheads with one another in the realm of ongoing culture wars in the United States. But unless we begin to discuss the subject of political economy and its role in affecting people based on their social location and do so with a fair amount of reason, restraint, and resourcefulness, visceral discomfort and vitriolic unpleasantness will dog questions of race, religion, and economic justice persistently for a long time to come. Ironically, our failure to step more knowingly and effectively into the havoc created by the interplay of the State and the Market is intensifying the anxieties and despairs that faith is actually supposed to mitigate and relieve. Thus, in the face of such concerns, there should be no harm in seeing red in the Black Church.