The Critical Christ: Understanding the theological cultural criticism of Howard Thurman and James Cone
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Introduction

Over the course of the twentieth century, African American Christian intellectuals and scholars (both Protestant and Catholic) formulated a body of theological reflection on the persistence of racial denigration, segregation, and inequality in the United States of America. While many of their liberal Christian intellectual counterparts were interested in analyzing the rise and triumph of corporate capitalism, these African American thinkers were interested in drawing upon the resources of religion in an effort to make sense of their world and find a sense of human dignity in the midst of a society that sought to dehumanize them. This research proposes to explore and examine how African American religious scholars used theological reflection on the person and ministry of Jesus to critique twentieth century United States culture.

Fundamentally, the underlining question of this research is what methodological and theoretical elements constitute and enable African American religious criticism? In an effort to address this question, the research will explore the religious criticism of two African American religious scholars: James Cone and Howard Thurman. Both Cone and Thurman used the resources of Religious/Christian thought to critique the twentieth century culture they were a part of; together they are arguably the two most influential African American religious cultural critics of the past century. For this reason they are the principal subjects of this study.

The parameters of this research project will not allow the time to explore every aspect of these thinkers religiously informed cultural criticism, therefore, only their usage of Jesus the Christ as a critical symbol in their theology will be explored in depth. Cone and Thurman in their work view Jesus as a preeminently religious historical figure who's person and work relates to the problem of the contemporary world. Moreover, they contend that the Jew named Jesus has something to say about the modern problems of poverty, oppression, and racism etc. How these thinkers use Jesus to speak to these realities is what this study endeavors to engage.

This research is important to consider for several reasons. Primarily, this work is significant because there is a paucity of research on the concept of African American religious discourse as a form of publicly viable cultural criticism. Therefore, this research potentially adds a crucial element to the developing canon of African American religious cultural criticism. Additionally, the term religious critic is not to be confused with a critic of religion. Critics of religion are those who criticize religion, like new atheism, represented by such authors as Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, Richard Dawkins, and Christopher Hitchens. Basically, these individuals find significant difficulties in the concept of religion. Their concern is that many religious concepts contradict modern scientific and cultural values, and have a negative impact on current social and ethical issues. In contrast, religious critics are those who utilize Religious language and symbols to critique certain elements of culture and society.

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1 The claim that Cone and Thurman are the most influential African American religious scholars of the second half of the twentieth century will be explicated in a later section of this research. Also, the term religious critic is not to be confused with a critic of religion. Critics of religion are those who criticize religion, like new atheism, represented by such authors as Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, Richard Dawkins, and Christopher Hitchens. Basically, these individuals find significant difficulties in the concept of religion. Their concern is that many religious concepts contradict modern scientific and cultural values, and have a negative impact on current social and ethical issues. In contrast, religious critics are those who utilize Religious language and symbols to critique certain elements of culture and society.
religious thought. Additionally, the major questions for many contemporary Christians are how Jesus relates to the issues and challenges of our time? And does Jesus have anything to say to the present moment we find ourselves in? I submit this research will help interested persons engage these questions with the witness of two African American religious scholars who wrestled with the same questions in the previous century.

To be sure, in recent times there have been scholars who’ve engaged the concept of African American religious cultural criticism. In particular, Princeton trained public intellectuals Michael Eric Dyson and Cornel West have offered their own brands of religiously informed cultural criticism in Dyson’s text Reflecting Black: African American Cultural Criticism and West’s collection of essays titled Prophetic Fragments: Illuminations in Religion and Culture. Though these classic texts continue to influence public discourse on the subject matter, they do not provide specific analysis about the nature or practice of African American religious criticism.

Also, Vanderbilt University ethicist Victor Anderson in his hugely popular book Beyond Ontological Blackness: An essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism, courageously critiqued the entire “black theological project” and in so doing offered his own concept of African American religious cultural criticism. Though Professor Anderson’s work is momentous to the study of African American religious thought and extremely important to this particular research project, it is significantly different from the intention of this paper. Dr. Anderson’s intention was to compare the religious criticism of various religious intellectuals (i.e. Cornel West, Howard Thurman, James Cone, and Delores Williams etc.) for the purpose of placing these thinkers in the context of his larger argument for criticism that rises above racial apologetics and aesthetics. In contrast, this research project attempts to delineate the style and substance of Cone and Thurman’s Christological religious criticism in relation to one another; for the purpose of discerning the essential elements that constitute viable African American Religious Criticism.

I would like to address two more important issues concerning this research project. First, the reasons I focus on the two African American scholars under consideration have to do with their sheer stature in the canon of African American religious thought and the prominence of their theologies as sources of cultural criticism for social movements and congregations. Both scholars have books that were published decades ago, but are still widely read among clergy, scholars, and concerned lay persons. In addition, in seminaries across the United States, there are classes studying the life and thought of Cone and Thurman as a result of their enormous impact on American religious culture. Furthermore, the religious criticism of Cone and Thurman is used as

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ideological fodder for various social movements (i.e. modern US civil rights movement, black power movement, and the Pan-African Christian movement) and influential African American congregations that promote social justice teachings (i.e. Trinity United Church of Christ of Chicago, City of Refuge UCC of San Francisco, Union Temple Baptist Church of Washington DC, and The Church For The Fellowship of All Nations in San Francisco etc). Moreover, I contend these scholars represent two major streams of African American Religious cultural criticism: the black love and power tradition (Cone) and the non-violent universal love tradition (Thurman). In my assessment, these are two important traditions of criticism that need to be considered and explored and Cone and Thurman provide a great framework for examination.

Furthermore, by studying the thought of these two highly visible scholars I can delineate what constituted effective public theology in the middle to late twentieth century. This is an extremely significant question to consider, given the difficulty of a public theologian and/or theology to rise in our current times. Scholars have attributed the difficulty of formulating an effective public theology in the 21st to multiple cultural factors in our society. In particular I find the insights of theologian David Tracy and homiletician David Buttrick most helpful in this regard.

University of Chicago professor emeritus David Tracy perceptively writes, “In our current era religious faith is tolerated as a private system for those who wish to take what is perceived as a relatively eccentric or idiosyncratic position. But in this cultural process of uneasy toleration, religious faith is relegated to a place of benign neglect where its truth claims are not allowed to be taken seriously in the larger public.” As a result, when public theologians and religious critics enter the sphere of public discourse they are required by the consensus of the times to keep their personal religious perspectives out of the ideological market place or public square.

From another perspective, David Buttrick proposes that various cultural shifts influenced by a new politics of difference have decentered the cultural mainstream (a white, male, heterosexual, Protestant, and Eurocentric hegemony). Recalling a past era of American public theologians such as Paul Tillich and the Niebuhrs, he declares “the

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6 These typologies will be explained in depth in later sections of the paper.

7 I define “public theology” as When the public church reflexively examines and critiques existing social practices and cultural understandings in the light of its deepest religious insights into justice and the good society, it does public theology.

end of the Protestant Era but not perhaps the end of the Protestant Principle.”

Although I understand Professor Buttrick’s powerful point, I agree with Professor Tracy that the perceived divisiveness of religious ideology has caused those involved in public discourse to shun the contribution of religious discourses. Nevertheless, I think Buttrick’s analysis provides a way forward for public theologians, in so much as he highlights the need for public theologians to take into account the politics of difference if they hope to provide a viable twenty-first century public theology.

The second matter involves the decision to examine two African American male scholars as representatives of viable religious criticism. Obviously, there are women religious scholars who have participated in religiously based culture criticism, especially since the advent of womanist theology (which is religious discourse that utilizes black women’s experience as a starting point for theological reflection). Certainly ethicists Katie Geneva Cannon and Emile Townes as well as theologians Jacquelyn Grant and Delores Williams are among the ranks of reputable womanist scholars who have produced works that could be classified as religious criticism.

In particular, Grant’s classic *White Women’s Christ and Black Women’s Jesus* is significant because it critiqued the white-female culture of privilege that ignores the religious experiences of black women. Grant provides this critique within the framework of Christology (theological reflection on the person and work of Jesus Christ) by arguing that the feminist Christology in focusing on white women’s experiences fails to reflect on non-White and non-Western women. As a result, Grant proposes a womanist Christology as a way of taking into account the realities of contemporary black women. Given Grant’s particular interest in Christology her religious criticism is fundamentally related to the focus of this research project. However, Grant’s theological project, though highly celebrated among scholars, cannot compare to the work of Cone and Thurman in regard to its influence as a popular source of cultural criticism in the twentieth century.

The major function of this paper is to explore African American religious cultural criticism as a concept and as a practice. In order to accomplish this goal, it must be established what is meant by the principal terms in question, such as cultural criticism and religious criticism etc. Therefore, we’ll begin by attempting to define and make clear the major concepts of this research. Then the research will transition to an analysis and examination of James Cone and Howard Thurman as religious cultural critics. In these sections I basically provide a brief summary of their early formation and academic accomplishments and then I move swiftly into an analysis of their critical

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9 David Buttrick. *A Captive Voice: The Liberation of Preaching.* Minneapolis: Fortress, 1992, 72. Also, a definition of the protestant principle will be provided in the first section of the research.


11 The same argument could not be made about any female African American religious scholar in particular. Perhaps this is due in part to the patriarchal power structure of 20th century US culture or the perennial problem of dominant androcentric leadership in African American faith communities. Nonetheless, as result of these realities and the reasons aforementioned concerning the choice of Cone and Thurman, I contend this research is justified in focusing predominantly upon two male scholars as subjects of exploration.
religious thought in relation to their understandings of Jesus Christ. In the final section, I simply offer concluding clarifications, considerations, and critiques.

What is Religious Cultural Criticism

Victor Anderson in his groundbreaking book *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism* understands cultural criticism to be an intellectual activity that analyzes, examines, discloses, and commends for the purpose of cultural fulfillment. He adds that cultural criticism at its best is both culturally enlightening and emancipatory. In this sense, cultural criticism reveals more than just the inadequate sides of culture, it also advances public languages that are oriented toward cultural fulfillment. This emphasis on cultural fulfillment provides a basis whereby we can engage the notion of religion based cultural criticism.

Professor Anderson’s description of cultural criticism highlights the descriptive, discerning and constructive activities of the discipline. Cultural criticism as descriptive activity proposes ways to describe and classify human activity and conduct, and as discerning activity it judges whether described human activities are adequate or lacking, and insofar as it advises more desirable human activities it is also a constructive activity. When all three of the activities are assessed and/or carried out according to some greater religious good or end (i.e. beloved community, divine reconciliation) the process becomes religious in nature. This threefold framework of cultural criticism will provide the basis by which two religious critics will be assessed in this essay.

Section 2: Howard Thurman as Religious Critic

Howard Thurman was arguably the most influential African American religious cultural critic in mid-century America. With one foot in evangelical liberalism and another in Christian mysticism, Thurman articulated a “Prophetic Spirituality” that in its mystical and liberal ideological forms captured the imagination of an African American religious intelligentsia bereft of utopian hopes yet still enamored with the possibility of creative divine empowerment. The distinctive contribution of Thurman was to deploy a hopeful universal perspective, stamped with a prophetic Christian imprimatur, as impetus to moral critique of and struggle against 20th century American segregation and racism. Even to this day, Thurman’s commitment to the themes of religious experience, hunger for community, and the realization of an authentic sense of self still inspire persons of all ages, colors, creeds, and religious convictions.

Without question, Thurman was an utter dynamo of intellectual energy; his perennial, tireless work ethic embodied the burdened African American struggle for equality, stability, and authentic existence. Born in 1899 and raised in the Southern United States (Florida), Thurman lived in a loving yet fluid African American family structure.

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12 Anderson, 21.
13 Anderson, 21.
14 Anderson, 22.
15 Smith, 13-33.
Since his father passed away when Thurman was seven, the task of raising young Howard and his siblings was placed upon his mother and his maternal grandmother. As Thurman’s later writings would reveal, his grandmother had a lasting and indelible impression upon him. Scholar Luther Smith writes of Thurman that “he marveled in her strength of character and religious sensibility.”

Academically, Thurman successful matriculated and graduated as valedictorian of his class from both Florida Baptist Academy in Jacksonville, Florida and Morehouse College in Atlanta. In 1923 Thurman enrolled at Rochester Theological Seminary in Rochester, New York, were he began his formal preparation for a life of ministry and Christian service. Three years later he graduated from RTS with bachelor of divinity degree, married Kate Kelley, and was installed as pastor of Mount Zion Baptist Church in Oberlin, Ohio. During the beginning of the year 1929 Thurman experienced a life changing encounter when he resigned from Mount Zion and spent a semester studying at Haverford College with Quaker mystic and social activist Rufus Jones. According to Thurman his encounter with Jones gave him “confidence in the insight that the religion of the inner life could deal with the empirical experience of man without retreating from the demands of such experience.” In a general sense, this quote encapsulates the basic premise of the religious cultural criticism that Thurman offers in his writings and verbal presentations.

As aforementioned at the core of Thurman’s religious cultural criticism is his commitment to the actualization of universal community, which is a world where individuals are valued for their worth as particular persons who possess the universal or sacred within. In other words, Thurman’s religious criticism affirms the notion of utopian community as the goal and purpose of his religious thought. Using the conception of cultural criticism proposed in this research, Thurman’s utopian community serves as the discerning and constructive element of his religious criticism, insomuch as universal community is both the standard by which cultural conditions are assessed and the desired goal that is to be actualized.

The discerning and constructive cultural critical element is quite pronounced in Thurman’s thought. In fact, certain scholars have suggested that the constructive utopian element in Thurman’s thought tends to overshadow the iconoclastic (discerning or deconstructive element) in his writings. Though I agree that Thurman’s vision for community looms large in his thought, in my view, it does not detract from the power of his cultural analysis and assessment. In fact, the strong constructive element of his cultural critical thought safeguards him from being relegated to the ranks of those critics who only expose the inadequacies of culture but never offer an alternative for culture to

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16 Smith, pg. 14.
18 It’s important to note that the categorization of Thurman’s notion of community as “utopian” is not utopian in the sense of being unattainable or fantasying. Rather, Thurman regards community as realistically humanly possible because it is conceptual. In other words, if you can conceive of community then it is correspondingly achievable by some human action or activity.
19 Anderson, pg. 39.
aspire. In many ways this is the genius and enduring quality of Thurman’s “prophetic spirituality”.

As previously mentioned, in addition to being the constructive feature of Thurman’s cultural criticism, universal community is also a discerning or assessing concept as well. For Thurman, though every particular (age, ethnicity, gender, nationality, race, and sexuality etc.) contains the universal, no particular is the full expression of the universal. Therefore, it follows that particulars or components of culture can be assessed based upon their acceptance or lack of acceptance of this fundamental truth. For instance, if particular cultural feature such as race and/or nation is perceived to be the sole expression of the universal, the ground has been cultivated and watered for the seeds of colonialism, domination, genocide, and oppression to take root. This example provides a peek into how Thurman seeks to discern and assess whether certain elements of culture are adequate or lacking. In addition it also validates that Thurman as a cultural critic, with his emphasis on the universal community, attends to our threefold criterion for religious cultural criticism.

In 1949, Howard Thurman published arguably the most celebrated book of his writing career, the perennially admired book, Jesus and the Disinherited20; Thurman boldly offers his interpretation of the life and ministry of Jesus and in so doing provides a quintessential work of African American religious cultural criticism. In my assessment, Thurman’s little powerful book, in addition to containing the requisite threefold criteria for religious cultural criticism, also presents a classic portrait of the African American non-violent love tradition of cultural criticism. The remainder of this section will assess Thurman’s religious criticism as it set forth in his Jesus and the Disinherited, in an effort to show how the person and ministry of Jesus fits into the larger framework of Thurman’s “prophetic spirituality”.

Thurman states that his purpose is to interpret what the teachings of “Jesus have to say to those who stand at a moment in human history with their backs against the wall”21 i.e. the poor, the disherited, and the dispossessed etc. With this statement, Thurman places his literary work in the context of cultural analysis and critique, insomuch as his intention is to provide a religious response to the racist 20th century US culture. Thurman accomplishes this task by using theological reflection on the life and ministry of Jesus to critique the broader American culture and inspire those who are oppressed.

The primary critical interpretive aspect of Thurman’s critique is the concept of “the religion of Jesus”22. Thurman understands “the religion of Jesus” to have been a critical creative response to the oppressive conditions of Jesus’ day. In other words, the religion that Jesus practiced served as a means of resistance and survival in the midst of a pernicious social situation. This notion of the “religion of Jesus” is the standard criteria of Thurman’s descriptive, discerning, and constructive activity as a cultural critic.

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21 Thurman, 11.
22 Thurman, 15.
Thurman begins his interpretation of “the religion of Jesus” with an assessment of Jesus’ context. According to Thurman, Jesus was a poor Jewish man who suffered oppression from the hands of the Roman government. This interpretation of Jesus places him within a historic socially marginalized or disinheritied class, which means Jesus did not just minister to the oppressed, he was the oppressed. And as a disinheritied person, Thurman argues that the oppressed social situation of Jesus’ life is analogous to the lived conditions of the Negro in Thurman’s time.

Thurman’s analysis of Jesus’ social and cultural context as a disinheritied oppressed Jew, accentuates the descriptive element of his religious cultural criticism. In this way, Jesus’ challenging social condition becomes a mirror to Thurman’s own social setting. He writes:

The striking similarity between the social position of Jesus in Palestine and that of the vast majority of American Negroes is obvious to anyone who tarries long over the facts. We are dealing here with conditions that produce essentially the same psychology.23

By categorizing the Negro social situation as tantamount to the oppressive social position of Jesus, Thurman successful accomplishes the descriptive task of religious cultural criticism.

Thurman’s interpretation of the life and teachings of Jesus is not only descriptive but it is also discerning. In addition to describing the social context of the Negro as oppressive and denigrating, Thurman also provides a critical assessment of what he views to be at the heart of society’s problems. According to Thurman:

“Too often the price exacted by society for security and respectability is that the Christian movement in its formal expression must be on the side of the strong against the weak. ……[Christianity] has become the cornerstone of a civilization and of nations whose very position in modern life has too often been secured by a ruthless use of power applied to weak and defenseless peoples.”24

In Thurman’s opinion, Christianity had been co-opted by the socially strong to the detriment of the socially weak. Therefore, his critical assessment is that both the larger social structure and the Christian culture that supports it are inadequate and undesirable because they side with the strong over and against the weak. Thurman affirms this critique so strongly that he suggests that the contemporary practice of Christianity in his time seemed to be a betrayal of the Negro into the hold of its enemies.25

At the core of Thurman’s cultural assessment, after taking into account the social setting of Jesus and the 20th century Negro is the belief that the central social problem is the denial of full citizenship. This denial of basic civil rights produces a culture of insecurity where the Negro feels unsafe, socially unprotected, and subject to random

23 Thurman, 34.
24 Thurman, 11, 12.
25 Thurman, 29.
violence. As a result, Negroes are left with no choice but to enact their own survival movement which Thurman understands to be the goal of the religion of Jesus.

The notion of Jesus formulating a religious survival technique is the substratum of the constructive element of Thurman’s religious cultural criticism. From Thurman’s viewpoint, there was little that was either meaningful or intelligible, to be found in the Church’s teaching concerning Jesus Christ because it lacked an emphasis on the religion of Jesus as a source of empowerment for the weak and disinherited. Therefore Thurman proposed an alternative religious vision for the oppressed. This vision, based on the religion of Jesus, encouraged the disinherited to look deep within for an inner strength that would enable them endure and rise above the cruelties of their current condition.

In Thurman’s constructive vision the disinherited can develop a sense of agency in the midst of their oppressive circumstance. Their agency involves the capacity to recognize and resist fear, deception, and hatred by getting in tune with the Spirit that is working in the lives and hearts of all individuals. This agency that Thurman commends to the disinherited offers them options for freedom and ultimately lifts their sense of worth and value beyond their actually social condition.

In the end, the constructive element of Thurman’s religious cultural criticism admonishes the disinherited to embrace their option to love. Interestingly, the option to love actually places the power in the hands of the oppressed because the oppressor does not dictate the motive to love. This freedom to love despite the oppressor’s acceptance or non-acceptance is the God-given agency that culminates Thurman’s interpretative understanding of the religion of Jesus.

Thurman’s commitment to the love ethic and non-violence places him the tradition of African American religious thinkers whose critique of culture involves non-violent resistance based on the principle of love for one’s enemy. This tradition includes religious critics to likes of Benjamin E. Mays, Martin Luther King Jr., Fannie Lou Hamer, and Jesse Jackson etc. In my assessment, Thurman is the ideological father of this tradition because he better than anyone else articulated the connection between the religion of Jesus and the loving practice of non-violent resistance.

Thus far, we’ve attempted to explicate how Thurman utilizes the life and ministry of Jesus as bases for critiquing the US culture of his day. Using the religious cultural critical framework purported in this paper we’ve revealed that Thurman described the 20th century US culture of his day as oppressive toward the Negro, he discerned that the reason the culture was oppressor is because it denied the Negro full citizenship, however he constructively argued that the Negroes could triumph over their oppression by finding their God-given inner strength and embracing the ethic of love.

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26 Thurman, 89.
27 Thurman, 26.
Section 3: James Cone as Religious Critic

The career of James Hal Cone serves as a unique response to the crisis of American racism in the twentieth century. Although he was born 39 years after Howard Thurman in the year 1938, he like Thurman lived during a time in American history when blacks were being denied their basic human rights and were viewed as little more than second and third class citizens. As an American theologian of African descent (arguably the most celebrated one produced in this country), Cone looks at the United States through a different lens from many theologians of the twentieth and twenty-first century. As one grounded in and nourished by the black Christian community and the black freedom movement, Cone, by personal choice and by social conditioning, allies himself in word and deed with the oppressed wretched people of the earth. Over the last forty plus years, Cone’s commitment to the cause of the oppressed has manifested through the intellectual production of texts and lectures that provide a theological response to the suffering of the most vulnerable in our society.

As one born and reared in Arkansas during the time of Jim Crow and segregation, Cone experienced racial discrimination and depreciation during his childhood. Though he was a child of the black church tradition and a professed Christian, throughout his adolescence he pondered why the black congregations he encountered were so uncritical in matters of faith. This curiosity led him to enter Philander Smith College, where he learned the value of connecting faith with the resources of higher education. After graduating from Philander College, he enrolled in Garrett Theological Seminary and then went on to receive a Ph.D. in systematic theology from Northwestern University in 1965. Eventually, Cone would become the Charles A. Briggs Distinguished Professor of Systematic Theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York; where he has taught for the last four decades.

As aforementioned Cone during his early years struggled with questions related to the theological integrity and critical examination of Christian faith; and in many ways Dr. Cone’s career as a theologian can be seen as a lifelong quest to address these issues. Principally, at the core of Cone’s work and theological quest is the task of developing a Christian theology out of the black experience of slavery, segregation, and the struggle for a just society. It is this task that informs the structure and substance of Cone’s religious cultural criticism.

Central to James Cone’s religious cultural criticism is a commitment to developing Christian theological thought that speaks to the realities of the African American experience. And given the reality that the experience of blacks in America has been plagued by racism and various forms of dehumanization, Cone’s criticism has mostly been a critique of the racist white American culture and society. Since 1967, in the aftermath of the Detroit riots, Cone has sought to confront the problem of racism with a theological critique of culture that takes seriously notions of liberation and

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empowerment. In fact, Cone’s first published work *Black Theology and Black Power*\(^{29}\) was an attempt to name, classify, and critique the racism in the theological academy and the church by identifying liberation as the heart of the Christian gospel.

Taking into account the cultural critical methodology proposed in this research, the notion of liberation serves as the constructive element of Cone’s religious criticism. For Cone, liberation is both the task and the desired outcome of his theological thought. He writes:

“….the sole reason for the existence of Christian theology is to put into ordered speech the meaning of God’s activity in the world, so that the community of the oppressed will recognize that its inner thrust for liberation is not only consistent with the gospel but is the gospel of Jesus Christ.”\(^{30}\)

It is not completely clear, in a practical sense, how Cone envisions liberation in society. One can only assume from Cone’s writings that liberation as a goal is the actualization of a world where blacks (and all oppressed persons) are no longer subjected to structural racism and inequality and the world’s poor are raised from poverty and exploitation. However, theoretically, Cone is clear that liberation is the God-given power to break the chains of oppression.\(^{31}\)

In addition to being the constructive feature of Cone’s religious cultural criticism, the liberation of the community of the oppressed is also a discerning or assessing concept as well. In other words, liberation is not only the goal but it is also the standard by which culture and society is evaluated as being either just or unjust. Interestingly, Cone posits that Jesus Christ is the essence and revelation of this liberating standard.\(^{32}\) Therefore, Jesus Christ becomes a fundamental and determinative component of Cone’s religious criticism. In the balance of this section I will attempt to show how James Cone uses the person and ministry of Jesus Christ to critique the contemporary culture.

In 1970, James Cone produced one of the most highly debated and regarded theological works of the 20\(^{th}\) century. In his classic controversial book *A Black Theology of Liberation*, Cone pointedly offers his interpretation of the gospel of Christ as message of liberation to the poor and oppressed. The religious criticism Cone sets forth in this text is significant for primarily two reasons: (1) it clearly advances the type of cultural criticism proposed in this research and (2) it presents a standard example of the African American black love and power tradition.

Cone asserts at the beginning of his discussion of Jesus Christ that “unless his (Christ) existence is analyzed in light of the oppressed of the land, we are still wondering what his presence means for the auction block, the Underground Railroad,


\(^{31}\) Cone, 5.

\(^{32}\) Cone, 4, 5.
and contemporary manifestations of black power.” 33 With this statement Cone clearly puts forward the basis of his discourse which is to provide an account of what the existence of Christ has to say to the oppressive contemporary context. In this sense Cone, like Thurman, places his Christology in the context of cultural analysis and critique, insomuch as his purpose is to display how the person and ministry of Christ relate to the racist 20th century context.

The primary critical interpretive aspect of Cone’s critique is the concept of “the black Christ.” 34 According to Cone, “the black Christ” is the Incarnate One who represents the complete opposite of the values of white culture. In other words, Christ is black becomes he identifies in his being with the oppressed black community and as a result solidifies as good what whites have ignored or regarded as evil. This notion of “the black Christ” is the substratum of Cone’s descriptive, discerning, and constructive Christological cultural criticism.

The discerning and constructive elements are so pronounced and confronting in Cone’s thought that the descriptive analysis can be easily overshadowed. However Cone clearly provides a descriptive analysis in his cultural critical work. Consider this statement concerning the relevance of the existence of Jesus for blacks, he says, “….there is times when the burden and the agony of life become difficult, and the people feel powerless to do anything to change sorrow into joy. These occasions happen when somebody’s house is destroyed by fire, leaving a family shelterless with winter approaching. Then there is death, an ever present enemy….The most visible symbol of death’s power is found in the everyday presence of white people who violated black dignity at every level of black existence.” 35

With these words Cone provides a descriptive analysis of racist southern culture during the era of Jim Crow and segregation. Interestingly Cone, like Thurman, sees a parallel between the oppressive culture of his day and the social situation of the historical Jesus. Cone writes, “Without the certainty that Christ is with us as the historical Jesus was present with the humiliated and weak in Palestine, how can black people account for the power and courage to struggle against slave masters and overseers in the nineteenth century and the Klux Klux Klan and police in the twentieth?” 36

Cone’s interpretation of the historical Jesus as one present among the socially humiliated and weak in Palestine places Christ among the oppressed community. And as an oppressed person, Jesus’ social situation becomes the lived reality of the contemporary oppressed in time and space. Therefore, the notion of the black Christ

33 Cone, 110.
34 Cone, 117.
36 Cone, 112.
as oppressed serves as the basis of Cone’s descriptive analysis and thus accomplishes
the first task of religious cultural criticism.

Cone’s theology of “the black Christ” is not only descriptive but it is also discerning.
If the social context of “the black Christ” and the black community is one of oppression
and dehumanization, what accounts for these circumstances? The answer to this
question reveals the discerning element of Cone’s critique. According to Cone, the
oppressive circumstance is the result of the white society using Christianity as a tool to
support their interest and social power. In the process they have made Jesus an easy-
going white American who is completely alien to the black community. Moreover, the
hostile and oppressive black world is the result of blacks living without the protection of
the law.

It is important to note that Cone, similar to Thurman, assessed that the persistence
of oppression in the early to middle twentieth century was the result of Christianity being
hi-jacked by the oppressor. In fact, the works of both scholars offer a strong critique of
the mainstream US society in general and the American Christian culture in particular.
However Cone, unlike Thurman, specifically targets the white American theological
community as object of his criticism. In typical James Cone fashion, he writes,

“White theology…has been basically a theology of the white oppressor,
giving religious sanction to the genocide of Amerindians and the
enslavement of Africans. From the very beginning to the present day,
American white theological thought has been “patriotic,” either by defining
the theological task independently of black suffering (the liberal northern
approach) or by defining Christianity as compatible with white racism (the
conservative southern approach).”

Based on this analysis, Cone suggests that “the black Christ” incites the rebellious
impulse in blacks so that at the determined time the oppressed black community can
respond to the injustices of the white society and culture. This rebellious impulse,
nourished by “the black Christ” speaks to the constructive element of Cone’s religious
criticism which we will now turn our attention to.

The concepts of “the black Christ” and “the kingdom of God” are the central elements
of Cone’s constructive vision in his religious cultural critical thought. In his viewpoint,
Jesus as “the black Christ” means that the black revolution is God’s kingdom becoming
reality in America. Cone understands “the kingdom of God” to be the rule of God
breaking into the world and usurping the powers that enslave human lives. The
“kingdom of God” is the manifestation of the radical, revolutionary message of Christ in
lived reality.

This constructive vision Cone proposes is intended to give oppressed blacks hope
that they can, with God’s help, confront and change their downtrodden situation. In this
sense, the attainment of the kingdom of God is actually individuals coming into the

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37 Cone, 4.
38 Cone, 117.
realization of their true human worth and value. It is literally the acceptance of a way of life that knows and affirms one's sense of full personhood. This is Cone's view of the kingdom of God and the constructive activity of his religious cultural criticism.

In the end analysis, Cone's "black Christ" and "kingdom of God" are conceptual tools used to encourage the oppressed to love themselves and embrace their God-given power as persons. Insomuch as Cone accomplishes this task he places himself in the tradition of African American scholars who critique the culture by appealing to notions of communal self-love and racial empowerment. This tradition includes religious critics like Marcus Garvey, Malcolm X, James Cone, and Louis Farrakhan. Cone specifically critiques the post-Civil War Black Church for its indifference toward the Black power movement.

In this section, I attempted to show how the theologian James Cone utilizes the person and ministry of Jesus as a basis for critiquing the US culture. Employing the religious cultural critical concept proposed in this research I demonstrated that Cone described the twentieth century US culture as oppressive and dehumanizing to the black community, he discerned that the cause of the oppression was the denial of black's protection by the law and the racist disposition of white theological discourse. Constructively, he proposed that the black community would defeat oppression when they enter "the kingdom of God" as instituted by "the black Christ." For the kingdom of God is the oppressed ones coming into the realization of who they really are in God.

Concluding Observations, Considerations, and Critiques

Observations

W.E.B. Du Bois concludes "Of the Faith of the Fathers," with a critique of what he regards as the diverging ethical tendencies of African American religious race politics—"for first tending toward radicalism, the other toward hypercritical compromise." Unfortunately, these tendencies are two sides of the same problematic coin and offer insight into the dilemma black religious cultural critics' face today. The former, often touted by intellectuals and scholars, emphasizes the radicalism of African American resistance to the point of excess. While the latter, merely seek means of compromise to find some degree of advantage and stability in the midst of unstable conditions.

In my view, Du Bois' analysis generally sums up the dilemma of African American religious criticism over the past fifty or sixty years. On one side, there are those of Thurman's tradition, who sought to critique culture by appealing to the better angels of its nature practicing principles of love and non-violent resistance. These individuals, with magnanimity and grace, sacrificed the bodies and livelihood for opportunity to have a seat at the table of brotherhood and sisterhood. On the other side, there are those of Cone's tradition, who wrote to eradicate racism by promoting an aggressive self-love

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39 Though I am aware that Cone's theological body of work includes elements of the Christian love tradition as we have described it, I contend a full assessment of Cone's thought would reveal a strong emphasis on black love and power over and against universal love which extends to the so-called enemy.
that was only interested in black love and survival. These persons, with passion and
tenacity, seek to empower their community by inciting a spiritual revolution of social
rebellion that operates on the premise of by any means necessary.

To be sure, neither Cone, nor Thurman fit perfectly into either tradition that I have
described this paper. But they both carry strands of these traditions in their thinking. At
times, the cultural criticism of Thurman can be so utopian, reconciliatory, and loved filled
that it’s like a denial of the actual harsh existential realities of disinherit ed people. Then
at times Cone's cultural criticism can sound so militant and combative that it’s like the
denial of love and reconciliation altogether. Yet, despite these extremes, these scholars
through their religious cultural criticism have convicted the hearts of countless
oppressors and encouraged the hearts of innumerable oppressed folks.

Considerations
In this research, I have attempted to show that the effectiveness of Cone and
Thurman as religious critics is in large part due to a particular process of religious
cultural criticism. Though, both scholars approach the process in different manners
they maintain a commitment to the threefold cultural critical framework presented in this
paper. In addition to the framework, these scholars are also effective because their
constructive visions for community and liberation are built on the person and ministry of
Jesus Christ. Given the high-Christological leanings of the African American religious
community, any particular religious discourse that provides a compelling Christological
component has a chance to make an impact.

Critiques
After researching the extensively the thought of Cone and Thurman there are still
several questions and critiques that remain. One important question of consideration is
whether or not Jesus can be a viable symbol and source of cultural critique if he is not
viewed as a historical member of the Jewish underclass? This question seems relevant
given the fact that both scholars situate Jesus as among the socially marginalized and
then make that the basis of their critique. Moreover, they seem to suggest that a view
of Jesus that is disconnected from the context of oppression and disinheritance has
nothing to say to the contemporary Negro of the 20th century. Given the election of our
nation's first black president and the civil rights gained in this country over the last 40
years I can't help but wonder whether these themes of oppression and liberation still
have the potency they once did.

It would appear from a preliminary analysis of the work of Cone and Thurman that
one's portrait of Jesus ultimately expresses one's own normative statement about the
Christian faith and message to the world. In other words, though these thinkers provide
various interpretations of Jesus i.e. liberal, mystical, liberationist, and existentialist etc.
What they fail to acknowledge is the extent to which the Christ of faith and the Jesus of
history are so intertwined that a standard definition of Jesus is merely indiscernible. In
other words, given the emphasis that certain ideological groups place on specific
aspects of the person and work of Jesus Christ, how can we know what Christ is being
spoken of in any given situation or cultural context? Certainly Professor Cone is aware
of this problem. Perhaps that’s why he goes to great lengths to portray Jesus as black because he knows that any portrait he presents about Christ will ultimately say more about him than it will Christ anyway. I perceive this will be a continual challenge for African American cultural criticism in the days ahead.


