

## **Methodological Issues in Black Theology and Dalit Theology: A Critical Dialogue**

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### **Abstract**

All theologies emerge from human questions surrounding the relationship between an existential predicament and an ultimate concern. The existential situation provides the type of question posed and colors the answer received. One such instance can be seen in two different but relevant experiences of the people, namely Blacks in America and Dalits in India. Their theological methodologies emanate from two different social milieus, which present different sources of their systemic oppression: the former deals with the issue of racism and the latter casteism. This paper engages in a critical dialogue on the methodological issues in both Black Theology and Dalit Theology with an emphasis on exercising liberation in their present contexts. The rationale for selecting these two theologies is not their similarity in their historical portrayal of oppression but their common origins. There is a common collective heritage among Dalits, South Africans and other people of the African Diaspora. According to V. T. Rajshekar, Dalits are the descendants of Africans who founded the Indus Valley Civilization and who were enslaved by fair-skinned Aryans from the North. He goes on to state that the separation of the struggle of African Americans in the United States from other people of African descent in the Diaspora is harmful to the collective uplift of a people. This common origin and the experience of oppression, along with a friendly yet critical approach, provide us with clues for interrogating Black and Dalit methods.

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Theology has always characterized itself not in a vacuum, but in the concrete realities of the lives of people in a particular period of time. It has, at times, been portrayed intellectually, religiously or under the power of an empire in a particular place and period of time. However, doing theology has never been a value- or context-free exercise. Until the nineteenth century, a major part of the theological

enterprise invested its energy in addressing the message of Christianity in the context of a thriving power struggle and an assumed religious superiority. This cultural mandate stemmed from the manifest destiny to expand the Church and, of course, from the forces of the Enlightenment. However, the twentieth century saw the rise of Black,<sup>1</sup> Dalit, Feminist, Latin American, Latino/Latina and American Indian liberation theologies that stem from the experiences of oppression of people based on race, caste, gender and socio-political economic and cultural forces. All theologies emerge from human questions surrounding the relationship between an existential predicament and an ultimate concern. The existential situation provides the type of question posed and colors the answer received.<sup>2</sup> One such instance can be seen in two different but relevant experiences of the people, namely Blacks in America and Dalits in India. Their theological methodologies emanate from two different social milieus, which present different sources of their systemic oppression: the former deals with the issue of racism and the latter casteism. This paper engages in a critical dialogue on the methodological issues in both Black Theology and Dalit Theology with an emphasis on exercising liberation in their present contexts.

The critical dialogue employed here is not a concept that merely entails superficial conversation. Rather, it passionately involves the world of the other in a revolutionary way in order to disturb and awaken faith. To phrase it differently, critical dialogue presupposes the need to be a critical friend who is close by and at the same time an observer without cultural biases. Anthony Reddie states,

One needs to maintain a critical distance between oneself and the subjects with whom one is engaging. That distance has to be carefully realized, for if one is too far removed from the experiential realities of the Black subject, the facility of signifying or the subordinate elements of “cultural dissonance” will leave the scholar floundering in a cultural vacuum.<sup>3</sup>

Nevertheless, any theological discourse is not culture-neutral, and this paper will, therefore, reflect some contextual and cultural bias of the author<sup>4</sup> while attempting

1 The words African American, Afro-American, People of African descent, African Diaspora, People of color and Blacks are used interchangeably. However, the author will be using mostly Blacks in the entire paper for people of African descent.

2 James Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (New York: Seabury, 1975). Cf. also, Dwight N. Hopkins, *Black Theology USA and South Africa* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989), 7.

3 Anthony G. Reddie, *Dramatizing Theologies: A Participative Approach to Black God-Talk* (London: Equinox, 2006), 124; see also Anthony G. Reddie, *Nobodies to Somebodies: A Practical Theology for Education and Liberation* (Peterborough: Epworth, 2003), 97–99.

4 The author is from India and a non-Dalit coming from middle class upper caste family. However, the author has experienced the evil side of caste oppression and stands against such evil practices. As James Cone argues, if anybody wants to become involved in Blacks’ struggle, then s/he has to become Black symbolically and passionately. James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 40th anniversary ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2012), 103.

to address the issues. As James Cone opines, “Culture refers to the way persons live and move in the world; it molds their thought forms.”<sup>5</sup> Therefore, this paper will also reflect the author’s cultural expression of the community he represents, i.e., a non-casteist urban pluralistic community with international exposure.

The rationale for selecting these two theologies is not their similarity in their historical portrayal of oppression but their common origins. There is a common collective heritage among Dalits, South Africans and other people of the African Diaspora. According to V. T. Rajshekar, Dalits are the descendants of Africans who founded the Indus Valley Civilization and who were enslaved by fair-skinned Aryans from the North.<sup>6</sup> This common origin and the experience of oppression, along with a friendly yet critical approach, provide us with clues for interrogating Black and Dalit methods. Unlike Mary Veeneeman’s approach of analyzing different theological methods without advocating for any specific method, the author tends to be in favor of the inter-contextual liberation method to establish a case for Black and Dalit experiences.

This study will focus on the following questions: What are the methodological approaches undertaken to respond to systemic violence against these groups? Do the methodologies used by Black and Dalit theologians adequately address their issues today? This paper will take the alternative constructive method of *Sarvodaya*’ model of inter-contextuality for a symbiotic methodological dialogue. Using the *Sarvodaya* model inter-contextually, the author aims to say “no” to all elements of dehumanization beyond boundaries and “yes” to all those committed to the affirmation of the fullest meaning by achieving freedom of life.

## Existing Literatures

There is a plethora of literature on Black theological discourses, from James Cone’s *Black Theology and Black Power*<sup>8</sup> to Victor Anderson’s *Beyond Ontological Blackness*.<sup>9</sup> This literature provides substantial material on socio-economic, religious, cultural and political reflection on the Black experience and ethos. At the same time, the writings of Dalit theologians from the time of Arvind P. Nirmal’s *A Reader in Dalit Theology*<sup>10</sup> to Sathianathan Clarke’s recent edition of *Dalit*

5 Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 29.

6 Rajshekar goes on to state that the separation of the struggle of African Americans in the United States from other people of African descent in the Diaspora is harmful to the collective uplift of a people. V. T. Rajshekar, *Dalit: The Black Untouchables of India* (Atlanta: Clarity, 1987), 5.

7 It was first used by Acharya Samantbhadra, a Jain servant of 2nd century A.D. It was later taken by Gandhiji along with his influence from John Ruskin’s “unto the last” to explain his action, in his liberative freedom movement of India.

8 James. H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: Seabury, 1969).

9 Victor Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness: An Essay on African American Religious and Cultural Criticism* (New York: Continuum, 1995).

10 Arvind. P. Nirmal, ed., *A Reader in Dalit Theology* (Madras: Gurukul, 1992).

*Theology in the Twenty-first Century*<sup>11</sup> represent significant studies on the Dalit experience and its praxis. These texts have provided a critique of American and Indian society, recommendations for Black and Dalit empowerment, and steps for psychological, physical, theological, and ontological revolution. As a whole, however, this literature has dealt with the experiences of Blacks and Dalits separately.

Nevertheless, there are a few writings that particularly acknowledge the collective struggle of people of African descent, such as *The Rhetoric of Revolution: The Black Consciousness Movement and Dalit Panther Movement* by Antonette Jefferson.<sup>12</sup> Previous researchers also investigated the similar plights among people of African descent throughout the Diaspora, especially in India. In their writings, the authors focused primarily on the convergence and divergence of liberation theologies. Anthony Pinn and Benjamin Valentin, in *The Ties that Bind: African American and Hispanic American/Latino/a theology in dialogue*, undertook a theological dialogue between Blacks and Hispanic-Americans. Nevertheless, to achieve clarity in theological approaches used by Black and Dalit theologians, it is critical to interact with some of the standard jargon in theological methods, such as in Stanley Grenz and Roger Olsen's *Twentieth-Century Theology*, Mary Veeneman's *Introducing Theological Method*, and Michael Gorman's *Scripture and Its Interpretation*. This paper will deploy an inter-contextual reading but in a symbiotic dialogical form.

### Context of Oppression: The Centrality of the Periphery

Grenz and Olson in *Twentieth-Century Theology* argue that "theology describes faith within a specific historical and cultural context, and therefore it is unashamedly a contextual discipline."<sup>13</sup> If theology is defined historically and contextually, then understanding the historical context in which the liberation movements of Blacks and Dalits occurred is central to grasping both the subtle and salient nuances of these liberation movements. The history of the oppression of Blacks generally began in 1441 when Portuguese sailors left the West Coast of Africa with a group of captive Africans.<sup>14</sup> Dwight Hopkins asserts that "up until 1865, the official end of the North American civil war, roughly 100 million black people had been taken from their homelands in Africa, primarily from the West Coast."<sup>15</sup>

11 Sathianathan Clarke, Deenabandhu Manchala and Phillip Vinod Peacock, eds., *Dalit Theology in the Twenty-first Century* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010).

12 Antonette Jefferson, "The Rhetoric of Revolution: The Black Consciousness Movement and Dalit Panther Movement," *The Journal of Pan African Studies* 2 (July 2008).

13 Stanley J. Grenz and Roger E. Olson, *20th-Century Theology: God and the World in a Transitional Age* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 1997), 9.

14 Colin A. Palmer, "The First Passage: 1502–1619," in *To Make Our World Anew: A History of African Americans*, ed. Robin D.G. Kelley and Earl Lewis (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 9.

15 Dwight N. Hopkins, "The Basics of Black Theology," in *Frontiers in Dalit Hermeneutics*, ed.

Blacks endured legalized slavery first in Virginia and then across North America from 1619 until 1865. The legalized slavery of Blacks defined American history.<sup>16</sup>

Although slavery was intended to end after the declaration of Emancipation Proclamation in 1863 and with the culmination of the Civil war in 1865, it was essentially re-instituted by the federal government and local states through Jim Crow laws<sup>17</sup> that segregated, isolated, and oppressed Black people in all walks of social, physical, and economic life, even following (and continuing long after) the passing of the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> Amendments (adopted between 1865–1870).<sup>18</sup> William Loren Katz argues that the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment, which was aimed to protect the rights and freedom of Blacks, ultimately neglected to do so, becoming instead the protector of corporations.<sup>19</sup> Black codes was enacted by the newly constituted southern governments to empower white supremacy, regardless of the ratification of the 13th Amendment. Important Supreme court cases like *Slaughter-House* case in 1873, *United States v Harris*, and *Plessy v Fergusson* in 1896 were instrumental in undermining the efficacy and practice of these amendments.<sup>20</sup>

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James Massey and Samson Prabhakar (Bangalore: BTESSC/SATHRI, 2005), 112.

16 Mildred Bain and Ervin Lewis, eds., *From Freedom to Freedom: African Roots in American Soil* (New York: Random House, 1977).

17 Jim Crow laws was popularized in the ante-bellum Minstrel routine of Thomas Dartmouth Rice, who in 1828 paraded out of Baltimore theatre in blackface and costume. Thomas Rice, also called “Daddy Rice,” imitated African-American songs and danced to entertain a white crowd. Later, in the 1870s, Jim Crow laws were passed that discriminated against African-Americans in the Southern states. See William Loren Katz, *Eyewitness: The Negro in American History* (New York: Pitman Publishing Corporation, 1967), 340–41; see also Melvin Urofsky, “Jim Crow Law History & Facts,” *Encyclopedia Britannica*, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Jim-Crow-law>.

18 The Emancipation Proclamation declares, “That on the 1<sup>st</sup> day of January, A.D. 1863, all persons held as slaves within any State or designated part of a State the people whereof shall then be in rebellion against the United States shall be then, thenceforward, and forever free; and the executive government of the United States, including the military and naval authority thereof, will recognize and maintain the freedom of such persons and will do no act or acts to repress such persons, or any of them, in any efforts they may make for their actual freedom.” *Emancipation Proclamation* (1863), Africans in America: Historical Documents, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/aia/part4/4h1549.html>

19 William Loren Katz, *Eyewitness: A Living Documentary of the African American Contribution to American History* (New York: Pitman, 1967), 287.

20 After the Civil war, the reconstruction amendments were aimed at abolishing segregation and uniting the whole populace by giving liberty, equal treatment, and voting rights. However, these laws were not ultimately put into practice due to their erosion by state and federal court decisions. For instance, in the 1896 *Plessy vs. Fergusson* case, the Supreme Court approved of a “separate but equal” doctrine, ordering that segregation did not violate the United States constitution. As a result, the new order served to enforce Jim Crow laws, which stood as the law of the land until 1954. The result of the *Slaughter-House Cases* in 1873 limited the protections proffered by the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment, as the court ruled that states still possessed significant control over matters of civil rights. In 1883, *United States v Harris* resulted in racist murderers walking free without any federal prosecution. See Nathan Newman and J J Gass, “A New Birth of Freedom: The Forgotten History of the 13th, 14th, and 15th Amendments,” *Brennan Center for Justice at NYU School of Law*, Judicial Independence Series, <http://www.brennancenter.org/sites/default/files/legacy/d/ji5.pdf>, 9–24. See also William Katz, *Eyewitness*, 341.

Dwight Hopkins notes that “white Americans set up Christian terrorist groups<sup>21</sup> to humiliate blacks by raping, murdering, and lynching [them], as a method to enforce informal slavery.”<sup>22</sup> As the US constitution in the 19<sup>th</sup> century allowed states to determine voting eligibility, people of color experienced disenfranchisement. For example, most states allowed only white males who owned property to vote (by 1856 all white males could vote irrespective of property ownership). Indeed, states could raise any of a host of issues to deny non-whites the right to vote.<sup>23</sup> In all, despite the Reconstruction amendments, and because eligibility was not clearly marked in the US constitution, people of color were consistently denied the right to vote.

As Mark Chapman rightly points out, “The optimism of the 1950s and early 1960s turned to hopelessness and despair as African-Americans in the urban North discovered that the passage of civil rights legislation had no bearing on their economic plight.”<sup>24</sup> This plight was based on being black. Blackness or skin color determined their human existence, which in turn is based on white superiority.

White superiority over blackness was not a European creation; rather, it was borrowed from the biblical story of Ham, which historically explained “the origin and natural subordination of black cultures and peoples and the negativity of blackness.”<sup>25</sup> Thomas Virgil Peterson quotes James Sloan, a Mississippi Presbyterian cleric, who said that “the sons of Ham are intended by God to be subordinate to whites on all fronts: Anatomy, physiology, history and theology . . . sustain

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21 Hopkins refers here to the Klu Klux Klan (KKK) as a “Christian terrorist group,” which is a modern construct. In any case, in the era under discussion, the KKK were racist heroes among many whites, consisting themselves of a group of white Southerners angered over and threatened by the emancipation of Blacks, and thus the loss of slave labor, following the Civil War. See Allen W. Trelease, *White Terror: The Klu Klux Klan Conspiracy and Southern Reconstruction* (1971; reprint, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995).

22 Hopkins, “The Basics of Black Theology,” 116.

23 As Kevin Coleman points out, “The Civil Rights Acts of 1957, 1960, and 1964 had included provisions intended to guarantee voting rights but, according to the Johnson administration Attorney General, Nicholas Katzenbach, they “had only minimal effect. They [were] too slow.” The proposed “Voting Rights Act of 1965” abandoned this “measured” approach and called for certain states and jurisdictions to demonstrate progress, while submitting to federal oversight of voting changes. It was intended “[t]o enforce the fifteenth amendment to the Constitution of the United States, and for other purposes.” Kevin Coleman, *The Voting Rights Act of 1965: Background and Overview*, in Congressional Research Services. [https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20150310\\_R43626\\_af64c8a39967fe182f8aad6097d6b6d94be83352.pdf](https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20150310_R43626_af64c8a39967fe182f8aad6097d6b6d94be83352.pdf), 12. See also “The Voting Rights Act of 1965” in *History of Federal Voting Rights Laws*, [http://www.justice.gov/crt/about/vot/intro/intro\\_b.php](http://www.justice.gov/crt/about/vot/intro/intro_b.php).

24 While blacks had been granted liberty in U.S laws, they seldom experienced liberty in their economic lives. Mark Chapman, *Christianity on Trial: African-American Religious Thought Before and After Black Power* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996), 3.

25 Robert E. Hood, *Begrimed and Black: Christian Traditions on Blacks and Blackness* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 155.

one another.”<sup>26</sup> Concerning the story of Ham with relation to black oppression, Mary Veeneman interprets the biblical text and opines that “the origin of this interpretation of the biblical text may be rabbinic Judaism. Some statements in the Midrash, Talmud, and later medieval texts seem to indicate that God cursed the descendants of Ham with dark skin and lives of Slavery.”<sup>27</sup> Moreover, Hood goes a step further and argues that this message took blackness or darkness as a sign of evil and inferiority, which became the topic of many Christian sermons in colonial America.<sup>28</sup> However, Veeneman analyzes rabbinic sources and argues that “rabbinic literature follows the biblical text in seeing Canaan, rather than Ham, as the one who was cursed.”<sup>29</sup>

Using the Bible as the authority, Blacks were pushed to the ghettos to be the bearer of the white agenda. Later, white religion came as a savior to help save Blacks from their status. Many Blacks adopted white religion for their survival. White religion was therefore able to thwart the identity of Blacks by assimilating them to white religion in the contemporary society. Within this context, Elijah Muhammed appealed to fellow black men and women to “get out of the church and into the Mosques” as the sole solution to Black oppression.<sup>30</sup> According to Cone, this brought a crisis of identity for Blacks. However, one could argue that the discrimination was already there and that the story of Ham was used after the fact to justify it, i.e., eisegesis (reading into a text) versus exegesis (reading out of a text).

Whatever be the origin, the story of Ham played a significant role for the oppression of Blacks since the seventeenth century and throughout the American Civil War. In her analysis, Veeneman relates Cone’s idea of black experience with the continued oppression from the white folks; these have not only historical significance but also political and ecclesiological effects. Despite Veeneman’s meticulous account of Black theology of liberation and its methodology through the lens of James Cone, she wittingly or unwittingly overlooked the other methodologies in Black theology like Mark Chapman, Dwight Hopkins, Victor Anderson, Horace Griffin and so on. However, omissions like these are expected when summarizing a big issue in a short form.

The 1960s were marked by the activities of Stokely Carmichael, Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X, who initiated the Civil Rights Movement and the Black

26 Thomas Virgil Peterson, *Ham and Japheth: The Mythic World of Whites in the Antebellum South*, ATLA Monograph Series (New Jersey: Scarecrow Press and The American Theological Library Association, 1978), 97.

27 Mary M. Veeneman, *Introducing Theological Method: A Survey of Contemporary Theologians and Approaches* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), 128. Michigan: Baker Academic, 2017

28 Hood, *Begrimed and Black*, 159.

29 Veeneman, *Introducing Theological Method*, 129.

30 Chapman, *Christianity on Trial*, 46.



Power Movement to restore Black identity. Carmichael was the one who shouted out “Black Power” during a “march begun by James Meredith, Stokely Carmichael of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) [as they] rallied a crowd in Greenwood, Mississippi”;<sup>31</sup> and it led to a significant debate within the Civil Rights Movement. It became a debate because of King’s worry about its connotation of violence.<sup>32</sup> Malcolm X, because he was from the North, reflected a more nationalist position which carried the anger of the “Black Power Movement.”<sup>33</sup> Black consciousness, advocated by King, provided Black power, a reliable weapon in the hands of the oppressed to fight white brutality.

This consciousness was given proper shape by the rise of Black theology, among which the major personalities involved have been James Cone, J. Deotis Roberts, and Albert Cleage, among others. Among prominent theologians, James Cone was more sympathetic to the radical Black power movement of Malcolm X, as he applied the revolutionary principles of Black power to Christian liberative praxis in Tillichian terms.<sup>34</sup> In actuality, Cone was challenged about the theology he was writing because he was using European sources to write a Black liberation theology. This was rectified by Cone in his later work called *The Spiritual and the Blues: An Interpretation*,<sup>35</sup> where he tried to wrest the mini-narratives of African history from the clutches of Eurocentric principles. However, Joseph Washington challenged “the black congregations to ‘go out of the business’ and enter white congregations *en masse*.”<sup>36</sup> Washington was not sympathetic towards the theology for Blacks as it would mimic White theology, and therefore the best way to theologize would be to march into white churches.

“Standing on the shoulders”<sup>37</sup> of first-generation Black theologians, the second-generation theologians like Dwight Hopkins, Mark Chapman, Cornel West, Garth Baker-Fletcher, Kati Cannon, Jacquelyn Grant, Horace Griffin and Victor Anderson espoused issues that were uncritically overlooked in the works of

31 “Black Power,” in *Stanford: The Martin Luther King, Jr. Research and Education Institute*, <https://kinginstitute.stanford.edu/encyclopedia/black-power>

32 “Black Power,” in *The Martin Luther King, Jr. Encyclopedia*, [http://mlkpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc\\_stokely\\_carmichael\\_1941\\_1998/](http://mlkpp01.stanford.edu/index.php/encyclopedia/encyclopedia/enc_stokely_carmichael_1941_1998/)

33 These movements addressed the issue of Black oppression and the need for Black power. King, being an Integrationist, gave a Christian message to Black consciousness, and Malcolm X, a Muslim nationalist, provided the political, public and ethical mandate for Black Power. James Cone, *Martin and Malcolm and America* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 2.

34 It was a Black pilgrimage to attack white supremacy and white theologies. Black theology sought to topple the Tower of Babel of white belief that regarded white Christianity as a means to make Blacks better and obedient slaves. James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore, eds., *Black Theology: A Documentary History 1966–1979* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 123; see also James H. Cone, “Jesus Christ in Black Theology,” in *Liberation Theology: An Introductory Reader*, ed. Curt Cadorette, et al. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1992), 145.

35 James Cone, *The Spiritual and the Blues: An Interpretation* (New York: Seabury, 1972).

36 Joseph Washington, *Black Religion*, Beacon Paperback ed. (Boston: Beacon, 1966), 289.

37 Chapman, *Christianity on Trial*, 5.



the first generation. Those issues include gender, ethnicities, class, sexual orientation, and ethics that defined the marginal existence of Black racial identity.

On the other hand, Dalit oppression, according to Dr. Bhimrao Ramji Ambedkar, manifested as dehumanization in the hands of oppressors and is based on one's caste and untouchability. Some theorists trace this structure to the Aryans and their ways of relating to the people of India as they encountered them through invasion/migration from the northwest around 1500 BCE. However, Ambedkar holds that the structure has been the result of the distinction between tribesmen and the "broken men" from alien tribes.<sup>38</sup> But most anthropologists concur with the former view. Moreover, from the outset, Aryans looked at the indigenous people as culturally inferior and excluded them as ritually unclean or *chandalas* (post-Rig Vedic literature). Because *chandalas* were ritually unclean, they were treated as untouchables. Louis Dumont, a French anthropologist, considers untouchability as a cultural phenomenon of the Brahmanic social order. According to him, caste and untouchability represent the institutionalization of hierarchical values. These values stem from four castes predominant in India.<sup>39</sup> The lowest class is the Dalits, who are known as the untouchables and therefore are not included in the caste structure as they are not even counted as humans. In this ladder of caste structure, hierarchy is expressed as a cultural signboard of relative purity and impurity and in which Brahmins are placed at the top and the untouchables at the bottom.<sup>40</sup> For James Massey, the word "Dalit" comes from the Sanskrit word *dal* meaning "broken," "crushed" or "split open."<sup>41</sup> Put differently, Dalits have been the most degraded, broken, downtrodden, exploited, and least educated in Indian society.

S. Lourdanathan opines that the intervention of Buddhism, B. R. Ambedkar and the Dalit movements played a vital role in the emancipation of Dalits. Buddhism brought the concept of non-violence and equality of all humans. However, Massey denies the role of Buddhism in the emancipation of Dalits in practical

38 James Massey, *Roots of Dalit History, Christianity, Theology and Spirituality* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1996), 51.

39 Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and its Implication* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 205–12. The Brahmins, the priests and holy leaders represent the highest class, which is followed by the Kshatriya (Kings), the princes and warriors. The *vaishyas* are the farmers, merchants, and artisans of society, and the *shudras* are servants and workers. See Sager Schmidt, et al., *Patterns of Religion* (Belmont: Wordsworth, 2005), 132–45.

40 V. Devasahayam, "Pollution, Poverty and Powerlessness—A Dalit Perspective," in *A Reader in Dalit Theology*, ed. A. P. Nirmal (Madras: Gurukul Lutheran Theological College & Research Institute, 1990), 1–6.

41 Dalits have been socially and culturally, economically and politically subjugated and marginalized through three thousand years of history. Here Massey wanted to liberate Dalits from the anthropological construct by the Brahmanical order. This can be accomplished only when Dalit anthropology confronts its own historical credibility as the original inhabitants of India. James Massey, *Towards Dalit Hermeneutics: Rereading the Text, the History and the Literature* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1994), 28.

forms.<sup>42</sup> Their interventions promoted a philosophy of resistance and at times strategic interventions to restore the “Speaking body” of Dalits, which was muted by the casteist philosophy. He argues that the benumbed body of the Dalits, by and within the traditional Hindu caste system, needed to be empowered by projecting a political philosophy of Dalit liberation.<sup>43</sup> However, the post-Independence era saw the hard toil of B. R. Ambedkar, the ideas regarding self-respect of Jyotiba Phule in Maharashtra,<sup>44</sup> and the Dravidian movement of Periyar in Tamilnadu.<sup>45</sup> These, together with the *adi-Hindu* or *adi-Andhra* movement<sup>46</sup> all over India, enabled the informed affirmative action for the Dalits and the *Adivasis* (original inhabitants) to be enshrined in the Constitution of India.<sup>47</sup> From the 1970s onwards, the Dalits forcefully expressed a social, political and cultural awareness in the form of Dalit literature, Dalit organizations, and Dalit political parties. This awareness resulted in the organization of Christian Dalits into various grass roots movements and the fight against the unjust marginalization at the hands of dominant Christians and against the government bias against religious freedom. Their timely consciousness of who they are and what they should do to achieve their rightful place in society became the stepping stone towards a wider movement of liberation.

The efforts toward Dalit theological discourse made a radical break with the Brahmanical theologies and their major concentration on elucidating a hermeneutical key within the premises of the Indian philosophical system. This philosophical system was casteist in nature and undermined the Dalit experience. In such a context, Dalit theology developed by Arvind P. Nirmal, James Massey and

42 Massey, *Towards Dalit Hermeneutics*, 15–30.

43 S. Louridunathan, “The Cultural Context for Evolving a Philosophy of Dalit Emancipation,” in *Frontiers in Dalit Hermeneutics*, ed. James Massey and Samson Prabhakar (Bangalore: BTESSC/SATHRI, 2005), 239.

44 Jyotiba Phule (1827–1890), coming from an inferior “mali” caste in Maharashtra, was a prominent activist, thinker and social reformer during the 19th century. During his time, he tried bringing in positive renovations in the spheres of education, agriculture, caste system, social position of women, etc. He was the founder of *Satya shodhak Samaj* (Truth Seeking Association) Movement. See Tarkateertha Laxmanshastri Joshi, Jyotirao Phule, trans. Daya Agarwal, <http://www.arvindguptatoys.com/arvindgupta/phule.pdf>

45 E. V. Ramasami, or E.V.R. as he was popularly known, was born on Sept. 17, 1879 at Erode in Tamil Nadu. In 1925, he left the Congress party and fought against the caste practices in Kerala. E.V.R. strove for the emancipation of the exploited masses and weaker sections of society. See *Social Science History* 8, Social Science History Association (New Delhi: Ratna Sagar, 2005), 59.

46 This movement originated in Andhra Pradesh, under the leadership of Bhagya Reddy Verma who endlessly engaged in consciousness-raising among the Dalits as to their identity and plights. Inspired by Ambedkar, he supported separate electorates for Dalits. See Swapna Samel, *Dalit Movement in South India 1857–1950* (New Delhi: Serials, 2004).

47 Dalit and Adivasis Right initiatives under The Constitution of India have banned any form of structural and individual violence rendered against Dalits and Adivasis under Article 17 and Prevention of Atrocities Act, 1989. See National Advisory Council, *Strengthening the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 & Rules 1995*, [http://nac.nic.in/pdf/scest\\_recom.pdf](http://nac.nic.in/pdf/scest_recom.pdf)

M. E. Prabhakar gave a systematic representation of Dalit experience and history from a theological perspective. Following their methodological exclusivism as the theological method, the issue of marginal Dalits to the center of theological debate became warranted. However, after three decades of survival, Dalit theology stagnated as its contribution to the Dalit cause became minimal in the postliberal and postmodern context of India. Therefore, the second generation of theologians like Sathianathan Clarke, Peniel Rajkumar, Phillip Peacock, L. Jayachitra, Monica Melanchthon, Evangeline Rajkumar and Y. T. Vinaraj brought a different framework for interpreting the Dalit experience from variegated perspectives. These include gender, class, and globalization. Since mapping the stories of Black and Dalit experiences depicts one side of the story of oppression, it nevertheless opens up a platform for an open conversation. Each of these stories “shows what is at stake in these kinds of conversations.”<sup>48</sup>

### Level of Oppression?

Is it justifiable to quantify the oppression of people? The level of oppression is always contested by those who compare it. Where Sanjay Paswan and Pramanshi Jaideva—Indian anthropologists—err, however, is in suggesting that the level of oppression suffered by Dalits is greater than that of enslaved Africans in America or Europe because those other places “were better placed in terms of certain minimum access to civilized life such as education and training.”<sup>49</sup> Antonette Jefferson argues that this statement reinforces oppression by creating division within itself. Concurring with Jefferson, the author insinuates that Paswan and Jaideva did not have an accurate portrayal or had not done a thorough investigation of slavery in the States, where enslavers went to great lengths to ensure that Africans, like in the Dalit experience, were not afforded the opportunity of literacy. Jefferson resuscitates Paswan and Jaideva’s assertion:

Dalits are vulnerable to “domination, exploitation and oppression by powerful, aggressive, and arrogant self-serving socio-economic and political interests” [which] forces one to reject trivializing the oppression of people of African descent.<sup>50</sup>

In other words, oppression cannot be measured on a single level. There are various forms of oppression, and they need not be in contest with one another. Blacks are oppressed based on their blackness, and Dalits on their lineage. Both were “destined” to be servants. Whatever the level of oppression, the experiences

48 Veeneman, *Introducing Theological Method*, 2.

49 Sanjay Paswan and Pramanshi Jaideva eds., *Encyclopaedia of Dalits in India*, vol. 14 (Delhi: Kalpaz, 2002), 15.

50 Jefferson, “The Rhetoric of Revolution,” 51.

of oppression present to us the face of racism and the face of casteism. These faces represent the doors that open to construct a methodology to deal with this oppression.

What is the common factor in these modes of oppression? There is another facet to be pursued, particularly the similarities between the racially-based oppression of Blacks and the caste-oriented marginalization of Dalits. Generally speaking, a caste is understood as a social class made distinct from others by differences in rank, profession or wealth. In Hinduism, everyone born in a caste, or *jati*, cannot change his or her caste until death. Michael D. Coogan explains:

Underlying the hierarchical social system is the fundamental Hindu idea that people are born into an existence that is the fruit of their past karma. One's social status in life is therefore traditionally considered predetermined and immutable, and the individual must adhere to the particular ritual practices and dietary rules of his or her *jati*.<sup>51</sup>

However, many scholars studying the history of India concur that the caste system might have evolved due to race. It is believed that, along with sacrificial religions, Aryans might have integrated a caste system into the country, dominating the darker-skinned natives.<sup>52</sup> An etymological inquiry supports this argument. The English word *caste* is probably derived from the Portuguese word *casta*, meaning race. It is especially used by the Europeans to denote the division of people in Hindu society. Varna, color, *jati*, and race are all Indian words that can be used interchangeably.<sup>53</sup> The word caste seems to have been applied to India by the Portuguese in the middle of fifteenth century.<sup>54</sup> The Hindu religious scriptures like Rigveda, Samveda, Yajurveda, Atharvaveda and the Manusmriti used caste ostensibly to differentiate people based on occupation, lineage, and the result of deeds in the past. Practically and more ontologically speaking, however, it refers to dark complexion. In India, dark symbolizes evil and uncleanness. Therefore, being dark or black is one of the root causes of any form of oppression that has been witnessed throughout the centuries, whether for Dalits or for Blacks.

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51 Micheal D. Coogan, *The Illustrated Guide to World Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 159–60; see also Katelyn Coyle, *The History of Untouchables: The Buraku and the Dalit*, <http://www.agorajournal.org/2006/History%20of%20Untouchables.pdf>

52 Partha P. Majumder, "Indian Caste Origins: Genomic Insights and Future Outlooks," *Genome Research* 11 (June 2001), 931–32.

53 S. N. Singh, *Reservation Policy for Backward Classes* (Jaipur, Rajasthan: Rawat Publication, 1996), 2.

54 J. Murdoch, *Review of Caste in India* (Jaipur, Rajasthan: Rawat, 1997), ii.

## Sources and Norms of Black and Dalit Theology

Sources and norms play a significant role in any methodology. They are presuppositions that determine the questions that are to be asked, as well as the answers that are to be given.<sup>55</sup> They are the data that enable any researcher to reach certain goals, thus making sources and norms a teleological imperative.<sup>56</sup> The sources and norms of Black and Dalit theology should consider the indispensability of community experience to articulate relevant theological discourse. However, White and Brahmanical theology present the gospel in light of the social, political, cultural, economic, and gender benefits of the White and the Brahmin majority. Both theologies cater to similar points of consensus.

Black and Dalit theology should take their experiences seriously as a “point of departure of all God-talk.” They acknowledge the importance of God’s revelation in Christ: “what does Jesus Christ mean when faced with White racism and casteism?”<sup>57</sup> The purpose is to make sense of their experiences in their Black and Dalit ethos. However, second-generation Black theologians like Horace Griffin critiqued Black theology for lack of a holistic appropriation of sources from the Black community. He argues that if Black experience does not consider the experience of the Black homosexual community, then liberation claimed by Black theologians is not liberation at all.<sup>58</sup> Therefore, Black theology needs to take the experience of sexual minorities into consideration to be holistic.

“History” is a vital source for determining the origin and perpetual forms of oppression. History is witness to the fact that along with the experience of slavery and subsequent treatment of Black and Dalit people as non-humans in America and India respectively, there was also resistance to every act of brutality with slave revolts and rebellions, the Abolitionist movements, and the Dalit Panther Movement.<sup>59</sup> It was a culture in which God situated Godself through Jesus Christ to emancipate the poor from the systemic oppression of their time and establish a kingdom of equal identity. Thus, a dignified identity is one of the main visions of liberative movements that play a centripetal role in the fight for liberation.<sup>60</sup>

Both theologies take “Revelation” seriously, as it provides the basis for Christian reflection. For Blacks, it is an event of historical importance. According to James Cone, it is “God’s self-revelation to the human race through a historical act

55 James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1970), 23.

56 Fernando Canale, “Evolution, Theology and Method, Part 3: Evolution and Adventist Theology,” *Andrews University Seminary Studies* 42 (Spring 2004): 10.

57 Canale, “Evolution Theology and Method,” 24; see also Kondasingu Jesurathnam, *Dalit Liberative Hermeneutics: Indian Christian Interpretation of Psalm 22* (Delhi: ISPCK, 2010), 161.

58 Horace L. Griffin, *Their Own Receive Them Not* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2006), 3–7.

59 Dalit Panther Movement in Mumbai by Namdev Dhasai in 1972, India was inspired by Black Panther Party.

60 V. Devasahayam, *Doing Dalit Theology in Biblical Key* (Madras: ISPCK, 1997), 13–18; see also Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 30.

of human liberation. It is a Black event—it is what blacks are doing about their liberation.”<sup>61</sup> Therefore, the event of God’s self-revelation in Jesus Christ reveals who God is and what God does for the marginalized. For Dalits, it is a “happening” whereby God not only breaks into the Israelite community but also supports Dalits’ ethos and frees them from the clutches of ongoing inhumanity.<sup>62</sup>

Concerning scripture, James Cone asserts that “The meaning of scripture is not to be found in the words of scripture as such but only in its power to point beyond itself to the reality of God’s revelation—and in America, that means black liberation.”<sup>63</sup> The Bible as scripture is very significant for the African-Americans because the Bible not only mirrors the Black experiences but also introduces to them a world of tradition built on the shoulders of people who lived in faith and total trust in God against all oppression; and it assures them that they are not alone in their faith journey. Michael Gorman in his work *Scripture and Its Interpretation* depicts the Bible as a “library” with “its historical and geographical context,”<sup>64</sup> embedded in the lived realities of a community of faith. He says, “And like a good library, in fact like any good book, Scripture also invites all of us into a world that we could not imagine on our own.”<sup>65</sup> Gorman’s ecumenical reading of Scripture is worth noting because it opens up diverse cultural and religious tradition that would enhance the faith journey. African-American use of scripture and their respective African religious roots, therefore, offer significant insights into the development of Black methodology.

“Tradition,” on the other hand, is to be used as far as it can be helpful for their liberative pursuit.<sup>66</sup> For instance, according to Gorman, “the importance of preaching in the black church tradition can be directly traced to the role of narrative and narrator (the storyteller, or *jail/fundi/griot*) in African tribal culture” for a liberative meaning.<sup>67</sup> This storytelling tradition offers significant resources in the search for authentic Black hermeneutics. African-American scholars like Dwight Hopkins and Mark Chapman use the traditional African storytelling method to cultivate Black liberation theologies.<sup>68</sup>

For Dalits, the scripture, like in Black theology, is rooted in its tradition and faith; and it offers a source of power and comfort in moments of crisis, both

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61 Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 31.

62 Devasahayam, *Doing Dalit Theology in Biblical Key*, 48.

63 Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 34.

64 Michael J. Gorman, ed., *Scripture and Its Interpretation: A Global, Ecumenical Introduction to the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2017), xxi.

65 Gorman, *Scripture and Its Interpretation*, xxii.

66 Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 34.

67 Gorman, *Scripture and Its Interpretation*, 301.

68 Dwight N. Hopkins, *Shoes That Fit Our Feet: Sources for a Constructive Black Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993).

personal and communal. The Bible is used to address the life realities of the Dalit under casteist oppression.<sup>69</sup>

Another source for Black and Dalit theology is culture, which includes art, literature, music, folk culture, language, etc. As Dwight Hopkins argues, “In the structure and words of folk culture, a people’s faith breaks through to provide an important source for constructive black theological development.”<sup>70</sup> Moreover, the Black Power Movement and Civil Rights Movement for Blacks, and the Dalit Panther Movement and Ambedkar Ideology for Dalits find their vocation in creating a space in the political scene.<sup>71</sup> The norm of their theology, as argued by James Cone and Devasahayam, is informed by the revelatory event in Jesus Christ that breaks into their realities and fights for their liberation. Having located the sources and norms, it becomes imperative to know how these sources are used to construct a method that might be palpable to their experience.

### Methodology of Black Theology

Black Theology proposes an epistemological break with traditional totalitarian Western theology. Black theology in the tradition of liberation theology chooses social context as its starting point, particularly the cry of the oppressed. The experience of Black people is the instrument for formulating theology. It is a theology from below that can counter any form of hegemonic and autocratic expression.<sup>72</sup> Social analysis takes into consideration the links between racism, capitalism, and imperialism on the one hand, and theology and church on the other. James Cone applied his Marxist class analysis after 1973 in the WCC symposium on Black theology and Liberation theology.<sup>73</sup> It was at that time that he realized the need to counter economic disparity between the Black rich and the Black poor. What does God have to do with the experiences of the Black people with all their socio-economic and political alienation, in their fight for liberation? The Christology of James Cone is based on the biblical portrayal of Jesus Christ and Jesus’s past and present involvement in the struggles of oppressed peoples. He asserts, “That God could ‘make a way out of no way’ in Jesus’ cross was truly absurd to the intellect,

69 V. Devasahayam ed., *Frontiers of Dalit Theology* (Madras: Gurukul Summer Institute, 1997), 52.

70 Dwight N. Hopkins, *Shoes That Fit Our Feet: Sources for a Constructive Black Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1993), 128.

71 Dwight N. Hopkins, *Introducing Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999), 44–46.

72 As social relations have been identified as the starting point for theologizing, social analysis becomes an important tool of theology in mediating between Black experience and the theological reformulation. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 33–34.

73 James H. Cone, *For My People: Black Theology and Black Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1984), 88–93.



yet profoundly real in the souls of black folk.”<sup>74</sup> In short, it is a critical reflection on “praxis,” as reflection on action in the struggle for liberation.<sup>75</sup>

Liberative theological praxis provides the shape for the Black religious and political identity and is oriented to equip Blacks or African Americans to follow the liberative model of the Exodus event and Jesus Christ. According to Cone, “The exodus, the call of Israel into being as the people of God of the covenant, the gift of the Promised Land, the rise of prophesy, the second exodus, and above all the incarnation reveal God’s self-giving love to the oppressed humanity.”<sup>76</sup> However, to apply their method, Cone understood the need for Black consciousness and Black power as the instruments to materialize the act of liberation. For example, Bishop Henry McNeal Turner articulated “Black consciousness,” and it was Marcus Garvey’s genius to organize Black people at a time when no one else was organizing Black people, especially around the concept of “Black.” Cone argued that “no one denies that Garvey organized the largest and most successful mass movement of blacks in the history of United States.”<sup>77</sup>

R. S. Tshaka opines that Black consciousness among Blacks is not just knowing one’s racial oppression in the world but also engaging Blacks to deal with the self-hatred of the Black community that arose out of a racist world.<sup>78</sup> This can be witnessed in Garvey’s slogan, “To be Negro is no disgrace, but an honor and we of the Universal Negro Improvement Association do not want to become white.”<sup>79</sup> Therefore, Black consciousness is coming back to self-consciousness; it investigates the root cause of this hatred that characterizes Black people, and it takes pride in their history. This is possible when Blacks realize their responsibility to come out of whiteness and take pride in their blackness.

However, Victor Anderson brought a serious critique of Garvey and called Garvey’s project “African imperialism.”<sup>80</sup> He argues that “such a discourse would see the cultural aesthetics of the Enlightenment radicalized into an imperialist cult of black genius.”<sup>81</sup> Within this imperialist model, Anderson argued, Garvey turned the Black revolutionary spirit of liberation into an imperialistic cult of racial superiority, which is much like the white racial agenda. Here, Anderson chooses to go beyond the ontological and reified form of blackness to apply a more

74 James H. Cone, *The Cross and The Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2011), 2.

75 Grenz and Olson, *20<sup>th</sup>-Century Theology*, 202.

76 Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 72.

77 Cone, *Martin and Malcolm and America*, 14.

78 R. S. Tshaka, “Do our Theological Methodologies Help us to Deal with Situations of Violence in Black Communities, Specifically Afrophobia?” *Journal of Theology for Southern Africa* 138 (Nov 2010): 133.

79 Amy Jacques Garvey, ed., *Philosophy and Opinions of Marcus Garvey*, vol. 2 (New York: Arno/New York Times, 1969), 325–26.

80 Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness*, 76.

81 Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness*, 72.

nuanced religious critical method. He highlights the danger of essentializing a Black aesthetic that would be constructed within the framework of imperialistic ontic whiteness, which Black theologians were fighting against. It is because the racial ontology itself is the creation of whiteness. Therefore, it is the “blackness that whiteness created.”<sup>82</sup> Against the background of a white or black racial aesthetic superiority, Anderson’s religious critical method proposes an extreme aesthetic or grotesque in order to uplift the marginalized in African American society.

James Cone employed Paul Tillich’s method of correlation in defining his method. However, he took his method to a functional level to attain liberation. Cone’s methodological quest was to liberate Blacks from their experience of “non-being” to “being” in freedom from oppression through God’s liberating activity. According to Charles Fielding Stewart, III, “His method of correlation sought theological answers to the interminable suffering and dehumanization especially of Black people, a people who have endured these hardships because of the color of their external being.”<sup>83</sup> Therefore, Cone’s theological formulation provides a systematic approach towards emancipation of Blacks from oppressive structures.

Cone’s initial journey against white racism resulted in presenting Black Theology with an ethnocentric view that developed within the framework of a moral critique. This was a stumbling block not only for second generation scholars but also to other theological networks. First generation Black theologians including Cone himself identified the lack of proper involvement with worldwide theological fraternities in their struggle for liberation. A dialogical approach was taken to address the criticism leveled against Black Theology. Therefore, in 1976, Black Theology echoed the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians’ (EAT-WOT) emphasis on the liberation of the poor and the oppressed, its standing with the experiences of marginalized communities as the basis for knowledge, and the underscoring of self-critique and accountability to God’s call for justice.<sup>84</sup> Therefore, Cone highlights the importance of *praxis*, where “theology arises from our experience in the ghettos, villages, and the churches of the poor in our countries.”<sup>85</sup> Further, Black Theology’s methodology seeks to incorporate other liberation theologies of the Third World in the act of liberation with the aim to bring justice to an unjust world. Unless Jesus Christ comes to terms with the ghetto experience of Blacks and the poor of the world, justice will not be complete.

In response to Black theology, Grenz and Olson lament the presence of an

82 Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness*, 13.

83 Carlyle Fielding Stewart, III, “The Method of Correlation in the Theology of James H. Cone” in *Journal of Religious Thought* XIV (1957): 31–32.

84 Cone, *For My People*, 140–53.

85 Cone, *For My People*, 148.

“ethnocentric” agenda in Black methodology. Conversely, they argue that “Prior to the 1960s, theologians, regardless of their theological orientation, perceived their efforts and their discipline in terms of the engagement in the quest for truth on behalf of all humankind.”<sup>86</sup> This assertion “on behalf of all humankind” by Grenz and Olson goes against their own initial assertion in the preface that all theology is historic-specific and a cultural reflection. Another problem of Grenz and Olson is that, while criticizing Black theology as ethnocentric, they seem to be aloof to the fact that their work is clearly representative of Western European or American Caucasian males. If 95% of the authors of *Twentieth-Century Theology* represent Western Caucasian males, then their claim for a theology “on behalf of all humankind” is a farce.

### Methodology of Dalit Theology

All theologies of *praxis*, except Medieval scholastic theology, which ignored raw life experience, are contextual and have to deal with the raw life experience of the people. Dalit methodology is no different from any other contextual reflection on theology. The context of the theology of Dalits is one of a people who were oppressed and sidelined in the name of caste consciousness.<sup>87</sup> A. P. Nirmal termed the experience of Dalits as *pathos* or suffering. It is from the Dalit pathos that theology needs to be constructed; otherwise, it will be like seedless fruit. Pathos provides an epistemological break from other dominant theological enterprises that had been oppressing the Dalits.

For Nirmal, the implication of the above epistemological break is that Dalit theology must observe a “methodological exclusivism in relation to other theologies.” However, this methodological exclusivism is not directed toward constructing an exclusive community. Rather, it is open to all those marginalized communities who are suffering in the name of caste, class, color, gender, and sex orientation, etc. They must also be willing to receive help from all possible sources and promote community relationships. Nevertheless, he affirms that to produce a theology of the people, it is necessary that Dalit theology should remain “exclusive in character.” This exclusivism must be stressed “because the tendency of all dominant traditions—cultural or theological—is to accommodate, include, assimilate and finally conquer others.”<sup>88</sup> Hence, as a people’s theology it needs to

86 Grenz and Olson, *20th-Century Theology*, 209.

87 Following the steps of any other people’s theology, Dalit theology vociferously rejects the assumption of any imported universal theology that claims to answer their suffering. Like any other liberation theology, the point of departure for Dalit methodology is the experience of struggle against the dominant structures and oppressive elements.

88 Arvind P. Nirmal, “Towards a Christian Dalit Theology,” in *A Reader in Dalit Theology*, ed. Arvind P. Nirmal (Madras: Gurukul, 1991), 58–59.

be on its guard and needs to shut off the influences of the dominant theological traditions.

In Nirmal's assessment, the primacy of the term "Dalit" will have to be conceded to the primacy of the term "Christian" in the dominant, primary theological meaning. One may ask then what is Christian about Dalit theology? We can say that "it is the dalitness which is 'Christian' about Dalit theology."<sup>89</sup> Moreover, the "Christian" for this theology is exclusively the "Dalit." What this exclusivism implies is the affirmation that the Triune God—the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit—is on the side of the Dalits and struggles with them against the oppressors. Ultimately, it is the common Dalit experience of Christian Dalits along with the other Dalits that will shape a Christian Dalit theology.<sup>90</sup>

Why and from whom should Dalit Theology exclude any influence? In Nirmal's view, Dalit Theology will represent a radical discontinuity with the classical Indian Christian Theology of the Brahmanic tradition, which follows the Indian philosophical system. This means that a Christian Dalit theology will be a counter theology.<sup>91</sup> For M. E. Prabhakar, the discontinuity with the Brahmanic tradition invites a radically different theology whose starting point is from "below." Therefore, "it uses Dalit language and expressions, their stories and songs of sufferings and triumphs, popular wisdom including their values, proverbs, folk lore and myths and so on to interpret their history and culture and to articulate a faith to live by and to act on."<sup>92</sup> By returning to their basics, Dalits would eventually discard any academic or any intellectual activity that carries the dominant ideology and has little or no direct contact with realities experienced by the people. Dalit theology is not only a people's self-affirmation of doing their theology from within their own pathos, but it is also an innovative substitutive consciousness of economic equality, political justice, and a religion of God's freedom in the life of Dalits.

From the aforementioned discussion, it is understood that the traditional dominant theology arose out of the propositions of the Brahmanical philosophical system, i.e., from above, believed to be the only truth. This truth was arranged logically, consistently, coherently and systematically and therefore away from any kind of realities of the people anchored in life. Dalit methodology contests this logically and consistently revealed truth because it does not answer the questions derived out of Dalit pathos. Thus, Dalit Theology relies on the sociological discipline to analyze the social realities of Dalits.<sup>93</sup> Unlike other liberation

89 Nirmal, "Towards a Christian Dalit Theology," 58–59.

90 Nirmal, "Towards a Christian Dalit Theology," 58–59.

91 Nirmal, "Towards a Christian Dalit Theology," 59.

92 M. E. Prabhakar, "The Search for Dalit Theology," in *Indigenous People: Dalits, Dalit Issues in Today's Theological Debate*, ed. James Massey (Delhi: ISPCK, 1994), 48.

93 Arvind P. Nirmal, "Doing Theology from Dalit Perspective," in *A Reader in Dalit Theology*, ed.

theologies, it takes into consideration the religio-cultural aspect to read the extent of oppression without negating the Marxist social analysis. Therefore, Dalit methodology shifts from universal truths to the particularities of Dalit pathos. It is the pathos of Dalits derived from casteist and Brahmanical structure and Dalits' own historical and cultural expressions, which makes it unique from Black methodology. The historical and cultural roots of Dalits go back to the pre-Dravidian period (3000 BCE), and therefore, it is a gigantic task but not impossible. Theologians like James Massey and other Dalit anthropologists are trying to resurrect these expressions from their own oral traditions and literatures belonging to Brahmanical structures.

Just as Black consciousness is important in doing Black methodology so too is Dalit historical consciousness important in doing Dalit methodology. The consciousness of Dalits in history was the product of the dominant religious system as a divine imperative to keep Dalits as servants forever. Nevertheless, Dalits have their own glorious history in the form of stories, myths, folklore, and community dramas that depict their forebears' glorious past. It is transmitted from generation to generation orally. Therefore, Dalits, being conscious of their past, understood the evil intention of the master-narratives as not God-given but rather man-made, as something to be dismantled. So, they have begun to question the rationale behind their relegation as untouchable in the Hindu social order and regaining their consciousness would enable Dalits to create their identity and write their history. To resuscitate this lost history is to bring Dalits back from their stories of non-being, scripted and directed by the dominant system. In other words, history, from their point of view or "from below," has to be prepared in order to restructure their theology to recover their lost dignity. The lost history of Dalits cannot easily be revived due to the lack of a proper written history. Nevertheless, the oral histories, folklores, and stories can be used to restructure the history of Dalits. Abraham Ayrookuzhiel asserts, "Their history is buried in their folk songs, stories myths, certain extent religious symbols and practices."<sup>94</sup> For James Massey, restructuring Dalit history is a theological act and art that reconstructs history by reclaiming consciousness.<sup>95</sup> Therefore, theologizing is the art of going into the history and consciousness of the Dalits who are imprisoned under Brahmanical history and liberating them through an act of self-affirmation and self-respect.

The pathos of Dalits becomes the paradigmatic locus of theologizing. Along with the histories of Dalits, the stories of the suffering people today from the vantage point of the subject rather than the object provide an ample resource for

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Arvind P. Nirmal (Madras: Gurukul, 1991), 139.

94 A. M. Abraham Ayrookuzhiel, ed., *Dalit Desyita* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1990).

95 James Massey, *Down Trodden: The Struggle of India's Dalits for Identity, Solidarity and Liberation* (Geneva: WCC, 1997), 59.

doing theology in Dalit contexts. Y. T. Vinayaraj's postmodern approach locates the subject as the epistemological *loci* that decenters the objective fascination of the dominant.<sup>96</sup> That is, the methodology that Dalits utilize when reflecting on God and its activities should come out from the daily life experience or *habitus* of Dalits.

Last but not least, liberative praxis is the method of Dalit theology. By praxis, we do not mean rejection of theory. Rather, it should emerge from a theory that is oriented to transformation, which can be witnessed in Martin Luther King's theory. It is in the dialectics of theory and action that the structure of oppression is highlighted and repudiated. By pointing to false and oppressive relationships it brings them to awareness, which is the first step towards transforming them. Therefore, Dalit theology is an effort to examine critically and re-interpret the liberative and humanistic values that were shadowed under Brahmanical philosophies and theologies and to deploy a new method of liberative praxis based on Ambedkar's ideology,<sup>97</sup> one that resuscitates their cultural and religious values, which have become long forgotten.

### **A Critical Dialogue: Towards a Methodological Praxis**

Having discussed the method of action for the theological construction of Black and Dalit theology, it becomes imperative to be involved in the dialogical praxis so as to ease the pathway for learning, unlearning and relearning. In this methodological inquiry, the dialogue should be channeled into four areas: Theological, Christological, Ecclesiological, and Hermeneutical.

#### *Theological and Christological Issues*

The method used in any theological talk is intended to interpret God from various perspectives by theologians in different contexts. Throughout the centuries, these perspectives have grappled with the issues of Transcendence and Immanence. However, the former has usually taken precedence. Theologians like Karl Barth and Emil Brunner, who emphasized transcendence, believe that a transcendent God cannot mingle with human realities. Grenz and Olson stand for balancing

96 Y. T. Vinayaraj, "Envisioning a Postmodern Method of Doing Dalit Theology," in *Dalit Theology in the Twenty-first Century: Discordant Voices, Discerning Pathways*, ed. Sathianathan Clarke, Deenbandhu Manchala and Phillip Vinod Peacock (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010), 93–102.

97 Ambedkar's ideology is based on *Dhamma Raj*, meaning "Kingdom of righteousness," derived from Buddha's understanding of *Dhamma*. This Kingdom is a society of liberty, equality and fraternity and hence the driving force for revolution. The underlying foundation of this Kingdom is the experience of divine state of love, justice and peace. He worked for the liberation of Dalits and other weaker section of society. Although he advocated for non-violent methods to achieve the goal, he never denied the use of violent methods if necessary. See Anthoniraj Thumma, *Springs from the Subaltern: Pattern's and Perspectives in People's Theology* (Delhi: ISPCK, 1999), 32–39.

both transcendence and immanence with strategic relationality. They argue that “an overemphasis on transcendence can lead to a theology that is irrelevant to the cultural context in which it seeks to speak, whereas an overemphasis on immanence can produce a theology held captive to a specific culture.”<sup>98</sup>

However, with the rise of liberation theologies, theologians questioned the transcendental priority in classical and modern theology. Like “After Auschwitz” theologies, Black and Dalit theology struggled with the question of the presence of God in an oppressive situation. The question was, “How do these liberation theologies from different contexts balance the concepts of transcendence and immanence?” James Cone affirmed that “God always encounters us in a situation of historical liberation.”<sup>99</sup> Nevertheless, Cone did not reject the transcendental worth in reflecting the oppression of the people. For him, transcendence means that the reality of a God who is involved in the struggle for liberation is not limited to any one particular human liberating experience, but rather, oppression of any sort is absorbed into his very being. As he asserts, “Liberation is not an afterthought, but the essence of divine activity.”<sup>100</sup> This is also a major theme of Jewish theology vis-à-vis the Exodus (from slavery!) and the Passover Haggadah (evidently written during Roman domination).

Because Blacks have encountered the immanence of the divine in their liberation, they have ultimately revealed the transcendence of their cause of liberation beyond all human premises. When applying Paul Tillich’s tension of transcendence and immanence, Cone interprets this tension to mean that “our struggle for liberation is the infinite participating in the concrete reality of human existence. But because God is always more than our experience of God, the reality of God cannot be limited to a particular human experience.”<sup>101</sup> How do the particular historical experiences relate to the transcendence of God? Cone answers:

Through my particular experience of blackness, I encounter the symbolic significance of black existence and how that existence is related to God’s revelation in Jesus Christ. In the divine-human encounter, the particular experience of oppression and liberation, as disclosed in black-skinned people, is affirmed as God’s own experience; and through that divine affirmation, I encounter the universal meaning of oppression and liberation that is not limited by skin color.<sup>102</sup>

98 Grenz and Olson, *20th-Century Theology*, 12.

99 Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 141.

100 Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 64.

101 Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, 78.

102 William Hordern, “Dialogue on Black Theology: An Interview with James Cone,” in *The Christian Century* (15 Sept 1971), <http://www.nathanielturner.com/dialogueonblacktheology.htm>



In short, the suffering of Blacks stands in parallel to God's own suffering in Jesus Christ who gave his life for the liberation of the poor.

Arguing against the suffering of Blacks as the point of contact between transcendence and immanence, Anthony Pinn says that this has created a fallacy in Black history for "social transformation because it leads to keeping oppressed African Americans quiet and passive and, on a theological level, exposes God's approval of black people's suffering."<sup>103</sup> However, David Goatley argues for a "God who is present in the testimony of enslaved blacks and the wailing cry of Jesus' crucifixion in Mark 15:34, which indicates both God's absence and presence for the poor."<sup>104</sup> Here Cone's assertion is worth noting. He says, "Jesus was not for and against the poor, for and against rich. He was for the poor and against the rich, for the weak and against the strong."<sup>105</sup> This implies that God in history has always been on the side of the poor, cognizant of the sufferings of the poor and oppressed; this does not mean that God sanctions suffering, as claimed by Pinn, but rather that God stands with those who are weak and poor to fight against all oppressive powers as well.

However, in all this liberation talk, Jacquelyn Grant argues that the voices of women are unheard. If Black Theology of liberation showcases the transformation of all Blacks, then it should be ready to embrace the triple oppression of Black women in the liberative action.<sup>106</sup> The resources of women's lives and spirituality would add holistic expression to the Black theological discourse. The agenda of Womanist theologians is to revive the voices of Black women in all facets of life. Yet their construct of Black women's identity lacks proper portrayal of gender construction within Black heterosexual and hegemonic society.

The Blackness of God participates in the lives of African Americans as a divine ontological gesture happening in the being of God as God is love. If God is Black for his love for Blacks, then God's transcendent nature reaches into the heart of Black liberation out of love. Therefore, the "Blackness" of God unifies transcendence and immanence in his *ontic* fulfillment. However, Anderson argues that the Blackness displays how universal conceptions of "Blackness" fail to do justice to the reality of the Black existence in the contemporary postmodern context:

Throughout this book [*Beyond Ontological Blackness*], I describe this tendency toward racial reification as ontological Blackness.

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<sup>103</sup> Hopkins, *Introducing Black Theology*, 107.

<sup>104</sup> David Emmanuel Goatley, *Were You There? Godforsakenness in Slave Religion* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996).

<sup>105</sup> Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 127.

<sup>106</sup> Jacquelyn Grant, "Black Theology and Black Women," in *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966–1979*, ed. Gayraud S. Wilmore and James H. Cone (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1979), 418–33.

Ontological Blackness is a covering term that connotes categorical, essentialist, and representational languages depicting Black life and experience. In contrast to ontological Blackness, I commend the racial discourse that bell hooks, a leading contemporary African American cultural critic, calls “postmodern Blackness” . . . [which] recognizes that Black identities are continually being reconstituted as African Americans inhabit widely differentiated social spaces and communities of moral discourse. . . . However, in many of the cultural studies that I examine, mostly philosophical and theological ones, “race” is often regarded as a topic in metaphysical ontology. In metaphysical ontology, “race” denotes essential properties (essences), such that to lack any one property renders one a member of a pseudospecies.<sup>107</sup>

When Black theology moves beyond ontological blackness, which is the product of whiteness, as argued by Anderson, then it embraces all forms of injustices happening within the Black community without reifying the blackness. Then, only liberation has any meaning for the whole humanity. Horace Griffin poignantly summarizes his argument in the following way:

If liberation is at the heart of the historical black church as Cone and others claim and if it is to be consistent with Jesus’ gospel mandate “to liberate the oppressed” . . . then black heterosexuals Christians must work to end legal discrimination against gays in marriage, employment, and the military . . . and the church teaching and practices that are demeaning to black gays and which contribute to their suffering and death.<sup>108</sup>

Dalit theology, which is accused of being anthropocentric in its theological discourses, can learn from its Black counterpart in the reconciliation of transcendence and immanence within their “Dalitness,” without being succumbed to the Brahmanical ontological categories of caste. Because Dalitness in Dalit theology signifies being broken and crushed, concomitantly, it reflects the brokenness of God in Jesus that has an overarching transcendental implication for all humanity. M. E. Prabhakar urges that the “Dalitness” of God cannot be regarded as the passive acceptance of suffering but rather should be seen as ushering in a new culture of life for Dalits and thereby, salvation and liberation from their marginalized existence into God’s transcendental self.<sup>109</sup> This new cultural life, in order to have

107 Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness*, 11–12.

108 Horace Griffin, *Their Own Receive Them Not: African American Lesbians and Gays in Black Churches* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2006), 216.

109 M. E. Prabhakar, “Christology in Dalit Perspective,” in *Frontiers of Dalit Theology*, ed.

transcendent meaning should be iconoclastic and avoid any form of self-referential inconsistencies.

Envisioning a new culture of life can only be possible when Dalit theologians end their silence over the issue of homosexuality and gender biases in the community and display courage to stand for the rights of Dalit homosexuals. If Dalit Christians are not ready to include their homosexual brothers and sisters in their liberative agenda, then their discourse on utopian liberative community will never be holistic. Therefore, what is needed for holistic theology is the balance between transcendence and immanence not only in a strategic relationality (Grenz and Olson's "new Immanence") but also in strategic symbiotic *intra-activity*.<sup>110</sup>

### *Ecclesiological and Hermeneutical Issues*

The Church is the body of Christ, and therefore it should be involved in imparting the nature of Christ to all his believers. If Christ's body is Black and Dalit literally and symbolically, then the Church should also be Black and Dalit. The Church should have solidarity with those who are broken and crushed in the name of race and caste. However, this is not the scenario at hand because oppression continues in the churches at a microcosmic level. The issues of sub-casteism, classism and gender discrimination are still rampant and must be curbed urgently. These issues are facilitated by the new models of globalization and neo-capitalism.<sup>111</sup> If Dalit Christians believe that they represent the image of God and trust that Christ's dalitness is their dalitness, then they need to cease the caste practices in which they themselves indulge. Equally, the divisions among Dalits in the forms of classism, sexism, rural/urban and literate/illiterate distinctions, and different faith affiliations should be exposed and eliminated.

Dalits should unite together and work towards liberation through resistance and at the same time, the churches should become involved in a radical self-critical approach to what it means to be a true follower of Christ. Just like the Black church responded to white oppression in a revolutionary and self-critical way, the Dalit church should be motivated to be a self-critical revolutionary church that stands for its bleeding children. Only then will the church become a

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V. Devashayam (Delhi: ISPCK/Gurukul, 1997), 419.

110 "Intra-activity" here means an intrinsic interdependence of two opposing thoughts in a strategic relationality for a better theological understanding.

111 Neo-capitalism is an amalgamation of different economic ideologies adopted to contain the risk of economic failure during economic meltdowns. It is a new form of capitalism post-World War II whereby the government plays an active role in safeguarding a country's economic infrastructure by rescuing major corporate companies. In other words, when capitalism thrived on the back of private ownership to boost private interest at the cost of people's fair share, neo-capitalism gave a legitimate face to the greedy capitalistic corporate system to hijack people's right to fair labor. Neo-capitalism proposes to expand private enterprise along with social welfare with selective government intervention. But in truth, neo-capitalism is a wolf in sheep's clothing.

prophetic church. Mark Chapman argues in his book that “Christianity on Trial seeks to join the prophetic stream of African-American religious thought, which has consistently argued that black churches must encourage honest self-criticism.”<sup>112</sup>

Concomitantly, the Black church was called into existence by God as a protest against white power, and therefore the “church was the sole source of personal identity and the sense of community.”<sup>113</sup> Today, Black churches are still in the clutches of color differentiation, as they continue to differentiate between their light black and dark black skin among themselves.<sup>114</sup> Often, the oppressed person comes to believe that somehow she or he can get into the shoe of the oppressor so that she or he will no longer be the object of humiliation. The darker the skin, the more oppressed and marginalized. Victor Anderson, along with Jacquelyn Grant and Delores Williams, critiqued Cone for essentializing blackness, which left the issues of multiplicity in Black identity unnoticed. However, it can be argued that Anderson forgot the fact that Cone rectified the problem of “totalizing discourse” in his subsequent works like *For My People*.<sup>115</sup> A critique of Anderson’s view would state that the color of the skin might play a major role in the regulation of oppression in the churches. However, it cannot be taken as standard or foundational because it is not reflected in systemic forms and therefore can be contested. Nevertheless, methodology should not succumb to an essentialist category of Blackness but rather should undertake “skin”-related oppression within the Black community as a serious hurdle to promoting holistic liberation for Blacks in America.

The multiplicities of Black identity are not peculiar to Blacks but also exist in the Dalit Christian ethos. It is an undeniable fact that the concepts of purity and pollution and good and evil are incorporated into beliefs about the color of skin. Dark is considered polluted and evil, whereas white is understood as good and pure. Just as the churches of Blacks and Dalits were born out of protest, so should they exist continually in protest. Therefore, Anderson’s religious criticism of cultural inconsistency is a prospective tool to present “grotesque as heroic...[and] advance a conception of cultural criticism that is at once iconoclastic and utopian.”<sup>116</sup> In short, grotesque becomes a hermeneutical key for a utopian life.

Interpretation is the interplay between engagement and understanding. Various interpretative tools have been used to interpret experiences of suffering. Dalit

112 Chapman, *Christianity on Trial*, 172.

113 Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 92.

114 Cf., e.g., “The brown paper bag test.” It was a test to allow the color of the Blacks as light as brown to enter to a social event.

115 James H. Cone, *For My People: Black Theology and Black Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1984), 88–93.

116 Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness*, 142.

pathos, therefore, projects a face in the form of the Dalit body, which is a prospective tool for the Dalit methodological approach. The Dalit body has always been the arena of discrimination and oppression. It is through the body that the experience of Dalits draws our attention to the historical oppression and thereby retrieves the lost consciousness. Throughout philosophical and theological discourses, the body has been held secondary and subsidiary without any worth related to it except as the carrier of mind.

However, in Dalit theology, the body plays a central role in the art of interpretation. The Dalit body highlights itself as a broken body inflicted upon by the Brahmanical and colonial agenda. Y. T. Vinayaraj, reading the Dalit body from a postmodern perspective, asserts that “Dalits reject all the colonially imposed imprints/notions on their bodies. By affirming the new social meanings/imaginations of their bodies, Dalits reject the casteist traces inscribed onto their bodies and determinedly enter into new and unattached social relationships.”<sup>117</sup> In other words, Dalit bodies should wipe away the given social body and discover a contested body against the dominant ethos. Moreover, Dalits should understand their body as “text” that tells the story of their age-long discrimination rendered by the casteist tradition. Here, body becomes a text to read and re-read according to their respective socio-political and religio-cultural engagement.

Black theology has seldom addressed the issue of body-related events that inform the experiential knowledge, except in the case of Dwight Hopkins and Anthony Pinn. Their approach to body as a methodological tool provides a sensual and erotic view. They asked, “Why has the sensuality and eroticism of the Black body, so evident in Black culture and African American life, remained a taboo topic?” It seems, “they subsume Christian discourse within the broader conversation in both a sacred and profane manifestation of the contentions over what it means to construct the eroticism of black materiality.”<sup>118</sup> This view narrowed the whole concept of body into a sensual box. However, the methodological approach of Dalits towards body is an inviting paradigm to explore the intricacies of Black body and locate their historical bodily oppression as a text to be interpreted. A theology of body challenges Blacks to re-politicize their bodies and fight for liberation. Nevertheless, this body-talk is not limited only to adult Black men and women but to all who are marginalized, including the children in whom the future rests.

### **Towards a *Sarvodaya* Model of Inter-Contextual Approach**

The term *Sarvodaya* means the “liberation of all.” The meaning of *Sarvodaya*

117 Vinayaraj, “Envisioning a Postmodern Method of Doing Dalit Theology,” 100.

118 Dwight Hopkins and Anthony Pinn, *Loving the Body: Black Religious Studies and the Erotic* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 117.

lies in its nature of taking all the living beings together irrespective of class, race, caste, gender, sex, species, etc. and working for the liberation of all within a given context. The *Sarvodaya* model welcomes the new generation of theologians not in their commonality of experience, but rather in a commonality of commitment to overcome, root out, and even abolish the discriminatory system. The *Sarvodaya* community is a theological reality where God, humans and other living beings live in perfect relationship and participate in the lives of each other to bring about an egalitarian society. It is a community that critiques any individual or group-based community and deals with it in a holistic way, addressing the issues of each and every life reality. In other words, it is a corporeal model. In this model, all are included as a family to have dialogue and enter the world of the other, thereby anticipating solidarity to the needy.

How can the Church facilitate a *Sarvodaya* model into the life realities of the people? The Church through its vision and mission becomes the foundation for imparting kingdom values to all communities that are drenched in chaos and could thereby become the icon of universal liberation. This mission-oriented vision of the church not only invites the world into a new identification with the downtrodden but also frees them by joining with other subjugated identities in various parts of the world through inter-contextual reading. This can be witnessed in Anderson's critique of Black theology that challenges any "essentializing" discourse and is endowed with conforming differences within the Black community. This presents the oppressed communities with opportunities to reconfigure their own identity by incorporating a global alliance in new and transforming ways. This transformation, according to Anderson, can be initiated through cultural transcendence and iconoclastic precision.<sup>119</sup>

However, because of its utopian nature, it is my contention that Anderson's cultural transcendence is understood as cultural fulfillment that is one-sided (only belonging to Anderson's aesthetic perspective) and lacks epistemological clarity on the linguistic construction in his cultural critical method. It seems that Anderson is dreaming of a community of perfection without any concrete level of cultural and religious solidarity within the community irrespective of class, caste, race, gender, and sexual orientation. The difference is marred with division that has an inexplicable effect on the community's life. Only a community of solidarity with the least can truly destabilize the cultural ascendancy. In other words, solidarity of the shaken can only find its meaning when an epistemology from the broken bodies is taken seriously because body is the door towards the world. And without a proper epistemological engagement with the body, the understanding and function of power in the lives of the vulnerable will not be fully fathomed.

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119 Anderson, *Beyond Ontological Blackness*, 50.

Sally McFague in her book *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* takes us on a journey of an embodied eco-theology. She argues that any engagement with the body is an engagement not only with the idea of God but also with the world around us as presented in nature. She claims that

We ought to love and honor the body, our own bodies, and the bodies of all other life-forms on the planet. The body is not a discardable garment cloaking the real self or essence of a person (or a pine tree or a chimpanzee); rather, it is the shape or form of who we are. It is how each of us are recognized, responded to, loved, touched, and cared for—as well as oppressed, beaten, raped, mutilated, discarded, and killed. The body is not a minor matter; rather, it is the main attraction.<sup>120</sup>

In this claim, McFague has vouched for two natures of the body. The first is about the body as self and the second about the body in relation to the eco-system and the whole universe. McFague's claim expands my argument of oppressed bodies regarding race, caste, color, gender, and sex to a more holistic perspective. This ecological perspective is based on the idea that the world, including the universe, is the body of God knitted together with eternal relationality. It means that God cares not only for the humans but also the entire universe with its living and non-living bodies.

This body of God model is liberational because God's body is related to the very being of humanity as well as the universe. Any liberation experience in God is a reflection of liberation in the world and humanity. Therefore, the liberation of humanity is the liberation of "the oppressed earth and all its life-forms," and to a certain extent, it is liberation in the being and existence of God itself. Thus, McFague's ecological theology departs from the majority of liberation theology, which is anthropocentric. McFague's incarnational embodied eco-theology offers numerous insights into the very existence of God, humans, and the world. The author is involved in an inter-contextual approach for a just and equitable society. This society holds the kingdom values where all voices are heard and vouch for the rise of all.

Since God showed his solidarity by coming to the world and experiencing the otherness, dismantling the power structure with his "Kingdom ethic," the oppressed can come together in symbiotic union to share God's suffering and act towards liberation without compromising the otherness of God. Jürgen Moltmann argues that Jesus died on the cross not merely as a condemned blasphemer and as an executed rebel but also as one forsaken by God. In his abandonment by God,

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120 Sallie McFague, *The Body of God: An Ecological Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 16.



the son of God becomes vulnerable and takes upon himself also the fate of humanity who has been forsaken by God. Through Jesus's experience of the Godforsakenness, he is bringing those who are forsaken and broken to the eternal love of God. In the Son's cross, God takes this death on himself in order to give those who are lost his own eternal life. In other words, as Jesus being abandoned brings those forsaken to God, in the same way God, who experiences pain in giving of his son to death, comes closer to those who are away from God.<sup>121</sup> This abandonment is drenched in the otherness of God in which solidarity with the oppressed finds its fulfillment. This solidarity is the backbone of any political-cultural-religio-ecological theology of liberation. As Dwight Hopkins asserts, "If Yahweh and Jesus Christ privilege the total freedom of the victims of society, then the foundation exists for an integral political-cultural theology of liberation."<sup>122</sup>

How is the *Sarvodaya* model different from Jesus's "kingdom of God"? One of the most crucial aspects in the realization of kingdom ethic is through the rising of all. Gandhi's *Sarvodaya* model is a rearticulation of Jesus's kingdom values with special reference to the multicultural and multireligious context of India. Gandhi's reinterpretation of Jesus's kingdom of God inspires his interpretation of the social philosophy of Ramarajya (the reign of Lord Rama and the incarnation of Vishnu, under whom the people lived in full prosperity and happiness) that vouches for a liberated holistic society. The uniqueness of the *Sarvodaya* model from Jesus's kingdom values is its openness to make use of other religious traditions of India sympathetically and to appropriate them in social, religious, political and cultural justice for all, including our ecology as well. Justice and the rise of all are important because they advocate for and affirm the value of all life, both animate and inanimate. Although many would argue that Gandhi's *Ramarajya* instilled fear and suspicion and created a rift in the hearts and minds of people, his overall depiction of *Ramarajya* is yearning for a just society with kingdom of God values.

## Conclusion

The liberative praxis employed in Black and Dalit theologies is a valiant way to retaliate against their unjust lives under the yoke of a racist and casteist system and to create a value system from "below." These values, which are based upon the real-life experiences of Blacks and Dalits, should not limit themselves to the race and caste struggles in the United States and India but rather should make pathways to inspire and join in solidarity with all those people who face any form

121 Jurgen Moltmann, *The Open Church: An Invitation to a Messianic Lifestyle* (London: SCM, 1978). See also Jurgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (London: SCM, 1974).

122 Dwight Hopkins, *Black Theology USA and South Africa: Politics, Culture and Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1989), 170.

of oppression. The methodological musing enriches and encourages travel to the worlds of others in a critical and dialogical gesture with a desire to bring liberation to all. The *Sarvodaya* model aims to say “no” to all elements of dehumanization beyond boundaries and “yes” to all those committed to the affirmation of the fullest meaning by achieving freedom of life.