

# Holy Spirit and the Trinity in the Black Church

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## Abstract

Communion with the Holy Spirit forms a major part of the worship traditions of the black church. The Spirit experientially and conceptually exercises a strong influence in black American religion and culture. Like the breath of God in Scripture, His power makes the slave song and gospel hymns, the extemporaneous and unrehearsed prayers of the unsophisticated, along with the written liturgical prayers of the more sedate congregations all bear witness to the centrality of the Spirit in the African American/Canadian church and the Holy Spirit's occupation of every aspect of black culture. How this distinct pneumatological focus potentially speaks to the realization of an African American/Canadian Trinitarian ideology cannot be ascertained without first looking at the reasons behind the black church's focus on the Spirit. This would include looking at the origins of slave theology, the black church, and Black Theology. By understanding the evolution of the black church, and its focus on the Spirit, one can then begin to assess the prospects of an African American/Canadian Trinitarian ideology. Ultimately, this paper seeks to answer the question: does the African American/Canadian church—and its protest arm, Black Theology—have a Trinitarian ideology?

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## Introduction

Communion with the Holy Spirit forms a major part of the worship traditions of the black church. Worship is subject to the “moving” of the Spirit. The constant use of terms such as “getting the Spirit,” “sensitivity to the Spirit,” and “the filling of the Spirit,” all bears witness to the centrality of the Spirit in the African American/Canadian church.<sup>1</sup> The Spirit experientially and conceptually exercises a strong influence in black American religion and culture. Like the breath of God

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<sup>1</sup> Beckford, Robert, *Dread and Pentecostal: A Political Theology of the Black Church in Britain* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2000), 6.

in Scripture, His power is present in the slave song and gospel hymns, the rhetoric of the black preacher and even the black trickster, the extemporaneous and unrehearsed prayers of the unsophisticated and the written liturgical prayers of the more sedate congregations. In short, the Holy Spirit occupies every aspect of black culture.<sup>2</sup>

Questions regarding the origins of the black church's distinct pneumatological focus are of paramount concern because they speak to the realization of a Trinitarian ideology. Pursuant to this concern, it would be prudent to look at the reasons behind the black church's focus on the Spirit. This would include looking at the origins of slave theology, the black church, Black Theology, and finally assessing the prospects of an African American/Canadian Trinitarian ideology. Ultimately, this paper seeks to answer the question: does the African American/Canadian church—and its protest arm, Black Theology—have a Trinitarian ideology? We will begin by looking at the pneumatological focus of slave theology and the origins of the black church.<sup>3</sup>

### Why a Pneumatological Focus?

Dietrich Bonhoeffer was the first—and, for a least 40 years, the only—theologian who saw the political and theological relevance of the spirituality of black churches. Bonhoeffer was surprised by the black church's "ability 'to smile' in the face of life's difficulties when filled with the Holy Spirit."<sup>4</sup> The active presence of the Holy Spirit in the black church is consciously engaged, waited upon, expected, and welcomed. Its roots reach back beyond the arrival of enslaved Africans on

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2 Thomas, Linda E, "The Holy Spirit and Black Women: a Womanist Perspective," in *Christian Doctrines for Global Gender Justice*, ed. Ji-Sun Kim, Grace, and Jenny Daggers (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 79; McGann, Mary E, "Let it Shine: The Emergence of African American Catholic Worship (NY: Fordham University Press, 2008), 58; Rivers, Clarence R. J., *The Spirit in Worship* (Cincinnati: Stimuli, 1978), 37.

3 Discussing slavery, segregation, and discrimination in North America inevitably brings up issues of race and the terms used to describe each phenotype. To add clarity to my paper and eschew offense, I have opted to use black Canadian and African Canadian interchangeably to denote the group of people that belong to the Negro race; and white or European Canadian interchangeably for those belonging to the Caucasian race. However, every term is problematic, these included. In the Canadian context 'black' and African Canadian, and 'white' and European Canadian are widely used by advocacy groups, governments, and scholars. In this particular case using African Canadians as opposed to African Americans shows the distinction between two different cultural groups of the same Negro race—where only using the term 'black' would promote confusion. Also, I have chosen to utilize a lower case 'b' when using the term black. Many scholars of black history capitalize the 'b,' however, because blacks are a diverse group, whose distinctions go well beyond racial uniformity, I believe that doing so unnecessarily distinguishes blacks from the other groups of people this dissertation discusses.

4 Price, Lynne, *A Theological Biography of Walter J. Hollenweger* (New York: Sheffield, 2002), 80; Hollenweger, Walter J., *Pentecost, Mission, and Ecumenism: Essays on Intercultural Theology* (New York: Peter Lang 1992), 29; McGann, *Let it Shine*, 13.

American soil, beyond their encounter with Christianity, and therefore, with the biblical narrative.<sup>5</sup>

In traditional African religion, “the heritage of our foreparents, the main thrust of religious practice, is to achieve harmony with and empowerment by the spirits.” This cultural orientation prepared black communities in America to recognize in the Bible a God who brings life, energy, and power through His Spirit.<sup>6</sup> Therefore, the reasons for the black church’s pneumatological focus have both African and American origins. Let us first venture into the African aspect of African American pneumatology by looking at African spirit worship and ancestry.

### *African Ancestry*

Kwesi Dickson and Benezet Bujo, among other scholars, emphasize the importance of the role of ancestors in representing the sense of community and the “concept of corporate personality”—a theme that is also part of the Israelite faith in the Old Testament.<sup>7</sup> Ancestors (as well as those not yet born) are regarded as part of the community. They are called upon during the important parts of life and the spirits of the ancestors use their power for the well-being of the community.<sup>8</sup> Not all the dead represent ancestors. Rather, ancestors are those who had led a virtuous life and served as leaders of the community;<sup>9</sup> they are lower in status than God but higher than humans.<sup>10</sup> Bujo states that in Africa the *gesta* (manifestations) of ancestors are constantly reenacted through ritual; this enables Africans to recall these *gesta* and conform their conduct to them.<sup>11</sup> Bujo sees Christ in this manner; he is considered a Proto-ancestor, the source of life, and the model of ancestorship. In African religion, it is a legitimate way to bring home the central idea of the eternal Word becoming flesh (John 1:14).<sup>12</sup> Let us now look at how the role of ancestors in African religion helped frame African American slave theology.

### *Conflation of the Spirit*

Africans from various cultures lived with elaborate cosmologies that included a high god, lesser divinities, and ancestors across the centuries.<sup>13</sup> The movement

5 Thomas, “Holy Spirit,” 78–79; McGann, *Let it Shine*, 58; Rivers, *The Spirit in Worship*, 37.

6 McGann, *Let it Shine*, 58.

7 Kärkkäinen, Veli-Matti, *The Trinity: Global Perspectives* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2007), 359; Bujo, Benezet, *African Theology in the Social Context* (Translated by John Donohue. Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2006), 79; Dickson, Kwesi A., *Theology in Africa* (London, UK: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1984), 172–74.

8 Dickson, *Theology in Africa*, 69.

9 Fulljames, Peter, *God and Creation in Intercultural Perspective: Dialogue Between the Theologies of Barth, Dickson, Pobee, Nyamiti, and Pannenberg* (London: Peter Lang, 1993), 47.

10 Dickson, *Theology in Africa*, 69.

11 Bujo, *African Theology*, 79.

12 Bujo, *African Theology*, 79.

13 Thomas, “Holy Spirit,” 77.

of the various understandings of spirit among Africans born in Africa and those born in North America gave rise to an expression of the Spirit that is now found in African American/Canadian churches.<sup>14</sup> Enslaved Africans brought to the new World were mostly adults. These adult slaves brought with them their African religion and religious notions of the spirit (ancestors).<sup>15</sup> Historian Lewis Baldwin notes that African religious “notions were blended with Christian conceptions” (most notably the Holy Spirit) and as the “number of American-born slaves began to outnumber African-born slaves,” exposure to white Christian teachers (slaveholders, missionaries, and white preachers on plantations) increased considerably and cosmologies were intertwined.<sup>16</sup>

These diverse elements—African religion and white Eurocentric Christianity—were folded into a new religion;<sup>17</sup> one where the importance of the felt presence of the Holy Spirit was quickly embraced by slaves, because it harkened back to their African religious origins.<sup>18</sup> Most notably, notions of the Spirit were revealed in the “invisible institution”—the progenitor of the black church.<sup>19</sup> During the “secret meetings” of the slaves, the Holy Spirit moved among them and through them, as it did their African ancestors. The Spirit possessed them until one or another’s body moved in response to the Spirit’s call.<sup>20</sup> In slave theology,

14 Thomas, “Holy Spirit,” 77; Callahan, Allen Dwight, *The Talking Book: African America and the Bible* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), xii.

15 Thomas, “Holy Spirit,” 77; African scholar John Mbiti asserts that when Africans move intra and intercontinentally, “they take their religion with them.” Moreover, “even if converted to another religion, like Christianity or Islam, they do not completely abandon their traditional religion, it remains with them for several generations and sometimes centuries.”

16 Thomas, “Holy Spirit,” 77; Callahan, *Talking Book*, xii; Harris, J. William, *The Making of the American South: A Short History, 1550–1877* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2006), 44; Eltis, David, et al., eds., *The Cambridge World History of Slavery: Volume 3. AD 1420–AD 1804* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 490; MacRoberts, Iain, “Black Roots and White Racism of Early Pentecostalism in the USA,” in *Pentecost, Mission and Ecumenism: Essays on Intercultural Theology: Festschrift in Honour of Professor Walter J. Hollenweger*, (New York: Peter Lang, 1992), 10.

17 MacRoberts, Iain, *Black Roots and White Racism of Early Pentecostalism in the USA* (London: Macmillan, 1988), 10.

18 Hopkins, Dwight N., *Introducing Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999), 16; Pinn, Anne H., and Anthony B. Pinn, *Fortress Introduction to Black Church History* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2002), 29; Bennett, Robert A., “Biblical Hermeneutics and the Black Preacher,” *Journal of the Interdenominational Theological Centre*, no. 2 (1974): 39; Glenn, N.D., “Negro Religion and Negro Status in the United States,” in *Religion, Culture and Society: A Reader in the Society of Religion*, edited by Louis Schneider (New York: John Wiley, 1964), 628; Montgomery, William E., *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree: The African-American Church in the South 1865–1900* (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 1993), 23.

19 It was called the “invisible Institution” because of its desire to remain hidden from the view and hearing of the slavemaster. The slaves would worship God through dance, song, the shout, and spirituals; Hopkins, *Black Theology*, 16; Thomas, “Holy Spirit,” 77–78; Callahan, *Talking Book*, xii; Smith, Robert London, *From Strength to Strength: Shaping a Black Practical Theology for the 21st Century* (Peter Lang: New York, 2007), 94.

20 Glenn, “Negro,” 628; Pinn and Pinn, *Black Church*, 29; Manis, Andrew M., “Birmingham’s Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth: Unsung Hero of The Civil Rights Movement,” *Baptist History and Heritage*, no. 35 (2000): 75–76; Montgomery, *Fig Tree*, 23–24.

Jesus is a fellow sufferer and liberator. However, the Spirit gave hope, determination, and—more importantly to the slave—daily empowerment and replenishment of the body and spirit.<sup>21</sup> It is important to note that slavery in North America was a self-contained system of daily human domination and denial of personhood and dignity.<sup>22</sup> The day-to-day survival issues of both the slave and today's free African Americans/Canadians are likewise based on the empowerment and replenishment of the Holy Spirit, with the result that the Holy Spirit has become a constant companion and a focus of worship in the black church.

But how was this slave religion transmitted from plantation to plantation and slave to slave? Let us now seek to understand how the Spirit's centrality, in slave theology specifically, was transmitted, and how it ties into Black Theology and eventually a Trinitarian ideology.

### *Communication: Praxis before Theology*

The cornerstone of slave theology was God's liberating message. The emancipation of the Hebrew slaves and the sending of His Son for the liberation of all peoples showed that Yahweh continuing to act in human history, siding with the oppressed.<sup>23</sup> However, for the slave, this was only communicated in conversation, song, and spirituals; the slave and slave-priest (progenitor of the black pastor) were often illiterate,<sup>24</sup> and therefore their theology was not written down or codified.<sup>25</sup> The slave-priest often committed large portions of the Bible to memory. Cato Carter, a slave, stated: "In the chapel some slave mens [sic] preached from the Bible but couldn't read a line no more than sheep could." Although African American literacy rates increased through Emancipation and Jim Crow segregation eras, a codification of black slave theology was not pursued. It was not until the civil rights era that we would see a change in this trend.

Without the tools and impetus to systemize black slave theology, African American religious institutions were not engaging in biblical scholarship but practical theology—a black praxis predicated on an eschatological view of freedom

21 Hopkins, *Black Theology*, 71.

22 Hicks, H. Beecher Jr., *Images of The Black Preacher: The Man Nobody Knows* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1977), 27–28; Shenton, James, "Slavery as an Institution," in *From Freedom to Freedom: African Roots in American Soil*, ed. Bain, Mildred and Ervin Lewis (New York: Random House, 1977), 130, 134–35.

23 Hopkins, *Black Theology*, 21–22; Kärkkäinen, *Trinity*, 155.

24 It was illegal for slaves to learn how to read or write, in some places, under penalty of death or some close approximation; Rogers Albert, Octavia V., *American Slaves Tell Their Stories: Six Interviews*, (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2005), 77; Allen, Marlene D., and Seretha D. Williams, eds., *Afterimages of Slavery: Essays on Appearances in Recent American Films, Literature, Television and other Media* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 1997), 173.

25 Rawick, George P., "From Sun Up to Sun Down: The Making of the Black Community," in *The American Slave: A Composite Autobiography Vol 1* (Westport, CN: Greenwood, 1972), 35; Glenn, "Negro," 628.

from slavery, Jim Crow segregation, and later systemic racism. Joseph Washington contends that the “Negro institutions were not established to propound theology or liturgical matters.” He believed the harmful impact of Christian white supremacy and the evils of segregation forcefully kept blacks out of many aspects of the church, most notably theology. He goes on to say that “the central theological questions of faith, particularly the teachings of the church on social issues, have not entered the religious realm of the Negro.”<sup>26</sup> As mentioned earlier, black religious organizations of the 1950s and 1960s were in fact institutions of justice and liberation—praxis for surviving life as an African American/Canadian in North America. As Gustavo Gutierrez states, “theology is a reflection . . . a second act . . . that comes after action.” That is, “it is not the role of theology to tell us what to do or provide solutions for pastoral action. Rather, theology follows the pastoral action of the church and is a reflection upon it.”<sup>27</sup> This was very true for slave theology. Moreover, a modern Black Theology arose, in part, as a systemic investigation, development, and creation of a Christian theology for black people moving towards liberation.<sup>28</sup>

Let us now look at how Black Theology became a response to African American religious institutions’ lack of theological scholarship, i.e., a study and codification specifically centred on viewing the gospel through the lens of the black experience.

### **Why A Black Theology?**

After Reconstruction (1877), what was seen as a white southern backlash to Emancipation and Reconstruction was galvanized in the election of Rutherford B. Hayes. Jim Crow segregation resulted, and with it the systematic repeal of any social, political, and economic gains made by blacks due to Emancipation and Reconstruction. At this time, while blacks died in the streets, theologians were engaged in intellectual conversations unconcerned with God’s relationship to the survival and freedom of black humanity. During the civil rights movement and the aftermath of Martin Luther King’s assassination, riots in 130 US cities ensued (mainly in the ghettos). What was seen as a white backlash to the civil rights movement was galvanized in the election of Richard M. Nixon, resulting in a systematic repeal of civil rights gains by African Americans in the 1960s. Here as well, while African Americans died in the streets, theologians remained engaged

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26 Hopkins, *Black Theology*, 31; Washington Jr., Joseph R., *Black Religion: The Negro and Christianity in the United States* (Boston: Beacon, 1966), 255.

27 Hennelly, Alfred T., *Liberation Theologies: The Global Pursuit of Justice* (S.J. Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1995), 12.

28 Hopkins, *Black Theology*, 32.

in conversations unconcerned with God's relationship to the survival and freedom of black humanity.<sup>29</sup>

Black Theology arose because African American scholars believed traditional white theology was part of the problem. In the sixties, Allan Boesak (who popularized the term "black consciousness"),<sup>30</sup> Malcolm X (a black polemicist), and later James Cone (the father of Black Theology), along with others, saw the need to resurrect the black subjugated consciousness. They believed it needed to be awakened to allow African Americans to actively participate in their liberation.<sup>31</sup> This conviction stood in agreement with Jürgen Moltmann's contention that all liberation theologies follow a similar praxis: initial separation from the oppressor, then (as Boesak, X, and Cone expressed) liberation from the psychological oppression to facilitate the discovery and development of the consciousness of the oppressed, and finally integration through mutual recognition.<sup>32</sup>

Corresponding to this theological development, while Cone argued for Jesus' literal blackness,<sup>33</sup> Dwight Hopkins, Deotis J. Roberts, and other black scholars asserted that the notion of Christ's blackness served psychocultural needs, i.e., low self-esteem due to psychological damage of slavery and traditional, white-centred theology.<sup>34</sup> Hopkins argued that mainstream white theology did not accurately reflect the Bible or human social relationships. In fact, in the case of African Americans, it solidified institutions dominated by racism.<sup>35</sup> For example, during the time of slavery, "after sitting in the segregated areas of white churches listening to sermons, slaves were admonished not to steal and to serve their white masters as best as they could, so that they might find salvation."<sup>36</sup> In response, slaves would steal away in the evening into the woods to have *their* church—an invisible institution.<sup>37</sup> The white community not only passed laws to prevent slaves from receiving unsupervised religious instruction but also sought to whip and kill slaves who met secretly to praise God. Yet the "invisible institution" continued

29 Hopkins, *Black Theology*, 54–55.

30 Boesak, Allan, *Farewell to Innocence: A Social-Ethical Study on Black Theology and Black Power* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1977), 138–42. "Black consciousness" was a spiritual reawakening of black pride in self and a reaffirmation of black culture and humanity in North America.

31 Boesak, *Farewell to Innocence*, 9; Hopkins, *Black Theology*, 8.

32 Moltmann, Jürgen, *Experiences in Theology: Ways and Forms of Christian Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 191–96.

33 Cone, James H., *God of the Oppressed* (New York, NY: Seabury, 1975), 135–37. Cone states that Christ is black because he enters and converges with black oppression and black struggle; Schultz, *Religion*, 28; Hopkins, *Black Theology*, 58.

34 Roberts, Deotis J., *Liberation and Reconciliation: A Black Theology* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1971), 43; Hopkins, *Black Theology*, 63; African Americans/Canadians felt little worth when they saw white Christians offering a white Christ as a true picture of Jesus and a God that did not resemble them but was painted white like the slave-master.

35 Hopkins, *Black Theology*, 82–83.

36 Smith, *Strength to Strength*, 94; Hopkins, *Black Theology*, 20.

37 Smith, *Strength to Strength*, 94; Hopkins, *Black Theology*, 20.



and became the crucible in which slave theology, the black church, and Black Theology would ultimately be forged.<sup>38</sup>

In 1966, the NCNC (National Committee of Negro Churchmen) published a full-page article in the *New York Times*. The article espoused the notion that “Black Power” ideology was “rooted in (and a response to) the ongoing gross imbalance of power and conscience between Negroes and white Americans”—it was an attempt by African America to relate the Gospel of Jesus to the black community’s need for power.<sup>39</sup> Three years later, during the Civil Rights Movement, James H. Cone published his classic book *Black Theology and Black Power*. Black Theology would be codified in a document that was inserted into American society during a tumultuous period.<sup>40</sup> “Black Theology believes that liberation is not only ‘part of’ the gospel or ‘consistent with’ the gospel, but is the content and framework of the gospel of Jesus Christ.”<sup>41</sup> Both the NCNC and Cone were the first attempts at systemizing the gospel from a black perception.<sup>42</sup> From a Gutierrezian perspective, codification helped African Americans/Canadians see the particularity of their ideology and praxis. Due to their social context, theirs’ would necessarily be a unique Trinitarian ideology. But it would be helpful to ask here to what extent African ancestry bore any influence on the development of this ideology.

In addressing this question, we must first determine if an African Trinitarian view even existed; one that may have survived the Atlantic voyage to North America and contributed to the African American/Canadian Trinitarian ideology.

### African Trinitarian Ideology

Veli-Matti Kärkkäinen states that Trinitarian ideology in Africa is marginalized and even eschewed due in part to the fact that as a doctrine based on Hellenistic metaphysics it is very difficult to understand.<sup>43</sup> It uses the non-African term “person” and it has no practical nature, which is a key component in African American/Canadian theology.<sup>44</sup> It is important to note that Kärkkäinen’s perspective on Afri-

38 Hopkins, Dwight N., *Cut Loose Your Stammering Tongue: Black Theology in the Slave Narrative* (Maryknoll, New York, NY: Orbis, 1991), 9; Hicks, *Black Preacher*, 29.

39 Schultz, Jeffrey D., et al., eds., *Encyclopedia of Religion in American Politics. Vol 2* (Phoenix: Oryz, 1993), 28; Hopkins, *Black Theology*, 8–9.

40 Lincoln, Eric C., *The Black Church Since Frazier* (New York, NY: Schocken, 1974), 125.

41 Kärkkäinen, *Trinity*, 355.

42 Bradley, Anthony B., *Liberating Black Theology: The Bible and the Black Experience in America* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 57. Cone argues that to understand Jesus outside of his identification with the poor is to distort his person and work. Jesus was born into an oppressed community identified with the poor and to whom he ministered. Jesus was a victim of social and structural oppression by the cultural elite, died, and was resurrected to reveal that God is present in all dimensions of human liberation.

43 Kärkkäinen, *Trinity*, 356.

44 Kärkkäinen, *Trinity*, 356; Mugambi, Jesse N. K., *African Heritage and Contemporary Christianity* (Nairobi, Kenya: Longman, 1989), 75.



can Trinitarianism concerns the present time. We cannot state with any certainty that African Trinitarian ideology today resembles that of the period of the Atlantic slave trade—a period which spawned the syncretic events that led to the creation of an African American slave theology. However, if we take into consideration John Mbiti's assertion regarding the immutability and retention of African religious traditions, then African Trinitarian ideology should have remained largely constant over time. In any case, notwithstanding Kärkkäinen's view, most African Trinitarian reflections represent instead the social analogy—the primacy of communion in general and family community in particular; “family” in Africa meaning extended family, consisting of both the living and the dead (i.e., ancestorship).<sup>45</sup>

Indeed, ancestorship is a legitimate way of espousing the Trinity in an African context. Scholarship tells us: “The Father has the fullness of eternal life and begets the Son. Their love for each other is in a total and vital union; the vital power goes out from the Father to beget the Son and finally returns to the Father—this vital union that produces the interaction between Father and Son is nothing other than the Holy Spirit, the bond between the Father and Son.”<sup>46</sup> African religion—and later slave and Black Theology—realized that the doctrine of God (Godhead) is a relational dynamic concept.<sup>47</sup> In traditional African terms, a “vital union” may characterize the mutual-reinforcing stream of energy that results in the building-up and binding of community. This union produces the interaction between a father and son or mother and daughter, and that which constitutes the bond between them is nothing other than the divine power that, being within the Godhead, takes actual form and is identified as the Holy Spirit. It is a phenomenon that may be traced back to Jesus, raised up by the Father as proto-ancestor and thereby becoming the final source of life. Through his death and resurrection, Jesus becomes the vehicle of a new life-energy, the Spirit, who unites the new tribe and community.

Since the idea of “the Spirit play(ing) an active role in defining the identities of the Father and the Son”<sup>48</sup> was in fact embedded in African religious thought, and

45 Kärkkäinen, *Trinity*, 356.

46 Bujo, *African Theology*, 86; Kärkkäinen, *Trinity*, 156; Pinnock, Clark H., *Flame of Love: A Theology of the Holy Spirit* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1996), 21–22, 40; Studebaker, Steven M., *From Pentecost to the Triune God: A Pentecostal Trinitarian Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2012), 106–107. This is an ideation shared by Studebaker and Pinnock. Studebaker states, “the Father who is in loving communion with the Son, is only Father as such by the Holy Spirit who facilitates their fellowship and completes the triune community.” Pinnock concurs by stating, “the Spirit bonds the Trinity by being the witness to the love of the Father and Son, by entering into it and fostering it, and by communicating its warmth to creatures.”

47 Kärkkäinen, *Trinity*, 155.

48 Studebaker, *Pentecost*, 93–94. The economic work of the Spirit—liminal, constitutional, consummational or eschatological—reveals the Spirit's immanent identity. In short, only in the Holy Spirit does the triune nature of God find the fullness of fellowship—only in the subsistence of the Holy Spirit does the Godhead cross the Trinitarian threshold and “becomes” the fellowship of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

now has primacy in African American/Canadian theology, it may be questioned why a Trinitarian ideology did not, then, organically developed from African American slave theology.

### **Why Scholars Believe Contemporary African American/Canadian Christianity Does Not Possess a Trinitarian Ideology**

If the Spirit is the lynchpin of the Godhead, then, as Kärkkäinen postulated, African Americans/Canadians should have a vibrant Trinitarian ideology. This should have been due, in no small part, to the function of the Holy Spirit in the Godhead and the deep and complex ways African American/Canadian Christians understood Him. That is, this dynamic understanding should have naturally and inexorably progressed into a deep and complex understanding of the Trinitarian relationship. However, Kärkkäinen argues that, with a few exceptions, it did not. I contend that the reason may not be the absence of a Trinitarian ideology but a lack of a more holistic understanding of the history of black religion and theology.<sup>49</sup>

Like Kärkkäinen, Anthony Reddie remarks, “relatively little work has been done on the Trinity in Black Theology.” Reasons for this vary, including the argument that many black Christians belong to the “Oneness Tradition” that eschews any notion of the Trinity as having any probative functionality within the Bible.<sup>50</sup> Another reason is, again, the intense metaphysical and philosophical understanding demanded of those seeking to explore the complexities of the “immanent” and “economic” Trinity.<sup>51</sup> Reddie comments that for many black theological scholars there has been a preference for understanding practical forms of discourse around which most black people can cohere, as opposed to more speculative forms of scholarship that might divide the African American/Canadian community.<sup>52</sup> While these are legitimate observations, they fail to view black theological history and black religious institutions from their historical foundations, and in doing so miss how they evolved and are communicated<sup>53</sup>—first by word of mouth and then, in time, being codified. A more holistic view of black Trinitarian history is required for a more robust understanding of the unique African American/Canadian Trinitarian ideology.

The Christianity of the North American slave was one of practicality; it possessed an eschatological view, namely, delivery from slavery. It was not a theology that was written down or codified; as Joseph Washington stated, black religion was not set up that way. However, the black pneumatological focus—argued by

49 Kärkkäinen, *Trinity*, 356.

50 Reddie, Anthony G., *Working Against the Grain: Reimagining Black Theology in the 21st Century* (New York: Routledge, 2014), 75.

51 Reddie, *Against the Grain*, 75.

52 Reddie, *Against the Grain*, 75.

53 MacRoberts, “Black Roots,” 77.

Kärkkäinen and others—coupled with Steven Studebaker and Clark Pinnock’s ideas surrounding the vital role the Holy Spirit plays in the Trinitarian relationship—as a conduit to the fullness of fellowship that is the Trinity—should have engendered a Trinitarian ideology. In fact, it did, just not one systematized. Rather, as typical of slave theology, it was practical, a lived Trinitarian view. Kärkkäinen goes on to state that although black theologians have contributed significantly to the doctrine of God they have not felt the need to reflect on the Trinity<sup>54</sup>—at times being quite doubtful about the whole doctrine. Kärkkäinen cites, for example, James H. Evans Jr.’s book, *We have been Believers: An African-American Systematic Theology*, as the example of a widely used manual that hardly mentions the term Trinity even though there is a chapter on the doctrine of God.<sup>55</sup> He then goes on to say that there is much in the heritage and agenda of Black Theology that leans toward a relational and dynamic understanding of God.<sup>56</sup> In this, I agree. But I disagree with his assessment of black theologians’ reflection on the Trinity.

I will attempt to give a much different take on this issue by first sharing the Trinitarian views of a few notably African American theologians, and then taking a slightly different approach to black Trinitarian understanding.

### **Black Trinitarian Ideology: A Holistic View**

The patristic fathers of Black Theology<sup>57</sup> tacitly spoke to the Godhead by directly defining each persona’s role in black liberation. They saw the Spirit, Father, and Son perform much of the same tasks, alluding to their interconnectedness in the African American/Canadian consciousness. This view lends itself to Hopkin’s statement that Trinitarian language was ever-present even though Kärkkäinen argues that the Trinitarian view in Africa was minimal if not eschewed. But it existed and enough of it was embedded in African religious thought to make its way to North America.<sup>58</sup>

Cone’s doctrine of the Trinity—expressed (in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement) in terms of God’s essential blackness<sup>59</sup>—states

that as Creator, God identifies with oppressed Israel and participated in the forming of that people; as Redeemer God became the oppressed one so that all may be free from oppression; as Holy Spirit, God

54 Kärkkäinen, *Trinity*, 157.

55 Kärkkäinen, *Trinity*, 157.

56 Kärkkäinen, *Trinity*, 157.

57 James H. Cone (considered the father of Black Theology), J. Deotis Roberts, Gayraud S. Wilmore, and Charles H. Long.

58 Kärkkäinen, *Trinity*, 156; Bujo, *African Theology*, 86.

59 Cone, James H., *A Black Theology of Liberation and God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1970), 135–37. Cone states that God is, in fact, black because God has made the oppressed condition his condition; as Jesus was an oppressed Jew he is, in turn, an oppressed African-American; Bradley, *Black Theology*, 56.

continues the work of liberation. In North America, the Holy Spirit aids blacks in making decisions about their togetherness which means making preparation for an encounter with whites.<sup>60</sup>

Hopkins (a generation removed from the Civil Rights Movement) states, “Black Theology claims that the God of liberation witnessed to in the Bible, decisively revealed in the living presence of Jesus Christ, and offered today as an empowering Spirit is the same God who desires the divine will be located amidst the plight and struggle of the black poor.”<sup>61</sup> He goes on to say, “God is never positioned so high that the divine Spirit couldn’t be bestowed on the human predicament”; lastly, Hopkins asserts that “the Spirit of hope, determination, and liberation continues to move African America.” Black Theology’s concept of the Godhead understands the divine-human relationship as dynamic and relational. He is not only out there, but also involved with our history here. This is exemplified by Jesus’ resurrection, which made it evident that God’s liberating work is not only for Israel but also for all enslaved humans.<sup>62</sup>

Early African American writers and preachers assumed the triune nature of God.<sup>63</sup> Trinitarian language has existed since slavery, where the Trinity was “real in the daily practice of religion and not dogma and doctrine.” They saw Jesus as another form of God, not the abstract second person of the Trinity.<sup>64</sup> However, the traditional doctrinal perspective posed serious problems for enslaved and marginalized Africans who were immediately confronted with the question of God’s righteousness in light of the evils of slavery.<sup>65</sup> Christian ideas about the Godhead needed to be applied to and exercised in the context of their life circumstances. That is, they needed to be practical, along the lines of the belief in the appearance of God’s Word in the form of the human Jesus, which symbolized precisely the divine being becoming poor to bring about suffering humanity’s liberation—in this case the black slave.<sup>66</sup> Lastly, but more importantly for the black praxis, is the idea that the Holy Spirit dwelt within Jesus to bring forth justice even when it meant his living with suffering and struggle.<sup>67</sup> The existence of these ideas

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60 Kärkkäinen, *Trinity*, 156.

61 Hopkins, *Black Theology*, 27–28.

62 Hopkins, *Black Theology*, 27–28.

63 Arvyabwile, Thabiti M., *The Decline of African American Theology: From Biblical Faith to Cultural Captivity* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 2007), 64.

64 Hopkins, *Black Theology*, 79.

65 Arvyabwile, *The Decline*, 64. This dilemma was not completely resolved with the abolition of slavery; new evils, such as Lynch laws and Jim Crow, emerged to challenge the belief in the inherent goodness of God. A high view of God’s sovereignty allowed early black Christians, despite the horrors of slavery, to trust that God had the necessary power to deliver them from oppression.

66 Hopkins, *Black Theology*, 19.

67 Thomas, “Holy Spirit,” 79.

intimate that a lived Trinitarian view may have superseded ideological formulations or at least account for their absence.<sup>68</sup>

## Conclusion

What Kärkkäinen, Reddie, and others seem to overlook is the significance and intensity of the day-to-day struggles of the life of the average African American and African Canadian. Blacks in North America are forever cognizant of the fact that God acts in human history to liberate the oppressed. The Word in human form who walked in the shoes of the oppressed identifies with this very struggle, and the Holy Spirit was thus sent as a source of daily empowerment and replenishment for the oppressed. The ancestors of enslaved Africans knew the Godhead in deep and complex ways—an understanding that has a significant impact on African American/Canadian Trinitarian orientation if not a codified ideology.<sup>69</sup>

Brian Bantum, like Gutierrez, cites Long's assertion that "even if one is to have a theology, it must arise from (practical) religion, something that is prior to theology."<sup>70</sup> African Americans/Canadians live the Trinity daily; it is embedded in their praxis and is a prosaic part of their consciousness. It may not be systematized but, like black slave theology, it exists in a very practical sense.<sup>71</sup> This is summed up by Hopkins when he states, "the God of freedom, Jesus the liberator, and the empowering Holy Spirit are manifest in what it means to be black and Christian today."<sup>72</sup> In short, the black Trinitarian ideology is an embedded aspect of the daily life of African Americans/Canadians. However, this does not mean that scholarship on the Trinity among black theologians should not be pursued or prioritized.

### *Work on a New Black Theology of Liberation and Trinitarian View*

Kärkkäinen argues that, while acknowledging the presence of African theology with prayers, hymns, and other forms of spirituality, theologies (specifically, black) need to move beyond these towards building a systematic theology from an African perspective.<sup>73</sup> This echoes Hopkins's concern for an African American/Canadian theology of liberation. Hopkins, Gayraud Wilmore, Robert London Smith, and other scholars question many aspects of Black Theology. This includes gaps between it and the ideology of the black church, black suffering as redemptive, Black Theology's hyper-focus on reform, its masculine proclivity, and

68 MacRoberts, "Black Roots," 77.

69 Thomas, "Holy Spirit," 77.

70 Bantum, Brian, "Black Theology or Black Religion? Discipleship as a Theological Method," *Black Theology*, no. 8 (2010): 177.

71 MacRoberts, "Black Roots," 77.

72 Hopkins, *Black Theology*, 202.

73 Kärkkäinen, *Trinity*, 360.

lack of focus on the poor. Hopkins then poses the question, “is Black Theology serving the black community today?”<sup>74</sup> Like most black theologians I disagree with Washington’s assertion that black people must merge with whites and adopt white theology—one that has been historically repressive to African Americans/Canadians—to foster their own growth.<sup>75</sup>

Reddie, like Hopkins, Smith, and Wilmore, offers a “Theo-educational polemic” for a new model of Black Theology (one for the 21<sup>st</sup> century); one focused on black liberation but with a new ideal and methodology that includes using the black experience at every level of life and encompasses the gospel of good news for a broken humanity.<sup>76</sup> Hopkins furthers this proposal by specifying that a more vibrant and nuanced Black Theology needs to reflect black culture, look back at its African origins and ancestry, be attentive to the black poor, and incorporate the thoughts and aspirations of black women, who comprise 70% of the black church. This can only help form a Christology that is principally African in origin and African American/Canadian in its formulation. Hopkins argues this will create a more vibrant and cohesive Black Theology of liberation,<sup>77</sup> one without influence from white European Christianity, allowing for the formulation of a truly unique black Trinitarian ideology that contributes to the doctrine of God.

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74 Hopkins, *Black Theology*, 122. Hopkins argues that black political theologians waste time waging war on white racism while using a white theological framework. A new and more sophisticated theology is needed, one that encompasses the gospel of good news for a broken humanity, and a radical restructuring of American political economy.

75 Hopkins, *Black Theology*, 32; Washington, *Black Religion*, 255.

76 Hopkins, *Black Theology*, 94–96; Reddie, *Against the Grain*, ix.

77 Hopkins, *Black Theology*, 94–96; Reddie, *Against the Grain*, ix.