

## April 23, 2019, Week 14 – 21<sup>st</sup> Century (Black) America

*What in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century is most relevant to how we view the end of the world/afterlife/reincarnation?*

When reading this question, I found myself trying to detach myself from the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, as though I am not one who is experiencing whatever is impacting one's perception or as though my perception is not being impacted. Then I took a step back to analyze just where my own perception originated; what is my perception.

And in doing this, it raises the question that everyone should ask themselves: What is my perception of the end of the world, afterlife, and reincarnation?

Upon doing this myself, I realized I had nothing. Based on my upbringing, based on my own life experiences, and based on the urgency of surviving current circumstances, I realized there is a conglomerate that is my own perception of what is to come. And, upon doing a bit of research, I realized these feelings are shared by many who have a very specific thing in common: being black. It is not shared by all, however, but I did find that it was a shared feeling. To break down what that perception is.

James H. Evans, Jr. wrote that Eschatology in black theology is inseparable from the struggle of African-Americans for freedom. (WHBB p. 152) The whole of black eschatology could be summed up in one word: liberation and that Black theologians God is the Liberator who acts in history to set people free from whatever keeps them in bondage to a life which is less than human. One has to understand the freedom struggle of the black community to understand the significance of eschatology in the African-American religious experience. Eschatology is the finality and Rectifying (fixing) of History and the persistence of hope.

The question really is what is the relationship between past, present, and future context of blackness? African-American theologian, James Cone, states that the eschatological perspective is grounded in the historical present (which I view as what is vs what was). This does force those oppressed to reject unjust treatment today due to its inconsistency with what is considered the promised future.

### **Black Liberation, African Spirituality, and the Black Hebrew Israelite**

I chose this title because all the thoughts are a culmination of these beliefs. Again, I am not saying everyone shares these same beliefs, but there is a strong influence of each one among them all.

**Black Liberation Theology** is a theological perspective that seeks to liberate non-white people from multiple forms of political, social, economic, and religious subjugation. Writer and African-American Theologian James H. Cone specifically wrote that it is the rational study of the being of God in the world in light of the existential situation of an oppressed community, relating to forces of liberation to the essence of the Gospel, which is Jesus Christ. James Cone was known to advocate black theology and black liberation theology. His idea was that Black Power (which was defined as black people asserting the humanity that white supremacy denied them) was the gospel of America. His belief was that Jesus came to liberate the oppressed (Black individuals).<sup>1</sup>

His theory was from within the context of the black experience with oppression. He emphasized how the Gospels related to Jesus' identification with the poor and oppressed and emphasized that the resurrection is the ultimate act of liberation.

One thing Cone argues was God's identification with "blackness":

*The black theologian must reject any conception of God which stifles black self-determination by picturing God as a God of all peoples. Either God is identified with the oppressed to the point that their experience becomes God's experience, or God is a God of racism. ...*

*The blackness of God means that God has made the oppressed condition God's own condition. This is the essence of the biblical revelation. By electing Israelite slaves as the people of God and by becoming the Oppressed One in Jesus Christ, the human race is made to understand that God is known where human beings experience humiliation and suffering. ... Liberation is not an afterthought, but the very essence of divine activity. (p. 67)*

So, what does this have to do with eschatology?

#### ➤ **THEORY**

*A Black Theology of Liberation*<sup>ii</sup>

In Cone's *A Black Theology of Liberation*, he specifically speaks of eschatology. He explains the inevitability of death from the human perspective which is essentially the "not yet" we speak of. He also states that, answers regarding questions about the end come when we face the reality of the future nonexistence in the context of existence that is characterized by oppression and liberation.

1. *How does use of the word "nonexistence" impact the perception of what is to come after death? (p.136-37)*  
**What does it matter?**

When people are oppressed—when we don't have the time to think about the after due to current circumstances.

Cone poses that religion is the attempt for humankind to grapple with death. This leads to talk about blacks, specifically, and the "ultimate hope" (which can be perceived as what you would like to come) and how that relates to their present existence. There is the perception that those who are the oppressors do not know death because they don't know themselves—their finiteness (limit) and future end. However, those who are oppressed are constantly reminded of the death that awaits them as they are facing it every day. It is not of the future; it is of the now.

2. *What does this mean (pg. 137):*

An eschatological perspective that does not challenge the present order is faulty. If contemplation about the future distorts the present reality of injustice and reconciles the oppressed to unjust treatment committed against them, then it is unchristian and thus has nothing whatsoever to do with the Christ who came to liberate us. It is this that renders white talk about heaven and life after death fruitless for blacks.

3. *Does there appear to be a perception of individual or collective belief? (Consider p. 138)*

Collective; Protestant context – and the return to a communal based theology and that shakes hands with Catholicism

Contemporary theology is indebted to Bultmann for his contention that eschatology cannot be separated from the present historical moment of the human being. But Bultmann did not take his point far enough. His view failed to take seriously the significance of the liberation of an oppressed community. How is eschatology related to *protest* against injustice and the need for revolutionary change? True, as Bultmann pointed out, one's future cannot be separated from one's present moment of decision. But neither can one's future be separated from the future of one's community, the nation. In the Old Testament, God is conceived not only as a God who acts in history *for me*; God acts in the history of a particular community. And God's action can be for me only insofar as I choose to belong to the community of God. One's selfhood is bound up with the community to which one belongs.

4. *What do you feel is being stated in regard to present and future realities? (p.138-140)*

Rudolf Bultmann states eschatology cannot be separated from the present historical moment of the human being. One's future cannot be separated from one's present moment of decision; one's future cannot be separated from the future of one's community (the nation).

- Powerful statement is the switch of the view of Eschatology being connected to the end of time or a reward to those who are obedient. This equates the resurrection of Jesus Christ to mean that salvation is now complete – finished and that the church looks at the world as a place to live, vs die in preparation for the Second Coming.
  - But one cannot just accept the world as it is – know it is incongruent to what is expected in the future. Our hope is not just in HIM, but in what HE WILL BRING.
5. *How is the perception of complacency demonstrated? ("Staking one's whole existence on heaven" – p. 142)*

➤ AS APPLIED

*The Slave Narratives as A Source of Black Theological Discourse* – George L. Cummings

He states that eschatological hopes that emerge from these interviews reflect a connection between the presence of the Spirit of God and the hopes and aspirations of the slave community. The presence of the Spirit was seen as the basis for a slave's prayers for freedom "someday". Yearning, praying, preaching, and working for freedom were expressions of eschatological views of slaves and their lives "in the spirit".

them with the faith to dance. The Spirit was the living and dynamic presence of God the Liberator erupting through the culture, religion, and history of the black oppressed in their struggle for freedom.

1. What does it mean to be "in the spirit"?
  - a. How does this impact one's perception of body/soul dualism? (Consider p. 60; p. 56)  
Against Plato; the idea that your body can be inhabited by a spirit.

Heaven was viewed as a place of eternal rest where "someday . . . we'll be free of the yoke of bondage." Their hope was to be free. Slave testimony viewed death, heaven, and escape as possibilities for alleviating their great burden of bondage; their persistent hope for the future was tied to their faith in God. What would the future be like for black oppressed slaves?

Perhaps the word *reversal* is the best description. Heaven was to be a reversal of the present order. In the present they had no home, but in heaven they did. "My Lord! Po' mourner's got

2. So, is Heaven a place? Or a concept? (p. 57-58)  
Not mutually exclusive → this represents the earthly nature of eschatology
  - a. What picture does this paint regarding what "Heaven" will be like?  
A place of eternal rest where individuals would be free of the yoke of bondage. It would be an escape where, possibly, present order would be reversed.
  - b. What is "future reversal"? (p. 58)  
The belief that, in the future, the roles of slaves and masters would be reversed.
  - c. What is the "final future"? (p. 58)  
Some sort of afterlife or event following one's death. Here, narratives of dreams showed individuals what the "final future" looked like.
  - d. Is there a Heaven? You are called to go back to the other world?  
After the *dream*, individuals were said to experience a conversion. In one account, the individual saw the end and then was given an order to go back to "yonder world" (i.e. oppression) unafraid but filled with hope and strength. So, it is as though you experience death and then are converted to spend a life in the spirit.
- Traits of Pentecostal beliefs → relating to or denoting any of a number of Christian movements and individuals emphasizing baptism in the Holy Spirit, evidenced by speaking in tongues, prophecy, healing, and exorcism.
3. What is this conversion? A dream? Beatific vision? (p. 58-59)
  - a. They are explaining dreams where they are converted after having proleptic experiences – which I guess the best way to describe it would be before it actually occurs – individuals are able to see the end, with God, and are thus given hope.

4. What is the significance of the quote in the middle of p. 61?

The eschatological expectations shared in the slave testimonies showed that their encounter with the Spirit of the Lord enabled them to evolve a critique of racism and racists, dream a grand vision of freedom, nurture communal relationships, fight for freedom, defend each other, affirm their humanity, and hear the melody of the future with such clarity that they literally, in faith, were prepared at great cost to dance to the melody of the future by acting in the present to create it. "Strangest thing," said ex-slave John Crawford, "is that while Mammy was in her spell of prayin' that a little boy was eight-year old up North who grew up and set the niggers free."<sup>37</sup>

➤ **RESISTENCE**

With movements such as Black Lives Matter and others, we often see talk of oppression at the forefront of discussion. To an individual considered "woke", the oppression that still exists today can lead to frustration and extreme tendencies. Groups like the Black Hebrew Israelites and African American Muslims (Nation of Islam) are two groups that somewhat stand out. The African American Muslims is another popular group. We often see individuals begin practicing this faith in prison. Malcolm X was one who was famously said to have been killed by the NOI after his "ignorant teachings" as stated by NOI leader, Elijah Muhammed.

The Black Hebrew Israelites are a group of Black Americans who believe they are the descendants of Israelites. Black Hebrew Israelites adhere to religious beliefs and practices in both Christianity and Judaism. They are not recognized as Jewish by the greater Jewish community and choose to identify as Hebrew Israelites or Black Hebrews. They are sometimes referred to as black supremacist and are said to openly be opposed to whites and consider them evil. However, most are considered neither explicitly racist nor anti-Semitic and do not advocate violence.

1. How can the beliefs of the Black Hebrew Israelites be considered a reaction to history?  
Being an oppressed and an attempt to redeem or reconcile what has happened to their community.
2. If this information is correct, according to the Black Hebrew Israelites, is there a Heaven or a Hell? If not, then what does this say about the "afterlife" from their perspective? (#5)  
It is a metaphor; not a literal place where people suffer. What we are currently living in (this earth) is Caucasian Heaven.
3. Who is the Messiah? (#2)  
No universal agreement to his identity, but there is a belief that, if anything, He is Black.
4. At the return of the Messiah, who will be gathered and where are they going? (#9)  
The Israelites, specifically people of color, will be going to the Promised Land.

➤ **FREEDOM**

**African Spirituality**

Prayer and spirituality as a way of transcending beyond the current state one is in.

On Nipsey Hussle's (Ermias Asghedom) death: Angelique Smith, Ermias's mother (of the African Spiritual Science Church):

*"Death is something to prepare yourself for, and you walk this Earth and you do good deeds for people and you are loving and kind. Those are the kind of things that will show on your face, you will look more beautiful. Ermias looked healthy, he looked clean. He had a glow. He was radiant. And he was so radiant that he had a sweet aroma. He even smelled good. So, please. Do not fear death. Death is just the beginning of a wonderful world. And I tell myself, Ermias like thrilling things. And now my son knows the secret to the mystery of life."*

*"When you live life and you have god on your side, when God dwells inside of you, you have no fear. Everything is in perfect order. Everything is in the divine perfect order of our creator. And we have perfect peace. I have perfect peace, and I have strength, and I want to lift you up. Please do not stay down, do not stay stuck, do not mourn. Because Nipsey is great [...] and now he's even greater*

because he has no bounds and limits. His energy is everywhere. He's there with you now and he's here with me now. And pleased be encouraged."

Article: *The Importance of Spirituality in African American's End of Life Experience*

1. If death does not represent the end of one's life, what does it represent? (p. 143-144)  
Greater things are to come in the *next life*.

Article: *What Most People Don't Know About African Spirituality*

2. What gender is African Spirituality and how is that distinguished from literature we have read thus far?  
Female!
3. How might encouraging happiness correlate with the theme of hope and liberation? (#3)  
An aspect of optimism.
4. If heaven and hell are of the same divine space, what does this mean in regard to an afterlife? (#4)  
The dead walk among us.

*We Have Been Believers*<sup>iii</sup>

1. In traditional African societies, the death of a member of the community is viewed as what? (p. 143 (bottom))  
They live as a part of the community as long as the relatives and friends remember his or her name. Death finally occurs after the fact (they are "accomplished"). (p. 144)
  - a. What happens to the no-longer-remembered ones? (p. 144)  
They are not vanquished from the community, but instead referred to as the living dead, entering a state of collective immortality.
  - b. How does that impact thoughts regarding "Parousia" or intermediate state? (p. 142)  
It doesn't exist, because it has yet to occur. Time is a currency that owes its value to the coming and going of events.
2. What are the three eschatological motifs of black theology? (p. 147)
  1. Eschatology related to the existence of evil in the world (James Cone)
  2. Eschatology related to God's benevolence (compassion) within the created order, reflecting God's terrestrial (earthly) promise (J. Deotis Roberts)
  3. Eschatology related to the determination of African-American Christians to survive and prosper in difficult circumstances (the anatomy of hope) (Gayraud Wilmore)
3. In the second motif, (similar to what has been stated before) what are heaven and hell? (p. 150)  
Symbols; they do not refer to physical realities. This therefore forces one to look at the moral and spiritual essence of human existence.
  - Heaven is the best of human potential
  - Hell is the worst of human potential
4. How does hope tie in with the collective and interpersonal dimension of hope? (p. 153 - bottom)  
Hope has a collective or interpersonal dimension; being in community with others and your continued existence is tied to your ongoing participation in that community.

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<sup>i</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James\\_H.\\_Cone#CITEREFJ.\\_H.\\_Cone2010](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_H._Cone#CITEREFJ._H._Cone2010)

<sup>ii</sup> Cone, James H., *A Black Theology of Liberation* (2010)

<sup>iii</sup> Evans Jr., James H., *We Have Been Believers*