The Ambivalent Nature of Christianity: Reconfiguring Black Identity in South Africa

by

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Class of 2015

A thesis submitted to the faculty of Wesleyan University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts with Departmental Honors in Religion

Middletown, Connecticut April, 2015
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Acknowledgements

I would firstly like to thank my thesis advisor, Mary Jane Rubenstein, for her diligence, patience, guidance, and editing. This thesis would not have been completed without her help. Also a big thank you to my readers, Eugene Klaaren and Elizabeth McAlister, the Religion Department, and Richard Elphick.

I would also like to thank my family and friends who gave me support and help with edits during the last part of this journey: my mother, my sister, Mickey, Mariah, and Jacob. You were all a great support to me. I appreciate and love you all so much.

Thank You.
Introduction

The Royal Chronicler of Prince Henry of Portugal, Gomes Eanes de Azurara, was responsible for recording the moods and motivations of the Prince during late Medieval Christendom, from about 1440-1470 CE.¹ According to American theologian Willie James Jennings, “Zurara,” as Azurara was often called, wrote the accounts of Prince Henry’s successful conquests in Ceuta and Guinea, and these accounts “remain crucial narratives of a founding moment in Christendom’s colonialism.”²

In The Christian Imagination: Theology and the Origins of Race, Jennings offers a close reading of Zurara’s Chronicle of the Deeds of Arms Involved in the Conquest of Guinea (1457).³ Among the most arresting scenes for Jennings is one characterized by “penitent prayer” on the part of the author.⁴ The scene describes a ritual slave capture and auction on August 8th, 1444, of which Prince Henry was a participant. In the observation of families painfully separated during the auction process, Zurara write an emotional lamentation to God. The basis of this lamentation is Zurara’s recognition of the Africans’ humanity in relation to his own, noting that, they too are descendants of Adam.⁵

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³ Ibid, 17.
⁴ Ibid, 17-18.
⁵ Ibid, 17-18.
writes: “it is not their religion but their humanity that maketh mine to weep in pity for their sufferings.”

In this prayer, however, Zurara asks God not to free the slaves but rather “to ease his conscience and make the event unfolding in front of him morally palatable.” Perhaps a sign of God’s response, the chapter ends with Prince Henry’s successful conversion of the slaves apportioned to him during the auction. Presumably, the slaves’ conversion to Christianity mitigates, or even (spiritually) redeems their enslavement. According to Jennings, the purpose and culmination of this chapter in this sense “enacted as an order of salvation,”—that is, that “African captivity leads to African salvation and to black bodies showing the disciplining power of the faith.”

Over a century later, a Jesuit priest named Alessandro Valignano (1539-1606) similarly attempts to capture the salvific potential of all native peoples “discovered” during the colonial encounter. Valignano was trying to assess the viability of Christian missions to colonized areas—in his case, Japan. Jennings claims, however, that the Jesuit priest was also enacting an ideology that would become “the most decisive and central distortion that exists in the church,” supersessionism. According to Jennings, supersessionism is an effect that “begins with positioning Christian identity fully within European (white)}
identity and fully outside of the identities of other religious traditions.\textsuperscript{11} The potential for salvation therefore becomes a matter of creating insiders and outsiders along racial lines: to become Christian is, in some sense, to become white.

This thesis deals with the matter of insider (white European) and outsider (black African) with respect to a globalizing Christianity. Its primary case study will be the colonized and then white-ruled nation of South Africa. It examines notions of blackness in early Christian literature that served to dehumanize black people, the various manners in which black people reclaim and reconfigure these concepts, and process by which they sought to make sense of their lives through indigenized Christian traditions, asserting their humanity and dignity in the face of, and in a sense by means of, the very forces that had dehumanized them. In other words, I start from a place where blackness and black bodies are being discussed by non-black Christians, to a place where white and black Christians are vying for power to define and ascribe value to blackness, to a place where black voices are privileged in this previously oppressive discourse, because they have transformed the discourse itself.

In order to set the scene for the missionary encounter in South Africa, Chapter I begins with a discussion of patristic and medieval conceptions of blackness, which are deeply influenced by Greco-Roman understandings of white and black, light and dark. These composite conceptions then become the cultural molds that influence patristic, medieval, and early modern

understanding of blackness and black bodies. In short, blackness in this literature is used to demarcate incorrect from correct understandings of Christian behavior. Blackness is understood to be sinful, hypersexual, and even demonic. In the midst of these negative images of blackness, there are a few instances in which black people appear as virtuous. These virtuous representations are, however, instances of exemplary Christian virtue *in spite of* blackness. For this reason, virtuous blackness comes to signify Christianity’s salvific capabilities, its capacity to redeem blackness. Therefore, as Jennings explains, Christian and black are juxtaposed—the one [conceptually] overcoming the other,” even before the colonial encounter.\(^\text{12}\)

Finally, we will encounter medieval interpretations of the “Hamitic” curse. As a result of an ambiguously sexual sin, the descendants of Noah’s son Ham are cursed with intergenerational servitude, a condition that medieval authors believed was physically marked by blackness. In other words, this Hamitic myth and its subsequent interpretation provide an etiology of blackness that is as persistent as it is dubious. Taken all together, these historically layered messages create a “scale of existence, with white at one end and black on the other end.”\(^\text{13}\) This chapter then demonstrates how the Christian imagination cultivated these negatives metaphors even before the advent of colonialism.

Ultimately, this thesis seeks to trace the indigenous-Christian redefinition of blackness over against these oppressive, European-Christian metaphors. At


the end of the 20th century, the term “black” will be reclaimed by the Black Consciousness Movement and Black Theology project, both of which were enabled in complicated ways by the Christian missions to South Africa. In order to address these movements’ reconfiguration of blackness, it is important to address the process of conversion in South Africa; in particular, to see how the conversion process treated blacks. Chapter II traces the colonial and missionary incursion into South Africa, and the complex negotiations between European Christians and would-be converts. Against those scholars who claim that Christianity in Africa is simply a European imposition, this chapter analyzes the process by which converted Africans were engaged in a process of theological reasoning with special regard to their African identity. Titled, “Indigenizing Christianity,” this chapter claims that Christianity only fully entered black South African sphere once the Africans themselves were capable of constructing their own African identity. It will be on this basis that African Christians will ultimately reconfigure Christian theology in order to affirm and liberate blackness.

Chapter III, titled, “Towards a Reconceptualization of Blackness,” brings us back to the dialectic of blackness discussed earlier in Chapter I. What Chapter II has demonstrated is that black South Africans transformed Christianity in order to reconcile their identities as both Christian and African. This indigenized Christianity allowed Black Theology to continue this process, and to move from indigenization to liberation. This chapter briefly outlines some of the legislation implemented by the apartheid government to circumscribe the lives of Blacks,
Coloureds, and Indians. It then moves to discuss the influence of the Black Consciousness Movement on Black Theology in South Africa, with special consideration given to Steve Biko’s positive, cross-categorical definition of blackness. According to Biko, blackness based on the condition of oppression, rather than skin color alone, and recognizing this shared oppression was the first step toward liberation. In effect, apartheid had assigned value on a hierarchical scale based on skin color, so Biko decided to combat the whole system by asserting that everyone oppressed under apartheid was black. Furthermore, blackness, according to Biko, was also a mental state—a conscious refusal to conform to these oppressive regimes. This redefinition of blackness was an important step, as it responded to the descriptions of blackness describes in Chapter I. But the specific contributions of Christianity will be combatted by South African theologians who draw on Biko’s Black Consciousness, African-American liberation theology, and their own experiences as African Christians in order to reconfigure the humanity of blacks under apartheid. In particular, South African Black Theology critiques and reconstructs the persons of God the Father and Jesus Christ, in order to claim divine endorsement of their political agenda and to reconceptualize black humanity, made in the image of this reconceptualized God. This chapter ends with an exploration of how Black Theology subverts the narrative of mental slavery and political absolutism in order to advocate for black solidarity through corporate personality. Ultimately, these examples of Black Theology at work reflect the political agenda of its secular predecessor, Black Consciousness.
The underlying theme of this thesis is the ambivalence of Christianity in South Africa, especially with regards to black identity. Chapters I, II, and III are all examples that each reflect varying agendas of creating a dialectic of identity and power within the Christian tradition. In these chapters, we find a paradox of both the oppressor and the oppressed sharing the same Bible and faith. For example, during the advent of the colonial project in South Africa, African converts use their knowledge of the Christian faith in order to craft an African-Christian identity, despite missionary insistence on complete authority over the converted community’s practices.

In the concluding chapter, we address one of the more contemporary implications of Black Theology. Why do we need to affirm and assert black dignity in places that have legally abolished pre-existing forms of oppression? The conversation will then briefly turn to the social-media based, intersectional movement Black Lives Matter.
Chapter I: Blackness in the Christian Imagination

To examine blackness in the history of Christian thought, one must begin with Greco-Roman conceptions of sub-Saharan Africa and its inhabitants. According to biblical scholar Gay L. Byron, Greco-Roman “geographical descriptions and historical summaries about Ethiopia served more to stimulate the literary imagination than to record actual events.” This imagination conjures images of Ethiopia as geographically remote and uncivilized; even Homer and Herodotus describe the location of “Ethiopia” as the end of the earth. Aristotle claimed that Ethiopians were less intelligent than the Scythians (Eurasian nomads). In the Greco-Roman tradition, Ethiopia and Ethiopians were generic terms used to indicate all places and persons in Sub-Saharan Africa. These ambiguous definitions indicate Greek ignorance of the African continent in general.

While little was known about what lay below North Africa, Greek writers, like Aristotle, were aware that its inhabitants were “black,” and “woolly-haired.” In regards to white (leukos) and black (melas), the Greeks used the “fluid paradigms” of day and night to imagine the contrast between light and dark, whiteness and blackness. In classical Greece, whiteness (leukos) “signaled well-being and good luck.” For instance, “only in Olympia, the residence of the gods … [was] sunlight

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16 Ibid, 33.
19 Ibid, 30.
and brightness eternally present.”

By contrast, black (*melas*) “implied negative qualities in the sense of sinister, dreadful, terrible, [and] unlucky.”

Melas not only described the Grecian underworld, the locus of dead human souls, but it “also characterized a level below” the underworld, a black, primordial pit for “disobedient deities.” These Greek associations of blackness with death, disobedience, and misfortune, were then carried into the Latin world when Greece was incorporated into the Roman territories, c. 140 BCE.

As “Hellenists devoted to Greece,” the Roman elite “assimilated Greek ethnocentric beliefs about the rest of the world,” including beliefs about blackness.

As we have seen in the cases of Homer and Herodotus, Ethiopia—eventually “Africa”—was thought to be the southern-most part of the world. According to Robert Hood, Roman authors believed that Africa’s hot climate caused its inhabitants to be black, thus lacking highly regarded Roman qualities. In particular, black Africans in the Roman imagination “had shrill voices, were bow-legged, had a blood deficiency, and made poor soldiers.” Both Cicero and Pliny the Elder thought of Africans were highly fertile, oversexed, and stupid.

In short, Romans adopted and

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23 Ibid, 34.
27 Ibid, 39.
28 Ibid, 39.
29 Ibid, 40.
elaborated on Greek views concerning blackness, creating an overwhelmingly negative aesthetic in regards to blackness and black people.

The growth and eventual establishment of Christianity within the Roman Empire led early Christian authors to appropriate Greco-Roman understandings of blackness. These etiologies and associations of color allowed such authors to mark Christians as separate from and superior to non-Christians, and to mark particular Christians as right-thinking and others as heretical.\(^{30}\) While the color-symbolic language used by early Christian authors “may not have signified anything pejorative or prejudicial,” Byron argues, “they certainly implied some hierarchy on a descending or ascending scale.”\(^{31}\) In order to demonstrate the kind of rhetoric European Christians were armed with once the colonial encounters began, this chapter will construct an analysis of the polemical color-coded language in early Christianity.

**Patristic Metaphors of Blackness**

The establishment of Christianity in the Mediterranean world owes much of its success to the theological and ecumenical reflection of the patristic period.\(^{32}\) The patristic period is often classified as the “period from the closing of the New Testament writings (c. 100) to the definitive Council of Chalcedon (451).”\(^{33}\) The most important geographical locations of theological debate in this time were: Rome,

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Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch, Cappadocia, and Western North Africa.\textsuperscript{34} In Christianity, the patristic period was important as a means of clarifying Christian identity within the Roman Empire and in relation to Judaism. It is therefore marked by a proliferation of diverse apologetics, which is to say, “the reasoned defense and justification of the Christian faith against its critics”—both “pagan” and Jewish.\textsuperscript{35} The theologians whose lives and work rose to prominence during this period are considered formative to almost all denominations and sects of the Christian tradition.\textsuperscript{36} Their constructions of blackness were carried through the medieval era into the early modern period, when Christianity would encounter actual black bodies, beginning with the West African slave trade. It is to these patristic conceptions of blackness that we now turn.

\textit{Sinful or Polluting Blackness}

The church fathers of the patristic period overwhelmingly tended to equate “sin with blackness and salvation with whiteness.”\textsuperscript{37} According to Byron, the ethnic othering of “Blacks/blackness [in patristic sources] became an effective rhetorical strategy for defining vices and sins among early Christian” communities.\textsuperscript{38} Blackness defined the threat of sin because it was contrasted to the light and purity of God. Additionally, because blackness represented the threat of any and all sins or vices


\textsuperscript{36} Ibid, 24.


within the Christian community, it assumed a valence of pollution: blackness might *spread*.

The leaders of early Christian communities wanted to attack and publicize the dangers of sin and vice in order to define identity and establish stability.\(^\text{39}\) They therefore used blackness as a foil for Christian rectitude; blackness became an ambiguous force of sin that threatened the moral strength of the community. In the *Epistle of Barnabas* (c. 70-115 CE), for example, “the Black One” is a figure that signals immorality within the community of early Christians.\(^\text{40}\) The author writes: “therefore, we ought to pay attention in the last days… in order that the *Black One* (*ho melas*) may not creep in among us.”\(^\text{41}\) According to Byron, “the Black One” is a personification of the evil and sinful behavior in the community “that should be cut off.”\(^\text{42}\) In the second chapter of the *Epistle of Barnabas*, the anonymous author writes, “we ought to consider carefully, brothers and sister, our salvation, in order that the Devil (*ho poneros*) may not gain a deceitful entry into us and hurl us away from our life.”\(^\text{43}\) The Devil and “the Black One” are both metaphysically dangerous and physically ambiguous characters that threaten to enter the community and violate its purity. The reader is led to understand these two figures as equals, even as interchangeable, so that the Devil himself is anesthetized as black.

Granted, “the Black One” is not defined as a physical being; rather the figure operates as an allegorical manifestation of all sins and vices. All necessary

\(^{41}\) Ibid, 60.
\(^{42}\) Ibid, 60.
\(^{43}\) Ibid, 61.
information about the “the Black One” is outlined as a list of sinful behaviors; the way of “the Black One” is the “way of death that destroy[s] the soul.” The Epistle of Barnabas lists a myriad of vices, ranging from pride and not giving alms to murder and idolatry. All these behaviors are markers of “the Black One”, now understood to be equivalent to the Devil, who “tries to subvert God’s creation by moving humankind from Christ’s kingdom of light to his own kingdom of evil and darkness.” According to Byron, the polemic against this allegorical figure “was not intended to denounce actual Black persons within the community,” but rather was against “vices and sins that threatened the weaker members of the community.” Nevertheless, this set of negative associations with “the Black One” would eventually be associated with actual black persons during the colonial encounter.

The explicitly polluting presence of blackness is magnified in the works of Saint Jerome (348-420 CE), who in his Homily 18 on Psalm 86, writes that before the advent of Christ, “we were Ethiopians in our vices and sins… our sins had blackened us.” In this “history” of salvation, Jerome further typecasts blackness (“Ethiopians”) as a symbol of vice and sin. Again, such blackness was said to be metaphorical rather than spiritual. Moral and spiritual offenses did not physically alter a person’s appearance; rather they polluted the souls of the transgressors, which could be un-

48 Ibid, 55.
blackened through the rites of penance and confession. Before Christ, we were black, writes Jerome, “but afterwards we heard the words: ‘Wash yourselves clean!’” His conclusion: “We are Ethiopians, therefore, who have been transformed into whiteness.” In this manner, the reader is encouraged to undertake a spiritual transformation from a state of blackened sin to one of whitened virtue. Reading Jerome alongside the Epistle of Barnabas, we see that blackness threatens the individual soul as well as the community at-large, “staining” it until proper penance is made and whiteness is attained.

Hypersexual Blackness

One of the ways in which blackness was particularly polluting was through its hypersexuality. Chastity was a necessary virtue in one’s cultivation of spiritual integrity, therefore, blackness became mapped on to chastity’s antithesis, hypersexuality. Patristic authors often hypersexualized blackness in allegorical literature in order to emphasize the importance of cultivating ascetic virtues, such as celibacy. Most often, the black figures of temptation in these texts are women. In these texts, blackness becomes an interpretative site within monastic culture and a marker of spiritual destruction.

The construction of the (black) female body as polluting, dangerous, and even non-human reveals the fathers’ pervasive association of women with sexual immorality, and their fear of both. Indeed, for many monks, the mere thought or

51 Ibid, 78.
presence of a woman posed a threat to their ascetic practice. This threat was often rendered in color-symbolic language. In the *Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, for example, an ascetic travels the desert and is confronted with “the work of the Devil… in the form of an Ethiopian woman.”\(^{52}\) The woman says, “‘I am she who appears sweet in the hearts of men, but because of your obedience and your labor, God does not permit me to seduce you, but I have let you know my foul odor.’”\(^{53}\) Even though the ascetic is able to resist sexual temptation, he is unable to avoid the “foul odor.” This personified sexual temptation reveals herself in sight (color) and in odor, two of the senses engaged during a sexual act. The “Ethiopian” woman and monk do not interact through tactile senses, which would irrevocably damage the monk’s spiritual integrity; instead, she reaches him through vision and smell, senses that are harder to control (but arguably less polluting) than touch or taste. The monk is victorious in his trial against sexual immorality “by overcoming the seductive traps of the Ethiopian woman.”\(^{54}\) However, her obscene odor lingers, signaling the persistent dangers of sexual immorality.

Astonishingly, this is not the only story in which a monastic leader is challenged with sexual immorality by a malodorous, black, and female figure. Saint Pachomius wrote about a vision in which the Devil appeared to him as a seductive black woman. Saint Pachomius drives the Devil away with a slap, but the smell lingers on his hand for two years.\(^{55}\) In chapter 5 of the *Historia Lausiaca*, Palladius

\(^{54}\) Ibid, 102.
writes about a demon taking the form of an “Ethiopian maiden” in order to seduce a monk named Pachon. The monk is able to give “her a box on the ear,” causing her to disappear. However, the physical contact between monk and demon again leaves an “evil smell” on Pachon’s hand for two years. Like Saint Pachomius, Pachon is able to elude temptation, but he is defiled and reminded of this incident for two years thereafter. Representing black women as sexual threats with distinctly unappealing characteristics allowed the monastic community to overcome sexual vice. The threat of sexual immorality continues to linger long after it is overcome, like the odor that haunts these two monks. Resisting all forms of sin was not one instance of spiritual fortitude, but a continuing struggle towards virtue and away from evil.

Demonic Blackness

The descriptions of blackness as sinful, polluting, hypersexual, and malodorous have served to construct blackness as demonic. According to Byron, early Christian literature constructs black demons as projections of ethnic and spiritual “others.” For Byron, these authors fashion demons as ethnic others precisely by means of their blackness, which as we have seen are associated with (particularly sexual) sin. Therefore, such demons remind us of “the importance of constant spiritual warfare against the passions of the flesh.” Moreover, they signaled the importance of guarding the Church against evil intruders. According to Robert Hood,

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“during the patristic period, various anecdotes circulated that characterized the Ethiopian as a demon or a devil bent on sabotaging Christian spirituality and Christian liturgy.” 59 In these anecdotes, these anti-Christian saboteurs were consistently figured as black.

In *Vita Antonii*, written by Bishop Athanasius of Alexandria in the mid-fourth century, black demons are dramatic tropes for the temptation to sin. 60 In chapter 5, a demon tempts Antony by infiltrating his thoughts and directing them towards money, property, and fame. 61 Antony repels this temptation through prayer, but the demon later returns in the form of a black boy. 62 Although clearly a threat to the saint, this demon is described as weak, treacherous, deceitful, pitiful, and fearful. And crucially, the soul of this boy/demon/tempter is described as black. 63

“Virtuous” Blackness

Up until this point, blackness has carried three insidious, interrelated meanings in North African patristic literature. Blackness is revealed to be sinful, polluting, sexually immoral, and even demonic. And yet, there are exceptions to these overwhelmingly negative associations with blackness. Christian literature also presents us with an idealized or virtuous blackness, which surprisingly *combats* the powers of sin, darkness, and death.

63 Ibid, 88.
Blackness itself however never becomes virtuous. Rather, it can be altered to attain a state of purity and holiness. Origen (c. 185-254), an important patristic writer and Egyptian theologian, associated the Bride of Solomon with the Gentile church in his Homilies on the Song of Songs. The passage reads: “I am black, but comely, O ye daughters of Jerusalem, as the tents of Kedar, as the curtains of Solomon. Look not upon me, because I am black, because the sun hath looked upon me.” Origen’s exegesis of these verses reveal that although the Gentile church “is baseborn” because of her non-Jewish heritage, her virtue lies in her openness to receiving the Gospel and abandoning the false beliefs of her ancestors. Furthermore, Origen deems her blackness as accidental. It is her skin that has been darkened by the sun; her soul is white and pure. Blackness is therefore selected in scripture to reveal the importance of penance and faith, which in turn reveal the bride’s true inner beauty (and whiteness). The black bride in Song of Solomon comes to represent the universal saving nature of Christianity; as Jean Devisse explains, “even Ethiopians, provided they get rid of their blackness by doing penance,” “[are] destined to salvation.”

Virtuous black people in patristic sources exemplify Christian virtue in spite of their skin color. The anonymous editor of the Apothegmata partum, for example,

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describes a desert father named “Ethiopian Moses” as a model of virtue.69 As Byron points out, however, Moses’ exemplary status “comes at the expense of [his] ethnic and color difference.”70 For example, before his ordination in Scete (Egypt), Moses’ ascetic virtues were put to the test. He was publicly ridiculed, as the Fathers asked one another: “Why has this Ethiopian come into our midst?”71 Moses kept silent, thus reflecting “the spirit of long-suffering and patience... the essence of the spiritual life” to the council.72 Here, Moses must completely suppress his anger in order to convey his humility. Furthermore, his public denigration demonstrates the virtues that were the community’s standard for entry, namely, humility, self-denial, and steadfastness.73 The examples of virtuous blackness in this chapter are used as foils to indicate correct and incorrect Christian behavior in patristic literature.

**Blackness and the Hamitic Myth**

The main focus of this chapter thus far has been that of blackness in patristic literature. We now move to early modern sources that rely heavily on Genesis 10 in order to categorize the native inhabitants of the lands that colonialists “discovered”. The “Hamitic myth” in the Book of Genesis tells the story of Noah’s youngest son Ham, and of the curse on his progeny as a result of his sexual indiscretion. The Hamitic myth in post-biblical Jewish literature explains the existence of black Africans, and justifies their subsequent subjugation at the hands of Europeans. This

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73 *Ibid*, 118.
section does not intend to substantiate or disprove the Hamitic myth; rather it intends to bring to light the ways in which blackness was given space and meaning in the Christian imagination.

Genesis 6 tells us that God was displeased with the state of affairs on earth. Specifically, divine beings had come down from heaven and procreated with human women, breeding a race of powerful monsters.\textsuperscript{74} According to the narrative, God saw that humankind had become irreversibly immoral, and decided to flood the earth to destroy all of humanity, except one righteous man (Noah) and his family.\textsuperscript{75} After the flood, God blessed Noah’s family and promised to never inflict such a curse on the earth and humankind again.\textsuperscript{76} Noah and his three sons, Shem, Japheth, and Ham, were therefore destined to “fill the earth” in the post-flood earth.\textsuperscript{77} The subsequent genealogy of each son is described in Genesis 10, and the line of Ham produces Cush, Egypt, Put and Canaan.\textsuperscript{78}

While each of Noah’s sons is blessed by God “to be fruitful and multiply” all over the earth, descendants of Ham become cursed with intergenerational servitude as a result of Ham’s sin.\textsuperscript{79}

“Noah was the first tiller of the soil. He planted a vineyard; and he drank of the wine, and became drunk, and lay uncovered in his tent. And Ham, the father of Canaan, saw the nakedness of his father, and told his two brothers outside. Then Shem and Japheth took a garment, laid it upon both their shoulders, and walked backward and covered the nakedness of their father; their faces were turned away, and they did not see their father’s nakedness. When Noah awoke from his wine and knew what his youngest son had done to him he said, ‘Cursed be Canaan; a slave of slaves shall he be to his

\textsuperscript{74} Genesis 6:4 (Revised Standard Version).
\textsuperscript{75} Genesis 6:8 (Revised Standard Version).
\textsuperscript{76} Genesis 8:21 (Revised Standard Version).
\textsuperscript{77} Genesis 9:1 (Revised Standard Version).
\textsuperscript{78} Genesis 10:6 (Revised Standard Version).
\textsuperscript{79} Genesis 9:1 (Revised Standard Version).
It is unclear what exactly Ham has done to his father. Ham “sees” his father’s nakedness. According to biblical scholar Jennifer Knust, “uncovering nakedness [was] a euphemism for illicit sexual activity.” In Leviticus, she notes, incest is described as “uncover[ing] the nakedness” of a relative. By this logic, Ham could have raped his father. But Leviticus also says, “you shall not uncover the nakedness of your father’s wife; it is your father’s nakedness.” If this is the derived meaning of “the nakedness of his father” in Genesis 10, then it could be that Ham raped his mother, whose nakedness would be interchangeable with that of the husband who owns her. If this is the case, Knust explains, “Canaan can be understood as Ham’s progeny via his sexual liaison with this mother,” making the curse on Canaan (instead of Ham) clearer. But there is yet another possibility: according to Louis Ginzberg’s *The Legends of the Jews* (a compilation of stories about the Hebrew Patriarchs from post-biblical Jewish literature), Ham’s “uncovering the nakedness of his father” means that he castrated his father. In line with this reading, Knust explains that the curse on Ham would make “Canaan and all his descendants into slaves rather than

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80 Genesis 10:20-27 (Revised Standard Version)  
83 Leviticus 18: 8 (Revised Standard Version).  
free men, who would [otherwise] be capable of passing on their property.”86 In short, while the specificities of Ham’s transgression remain mysterious, the crime is clearly sexual, and it validates an intergenerational state of servitude for all of Canaan’s descendants.

The earliest sources that equates the Hamitic curse with physiognomic blackness are the Palestinian and Babylonian Talmuds, dating from around the 4th and 6th century C.E., respectively.87 According to the Babylonian sources, cited in David Goldenberg’s work *The Curse of Ham*, Ham was “punished in his skin,” which is to say the color of his skin was the result of his having violated his father.88 The Palestinian Talmud goes into more specificity about this curse; “Ham went forth [from his father’s tent] darkened/blackened.”89 According to these sources, then, Ham and Canaan’s descendants become physically marked as a result of this ancient curse—not just with blackness, but with its purportedly attending physiological traits. According to Ginzberg, the cursed progeny of Canaan were said to have “misshapen lips, because Ham spoke with his lips to his brothers about the unseemly condition of his father”; they have “twisted curly hair,” because Ham turned to see Noah’s nakedness, “and they go about naked;” because Ham did not respect his father’s nakedness.90 Therefore the descendants of Ham are cursed not only in servitude, but

also in their visible, physical features. Noah also divided and allotted all parts of the earth to his sons; Ham received the Southern portions of earth, whose climate was "hot." Therefore, Ham and his progeny are understood to be black Africans, all under a congenital curse. The patristic associations of blackness with sin, sex and Satan are reaffirmed, and even given biblical authority. Moreover, Ham’s sin is the first instance of sin after the flood, an event meant to purge the earth of immorality altogether. The “Hamitic myth” explains the etiology of blackness and of sin in a supposedly perfect world, presenting modern Europeans with a set of negative metaphors even before it encountered “black” bodies.

Using this biblical myth alongside later Christian work regarding blackness, European colonial powers would be able to justify the enslavement and colonization of African under “ancient”, biblical pretenses. At the same time, however, the process of colonization produced indigenous black Christians who, as the next chapter will show, accepted the Gospel only when they could do so on their own terms. In the process, they began to take back the language that had demonized, enslaved, and oppressed them for centuries.

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Chapter II: Indigenizing Christianity

The Southern African landmass is located at the southern tip of Africa, with a coastline spanning more than 2,500 kilometers from its western borders with Namibia to its border with Mozambique on the Indian Ocean. The coastline is relatively thin and most of the land in South Africa lies on a large, high plateau with a long escarpment on the edges. The escarpment on the eastern side of South Africa reaches peaks as high as eleven thousand feet, and is more commonly referred to as the Drakensberg Mountain Range. Its location and unfavorable ocean currents on both the Atlantic and Indian made access by sea virtually impossible until modern technological advances of the last few centuries. At the end of the seventeenth century, imperial Dutch and British forces began to colonize the area around Table Bay in order to establish checkpoints in trade routes from Europe to Asia.

The pre-colonial inhabitants of South Africa have been aggregated into three main groups. The hunter-gathers, or San, the pastoralists, called Khoi Khoi, and the Bantu-speaking mixed farmers, who used both arable agriculture and pastoralism. While the Khoi and San people lived exclusively in the northwest and west regions of South Africa, the Bantu-speaking mixed farmers were dispersed throughout the central and eastern regions of modern South Africa. Historian Leonard Thompson explains that in these communities, “social and political groups were clans… often joined in loosely associated chiefdoms.” Chiefs and the clan heads were responsible

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for moving the groups from one location to another, and for defense against human and animal threats.\textsuperscript{95}

In 1652, the Dutch East India Company sent Jan Van Riebeeck, a colonial administrator, to occupy Table Bay in order to establish a “refreshment station” for its trading expeditions at the Cape of Good Hope. Refreshment stations allowed boats to dock and gather supplies on trade routes from Europe to Asia. This was the first European settlement within the borders of what would become the Republic of South Africa. Although the Company did not intend for the base to be anymore than a checkpoint for fleets from the Netherlands to Java, the colony quickly became a complex, racially organized society.\textsuperscript{96} The process by which this transformation took place changed the composition of the area almost instantly. The company released some employees from their contracts and offered them land in order to produce grain and vegetables to sell to the company at a fixed price. Most of these employees were lower class Dutch, German, or French Huguenots. The company intermixed these groups among one another in the colony, labeling them “free burghers.”\textsuperscript{97} When this agricultural venture proved unsuccessful, the company began importing slaves from Angola through the Portuguese slave trade. By 1658, the provisional settlement and the colony had become slave-dependent.

Within this new economy, the indigenous inhabitants of Table Bay (the Khoi Khoi and San) were left with the choice between abandoning the area entirely or working as servants for the Dutch. The burghers, although some managed to become

\textsuperscript{95} Leonard Thompson, \textit{A History of South Africa}, 3\textsuperscript{rd} edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 3.
\textsuperscript{96} Leonard Thompson, \textit{A History of South Africa}, 3\textsuperscript{rd} edition (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 33.
\textsuperscript{97} Ibid, 35.
wealthy traders, found their labor was replaced with slave labor, and “turned to the self sufficient life of the trekboeren (literally, ‘wandering farmers’ but perhaps better translated as ‘dispersed ranchers.’)”. Eventually these trekboeren would give rise to the modern Afrikaner population. These early forms of colonial infiltration of the land and exploitation of inhabitants, as well as the interaction between colonial power, settlers, and indigenous peoples established in the 17th century would go on to characterize the relationship between these same groups until the 20th century, with the genesis of apartheid.

The Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) was involved with the historical processes in South Africa since the establishment of the Cape colony in 1652. Originating in the Netherlands, the church followed Boers migration into the South African interior during the Great Trek (1830s), and established independent synods in the Transvaal, the Orange Free State, and Natal. While these independent synods flourished in the South African interior, the official DRC remained in the Cape, and for all intents and purposes, this is where all official DRC theology and policy came from until the 1930s.

Before the arrival of the Dutch traders, Bantu-speaking mixed farmers occupied most of the interior land between the Cape colony and the eastern coast. Specific examples of such groups of the interior include the Tswana, the Xhosa, the

101 Ibid, 58.
Zulu peoples, Basotho, and Pedi. They are termed mixed-farmers because women worked in agriculture while men worked exclusively as pastoralists. Economically, wealth was based on cattle. Politically, chiefdoms were governed and protected by a single chief, whose position was hereditary or usurped during warfare, and whose main allies and advisors were heads of powerful families. According to David Chidester, the chief was responsible for “sustaining order—in its economic and spiritual, social and cosmological aspects, since these were indivisible” in the pre-colonial South African worldview.102

The religious tradition of Bantu-speaking mixed farmers was focused on ancestor veneration. In each of the local chiefdoms, there was a term for a supreme being or god, but priests and lay-people were primarily concerned with performing rituals for the deceased ancestors, who, unlike the supreme god, were “spiritually present and active relatives of the [African] homestead.”103 Such rituals attempted to gain favor from the ancestors for rain, healing, and fertility, but also served to reinforce the political power of a new or existing chief. Religious rituals accompanied all major life events such as birth, initiation, marriage, and death. Although there were many differences among practices of ancestor veneration, scholars agree that these basic elements characterized a diverse array of pre-colonial South African religious and cultural practices.104

In the early nineteenth century, the African population was devastated by a combination of widespread drought, settler and colonial expansion, diminished access

to land, and inter-chiefdom warfare. This period is known as the *Mfecane*, which literally means “the crushing.” Its catastrophic consequences of this period were exacerbated by the continued influx of settlers from the Cape Colony, which the British Empire had annexed in 1814.\(^{105}\) The burgher population, looking for land to settle on and a way to distance itself politically from British authority, continued to move away from the coastline and into the region’s interior. During and after the *Mfecane*, warfare continued between settlers and the continually expanding British government.

The infiltration of British political power was also marked by an influx of Protestant missionaries in the Cape and the interior. From the perspective of indigenous South Africans, these missionaries initially served economic purposes: African chiefdoms allowed the missionaries to trade European goods for access to land and cattle, and to teach some Dutch to some Africans to advance the chief’s diplomatic agenda.\(^{106}\) From the perspective of the missionaries, of course, their purpose was to spread the Christian gospel; for them, trading and teaching were instrumental to evangelization. And although they tolerated the missionaries for economic purposes, the chiefs were very much aware of their missionary agenda. Chief Mothibi of the Tlhaping was especially disdainful of the missionaries, claiming, “that his people had no time for their instructions…Besides, the things which these people teach are contrary to all [the Tswana] customs.”\(^{107}\) Initially, the severity of


this contrast led indigenous Southern Africans to reject Christianity entirely. Throughout the 19th century, however, as Christianity and mission stations became politically and geographically ubiquitous, South Africans began to think that Christianity might actually serve their political, economic, social and existential needs.

This chapter will examine case studies in Southern Africa in order to assess the contexts in which white missionaries eventually converted indigenous South Africans, as well as the process by which Africans gradually incorporated Christianity into existing worldviews, determined to reconcile their African and Christian identities. Specifically, this chapter will focus on the ways in which Africans were active participants in a network of semantics, symbols, and conversion. While the term “conversion” tends to indicate a complete rejection of one worldview in favor of another, this chapter is interested in how Christianity was actively appropriated by indigenous agents to become especially relevant to African life under colonial rule. In short, this chapter will claim that the process of conversion in South Africa transformed not only “Africanness,” but also Christianity. Such a transformation can be seen clearly in the emergence of African Initiated (or Independent) Churches, addressed in the chapter’s last section. As indigenous forms of Christianity, the AICs are a powerful site of South African agency in the midst of colonialism; in the 20th century, in fact, they will become tools of political resistance against segregation and apartheid legislation. This discussion of the AICs will therefore set the stage for the final chapter’s focus on South African Black Theology.
Encounters between Missionaries and Africans in the early 19th century

Jean and John Comaroff’s *Of Revelation and Revolution* is a historical anthropology of missionary interactions with a Tswana chiefdom, ruled by Chief Mothibi, from 1820 onwards. The Tswana are a mixed-farming Bantu-speaking group, located in the South African Highveld, the region of the inland plateau under the Limpopo River. This land lies far from the eastern boundaries of the Cape Colony and was very difficult to reach via ox and wagon, the main method of transportation used by missionaries. The missionaries who overcame these difficulties in order to minister to the Tswana were members of the London Missionary Society (LMS), a “Nonconformist” group, meaning they were unaffiliated with the Church of England.

The main claim of the Comaroffs’ study is that the missionaries of the London Missionary Society were “driven by the explicit aim of reconstructing the ‘native’ world in the name of God and European civilization,” a process the Comaroffs call “colonizing consciousness.”¹⁰⁸ The term reflects a deep criticism of the missionizing process; as the introduction claims, “whether it be in the name of a ‘benign,’ civilizing imperialism or in cynical pursuit of their labor power, the final objective of generations of colonizers has been to colonize their consciousness with the axioms and aesthetics of an alien culture.”¹⁰⁹ For the Comaroffs, therefore, the colonization of the Tswana consciousness was not a project of salvation, but of creating compliant British subjects. While the LMS was technically unaffiliated with the Church of England, the Comaroffs argue that the main purpose of the mission was to “establish

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itself at the heart of the indigenous social order” in order to “spread the ‘kernel’ of knowledge and truth, and work profound, civilizing transformations” for the eventual management by the British Empire.\textsuperscript{110} Ultimately, the Comaroffs claim, this colonization of indigenous consciousness—of which the missionary project was a significant part—paved the way for a culture of complicity and domination in modern South Africa that would culminate in apartheid.\textsuperscript{111}

Invoking Antonio Gramsci, the Comaroffs define culture as “the shared repertoire of practices, symbols, and meanings from which hegemonic forms are cast—and, by extension, resisted.”\textsuperscript{112} By hegemony, Gramsci means “that order of signs and practices, relations and distinctions, images and epistemologies… that come to be taken for granted as the natural and received shape of the world and everything that inhabits it.”\textsuperscript{113} In particular, hegemonic culture comes to assume “cultural, moral, and ideological leadership” over other groups.\textsuperscript{114} Therefore, the Comaroffs elucidate that the European colonizing of Tswana consciousness was a project of imposing a repertoire of naturalized, unquestioned, yet distinctly European and Christian symbols and practices upon indigenous South Africans, and of making this repertoire the standard for “understanding”—which is to say reconstructing—indigenous life.

The Comaroffs argue that the Nonconformists’ Euro-Christian worldviews brought by the Nonconformists quickly came to dominate indigenous forms of meaning, as missionaries convinced Africans of Christianity’s “superior truths” and

\textsuperscript{112} Ibid, 21.
\textsuperscript{113} Ibid, 23.
even earned “their voluntary compliance” in the conversion process.\textsuperscript{115} According to the Comaroffs, this compliance was primarily achieved by means of the European classification of Setswana (Tswana language), and the subsequent rendering of English prayer books, hymnals, and eventually the Bible, into this manufactured idiom. In other words, the Protestant missionaries who claimed to be preaching the gospel of salvation were colonizing the consciousness of the Tswana through a process of translation.

In 1821, one missionary of the London Missionary Society (LMS) named Robert Moffat traveled to the interior with colonial approval to missionize among the Tswana.\textsuperscript{116} One of Moffatt’s main evangelical strategies in conveying the Christian gospel to the Tswana was to translate the entire Bible into Setswana. Although native speakers had codified neither Setswana language nor its various dialects, the missionaries were keen to impose Indo-European linguistic categories upon it.\textsuperscript{117} Of course, the missionaries experienced great difficulty in attempting to organize Sestwana, since they tended to ignore the “subtle semantic distinctions” in the indigenous language.\textsuperscript{118} For example, the “Tswana [had] long explained their reluctance to say the term shupa (‘seven’) by observing that it also means ‘to point out’… [, which was] a gesture which connotes ‘to curse’.”\textsuperscript{119} Nonetheless, the Methodist missionaries eventually devised their own orthography of Setswana

\textsuperscript{117} Ibid, 222.
\textsuperscript{118} Ibid, 222
\textsuperscript{119} Ibid, 227.
language and Moffat’s subsequently translated Sestwana Bible (1830) became an icon of Christian civilization in the South African interior.\textsuperscript{120}

While the Comaroff’s study is both historically and anthropologically invaluable, I argue that its excoriation of the conversion process places excessive agency on the Nonconformist missionaries. The Comaroff’s reduction of mission work to “colonizing consciousness” makes it seem as if indigenous people played no role in the process. And yet, as the Comaroffs know well, the process of translation required the cooperation and ingenuity of indigenous African linguists. At first, the topics of discussion between indigenous subjects and missionaries had very little to do with doctrine or evangelism; rather, they talked about rain, control over water, and the location of the mission station.\textsuperscript{121} These mundane decisions and ideas laid the groundwork for the eventual translation of the Bible and other Christian texts into the vernacular. In the meantime, however, African agents were unwilling to become compliant Christians (or British subjects); they only adopted Christianity once they had altered it to fit their indigenous worldview.

The relationship between Christianity and indigenous Southern African groups can be divided into four stages: missionary failure, indigenous resistance and contestation; cultural transformation; and finally, indigenization. In short, while Christianity was brought to Southern Africa to be imposed upon the indigenous inhabitants, Africans were resistant to conversion until they had fully transformed the Christian message to suit their cultural and existential needs.

Failure: The Case of the LMS to the Tswana

While the vernacular was important to relaying the message of Christianity, convincing the Tswana that their traditions were false and Christian ones true proved to be both difficult and initially unsuccessful. The maintenance of an African polity, headed by the chief, also added another layer of resistance between missionaries and their potential converts. Therefore, the colonization of Tswana consciousness did not occur, as claimed by the Comaroffs. The failures of the LMS station among the Tswana point to African resistance of Christian forms and narratives.

Chief Mothibi allowed the mission station to be situated “some thirty miles to the southwest” from the center of the African polity.\textsuperscript{122} The distance from the \textit{motse} (town) indicates the chief’s suspicion regarding the missionary agenda. The term \textit{motse} does not just imply the physical boundaries of the polity; it also “connoted a ‘nucleus’, the epicenter of the surrounding world.”\textsuperscript{123} In keeping the mission away from the \textit{motse}, Mothibi was trying to keep his world intact; according to the Comaroffs, he and his advisors believed “that the very day they [gave] their consent to receive the gospel they [would also] give up their political authority” and all indigenous social and economic systems.\textsuperscript{124} That having been said, Mothibi did allow a mission station to be built on the outskirts of town, demonstrating that he understood its usefulness in terms of trade.\textsuperscript{125} Therefore the Africans and missionaries had competing ideas about the central purpose of the mission station.

\textsuperscript{124} Ibid, 179.
\textsuperscript{125} Ibid, 179.
To be sure, it was clear to the Tswana that the missionaries thought their purpose was to convince the Africans of the truth of the Christian message and the falsities of indigenous practice. Nevertheless, the Tswana steadfastly resisted such claims. For example, when missionary David Livingstone attempted to convince a rain doctor that it was not his medicines but God who made rain, the rain doctor replied, “God told us differently… God has given us one little thing, which you know nothing of. He has given us the knowledge of certain medicines by which we can make rain. We do not despise those things which you possess, though we are ignorant of them.”

126 In this conversation, the Tswana rain doctor is willing to accept the fact that the Christian deity gave certain instructions to the British. However, the existence of the Christian God and whatever instructions he gave to the British did not nullify the validity of Tswana rain-making practices. This conversation indicates Tswana confusion with the missionaries’ conviction that only the tradition of Protestant Christianity was correct and free from critique. Africans were also aware of how other indigenous forms of social unity had been completely destroyed by colonial and missionary forces, as they had among the Khoi San in the Cape. The struggle to maintain political and social autonomy in their traditional forms fueled their resistance to Christianity, which they understood to be the primary marker by which Europeans identified themselves.

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The mission station among the Tswana was not the only one that failed in securing a large number of converts. Two mission stations in Natal, gained merely

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two hundred indigenous converts after twenty years.\textsuperscript{128} The mission outposts to the Ndebele under Chief Mzilikazi and the Zulu under Dingan, were both short-lived and unsuccessful.\textsuperscript{129} The Africans who did take refuge in mission stations were for the most part people on the margins of society: outcasts, women fleeing marriage, political refugees, and accused witches.\textsuperscript{130} For example, of the 177 people living on the mission in Natal between 1836 and 1885, thirty-three percent were seeking refuge from their homes, while twenty six percent were on the station for temporary employment prospects, such as working as a domestic or farmhand.\textsuperscript{131} Therefore, the process of colonizing indigenous consciousness failed in its effort to create British imperial subjects because most Africans were still very much involved in the social, political, economic, and religious institutions of indigenous life. When they did, in fact, reside on mission stations, it was because they needed work or could no longer live at home—not because their minds had been won over by Christians.\textsuperscript{132}

Contesting Conversion Narratives on the Homestead: The Case of the ABM in Natal

As previously mentioned, the failures of the LMS among the Tswana were not one isolated event of indigenous resistance to European and Christian hegemony. During the middle of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, American missionary organizations, like the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{128} Robert J. Houle, \textit{Making African Christianity: Africans Reimagining Their Faiths in Colonial South Africa} (Bethlehem: Lehigh University Press, 2011), 14.
\item \textsuperscript{129} Robert J. Houle, \textit{Making African Christianity: Africans Reimagining Their Faiths in Colonial South Africa} (Bethlehem: Lehigh University Press, 2011), 7.
\end{itemize}
American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABM), sent half a dozen of its members into Natal to mission to the Zulu. However these stations also reached relatively low success in their first few decades of working in Natal because Africans came to the mission stations largely for short-term employment opportunities.

The few conversions that did occur in this period tended to follow one of two major narratives: one economic, the other social. African adolescents were sent by their parents to work for missionaries in exchange for cattle or money. These youths were often taught basic literacy skills, history, arithmetic, and, of course, the Christian message. While most teenagers went back home with skills to procure better paying and less labor-intensive work in urban areas or at the mines, a select few stayed to continue to work on the mission as converted Christians. The social conversion narrative involved Africans escaping their social obligations of homestead life. Fleeing from social bondage, women in particular arrived on mission stations in order to flee their marriages, family, and accusations of sorcery. This second conversion narrative, particularly for women, tended to be dramatic, as the “dominant trope in mission correspondence” emphasized women escaping forced marriages and polygamy. These were the most common reasons for taking up residence on a mission station. These conversion narratives indicate that young Africans were aware of how the mission station could be used to improve their economic and social situations.

135 Ibid, 16.
136 Ibid, 17.
These individual converts notwithstanding, the larger indigenous community resisted the conversion of its community members because it disrupted traditional African society. Each convert occupied a “liminal status” in regard to the traditional African polity, and represented new gaps in the indigenous social chain. The implications of the converted status of men and women will be discussed separately because they occupied important but separate sectors of indigenous society.

The conversion and loss of African males damaged the socio-political fabric of indigenous life. Politically, converts lost their Zulu citizenship “from the moment they took up residence at a mission.” Bereft of these legal protections, the kholwa, the Zulu word for converts, could not farm or safely live on land outside of the mission station. Socially, if one’s brother converted, this Christian sibling would refuse “his responsibility to marry one’s widowed wives (and thus ensure the wellbeing of both the women and their children)” because of the restrictions against polygamy. Moreover, men were the political representatives of their families. In the homesteads, men created life-long “strategic alliances built up along generational lines.” Therefore, existing and potential sociopolitical relationships in the homestead suffered irreparable damage as a result of conversion.

The strict agnatic structure of African society necessitated male control over female productive and reproductive powers on the homestead. Therefore, any losses of woman on the homestead “created reverberations felt by all.”\textsuperscript{142} Women escaping unwanted marriages invalidated the social bonds created by two families during an engagement. Additionally, losing a woman to the mission station represented a significant loss of agricultural production on the homestead. Women on mission stations were isolated from their traditional roles as agricultural producers. Converted men were given ox and plow with which to farm, and “increasingly took possession of both the fields and what they produced.”\textsuperscript{143} The conversion of African women was therefore also economically transformative because converted women lost their ability to produce goods for the family.

The indigenous community that remained unconverted initially resisted and lashed out toward their kholwa family members. The unconverted community often saw conversion “as choosing a lesser way of life.”\textsuperscript{144} Families often reacted angrily when confronted with the news of their child’s conversion. For example, one father forcibly took his daughter home from the mission station, “made her remove her Western dress, put on traditional skins, forbade her to read books, and required her to drink medicine designed to cleanse her of the ‘sickness’ of Christianity.”\textsuperscript{145} Parents also responded to the kholwa’s “perceived irresponsibility [to the obligations of traditional life] by cutting off such wayward children from their inheritance.”\textsuperscript{146}

\textsuperscript{144} Ibid, 28.
\textsuperscript{145} Ibid, 27.
\textsuperscript{146} Ibid, 28.
Families who responded to conversion by cutting off their children economically might have been acting in anger. More importantly, these families were challenging the sincerity of their children’s conversion by forcing them to procure the means to build their own homes and families on the mission station. This familial-economic retribution against converts reflects, in a small way, the damage that conversion did to the homesteads.

Forced to build new lives apart from their unconverted families, converts tended to do so in opposition to traditional African social norms.\(^{147}\) To distinguish themselves from their traditional communities, converts sought to acquire European items, clothing, and education. They did not, however, reject traditional forms completely. Converts recognized that they were not European Christians, but rather African Christians. They therefore actively sought to reconcile Africanness and Christianity, using scripture and doctrine to reject some indigenous cultural forms while also validating others. In addition to making sense of their own lives, converts sought to lead unconverted African communities to Christianity by example. They therefore endeavored to make Christianity relevant to traditional African life and culture, and ended up reshaping both Africanness and Christianity.\(^{148}\)


Adapting Christianity: The Case of *utshwala* and *lobola* in Natal

In order to examine the process by which South Africans indigenized Christianity, we will turn to the example of American missions in Natal, where Zulu Christians constructed their identities as converts in order to reconcile being Zulu and Christian. Early converts worked as farmers on mission land and debated the theological implications of their indigenous cultural practices in a Christian context. While missionaries intransigently opposed practices such as polygamy and ancestor veneration, the practices of *lobola* (bride price) and *utshwala* (fermented corn beverage) were allowed until about the 1860s, when a new generation of American missionaries arrived to the stations in Natal. The existing converted community opposed the new restrictions on *lobola* and *utshwala*. Instead, converts validated or invalidated the cultural practice in question by using their own interpretations of the Bible and therefore fashioning their own Christian identity.

The beer in question is called *utshwala*, a fermented corn drink that one scholar describes as, “more filling than intoxicating.”\(^{149}\) *Utshwala* was made by the women of the family, and was used in two situations: one health, and the other social. *Utshwala* was considered a filling and healthy beverage, and its consistency made it easier to consume and digest by those who were either sick or elderly. Additionally, it was a popular and refreshing beverage and was served to all participants of all social gatherings, such as weddings, engagement parties, birthdays, etc.\(^{150}\) Aside from drinking *utshwala* in their homes on the mission stations, the *kholwa* community members would also be expected to drink this fermented corn beverage while


\(^{150}\) Ibid, 101.
attending events of their unconverted extended families outside the mission station. For instance, consuming *utshwala* at a wedding was necessary in order “to bring the blessing of the ancestors down on the new household.”

Missionaries opposed the production and consumption of *utshwala* in order to exert control over the *kholwa* community, both on the mission station and outside its boundaries. They were convinced that drinking *utshwala* at social events outside of the station was “inherently conducive to immorality,” specifically alcoholism and ancestor worship. The temperance movement of the United States was influential to the American missionaries in Natal, and they intended on imposing the same moral reforms in Southern Africa. Consuming *utshwala* at social events also implied ancestor veneration, as in the example of a typical Zulu wedding in the previous paragraph. While the *kholwa* community was expected to be a beacon of Christian exceptionalism to the unconverted community, participating in events off the mission station signified gaps in the missionaries’ control over *kholwa* life. The missionary agenda regarding *utshwala* was therefore centered on imposing a standard of Christian respectability on the lives and identity of the *kholwa* community.

The *kholwa* community was interested in retaining ties to their Zulu identity, despite the missionary agenda against *utshwala*. In response to the accusation of ancestor veneration, converts maintained that they did not believe in the *amadhlozi*, and consumed *utshwala* at social gatherings to observe the customs regarding that

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particular event. Convert also defended *utshwala* on the basis of its nutritional benefits. One elderly convert, Hobiana, who “fully demonstrated his commitment to Christianity” by giving up his second and third wives and abandoning ancestor worship, found it absurd that he should “give up his beer.” Hobiana had no teeth left and did not see why the typical Zulu beverage, this “little cup of beer,” should hinder his opportunity for salvation. While converts eventually lost the debate concerning *utshwala*, it is one example of how the *kholwa* sought to exercise agency in a cultural habit they saw as both nutritionally important and as a form of social bonding. The example of *lobola*, or bride price, is a discussion that involves the economic and social status of the entire family, and was more tenaciously defended by the converted community.

*Lobola*, or bride price, was a ubiquitous social practice in Southern Africa. Through marriage, the practice of *lobola* represented a remedy to the loss of a daughter’s productive powers in her father’s household. During an engagement, the groom, with assistance from his family, would present his prospective father-in-law with cattle for his bride’s hand in marriage. *Lobola* was therefore also a public demonstration of a family’s economic status and ensured a spectacle of visible respectability for the *kholwa* community, as marriages without *lobola* were considered illegitimate by traditional African standards. Therefore, *lobola* indicated a public, contractual agreement of marriage between two individuals and their

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154 Ibid, 96.
157 Ibid, 98.
158 Ibid, 93.
families in the same way that a marriage license would. It was integral to indigenous African ideas regarding marriage, wealth, and respectability. As such, it was necessary that the practice of "lobola" be endorsed by the adopted religious tradition of the kholwa community.

Missionaries wanted to enforce a standard of Christian behavior upon the kholwa community that did not include lobola. On the Umsumduze station, bans were made on “polygamy, beer-drinking, isangu (hemp) smoking, and lobola.”

American missionaries coming to Natal in the 1860’s “grew up as abolitionists, [and] readily compared lobola with slavery.” Therefore missionary resistance to lobola constituted an oversimplification of lobola as a purely commercial exchange of women and cattle. Missionaries were not interested in encouraging a Zulu Christian community, but rather an American one.

The kholwa community wanted to continue practicing lobola in order to maintain economic agency and their indigenous culture. Cattle were the main marker of wealth and status in indigenous society, so the attack on lobola was an attack on the economic status of the converted community. Lobola also signified the last chance to “build social connections and status with traditionalist friends and family without sacrificing their Christian identity.” The status and respectability of a family was related to the spectacle of their wealth in cattle. Therefore converted families who abandoned lobola could not be seen as respectable or successful outside

161 Ibid, 98.
162 Ibid, 98.
163 Ibid, 98.
the mission station. Additionally, the issue of translatability between European and Africans forms is raised in this situation, as converts held that “the language surrounding lobola could not be commercial...umfazi, or wife, could not be translated to mean slave or servant just as indoda, or husband, could not be translated as master.” The continued resistance to lobola by the American missionaries indicates their refusal to grant African agency on the station.

The kholwa were aware of the cultural meaning and importance of lobola, but Protestant missionaries continued to question its moral status. As much as missionaries during this time were committed to the African vernacular in translation, “they tended to dismiss African worldviews and African practices in Christian worship and spiritual life.” These rules restricting African cultural forms “represented the culmination of several decades of increasing pressure on amakholwa to purify their lives according to the moral ideals of missionaries.” As a result, the converts then took on this process of making Christianity relevant to African life by asserting their professed right to practice lobola without damaging their Christian identity.

Theological disputes regarding utshwala and lobola took place within the African-Christian communities at weekly community meetings. Such disputes are indicative of how seriously kholwa took their conversion, and how actively they wanted to reconcile their Christian and African values. While converts were willing

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to give up polygamy, ancestor veneration, and other aspects of traditional African life, an attack on other practices, like lobola and the use of utshwala, reflected the fact that the converts wanted to exercise agency and power in the formation of their culture as Zulu converts. Lobola and utshwala were different from ancestor veneration and polygamy. Converts would never be able to validate ancestor worship. They all would have been well aware that worshipping supernatural entities other than God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit would be completely unacceptable.

Polygamy was also another topic that could not come close to missionary acceptance. According to Robert Houle, “male converts understood that to be Christian was to take only one wife.”\textsuperscript{167} Converts involved in assessing the validity of indigenous cultural practices clearly felt that they were not in a position to demonstrate their commitment to the faith and prioritize their Christian status. The missionaries tended to exert power over situations using their distinctly non-African worldviews, which only resulted in kholwa resentment, as they felt undeserving of theologizing and practicing Christianity in ways that would suit their needs as community members. In order to be fully entrenched in the context and lives of black South Africans, Christianity needed to become fully theirs, without constant question and reprobation by European or American missionaries. While this section has discussed how converts wanted to adapt Christianity to encompass Zulu cultural forms, it will now turn towards a discussion of how Christianity was “indigenized” in South Africa, using African Independent Churches as an example.

The proliferation of African Independent Churches during the early 20th century addressed the needs of African Christian communities that were looking to construct and practice a Christianity that could address the political and social realities of their time and space. As African polities provided increasingly less protection from dehumanizing settler and colonial forces in Southern Africa, becoming an active member in the religious community was the only way that black Southern African (men) could occupy positions of power in their communities. A discussion of the African Independent Church movements in Southern Africa and their emphasis on healing and worship indicate the black struggle to find meaning, power, and community. Finally, the independent Churches became a space where an African Christian identity could be fully realized in a South African context.

Indigenization: The Case of Zionist African Independent Churches

From the 1880’s onward, disputes on mission stations regarding traditional African cultural practices resulted in the expulsion of a number of African converts from mission stations.168 Sometimes, these members were permanently removed, and other times they were re-admitted into full membership after offenses such as beer drinking, accepting lobola, or engaging in polygamist practices were adequately resolved in the eyes of the missionaries. Among those permanently banished from the mission station, however, African-Christian beliefs and practices persisted, “and gradually an expatriate community grew.”169 As a result of a growth of these


While these independent churches were heavily influenced by missionary church culture in Southern Africa, they also engaged in international correspondence with American churches. The terms “African Initiated Churches” or “African Independent Churches,” which are more or less interchangeable, both indicate the churches specifically black membership and management. These churches specifically addressed the contexts in which black South Africans lived, especially as the 20\textsuperscript{th} century progressed from segregation to official apartheid policy. Thanks to their indigenous leadership, the AICs regularly addressed the dehumanizing economic, social, and political environments of the time, constructing alternative (which is to say, non-European) locations of Christian power and authority.

Throughout the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, AICs and their congregants multiplied across Southern Africa. By 1990, there were over 6,000 churches, and this number accounted for over 47\% of the black Christian population in South Africa.\footnote{David Chidester, \textit{Religions of South Africa} (London: Routledge 1992), 114.} The proliferation of AICs in South Africa over the course of the 20\textsuperscript{th} century demonstrate how blacks were interested in forging for themselves a black religious experience in South Africa. In this section, the themes of divine healing, black leadership, and global identity in the Zionist Churches of South Africa will be treated as creative theological and political endeavors by which black South Africans sought to
contextualize their existence and exercise agency. Additionally, these creative endeavors are the final stage in a process toward an indigenous, South African Christianity. While the Zionist churches in South Africa were instances of “local, black appropriation of Christianity,” they did operate within a Zionist global network largely headed by whites in the United States.\(^{172}\) Black leaders of the Zionist churches in South Africa were able to use the relationship between local congregation and global Zionist network against white church control in South Africa.

The Zionist churches in South Africa were fashioned after the Christian Catholic Church in Chicago, founded in 1896 by a white Australian Congregationalist minister, John Alexander Dowie.\(^{173}\) In 1900, Dowie used church funds to purchase land north of Chicago, USA, to found a town called Zion.\(^{174}\) In 1904, the town had its largest population of about 6,000 members.\(^{175}\) Dowie’s followers, called Zionists, were urban lower-middle class and working class families attracted to Dowie’s congregation because of his emphasis on divine healing. According to scholar Joel Cabrita, “Zion’s enactment of bodily and spiritual health was powerfully displayed by frequent healing services in Zion’s Tabernacle.”\(^{176}\) All medical professionals and

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\(^{175}\) Ibid, 9.

\(^{176}\) Ibid, 9.
medicines were banned from the community. Members of the community were healed of physical ailments through prayer at church meetings.\textsuperscript{177}

The Christian Catholic Church in Chicago, USA, brought the Zionist Church movement to Southern Africa. This movement in South Africa, like in Chicago, focused particularly on divine healing, or the alleviation of physical ailments through prayer.\textsuperscript{178} During this period, many African Americans were working as domestic servants or in the industrial sectors under poor conditions. Therefore they saw divine healing rituals as particularly rehabilitative.\textsuperscript{179} Likewise, black South Africans in the early 20th century were drawn to healing rituals thanks to their extremely poor living and working conditions, with “most urban workers [were] living in mine compounds, overcrowded locations, or slum-yards, and the majority of Africans in the rural areas [living] with limited access to land” and little mobility.\textsuperscript{180} Zionist churches headed by black ministers were supportive communities where the increasingly negative political and social conditions of blacks could be addressed through divine healing.

\textit{Divine Healing}

The practice of divine healing, brought by American Zionists to South Africa, became a religious experience that was uniquely fashioned and practiced by South African Zionist churches. As arguably the most important part of practice, divine

\begin{footnotes}
\item[177] Ibid, 11.
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healing in Zionist communities was present in worship services of the congregation, in rituals of purification, and in private consultation with a (black) religious leader.\textsuperscript{181} In the worship services, the ritual of divine healing involved the entire congregation present. While the religious leaders infused the afflicted individual’s body with the Holy Spirit through prayer, the congregation enhanced the spiritual power in the space by praying, singing, speaking in tongues, and therefore “reaffirmed the social solidarity of the congregation.”\textsuperscript{182} Divine healing rituals in the Zionist communities of South Africa addressed the immediate social conditions of the congregation, usually the poorest of the working class.\textsuperscript{183} While emphasis on healing rituals represent the parallel relationship between the spiritual and material in Zionist culture in the US and in South Africa, particularly in Zulu Zionist communities, African concepts of water with regards to healing were often used in the powerful emotional experience of divine healing.\textsuperscript{184}

Indigenous African concepts regarding the relationship between medicine and religion point to why divine healing would have become “the pivot of all Church activity” in South African Zionist churches.\textsuperscript{185} For example, the verb “to heal” also means “to sacrifice” in some Bantu idioms.\textsuperscript{186} This linguistic similarity demonstrates the relationship between religious practice and physical health in indigenous African thought, as neglected ancestor spirits might inflict illness or bad luck upon their

\textsuperscript{181} David Chidester, \textit{Religions of South Africa} (London: Routledge 1992), 141.
\textsuperscript{182} David Chidester, \textit{Religions of South Africa} (London: Routledge 1992), 141.
\textsuperscript{183} Ibid, 138.
descendants.\textsuperscript{187} Similarly, in many rural South African Zionist communities, physical illnesses were associated with spiritual transgressions.\textsuperscript{188} Therefore, on a local level, Christianity was capable of addressing the interrelatedness of spiritual and physical problems within Zionist communities.

In Zionist communities, water was seen as an element imbued with spiritual power and was often used to heal someone suffering from affliction. Again, physical ailments were directly associated with spiritual impurity or the presence of an evil spirit. In traditional African thought, spanning from West Africa to Southern Africa, the element of water is a sacred power of purification and its use signified a return “to freshness, to immaculate concentration of mind… and societal happening[s].”\textsuperscript{189} During purification rituals, ocean water, or water mixed with salt and/or ashes, would be imbibed repeatedly over the course of a few days.\textsuperscript{190} Water was “frequently applied internally rather than externally” because of its metaphysical cooling properties.\textsuperscript{191} These properties could cure physical ailments, especially stomach problems that were a result of physical or spiritual problems.

American Zionist culture put material and spiritual woes on the same plane; both were equally suffused into the physical realities of these religious communities. Water as a vital element of life, healing, and purity, could therefore be introduced into the healing rituals that addressed physical and moral ailments, as it too occupied both

\textsuperscript{190} Ashes were also a cooling agent because they are the result of a cooling fire, and added another layer of curative metaphysical power to the mixture of saltwater. (Kiernan: 1978, 30)
spheres simultaneously. The salt and ash water concoction, “generally referred to as isiwasho, which is a corrupt form of the word ‘washing’,,” serves as a twofold expellant of what is physically agitating the person’s body, as well as of “evil spirits which are causing the affliction.”

Therefore while foreign agents introduced the practice of divine healing to African communities, the independent church communities were able to shape this practice with their own traditional concepts regarding the abstract. These communities were able to fashion their own form of practice using traditional curative substances in order to heal each other and themselves as a whole. While the Zionist churches (and their emphasis on divine healing) are one type of AIC, black leadership and membership has been the distinctive feature of all AICs in South Africa.

Black Leadership

The AICs allowed members and religious leaders to foster “a new consciousness of African dignity and self-reliance” by creating new enclaves of discursive power. African ministers who were missionary-trained resented their mistreatment among white clergymen, and began to form religious organizations in their communities. For example, in 1884, a Wesleyan-trained African preacher, Nehemiah Tile, left the church because of his increasing sympathies for the political actions of the Thembu [a Xhosa group] against colonial government in the eastern

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Cape. He then went on to founded the Thembu National Church, where he “preserved Methodist forms of worship…but spoke against paying hut taxes, against pass laws, against white settlement, and against the network of magistrates that enforced colonial rule.” In another example of black leadership against white control, Mangena Mokone, Wesleyan Methodist minister, resigned from the church in 1892 to organize an Ethiopian Church. Rather than organize the church under a specific ethnic identity, as Nehemiah Tile had, Mokone organized the Ethiopian church to refer to the future evangelization of Africa, by Africans, without white rulers.

Although both Mokone and Tile represent earlier and different examples of black leadership in separatist church movements, their colleagues and successors would also exhibit a sense of ambition and self-government in the subsequent independent church movements of the 20th century. While Mokone and Tile were politically vocal and antagonistic, the AICs that emerged in their wake usually positioned themselves politically as posing no threat to local and national governments, especially during the apartheid era. It was very important for black religious leaders to be seen as nonthreatening, so that their churches might achieve government recognition. And precisely by appearing politically non-threatening, they became politically revolutionary.

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Global Identity

In the mid 20th century, Isaiah Moteka, an ambitious Zionist minister from the Orange Free State, was interested in achieving government recognition so that his worshippers could construct a building. Isaish Moteka’s letters, now archived in Pretoria, span from the 1930’s to about the 1960’s, and seek to legitimize his congregation by persuading South African officials “that his church belonged to a worldwide network of Zionist Christians—and crucially, one headed by whites.” Moteka’s church and political agenda indicated a relationship with the American Zionist community, as his letters conveyed a “sense of cosmopolitan belonging.” In claiming a cosmopolitan identity for himself and his congregation, Moteka put his congregation on the map as part of a global network of Zionist churches in order to receive recognition from the South African government. At the same time, he used this cosmopolitan identity to subtly articulate a critique against the mistreatment of blacks in South Africa in his letters to the NAD (The Native Affairs Department).

Black leadership in this Zionist congregation became particularly adept in advocating for itself by pitting two types of white authority against each other, namely the white-led American Zionist Church against the white-led South African government. While black leadership in the church was seen as a threat to the white-minority state in South Africa, white American influences on the independent church

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199 Ibid, 170.
200 Ibid, 164.
201 Ibid, 164.
signified a “slippage between the local and the global, invoking in the same breath loyalty to Pretoria and Zion, USA.”

Therefore, the relationship between Zionist American churches and Zionist churches in South Africa reflects an important political strategy among black South African church leaders. In their local setting, black-led churches exercised agency by focusing on prayer and healing. On the national and global levels, these same churches gained recognition as members of regional and transatlantic (particularly American) Zionist networks. By means of these partnerships, black ministers like Moteka could subtly criticize the South African “state’s racial policies” of “dividing blacks and whites [and] denying Africans full citizenship,” while claiming to be part of an ecclesiastical hierarchy headed by whites. For example, Moteka often mentioned how “blacks aspired to equality with whites” in letters to the Native Affairs Department of South Africa (NAD). For Zionist ministers who maintained correspondence with the church in the United States, “Zion’s internationalism, and its corresponding racial cosmopolitanism,” served the local political agenda of black Zionist ministers in South Africa.

Moteka’s letters serve as an example of a critique to and against the South African government, but his opinion becomes elevated above the state as he claims

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204 Ibid, 173.


divine favor. While Moteka was concerned with achieving governmental recognition, his letters also pointed to his belief that Jesus Christ ruled over his congregation, South Africa, and the world equally—not according to racial hierarchies.\textsuperscript{207} As such, local religious leaders like Moteka were capable of subverting the power of the South African government while advocating recognition for their local congregations.\textsuperscript{208} While Moteka was eventually unable to receive approval for a church building from the NAD, his letters “subordinated earthly power to the Kingdom of God.”\textsuperscript{209} This rhetoric brought the white political powers of South Africa to the same level of judgment received by Moteka’s congregation, under God. Isaiah Moteka’s letters were therefore able to convey obedience to the South African government in action while it simultaneously destabilized

Black leaders were therefore able to exercise agency in the ways their congregations were organized and how they were perceived by national administrative powers. Independent churches, and Zionst churches as the focus of this section, constitute the final stage in indigenizing Christianity for black South Africans.

\textsuperscript{208} Ibid,164.
\textsuperscript{209} Ibid,179.
Conclusion

The missionary goal, according to the Comaroffs, was to colonize African consciousness through Christianity for British management.\textsuperscript{210} However, this chapter has pointed to the process by which Africans made Christianity their own before accepting it. This chapter has traced the indigenization of Christianity from its introduction to traditional African society to its full comprehension and entrenchment in the lives of black South Africans. African leaders staunchly resisted the introduction of Christianity by missionaries, fearing the total breakdown of traditional society would result from exposure to Western culture. However, people were still drawn to the mission stations. Individuals seeking to flee their lives on the homestead or better their lives economically became the first converts on mission stations. At first, the families and larger communities of these individuals resisted and lamented the conversion of their family members. However, as converts became interested in adapting Christianity to include traditional African cultural practices, the converted community was able to maintain relationships with unconverted African communities.

In the final stage of this process, Christianity was fully indigenized into the context of black South African life. While black Christians did stay involved in missionary churches throughout the 20\textsuperscript{th} century, African Independent Churches were more directly involved in adapting and indigenizing Christianity, as they operated outside of white control and in the rural areas, where most blacks lived. Black

religious leaders and their congregations were therefore able to focus on practicing Christianity in a way that made sense to them.

At the point of Christianity’s full entrenchment in black South African society, “black faith emerged out of black people’s wrestling with suffering, the struggle to make sense out of their senseless situation” during segregation and apartheid.\textsuperscript{211} In the 1970’s and 1980’s, towards the end of the apartheid regime, Black Theologians advanced an abrasive critique on apartheid and white liberals. Black Theologians also worked to give black South Africans the language and ability to overcome the overwhelming powers of apartheid and death with their Christian identity. The process of indigenizing Christianity is important in assessing how this tradition could become such an important interpretative tool with which to understand and rediscover black identity in South Africa.

Chapter III: Towards a Reconceptualization of Blackness

Black Theology in South Africa was constructed out of the situation in which indigenous South Africans found themselves towards the end of the twentieth century. Apartheid, the Afrikaans word for “apartness” was a policy that managed socio-political relationships between South Africa’s white minority and non-white majority. The policy sanctioned racial, political, and economic discrimination against non-whites in order to keep whites in power. Racial segregation had been part of South Africa’s legal system since the onslaught of colonial rule, but in 1948, the Afrikaner National Party was elected to power and made apartheid, which it called “separate development,” official state policy.\(^\text{212}\) Under the Population Registration Act of 1950, the people of South Africa were consolidated into one of four categories based on their racial characteristics: White, Black, Coloured (of Black and White descent), and Indian.\(^\text{213}\) Under apartheid, Blacks were relegated to unfertile, circumscribed areas (known as “homelands”), stripped of political rights and access to education, economically exploited and culturally subordinated. In the late 1960’s and early 1970’s student-led anti-apartheid activism ushered in a movement that sought to reclaim black identity and dignity. This group, called the Black Consciousness Movement, offered an ideology of resistance that opened up the possibility of black dignity in the face of oppression. Black Consciousness brought black students and clergy together in order to talk about black identity during and after apartheid.

Black Theology in South Africa elaborated on the thoughts of the Black Consciousness Movement by interpreting the Gospel message in terms that were relevant to the black experience. In Chapter I, we encountered a series of negative representations of blackness in patristic and medieval literature. In the early days of Christianity, authors were deeply interested in making distinctions between correct and incorrect forms of Christian practice, and between pure and impure social identities. Insofar as it was associated with sin, hypersexuality, and diabolic possession, blackness was effectively used as a foil for the virtuous Christian community.

During the colonial period, these representations were transcribed onto actual black people. In Chapter II, we recounted the invasion of Southern Africa by Euro-Christian forces, armed among other things with a set of metaphoric associations between blackness and evil. In spite of these associations, missionaries tended to follow Origen in believing that blackness could be (spiritually) transformed into holiness by means of conversion. As we saw, black South Africans were not initially drawn to Christianity per se, but rather to the economic resources it offered. While land and economic resources were being increasingly annexed by colonial or British imperial control, many Africans found relative security on mission stations. Yet they remained resistant to conversion itself, insofar as the Europeans insisted that conversion entailed abandonment of all traditional cultural forms; that is, they were trying to make South African blackness white. Believing the total rejection of African culture to be unnecessary and undesirable, African converts began to separate form the white-managed mission stations and construct indigenous Christian
congregations. These communities encouraged black leadership, black solidarity, and they maintained aspects of African culture that were not deemed anti-Christian; for example, traditional food/drink and marriage customs were acceptable (and even encouraged, as seen in Chapter II), even if polygamy and animal sacrifice were not.

It was upon this indigenized Christian foundation that Black Theology in South Africa would build: if the earliest South African Christians reconfiguring Christian practice as a means of surviving under colonial rule, Black Theology reconfigured the meaning of key Christian terms in order to empower and liberate blacks under apartheid. This chapter will examine the situation of blacks under the state policy of “apartness,” before examining the radical groups that worked against it, and the major influences on Black Theology in South Africa. The focus of the chapter will then turn toward the theological and the sociopolitical characteristics of Black Theology—specifically, the reconfiguration of the divinity of God and the humanity of blacks—which served to combat the dominant cultural structures of apartheid.

Apartheid Legislation/Culture: Black Subordination and White Superordination

The roots of apartheid have their most solid foundation in the history of racial inequalities that resulted from colonial economic exploitation, but which later came to seem as though they had always been there. This seemingly “natural” distinction between whites (made up of the English-speaking British and the Afrikaans speaking Afrikaners) and “non-European” groups would be solidified during the 1948 elections. As sociologist Rupe Simms explains, the political system of apartheid
consistently entrusted “material and social privilege to White South Africans and ensured that they monopolize political power so as to maintain that privilege.” 214 In this system, whites were assured of their political, social, cultural and economic superiority. Blacks, Coloureds, Indians, Pakistani, and other Asian groups were forced to internalize apartheid ideology and “perceive the conditions of their exploitation” as natural. 215

As seen in the second chapter, the first colonial outpost of the Dutch East India Company in the Cape was a society that relied heavily on unpaid African labor. 216 Even though slavery was abolished by the imperial British government in 1833, this meant very little for the lives of these recently freed slaves. 217 Native South Africans and former slaves who were imported into the Cape continued to rely on meager employment as farm and manual laborers for survival. 218 This exploitative economic structure, based on racial differences, continued throughout the colonial period in South Africa. In fact, as Richard Elphick and Herman Giliomee explain, “by the late eighteenth century race and class had overlapped for so long (in the sense that almost all landholders and officials were Europeans and almost all members of other racial groups were unfree or poor)” that this structure “appeared to be natural or God-

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The early economic exploitation of non-Europeans therefore lays the groundwork for European racial and political domination throughout the twentieth century.

The South Africa Act of 1909 created the Union of South Africa out of British colonies and Afrikaner republics. From 1910 onward, white South African officials were mainly concerned with the establishment and consolidation of white power. The Act completely denied blacks political franchise. Additionally, it eroded the long-standing tradition of a multi-racial franchise system in the Cape. During this period, the rights of blacks became increasingly regulated and restricted by the government. The black population became physically, economically, politically and culturally limited, even more so than under colonial rule. These restrictions will be addressed in order.

Blacks were first physically circumscribed though the Land Act of 1913. This act regulated black acquisition of land by prohibiting the purchase and lease of land

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222 The Cape Franchise was established for the Cape Town municipality in 1839 and for representative government in 1853 were not racially defined. The racial definition was not necessary because most slaves were black and almost all masters were white. The 1853 standard for franchise was based on annual income and property ownership: the minimum were £50 a year or property, which included land, worth £25. This admitted a number of Coloured and African voters. The non-racial franchise was at the core of mid-19th century Cape liberalism, according to Worden. Its low standards for franchise were unique with regards to other constitutions of its time. Furthermore, it franchised Coloured and African peasant farmers whose votes would support commercial development. Nigel Worden, The Making of South Africa: Conquest, Segregation, and Apartheid (2nd Edition) (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1995), 68-69.
anywhere outside an individual’s “homeland”.

For black South Africans, the “homelands” amounted to 7% of the new Union’s land, scattered in the eastern area of the country and given as a trust to the black population. Almost immediately following the Act, the “homelands” or reserves, became unable to provide enough food to feed people and pay taxes to provincial and central governments, a situation hardly improved by the South African Native Trust’s increasing the land allotment to 11.7% in 1936. Furthermore, blacks were unable to leave these reserves unless they were employed as tenant laborers by white-managed farms or factories. According to historian Leonard Thompson, the reserves became little more than massive “reservoirs of cheap, unskilled labor for white farmers and industrialists.”

Blacks’ physical movement was further circumscribed by the Pass Laws, which were passed mostly in the 1850’s and 1860’s in the pre-Union provinces. These Pass Laws stipulated that Africans, Coloureds, and Indians needed to carry a “reference book” that contained their personal information and employment history. Originating in the British colonies as a way to regulate the mobility of slaves when they were not in their master’s home, Pass Laws made it difficult and dangerous for blacks to work outside of white owned farms in rural areas. They faced imprisonment, fines, or expulsion from the area if their papers were somehow

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225 Ibid, 163.
226 Ibid, 165.
227 Ibid, 164.
considered insufficient to a government official. The mobility of blacks was therefore limited in a way that made it virtually impossible for them to be employed as anything more than cheap, unskilled laborers by the exploitative industries.

Blacks, Coloureds, and Indians were also extremely limited in terms of economic opportunity. In fact, the economic oppression of “non-Europeans” was seen as necessary in order to socially and economically elevate poor white (Afrikaner) people in South Africa.\(^\text{231}\) The Mines and Works Act, originally passed in 1911 established the official “colour bar” for South African employment. White workers were legally given a monopoly of skilled labor positions, while Africans were prohibited from strikes or unionizing.\(^\text{232}\) According to Leonard Thompson, the wage gap between whites and African workers “was never less than eleven to one in cash wages.”\(^\text{233}\) Throughout the twentieth century, apartheid supporters would claim legitimacy to apartheid by pointing out that blacks were “inferior because they [had] no economists, no engineers, etc.,” but insofar as skilled labor by blacks was illegal, there was no way for a black South African to become an economist or engineer.\(^\text{234}\)

\(^{231}\) Since the Anglo-Boer War (1899-1902), a war when the Dutch settlers of South Africa won independence from the British, Afrikaners were living on farms in the interior of South Africa and were mostly impoverished. Contributing factors included the worldwide economic depression, “local droughts, and overpopulation” that resulted in massive urbanization over a short period of time. Of course, non-whites in South Africa were living in even poorer conditions than whites and on a larger scale, but this was not a huge problem for the government. The obligation to fix the “poor white problem” was the basis upon with Afrikaner nationalism, was created. The years leading up to the 1948 election was marked by a deeply held belief on the part of Afrikaner politicians to save the Afrikaner people, identity, and culture. Johann Kinghorn, “The Theology of Separate Equality: A Critical outline of the DRC’s Position on Apartheid,” in Christianity Amidst Apartheid, ed. Martin Prozesky (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990), 61-63.


Under apartheid, Blacks and Coloureds were also culturally indoctrinated with subordination. For example, the Bantu Education Act (1953) placed African education under the jurisdiction of the Department of Bantu Affairs. Prior to this legislation, African children had almost all been taught by missionary schools, subsidized by the government. This Act imposed a curriculum that highlighted the importance of “separate development” between whites and traditional “Bantu culture.” Furthermore, funding to these missionary schools for Africans became precariously low under official state control. The Extension of University Education Act (1959) established three colleges for black students, one for Coloureds, and one for Indians. This law denied the admission of black students to white universities without written permission from the Minister of Internal Affairs. Blacks were therefore culturally indoctrinated with apartheid ideology throughout their educational careers.

Apartheid and the Dutch Reformed Church

These physical, economic, and cultural restrictions were reaffirmed and augmented by religious practices under apartheid. As briefly explained in Chapter II, the Dutch Reformed Church (DRC) had been involved with the historical processes in

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South Africa since the establishment of the Cape colony in 1652.\textsuperscript{238} In the mid-nineteenth century, the DRC had many first-generation African converts. According to historian Johann Kinghorn, “differences in language [and] culture” created friction between white and black church members.\textsuperscript{239} White church-goers therefore began to propose the idea of having separate church services or congregations for the African converts.\textsuperscript{240} According to Kinghorn, the DRC in the nineteenth century theologically accepted the humanity of blacks; but for “practical” reasons sought to separate its white and black congregations.\textsuperscript{241} While Kinghorn claims that this separation was not indicative of the church’s political opinions, he does acknowledge that the move toward separation was retroactively identified as “the first step in a process which was coming to fruition in the policy of apartheid.”\textsuperscript{242}

Regardless of the intention, separate churches were founded in order to cater to the social and political wishes of the Afrikaner congregations. These non-white “daughter churches” were the Coloured Dutch Reformed Mission Church and the African Dutch Reformed Church in Africa.\textsuperscript{243} In accordance with apartheid ideology, Black and Coloured congregations of the DRC were taught that their racial inferiority was divinely sanctioned. According to scholar Daniel Magaziner, “black students

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  \item \textsuperscript{240} Ibid, 59.
  \item \textsuperscript{241} Ibid, 59.
  \item \textsuperscript{242} Ibid, 59.
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were taught that Afrikaners were a chosen people,” and that blacks occupied a inferior space and function in the world “because God wanted [them] there.”

White congregants were uncomfortable with sharing religious spaces with Africans because they were ignorant of and discriminatory against African culture. This echoes the missionary mistrust of African culture we encounter in Chapter II. Europeans coming to Southern Africa had deeply ingrained negative associations with blackness and black bodies. These xenophobic tendencies among missionaries and colonists in modern South Africa reflect the negative representations of blackness in early Christian sources, as seen in Chapter I. In the early 20th century, the between African and white in churches would take on deeper theological and ontological meanings, with the implementation of segregation laws, and later, apartheid.

In order to advance the concept of “separate development,” DRC employed Dutch Neo-Calvinist theologian Abraham Kuyper. Kuyper gave special attention to a verse in the Epistle to the Romans, in which Paul writes that there are many organs and limbs in the body that serve different functions, and urges Christians to use their talents to serve God. Kuyper used this description as an interpretation applicable to ethno-racial groups. For example, just as the merciful were asked to act according

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246 “For by the grace given to me I bid every one among you not to think himself more highly than he ought to think, but to think with sober judgment, each according to the measure of faith which God has assigned him. For as in one body we have many members, and all the members do not have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another.” In, Romans 12:3-5 (Revised Standard Edition).

to the faith and the teachers asked to teach, each “ethic group” was tasked with their “unique” responsibilities. For whites, this was taking charge of the state of affairs, and for blacks, it was total submission.\textsuperscript{248} According to this developing neo-Calvinism as espoused by Kuyper’s thought, “mankind maintained its distinctiveness by having different nations, different peoples, and even different churches participate in their unique and separate relationships with the divine.”\textsuperscript{249} By the 1930’s this idea would become official DRC orthodoxy.\textsuperscript{250}

According to the DRC, the role of Blacks and Coloureds within Christian cosmology was very clear: to passively accept their place of subordination in South African society. Blacks were existentially devoid of value within the apartheid ideology, as their status and importance within this system is revealed in their acceptance of ridicule—as in the example of “Ethiopian Moses,” the desert father encountered in Chapter I. Blacks living under this ideology of separation and subordination in South Africa were expected to find existential meaning in the Christian tradition through an ideology that denied their own dignity.

These standards for black life in South Africa provoke several questions. Is there another way to be black and Christian than to submit to “separation” from and rule by whites? Do the Bible and the Christian message have anything to say to the black South African under apartheid? If so, what? As seen in Chapter II, early black converts were deeply interested in negotiating the terms of their Christian (and

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\item[250] Ibid, 62.
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African) identities. For example, the indigenous traditions of *lobola* and *utshwala* were defended in light of their cultural importance to the Zulu converted community. These same questions persisted throughout the twentieth century and were of particular interest to students involved in the Black Consciousness Movement in the 1960s and 1970s. Influenced by the Black Consciousness Movement and American Black Theology, students and clergy in South Africa decided that this question could only be solved through a reinterpretation of the gospel.

**Black Consciousness: Who is Black?**

The Black Consciousness Movement began in 1969 with the founding of SASO (South African Student Organization), an all-black student group led by a medical student and political activist, Steve Biko.251 By the early 1970’s, SASO led black student resistance to apartheid in a movement called Black Consciousness.252 Between 1968 and 1977, this movement incited “a resurgence in popular pressure against apartheid,” inspiring “black South Africans with new ideas about dignity and self-worth.”253

These “new ideas” entailed a reassessment of what blackness was and what it meant. In *I Write What I Like*, Steve Biko writes that black people are “by law or tradition politically, economically, and socially discriminated against as a group in


253 Ibid, 4.
the South African society.”

By this logic, Biko was describing all non-whites in South Africa, Blacks, Coloureds, and Indians, as black. Over against such oppression, Biko insisted that blacks are also a people who identify “themselves as a unit in the struggle towards the realisation of their aspirations,” namely, freedom. For Biko, the term “black” had the power to counteract repressive South African government’s effectively negative designation of people of color as “non-white.” In fact, Biko claimed, “by describing yourself as black you have started on a road towards emancipation.” Therefore, blackness for him was not just a skin pigmentation, but more specifically, a mental state. Hence, the term “black consciousness.”

The Black Consciousness Movement wanted to mobilize black South Africans against apartheid by uniting the marginalized black majority in South Africa. The system of apartheid had subtly incited Blacks, Indians, and Coloureds toward animosity against each other. For example, Biko explained, Coloureds, disliked blacks because their partial Africanness denied them “the chance of assimilation into the white world.” Black Consciousness therefore worked against these “inter-group suspicions” by insisting that the discord between Blacks, Coloureds and Indians was the deliberate intent of apartheid ideology. For Biko, this friction is easily solved if

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256 Ibid, 48.
257 Ibid, 48.
258 Ibid, 52.
259 Ibid, 52.
260 Ibid, 52.
all oppressed groups, blacks, were wholly committed to the struggle toward having “the black man assuming his rightful place at the helm of the South African ship.”  

Blacks united in solidarity against apartheid could work to address and correct the defamation of their character, humanity and history within South African culture. Earlier in this chapter, blacks under the care of the DRC were instructed to internalize their oppression. Black Consciousness saw this as a “distrust of themselves” and a “continued dependence on” whites. According to the leaders of Black Consciousness, such as Steve Biko, this mental state is the ultimate embodiment of self-hate. The defamation of non-white identity, culture, and history was the result of the colonial history of indoctrination and inferiority propagated by the apartheid government and the Dutch Reformed Church.

In 1971, SASO members met to discuss the organization’s official opinion on Black Theology in South Africa. The Resolution criticized the problematic nature of “Christianity as propagated by the white dominant churches [, which] has proved beyond doubt to be a support for the status quo…[of] oppression.” The General Student Council decided that Black Theology was “an authentic and positive articulation of” the “existential situations” that arose from being black under apartheid. While Black Consciousness was concerned with these very matters, Black Theology “assert[ed] its validity and [saw] its existence in the context of the

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words of Christ,” and therefore operated in a distinctly socio-religious sphere.\textsuperscript{266}

Black Theology, in so much as it was a full examination of the reality of blacks under apartheid, was the force by which Christianity would be transformed to suit the emancipatory agenda of the Black Consciousness Movement.

Reconfiguring Blackness

Among South African Black Theologians, the best-known American Black Theologian is James Cone. A member of the faculty at the Union Theological Seminary in New York, Cone is a theologian whose work is most notable for its relating systematic theology with the American Black Power Movement. Cone is probably the first person to use the term “Black Theology” in his 1969 opus, \textit{Black Theology and Black Power}. For Cone and other Black Theologians in the United States and in South Africa, Black Theology is a conceptual framework that reconsiders and revises biblical interpretation with a lens that empowers and liberates blacks.

According to Cone, the gospel had failed over the course of the preceding centuries to be relevant to the existence of oppressed blacks. In fact, the gospel message, along with the rest of the Bible, had been distorted by the “white religious establishment[s],” in order to exploit and humiliate blacks.\textsuperscript{267} At worst, theologians were directly responsible for this exploitation insofar as they reaffirmed diabolical associations of blackness. And at best, theologians were implicitly responsible because they accepted the repressive conditions under which blacks lived, and


remained silent, instead concerned with passing “innocuously pious resolutions”, waiting “to be congratulated.” This kind of theological work was no longer acceptable to Cone. Therefore, he proposed a theology that would stem directly from, and therefore be relevant to, the black experience. In doing this, the Christian message of salvation is self-determination for blacks, or, Black Power.

At one of the first seminars of Black Theology in South Africa, which were held at various Fellowship centers across the country in 1971, attendees listened to papers given by South African clergy, as well as a tape-recording of Cone on “Black Theology and Black Liberation.” The University Christian Movement (UCM), a multi-racial group led by white Methodist clergyman Basil Moore and Catholic activist Mogkethi Mothlabi, organized the conference. Moore and Anglican priest Sabelo Ntswasa compiled and edited the papers given at the conference and published them in a volume titled Essays in Black Theology (1972). The book, banned by the apartheid government, was also published in the United States and in the United Kingdom under the title, The Challenge of Black Theology in South Africa.

This volume courageously tackles the existential problem of being black and Christian under apartheid. Inasmuch as Black Theology attempts to make sense of black life under white rule, Lutheran minister Manas Buthelezi describes it as a

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matter of “methodological technique.” The method is a re-evaluation and re-interpretation of the Bible, which serves the purpose of affirming black dignity. Black Theological praxis is an approach that prioritizes the multifaceted nature of black oppression. This oppression is the point of departure for biblical hermeneutics in Black Theology. Its goal is the empowerment of blacks and the full realization of their human potential, which it encourages through critiques and reinterpretations of God, Christ, and black humanity.

De/Re-Constructing God the Father

The official church doctrine concerning the Trinity, or three persons, within a single Godhead was established during the Council of Nicea (325 C.E.). Since then, Christian authors have insisted on the absolute unity of God, but also affirm that God is self-differentiated, and that this internal differentiation reveals itself in three different functions: God works in the world as “creator and lawgiver”, as redeeming savior, and as sanctifying spirit. These persons are the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, respectively.

As feminist theologians have long argued, the person of “God the Father” presents us with a gendered image of God. Artistic representations of God almost always depict a male figure or voice. Catholic theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether notes that God “is modeled after the patriarchal ruling class and is seen as

addressing this class of males directly.” For example, in the biblical story of the flood, God only speaks directly to Noah, and addresses his wife and the wives of Noah’s sons twice, and never by name. The biblical tradition therefore sets up a symbolic hierarchy by which women are “symbolically repressed as the dependent servant class” because “they are referred to indirectly through their duties and property relations to the patriarch.” This gendered image of God reflects the image of a man, rather than a woman, and therefore contributes to misogyny in the Christian tradition.

Layered over this gendered image, the image of God the Father as been traditionally racialized as white. According to Ntwasa and Moore, God’s whiteness had been circulating in South Africa since “the strange white man arrived on [their] soil with his strange new God,” and condemned all African traditions and cultures. African converts were therefore made to understand their faith in terms of white culture, as explained in Chapter II. Additionally, Western theology and art have constantly illustrated God as white. According to DRC doctrine discussed previously, blacks were made to think of themselves as ontologically subordinate to the chosen Afrikaner nation. This racialized image of God therefore carries out the ideological oppression of blacks in Christianity.

278 Genesis 6-9 (Revised Standard Version).
Black Theology claims that the image of God the Father had taken on the image of a white, authoritative male who violently punished wrongdoers or the unchosen. In Chapter I, we encountered the biblical story of God sending a flood to destroy all of earth’s inhabitants. Only one family was chosen to survive this traumatic destruction. God is aware of all the sins and wrongdoings on earth. However, rather than reforming the sinful population on earth, he uses his power to destroy everything. God is therefore depicted as an omniscient and violently omnipotent character. These qualities as explained to Africans by white missionaries served to give blacks “the inescapable impression of [God as] a super-human tyrant.” The authoritative characteristic of God is the most damaging to blacks, as this figure exists “‘over’, or ‘beyond’” blacks, and serves to reinforce the ideology of their oppression.

Black Theology attempts to reinterpret the actions of God over the course of biblical history. This re-evaluation is necessary in order to reaffirm black humanity within the Christian tradition. In Black and Reformed, Coloured clergyman of the Dutch Reformed Mission Church Allan Boesak claims that “God’s righteousness is manifested in liberative deeds.” For example, the Bible tells of a period in the Israelites’ history in which they were enslaved by Egypt. The Egyptian Pharaoh refuses God’s command to free the Israelites, and is consequently sent ten plagues. Black Theologians, like Boesak, regard the Exodus story as God’s preference for the

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poor and unfree. According to Cone, “Israel’s identity as a people was grounded in [God’s] liberating activity in Exodus.” ²⁸⁶

Aside from the gospel, the Exodus narrative is the most concrete story of physical and political liberation in the Bible. In using the Exodus narrative, black South Africans claimed the place and identity of the Israelites. The people of Israel and black South Africans are both socially subjugated and economically exploited by a foreign political system. The Israelites are, however, enslaved outside their native land, while the black South African is subjugated by a foreign power in their native land. In the story of Exodus as told by South African Black Theology, “God heard their cry and liberated them from slavery, from meaningless[ness] and alienation, to the fulfillment of their humanity in service of the living God”. ²⁸⁷ According to Allan Boesak, “The name by which God reveals himself is YHWH—the One who is Active, who is and is present, who will free his people.” ²⁸⁸ Thus, the Exodus narrative reveals to twentieth century Christians that God’s will is historically bound in a liberation of those in “the condition of oppression and poverty”. ²⁸⁹ The Israelites, who are conscious of the nature of their enslaved condition, fit Biko’s definition of black, thereby forging a historical and divine connection between Israel and (an imagined) post-apartheid South Africa. The Exodus narrative is hinged on the direct action of God, especially through one political figure, a Moses persona. Since Black Theology in South Africa took on many themes from Black Consciousness, the agency of the

²⁸⁸ Allan Boesak, A Farewell to Innocence (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1976), 17.
²⁸⁹ Ibid, 73.
divine from one “Moses” figure was moved onto every single black individual in order to uplift blacks.

This contribution expands the emancipatory agenda of Black Theology in regards to black humanity. God’s “complete transcendence over creaturely existence,” affirms his divine freedom, according to Cone.290 Furthermore, “God’s being as freedom… is also an affirmation of God’s freedom to be for us [, blacks,] in the social context of human existence.”291 Julian Kunnie, a religious studies scholar and activist, claims that the right to be free is based on the fact that God “created all human beings in freedom and as destined to be free.”292 In short, humans were created to be free because they were made in God’s (free) image. The Exodus narrative is included under other Biblical narratives in order to highlight the morality of the oppressed under the direction of God.

God’s transcendent freedom over humankind is one step in reaffirming black humanity in Christianity. Every person’s humanity, bestowed upon us by God, therefore lies deepest in the gospel message of salvation. Jesus Christ’s embodiment of divinity and humanity demonstrate how humans should strive to exist in the world.293 Just as God the Father must be reconfigured from colonial absolutist to revolutionary liberator, so must Jesus’ identity and actions in the Bible be reconstructed in order to expand the emancipatory agenda of Black Theology.

Jesus Christ: The Black Messiah?

Along with a reconsideration of the personhood of God the Father, the project of recovering black humanity also entails a re-evaluation of Jesus Christ’s human. The life of Christ and the gospel message are of paramount importance in the Christian tradition. However, as Manas Buthelezi notes, the message of salvation has only ever been presented as the solution to the needs of the European.294 This has been most recently been demonstrated in the position of the DRC in South Africa. During the early 20th century in South Africa, the growing poor white population was the impetus for this new philosophy of Afrikaner nationalism, apartheid. Christianity operating under the colonial legacy sought to alleviate the situation of the poor whites by claiming that “the suffering of the Afrikaner, accordingly, was the result of the sin of admixture” between “civilized Christian nations.”295 This crude language underscores the fact that a racially defined ideology can only affirm the dignity of one groups of people by stressing another’s inferiority.296 Additionally, the redeeming salvific agenda of Jesus Christ, according to white theologians, emphasizes salvation from sin, and not from oppression. Jesus is therefore exclusively concerned “men’s motives and hearts,” and is not “a social reformer in any sense.”297

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Jesus is therefore detached from the “strangling problems of oppression, fear, hunger, insult and dehumanisation” that black South Africans face. In “What is Black Theology?” Basil Moore wonders how a black ghetto congregation group in a South African township would make sense of a white, middle-class minister’s seminary image of Jesus of Nazareth. Moore wonders, “what meaning would ‘Son of Man’, ‘Messiah’, [or] ‘Son of God,’” convey. Buthelezi calls this detachment between Christ and blacks, a “hermeneutical gap,” meaning the existing interpretations of Jesus’ life have very little relevance to a black South African’s ontological problems.

Black Theology assigns importance to the aspects of Jesus’ life that would resonate the most with oppressed South Africans. Black Theologians in South Africa were not interested in Jesus’ skin color, per se. Rather, his status as a poor Jew living in Roman-occupied Judea was “a meaningful symbol of God’s identification with the oppressed,” and signified Christ as black. Boesak claims that this blackness of Christ “has nothing to do with the physical appearance of God.” Nor is it, according to Moore, “a rush of hot religious emotionalism that has obscured reason.” Mokgethi Motlhabi, the acting director of UCM’s Black Theology Project, claimed that blackness “denotes all the oppressed people in our country

300 Ibid, 7.
irrespective of color (which cannot be white, of course), nationality, or creed. Additionally, as we will remember from Steve Biko, blackness does not just refer to one’s oppressed status; it is also one’s ability to cultivate insight about their reality. Jesus’ blackness therefore informs his message of salvation, and the message of salvation affirms his blackness. Under the project of Black Theology, Jesus becomes a political revolutionary against the imperial and capitalist forces of the occupying Roman Empire—his agenda of salvation for humans therefore contains implications for eternal souls of humans as well as their lived experiences on earth.

A re-evaluation of Jesus’ identity in order to give relevance to black South Africans must be class-conscious. According to Allan Boesak, Jesus’ parents were so poor that they were not able to bring the sacrifice prescribed by the Torah for his circumcision, which was a year old lamb. Instead, they brought the sacrifice of the poor: two turtledoves. Jesus’ humble origins would go on to characterize his revolutionary project of salvation. At one of Jesus’ most important speeches, the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus blesses the oppressed and downtrodden of the earth, “for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” The kingdom of God was for the poor rather than the rich “because the poor has nothing to expect from this world while the entire

309 Matthew 5:3 (Revised Standard Edition).
existence of the rich is grounded in [their] commitment to worldly things." The oppressed were therefore always at the heart of Jesus’ message of salvation.

A reinterpretation of Jesus’ life that highlights his modest economic status and his political status gives the image of a Jesus who is not unlike a black person living in South Africa. Geopolitically, Jesus lived in the Judean province of the Roman Empire. Neither Jesus nor any of his disciples would have been Roman citizens. Jews living in 1st century Israel at this time were a conquered people paying taxes to and living under a colonial occupation. Jesus as a colonized individual living under the alien legislation of an imperial power resonates with the reality of blacks, living in homelands under apartheid. However, while Jesus was one of the economically exploited and politically disenfranchised Jews under Roman occupation, he was also a revolutionary liberator.

According to Black South African liberation theologians, Jesus critiqued the Roman appointed political system in Judea as a part of his revolutionary sociopolitical agenda of salvation. Boesak claims that to the Roman Empire, the Jews “were without value except insofar as they were useful to the Romans and their accomplices”. King Herod, the Roman appointed King of Judea, was one such accomplice and well known for his mental illness and cruelty to his family and

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According to Boesak, Jesus referred to Herod as a “fox,” as he was well-known for supporting Roman decrees. Jesus’ disapproval of the oppressive political powers in Judea therefore indicate his support for revolutionaries against unjust political systems today. In this sense, Black Theology reinterprets the gospel message in order to attack the status quo as espoused by apartheid supporters, like the DRC.

Jesus’ critique on the religious leaders of the Jewish community also reveals his revolutionary agenda of salvation for Black Theology. In Matthew 23, Jesus decries the Pharisees as “full of hypocrisy and iniquity.”317 Jesus continuously deprecated the religious leaders in Judea for being concerned with their outward appearances instead of with the matters of “justice and mercy.”318 Christ’s critique of the Pharisees mirrors Black Theology’s critique on the DRC and white Christian liberals who refused to speak up and act out against oppression. Cone calls these Christians and their churches enemies of Christ, because they refuse to take on Christ’s liberatory agenda in the world.319

Black Theology critiqued white religious powers of the same crimes, as blacks were made to think of themselves as ontologically subordinate to whites, in accordance with apartheid ideology. This particular reading of the person and gospel of Christ empowered blacks by claiming that Jesus’ life was far more alike black realities under apartheid than they were led to believe. Accordingly, Cone says, “If

Jesus Christ is in fact the Liberator whose resurrection is the guarantee that he is present with us today, then he too must be black, taking upon his person and work the blackness of our existence.³²⁰

A re-evaluation of Jesus’ life through a Black Theological lens then serves to demonstrate that blacks could form a religious protest against apartheid in order to reassert their humanity and dignity. If the life of the resurrected Christ could reveal meaning in the lives repressed black South Africans—“The conflict was not theirs but the Lord’s, the stakes were not political but divine,” and were therefore predestined for victory.³²¹ According to black feminist-womanist theologian Delores Williams, one can only gain knowledge and therefore true salvation of Jesus by joining the liberation struggle of the oppressed.³²² This sort of reading of the gospel message of salvation therefore creates a socio-ethical praxis for the way Christianity is practiced by black South Africans.

_Engaging in Black Theological Praxis_

Black Theology is a critical reflection of the word of God with regards to the lives of South African blacks. Christians are called to engage with the will of God, expressed in this chapter as liberation from oppressive sociopolitical forces. Therefore, the socio-ethical nature of Black Theology makes the claim that liberation from oppression means the empowerment of black people. In South Africa, this is

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crucial, since the black majority was systematically oppressed in order to socially elevate whites. This section is concerned with the ways in which engaging in this socio-ethical theology brings about a sincere black humanity. We will therefore discuss the Black Theology’s critical understanding of mental oppression, absolutism, and corporate personality.

In South Africa, the political system of apartheid worked with the DRC in order to circumscribe the lives of blacks in such a way as to make oppression seem natural. While the institution of apartheid had a lasting and devastating influence, blackness, as we have already discussed, came to South Africa rife with the most crudely negative associations. Boesak notes that it is no wonder that blacks learned to hate themselves and each other as a result of the ancient and systematic indoctrination of their inferior status.  

In “Black Consciousness and the Quest for a True Humanity,” Biko noted that the “most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed.” He believed that if the minds of black South Africans were totally “manipulated and controlled,” as was the goal under apartheid, there would be no way to escape subordination by whites.  

According to Buthelezi, the definition of a colonized mind is the “state of existence in which the selfhood is crushed by external factors and circumstances or is subject to pressure from outside to direct itself in such a way as to serve interests other than those of self.” Furthermore, the most extreme example is in the mental condition of a slave, who is

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stripped of humanity and completely exploited to serve the needs of his/her master.\textsuperscript{327} The condition of mental colonialization therefore needed be abolished in order to destabilize the ideological grip of apartheid and cultivate a sincere black humanity in South Africa.

The abrogation of the colonized mind in South Africa entails a complete rejection of the domination of whites over blacks. This involves rejecting the white liberal tendency to guide and lead blacks against oppression.\textsuperscript{328} The reasoning behind this rejection is, according to Biko, because white liberals seem to be interested in determining the method for resistance and leading blacks against oppression, even when these liberal whites have benefitted and operated within these very systems of oppression.\textsuperscript{329} A cultivation of a true black humanity cannot happen when whites lead the opposition against injustice. Rather, there must be “a strong solidarity amongst the blacks,” in order for the project of liberation to be truly empowering.\textsuperscript{330} According to Biko, “the limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress,” which is why blacks “must reject the beggar tactics” forced on them by white liberals.\textsuperscript{331} This rejection allows for the development and enrichment of black leadership against oppression. Additionally, the development of a black leadership demonstrates the ability to self-govern to the entire black community. This strengthens black solidarity and contributes to an authentic black empowerment.

\textsuperscript{330} Ibid, 39.
\textsuperscript{331} Ibid, 39.
A true black humanity must be concerned with creating opportunities of leadership and power for blacks. Earlier in this chapter, the image of God the Father as an authoritative white male is deconstructed in order to develop a more holistic person of God. According to Black Theologians, the image of God the Father as an absolutist white male gives the impression of an unforgiving tyrant, unconcerned with the Black Theological agenda of liberation. If the image of God is to undergo rehabilitation in order to suit the emancipatory agenda of Black Theology, then the method of black organization against oppression must also be held to that standard.

The project of uncovering and reaffirming black humanity requires a coalition of blacks to support black liberation in South Africa. Firstly, it needs to be said that the true meaning of black liberation in South Africa means that the black majority is in power. In accordance with a democratic rule, which Black Theology supported, the black majority would then exercise power in South African politics as a result of their population’s majority. The implementation of black power with regards to the reconstruction of God means that blacks “have to be on guard in [their] own structures and organisations [so] that we don’t become authoritarian,” according to Motlhabi. If blacks can envision a post-apartheid era where racism is rejected but the authoritative nature of politics is unchanged, then a Black Theology, a theology of the oppressed, will still be necessary.

Engaging in Black Theological praxis and abolishing the systems of oppression and authoritarianism rest on the active and community based

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understanding of one’s humanity in direct relationship to others. As Motlhabi notes, “human relations depend on at least two human beings who are trying to work out the character of their relationship.”334 Sabelo Ntwasa claims that Black Theological praxis “is a unity in total commitment to each other in a corporate life ‘in Christ.’”335 English Theologian H. Wheeler Robinson coined the term “corporate personality” in order to demonstrate the ancient Hebrew tendencies to inextricably associate one individual with their extended kin group. According to Wheeler Robinson, “the whole group…might function as a single individual,” because every individual was considered representative of the entire group.336 Black Theologian Boganjalo Goba uses H. Wheeler Robinson’s concept of corporate personality defined as the “embodiment of the community in the individual.”337 The concept of corporate personality is a useful way to gain insight into how black solidarity leads to the affirmation and assertion of black humanity. According to this logic expressed by Goba and influenced by Wheeler, when the individual is committed as an agent of social change, they necessarily express the interests of the black community.338 The idea of corporate personality in a black community allows for an exploration of black humanity because it prioritizes the needs of the entire community. The humanity of the entire community, asserted on the level of the individual, will then permeate the life of each community member. This is the socio-ethical practice of Black Theology

with regards to black humanity—the needs of the black community, namely freedom—are prioritized in the social agenda of each individual.

The full realization of black humanity within the Black Theological project can therefore be understood as a project of clarifying and reasserting the humanity of blacks under oppressive structures. While Black Theology has not been limited to just South Africa, as evidenced by the work of James Cone (and other American Black Theologians not mentioned in this chapter), the nature of apartheid within the context of an indigenous, black majority involves unique issues, such as the displacement of Africans from their native lands, on such lands, by a foreign power. The end of apartheid in 1994 unfortunately did not drastically change the quality of black life for the better. To date, the land reform process in South Africa has been unsuccessful: in the post-apartheid era, blacks have received a re-distribution of less than 7% of the land.\(^{339}\) The problem of land reform is just one small issue that faces black South Africans and the democratic government, 20 years after the dismantling of apartheid. The system of apartheid was only decades long, but segregation period before, and the slave trade of the early colonial period contributed vastly to the dehumanization of blacks. For this reason, the project of Black Theology has still not been completed. Black Theology has, however, expanded the language and methods of organization by which blacks can continue to endeavor to an authentic existence in the world.

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Conclusion

On Saturday, April 4th, 2015, a police officer stopped 50-year-old Walter Scott in North Charleston, South Carolina, for a broken taillight. Not an hour later, Scott was dead; three shots to the back, one to his upper buttocks, and one to his ear. Walter Scott remained handcuffed for the last minutes of his life, pronounced dead by paramedics at the scene.340

On Tuesday, April 7th, 2015 Officer Michael T. Slager, was arrested and charged with murder only after a video of the event surfaced, indicating falsities in the filed police report. While the details of this case are currently unclear, what is clear is that being black in America today is a crime within itself. Slager’s arrest is an exception to the rule; (white) police officers are rarely held accountable for their use of deadly force against unarmed black civilians. If the events of the past year are any indication, Slager will not be indicted for charges of first-degree murder.

The project of this thesis was spurred by an interest in the use of Christian thought and language to combat apartheid in South Africa, one of the most singular methods of social organization within the context of modern nation-states. Throughout this thesis, we encounter white-dominated discourses, which ascribe varying degrees of meaning to blackness and black bodies. Simultaneously, we encounter theological retaliation by these individuals and communities that were commodified and dehumanized by the white-dominated discourses. While both the oppressor and the oppressed used Christianity in their agendas of subjugation and

liberation, respectively, we must remember that the project of liberation does not mean the subjugation of the old oppressor. It means the empowerment of the oppressed in order to explore past identities, configure present ones, and explore options for a more positive view of the self.

Inasmuch as we have explored the processes of indigenization and reaffirmation of black humanity, we might ask ourselves—why do we have to say, “Black lives matter!” The answer to this lies in refusal of a grand jury to indict a police officer Darren Wilson for the murder of an unarmed teenager, Michael Brown, a modern day embodiment of these ancient and medieval conceptions of blackness in Chapter I. The existing state of affairs has indicated that black bodies are still not given the same protections as non-black bodies, which demonstrates the deep-rooted notions held by patristic, medieval, early modern authors, and the colonial legacy at large.

This thesis has sought to contribute to a narrative that has been systematically silenced by the institutional powers of the world. As an addition to this narrative of reaffirming black dignity, this work acknowledges that black bodies have been forced to and are remained forced to validate their existence when others are not expected to do the same, namely, whites. However, verbal tradition lies an opportunity for black people recode the discourse surrounding their existence—and therefore create a reconfigured blackness that might be vital to their future identity.
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