

Union Theological Seminary

INDIGENIZATION AND LIBERATION

A Report
Presented in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the
Master's Thesis

Dr. James Cone

by

Gilbert Bouhairie

April 10, 2014

Table of Contents

Introduction.....	2
The Methodology of Indigenized Liberation theology.....	8
Black liberation theology.....	12
Latin American liberation theology.....	23
African liberation theology.....	34
Ecumenical Association of Third World Theology dialogues.....	45
Black, Latin American and African theologies today.....	47
Indigenization through the love, cross and resurrection of Christ.....	48
Indigenization is liberation.....	50
Reasons for Indigenization.....	52
Conclusion.....	55

Introduction

‘Indigenization’ and ‘Liberation’ are two of the major contending theological directions within the dialogue of Liberation theologies of the twentieth century. Although this friction between the two hermeneutic procedures continues till this day, I believe this tension between indigenization and liberation has been falsely identified with the natural tension between inculturation and contextualization. While ‘contextualization’ (the Christian faith within a particular context) and ‘inculturation’ (the Christian faith within a particular culture) have been essential to debates within liberation theologies, indigenization seems to capture both concepts with more depth. Contrary to popular ideas about anything indigenous pertaining to the native people of a certain land, to indigenize, by definition, means to increase local participation in or take ownership of something and adapt it to local ways.¹ Therefore, the indigenization of Christian theology is the attempt to interpret the Christian faith through contextual religious and socio-political realities in order to increase local participation in Christianity amongst those who suffer most from oppression of any kind.

Indigenization was a term first used by African theologians to describe the necessity of “Africanizing” Christianity. Indigenization assimilates the Christian faith with the local language, beliefs, customs, traditions and the history of group identities and makes the faith indigenous to the nature of those groups. So while indigenization has been specifically associated with African and Asian theology, it is my contention that all theologies are indigenized, including the more prominent and traditional Westernized theology to which most Christians ascribe. Therefore, it is my opinion that all liberation theologians of non-Western and descendants of non-Western countries must reject the more prominent version of Christianity

¹ <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/indigenization?s=t> (2014).

(namely an indigenized Westernized version), in order to create and construct a theology and praxis based on a Christian faith that is livable through one's own culture and context without this juxtaposition being interpreted as syncretism. Let me illustrate this through my own experience with the Christian faith.

I was born in the U.S to Ghanaian parents. Although she was very cultured when it came to family functions and occasions, my mother was a Methodist. We attended a Methodist church in Manhattan religiously and as a child I was always excited to accompany her because those were the days I got to spend time with Jesus. Although this enthusiasm is shared by most Christians who attend church every Sunday, my weekly communion with Jesus was not theoretical or even spiritual but literal. This is because after staring at all the traditional pictures of Jesus I saw around the house, and my mother's pastor, Pastor Edward Horn, resembled the traditional physical rendering of Jesus as a white man. Every Sunday I was eager to see the Jesus look-alike majestically appear on the podium in his all too familiar white robe. I always anticipated his weekly call for all the children to come up to the podium to sit with him and tell him about our daily activities. This was my favorite part of church because sitting next to the Pastor always reminded me of my favorite picture in my children's Bible of Jesus sitting with all the little children.

So it was quite disappointing when I moved to Ghana at the age of eight and began attending a church that my Jesus never attended. Notwithstanding the culture shock, going to my mother's Methodist church in the capital city Accra, was quite familiar to me. The dressing and the hymns were all familiar to me, but our Pastor looked nothing like Jesus, even though he preached in English. It was at that moment that I realized that not all preachers looked like Jesus. Clearly the church knew how Jesus really looked like because there were pictures of him

everywhere and even though all the familiarities of my church in America were there, this church seemed like a bad imitation of Christianity to me. Church always felt like the pastor was an intruder pretending to be something he was not, the members were pretending to be something they were not and although the spirit of the Western Methodist church was apparent in this Ghanaian church, the spirit of the Ghanaian people were not.

Then I made a rare trip to my mother's village at the age of twelve and attended a traditional church. The outer walls of this seaside church might've resembled any other. Stained glass windows were encased in the staccato structure and a wooden statue of a crucified Jesus hung high above the entrance. What was taking place inside the timbered doors, however, recalled a time long before missionaries first stepped on African shores. Entranced parishioners, adorned in traditional garb, rhythmically clapped and sang. They assembled with the priest to perform exorcisms and miracles; shouting in their rapid-fire local language as they called upon a higher being to reveal great power. Although it was obvious that the core beliefs in the fundamental tenets that I had come to identify with Christianity were there, there was a poignant difference in prayer, worship and overall religiosity that I had never seen before. I was surprised to see the same traditional picture of Jesus in this traditional Ghanaian church, because it looked out of place. I did not think I was in a Christian setting, but in something rather different and more intriguing. The spirit of these Ghanaian people manifested so heavily throughout every expression of this indigenized Christian faith that I did not just think this was a bad version of Christianity, I believed it was not Christianity at all.

True Christianity, I believed, was a faith thought out and practiced in the way my pastor in New York and his church members practiced it and in which my Methodist church in Accra tried to mimic. The spontaneous and emotional praise and worship as well as the pastor's eerie

melodramatic miracles and exorcisms in this indigenized church reminded me of parts of the bible I had read and I was surprised to see these archaic expressions of the faith still exist. Listening to their heightened cries to God, I began to wonder if perhaps the elaborate expressions of worship was done to compensate for an extremely sinful nature. At the very least, more sinful than the true followers I knew back in New York, the ones who sounded almost restrained when singing hymns and no longer needed their maker to perform instant miracles. Perhaps the yearnings of these indigenous people for God were more elaborate and intense because of the extent of their poverty. This would explain why they could not afford to assimilate into “true” Christianity and hence God’s abandonment. I wondered how Ghanaians of the same culture could practice their Christian faith differently simply because of context? These were legitimate questions that I pondered upon for years until I came to know my African/African American history. I realized that my childhood outlook on Christianity was no different than past colonial and missionary attitudes towards a way of life we simply did not understand. All this time my idea of true Christianity was actually an indigenized Westernized version of Christianity and I came to realize that Christianity and Westernism were not synonyms in the evangelistic vocabulary. The nature of my questions began to change. As opposed to questioning the validity of indigenous Christianity I began questioning Christianity itself.

Was the aim of Christianity to “Westernize” people or was Western Christianity nothing more than a cult and an imperialistic spirit disguised as original Christianity to fetter the souls of non-Western peoples for the sinister purpose of colonial exploitation and self-hatred? If so, did the Christian faith serve any purpose to post-colonial people such as Ghanaians who had a long history of seeking liberation from Western rule of any kind? If Christianity was not a Western cult, was it possible to preserve what was essentially Christian while developing local

indigenized expressions of the Christian faith?² These questions derived from my own Christian experience demanded theological reflection and set me on my theological journey.

Grasping the full meaning of the two love commandments Jesus advocated in Matthew 22:36-40 in order for believers to stay true to the faith, I realize now that people do not have to deny their identity in order to practice the Christian faith. That indigenized Christianity in Ghana was in fact more faithful to the faith than the Western assimilated Ghanaian Methodist Church in Accra ever was. Not only were the Ghanaian methodists possessed by a Westernized version of Christianity by not worshipping and loving God with their own heart, soul and mind but these Ghanaian Methodists did not seem to love or embrace themselves or their neighbors as they were. By internalizing the love commandments I gained an understanding of the meaning of the cross of Jesus and this love made me recognize the anthropological and spiritual poverty Ghanaians suffered from by adopting and practicing a Westernized Christianity. This was not only detrimental to the self-affirmation of God's love for the Ghanaian people but was also an implication of the denial and failure of Western Christianity to recognize the universal Lordship of Christ.

Therefore, it is my belief today that all people must be able to indigenize the Christian faith through the love teachings of Jesus Christ in order to receive the revelation of the cross they bear as a people and recognize the suffering cross from which they need to be liberated. As a theologian I recognize that if theology is not indigenized, Christianity remains a Westernized religion that dominates rather than liberates the oppressed by presenting a Christianity with a Western slant cloaked as a universal religion. Rather than being opposed to each other, as

² Bolaji Idowu, *Towards An Indigenous Church*, (London, Oxford University Press, 1965), 1-3.

formally thought by liberation theologians, I believe indigenization and liberation are both hermeneutic procedures that seek to fulfill three functions; liberate Christianity from its religio-cultural and socio-political bondage to Westernized values; cater to and find solidarity with the poor and oppressed in their fight against systemic oppression; and finally, show that the struggle for political, social and economic justice—as well as the struggle for a religious and spiritual liberation that comes from the love of God, self and neighbor—is consistent with the gospel of Jesus Christ.

I shall introduce three of the major liberation theologies of the twentieth century—Black, Latin-American and African liberation theology—and explain their conception and growth: their differences, but most importantly, their similarities in attempting to liberate themselves from the injustices Western supremacy has created in each. I will explicate how these three liberation theologies indigenized the Christian faith by loving God with their own heart, mind, body and soul in order to extract for themselves the universal premise of Christianity, which is the “liberating power” of the gospel revealed in the Cross and the Resurrection. This extraction ultimately deems everything else in prominent Christianity as a human construct reminding us that all theology must be indigenized, for the Christian faith demands it. In the realities of culture and context, indigenization and liberation, which are both guided by the two love commandments, are synthetic. I propose that not only is the tension between the dialectical encounters concerning indigenization and liberation a farce and obsolete, but indigenization, fully understood, reveals that there can be no liberation of any kind without it. This statement shall be the foundation of my thesis.

The Methodology of Indigenized Liberation theology

The Christian faith, founded upon the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, has been on trial since the days of its inception. Since its beginnings, this Judeo-Christian faith has attempted to justify its existence and salvific liberating power to people of all races, cultures and contexts. In an effort to ensure the same meaning and practice of the faith for all people, the early Church in the second century invented the word ‘ecumeny,’ which meant that the universal Christian world was in solidarity.³ On the contrary, the universal Church representative of the body of Christ has always been divided and this is simply because there has never been a single Christian interpretation of the Christian faith. Since the institutionalization of Christianity by the Roman Empire and the privatization of the faith by the West, Christianity has been defined by Western authorities who dictate what the correct faith is and how it is to be practiced. However, throughout church history, there have always been other Christian viewpoints that were contrary to that of the Church and this phenomenon has continued. The debates about the nature of Christ, the belief and praxis of the Christian faith and the sources of legitimate authority in the Christian community, has troubled the peace of Christianity proving that there never has and may never be one true way of theologizing.

The methodology of liberation theology takes pride in being part of this rich diversity, understanding that the diversity of the Christian tradition and its biblical world view has always been counterfactual. The faith itself, as seen in the Bible, was formulated from debates about the faith. Within the scriptures there is a rich diversity of theologies, many of which complement one another, though they may also be incompatible according to various contexts and cultures. I

³ Khaled Anatolios, *Retrieving Nicaea: The Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2011), 5-36.

chose three of the major liberation theologies because I believe their dialogues represent this diversity well. While it is clear to liberation theologians that the meaning of the life, death and resurrection of Christ is meant to console and liberate the weak and heavy laden, liberation theology confronts the Christian tradition's long history of having to answer in precise terms whether its purpose is not simply to serve as an effective tool and justification for Western imperialism and the convenient exploitation of the oppressed.⁴ Liberation theologies testify not only to Christ 'the liberator' who liberates humans from sin and death, but also to God's liberating activity of the oppressed already witnessed in the Exodus. Therefore, liberation theology dismisses the dichotomy of the secular and the sacred and brings this debate to the forefront of theology.⁵

For those coming from the underside of history, theology has always been a struggle against enslaving and dehumanizing forces. The methodology of liberation theologies erupts from the historical situations of broad movements around the world by people who had become increasingly conscious about the oppression and neglect from which they suffered. This is the history of Black, Latin and African liberation movements and theologies that developed during their time of zeal for full liberation from every form of servitude while searching for personal maturity and collective integration.⁶ These concrete, real life movements exemplify liberation theology's distinctive character. Fueled by their own hermeneutics of suspicion, which Marx, Nietzsche and Freud believed was necessary to critique the phenomenology of the sacred and

⁴ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1973), xx-xxvi.

⁵ Idowu, *Towards An Indigenous Church*, 1.

⁶ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1973), xvii.

clear the horizon for more authenticity, these three liberation theologies recognized that faith and life were inseparable. Therefore it was necessary to take a backward glance and reconsider the great Christian themes within these radically changed perspectives, with regard to the new questions posed by these new commitments. Therefore liberation theology, as the theologian Miguel Bonino believes, is the attempt to “do” theology in a revolutionary situation.⁷

The Christian faith according to liberation theology is universal only because of its “liberating” theme founded in the Exodus, the contemplative and prophetic language of the Prophets, the love commandments, and the Cross and Resurrection of Jesus Christ. Liberation theology, more than any other kind of theology responds to the cries of the people on the cross and issues out of the crucible of human suffering and anguish. In a sense, liberation theology is really a theodicy because it seeks to justify the “all loving” and “all powerful” God and the ways of God to downtrodden and perplexed people so that they may be inspired to seek liberation from their crosses and resurrect.⁸ Those who adopt the liberation perspective have the sensitivity that is needed for understanding and cultivating the celebratory and contemplative dimension of peoples who find in the God of their faith the source of their demand for life and dignity.⁹ By indigenizing the Christian faith, liberation theologians make a radical communion with the suffering of their people, a communion Christ shared through the redemptive experience of the cross which is the universal symbol of the Christian faith. Not only is the cross a symbol for those who use their freedom to find solidarity with the poor and oppressed, but like the cries of

⁷ Jose M. Bonino, *doing theology in a revolutionary situation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), Foreword.

⁸ Kofi Appiah-Kubi and Sergio Torres, *African theology en route* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979), 162-167.

⁹ Guitierrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, xxxii.

Jesus on the cross, the outcry of liberation theologies represents the voice of all who suffer unjustly. These cries, liberation theologians believe, have echoed throughout history and, therefore, the goal of liberation theology is to give these cries a voice that strengthens souls in their efforts to solve the problem of evil and the plague of suffering and oppression in the world.¹⁰

In this sense, liberation theology breaks the silence of traditional theology's focus on the metaphysical aspects of God and its rather complacent approach towards religio-cultural and socio-political issues. The paradox of the crucified savior lies at the heart of the Christian faith and liberation theology involves itself in the suffering of others through the love commandments in order to speak out of the hope in understanding that one must go through the cross in order to get to the resurrection.¹¹ This is the norm that liberation theologians believe makes the gospel authoritative for all people. For liberation theology, the Christian faith demands all people to love God with their own mind, heart, body and soul, to have the love of self and neighbor in order to recognize the crosses we bear as a people, and to seek liberation. The epistemological approach on the praxis and theological reflection of the Christian faith by these indigenized liberation theologies proves that all people have a cross they bear and Christians all over the world must be careful about those we allow to speak about the cross on our behalf. The methodologies of the following liberation theologies prove that indigenization liberates the Christian faith from all forms of Western heteronomy. Since all theologies come out of a particular socio-historical context, it is necessary to provide the historical backgrounds of each of

¹⁰ Gustavo Gutiérrez, *On Job: God-talk and the Suffering of the Innocent* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1987), 92-99.

¹¹ James H. Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2011), 1.

the three liberation theologies in order to understand the synthesis between indigenization and liberation.

Black liberation theology

Black liberation theology was formed in the 1960's during one of the most turbulent periods in American history. America's racial climate had reached its climax and the Civil Rights (integrationists) and Black Power (separatists) movements were gaining momentum in America. The oppression and degradation of the humanity of blacks caused by white supremacy and the killing of two great martyrs, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. shattered any protracted romanticism blacks had left of America. Blacks around the country, especially young African Americans who were yelling and marching through the streets of America with shouts of "black power," were being influenced by the revolutions taking place around the world; the power of whites to control black and brown minds was being broken. The fear and self-hatred blacks once had that stemmed from slavery, lynching and Jim Crow no longer carried any weight and blacks were tired of waiting for white liberals to remove the suffering crosses of racism from their backs. Although white liberals advocated civil liberties for all, their conviction and goodwill had cost them nothing.¹²

While white Christians and liberals could afford to be patient, many young blacks were no longer willing to wait. This new generation of African Americans exuded self-confidence, from their clothing to their actions and although their radical nature gave the ideology of "black power" a supremacist notion, these movements represented a major paradigm shift in race relations. Optimistic Americans—both black and white liberals and Christians—seemed to

¹² James Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York, Seabury Press, 1969), 1-10.

misunderstand the urgent outburst of these revolutionary cries opting, rather, to dismiss and condemn the notion of “black power” as non-Christian and a nuisance to the black church and the progress of black people in America. It was during this tumultuous time that Dr. James Cone responded with the most radical message for Christian America: “black power” was not only the message of Christ for America, but the gospel of its time.¹³

Dr. Cone was well aware of traditional Christianity’s tranquil conscience. Insofar as white “do-gooders” tolerated and sponsored racism in America through their “lukewarm” stance in their educational, economic, political, social and church institutions, Cone believed white Christians and liberals were directly responsible for the atrocious treatment blacks were experiencing under white supremacy. Traditional theology, which had been a European indigenized theology, had ignored the suffering cross of racism and Cone believed someone had to give the cries of those on the suffering cross a theological voice as a prayer to a liberating God. Dr. Cone was well aware that “black power” was not an intellectual outcry, but rather an evolvement of an experiential tradition of blacks that had precedent in reference to the Exodus, the Prophets of the Old Testament and Jesus the liberator. Cone understood that “black power” did not come out of a vacuum but had always been a cultural construct of enlightened blacks throughout the history of African Americans, representing the power of love from black people and for black people. This was essential considering the self-hatred blacks had internalized for centuries due to intense oppression.¹⁴

¹³ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, vii-xiv.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 1-30.

In Cone's opinion, it was time for someone to address what the gospel of Jesus was truly about and reveal the hypocrisy of white Christianity. Cone refused to accept a Christianity that bred self-hatred among blacks and a Westernized theology that suppressed the voices of suffering blacks. He was not a separatist, nor did he believe in a kind of "false integration" where power still remained in the hands of whites. In Cone's opinion, the concept of "black power" illustrated a self-love that was justified by the love commandments of Christ and represented a self-affirmation of humanity by a people who had been denied theirs. Although black power movements were hard on the black church for their passivity, Dr. Cone reminded blacks that the black church had always been radical in its journey towards liberation. Blacks in America never fully accepted Christianity as it was presented to them by white slave masters; instead, they transformed the faith through their experience of suffering and struggle, cultivating a tradition that was based, as Gayraud Wilmore puts it, on survival, elevation and liberation.¹⁵ The black faith had always been distinct in nature and character from the slaveholder's faith in God, and as destructive as slavery was, Jesus who had overcome equally terrible odds had become for black Christians the primary source of liberation from the yoke of slavery. While Christ did not advocate violence, Dr. Cone knew that "black power" was more than a "revenge" and "revolt" mentality. It was a cry that was faithful to the liberating theme found in the gospel and throughout the black religious tradition.¹⁶

Black faith in America, as Gayraud Wilmore explains, has been a fusion between a highly sophisticated and ubiquitous spirituality originating from African traditions, and a radical

¹⁵ Gayraud S Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism* (Garden City, N.Y., Anchor Press, 1973), 25.

¹⁶ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 5-14.

religious sensibility for justice from the experiences of slavery. Cone decided to create an indigenized theology out of the African American experience using as his sources the cultural, spiritual and religious nature of the black tradition.¹⁷ His indigenization of the Christian faith in order to gain liberation was not just a theological necessity for the academy, but was also a way of remaining true to the black Christian tradition. The black Christian faith had always been experiential and the experiences of blacks were obviously different from those of whites. Black Christian faith was active and had always been less concerned with precise doctrinal contours. While whites tended to practice their faith in a more academic/doctrinal manner (indigenized European Christianity), blacks were more likely to practice their faith in an experiential manner that was less theologically defined, leaving room for spontaneous and emotional praise and worship. Reason alone caused no one to act, and since blacks needed a faith that created action, they leaned towards feeling and emotions rather than intellect.¹⁸ Cone explained this as the “ethics” versus “creed” dichotomy. What was important to blacks was how the Christian faith was practiced in the daily life of Christians while white Christians in Cone’s opinion spoke about Christian ethics but failed to practice it. The suspicion of intellectualism and the mystery of faith were crucial and caused blacks to lean more on folk theology when interpreting the Christian faith than doctrine. This caused a more expressive and informal practice of the Christian faith in the black context than it did in the white Christian context.¹⁹

¹⁷ Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 20-30.

¹⁸ Jason E. Shelton and Michael O Emerson, *Blacks and Whites in Christian America: how racial discrimination shapes religious convictions* (New York: New York University Press, 2012), 45-55.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 75-85.

Although, everyone needed God, indigenized black faith showed how the need for God, for blacks, had always been more urgent given the unfathomable circumstances of slavery and its long-lasting effects. This need caused blacks to pray, go to church and seek God more often than whites ever needed to. Blacks understood only the grace of God could have made them survive the horrors of white oppression and black religiosity became a sign of gratitude towards God for making ways out of nothing even when that meant breaking human-made rules to survive.²⁰ For blacks, right and wrong had always been based on God's rules, for if slaves had continued to obey their masters, and had not looked to Jesus as liberator, blacks would have never gained their freedom. For black faith, salvation was synonymous with liberation because salvation had to do primarily with earthly realities and blacks needed a God that was relational. White Christianity did not have any need for a survival or liberation theology because they had all the power and therefore their indigenized theology had the luxury to be more concerned with the metaphysical and philosophical nature of God. This metaphysical and eschatological talk about God was quite irrelevant for the black faith. If eschatology meant that God was totally uninvolved in the suffering of blacks because God was preparing them for another world as white Christianity had preached during slavery, then Black theology could have no interest in the eschatological. For Cone, the eschatology of Black theology was primarily interested in the hope in this life.²¹

Furthermore, the Christian faith for blacks was filled with mystery and the belief in the miraculous; therefore, blacks developed an appreciation for the mystery of life, which included folklore and cultural components deriving from the African Diaspora; as Cone stated, since blacks did not adhere to doctrines and creeds, there was always room for mystery. Blacks also

²⁰ Ibid., 105-120.

²¹ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 123.

had a confident and comprehensive faith in the miraculous, with which white indigenized Christianity was not concerned. Blacks had a far-reaching faith in the black sacred cosmos because blacks had survived a phenomenon that could only be described as divine intervention. Indigenized white Christianity's understanding of a miracle was radically different from that of blacks simply because triumph in any aspect of life for a powerless people was considered a miracle. This made blacks believe in a God who performed miracles in their daily lives and although blacks were more likely than whites to believe in an impersonal God, Dr. Cone understood that it was not God that blacks took personally, but Jesus Christ, the one who liberates.²²

Finally, the black faith had always been committed to social justice and equality for all individuals and groups in society. This involved the continuous struggle of blacks to reconcile the race problem of inequality in America to the Christian faith. While white Christians and liberals tended to believe in a more individualistic approach that focused on one's personal choices, abilities, talents and overall moral character for solving the issue of inequality, blacks leaned towards a more structural approach that aimed to eliminate their cross of racism which could only be overcome by the God of the oppressed.²³ Blacks believed there were more structural obstacles that only God could eradicate even after individuals had moved from an ascribed status to an aspiring one. With all these facts it was clear that black and white Christians differed profoundly in their definitions, understanding and practices of the Christian faith.²⁴ Consequently, Dr. Cone set out to interpret the Christian faith through these black contextual

²² Shelton and Emerson, *Blacks and Whites in Christian America*, 134-165.

²³ *Ibid.*, 175.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 173.

religio-cultural and socio-political realities in order to increase, and in this case justify, black participation in Christianity amongst blacks who agonized most from their suffering cross of racism in America.

Bringing the voices of the streets into the theological arena in formulating Black theology, Dr. Cone channeled the spirits of past pre-civil war preachers and prophets of liberation such as David Walker, Nat Turner, Denmark Vesey and Henry Highland Garnett. These forefathers were to Dr. Cone what Luther and Calvin were to European Protestants. They made reference to the Exodus and gained knowledge about their own African religious beginnings. These black forefathers were the first to see the need for independent black churches in order to create a spirit of freedom among the black church in their search for liberation. These forefathers read the Exodus story believing that God had taken sides with the oppressed, the outcasts and the despised by electing to liberate Israel from Egyptian bondage.²⁵ Therefore, it was just and right in their eyes to adhere to such a liberating God. Cone also remembered the rich cultural black music—the language of the black soul identified in the “spirituals” that were sang in the “invisible institutions” of plantation America—which expressed the slaves’ determination to relate Christianity to a life of freedom. Cone did not forget the “blues” sung by black musicians like Bessie Smith and B.B. King. The spirituals and the blues gave blacks in America a preoccupation with the paradoxical nature of the Christian faith in the cross and resurrection. These songs reminded blacks that God had allowed them not only to survive all the terror white supremacy caused, but in the process to keep their sanity and existence.²⁶ Cone understood that this radically sophisticated creativity coming out of the unique African American

²⁵ James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1986), 26-27.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 27-29.

experience which W.E.B. Dubois called the “gifts of black folks,” had to be molded into the formulation of Black theology.

Dr. Cone’s Black theology did not leave out the spirit of the Harlem Renaissance and the incredible black poets and writers such as James Baldwin, Richard Wright and Nikki Giovanni. Most importantly, Dr. Cone summoned the spirits of the two black martyrs of his time, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr., whose deaths were responsible for shaking Cone out of his theological complacency. Malcolm X was thought provoking with his insistence that Christianity was a white religion. While Cone disagreed, he appreciated Malcolm’s insistence that black self-hatred was the worst aspect of slavery, thereby stressing the need for black self-love, and the singularity and beauty of blackness. The teachings of Martin Luther King Jr. however, embodied for Cone the universality of love and the true praxis of the Christian faith.²⁷ Although they both came from the same culture, their contexts, (Malcolm from the north and Martin from the south) justified their approach towards liberation for their people. All this gave Cone the dialectical balance he needed between indigenization and liberation to formulate an indigenized theology that juxtaposed all this rich black history and culture with the Christian faith, thus rendering it identifiable to a people in search of a liberating God.

In Cone’s words, “the task of Black theology is to analyze the nature of the gospel of Jesus Christ in the light of oppressed blacks...this means a theology of and for the black community, seeking to interpret the religious dimensions of the forces of liberation in that community.”²⁸ For Cone, because Jesus Christ was the liberator of those despised, any theology

²⁷ Ibid., 29-40.

²⁸ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, xii.

that was indifferent to the liberation of the oppressed was simply not Christianity. Black liberation theology was “black power” (self-love) masked in a channeled intellectual indignation, balanced with the fortitude, optimism and confidence in the rich culture of blacks that theologically formed a religious protest specific to the black community in its struggle for identity, freedom and the ultimate justice of God.²⁹ Cone believed God had identified with blacks in special ways because blacks were the oppressed of the land and America needed to know more about these special ways in order to stay true to the Christian faith. However, Cone did not seek to raise the block “particular” above others. He merely sought to use the block “particular” as a challenge to Christianity. This challenge did not reify the dominant narrative of Christianity but offered a self-conscious “particular” angle from which to speak to the “multiplicity” of that which we call God. Cone’s notion of finding the “universal in the particular” was Black theology being the one voice seeking to illuminate the truth about the Christian faith.³⁰

Cone christened his indigenized theology ‘Black theology,’ because the cross black people bore was not due to poverty but their blackness. Cone coined the term “ontological blackness,” which emphasized that being black had nothing to do with the color of the skin, rather the shades of one’s heart which showed where one’s solidarity lie.³¹ Cone understood that Christianity was a universal message and if Black theology was to be the gospel for all, including white Americans, then whites also needed to be liberated from their own enslavement to white supremacy, which had also taken away from their humanity. Racism therefore was not only the suffering cross of blacks in America but of whites as well. Therefore, being black meant that

²⁹ Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 36.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 250.

³¹ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 151.

one's heart, soul and body were with the dispossessed and this is what it meant to be reconciled with God in America. This formulation and interpretation of Black theology created an uproar in theology not only among white theologians but blacks as well.

Black theologians and socialists such as Gayraud Wilmore wondered if Cone's theme of universality robbed black religion of its unique spirituality, thus diminishing the hardships blacks had endured. In Wilmore's view, one could argue that, in a world dominated by white power, being of African descent or identifiably Negroid was a unique experience. Wilmore did not believe that simply being oppressed, or feeling and/or showing empathy toward the poor, meant one could relate to black suffering. Indeed, for Wilmore, all oppression was offensive to the God who created all, but there was a fundamental difference between the way various groups experienced oppression and how they responded in religious and theological terms.³² In Wilmore's view, the love, strength and faith blacks had shown throughout their experiences were unparalleled; therefore, he believed Cone's Black theology needed to recognize that it could not be indifferent to the importance of blackness by making some kind of existential leap beyond blackness to an undefined universalism.³³ While Wilmore felt Cone's indigenized Black theology was too "pluralistic" and "inclusive," other black theologians such as Deotis Roberts thought it was too "black," "militant," "particular" and "exclusive." Like most white theologians, Roberts believed Cone's indigenization of the Christian faith was a slippery slope. According to Roberts, Cone's indigenization of the Christian faith was too narrow and showed disinterestedness towards whites with whom black Christians were seeking reconciliation that

³² Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, 250.

³³ *Ibid.*, 251.

was justified in Christ as liberator and reconciler.³⁴ Cone's Black theology also drew criticism from black women theologians such as Delores Williams who believed Cone's articulation of Black liberation theology excluded the double oppression black women experienced in America through racism and sexism.³⁵ There were others such as Charles Long who believed Cone had just "blackened" White theology by forming an academic theology of the black historical experience and culture.³⁶

Cone interpreted these criticisms of Black theology positively, for he had succeeded in what he set out to accomplish. He had successfully initiated the discussion in theological arenas regarding what the Christian faith meant to the black community by giving the cries of blacks on the streets a prophetic and contemplative language. Cone did something that black revolutionaries in the past, religious or not, could not do. He brought and kept young militant blacks and black skeptics of the Christian faith back in the Church. This led to the continuance of the black religious traditional faith in the radical liberation theme found within the scriptures.

In the end, Cone had theologically articulated, in a way that was intelligible for blacks, the already indigenized Christian faith blacks had believed in and practiced since slavery. Cone proved that not having an indigenized Black theology would have betrayed Christians who were trying to emancipate black minds, bodies and souls from white Christian definitions of black

³⁴ J. Deotis Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation: A Black Theology* (Philadelphia, Westminster Press 1971), ix, xii-xiv.

³⁵ Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: the challenge of womanist God-talk* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993), introduction.

³⁶ Charles H. Long, *Significations: signs, symbols and images in the interpretation of religion* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986), 203-209.

humanity.³⁷ Black liberation theology was a major paradigm shift from the traditional European indigenized theology. If the task of theology was to show what the changeless gospel meant in new situations then the indigenization of the faith by Cone was the only way to bring about any form of liberation from the oppressive crosses blacks experienced in the political, social and religious arena. Although blacks and whites were as Cone said, “bound together in Christ by their brutal and beautiful encounter in the American context, the Blackenized and Europeanized versions of the Christian faith produced glaring differences in both praxis and reflection. The differences in culture and context had to be exposed by Black theology in order for both whites and blacks to experience the liberating power of the gospel.”³⁸

Latin American liberation theology

Just as there was a desperate need for an indigenized theology that applied the freeing and liberating power of the gospel to black people bearing the cross of racism, there was an equally desperate need for a revolutionary theology in Latin America. As Paulo Friere said, Latin American liberation theology was unquestionably tied to Black liberation theology in America.³⁹ However, Latin America’s historic struggle for liberation has always been complicated. Christianity entered Latin America under two historic movements: conquest and colonization in the sixteenth century, and modernization and neocolonialism in the nineteenth century. Latin America’s political emancipation from Spain led to an Anglo Saxon colonial and neocolonial expansion. Accompanying these social and political changes was the pervasive economic

³⁷ Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 31.

³⁸ Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*, 166.

³⁹ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, xi.

penetration of Latin America, first by Britain and then by the US. Spanish colonialism it seemed had given way to British and American Neocolonialism.⁴⁰

Latin Americans suffered from both external and internal domination as was true for most Third World countries. They did not have external autonomy because of their dependence on outside centers of power and economic influence and, in turn, they were controlled internally by dominating groups from the region, who for the most part had also been westernized and replaced the former European colonizers. The two worked together as defenders of an unjust and exploitative capitalism that only benefitted the lesser-populated higher classes. Nevertheless, the Cuban revolution in 1959 and the death of Che Guevara in 1967 were the tipping points in Latin American history. Revolutionary movements began to emerge and Latin American economists and social scientists began to work out strategies for social change according to their own definitions of human needs.⁴¹

Developmentalism (*desarrollismo*), a term used by developed countries in securing foreign aid and investment for progress in under-developed countries, no longer captured the imagination of Latin Americans. The theory of development rested on an unhistorical and mechanistic analysis which produced three fundamental mistakes for Latin American socialists and economists. First, developmentalism meant Latin Americans were to believe that history was somehow unilinear and that a society could move to previous stages of other existing societies. Latin American socialists and economists realized that all societies moved in a parallel and interrelated way. The takeoff point and development in Western societies was dependent on the

⁴⁰ Dennis McCann, *Christian Realism and Liberation Theology* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1981), 133.

⁴¹ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, xvii.

relation to the then colonized and enslaved societies. Secondly, the Western idea of developmentalism did not take into account contextual political factors that made the slave labor that was available to the West in their early stages of development impossible in the Third World. Finally, the theory of developmentalism by Western authorities assumed that their countries were the “norm” model for all. This resulted in an anticommunist and pro-Western ideological indoctrination and a systematic hallowing of the Western capitalistic style of life in Latin America which lead to a Latin American society that lacked critical awareness of its situation.⁴²

Escaping from reality and developing the habits of a lax and selfish society created a culture that killed the spirits of the Latin American people. To be unaware of their own condition of dependence and exploitation destroyed the very core of their own humanity. When it became evident that development and underdevelopment were two dimensions of one single historical movement, Latin American socialists, economists and theologians began to study Latin America as the dependent and dominated part of that process. They believed their society would be better if they changed the notion of development and defined it on their own terms and in accordance to their own standards of progress. The decision to stand up and become agents of their own history gave Latin Americans the will to conceive and realize an authentic historical project that did not exist⁴³ Latin America became less impressed by the Westernized notion of progress and by the portrayal of life in North American societies. This realization gave birth to a new form of theological analysis that began the indigenization process.

⁴² Bonino, *doing theology in a revolutionary situation*, 21-27.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 30-31.

The revolutionary movements in Latin America viewed the world as being divided between oppressors and oppressed. Latin American Christians and their Catholic Church were forced to contemplate their role in these revolutionary movements. An ethos was needed based on the Christian faith that called for Christian solidarity with the oppressed.⁴⁴ Therefore, when Gustavo Gutiérrez, a Peruvian theologian, published his book “A Theology of Liberation,” in 1971, it was clear that the revolutionary cries of those on the cross in Latin America were being heard throughout the world. For Gutiérrez, although Jesus died for all people, he also lived especially for the poor and so the Latin American Catholic Church, which represented the reconciling body of the risen Christ, was called to minister likewise. As Gutiérrez began to indigenize the Christian faith, he realized that classism stemming from poverty was the suffering cross of Latin Americans. Gutiérrez thus developed a Marxist approach in his indigenized theology towards a Latin American socialist society.⁴⁵

Gutiérrez began creating a hermeneutic that explained the reawakening of Latin American conscience erupting from the cries of the oppressed. The Catholic Church of which he was a member had for centuries devoted its attention to formulating truths while doing nothing to better the world. The church focused more on orthodoxy and left orthopraxis to the hands of non-Christians.⁴⁶ This confirmed the moral and intellectual bankruptcy of Westernized theology in Latin America. Gutiérrez understood that a historical perspective was needed to move away from the West and its long held presumptions about the world. New models for thought and action were being constructed by awakened groups, who created their own Latin American reality.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ *Gutiérrez, A Theology of Liberation, 8.*

⁴⁶ Ibid.

There was a need for a critical reflection on the Christian praxis in light of the extent of Latin America's poverty. Although, both Catholics and Protestants, as Father Segundo puts it, "suddenly and unexpectedly realized that their Church had been serving the interests of an inhuman structure, this traumatic experience opened the door for a new search and quest for a post-colonial and post neocolonial understanding of the Christian gospel."⁴⁷

Gutiérrez believed the term "liberation" expressed the social revolution Latin Americans needed and experienced more so than "developmentalism." To be truly independent and liberated meant there was a need for an indigenous Christian socialism that allowed Latin Americans to take full responsibility of their own destiny. Gutiérrez believed that only a radical break from the status quo—a profound transformation of the private property system, access to power of the exploited class, and a social revolution that would break this dependence—would allow for change to a new socialist society in Latin America.⁴⁸ An indigenized Latin American theology was needed not only to seek better living conditions, have a radical change of structures and a social revolution, but it was also needed for the continuous creation and never-ending new way of being human. Gutiérrez decided to take a stance by adhering to the inevitability of the drastic changes to develop an indigenized theology that would not only prepare Latin America and their Catholic Church for these changes, but also reveal the spiritual and religious implications as well as the liberating possibilities of such needed change.⁴⁹

The academic theology transplanted from Europe to Latin America unwittingly served as an ideological block that prevented Latin Americans from perceiving their actual situation and

⁴⁷ Ibid, introduction.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 17.

⁴⁹ McCann, *Christian Realism and Liberation Theology*, 143-145.

responding to it effectively. Latin American theologians had to overcome this block and learn how to criticize the ideological distortions of Western theologies that were built into their perspectives. The critical reflection of self and community helped locate the pulse of the Latin American history and they realized that the beat was discovered in the praxis of the Christian faith. Gutiérrez, along with other Latin American theologians like Paulo Friere, proposed a conscientizing evangelization which was to bring a social awakening among the oppressed and a revolutionary theory of education derived from their praxis.⁵⁰ Reflection on praxis, on human significant action, could only be authentic when done from within, in the vicinity of the strategic and tactical plane of human action, in Gutiérrez's opinion. Without this, reflection could not be a critical and projective conscience, but only a revision and projection of praxis. Therefore, orthopraxis was to precede orthodoxy and become the criteria for doing theology in Latin America.

Paulo Freire theorized that the oppressed in Latin America had internalized the Western perspectives of Christianity to such a degree that they had difficulty in seeing their own true situation. Through conscientization evangelism, Latin Americans would begin to gain the self-love needed to grasp what their limit situations were and overcome them with realistic limit actions. Once they were faced with their own reality and their own limits, Freire believed a climate of hope and confidence in overcoming their limit situations could be developed.⁵¹ Since their reality was the suffering cross of poverty, Gutiérrez believed there needed to be a poverty of the Church, a spiritual poverty in the Churches readiness to do God's will. The Church needed to behold a poverty that found solidarity with the poor in order to protest against the conditions

⁵⁰ Ibid., 165-167

⁵¹ Ibid., 171.

from which they suffered. This commitment was to be fueled by a ‘preferential option for the poor.’ Solidarity with the poor meant the Church had to disassociate and liberate itself from those who held political and economic power. The Latin American Church had to free itself from the various forms of dependence it had on the West and divest itself of all privileges. The Church was to be a poor church at the service of all, but paying special attention to the poor and this was Gutiérrez’s idea of the spiritual poverty of the Church.⁵²

Gutiérrez understood that most of the Christians in Latin America were Catholic and put their faith in the Catholic Church. However, there were other Latin American theologians such as Miguez Bonino who had little faith in the abilities of the Church as an institution. Bonino was more influenced by the more revolutionary and militant approaches of people such as Che Guevara and former Catholic priests who took more radical approaches towards liberation.⁵³ Other theologians such as Sergio Torres condemned the Church for always speaking about the material and spiritual poverty of Latin Americans but never doing anything about it. Gutiérrez, however, remembered the traditional spirit of the Catholic Church and its previous Popes who had forcefully repeated the phrase “the church of the poor,” but failed to make solidarity with the poor. Gutiérrez conjured the spirits of all the martyrs of Latin American liberationists, most of whom were Latin American priests such as Archbishop Oscar Romero and Camilo Torres, both killed for bearing witness to the God of life and to God’s predilection for the poor. Gutiérrez also recalled Roman Catholic thinkers such as Johannes Metz along with Protestant thinkers like Jurgen Moltman to justify his stance in indigenizing the Christian faith for liberation.⁵⁴

⁵² Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 53-70.

⁵³ Bonino, *doing theology in a revolutionary situation, introduction*.

⁵⁴ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, xxxiv-xlvi.

To Gutiérrez, because poverty was the suffering cross of Latin America, the Church was to bear this cross by committing to the poor in order to discover the evangelizing potential of the poor. Gutiérrez believed that the poor in Latin America challenged the church at all times and summoned it to conversion. This was because the poor naturally incarnated in their lives the evangelical values of solidarity, service, simplicity and openness to accepting the gifts of God.⁵⁵ Although the Latin American Church needed human resources to carry out her mission, the Church was not set up to seek earthly glory, but to proclaim humility and self-sacrifice.

For Gutiérrez, poverty, like the incarnation, was an act of love. Christ became human and because of his love died on the cross and rose from the dead to set us free. To die and rise with Christ was to vanquish death and enter into a new life through love. In Gutiérrez's opinion, the cross and the resurrection were the seal of liberty and one could only go through this incarnation with the love for God, self and neighbor. Therefore, poverty had a redemptive value and this testified to the paradoxical nature of the cross. If the ultimate cause of human exploitation and alienation was selfishness, the deepest reason for voluntary poverty was the love of neighbor. For Gutiérrez, the Christian faith only had meaning in Latin America if it made a commitment to the poor and those who suffered misery and injustice. This commitment was not to be idealized for one could not really be in solidarity with the poor unless they too were struggling against poverty in Gutiérrez' opinion. Gutiérrez understood that an authentic indigenized theology of liberation was only possible in Latin America if the poor of Latin America could freely raise their voices and express themselves directly and creatively in society. When the poor accounted for the hope in the paradoxical nature of their suffering cross of poverty and became protagonists of their own

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, xlii.

liberation, then the connection Gutiérrez sought between indigenization and liberation was made.⁵⁶

While this indigenized approach seemed unrealistic in the eyes of Western theologians such as Christian realists, Latin America's indigenous outlook on its own reality questioned any realistic, pragmatic attitudes that were not coming from Latin America. For Gutiérrez, the indigenization of the Christian faith by Latin Americans reminded Christians that possibilities were always relative to the systems they tried to transcend, and although all systems were under God's historical judgment, mistakes of traditional theologies were not to determine the scope of what an indigenized Latin American theology could bring. If God had chosen things that were not to overthrow existing orders and summon things that were not yet in existence as if they already were, then Gutiérrez believed the poor in Latin America were to always think of the real as unreal and the presently unreal as real in order to liberate themselves from their suffering cross of poverty.⁵⁷

For Latin American liberation theology, what the new being was to become was less important than what liberation from oppressors represented. Oppression was always in opposition to self-affirmation and the rethinking of the meaning of the Christian faith in light of the Latin American reality created new theological perspectives to the ethical responsibilities of their region. Gutiérrez believed that Latin Americans would be liberated only through their participation in the new life that was brought to the world by Christ by communing with the poor in the mystery of his death and resurrection. Liberation was synonymous with salvation and

⁵⁶ Ibid., 173-174.

⁵⁷ Rubem A. Alves, *Christian Realism: Ideology of the Establishment, Christianity and Crisis*, 173-176.

Gutiérrez believed this salvation would be obtainable in the Latin American context once capitalism, which fostered a “Cain mentality” amongst Latin Americans, was destroyed.⁵⁸ While Westernized theologians such as Christian realists believed the presuppositions and the social analysis of Latin American liberation theology were forms of moralistic “soft utopianism,” a phrase used by Reinhold Niebuhr, Gutierrez interpreted this criticism positively. Utopian thought Gutiérrez believed was viable and highlighted a wealth of possibilities in Latin America’s revolutionary ferment stage. In other words, Gutiérrez believed there were new demands of the gospel given the times and the time had come in Latin America where a utopian society was possible.⁵⁹

Gutiérrez believed as Cone did that universal love was made concrete and effective in the struggle for the liberation of the oppressed. To Gutiérrez, the excessive spiritualization of indigenized Western theological dualistic thought was foreign to the biblical mentality and had shattered the possibility for universal love. Gutiérrez, like Cone, believed that neither Christ nor the Exodus story spiritualized the eschatological promises and while Western Christianity had a religious vision of the Hidden God, who’s meaning for humanity was paradoxically revealed in the content and structure of human experience, both Latin American and Black liberation theologies began with a vision of a God who emphatically stood revealed in the struggle of the oppressed. The biblical theme of the Kingdom of God provided the framework for analyzing the implications of liberation for those in the ecclesia who professed Christ for all oppressed people. Therefore, for Gutiérrez, the Kingdom grew historically in liberation, insofar as liberation meant a greater fulfillment of all people. It could not grow under bondage, laws, oppression, limits,

⁵⁸ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 83-91.

⁵⁹ Alves, *Christian Realism*, 164.

checks and balances of power or even Christian doctrines and dogma as Westernized hermeneutics seemed to suggest. The poorly understood spiritualization of Western Christianity's indigenized version of the Christian faith in Gutiérrez's opinion, made them forget the human consequences of the eschatological promises and the power to transform unjust social structures.⁶⁰

It was clear that Westernized theologies differed from both Latin American and Black liberation theologies because of the socio-historical situations in which they spoke about realistic expectations in anthropological and eschatological perspectives. Liberation theologians in Latin America believed they could harness power and give it back to the poor and were more hopeful in the level of justice that humanity, especially in their context could achieve, than Westernized interpretations of the Christian faith ever was.⁶¹ This difference between the Latin American and Western indigenization of the Christian faith illustrated the different contexts and circumstances in which they were developed. Western indigenized theologies did not erupt or begin with majority of humanity and their cries for justice. However sensitive Westernized theologies were to social grievances, they typically were from the vantage point of the privilege and therefore never seemed too concerned about people who held no power. This was enough of a reason for Latin Americans to indigenize the Christian faith.

In the end, Gutiérrez believed that if Latin Americans continued to drink from their own wells through indigenization, then their theology would be filled with the true nature of the spirituality of Latin Americans. This spirituality would be nourished with their own springs of

⁶⁰ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 116-130.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

living water emanating from the very depths of their experiences of faith and through this indigenization, the poor of Latin America would be able to experience this spring of living water and live their own life in the spirit of Jesus. Gutiérrez believed that in order to see the transparency and quality of the waters Latin American Christians drank to refresh their travels on the journey with Jesus, the love of God, self and neighbor had to be apparent. This was the special quality of water that sprung when believers lived out their faith through their own history and culture.⁶²

African liberation theology

However, when other people of the Third World, such as Africans, attempted to drink from their own wells and indigenize the Christian faith, not only were they often demonized by Western Christianity, but also by their own community to which my own personal experience can attest. Africa's well, however, is so deep that their depths are still untouched. Although it is appropriate to describe any theology emerging from Africa as African theology, there are only two theological systems that African liberation theology has been able to tap into. Unfortunately, African theologies have not reached the depths of the Coptic and Ethiopian Orthodox theologies that make up the very beginnings of African theology. With the exception of North Africa, which is considered an Arab/Muslim region, most of the regions in Sub Saharan Africa have expressed their Christian faith much differently from that of East Africa. This is because the origins of Christianity in East Africa amongst the Ethiopian Orthodox Church and the Egyptian Coptic Churches were distinctly different than the Christianity brought to Sub-Saharan Africa by way of slavery and colonialism. This omission, along with Africa's combination of traditional African

⁶² Gustavo Gutiérrez, *We Drink from Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books ; Melbourne, Australia : Dove Communications, 1984), Foreword.

religions and the influences of Euro-Christian and Arabic Islamic elements has made understanding African theology quite a difficult task to undertake.⁶³

The liberation theme in African liberation theology, in the Black and Latin American context, was part and parcel of the revolutionary struggles in Africa that denigrated their African humanity. The roots of this revolution began in the African political arena with the organizations of black resistance to colonial oppression and racism in the late nineteenth century. Colonialism drained African societies of their very essence, trampled African culture, undermined African institutions, confiscated its lands, desecrated its ancestral religions, destroyed its magnificent artistic creations and erased the extraordinary and spiritual capabilities Africans were once known for.⁶⁴ The rise of Pan-Africanism, which gained more momentum with African nationalism after World War II, made Africans aware of the irrelevancy of Western theology to the African situation. It became clear that Western theologies opposed to the violence of the World Wars situated in the West, never addressed the issue of colonial violence and military oppression against the African people. Therefore, the struggle against oppressive and exploitative forces from both outside and within the African continent along with the impact of the African revolutionary movements for liberation placed a theological compulsion upon African Christians and their Church.⁶⁵ African theologians began to take a thoughtful survey of the revolutionary movements that were thriving throughout the continent just as Gutiérrez did in Latin America and Cone did in North America.

⁶³ Martey, *African Theology*, 36-45.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, Introduction.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 63-73.

For African theologians, like their counterparts in America and Latin America, the hermeneutic presuppositions of the West were no longer considered normative in theology or in praxis. Christians in Africa were seeking new ways of interpreting not only scripture, but also the human condition in their own various cultural and political settings. The African search for relevant theological hermeneutics was necessary for the African Christian self-understanding and maturity, but it was also a legitimate theological pursuit. Africans wanted to appropriate the riches of African insights into the human condition and the divine life in order to enrich and enhance the Christian life and thought. The fragmentation of the continent by way of ethnicity and European colonialism's exploitation of this intricacy left a legacy of division among Africans, which led to theological zones with their own distinctive cultural-political movements influenced by a variety of religious thoughts and motivations.⁶⁶ In turn, African theologians believed Africa's diverse historical reality was an integral part of their theological hermeneutic process. African theologians emphasized history as their first methodological approach to their contextual analysis and theological interpretations. For Africans, there was no liberation without their historical presence and since their history had become the missing pages of world history, if liberation was to be achieved in their context, a historical rehabilitation was needed.⁶⁷

The social underdevelopment of African history represented a fundamental aspect of an "anthropological pauperization" of Africans. The term "anthropological pauperization" was coined by the African Scholar, Engelbert Mveng, to describe a fact of becoming or making poor and being deprived of all that one is and has. Therefore Africans, who had been subjugated to structures that resulted in the complete pauperization of their political, economic and social

⁶⁶ Ibid., 36-62.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

arenas, carried the suffering cross of anthropological pauperization. The deprivation of all that Africa owned as well as the demonization of their human identity, social roots, history, culture and traditional religions inherently affected the roots of their religio-cultural and politico-socioeconomic life.⁶⁸ The struggle against this anthropological pauperization of Africans gave Africa its theological agenda. However, any attempt at giving a theological interpretation to this agenda had to be contextual in order to wrestle with these interpenetrating dimensions of the African reality, and any God talk in Africa had to be done in light of these unyielding dimensions.⁶⁹

Two mainlines of thought regarding the character of African theological thinking developed in response to their suffering cross of anthropological pauperization. The first was “inculturation,” which sought to look upon theology as indigenizing in the sense of replacing the Western cultural incidents with African cultural elements. This school of thought was called “Africanization” and emphasized the hermeneutic approach of Africa’s religio-cultural existence in its expression of African theology within independent Africa. The second approach concentrated on Africa’s political and economic struggle within theological contexts and therefore emphasized the sociopolitical and economic realities of the continent. This school of thought came to be known as the “liberation” theological approach which found expression in South African Black theology. These two approaches in African discourse became the two hermeneutic procedures that sought to interpret the gospel of Jesus Christ in light of the African condition in order to bring about the transformation of the oppressive status quo.⁷⁰ These

⁶⁸ Virginia Fabella, M.M. and Sergio Torres, *Irruption of the Third World, Challenge to Theology*, (Maryknoll: N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1983), 217-221.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 36-42.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 54-55.

hermeneutic models were an attempt to do away with the basic Western theological frameworks, such as orthodoxy, liberalism and neo-orthodoxy, all of which did not take into account the slave trade, racism and neo colonialism, which were all factors that contributed to Africa's underdevelopment and backwardness in world affairs.

“Africanization” and “liberation” were seen as the Christian intellectual revolution standing behind the African revolution directed towards the total emancipation of the African society. Both were weapons within the cultural and political environment of the living conditions of Africans who sought to disentangle the gospel of Jesus Christ, as well as their Christian self-understanding from Western cultural assumptions and intellectual frameworks of the Christian faith.⁷¹ The new critical questions that African Christians began to ask in the wake of the African revolution brought a new theological consciousness, an awareness that led to the suspicion of Western Christianity and its interpretation. African hermeneutics aimed at tearing off the masks in order to give an African interpretation that reduced disguises of missionaries who seemed to be the drumbeaters of colonialism.

It was the emergence of African nationalism that had the greatest impact on the African church. African nationalism emerged when the contradictions between Western democratic values and colonial autocratic oppression had become apparent to independent Africa. Independent Africa strongly resisted the attempts of both colonialism and missionaries to dehumanize and obliterate the African cultural identity. The cultural resistance was integral and fierce, for Africans knew that European domination could only be maintained by the permanent and organized repression of the cultural life of the people concerned. African intellectual

⁷¹ Ibid., 55.

Amilcar Cabral believed liberation was an act of culture and political liberation from Western imperialism could not be achieved apart from cultural liberation⁷² African theologians began to favor the search for Christianity's essential message, one which would be able to penetrate African ways of thinking and living.

In their efforts to wrestle with Africa's plethora of problems, African theologians in independent Africa such as John Mbiti, Harry Sawyerr, Bolaji Idowu, Kwesi Dickson, among others, pinpointed and highlighted the religio-cultural sphere as the main domain of Africa's dehumanization and exploitation. They encouraged "inculturation" hermeneutics because they saw African culture and African religion as the dominant sources for theological enterprise. The term "Africanization" represented the beginning of a new theological trend toward a search for an authentically relevant African perspective on the Christian faith. The idea, according to Justin Ukpong, was to re-express the Christian message with African idioms and conceptual tools in an African cultural milieu. The Christian faith was to enlighten the African culture in order to give the data of revelation contained in scriptures an African cultural expression.⁷³

As Cone reminded theologians, it was impossible for any student of theology to ignore tradition. Following tradition for African theologians meant that Christianity could only have meaning and relevance to Africans, if it was connected to the Word of God that was spoken through the African ancestors. Inculturation meant that Christianity had to speak through this already spoken word of the ancestral traditions. African philosophy, as Mbiti explained, also could not be ignored, for African philosophy sustained not only the spoken word of the

⁷² Ibid., 13.

⁷³ Ibid., 63-75.

ancestors, but also the African cultures and civilizations and provided Africans with an analysis and an interpretation of linguistic structures and anthropological patterns. The inculturation process was to find ways in the Christian faith that could seek understanding in the philosophy and wisdom of the African people. Because anthropological pauperization was the suffering cross of Africans, the interlocutors of African theology who sought to gain anthropological dignity had to be the anthropologically poor, whom Frantz Fanon called “the wretched of the earth.”⁷⁴ Therefore inculturation mostly functioned among those who could not *afford* to assimilate into the Christian practices of the West.

African Independent Churches (AIC), like the one I attended in my mother’s village were succeeding in stripping Christianity of its foreignness proving that Christianity could be expressed through the African religio-cultural reality. Because these churches were the bearers of authentic African Christianity and drew most of their insight from traditional religion and culture, their indigenization of the Christian faith was demonized and criticized by scholars as heresy and syncretism. However, African theologians began to see these churches as the hope of the continent. African theologians began to understand that the very praxis of the AIC’s were invaluable sources for African theological analysis. These churches were called spiritual and charismatic churches because the Holy Spirit was expressed through the spirit of the people.⁷⁵

These indigenized expressions of the Christian faith also made an impact on the Christology in Africa. The AIC’s made an effort not to integrate a colonial Christ into their belief systems and African theologians had to decide whether or not Jesus for Africans could be seen as

⁷⁴ Ibid., 63-80.

⁷⁵ Ibid., 76.

the “ancestor liberator” who solved all of Africa’s multifaceted problems of poverty, racism, sexism, classism, colonialism, neocolonialism, imperialism, social injustices, political dictatorships, coups, and every other hindrance towards African full humanity. Jesus was the one who liberated Africa from all these problems, but he was an ancestor precisely because, as Emmanuel Martey explained, Christ was still part of the human family. Christ, just like the African ancestors, did not live in a far distant heaven without relating to the world, for it was the world that gave him his being and as such he protected and guarded it. This was the highest honorary title that could be given to Christ by Africans because it meant that Christ was the elder in the African community, an intercessor between God and the community and the possessor of ethereal powers, which enabled him to commune and be a citizen of both heaven and earth. Christ was simply the ultimate embodiment of all virtues of the ancestors and the realization of the salvation they yearned. This Christology for Africans was the ultimate inculturation of the Christian faith, which most African theologians in independent Africa believed would lead to a cultural liberation from the bondage of Westernized Christianity.⁷⁶

The “liberation” approach in South Africa took a different direction. South African liberation theologians such as Allan Boesak and Desmond Tutu along with other African theologians such as Jean-Marc Ela and Engelbert Mveng from Cameroon focused on Africa’s economic and political struggle within theological contexts. The black struggle against white domination and apartheid in South Africa was akin in context to the black struggle against a similar oppression and racism in America. Dutch colonialism and British imperialism justified white domination in South Africa and European people who were cut off from their homeland

⁷⁶ Ibid., 76-86.

believed colonialism and their settlement in South Africa was a manifest destiny.⁷⁷ So when black Africans began to challenge white supremacy in South Africa, the Afrikaner government met the challenge with apartheid. Apartheid was a policy similar to Jim Crow in America aimed at preserving and safeguarding the racial identity and supremacy of white minority groups in South Africa. The struggle for liberation in South Africa became political and black African theologians in South Africa believed the Christian faith could function as a guide for cultural, political and social judgments that would provide an indigenized language for protest. Like the Black Power and Civil Rights movements in America, by mid-twentieth century, there were Black Africans who had a more integrationist/accommodationist view and were prepared to work together with sympathetic whites toward a nonracial representative government. There were others who had a more segregationist/radical Africanist view, convinced that black preservation and progress was best achieved through exclusive black organizations that were prepared to challenge white supremacy.⁷⁸

The Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) inspired by Black Power in the U.S. and Cone's Black theology was a cultural political movement that permeated every aspect of the oppressed black community in South Africa. They sought a true humanity without regard to color or race in which there was no place for power politics. Led by a young South African student named Steve Biko who was often compared with Malcolm X, the movement was defined as an attitude of the mind which sought to make blacks see themselves as independent and complete, expressing and affirming their full humanity, reminding blacks that their humanity was

⁷⁷ Ibid., 95-100

⁷⁸ Ibid., 21.

constituted by their blackness as Cone had suggested.⁷⁹ Similar to the conscientization evangelization approach of Latin American theologian Paulo Friere, BCM agreed that the strongest tool in the hands of the oppressor was the self-hate of the oppressed. Therefore BCM sought to liberate black Africans first from the psychological alienation and oppression of apartheid and the physical oppression accruing out of living in a white racist society in their own land. Although BCM's conscientization approach was not specifically Christian as it was in Latin America, it contained within its essence the theological seed of resistance to apartheid and this led to a Black theology in South Africa.⁸⁰

African theologians in South Africa who were called black African theologians because of the racist context in which they lived focused more on the sociopolitical and economic structures as the major determining factor for oppression and domination. Their theological struggle emphasized black liberation hermeneutics, which they believed would bring about a more effective way of transforming the evil and oppressive structure of white supremacy in their country.⁸¹ BCM radicalized black Christians and stimulated their thinking about social and political problems and thus created the intellectual atmosphere out of which Marxist and neo-Marxist analyses were used by black African theologians to uncover the dynamics of racial capitalism in South Africa. However, because "inculturation" developed in independent/neo-colonial Africa and "liberation" in apartheid South Africa, there proved to be a distinct difference in not only their history but also in their theological emphases.

⁷⁹ Ibid., 102-110.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 23-24

⁸¹ Ibid., 2.

Insofar as indigenization was specifically identified with culture and liberation strictly identified with politics, the two were dissimilar although not contradictory. The differences in the historical backdrops seemed to justify a tension polarity between the two hermeneutical procedures.⁸² The anthropological fact of “blackness” that black liberationists employed as a theological category was strongly opposed by inculturationists like Mbiti. Mbiti condemned the idea of racial color being a theological concept of the scriptures and wondered, as Deotis Roberts did, how Black theology could leave out the insight of white Christians who lived among them. Furthermore, Mbiti believed theology could only arise from joy and not suffering, suggesting that inculturation was a process emanating from the joy of African culture while liberation originated in pain. In fact, Mbiti’s liberation ideology made little room for human experience and therefore believed suffering had no significance for the Christian faith, not even the suffering cross of Jesus. Of course, this was contrary to the Black and Latin American understanding of the cross. Nevertheless, Mbiti believed Black theology lacked scriptural backing and since Black theology could only exist in a context where whites lived, as soon as the black versus white dichotomy was over, there would be no use for Black theology.⁸³

For Mbiti, the fact that Black liberation theology was not concerned with the eschatological implications of its theology meant that it had mythologized the concept of liberation as the only theme. However, black African theologians such as Desmond Tutu disagreed with Mbiti. Tutu interpreted “Black” the way Cone interpreted it, as referring to all people who were oppressed. Theology in the Bible, Tutu contended, addressed specific situations within specific contexts and this was a biblical paradigm that Black theology had followed. For

⁸² Ibid., 27.

⁸³ Ibid., 121-130.

Tutu, liberation was not about one issue, but all African issues. Black theology not only liberated blacks from white oppression, but liberated whites as well from the evil of white supremacy. Nevertheless, even though Africans had similar cultures, because of different contexts, their theologies took different approaches in their indigenization of the Christian faith.⁸⁴

Ecumenical Association of Third World Theology dialogues

The blaring tensions between cultures and contexts were made apparent in the dialogues between the Third Worlds with the establishment of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologies (EATWOT) in 1976. This council brought the three liberation theologies together and opened up broader dialogues with Asian and Women theologians of the Third World. The goal was to examine the common and diverse aspects in their developing indigenized theologies in terms of theological issues, orientation and methodology. Even though it was clear from its inception that there were historic, linguistic and cultural differences between Black, Latin and African liberation theologies, the continuation between these dialogues provided some hope and unity between them. Common elements in the economic, social, political, cultural, religious, ecclesial, and theological levels were revealed in all three indigenized theologies; however, due to historical and contextual differences, there were also some significant differences in theological reflection.⁸⁵

The sharp distinction made between inculturation and liberation was mind boggling to liberation theologians, especially Cone, who believed that African's endured most of the same problems Black and Latin Americans had. Analysis of contemporary African culture could not

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ K.C. Abraham, *Third World Theologies: Commonalities and Divergences* (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1990), 195-205.

be limited to traditionalism in Cone's opinion and had to include the whole totality of African existence, which included politics and economics. As Cabral believed, the fundamental characteristic of culture was its close, dependent and reciprocal connection with the economic and social reality of the environment. On the other hand, African theologians showed that to deprive a people of their culture was to deprive them of God's gift and authenticity to their being. Liberation was not only political, but a cultural achievement, a reassertion of the validity of spiritual and intellectual continuity with the pre-colonial past.⁸⁶

This tension and polarity between cultures and contexts seemed to stem from liberation theologies relation to Western cultures. This was apparent in the Latin American dialogues. Latin America claimed itself to be the most Westernized of the Third World's because of their history, culture, context, and their social, racial and cultural history, which subjected them to Western culture. This made their theology indifferent to the reality of black and indigenous people who made up majority of their region. So while it was obvious that their suffering cross was poverty, by not naming the racial element of poverty, their indigenized theology seemed to ignore a significant part of their suffering which was racism. Latin Americans realized they had ignored the native and African American expression of religiosity in their own region and were rather influenced by the middle class culture which was the minority in their vast and multiracial continent. Because of their context, the majority of Latin Americans considered themselves to be Christian and therefore Ecumenism for them consisted of only Protestants and Catholics. The

⁸⁶ Martey, *African Theology*, 121-139.

questions of “doing” theology in a multi-religious and religio-cultural context was not a major topic for discussion in Latin America.⁸⁷ However, EATWOT made a difference.

Black, Latin American and African theologies today

Indeed, there were many different emphases about the use and the quality of indigenizing the Christian faith in all three liberation theologies. African theology was challenged more by their cultural and religious realities while Latin America was taken up with the socio-economic situation and both Black Americans and black Africans in South Africa had been more concerned with the racial politics of their contexts. However, as the dialogue continued, differences were spoken of as wealth meant to be shared and contrary to the first couple of dialogues between the three theologies that proved none were open and ready to be challenged, today Black and African theology incorporate a more social class analysis to their racial and multicultural contexts while Latin America takes on the racial and multicultural elements within their social class contexts. All three liberation theologies began to understand as James Cone already suggested, that the relationship between indigenization and liberation did not have to be antagonistic, for both emphases were needed.⁸⁸

Instead of concentrating exclusively on one dimension of their realities at the expense of the other, liberation theologians began to understand the interwoven and interpenetrating nature of their inseparability.⁸⁹ These indigenized liberation theologies also opened up the dialogue for Women liberation theologians such as Mercy Oduyoye from Ghana, Delores Williams in America and Ivone Gebrara in Latin America to speak about the male oppression in their

⁸⁷ Abraham, *Third World Theologies*, 170-173.

⁸⁸ Martey, *African Theology*, 125-130.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

contexts. Liberation theology today acknowledges sexism as a central problem and how any omission of women's perspectives towards liberation would make liberation theology just as guilty as Western theology was in distorting the gospel of liberation. These dialogues along with other Third World contributions although long and painful, have brought about voices of confession and conversion from all over the world and liberation theologies have learned a great deal from each other's indigenized Christian faiths. Indeed, liberation theologies learned that they must never let their solidarity and commitments to an indigenized theology distort the truth of the gospel which demands liberation for all.⁹⁰

Indigenization through the love, cross and resurrection of Christ

Indisputably, the dialogical encounter between all three liberation theologies, especially within the contexts of EATWOT, has contributed tremendously in reducing what liberation theologies have called a tension and polarity between indigenization and liberation. However, it is my contention that liberation theology has had a theological battle over what I believe the facts prove is a false dilemma. The explication of these three liberation theologies and the dialogue and debates between them were not about indigenization and liberation, but about inculturation and contextualization which are subsets of indigenization. The main commonality between all three theologies was their attempt to indigenize the Christian faith, which was motivated by self-love and self-affirmation in the liberating theme of the gospel in order to justify their resistance to oppression, racism and dictatorship of any kind. All liberation theologies, and for that matter all theology, including Western theology, are forced to indigenize the Christian faith because, in

⁹⁰ Ibid., 38-39.

a sense, the Christian faith—which is founded upon the love commandments of Christ, his death and resurrection—when applied naturally, leads to indigenization.

Despite the moments of tensions and polarization between the different cultures and contexts, all three liberation theologies reaffirmed reconciliation in truth and in love. The most significant and unifying aspect of all three theologies was their will to indigenize the Christian faith derived from a self-affirmation in their search for dignity, meaning, and fuller humanity. All three liberation theologies were founded upon a new sense of equality and dignity, a passion for freedom, and the searing memory of having been wronged and humiliated and this led to movements of resistance and inevitable indigenization of the Christian faith.⁹¹ Although Blacks in America and in South Africa emphasized their suffering cross of racism, Latin Americans emphasizes was their suffering cross of poverty and Africans emphasizes was their suffering cross of anthropological pauperization, their love of self was faithful to the love commandments. Indigenization proved that to deny the crosses we bore was to deny Christ because Christ made himself synonymous with the suffering cross; therefore, it was through Christ that Christians came to know who they were, what their crosses were, and what they must do in order to liberate and resurrect from their cross. This process was the essence of indigenization.⁹²

Therefore, my intellectual clarity on liberation theologies and my comprehensibility of the Christian faith leads me to understand that there is absolutely no liberation of any kind without indigenization, for the two always work together. The same could not be said for inculturation and contextualization. The common underlying motif of all liberation theologies

⁹¹ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, xx-xxxvi.

⁹² Abraham, *Third World Theologies*, 198.

was the hermeneutic procedures of indigenization and liberation because indigenization was the liberating action in the liberating process of liberation theologies. It is clear to me, that without indigenization, Christians cannot receive the free and liberating gift the Christian faith requires. Indigenization gave all three liberation theologies the prophetic and contemplative language needed to speak “appropriately” about the God of love, freedom, justice and gratuitousness as well as God’s preferential love for the poor and suffering in their cultures and contexts.⁹³ Indigenization was not concerned about whether liberation theologies were wrong or right but rather whether it had the freedom God freely gave to be wrong or right. These indigenized liberation theologies proved that the gratuitousness of God’s love and gift of freedom was the framework within which the requirement of practicing justice could be found⁹⁴. What was under threat for liberation theologies was the joyful freedom to be faithful to the living word of the God of life and indigenization saw this liberation through.⁹⁵

Indigenization is liberation

Indeed, Black, Latin American and African theologians were not going to continue sharing the common faith of Western Christianity, which had been used to exploit them. They were no longer going to give respectful hearing to Western theologies and those who called themselves Christians while their activities continued to perpetuate the suffering and impoverishment of their people. Liberation theologies elected to disassociate themselves from Western Christianity which had long been an instrument for enslavement, domination and oppression and if the faith taught by Jesus Christ and proclaimed by his disciples was not meant

⁹³ Gutiérrez, *On Job*, 11-19.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 89.

⁹⁵ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 172-174.

to be a tool used to oppress or to exploit but, rather, to set the captives free, liberate the poor and oppressed and bring meaningful and abundant life, than indigenization was necessary to quiet the theological rhetoric of traditional Christianity. However, the theologian could not identify with the struggle for liberation or claim to have solidarity with those suffering until both intellectual and religious beliefs in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ took on an existential dimension.⁹⁶ Indeed, there was no such thing as Christianity outside or above its concrete temporal incarnations. Therefore, a Christian could only understand themselves if they discovered, analyzed and took a stance concerning the historical relationships of the Christian faith.⁹⁷

The idealism of Western theology to believe they could start theology from abstract conceptions and objective sources while idealizing existing situations was in itself a deception, because Western theology was also an indigenized European interpretation of the faith. European philosophical and capitalistic approaches also stemmed from their own cultural and religious history. Indeed, the only possible point of departure for all theology is concrete situations in concrete places for concrete people.⁹⁸ Liberation theology unmasked the ideologies hidden in Westernized theologies and assumed the indigenized character of theological reflection for their own liberation. The history of indigenized liberation theologies formed within particular cultures and contexts proves that indigenizing the Christian faith is not only crucial but a natural process towards liberation.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ Martey, *African Theology*, 146.

⁹⁷ Bonino, *doing theology in a revolutionary situation*, xxv.

⁹⁸ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, introduction.

⁹⁹ Bonino, *doing theology in a revolutionary situation*, 72.

Reasons for Indigenization

Therefore, with this understanding of the connection between indigenization and liberation, many reasons can be given for why we must continue to indigenize the faith. I shall conclude by proposing four fundamental reasons why indigenization is necessary for liberation. First, theology must be indigenized because of the Christian traditions complicity with justice. Liberation theologies show that the Bible has been a locus for both good and bad and it does not suffice to only turn to scripture for the truth. Scripture had to be incorporated into life experiences, for the slave master and abolitionist both used the Bible. Therefore, indigenization allows for the reconstruction of certain contingent truths within theological traditions that have been oppressive towards non Western people. Indigenization calls for creative and constructive theology to life-giving and liberating ends. Not only does indigenization liberate the oppressed and marginalized but it also liberates the Bible and tradition from their distorted usages.¹⁰⁰

Secondly, indigenized theology answers new questions that erupt daily in new and different worlds. Indigenization forces us to think of the truth of the gospel not as fixed, but discovered on the way of working out a theology that applies to the context and culture.¹⁰¹ The truth happens and is unveiled as it emerges within the construction of indigenized theology. Liberation theologies prove that the truth of the Christian faith is interpretation and translation into context and culture and therefore truth could be attended sometimes by failure. For this reason indigenization is necessary because authority must always be questioned. Liberation theology's quest for freedom from Western imperialism proved that the prevailing stance on the Christian faith may not seem plausible and compelling in certain contexts and cultures. Although

¹⁰⁰ Idowu, *Towards an Indigenous Church*, 15-16.

¹⁰¹ Gutiérrez, *We Drink from Our Wells*, 136.

we must not totally reject authority, indigenization shows that nothing is fixed and all truth about God is an encounter and theology must be a human reflection upon that encounter.¹⁰²

Thirdly, through indigenization, liberation theologies prove that God speaks to all people in their own way. Indigenization confirms that the spirit of God is broadly active in the world and the Western Church does not hold this spirit hostage.¹⁰³ Therefore, the Christian faith based on the love commandments asks us to receive as well as to give wherever truth can be offered. Indigenization based on the two love commandments requires all people to love, which also means to be critiqued by other people and their truths. In fact, indigenization demonstrates that the Christian faith, which is expressed by loving God with one's mind, heart, body and soul and loving neighbor as one loves self, is universal, in that, it requires all people to be who they are, love who they are, worship God as they are so that love and respect can permeate the whole world giving value to differences. All theologies have a metaphorical nature, so the mystery of a God who is universal demands the input and insight of all people proving that theology is meant to be provocative. God is not an object but an encounter by people all over the world, and any speech about God is meant to make God felt and experienced by all and indigenized theology brings all Christians closer to this universal divine spirit.¹⁰⁴

This proves finally that all theology must be indigenized in order to remain faithful to the Christian faith. As shown in this paper, indigenization is about creativity and construction, which is how debates within the bible, the creeds, and church doctrines came about. Indigenization reminds us of the internal diversity of the tradition. The faith has always been debated and

¹⁰² Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 106-116.

¹⁰³ Idowu, *Towards an Indigenous Church*, 41-55.

¹⁰⁴ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 106-116.

different accounts and interpretations on a plethora of different topics such as Christology, soteriology, eschatology or even the meaning of the Eucharist continue to be debated.

Indigenization reminds us that the option should never be orthodoxy or heresy, but a recognition of diversity. To recognize that if God is indeed universal then the body of Christ must be diverse. Indigenized theologies such as liberation theology remain faithful to the Christian faith by recognizing the multiplicity of God among all particularities. Therefore, indigenization proves that theology is not universal language about God, nor is it written by God. It is human speech written by humans that are informed by their own historical, socio- political and religio-cultural traditions, written for particular times and places. Indigenized theology confirms theology's contextual and cultural language, defined by the human situation to which it gives birth.¹⁰⁵

If truth and wisdom are the kernel hidden within the husk of the Christian faith than to find meaning in it through indigenization presupposes this truth. A faith created in the past always needs contemporary clothing to find meaning in the present. Indeed, many theologians, mostly Western, believe constructive indigenized theologies such as liberation theology potentially minimize the truth of the gospel. Rather than translating and being creative with the Christian faith by forming new idioms that might betray the "truth," Western theologians believe, like all language that may not be understood at first, immersion in the Christian tradition was better.¹⁰⁶ However, indigenization reminds us that this so called "Christian tradition" has been mostly articulated by Western indigenized theologies, so each community must indigenize the Christian faith in order to come up with constructive theologies that can never be considered as syncretism. To suggest that indigenized theologies are syncretic is to suggest that Western

¹⁰⁵ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, xv-xvi.

¹⁰⁶ Idowu, *Towards an Indigenous Church*, 15-25.

Christianity has a monopoly on the Christian faith. Christianity is not the privatization of the West nor did they create the faith. In fact, Christianity is a faith that erupted among the non-Western people of the world. Consequently, if Westernized Christianity and their theologies came about through creative construction, so can the theologies of those who represented most of the body of Christ.¹⁰⁷ As shown in this paper, liberation theologies did not seek to indigenize Western indigenized theology but rather to indigenize the Christian faith which naturally demands its indigenization. All these reasons prove that there can be no liberation without indigenization

Conclusion

These illustrations are enough to show that indigenization can assume various concrete shapes, especially when applied to living and organic things such as socio-political and religio-cultural elements. Indigenization does not mean Christians must pour new wine into old wine skins, nor does it mean that every hint of Western indigenized Christianity among non-Western Christians and churches must be destroyed. If the Universal Church represents the resurrected body of Christ in the world, then indigenization means Christians must recognize that as an organic cell belonging to the whole body, the Church must naturally partake of various characteristics which belong to this whole body.¹⁰⁸ Christian theologians cannot claim Christianity and the Church as a universal body while being so unaware of the thoughts and beliefs of crucified peoples elsewhere in the world.¹⁰⁹ Therefore, in order to avoid a monopoly on the Christian faith or any form of theological imperialism, theologies must be compatible with

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., 1-50.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., 1-10.

¹⁰⁹ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, xvi-xxiii.

the spiritual temperament of the particularities in which they are developed in order for this body to bear the unmistakable stamp of all people of the Christian faith. Indigenization reminds us that the crucifixion was an attempt by authorities to destroy not just an individual body, but a whole community (the entire body of Christ).¹¹⁰ Therefore, if Christ has invited all people to the global table to join in solidarity with all crucified bodies by partaking in his crucified body, then theologians must testify to the liberating right of the resurrection of these crucified bodies, for indeed, Christ has risen. This is the indigenizing stance liberation theology's express.

It is for this reason that a reaction against the spiritually unsatisfactory state of things in the body of Christ is inevitable. The spirit of this resurrected body cannot be deemed dead nor its soul fettered indefinitely by imperial authorities. The history of liberation theology does prove that sooner or later, the inherent urge to freedom and self-expression which resides in all humanity will bring about rebellion against any form of bondage. This search for something fresh and appealing in their sincerity enlightens the freedom of the expression of the Christian faith manifested in their own ways.¹¹¹ Due to the diversity of our voices, indigenized perspectives can appear contradictory to each other at times, but the goal of indigenized theologies is not to develop a "universal" theological apparatus or to bring alternative views into line with artificial formulations. Indigenization affirms the ability of Christians to define their experience and understanding of God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit differently and to read scripture faithfully within their own lived reality. By sharing the expressions which result in this theological and interpretive process, Christians from all avenues are awakened to a fresh

¹¹⁰ Idowu, *Towards an Indigenous Church*, 1-20.

¹¹¹ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, 83-102.

understanding and realization of diverse interactions of God with humanity.¹¹² Therefore, the indigenization of the Christian faith means liberation from Western privatization of the faith in all its facets. Let me conclude with how I began and illustrate from my own experience a few concrete examples of this fresh and more appealing way of indigenization.

Indigenization in my culture and context has not only affected theology, but has naturally led to evangelistic idioms. The indigenization of the Bible in Ghanaian languages has been an invaluable heritage for the Ghanaian people. Every language is filled with wisdom that sometimes cannot be translated or even worded in other languages; therefore, if the English Bible, is itself, filled with translations of other translations, then there is no reason for non-Western Christians to read and speak in strange idioms making “language evangelism” and devotion somewhat unintelligible and unnatural to their beings. If the Western church cannot speak in clear accents for all Christian people, then certain theological concepts and insights must be conveyed to hearers in their own appropriate linguistic vehicles, if they are to properly understand the Christian faith.¹¹³ The indigenization of the Bible and “language evangelism” draws the “line” when speaking one’s truth and finding one’s audience. This helps in maintaining accountability to one’s own community without ending up in dialogues of worship and praise that succumb to the terms set up by Western indigenized Christianity.

My awe and wonder of the way indigenized Ghanaian churches expressed themselves, especially in a congregational setting, attests to the way indigenization allows human souls to link with the living spirit of God. Spirituality suited for Ghanaians was not to be found in the

¹¹²Michael Shepherd, *Global Theology: Bringing diverse voices together* (2011), <http://globaltheology.org/what-is-global-theology/>.

¹¹³ Idowu, *Towards an Indigenous Church*, 15-20.

Western assimilated Methodist churches that my mother and I attended in Accra. Indigenized churches in Ghana held the spirituality that originally sprang from the historical and spiritual temperament of Ghanaians; therefore, it was obvious that when hymns, psalms and other forms of worship were done in an indigenous way, at once every face lit up, exemplifying those thirsty desert travelers who had reached the well of living water.

My hope in writing this thesis is to show that liberation comes from within as an interpretation of the Christian faith not only through one's own spectacles, but through one's own heart, mind, body and soul. This is consistent with the love commandments of Christ. Therefore, liberation essentially means to be able to assimilate the Christian faith in an indigenized way in order to be what human beings were meant to be, free and independent to love and be loved. Indigenization leads us to experience God in the human predicaments that we are in, receive revelations about the crosses we bear and be mindful of those we allow to speak about our suffering crosses on our behalf by rejecting abstract revelations brought by others that are independent of our own particular human experiences.¹¹⁴ Indigenization proves that if people brought forth what was within them then what was brought forth would liberate them, and if they did not then what was in them would destroy them.¹¹⁵ For all three liberation theologies, their starting point was their faith to bring out what was in them in order to determine how the Christian faith liberated them from their suffering crosses.

¹¹⁴ Gutiérrez, *A Theology of Liberation*, xvii-25.

¹¹⁵ Elaine Pagels, *The Gnostic Gospels*, (Random House, Inc., New York, 1979), xv.

Bibliography

- Abraham, K.C. *Third World Theologies: Commonalities and Divergences* Maryknoll, N.Y. Orbis Books, 1990.
- Alves, Rubem A. *Christian Realism: Ideology of the Establishment, Christianity and Crisis*, 1973.
- Anatolios, Khaled. *Retrieving Nicaea: The Development and Meaning of Trinitarian Doctrine*. Grand Rapids, Mich: Baker Academic, 2011.
- Appiah-Kubi Kofi and Torres Sergio. *African theology en route*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1979.
- Bonino, Jose M. *doing theology in a revolutionary situation*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975.
- Cone, James H. *The Cross and the Lynching Tree*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 2011.
- Cone, James H. *Black Theology and Black Power*. New York, Seabury Press, 1969.
- Cone, James H. *A Black Theology of Liberation*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1986.
- Gutiérrez, Gustavo. *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics and Salvation*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1973.
- Gutiérrez Gustavo. *On Job: God-talk and the Suffering of the Innocent*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1987.
- Gutierrez, Gustavo. *We Drink from Our Own Wells: The Spiritual Journey of a People*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books; Melbourne, Australia : Dove Communications, 1984.
- Idowu, Bolaji. *Towards An Indigenous Church*. London, Oxford University Press, 1965.
- Long, Charles H. *Significations: signs, symbols and images in the interpretation of religion*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1986.
- Martey, Emmanuel. *African Theology: Inculturation and Liberation*. Maryknoll, N.Y. : Orbis Books, 1993.
- Mbiti, John. *New Testament Eschatology in an African Background: A Study of the Encounter between New Testament Theology and African Traditional Concepts*. London, Oxford University Press, 1971.
- McCann, Dennis. *Christian Realism and Liberation Theology*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1981.
- Moltmann, Jurgen. *The Crucified God: the Cross of Christ as the foundation and criticism of Christian theology*. New York: Harper & Row, 1974.
- Pagels, Elaine. *The Gnostic Gospels*. Random House, Inc., New York, 1979.

Roberts, J. Deotis. *Liberation and Reconciliation: A Black Theology*. Philadelphia, Westminster Press 1971.

Shelton Jason E. and Emerson Michael O. *Blacks and Whites in Christian America: how racial discrimination shapes religious convictions*. New York: New York University Press, 2012.

Shepherd, Michael. *Global Theology: Bringing diverse voices together* 2011.

Virginia Fabella, M.M. and Sergio Torres. *Irruption of the Third World, Challenge to Theology*. MaryKnoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1983.

Williams, Delores. *Sisters in the Wilderness: the challenge of womanist God-talk*. Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1993.

Wilmore, Gayraud. *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*. Garden City, N.Y., Anchor Press, 1973.

<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/indigenization?s=t>.(2014)