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The Audacity of Faith: A Study of Barack Obama's Religious Views and How they could Shape his United States Presidency

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AND HOW THEY COULD SHAPE HIS UNITED STATES PRESIDENCY

by

ZACHARY ROSS

Under the Direction of Timothy Renick

ABSTRACT

During the 2008 Presidential election, questions concerning Barack Obama's religious views arose. Specifically, the controversy surrounding Obama's former pastor, Jeremiah Wright, caused some people to wonder how Wright's theology may have influenced Obama. This project investigates Obama's religious views and examines several forces, including Wright, which influenced his theological perspective. Wright bases his theological perspective on the works of James Cone, a significant figure in Black Liberation Theology and a mentor to Wright. This thesis compares and contrasts Obama's religious perspective with that of James Cone.

INDEX WORDS: Barack Obama, James Cone, Jeremiah Wright, President, Liberation Theology, Black Theology, African American, Politics, Religion, U.S. Election

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

“The government wants us to sing *God Bless America*. No, no, no, not God Bless America...God damn America.” With these words, Reverend Jeremiah Wright thrust candidate Barack Obama’s religious beliefs into the bright lights of public scrutiny during the 2008 U.S. Presidential race. Who is Wright and why did he say these words? What is the relationship between Wright’s views and those of Obama? Many Americans wanted to know if the religious beliefs of Jeremiah Wright somehow influenced the worldview of Obama, who was a member of Reverend Wright’s church for over twenty years. Like Wright, did Barack Obama believe the United States deserved the terrorist attacks carried out on September 11th? Would Obama favor African American concerns over the concerns of all Americans? For Obama, does God care exclusively about black people or is God concerned about all people? These questions came to the media attention once some of Wright’s sermons were broadcast and made available online in the spring of 2008. The fear and anger caused by the harsh words in Wright’s sermons caused many voters to become both curious about and wary of Obama’s religious views.

Leading up to the election, Obama’s background, especially his religious background, was largely unknown to the American public. For many, his life was just a collection of a few, quick sound bites. His mother was a white woman from Kansas and his father was a black man from Kenya. Neither parent was very religious, but Obama did attend church and was a community organizer on Chicago’s South Side. This is all the information many people knew about Obama’s past. With the release of Reverend Wright’s sermons, new attention was paid to Obama’s background, especially the relationship with his now famous former pastor.

The purpose of this paper is to examine Barack Obama's religious views and to understand how those views may or may not have been influenced by his association with Black Liberation Theology, the religious worldview espoused by Reverend Wright. Because Obama participated in Jeremiah Wright's church, which is a center of Black Liberation Theology, and because Obama writes and speaks extensively of religious themes, and because limited academic work has been performed on Wright's influence of Obama's religious views, I propose to compare Obama's and Wright's theological views from a scholarly perspective. If Wright is representative of Black Liberation Theology, as I believe he is, this thesis will attempt to point out the differences and similarities between Wright's and Obama's religious views. In order to frame this investigation, I'll use categories established by James Cone, a significant figure in Black Liberation Theology and a mentor to Reverend Wright. Cone represents the religious and philosophical context in which Obama initially became a Christian. While much attention, quite understandably, has been devoted to Obama's political views, far less scholarly focus has been directed to his religious views. What insights might come from taking Obama's theology seriously?

In order to gain a deeper understanding of Obama's personal theology, I have chosen to focus my attention primarily on his two autobiographies, Stephen Mansfield's biography of Obama, and various web sources. Of his two autobiographies, Obama's earlier one is *Dreams from My Father* in which he details his entire life up until his Illinois senatorial seat win. Obama's second autobiography, *Audacity of Hope*, also describes his early life, but in less detail than his first book. The stated goal of the second book is to introduce Obama to a national audience and to present Obama's political vision for the country. Both works offer an in depth description of Obama's life, his early influences, his thoughts on faith and politics, and overall

worldview. *Audacity of Hope* was written as a precursor to Obama's run for the U.S. Presidency. The autobiographies were written with a large audience in mind and intentionally serve a function that is, at least in part, political. In spite of the possible shortcomings of using such material (such as the possibility that points are made for political effect rather than as the result of sincerely held conviction), I think Obama's books are still extremely important to an examination of his personal theology since they attempt to render his religious views, not merely in his own words but in a consistent fashion. Plus I believe Obama's view of himself is critical to understanding his view of religion, Christianity, and Black Liberation Theology.

I chose also to use Stephen Mansfield's *The Faith of Barack Obama* to help illuminate some of the religious influences in Obama's life. Mansfield is a New York Times best-selling author and has written several books on the faith and politics of various political leaders. Partly because of its popularity and partly because of its readability, I decided to use Mansfield's biography as a resource for understanding Obama's background and religious upbringing. Mansfield is a self-identifying evangelical Christian with a particular view of politics and religion, specifically Christianity. While this work is not targeted toward an academic audience, I believe that the biographical information I reference from it still has scholarly value. Portions of his work are targeted toward a decidedly evangelical Christian audience, but for the sections I reference, I think this is much less of a concern. Mansfield is a journalist and has attempted to write a biography which gets the facts straight but admittedly is writing from an evangelical Christian perspective.

Understanding Obama's religious views can help observers understand his possible political views. In politics, especially American politics, religion can play an important role in how people vote and who they elect as their leader. Though faith can be a very personal

experience, it is also a very public matter when it comes to politics. Many voters believe a candidate's religious faith says a lot about how a politician will govern or legislate. According to John Green, the author of *The Faith Factor*, "religious behavior and belief matter in politics" and are "a potent independent force" in their own right (Green, 3). In his book, Green painstakingly demonstrates how the 2004 Presidential Race was heavily influenced by the Christian Right's stance on several social/moral issues. The level of involvement that religion seemed to play in the outcome of the election was surprising to many. If connecting with citizens is important to a politician, then religion is one of the strongest ways to build that relationship. "Religious belonging has been the primary means by which an individual's faith was connected to the vote throughout most of American history" (Green, 46). The religious beliefs of politicians and the religious makeup of the electorate are both vital to understanding the political environment. While much research has been done on the religious views of the American electorate, very little has been done on the religious views of Barack Obama. I hope to add some insight to this emerging conversation.

The 2008 U.S. Presidential race marked a change in political direction for the country in several ways. Not only did Barack Obama become the first African American to win the Presidency, but he became the first President to grow up in a decidedly non-Christian home. The fact that Obama is non-white and had a non-traditional religious upbringing will be examined in further detail, but for now it is enough to say that Obama represents a changing America both demographically and religiously. "According to the American Religious Identification Survey...the percentage of self-identified Christians has fallen 10 percentage points since 1990, from 86 to 76 percent" (Meacham, 34-38). In fact, "the percentage of people who say they are unaffiliated with any particular faith has doubled in recent years, to 16 percent; in terms of

voting, this group grew from 5 percent in 1988 to 12 percent in 2008 – roughly the same percentage of the electorate as African Americans” (Meacham, 34-38). And within the group of unaffiliated persons, “the number of people willing to describe themselves as atheist or agnostic has increased about fourfold from 1990 to 2009, from 1 million to about 3.6 million” (Meacham, 34-38). Based on statistics such as these, many intellectuals such as Meacham, believe a significant portion of the American electorate is walking away from involvement with organized religion, especially Christian institutions. This is a trend that has been happening for several decades, but it has until recently been ignored by most national politicians.

If the Bush administration was supposed to represent the ascendancy of the Christian Right in American politics, Barack Obama’s election can be seen to represent the decline of that influence and maybe its eventual demise. But with the election of Barack Obama, a new appreciation for the changing religious landscape has occurred within the American electorate. Because of Obama’s non-traditional upbringing, many voters felt he was uniquely qualified to understand the concerns of religious and ethnic groups who may not have felt part of the political process before. For example, in the commemorative edition of *Newsweek* magazine following the election of Obama, Professor Henry Louis Gates Jr. of Harvard wrote a piece about the importance of Obama’s election to the African American community. “There is one thing we can proclaim today, without question: that the election of Obama as president of the United States of America means that the ultimate color line has, at long last, been crossed. It has been crossed by our very first postmodern race man, a man who embraces his African cultural and genetic heritage so securely that he can transcend it, becoming the candidate of choice to tens of millions of American who do not look like him” (Gates, 116-121). So while Obama’s election was important from a racial perspective according to Gates, it also was potentially important

from a religious perspective. When Obama gave his Inaugural Address on January 20, 2009, he became the first President explicitly to acknowledge religious unbelievers in a Presidential Inauguration speech: “We are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus, and nonbelievers.” Obama recognized the religious diversity among Americans; a diversity that is growing and not shrinking. While America is still considered a very religious country, it is perhaps telling to note that Obama thought it was necessary to mention nonbelievers in his list of religious communities. Nonbelievers are the fastest growing “religious” group in the country according to the *Newsweek* article. What can Obama’s election tell us about the American religious landscape and more specifically what can Obama’s religious views tell us about his Presidency?

CHAPTER 2: OBAMA'S RELIGIOUS INFLUENCES

In order to have a broad understanding of Obama's religious views, we must understand the religious context in which Obama was raised and the individuals who influenced his thinking. In this chapter, I will take a brief look at six important figures in Obama's life. Each person contributes something to the makeup of Obama's religious views, with some contributing more than others. I will use Obama's various written works as biographical background as well as Stephen Mansfield's biography. The purpose of this chapter is to lay a foundation (albeit a brief one) of Obama's early life so we can better understand Obama's religious views in comparison to Black Theology, which I will investigate further in chapters three and four.

Barack Obama has an unconventional background which includes relatives from three different continents and personal experiences with several different faith traditions. "He spent his early years under the influence of atheism, folk Islam, and a humanist's understanding of the world that sees religion merely as a man-made thing, as a product of psychology," according to Mansfield (Mansfield, 4). In fact, Obama is the first President to not have been raised in an explicitly Christian home. On the contrary, he was exposed to the teachings of all major religions since his mother thought it was important that he be well versed in the faith traditions of other people. Not only did his mother introduce him to other religious viewpoints, but the faith of his closest relatives was a diverse mix and affected his early thinking about religion.

Obama is the product of an interracial relationship between his white Kansan mother and his black Kenyan father. His parents came from completely different worlds and according to Mansfield, instilled in their son a very broad global perspective. Mansfield writes that "it is this departure from tradition in Obama's early years that makes both his political journey and his

religious journey so unusual and of such symbolic meaning in American public life” (Mansfield, 4). Obama had many religious influences in his life, but I will focus on six individuals who the author of this thesis believes had the most profound impact on him religiously: Stanley and Madelyn Dunham, Stanley Ann Dunham, Barack Hussein Obama Sr., Lolo Soetoro, and Reverend Jeremiah Wright.

Stanley and Madelyn Dunham (Grandparents)

Obama’s maternal grandparents were from Kansas and lived most of their early life in and around Wichita. Stanley was born in 1918 and grew up only about twenty miles away from Madelyn, who was born in 1922. They met each other in Wichita and eloped right after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Stanley came from a blue-collar Baptist family and worked the oil rigs around Wichita. According to Obama, his grandfather “turned out a bit wild” (Obama, Dreams, 14) and was kicked out of high school for punching the principal in the nose. Shortly after marrying Madelyn, Stanley enlisted and served in the army during World War II. He returned from Europe not having seen any major combat and enrolled at Berkley under the GI bill. From there, he moved the family around various jobs in Kansas and Texas. But once his daughter Ann, Obama’s mother, graduated from high school, he moved the family to Hawaii, having learned about a furniture salesman position open there. According to Obama, Stanley was restless and was “always searching for that new start, always running away from the familiar” (Obama, Dreams, 16).

Mansfield writes that in spite of his Midwestern Baptist upbringing, Stanley was a non-conformist and never truly embraced the traditional religious faith of his family. According to Obama’s descriptions of his grandfather, Stanley was a “dreamer” and didn’t want societal

norms to hold him back from achieving his ambitions. He was open-minded about his future, willing to go where fortune may take him. Stanley wanted to go beyond his humble beginnings and achieve something greater. According to Obama, “in the back of [Stanley’s] mind he had come to consider himself as something of a freethinker – bohemian, even” (Obama, *Dreams*, 17). Possibly because of this open mindedness, Stanley’s one foray into organized religion involved enrolling his family in a local Unitarian Universalist congregation. According to Obama, “he liked the idea that Unitarians drew on the scriptures of all the great religions (‘it’s like you get five religions in one’)” (Obama, *Dreams*, 17).

Madelyn Dunham also grew up in rural Kansas, but came from a strict Methodist family. There was no drinking, card playing, or dancing. Mansfield writes that from within this rigid environment, Madelyn struggled with how to embrace a faith that she believed suffered from too much hypocrisy and not enough grace. According to Mansfield’s description, Madelyn’s Scotch/English ancestry and Midwestern common sense, led her to embody a no nonsense demeanor which rejected all forms of insincerity and was open to non-traditional ways of thinking. This may explain what attracted her to Stanley. They were two non-conformists rejecting their traditional upbringings and embracing an open-minded liberalism, which pushed them away from institutional religion, they never settled on anything else. Obama remarks that “all this marked them as vaguely liberal, although their ideas would never congeal into anything like a firm ideology” (Obama, *Dreams*, 17).

Because Obama was raised by his grandparents for a majority of his childhood, their religious worldview is important to understanding Obama’s evolving beliefs. Stanley and Madelyn’s rejection of formal religious institutions possibly instilled in Obama a suspicion of people who claimed to have truth. Mansfield posits that Obama’s grandparents promoted a

think-for-yourself independence and a belief that one should not be tied down to certain ways of thinking just because society says something is the norm. “There was nothing in their background to predict such a response, no New England transcendentalists, or wild-eyed socialists in their family tree” (Obama, *Dreams*, 12). Nonetheless, free-thinking liberalism and an unapologetic nonconformity are hallmarks of their entire worldview, especially religion. According to Mansfield, because religion seemed hypocritical, stiff, and unrelated to everyday living, Obama’s grandparents dismissed it as an unnecessary component of a free-thinking person’s life. Religion can actually get in the way of people reaching their potential rather than helping them find it. I suggest that these ideas informed Obama’s initial opinion of religion, but they represent only some of the voices he heard.

Stanley Ann Dunham

Obama’s mother was born November 29, 1942 to his grandparents, who were living in Wichita Kansas at the time. Ann spent her early years living in various states as the family moved from job opportunity to job opportunity. Eventually her family moved to Seattle where she attended junior high and high school. From there, she moved to Hawaii with her family and attended the University of Hawaii where she met Barack’s father. Mansfield comments that just like her parents, Ann considered herself a freethinker not beholden to social norms or traditional ways of viewing the world (Mansfield 9). This individualistic streak evidenced itself early on in her childhood. The frequent moving “had made [Ann] something of a loner – cheerful and easy-tempered but prone to bury her head in a book or wander off on solitary walks” (Obama, *Dreams*, 19). When Ann got to high school, her friends even noted her strong desire to study, think, and stand apart. Mansfield writes, “she was always challenging and arguing and comparing. She was already thinking about things that the rest of her friends hadn’t” (Mansfield,

9). The tendency to be a non-conformist or someone who challenged conventional thinking seems to have begun early in Ann's life and continued into adulthood.

Obama's mother grew up during the 1960's, a time of significant social change in the country. Women were asserting their equality, African Americans were fighting for their civil rights, and the entire social contract of the nation was being rewritten. Ann stood out among her peers, "yet [was] keeping with the philosophical trends of her times" (Mansfield, 8). According to Mansfield, because of her parents' liberal views, Ann was able to explore the issues of the day within an environment which was freethinking from the beginning. While in Seattle, Ann formed her foundational views about society, family, and religion. "Having begun with her parents' religious skepticism, Ann went even further and declared herself an atheist" (Mansfield, 8). Though Obama's grandparents may have still held on to some vestige of religious experimentation, Ann had broken the link entirely. She was more interested in solving the social problems of the day than she was in embracing institutionalized religious faith.

After high school, Ann moved with her family to Hawaii and attended the University of Hawaii. It is here that Ann met Barack's father. Barack Obama Sr. was a gifted graduate student from Kenya studying economics through an exchange program between the U.S. and his home country. The two students soon began dating, which was a possible testament to Ann's liberal views and her refusal to be shaped by cultural norms, including widespread opposition to interracial relationships. Ann was a white woman originally from Kansas and Barack Obama Sr. was a black man from Kenya. They were different people from different backgrounds, but according to Mansfield, in some ways they shared a common vision of mankind. They both grew up in nominally religious homes and, through years of education, had decided that human reason was a more reliable agent of change in the world than religious sentiment or institutions.

While their public philosophies may have been shared, their personal differences eventually were too much to overcome. Though Ann and Obama Sr. married in February 1961, they eventually divorced in January 1964.

During their time together, they witnessed the birth of their son, Barack Obama. The senior Obama remained in his son's life for only a few years until the divorce and a desire for further education took Barack's father away. Possibly because of this difficult experience, Ann decided to instill in Obama the ideals that she believed were important: self-reliance, freethinking, non-conformity, and an appreciation for all cultures. Obama remembers how early in his childhood, his mother gave him "a book called *Origins*, a collection of creation tales from around the world, stories of Genesis and the tree where man was born, Prometheus and the gift of fire, the tortoise of Hindu legend that floated in space, supporting the weight of the world on its back" (Obama, *Dreams*, 10). According to Mansfield, the book was meant to be more than just a way of entertaining a small child, it was also a way of teaching Barack about the inherent worth of other traditions. Throughout her life, Ann would be a student of people and cultures, eventually getting her Ph.D. in anthropology and traveling the world to experience its diversity. According to Obama (*Audacity* 204), when it came to the religions of people she encountered during her travels, Ann viewed religion as just another cultural category to be studied and analyzed. It was this academic approach to culture, especially religion, which was passed down to Obama during his childhood and into his early adult life. "In sum, my mother viewed religion through the eyes of the anthropologist that she would become; it was a phenomenon to be treated with a suitable respect, but with a suitable detachment as well" (Obama, *Audacity*, 204). Though Obama initially approached religion in much the same way as his mother, he eventually

embraced the Christian faith. We will look at some possible reasons for his decision to enter organized religion later in this chapter.

According to Mansfield, the belief that all people are connected and that each person should work toward relieving the oppression of others was a central component to Ann's liberal worldview. Ann not only wanted to learn about other cultures, but she also wanted to help them. Her marriage to Obama senior and even to her second husband were desires of the heart, but they were also a way to prove that people can overcome culture, language, and tradition to connect to one another. For example, Obama writes that during their time in Indonesia he and his mother lived "in a land where fatalism remained a necessary tool for enduring hardship, where ultimate truths were kept separate from day-to-day realities, [Barack's mother] was a lonely witness for secular humanism, a soldier for New Deal, Peace Corps, position-paper liberalism" (Obama, *Dreams*, 50). Even though by the end of the 60's many of the idealistic liberal views of her generation had turned into radicalism and civil unrest, Barack's mother held onto her utopian vision of an ever improving society. As Obama puts it, "emotionally her liberalism would always remain of a decidedly pre-1967 vintage, her heart a time capsule filled with images of the space program, the Peace Corps and Freed Rides, Mahalia Jackson and Joan Baez" (Obama, *Audacity*, 30). Her liberalism was born out of a romantic optimism for mankind, which did not always coincide with the reality of the era. "Intellectually she might have tried to understand Black Power or SDS or those women friends of hers who had stopped shaving their legs, but the anger, the oppositional spirit, just wasn't in her" (Obama, *Audacity*, 30). And yet it was people such as her who made the social progress of the 60's possible. "The civil rights movement, in particular, inspired her reverence; whenever the opportunity presented itself, she would drill into [Barack] the values that she saw there: tolerance, equality, standing up for the disadvantaged"

(Obama, Audacity, 29). According to Mansfield, it is these ideals that Ann believed in and which had such an important impact on her son.

Barack Hussein Obama Sr.

Barack Obama Sr. was born in Kenya in 1936. He came from the Luo tribe, which is one of the largest ethnic groups in Kenya and East Africa. Obama Sr.'s family was large and, just like most native families in Kenya at the time, his father had multiple wives. Obama Sr.'s father, Hussein Onyango Obama, had three wives. Obama Sr.'s father was born Roman Catholic, but converted to Islam during his many travels with the British colonial forces of which he was a member. Thus Obama Sr. was born into a Muslim family even though by the time he went to study in the United States he was an atheist. According to Mansfield, the pursuit of education and the desire to rise above his circumstances influenced him to reject his religious upbringing in favor of a secular humanism, relying on reason rather than faith. Obama Sr. was a good student and studied at several prestigious schools where he majored in economics. Immediately after high school, at the age of 18, Obama Sr. married Kezia Aoko with whom he ultimately had four children. But because Obama Sr. was an accomplished student, the government of Kenya sent him to study abroad as part of a program to educate Africans in western educational institutions.

At the age of 23, Obama Sr. enrolled at the University of Hawaii at Manoa and studied economics. During his studies at the university, Obama Sr. met Ann Dunham. They quickly became romantically involved and married on February 2, 1961. At the time, Ann was not aware that Obama Sr. was still married to Kezia. Obama Sr. told Ann he was divorced, but she would later find out that this was untrue. Years later, Obama Sr. eventually did divorce Kezia quietly. Soon after the marriage, the couple had Barack Obama II on August 4 1961. A year later,

Obama Sr. graduated from the university in 1962 and decided to further his education at Harvard University. Ann and child followed, but according to Mansfield, she soon decided to return to Hawaii due to personal differences and diverging opinions about their future together. Three years after their wedding, the couple got a divorce on March 20, 1964. Obama Sr. would eventually obtain his graduate degree from Harvard and return to Kenya to work as a senior governmental economist. Father and son only met each other one more time in 1971 when Obama Sr. came back to Hawaii to visit his 10 year old son. Obama Sr. later died in an automobile accident in 1982 after several years of hard living, which included poverty, drinking, and ill health.

Obama Sr. impacted his son's life not primarily through his personal contact with his child but through the idea which the junior Obama had of him. In fact, Obama's first autobiography, *Dreams from My Father*, is a testament to the affect his father had on his view of the world and of himself. The elder Obama acted as an ever present influence in the young man's life even though, after the initial years, they only met each other briefly in 1971. As a young boy, Obama was raised with an idealized version of his father which was a product of his family's generous view of a flawed man. "As a child I knew him only through the stories that my mother and grandparents told...my father remained a myth to me, both more and less than a man" (Obama, *Dreams*, 5). The family would share stories of the senior Obama, remembering his British accent, his confident demeanor, and his ability to command a room of people. Once Obama reached adulthood, he was able to learn a fuller story of his father, including the good and the bad. But in his younger years, Obama held a romantic notion of his father as a leader and image of the newly liberated Africa. According to Mansfield, the son was able to hold on to this view regardless of whether or not these were accurate depictions of his father perhaps

because they spent such a short amount of time together. Obama put his father in the same category as other great African men of the time who were fighting for liberty and freedom across the continent. “But these men had become object lessons for me, men I might love but never emulate, white men and brown men whose fates didn’t speak to my own. It was into my father’s image, the black man, son of Africa, that I’d packed all the attributes I sought in myself, the attributes of Martin and Malcolm, Dubois and Mandela” (Obama, *Dreams*, 220). Just like many young children who look up to their parents as heroes, young Obama did the same with his absent father.

One characteristic of Obama Sr., which according to Obama made an impression (*Dreams* 67), was his desire for excellence in himself and in his children. Obama Sr. was at the top of his class both in high school and at university. He was a member of Phi Beta Kappa, attended Harvard, and obtained a high level government position in Kenya. He tried to encourage his children, specifically Obama, to have that same drive and ambition to achieve success. During their one visit together when Obama was 10 years old, the father repeatedly challenged his son to study and put away childish behavior. In one case, an argument occurred between Obama Sr. and the rest of the family when he told Obama to quit watching television and to study instead (Obama, *Dreams*, 67-68). The family thought Obama Sr. was being too strict since school was out and Obama was on Christmas vacation. Nonetheless, this incident made an impression on the junior Obama, which may partially explain his political ambitions later in life. Obama remembers: “My father’s voice had nevertheless remained untainted, inspiring, rebuking, granting or withholding approval. You do not work hard enough, Barry. You must help in your people’s struggle. Wake up black man!” (Obama, *Dreams*, 220). According to Obama, despite Obama Sr.’s absence, his father represented everything an ideal

father ought to be: hard working, pursuing excellence, and dedicating to a cause greater than one self.

Lolo Soetoro

Ann went on to finish her undergraduate degree and in time met another man, Lolo Soetoro, whom she married in 1967. Lolo was an Indonesian student at the University of Hawaii and a classmate of Ann's. He was getting his education in the U.S. so that he could work with American companies in Indonesia as a government relations consultant. Once Ann's school was over, she and Lolo decided to move to Indonesia and take Barack with them. According to Mansfield, this move was not just motivated by a sense of adventure; it was in keeping with Ann's socially progressive ideals. They were going to Indonesia to take part in the national reform that was taking place in the mid 1960's. The move was motivated partly out of family considerations but also out of a desire to help improve the lives of oppressed Indonesians.

As Mansfield describes it, Barack's life in Indonesia was a "religious swirl". Barack lived in a Muslim country and attended Catholic school. Young Obama "prayed at the feet of a Catholic Jesus...learned Islam in his public school...and at home, his mother taught him her atheistic optimism" (Mansfield, 14). Barack's exposure to religion was a milieu of different faiths not just in isolation, but in conversation with one another. In fact, Barack's stepfather was a living example of this melting pot of faith. "The Islam of Indonesia in those days easily blended with Hinduism, Buddhism, and even animism, to produce a broad, eclectic spirituality...Lolo lived on the folk edge of Islam, teaching young Barack superstitions and rituals popular on the streets of Jakarta" (Mansfield, 15). According to Mansfield, Lolo was a realist and did not dwell much on romantic notions of Western liberalism, at least as they related

to life in Indonesia. His homeland had many problems and suffered from poverty, corruption, and lack of basic services. So while religion may have been a “hedge against death” (Obama, Audacity, 207), it was not a reliable way to navigate the daily struggles of life. As Obama recalls, Lolo had a “skeptical bent” and was “a man who saw religion as not particularly useful in the practical business of making one’s way in the world” (Obama, Audacity, 204). Obama learned many useful things from his Indonesian stepfather, but there was always a sense that in Indonesia, one must learn just to “get by” rather than thrive.

As we read in the previous section, Obama’s mother struggled to instill a sense of values in her son in the midst of this mixture of religious voices and even non-religious voices. Though Lolo followed a religious practice with nominal faith, Obama’s mother had “a faith she would refuse to describe as religious” (Obama, Dreams, 50). And yet according to Obama, Ann Dunham had an undying belief in people and especially a belief in people to shape their own destiny. This difference in worldview may explain why Obama’s mother and stepfather eventually divorced in 1980 after several years of separation.

Jeremiah Wright

During the race for the U.S. Presidency, the role Jeremiah Wright played in Obama’s life came to national attention. Because public comments spoken by Wright were considered incendiary by some members of the public, his association with Obama became a lightning rod for criticism and political attack. As Obama’s pastor for nearly twenty years, many people felt it was important to understand the nature of Wright’s influence on Obama since many of Reverend Wright’s views were considered out of the mainstream and thus problematic for Obama’s

Presidential run. As one of the most important religious influences in Obama's life, Wright and his views will constitute a central focus of this paper.

Jeremiah Wright was born in 1941 in a racially mixed section of Philadelphia (Mansfield, 38). His father was a Baptist minister and his mother was a school teacher. During his high school years, Wright attended one of the best schools in the Philadelphia area, Central High School. After high school, Wright enrolled at Virginia Union University in 1959, but before graduating, he decided to join the United States Marine Corp. He served in the Corp for two years and then served as a cardiopulmonary technician at the National Naval Medical Center where he worked on the medical team for then President Lyndon Johnson. In 1967, Wright decided to attend Howard University where he graduated with bachelor's and master's degrees in English. This was followed by another master's degree from the University of Chicago Divinity School and a Doctor of Ministry from the United Theological Seminary in Dayton, Ohio (wikipedia.org). Education was always an important priority for Wright. According to Mansfield, he thought it was vital for African American's to pursue quality education as a way of lifting themselves out poverty and to battle racial oppression in society.

Starting in 1972, Reverend Wright led Trinity United Church of Christ on the South Side of Chicago as the senior pastor. During his 36 years leading the church, Wright grew the church from 90 members to nearly 8,500 congregants. The church was and is a member of the United Church of Christ denomination. Ironically, even though Trinity United is comprised of an almost entirely African American membership, the United Church of Christ denomination is made up of mostly white members. This is notable since the role which race plays in religion is a central component of Reverend Wright's sermons and ministry. Wright is a self-professed proponent of Black Liberation Theology, which is a theological framework that emphasizes the

importance of race and opposition to oppression in the Christian Gospel. In fact, Trinity United's mission statement is modeled after this theology, and it is at the core of the church's ministry. According to the church's website, "Trinity United Church of Christ has been called by God to be a congregation that is not ashamed of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and that does not apologize for its African roots! As a congregation of baptized believers, we are called to be agents of liberation not only for the oppressed, but for all of God's family" (trinitychicago.org). Black Liberation Theology was first described in the works of James Hal Cone, who is a professor at Union Theological Seminary in New York. Wright bases much of his worldview and especially his religious thinking on the works of Cone, so to understand Wright, one must understand Cone. This theological framework will be discussed in chapters three and four when I will examine the effect Wright and Cone's theology had on his personal faith and his political ideology.

Obama and the Appeal of Wright's Trinity United Church

As suggested by this chapter, the faith of Barack Obama is an amalgamation of many influences. Still one of the most important contributors to his religious worldview is his relationship with Reverend Jeremiah Wright and Trinity United Church of Christ. Given that Trinity United is one of the largest congregations on the South Side of Chicago, it makes sense that Obama, working as a political activist, would attend the church if for no other reason than to be involved with one of the most politically and socially active churches in the city. But at the same time, Obama's participation in the church is surprising if one merely focuses on his religious upbringing, which did not include regular church attendance. As the child of a

nominally Muslim father who eventually rejected religion and an atheist mother, the notion that Obama would naturally be attracted to a church like Trinity United seems unlikely given that his childhood was filled with religiously skeptical adults. Obama had very limited Christian training and even that was viewed through an academic lens. Religion was not something to trust in personally.

By his own admission, Obama's decision to attend Reverend Wright's church was more of a journey than a leap. One can follow Obama's path from uninterested observer to becoming a member in a large Christian congregation. Obama said that his work on the South Side of Chicago confronted him with a dilemma: "I had no community or shared traditions in which to ground my most deeply held beliefs" (Obama, *Audacity*, 206). In other words, Obama felt the need to connect with others as a way of also connecting with something higher than himself. It took several years for Obama to overcome his skepticism of institutional religion, but he slowly warmed up to the idea the longer he spent time with believers and, maybe more importantly, the more time he spent with the clergy.

When Obama first came to Chicago in 1985, he was not very inclined to participate in organized religion. Like his anthropologist mother, he saw religion as just another social phenomenon that people participated in to cope with life and come together as a community. Ironically, Obama's activist work in the city was centered on getting churches to join a coalition of churches, which would help push the city to address community concerns. This obviously led Obama to meet with many clergy members throughout Chicago's South Side and to familiarize himself with the day-to-day struggles of people. In coming to terms with the issues facing the community, Obama began to come to terms with his own identity.

Because of his background, Obama initially felt a gap between his life and the lives of those people he was trying to serve. This gap really has two aspects: cultural and religious. The first aspect is that Obama felt culturally different than his fellow Chicagoans. In some ways, Obama's immersion in quintessential African American community was the complete opposite of his upbringing in a mostly white community in Hawaii. Obama had attended good schools, traveled to various parts of the world, and had a generally safe and happy childhood (Mansfield, 22-23). This is in contrast to the lives of many people in the South Side neighborhoods where Obama worked. There were problems with crime, poverty, unemployment, and a general sense of hopelessness. Obama's life did not parallel the lives of most people that he interacted with and thus he had a harder time finding areas of commonality (Obama, *Dreams*, 133). The second aspect of Obama's perceived gap between himself and the community was his lack of personal faith. When Obama first came to Chicago he was non-committal about religion and had no affiliation with a religious institution or faith community (Obama, *Dreams*, 176). Over time Obama realized that this was a stumbling block for many clergy members as they considered joining Obama's coalition. How was a man with no faith supposed to pull together a group of churches? Community members had a difficult time embracing someone who did not embrace their faith or at least a faith which they could understand.

Obama's initial hesitancy to develop a personal faith began with his family. Faith was never really a part of the family discussion and when it was, criticism of hypocrisy and insincerity were quick to follow. And yet, Obama had a strong notion of common sense passed down by his Midwestern grandparents. They may not have agreed on a higher power, but they did believe in treating people right. Obama felt the need to attack the big issues of life and to live up to the standards he felt his father expected of him. The world needed people to help solve

big problems, and Obama felt a desire to tackle them. But when Obama looked around his community in Chicago, these big ambitions seemed to pale in the face of everyday people with everyday struggles. The problems most people in South Side Chicago struggled with were in Obama's estimation, the small issues of everyday life rather than the large societal ills Obama was hoping to combat. Obama writes, "most black folks weren't like the father of my dreams, the man in my mother's stories, full of high-blown ideals and quick to pass judgment. They were more like my stepfather, Lolo, practical people who knew life was too hard to judge each other's choices, too messy to live according to abstract ideals" (Obama, *Dreams*, 278). The difficulty of life was the concern for most people, not theoretical concepts or ambitions of greatness. As a successful attorney and upwardly mobile African American, Obama says he could have eschewed his mission to involve himself with struggling South Side neighbors. Rather, he could have been just a "role model, an example of black male success" (Obama, *Dreams*, 278). In other words, being a successful African American and overcoming the traditional boundaries of black ambitions could have been enough to satisfy the need to give back. "But to be right with yourself, to do right by others, to lend meaning to a community's suffering and take part in its healing – that required something more" (Obama, *Dreams*, 279).

This something more for Obama was faith. Just like the clergymen who often asked Obama if he had faith, Obama came to believe that faith in something was important (Obama, *Dreams*, 274). It was not just important to have faith so that he could gain influence with community leaders and the trust of South Side Chicagoans, it was important because he sensed a need to reach out to something higher than himself. At one point during his first year in Chicago, Obama commented that he "was a heretic, or worse – for even a heretic must believe in something, if nothing more than the truth of his own doubt" (Obama, *Dreams*, 163). But over

time, Obama warmed to the idea of faith and slowly changed his opinion about spiritual issues. As Obama said, “faith in one’s self was never enough” (Obama, *Dreams*, 279). There is a desire to connect to a higher purpose and this higher understanding is “our own buried sense that an order of some sort is required, not the social order that exists, necessarily, but something more fundamental and more demanding; a sense, further that one has a stake in this order sometimes appears, it will not drain out of the universe” (Obama, *Dreams*, 270). Ultimately, a rational set of principles have been established that requires faith and a community in which to share that faith. Reverend Wright provided that community of faith.

In this chapter, I’ve attempted to summarize the major religious influences in Obama’s life. In order to contextualize Obama’s religious views, I believe it is necessary to understand his past. The individuals mentioned in this chapter each contributed their own perspective to Obama’s upbringing. Specifically, I summarized the lives of Stanley and Madelyn Dunham (Obama’s maternal grandparents), Stanley Ann Dunham (Obama’s mother), Barack Hussein Obama Sr. (Obama’s father), Lolo Soetoro (Obama’s step-father), and Jeremiah Wright (Obama’s pastor in Chicago). Then I focused on the relationship between Jeremiah Wright and Obama, attempting to demonstrate the importance that Reverence Wright had on Obama’s religious views. I chose to highlight Reverend Wright’s influence, because in chapters three and four I make the argument that Wright’s religious views were based on the theology of James Cone and explore the relationship between Black Theology and Obama’s theological views.

CHAPTER 3: THE FOUNDATIONS AND FORMATION OF BLACK LIBERATION AND OBAMAN THEOLOGIES

The purpose of this chapter is to examine several foundational concepts that ground the theologies of Black Liberation and Obama. Theological thought, like most intellectual activities, is grounded by foundational concepts that are used to build the framework of a total perspective. Although the sources of Black Liberation and Obaman theologies are similar, I believe the way in which these sources influence the eventual form of each theology is distinct. In this chapter, I will look at two categories: experience and textual interpretation. These categories are derived from James Cone's book, *Black Theology and Black Power*, but the author of this thesis has done some rearranging of the categories to make the analysis less complicated. Cone lists black experience, black history, and black culture as three distinct categories, but I have chosen to collapse them into one category since, for the purposes of this thesis, the subtle differences Cone makes between the three sub-categories are of less importance than the collective impact of the concepts. These two categories are not meant to represent the entire spectrum of Christian theological foundations, but they are meant to highlight some important concepts from which I believe both theologies proceed and that shape how Black Liberation and Obaman theologies ultimately coalesce into unique belief systems. I hope that by comparing and contrasting foundations central to both theologies, Obama's religious views will become clearer.

While Black Liberation Theology is well known and has been written about extensively, Obama's religious views are not as well documented. Obama has never written a systematic treatise concerning his religious beliefs; the most substantive details come from what he has shared in his two autobiographies and brief comments made during various speeches. In Obama's autobiographies, he does speak in some detail about his personal faith journey from

non-belief to belief. The description of his journey is not a formalized explanation of doctrines; rather, it is a personal account of why Obama chose to accept the Christian faith and what that faith means to him. But it is my belief that from these sources we can piece together a clearer picture of where Obama gets his faith, as well as the content and the importance of his religious worldview. While this chapter will focus on some key foundations of Obaman and Black Liberation Theology, chapter four will look at the practical implications of these theologies in contemporary society.

Before proceeding, it is important that I first explain why a project to compare and contrast Obama's theology and Black Liberation Theology is justified. In the previous chapter, I described the relationship that Obama and Reverend Wright had with one another. Wright was a strong proponent of Black Liberation Theology, and it is possible that aspects of this theology may have influenced Obama's personal theology. Clearly, a central question which arises from such a project is whose view of Black Liberation Theology should be used for comparison? There are certainly many thinkers who have influenced the conversation concerning Black Liberation Theology, and it would be nearly impossible to do an exhaustive examination of every thinker's perspectives. Therefore, in order to narrow the field of study, I have chosen to focus on two champions of Black Liberation Theology, Jeremiah Wright and James Cone. As explained in chapter two, Reverend Wright was Obama's pastor for nearly twenty years and helped to shape his life while he lived in Chicago. Probably the most controversial aspect of Wright's ministry was his embrace of Black Liberation Theology. The other prominent figure is James Cone, the father of Black Liberation Theology and the author of several influential books on the topic such as *Black Theology and Black Power* and *A Black Theology of Liberation*.

Why Cone? Besides being the founder of Black Liberation Theology, Cone is the spiritual mentor to Reverend Jeremiah Wright. Black Liberation Theology, as defined by Cone, is the model by which Wright and his church, Trinity United, practiced Christian ministry. In an article printed in the May 2007 issue of *Christian Century*, contributing editor Jason Byassee highlighted the close relationship between Reverend Wright, Trinity United, and Cone. “James Cone, the pioneer of Black Liberation Theology, is a much-admired figure at Trinity. Cone told me that when he's asked where his theology is institutionally embodied, he always mentions Trinity” (*Christian Century*, May 2007). So, according to Cone, Trinity United “embodies” the essence of Cone’s vision for the black church and embraces his theology.

Wright is just as explicit about his association with Cone as Cone is about Wright. During a speech given to the National Press Club given several days after some of Wright’s incendiary remarks were famously released to the media, he continued to profess a tight personal relationship with Cone and a continued belief in Black Liberation Theology. “I do not in any way disagree with Dr. Cone, nor do I in any way diminish the inimitable and incomparable contribution that he has made and that he continues to make to the field of theology. Jim [Cone], incidentally, is a personal friend of mine” (Wright, National Press Club, April 2008). Cone is the intellectual father to Wright and his ministry at Trinity United, and is thus worthy of our examination as an important voice in Obama’s religious upbringing. Because Wright has written very little on the specific topic of Black Liberation Theology, I focus my discussion on the initial writings of Cone, where Black Liberation Theology receives its initial and still definitive articulation. I believe this is an academically fair approach considering Cone’s and Wright’s close association and their mutually stated fidelity to the tenets of Black Liberation Theology. I

will use Cone's early works to represent Wright's religious views and will compare and contrast them with what I have discovered concerning Obama's religious perspective.

Experience

The first category I will consider is experience. The term refers to those activities in life which affect an individual on a daily basis and includes everything from going to the store and attending church to working at a job and even walking down the street. Each activity is part of a personal narrative which tells a person's unique story. This narrative influences how a person views the world, views himself or herself, and potentially views God. Depending on one's perspective, a personal narrative can be a foundational element to forming a view of God at a particular moment in history. According to both Cone and Obama, experience is vital to understanding their respective theologies and to understanding their worldviews. In the next section I will look first at Cone's understanding of how experience shapes Black Liberation Theology and then at Obama's understanding of the relationship between experience and his own religious views.

At the start, I propose that the African American experience is a foundational component of Cone's theology. One cannot construct a Black Liberation Theology without the experience of the black community, especially its experience as it relates to oppression. The struggle of blacks living in America permeates Cone's writings and is the impetus for the formation of his theology. It was because of his experience as a black man in America that Cone felt a new theology had to be constructed that took into consideration the needs and views of the black community. For Cone, "there can be no black theology which does not take seriously the black

experience – a life of humiliation and suffering” (Cone, Liberation, 23). There are two important points to notice here. First, black theology and black experience go hand in hand, because experience informs the theology. Secondly, the black experience is fundamentally one of suffering and oppression. Discrimination, intimidation, and racial prejudice are hallmarks of the African American experience in America, according to Cone. Cone believes that “the black experience is the atmosphere in which blacks live. It is the totality of black existence in a white world where babies are tortured, women are raped, and men are shot” (Cone, Liberation, 24). Cone also writes, “the black experience is existence in a system of white racism. The black person knows that a ghetto is the white way of saying that blacks are subhuman and fit only to live with rats” (Cone, Liberation, 24). These are not soft words of frustration but harsh cries of condemnation. The black narrative begins and ends with oppression, at least as far as Cone can see. When Cone was first developing his theology, it was in the midst of the civil rights movement and all its associated conflict. Cone sees the anguish experienced by his fellow African Americans and believes their experience demands a radical reinterpretation of Christian theology. “And because black theology is a product of that experience, it must talk about God in the light of it. The purpose of black theology is to make sense of black experience” (Cone, Liberation, 24).

In Cone’s mind, God’s interaction with mankind, as recorded in Scripture, is summed up in one word, liberation. God is interested in freeing those who are oppressed and lifting up those who are suffering. If God does anything else, it is secondary to this main project of lifting up the downtrodden. The entire Bible, in Cone’s theology, is the story of how God liberates people throughout history and helps them to overcome oppression. So, the role of black theology is to associate what God has been doing since the beginning of time with what is happening to blacks

in the United States. “The black experience is a source of black theology because this theology seeks to relate biblical revelation to the situation of blacks in America. This means that black theology cannot speak of God and God’s involvement in contemporary America without identifying God’s presence with the events of liberation in the black community” (Cone, Liberation, 25). God is revealed via liberation. In the same way that God revealed himself during Israel’s struggle with oppression, the black community sees God in their struggle for equality against white oppression. Cone believes there is a link between what God did in the past and what God is doing now. There is continuity in God’s work, namely fighting against injustice. This reorientation of thinking which calls Christians to understand God in light of present realities is at the heart of Cone’s mission.

According to Cone, the black experience validates his theology, because it is a theology which comes out of an oppressed people and only a community under oppression can claim God’s authority. The fact that African Americans undergo racial prejudice and economic injustice is what gives blacks the authority to claim God’s favor. According to Cone, if one wants to see where God is working, one must look to where people are experiencing suffering. For the past three centuries in America, God’s chosen people are African Americans. Their experience suggests that God is working in their community and is intimately involved in bringing about their liberation.

It is this common experience among black people in America that Black Theology elevates as the supreme test of truth. To put it simply, Black Theology knows no authority more binding than the experience of oppression itself. This alone must be the ultimate authority in religious matters....[Black Theology] believes that, in this time, moment, and situation, all Christian doctrines must be interpreted in such a manner that they unreservedly say something to black people who are living under unbearable oppression. (Cone, BT&BP, 120, 121)

According to Cone, African Americans are the oppressed people of this generation, and God is working through them to demonstrate his justice and mercy. In order to understand what and how God is working in contemporary society, one must view all divine interaction through the lens of the black struggle and black experience.

Now that I've outlined Cone's perspective on how experience shapes Black Liberation Theology, I would like to turn our attention to Obama's perspective. It is this author's contention that even though Obama was immersed in Reverend Wright's church for many years and was likely exposed to all the tenets of Black Liberation Theology, I believe his view of experience differs from that of Black Liberation Theology in several ways. First, Obama looks to his experience and the experience of African Americans in general as a cause for optimism. This optimism permeates his personal theology and his view of how God interacts in the world. Secondly, Obama believes there are aspects of the African American experience that are universal and therefore applicable to every person. This obviously has implications for his theology because it allows for God to be intimately involved in the lives of all people rather than just one oppressed minority.

Cone places a premium on the importance that the African American experience plays in shaping how one sees God in relationship to mankind, but as we saw in chapter two, Obama's personal experience was far different from that of most African Americans of the 1960's and earlier. Obama writes:

As the child of a black man and a white woman, someone who was born in the racial melting pot of Hawaii, with a sister who's half Indonesian but who's usually mistaken for Mexican or Puerto Rican, and a brother-in-law and niece of Chinese descent, with some blood relatives who resemble Margaret Thatcher and others who could pass for Bernie Mac, so that family get-togethers over Christmas take on the appearance of a UN General Assembly meeting, I've never

had the option of restricting my loyalties on the basis of race, or measuring my worth on the basis of tribe. (Obama, *Audacity*, 231)

By having such a non-traditional upbringing, it is possible to see why Obama's use of experience to inform theology is different than Cone's. Obama's mother was white and even though Obama's father was African, he was not African American in the sense of growing up black in America, which is an identity at the center of Cone's experiential framework. Growing up black in America is something unique, with problems, stories, and emotions all its own. Obama really only came into contact with this world in his adult years, and the prejudices he experienced emerge to him as comparatively modest. As Obama wrote in *Audacity of Hope*, "While my own upbringing hardly typifies the African American experience – and although, largely through luck and circumstance, I now occupy a position that insulates me from most of the bumps and bruises that the average black man must endure – I can recite the usual litany of petty slights that during my forty-five years have been directed my way: security guards tailing me as I shop, white couples who toss me their car keys as I stand outside a restaurant waiting for the valet, police cars pulling me over for no apparent reason" (Obama, *Audacity*, 233). Obama clearly has had a different experience of being black in America than Cone.

This distinct experience informs Obama's theology in two ways. First, Obama believes the African American experience is a source of theological optimism for both blacks and whites. Obama comes to this conclusion based on his view that African Americans have significantly improved their place in society over the past forty years. Obama does not believe all vestiges of a racist society have been extinguished, but he does believe great strides have been made toward the goal of racial equality. Obama writes, "I have witnessed a profound shift in race relations in my lifetime. I have felt it as surely as one feels a change in the temperature" (Obama, *Audacity*,

233). But there is a delicate balance between appreciating the racial progress that has been made and not forgetting the past.

To think clearly about race, then, requires us to see the world on a split screen – to maintain in our sights the kind of America that we want while looking squarely at America as it is, to acknowledge the sins of our past and the challenges of the present without becoming trapped in cynicism or despair....But as much as I insist that things have gotten better, I am mindful of this truth as well: Better isn't good enough. (Obama, *Audacity*, 233)

In contrast to Cone, Obama is much more optimistic about the possibility for racial reconciliation and for the advancement of minority groups in America. It is this sense of optimism which imbues his theology with a desire to see the best in people and to believe God wants the best for people. For example, Obama states that his experience in Chicago “confirmed my belief in the capacity of ordinary people to do extraordinary things” (Obama, *Audacity*, 206) and that the black church “understood in an intimate way the biblical call to feed the hungry and clothe the naked and challenge powers and principalities” (Obama, *Audacity*, 207). Seeing people rise up from difficult situations and making something better of their lives caused Obama to see his “faith as more than just a comfort to the weary or a hedge against death; rather, it was an active, palpable agent in the world” (Obama, *Audacity*, 207). For Obama, people of faith have a genuine interest in improving the lives of all people, which means there is hope that tomorrow can be better than today. Obama’s theology reflects this attitude and stands in contrast to Cone’s more dire view of society’s racial condition.

The second way in which Obama’s view of experience informs his theology is the belief that God is at work in every person regardless of race. As we saw in the previous section, Cone recognizes God’s liberating activity as only occurring in the black community. Obama believes that the common experiences of all people bind them together such that one can see God work in

whites just as easily as in blacks. There is enough commonality among people to enable society to think in terms of ‘we’ rather than ‘they’. For example, when speaking of economic opportunities, Obama says, “in their hopes and expectations...black and Latino workers are largely indistinguishable from their white counterparts” (Obama, *Audacity*, 242). The needs of the black worker are very similar to the needs of the white worker. Rather than focusing on the differences, Obama believes there is strength in seeing the universality of the human experience.

Early in his life, Obama struggled with the issue of universal forms of identity versus ethnic identity. As the son of a biracial marriage, Obama wrestled with how he wanted to describe himself. Was he black, white, or something else? Before going off to college, he admits that he suffered from a “crippling fear that I didn’t belong somehow, that unless I dodged and hid and pretended to be something I wasn’t I would forever remain an outsider, with the rest of the world, black and white, always standing in judgment” (Obama, *Dreams*, 111). But through the prodding of his black grandmother and white grandmother, Obama came to appreciate that “only a lack of imagination, a failure of nerve, had made me think that I had to choose between [black and white]...My identity might begin with the fact of my race, but it didn’t, couldn’t, end there. At least that’s what I would choose to believe” (Obama, *Dreams*, 111). Obama chose to believe that identifying with all of humanity is better than identifying with only one ethnic group. In Obama’s thinking, we share a “common destiny,” desire a “common good” (Obama, *Audacity*, 214), and possess “a faith in something bigger than ourselves” (Obama, *Audacity*, 55). The view that we all share a common experience is fundamental to Obama’s theological view of the world. Though God is interested in the lives of oppressed people, he is also interested in the lives of all people. There is a universal commonality to humankind which Obama recognizes and which informs his theology.

Textual Interpretation

The second theological foundation I will examine is authoritative texts. Almost every major world religion has some sort of sacred canon that its believers may look to for moral and theological guidance. Investigating how one wrestles with religious texts is informative because it can illuminate how a person thinks about the world. It demonstrates how one views authority both in a theological sense and in a spiritual sense. Are truths eternal or are they reinterpreted for each generation? What authority do sacred writings have on people now? Obviously the answers to these questions are complex, but these are the issues at stake when investigating James Cone's and Barack Obama's approaches to textual interpretation. While there are some similarities between their interpretive approaches, there are also some important differences that I will examine by focusing on Cone first and then Obama.

The purpose of this present section is to investigate how Cone chooses to interpret texts in his effort to build a foundation for Black Liberation Theology. According to Cone, the Bible is an integral component to his theological foundation. In fact, "there can be no theology of the Christian Gospel which does not take into account the biblical witness....it is an indispensable witness to God's revelation and is thus a primary source for Christian thinking about God" (Cone, *Liberation*, 31). As Cone said, the Bible is a "witness" to God's activity in the world and should be considered a "primary source" for Christians. Scripture is given an important place in Cone's theology because it "can serve as a guide for checking the contemporary interpretation of God's revelation, making certain that our interpretation is consistent with the biblical witness" (Cone, *Liberation*, 31). So in Cone's mind, the way in which believers experience God now

ought to be tested against the experience of believers in the Bible. Scripture acts as a spiritual yardstick by which Christians can judge their personal experiences.

But even though the Bible is an “indispensable witness to God’s revelation,” Cone is against a literal interpretation of the Bible for three very important reasons (Cone, Liberation, 31). First, Cone is against a literal interpretation because such a hermeneutic distracts from the core mission of God, which is liberation. Cone writes that “Unfortunately, emphasis on verbal infallibility leads to unimportant concerns” (Cone, Liberation, 31). By focusing on the literal words of Scripture as the sole authority of Christian thinking, Cone believes that one spends more time trying to understand first century problems than trying to solve modern day problems. An example Cone cites as an “unimportant concern” is whether or not a whale actually swallowed the prophet Jonah. Cone does not believe the black community cares about who wrote the Bible or if its words are infallible. According to Cone, the African American community is more concerned about “inhuman laws against the oppressed” and making “freedom a reality for all human beings” (Cone, Liberation, 31). The struggles of oppressed people should be the focus of Biblical interpretation according to Cone. Trying to figure out what certain verses meant in a first century context is unimportant in the face of what Scripture means in 21st century America. The Bible needs to speak to the present moment. In Cone’s view, theologians should not waste their time fighting abstract hermeneutical battles while real battles, battles worth fighting for, are raging in modern society.

Secondly, Cone is against a literal interpretation of the Bible because it robs contemporary believers of the freedom to make decisions about their faith. According to Cone, a literal interpretation of the Bible causes followers of Christ to look at every situation from a first century Roman perspective. The fact that Jesus lived and ministered in the first century does not

mean contemporary Christians ought to approach every ethical situation from a similar perspective. Cone writes that “we cannot use Jesus’ behavior in the first century as a literal guide for our actions in the twentieth century. To do so is to fall into the same trap that fundamentalists fall into. It destroys Christian freedom, the freedom to make decisions patterned on, but not dictated by, the example of Jesus” (Cone, *Liberation*, 32). The important point for Cone is that Christians ought to “pattern” their lives on the example of Jesus rather than a strict imitation. Proper textual interpretation involves ascertaining principles from the life of Christ which can be applied to today’s situations. For as Cone writes, “the Christian does not ask what Jesus would do, as if Jesus were confined to the first century....Each situation has its own problematic circumstances which force the believer to think through each act of obedience without an absolute ethical guide from Jesus” (Cone, *BT&BP*, 140). It is impossible for every modern situation to be addressed by the Bible directly because many modern problems are unique to this generation. On the contrary, the Bible is a “theological source because of its power to renew for us the disclosure of the holy which was the content of the primordial revelation” (Cone, *Liberation*, 32). For Cone, the Bible should be used as an ethical “guide” rather than a literal mandate.

The third reason Cone is against a literal interpretation of the Bible is because it causes those who hold literalist views to become severely dogmatic and overly confident in their views. In Cone’s thinking, verbal infallibility allows some Christians to hold onto extremely rigid beliefs without an inkling of doubt. It is this lack of doubt which Cone finds troubling. People who have no doubt have the potential to do dangerous things because they are empowered with the belief that God is wholeheartedly behind them. As Cone writes, “if they can be sure, beyond any doubt, of their views of Scripture, then they can be equally resolute in imposing their views

on society as a whole. With God on their side there is nothing that will be spared in the name of the laws of God and men” (Cone, *Liberation*, 32). The confidence which comes from believing one is doing the will of God, as understood in the Bible, can be potentially dangerous in Cone’s opinion. A textual “literalism thirsts for the removal of doubt in religion, enabling believers to justify all kinds of political oppression in the name of God and country” (Cone, *Liberation*, 32). To illustrate his point, Cone cites the Biblical justifications that were used to keep blacks enslaved because it was the will of God. For example, in the New Testament, the apostle Paul exhorts “slaves obey your masters” (Cone, *Liberation*, 32). The white system of oppression interpreted Scripture in a way which would continue the status quo and not challenge the hierarchical structures of slavery. Even African American churches in the post-Civil War era taught a literalist interpretation of Scripture which perpetuated their oppressed status. “Black churches adopted, for the most part, the theology of the white missionaries and taught blacks to forget the present and look to the future” (Cone, *BT&BP*, 105). They taught that the present world, though full of misery and oppression, should not be challenged. The world of the future would be one of freedom and peace. According to Cone, both black and white ministers interpreted various verses of Scripture that supported slavery literally. Because these verses were in the Bible and understood to be directly from God, they could not be questioned. Based on what Cone believes are past abuses based on the literal interpretations of Scripture, Cone rejects literalism as a viable textual interpretive approach.

But what does Cone champion as a proper interpretive approach to the Bible? Very simply, Scripture ought to be interpreted through a lens which acknowledges God’s liberating activity in every story, proverb, psalm, and sermon. Rather than interpreting the Bible literally, Cone believes interpreters should see that the entire Bible is the story of God liberating mankind.

Cone writes, “efforts to prove verbal inspiration of the scriptures result from the failure to see the real meaning of the biblical message: human liberation” (Cone, *Liberation*, 31). Human liberation, unsurprisingly, is the ultimate concern for any hermeneutic of the Bible, because that is the true spirit in which the text was written. In Cone’s mind, the Bible is meant to be a “witness” to God’s continual mission of helping the oppressed, nothing less, nothing more.

Now I would like to turn my attention to Obama. Obama’s interpretive approach -- his hermeneutic -- relies on the interpreter’s individual reason to determine what a text is trying to say. Further, the meaning of a text is not based on the words alone but on a whole host of other factors such as the writer’s context, language, purpose in writing, and so forth. The job of the reader, according to Obama, is to understand these complex factors and to use them to interpret a particular work. One cannot merely rest with ascertaining the author’s original intent. No, the role of the thinking reader is to start from the author’s original intent and to make the work relevant to current realities.

As a constitutional law professor at the University of Chicago, Obama understood well the need to interpret older writings and to apply them to today’s setting. Indeed, every lawyer is trained to interpret the law and to apply it to specific situations. Because Obama had the opportunity to teach students about the various ways one interprets the law, particularly the Constitution, the task of understanding Obama’s hermeneutic is made easier. If one were to summarize Obama’s interpretive style it, would be characterized as viewing a text as a living document speaking differently to each generation. Obama’s view of Constitutional interpretation is not only based on an appreciation of the past, but also on a belief that each generation must understand the text in its contemporary setting. As Obama puts it, “sometimes the original understanding can take you only so far – that on the truly hard cases, the truly big arguments, we

have to take context, history, and the practical outcomes of a decision into account” (Obama, *Audacity*, 89). Constitutional interpretation cannot be done in a vacuum; it has to be understood in its present context. For example, the Founders did not address the reasonableness of an NSA computer data mining operation or the rights of freedom of speech in the context of the Internet. Positions must be developed in light of what the Constitutional authors did write. “The Founding Fathers and original ratifiers have told us *how* to think but are no longer around to tell us *what* to think. We are on our own, and have only our own reason and our judgment to rely on” (Obama, *Audacity*, 89). Thus it is necessary for each reader to interpret the Constitution for his or her generation.

To make Obama’s interpretive style even clearer, it is useful to see how he describes the two major camps within the U.S. Supreme Court and then to see where he ultimately places his allegiances. On one side of the court is the conservative camp, which generally sticks to a strict interpretation of the Constitution, not deviating too far from the authors’ original intent. On the other side of the court is the more liberal camp, which believes in a looser interpretation of the Constitution, allowing judges to extend the original meaning of the text to encompass contemporary situations. Justice Antonin Scalia is considered a champion of the conservative approach while Justice Stephen Breyer lies strongly in the liberal camp. As a Constitutional Law professor, Obama says he appreciates the “temptation on the part of Justice Scalia and others to assume our democracy should be treated as fixed and unwavering; the fundamentalist faith that if the original understanding of the Constitution is followed without question or deviation, and if we remain true to the rules that the Founders set forth, as they intended, then we will be rewarded and all good will flow” (Obama, *Audacity*, 90). Some argue that being faithful to the original intent of the Constitutional authors is the goal or should be the goal of judges so that

whatever success the U.S. has enjoyed up to this point will continue. But Obama believes this view is naïve and does not allow judges to face the modern world with the interpretive tools they need in order to address contemporary issues that the founders never had to face. “Ultimately, though, I have to side with Justice Breyer’s view of the Constitution – that it is not a static but rather a living document, and must be read in the context of an ever-changing world” (Obama, *Audacity*, 90).

In addition to his view that the Constitution is a living document, Obama also believes the Constitution provides a “framework” rather than a “blueprint” for proper governance. The founding fathers built a system that defines the general rules of the game, and leaves it up to each generation to fill in the details. The genius of the authors’ design “is not that it provides us a fixed blueprint for action, the way a draftsman plots a building’s construction, [but] it provides us with a framework and with rules, but fidelity to these rules will not guarantee a just society or assure agreement on what’s right” (Obama, *Audacity*, 92). Issues such as abortion, school prayer, and gay marriage are not issues that can be answered directly by looking to the Constitution; rather, the Constitution provides a foundation for how one debates these issues in the public realm. The Constitution is “designed to force us into a conversation, a ‘deliberative democracy’ in which all citizens are required to engage in a process of testing their ideas against an external reality, persuading others of their point of view, and building shifting alliances of consent” (Obama, *Audacity*, 92). The separation of powers assures that no one branch of government grows too strong to dominate the other branches and thus limit debate. The purpose of a federated government is to allow as many voices as possible so that meaningful dialogue can and will happen in the public square.

Since the purpose of this study is to understand Obama’s faith in light of his religious

background, it's important to investigate how his interpretive style applies to religious texts. As a committed Christian for more than twenty years, Obama acknowledges the Bible as a foundational text for the Christian faith. But as a non-conservative Christian, he does not subscribe to the idea that the Bible contains infallible truth and must be interpreted literally. For him, it contains important stories of moral leadership, historical record, and spiritual guidance. Literal interpretation is mistaken and leads to fundamentalist thinking, which challenges God-given reason. Obama writes, "when I read the Bible, I do so with the belief that it is not a static text but the Living Word and that I must be continually open to new revelations – whether they come from a lesbian friend or a doctor opposed to abortion" (Obama, *Audacity*, 224).

But Obama's analysis goes even further. To believe every word of the Bible and to interpret them literally would be completely untenable in a modern context. There are too many contradictory concepts within Scripture. Even for those concepts which are easily understood, some are completely counter to modern sensibilities of right and wrong. For example, when Obama writes about his faith in *Audacity of Hope*, he challenges those people who believe America should support public policy that is more in line with a strict interpretation of Biblical principles. He asks "should we go with Leviticus, which suggest that slavery is all right and eating shellfish is an abomination? How about Deuteronomy, which suggests stoning your child if he strays from the faith? Or should we just stick to the Sermon on the Mount – a passage so radical that it's doubtful that our Defense Department would survive its application?" (Obama, *Audacity*, 218). Like it or not, the Bible, if read in certain ways, contains passages which seem hopelessly out of sync with contemporary mores and ways of thinking. For those individuals who want to impose a more traditional Biblical public policy, Obama believes they are out of

step with the modern society and do not reflect the ever changing views of contemporary thinking.

Obama uses Biblical examples to make his point that strict adherence to Scripture or blind faith is not something the political state can enforce. The story of Abraham and Isaac from the book of Genesis is considered a classic example of unwavering faith to God. Abraham is asked to sacrifice his son Isaac as an offering, and Abraham almost carries it out until God stops him at the last moment. Though many Christians view this emotion filled episode as representing the pinnacle of strong faith, Obama says that if such an event were to happen now, outrage would be directed toward Abraham for abusing his son. Society would condemn Abraham, and it would do so “because God doesn’t reveal Himself or His angels to all of us in a single moment. We do not hear what Abraham hears, do not see what Abraham sees, true as those experiences may be” (Obama, *Audacity*, 220). So, according to Obama, the lesson of this story should be one of faithfulness to God in general rather than a license to commit child sacrifice. Reason must be applied to every text rather than simple-minded adherence. According to Obama, the “best we can do is act in accordance with those things that are possible for all of us to know, understanding that a part of what we know to be true – as individuals or communities of faith – will be true for us alone” (Obama, *Audacity*, 220).

This view is deeply troubling to many evangelical Christians, for whom the Bible is the very Word of God and imparts universal, timeless truth, but he does represent a younger generation skeptical of institutions, creeds, and authority. Mansfield characterizes Obama’s approach as “evidence of the postmodern picking and choosing” that is characteristic of today’s thinking among non-traditional Christians (Mansfield, 57). For example, Obama is supportive of civil unions for homosexual couples even though a majority of evangelical Christians continue to

see the Bible as opposed to them. He writes, “I [am not] willing to accept a reading of the Bible that considers an obscure line in Romans to be more defining of Christianity than the Sermon on the Mount” (Obama, *Audacity*, 222). Clearly, Obama does not reject Scripture, but he questions literal interpretation and looks to individual reason to adjudicate its tensions.

So, if modern Christians should read their Bibles more critically and not just expect to pull spiritual guidance from the text word for word, how should Christians in America bring their faith to bear in public? Just like the prominent Catholic thinker, Richard Neuhaus, wrote in his book, *The Naked Public Square*, Obama believes in a public philosophy (Neuhaus 2). This public philosophy acts as the common language citizens use to communicate with one another about moral and political issues. For Obama, this public philosophy is a philosophy based on reason and the ability of each person to interact with ideas without having to believe in some religious authority such as a higher power, a canon of texts, or a religious institution. According to Obama, reason is available to everyone but religious truth is not. “Almost by definition, faith and reason operate in different domains and involve different paths to discerning truth” (Obama, *Audacity*, 219).

These two “paths”, as Obama refers to them, are both valid ways of discovering truth, but only one path has a place in the public square. And that path is the one informed by reason. It is not Obama’s opinion that religious individuals should not engage in public discourse; it is that they should not bring religious arguments into the conversation as religious arguments, expecting others, who may not have the same religious convictions, to accept them. Obama writes for example, “If I want others to listen to me, then I have to explain why abortion violates some principle that is accessible to people of all faiths, including those with no faith at all” (Obama, *Audacity*, 219). Saying that the Bible condemns abortion or that a certain interpretation of the

Bible condemns abortion does not carry much weight with people who do not see the Bible as having any moral authority. Yet, it is impractical or almost impossible to ask religious people to leave their most strongly held beliefs at the door and to engage in public discussion about important issues. “To say that men and women should not inject their ‘personal morality’ into public-policy debates is a practical absurdity; our law is by definition a codification of morality, much of it grounded in the Judeo-Christian tradition” (Obama, *Audacity*, 218).

So, one could almost construct a formula to describe Obama’s thinking about law. It might go something like this. Religion influences people’s understanding about moral issues. Since the law encapsulates the moral sentiments of a society, it makes sense that as those moral sentiments change so does the law. But Obama also believes that religion is not the only influencer of moral issues. In fact, there is an ever-growing segment of society that does not rely on religion for spiritual or moral guidance. Regardless of one’s religious background, a certain sense of proportion needs to be shown when it comes to listening to moral arguments. As Obama puts it, “I am more prone to listen to those who are as outraged by the indecency of homelessness as they are by the indecency of music videos” (Obama, *Audacity*, 221). Compromise and even-handedness are the principles necessary for engaging in public debate concerning policy and legislation. The law is not meant to be a static thing that remains the same for all time. It necessarily changes to meet the needs of each new generation.

In this chapter, I have examined the two topics, which I believe are important to the foundation of Cone’s Black Liberation Theology and Obama’s theology. Specifically, I investigated the role that experience plays in both theologies. In the case of Cone, we saw that the African American experience is critical to understanding Black Liberation Theology. The black experience, especially as it relates to oppression by a dominant white society, infuses

Black Liberation Theology with a unique identification with the poor and dispossessed. For Obama, experience is also a foundational component to his theology. But in Obama's case, the black experience is a source of optimism rather than shame. The positive strides that African Americans have made over the past forty years indicate that society is transforming and headed in a better direction.

The second topic I investigated as a theological foundation was textual interpretation. Cone's interpretive style rejects literal interpretations of Scripture in favor of interpretations which illustrate God's liberating activity in the world. Because human liberation is the heart of God's mission, the Bible must be viewed through this lens. All other interpretive styles are secondary or even worse, amoral. Obama, too, puts forth a non-literal hermeneutic, which applies to the Bible, the Constitution, and any other important text. Works such as these are living documents, which must be interpreted through the lens of reason and context. Based on these two foundational topics, I have tried to lay the necessary groundwork for understanding the implications of Cone's theology and Obama's theology. In chapter four, I will go into greater detail about how these theologies speak to contemporary religious and social issues.

CHAPTER 4: THE POLITICAL AND SOCIAL IMPLICATIONS OF BLACK LIBERATION THEOLOGY AND OBAMAN THEOLOGY

In the previous chapter, we looked at several components in the foundation of Black Liberation Theology and Obaman theology. Specifically, we looked at the importance of experience and textual interpretation as they relate to forming Cone's and Obama's religious worldview. Now, I'd like to turn our attention to some of the practical implications of the two theologies under consideration in order to understand in what ways they are similar and in what ways they are different. I will examine four areas that are essential to understanding the political and social implications of Cone's theology and Obama's theology. First, I believe it is important to understand how each theology defines the Gospel. Secondly, I want to understand how each theology defines the term Christian. Though these first two topics are clearly related, I believe they each deserve separate analysis. Third, I will explore what these theologies have to say about the purpose and role of the Christian Church. And finally, I will investigate the role political and religious violence plays in each theology. I will discuss each topic in order and then within each area, I will examine Cone's theology first and Obama's theology second.

Definition of the Gospel

The first topic I want to examine is how Cone's and Obama's theology define what the Gospel is or ought to be. For many Christians, the Gospel is understood to be the central message of Christianity. It is the definitive statement about the mission and purpose of the Christian faith. Though Christianity is complex, varied, and diverse, the act of defining the Gospel brings the most important aspects of Christian faith to the forefront of discussion. In

modern terms, the Gospel could be viewed as the mission statement for Christians and for the Christian Church. For many, including Cone and Obama, one's view of God and mankind drives what the practical implications of the Gospel message are because belief about what God is doing in the world informs belief about what mankind's response should be. While Cone and Obama agree on some general aspects of the Gospel, I believe they differ in some other more subtle ways. I will first examine Cone's views and then Obama's.

It should be said from the beginning that Cone's views of Christianity and the Gospel are grounded in his belief that God is single-mindedly concerned about the poor and the oppressed. Everything God is, does, or will do is centered on this principle. The Gospel of God and all of faith must be viewed through this prism according to Cone (Cone, BT&BP, 35). But Cone does not suggest that he is projecting his views onto the definition of the Gospel; he believes that his view springs out of a simple reading of the New Testament. The life of Christ, as described in the Gospels, is evidence detailing God's overall mission in the world. For Cone, every aspect of theology and faith must begin with Jesus: ethics, theology, and in this case, the Gospel itself. In *Black Theology and Black Power*, Cone asserts that "Christ is the essence of Christianity" and "in contrast to many religions, Christianity revolves around a Person, without whom its existence ceases to be" (Cone, BT&BP, 34). As the central figure in Christian faith, Jesus' life is the example by which all spiritual decisions ought to be made. Cone says it this way, "to talk of God or of man without first talking about Jesus Christ is to engage in idle, abstract words which have no relation to the Christian experience of revelation" (Cone, BT&BP, 35). Later on, when I examine Obama's perspective, I hope to show that while Obama views Christ as an important spiritual figure, Jesus is considered just one spiritual voice among many.

By placing Christ and his ministry at the center of the Christian message, Cone bases his view of the Gospel on his understanding of Jesus' life. I think this is an important point to consider since those things that Cone focuses on may not be the same things concentrated on by other theologians. Cone's passion and focus is squarely on the black push for equality and freedom. Based on what we've examined thus far of Cone's theology, it is not surprising to hear Cone say that "Jesus' work is essentially one of liberation" (Cone, BT&BP, 35). Christ came to bring freedom to those who are oppressed and to align his concerns with those who are downtrodden. Cone says that through Jesus, "God enters human affairs and takes sides with the oppressed. Their suffering becomes his; their despair divine despair" (Cone, BT&BP, 36). Oppressed peoples are ennobled by their association with Jesus' redemptive work. "He is God himself coming into the very depths of human existence for the sole purpose of striking off the chains of slavery, thereby freeing man from ungodly principalities and powers that hinder his relationship with God" (Cone, BT&BP, 35). So the Christian mission is to enable all humanity to have a relationship with God unhindered by oppression and sin. But as Cone constantly reminds his readers, America is full of oppression, specifically racial and ethnic discrimination.

Therefore, the mission of the God in contemporary society is to bring racial injustice to an end and to promote the aspirations of oppressed communities. But this ideal cannot be achieved alone; it is aided by the divine hand of God. Cone believes that, based on the example of Jesus, we can know that God is fully behind those who fight oppression. In Cone's view, "the Gospel proclaims that God is with us now, actively fighting the forces that would make man captive. And it is the task of theology and the church to know where God is at work so that we can join him in this fight against evil" (Cone, BT&BP, 39). The evil which Cone is most worried about is racial oppression, specifically in America. For Cone, the Gospel for the present

American generation is that God is actively working in the black community to liberate them from white oppression and racial discrimination. All other concerns are secondary to the primary need to fight racial injustice because, as Christ's life manifests, the oppressed are the center of God's activity.

Black Theology is not prepared to accept any doctrine of God, man, Christ, or Scripture which contradicts the black demand for freedom now. It believes that any religious idea which exalts black dignity and creates a restless drive for freedom must be affirmed. All ideas which are opposed to the struggle for black self-determination or are irrelevant to it must be rejected as the work of the Antichrist (Cone, BT&BP, 120).

The Gospel undergirds the cause of black freedom, because the struggle for racial equality is synonymous with the very nature of God's activity in the world. So, to understand Cone's view of the Gospel, one must appreciate the centrality of Christ to the Christian message, accept that Jesus' life was centered on liberating the oppressed, understand that the black community is oppressed, and finally believe that God's main activity in today's society is liberating the black community from white oppression. While this summarizes Cone's view of the Gospel, it is not Obama's view.

If Cone's view of the Gospel was shaped by the Civil Rights struggle of the 1960's, Obama's view of the Gospel was shaped by his non-traditional "post-modern" upbringing in Hawaii and Indonesia. I have already discussed Obama's various religious influences in chapter two, but it is worth noting again that Obama's religious upbringing was markedly different than most African Americans (Mansfield, 4). Obama's approach to faith represents an emerging and growing segment of American society. It is important to recognize Obama's religious experience, because it has shaped his view of the Christian Gospel. Specifically, it is this author's contention that Obama's definition of the Gospel is broad and extremely inclusive in

nature. But in order to explain this perspective, an examination of Obama's religious viewpoint must be made.

Obama sees religion as an expression of a deeply internal spiritual experience, which manifests itself in various ways. According to Obama, all people "value a faith in something bigger than ourselves, whether that something expresses itself in formal religion or ethical precepts" (Obama, *Audacity*, 55). Every faith tradition taps into a common desire to explain the deeply personal issues of life. As Obama says, religion and ethical precepts are evidence that human beings share a universal desire to understand "something" greater than themselves. In fact, Obama goes on to say, "I believe that there are many paths to the same place and that is a belief that there is a higher power, a belief that we are connected as a people" (Mansfield, 55). This is very different from Cone's contention that Christ's sacrificial life is a special example of God's intervention in mankind and ought to be lifted up as a singular religious model for emulation.

So, if there are multiple paths to a right standing with God or a higher power, confidence in one's own tradition could be weakened. And for this very reason Obama is hesitant to make explicit truth claims about faith since a healthy dose of doubt is part of his religious perspective. Mansfield echoes this point when he writes, "Obama does speak with a thoughtful lack of clarity, or perhaps with well-considered doubt, for doubt is at the heart of Obama's religion" (Mansfield, 54). Obama is very open about his doubts when he writes, "I must admit that I may have been infected with society's prejudices and predilections and attributed them to God; that Jesus' call to love one another might demand a different conclusion; I don't believe such doubts make me a bad Christian. I believe they make me human, limited in my understandings of God's purpose and therefore prone to sin" (Obama, *Audacity*, 223). This attitude of uncertainty stands in stark

contrast to Cone's more confident stance. For example, Cone uses very strong language when he says that "there is no place in this war of liberation for nice white people who want to avoid taking sides and remain friends with both the racists and the Negro. To hear the Word is to decide: Are you with us or against us" (Cone, *BT&BP*, 67)? Cone is sure of his views, while Obama takes a more circumspect approach.

Even though Obama is not completely certain about his religious faith, according to Obama, this does not mean that he is "unanchored" in his faith (Obama, *Audacity*, 224). Having doubts does not cause Obama to lack moral direction in his life, and it does not stop him from being able to define a religious mission for himself. Rather according to Obama, "there are some things that I'm absolutely sure about – the Golden Rule, the need to battle cruelty in all its forms, the value of love and charity, humility and grace" (Obama, *Audacity*, 224). Obama chooses to emphasize the ethical and social justice aspects of the Christian tradition since that is something he is sure is true and good. Questions of doctrine, eternal life, and the exclusivity of Christian faith are minimized in favor of a strongly moral message. Obama explains that he "values the constellation of behaviors that express our mutual regard for one another: honesty, fairness, humility, kindness, courtesy, and compassion" (Obama, *Audacity*, 55). But even this call to live an ethical life is not exclusive; in Obama's mind, it is a universal message. In his discussion of faith in *Audacity of Hope*, Obama points out, "organized religion doesn't have a monopoly on virtue, and one need not be religious to make moral claims or appeal to a common good" (Obama, *Audacity*, 214). So, Obama's mission for the Christian faith is one of moral goodness, but even this is not an exclusively Christian message. It is a universal Gospel, even though Obama does not use this term himself. Obama's view of the Gospel, such as can be constructed from his own words, is to "battle cruelty in all its forms", to understand "the value of love" and

to live a life of “grace” (Obama, *Audacity*, 224). Cone’s dictate to fight racial oppression would fit within Obama’s view of the Gospel, but it would only be one example of Obama’s larger project of battling “cruelty in all its forms”. Obama’s gospel goes beyond just the alleviation of racial discrimination and extends its meaning to issues such as education, health initiatives, and gender equality. While Cone may find many things to like in Obama’s gospel, Cone’s gospel still places a singular priority on racial justice. In this way, we can see that Obama’s view of the Gospel parallels Cone’s understanding, but it is more universal and inclusive in scope.

Definition of a Christian

The second implication of Cone and Obama’s theology that I want to examine is how each defines the term Christian. Who is a Christian? Answering a question like this can be a difficult undertaking for both the scholar and, more importantly, the believer. How a person answers this question can say a lot about that person and say a lot about his or her view of the world. By most estimations, Obama has never directly answered this question either in his speeches or his writings. But it is possible to get an idea of his thoughts on this issue by carefully inspecting what he has said and done. Much of what Obama believes about the Christian faith comes from his experience in Jeremiah Wright’s church. Wright and his mentor, Cone, give a clear idea of who they think are Christians and who they do not think are Christians. Obama has a different definition of the term Christian than does Cone. I will examine each person’s definition by first looking at Cone and then Obama.

Cone is quite clear on who he thinks is a Christian and who he does not think belongs to this category. For Cone, a Christian is someone who is wholeheartedly involved in the project of

promoting liberation and human freedom. Cone feels justified in making this stark contrast between “true” Christians and “fake” Christians because the work of God, according to Cone, is too important to be corrupted by individuals who deny the true mission of God. And as I mentioned in the first section of this chapter, the Gospel mission of God, according to Cone, is simply the liberation of the oppressed. As Cone writes, “whoever fights for the poor, fights for God; whoever risks his life for the helpless and unwanted, risks his life for God. God is active now in the lives of those men who feel an absolute identification with all who suffer because there is no justice in the land” (Cone, BT&BP, 47). God’s activity in the world is centered on his desire to help the oppressed, and anyone who involves themselves in that project is within God’s will. Flipping the argument around, Cone writes, “anyone who does not promote human freedom is not within God’s will” (Cone, BT&BP, 39).

According to Cone, the world is broken up into two very distinct groups. On the one side is the group which identifies with the oppressed and is considered a true Christian as labeled by Cone. On the other side is everyone else, including many self-professed Christians, who Cone thinks do not represent the true nature of Christ. Cone’s taxonomy is singularly focused on the issue of black liberation to the exclusion of anything else. While some critics may voice concern that Cone’s classification seems to be based only on one characteristic, he is not deterred (Cone, BT&BP, 68). Cone realizes that splitting the world into these categories is dangerous, but “while we should be careful in drawing the line, the line must nevertheless be drawn” (Cone, BT&BP, 80). The fact that framing the world in such stark terms is unpopular does not stop Cone, because true Christianity is unapologetically concerned with freeing oppressed people (Cone, BT&BP, 35). “In the New Testament, Jesus is not for all, but for the oppressed, the poor and unwanted of society, and against oppressors. The God of the biblical tradition is not uninvolved

or neutral regarding human affairs; God is decidedly involved...taking sides with the oppressed of the land” (Cone, *Liberation*, 6). For fear of belaboring the point too much, it is enough to say that Cone believes the world is divided into those who fight for the oppressed and those who do not.

The most important organization involved in perpetuating an oppressive society and the most popular recipient of Cone’s scorn is the white church. Since the nation’s inception, the white church has been arrayed against the black community. The white church has provided religious sanction for continuing a divided society in which whites dominated blacks. For Cone, this is unconscionable and is the height of hypocrisy. Cone is scathing in his criticism of the white church when he comments, “if there is any contemporary meaning of the Antichrist, the white church seems to be a manifestation of it. It is the enemy of Christ” (Cone, *BT&BP*, 73). I will say more about Cone and Obama’s view of the church in the next section of this chapter, but for right now, it is enough to say that Cone believes the white church is not Christian. The white church has utterly failed to live up to God’s ordained mission for it, and if there is to be any reconciliation between God and the white church, then “it means that they must change sides, giving up all claims to lofty neutrality. It means that they will identify utterly with the oppressed, thus inevitably tasting the sting of oppression themselves” (Cone, *BT&BP*, 81). Identification with the African American community is fundamental to reforming the white church.

Now let’s turn our attention to Obama’s definition of Christian. Because of Obama’s unique upbringing, he has a distinctive view of Christianity and a broad sense of what it means to be a Christian. Much has already been said about his formative years, but it is worth reemphasizing his unconventional childhood since it played such an important role in Obama’s

worldview later in life. By growing up in a home where all religions were taught and where an appreciation for many different spiritual perspectives was encouraged, Obama came to the Christian faith with an open mind, not being quick to judge. Religion was a way of instilling values in a person, a way to experience community, and a place to pursue truth. Obama's grandparents were disenchanted Christians, his mother relied on a form of secular humanism, his biological father was a nominal Muslim approaching atheism, and his stepfather followed a mixture of southeast Asian Islam and animist beliefs. In this milieu, religion was kept at arm's length. It was something to be appreciated and not necessarily something to be believed. There was good in all religions, not just one.

So, it is not surprising to learn that Obama's view of the Christian faith is broad and inclusive. Obama is comfortable considering a wide array of people as Christian, but he is not even interested in labeling people as in or out. According to Obama, being a Christian does not mean having all the answers and having "faith doesn't mean you don't have doubts" (Obama, *Audacity*, 243). Faith, of the sort that Obama considers to be genuine, embraces doubt as part of an honest approach to God. According to Obama, the Christian faith is about pursuing a relationship with God and relying on His providence to help mankind discover His will and purpose for humanity (Obama, *Audacity*, 237). Conversation with God is not limited to just Christians, but it is available to all people of faith, whether Jew or Muslim, Hindu or Buddhist (Obama, *Audacity*, 239). In Obama's view, Christianity is a very important way to discover God, but it is only one way. It is arrogant to think that God can only work through one faith tradition because this limits God and limits his ability to reach all people. Besides, if doubt is a healthy component of faith, it is possible that no religious worldview is true.

This non-traditional approach to faith is not unique to Obama. The argument could be made that such a view has been around since faith in Christ began, but most would agree that it is a view that has gained popularity in the last twenty to thirty years, at least in the United States. Obama seems to embody a burgeoning segment of the country which holds a more liberal understanding of faith and Christianity in particular. It is a view which is more inclusive and not worried about definitions or creeds, or doctrines, or belief statements. It is a view which values inclusion over exclusion and values non-sectarianism over sectarianism. “He is the product of a new, post-modern generation that picks and chooses its own truth from traditional faith, much as a man customizes his meal at a buffet” (Mansfield, 52). If the previous President represented a dividing of America along religious lines, then it is possible that this President represents a stronger desire to include all religious voices in the national conversation.

But Obama is not just the product of a non-traditional Christian faith informed by a liberal mother and an unconventional upbringing. He has also been influenced by a strong African American Church experience from his years with the Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago. The ethos of the black church, especially the black church as expressed by Trinity United, informed Obama’s faith in a way that melded his non-traditional past with a strong sense of African American identity. Jeremiah Wright’s church gave Obama a place to exercise his faith, even though it was fragile and not well-formed at the time. As Obama terms it, the black church provided “a vessel for my beliefs” (Obama, *Audacity*, 206) and a “community of shared traditions in which to ground my most deeply held beliefs” (Obama, *Audacity*, 206). Obama did not have all his questions answered, but he never expected to. “He came as many of his generation do – not so much to join a tradition as to find belonging among a people; not so much to accept a body of doctrine as to find welcome for what they already believe; not so much to

surrender their lives but to enhance who they already are” (Mansfield, 50). Spiritual truth, while important, was not the only reason Obama reached out to the African American church. Rather than seeking answers, the church provided community. And this community had a uniquely African American perspective, which emboldened Obama’s faith and gave him a vehicle to express his most deeply held beliefs.

But there are important ways in which Obama’s faith differs from the faith of Wright and that of his mentor James Cone. Obama did not simply take the faith that was preached to him and carry it with him unfiltered and unexamined. He wrestled with his faith and framed it in a way that made sense to him and fit into his ever evolving worldview. While Trinity United provided the framework through which Obama experienced his new found faith, it didn’t so much define his faith as influence it. This church on the South Side of Chicago was born out of the 60’s Civil Rights movement and was unapologetic in its concern for black power and black rights. The plight of African Americans was the driving concern for Reverend Wright and his ministry at Trinity United. Yes, the church preached the Gospel of Jesus Christ, but it was a Gospel resonating with racial and social concerns, especially concerns of blacks in America. It is in this milieu that Obama immersed himself for nearly twenty years, but still, Wright and Obama define the term Christian differently.

For Obama, the term Christian is broad and inclusive. His faith is not about creeds, doctrines, or positions. Faith is a journey to discover God’s will in all its forms. This way of thinking is not unique to Obama; it is representative of a post-modern way of looking at faith. There is less concern for allegiance to a particular denomination or sect and more emphasis on broad ethical guidelines. Large religious institutions are viewed with suspicion. Denominational

affiliations are unnecessary divisions within the larger Christian community and tear away at the ecumenical unity, which should be at the heart of sincere believers.

An important hallmark of Obama's Christian faith is doubt. Some may see doubt as a hindrance to faith, but Obama sees it as a positive since it is more intellectually honest than a blind unexamined faith. Believing that one has all the answers is not only wrongheaded but dangerous. In fact, terrible things have been done in the name of undoubting faith. In many ways, confidence can be a good thing, but for Obama, when it comes to faith, overconfident certainty leads to a stubborn uncompromising religion. When he first decided to join Trinity United, Obama was pleased that his "religious commitment did not require [him] to suspend critical thinking, disengage from the table for economic and social justice, or otherwise retreat from the world that [he] knew and loved" (Obama, *Audacity*, 208). He concedes, "the questions I had did not magically disappear," but rather he brought his doubt to the church and believed that his mission as a Christian was to navigate God's will for his life while still holding on to his unanswered questions (Obama, *Audacity*, 208).

It is this doubt that causes Obama to have a broader understanding of what faith is and what a Christian is. The church is a place to express one's gratitude, to grow one's faith, and to draw strength from a community of fellow seekers. The church does not have all the answers, and for Obama, that's acceptable. Seeking to know God is the core of the Christian life. Knowing God's will with one-hundred-percent clarity is impossible and to act as if you do know it perfectly is pride in its worst form. This is one reason why the African American church in Chicago appealed to Obama: "the historically black church offered me a second insight: that faith doesn't mean that you don't have doubts, or that you relinquish your hold on this world" (Obama, *Audacity*, 207). It is precisely this fact that made the black church so relevant,

especially to a young man struggling to find his identity as a man and particularly as a black man. He felt that he could enter into a community without preconditions and without pretense. In Obama's opinion, the black church was especially accepting of people with struggles, because so many people within the black community had problems stemming from racial oppression. The African American church in the United States was founded by people who were undergoing persecution and were just struggling to get by. Pretending that everything was okay or that one's spiritual journey was complete was foolishness. "In the black community, the lines between sinner and saved were more fluid: the sins of those who came to church were not so different from the sins of those who didn't, and so were as likely to be talked about with humor as with condemnation" (Obama, *Audacity*, 207). The traditionally black church provided a welcoming environment for those with problems, questions, and everything in between.

Purpose/Role of the Church

Barack Obama participated in Reverend Wright's Trinity United Church of Christ for nearly twenty years and was a member for almost that entire time. According to Obama's own autobiography, Obama's involvement with Trinity United and Jeremiah Wright are at the center of Obama's personal faith journey. This is the church where Obama accepted Christ as his savior, it is the church where he got married, and it is the church where his children were baptized. Not only did Trinity United provide a community to mark special events in Obama's early adult life, but it shaped him personally. Obama's involvement with the church influenced his view of the black community and more specifically of the black religious community. According to Obama's own admission, this church shaped Obama's identity as a black man, as a

Christian, and as a community activist. If we are to take Obama's words seriously, then it is important for us to examine the purpose and role of the church, specifically in the context of Black Liberation Theology since the theology is the foundation of the ministry at Trinity United. I hope to show that Cone's view of the church can be summarized by two major elements. First, the church's main purpose is and always has been a mission to liberate the oppressed in society. Secondly, a church which does not wholeheartedly pursue this mission of liberation is antithetical to God's desire for His church.

Liberating the Oppressed

James Cone wrote the seminal work on Black Liberation Theology, *Black Theology and Black Power*. The entire work deals with the issue of race in America and how the Christian Gospel should be reinterpreted in light of the racial oppression present in society. Cone paints a very clear picture of what he believes the role and purpose of the Christian Church is or should be. In Cone's mind, there is no doubt about what the church should be doing and what it should be about. Christians should already know since the direction has been clearly set by God himself. Cone says, "[the church's] sole purpose for being is to be a visible manifestation of God's work in the affairs of men" (Cone, BT&BP, 65). On the surface this may seem broad, but he narrows his definition of God's church to be "that people called into being by the power and love of God to share in his revolutionary activity for the liberation of man" (Cone, BT&BP, 63). Liberation of men is the central component of the church, and this liberation is not only spiritual, but it is social and political. We will look more closely at this view of the church in the next few pages, but for now the important aspect to recognize is that the church is supposed to be God's physical representation here on earth. For Cone and by extension Reverend Wright, the church is supposed to reflect everything God stands for. God is for justice; therefore the church should

be about justice. God is for love; therefore the church should be about love. And since God is for freedom, the church should be about freedom.

By far the most important thing that God is doing in the world, according to Cone, is liberating the oppressed. God's whole purpose in interacting with humanity is to free those who are being taken advantage of and who cannot defend themselves. This is why Cone writes, "[I]n Christ, God enters human affairs and takes sides with the oppressed. Their suffering becomes his; their despair, divine despair" (Cone, BT&BP, 63). The fundamental character of Christ is empathy with the downtrodden. Christ's entire ministry, according to Cone, is centered on bringing hope to the poor and oppressed. Individual moral ills such as drinking, lying, and adultery take a back seat to political and social wrongs. God is more concerned about freeing the slave than He is about catching the liar. Since the black community in America has historically been oppressed, God's current work in the world is to liberate African Americans from white oppression. This realization of God's intervention "means that the slave now knows that he is a man, and thus resolves to make the enslaver recognize him" (Cone, BT&BP, 63). Cone "contends that such a spirit is not merely compatible with Christianity; in America in the latter twentieth century it is Christianity" (Cone, BT&BP, 63).

The message of the black church calls for society to recognize the intrinsic worth of African Americans and to recognize their equality with the rest of humanity. Part of liberating the oppressed is to remind them that they are loved by God regardless of their social, political, or racial standing. "The black man does not need to hate himself because he is not white, and he should feel no need to become like others....He has worth because God imparts value through loving....It means that God has bestowed on him a new image of himself, so that he can now become what he in fact is" (Cone, BT&BP, 52). This is no small point, because Cone is saying

the focus of God's redeeming work in the world is to lift up the black community and to free them from oppression. "If the Gospel of Christ...frees a man to be for those who labor and are heavily laden, the humiliated and abused, then it would seem that for twentieth-century America the message of black power is the message of Christ himself" (Cone, BP&BT, 37). At the time Cone wrote these words, he firmly believed that lifting blacks from their oppressed state is the main emphasis of God's work.

If freeing blacks from white oppression is God's current project, then that project must also be the work of the church. The entire church-- black and white, rich and poor, North and South-- must take up the mantle of racial equality. Cone says of contemporary church, "to preach in America today is to shout 'Black Power! Black Freedom'" (Cone, BT&BP, 67). To make his point, Cone looks back to the Old Testament story of God's work with the people of Israel. The relationship God had with Israel is illustrative of the relationship God has with humanity now. The entire "history of Israel is a history of God's election of a special, oppressed people to share in his creative involvement in the world on behalf of man" (Cone, BT&BP, 64). God's active involvement with the world took place through a special people dedicated to the work of God. But Israel was special not only because God chose it as a way of manifesting His character, but because the Israelites were the poor and oppressed people of their time. For Cone this is the important aspect of the narrative, because it demonstrates how intensely God is interested in the plight of the oppressed. As he says, "[b]y choosing Israel, the oppressed people among the nations, God reveals that his concern is not for the strong but for the weak, not for the enslaver but for the slave, not for whites but for blacks" (Cone, BT&BP, 64). Cone is aligning God's involvement in the world almost entirely with the single activity of freeing the oppressed.

In ancient Egypt, this meant freeing Israel from Pharaoh's hand, and in modern America, this means freeing blacks from white oppression.

Those people involved in the project of black liberation are participating in God's redemptive work. If the church's purpose in existing is to fulfill God's work in a particular generation, then the mission of the church is to address the suffering of African Americans. In fact, the church "is God's suffering people" and the "call of God constitutes the church, and it is a call to suffering" (Cone, BT&BP, 65). God identifies with the poor and oppressed. One must identify with that segment of society in order to be part of God's working in the world. The further one is from identifying with the oppressed, the further one is from God. Cone is very explicit in his view that a true Christian, and by extension the true church, absolutely must identify with the oppressed. "Christ is to be found, as always, where men are enslaved and trampled underfoot; Christ is found suffering with the suffering" and "[w]here Christ is, there is the church" (Cone, BT&BP, 65). The church is present in the world's suffering because Christ is present in the sufferer.

Church in Black and White

Cone believes that the Christian Church in America can be divided into two different categories, the black church and the white church. True, there are denominational and ecclesiastical differences, but the most important difference in American Church life, according to Cone, is race. The evolution of racial and social attitudes in the United States has led to the emergence of these two very different churches. The first church is the white church, which represents the dominant form of Christian expression in America. The second church is the black church, which was formed out of necessity and desire. These two churches are completely

different not only because of their racial characteristics, but more importantly because of who they are trying to reach. The white church is only concerned with maintaining the status quo and meeting the needs of an oppressive majority. On the other hand, the black church is concerned with the abused African American community. In Cone's view, God is on the side of the black church since "the only redemptive forces left in the denominational churches are to be found in the segregated black churches" (Cone, BT&BP, 78). The white church has forfeited its claim to Christian legitimacy and must look to the black church to see how and where God is working.

For Cone, the white church has utterly failed its calling to represent Christ in this world. Not only has it not lived up to its calling, but it has actually aided in the oppression of the very people God came to save, the poor and weak. In Cone's blistering assessment, "[t]he white church has not merely failed to render services to the poor, but has failed miserably in being a visible manifestation to the world of God's intention for humanity and in proclaiming the Gospel to the world" (Cone, BT&BP, 71). God's whole plan of salvation hinges on helping the poor; by this standard, Cone believes the white church has totally lost its way. "If the real church is the people of God, whose primary task is that of being Christ to the world by proclaiming the message of the Gospel, by rendering services of liberation and by being itself a manifestation of the nature of the new society, then the empirical institutionalized white church has failed on all counts" (Cone, BT&BP, 71).

The biggest problem Cone has with the white church is that it is plagued by the legacy of racism and the prejudice it has against black America. "There is little question that the Church has been and is a racist institution, and there is little sign that she even cares about it" (Cone, BT&BP, 78). From its earliest beginnings, the white church in America has followed a path of supporting the political system which enslaved blacks and kept them subjugated to white

authority. Cone sees no redeeming value in the white church. It is rotten to the core and “must own that it has been and is a racist institution whose primary purpose is the perpetuation of white supremacy” (Cone, BT&BP, 81). Several ministers during the time of slavery wrote books justifying the institution as “ordained of God” (Cone, BT&BP, 74). Theology fortified a social construct making it almost impossible to tear down without radical intervention. Cone sees this as unforgivable and writes, “racism is a complete denial of the Incarnation and thus of Christianity...the white denominational churches are unchristian...they are a manifestation of both a willingness to tolerate it and a desire to perpetuate it” (Cone, BT&BP, 73). In even more striking terms, Cone associates the white church to the Antichrist because “if there is any contemporary mean of the Antichrist, the white church seems to be a manifestation of it” (Cone, BT&BP, 73). In Cone’s estimation, such an institution has lost its legitimacy and must be rejected as an agent of God’s kingdom.

Another problem with the white church according to Cone is its utter lack of relevance. The white church in his estimation has largely ignored Christ’s call to help the poor, visit the prisoner, and free the slave. “We must therefore be reminded that Christ was not crucified on an altar between two candles, but on a cross between two thieves. He is not in our peaceful, quiet, comfortable suburban ‘churches,’ but in the ghetto fighting the racism of churchly white people” (Cone, BT&BP, 66). In Cone’s view, the white church has focused for too long on abstract theology and not on practical application of Christian principles, especially the principle of human liberation. “[T]he Church is more than a talking or a resolution-passing community. Its talk is backed up with relevant involvement in the world as a witness, through action, that what it says is in fact true” (Cone, BT&BP, 68). Cone laments, “society is falling apart for want of moral leadership and moral example, but the white church passes innocuously pious resolutions

and waits to be congratulated” (Cone, BT&BP, 72). There is no room in Cone’s view for a church which talks about spiritual principles without living them out. Turning a blind eye to the most important moral crisis of this generation (i.e. racism) is denying the very reason for the church’s existence (i.e. fighting oppression).

In order to combat a church fundamentally flawed by racism and irrelevance, Cone demands that the church embrace the cause of black liberation. Cone explains that the church must confront its racist past and learn to value all people equally regardless of race. Racism is predicated on the color of one’s skin, and in Cone’s view the Church must learn to embrace color as a balancing force to prejudice. According to Cone, through much of American history, blackness represented inferiority, dirtiness, and lowliness; whiteness became inherently positive. Blackness represented every characteristic related to the poor, the oppressed, the downtrodden, and the abused. In America, to be black is to be despised by society, but in God’s kingdom to be black is to be at the center of God’s redemptive work. “Where there is black, there is oppression; but blacks can be assured that where there is blackness, there is Christ who has taken on blackness so that what is evil in men’s eyes might become good” (Cone, BT&BP, 69). As “God became a despised Jew” (Cone, BT&BP, 68) and was hated by the authorities of his time, so African Americans are despised and hated by their contemporary society. The very thing that white society has made a hallmark of inferiority, God has made a hallmark of celebration. Blackness is now the distinguishing characteristic of God’s redemptive work. This is why God is so invested in the black community. The black community has suffered a great deal simply because of its color. According to Cone, God is liberating the African American community, and celebrating blackness rather than hiding it. “In order to remain faithful to his Word in Christ, his present manifestation must be the very essence of blackness....Thinking of Christ as

nonblack in the twentieth century is as theologically impossible as thinking of him as non-Jewish in the first century” (Cone, BT&BP, 69). The black church is called to confront the world with this truth and to promote the cause of freedom, especially the freedom of oppressed blacks. Society may not be ready for this radical recalibration of racial reconciliation, but according to Cone it has to be done. “But whether whites want to hear it or not, Christ is black, baby, with all the features which are so detestable to white society” (Cone, BT&BP, 68). He continues: “It is the job of the church to become black with him and accept the shame which white society places on blacks. But the church knows that what is shame in the world is holiness to God. Black is holy, that is, it is a symbol of God’s presence in history on behalf of the oppressed man” (Cone, BT&BP, 69). According to Cone, the church is fundamentally corrupt because it has made concern for the oppressed, especially blacks, into something that the church despises. The black church is calling for a reversal of this shift so that the church can return to its original mission of siding with the oppressed rather than the oppressors. “For too long Christ has been pictured as a blue-eyed honky. Black theologians are right: we need to dehonkify him and thus make him relevant to the black condition” (Cone, Liberation, 28). This is the essence of Cone’s Black Liberation Theology, which calls the Christian community to confront its racist past and celebrate the very thing it once despised. As Cone writes, “black is holy”; God is lifting up the oppressed African American community and championing the cause of black liberation.

The Church and Community

Now let’s shift our focus to Obama’s view of the Church. It’s worth noting again that almost all of Obama’s experience with church life has been his involvement with Trinity United Church of Christ, which was pastored by Jeremiah Wright during Obama’s involvement there. Obama did meet with other church groups during his years as a community organizer, but in

terms of membership within a particular church body, Trinity United was Obama's sole experience. It is this author's contention that Obama's membership in Trinity United significantly influenced his ecclesiastical view in two important ways. First, Obama came to see the church as an important vehicle for expressing and sustaining one's religious beliefs in a community of likeminded individuals. Second, he came to regard the church as God's primary instrument to bring about social justice and freedom in society. These two concepts are at the core of Obama's understanding of the church. We'll investigate these ideas in more detail, and I will then compare them against Cone's viewpoint, which we examined in the previous section.

Obama believes that community is the main purpose of the church. Through his writing and his speaking, Obama has stated that, in his opinion, the church is meant to be a place where individuals can share their most strongly held values as a way of providing a sense of community. Another way of describing this community sense is an oneness in spirit. Community may seem an obvious characterization of any social group, but Obama believes that having a sense of community is essential to having peace with oneself and peace with one's neighbors.

Because of Obama's bi-racial heritage and his non-traditional upbringing, the need for community became potentially more acute for him. He felt a separation between himself and those he was trying to serve in South Side Chicago. During his first months trying to fit into the South Side communities, he recognized that for some people, his color was "a sufficient criterion for community membership, enough of a cross to bear" (Obama, *Dreams*, 278). But though his race gave him a certain amount of credibility within the neighborhood, Obama still felt a gap between those he was trying to help and himself. "But to be right with yourself, to do right by others, to lend meaning to a community's suffering and take part in its healing—that required

something more...it required faith” (Obama, *Dreams*, 279). In other words, to truly be part of his community, Obama had to cultivate a sense of empathy with those he was trying to help. To “take part in [the community’s] healing” meant feeling their suffering. The full range of human emotions, including suffering, is expressed vividly in the black church because traditionally it was the only place African Americans could express their true feelings in safety. According to Obama, the African American experience gave the black church a unique understanding of the importance of community.

Initially Obama “had no community or shared traditions in which to ground [his] most deeply held beliefs” (Obama, *Audacity*, 206), but he eventually found that desired community at Trinity United. He found a “connectedness” to his neighbors which he never had before. The church was filled with people from all walks of life. There were doctors and lawyers, janitors and school teachers. A wide range of socio-economic backgrounds existed in the membership. Even though this diversity could have been a source of discomfort, most members found it as extremely positive because it bound an economically variegated church together. “By widening its doors to allow all who would enter, a church like Trinity assured its members that their fates remained inseparably bound, that an intelligible ‘us’ still remained” (Obama, *Dreams*, 286). It allowed the rich and the poor to learn from one another. “Like a great pumping heart, the church had circulated goods, information, values, and ideas back and forth and back again, between rich and poor, learned and unlearned, sinner and saved” (Obama, *Dreams*, 273). Even though the members had very different backgrounds, the church had the “ability to hold together, if not reconcile, the conflicting strains of black experience – upon which Trinity’s success had ultimately been built” (Obama, *Dreams*, 282). Trinity United stood out in the community

because it fought against the trend of disintegrating families, apathetic membership, and most importantly, a defeated black consciousness. African Americans found in

Trinity some of the same things every religion hopes to offer its converts: a spiritual harbor and the chance to see one's gifts appreciated and acknowledged in a way that a paycheck never can; an assurance, as bones stiffened and hair began to gray, that they belonged to something that would outlast their own lives—and that, when their time finally came, a community would be there to remember. (Obama, *Dreams*, 285)

In a city where community was being destroyed by poverty and crime, Obama believed Trinity provided a refuge for both the rich and the poor. It was this call to a unique community that drew Obama to call the church home.

The Church and Social Justice

The second purpose of the church, in Obama's view, is to be an agent of justice and freedom in a broken society. The Christian Church ought to go out into the world and improve the lives of people locally, nationally, and globally. Helping others is not unique to the church, but for Obama it is supposed to be a hallmark of Christian living. Members of the church are called to heed the "biblical call to feed the hungry and clothe the naked and challenge powers and principalities" (Obama, *Audacity*, 207). The church is the body of Christ and therefore the physical representation of Christ in the world. If the church is supposed to represent the attitude of Christ, then in Obama's mind, the church must help those in need, because Jesus helped those in need. In order to examine this aspect of church life, let's first look at what Obama believes is the universal call of the church for social justice and then we will look at the unique call for justice from the black church experience.

For Obama, improving the lives of people, both rich and poor, is a fundamental purpose of the church. It is within this community that a desire to make the world a better place is cultivated. It is within the church community that calls to social action are made. All churches, black and white, big and small, rich and poor are asked to participate in a divine mission to help others. Great leaders such as Martin Luther King and Abraham Lincoln have sensed this calling for justice, and according to Obama, “their summoning of a higher truth helped inspire what had seemed impossible and move the nation to embrace a common destiny” (Obama, *Audacity*, 214). Even though the call to improve society is not just a Christian calling, the church provides a community in which the pursuit of a better society is ingrained in its foundation. “Organized religion doesn’t have a monopoly on virtue, and one need not be religious to make moral claims or appeal to a common good,” but those who fear religious communities should not “discount the role that values and the [church] play in addressing some of our most urgent social problems” (Obama, *Audacity*, 215). The church has historically played an important role in solving social problems, it is playing an important role today, and Obama believes it can play an important role in the future.

The imperative to care about others is at the heart of Obama’s church view and at the core of his own personal morality. As Obama states, empathy “is at the heart of my moral code, and it is how I understand the Golden Rule – not simply as a call to sympathy or charity, but as something more demanding, a call to stand in somebody else’s shoes and see through their eyes” (Obama, *Audacity*, 66). This ability to see other peoples’ perspectives is a trait which must be cultivated within the church and maybe more importantly outside the church. The role of the church is to help the poor, feed the hungry, and take care of the orphan. But this is an attitude that everybody in society, Christian or not, ought to embody according to Obama. “I believe a

stronger sense of empathy would tilt the balance of our current politics in favor of those people who are struggling in this society” (Obama, *Audacity*, 68). Because “to do otherwise would be to relinquish our best selves” (Obama, *Audacity*, 69).

Obama believes the faith community is responsible for living up to the best ideals of their respective traditions. This is why as a politician he encourages all religious communities to take part in social causes. “We might recognize that the call to sacrifice on behalf of the next generation, the need to think in terms of ‘thou’ and not just ‘I,’ resonates in religious congregations across the country. We need to take faith seriously and ... engage all persons of faith in the larger project of American renewal” (Obama, *Audacity*, 216). The religious community, which includes the church, has an important role in addressing issues such as drug use, crime, gangs, poverty, education, and economic disparities. The problem Obama has seen within the church is that it has gotten too distracted with one or two issues and ignored others. For example, religious groups rally against certain types of shows being broadcast on television; in Obama’s mind there are bigger problems to solve. “As a general rule, I am more prone to listen to those who are as outraged by the indecency of homelessness as they are by the indecency of music videos” (Obama, *Audacity*, 221). The church, according to Obama, must stay focused on its core mission of advocating for the oppressed within society.

There is another aspect of the church’s purpose as an agent of social justice that Obama finds important and which deserves examination, namely how the black church is especially attuned to meeting the needs of the community. We just examined how important it is for the church, broadly speaking, to engage in promoting social justice. But on a more specific level, Obama views the black church as having a special calling to justice given the history of African Americans in the United States. The black church grew out of a long history of slavery, then Jim

Crow laws, and eventually the civil rights movement. This tumultuous past uniquely positions the African American Church to teach and to promote justice both within the black community and outside it as well. In fact, it is this special calling which attracted Obama to the black church in the first place.

I was drawn to the power of the African American religious tradition to spur social change. Out of necessity, the black church rarely had the luxury of separating individual salvation from collective salvation. It had to serve as the center of the community's political, economic, and social as well as spiritual life; it understood in an intimate way the biblical call to feed the hungry and clothe the naked and challenge powers and principalities. (Obama, *Audacity*, 207)

The black church tightly coupled the physical and spiritual needs of the person. In some ways, the only hope many oppressed blacks had was a hope in God and by extension the church. The black church became the most influential and instrumental institution within the African American community. As such, it became the major vehicle for meeting the physical, economic, emotional, and spiritual needs of blacks.

The fact that the black church evolved in this way is not an accident according to Obama. In his view, the black church's willingness to promote justice and freedom is directly linked to its past. The church's "history of slave religion, and ... the Africans who, newly landed on hostile shores, had sat circled around a fire mixing newfound myths with ancient rhythms, their sons becoming a vessel for those most radical of ideas – survival, and freedom, and hope" (Obama, *Dreams*, 272). Out of necessity, the black community forged a strong identity through undergoing oppression. Because freedom had been taken away for so long and because justice had been denied for so long, these ideas became the rallying cry for the African American community. The black church took up these desires and imbued them with religious significance. According to Obama, during the few weeks leading up to his decision to join

Trinity United, he came to realize that “these stories – of survival, and freedom, and hope – became our story, my story; the blood that had spilled was our blood, the tears our tears; until this black church, on this bright day, seemed once more a vessel carrying the story of a people into future generations and into a larger world. Our trials and triumphs became at once unique and universal, black and more than black” (Obama, *Dreams*, 294). The struggle which began in the African American experience strengthens the black church to promote social justice, but the struggle for freedom also acts as a rallying cry for all churches and all peoples -- black or not-- to take up the cause of the oppressed.

Purpose and Role of Violence

In this final section of chapter four, I want to examine how both Cone’s and Obama’s theologies address the issue of religious and political violence. Religious thought has been used to support violent struggle against political systems, but it has also been used to promote non-violent movements for and against various political systems. The way in which a person understands faith can have an important effect on how one views mankind’s response to the world. Cone’s and Obama’s theologies influence how they answer the question of whether violence should be used to confront the world, especially for those with religious commitments. In some ways, this final section is the least abstract and most dramatic of the topics I’ve covered in chapter four, because it deals with the very real issue of violence in contemporary society. I will examine Cone’s perspective of violence first and then Obama’s.

Of the two figures I am studying, Cone has considerably more to say about the use of violence rooted in religious commitments. Black theology’s goal is to show how God is

singularly concerned with liberating the oppressed. When it comes to contemporary America, the oppressed are black men and women. Every aspect of black theology is centered on the one idea of liberation and not just spiritual liberation, but physical liberation. As I've discussed in earlier sections of this chapter, Cone believes that Christians are called to be a people who oppose oppression, especially racial oppression. He also believes that the Gospel is defined in terms of liberation language. And according to Cone, the church's mission is to be God's instrument of liberation in the world.

So, it is no surprise to hear Cone say about black theology that "it is a theology which confronts white society as the racist Antichrist, communicating to the oppressor that nothing will be spared in the fight for freedom" (Cone, BT&BP, 135). The phrase "nothing will be spared" certainly seems to imply that all means of rebellion are on the table when it comes to struggling against a racist society. For Cone, the struggle for racial equality is a religious duty and calls the black community to actively "confront" those who oppose this project. The white church is representative of the "Antichrist" and everything else that is wrong with the larger Christian Church. Cone divides the world into an us them dichotomy, which puts an evil, racist, white America on one side, and a good, proud, noble black America on the other. There is no middle ground between the two groups, because white America is totally corrupt or, in Cone's words, a "menacing power" (Cone, BT&BP, 136). And because there is no compromise, the black community must be ready to say to white America "if it's a fight you want, I am prepared to oblige you" (Cone, BT&BP, 135). Pugnacity and anger permeate Cone's perspective, because in his view, white American society is an enemy which must be destroyed. Trying to dialogue with white America to solve the problem is worthless because "revolution is not merely a 'change of heart' but a radical black encounter with the structure of white racism" (Cone, BT&BP, 136).

Destruction is the goal. The current system is beyond fixing. In Cone's mind, black America can no longer work with white America to "fix" modern society's racist institutions, white America must be converted. Cone's "revolution aims at the substitution of a new system for one adjudged to be corrupt, rather than corrective adjustments within the existing system" (Cone, BT&BP, 136). Compromise with white America or just protesting white oppression would be like "begging" or "supplicating to the gods" in Cone's opinion (Cone, BT&BP, 136). Black America is too proud for this level of dialogue, because its cause is just and its methods justified.

Cone truly believes that the cause of black liberation, namely complete liberation of blacks, is justified but more importantly sanctioned by God. Christ's came to bring freedom to the poor and the oppressed and since blacks are the poor and oppressed of 20th century America, Christ is on their side. There is righteousness and a confidence in this battle because blacks are participating in God's plan for this generation. Cone writes:

This means that ultimate allegiance belongs only to God. Therefore, black people must be taught not to be disturbed about revolution or civil disobedience if the law violates God's purpose for man. The Christian man is obligated by a freedom grounded in the Creator to break all laws which contradict human dignity. Through disobedience to the state, he affirms his allegiance to God as Creator and his willingness to behave as if he believes it. Civil disobedience is a duty in a racist society (Cone, BT&BP, 137).

Cone's argument sounds Augustinian, because he posits that an ungodly law is no law at all and therefore not worthy of compliance. This is exactly the same argument that Martin Luther King made in his *Letter From a Birmingham Jail*, but where Cone deviates from King is that he does not preclude the possibility of justified Christian violence. Rather, Cone suggests "revolutionary violence is both justified and necessary" (Cone, BT&BP, 143). While King supported resisting unjust laws, he stopped at the notion of committing violence in the name of resistance.

According to Cone, this is why “most whites ‘loved’ Martin Luther King, Jr., not because of his attempt to free his people, but because his approach was the least threatening to the white power structure” (Cone, BT&BP, 56). Cone writes much more extensively about King’s response to racial injustice in his later works, but further comparison of King and Cone will have to be the subject of another paper. It is enough to say that Cone disagrees with King’s pacifist approach to dealing with racial injustice and condones violent resistance as a legitimate answer to the question of an oppressive system.

As a Christian, though, Cone struggles with his approval of violence because, as he writes, his “chief difficulty with black theology and violence arises from the New Testament itself” (Cone, BT&BP, 138). An initial reading of the Bible could easily be interpreted as condemnatory of violent resistance. A literal reading of Scripture could lead a reader to “eschew the use of violence and emphasize the inward power of the Christian man to accept everything the enemy dishes out” (Cone BT&BP, 139). Many of Cone’s critics would agree, because a simple reading of the gospels and an examination of Jesus’ life would seem to suggest that violence is something proscribed by Christ. But Cone has an answer to this criticism by saying that one ought not to look at Jesus’ life too literally as a way of answering every ethical question a modern believer may have today. In fact, Cone criticizes those who look to Christ’s life as a literal example of how a Christian should live, labeling them “fundamentalists” (Cone, BT&BP, 139). Cone believes, “we cannot solve ethical questions of the twentieth century by looking at what Jesus did in the first. Our choices are not the same as his. Being Christian does not mean following ‘in his steps’” (Cone BT&BP, 139). According to Cone, “each situation has its own problematic circumstances which force the believer to think through each act of obedience without an absolute ethical guide from Jesus” (Cone, BT&BP, 140). So looking to Jesus’ life as

a strict example of how a person is supposed to navigate the modern world is unrealistic. One must ascertain life principles from Jesus and apply them in a contemporary context. In other words, following Jesus is an interpretive rather than an imitative project.

But how can a person, especially a Christian, justify political violence? Cone answers this question very simply by saying that the good which is achieved by fighting oppressive forces outweighs whatever evil is produced by the violence. There is a cost benefit analysis which must be done and if one can see that true societal change is produced by violent struggle then it is worth fighting according to Cone. The question is not whether one should commit violence, but how one should react in the face of violence. The problem with most Christians, and specifically white Christians, is that they seem to “overlook the fact that violence already exists” (Cone, BT&BP, 143). Cone constantly reiterates the fact that blacks are lynched, beaten, abused, and denied their basic civil rights (Cone, BT&BP, 142). So the black revolutionary “does not decide between violence and nonviolence, evil and good. He decides between the less and the greater evil” (Cone, BT&BP, 143). The entire system is stacked against the black community and violence perpetrated against them every day. So, “if the system is evil, then revolutionary violence is both justified and necessary” (Cone, BT&BP, 143). Violent struggle is legitimate if more good is produced than evil, but Cone never seems to detail what rubrics he uses to measure the good that is achieved. Who gets to make this calculation or how this calculation is made is never defined explicitly, but for Cone it is enough to say that a general sense of fairness dictates that black America is justified in executing revolutionary violence in the face of systemic violence. This sense of fairness and a call to self defense is what pushes Cone to allow and even encourage violence as a proper response to white racism. Whether one agrees or not with the argument, it is important to appreciate how strongly Cone feels about this struggle and to

understand that he believes violence, in the name of human freedom, is both spiritually justified and theologically legitimate.

Now I want to focus on Obama's view of violence as a way of bringing about societal change. In order to frame the conversation, the discussion can be broken down into two categories, non-state-sanctioned violence and state-sanctioned violence. When it comes to non-state-sanctioned violence, I have chosen to focus on violence emerging from racially motivated resistance. Obama has not said or written a great deal on violent racial struggle since it no longer dominates the national conversation as much as it did during Cone's earlier years. But what Obama has written and what he has said about politics and religion does provide a general sense of his viewpoint. Obama has spoken more about state-sanctioned violence especially after assuming the Presidency. The fact that the country is currently participating in two wars has forced Obama to articulate his view of legitimate state-sanctioned violence. In this next section, I will discuss Obama's view of non-state-sanctioned violence and then move onto his view of state-sanctioned violence.

When it comes to supporting non-state-sanctioned violence, I believe Obama's position is markedly different from Cone's. Although Obama's Presidential win supposedly represents a "postracial politics," he cautions that such a win does not "suggest that race no longer matters – that the fight for equality has been won, or that the problems that minorities face in this country today are largely self-inflicted" (Obama, *Audacity*, 132). Rather there are still battles to be fought and problems to face. But for Obama, the tactics used to achieve a more racially equitable society do not lie in violence like the kind condoned by Cone earlier in the century. Obama specifically discourages violent resistance to social problems (Obama, *Audacity*, 237). With respect to racially motivated resistance, Obama believes great strides have been made

toward racial equality, but he still believes racial issues need to be addressed minus the violence (Obama, Audacity, 232). As a child of the 1960's, Obama is part of a generation of black Americans who did not participate in the civil rights movement and did not experience the same amount of racial prejudice that earlier generations underwent (Obama, Audacity, 241). While racism and prejudice still exist, according to Obama, he has "witnessed a profound shift in race relations in his lifetime" (Obama, Audacity, 233). The level of anger and resentment has declined. What is required in Obama's thinking is "to acknowledge the sins of our past and the challenges of the present without becoming trapped in cynicism or despair" (Obama, Audacity, 233). The cynicism and despair of earlier generations and even some in this generation will only lead to further racial strife. What is required is a reenergized commitment to bridging the gap between blacks and whites because doing anything less would mean to "surrender to what has been instead of what might be" (Obama, Audacity, 237).

The second category of violence (i.e. state-sanctioned violence) has been discussed in much greater detail by Obama since reaching the Presidency. Obviously Obama has much to say about this since he is currently overseeing the execution of wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. One of the ironies of Obama's Presidency is that he won the office based partly on his opposition to the Iraq War, but now as President he is responsible for the task of concluding a war he did not support but which he does not want to lose. In contrast to the Iraq War, Obama does support the escalation of forces in the war in Afghanistan, because according to his own words, it is a "war of necessity" rather than choice. These are two very different wars, but as Commander-in-Chief, Obama is responsible for both of them.

In order to limit the scope of the conversation, I want to focus on a speech that Obama made at the acceptance ceremony for the 2009 Nobel Peace Prize. Obama was honored with this

award in December 2009 “for his extraordinary efforts to strengthen international diplomacy and cooperation between peoples” (Jagland, nobelprize.org, 2009). According to the official announcement, Obama won the award based on his desire “to strengthen international institutions as much as possible; to advance democracy and human rights; to reduce the importance of arms and preferably do away with nuclear arms altogether; to promote dialogue and negotiations; and, in the last few years, to adopt effective measures to meet the climate threat” (Jagland, nobelprize.org, 2009). Within his acceptance speech, Obama outlines his overall view of political violence, specifically the use of war, which is markedly different from his view of non-state-sanctioned violence related to fighting racism. The irony of his acceptance was not lost on him when he acknowledged that “perhaps the most profound issue surrounding my receipt of this prize is the fact that I am the Commander-in-Chief of a nation in the midst of two wars” (Obama, NYT 2009). But even so, Obama does put forth his argument for legitimate state-sanctioned violence based on two ideas: human nature and moral responsibility.

The first idea posits that in some way, human nature is flawed and this leads to evil in the world. To ignore this fact is to ignore reality. Armed conflict is a necessary response to the actions of those who seek unjust power, wealth, or prestige. Obama is a realist and believes that whatever one’s views of humanity are, they must be tempered with the reality in which we live. Obama says, “I face the world as it is...and evil does exist in the world” (Obama, NYT 2009). One cannot ignore the fact that bad things are perpetrated by evil people, but this does not necessarily mean all of humanity is evil. What it does mean, according to Obama, is that evil occasionally must be resisted by force, but “to say that force may sometimes be necessary is not a call to cynicism -- it is a recognition of history; the imperfections of man and the limits of reason” (Obama, NYT 2009). Obama tempers this idea that force is sometimes necessary with

the idea that one should only enter into violent conflict reluctantly and with an appreciation of the costs. As Obama admits, “war itself is never glorious, and we must never trumpet it as such. So part of our challenge is reconciling these two seemingly irreconcilable truths — that war is sometimes necessary, and war is at some level an expression of human folly” (Obama, NYT 2009).

The second idea behind Obama’s argument justifying state-sanctioned violence is the belief that people have a moral responsibility to help those in need. Because human nature is the way it is, wrongdoing is often perpetrated against innocent people and innocent nations. But people and nations have a responsibility to protect others when the offense is so severe it cannot be ignored. Obama says, “I believe that force can be justified on humanitarian grounds....Inaction tears at our conscience and can lead to more costly intervention later. That’s why all responsible nations must embrace the role that militaries with a clear mandate can play to keep the peace” (Obama, NYT 2009). To “keep the peace” is hard and “entails sacrifice” but it is the concern of “responsible nations”. This idea of responsibility is fundamental to Obama’s justification for war and is founded in a theological perspective which believes that people are called to take care of one another (Obama, Audacity, 221). Concern for one’s fellow man is a theme echoed throughout Obama’s theology and explains how Obama developed his view of violence.

Obama and Cone both have answered the question of violence differently, but I believe it’s possible to understand why they hold their views based on their respective theologies. Cone is confident God is on the side of the black community and anyone who opposes the black agenda as he defines it is really opposing God. Christ is among the poor and oppressed and according to Cone that’s exactly where black America is at. Christ is concerned about the

oppressed, and in fact wants to free them from their bondage. In light of this truth, then, Cone believes black America is called to resist white oppression both politically or violently. One side is right and the other is wrong. Obama is not nearly as angry as Cone and believes more can be accomplished through dialogue than violence (Obama, *Audacity*, 69). For Obama, participating in violence to fight racial oppression, which is not sanctioned through a legitimate legal framework, would contradict Christian ideals of non-violence and abandon the moral high ground (Obama, NYT 2009). The harm done in the name of non-state-sanctioned resistance outweighs the good accomplished by it. While Obama is against any form of violence which is not legitimized through the state, Obama does believe state-sanctioned violence, such as war, is permissible (Obama, NYT 2009). Because human nature is flawed, evil and violence will occur. In some cases, it is necessary for nations to commit violence for the sake of preventing even greater harm. The key for Obama is not merely that the good achieved through violence must outweigh the bad but also a legitimate legal body must approve the violence. But such calculations are hardly without controversy. Both authors are acutely aware that evil exists, but each one comes to his own conclusion on how to resist it.

In this chapter, I have examined four topics within Cone's and Obama's theologies, which I believe represent the most important implications of each theology. I first investigated how each author defined the Christian Gospel. I said that Cone described the Gospel as the good news of God's liberating activity in the world, especially as it relates to African Americans. For Obama, the Gospel refers to a more universal message of love and peace for all humanity. Secondly, I examined how each author defined the term Christian. Cone believes Christians are only those people who fight exclusively for human liberation. Obama has a much broader understanding of the term Christian and is willing to be much more inclusive. While Cone is

unapologetic in categorizing people, Obama is much less interested in assigning Christian labels. Thirdly, I discussed the role the church plays in each author's theologies. Cone sees the church as God's operative tool in the world to bring about liberation from oppression. Obama focuses more on the church as community, especially as a place to express one's inner spiritual longings. But both Cone and Obama believe the church ought to be involved in social justice projects, because the church has a responsibility to express the love of Christ in the world. Lastly, I looked at violence and said that Cone is supportive of fighting oppression through non-state-sanctioned violence, while Obama opposes such violence. I suggest that one of the reasons for this difference in views is due to the time periods in which the authors grew up and their respective views of human nature. This chapter is not meant to cover all the implications of Cone's theology and Obama's theology, but hopefully it has examined the most critical.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

Throughout the course of this thesis, I have attempted to examine Barack Obama's religious views and to investigate the factors that shaped his personal theology. My initial reason for attempting this project was my desire to understand how the relationship between Reverend Jeremiah Wright and Obama shaped Obama's religious perspective. The 2008 Presidential election brought this relationship to national attention because of Wright's controversial statements both before and during the campaign. As a scholar of religion, I was curious if Wright's theology, which is based on James Cone's Black Liberation Theology, has had a significant impact on Obama.

I argued that while Black Liberation Theology undoubtedly played an important part in Obama's religious formation, it did not encompass his entire theological perspective. I highlighted several areas where Cone's theology differed from Obama's. Specifically, I said that Cone's theology is completely focused on the concerns of a black community, which Cone believes is the center of God's activity in modern America. This view shapes Cone's thinking about everything including textual interpretation, the Gospel, and political violence.

While Cone's Black Liberation Theology infused Obama with a concern for the African American community in America, Obama chooses to accept a broader vision of what God is doing in the world beyond the liberating activity of blacks. In Obama's thinking, God is concerned for all communities and it is the purpose of every Christian to promote a more just existence for humanity. As Obama said in his victory speech following the Presidential election, "there is not a black America and white America and Latino America and Asian America – there's the United States of America" (Obama, *Audacity*, 231). For Obama, these are not just

rhetorically inspiring words, they articulate a view of the world which he champions personally, publicly, and theologically. I argued that Obama may represent a changing attitude among younger African Americans who did not experience the same level of discrimination as did older generations of blacks. This emerging attitude is more optimistic about the chances for racial reconciliation and integration. Obama grew up with a healthy appreciation of the African American struggle and fused it with his more optimistic outlook for America.

Since I began work on this project, Obama has been in office for more than a year. During this time, he set an ambitious agenda for his administration both domestically and internationally. For some observers, the agenda which Obama has undertaken is a surprise. But for the more informed observer, I believe the changes Obama has called for this past year are reflective of his theological worldview. If Obama's theology places an emphasis on social justice, reason, racial equality, and rule of law, as I believe it does, then much of Obama's agenda during his first year in office follows naturally from his religious beliefs. For example, immediately after his inauguration, Obama set a deadline for closing the controversial detention center in Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, which Obama viewed as a center of human rights violations. In addition, Obama's administration put together a large stimulus package which was pushed through Congress as a way to stimulate the lagging economy. Social justice advocates celebrated the governmental program to alleviate joblessness among the working poor, because, according to advocates of the bill, it brought much needed aid to those with the most need. He raised funding for Pell grants to help low-income families afford the costs of college. And probably his most ambitious task, albeit his most controversial initiative, was to promote a comprehensive healthcare reform bill which would overhaul the entire healthcare industry. As I've argued in chapters three and four, both Cone and Obama share a deep concern for the poor

and oppressed within society. And since healthcare is such an essential component to living, it is not surprising that Obama feels compelled to offer greater access and care to those individuals not currently receiving it. Whether or not this is a financially and politically prudent move is another discussion, but the mere fact that Obama is championing greater healthcare access is consistent with what we've seen in his theology.

As President Obama enters the second year of his presidency, it will be interesting to watch how he continues to integrate his personal theological beliefs into public policy. The degree to which Obama chooses to marry his personal convictions with his public responsibilities is something which he alone fully knows. But it is my hope that this thesis has provided some insight into what Obama's personal convictions are and how these convictions emerged. Up to this point in his Presidency, Barack Obama's religious worldview seems to be compatible with his political priorities. The next several years will demonstrate if this continues to be true, but whatever happens, Obama's Presidency will provide plenty of material for further study.

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