Theological-Historical Research Paper:

Caribbean Theology –
The Middle Passage which connects African Theology and Black Theology

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Introduction

Some might say, “The more things change the more they stay the same.” Others might also conclude that the better way of understanding what is transpiring in the present is by exploring the history of a matter. There are a plethora of sources or resources one can tap into in order to begin to answer questions they have been grappling with. This has been the case for me as it pertains to the subject topic of Caribbean Theology. “For Caribbean Theology to flourish, it must be contextual. This contextual theology by its nature reckons with the questions and implications of the incarnation in and salvation of the Caribbean society as well as the Caribbean person” (United Theological College of the West Indies, 2021, 1:14). One can possibly best characterize Caribbean Theology as a form of biblical theology within a Caribbean context.

I was born in the Caribbean and I am a product of two Caribbean parents. My family is largely comprised of Christ-following, Bible-believing, regular Sunday attending church members who have followed in this path of worship and daily living as was the case for our grandparents and great-grand parents. I am sure that not only I but many others who are 1., 2. and possibly 3rd generation individuals are faced with the following considerations: if we are truly free to express our Caribbean identity as it relates to Caribbean Theology, and secondly how does this tie into or relate to other aspects of our history and the trajectory of events which has brought us to this present time? The focus of this paper will be to explore how Caribbean Theology is the middle passage which connects African Theology and Black Theology.

Historical impact of colonization and slavery in Africa

The Bible is a rich resource or repository of various historical facts and can serve as a template for understanding current contextual applicability to a subject topic. An example of this

can be found in Psalm 137: 1 – 4, “ By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. There on the poplars we hung our harps, for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’ How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land?” This Psalm refers to a time of those in captivity who were taken from their homeland or native country by their oppressors. Their oppressors requested for them to worship in a place and time when they felt out of place.

Although the focus of this passage of scripture was written with regards to those of the Jewish nation and their time in Babylon, there is a certain level of parallelism with what transpired with the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade and Africans being forced via slavery to relocate to the other regions. There exists a historical dimension as to what transpired, and the subsequent events which followed. Colonialism had a tremendous impact on various aspects of various regions in Africa. The impact was experienced in such areas as the Congo, Kenya and South Africa. Europeans were interested in the richness of the land and the mining of resources. According to Havea, “the arrival of Europeans in the mid-seventeenth century changed the land tenure system to individual ownership, which conflicted with the African communal land tenure” (Havea, 2020, p. 92).

There was a significant church involvement in what transpired. “Church mission stations tended to be located in rural areas, and the church became a major landowner. The church was cash poor but land rich. The church took over the function of defining and managing Black dignity, livelihood and culture” (Havea, 2020, p. 93). What occurred over a period of time was that Black people were forced to relocate to the poorer and more impoverished areas outside of the city to instead the outskirt areas. “This scandal of church land ownership was the church’s

participation in historical disinheritance and exploitation with a view by many that the white man took the African land in exchange for the Bible" (Havea, 2020, p. 92).

Besides just the impact on the land resources of Africa, there was also a tremendous societal effect on the population. With the ever-increasing need for a workforce to keep up with the demands of pilfering the natural resources, slavery was instituted. "The racial constructs imposed upon the world by Europeans devalued people of other races and would in turn be reflected in the territories and peoples subject to colonization, slavery and their attendant legacies" (Havea, 2020, p. 20). Africans who lost their lands were then provided with the reduced option to engage in cheap labor.

It has been noted that local Africans began being taxed by these colony establishing Europeans. Africans who lived in this area either lost their land to Europeans or were unable to live off their land. They moved to the towns, farms, or mines started by Europeans. Working conditions were terrible, with corporal punishment and low wages. They were paid in cash and food rations. As Europeans began to expand their focus to the Caribbean, they started to explore means of providing a sustainable workforce to work on the plantations and in harvesting produce.

Slavery of Africans became the best viable option for providing forced labor in Africa and then more importantly in the Caribbean. Indeed, it is true that slavery in Africa did not start as a result of European presence in Africa. What often transpired was the capture and enslavement by Africans by other Africans. However, there was an exorbitantly increased population of slaves which were captures and sold into slavery as a result of heightened European demands for cheap labor.

Having an interest or valuing the importance of preserving the African culture and traditions was not the primary focus of the Europeans. They invaded and took control of land areas, mining of natural resources as well as benefited from slavery of the indigenous population within Africa. It is probably safe to say that Africa and its inhabited population experienced tremendous negative cultural, political and economic impact as a result of the Europeans persisting in their efforts to extract resources from this region.

There however was also a theological component which cannot be ignored or disregarded but must be included in the equation as one explores the foundation of Caribbean theology from African Theology. One may ask what is African Theology. According to Greenman and Green, "It concerned itself primarily with the area of continuity between God in the Bible and God in the African primordial narratives" (2012, p. 134). They further went on to discuss that African philosophy **"**conclude that the God of the Bible was the same God known to Africa by various names, and as such He could not have been foreign or a mere figment of imagination but was always part of the African reality" (2012, p. 135).

Historical impact of colonization and slavery in the Caribbean

According to Erskine, "In the Caribbean, Latin America, and Africa, the Europeans subjected the local population to their domination. These dominated countries were required to produce sugar, labor, raw materials, and markets for the mother countries" (1981, p. 8). The increased presence of European empires in the Caribbean and their emphasis on economic enrichment precipitated their determination for increased plantation growth on the islands and the use of the cheap labor force. As a result of the financial benefits of plantations, the wealth of many land owners steadily increased. Colonialism in the Caribbean produced a tremendous increase in the African slave population and a suppression of the indigenous population which

existed. It has been accounted that almost 5 million Africans were taken as slaves from Africa and transported to islands in the Caribbean. It has also been noted that this population of individuals became so large that they became the majority of the individuals that resided on the islands especially islands like Barbados and St. Kitts.

There was an ensuing social dynamic as well which was interwoven into what transpired via the European empire rule and presence in the various islands. Slavery was justified by the societal framework which existed in the Caribbean islands. "The social principles of Christianity preached the necessity of a ruling and an oppressed class, and for the latter all they have to offer is the pious wish that the former may be charitable and obedient" (Gossai & Murrell, 2000, p. 20). Even though the enslaved population were larger than the ruling population, the enslaved were encouraged to view themselves as an inferior group of individuals.

As it did occur in Africa, it can also be seen that the church had a significant impact on what transpired in the lives of the oppressed individuals. "For centuries the people of Western Europe oppressed the people of the Caribbean, Latin America, Asia, and Africa. It was unfortunate that the Christian churches were an important part of this process of domination" (Erskine, 1981, p. 8). He also stated that "Very often their insistence that Christianity was a superior religion "provided a rationale for the conquest and domination of so-called pagan peoples. In many overt ways the Christian church often used theology to undergird the system of oppression" (1981, p. 8).

The presence of the National churches from Europe in the Caribbean islands was exponentially evident by the increased number of missionaries who traveled to the Caribbean region from their respective national homelands\countries. “The Caribbean Sea area was the heartland of slavery with the English in Jamaica, Barbados, and smaller islands; the French in Guadaloupe, Martinique and St. Dominique; the Portuguese in Brazil; Spanish in Cuban and Puerto Rico as well as the Danish and Dutch” (Smith, 1950, p. 171).

It has been noted that missionaries from such as the Moravians, Baptists, Catholics and other Protestant groups had come to the islands with varying religious agendas or focus. There were varying challenging scenarios which missionaries encountered in the respective communities of the Caribbean islands in association to the promoted institution of slavery and the resulting treatment of the enslaved individuals. The missionaries had a plan to minister and convert slaves to Christianity. This plan was met with resistance by a significant segment of the population. They advanced the ideology of refusing any negro slaves to be recognized as part of the Christian fellowship until slavery had ended.

The economic gains which occurred as a result of slavery in the Caribbean islands, overshadowed the advancement of particular humanitarian thoughts or ideas in regards to the enslaved population such as teaching them to read and write or to their ability to freely attend religious services. “Englishmen entered the lucrative slave trade and like traders of other nationalities, sought to justify their activities by alleging that enslavement of a non-Christian was no moral wrong” (Smith, 1950, pp. 171). However, there were some who sought for the abolishing of slavery and the cruelty as well as suppression of cultural and religious expressions which also occurred.

Historical impact of colonization and slavery in the United States

The economic gain was not only in terms of this enslaved work force in the Caribbean, it also resulted in a need for increased populations of slaves to be transported from the Caribbean to different areas in the United States. The large number of individuals who were enslaved and taken from Africa were brought to the Caribbean. That would then help to explain why there was a significant number of enslaved individuals who were then transported from the Caribbean to the United States.

"The Caribbean was at the core of the crime against humanity induced by the transatlantic slave trade and slavery. Of the 11 million or more enslaved Africans forced to cross the Atlantic after 1500, no fewer than 95 percent disembarked in tropical and sub-tropical regions" **(**Eltis et al., 2005, p. 673). In my opinion, this in and of itself is an incredible percentage to grapple with in one's understanding of what transpired at that time and the incredible volume of lives, families and communities which were impacted. "The movement of Africans to the Americas from the 17th to the 19th centuries may be accounted as mankind's second-largest transoceanic migration. It was distinct from other major modern migrations in its involuntary nature, high rates of mortality and social dislocation" (Manning, 1993, p. 279).

One may ask, why the great number of enslaved blacks needed to be relocated from the Caribbean islands to the United States? As the need for available inexpensive labor force escalated, the use of enslaved Africans became the most viable and profitable solution to this problem. As industrialization efforts and expected production results expanded, so did the use of enslaved Blacks beyond limited areas throughout the United States. Due to extensive use and establishments of plantations in southern states, there was a heavier presence of enslaved Blacks

which were engaged in forced slave work in regards to the production of tobacco, cotton and other items throughout the United States.

Similar to what transpired in Africa and in the Caribbean, one is able to observe the involvement of the church regarding slavery in the United States. The Biblical message which was shared within Christian churches in the United States supported the oppression of the enslaved blacks. Church leadership preached and promoted their construed theological message based upon both Old and New Testament scriptural texts, which encouraged a pro-slavery positioning and status quo for the community. Christian Church individuals were not only involved in slave trade, they were extensively or intrinsically engaged in the use of slave labor in support of advancing their economic gains with subsequent financial and at times political elevated statuses. The financial wealth status of many churches was strongly dependent on the profitability of the slave trade and the slave labor being maintained by legislative and supporting political polices being kept. These efforts would continue until independence, freedom or emancipation transpired.

Historical religious impact of decolonization and liberation, emancipation, or freedom for Black people

As a result of diminishing European national ability to adequately support and financially afford what was needed for their African colonies, decolonization in Africa subsequently occurred. The necessity for this was also precipitated by the various revolts which transpired. “Over time, however, the people of Africa began to reject the version of Christianity being spoon-fed to them by Europeans, and instead began to see the religion as a tool for their own liberation from their colonial oppressors” (Schmidt, 2015, p. 3). Freedom from colonization and slavery within the United States was facilitated by the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. Freedom from slavery in regards to differing Caribbean islands transpired at different

times but started for the most part in the early 19th Century. Independence from the rule of the European colonizers became increasingly evident between the timeframe of 1945 and 1960.

"As it could be argued that religion played an incidental, albeit significant, role in the disintegration of African culture and identity, it later played an equally significant role in its restoration" (Schmidt, 2015, p. 4). Hence, Black individuals pursued the ability to publicly congregate and to freely worship God. It was within this timeframe of the early 1900's when some notable historically Black denominations were formulated. This was done largely in part in response to political, social and economic reasons which contributed to the perspective that there were some failures in the equality of the treatment of Blacks by whites. "Whiteness invites us to imagine that we become visible to ourselves and others only through its narration of our lives" (Jennings, 2020, p. 137).

Modern religious expression of Blacks in the Caribbean and the United States as a result of historical framing

Prior to, during and subsequent to emancipation, religion continued to fulfill an important role or function as a key component in the lives of both Black and White, or enslaved or free members of the societies. However, one should expect that after these many years since physical freedom from slavery, which occurred whether via liberation in Africa, emancipation in the Caribbean, or independence in the United States, that religious freedom to worship today should not be encumbered or limited by historical influences. This unfortunately is not the case.

One of the questions which must be explored is if we are truly free in mind, body and soul to worship God in support or connection to our traditional roots in African Theology, Caribbean Theology which birthed out of African Theology and in response to western Christian views, or Black Theology with its Caribbean theology underpinning? "Christianity in America in many

ways has participated in an unconscious extension of colonialism. Blurred boundaries between government and church have caused our country to often mistake the Manifest Destiny for the Great Commission" (Humphreys, 2018, p. 198). We cannot disregard the fact that "colonization included suppressing traditional religions and often blocked the way against indigenized forms of the Christian faith. The colonized then feel like aliens in their own land and alienated from themselves" (Greenway & Green, 2012, p. 60).

This is one of those challenging situations which has or will not go away just because time elapses "Ignoring the discourse and not participating in it is the worst thing we can do for the health of the whole church" (Greenway & Green, 2012, p. 63). This then leads the discussion into another question of if we are functioning and expected to operate as if we are singing the Lord's song in a strange land in accordance to Psalm 137. "Traumatized communities must be able to tell God the truth about what they feel. Psalm 137 does not take power from God. It is an affirmation of His power in the midst of deep pain and estrangement" (McCaulley, 2020, p. 128).

What was endured by enslaved Blacks by their oppressors warranted for them to be recognized and acknowledged as outlined through African, Caribbean, and Black Theological expression and observance. For example, "the African people; forcibly subjugated and broken, yet they still managed to take the sword from the hands of Europeans and use it to carve a path toward their own liberation, preserving the strengths of their culture while creating a distinctly new identity for themselves." (Schmidt, 2015, p. 9). He also shared that "African people and their ways of life were being suppressed on multiple fronts, while the language and mentality of the time enabled the Europeans to see their efforts as "civilizing missions" (Schmidt, 2015, p. 4).

Conclusion

"As evangelicals came to embrace worldwide Christianity and its diverse multicultural character, they naturally came to recognize non-Western evangelical voices, distinct theologies and leadership" (Pachuau, 2018, p. 105). This highlights the importance of recognizing the divergence as well and points of convergence of the three theologies. Black Theology differs considerably from those of African theology. Black Theology hardly knows the situation of Christians living in Africa, and therefore its direct relevance for Africa is either nonexistent or only accidental" (Erskine, 1998, p. 7). What then is often referred to as the Black Church experience even today typically is associated to what is transpiring in African American churches and their relevance to the Black Theological message of freedom from the bondage and suppression of the oppressor.

In my opinion, since the majority of the slaves who were brought from the Caribbean to the United States, there is a stronger connection between Black theology and its connection to Caribbean Theology versus African Theology. "Black Theology may be able to provide clues in the Caribbean as we seek to understand the quest of oppressed people for freedom in history. I say this because of the common quest in the Caribbean and in North America for liberation" (Erskine, 1998, p. 7). This liberation must also be evident in their times of private as well as corporate worship. As expressed by Van Opstal, " Worship refers to the self-expression of a particular church community in a public celebration of its faith. It has both vertical and horizontal dimensions: one's relation to God and one's relationship with fellow worshippers" (2016, p. 16).

I also conclude from my research, that there existed a common quest of those in the Caribbean and in the United States for their physical, mental, emotional and religious freedoms

from their oppressors and the impact of forced migration and brutality of slavery. Even after many years since freedom to an extent has occurred, there is a continued quest for the commonalities as well as differences of these two theologies to be acknowledged and discussed. “Christianity in the Caribbean has been religiously transformed over the last two centuries from the religion of the master class to the religion of the under classes” (Kojo Nyame, 2014, 1:18). I as a Caribbean-American, appreciate settings and occasions when the combined Caribbean and American theological aspects of my life can be observed and respected. However, I also at times feel displaced, when I am forced or “covertly encouraged” to align myself to one or the other to be accepted.

As stated by Knight and Martinez-Vergne, “the most active site for contemporary Caribbean creolization and intercultural entanglements can be found, not so much within the region but rather among the large transnational diasporic communities dwelling in the large global cities abroad” (Knight & Martinez-Vergne, 2006, p. 2). That is my story, as I am living in my diasporic community here in New York and still connected to my heritage in the Caribbean. Caribbean Theology in a similar perspective serves as a critically connecting and pivotal component between what was fostered and cultivated in association to African Theology and what as a result of the suffering in the United States due to slavery is characterized as Black Theology.

“It becomes apparent not only that Caribbean theology must talk about God and people in history, but that it must go beyond Black religion in making a connection between Christian hope and freedom in history” (Erskine, 1998, p. 169). It is probably safe to say that the religion of African Americans in the United States was birthed out of the slave trade operation in the Caribbean. “The universal nature or catholicity of the Christian faith requires means to access

and understand the faith by people of all times, all cultures, and in all places of the world. Thus dissemination and meaningful communication of the faith are essential" (Pachuau, 2018, p. 91).

As was stated in class by Prof. Wilmer Estrada on 1/28/2023, "Theology is a lived experience." I can include in my conclusion that researching Caribbean theology as a middle passage of African Theology and Black theology has enhanced my understanding of the importance of the Caribbean aspect as it relates to both African and United States Black experiences. This is not just on a logistical perspective but on religious and cultural platforms as well. As was also shared in class on 1/28/2023 by Professor Wilmer Estrada, "we must be a part of the process. It takes commitment and intentionality." As stated by Van Opstal, "The biggest barrier Christians face developing communities hospitable to people of every ethnicity and culture is their ignorance about their own culture. The hardest part of the journey for many of us starts with self-awareness" (Opstal, 2015, p. 40).

I agree and can join with what was shared by Humphreys in his book that, "My DNA holds the story of the struggle of conquered land, peoples and places, histories, and cultures – even diaspora. God continues to meet me at this intersection, forming the person who I am, and doing work through me" (Humphreys, 2018, p. 68). Caribbean theology is not an independent theological concept but truly continues to function and operate as the Middle Passage which connects African Theology from our Motherland and Black Theology in the United States. "Even with the distinctiveness of each island and each territory, and whether you are a mainlander Caribbean, it does not matter where you are. There is a kind of ethos that binds us together. It is an experiential identify that makes us one people" (Caribbean Cricket Podcast, 2022, 18:42). We must strive for the oneness as a people and our connection via Caribbean theology to be continuously fostered and sustained.

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