

From Birmingham, Alabama to Charleston, South Carolina a deafening silence drowns out six decades of cries for justice and action. A Black man is shot dead in a car in Minnesota by a police officer triggered by fear and loathing regarding the skin tone of an Other. A woman is run down dead in Virginia by an angry and triggered young man because she publicly challenged the claims of superiority vocalized by a group of scrubbed and waxed white faces gathered by torch light the night before. Whether predictably or incredibly, many of my people have responded to calls for justice by ignoring or silencing God's prophets.

By ballot box or bullet, my people struggle to maintain racial and nationalist privilege as it nevertheless decays from the inside and is being vomited out from within the belly of a white supremacist beast. It often appears that the navigational center of this beast is the Christian Church. Yet, my God, our God, insists upon eschewing privilege – building relationships rather than walls and liberating ourselves from fear rather than incarcerating perceived threats to self.

Christendom is the cultural civic-religious expression of a popular myth that both supports and is buoyed by nationalist myths of American Exceptionalism. Biblical justice relies upon a core of textual mandates and kenotic ethics which call those who claim Christ to respond to cries for justice with action. Prophetic voices call upon European-American Christ-followers to sacrifice their privilege on behalf of those exploited by our own. Such calls came from W.E.B Du Bois. Such exhortation came from Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. And now, calls for whites to engage in justice for persons of color across the world come from voices across the religious and political spectrum.

Typically, it is not just the reactionary activity of white supremacy that first leaps into action against prophetic challenges to its assumed superiority, but the continuing and now often self-justified inactivity of the church catholic to sacrifice any privilege of its own in pursuit of

justice for persons of color. The fact of the authoritative texts give credibility to the actions that are both prescribed and proscribed as Christian or American responses to injustice, none of the them indicating inaction as a means to an end. Many European Americans tend to stay the course, believing that the wheels of justice are often as slow as the wheel of history. The result is being that those with privilege should act to make things as equal as possible and protect the rights of all Americans while maintaining the stability of the edifice that ensures slow and steady changes in cultural perspectives. This has been a conservative socio-religious approach to the sin of racism. There is also another option, that being a radical rejection of the entire framework that has indeed maintained a consistent procession of successes and failures, death and outrage, safety-pin solutions and amnesic nostalgia.

Uprooting the lynching trees of Southern blood and soil

Birmingham, Alabama was described by Martin Luther King Jr. as an American city “whose city fathers had apparently never heard of Abraham Lincoln, Thomas Jefferson, the Bill of Rights, the Preamble of the Constitution, the Thirteenth, Fourteenth, and Fifteenth Amendments, or the 1954 decision of the United States Supreme Court outlawing segregation in the public schools.”¹ The Jim Crow culture of post-Reconstruction southern American states is accurately defined as a race-based caste-system encoded in “laws on the books that disenfranchised blacks and discriminated against them in virtually every sphere of life.”² This segregation of citizens based solely upon skin-tone is described by the Reverend James Abernathy as “an evil that separates men...and creates bad men.”³ Gary Selby describes post-war

¹ Martin Luther King, Jr. *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* Edited by Clayborne Carson, New York: Grand Central Publishing, 1998. 171.

² Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*. New York: The New Press, 2010. 35

³ Ralph Abernathy, “The Report of the Committee on the Recent Supreme Court Ruling on Segregation in Public Education,” in *Baptist Leader* 9/2/1954 cited by *The Papers of Martin Luther King Jr.* Edited by Clayborne Carson

Birmingham as a paradigm of Jim Crow – “generally considered the Country’s most racially oppressive city.”⁴ It is in Birmingham that we find an initial rendering of racial tensions in Christian institutions through the meanings attributed to the biblical text as a canon for conflict between persons of faith who segregate into groups seeking freedom, or maintaining race-based power and control. This is evident in activities undertaken by the Black Church as catalyst for change according to gospel of justice and Exodus-based ideas regarding liberation; in white civic-religious attitudes of defending white supremacy and utilizing the Bible for proof-texts supporting concepts of racial superiority; and a paralyzed mainstream Christendom of some Black, but mainly white and middle to upper-class congregations and leadership who called for an attitude of patience and expectation of post-mortem bliss as reward for suffering.⁵

At the center of this ecumenical, or perhaps oppositional conflict of religious attitudes were two common discourses, shared by all involved to achieve political and spiritual goals; The Bible and the authoritative political and legal texts of the United States and liberal democracies. As a theological scholar and ethicist, as a Baptist minister, and as a rhetorical master of the uniquely American cultural discourse – civil rights leader King had a capacity to combine the various

et.al. Berkley, CA: University of California Press, 1994. 35. Abernathy is recording as stating, segregation “destroys brotherhood. Jesus is against it and he wants us to fight it. Our business as Christians is to get rid of [the] system... until black men of Alabama are privileged to enjoy every God-given opportunity as any other man.” 35.

⁴ Gary Selby, *Martin Luther King Jr. and the Rhetoric of Freedom* in *Studies in Rhetoric and Religion* Series edited by Martin Medhurst, et al. Waco, TX; Baylor University Press, 2008. 2

⁵ JoAnne Terrell, *Augustine, Niebuhr, & Malcolm X* course lecture. Chicago; Chicago Theological Seminary, 10/10/2018. Terrell shares the necessity of using religious, though not specifically Christian narratives as change agents for African-American communities. She states the existence of a “requisite religious basis” that understands the fact of a consistent and continual African acknowledgment of the sacred as a necessary part of life. Concerning the black church and its struggle to end segregation, Terrell interprets those along the spectrum of Black Christian Church concerns as one of civil rights. Thus, the dynamic is one of biblical texts dovetailing with American legal texts to produce a legal and moral persuasive argument for an end to segregation as the corporate public acceptance that segregation is both sinful and unlawful, and a violation of unique aspects of the myths of the Christian gospel, the American Dream, and western liberal democracy. In keeping with Christian themes of self-sacrifice or agape love, even for enemies, civil rights movement actions interpreted gospel and American traditions of civil disobedience and non-violence as primary vehicles for change.

narratives of prophetic biblical voices, American exceptionalism and themes of liberty, and the non-violence of Mahatma Gandhi and Jesus of Nazareth.

Also at the center of this conflict was a sense of individual and corporate rootedness throughout the south. This was a rootedness that in southern culture that promoted a love of the region and all that it had stood for in the minds of white Americans. So too the South is a place called home where roots had been growing and spreading thick and strong for Americans of African ancestry who were forced to cultivate the land and build it up to remarkably productive status while they were exploited as slaves without full human status. Though the southern soil was productive and bore many cultural and intellectual fruits, Blacks were now ready to share in those fruits. The paradox of the conflict was that the claims to southern roots were going to create the uprooting of long-lasting and coercive traditions and laws that had begun at the end of slavery, continued through the boll weevil infestation, the Great Migration, the Great Depression, and the labor battles, lynching, and lashing-out produced by two World Wars and an unstoppable move toward American racial integration.

It is the rootedness of the South as home that allowed for the development of Martin Luther King, Jr. as a unique product of a Georgia know just as much for its strange fruits. His rootedness in the Southern soil, in the Southern Black Church, in American theo-political contexts and in the Bible itself, produced a leadership perceived as constructive, effective, and intelligible to every American. Even those who disagreed or opposed King understood clearly what his appeal was, and what he was appealing to as the legitimizing authority of his claims to a share of Southern soil for the very folks who had long tilled and seeded it. It is in King that we find the most potential for Christianity's role as a moral witness and conscious to the nation state or common culture in midst of conflict or injustice.

King found the narratives of the Exodus and the ethics of Jesus of Nazareth as the paradigm through which to give meaning to experiences of Black Americans. The descendants of slaves sought positively to find full equal status as citizens protected by law, and as beneficiaries of the privileges connected to living within a liberal democratic society. It also seems that he to some extent could trust that he was properly rooted in the Southern cultural climate because it benefited him as it stood, even in the plain view of gross injustices. King was raised by a family that saw a biblical mandate to serve and lift the exploited as an obligation to the benefits they gleaned as financially and social secure African Americans.

In his autobiography as compiled by Carson, King recalls his early Atlanta childhood during the period of the most economically depressed period in the history of the industrialized United States. He remembers, "I questioned my parents about the numerous people standing in breadlines." King Jr. was a product of segregated Atlanta Public Schools, and shares that his early childhood was lived among neighbors in a "section of town known as Hunter Hills, characterized with a sort of unsophisticated simplicity. No one was in the extremely poor class."⁶

This childhood memory apparently common to Atlantan Black youth (perhaps not so much for Black youth across other parts of the United States) is anchored to more humble origins in rural Georgia. King, Jr. was the first son of Martin Luther King, Sr. The senior King left his sharecropping parent's home in Stockbridge, Georgia "with only a pair of shoes slung over his shoulder."⁷ After one day working with the patriarch King, the adolescent who would soon walk away from the fields made the decision to point out that a plantation boss was cheating his father out of earned wages. Power dynamics of the South prompted the eldest King to remind his son

⁶ King, *Autobiography*. 1-2

⁷ King Sr., Martin Luther, *Daddy King: An Autobiography*, with Clayton Riley. (New York; William Morrow, 1980), cited by Cone, James H. *Martin and Malcolm and America: A Dream or a Nightmare*. (Maryknoll, NY; Orbis, 1991), 22.

that the family was wholly dependent upon this relationship after the boss threatened to beat the adolescent for speaking up. It is said that King, Jr.'s father claimed "I ain't gonna plow mule anymore."⁸

Walking to Atlanta from Stockbridge, Martin Luther King, Sr. also had the strength and self-discipline to enter high school at age 18 and continue formal education through his graduation from Morehouse College. King, Sr. graduated from Morehouse and married Alberta Williams, the daughter of AD Williams, pastor of Atlanta's Ebenezer Baptist Church. It was a marriage of partners from different sides of the tracks, so to speak. Alberta Williams was "sent to the best available schools [Spelman Seminary and Hampton Institute] and was protected from the worst blights of discrimination."⁹ After the marriage, King, Sr. became the pastor of Ebenezer following the service of Williams. That congregation provided solid roots in Christian community for King, Jr., and with his father's experiences of life, King matured in the presence a Black man that was commanding in both presence and leadership qualities.

In his childhood life he saw Americans of African ancestry secure a sense of stability, both socially and economically, in the midst of a segregated nation that tried to strip dignity away. He witnessed the opportunities for Black men that were found in the church community, and a anchoring of Black family identity in the church. Also, he saw another American narrative being played out before him, one of empowerment and the commanding of dignity from oppressors. King, Sr. was rooted in Atlanta social and political activism, being not only the pastor of the city's largest congregation, but the president of the Atlanta chapter of the NAACP. Martin King, Sr. also provided leadership to an integrated strike of public school teachers and led them to a positive outcome.

⁸ King Jr., *Autobiography*. 4.

⁹ *Ibid.* 5.

While King, Jr.'s mother appreciated a more stable start to life than her future husband, she could not escape the shared indignities of the Jim Crow South. She had every bit as much of an impact on the family's witness to justice as his father. It "was my mother who told me about slavery and how it ended with the Civil War," he wrote. "She tried to explain... segregated schools, restaurants, theaters and housing... as a social condition rather than as a social order." Mother Williams-King also shared with King, Jr. with what might be imagined as a sort of mid-20th-Century conversation that African Americans now refer to as "the talk." Williams-King is memorialized by her son writing that "She said the words that almost every Negro hears before he can yet understand the injustices that makes them necessary: 'You are as good as anyone.'" Recalling his childhood and his parents, King Jr. wrote "with this heritage, it is not surprising that I learned to abhor segregation, considering both rationally inexplicable and morally unjustifiable."¹⁰

In sum, Martin Luther King was born into circumstances and a worldview that prepared his own mind and soul for engaging the conflict over the soul of America that had been building since colonization, erupting in the 1860's, and feeling aftershocks of significant if not varying social tremors and quaking conflicts every single day that followed Juneteenth and the emancipation of the last Texas slaves. As mentioned above, King was steeped in the narratives of the biblical Exodus and the American Dream. These are the foundations of Martin Luther King, Jr.'s struggle and leadership, and indeed his Moses-like recognition that he would not live to see African Americans be given their portion of America as a promised land of freedom. Nevertheless, they informed a movement that was nothing if not the realization of the incongruence that existed between what white Americans believed to be true and what African

¹⁰ King Jr. *Autobiography*. 4.

Americans recognized as reality and unfulfilled promise. It is King that provides us with a glimpse of American as promised land of democracy and freedom as the American Dream.

American Dream as Racist Nightmare

For Malcolm Little of Lansing, Michigan, the American experience was both a nightmare and antichrist. The proof was in the apocalyptic nature of his parents' lives, and his own experiences that might only be described as fuel for the fiery soul of a child raised in the flames of fire-bombings, murders, and apocalyptic realities that can only be articulated by a prophetic voice. As much as Martin Luther King, Jr.'s experiences were rooted in stability and promise stemming from strong parental influences, Malcolm Little's experiences originate from a lengthier paternal sojourning through the African Diaspora of North America, yet similarly prompted by the infringement of white supremacy upon a determined Black man's intentions.

Earl Little was born and raised in Southwest Georgia in circumstances not unlike Martin Luther King, Sr. Earl Little [nicknamed Early] was a competent carpenter, undereducated, married father of three children. Home was called Reynolds, which is identified by Marable as "an impressive manufacturing hub with a large cotton milling factory."¹¹ Little was born in 1890, at the very beginning of an economic downturn in the United States that was followed by the arrival of an unwanted Texas visitor to the Georgian cotton fields, the boll weevil, in 1915.¹²

Just as Martin Luther King, Sr. struggled with the racism of the greater Atlanta region of Georgia, Earl Little was residing in an area of Georgia, indeed, in a region of the United States that was guilty of more than 500 lynchings in 50 years, second only to Mississippi in the number

¹¹ Marable, Manning. *Malcom X: A Life of Reinvention*. (New York; Viking, 2011). 15. Manning writes that Reynolds, GA had a population of 1200 in 1910.

¹² Ibid. Manning reports that the 1890 depression "hit Georgia particularly hard, unleashing a wave of business failures twice the rate of that in the rest of the United States." 15. The boll weevil blight that occurred only 25 years later.

of African Americans murdered by acts of organized white supremacist terror. King, Sr. witnessed overt racist power dynamics in the threat of a beating, but certainly the threat of lynching as abiding common knowledge might be considered a motivating factor for the young man's decision to walk to Atlanta. He decided to find alternatives to the family patriarch's decision to be mindful of who was financially dependent upon his behaviors in the face of white terror tactics. Little could see a similar future that lead to a similar decision.

There is no report that Earl Little found himself in regular trouble, but history shows he might have known it was coming, and that trouble would find him. The fact of lynching and economic motivators contributed to a long-term white supremacist struggle to eliminate competition from skilled African American labor. Marable writes "Earl's status as a skilled carpenter probably provoked tensions with local whites, and his parents and friends feared for his safety."¹³

A cursory bit of research indicates the potential that organized terror and organized segregation of labor was working hand in hand in ways that hit close to home for Earl Little. That there were no reported lynchings in Taylor County may say less than the fact that 100 miles further south in Early County, there had been more than 11 lynchings, two of which occurred only two years after Earl Little left his wife and three children behind to move north. One of the

¹³ Ibid. See also Georgia State University, *Southern Labor Archives: Work n' Progress - Lessons and Stories: Part III: The Southern Textile Industry*. University Library Research Guides. Retrieved 12/20/2018 from <https://research.library.gsu.edu/c.php?g=115684&p=751981>. "Textile mills could easily exploit the abundant supply of relatively low-wage labor as workers shifted from agriculture to industry. The merchants tightened credit in the 1880s and 1890s, and the economic distress on small farmers increased. Businessmen couched their ideas in philanthropic terms, but they clearly benefited from the economic problems they created... The South's mill owners not only benefited from cheap labor, they also entered the textile industry at a time of unprecedented technological advancement. The mill owners incorporated the most modern machines into their factories which allowed them to increase production and cut labor costs... The Southern textile industry became a "white domain." Laws in some states prevented blacks and whites from working in the same factory rooms. Black men, however, did perform some of the most important jobs in the textile factories. They worked in the mill yards, moving bales of cotton and loading finished goods on to boxcars. They also worked in the opening and picking rooms of mills. Black women were almost completely shut out of the industry in the South."

two men lynched in Early County in 1919 was a World War I veteran who worked a security detail for a bank in Blakely, Georgia. His name was Wilfred Little (mistakenly reported by a Chicago newspaper and the Georgia Lynching Database as William Little) who refused to remove his military uniform, thus frustrating and triggering white brutality.¹⁴

Martin Luther King, Sr. saw a future of trouble if he did not leave rural Georgia for the potential he believed existed in Atlanta. Amidst lynchings and, potentially, hearing of family troubles further South, Earl Little left Georgia for the northern United States, and later, Montreal. 1910 Census reports identify Early Little as a porter. 1920 Census reports from Pennsylvania identify Early Little as a minister. The Montreal experience changed his life. It was in Canada that he met Louise Norton and began to appreciate the teachings and activist leadership of Marcus Garvey. Described by all who were close to him as aggressive-speaking and justice-minded - and temperamental - Earl married Louise and then returned to the United States having “decided to dedicate their lives and futures to the building of the Garveyite movement in the United States. In 1920 they relocated from Philadelphia to Omaha. In 1921, The African American Greenwood neighborhood of Tulsa, Oklahoma was burned entirely to the ground, destroying the most successful Black-owned business districts in the United States and murdering more than 100 individuals, injuring more than 800, with more than 600 black citizens

¹⁴ The Mary Turner Project, *Known Georgia Lynching Victims*. www.Maryturner.org. Retrieved 12/20/2018 at <http://www.maryturner.org/database.htm>. Gilbert, Tony “The Meanest Little Town...” in the *Early County News*, Blakely, GA www.earlycountynews.com. Retrieved 12/20/2018 at http://www.earlycountynews.com/news/2015-03-25/Other_News/The_meanest_little_town.html. There is no evidence that Wilbert or William Little are related to Earl(y) Little in any way. While my use of the murder of Wilbert Little may be apocryphal in nature, it illustrates the tensions apparent during the time in Georgia and across the United States, and I found it relevant that Earl’s nickname Early was used on census reports, and that the other Little was a resident of Early County. At times, Apocryphal narratives serve to identify apocalyptic interpretations of coincidences and other ominous events. In his autobiography, Malcolm X recalls that his father had “seen four of his six brothers die by violence, three of them killed by white men, one of them by lynching.” There is no other mention of evidence of a Little family member being lynched in my limited research, but it does suggest circumstances that support the Early County murder’s connectedness to Earl Little’s circumstances in 1917 Georgia.

arrested.¹⁵ In 1923, more than 3 million white Americans claimed new membership in the Ku Klux Klan. The Little family's home in Omaha was firebombed in the "winter of 1925."¹⁶ That tragedy prompted a move to Milwaukee, and later, Lansing, MI. Not only was another Little family home burned to the ground, but soon after, Earl Little was found dead, very likely murdered for his activism and work for a Black homeland, Black capitalism, and Black self-sufficiency according to the themes of Garveyite separatist solutions to white supremacist realities.

While Martin Luther King, Jr. had an experience of American Blackness that allowed for a well-educated and firmly rooted childhood to develop into a life of leadership that could find a way to trust process and American sensibilities, it is evident that the roots of the Malcolm Little family experience were rooted in violence at the hands of white supremacists, the destruction of family by white institutions, and little room for more than anger and oppositional behaviors to guide the maturation process of the man who would become Malcolm X. However, the religious experiences of Minister Malcom X can be understood far better in light of the way in which the lack of stability impacted the thinking of his mother and father, and his own transformation. For Christians, even if they be of European origins and beneficiaries of a privileged racist history, they can see the cross that King, Jr, embodied through non-violence, and also embodied by apocalyptic hermeneutical understandings of the responses of Minister Malcom X to white supremacy throughout the Civil Rights movement of the 50's and 60's. In the socio-political realm, there is nothing so apocalyptic as the notion of the imminence of God's readiness to act in

¹⁵ Equal Justice Initiative, "Tulsa, Oklahoma Race Riots" at EJI.org retrieved 12/20/2018 at <https://eji.org/tulsa-riots-oklahoma>. "Over 10,000 black people were displaced from their community. Several hundred black people were likely killed, but there is no reliable account of the casualties because public officials did not keep a record of black people who had been hospitalized, wounded, or killed."

¹⁶ Marable, 22-23.

history as the experience of life as one of the-hour-is-at-hand and the time is now! Christians can clearly relate such thought to the early Christian gospel texts.

Most Christians of European ancestry, however, will be far more comfortable with the work of Reinhold Niebuhr, and a look at his experiences of adolescence and early adulthood make clear how much the interpretive lenses of white Christians differs from the hermeneutics of the two major African American religious leaders of that time. Niebuhr brings an equally typical experience of Americana to the religious understandings and responses to the Civil Rights movement and Christian responsibility to justice. While equally typical, however, Niebuhr was quickly able to overcome any difficulties his German-speaking immigrant parents experienced in Missouri. Niebuhr undoubtedly experienced the benefits of white privilege established not by his rootedness to the land but solely due to his skin tone.

Undoubtedly, Niebuhr had remarkable intellect and theological giftedness, just as King, Jr. and Malcom Little possessed. His privilege does not discredit his sizeable contributions to American religious ethics. Rather, his contributions to religious ethics regarding the Civil Rights movement and what was often known to be “America’s racial problem” seemed limited in both scope and biblical relevance. Niebuhr seemed bound to produce an American religious ethic from the perspective of manipulating the benefits of privilege and power in order to produce justice, including the protection of the civil rights of American citizens of color.

Like the overview of the first two moral leaders, a quickly sketched biography of Niebuhr’s youth makes his later contributions to theology and ethics more identifiable as driven purely by contingency and privilege. It shows clearly the impact of how privilege and access to institutional control lend to an view of Americanism that lands squarely in the middle of a spectrum of ethics and action that Euro-American civic religious leaders produce in reaction -

not to the so-called racial problem of post WW II United States and the civil rights struggle – but in reaction to both Malcolm X’s determined apocalyptic delegitimizing narrative of American liberal democracy and Martin Luther King’s biblical mandate for justice as the God-ordained outcomes inherent to his vision of a fulfilled constitutional and biblical eschatological revelation.

In Niebuhr we find rootedness in white supremacist notions of the American Dream and civic religious accommodation of national power. He is an illustration of the notion that the ethical realization of Christian Kingdom moral constructs are recognized when democratically authorized political mandates function as the right hand of a loving God. Niebuhr’s civic religious construct is known as Christian Realism. The reader will see how the realism of Niebuhr compares with the apocalyptic imminence of Malcolm X and the eschatological hope for now and later in the witness of King Jr.

Richard Fox’s biography of Niebuhr reads like an early Rockwell painting of Independence Day celebrations or family dinner scenes and chaperoned contra-dances in a township hall. Chapter One almost legitimizes Niebuhr’s American rootedness as a grafted shoot of white immigrants into the white supremacy of the American Dream. It reads “For prosperous Protestant farmers of Logan County in central Illinois, the summer of 1903 was a time of rejoicing... There had been several banner years in succession. The depression of the nineties – a bleak era of declining prices and receding personal horizons- was fading in memory.”¹⁷

¹⁷ Fox, Richard, *Reinhold Niebuhr: A Biography*. (San Francisco; Harper and Row, 1985). 1. Fox goes on to describe a community event in Logan County as “an annual... social and recreational high point of the midwestern Protestant calendar: communal camping, picnicking, ball games, study groups, lectures, music, theater, capped by the impassioned address of renowned orators. Fellowship, lofty ideals, the purifying waters of a lake or river: the Chautauqua was a dignified, secularized camp meeting. It was still Protestant, but not revivalist or sectarian. A sober, interdenominational celebration of the temperate way of life.” 1. In contrast to Georgia, whether in Atlanta or Reynolds, Fox describes that new structures were erected for the 1903 event at a cost of \$10,000 that included an auditorium, wood and stone cottages built upon the shore of an artificially made lake that was filled by the water of a nearby creek, and the entire city shut down in celebration of what called evidence of Logan Township as a stop on

Just prior to that economic depression, Gustav Niebuhr arrived in the United States as a German immigrant. Known to his cousin as “a wild young man” he experienced religious conversion in 1883 followed by a commitment to study for the ministry in the Prussian Union Church. One year after the depression of the 90’s, Gustav Niebuhr married 17-year-old Lydia Hosto and with her talent as a musician and church organist her grew congregations. Niebuhr also preached on a circuit and at revivals before finally settling his family in Lincoln, Illinois.

Similarly to both Malcom Little’s parents and King, Jr.’s family, religious witness was a family witness and a team effort that provided context for the manner in which the three men progressed through their religious life. Reinhold Niebuhr’s mother is described by Fox as “the pivotal force in developing his imagination” by making up games and creative endeavors that were turned variously into “circus[es], a World’s Fair, a Chautauqua. They mounted their own theatrical skits wit neighborhood children and played assigned roles, modeled church services and Niebuhr was described “by common consent the best actor, was always given the lead. One of his favorite roles was ‘preacher.’ He loved to officiate at weddings and baptisms,” according to his sister Hulda.¹⁸

Fox writes that Gustav treated his son Reinhold differently from the other siblings. Niebuhr recalled that his father “constantly flattered me in my adolescence by taking me into his confidence and asking for advice on decisions which he faced.” Fox reports that “compared to his siblings, Reinhold was a favored child. Gustav had caught his own reflection... of his mature identity – in this exuberant son.” Something to be considered about the manner in which the adolescent impacted the religious identity and theology he committed to during the era congruent

the “circuit of Enlightenment.” At this event a nine-year-old Reinhold Niebuhr sat in the shadow of his German immigrant father, who pastored the local German Evangelical Church, one of many important but final stops of his father’s religious sojourn of pastoring congregations from San Francisco to St. Louis.

¹⁸ Fox. 10-11.

with the Civil Rights struggles is summed in one of the eulogies of his father at a memorial service. “W.N. Tobie of First Methodist stressed Gustav’s patriotism and ecumenical spirit. ‘German though he was,’” stated Tobie, “‘he impressed his brethren with his Americanism in thought and sentiment... He cooperated with his American brethren in all his work.’”

I propose that Niebuhr’s publicly expressed ethics during the Civil Rights movement, as well as the war in Southeast Asia and America’s role in the world as an economic and military power allow for a full understanding of how his religious ethics stand in remarkable contrast to those of Malcolm X and King, Jr. based almost entirely on his desire to make his Christian realism relevant to power and authority. The question I find to be important is whether Niebuhr’s Christian realism and civil religion was effective in touching a nerve of mainstream Christians or whether it in fact produced what is now the civic religion of the Christian Evangelical Right, and the election of Donald Trump. I propose that as much as the legacies of King, Jr. and Malcolm X produced an American citizenry that elected an African American president some 40 years after the assassination of King, Jr.; the legacy of Niebuhr’s civic religion is found among the cobbled together theo-politics of right-wing white supremacist Christianity that has never been challenged by the church catholic for its lack of Christian ethics found in any of its public witness.

There is a quote that is often falsely attributed to Winston Churchill regarding the political normativity of both young adults and more mature adults. Common wisdom is often founded upon false beliefs, and the suggestion that all young adults that refrain from radical politics as a point of youthful passion in fact lack heart. It then suggests that once an individual reaches the age of thirty, they will be far more conservative if they have any common sense. Regardless of the facts of socio-political behaviors as related to age, it seems that the old adage tends to be

confirmed rather by the potential truth of young radicals who observe and then assimilate to socio-political power mechanisms that ensure not only relevance to public policy and opinion, but socio-economic stability. It is reasonable to identify one additional fact. Niebuhr's Christian ethics allowed for him to live a long life and receive accolades for his contributions to the religious conscience of America. Both of his parents lived long and fruitful lives. Earl Little and Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, Jr. and his mother Alberta Williams King were all incarcerated, burned out or bombed, and murdered. How must we reflect the cross of Christ in an era of Trump? I want to provide a comparison by which Christians can discuss the spiritual and religious approaches to social crisis and racist realities that all three men and their families faced.

Reinhold Niebuhr pursued education at Yale and was exposed to the kind of thinking that was anathema to the faith of much of the Midwest conservative German speaking congregations that he was familiar with. There is an incident during his Divinity studies that is telling, however. Niebuhr was struggling with the tensions between European Marxist thought of the pre-WW I era and a pragmatism that has always been part of a historically marginalized American academic and philosophical thought. His scholarship circa 1914 provides evidence of the above tensions. Niebuhr produced a Master of the Arts thesis and separate essay for publication first entitled *Patriotism and Altruism* then retitled *The Paradox of Patriotism*. At the same time, Niebuhr was exploring and decisively accepting a pacifist Christian ethic as one that should be normative for all religious discussion related to war as defining combat as "primarily selfish and immoral without excuse."

The pacifism is common to the pre-war Social Gospel of Walter Rauschenbusch and in 1914 was described by Niebuhr the framework for a Christian "civilization of peace," recalled by Fox as "a society in which the individual and the collective would both be committed to the same

standard of love and self-sacrifice.” Niebuhr wrote in *The Paradox of Patriotism*, “there is one agency, one special community that ought to be particularly effective in providing adequate moral substitutes for war. That agency is none other than the Christian Church... It is more universal than most agencies and its ideals are more unique and therefore more challenging than are those of any other special community.”¹⁹

Not only did the seminarian Niebuhr take seriously the peace witness that many interpreters find in the gospel texts, but Niebuhr’s pastorate in Detroit was a pulpit of social justice preaching and organizing in a working class neighborhood of laborers and families exploited by the working conditions at Henry Ford’s production plants. Schlesinger, Jr. wrote “He combined his pastoral duties with eager attention to the intellectual challenges and controversies of the day. The wretchedness of life on the industrial frontier quickened an already live interest in social problems. Niebuhr was, in a real sense, a child of the Social Gospel.”²⁰

He was also a “child of the pragmatic revolt. Nature had made him an instinctive empiricist; he had sharp political intuitions... and an instinct for realism; and his first response to

¹⁹ Fox, 35-36. Fox attributes the following thought to Niebuhr: “If people would always preserve a residual identification with and devotion to ‘their own particular race and nation, ’the only way to ground a ‘militant altruism’ was by creating a voluntary, intentional body independent of races and nations.” 36. It seems that Niebuhr is acutely aware of the racial realities of the United States. It also shows that pacifism as a response to injustice or evil was common enough to find supportive audiences in established Christian institutions of ministry and theology. That Niebuhr was a staunch union activist at the church he pastored in Detroit, including being a public witness against the power and control tactics of avowed white supremacist Henry Ford, indicates that the young pastor was every bit aware of American social and economic injustices that individuals like Earl Little and Martin King Sr. experienced firsthand. Like the King family, Niebuhr saw the Christian church as a social ethic and faithful response to economic and racial injustice.

²⁰ Schlesinger, Arthur Jr. “Reinhold Niebuhr’s Role in Political Thought” in *Reinhold Niebuhr: His Religious, Social, and Political Thought*. Edited by Charles Kegley and Robert Bretall. (New York; Macmillan, 1956). In Detroit, Niebuhr was known to have grown a congregation from 70 persons to more than 700 and was a significant contributor to the politics of a city that was bursting at the seams with southern who had come north to work for Ford and other corporate giants of the automotive industry. Schlesinger writes that “he was serving on the Mayor’s Commission on Inter-racial Relations, and on the Detroit Council of Churches’ Industrial Relations Commission. He became a member of the Fellowship for Christian Social Order and of the Fellowship of Reconciliation... a circuit rider to the colleges and universities; and he was a frequent contributor to *The World Tomorrow* and *The Christian Century*. 131.

situations requiring decisions was typically as a pragmatist, not as a moralist or a perfectionist.”²¹ It was this political pragmatism that won over the mind of Niebuhr in the struggle between liberal social gospel and peace-witness foundations of his early praxis. Schlesinger claims that the Detroit pastorate fueled an energetic rendering of the Sermon on the Mount as Christian pragmatism. Even the moral choice of non-violence as a response to the need for social change “was purely an expedient choice.”²² From a fairly deep and committed understanding that capitalism would lead to fascism as it had in Europe, and that socialism or Marxist social dynamics would produce just social changes over and against the claims of liberal religious Christianity that I believe is the beginning of an Americanism that produces a worldview that constitutional democratic agencies act as the right hand of God.

By 1940, Niebuhr saw a deeply flawed Marxism under Stalin and a deeply shattered liberal religious social program in Europe as well as the American social gospel movement. He saw liberals as enemies of Kingdom ethics, but he also concluded at this time that non-violence or Christian pacifism was immoral. “he attacked the versions of Christian and secular perfectionism that placed a premium on non-participation in conflicts.” In contrast to other Christian critics of

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid. 136-137. It is here that Schlesinger marks the pragmatic turn by Niebuhr (circa 1935) from “Christian Radicalism” to “Christian Realism.” Niebuhr understood “All life is an expression of power.” Yet, he rejected the idea that human beings could be counted upon to voluntarily eschew the use of power for the improvement of the social order. Therefore, in light of the moral failures of World War I and his witness of the realities of Stalinism in the Soviet Union, Niebuhr wrote that “the necessity of reducing power to a minimum, of bringing the remainder under the strongest measure of social control; and of destroying such types of it as are least amenable to social control. For there is no ethical force strong enough to place inner checks upon the use of power if the quantity is inordinate.” When Niebuhr identifies the tension between the facts he interprets concerning power and monopolies over violence which tend to referee social conflict and the use of power and control, he identifies a tremendous inconsistency between the ability to mandate non-violence as the Christian witness and coercive force used on behalf of Christian ideals of justice. Quoting James Madison, he stated “The truth is that all men having power ought to be distrusted.” On the other hand, he finally believes that “an uneasy balance of power would seem to become the highest goal to which a society could aspire.” I interpret this conclusion to produce an ethic that calls upon constitutional government to be the referee and monopoly holder concerning violence and coercive force as the primary means of social change and the interpretive mechanism for what justice is, even if Niebuhr wants his moral vision and ethic to be founded in the Kingdom of God narrative, the Kingdom is ruled by democratic means rather than faith to textual interpretations, or, interpretations of the cross and self-sacrifice.”

capitalist ethics, Niebuhr found that the competitive nature of democratic participation as the mechanisms for Christian ethics to contribute or manipulate political outcomes toward positive social change was both consequence and antidote to the abuse of power to suppress social progress. “The effort to reduce the Kingdom of God to a simple historical possibility... inevitably invited surrender to evil as the price of avoidance of conflict. We need the realism of the Christian faith to save us from sentimentality. In America at least, the dangers of a perverse sentimentality have been greater than the perils of cynicism.”²³

Martin Luther King Jr.: Summa Sanctus Est

King Jr. remembers reading Niebuhr in the final year of his seminary studies at Crozer Seminary. Niebuhr’s concerns for sin as existing “at every level of man’s existence” was a corrective or synthesis for King’s understanding of the non-violence of Gandhi, and liberal Christianity. His autobiography shares that King Jr. “became so enamored of his social ethics that I almost fell into the trap of accepting uncritically everything he wrote.”²⁴ At the time of his introduction to Niebuhr, King’s understanding of pacifism as the moral means of producing socially healthy change was heavily influence by the work of Gandhi. King’s introduction to Nietzsche brought despair regarding “the power of love in solving social problems.” He found Nietzsche to be an antithesis to his understanding of Marx, who was an informant of King’s social ethic of community [and rootedness, perhaps) and Nietzsche the individualist. Of both Marx and Nietzsche King found the Christian love ethic to be one of individual relationships, and war or violence to be potentially “negative good in the sense of preventing the spread or

²³ Ibid. 144-145.

²⁴ King Jr. *Autobiography*. 24-25. King wrote “that Niebuhr himself was once a member of the pacifist ranks... His break with pacifism came in the early 30’s, and the first full statement of his criticism of pacifism... argued that there was no intrinsic moral difference between violent and non-violent resistance. The social consequences of the two methods were different, he contended, but the differences were in degree rather than kind.” 26.

growth of an evil force... I thought the only way we could solve our problem of segregation was an armed revolt.”²⁵ In the Gandhian antithesis, he found the love ethic of individual relationships applied to social ethics and politically favorable outcomes. “It was this Gandhian emphasis on love and non-violence that I discovered the method of for social reform that I had been seeking.”²⁶

King remembers “At first, Niebuhr’s critique of pacifism left me in a state of confusion.” While it seems that his time at Crozer had been a time of deep exploration and self-critique, if not intellectual self-awareness and growth, that allowed for King to not cobble but mortar and brick a foundation of non-violence that had been tested not only by the strength of Neibuhr’s intellectual arguments for coercion as a measure against the spread of evil, but by the intellectual conversion of a fellow Marxism-influenced ethicist that held no room for sentimental patience of non-violence when evil was overwhelming the potential progress that good could make against evil in creating a more just social order. It may be that his working through Niebuhr’s criticisms of non-violence offered the very dialectic that King then used to counter what had been a most effective Niebuhrian challenge to King’s concern for Christian love as a social rather than individual ethic.²⁷ After thinking through Niebuhr’s theology and ethics, King found that Gandhi produced a more Christ-centered ethic of love that was based not in a realist pragmatism, but a non-violent resistance to evil through “the courageous confrontation of evil with the power of love, in faith that it is better to be the recipient of violence rather than the inflicter of it, since the

²⁵ Ibid. 22-23.

²⁶ Ibid. 24.

²⁷ King Jr., *Autobiography*. 25-26. Niebuhr argued that non-violence such as Gandhi’s methods could only be productive in conflict with an agency or institution that “had some degree of moral conscience,” as with the British. Yet King recognized that “Niebuhr’s ultimate rejection of pacifism was based primarily on the doctrine of man. He argued that pacifism failed to do justice to the reformation doctrine of justification by faith, substituting for it a sectarian perfectionism which believes that divine grace actually lifts man out of the sinful contradictions of history and establishes him above the sins of the world.”

latter only multiplies the existence of violence and bitterness in the universe, while the former may develop a sense of shame in the opponent and thereby bring about a transformation and change of heart.”²⁸ Nevertheless, Niebuhr remained an important contributor to the sum of King’s theology and praxis. “He is keenly aware of human motives and the relations between morality and power... a persistent reminder of the reality of sin on every level of man’s existence. These elements in Niebuhr’s thinking helped me to recognize the illusions of a superficial optimism concerning human nature and the ideas of false idealism.”²⁹

Terrell describes the love dialectic that comes from readings of Niebuhr and can be applied successfully to describe the dialectic that ultimately related to this project the concern for Christian religious praxis in the struggle against white supremacy in the church and as embedded in various Americanisms, including whiteness as the informant of the American Dream myth. Terrell states that justice in Niebuhr’s thinking is a relational term that cannot occur without connection to love. She describes the tensions in justice seeking in terms of a describing the tensions of a love ethic in achieving justice as a historical outcome rather than a hope over the horizon. One of Niebuhr’s criticisms of pacifism is that it’s supposed selflessness ultimately is self-centered as it lacks a concern for justice. He suggests that *agape* love must be connected to the disinterested love of *eros* to reduce the component of justice that is driven by the protection of or provision for one’s own favored outcomes as the result of conflict or desire (*porneia?*). Niebuhr’s dialectic is that the Christian ethic of agape or selfless love must be held in tension with the antithesis of maintaining justice with some concern for one’s own care. While *eros* is

²⁸ Ibid. 26.

²⁹ Ibid. 27.

justice when it maintains mutual self-interests at the same time it shares or prioritizes the interests of an Other.³⁰

Niebuhr's criticism of *agape* is one that certainly caught King's attention in his struggle to overcome tensions between Niebuhr and Gandhian ethics. Terrell states that the so-called norms of *agape* in Niebuhr's thinking have negatively impacted the powerless by preventing them from self-assertion of worth and deservedness of justice or equal status under constitutional law. *Agape* as the Christian teaching of justice is actually the mechanism by which oppressed Christians or other marginalized peoples are consistently denied justice. Justice is that relative embodiment of sacrificial *agape* in the public or political sphere which is of course regulated, mandated, and coercively applied through legal codes and consequences for violation of the norms developed through an application of mutual self-interests of those served by democratic regimes of power and control.³¹

King, Jr. can be identified as a thinker whose commitment to a love ethic rooted in his experience of the southern Black Church and his own experiences of family and congregational rootedness identify Jesus' as the embodiment of *agape*, and not a negative selflessness that promotes the cross as an acceptance of injustice, but rather identifies Love as *eros* being a Christian thesis of social relationships, and justice being an antithesis or negation of love, which can transcend conflict between interested parties to promote a disinterested transcendent solutions to conflict.

However, the synthesis to the dialectical tensions between love and justice is not, as Niebuhr sees it, the use of coercive force or violence as a means of establishing justice through

³⁰ Terrell, Joanne. *Augustine, Niebuhr, & Malcolm X* course lecture. Chicago; Chicago Theological Seminary, 9/26/2018.

³¹ Ibid.

the defeat of evil, but rather a synthesis of *agape* that blends the Love embodied by the Jesus myth and the search for justice with fulfillment of Christian promise, *Agape* as the perfectly sacrificial goodness that completes the incomplete nature of the tensions between love and justice – the disavowal of power – Christianity as the perpetuation and ultimate furthering expansion of messianic themes of liberation. Between Niebuhr’s Christology of Jesus as redeemer of human history, and human historical agency as the necessary component of God’s determining of just outcomes, and King’s concern for racial equality and social change, we find justice not as a point of future redemption of humanity through God’s perfecting love, but rather a here and now eschatological event rooted in the Christian narrative and the Exodus event that is promoted and embodied through the self-sacrificial love that promotes the self-emptying of self-concern and self-preservation on behalf of those who do not have a voice or access to power.³²

There are significant differences that occur between King, Jr. and Niebuhr, and the impact the two Christian ministers have had on America are significantly different as well. However, both are founded in Christian concepts of the cross and an understanding that kenosis in one context or another is a core of social change, including the pursuit of a lasting justice defined in terms intelligible to both the promises of a God of Love and an American Dream of equal status under the law. However, the rootedness on King and Niebuhr in these contexts should never be understood as motivated or in pursuit of similar outcomes or understandings of God’s love or justice. The dichotomy that exists between them cannot be overcome, even within the context of shared discourse. Cone writes how “Niebuhr derived his ethics from white culture and not biblical revelation.”³³

³² Terrell. *Augustine, Niebuhr, & Malcolm X*, class notes from 9/26/2018.

³³ Cone, James. *God of the Oppressed*. Maryknoll, NY; Orbis, 1975). 184. Cone discusses the errors inherent to contingencies in any theological or ethical project. Building upon theological errors identified in the theology of

As this project now prepares to show, Minister Malcolm X of the Nation of Islam adds an additional context that rejects the potential of Americanism, liberal democracy, and Christianity as the appropriate hermeneutical or socio-cultural path to justice and social change. His critique of white supremacy in America during the Civil Rights movement in the United States recognizes and condemns the Theology of whiteness that was part of King's intellectual growth and development as an even more relevant ethicist, as history should reflect. Malcolm X anticipates Cone's work, and though it is rooted in Nation of Islam narratives attributed to the Honorable Elijah Muhammed, provides Christian biblically centered ethics with an appropriate understanding of apocalyptic thought, literature, and resistance to oppression. Cone sees the errors of racism throughout Niebuhr's work: "Thus, Reinhold Niebuhr can speak in terms of black people in terms of 'cultural backwardness' and then conclude: 'We must not consider founding fathers immoral just because they were slaveholders?'" Cone writes of Christian theologians contemporary to the three central to this project, such as Paul Ramsey: "They spend more time informing black people about the proper respect for 'law and order' than in unmasking the systematic order of white injustice." Cone identifies such measured incompetence as an error not related to cultural realities but due to a "theological blindness."³⁴

reformers in the 17th Century, he writes that Calvin's easiness with American slavery, and Luther's conspiracy with landowners against peasants were "*wrong ethically because they were wrong theologically*. They were wrong theologically because they failed to listen to the Bible – with sufficient openness and through the eyes of victims of political oppression." 183. Cone applies this critical approach to Niebuhr, who did see himself aligned with the oppressed in Detroit, and in fact was active in overcoming racial tensions. Like Wesley and Luther, however, Cone shows through his understanding of Herbert Edwards' essay "Racism and Christian Ethics in America" that "white ethicists, from Reinhold Niebuhr to James Gustafson, reflect the racism current in society as a whole... racism appears in the form of *invisibility*. White theologians and ethicists simply ignore black people by suggesting that the problem of racism and oppression is only one social expression of a larger ethical concern." Cone uses many of Niebuhr's statements concerning race to provide examples of the insufficiency of white theology as biblical or theological, but rather "an ethics of the status quo, primarily derived from an identity with white oppressors than with the biblical theme of God's liberation of the oppressed." 184.

³⁴ Cone. *God of the Oppressed*. 185.

Malcolm X, with the nostalgia of oppression driving a theology of immediately realized vindication, apocalyptically sees what the biblical texts refers to as “the great and terrible day of the LORD come.”³⁵ Whereas Niebuhr, and in Malcolm X’s mind, King as well tended to be mired in a religion and democracy that itself was not only rooted in, but provided the fertile soil of slavery that produced institutionalized white supremacy as the law of the land. “More than any other images,” writes Cone, “‘dream’ and ‘nightmare’ best summarize the differences between Martin King’s and Malcolm X’s perspective on America.”³⁶

“America’s problem is us,” stated Malcom X, “she doesn’t want us here... once you face this as a fact, you can start plotting a course that will make you appear intelligent instead of unintelligent.” Intelligent Americans of African Ancestry should easily identify white Americans not as neighbors but “their common enemy.” Malcolm X did not subscribe to a Christian love of neighbor and enemy ethic, at any rate. His apocalyptic nature was to tell the truth of an American culture rooted in racism and as such, rooted in evil from its very inception. “You sure don’t catch hell because you’re a Democrat or a Republican, you don’t catch hell because you’re a Mason or an Elk, and you sure don’t catch hell if you’re an American; because if you were an American, you wouldn’t catch hell. You catch hell because you’re black... You catch hell, all of us catch hell for the same reason.”³⁷

Malcolm X mocked the love of neighbor theology of the Christian church. “The only revolution in which the goal is loving your enemy is the negro revolution. It’s the only revolution

³⁵ Joel 2:32b KJV

³⁶ Cone. *Martin and Malcolm*. 111. Cone suggests that Malcolm X’s nightmare imagery is in fact a reaction to King’s American Dream imagery. “His use of the nightmare image did not appear prominently in his speeches until he responded to Martin’s well-known ‘I Have a Dream’ speech at the March on Washington event.”

³⁷ Cone. *Martin and Malcolm*. 115. In his theology of liberation of Africans throughout the world, Malcom X presented a revolutionary theme of Blackness as the only potential realization of a justice that Allah has made imminent. Integration was, in Malcom X’s concern for imminence a counter-revolutionary expression of a refusal to compromise. Allah acting in history was rather a “revolution” that “knows know compromise... [and] overturns and destroys everything that gets in its way.”

in which the goal is a desegregated lunch counter, a desegregated theater, a desegregated public toilet.” “Imagine that... You’ll have a chance to go to the toilet with white folks – why, you’re out of your mind! Only way I want to go to the toilet with him is if I can flush him down with the rest of that stuff.” Yet, Malcolm X was far more than sarcastic and aggressive rhetoric. He was intellectually equal to both Niebuhr and King and like both of them, spent time lecturing at universities across the nation. In Atlanta, Malcolm X attended a lecture given by Arthur Schlesinger Jr, at Atlanta University. He listened to Schlesinger state that “Nothing can obstruct... recognition of the brotherhood of the human community more than the racist doctrines preached by the White Citizens Councils, the Ku Klux Klan, and the Black Muslims,” and then “applauded Martin Luther King Jr. for promoting non-violence as ‘the best way to attack prejudice.’”³⁸ At a later question and answer session, Malcolm X “Identifying himself only as ‘a Muslim’... demanded to know on ‘what do you base your charge that the Black Muslims are racist and Black Supremacists?’” The two discussed [or debated] Schlesinger’s evidence appropriated from a recent article written by William Worthy, which the advisor to John F. Kennedy used as ground of support for his claim.

“But sir, how can a man of your intelligence, a professor of history, who knows the value of thorough research, come here from Harvard and attack Black Muslims. Basing your conclusions on one small article?” *The Pittsburgh Courier* ‘declared that ‘the fiery Mr. X victoriously crosses swords’ with Schlesinger, forcing the Harvard historian ‘into a diplomatic withdrawal’ of his earlier statement.”³⁹ Furthermore, Minister Malcolm X was proving

³⁸ Marable. 184.

³⁹ Marable. 186-187. Marable writes that the second debate between Rustin and Malcolm X at Howard University was a turning point that had tremendous impact upon the thinking of students at that university. Malcolm was a “divisive” presence “in the Black community” and that fact was “more prominently on display at Howard... when the NAACP invited Malcolm to speak... as part of Negro History Week. The invitation rattled the school’s

intellectually inspiring at universities, and his debates with Bayard Rustin provided evidence, win or lose, that Black Americans and Black thinking were not only equal to the Schlesingers and Niebuhrs of the world, but, unlike Rustin and King, Malcolm X understood and rejected black scholarship and ethics that were in his mind rooted in the institutions of white supremacy and its *intelligencia* on display in the thought of Niebuhr and Schlesinger, Ramsey and Gustafson.

If King's witness to a God of Love and the American Dream can best be summed in the words of his best known speech, Niebuhr's legacy is likely summed in this line taken from his *New York Times* obituary: "Mr. Niebuhr was a member of the American Academy of Arts and Letters, a group of 50 distinguished Americans. He received the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 1964."⁴⁰ As For remembering Malcom X, this project memorializes his apocalyptic message as delivered by Denzel Washington according the script of Spike Lee's movie X to begin concluding lessons from these three religious thinkers and applying them to the contemporary problems evident in the United States during the Era of Trump.

I'm not here this afternoon as a Republican, nor as a Democrat; not as a Mason, nor as an Elk; not as a Protestant, nor a Catholic; not as a Christian, nor a Jew; not as a Baptist, nor a Methodist. In fact, not even as an American, because if I was an American, the problem that confronts our people today wouldn't even exist. So I have to stand here today as what I was when I was born: a black man. Before there was any such thing as a Republican or a Democrat, we were black. Before there was any such thing as a Mason or an Elk, we were black. Before there was any such thing as a Jew or a Christian, we were black people! In fact, before there was any such place as America, we were black! And after America has long passed from the scene, there will still be black people.

I'm gonna tell you like it really is. Every election year these politicians are sent up here to pacify us! They're sent here and setup here by the White Man! This is what they do! They send drugs in Harlem down here to pacify us! They send alcohol down here to pacify us! They send

administrators, almost all of whom were staunch integrationists" and were worried of having the school's federal funding revoked.

⁴⁰ Whitman, Alden. "Reinhold Niebuhr Is Dead; Protestant Theologian, 78." *New York Times*, June, 2 1971. Retrieved 12/22/2018 at <https://www.nytimes.com/1971/06/02/archives/reinhold-niebuhr-is-dead-protestant-theologian-78-reinhold-niebuhr.html>.

prostitution down here to pacify us! Why you can't even get drugs in Harlem without the White Man's permission! You can't get prostitution in Harlem without the White Man's permission! You can't get gambling in Harlem without the White Man's permission! Every time you break the seal on that liquor bottle, that's a Government seal that you're breaking! Oh, I say and I say it again, ya been had! Ya been took! Ya been hoodwinked! Bamboozled! Led astray! Run amok! This is what He does.⁴¹

Christians must be extremely careful not to colonize Malcolm X's apocalyptic message of a God who will act in history to command justice on God's own terms. We need not appropriate his message of Black liberation and justice that somehow makes right the wrongs of a racist agenda maintained against people of color by somehow attempting to make Minister Malcolm a savior of white supremacists from their own consequences. The fact is, we need not look to Black apocalyptic thought to make Christian claims to a God of Love credible to African Americans. There is no credibility. Yet we do have our own apocalyptic tradition that gives us the ears necessary to hear what Malcolm X is saying and use that opportunity to self-reflect and insist on honest self-appraisal of racism in the church and cultural institutions and tell the truth about them in a manner that calls Americans to witness both to themselves, and to those who claim Christ and promote the maintenance of white supremacist institutions such as Niebuhr did (intentionally or otherwise).

Douglas Harink provides an example of postmodern apocalyptic thought and language that allows for European Americans to see the rhetoric and intellect of Malcolm X as being as necessary to the concern for the emancipation of Americans from the stocks of whiteness as it is historically necessary to understanding how power and control mechanisms must be judged and resisted with the knowledge that turning such power and control upside down is the revealed truth of God. For Christians of every background, Jesus as Christ, the cross, and the resurrection

⁴¹ Lee, Spike. *Malcolm X*. Produced by Marvin Worth and Spike Lee. Distributed by Warner Brothers (11/18/1992).

are apocalyptic. Harink draws from Christian ethicist Hauerwas and suggests “moderation is missing from most of his work, which is not to say that he does not engage in careful, even patient, reasoning about matters theological... But Hauerwas understands that even patience, respectful listening, and a certain playfulness in theological reasoning can only serve his primary aim, ‘to remind Christians that we are in a life and death struggle with the world.’”⁴²

While Malcolm X used the phrase “By any means necessary” and found that white Americans could do no more than steal its meaning and regurgitate the phrase as proof-text evidence of the Nation of Islam or X as an organization that promotes violence against whites, Stanley Hauerwas goes further in telling his own apocalyptic truth about the aims of Christ as the apocalypse of God. Harink notes that life and death struggle, or warfare, is always engaged with specific awareness that real enemies pose real threats, in relation to which the theologian may, playfully but rightfully – be labeled a “non-violent terrorist.”⁴³ He writes that “for Hauerwas, theology is thoroughly apocalyptic activity... a way of coming to terms with liberalism, or liberal democracy, or ‘America.’” For Christian apocalyptic thought, democracy, Christian institutions, or even the defense of liberty can be an obstacle to the primacy of Christ as the full revelation for what Niebuhr can only deny as possible, but is fully embodied by Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr. “It is first and foremost a strong emphasis on God’s action in the history of Jesus Christ, rather than human action or response.”

Harink then states that God’s action is “characterized by conflict with enslaving powers... that oppose God’s good purpose for all creation.” Harink notes additional Christian apocalyptic criteria for faithful persons to be able to reflect God’s will rather than the institutional will of

⁴² Harink, Douglas. *Paul Among the Postliberals: Pauline Theology Beyond Christendom and Modernity*. (Grand Rapids, MI; Brazos Press, 2003). 67.

⁴³ Hauerwas, Stanley. “The Non-Violent terrorist: In Defense of Christian Fanaticism.” 177-200. *In Sanctify them in Truth: Holiness Exemplified*. (Nashville, TN; Abingdon, 1998). Cited by Harink, *Paul Among the Postliberals*. 67.

white supremacy. “The goal is liberation of humanity and the creation.” Terroristic perhaps as a threat to the stability of national narratives that maintain or defend white supremacy. Judgment will occur with “Jesus as the normative and critical measure of faithfulness to God.” Such judgment seems terroristic when the judgment of God is a concept that empowers and liberates those judged marginal or enslaved by the nations. Not finally, but importantly, Harink suggests that an apocalyptic truth of Christ is a truth that names Christ as the “unsurpassed and unsurpassable; there is no reality, no history... no system, framework, idea or anything else that transcends the reality of Jesus Christ.”⁴⁴ As Malcom X indicated to the world, judgment of white supremacy is imminent, as is a change that reinstitutes a natural order that places Africans in their ordained place in history and creation – exposing the evil and violence of European racism, paternalism, and genocide. If Malcom X could be deemed terroristic or as promoting violence, then the gospels of Jesus Christ and the Apocalypse to John cannot only be interpreted as terroristic in some sense, but as historically understood to be written and read aloud in a context of Christian opposition to the racism and terror inherent in the Roman Empire and the Judean elites who benefited from Roman militarism and protected status.

What Malcom X said about the American Dream and the Christendom of Niebuhr is just what an apocalyptic Christian worldview sees through the eyes and promise of Christ. While discussion must be reasonable, apocalyptic discourse puts white supremacist rationality on edge. “The rationalist response to apocalyptic” writes Walter Lowe, “is to treat it, or the belief in it, as ahistorical phenomenon. In doing so, the historian asserts a priori the very continuity of history which apocalyptic would question – into the dustbin of history goes the notion that history is headed for the dustbin.” Lowe knows that to discuss apocalyptic claims about the truths of evil in

⁴⁴ Harink. 68.

terms that allow for white supremacist evil to thrive is to contextualize the will of God and the truth of racism as evil as a rather unfortunate reality to be tolerated until change can occur in its own due time – as though change can only be trusted to happen when all involved are comfortable with it. As Malcom X and Martin Luther King Jr. point out prior to their assassinations (racist terror in which evil is maintained and murder re-contextualized as martyrdom), The fact that change is being allowed to occur in due time only means that the consequences of racist terror continue to be the embodiment of democracy until the tides of history turn.

We leave Hauerwas behind here, as like other white theologians, he rarely tasks himself with even the slightest discussion of racism as institutionalized church culture, and focuses like Niebuhr (Hauerwas is a remarkably harsh and accurate critic of Niebuhr) on the global realities of sin and the need for non-violence at the expense of credible witness against white supremacy. Of course it is wrong, it might be said, but sin is ever present in many ways. Like many, Hauerwas calls for praxis and embodiment, but rarely imposes a guideline for faithfulness upon his readers. The focus on sin at the expense of speaking prophetically against capitalism, racism, and sexism fails to call racism, exploitation, and violence to accountability. Malcom X calls his people away from violence and exploitation, indeed calls them to separate themselves from the white devil. Martin Luther King sees change as imminent as well, but does not see the destruction of the framework of American democracy as a necessary component of change. For King, Christ and the beloved kingdom represents the end of an era, and a new beginning.

Eschatology is another theological reality of the Christian faith that is often misunderstood or appropriated for the aims of both white supremacy and political policy making. Though the Greek *eschatos* is used definitively as an end, the end, last or final, the Greek New Testament

only uses the word in terms of the final end one time, when a little girl dies in the Gospel of Mark. Interestingly, this one-time use of the word as the final end is part of a story related to resurrection. More commonly, *eschatos* and its variants are used to identify points of transition, the end of a particular reign or project, and it then assumes something new takes its place. Nowhere is the theme of such change evident as it is in the eschatological witness that is found in King's *I have a Dream* speech. He narrates the end of an era of racist realities in the United States and then projects a new era of multi-racial children playing together and benefiting from the promises of equal status identified in American legal and political texts.

However, there is a more important eschatological witness in King's corpus that lends to the imminence of change and how a call has been trumpeted that demands immediate response from all who speak about change as necessary to make the American Dream myth credible. This eschatological theme is found in King's *Letter to a Birmingham Jail*. After being arrested for acts of civil disobedience in Birmingham, King was frustrated to find that local white pastors were concerned for King and African Americans to be more patient and cautious about their actions promoting an end to segregation.⁴⁵

King wrote a response to those pastors. "WHILE confined here in the Birmingham city jail, I came across your recent statement calling our present activities 'unwise and untimely,'" he penned. "I am in Birmingham because injustice is here... You deplore the demonstrations that are presently taking place in Birmingham. But I am sorry that your statement did not express a similar concern for the conditions that brought the demonstrations into being." King identifies the need for change is evident, that he is an American who is bound to pursue justice, and that his intention is to non-violently initiate the necessary change. As indicated above, King has a

⁴⁵ King, Jr. Martin Luther. *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*. Retrieved 12/22/2018 at https://web.cn.edu/kwheeler/documents/Letter_Birmingham_Jail.pdf

change in mind and is accountable to this change as a matter of his Christian faith and obligation to the American Dream. King deems the framework worthwhile, and sturdy enough to support the change. His call is not for a decisive action of God to judge and condemn America, but rather its racism.

He then states clearly why the struggle cannot wait, or be domesticated. "My friends, I must say to you that we have not made a single gain in civil rights without determined legal and nonviolent pressure. History is the long and tragic story of the fact that privileged groups seldom give up their privileges voluntarily. Individuals may see the moral light and voluntarily give up their unjust posture; but, as Reinhold Niebuhr has reminded us, groups are more immoral than individuals." While referring to Niebuhr, King only mentions the ethics of the white American in passing, a sort of a cultural pointer that King shares with the others. He points out the power that some individuals are looking to maintain or negotiate must not be part of the conversation of change, as King is looking to eliminate from the realm of what is possible within the changes he is promoting. "We know through painful experience that freedom is never voluntarily given by the oppressor; it must be demanded by the oppressed. Frankly, I have never yet engaged in a direct-action movement that was 'well timed' according to the timetable of those who have not suffered unduly from the disease of segregation. For years now I have heard the word 'wait.' It rings in the ear of every Negro with a piercing familiarity. This 'wait' has almost always meant 'never.'"

King then offers a glimpse of the condition of the church resulting from its complicity with white supremacy. "The contemporary church is so often a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. It is so often the arch supporter of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the

church's often vocal sanction of things as they are." Yet, unlike Malcom X. King cannot judge the church, or the American Dream in finality, but rather calls it to repentance during this eschatological event characterized by the Civil Rights movement. "I hope the church as a whole will meet the challenge of this decisive hour. But even if the church does not come to the aid of justice, I have no despair about the future. I have no fear about the outcome of our struggle in Birmingham, even if our motives are presently misunderstood. We will reach the goal of freedom in Birmingham and all over the nation, because the goal of America is freedom."

What did the apocalyptic nature of Malcolm X's thinking promote in his understanding of what King was doing in Birmingham, Selma, and Washington D.C.? Minister Malcolm X could not express any hope for an eschatological change, only for a final judgment of God that tore down the edifices of the temples of white supremacy.

In fact, he told an apocalyptic tale in speeches and interviews that indicated his thinking about integration as an eschatological act of transition toward hope, and Black separatism as an act of God's justice and will:

So you have two types of Negro. The old type and the new type. Most of you know the old type. When you read about him in history during slavery he was called "Uncle Tom." He was the house Negro. And during slavery you had two Negroes. You had the house Negro and the field Negro. The house Negro usually lived close to his master. He dressed like his master. He wore his master's second-hand clothes. He ate food that his master left on the table. And he lived in his master's house--probably in the basement or the attic--but he still lived in the master's house. So whenever that house Negro identified himself, he always identified himself in the same sense that his master identified himself. When his master said, "We have good food," the house Negro would say, "Yes, we have plenty of good food." "We" have plenty of good food. When the master said that "we have a fine home here," the house Negro said, "Yes, we have a fine home here." When the master would be sick, the house Negro identified himself so much with his master he'd say, "What's the matter boss, we sick?" His master's pain was his pain. And it hurt him more for his master to be sick than for him to be sick himself. When the house started burning down, that type of Negro would fight harder to put the master's house out than the master himself would. But then you had another Negro out in the field. The house Negro was in the minority. The masses--the field Negroes were the masses. They were in the majority. When the master got

sick, they prayed that he'd die. [Laughter] If his house caught on fire, they'd pray for a wind to come along and fan the breeze. If someone came to the house Negro and said, "Let's go, let's separate," naturally that Uncle Tom would say, "Go where? What could I do without boss? Where would I live? How would I dress? Who would look out for me?" That's the house Negro. But if you went to the field Negro and said, "Let's go, let's separate," he wouldn't even ask you where or how. He'd say, "Yes, let's go." And that one ended right there. So now you have a twentieth-century-type of house Negro. A twentieth-century Uncle Tom. He's just as much an Uncle Tom today as Uncle Tom was 100 and 200 years ago. Only he's a modern Uncle Tom. That Uncle Tom wore a handkerchief around his head. This Uncle Tom wears a top hat. He's sharp. He dresses just like you do. He speaks the same phraseology, the same language. He tries to speak it better than you do. He speaks with the same accents, same diction. And when you say, "your army," he says, "our army." He hasn't got anybody to defend him, but anytime you say "we" he says "we." "Our president," "our government," "our Senate," "our congressmen," "our this and our that." And he hasn't even got a seat in that "our" even at the end of the line. So this is the twentieth-century Negro. Whenever you say "you," the personal pronoun in the singular or in the plural, he uses it right along with you. When you say you're in trouble, he says, "Yes, we're in trouble."

But there's another kind of Black man on the scene. If you say you're in trouble, he says, "Yes, you're in trouble." [Laughter] He doesn't identify himself with your plight whatsoever.

For Christians, white Christians and white congregations, it is not only Martin Luther King's Jr.'s rootedness in Christ, the church, and the American Dream, or Malcom X's apocalyptic judgment of truth and God's victory over evil that speak to us and call us to embody justice. King calls upon us to do justice now. Malcolm X does not call us to do anything, but speaks the truth that provides us with a moment of decision about the primacy of Christ in our lives. Malcolm X also allows for Christians to understand the concept of justification, sanctification, and perfecting grace. As he continued toward what might have been considered his destiny; firebombings, alienation from Black institutions and liberal American agents of change, and murder; just as his father's life played out, he engaged in a life of utter faithfulness. As Augustine might have found to be true, Malcolm X never allowed for his gaze to turn from Allah, and at the end, he found peace before terror took his life.

Martin Luther King embodied *agape* – in seeking civil rights he became more faithful to a God who had chosen him to bear a remarkable cross. The assassination of King was evidence that he took his cross, but also that he took up his cross with the knowledge that, like Moses, he would not reach his promised land. King gave all of himself without ultimate regard for his family or his own life. He sacrificed his privilege, the privilege of election, of security of self and self-identity, and of the potential to earn millions as a theologian, ethicist, or speaker without suffering the pain of death.

It was Niebuhr who ultimately proved to himself that *agape* was an unrealistic or merely individual love ethic, one that did not show a realistic understanding of sin, evil, or power. Niebuhr in retrospect seems to have not been secure in his revolt against Henry Ford, or as the pastor of poor autoworkers. He seemed not content to struggle with the racism of Detroit and the rest of the integrated North. He found his call rather to be in academia and writing to academia, and being relevant to the power structures of both democracy and church as a sort of conscience that allowed for evil to run its course like a river, following the path of least government or theological resistance. Indeed, Niebuhr's theology lacked apocalyptic and eschatological components that indicated a biblical worldview of the supremacy of Christ and the cross. Niebuhr wholly believed in the cross, he simply seemed unwilling to bear it, or demand such action of white Christians.

I state above that Niebuhr was a consistent contributor to the still publishing *Christian Century*. He had much more to say, and published his own periodical entitled *Christianity and Crisis*. The latter provide some insight as to how Niebuhr regards Christian ethics and the role Christians must play in the Civil Rights movement discussed above.

“One can only hope that the Church will be more effective in restraining and transmuting these vague and recalcitrant passions of man than it has in the past... We protestants might begin the new chapter in our national life by contritely confessing that evangelical Christianity has failed to contribute significantly to the solution of the gravest social issue and evil that our nation has confronted since slavery.”⁴⁶

As we consider the age of Trump and white supremacy in America, we can only take note of statistics that, if one wishes, can be interpreted through each of the three responses to the fact of institutionalized racism in the United States. Malcolm X provides us with the lenses of an African American man who was crucified for his rejection of the idolatrous claims of the United States. Martin Luther King Jr. provides us with a rootedness in both the biblical story, the cross of Christ, and the selfless love of God that can allow for America to be a beacon of democratic hope and evidence of the credibility of our claims regarding Jesus as Christ. Niebuhr calls for us to challenge the approximately 70 percent of white evangelical Americans who call Black men “sons of bitches” for rejecting the idolatrous bending of knee to the gods and guardians of white supremacy. Niebuhr may have asked the Quarterback to take a knee in church, but not on the field of worship.

⁴⁶ Niebuhr, Reinhold. “The Mounting Racial Crisis.” *Christianity in Crisis: A Journal of Christian Opinion*. July 8, 1963. Vol 23. No. 12. 121-22. In another essay, Niebuhr praises Americanism for producing a restrained racism. “We may all be racists at heart, but we have some limits of humane concern that distinguish us from the Nazis.” “Civil Rights Climax in Alabama.” *Christianity in Crisis*. April 5, 1965. Vol. 15 No. 5. 61.