
St. Augustine and Malcolm X as Theological Figures in Relation to a Contemporary Theologia Crucis in Solidarity with the #BlackLivesMatter Movement

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Introduction: Uniting divine delight and radical politics

St. Augustine and Malcolm X are two “God-radiated” individuals.¹ Augustine blends intellect with delight in God, and Malcolm X incorporates intellect with contemplation to lead to radical politics on behalf of suffering Black people. Both thinkers can be approached as theological figures for synthesizing delight in the incomprehensible and intimate Mystery of God with radical action in the world on behalf of oppressed Black bodies.² If piety and justice are synthesized, then delight in God leads to radical politics on behalf of the neighbor. The Christian St. Augustine of Hippo and the Muslim Malcolm X can be helpful voices for exploring a cruciform synthesis of piety and justice when understood as theological figures.³ These thinkers share an important commonality: a profound stress on delight and centeredness in God as the basis for their relationship with God. Augustine most clearly focuses on desire and sin, while Malcolm integrates desire for God with overcoming fleshly desire through radical action on behalf of suffering and exploited victims of injustice.

Hermeneutically, understanding Augustine and Malcolm X as “figures” means approaching their texts with the conscious intention of transcending original historical contexts, for the purposes of proposing how these texts (and thus, the respective “figures” of the authors contained therein) may have helpful insights for today, even as contemporary theologians are free to reach radically

1. By using this phrase, I mean right relationship with God was the center of their existence. Evidence for this claim is found in Augustine, *Confessions, 2nd Edition*, trans. F.J. Sheed (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2006) and Louis A. DeCaro Jr., *On the Side of My People: A Religious Life of Malcolm X* (New York: New York University Press, 1996).

2. The understanding of God as intimate and incomprehensible Mystery has connections both to the *Confessions* of St. Augustine, and the German Jesuit systematic theologian Karl Rahner. Cf. Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York: Seabury Press, 1978).

3. The present reading of Malcolm X draws from James Cone’s Christian incorporation of Malcolm throughout the essay. By so doing, I admit my reading of Malcolm is influenced by a prominent Christian systematic theologian and reaches conclusions Malcolm himself could not have endorsed as a non-Christian. Nevertheless, this reading seeks to respect Malcolm’s synthesis of piety and radical politics while drawing from his autobiography for a contemporary *theologia crucis*.

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different conclusions than the historical figures/authors themselves reached in their own respective textual readings and historical contexts. This understanding of “figure” (*figura*) is indebted to Vitor Westhelle (and pioneered in literature by Erich Auerbach), according to Westhelle’s *figura* hermeneutic for Lutheran theology.⁴

The present essay, then, pays special attention to the intersection of piety and justice for the sake of proposing a contemporary *theologia crucis* in relation to the #BlackLivesMatter movement, and is written from the perspective of a White, Queer, male working theologically within what can be broadly defined as the Lutheran Barthian tradition.⁵ The essay attempts to offer a new approach to a *theologia crucis* through texts from two theologians

4. Cf. Vitor Westhelle, *Transfiguring Luther: The Planetary Promise of Luther’s Theology* (Eugene: Cascade Books, 2016), 7.

5. A *theologia crucis* rooted in yet diverging from Martin Luther is thus the theological grounding for the present essay. Related to the Barthian tradition, the essay incorporates Barth’s claim that dogmatics and ethics should be related to one another, as well as his critique against the traditional Lutheran dogmatic sequence of Law and Gospel. Cf. Karl Barth, “Evangelium und Gesetz,” in Ernst Kinder and Klaus Haendler, eds. *Gesetz und Evangelium: Beiträge zur gegenwärtigen theologischen Diskussion*, 2nd ed. (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1986), 1-30. Finally, the theme of *theologia crucis* is the reason for drawing from Cone’s reading of Malcolm X. Direct evidence of Cone as a *theologus crucis* can be found in James Cone, “An African American Perspective on Cross and Suffering,” in Yacob tesfai, ed. *The Scandal of a Crucified World: Perspectives on the Cross and Suffering* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1994), 48-61.

of African descent for the post-Donald Trump United States where Black people are still continually shot, beaten, and imprisoned by docetic White individuals who deny the *imago Dei* in Black bodies.⁶

St. Augustine and the value of human bodies⁷

At the forefront of approaching Augustine in relation to the unification of piety and justice is his *Confessions*. The Bishop of Hippo's spiritual autobiography blends experience, philosophy, and theological exegesis for an account showing how life in the Triune God is filled with questing, questioning, wrestling, and seeking. The work is a classic example of the heart's delight and joy when it rests and finds fulfilment in the Triune God, the creator, redeemer, and sustainer. "Thou dost so excite him that to praise Thee is his joy. For Thou hast made us for Thyself and our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee."⁸ There is profound truth to Augustine's prayer for the Christian seeker. Where does the heart turn, particularly in time of need; to a mutable good, or the immutable good? As Luther remarks in his *Large Catechism*, "That to which the heart clings for all good in times of need that is your god."⁹ Augustine frames this question of delight and desire in God versus the world's delights and desires throughout the *Confessions* in a personal, spiritual manner that has implications for theological-political reflection today.

"Of You we must ask, in You we must seek, at You we must knock. Thus only shall we receive, thus shall we find, thus will it be opened to us."¹⁰ Augustine's text overflows with biblical references and illustrations. While not being what modern people would consider to be a biblical fundamentalist, Augustine's text is a reminder to Christian theologians to ground observations concerning the Christian God and Christian tradition in the Bible.¹¹

6. The *Confessions* of St. Augustine and the *Autobiography* of Malcolm X have been previously compared, although not in relation to a contemporary *theologia crucis*, in Winston A. Van Horne, "From Sinners to Saints: The *Confessions* of Saint Augustine and Malcolm X," *The Journal of Religious Thought* 43, no. 1 (1986): 76-101. I am grateful to womanist theologian and anthropologist Dr. Linda E. Thomas for alerting me to this article.

7. Conversations about St. Augustine of Hippo inevitably turn toward sexuality and desire. It is commonly thought that Augustine is anti-sex and anti-body, and the destructive framer of "original sin." While the present work is by no means an exploration in Augustine's theology *per se*, a proposal for a contemporary *theologia crucis* exploring the synthesis of piety and justice can, nevertheless, draw from texts of Augustine for the unification of doxological Trinitarian theology and radical politics in solidarity with oppressed Black bodies today. Hermeneutically, then, Augustine as a "figure" is theologically related to synthesizing divine delight and radical politics, even though he should not be thought of as a Black liberation theologian in the twentieth century sense of that term.

8. St. Augustine, *Confessions*, 3.

9. Martin Luther, *The Large Catechism* (1529), in Kolb, Robert, and Timothy J. Wengert, eds. *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 386.

10. Augustine, *Confessions*, 321.

11. This notion is particularly important for James Cone's ap-

Augustine's text is a reminder to Christian theologians to ground observations concerning the Christian God and Christian tradition in the Bible. In the end, Augustine leads beyond himself to the Scriptures he found life through, and beyond the Scriptures to the God whom the Scriptures bear witness.

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Augustine's goal is to address the difference between the Triune God and lesser delights that can distract us from God's goodness, faithfulness, and promises. Those lesser desires are unbridled sexuality, and here we enter into territory where Augustine is most often criticized. In *On Christian Teaching*, he says the following:

Neither should a person enjoy himself, if you think closely about this, because he should not love himself on his own account, but only on account of the one who is to be enjoyed. A person is at his best when in his whole life he strives towards the unchangeable form of life and holds fast to it wholeheartedly. But if he loves himself on his own account, he does not relate himself to God, but turns to himself and not to something unchangeable.¹²

Augustine is not denying the goodness of the body and the divine origin of sexuality in this excerpt, *per se*. Rather, he is critiquing sexuality disconnected from centeredness in the Triune God. Here we see love of self without the love of the Triune God *for us* as the root of self-love is problematic. As Sarah Coakley observes, "Physical sex, for Augustine, undermines the ideal of control or 'mastery,' of one's self (as he puts it in the famous passage on continence in *Confessions*, X.29). It is, however, only *God* who can finally supply the (graced) control that human, ascetic effort constantly fails to achieve."¹³

We now come to the controversial aspect of Augustine, his supposed support of the notion of original sin as related to sexuality and desire. While the above examples should make clear rightly

proach to theology as a dialectical relationship between the Bible and the black experience.

12. St. Augustine, *On Christian Teaching*, trans. R.P.H. Green (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, 2008), 17.

13. Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality, and the Self: An Essay on the Trinity* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 279.

ordered desire for the Triune God was crucial for Augustine, he should not be blamed for the notion of original sin that says the body and sexuality is bad *per se*. Rather, what Augustine is describing is a shift of the gaze, from the Triune God to a mutable good focused on anything other than God.¹⁴ Here it is important to note feminist critiques of Augustine, and original sin, by saying that women might not experience the same tug toward unbridled desire and sexuality that men do, and thus have a different understanding of sin than men, not to mention LGBTQIA+ people who are so often left out of these conversations. As Valerie Saiving notes, women are more likely to fall into “triviality, distractibility, and diffuseness; lack of an organizing center or focus; dependence on others for one’s own self- definition; tolerance at the expense of standards of excellence; inability to respect the boundaries of privacy; sentimentality, gossipy sociability, and mis- trust of reason-in short, under-development or negation of the self than unbridled, masculine, lustful desire for sex.”¹⁵

If contemporary theologians take contextual experiences of oppression into consideration, we need not come to the same conclusions as Augustine regarding rightly ordered desire, and can claim true centeredness in God means not resorting to idle gossip or thinking one needs the best clothes, social standing, or material possessions to be good enough before God. From a Christian standpoint, God’s grace is freely given in Jesus Christ, and being centered in this grace leads to delight in God because of God’s goodness and faithfulness, and radical love of the neighbor. True surrender to God’s mercy and faithfulness means trusting God declares human beings “good enough” for Christ’s sake and humans need not seek this goodness by works. However, once trusting in God’s faithfulness in Christ, there is freedom from worry, self-doubt, and blame in order to practice radical love for neighbors near and far. Expressed in a phrase originating with Alice Walker, human beings are free to love ourselves. Regardless.¹⁶ Neighbor love and unconditional self-love are rooted in God whose grace is at the basis for good works and who then grants rest in God’s goodness. In Augustine’s words, “And likewise the voice of Your Book tells us that we also, after our works – which are only very good because You have granted us to accomplish them – will rest in You in the Sabbath of life everlasting.”¹⁷

Notwithstanding limitations of historical context, Augustine’s *Confessions* remains a helpful guide for the intellectual life as rooted in prayer. Further, internalizing Augustine’s message of divine desire being the center of human existence means humans should be empowered to love our neighbors and creation as Christ has loved us. Desire for and centering in the Triune God can lead to seeing the world as radiating with the Triune God’s presence.

14. For an insightful summary of Augustine’s struggles with (mis-directed) sexual desire in relation to Malcolm X’s own struggle with lust, cf. Van Horne, “From Sinners to Saints,” 79-80.

15. Valerie Saiving Goldstein, “The Human Situation: A Feminine View,” *The Journal of Religion* 40, no. 2 (1960), 109.

16. Alice Walker, *In Search of our Mother’s Gardens: Womanist Prose* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1983), xii.

17. St. Augustine, *Confessions*, 320.

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If the world is enveloped in God’s presence, then neighbors and creation are to be loved with divine intensity. Ethics might not be a strong current in the *Confessions*, but ethical implications can be discerned nonetheless.¹⁸ Current seekers after God should “take up and read” Augustine’s *Confessions* for a timeless companion on the spiritual and theological pilgrimage. For enacting this radical love on a concrete basis, we now turn to Malcolm X as the figure for embodied love in the world

Malcolm X as truth teller against the system exploiting Black bodies

Malcolm X is arguably the most vocal and powerful Black prophet of the twentieth century. Malcolm exposed the hypocrisy of Whites who sought to keep Black people from finding their true humanity. While Whites pursued the American Dream, Blacks saw the dark underbelly of such aspirations as a nightmare. Jürgen Moltmann summarizes aptly by noting, “What the whites call their American dream has always been for the Blacks only a nightmare.”¹⁹ Fiercely devoted to the freedom of Black people “by any means necessary,” Malcolm X remains a controversial figure in United States history. What is often missed when considering Malcolm, is his profound religiosity. His work with the Nation of Islam sought to advance religion as a liberating force for oppressed bodies in the world. As Louis A. DeCaro Jr. notes in his religious biography of Malcolm X, “Islam, as Malcolm X understood it, could not be forced on people, especially those dwelling in different lands and cultures...the Islamic mission could only succeed by setting an example of leadership that was attuned to the spiritual values of love and justice.”²⁰ James Cone also agrees with the notion of Malcolm as profoundly religious, and that Malcolm’s religiosity should be understood as intricately connected to his pursuit of social justice on behalf of oppressed Black people. “As Martin King’s commitment to justice cannot be understood apart from his *faith*, Malcolm X’s faith cannot be understood apart from his

18. St. Augustine. *Confessions*, 320.

19. Jürgen Moltmann, *Experiences in Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 205.

20. Louis A. DeCaro, Jr., *On the Side of my People: A Religious Life of Malcolm X* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 261.

commitment to *justice*.²¹

Many Whites are suspicious of Malcolm X and his legacy, if not dismissing him outright as unworthy of consideration. However, Malcolm's legacy calls Whites to give up social-political-cultural privilege and to stand for the least of these as common siblings in humanity. Still, as Moltmann writes,

For the whites Malcolm counted as a radical, a black racist, a preacher of hate; for many blacks he was an apostle of the new black self-respect. He led young blacks in the ghettos away from their self-destructiveness through drugs, crime, prison sentences and so forth. As James Cone says, freedom is always first of all one's own perception of one's own self-esteem and dignity.²²

If freedom really is "one's own perception of one's own self-esteem and dignity," then Malcolm X is a prophet of freedom from whom Christians have much to learn and to be thankful for. Malcolm spoke for oppressed Blacks and fought against White oppressors, and remains a figure to draw from textually for arguing for God's preferential option for the oppressed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The black oppression Malcolm X spoke against and was ultimately assassinated for still runs rampant in the United States today. The #BlackLivesMatter movement, launched in 2014, is a response to black oppression by White, docetic oppressors. Particularly egregious are prison rates of people of color, when White people committing similar crimes people of color are imprisoned for often go free or receive drastically reduced sentences. Legal theorist and Professor of Social Justice at Union Seminary Michelle Alexander writes convincingly in *The New Jim Crow* about the blatant discrimination people of color experience in regard to police searches, arrests, and abuse.²³ Originally written in 2010 and revised in 2012, this book described well the realities of exploitation suffered by people of color, and harkens back to events described by Malcolm X in his *Autobiography*.²⁴ Simply stated, Black people are incarcerated at extraordinarily high rates for the same "crimes" that White people commit each day, yet are much less likely to be imprisoned for.²⁵

Many factors play a role in the systemic oppression of Black

21. Cone, *Martin and Malcolm in America: A Dream or a Nightmare?* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1991, 2012), 155.

22. Moltmann, *Experiences in Theology*, 205.

23. Cf. Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* (New York: The New Press, 2010), 178-221.

24. One of the most moving portions of Malcolm's *Autobiography* is his section written from prison describing his self-made education in order to be able to read letters from Elijah Muhammad, which was a principal source of his political liberation. "It was because of my letters that I happened to stumble upon starting to acquire some kind of a homemade education." See Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1964, 2015), 197. Here we see the beginnings for Malcolm of the integration of piety, education, and social justice.

25. Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 7-9.

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bodies in the United States, but it is especially important to recognize the relationship between the capitalist economic system and the systemic oppression of Black bodies. Alexander addresses this relationship throughout her book, especially in terms of federal funding for police departments to get "tough on crime" in light of the War on Drugs, and the profitability of the private prison industry.²⁶ As regards the prison industry, rural areas now depend on the prison industry as a local economy booster. After all, the industry provides a substantial number of jobs in an era when jobs are much harder to find as capitalism migrates its exploitative practices from its traditional epicenters in the United States and Europe to Asia.²⁷ In the end, the mass incarceration of Black people primarily for nonviolent drug offenses is a matter of dehumanization. Dignity is stripped away from these so-called "felons" and they are locked up and then locked out of society.²⁸

Malcolm X knew the reality described by Michelle Alexander intimately well, and his work on behalf of suffering Blacks is admirable for its truth-telling power. Unfortunately, times have not improved since Malcolm's assassination in 1965, demonstrated by Alexander's book. Still, Malcolm X deserves to be called a prophet, exemplified by Cone's description of him.

Malcolm was committed to telling the truth as he felt it and with the simplicity, clarity, and passion of an angry biblical prophet. He frequently quoted Jesus' saying, "You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you free." No one believed that saying more than Malcolm. "We don't care who likes this or not, as long as we know it's the truth," he told his audiences. "If you are afraid to tell the truth, why you don't deserve freedom. Just tell the truth."²⁹

Late Medieval Augustinian friar Martin Luther famously proclaimed in the *Heidelberg Disputation* of 1518, "a theologian

26. Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 97-139; 230-232.

27. Essays about capitalism's migration from its traditional U.S. and European epicenters to Asia are found in Richard D. Wolff, *Capitalism's Crisis Deepens: Essays on the Global Economic Meltdown* (Chicago: Heymarket Books, 2016), 1-73, esp. 42-44, 54-57, 68-73.

28. Alexander, *The New Jim Crow*, 98-102.

29. Cone, *Martin and Malcolm in America*, 95.

of the cross calls a thing as it actually is.”³⁰ Here is a statement that can be re-interpreted today for imagining anew a theological prophet as centered in the incarnate, crucified, and risen Christ.³¹ Although decisively not within the Christian tradition, Malcolm X’s tireless truth-telling on behalf of victimized Black bodies shows he is a truth-telling theologian, and that he deserves to be a prophet Christians should respect and learn from when advocating a Christ-centered ethic of justice, resistance, and love.³²

A theology of the crucified Christ’s resurrection for protesting Black exploitation³³

Both Augustine and Malcolm are radically centered in God as the basis for their intellectual endeavors. One place where their insights can be expanded upon is in developing a theology of the resurrected Christ as the theological center for radical love for suffering and exploited Black bodies. Doing so keeps the Trinitarian focus of Augustine, combined with Malcolm’s radical, worldly politics on behalf of exploited Black bodies. Here is the best of both worlds for a contemporary *theologia crucis* seeking to be attentive to the ongoing importance of the Gospel message in light of massive dehumanization of Black bodies in the post-Donald Trump United States.

The continual oppression of Black people in the United States makes it seem commonplace that oppression, exploitation, and domination of Black bodies are unending. However, the “powers and principalities” of this world are defeated thanks to Christ’s resurrection into the Triune God’s future (cf. Eph. 6:12), even though

30. Martin Luther, *Heidelberg Disputation*, 1518, in *Luther’s Works 31: Career of the Reformer I* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1957), 40.

31. The *Heidelberg Disputation* is an example of theological knowledge (*scientia*) synthesized with piety-spirituality (*sapientia*). This synthesis in the historical context of late Middle Ages passion mysticism has been analyzed by Volker Leppin. Cf. Volker Leppin, “Luthers Kreuzestheologie als Fortentwicklung mittelalterlicher Mystik und Exegese,” *Lateranum* 84 (2018): 55-70. When re-interpreting a *theologia crucis* for today, contemporary theologians can propose a new synthesis by stressing piety and justice in a *theologia crucis*, exemplified in approaching Augustine and Malcolm X as theological “figures.”

32. Malcolm also spoke favorably of what he considered to be Martin Luther’s prophetic act of “nailing” the 95 Theses to the door of the church in Wittenberg in October 1517: “What about Martin Luther, nailing on a door his thesis against the all-powerful Catholic church which called him ‘heretic’? We, the followers of The Honorable Elijah Muhammad, are today in the ghettos as once the sect of Christianity’s followers were like termites in the catacombs and the grottoes – and they were preparing the grave of the mighty Roman Empire!” See Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 278.

33. I have chosen to specifically address a theology of the resurrection of the crucified Christ here, in order to attempt to show how a *theologia crucis* indebted to Martin Luther’s theology is not separate from, but inclusive of, a theology of the resurrection. Regarding keeping cross and resurrection together in a *theologia crucis* see Jürgen Moltmann, *Theology of Hope: On the Ground and the Implications of a Christian Eschatology* (New York: Harper & Row, 1967), 163, and Jürgen Moltmann, *The Crucified God: The Cross of Christ as the Foundation and Criticism of Christian Theology* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974), 204.

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Black bodies are continually devalued, oppressed, and exploited by White society. Malcolm X becomes the model for shouting “Black Lives Matter!” in full voice, and one is reminded from his autobiography that piety is demonstrated through justice. From a Christian perspective, the crucified Christ’s resurrection is God’s vindication of Black bodies that are so often de-humanized in the United States, and cause for hope in the Triune God’s future, as well as the example of Christian love toward suffering neighbors. The mystery of the incarnate, crucified, and risen Christ is decisive for saying God stands on the side of oppressed Black bodies in history over and against White, docetic oppressors. Here a statement from Augustine’s *Confessions* can be re-interpreted:

Beautiful bodies utter the same truth: because the body, all of whose members are beautiful, is much more beautiful than the individual members by whose harmonious arrangement the whole is completed, although taken one by one these members are beautiful.³⁴

Re-interpreting Augustine’s statement on the goodness of bodies is to fruitfully demonstrate how Augustine is a *figura* for the present argument. Since he was African (although often depicted as White in portraits), his words are especially helpful when fighting for black dignity from a Christian perspective.

The resurrection of the crucified Black Christ symbolizes the beauty of Black bodies for the current times when Black bodies are so often exploited, dehumanized, and victimized. Black bodies are beautiful. “Say it Loud-I’m Black and I’m Proud!” as James Brown sang.³⁵ Truly seeing the beauty of Black bodies requires de-

34. St. Augustine, *Confessions*, 316.

35. James Brown, as quoted in James H. Cone, *Said I Wasn’t*

constructing white theology. In the words of James Cone, “When I turned away from white theology and back to scripture and the black religious experience, the connection between Black Power and the gospel of Jesus became crystal clear.”³⁶

In faith and hope, Christians proclaim the resurrection event amid concrete embodiment for the betterment of suffering and oppressed Black bodies. Here is then the basis for an ethic of Trinitarian, cruciform solidarity.³⁷ From the lens of Trinitarian solidarity rooted in the resurrection of the crucified Christ, Christianity can become a radical faith concerned with deep centeredness in God, as well as concrete life in the world where God’s beautiful Black children are being oppressed and denied their full humanity. While thinking in traditional terms of sin and grace, mercy and judgment, Augustine’s statement is still apt: “Our one hope, our one confidence, our own firm promise is Your mercy.”³⁸ Christians confess confidence and hope in the resurrected Christ, and stand in solidarity with all who are oppressed, exploited, and dehumanized.

The resurrection of Jesus of Nazareth, a first-century Palestinian Jew brutally executed by the Roman Empire, shows that God takes the side of the poor, oppressed, and victimized, and becomes their champion and liberator. In contemporary United States culture, Jesus Christ is symbolized in oppressed and victimized Black bodies. James Cone writes,

The resurrection means that God’s identity with the poor in Jesus is not limited to the particularity of his Jewishness but is applicable to all who fight on behalf of the liberation of humanity in this world. And the Risen Lord’s identification with the suffering poor today is just as real as was his presence with the outcasts in first-century Palestine. His presence with the poor today is not docetic; but like yesterday, today also he takes the pain of the poor upon himself and bears it for them.³⁹

The mystery of Christ’s bodily resurrection from the dead, proclaimed in word and deed, is decisive for proclaiming the beauty of Black bodies from a Christian perspective.⁴⁰ Contemporary justice movements for black dignity such as the #BlackLivesMatter move-

Gonna Tell Nobody (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2018), 13.

36. James H. Cone, *Said I Wasn’t Gonna Tell Nobody* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2018), 15.

37. The explicit mentioning of ethics in relation to a proposal for a contemporary *theologia crucis* as the synthesis of piety and justice is an intentional nod to Karl Barth’s intertwining of dogmatics and ethics in Volume 2.2 of the *Church Dogmatics*, which is Barth’s own *theologia crucis*. Cf. CD 2.2, 509-552.

38. Augustine, *Confessions*, 216.

39. James H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997), 124.

40. Perhaps the most convincing argument for the historical bodily resurrection of Jesus in twentieth century systematic theology is found in Wolfhart Pannenberg, *Grundzüge der Christologie*, 5th ed. (Gütersloh: Gütersloh Verlagshaus, 1975). Cone cites the English translation of this text with overall approval in James Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1969), 34-35, and James Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 40th anniversary ed. (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2010), 116, 119, 126.

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ment are concrete expressions of the resurrected Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit in the world. The Spirit is at work sighing and groaning any time God’s beautiful Black children are oppressed, leading them to liberation seen in Jesus (cf. Rom. 8:26). God has vindicated the crucified, victimized, and broken Jesus of Nazareth in the resurrection, and God vindicates the Black bodies who suffer racism, exploitation, and victimization at the hands of White oppressors by being the transcendent force enabling the oppressed to stand up to their oppressors, and to claim their full humanity “by any means necessary.”⁴¹

Saying “by any means necessary,” is a nod to Malcolm X, who can then be interpreted for Christian theology through James Cone’s work.⁴² The vindication of Black bodies is seen today through the #BlackLivesMatter movement. When Black bodies stand up to White oppressors through movements such as #BlackLivesMatter, the Holy Spirit’s sighs and groans are heard (cf. Rom. 8:26), and the New Creation is seen (2 Cor. 5:17-21).

God’s vindication of de-humanized, oppressed, and victimized Black bodies shows how God subverts the wills and actions of White, docetic oppressors, in order to vindicate God’s beautiful Black children. Although Jesus died a violent death at the hands of the Roman Empire, his resurrection reveals another unexpected divine reversal: God vindicates the violently executed Jesus through decisive nonviolent action, serving as a model for faithful protest to the injustices inherent in black exploitation.⁴³ The crucified

41. It should now be noted that Malcolm X was often accused by both White and Black detractors of practicing reverse racism. Evidence against this claim can be seen in Haley’s documentation of Malcolm’s interaction with Whites who genuinely attempted to aid the black freedom movement. “I have learned that not all white people are racists. I am speaking against and my fight is against the white racists. I firmly believe that Negroes have the right to fight against these racists, by any means that are necessary.” See Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, 422.

42. See, in particular, Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 135-153.

43. This is not to say that all forms of violence should be critiqued. Rather, God’s vindication of Jesus in the resurrection shows

Christ's resurrection from the dead shows the Triune God's power, wisdom, and might, which seems to be utter foolishness from the standpoint of empires past, present, and future (cf. 1 Cor 1:28). The ways of empire are domination, exploitation, and oppression against Black bodies. In contrast, God ways are grace, love, freedom, and liberation for Black bodies "by any means necessary." Here is hope worth celebrating, proclaiming, and living. The world and its docetic, anti-black oppressions will not have the last day. The Triune God as revealed in Jesus Christ is then the basis for Christian faith, hope, and embodied love manifested as political action in the world (cf. 1 Cor 13).

Conclusion: A contemporary *theologia crucis* in solidarity with oppressed Black bodies

Seeing St. Augustine and Malcolm X as theological figures presents a possibility for unifying piety and justice. Augustine was chosen for his stress on divine desire, and Malcolm X for his blend of intellect and tireless advocacy on behalf of his suffering Black neighbors. The two thinkers might seem to be an odd combination, but they can be approached and developed fruitfully as "figures" for the theological task of uniting piety and justice from the standpoint of a contemporary *theologia crucis*. Both have autobiographies that are spiritual classics. Both were centered in God as the basis for all of their intellectual and practical actions, and can be jumping off points for further theological developments.

This approach has offered an opportunity to draw from two theologians from quite different historical locations to articulate the goodness and beauty of Black bodies through delight in the goodness of the Triune God. The argument proposed here then relied on Trinitarian, Christocentric thought as the theological basis for radical politics in the world on behalf of oppressed Black bodies. This argument could be critiqued for taking historical theologians out of their various contexts to make a point, and even being bold enough to say a radical Muslim activist is essential for Christian prophetic theology in the twenty-first century. Still, as demonstrated through Westhelle's *figura* hermeneutic for Lutheran theology, proposing a contemporary *theologia crucis* using these theological figures can transcend strict historical contexts in order to witness to the Gospel's contemporary relevance. The above argument thus sought to show one way a Gospel-centered *theologia crucis* can be relevant in relation to African Americans who have been oppressed, exploited, and victimized by White docetic oppressors. While there remains much work to be done, the initial attempt presented here sought to provide a possible starting point for a contemporary *theologia crucis* for the sake of

God's solidarity with the suffering, executed Christ, as Christ has been raised in glory to the "right hand" of God the Father through the power of the Holy Spirit. Through the crucified Christ who has been bodily raised from the dead, then, God is in solidarity with Black bodies who are so often marginalized and oppressed by dominant U.S. society. For the question of violence in relation to Christian ethics, cf. James Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 1997), 199-206.

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the glory of the Triune God and God's liberating solidarity with oppressed neighbors of color near and far.⁴⁴

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