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God Liberates in Mysterious Ways

Reverend William W. Bennett¹

I. INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to describe, from the perspective of black liberation theology, what God can be expected to do to liberate the oppressed in Iraq through America's war against that nation. Such an undertaking might seem outrageous for a few reasons. First, it may seem incredulous, given the genesis of the war, that God would use it as an instrument to free a people who have been systematically oppressed. After all, some may reason that America launched the war to prevent Saddam Hussein from either using weapons of mass destruction against the United States or selling such weapons to terrorists who would then use them to attack the United States.² Such a rationale hardly sounds like God at work to spread social justice to subordinated communities in Iraq. Rather, that rationale focuses on the security of the United States.

A second reason one might have difficulty with the purpose of this article is that some might find unbelievable, if not offensive, any suggestion that black liberation theology, with its sharp critique of the United States as a racist, oppressive society, would have anything good to say about that same oppressive society using its superior military might to crush an oil-rich non-European nation. They would remind us that the primary agenda of black liberation theology is always to oppose racism.³ The voice of black liberation theology is a prophetic voice that proclaims the doom of America and its racist, oppressive ways.⁴ To be true to that voice, one must condemn America's war against Iraq as an undertaking bereft of anything as decent as setting the oppressed free.

These two reactions to the purpose of this article may be understandable, but they are also myopic. The God of black liberation theology is

sovereign⁵ and is, therefore, not bound by the holy or unholy ambitions of men. Moreover, the primary focus of black liberation theology is on the oppressed and their struggle alongside God to be free, and not as much on the oppressor's efforts to enslave.⁶ The task of describing how one would expect God to liberate the oppressed in Iraq through America's war against that nation is well within the ambit of black liberation theology.

Black liberation theology has relevant insights to share about what God can be expected to do through America's war to liberate two oppressed groups in Iraq: women and Muslim thinkers who take a nontraditional, open approach to understanding the Qur'an. To meaningfully convey those insights, this article has been organized into three main sections. The first section consists of background about the genesis and nature of black liberation theology as well as the historical facts leading up to the Iraq war. From the perspective of black liberation theology, the background section then addresses the following theological questions: (1) whether it is useful to determine that the war is good or evil, and (2) whether the fact that the majority of the oppressed in Iraq follows Islam limits the relevance of black liberation theology. The second section describes the oppressed Iraqis and focuses, as noted above, on two communities in particular: Iraqi women and nontraditional Muslim thinkers. This section contains the core of this article; namely, the relevance that black liberation theology has for these two oppressed communities. The third section of the article outlines a praxis that black churches can pursue to work with God in liberating the oppressed in Iraq.

II. BACKGROUND

To appreciate the theological reflections that are at the core of this article, it is important to understand several matters by way of background. First, it is necessary to understand the origins and basic tenets of black liberation theology. Next, it is essential to be reminded of the significant historical facts that describe how America decided to go to war against Iraq. Finally,

with an understanding of the key facets of black liberation theology and an awareness of the historical events that propelled America into the war against Iraq, two questions naturally submit themselves for consideration: (1) does it make a difference to the black theological reflections proffered in the core of this article whether America's war against Iraq is good or evil and (2) does the fact that the majority of people in Iraq follow Islam limit the relevance of these reflections? These matters taken together give a context in which to consider the core of the article, which sets forth black liberation theology's insights about what God can be expected to do to liberate women and progressive Muslim thinkers through America's war against Iraq.

A. The Genesis of Black Liberation Theology

Black liberation theology finds its roots in the black power movement of the 1960s in the United States. The civil rights movement, led by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., emphasized Christian love and nonviolence as the way to win social justice for black Americans. As this movement began to pass its zenith, a new, younger generation of black leaders emerged in the struggle against white racism.⁷ These leaders, such as Stokely Carmichael of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and Floyd McKissick of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), did not believe that when the white power structure used violence to thwart the freedom struggle, black people should be nonviolent, but instead they felt that they should be prepared to respond forcefully.⁸ The battle cry for them changed from "freedom now" to "black power."⁹ The younger leadership rejected nonviolence based on notions of Christian love as a strategy for social change.¹⁰ Some black preachers and theologians, including Dr. James H. Cone, began to question how Christianity could be relevant to this radical turn in the struggle for social and political equality, and "[i]n an effort to resolve the conflict, they began to reflect on how the gospel can be reconciled with the black power politics of liberation, especially as

articulated by young black radicals who claimed that blacks should take their freedom ‘by any means necessary.’”¹¹ The question of the relevance of Christianity to the black power movement gave birth to the first systematic expositions of black liberation theology.¹²

A fundamental tenet of black liberation theology from the beginning was that God, by nature, is a liberator who has chosen to make the liberation of black people from America’s white supremacy God’s own undertaking.¹³ While a focus of black liberation theology was the struggle of black people in the United States against white racism, its claim was also much broader. God was seen not only to side with the black oppressed in the United States, but God was seen to side with all oppressed people as they fought against oppressors who would dehumanize them.¹⁴ In his seminal work on black liberation theology, Dr. James H. Cone wrote,

Because God has been revealed in the history of oppressed Israel and decisively in the Oppressed One, Jesus Christ, it is impossible to say anything about God without seeing him as being involved in the contemporary liberation of all oppressed peoples. The God in black theology is the God of and for the oppressed, the God who comes into view in their liberation. Any other approach is a denial of biblical revelation.¹⁵

The word “all” means all. The “liberation of all oppressed peoples” would include the oppressed in Iraq as well.¹⁶ God has not stopped being God, and God has not stopped liberating those who are bruised and shattered by powerful oppressors who systematically seek to subjugate them. To describe how one would expect God to liberate the oppressed in Iraq through America’s war against that nation is an appropriate undertaking for black liberation theology. Black liberation theology recognizes the need for a global perspective on the struggles of other oppressed communities in other parts of the world.¹⁷ The next important step is to recount the key historical events that led America to go to war against Iraq.

B. Brief History of the Iraq Crisis

On September 11, 2001, al Qaeda attacked the United States. Al Qaeda-trained terrorists, Mohamed Atta from Egypt and Marwan al Shehhi from the United Arab Emirates, led the attack.¹⁸ They piloted the hijacked American Airlines Flight 11 and United Airlines Flight 175, respectively, into the World Trade Center North and South Towers in New York City.¹⁹ They killed thousands of civilians and rescue personnel.²⁰

Within weeks of that day, the United States unleashed its military and intelligence forces in attacks on Afghanistan, whose Taliban government had provided sanctuary for al Qaeda to plan and execute the attack.²¹ Before the end of the year, America and other nations in a military coalition destroyed much of the al Qaeda network.²² They deposed the Taliban government and installed an interim administration headed by Hamid Karzai pending national elections.²³

America's war in Iraq differs from the war in Afghanistan. The Taliban government in Afghanistan provided a safe haven for al Qaeda, the organization that clearly planned and executed the terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001.²⁴ The pilots who crashed the planes into the World Trade Center had each met al Qaeda's leader, Usama bin Laden, in Afghanistan and were trained there.²⁵ By way of contrast, as the 9/11 Commission Report made clear, there was no connection between the al Qaeda terrorists involved in the 9/11 operation against the United States and Iraq.²⁶

Another rationale for the war against Iraq emerged from President George W. Bush's administration. Recognizing that the world had become a much more dangerous place because of the tactic of terrorism and acknowledging that a high priority of government is to protect the people, the Bush administration issued a policy statement in September 2002 to add coherence to the nation's foreign policy.²⁷ In a document titled "The National Security Strategy of the United States," the President announced the policy of preemptive warfare.²⁸ He declared the following:

The gravest danger our Nation faces lies at the crossroads of radicalism and technology. Our enemies have openly declared that they are seeking weapons of mass destruction, and evidence indicates that they are doing so with determination. The United States will not allow these efforts to succeed. We will build defenses against ballistic missiles and other means of delivery. We will cooperate with other nations to deny, contain, and curtail our enemies' efforts to acquire dangerous technologies. *And, as a matter of common sense and self-defense, America will act against such emerging threats before they are fully formed.* We cannot defend America and our friends by hoping for the best. So we must be prepared to defeat our enemies' plans, using the best intelligence and proceeding with deliberation. History will judge harshly those who saw this coming danger but failed to act. In the new world we have entered, the only path to peace and security is the path of action.²⁹

Addressing the question of weapons of mass destruction with more particularity, the White House went on to indicate that the United States will act preemptively even though the evidence of imminent threat from such easily concealable weapons will differ from that of conventional weapons.³⁰ Six months later, in March 2003, the United States attacked Iraq, the first nation to which this policy was applied.³¹

The primary rationale for going to war with Iraq was the anticipated presence of weapons of mass destruction and their sale to America's enemies or direct use by the president of Iraq, Saddam Hussein.³² The United States Senate passed a resolution authorizing the president to use military force against Iraq on October 11, 2002.³³ Even though American forces may have begun redeploying from Afghanistan to Iraq as early as February 2002,³⁴ American forces attacked Iraq on March 20, 2003.³⁵ On May 1, 2003, while aboard the USS *Abraham Lincoln*, President Bush declared that major combat operations in the war with Iraq had ended, and the United States and its allies had prevailed.³⁶ However, his announcement was lacking in one respect.

The reality was that no weapons of mass destruction were discovered in Iraq.³⁷ Prewar information about them proved deficient.³⁸ While the President's administration lay blame for its prewar misperceptions at the feet of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA), whose director, George Tenet, resigned in the summer of 2004,³⁹ some people, notably 2004 presidential candidate Senator John Kerry, claim that the war was, at best, reflective of a colossal misjudgment by President Bush.⁴⁰ At worst, it was indicative of decisions made in an effort to mislead the American people to war.⁴¹ The United States eventually stopped looking for weapons of mass destruction in Iraq.⁴²

Senator Kerry was not the only person concerned about deception and the Iraq war. One well-regarded former member of the Senate Intelligence Committee concluded that President Bush argued that there was a direct link between Iraq and the perpetrators of the September 11 attacks in order to effectively persuade Americans to believe there was a connection.⁴³ He maintains that President Bush, rather than disabusing the nation of any such connection, chose to solidify the public perception that there was such a connection and did so to build support "for a war against an unrelated threat."⁴⁴

To conclude, the 9/11 Commission clearly held that there was no connection between Saddam Hussein and the 9/11 attack on the United States.⁴⁵ The Bush administration's primary public rationale for the war—Iraq's putative weapons of mass destruction as a threat to the United States⁴⁶—collapsed in a cloud of suspicion.⁴⁷ Further, it was only after the war that the Bush administration gave prominence to the notion that the aim of the war was to develop democracy in Iraq.⁴⁸

Because the Bush administration's primary rationale for the attack on Iraq proved fallacious, if not manufactured, and because of that administration's tardiness in forcefully presenting the democratization rationale for the war, a twofold question naturally arises for theological consideration. First, would God the liberator sponsor such a war? Second,

is it significant for purposes of this article whether God did or did not? The first part of the question raises an issue of theodicy.⁴⁹ The second part addresses the issue of God's sovereignty.

C. The War and the Theodicy Question

The aim of this article bears repeating. Its aim is to describe the relevant commentary black liberation theology has to make about how God can be expected to use America's war against Iraq to liberate oppressed communities in that nation. The essence of this article is theological. It is about God and not about the effect of human decisions on history. Because theological reflection is the purpose of the article, a question naturally arises: would God the liberator, who is absolutely good and all-powerful, sponsor a war, fallacious in its origination and clouded in deception, to liberate oppressed Iraqis? This is a theodicy question.

Theodicy is theological reflection around the difficult task of explaining how evil can persist in the face of an all-good and all-powerful God.⁵⁰ The difficulty can be captured in the classical statement: either God is able to prevent evil but is not willing to do so (in which case God's goodness can be doubted) or God is willing to prevent evil but unable to do so (in which case God's all-powerfulness can be doubted).⁵¹ If you assume that America's war against Iraq is evil—a reasonable assumption given the way the Bush administration devised the war—one question becomes why did God the liberator, who is all-powerful and all good, sponsor the war by allowing it to happen? The other question becomes is God the liberator really all-powerful if God was willing to prevent the war but did not?

Politicians are not the only ones who discern evil in the way the Bush administration devised the war against Iraq.⁵² For some, America's war against Iraq displays a wicked aim to control and to assure the availability of Iraq's oil resources for the primary benefit of American oil companies.⁵³ The failure to discover weapons of mass destruction and the historic personal antagonism between President George W. Bush and Saddam

Hussein, who attempted to murder the president's father,⁵⁴ bolster the point that the war's conception was nefarious.

For many people, it would be impossible to believe that God liberates through America's war in Iraq since God, being all-powerful and all good, would surely eschew evil.⁵⁵ For others, it would seem impossible for God to be all-powerful because God was unable to prevent a wicked war; furthermore, if liberation does happen, it is not because of God. Both of these considerations regarding theodicy center on a preliminary determination of whether evil motives account for America's war against Iraq.

While some theologians maintain that theodicy is at the heart of any theology, including black liberation theology,⁵⁶ the theological reflections offered in this article do not begin at this point of theodicy for two reasons. One reason is that to begin by reflecting on the motivation for the war would lead to a macro focus on the United States as putative oppressor rather than a micro focus on the poor and oppressed in Iraq. Black liberation theology focuses on the oppressed and their struggle to be free. God reveals God's self among the oppressed in Iraq, not in conference rooms in the White House, the Executive Office Building, or the Pentagon.

The other and more important reason not to begin the theological reflections by focusing on the war and the motives behind it is that God is sovereign.⁵⁷ Without humanity's permission, counsel, or understanding, the God of black liberation theology works with all to accomplish what it is for God to accomplish.⁵⁸ As Jesus declared, that accomplishment is "to set at liberty them that are bruised."⁵⁹ The way God accomplishes liberation may be mysterious, but it is God. Those who are among the redeemed of God learn to be comfortable with the tantalizing anguish of the mystery. The appropriate starting point for reflection from the perspective of black liberation theology is with the Iraqi oppressed.

Oddly, the war has created the opportunity to restore order in Iraq. By the summer of 2003, the American military, with unmatched

professionalism and lethality, had destroyed the Iraqi army, disbanded the Iraqi domestic security apparatus, deposed the governing Baath Party, and discovered Saddam Hussein—the leader of the Baath Party—in a hole near Tikrit.⁶⁰ America put in place a transitional government for Iraq and set national elections for January 2005.⁶¹ By its war, America had disassembled the governing social infrastructure of Iraq and cast the country into chaos.

The biblical God of whom the authors of Genesis write brings order out of chaos. God in black liberation theology is still the biblical God who acts in human history to free the crushed and the shattered. God intervened in human history and formed the identity of biblical Israel in delivering them from Egyptian bondage.⁶² That same God intervened in human history through the black power movement in the 1960s in the United States to elevate the consciousness of African Americans.⁶³ God elevated their consciousness toward the realization that black people are fully human and struggle for victory for social justice over white racism.⁶⁴ God, who intervenes in human history to do justice, certainly is working through America's war in Iraq to do justice. The point of interest is to discern how various communities of oppressed will struggle to participate as the new infrastructure in Iraq assembles.⁶⁵ This article next addresses the applicability of black liberation theology to the oppressed that follow Islam.

D. Black Liberation Theology and Islam

There is no reason to believe that God, who is the liberator, now has chosen to limit God's self to those oppressed who know God through redemptive Jesus. Dr. Cone got it right when he stated that black liberation theology holds, as a substantive matter, that God's nature is to be involved in the liberation of "all" oppressed people.⁶⁶ That would include the oppressed in Iraq. It is within the ambit of black liberation theology to describe how one would expect that God, the biblical liberator, would

struggle with the non-Christian oppressed of Iraq to free them from their oppression, even through war.

Black liberation theology centers on Jesus Christ as the oppressed one whose death and resurrection reveal the presence of God in all dimensions of liberation.⁶⁷ He was more than just a good man who was concerned about the lives of the poor.⁶⁸ Since the overwhelming majority of Iraqis are Muslim,⁶⁹ one might question whether black liberation theology can speak to the condition of the human oppressed who are followers of Islam. The fact that the oppressed are non-Christian does not prevent God of black liberation theology from struggling with them against oppression.

The biblical warrant for this proposition rests in the Gospel of Luke. In Luke, the writer makes clear that the purpose of Jesus's ministry was deliverance and liberation. In chapter 4 of the book of Luke, Jesus declared in his inaugural sermon at a Jewish synagogue in Nazareth that he was anointed and chosen "to set at liberty them that are bruised."⁷⁰ He did not specify the "them" as his fellow Jews. Indeed, in that same inaugural sermon, Jesus described the scope of his ministry with two Old Testament accounts in which God delivered gentiles, not Jews, who were bruised.⁷¹ One was Naaman, the Syrian general who was a leper and was cleansed by dipping into the muddy Jordan River seven times.⁷² The other was a widow of Zarephath who was poor but who, on the words of the prophet Elijah, received limitless meal from a limited barrel.⁷³ Jesus announced that his ministry extended beyond Israel, and that announcement incited the worshippers in the synagogue to attempt to murder him.⁷⁴ Jesus escaped and continued his ministry.⁷⁵

The point is that God sent Jesus, who is God manifested in the flesh,⁷⁶ to liberate those who did not know him. The Lucan account of that inaugural sermon demonstrates that Jesus's liberating ministry extended to gentiles as well.⁷⁷ It extended to people who were outside the covenant people, Israel.⁷⁸ There is further support for the broad scope of Jesus's liberating ministry in the book of Acts. Acts, also authored by Luke, describes the

evangelistic ministry to the gentiles, to which the Holy Spirit called Paul.⁷⁹ Paul's ministry was to introduce the living Jesus to gentiles who previously had not known Jesus.⁸⁰ Because black liberation theology, which has Jesus the liberator at its center, is for "all" who are oppressed,⁸¹ black liberation theology applies to persons in Iraq who are outside the covenant people, Israel. The fact that the oppressed in Iraq are followers of Islam does not limit the relevance of black liberation theology to their liberation.

III. THE IRAQI OPPRESSED

An understanding and identification of the oppressed communities in Iraq requires knowledge about the Iraqi social structure. This article does not purport to describe a detailed social analysis of Iraqi society.⁸² The author's limited examination indicates, however, that there are a number of communities of people within the Iraqi Muslim world who are candidates for being the oppressed. God now struggles alongside these people through America's war for their deliverance. Those communities include (1) the Shia Arabs, (2) the Sunni Arabs, (3) the Kurds, (4) the economically poor in rural and urban Iraq, (5) women, and (6) progressive Muslim thinkers who take a contextual perspective to understanding the Qur'an. The balance of this section will contain a brief description of the first four groups. The focus will then shift to two oppressed groups, in particular, women and progressive Muslim thinkers.⁸³ From the perspective of black liberation theology, this article discusses relevant insights about God's liberation of these two groups.⁸⁴

The first three groups, the Shia Arabs, the Sunni Arabs, and the Kurds, comprise major segments of the Iraqi population.⁸⁵ In the 1980s, the Iraqi government officially declared the Shia Arabs at 55 percent of the population, the Sunni Arabs at 13 percent, and the Kurds at 19 percent.⁸⁶ In 1987, that total population was about 16.3 million people.⁸⁷ Some American analysts estimate that the total population of Iraq today is about 25 million.⁸⁸ In 2000, the country's population was 23.3 million, and 77

percent of those persons lived in urban areas.⁸⁹ The poor represent a sizable segment of people. For example, in 2004 the World Bank estimated that 60 percent of the Iraqi population is dependent on food rations.⁹⁰ Further, women comprised about 50 percent of the total population in 1987,⁹¹ while more recent estimates suggest that they make up almost two-thirds of the total population.⁹² These four groups, the Shia Arabs, the Sunni Arabs, the Kurds, and women, comprise substantial segments of the Iraqi population.

A. The Shia and the Sunni

There are two major groups of Muslims—the Shia and the Sunni. While the author claims no expertise in Islamic history, it is safe to say that, though there are theological differences between the Shia and the Sunni,⁹³ a primary difference between them concerns who was to succeed to the leadership of the community of Islam after the death of the Prophet Muhammad.⁹⁴ Shiites (the Shia Arabs) hold that the successor should have been Ali, the Prophet’s cousin.⁹⁵ The name “Shia” refers to the party of Ali.⁹⁶ The Sunni maintain that the successor should have been Abu Bakr, the Prophet Muhammad’s old friend.⁹⁷

Another important difference between the Shia and the Sunni has to do with the qualities of the persons who succeed the Prophet Muhammad.⁹⁸ In the Sunni view, such a successor excels in governance and administrative skills to protect the borders of Islam, keep security and peace, and make sound appointments for the judicial system.⁹⁹ In the Shia view, such a person, in addition to having these skills, has to have a deep knowledge of the Qur’an, the prophetic teachings, and Islamic law.¹⁰⁰ Finally, such a person has to have succeeded to leadership of the house of Islam by Prophet Muhammad’s selection as inspired by God.¹⁰¹

In addition to these religious differences, there are also social differences between the Shia and the Sunni.¹⁰² While Iraq became a sovereign nation and was admitted to the League of Nations after World War I on October 13, 1932, conflicts among a number of social communities made it difficult

for the nation to cohere.¹⁰³ These conflicts included disputes among traditional tribes and a growing urban population.¹⁰⁴ Due in part to the legacy of British colonialism in Iraq, which extended from World War I to the 1958 overthrow of the monarchy the British had established in Iraq after that war, most of the key government officials and the officer corps in the Iraqi military were Sunni.¹⁰⁵ The roots of the disparity between the Shia and the Sunni in government may extend back to the Ottoman Empire as well.¹⁰⁶ Yet, in Iraq, the Shia Muslims are the majority of the population.¹⁰⁷ Further, in Iraq, the Shia have been less affluent than the Sunni.¹⁰⁸

The disparity between the Sunni and the Shia did not change under Baath Party rule. The Baath Party ascended to power in Iraq in 1968.¹⁰⁹ It is a secular political party whose primary goals are Arab unity, freedom, and socialism.¹¹⁰ It is not a religious party.¹¹¹ While Saddam Hussein headed the Baath Party, Hussein, a Sunni Muslim, banned Friday communal prayers by the Shia.¹¹² Daily prayer is a fundamental ritual of Islam.¹¹³ Hussein also restricted the circulation of books from Shia libraries in mosques.¹¹⁴

By deposing the Baath Party, America created the possibility for the Shia to worship as they had not previously been able to do.¹¹⁵ Further, as Iraq assembles a new governing infrastructure, a point of interest is whether the Shia will now be free to participate in that infrastructure in a fashion commensurate with their numbers.¹¹⁶ In a democracy, one would expect that the group with the larger number of voters would gain sway in the governance of that society.

While the Sunni have been more politically powerful and economically empowered than the Shia,¹¹⁷ the Sunni in Iraq have not optimized their well-being. The governing Baath Party was a secular party.¹¹⁸ It tolerated little political opposition to its policies.¹¹⁹ It follows that the Sunni as a group did not fare as well under Baath rule as they might have if they had been able to form a vibrant political force. The Sunni continue to be a minority in Iraq,¹²⁰ but it will be interesting to see the extent to which the

Sunni will be free to participate in the system of governance that develops from America's war against Iraq.

B. The Kurds

The Kurds are the largest non-Arab ethnic minority in Iraq and numbered about 3.1 million in 1987.¹²¹ They are overwhelmingly Sunni, and in 1987, comprised about 19 percent of the total population of Iraq.¹²² The Iraqi Kurds are located primarily in the northern part of Iraq in the region that borders Turkey and Iran.¹²³ The Iraqi Kurds are part of a larger Kurdish people.¹²⁴ A large number of Kurds, if not the bulk of them, inhabit eastern Turkey.¹²⁵ Their language sets them apart from the Arab majority in Iraq.¹²⁶ The region around Kirkuk, in northern Iraq where they live, has abundant oil resources.¹²⁷ For many years the Kurds have fought against the central government of Iraq to be an independent or autonomous land.¹²⁸ In the Iraq-Iran war, from 1980 through 1988, an element of the Kurdish population aligned itself with Iran in insurgent actions against Iraq.¹²⁹ The Kurds' future participation in a reassembled Iraq is also a point of interest.

C. The Poor

Another oppressed group is the economically poor.¹³⁰ The poor in Iraq are the masses of the people who do not benefit from Iraq's tremendous oil resources. They also include those who do not own a significant stake in rural lands. Finally, they are the urban dwellers with low annual incomes and without prospects for the quality of life that full employment would afford. In 1987, about 70 percent of the population lived in urban centers,¹³¹ and in 2000 that figure had grown to 77 percent.¹³² Before America's war against Iraq in 2003, unemployment in Iraq stood at over 50 percent.¹³³ While a lack of data makes it difficult to accurately assess the economic status of the Iraqi population, an estimated 60 percent of the population is dependent on the food ration system.¹³⁴ Annual income per

capita dropped from \$3,600 in the early 1980s after Saddam Hussein first came to power to about \$770–1,020 two wars later in 2001.¹³⁵ Here, it will be interesting to see how the poor in Iraq will be given economic opportunity as the society is reassembled.

To summarize, black liberation theology has relevant commentary to make about the four oppressed communities described above. As stated previously, black liberation theology asserts that God fights with “all” who are oppressed.¹³⁶ In the aggregate, the Shia Arabs (a majority without commensurate power), the Sunni Arabs (a minority that did not optimize its political participation under Baath rule and faces a fundamental change in status in a democratic Iraq), the Kurds (a group which did not fully control the oil-rich land it inhabited), and the economically poor (those urban and rural people experiencing high unemployment and declining per capita income) form a collective group of oppressed people that is a focus for liberation theology, including black liberation theology.¹³⁷ Dr. James H. Cone has spoken to the broad scope of black liberation theology as follows:

If theology is to be relevant to the human condition which created it, it must relate itself to the questions which arise out of the community responsible for its reason for being. The very existence of black theology is dependent on its ability to relate itself to the human situation unique to oppressed persons generally and blacks particularly.¹³⁸

Having briefly described these four oppressed communities in Iraq, the main focus will be on black liberation theology and its application to two other Iraqi communities: (1) Iraqi women and (2) those influential Iraqi Muslim thinkers who read the Qur’an contextually. This article centers on black liberation theology and Iraqi women because of their proportional size in Iraq. This article also centers on black liberation theology and progressive Muslim thinkers because, as intelligentsia, they may be situated to shape a liberation consciousness among the Iraqi people. And that is where, among other places, God the liberator can be expected to be at work.

D. Women as the Iraqi Oppressed

This section first illustrates how women are oppressed in Iraq by focusing on their participation in the educational system compared with that of men. The disparity between men and women in the educational system is symptomatic of the oppression of women in general.¹³⁹ Based on insights from black liberation theology, this section examines four areas in which God can be expected to struggle alongside Iraqi women for their liberation. These four areas are (1) change in consciousness, (2) leadership development, (3) coalition formation, and (4) Qur'an interpretation. Of these four, the paramount focus will be on Qur'an interpretation as illustrated in the work of a Muslim female author, Dr. Asma Barlas.¹⁴⁰

As a general proposition, women's issues are the source of some of the most significant challenges facing the Islamic world, and those challenges include the education of women compared with men.¹⁴¹ The same holds true for women in Iraq. Women make up approximately two-thirds of the Iraqi population.¹⁴² Under the reign of the Baath Party, Iraq's education system opened up to females, but females did not participate as students in the education system in the same numbers as males.¹⁴³ According to the World Bank, in 1980 Iraq achieved near universal primary school enrollment.¹⁴⁴ In 1985, the ratio of girls to boys in primary school was about 72 percent.¹⁴⁵ However, in the last two decades primary and secondary school enrollment and attendance have dropped.¹⁴⁶ Attendance has dropped most dramatically among girls in rural areas.¹⁴⁷ The ratio of literate females to males (between the ages of fifteen and twenty-four) is about 50 percent.¹⁴⁸ These numbers can be understood to mean that over time, females have not reached the same proficiency level of education as males. The disparities between females and males in the education system illustrate the oppression of women in Iraq.

1. Consciousness Change

Two relevant insights from black liberation theology speak to the oppression of Iraqi women. First, God can be expected to struggle with women to free them from their oppression, because God as liberator has chosen to side with the oppressed against oppression.¹⁴⁹ Second, God can be expected, initially, to struggle with Iraqi women to elevate their consciousness so that they see themselves as worthy human beings, destined to live their lives to the full potential God has intended for them.¹⁵⁰ God struggles alongside the oppressed, which means that the oppressed themselves must intend to effect their freedom by participating in the “liberation struggle.”¹⁵¹ The ability to act intentionally begins with a God-inspired change of consciousness.¹⁵² The black power movement in the United States and black liberation theology, which articulated the theological dimension of that movement, illustrate this point.

Elevation of consciousness among blacks was a signal achievement of both the black power movement in the United States and black liberation theology.¹⁵³ During the early days of the civil rights movement, even people of African ancestry in the United States referred to themselves as “Negro.”¹⁵⁴ Through the black power movement and black liberation theology, God transformed the minds of black people in America.¹⁵⁵ Blackness became goodness,¹⁵⁶ and the liberating God of the Bible was discerned to be black.¹⁵⁷ The more the idea of blackness was debated in the United States—and was indeed opposed by the oppressive, white racist power structure—the stronger a liberated consciousness became not only for people whose ancestry was African, but for all who engaged in or witnessed the debate and wanted to be saved.¹⁵⁸ Today, few refer to people of African ancestry in the United States as “Negro”; instead, many say “black” or “African American.” Consciousness changed for all.

Black liberation theology asserts that God can be expected to struggle with Iraqi women to change their consciousness about their condition so that they become intentional in participating with God in their liberation

struggle. God can be expected to create among Iraqi woman a sense of “womanness” that would be comparable to the “blackness” of the black power movement.¹⁵⁹ God can be expected to work to elevate the consciousness of Iraqi women through various activities including block club meetings in homes or elsewhere, discussion groups in mosques, radio broadcasts, newspaper editorials, school programs, political debate, ballot referendums, political elections, athletic clubs, seminars among professional associations, and university classes. God also can be expected to elevate the consciousness of Iraqi women through the transitional government in Iraq through the process of drafting a constitution for that nation. Wherever there is debate and discussion about the place women should have in the Iraq of the future, God can be expected to struggle alongside women to use the debate to increase the liberation consciousness of Iraqi women generally.

Through such activities Iraqi women will begin to take charge of defining who they are as God aligns God’s self with them as they wrestle for liberation. They can begin to distance themselves from stereotypes and embrace their own descriptions of what it means to be Iraqi women, as was the case for blacks in the black power movement.¹⁶⁰ Iraqi women will experience a personal fellowship with the liberating God that will empower them to cast off old stereotypes. Without the liberating personal knowledge of God in the vertical dimension of life, Iraqi women would not know that what the oppressor says about them in the horizontal dimension of life is a lie. Black liberation theology indicates that God as liberator of the oppressed can be expected to impel Iraqi women to embrace their new consciousness as free women.

2. Leadership Development

According to black liberation theology, a second area in which God can be expected to struggle with Iraqi women for their liberation is through leadership development. God can be expected to reveal God’s self by

elevating women to leadership positions in their struggle alongside God for freedom, just as God elevated black theologians to articulate black liberation theology independently of white theologians.¹⁶¹ No one can tell the story of experiencing divine liberation with more persuasion and appeal than the oppressed themselves who struggle with God to be free.¹⁶² Indeed, if the black liberation theology movement in the United States is any guide, women need to be in the forefront of the struggle in Iraq and cannot cede leadership to others.

An unfortunate aspect of black liberation theology in its earlier years was that it did not focus on the peculiar and particular oppression faced by black women.¹⁶³ While that was due, in part, to the sexist attitude of male liberation theologians, it was also because black women thinkers subordinated their own voices for liberation to those of men.¹⁶⁴ They also saw gender struggle as an activity engaged in by white women that would divide black women from black men at a time when the humanity of the entire black community was at stake.¹⁶⁵ For a perceived greater good, the women muted their distinct message in the struggle with God for liberation of the black community.¹⁶⁶ No one told their story or fought their fight as effectively as they could have told it or fought it.¹⁶⁷ No one could discern when the struggle around their distinct bondage was being won as clearly as they could. Black women thinkers did not set about in the early years of black liberation theology to reflect theologically about their plight as black women in a society riddled with racism and sexism. Thus, they deprived black liberation theology of a deep well of insight from which inspiration and energy could be drawn to slake the entire community's thirst for freedom.¹⁶⁸ Iraqi women should not miss God in this regard.¹⁶⁹

The inspirational leadership that Malcolm X offered to the black power movement illustrates the importance of the oppressed community birthing its own leaders. The major contribution of Malcolm X to America was that through his public debate with white intellectuals¹⁷⁰ about blackness, he helped black people perceive themselves as capable human beings whose

struggle for liberation from the dehumanizing effect of white racism was a virtue.¹⁷¹ In this regard, Malcolm X was a cultural revolutionary.¹⁷² God used him, a Muslim, to free the minds of black people, Christian and Muslim. Today, there are hundreds if not thousands of black elected officials at various levels of government in the United States. This includes forty-three black members of the House of Representatives in the new 109th Congress.¹⁷³ Transformed minds led to social action, and social action led to liberation. From the perspective of black liberation theology, God can be expected to elevate leaders from the ranks of oppressed Iraqi women to tell their own story about the dignity and justice to be accorded them.

3. Coalition Formation

Black liberation theology indicates that a third area in which God can be expected to struggle for liberation of Iraqi women is in the formation of coalitions connecting Iraqi women and other oppressed groups in a broader struggle for liberation.¹⁷⁴ At the same time that God reveals God's self by developing leaders among Iraqi women to tell their own stories and raising the consciousness of Iraqi women about their own self-worth as human beings, God can likewise be expected to reveal God's self in efforts by Iraqi women to coalesce with other oppressed communities in Iraq.

Oppression is like a web or network with hubs of evil that is cast over various oppressed communities. Correspondingly, liberation must also be a web or network with hubs of struggle to match the network of oppression. Iraqi women must recognize the networked nature of oppression and be open, as God guides, to bringing vibrancy to the network of liberation against all oppression. Black liberation theology suggests that black people in the United States can learn from the struggles of oppressed peoples on other continents, and, in turn, other oppressed people can learn from the experiences of black Americans.¹⁷⁵ Similarly, Iraqi women can learn from other oppressed groups in Iraq, and, in turn, those groups can learn from Iraqi women. From the perspective of black liberation theology, one would

expect God to reveal God's self as Iraqi women link their struggle against oppression to the struggles of other oppressed communities in Iraq.

4. Qur'anic Interpretation

Black liberation theology indicates that a fourth area in which God can be expected to reveal God's self in Iraqi women's struggle for liberation is in the interpretation of the Qur'an so as to correct its past use to oppress women. God would be part of an effort made by Iraqi women to understand the Qur'an in a different way. An aspect of black liberation theology is a liberated understanding of the Bible. Through the work of scholars, black liberation theology embraces an Afrocentric understanding of the Bible. An Afrocentric reading of the Bible highlights the centrality of Afro-Asiatic people, including Mary, Joseph, and Jesus, in the account of God's plan of liberation and redemption on earth.¹⁷⁶ Afrocentrism was a corrective answer to Europeans who portrayed the people of the Bible and the persons integral to the Christ story as northern European.¹⁷⁷ From the black liberation theological perspective, one would expect God to be in efforts made by Iraqi women to correct perceptions of women's place in the world according to the Qur'an. Women will have to confront the question of whether oppressors have read the Qur'an to keep women in bondage rather than to liberate them to be all God intended for them to be.

One female Muslim scholar has faced the challenge of articulating an understanding of the Qur'an that cures its misuse by men to oppress Muslim women.¹⁷⁸ Her work details the nature of the struggle God can be expected to engage in along with Iraqi women to help liberate them from those who would use the Qur'an to oppress them. In her book, *Believing Women in Islam: Unreading Patriarchal Interpretations of the Qur'an*, Asma Barlas wrote the following:

[I]f we wish to ensure Muslim women their rights, we not only need to contest readings of the Qur'an that justify the abuse and degradation of women, we also need to establish the legitimacy of

liberatory readings. Even if such readings do not succeed in effecting a radical change in Muslim societies, it is safe to say that no meaningful change can occur in these societies that does not derive its legitimacy from the Qur'an's teachings, a lesson secular Muslims everywhere are having to learn to their own detriment.¹⁷⁹

Professor Barlas examines a number of passages in the Qur'an that have been interpreted by some men to subordinate women on the ground that their gender or nature is less than the gender or nature of men. For example, she considers a passage that describes men as protectors and maintainers (not rulers) of their wives.¹⁸⁰ She investigates, in the same text, a passage that addresses husbands beating their disobedient wives, and she views it as a symbolic statement.¹⁸¹

By examining the context of these texts, however, Professor Barlas arrives at an understanding that is consistent with the notion that the Qur'an does not differentiate the value of persons based on gender. Rather, a person's value is based on submission to God as shown in the ethical way an individual conducts his or her life. Further, a pillar of her position—that the Qur'an stands for gender equality—is the passage in the Qur'an that describes how male and female were created from the same self.¹⁸² The nature of male and female is the same, and one cannot be inferior to the other.¹⁸³ From her vantage point, it would follow that oppressors who read the Qur'an to maintain that men are superior and women inferior widely miss the mark.¹⁸⁴ Iraqi women who wrestle to open up these texts do so with God the liberator wrestling to open up the texts as well.

Beyond the exegesis of particular texts, Dr. Barlas's bigger point goes to the importance of a "liberatory reading" of the Qur'an.¹⁸⁵ The suggestion is that God as liberator who struggles with the oppressed, including women, struggles to illumine the way in which the oppressor and the oppressed understand the very word of God.¹⁸⁶ Iraqi women who struggle for full humanity and equality will be open to illumination from God about the way in which to interpret and understand God's word. Likewise, such women

can be expected to avail themselves of opportunities to engage in theological reflection with oppressors who would use the word of God to subordinate women.

Two points undergird the expectation that Iraqi women will struggle with God the liberator for a new understanding of God's word that frees them from the oppressive readings proffered by oppressors. The first is that the nature of humanity is such that humans cannot fully understand the word of God. God is the giver of God's word. After all, God is sovereign. Just as importantly, God is infinite and humans are finite. God is beyond what humans can even imagine. Struggling to try to understand God in God's fullness, however, is human.¹⁸⁷ Iraqi women who want to be free can be expected to struggle for a new understanding of the word of God the liberator because such struggles are integral to humans in general and integral to oppressed humans in particular.

The second point is that God assists humans to understand God. God recognizes our human feebleness, and yet God has sculpted humans for communion with God. Having created us for communion, God does not cease to reveal to humans the meaning of God's word. God continually seeks to communicate with us because of who God is and because God recognizes that human understanding of God must be incremental since humans are finite. Inquiring Iraqi women make themselves and those who are engaged in reflection with them available to God's incremental revelation of God's self. Iraqi women can be expected to struggle for a new understanding of the word of God because God wants to and continually does reveal God's self. In the vertical relationship between Iraqi women who struggle to be free and God who struggles with them, the desire for new understanding initiates from below and above. In the horizontal relationship between Iraqi women and other humans they encounter in the struggle for freedom, Iraqi women pass on the unfolding understanding of God that is birthed from their vertical relationship with God. In this way,

all come to a richer understanding of God the liberator and of God's spoken word.

Human beings should be open to the possibility that their understanding of God's word, their reading of God's word, and their faith speech about God's word may be wrong.¹⁸⁸ Failure to countenance the possibility that one's understanding of how to read or speak God's word may be mistaken, not only displays dangerous arrogance, but it also bespeaks a mindset oblivious to the liberating activity of God. Dr. Gayraud S. Wilmore, one of the earliest modern-day black liberation thinkers, described how one, whether white or black, ought to approach faith speech about God:

All theologies are human ways of thinking and speaking about God out of a particular context. All theologies are qualified by time, geography, culture, and the material conditions of existence. It is not possible to understand the theologies of a people, or to have deep fellowship and bonding with them across lines of demarcation such as race, ethnicity, class, gender, sexual preference, or denominational affiliation, without approaching their thought-life with humility, sensitivity, and an openness to differences from one's own strenuously held convictions. The time is past when white theologians and ethicists can expect to understand black liberation theology, or to contribute to interracial unity, without knowing the history, studying the texts, and appropriating for themselves the subtlety and complexity of the African American religious experience in the United States.¹⁸⁹

These truths hold even when we say "Iraqi men," instead of "white," and "Iraqi women," instead of "black." Iraqi women who follow Islam and who lift their voices to describe cultural, historical, or social factors affecting interpretation and understanding of the Qur'an are simply talking in faith about God from their own particularities. Listening with a sensitive ear and an open heart to what Iraqi women have to say places one in a position to hear the liberating tenor of the Qur'an. For God struggles with the oppressed even as the oppressed speak about God's word.

To summarize, from the vantage point of black liberation theology, over time God can be expected to work to free women in Iraq from their oppression.¹⁹⁰ As suggested earlier in this article, activities that elevate the consciousness of women whether they be block club meetings in homes or elsewhere, discussion groups in mosques, radio broadcasts, newspaper editorials, school programs, political debate, ballot referendums, political elections, athletic clubs, seminars among professional associations, or university classes will likely abound over time. In addition, God can be expected to elevate women, particularly women who follow Islam and want to be free and who feel burdened to speak out, to play a prominent role in defining the dimensions of their struggle alongside God to become all that God has intended for them to be. Finally, wherever people study and learn from the Qur'an, God can be expected to use women to exert effort to reexamine the way in which Iraqi society understands the value of women as illumined in the Qur'an.

E. Progressive Muslim Thinkers as Iraqi Oppressed

The final oppressed group to be considered is the community of Muslim thinkers in Iraq, male or female, who take an open approach, as opposed to a closed approach, to understanding the Qur'an. This is a difficult community to describe with confidence because current information about the various communities of religious thought in Iraq is not readily available.¹⁹¹ It could be that an open-approach community does not exist among Muslim thinkers in Iraq, though that does not seem likely.

An open approach is one in which the thinker accepts that there are ways of understanding the meaning of a text that are God inspired in addition to a direct reading of the particular text.¹⁹² The thinker using the open approach is receptive to the possibility that a determination of the meaning of a text can be ever illumined by God through means other than the text itself.¹⁹³ Indeed, the open approach avoids the danger of claiming full knowledge of God's will, which God alone fully knows. Asma Barlas is an example of a

Muslim thinker who uses the open approach.¹⁹⁴ In a recent work, she considered whether a verse from the Qur'an that called upon men to "beat" women licensed husbands to strike their wives to discipline them.¹⁹⁵ Through an examination of the historical context of the verse, she concluded that the verse does not sanction wife beating.¹⁹⁶ She reasoned that at the time the verse was revealed, men in Arabian society did not need permission to beat their wives, so the verse could not have functioned as a license to do so.¹⁹⁷ She also asserts that in today's society, a time when we claim to be more civilized, the verse provides even less justification for wife beating.¹⁹⁸ Muslim thinkers who use an open approach, considering factors other than the text itself to discern the meaning of the Qur'an, may be an oppressed community in Iraq. A closed approach, on the other hand, would be one that determines the meaning of a text of the Qur'an from its direct reading alone.¹⁹⁹ A closed approach does not accept the possibility that God could have intended that meaning to be discerned in any nontextual way.²⁰⁰

Black liberation theology holds that if there are Muslim thinkers who use the open approach to understand the Qur'an, then they may well be oppressed in Iraq. Their approach diverges from the traditional Muslim view of the Qur'an as the verbatim revelation of God's words.²⁰¹ The traditional view suggests that the Qur'an cannot be touched by human influence. Analyzing the Qur'an based on factors such as the human context in which the Qur'an was written does not make sense in the traditional view.²⁰² To critique the plain text reading of the Qur'an by applying nontextual factors is to touch the Qur'an with human influence and, thus, to deviate from the traditional Muslim view of the Qur'an.²⁰³ However, liberation in black liberation theology necessarily entails understanding God in a new way; a new understanding of God typically departs from the traditional view, because the traditional view is that of the white oppressor.²⁰⁴ Muslim thinkers who have an open approach to

interpreting the Qur'an depart from the traditional way and thus are likely to be oppressed.

The oppression suffered by black liberation theologians provides an analogy to Muslim thinkers who use the open approach for understanding the Qur'an. Black liberation theologians discerned the biblical God to be black.²⁰⁵ This meant that God had made the condition of black people in white racist America God's own condition.²⁰⁶ As a result, liberation from the oppression of white racism was part of God's "innermost nature."²⁰⁷ In the United States, a society organized around color, this biblical understanding of God was a radical departure from the traditional understanding of God.²⁰⁸ Black liberation theologians also discerned in the Bible the presence of Africans and Africa—a radical departure from the traditional understanding of the holy scriptures.²⁰⁹ The traditional perception of white oppressors was that Africa and Africans contributed little to the biblical account of God's plan of redemption for humanity on earth.²¹⁰ Black liberation theology involved a new understanding of God as black; Africans and Africa were central to the biblical story.²¹¹ Yet, black liberation theologians and their views were lightly regarded, if not disregarded, by traditional white theologians and religious thinkers.²¹² Black liberation theologians in the academy have long lamented the struggle for acceptance of black theology as a worthy discipline to be enhanced by other academicians, including white theologians.²¹³ There was tension surrounding black theology and what it had to say about God and the biblical story.²¹⁴ In Iraq, one would anticipate the same kind of tension between the traditional Muslim thinkers and Muslim thinkers who adopt the open approach to understanding the Qur'an.

This tension is not a far-fetched notion. The South African Muslim theologian Farid Esack, who was active in the antiapartheid movement, described this notion in two significant ways in his book *Qur'an, Liberation and Pluralism*.²¹⁵ First, he described how a Muslim theologian, Fazlur Rahman, was forced into exile from his native Pakistan because he believed

that the task of interpreting the Qur'an must also include considering the context in which the revelation was received and the contemporary context in which it is to be lived.²¹⁶ Certainly, there are tensions in the Muslim world between traditional thinkers, who approach the Qur'an as the direct words of God whose meaning cannot be discerned by considering its contexts, and progressive thinkers, who are open to discerning the meaning of the Qur'an by considering its contexts. One would anticipate that these same tensions exist in Iraq.

The second way Esack showed that the tension exists is in his description of the South African struggle against apartheid.²¹⁷ Liberation struggle was a pluralistic one; Christians, Jews, Hindus, followers of indigenous African religions, as well as Muslims joined to eradicate the apartheid system.²¹⁸ The challenge for Muslims was how to unite with persons who were unbelievers when that was seemingly outside the pale, according to the Qur'an.²¹⁹ Muslims differed with one another about joining with the "religious Other"²²⁰ to fight for liberation against apartheid.²²¹ Esack also addressed, from a contextual perspective, a number of Qur'anic texts about persons of different faith to establish that the Qur'an does legitimately countenance solidarity among Muslims and others in a common struggle against injustice and for liberation.²²² Many Muslims have rejected Esack's view.²²³

As progressive Muslim thinkers become more involved in the liberation struggles of other oppressed groups in Iraq, such as women, the oppression against those progressive Muslim thinkers will further manifest due to the tensions noted above. Notwithstanding those tensions, black liberation theology suggests that God can be expected to struggle with progressive Muslim thinkers as they seek for a new understanding of God the liberator as reflected in the Qur'an through an open approach to the text. The open approach is a posture that is humble in recognition that the Qur'an is interpreted by human beings who themselves bring predispositions and cultural determinants to the text.²²⁴ Black liberation theology would hold

that such openness and humility places one in readiness to receive revelation of meaning from the liberating God.²²⁵

God can be expected to struggle with progressive Muslim thinkers to reveal God's self as liberator in a number of settings. Sharp debate about the approach to the Qur'an will likely occur in those settings in Iraq where Muslims thinkers with different views congregate, such as in Muslim ecumenical circles. In addition, one would expect God's liberating activity of self-revelation to manifest itself in religious and scholarly journals. Similarly, God can be expected to struggle alongside progressive Muslim thinkers in the religious schools where believing people matriculate, sensing a call on their lives to embrace understanding and interpreting the Qur'an as a discipline. The struggle will likely emerge in the legislative body of restructured Iraq when the question arises about whether to adopt the *Shari'a*, derived from the Qur'an, as the law of the land as opposed to a secular code of law. God's struggle alongside progressive Muslim thinkers for the manifestation of God's self-revelation can be expected to continue outside Iraq before committees of the United Nations or the World Bank, where the various oppressed Iraqi communities, including women and the poor, discuss the mutuality of their oppression. Lastly, in one form or another, God can be expected to wrestle for a liberated understanding of the Qur'an in the informal conversations among Muslims, each of whom struggle earnestly to understand how God wants them to live a just life.

To summarize, black liberation theology maintains that God as liberator joins with the oppressed in their struggle to be free. God identifies with the oppressed regardless of where they live or their understanding of Jesus Christ. Consequently, God identifies with oppressed communities in Iraq, including women, who constitute a majority of the population. God also identifies with progressive Muslim thinkers who may be situated to influence people's understanding of who God as liberator has revealed God's self to be at this point in Iraq's history. The challenge to black men and women in the United States, as a people who suffer oppression in its

diverse dimensions and who struggle now with God the liberator to be free, is whether and how to join God and the Iraqi oppressed in the struggle for freedom. One institution to which black people can turn for action and understanding is the black church. The next section of this article briefly sets forth ways in which the black church can engage in a praxis of liberation with regard to the Iraqi oppressed.

IV. PRAXIS AND THE BLACK CHURCH

Liberation theology involves praxis as well as reflection.²²⁶ Praxis is action to assist the oppressed in moving out of their inhuman situation.²²⁷ One must ask what black congregations can do to join God and the oppressed in Iraq in the struggle for liberation. Generically speaking, the theological nature of the black church lends itself to praxis. Black churches are assemblies of people who have suffered oppression because of white supremacy. White supremacy is an organizing principle of power in the United States.²²⁸ The unmerited suffering among congregants in black churches equips them for the ministry of transforming suffering into victory—the hallmark of the redemptive ministry of Jesus Christ, the suffering servant.²²⁹ This is not to say that God created suffering for blacks in the United States to accomplish redemption, for much of the suffering is simply human beings' inhumanity toward other human beings. It is to say, rather, that the black church has the gift and the charge to turn what was meant for evil into good. Theologian J. Deotis Roberts, in discussing an ecclesiology of involvement for the black church, explains suffering as follows:

Much of it, too much of it, has resulted from man's inhumanity to man. It is in no way related to an understanding of God's purpose in the world or our mission as a people. This is the cross of black experience that we must get rid of. At the same time, we must seek to transmute suffering into victory; we must strive to transcend suffering that we as individuals and as a people may know the liberty of sons of God here as well as hereafter. At the

same time that we seek reconciliation through our roles as “suffering servants,” we are to seek liberation from suffering stemming from being a black in a white man’s world. Our Christian understanding of our peoplehood leads us in the search for meaning, service, and protest.²³⁰

This protest is part of the identity and self-understanding of the black church.²³¹ The black church has been strong with respect to revivalism and the struggle for social justice as well.²³² Notwithstanding the epic suffering black people have endured through the operation of white racism, the strength of their church to affirmatively participate with God to transform society for social justice comes from the liberating presence of Jesus Christ in that suffering. Jesus’s suffering with the black church does not inspire passivity, but it incites a self-understanding, free of the oppressor’s will, that leads to struggle with God for a present and future unbound by oppression.²³³ The nature of the black church, then, reflects its predisposition, not only to simply proclaim the good news of Jesus Christ the redeemer, but also to actively share in the liberation struggle to make the gospel message a social, economic, and political reality.²³⁴

Given this predisposition of liberation struggle to transmute suffering into victory, how can black congregations engage in praxis toward liberation of oppressed communities in Iraq? First, whichever member of the congregation is led by God to be the change agent should approach the church leadership for collective prayer about God’s will for how that congregation can minister in the liberation of the oppressed in Iraq. The Holy Spirit has not imparted to every congregation the same gifts for use in ministry. Different local congregations have different collective gifts. In the Acts of the Apostles, for example, the church at Antioch was gifted by the Holy Spirit to be a mission church.²³⁵ It was in that church that Paul and Barnabas received their call to take the gospel to the gentiles, and from that church they departed on what has come to be known as the first missionary journey.²³⁶ On the other hand, the church at Berea’s collective gift was

study.²³⁷ The church at Berea was a synagogue visited by Paul and Silas as they evangelized Macedonia²³⁸ on Paul's second missionary journey.²³⁹ After the members of the synagogue heard Paul's preaching, they made it a point to collectively study the scriptures to see whether it was so.²⁴⁰ Thus, prayerfully discerning the collective ministry gift of the local black congregation and determining whether God wants the church to use that ministry gift in the liberation struggle in Iraq is the first step.

Second, a program of education and consciousness elevation among the parishioners would follow. Parallels between the black liberation struggle in the United States and the liberation struggle for one or more communities of oppressed in Iraq should be examined. Resources external to the church, for example, the World Bank, a local university, the U.S. State Department, or the embassy of Saudi Arabia, could be invited to inform black congregants. In the process, a local black church may give its heart to one of the several communities of oppressed in Iraq; the congregation might fall in love with such a community and see its central ministry as serving that oppressed community for the glory of God.

Third, a program of ministry would be designed, planned, and executed.²⁴¹ The kind of ministry could be as imaginative as the inspired human mind could conceive. Some ministry ideas for black churches include the following: (1) sponsoring one of the legal scholar congregants to engage in dialogue with an Iraqi jurist about the place of civil law, the Shari'a, or some other form of law in the reassembled Iraq; (2) partnering with a particular mosque or town in Iraq in some pragmatic undertaking such as constructing housing; and (3) forming an advisory group of black businesswomen in the congregation to assist Iraqi businesswomen in wealth and job creation as the physical infrastructure of Iraq is rebuilt and the country continues to urbanize.

Finally, a program of reflection after ministry should be adopted. A hallmark of liberation theology is to engage in faith speech about God's liberating activity in the world after engaging in action supporting that

activity.²⁴² Piety and practical action go together.²⁴³ A black congregation must engage in action. It must reflect about that action. Then, it must return to action. By following such a course, a black congregation would likely come to appreciate that God does liberate in mysterious ways.

V. CONCLUSION

Regardless of the motivations behind its genesis, America's war against Iraq has disassembled the Iraqi society and created an opportunity for the society to be reassembled. Black liberation theology has relevant commentary to make about how God will reveal God's self in the reassembling of that society. Black liberation theology holds that God is the sovereign liberator who sides with the oppressed.²⁴⁴ That includes the oppressed in the abode of Islam. God joins with the Iraqi oppressed and struggles alongside them to free them of suffering. In particular, from the perspective of black liberation theology, one would expect God to fight with two particular oppressed communities in Iraq—women and Muslim thinkers who take an open approach to understanding the Qur'an.

God would elevate the consciousness of women and such Muslim thinkers toward the realization that they can define themselves as fully human people deserving of just and dignified lives. God can be expected to raise their consciousness so that they are free to be what God has intended for them to be. One would expect women to begin to lead the effort to change gender consciousness and to coalesce with other oppressed communities to defeat oppression. In addition, God would inspire in Iraq, through those oppressed groups, a re-exploration of the meaning of the Qur'an. God would inspire it, because those in power in Iraq may have used the Qur'an to oppress the weak. In liberation, God challenges the status quo.

As the Iraqi society begins to reassemble itself, the opportunity for Iraq to transform into a new creature arises. The opportunity also exists for the black church to join in that transformation by sharing its experience of

liberation with the Iraqi oppressed and hearing the Iraqi oppressed tell their stories of fighting to be free. A black congregation that senses the call has the chance to offer its talent and resources, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, for action alongside God and the Iraqi oppressed in their struggle to be all that God has intended for them to be. Then the truth would arise and it would be known that God of black liberation theology, who is sovereign, liberates in mysterious ways.

¹ Reverend William W. Bennett received his Master of Divinity from Howard University School of Divinity and his J.D. from the University of Chicago Law School. He is an associate minister at the Metropolitan Baptist Church in Washington, D.C., and serves as a leader of the church's Prayer Warrior training program. A draft of this paper was presented at the Second National People of Color Legal Scholarship Conference, Liberation Theology Panel, at George Washington University School of Law on October 9, 2004.

² See PAUL KENGOR, GOD AND GEORGE W. BUSH: A SPIRITUAL LIE 210–11 (2004).

³ See BLACK RELIGION, BLACK THEOLOGY: THE COLLECTED ESSAYS OF J. DEOTIS ROBERTS 51 (David Emmanuel Goatley ed., 2003).

⁴ See JAMES H. CONE, A BLACK THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION 55–56 (20th Anniversary ed., Orbis Books 1990) (1970).

⁵ See JAMES H. CONE, BLACK THEOLOGY AND BLACK POWER 137 (20th Anniversary ed., 1989).

⁶ See BLACK THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION, *supra* note 4, at 60–61.

⁷ See JAMES H. CONE, MARTIN & MALCOLM & AMERICA: A DREAM OR A NIGHTMARE 227–29 (8th ed. 1998).

⁸ See JAMES H. CONE, FOR MY PEOPLE: BLACK THEOLOGY AND THE BLACK CHURCH 56, 58 (1984).

⁹ See *id.* at 54–57.

¹⁰ See *id.* at 58.

¹¹ *Id.* at 58.

¹² See *id.* at 75. Dr. James H. Cone notes that his first two works addressing the relationship of the black power movement and black theology focused on liberation as the central message of the gospel of Jesus Christ. See *id.*; see also BLACK THEOLOGY AND BLACK POWER, *supra* note 5 (1989); BLACK THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION, *supra* note 4. Throughout this article, these and other works of Dr. James H. Cone are cited frequently. In doing so, I do not mean to suggest that he has been the only theologian writing on black liberation theology, although he certainly was the original modern-day author in that area and a prolific writer. To get a good sense of the various ministers, theologians, and religious scholars who have written about black liberation theology, see 1 BLACK THEOLOGY: A DOCUMENTARY HISTORY, 1966–1979 (James H. Cone & Gayraud S. Wilmore eds., 1993) (1979); 2 BLACK THEOLOGY: A DOCUMENTARY HISTORY, 1980–1992 (James H. Cone & Gayraud S. Wilmore eds., 1993). Indeed, some black theologians have critiqued the foundational works of Dr. James H. Cone. See

generally WILLIAM R. JONES, IS GOD A WHITE RACIST?: A PREAMBLE TO BLACK THEOLOGY 98, 115 (Beacon Press 1998) (1973) (challenging Dr. Cone's assessment that God is on the side of the black oppressed by noting that Dr. Cone failed to produce evidence of the liberating event, comparable to the biblical Exodus, through which God has liberated the black oppressed in the United States from white racism). *See also* CECIL WAYNE CONE, THE IDENTITY CRISIS IN BLACK THEOLOGY 95, 120 (1975) (critiquing Dr. Cone for his "uncritical acceptance" of the black power movement, which led him, in his reflections on black liberation theology, to reduce black religion to politics and "to see political liberation in any document under investigation.").

¹³ *See* BLACK THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION, *supra* note 4, at 56.

¹⁴ *See id.* at 60–61.

¹⁵ *Id.* (emphasis added).

¹⁶ Dr. James H. Cone was one of the first theologians to write systematically about God as liberator who by nature preferred to and decided to struggle with black people against white supremacy. In the 1997 preface of his book *God of the Oppressed*, he described his broadened understanding of God as liberator saying:

While I find it meaningful to speak of Jesus as God's Black Christ who empowers African Americans in their fight against white supremacy, I cannot limit God's revelation to Jesus or to the fight against white racism. God's reality is much bigger than the black experience and the concepts black theologians create from it. No one people's language and experience are capable of capturing the full reality and presence of God.

JAMES H. CONE, *GOD OF THE OPPRESSED*, at xiv (Orbis Books rev. ed. 1997) (1975). Cone does continue to understand Jesus's redemptive death on the cross to empower oppressed blacks to resist and to struggle against white racism for human dignity and for a more just America. *See id.* at xvii.

¹⁷ *See* JAMES H. CONE, RISKS OF FAITH: THE EMERGENCE OF A BLACK THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION, 1968–1998, at 49 (1999).

¹⁸ *See* THE 9/11 COMMISSION REPORT: FINAL REPORT OF THE NATIONAL COMMISSION ON TERRORIST ATTACKS UPON THE UNITED STATES 160, 162, 166 (2004).

¹⁹ *See id.* at 285, 293–97.

²⁰ *See id.* at 285–87, 293–97.

²¹ *See id.* at 336–38.

²² *See id.* at 338.

²³ *See id.*

²⁴ *See id.* at 337.

²⁵ *See id.* at 166, 226.

²⁶ *See id.* at 334–38.

²⁷ As noted later in this paper, even though the Bush administration had decided as early as February 2002 to redeploy military forces from the war against al Qaeda in Afghanistan to Iraq, the September 2002 policy statement was supplying a rationale for American foreign policy, particularly with regard to the Middle East. It sought to bring cohesion to that policy.

²⁸ *See* George W. Bush, *Introductory Letter to THE NATIONAL SECURITY STRATEGY OF THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA* (Sept. 17, 2002), *available at*

<http://www.whitehouse.gov/nsc/nss.pdf> (last visited Mar. 30, 2005).

²⁹ *Id.* (emphasis added).

³⁰ *See id.* at 15.

³¹ Dwight Jon Zimmerman, *Time Line: Operation Iraqi Freedom*, in OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM 18 (2003).

³² *See* KENGOR, *supra* note 2, at 210.

³³ BOB GRAHAM, INTELLIGENCE MATTERS: THE CIA, THE FBI, SAUDI ARABIA, AND THE FAILURE OF AMERICA'S WAR ON TERROR 198 (2004).

³⁴ *See id.* at 123.

³⁵ Zimmerman, *supra* note 31, at 18.

³⁶ ALAN GOTTLIEB, GEORGE W. BUSH SPEAKS TO AMERICA: SPEECHES SELECTED BY ALAN GOTTLIEB 81 (2004).

³⁷ GRAHAM, *supra* note 33, at 222.

³⁸ *See CIA Chief George Tenet Quits*, BBC NEWS (World Edition), June 4, 2004, at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/3774089.stm> (last visited Feb. 22, 2005); *see* GRAHAM, *supra* note 33, at 180–83.

³⁹ *See CIA Chief George Tenet Quits*, *supra* note 38.

⁴⁰ *See Kerry, Bush Clash Over Iraq War*, BBC NEWS (World Edition), Oct. 1, 2004, at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/americas/3703756.stm> (last visited Feb. 22, 2005).

⁴¹ *See* U.S. Newswire, *Statement from Kerry Campaign Manager on President's Speech Tonight*, Sept. 2, 2004; GRAHAM, *supra* note 33, at 193.

⁴² *U.S. Gives Up Search for Iraq WMD*, BBC NEWS (World Edition), Jan. 12, 2005, at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/4169107.stm> (last visited Feb. 22, 2005).

⁴³ *See* GRAHAM, *supra* note 33, at 193.

⁴⁴ *Id.* It is noteworthy that in his book *God and George W. Bush*, presidential scholar Paul Kengor maintained that Condoleezza Rice unequivocally stated in a Chicago speech that there was no proof of a connection between Saddam Hussein and the 9/11 attacks. *See* KENGOR, *supra* note 2, at 353 n.27.

⁴⁵ *See* 9/11 REPORT, *supra* note 18, at 334–38.

⁴⁶ *See* KENGOR, *supra* note 2, at 210–11.

⁴⁷ *See* Walter Pincus, *No Proof of Powell's Arms Claims: U.S. Empty-Handed in Iraq Search for Weapons of Mass Destruction*, WASH. POST., Apr. 26, 2003, at A14; *U.S. Gives Up Search for Iraq WMD*, *supra* note 42.

⁴⁸ *See* Robin Wright, *Iraq Occupation Erodes Bush Doctrine*, WASH. POST., June 28, 2004, at A1.

⁴⁹ To explain the prevalence of evil in a cosmos ordered by the all-powerful God of absolute good is to address a theodicy issue. *See* VAN A. HARVEY, A HANDBOOK OF THEOLOGICAL TERMS 236–38 (1964). I recall that in the days of the bombing leading up to America's offensive against Fallujah, Iraq, a camera man captured a poignant example of ordinary people addressing a theodicy issue. An Iraqi grandmother with a black headdress and long black garment stood with a pile of rubble that had been her home at her back wailing because her children and grandchildren had been killed by bombs from American jets. As her voiced reached a high-pitched and strident tone and she cried in Arabic waiving her arms, the commentator translated her perplexed words: "Allah, where were you? Allah, why did you let them do this? Allah, where were you?"

⁵⁰ See HARVEY, *supra* note 49, at 236 (1964).

⁵¹ *See id.*

⁵² See GRAHAM, *supra* note 33, at 193.

⁵³ See ALEXANDER COCKBURN & JEFFREY ST. CLAIR, *IMPERIAL CRUSADES: IRAQ, AFGHANISTAN AND YUGOSLAVIA* 181 (2004).

⁵⁴ See KENGOR, *supra* note 2, at 199–200.

⁵⁵ Of course, some maintain that the war is good. To show that it is good, they vigorously contend that the Iraq war merely continues the Gulf War of the early 1990s. See KENGOR, *supra* note 2, at 217. American planes had patrolled the skies over Iraq continually from then until America attacked in March 2003. See *id.* at 216. Moreover, they argue that Saddam Hussein supported terrorism. See *id.* at 217. To prove the point they note that he had publicly raised \$25,000 for a payment he would make to family members of Palestinian suicide bombers. See *id.* at 209. This is not the predominant view.

⁵⁶ See JONES, *supra* note 12, at xxiii-xxiv.

⁵⁷ See GOD OF THE OPPRESSED, *supra* note 16, at 145.

⁵⁸ *See id.* at 147.

⁵⁹ Luke 4:18 (King James).

⁶⁰ Peter Greste, *World Still Waits for Saddam Trial*, BBC NEWS (UK Edition), Dec. 13, 2004, at http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/middle_east/4090081.stm (last visited Feb. 22, 2005).

⁶¹ See Paul Reynolds, *Humvee More Telling Than Handover*, BBC NEWS (World Edition), Apr. 27, 2004, at http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/3660389.stm (last visited Apr. 3, 2005).

⁶² See BLACK THEOLOGY AND BLACK POWER, *supra* note 5, at 44.

⁶³ *See id.* at 47.

⁶⁴ *See id.*

⁶⁵ On June 30, 2004, several days ahead of schedule, a new transitional administration formed in Iraq. See Ibrahim al-Marashi, *Boycotts, Coalitions, and the Threat of Violence: The Run-Up to the January 2005, Iraq Elections*, MIDDLE EAST REV. OF INT'L AFF., Jan. 2005, <http://meria.idc.ac.il/news/2005/05news1.html> (last visited Apr. 15, 2005). The transitional administration has the responsibility to govern Iraq. Representatives were selected to represent eighteen provinces in Iraq. See Wendy Ross, *Bremer, in Washington, Discusses Transition in Iraq with Top U.S. Officials*, Coalition Provisional Authority (Jan. 21, 2004), at <http://www.iraqcoalition.org/transcripts/clarifications.html> (last visited Apr. 15, 2005). Elections for a transitional national assembly were held on January 30, 2005. See al-Marashi, *supra*.

⁶⁶ For an account of the engagement of black liberation theology with theologians from other parts of the world from its origin, see 1 BLACK THEOLOGY: A DOCUMENTARY HISTORY, 1966–1979, *supra* note 12, at 349–424, and 2 BLACK THEOLOGY: A DOCUMENTARY HISTORY, 1980–1992, *supra* note 12, at 355–425.

⁶⁷ See BLACK THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION, *supra* note 4, at 118.

⁶⁸ *See id.*

⁶⁹ See IRAQ: A COUNTRY STUDY 81 (Helen Chaplin Metz ed., 4th ed. 1990).

⁷⁰ *Luke* 4:18 (King James).

⁷¹ *See Luke* 4:25–27 (King James).

⁷² *See 2 Kings* 5:11–14 (King James).

⁷³ *See 1 Kings* 17:9–10, 17:16 (King James).

⁷⁴ *See Luke* 4:28–29 (King James).

⁷⁵ *See Luke* 4:30 (King James).

⁷⁶ *See 1 Timothy* 3:16 (King James); *John* 1:14 (King James); *John* 10:30 (King James); *Luke* 3:22 (King James); *Matthew* 3:17 (King James); *Mark* 1:11 (King James).

⁷⁷ Biblically, a gentile is a person who is not of God’s covenant people. *See Luke* 2:32 (King James). Much of the book of Acts is about the spread of the gospel under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit to the gentiles. *See Acts* 10:45 (King James). Indeed, one of the Bible’s greatest Jewish evangelists, the apostle Paul, *see Philippians* 3:5, described his ministry as one to the gentiles. *See Romans* 11:11–14 (King James).

⁷⁸ *See Luke* 2:32 (King James); *Acts* 13:46–48 (King James).

⁷⁹ *See Acts* 13:1–52 (King James).

⁸⁰ *See Acts* 13:46–48 (King James); *Acts* 17:23 (King James); *Romans* 11:11–14 (King James).

⁸¹ *See* BLACK THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION, *supra* note 4, at 61.

⁸² It should be noted that a source of theological reflection in black liberation theology is the “black experience.” This is the struggle of black people to be fully human and free in white racist America. *See* BLACK THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION, *supra* note 4, at 23–24. It would follow that the life experiences of the oppressed in Iraq are also a source for reflection from the perspective of liberation theology. Dialogue with the Iraqi oppressed would enrich a theological understanding of what God is doing to set people free in that part of the Muslim world.

⁸³ My focus on these two groups does not mean that God has abandoned struggling with the other four for their liberation. Time and space do not permit me to concentrate on all oppressed groups in Iraq and the relevant comment black liberation theology has for them. I focus on women because of their substantial and growing representation in the Iraqi population, a fact surely known to God. *See* National Council of Women’s Organizations, Congressional Briefing on Women in Iraq—Statement on Women’s Rights in Iraq, Feb. 25, 2004, <http://www.womensorganizations.org/pages.cfm?ID=155> (last visited Apr. 1, 2005) (estimating the Iraqi female population constitutes close to two-thirds majority). I focus on progressive Muslim thinkers because God may use them as part of the Iraqi intelligentsia to shape popular consciousness about the need for liberation in the society.

⁸⁴ At this juncture, a useful generalization may be that oppression might exist at other points of social tension in the Muslim world. Dr. Seyyed Hossein Nasr writes about two such tension points, though he does not attribute oppression to either one. One point is the tension between traditional Islamic education systems and the non-Islamic education systems that derive from the encounter between the West and the Muslim world. *See* SEYYED HOSSEIN NASR, ISLAM AND THE PLIGHT OF MODERN MAN 242 (ABC International Group, Inc., 2001) (1975). Educators in secular universities in Muslim countries may compete with educators in traditional Islamic educational institutions (madrasahs) for students, status, and resources. *See id.* at 243. A second point is the

tension between those who advocate a legal system based on a secular legal code perhaps derived from European colonialism and those who advocate the Shari'a, the full divine law, as the sole law of the land. *See id.* at 239. While this article does not address these two matters with regard to America's war against Iraq, God's liberating activity would reach these two points of social tension as well should they exist and reflect oppression by one group of another.

⁸⁵ IRAQ: A COUNTRY STUDY, *supra* note 69, at 81.

⁸⁶ *Id.*

⁸⁷ *Id.* at 79.

⁸⁸ J.R. Wilson, *Rebuilding Iraq*, in OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM 144 (2003).

⁸⁹ World Bank Data Sheet For Iraq (Jan. 29, 2004), *available at* [http://lnweb18.worldbank.org/mna/mena.nsf/Attachments/Datasheet/\\$File/iraqprototype.pdf](http://lnweb18.worldbank.org/mna/mena.nsf/Attachments/Datasheet/$File/iraqprototype.pdf) (last visited Apr. 3, 2005).

⁹⁰ Interim Strategy Note Of The World Bank Group For Iraq (Jan. 14, 2004), at 3, *available at* [http://lnweb18.worldbank.org/mna/mena.nsf/Attachments/Iraq+Interim+Strategy/\\$File/Iraq+Interim+Strategy.pdf](http://lnweb18.worldbank.org/mna/mena.nsf/Attachments/Iraq+Interim+Strategy/$File/Iraq+Interim+Strategy.pdf) (last visited Apr. 3, 2005).

⁹¹ *See* IRAQ: A COUNTRY STUDY, *supra* note 69, at 80 (Fig. 6).

⁹² *See* Congressional Briefing on Women in Iraq—Statement on Women's Rights in Iraq, *supra* note 83.

⁹³ *See* IRAQ: A COUNTRY STUDY, *supra* note 69, at 90–95.

⁹⁴ *See* SHABBIR AKHTAR, THE FINAL IMPERATIVE: AN ISLAMIC THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION 53 (1991).

⁹⁵ *See* SEYYED HOSSEIN NASR, THE HEART OF ISLAM: ENDURING VALUES FOR HUMANITY 65–66 (2002).

⁹⁶ *Id.* at 65.

⁹⁷ *Id.* at 30, 65.

⁹⁸ *See id.* at 65–66.

⁹⁹ *See id.* at 66.

¹⁰⁰ *See id.*

¹⁰¹ *See id.*

¹⁰² IRAQ: A COUNTRY STUDY, *supra* note 69, at 95–97.

¹⁰³ *Id.* at 40.

¹⁰⁴ *See id.*

¹⁰⁵ *See id.* at 96.

¹⁰⁶ *See id.* at 40.

¹⁰⁷ *Id.* at 81.

¹⁰⁸ *Id.*

¹⁰⁹ *See id.* at 189.

¹¹⁰ *See id.* at 53.

¹¹¹ *See id.* at 188–192, 198. Interestingly enough, Usama bin Laden, a Saudi Arabian Sunni Islamist, and head of al Qaeda, had at one point actively supported anti-Saddam Islamist forces in Iraqi Kurdistan. *See* 9/11 REPORT, *supra* note 18, at 61. The suggestion is that al Qaeda did not view Saddam Hussein as a religious man with an Islamist agenda.

¹¹² KENGOR, *supra* note 2, at 214.

¹¹³ See NASR, THE HEART OF ISLAM, *supra* note 95, at 59.

¹¹⁴ KENGOR, *supra* note 2, at 214.

¹¹⁵ This does raise a question of how it is that the God of the Bible would liberate people to worship freely though they may not profess to accept redemptive Jesus Christ as the Son of God. I do not attempt here to confront this question, except to note two points: (1) that the freedom to worship leaves open the possibility of the oppressed worshippers encountering the redemptive Jesus Christ, and (2) that by joining the struggle for the freedom to worship in Iraq those who do name Jesus display in deed the love of the redemptive Jesus Christ. South Africa clearly offers a model of a religiously plural struggle for liberation by the Christian and Muslim oppressed. See FARID ESACK, QUR'AN, LIBERATION & PLURALISM: AN ISLAMIC PERSPECTIVE OF INTERRELIGIOUS SOLIDARITY AGAINST OPPRESSION 37 (1998). One author has engaged this question, but not from the perspective of a Christian liberation theologian asking how God's liberating activity embraces Muslims. Rather he takes up the question from the perspective of a Muslim thinker who asks how God's liberating activity embraces Christians. See *id.* at 146–76. More particularly, the author engages the question of how the Qur'an can be read to allow him to struggle along with the "Other," meaning Christians and persons of different religious faiths, that they all might be free in an apartheid society where oppression was rooted in white racism. See *id.* at 155–61.

¹¹⁶ Though the Shia constituted a majority of the population, they occupied a relatively insignificant number of government positions. IRAQ: A COUNTRY STUDY, *supra* note 69, at 63.

¹¹⁷ See *id.* at 63.

¹¹⁸ 9/11 REPORT, *supra* note 18, at 52.

¹¹⁹ IRAQ: A COUNTRY STUDY, *supra* note 69, at 197.

¹²⁰ See *id.* at 81.

¹²¹ *Id.* at 82.

¹²² *Id.* at 81.

¹²³ *Id.*

¹²⁴ *Id.* at 83.

¹²⁵ *Id.*

¹²⁶ See *id.* at 84.

¹²⁷ See *id.* at 139.

¹²⁸ See *id.* at 84.

¹²⁹ See *id.* at 84–85.

¹³⁰ In examining the poor in Iraq, it is important to note a number of major economic aspects of the country. In 1968, the Baath Party initiated a socialist economic program. *Id.* at 123. The state owned and operated many parts of the country's economic engine. *Id.* Oil was the major earner of foreign cash reserves for Iraq. Before the start of Iraq's costly war with Iran in 1980, it is estimated that Iraq had \$35 billion in reserves. *Id.* Due to the decreased exportation of oil attendant to the war, by the time it had ended in 1988, Iraq had foregone at least \$65 billion in oil revenues, and its war debt topped \$50 billion. *Id.* at 124. In 1987, the Iraqi government announced an economic reform program and began it the next year. *Id.* Iraq's tragic invasion of Kuwait in 1990 in a bid to expand its

oil reserves came practically on the heels of the war against Iran and the economic reform program. America, with a coalition of other nations, expelled Saddam Hussein's army from Kuwait. Severe economic sanctions followed and continued into America's war against Iraq. This is the historical context in which to consider the poor in Iraq.

¹³¹ IRAQ: A COUNTRY STUDY, *supra* note 69, at 79.

¹³² World Bank Data Sheet For Iraq, *supra* note 89.

¹³³ Wilson, *supra* note 88, at 147.

¹³⁴ Interim Strategy Note, *supra* note 90, at 3.

¹³⁵ *Id.* at 2.

¹³⁶ See BLACK THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION, *supra* note 4, at 61.

¹³⁷ See LEONARDO BOFF & CLODOVIS BOFF, INTRODUCING LIBERATION THEOLOGY 3 (Paul Burns trans., Orbis Books 2d ed. 1987) (1986).

¹³⁸ BLACK THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION, *supra* note 4, at 36 (emphasis added).

¹³⁹ See NASR, THE HEART OF ISLAM, *supra* note 95, at 197.

¹⁴⁰ See ASMA BARLAS, "BELIEVING WOMEN" IN ISLAM: UNREADING PATRIARCHAL INTERPRETATIONS OF THE QUR'AN (2002).

¹⁴¹ See *id.* Dr. Nasr makes this point though he clearly holds that the appropriate way to address these issues is on the basis of Islamic teachings and traditions. See *id.*

¹⁴² See Congressional Briefing on Women in Iraq—Statement on Women's Rights in Iraq, *supra* note 83.

¹⁴³ IRAQ: A COUNTRY STUDY, *supra* note 69, at 114. Overall, male students are more populous than female students. See *id.* at 260 (Table 4).

¹⁴⁴ Interim Strategy Note, *supra* note 90, at 3.

¹⁴⁵ *Id.*

¹⁴⁶ See *id.*

¹⁴⁷ *Id.*

¹⁴⁸ *Id.*

¹⁴⁹ See BLACK THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION, *supra* note 4, at 56.

¹⁵⁰ Cf. *id.* at 85 (Cone declares that God in Jesus told black people who they were and what they must do about white racism).

¹⁵¹ See *id.* at 93.

¹⁵² An initial step in the struggle for liberation is the "process of conscientization" in which the oppressed understand their situation enough to act in a coordinated fashion to help free themselves. BOFF, *supra* note 137, at 5.

¹⁵³ See RISKS OF FAITH, *supra* note 17, at xx. Dr. Gayraud S. Wilmore gives an historical account of the formation of black consciousness among Negro churchmen during the early months of the black power movement. See GAYRAUD S. WILMORE, BLACK RELIGION AND BLACK RADICALISM 194–95 (Orbis Books 3d ed. 1998) (1973).

¹⁵⁴ See RISKS OF FAITH, *supra* note 17, at xxi (giving the example of how the black power movement and one of its leading proponents, Malcolm X, helped transform Dr. Cone from a "Negro" theologian to a black theologian). See also MARTIN & MALCOLM & AMERICA, *supra* note 7, at 229 (noting how Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. began to intentionally refer to people of African ancestry in his sermons and speeches as "blacks" and not "Negroes" after the black power movement began).

¹⁵⁵ See BLACK THEOLOGY AND BLACK POWER, *supra* note 5, at 6.

¹⁵⁶ See MARTIN & MALCOLM & AMERICA, *supra* note 7, at 229.

¹⁵⁷ BLACK THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION, *supra* note 4, at 63.

¹⁵⁸ See *id.* at 65–66. Dr. Cone called for the white church in America to get saved by radically reorienting their style of existence toward blacks. James H. Cone, *The White Church and Black Power*, in 1 BLACK THEOLOGY: A DOCUMENTARY HISTORY, 1966–1979, *supra* note 12, at 78–79.

¹⁵⁹ See MARTIN & MALCOLM & AMERICA, *supra* note 7, at 229. Dr. Cone succinctly described taking authority to define the black self in this way. “Black power, in short, is an attitude, an inward affirmation of the essential worth of blackness.” (emphasis in original). BLACK THEOLOGY AND BLACK POWER, *supra* note 5, at 8.

¹⁶⁰ See BLACK THEOLOGY AND BLACK POWER, *supra* note 5, at 8.

¹⁶¹ See RISKS OF FAITH, *supra* note 17, at 42.

¹⁶² See GOD OF THE OPPRESSED, *supra* note 16, at 84.

¹⁶³ See FOR MY PEOPLE, *supra* note 8, at 96–97.

¹⁶⁴ See KELLY BROWN DOUGLAS, THE BLACK CHRIST 90 (1994).

¹⁶⁵ See *id.*

¹⁶⁶ See *id.* at 91.

¹⁶⁷ This point is illustrated by the early feminist movement in the United States that was formed around a struggle for the right to vote. White women were disinterested in removing racial identification as a requirement for voting, and consequently they failed to recognize that their movement benefited white women and not all women. See Kelly Delaine Brown-Douglass, *Womanist Theology: What Is Its Relationship To Black Theology?*, in 2 BLACK THEOLOGY: A DOCUMENTARY HISTORY, 1980–1992, *supra* note 12, at 293. Even if the right to vote were granted without regard to gender, a black woman still would not be able to vote due to her race. See *id.* at 293–99. In Iraq, no group will be able to articulate the way in which Iraqi women join with God in God’s liberating activity to destroy gender discrimination other than those women themselves.

¹⁶⁸ See *id.* at 295. Professor Brown-Douglas describes a womanist theology of “wholeness” that focuses on articulating how God keeps the entire black community whole as the community struggles against oppression. See *id.* For a discussion of ethical constraints on womanist theology particularly with regard to lesbianism, see Cheryl J. Sanders, *Christian Ethics and Theology in Womanist Perspective*, in 2 BLACK THEOLOGY: A DOCUMENTARY HISTORY, 1980–1992, *supra* note 12, at 336–44.

¹⁶⁹ It should be noted that since the early period of black liberation theology, black women religious thinkers have more than made up for the initial silence, and womanist theology, as pioneered by black female religious thinkers, is the “most creative development to emerge out of the Black theology movement during the 1980s and 1990s.” James H. Cone, *Introduction to Part IV: Womanist Theology*, in 2 BLACK THEOLOGY: A DOCUMENTARY HISTORY, 1980–1992, *supra* note 12, at 257.

¹⁷⁰ See MARTIN & MALCOLM & AMERICA, *supra* note 7, at 175.

¹⁷¹ See RISKS OF FAITH, *supra* note 17, at 105.

¹⁷² *Id.*

¹⁷³ See Press Release, Congressional Black Caucus, U.S. Rep. Melvin L. Watt Assumes Chairmanship of Congressional Black Caucus (Jan. 4, 2004), at <http://www.house.gov/cummings/cbc/cbcnew/05jan04.htm> (last visited Apr. 1, 2005).

¹⁷⁴ See RISKS OF FAITH, *supra* note 17, at 46–47.

¹⁷⁵ *Id.* at 48.

¹⁷⁶ See Cain Hope Felder, *Cultural Ideology, Afrocentrism and Biblical Interpretation*, in 2 BLACK THEOLOGY: A DOCUMENTARY HISTORY, 1980–1992, *supra* note 12, at 192.

¹⁷⁷ Ironically, Dr. Felder denotes Afro-Asiatic people as people who historically traversed the region ranging from northeast Africa, including Egypt and Palestine, to the land between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers, what is now modern-day Iraq. See *id.* at 184–95.

¹⁷⁸ See BARLAS, *supra* note 140, at xi.

¹⁷⁹ *Id.* at 3.

¹⁸⁰ See *id.* at 184–85 (quoting from verse 4:34 of the Qur’an).

¹⁸¹ See *id.* at 185–89. We do not recount here the exegeses tendered by Professor Barlas.

¹⁸² This view that humanity was made from the same soul or self finds some support also in Dr. Seyyed H. Nasr’s book, *The Heart of Islam*, where the author cites from the Qur’an: “‘He created you [humanity] from a single soul.’ (39:6)” NASR, THE HEART OF ISLAM, *supra* note 95, at 16.

¹⁸³ See BARLAS, *supra* note 140, at 183.

¹⁸⁴ See *id.* at 186.

¹⁸⁵ *Id.* at 3.

¹⁸⁶ See *id.* at 20–21. For purposes of this article, I set aside the question some Christians might immediately ask, namely whether the Qur’an is God’s word in the first place. I suggest that a satisfactory response begins with the notion attendant to black liberation theology that God continues to reveal God’s self to humanity, especially in the struggle of the oppressed to be free of oppressors’ dehumanizing power. See BLACK THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION, *supra* note 4, at 45. This is true even though the canonical Bible closed centuries ago. Further, as the Genesis accounts show, in creating human beings, God, truly the great communicator, by his life-giving breath, wired humanity in the image of God for communication with God. That characteristic has not changed since Adam. The pertinent texts read: “So God created man in his own image, in the image of God created he him; male and female created he them.” *Genesis* 1:27 (King James); and “And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul.” *Genesis* 2:7 (King James).

¹⁸⁷ This truth is a bedrock principle among Muslim jurists or theologians as well. Many such jurists hold that sincerely engaging in a search for God’s will is a sign of submission to God. See KHALED ABOU EL FADL, SPEAKING IN GOD’S NAME: ISLAMIC LAW, AUTHORITY, AND WOMEN 34 (2001).

¹⁸⁸ See GOD OF THE OPPRESSED, *supra* note 16, at 87–88.

¹⁸⁹ GAYRAUD S. WILMORE, PRAGMATIC SPIRITUALITY: THE CHRISTIAN FAITH THROUGH AN AFRICENTRIC LENS 226 (2004).

¹⁹⁰ I say “over time” to caution that human beings cannot put God on our timetable. It is important to bear in mind that liberation does occur over time. It would be myopic to look at the current circumstances in Iraq and to conclude that because the number of women rising to positions of political, economic, or religious leadership is small, God is not fighting alongside the oppressed to liberate them. God does things in God’s own time, and it is wise to bear in mind the eschatological scripture: “But beloved, be not

ignorant of this one thing, that one day is with the Lord as a thousand years, and a thousand years as one day.” 2 *Peter* 3:8 (King James). In humanity’s sense of time, the struggle may be long.

¹⁹¹ See NASR, *THE HEART OF ISLAM*, *supra* note 95, at 176.

¹⁹² See EL FADL, *supra* note 187, at 93.

¹⁹³ El Fadl suggests that a person can learn about God through “prayer and supplication” and reflection “upon creation.” This understanding could work in conjunction with text in the Qur’an to develop in the reader a faith-based conviction about what God requires which even may be inconsistent with what the text says. *See id.* at 93–94.

¹⁹⁴ Dr. Barlas holds that reading the Qur’an verses in their original seventh-century Arabian context is necessary to understand the Arabs’ rationales. *See* BARLAS, *supra* note 140, at 168.

¹⁹⁵ *See id.* at 184–89.

¹⁹⁶ *See id.* at 188.

¹⁹⁷ *See id.*

¹⁹⁸ *See id.*

¹⁹⁹ *See* EL FADL, *supra* note 187, at 93; BARLAS, *supra* note 140, at 52–53.

²⁰⁰ This mindset about lifting meaning from the Qur’an is akin to what El Fadl calls “authoritarianism” in which one captures the “will of a text, into a specific determination, and then presenting this determination as inevitable, final, and conclusive.” EL FADL, *supra* note 187, at 93.

²⁰¹ NASR, *THE HEART OF ISLAM*, *supra* note 95, at 22.

²⁰² *See* EL FADL, *supra* note 185, at 100. This view does not hold with regard to the Sunnah, which is the sayings, commands, and ways of the Prophet Muhammad and descriptions of the activities of his contemporaneous companions. *See id.* at 100, 108–09. The traditional Muslim view is that the human beings have significantly influenced current understandings of the Sunnah, which after all are about another human being, even one as unique as the Prophet. *See id.*

²⁰³ *See* NASR, *THE HEART OF ISLAM*, *supra* note 95, at 23.

²⁰⁴ *See* BLACK THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION, *supra* note 4, at 64. Dr. Cone says that it is the black theology’s emphasis on the blackness of God that distinguishes it sharply from white views of God. *Id.*

²⁰⁵ *Id.* at 63.

²⁰⁶ *See id.* at 56.

²⁰⁷ *See id.* at 64.

²⁰⁸ For a sense of the extent of this radical departure, read the chapter entitled “The Black Messiah” in WILMORE, *supra* note 189, at 121–36. A major point made is that when Jesus the Christ incarnated as a Palestinian Jewish man and suffered the humiliation and death of the cross, he took on blackness and demonstrated to the world his solidarity with the abused and wretched oppressed of the earth. *See id.* That includes blacks in the United States. This blackness is certainly a radical notion to Western Christianity. *See id.* at 133–35. My point is that the notion of Black Messiah demonstrates the newness and openness the oppressed bring to understanding scripture as God’s liberating activity goes forward.

²⁰⁹ *See* Felder, *supra* note 176, at 188–89.

²¹⁰ See *id.*

²¹¹ One could argue that understanding God's sacred words in a way different than white oppressors has long existed among Africans in America. The text in *Ephesians* 6:5 reads, "Servants [slaves], be obedient to them that are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in singleness of your heart, as unto Christ." (King James). Some African slaves in America did not accept the import of these words in the same way as their slave masters. They refused to be defined in their interior by external conditions of slavery. See CECIL WAYNE CONE, *supra* note 12, at 41, 48.

²¹² See GOD OF THE OPPRESSED, *supra* note 16, at 47–49.

²¹³ See RISKS OF FAITH, *supra* note 17, at 133.

²¹⁴ See *id.* at 133–35.

²¹⁵ See ESACK, *supra* note 115.

²¹⁶ See *id.* at 64–65. I do not mean to suggest that Rahman was a liberation theologian. Esack points out that for most Muslims the Qur'an is the direct words of God from outside history. See *id.* at 53. He also notes that the historical-critical method of discerning meaning from a text, which has been prevalent among Christian thinkers for decades in regards to the Bible, was infrequently applied traditionally to the Qur'an by Muslim thinkers. See *id.* at 61–63. The notion that a human being unavoidably understands and interprets a sacred text through their particularities of culture, history, and personal experience is not accepted generally among traditional Muslim thinkers. See *id.*

²¹⁷ See *id.* at 38.

²¹⁸ See *id.* at 37.

²¹⁹ See *id.* at 38–41.

²²⁰ See *id.* at 37.

²²¹ See *id.*

²²² See *id.* at 146–76.

²²³ See Adbal Hakim Murad, *Book Review of Farid Esack's QUR'AN, LIBERATION AND PLURALISM*, at <http://www.masud.co.uk/ISLAM/ahm/esack.htm> (last visited Apr. 3, 2005).

²²⁴ See EL FADL, *supra* note 187, at 24.

²²⁵ See GOD OF THE OPPRESSED, *supra* note 16, at 89, 94–95. See also BLACK THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION, *supra* note 4, at 45–46 (addressing the place of revelation in black theology).

²²⁶ See BOFF, *supra* note 137, at 4–9.

²²⁷ See *id.*

²²⁸ See BLACK THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION, *supra* note 4, at 55.

²²⁹ See BLACK RELIGION, BLACK THEOLOGY, *supra* note 3, at 77–78.

²³⁰ *Id.* at 78.

²³¹ See C. ERIC LINCOLN & LAWRENCE H. MAMIYA, *THE BLACK CHURCH IN THE AFRICAN AMERICAN EXPERIENCE* 15 (1990).

²³² BLACK RELIGION, BLACK THEOLOGY, *supra* note 3, at 198.

²³³ See GOD OF THE OPPRESSED, *supra* note 16, at 177–78.

²³⁴ BLACK THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION, *supra* note 4, at 131.

²³⁵ See *Acts* 13:1–52 (King James).

²³⁶ *See id.*

²³⁷ *See Acts 17:11* (King James).

²³⁸ *See Acts 16:9–10* (King James).

²³⁹ *See Acts 15:36–41* (King James).

²⁴⁰ *See Acts 17:1–10* (King James). “These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so.” *Acts 17:11* (King James).

²⁴¹ This would likely be at a time when Iraq becomes more secure, from a law enforcement or military perspective.

²⁴² *See BOFF, supra* note 137, at 21–22.

²⁴³ WILMORE, *supra* note 189, at 239.

²⁴⁴ *See BLACK THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION, supra* note 4, at 61.