

# **Blue On Black Violence: Freddie Gray, Baltimore, South Africa, & the Quietism of Africana Christian Theology**

by

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## **Abstract**

When contemplating the anti-Black police violence that has occurred in the US recently that has been insufficiently addressed by the courts with no end in sight, the most curious feature has been the absence of a sustained and organized outcry from Black Religion in general and Black Christianity in particular. In this essay, I consider the Black Christian tendency to avoid substantive and systemic protest against state sponsored violence; with special attention paid to Baltimore, Maryland and South Africa. One of my claims is that there are threads endemic to Africana Christian theology that has created psychological and philosophical barriers to resisting violence when perpetrated by official state actors upon the citizenry. After presenting the argument and a discussion of competing liberation strategies, I offer correctives to a perspective that I claim only designates Black people as "good" if they are silent in the face of their own suffering; with consideration of the plight of Michael Brown, Eric Garner, Tamir Rice, the recent Southern Church burnings, and the Charleston Massacre as a backdrop.

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CNN reported that May 2015 was the deadliest month for Baltimore, Maryland in 16 years with 35 recorded, civilian-caused homicides (Martinez 2015). Most of the victims were African American and killed on the west side of the city. One way to view the escalation in deaths is to attribute them to the consistent surge that occurs every year in late spring and summer when temperatures rise, and thus, altercations are more plentiful, and people are on the streets later at night. Another way is to attribute the occurrence to "a nexus of gang violence" as did former Baltimore Police Commissioner Anthony Batts when he noted that many of the deceased were shot in groups.

A third view is that the violence is a result of income inequality. Baltimore is a city that is 2/3 African American. According to U.S. Census data for 2013, 24% of Baltimore's population lives below the poverty line and 37% of Black male residents, ages 20-24, are unemployed compared to 10% for white males in the same age group (United States Census Bureau 2015). While all three of the previous reasons given cannot be discounted as major contributing factors to May 2015 being one of the deadliest months in 15 years for one of the most dangerous cities in the United States, to understand May 2015 it is essential to discuss what happened in April 2015 that may have served as a Gladwellian tipping point.

Beyond the high-profile police caused deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner, Sean Bell, Johnathan Ferrell, Oscar Grant, Kamani Gray, Ramarley Graham, and Amadou Diallo are some of the more infamous cases of unarmed Black men in the United States. Yet on April 12, 2015, Freddie Carlos Gray, Jr. was pursued by police, apprehended, searched, and arrested. After being booked into custody, the police report filed by one of the arresting officers states that Gray "...fled unprovoked upon noticing police presence. The defendant was apprehended in the 1700 block of Presbury St. after a brief foot chase. This officer noticed a knife clipped to the inside of his front right pants pocket. The defendant was arrested without force or incident. The knife was recovered" (Miller 2015). Yet eyewitnesses and film footage tell the tale of a slim Black man being wrestled to the concrete, tased, placed into a van that makes a mysterious stop before reaching the police precinct, refused immediate medical treatment after repeated requests, and arrives at the station with a severed spinal column; dying seven days later.

This ignites a series of riots, lootings, and burnings of buildings by some Baltimore residents in protest that causes mass destruction and results in a state of emergency declaration and citywide six day curfew to ensue. From the Black Christian community, a few of the hallmark conspicuous voices were present along with many local, national, and international African clergy condemned both the treatment of Freddie Gray as well as the subsequent mayhem in the streets of Baltimore. The six officers involved have been indicted by a grand jury and will stand trial for the death of Mr. Gray. Similarly during South African apartheid and the brutal treatment of its Black and Colored citizens by police in Cape Town, Johannesburg, and the surrounding towns, local African Christian clergy as well as those throughout the Diaspora critiqued individual instances of violence and the enterprise of racial Apartheid in general. However, there has rarely been a sustained and public critique from African Christian clergy *qua* African Christian clergy of the existence of the very idea of the police state and its implications for systemic violence against poor Black people. In this essay, I will explore reasons for why that is and argue that if a theology of domination is not challenged and supplanted, the ability of African Christianity (Christianity broadly practiced by members of the African diaspora) to affect fundamental change in the area of police violence will be an unattainable dream.

## **Prevailing Theologies and Implications for Africana Christianity**

Within the biblical text, Paul's Epistle to the Romans is generally considered the quintessential reference that elucidates the prevailing ideology for the Christian relationship to authority. Particularly relevant are the first two verses of the 13<sup>th</sup> chapter:

Every person is to be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God. Therefore whoever resists the authority has opposed the ordinance of God; and those who have opposed will receive condemnation upon themselves (Rom. 13:1-2, NIV).

While this text speaks more to governmental rulers, whether democratically elected, appointed, or dynastic monarchs, by extension the passage empowers the agents of these officials to exercise legitimated authority; even in matters of discretion. What is more egregious is that the Pauline license to governors and their "ministers" is declared to be irresistible in that when one opposes the authority, s/he also opposes God and endangers self spiritually for such rebellion. When this pronouncement is coupled with the instructions of the Apostle Peter to Christian slaves, the theology of domination toward a vassal people rises into full view:

Slaves, in reverent fear of God submit yourselves to your masters, not only to those who are good and considerate, but also to those who are harsh. For it is commendable if someone bears up under the pain of unjust suffering because they are conscious of God. But how is it to your credit if you receive a beating for doing wrong and endure it? But if you suffer for good and endure it, this is commendable before God (I Peter 2:18-20).

Here submission to the institution of slavery in general as well as to particular slave masters is seen as an act of piety. Consequently, character virtue need not be a necessary trait to be an authority figure. The directive is for the oppressed not to evaluate the ethical worthiness of their governors because, regardless of deportment, the ones in charge represent deity in the scenario. The combined edict in these two passages reflects obedience and acquiescence to individual and institutional injustice when slaves are admonished to endure both bondage and cruelty as an act of reverence for God.

In the modern era, this theology declares divine authority for political officials and law enforcement that are to be esteemed and submitted to even when they behave immorally, illegally, or viciously toward the citizenry.

Recall one of the chief points of defense New York State offered in the choking death of Eric Garner was that he was “resisting arrest” by not kneeling and putting his hands behind his head in submissive surrender to unbridled police power. The rationale was that no matter how unjustifiable or excessive the force, the State and its agents are to be revered and obeyed because their authority derived from a source that was not answerable to the people, unless it chose to be in extremely controlled venues like press conferences and secret grand juries.

Given the outcomes of the Michael Brown and Eric Garner grand juries, democracy has been frustrated and fragile; however, hope exists in the case of Freddie Gray. Not because many feel that the circumstances behind Gray’s death are questionable. Rather because they feel that the very system which dictates the atrocities committed by the purveyors of state sanctioned violence against the poor, Black, and vulnerable must ultimately be appealed to for justice. This is a jaundiced hope indeed. But it is further insulted by the admittedly misplaced and often misdirected anger of the victimized being demonized as mere thuggery and hoodlum behavior. In fact, when Cleveland police officer Michael Brelo was acquitted of the 2012 shooting deaths of an unarmed Black couple even though he stood on the hood of their car and shot 15 times into the windshield, the Black community’s peaceful protests were heralded as a model by Cleveland’s Police Department and political elites (Steve Osunsami, Dan Good, Emily Shapiro, Whitney Lloyd 2015). Yet this proverbial pat on the head is in line with the Christian theology that has been disseminated to African people that non-violent resistance to physical aggression is the only moral, spiritual, and socially viable form of protest than what sovereign will endorse.

This suggests another aspect of the efficacy and social currency that the philosophy of non-violence enjoyed in India, South Africa, and the United States other than being the moral and spiritual high ground. Each country was politically and physically dominated by cultural and practicing Christians who held Mohandas Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, and Martin Luther King, Jr. as respective ethical exemplars who moved the hearts of white Christians to change their racist apartheid and Jim Crow policies. The late William R. Jones wrote forcefully from a philosophical perspective about the way King and his resistance strategy was knighted by the foes of Africana people worldwide. While clearly in favor of more of an instrumentalist approach espoused by Malcolm X, he convincingly argues that all other forms of Africana protest have been successfully undermined by governments globally; even though those same governments would never consider reciprocal behavior toward Africana peoples (Jones 1983). However, the psychology of why this strategy was effective beyond moral shaming has rarely been explored from an Africana religious perspective. To do so is to look at Mandela’s moderate, assimilationist approach to resolving South African apartheid as in line with a theology of governmentally sanctioned resistance. The same can be said for King’s Civil Rights strategy of non-violence and Gandhi’s homeland reclamation project. All were fervent, serious, and required life-threatening commitment, yet all embodied some version of the Apostle Peter’s sentiment that suffering for good is commendable before God. Martin Luther King, Jr. summarized this idea in the phrase, “Innocent Suffering is Redemptive”.

## A Theology of Quietism Regarding Black Suffering

Whether or not King is correct about the redemptive nature of innocent suffering is not primarily at issue here. Rather, I am concerned about the social implications for Africana people of adopting a strategy that aligns (and, as I argue, emerges from) a theology of domination. My contention is that such a theology is complemented by another which encourages the victimized to be silent in the face of state terror. This *theology of quietism* functions as a theodicy to justify the goodness of the sovereign and law enforcement, given the presence of moral and institutional evil in the world. For instance, when the extent of Freddie Gray's injuries were discovered, the counter narrative offered was to portray Gray as a repeat drug offender who was constantly in trouble with the law to mitigate the breaking of his spine and his subsequent death. Tribunals are held to vindicate barbaric practices of choking men already subdued, shooting unarmed teenagers at point blank range, wrestling pregnant women to the ground for failure to provide a name, and countless other miscarriages of justice against Africana people. The *theology of quietism* asks what did the victim do to warrant the brutality received at the hands of the police? Why don't Black men simply keep their mouths shut when police are harassing their families and friends? What is it about Black people globally that is so violent that it causes police to have to be so heavy handed with them? And why don't Africana people just accept their place in society as largely relegated to decrepit schools and dilapidated housing?

The *theology of quietism* internalized by many Africana Christians conveys to them that civil disobedience in any fashion is spiritually unacceptable because it disrupts the function of society and dishonors God by elevating human concerns over glorifying God through endurance of innocent suffering. This manifests as an elimination of protest on one's own behalf but also protest on the behalf of others. Quietism is pernicious precisely because it undermines neighbor-love by esteeming Empire as God. Moreover it sacrifices self and others for an idea of a protective social order that ends up preying on the most defenseless among us. Quietism teaches us to turn away from injustice or to accept it as an inevitable feature of life that happens to the deviant, the disobedient, and the unchosen. For Africana Christians to behave otherwise is for them to jeopardize their relationship with the God of the civitas. As a mode of survival, quietism requires practice and many inputs, because human beings are not naturally disposed to readily accept abuse, unless conditioned to do so.

I was in a recent conversation with my spouse about a tune she had heard on a Christian radio station. The song is "Greater Is Coming" by Jekalyn Carr, an 18 year old African American Christian evangelist and singer from West Memphis, Arkansas. The theme of the lyrics is consistent throughout and summarized by the words of the chorus:

I feel a shaking in the Sprit  
I feel a beating in the Spirit  
I feel a pressing in the Spirit  
Preparing me for Greater... (Carr 2013)

In the Africana Christian tradition, much of the music speaks of persevering through tragedies, attacks, and assaults to be worthy of a better life. Here the artist sings of what she feels in the Spirit that is preparing her for greatness. The problematic feature is that the pathway to destiny runs through violence sanctioned by deity. Moreover, the signal that good things are on the horizon is the unrest and perhaps suffering that precedes the awaited event. Therefore in suffering, the more innocent the better, which serves as a herald announcing the arrival of blessings in the lives of the faithful. Again, while the metaphysical veracity of these claims is beyond the scope of this exercise, the social function of these types of lyrics is to prepare the consciousness of the oppressed to endure maltreatment as a necessity. A shaking, beating, and pressing sounds very much like a modern arrest that could end in severe bodily injury or in the death of the apprehended. A *theology of quietism* allows testimony of overcoming abuse, but not resistance, protest, or critical engagement on the behalf of others; because that would be tantamount to blasphemy.

## **A Radical Reorientation**

In the last two weeks of June 2015, there were at least 6 African American churches that have caught fire; 3 are being investigated as arson (Kaplan and Moyer 2015). Beyond initial outrage at the modern continuation of this diabolical and centuries old anti-Black terrorist tactic, the present state of the Black clergy response has been to declare a “Week of Righteous Resistance (Cannon 2015).” This week was comprised of prayer, marching, and education about diversity and social injustice. This way of declaring war on racism is congruent with the prevailing social theology of Black Christianity which does not advocate sustained, systemic, and institutional calls for retaliation. In this vein, even the Civil Rights bus boycotts were anomalies and its leaders often labelled unchristian for instigating such undertakings.

Yet preceding these Black Church burnings, on June 17, 2015, 9 African American citizens of Charleston, South Carolina were murdered as they attended midweek service on a fateful Wednesday night. Surveillance footage shows that a 21 year old white male, Dylann Storm Roof, entered Emmanuel African Methodist Episcopal church shortly after 8pm and was invited to attend an ongoing bible study. Witnesses say that Roof asked for the Pastor when he entered the church and sat next to Rev. Clemente Pinckney while the small group session was conducted.

After listening a while, Roof disagreed on a few matters of scripture but continued to attend the study. Nearly an hour after his arrival, Roof stood and began to execute most of those in attendance because, in his own words, “You are raping our women and taking over the country” (Corasaniti, Perez-Pena and Alvarez 2015).

Still, in it all, one of the more shocking facets of the incident was how delicately and carefully Roof was handled upon arrest. Comparing the treatment of Freddie Gray and Eric Garner to that of Roof, especially considering the severity of his crime, brings pause to note that the ferocious police energy exerted upon African Americans for suspicion of criminal behavior and minor infractions does not find a corresponding referent when the known perpetrator of a mass murder and hate crime is apprehended. Instead African Americans are admonished and praised for extending “Grace” to Roof as well as to a political system that treats him with more dignity and respect than it does African American citizens who are mercilessly victimized by state-sponsored terror tactics without remorse or redress.

Because theologies of domination and quietism are rooted within Africana Christianity, there are few resources available to combat their effects of anesthetizing Black people to their own imiseration on a global scale as a religious duty. Wherever there are armed agents empowered by the state that outnumber civilian actors, a power differential exists which legally equals coercion and will result in inevitable systemic violence by design. Given the prevailing theological resources within standard versions of Africana Christianity, the only recourse is to transcend these perspectives through creating a new center that displaces politicians and police as extensions of the divine. Instead re-centering the people, particularly those of African descent who are the consistent targets of economic, social, and physical violence, as having spiritual authority to resist injustice in organized and consistent ways on both individual and collective levels is essential. This will require an existential shift away from a quietism that accepts innocent suffering as redemptive to seeing it as often complicitous with those who disregard the worth and dignity of Black life. This means destabilizing non-violence as the only acceptable response to organized state injustice. Rather than being a call to insurrection, it is more a call to an instrumentalism that interrogates the justice system and the mechanism of state law enforcement.

Courage is necessary to undertake an endeavor of this magnitude, knowing full well that success is improbable given the entrenched nature of the prevailing ideology of domination. It calls for a radical reorientation that refashions what it means to be an Africana Christian in a world where anti-Blackness is blessed by the sovereign as well as the sacred. In essence, a new Heaven and new Earth must be created where Africana people do not endure the insupportable insult of existing as a problem unless they accept perpetual abuse with silent anticipation of approval by a God and a civil society that hate them. If this paradigm is not shifted, far worse atrocities and insurrections involving Africana people will occur; all to their detriment.

Freddie Gray fleeing the police explains why he got arrested, the theology of dominance and violence against the poor, Black, and vulnerable explains why he and so many others like him are dead, and the *theology of quietism* and acquiescence to unjustified and excessive state violence against the citizenry explains why very few people have taken sustained, organized action to create a true protest that fits the nature of these crimes against African people everywhere.

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