

**FREEDOM AND ESCHATOLOGICAL FULFILMENT:  
THE PROMISE AND PERIL OF MODERNITY FOR  
PEOPLE OF AFRICAN DESCENT**

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To tell the story of freedom for Africa and all peoples of African descent, I would like to begin with the most widely read slave narrative, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano*, published in 1789. M. Shawn Copeland proposes that we read the African American spirituals as revealing something hidden from human view. In the same way, I propose that reading the narrative of an enslaved Black person, Olaudah Equiano, lifts the veil on the hidden wounds of slavery. This is because it presents some powerful apocalyptic imageries that can bring to our consciousness in many ways the painful long walk of people of African descent for freedom. Hopefully, the images, and words that I reverence though this account, can also help us all to think of so many people who look like Equiano who are facing the same painful realities that he faced in their ongoing struggle for life today more than two hundred years after the death of Equiano in 1797.<sup>1</sup>

Using Equiano's painful narrative of freedom's journey as the main text for my account of freedom, I argue that just like Olaudah, the stories of most people of African descent have been characterized for over five hundred years by the same persistent painful realities, namely: captivity to the contradictions of history and the fight for survival; promise, providence and peril, dominion and damnation.

Every Christmas when I sing that song put into English from the French by the Unitarian minister and music critic, John Sullivan Dwight, "O Holy Night," I wonder: When will this suffering, existential homelessness, racism, poverty, and pain end for people of African descent? When shall my people truly be free? The words of Dwight that I am sure you all know goes like this:

*Truly he taught us to love one another;*  
His law is love, and His Gospel is peace;

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<sup>1</sup> M. Shawn Copeland, *Knowing Christ Crucified: The Witness of African American Religious Experience* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2018), 170.

Chains shall he break, for the slave is our brother,  
And in his name all oppression *shall cease*.<sup>2</sup>

If many people of African descent in the United States, Brazil, Haiti, South Africa, Sudan, Ethiopia, the United Kingdom, France, Nigeria—to mention but a few—do not enjoy abundant life and are not flourishing, if most of them are denied the possibility of living in peaceful and prosperous societies and nations, it is the task of an accountable theology to dig deeper into the reasons for this sad situation through a wider historical analysis. Many Africans today and African Americans here in the United States or in Canada and anywhere in the world who are members of our churches are asking the question, what difference does it make belonging to the church? What does the birth and the death of the Son of God mean to them? What does theology offer them in repairing their world, redressing historical wrongs, and transforming the structures of oppression and injustice that have continued to persist since the time of the slave trade. The sad realities faced by many people of African descent have nothing to do with Blackness, gene, culture, geography, or space. It has everything to do with many social, commercial, religious, and political determinants of poverty, health, social hierarchies, and exclusion in the course of history.

These realities, sadly, are firmly embedded in the construction of history in different versions of Christianity, some of which have been appropriated in some of our theologies, spiritualities, moralities, and teachings on divine providence, suffering, theodicy, and eschatology. This is why it is important to critically examine some religious and theological claims on the meaning of freedom and eschatology, and the theological account of how history unfolds among all peoples and human agency. This critical examination should extend to an interpretation of the forces driving the trajectory of history that constantly produce different outcomes for people because of their place of birth, race, sex, location, and other socially constructed identities and hierarchies.

This critical examination is particularly important since some of the claims of Christendom with its projects, ideas, and ideals of church and state, grace and freedom, human nature, sin and redemption are built on a very narrow epistemology, and notions of God, divine providence, and eschatology. These projects were implemented in non-Western societies by Western imperialists and missionaries and some of the consequences include slavery and racism and white supremacy among other sad images that we see in Equiano's narrative. It is important then to critically analyze such notions like freedom, liberal or illiberal democracies, international development, humanitarianism as well as some of the contentious issues of our times like immigration, poverty, terrorism, health inequity, and the false notion on the convergence of history through modernity and the construction of the global order. While I cannot fully unpack these complicated converging forces in this presentation because of time limitations, I wish to at least show the outline of their destructive prehensile reach in the way they function today by taking us back to their initial beginnings in the slave trade. I know that some people will be wondering, what

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<sup>2</sup> J. S. Dwight, "Christmas Song: Cantique Pour Noel," *Musical World* 19, cited in Christopher J. Kellerman, *All Oppression shall Cease: A History of Slavery, Abolitionism and the Catholic Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2022), 116.

new thing can we learn from repeating this account. I will try to share with you my thoughts for its worth.

In telling the story of freedom through the narrative of an enslaved African person who managed to reclaim his own voice and agency, I am also recounting the story of a people, the people of African descent. His slave narrative was a communal narrative, a prosopography told in the most suffocating and destructive of circumstances. But Equiano's notion of community was not simply limited to his own Black community and race, but for all of humanity. The enslaved persons like the millions of poor and suffering people throughout the world understand the meaning of our common humanity more than those who enslaved them. However, as Equiano points out in his narrative there is no limit to which human greed and thirst for capital can take humans, who will stop at nothing to acquire capital. Angela Davis writes with some clarity about this abuse of the triumph of the self over community in *Freedom is a Constant Struggle* showing how neo-liberalism pushes people into small prisons, "neoliberalism attempts to force people to think of themselves only in individual terms and not in collective terms."<sup>3</sup>

Equiano writes among other things that his motive for writing his slave narrative was for the good of our common humanity:

I am not so foolishly vain as to expect from it either immortality or literary reputation. If it affords any satisfaction to my numerous friends, at whose request it has been written, or in the smallest degree promotes the interest of humanity, the ends for which it was undertaken will be fully attained, and every wish of my heart gratified.<sup>4</sup>

Many enslaved persons, like many poor people today who are dying needlessly because of preventable wars, diseases, poverty, and violence never live to tell their own stories. May this my imperfect offering be an ancestral tribute to all people who are dying in our world today because of our destructive economies, violent nation-states. May this short account honor the millions of Black people and oppressed peoples throughout the world. These are our siblings whose narratives as victims of some captive historical forces remain buried in the rising rubbles of lies, deception, exploitative assaults on their personhood and autonomy through an unjust global order, false democracies, and manipulations that characterize neo-liberal capitalism and its associated projects that began in the last five hundred years with the Trans-Atlantic slave trade. The body bags that are produced by our systems and economies—or the economies that kill as Pope Francis calls them<sup>5</sup>—among the poor and oppressed people throughout the world should remind us of all that freedom is more than a word.

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<sup>3</sup> Angela Y. Davis, *Freedom is a Constant Struggle: Ferguson, Palestine, and the Foundations of a Movement* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2016), 29.

<sup>4</sup> Olaudah Equiano, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (London, 1889), 3.

<sup>5</sup> Cf., Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium* (November 24, 2013), § 53, [https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost\\_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco\\_esortazione-ap\\_20131124\\_evangelii-gaudium.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html).

I am standing timorously on Olaudah's shoulders as I tell my people's stories of freedom, in three cyclical movements of *captivity, condemnation, and Crucifixion*. I contend that my people are fighting for life. Until Black people throughout the world enjoy human flourishing and abundant life wherever they wish to live, the word redemption and salvation will continue to ring hollow to us. I invite you then into this struggle against the idols of power, money, race, nationalism, and exclusion in our nations, churches and religious groups. I invite you to become participants rather than spectators because the freedom and liberation of our common humanity is tied to the freedom and liberation of billions of people the world over who are condemned to die by the convergence of adverse historical factors legitimated through systems, structures and systems created by states, religious institutions, and international organizations—both local and global.

### FREEDOM: A SHORT CONCEPTUALIZATION

Before engaging Equiano, let me speak briefly about what I understand as freedom. When I speak of freedom here, I can only be descriptive. This is because freedom for me as an African is more than a word that can be defined. Rather, freedom is a condition that can be described within contexts in which people are born, grow up, live, work, and have their being. So freedom should be told as a story; it is a story of a journey—mine, yours; your people, my people; my humanity, your humanity; my world, your world. Where are we going and how can we get there together? Thus, using an African communal philosophy, the conceptualization of freedom, in my thinking, can be framed through three fundamental and related questions. *What can I do (capability)? Where and how can I do what I desire to do (opportunities)? What moves me to act and why do I do what I do (motivation)?* The answers to these three questions offer the possibility of pointing in the stories of people's daily life the favorable and adverse conditions and factors for everyone's ultimate fulfilment and happiness through participation in the web of life. I am free when I can participate fully in the life of the community and contribute to creating the possibilities in the community for human and cosmic flourishing—for all. To operationalize it in the words of a woman leader in Soroti, Uganda that I met in the course of my work for the Canadian Samaritans for Africa, "We are not asking for money, but that the obstacles be removed on our path to the future that God willed for us."

I like to focus only on the third question because of time constraints.

*The third question is: What moves you to act, why do you do what you do?* This is the question of motivation. Susan Michie, et al., define motivation as "all those brain processes that energize and direct behavior, not just goals. It includes habitual processes, emotional responding, as well as analytical decision-making."<sup>6</sup> African social theorist, Achille Mbembe, offers a good framework for entering this realm of reasoning. What moves people to act must first be based on their location not in terms of spatial setting, place, or space, but within the stream of history. For people of African descent, this location, is what Franz Fanon writes about at the end of his book, *Black*

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<sup>6</sup> Susan Michie, et al., "The Behavior Change Wheel: A New Method for Characterizing and Designing Behavior Change Interventions, *Implementation Science* 6, no. 42 (2011): 4.

*Skin, White Masks* when he says, “I am my own foundation.”<sup>7</sup> The Black person, he argues, is motivated to claim this foundation not in a solipsistic manner, but as an act of resistance to being voided by external factors and circumstances. He or she must recover his or her agency through a reconstitution of “this capacity to be oneself and to act for oneself” as an inner fire surging forth “from the depths of an extraordinary arid and sterile zone” of non-being in the eyes of non-Blacks.

Mbembe argues that one cannot conceptualize freedom and the future of people of African descent without confronting the question of “actuality,” that is, who we are today because of our journeys. It is so easy to talk about freedom and perhaps the theologies of freedom, or to blame the victims for their poverty and suffering. However, for most people of African descent, to use the words of James Weldon Johnson’s “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” we wish to become the protagonists of our own history. This is because like our ancestors did in the past, today we still sing the “harmonies of liberty” embodying the lesson that our “dark past has taught us,” as we confront the realities we face today when “Hope unborn had died.” We contemplate with our ancestors the many roads that “our tears have watered” on “the blood of the slaughtered” in our “gloomy past” filled with our weary years and silent tears.<sup>8</sup>

Mbembe wishes to locate the motivation of peoples of African descent in acting or not acting to change the arc of history in “the will to live and the future of affirmation (freedom—my interpretation) especially where the reign of negation dominates” the long road of tears and blood that we have traversed. It is a struggle to live again—to re-exist—to develop thought processes that can potentiate actions for the reversal of history for people of African descent. These actions are our struggles to breathe again because “I can’t breathe!” It is a struggle to wrestle for ourselves a historical agency denied us through the systems so that we can “move beyond the cruel alternatives: Kill or be killed.”<sup>9</sup> Or to put it in the words of James Cone in his answer to the question he posed: “What is the meaning of this unspeakable Black suffering—suffering that is so deep, so painful and enduring that words cannot even begin to describe it?” His answer to the question he poses offers an answer to my description of the meaning of freedom for people of African descent as to what moves us to act and the obstacles on our way: “Only the song, dance, and the shout—the voices raised to high heavens and bodies swaying from side to side—can express both the wretchedness and the transcendent spirit of empowerment that kept blacks from going under, as they struggled, against great odds, to acknowledge humanity and freedom denied.”<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Achille Mbembe, “Thinking about the World from the Vantage Point of Africa”, in *To Write the Africa World*, ed. Achille Mbembe and Felwine Sarr (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2023), 270.

<sup>8</sup> James Weldon Johnson, “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” *Poetry Foundation*, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/46549/lift-every-voice-and-sing>.

<sup>9</sup> Mbembe, 270.

<sup>10</sup> James Cone, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2011), 124.

### OLAUDAH, THE STORYTELLER

Bontemps, in the introduction to the *Great Slave Narratives*, credits Equiano for pioneering the literature genre that came to be known as slave narratives.<sup>11</sup> The slave narratives were both personal and intimate and opened up the world of persons who were held in the bondage of slavery. There have been slave narratives before Equiano's. We know of such moving autobiographies of Briton Hammon (1760), James Albert Ukawsaw Gronniosaw (1774), John Marrant (1785 and 1789), and Venture Smith (1798), all of which like Equiano's were also like spiritual biographies of captivity, condemnation, contaminating narratives, and death. *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African* (1789 and 1791), has been described as "probably the most artful and influential black narrative in English before Frederick Douglass's *Narrative* appeared in 1845."<sup>12</sup>

The abolitionists who encouraged enslaved persons to tell their stories as a form of spiritual autobiography found in the narratives of Olaudah something that goes beyond spiritual biography. His autobiography was a critical account of the evil of slavery and the loss of human freedom and dignity suffered by him and Black persons held in the captivity of slavery. It was also a hope for freedom—if not for him at least for those Blacks who will come after him and the entire humanity. For many Black persons who were enslaved, they sought different ways to "reorient their worldviews" and telling the stories of their ordeal or singing their pains into dance, and praying their sorrows into tears was their way of finding freedom.<sup>13</sup> In the words of Alice Sewell, a former enslaved person, "We prayed for dis day of freedom. We come four and five miles to pray to gether to God dat if we don't live to see it, to please let our chillen live to see a better day and be free, so dat dey can give honest and fair service to de Lord and all mankind [*sic*] everywhere."<sup>14</sup>

There are three moments in these slave narratives and Olaudah's followed the same pattern:

First is the capture, subjection into bondage and enslavement.

Second, is the condemnation to non-existence, natal alienation, deracination, and social death (Orlando Patterson) in the journey through the middle passage from Africa to North America, Europe, Caribbean or Latin America. In the case of Olaudah, he was enslaved in all these places as he was moved from one master to another; and from one country to another, and from one continent to another.

The third is the crucifixion: the strife of an enslaved person between life and death in the fight for freedom, to stay alive, to survive, and to be human when people around you want to neuter you and reduce you to nothing.

This third phase is usually filled with scenes of suffering and humiliation that worsens all the marks identified by Orlando Petterson (*Slavery as Social Death*) as

<sup>11</sup> Arna Bontemps, ed., *Great Slave Narratives* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), vii-xix.

<sup>12</sup> See Theodore Dwight Weld, Angelina Grimke, and Sarah Grimke, ed., *American Slavery as It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses* (New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1839), 7.

<sup>13</sup> Copeland, 158.

<sup>14</sup> Norman R. Yetman, ed., *Voices from Slavery* (New York: Holt, Rinehard and Winston, 1970), 263.

characteristic of slaves: natal alienation, social death, deracination, and loss of dignity, respects; and treatment as personal property because the enslaved person does not belong; he or she is a non-person.

Finally, is gaining freedom and remaining permanently under bondage or facing racism, and slavery by other means, e.g., incarceration, lynching, and other forms of barriers that made the life of a freed Olaudah worse than enslavement. Reading Equiano's narrative offer a portrait for reading the condition of African Americans and peoples of African descent in the world today. We as Black people are living a new form of slavery through other means and it is our vocation to fight for the liberation of our people. I will give some examples of these three moments, as I ask you to think of what freedom means for you today, and for people who look like Equiano.

### CAPTIVITY, CONDEMNATION, CRUCIFIXION

Olaudah was kidnapped when he was 11 years. He was kidnapped with his sister and taken to the coast. As they were heading to the coast, he writes that, "The only comfort we had was being in each other's arms all that night and bathing each other with our tears."<sup>15</sup> However, one recurrent theme in Equiano's narrative is the hand of providence and how the loss of freedom left him in the merciful hand of divine providence: "I regard myself as a particular favorite of heaven."<sup>16</sup> He thanked God when he was under servitude to Mr. King and was treated better than his previous master, "I blessed God for the hands into which I had fallen."<sup>17</sup> Even his name, Olaudah, signified for him that he bore the seal of fate—Olaudah means "*vicissitude or fortune; one favored and having a loud voice and well spoken.*"

In chapter six, he writes so strongly about his regular prayer to God to help him obtain his liberty on one hand, while he worked so hard (using every honest means) to obtain his freedom. However, being a predestinarian, he thought that "whatever fate had determined must ever come to pass; and therefore, if ever it were my lot to be freed nothing could prevent me, although I should at present see no means or hope to obtain my freedom."<sup>18</sup>

In chapter one he writes again of divine providence, "I might say my sufferings were great: but when I compare my lot with that of most of my countrymen, I regard myself as a particular favorite of Heaven, and acknowledge the mercies of Providence in every occurrence of my life."<sup>19</sup> Throughout the *Narrative*, Paul Edwards and Rosalind Shaw note the constant deployment by Equiano of the expressions "looking up to God mighty in the top for my right"; and that "providence was favorable to me than we could have expected." But one of the saddest contradictions he tells in his *Narrative* is the violence of which he suffered in the hand of "Christian depredators" even after he received baptism and became a Christian.<sup>20</sup> He was mortified by the

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<sup>15</sup> Equiano, 50.

<sup>16</sup> Equiano, 3.

<sup>17</sup> Equiano, 81

<sup>18</sup> Equiano, 243.

<sup>19</sup> Equiano, 8.

<sup>20</sup> Paul Edwards and Rosalind Shaw. "The Invisible Chi in Equiano's Interesting Narrative," *Journal of Religion in Africa* 19, no. 2 (1989): 146-56, at 152-153.

discrimination he suffered including the refusal of white Christian pastors to bury a Black woman's little baby (in chapter eight). He drew a contrast between his own exercise of limited freedom in avoiding sin and doing harm to no one, and the abuse of freedom of his white oppressors in these words: "O ye nominal Christians! Might not an African ask you, learned you this from your God, who says unto you, Do unto all men as you would men should do unto you?"<sup>21</sup> The same outrage was expressed by Frederick Douglass with "Christianity and its collusion with southern sociopolitical structures."<sup>22</sup> He writes, "The dealers in bodies and souls of men erect their stand in the presence of the pulpit, and they mutually help each other. The dealer gives his blood-stained gold to support the pulpit, in return covers his infernal business with the garb of Christianity. Here we have religion and robbery the allies of each other—devils dressed in angels' robes, and hell presenting the semblance of paradise."<sup>23</sup>

Equiano oscillates between his free and beautiful home in Africa and the chaos and suffering of his enslavement. He writes of his motherland, Africa, as a land that is "uncommonly rich and fruitful"; a land that produces all kinds of food and vegetables where everyone worked together—men and women—in tilling the earth, where everyone enjoyed the freedom to participate in the common good, "everyone contributes something to the common stock; and as we are unacquainted with idleness, we have no beggars."<sup>24</sup> He speaks of the land of Africa as beautiful and African women as "uncommonly graceful, alert and modest...cheerful and affable—two of the leading characteristics of our nation."<sup>25</sup> He saw his birth as a promise, and his land of birth, the African motherland as a promise; but through the iron hand of fate, he was taken into slavery and the rest of his life was lived precariously on the verge of death, despair, and pain.

During his journey through the middle passage, he writes that he watched the beatings, the poor treatment, the insufferable sights beneath the ship's deck and some of his mates crying, for their freedom or death as they jumped to their death into the Atlantic, he said, "I now wished for the last friend, death, to relieve me."<sup>26</sup> As he reflected on all these on many sad nights during the voyage he was often woken by "the shrieks of the women, and the groans of the dying that rendered the whole scene of horror almost inconceivable."<sup>27</sup> However, the "scenes of horror" that characterized his life from captivity to the end of his *Narrative* demonstrate that for Olaudah and millions of his siblings caught in this iniquitous and perilous slave trade the three questions (*what you want to or desire to do? Where and how you can do it? What moves you to act, why do you do what you do*) can only be answered in the negative—not in the affirmative. Immediately as one wishes to answer these questions what opens

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<sup>21</sup> Equiano, 87.

<sup>22</sup> Alexis S. Wells-Oghoghomeh, "Re-evaluating Roots: Slavery as Source and Challenge for African American Theology", in *T&T Clark Handbook of African American Theology*, ed. Antonia Michelle Daymond, Frederick Ware, and Eric Williams (London: T&T Clark, 2019), 19.

<sup>23</sup> Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave Written by Himself* (Boston: Bedford Books, 1993 [1845]), 105-106.

<sup>24</sup> Equiano, 21.

<sup>25</sup> Equiano, 22.

<sup>26</sup> Equiano, 73.

<sup>27</sup> Equiano, 79.



is a world of tears, pain, betrayal, suffering, death. It is in a word, a world that said “NO” to Equiano and that even today continues to say “NO” to most people of African descent today through systems and structures that objectify, thingify, instrumentalize, erase, exclude, dehumanize, patronize, belittle, and even exterminate the Black *other* and other subjects considered expendable and disposable in our neoliberal capitalist frame.

As Equiano writes with so much clarity, “I would rather die than allow myself to be treated so badly because to me life had lost its relish when freedom is gone.”<sup>28</sup> The social condition of Blacks who were liberated in some parts of America in the early nineteenth century were as bad as those still held in captivity, as at the time Equiano was writing. The reasons for this, according to Equiano is a racialized thinking driven by godlessness, greed, and violence. He writes that no Black person should accept the simulacra of freedom by accepting to be insulted, plundered, and mistreated without any possibility of redress or accepting “a mockery of freedom” by continuing to accept “the misery of slavery.”<sup>29</sup>

### CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In one moving passage in his narrative, Equiano writes that what gave him calm was his belief in providence, “I soon perceived what fate had decreed no mortal on earth could prevent.”<sup>30</sup> With no friend to bring him comfort, and no hope to bring cheers, and no help from heaven above to put an end to his misery, he bore his bruised and battered body with some dignity in the hope that the night that came upon him had put an end to his miserable and toilsome day—thank God.

Equiano’s narrative raises three questions for us as I conclude these thoughts: First, the role of our churches and theologies in undermining the journey of freedom in America and the world. Our theologies and churches often paper over the deep contradictions and trajectory of history that continue to unfold in the rivers of blood and tears of people of African descent, minoritized individuals, and marginalized peoples. We do this often with the “God of the gaps” narratives of God’s will: God has a purpose in all things, carry it like a cross, etc.

We often talk about freedom, God’s will, hope, and suffering as abstract terms. As Christopher Kellerman writes, the history of slavery is too horrific, too tragic to be put in words, but the sad thing is that the Catholic Church to which most of us are committed has “been so wrong, so callous, so caught up in the ways of the world as the cause of so much harm, century after century after century.”<sup>31</sup> In that light, the discussion of freedom must begin with truth telling, listening to the hidden stories of pain, and the narrative ligaments that go back to the slave trade with capillaries that connect today’s racialized societies with this iniquitous atrocity. Churches and theologies should provide moral clarity without sugar coating the story, and prophetic

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<sup>28</sup> Equiano, 244.

<sup>29</sup> Equiano, 250.

<sup>30</sup> Equiano, 189.

<sup>31</sup> Kellerman, 214.

and pragmatic solidarity.<sup>32</sup> We must create the space for lamentation in our churches, classrooms, and public spaces. I believe that it is only by hearing narratives such as Equiano's and those who are condemned to die by our systems, structures, and institutions that we can begin to atone for the sins against freedom of which many of us are still beneficiaries or perpetrators.

Second, we must move away in our theologies from disembodied or spiritualized notions of freedom and grace, free choice of the will (St. Augustine), divine judgement, and destiny, etc. An embodied and socialized narrative of freedom that asks the three questions I propose when applied to individuals and groups can help us locate the barriers and roadblocks to the march to freedom and what freedom means for people who are too injured with our *Nos* to worry about the theological or philosophical conceptualization of freedom.

Finally, the myth that democracies guarantee freedom and that the presence of freedom in neo-liberal democracy brings prosperity—as advanced recently by the Atlantic Council's *Freedom and Prosperity Initiative* and Amartya Sen's *Development as Freedom*—needs critical reappraisal. It is the mission of theologians today to develop the compass for a liberation historiography, the kind that can free our minds from imprisonment to worn out categories and terms like freedom, liberal democracy and Christian nationalism that grew from the Western construction of an unjust global order and the false promise of the convergence of global history through modernity. Today, we now speak of illiberal democracy, and we see the wreckages of our democratic experiments from Hiroshima to Kiev, from Kigali to Aleppo, and from Palestine to El Paso.

As an African, I have watched the convulsion in my continent in the last five decades since my birth after the first modern genocide in Africa, the Biafran War. I watch sadly the new battles between the United States, China, Russia, France and the United Kingdom playing out again in Africa. Some of the same forces that conspired to enslave our ancestors like Equiano are now gathering like vultures over the African Motherland as modern saviors of Africa. The stories of many African young people have become like that of Equiano's. Sadly, this time they are not being forced or kidnapped from a beautiful Africa. Rather, they are leaving the wreckages of the promise and peril of modernity in Africa and looking for some escape routes. Like Equiano, some of them seek for God's divine providence to unfold through their perilous pathway across the Sahara, the Atlantic or the Mediterranean and give thanks to God if they arrive safely to the United States or Canada, Greece, the United Kingdom, or France. Their countries all gained independence from the erstwhile colonialists, and they received the promise of better days, but all is dissipating before their very eyes. Many of them are so desperate that they are volunteering for Wagner on the Russian side and for the Kiev government's call for volunteer fighters for Ukraine.

Four years ago, young Sudanese flooded the streets and asked for their freedom from oppression, tyranny, and death from the hand of a dictator and hundreds of them paid with their lives. On 25 and 26 June, 1955, the African National Congress (ANC), the South African Indian Congress, and the South African Colored People's

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<sup>32</sup> Olga Segura, *Birth of a Movement: Black Lives Matter and the Catholic Church* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2021), 75.

Organization and the Congress of Democrats signed the famous *Freedom Charter* that offered the most articulate and widely circulated understanding and interpretation of freedom for Africans and peoples of African descent.

Today these young Sudanese have all fled their country, many of them are wandering in the lonely path of forests and valleys trying to escape from Sudan or hide from bombs and bullets flying over their land from Khartoum to Darfur. Today South Africa's most popular party is no longer the scandal-ridden ANC, but the Economic Freedom Fighters led Julius Malema. Today young South Africans like young South Sudanese are asking the question: What is freedom? Where lies the future for us?