

**Spring 2025**

**Final Exam Writing**

**Cone and "Judas and the Black Messiah"**

Throughout this spring, we focused on the dialogue about freedom among Christians and various people of different orientations. We have looked at classic and modern notions of freedom among Christians and compared them with those of non-Christians. We have employed an analysis that focuses on the character of enslavements in a series of serious films; we have analyzed how various liberations have emerged in particular situations; and we have considered models of freedom that sometimes appear. And then we have considered the impact of these three foci on the communities affected by social and religious transformations.

For your final work in the course you are to take up the enslavement, the liberation, the freedoms that emerge for communities affected by the Black Liberation aspect of the 1960's Civil Rights Movement. James Cone's 1970 *A Black Theology of Liberation* provides an analysis of white and black theologies and pictures of their respective communities. Our final film, "Judas and the Black Messiah," recreates the budding Black Panther movement in the Chicago of the 1960s. It reveals the secular cult of 17 year old Fred Hampton and his devoted disciples who enact analogically the passion of the Black Messiah (Fred). Meanwhile, the FBI and the local "pigs" play the part of the Jewish and Roman leaders who end the passion play with the murder of the black Jesus.

**1. Background preparation:**

- Your first preparation is to pick up Cone's analysis of black and white theologies, of black history and religion, of white religious participation in enslaving blacks, and black struggles for liberation.
- How does Cone help us see the Panthers as a kind of secular religious community? What features of this community look religious?
- How do the white communities sustain their power?
- Would Cone support the secular community of the Panthers?

**2. Then, in preparing to write, consider these themes from the Panther movement: analyze the Black Panther cult, its function and community life, its rituals and organization, its achievements and innovations, its tragedies and possible future.**

- How do Panthers deal with traditional racism?
- How does leader Fred lead the community?

- How do Panthers reach out to other groups and cults from other neighborhoods of Chicago?
- How does the Panther community focus on practice and not theory so much, to change their world? How does the community raise the consciousnesses of its people?
- What techniques does the community use to crack white ideology?
- Do the Panthers think of evil as individual or as a corporate reality?
- Why have American blacks been oppressed?
- How do the Panthers fall into the passion play of the "Black Messiah"?
- How does O'Neal come to his role as the money manager and become the eventual "Judas" of the community?
- Does the community get any justice in their war against the white "Federal church" with all its power?
- Is there a future for Fred's Panther devotees or are they simply crushed by white violence and intimidation? Does their sacrifice amount to anything?
- Do you see any positive contributions for the community from the passion of Fred?
- Does the Panther moment of the civil rights movement make a difference for white communities?

Select 2-3 themes from above that can inspire an essay on the impact of enslavement/liberation/ freedom in the black and white communities.

3. Conclude by considering whether black liberation has contributed to overcoming hatred and conflict in the black and white communities in the US. Did the Black Panthers and other pioneers of the Civil Rights movement make any difference in the two communities?

Orient yourself to the issues of 1. above, select 2-3 issues of 2. above, and end with a discussion of the impact of the revolution on the two communities. Finished final exam papers due at the end of ~~the~~ 19th May. REMEMBER TO OPEN ACCESS TO THE ESSAY.

*Monday*

#### **All Purpose Comment on the Essay**

Essays in religion and in philosophy are mainly argumentative in character. As such, they are different from some essays that you may have written, say, for a literature class, where the chief focus is to discuss a theme or exegete an issue. The argumentative essay must persuade the reader of the validity of a case. Imagine that you are a defense attorney or a prosecutor who must reason from evidence to a convincing conclusion. The conclusion is the thesis of the essay.

The thesis of the essay responds to the problem posed in the beginning of the essay. Consequently, the first business of the essay is to pose a **problematic** which the essay should solve. Note two things about the problematic: 1) the problematic is yours, is that of your essay which you will solve in the argument itself; it is not the problem of an author. For instance, if you were to argue that Cone's notion of faith presupposes a very modern understanding of freedom, the thesis is your claim, not Cone's. 2) The best setting of the problematic of an essay is concrete and allows readers to experience the difficulty or riddle or puzzlement you will solve. Do not simply announce an issue to be solved but let readers feel it.

The **Thesis** states in a sentence or two the specific resolution to the problem posed in the initial section of the essay. An essay in religion or philosophy usually sets out a blunt thesis (i.e., "I will argue that conservative Christians tend to flee from freedom as autonomy"). You may conclude the thesis statement with a word or two on the steps of the argument, but a short essay may not need an agenda. Note that in a longer paper one would insert here a section on one's method in approaching the argument.

The **Development** begins by recalling the problematic and proceeds with a step-by-step building of a case. The argument moves by drawing on evidence, here on an exposition of pertinent passages from the text or from the film. It alternates between paraphrases that are credited, to full quotations of the most revealing passages ~~that also are cited~~. One can usually discover the logic that can be applied to the evidence by pondering the steps that would prove the thesis. There should be a logic in the unfolding of a case, but sometimes the effective or aesthetic presentation of the case in a written form may require some accommodation in the unfolding of the logic. In any case, work from evidence that has been explicated in the body of the essay. Note that all evidence explicated must be analyzed. Two features of this development should be the general orientation to the works in question and then an exposition of the theme.

The **Conclusion** brings the reader back to the thesis of the essay, now with a sense that it is a viable conclusion to the evidence presented. The best conclusions bring us to the thesis without a mechanical repetition of the point. They do something novel or interesting with the point: an application, a critique, a statement of unfinished business, a qualification etc.