

PROPHETIC MISSION

Foreword

The advent of “Black Theology” in the wake of the civil rights and black power socio-political movements in America, as well as liberation struggles in South America and Africa advanced several relevant questions.

We reference a book authored by James H. Cone, entitled “A Black Theology of Liberation, and highlight excerpts from the preface of the 1970 edition. “The reader is entitled to know what to expect in this book. It is my contention that Christianity is essentially a religion of liberation. The function of theology is that of analyzing the meaning that liberation for the oppressed so they can know that their struggle for political, social and economic justice is consistent with the gospel of Jesus Christ. **Any message that is not related to the liberation of the poor in a society is not Christ’s message. Any theology that is indifferent to the theme of liberation is not Christianity.**”

“In a society where persons are oppressed because they are black, Christian theology must become *black theology*, a theology that is unreservedly identified with the goals of the oppressed and seeks to interpret the divine character of their struggle for liberation. ‘Black Theology’ is a phrase that is particularly appropriate for contemporary America because of its symbolic power to convey both what whites mean by oppression and what blacks mean by liberation. However, I am convinced that the patterns of meaning centered on the idea of black theology, are by no means restricted to the American scene, for blackness symbolizes oppression and liberation in any society.

It will be evident, therefore, that this book is written primarily for the black community, not for whites. Whites may read it and to some degree render an intellectual analysis of it, but an authentic understanding is dependent on the blackness of their existence in the world. There will be no peace in America until whites begin to hate their whiteness, asking from the depths of their being: ‘How can we become black?’ I hope that if enough whites begin to ask this question, this country will no longer be divided on the basis of color. But until then, it is the task of the Christian theologian to do theology in the light of the concreteness of human oppression as expressed in color, and to interpret for the oppressed the meaning of God’s liberation of their community.”

The preface to the 1986 edition of “A Black Theology of Liberation” as compared to the 1970 preface is instructive and offers perspective going forward. Therefore we have excerpted it for your information:

“Theology is not universal language about God. Rather, it is human speech informed by historical and theological traditions, and written for particular times and places. Theology is contextual language- that is, defined by the human situation that gives birth to it. No one can write theology for all times, places, and persons. Therefore, when one reads a theological textbook, it is important to note the year of its publication, the audience for whom it was written, and the issues the author felt compelled to address.”

“A Black Theology of Liberation was first published in 1970, and it was written for and to black Christians (and also to whites who had courage to listen) in an attempt to answer the question that I and others could not ignore, namely, ‘what has the gospel of Jesus Christ to do with the black struggle for justice in the United States?’ This book cannot be understood without a keen knowledge of the civil rights and black power movements of the 1960s and a general comprehension of nearly four hundred years of slavery and segregation in North America, both of which were enacted into law by government and openly defended as ordained of God by most white churches and their theologians.

I can remember clearly when I first sat down to write this text. I was immediately following the publication of my first book, ‘Black Theology and Black Power’ (1969). Although Black Theology and Black Power appealed to many black and white radicals who were interested in the theological implications of black power, I knew that most Christians, black and white, especially theologians and preachers, would need a deeper analysis of Christian doctrine, using traditional theological concepts, before talking black theology seriously. When I began to write A Black Theology for Liberation, I was deeply involved in the struggle for justice and was still searching for a perspective on Christian theology that would help African-Americans recognize that the gospel of Jesus is not only consistent with your fight for liberation but is its central meaning for twentieth-century America.

I was completely unaware of the beginnings of liberation theology in the Third World, especially in Latin America. Neither did I know much about the theme of liberation in African-American history and culture. Unfortunately, my formal theological and historical knowledge was primarily limited to the dominant perspectives of North America and Europe. But, despite these limitations, I was determined to speak a liberating word for and to African-American Christians, using the theological resources at my disposal. I did not have time to do the theological and historical research needed to present a ‘balanced’ perspective on the problem of racism in America. Black men, women, and children were being shot and imprisoned for asserting their right to a dignified existence. Others were wasting away in ghettos, dying from filth, rats, and dope, as white and black ministers preached about a blond, blue eyed Jesus who came to make us all just like him. I had to speak in a different word, not just as a black person but primarily as a theologian. I felt then, as I still do, that if theology had nothing to say about black suffering and resistance, I could not be a theologian. I remembered what Malcolm X said: ‘I believe in a religion that believes in freedom. Any times I have to accept a religion that won’t let me fight a battle for my people, I say to hell with that religion.’

The passion with which I wrote alienated most whites (and some blacks too). But I felt that I had no other alternative if I was to speak forcefully and truthfully about the reality of black suffering and of God's empowerment of blacks to resist it. It was not my task to interpret the gospel in a form acceptable to white racists and their sympathizers. Theology is not only a rational discourse about ultimate reality; it is also a prophetic word about the righteousness of God that must be spoken in clear, strong, and uncompromising language. Oppressors never like to hear the truth in a socio-political context defined by their lies. That was why A Black Theology for Liberation was often rejected as racism in reverse by many whites, particularly theologians. For example, Father Andrew M. Greeley referred to my perspective on black theology as a 'Nazi mentality' a theology filled with hatred for white people and the assumption of a moral superiority of black over white. White reactions to black theology never disturbed me too much, because Malcolm X had prepared me for them. With skillful manipulation of the press, said Malcolm, they're able to make the victim look like the criminal and the criminal look like the victim.

White theologians wanted me to debate with them about the question of whether 'black theology' was real theology, using their criteria to decide the issue. With clever theological sophistication, white theologians defined the discipline of theology in the light of the problem of the unbeliever (i.e., the question of the relationship of faith and reason) and thus unrelated to the problem of slavery and racism. Using a white definition of theology, I knew there was no way I could win a debate. And even if I had managed to give a 'good' account of myself, what difference would that have made for the liberation of poor black folk?

The task of explicating the gospel as God's liberating presence with oppressed blacks was too urgent to be sidetracked into an academic debate with white scholars about the nature of theology. It was clear to me that what was needed was a fresh start in theology a new way of doing it that would arise out of the black struggle for justice and in no way would be dependent upon the approval of white academics in religion. Again, I thought of Malcolm: 'Don't let anybody who is oppressing us ever lay the ground rules. Let them know now that this is a new game, and we've got some new rules...

I knew that racism was a heresy, and I did not need to have white theologians tell me so. Indeed, the exploitation of a person of color was the central theological problem of our time. 'The problem of the twentieth century,' wrote W.E.B. Dubois in 1906, 'is the problem of the color-line' the relation of the darker to the lighter races of persons, in Asia, Africa, in America and the islands of the sea.' Just as whites did not listen to Dubois, I did not expect white theologians to take black theology seriously. Racism is a disease that perverts one's moral sensitivity and distorts the intellect. It is found not only in American society and its churches but particularly in the discipline of theology, affecting its nature and purpose. White racist theologians are in charge of defining the nature of the gospel and the discipline responsible for explicating it! How strange! They who are responsible for the evil of racism also want to tell its victims whether bigotry is a legitimate subject matter of systematic theology.

I had no patients with persons (white or black) who expected me to remain ‘cool’ and ‘calm’ as whites played their racist theological games. I felt deeply that the time had come to expose white theology for what it was: a racist, theological justification for the status quo. In understanding the content and style of *A Black Theology of Liberation*, one must have empathy for the depth of my anger regarding the presence of racism in theology, with white theologians trying first to deny it and then justify it. I could barely contain my rage whenever I read their books or found myself in their presence. They were so condescending and arrogant in the way they talked about black theology, always communicating the impression that it was not genuine theology because it was too emotional and anti-intellectual. Furthermore, it did not deal with the ‘proper’ subject matter of theology, namely, the rational justification of religious belief in a scientific and technological world that has no use for God. I refused to let them intimidate me with their intellectual arrogance, quoting persons and documents of western theological tradition, as if knowledge of them were a prerequisite for even calling oneself a theologian. I kept thinking about my mother and father (and all the poor blacks they symbolized in African-American history and culture) in order to keep my theological vocation clearly focused and my immediate purpose sharply defined. God did not call me into the ministry (as a theologian of the Christian church) for the purpose of making the gospel intelligible to privileged white intellectuals. Why then should I spend my intellectual energy answering their questions, as if their experience were the only source from which theology derives its questions?

Some of my discussions with white theologians degenerate into shouting matches, because they did not like my ‘cool’ indifference that they must learn something about the black religious tradition in order to be genuine American theologians. I must admit that I was often as arrogant toward white theologians as they were toward me. My style of doing theology was influenced more by Malcolm X than by Martin Luther King, Jr. And I am sure that my intemperate behavior prevented some whites, whose intentions were more honorable than my responses suggested, from dialoging with me. My critical evaluation (deleted from the 1986 edition) of Joseph Hough’s *Black Power and White Protestants* (1968) and of C. Freeman Sleeper’s *Black Power and Christian Responsibility* (1969) is a case in point. But when I thought about the long history of black suffering and the long silence of white theologians in its regard, I could not always control my pen and tongue. I did not feel that I should in any way be accountable to white theologians or their cultural etiquette. It was not a time to be polite but rather a time to speak truth with love, courage, and care for the masses of blacks. Again Malcolm expressed what I felt deep within my being:

The time that we’re living in... now is not an era where one who is oppressed is looking toward the oppressor to give him some system or form of logic or reason. What is reason to the oppressor isn’t logical to the oppressed. The black people in this country are beginning to realize that what sounds reasonable to those who exploit us doesn’t sound reasonable to us. There just has to be a new system of reason and logic devised by us who are at the bottom, if we want to get some results in this struggle that is called the “Negro revolution.”