

**Howard University School Of Divinity**

**Class Lecture Notes & Papers From  
Black Theology Course**

Instructor

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## Lecture Notes

### Black Theology - August 29, 1995

Why would there have to be a black theology?? If we are talking about one God, can there be a black view of God that would be different from some other theology? If God is not contained in any particular culture, why should we talk about God in a black theology as if we have a different God? Is it appropriate to label our theology?

What Theology really is: God talk. Theos (gk) for God; logos (gk) for study of or word. Who is doing the talking about God? Not God. In theology, human beings are doing the talking about God. Human discourse about God. God is the subject matter but humans are attempting to understand God.

Presumedly, we can talk about God because we know something about God. Theology assumes God where philosophy does not. It is through revelation that we can know God and have something to talk about. Theology is the meaning of God's disclosure and revelation. But why a black theology? Isn't revelation a revelation? Isn't Jesus, Jesus??

We are trying to understand God's relationship to us and our relationship to God. Though the revelation may be universal, perfect, complete, and unfettered by human limitations (races, sexuality, economic status, historical background), WE ARE NOT!! God may be perfect, universal, and complete but we are not.

Who we are influences our understanding of God and how we experience life. Who we are shapes how we experience life and how we view the world. For example, people have different perceptions of the O.J. Simpson case based on their cultural perspective. Same could be said of the Anita Hill/Clarence Thomas debacle.

Your location has an impact on how you perceive reality. If that is the case in the finite world, it certainly has an impact on how we view God's revelation. Our discussion about God is as much about us as it is about God. It is intrinsically anthropological. What does that mean for our theologies? We must keep in mind that it is human reflections about God. This is nothing human beings can say about God that is infallible. It's impossible because we do not experience life as perfect, infallible beings.

Q: Do we bring any absolutes to the table? The cannon is even human limited. There were writings that never made it into the Bible. The people in power had a say as to what got into the bible. Black folks have always had an ambivalent relationship with Paul. Why didn't the Gospel of Thomas or Mary make it into the N.T. Even when people talk about universals, it's someone's particular experience because we cannot start at the top where the universal is and work down. We all start at ground zero and work up.

Because humans are talking about God, it cannot be complete because we cannot perfectly capture all there has been revealed by God. Theology is done in dialog and community and not in a vacuum. We approach theology like a crossword puzzle. We don't use an ink pen but in pencil with a readiness to erase. Sometimes you have to live with blanks in the puzzle.

In doing theology, we have to know where people are sitting. We must be honest about the discourse and

our relationship to God. You can't do theology in a haphazard way. It's usually done in the midst of a crisis or when we are challenged about our assumptions about God. Theology rises out of the experiences of our lives. Thus we are prone to ask different questions at certain times in our lives. Being black will cause different questions to be posed from whites. The slave and the slave holder did not have the same questions about God. The slave asked about freedom and the slave holder wanted to know if he could still be Christian and hold slaves.

We must always have the hermeneutic of suspicion about other's theologies and even our own. When God starts looking like you, something's wrong because God is transcendent and always a part from us. If we had all the answers we'd stop seeking him and get comfortable. We need to be critical of our own subjectivity and bias.

Q: Who and what is doing the changing, God or us? God's revelation is unmoved but we change as we see different aspects of the revelation.

## **Black Theology I - September 12, 1995**

Why don't many more students take Black Theology? It is a shame that some student go through a black seminary and know more about European theology than our own. We think we know all there is to know about black theology. We've not become reflective of our own beliefs in God and it's relevance to the church. Our church folks don't hold black theology up to a lot of regard.

But where has it come from and does it have any relationship to the black religious experience? Why does it seem like we don't know anything about it?

### **Black Theological Reflection.**

It didn't come out of Cone, Roberts, Cleage and other out of the civil rights movement. That's not the beginning. The beginning starts with the enslaved Africans in the south who reflected upon the acts of God in light of their condition. "How can I still believe in God in light of this?" is the question that was asked. It probably took place at every step of the slaves journey (capture, transport, and enslavement).

What part of the black religious history forms the roots of this religious thought? The enslaved community holds part of the key. We should not assume that all of the enslaved were Christian or that they all remained believers or that the first introduction to religion was through the slave holders. Africans did bring some understanding of God to America. There were certainly other religious experiences taking part in the slave community besides the Christian movement.

Slave holders attempted to use Christianity as a means of holding the Africans in bondage. They indoctrinated the slave community with their "modified" version of Christianity. Two strands of black religious thought:

*Priestly*-Cornel West says its that strand that helps you survive and finds ways to cope with the tough realities of life. "If you're good here, you'll get yours bye and bye in the sky." The problem is that what you are sitting with is oppressive but the oppressor convinces you to pray your way through and that He won't put more on you than you can bear.

Before we ridicule this strand of though we need to realize that it helps people to make it and survive the worst of conditions. We need to appreciation it as a form of resistance to a system that denies life and our existence. Survival itself is defiance against a system that is denying life. This quality is not appreciated in our society. People find their own ways to make it. Maybe that's how Uncle Tom got through. Before we can critique our culture, we need to appreciate the role it has played in our survival and in our ideas and relationship to God. How do you get up every morning and be a slave? Just waking up was another day of survival. Black theology does not arise from this strand.

*Prophetic Tradition*-This strand rose up from the "Invisible Institution". The enslaved shaped Christianity for themselves in this mode. They began to glean their own understanding of the God of Jesus Christ. There is emerging an "II" among the slaves. Not a formal institution with church polity and denominations. They would sneak away to other slave quarters, brush arbors or back woods and then they would "have church." It was in these settings that we begin to see a more prophetic concept of God arising. What are they drawing upon?

The understanding of God was not simply a reaction to what they were being told by the slave holding community. The understanding of God was not necessary a reaction to white folks. They were not always in an apologetic mode. They were developing their own culture and understanding of God. The sources for this understanding of God was

1. Their experience of God that was brought from Africa.
2. The experiences of God in this “new world”. God didn’t hide away from these people because they were black. To say that religion only came from white folk is to say that black folk did not have access to the revelation of God.
3. Black folk had access to the Bible despite prohibitions on teaching slaves to read and write.

Together these sources helped them to form a different concept of God that was different from their masters. Their socio-political location opened them up; gave them a better vantage point to see the God of Jesus Christ. If the slave holders religion focused on the New Testament (they overlooked the Old Testament completely), they created their own narrow cannon or “cannon within the cannon”. They dealt with the Leviticus codes and the miss interpretation of Ham.

The slave holding class did not dwell on Moses or other stories of the Old Testament. In the New Testament, it became even more problematic for the “masters.” Jesus Christ talked all about freedom and liberation. Freedom was not related to anyone’s earthly condition. They bypassed Jesus Christ and focused on Paul who made many of these ideas of Jesus Christ abstract. We’ve lost the meaning of the historical Jesus Christ by the time we get to Christ. The slave holders had to justify baptism and salvation apart from the liberation of Jesus Christ. So they eliminated the gospels for the most part.

The religion in the “Invisible Institution” was doing just the opposite. The enslaved began to see a connection between themselves and the Hebrew children and the similarity of their conditions. Moses became a central figure for them. “The God of Moses”. Jesus became like a second Jesus focusing on how Jesus birth into poverty into a manger.

What even drew them this connection? How were they really seeing Jesus? It had to have something to do with their relationship to God before coming to America. In Africa, the cross is not something foreign. The staff (cross) is symbolic of the entire life cycle. Jesus resurrection is not something strange for Africans who had a high belief in the spirit world. Africans believed that access to the great high God came through one’s ancestors and Jesus was considered one of their ancestors. In the spirituals, the slaves are talking with and fussing with Jesus because it was through him that access to God was granted. Slaves had a concept of a redeeming God and a Saviour God.

Their African model of worship/religion is not that different in the new world. We cannot deny the role of the African religious experience as a source for the development of black folks concepts about God. The concepts they had in Africa won’t work in the new world because they weren’t chattel in Africa so the experience and relationship to God is different. To be sure, it is formed by their African religious heritage which helps to shape their Christianity.

This understanding or view out of the “Invisible Institution” would influence the Nat Turners, the Harriet Tubmans, and the Denmark Vesseys. They did what they did based on their understanding of God and his liberating strand. We may critique black theology for not having more of a survival theme but the roots came out of the “Invisible Institution” and not the survival mode.

Many of those in the “Invisible Institution” as they come out feed into the independent institutions in the north formed by Richard Allen and others. Over time, these new institutions got away from the “Invisible Institution” and tried to be more main stream and in line with the white churches. This led to the creation of store-fronts and “sanctified” strands of the black church.

Some how the strand out of the “Invisible Institution” has always survived. Cornel West says that the genius of the black church is that it gives birth to the prophetic heritage which is to say that the black church is not always prophetic. Maybe our theology is not always “black”. What are the characteristics of this legacy:

Justice-The God who would not stand for slavery. This God empowered the slaves for liberation. A God of justice who understood the slaves conditions and worked with them towards their liberation. Nat Turner and Gabriel Prosser really felt that God had told them to move in the way that they did. They saw themselves as new Moses. Harriet Tubman was very clear that she was on a mission as was Sojourner Truth.

The Black God/Black Christ-It begins in slavery even if they didn’t explicitly call him black by giving witness to how God was working in their life. God knew the black experience and how Jesus was connected with the suffering of slavery. King carried on the tradition of the legacy of the “Invisible Institution” but Malcolm brought out the color issues.

What does “black” mean in black theology? It has to do more than what somebody looks like. It broader than the color of the ethnic group. Everything a black person says about God doesn’t fall into the area of black theology. We can’t get trapped by what someone looks like to define black theology. Blackness is having something to do with someone’s activity or that which nurtures the survival and freedom of the black community. God/Jesus Christ is black in that he nurtures and sustains the black community. One can look black yet be hostile to black life (e.g., Clarence Thomas some might say).

Blackness in our reading must be viewed at a number of different levels and not just skin color. People can misunderstand us if other are not aware of the broad definition of blackness. “To whom are you accountable?” is a key question that must be answered to determine one’s blackness. With this concept, we can be self-critical and have the tools to examine our community and our theology. It is in this mode that we can say that our slave foreparents began to think of God as black.

Q: Can those other than black people do black theology? People can be pro-black but black theology always come out of the black experience so in some ways it is limited based on one’s social position. We can’t divorce theological thinking from our cultural position. If we universalize the definition, then people won’t take our story seriously and feel that our story doesn’t need to be told. We don’t experience anything in a universal form. God entered into human history and a particular point of history. If we tell our story, people have to deal with their relationship to the story and it’s implications. We can’t divorce it from the concrete black experience.

White folks can’t enter into the black experience to interpret it for us. You must force them to accept the experience and your story. You can’t become black but you can do things which nurture the black experience. One has to be willing to listen and appreciate the stories. When the story is cut off, the story is not important to them and has been minimized. To be color blind is for someone to accept you only on their terms. What does Lyndon Johnson have to overcome in singing “We Shall Overcome” in the 60s.

Q: We talk about blackness that is reaching out to the black community but that community doesn't completely embrace the God that we are talking about? Not everything that is black is good. This definition opens us up to a self critique. When do we move out of sync with this concept of our blackness and hence our compatibility with God? What is the black church only sometimes prophetic or why won't it take on other issues? It sometimes seems to be stuck on racial justice.

When we talk about freedom and liberation, we are talking about God and systems in the concrete. Hence, what is the black theologians response to the socio-political situations which exist in the world today. What is a barrier to human wholeness and happiness? We can't get their spiritualizing or speaking about God in the abstract.

There is a need for black theology to dialog with other communities but also to be aware of the history of such dialogs in the past.

### Reflection/Discussions On The Reading

Frederick Douglas asks the question "Is God Just?". Here we have the beginnings of black theology. David Walker's appeal contains some very strong language for the day. Calling the European religion a religion of "devils". Some think that Nat Turner, Prosser and Vessey got a hold of this appeal and that it influenced their desire to take up arms. We read this material quite removed from the original context. Slaves and masters read Walker's Appeals inspired actual rebellion. There is almost a systematic theology contained in the appeal.

For further reading: Robert Young.

## **Black Theology - September 19, 1995**

### **The Roots Of The Black Christ (Summary)**

The first week we started to look at “Why Black Theology?” Theology says as much about the people doing it as it has to say about God. What people are saying about God in theology says a lot about the vantage point of the people doing the theology.

Last week we examined the definition of “black” and the difference in which we encounter reality. Blackness makes a difference and effects how we encounter and how God encounters us. We also examined the roots of black theology and where it began to emerge and the difference that our blackness would bring to the task of theology. We limited our discussion to Black theology as it emerged in the United States even though there are theologies in South Africa and the West Indies/Caribbean.

The roots of black theology really begin in the middle passage. The Middle passage implies an experience. Lerone Bennett’s Before The Mayflower chronicles the history of our people before being brought to the new world. Something happened in the middle passage. Those who were free began to experience what it meant to be chattel; isolated from family, friends and clansmen; and stripped of language and culture. The miracle was that any survived the middle passage.

Sterling Stucky says that “Black Nationalism” was formed in the middle passage because it forced a common identity and community among the Afrikaans. What used to be important in terms of bloodlines became meshed into one blood. Someone in the passage began to wonder about their God and once that occurred, black theology was instituted.

We must affirm that in many ways, black theology allowed the slaves to develop a different understanding and relationship with God and Jesus Christ. There were some enslaved Africans who knew about Christianity before they were brought to the U.S. We know this because Northern Africa was a part of the history of the O.T. and the Bible speaks about the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts.

If something had not happened in the “II”, we would not be talking about black theology or even Christianity today. The middle passage launched this new theological thought and the “II” nurtured it and helped it to blossom further.

Charles Long talks about the dangers of the Afrocentric movement especially the return to the African heritage of the past. We can’t go back to our roots and find exactly what we left behind because the middle passage so radically changed those who went through it. We cannot return to the pristine state of the Africans before slavery. Africans are having the same struggle in forming their theology from a pre-colonial state. What’s a worst fate: To be put out of your house (slaves to America) or people moving in and taking over (imperialism in Africa).

The tradition of the “II” is really the source of our black theology with those enslaved women and men. They were able to make connections to Jesus that their slave holding masters could not make. When we hear spirituals and testimonies from this period and folks are wrestling and talking with someone, they are talking about Jesus. When they refer to the heavens and universal power at work, they are referring to God. When they talk about a power that give them strength and empowers them to go on a little while longer, they’re

talking about the Holy Spirit. They've worked out in their experience what had been documented from the Nicene Council.

### **A New Perspective & A New Story**

What causes theologians to become more self-conscious of the fact that we have a different story or angle on "God talk?" What happened that even turned black preachers to go back and recover their own theological tradition. Cone, Roberts, and Wilmore did not have the critical distance that we currently have today so they originally were caught up in Barth, Tillich and the others. What turned the switch on for them and black theology? The 1960s were to black theology what the middle passage was to the slaves. We went into the 60s as "Negroes" and came out as "Black". You can't appreciate what we have today without understanding what the 60s meant to our culture.

Black Theology emerged out of the struggle against white racism. Blackness is reflective of an experience and a struggle. The move from "Negro" to "black" was an affront to white folk. It was taking on all the whiteness denied. Why was this important? Because everything that was black was to be denigrated. Black was totally negative at the time so to say that I was black was to affirm who I am. White Christianity even bleached out Christ. Blackness also speaks to the history, the culture and the people. Black theater emerged, black literature flourished. James Brown and Aretha Franklin raised the black conscience through music.

As an aside, we can't be afraid of secular culture. In the rap and music of our culture, questions are being raised and perspectives are being put forth that give us a pulse of what's going on in our community. Culture and music reflect the community. The church's misogynistic tendencies have seeped out into the community yet is being expressed differently. The church can't run from the challenges of the culture. Bring the movies of the day ("Do The Right Thing", "Boys In The Hood", etc.) into the church and talk about them with our children.

### **Black Wholeness - Martin & Malcolm**

Our African heritage does not have such a split. Life was whole. Life informed life. The movement in the 60s left no stone unturned in addressing what it meant to be black in America. The music, literature, economics, educational institutions and churches were all effected by the 60s. Black theology is a prophetic response to white racism. The struggle against white racism is the main theme of black theology. The prophetic edge is seeing Jesus and God as being black over and above white definitions.

Two important figures as catalysts in the theological movement: *Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X*. Martin carries forth the slave religious tradition out of the "II". God is a god of the oppressed and is a liberator. MLK is not caught up in the color of God and Jesus Christ. King still referred to us as "negroes". He didn't have a grasp on the need for a black identity but he was clear about the God of justice. His message was prophetic and who he was as a Christian put him at the center of the movement. He felt a sense of calling for what he did. (Additional Reading, Wilmore's, Black Religions & Black Radicalism).

Malcolm carries forth the nationalist tradition. The emphasis on color is more important than the theological issues. Because he comes from the Nation of Islam, Malcolm approaches this era with a different set of eyes. Malcolm was really dead during the Black Power movement but his presence has had an impact on SNCC and Stokely Carmichael. Black Power is really the legacy of Malcolm's ministry. Malcolm's critique

of Christian misses the fact that the slave did not take on the slaveholder's Christianity. Malcolm saw Christianity as the white man's religion or the slaves religion. But he did note that our images and icons of the God we worshipped were white.

Malcolm raises the question: If Jesus can be used the way white people have used him to oppress black people, is there any validity in Christianity? We cannot ignore Malcolm's question. The black power movement was concerned with only those things that affirmed blackness. King's non-violent approach was out. Turn the other cheek is old. People are getting killed and King is talking about the Christian Way of turning the other cheek. Can we still be black and still be a Christian?

The black theologians had to bring Martin and Malcolm together. The initial response came from black ministers who were on the firing line. The children of Malcolm X were not playing and were ready to push forward "by any means necessary." They were going to fight back against the white oppressors. White folks thought that black minister would be on their side and they had to respond. The NY Times ad was a response that affirms Black Power. That was the first step. Theological reflection was the second step. Out of crisis comes theological reflection.

The theologians didn't drive this movement. The crisis raised the questions and compelled a response. Cleage was in the middle of the Detroit riots with questions burning. The children of Malcolm forced the black church to answer how to be black and Christian.

King was really prophetic in the sense that he caused a rift in the National Baptist Convention which eventually led to the split and the creation of the Progressive Convention. SNCC's turn from King and leaning more towards Black Power speaks to the tension that existed in the black community. The church had to find a way to bring Martin and Malcolm together and maintain Christianity. Martin wanted a color-blind society and Malcolm's folk wanted nothing of that.

## **Black Theology - October 3, 1995**

We want to look at race in America in tonight's discussion. Race still shapes life in America. The OJ Simpson trial has raised this issue further in America and for some it has caused a crisis of faith. Where is God in the midst of this situation and what does He have to say. Blackness shapes my social, historical and political reality in my life.

### **The Significance Of Black Theology**

MLK and Malcolm are so significant to know what it means to be black in America and to be American. We have to understand them both, together, to fully understand the complexity of what it means to be black in America and to know what it means to be free. Together they acted as a catalyst for Black Theology. The task of black theologians was to bring Martin and Malcolm together.

#### *Martin Luther King Revisited*

Some would say that Martin King brought together the relationship of religion and politics in the black church. He stirred up the prophetic voice in the black church again. He called us back to our prophetic roots. But we need to go further than that. Martin said something about the nature of Christianity in America and his impact is on the order of what Luther was to the reformation. If one were to name the great theologians of America, Martin outshines Niebuhr and the others.

Martin revealed the link between Christianity, politics and race. He entered this arena to raise the race issue. Martin would raise questions to white theologians: "How can you ignore this issue?" The Letter From A Birmingham Jail was a direct response to the white theological thought of the day. They said that the minister should care for the souls. He challenged their thinking about Jesus and the saviour's role for social and racial justice.

He made clear that in America that Christianity had to be at the heart for any struggle for justice. He made clear the question How one could be a Christian in America and not engage the issue of race? You can't do Christian Theology in America and leave race outside the arena for discussion. The black theologians have picked up on this. White theologians in America never bring race into the discussion.

The very foundation of this country is race. Race and America are intrinsically tied with the image of America around the world. OJ Simpson trial was being followed in Europe. Dr. Douglas received telegrams from people in the far east, India, Bangladesh regarding the Rodney King incident citing support from overseas. Race is a defining factor of who America is.

When the constitution was written, race was there. Price for the Ticket (James Baldwin) asks the questions "What's the price for the ticket to be black and male in the America?" He prefaces that questions with "What's the price to be white in America?" He reviews where white people came from (Europeans, Polish). They were a motley crew of different ethnic heritages. At Ellis Island, this motley group became "white". White is that which is non-white. They came together as a people over and against those who were non-white. What is more contrary to whiteness than blackness?

Toni Morrison says that whiteness only exists as it is different from non-whiteness. When do white folks

raise their ethnicity? It emerges when they attempt to pull the leg out from under our story. In the Simpson case, Goldman raised the Jewish background only at the end to counter the race issue. Baldwin says that white defined themselves as a people at Ellis Island. Within the white community, there is a breakdown of the different cultures but when dealing with non-whites, they are solidified group.

Malcolm use to say that white people were evil to the core. It must be something endemic to them. He misplaced the source. It wasn't in the people so much as it was in the culture. The culture incubated the people into white racism. "The best that white people can be is a recovering racist" (Susan Thiseltwat). There is a white culture which is the American culture.

Malcolm touched on the roots of this racism. He couldn't understand how every white person he met was infected with the disease of racism. People today talk about church history and American history and never talk about race (even at Howard Divinity school)? How do you do that?

Martin said that we can't talk about God in America and not talk about race. White theologians were uncomfortable this prospect. Look at the things that associate black with evil in the culture. What color are the band-aids in our society? Look at the subtle racial tones on TV alone. Martin said that if God is going to make sense to anyone in America, we have to talk about race. Martin didn't stop white theologians from talking about God but it did raise the spectre of suspicion. Black theologians now critique white theologians based on whether or not they include/deal with the race issue in America.

When Martin raised this issue, he didn't raise it up as an extra-circular activity. It had to be addressed. When asked why he was in the struggle for black freedom, his response was "Because I am a Christian." After Martin King, you had to say something about race (if you just said you weren't going to talk about it) in dealing with theology in America.

Can it be fixed? Yes by breaking down the structures in America. Who are the people that get laid off first? Non-whites. Shouldn't everyone have access to basic health care in America? How can black kids study in school when they are hungry? How can you focus on studying when mother is sick and there are a mountain load of other problems? The people in the dominant culture aren't in a rush to turn things around. What can a person do with \$100M in a year? Julian Bond says that you can have 10,000 pairs of shoes but you can only wear one pair at a time. Once you have privilege, it's hard to give it up and some black middle class has gotten caught up in this mode.

Read Martin's sermons and impromptu lectures to really get a sense of this perspective. His books were edited by the dominant culture so you don't always see the core beliefs. Examine his interviews and you will see what motivated him and what his thoughts were on the black church. America holds up Martin so much because the alternative was Malcolm X.

### *Malcolm X Revisited*

The children of Malcolm said that they were willing to fight back and that assimilation was not our goal. We are going to love our blackness and it doesn't have to be a black and white thing together. "Black Power" was the battle cry not "We Shall Overcome."

Martin wanted an integrated society where color would not be an issue. Malcolm, however, was very clear

about the importance of black identity: self esteem and respect. If were to go to the table, we have to go in strength of who we are. There is not justice if there is no respect for blackness. There is no justice if we can't retain our blackness. Malcolm compels us to love ourselves and our culture. Malcolm empowered us to appreciate our history and culture.

King made clear that christianity had to address race. Malcolm made clear that whatever racial justice meant, it had to affirm blackness. Recall Malcolm's critique of Christianity as a white man's religion. It negates blackness with its white Christ and white symbols. Christianity told blacks that we got our in the sweet bye and bye. He said that Christianity negates blackness.

Malcolm held the black identify banner at one end of the civil rights movement and Martin was at the other end holding up Christianity as it deals with race. Black theologians had to bring Martin and Malcolm together. Malcolm asked the black theologian, "Can you be a good Christian and still be black?" Malcolm is the blackness of black theology. Martin is the Christian of black theology. The NY Times document we read talked about bringing these two viewpoints together. Is there room in christianity for black people who are flamingly proud of who they are.

Martin said that you can't do theology without dealing with the race issue. Malcolm says that it makes no difference what kind of theology you have if it doesn't affirm black identity. You can't have a white Jesus. Christianity became white at Ellis Island. Wilmore says that once you have sanctioned something with the canopy of God, it's hard to root it out of the culture.

Malcolm understood the depths of how white christianity had held up the racist structure in America. He knew that white christianity had used the symbols of chrisitianity to oppress black folks from the shore of African to America. His challenge to christians is: If the symbols of Christianity can be used that way and have had a long history of being used that way, is there not a problem with Christianity and its various symbols? Is there a weakness with Chrisitianity itself that lends itself to be used as a vehicle of oppression around the world?

*Q: What happened to the God is Dead movement?* That movement arose out of the dominate culture during the 50s and 60s. White folks felt meaningless after the Korean war and the culture was in a funny state. Everything was honky doory. Nothing was happending and was peaceful and calm. The meaning of God changed. The God of A,I, and J was dead. All this when black folks were raising up and challenging the racial structures of the south. Leave it to Beaver and Father Knows Best where the popular shows (along with Andy Griffith) while protests were going on. White theologians never talked about the civil rights struggle during the 60s.

*Q: It seems like the million man march raises the same tension between Malcolm and Martin. Is that the same issue as what we've been discussing?* The passion that has been raised over this march is the basis for good theology. Now we have a theological issue to address.

*Q: Woman may want to ask the same question: Can I be a Christian and a woman?* This question is similar to the question that Malcolm raised for black folks. There is big to-do about this million man march when the bulk of those marching are non-churched. What conclusions is this group going to come to when the black conventions and churches stay away? Where do you turn to resolved the theological question? You have to check your sources: tradition, your experiences as a black man/woman, church and other places

where black people have struggled with similiar issues.

When we read Cone, understand that he is not giving white theologians the option of talking about racial justice. It has to be engaged and addressed. He says that the white folks have to give up what it means to be white and Christian. The two just don't fit. Cone says that Christianity is the anthitthesis of whiteness.

## **Black Theology - October 10, 1995**

Some new texts of interest: A Fire In The Bones, Albert Rabeteau (Slave Religion: The Invisible Institution also) deals with black religious and church history. Albert teaches at Princeton. Another book The Spirituality of African Peoples and Black Leaders In Conflict by Peter Paris. The former book deals with Christianity and ethics. He is at Princeton as well.

Today we move from the general to the particular. By focusing on James Cone's book, we begin to focus on a particular angle of black theology. As we do so, we begin to do theology more deliberately whereas before we indirectly talked about it as it related to the roots and origins. We then took a leap in time from the invisible institution to the civil rights era. It was a time so full of God's presence that black theologians had to say something about God at this time. Wilmore says that the black power movement was an "unmistakable" time that God was doing something.

Let's remember that our approach to doing theology (i.e., black theology) is different from the dominant culture. We don't just start talking about God in a vacuum apart from our experience. If we are going to do theology, we can't do that apart from the revelation (defined as disclosure) of God in human history. Revelation implies that God must enter into our reality for us to perceive it or understand it.

Cone is talking about a God of history not a dispassionate God. God encounters us in history. Two important elements: (1) our social context which shapes us as interpreters and perceivers (where we are in the arena); but also (2) the context into which God has entered. We have affirmed a God of history. A God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. A God who involved in people's lives not a God who met a select few in an abstract experience. Other white theologies leave out the context in which God revealed himself so the historical context is significant.

*Q: What does the historical angle have to say about the make-up of the cannon?* The books that are in the bible are not the only things that have been written about the topics presented. The cannon has been closed for centuries. That doesn't suggest that God's revelation is closed. There is a difference between what's in the book and God's on-going revelation. Is God still revealing? For us we say yes. We say that the bible is a source for doing theology but there are other sources for theology as well (e.g., experience, tradition, etc.).

Sometimes there are vantage points which open us up in the theological dialog and there are other points which limit us in the dialog. White people do theology and talk about God but never raised the specter of oppression that exists in our society. Cone took umbrage with this. Everywhere he looked during the 60s, white theologians saw the societal upheaval and never said a think about God in relation to the black struggle. Here is where the importance of Martin King comes into play because he said that you can't talk about God and theology apart from the black struggle. The silence fired Cone up to address the struggle of black people and God's relation to it.

Cone focuses on God is as a god of the oppressed. The context out of which Cone wrote is very significant. He starts with the historical context of the oppressed Israelites. This is the context into which God entered human history. It was a deliberate act on God's part. Liberation theologians takes serious the context in which the revelation occurred in addition to when it occurred.

People from the dominant culture just don't understand this perspective.

*Q: Isn't most of Christian history one of oppression?* We need to understand that many liberation theologians critique Christian history. Other attempt to find out what went wrong. Most point to Constantine where religion moved from outlaw to the darling of the state. At that point it became a religion of the people in power. Some might say that you don't even have Christianity in an atmosphere of dominance. This was the hard critique of Malcolm X. If Christianity can be used this way, they to hell with that religion.

Christianity has been employed to empower people for movements towards freedom. Is there something about the religion which lends itself to being misused? We need to take seriously the eyes that are seeing the revelation. Sometimes it's people who are have the worst vantage point that dominate the dialog and that's where things get messed up.

*Q: How can take the messed up picture of God as portrayed by whites and transform it into something that's good?* The God that we live with is the God who reveals himself in theology. A God who sends Hagar back into the oppressive situation. Our God is complex and it appears that God is not always liberating. This God allowed the Israelites to kill and boot out the people in Canaan so they could have a "promised land." Never forget that theology is "faith seeking understanding." The paradox of faith is that it's needed in order to endure the suffering in order to stay in relationship with God especially when God doesn't appear to be just. It also is suffering injustice that builds the faith.

How does blackness function for Cone? Looking black is not a sign that you're on the right side. Cone looks at this in two ways: (1) Ethnicity is important (West says the "racial reasoning") and (2) Ethic (Moral). Blackness entails not only what you look like but also some type of ethical commitment to the least of our community. One of the things that has damaged us has been integration. A third of our community was integrated and that separated the black community into the "haves" and "have nots".

It is a privilege to reflect theologically. Those who are in the struggle don't have the time to reflect upon their situation. To be a black theologian is to be outside the struggle but the responsibility of that privilege is to feed back into the struggle.

*Q: Can we really transfer the Exodus story literally with the black struggle?* No we can't do that but we do enter into dialogue with the struggle to see what God was doing with them and what is he doing with us and analyze what do the similar situations tell us about God. That context involves a racial, gender, and political aspect to the analysis that the Europeans failed to affirm.

### Categories of the Oppressed

We are very dualistic in the Western mind (black/white, good/evil, etc.) When we say oppressor and oppressed its incomplete. It's more dynamic than that. One may be oppressor but not always an oppressor. The oppressed do not always remain oppressed. Those who claim to be oppressed are not exonerated from ever become an oppressor.

Some of the privileges that we enjoy even as a part of the marginalized group in America is contributing to the oppression of others in underdeveloped countries. When we hear the downtrodden even in our own churches and do nothing, we contribute to oppression. Look at how we treat gay and lesbian people or even the way women are treated. There is equal privilege and penalty to go around with the oppressed/oppressor

dualism.

We are talking about an interlocking system of privilege and penalty. Our task in the oppression group is to never to be an oppressor. To say that God is with the oppressed is not to say that God is never with me in the privilege area. I can move to where God is. Everyone can be saved but you have to come a certain way. The rich man can be saved but he has to come a certain way to inherit eternal life.

Cone sets up this hard dualism but his point is that white people can move from where they are to a point where God is in the oppressed community. They have to act against their privilege and the structures which act as the foundation for racism. Just as black have to overcome structure which cause us to be caught up in materialism and privilege thinking we are in the white structure.

White folks have to turn the world upside down in order to reverse the racism that exists in our society. Black folks can't tell white folks to change. Every day white folks will have to say that they won't engage in the privilege of racism.

People today are comfortable with unjust privilege but we need to create a world in which these folks are uncomfortable with that privilege. We are really talking about conversion. Conversion is a complete turning around. But it is not a reversal of a hierarchy. We are not talking about the oppressed becoming the oppressor but a state where there is no oppression.

What happens when there is no more oppression? That is a question that comes from above and not from people who are in the struggle against oppression. The question is where do I fit in the struggle for freedom. The issue at hand is making it day by day in the midst of a struggle. How do I enter in for the struggle for racial justice. Are we fighting for more privilege in an unjust system or are we fighting for racial justice and a state of non-oppression.

## **Black Theology - October 17, 1995**

If we take the human face off of oppression then it becomes more tolerable for the oppressor. Because it is particular you have to talk about it that way. Also, in America you have to somehow talk about the race problem. The human face of oppression in America is a face of color. Why is more diametrically opposed to whiteness than blackness.

In order for us to know anything about God, God must reveal himself in a way that we can have access to the revelation. God enters human history in a particular context. What good is it to talk about a just God but there is no manifestation of God's justice. How do we know justice except that we enter it in our context in some way. If God is just, then a just God takes sides. A liberating God takes sides with a movement for human liberation. In America, God can't be black and white, he must be black (oppressed) or white (oppressor). He takes sides not so much with a people but with a people's condition.

Cone says that God and Christ are black so long as black stands for the struggle against oppression. Being a person of color does not automatically put you in this group. Only as long as you struggle against oppression are you black. The blackness of God means that liberation is not an afterthought but the essence of the divine activity.

White folks want to make God colorless or a spirit but we affirm a God who is a part of history which means that he takes sides and Cone says that God has sides with blacks in the struggle to overcome oppression. Where would the students of Tiananmen Square say that God was? On their side. A God of justice and liberation can't function in the realm of concepts and abstract thoughts. He's real and has some meat on those ideas. For a native American, God might be red but out of my context he's black.

Two themes to be sensitive to in comparing Cone and Roberts: (1) Can we have a white Christ; (2) What can we do with suffering. Suffering for Cone is one who is committed to the struggle for freedom, life, wholeness even to the point of death. That's what Christ's suffering on the cross was all about. God entered into human history in the incarnate Christ. In Christ, God becomes oppressed and as a result sides and walks with an oppressed people. He talks on the powers that be and sides with the marginalized of Israel. Jesus didn't take pity on them but he took on their cause. Cone calls redemptive suffering not the enslavement but the struggle against enslavement to the point of death. Roberts has a different take on redemptive suffering.

For Cone God and Christ can't be white. God's existential commitment is for liberation. There is no a priori reason for God be male/female, slave/oppressor. God is where there is oppression. If women are oppressed then God is on the side of the oppressed women. God is everywhere justice is being worked out.

Racism comes in a particular way and culture. We can't mystify it because then we can't get a whole of it. When white's raise their ethnicity, they are trying to deflect their whiteness which is linked to racism and oppression (that's what Baldwin was saying as we discussed earlier). This white racist culture has the power to implement its desires. Gingrich can implement his program whereas Farakhan cannot.

To act against your whiteness, you do things which act against your self-interest. If God enters history on purpose, then have to understand the meaning in which God entered. If God came as a first century Jew in Christ, then we have to examine what that means for God coming into the world. Jesus acted against every social structure/privileges that was associated with being Jewish and Male at that time.

God is always working through a particular community but if that community becomes oppressors or acts in an unjust way, God's justice will come down even on that oppressed group. God could even be gay for by Cone's theology. That's one area that black theology has not addressed: homophobia, physically challenged, and sexism. Will a just God overlook that. The hermeneutic of suspicion really comes into play when we are dealing even with our own privileges.

Because we know of heaven, heaven has an impact on earth. Because we know the kingdom of God, we know that our culture doesn't have to be the way that it is. The vision of the eschaton is disruptive of history which is why you have Nat Turner, Denmark Vessey and Gabriel Prosser. A white racist society has to be sustained by somebody. What is the white person's relationship to the racist structure that exists in America.

Cone states the mission of the church:

- (1) Proclaim divine liberation
- (2) To take part in divine liberation
- (3) Create a liberated community

The church is suppose to empower people to reach their full potential. The church should be a glimpse of the kingdom. We need to call our members into question for the privileges that they enjoy while other members are hurting or are doing without.

The significant of black and white; of the oppressed/oppressor

## **Black Theology - October 24, 1995**

We need to place Cone and Roberts in an even wider context to give us a wider understanding. A handle which may seem as a tension in Roberts or ambiguity and as we work out liberation between a Roberts and a Cone. Remember that Cone and Roberts represent only two voices of many voices in the Black Theological movement. If we had time, we'd read Cleage as well.

### **A Wider Context**

We sometimes view the black community as having one spokesman or a monolithic movement but this community is not. W.E.B. DuBois in The Souls of Black Folks talk about the dichotomy that exists in the souls of African-Americans historically and as individuals.

Vincent Harding has offered us a scholarly piece on the black struggle entitled, There Is A River. Harding uses the metaphor of a river to suggest the history of our struggle. A metaphor that symbolizes as a stream from African through the river and on to the American soil. There was always a struggle for freedom. The Africans protested in various ways but there has never been a time in the history of our people that there has not been a struggle or a protest for freedom.

Even in the slave ship holds there were protests. There were mutines on some ships. The river points not only to the real water but to also suggest an on-going struggle that has no end. Where do we enter into the river is the question that Harding asks? A river has rough waters, peaceful waters, ebbs and flows. Sometimes what goes on around the river dictates how the river flows.

The river of black protest, black struggle, black freedom in this land of enslavement. A river that extends from the beaches of Africa to the shores of America. A river which is susceptible to the climate around it. This climate also dictates how we enter into the river. There has been traditionally two ways that people have entered into the struggle of protest: nationalist or integrationist. Typically we have seen our struggle between these two poles. We have categorized our leaders as one or the other.

These two poles are reflective of the American and African within us and our community. Also realize that in our river of struggle both streams have been and are necessary. Sometimes they flow together as different people and sometimes as one person with both poles. At other times one seems more prominent than the other. The climate has had a lot to do with which one is more prominent. A climate in the community or within the individual.

What do we mean that it depends on what's going on? This struggle between the African and the American? Between the nationalist self and the integrationist self? Why can't we settle on something in the river? Why are both voices necessary? Why this tension which is always in the air? Because the very ambiguity is within our American political, economic structure itself. At once we have in the constitution "all people are created equal" and within that same document, Negroes are "three fifths people". One side of America would allow black men to fight a war (i.e., Tuskegee Airmen) and then come back and be lynched with that same government sanctioning it. The nation is not sure what it wants to do with us.

When we hear that justices are "strict constructionist" they are looking at a document that didn't lift up black folks. The constitution lifts up life and liberty but it also lifts up the fact that black folks are to be

treated like property or chattel. How could we not have an african-american that does not have this tension.

We rarely have a Malcolm X without a Martin King. Or a W.E.B. DuBois with a Booker T. Washington. The two warring souls are in critique of one another. The two together in it's variant forms will get us where we want to be. It not only exists in the community but within the individual as well. Martin Delaney (chronicled in Sterling Stucky's Slave Culture is a good book on early black nationalists). was an early nationalists and had an appreciation for African culture. He talked about a black state and he yet he also talked about our duty to fight for the country. He served in the U.S. Army. See the dichotomy as work? Two warring souls.

In 1935, Harlem experienced some of the worst race rioting seen to date. In 1910/1915 you had over 150 lynchings in the south. Between WWI and WWII, the American Negro suffered someof the most evil effects of racism. The literature and art reflect the culture of the time in which is expressed. The same was the case within the black community in the 20s, 30s, 40s and so on. Look at Billie Holiday, Alvin Ailey, a young Quincy Jones, James Baldwin and others. The Black Experience chronicles the struggle in the midst of the literature.

We need both eyes in our community because of the nature of the demon called racism in America. What does this have to do with Roberts and Cone? Theologians don't descend from the throneroom of God. They are not a privilged lot sheltered from the confusion of life. One has to exist in the world because it is in the world that God reveals himself. The questions that give rise to good theology don't come in the shower or during our leisure but they arise out of the context in which the theologian lives; out of the struggle of daily living.

Cone and Roberts are right in the middle of the river. Yes they are talking about God but it also says just as much about the person doing the theology as it does about God. God comes to us, we meet God in the middle of the river. The point of commonality is that we meet God where God meets us, namely the river of black protest.

We need to appreciate that our struggle needs both voices. They are looking at God from different seats in the arena. We need both eyes in the community not only to look at liberation but to look at God. In Roberts we see a tension not so much between nationalism and intergrationlism as between liberation and reconciliation.

### **Now About Roberts...**

When Cone and Roberts enter the river, Martin and Malcolm were in the river. By examining their readings you can see who is influenced by whom. Cone talks about reconciliation as a part of liberation but Roberts language looks like he wants reconciliation more so than liberation. In Roberts confusion or ambivalence about black theology we see the two warring souls. On the one hand he wants to affirm black liberation at almost all costs but not at the expense of reconciliation.

The better way to understand Cone and Robert's tension is to understand the historical context of our community. Even in Cone we can see the conflict in the community. It takes more than one I to understand the complexity of the black community. Likewise, it takes more than one I to understand the complexities of the mysteries of God.

*Q: While I may need to affirm my black Christ, how can we deny a white Christ to white people? Or what color is the God of the recovering white racist?* Christ is not white as long as you hold up whiteness as an oppressor in a land of black underclasses. We aren't called Christ black just for our self-esteem. We are making a statement of truth about God. So blackness is a way of making a statement that God is just or God is against the oppressor and sides with the oppressed. We have to witness to God where God meets us. We can't define who God is for the white person recovering from racism.

We are all called to work for justice. The question is where do we meet God in the struggle for justice? This question arises from our affirmation of God as a just God. We can't tell white people who their God is. We can dialog about how they see God in the struggle for justice. God is not affirming of white racist culture.

We need to be in a struggle for wholeness, i.e., proper relationship with God, white humanity and ourselves. Some of the contradictions in our world are places where we need to be made whole. Places where we need to pick up the struggle and make it smooth. Do we act in ways that are hostile to our very well being? Yes, we do do somethings that say "I just want to be accepted."

We can't smooth out the ambiguities in someone else's life. One of the problems with liberation theology is their clearness that God is a liberator and the exodus motif. The God that we meet in the wilderness is more complex than the God we chronicle in our theologies. We want to understand it all as finite beings but this is the God we call a mystery. The more we affirm about God, the more we are pulled into the mystery and complexity of God. We can't work it all out.

Faith is required because there will be contradiction and struggle at times. Faith that the God of love and justice will do nothing which will violate the life sustaining relationship. God sent Hagar back to Abraham and Sarah. God sent the Israelites into the Canannite land and told them to drive the people out.

## **Black Theology - October 31, 1995**

### **Critical Reflection Paper**

Avoid making assertions without providing the groundwork for the assertion. Also avoid prooftexting. Quoting scripture does not end the discussion.

### **Back to Roberts & Cone**

Last week we tried to place Roberts and Cone within a wider history of struggle in the black experience. We tried to place them in a dialectical tension that has been present through our struggle for freedom.

For black Americans, black religion/Christianity became in many ways a protest against what white Americans called Christianity (it wasn't really Christianity). We presented ourselves as the true nature of Christianity. It can be seen in Dave Walker's and Frederick Douglas' writings. They say that the white man has distorted Christianity. Black Christianity has been a protest against white Christianity which oppresses.

There is also a tradition in which black folks see themselves as the proper understanding of the God of Jesus Christ. When others suggest that what came out of the II is not valid, there are others like Cone and Wilmore who affirm that what did come out was indeed valid. They say that we have to understand Christianity from the vantage point of the oppressed. It is through Jesus that God took sides with the marginalized and oppressed and thus that is the best vantage point in which to learn about and know God.

In some ways black christianity has been a corrective. But also in the black community there has always been a strand that feels that Christianity is indeed a white man's religion and that it has a long history of being manipulated by the white man to oppress others. That strand would tend to want to move beyond the realm of Christianity (e.g., Nation of Islam, etc.).

### **Roberts On This Matter**

Cone starts his theology from below, i.e., the particularity of God's revelation. He takes seriously the social, cultural context out of which God has entered history. God's revelation of himself in human history in a particular context is important for Cone. Without God entering history, we would have no revelation. There is a dialog between God's story and Cone's particular community (i.e., the black experience in America).

Roberts makes an interesting move related to the revelation of God. He is trying to encounter the universal God which is problematic because we don't encounter God universally. Roberts starts at the top. He says that God is black and white and asian and whatever other particularities there are in the world because God is for all people. By doing this he minimizes the particular features for the various religious communities.

*Q: Is salvation now not even universal?* According to Cone, the basis for our sin is not seeking our own freedom. God can save us all universally but we all have to make a different movement in order to meet God. Where we are impacts the path we take to get to God. White folks have to give up their structures of oppression and power to move towards salvation.

*Q: Where do we meet God?* God will meet a person in a struggle against sin. For Roberts, he can be

interpreted to mean that God affirms everyone where they are. On the other hand you can read Roberts more like Cone where God meets us as a liberating God. Roberts is caught sometimes between wanting the respect of their white colleagues and speaking to the black community as well.

The genius of Cone is that he took the tools of white theologians (i.e., Tillich, Barth, etc) and turns it against them. White folks never name their particularities in doing theology because they make the arrogant assumption that they are making universal statements about God.

This issue of liberation and reconciliation with Cone is that God is just; God is love. Now if God is just and loving, then God can't be here and there. Justice demands taking a stand for justice. You can't be both for the oppressor and the oppressed. You just talk about justice in the abstract way. You have to define it in the particulars of human history. It answers the question How is God just in his relations with humanity. White people and black people will struggle for justice from different angles but we should meet at some point at a common point.

We have to think about the claims that we make about God. Black folks have pinned their religious hopes on two pieces of God: that God is just and that because God is just their is hope.

One of the critiques of Roberts are a number of questions: What is required of white people in the reconciliation process? What is required for white people to be redeemed? What do they have to be saved? He talks about reconciliation between equals but who is equal? Is he really talking about equals? Do white folks have to give up anything? Why do black folks have to be redemptive suffers in order to bring all people back together? What are white folks doing while we suffer?

## **Black Theology - November 28, 1995**

The slaves first exposure to an experience with God was not in the institution of slavery. They brought some knowledge with them and they brought that to the new experience of Christianity. The africans were not a blank religious slate. They utilized their pre and post-slave knowledge as a resource for understanding this religion of Jesus Christ.

The slaves developed a sense of Christianity that was different from their enslavers. Though they did that (and we are the inheritors of that tradition) a question still exists: In their understanding of the God of Jesus Christ, did they interpret correctly or incorrectly? Some would say that from their vantage point they could interpret precisely what God's revelation really was. That the vantage point of the slavers or of the oppression gave them a clear view of God's revelation. Some have concluded that the only way to see God clearly is from the viewpoint of the oppressed. Others would suggest the Christian religion itself is inherently flawed and is not a religion for the oppressed.

We have to be precise when we are talking about "the Christian tradition" because there are a multiplicity of traditions and understandings. What understanding or interpretation best reflects God's revelation as witnessed in the Hebrew and Christian testaments? When we critique Christianity, we have to be clear about what we are critiquing. Are we critiquing Christianity itself (is there something inherently wrong with the religion itself) or are we critiquing the traditions of interpretation?

When we argue that Christianity is not a fit religion for black folks, what do we mean? What makes it unfit. We have to be precise in our criticism. Is it so tainted that we have to start over completely? Is our relationship with God so damaged that it's best for us to move on and find another vehicle of faith? Maybe one more suited for life and wholeness? These questions arose out of our papers. There was a lack of clarity in our problematics as stated in our papers.

Malcolm forced us to review a portion of the questions we've raised. He had a problem with the symbol itself, i.e., Jesus Christ. The other part is regardless of the symbol is there something wrong with a religious system that it could be manipulated to oppress black folks. The feminists have pointed out that even before oppressing black folks that it held down women. Is there something in the symbol and religion that does not allow for the wholeness of women?

We have been able to say that in spite of what the traditions might be, we see salvation or something on which to grasp.

### *The Bible*

There is not an unambiguous picture in the Hebrew scriptures and N.T. What's its role and authority? How we view the Bible is one of the things we must address if we are to get beyond the discussions of sexuality. The Bible contained, for Dr. Douglas's grandmother, the story which gave her the tools to survive each day.

Is the God of the Hebrews and J.C. really a liberator of the oppressed? Randall Bailey (ITC) has challenged the use of the Israel liberation as a valid paradigm for the oppressed. Delores Williams supports that there is a non-liberating strand that flows through the bible for the non-elect with her main witness the Sarah-Hagar story. When non-Jewish people (today's black women) read the O.T. from the point of the slave,

there is no clear indication that God is opposed of slavery or freedom. What does this mean for us as we do our theologies?

For our theologies and what we say about God or Theological Yield

It begins with the recognition of what happens when what was a subjugated experience comes to the center of the theological roundtable. It changes the nature of the discourse be it also changes our understanding of what knowledge is. The taken for granted knowledge of women/oppressed is indeed knowledge and valid. The question we put to God changes and so does our understanding of who God is. Those on the margins are now taking over the discussion and are seeing new/different questions about the text.

Wms starts from a subjugated experience through the most oppressed character: Hagar. Traditionally it has been Sarah's or Abraham's experience and thru their eyes that we've viewed this story. Coming from Hagar's pt of view, you get a different picture of God; different questions and different concerns. She connects with the one who most resembles the African-American experience. Wms suggests that when we read the bible out of a subjugated experience, then at best one see an ambivalent picture of God who is not always for the oppressed. This puts us in a tizzy.

When we view God from the most oppressed, many of the questions/contradictions come to the surface. The meaning and significance of God's liberation and justice is seen to be beyond our understanding. God is much more complex that just saying that he is a liberator. Our theologies smooth God out but this vantage point highlights the complexities of our transcendent God.

We must be suspicion when it becomes too easy to pronounce God as liberator. We must check them from the vantage point of the least in the community. We are reminded in the story of Hagar that our view of liberation can become exclusive and elitist. Our understandings of God can not ring true for the least in our community. Those who are on the margins provide the best vantage point

What this says about how we access the bible

We should learn from those on the margins how they read the bible. We must enter the bible through the liberative strand. We must be compelled by the community of faith to derive a canon of life and wholeness from a wider canon that does not always lift up life and wholeness. We must find a "canon within the canon." Howard Thurman's grandmother utilized a canon within a canon by discarding the slave epistles of Paul.

Such an approach necessitates that we denounce any principle that denies life and wholeness and lifts up oppression. We come from a tradition where black christians have always had a consistent hermeutic of life and wholeness and so not everything has been authorative for black folks. We must continue to enter through the liberative strand. This means the non-liberative strand has had no authority for our community.

We are held accountable to this principle. If we always go for the liberative strand then we must stay with it even when there are others outside of circle. What does this mean for us as we acces the Bible? The Bible is not God and God is not the Bible. We must discern a God out of the text from a witness that does not always speak of that God. Regardless of the complexities of the Bible, people have found their story of struggle in the Bible. A faith that says that God would betray us in our struggle for life and freedom. A faith not of a

God who's actions were always clear, but a faith of a people that was born out of a struggle of uncertainty. That means that our God might seem ambiguous but God will not betray the task or promise for life and wholeness.

To casually affirm God as a liberator must cause us to view our relationship to God as it relates to the oppressed in our community.

## **Black Theology - December 5, 1995**

To bring the subjugated experience to the center changes the way we do whatever we are doing. It changes the nature of the discourse itself. We are still looking for the tools to mine our experience and to understanding the richness of the God that's in the black experience. To really understanding the black experience of God of black faith. We have to find a way to really appreciate the sources, testimonies of those everyday ordinary believers in the pew. To understanding the complexities of our believer. We are just developing a conscienceous that we need to dig deeper. The tools of the past are not going to be able to harvest the understanding needed for today.

As we better understand ourselves, we'll better understand God.

*Q: What is the difference between the Black Christ and the Black Jesus? Keep the distinction between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith. What we understand about Jesus' blackness has to do with what it means for Jesus to be Christ. Jesus' historical heritage places him as a palestine Jew who was probably not Arian. The white Christ is the Jesus who emerged out of the white dominate tradition. Keep in mind that Jesus is a historical figure who we've confessed as Christ.*

*Q: In the whole process of Black Theology, I find it so male dominated that I am struggling with being black and woman. In doing womanist theology the tools will not be the same. Is there is a meeting place for men and woman? Yes, black male theologians have to open up the grid to embrace some of the challenges and angles of womanist theology. Black theology laid the foundation for womanist theology to take off. Black theological discourse may be a dying discourse. The black experience of God may be more complex than the liberation motif of traditional black theology. Patricia Hill Collins, Black Feminist Thought. She looks at the whole understanding of knowledge and subjugated knowledge.*

*Q: How do we find ways to take Black & Womanist Theology into the church? Pastors must find ways to empower the subjugated people. We have to be empower to appreciate our experience and to even know that there is better. Use black literature as a lens by which one might approach the bible.*

Make a tape of last night's Systematic and the 2nd Black Theology class.

## **Written Papers**

The following pages contain the various term papers and written assignments produced for this class.

**Howard University School Of Divinity**

**Cone/Roberts Comparative Essay**

Submitted to:

Dr. Kelly Brown-Douglas  
Black Theology

November 7, 1995

By

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## Introduction

“One of the most serious dilemmas facing black Christians in their period of black-white confrontation is the questions of means. . . . the ‘by whatever means necessary’ ethic needs careful examination by black theologians and ethicists.”<sup>1</sup> This quote by Roberts summaries the struggle that Christians who happen to be black are up against in the struggle for freedom in a white racist society.

This paper will examine how Roberts and Cone would pursue the Black Liberation that each chronicles in their books Liberation and Reconciliation and A Black Theology Of Liberation respectively. Is our struggle for freedom on a higher level than maintaining the Christian banner we are supposedly carrying as believers? Is the black correlation to Israel only limited to the exodus narrative?

## The Issues & Dialog

### Black Theology And The Christian Faith

Cone states that one of the major problems confronting the black community is the fact that white folks cannot “deal with the reality of physical blackness as an appropriate form of human existence.”<sup>2</sup> Because we cannot be accepted in this society by white people and because assimilation has not worked either, black people need to turn their attention away from what whitey thinks and focus more on our own community and our own self-determination by being willing to do whatever the community deems appropriate in order to assure it’s existence.

He makes his point most succinctly when he states that “. . . the development of black power means that the black community will define its own place, its own way of behaving in the world, regardless of the

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<sup>1</sup>J. Deotis Roberts, Liberation And Reconciliation, p. 99.

<sup>2</sup>James Cone, A Black Theology Of Liberation-Twentieth Anniversary Edition, (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1994), p. 15.

consequences to white society.”<sup>3</sup> I can agree with the need for the black community to do whatever is necessary in order to affirm itself and for it to become the best that it can be in the midst of white racism.

The problem is with Cone’s approach is realizing who actually is involved in the struggle for liberation. We are not talking about folks that have made no religious affirmation (although many in the black power movement today are in that state). Supposed when we talk about defining a Black Theology we are talking about a Christian enterprise. We are talking about defining a theology in relation to the Judeo-Christian God that the black tradition has affirmed and worshipped. Roberts makes the distinction between an interpretation of the black Christian experience and the interpretation of the religion of Black Power. He notes:

“Many blacks who are not Christians are associated with ‘the religion of Black Power.’ A black theologian who operates from the Christian faith has difficulty being heard in this company, however angry he may be. . . . A Christian theologian is not an interpreter of the religion of Black Power.”<sup>4</sup>

Because we are talking about the Christian community in addition to the black community, there is a definite relationship between the goals of the community and way in which those goals are achieved. Roberts is clear in making the linkage whereas Cone is not as firm.

In defining Black Theology, Cone draws very heavily upon the Exodus narrative and relates the Hebrew’s liberation from Egyptian bondage to the liberation that God desires for oppressed black people. In examining this narrative, there are a number of concerns that can be lifted in relating it to the black struggle for freedom.

First, God did have a purpose in mind when he set out to liberate the Hebrews. God was liberating a people who in turn would worship God and be faithful to the Liberator. After all, God was remaining faithful to a covenant that was established between God and Abraham. A covenant in which God anticipated

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<sup>3</sup>Ibid., p. 15.

<sup>4</sup>Roberts, p. 5.

that God's people would act in a certain way. Because we are in relationship with God, we are expected to act a certain way even in our struggle for freedom.

Second, God did not deliver the Hebrews in a vacuum. Cone in drawing his analogy between the Hebrew nation and the black struggle fails to take into consideration the fact that a code of ethics was given to this liberated group following the exodus, namely the ten commandments. These instructions were to govern behavior within the community and the behavior with regards to the divine-human relationship.

Finally, the biblical record does convey situations and consequences for those in the liberated community who chose to act outside of the prescribed limits of God's commands. For Moses it meant that he could not enter into the Promised Land because he struck the rock in the desert instead of speaking to it. For Aichin it meant the end of his life and the lives of his family for taking some of the spoils of the battle and keeping it for himself. God even sent prophets into the liberated community to call them back to faithful to the God who freed them from oppression. And when the prophets were ignored, the entire nation was send into exile.

These concerns have implications for the way in which we go about pursuing our freedom. There needs to be a balanced approach which can include confrontation (e.g., civil disobedience, boycotts, etc) sometimes but at other times includes a non-confrontation approach which can be just as effective (e.g., flexing our political power at the polls or developing our own businesses).

I feel that the essence of the tension between Cone and Roberts lies in the fact that Cone appears to be addressing the religion of Black Power which is free from any prescribed behavior for the black community. His reflections on the struggle are squarely centered on what the community feels is right or what was right in regards to exodus narrative. This approach has to be in tension with the God whom Black Theology is supposed is talking about. The book of Judges opens and closes stating the problem within the nation of Israel, "In those days Israel had no king; everyone did as he saw fit" (Judges 21:25).

Roberts does point out the need for the black community to take bold steps towards securing its liberation but he realizes that we as a people are going to have to be liberated in the United States. If that is to be the case, our liberation is going to have to involve some dialog between other communities (not just white folks) within the U.S. The power structures of the dominant culture for Roberts must be broken down if racial harmony is to be achieved and because we are a faith community, there is a relationship between the means and the ends.

### Black Theology And The Black Community

Cone's theology is very enlightening in terms of defining the problem and putting it in perspective to the black historical struggle for freedom but he fails to lift up the hermeneutic of suspicion on the black community itself. Just because we are black and oppressed and God is on the side of the oppressed doesn't mean that everything the oppressed do is acceptable before God.

He points out that the problem with Christianity being adopted as the state religion under Constantine was the fact that it turned a persecuted church into a persecuting church. By not being specific about the nature in which we are to proceed in the struggle for freedom, Cone's message could be interpreted in such a way that the oppressed become oppressive through the use of violence (the ultimate form of oppression) or some other contemptible act.

This lack of self-examination is what has lead to the current state of affairs in the black community. In stead of Black Power affirming the black community and moving it in a positive direction, the angry nature of the movement has been lifted and has turned in on itself in the form of black-on-black crime, low regard for women as portrayed in black music and video expression, and the low self-esteem seen in our dress and self-destructive behavior. On the other end of the spectrum, those who have been able to navigate through the white power structure and earn a few dollars have forgotten our brothers and sisters who have been religated to the margins of American society.

A clear prophetic voice is needed today but not one that just lets anything go because it's black.

Roberts feels that there can be reconciliation between equals even though he does not clearly define what to be equal is. He hints at this prophetic voice, especially turned towards the black community, when he says there is a “. . . need for blacks to ‘get their thing together’ and be in position to bargain for social justice from a position of strength rather than from a position of disunity or weakness.”<sup>5</sup>

That prophetic voice must come from what has traditionally been the source of liberation and hope in the black community: the black church. Roberts notes,

“Worship, especially for the oppressed, must be such an exalted experience of spiritual renewal and empowerment. Black worship, composed of gospels, spirituals, sermons, and prayers must provide refreshment and renewal for travel-weary pilgrims in black skin.”<sup>6</sup>

So it is from the church that black people need to derive their strength and empowerment for the liberation journey which lies ahead. Roberts notes also that even this institution must cast a critical eye on itself and root out those practices which are self-destructive for example, an over emphasis on emotion and charlatans who misguide rather than empower the black masses. Those who have achieved something in our racist society need to remember what spiritual empowered them rather than attempting to duplicate the empty worship experience of white folk.

### Conclusion

Cone goes a long way in defining what the struggle is all about and he communicates it in such a way that one comes away with the passion of the times in which it was penned. But passion not totally focused does not always give one a sure direction to follow. Robert's work refines the passion (admittedly at times in less than clear language) but concludes his work with the need to keep in mind that Black Theology is a Christian enterprise and that in our struggle for freedom the “. . . Christian faith has never,

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<sup>5</sup>Roberts, p. 95-96.

<sup>6</sup>Roberts, p. 66.

under any circumstances, sanctioned 'any means' as an ethical program."<sup>7</sup>

## Personal Reflections

I have immensely enjoyed both of these texts and in my own life I am trying to synthesize both of them into a coherent plan of action rather than just throwing out Cone in favor of Roberts which would have been uninformed choice based on the overview in The Black Christ.

My own hermeneutic of suspicion has caused me to name my location within the black community (namely the middle class) and to view that location as one that is more responsible not necessarily more privileged. In terms of ministry, these texts have armed me with a perspective on what the church needs to be doing in terms of creating a liberating and empowering community as well as a community where worship renews and refreshes.

I do tend to lend towards finding a way of normalizing relations between blacks and whites in America. We all are stuck with each other and both claim to have relationship with God and are both going to heaven. In addition, until the black community develops its own economic environment where we can employ and sustain our own people, blacks will have to work for and with white folks on a daily basis for the foreseeable future so why not work out a way of being able to live together rather than a part?

Finally, each of the texts has fired up within my spirit to learn more about the nature and roots of Black Theology. Prior to this class and Systematic, I would have said that my doctoral direction would have been biblical studies but now I am more interested in doing something in Black Theology more than a topic or focus on biblical studies. Now if I can just get around reading all that stuff by dead white men!

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<sup>7</sup>Roberts, pp. 104-105.

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**Howard University - School Of Divinity**

**Critical Reflections On The Black Christ**

Submitted to:

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Black Theology

November 28, 1995

By

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## **Introduction**

In an age where the Black Church is more than ever focusing on the significance of our African heritage, The Black Christ reflects on the roots that give meaning to this emphasis from a theological perspective. The fire for this subject was first ignited in my life last semester during a course on Black Church History. It was during this class that I was first introduced to the author and this most “unusual” topic. It was my first formal introduction to black theology and thought in the academy.

In this paper, I shall discuss some of the benefits presented in this work as well as address some of the issues raised in the text and reflect upon how those issues impact the African-American church of today.

## **The Benefits Of The Black Christ**

It is fair to say that most congregants that sit in our pews on Sunday morning would not be willing to endure the rigors of a Systematic Theology class for fear that “Our Jesus might be taken away.” The same attitude might apply to many of the books written on the topic. They generally tend to be very technical and abstract in their presentation and might well be beyond the educational reach of some in the black community.

The first element of The Black Christ that I really appreciated was how easy it was to read the text without sacrificing the critical message of the content: the significance of the black Christ to the black community of faith as it struggles in a white dominant culture. Dr. Douglas presents a very good introduction to the subject of black theology and outlines the dilemma that the black church faces today as it attempts to minister to the self-esteem needs of African-Americans in the United States.

Another key feature of this text is its ability to succinctly and clearly describe the history of black theological thought starting with our slave ancestors on through the civil rights movement and up to relevant current issues. It is a concise and yet not too shallow broad stroke across the black theological landscape which gives the reader a good introduction to the subject of black theology.

Finally, this text presents the major players in the black theological movements such as James Cone, J. Deotis Roberts and Albert Cleage and how their individual major works attempted to make practical the messages of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. Since both of these black leaders had different approaches in the struggle for liberation, black theologians had their hands full in developing a theology of liberation that spoke to the struggle for freedom in the light of Christian faith for black folks in the United States. This text is a good launching point for one seeking to read the major works of the theologians reviewed.

The Black Christ is a text that could easily be used by a pastor/minister to teach black theology in the local church. It is reading that can be grasped by most individuals and provides the seeds for good discussion on the issues addressed in the text. The subject material is broken down into relevant sections and is just the right length to keep the reader's interest in the material at hand.

## **Issues Raised In The Black Christ**

### **Self-Esteem & Encouragement In The Local Church**

One of the issues that jumped out at me as I read this text was the need to be more aware of the impact of what goes in our churches as it relates to our congregants self-esteem. Dr. Douglas sums it up perfectly:

“. . . far too many Black churches speak of the Christ who is against white racism while still displaying images of White male Christs in their buildings and pulpits. . . . a blond-haired, blue-eyed Christ does not empower or nurture self-esteem for Black people. This Christ is not a reflection of who they are as a people. . . . Moreover, such an image is not inviting to black youth who are in need of developing positive self-images.”

I have learned during my tenure at Howard that the church needs to be more of an encouraging and supporting institution in the black community. This is needed because many struggle just to survive each day. The church should be a place where positive and healthy images of our God are presented and lifted up as symbols which point us to Almighty Yahweh.

### Roberts' Inner Struggle

One dynamic that I thought could have been addressed with a bit more clarity was Roberts' need to be accepted by the wider white theological community and the impact that seeking that acceptance may have had on the black theology that he was developing. It's stated that Roberts developed his theology in response to the Black Power movement as manifested by militant Howard University students such as Stokely Carmichael but the impact of developing this theology under "duress" is not explored.

Having read Roberts' now one can see that his book has a dualism in it which on the one hand wants to speak to the brothers and sisters from the "hood" but on the other hand wants to speak to the minds of the white theological community. While Cone's theology seems more clearly stated, that is not the case with Roberts. The Black Christ could have said a little more on this struggle that Roberts' faced in writing his book.

It was this dualism that caused me to rethink Roberts. My initial response to The Black Christ was to outright reject Cone's approach to the struggle in favor of Roberts' approach but now I have synthesized both Cone and Roberts and see the need to use the best of what each had to say to the black community in struggle. White folks need to understand that oppression is no longer going to be tolerated and that we will take steps to strengthen our own communities (Cone) but we also understand that we're all in the United States together and that there must be a coming together between our two communities in order for the nation to survive hence the need for dialog (Roberts).

### Applying Today's Issues to Yesterday's Struggle

We have made the affirmation that theology is a human enterprise in which men and women attempt to define the relationship between humans and our transcendent God. Given that humans are doing the theology, can a theology ever be developed that will stand the test of time in terms of its relevance and contemporary application? Since theology is answering questions about God raised during certain periods in human history,

one should be careful when critiquing a theology developed in the past based on contemporary issues and concerns.

In Chapter Four, the adequacy of the Black Christ is explored and it is my belief that some of the criticism leveled at the theologies (in the section dealing with the lack of internal critique) which were developed out of the turbulent civil rights struggle is not suitable given those times. It is easier now with a different mind set and sensitivity to see what was missed in the past but the only thing we can do now is impact the future. We should reflect on what was missed (e.g., sexism, classism, etc.) and use those issues as stepping stones for today's discussions and agendas.

#### The Role Of Black Women

It is fair to say that black theologians overlooked the contributions of black women in the freedom struggle using today's spectacles but could such a debate have been healthy during the time of the struggle? "Divide and conquer" has always been a ploy of the white establishment and wouldn't it have been better to attempt to free the whole rather than to engage in an internal conflict which would have drained our strength? Would it have been well served to take on this issue during that time? We might have won the internal battle but have lost the broader war. This is not to say that the contribution of black women in the struggle was not a valid issue to be addressed.

#### Privilege And Responsibility

While Dr. Douglas is right in saying that middle class black folks need to have a heightened sense of concern for our brothers and sisters in the lower class, I feel that there is a need for each of us to take the first step and make some effort to better ourselves. If one is denied opportunities due to the "vicious cycle of poverty" and that cycle is broken but for a moment by a middle class brother or sister, isn't it incumbent upon the one caught in the cycle to jump at the chance to get off that merry-go-round?

I've learned in this class and from the text that I, being in a position of limited privilege (for I too am only a few paychecks away from poverty), need to find ways to help other black people to rise up out of the squalor of oppression to a better life but when the path has been cut and the way made, I cannot force someone to go down the path that has been opened up. If I were to do that then I would be exercising another form of oppression myself.

### Jesus In Process?

One of the more controversial elements presented in the book deals with an incident in which the text seeks to point out how black theologians have exercised their male privilege option in society. To highlight the danger of such thought a passage of scripture is lifted up to show how Jesus learned to reject such privilege as he dealt with the Syrophoenician woman. The passage relates

“. . . Jesus, apparently controlled by the biases of his society, . . . harshly rebuffs the woman's pleas for help. It is not until after the woman reminds Jesus that . . . Jesus realizes how he had succumbed to the privileges of being Jewish and male in that particular society.”

Such a statement sets up a number of theological concerns. First of all it suggests that Jesus would exercise his option to benefit from a system which might oppress someone. By exercising such an option Jesus would be participating in a sinful venture which would be inconsistent with his divine nature, especially a nature that had come to “set at liberty” the captives.

Secondly, it suggests that some influence (ungodly no doubt) was at work in the life of Jesus. If Jesus could be controlled by societal influences up until this point, why weren't they ever a factor during the temptations in the wilderness or at other junctures in his ministry? If they had been a factor then he would have acted based on them. If Jesus was susceptible to cultural peer pressure, would our Saviour be the spotless, sinless lamb capable of purchasing our redemption at Calvary? I would think not.

### Sexual Oppression & The Black Christ

As I have stated before I have immensely enjoyed The Black Christ as it has taught me a great deal and enlightened me in a number of areas. One area that I cannot to this day embrace is the acceptance of the homosexual lifestyle as expounded by the Womanist definition (or any other definition for that fact). There is a lot of different oppression that exists in the United States today. Some of it is outside the control of the victim while other oppression self-inflicted. Say what you will about homosexuality, one thing is certain and that is we are born into the world as either a male or a female physically. God designed the human being in such a way that procreation cannot occur between two men or two women. To be homosexual is to **choose** to act in a way that is contrary to one's physical orientation.

I am opposed to taking up the banner of homosexuals as an oppressed group because the choices we make in life have certain ramifications which go with them. An African-American does not choose to be one. A woman or man (black or white) does not choose at birth what gender to become or into what group in society to be born. These are all conditions which are outside the control of the individual. But how one chooses to act sexually is a choice and just because the consequences are not desirable does not mean that this group somehow is deserving of protection.

Christ encountered a number of people with different lifestyles over the course of his ministry. The woman at the well and her relationship with a man who was not her husband; Zaccheus who exploited his own people in his duties as tax collector; and the rich man who thought he was a part of the kingdom because he kept the law but was unwilling to part with the material goods of this world for the betterment of the community. All these were choices that people made but not choices that required special civil protection.

The Black Christ realizes that people make bad choices but rather than condemn and write off the estranged child of God (which the church has done at times), Christ lovingly confronted and persuaded those who had made wrong choices to make right choices if they were open to his guidance. Homosexuals do need our compassion and guidance to help lead them out of that lifestyle. They need our ministry just like heterosexual

needs our ministry but I do not believe it is my calling to make them feel comfortable in their sinful condition any more than I need to make the couple that's living together apart from marriage comfortable.

The Black Christ would not oppress anyone but this Christ would also not condone all activity within the faith community either. There was a divine plan for the make-up of the family and that plan has a specific purpose. The homosexual "family" is not the original order and as pointed out by Dr. Sanders excerpt in the book, the church needs to be a promoter of "positive sexual ethics."

### Is 'Womanist' A Sexist Term?

As has been pointed repeatedly throughout this semester, gender inclusive language is par for the course in this academy. Everywhere one looks, "Our Father" and "Father, Son, and Holy Ghost" have been replaced with terms that are more inclusive of both genders and less offensive to those with gender sensitivity.

One issue that is raised out of reading The Black Christ and some of Dr. Sanders Living The Intersection is the use of this term "womanist." I understand the meaning of the term and its positive significance for the black community but I have to wonder if the term itself is sexist. Not the meaning but the label itself. At a time when inclusion and neutrality is the clarion call of the day, why have a term which is gender specific? Is the term relevant only to black women? I am still in process on the nature of this term.

### Conclusion

I have found The Black Christ to be a most enjoyable text which is seen in a different light this semester. It presents a fantastic overview of black theology and presents current womanist thought in the theological arena. It raises some issues for the black community which can serve as the basis for additional theological reflection and discussion.

**Howard University School of Divinity**

**Is a Black Systematic Theology Possible?**

Submitted to:

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Black Theology

December 19, 1995

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## Introduction

Black theology was born out of the struggle for freedom by black people during the 1950s and 1960s. Its initial goal was to take the Christian message of the gospel as presented in the civil rights struggle by the teachings and leadership of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and meld them together with the nationalistic message of Black Power as demonstrated and proclaimed by Malcolm X. Some of the classic black theological works were developed during this time by James Cone, J. Deotis Roberts, and Gayraud Wilmore.

But a question that remains in the broader theological arena as one reflects upon these works might be “*Is a black systematic theology possible?*” James Evans’ book We Have Been Believers attempts (and I believe succeeds) to say “yes” to that question. This paper will examine how that is accomplished in light of Evans’ text.

### Is A Black Systematic Theology Possible?

Mickelsen defines the endeavor of systematic theology as a “. . . theology [that] emphasizes systems of thought. Systematic theologians try to take all the teachings on a particular subject and put them together to give a full picture of that subject.”<sup>8</sup> Given such a definition, anyone with some skills for organizing thought could develop a systematic approach to the various topics of Christianity (e.g., sin, evil, God, the scriptures, etc.).

But I believe the difference between what Evans is doing in formulating a Black Systematic Theology is different from the approach exhibited by most “church fathers.” For Barth, Tillich, et. al., their theologies start from the top and attempt to deal with God in the sphere of his infiniteness. Coming to theology from this direction tends to generate very high and abstract ideas of relating to God. That is why one needs to read the sermons of many of these theologians to see how one should carry out the theology in a practical way because there is a disconnect between the theology and daily life.

Evans states that black theology is borne out of the life experience of a struggling and oppressed African-American existence. In order for blacks folks to survive, our “God-talk” must empower and strengthen us for the daily grind. And so black theology does not start from the infinite and make its way down to the finite. It starts from the bottom and attempts to understand God from the vantage point of the oppressed.

A black systematic theology is possible for there certainly is enough in the black experience to chronicle our relationship with God. Because black theology starts from the ground up, the sources for black theology are different from the traditional approaches employed by the dominate culture. Our sources for doing black theology are wide and vast and I would liken them to the northern California hills during the gold rush era. Data on the black religious experience is plenteous but one must do the digging and mining to unearth the treasure. Evans states that the black theologian must not only be concerned with what the Bible has to say but also with the “folk stories” of the faith as well. In addition there are many other sources that must be combed to pull out the golden nuggets of the black faith: our spirituals, black literature, the slave experience, music, dress, and many other elements of black life in these United States.

Evans does a good job of combining these various sources in expounding on the various subjects presented in his work and I believe that is the challenge of a black systematic theology. If one can absorb

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<sup>8</sup>A. Berkeley Mickelsen and Alvera M. Mickelsen, Understanding Scripture: A Laymen’s Guide to Interpreting the Bible (Ventura, Calif.: Regal Books, 1982), p. 165.

the wide breath of material in the black experience, then a black systematic theology can arise. Black systematic theology is truly borne out of the community for the essence of the theology is derived from the work others have done to a large degree. Evans cites the work of other black authors and scholars as he presents his material: Benjamin Mays, Jacquelyn Grant, Cain Hope Felder, J. Deotis Roberts, James Cone, Katie Cannon, Cornel West, David Walker, et. al.

Because this theology arises out of the community, Evans work has a quality which allows it to be deposited back into the community. One quality of black theology is that it “. . . reflects the passion, feeling, and expressiveness of African-American Christianity. It must be in touch with the ‘guts’ of black religion.”<sup>9</sup> So Evans bridges the gap between the church and the academy in this work.

Believers is an excellent work which gives a very thorough treatment of the various subjects of black theology. While stressing the liberation theme like most black theologians, Evans does not spend a whole lot of time trying to make the Exodus motif fit into the Black experience as he does discussing traditional aspects of the black religious experience. The use of this text in the church could give our people a theological basis for some reason to the beliefs that we hold.

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<sup>9</sup>James H. Evans, Jr., We Have Been Believers: An African-American Systematic Theology (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1992), p. 2.

**Howard University School of Divinity**

**Implementing Black Theology  
In The Local Church**

Submitted to:

Dr. Kelly Brown-Douglas  
Black Theology -  
Prophetic Ministry Requirement

December 19, 1995

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## **Introduction**

Traditionally, the topic of theology (black or otherwise) is not discussed much in the black religious experience even though it is employed in our praxis. Just because we don't formally identify our God-talk does not mean that a language is not in play. One of the challenges of the pastorate is finding new ways to introduce black theology into the congregation in such a way that is stimulating and inviting while at the same time educational and edifying. This paper will present a couple of ideas.

### **The Preaching Event**

Traditionally, the largest gathering of people in the black church is during the Sunday morning worship experience. By utilizing the preaching moment, the pastor can express some of the sentiments of theology to the congregation. Olin P. Moyd in his book The Sacred Art: Preaching and Theology in the African American Tradition helps the black preacher to understand that theology is being conveyed to the congregation every time we mount the sacred desk. Since our theology must be lived out every day, Moyd encourages the preacher to be practical in the message as well as theological. We can't afford to be abstract in our approach. He goes on to highlight the ways in which a theological strand can be woven into the fabric of the preaching moment.

By understanding the broader significance of our biblical text, we can bring other experiences to bear in the sermon. Justo Gonzalez and Catherine Gonzalez in their book Liberation Preaching: The Pulpit and the Oppressed note that one of the bottlenecks that Protestant preachers run into is *sola Scriptura*, i.e., the sole authority of Scripture. By utilizing other black literary sources or events, we can introduce the genesis of some of the things we take for granted in the faith today. The preacher needs to be open to looking at the biblical texts from different lenses in order to reach a wider audience in the preaching moment.

### **A Video Witness**

One of the great blessings of this technological age in which we live is access to historical events that have been captured on video. By utilizing such materials, one can explore the birth and development of black theology. One of my favorite civil rights video series is *Eyes On The Prize* which covers the entire civil rights movement from the early days of Emmit Till in the 1950s all the way through to the Black Panthers in the 1970s.

By using this series during a Bible Study period, one could examine the events during the movement that point towards the Christian aspects of the movement. Not only that, one could also explain how Christian principles were applied in such a way as to support the goals of the movement. Dr. Martin Luther King's "Holt Street Address" is pregnant with meaning for the black Christian who was struggling for freedom in Montgomery.

Utilizing such a series also gives the pastor the ability to examine the way in which the dominate culture twisted the Christian faith in such a way as to oppress black people. Because it covers the full gamut of the movement, the black pastor is also challenged to reconcile the rhetoric of the Black Power movement as presented by Malcolm X or Stokely Carmichael with the Christian message we hold to today. In essence, the pastor gets to be a Cone or Roberts in the middle of these two opposing messages with the task of constructively utilizing the heat generated from both sides. Fortunately, Cone and Roberts (and others) provide plenty of material for the discussion.

### **Teacher Training**

Finally, one other way of introducing black theology into the church is through the various teaching avenues that already exist in the church such as Sunday School and Vacation Bible School. Although there are black Sunday school materials from David C. Cook (*Echoes*) and Urban Ministries, much of that material is not deep theologically. Rather than focusing on the materials, it might be helpful to have some teacher training sessions in which the themes and perspectives of Black theology are raised.

By using texts like The Black Christ and We Have Been Believers, teachers could be exposed to the issues surrounding black theology. Such exposure would help them to develop a hermeneutic of suspicion and retrieval that could be using in the weekly preparation of their lessons. By heightening the interest of black theology in the teacher, the black theological perspective will trickle down into the congregation as a whole as the teacher examine the texts with new vision.

### **Conclusion**

There is a wide variety of material that is available to the pastor who wishes to expose the congregation to black theology. By incorporating it into the weekly makeup of the church's program, our people can develop a sense that there is nothing wrong or suspect about theology (or the academy either) and that there is nothing wrong or sinful about asking hard questions about the relationship that we have with the God who is our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer.

**Black Theology - Reading Notes & Questions: A Black Theology Of Liberation, Cone.**

p. 18. Cone talks about white theology being so dispassionate and calm as it relates to human evil. Isn't racism sin? Does Liberation Theology deny the depraved sin nature of man? Does God talk apart from the oppressed always imply racism? Where does suffering fit into Liberation Theology? Jesus preached liberation to the oppressed but he also end up suffering and dying a horrible death before being raised. Is there room for redemptive suffering?

p. 25. Cones speaks glowingly of throwing a Molotov cocktail into a white building as part of the black experience. Does Liberation Theology condone any action which seeks to liberate the oppressed? Are the Los Angeles riots of 1992 a proper expression of the black experience?

p. 30. Cones accuses the white theological establishment with racism because it overlooks the black struggle for liberation. Could it be that white people are not asking the same questions that black folks are raising? If theology is suppose to arise out of the experience of a community, would white theology be asking the same questions as black theology?

p. 33. Cone suggests that the meaning in scripture is to be found in its ability to point beyond itself to the reality of God's revelation, namely, black liberation. Is the bible that narrow? Are there no other issues which the bible speaks that are validated by the Holy Spirit in the Christian community? Does it not witness to anything else? Is only what it says about liberation apropos to the black community?

P. 37. Cones states that white theology comes about from "...abstract reflections." He seems to point to Tillich and Barth quite often in his discussion of black theology. Did none of there theology arise from concrete situations in their lives? Although they where white, did not of their experiences give black people a different angle in the arena that might be beneficial?

Cone hasn't gotten to this yet, but I would hope he speaks about the dialog between the black and white communities. Another question is, what is black life to be like in the absence of oppression? If liberation is what we seek, what's next once liberation is obtained? How is the black community to proceed? Do we affirm those things which are black to the exclusion of the white community? Wouldn't that then make us the oppressors and white folks the oppressed?

p. 45. Cones states the the oppressors in America cannot be forgiven for the oppression that have inflicted on black people. First, where does he think the oppressors are going to go? We will never have the U.S. to ourselves so is it our goal to simply flip the oppressor/oppressed roles so we have the upper hand?

Second, is reconciliation not possible with black theology? We need to break the oppressive structures in society in favor of building bridges which uplift all people without oppressing anyone. We talk about who Jesus liberated but the flip side is, who did Jesus oppress? I would suggest that he oppressed no one.

p. 45. Cones mentions that "Revelation is God's self-disclosure to humankind *in the context of liberation.*" Wouldn't it be more appropriate to say "in the context of a faith community" of which black is one of those communities? That is what defining the "interpreter" in systematic theology would seem to suggest.

p. 70. Cone speaks of needing a God here and now who is willing to sanction black power. The statement itself would seem to suggest that Cone wants to redefine God in his own image. I know that the crisis of the 60s is influencing this "God-talk" but he does appear to be way out there and at times speaking a very unrealistic picture of God.

**Black Theology - Reading Notes & Questions: A Black Theology Of Liberation, Cone, p. 83-142**

p. 106, "*Sin, then, is a condition of human experience in which we deny the essence of God's liberating activity as revealed in Jesus Christ.*" Cone seems to be saying sin cannot occur a part from a connection with God's liberating activity. He would appear to be a bit narrow here in his definition.

p. 117, "... *even today, white 'Christians' see little contradiction between wealth and the Christian gospel.*" From the definition that Cone presents of sin (i.e., forsaking our identity and pursuing whiteness), it would appear that many black ministers are missing this mark as well. One need only attend a major minister's convention and see the vehicles to see that we don't see a contradiction between wealth (as expressed in the expensive vehicles that are driven) and the Christian gospel.