

BLACK THEOLOGY: AN APPRAISAL OF THE INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL ISSUES

JOHN J. CAREY

Florida State University

WHEN THE theological and cultural history of the sixties is written, the black renaissance will surely be considered one of the dominant factors in the period. Not only in civil rights but also in literature, history, culture, and theology, the black awakening has led to a new awareness of black peoplehood and personhood. From a theological standpoint the most striking aspects of this whole "revolution" have been the new appraisals of black religion and the emergence of a distinctive black theology. The catalytic book in the movement now appears to have been Joseph Washington's *Black Religion* (Boston: Beacon, 1964), which showed that there are elements of black history and church life which do not fit into the established categories of white theology, and that in fact white Christianity (in all of its diverse traditional forms) is sick unto death because of its deep intertwinings with paternalistic and/or oppressive societies. A second influential book which deepened the analysis of a distinctive black theology and which showed its affinities with the emerging mood of black militancy was James Cone's *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: Seabury, 1968). Cone condemned the black churches for so docilely having subscribed to the white man's faith and thereby reinforcing the tentacles of racism in American society. The advocates of black power, he argued, have a more realistic appraisal of the black condition and hence offer a more viable alternative to blacks for the elimination of oppression. Black theology attempts to read the Bible from the distinctive perspective of black suffering and thereby provides a bridge between the Christian heritage and black militancy.

The search for an authentic, indigenous black theology quickly spread beyond Washington and Cone, and soon a considerable body of literature was emerging which was analyzing the black church and the black religious heritage in a new light. Washington's *The Politics of God* (Boston: Beacon, 1967) and Albert B. Cleage, Jr.'s *The Black Messiah* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968) received considerable attention, and Cone provided the first systematic exposition of a black theology in his *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1970). The strident antiwhite posture of Cone made him the foremost interpreter of black theology and indeed a controversial figure even in the black community. Recently, however, two other attempts at a black

systematic theology have appeared which take sharp issue with Cone and show that there is a diversity of outlook and method within the ranks of black theologians. I am referring to Major J. Jones's *Black Awareness: A Theology of Hope* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1971) and J. DeOtis Roberts' *Liberation and Reconciliation: A Black Theology* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971). Some of the diversity of the black movement is also reflected in the volume edited by Roberts and James J. Gardiner, S.A., *Quest for a Black Theology* (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1971). There have, of course, been other significant contributions to black theology in essays and periodical literature,¹ but these books provide the basic framework for a radically different interpretation of the Christian faith than has prevailed for centuries in Western Christendom. It is my intent in this article to analyze some of the distinctive themes of black theology and to consider the major issues it raises *internally* for the black Christian community and *externally* for the wider, essentially white Christian community. First, however, some preliminary comments about black culture will help us understand the milieu of black theology.

BLACK CULTURE

Anyone familiar with black culture in America recognizes that it is stratified socially just as is the white culture. The diversity of organizations and spokesmen for the black community not only mirrors that stratification but also is indicative of a considerable rivalry for leadership and recognition. Although previous generations have had their spokesmen for black autonomy and black pride (W. E. B. DuBois, Marcus Gervey, Elijah Muhammed), on the whole the black churches have been on the conservative side of the black spectrum and have re-

¹ See Vincent Harding, "The Religion of Black Power," in Donald Cutler, ed., *The Religious Situation, 1968* (Boston: Beacon, 1968) pp. 3-38; C. Eric Lincoln, "The Black Revolution in Cultural Perspective," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 23, no. 3 (Spring 1968) 219-33; Preston N. Williams, "The Black Experience and Black Religion," *Theology Today* 26, no. 3 (Oct. 1969) 246-61; Robert A. Bennett, "Black Experience and the Bible," *Theology Today* 27, no. 4 (Jan. 1971) 422-33; Richard I. McKinney, "The Black Church," *Harvard Theological Review* 64, no. 4 (Oct. 1971) 452-81; William Jones, "Theodicy and Methodology in Black Theology: A Critique of Washington, Cone and Cleage," *ibid.*, pp. 541-57. John Killinger shows how the movement of black theology has parallels in black literature in his article "The Black Man and the White God," *Religion in Life* 39, no. 4 (Winter 1970) 498-521. Cone in his latest endeavors has attempted to show how the theme of liberation has historic roots in the Negro spirituals; see his "Black Spirituals: A Theological Interpretation," *Theology Today* 28, no. 1 (April 1972) 54-69, and his book *The Spirituals and the Blues* (New York: Seabury, 1972). Attention should also be called to the special issue of *Christianity and Crisis* 30, no. 18 (Nov. 2-16, 1970) on the theme of "Black Theology and the Black Church."

inforced elements of black folk religion. I do not say this in any pejorative sense, since the white American churches have supported their own kind of folk religion, but simply to point out that there have been historic tension points between black-awareness leaders and the black churches.

That tension is still present today in different power bases of black-power advocates (Black Panthers, Malcolm X Fronts, etc.) and groups more related to the traditional religious heritage of the black churches (Southern Christian Leadership Conference). These two foci are the twin sources upon which black theology draws and much of the ambiguity and ambivalence of black theology stems from its vacillating use of these sources. Caught between these two poles of emphasis is the black middle class, whose orientation has been more towards assimilation than separatism from the white culture. In one important sense, black theologians have been attempting to awaken the black middle class to the insights of more militant black spokesmen and to enlist their help in the struggle for black awareness.

Much of the diversity in the black culture, of course, is not due to social class but to age, and certainly the impatience and determination of a younger generation have forced black religious leaders into a more critical (if not radical) stance towards American culture. It is important to note, however, as C. Eric Lincoln has pointed out, that the ethos behind black theology is a black revolution which is an indigenous expression of black America's rejection of apartheid, and that in its fundamental goals this revolution aims at restructuring *all* of American life (economics, industrialization, technology) rather than just focusing on the black community.² Whites need to be cautious, therefore, lest they assume that black theology only represents the voices of militants or the select reflections of the black intelligentsia. There is much to suggest that all strata and ages of the black community support the black revolution, consistent with their own qualifications and self-image.

Structurally, the black awakening has led to the formation of the National Committee of Black Churchmen (NCBC), whose Theological Commission has issued periodic statements about the nature and intent of black theology. Their document of June 13, 1969 deserves citation:

For us, black theology is the theology of black liberation. It seeks to plumb the black condition in the light of God's revelation in Jesus Christ, so that the black community can see the Gospel is commensurate with the achievement of black humanity. Black theology is a theology of "blackness." It is the affirmation of black humanity that emancipates black people from white racism thus

² Lincoln, *art. cit.*, pp. 221, 226-30.

providing authentic freedom for both white and black people. It affirms the humanity of white people in that it says "No" to the encroachment of white oppression.³

Closely related to the NCBC is the Society for the Study of Black Religion, which was founded in Atlanta in October 1971. This group is more academic than ecclesiastical in its interests, and intends to encourage further study of the black religious experience. Both of these organizations will undoubtedly attempt to further ties between the black theology of America and emerging black theologies of Africa. Some preliminary attempts have been made in this direction, with some solidarity affirmed but also a recognition that African nations have their own histories and problems which do not always coincide with those of America.⁴

Another cultural factor which needs to be noted is the fact that black religion has been most strongly shaped in America by the Baptist and Methodist traditions, and hence has demonstrated the spontaneity and emotionalism characteristic of evangelicalism.⁵ The emphasis on congregational response to preaching ("Yes, Lord"; "Amen, Brother"; "Tell it like it is"), the rhythmic music, handclapping, and informality have been important means of communication and fellowship. Even Martin Luther King, whom Herbert Richardson has called the most important theologian of our generation,⁶ retained the oratorical style of

³ Cited by Joseph A. Johnson, "Jesus, the Liberator," in Roberts and Gardiner, *op. cit.*, pp. 101-2.

⁴ The African Commission of the National Commission of Black Churchmen sponsored a conference between African and American black theologians in August 1971 at Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, on the theme "Black Identity and Solidarity—The Role of the Church as a Medium for Social Change." For a report on this conference, see Cornish Rogers, "Pan-Africanism and the Black Church: A Search for Solidarity," *Christian Century*, Nov. 17, 1971, pp. 1345-47. For a fuller treatment of the perspectives of African theology, see Dibinga WaSaid, "An African Theology of Decolonization," *Harvard Theological Review* 64, no. 4 (Oct. 1971) 501-24.

⁵ According to the 1972 *Yearbook of American Churches*, the largest black denominations are the National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Inc., with 5,500,000 members; the National Baptist Convention of America with 2,668,799 members; the African Methodist Episcopal Church with 1,166,301 members; and the AME Zion Church with 940,000 members. Richard McKinney estimates that there are approximately 800,000 blacks in the major white Protestant denominations and some 774,000 black Roman Catholics; cf. *ibid.* For the complex and strange world of black sects and cults, the somewhat dated study of Arthur H. Fauset, *Black Gods of the Metropolis* (Philadelphia: Univ. of Pennsylvania, 1944), is still helpful. One of the most thorough analyses of the black church is Benjamin E. Mays and Joseph W. Nicholson, *The Negro's Church* (New York: Arno, 1969; reprint of the original 1933 edition).

⁶ "Martin Luther King—Unsung Theologian," in Martin Marty and Dean Peerman, eds., *New Theology No. 6* (New York: Macmillan, 1969) pp. 178-84.

his Baptist heritage in his public addresses. We should not be surprised, therefore, to detect in black theology elements of black folk religion, sectarian mentality, and emotional oratory. In one sense black theology, for all of its attempts at sophistication, retains an element of "soul": its mood is meant to be *felt* as well as rationally grasped. Cleage's work in particular reflects this, and even Cone has a tendency to lapse into his Arkansas dialect when attempting to communicate orally with blacks. There is a distinctive style, therefore, to black theology which reflects the cultural heritage of black religion.

One must also point out that the mood of black separatism has deeply pervaded the emergence of black theology, with the result that practically no whites have been a part of its development, and spokesmen have made it clear that as a movement black theology is of, by, and for black people. Cone observes:

Whites may read it and to some degree render an intellectual analysis of it, but an authentic understanding is dependent on the blackness of their existence in the world. There will be no peace in America until white people begin to hate their whiteness, asking from the depths of their being: "How can we become black?"⁷

This ethnic separatism, while understandable, has meant that black theology has developed up to this point with little contact with the white Protestant and Catholic communities. The sectarian stance of much black theology would render it unimpressive and unconvincing to the broader circles of Christian life and thought if it were not dealing with such a sensitive issue in society today. Yet its refocusing of Christian faith is so crucial, given this point in time for the black revolution, that Frederick Herzog, one of the few white theologians to grapple with black theology, has said that the crucial issue in Christian theology in the seventies will not be whether God is dead or alive but whether He is black or white.⁸

INTERNAL ISSUES

The internal issues of black theology come into focus when one con-

⁷ *A Black Theology of Liberation*, p. 12. Cone's bitter repudiation of any white interpretations of the black awakening can be seen in his following observations about two important books by white theologians: Joseph Houghs's *Black Power and White Protestants* (New York: Oxford, 1968) and C. Freeman Sleeper's *Black Power and Christian Responsibility* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1969). "The problem with both books is the white audacity to speak at all, especially about Black Power. Who do they think they are, pontificating about their brutality against us as if they have a relevant word about black humanity? They should know that the long history of white silence on black liberation renders their ideas irrelevant for both black and white people" (*A Black Theology of Liberation*, p. 195).

⁸ "God: Black or White?" *Review and Expositor* 67, no. 3 (Summer 1970) 299.

siders the different viewpoints of Washington, Cone, Cleage, Roberts, and Jones. Of these five, Washington, Roberts, and Jones draw more upon black church experience and the language of traditional Christian theology; Cone and Cleage are more strident, more clearly antiwhite, and more sympathetic to cultural movements of black power and black pride. It should be pointed out initially, however, that in spite of different emphases each black theology presents itself, implicitly or explicitly, as a specific strategy for black liberation. As William Jones has put it, black theology is "engaged" or committed theology, in that its particular goal is to transform the black condition from oppression to authentic humanity.⁹ In the literature one frequently comes across the term "survival theology" as a designation of the way blacks see the life-and-death issues facing the black community. Whatever the nuances and internal issues might be, we must recognize that there is a solidarity among black theologians to work for the improvement of black people. It is in the means that they differ, and here is where we begin to discern the internal issues of black theology. Let us now consider these in more detail.

1) *The relationship of liberation and reconciliation.* Cone has been the most relentless exponent of the view that the concern of true Christianity is the liberation of the oppressed, and with blacks in particular. He writes:

In view of the biblical emphasis on liberation, it seems not only appropriate but necessary to define the Christian community as the community of the oppressed which joins Christ in his fight for the liberation of men. The task of theology then is to explicate the meaning of God's liberating activity so that those who labor under enslaving powers will see that the forces of liberation are the activity of God himself.¹⁰

For Cone, the tragedy of most "white" theology is that it has not been concerned with the liberation of the oppressed. He reads biblical history to support the claim that from Exodus to Jesus, God is at work to free the captives; blacks, therefore, are a special people to God and are vehicles of His activity in the world:

There is no use for a God who loves whites the *same* as blacks. We have had too much of white love, the love that tells blacks to turn the other cheek and go the second mile. What we need is the divine love as expressed in Black Power which is the power of black people to destroy their oppressors, here and now, by any means at their disposal.¹¹

* "Toward an Interim Assessment of Black Theology," *Reflection* 69, no. 2 (January 1972) 4.

¹⁰ *A Black Theology of Liberation*, p. 20.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

Cleage likewise emphasizes liberation of blacks but relates it more specifically to black nationalism under a Black Messiah and a Black Church. Cleage, properly speaking, is not a theologian but a pastor of the Shrine of the Black Madonna (United Church of Christ) in Detroit. His frequently cited book *The Black Messiah* is a series of sermons he delivered to his congregation and not an attempt to do theological analysis. One can detect in Cleage some of the elements of black rage and the emotionalism of black folk religion. Yet on the primacy of liberation as a goal for blacks he stands with Cone. He writes:

As black preachers we must tell our people that we are God's chosen people and that God is fighting with us as we fight. When we march, when we take it to the streets in open conflict, we must understand that in the stamping feet and the thunder of violence we can hear the voice of God. When the Black Church accepts its role in the Black Revolution, it is able to understand and interpret revolutionary Christianity, and the revolution becomes part of our Christian faith.¹²

This militant position of Cone and Cleage has drawn sharp criticism from both DeOtis Roberts and Major Jones, as well as from more temperate scholars such as Joseph Johnson and Preston Williams. Roberts has contended that Cone is more of an advocate of black power than an accurate interpreter of the biblical tradition, and that in his emphasis on God's "blackness" and God's sole identification with the cause of blacks Cone has become too narrow in his theological vision.¹³ Jones argues that the vision which informs black theology is a vision of a better world for all mankind, and that it is both unwise and unbiblical to speak of black liberation without concomitant white liberation.¹⁴ Both Jones and Roberts see in Cleage's stance a black nationalism tinged with religious garb. His strong stand on black exclusiveness fits hand in glove with the cultural emphasis on black pride, but they both doubt the legitimate biblical and historical foundation for Cleage's work.

The issue which emerges here is that of the relationship of liberation and reconciliation. This in turn rests upon biblical exegesis and which of these facets of biblical faith is to be given primary emphasis. The more moderate group of black theologians, influenced by the theology of hope, argue that reconciliation of the total human community is an essential ingredient to any Christian theology, black or white. Cone is aware of the criticisms directed at him on this point, but argues that reconciliation can only enter the discussion at a second stage, after

¹² *The Black Messiah*, p. 6.

¹³ *Liberation and Reconciliation: A Black Theology*, pp. 19-21; cf. also pp. 106, 161.

¹⁴ *Black Awareness: A Theology of Hope*, pp. 109-11.

liberation has been achieved. To speak of reconciliation prior to that point is to come to the peace table with a master-slave relationship. Cone, who has appropriated some of Reinhold Niebuhr's political insights, maintains that for justice to emerge in society contending factions must meet as equals, or, to put it differently, power must be confronted with power. Cone argues that reconciliation is a white theological category, used prematurely to keep the oppressed in their place. Like Bonhoeffer, he is fearful of "cheap grace," and the immediate need for his justice requires a theological emphasis on liberation. Behind this dispute lies the difference between radical and more temperate outlooks in the black community.

2) *The role of the black church.* The spokesmen for black theology have sharply differing views on the black church, although all recognize that it has been a pervasive influence in black culture. Both Cone and Cleage feel that on the whole the black church has capitulated to the demands of a white racist society; Cleage speaks disparagingly of black churches other than his own as "Uncle Tom" churches, and Cone argues that in order to survive, the black churches have forsaken their freedom and dignity. Cone maintains:

The black church, though spatially located in the community of the oppressed, has not responded to the needs of its people. It has, rather, drained the community, seeking to be more and more like the white church. Its ministers have condemned the helpless and have mimicked the values of whites. For this reason most Black Power people bypass the churches as irrelevant to their objectives.¹⁵

Roberts, Jones, and Washington, however, are more optimistic about the black church, albeit aware of its historic problems. Roberts argues that the black church has an important role to play as an "extended family" for so many black families which have been splintered by a racist society; furthermore, it provides a fellowship for those who suffer.¹⁶ Jones and Washington both are hopeful about the black church in theological and practical ways. Theologically, they feel that the category of "chosen people" and a suffering-servant consciousness can give the black church a sense of mission and destiny. Practically, they feel that the black church is the institution best prepared to foster a new black awareness and to organize the black community into an effective political force. A renewed black church will be more capable of facing conflict in the larger society and more militant in style, but it will continue to be faithful to the biblical tradition and not afraid of suffering.¹⁷

¹⁵ *Black Theology and Black Power*, p. 114.

¹⁶ *Liberation and Reconciliation*, pp. 64-75.

¹⁷ See Jones's *Black Awareness*, pp. 116-18, and Washington's *The Politics of God*, pp.

There are some problems not dealt with by the black theologians who are interested in church renewal, not the least of which is the educational level of black clergy. Recent studies indicate that 92 percent of the men who enter the black ministry each year are professionally unprepared, i.e., have less than complete college and seminary training.¹⁸ This reflects the strong Baptist heritage of the black church and indicates some credibility problems with the black middle class. The issue for black theology, however, is at a deeper level. Should black power or the black Christian heritage be the dominant model for black awareness? Is the black church potentially renewable? Unsolved problems in this area, of course, are closely related to the strength of the Black Muslims and their challenge to Christianity as the faith for black men. There is also some uncertainty as to how willing the white churches will be to work effectively with black churches in the area of urban renewal. Certainly, if the more moderate stream of black theology is to prevail, the white churches need to demonstrate good faith in working with the black churches in all facets of urban ministry.

3) *Revolution and violence.* The black nationalism of Cleage and the pessimism of Cone put both of these men in the camp of theologians of revolution.¹⁹ In spite of their rhetoric, neither man is an advocate of armed revolution against white society, but both contend that racism has already injected violence into the American scene and that the responsible black man today must be ready to defend himself and his family against the ever-present threats to the black man in a white society. Cone observes:

It is this fact that most whites seem to overlook—the fact that violence already exists. The Christian does not decide between violence and nonviolence, evil and good. He decides between the less and greater evil. He must ponder whether revolutionary violence is less or more deplorable than the violence perpetuated by the system. There are no absolute rules which can decide the answer with certainty. But he must make a choice. If he decides to take the “non-violent” way, then he is saying that revolutionary violence is more detrimental to man in the long run than systemic violence. But if the system is evil, then revolutionary violence is both justified and necessary.²⁰

214–20. Washington contends that the political tactics of Saul Alinsky could be a model for a more politically conscious black church.

¹⁸ Harry V. Richardson, “The Negro in American Religious Life,” in John P. Davis, ed., *The American Negro Reference Book* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1966) p. 413.

¹⁹ This movement in contemporary theology is broader than black theology and has many nuances, but particularly from Latin America and Third World areas there has been in recent years a theological openness to revolution as a means of effecting rapid social change. Cf. my “Theologies of Revolution: Hard and Soft,” *Anglican Theological Review*, Summer 1972, pp. 147–63.

²⁰ *Black Theology and Black Power*, p. 143.

The Roberts-Jones-Washington axis, however, is much more cautious on this point than the Cone-Cleage axis. Theologically, Roberts contends that in the prophetic tradition the justice of Amos is tempered by the love and mercy of Hosea; the Christian response to injustice is not necessarily the natural one of hate and violence. The only long-range answer which these interpreters see is a constructive and massive reorientation in black-white relations. They feel that (in Roberts' terms) there is more to be gained by the black community through ballots and bills than in bombs and bullets. They are also perhaps more politically and pragmatically astute in recognizing what violence does to the one who utilizes it, and in realizing the ominous capacity of white backlash against any minority group. Their main rationale, however, is theological. They are persuaded that a Christian loyalty transcends the ethnic loyalty. On the positive side it is felt that the black experience can be the bearer of a new humanity, so that violence and revolution are not needed as instruments of social change. There is a tenacious belief that Jesus really does have liberating power, and that if this is mirrored in the black tradition it can also become a reality for whites.²¹

EXTERNAL ISSUES

The external issues raised by black theology are those which have implications for white church life and theology, both in the Protestant and Roman Catholic traditions. Whites can feel somewhat detached from the internal issues of black theology, feeling that they can only be resolved by blacks through time, circumstance, and/or providence. The external issues are more threatening, however, because they call into question many traditional white assumptions about Christian faith. Three of these external issues require some consideration.

1) *The place of culture in religious understanding.* Most whites who have been raised in the Christian tradition come to have at least a general understanding of its history and divisions. Those who have studied theology come to understand the "main line" Roman Catholic and Protestant traditions and recognize how various seminal thinkers have deepened or refocused the richness of the Christian faith. We have recognized that there are major "families" within Christendom (Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican, Lutheran, Reformed, etc.) and by and large our ecumenical endeavors have consisted of dialogue, co-operation, and mutual goodwill among these families. Somehow the black tradition has not entered our thinking as an experience to be taken seriously. Now black theology, supported of course by the renaissance

²¹ See Joseph A. Johnson, Jr., "Jesus, The Liberator," in Roberts and Gardiner, *op. cit.*, pp. 104-111.

of black history, calls all of our interpretations and even theological heroes into question.

What do these white American and European theologians of a white-racist-dominated religious establishment know about the soul of black folks? What do Barth, Brunner and Tillich know about the realities of the black ghettos or the fate of black sharecropper families whose souls are crushed by the powerful forces of a society that considers everything black as evil? Could these white theologians see the image of the crucified Jesus in the mutilated face of a rat-bitten child, or a drug addict, bleeding to death in a stinking alley?²²

The black theologians are unanimous in their opinion that the only kind of theology which has credibility for them must be rooted in and speak to the "black experience," which is interpreted as suffering and oppression. When black theologians assert that "the white Christ of the white Church is our enemy," they remind us that we have interpreted Jesus Christ through our white eyes and with white cultural categories. When James Cone, speaking at a seminar at Florida State University, was asked by a colleague of mine, "When will black theologians stop all this exclusivist talk and join the main stream of Christian theology?", Cone glowered back and said, "Whose main stream, white man?" The point here is that the emergence of black theology requires us to do some major reassessment of white "main stream" theology. Instead of being colorless and for all men, much of Western Christendom now looks painfully white. The truth of the Christian message is not as Western, transhistorical, and transcultural as we thought. Our religious awareness and theological categories have been molded by a white consciousness, with all of the assumptions intrinsic to that range of human experience.

Both in theological and sociological terms we have spoken in the past about subcultures, ghetto mentalities, and sectarian movements. Only recently, however, have we become aware of how culturally conditioned our own religious forms and vocabularies are. Black theology, when taken seriously, requires us to be more tentative and modest in our own theological assertions, and certainly reintroduces the fact of human experience as the beginning point of a credible theology.

2) *The problem of hermeneutics.* Central to the case of black theologians is the centrality of "liberation." One detects a strong emphasis on the Exodus, an identification with Israel as God's chosen people, and a stress on Jesus as one who came to liberate the captives. God is understood to be at work in the world solely to liberate the oppressed. Cone writes:

²² *Ibid.*, p. 101.

There can be no Christian theology which is not identified unreservedly with those who are humiliated and abused . . . the resurrection of Christ means that all oppressed peoples become his people. . . . The task of Christian theology, then, is to analyze the meaning of hope in God in such a way that the oppressed community of a given society will risk all for earthly freedom, a freedom made possible in the resurrection of Christ.²³

This starting point in black theology has received powerful support from Harvey Cox (cf. *The Secular City*) and from various theologians interested in social change. It provides a focal point from which to interpret and assess the full range of Christian theology, similar to Luther's justification by faith, Barth's Christology, and Tillich's New Being.

This way of interpreting the biblical tradition is not, of course, without problems. It ignores much of the substratum of biblical history and religion, and minimizes other important theological factors (the Jewish-Gentile controversy, the impact of Paul, the Hellenizing of the early church) which shaped early Christianity. Whites are quick to say that this leitmotif does not do justice to the rise of the church as institution and to its sacramental role in sustaining faithful people of all cultures and social strata. Yet there is enough biblical evidence to support this sense of *Heilsgeschichte* that it cannot be quickly or glibly dismissed; it is, after all, consistent with much Old Testament material and with the Cross as a symbol for Christianity. For those who come from more established churches, this hermeneutic of black theology causes some uneasy stirrings of conscience. If the biblical story really is the account of God's work to liberate the needy and the oppressed, why are we in the churches doing much of what we are doing?

There are, however, some unresolved points in the black hermeneutic, stemming mostly around the question of who the "oppressed" people of the world really are. Cone and Cleage have argued that these are the black peoples, yet Cone also seems to occasionally use "black" as a symbol for oppressed people of all races and conditions.²⁴ Roberts and Jones would certainly allow that there are many white people who are oppressed and who share the same need for liberation as blacks.

There is no easy answer for the white man to the black hermeneutic; but fairness requires that we acknowledge that it is both a possible and legitimate perspective out of which to understand Scripture. White interpreters who struggle with this issue may well come away feeling that the black church is closer to the heart of the gospel than is the

²³ *A Black Theology of Liberation*, pp. 17, 21.

²⁴ William Hordern has pressed Cone on this point; see Hordern and Cone, "Dialogue on Black Theology," *Christian Century*, Sept. 15, 1971, p. 1080.

white church.

3) *Ecclesiology*. This issue follows directly and urgently from the preceding one. We have seen that black theology begins with the experience of oppression and understands the whole biblical drama to be an account of God working to liberate captive peoples. Blacks have adapted the chosen-people theme and, like the ancient Jews, still dispute whether this means an ethnic pride or service to all of mankind. The black-awareness movement, however, has given the black churches a fresh sense of identity and purpose, and raises for the white Christian churches some searching questions about their own foundations and functions.

There has been, of course, a spirited discussion of ecclesiology in Roman Catholic circles in recent years, and the Vatican II description of the Church as the "People of God" has brought more humanity into Roman Catholic church life. There has been a remarkable paucity of ecclesiology in Protestant ranks, however, and much more careful analysis will be needed if American white Protestantism is to escape the charge of being a "folk religion." The tragic thing about black criticisms of the white churches is that they are essentially true. White churches *have* reinforced the culture.²⁵ Attempts of Protestant churches at the national level to be more responsive to black needs have met with a serious backlash and a reduction of giving by members at the local level. Fundamentalist Protestants have formed the core of antiblack organizations and movements. Many scholars who begin to read black theology to refute its sectarian claims will emerge sobered with how much truth there is in the black charges against the white church.

What is needed is a clearer understanding among white Christians of the origins and purpose of the church. Protestants in particular are always subject to the temptation to make congeniality and not mission the focus of their common life. Bishop John A. T. Robinson's call for a "new reformation" in church life and style is germane to this situation. Whatever else the white churches have been, they have failed in the task of liberation and reconciliation of needy peoples. The serious "heresies" in the Christian church today, as Richard McBrien has suggested, are racism and a doctrine of rugged individualism.²⁶ These can be the first items eliminated by any community of people who want to be faithful to the biblical heritage of the People of God.

²⁵ For a particularly telling analysis of how this has happened in the South, see Samuel Hill, Jr., *Southern Churches in Crisis* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966).

²⁶ *Do We Need the Church?* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969) p. 224.

EVALUATION

There is much that white Christians will find offensive in black theology. The attempts by Cone and Cleage to reinterpret the whole of biblical history and church history to fit black categories seem strained and unconvincing. Cone's penchant for sectarian-type language and his unwillingness to accept criticism of his work by whites on the ground that their attitudes are all "racist" may simply remove him from any significant interchange with the white theological community. Roberts and Jones have both cautioned that the more strident form of black theology runs the risk of being a black chauvinism, with little capacity for self-criticism. The sin which Cone and Cleage see rampant in white society so dominates their rage and vision that they cannot interpret sin as a universal human problem which also is applicable to blacks.²⁷ As a theological movement, it appears weak in understanding the phenomenology of religion and unsophisticated in analyzing philosophical assumptions behind theological assertions.

Black theology, however, is still in a growing stage. Its ties with the black-awareness and black-power movements are not enough to sustain it as a viable counterpoint to white theology. More serious work will need to be done in exegetical and historical studies if it is to have adequate foundations.²⁸ I hope I have said enough in this essay, however, to show that black theology is not just a folk aberration within contemporary theology. It has its internal tensions but it likewise raises important issues for whites. If it can jar the white churches into a renewed concern for the poor and the needy, the oppressed and the hungry, it will help us take the first steps towards a community beyond racism. It might also force us towards a reassessment of many of the claims and assumptions of white theology.

²⁷ See Cone's *A Black Theology of Liberation*, pp. 186-96.

²⁸ A good example of a more critical analysis is found in Charles H. Long's "Perspectives for a Study of Afro-American Religion in the United States," *History of Religions* 2, no. 1 (August 1971) 54-66.