

is pervasively eschatological; that is, it looks to the future, to a time when the new will displace the old.

Black Theology believes that we are on the threshold of a new order—the order of a new black community. The Black Power movement is a transition in the black community from non-being to being. In the old order, black people were not allowed to be human; we were what white America permitted us to be—no-things. We took on false identities that destroyed our real selves, our beautiful black selves. The new order (partially realized now, but not fully consummated) is an order that affirms black self-identity.

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REVOLUTION, VIOLENCE, AND RECONCILIATION IN BLACK THEOLOGY

Revolutionary action is a Christian, a priestly struggle.

—Camilo Torres

Because Black Theology is biblical theology seeking to create new value-perspectives for the oppressed, it is revolutionary theology. It is a theology that *confronts* white society as the racist Antichrist, communicating to the oppressor that nothing will be spared in the fight for freedom. It is this attitude that distinguishes it from white American theology and identifies it with the religionists of the Third World. It says with LeRoi Jones:

Fact: There is a racial struggle.

Fact: Any man had better realize what it means. Why there is one. It is the result of more than "misunderstanding" . . .

Fact: "People should love each other" sounds like Riis Park at sundown. It has very little meaning to the world at large.¹

The debate is over. There will be no more meetings between liberal religious whites and middle-class Negroes to discuss the

1. LeRoi Jones, *Home*, 119. Copyright © 1963, 1966, by the author. Used with permission of the publisher.

status of race relations in their communities. Black Theology believes that the problem of racism will not be solved through talk but through *action*. Therefore, its task is to carve out a revolutionary theology based on relevant involvement in the world of racism.

Revolution

The revolution that Black Theology advocates should not be confused with some popular uses of the word. When Billy Graham can speak of a need for a revolution, we clearly require a tighter definition of the term. Revolution is not merely a "change of heart" but a radical black encounter with the structure of white racism, with the full intention of destroying its menacing power. I mean confronting white racists and saying: "If it's a fight you want, I am prepared to oblige you." This is what the black revolution means.

It is important not to confuse protest with revolution. "Revolution is more than protest. Protest merely calls attention to justice. . . . It is an act of defiance against what is conceived to be an established evil. It is the refusal to be silent in the presence of wrong to which others are accommodated. Social protest flings a gauntlet into the teeth of a suspect authority and challenges the principles upon which that authority claims to rest."² It seems that the work of the traditional civil rights organizations falls in this category. Though they changed laws, they were essentially movements that appealed to the conscience of white America. They were asking for black Americans to be included in the total structure of the white American way. Black Power believes that "implicit in the act of protest is the belief

2. C. Eric Lincoln, "The Black Revolution in Cultural Perspective," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 23, no. 3 (Spring 1968): 221. I am not in total agreement with Lincoln's examples of revolution and protest.

that change will be forthcoming once the masters are aware of the protestors' 'grievance' (the very word connotes begging, supplicating to the gods)."³

In contrast, "revolution sees every particular wrong as one more instance in a pattern which is itself beyond rectification. Revolution aims at the substitution of a new system for one adjudged to be corrupt, rather than corrective adjustments within the existing system. . . . The power of revolution is coercive."⁴ The pre-Civil War black preachers were revolutionary in that they believed that the system itself was evil and consequently urged slaves to rebel against it. The very existence of the black church meant that men like Richard Allen and Absalom Jones were convinced that the evil of racism in the white church was beyond redemption. Today the Black Power movement is an expression of this same revolutionary zeal in the black community. It shuns protest and seeks to speak directly to the needs of the black community. Black Power seeks to change the structure of the black community—its thought forms, values, culture. It tells black people to love themselves, and by so doing, confront white racism with a mode of behavior inimical to everything white.

The revolutionary attitude of Black Theology stems not only from the need of black people to defend themselves in the presence of white oppression, but also from its identity with biblical theology. Like biblical theology, it affirms the absolute sovereignty of God over his creation. This means that ultimate allegiance belongs only to God. Therefore, black people must be taught not to be disturbed about revolution or civil disobedience if the law violates God's purpose for man. The Christian man is obligated by a freedom grounded in the Creator to break all laws that contradict human dignity. Through disobedience

3. Quoted in Neal, *Black Theatre*, 30.

4. Lincoln, "Black Revolution," 221-22.

to the state, he affirms his allegiance to God as Creator and his willingness to behave as if he believes it. Civil disobedience is a duty in a racist society. That is why Camilo Torres said, "Revolutionary action is a Christian, a priestly struggle."⁵

The biblical emphasis on the freedom of man also means that one cannot allow another to define his existence. If the biblical *imago Dei* means anything, it certainly means that God has created man in such a way that man's own destiny is inseparable from his relation to the Creator. When man denies his freedom and the freedom of others, he denies God. To be for God by responding creatively to the *imago Dei* means that man cannot allow others to make him an It. It is this fact that makes black rebellion human and religious. When black people affirm their freedom in God, they know that they cannot obey laws of oppression. By disobeying, they not only say Yes to God but also to their own humanity and to the humanity of the white oppressor.

Violence

To raise the question of revolution is to raise the question of violence. Revolution always involves coercion. Is Black Theology a theology of violence? Does it advocate guerrilla warfare against the white adversary? These questions are not new. They are the kinds of theoretical questions that we expect from those who sit in the grandstand of middle-class Western morality untouched by the stings of oppression. They are also existential questions that the oppressed themselves are forced to think through as the oppressors continue to tighten the rope. When the oppressed first come to the recognition of their humanity and their treatment as things by the societal structures, the response usually

5. Quoted in José M. Bonino, "Christians and the Political Revolution," *The Development Apocalypse*, special U.S. edition of *Risk*, edited by Stephen Rose and Peter Vav Lelyveld (1967), 109.

consists of spontaneous, undisciplined outbursts of violence, saying, "We can't stand any more of this." But the masters are always silent on injustice, saying, "justice will come only in a stable orderly society"—which means at the good pleasure of the white overlords. Therefore, if Black Theology is to speak to the predicament of the oppressed, it must deal honestly with the question of violence.

First, we must realize that to carve out a theology of black revolution that does not sidestep the question of violence is difficult. It is normal, with a Western view of morality, to think that any expression of violence, at least by the disfranchised, is unchristian. By contrast it is quite normal to think that a nation has a right to defend its national interests with violence, especially if it happens to be a part of the "free" world. It is interesting that so many advocates of nonviolence as the only possible Christian response of black people to white domination are also the most ardent defenders of the right of the police to put down black rebellion through violence. Another interesting corollary is their defense of America's right to defend violently the government of South Vietnam against the North. Somehow, I am unable to follow the reasoning.

Our chief difficulty with Black Theology and violence, however, arises from the New Testament itself. The New Testament picture of Jesus seems to suggest that he was against violence as a proper redress. He certainly never resorted to violence. In fact, he seemed to have avoided the term "Messiah" as a personal designation because of its political (violent) implications. Also his constant references to love and the turning of the other cheek seem to indicate that the Christian life cannot be one characterized by an "eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth." Does not Jesus clearly say that his ministry is for the meek and helpless precisely because they are without an advocate? And even if we agree that love, as suggested in Chapter 2, includes power, does this mean the power of violence? Is it not true that the power of

love as expressed in the life and death of Jesus eschews the use of violence and emphasizes the inward power of the Christian man to accept everything the enemy dishes out? Is this not what he meant when he said, "Father forgive them, for they know not what they do"? Can we then, by any strength of the imagination or clever exegesis, interpret his command to turn the other cheek to mean a turning of the gun?

These questions are not easy to answer. The real danger of these questions is the implied *literalism* in them. Like the fundamentalist who stressed the verbal inspiration of Scripture, this view suggests that ethical questions dealing with violence can be solved by asking: "What would Jesus do?" We cannot solve ethical questions of the twentieth century by looking at what Jesus did in the first. Our choices are not the same as his. Being Christian does not mean following "in his steps" (remember that book?). His steps are not ours; and thus we are placed in an existential situation in which we are forced to decide without knowing what Jesus would do. The Christian does not ask what Jesus would do, as if Jesus were confined to the first century. He asks: "What is he doing? Where is he at work?" And even though these are the right questions, they cannot be answered once and for all. Each situation has its own problematic circumstances that force the believer to think through each act of obedience without an absolute ethical guide from Jesus. To look for such a guide is to deny the freedom of the Christian man. His only point of reference is the freedom granted in Christ to be all for the neighbor. Therefore, simply to say that Jesus did not use violence is no evidence relevant to the condition of black people as they decide on what to do about white oppression.

"The first task of Christian ethics," writes Bonhoeffer, "is to invalidate this knowledge" (the knowledge of good and evil).⁶

6. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, ed. Eberhard Bethge, trans. N. H. Smith (New York: Macmillan, 1955), 17.

Bonhoeffer is referring here to the Pharisaic and philosophical assumption that there is a guide, an absolute standard to right and wrong.

For the Pharisee every moment of life becomes a situation of conflict in which he has to choose between good and evil. For the sake of avoiding any lapse his entire thought is strenuously devoted night and day to the anticipation of the whole immense range of possible conflicts, and to the determination of his own choice.⁷

The Pharisee is a man who figures out on the basis of law what is the right and wrong course of action. If asked why he chose this action rather than that, he can rationally defend himself. Essentially the Pharisee is not a doer of good or evil; he is basically one who judges the actions of others. But to assume that one has knowledge of good and evil is to ignore the fall of man. It assumes that doing the will of God means obeying a system of rules, a pattern of life. It fails, according to Dietrich Bonhoeffer, to recognize that

The knowledge of Jesus is entirely transformed into action, without any reflection upon a man's self. A man's own goodness is now concealed from him. It is not merely that he is no longer obliged to be judge of his own goodness; he must no longer desire to know of it at all; or rather he is no longer permitted to know of it at all. . . . His deed has become entirely unquestioning; he is entirely devoted to his deed and filled with it; his deed is no longer one possibility among many, but the one thing, the important thing, the will of God.⁸

In dealing with the question of violence and black people, Black Theology does not begin by assuming that this question

7. Ibid., 27. Used with permission.

8. Ibid., 34-35. Used with permission.

can be answered merely by looking at the Western distinction between right and wrong. It begins by looking at the face of black America in the light of Jesus Christ. To be Christian means that one is concerned not about good and evil in the abstract but about men who are lynched, beaten, and denied the basic needs of life. It is not enough to know that black people make up a high percentage of the poor; that white complacency forces them to live in rat-infested apartments; that despite the gains of civil rights laws, police brutality is on the increase; that the appeal to love and nonviolence is a technique of the rich to keep the poor poor. These facts must be translated into human beings. While America is the richest country in the world as a result of the involuntary servitude of blacks and the annihilation of Indians, this country persists in expecting black people to accept their ideals of freedom and democracy. This country expects black people to respect law and order while others beat them over the head. It is this perspective that Black Theology must face before it can deal with the question of violence.

It is not that black Americans suffer more than any other people in the world, or even more than some whites in America. We may even safely assume that the blacks of America suffered more physically in the past than today. As the adversary would say: "Blacks never had it so good." Black suffering is not new. But what is new is "black consciousness." Black people know who they are; and to know who you are is to set limits on your being. It means that any act of oppression will be met with an almighty Halt! Any act of freedom will be met with an almighty Advance! This is the mood of black America that gives rise to Black Theology.

It does not matter how many gains are made in civil rights. Progress is irrelevant. The face of the black revolutionary will always be there as long as white people persist in defining the boundary of black being. It is the price one pays for oppression. The System, symbolized in the words "law and order," can only mean injustice for black people as long as the structure oper-

ates on the basis of racism. The appeal to democracy becomes a facade behind which the white hierarchy defends its right to rule over blacks. In any case the majority of black people see no relationship between the democratic process and their attempt to be free.

It is in this situation that Black Theology must speak the Word of God. How does it begin to deal with the face of the black revolutionary? Black Theology says, with José Bonino, that "A Christian must think through the question of revolution on the basis of his faith and he must express this interpretation in the concrete situation and translate it into action."⁹ This means that the Christian is placed in a situation in which he alone makes the choice. The dichotomy between "good and evil," "right and wrong" is a false one. The Christian man

has not to simply decide between right and wrong and between good and evil, but between right and right and between wrong and wrong. . . . Precisely in this respect responsible action is a free venture; it is not justified by any law; it is performed without any claim to a valid self-justification, and therefore also without any claim to an ultimate valid knowledge of good and evil. Good, as what is responsible, is performed in ignorance to good and in surrender to God of the deed which has become necessary and which is nevertheless, or for that very reason, free.¹⁰

Black Theology realizes that violence per se is not the primary question. Violence is a "subordinate and relative question."

It is subordinate because it has to do with the "cost" of desired change—the question of the legitimacy of revolution is not decided on the basis of the legitimacy of violence and vice versa! Violence is a cost that must be

9. Bonino, "Christians and the Political Revolution," 114–15.

10. Bonhoeffer, *Ethics*, 249. Used with permission.

estimated and pondered in relation to a particular revolutionary situation. It is "relative" because in most revolutionary situations . . . violence is already a fact constitutive of the situation: injustice, slave labor, hunger and exploitation are forms of violence which must be weighed against the cost of revolutionary violence.¹¹

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 the 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 that can decide the answer with certainty. But he must make a choice. If he decides to take the "nonviolent" 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.

Whether the American system is beyond redemption we will have to wait and see. But we can be certain that black patience has run out, and unless white America responds positively to the theory and activity of Black Power, then a bloody, protracted civil war is inevitable. There have occasionally been revolutions—massive redistributions of power—without warfare. It is passionately to be hoped that this can be one of them. The decision lies with white America and not least with white Americans who speak the name of Christ.

Reconciliation

When Black Theology emphasizes the necessity of a theology of revolution based on the unity of black people committed to the

11. Bonino, "Christians and the Political Revolution," 116. Used with permission.

task of destroying white racism, it is to be expected that many white religious people will ask: "What about the biblical message of reconciliation?" Whites who ask the question of blacks should not be surprised if some blacks reply: "Yeah man, what about it?" The question, while it may be legitimate, bears a close resemblance to the old (new?) questions about integration and love. White people, creating the barriers of separation, now want to know whether black people are willing to let bygones be bygones. That is why Stokely Carmichael said: "As for separatism what are they talking about? We have no choice. . . . They separated us a long time ago and they sure intend to keep it that way."¹²

White people have short memories. Otherwise, how are black people to interpret questions about reconciliation, love, and other white values? Is it human to expect black people to pretend that their parents were not chattels in society? Do they really expect black people to believe that their status today is unrelated to the slavery of the past? Do they expect black people to believe that this society is not basically racist from top to bottom? And now white religious people want to know what can be done about the "wall of hostility" between blacks and whites. Some critics of Black Theology are certainly going to suggest that my approach to theology will do more toward the separation of black and white Americans than toward reconciliation, and yet there is an appropriate concluding word to be spoken about reconciliation.

First, let me say that reconciliation on white racist terms is impossible, since it would crush the dignity of black people. Under these conditions blacks must treasure their hostility, bringing it fully into consciousness as an irreducible quality of their identity. If white people insist on laying the ground rules for reconciliation, which can only mean black people denying the

12. Quoted in Parks, "Stokely Carmichael," *Life*, May 19, 1967, 82.

beauty of their blackness, then black people must do everything within their power to destroy the white thing. Black people can only speak of reconciliation when the black community is permitted to do *its* thing. The black community has experienced the crushing white thing too long. Therefore, Black Theology believes that in order for reconciliation to be meaningful and productive, black people must have room to do their thing. The black community itself must lay down the rules of the game.

White oppressors are incompetent to dictate the terms of reconciliation because they are enslaved by their own racism and will inevitably seek to base the terms on their right to play God in human relationships. The history of slavery and Jim Crow and "integration" efforts renders white people virtually incapable of knowing even how to talk to black people as persons. It is this fact that nullifies the "good" intentions of concerned white religious people who insist that they are prepared to relate to black people as human beings. They simply do not know how. Since racism is inseparable from the history of America, and since practically all white people in this country are taught from birth to treat blacks as things, Black Theology must counsel black people to be suspicious of all whites who want to be "friends" of black people. Therefore, the real question is not whether Black Theology sees reconciliation as an end but, rather, on whose terms we are to be reconciled.

The problem of reconciliation is the oppressor's problem. Being accustomed to defining human relationships between themselves and the slaves on "I-It" terms, they naturally think that they have a monopoly on truth and right behavior. But when the slaves begin to say No to the God-behavior of the masters, the masters are surprised. They are surprised because they thought the slaves were happy. They cannot believe that the hostilities of the slaves stem from anything that the masters themselves have done. But neither can they believe that the unrest in the slave camps is motivated from within the slave

community. Therefore, in an attempt to explain the phenomenon of slave hostility, the masters devise tests that will show that most, if not all, people in the society are happy, and the disorders are created by outside agitators who can easily be lumped into one category—Communists. All unhappiness is a lie created and perpetuated by the ungodly Communists who want to destroy the "free" American society. There are usually enough slaves around who have been so crushed by the forces of evil that they do in fact respond according to the intentions of the masters. These slaves become the actual evidence that the slaves as a whole are satisfied with their condition. With this kind of assurance, the masters can begin to stamp out offenders against law and order, killing or caging all who refuse to cooperate with the laws against humanity. It is impossible for the oppressed black people of America to have dialogue with men who have this perspective. They can only say in word and deed: "Think what you like about America and its goodness toward blacks, but the black experience is different. And as long as you persist in that attitude, not only will there be no reconciliation, but soon it will be impossible even for us mutually to survive."

But sometimes it dawns on the liberal oppressors that the oppressed do not wish to be slaves any longer and will stop at nothing to break the chains. Sometimes it enters their minds that "progress" is irrelevant. What the oppressed want is Freedom Now! When the liberal oppressors come to that recognition, they will ask: "What are we to do?" These people want to know whether all has been lost. They are inquiring whether reconciliation is possible in spite of slavery and the present crushing of every black attempt to be black.

What can we say to this group? We must inform them as calmly and clearly as possible that black people cannot talk about the possibilities of reconciliation until full emancipation has become a reality for *all* black people. We cannot talk about living together as brothers (the "black and white together"

attitude) as long as they do everything they can to destroy us. While black people may continue to work in the factories, teach in schools, and even fight in wars, there is no law that blacks have to "love" whites. And as long as whites may pass laws against blacks, black people will affirm their dignity in spite of white racism at every opportunity. This country is and will continue to be two societies—one black and one white—as long as whites demand the right to define the basis of relationship. For white people to speak of reconciliation at the very moment that they are subduing every expression of black self-determination is the height of racist arrogance.

Some of our liberal white friends will probably insist that we are not being fair. When white people speak of black people being fair, I am reminded of John O. Killens's Solly Saunders in *And Then We Heard the Thunder*. When Solly rejected his white mistress's love because of his realization that all blacks are the same to whites, she says: "You hate me because I'm white, and I don't blame you, but it isn't fair—it just isn't fair." But Solly replies:

Fairness is a thing no white man has a right to ask of colored. I mean, look—who's been unfair to whom? Who's been unfair to my mother and her mother and my father and his father and who'll be unfair to my son and his children? "Fairness" is a word that should choke in the white man's throat. I'm not asking any white man to be fair with Solly Saunders, baby. I live with no such false illusions.¹³

Do not misunderstand me. Black Theology is a theology that takes seriously God's reconciling act in Jesus Christ. In fact, the heart of the New Testament message is the gospel of reconciliation. As St. Paul says: "God was in Christ reconciling the world

to himself" (2 Cor. 5:19). Among other things, this means that the wall of hostility is broken down between blacks and whites, making color irrelevant to man's essential nature. But in a white racist society, Black Theology believes that the biblical doctrine of reconciliation can be made a reality only when white people are prepared to address black men as *black* men and not as some grease-painted form of white humanity. Black Theology will not respond positively to whites who insist on making blacks as white as possible by de-emphasizing their blackness and stressing the irrelevance of color while really living as racists. As long as whites live like *white* people (through marriage, schools, neighborhood, power, etc.) black people must use blackness as the sole criterion for dialogue. Otherwise reconciliation will mean black people living according to white rules and glorifying white values, being orderly and calm while others enact laws that will destroy them.

Black Theology must reject outright this style of behavior and insist that black people can bring something to the relationship. They must bring a system of black values that deny that "white is right" and stress the beauty of being black. They must bring *color* to a sterile and depraved white people who have endeavored to label this world "for white only."

The task of Black Theology is to make the biblical message of reconciliation contemporaneous with the black situation in America. According to the New Testament, reconciliation is the exclusive work of God in which he becomes man in Jesus Christ in order that depraved humanity might become whole. Karl Barth puts it in this way:

The subject matter, origin and content of the message received and proclaimed by the Christian community is at its heart the free act of the faithfulness of God in which he takes the lost cause of man, who has denied him as Creator and in so doing ruined himself as creature, and makes it his own in Jesus Christ, carrying it through to its goal and

13. John O. Killens, *And Then We Heard the Thunder* (New York: Pocket Books, 1963), 413. Used with permission.