

Preface to the 1986 Edition

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

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

I can remember clearly when I first sat down to write this text. It was immediately following the publication of my first book, *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969). Although *Black Theology and Black Power* appealed to many black and white radicals who were interested in the theological implications of black power, I knew that most Christians, black and white, especially theologians and preachers, would need a deeper analysis of Christian doctrine, using traditional theological concepts, before taking black theology seriously. When I began to write *A Black Theology of Liberation*, I was deeply involved in the black struggle for justice and was still searching for a perspective on Christian theology that would

help African-Americans recognize that the gospel of Jesus is not only consistent with their fight for liberation but is its central meaning for twentieth-century America.

I was completely unaware of the beginnings of liberation theology in the Third World, especially in Latin America. Neither did I know much about the theme of liberation in African-American history and culture. Unfortunately, my formal theological and historical knowledge was primarily limited to the dominant perspectives of North America and Europe. But, despite these limitations, I was determined to speak a liberating word for and to African-American Christians, using the theological resources at my disposal. I did not have time to do the theological and historical research needed to present a "balanced" perspective on the problem of racism in America. Black men, women, and children were being shot and imprisoned for asserting their right to a dignified existence. Others were wasting away in ghettos, dying from filth, rats, and dope, as white and black ministers preached about a blond, blue-eyed Jesus who came to make us all just like him. I *had* to speak a different word, not just as a black person but primarily as a *theologian*. I felt then, as I still do, that if theology had nothing to say about black suffering and resistance, I could not be a theologian. I remembered what Malcolm X had said: "I believe in a religion that believes in freedom. Any time I have to accept a religion that won't let me fight a battle for my people, I say to hell with that religion."¹ *

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

of a moral superiority of black over white."² White reactions to black theology never disturbed me too much, because Malcolm X had prepared me for them. "With skillful manipulating of the press," said Malcolm, "they're able to make the victim look like the criminal and the criminal look like the victim."³

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

The task of explicating the gospel as God's liberating presence with oppressed blacks was too urgent to be sidetracked into an academic debate with white scholars about the nature of theology. It was clear to me that what was needed was a *fresh start* in theology, a new way of doing it that would arise out of the black struggle for justice and in no way would be dependent upon approval of white academics in religion. Again I thought of Malcolm: "Don't let anybody who is oppressing us ever lay the ground rules. Don't go by their games, don't play the game by their rules. Let them know now that this is a new game, and we've got some new rules. . . ."⁴

I knew that racism was a heresy, and I did not need to have white theologians tell me so. Indeed, the exploitation of persons of color was the central theological problem of our time. "The problem of the twentieth century," wrote W. E. B. DuBois in 1906, "is the problem of the colorline,—the relation of the darker to the lighter races of [persons] in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea."⁵ Just as whites had not listened to DuBois, I did not expect white theologians to take black theology seriously. Racism is a disease that perverts one's moral sensitivity and distorts the intellect. It is found not only in American society and its churches but particularly in the discipline of theology, affecting its nature and purpose. White *racist* theologians are in charge of defining the nature of the gospel and of the discipline responsible for explicating

it! How strange! They who are responsible for the evil of racism also want to tell its victims whether bigotry is a legitimate subject matter of systematic theology.

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

Some of my discussions with white theologians degenerated into shouting matches, because they did not like my "cool" indifference toward the Western theological tradition and my insistence that they must learn something about the black religious tradition in order to be genuine *American* theologians. I must admit that I was often as arrogant toward white theologians as they were toward me. My style of doing theology was influenced more by Malcolm X than by Martin Luther King, Jr. And I am sure that my intemperate behavior prevented some whites, whose intentions were more hon-

orable than my responses suggested, from dialoguing with me. My critical evaluation (deleted from the 1986 edition) of Joseph Hough's *Black Power and White Protestants* (1968) and of C. Freeman Sleeper's *Black Power and Christian Responsibility* (1969) is a case in point. But when I thought about the long history of black suffering and the long silence of white theologians in its regard, I could not always control my pen or my tongue. I did not feel that I should in any way be accountable to white theologians or their cultural etiquette. It was not a time to be polite but rather a time to speak the truth with love, courage, and care for the masses of blacks. Again Malcolm expressed what I felt deep within my being:

The time that we're living in . . . now is not an era where one who is oppressed is looking toward the oppressor to give him some system or form of logic or reason. What is logical to the oppressor isn't logical to the oppressed. And what is reason to the oppressor isn't reason to the oppressed. The black people in this country are beginning to realize that what sounds reasonable to those who exploit us doesn't sound reasonable to us. There just has to be a new system of reason and logic devised by us who are at the bottom, if we want to get some results in this struggle that is called "the Negro revolution."⁶

Although my view of white theology is generally the same today as it was in 1970, there are several significant shifts in my theological perspective since the publication of this text. Inasmuch as I have given a full account of my theological development in *My Soul Looks Back* (1982) and *For My People* (1984), it is not necessary for me to repeat it here. However, I do want to mention four themes particularly pertinent for readers of this text: sexism, the exploitation of the Third World, classism, and an inordinate methodological dependence upon the neo-orthodox theology of Karl Barth and other European theologians.

The most glaring limitation of *A Black Theology of Liberation* was my failure to be receptive to the problem of sexism in the black community and society as a whole. I have become so embarrassed by that failure that I could not reissue this volume without making a

note of it and without changing the exclusive language of the 1970 edition to inclusive language. I know that this is hardly enough to rectify my failure, because sexism cannot be eliminated (anymore than can racism) simply by changing words. But it is an important symbol of what we must do, because our language is a reflection of the reality we create. Sexism dehumanizes and kills, and it must be fought on every front.

Contrary to what many black men say (especially preachers), sexism is not merely a problem for white women. Rather it is a problem of the human condition. It destroys the family and society, and makes it impossible for persons to create a society defined according to God's intention for humanity. Any black male theologian or preacher who ignores sexism as a central problem in our society and church (as important as racism, because they are interconnected), is just as guilty of distorting the gospel as is a white theologian who does the same with racism. If we black male theologians do not take seriously the need to incorporate into our theology a critique of our sexist practices in the black community, then we have no right to complain when white theologians snub black theology.

Another serious limitation was my failure to incorporate a global analysis of oppression into *A Black Theology of Liberation*. Unlike my moral blindness in relation to sexism, the absence of Third World issues in my perspective was due more to my lack of knowledge and personal exposure. Being so concerned about the problem of racism in the United States and being strongly influenced by the analysis of it made by the civil rights and black power movements, it was easy for me to overlook Third World problems. I vehemently rejected any suggestion from whites about this weakness, because I did not trust them. How could they be genuinely concerned about the poor of the Third World when they showed little or no concern for poor blacks at home? I quoted one of their philosophers to them: "The only way of helping the enslaved out there is to take sides with those who are here" (Sartre).

At the time of the writing of *A Black Theology of Liberation*, I had not traveled to Asia, Africa, Latin America, or even the Caribbean; and unfortunately I had done little reading about the problems of poverty, colonialism, human rights, and monopoly capitalism. Largely due to my involvement in the Ecumenical

Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT), I have now visited many Third World countries, meeting many Third World persons and seeing for myself enormous gaps between rich and poor nations. I am convinced that no one should claim to be doing Christian theology today without making the liberation of the Third World from the exploitation of the First World and the Second World a central aspect of its purpose. There is an interconnectedness of all humanity that makes the freedom of one people dependent upon the liberation of all. No one can be free until all are set free. Martin Luther King, Jr., expressed this point persuasively:

We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied to a single garment of destiny. What affects one directly, affects all indirectly. As long as there is poverty in this world, [no one] can be totally healthy. . . . Strangely enough, I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. You can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be.⁷

The third weakness of *A Black Theology of Liberation* was the absence of a clearly focused economic, class analysis of oppression. This limitation is unquestionably the result of my strong identification with the common tendency in the black community of defining racism as a domestic problem, largely associated with the exclusion of blacks from the benefits of American capitalism. Racism was primarily identified as social exclusion with disastrous political and economic consequences. I assumed that if blacks were creatively integrated into all aspects of American society, the issue of racism would be essentially solved. This was faulty analysis, because I failed to see that the problem of the human condition involved much more than simply the issue of racism. Anyone who claims to be fighting against the problem of oppression and does not analyze the exploitive role of capitalism is either naive or an agent of the enemies of freedom. I was naive and did not have at my disposal sufficient tools for analyzing the complexity of human oppression. My strong negative reaction to the racism of many white socialists in the United States distorted my vision and prevented me from analyzing racism in relation to capitalism.

An exclusive focus on racial injustice without a comprehensive analysis of its links with corporate capitalism greatly distorts the multidimensional character of oppression and also camouflages the true nature of modern racism. There are black as well as white thieves, and the color of a person's skin does not make wrong right. We are all—blacks and whites, men and women, young and old—sinners, and thus capable of exploiting the poor in order to promote our economic and political interests. No event has demonstrated this truth more clearly than the tragic bombing in Philadelphia (May 1985). It made no difference whether Frank Rizzo (white) or Wilson Goode (black) was the mayor, the dignity and well-being of poor blacks was considered expendable in the killing of eleven persons, including four children. The color of the mayor's skin did not change the immoral character of the act or justify the general silence of civil rights groups about it. The act was murder and ought to be prosecuted as such. We must not allow racial solidarity to distort the truth. Without class analysis, a global understanding of oppression will be distorted and its domestic manifestations seriously misrepresented. There are very few differences between black and white capitalists when viewed in the light of the consequences of their behavior for the poor. When profits are more important than persons, disastrous results follow for the poor of all colors. It does not matter whether blacks or whites do it. This madness must be opposed.

The fourth and last weakness that I wish to comment on was my inordinate methodological dependence upon the neo-orthodox theology of Karl Barth. Many of my critics (black and white) have emphasized this point. It is a legitimate criticism, and I can offer no explanation except to say that neo-orthodoxy was to me what liberal theology was to Martin Luther King, Jr.—the only theological system with which I was intellectually comfortable and which seemed compatible with the centrality of Jesus Christ in the black church community. I knew then as I know now that neo-orthodoxy was inadequate for my purposes, and that most American theologians who claimed that theological identity would vehemently reject my use of Karl Barth to interpret black theology. However, I did not have the time to develop a completely new perspective in doing theology. I had to use what I regarded as the best of my graduate education.

If I were to be writing *A Black Theology of Liberation* today, I would not follow the theological structuring that begins with a methodology based on divine revelation, and then proceeds to explicate the doctrines of God, humanity, Christ, church, world, and eschatology. There is no "abstract" revelation, independent of human experiences, to which theologians can appeal for evidence of what they say about the gospel. God meets us in the human situation, not as an idea or concept that is self-evidently true. God encounters us in the human condition as the liberator of the poor and the weak, empowering them to fight for freedom because they were made for it. Revelation as the word of God, witnessed-in scripture and defined by the creeds and dogmas of Western Christianity, is too limiting to serve as an adequate way of doing theology today. Theology, as Latin American liberation theologians have stressed, is the second step, a reflective action taken in response to the first act of a practical commitment in behalf of the poor.

Despite the limitations of *A Black Theology of Liberation*, I decided to publish the 1986 edition without any changes except those related to the elimination of exclusive language and a few adjustments in style. The chief reason for reissuing this text as it appeared in 1970 is its central theme: *liberation*. More than any other text I have written, *A Black Theology of Liberation* represents the new start I tried to make in theology. Alone in Adrian, Michigan, searching for a constructive way in theology that would empower oppressed blacks, the motif of liberation came to me as I was rereading the scripture in the light of African-American history and culture. I had already had glimpses of this theme as a motif for theological construction when writing *Black Theology and Black Power*. However, in that book I was more concerned with problems in society than with developing a new way of doing theology. *A Black Theology of Liberation* represents my initial attempt to construct a new perspective for the discipline of theology, using the Bible and the black struggle for freedom as its chief sources. Liberation emerged as the organizing principle and has remained the central motif of my perspective on the gospel.

I repeat: Theology is always done for particular times and places and addressed to a specific audience. This is true whether theologians acknowledge it or not. Although God is the intended subject of theology, God does not do theology. *Human beings do theology.*

The importance of this point cannot be emphasized too strongly, because there are white theologians (as well as others greatly influenced by their definitions of theology) who *still* claim an objectivity regarding their theological discourse, which they consider vastly superior to the subjective, interest-laden procedures of black and other liberation theologians. That there are theologians who make such claims today (even after the successful critiques made by black, feminist, and Third World liberation theologians) continues to baffle me. It is like President Ronald Reagan claiming objectivity in his development of a Third World policy of freedom and democracy in South Africa and Central America. He *cannot* be serious! But he is, and so are white theologians regarding the objective character of their way of doing theology. In *A Black Theology of Liberation*, I tried to uncover the wrongheadedness of the white way of doing theology and then attempted to set Christian theology on the right path of liberation. I believe that it was a message worth saying in 1970 and still an important word to say today.

PART I

A BLACK THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION

1

The Content of Theology

Liberation as the Content of Theology

Christian theology is a theology of liberation. It is *a rational study of the being of God in the world in light of the existential situation of an oppressed community, relating the forces of liberation to the essence of the gospel, which is Jesus Christ*. This means that its sole reason for existence is to put into ordered speech the meaning of God's activity in the world, so that the community of the oppressed will recognize that its inner thrust for liberation is not only *consistent with* the gospel but *is* the gospel of Jesus Christ. There can be no Christian theology that is not identified unreservedly with those who are humiliated and abused. In fact, theology ceases to be a theology of the gospel when it fails to arise out of the community of the oppressed. For it is impossible to speak of the God of Israelite history, who is the God revealed in Jesus Christ, without recognizing that God is the God *of* and *for* those who labor and are over laden.

The perspective and direction of this study are already made clear. The reader is entitled to know at the outset what is considered to be important. My definition of theology and the assumptions on which it is based are to be tested by the working out of a theology which can then be judged in terms of its consistency with a communitarian view of the ultimate. We begin now by exploring some preliminary considerations in my definition. X

The definition of theology as the discipline that seeks to analyze

the nature of the Christian faith in the light of the oppressed arises chiefly from biblical tradition itself.

(1) Though it may not be entirely clear why God elected Israel to be God's people, one point is evident. The election is inseparable from the event of the exodus:

You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples . . . [Exodus 19:4-5a].

Certainly this means, among other things, that God's call of this people is related to its oppressed condition and to God's own liberating activity already seen in the exodus. *You have seen what I did!* By delivering this people from Egyptian bondage and inaugurating the covenant on the basis of that historical event, God is revealed as the God of the oppressed, involved in their history, liberating them from human bondage.

(2) Later stages of Israelite history also show that God is particularly concerned about the oppressed within the community of Israel. The rise of Old Testament prophecy is due primarily to the lack of justice within that community. The prophets of Israel are prophets of social justice, reminding the people that Yahweh is the author of justice. It is important to note in this connection that the righteousness of God is not an abstract quality in the being of God, as with Greek philosophy. It is rather God's active involvement in history, making right what human beings have made wrong. The consistent theme in Israelite prophecy is Yahweh's concern for the lack of social, economic, and political justice for those who are poor and unwanted in society. Yahweh, according to Hebrew prophecy, will not tolerate injustice against the poor; God will vindicate the poor. Again, God is revealed as the God of liberation for the oppressed.

(3) In the New Testament, the theme of liberation is reaffirmed by Jesus himself. The conflict with Satan and the powers of this world, the condemnation of the rich, the insistence that the kingdom of God is for the poor, and the locating of his ministry among the poor—these and other features of the career of Jesus show that

his work was directed to the oppressed for the purpose of their liberation. To suggest that he was speaking of a "spiritual" liberation fails to take seriously Jesus' thoroughly Hebrew view of human nature. Entering into the kingdom of God means that Jesus himself becomes the ultimate loyalty of humankind, for he is the kingdom. This view of existence in the world has far-reaching implications for economic, political, and social institutions. They can no longer have ultimate claim on human life; human beings are liberated and thus free to rebel against all powers that threaten human life. That is what Jesus had in mind when he said:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord [Luke 4:18-19].

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 Jesus Christ in his fight for the liberation of humankind. 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 very activity of God. Christian theology is never just a rational study of the being of God. Rather it is a study of God's liberating activity in the world, God's activity in behalf of the oppressed.

If the history of Israel and the New Testament description of the historical Jesus reveal that God is a God who is identified with Israel because it is an oppressed community, the resurrection of Jesus means that all oppressed peoples become his people. Herein lies the universal note implied in the gospel message of Jesus. The resurrection-event means that God's liberating work is not only for the house of Israel but for all who are enslaved by principalities and powers. The resurrection conveys hope in God. Nor is this the "hope" that promises a reward in heaven in order to ease the pain of injustice on earth. Rather it is hope which focuses on the future in order to make us refuse to tolerate present inequities. To see the future of God, as revealed in the resurrection of Jesus, is to see also

the contradiction of any earthly injustice with existence in Jesus Christ. That is why Camilo Torres was right when he described revolutionary action as "a Christian, a priestly struggle."¹

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 Jesus. The language of theology challenges societal structures because it is inseparable from the suffering community.

Theology can never be neutral or fail to take sides on issues related to the plight of the oppressed. For this reason it can never engage in conversation about the nature of God without confronting those elements of human existence which threaten anyone's existence as a person. Whatever theology says about God and the world must arise out of its sole reason for existence as a discipline: to assist the oppressed in their liberation. Its language is always language about human liberation, proclaiming the end of bondage and interpreting the religious dimensions of revolutionary struggle.

Liberation and Black Theology

Unfortunately, American white theology has not been involved in the struggle for black liberation. It has been basically a theology of the white oppressor, giving religious sanction to the genocide of Amerindians and the enslavement of Africans. From the very beginning to the present day, American white theological thought has been "patriotic," either by defining the theological task independently of black suffering (the liberal northern approach) or by defining Christianity as compatible with white racism (the conservative southern approach). In both cases theology becomes a servant of the state, and that can only mean death to blacks. It is little wonder that an increasing number of black religionists are finding it difficult to be black *and* be identified with traditional theological thought forms.

The appearance of black theology² on the American scene then is due primarily to the failure of white religionists to relate the gospel of Jesus to the pain of being black in a white racist society. It arises from the need of blacks to liberate themselves from white oppressors. Black theology is a theology of liberation because it is a

theology which arises from an identification with the oppressed blacks of America, seeking to interpret the gospel of Jesus in the light of the black condition. It believes that the liberation of the black community is God's liberation.

The task of black theology, then, is to analyze the nature of the gospel of Jesus Christ in the light of oppressed blacks so they will see the gospel as inseparable from their humiliated condition, and as bestowing on them the necessary power to break the chains of oppression. This means that it is a theology of and for the black community, seeking to interpret the religious dimensions of the forces of liberation in that community.

There are two reasons why black theology is Christian theology. First, there can be no theology of the gospel which does not arise from an oppressed community. This is so because God is revealed in Jesus as a God whose righteousness is inseparable from the weak and helpless in human society. The goal of black theology is to interpret God's activity as related to the oppressed black community.

Secondly, black theology is Christian theology because it centers on Jesus Christ. There can be no Christian theology which does not have Jesus Christ as its point of departure. Though black theology affirms the black condition as the primary datum of reality to be reckoned with, this does not mean that it denies the absolute revelation of God in Jesus Christ. Rather it affirms it. Unlike white theology, which tends to make the Jesus-event an abstract, unembodied idea, black theology believes that the black community itself is precisely where Jesus Christ is at work. The Jesus-event in twentieth-century America is a black-event—that is, an event of liberation taking place in the black community in which blacks recognize that it is incumbent upon them to throw off the chains of white oppression by whatever means they regard as suitable. This is what God's revelation means to black and white America, and why black theology is an indispensable theology for our time.

It is to be expected that some will ask, "Why black theology? Is it not true that God is color-blind? Is it not true that there are others who suffer as much as, if not in some cases more than, blacks?" These questions reveal a basic misunderstanding of black theology, and also a superficial view of the world at large. There are at least three points to be made here.

First, in a revolutionary situation there can never be nonpartisan theology. Theology is always identified with a particular community. It is either identified with those who inflict oppression or with those who are its victims. A theology of the latter is authentic Christian theology, and a theology of the former is a theology of the Antichrist. Insofar as black theology is a theology arising from an identification with the oppressed black community and seeks to interpret the gospel of Jesus Christ in the light of the liberation of that community, it is Christian theology. American white theology is a theology of the Antichrist insofar as it arises from an identification with the white community, thereby placing God's approval on white oppression of black existence.

Secondly, in a racist society, God is never color-blind. To say God is color-blind is analogous to saying that God is blind to justice and injustice, to right and wrong, to good and evil. Certainly this is not the picture of God revealed in the Old and New Testaments. Yahweh takes sides. On the one hand, Yahweh sides with Israel against the Canaanites in the occupancy of Palestine. On the other hand, Yahweh sides with the poor within the community of Israel against the rich and other political oppressors. In the New Testament, Jesus is not for *all*, but for the oppressed, the poor and unwanted of society, and against oppressors. The God of the biblical tradition is not uninvolved or neutral regarding human affairs; God is decidedly involved. God is active in human history, taking sides with the oppressed of the land. If God is not involved in human history, then all theology is useless, and Christianity itself is a mockery, a hollow, meaningless diversion.

The meaning of this message for our contemporary situation is clear: the God of the oppressed takes sides with the black community. God is not color-blind in the black-white struggle, but has made an unqualified identification with blacks. This means that the movement for black liberation is the very work of God, effecting God's will among men.

Thirdly, there are, to be sure, many who suffer, and not all of them are black. Many white liberals derive a certain joy from reminding black militants that two-thirds of the poor in America are white. Of course I could point out that this means that there are five times as many poor blacks as there are poor whites, when the ratio of each group to the total population is taken into account.

But it is not my intention to debate white liberals on this issue, for it is not the purpose of black theology to minimize the suffering of others, including whites. Black theology merely tries to discern the activity of the Holy One in achieving the purpose of the liberation of humankind from the forces of oppression.

We must make decisions about where God is at work so we can join in the fight against evil. But there is no perfect guide for discerning God's movement in the world. Contrary to what many conservatives would say, the Bible is not a blueprint on this matter. It is a valuable symbol for pointing to God's revelation in Jesus, but it is not self-interpreting. We are thus placed in an existential situation of freedom in which the burden is on us to make decisions without a guaranteed ethical guide. This is the risk of faith. For the black theologian God is at work in the black community, vindicating black victims of white oppression. It is impossible for the black theologian to be indifferent on this issue. Either God is for blacks in their fight for liberation from white oppressors, or God is not. God cannot be both for us and for white oppressors at the same time. *

In this connection we may observe that black theology takes seriously Paul Tillich's description of the symbolic nature of all theological speech.³ We cannot describe God directly; we must use symbols that point to dimensions of reality that cannot be spoken of literally. Therefore to speak of black theology is to speak with the Tillichian understanding of symbol in mind. The focus on blackness does not mean that *only* blacks suffer as victims in a racist society, but that blackness is an ontological symbol and a visible reality which best describes what oppression means in America.

The extermination of Amerindians, the persecution of Jews, the oppression of Mexican-Americans, and every other conceivable inhumanity done in the name of God and country—these brutalities can be analyzed in terms of the white American inability to recognize humanity in persons of color. If the oppressed of this land want to challenge the oppressive character of white society, they must begin by affirming their identity in terms of the reality that is antiwhite. Blackness, then, stands for all victims of oppression who realize that the survival of their humanity is bound up with liberation from whiteness.⁴

This understanding of blackness can be seen as the most adequate symbol of the dimensions of divine activity in America. And

insofar as this country is seeking to make whiteness the dominating power throughout the world, whiteness is the symbol of the Antichrist. Whiteness characterizes the activity of deranged individuals intrigued by their own image of themselves, and thus unable to see that they are what is wrong with the world. Black theology seeks to analyze the satanic nature of whiteness and by doing so to prepare all nonwhites for revolutionary action.

In passing, it may be worthwhile to point out that whites are in no position whatever to question the legitimacy of black theology. Questions like "Do you think theology is black?" or "What about others who suffer?" are the product of minds incapable of *black* thinking. It is not surprising that those who reject blackness in theology are usually whites who do not question the blue-eyed white Christ. It is hard to believe that whites are worried about black theology on account of its alleged alienation of other sufferers. Oppressors are not genuinely concerned about *any* oppressed group. It would seem rather that white rejection of black theology stems from a recognition of the revolutionary implications in its very name: a rejection of whiteness, an unwillingness to live under it, and an identification of whiteness with evil and blackness with good.

Black Theology and the Black Community

Most theologians agree that theology is a church discipline—that is, a discipline which functions within the Christian community. This is one aspect which distinguishes theology from philosophy of religion. Philosophy of religion is not committed to a community; it is an individualistic attempt to analyze the nature of ultimate reality through rational thought alone, using elements of many religions to assist in the articulation of the ultimate.

Theology by contrast cannot be separated from the community which it represents. It assumes that *truth* has been given to the community at the moment of its birth. Its task is to analyze the implications of that truth, in order to make sure that the community remains committed to that which defines its existence. Theology is the continued attempt of the community to define in every generation its reason for being in the world. A community that does not analyze its existence theologically is a community that

does not care what it says or does. It is a community with no identity.

Applying this description, it is evident that white American theology has served oppressors well. Throughout the history of this country, from the Puritans to the death-of-God theologians, the theological problems treated in white churches and theological schools are defined in such a manner that they are unrelated to the problem of being black in a white, racist society. By defining the problems of Christianity in isolation from the black condition, white theology becomes a theology of white oppressors, serving as a divine sanction from criminal acts committed against blacks.

No white theologian has ever taken the oppression of blacks as a point of departure for analyzing God's activity in contemporary America. Apparently white theologians see no connection between whiteness and evil or blackness and God. Even those white theologians who write books about blacks invariably fail to say anything relevant to the black community as it seeks to break the power of white racism. They usually think that writing books makes them experts on black humanity. As a result they are as arrogant as George Wallace in telling blacks what is "best" for them. It is no surprise that the "best" is always nonviolent, posing no threat to the political and social interests of the white majority.

Because white theology has consistently preserved the integrity of the community of oppressors, I conclude that it is not Christian theology at all.⁴ When we speak about God as related to humankind in the black-white struggle, Christian theology can only mean black theology, a theology that speaks of God as related to black liberation. If we agree that the gospel is the proclamation of God's liberating activity, that the Christian community is an oppressed community that participates in that activity, and that theology is the discipline arising from within the Christian community as it seeks to develop adequate language for its relationship to God's liberation, then black theology is Christian theology.

It is unthinkable that oppressors could identify with oppressed existence and thus say something relevant about God's liberation of the oppressed. In order to be Christian theology, white theology must cease being *white* theology and become black theology by denying whiteness as an acceptable form of human existence and affirming blackness as God's intention for humanity. White theo-

gians will find this difficult, and it is to be expected that some will attempt to criticize black theology precisely on this point. Such criticism will not reveal a weakness in black theology but only the racist character of the critic.

Black theology will not spend too much time trying to answer its critics, because it is accountable only to the black community. Refusing to be separated from that community, black theology seeks to articulate the theological self-determination of blacks, providing some ethical and religious categories for the black revolution in America. It maintains that all acts which participate in the destruction of white racism are Christian, the liberating deeds of God. All acts which impede the struggle of black self-determination—black power—are anti-Christian, the work of Satan.

The revolutionary context forces black theology to shun all abstract principles dealing with what is the "right" and "wrong" course of action. There is only one principle which guides the thinking and action of black theology: an unqualified commitment to the black community as that community seeks to define its existence in the light of God's liberating work in the world. This means that black theology refuses to be guided by ideas and concepts alien to blacks. It assumes that whites encountering black thought will judge it "irrational." Not understanding what it means to be oppressed, the oppressor is in no position to understand the methods which the oppressed use in liberation. The logic of liberation is always incomprehensible to slave masters. From their position of power, masters never understand what slaves mean by "dignity." The only dignity they know is that of killing slaves, as if "superior" humanity depended on the enslavement of others. Black theology does not intend to debate with whites who have this perspective. Speaking for the black community, black theology says with Eldridge Cleaver, "We shall have our manhood. We shall have it, or the earth will be leveled by our attempts to gain it."

Black Theology as Survival Theology

To speak of black theology as survival theology refers to the *condition* of the community out of which black theology arises. We can delineate three characteristics of the black condition: the ten-

sion between life and death, identity crisis, and white social and political power.

1. *The Tension between Life and Death.* Black theology is the theology of a community whose daily energies must be focused on physical survival in a hostile environment. The black community spends most of its time trying "to make a living" in a society labeled "for whites only." Therefore, the central question for blacks is "How are we going to survive in a world which deems black humanity an illegitimate form of human existence?" That white America has issued a death warrant for being black is evident in the white brutality inflicted on black persons. Though whites may deny it, the ghettos of this country say otherwise. Masters always pretend that they are not masters, insisting that they are only doing what is best for society as a whole, including the slaves. This is, of course, the standard rhetoric of an oppressive society. Blacks know better. They know that whites have only one purpose: the destruction of everything which is not white.

In this situation, blacks are continually asking, often unconsciously, "When will the white overlord decide that blackness in any form must be exterminated?" The genocide of Amerindians is a reminder to the black community that white oppressors are capable of pursuing a course of complete annihilation of everything black. And the killing and the caging of black leaders make us think that black genocide has already begun. It seems that, from the white cop on his beat to the high government official, whites are not prepared for a real encounter with black reality, and thus the black community knows that whites may decide at any moment that the extermination of all blacks is indispensable for continued white existence and hegemony.

This is the content of "the tension between life and death." By white definitions, whiteness is "being" and blackness is "nonbeing." Blacks live under sentence of death. They know that whites will kill them rather than permit the beauty and the glory of black humanity to be manifested in its fullness. Over three hundred and fifty years of black slavery is evidence of that fact, and blacks must carve out a free existence in this situation. To breathe in white society is dependent on saying yes to whiteness, and blacks know it.

It is only natural to cling to life; no one wants to die. But there is such a thing as living physically while being dead spiritually. As

long as blacks let whiteness define the limits of their being, blacks are dead. "To be or not to be" is thus a dilemma for the black community: to assert one's humanity and be killed, or to cling to life and sink into nonhumanity.

It is in this situation that black theology seeks to speak the word of God. It says that the God who was revealed in the life of oppressed Israel and who came to us in the incarnate Christ and is present today as the Holy Spirit has made a decision about the black condition. God has chosen to make the black condition *God's* condition! It is a continuation of the incarnation in twentieth-century America. God's righteousness will liberate the oppressed of this nation and "all flesh shall see it together." It is this certainty that makes physical life less than ultimate and thus enables blacks courageously to affirm blackness and its liberating power as ultimate. When persons feel this way, a revolution is in the making.

With the assurance that God is on our side, we can begin to make ready for the inevitable—the decisive encounter between black and white existence. White appeals to "wait and talk it over" are irrelevant when children are dying and men and women are being tortured. We will not let whitey cool this one with his pious love ethic but will seek to enhance our hostility, bringing it to its full manifestation. Black survival is at stake here, and we blacks must define and assert the conditions necessary for our being-in-the-world. Only we can decide how much we can endure from white racists. And as we make our decision in the midst of life and death, being and nonbeing, the role of black theology is to articulate this decision by pointing to the revelation of God in the black liberation struggle.

2. *Identity Crisis.* There is more at stake in the struggle for survival than mere physical existence. You have to be black, with a knowledge of the history of this country, to know what America means to black persons. You also have to know what it means to be a nonperson, a nothing, a person with no past, to know what black power is all about. Survival as a person means not only food and shelter, but also belonging to a community that remembers and understands the meaning of its past. Black consciousness is an attempt to recover a past deliberately destroyed by slave masters, an attempt to revive old survival symbols and create new ones.

Herbert Aptheker has written:

History's potency is mighty. The oppressed need it for identity and inspiration; oppressors for justification, rationalization and legitimacy. Nothing illustrates this more clearly than the history writing on the American Negro people.⁶

White Americans try to convince themselves that they have been innocent onlookers of that history, but black Americans evaluate the history of this country differently. For them, white Americans have pursued two principal courses of action with regard to blacks. First, they decreed that blacks were outside the realm of humanity, that blacks were animals and that their enslavement was best both for them and for society as a whole. And as long as black labor was needed, slavery was regarded as the only appropriate "solution" to the "black problem." But when black labor was no longer needed, blacks were issued their "freedom," the freedom to live in a society which attempted to destroy them physically and spiritually. There is no indication before or after the Civil War that this society recognized the humanity of black persons.

The second course of action that whites have taken is to try to "integrate" blacks into white society. Before the Supreme Court decision in 1954, whites sought to destroy black identity by segregating blacks from the mainstream of society, decreeing that this world is not for blacks. Then, under the banner of liberalism (compounded of white guilt and black naivety), "integration" became the watchword. The implications of the term are now all too clear: the destruction of black identity through assimilation. Whites wanted to integrate blacks into white society—straight hair, neckties, deodorant, the whole package—as if blacks had no existence apart from whiteness. *

In such a situation, there is only one course of action for the black community, and that is to destroy the oppressor's definition of blackness by unraveling new meanings in old tales so that the past may emerge as an instrument of black liberation. If the oppressed are to preserve their personhood, they must create a new way of looking at history independent of the perspective of the oppressor.

Black theology is survival theology because it seeks to provide

the theological dimensions of the struggle for black identity. It seeks to reorder religious language, to show that all forces supporting white oppression are anti-Christian in their essence. The essence of the gospel of Christ stands or falls on the question of black humanity, and there is no way that a church or institution can be related to the gospel of Christ if it sponsors or tolerates racism in any form. To speak of a "racist Christian" or a "segregated church of Christ" is blasphemy and the antithesis of the Christian gospel.

In another connection, Paul Tillich wrote:

Man discovers himself when he discovers God; he discovers something that is identical with himself although it transcends him infinitely, something from which he is estranged, but from which he never has been and never can be separated.⁷

Despite the pantheistic implications, there is some truth here that can be applied to the black identity crisis. The search for black identity is the search for God, because God's identity is revealed in the black struggle for freedom. For black theology, this is not pantheism; it is the conviction that the transcendent God who became immanent in Israelite history and incarnate in the man Jesus is also involved in black history, bringing about liberation from white oppressors. This is what black theology means for black persons who are in search of new ways of talking about God, ways that will enhance their understanding of themselves.

3. *White Social and Political Power.* Black theology is the theological expression of a people deprived of social and political power. Poverty-stricken whites can manage to transcend the oppression of society, but there is nothing blacks can do to escape the humiliation of white supremacy except to affirm the very attribute which oppressors find unacceptable. It is clear to blacks why they are unwanted in society, and for years they tried to make themselves acceptable by playing the game of human existence according to white rules, hoping that some day whites would not regard the color of their skins as the ultimate or only criterion for human relationships. But to this day, there is little evidence that whites can deal with the reality of physical blackness as an appropriate form of human existence. For this reason, blacks are oppressed socially

even if they have economic and intellectual power. Jews in Nazi Germany found out the hard way that economic power was no security against an insane government that had the political and social power to determine the fate of Jewish existence.

Realizing that white racism is an insanity comparable to Nazism, black theology seeks to articulate a theological ethos consistent with the black revolutionary struggle. Blacks know that there is only one possible authentic existence in this society, and that is to force a radical revolutionary confrontation with the structures of white power by saying yes to the essence of their blackness. The role of black theology is to tell blacks to focus on their own self-determination as a community by preparing to do anything the community believes necessary for its existence.

To be human in a condition of social oppression involves affirming that which the oppressor regards as degrading. In a world in which the oppressor defines right in terms of whiteness, humanity means an unqualified identification with blackness. Black, therefore, is beautiful; oppressors have made it ugly. We glorify it because they despise it; we love it because they hate it. It is the black way of saying, "To hell with your stinking white society and its middle-class ideas about the world. I will have no part in it."

The white view of black humanity also has political ramifications. That is why so much emphasis has been placed on "law and order." Blacks live in a society in which blackness means criminality, and thus "law and order" means "get blacky." To live, to stay out of jail, blacks are required to obey laws of humiliation. "Law and order" is nothing but an emphasis on the stabilization of the status quo, which means telling blacks they cannot be black and telling whites that they have the moral and political right to see to it that black persons "stay in their place." Conversely 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 consequences to white society. We have reached our limit of tolerance, and if it means death with dignity or life with humiliation, we will choose the former. And if that is the choice, we will take some honkies with us. What is to be hoped is that there can be a measure of existence in dignity in this society for blacks so that we do not have to prove that we have reached the limits of suffering.

The person in political power is a strange creature, and it is very

easy for such a one to believe that human dignity has no real meaning. In André Malraux's *Man's Fate*, Konig, chief of Chiang Kai-shek's police, illustrates the inability of the man in political power to understand the condition of the oppressed. Intrigued by Kyo's participation in the Shanghai insurrection, Konig asks his prisoner:

"I have been told that you are a communist through dignity. Is that true?" Kyo replies: "I think that communism will make dignity possible for those with whom I am fighting." But Konig asks, "What do you call dignity? It doesn't mean anything." "The opposite of humiliation," says Kyo. "When one comes from where I come, that means something."⁸

Because oppressors do not come from the land of the oppressed, they do not have to attach any meaning to the demands of the oppressed.*

We can conclude, then, that survival is a way of life for the black community. Black theology is a theology of survival because it seeks to interpret the theological significance of the being of a community whose existence is threatened by the power of nonbeing. We are seeking meaning in a world permeated with philosophical and theological absurdities, where hope is nonexistent. In existential philosophy the absurd is "that which is meaningless":

Thus man's existence is absurd because his contingency finds no external justification. His projects are absurd because they are directed toward an unattainable goal.⁹

This is certainly the feeling of blacks as they seek to make sense out of their existence in a white society. What can we say to a community whose suffering and humiliation is beyond rational explanation? The black condition is inflicted by the white condition and there is no rational explanation of it.

Speaking to the black condition characterized by existential absurdities, black theology rejects the tendency of classic Christianity to appeal to divine providence. To suggest that black suffering is consistent with the knowledge and will of God and that in the end everything will happen for the good of those who love God is

unacceptable to blacks. The eschatological promise of a distant, future heaven is insufficient to account for the earthly pain of black suffering. We cannot accept a God who inflicts or tolerates black suffering for some inscrutable purpose.

Black theology also rejects those who counsel blacks to accept the limits which this society places on them, for it is tantamount to suicide. In existential philosophy suicide is the ultimate expression of despair. If we accept white definitions of blackness, we destroy ourselves.

Black theology, responding to the black condition, takes on the character of rebellion against things as they are. In the writings of Camus, the rebel is the one who refuses to accept the absurd conditions of things but fights against them in spite of the impossibility of arriving at a solution. In black theology, blacks are encouraged to revolt against the structures of white social and political power by affirming blackness, but not because blacks have a chance of "winning." What could the concept of "winning" possibly mean? Blacks do what they do because and only because they can do no other; and black theology says simply that such action is in harmony with divine revelation.*

Black Theology as Passionate Language

Because black theology is survival theology, it must speak with a passion consistent with the depths of the wounds of the oppressed. Theological language is passionate language, the language of commitment, because it is language which seeks to vindicate the afflicted and condemn the enforcers of evil. Christian theology cannot afford to be an abstract, dispassionate discourse on the nature of God in relation to humankind; such an analysis has no ethical implications for the contemporary forms of oppression in our society. Theology must take the risk of faith, knowing that it stands on the edge of condemnation by the forces of evil. Paul Tillich calls this an "existential risk":

The risk of faith is an existential risk, a risk in which the meaning and fulfillment of our lives is at stake, and not a theoretical judgment which may be refuted sooner or later.¹⁰

Blacks know what it means to have their lives at stake, for their lives are at stake every moment of their existence. In the black world no one takes life for granted: every moment of being is surrounded with the threat of nonbeing. If black theology is to relate itself to this situation, it too must take the risk of faith and speak with a passion in harmony with the revolutionary spirit of the oppressed.

The sin of American theology is that it has spoken without passion. It has failed miserably in relating its work to the oppressed in society by refusing to confront the structures of this nation with the evils of racism. When it has tried to speak for the poor, it has been so cool and calm in its analysis of human evil that it implicitly disclosed whose side it was on. Most of the time American theology has simply remained silent, ignoring the condition of the victims of this racist society. How else can we explain the theological silence during the period of white lynching of black humanity in this nation? How else can we explain the inability of white religionists to deal relevantly with the new phenomenon of black consciousness? And how else can we explain the problem white seminaries are having as they seek to respond to radical black demands? There is really only one answer: American theology is racist; it identifies theology as dispassionate analysis of "the tradition," unrelated to the sufferings of the oppressed. ✕

Black theology rejects this approach and views theology as a participation in passion in behalf of the oppressed. Seeking to be Christian theology in an age of societal dehumanization, it contemplates the ultimate possibility of nonbeing (death) with the full intention of affirming the ultimate possibility of being (life). In the struggle for truth in a revolutionary age, there can be no principles of truth, no absolutes, not even God. For we realize that, though the reality of God must be the presupposition of theology (the very name implies this—*theos* and *logos*), we cannot speak of God at the expense of the oppressed.

Insistence on a passionate theology is a call for an anthropocentric point of departure in theology. I realize that such a call must raise the eyebrows of all who have felt the impact of Karl Barth. But let me state clearly that this approach is not a return to nineteenth-century liberalism with its emphasis on the goodness and worth of humanity (which always meant white European

humanity). Every black intellectual is aware that when liberals spoke of "inevitable progress" and the "upward movement of Western culture," it was realized at the expense of blacks who were enslaved and colonized to secure "progress." My concern is altogether different. Though my perspective begins with humanity, it is not humanity in general, not some abstract species of Platonic idealism. I am concerned with concrete humanity, particularly with oppressed humanity. In America that means black humanity. This is the point of departure of black theology, because it believes that oppressed humanity is the point of departure of Christ himself. It is this concern that makes theological language a language of passion.

My characterization of black theology as passionate theology is analogous to Paul Tillich's analysis of "the existential thinker." Quoting Feuerbach, he writes:

Do not wish to be a philosopher in contrast to being a man . . . do not think as a thinker . . . think as a living, real being . . . think in Existence. Love is passion, and only passion is the mark of Existence.¹¹ ✕

In fact, Tillich quotes Feuerbach as saying, "Only what is as an object of passion—really is."¹² The existential thinker is a thinker who not only relates thought to existence but whose thought arises out of a passionate encounter with existence. As Kierkegaard put it in his definition of truth:

An objective uncertainty held fast in the most passionate personal experience is the truth, the highest truth attainable for an Existing individual.¹³ ✕

Relating this to black theology, we can say that the definition of truth for the black thinker arises from a passionate encounter with black reality. Though that truth may be described religiously as God, it is not the God of white religion but the God of black existence. There is no way to speak of this objectively; truth is not objective. It is subjective, a personal experience of the ultimate in the midst of degradation. Passion is the only appropriate response to this truth. ✕

To be passionate, black theology may find it necessary to break with traditional theological concerns. Such concerns are often unrelated to oppressed existence. Like the pre-Civil War black preachers, it believes that racism is incompatible with the gospel of Christ, and it must, therefore, do everything it can to reveal the satanic nature of racism, so that it can be destroyed. It will be difficult for white theologians to participate in this reality—because of their identification with unreality. Creative theological reflection about God and God's movement in the world is possible only when one frees oneself from the powers that be. The mind must be freed from the values of an oppressive society. It involves prophetic condemnation of society so that God's word can be clearly distinguished from the words of human beings. Such a task is especially difficult in America, a nation demonically deceived about what is good, true, and beautiful. The oppression in this country is sufficiently camouflaged to allow many Americans to believe that things are not really too bad. White theologians, not having felt the sting of oppression, will find it most difficult to criticize this nation, for the condemnation of America entails their own condemnation.

Black thinkers are in a different position. They cannot be black and identified with the powers that be. To be black is to be committed to destroying everything this country loves and adores. Creativity and passion are possible when one stands where the black person stands, the one who has visions of the future because the present is unbearable. And the black person will cling to that future as a means of passionately rejecting the present.

2

The Sources and Norm of Black Theology

The Function of the Sources and Norm

Though I have alluded already to some of the factors which shape the perspective of black theology, it is necessary to say a word about what are often designated as the sources and the norm in systematic theology. Sources are the "formative factors" that determine the character of a given theology. The norm is "the criterion to which the sources must be subjected." That is, the sources are the relevant data for the theological task, whereas the norm determines how the data will be used. It is often the case that different theologies share the same sources, and it is the theological norm which elevates one particular source (or sources) to a predominant role.

Karl Barth and Paul Tillich provide useful examples. Both agree that the Bible and culture are important data for theology. But an examination of their work shows that culture plays a much larger role in Tillich's theology, whereas the Bible is crucial for Barth. For Barth scripture is the witness to the word of God and thus is indispensable to doing theology. Tillich, on the other hand, agrees that the Bible is important, but holds that the task of making the gospel relevant to the contemporary mind is equally important. If pressed, Barth (at least in his later years) would not deny that Tillich's concern for relevance is a legitimate concern; yet Barth is

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