

WHAT CAN WE LEARN FROM BLACK THEOLOGY?

There is no doubt among scholars in the field that the development of black theology has been one of the major developments on the American theological scene in the past decade. The roots of black theology and the major contribution to its development are well known and do not need to be recited here. Today we have a different task: to see how black and white theologians can speak to each other and learn from each other as we do our respective work. It is well recognized that up to this point black theology has developed as a self-conscious articulation of the black community and has not been primarily concerned to be in dialogue with white theologians. Some of the more articulate black spokesmen have, in fact, insisted that black theology is by blacks and for blacks and that it is not intended for edification of, or criticism by, the white community. Some white theologians have nevertheless attempted to understand the issues raised by black theology and have attempted to draw on it for insights into the political and cultural framework of a white society.¹ In my previous work I have explored some of the internal and external tensions raised by black theology; in this paper I propose to extend the parameters of the discussion about the implications of black theology for white theologians. Before we turn our attention to that specifically, however, let me make several preliminary (and precautionary) comments:

1) I recognize that the term "black theology" is distinct from the broader realm of black scholarship. Not every black who is engaged in the study of black religion or religious life would be called a black theologian, and certainly there are blacks who are reflecting upon black experience and using religious but non-Christian categories. For the purposes of this paper, however, I will assume that black theology refers specifically to the attempt to understand the Christian tradition from the vantage point of black history and black experience. I shall not attempt to incorporate some of the distinct movements in African Christian thought, nor am I concerned to dwell on the differences between African and American versions of black theology.

2) I recognize that black theology is, as William Jones pointed out, a growing discipline, and that it cannot at this stage be expected to demonstrate the diversity or nuances which we associate with more established theological positions. This does not mean, of course, that it is

¹ See Frederick Herzog, "God: Black or White," *Review and Expositor* 67, no. 3 (Summer 1970); Rosemary Ruether, "Is There a Black Theology? The Validity and Limits of a Racial Perspective," in her *Liberation Theology* (Paramus, N.J., 1972) pp. 127-44; John J. Carey, "Black Theology: An Appraisal of the Internal and External Issues," *THEOLOGICAL STUDIES* 33 (1972) 684-97.

immune from criticism or analysis, but is simply to acknowledge its neoteric character. The recent interests expressed in developing black ethics and social ethics are examples of the growing boundaries of black theological awareness.

3) One must acknowledge, furthermore, that rightly or wrongly there is a tendency in the white community to take James Cone as the normative model for black theology in America. Given the impact of Cone's writings and his own articulate and pungent style, this is perhaps understandable; but we ought to recognize that black theology is a broader and more complex phenomenon than the perspective of James Cone, even though in any mode of analysis Cone is a major figure to be reckoned with. The differences of internal style and nuance make assessments of black theology difficult for the outsider, but they certainly do not justify a position by the white community that black theology is marked by internal dissension and hence speaks to the broader Christian community with a weakened voice. It is my contention that, in spite of differences of outlook and emphasis, there are some central thrusts to black theology and that these do indeed have some broader implications for the wider Christian community.

4) I am aware of some of the problematic dimensions of our task. We know that there are some black theologians who, sharing in the mentality of black separatism, do not think that it is necessary or desirable to discuss the nature of black theology with whites. Other black theologians do not object as strongly in principle but feel that the present time is premature. Some whites do not feel that black theology has anything to say to them, and others feel that the value of black theology is in what it can spur whites to do with and for their own communities. I am further aware that, given the racial orientation of black theology, there are those within its ranks who hold that no one apart from the black tradition can criticize it. I stand against that mentality, both because I think that stance reflects a sectarian exclusiveness and because I think all theological endeavors which grow out of a Christian matrix have to stand the scrutiny of the broader Christian community. It is precisely this interaction and criticism which are the checkpoints against cultism and fanaticism. Without apology, then, just as I have learned much from black theology, I have also attempted to become engaged with it.

I

I shall deal initially with the positive contributions of black theology to our present theological situation. In my earlier paper I indicated that black theology raises the questions of the place of culture in religious understanding, for the understanding of hermeneutics, and for our understanding of ecclesiology. I continue to feel that these are valid

issues, but here I want to focus primarily on positive contributions rather than issues. I shall deal with problematic issues later in the paper.

1) The work of black theologians has clarified for us the importance of the black experience as a distinctive but frequently overlooked dimension in the American Christian tradition. As Lawrence Jones and Gayraud S. Wilmore have indicated,² there is a richness and distinctiveness to the black heritage which does not easily fit into matters of white consciousness or white experience. We could say, of course, that Michael Novak and Andrew Greeley have done the same thing in reminding us of the distinctiveness of the experience of ethnic America, but cumulatively black theology has pressed upon us the recognition of the plurality of experience and the need to find appropriate categories which can incorporate each experience meaningfully. We know that we can no longer take white history as normative or white institutions as necessarily authoritative. In many ways our society is still reeling under the impact of that realization, and theologically this by itself gives ample rationale and justification for an indigenous black theology.

2) From black theology we have been reminded that theology is most effective and persuasive when it is "engaged" with the important issues of the time. This was, of course, one of the many legacies of Reinhold Niebuhr to the theology of the twentieth century, but other theological currents have weaned us away from that insight. Black theology has drawn upon the impressive social witness of Martin Luther King and continues to represent dynamism, expectation, emotion, and passion in its interpretation of the black experience and the struggle for full personhood in an oppressive society. Even though there are limitations to the categories of oppressor and oppressed, we must recognize that these have been powerful categories around which to understand racist tendencies and structures in American society. It is certainly legitimate for every viable theology to take a specific norm, or as one might say, to have a "strategic concentration," and the conscience and theological sensitivities of white Christians have been stirred by the legitimate black rebellion against a dehumanizing order.

Black theology has thus reminded us that the theological enterprise is not an intellectual game, and is not the preserve of universities, seminaries, and libraries. It deals with people, hurts, hunger, priorities; it may entail suffering, jail, ostracism. That is what it means to be "engaged." In this way black theology stands as a corrective to the theology of hope, which tends to focus on God's future rather than on the

² See Lawrence Jones, "They Sought a City: The Black Church and Churchmen in the Nineteenth Century," *Union Seminary Quarterly Review* 26 (1971) 253-72, and Wilmore's *Black Religion and Black Radicalism* (Garden City, N.Y., 1972).

harsh realities of the present. Deotis Roberts speaks for many blacks and whites when he says:

Instead of moving from the future to the present, we move from the present to the future—at least to begin. Only after we are aware of what God is doing in this world to make life more human for blacks may we speak of God's future breaking into our present and look forward to the new age.³

3) Black theology has clarified for us how deeply imbedded the white church is in the American political and economic power structure. As if we did not know it before, the backlash of middle America against commitments of major denominations to help black liberation movements dramatized this insight. Through the attempt of black theology to establish a critical distance from white theology and church life, many of us have seen more clearly the ideological superstructure between the American ethos and church practices. The judgmental word of black theology here, pointing out the "false awareness" between religion and American society, has been an extremely valuable contribution. The black church, whatever its ties with black folk religion, has in most instances been more of a center of community and humanity than has the white church. Perhaps its capacity to be a center of community has been precisely because it has been so alienated from the main centers of power in this country. Whatever else might be said about the black movement, it has clarified both the elitism and the ecclesiasticism which have shaped white Christianity, and has forced us into broader categories to understand the Christian heritage.

4) Another lesson follows closely from this: the nature and meaning of power. It is not accidental that black theology has been shaped so significantly by the black power movement, for that movement saw earlier than many of us the need for an autonomous black economic and political base of support. As Rosemary Reuther has suggested,

Power is man restored to his integrity and creativity so that his actions directly and effectively express his soul. Power is participation in the making of one's destiny; power is effective action. Power is the ability to create autonomously. Power alienated from this integrity becomes oppressive, but man's redemption is the restoration of human power from alienation to self-directed and self-fulfilling creativity.⁴

It is suggestive to think that the redeemed society would be a place where our alienation from power is overcome. Both politically and theologically we have learned that social change comes only through pressure and that

³ *Liberation and Reconciliation: A Black Theology* (Philadelphia, 1971) p. 157.

⁴ *Liberation Theology*, p. 133.

pressure is exerted best from a consolidated economic base.

5) We can point to one of the newer developments in black theology and say that it opens to us alternative approaches to social ethics. The June 1973 conference in Atlanta of the Society for the Study of Black Religion gave some focus to this new development and implied that many of the priorities and values which have gone into traditional Christian thinking about social ethics have been shaped by both white and middle-class biases. From the counterculture and other sources we have learned the same truth about individual ethics, but now we can see that there has been an intrinsic parochialism in much of our traditional perspectives on social ethics. The fruits of this new development have yet to ripen, but it is a sobering word to the white community.

6) We must acknowledge that black theology has deepened and sharpened our sense of evil. Even though white theologians may be tempted to say that for black theology evil is practically equated with racism, and that surely evil has to be understood in the more complex matrix of psychological, economic, and political dimensions, even so black theology has registered a telling blow in pointing out the scope and pervasiveness of racism in modern society. Whites are only beginning to see how entrenched and immutable are racist assumptions. Racism may well be the essence of sin, practically an ontological reality in the present age. Black obsession with this point is therefore not just paranoia, but a major truth which awakens new sensibilities for white Christian theologians.

In all of these ways black theology has made an impressive contribution to the contemporary theological scene, and even those who do not share in its heritage or in its passion can understand the legitimacy and the pervasiveness of its influence.

II

Just as we can learn positively from black theology, however, we can also learn some things negatively. As a theological movement, some of its stances and deficiencies are obviously clearer to those standing apart from it and who have some distance from it than they are to those who share its intensity and passion. In this section I wish to comment on three areas where black theology at best appears problematic to white interpreters.

1) One does not have to read much of the literature of black theology to detect within it strong sectarian elements. If we define sectarianism as minority groups with exclusivist tendencies, segregated from the broader culture, and committed to the conviction of the presence of the spirit,⁵

⁵ See Peter L. Berger, "The Sociological Study of Sectarianism," *Social Research* 21 (1954) 466-85.

then we can see the sectarian quality of James Cone's theology. When Cone says that "There can be no *white churches*, because the white reality is the work of him who seeks to destroy humanity by enslaving men to false ideologies regarding race. The Church of Christ must be black, that is, it must be related to the realities of human misery and to what that means to people of color in white society," he is taking an essentially sectarian stand. When he denies that white theology can criticize or inform black theology, he is reinforcing the exclusivism that is characteristic of all sectarian and cultic groups. This exclusivist tendency borders on an inverse racism, and I believe Rosemary Ruether is correct when she says that "Black theology walks a razor's edge between a racist message and a message that is validly prophetic, and the character of this razor's edge must be analyzed with the greatest care to prevent the second from drifting toward the first."⁶ As is the case with any theology that is so politically partisan, there are tendencies to oversimplify the situation. The tendency in black theology, for example, to speak of an entire society as divisible into the two groups of oppressor and oppressed does not allow for the full appreciation of the moral ambiguities which characterize all forms of social existence. Every social system and form of government known to man has been imperfect and will continue to be so. Although we have seen a number of balanced and reflective interpretations of black theology,⁷ at least in Cone's perspective there is a notable lack of self-criticism. There is little recognition in Cone's work that sin is a pervasive human category, and that it is just as distorting for black visions and intentions as it is for white. Cone's answer to this charge is that the recognitions of these ambiguities are second-order rather than first-order theological questions, given the present state of oppression in the society.⁸

Most white interpreters will see in the work of Deotis Roberts, Major Jones, Preston Williams, and others more balanced perspectives on the black experience and black religion than is found in the work of Cone. There is little that is possible or even appealing about the prospect of dialogue with one who stands on the grounds of sectarian exclusivism. For black theology to move beyond parochial boundaries, it must like all

⁶ *Op. cit.*, p. 129.

⁷ Cf. William Jones, "Theology and Methodology in Black Theology: A Critique of Washington, Cone and Cleage," *Harvard Theological Review* 64 (1971) 541-57, and Joseph Washington, "Roots and Fruits of Black Theology," *Theology Today* 30 (1973) 121-27.

⁸ In Cone's defense, however, one might cite the following words of Reinhold Niebuhr: "Without the ultra-rational hopes and passions of religion, no society will ever have the courage to conquer despair and attempt the impossible; for the vision of a just society is an impossible one that can be approximated only by those who do not regard it as impossible. . . . For what religion believes to be true is not wholly true but ought to be true, and may become true if its truth is not doubted" (*Moral Man and Immoral Society*, p. 81).

other theological currents be able and willing to enter into dialogue and to criticize itself.

2) One detects, furthermore, in black theology a propensity to become an ideology for the oppressed. Its primary categories are sociological, and through the work of someone like Albert Cleage, Jr., it emerges as little more than a black ideology intertwined with black nationalism. Legitimate questions can be raised vis-à-vis Cleage's work as to how much of the Christian heritage is retained and how much the symbols and vocabulary of Christianity have simply been adopted by a black nationalist movement. Recent work in the sociology of knowledge has clarified for all of us how our world views and theological vocabularies are shaped by our national, sexual, and class orientations. We have seen how easily the Christian message has been appropriated by a white power structure to provide a supportive ideology, and the black movement must be cautious lest it do the same thing in turn. Here Frederick Herzog's comments about political theology are also germane to black theology:

The worst thing that could now happen would be that political theology were understood as invitation to develop a Christian ideology for this or that political task. What political theology can help us to understand is why religious people still exploit their neighbor. We must see ourselves time and again in the mirror of the Christ event so that we realize how much we continue to reveal ourselves. The shaping of an ideology would probably afford us a new opportunity for hiding behind a front.⁹

Ideologies perpetrate stereotypes and force us to interpret experience to preconceived categories. The clear focus on the Christ-event can both illumine our blind spots and give us direction for identity and purpose. Cultural, political, and sociological categories are easily infused into theological thinking as it talks about oppressors and the oppressed, and one would hope that such factors can be carefully dissected and analyzed by black theologians.

3) The parochial boundaries of black theology become clear when it is seen in the broader context of the contemporary discussion about liberation theologies. The tendency of black theologians to either symbolically or metaphorically describe forces of good and evil with the categories of "black and white" is both ambiguous and probably inadequate. If black theology is to have anything more than a sectarian appeal, one would expect its interpreters to recognize that there are many kinds and levels of oppression in this world: oppression of whites by whites, blacks by blacks, between nations, classes, and sexes. As

⁹ *Liberation Theology* (New York, 1972) p. 261.

Rosemary Reuther has suggested, "If black theology wants its stress on 'oppression' to stand for a universal anthropology, then 'the racial metaphor' must make clear that blackness refers to all oppressed people in every situation."¹⁰ It is not yet clear whether it is the intention of black theology to inform the white community as well as clarify the meaning of black experience. There are deep ambivalences within the community of black theologians on this point. From my standpoint, I would agree with both Deotis Roberts and Major Jones that the eventual goal is the renewal of all levels and strata of society, white as well as black, and hence the development of theological categories which are persuasive over and beyond the black community would be a helpful step forward in the evolution of black theology. One specific observation I have at this point is that black theology would learn much from engagement with theologies of liberation which grow out of Third World, counterculture, and female experience. I recognize that from the black power movement black theology has inherited a tendency to be suspicious of political and theoretical alliances, but I would think that through some dialogue with other liberation movements black theology could be enriched without losing its own interests and identity.

I have attempted in this section of the paper to address some criticisms to black theology in a congenial and open spirit. If we can learn positively from its emphases, then we can also learn negatively from what (at least from an outsider's perspective) appear to be some deficiencies. My intention here has been to give a word of caution about the sectarian, ideological, and parochial tendencies discernible in black theology.

III

Having acknowledged the many contributions which black theology has made to the contemporary theological climate, it now behooves us to ask if we can discern something of a future model for dialogue between black and white theologies. Important as this is, I do not think we can be sanguine about its possibilities. Serious engagement with black theology forces one to recognize deep hurts, lingering suspicions, and profound problems of communication between the black and white communities. There is a smoldering anger deep in the black consciousness which may be impossible for whites to understand, and genuine communication may be traumatic for blacks and whites alike. Even so, I feel that some kind of dialogue is desirable and necessary, and I would like to suggest some areas which might merit our reflection and discussion.

1) Black theology has clarified for us the distinctive characteristics of black experience and has shown us that this experience needs its own

¹⁰ *Op. cit.*, p. 136.

categories and symbols. If this point is pressed to an obvious extreme, it implies that there may be as many theologies as there are diversities of experience. This realization could lead to an insurmountable cleft between groups whose life experiences are fundamentally different. There is, however, a way of overcoming that impasse: we can perhaps find a model here in the ground rules of the Christian-Marxist dialogue, where groups came together from fundamentally different orientations and outlooks. They could, however, agree that there were some basic human problems which transcended their own categories, institutions, and language systems: such problems as the meaning of authentic life, problems of fulfilment and self-respect, problems of guilt and suffering, peace and disarmament, and the alleviation of hunger. From that perspective, therefore, we might ask if there are not problems of human fulfilment that are broader than simply black or white fulfilment: problems of alienation and poverty, meaning and dignity, sin and guilt. These affect millions of people over and beyond our black and white categories. The strength of black theology has been in its specific desire to be contextual to black experience. Christian theology, however, can be contextual without being exclusivist or racist, important as black experience or white experience is. We might, therefore, question the appropriateness of our categories. If we can agree to address problems which transcend black and white experience, although known in black and white experience, we might find a basis for a common theological dialogue. To put this matter dialectically, if black theology can be seen as an antithesis which emerged to the prior thesis of white theological categories, we might ask what is the shape and form of the synthesis of the interaction of these two perspectives.

2) One notices in the work of Deotis Roberts and Major Jones an indebtedness to the theologians of hope. On the other hand, there are strains of black theology which are more indebted to traditions of political realism and pragmatism. The question would be how to combine a political realism with a theology of hope. At least three factors could be operative here: (a) the acknowledgment of the self-deceptions and false paths which we have each traveled in the past; (b) the search for a universal humanism as opposed to any national or racial exclusivity; and (c) a program of combating fanaticism in one's own ranks. Both the black church and the white church look back on ambiguous histories. There have been false prophets, misplaced values, misdirected aspirations, and fanatics of various stripes. What we need is honesty in the assessment of our own paths and an openness to how we can learn from each other in a new day and time.

Surely, white theology can learn from the engaged stance of black theology, and no longer purport to be dealing with something antiseptic

and bloodless. Black theology can break away from its stereotypes of whites to recognize that there have been both revolutionary and reactionary forces within the white Christian heritage, and that judgment on the white tradition is never fair if only the reactionary elements are taken into account. Even if both groups would now reappraise Martin Luther King's political strategies, his vision for a redeemed humanity is still a powerful and viable one. As Gustavo Gutierrez has reminded us, "Christian hope opens us in an attitude of spiritual childhood to the gift of the future promised by God. It keeps us from any confusion of the kingdom with any one historical stage, from any idolatry towards unavoidably ambiguous achievement, from any absolutizing of revolution."¹¹

3) The area of social justice, along with the corollaries of force and violence, has to be on future agenda. If as white theologians we acknowledge the depth of racism, then we cannot turn a deaf ear to the radical black voices who are trying to overcome it. White theologians such as Jacques Ellul and Jürgen Moltmann tend to take a dim view of violence as a means towards social justice,¹² noting that it invites retaliation in kind and develops ruses for its justification. Yet James Cone and other blacks, as well as Third World spokesmen, have clarified that there is covert violence already operating in our social systems, and that it is far more destructive and debilitating than the occasional outbursts of rage from frustrated minorities. In many instances overt violence seems to be the only recourse of the oppressed. Third World theologians have seen this more readily than have white Western theologians; we have shied away from endorsing violence even as a desperation measure of the poor and needy. Whether the American situation is bad enough to merit this line of thinking, however, remains to be resolved, and the whole area needs further exploration from both black and white theologians. Here is where we need to be theologically sensitive and pragmatically wise.

4) The emerging interest in theology as autobiography may say something to future dialogues between black and white theologians. What experiences do we bring to these meetings? What elements of personal interests, loyalties, hurts, and expectations have shaped our theological sensitivities? Are there common levels of experience which are reflected here? Our engagement with each other is not just academic and detached, but the interaction of personal stories, our being shaped by particular regional contexts, and molded by our own religious traditions. Openness and honesty in this area could make us more

¹¹ *A Theology of Liberation* (Maryknoll, N.Y., 1973) p. 238.

¹² See Ellul's *Violence* (New York, 1969) pp. 84-108, 127-31, and Moltmann's *Der gekreuzigte Gott* (Munich, 1972) *passim*.

modest in our claims and able to better understand the interests and viewpoints of our colleagues. Perhaps it is only through this style of interaction that we can begin to grasp the depth of the hurts and alienation which exist among us.

Black theology has become, in my opinion, not only a rallying point for the black Christian community but the conscience for the white community. Perhaps the white theological community shows best that it has learned from black theology best when it attempts to apply the same calls for renewal and social change to the white power centers of church and society. The task of that renewal is gigantic and difficult, and in it we will need the support of the black community. However we differ in our past experiences and perspectives, it seems to me that both black and white theologians can agree with Robert McAfee Brown's paraphrase: Theologians in the past have tried to understand the world; the important thing now is to change it.

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