

# BLACK THEOLOGY



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*A Black theologian from South Africa explains what it is all about.*

THE TERM 'BLACK THEOLOGY' is used in reference to the whole area of theological thinking by the Black Man in the world. It is negatively inspired by the fact that in the past, it is felt, theologians have been insensitive to, and neglectful of certain experiences of mankind in our life together on this planet. These experiences are those of the poor man, the down-trodden, and, the Black Man usually falling into these two categories, therefore, the experience of the Black Man. It seeks to redress this and is thus 'addressed to blacks as an identifiable group.'<sup>1</sup> Used outside the United States of America the term comprises all the theological reflections of the Black Man from within his genuine *zits in leben*, not aping nor copying (the Whiteman) but based on his own confrontation with God in his unique and particular situation through the ages. It recognises that all Theology is reflected and given birth to from within a social and cultural experience and is, therefore, apologetical. It claims the right of the social and cultural setting of the Black Man and his experiences, alone and within the general family of mankind, as an equally legitimate basis as any for reflection about God, Man and Society. It is summed up in a characteristic quip which did the rounds in the first A.A.C.C. Assembly in Kampala in 1963—'The last word in Theology does not have to come from Edinburgh, Marlborough, Oxford, Cambridge, Harvard or Yale'.<sup>2</sup> It may as well come from Kampala, Yaounde or Atlanta.

### It did not begin in The U.S.A.

My own point of view is that Black Theology, as I have tried to define it above, did not begin in the United States. Indeed our American brothers with T.V. cameras all around, mass media and communication gadgets about, and the news-worthiness of their electrically charged situation, have stolen our thunder and helped to make Black Theology, even as all the cause of the Black Man, famous. I will therefore let them speak first:

According to Preston Williams, Asst. Professor of Social Ethics at Boston University, and co-author of the 'Atlanta Document on Black Theology':

'Theology can be defined as reflection on faith of a community, as an attempt to order systematically that faith and the experience of it to the end that the com-

munity may know itself more fully. The theologian chooses an integrating concept to illuminate both the faith and the nature of reality. At various times in history, nature, grace, hope, revolution have all served as integrating concepts, for while theologians are intended to be universal they reflect concrete and particular events or cultures. Thus we speak of German, British, American or Roman theologies, of romantic, pragmatic, process or historical theologies. In short, since the theologian necessarily carries on his work in a particular concrete culture his method of analysis and his integrating concept are in some degree rooted in that culture. Black Theology is another of the many forms theology has taken. Potentially, it has all the faults and all the virtues of any other form. If it claims to be pre-eminent, that claim must be verified, not simply asserted.'<sup>3</sup>

The document which Preston Williams was defending or interpreting, itself makes the declaration that:

'Black Theology is a theology of liberation. It seeks to plumb the black condition in the light of God's revelation in Jesus Christ, so that the black community can see that the gospel is commensurate with the achievement of black humanity. Black Theology is a theology of 'blackness'. It is the affirmation of black humanity that emancipates black people from white racism thus providing authentic freedom for both white and black people. It affirms the humanity of white people in that it says 'no' to the encroachment of white oppression.'

Then follow some very choice affirmations:

'The message of liberation is the revelation of God as revealed in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Freedom is the Gospel. Jesus is the Liberator! 'He hath set me to preach deliverance to the captives' (Luke 4: 18). The demand that Christ the Liberator imposes on all men requires all blacks to affirm their full dignity as persons and all whites to surrender their presumptions of superiority and abuse of power.'<sup>4</sup>

This was Atlanta, Georgia, June 1969. To many it sounded something very new. But the same sentiment had been expressed, albeit in less polemic terms, by the delegates of the A.A.C.C. Youth Assembly in Nairobi, December 1962: They declared:

'In the freedom which Jesus Christ has given us, we affirm ourselves to be African Christians. To be Chris-

tion in this time and place means to be fully engaged in the whole of African life! Following Jesus Christ, our first task is to identify ourselves with all men (this really meant all African men, educated, uneducated, traditional etc.) to seek to serve them, and to love them. It is through such participation in life that we shall experience continually the cross in which is our freedom. We may make mistakes, but our confidence is in the Holy Spirit.

But this was not quite clear until a forthright rejection of outside interference was written into it:

'We are convinced that anyone, or any organisation or any missionary body wishing to help us with our problems must be willing first to submit themselves to the requirements of our situation. All the efforts of our youth and student movements have to be tested by and geared to, these our convictions and intentions.'

I think Preston Williams speaks for us all when he sums up what Black Theology is all about thus:

'Black Theology asserts that God's word for every man is freedom and liberation. At this moment in history, liberation of the black man is God's mighty act, and all black men must participate in it. The task of the white man is simply to 'let my people go'. The gospel is Freedom. Jesus is the Liberator. No black Christian sees the gospel as a message of enslavement or Jesus as commanding him to surrender his black humanity.'

Again

'The meaning of black theology is quite clear: the black churchman must stand with his black community. If there is tension between the community and faith, he must make the tension creative...'

Thus

'They do not condemn the Christian faith. What they condemn is the racist interpretations and institutions that characterise much of Christianity.'

For the same reason the Nairobi Assembly was so very strong on the combination *African Christian*.

#### Black Theology in Africa

The difference between American Black Theology enthusiasts and the Africans is that the Americans do their theologising in the dust and heat of political warfare, hence their militancy and impatience; whereas we can claim to work in an atmosphere of physical political freedom and comparable calm. We feel the encroachment of the West or White man more in the cultural, theoretical-philosophical or ideological area of life than in the politico-social. Therefore, the Africans appear to come at it more relaxed and with less phlegm as in this statement from Abidjan:

'By African theology we mean a theology which is based on the Biblical faith and speaks to the African 'soul' (or is relevant to Africa). It is expressed in categories of thought which arise out of the philosophy (world view) of the African people...To speak of African theology involves formulating clearly a Christian attitude to

other religions. It must be pointed out that the emphasis is basically on *Christian* theology, which could be expressed through African thinking and culture. In changing Africa many people are engaged in trying to rediscover or capture the 'soul' of Africa. The Church has a duty to study the best method of helping to create the 'new' man and community of Africa. Hence the problem of working out an African theological expression is urgent.'

Obviously African Theology, like Black Theology of the U.S. is born on the arena of human and cultural encounter, out of the frustration of trying to make Christian truths comprehensible; these truths themselves clothed in foreign concepts and a totally different world view. The expression I have used previously is 'Christ dressed in foreign swaddling clothes'. The attempt of both American and African Theologies is to rip the foreign swaddling clothes and thus expose the authentic naked *kyruga*. As Preston Williams puts it - 'The task of Black Theology is to mine Christianity in order to bring to light its real truth and strength.' Therefore I do not agree that Black Theology is for the Black Man only, as Preston Williams and some of his colleagues often want to indicate. If it is God's truth it sheds light on, it is universal truth, applicable to all man, white, brown, etc. of course, black. Its uniqueness lies in the fact that it has been refined in the fire of experience of the black man - and I am in fire!

Speaking for Africa: what we cannot buy in Western theology is its inevitable dependence on Western culture, civilisation or whatever you want to call it. Its Greek Roman thought-forms and modes of expression are the 'swaddling clothes' that we need to tear open in order to get to Christ. The white man could not have done otherwise. Every man understands truth and expresses it according to his situation. This Westernising trend begins already in the Bible days: Stoicism, agnosticism and other current philosophical modes of thought already found their way into the Biblical writings. The accretions increased as Western civilisation advanced, so that by the time Christianity came to Africa it was a tightly-packed and sealed packet. If theology is reflection, in African theology we try to break the seal of Western thought-forms and culture so that we can come face to face with Christ, and in Him see ourselves, and others. 'Selfhood' is the word used in Africa as the goal of this search. I was struck by the fact that Preston Williams uses 'Self-determination' a term we used when we were struggling for political freedom. 'Thus in standing firm for our freedom (which Christ has given us, the Nairobi Assembly would add) we shall be participants in the task of reconciling the world unto God.'

#### Objections and Criticism

(a) Black Theology has been criticised as being too militant and polemical. First, I would answer that most creative theological thinking over the ages has been done in an atmosphere of controversy and polemics, e.g. the early Church, The Reformers, etc. Secondly, if theology is apologetics then it is by nature polemical. Black Theology has to become especially so because of the mass of theological thought it has to make its points across, and the 'other cul-

tural prejudice against the black man and his thinking capacities through the ages.

(b) The other criticism is—why set out consciously to theologise i.e. build a theology? Answer, because the pressure of frustration is so great on us. We are smothered to death by Western theologies which to us are human fabrications, changing fashions daily, and sometimes, we think vying with each other in seeking so much to cut God to size that some have now actually got rid of Him (I mean the *God in dead thing*). We have to be serious; we cannot stand still. So, if we find we cannot use the tools of Western theology, we have consciously to seek others. Perhaps this way not only we ourselves, but the whole world of faith could be saved.

(c) My own criticism of the American version of Black Theology, and we expressed it to our brothers who, sat with us in the theological discussion study group of A.A.C.C.'s second Assembly at Abidjan last September, is that it builds too much on the sufferings of the past through which the black man has gone: 'They want to utilize the religious resources which, refined and purified by the sufferings of generations of blacks, exist in the black community today'. True. There is a legitimate axe to grind. But, the sufferings of the black are not 'all' and 'only' his 'experience'. Even in the United States, as the whole world recognises in music, drama and sport etc., the other side of Black American experience of God is patent. The (vaira) joy and celebration of faith that comes through in their song from 'Satchmo' to *He shall overcome*, the humour and general unattachedness to the transitoriness of life which can only come through a knowing, out of practical living, that our real citizenship denied us, and violently contested by us here 'is in heaven' whatever we understand by that.

(d) Another point we made quite clear to our American brothers was something like: 'We have heard enough from you about Black Theology, for—sake, go ahead now and theologise black!...'

\*For one of my attempts at African Theologising see 'The God of My Fathers and My God' printed in the Centenary Issue of *S.A. Outlook*, October, 1970.

### W.C.C. on Racism (from p. 17)

within the churches to educate, inform, interpret to and involve the clergy and laity of the church in action programmes to eliminate racism and racial discrimination within church and society.

- (b) make the elimination of racism and racial discrimination a primary educational task of the church. This will involve (1) making a thorough review of existing parish education materials and programmes to eliminate overt or covert racist content, and (2) a new creative effort, to develop parish education material and programmes designed to contribute toward the elimin-

ation of racism and racial discrimination and to develop the conscientization of children, youth and adults.

- (5) The Central Committee urges the W.C.C. staff and committees and member churches to begin an immediate study and analysis of their involvement in the support and perpetuation of racism in the following areas:

- (a) investment policies and practices;
- (b) employment training and promotion schedules;
- (c) the ownership, management and control of property;
- (d) the ownership, management and control of church and church-related institutions;

and that the results of this study and analysis be reported to the Central Committee through the P.C.R. at its next meeting. Where this has already been done, the results of this study and analysis should be updated and included in the report.

- (6) The Central Committee urges the member churches themselves or through their respective national councils to:

- (a) investigate and analyse the military, political, industrial and financial systems of their countries to discover and identify the involvement and support provided by these systems in the perpetuation of racism and racial discrimination in the domestic and in the foreign policies of their countries and coordinate their findings through the Programme to Combat Racism;
- (b) develop individually or in cooperation with other churches, strategies and action programmes designed to redirect these systems to contribute to the elimination of racism and racial discrimination, and to promote racial justice, and
- (c) develop in cooperation with the Programme to Combat Racism and between themselves joint strategy and support in their efforts to eliminate racism and racial discrimination in church and society.

To this end the Central Committee welcomes the invitation of South African churches for consultation on joint strategy and action.

### How to Teach Religion (from p. 29)

church representatives, but without effect. Are the Churches now going to ignore the plight of their membership (pupils and teachers), or will some attention be paid to the dichotomy being forced upon so many of them?

5. *Realistic thinking about R.I.* Whatever is to be done in schools in the name of religious instruction (or, preferably, religious education) must be relevant to the needs of the pupils, and realistic in its aims and methods—i.e. showing awareness of the resources and possibilities.