

Aufsatz

“Black culture, then, is God’s way of acting in America”: Black Theology, Culture, and Identity¹

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Abstract

Black theology emerged as a discipline in the aftermath of the Civil Rights movement. Beyond representing the formalization of African American religious thinking systematically, it complemented the discourse of black identity emerging forcefully in the 1960s. The religio-cultural discourse conceptualized black identity within and as the direct continuation of a black religious tradition but it also represented the crisis situation in the era and after the disruption of the Kingsian leadership. The paper seeks to map the complex cultural context of the advent of black theology and to examine the religio-cultural aspect of the theological discourse.

Keywords: Black theology, black consciousness, Black Aesthetics

For the apparent militancy of early black theology, it appears to closely follow the precepts of the black power movement. Much as such ties are undeniable, the complexity of the 1960s provides a much-layered context that influenced heavily the emerging black theological school. Thus, beyond the new black aesthetics representing a more militant, nationalistic ideal of blacks, the formation of black theology was shaped in a milieu of disenchantment with the outcome of the Civil Rights movement “offer[ing] no effective solution to identity crises of this kind, or to the whole problem of cultural marginality” (Runcie 1976, 186) and the black community’s

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anxiety about where to proceed from the partial success of the movement, in which the strict racial binary promised to loosen up, yet the social and cultural reality continued to deny such progress, problematizing black identity politics.

James H. Cone is regarded as the father of black theology, whose book *Black Theology and Black Power* heralding the advent of a formal black theology came out in 1969, closely followed by *A Black Theology of Liberation* in 1970. The time of the publications was by no means arbitrary as black theology was “born out of the chaos of deferred cultural fulfillment” (Anderson 2016, 86). Both the domestic occurrences closely connected to the black community, i.e., the Civil Rights movement, the Black Power movement, and the Black Arts movement in America; and, internationally, similar movements in Britain, Latin America, and on the African continent as well as the emergence of third world theologies foresaw the extension of the black cultural revolution into the realm of theology. The self-assertive actions of the mainly accommodationist Civil Righters advocating the integration of African Americans into American society, the nationalism and aggressive awareness-raising of the Black Power advocates enhanced an aesthetics based on empowerment and racial solidarity.

As the leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the leading spokesperson of the Black Power movement, Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture) explained in *Black Power: Politics of Liberation in America* in 1967: “Throughout this country, vast segments of the black communities are beginning to recognize the need to assert their own definitions, to reclaim their history, their culture; to create their own sense of community and togetherness” (1992, 40). His statement did not simply signify a political manifesto to counter negative stereotypes and to reinstate the racial binary but to allow the black community to construct “a positive image of itself that *it* has created” (1992, 40). With spiritual overtones, he evoked a Pan-Africanist spirit of belonging, “a soul connection from each individual to the greater whole [and] a community filled and blessed with Black love” (1996a, 189). The community bonding had clearly Pan-Africanist horizons, yet its immediate scope targeted the African American community. The approach reflected disenchantment with white America’s lack of engagement in the realization of civil rights and, further, the reassertion of the black self-help tradition. As Carmichael asserts, “What our community needs more than anything is a return to self-love and self-rule” (1996b, 171). His statement can be traced back to the self-help tradition connected to the black church as the de facto only institution of self-help in the peculiar institution and to the prevailing tenets of black nationalism (see Wilmore 1973, 136), but more closely, the Garveyist sentiments of black nationalism in the first decades of the twentieth

century. Reinvigorated by the Black Power movement with shades of Marxism (see Robinson 1983) and the militant religio-cultural sect of the Black Muslims in the 1960s, however, the demand for the reinterpretation of the black self and solidarity came to the foreground with renewed urgency and anger (much as the latter was not a new phenomenon in the black community [see Gayle 1971, xvii]), which shaped a “revolutionary struggle” (Fuller 1971, 9) for “for the minds of the (masses of the) People” (O’Neal 1971, 54).

Besides economic and political goals, the revolutionary attitude, therefore, was implemented on a cultural level in that a new black aesthetics was defined (one that blended into a tradition of black aesthetics [see Taylor 2016, 12]). On the one hand, it aimed to deny objecthood by radically staging “the commodity who speaks” (Moten 2003, 8), claiming and performing (an always already) subjectivity, which was subversive regarding the white power structure displacing while also emplacing African Americans in it. As Paul C. Taylor explains, many writers in the era endeavored to undertake the “self-conscious creation of non-European or non-white aesthetic principles, authentically black principles that were meant to be more consonant with black practices” (2016, 16). In line with the latter, on the other hand, in the process of decolonizing the mind (as, for example, “colonized” meaning for Malcolm X “my poor, ignorant, brainwashed black brothers mostly too deaf, dumb, and blind, mentally, morally, and spiritually” [1965, 203]), the black aesthetics revolved around racial pride, self-love, and solidarity. It sought to establish a context decentering white discourses and centering on approaches to cater to black lives in a rewarding way. As John O’Neal revealed, “Black as a physical fact has little significance. Color, as a cultural, social, and political fact, is the most significant fact of our era. Black is important because it gives us ground from which to fight—a way to feel and think about ourselves and our own reality—a way to define” (1971, 53). Recontextualizing the African American self thus served the purposes of empowerment and consciousness-raising.

It was but natural that sentiments of black pride and racial solidarity were to evolve formally in the realm of theology both as a criticism of the church—as an institution and the symbol of society—and of the “colorless” theologies and as the appropriation of the religio-cultural framework to include, but, further, to focus on African Americans. In the third world including Latin America and Africa, similar activities were coming to the foreground (in fact, it is arguable that there had been a protest movement evolving, starting much earlier as Cone’s *Spiritual and the Blues* [1972] shows or as, regarding Latin America, Christian Smith’s *Emergence of Liberation Theology* [1991] testifies). While in the US, the focus was on race, in Latin America, the primary focus was put on class issues. One of

the founding fathers of Latin American liberation theology, Gustavo Gutiérrez, addressed social inequality in his *A Theology of Liberation* (1971), criticizing the church and society on a very similar basis to blacks in America. When he claimed that “The denunciation of injustice implies the rejection of the use of Christianity to legitimize the established order” (1973, 125), Gutiérrez echoed the African American resentment of the white church and the ideological use of Christianity to maintain the social and political status quo. Rejecting “the cowardice that keeps silent in the face of the sufferings of the poor” (1985, 97), he called for solidarity with and among the poor, i.e., for a “praxis of solidarity in the interests of liberation and [. . .] inspired by the gospel” (1973, 27). Gutiérrez along with other theologians considered “peoples of the Third World [. . .] the proletariat of today’s humanity” (Smith 1991,137), centering their theological work on social issues.

Struggling with a (post)colonial context in the 1960s, African (liberation) theology, on the other hand, focused on culture as a theological method: “The Scriptures are also used to liberate the oppressed who are often victims of their own culture when culture is used to interpret the word of God” (Muzorewa 1989, 55), besides racial and social issues dominant especially in South Africa. The oppressive structures of apartheid determined the evolution of theology in predominantly political directions also supported by the initiating work of some white theologians as, for example, Beyers Naudé (see Walshe 1987, 305) and influenced by the Black Consciousness Movement led by black activists like Steve Biko. Biko’s black pride echoed James Cone’s belief of “God and Christ siding with the radically oppressed” (Ferm 1986, 65). In the struggle to establish a genuine African theology, however, predominant was the return to African roots in an attempt to reconcile indigenous African cosmological thinking with Christianity. In the process of authentication from within, African theologians maintained that “the selfhood of the church in Africa, the African churches’ own theological thinking had to resonate with Africa’s contextual situation” (Gichaara 2005, 77). The context argued for was seen as the traditional and unified (diverse as it is yet) cosmology. As John Mbiti argued in 1969, “Since traditional religions occupy the whole person and the whole of his life, conversion to new religions [. . .] must embrace his language, thought patterns, fears, social relationships, attitudes and philosophical disposition” (1970, 4).

It is in this domestic and international climate that black theology made its advent. The refusal of the racial binary also evolved as a straightforward criticism of white Christianity. In the US, the words of the Nation of Islam leader, Malcolm X (later Sunni Islam convert), verbalizing the long-standing view of the black community reverberated with religious thinkers: “Christianity is the white man’s religion. The Holy Bible in the white man’s

hands and his interpretations of it have been the greatest single ideological weapon for enslaving millions of non-white human beings” (1965, 246). The sentiment that had saturated the African American community reemerged in black theological thinking, expressed forcefully in the “Black Theology Statement” in 1969 that “White theology sustained the American slave system and negated the humanity of blacks” (1993, 37). It regarded “white” theology as “a theology of the white oppressor, giving religious sanction to the genocide of Amerindians and the enslavement of Africans” (Cone 2010 [1970], 4), dismissing it as “ideological distortion of the gospel of Jesus” (Cone 1975, 88). The critique entailed, on the one hand, the color-blindness of white theologians for addressing theological issues in an “abstract, unembodied” manner (Cone 2010 [1970], 5) and “in isolation from the black condition” (2010 [1970], 9), demonstrating a lack of concern of black issues; on the other, their justification of slavery theologically (Cone 1975, 43). As a forerunner of formalized black theology, Vernon Johns poignantly exclaimed once: “The thing that disappoints me about the Southern white church is that it spends all of its time dealing with Jesus after the cross, instead of dealing with Jesus before the cross” (Branch 1988, 339). The overt and harsh criticism of white churches and theologians condemned their silence and insufficient participation in the struggle against racial discrimination (for white involvement in the Civil Rights movement see Findlay 1997).

The slaves’ realization and the consequent refusal of the inadequacy of “white” Christianity to cater to their needs and condition carried over into post-slavery times and erupted powerfully in 1966 when black pastors formulated the “Black Power Statement”: “We must first be reconciled to ourselves lest we fail to recognize the resources we already have and upon which we can build. We must be reconciled to ourselves as persons and to ourselves as an historical group. This means we must find our way to a new self-image in which we can feel a normal sense of pride in self” (1993, 22). Reconciliation meant empowerment through reworking traumatic memories of slavery, which also pertained to making sense of it by insisting on black subjectivity and resistance. In the rehistoricizing process, or as Cecil Wayne Cone put it, amid “a historical *possibility* for existence in a situation of contradiction” (1975, 137), it included, from a religio-cultural perspective, blackening religion and making blackness an ontological category. As Albert B. Cleage, Jr. announced, “Our rediscovery of the Black Messiah is a part of our rediscovery of ourselves. We could not worship a Black Jesus until we had thrown off the shackles of self-hate. We could not follow a Black Messiah in the tasks of building a Black Nation until we had found the courage to look back beyond the slave block and the slave ship without shame” (1993, 104). Rediscovering the black self as an a priori category through the religious served as a means to deracialize it.

It may seem that the pendulum swung in the other direction as the often fiery language may suggest counter-racism, sometimes playing on thoughts of overt aggression against whites—as when Cone seemed to admit thoughts of “throwing a Molotov cocktail into a white-owned building and watching it go up in flames” (2010 [1970], 26). However, on the whole, it cannot be maintained that the religio-cultural phenomena of the period reflected counter-racism, especially as black theology could be described by inner heterogeneity with more radical and moderate thinkers from the beginning. The forcefully assertive overtones must be seen as attempts to counterbalance the “conscienceless power” of white America toward the “powerless conscience” of African Americans (qtd. in Cone 1984, 12). The “Black Manifesto” refers to America as “our beloved land” (1993, 19), and even though Cone criticizes it along with others like Vincent Harding as integrationist and offering “no creative social analysis and thus no program for radical change” (Cone 1984, 88), he, too, admits that it “does not mean that we blacks are for separation” (Cone 1975, 221). The apparent militancy reflected on a dilemma that pervaded the whole of black theology in a time of multilayered turmoil: as Cone reveals in a later book, the often aggressive coinage divulged the undertaking “to integrate a cleavage in black life: Martin and Malcolm, Christianity and blackness, Christian love and a militant defense of black dignity. This was the paradox that captivated us and demanded a theological resolution. It was also the paradox that revealed our most serious limitations” (Cone 1984, 89). The limitations undoubtedly included a rigid framework of interpretation, which allowed approaching any matter, be it political, social, cultural, and theological, within the scope of a narrow racial binary, thus also neglecting issues important to groups within the African American community such as women. Concomitantly, black theology can be seen as counter-hegemonic in so far as, it “offers a viable counter-hegemonic theological interpretation that disrupts traditional theological categories” (Walton 2009, 272). Functioning as a “mirror of white racism” (Anderson, 2016, 90), black theology sought to deconstruct it by simultaneously reconstructing African American subjectivity with theological means.

Beyond the racial binary directly instigating black theological arguments, there was also the need to establish and acknowledge a link to a black theological tradition as well as black religious culture. Black theologians attempted in both their theological and non-theological writings to give an interpretation of this link—often with clearly Black Power informed overdetermination. In fact, from a theological point of view, the inquiries were in danger of being flawed and self-contradicting due to the uncritical insistence on a black theological tradition in emphasizing the prevalence of Black Power and resistance in it—for example, when the Christian theologian Cone insisted on a black tradition

of judges similar to the judges in the Old Testament and included in their rows the black Muslim leader, Malcolm X (2010 [1970], 51). W.E. B. DuBois with his *Souls of Black Folk* (1903) and *The Negro Church* (1903) reckon among others as earlier accounts of an African American religious tradition, but in the 1960s and 1970s the validation of the religious tradition emerged as imperative as it contributed to foregrounding the black cultural self as historically justified. Besides the aforementioned book on the spirituals by Cones, historians and scholars of religion strove to establish the connection like Harding (see 1993, 47), Albert J. Raboteau’s *Slave Religion* (1978), or John W. Blassingame’s *The Slave Community* on slaves, the “overwhelming majority of [whom] still believed in the religions of their African fathers” (1972, 72). The latter tenet was emphasized by black theologians (C. Cone 1976, 25) with Africa as “one of the primordial religious images of great significance” (Long 1971, 58); but, more distinctively, the emphasis was laid on an evolving and persistent African American religious tradition based on “survival, self-help, elevation, chosenness, emigration, unity, reparations, liberation” (Wilmore 1995 [1973], 236). The body of black religious tradition enabled black theologians to insist on a particular African American culture built upon “the bedrock of black faith” (Wilmore 1995 [1973], 236).

The cultural discourse helped thus to establish a theological argument as black theologians looked to define themselves, on the one hand, in contrast to white society and its “divine racism” (Jones 1998 [1973], 3) and, on the other, from within African American culture. As Henry H. Mitchell expressed forcefully, “the Black hermeneutic seek to look into the message of the Black past and see what the Black Fathers could be saying to Black people today” (1970, 11). Culture was regarded as the context, “where the sacred reveals itself” (Hopkins 2005, 80) and which also served as the historical validation of the black revolutionary thinking—a tenet persisting in the course of the development of black theology: “Christian revelation is a cultural dynamic colored by the social conditions and collective experiences of peripheral communities in the biblical witness” (Hopkins 2005, 65). The cultural was merged with the theological to address the burning contemporary issues from an African American perspective. Consequently, blackness was theologized as an ontological category so that the a priori category of blackness could be recycled to be identity constructive in the present:

in order for the oppressed blacks to regain their identity, they must affirm the very characteristic which the oppressor ridicules—*blackness*. Until white America is able to accept the beauty of blackness (“Black is beautiful, baby”), there can be no peace, no integration in the higher sense. Black people must withdraw and form their own culture, their own way of life [. . .] What is needed is not integration but a sense of worth in being black, and only black people can teach that. Black consciousness is the key to the Black man’s emancipation from his distorted self-image (Cone 2008 [1969], 18-19).

Affirmation revolved around biblical topoi, but foremost “the Exodus-event of the Old Testament and the Christ-event of the New Testament” (C. Cone 1976, 23) in direct parallel with the Israelites’ stories in the Bible and Jesus’s redemptive activity to form “reconfigurations of the classical black aesthetic: black survivalist culture and black revolutionary self-assertion” (Anderson 2016, 89).

Black theological argumentation was not devoid of European theological traditions, though, just as Black Power “owes more in its origin to Europe than to Africa” (C. Cone qtd. in Pinn 2010, 39); in fact, it relied on them as much as it denounced them. This may have been part of the reason why Deotis J. Roberts said at the time regarding “the *black* or *white* conception of ethics” that “in the long run, *gray* is more honest and realistic” (1971, 14). His stance shows that black theologians represented already at an early stage a heterogeneous group comprising more and less radical, integrationist thinkers—well documenting an age of transition. Roberts’s *Liberation and Reconciliation: A Black Theology* (1971) embraced the Black Power revolutionary ethics; however, he considered the black radical self an interstitial stage until equality could be reached: “Any black separatism, though arising directly from white resistance, must be understood as a ‘strategic withdrawal’ for unity and empowerment, and not as permanent. Authentic existence for blacks and whites can only be realized finally in reconciliation between equals in the body of Christ” (1971, 25). In this way, Roberts appropriated the aesthetics of black religiosity to empower and emancipate, and, thus, to liberate African Americans. Rather in contrast to Cleage’s concept of the Black Messiah, for Roberts “the black Messiah encounters the black Christian on the level of personal experience in the black church in its setting in the black community enabling black Christians to overcome their identity crisis” (1971, 130). From his perspective, it was the black religious experience that was seen as liberating: “The black Messiah liberates the black man” (1971, 140); but, in the post-revolutionary phase, “the universal Christ reconciles the black man with the rest of mankind” (140). Black theologians like Roberts already managed to look beyond the mere racial binary.

The birth of black theology must be seen as a complex and multilayered religio-cultural phenomenon embedded in the domestic as well as international social and political turmoil of the 1960s. Nevertheless, it emerged as an eruption of or arrival at the next stage of accumulated authentic cultural energy in the mold of American racism. Disenchantment with the partial success of the Civil Rights movement created a vacuum as to whereto proceed with the movement. In this way, black theology reflected the new, revolutionary understanding of the black self forged in the movement(s), but it also represented the struggle for continuity involving a memory politics informed by the new black aesthetics. The

narrow focus of the early black theology echoed values of Black Pride such as racial solidarity, empowerment, or self-determination; however, it also confined the scope of inquiry to the narrow racial binary signifying its serious limitations. The critique came from within the camp, as later black theologians sought to claim a place in the discipline, including black womanist theology, ecotheology, and, generally, theology of a more inclusive scope. The “crisis theology,” as Andrew Victor terms it (2016, 87), proved significant, as a step, by way of a “counter discourse,” to pave the way toward a “religiously informed cultural criticism” (Pinn 2004, 56).

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