

INTRODUCTION

Theological reflection is central to the ongoing life of the African American Christian church. Theology is essentially the church's response to the autobiographical impulse, and it grows out of the need to proclaim with authority and commitment the identity and mission of the church in the world. That is, in theology, the church both asks and answers the questions, "Who are we, and where are we going?" It has unfortunately been the case that the work of black theologians and the work of African American churches have often been construed as separate types of activities. It would not be an exaggeration to say that the leadership of many black congregations, large and small, and the ranks of professional black theologians have looked on one another with caution and, at times, suspicion. This has resulted in a chasm in the black religious community between the theology and practice of Christian faith, leaving the churches with a religion that appears to be no more than a cultural performance, and the theologians with a theology that seems to consist only of abstract concepts. The question, then, is "How can the dialogue between professional black theologians and other members of the African American churches be strengthened so that it becomes clear that Black Theology is rooted in the faith of the church and that the faith of the church is given intellectual clarity and expression in Black Theology?"

This intellectual clarity is not a substitute for, but a complement to, genuine, personal, and communal expressions of faith. In other words, African American church leaders should be reminded that leadership means more than habitually performing the liturgical functions necessary to the structural maintenance of the community. Genuine church leadership requires sound theological judgment. At the same time, professional black theologians

need to be reminded that theology is more than the writing of scholarly articles and books. Genuine theological judgment requires a praxiological commitment to the community of faith. Theologians as theologians cannot tell other Christians what they should believe; rather their task is to help the community understand more clearly what they do believe and to assess those beliefs in light of the major sources of Christian revelation.

Black Theology differs from traditional theology in much the same way that African American Christianity differs from the Christianity of Europe and the North Atlantic. Since the first Africans set foot on this soil, people of African descent have had a singularly unique experience in the New World. They brought with them an inherent philosophical heritage, including a distinctive religious sensibility; they encountered the most brutal form of slavery in human history; and they were introduced to North Atlantic Christianity. Because there was no precedent for the experience of people of African descent, they created distinctive ways of conceptualizing and speaking about their ultimate concerns. Black Theology is a continuation of that discursive tradition. Therefore, African American theological development can be best understood as the convergence of an African-derived worldview, the complexities of the experience of slavery, oppression, survival, rebellion, and adjustment in the New World, and their encounter with the biblical text. These realities shaped the African American intellect and spirit.

Black Theology reflects the passion, feeling, and expressiveness of African American Christianity. It must be in touch with the “guts” of black religion. It must have, as Karl Barth once put it, “heavenly fire.” Without this quality, it would forfeit its claim to authenticity. On the other hand, theological reflection is not synonymous with the sermon, the litany, or the testimony, although they all participate in the same ethos of religious expression. Black Theology is also a formal, self-conscious, systematic attempt to interpret the faith of the church. The form need not always be linear, nor the system based on Western philosophy. Black theologians may employ explanatory and formal devices such as story or biblical commentary. Black Theology is passionate and incisive, reflecting what Paul Tillich called “ecstatic reason.” The important factor, however, is that the theology that results must coherently interpret the experience of black people and the gospel.

The contemporary African American church needs theological acumen as much as it ever has. Not only must attacks on the integrity of black religion

be resisted, but the continual evolution of religion in America and the often surprising turns that it takes require a constant “testing of the waters” by theologians of the Black Church. However, the need for theological reflection goes beyond the issues of the survival or integrity of the Black Church as an institution. In a world where black people, people of color, and poor people are continually frustrated in their attempt “to have life, and have it more abundantly,” black theologians must speak to those systems, persons, and conditions that impede the worship and adoration of the God of the gospel and the living of a just life.

In light of these factors, there are several tasks that black theologians have before them today. *The first task is to clarify the contexts—historical, socio-political, cultural, and intellectual—in which African American Christian faith is affirmed.* The historical context of the faith of black Christians includes a shared legacy of slavery, the struggle to adapt to legal manumission, and the ongoing battle to be recognized as full human beings. The development of slave religion and its relation to the early freedom struggle among people of African descent is the historical source of contemporary black Christian faith. African slaves who embraced Christianity also modified and shaped it to meet their existential needs and saw, even in the contorted presentations of the gospel by some white people, a continuity between what they knew of God in Africa and the God of the Bible. Gayraud Wilmore describes the essential relationship between faith and freedom in the development of black religion:

An exceedingly elastic but tenacious thread binds together the contributive and developmental factors of black religion in the United States as one distinctive social phenomenon. It is the thread of what may be called, if properly defined, “black radicalism.” Black religion has always concerned itself with the fascination of an incorrigibly religious people with the mystery of God, but it has been equally concerned with the yearning of a despised and subjugated people for freedom—freedom from the religious, economic, social, and political domination that whites have exercised over blacks since the beginning of the African slave trade.¹

This thread can be traced through the public annals of professional historians, but is also present—perhaps in even more striking manifestations—in the autobiographies, personal narratives, and journals of African American

women and men who felt compelled to give testimony to the work of God in their lives.

The sociopolitical context for the re-radicalization of African American Christianity in the twentieth century is the civil rights/black power movement. Scholars differ on which aspect of the substantively crucial period in American history is most directly responsible for the religious and theological revival in the black community. Warner R. Traynham argues that the civil rights movement and its most visible leader, Martin Luther King Jr., were most responsible for the religious and theological reawakening.² Both James H. Cone and J. Deotis Roberts suggest that the radical critique of American racism inherent in the black power movement is the source of contemporary Black Theology and prophetic black Christianity.³ Gayraud Wilmore argues that radical black Christianity and Black Theology in the twentieth century emerged after many of the leaders of the civil rights movement had been coopted by the white power structure and before the full measure of black power had been seized.⁴

It seems clear that while there are differences in interpretation, the civil rights movement and the black power movement are part of a continuous tradition of protest and struggle in African American religious life. The civil rights movement was based on the notion that the equality of black people was a function of their legal status in American society. Equality had been denied by the Fugitive Slave Law of 1850, the Dred Scott decision (1857), and the Plessy vs. Ferguson decision of the Supreme Court (1896). These legal conscriptions were subsequently reversed or eliminated by the Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka Supreme Court decision of 1954 and the voting rights laws passed in the 1960s. These advances were engineered by people and groups directly or indirectly related to the African American church. They were visible evidence of the reawakening of the Black Church militant that had slumbered for decades.

Not since the end of slavery, however, had the attitudinal and psychological dimensions of racism come to the forefront of discussion. The black power movement was, in part, the result of the failures and limitations of the early civil rights movement, especially its dependence on enfranchisement as a tool for liberation. Black power advocates asserted that control of the institutions that regulated *intellectual commerce* and *social values*, not legal prescriptions, were the most effective means for achieving the liberation of

black people. Racism was seen as an attitudinal, psychological, and structural aspect of American life. Therefore, it could not be eliminated simply through legislation because people tend to structure their behavior according to deep-seated values and not in strict accordance to extraneous norms. Thus civil rights laws were widely ignored. The psychological, attitudinal, and structural aspects of racism also meant that racism was supported by the pseudo-Christian values prevalent in American society.

The most profound contribution of the black power movement to the development of Black Theology was its challenge to black people to show how they could be black and Christian at the same time. This challenge was multidimensional. Black Muslims called Christianity a “white man’s religion” that had nothing to do with the spiritual heritage of African Americans. Black secular Marxists argued that Christianity was an unscientific, irrelevant, and counterrevolutionary illusion that only hindered the liberation of black people. Pan-Africanists eschewed Christianity to the extent that it obscured the reality that black people were part of the African Diaspora. Black nationalists rejected Christianity on the grounds that it prevented black people from seeing the necessity of separating themselves from white culture as a prerequisite for their liberation.⁵

Black Theology was in part a response to these objections. Black theologians were not willing to concede Christianity to its white abusers and based their legitimacy on the fact that African American Christianity was the result of the encounter of black people with the liberating essence of the gospel. Black theologians viewed the history of black resistance to white oppression, and the fact that the leaders of that resistance were more often than not black Christians, as evidence that the black liberation struggle was rooted in black religion. Black theologians stressed that the connection with Africa was more evident in black religious life than anywhere else. Further, they pointed to the identification of black Christians with the biblical people of Israel as an example of an appropriate nationalist sentiment in the religious setting.

In addition to the historical and sociopolitical contexts, the cultural and intellectual contexts in which African American faith is affirmed are part of the focus of this first task of theology. Black religion was shaped in the midst of a profound cultural conflict between the inherited cosmology, value systems, and philosophical constructs that African slaves brought with them to the New World, and the protean culture of the colonies that were

struggling to define themselves over against the dominant European paradigm, and in light of the ironic position of the colonies as an imperialist presence. (The colonists presumably came to the New World to escape tyranny, but found themselves in the position of tyrants in relation to Amerindians and Africans.)

The cultural matrix of the African tended to affirm the infinite worth of the African as a human being in relation to other human beings and under the auspices of a benevolent creator God. The community (the no longer living, the living, and the yet to be born) was affirmed as the basic social unit and as the social framework in which the individual was defined. All creation, including nature, was seen as infused with the spiritual presence of God.

The formative culture of the colonies demeaned the African as a human being, by associating blackness, and thus black people, with evil; by denying the existence of an indigenous African culture and civilization; and by rejecting the notion that Africans had any idea of a Supreme Being, thereby condemning them to the state of God-forsakenness and justifying their continued enslavement and exploitation. The culture of the colonies devalued community and idolized the individual, making the protection of private property and individual rights the basis for social and political organization. Further, nature and those living beings thought to be most closely related to it became, in the minds of the colonists, the “wilderness” and the “savages,” both of which were to be tamed, subdued, and domesticated.

This cultural conflict has not been resolved in contemporary American life. As African Americans struggle with the pull of a secular, materialistic, hedonistic, narcissistic, and pessimistic culture, they also experience, to varying degrees, the magnetic hold of a spiritual, integrated, communal, and hopeful, counter-culture. African American Christian faith is in part a response to this cultural conflict, attempting to navigate, with varying degrees of success, a course between the old and the new, the familiar and the strange.

The intellectual context of black faith reflects a similar struggle on the ideational and practical level. In the eighteenth century Gustavus Vassa, Phyllis Wheatley, and Jupiter Hammon attempted to reconcile the African intellectual tradition with their crisis-ridden status as slaves in the New World. In the nineteenth century, Henry Highland Garnet, T. Thomas Fortune,

Martin R. Delaney, and Maria Stewart attempted to resolve the tension between the problematic presence of African Americans with their relationship to Africa and the emerging national identity of the United States.⁶ In the first two-thirds of the twentieth century Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. Du Bois, Marcus Garvey, Mary McCloud Bethune, Martin Luther King Jr., and Malcolm X attempted to relate the plight of African Americans to that of the insurgent liberation movements in Africa and the so-called Third World. The ideas generated in these historical moments owe much of their power and pertinence to the influence of African American Christianity. These attempts to orient people of African descent in an alien environment were shaped by the fundamental encounter of a sternly held faith and the fierce desire for freedom. Moreover, Black Theology is the ideological progeny of these moments. Therefore, black theologians must take seriously these intellectual contexts and sources.

The second task is to articulate, interpret, and assess the essential doctrinal affirmations of African American faith for the contemporary African American community of faith. In spite of the unique history of the evolution of African American faith, this faith cannot be reduced to its contexts. That is, sociological reductionism, cultural reductionism, or ideological reductionism does not reach the spiritual essence of black faith. Empathic intimacy with the heart of African American faith requires that we move beyond the *contexts* to the *content* of that faith.

Briefly stated, the content of African American faith is the story of God's dealings with God's people and the world. There are, in fact, two stories involved here. On one hand, the Bible presents what I call "canonical stories." The canonical story is what we construe to be the message of the Bible and tradition. For African Americans that story has always been, in some paradigmatic form, the story of the liberation of the Hebrew slaves and Jesus' liberating mission in his time. The elements in that story are linked by the providential will of God. That is, clearly God has been in control of events from the beginning and stands as the guarantor that, in the end, "everything will be all right." It is this guarantee that is the basis of faith. Yet there is a danger of distortion present here. It is also possible that this story can become a safe haven for those Christians who yearn to return to the pristine past or to create a religious subculture in which they might escape the demands of postmodern life.

On the other hand, African Americans bring their own stories to bear on the Bible and tradition. They bring what I call “folk stories.” Because we are historical creatures, we suffer under the tragic limitations of human finitude, and folk stories are our way of expressing the fears, frustrations, and struggle as well as the determination for freedom from existential anxiety, political oppression, and cultural exploitation that constitutes our experience. We live uncertain of whether our hopes will be vindicated or whether the struggle for freedom will end; therefore we can only infer that, given the faithfulness of God, one day “the wicked shall cease from troubling, and the weary shall be at rest.” That is, African American existence may be characterized by a rugged determination for freedom and not by any certainty that this freedom will be realized. There is a danger of distortion connected with this story as well. This existence may also portray a kind of pathos and despair in which anomie and disorientation in a mass culture and secular society have all but extinguished the fires of the will and determination.

The black theologian must relate the “canonical” story, in its prophetic mode, with the “folk” story of a people who hope against hope. To do this the theologian cannot be so immersed in the assurance, optimism, or myopia of the canonical story (the proclamation of the churches) that he or she is unable to see the challenge of the folk story. Conversely, the theologian cannot become so enchanted by the pathos of the folk story or so disillusioned by the tragic dimensions of African American experience that the hope expressed in the canonical story is not seen. In sum, black theologians must tell a story that relates the hope of the biblical message with the realism of black experience. Through the arrangement and explication of the basic Christian doctrines, from creation to consummation, black theologians must fashion a story that brings together the twin commitment of African American Christians to faith and freedom.

The third task is to examine the moral implications of that faith for Christian witness in the world. African American Christian faith is shaped by a variety of *contexts*, has a distinctive and identifiable *content*, and matures only through the fulfillment of its *intent*. The intent, goal, or telos of African American Christian faith is the moral ordering of personal and collective human existence through Christian witness in the world. Christian witness here is understood to involve three moral moments. First, Christians must engage in moral discernment. The challenge is to read the signs of the times,

to look into the hearts of people, institutions, and social systems, to find the sources of impediments to justice and truth. Therefore, Christians can and must employ those modes of analytical discourse that can make plain the origins of human misery. Depth psychology, literary criticism, and other forms of analysis may be helpful in this regard. However, given the morphology of human existence in postmodern society, it is imperative that moral discernment today include a socio-economic and cultural analysis of our world and its inner workings. Human suffering in our time cannot be fully explained by looking at the cruelty that one individual inflicts upon another; it must also be seen as the result of conflicting economic interests and conflicting social values.

Second, this moral discernment must be guided by moral norms. That is, one must have a set of criteria by which one can determine whether the present social order is just. These criteria must themselves be drawn from the content of African American Christian faith, rather than from any extraneous philosophical norms of good and evil, right and wrong. Therefore, one cannot introduce a notion of justice, for example, as central to ethical behavior if the notion itself is not central to the theological affirmations of African American faith. In other words, one must be able to act and live in a way that is consistent with one's beliefs.

Third, the moral norm must render judgment on society, and the participation of African American Christians in that society, in such a way that one is forced to decide and is moved to action. It is not enough to analyze society and to announce that injustice exists. The full meaning of Christian witness in the world includes deciding for the victims and acting in solidarity with them. It is interesting that Jesus rarely talked about the issue of poverty, but constantly communed with poor people. People are rarely moved to compassionate acts by abstract issues, but are often moved by the encounter with specific people. Christians must refuse to sacralize poverty or to abandon the poor. Christians must resist victimization and minister to the victims. This requires a praxis that embraces moral acts as well as moral existence. Christians must act morally, but moral acts are grounded in a basic lifestyle and mindset that itself is moral. Christians must exist as moral people, but moral existence is buttressed by moral acts.

In sum, authentic Christian witness is an engagement in moral discernment and making moral judgments, in light of moral norms, that results in

moral acts and lifestyles. Black theologians must contribute in a substantive and comprehensive way to authentic Christian witness. As “organic intellectuals” (Antonio Gramsci) their work involves social analysis, normative claims regarding the demands of the faith in the postmodern world, and actual engagement in communities of resistance. In this way, theology as a vocation can become a form of authentic Christian witness.

These, then, are the primary dimensions of African American Christian faith. The contexts show how the external and internal forces that shaped and continue to influence black religious expression have brought faith and freedom into sharp relief. The doctrinal affirmations must form the story, or gestalt, of black Christianity around the twin elliptical centers of faith and freedom, the dialectic of which recasts and reinterprets the major sources of Christian revelation. The moral implications of this faith must guide and direct African American Christian witness in the world in a way that manifests the twin commitments of faithfulness to God and the struggle for freedom.

The focus of this book is the second theological task as described above. Of course, the contexts of African American Christian faith are always in the background and the moral implications of that faith must always be acknowledged to be in the foreground, but the concern here is specifically the content of African American faith and its theological significance. The opening chapter on theological methodology will provide an examination of the distinctive problems and solutions that black theologians have had in analyzing and correlating black experience and divine revelation. It is followed by a chapter that examines the Bible as an imaginative text, the meaning of which is most clearly visible to those who experience marginalization and powerlessness. The next five chapters are devoted to a discussion of the doctrines of God, Christ, humanity, church, and eschatology in Black Theology.

In sum, this book is an explication and elaboration of the following theological affirmations:

- The content of God’s *revelation* is *liberation*.
- The primary record of that revelation is the *Bible*, which has historically carried a special significance for those who are *outside* the corridors of power in society.
- It is *the ungiven God* of the oppressed who is revealed in the Bible.

- The zenith of God's self-revelation is *Jesus Christ*, who is affirmed as both *liberator* and *mediator*.
- Jesus Christ embodies *being black* in such a way that the result is the emergence of a distinctive *community of faith*.
- This community, vivified by *the spirit of freedom*, provisionally manifests and anticipates the justification of the present social and human order, a justification so radical and complete that those who are now counted as *last shall be first*.

Theology as introspection and as proclamation is crucial for the African American church, and for all Christian churches, because the relationship between faith and freedom is, perhaps, the most pressing theological problem of our time. Faith seeks understanding; but in the present context that understanding must be a critical one. The point is not simply to understand the basis on which faith is affirmed, but to understand it in a way that makes the faithful a redeeming and transforming presence in the world. Faith seeks critical understanding. Likewise, freedom seeks expression; but the freedom of which we speak must be discernible in visible acts and modes of being in the world. Christian freedom, then, is never simply a spiritual reality, or only a spiritual possession, but is realized in and among those who, even in our midst, struggle for liberation. Freedom seeks public expression.