

Black Theology

by Edmund Hill, O.P.

It was my original intention to write this article about black theology in South Africa, where I first encountered the movement. But two things have led me to form the opinion that black theology is of crucial importance to Christianity all over the world, and not just in South Africa, or in the United States, where the idea was born. One has been my reading of two books by the black American theologian James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*,¹ and *A Black Theology of Liberation*;² and the other has been my introduction, very recent and superficial though it is, to the race question, and kindred political questions, in Great Britain. So I will, after all, devote this article to the subject of black theology as such, and chiefly in the form of a review of Cone's two books. But I will lead into this subject by way of black theology in South Africa.

In writing this article I incur the risk of bringing down on my head the hostility and scorn of black theologians, or quite simply of blacks. As a white man I have no business to poke my long Caucasian nose in. Cone is quite scathing in BTL (p. 194) on two white liberals who presumed to write on the black power movement; and on the same page he writes: 'To whites who want to know what they can do (a favourite question of oppressors) black theology says, "Keep your damned mouth closed, and let us black people get our thing together."' Still, just as in the dominant white ethos of today, or at least of a generation ago, it was possible for a black man to be a good nigger, and sometimes even earn the supreme accolade of being told that he was a true white man, in spite of his skin (You're a better man than I am, Gunga Din), so in the black ethos of the dominated which we are going to be looking at, it is possible for a white man to be a good honky. Whether this article will earn me the honour of being called such by black men, and considered to be black at heart or black in spirit, is not for me to say. I would be proud if it did (I am sure Gunga Din must have felt very proud), but I am not going to curry the favour by letting my enthusiasm for blackness be sentimentally uncritical.

It will be my thesis that black theology is potentially the most important development taking place in the Christian world today. It is very rudely showing the established Churches that most of their theology, and practically all their organization and daily ethos and mode of functioning, is as much 'white' (that is to say, geared to the purely secular, even material, interests of the dominant white society) as authentically Christian. I hardly think this 'white'

¹Seabury Press, New York, 1969; referred to hereafter as BTBP.

²Lippincott, Philadelphia and New York, 1970, in the C. Eric Lincoln series *Black Religion*; referred to hereafter as BTL.

corruption of authentic Christianity is the product of some deliberate diabolical and age-long conspiracy, as some black theologians seem tempted to believe. It has happened almost wholly unconsciously, and is all the more disastrous for that. The therapeutic value of black theology could precisely be to bring this unconscious sin to consciousness. When I first heard the expression 'black theology', in South Africa in 1970 or 1971, my immediate reaction was that of nearly all white churchmen, one of puzzled disapproval; how can proper theology, I wondered, be either white or black? One might put the question now: if the unconscious 'white' theology (I put 'white' in quotation marks just because it is unconscious) is a corruption and a sin, will not a deliberate black theology be even more a corruption of the authentic gospel? My opinion is that it will certainly run the risk of becoming so, but need not be so if its practitioners keep their heads and see black theology as a provisional, and not an absolute, exposition of the gospel; one addressed to the particular situation of the 20th century and in no sense a *theologia perennis*. I think that in fact this is how Cone does see it.

Black theology appeared in South Africa, under the influence of Cone, as one form of a rapidly spreading black consciousness, just as it appeared in the United States as one form of the black power movement. I gave a brief description of some of the manifestations of black consciousness in South Africa in a previous article in *New Blackfriars*,¹ so I shall not repeat it here, but simply give a summary account of the black theology movement in the country. It started under the aegis of the UCM (University Christian Movement), which has now folded up for a variety of reasons—among them the coldness, not to say hostility of the various Church establishments. But the black theology project which it launched still goes on, in spite of the harassment to which the government subjected it from the beginning. The South African government has every reason to fear black theology, since it lends the opposition of blacks to the whole policy of the régime a moral and religious sanction that could be of incalculable importance.

The first stage of developing the black theology project was the organizing of a number of seminars in 1971, attended exclusively by black Christians. It was at the first of these that Bishop Zulu, the Anglican bishop of Zululand, was arrested in the small hours of the morning on a 'routine' pass raid, and held for several hours for not being in possession of his reference book. In the course of 1971 the newly elected president of UCM, Mr Justice Moloto, a young Catholic layman, was banned and indeed banished to Mafeking for three years.

1972 was to be devoted by the organizers of the project to getting some material published, the fruit of the seminars of the previous

¹South Africa in the Seventies, *New Blackfriars*, August 1971.

year. A volume of *Essays in Black Theology* was planned, to be edited by Mr Sabelo Ntwasa, an Anglican student for the ministry, who had been active in organizing the seminars of the previous year. On 17th March, 1972, he was arrested at the Federal Seminary, at Alice in the Eastern Cape Province, where he was completing his studies, and put under house arrest for five years at his home in the Kimberley location. This delayed the publication of the *Essays*, but they eventually appeared in June, only to be listed as a banned publication at the end of July.¹ Meanwhile the Rev. Basil Moore, secretary of UCM, a Methodist, and a leading inspiration behind the black theology project, had also been put under house arrest. Clearly, however difficult it may be to define, black theology in South Africa carries a considerable potential punch.

I will not discuss any of these essays, because almost everything they say is put much more forcefully and lucidly by Cone in his two books. They do, however, raise two questions that he does not really seem to consider. In the first place, the various contributions to the *Essays*, and other occasional writings, show that in South Africa the term black theology is used very loosely to cover practically any 'ideological' expression of black consciousness, ranging from that of genuinely Christian protest to a not uncommon view that rejects Christianity itself as a white man's religion; including both idealizations of traditional African religion, and entirely secular and non-religious philosophies of liberation and revolution. I do not think that Cone faces the challenge that this kind of situation implies, a challenge to the concept of Christian black theology, or at least to its importance and relevance, coming from its own black friends in the black power/consciousness movement. The challenge must be if anything even more open and widespread in America than in South Africa, to judge from the writings of James Baldwin, Eldridge Cleaver, and George Jackson. And yet all that Cone seems to have to say to the challenge is this: 'One can be convinced that Jesus Christ is the white man's saviour and god and thus can have nothing to do with black self-determination. And yet what other name is there? It is the name of Jesus which has a long history in the black community' (BTL, 78); spoken like a true Christian, but one can, in fact, think of several other names that there are, and that are actually offered. What does Cone say to the black Muslims? Then he also writes in his other book: 'For whites who are concerned about Christianity and their role amid the black revolution, the underground church may be an appealing and useful style. . . . But for black people the call for a new value system must not be identified with . . . the underground church. . . . Black theology is a theology of the black community . . . in this sense nationalistic' (BTBP, 129/30). It is not just that there seems to be a tendency here not

¹The essays are to be published in England this year by C. Hurst and Co. under the title *Black Theology: The South African Voice*.

just to black chauvinism but to black *Christian* chauvinism; it is all very well for Cone to propose black theology as a kind of establishment doctrine of the black community, but is the black community as a whole willing to grant such a privileged position to black theology? It would seem not, and in that case black theology has a lot of arguing to do with revolutionary blacks as well as with traditionally minded Christians, black and white.

In the second place, black theology in South Africa is faced with a question that scarcely rises over Cone's American horizon; that is the distinction, if any, between black theology and African theology. I say 'if any' because the point is arguable. I myself think there is an important distinction, although I am not sure if it is the same one as is made by the Lutheran Dr Manas Buthelezi in his essay *An African Theology or a Black Theology?*¹ By African theology I would understand something simply comparable to European, Asian or American theology, and divisible into Kenyan and Ghanaian theology, etc., just as European theology includes specifically French, German and Dutch styles. The development of such a theology would be part and parcel of the development of a properly African style of Christianity, of the genuine indigenization of the Church on that continent. Such indigenization is an urgent need in the Church, although it involves very grave risks to the authenticity and integrity of the gospel, as the history of the all-too-successful indigenization of Christianity into European society shows. Indigenization is necessary for effective evangelization, but if pastors relax their vigilance it too easily leads more to the enslavement of the gospel and its reduction to an established national or tribal or political religion (like the religion of the pagan Greek or Roman state), than to the liberation of human society and its incorporation into the people and city of God. And incidentally, such indigenization all too easily leads to national schisms, as one can see from the Donatists onwards.

But in any case, important though it is, the distinction between African and European theology in terms of indigenization is not so important, and nothing like so radical as the distinction between black theology and white theology in terms of the gospel's authentic message of liberation. The terms 'black' and 'white' are not only descriptive, like the terms 'African' and 'European'; they are also and above all symbolic. And I wish to suggest that as both symbolic and descriptive terms they have the same kind of theological significance as the terms 'Jew' or 'Israelite' and 'Gentile' in the Bible, particularly in the New Testament, and most particularly in St Paul.

This seems to me to be the positive possibility or tendency in what Cone has to say, and I will now give a series of extracts from his books in an attempt to substantiate my view. There is of course also a negative possibility in his black theology, and I must warn the

¹*Essays on Black Theology*, 2ff.

reader that he writes in a style that is angry, exaggerated, hyperbolic, brutal and paradoxical, a style that is certainly destined and one might almost think designed to raise the hackles of the white reader. But I would ask the reader who feels his hackles rising as he reads to try and imagine the hackles of a Pharisee reading the gospels, of an unusually intelligent and well-informed Roman civil servant on reading the Apocalypse, of a Persian supporter of Haman on reading the book of Esther; and then to swallow three times and read on, keeping his cool. Here then are some of the thoughts of Dr James H. Cone.

On black power (black consciousness in South African language).

My thesis is that Black Power is not the antithesis of Christianity, nor is it a heretical idea. . . . It is rather Christ's central message to 20th-century America (BTBP, 1).

Black power means complete emancipation of black people from white oppression by whatever means black people deem necessary.—'Better to die on one's feet than to live on one's knees' (*The Rebel*, by Camus) (BTBP, 6).

It is not the intention of the black man to repudiate his master's human dignity, but only his status as master. . . .

'Negro hatred of white people is not pathological—far from it. It is a healthy human reaction to oppression, insult and terror' (Arnold Rose, a white author) (BTBP, 14).

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 (BTBP, 18).

The real menace in white intellectual arrogance is the assumption that the structure that enslaves is the structure that will also decide *when* and *how* this slavery is to be abolished. . . . The time has come for white Americans to be silent and listen to black people (BTBP, 21).

A comment in passing: substitute South Africans for Americans, and the author's remark would be doing the most exact justice to the attitudes of South African whites, especially of South African nationalists and, above all, of the South African government. This quotation, too, is wholly apposite to the South African situation:

When a white man says, 'It takes time . . . I feel the same way as you do, but . . .'. I must conclude that he is talking from a different perspective. There is no way in the world I can get him to see that he is the problem, not me (BTBP, 22).

On black theology as a theology of liberation

Christianity is essentially a religion of liberation (BTL, 11).

Christian theology is never just a rational study of the being of

God. Rather it is a study of God's liberating activity in the world, his activity on behalf of the oppressed (BTL, 20).

Its language is always language about liberation, proclaiming the end of bondage, and interpreting the religious dimension of the revolutionary struggle (BTL, 22).

Contemporary theology from Karl Barth to Jorgen Moltmann conceives of the theological task as one which speaks from within the covenant community with the sole purpose of making the gospel meaningful to the times in which men live. . . . There is then a desperate need for a *black theology* whose sole purpose is to apply the freeing power of the gospel to black people under white oppression (BTBP, 31).

Certainly white western Christianity with its emphasis on individualism and capitalism as expressed in American Protestantism is unreal for blacks. And if Christianity is unreal for blacks who are seeking black consciousness through the elements of black power, then they will reject it (BTBP, 33).

The message of the kingdom strikes at the very centre of man's desire to define his own existence in the light of his own interest at the price of his brother's enslavement. It means the irruption of a new age . . . of liberation. . . . In Christ God enters human affairs and takes sides with the oppressed (BTBP, 35/6).

Black theology and white people: white theology

In a revolutionary situation there can never be just theology. It is always theology identified with a particular community. It is either identified with those who inflict oppression or with those who are its victims. A theology of the latter is authentic Christian theology, and a theology of the former is a theology of Antichrist (BTL, 25).

If there is any contemporary meaning of the Anti-christ (or the principalities and powers), the white church seems to be a manifestation of it (BTBP, 73).

In liberating the wretched of the earth, Christ also liberates those responsible for the wretchedness. The oppressor is also freed of his peculiar demons (BTBP, 42).

Black theology is primarily a theology *of* and *for* black people. . . . The purpose of black theology is to analyse the nature of the Christian faith in such a way that black people can say Yes to blackness, and No to whiteness and mean it (BTBP, 116/7).

To be Christian is to be one of those whom God has chosen. God has chosen black people! . . . 'How can I, a white man, become black?' To be black means that your heart, your soul, your mind and your body are where the dispossessed are (BTBP, 151).

There will be no peace in America until white people begin to hate their whiteness, asking from the depths of their being, 'How can we become black?' (BTL, 12).

The question, 'How can white people become black?' is analogous to the Philippian gaoler's question to Paul and Silas, 'What must I do to be saved?' (BTL, 124/5).

Whites will be free only when they become new persons—when their white being has passed away and they are created anew in black being. When this happens they are no longer white but free (BTL, 176).

Freedom is the opposite of oppression, but only the oppressed are truly free (BTL, 160).

When I say that white theology is not Christian theology, I mean that theology which has been written without any reference to the oppressed of the land. This is not true of Karl Barth, and certainly not true of Dietrich Bonhoeffer (BTL, 28, footnote).

To be sure, as Barth pointed out, God's word is alien to man and thus comes to him as a 'bolt from the blue', but one must be careful about which man one is speaking of. For the oppressors, the dehumanizers, the analysis is correct. However, when we speak of God's revelation to the oppressed, the analysis is incorrect. His revelation comes to us in and through the cultural situation of the oppressed. His word is our word; his existence our existence (BTL, 62).

God and Christ as black

God is not color-blind in the black-white struggle, but he has made an unqualified identification with black people. This means the movement for black liberation is the work of God himself, effecting his will among men (BTL, 26).

To put it simply, black theology knows no authority more binding than the experience of oppression itself. This alone must be the ultimate authority in religious matters. . . . But this doesn't make the experience of Christ secondary to the experience of black oppression. It means that black people have come to know Christ precisely through oppression (BTBP, 120).

If God is not for us and against white people, then he is a murderer and we had better kill him (BTL, 59).

For too long Christ has been pictured as a blue-eyed honky. Black theologians are right; we need to dehonkify him, and thus make him relevant to the black condition (BTL, 61).

Whether whites want to hear it or not, *Christ is black, baby*, with all of the features which are so detestable to white society . . . God's word in Christ inaugurates a new age . . . in which all oppressed people become his people. In America that people is a black people. In order to remain faithful to his word in Christ, God's present manifestation must be the very essence of blackness. It is the job of the Church to become black with him, and accept the shame which white society places on blacks (BTBP, 68).

Black people have heard enough about God. What they want to know is what God has to say about the black condition. Or more importantly, what is he doing about it? What is his relevance in the struggle against the forces of evil which seek to destroy black being? (BTL, 77).

The norm of all God-talk which seeks to be black talk is the manifestation of Jesus as the black Christ who provides the necessary soul for black liberation (BTL, 80).

In contrast to the racist view of God, black theology proclaims his blackness. People who want to know who God is and what he is doing must know who black people are and what they are doing. . . . Knowing God means being on the side of the oppressed, becoming *one* with them, and participating in the goal of liberation. *We must become black with God!* (BTL, 121).

Black theology, reconciliation and love

Reconciliation has nothing to do with the 'let's talk about it' attitude or 'it takes time' attitude. It merely says, 'Look man, the revolution is on. Whose side are you on?' (BTBP, 69).

What does it mean for the black man to love . . . the white neighbour? To love the white man means that the black man *confronts* him as a Thou without any intention of giving ground by becoming an It. . . . 'Profound love can only exist between two equals' (quoting V. Harding). Therefore the black man refuses to speak of love without justice and power (BTBP, 52).

Epilogue

In the Tillichian understanding of symbol, blackness is an ontological symbol . . . in America (BTL, 27).

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I will first comment on black theology as a theology of liberation, within Cone's own terms of reference. From the white point of view, I see it as a challenge to the white Churches and their theology as important in its way and in our present world situation as the *City of God* was to the Church of the fifth century. I hope it will goad the Churches into a more effective and uncompromising critique of the actual *civitas terrena*, and help them free themselves from the temptations of establishment to which they have too long succumbed. At the same time black theology, representing all revolutionary theology, needs perhaps to be more alive to the danger of becoming an establishment of the left, afraid of being critical of the revolution, especially of successful revolution.

In this context one must reflect a little further on the force of the terms 'black' and 'white' as symbols. The basic symbolism, and its grounds, is clear; black stands for oppressed, white for oppressor. But one should be aware of the inescapable ambivalence of all symbols. It is not only possible but quite common for the oppressed in one respect to be oppressors in another, indeed to be oppressors precisely because they see themselves as oppressed. The most obvious instance of this is, ironically, the Afrikaners; their obstinately intractable sense of their own identity, in the name of which they in fact oppress the South African blacks, depends on their view of themselves as a small people oppressed by the might of the British

Empire. Is there not a similar myth behind the great white American dream?

It is here that my comparison with the Jew-Gentile distinction comes in useful. Suppose Dr Cone accepts the comparison for the sake of argument; would he say that in modern terms Jew equals black and Gentile equals white—or the other way round? Either way he would be in difficulties. On the whole, the former equation would be the more tenable. But then what about the Pharisees? What about the odd Roman centurion in the gospels? Above all, I would be very interested in black theology's exegesis of the book of Jonah. A black prophet, surely, going to preach the divine wrath to a white oppressive city, Assyrian Nineveh, the very archetypal symbol of the oppressive and rapacious society. There are real problems here. This case at least suggests a possibility of missionary responsibility of black Christians to white people, a possibility that in my reading of him Cone would not repudiate.

Secondly, some observations on the limitations of Cone's terms of reference. Yes, the gospel is a message of liberation, liberation from political, economic and social oppression, a message addressed to the prisoners and the poor. But is that a complete description of it? What about the gospel as a message of healing? There are other human ills besides oppression. In this respect I think that perhaps a specifically African theology might have more to contribute to the lacunae of white Christian thought and practice than black theology seems to offer. And then, what about the gospel as a message of forgiveness of sins? 'I came to call not the just, but sinners to repentance.' But who are the sinners—the oppressed blacks or the oppressive whites?

I conclude by saying that I would have almost no reserves about Cone's black theology if he had presented it in a consistently Barthian framework. His statement that God has chosen black people, that the blacks are the elect, is acceptable if its implications are worked out in terms of Barth's doctrine of election—but only on that condition. His qualification of Barth in one of the statements quoted above almost suggests that black people are chosen by God on their merits, on the merits of being black (equals poor, oppressed, etc.). His qualification, if pressed, could lead to the conclusion that black people do not stand in need of redemption, that is to say of a kind of intrinsic liberation. All they need from Christ is external liberation from external bondage. The symbolism of blackness looks like being extended, unwarrantably, to mean not only poor, oppressed, etc., but naturally good. This means that blacks do not really need Christ or the gospel or Christianity.

This is indeed a view that was expressed to me by a black militant in Manchester. He was of the opinion that Christianity is needed by whites—it might still, just possibly, help to make them less horrible people. But all that blacks need is liberation, and Christ and his

gospel will contribute nothing to this that cannot be more effectively achieved by black power. It is a view one can readily understand; it is one that not a few of the younger black people I have met in South Africa are tempted to adopt. But it is hardly one that could be acceptable to Dr Cone as a Christian.

A Report on Marriage

by Fr Adrian Hastings

Early in 1970 I was approached by the Anglican archbishop of Central Africa with a request that I conduct an investigation for the Anglican communion in Africa of marriage issues—to be precise, ‘a pastoral appreciation of the problems arising out of African marriage customs, both rural and urban, in relation to full membership of the Church’. It was hoped at first that the work could be sponsored by both the Anglican and the Roman Catholic hierarchies, but for various reasons the latter were unwilling to join in on the plan as it had been proposed, so in December 1970 I began work sponsored by the Anglican archbishops alone but with the general understanding that I would look at the problems of Catholics as well, in so far as I could. The Anglican communion is not present in most African countries, notably the French speaking lands (except for Rwanda and Burundi), and it was also decided to leave out West Africa, but the area to be considered remained vast—Kenya to South Africa—and it was obvious that my survey could not include original field research; the idea was to provide an overall view of the position in some nine countries based upon already available literature, brief visits on my part and a questionnaire, together with a theological and pastoral appreciation of the problems the factual survey indicated as most pressing. It is this that I have attempted to do in the six chapters and ten appendixes of my final report, *Christian Marriage in Africa*, published by SPCK in March of this year.

My aim here is not to summarize all the arguments or conclusions of that report, but simply to offer a few of my own comments upon it or upon the subject it treats. The report was completed in July 1972, so already some nine months have passed to distance me a little from it. The points I make here have either come home to me more forcibly since concluding the report or they are ones