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# PROLEGOMENON TO THE STUDY OF BLACK THEOLOGY

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## DEFINITION OF THEOLOGY

It was Plato in his *Cratylus* who said "to teach a thing rightly it is necessary first to define it clearly." The discipline of theology has had such a distinguished history, being at one stage regarded as the queen of the sciences, that one ought to guard against misconceptions as to its nature and function.

The point at which to begin our discussion of theology is the etymology and usage of the word. Etymologically it is made up of two words *THEOS* meaning, "God" and *LOGIA* meaning "speaking" or "thinking" about something. When joined it was used to mean "speaking of or about a god or gods".

It was not until the further development of the word *LOGOS* that *THEOLOGOS* was conceived as a "knowledge of or concerning a god or gods". The point to emphasize here is that the word was adopted from the pagan usage to indicate knowledge of the things that pertain to gods or God. Augustine, for example, rarely used the word "theology" because it connoted to him pagan rather than Christian conception of

the Divine. Thus in the Western Church what was called "theology" was called "Doctrine of God" or "Christian Doctrine".

The word "Theology", then, is the combination of *THEOS*, "God" and *LOGOS*, "the word" or "expression". When the two meanings are put together, theology may be defined as "the study which treats directly of God and His relationship to the world and man". The central term to be investigated is the relationship of the world and man to the divine. "Faith in God" is subjected to rational thought or reflection by those who are participating members of the community of faith. But theology cannot stop at reflection, it must also express the content of faith in the clearest and most coherent language possible. Only by so doing can theology share the character of an intellectual discipline, namely, intelligibility and consistency.

It is important to note at this point that "religion" is not synonymous with "theology". "Religion" from the Latin *religare*, "to bind fast", commonly means the set of beliefs, attitudes, and practices which indicate and express the feeling or conviction of a group of persons who feel themselves bound to any object or ideal they regard as of supreme

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1. Kasper, *Principles of Sacred Theology*, p. 228ff.  
2. See Bavinck, *Systematic Theology*, p. 11.

worth.<sup>4</sup> If this definition is accepted we would have to identify the ideal of Black Religion as freedom.<sup>5</sup> Freedom is the ultimate concern which binds the Black community together as a religious entity. Theology by its very definition, however, can have no ultimate concern, no ideal or object of veneration higher than God.

## II SYSTEMATIC THEOLOGY

Before proceeding further in our discussion let us look at the term *Systematic Theology*. The word "systematic" is derived from the Greek verb *sunistanō* which means to put together as a whole or to organize. The use of the word in relation to theology implies that the study of God in his relationship to the world and man is capable of organization as a systematic whole. Systematic theology claims to be systematic in the sense that it seeks to articulate all the constituent elements of theology in a coherent whole.<sup>6</sup>

In other words, systematic theology is the attempt to see each doctrine in its relation to the whole Christian faith, and to see the whole with all the fulness and richness which the several doctrines collectively disclose. Such a systematic approach provides a necessary corrective against the pitfalls of extravagant overemphasis and one-sidedness. Thus as Goddon Kaufman points out: "Systematic theology, as insight into the unity of the whole Christian faith, is the beginning of genuine theological thinking, as the relating of one doctrine to another.

idem.

<sup>4</sup> See J. Carter, *Black Theology and Black Power*, p. 121.

<sup>5</sup> See J. Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*, p. 35.

<sup>6</sup> G. Kaufman, *Systematic Theology: A Historical Perspective*, p. 99.

ther in the attempt to see the meaning of each, it is the method of all theologizing; as an overall view which sees the richness and fulness of the Christian Gospel, it is the goal of theological work."

## III HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

In order to see theology in a historical perspective we may divide the history of doctrine into several periods:

- (a) The earliest writings of a theological nature were designed to defend Christianity as a whole against heresies which threatened the very essence of the Christian faith. Thus the period from the close of the Apostolic Age to about 320 A.D. can be called the *Age of Apology*.
- (b) In the period from 320-726 A.D. theology developed in response to widespread controversy concerning central points of the Christian system - especially the Trinity and the Incarnation. This was the *Age of Polemics*.
- (c) In the third or medieval period from 726-1517 A.D., theological reflection was characterized by the endeavour to systematize and to defend the existing faith of the Church. This is known as the *Age of Scholasticism*.
- (d) In the fourth period, from 1517-1720 A.D., Protestantism was called upon to define and to vindicate its position against Roman Catholicism. On the other hand, Catholicism was stimulated to make an elaborate and authoritative restatement of its faith. Protestantism

moreover, became divided into a number of communions, each ardently bent upon vindicating its own special beliefs. Controversies and creeds abounded, the creeds or confessions being a response to the controversies. This may be called the *Age of Confession*.

- (c) In the period from 1720 to the present, theological reflection has been so complex that it is difficult to give a brief statement of its leading characteristics. In a general way, the modern era may be seen as an attempt to make theology conform to the conclusions of scientific inquiry and criticism. Theology, especially since Paul Tillich, has been developing in response to the problems facing man in a technological society.

In looking at the history of doctrine we can see that in every period theology developed in response to challenges from the larger society. This being the case there is nothing strange in a particular segment of the Christian community reflecting on the nature of God in relation to its experience of suffering and oppression. Hence to-day there is *Black Theology*.

#### IV

#### BLACK THEOLOGY

This question, "What is Black Theology?" has been asked so many times by people that sometimes I can scarcely hide my annoyance. The annoyance stems from the fact that the question is often followed by a statement or question indicating that Christian theology has no colour. In other words, the question is often asked with the assumption that Black Theology must be a racist theology.

<sup>7</sup> See Sheldon, *History of Christian Doctrine*, pp. 71.

Because the word *black* has been given such a negative connotation there is a further assumption that Black Theology cannot be good theology. Interestingly enough, our interrogators do not question the legitimacy of British, German, American and Afrikaner theologies as valid expressions of Christian theology although they are identified with specific *cultures* and national entities.

The practitioners of Black Theology constantly affirm that Black Theology is Christian theology because it centres on Jesus Christ.<sup>8</sup> Its task, according to Cone "is to analyze the black man's condition in the light of God's revelation in Jesus Christ with the purpose of creating a new understanding of black dignity among black people, and providing the necessary soul in that people, to destroy white racism."<sup>9</sup> Cone's understanding of the theological task in his early work is in direct opposition to the definition of theology, in fact it is in direct opposition. His locus is on the analysis of the black man's condition, ours is on God as revealed in Jesus Christ and his relationship to the world and man. Cone's approach here could be classified as Christian sociology rather than Christian theology.

In his second work, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, Cone reverses his position when he states that "the task of Black theology ... is to analyze the nature of the Gospel of Jesus Christ in the light of oppressed black people so that they will see the Gospel as inseparable from their humiliated condition, bestowing on them the necessary power to break the chains of oppression."<sup>10</sup> By shifting his major premise from the black condition to

<sup>8</sup> See J. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, p. 24.

<sup>9</sup> *Black Theology*, p. 117.

<sup>10</sup> p. 23.

the Gospel of Jesus Christ (i.e. the Christian faith), Cone is indeed engaging in Christian theology. The object of theological reflection (i.e. God) should never be made subservient to the condition of the subject who engages in the reflection. I am in full agreement with Deotis Roberts when he says: "A Christian theologian is not an interpreter of the religion of Black Power. He, as a black theologian, may be the interpreter of Afro-American Christianity. He may be conscious and be proud of his heritage. He may be in tune with the meaning of Black Power. But he is attempting to understand the Christian faith in the light of his people's experience".<sup>11</sup>

In spite of the fact that Roberts has been an outspoken critic of the narrow perspective imposed by Cone on Black Theology, the viewpoint expressed above does not conflict with Cone's mature understanding of Black Theology. In fact both men share a strong faith in the fact that God who reveals Himself as Creator, Provider and Redeemer is concerned with and seeks the liberation of the oppressed. Cone, in particular, speaks of Black Theology as a theology of liberation.<sup>12</sup> I interpret this to mean that Black Theology as a conceptual interpretation of the Christian faith has as its goal the transformation of the black condition from one of oppression to one of authentic humanity in Christ.

As one reads the published books and articles on Black Theology one becomes aware that the authors have not given a clear definition of Black Theology. One arrives at a definition from their description of the theological task. My definition of Black Theology is this: "Black Theology is

an attempt by black Christians to grasp and think through the central claims of the Christian faith in the light of black experience". Such a definition avoids the temptation of making Black Theology a mere instrument of propaganda for certain political ends. My definition of Black Theology, however, does not rule out the concept of a "political theology" as propounded by John Mbiti, that a considerable amount of theological discourse should be directed towards issues of a political nature, since theology takes place in socio-political-cultural settings.<sup>13</sup>

#### V THE REASONS FOR BLACK THEOLOGY

The appearance of Black Theology has been attributed to the failure of white Christians in general and white theologians in particular to relate the Gospel of Christ to the pain of being left with no dignity as a black man in a white governed society. Since some white theologians or churchmen have consistently given religious sanction and respectability to the oppression of black people, there was and still is an obvious need to reinterpret the Christian faith from the standpoint of the oppressed. The situation is very aptly stated in the form of a question by a white theologian: "Has not the God of the white man, the White God, become mote and more the sanctioner of exploitation, who uses this power to exalt the mighty on their thrones and put down those of low degree, who fills the rich with good things and who sends the hungry away empty?"

13 J. Mbiti, "African and Asian Contributions to Contemporary Theology" *The Expository Times*, March 1976, LXXXVII, 6-164 ff.

14 Herrry, "God, Black or White", *Review and Expositor*, Summer 1970, 203.

11 Deotis Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation: A Black Theology*, p. 21.

12 Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, p. 23.

If this question expresses the truth with respect to some white theologians and white churchmen's understanding of God, then the question should not be, "Why a Black Theology?", but "Why has a Black Theology taken so long to emerge?"

Even if one should dispute Herrzog's statement, the black theologian would have no difficulty finding relevant evidence to prove that white theology is at times defective and that it must be supplemented. The black theologian merely has to point to the absence of the black experience in the theological arena, the failure to afford it co-equal theological authority and significance, the preoccupation of white scholars, American, European and South African, with issues other than racism and oppression, the actual history of the white Churches' response to black demands for recognition of their full humanity, etc. Black Theology, therefore, justifies its existence on the grounds that it is seeking to relate the truth of the Gospel to a grossly neglected area of concern to black people, viz., the black experience of suffering and oppression at the hands of white racism.

The pioneers of Black Theology broke new ground in theological reflection. They expressed the anger of the black Christians against racism even in religious institutions and articulated the justification for a new departure in theology based upon Black experience. Although much has been accomplished since these pioneers, the development of a Black systematic theology is still in the formative stage. One criticism of Black Theology frequently voiced is that it needs to free itself from the fetters of European theological categories. Rosemary Reuther, for example, thinks that Cone's formal application of crisis theology to racial polarities results in a certain lack

of "soul" in his theological charisma.<sup>15</sup> This point needs to be taken up and discussed at length.

## VI SOURCES OF BLACK THEOLOGY

It is the custom of those who write theological treatises to outline and discuss the "sources" of theology. I agree with John Macquarrie that many of the items which are often included cannot all be considered "sources" in the same sense of the word. Hence he speaks of "formative factors" in theology so as not to imply that all are on the same level or of equal importance.<sup>16</sup> This distinction between "sources" and "formative factors" is very relevant to our study of Black Theology for among the sources listed by black theologians are items such as "literature, history, sermons, folklore, art, and the testimony of some saints and sages of the Black community."<sup>17</sup> All of these may very well contribute to the construction of Black Theology, but unless the major factors are identified and given due weight, distortion may easily occur. It is at the point of assigning weight to the formative facts that the theologian's perspective or presuppositions become apparent. His perspective is the most important determinant in his thinking for it shapes his fundamental judgements regarding what is theologically important.

(a) The first and most important source of knowledge for theology is the *biblical revelation*. Since theology is the study of God and his relationship to the world and man, it

<sup>15</sup> Rosemary Reuther, *Liberation Theology*, p. 138.

<sup>16</sup> J. Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology*, p. 54.

<sup>17</sup> Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation*, pp. 18 ff.



must be founded on the study, analysis, and interinterpretation of the Scriptures. To know anything about God we are dependent on what He has revealed, a record of which we have in Scripture. As the written Word of God, the Bible is not opposed to Christ, the Living Word. It is only through the written Word that we learn of the Living Word. Protestantism since the Reformation has therefore regarded the Scriptures as the locus of authority in theology. "Christian theology", says Kaufman, "is not simply the work of autonomous man thinking whatever he pleases; on the contrary, it is produced when men seek deliberately to subject their thinking to the authority of God's revelation".<sup>18</sup>

If Black Theology is to be truly Christian theology, if it is to avoid ending up as a meaningless intellectual activity of a few black scholars, then its authority cannot be less or other than the revelation of God. In making the biblical revelation the ultimate test of truth, I am taking a position in direct opposition to Cone. According to Cone "Black theology knows no authority more binding than the experience of oppression itself. This alone must be the ultimate authority in religious matters."<sup>19</sup> Essentially what Cone has done is to absolutize the black experience as the principal source of the knowledge of God and the ultimate authority in religion. In this he is closely related to Schleiermacher, the nineteenth century theologian, who located the source of the knowledge of God in the religious experience of the Church. However, Schleiermacher, unlike Cone, makes a distinction in the type of experience, for this ex-

perience is based on the faithfulness to the Word of God.

(b) In taking this position, however, I am not denying the importance of *experience* as a major factor in theology. In fact, Christian experience is next to Biblical revelation in importance. It is the correlate of the Biblical revelation and serves as a necessary touchstone for distinguishing Christian truth from error. Experience is the context of decision, action and life and determines to a great extent the understanding and the appropriation of revelation. "Experience determines the need, the meaning and the effectiveness of revelation in the human situation."<sup>20</sup> For Black Theology, therefore, the black experience has to be taken seriously since its primary aim is to relate the Biblical revelation to the situation of black people.

(c) The third factor in the construction of a Black Theology is *Black history*. Black people have a history, a history of struggle against white oppression, a history of dependence upon God as their Creator, Provider and Redeemer. Black church history in particular cannot be ignored if Black Theology is to speak to the condition of black people.

(d) The fourth and by far the broadest source of Black Theology is that of *Black culture*. Closely related to black experience and black history, black culture is the black community expressing itself in music, poetry, and other art forms. It refers to the social climate in which one lives and moves in the world. Black culture influences and gives content to every theological formulation the black theologian makes. In Africa, cultural theology has become one of

18 Kaufman, *Systematic Theology*, p. 65.

19 *Black Theology and ...*, p. 120. See also *A Black Theology of Liberation*, p. 33.

20 Roberts, "Black Theology in the Making" *Review and Expositor*, Summer 1973, 321 f.

the categories of concerns, particularly those dealing with the relationships between culture and the Christian faith. "These arise partly from the widespread, but largely unappreciated, exclusion of African culture from Church life. Consequently many Africans are reacting to this, and some are strongly critical of the harm done to African culture through the 'smear' campaigns on the part of many missionaries and some African (Christians)".<sup>21</sup> John Mbiti has rightly observed that Africans want to show their appreciation of their culture, to see its values, to relate it to the Christian faith, to make more use of it in the life of the Church, and largely to remove the stigma that has been cast upon African culture by the western world.

(e) The fifth source or formative factor is *tradition*. Tradition refers to the theological reflection of the Church upon the nature of Christianity from the time of the early Church to the present. As Cone rightly points out, it is impossible for any student of Christianity to ignore tradition. By tradition, however, is meant the history of the Black Church and only secondarily white western Christianity.<sup>22</sup> The significant point here is that Black Theology can no more fly in the face of Christian tradition than it can in the face of Scripture. To deny fundamental doctrines such as the Trinity or the Incarnation would amount to a rejection of Christian tradition and therefore of the continuing identity with the community within which theologizing takes place.

## VII

### THE METHODOLOGY OF BLACK THEOLOGY

In the long history of theological

<sup>21</sup> J. Mbiti, *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>22</sup> Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, pp. 69ff.

reflection various points of departure have been chosen. Tillich, for example, following the tradition of Schleiermacher, makes anthropology i.e. the doctrine of man, the starting place for his theology. Black theologians are not agreed on a point of departure. Deotis Roberts sees both faith in the existence of God and the Exodus as good starting points for Black Theology.<sup>23</sup> Cone, on the other hand, chooses "an anthropocentric point of departure in theology".<sup>24</sup> William Jones takes a similar approach when he says, "If black liberation is the goal of Black theology, black suffering, in the final analysis is its starting point."<sup>25</sup> Following in the Tillichian tradition Jones accepts the method of correlation as the best suited for Black Theology. In other words, black theological reflection begins with the issues and questions that emerge from the black experience and tries to find answers which are consistent with that experience.<sup>26</sup> We ought to note here that one of the objectives of Black Theology is also to liberate the white group from the superiority complex vis-a-vis the inferiority complex imposed on a black man.

In conclusion, I wish to state that although the method of correlation appears to be a very fruitful one for Black theology at this stage of its development, it also has its dangers. One can become so engrossed with the questions related to black experience as to forget that theology must always glorify God and clarify what He has done. The ever-present tendency of theology to

<sup>23</sup> Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation*, pp. 18, 29.

<sup>24</sup> Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, p. 47.

<sup>25</sup> William Jones, "Theology and Methodology in Black Theology", *Harvard Theological Review*, Oct 1971, 542.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 543f.

anthropocentrism and egocentrism means that Black Theology must ground itself in a sound doctrine of God. An understanding of God as Creator, Provider, and

Redeemer will be an important deterrent against the hopelessness and despair which characterizes humanistic thinking.

