

PRELIMINARY REPORT

RESEARCH COMMITTEE FOR BLACK THEOLOGY

This report might well be classified *pre-preliminary*. For reasons which should become apparent as I proceed, I felt that before doing anything else, even forming a research committee, I should share some of my own reflections with the members of the Society present at this convention. As I understand the commission given me by the Board of Directors this Research Committee is to be concerned not simply with black theology, but with black theology as it affects Roman Catholic theology and as it should be a concern for the CTSA. It is in this context that I propose to delineate the problem as I see it.

When President McBrien asked me to take on this task we decided that for the CTSA to address the question of black theology we needed someone who was (1) black, (2) Catholic, (3) a theologian. I noted that "the field is fairly limited" and McBrien immediately responded "To my knowledge you *are* the field." The correctness of that observation depends upon how one wishes to define "Catholic theologian," but as I look around at this convention I note that I am the field this morning. *This is our first and most pressing problem.* The first response of the Catholic theological community to the "black reality" must be, as Preston Williams noted at last year's convention, actively to seek out and promote the theological formation of black Catholic scholars.¹

Because I am a Catholic theologian, Roman trained during the 1950's, living in a religious community where my racial background has never been a factor, engaged in work that has occupied me with other aspects of theology, I must confess that until I was requested to take on this assignment black theology was not one of my preoccupations. Consequently I felt a real necessity to read and reflect by myself before I could do justice to the task of heading a Research Committee on Black Theology. This report, therefore, gives my own reflections on the

¹Cf. Preston N. Williams, "Religious and Social Aspects of Roman Catholic and Black American Relationships," *CTSA Proceedings* 28 (1973), 15-30, esp. 24-5.

nature of the problem before us together with both suggestions and an appeal for your assistance in carrying out my assignment during the year to come so that I can offer a statement for your endorsement at the next convention.

As I have already noted the black experience has not been considered, or has hardly been considered by Catholic theologians. My reading has convinced me that we are faced with a significant opportunity to both make a contribution and to receive an enrichment by turning our attention to this question.

Three principal questions (each of them susceptible of subdivisions) demand our investigation: (1) To what extent are our black brothers and sisters correct in accusing us of having a "racist theology"? (2) How can incorporation of the black experience enrich our theology? (3) How can the Roman Catholic tradition contribute to the quest for black liberation and identity?

In the report to be presented at New Orleans next June, I shall seek to propose some answers to these questions. Permit me at this time to give some brief comments on their import.

TO WHAT EXTENT IS ROMAN CATHOLIC THEOLOGY RACIST?

It is a fact that the black man who embraces Catholicism finds himself alienated from his "brothers" and only superficially accepted by his new co-religionists. He has joined the "white man's Church" (when the characterization given is not more forceful). Unlike many Protestant groups there is no real black Catholicism in this country because the establishment of an autonomous black Catholic Church would have been contrary to the whole notion of the Church in the context of the ecclesiology that was—and on the practical level still is—taken for granted in this country.

The "racism" of American Catholicism is, in my opinion, above all a question of omission (which comment, incidentally, neither ignores nor excuses the real sins of commission in this regard of not a few American Catholics). As an immigrant Church, we have been preoccupied with other things. The traditions and practices of the American Church have reflected the cultures from which most of its members came, cultures the roots of which are European. Blacks have been ac-

cepted (or more accurately allowed to join) to the extent that they assimilate to an already established cultural pattern and no one ever even thought that the black Catholic had something to contribute to Catholicism, and especially to Catholic theology, as well as something to receive. The Roman Catholic apostolate to blacks and other non-whites is what constitutes the "home missions." This is in distinction to efforts to "convert" non-Catholics whose racial background is Caucasian which was never called "mission work" in the same sense.

On the level of theology and theological reflection the black experience has been considered irrelevant—or perhaps, more accurately—until blacks began to press the issue American Catholic theologians never adverted to the fact that the black experience might offer a datum for theological reflection. The symbols which we use to articulate our theology take no account of blackness and—pardon the pun—frequently denigrate it: virtue is white, sin is black. Indeed has this type of symbolism not been taken for granted in the whole of our culture as well as in theology I would not have been able to employ the word "denigrate" to make a pun.

Catholic theology is racist. If this fact can be blamed on the cultural situation, if it is more a result of omission and inattention than conscious commission it is still a fact. There is an insensitivity here which can only remain blameless until it has been pointed out and I serve notice to you, my colleagues, that I am now pointing it out. I hasten to add that I do this not to condemn, but to awaken.

As theologians we are not called to enter the fight for black liberation on every level but we do have a duty to expunge our theology of everything that can give aid and comfort to racism. We must examine the implicit assumptions that found some of our symbols and some of our emphases and if they be found to be racist, first of all acknowledge the fact and then correct our formulations. This task, important though it is, is only the beginning. I consider it to be only the necessary preliminary to a positive approach. Once it is accomplished we may enter into dialogue with black culture to the mutual benefit of both that culture and our own theological work. It is to this positive approach that my next two questions pertain.

TO WHAT DEGREE CAN REFLECTION UPON THE BLACK EXPERIENCE ENRICH OUR THEOLOGY?

Not the least of the problems of Catholic theology is the fact that the cultural tradition in which it has been articulated is "Western culture." After the transposition from its Semitic origins to the Hellenistic culture of the "Gentiles" Christianity has not made any significant effort to reformulate itself in other cultural contexts. Until very recently—with a few exceptions which underline rather than negate the fact—the "missionaries" have preached not only the gospel of Jesus Christ, but the culture of the West with the implicit assumption that there is no other way to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ.

I would suggest that the black experience is a rich source of new insights for our understanding of the gospel. In this regard the work of our committee will have to consider two distinct questions: (1) the relationship of the American black community to the Christian message; (2) the insights that can be gained from an understanding of the rich, ancient and essentially religious cultures of black Africa.

For American theologians the first of these two is the most urgent. Yet they are related, if distinct questions, and however "deculturized" we may have become, American blacks must find once again our roots in Africa if we are to find our identity. Because these roots are so profoundly religious, when we reattach ourselves to them, we will have much to say about the meaning of the gospel which can make a great contribution to the whole Church.

WHAT HAS THE ROMAN CATHOLIC TRADITION TO OFFER TO THE QUEST FOR BLACK IDENTITY?

Black theology until now has been in the various Protestant traditions. It seems to me that the time has come for us to enter into dialogue with this theology. Just as Roman Catholic entry, since Vatican II, into the dialogue of ecumenism has added a new dimension to that enterprise (and a new openness to the Roman Church) so can we enrich and be enriched by entering the arena of black theology.

If consideration of the black experience will enable us to further actualize our claim that universality is not uniformity, it will also

enable serious black theologians to look beyond their immediate problem: black identity and black liberation, and consider the equally important factor of black contribution. I sympathize with the claim of black theologians like James Cone that their task is to work toward the liberation of the black community. At the same time I feel that the idea of reconciliation put forth by those like J. Deotis Roberts is also of highest priority. Without at all intending to disparage the non-Roman Churches in which the current black theologians work, I would submit that a black theologian working in the Roman Catholic tradition would find new and important insights in the search for reconciliation. This brings me back to my original suggestion: the first priority for the CTSA is a concerted effort to raise up a generation of black Catholic theologians.

From these comments it should be apparent that the work of this Research Committee cannot, by definition, be complete. It can never be more than the beginning of a necessarily ongoing project.

The theme of next year's convention is eminently suited to an extended discussion of the points I have only suggested here. I pledge to prepare a discussion worthy of the Society and I earnestly ask your assistance in carrying out this task.

JOSEPH R. NEARON, S.S.S.
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