

## A CHALLENGE TO THEOLOGY: THE SITUATION OF AMERICAN BLACKS

To speak of the situation of American blacks as a challenge to theology is immediately to place limitations on the scope of the discussion. The challenge to theology is no more than a derivative of the far more basic challenge to the whole structure and life of the Church. What I mean is that the problem of racism is first and foremost a problem affecting the basic attitude of the Church and the whole gamut of structures and activities which are shaped by this attitude. Theological reflection on this problem—like theological reflection on any problem—is relevant only in so far as it stays in contact with this living context. To put it another way, the task of the theologian is to reflect upon the life of the Church, to find the meaning inherent in that life and to criticize the distortions it may contain. The primary reality is the *life* not the *reflection*.

A further limitation is imposed by the fact that we are concerned with the challenge to Roman Catholic theology. This assumes that we may speak of a Roman Catholic theology as distinct from other Christian theological traditions.<sup>1</sup> As regards black theology this statement of the question has several consequences. First of all, it affirms that there can be a specifically Catholic contribution to black theology as well as a specifically black approach to Catholic theologizing. In the second place it affirms that the situation of American blacks presents certain specific challenges to Roman Catholicism similar but not identical to those affecting the other Christian churches. Both of these points will be expanded in the course of this presentation.

A final limitation to be noted is that this presentation is the *beginning* of an effort by the CTSA rather than a definitive statement. The author of these remarks has been commissioned by the Society to chair a research team on black theology. This paper and your reactions to it are intended to uncover the questions which that team will consider. Consequently what I will do is try to raise the issues rather than suggest solutions. Even this is only a beginning, since there can be little doubt that subsequent dialogue will surface many more questions. As I noted at the Chicago Convention, "The work of this Research Committee

<sup>1</sup>Cf. J. Connelly, "The Task of Theology," together with the response of S. Ogden and D. Tracy, *Proceedings CTSA* 29 (1974), pp. 1-75.

cannot, by definition, be complete. It can never be more than the beginning of a necessarily ongoing project."<sup>2</sup>

The first reaction of many theologians when they hear the term "black theology" is to object: "How can you speak of *black* theology, since Christianity is by definition universal?" Indeed, this was my own feeling the first time I read James Cone. Does not the qualification of theology by adjectives like "black" or "white" violate the universalism of the Christian revelation?

James Cone, for example, writes:

This work . . . seeks to be revolutionary in that "The fact that I am Black is my ultimate reality." My identity with *blackness*, and what it means for millions living in a white world, controls the investigation. It is impossible for me to surrender this basic reality for a "higher, more universal" reality. Therefore, if a higher, Ultimate Reality is to have meaning, it must relate to the very essence of blackness. Certainly, white Western Christianity with its emphasis on individualism and capitalism as expressed in American Protestantism is unreal for blacks. And if Christianity is not real for blacks who are seeking black consciousness through the elements of Black Power, then they will reject it.<sup>3</sup>

Again, Albert Cleage seeks to demonstrate, against all biblical and historical scholarship, that Jesus was in fact a blackman.<sup>4</sup> Statements like these do not allay the fear that to speak of black theology is incompatible with orthodoxy. No one speaks of "white" theology, so why introduce the category "black" theology? This last sentence both summarizes the essence of the objection and provides the starting point for its refutation.

The fundamental premise behind the whole objection is that there is such a thing as a universal theology which is neither white nor black. This is a transference to the realm of theology of a wider problem which I would call Western cultural arrogance. For a long time it was

<sup>2</sup>*Proceedings CTSA* 29 (1974), p. 417.

<sup>3</sup>J. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1969), pp. 32-3.

<sup>4</sup>A. Cleage, "The Black Messiah and The Black Revolution" in *Quest for a Black Theology*, ed. by J. Gardiner and J. D. Roberts (Philadelphia: Pilgrim Press, 1971), pp. 1-21.

assumed that Western culture is to be equated with all of culture. This very statement is intrinsically racist. It denies any validity to cultures outside of this one civilization. Peoples are seen as "civilized" or as "primitive" to the extent that their institutions, their literature, their religious outlook, etc., approximate our own.

This way of putting it is somewhat of a caricature. It is patently false when we look at the cultures represented by, for example, India or China. However, in the popular mind black Africa is still considered to be a country that does not have any culture. Its inhabitants were for a long time considered to be savages, hardly meriting the appellation human. This attitude—often implicit—motivated both slavers and missionaries in their dealings with Africans,<sup>5</sup> however different may have been the motivation of these two categories from other points of view.

While recent studies have shown how false this premise is, neither the popular mind nor many scholars who are not specialists on Africa seem to be aware that many truly "high civilizations" besides Egypt existed on the African continent from ancient times. Great empires, superbly organized flourished in both East and West. At the beginning of the sixteenth century there was a *Christian* kingdom of the Kongo, sending ambassadors to the courts of Europe. The son of one of these kings studied at Coimbra and returned as Archbishop to a Bantu royal court modeled on that of Portugal.<sup>6</sup>

In like manner the West Sudan had the successive kingdoms of Ghana, Mali and Songhai famed throughout the Moslem world for their magnificence and their culture, for their centers of learning (Jenne, Timbuktu) and their high regard for justice.<sup>7</sup> Examples could be multi-

<sup>5</sup>Cf. B. Davidson, *The African Genius* (Boston-Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1969), pp. 23-8. Cf. also the polemic against the approach of Western scholars to African Studies, O. P'Bitek, *African Religions in Western Scholarship* (Kampala: East African Literature Bureau, 1970).

<sup>6</sup>R. Oliver and J. D. Fage, *A Short History of Africa* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1963), pp. 125-6.

<sup>7</sup>The Arab traveller Ibn Battuta wrote of his impressions on a trip to Mali in 1352-3: "[Its Negroes] are seldom unjust, and have a greater horror of injustice than other people. Their sultan shows no mercy to anyone who is guilty of the least act of it. There is complete security in their country. Neither traveller nor inhabitant in it has anything to fear from robbers or men of violence." Quoted by Oliver and Fage, *Short History of Africa* p. 89.

plied, but the point has been made: to say that Africa had no culture before the coming of Europeans or Arabs is to display one's ignorance.

Studies in the area of comparative mythology have shown that traditional Africa had a highly sophisticated religion. Far from a naive "animism" many peoples had a lofty concept of God and a deep understanding of the divine transcendence.<sup>8</sup> Above all, religion was and is an all pervasive influence in African life. Unlike the essentialist approach coming from Greek philosophy with its tendency to seek "immutable definitions," the African view of God, of man and of the world is dynamic.<sup>9</sup> The category of predeliction is *power*. This idea is of some significance if we are to grasp the real meaning of "Black Power."

Any articulation of the Christian reality comes from a particular context, i.e., a particular historico-socio-cultural matrix. To speak of a universal, that is to say, non-culturally conditioned theology is to speak what is really nonsense.<sup>10</sup> Earlier in this convention we heard the brilliant paper of Gregory Baum in which he noted that "all knowledge is socially grounded." For purposes of the present discussion this means that any way in which we try to put the Christian faith into words must necessarily be determined and limited by the world outlook, the cultural perspectives, the historical situation, the social organization, etc., in which this articulation is made. The contention of the black theologians is that the social context of Western European theology is racist for the reasons which have already been suggested. In other words, in point of fact there is a "white" theology. Our traditional theology is white.

The term *white* is placed in front of theology because it is recognized that there is need for such a qualification. If it is assumed that a particular manner of doing things is the only way, that the theology which was produced in Europe is the only possible theology, then that exhausts the category *theology* and there is no need to classify it as "white" or "black" or anything else. Our whole point is that white theology, first of all, does not exhaust the category and, secondly, contains a very serious deficiency, viz., the deficiency of the whole white culture, its racism.

<sup>8</sup>J. Mbiti, *Concepts of God in Africa* (New York: Praeger, 1970), *passim*.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup>W. R. Traynham, *Christian Faith in Black and White: A Primer in Theology from the Black Perspective* (Wakefield Mass.: Parameter Press, 1973), pp. 1-4.

A second implication of the objection that black theology would be unorthodox because it would deny the universality of the Christian revelation and the Christian religion is the identification of theology with faith and with religion. Christianity is indeed a universal faith, but as has just been explained the theological articulation of this universal faith is necessarily done in a particular cultural context. So when we speak of black theology we are not at all denying the universality of Christianity. Indeed we are affirming that one of the defects of Christianity as it has been practiced, theorized upon and systematized in the West is the fact that this particular theology really does not appreciate the universality of the Christian revelation. The catholicity of the Church is, from many points of view, still not an actuality but a potential contained in the revelation upon which the Church is founded. The black theologian would affirm, therefore, that by offering a black approach to the Christian reality he is far from denying or attacking its universality. He is seeking to exploit the possibilities to make the Church and the theology by which the Church seeks to define itself really universal and all-embracing by calling out to the Church to accept all men as created by God in their great heterogeneity and in all their diversity.

We can now turn our attention to a consideration of the tasks of black theology. While we are directly concerned with the relationship of black theology and Roman Catholic Christianity we must not look upon this in any narrow sense, nor consider that there is an opposition between a Catholic black theology and other Christian black theologies. I am sure that this is understood by the theologians of our Society. However, it is worth mentioning because ecumenical dialogue is of a particular importance in this area. It is a fact, as you all know, that there has been very little work among Catholic theologians in black theology. Much of the data we will use will come from those who do not share our tradition.

Black theology is an effort to understand the relationship between two realities: the black experience and the Christian faith. It is especially concerned with theological reflection in the context of that phenomenon which is *black religion*,<sup>11</sup> or, if you will, to do "soul" theology.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>11</sup>J. Washington, *Black Religion* (Boston: Beacon, 1964).

<sup>12</sup>Every black person knows what "soul" is. J. D. Roberts uses the term and

This black religion has a very close relationship to the African origins of the black people.<sup>13</sup> However, care must be taken not to identify American black theology with African black theology.<sup>14</sup> Certainly they have much in common, but there are also some significant differences. In the first place, in Africa black people are the majority not the minority. With a few exceptions they have control of their own national and political destinies. Even during the days of colonialism the oppressors were foreigners. In America, on the other hand, social oppression is of Americans (black) by Americans (white). The two situations are quite different.

More significant than this is the fact that in Africa blacks are still in their "homeland" and consequently still have living contact with their traditional cultures. In America, on the other hand, blacks form a "diaspora"<sup>15</sup> having been violently separated from their ancient traditions. The two theologies will show similarities to the extent that black Africans and black Americans share a common origin. They will be diverse because the relationship of Africans to that origin differs from that of black Americans. There is a natural sympathy which calls forth dialogue; there is a different context which gives to each a separate task.

In the second place the black Church in America is from its very foundation Christian. It is very important to keep this in mind. While the slaves did indeed maintain—to an extent that is not always recognized—the basic world outlook that came from Africa, their need to express their religious awareness was actualized within a Christian frame of reference. In Africa the fundamental religiosity even of those who have accepted the Christian faith is that of the traditional African religions. This important distinction gives an entirely different starting point for American black theology from that which gives rise to African black theology. Blacks are by birthright Christians and Americans.

the concept to begin his book *Liberation and Reconciliation* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1971) p. 11.

<sup>13</sup>C. S. Rooks, "Toward the Promised Land: An Analysis of the Religious Experience of Black Americans," *The Black Church* (Quarterly Journal of the Black Ecumenical Commission of Massachusetts) 2 (1972), 1-48; cf. esp. pp. 9-16.

<sup>14</sup>J. Carey, "Black Theology: An Appraisal of the Internal and External Issues," *Theological Studies* 33 (1972), 684-97. Cf. p. 687, fn. 4 and the text to which it refers.

<sup>15</sup>The term is from Rooks, *Toward the Promised Land*, p. 9.

Black theology has a twofold task. First, it may seek to give a black articulation of the Christian faith. Secondly, it may strive to give a Christian interpretation of the black experience. Obviously these two approaches are closely related. Yet they are not identical and the correct interpretation of any given black theologian must begin by ascertaining which of these two approaches he is taking.

Some of the implications of this distinction are that the starting point is somewhat different and that the attitude of the particular theologians will be different. In the first approach the given is blackness and the theological effort aims at reconciling Christianity with this blackness. In the second approach the given is the Christian faith and the theological effort aims at finding meaning in the black experience using this faith as the criterion for seeking this meaning.

The attitude of the theologian will differ because the dialectic at work in theologians of either category will differ. For both types there will be a tension between what we have called the *given* and the *criterion of interpretation*. In the first case one starts with the reality which is blackness and Christianity will be incorporated and harmonized with this reality. In the second instance one starts out with the reality which is Christian faith and strives to understand blackness in the light of this faith. The given cannot, by definition, be abandoned and this is the source of the tension. Can one be a Christian if one is black? Can one strive for black identity and black power if one is to be a faithful Christian?

I speak here of a tension, because the assumption upon which black theology is built is that the two poles of the tension, blackness and Christian faith, are not incompatible. Theologians who start with blackness and use it to rearticulate Christianity emphasize that any theology which is racist, to the extent that it is racist, is in fact anti-Christian.<sup>16</sup> Theologians who start with Christianity, seeking to find a meaning for blackness, underline that blackness is indeed meaningful, that the search for black identity is indeed legitimate precisely because of authentic Christian teaching. Both arrive at basically the same conclusion but give differing emphases and travel different paths.<sup>17</sup> Atten-

<sup>16</sup>Cf. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* Ch. II, "The Gospel of Jesus, Black People and Black Power," pp. 31-61. Also, the same author's *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1970), *passim*.

<sup>17</sup>An example of the second approach would be J. D. Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation*.

tion must be given to these differences if what is said is to be understood.

Exaggerations in either direction resulting from this tension are the opposing heresies which will constantly threaten black theology: either to dissolve the tension by denying Christianity in the name of blackness; or to reject blackness in the name of a faith commitment. In the first case the result will not be a black theology but a black ideology, using Christian symbolism and terminology.<sup>18</sup> Such has been, for example, the charge leveled against Albert Cleage.<sup>19</sup> It is also the first impression that many traditional theologians take away from a reading of James Cone. In the second case, the result will become a "niggerization," a capitulation to the ideology of the oppressor. This, it would seem to me, while it seems to abandon blackness because of commitment to Christianity is in fact disobedience to the demands of Christianity itself. Why? Because it is failure to exercise the prophetic role toward and in the Church, which, it would seem to me, is the present vocation of black people precisely in virtue of their blackness.

It might be well to dwell on both these points a bit longer. The "exaggeration" of the Cleage-Cone axis<sup>20</sup> presents a difficulty of interpretation. Cleage is a preacher and Cone writes in the style of black oratory. Cone would surely reject any suggestion that he is not Christian and frequently affirms the gospel.<sup>21</sup> We need not, therefore, defend his position at length from this point of view.

Cleage is a more difficult case. His apparent rewriting of history cannot be defended. However, even with him it should be noted that his notions of "Black Messiah" and "Black Madonna" are an attempt to establish a symbol system coming from the black experience.<sup>22</sup> He is a

<sup>18</sup>This problem is clearly faced by William R. Jones, *Is God a White Racist?* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1973).

<sup>19</sup>Cf. Carey, "Black Theology," p.690.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup>Cf. *Black Theology and Black Power*, p. 120; *A Black Theology of Liberation*, p. 197ff.

<sup>22</sup>Though he does not cite Cleage, Cone has understood this. Cf. *A Black Theology of Liberation*, pp. 212-9. Cf. also Jones, *Is God a White Racist?* pp. 121-31. On the whole question of color symbolism, cf. E. R. Baltazar, *The Dark Center: A Process Theology of Blackness* (New York: Paulist Press, 1973).



myth maker. If we are willing to expend the effort necessary to demythologize his utterances we can find valuable insights.

The second "heresy" is of particular relevance to any discussion of black theology in a Roman Catholic context. The great accusation of black people against the Catholic Church is that it is a "white man's Church." I personally know a black clergyman, neither a bigot nor an ignoramus, who says, "No black person should be a Catholic." In many ways he is correct, because black people find extreme difficulty feeling at home in the Catholic community.

The black church is traditionally much more than a place of worship. It is the center of the social life of the community.<sup>23</sup> Very frequently acceptance of Catholicism cuts blacks off from this community and in many instances there is nothing to take its place. On this level blacks have never been really accepted, even as individuals, by the Catholic community; blackness as such has thus far found no place in American Catholicism.<sup>24</sup> If "The Situation of American Blacks" is in any way a challenge to the Church, it is in this area.

The final point to be considered in the description of black theology is: Who does black theology? Many critics of Cone have taken exception to his statement that black theology is by black people, for black people and that white people have no right to criticize it.<sup>25</sup> It should be remembered that Cone is writing not only an intellectual analysis but also, in the style of black preachers, that he makes use of the emotional content and emphasis which is characteristic of this style.

The critics are correct if Cone maintains that he is above criticism. They are, however, incorrect if they miss his principal point which it seems to me is this: because the two elements which have to be brought together in order to form a black theology are *blackness* (the black experience) and *Christianity*, the only one who can do this is someone who is black, who does in fact have the black experience as his own experience as well as being a Christian. Those who are not black can read black theology, hopefully can learn something from black the-

<sup>23</sup>"... the black church was a family for blacks when there was no organized family." Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation*, p. 61.

<sup>24</sup>Cf. my comments at the Chicago Convention. *Proceedings CTSA* 29 (1974), pp. 413-7.

<sup>25</sup>Cf. *Black Theology and Black Power*, pp. 1-4.

ology,<sup>26</sup> but are lacking one element which is necessary to make black theology. Non-black critics can point out to black theologians logical inconsistencies that may appear in their positions, as well as failure to take into account certain aspects of the question, particularly relevant elements of the Christian tradition.<sup>27</sup> However, the final judgment whether or not a particular statement of black theology is a valid interpretation of the black experience according to the criteria of the Christian faith is something which must be done by blacks and can only be done by blacks. This point is not just abstract theory but has extremely practical consequences. To whom is the black theologian accountable? How are we to judge his orthodoxy? These are difficult questions in any theology but they present special problems for Roman Catholic theology. It is worth taking a moment to consider them.

*The black theologian is accountable to the black community*, which has the right to demand that what he is interpreting is indeed the black experience and that his interpretation does give an authentic Christian meaning to this experience.

In this regard I should remark that my constant references to the black experience demand to be nuanced. In point of fact there is not just one black experience or one black culture in America but several. Rural blacks in the South and urban blacks in the metropolitan centers of the North are not in the same socio-cultural situations. Middle class blacks and poor blacks, middle aged blacks and young blacks, are no more identical in outlook than whites in these same categories. Part of the responsibility of the black theologian, therefore, is to take into account these variables. If he sees the affirmation of "black identity" and "black solidarity" as central to his agenda, he must carry out his task with the proper nuance. He must remember that *the* black experience is the concatenation of a great variety of black experiences. The only way to define *this* experience is by carefully investigating *these* experiences.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>26</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 3.

<sup>27</sup>Cf., for example, G. C. Chapman, "American Theology in Black: James H. Cone," *Cross Currents* 22 (1972), 139-57.

<sup>28</sup>Cf. P. N. Williams, "Religious and Social Aspects of Roman Catholic and Black American Relationships," *Proceedings CTSA* 28 (1973), pp. 15-30, esp. pp. 19 and 29.

*The black theologian, like every theologian, is accountable to God.* Sometimes we make too much of the accountability of the theologian to the Church, meaning the official magisterium and too little of his accountability to God. The words of the Acts of the Apostles "... whether it is better to obey God or men" (5:29) apply here.

What is demanded of the white Church in this regard is a great measure of trust; trust in the black theologians that they are being sincere and honest, that they are indeed operating out of the context of faith, as they affirm they are. Trust is demanded in the presence of the Spirit of God. If indeed the black children of God have also received the Spirit of God, then when they attempt to speak of Christ as their Savior it is under the guidance of the Spirit. "... I want you to understand that on the one hand no one can be speaking under the influence of the Holy Spirit and say 'Curse Jesus,' and on the other hand, no one can say, 'Jesus is Lord' unless he is under the influence of the Holy Spirit" (I Cor 12:3). If this is the providential time that the black community is called to make its contribution to the whole people of God, this must be the work of the Holy Spirit.<sup>29</sup> All involved, black and white, must trust and must pray that the Spirit will bring his work to a successful conclusion. The criterion of the Gospel, "By their fruits you shall know them," is most relevant in this context.

The foregoing may seem to be incompatible with Catholic orthodoxy inasmuch as it appears to be vindicating an autonomy for black theology and black theologians in complete independence from the hierarchy. Let us look at this aspect of the problem a little more closely because it is one of the central issues which must necessarily be confronted in any attempt to frame a black theology within the Catholic tradition.

The reason why we seem to be rejecting accountability to the hierarchy is that we are faced with a dilemma. On the one hand black theology must be done by black people. This requirement includes the fact that the judgment of the validity of such a theology must rely upon the black understanding of blackness and of the mystery of Christ. As we said earlier, others may confront black theologians with questions and apparent contradictions but the only one really competent to understand whether or not the assertions of black theology

<sup>29</sup>J. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, pp. 46-61 and 118-21.

are faithful representations and interpretations of the black experience is someone who is black.

On the other hand doctrinal authority in the Church is vested in the hierarchy. The solution to the dilemma is very simple. We need to have full and equitable representation of the black community in the hierarchy. At present there are three black bishops in the United States, none of them local ordinaries. Those who would be competent to judge according to the criteria of the Catholic tradition have been systematically excluded from those positions where judgment takes place. Just as a black theology must be done by black Christians, a magisterium competent to judge this theology requires black bishops.

What we have here is a particularly acute instance of the wider problem of the whole relationship between theologians and the hierarchy as teachers in the Church. It seems reasonable for theologians to demand this much: if bishops insist upon vindicating their prerogatives as "the official teachers in the Church" they must also recognize their *responsibility* to acquire the necessary competence. In the context of the present remarks this means that the episcopal magisterium must co-opt what I have called equitable representation of the black community because a racist hierarchy (i.e., a hierarchy which is racist in composition, whatever may be the subjective dispositions of any or all of its members) is and must remain radically incompetent to carry out a teaching role in relationship to the black religious experience. Is it too much to expect that the dialogue between black theology and the Catholic tradition will provide as a sort of by-product some new insights into the wider problem to which we referred: What exactly is meant when we say that the bishops are the teachers in the Church?<sup>30</sup>

In the area of ecclesiology there is a particular challenge to Roman Catholic theology from the black community. It is not just by accident that that phenomenon which we call black religion is confined almost exclusively to the Protestant churches. It was much easier to establish a more or less independent black Church within the framework of Protestant ecclesiology and church order. At the time that American black religion was being formed, Roman ecclesiology was concerned with uniformity and centralization. It is difficult to understand how a black

<sup>30</sup>Cf. R. McCormick, "The Teaching of the Magisterium and Theologians," *Proceedings CTSA* 24 (1969), pp. 239-54, and J. Quinn, "The Magisterium and Theology," *ibid.*, pp. 255-61.

Church, expressing black religious values and a black outlook could have found a place in the American Catholic Church of the nineteenth or the first half of the twentieth centuries.

If it be true that black theology can only be done by black theologians and judged by a magisterium with true black representation, it is equally true that the practice of black religion can only be organized by black people. I think particularly of liturgy, but even such things as structural organization must be tested against black experience.

There are two levels at which the investigation must be carried out: the sociological and the theological. As a socio-cultural phenomenon the American Church has developed as an "Irish Church."<sup>31</sup> Within this structure the phenomenon of "national parishes" has incorporated—at least at the local level—other ethnic groups with diverse customs. Considered sociologically, the "immigrant Church" is formed by groups whose self-identity and continuity with their cultural roots in the "old country" includes their allegiance to Catholicism. In trying to understand the American Church as an institution it is important to realize that the reason why certain peoples are Catholic and certain others are not is not only theological but socio-cultural as well. In the case of the black man, from this point of view his blackness would be found precisely in not being Catholic. Black identity and the continuity of black traditions—whether in America, or more remotely in Africa—exclude rather than include Catholicism as the religious component of that identity.

Perhaps part of the racism which characterizes American Catholicism<sup>32</sup> is the feeling that blacks are basically Protestant. The suspicion of a "black liturgy," for example, has this idea as one of its implicit assumptions. Many are afraid that in bringing such things as "spirituals" into the liturgy, the Eucharistic celebration is being contaminated by Protestantism. Now I suppose that any serious theologian would reject this attitude as nonsense. However, if our theology is to be something

<sup>31</sup>One need only consult a list of American bishops past and present to be convinced of this fact.

<sup>32</sup>"The Negro-white confrontation in American cities is in great part a Negro-Catholic confrontation. This is true because so small a percentage of Negroes are Catholic. . . ." J. Dearden, "Challenge to Change in the Urban Church," in *The Church and the Urban Racial Crisis* (Techny, Illinois: Divine Word Publications, 1967), p. 43.

more than we theologians talking to each other, we have to take into account the fact that the popular mentality of our coreligionists (clerical as well as lay) is pretty well characterized by this description.

Even abstracting from the black community, ever since the days of the great immigrations from Southern and Eastern Europe there has been a tension within American Catholicism between pluriformity and uniformity. In its hierarchical organization the American Church is historically Irish. Under this hierarchy various other ethnic groups have struggled to keep their own identities. Because of a uniformity in liturgical language and canonical discipline the success of this struggle was limited and never exceeded the local parish level. The American Church adapted the myth of the "melting-pot" in seeking to become aware of its own identity.

National parishes were concessions to the foreign born, often looked upon as temporary expedients until future generations would be assimilated into the mainstream of American Catholicism. The irony of all this is that this so-called "mainstream" itself developed into a sub-culture within the wider and equally mythical "mainstream" of the whole American society. This sub-culture is itself not "universal" Catholicism but ethnically conditioned: it is basically Irish.

At this point fairness demands that I affirm that I do not seek to minimize or hold in contempt the contributions of the Irish immigrants and their descendants to the growth of the American Church. Neither do I seek to make light of the sufferings they endured from "native Americans," sufferings which included enmity against their religious allegiance. (My own maternal grandmother was one of these immigrants. From stories she and my mother have told me, many parallels are suggested between the experience of the Irish and that of blacks.) What I am seeking to do is point up one of the social realities which must be taken into account and analyzed if American Catholic theology is to respond to the challenge presented by the situation of American blacks. One of the factors which causes racism is the universalizing and absolutizing of what is in reality particular and relative. This factor has been at work in the shaping of the American Church. Whether it is implicit (as it often is) or not, whether it is culpable (as many times it is not) or not, is really irrelevant. It is a problem!

Full participation of blacks in American Catholicism is impossible as long as the myth of the melting pot continues to influence Church

policy, howsoever implicitly. No less than the society as a whole, has the Church as an institution effectively excluded them from the melting pot. With the coming of the Black Power Movement and the awakening of black consciousness much of the black community itself has rejected the idea. Blacks no longer want to be "integrated" (which in fact means "whitened"); they demand to be respected as black. This is the real situation with which theology must come to grips.

No localized black church developed in the way that this happened for other ethnic groups because the formation of such a church, designed to preserve the identity of the group had no relevance for blacks. If the Italians, the Polish, etc., clung to their Catholicism to conserve their Italian or Polish identity and heritage, the black man when he becomes a Catholic ends up as a "guest" in the "white man's Church" not able and not permitted to identify socially with his new coreligionists and cut off from his own true identity. American Catholicism could not find a place for black religion in the way that this was possible for at least some of the Protestant denominations.

The above account is, I think, an accurate description of the socio-cultural forces which form an obstacle to any rapprochement between black religion and American Catholicism. They present a major problem for the elaboration of a black theology in the Roman Catholic tradition. One of our principal tasks, therefore, will be to examine this situation theologically in order to discover the principles necessary to find a solution.

This presentation is not the place to carry out this task in detail. I would, however, like to offer a few comments which may indicate the road to be traveled. It was noted at the beginning of this paper that one of the objections posed against speaking of a "black theology" is that such a concept seems to deny the universality of the Church. The response to this objection can be summarized by saying that the objectors fail to distinguish between *universality* and *unity* on the one hand and *uniformity* on the other. Uniformity demands that no particularizing adjectives precede the noun *theology*; universality (i.e., catholicity) not only permits such particularization but requires it. Until a great variety of culturally different articulations of the Christian faith have been elaborated the true catholicity of the Church and of the theology, which is the Church's statement of its own self-understanding, will remain a partially actualized potential.

One of the definitions of racism is the refusal to accept heterogeneity as a positive value within the order of creation or, as it has been put: refusal to accept the other precisely as "other." This sort of racism is systemically present in any institution which demands uniformity as the price of fellowship and unity. Even those of goodwill who are willing to accept black people "as people, overlooking their blackness" are guilty of this kind of racism. This is so because they deny implicitly (when it is not explicit) any positive meaning to blackness as such. This is the reason why the Black Power advocates of the 60's reacted so strongly against "integration" as the proper goal of the Civil Rights Movement as this was understood in the 50's. Stokely Carmichael and his disciples rightly understood that integration is racist because it says to the black man, "You are acceptable to the degree that you cease to be black." How many of us have been offered the "compliment": "But you're different!"—meaning not like blacks but really "white" in all but skin color. Black Power responds: "Baby, you better believe I'm different, different from you. My humanity *is* my blackness." Blackness is not a negation of human value but constitutes humanity for black people.<sup>33</sup>

The scholastic theology of the Trinity, considered simply an intellectual exercise by so many, affords a fruitful field of exploration.<sup>34</sup> In barest outline the argument to be elaborated consists of the following propositions.

*First*, the mystery of the Trinity affirms that there is otherness in God. The "relations of opposition" are an attempt to symbolize the dynamism whereby the Persons are mutually acceptable to each other in their distinction from each other. *Second*, this distinction among the persons is not something over and above the divine nature but is precisely what constitutes the divine nature. God is not one nature and three persons but one nature subsisting in three persons.

The relevance of these propositions to the present discussion is that they affirm that because God is what he is, otherness is not destructive

<sup>33</sup>Cf. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, pp. 17-20; Rooks, "Toward the Promised Land," pp. 2-3.

<sup>34</sup>Cf. K. Rahner, "Remarks on the Dogmatic Treatise *De trinitate*," *Theological Investigations* IV, pp. 77-102.



of unity but is the only way to constitute unity which is formed in the "image and likeness of God."<sup>35</sup>

A second area of theological investigation will center on the role of the local community. Since *Lumen gentium*, the decentralization of the Church and the importance of the local church have been more and more in the forefront.<sup>36</sup> It is being realized that it is above all in the local community that Church is actualized. Consideration of the universal Church as rooted and founded in the local communities instead of the local church as following from a monolithic "universal Church" is becoming more and more popular.<sup>37</sup> Besides the fact that this seems to correspond more exactly to the New Testament notion of *ekklesia*,<sup>38</sup> it also appears to be the proper manner to reduce to institutional reality the principle of unity in diversity.

The implications for black theology are most important. I will discuss one of these briefly. As I have already noted, one of the great difficulties involved in finding a place for blackness within the Roman Catholic fellowship is that black religion is quite different from the Western religion which has been institutionalized in Roman Catholicism. The religious dimension of black culture presupposes a different world outlook from that of the dominant culture and its expression will

<sup>35</sup>The condemnation of Abbot Joachim by the Fourth Lateran Council can be instructive in this regard. The Council reproves the good abbot for positing a quaternity in God: three Persons *and* the common nature (Denz. 431). Joachim did not understand the unity of God except as something other than the distinction of Persons. The Council affirms: "Nos autem, sacro approbante Concilio, credimus et confitemur . . . quod una quaedam summa res est, incomprehensibilis quidem et ineffabilis quae veraciter est Pater, et Filius et Spiritus Sanctus; . . . et illa res non est generans, neque genita, nec procedens, sed est Pater, qui generat, et Filius qui gignitur et Spiritus Sanctus qui procedit . . ." (Denz. 432). —I should like to acknowledge that the ideas contained in this section of my presentation were suggested in a lecture given by Rev. Moses Anderson, S.S.E. of Xavier University, New Orleans as part of a course that he and I team taught for the Catechetical and Pastoral Institute of the South in New Orleans from June 9-20, 1975.

<sup>36</sup>Cf. Constitution *Lumen gentium*, n. 26.

<sup>37</sup>This seems to be presupposed for example by K. Rahner, *The Church and the Sacraments* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1963).

<sup>38</sup>Cf. K. L. Schmidt, "Ekklesia," in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1965), pp. 501-30.

be different. In an ecclesiology which operates "from the top down" it is difficult to assimilate this difference. On the other hand, an ecclesiology which starts with the local community, accepts diversity as a "given" and seeks to find true unity through this diversity rather than imposing uniformity from the top. In a word, such an ecclesiology will understand that unity is not something over and above or along with diversity but that it is constituted by diversity.

My final point in seeking to outline the agenda for a black theology in the Catholic tradition will concern the relationship between black theology and liberation theology. Not a few black theologians would affirm that black theology is essentially liberation theology. They are certainly correct to the extent that they affirm that the concern of any theology worthy to be called black is the liberation of black people from the state of oppression which defines their current status in American society.

There is, however, a problem of semantics. Liberation theology can take many forms, as many forms as there are forms of oppression. If the term be used this way, then we may say black theology is a *species* of which liberation theology is the *genus*. This species starts out from the existential situation, the concrete experience of oppression which is that of black Americans. Other species of liberation theology while concerned with the same basic notion, liberation of the oppressed, take as their starting points other concrete situations of oppression.

In practice, however, because of the work of people like Gutierrez and Segundo<sup>39</sup> the term theology of liberation is frequently used as an equivalent for Latin American theology.<sup>40</sup> In this usage the relationship with black theology is that of two species belonging to the same genus and, *mutatis mutandis*, much of what was said above about the relationship between black African theology and black American theology applies here as well. Perhaps the difference between black theology and Latin American theology can best be summarized this way: in Latin American liberation theology the emphasis is not so much racial as economic, whereas when we are speaking of black theology in this country, while the economic factor and the economic effects of oppres-

<sup>39</sup>Cf. R. Antoncich, *Seven Lectures on Liberation Theology* (privately printed by Jesuit Project for Third World Awareness, Chicago, Jan.-Feb. 1975).

<sup>40</sup>*Concilium 96: The Mystical and Political Dimension of the Christian Faith* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1974).

sion are certainly a deep concern, the nature of the oppression is seen as something which goes beyond the economic situation. Even rich blacks—whether they themselves know it or not—form part of an oppressed group.<sup>41</sup>

The value that the black theologian will find in consulting the Latin American theologians is that they have worked out, in some detail, a methodology and categories which are useful in both cases. The categories in which liberation theology is framed are not those of philosophy, to which we are accustomed, but rather those of the social sciences, particularly sociology and economics.<sup>42</sup>

Several consequences follow from this approach. Without seeking to be complete, I will enumerate some of them. When we look at the categories oppressed and oppressor, we can find out something very important about the goal of black theology. We ordinarily speak of those who are oppressed and those who are free. In a context coming from an individualistic anthropology and psychology, this distinction is probably adequate. If we approach the matter from the view point of sociology, it becomes apparent that in a society composed of oppressed and oppressors no one is free. Such a society is as dehumanizing for the oppressors as it is for the oppressed. Indeed, it may well be more dehumanizing for those in the groups which are oppressors. The oppressor is not only not free, he does not know he is not free, for he does not have as self-image the fact that he is oppressor. To arrive at this, it seems he must reflect not only on his own attitudes and motivation but upon the society to which he belongs and come to understand it as a society composed of oppressed and oppressors. I say the situation is sometimes more dehumanizing for the oppressor because to the extent that he does not recognize himself as oppressor he has no reason to embark upon those efforts, in themselves humanizing and ennobling, which will make him free. The oppressed, on the other hand, is acutely aware of his situation. If he would survive (and many do not) he must, even while he is still under the yoke, seek an interior freedom and the effort to do this cannot but be humanizing.

We should speak, therefore, of three categories: the oppressed, the oppressor and the free. Furthermore, we should recognize that when

<sup>41</sup>Cf. Williams, "Religious and Social Aspects of Roman Catholic and Black American Relationships," pp. 16-7.

<sup>42</sup>Antonicich, *Seven Lectures on Liberation Theology*, Lecture 3.

the oppressed throw off the yoke of oppression, they not only free themselves, they also free their oppressors. This approach gives new insights into the meaning of the freeing power of the gospel, of the universal necessity for salvation as that is explained, for example, in Galatians and Romans.

The work of the oppressed to free themselves precisely because it also frees the oppressor is redemptive and salvific for all. It is closely connected with the vocation of the Church to seek and to manifest the presence of the Kingdom of God, not only in the future but in the here and now.<sup>43</sup> A black theology which keeps this in mind will also oppose any sort of revolt against oppression which would not be an effort to free both the oppressed and the oppressors but simply to have them change places. Authentic black theology clearly understands that such a situation would be intolerable, not only because this would be a violation of the humanity of the oppressors but also, and especially, because if the oppressed were to seek to become oppressors they would be negating their own search for freedom, since the oppressor is not free.

This was understood by Martin Luther King, but it is also understood by people as radical as James Cone.<sup>44</sup> Black theology and black power do not seek to destroy those whom they resist but to validate their humanity by freeing them from the role of oppressor, by eliminating the category oppressor as one of the components of society.

This consideration can show the solution to the question whether black theology should be primarily concerned with liberation or with reconciliation. If it is to be Christian, reconciliation must be included. This principle must be correctly understood. For the oppressed to acquiesce in their oppression is not reconciliation. For the oppressed to accept as correct the denial of their humanity is not only not reconciliation or Christian meekness but is an insult to God who has created them.

It is not reconciliation *or* liberation but reconciliation *through* liberation. If by the process of liberation both oppressed and oppressor are raised to the new status of free, the very liberation is at one and the same time a reconciliation. They will both have found redemption and

<sup>43</sup>Cf. R. McBrien, *Do we Need the Church?* (New York: Harper and Row, 1969), pp. 127-32.

<sup>44</sup>*Black Theology and Black Power*, pp. 15-6.

salvation and consequently will find a new state of reconciliation both with God and with each other.

The foregoing discussion is a good example of what we mean when we say that black theology is a new interpretation of the Christian faith from the vantage point of the black experience. The oppressed know what it is not to be free, the oppressors, as we just pointed out, do not. In other words, once the distinction into three categories, oppressed, oppressor and free, is explicated it seems reasonable enough, almost self-evident. However, for the reasons already given above, this distinction could never emanate from the oppressing group. It is from the experience of oppression that one is able to see that freedom is lacking to both groups and that one is able to plumb much more deeply, if one be a Christian, the true meaning of the freedom which is proclaimed in the gospel.

Piet Schoonenberg has written:

Both Scripture and the statements of the magisterium of the church have emphasized human solidarity with respect to sin. The magisterium faced that theme in the dogma of original sin. Yet, as that dogma is generally presented, solidarity does not come much to the fore in it. It affirms a mysterious bond between individual child and the first father of the race, while the sins of his own parents and of his environment and the great sinful decisions of the past generations have no share in it. We wonder whether the dogma of original sin does not mean more. Should this not be the case, modern man is inclined to relegate it to the realm of mythology.<sup>45</sup>

The approach of liberation theology, using the social sciences as the frame of reference within which to theologize, can give the "more" of which Schoonenberg has written. In our classical theology when we consider human nature, when we consider what are the norms for human nature and what are deviations from these norms, we usually concern ourselves with the individual. Even in social ethics, we tend to be concerned with the ethical posture to be taken by the individual in relation to society and social obligations. All of this is surely valid but it is also incomplete. Using the categories of the social sciences we can speak of the situation of the social group as such. We can with some

<sup>45</sup>P. Schoonenberg, *Man and Sin* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1965) p. 98. Cf. the whole context pp. 98-123.

sort of intelligibility speak of a sin of society.<sup>46</sup> We can speak of corporate responsibility which does not always or necessarily mean that individuals are subjectively guilty (or that it is necessary to determine which ones are), but which is nevertheless a manifestation of sin.

The understanding of sin as a social reality is of great practical importance as well as affording new theoretical insights for a theology of sin. I speak of a point to which I have alluded several times in this presentation. Not infrequently, white persons at whom black theologians direct the accusation "racist" are genuinely hurt. They protest that they are not responsible for the horrors of slavery or the injustices of segregation. More sincerely, many will say, "I genuinely love black people; I have dedicated myself to serving their needs. Why do you call me a racist?"

I know many people in this category to whom it would be a grave injustice to dismiss their complaint by accusing them of insincerity or, admitting that they are sincere, taxing them with condescension and paternalism. No doubt all these accusations apply to some who object to being called racist because they "have many black friends." There are many who really are sincere, who really do not condescend, who really do seek to love and to serve.

What must be pointed out to such men of goodwill, such "friends of our people" is that they belong to the dominant group in a society which is systemically racist. What the black theologians and the advocates of black power are concerned about is this racist system. Where the accusation of racism is justified against even those of goodwill is in regard to their solidarity in sin, their position—whether or not it be their own fault—in this system. Such an accusation is no more of an insult than to tell someone, "You were born with original sin." Indeed, it gives a lot more concreteness and meaning to that latter statement.

It might be helpful toward understanding the point being made here to recall what I said above concerning the fact that in a racist society no one is free. Furthermore, because of this situation of not being free, both oppressed and oppressors are in a situation of sinfulness which not infrequently leads to the actual commission of sin by both. A black theology which is Christian theology must remember that blacks are also sinners in need of redemption. Failure to be clear about

<sup>46</sup>Cf. Traynham, *Christian Faith in Black and White*, p. 21.

this is perhaps the real weakness of James Cone. In a theological sense, liberation is always liberation from sin and from a sinful situation.

More important than this understanding of sin is the new insight given into the meaning of redemption. We see that redemption and the coming of the Kingdom of God include much more than the conversion of individuals as individuals. If the reign of God is to be anything more than merely a term it must affect the society as society.

What the black theologians maintain is that redemption consists not only in the conversion and ultimate salvation of the individual, but also in the humanization of society itself. Here again we have a contribution which the dominant group would, it seems, never have arrived at, except under the prodding of those who are impatient with oppression, of those who have an interest in theologizing precisely from the context of being oppressed.

One of the problems that is often raised as an objection against liberation theology in general and black theology in particular is that it advocates violence and revolution.<sup>47</sup> Let us consider revolution first. Black theology certainly does advocate revolution, if by that we mean a change in the present order. The reason why has already been given: the present order is racist and to the extent that it is is unchristian. The revolution then is none other than the revolution necessary to make the Kingdom of God a reality in faithfulness to the gospel.

As far as violence is concerned we must note in the first place that it is wrong to think that when we say violence we always and necessarily refer to physical violence. Physical violence is indeed a danger in any movement of liberation. Sometimes it becomes necessary but there is the tendency to go beyond what is necessary. Furthermore, the person who engages in such violence runs the risk of dehumanization. Recall once again that a program of liberation does not seek to have the oppressed change places with the oppressor. The use of physical violence inherently carries with it the risk that this will happen.

Be that as it may, the real question (and every black theologian insists upon this) is not a choice between violence or non-violence. Violence is a fact; oppression is violence. The choice then is not whether or not there will be violence. That choice has already been made by a society which is continually offering violence to the op-

<sup>47</sup>Cone, *Black Power and Black Theology*, pp. 136-8.

pressed. The choice for the oppressed is rather whether violently to resist the violence already present; will they accept the covert violence of the society in which we exist or resort to some form of overt violence by which they will be striving to change this society?<sup>48</sup>

The necessity to resort to some form of violence is caused by the necessity to acquire power. I think this is what James Cone means when he says that the oppressed have the right to use any means necessary to overcome oppression.<sup>49</sup> Cone also explains what he means by Black Power. It is, he writes, "... an *attitude*, an inward affirmation of the essential worth of blackness. . . . This is Black Power, the power of the black man to say Yes to his own 'black being' and to make the other accept him or be prepared for a struggle."<sup>50</sup>

The real choice of how extreme these means will be is not that of the oppressed but lies with the oppressor. I do not mean that the oppressor can determine the "ground rules" for the struggle. What I do mean is that to the extent that the oppressor insists on resisting a change in the oppressive situation he calls forth violence. On the other hand, to the extent that he recognizes his need for conversion, his need to renounce the role of oppressor and to be released from it, he will limit violence and contribute to its complete elimination.

I agree with Cone, therefore, when he insists that the judgment as to what means are to be used to overcome oppression, what limits are to be put upon these means belongs with the oppressed and only with them.<sup>51</sup> The oppressor, as long as he maintains the role of oppressor, will by the very nature of things seek to limit these means to the point where they become no longer efficacious. The history of resistance to civil rights legislation and court decisions is more than abundant proof that this is the case.

Nor is the insistence on the acquisition of power by "whatever means are necessary" incompatible with the gospel command to love. On the contrary, to push forward the struggle for freedom is the practical implementation of the imperative of Christian love for the black

<sup>48</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 138-43.

<sup>49</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>50</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>51</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 6.



man in America today.<sup>52</sup> The gospel injunction "to turn the other cheek" is indeed true, but it is supreme arrogance for the one who strikes you on the cheek to enjoin it.

It is for those who are being struck to exhort and encourage one another in this regard. If they come to the conclusion that at any given moment forbearance and meekness are the true Christian posture, it is for them to make the choice. It is not for those who are oppressing to say: "If you really want to be Christian, then you have to allow us to oppress you." Such a way of interpreting the gospel is more than arrogance; it is blasphemy. Jesus did not go around striking people on the cheek in order to test whether or not they would follow his command. He rather gave the example; he was not of the oppressors but identified himself, and continues to identify himself with the oppressed.

To insist that these remarks are any more than a beginning is to belabor the obvious. As I noted earlier in my presentation, they do not pretend to have uncovered all the questions, much less the answers. They are proposed to stimulate reflection. Even the eventual report of the research team on black theology must remain the beginning of an ongoing task.

Because a corps of competent black Catholic theologians is an absolute necessity if this continuing challenge to theology is to receive an adequate response, I can do no better than to conclude my remarks with the observations made to the Society by Preston Williams on June 19, 1973 in New York:

If the Roman Church is to take more seriously black experience and culture, and encourage blacks to design new cultural and religious forms, and give a larger role to blacks within the Church, then it needs not only to convert and recruit more blacks to holy orders, but also to educate more blacks to be doctors in the Church. . . . American Catholics are simply not equipping themselves to know or to understand blacks. This is a grave weakness in Church and theological planning and one that needs to be quickly remedied. . . . Catholics it appears, have not yet learned that blacks are asking whites to study the neglected aspects of world and Church history and they are making the claim that in order to do this objectively and well, there must be black colleagues of equal sophistication, status and position. . . . Precisely because of the rootedness of the

<sup>52</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 47-56.

Church in European cultures and its white biased universalistic way of thinking it needs trained interpreters of black life and black religion. . . .<sup>53</sup>

JOSEPH R. NEARON, S.S.S.  
*John Carroll University*  
*Cleveland, Ohio*

<sup>53</sup>"Religious and Social Aspects of Roman Catholic and Black American Relationships," pp. 24-5.