

D. PROVIDENCE AND HISTORIES:  
AFRICAN AMERICAN PERSPECTIVES WITH EMPHASIS  
ON THE PERSPECTIVE OF BLACK LIBERATION THEOLOGY

*Introduction*

Black theology as a particular perspective and method in the field of theology is a relatively new phenomenon which has roots in the religious history of the slave ancestors of today's African-Americans.<sup>1</sup> Black theology, like most theology, is essentially an attempt to understand the meaning and purpose of human life in the context of a community which believes in God.

Black theologies, though diverse, all seek to understand the meaning and purpose of Black humanity in the context of a society which is inimical and oppressive to its existence. Recent news reports would suggest that assertions that African-Americans are the victims of systemic genocide may not be too radical. The infant mortality rate of African-American babies in major United States cities is equal to that of some third world countries; the life expectancy of Blacks decreased in the last six months; suicide rates have increased; the major threat to life for Black males between the ages of 22 and 45 is murder; Black males and females experience a higher rate of incarceration in prisons; deaths by AIDS and drugs is steadily increasing; etc. The development "life statistics" have complex histories but the environmental stresses of high unemployment, homelessness, miseducation, poor medical care, general poverty, and racism are contributing factors. These conditions have a systemic origin and require systemic solutions.

John W. Fleming suggests that in its initial stages of development, Black theology was united in its goal but diverse in its response in addressing the reality of the "color-caste system" and oppression which characterize the social reality of African-Americans. It offered three basic options or responses to White racism: "resignation—which gives up on the good life in this world and places all hope on a life beyond . . . accommodation—which attempts to adjust to and appease the status quo, and . . . liberation—which seeks to break the shackles of oppression."<sup>2</sup>

*Three Interpretations of Divine Providence*

These three sociotheological options which find concrete manifestation in the history of the Black community reflect three interpretations of the relationship of God to the world which is the central concern of the doctrine of divine providence in the context of the African-American experience. The first option, *resignation*,

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<sup>1</sup>Gayraud Wilmore and others trace the formal coinage of the term "Black Theology" to the 1969 statement by the National Committee of Black Churchmen in the context of the civil rights decade of the sixties. See Gayraud S. Wilmore and James H. Cone, *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-1979* (New York: Orbis Press, 1979) 100-102. For a brief history of the developments which led to the statement see Shawn Copeland, "Black Theology" *The New Dictionary of Theology* (Wilmington: Michael Glazier Inc., 1988) 137-41; and James Cone, *For My People* (New York: Orbis Press, 1984) 5-30.

<sup>2</sup>John W. Fleming's "Black Theology," *The Black Christian Experience*, ed. Emmanuel L. McCall (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1972) 85.

assumes a God who is not directly involved in human history, but calls one to transcend history and to prepare to sit at "the welcome table," i.e., to prepare for happiness only in eternal life. The second option, *accomodation*, requires an internalization of a portrait of a God who has established the social economic order. In this view, one's status in life is preordained and is to be accepted without any attempt to alter one's human condition. One must make the best of one's station in life. The third option, *liberation*, portrays a God who is concerned about those under the bondage of oppression and who strengthens them to struggle against oppression, confident that God will aid them to be successful.

The prevailing social and theological theories of nineteenth century conservative White Protestant thought supported the first and second views of God's Providence:

Every afflicting stroke is meant for our good, to cultivate our graces, to mortify our passions, to elevate and purify our affections, and so to discipline our spirits, as to work out for us a far more exceeding and eternal weight of happiness and glory in heaven. . . . If [one] is poor . . . we must own this to be god's will and appointment that we should be poor; and if we are rich we must consider that it is God's blessing which maketh one rich.<sup>3</sup>

Within Catholic thought Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* (1891) rejected such absolute social economic theories but maintained traces of it when he spoke of a divinely ordained social inequality.

There naturally exists among mankind innumerable differences, in health, and in strength, and unequal fortune is a necessary result of inequality of condition. . . . To suffer and to endure, therefore is the lot of humanity; let men try as they may, no strength and no artifice will ever succeed in banishing from human life the ills and troubles which beset it.<sup>4</sup>

Some African-Americans, nurtured in Christianity by Protestant and Catholic slave masters, uncritically adopted such nineteenth century understandings of their religious condition. The first and second theological options and their understanding of God's providence in relation to human history and freedom was reflected in some of the religious music and worship during the antebellum and postreconstruction eras. However, as their perception of the churches' treatment of Blacks became more critical, some other African-Americans were moved to embrace the third religious option of liberation which sought to break the shackles of oppression within the society and the church. It is the third interpretation of divine providence, the most critical of the three theological options which will be the focus of the remainder of this paper.

<sup>3</sup>Charles D. Cashdollar, "The Social Implications of the Doctrine of Divine Providence: A Nineteenth Century Debate in American Theology," *Harvard Theological Review* 7 (July-October 1978) 274.

<sup>4</sup>Leo XIII, "On the Condition of Labor," *Five Great Encyclicals* (New York: Paulist Press, 1939) no. 14, p. 8. Leo XIII spoke out against the slave trade and slavery. See *In Plurimus* (1888) and *Catholica Ecclesia* (1890) in Claudia Carlen, *The Papal Encyclicals: 1878-1903* (Salem NH: McGrath Publishing Co., 1981).

### *Historical Review of Black Liberation Theology*

Contemporary Black liberation theology was formally forged in the twentieth century crucible of Black ministers' attempt to respond to the challenge to religious understanding and ethics posed by the civil rights and Black power movements of the 1960s. Faced dramatically with the challenge of the church to take sides with the Black victims of white oppression, ministers and theologians of the Black church searched the scriptures and the Black religious tradition for a Christian understanding and response to the challenge of the times. Although Black liberation theology as a formal theology is a contemporary theological phenomena, it is historically rooted in the experience of the Black community's religious tradition preserved in the archives of Black history and Black culture and expressed in religious music, particularly the spirituals and gospel music, Black literature and Black worship. Because of the limits of time, we will limit these remarks to a sketch of the African-American religious history as it reflects the liberation interpretation of divine providence.

The peculiar nature of the enslavement of Blacks in the United States gave rise to Black religious thoughts of freedom. The African slaves knew *intuitively* that slavery was not God's final word for Black life. Listening to the biblical stories of God's concern for his chosen people, they identified analogously with the oppression of "the chosen people" and sensed that God's providence grounded in his all-caring love and omnipotent power was the source of their right and desire to be free. God had created human beings with the spirit of freedom at the core of their being, and if God had not chosen to enslave human beings, no other creature should. Slavery denied the human identity, dignity and freedom of Black humanity and was contrary to God's will. The prevailing theological and philosophical theories which supported slavery were simply erroneous!<sup>5</sup>

Slave insurrections were frequent. Free Blacks articulated the relationship between the Black quest for freedom and religious belief. As early as 1829, David Walker's tract entitled "Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World, But in Particular and Very Expressly, to those of The United States of America" sought to remind slave owners of their impending judgment by God because of their violation of his ruling providence. Walker wrote:

They forget that God rules in the armies of the heaven and among the inhabitants of the earth, having his ears continually open to the cries, tears and groans of his oppressed people; and being a just and holy Being will at one day appear fully in behalf of the oppressed, and arrest the progress of the avaricious oppressors; for although the destruction of the oppressors God may not effect by [*sic*] the oppressed, yet the Lord our God will bring . . . destructions upon them.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup>Jamie T. Phelps, "The Mission Ecclesiology of John R. Slattery: A Study of an African American Mission of the Roman Catholic Church in the Nineteenth Century" (dissertation, Catholic University of America, 1988) 69-80.

<sup>6</sup>Charles M. Wiltse, ed., *David Walker's Appeal*, 13th printing (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982) 3. After this preamble, Walker condemned slavery in the United States as more cruel and pernicious than that of the Israelites in Egypt and other slave systems in European history. Walker also made reference to the Declaration of Independence whose profession that "all men were created equal and endowed by their creator with certain inalienable rights of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness" seemed contradicted by the institution of slavery.

The sense of the injustice of slavery which denied the humanity of the slaves and the belief that this violated the will and purpose of God for human beings gave rise to other pre-Civil War slave insurrections. Gabriel Prosser and Denmark Vessey employed a mixture of religious and political rationales as foundation for their liberation movements. Combined with his own "divinely inspired" visions and his interpretation of Christ's crucifixion, Nat Turner testified that he was directed to slay his enemies. Later, Black religious leaders like Sojourner Truth, Harriet Tubman, Henry Garnet, and Martin Delaney sought liberation of Blacks from slavery by diverse forms of emigration.<sup>7</sup>

Civil and political events or movements like slave insurrections, the abolitionist movement, the Civil War, were interpreted by Christian slaves as interventions by God on behalf of their freedom, thus setting a pattern of interpreting the hand of God in acts which promise the liberation of slaves. These liberating acts (insurrection, emigration, etc.) in the Christian terminology were interpreted as acts of "redemption" consistent with God's universal salvific will. As Olin Moyd suggests:

Personal and communal development and deliverance from the ills of life are and always have been an undergirding reality in the understanding of redemption in the Black Church. . . . Redemption means salvation from oppression as well as from sin and guilt.<sup>8</sup>

Having gained legal freedom by the resolution of the War, the Emancipation Proclamation and the thirteenth and fourteenth amendments to the Constitution of the United States, some African-Americans began to focus on the role of the churches within their community. Richard Allen had already founded the African-American Episcopal Denomination when confronted with segregation within the Methodist Church in 1830. During and after Reconstruction separate Black churches increased in number and size as a concrete manifestation of Blacks' refusal to accept secondary membership within the church.

Black Catholics in the nineteenth century adhered to the Catholic Church because it was perceived as the friend of Blacks. Catholic slaves had been reputedly treated more benignly than those on Protestant plantations. The official directives of the Catholic Church regarding the treatment of slaves had advocated a more humane treatment.

In the late nineteenth century, Daniel Rudd, an African-American-Catholic laymen and journalist, convened five lay Congresses to explore how Black lay-

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<sup>7</sup>Vincent Harding, *The Other American Revolution* (Los Angeles: University of California, 1980) 19-36, and Herbert Aptheker, *Nat Turner's Slave Rebellion* (New York: Groves Press, 1966). This account leaves the impression that Turner had little formal Christian training and interpretation of the scripture. His isolation from the Christian community may account for his inability of seeing the limited interpretation of Christ's crucifixion on which he grounded his courageous action for freedom.

<sup>8</sup>Olin P. Moyd, *Redemption in Black Theology* (Valley Forge PA: Judson Press, 1979) 58-59. The first chapter of this book compares and contrasts the meaning of Redemption in Jewish Thought, General Christian Theology (European or Euro-American Theology) and Black Theology.

men and women could assist the priests in expanding the church within the African-American Community. Rudd was sure that the Catholic Church offered "the oppressed Negro a material as well as spiritual refuge, superior to all the inducements of all the other organizations." A loyal Catholic, Rudd was sure that the church would welcome Black people because it was "impartial in recognizing them as equals of all and any of the other nations and races of men before her altars."<sup>9</sup>

In the course of the five "Coloured Catholic Congresses" conducted between 1889 and 1895, Congress delegates began to discover and document discrimination within the church. Encountering the church's refusal to admit men and women to religious communities and priesthood, refusal to admit Black children to non-segregated parish schools, etc., led the group to become advocates of church reform on this matter. The ensuing conflicts kept the previously supportive White clergy from endorsing and supporting the Congress movement which directed itself to the liberation of Blacks within the Catholic community for full participation and contribution to the church and the society.

These issues and concerns of Blacks in both Protestant and Catholic churches were part of the foundations of a nascent liberation theology which would address both the ecclesial and social order. The experience of racial segregation and ostracism in the church and society led some Black Protestants and Catholics to embrace a liberative understanding of divine providence.

#### *Interpretation of Divine Providence in Black Liberation Theology*

Beginning with the sources of Black history, literature, religious poetry, spirituals and the contemporary experience of African-American people in the United States, Black liberation theologians, most notably James Cone, critiqued the screaming silence of mainline Christian theologians on matters which impacted on Black life and freedom (slavery, racism and other forms of institutionalized dehumanization). They turned to the New Testament as the normative Christian source for their task of seeking the meaning of Black life in the context of a God who cares. They sought liberation themes to interpret the dynamic of freedom seeking which is an integral part of their understanding of God's will for Blacks in a racially oppressive society.

The intuitive biblical interpretations of biblical themes, found in the musical tradition of the spirituals and gospel hymns and, more recently, the new methods of biblical criticism (particularly literary and historical-critical analysis), give new understandings of the historical realities of the sociopolitical implications of the biblical text. Black liberation theologians accept "a priori" a concept of revelation and divine providence in which God acts in history. God acted first in creation, through the sons and daughters of Israel (Abraham, Moses, Judith, Esther) and the prophets, then through Jesus the Christ and finally God acts through those contemporary disciples of Christ who struggle against the forces of racial and other forms of oppression.

Black liberation theologians are beginning to develop systematic expositions of the intuitive understanding of African-Americans who refuse to believe that either the denial of human dignity and identity or the systemic and individual

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<sup>9</sup>Phelps, "The Mission Ecclesiology of John R. Slattery," 120.

oppression of Blacks are God's final word for African-Americans. The God of Black liberation theology desires the liberation of those victimized even to the point of death by racial oppression.

The God of Black liberation theology desires African-Americans to exercise the freedom which is theirs by virtue of the act of divine creation. Just as God liberated the biblical Israelites from their captivity in Egypt, just as Jesus liberated the poor, oppressed and marginalized from their dehumanization, and just as God delivered Jesus from the despair of death on the cross by the resurrection, so too God is with African-Americans in the struggle against racial, gender, class and cultural oppression.

Black liberation theology declares that Blacks were and always have been free and that they have the right and responsibility to claim their freedom within our national and global society and the theological and religious institutions of our ecclesial communities. God is on the side of oppressed Blacks and all oppressed peoples in their struggle for freedom. God's revelation in Jesus confronts those who continue to victimize human beings by overt acts of oppression and the covert oppression of institutionalized racism imbedded in the philosophical, economic, social, cultural assumptions of the prevailing theology.<sup>10</sup>

Black liberation theology invokes Jesus under the title of Liberator. Salvation and redemption means liberation not only from sin but from the social and political alienation and oppression which characterizes Black life. Racism and oppression are human-created sins. Racism is an evil and sinful product of free acts of the human will. It is a sin which divides the human community and contradicts God's providence and will to establish the rule of God as the final goal of the whole human community.<sup>11</sup>

### Conclusion

From the ethical perspective of Black liberation theology, Christians have a moral responsibility to participate in the liberation of Black Americans from the oppression of racism in all its institutionalized social, economic and political forms. Such participation is in accord with the liberation interpretation of divine providence which assures the Black community that God will provide them with the strength and moral fiber (grace) to stand and act in truth.

Black liberation theology's interpretation of divine providence challenges theologians to reexamine the themes, methodology, and content of contemporary theological thought which seems to remain silent and indifferent to the reality of oppression of Black Americans and unconsciously supports the concepts of White

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<sup>10</sup>See Cornel West, *Prophecy and Deliverance*, for an analysis of the racism which permeated the development of modern discourse and Enlightenment philosophy and an exposition of African-American Philosophy; James Cone, *For My People* (New York: Orbis Press, 1984) 67. This text critiques his development of liberation theology. See his other works: *Black Theology and Black Power*, *Black Theology of Liberation*, *God of the Oppressed*, and *Speaking the Truth*, all available through Orbis Press.

<sup>11</sup>See the recent Catholic Documents, "The Church and Racism: Toward a More Fraternal Society," in *Origins* 18 (February 23, 1989); "Brothers and Sisters to Us" (Washington DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1979)

superiority which undergirds racism and remains silent in the presence of the genocide of Black human beings. Black liberation theology argues that the primary criteria of truth of theological propositions in Black theology cannot be the internal logical coherence alone, but whether or not these propositions lead to patterns of ethical behaviour which effect a transformation of the dehumanizing structures and right-relationship patterns of our society and churches. Structural and relational patterns must be a sacrament of the Spirit who empowers us to continue to incarnate the inauguration of the Kingdom which was initiated by Jesus the Christ, God with us in human history.

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