

# An African Views American Black Theology

John Mbiti

**B**lack Theology is a painful phenomenon in the history of the Church. Painful not because of what it says—although it certainly does not deal in soft phrases—but because it has emerged in an America that, since the arrival of the Pilgrims in the seventeenth century, has claimed to be a Christian country. Black Theology is a judgment on American Christianity in particular and Christianity in general. Ideally there would be no reason for Black Theology. It was forced into existence by the particularities of American history.

Black Theology as an academic concern can be dated from July 31, 1966, when the National Committee of Negro Churchmen issued a statement asking for power and freedom from the leaders of America, for power and love from white churchmen, for power and justice from Negro citizens, and for power and truth from the American mass media. Three years later the Black Manifesto demanded, inter alia, reparations to Negroes by the white churches because of the latter's complicity in the exploitation of Negroes (blacks, as they now prefer to call themselves). In the same year Professor James H. Cone published *Black Theology and Black Power*, which marked the formal inauguration of Black Theology as a serious academic concern with which the whole of Christian theology must reckon. Other publications appeared earlier, but Cone's is the one that formally incorporated Black Theology into the stream of Christian theology at large.

The roots of Black Theology must in fact be traced to a much earlier period of American history, the arrival of the first African slaves in the seventeenth century. The subsequent history of Americans of African origin—of exploitation, segregation and

general injustice—is the raw material of what we now call Black Theology. Insofar as Black Theology is a response to this history of humiliation and oppression it is a severe judgment and an embarrassment to Christianity, especially in America. Black Theology was born from pain and communicates pain and sorrow to those who study it. It is a cry of protest against conditions that have persisted for nearly four hundred years in a land which otherwise takes pride in being free and Christian, or at least in having Christian institutions.

One would hope that theology arises out of spontaneous joy in being a Christian, responding to life and ideas as one redeemed. Black Theology, however, is full of sorrow, bitterness, anger and hatred. Little wonder Black Theology is asking for what black Americans should have had from the start—freedom, justice, a fair share in the riches of their country, equal opportunities in social, economic and political life. The wonder is that it has taken all these years for the anger of Black Theology to surface. It draws from the peculiar history of the Negroes in America: from the "Black Experience," which is "a life of humiliation and suffering . . . existence in a system of white racism"; from the Black History of "the way Black people were brought to this land and the way they have been treated in this land"; from Black Culture with its "creative forms of expressions as one reflects on the history, endures the pain, and experiences the joy"; and in a more general way from the Scriptures, Christian tradition and African religious heritage (see Cone's *A Black Theology of Liberation* and Gayraud S. Wilmore's *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*). Professor Cone defines Black Theology as "that theology which arises out of the need to articulate the significance of Black presence in a hostile white world. . . . Black Theology is revolutionary in its perspective. It believes that Black people will be liberated from op-

---

JOHN MBITI, recently appointed director of the Ecumenical Institute in Geneva, Switzerland, was formerly head of the Department of Religious Studies and Philosophy at Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda.

pression" ("Black Consciousness and the Black Church" in *Christianity and Crisis*, November 2 and 16, 1970).

The main concerns of Black Theology are directly related to the circumstances that brought it into being. One such concern is "blackness" itself. It wants to see "blackness" in everything. It speaks of a Black God, Black Church, Black Liberation, Black this and Black that. While some theologians, notably James Cone, try to give a wider ontological meaning to "blackness," it is nevertheless a color terminology arising out of the color consciousness of American society. Indeed Professor Cone goes so far as to say that "white theology is not Christian theology." In reading Black Theology one becomes sated by color consciousness. It is necessary to remind oneself that racial color is not a theological concept in the Scriptures. A few black theologians are becoming aware of the dangers in excessive emphasis upon color. Professor Miles J. Jones has written (*The Christian Century*, September 16, 1970): "Color is merely a vehicle; experience is the concern. . . . Changing our concept of Christ's color is no acceptable substitute for interpreting our experience as black people in what God did and is doing through the Christ. Moreover, such 'coloring' is dangerously idolatrous. We need not color God or the Christ black in order to appreciate blackness as an instrument of the Divine."

Nonetheless, for Black Theology blackness has become an ideology embracing much of the life and thinking of Negroes in America, whether their skin color is black, dark brown, light brown, khaki or coffee, or even if they have a remote African ancestry and most of their biological heritage is actually French, English, Scottish, American Indian or other. All are "black."

Next to blackness the main concern of Black Theology is liberation. It is also, of course, the concern of Black Power and of the Negro community as a whole. Black Theology simply provides a theological dimension to the concept of liberation, a dimension for which there is a great deal of biblical support. Black Theology speaks of liberation in all spheres of the Negro's experience in America—social, economic, political, ecclesiastical, educational and cultural. Black Theology is a response to an American past and to an American present. It is a highly politicized theology designed to shape, advance and protect a popular ideology within the American scene. Without the American history of slavery, racism and domination by whites (pinks) over blacks (browns) and without the present realities of an America shaken by the Vietnam war, student protest, the civil rights movement and continued poverty among large numbers of whites and Negroes there could be no Black Theology.

Black Theology's preoccupation with liberation is brought out powerfully in James Cone's *Black Theology and Black Power*: "Black Power and Christianity have this in common: the liberation of man!"; "Jesus' work is essentially one of liberation"; "Black rebellion is a manifestation of God himself actively involved in the present-day affairs of men for the purpose of liberating people"; and so forth. His subsequent book, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, opens with the assertion that "Christian theology is a theology of liberation," and that "liberation [is] the content of theology."

On the question of liberation there is a near absolute unanimity among the theologians of Black Theology. They find ample grounds for it in the Old Testament, in the story of the Exodus and the history of Israel, and in the life and work of Jesus Christ. As a theology of the oppressed every concern in Black Theology has some bearing on the question of liberation. What I view as an excessive preoccupation with liberation may well be the chief limitation of Black Theology. When the immediate concerns of liberation are realized, it is not at all clear where Black Theology is supposed to go. Black Theology is deeply "eschatological," yet its eschatological hopes are not clearly defined. There is no clue as to when one arrives at the paradise of "liberation." One gets the feeling that Black Theology has created a semi-mythological urgency for liberation that it must at all costs keep alive. As a result it seems that Black Theology is avoiding other major theological issues not directly related to "liberation."



Black Theology presents Jesus Christ variously as the liberator, the Black Messiah, the Black Christ, and so on. We are told that Negroes are tired of a Jesus seen through the eyes of white or pink Americans. The Negroes in the Black Power movement are said to cry: "Give us no pink, two-faced Jesus who counsels love for you and flaming death for the children of Vietnam. Give us no bloodsucking savior who condemns brick-throwing rioters and praises dive-bombing killers. That Christ stinks. We want no black men to follow in *his steps* . . ." (see "Black Power and the American Christ" by V. Harding in *The Christian Century*, January 4, 1967). So in Black Theology Jesus has to be "the liberator par excellence" who sets free the oppressed and identifies himself with the poor; there is no salvation apart from identification with this Black Christ. Some see the Negroes as the Old Testament children of Israel, enslaved, delivered, led to the Promised Land, promised the Messiah and finally welcoming the Black Messiah who leads them

to the Kingdom of God. The most explicit statement along these lines is *The Black Messiah* by Albert B. Cleage, Jr. (New York, 1968). Similar sentiments are variously expressed in the Negro Spirituals and, undoubtedly, from many a pulpit in Negro churches.

A further theme in Black Theology is that "God himself must be known only as he reveals himself in his blackness. The blackness of God, and everything implied by it in a racist society, is the heart of Black Theology's doctrine of God. There is no place in Black Theology for a colorless God in a society when people suffer precisely because of their color . . . . The blackness of God means that God has made the oppressed condition his own condition . . . [and] that the essence of the nature of God is to be found in the concept of liberation . . . . It is Black Theology's emphasis on the blackness of God that distinguishes it sharply from contemporary white views of God" (James H. Cone in *A Black Theology of Liberation*). Cone declares categorically, "We must become black with God!"

Of course Black Theology addresses itself also to other themes, such as the Church, the Community, the Bible, the World, Man, Violence and Ethics. But the treatment of these topics is subservient to the overriding emphasis on blackness and liberation as they relate to Jesus Christ and God. At least this is my impression of Black Theology as I have tried to read it sympathetically and have discussed it extensively with such leading Black Theologians as James Cone of Union Theological Seminary in New York, Charles Long of the Divinity School at Chicago, Preston Williams of Harvard, Vincent Harding and George Thomas at Atlanta, Gayraud Wilmore of Boston University and many others. A number of questions keep coming up as one views Black Theology from the perspective of an African theologian. It is impossible to offer anything but provisional comments, for I am still digesting Black Theology and admiring it as a specifically American phenomenon. I admire the boldness with which it is presented. I admire the commitment Black Theologians have shown to this theological movement. I admire the zeal, the enthusiasm, even the joviality with which these Americans are going about their work. I understand the reasons for their bitterness, their anger, their hatred, all of which comes through in their Black Theology. Standing as I do at a distance, I am impressed with this sudden eruption of theological liveliness in America. Black Theology has been made necessary by the American past and present; the wonder is that it did not erupt sooner. It is long overdue.

**B**ut Black Theology cannot and will not become African Theology. Black Theology and African Theology emerge from quite different historical and contemporary situations. To a

limited extent the situation in Southern Africa is similar to that which produced Black Theology in America. African peoples in Southern Africa are oppressed, exploited and unjustly governed by minority regimes; they have been robbed of their land and dignity and are denied even a minimum of human rights. For them Black Theology strikes a responsive chord and perhaps offers some hope, if that be any consolation. In Southern Africa Black Theology deserves a hearing, though it is impossible to see how that hearing could be translated into practical action. But even in Southern Africa the people want and need liberation, not a theology of liberation. America can afford to talk loud about liberation, for people are free enough to do that in America. But in Southern Africa people are not even free enough to talk about the theology of liberation. Thus when *Essays on Black Theology* (edited by Mokgethi Motlhabi) was published in Johannesburg in 1972, the government banned it before it reached the bookstores. (The same work has since been republished, edited by G. Moore, in London under the title *Black Theology: The South African Voice*.) This book, however, is no more than an echo of American Black Theology; it even includes a contribution by James Cone. But the fact that it was banned so readily clearly indicates that Black Theology has a measure of relevance in Southern Africa.



Apart from Southern Africa the concerns of Black Theology differ considerably from those of African Theology. The latter grows out of our joy in the experience of the Christian faith, whereas Black Theology emerges from the pains of oppression. African Theology is not so restricted in its concerns, nor does it have any ideology to propagate. Black Theology hardly knows the situation of Christian living in Africa, and therefore its direct relevance for Africa is either nonexistent or only accidental. Of course there is no reason why Black Theology should have meaning for Africa; it is not aimed at speaking for or about Africa. As an African one has an academic interest in Black Theology, just as one is interested in the "water buffalo theology" of Southeast Asia or the theology of hope advocated by Jürgen Moltmann. But to try and push much more than the academic relevance of Black Theology for the African scene is to do injustice to both sides. In America and Europe, and to a lesser extent in Africa, there is an obvious temptation to make a connection that should not be made.

It would seem healthier if Black Theology and

African Theology were each left to their own internal and external forces to grow in a natural way without artificial pressure and engineering. African Theology is concerned with many more issues, including all the classical theological themes, plus localized topics, such as religious dialogue between Christianity and African Religion and between Christianity and Islam. Relations between Christianity and African culture, between Church and State, together with innumerable pastoral and liturgical problems, give African Theology a very full agenda for the years ahead. African Theology is not something that can be done in a decade or covered in one volume. It is a living phenomenon that will continue as long as the Church exists in our continent. African Theology has no interest in coloring God or Christ black, no interest in reading liberation into every text, no interest in telling people to think or act "black." These are interests of Black Theology across the Atlantic, and they are admirable on the American scene.

Similarly, African theologians have no business trying to tell other Christians how to solve their

theological problems, or what theology to use for their situations. We (I) wish only for dialogue, fellowship, sharing of ideas and insights, and learning from one another as equal partners in the universal Body of Christ, even if we Africans may still speak the theological language of Christianity with a stammering voice, since most of us are so new to it. We appreciate what others are saying according to their peculiar circumstances and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, but what they say reaches us only in whispers because they are speaking primarily to themselves and for themselves, just as we speak first and foremost to ourselves and for ourselves. We must recognize simultaneously our indebtedness to one another as fellow Christians and the dangers of encroaching upon one another's theological territories.

Black Theology and African Theology have each a variety of theological concerns, talents and opportunities. Insofar as each contributes something new and old to Christian theology as such, it will serve its immediate communities and also serve the universal Church.