

A Black American Looks at African Theology

James H. Cone



Georges Dauphin

As a black North American whose theological consciousness was shaped in the historical context of the Civil Rights movement of the 1950's and the subsequent rise of Black Power during the 1960's, I find it difficult to speak about the future of African theology without relating it to the struggle for freedom in the United States of America. The concern to accent the distinctiveness of the African context has led many African theologians to separate African theology, not only from traditional European theology, but also from American black theology. In "An African Views American Black Theology" (*Worldview*, August, 1974) John Mbiti is emphatic on this issue:

JAMES H. CONE is Charles A. Briggs Professor of Systematic Theology at Union Theological Seminary, New York. His article is adapted from a paper prepared for the Pan African Conference of Third World Theologians, held in Ghana.

The concerns of Black Theology differ considerably from those of African Theology. [African Theology] 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 an ideology to propagate. Black Theology hardly knows the situation of Christians living in Africa, and therefore its direct relevance for Africa is either nonexistent or only accidental.

Mbiti's concern and perspective are not based upon a superficial encounter with black theology. Mbiti made these remarks after he and I had had many conversations on the subject while jointly teaching a year-long course on African and black theologies at Union Theological Seminary in New York. Nevertheless, it seems to me that he misrepresents black theology. His perspective not only makes substantive dialogue difficult but also
(Continued on page 36)

Is the universality of the Gospel to be discovered in the global struggle against racist and imperialist oppression?

(Continued from page 26)

excludes black American theologians from creative participation in the future development of African theology. Admittedly, John Mbiti is not alone in making a sharp distinction between black theology and African theology. Similar views are found in the writings of Harry Sawyerr, E.W. Fashole-Luke, and, to a lesser extent, Kwesi Dickson. There is much truth in the widespread belief that the future of African theology belongs to Africans alone.

There is a second difficulty in my addressing the subject of African theology. In addition to the sensitivities of African theologians, there is the existential conflict inherent in my double identity as American *and* African. This identity conflict is widespread among black Americans, and it is a prominent theme in black literature and theology. One of the earliest and classic statements of this problem is found in the writings of W.E.B. Dubois:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder [*The Souls of Black Folk*, 1903, republished 1961].

Aside from the technicality of my genetic origin and its relation to the African continent, what right do I have to participate in the future development of African theology? Unless this question is honestly faced, the relations between African theology and black theology will remain superficial. We must move the dialogue beyond the phase of theological politeness to a serious encounter of each other's historical options. What is the relation between our different historical contexts and our common faith in God's power to make us all one in Jesus Christ? How do we translate the universal claim of our faith into a common historical practice?

An additional word of clarification is necessary. If by African theology we mean an interpretation of the Christian gospel in the light of the political and cultural situation of Africa, then it is obvious that the future of this enterprise belongs primarily to Africans alone. People who have little or no knowledge of Africa or whose theological consciousness was shaped elsewhere should not expect to play a decisive role in the future development of theology on the African continent. This point is applicable, not only to white Europeans, but to black Americans as well. My disagreement with Mbiti and other African theologians who separate radically African theology and black theology does not mean that I believe that black Americans should play a major role in the formulation of African theology. My contention is

that black and African theologies are not as different as has been suggested and that their common concerns require a dialogue that is important to both.

The history of American blacks cannot be completely separated from the history of Africa. Whatever may be said about the significant distinctions between Africans and black people of the American diaspora, there was once a time when these distinctions did not exist. The significance of this point extends beyond a mere academic interest in historical origins. Whether we live in Africa or the Americas, there is some sense in which the black world is one, and this oneness lays the foundation for and establishes our need for serious dialogue. Marcus Garvey expressed this point in his ill-fated "back to Africa" movement. With a similar philosophical ideal but a radically different political vision, W.E.B. Dubois, George Padmore, and Kwame Nkrumah expressed the unity of the black world in their development of pan-Africanism. But we do not need to accept Garveyism or the pan-African philosophy of Dubois in order to realize that the future of Africa and of black people in the Americas is inextricably bound together. International economic and political arrangements require a certain kind of African and black nationalism if we are to liberate ourselves from European and white American domination. This economic and political domination, sharply enhanced and defined by racism, will not be ended simply through an appeal to reason or the religious piety of those who hold us in captivity. Oppression ceases only when the victims accumulate enough power to stop it.

The oneness that I refer to is made possible by a common historical option available to both Africans and black Americans. Each of us can make a choice that establishes our solidarity with the liberation of the black world from European and American domination. This domination is not only revealed in the particularity of American white racism or European colonialism in Africa, but also in Euro-American imperialism in Asia, Latin America, and the Caribbean. World history has been written by "white hands" (to borrow a graphic expression from Leonardo Boff), and the time has come to recover the memory of the victims of this world. The need to reinterpret history and theology in the light of the hopes and struggles of the oppressed peoples of the world establishes, not only a oneness between Africans and black Americans, but also makes possible our common solidarity with the liberation of the poor in Asia and Latin America. This global perspective requires that we enlarge the oneness of the black world to include our solidarity with the world's poor. It was this assumption that defined the "Final Statement" of the Ecumenical Dialogue of Third World Theologians that met in Tanzania (August, 1976), and it continues to shape our dialogue in Ghana. To be sure, we must recognize that we live in quite different historical and contemporary situations, which will naturally influence certain emphases in our theologies. But we should guard against the tendency of allowing our particularities to blind us to the significance of our commonality. It is a oneness grounded in a common historical option for the poor and

against societal structures that oppress them. This "poor perspective" (to use an apt phrase from Gustavo Gutierrez) makes us one and establishes the possibility of our mutual sharing in the creation of one humanity.

The possibility of substantive dialogue between African theology and other Third World theologies is created, not only on the basis of our common historical option, but also on the basis of our common faith in Jesus Christ. Because we confess Jesus as Lord, we are required to work out the meaning of that confession in a common historical project. Faith and practice belong together. If we are one in Christ Jesus, then this oneness should be seen in our struggle together to create societal structures that bear witness to our vision of humanity. If our common confession of faith is in no way related to a common historical commitment, how do we know that what we call the universal Church is not the figment of our theological imagination? I contend that the unity of the Church can be found only in a common historical commitment.

It is important to recognize the limitation of our particularity so that we will not ignore the universal claims that the gospel lays upon all of us. Whether Christians live in Africa, Asia, Latin America, or Europe, we have been called by God to bear witness to the gospel of Jesus to all peoples. There is only one history, one Creator, and one Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. It is the centrality of this faith claim that brings us together and requires us to have dialogue with each other about its meaning in society. Our cultural limitations do not render us silent but open us up to share with others our perspective about the historical possibility for the creation of a new humanity.

What is the universal dimension of the gospel that transcends culture and thus lays a claim upon all Christians, no matter in what situation they find themselves? This is the question that every theology must seek to answer. Because our various theologies are so decidedly determined by our historical option in a given context, different answers have been given. Because dominant European and American theologies have chosen an option that establishes their solidarity with Western imperialism and capitalism, they usually define the universality of the gospel in terms that do not challenge the white Western monopoly of the world's resources. There have been many debates in traditional theology about the precise content of the essence of the gospel, but seldom has the debate included political and economic realities that separate the rich nations from the poor ones. This is not an accident, and we must recognize the danger of defining the universal aspect of the gospel in the light of Western culture.

The future of African theology is found in its creative interpretation of the gospel for the African situation and in relation to the theologies of the poor throughout the world. This emphasis does not exclude the legitimacy of African theology's concern with indigenization and selfhood in its attempt to relate the biblical message to the African cultural and religious situation. But selfhood and indigenization should not be

limited to cultural changes alone. There is a *political* ingredient in the gospel that cannot be ignored if one is to remain faithful to biblical revelation. The recognition of this political ingredient in the gospel is clearly implied in the All Africa Conference of Churches' support of the liberation movements in Southern Africa. It is within this context that we should understand Canon Burgess Carr's highly publicized distinction between the "selective violence" employed by the Liberation Movement and the "collective vengeance" perpetrated by the South African and Rhodesian regimes in Africa. Thus, any outright rejection of violence is an untenable alternative for African Christians." These words caused a great deal of unrest. Carr drew a radical theological conclusion from the liberation struggles of African people, and the churches of Africa and Europe are still trying to assimilate its significance.

If for no other reason, we must give our unequivocal support to the Liberation Movements, because they have helped the Church to rediscover a new and radical appreciation of the cross. In accepting the violence of the cross, God, in Jesus Christ, sanctified violence into a redemptive instrument for bringing into being a fuller human life.

Burgess Carr is not alone among African theologians and church people who define liberation as a common theme in the gospel. "Liberation," writes Jesse Mugambi, "is the objective task of contemporary African Christian Theology. It is not just one of the issues, but rather, all issues are aimed at liberating Africans from all forces that hinder them from living fully as a human being." According to Mugambi, the idea of liberation is inherent in the concept of salvation. "In the African context, and in the Bible, *salvation* as a theological concept cannot be complete without *liberation* as a social/political concept."

No African theologians, however, have expressed the theme of liberation more dramatically than South African theologians. Desmond Tutu and Manas Buthelezi are prominent examples of this new theological perspective emerging from behind the apartheid walls of the Republic of South Africa. Both have challenged African theologians to take seriously the political ingredient of the gospel as related to the contemporary problems of Africa. Desmond Tutu is emphatic:

African theology has failed to produce a sufficiently sharp cutting edge....It has seemed to advocate disengagement from the hectic business of life because very little has been offered that is pertinent, say, about the theology of power in the face of the epidemic of coups and military rule, about development, about poverty and disease and other equally urgent present day issues. I believe this is where the abrasive Black Theology may have a few lessons for African Theology. It may help to recall African Theology to its vocation to be concerned for the poor and the oppressed, about [people's] need for liberation from all kinds of bondage to enter in an authentic personhood which is constantly undermined by pathological

religiosity and by political authority which has whittled away much personal freedom without too much opposition from the church.

These are strong words and they remind us all of the prophetic calling of the Church and theology.

Unfortunately, John Mbiti and Edward Fashole-Luke have been very critical of this South African black theology as being too narrowly focused on blackness, liberation, and politics. Both contend that Christian theology must transcend race and politics. But their criticisms are misplaced because the theme of liberation, as interpreted by the particularity of the African economic and political situation, provides the most creative direction for the future development of African theology. If God came to us in the human presence of Jesus, then no theology can transcend the material conditions of humanity and still retain its Christian identity. Jesus did not die on the cross in order to transcend human suffering, but so that it might be overcome. Therefore, any theology whose distinctive perspective is defined by Jesus is required to find its creative expression in the practice of overcoming suffering.

The need for African theology to focus on politics and liberation arises not only out of a christological necessity. It is also a necessity that arises out of the ecumenical context of contemporary theology. By locating the definition of African theology in the context of the political and economic conditions of Africa, African theologians can easily separate their theological enterprise from the prefabricated theologies of Europe and establish their solidarity with other Third World theologies. If black theology's focus on liberation is its challenge to African theology, what then is the challenge of African theology to black theology, Latin American liberation theology, and theology in Asia? Unless the challenge is mutual, then there is no way for substantive dialogue to take place. I believe that African theology's challenge to us is found by rejecting prefabricated theology, liturgies, and traditions and focusing the theological task on the selfhood of the Church and the incarnation of Christianity in the life and thought of Africa. African theologians challenge all Christians in the Third World to take seriously popular religion and unestablished expressions of

Christianity. Perhaps more than any other Third World theological expression, African theology takes seriously the symbols and beliefs of the people whom all liberation theologians claim to represent. If liberation theology in any form is to represent the hopes and dreams of the poor, must that representation be found in its creative appropriation of the language and culture of the people? If the poor we claim to represent do not recognize themselves in our theologies, how then will they know that we speak for them? From their earliest attempt to create an African theology, African theologians are agreed that their theology must take seriously three sources: The Bible, African traditional religion, and the African independent churches. The appropriation of these sources structurally locates the theological task among the poor people of Africa. Until recently Latin American liberation theology has tended to overlook the importance of this cultural ingredient in theology. The same is true to some extent of American black theology and perhaps, to a lesser degree, of theology in Asia.

The relation between indigenization and liberation does not have to be antagonistic. In fact, we need both emphases. Without the indigenization of theology, liberation theology's claim to be derived from and accountable to oppressed peoples is a farce. Indigenization opens the door for the people's creative participation in the interpretation of the gospel for their life situation. But indigenization without liberation limits a given theological expression to the particularity of its cultural context. It fails to recognize the universal dimension of the gospel and the global context of theology. It is simply not enough to indigenize Christianity or to Africanize theology. If theology is to be truly indigenized, its indigenization must include in it a social analysis that takes seriously the human struggles against race, sex, and class oppression. I contend therefore that indigenization and liberation belong together. The future of African theology, and all Third World theologies, is found in the attempt to interpret the Christian gospel in the historical context of the people's struggle to liberate themselves from all forms of human oppression. [VV]