BLACK THEOLOGY AND THIRD WORLD THEOLOGIES

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BEGINNINGS OF BLACK AND THIRD WORLD THEOLOGY

All Third World theologies began as a reaction to the dominant theologies of Europe and North America. Whether one speaks of Latin American, African, Asian, or Caribbean theologies—all of these recent theological developments in the churches and seminaries of Third World nations signal the rejection of the missionary theologies of their former colonizers.

Instead of accepting the prefabricated theologies of Europe and North America, Third World peoples are developing their own theologies. Most of them show a special interest in liberation, understood as the attempt of a poor people to gain its freedom. The focus on liberation is partly a reaction to the missionary emphasis on spiritual salvation, as if the gospel of Jesus had no interest in the material condition of life. Almost universally, awaken Third World peoples began to realize that the Bible is concerned about the salvation of the whole person, including his or her physical well-being. The neglect of the political and economic aspects of the gospel by European and North American missionaries came to be understood as a deliberate cover-up by oppressors so that Third World victims would not challenge the unjust international economic order.

As long as Third World peoples believed that the meaning of the gospel is defined by Europe and North America, they could not develop theological perspectives that would challenge their domination by the First World. The rise of Third World theologies, with their almost universal interest in liberation, is directly related to the emergence of national, political movements of liberation in the countries of their origin. When grassroots peoples of the Third World began to rebel against colonial rule by insisting, sometimes through armed revolution, upon self-rule, theological perspectives also began to develop with a similar focus.

It was no accident that Third World theologies of liberation began in the context of struggles for political liberation. The precise character of the liberation sought depended upon the political needs of the country as defined by a people struggling to liberate itself from foreign domination. Africans began to speak of a distinct African theology with a special interest in the Africanization or indigenization of the gospel so that they would not have to become European in order to be Christian. Latin Americans spoke of theology with an emphasis on liberation as defined by Marxist class analysis. Asians also used the term “liberation” in defining Asian theology, but they included in its meaning a special focus on their culture as defined by their great religions. They spoke about contextualization instead of indigenization, and began to relate it to an Asian Principle. Although Caribbean peoples have not developed a distinct theological perspective comparable to Asian, Latin, and African theologies, there are several indications that they also share many of the concerns for liberation found among other Third World peoples. Perhaps Caribbean theology will be a theology of liberation that will address itself to the issues of imperialism, classism, and racism.

It is clear that all Third World theologies began as a direct reaction to the theologies of the First World. A similar point can be made regarding theologies of liberation among the oppressed in North America. Black, Asian, Hispanic, and native North American minorities have begun to develop distinct theologies of liberation as defined against oppressive white North American theologies. Like Third World peoples in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Caribbean, the oppressed peoples of North America do not believe that white oppressors can define for them what the gospel of Jesus is.

Included among our liberation theologies of North America is also a distinct feminist theology that seeks to address the evils of sexism. Although feminist theology began among white North American women, some of the aspects of this theology have been adopted by minority women as well. Although minority women have not, for the most part, adopted the extreme radical rhetoric of some white women, minority women do realize that their men are not exempted from sexism. Furthermore, minority men have internalized many of the sexist values of the white male culture that defines the woman’s place as the home, thereby limiting her contribution in the liberation struggle.

Although the theologies of liberation have been in dialogue with the dominant theologies of North America and Europe, they have not been, until recently, in dialogue with each other. They have been so preoccupied with correcting and uncovering the hypocrisy of European-American theologies that they have tended to ignore their relationship to each other. Like their colonizers and oppressors, unfortunately, many Third World persons do not believe that
they have anything intellectual to learn from another oppressed people. Although some Third World peoples may turn against their white colonizers and oppressors, as is true also of liberation theologians, they are not likely to turn to their Third World brothers and sisters on other continents for intellectual resources of liberation. What they know about each other is often determined by white missionaries and other European mediators. This is tragic because missionaries are just as prejudiced against one Third World people as they are against another. The information supplied by white missionaries becomes suspect, because they do not intend for Third World peoples to build a coalition among themselves.

If Third World people were to build a coalition among themselves in their common struggle, it would be more difficult for Europeans and North Americans to control the Third World. When Third World persons become Christians, they must be persuaded that Europeans and North American whites are the only ones who know what Christianity means. Whatever the oppressed attempt to do, their oppressors must convince them that they need their help. The control of a people’s thinking is an essential element in socio-political oppression.

When I first began to write black theology, in 1968, the first thing white theologians and ecclesiastics told black and other Third World persons was that there was no such thing as black theology, because theology does not come in colors. What was so amazing is that many blacks rejected black theology, because white theologians, missionaries, and preachers said black theology was not "real" theology. It is unfortunate that many Third World persons even today ignore each other because they do not think that they could have anything of theological value to say. Even today there are still some Third World and North American black seminaries that offer courses in systematic theology but do not include their own theology or that of other oppressed peoples alongside North Atlantic theologies. Some North American black theologians are black in color only, not in their thinking, because they still contend that only Europeans and others who think as do they are "real" theologians.

It is very difficult for Third World persons to liberate themselves from a dependence on European thought, because we were trained by them and thus have a certain—indeed—affectation of their thought processes. Even when we rebel against Europeans or North American whites, our rebellion is often limited to negative reactions.

My interpretation of black theology during the late 1960s and early 1970s is an example of this weakness. When one reads Black Theology and Black Power (1969) and A Black Theology of Liberation (1970), my dependence on white theological concepts is obvious. And my black colleagues were quick to point out this contradiction in my perspective. Since the publication of The Spirituals and the Blues (1971) and God of the Oppressed (1975), I have been struggling to incorporate the experience and culture of the oppressed into the conceptual raw material for articulating black theology. For I contend that our rebellion against a European mentality should lead to a second step, namely, to an affirmation of our own cultural resources as well as those found among other oppressed peoples who have had similar experiences of oppression.

As a North American black theologian, I have emphasized the need of oppressed Christians of the world to begin to develop structures of coalition among themselves so that we can pursue a common struggle for freedom. In an organization called Theology in the Americas, oppressed black, native American, Hispanic, and Asian Christians have begun to dialogue on their common plight of oppression. In the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians, Asians, Africans, Latin Americans, and oppressed minorities of North America have begun to dialogue with each other. It has been within the EATWOT context that black theology has developed a dialogue with other Third World theologies. Other settings for dialogue include the World Council of Churches and the individual efforts of black and Third World theologians to be in conversation with each other.

In the next two sections of this paper, I want to focus my attention on the similarities and differences of black theology when compared with some literary expressions of Third World theologies in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. (I have not included Caribbean theology, because its distinctive features are still at an early stage of development.)

Black and Third World Theologies: Some Similarities

Black and Third World theologies are in agreement that the dominant theologies of Europe and North America must be rejected. In their rejection of the white theologies of North America and Europe, black and Third World theologians used the term "liberation" as a focus of their theological concern. The earliest references to liberation, as the heart of the gospel and as a definition of Christian theology, were made by black and Latin American theologians and church persons. It is important to note that black and Latin theologians began to use the term "liberation" almost simultaneously but independently of each other. Liberation became the dominant emphasis of black theology from its beginning with the publication of my Black Theology and Black Power (1969) and A Black Theology of Liberation (1970). One year after the publication of the second book, the Spanish edition of Gustavo Gutiérrez’s book, A Theology of Liberation (1971), was published. Other black and Latin theologians followed with an emphasis on the same theme.

The theme of liberation is not limited to Latin and black theologies. A similar concern is found among Asian and African theologies as well. The common concern of rejecting the dominant theologies of Europe and North America and the emphasis on liberation led Third World theologians to organize EATWOT. In the New Delhi meeting, efforts were begun for the development of a Third World theology within the context of the non-Christian world. When one analyzes the Final Statements of the five EATWOT conferences to date, the rejection of European theology and an affirmation of liberation are common characteristics.

In addition to the rejection of European theology and the affirmation of
liberation, black and Third World theologies also stress the need to reread the Bible in the light of the struggles of the poor for freedom. They have begun to speak of the 'hernierautical privilege' of the poor, and of God's option for the poor—that is, God's decision to reveal Godself to all humankind preferably in and through the poor. Rereading of the Bible in the light of God's option for the poor has led to an emphasis on the Exodus, the prophets, and Jesus Christ as the liberator of the poor and the downtrodden.

It has been within the context of our attempt to reread the Bible in the light of the struggles of the oppressed that the theme of the "suffering God" has become important in our theological reflections. Jürgen Moltmann's writings on the "crucified God" have stimulated our theological imagination, as has also Luther's distinction between the "theology of glory" and the "theology of the cross." But it has been the actual suffering of the oppressed in Africa, Asia, Latin and North America that has been the most decisive influence in our reflections on the cross of Jesus Christ. As Gustavo Gutiérrez has said: "We cannot speak of the death of Jesus until we speak of the real death of the people." It is in the deaths of the poor of the world that is found the suffering and even death of God.

The political implications of Luther's insight on this point seem to have been completely distorted with his unfortunate emphasis on the two kingdoms. Contemporary Lutheran scholars are even worse, because they appear to turn the cross of Jesus into a theological idea, completely unrelated to the concrete historical struggles of the oppressed for freedom. For most Lutheran scholars, the theology of the cross is a theological concept to be contrasted with philosophical and metaphysical speculations. It is a way of making a distinction between faith and reason, justification by faith through grace and justification through the works of reason.

But when the poor of the Third World and of North America read the passion story, they do not view it as a theological idea but as God's unqualified solidarity with the victimized of the world. Jesus' cross is God's election of the poor, taking their pain and suffering upon himself. This is what Third World theologians mean when they say that "God is black," "God is red," "God is rice," and other strange ways of speaking when compared with the metaphysical reflections of Europeans. This apparently crude anthropomorphic way of speaking of God is the Third World Theologian's way of conceiving Paul's dictum: "To shame the wise, God has chosen what the world counts folly, and to shame what is strong, God has chosen what the world counts weakness. He has chosen things low and contemptible, mere nothing, to overthrow the existing order" (1 Cor. 1:27-28).

Another common emphasis among black and Third World theologians is their de-emphasis, though not complete rejection, of the Western theological tradition and an affirmation of their own cultural traditions. If the sufferings of God are revealed in the sufferings of the oppressed, then it follows that theology cannot achieve its Christian identity apart from a systematic and critical reflection upon the history and culture of the victims of oppression.

Black Theology and Third World Theologies

When this theological insight impressed itself upon our consciousness, we Third World theologians began to realize that we had been misinstructed. In fact, European and North American theologians and missionaries stifled the indigenous development of theological perspectives of Third World peoples by teaching them that their own cultural traditions were not an appropriate source for an interpretation of the Christian gospel. Europeans and white North Americans taught us that the Western theological tradition, as defined by Augustine, Aquinas, Luther, Calvin, and Wesley, is the essential source for a knowledge of the Christian past. When black and Third World theologians began to concentrate on distinct black, African, Asian, and Latin theologies, they also realized that their own historical and cultural traditions are far more important for an analysis of the gospel for their struggle for freedom than are the Western traditions that participated in their enslavement.

African traditional religions and the African independent churches have played a vital role in the development of African theology. Black spiritual blues and folkways as well as radical nineteenth-century black freedom fighters played a special role in the rise of North American black theology. The major religions of Asia, including Hinduism and Buddhism, are being integrated into the current shape of Asian theology. In Latin America, the most Western of all liberation theologies, theologians have also turned to their own cultural history for guidance and inspiration.

All Third World theologians began to realize that those responsible for our enslavement are not likely to provide the resources for our liberation. If oppressed peoples are to be liberated, they must themselves create the means to make it happen.

The focus on our culture in the light of our liberation struggle has led to an emphasis on praxis as the context out of which Christian theology develops. To know the truth is to do the truth—that is, to make happen in history what is professed in church. All proponents of liberation theology contend that the masses are not poor by accident. They are made and kept poor by the rich and powerful few. This means that to do liberation theology, one must make a commitment, an option for the poor and against those who are responsible for their poverty.

Because liberation theology is not simply something to be learned and taught in colleges and seminaries but something to be created in the struggles of the poor, social analysis becomes a critical component of all forms of liberation theology. How can we participate in the liberation of the poor from oppression if we do not know who the poor are or why they live in poverty? Social analysis is a tool that helps us to know why the social, economic, and political orders are composed as they are. It enables us to know who benefits from the present status quo. Unlike European and North American theology, whose interlocutor is philosophy, liberation theologians dialogue with sociology. Agreeing with Karl Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, they say: "The philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it."
Black and Third World theologians have been searching for ways in which they can change the world together.

In our use of the tools of the social sciences for an analysis of the social, political, and economic structures that dehumanize the poor, Third World theologians almost universally endorse democratic socialism and condemn monopolistic capitalism. When we speak of democratic socialism, we do not have in mind the USSR, Eastern Europe, or any other so-called socialist country under the influence of the Soviet Union. Socialism by definition means democracy, and the U.S.S.R. is not a political democracy. Many Third World thinkers refer to Russia as an example of state capitalism.

Although there are no perfect reifications of our socialist vision, its authentification is based upon the struggles of the poor in the Third World who believe that there is no insurmountable reason why the present unjust order must continue. And the struggles of the peoples of Tanzania, Zimbabwe, Nicaragua, and other Third World countries symbolize the partial realization of our socialist vision.

For what we do know is that monopolistic capitalism is evil and must be opposed. Latin American liberation theologians have taken the lead in condensing and exposing the international capitalism of the United States and Europe, and their voices have been joined by Asians, Africans, Caribbeans, and Third World theologians in the United States. Our discussions together have widened our vision and enabled us to analyze more clearly the complexity of the international machinations of monopolistic capitalism.

Although Africans, Asians, and black North Americans have emphasized the role of culture in the bestowal of identity in the struggle for freedom, we also see more clearly now the importance of Marxian and the role of class analysis in the doing of theology. Both race and class analyses are important, and their importance is reflected in our support of each other.

Black and Third World Theologies: Some Differences

Although black and Third World theologies share many common concerns, they are not identical. The differences between black theology and Third World theologies in Asia, Africa, and Latin America can be classified in two general areas. There are differences that separate us, and there are others that complement and enlarge our liberation perspectives. Both kinds of differences are present in the relationship of black theology with African, Latin American, and Asian theologies.

The two main focuses around which our differences have shown up are socio-political liberation, on the one hand, and cultural liberation, on the other. In our dialogue with African theologians, North American black theologians have placed more emphasis on socio-political liberation, and Africans have stressed cultural liberation. Our dialogue began in 1971 and has continued to the present. In each of our meetings, Africans have shied away from the term "liberation," because they say that the gospel is not political. It is not an ideology of the oppressed. Some have even said that the gospel is concerned about all—the rich and the poor alike.

In light of liberation, Africans often prefer the terms "agriculturalization" and "indigenization," because they locate the problem at the point of culture, not politics. But black theologians have been adamant in their insistence that the God of the Bible is a political God who has identified divine righteousness with the bodily liberation of the poor. The difference between African and black theologians on this point has led some African theologians, such as John Mbiti, to say that African and black theologies have nothing in common. But the presence of black theology in southern Africa has cast a shadow over Mbiti's statement. Desmond Tutu, the present director of the South African Council of Churches, says that black and African theologies are soulmates and not antagonists. A similar point has been made by black Lutheran Bishop Mantas Buthelezi.

The concern of North American black theologians has not been to reduce theology and the gospel to blackness, or political liberation. Like our African brothers and sisters, we believe that there is a spiritual ingredient in the gospel that transcends the material conditions of human life. What we reject is the tendency, among some African theologians, to reduce the gospel and theology to a spirituality that has not been carved out of the real life sufferings of the poor who are engaged in political liberation. When the sufferings of the poor are individualized, privatized, it becomes possible to identify their sufferings with God without challenging the existing socio-political structures responsible for their suffering. A suffering God and Jesus' cross become mere intellectual, theological concepts totally unrelated to the daily life of the poor. This is precisely José Míguez Bonino's and other Latin theologians' critique of Jürgen Moltmann's writings on the "crucified God." A much more severe critique can be made of contemporary Lutheran reflections on Martin Luther's theology of the cross. Some liberation theologians would even make the same critique of Martin Luther because of his failure to extend his theological analysis of the cross to society.

Whether it is Moltmann's crucified God, Luther's theology of the cross, or African theology's theme of indigenization, the question of the socio-political ingredient of the gospel must be faced head-on. This has been and still is black theologians' chief concern in our dialogue with African theologians.

In the dialogue between black theology and Latin American liberation theology the opposite pole has been stressed. The main question has been: What is the relationship between race and class oppression? Because the Latin Americans are Marxists, they emphasize class oppression, almost to the exclusion of race oppression. Inasmuch as black theologians live in the white racist society of North America, with a heritage of two hundred fifty years of slavery and over a hundred years of white capitalist oppression, it is not likely that they will ignore cultural oppression as imposed by white racism.

Unfortunately black theologians have not always been sensitive to class oppression or to the role of U.S. imperialism in the Third World. Sometimes
we have given the impression that all we want is an equal piece of the North American capitalist pie. Therefore Latin Americans have rightly asked for a social analysis in our theology that criticizes capitalism. In this dialogue with Latin theologians, we have come to realize the importance of Marxism as a tool for social analysis.

As Latin Americans have pressured us on the issue of class analysis, we have pressured them on the importance of race analysis. Similarly to black theologians in their approach to Marxism, Latin theologians have not taken up race analysis enthusiastically. Our dialogue began in 1973, and we have struggled with the issue of race versus class since that time. Although the tensions between us have been high, we have learned a lot from each other and intend to carry on the dialogue.

It is revealing to note the changing dynamics and emphasis in black theology and its dialogues with African and Latin American theologies. With Africans, we black theologians often appear very "political" in our view of theology, and the Africans seem more "cultural" and "spiritual." In our conversations with the Latins, black theologians seem very "cultural" and "spiritual," and the Latins appear to reduce theology to politics. The reason for these differences in dynamics and emphasis is partly due to the way we read the Bible and analyze the gospel with our respective situations in view. Another reason is our limited knowledge of each other's situation and the role of our theologies in our liberation struggles. Sometimes we try to impose our particular theology upon another situation.

The crucial issue is whether our theological perspectives have achieved and still retain their identity out of the struggles of the poor. For I contend that any theological perspective that does not remain committed to the liberation of the oppressed cannot be Christian. It does not matter on what continent a theology may be found. What is crucial is where it represents: the poor or the rich, the black or the white, the First or Third World?

There has been less dialogue, and almost no conflicts, between black and Asian theologians. Asians do not know much about North American blacks, and we do not know much about Asians. The differences in culture and geographical distance are so great that we seldom have much to say to each other. This situation began to change when I was invited in 1975 by the Korean Christian Church in Japan to lead a three-week workshop on the theme "The Church Struggling for the Liberation of the People." Since 1975 I have returned to Japan and South Korea several times. Black theologians have met with Asian theologians in the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians. We found that we have many differences and similarities that complement each other.

Important for my perspective on Asia have been my colleagues Kouyou Koyama and Preman Niles of the Christian Conference of Asia, both of whom have done much to teach me about Asian theology. In addition to Koyama and Niles, I must also mention Asian students who have been in my classes at Union Seminary. Their presentation of the Asian reality and their commitment to participate in the struggle to liberate the oppressed on that continent have done much to illuminate my perspective on Asian theology. Like black theology, Asian theology seeks to bring together in dialectical tension the commitment to cultural identity and socio-political liberation. As I have suggested in my discussion of African and Latin theologies, they seem to be in danger of minimizing one side: the African socio-political liberation and the Latin cultural liberation. In Asian theology, there is a recognition of the importance of both these elements. My perspective on black theology has endowed it to recognize both elements as well.

Because our differences and similarities seem to complement each other's perspective, black and Asian theologians have begun to discuss the possibility of a dialogue with each other outside the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians. Preman Niles has explored this possibility among Asian Christians, and I have done a similar exploration within the context of the Black Theology Project of Theology in the Americas. No dates or agenda for a dialogue have been decided, but we are both anxious to initiate it, because we believe that we will have much to learn from each other.

Because black and Asian theologians have had few conflicts in our dialogue, we have been able to transport this experience of mutual support to our respective dialogues with Africans and Latin Americans. Why should we fight each other when we have so much to lose in division and so much to gain in unity? Asians and blacks seem to recognize that point in our theological conversations, and this recognition has enabled us to move to a deeper understanding of each other's struggles.

On the basis of the Third World theologians' dialogues together, it is clear to us that the future of each of our theologies is found in our struggles together. I am firmly convinced that black theology must not limit itself to the race struggle in the United States but must find ways to join in solidarity with the struggles of the poor in the Third World. The universal dimensions of the gospel message require that we struggle not only for ourselves but for all. For there can be no freedom for any one of us until all of us are free. Any theology that falls short of this universal vision is not Christian and thus cannot be identified with the Jesus who died on the cross and was resurrected so that everyone might be liberated in God's emergent kingdom.

NOTES

1. The term "Third World" is the object of much discussion. When I use the term in this essay, I am referring primarily to Asia, Africa, and Latin America. For a discussion of this term in a theological context, see Siegel Tures and Virginia Fabela, eds. The Emergent Gospel: Theology from the Underside of History (Maryknoll, N.Y.: Orbis Books, 1979), vii-x.


3. One of the best introductions to Latin American liberation theology is that of


7. Writings on feminist theology among whites are well known. For a good introduction see Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow, eds., *Womanspirit Rising* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1979).


11. See especially Míguez Bonino’s *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation*. 