

BY JAMES H. CONE

## “Freedom, History, and Hope”

Since the appearance of “Black Theology” in North America, “Liberation Theology” in Latin America, and “Political Theology” in many countries, it is no longer possible to *do* Christian theology without taking seriously the question of *freedom* in *history* for the *hope* of humankind. The black struggle for liberation in history, as it is related to oppressed peoples’ struggle for liberation throughout the whole world, forces Christian theology to ask: What is freedom and how is it related to oppressed peoples’ striving for a humane future?

I will begin this essay by establishing a perspective on freedom, history and hope, and then proceed to explore its theological implications. Freedom is that *structure of* and *movement in* human existence which enable people to struggle against slavery and oppression. History is the *place* in which freedom actualizes itself; and hope is the *anticipation* of freedom that is actualized in history. Hope is freedom’s vision, and history is the context in which the vision takes shape. Freedom, history, and hope are bound together, expressing humanity’s constitution, its place and also its future realization. When freedom is separated from history, it is no longer authentic freedom. It is an opium, a sedative which makes people content with freedom’s opposite, oppression. Freedom is also denied when it is separated from hope, the vision of a new heaven and a new earth. Hope is freedom’s transcendence, the soul’s recognition that what *is* ain’t supposed to be. History is freedom’s immanence, the recognition that what *is* is the place where we have been called to bear witness to the future, the “not yet” of human existence. Freedom then is a *project*, not an object. It is the projection of self in history against the structures of unfreedom in order to bear witness to the coming realm of perfect freedom.

In the light of this perspective on freedom, history and hope, it is possible to reflect on its implications for Scripture, theology and our contemporary situation.

### DIVINE FREEDOM AS THE SOURCE OF HUMAN FREEDOM

The human freedom to hope for a new heaven and a new earth is grounded in God’s freedom to be for us in history, both now and in the future. This divine freedom must be the Christian starting point of the analysis of freedom, history, and hope. According to Scripture, God’s Being as freedom not only affirms the divine will to *be* in the divine-self; it is also an affirmation of God’s freedom to be *for us* in the social context of human existence. Divine freedom is not merely an affirmation

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of the self-existence of God, his complete transcendence over creaturely existence. It also expresses God's will to be in relation to his creatures in the context of their struggle for the fulfillment of humanity. This is the meaning of the Exodus, the Incarnation, and the claim that "Christian theology speaks of God *historically*."<sup>1</sup> To speak of God historically is to speak of the God who is revealed in history and whose freedom is the divine will to be known in the political context of human strivings for liberation. The biblical God is the God of freedom who calls the helpless and weak into a new created existence. He is the God of Jesus Christ, the Oppressed One, who came to "put down the mighty from their thrones" and to "exalt those of low degree." He came to "fill the hungry with good things" and to send the rich away empty (Luke 1:52-53). Jesus was born like the poor, was baptized with them, lived among them, and died for them. In Jesus Christ, God disclosed his freedom to take the humiliated condition of the oppressed upon his divine Person so that they might have a new future, different from their past and present miseries. This is why Ernst Käsemann is correct in his contention that "Jesus means freedom."<sup>2</sup> "The Christian faith not only believes in freedom but is already freedom itself. It not only hopes for freedom but, rather, is itself the inauguration of a free life on earth."<sup>3</sup>

When God is revealed in history as freedom for us, the divine is disclosed as a God of hope. "Christian theology," writes Moltmann, "speaks of history *eschatologically*."<sup>4</sup> To speak of history eschatologically is to speak of the promise of God's Word of liberation, disclosed in his future, breaking into our present, and overthrowing the powers of evil that hold people in captivity. The biblical God then is a God of freedom, of history, and of hope.

Divine freedom is the source and content of human freedom. Human freedom, the will to create a new future in history, is grounded in divine freedom, God's will to be for and with us in his future. Because God has created us in freedom and thus wills to be in relation to human beings outside the divine self, freedom is bestowed upon us as a constituent of our created existence. We know, therefore, that we are free not because of the intellectual investigations of idealistic or naturalistic philosophies, but because of a liberating encounter with the One who is the source of freedom. To be content with servitude and oppression is to deny the very ground and intention of our created existence. This is what Anthony Burns, an ex-slave, meant by saying that "God made me a *man* — not a *slave*, and gave me the same right to myself that he gave to the man who stole me to himself."<sup>5</sup> A similar point was made by David Walker when he urged black slaves to remember that freedom is

<sup>1</sup> Jürgen Moltmann, *Religion, Revolution and the Future*, trans. by Douglas Meeks (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1969), p. 203.

<sup>2</sup> Translated by Frank Clarke (London: SCM Press, 1969).

<sup>3</sup> Moltmann, p. 66.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 203.

<sup>5</sup> A letter of "Anthony Burns to the Baptist Church at Union, Fauquier Co., Virginia" in Carter Woodson (ed.), *The Mind of the Negro as Reflected in Letters Written During the Crisis 1800-1860* (New York: Russell and Russell, 1969), p. 660.

not a gift from white slavemasters but a natural right of divine creation.

Should tyrants take it into their heads to emancipate any of you, remember that your freedom is your natural right. You are men, as well as they, and instead of returning thanks to them for your freedom, return it to the Holy Ghost, who is your rightful owner. If they do not want to part with your labors . . . God almighty, will break their strong band.<sup>6</sup>

Human freedom is not a possibility that can be given or taken away by oppressors. And people who recognize that essential point can also understand John Cassandra's bold affirmation: "You treated me like a mule and I came out like a man."<sup>7</sup> Human freedom is grounded in God's freedom to be with us in history, disclosing that our future is to be found in the historical struggle against human pain and suffering.

#### TOWARD A DEFINITION OF HUMAN FREEDOM

With divine freedom as the point of departure of our theological exploration, we are ready to ask: what is the *content* of human freedom?

(1) *Human freedom is being in relation to God.* Since divine freedom is the source and content of human freedom, then it follows that human freedom is freedom for God. Fellowship with God is the beginning and the end of human freedom. The free person is the one who encounters God in faith, that is, in conviction and trust that one's true humanity is actualized only in God.

Human freedom in this sense must now be seen as the very heart of the theological concept of the "image of God," even though this point has too often been obscured. In the history of theology, the image of God has frequently been identified with the human capacity to reason. Theologians since Barth, of course, taking their clue from the Reformation, have recognized the relational character of the image of God. But even Barth did not set forth the political and social implications of the divine-human encounter with sufficient clarity. To affirm that human beings are free only when that freedom is derived from divine revelation has concrete political consequences. If we are created for God, then any other allegiance is a denial of freedom, and we must struggle against those who attempt to enslave us. The image of God then is not merely a personal relationship with God, but is also that constitution of humanity which makes all people struggle against captivity. It is the ground of rebellion and revolution among the slaves.

The relational character of freedom as grounded in the human struggle to be free is emphasized in the black spiritual:

Oh Freedom! Oh Freedom!  
 Oh Freedom, I love thee!  
 And before I'll be a slave,  
 I'll be buried in my grave,  
 And go home to my Lord and be free.

<sup>6</sup> *Walker's Appeal/Garnet's Address* by David Walker and H. H. Garnet (New York: Arno Press, 1969), p. 81-82. *Walker's Appeal* was originally published in 1829 and Garnet's address delivered in 1843.

<sup>7</sup> Cited in *Long Black Song* by H. A. Baker, Jr. (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1972), p. 116.

Here the theme is freedom in history and struggle against human servitude. Black slaves not only recognized that freedom is an essential constituent of human existence ("Oh freedom! Oh freedom! Oh Freedom, I love thee!"); but also that freedom was being in relation to God ("And before I'll be a slave, I'll be buried in my grave, and go home to my Lord and be free"). Freedom is not only a relationship with God but an encounter grounded in the historical struggle to be free. "The Christian faith is freedom in struggle, in contradiction, and in temptation."<sup>8</sup>

(2) *Freedom is being in relation to self and the community of the oppressed.*

Freedom is not only being in relation to God; it is being in relation to self in the context of an oppressed community striving for liberation. To affirm that freedom is the image of God is to say not only who God is but also who I am, and what I am called to be in history. Freedom is knowledge of self; it is a vocation to affirm who I am created to be.

It is clear from divine revelation as witnessed in Scripture that authentic freedom of self is achievable only in the context of an oppressed community struggling for liberation. Because God's freedom for humanity is the divine liberation of the oppressed from bondage, human freedom as response to God's gracious liberation is an act for our brothers and sisters who are oppressed. There can be no freedom for God in isolation from the humiliated and abused. There can be no freedom to be for God unless the hungry are fed, the sick are healed, and justice is given for the poor. "If we believe the crucified Christ to be the representative of God on earth, we see the glory of God no longer in the crowns of the mighty but in the face of the man who was executed on the gallows."<sup>9</sup> To see the freedom of God in the man hanging on a tree means that God's liberation is for those who are falsely condemned and executed in the name of law and order. Black slaves recognized this fact when they focused on the crucified One and saw in Jesus' face their faces, his condition as their condition, his shame as their shame.

They nail my Jesus down,  
 They put him on the crown of thorns,  
 O see my Jesus hangin' high!  
 He look so pale an' bleed so free:  
 O don't you think it was a shame,  
 He hung three hours in dreadful pain?

It is most revealing that the slave songs, often called the Black Spirituals, focused more on the Passion and the crucified One than on the nativity of Jesus, although much could have been said about the similarity between the birth of Jesus and that of black slaves. They chose to sing about the One who was "whupped up the hill" and "nailed to the cross." They talked about the One who was "pierced in the side" and how "the blood came twinklin' down." And like black slaves who were rejected, beaten, and shot without a chance to say a word in their

<sup>8</sup> Moltmann, p. 66.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

defense, Jesus too was humiliated. But he “never said a mumbalin’ word/He jes’ hung down his head an’ he died.” In Jesus’ death black slaves saw themselves; they suffered and died with him. James Weldon Johnson expressed the spirit of that reality in poetic and sermonic imagination:

Jesus, my lamb-like Jesus,  
Shivering as the nails go through his hands;  
Jesus, my lamb-like Jesus,  
Shivering as the nails go through his feet.  
Jesus, my darling Jesus,  
Groaning as the blood came spurting from his wound.  
Oh, look how they done my Jesus.  
Oh, I tremble, yes, I tremble,  
It causes me to tremble, tremble,  
When I think how Jesus died;  
Died on the steps of Calvary,  
How Jesus died for sinners,  
Sinners like you and me.<sup>10</sup>

In the slave songs, sermons, and narratives are revealed God’s identity with the poor and the wretched of the earth, affirming the condition of the poor as the condition of the divine. God takes upon his Person black pain and humiliation and discloses that he has come to ease black people’s burden and to make their load light. Jesus’ resurrection from the dead is their guarantee that the oppressed have a future that cannot be destroyed by slave masters and overseers; so they also sang:

Weep no more, Martha,  
Weep no more, Mary,  
Jesus rise from the dead,  
Happy Morning.

Persons who do not recognize their freedom as bound up with the liberation of the poor do not know authentic freedom. They who define freedom as “spiritually,” as if the political freedom of the oppressed is secondary to divine freedom do not know Christian freedom, and are in fact alienated from God and in league with the devil.

We cannot grasp freedom in faith without hearing simultaneously the categorical imperative to serve bodily, social, and political obedience for the liberation of the suffering creation out of affliction. If we grasp only the promise of freedom in faith and forget the realistic demand for the liberation of the world, the gospel becomes the religious basis for the justification of society as it is and a mystification of the suffering reality.<sup>11</sup>

That human fellowship with God is possible *only* in an oppressed community is also made clear in the parable of the Last Judgment in Matt. 25:31f. People are placed on the right and on the left according to their ministering to the neighbor. Because the ones on the right met the needs of the oppressed, they were accepted into the Kingdom, even though they were not consciously trying to make it there. For them the neighbor was an end in himself and not a means to an end. The ones on

<sup>10</sup> James Weldon Johnson, *God’s Trombones* (New York: Viking Press 1972.), pp. 42, 43.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 95.

the left, who are rejected, were surprised at their rejection because they wanted to make it in the Kingdom. They failed to recognize the connection between the poor and the Son of man. For if they had known that the despised were in fact Jesus, they would have been prepared to help them, because they just wanted to be in the Kingdom. That is why they said, "Lord, when did we see thee hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison, and did not minister to thee?" (25:44 RSV). The answer was simple: "Truly, I say to you, as you did it not to one of the least of these, you did it not to me" (25:45 RSV).

(3) *Freedom is being in history.* There is no true freedom independent of the struggle for liberation in history. History is the immanent character of freedom; it is freedom's praxis, the project of freedom. The immanence of freedom is "visible whenever the emancipation of [people] from the chains of slavery takes place in history."<sup>12</sup> There is no freedom without transformation, i.e. without the struggle for liberation in this world. There is no freedom without the commitment of a revolutionary praxis against injustice, slavery, and oppression. Freedom then is not merely a thought in my head; it is the socio-historical movement of a people from oppression to liberation — Israelites from Egypt, Black people from American slavery. It is the mind and body in motion, responding to the passion and the rhythm of divine revelation, and affirming that no chain shall hold my humanity down. This is what black slaves meant when they sang:

I'm a child of God wid my soul set free,  
For Christ hab bought my liberty.

A similar point is made in scripture when divine revelation is connected with history and salvation is defined in political terms. In the Old Testament salvation is grounded in history and is identical with God's righteousness in delivering the oppressed from political bondage. The Savior is the One who has power to gain victory in battle, and the saved are the oppressed who have been set free. For Israel Yahweh is the Savior because "the Lord saved [her] that day from the hand of the Egyptians; and Israel saw the Egyptians dead upon the seashore" (Exodus 14:30). That is why the people responded with song:

I will sing to the Lord, for he has risen up in triumph —;  
the horse and his rider he has hurled into the sea.  
The Lord is my refuge and my defense,  
he has shown himself my deliverer. (Exodus 15:1-2 NEB)

Here salvation is a historical event of rescue. It is God delivering the people from their enemies and bestowing upon Israel new possibilities within the historical context of her existence.

The historical character of freedom is also found in the New Testament. This theme embodies Jesus' life and message and is perhaps best summarized in Luke 7:18 ff. When the disciples of John came to Jesus inquiring whether he was the expected messiah, Jesus is reported as saying: "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 79.

receive their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, the poor have the good news preached to them" (Luke 7:22). Again salvation is not an abstract, spiritual idea or a feeling in the heart. Salvation is the granting of physical wholeness in the concreteness of pain and suffering.

Any view of freedom that fails to take seriously a people's liberation in history is not biblical and is thus unrelated to the One who has called us into being. That is why black preachers from Richard Allen to Adam Clayton Powell and Martin Luther King, Jr. viewed slavery and oppression as a contradiction of the divine will. While white missionaries and preachers were saying that "The Freedom which Christianity gives is a Freedom from the Bondage of Sin and Satan, and from the Dominion of Men's Lust and Passions and inordinate Desires" but "does not make the least Alteration in Civil property,"<sup>13</sup> black preachers were saying in the spirit of the contemporary black poet, Mari Evans:

I take my freedom  
lest I die  
for pride runs through my veins . . .  
For I am he who  
dares to say  
I shall be Free, or dead  
today . . .<sup>14</sup>

Freedom is not a theoretical proposition to be debated in a philosophy or theology seminar. It is a historical reality, born in the struggle for liberation in which an oppressed people recognize that they were not created to be seized, bartered, deeded, and auctioned. To understand the *question* of freedom, we need only hear the words, experience the mood, and encounter the passion of those who have to deal with the dialectic of freedom and oppression in the concreteness of their everyday existence.

Standin' on de corner, weren't doin' no hahm,  
Up come a 'liceman an' he grab me by de ahm.  
Blow a little whistle an' ring a little bell  
Heah come patrol wagon runnin' like hell.  
Judge he call me up an' ast mah name.  
Ah tole him fo' sho' Ah weren't to blame.  
He wink at 'liceman, 'liceman wink too;  
Judge say, 'Nigger, you got some work to do?  
Workin' on ol' road bank, shackle boun'.  
Long, long time 'fo' six months roll aroun'.  
Miserin' fo' my honey, she miserin' fo' me,  
But, Lawd, white folks won't let go holdin' me.

In this context, freedom is the opposite of the policeman, the judge, and that system which may be loosely described as "white folks" and in the New Testament is called the principalities and powers. Black people do not need a degree in theology or philosophy to know that something is not right about this world. Karl Marx may be helpful in

<sup>13</sup> Cited in H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1929), p. 249.

<sup>14</sup> *I Am A Black Woman* (New York: William Morrow and Company, 1970), p. 75.

providing a theoretical frame for an articulation of the consciousness of the masses who are victims of economic oppression. But blacks in America and some other places believe that the problem of oppression is much more complex than that. And any analysis that fails to deal with racism, that demon embedded in white folks' being, is *ipso facto* inadequate.

Diggin' in de road bank, diggin' in de ditch,  
 Chain gang's got me, boss got de switch.  
 Judge say, "Three Days!" Ah turn aside.  
 All ah want's dese cold iron shackles off mah leg.  
 "And ninety nine more years!" Ah hung mah head an' cried.  
 All ah want's dese cold iron shackles off mah leg.

Of course, freedom is more than the recognition that iron shackles are inhuman; it is also the willingness to do what is necessary to break the chains. As Paulo Freire says: "Nor does the discovery by the oppressed that they exist in dialectical relationship with the oppressor . . . in itself constitute liberation. The oppressed can overcome the contradiction in which they are caught only when this perception enlists them in the struggle to free themselves."<sup>15</sup>

Also it is in the historical context of reflection and action that the oppressed recognize that God is struggling with them in the fight for freedom. This is the meaning of Jesus' lowly birth in Bethlehem, his healing of the sick and demon-possessed, and his death on the cross. God is making plain that his kingdom is not simply a heavenly reality; it is an earthly reality as well. Human beings were not created to work in somebody else's fields, to pick somebody else's cotton, and to live in ghettos among rats and filth. They were created for freedom — for fellowship with God and the projection of self into the future, grounded in historical possibilities. Freedom is self-determination in history and laying claim to that which rightfully belongs to humanity. As Mari Evans puts it:

I  
 am a black woman  
 tall as a cypress  
 strong  
 beyond all definition still  
 defying place  
 and time  
 and circumstance  
 assailed  
 impervious  
 indestructible  
 Look  
 on me and be  
 renewed.<sup>16</sup>

And lest this struggle seem only grim and austere, the same poet sings of its present joy.

<sup>15</sup> *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. by M. A. Ramos (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970), p. 34.

<sup>16</sup> Mari Evans, *I Am A Black Woman*, p. 12.



Who  
 can be born black  
 and not  
 sing  
 the wonder of it  
 the joy  
 the challenge  
 Who  
 can be born  
 black  
 and not exult!<sup>17</sup>

(4) *Freedom is being in hope.* While the meaning of freedom includes the historical determination of freedom in this world, yet freedom is not limited to what is possible in history. There is a transcendent element in definition of freedom which affirms that the "realm of freedom is always more than the fragments of a free life which we may accomplish in history."<sup>18</sup> As the writer of I John puts it: "Beloved, we are God's children now; it does not appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (3:2). There is included in freedom the "not yet," a vision of a new heaven and a new earth. This simply means that the oppressed have a future not made with human hands but is grounded in the liberating promises of God. They have a freedom not bound by human praxis, human strivings to change the social and political structures of existence. In Jesus' death and resurrection, God has freed us to fight against social and political structures while not being determined by them. Black preachers expressed that truth with apocalyptic imagination:

I know the way gets awful dark sometimes; it looks like everything is against us. Sometimes we wake up in the dark hours of midnight, briny tears flowing down our cheeks, crying and not knowing what we are crying about. But because God is our Captain and is on board now, we can sit still and hear the Word of the Lord. Away back before the wind ever blowed or before the earth was made, Our God had us in mind. He looked down through time one morning and saw you and me and ordained from the very beginning that we should be his children. You remember Old John the Revelator who claimed he saw a number that had come through hard trials and great tribulations and who had washed their robes in the blood of the lamb. Oh, brothers! Ain't you glad that you have already been in the dressing room, because it won't be long before we will take the wings of the morning and go where there will be no more sin and sorrow, no more weeping and mourning.<sup>19</sup>

This sermon makes clear that freedom is also beyond history and not limited to the realities and limitations of this world. God is the sovereign ruler and nothing can prevent his will to liberate the oppressed from being realized.

It is important to note that Black Theology, while taking history with utmost seriousness, does not limit freedom to history. When people are bound to history, they are enslaved to what the New Testament calls

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 93.

<sup>18</sup> Moltmann, p. 79.

<sup>19</sup> Langston Hughes and Arna Bontemps (eds.) *Book of Negro Folklore* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1958), pp. 252-253. (Paraphrased).

law and death. If death is the ultimate power and life has no future beyond this world, then the rulers of the state who control the policemen and military are indeed our masters. They have our future in their hands and the oppressed can be made to obey laws of injustice. But if the oppressed, while living in history, can nonetheless see beyond it; if they can visualize an eschatological future beyond the history of their humiliation, then "the *sigh* of the oppressed," to use Marx phrase, can become a cry of revolution against the established order. It is this revolutionary cry that is granted in the resurrection of Jesus. Freedom then is not simply what oppressed people can accomplish alone; it is basically what God has done and *will* do to accomplish liberation both in and beyond history. Indeed, because we know that death has been conquered, we are set free to fight for liberation in history — knowing that we have a "home over yonder."

"The home over yonder," vividly and artistically described in the black slave songs, is a gift a divine freedom. If this "otherworldliness" in freedom is not taken with utmost seriousness, then there is no way for the oppressed to be sustained in the struggle against injustice. The oppressed will get tired and also afraid of the risks of freedom. They will say as the Israelites said to Moses when they found themselves between Pharaoh's army and the sea: "Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, in bringing us out of Egypt?" (Exodus 14:11). The fear of freedom and the risks contained in the struggle are ever present realities in the fight for liberation. But the transcendence of freedom, granted in Jesus' resurrection, introduces a factor that makes a significant difference. The difference is not that we are taken out of history while living on earth — that would be an opiate. Rather it is a difference that plants our being firmly in history for struggle, because we know that death is not the goal of history. It was this truth that enabled black slaves to survive humanely in a situation of extreme cruelty. To be sure they sang about the fear of "sinking down" and the dread of being a "motherless child." They encountered death and the agony of being alone in an "unfriendly world." But because black slaves believed that death had been conquered in Jesus' resurrection, they transcended death and interpreted freedom from death as a heavenly, eschatological reality.

You needn't mind my dying,  
 Jesus' going' to make up my dying bed.  
 In my room I know,  
 Somebody is going to cry,  
 All I ask you to do for me,  
 Just close my dying eyes.

