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Religio-Ethical Reflections Upon the Experiential Components of a Philosophy of Black Liberation

Blacks are reluctant philosophers. But the present essay is not an apology. It is rather an attempt to blaze a new trail. We believe that there is an implicit philosophy within the black experience which needs analysis and interpretation.

Among highly advanced Asian people, the Japanese have been reluctant philosophers. Until they made contact with the West, their philosophy was limited for the most part to ethics and this was based upon Confucian principles imported from China through the Korean Kingdoms.

More to the point, however, Africans appear likewise to be reluctant philosophers in the formal sense. But recent writers on African religion and culture make a serious case for an implicit philosophy of the African experience.

Mbiti treats the concept of time as the central consideration for the African world-view. The African world-view is said to be anthropocentric. Everything is understood in terms of how man experiences events. Time consists of the past, the present and a short future. Whereas those of us in the West hold a three-dimensional view of time, Africans, according to Mbiti, have a two-dimensional understanding of time. All aspects of life, whether personal, social, economic, political or religious must be comprehended in this context. The past is designated as "big time" while present and short future belong to "little time." Eventually the present and short future are absorbed by "big time." This means that Africans look to the past. This explains why so much is invested in the family system with its deep reverence for ancestors.

What happens when African culture meets Western civilization with its "belief in progress" based upon a profound belief in the future, is that Africans want much of what this Western view yields in terms of material benefits, but they want these things *now*. Since African philosophy with its deep religious roots is essentially materialistic, the immediate expectation of earthly things is sought with religious zeal. So much for Mbiti in *African Religion and Philosophy*.

For a people transported to a new world in chains and shackled throughout their history in the new social environment in either physical or psychological bondage, *liberation* or *freedom* is the basis of reflection upon existence. I prefer *liberation* to *freedom* in this context because the word, *freedom*, has been so abused by the majority of oppressing groups in this society.

It is not easy to find "systems" of philosophy neatly packaged by black scholars to indicate this constant concern of the black man in the American environment. There are several reasons for this. The black man has a different temperament from those rooted solely in the Euro-American milieu. He has what Carter G. Woodson describes as "an oriental mind." The black man expresses himself in intuitive more than in rational or metaphysical terms. As a victim of oppression, he has not been afforded the luxury of reflecting upon reality in terms of pure thought. The black man has had to deal with concrete life-and-death issues in view of confrontation or escape. Whatever "reasons" the black man has as he reflects upon existence are "practical" rather than "pure" reasons. This explains why black scholars are attached to existentialism. Novelists like Richard Wright and James Baldwin, no less than theologians like Nathan Scott and James Cone are fascinated by the philosophy of existence. Furthermore, the moral and social implications of philosophical reflection hold the field. Alain Locke, the Oxford and Harvard trained philosopher at Howard University, turned his attention to a philosophy of culture. His search for "The New Negro" led him to apply his expert knowledge of aesthetics to art and literary criticism with special reference to the race problem. One is likewise reminded of William Banner's concern for moral philosophy and E. Franklin Frazier's preoccupation with social philosophy. Whether the black philosopher is conscious of his blackness or not, his experience in this society inevitably leads him in the more pragmatic direction where he begins an interpretation of liberation from oppression. The very nature of the black man's existence leads him to a philosophical search for meaning and a sociological analysis of majority-minority group relations.

II. AN EXISTENTIAL-ONTOLOGY

In my interpretation of the black experience, I would like to combine the ontological and the existential. The very nature of the black experience, as we have observed, requires a constant existential analysis of one's life. But this cannot be a mere navel-gazing activity. We must always deal with reality.

Existentialism is an introspective humanism or a theory of man which expresses the individual's intense awareness of his contingency and freedom. It implies self-examination and the search for meaning. It indicates freedom, dignity and responsibility in shaping one's destiny.

It is not difficult to understand why individuals belonging to a suffering race should be moved by an introspective philosophy. The question "why?" has been a part of black reflection from the very beginning. The folktales of black folks are motivated by this poignant question. A people who live in what Nathan Scott calls, "an extreme situation" must seek to make sense out of it if life is to continue. Thus the existential posture is native to black experience. White oppression and black introspection are strange bed-fellows, but they co-exist in this society.

A people cannot live without hope based on purpose or meaning. Neither may they survive on rhetoric and myth. Blacks must find a philosophy of survival in their *lebens welt* — living world. I would prefer, at this stage at least, to be non-judgmental regarding the “cleansing” value of violence or the search for “land,” so characteristic of the language used by some black spokesmen. It bears watching, however, that some white racists prefer the hot rhetoric of angry black militants to the challenge presented by the black caucus on Capitol Hill. White racists are content to let blacks blow off steam if they are assured that they are able to offset such words or deeds by superior power. On the other hand, if they see a weakening of their control at the power base, they feel seriously threatened. Another way of putting the matter is to say that a viable philosophy of the black experience must demonstrate that its rhetoric is grounded in reality. It follows that a significant philosophy of the black experience is ontological.

Ontology is derived from two Greek words “onta,” the things which exist and “logy” or “theory.” Ontology is, therefore, a theory of being or reality. It is the branch of knowledge which investigates the nature, essential properties and relations of being. Whereas existentialism is pre-occupied with meaning, ontology is concerned about reality. Through their ability to survive under conditions which would have driven most whites to insanity or suicide, Blacks have indicated the ontological basis of their experience. In spite of everything, we have touched base with the realities of our existence. The “trickster” folk tales of Blacks is one example of how black reflection has been based upon reality. The rabbit outsmarts the fox and symbolizes powerlessness overcoming power. This is a philosophy of survival under conditions which deny the humanity of black life. The use of slave songs, both work songs and spirituals, understood by the oppressor to be comforting and escapist in other-worldliness, to convey a code message of escape to freedom north of slavery, is an example of sound ontology. The black man was “thinking” of an interpretation of his existence that would make it livable. But at the same time he was very much in touch with the realities of his existence. His outlook can be justly described as existential-ontological.

Myth from the Greek *mythos* explains some practice, belief, institution or natural phenomenon. But *myth* may also refer to something which exists only in the imagination. Such myths when held by individuals or groups may be a powerful means for survival by the in-group. When held by an opposing group, myth may be used as a convenient means toward oppression — if the oppressed group believes what the oppressing group conveys through its myths. Myths abound in the black-white encounter in this society. Examples are the Magnolia myth of the contented Negro held by Whites and the Christ-like myth held by Negroes concerning their saintliness vis-à-vis the brutal, corrupt white man. As these examples show, myth participates in the rational and the irrational, in reality and in the imagined. But for a myth to have its impact, it only

need be believed. And the believing of myth is based to a large degree upon the thinking, feeling and words which sends it forth.

In the black-white encounter, both races have used myth in a forceful way in reference to the in-group and the out-group. Joseph Washington is correct in pointing to freedom as a constant concern of the black man. I would agree upon the predominance of the "stride toward freedom" in the thought and life of the black man. And yet Preston William has alluded to a necessary corrective to the absolutization of freedom as the black man's only preoccupation. There have been times when mere survival has been his only objective. In this instance a myth like the Christ-like myth is a means of self-respect, personal worth and dignity. Myth may serve as a weapon against oppression as well as an instrument for liberation. Some scholars like B. F. Skinner may be prepared to move "beyond freedom and dignity." Reality for the black man has been a constant quest for freedom and dignity.

Rhetoric, like myth, has been a useful tool in the black man's quest. Rhetoric is the art of expressive speech. It is a skillful, artistic and eloquent use of language. An "oratory of the oppressed" or a "rhetoric of protest" has been forcefully used by the black man to win his freedom and claim his manhood and his peoplehood in a society which treats him with a "benign neglect." Another way of putting the matter, is that a philosophy of language has developed to articulate the depths of the black experience. One may correctly refer to this language as the "hermeneutics" of the oppressed in quest of liberation. One gets the feel of "black rhetoric" as he reads the speeches of Frederick Douglass, as he ponders through DuBois' *The Soul of Black Folk*, as he reads Martin Luther King's *Letter from a Birmingham Jail* or listens to a recording of his, "I Have a Dream." Listening to Benjamin Mays, Howard Thurman or Mordecai Johnson is the best way to capture the real power of the soul of the black orator. This language is uniquely fashioned to convey the thirst for freedom and humanity that stirs in the depths of every black man in his solitude as he seeks meaning in his life. The oratory of protest is existential-ontological. It lays bare the soul of the black man — it is introspective. On the other hand, it is in touch with reality — it is related to the experience of oppression and the longing for liberation. The philosophy of the black experience is subjective-objective. It expresses the "spiritual strivings" of the black man as he carves out a philosophy of existence amidst the "extreme situation" — racism.

It is not surprising that DuBois became an ardent disciple of William James while studying at Harvard. It is characteristic of Blacks to find perception or intuition more appealing than rationalism. A black man finds greater affinity with his own experience and needs in this type of reflection. Abstract metaphysics and arid rationalism have little appeal. Much of my personal search for a reasonable faith has led me through the history of philosophy as well as doctrine. Very early

I found kindred souls like William James and Henri Bergson. I was impressed most, however, by Blaise Pascal's "reasons of the heart." Most recently Kierkegaard, Buber, Schleiermacher and Macquarrie in their several ways, have challenged me and aided me in my search.

While these august thinkers of the modern period have aided me, black fathers of the Church, like Origen and Augustine have made through the years an indelible imprint upon my mind and spirit. It would be amiss to omit the riches which have flowed into my understanding of the human spirit and ultimate verities from Asian religions and philosophies. From the study of Zen, Sufism and other religions or movements within these great religions, I have gained a real appreciation for perceptive knowledge.

It has been, however, by moving from existentialism (both theistic and humanistic) into the depths of the souls of black folks that I have discovered my true self. The philosophy of the black experience is more like insight or intuition than abstract thought. It is closer to existentialism than rationalism — closer to "practical reason" than to "pure reason." When a Zen poet writes about a tree, he identifies with the life of the tree. He does not think of the tree as an object. The tree becomes a subject and in some mysterious way he absorbs the life of the tree into his own awareness of existence. In spite of the black man's co-existence in a highly technocratic society, he has maintained much of this nature-mysticism which is native to both Asians and Africans.

It is clearly understandable why DuBois, Archibald Grimke and other black Harvard men of their generation were lifted up by the transcendentalism they breathed in the New England air. Howard Thurman, to this day, remains the black poet, mystic and philosopher of the black experience. Trained as a theologian and serving as a minister, he is essentially a religious philosopher — and not a theologian. His *Search for a Common Ground* is a recent and mature statement of a philosophy of the black experience which espouses the unity and reverence of all life. It is a philosophy of feeling. As one reads or listens to Thurman's message he is transported into the depths of reality — even unto the very bottom of his own soul.

Thurman is able to articulate a "soul" quality in the black experience philosophically, which one "feels" as he communicates with the mass of black folks. These mass blacks share the same experience but are unable to express what they feel. The source of Thurman's philosophy is deeply rooted in the black heritage. This is an African as well as an Afro-American experience. One observes it in the slave narratives, in folktales, spirituals, blues, novels and poems. Under the genius of Howard Thurman one observes the black experience taking shape not merely of perception, but reflection upon perception. Thurman enables us to communicate what we have been feeling and to understand it. The philosophy of the black experience is a type of knowledge. It is like *prajna* or non-knowing-knowledge. That is to say it is not rational

knowledge, but insightful knowledge. It is knowing from the inside rather than from the outside. It is characteristic of Blacks that they have learned about life from living it. Knowledge of experience more than book knowledge has been the basis of the black experience. And as we have observed, even the intellectual black man eventually finds his greatest interest in philosophy at the point where thought touches life. We have had to learn about life by living rather than thinking about living. Thus our reflection is based upon the realities of our existence. It is ontological-existential reflection. Black thinking is always practical. Even mysticism, as in Thurman, becomes practical or ethical mysticism.

III. MEANING AND PROTEST

All philosophies of black experience must tackle the question of meaning. Not only the question: "Who am I?," but the question of purpose or teleology must be raised and dealt with. If the philosophy of the black experience takes a religious turn, the problem of theodicy arises. The question: why there is so much unmerited suffering in a world in which the One said to be in charge is lovingly just?

All humans, from pre-literate days, have been preoccupied with the whence and whither of existence. We understand that man as a self-conscious being is alone in his reflection upon where he came from and where he is going. He is likewise concerned about the purpose of his life between his coming into this existence and the going out of this existence. He is concerned about his origin and the beginnings of the universe in which he lives. He develops myths of creation and cosmologies to explain these concerns. But as the existentialists remind us, being-in-the-world is a being-toward-death. Hence man is concerned with the termination of his earthly sojourn. He even looks beyond physical death to immortality, personal or social and in some instances both. Thus, like other humans, the black man's search for meaning is three dimensional. He is concerned about where he came from, where he is going and the meaning of his existence here and now.

At various times, as an individual or as a race one or the other of these concerns may have been in the ascendancy. Even if all concerns have been in mind simultaneously, one teleological issue may have had the priority. There might be even an explanation for the present suffering in terms of what happened in the creation of man. For example, one black folktale relates that when God created the world he dropped two bundles in the middle of the road. One bundle contained a pick and shovel and the other a pencil and paper. The black man picked up the first and the white man the second. This explained to the slave *why* he was slave and *why* the white man was his master. Such simplistic answers will not stand up under critical examination, but it did provide the slave with an answer that made an otherwise unbearable existence livable.

Even belief in life after death is not merely "escapist" for the black experience. For a people brought to the New World from a social en-

vironment with strong kinship ties, who had their family system destroyed, the belief that loved ones, torn from them by a cruel slave system of the auction block, would be united with them at another time and place, gave meaning to their present existence. They brought with them the reverence for ancestors and the belief in a continuing bond between the living and the living-dead. This was buttressed by their understanding of the Christian hope.

In the estimate of the people who enslaved them, their life was meaningless. They were a mere thing, property to be used. But deep within they knew that life was worthful. Death was not only relief from the "troubles of this world," it was the one thing that they could do out of a sense of freedom and therefore vindicate their humanity. They had no control over their life, but they did have control over their death, so far as their relation to the master was concerned. Whereas to the slave master their death was mere bookkeeping, to the black slave "freedom to die" gave significance to his life.

Beyond this, the black man was able to see death as an experience within life. This message is born in the spirituals. In a real sense the black man's future broke into his present life and gave it significance. There is more to what appears to be a sheer other-worldliness than an escapism. The meaning derived from an abiding existence and continuing relationships with loved ones brought richness and hope into a given existence. How else may we explain the "gift of laughter" or even the survival of black men under such intolerable conditions over such a long period of time?

Indeed, conditions still are unbearable for masses of black people in this country. Whereas some very affluent, comfortable, intelligent blacks "cop out" in sheer hopelessness through sex, drugs — even suicide, those who are rooted in the heritage we have just described are able not merely to survive, but to live meaningful and fulfilled lives. Recently a friend of mine, who is principal of a school in a Southern state related some of his experiences during the first phase of desegregation. It was of interest to me that he observed that white parents were the ones who encouraged him to hire more black teachers. They had learned not only that they were well qualified, but also they observed that black teachers had a "humaneness" — a dedication to their task, which made all the difference in the world. How may we explain this "humaneness?" How does a person victimized by the situation of racism, who has every human right to revenge and bitterness, find meaning in his life and express deep affection for the offsprings of the oppressor? It is my belief that part of the answer stems from the kind of reflection we have just described. Things which whites have given blacks as a noose have been re-shaped in the understanding brought to oppression into a cornucopia of meaning and service.

Black philosophical reflection has not only been concerned about meaning; it has likewise been a philosophy of protest, a political philos-

ophy. We have been determined to be free and thus our philosophical reflection has been uniquely a philosophy of freedom. Sometimes this reflection has moved to the point of defiance. Liberation has demanded the willingness to die. Revenge and revolt have been the content of this philosophy of freedom. The black man has said to the white oppressor, "give me liberty or give me death." Too often the white man has obliged him with death. For example lynching became a respectable sport for many God loving, Bible thumbing, patriotic Americans. Nat Turner's *Confessions* represent the philosophy of the violent black "rebel." His philosophy of freedom reflects what Camus describes as "resistance, rebellion and death." Such a philosophy is not concerned about pragmatism. It is not preoccupied with winning. It affirms the dignity and freedom of the black man even in death. Those who subscribe to this philosophy had rather die as free men than live as slaves. To be truthful, in their reflection, death was preferable to life, if life were to be the living-death they endured. This philosophy still is alive among Blacks. Fanon's *Wretched of the Earth* and Camus' *Rebel* are sacred texts to these adherents. Nat Turner is a saint for those who hold this view.

This is a very natural philosophy for Blacks to hold, given a factual look at black existence in the history of the United States. It is easy to understand and some cannot understand how black men can hold any other view. To those who think thus, any alternative view is untenable on moral, practical or any grounds whatsoever. Since my description of black philosophical reflection is intended, at least, to be non-judgmental we must let it be. It is worthwhile, however, to recall Aristotle's advice that courage is midway between cowardice and foolhardiness. Furthermore, there are dead cowards as well as living ones. Goading a sadist cop into taking one's life, which he may be happy to do under the guise of heroism, may be, in some cases at least, the final "cop-out." If one has something to live for, there is meaning in his death. If he does not have meaning in his life, his death may also be senseless. It is interesting that death, imprisonment and exile have taken so many blacks who hold this view out of the black revolution. But one may immediately recall that the fate of Nat Turner was likewise the fate of M. L. King, Jr. King, the apostle of the philosophy of non-violence both became the victims of violence.

This leads us to consider the other manner in which black men have expressed a philosophy of freedom. We have already alluded to the way folktales and spirituals were used by black men to proclaim the determination to be free. Blacks, under oppression, used "veiled language" and double talk to speak of freedom. Folktales that whites considered humorous or charming, sermons that appeared to be other-worldly and songs which spoke of heaven or heroes in the Bible, were means of expressing the longing for earthly freedom — even escape to freedom.

There have been those like Frederick Douglass who beseeched Americans to be true to their promises to all citizens. Emancipation followed

by Reconstruction led to great political thinking and activity with black liberation in view. These hopes were aborted by the Compromise between North and South in 1877 which exchanged economic gain for the black man's freedom. Black thought turned from politics to economics. Booker T. Washington embodied the new vision. Freedom was to be won by self-help, thrift and skilled labor. The cordial acceptance of Washington's Compromise in Atlanta in 1895 indicates that the ground was prepared for his message — that many blacks despaired of politics as an avenue to freedom and were now open to the alternative economic approach. The pot of gold at the end of the rainbow for which all Americans long now haunted the dreams of the black man. Economic security was his means to freedom.

DuBois represents a different departure for a philosophy of freedom. He espouses a cultural nationalism and would like to make room not only for the black masses, the skilled laborer, but also the "talented tenth." This latter group would not be industrial workers and the like, but professional blacks who would stand equal to all others in their chosen vocation. The diversity in the gifts of black men would blend into the plurality of the total society. Knowledge and experience for the black man would not be circumscribed by pre-conceived restrictions. He desired to see blacks break through the ghettorization of black experience and knowledge into the open field of opportunity available to all Americans. In his experience of "doubleness," as a black man and as an American he sought the true air of freedom. DuBois was said to mix mysticism with pragmatism and at times the mystic in him gained the upper hand.

While in Booker T. Washington, we meet a faith in the Negro based upon an ideology of accommodation, in DuBois, we confront a cultural nationalism highly pan-African in flavor. He asserted that blacks have a unique contribution to make to civilization; that they should support their own businesses; cooperate with each other and go to every length to organize our economic and social power.

A more cultural type of philosophy of freedom develops under Benjamin Brawley, Paul Roberson, Alain Locke, Kelly Miller and James Weldon Johnson. Brawley spoke of the "peculiar genius" of the black race and Locke the interpreter *par excellence* of the Harlem Black Renaissance of Arts and Letters speaks of "The New Negro." Johnson asks blacks to cherish the faith that "that dark past has taught us" as he penned what has been called ever since the "Negro's National Anthem."

Marcus Garvey arrived in New York from Jamaica in 1917 with a vision of black power as racial enterprise and solidarity. He taught self-help and self-reliance and gained popular support among blacks. He moved the black masses. Recalling the African heritage of ancient times, Garvey produced within blacks a pride of race and provided them with hope. He expresses through his organizations, social, eco-

conomic and political, the longing of blacks to be free. He asserted that the black man wants to take his destiny into his own hands and will have the rights to which he is entitled. Garvey is important in his own right for his immediate influence (even if he appears defeated by white power), but also for his influence upon black power at this time. Not an Afro-American in the same sense as other leaders discussed, he nevertheless was in touch with the aspirations of the black masses more than most other leaders of his day. His life and thought have come down to us through Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, Stokely Carmichael and Albert Cleage. His "philosophy and opinions" are alive in the current black liberation struggle.

The philosophy of the black experience with its message of freedom is eclipsed by the Great Depression save for men like A. Philip Randolph, DuBois and other kindred spirits who kept hope alive. Then the Supreme Court passed its landmark education decision in 1954. In that same decade M. L. King, Jr. assumed the mantle of the prophet of non-violence. He developed a philosophy of freedom by combining the Gandhian principle of non-violence with the Christian virtue of love. *Satyagraha* "soul-force" and *Agape* self-giving, sacrificial love were welded together into a militant battering ram against the racist walls of American society. With the method of Gandhi and the message of Jesus, as he put it, King sought the liberation of his people. King's fame, influence and fortune swept like a meteor across this nation and throughout the world. The Nobel Peace Prize won by him symbolized the international esteem of this man who rose from the obscurity of a Baptist pulpit in Alabama to a world leader in the field of human relations. No one man, in this century, has been able to move "all sorts and conditions" of blacks as King did. He was equally at home among kings, queens, presidents and professors as among farmers, dishwashers and janitors. He was at home in the lecture halls of the great universities, but could talk to the share croppers in the backwoods of Mississippi and the gangs on the South Side of Chicago, in words and ideas they understood. For all his learning and popularity, he maintained his common touch and his Baptist "hum."

He was influenced by the personalism of the Boston School, by Anders Nygren, the Swedish theologian of the *Agape* Motif School, by the Indian philosophy of *ahimsa* and many others including Reinhold Niebuhr, but his focus was the black experience of oppression and the longing of blacks to be free. King developed his own philosophy of liberation and applied it in the racial struggle. He was existential and ontological in thought and practice. He taught and practiced love but sought justice.

Like Roy Wilkins, Whitney Young and others of his peers, he sought to be "free and equal." His March on Washington highlighted by his "I Have A Dream" speech was focused on integration as a workable policy in black-white relations. Under the pressure of black militants,

King became more militant in a non-violent sense. But his demonstrations in Selma, Memphis, Chicago and the Poor People's Campaign, all emphasized non-violence and integration. "Black and White together" in coalitions of power were to enter the "kingdom of equality and justice." The philosophy of non-violence espoused by King moved SNCC, CORE, NAACP and his own SCLC. King was the philosopher *par excellence* of the freedom rides, sit-ins and all other "ins" for black liberation at the crest of his influence.

An unsung-philosopher and theologian, King's thought as well as his life now begs for careful appreciation and critical evaluation. But his very success was his failure. He spoke in absolutist terms about moral ideals. Even his program was based upon the pragmatic results of the application of these ideals in what he called the stride toward freedom. What he was about in Memphis, in Chicago and the Poor People's Campaign were to be the ultimate vindication of his philosophy of non-violence. He invested everything in the hope that non-violence would win an immediate and sure victory for the blacks and the poor. He had a lot of confidence in his ideology as well as the conscience of money-hungry, power-mad members of the economic and political establishment in this country. He was to this extent a dreamer and did not perceive what some of his ministerial colleagues, of the National Committee of Black Churchmen, rightly described as a situation in which "powerless conscience faces conscienceless power." This explains the immediate acclaim of Stokely Carmichael's cry for "black power," together with the decline of King's influence as he moved into the racial conflicts in the urban North — i.e., Watts and Chicago. A tragic realism had confronted the black masses regarding the white power structure and their worsening conditions of oppression.

But as long as King lived, black churchgoers, white liberals and many others who had only a vested interest in the black man's misery hoped that King would win out over the black militants who were undermining his hold upon black youth. Even middle aged members of the black middle class, supported him, even if their own children were listening carefully to what Stokely was saying "loud and clear." Many "Anglo-Saxon Negroes," to use Nathan Hare's description, had just begun to breathe the air of freedom. They could care less about their black brothers and sisters trapped in the "dark ghetto." King's death illustrated how much the "high and mighty" thought of his "non-violent integrationist" approach to race relations, but it assured the triumph of "black power."

With King's death a hopelessness settled over the black people of this country. Those who entrusted all to his dream now had no basis for hope. A people cannot live without hope. The fact that life had become meaningless as a result of King's untimely death, may explain the sheer senseless character of the riots which erupted like brush fires across this land as slum after slum bursted into flame. I was in Durham, N. C. the

night King was assassinated. While I was in the peaceful environment of Duke University, much of Durham was aflame. On the next night as I arrived in downtown Washington, much of the city was in flames and the rest a military camp. The "King was dead" as the song says, and much of his dream had also died.

It was perhaps fortunate that some had not staked everything on King's philosophy and program; and that a radically different philosophy of protest and liberation had its roots in the black psyche. A different departure in race relations with its own philosophy and program swept across the country from a March in Mississippi where Stokely had shouted "black power." Immediately the philosophy of black power became an alternative to King's philosophy of non-violence. It operated with different principles and by different methods. It made "separatism and violence" possible if not necessary. This turned some off, but for others it provided grounds for hope. As we move toward a conclusion, we shall discuss the positive aspects of a black power philosophy of the black experience in the context of *survival* and *hope*.

Ideas have consequences as Marxism has taught us. Black Power is an ideology whose time has come. The only alternative to total despair for many blacks is some assertion like "black power." All legal and moral efforts that could be expected of any humans, including those who accepted the myth of the Christ-likeness of the black man, had been employed to integrate this society. Within a decade, blacks had sued, prayed, marched, rode and sat for freedom. What they had discovered was that the majority group did not have the will to grant black men their freedom. They were systematically rejected in all important ways. Even their appeals to the highest authority in the land were met by repression, indifference or "a benign neglect." Few choices were open. Even their sanity was being taxed and a way to psychological survival had to be found. Black Power inclusive of black consciousness, black pride and self-determination allowed blacks to stir among the ashes of King's shattered dream and light the embers of hope. *A people cannot live without hope.*

When Yette reviewed his book, *The Choice*, at Howard University, someone asked him, if he saw any grounds for hope. His reply was that as a journalist, it was his task to report his findings and not to interpret his facts. But, he was informed, this is exactly what he had done. He asserted that blacks were brought to this country and tolerated out of economic necessity. In this age of machines their labors are no longer needed and, therefore, they are expendable. Genocide is seen by Yette as a likely ultimate solution for the "black problem." This is about where Yette leaves us. It is not surprising that his questioner was left without hope.

I find much of this pessimism among young blacks, many of whom have had a rather comfortable life. This is the generation that cut teeth by the T.V. screen that revealed how cruelly sadistic the white man can be as a racist. Black heroes, like Dr. King, were beaten, chased by

dogs, thrown into jail and even killed as they sought justice and equality. This happened in the North as well as the South. What whites were willing to do to maintain a superiority position in this society was paraded before their impressionable minds and sensitive spirits daily on national television.

The study of black history has aggravated this awareness of the victimization of blacks in this country. There is little comfort in assessing what whites have done to blacks in the new world. The purpose of black history is to provide what Vincent Harding calls "the new land" — a cultural home for a rootless people. Unfortunately, what one comes out with is dependent upon the philosophy of the one who reads black history and the purpose he has in mind. When one seizes upon the brutality of the white man vic-a-vis the black man, it is almost natural to conceive of no relations between blacks and whites which are not based upon the "revenge and revolt" answer to the racial struggle. One concludes that all whites are racists. Rap Brown is correct: "Violence is as American as cherry pie." The only question is whose violence and not violence vs. non-violence. Put this way, black power becomes a way of expressing a life and death struggle in which liberty or death is the black man's portion. To accept these assertions absolutely is to be taken out of the revolution; for there are no grounds for hope. One who operates out of these suppositions accepts a self-fulfilling prophecy. What he does as he acts upon this philosophy may create the basis for his exile, imprisonment or death. By such hopelessness one may be taken out of the struggle for black liberation.

Whatever outlook one accepts in this society that has any promise of leading to black liberation *must* allow for black-white co-existence. Our destinies are bound together. Together we shall "nobly win or meanly lose" the struggle for black liberation. What we need is an ideology which will strengthen black power and humanize white power. It is not conceivable that wanton violence and irresponsible thought and action will accomplish either. We need an ideology and a course of action which reveal our strongest points and exposes the white man's weakest points. It is not likely that confessing our love for him will accomplish this. Our propensity toward religion has already been exploited to our sorrow. Now, in this time of black power, we no longer have a sentimental understanding of love. There can be no love where there is no justice. These are the bases for all moralized relations between humans.

It is at this point that we need a philosophy of the future. A philosophy of hope has been developed in Germany by Ernst Bloch, a non-theist. Due to the Marxist-Christian dialogue, some major theologians have been captivated by the potential of a philosophy of hope for a theology of hope. Jurgen Moltmann of Tubingen has become known, in this country, at least, as the theologian of hope *par excellence*. While he was at Duke Divinity School, a major theological conference was centered around his thought. Resulting from this confrontation with both a philosophy and theology of hope, there has developed in revolu-

tionary thought a looking toward the future. Black and Third World theologians have been captivated by this "political theology" more than they have been by other recent philosophical or theological movements. Rubum Alves wrote his, *A Theology of Human Hope* and Major Jones his, *Black Awareness: A Black Theology of Hope* from this perspective. The "hope" motif has much to offer as we look at the black experience.

Any use we make of the hope motif as a basis for a philosophy of the black experience will need to be put in black perspective. Here, also, a purely African understanding of time, if we take Mbiti seriously, will be equally problematic. Africans are said to have a long past and a short future. The concerns of Europeans and Latin Americans in applying a philosophy of hope to social and political problems are not our concerns. Our world-view is neither Anglo-Saxon nor African, it is both and more still. Our self-understanding is rooted in our experience as a people in this country. We have our own message of hope and any helpful explorations in this outlook must grow out of the black experience. Our oppressed conditions have not provided grounds for hope and yet we have dared to hope and have passed it on to our children.

Whether the black man's hope has been based upon myth or upon reality, what this trust in the future has done for him deserves careful consideration. There is evidence that much of the black man's confidence has been misplaced. He has trusted undeserving whites, he has taken seriously the promises of Americans and has too seldom trusted himself or his own race. But something has enabled black people to make bricks out of straw — to bring the improbable within the range of possibility. I am sure religion has had something to do with this, but religion *per se* is a subject in its own right. I will turn, therefore, to what we have introduced as the ideology of black power and seek to indicate how this may yield for blacks, out of their own experience, a philosophy of hope.

When I mention "black power" here, I do not have in mind a violent confrontation with white racists. I am aware that circumstances can push human beings to the breaking point where violence will result. Violence or counter-violence should not be programmed nor provided logical or ethical justification. Given sufficiently bad conditions of oppression, violence is inevitable. This is precisely why considerable attention should be directed toward the alleviation of oppression or talk of violence will be a self-fulfilling prophecy. Any consideration of the hope motif as a basis for a philosophy of the black experience must include a "political dimension." By "political dimension" I refer to "black power" as a basis for massive social, economic and political changes, making life more human for blacks. As long as life, for masses of blacks, remains a living-death, the grounds for hope are dim.

In a land of plenty, in the land of the free, the lot of the man in black skin must no longer be crumbs from the rich man's table. Over against an escapist and sentimental religious hope based upon a crude Jesusology, black power juxtaposes a this-worldly, secular and tough-minded

understanding of what can be done to humanize structures of power to enable blacks to hope.

There is a question as to how blacks are to relate to whites in a society where there must be co-existence and in-existence in the black-white encounter, but the real issue remains *liberation* from *oppression*. Whether one espouses integration or separation, it is a fact that black men, *as a people*, long to be free. The one-by-one taken approach of the black middle class and the white liberal is outmoded. It is based upon the philosophy of whites over blacks. It moves in one direction — toward the white mainstream as the promised land. It ignores the richness of the black heritage and is based upon the assumption that blacks will be deculturated from “blackness” and acculturated into “whiteness” in order to be free and equal. Blacks must earn their right to be human according to the white agenda. White is beautiful and black is ugly. This is symbolized by the “lily-white” beauty contests that represent the ultimate in female beauty. The fact that one black girl is used as a token, since blacks have their own contests, does not alter the situation since the judges are mostly white.

According to the ideology of black power, black is beautiful in its own right. I can now look at my three daughters and appreciate their beauty. This is based upon a new awareness. We have transvaluated ourselves and have been led to a new self-understanding. This has brought a new meaning and purpose into our experience. We see our history, heritage, people and ourselves as not needing to win their humanity by measuring up to white demands, but freedom is our birth-right. We take seriously the ideologies of natural law and natural rights upon which the Constitution and Bill of Rights are based. *Equity* which is based upon the belief that to be human is to have dignity is the basis of black power. We believe this position to be based upon a theory of being as well as a theory of existence. It is rooted in reality and provides meaning for the black experience. It is, likewise, the firm ground for hope and action.

This leads us to our conclusion. In this essay we have attempted to reflect creatively upon the existential-ontological aspects of the black experience. We have described meaning and protest, survival and hope in black perspective. We have described black reflection upon being and personal existence as a movement from oppression to liberation. Black philosophy is essentially a philosophy of liberation. These have been the first fruits of a religio-ethical examination of the experiential foundations of a philosophy of black liberation.

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