

By GEORGE THOMAS

## Black Theology: Vanguard of Pan-African Christianity in America

### 1. THE THEOLOGY OF THE BLACK EXPERIENCE.

#### a. Black Theology: A New Beginning of Pan-African Religion in the Black Diaspora?

As a particular theological formulation and system, Black theology attempts to engage some religious descriptions, interpretations and expressions of the life styles and God-consciousness of Black peoples, beginning in the African context and moving into the Black diaspora. In Black consciousness, the revelation of God is experience with special kinds of universal implications. As "the" theology it is the relevant message (*kerygma*) of God-activity in the contemporary situation. God has called Black people into the center of history. (He has called and calls others also.) Salvation history, in terms of Black experience, is for a divine purpose. Black history is not purposeless. The Black religious experience has become a reference point in the drama of human redemption. Black theology, whether "a" or "the" theology, is not the only theology, but it is the most relevant revelation of God-activity to accomplish a "Providential design" in the contemporary world, — certainly from the Black point of view. Probably it is the only theological enterprise in contemporary history that can serve the circumstantial will of God in moving the Black experience toward a historical and universal mission.

Because the situation of alienation has been offensive to God's will and purpose, the message of liberation has appeared in the flesh — functioning as God's offense in revolution and reconciliation in the world. The suffering of oppressed peoples of the Black diaspora have come to a new self-consciousness under the God-spell (*kerygma*). Black liberation as a Pan-African priority intends to serve all oppressed peoples in that which concerns the life needs of all humans as the only logic of redemption. Statements by Black people in America move in the direction of affirming both Africa and religion. "We are an African people" and "We are a religious people." The spiritual humanity is the most basic right of life of all people. Black Americans pursue clarification of Black history cast on the background of the Black diaspora. Black Theology may be the contemporary offense of God's judgment and grace in salvation-history, stretching to bring man into the new land. The "New Land" "beyond chaos"<sup>1</sup> is the context of faith and freedom as the quality of life experienced across the space of human geography.

<sup>1</sup> (See Drake's analysis in "God's Hand in Black History," p. 44 ff.) St. Clair Drake, *The Redemption of Africa and Black Religion*, Chicago: Third World Press, 1970. I am grateful to Vincent Harding for these phrases.)

b. In the Black Experience.

Black theology is dogmatic in a way, in the sense of affirming the reality of God-consciousness as a given — a reality as natural as air for the lungs to breathe. Black theology is human-centered in affirming the sustained activity of God's pressure toward the total redemption of the human experience. Black theology from the Black experience does not make an end of focusing on the skills of particular theologians or cultural or rational systems. The historical revolutionary struggles of the alienated and exploited peoples, the fostering of compassionate rather than paternalistic relationships among peoples, and the nurturing of creative Godly feelings in supporting the life-sustaining systems are the priorities in the reflections of Black theology. As the Incarnation comes and lives within the particular human condition, especially among those suffering from inhumane treatment, redemption, in Black theology, perceives God's utilization of the Black experience as revolutionary. The Black experience is one of those particular human conditions now set in a revolutionary motion.

## 2. BLACK THEOLOGY FROM BLACK RELIGION.

Whereas Black theology does attempt to interpret the Black religious experience in the light of the whole truth, its presentation and proclamation have the struggles of Black people as the religious agenda — with the unconditional smashing of the fetters of exploitation as essential. At such points where Black theology does attempt to sharpen and describe the concepts and beliefs in the Christian faith, in the light of the whole truth, including liberation from oppression, the role of Black hermeneutics assists to accomplish this function. On the other hand, it is in Black religion that the concern about the quality of the Black religious experience is especially nurtured, appreciated and expressed. The crucible of suffering has enabled Black people to internalize religion as the spiritual force which binds people in obedience to God. Religion is a quality of reverence for life and living. Theology has interpreted these qualitative experiences and relationships as spiritual values. Black people have been bound together, undergirded and sustained by such a religious force in an alien land. Black theology is a reflection of and from that life of faith — in survival and liberation.

## 3. BLACK THEOLOGY OF THE BLACK CHURCH.

Black theology, by and large, comes out of the Black church, especially the church that maintains the continuity and creativity of the Black religious experience. African religious consciousness is nevertheless the substratum of the historical religious experience out of which the Black church has come. The various movements which have spun out of Black religion in America have provided a latitude of experiences in and through which the faith of Black people has been maturing. All of the sects, cults, denominations and expressions of religious cul-

ture in the Black experience, represented in the struggles of an African people in the Black diaspora, have made the religion of the Church a part of that survival or struggle.

In the revelations of the "spirits" breaking into the consciousness, communications brought unions with Divine energy, erupting, as it were, through the Word of God, Scripture, through worship, and the Divine presence which came in the personality of Jesus, strengthened by the Holy Spirit. When Black folk said, "Let's have church", there was a special meaning — spiritual vibrations in the Black experience were set in motion. The African "temperament" has been deeply subtle and strong in the Black religious experience in America. There are profound religious sentiments and ways of doing things that manifest Black or Afro-American religiosity. Within Black culture, there are survivals of Africanisms, inherent in both the substance and style of affirming religious reality in personal and interpersonal feelings and relationships. The Black church has nurtured the precious experiences, traditions and culture of Black people in America. The black church has nurtured the faith, reason and revelation — presuppositions as ways to Christian knowledge, and as spiritual resources implicit in the Black religious experience. Black theology, evolving out of religion in the Black church, whether viewed as the primitive or orthodox, radical or sectarian, evolves existentially from an African religious tap root. At the same time, it advances toward African Christianity as the vanguard of Pan-African thology — a Third World force. We will now look at some of the reflections of contemporary Black theologians in the United States.

#### 4. BLACK THEOLOGY AND REFLECTIONS OF BLACK THEOLOGIANS

Black Americans are just beginning to recognize what African religion has contributed to Christianity in America through the total Black religious experience in personality and cultural creativity. God was a given-consciousness in the universal affirmation in the Black experience which was and endured in spite of white racism which sought to destroy Black God-consciousness. The profound inwardness of God and spiritual awareness existed before Black people came to accept Christianity from Euro-American Christian sources. God-consciousness was a manifestation of an inner spirit ordained by God.

In Black religion, the universal reality of God-Spirit entered into the particular humanity of Jesus Christ and thence into the enslaved African experience in America. As Jesus Christ sought to liberate man from the false, provincial and dogmatic controls of a narrow and individualistic type of religious idolatry, so Jesusology in the Black experience engages a theology that reforms Western Christianity. Some of the history of Christianity in Western culture has been that which bound the revelation of God to the sanction and support of racial, sensual and materialistic exploits of anti-human systems. The negative aspects in the history

of the Black experience and the history of white Christianity have of-times been two sides of the same coin. One speaks of Euro-American Christianity as having "niggerized" Africans and having superimposed on them a slave Christianity:

"The Black man's life in America constituted a process by which a proud African people were niggerized."<sup>2</sup>

"Slave Christianity is the Christianity that old master gave Black people back on the plantation . . . The whiteness of Jesus and Israel was basic to slave Christianity."<sup>3</sup>

In this way, Euro-American Christianity became the unconditionally assumed power in which all whites participated *ipso facto*. Preston Williams describes this type of participation as "conscienceless power".<sup>4</sup> Consequently, Black existence is existentially powerless and is disposed to distrust the theological universals which white Christianity espouses as in words only. Theological definitions and descriptions which become disconnected from humaneness are intellectual abstractions and do not even humanize the theological enterprise, but do sanctify the status-quo:

"Black people are oppressed because they are powerless and they are identifiable. They are oppressed by white people who have power and who control a system. It is necessary to understand then that a white persons is part of this oppressive system . . ."<sup>5</sup>

The hard questions are raised concerning the whole theological bag of Western culture. Bishop Joseph Johnson observes it in the new Black consciousness (see also his book *Soul of the Black Preacher*, 1972):

"Fanon, Malcolm X, Carmichael and Karenga forced the Black seminary student to ask these questions: What do these white American and European theologians of a white-racist-dominated religious establishment know about the souls of Black folks? What do Barth, Brunner, Tillich know about the realities of the Black ghettos, sharecroppers, rate bitten . . . drug addict . . . in stinking alley?"<sup>6</sup>

The Black experience has sought to liberate Jesus from the controls and purposes of white Christianity and to re-engage Christ in the universal mission, purpose and function of God's power and will for all mankind. Some Black theologians see this function of Jesus as the Black Messiah. Others speak of Jesus as the Liberator:

"Jesus, the Liberator, is the power of God, the wisdom of God and the love of God."<sup>7</sup>

To be liberator, the Christ of God and the God in Christ had to be first liberated from the controls of white racism. The Christ of slave Christianity and of conscienceless power is rejected and has been through history. The Christ affirmed by many in the Black experience is the Black Messiah, whatever His color:

<sup>2</sup> Albert B. Cleage, Jr., "The Black Messiah and The Black Revolution," in Gardiner et al., *op. cit.*, p. 4.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>4</sup> Preston Williams, "The Ethics of Black Power," *Ibid.*, p. 90.

<sup>5</sup> Cleage, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 101.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 97.

"So all through the nation's history many Black men have rejected this Christ (of slave Christianity), indeed the miracle is that so many accepted Christ (in spite of the manner of his presentation), . . ."<sup>8</sup>

The Christ of white Christianity had to be liberated from the racist perspectives and images given him by the status quo of Western culture:

" . . . the Black preacher and scholar had to detheologize his mind of the racist ideas which had crept into interpretations of Jesus and to see him in the depth of his full humanity . . . Detheologizing demands that we recover the humanity of Jesus in all its depth, length, breadth and height . . ."<sup>9</sup>

Jesus the Liberator has come to lead the Black struggle. The Black Messiah has been the new critical and organizing principle, says Albert Cleage:

"Jesus the Black Messiah lived in the midst of . . . the Black liberation struggle."<sup>10</sup>

James Cone connects Christ, the Black revolution and the Kingdom of God in the context of America:

"The appearance of Jesus as the Black Christ also means that the Black revolution is God's kingdom becoming a reality in America."<sup>11</sup>

Joseph Washington perceives the struggle of Nat Turner, for example, as a Christian experience in which the vision of the struggle of the Black and white spirits was symbolic of the struggle of Black people to regain control over Black life:

"The freedom which Black Power says Black Americans must wrench from White Power is, in essence, the gift of God for mankind . . . Black Power is consistent with the Cross in its demand that freedom be a reality, that Blacks fully express the liberating power of freedom, for this power is the only human force for the creation of a new community of new men and women."<sup>12</sup>

J. Deotis Roberts reaches this same conclusion:

"If Black theology is to be messianic, even eschatological, then, in what sense? The Black Christian is born on the side of oppressed humanity and must have an understanding of his faith which commits him to the quest for freedom and justice in the contemporary struggle."<sup>13</sup>

Black Theology is inexorably driven to be the vanguard of Pan-African Christianity, even in America. The universal validity of Christianity is not in terms of its correct ideological formulation or proclamations as such but in terms of its humaneness and mission in humanization of the quality of life systems and environments for all mankind.

<sup>8</sup> Vincent Harding, "Black Power and The American Christ," in Floyd B. Barbour, *The Black Power Revolt*, Boston: P. Sargent, 1968, p. 86.

<sup>9</sup> Johnson, in Gardiner, et al., *op. cit.*, pp. 97-104.

<sup>10</sup> Cleage, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20.

<sup>12</sup> Joseph R. Washington, Jr., *Black and White Subreption*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1969, p. 130.

<sup>13</sup> J. Deotis Roberts, "Black Consciousness in Theological Perspective," Gardiner-Roberts, *op. cit.*, p. 77.

## 5. PAN-AFRICAN CHRISTIANITY AND PAN-AFRICAN THEOLOGY

It is a Pan-African Christianity and theology which would disengage the Black experience from the narrowness and provincialisms of religious, racial and geographical limitations. A slave Christianity is forever bound by religious, racial and geographical objectives. The mission of God through Christ sets the objectives of the liberation movement in the context of the world. The power of Christ in the form of Pan-African Christianity and Pan-African theology sets forth the new means and instrument of salvation-history. At this level, salvation history through Pan-African Christianity and theology set in motion the liberation process as a redemption process — in revolution, in reconciliation and in the reconstruction of the whole human experience in the context of the multiracial world. African religion is implicit in Pan-African Christianity and theology.

Pan-Africanism was born out of African Christianity in the Black diaspora during the period of colonial domination of Africa. Continuity and change in the levels of awareness of African identity have taken place among some descendants of Africa in the diaspora. The element of continuity has persisted in the distinctive traits of temperament, socio-political awareness and Black life style (Africanisms in the diaspora) in the New World. The element of change has transpired in the transformation of that continuity into the new stages of consciousness and in the forming of the linkages which have embraced the larger identity of African peoples.

We have already attempted to outline some of the distinctive traits of African religion which have been the critical center of the African-American and Afro-American religious experience in the Black diaspora. As the characteristics of African religion persisted in the continuum of the Black religious experience, it has been relevant in Christianity in America, in at least two significant ways. On the one hand, the African residuals in the Black religious experience remain fundamental in the Black church movements, even where changes have occurred in the various mergings of Christian influence imposed by non-African cultural forms and life styles. On the other hand, there has been a relentless pushing for the establishment or recreation of valid African spiritual linkages. The probings into the past are now underway in Black America. The pushing for linkages with Black Christians in other parts of the world is a parallel effort. In this process, Africans in America are attempting to identify and define a genuine loyalty to the spiritual aspects of Pan-Africanism. This is not a gesture of romanticism, but a quest for an authentic kind of wholeness about the truth of Black life and personality.

In that which concerns the kinds of probings into the Black past, P. O. Esedebe has set forth several conclusions about Pan-Africanism being sought in the most complete understanding:

"Any complete definition of Pan-Africanism must include all of the major aspects . . ." <sup>14</sup>

As major aspects, he set forth: 1) the humiliating experiences of African peoples in the New World; 2) the racialism that continued during and after the abolition period; 3) the independent African church movements; and 4) the nineteenth Century nationalism.<sup>15</sup> These may be regarded as some of the important watersheds in the rise of Pan-Africanism. We might also add that they contributed to enlarging political consciousness and the concept of African unity.

St. Clair Drake has described the movement as a religious movement in terms of "God's hand in Black history."<sup>16</sup>

Esedebe has outlined the first three periods:<sup>17</sup>

In the first period, there were men like Paul Cuffee, John Kizzell, Lott Cary, Daniel Coker, Elijah Johnson, John Russwurm from America. Drake captures the radical religious aspirations of these Black men under two religious motifs: 1) the doctrine of "Providential design", and 2) Ethiopianism. With Alexander Crumwell, in the perspective of the Providential design, he stated:

" . . . the forced and cruel migration of our race from this continent, and the wondrous providence of God, by which the sons of Africa by hundreds and by thousands trained . . . are coming hither . . . for Christ and his Church . . .";<sup>18</sup>

also Henry M. Turner as quoted by Drake:

"The Negro race has as much chance in United States . . . of being a man . . . as a frog has in a snake den . . . Emigrate and gradually return to the land of our ancestors . . . The Negro was brought here in the providence of God to learn . . . and then to return to Africa, the land of his fathers, and bring her his millions . . ."<sup>19</sup>

On the doctrine of Ethiopianism, Drake states:

"This biblical myth is the core of a thought style that might be called "Ethiopianism," and which became more complex and secularized as it developed during the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries."<sup>20</sup>

Edward Blyden kept before Africans in America the self-image of that larger identity that linked Blacks in America with Africa, the ancestral home. He provided for Africans that larger identity of peoplehood:

"Besides promulgating the main ideas, Pan-Africanism of this period took the dominant form of Back-to-Africa, the Fatherland. Behind this impulse was the belief of New World Negroes that it was their manifest destiny to regenerate Africa."<sup>21</sup>

The second period of Pan-Africanism started with Henry S. Williams, September 1897, and the successive meetings that followed the London

<sup>14</sup> P. O. Esedebe, "Origins and Meaning of Pan-Africanism," *Presence Africaine*, Sierra Leone, Institute of African Studies, University of Sierre Leone, 1970, p. 111.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 111-120.

<sup>16</sup> St. Claire Drake, *op. cit.*, pp. 41-53.

<sup>17</sup> Esedebe, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

<sup>18</sup> Drake, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>21</sup> Esedebe, *op. cit.*, p. 125. See also Drake, *Ibid.*, p. 60-62.

meeting — in Brussels, in Lisbon, in Paris and in Manchester. The young Black intellectuals of the Caribbean, America and Africa had gathered in Europe seeking to identify and define the political objectives of African peoples, the objectives of Pan-Africanism. Indirectly, all of them had been influenced by religious institutions.

The third period of Pan-Africanism<sup>22</sup> came after the liberation of Africa had begun in Ghana and the end of the European central influence was visible. Pan-Africanism came to an African base under the leadership of Nkrumah, Kenyatta and others. Conferences created a permanent structure, a political-cultural mechanism, the Organization of African Unity (O.A.U.) in 1963. Although the O.A.U. works primarily for Pan-Africanism on the continent, the Pan-African movement continues to establish various kinds of linkages with African nationalities in various quarters of the Black world.

The fourth period of Pan-Africanism is now taking place in the various types of cooperative programs and projects wherein Africans from the Black diaspora are brought into the orbit of Pan-Africanism on the continent. From the Christian point of view, the emergence of the All-Africa Christian Youth Assembly, the All-Africa Church Conference, in 1962-1963, and the various dialogues which have taken place in Tanzania and Uganda in the matters of African church life and theology have helped towards this end. In America, several Africa-oriented groups continue the thrust of Pan-Africanism, even as Black nationalists — such as the Congress of African Peoples, Africa Commission of the National Committee on Black Churchmen. Dialogue between Black churchmen and theologians, have taken place, for example, in summer, 1971,<sup>23</sup> in Tanzania, where African theologians and churchmen came together. In January, 1972, at Kampala, Uganda, dialogue continued.

In the light of these realities, Black theology and African theology are moving along in space and time from the African homeland to the Black diaspora and from the past into the present and future. In the first dimension, Black theology and African theology are engaging in these conversations and explorations which will discover and describe the link of traditional African religion to the Christian presence in Black religion in America as well as Christianity as an African religion in Africa. The thousands of independent Christian movements document the fact that there is a fermenting energy that will one day burst forth in the unity of strength of Pan-African Christianity. In the second dimension, the unnatural brokenness in the historical experiences of African peoples, especially in the Black diaspora, is artificial and the people perceive a sense of inevitability about the linking and healing of the relationships among all African peoples in space and time. Indeed the future of Christianity as a world religion will be greatly shaped by African Christianity coming up from the Third World or the Black

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 126-127.

<sup>23</sup> James Cone, Gayraud Wilmore, "Black Theology: Considerations for Dialogue, Critique and Integration" (unpublished), 1971.



world. (The work of John S. Mbiti and David Barrett on the subject, *The Future of Christianity in Africa*, should be considered insightful, informative and prophetic.) Between the movement to discover and describe African religion uniting the present with the past and the movement to unite the religious experiences of African peoples in the future, there is another and pressing dimension: the present stirring of dialogues at Kampala and Dar es Salaam. James H. Cone and Gayraud S. Wilmore moved in this direction in their presentation "Black Theology and African Theology: Considerations for Dialogue, Critique and Integration" given in Tazavia, 1971. In Kampala, the conference on African theology and church life continue the proliferation of discussion.

Beneath the umbrella of Pan-African theology is the proper place to effect the blends of Black theology and African theology. Both are based on the main thrust of the Christian religion in the religious experiences of African peoples, regardless of the diversity. Nonetheless, under the pressures of Black humanity, African history, and the will of God, we are experiencing signs of the past and future in the labor pains of the present:

"What we are experiencing among Black people in the United States, the Caribbean and Africa is an outright rejection of both of these assumptions (the "inferior" residuals of African religion in the Black religious experience and the addage by American liberals that the 'Negro is nothing more than a chocolate-covered white American' . . . and a new consciousness of racial, national and cultural identity which asserts a certain discontinuity with Euro-American values and perceives Black peoples to have, by virtue of historical circumstances if not innate characteristics, a distinctive and independent contribution to make to world civilization . . ."24

Whether we now speak of African theology or Black theology or other forms of theology emerging from other quarters of the New World, we are still dealing with Pan-African Christianity, the source and resource of Pan-African theology. African religion is in America in the form of Christianity and Black religion. Christianity as an African religious experience, whether imposed or imported, has been indigenized in Black folk religion. Traditional African religious resources may well enrich African Christianity in America. The Black church movements have been extensions from the folk experiences of the Black experience in which African religion has been an influential and sometimes invisible link. Black theology and African theology are manifestations of African Christianity out of which Pan-African theology will emerge. The true Pan-African theology will blend other religious forms so that religion functions and serves the Black man and humanity — in belief and practice — for the ultimate coming of the brave, *new* New World. To this end, African religion is indeed relevant to Christianity in America and beyond — in the religion of Man.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

