By Paul R. Garber

Black Theology: The Latter Day Legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr.

A significant aspect of the legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr. more than six years after his death is to be found in the neoteric discipline known as Black theology. King is usually thought of as a civil rights activist and as a devotee of the philosophy of nonviolence. A few writers have taken King seriously as a theologian, but few indeed have noted the significance of his life and message in the emerging Black theology of the 1960's and 70's. The theologically oriented journal, *The Christian Century,* commenting on the continuing, though diminishing, influence of King in 1973, noted the political involvement of such followers of King as Andrew Young, Robert Brown, and Jesse Jackson as being consistent with King's emphasis on grasping the levers of political power, but no connection was made between King and a young Black theologian like James H. Cone.[1] A recent book devoted to an examination of King as a thinker makes no reference to Black theology and no suggestion that King's thought was in any way relevant to this new intellectual movement.[2] Yet there are very real ties that bind Black theology and King together. To be sure, Cone's relationship with King is quite different from Young's. Cone, who has been labeled a "radical" Black theologian, is no disciple of King, and yet he acknowledges that he found the basic principles of his theological system in the life and message of King. And the genius of King's theology is not simply his dream of the beloved community, but also his commitment to Black liberation and his understanding of God as the divine Liberator.

THE RADICAL KING

King was not initially perceived as the meek and mild Christ figure that White liberals, at least, have subsequently made him out to be. He was criticized not only by Alabama red necks and clergymen, but also by the *Washington Post* as a troublemaker who created tensions when the time was right for cooling them.[3] It was only after Stokely Carmichael and company raised the cry of Black Power in 1966, calling forth the spectre of counter-violence as a response to perennial White violence that King began to look so good to so many White Americans. The beloved community sounded more congenial, somehow, than Black Power, and nonviolence was more appealing than the call for an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. King came to be perceived by Whites, as

[1] "King's Continuing Impact," *Christian Century,* XC (January 10, 1973), pp. 35-36.
[2] Kenneth L. Smith, and Ira G. Zepp, Jr., *Search for the Beloved Community: The Thinking of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Valley Forge, Pennsylvania, 1974).
[3] "Handwriting on the Wall," editorial, *Washington Post,* April 14, 1963; Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: Harper and Row, 1964), p. 63.

William Jones, Yale's resident Black theologian has put it, as a guardian of White values rather than the Black Messiah.[4]

King did work very hard indeed to win the support of White liberals, yet the earlier perception of King as something of a radical was, perhaps, not entirely in error. Certainly King regarded himself as a revolutionary whose goal was not simply to change people's attitudes so that Whites might be persuaded to be nicer to Blacks, but also to change the structures of society so that Whites would be compelled to be just and equitable in their dealings with Blacks. While the Symbianese Liberation Army (or what is left of it) would, no doubt, find King's brand of revolution very tame indeed, many Blacks as well as Whites point to the King era as the time when the Black American began once again to assert himself effectively against White oppression. And frankly, King did not always sound as tame as he did in those passages from his sermons and addresses recited so approvingly by Whites, celebrating the power that emanated from Black nonviolence and love and suffering. This is not to suggest that King ever repudiated the philosophy of nonviolence, though he did, on occasion, warn that Blacks could not be counted on to abstain from violence for ever if White violence continued. But King had fewer illusions about the goodwill of Whites than he is often credited with. William Jones may scorn King's naivete in imagining that in a racist society White men would ever cease their oppression simply because of the noble suffering of the oppressed. Yet King, with all his talk of persuasion and his undoubted commitment to nonviolence, was also a devotee of Black power. He rejected only the Black Power slogan which he considered unnecessarily abrasive and thus counterproductive. He embraced the concept of Black power in much the sense that the champions of the slogan did. He knew there must be a Black power bloc with economic and political clout if Black men were ever to be liberated. At the very beginning of his civil rights role at Montgomery, he resorted to an economic boycott in his effort to accomplish his goal, insisting that "no one gives up his privileges without strong resistance," and at the end of his career he planned a campaign of massive civil disobedience in Washington, D.C. and wrote that "we must subordinate programs to studying levers of power Negroes must grasp to influence the course of events."[5]

Even King's rhetoric at times approached the level of the Black Power advocates. On the notion that White Americans considered themselves committed to justice for Black Americans, King wrote that this was, unfortunately, "a fantasy of self-deception."[6] This view of White racism

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[4] William R. Jones, "Martin Luther King, Jr.: Black Messiah or White Guardian" (audiotape of unpublished lecture presented at the Florida A and M University, Tallahassee, Florida, February 20, 1973).

[5] Martin Luther King, Jr., *Stride Toward Freedom* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1958), p. 113; Martin Luther King, Jr., *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), p. 138; see also *The Trumpet of Conscience* (New York: Harper and Row, 1967), p. 60.

[6] King, *Where Do We Go*, p. 4.

was not a late development in King's thought as some have suggested, a concession to the Black Power people of the late 1960's. In his first book, published in 1958, King noted, as he would again in his later books, that the privileged never give up their privileges on request, but only in response to coercive power. In this context King wrote: "I saw further that the underlying purpose of segregation was to oppress and exploit the segregated, not simply to keep them apart."[7]

The genocide theme, associated with the more radical Blacks, was voiced more than once by King. "Since racism is based on the dogma 'that the hope of civilization depends upon eliminating some races and keeping others pure,' its ultimate logic is genocide."[8] As early as 1963 King wrote: "For too long the depth of racism in American life has been underestimated. . . . Our nation was born in genocide."[9] (It may be worth recalling that Malcolm X, while deploring the nonviolent stance of King, quoted with great delight King's charge of American genocide.)[10] King was aware that the problem of racism in America was so grave that there could be no smooth or easy transformation of American society as many White liberals seemed to imagine. He interpreted the words attributed to Jesus, "I have not come to bring peace, but a sword," to mean: "Whenever I come, a division sets in between justice and injustice."[11] And it was precisely in the courage to stand up for justice in the face of holocaust that King saw the divine image within man. With full awareness of the depth of evil within man, specifically within White American man, and in spite of a very human love of life and fear of death, King was fully committed to justice. He quoted with approval the lines: "Before I'll be a slave, I'll be buried in my grave and go home to my Lord and be free."[12] "Even if physical death is the price that some must pay to free their children from psychological death," he argued, "then nothing could be more Christian. . . ."[13] Yet, unlike some of the Black Power advocates, King never sanctioned counter-violence. He did insist that the Black man must stand up fearlessly before the White man, refusing to cringe in the face of death. Even the threat of genocide must not be allowed to rob the Black man of his dignity as a person made in the image of God. Lest it be thought that King was, somehow, infatuated with death, it should be remembered that his constant theme was "We shall overcome." The threat of genocide was always there, but Black and White men of courage could, in cooperation with the God of the universe, overcome the killers and contribute to the final realization of the beloved community.

Finally, like the Black Power people, King in his later writings in-

[7] King, *Stride*, p. 113.
[8] King, *Where Do We Go*, p. 70.
[9] King, *Why We Can't Wait*, p. 130.
[10] Malcolm X, with the assistance of Alex Haley, *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1964), p. 368.
[11] King, *Stride*, p. 40.
[12] King, *Where Do We Go*, p. 123.
[13] Martin Luther King, Jr., *Strength to Love* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), p. 132.

sisted that the much publicized Black violence, especially the violence of urban rioting, was small indeed in comparison with White violence. Rather than the poor Blacks, it was the policy-makers of the White society who caused the darkness of human suffering on the American scene: "they created discrimination; they created slums; they perpetuate unemployment, ignorance, and poverty." And King concluded that "if the total sum of violations of law by the white man over the years were calculated and were compared with the lawbreaking of a few days of riots, the hardened of criminal would be the white man."[14]

King by no means limited his concern to White violence against Blacks in America, but spoke out, to the dismay of many of his supporters, against the continuing American violence in Vietnam, calling the United States "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today. . . . "[15] From a rhetorical point of view, this statement may not be in the same league with such utterances of H. Rap Brown as: "This country is the world's slop jar."[16] Yet King's effort to combine militance with moderation tended to give his words more weight, at least in White quarters, than the less restrained rhetoric of Brown. In any event it hardly sounds as if King were an unambiguous champion of White values.

THE MODERATE KING

If the moderate King who preached and practiced nonviolence is better known and better loved by White liberals than the more radical King, this moderation — if indeed it can be so called — carries very little punch today. King's own Southern Christian Leadership Conference survives as an organization, but with little apparent influence among Whites or Blacks. The all too typical pattern seems to have been repeated. With the death of the charismatic leader, the nonviolent movement died. Monuments may be built for the prophet, but few indeed heed the words or follow in the way of the prophet. The impression one gains even from devotees of nonviolence in the 1970's is that the movement has come upon very hard times indeed. In an interview published in 1973, James W. Douglass, commenting on the argument that the deaths of both Gandhi and King prove that nonviolence will not work, points out that those who make such arguments do not say that war deaths prove that war does not work. But he goes on to confess the pathetic weakness of the nonviolent movement today.

> We believe that when we are warmakers, we naturally commit our lives. But when we are peacemakers, a weekend demonstration is the limit of our commitment. . . . Unless many of us are willing to die for nonviolence and for peace, there can be no peace. The fact that there have been so few is a comment on the lack of seriousness of our understanding of nonviolence.[17]

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[14] King, *Trumpet*, p. 8.
[15] *Ibid.*, p. 24.
[16] H. Rap Brown, *Die Nigger Die* (New York: The Dial Press, Inc., 1969), p. 135.
[17] R. Scott Kennedy, "The Future of Nonviolent Resistance: An Interview with James W. Douglass," *Christian Centrury*, XC (May 16, 1973), 567.

A few scholars seek to preserve King's philosophy of nonviolence. John W. Rathbun finds it a "serviceable" philosophy of revolution; Herbert Warren Richardson sees it as the only way of dealing with the peculiar character of evil in our time, namely the evil of ideological conflict, by refusing to meet a mindless chauvinism with another mindless chauvinism, but rather with friendship; Warren E. Steinkraus sees in King's philosophy an interesting new development in the ongoing career of personalist philosophy as King officiated at the marriage of personalism and nonviolence.[18] At least two Black thologians also continue to maintain, at least in some measure, King's commitment to nonviolence. Deotis Roberts and Major Jones see nonviolence as the Christian way. Roberts regards nonviolence, as King did, both as a viable strategy in the Black quest for justice and equality in American society, and as being God's will for man as revealed in Jesus Christ.[19] Major Jones weakens this commitment somewhat, arguing that while nonviolence is unquestionably the Christian calling, this calling may be overridden when the going gets rough. In times of terrible stress, the Christian man may have to react in the manner of unregenerate man. While the Christian can never find divine sanction for violence, neither can he be expected to adhere rigidly to counsels of perfection.[20]

For King the trumpet call of nonviolence had a surer sound than this. Even in his moderation, King was bolder than some of his latter day followers. The philosophy and practice of nonviolence is, after all, a strange sort of moderation, for the devotees of this philosophy does not shrink from plunging into the thick of the battlegrounds of this world. He avoids neither violence nor the threat of violence; he avoids only the inflicting of violence on others. And he who indeed walks onto the battlefields of this world armed only with love and with the courage to insist on his dignity as a person and to demand the liberation of the oppressed, is hardly a moderate as that term is usually understood, but an extremist without guns. King was this sort of extremist, and he quoted approvingly the words: "When you are right, you cannot be too radical; when you are wrong you cannot be too conservative." Continuing, he asserted:

> The Negro knows he is right. He has not organized for conquest or to gain spoils or to enslave those who have injured man. . . . He merely wants and will have what is honorably his . . . . "If this be treason, make the most of it."[21]

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[18] John W. Rathbun, "Martin Luther King, Jr.: The Theology of Social Action," *American Quarterly,* XX (Spring, 1968), 51; Herbert Warren Richardson, "Martin Luther King, Jr. — Unsung Theologian," *New Theology No. 6,* edited by Martin E. Marty and Dean G. Peerman (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1969), pp. 181-82; Warren E. Steinkraus, "Martin Luther King's Personalism and Nonviolence," *Journal of the History of Ideas,* XXXIV (January-March, 1973), 103.

[19] Deotis J. Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation: A Black Theology* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1971), pp. 189ff.

[20] Major J. Jones, *Black Awareness: A Theology of Hope* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971), pp. 101-102.

[21] King, *Why We Can't Wait,* p. 146.

KING AND BLACK THEOLOGY

If King's strange moderation appears to have won him few disciples, Black or White, hearty enough to charge into the battle zones of the 1970's armed only with love, his religiously oriented militance has won him some notable followers, though some of these followers may seem an unlikely lot, and they themselves may not claim to be devotees of King. Yet it seems clearly to be the case that insofar as King lives today, he lives in the currently developing Black theology movement. Black theologians, writing in the context of the Black experience in America, understand the God of the Bible, the Jesus of the New Testament, and the continuing work of the Spirit of God in the world in light of the concept of liberation. As God led the captive Hebrews from bondage in Egypt, as Jesus identified himself with the oppressed and not with the oppressors, so God is working still for the liberation of the enslaved. "Black theology is a theology of liberation," according to the statement issued by the Committee on Theological Perspectus of the National Committee of Black Churchmen. Meeting in Atlanta in June, 1969, the Black theologians asserted that "Freedom is the gospel. Jesus is the Liberator."[22]

One of the principal draftsmen of this Black theology statement was a young Black theologian by the name of James H. Cone. Cone's first book, *Black Theology and Black Power,* which also appeared in 1969, was a theological expression of the Black Power movement that erupted three years earlier within the Civil Rights movement that had largely been dominated by Martin Luther King, Jr. Cone wrote in that book that

> Black Theology is primarily a theology *of* and *for* black people who share the common belief that racism will be destroyed only when black people decide to say in word and deed to white racists: "We ain't gonna stand any more of this."[23]

Yet Cone is more than a Black Power spokesman, for he argues that God is identified with Black men and with their quest for liberation. "The event of Christ tells us that the oppressed blacks are his people because, and only because, they represent who he is."[24] Blacks, then, are understood as the chosen people, chosen not to be suffering servants, but to be liberated from their suffering.

Cone is an aggressive, abrasive, person who would appear to be far removed from King who with all his considerable powers of persuasion sought to win White support rather than to alienate potential allies. In the introduction to his first book, Cone wrote pointedly: "This is a word to the oppressor, a word to Whitey. . . ."[25] In the final chapter of that book, arguing that Black theology is revolutionary theology, Cone asserted that he did not use the word "revolution" carelessly.

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[22] "Black Theology: A Statement of the National Committee of Black Churchmen," *Christian Century,* LXXXVI (October 15, 1969), 1310.
[23] James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1969), p. 117.
[24] *Ibid.,* p. 118.
[25] *Ibid.,* p. 3.

> Revolution is not merely a "change of heart" but a radical black encounter with the structure of white racism, with the full intention of destroying its menacing power. I mean confronting white racists and saying: "If it's a fight you want, I am prepared to oblige you." This is what the black revolution means.[26]

Cone was no more irenic in his second book. Referring to "concerned" whites who want to know what they can do to help Black people ("a favorite question of oppressors"), Cone gives the answer of Black theology: "Keep your . . . mouth closed, and let us black people get our thing together."[27]

Interestingly enough, it is this same Cone who found the norm of his Black theology in the distinctive leadership of King. "His life and message," Cone wrote, "demonstrate that the 'soul' of the black community is inseparable from liberation but always liberation grounded in Jesus Christ."[28] Cone then proceeded to focus on liberation through Jesus Christ as the interpretive focus of his theology. "The norm of all God-talk which seeks to be black-talk is the manifestation of Jesus as the Black Christ who provides the necessary soul for black liberation. This is the hermeneutical principle for Black Theology which guides its interpretation of the meaning of contemporary Christianity."[29] Cone, of course, does not hesitate to criticize King, notably for his commitment to nonviolence. Yet he sees as the task of Black theology the building "on the foundation laid by King by recognizing the theological character of the black community, a community whose being is inseparable from liberation through Jesus Christ."[30]

Both Black and White interpreters of contemporary Black theology have suggested that Joseph Washington's 1964 book on *Black Religion* might be seen as the beginning of this movement. It may be, however, that the life and message of Martin Luther King, Jr. will serve more adequately as the beginning point of this movement. While Washington is Black and a theologian, *Black Religion* was an attack on Black folk religion in general and on King in particular, and it was a plea to Black Christians to enter into the "mainstream" of White Christian theology. While Washington's book undoubtedly spurred debate on Black religion, from the viewpoint of Black theology, he started it off all wrong. As Cone points out, Washington dismissed Black folk religion, placing it outside the true Christian tradition, yet "the heretics were not the slave preachers [who related Christianity inextricably to social justice in this world], but white missionaries who sought to use Christianity as an instrument of enslavement."[31]

The writings and activities of King would seem to be a better starting point for contemporary Black theology. As we have seen, Cone

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[26] *Ibid.*, p. 136.
[27] James H. Cones, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1970), p. 194.
[28] *Ibid.*, p. 78.
[29] *Ibid.*, p. 80.
[30] *Ibid.*, p. 78.
[31] Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, p. 103.

found in the life and message of King the hermeneutical principle of his Black theology. But the argument need not rest on this fact alone. King is seen by friend and foe alike as the one who aroused the Black community to a new, or renewed aggressiveness. This new assertiveness, which was the platform from which Black power was launched on the modern scene, was based on a theological interpretation of the world. King's words and his deeds were rooted in the conviction that oppression is contrary to the will of God, that liberation is in harmony with the purpose of God, and indeed that God is working in the world in our time, as the Bible insists that he was in ancient times, to set at liberty the oppressed.

King's writings were not, to be sure, books of theology. He wrote sermons; he wrote about the civil rights campaigns that he was involved in; and he sought to analyze the social situation in America, noting its problems and prescribing a cure. Yet every book was deeply theological, seeing injustice not simply as a sociological fact, but as an offense against God, and seeing nonviolence not merely as an effective strategy, but as being in harmony with the Ruler of the universe. And the actions of the civil rights activist were also rooted in the conviction that God was with the Movement and against those who fought to keep men in bondage. King was a working theologian who practiced what he preached. He was, perhaps, the best model for a new style of theologian, working not in leisure on the fringes of significant modern social movements, but in the midst of a people struggling to be free, struggling along with them, and declaring to them the ultimate significance of what they were doing together. It cannot be said that King was the original Black theologian, but his writings and his career serve far better than Washington's *Black Religion* as the beginning of the present Black theology movement.

THE DEEPER ROOTS OF BLACK THEOLOGY

While the present schools of Black theology are rooted in the King era, there are deeper roots to this theology than the life and message of King. To be sure there is the ancient biblical tradition that Black and White theologians share. But there are distinctive sources of Black theology. These sources are to be found in Black religion as it has been practiced both in Africa and in the New World. Gayraud Wilmore insists that Black Folk Religion in America is a new syncretistic religion with both African and American elements. But the "essential and most significant characteristic of Black religion," according to Wilmore, is not the evangelical conservatism inherited from the Great Awakening in America, but "a fusion between a highly developed and pervasive feeling about the hierophantic nature of historical experience, flowing from the African religious past, and a radical and programmatic secularity,

related to the experience of slavery and oppression."[32] This syncretistic religion has regularly been associated with Black radicalism, according to Wilmore. Rather than a quietistic religion, it is and has been a religion of freedom.[33] Black theology's focus on liberation, then, is rooted in this distinctive Black religion with its continuing sense of the immediacy of God's presence and its continuing quest for freedom from White oppressors.

Whether or not it can be demonstrated that Black theology does indeed have African roots, it is unquestionably true that the Black liberation theologians have a strong spiritual tie with some remarkable Black preachers of the American Antebellum era. One of the outstanding Black, anti-slavery preachers was Henry Highland Garnet whose "Address to the Slaves of the United States of America" indicates his approach to White racism.

> Let your motto be RESISTANCE! RESISTANCE! RESISTANCE! — No oppressed people have ever secured their liberty without resistance. What kind of resistance you had better make, you must decide by the circumstances that surround you, and according to the suggestion of expediency.... Trust in the living God. Labor for the peace of the human race, and remember that you are three million.[34]

Although Garnet had on one occasion resorted to violence in his own determination to be free — the townsfolk and farmers of Canaan, New Hampshire were met by a blast from Garnet's double-barreled shot gun when they attempted to bring desegregated education to a close in their community on July 4, 1835 — he did not advocate violence in this address directed to Southern slaves from a national Negro convention at Buffalo, New York in 1843. The resistance he counseled was the refusal of slaves to work for their Southern masters.

> We do not advise you to attempt a revolution with the sword, because it would be INEXPEDIENT. Your numbers are too small, and moreover the rising spirit of the age, and the spirit of the gospel, are opposed to war and bloodshed. But from this moment cease to labor for tyrants who will not remunerate you. Let every slave throughout the land do this, and the days of slavery are numbered. You cannot be more oppressed than you have been — you cannot suffer greater cruelties than you have already. RATHER DIE FREEMAN, THAN LIVE TO BE SLAVES.[35]

Garnet did point with pride to the exploits of Black men who resorted to violence in their determination to be free. He celebrated the heroism of Denmark Vesey, Nathaniel Turner, and Joseph Cinque. And he insisted that unless the slaves rose in resistance against their oppressors, they were not worthy of heaven, for God is the God of liberty.

Some Black, Ante-bellum preachers were less radical than Garnet, as for example Richard Allen, who though denouncing slavery as con-

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[32] Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, 1972), pp. 4, 19.

[33] *Ibid.*, pp. 5, 306.

[34] Henry Highland Garnett, *An Address to the Slaves of the United States of America*, published with David Walker, *Walker's Appeal* (New York: Arno Press and the New York Times, 1969), p. 96.

[35] *Ibid.*

trary to the will of God and withdrawing from a White racist church, called on slaves to trust in God for their salvation, and in the meantime to love their masters. Some were far more radical than Garnet as was Nat Turner in leading an insurrection against White oppressors, killing 57 of them in obedience to God. And of course there were Black preachers like Jupiter Hammon who comforted their enslaved brothers by giving them hope of freedom in a better world than this one. All were devotees of the God of liberation, though they were not all champions of revolution.

UNITY AND DIVERSITY IN BLACK THEOLOGY

Like their forebears, there is a certain unity and a certain diversity among the Black theologians of today. The rallying cry of them all, as we have seen, is liberation. Although not all Black theologians are revolutionaries, they agree that God is a God of liberation, who calls them to freedom here and now and who joins them in their quest. While they do not reject the notion of a blessed future life, they uniformly insist that God's call is to freedom now.

While Black theologians agree on the liberation motif, they vary in their reaction to other significant themes. The more moderate among them add to the liberation theme that of reconciliation, while the more radical either dismiss reconciliation as a possible or desirable goal, or else they assert that reconciliation is the oppressor's responsibility. Albert Cleage (now Jaramogi Adebe Agyeman), pastor of the Shrine of the Black Madonna in Detroit, and national chairman of the Black Christian Nationalist Church, rejects the notion of reconciliation with the enemy. A profound admirer of Malcolm X, Cleage sees no possibility that the White man will ever change. There can, therefore, never be any rapprochement with this incorrigible enemy. The Black man must, rather, create his own Black Nation, developing the power to prevent the White man from oppressing Blacks.[36] James Cone does not rule out entirely the possibility of Black-White reconciliation if the White oppressor will repent, seeking to become Black — that is, identifying himself with the oppressed Black people of America and the world — not presuming in this new identification to assume a leadership role among his new comrades, but simply and quietly joining the ranks of the lowly and the poor. Through such a thoroughgoing change of one's way of life, the White man might be saved and might join the company of the elect.[37]

Deotis Roberts was not satisfied with the place left for reconciliation in Cone's theology, so in response to Cone's theology of liberation,

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[36] Albert B. Cleage, Jr., *The Black Messiah* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1969), pp. 197-98. On the differences among Black theologians, see John J. Carey, "Black Theology: An Appraisal of the Internal and External Issues," *Theological Studies*, XXXIII (December, 1972), 684-97.

[37] Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, pp. 150-52; *A Black Theology of Liberation*, p. 176.

Roberts wrote his book on Black theology entitled *Liberation and Reconciliation.* Roberts insists that an authentically Christian theology must bring together these two themes. While Roberts thus devotes more space to reconciliation than does Cone, and gives it a prominent place in his theology, he does not, in fact, differ markedly from Cone in his contention that reconciliation must await the fruition of liberation. There can be no reconciliation as long as White men continue to oppress Blacks. Roberts is a more traditional evangelical theologian than is Cone, insisting that God can yet recreate the White man, enabling him to repent, as he can recreate the Black man, giving him the grace to forgive. Reconciliation begins with this miracle of divine grace.[38]

Major Jones goes beyond Roberts in his emphasis on reconciliation. As a theologian of hope whose theology is significantly influenced by the German theologian Jürgen Moltmann, he is more impressed by the possibilities held in store for man in the future than by the frustrations or tragedies of the past. And he notes a "strong sense of messianic mission" in Black awareness literature, concluding that "there is a sense in which black men think they are called of God to deliver black America from its bondage and white America from its lethal folly."[39] Major Jones, then, sees Black men not only as their own liberators in cooperation with the God of the future, but also as the liberators of White men. He sees the possibility of a new community of Black and White, not an integrated community in the sense that the two will become one in character and style, thus obliterating old distinctions, but rather an interracial community "wherein every person, race, or ethnic group shall take comfort in the fact of separateness and difference."[40] Jones, thus, looks toward a new community of mutual appreciation and respect which will be brought about through the initiative of Black men who both value their own distinctive gifts and recognize the worth of the gifts of others. Thus, while they are one in their focus on liberation, Black theologians differ in their relating of liberation and reconciliation.

Black theologians differ on other significant issues also. Cleage and Cone, for example, as representatives of the more radical wing of Black theology, reject totally the notion of nonviolence. While neither is a thoroughgoing revolutionary, calling for the destruction of White civilization, both regard the notion of nonviolence as unrealistic in the context of a White civilization that is so thoroughly committed to violence. Cleage's Black Nation has as its purpose the achieving of sufficient power to make the coexistence, not the integration, of Black and White a possibility.[41] Cone argues that as long as White men practice violence daily in their oppressing of Blacks, Blacks must maintain the option to exact an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth. Whether or not Blacks should actually resort to violence must not be determined in advance on

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[38] Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation,* pp. 119, 128-29, 153-54.
[39] Major Jones, *Black Awareness,* p. 137.
[40] *Ibid.,* p. 143.
[41] Cleage, *Black Messiah,* p. 198.

the basis of a perfectionist dogma, but rather in the light of actual circumstances. The question must be whether revolutionary violence would tend to be more or less detrimental to man than the systematic violence of the White oppressors.[42] In a later word, Cone, recognizing the overwhelming odds against the Black man since the "guns, atomic power, police departments, and every conceivable weapon of destruction are in the hands of the enemy," nonetheless insists: "There comes a time when a people must protect their own, and for black people, the time is now."[43]

As we noted earlier, Deotis Roberts and Major Jones view nonviolence in a more positive light, both understanding it as *the* Christian position. Jones insists that violence can never be given Christian sanction, even though he recognizes that there are times when a man must respond to provocation simply as a man and not as a Christian. Roberts, however, like King, understands nonviolence not only as the Christian way, but also as an appropriate strategy for Black men in American society.

Black theologians also differ in their evaluation of the Black church. The more radical theologians are ambivalent in their attitude toward the church. Cone writes of the apostasy of the post-Civil War Black church. While the Ante-bellum slave preachers — or at least some of them — preached liberation and worked to free their people, he considers the later Black preachers as men who sold out their own people, preaching salvation in another world and knuckling under to the White oppressors.[44] Yet Cone does not dismiss the contemporary Black church. "Some 'ultra Blacks' discard the Black Church," he writes, "but I remind them that there can be no revolution without the masses, and the Black masses are in the churches."[45] Cleage, too, generally disparages the Black church, insisting that the true church is to be identified with the Black Nation or with the Black Freedom Movement, and in the heyday of Stokely Carmichael and SNCC, he offered to ordain the freedom workers as ministers of his Shrine of the Black Madonna, in spite of, or because of, their rejection of White Christianity and the Black Church, so that they might avoid being disrupted from their authentic Christian mission by being drafted into the United States Army.[46]

Deotis Roberts and Major Jones offer a more positive view of the Black church. In the first place, they believe that even the post-Civil War church offered a valid ministry. "The black church," writes Roberts,

> as a social and religious body, has served as a kind of extended family for blacks. In a real sense, then thousands of blacks who have never

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[42] Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, p. 143.
[43] Cone, *Black Theology of Liberation*, pp. 248-49.
[44] Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, pp. 103ff.
[45] James H. Cone, "Black Consciousness and the Black Church," *Christianity and Crisis*, XXX (November 2 and 16, 1970), 249.
[46] Cleage, *Black Messiah*, p. 46.

> known real family life have discovered the meaning of real kinship in the black church.[47]

Roberts sees the role of the Black church now to be that of leading the White church from its bondage to racism to confession, forgiveness, and finally reconciliation both with God and with Black men. Major Jones also rejects Cone's view that while the apostasy of the Black Post-Civil War church can be understood, it cannot be excused. Jones rather sees in the Black church's "strategy of deception" a genius that avoided the very real danger of genocide.[48] The contemporary Black church is challenged by Jones' theology of hope to participate in the development of Black awareness and of the new interracial community that seems to him to be the wave of the future.

The Black theologians are by no means in agreement. And yet in a real sense they are bound together in their effort to come to a new understanding of the Christian faith that is meaningful in light of their own experience as a people in this none too hospitable land. They agree that fundamental to their interpretation of the Christian faith is the notion of liberation. God is the God of the oppressed who identifies himself with them and determines that they will be free. And he calls on them to join him in a quest for liberation. In contrast, White theologians are understood as identifying themselves with the oppressors and as being insensitive to the plight of the oppressed and to the will of the God of the oppressed. They worship and theologize about a White Oppressor God. Their only hope of salvation is to repent and to seek foregiveness.

THE LEGACY OF KING

This Black theology, though it may well have roots in Africa, and though it is surely related to the freedom message of the great Black Ante-bellum preachers, is in large measure the legacy of the life and message of Martin Luther King, Jr. While the Black theologians of today are by no means mere recorded announcements, repeating the words and ideas of King, King is the one who rekindled the faith of the Black fathers of the Black church. King's life's work was the work of freedom and his message was that of liberation, but it was liberation through the power of God, the God of liberation, who works through men, primarily through Black men, strengthening them for freedom's arduous work.

Both the more radical and the more moderate schools of Black theology have built on the foundation of Black theology constructed by King. The moderates add to King's liberation theme his dream of a great community of Black and White people living together in a system of justice and equality, and in a spirit of mutual appreciation and respect, and they see King's philosophy of nonviolence as a divinely ordained way of achieving this beloved community. But the more radical Black

[47] Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation*, p. 64.
[48] Major Jones, *Black Awareness*, p. 54.

theologians no less than the moderate seize on another theme that King combined with liberation, namely that of power. Almost from the beginning King realized that there could be no community of justice and love simply for the asking. So King used power tactics and he sought better ways of wielding levers of power. Calling himself a revolutionary, he sought to change the character of American society by obstructing injustice through boycotts, marches, and campaigns of massive civil disobedience. He sought also to utilize the economic and political power that Black men had in this country. He was a Black Power devotee without the slogan. And the radical Black theologians are his strange disciples. In both of these schools of Black theology far more dynamically than in the fizzling nonviolent movements, Martin Luther King, Jr. lives. What the legacy of King's life and message will finally be is not yet known, but it may well be bound up with these developing new Black theologies.