

BY JAMES H. CONE

## A Critique of J. Deotis Roberts, Sr.

### A Black Political Theology

Since the appearance of the phrase "Black Theology" in the late 1960's, J. Deotis Roberts has been one of its chief advocates. He was one of the editors and contributors of the volume *Quest for a Black Theology* (Pilgrim, 1971) and the sole author of *Liberation and Reconciliation: A Black Theology* (Westminster, 1971). He also has written many articles and book reviews on the subject. Because I have been involved in the development of Black Theology and have discussed this subject with Professor Roberts, I am pleased to have this opportunity to register my appreciation of his efforts to make Black Theology relevant to black people's struggle of liberation in America and throughout the world. Whatever criticisms we may make about Roberts' version of Black Theology, we must not fail to express our appreciation for the risk he has taken to do theology in the light of black people's fight for freedom. In this regard, black theologians in particular and black people generally are in his debt. Unless we have black theologians who are willing to try to make sense out of what it means to be black and Christian in the Euro-American context of racism, then we have no right to criticize the black church for its failures in the black liberation struggle.

*A Black Political Theology* is Roberts' second volume on the subject. Like the first book, *Liberation and Reconciliation*, his concern here is to establish reconciliation, along with liberation, as the essence of the Christian gospel. "The only Christian way in race relations," he writes, "is a liberating experience of reconciliation for the white oppressor as well as for the black oppressed" (222). Thus he contends that my emphasis on liberation, though necessary, is nonetheless one-sided. Unlike his first book, however, this volume centers on *ethics* and theology. This is why he calls it "A Black *Political* Theology." The word "political" refers to the concrete struggles of freedom. The term "black" designates the people who are seeking freedom. And "theology" is the attempt to place black people's fight for freedom in the context of the Christian faith. Roberts' intention is to lay an ethical foundation for the theological claim that God is the Liberator of black victims from political bondage.

While Roberts' theological attempt is to be commended, the actual result of his intellectual endeavors is a failure. This assessment is not based upon his statement of the differences in our perspectives on Black Theology. In most instances, there is little disagreement between Roberts and myself on Black Theology and the differences that remain are helpful in the overall development of the black theological enterprise.

Neither is my evaluation connected with his misrepresentation of my theology, though that may be somewhat related to my critical judgment about his failure. My chief reason for asserting that Roberts has failed in his otherwise worthy theological attempt is *his inability to develop a clear theological argument*. Although Chapter I, "Foundations," is designed to state the presuppositions upon which his theological program is based, I was left completely confused about those presuppositions. Roberts writes about so many persons and events that his own theological perspective does not emerge. He tells us that theology is related to reason and experience, and relates the latter to Richard R. Niebuhr, John Smith, and the concept of "indigeniation" in the thought of E. Bolaji Idowu of West Africa. He also contends that Jesus Christ is the norm but not the limit of divine revelation, that James Cone needs to break with Barthianism, that theology ought to be black and political and a lot of other adjectives. The problem with these assertions, many of which are true enough, is that we encounter them almost at random. He does not organize them into a coherent whole so that they will make sense to someone else besides himself.

This methodological unclarity makes the book very difficult to read. Roberts spends too much time referring to the theological positions of white and black theologians, with whom he sometimes agrees and at other times disagrees, without telling the reader how his discussion of these people contribute to a clarity of his own theological viewpoint. The entire procedure is disruptive.

He not only confuses the reader in terms of his own theological stance by introducing so many alien sources, he also distorts the viewpoints of those very sources. His analyses of other people's theologies are often so brief and out of context that one wonders whether Roberts does not know any better or whether his distortions are intentional. One example is his use of *The Theology of the Pain of God* by the Japanese theologian Kazoh Kitamori. Roberts' citation of Kitamori is not relevant to the *historical* dimensions of black suffering. He seems to be unaware of the contrast between Kitamori's ontological discussion of pain and black people's concrete *historical* experience of pain in white America. As another example, in discussing my statement on the historical Jesus, Roberts writes: "Cone does not see any relation between the teaching and example of Jesus and his so called black Christ, who is involved in the black liberation struggle" (123). For anyone to make that statement about my theology in view of my repeated insistence on the historical Jesus of Nazareth as the foundation of christological analysis (see especially my *A Black Theology of Liberation*, Chapter 6 and *God of the Oppressed*, Chapter 6) is deliberately twisting his sources.

The two examples mentioned above are by no means unique, or isolated. I do not intend to be unnecessarily critical, because the black community needs many theologians, and they certainly ought not to represent the same perspective. We need diversity.

When I read *A Black Political Theology*, I said to myself: "Now, we will see the distinction between the 'new' and the 'old' Roberts." But no references are made to his earlier volume. He begins the book by talking about "liberation theology" in general, including such persons as Fred Herzog and Rosemary Ruether. He describes the differences between Moltmann's hope theology and the Latin-American liberation theologians. Then he introduces a host of other characters, such as Robert Terry, Sterling Tucker, and Harvey Cox. He also talks about the sixteenth century Puritans and the Society of Friends. After about fourteen pages of apparently purposeless comments on many persons and subjects, he says: "Black Theology has a special contribution to make to the Christian understanding of reconciliation" (218). He spends the next four pages talking about the relationship of reconciliation and liberation in a manner similar to his first book on the subject. I am still trying to figure out the meaning of the word "revisited" and the relationship of the first fourteen pages to the last four.

In view of Roberts' failure to develop a coherent theological argument, I contend that the title *A Black Political Theology* is misleading. I firmly believe that whatever else a book on theology is, it ought to be a carefully written exposition of the faith it claims to represent, so that others within and outside the faith can make sense of it. The reader should be able to say: "I may not agree, but this is a well presented case." Unfortunately I cannot make such a statement about Roberts' book.

