

BY CALVIN E. BRUCE

Black Spirituality and Theological Method

"... Thou hast made us for Thyself and our hearts are restless till they rest in Thee."

— ST. AUGUSTINE

As black theology moves beyond its initial stage of self-annunciation, several pressing concerns head the theologians' agenda for constructive theologizing. I suggest a three-fold task that awaits future completion. It is needful for black theologians to thoughtfully and critically:

- 1) describe the norms for liberation inherent in the history of Christian faith and teaching;
- 2) interpret the significance of such norms in light of the crucial spiritual well being of the black church; and
- 3) apply such normative considerations of spiritual liberation to the construction of a theological program aimed at uniting black Christians into a univocal witness of the glory and goodness of God.

In sum, it is expedient for contemporary black theologians to make their theological method amenable to the liberation message the black church has always cherished.¹ This is facilitated by black theologians recognizing the vital spiritual strength of Afro-American identity and the liberative qualities of black spiritual striving.

The theme of this writing is declaratory: black spirituality can be liberative; and black liberation has an essential spiritual component. How successfully the theologian demonstrates the interdependence of each concern is determined by how insightfully his theological method works for his theological system. Any workable theological system addressing black Americans should posit the importance of the Afro-American spiritual temperament as an indispensable starting point. For inherent in Afro-American spirituality are proper ingredients that frame a phenomenological *context* in which the theological *content* of the Christian message most favorably speaks a message of hope to the despairing and oppressed.

I offer a different interpretation to the phrase "theological method" than what one customarily finds in a formal exposition on the aims of Christian theology.² Furthermore, I make a definitional distinction between black spirituality and black religion. The latter may include the

¹We should keep in mind the fact that the religious history of black Americans has not been altogether glorious or conducive of liberative enjoyment of American freedom. Nonetheless, the black church has preached freedom, as a soteriological possibility, even when it was not an immediate political reality.

²Ch. John Macquarrie, *Principles of Christian Theology* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1966), 29-34. My definition calls for more existential passion to be evidenced in the actuation of "theological method" than what Macquarrie's exposition emphasizes.

former. But the former deserves pre-eminence with respect to the "theological method" I see as highly favorable to the message of spiritual liberation. We begin with that distinction.

I. THE PRE-EMINENCE OF SPIRITUALITY

"Black spirituality" and "black religion" are often used interchangeably when discussion focuses on the faith of the black community that has sustained black souls through centuries of hardship and humiliation. Technically, spirituality (black or otherwise) is not synonymous with religion.

Religion can be the institutionalization of rite, ritual and dogma without involving a sense of the abiding presence of the Object of faith. It is possible for persons to be "religious" without experiencing the summons to participate in the magnitude and mystery of transcendent reality. By contrast, it is unlikely that persons enjoying a fruitful life in the spirit can bypass such participation in transpersonal ultimacy.

I refer to spirituality as the growth and enrichment of the human personality, as the soul journeys toward a closer proximity to the Source of all Creative Being. Spirituality involves the deepening of the affective response to the beauty and benevolence of God. Making its mark upon the intellect, spirituality includes the intensification of consciousness of the will and intent of the Almighty. Touching the interiority of moral experiencing, spirituality joins moral conviction with ultimate commitment. Moreover, spirituality embodies the inner-directedness that prompts those living in the spirit to stand in the gateway of Time and peer into the realm of Eternity. The fruition of spiritual ambition, I postulate, is mystic participation in the absolute Ground of Being, however such union is described metaphorically.³ We can push the distinction a bit further.

Religion is customarily metaphysical in philosophic outlook. (Civil religion appears to be an exception.) Spirituality is metaphysical in the context of the direction for living it offers spiritual man, and in the content of "ontic sanctity" that makes a qualitative difference in the person's spiritual make up.⁴ Religion is a belief system reflecting on the nature of ultimate reality. Spirituality is the method and manner by which the ultimately real touches the depth of being of the wonderer.

Religion proclaims, "God has said . . ." Spirituality invites the awakened soul to hear God's personal summons with the inner ear of faith. For spiritual man seems more concerned with what God is now saying, when divine creativeness joins human creativity.

³ Spirituality, as Christians have reflected on it over the centuries, is suited by a number of vivid metaphors. The union with Divinity seems especially appropriate to discussions of African-Afro-American spiritual temperaments. I am aware that my own language (quasi-ascetical, quasi-Philosophical) does not succeed in capturing the dramatic reality of such experiences.

⁴ N. B. Karl Rahner, *Theological Investigations*, III (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1967), 11. In the vernacular of black preaching, we would say that "sanctification" sets one apart as a "peculiar" person living a life of extreme devotion to God.

Religion teaches man to appreciate God's love. Spirituality challenges man to experience directly the transformative power of that love. Religion edifies. Spirituality sanctifies. Religion enlightens the mind. Spirituality illumines the soul. Religion is concerned, in part, with knowing. Spirituality is essentially replete with being. Religion can be an end in itself. Spirituality is always the conduit to a never-ending "every-when."⁵

By now it should be clear why this essay focuses upon black spirituality. Spirituality is boundless and dynamic. Religion may not be. Though it contains the possibilities for dynamic, creative I-Thou encounters, black religion as conservative and institutionalized tends to be static. In this regard black religion differs little from other non-black religious systems. Roger Bastide's observation is pertinent. Even for Afro-Americans.

Religion . . . is a living experience — yet it is not *alive*, in the sense that it does not evolve, does not change with the passage of time, and remains anchored to the performance of such ritual as has been laid down by the ancestors.⁶

This reading does not depreciate the meaning of religion for blacks of African ancestry. For certainly, black religion has served as a crucial psychic bridge over troubled waters. It has enabled black souls to look beyond the present situation of suffering and heartache to a Source of Love that renews and restores the faculties for living. Along with its therapeutic function, black religion has provided much of the only education blacks have received, in the form of ecclesiastical traditioning. Black religion has been the commodity of the unique social institution non-blacks could not thwart: the black church. Without good religion, the black community would not have survived until today.

Nonetheless, the prime value of black religion (as part of a permanent institution) lies in a different direction. The black church has fostered the sense of an "alive" spirituality we have just described. However one comes out in the debate as to the actual degree of African retentions in the New World, it is certain that the black church in America has thrived on the dynamic qualities of black spirituality. History has evidenced a faith affirmation among black religionists that "both the individual and the community [have] a continuous involvement with the spirit world in the practical affairs of daily life."⁷

To exclude black believers from the possibility of dynamic *spiritual* existence would negate this very phenomenological self-affirmation. The aphorism is that blacks are religious, even when we enjoy the carnal pleasures of life. I prefer to think that we have the capacity to enjoy

⁵For usage of this suggestive term, see Michael Gilsenan's article, "Myth and the History of African Religion" in T. O. Ranger and I. N. Kimambo (eds.), *The Historical Study of African Religion* (Nairobi: Heinemann Educational Books Ltd, 1972), 50-70, esp. p. 66.

⁶Roger Bastide, *African Civilizations in the New World* (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 129.

⁷Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion And Black Radicalism* (Garden City, N. Y.: Anchor/Doubleday, 1973), 19f.

a fruitful spiritual life, though all the fruits of the Spirit are not simultaneously visible at every moment. As long as we have retained a vision of God and have courageously journeyed toward a higher state of spiritual becoming, we have not suffered total confinement or constriction of the human spirit. As long as we have striven to attend the beckonings of the Divine Spirit, we have secured an ontological routage in ultimate reality. As long as our spiritual life has been satisfactory, other facets of human existence have tended to be in order.

The reality of an engaging spiritual life cannot be overplayed. It is what unites those of African ancestry into a distinctive *ethos*. The African Geoffrey Parrinder observes: "The spirit side of man is all important and rules his life."⁸ That affirmation expresses what characterizes the *Lebenswelt* of Afro-American spiritual man. He lives, breathes, thinks and moves in a spiritual world. His morals are grounded in recognition of the many spiritual powers-that-be. His faith accords him an all-purposive paradigm by which spiritual existence is understood as a vital ingredient in a cosmogonic vital life-force. His entire life is spirit infused and spirit directed.

The implication for a black ascetical theology is crucial. A black theology which honors the significance of black spirituality comprehends this "irreducible posit": at the heart of the Afro-American heritage is spiritual man's consciousness of and availability to Divinity. Afro-American spirituality enables the faithful to enjoy life as a communion with God, and as a co-operative venture in the creative purpose of God's will. This communion is transpersonal and transcendent at its base and mystical or ecstatic at its extremity. Obviously, theological language cannot capture the intensity of such experiences, which effect the depth of the human personality.⁹ But the imaginative employment of "theological method" may aid the task of capturing the reality of faith which has nurtured the spirits of black believers.

When that faith is sustained and transmitted by the program of the black theologian, the spiritual functionality of black theology is upheld. What follows is specific suggestion of how theological method has advanced the cause of Afro-American spirituality — as it culminates in spiritual liberation of black Christians who take up the cross and follow the Master.

II. METHOD FOR SPIRITUAL LIBERATION

For the Christian, liberation is Christ's call to freedom, addressed in the "nowness" of radical existential choice. Liberation insists on the immediacy of human decision. It urges that those who have experienced the depths of bondage rise to the occasion and enjoy the freedom now

⁸ Geoffrey Parrinder, *Western African Psychology* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1951), 48.

⁹ See my forthcoming article, "Black Spirituality, Language And Faith" in *Religious Education*.

made available through the liberative word of God that sets man free. The fruition of spiritual liberation testifies that those delivered from all that oppresses the spirit will walk in a new spiritual life and allow the human spirit to enlarge itself in deeds of love and justice toward all persons, as guided by the mercy of the Holy Spirit.

Spiritual liberation is the commencement of a journey toward a deeper relationship with God and with all of God's creation. Such a state of existence is never complete in itself, but points beyond itself to other realms of spiritual unfolding. Spiritual man is encouraged by the witness of Christian theology to know that the soul can attain closer proximity to God in his majestic glory. It is possible to allow the vision of God in one's consciousness. And it is possible to allow that vision to motivate one toward greater spiritual self-authentication, another name for "liberation."

Not surprisingly, this theological revelation is knowable directly by those who sensitize themselves to the beckoning of transpersonal signals of transcendence. The "rumor of angels" becomes a secret shared by those who make themselves *available* to divine communication. As expected, this availability is thwarted or obfuscated in the lives of those who are guilty of "sleeping on the margin of reality."¹⁰ The prophetic consciousness of the mystic alerts humankind, however, to the urgency of waking up to reality and participating in it directly. The mystic teaches us to appreciate the fact that there need not be a disjunction between the noumenal and phenomenal self. We can be spiritually awakened and drawn to God by the invisible spiritual magnetism that quickens the spirit.

One legacy of black spirituality is that it has taken black worshipers to "the borderland of mysticism."¹¹ The journey is made possible by strong faith in God. Faith has taught us that we can, indeed, steal away in the early morning hours and "have a little talk with Jesus, tell him all about our troubles." Faith has inspired us to see the beauty of God amid the ugliness of our surroundings. Mystic faith has summoned us to God's presence and has strengthened us, in every perplexity, to "hasten to the Throne."

The homiletical tradition of the black church has transmitted this faith. Black preaching has always conveyed a message of *joy* and a call to ecstatic worship. The good news has resounded. The Kingdom is now come into the hearts of those who receive with gladness the promise of the Father: the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. Black souls have been comforted by the truth of this timeless revelation: To know God in the fullness of spiritual liberty is to taste of the joy which refreshes but never completely satiates the soul thirsting for God. Furthermore, black

¹⁰ According to Gabriel Marcel, this insensitivity is countered by one's sustaining an *availability* to divinity. See Marcel, *Homo Viator* (Chicago: Henry Regnery Co., 1951), 22f.

¹¹ N. B. Henry Hugh Proctor, *Between Black And White* (Boston: Pilgrim Press, 1925), 66.

preaching has encouraged us to hunger and thirst for even more of God's righteousness.

This homiletical thrust of black spirituality is at the heart of "black liberation theology" of every age. Today's black theologian cannot afford to ignore the immeasurable spiritual sensitivity undergirding the dynamic of existence-with-others on the journey for spiritual advancement. In point, the black theologian is obliged to educate the religious community regarding the *spiritual* relevance of liberation struggles, and regarding the method for achieving the goals of liberation.

Some notable steps have been taken in this connection. James H. Cone has urged that black theology catch the spirit of black power and translate it into a program aimed at the creation of new black values concomitant with the recreation of self-affirming black identity. The purpose of black theology affirms the spiritual completion of the black self. In Cone's words:

The task of Black Theology is to make Christianity *really* Christian by moving black people with a spirit of black dignity and self-determination so they can become what the Creator intended.¹²

These words, suggestive as they are, lead us to ask: What did the Creator intend (black) persons to be? Christian ascetical theology offers a clue.

If we understand God's will as expressed through his creative agency, we can conclude that God's intent for man falls within the scheme of creation on the whole. Such creation is never completely finished, but always predisposed to the activity of the Spirit working in the world. Natural theology "reveals" that the creature has a vitally important mission in creation. It teaches this fact about human nature: "... each human spirit is an unfinished product, on which the Creative Spirit is always at work."¹³ The centrality of this revelation is that the meaning of human existence is interlaced with the ultimate meaning of all the created order. Man was created and is recreated to witness to the glory of God.

However man can subvert God's purpose and violate his own creative destiny. Accordingly, when man is bound by the sins of pride, self-deception and servitude to a life-force countervailing this first principle of creation, he is in spiritual bondage. He then needs a method for liberation: freedom *from* sin and freedom *to* participate in divine creativeness.¹⁴

Black liberation theology, honoring this principle, is not so radically new after all. It affirms two insights black folk have known all along: we are a spiritual community and we look to Jesus Christ for spiritual liberation. These are the essential credos of theological perspicuity revealed naturally when our ancestors received the kerygmatic message

¹² James H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: Seabury Press, 1969), 130.

¹³ Evelyn Underhill, *The Spiritual Life* (New York: Harper & Bros., 1937?), 50.

¹⁴ What is needed as part of black theological praxis is a "post-liberation" ethic suggestive of the moral possibilities for just and merciful deeds that are enlarged when oppression is overcome.

of liberation. The method for spiritual deliverance has been simple: hear God's voice, renounce sin, receive his Holy Spirit, and join creation in testifying to the benevolence of the Creator, by living a praiseworthy life.

God's "voice" is easy to discern, but difficult to describe. It may be heard by the bedside or down by the riverside. In any case, it calls for a decision and points the pathway to freedom. The power of its summons touches the interiority of human personality and effects a radical conversion of the spiritual self. Our ancestors who obeyed could testify to having been "struck dead" by God — only to awaken to a new life in the spirit. The problem of this symbolic language notwithstanding, we ought to be able to offer the same testimony in our age.

Blacks have always had a "lived theology" that served to liberate the spirit from all forms of bondage. Such a theology reflected the "deep hunger" black souls have felt for God. It has enabled black devotees to cultivate the "disciplines of the spirit" as part of the process of providing for "centering moments" and "creative encounters" that authenticate black existence. Such a theological penchant has intrigued the spiritually adventurous to enter a realm of being in which mystic enlightenment enables one to become a "disciple of sensitivity," one who strives for greater spiritual excellence.¹⁵

Similarly, black worshipers have known intuitively how we can reach God and sup with him and bask in the radiance of his majesty. Many of us have been practical mystics at heart and have been inspired to follow the spiritual pathway leading from purgative to illuminative to unitive stages of spiritual growth in godliness. We have realized that "experience is the only source of knowledge"¹⁶ and that a life graced with God's favor provides the best occasion for rewarding spiritual experiences.

Our forefathers and mothers contended for the faith once delivered to the saints. They exercised their faith and achieved "higher heights" and "deeper depths" in God's love. They entertained a vision of God that transformed broken lives into vessels of God's glory. They inspired us to take hold of a way of living, a method, for sustaining the blessings of a life graced by God's mercy. When we obeyed, we were blessed.

I wonder, at this point, what the professional black theologians of the last quarter of this century can teach the black religious community that it has not already known. Perhaps not a great deal of anything. My conviction is that the challenge to black theologians is to preserve the tradition of black spirituality, in demonstrating its instructiveness for the liberation movement. This can be accomplished, in part, when black theologians consider the full implications of "theological method" that honors the strong points of our spiritual heritage.

¹⁵ Alluding to Howard Thurman's writings only partially express his insights on the depth and richness of the spiritual life, which is "normative" to many expressions of black Christianity.

¹⁶ So postulated Henri Bergson, philosophically, in *The Two Sources of Morality and Religion* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1930), 236.

We now examine the connotation of that term, in order to comprehend what theological emphasis is most suited to the strivings of black *homo spiritualis*.

III. SPIRITUALITY, *THEOS*, *METHODOS*

The customary etymological definition of "theology" tends to be "the study of, or reasoned words about, God." In some circles, the common shorthand of this is "God-talk." Presumably the emphasis is on "logos" not "theos," as though the words we speak about God capture the essence of his being. As the consensus sometimes is: when enough words, and a variety of words, are spoken about God — some genuine gems of divine self-disclosure will shine through the discourse.

However, there is another way to define the scope of theology. It focuses upon "theos, whose true meaning is supreme desire or prayer — the Inward Love."¹⁷ Somewhat a tautology, theology thus denotes a prayerful dispositioning toward the source of prayer or inward spiritual desire: God alone. This definition should be seen as a proper denotation, not merely a convenient connotation to suit a treatise on asceticism. As such, it aids our understanding of theology that speaks to the black spiritual community.

"Method" generally connotes that which is purposeful, instructive, and pointing beyond itself. The customary denotation is that of a plan or rationale for undertaking a task in a certain way. Method can also be understood as *methodos*, a pathway toward something, in an Aristotelian sense. By this reading, *methodos* connotes not vision of the destination, but also enjoyment of the journey. The method is what one attaches oneself to — deliberately, virtuously, passionately.

To extrapolate a bit, method denotes an effective learning toward the "object" of free choice. In choosing the *methodos* as part of spiritual living, one chooses all that it may entail. One is never certain where the *methodos* will lead. Peril is overcome by promise, nonetheless; for the destination is never completely out of sight. One can be sure that if the *methodos* is worthwhile, the end it points to will be achievable.

At this point, I raise a question which all black theologians are urged to answer for themselves: If black liberation theology, indeed, does engage in a specific, worthwhile method, where does the *methodos* lead us? After we have existed the valley of the shadow of oppression, what liberative ground do we stand on? Once the liberation struggle succeeds in taking us to a promised land of humanistic self-realization, where will we really *be*, with respect to the larger concerns of human and trans-human destiny? Once we have overcome the racist's hate, where will we find ourselves in the domain of God's restoring love?

It would be unfortunate for black theology to serve only as another model for playing the theological word-game. Talking or thinking about

¹⁷Evelyn Underhill, *Mysticism* (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co., Inc., 1961), 103.

God is just not sufficient for a good number of black persons who are serious about Christian spiritual vocation. Those who have a deep spiritual hunger are not satisfied with morsels of intellectual rumination. We need a wholesome diet of rigorous spiritual discipline, and nothing less will suffice.

The history of Christian spirituality imposes an internal critique upon black theology addressed to the black church. Those involved in the black theological enterprise should be advised that, "Thought about God must in the end correspond with experience of God. . ."¹⁸ Any theological undertaking which does not prompt those subscribing to its insights to seek an actual experiential relationship with God may have accomplished not a great deal. In fact, if it has not made this accomplishment, what has it achieved? Stated otherwise: If those sharing the insights of black theology do not perceive in it a clearer, spiritual vision of God's purpose in their individual lives, how has black theology profited them as a *methodos* for making the Christian journey toward the City of God?

The issue is not solely that of placing one's hopes on living a better life in the hereafter, as the Conean critique sometimes insists.¹⁹ Heaven may be the ultimate goal, but there are other worthwhile goals achievable in this life, goals that obtain in the choice to live a spiritual existence "in but not of" the world, with all its immoral vicissitudes. The spiritual faith of black folks has its escapist features, without doubt. But the totality of black spiritual vocation is not confined to heaven-bound escapism. The crucial issue facing contemporary black theologians is to elucidate the possibilities for self-transcendence, as preserved in the history of black spirituality.

Historically, the psychic strengths of black spirituality have been liberative. Black spirituality has accorded believers a *methodos* for enjoying an elevated spiritual life that places one above the stress and strain of constant battle against the "principalities and powers" threatening one's existence at every point. Black spirituality has fostered a worshipful life style conducive of black persons' clinging to absolute hope and absolute faith. Charles H. Long broaches this point convincingly:

Though the worship and religious life of blacks have often been referred to as forms of escapism, one must always remember that there has always been an integral relationship between the 'hardness' of life and the ecstasy of religious worship.²⁰

Had not our ancestors availed themselves of this possibility for ecstatic self-transcendence, it is doubtful that the religious community could have preserved the convictions of promise proclaimed in the ecclesiasti-

¹⁸ Kenneth E. Kirk, *The Vision of God* (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1931), 10.

¹⁹ Cf. James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues* (New York: Seabury Press, 1972), chp. 3: "The Meaning of Heaven in the Black Spirituals." If the choice is between liberation now or heaven later, there is no doubt where the radical liberationist would cast his lot.

²⁰ Charles H. Long, "Perspectives For A Study of Afro-American Religion in the United States," *History of Religions*, Vol. 11 (1971-72), 60.

cal ministries. That is to say, if we had not been taught to live a worshipful life and to "walk and talk with Jesus," the struggle to survive would have been overpowering. The fact is: black Christians have been able to live a theology that awakened the human spirit to the occasion to live engagingly in the profane world and, in special moments, to step into another sacred realm of spiritual being.

Afro-American spirituality has also conveyed the *methodos* by which black religious aspirants could know God in his fulness of beauty and love. This emphasis is crucial for black liberation theology. It suggests that "where we are headed" as God's children is a place we can only arrive at through faith and disciplined spiritual maturation. Spirituality leads us outward from self-despair and upward from the place we stood when the word of deliverance was received. Both points should be stressed further.

Spirituality takes us "outside" the barriers of circumstantial self-definition. It is a personal stride toward freedom — freedom to address and to adore God, and to allow God to bestow upon us a "new name." We receive our name when we pass beyond existential contingency to ecstatic new-awareness. We become a New Being motivated by a radically altered intentionality and drawn more closely to Being-Itself.

Drawing upon a familiar Biblical motif, black spirituality has always been an Abrahamic venture of faith. It involves being called out from a hostile environment to tread a spiritual course God will show through the miracle of faith. The uncertainty that attends the venture (the peril of *methodos*) is matched by the reassurance of divine promise. The consolation is that we are traveling "somewhere," as opposed to idly marking time "nowhere."

Secondly, spirituality is a journey with others to a higher state of some-where-ness in the domain of God's eternal complacency and benevolence. Spirituality contains within its moral qualifiers the insistence that life in the spirit is co-existence, and that participation in transpersonal Being is a joint obligation of spiritual selves-in-becoming. The stride toward freedom is a stride all can share. Inevitably, some will lead. Others will follow.

Exceptional black leaders of this sort have been the black clergy. As Lawrence Jones reminds us, the nineteenth-century black clergymen sought a city.²¹ It was not so much a destination located on a map, as a city "whose builder and maker is God." Black ecclesiastics who broke away from white Christian institutionalism were radical in spirit as well as in political temper. In fact, the two sentiments may be expressions of the same passion: To be spiritually alive is to be awakened to the opportunities for God's Holy Spirit to work through one's life toward the accomplishment of a greater good toward all.

²¹ See Lawrence A. Jones, "They Sought a City: The Black Church and Churchmen in the Nineteenth Century," in E. Eric Lincoln (ed.), *The Black Experience in Religion* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor/Doubleday, 1974), 7-23.

The black churchmen were prophets, priests, and politicians. Collectively they were a New Moses, leading God's children out of a land of institutional bondage. The pathway they traveled (*methodos*) was directed by an affinity for *theos* — sincere prayer, Inward Love. This prayerful dispositioning toward God's grace and mercy was essential. Both the spiritual leaders and followers enjoyed every step of the journey, because Jesus was present in their lives as guide, comforter and sustainer.

This emphasis of spiritual becoming-with-others is indispensable for black liberation theology. It honors the crux of theological insight abstracted from the Biblical narratives and preserved in the gospels, spirituals and the homilectical tradition. As we are called to live a saintly, holy life wherever we are geographically — we can be encouraged by the discernment that we are advancing toward the Heavenly City that "eyes have not seen." The black church has been nurtured on that theological conviction. Should some man or angel preach some other liberation gospel, let him be accursed.

Finally we ask: What can professional black religionists do to propagate such a dynamic faith for spiritual liberation?

IV. A CHALLENGE FOR PROFESSIONAL RELIGIONISTS

The black church has always had a "theological method" for cultivating a sensitivity toward spiritual callings. The method has taught us that when we allow God's grace to infuse all of our spiritual personality, we have the testimony of black saints of all ages: "I am on the journey. Don't you care to join me?" The method has enabled us to see the beauty of holiness and the power of sanctification that make the journey worth pursuing.

In our day, black religionists need not look for some new theological method for preaching the coming of the Liberative Kingdom. It has come and is coming in the lives of those who have been radically awakened to reality and have made themselves available to God's creativeness. What black religionists can "do" is to lead the black church to an elevated plane of spiritual excellence. The three-fold task can be met in this manner.

1. Black religionists are called upon to become politicians of a wholesome spiritual program of liberation. For the theologians, this involves engaging in the descriptive, interpretive tasks that illuminate the richness of the Christian faith, when such faith accords practical expression to our collective spiritual strivings. The faith of black spirituality, I would argue, is traceable through Africanisms and all facets of spiritual ambition aimed at more joyful living on this side of "chilly Jordan." How the faith is articulated theologically challenges black theologians to shape their words carefully and prayerfully, so that the power witnessed to by the Christian Tradition will be convincing and comforting.

2. Black religionists can join in the expression of black spiritual

advancement by allowing their own spirits to be transformed by the liberative message of hope-in-God. By so doing, they will not merely be speaking and respeaking *words about God*. They will be active participants in the salvation history of the One who liberates, sanctifies, and satisfies the distraught human soul.

Technically, the "theological method" for this accomplishment is already explicated in the manuals on ascetical theology. It includes the contemplative, prayerful positioning toward the goodness and glory of God. Such inclination of will and intellect is the *methodos* for framing the vision of God toward which the soul is drawn. Black religionists are urged to "join the method," if they are not already set out on the quest for transcendental enlightenment. We can be a bit more specific.

3. Black religionists need not be "hardened ascetics" — but they can profit from becoming "practical mystics." Practical mysticism need not be thought of as a posture of quietism, or a life style of self-inflicted mortification. Though mysticism has its draw backs, it certainly has many endearing strengths. Elucidating all such strong points would require an independent analysis apart from the circumscribed concerns of this writing. Nonetheless, one feature of the mystic temperament can be underscored.

Enjoying the vision of God is not an end in itself. It is a means toward a fuller spiritual life which produces effects in other spheres of human interchange. A central strength of mystic vocation involves the moral urging to share with others a politic of spiritual co-existence. Evelyn Underhill's words (in another connection) suggest what is at stake:

The riches and beauty of the spiritual landscape are not disclosed to us in order that we may sit in the sun parlour, be grateful for the excellent hospitality, and contemplate the glorious view.

. . . the Spiritual life has everything to do with politics. It means that certain convictions about God and the world become the *moral* and *spiritual imperatives* of our life.²²

When the mystic ascends to God's Presence, he goes not as an individual, but as "the ambassador of the race." He brings back a spiritual message that corroborates with what the theological tomes attest: God surpasses all our conceptions and imaginings. The mystic sees a Reality which he urges others to see. He does not need a map to explore the spirit world. His concern is to take others to the threshold of consciousness, where they themselves may hear the summons and explore the Land of the Divine. The mystic has already been there, and may go again. He is most concerned that we see and experience what has touched his life.

A final word. William James was convinced of the value of saintliness, despite its obvious risks of excessiveness. He urged his readers, "Let us be saints if we can." To fellow black religionists, I challenge, "Let us be spiritual ambassadors to the race — if we dare." In so doing we can help restless hearts find a place of peace and trust in God's mercy.

²² Underhill, *The Spiritual Life*, 84, 91. Emphasis added.