

BY ROBERT T. OSBORN

White Need for Black Theology

Ever since its advent, recent "black theology" has puzzled and troubled whites. We have not known what to do with it. It has been so black as apparently to exclude whites, yet on the other hand it appears to some extent to be addressed to us. We can neither copy it and do it as our own, nor contain it as a chapter within our own theology. The waters have been troubled and muddled further by analagous efforts of other minorities and women to do their theologies. In terms of liberation, following in the path of black theologies of liberation have come women's liberation, gay liberation, Latin American liberation theology, etc.. Ironically, one effect of this proliferation has been an apparent ratification of the authority and dominance of white male theology, insofar as it has put upon the dominant theology the responsibility for clarifying, comprehending and ordering the situation which otherwise remains chaotic and confused. The thesis of this paper is, however, that the prevailing white (male) theology is not so easily off the hook. I contend that black theology is *sui generis* and singularly significant for white American theology (male and female), that while it cannot be appropriated by whites, neither can it be ignored or co-opted by them.¹ The reason for this judgment, to anticipate the argument that follows, is that blacks are uniquely objects of oppression and that among all oppressed groups in North America they present an uniquely Christian self-understanding. Only they speak so radically with both the vision of the oppressed and the responsibility of Christian faith. I propose that in the biblical story of Joseph and his brothers we have a key to understand our situation as white theologians who find ourselves addressed by this unique black experience and the theology which comes out of it.²

Let us recall the story of Joseph. He was sold into slavery by his brothers. Many years later when he had risen to power in Egypt and his father and brothers were suffering famine in the land of Canaan, he found himself in the position of being able to deliver his brothers from the oppression of their poverty and hunger. When they came to Egypt to find relief from their impending starvation and discovered to their dismay that their anticipated benefactor was Joseph, they were distressed and justly fearful. Joseph, realizing that their guilt and anxiety were incurable, spoke to them the memorable word of libera-

¹ Quite commonly in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Blacks interpreted their experience in light of the Joseph story. Indeed, it is the cornerstone of Black faith during this period that God was using the evil of slavery to build up the Black church and Black faith. See, Bishop J.W. Hood, *One Hundred Years of the African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church* (New York: AME Zion Book Concerns, 1895). It wasn't so common, however, to realize that God was using the Black experience for the liberation and salvation of the white oppressor.

² H. Shelton Smith, *In His Image But . . .* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1972), p. 145.

tion: "As for you, you meant evil against me, but God meant it for good." (Ex. 50:20) Whereas they had meant it for evil when they sold Joseph into slavery, God, in spite of their evil, meant it for good — for their good, for their salvation and survival ("to bring it about that many people should be kept alive, as they are today." — Gen. 50:20). In the United States, a similar story was told when the white man sold his black brother into slavery, and is still being told insofar as he continues to oppress the black brother and sister through racist institutions and conventions. However, the difference in the stories to date is more striking than the similarity — namely, that the American white person has yet to hear how radically he did and continues to do this for evil, and that whatever good comes from it has been and will be the gracious consequence of the divine intention alone. To the contrary, the white oppressor has remained confident of the goodness and righteousness of his intentions, and of their immediate identity with those of God. He argued that he sold blacks into slavery and oppressed them in a subsequent racist society for the good of both black and white. Both he and God meant it for good. In his account of the alleged goodness and godliness of the white man's intentions, Shelton Smith cites the testimony of one Iverson L. Brookes (1950): "Next to the gift of his Son to redeem the human race, God never displayed in more lofty sublimity his attributes, than in the institution of slavery." Nowhere, he continues, "had God's benevolence ever been more marvelously displayed" than when he permitted the Africans to be brought to America. For, as Smith observes, "as a result of their enlightenment under slavery, 'thousands (of blacks) will rejoice in redeeming mercy, in every generation, down to the judgment trumpet (Brookes).'"³ Professor Smith also cites the Virginian Thomas Roderick Dew who recognized that not only was slavery liberating of the blacks but also of all mankind: "We have no hesitation in affirming, that slavery has been perhaps the principal means for impelling forward the civilization of mankind."⁴ As far as his contemporary oppressors are concerned the black has to contend with two expressions of white righteousness — that of the "red-neck" who admits openly but scarcely penitently to his racism, and that of the liberal who admits to his but alleges to cover and overcome it with good and righteous "liberal" intentions and deeds, and who therefore cannot understand his failure to persuade and conciliate his black brother and sister. As I stated, unlike Joseph's brothers, not only were and are the intentions of whites righteous and divine, but this truth is immediately and self-evident to them.

In the story of Joseph the most significant element is that Joseph, the former slave and victim of his brother's oppression, was the voice of

³ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

⁴ "The black religious experience is something more than a black patina on a white happening." James Cone. *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Philadelphia: Lippenweth, 1970), p. 28.

the clarifying and liberating word of God. Were it not for that word his brothers would have feared Joseph and not deigned to ask for or accept relief and liberation from him. And Joseph did indeed speak and incarnate in his deed the word of liberation to his brothers and oppressors. However, we must note that while Joseph spoke the liberating word, he was not its author. It was God, not Joseph, who "meant it for good." It was God who liberated Joseph and overcame his oppression and who by that deed spoke and incarnated the liberating word he was then to speak in forgiveness and love through Joseph to Joseph's brothers. So *God* spoke the liberating word to the oppressors, but he spoke it through *Joseph*, the oppressed.

And as he spoke then through Joseph, so today God is speaking his liberating word to the white person through the black Christian in his black theology. So far, whites hear and receive this word only reluctantly, with little trust or faith, as if it were not truly a necessary word from God for him. (Similarly, Joseph's brothers found Joseph's gracious word unbelievable and so sought ground other than God's grace to secure their position with Joseph.) Instead of hearing and accepting the liberating word of the oppressed, we who are white would rather speak it ourselves, in declaration and witness of the alleged fact that we are for our part already liberated and thus free to speak a promising word of liberation to the black. And so when Martin Luther King spoke to whites and gave his word flesh in his own life, whites did not, nor do they now, perceive that at stake in that word is their own liberation from bondage to a deadly past. Rather, in confirmation and witness of the alleged goodness of white intentions, what ensued was a gracious white word of black liberation embodied in civil rights legislation. We remained unaware, essentially, that the good in that legislation was from God, working through the oppressed to overcome our sin; we did not know that it was *not* continuing, convincing evidence of the essential white goodness. That this is the case, that even while legislating civil rights for the blacks, as were we the liberator, we nevertheless remained and remain victims of our oppressive racism, is manifest in our continuing blindness to expressions of racism in our society and in our white impatience with and incomprehension of continuing black discontent and protest. Having spoken to blacks the liberating word, we are puzzled that they continue to speak out and demand a hearing of us. We have spoken the word of liberation! What more is there to be said? What need is there within the Methodist church, for instance, of a black caucus, when the Methodists (white) have spoken and said that there shall be no more Central (black) Jurisdiction? Our intentions are indeed honorable and of God and therefore liberating of us all. Just as whites once said to blacks that in their slavery to whites they were liberated from the darkness of their pagan past, so today we would again presume to speak to them the word of their liberation from white racism and oppression. From

such presumption one can conclude only that white intentions are indeed good, that unlike Joseph we did not and do not mean it for evil, but for good, and therefore are in no need of a divine and gracious word that would overcome our evil word. As were we God or very godlike and as were our evil not radical, we can speak ourselves beyond and out of our own bondage to sin and thus the black out of our oppressive racism. On the other hand, if our intentions were and are evil, if indeed we are the oppressed victims of our own sin, where but through the oppressed sufferer of our sinful word and deed can our liberation come?

Clearly, here is the place and function in the white world of black theology. Remember, Joseph, the oppressed, spoke a word of God to his brothers, the oppressors. Today, the oppressed (blacks) are speaking a word of God (theology) to the oppressor. It is the thesis of this paper that God is also speaking that word; it is God who means it for our white good, just as it was God who spoke through Joseph and who through Joseph meant good for his brothers. Black theology is not a "minority" theology which white theology may patronizingly and gratuitously take into account; it is not just another chapter to be appended to an otherwise white theology.⁵ To the contrary, it is the very possibility of white theology. Joseph's word to his brothers, like the black's word to his white brothers, is a primal, originating word. As such it was an incomprehensible word, a word that the brothers could neither speak themselves nor believe. It was a word of judgment that revealed and condemned their sin and brought them to their knees. It was not a word they were to comprehend in the power of their reason or heart; rather, it was a powerful, creative word that delivered them from their cunning minds and darkened hearts and liberated them for a new and promising future. In short, it was the word of God. The word of the black as the word of God is such a word. For the white person it is not an optional word; it is the very *sine qua non*, the very liberating word of authentic white theological existence.

However, we must be clear on two points. First, neither Joseph nor blacks are the liberators, nor are they authors of the liberating word. It is God who liberates and who speaks this word. It is not the *black* word as such, but the black *theological* word that liberates. Concretely, it is Jesus Christ who sets free. It is God in Christ who, through and as the oppressed Jew, spoke the liberating word to the Gentile oppressor, and to all oppressors. It is this same God who in and for the sake of this same Jesus Christ stands with the oppressed black to liberate him and make of him the liberating word to his oppressor. I am not talking, therefore, about a black Messiah, but about a Jewish Messiah who through the black would liberate the white.

Second, it is evident that this view of our (white) salvation neither requires nor even permits efforts on our part to adopt black theology.

⁵ Frederick Herzog, *Liberation Theology*, (New York: The Seaburg Press, 1972), p. 61.

White theology is not and cannot be black theology; rather it is white theology made possible by black theology. And, as with black theology, it is *Christian* theology. It asks about the truth and meaning of Christ for the white person, albeit with the understanding that this Christ comes to him as one who is one with the oppressed who, for our American world in the twentieth century, is most concretely and inescapably the black. It asks about Christ in light of the black experience rather than in terms of the white history of sin and racism, which is inimical and alien to him. White theology must seek Christ today with regard to the black experience of oppression, wherein Christ has always been at home. For us who are white, he comes into our past not to justify us, but brings us into our future to liberate us.

Many will object, white women for instance, to this focus on the black experience in contrast to the experience of other victims of oppression. The reason for this focus is two-fold: first, the black is the most unequivocal and most explicit focus of white male (and female) oppression. Secondly, and this is most important, blacks more than any other oppressed group perceive and witness that it is God who means it for good. He more than any other has been claimed by Christ's promise of his liberation and thus has and is a liberating word to the white man (and woman).

What all this may mean is yet before us, hopefully. As of the moment it is not clear that we as whites have identified the liberating word of God. We do not understand that the word must be spoken to us before we speak, that we must hear before we have anything to say. We continue to do theology of sorts, and, though there is much evidence to suggest it, we have failed to be persuaded that without God first speaking to us our theology so-called is a great to-do about very little.

In conclusion, I would point out what I trust is the obvious, namely, that this paper intends to be heuristic only and hardly a program for a responsible white theology. I do understand it as faithful to the intentions of the kind of response black theology registered by my colleague Frederick Herzog in his *Theology of Liberation*. When he translates Jesus' words to Nicodemus to mean for us (whites) that we cannot see the kingdom "unless (we) become black," he is saying only that the white experience is *not* that in which Christ comes to us but rather that from which Christ must save and liberate us.⁶ Our white experience is not the context for a faithful hearing of God's word; it is not hermeneutically sound. If we are to hear faithfully the word of God addressed us in Christ, Christ himself must translate us into that context which he was and is heard — namely, in the midst of the oppressed who, for us who are white, is the black (at least, for while there are other oppressed peoples in our white American world, these are the most obvious and inescapable. One should be very suspect of avoiding oppression and oppressed people if he avoids the

⁶ *Ibid.*

blacks in the name of other oppressed groups.) There, in his new born blackness, by virtue neither of blackness nor of whiteness, but of the grace of God, the white Christian seeks not to be black or to do black theology but rather to hear Christ and do Christian theology. To be "born black" is not to do black theology but to be able to do faithfully white Christian theology.



Books Received

- A CHRISTIAN VIEW OF HISTORY? Edited by George Marsden and Frank Roberts. Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1975. \$4.50.
- RITUAL IN A NEW DAY: AN INVITATION edited by Hoyt Hickman. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1976. \$3.75.
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