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Black Ecumenism and The Liberation Struggle

The theme "Black Ecumenism and the Liberation Struggle" is important, because it connects the movement for unity among the churches with the struggle for freedom in the larger society. When the World Council of Churches was formed at Amsterdam in 1948, the term "ecumenical" had acquired a modern meaning that referred to "the relations between and unity of two or more churches (or of Christians of various confessions)."[1] This definition remained dominant in theological and church contexts until the recent appearance of highly articulate and radical theological voices from Asia, Latin America, Africa and its diaspora. Third World theologians began to insist on a definition of ecumenism that moved beyond the traditional interconfessional issues to the problems of poverty and the struggle for social and economic justice in a global context. In their attempt to connect ecumenism with the economic and political struggle for a fuller human life for all, Third World theologians also began to uncover the original and more comprehensive meaning of the term *oikoumene*. In the Greco-Roman world generally and also in the New Testament, *oikoumene* referred to the whole inhabited world[2] and not simply religious activities. With this broader perspective in mind, it is appropriate to apply the term "ecumenical" to "both secular and religious aspirations toward achieving a united human family living in harmony with its global habitat."[3] In this essay, I will examine the meaning of black ecumenism in the context of black people's struggle for freedom.

I. *Black Ecumenism and the White Church.*

The phrase "black ecumenism" is significant, because black churches have traditionally resisted the limitation of the term "ecumenical" to the

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[1] W. A. Visser 't Hooft, "The Word 'Ecumenical'—Its History and Use" in Ruth Rouse and S. C. Neill (eds.), *A History of the Ecumenical Movement,* 1517-1948 (London: SPCK, 1967), p. 735.

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] See this definition given by Margaret Nash, *Ecumenical Movement in the 1960's* (Johannesburg: Raven Press, 1975) at the beginning of her book. This book is a good account of the impact of Asian, African and Latin American Churches upon the World Council of Church. See also W. A. Visser 't Hooft, *Has The Ecumenical Movement a Future* (Belfast: Christian Journals Limited, 1974); and his "The General Ecumenical Development since 1948" in Harold Fey (ed.), *The Ecumenical Advance: A History of the Ecumenical Movement, 1948-1968,* Vol. II, (London: SPCK, 1970).

unity among churches. Black church people contend that the search for unity in Jesus Christ cannot be separated from the struggle for justice in society. While black independent churches may have derived their names as well as creedal statements from white churches, yet it is not true to say that black churches were created purely for *sociological* reasons.[4] If we take seriously the contention of the sociologists of knowledge that all ideas (including theological ones) are dialectically related to social reality, then it is also true that black people's separation from white churches was a social protest grounded in their *theological* affirmation that the God of Jesus cannot tolerate segregation in the church or the society. Segregation in the white churches prompted black people to organize independent churches that would be committed to preaching and living the gospel of freedom. Segregation and slavery in the society prompted black churches to define black people's political resistance against oppression as a witness to God's eschatological intentions to establish justice for the poor and weak in the land. Whether we speak of northern black independent churches, blacks who remained in white churches, or of the so-called "invisible institution" in the south, the dominant theme in black ecclesiology is God's election and empowerment of an oppressed community to struggle for justice in human society. Northern black church people, like Henry Garnet and David Walker, were bold in their affirmation of divine righteousness against the evils of segregation and slavery. Walker's *Appeal* (1829) and Garnet's *Address to the Slaves of the United States of America* (1843)[5] are theological manifestoes that remind us of the chasm that existed between black religion and white religion, even when they were practiced in the same denominations.

While "free" northern blacks, like Garnet and Walker, expressed their views about the justice of God openly, southern black slaves were normally not permitted to worship separately unless authorized white people were present to proctor the meeting. In order to escape the limitations of white religion, black slaves held secret worship services that later historians have referred to as the "invisible institution." When it was not possible for slaves to "steal away" into the woods at night, they often camouflaged their language with biblical and apocalyptic images. A fugitive slave from North Carolina reminded a post-civil war black congregation how "we used to have to employ our dark symbols and

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[4] Both black and white scholars have often reduced the appearance of the autonomous black churches during the 19th century to social factors and to the exclusion of theology. For example: H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (Cleveland: World Publishing Co., 1929). "The causes of the racial schism are not difficult to determine. Neither theology nor polity furnished the occasion for it. The sole source of this denominationalism is social." Even J. Deotis Roberts can write: "We left the white churches for non-theological reasons." "A Black Ecclesiology of Involvement" in *Journal of Religious Thought*, Vol. XXXII, No. 1, Spring-Summer 1975, p. 43. Another example of this error is Joseph Washington, *Black Religion* (Boston: Beacon, 1964).

[5] Walker's "Appeal" and Garnet's "Address" are reprinted together in one volume by Arno Press, 1969.

obscure figures to cover our real meaning."[6] The possibility of hidden and militant meanings in the slave songs has prompted much debate over their precise meaning by later interpretors. But whether we claim that the slave spirituals were primarily this-worldly, political or spiritual in essence, one fact is clear: a militant and political reading is always possible for anyone who connects these songs with the universal claim of the gospel message. Apparently harmless songs can become revolutionary affirmations, if there is already present the seed of revolution among the oppressed. In a slave situation where whites were given inordinate privileges, blacks could use their songs to express God's judgment against slavery as well as their own political intentions to fight for freedom.

> Ev'body got to rise to meet King Jesus
> in th' morning
> Th' high and th' low
> th' rich and th' po'
> Th' bond and th' free
> As well as me.

Sometimes however, slaves expressed openly their rejection of the white church and its theology. "God never made us to be slaves for white people,"[7] a maid boldly asserted to her mistress. Because blacks believed that "God is no respector of persons" (Acts 10:34 KJV), they seldom regarded the white church as a true representative of the body of Christ. "When a group in one autonomous black church threatened to leave the congregation because of the minister's 'scandalous' behavior, he taunted them for running to the whites. If you want to 'sit by the door when the white folks have communion, an' wait there 'til they get through 'fore you get some. *Come now,* an' get your letter!' "[8]

The theme of God's impartiality is not only found in black churches of the 19th century, but also in the 20th century. In the writings of black theologians, like Howard Thurman and Benjamin Mays, and in the political activism of Adam Clayton Powell, Jr. and Martin Luther King, Jr., the black church projected an image of church unity based on a political commitment of justice for the poor. The absence of any serious commitment of white Christians to eliminate racism in their churches and in the society accounts for the lack of serious dialogue on the part of black independent churches in the ecumenical deliberations of the Consultation on Church Union (COCU), the National Council of Churches and the World Council of Churches in Geneva. We blacks do not believe that church unity with white people is meaningful unless it arises out of a demonstrated commitment to implement justice in the society. Willie White, a baptist preacher, is even more emphatic:

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[6] Cited in Donald G. Matthews, *Religion in the Old South* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), p. 218.
[7] Cited in *Ibid.*, p. 221.
[8] Cited in *Ibid.*, p. 211.

> It is precisely God's purpose that stands opposed to any thoroughgoing ecumenical approach between the black and white churches of America . . . . or the establishment of the black church was not the work of a mere man; it was the work of Christ. . . . [Its] task [therefore] is to stand everywhere in the world as a Christian symbol of God's opposition to oppression. White [people] must be made to realize that the black church is the instrument of God in this world, not just a group of nigger churchgoers who are separated unto themselves until the good graces of white [people] call them back into fellowship with white congregations.[9]

Although representatives of the black church attend ecumenical gatherings and hear lectures on the unity of the church by well-known Protestant and Catholic theologians, black participants soon realize that there is a huge gap between theological doctrines about the church and the actual practice of white church people. It is therefore hard not to conclude that white theologians are supported by their churches in order to reconcile the irreconcilable, namely white domination and the gospel of Jesus. How else can we explain all their talk about our unity in the body of Christ when they have no intentions of removing the barriers that separate us. My first extensive experience with this peculiar white attitude that calls itself "Christian" began at Garrett Theological Seminary and was later reinforced by white preachers involved in the civil rights movement. At Garrett (1958-63), black students could not understand why most of our teachers and white classmates remained conspicuously silent about black people's struggle for justice in American society. It was as if whites believed that the Bible, theology, and the church had nothing to do with life.

Later, after my graduation from seminary, I encountered a similar contradiction as the white churches of North America failed to come to terms with the theological significance of the civil rights movement. One of the most blatant examples of this contradiction was the appeal of eight white ministers of Birmingham who denounced Martin Luther King, Jr. and urged "our own Negro community to withdraw support" because the demonstrations were "untimely and unwise." Martin King responded with his now famous "Letter From Birmingham Jail."[10] King's dialogue with white church people disclosed not only how far he was willing to go in order to achieve a genuine reconciliation between blacks and whites; but also the limitations of a white perspective in the context of a black liberation struggle. As we black Christians listened to white theological rhetoric about the justice of God and the unity of the church and then related it to white passivity regarding the transformation of ecclesiastical and social structures of oppression, we could not help but conclude that white church people talk about love and reconciliation but seldom with the practical intentions of translating theological doctrines into political realities. The rise of black theology was partly due to the need to unmask this white theological hypocrisy so that black people would not be

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[9] Willie White, "Ecumenism and the Black Church," *Christian Century*. February 13, 1974, p. 179.

[10] Martin Luther King, Jr., *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: Signet Book, 1963), pp. 76-95.

deceived by carefully structured theological ideas that were unrelated to their struggle for justice.

II. *Black Ecumenism and the Rise of Black Theology.*

Is the ecumenical significance of black theology limited to the need of uncovering the hypocrisy of white christians? I think not. The theme of "black ecumenism and the liberation struggle" also challenges contemporary black denominational churches to implement in society the freedom they sing and preach about in worship. One of the constant dangers of oppressed people is the temptation to imitate their oppressors, even when the two groups remain socially separate. During the time of slavery and the rigid segregation that followed the reconstruction, the lines between the black and the white, the poor and the rich were clearly drawn, and there were many black churches who took their stand on the side of oppressed blacks in their fight for justice. The political solidarity of the black churches with the poor was characteristic of their involvement in the civil rights movement, and this political struggle united Baptists, Methodists, Presbyterians, Pentecostals, and Catholics. The institutional expression of the ecumenism among black Christians appeared with the formation of the National Committee of Negro Churchmen (which is now called the National Conference of Black Churchpeople). NCBC was a politically active group of ecumenical church people who took seriously Willie White's contention that black christians "must realize that the Baptist Articles of Faith and other such statements have nothing to do with the definition of the black church. The black church is defined by the very ideas which demand a new ecumenism among black Christians."[11] White continues:

> The black church is defined not by any or all of the traditionally accepted creeds but by the creed of liberation: the creed that one [person] does not have the right to oppress another, be the other black or white, baptized by immersion or by sprinkling, fashionably attired or running naked in the jungle. It is defined by the creed that the dehumanization of one [person] by another is in total contradiction to the way of Christ and must be opposed. And it is this creed that makes possible the . . . black church community. . . . [12]

Is this definition of black ecumenism still a dominant expression of the faith of independent black church denominations? Do black churches, as institutions, still regard black people's struggle for political liberation as the theological foundation of their *raison d'etre?* If black church people would answer these questions in the affirmative, then all I can say is that their judgment about themselves differs significantly from many black non-Christians who at best regard the churches as irrelevant in the black struggle for justice. Aside from two or three isolated examples, where is the empirical evidence that black churches are involved in the liberation struggle of the poor? How long will we continue to appeal to the black heroes of the past as evidence for the contemporary relevance of the black church?

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[11] Willie White, "Ecumenism and the Black Church," p. 180.
[12] *Ibid.*

My questions are not intended as a theological put-down of the black church, because I have been a minister in the A.M.E. Church since I was 16 years old. Anyone acquainted with my theological perspective knows that I believe that Christian theology has its validity only in so far as it arises out of and is accountable to the church of Jesus Christ. Indeed it is because of my commitment to the black church that I must ask: Do some black congregations—or entire denominations—act so as to require us to make the theological judgment that they are no longer the church of Jesus Christ? If the church's mission is to serve suffering humanity and not itself, can we really say that the black church of today lives the faith that it proclaims?

These are difficult questions, and they cannot be answered for all churches in the same way. Some are more faithful than others. But if we are serious about black ecumenism and the liberation struggle, then we had better not side-step the apostasy of the black church. To be sure, the black church looks good when compared with the sick history of the white church. But what about our relations with our brothers and sisters who believe that black churches are destructive forces in the struggle for political freedom? We may rightly claim that our separation from the white church is due to white racism, but what is the reason for our continued separation from *each other.* How can we bridge the gap between A.M.E., A.M.E. Zion, and C.M.E. churches so that they can become united in the struggle for freedom? How can we remove the barriers that separate Baptists and Pentecostals, Catholics and Anglicans and a host of other assorted black church people? Since many outsiders view our separation as indicative of institutional self-interest, it is necessary for us to state the *theological* reasons for our separation. What is the relation between our institutional life and the gospel which our institutions claim to serve? How important are our denominational identities in our definition of the gospel, especially since most of the names of our churches are derived from white denominations?

It seems that black denominations today are not good models of black ecumenism. With the decline in the black churches' support for NCBC, black Christians do not appear to be united in Christ for the purpose of liberating suffering humanity. Black churches seem content with preaching sermons and singing songs about freedom, but few of them have made an institutional commitment to organize church life and work for the creation of freedom.

During the civil rights movement and other high points of black ecumenism, the unity of the black churches was found in a religious expression grounded in the practice of freedom in the larger society. When our faith in God was expressed in the struggle for justice, we were joined together by a common spirit of liberation that controlled our community. When that common commitment to the struggle for liberation is gone, as with many black churches today, then the gospel becomes identified with the maintenance of a particular denominational structure. Some black Christians begin to think that to be Christian is to be Methodist or Baptist, as if our identity in Christ is defined by the

historical and religious experiences of John Wesley and Roger Williams.

The confusion about ecumenism and liberation in the black church is also found in its attitude towards the relations of men and women. The black church, like all other churches, is a male-dominated church. The difficulty that black male ministers have in supporting the equality of women in the church and society stems partly from the lack of a clear liberation-criterion rooted in the gospel and the present struggles of oppressed peoples. In many contexts the black church is as backward and obscene on the issue of sexism as the white church. It is truly amazing that many black male ministers, young and old, can hear the message of liberation in the gospel when related to racism but remain deaf to a similar message in the context of sexism. As Frances Beale says: the black man "sees the system for what it really is for the most part, but where he rejects its values and mores on many issues, when it comes to women, he seems to take his guidelines from the pages of the *Ladies Home Journal.*"[13] How can we be so radical when viewing the liberation of black male ministers from white domination and then be so conservative about the pains of our black sisters? If our concept of black ecumenism does not include our struggle to give equal status to women in the church and the society, then it is not Christian. Christian freedom is contagious. Its very nature requires that it be given to all—white and black, male and female. When the black church is evaluated by this theological criterion, the gap between the theory of freedom and the practice of freedom becomes blatantly obvious.

If the black church denominations could begin to deal creatively with the problems of separation among themselves as well as with sexism in the churches, they would be in a better position to deal with the problems of unity between black Christians and non-Christians. Among the old and young alike, black churches have serious credibility problems, because there are so many of them that appear to be indifferent to the poor and weak. To be sure, we can continue to refer to past heroes and martyrs, but in what way does the black church continue that tradition? As I look around the present black church scene and evaluate where it uses its economic and political resources, I think it is very difficult to show any institutional commitment to the freedom of people from societal oppression. The black church seems to be concerned about serving only itself. While it still preaches sermons and sings songs abut freedom, its claims about freedom are not incorporated into a social theory that will assist in the implementation of freedom. It is the absence of any carefully worked out social theory for the implementation of our religious confessions that makes black non-Christians suspicious of churchly intentions. Black ecumenism therefore must be broad enough to include all black people who strive for freedom or we have no grounds for connecting it with the theme of liberation. The theme of political liberation extends black ecumenism beyond confessional unity and

[13] "Double Jeopardy: To be Black and Female" in Toni Cade (ed.), *The Black Woman* (New York: Signet Book, 1970), p. 92.

affirms a oneness based on a practical solidarity with the poor. We begin to realize what Malcom X taught us:

> When we come together, we don't come together as Baptists or Methodists. You don't catch hell because you are a Baptist, and you don't catch hell because you're a Methodist . . . , you don't catch hell because you're a Democrat or a Republican, you don't catch hell because you're a Mason or an Elk, and you sure don't catch hell because you're an American; because if you were an American, you wouldn't catch hell. You catch hell because you're a black [person]. You catch hell, all of us catch hell for the same reason.[14]

In this quotation, Malcolm has identified a major contradiction in American culture—racism. Since black churches came into being as a protest against racism, it is unfortunate that many black church people cling rigidly to white denominational labels that were and are responsible for our separation. As long as we are divided on the basis of confessional expressions of faith that were not created in our historical experience, black church people will continue to have difficulties in relating the confession of faith and the struggle for freedom.

The same theological distortion that separates black churches among themselves, separates men and women, and separates black non-Christians and Christians in North America also accounts for the present failures of black church mission in Africa and other Third World countries. For example: Do Africans think that North American black missionaries and bishops from the A.M.E., A.M.E. Zion or Baptist churches are more responsive to the African liberation struggle than white missionaries? Every African that I have talked with answered this question by saying that there is little difference between black and white missionaries except in skin color. With so much talk about Africanization, indigenization, and the self-hood of the African churches, why are black denominations so slow in their support of a truly independent African church. A.M.E.'s and A.M.E.Z.'s have been in Africa nearly a century and both churches still send black northern American bishops as leaders in Africa rather than developing an indigenous leadership among Africans. The A.M.E. and A.M.E. Zion Churches have each elected only one indigenous African as bishop for service in Africa, Francis Gow (1956) and Solomon D. Lartey (1960) respectively. What does that tell us about their commitment to an independent African Theology and Church? Furthermore the black American bishops assigned to Africa are not chosen because of their particular interest or expertise in African life, but because of internal church politics—i.e., the seniority system. The most recently elected bishops are usually sent to Africa, because it is the least desirable place to be if one intends to be influential in shaping church policy. To allow African mission to be controlled by the self-interests of North American black church people is a disgrace to the legacy of Henry M. Turner, not to mention the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Of course, my critique of black churches in relation to their African

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[14] *Malcolm X Speaks* (New York: Grove Press, an Evergreen Black Cat Book, 1966), p. 4.

mission is not intended to suggest that they have done no creative work on the continent of Africa. Indeed A.M.E. Bishop H. H. Brookins' creative support of the freedom fighters in Zimbabwe is an important reminder that Henry M. Turner has not been forgotten. I am sure that there are other prominent examples that could be mentioned. In fact, it is because of the significant exceptions, as represented in the ministry of Bishop Brookins and others like him, that I am forced to ask: Why don't we structure the black church in such a way that it will become a visible instrument of African liberation? If we are serious about our African identity, as the names of some of our church denominations suggest, why not embody it in a historical commitment on behalf of our brothers and sisters in Africa? Our ability to implement this concern in the structures of our churches will show how serious we are about black ecumenism.

The same credibility problem that the black church encounters in Africa also exists in Asia and Latin America. To church people in Asia and Latin America, the black church in North America seems to be a colored version of the white church. Both the white and black churches seem to be content with an economic system of capitalism that is so dehumanizing to the vast majority of human beings in the world. To be sure, black churches have been critical of the lack of justice for black people in North American society. But where is the black church's social critique in the global context in which the vast majority of humanity suffers? If we do not place our claims for justice in a global context, then we will appear to Asians, Africans, and Latin Americans as being black capitalists who are upset only because we have not been given a larger piece of the American pie. What does the black church have to say about the fact that more than two-thirds of the world's population exist in poverty and that such material conditions are directly traceable to the exploitation of poor countries by rich ones. For example, the United States represents 6% of the world's population but consumes 40% of the world's resource. When we black people speak of justice, do we mean that we want equal share of the 40%? If that is what we mean, then there is very little difference between black people and white people in the U. S. when they are evaluated from the viewpoint of global justice. If we think that the theological difference between the black church and white church is visible even in an international context, then we need to articulate that difference in theory and in practice so that poor people in Asia, Africa and Latin America will recognize the nature of our difference. Aside from a few symbolic gestures in relation to African and the Caribbean, black church people have not shown that they view their civil rights struggle as a radical challenge to the evils of capitalism and as a historical expression of their solidarity with the poor people of the world. I believe that the time has come for the black church to display a form of black ecumenism that arises out of our historical commitment to defend the cause of the poor in the world. The poor must include not only black Americans but also Africans, Asians, and Latin Americans. What would black ecumenism look like if the black church accepted the challenge to define the body of Christ according to a people's commitment to liberate

the oppressed of the world? If we believe that the gospel we preach is universal and therefore intended for all peoples, are we not required to express this universality in our service to all humankind?

The ecumenical perspective that connects the unity of humankind with the liberation of the world's poor does not diminish our focus on *black* liberation. Rather it enhances it, not only because the vast majority of the world's poor are colored, but because economic exploitation is a disease that requires the cooperation of all victims if the world is to be transformed. The vocation of the poor is to struggle together for the transformation of their history. Their struggle to transform the world according to the Christian vision as disclosed in the cross and resurrection of Jesus makes known to them that "unity only becomes a reality to the extent that we partake of Christ (who) is hidden in those who suffer."[15]

[15] Rubem Alves, "Protestantism in Latin America: Its Ideological Function and Utopian Possibilities," *The Ecumenical Review,* January 1970, p. 15.