By Noel L. Erskine*

Christian Hope And The Black Experience

When Jurgen Moltmann calls for an eschatological faith that does not flee the world but struggles to bring the world into conformity with the new future of God, black Christians know what he is talking about. Indeed, it would be difficult to find a better example anywhere of that combination of profound trust in the eschatological promises of God with concrete application to the political and economic realities of this world that characterizes the black churches in America. Perhaps it has something to do with roots in African thinking that includes the unwillingness to adopt rigid time distinctions between the past, present and future found in conventional western thinking.[1] Both past and future are drawn into the present in a way that makes it quite impossible to keep future reality from having its impact on the present in practical ways. As a result the projection of eschatological hopes into an indefinite future, so common in white piety, could not become predominant in the Black Church. When black people sang, "Swing Low, Sweet Chariot," they were expressing not only a profound religious experience, they were referring to escape northward. "When the black slave sang, 'I looked over Jordan and what did I see, Coming for to carry me home,' they were looking over the Ohio River."[22]

This unwillingness to put asunder what God has joined together—the eschatological and the concrete historical—which characterizes the black spiritual ethos is what has uniquely equipped the Black Church to undergird the long march toward freedom and equality of black people in this country. The only institution that could give birth to and sustain the civil rights movement was the Black Church. Before black people went out on the streets to be beaten by cops and torn by dogs, they entered through the door of the Black Church to pray. It was not an accident that during the civil rights movement in Mississippi thirteen black churches were burned. The Black Church had become not only the symbol of hope but the agent of liberation for black people. It was the awareness of the presence of the despised and rejected one in its midst which enabled the Black Church to become the inspirational source, the organizational drive, and sustaining power for a movement which might often have faltered and failed but for the conviction that Almighty God himself was

[1] Cf. John S. Mbiti, "Eschatology," in Kwesi Dickson and Paul Ellingworth, *Biblical Revelation and African Beliefs,* (London: Lutterworth Press, 1969), pp. 159-184.
[2] James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues,* (New York: Seabury Press, 1972), p. 90.

*Dr. Erskine is Assistant Professor of Theology and Ethics at Candler School of Theology, Emory University.

committed to the struggle and would reward those who "endure to the end."

Moltmann's theology has given careful and systematic treatment to the themes that emerge out of the struggle with oppression. The critique which follows at the end of this chapter in no wise lessens my own appreciation of the way in which Moltmann, by candidly facing the forces which threaten Christian hope, has helped put the issue of oppression on the agenda of theology. Moveover, since the advent of Black Theology in North American and Liberation Theology in Latin America, the Christian Church cannot any longer meaningfully talk about Christian hope without relating it to the struggle of oppressed people for liberation in history.

As the story of hope's vision for liberation unfolds, however, it must be kept in mind that the struggle for freedom is not only waged by a people whose skin color is black. This struggle includes all oppressed people whether men or women. All who are the victims of socio-economic and religious domination. But the term blackness is an appropriate point of departure for our investigation of hope's relationship to liberation because black people in America best represent hope's struggle for freedom.

Hope is more than the anticipation of liberation. It is both the motive force and the shape of human liberation. When Paul points out in Col. 1:27 that Christ is our hope, he makes for us a connection between hope and the liberation of the oppressed. When oppressed people make the connection between hope and liberation they struggle to free themselves from bondage because "the Lord their God is in the midst of them" (Deut. 7:21). Hope then must become historical liberation, and this is certainly why in the New Testament hope is historically grounded in the incarnation of God, and why in order to understand hope in the black context we must first consider the concrete history that shaped the black experience.

Black people understood that although God was not limited to history, he was present in history as their savior, friend, and hope. The God who became their liberator was one who suffered with them at the hands of the unjust oppressor. This God was a helper in times of troubles. The prayer of a slave woman illustrates something of the connection black people made between hope and liberation. She prayed:

> Dear Massa Jesus, we all uns beg Ooner you come make us a call dis yere day. We is nutting but poor Etiopian women and people ain't tink much 'bout we. We ain't trust any of dem great high people for come to we Church, but do' you is de one great Massa, great too much dan massa Linkum, you ain't shame to care for we African people.
> Come to me, dear Massa Jesus. De sun, he too hot too much, de road am dat long and boggy sandy and we ain't got no buggy for send and fetch Ooner you. But Massa, you member how you walked that hard walk up Calvary and ain't weary but tink about we all do way. We know you ain't weary for to come to we.[3]

---

[3] Harold A. Carter, *The Prayer Tradition of Black People,* (Valley Forge, Pa: Judson Press 1976), p. 29.

Here Jesus is the oppressed one who in his identification with the oppressed brings hope in their struggle. According to black people, Jesus as the oppressed one would "make de dumb to speak", "de cripple walk" and "give de blind his sight". Jesus could make a way where there was no way.

This hope in Jesus for liberation was not only from social deprivations and a cruel world that was made for black people by the oppressors but also from the sin within. The hope for liberation was both for inner and outer transformation. And so the slaves would sing:

> O Lord, I'm hungry
> I want to be fed,
> O lord, I'm hungry
> I want to be fed,
> O feed me Jesus, feed me,
> Feed me all my days.
> O Lord, I'm naked
> I want to be clothed,
> O lord, I'm naked
> I want to be clothed,
> O clothe me Jesus, clothe me,
> Clothe me all my days.
> O Lord, I'm sinful
> I want to be saved,
> O Lord, I'm sinful
> I want to be saved,
> O save me Jesus, save me,
> Save me all my days.[4]

Inner and outer, material and spiritual, are conjoined when appealing to the One who took on our flesh to liberate us.

How did the white churches respond to the plight of black people? Most of the churches were so deeply enmeshed in the system that they were unable to pose a radical alternative to slavery as such. Instead their efforts were twofold, toward the amelioration of the worst aspects of slavery, and toward the conversion of the slaves to Christianity. A typical example of this is found in the actions of the Bishop of London, who was the spiritual head of the Church of England in Virginia. In 1696 he intervened with the crown, with the result that the royal instructions to Governor Culpeper included:

> Ye shall endeavor to get a law passed for the restraining of any inhuman severity which by ill masters or overseers may be used towards their Christian servants or slaves. And you are also with the assistance of the Council and assembly, to find out the best means to facilitate and encourage the conversion of Negroes to the Christian religion . . .[5]

The English hierarchy as a whole was greatly concerned about the lack of success which the colonial church had in converting black people in America to Christianity. In 1701, therefore, the Society for the

[4] James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues*, (New York: The Seabury Press 1972), p. 51.

[5] Cited by H. S. Klein, *Slavery in the Americas*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1967), pp. 113-114.

Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts was founded with the express purpose of Christianizing the slaves. But the Society complained that many masters would not permit their slaves to be baptized or to attend classes for Christian instruction. As Bishop Fleetwood said in his annual address to the Society in 1710,

> I have reason to doubt, whether there be any exception of any people of ours, who cause their slaves to be baptised. What do these people think of Christ? . . . . That he who came from heaven, to purchase to himself a Church with his own precious blood, should sit contented and behold with unconcern, those who profess themselves his servants, excluding from its gates those who would gladly enter if they might, and exercising no less cruelty to their souls (as far as they are able) than their bodies.[6]

In spite of the bishop's good intentions and his implicit questioning of the cruelties of the system, we can see in his words the fateful division which was to allow even the more humane elements in the white church to minister in good conscience to the souls of blacks while leaving their bodies in slavery.

Moreover, the contradictions in the system were soon evident in the Society itself when it found itself the owner of the plantation with slaves in the Caribbean. The eighteenth-century historian, Bryan Edwards, summarizes the dilemma:

> The Reverend Society established in Great Britain for propagating the gospel in foreign parts are themselves under this very predicament. That Venerable Society hold a plantation in Barbados under a devise of Colonel Codrington; and they have found themselves not only under the disagreeable necessity of supporting the system of slavery which was bequeathed to them with the land, but are indeed also from the purest and best motives, to purchase a certain number of negroes annually, in order to divide the work and keep up the stock.[7]

After 1740, there was an opportunity for black people who lived on the frontier of Virginia, to become a part of the great evangelical movement, which was known as the Great Awakening. From 1740, and especially after 1760, large numbers of Methodist, Baptist, Presbyterian and other preachers began preaching in the frontier counties of Virginia. Many of these preachers welcomed the slaves into the church. Black people in Virginia responded to this opportunity to attend church services. According to John Leland in his Virginia Chronicler:

> The poor slaves under all hardships, discover as great an inclination for Christian religion as the free born do. When they engage in the service of God, they spare no pains. It is nothing strange for them to walk twenty miles on Sunday morning to meeting, and back again at night. They are remarkable for learning—a tune soon, and have melodious voices. . . . They seem in general to put more confidence in their own color, than they do in whites; when they attempt to preach, they seldom fail of being very zealous; their language is broken but they understand each other, and the whites may gain their ideas.[8]

The change that took place was that the church was able to convince many members of the plantocracy that the Christian slave was the best

---

[6] H. S. Klein, *Slavery in the Americas, op. cit.*, pp. 114-115.

[7] Bryan Edwards, *The History: Civil and Commercial of the British Colonies in the West Indies,* Vol. 2 (London: printed for J. Stockdale, 1793-1801), pp. 38-39.

[8] Klein, p. 120.

servant the planters could invest in. George Whitefield, who was certainly the most oustanding evangelist of the Great Awakening remarked: "I challenge the whole world, to produce a single instance of the negro's being made a thorough Christian, and thereby a worse servant.[9] Whitefield was himself quite distraught at how black people were treated. "Your dogs," he said, "are caress'd and fondled at your tables but your slaves, who are frequently styled Dogs and Beasts have not equal privilege. They are scarce permitted to pick up the crumbs which fall from their masters' tables."[10] Despite evangelist Whitefield's aversion to the treatment of black people, he owned eight of these Christian slaves by 1747; and after 1750 he purchased many more.

Another example of the meliorative approach which had the end effect of reinforcing slavery was Samuel Davis, the foremost Presbyterian preacher to Christian slaves during the eighteenth century. He claimed that more than a thousand slaves attended churches under his care.[11] Davis claimed concern for their spiritual well being but demonstrated no interest in their liberation from human bondage. Davis did encourage the education of the slaves. He supplied them with religious books and many were allowed to conduct their own religious services. He also published a little book, *The Duty of Christians,* which was addressed to slave owners. He pointed out that masters should learn from St. Paul who deemed it worthwhile for slaves and servants to labor. Davis informed slaveowners that it was to their actual advantage to Christianize the slaves because Christianity would make black people more faithful, honest and diligent. "A good Christian is never a bad servant, for Christianity teaches obedience."[12] Some masters responded to the book by allowing their slaves to attend church services. But Davis did not make a connection between Christian hope and freedom in history for black people. The truth was that he:

> saw nothing in the institution of slavery that made it inconsistent with the Christian religion. Indeed, he pointed out that it was part of the order of Providence that some should be masters and others servants. Christianity did not destroy the relationship, but only regulated it.[13]

A contrasting position was taken by the Baptist General Committee in Virginia which in 1789 adopted a resolution that Christian slaves in Virginia should be set free. It read:

> Resolved that slavery is a violent deprivation of the rights of nature, and inconsistent with a republican government; and we therefore recommend it to our brethren, to make use of every legal measure to extirpate this horrid evil from the land and pray almighty God that our honorable legislature may have it in their power to proclaim the great jubilee consistant with the principles of good policy.[14]

---

[9] H. Shelton Smith, *In His Image, But. . .* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1972), p. 13.
[10] *Ibid.,* p. 12.
[11] Wesley M. Geweher, *The Great Awakening in Virginia, 1740-1790.* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1930), p. 236.
[12] *Ibid,* p. 236.
[13] *Ibid,* p. 236-237.
[14] *Ibid,* p. 239.

It must be noted, however, that the Baptist General Committee was not asking the Church to participate in the liberation of the Christian slaves. The hope was expressed that "our honorable legislature may have it in their power to proclaim the great jubilee consistent with the principle of good policy." Perhaps the very structure of the Baptist Church indicated that there was not any unanimity among the churches and associations. The Baptist General Committee had no power to impose its beliefs on the churches.

What then was the impact of the Great Awakening on the Christian slaves in Virginia? We must conclude that there were still many masters in Virginia who were opposed to their slaves attending Christian worship. Indeed, "Many masters and overseers (would) well whip and torture the poor creature for going to meeting, even at night when work was done."[15] According to Herbert Klein, the evangelical churches, after a short period of negro conversion and religious instruction, conformed to planter opinion in the nineteenth century. As Klein observes:

> The Great Awakening in Colonial Virginia was the work of only a handful of ministers, and it never penetrated into the tidewater parishes where the overwhelming majority of slaves lived under Anglican masters. Even with the breakdown of the established Church in the 1780's and the tremendous growth of permanent Methodist, Baptist, and Presbyterian Church movements, the slaves in the plantation areas still found themselves under the domination of the Episcopalians. And by the 1840's, the great rendering of the evangelical churches into northern and southern branches assured the planters' domination of church attitudes toward the negro by all sects except the Quakers.[16]

What of the churches in the North? Did they make the connection between hope and liberation?

By coincidence, the year 1628 marked both the founding in New Amsterdam of the first congregation of the Dutch Reformed Church and the first importation of the black slaves into the colony. Did this common history move the Dutch Reformed Church to make the connection between hope and liberation for black people? Professor Gerald Francis De Jong in his article, "The Dutch Reformed Church and Negro Slavery in Colonial America," points out that by the middle of the eighteenth century the negro population in New York was about fifteen percent and in New Jersey it was about seven and one-half percent. Black people in these colonies provided a ready-made labor force for the Dutch farmers who lived in the Hudson Valley and in the Raritan and Minisink Valleys of New Jersey. Professor De Jong suggests that the members of the Dutch Reformed Church were among the greatest users of Negro slaves in New York and New Jersey.[17] On February 6, 1792, Albert Hoogland, one of the trustees of the Jamaica, Long Island, Reformed Church, placed in the newspaper the following advertisement: "For sale cheap, for no fault but only for want of employ, a negro wench, aged thirty, who understands all kinds of country house work, with her two children, a girl aged eighteen

[15] Herbert S. Klein, *op. cit.*, p. 121.
[16] *Ibid*, p. 125.
[17] Gerald Francis de Jong, "The Dutch Reformed Church and Negro Slavery in Colonial America," *Church History*, Vol. 40, No. 1, March 1971, pp. 423-436.

and a boy aged six". [18] In 1770 the Consistory in New York accepted a negro valued at forty-five pounds sterling as payment for back rent for the use of church lands.[19]

Whenever the church fails to understand that the gospel of hope is the good news of liberation, people are in danger of being treated as property. But even in the anguish of dehumanization black people would fight back as they would hope for liberation in a context which seemed hopeless. They would sing:

> All my troubles will soon be over with,
> Soon be over with, soon be over with,
> All my troubles will soon be over with,
> All over this world.[20]

Or again the slave would sing:

> I'm so glad trouble don't last always: . . .
> Hallelujah, I'm go glad trouble don't last always.[21]

According to John Lovell, Jr., the slaves were here singing either about changing the structure of slavery or removing themselves physically from the cruel world which was made for them by the oppressors.

Even free black people living in the north were subject to indignities. In 1786 Richard Allen and Absalom Jones renounced their association with St. George's Methodist Church in Phildadelphia, where Allen had been one of the preachers, after they were ordered to move as they knelt to pray in a section of the church reserved for white people. Their response was to gather other blacks in the congregation and walk out as a body. According to the renowned black historian, Lawrence Jones, the action of Richard Allen and his colleague should be seen as a protest against racism. Jones points out that both in the North and South, black people did not have "equal access to the ministerial services and resources of the church. Blacks were forced to occupy so-called 'Negro-pews' (which were often painted black), or they were assigned to pews in the gallery. Frequently they were not allowed to enter the churches at all, especially in the South, and had to listen to the services at open windows and doors."[22] Jones informs us that it was not unusual for black people to be denied access to the Lord's table by white Christians. There were times when black people had to hold their own services in the basement of the church after white people had gone home.[23] Richard Allen ignited a flame of hope which helped black people to discover that the only context in which they were free to hope for liberation was the community which was despised and rejected by white folk. The Black Church became the only place where black people would hear—*you are somebody.*

---

[18] *Ibid,* p. 425.

[19] *Ibid,* p. 427.

[20] John Lovell, Jr., *Black Song: The Forge and The Flame,* (New York: The MacMillan Company 1972), p. 224.

[21] *Ibid.,* p. 224.

[22] Lawrence Jones, "Black Churches in Historical Perspective," *Christianity and Crisis,* Vol. XXX, No. 18, Nov. 2 & 16, 1970, p. 227.

[23] *Ibid,* p. 227.

Having noted the failures of the white churches to see the radical implications of the gospel, it should also be pointed out that it was this same gospel that somehow transcended the context in which it was held in bondage and signalled release for those who were in bondage. There were white radicals who taught the slaves to read the Bible. There were others who encouraged slaves to run away from their masters. The slaves were often aware of the stance adopted by Methodist and Quaker missionaries. "James Redpath of Malden, Massachusetts, who wrote a book on his travels through the South, said frankly that the slave holding class ought to be abolished and the overseers driven into the sea, as Christ once drove the swine; or chase them into the dismal swamps and black morasses of the South . . . I would slay every man who attempted to resist the liberation of the slave."[24]

We have noted two approaches within the early church in America which illustrates its attitude toward Christian hope. On the one hand we have seen where the Church did not make a connection between hope and liberation and hence could not offer historical liberation to the oppressed. On the other hand there were some lonely voices crying in the wilderness of oppression that there was hope in history for the oppressed. Thus the white church in this country—with the exception of some lonely voices—proclaimed a version of hope which was intended to deny black people historical liberation. We must now ask, what was the black response? Did black people accept this other-worldly hope and postpone liberation to the after life?

According to black sociologist Daniel C. Thompson, white people interpreted Christianity their way, a method which was intended to provide a certain set of social circumstances, and black people who related Christian hope to their African past understood it differently. Professor Thompson says:

> We must begin where it began—during slavery. It was then that our role in history was defined by illiterate black preachers. Many of them had been black priests in Africa who were preaching a very unchristian gospel. They came to this country with no supporting institutions at all, no friends, nothing but work and degradation. They began what I would call the embryonic Church, the invisible Church. Some of the white masters would take the blacks to Church with them in the morning and tell them how they ought to be obedient to the masters. They just loved the letter Paul wrote in the Bible. They loved that. Be obedient to your master, and be loyal to the system; and God will bless you when you get to heaven—oh, maybe a different heaven, maybe a lower heaven, but you'll get there. Blacks listened to this. What this white preacher didn't know was that this black man who listened to him would steal away. Do you know that spiritual about *steal away?* Well, the black slave would steal away after Church to some brush arbor, and would tell other blacks what the preacher should have said.[25]

---

[24] Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism,* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday S. Company, Inc., 1972), p. 42.

[25] Daniel C. Thompson, "Enabling, Strengthening and Radicalising the Black Church," *Experiences, Struggles and Hopes of the Black Church* (ed) James S. Gadsden (Nashville: Tidings, 1975), p. 28. An important contribution for Black Church Studies is also Daniel Thompson's *Sociology of the Black Experience,* Greenwood Press, 1975).

Black people began to transpose white Christianity into an African key and no wonder a new theme emerged. They emerged with a black hope which became a symbol of protest. The black preacher wanted black people to know that they were somebody despite the fact that they lived in a world in which they were treated as property.

Thus hope, as it kindled the flame of liberation, did not result just in revival meetings. Black people began to see that they would have to take their destiny in their own hands if they ever expected to actualize the freedom the gospel promised them. And it was to the Good Book that they looked for the assurance of victory.

> You may talk about yo' King ob Gideon,
> You may talk about yo' man ob Saul,
> Dere's nonlike good ole Joshua,
> At de battle ob Jerico . . .
> Up to de walls of Jerico,
> He marched with spear in hand,
> 'Go blow dem ram horns,'
> Joshua cried, "kase de battle am in my hand
> After the horns and trumpets blow,
> Joshua commanded de chillen to shout,
> An 'de walls come tumblin' down.[26]

The white church interpreted the Bible in a way which sanctioned the status quo. But black people read the Bible in the light of a coming new order. There religion transported them into that new order for which they sang:

> Git on board, little chillen
> Git on board, little chillen
> Git on board, little chillen
> Dere's room for many a mo'.
> De gospel train's a-coming
> I hear it jus at han',
> I hear de wheels moving',
> An rumblin' thro de lan'.
> De fare is cheap, an' all can go,
> De rich an' poor are dere,
> No second class a-board dis train
> No defference in de fare
> Git on board, little chillen,
> Git on board, little chillen,
> Git on board, little chillen,
> Dere's room for many a mo'.[27]

George Liele, one of the earliest black preachers in Georgia, was licensed to preach (c. 1775) after a trial sermon before a group of white ministers. Before escaping in 1783 with the British to Jamaica (where he founded the first Baptist Church in Kingston in 1784),[28] Liele baptized Andrew Byran who was to carry on his work in this country. On January 20, 1788, Bryan became minister of the first African Baptist Church in Savannah. E. Franklin Frazier, in *The Negro Church in America,* suggests

---

[26] John Lovell, Jr., *Black Song: The Forge and the Flame,* p. 229.

[27] James H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues,* p. 94.

[28] See P. Gates, "George Liele", *The Chronicle* (Scottsdale, Pa., Vol. VI, No. 3, 1943), p. 124. See also Gayraud Wilmore, *Black Religion and Radicalism,* pp. 106-107.

that both black and white people attended the Baptist meeting house.[29] It is understandable therefore that patrols were formed to observe the Black Church, and it was not long before Andrew Bryan was charged of using the gospel to foment insurrection.[30] Bryan and fifty other slaves were tortured and floged. White people discovered that black people had made the conection between the Gospel and human liberation. Slave-holding Christans began to get the message: "When the lash was cutting the backs of . . . (people) like Bryan . . . (and his fellow slaves) the thought was burned into their flesh with every blow, that for all their protestations, the slave-holding Christians knew that their system was doomed because it was abhorrent to the God they professed to serve."[31]

The mighty wind of hope blew messages of liberation in slave country. As Denmark Vesey and others planned in 1822 to initiate violent change in Charleston, South Carolina, black Methodists prayed almost every night for divine leading.[32] The black preacher, Nat Turner in Southampton, Virginia, expressed his impatience with slavery and organized his followers in a bloody revolution in 1831.

Though put down, this spirit which insisted on concrete political liberation as the fulfillment of the Christian promises could not be defeated, and it was to re-emerge in the civil rights movement of the twentieth century.

Emancipation only intensified the determination of black people never again to submit to slavery in any form.

> O Freedom, O Freedom,
> O Freedom, over me,
> And before I'll be a slave,
> I'll be buried in my grave,
> And go home to my Lord
> And be free.

Martin Luther King, Jr. was the classic representation of this spirit which combined the most intense eschatological hopes for future blessedness with moral witness and political action in the present. King was in his life and ministry a true son and prophet of the Black Church whose dream for the future was informed not by starry-eyed idealism, but by the conviction that God is faithful to his promises. Concretely this meant for him that one day his children, and the children of all black people would be judged not by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.

II

Now, what does this recital of the history of the oppression of black people in this country have to do with our dialogue with Jurgen Moltmann?

On the one hand it enables us to see why Moltmann's theology has been

---

[29] E. Franklin Fraser, *The Negro Church in America,* (New York: Schocken Books), p. 30.

[30] Gayraud Wilmore, *Black Religion and Radicalism,* p. 107.

[31] *Ibid,* p. 108.

[32] *Ibid,* p. 83.

greeted with enthusiasm by many black theologians. Here, finally, is a white theologian who understands the gospel in a way akin to the insights granted black Christians by virtue of their long history of suffering. Moreover, Moltmann was quick to recognize the contributions of Black Theology. And he has not only spoken out against racism, he has defended the right of black people and other oppressed peoples to pursue their goals with more aggressive means where non-violent efforts have proved to be of no avail.[33] The resulting dialogue has been fruitful for both positions.[34] It is not surprising therefore, that James Cone almost made a Black Theologian of Moltmann, so great was the congruency he saw in their positions. According to Cone, Moltmann reinforces the black insistence that God's promise means "that the church cannot accept the present reality of things as God's intention for humanity." To know God is to know "that the present is incongruous with the expected future." The result is a holy impatience with the world as it is.

> It is not possible to know what the world can and ought to be and still be content with excuses for the destruction of human beings. . . . Why do we behave as if the present is a fixed reality not susceptible of radical change? As long as we look at the resurrection of Christ and the expected 'end', we cannot reconcile ourselves to the things of the present that contradict his presence.[35]

Another exponent of Black Theology whose thought reveals the influence of Moltmann is Major Jones, the author of *Black Awareness: A Theology of Hope.* His was an early response to an application of the themes of the theology of hope to the situation of black people in America. Jones sees black awareness as grounded in a sense of positive self-worth under a God who calls upon black people to deliver themselves from bondage and their oppressors from folly. Only a powerful conviction about their identity, their mission and their future can sustain black people in the fact of inevitable opposition and discouragements.[36]

The congruencies and parallels between the concerns of Moltmann and Black Theology should not, on the other hand, blind us to crucial differences between the two. Nor should we assume that Moltmann's position, taken over lock, stock and barrel, is appropriate to the American scene. Precisely because he is a world theologian who strives to keep his categories universal, Moltmann may prevent us from seeing the theological necessities close at hand.

Latin American theologians were the first to point this out. They claim that Moltmann, in opting for the stance of "critical theory," tries to create for theology a neutral ground over and above all ideological camps.[37]

---

[33] Cf. *Religion, Revolution and the Future,* 40 f., 129 ff.; *The Crucified God,* 330 f.; *The Experiment Hope,* 131-157; *The Church in the Power of the Spirit,* 182 f.; *Die Zukunft der Schöpfung,* 117 ff.

[34] Cf. "Warum Schwarze Theologie?" a special issue of *Evangelische Theologie,* Vol. 34, No. 1 (Jan. 1974).

[35] *A Black Theology of Liberation,* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Co. 1970), p. 245).

[36] *Black Awareness: A Theology of Hope,* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1971), p. 37.

[37] Cf. Juan Luis Segundo, S. J., *The Liberation of Theology,* (Maryknoll, N. Y.: Orbis Books, 1976); Rubem A. Alves, *A Theology of Human Hope,* (New York: Corpus Books, 1969).

According to this scheme of things, the theologian plays the role of the universal critic who, on the basis of the perfection of the Kingdom of God, calls into question every concrete political movement and economic alternative. Such independence and unrelenting criticism is supposedly necessary out of loyalty to the absoluteness of the kingdom of God, lest theology be identified with—and therefore serve the purposes of—any single movement or ideology. (The shadow of the experience of the German Church with Nazism, which sought to co-opt German theology for its own purposes, undoubtedly lies behind Moltmann's unwillingness to commit theology to the role of handmaid for any political cause and his insistence on a consistently critical stance.) As Jose Miguez Bonino insists, however, far from being genuinely universal, this critical stance is in the pattern of the European Enlightenment and results in an "idealism" that floats above the real world of concrete political and economic options, an idealism that avoids a commitment that puts its shoulder to the wheel of those alternatives that are most consistent with the Gospel. "There is no divine politics or economics," says Miguez Bonino, "but this means that we must resolutely use the best *human* politics and economics at our disposal."[38] God does not dwell at a critical distance either above the world or in an indefinite future; he works in and through what is available in the world and calls upon us to meet him there.

A final difficulty that is inherent from a black standpoint in a theology that locates God's being in the future is that it robs the present of the assurance of divine reality in our midst. From Moltmann's perspective, the distinction between present and future must be maintained in order that God's being (as future) not be compromised by identification with the present order. Only in this way can he be the radical alternative to this age. Black piety solves this problem, however, not by appeal to what—in the black milieu—seem unnatural and rationalistic distinctions between present and future. The Black Church protects the sovereignty of God by its understanding of the Spirit. The Spirit is the presence of God experienced as a palpable reality. The Spirit cannot be defined, therefore, simply as the "living remembrance" of the crucified and risen Christ coupled with a lively hope for the Kingdom.[39] Black people find it difficult to become enthusiastic about the "delayed gratification" that seems endemic to any calvinistic position. It is the experience of God here and now that sustains them. Their confidence in the promises of future victory in God's Kingdom is based on their experience of his sovereignty as overwhelming spiritual power now. They *know* he will win the battle. In this confidence they do battle with the oppressive powers of this world.

Therefore, on the North American scene it is not enough to speak from a universal theological perspective and say that Jesus identifies with the oppressed, the *ochlos,* that great "mass without guidance and direction, the multitude without political and spiritual meaning, ... who have no

---

[38] Miguez Bonino, *Doing Theology in a Revolutionary Situation* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), p. 149.

[39] Jürgen Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* (New York: Harper and Row), p. 197.

firm community, ... who are unorganized and lack a collective identity."[40] This all sounds very good until one realizes that it can allow theology to remain in generalities. The pertinent fact that North American theologians must recognize if we are not to give up the concreteness of the Incarnation in our context, is that the disinherited peoples with whom Jesus identifies, are not nameless, faceless and countryless. These people are *black,* their faces are *black,* their history is *black*! For American theologians to operate in ignorance of this fact, or indifference to it, while at the same time claiming to present universal Christian truth, would be in contradiction to the reality of the Incarnation. We must not be afraid to say that God takes on specificity, in our own cultural situation as well as in the first century.

Does this mean that we lose all ability to criticize black people or black movements? By no means. But this criticism is grounded in solidarity with them and with their cause as the point at which God is at work in our particular corner of the globe making for justice and righteousness. Where he is, we must be.

Therefore, I conclude that Moltmann is of inestimable assistance in helping us to clarify the Biblical underpinnings and theological principles that ought to inform our theologizing today. But we would do well to go beyond his limitation of theology to the realm of universal critical principles and see that for the sake of *all* people in this land God has made the black condition his own. It is here among black people that we can say most assuredly his Spirit is at work. And the Black Church is the open door through which all who enter can learn what it is to hope, and can discover for themselves how hope liberates.

---

[40]Jürgen Moltmann, *The Passion for Life* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), p. 102.