

## Religious Humanism: Its Problems and Prospects in Black Religion and Culture

As my contribution to this volume, I would have preferred to narrow my concern to a description of the controlling categories and inner logic of religious humanism,<sup>1</sup> thus providing the reader with a neatly packaged model to compare and contrast with competing perspectives in black theology and religion.<sup>2</sup> However, because of the actual circumstance and rank of religious humanism in black religion, I have found it necessary to adopt an approach that is decidedly more apologetic.

A quick survey of research patterns in black religion reveals the reason. Religious humanism is a neglected aspect of black culture. In discussions of black religion, humanism of all varieties is virtually ignored, and when it is unexpectedly remembered, it suffers the unfortunate fate of being misinterpreted and misunderstood. Its' situation parallels the predicament of the hero in Ralph Ellison's, *The Invisible Man*, who though flesh and blood, living and breathing, is treated as if he did not exist.

Researchers in black religion characteristically narrow their focus to the history of the black church and its monolithic theological perspective of Christian theism. Because the black church is the major institutional expression of black religion, one can readily acknowledge that its thought and practice should receive preeminent attention. Having said this, however, it must also be allowed that the concern to uncover the rich past of the majority position should not obscure the full content and scope of black religion. Nor should the effort to honor the black church and its particular theological tradition obliterate the total spectrum of competing species of black religion, especially the nontheistic perspective. Unfortunately, this has occurred.

I am confident that future research will confirm that there are two religious traditions in black culture: a mainstream tradition of Christian and non-Christian theism and a minority tradition of humanism or

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<sup>1</sup>In this essay I have not attempted to describe the theological Weltanschauung of religious humanism, having outlined this elsewhere (Theism and Religious Humanism: The Chasm Narrows," *The Christian Century*, 92:18, May 21, 1975). My focus here is narrowed to an analysis of religious humanism as expressed in the Afro-American experience.

<sup>2</sup>The following pairs will be used synonymously: black humanism and black religious humanism; black theism and black Christian theism; humanism and non-theism; Afro-American and black; humanism and religious humanism.

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nontheism. There is unobscure evidence of a tradition of religious humanism in the black past that is opposed to Christian theism and the biblical perspective. Unable to fit the fact of black oppression and slavery into normative Christian categories and lacking confidence in God's love and concern for blacks, these ebony humanists, like Prometheus and Job's wife, refused to honor or worship the divine.

Evidence internal to black Christian theism, its major antagonist, confirms the presence of this "heretical" viewpoint. The testimony of Daniel Alexander Payne, a bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, is worth noting in this regard.

The slaves are sensible of the oppression exercised by their masters; and they see these masters on the Lord's day worshipping in his holy Sanctuary. They hear their masters praying in their families, and they know that oppression and slavery are inconsistent with the Christian religion; therefore they scoff at religion itself—mock their masters, and distrust both the goodness and justice of God. Yes, I have known them even to question his existence. I speak not of what others have told me, but of what *I have both seen and heard from the slaves themselves*. I have heard the mistress ring the bell for family prayer, and I have seen the servants immediately begin to sneer and laugh; and have heard them declare they would not go into prayers; adding if I go she will not only just read, "Servants obey your masters;" but she will not read "break every yoke, and let the oppressed go free." I have seen colored men at the church door, *scoffing at the ministers*, while they were preaching, and saying you had better go home, and set your slaves free. A few nights ago . . . a runaway slave came to the house where I live for safety and succor. I asked him if he were a Christian; "no sir" said he, "white men treat us so bad in Mississippi that we can't be Christians."<sup>3</sup>

In the very limited cases where the presence of this nontheistic tradition is acknowledged, it is not labeled "religious," nor is it recognized as a legitimate part of the family of black religion. This is not primarily the consequence of its status as a numerical minority in black culture; rather, humanism itself is suspect as something alien to the black psyche. Both its opponent and champion can agree that religious humanism has not established itself as an indispensable perspective in black religion, the description of which is required for an accurate and adequate understanding of Afro-American religion. Outside of this volume, one is hard pressed to uncover a panoramic analysis of black religion which self-consciously includes the humanist perspective as one of the competing options in black religion. Religious humanism, in sum, has little standing as an accredited representative of the black religious experience. Hence, the necessity and purpose of this essay: to inaugurate the discussion that will hopefully establish religious humanism as an authentic expression of black religion and culture.

#### Black Religious Humanism: The Invisible Religion

Though there can be little question about the actual presence of nontheism in the black past, it is exceedingly difficult to determine the actual extent of this radical religious perspective. In addition to the

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<sup>3</sup>"Document: Bishop Daniel Alexander Payne's Protestation of American Slavery," *Journal of Negro History*, 52 (1967): p. 63. (Emphasis in the original).

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testimony of Bishop Payne, researchers, such as Sterling Brown<sup>4</sup> and John Lovell,<sup>5</sup> call our attention to a musical/literary genre, the slave seculars, that also confirms a nontheistic tradition in black religion. The seculars, often called devil songs, ran counter to the spirituals, the musical embodiment of the black church and its theistic thoughtforms. Rejecting the biblical promises and the God-centered theology that the spirituals have etched in our collective memory, the seculars ridiculed the God their fellow slaves worshipped and bombasted the eschatological and soteriological "good news" of the spirituals.

In Lovell's monumental work on the spirituals, it is important to be reminded of the connection he establishes between the spirituals and the seculars. Though he is concerned to make the spirituals, as it were, the womb for fundamental features of black literature and culture, he does not trace the origin of the seculars back to the spirituals. Rather the devil songs and the spirituals are depicted as two different traditions existing side by side.

Other materials suggest a two-way movement between the spirituals and other varieties of slave music that exaggerates the difficulty in plotting the exact boundaries and religious consistency of each. In the first published collection of slave songs we find several revealing statements about the rich variety of musical types and their continuing intercourse.

We must look among their non-religious songs for the purest specimens of Negro minstrelsy. It is remarkable that they have themselves transferred the best of these to the uses of their churches—I suppose on Mr. Wesley's principle that 'it is not right the Devil should have all the good tunes.' Their leaders and preachers have not found this charge difficult to effect; or at least they have taken so little pains about it that one often detects the profane *cropping out*, and revealing the origin of their most solemn 'hymns,' in spite of the best intentions of the poet and artist.<sup>6</sup>

The collectors of this first volume of spirituals also inform us that the spirituals, the theistic incarnation of the slave experience, comprise only part of the black experience that was fashioned into song.

Fiddle-sings, 'devil-songs,' 'corn-songs,' 'jig-tunes,' and what not are common . . . We have succeeded in obtaining only a very few songs of this character. Our intercourse with the colored people has been chiefly through the work of the Freedmen's Commission, which deals with the serious and earnest side of the negro character.<sup>7</sup>

This last confession points to the most formidable obstacle to substantiate the actual extent of religious humanism in black culture: the biased pattern of selectivity used to compile and transmit the black religious heritage. We must not forget the fact that the individuals who

<sup>4</sup> Sterling Brown, "Negro Folk Expression: Spirituals, Seculars, Ballads and Work Songs" in August Meier and Elliott Rudwick (eds.), *The Making of Black America* (New York: Atheneum, 1969).

<sup>5</sup> John Lovell, "The Social Implications of the Negro Spiritual," in Bernard Katz (ed.), *The Social Implications of Early Negro Music in the United States* (New York: Arno Press, 1969).

<sup>6</sup> Preface, *Slave Songs of the United States*: Francis Allen, Charles Pickard Ware and Lucy McKim Garrison, in B. Katz, *The Social Implications of Early Negro Music in the United States*, p. xxxii.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. xxxiii.

first recorded the spirituals were white, and most of them were ministers. It is important to recognize the influence of these factors in determining both the genre and the number of songs recorded.

As Bernard Katz perceptively concludes:

The vast majority of the songs that were rescued from oblivion were the songs of the Sabbath—of church worship. The songs of the rest of the week would have to creep out of hiding during a time when fewer men of the cloth were around . . . Thus it is very possible that a great body of songs of secular social comment, too difficult to disguise for white ears, stayed underground . . . and would surface later in the blues and other forms. . . .<sup>8</sup>

These materials highlight the risk involved in extrapolating from the number of extant seculars to the actual range and importance of the theological perspective they represent. Moreover, if one does extrapolate from the popularity of the blues, the acknowledged descendant of the seculars, then the cultural and theological matrix of religious humanism may be a more extensive and significant entity than is suggested by the paucity of seculars in the collection of black songs.<sup>9</sup>

For all of its deficiencies, the account of the Reverend Charles C. Jones is also significant for unearthing the history of black religious humanism. That Jones, in this account, is describing the different belief patterns the Christian missionary will encounter laboring among the slaves strongly suggests that we are dealing with a radical criticism of traditional theism that is not numerically insignificant.

He discovers deism, skepticism, universalism . . . the various perversions of the Gospel, and all the strong objections which he may perhaps have considered peculiar only to the cultivated minds, the ripe scholarship and profound intelligence of *critics* and *philosophers*.<sup>10</sup>

Wilmore perceptively identifies another point that bears upon the history of humanism in black religion. He notes that figures like Edward W. Blyden enjoyed greater theological affinity with the radical left wing of New England Protestantism—the Channings, Theodore Parkers, and Emersons—who were more “dependable as friends of the Black man than the revival and camp-meeting preachers or the pious clerics of the main line denominations.”<sup>11</sup>

Several points in Wilmore’s analysis are revealing. He has identified members of Unitarianism, the radical theological movement of that era and which today is basically non-Christian and enthusiastically humanistic in its theological affirmations. What Wilmore accents as the basis for the theological congeniality is also revealing—their actions were more

<sup>8</sup>B. Katz, “Introduction,” *The Social Implications of Early Negro Music in the United States*, p. xii.

<sup>9</sup>The problem of ascertaining the actual latitude of black religious humanism parallels the determination of the true dimensions of insurrectionary activity among the slaves. Recent research leads one to conclude that the number of slave revolts was considerably more numerous than the actual records indicate.

<sup>10</sup>Charles C. Jones, *The Religious Instruction of Negroes in the United States* (Savannah: T. Purse Co., 1842), p. 127.

<sup>11</sup>Gayraud S. Wilmore, *Black Religion and Black Radicalism* (New York: Doubleday & Co., 1972), p. 161.

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pointedly focused towards the liberation of blacks. What his analysis here suggests is that the radical theological left was a more dependable friend of black Americans than the orthodox theological tradition. Does it crucify the imagination to infer that slaves, convinced of the biblical and common sense maxim—"By their fruits shall you know them—" would not automatically reject a radical theological position that manifested itself concretely in the practice of liberation?

### The Invisibility of the Black Humanism: Causal Factors

All that has been discussed thus far has attempted to make us aware of a competing, albeit minority, tradition in black religion. Having said all of this, however, the virtual invisibility of religious humanism in black religion becomes all the more perplexing, and the reasons both for its status as a numerical and a disvalued minority in black culture must be identified. In this connection a comprehensive treatment would analyze those factors which relate to the status of religious humanism as an authentic (a) religious and (b) Afro-American perspective, and those which accent the impact of (c) the context of blacks as an oppressed group in America and (d) the particular value and cultural orientation of Afro-Americans. Because of restraints of space and time only a select few of these factors can be discussed here.

To acknowledge the presence of black religious humanism as a minority tradition in black religion is to affirm that it has been constantly over-shadowed by the larger entrenched theism that continues in the black church. Accordingly, to explain the virtual invisibility of black religious humanism, we must focus on several features of institutionalized black theism and decipher their impact. First, we must accent the fact that religious humanism exists as a philosophical/theological *perspective* and not as an on-going *institution* like its rival, the black church. To state the obvious, and intellectual movement that lacks an institutional base has a limited life span.

Add to this the fact that humanism has been viewed as a hostile adversary, intent on exterminating religion in general and black Christian theism in particular, and it becomes clear why the black church would not be anxious to nurture a potential serpent in its own household.

If we highlight the connection between socio-economic-political context and one's theological/ethical outlook, we can identify another factor that accounts for religious humanism's status as a *numerical* minority. This, however, does not explain its position as a disvalued minority in black religion.

There are several different ways of connecting the cultural context and the minority status of religious humanism. Perhaps the most important and most controversial is the question: Is the historic oppression of blacks in America more conducive to the development of certain forms of theism than humanism? Put in other terms, is there a specific complex of socio-economic and political conditions that are correlated statistically with the respective world view of humanism and theism?

I must say at the outset that there are inadequate research data to

answer these questions confidently. However, I would hazard the opinion that humanism emerges most frequently in a situation that is antithetical to that which defines oppression and especially slavery. That is to say, a context of oppression is most generally connected with conceptual framework of theism. Accordingly, the actual historic situation of blacks in America is more likely to spawn certain types of theism than humanism.

Several factors lead me to advance this tentative hypothesis. The actual evolution of humanism seems to be associated with a firmly developed urbanized economy in contrast to an agricultural or pastoral one. Humanism, moreover, characteristically draws its adherents from the middle and upper socio-economic strata rather than those near the bottom of the economic ladder.

Because humanism affirms radical freedom/autonomy as the essence of human reality, humanism is most prominent in those cultures where individuals exercise in fact considerable control over their environment and history. The humanist understanding of wo/man comes into being, it appears, as the consequence of this type of experience and the material situation it presupposes.

The evolution of humanism in Greek culture, under the aegis of the Sophists, seems to confirm this tentative hypothesis. Gayraud Wilmore's invaluable treatment of the black church and its contribution to the radical wing of black thought and practice also supports this tentative conclusion about the socio-economic context for the evolution of black humanism. Wilmore identifies a "dechristianizing period" when the religious impulse self-consciously locates itself outside the circle of black Christian faith. Is it accidental that he identifies this secular nontheistic tradition with the intellectual, upper level groups of blacks? Is it accidental that a similar socio-economic context seems to be the base for those black writers associated with *The Messenger* and its radical critique of the black church?

At this juncture, it is important to make explicit the precise connection between humanism and socio-economic context that is being advanced. I am not arguing for either a strict relation of necessary or sufficient condition. Rather I am illuminating an empirical generalization<sup>12</sup> about the actual development of humanism that can serve as a hypothesis for examining the relation between cultural context and faith content. What I see is a clear-cut movement towards the humanistic pole of the religious spectrum<sup>13</sup> as individuals and groups move away from or release themselves from the scourges of oppression. Perhaps, a more focused analysis of the contrast between the spirituals and the blues will clarify the point.

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<sup>12</sup>CF. the similar claim of Benjamin Mays. "The other worldly idea of God . . . finds fertile soil among the people who fare worst in this world; and it grows dimmer and dimmer as the social and economic conditions improve." *The Negro's God as Reflected in His Literature* (New York: Atheneum, 1969), p. 28.

<sup>13</sup>This is not to affirm an abandonment of theism per se but a movement towards those forms of theism which are closest to the anthropological position of humanism.

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According to most interpreters, the blues and the spirituals reflect distinct theological perspectives and socio-economic contexts. James Cone's analysis of their contrasting outlook and existential situation provides a helpful specimen for our discussion.

The blues, also labeled "secular spirituals," gravitated to the nontheistic theological pole. Whereas the spirituals gird the black slaves to endure oppression with the belief that the God of Israel would eventually set them free, the theology of the blues rejects a God-centered perspective as the answer to the enigma of black suffering, choosing instead to address black oppression as if God, Jesus Christ, and the black church were all irrelevant.

Most interpreters also conclude that the blues surface in a less circumscribed socio-economic context.

The spirituals are *slave* songs, and they deal with historical realities that are pre-Civil War. . . . The blues . . . are essentially post Civil War in consciousness. They reflect experiences that issued from Emancipation, the Reconstruction Period, and segregation laws. 'The blues was conceived,' writes Leroi Jones, 'by Freed-men and ex-slaves. . . .' Historically and theologically, the blues express conditions associated with the 'burden of freedom.'<sup>14</sup>

Having noted this contrast, the general question I raise here is whether this nontheistic faith content is a reflexion of a less oppressive socio-economic environment? In like manner, the growing unchurched population among blacks triggers the same inquiry.

In discussing the connection between socio-economic context and conceptual content, mention must also be made of the impact of the value structure of black culture. Is it a reflection of its situation of oppression that black culture has not been a fertile environment for the cultivation of those intellectual and cultural products, such as philosophy and secularism, that have been historically associated with the development of a self-confident humanist perspective? Though religion has been blessed in black culture, philosophy has been denied a status comparable to its position in the larger culture. Though there are a heady number of black theologians, the number of black philosophers is, by contrast, miniscule.

### Methodological and Semantic Obstacles

Other factors affecting the visibility of religious humanism as an authentic expression of black religion relate to specific methodological and semantic practices. The interpretive grids of most current researchers are ineffective instruments for illuminating the totality of the phenomenon of black religion, especially the nontheistic component. Hence, to materialize religious humanism from its spectral status, it is necessary to challenge the semantic apparatus and methodological presuppositions that control current research in black religion.

As a corrective I would advance several interpretive principles. With these principles we can accelerate the resurrection of this disvalued

<sup>14</sup>James Cone, *The Spiritual & the Blues* (New York: Seabury Press. 1972), p. 112.

tradition for analysis and critical appraisal; without them black religious humanism will remain invisible, unloved, unappreciated.

*Afro-American religion must be approached as a multi-faceted phenomenon that comprises the full spectrum of theistic and nontheistic options.*

What this principle excludes is a reductionist approach that seeks to shrink black religion to a monolithic pattern. In that sense, the principle demands that we examine black religion as a pluralistic phenomenon. This means in methodological terms that the researcher should approach the data of black religion with the view in mind of identifying discrete philosophical and theological types as background for determining which major points of the religious spectrum are actually represented in black religion.

Semantically speaking, the principle dictates that we abandon the common, but question-begging, usage that collapses religion into theism, a particular—though admittedly the most prominent—sub-class of religion.

I must make the obvious point. If religion and theism are equated, nontheism, by definition, is excluded as a religious perspective. Add to this the common tendency, especially in the context of monotheism, to equate non-theism and atheism, and the possibility of a research apparatus that illuminates religious humanist is exceedingly remote. Nontheistic positions will either be ignored or mistakingly assimilated into the general theistic camp. The consequence is the same in either case: black religion becomes a single tradition of theism for research purposes.

Much more is at stake than a recommendation for an accurate terminology. It should be clear to all that the case for black humanism both as an authentic religious perspective and a valid expression of the black religious tradition stands or falls on this seemingly innocuous issue about the meaning of theism and religion. In deciding about the parameters of black religion, one is in fact answering the fundamental question of the essence of religion itself, in particular the logical and phenomenological connection between it and theism.

If the advocate of black religious humanism does not challenge the equation of theism and religion, s/he also provides grounds for the claim that religious humanism is not authentically black. This line of argumentation is unavoidable once the following descriptions of black consciousness are advanced within a semantic Framework where religion and theism are synonymous.

We black people are a religious people. From the earliest time we have acknowledged a Supreme Being. With the fullness of our physical bodies and emotions we have unabashedly worshipped Him with shouts of joy and tears of pain and anguish. We neither believe that God is dead, white, nor a captive to some rationalistic and dogmatic formulation of the Christian faith which relates Him exclusively to the canons of the Old and New Testaments, and accommodate Him to the reigning spirits of a socio-technical age. . . .<sup>15</sup>

<sup>15</sup>“Message to the Churches from Oakland,” the National Committee of Black Churchmen, 1969.



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The question of existence in reference to God is not the real issue for blacks. This does not preclude the fact that many blacks are nonbelievers. This is often true . . . of many older black intellectuals who are humanistically oriented and are greatly influenced by the position of Auguste Comte. . . . But the return to religion, often as blind faith in middle life, together with the spiritual strivings of their children, leads me to believe that religion is native to most blacks. Religion in some form or other appears to be an Africanism.<sup>16</sup>

Several points here merit special comment. Unless religion and theism are equated, these statements are meaningless. Moreover, it should also be noted that here theism is not simply advanced as the majority viewpoint but rather as the normative perspective and the yardstick by which one identifies the authentic black consciousness. Indeed, by defining black religion exclusively in theistic terms and thus failing to make an allowance for nontheistic perspectives, these statements come close to making the acceptance of theism a defining characteristic of being black.

It is true of course that researchers in this area espouse a pluralistic interpretation of black religion. Indeed the major research trend in black religion has been to attack monolithic and stereotyped interpretations of the black religious experience and its institutional expressions. Received traditions of the black church as an Uncle Tom institution, with a sugar tit strategy, have been countered by new interpretations of the black church as a formidable agency of protest and liberation at all levels of the slave's activity. Research such as John Lovell's treatment of the slave spirituals as protest songs with a this-wordly outlook, parallel this development. However, one searches in vain for the same approach to the humanist dimension of the Afro-American heritage. There is still monumental resistance to attack a remaining shibboleth: black religion as exclusively theistic.

Because of what is at stake, it is important at this juncture to articulate the inner logic of a pluralistic approach as a means of testing the actual, in contrast to the espoused, theory of researchers. Pluralism, in this context, involves, first, the recognition of at least two discrete perspectives in black religion; neither can be reduced to the other; and each is regarded as co-valuable in the sense that if either is omitted, the phenomenon under discussion will be incomplete or inadequate.

It is important to identify another feature of an authentic pluralistic interpretation: The numerical distinction between the majority and minority viewpoints cannot be the basis for establishing a qualitative difference between them. Concretely, the fact that theistic worshippers are numerically superior cannot by itself substantiate their status as the normative or authentic black perspective. If this principle is not allowed, black theists sabotage their own efforts to challenge those interpretations of traditional Christianity that are alleged to be a grotesque understanding of the gospel.

Again, the problem goes beyond the mere recognition of a nontheistic tradition in the black past; rather the basic issue is that of interpreting this

<sup>16</sup>J. Deotis Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation: A Black Theology* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1971), pp. 82-3.

point of view as both religious and a valid expression of the black religious experience.

Cecil Cone's recent volume, *The Identity Crisis in Black Theology*, illustrates the approach that is challenged here. His thesis is that black theology is in an identity crisis because it has failed to identify the essence of black religion and to make this the exclusive point of departure and source material for theological construction and analysis.

Cecil Cone defines black religion accordingly: "The divine and the divine alone occupies the position of ultimacy in black religion. Indeed, an encounter with the divine is what constitutes the core or essence of that religion. Such an encounter is known as the black religious experience."<sup>17</sup> This God-encounter, the resulting conversion experience, and the variety of responses to the latter define black religion for Cecil Cone.

Let it be clear at the outset that the black humanist does not question the accuracy of Cone's account as a description of black *theism*. Indeed, the issue would be resolved for the humanist if theism were inserted in each case where Cecil Cone speaks inaccurately of religion. What the humanist resists is the arrogant assumption that the black religious experience is somehow exhausted by the theistic experience.

We cannot escape the fact that black religion is reduced to a form of theism in Cone's definition. The rigidity of this semantic apparatus forces him to treat those materials which seem to fall outside the theistic tradition in a most dubious fashion.

Citing the slave seculars and the passage from Bishop Daniel A. Payne discussed above, Cone clearly acknowledges the existence of blacks who were unafraid to question God's intrinsic goodness and, like Prometheus, were willing to rebel on moral grounds. But how does Cone respond to this theological tradition that rejects the almighty sovereign God and the black church?

From one vantage point his response is simply to note the presence of this minority theological view without relating it to his definition of black religion or discussing it further. According to another interpretation, Cone assimilates the God-defying perspective into the theistic religious experience! The radical question about God's justice and/or existence becomes the *pre-conversionist* mentality of the black *theist* facing the absurdity of the slave condition. In this interpretation the slave experience, with its excruciating doubt and despair about God's rule over the world, creates the dark night of the soul. This, however, is erased by the slave's Job-like encounter with the divine. The transformation is complete. The pressure of Cone's equation of religion and theism has magically transmuted the humanist into a converted theist!

#### The Cultural Matrix of Afro-American Religious Humanism

To resurrect black religious humanism requires a second interpretive principle that current researchers in black religion do not sufficiently

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<sup>17</sup>Cecil Cone, *The Identity Crisis in Black Theology* (Nashville: African Methodist Episcopal Church, 1975), p. 143-44.

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honor: *The actual origin as well as the current position of black religion humanism must be seen as a response to perceived inadequacies of black Christian theism, its theological rival.*

Implicit in this principle is the hypothesis that black humanism emerges as part of a debate that is internal to black life and thought. It is not a spinoff of the enlightenment, the scientific revolution or, as Deotis Roberts has suggested, a borrowing from Comte.

Rather, as Benjamin Mays, an eminent representative of black Christian theism, has correctly perceived, black incredulity about the divine, as well as agnosticism and atheism "do not develop as the results of the findings of modern science, nor from the observations that nature is cruel and indifferent; but primarily because in the social situation, [the black American] finds himself hampered and restricted. . . . Heretical ideas of God develop because in the social situation the 'breaks' seem to be against the Negro and the black thinkers are unable to harmonize this fact with the God pictured by Christianity."<sup>18</sup>

Whether we encounter black humanism during the slave period or more recent eras of oppression, it appears as a critic of black Christian theism, questioning the latter's capacity to make sense of the history of black oppression and to accommodate the prerequisites of a viable theology of liberation. Substantiating this conclusion about the indigenous origin of black humanism is the telling statement of the heroine in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*.

. . . The white man's God.—And his great love for all people regardless of race! What idiotic nonsense she had allowed herself to believe. How could she, how could anyone, have been so deluded? How could ten million black folk credit it when daily before their eyes was enacted its contradiction?<sup>19</sup>

. . . And this, Helga decided, was what ailed the whole Negro race in America, this fatuous belief in the white man's God, this childlike trust in full compensation for all woes and privations in 'Kingdom' come. . . . How the white man's God must laugh at the great joke He had played on them, bound them at salvery, then to poverty and insult, and made them bear it unresistingly, uncomplainingly almost, by sweet promises of mansions in the sky, by and by.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>18</sup>Mays, *op. cit.*, pp. 281-19. Mays correctly identifies the cultural matrix of black religious humanism, but future research, no doubt, will challenge his claim about the historical location of black humanism. "Prior to 1914, God is neither doubted nor is His existence denied. Doubt, lack of faith, and denial are definitely post-War developments. In other words, from 1760 to 1914 God's existence is not denied." *Op. cit.*, p. 252. The presence of the slave seculars and Payne's account of the God-defying slaves both suggest that the last word has not yet been said about the presence of humanism in ante-bellum black thought.

<sup>19</sup>Nella Larsen, *Quicksand* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1928), p. 292. Though I contend that the fact of black suffering forces the question: Is God a White Racist? I do not conclude that the mere fact of black suffering—no matter how severe—permits us to answer the question. In this sense, Helga's self-confident assertion of a logical contradiction is inaccurate.

<sup>20</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 297. This accent on the seeming disharmony between traditional categories of black Christian theism and the existential situation of black oppression is a characteristic feature of the black humanist theology. It is still true today that the black humanist fails to perceive the inner consistency between the claim that God is the God of the oppressed and the continued oppression of blacks and other minorities. The more "The God of the Oppressed" theme is pressed, the more inexplicable becomes the point of departure for a black theology of liberation: the designation of the black situation as oppressive. From the

Any assessment of the relation between black humanism and traditional Western humanism must incorporate this understanding of the genesis of Afro-American nontheism. Though black humanists and those humanists who trace their lineage to the enlightenment or the scientific revolution are akin in attacking the superstructure of theism, their criticisms develop from radically different socio-economic contexts. Accordingly, the question of God is posed in quite different ways.

Scientific humanism poses the problem of the divine in terms of the coherence between the natural world and the supernatural realm. This query leads often to the denial of the divine reality, i.e., a form of atheism. Black humanists, contrastly, ask the question: *An Deus sit?* because of the crimes of human history, and this emerges frequently in the form: Is God a white racist?, a question that is absent from scientific humanism.

The radical theological questions that black humanism raises grow out of the context of black oppression. They cannot be reduced to the protests of a brainwashed black who has been seduced by white Western secularism. They are not imported, as it were, from the outside. Thus, it would appear that those who attempt to connect black humanism with non-black sources, e.g., Comte, are still handcuffed by the equation of theism and religion. Having equated the two, and having affirmed that blacks are a spiritual people, i.e., faithful theists, nontheism by definition would have to come from outside the black community.

#### A Liberation Theology: The Black Humanist Perspective

To understand black humanism of the past and to clarify its present agenda and interaction with the black church, it is necessary to identify yet another interpretive principle that is suggested by Helga's vehement protest. *Black Humanism must be interpreted as a specific strategy for liberation that issues in a particular theology/philosophy of liberation.* For the black humanist, this dictates a specific theological method which becomes part of the critical apparatus for assessing black Christian theism.

Before we outline this theological method, the intended interaction of black humanism with the black church must be made clear. The agenda of black religious humanism does not call for the destruction of the black church. Neither does it involve an absolute disapproval of the practice of the black church, past or present. As with its interpretive approach to black religion, black humanism endorses a pluralistic program for the mechanics of liberation. Though black humanism regards the black church as a "sleeping giant" in terms of its potential as a liberating force,

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humanist perspective, the crucial issue for black Christian theology is not that of original *sin*, but the original *oppression* that triggers the necessity of black liberation. To be extricated from this dilemma, the black Christian theologian will have to move towards a more radical eschatological doctrine or adopt a view of human reality that will relieve God of the responsibility for the crimes of human history. The former will push the black Christian theologian perilously close to a "pie-in-the-sky-eschatology," a point of view that has been denounced. The latter cannot be accomplished without endorsing the radical view of human freedom/autonomy that is the acknowledged core of the humanist anthropology.

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it also recognizes that the history of the black church is checkered relative to liberation and further that the black church has never successfully corralled the majority of blacks to be its congregation. For these reasons "black humanism thinks it unwise for the fate of black liberation to depend upon whether the black church awakens from its slumber or continues to snore, however piously and rhythmically. . . . The emergence of black humanism as a formidable opponent may successfully prod the black church, as other secular movements have done, 'to be about its father's (and mother's) work.'"<sup>21</sup>

In this sense black humanism should not be looked upon as a replacement for the black church but rather as its necessary complement. Black humanism seeks its constituency from the rapidly growing group of unchurched blacks, many of whom find the theology of the black church unpalatable and an untrustworthy account of their religious history. This large unchurched group, the black humanist concludes, cannot be ignored if black liberation is to succeed.

Though the black humanist seeks a cooperative and complementary relationship with the black church in the struggle for liberation, s/he nonetheless cannot avoid challenging it and its theistic theology at several significant points. This must be done to legitimate black religious humanism. But more importantly, black humanism is forced into a critical or gad fly posture because of its primary concern to advance the cause of black liberation. All of this becomes clear, if we analyze Helga's protest, cited above, as a miniature theology of liberation from a black humanist perspective.

In ridiculing the doctrine of God and eschatology, Helga is voicing a common protest of black humanists as well as more recent theologians and philosophers of liberation. The oppressed are oppressed, in fundamental part, because of the beliefs they hold. They adopt or indoctrinated to accept a belief system that stifles their motivation to attack the institutions and groups that oppress them.

This understanding of oppression is not restricted to humanism; leading black theists have advanced the identical conclusion. The basic argument of Benjamin Mays' *The Negro's God*, claims that blacks conform or rebel against their oppressive situation by virtue of the concept of God they endorse. Certain beliefs about ultimate reality helps blacks to survive, "to endure hardship, suffer pain and withstand maladjustment, but . . . do not necessarily motivate them to strive to eliminate the source of the ills they suffer."<sup>22</sup>

Mays' autobiographical account is instructive here, particularly in light of the fact that he denounces, in the same work, the stereotyped view of the black religion as an opiate and otherworldly.

Long before I knew what it was all about, and since I learned to know, I heard the Pastor of the church of my youth plead with the members of his congregation not to try to avenge the wrongs they suffered, but to take their burdens to the Lord in prayer.

<sup>21</sup>William R. Jones, "Toward a Humanist Framework for Black Theology," included in *Black Theology II*, ed. William R. Jones and Calvin E. Bruce, Bucknell Press, 1977.

<sup>22</sup>Mays, *op. cit.*, pp. 23-24.

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Especially did he do this when the racial situation was tense or when Negroes went to him for advice concerning some wrong inflicted upon them by their oppressors. During these troublesome days, the drowning of Pharaoh and his host in the Red Sea, the deliverance of Daniel from the Lion's Den, and the protection given the Hebrew children in the Fiery Furnace were all pictured in dramatic fashion to show that God in due time would take things in hand. Almost invariably after assuring them that God would fix things up, he ended his sermon by assuring them that God would reward them in Heaven for their patience and long-suffering on the earth. Members of the congregation screamed, shouted, and thanked God. The pent up emotions denied normal expression in every day life found an outlet. They felt relieved and uplifted. They had been baptized with the "Holy Ghost." They had their faith in God renewed and they could stand it until the second Sunday in the next month when the experience of the previous second Sunday was duplicated. Being socially proscribed, economically impotent, and politically brow-beaten, they sang, prayed, and shouted their troubles away. This idea of God had telling effects upon the Negroes in my home community. It kept them submissive, humble, and obedient. It enabled them to keep on keeping on. And it is still effective in 1937.<sup>23</sup>

In addition to examining the concept of God as a possible for oppression, the black humanist would also painstakingly inspect the understanding of human suffering, especially as this relates to the oppressed's beliefs about ultimate reality. That is, the theological method of black humanism elevates the theodicy question to first rank, and this is the consequence of the nature of oppression and the inner logic of a liberation theology.

A phenomenological analysis will reveal that oppression is reducible to a form of negative suffering, a suffering that is regarded as detrimental or irrelevant to one's highest good. Moreover, given that the purpose of a theology of liberation is the annihilation of oppression, the theologian of liberation must provide a sturdy rationale that establishes the negativity of the suffering that is the core of oppression. For instance, it must be shown that the suffering that is oppression is not sanctioned by God's will nor the unfolding of some fundamental laws of nature. In short, the suffering at question must be desanctified, or else the oppressed will not define their suffering as oppressive, nor will they be motivated to attack it.

### Liberation Theology and Theological Method

With this understanding as background, the primary purpose and initial step of the liberation theologian is unobscure: to free the mind of the oppressed from the enslaving ideas and submissive attitudes that sabotage any movement towards authentic freedom. This means several things for theological method. First, an exorcist or castration method is dictated. The ideas and concepts that undergird oppression must be clearly identified and systematically replaced with more humanizing and liberating beliefs. In this connection a clear differentiation must be made between those theological constructs that enhance *survival* in contrast to those which promote *liberation*.

In addition the examination must be total and comprehensive. At the outset each and every theological category in Christian faith and the black

<sup>23</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 26.

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church must be provisionally regarded as suspect, as an unwitting prop for oppression or a fatal residue of the slave master's world view. This means that God must also be ruthlessly crossexamined to determine her/his responsibility, if any, for the crimes of human history. In sum, black humanism concludes that a liberation theology must self-consciously adopt a *de novo* approach to Christian faith and its theological tributaries.

In advancing this theological method, the black humanist is well aware that he is challenging the fundamental premise of black theism and Christian faith; the intrinsic benevolence and justice of God. Since this challenge often serves as the grounds for questioning black humanism's status as an authentic expression of black consciousness, it is important to understand the rationale for this root and branch method.

The primary point to be made is that this approach follows from the concern of the black humanist to correct black oppression by formulating a viable theology of liberation. We have already seen that the primary goal of a liberation theology, to eliminate oppression, requires a theological method which isolates and excommunicates those enslaving beliefs, such as quietism, which smother the oppressed's motivation to replace the unjust social institutions. Until these manipulative and inauthentic elements of the tradition have been successfully identified and quarantined, the liberation theologian cannot recommend conformity to the tradition. Otherwise, s/he runs the risk of unwittingly endorsing ideas and concepts that support oppression, thus contradicting the explicit purpose of the liberation theology.

The black humanist also advocates a total root and branch analysis because the character of Christian faith as a vehicle for liberation is unsettled and, further, the boundary between authentic black theism and the counterfeit position of Whiteness is obscure.

As a representative of black humanism I have often raised suspicions about Christian faith as a potent means for liberation. Though I am persuaded of its excellence as a survival religion, its quality as a religion of liberation is, for me, still unresolved. This issue was posed most pointedly for me as a result of a fortuitous comparison of the Jewish and Christian liturgical calendars. I was struck by the way in which the Jewish calendar revolved around the celebration of events of ESP (economic-social-political) liberation: passover, purim, hanukkah, etc. In contrast, an examination of the general Christian calendar failed to reveal a single celebration of ESP liberation.

This absence is not accidental. Though Christianity began as the religion of an oppressed community, it appears that its liturgical calendar reflects an entirely different political and economic context.

I also inspected the calendar of the black church. It had not modified the Christian calendar in a manner that reflected its own context as an oppressed people; nor had it significantly included its own black saints in a way that other ethnic communities had done.

I did not conclude from this discovery that Christianity is not a liberation religion or that the black church is still captive to Whiteness. Rather, it suggested to me the necessity of a certain theological method.

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Each and every aspect of the tradition must be examined to determine its liberation quotient, and on this basis, accepted or rejected.

The necessity of a *de novo* approach can also be substantiated though a logical analysis of the concept of intrinsic benevolence itself as well as its actual function in black theism for some worshippers.

To believe that the universe is in the hands of God is to believe that there is a purpose in the world and that God will guarantee the successful working out of affairs in the universe. In this sense the idea is compensatory. One can rest secure and feel satisfied because he knows that nothing can wrong in the world since God governs it.<sup>24</sup>

Black humanism insists that the root and branch approach must be applied to the theology of the Black church as well as the more general Christian tradition. In this regard, the black humanist is actually raising the question: How black is black Christian theism? Is it an authentic expression of the black religious consciousness or is it Whittianity in black mask? Because the *de novo* approach advanced here has not been adequately executed, black humanism is uncertain where Whittianity ends and authentic black theism and Christian faith begin. Is the affirmation of God's intrinsic goodness and justice for instance an appropriation of the slave master's religion that creates a theology of survival rather than a theology of liberation?

John Mbiti's research on the African concept of the time strongly suggests to the black humanist that the particular eschatological emphasis of much of black religion, past and present, is an area where the religion of the slave master may have usurped the more liberating worldview of our African foremothers and forefathers. At least this radical shift in outlook supports the necessity of a total examination of the black tradition to determine the liberation quotient of each of its parts.

For the Akamba, Time is . . . simply a composition of events that have occurred, those which are taking place now and those which will *immediately* occur. What has not taken place, or what is unlikely to occur in the immediate future, has no temporal meaning—it belongs to the reality of "no-Time. . . ." From this basic attitude to Time, other important points emerge. The most significant factor is that Time is considered as a two-dimensional phenomenon; with a long "past," and a dynamic "present." The "future" as we know it in the linear conception of Time is virtually non-existent. . . . The future is virtually absent because events which lie in the future have not been realized and cannot, therefore, constitute time which otherwise must be experienced. . . . It is therefore, what has taken place or will occur shortly that matters much more than what is yet to be.<sup>25</sup>

There is also the growing acknowledgement that black theistic belief was formulated as a self-conscious theology of liberation.<sup>26</sup> That is, its specific theological emphasis was not constructed with the requirements of a self-consistent theology of liberation in mind. From this admission

<sup>24</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 149.

<sup>25</sup>John Mbiti, *New Testament Eschatology in an African Background* (London: Oxford University Press, 1971), p. 24. Emphasis supplied.

<sup>26</sup>"Black folk theology, despite its record of highly liberating activity, cannot be labeled exclusively a theology of liberation. Black masses unanimously intuit such a goal, but do not self-consciously characterize their beliefs as a body primarily designed for liberation. It is more likely a theology of existence or survival. . . ." Henry Mitchell, *Black Belief* (New York: Harper & Row, Publishers, 1975), p. 120.



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the black humanist again concludes that it is necessary to examine every jot and tittle of the thought and practice of the black church to assess its liberation quotient.

In all of this, the black humanist concludes that s/he is executing the actual operational methodology of current black theologians, though in a more consistent manner. It is easy to show that black theistic theologians do not simply read off their theologies from the testimonies of our foreparents. Black theology has not been simply the recording of a "latent, unwritten Black theology."<sup>27</sup> Instead a clear process of selection and rejection informs their approach to the tradition. Certain features of black religion, e.g., a pie-in-the-sky eschatology, have been black balled because of their quietist entailments. Indeed, the following theological method advanced by the leading black theologian, James Cone, is the precise point of view the black humanist wants to endorse.

We cannot solve ethical question of the twentieth century by looking at what Jesus did in the first. Our choices are not the same as his. Being Christian does not mean following 'in his footsteps. . . .' His steps are not ours; and thus we are placed in an existential situation in which we are forced to decide without knowing what Jesus would do. . . . Each situation has its own problematic circumstances which force the believer to think through each act of obedience without an absolute ethical guide from Jesus. To look for such a guide is to deny the freedom of the Christian man.<sup>28</sup>

Having granted us this latitude of authority relative to Jesus, how can the black church theologian withdraw the same authority to those assessing the black church? Surely, there is a clear inconsistency in denying absolute merit to Jesus but assigning it to the past of black theism.

### The Coming Debate

Black religious humanism speaks for a minority, too long voiceless and too long powerless, in black religion. It is a demand to interpret the black experience without the fetters of a theological apparatus that may be an inappropriate or inaccurate account of our actual history. Though now a still small voice in black religion, it is emerging as a major religious force that black Christian theism will undoubtedly encounter as a rival and most assuredly as a prominent ingredient in the cultural matrix where the black church operates.

The black humanist is persuaded that the controlling principle of humanism, the affirmation of the radical freedom/autonomy of humanity, points to a verity that theism in general and black theism in particular must eventually acknowledge as a given. As black Christian theologians wrestle with the theodicy question in its revised form of quietism and ethnic suffering, as they attempt to construct a theology of social, political, and economic liberation, as they seek to accommodate the enlarged theological particularly that informs black theology and as they search for interpretive models to describe the *totality* of the biblical

<sup>27</sup>Roberts, *op. cit.*, p. 16.

<sup>28</sup>James Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (New York: Seabury, 1969), pp. 139-40.

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conception of the human creature, the necessity and significance of this understanding of human reality will be evident.

The future impact of black humanism can best be described by paraphrasing Frederick Herzog's fateful prediction: "Black humanism forces us to raise questions about the very foundations of black religion. By the time we have understood what it is all about, we will have realized that the whole structure of Black Christian theology will have to be rethought."<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>Frederick Herzog, *Liberation Theology* (New York: Seabury Press, 1972), p. viii.