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Reflections Upon Black Theology: A European Theological Perspective

Introduction

"Black theology is too important to be left exclusively in the hands of the Black theologians" This is one of the messages, perhaps the most important one, to come through loud and clear from the groundbreaking book by Theo Witvliet, a Dutch liberation theologian who teaches at the University of Amsterdam.¹ I agree with these words of Professor Gayraud Wilmore in the Foreword of this book. I have received a great deal of stimulation from this work by Witvliet. It is the best thing so far that has been written in Europe on Black theology.

Whereas the earlier book by Klauspeter Blaser was a global reflection on racism and missiology today,² and the two valuable books by the French Catholic theologian Bruno Chenu were respectively a historical and documentary presentation of the material,³ Witvliet's *The Way of the Black Messiah* is the first detailed theological interpretation of both Black history and Black theology in America.

As a matter of fact, Black theology is no longer an object of curiosity.

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¹ Theo Witvliet, *The Way of the Black Messiah: The Hermeneutical Challenge of Black Theology as a Theology of Liberation*, with a foreword by Gayraud S. Wilmore. Marynoll, N.Y.: Meyer Stone Books, 1987), p. v.

² Klauspeter Blaser, *Wenn Gott schwarz wäre: Das Problem des Rassismus in Theologie und christlicher Praxis* (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1972).

³ Bruno Chenu, *Dieu est Noir: Histoire, religion et théologie des Noirs américains* (Paris: Centurion, 1977; *Le Christ Noir américain* (Paris: Desclee, 1984). In his book, *Théologies chrétiennes des Tiers mondes* (Paris: Centurion, 1987), Chenu has a good chapter on Black theology in America: "La théologie noire américaine," pp. 55-90.

It must now become a regular part of the work of the Church everywhere in the world.

Black theology is a theological reflection on the meaning of the gospel from a particular perspective, that is, from the perspective of Black people who in America and elsewhere suffer from injustice. Thus, it has a particular character. But the scope of its theological undertaking goes far beyond its American context. That it is a critique directed toward the dominant Western theological language and posture is too important indeed to be left exclusively in the hands of Black theologians in America. For the hard core of Black theology is a critique of any theological language that does not refer to the destiny of oppressed people. At least as far as my generation of European theologians is concerned, the Black critique is not without similarity to the radical critique of the young Karl Barth against bourgeois and unprophetic Christianity.⁴ Today European theology is indeed desperately searching for a new expression of faith, given the fact that it has been moved off center, so that it is only one among many others. ~And so," writes Paul, "there is no place for human pride in the presence of God" (1 Corinthians 1: 30). There is especially no place for European pride.

Therefore, while Black theology has to be discussed on the same level as every other theology, its *proprium*, its unique importance, is that it is meant as a reflection—even as a critical reflection—on the *Black Church*. This has been stressed over and over again by Black theologians and writers: "Without our Church, we would have ceased to be as a people."⁵ What is unique in Black theology is that it is not once more a closed system. Rather it is representative of a given

⁴ Cf. Blaser: "It is not illegitimate to suppose that here (in Cone's Black theology) perhaps for the first time in American theology Karl Barth is really accepted and incorporated," p. 285. Witvliet also quotes this passage (note 238, 315, p. 166), and adds: "Unfortunately, this suggestion is not sufficiently developed."

⁵ Gayraud S. Wilmore and James H. Cone, eds., *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-1979* (Maryknoll, N.Y. Orbis Books, 1979), p. 345.

expression and form of Christian life, the life of the Black Church. The spirituals and the blues, Black worship, and other expressions of faith are such important contributions of the Black experience to the universal Church because they emanate from the Black people. Even in the theologies of Barth, Bultmann, Tillich, Moltmann and Jungel, you do not find expressions of such an experience.

Locating the Discussion with Black Theology

One may have already sensed from these initial comments the shift of my interest in Black Theology. Some years ago I would have argued about theology and ideology, about the relation between Black theology and Marxism, or about its social analysis (and sometimes its lack of it). I am now more interested in Black history, in ecclesiological expressions of faith and in reflecting on communication. *How do we communicate with each other?* Why do we try to do so, despite all the barriers of language, culture, and past and present oppression? Why is it that we are so crucially linked to each other, whether female or male, whether Black or White, whether from the Third World or from Europe, in the need to understand each other?

I recall a symposium in Geneva that took place in May 1973 and that was recorded in history, as Witvliet puts it, "as an instance of "incommunication."⁶ Today there is a general crisis of communication skills, not only from the side of the oppressed,⁷ but also from the side of those who are engaged in this discussion in Europe. This may signal a major crisis in Christian expressions of faith, expressions that testify so

⁶ Witvliet, Preface, p. vx.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 46. "[it takes time to explore one's own means of communication] since oppression always means that the communication skills of an oppressed community are determined to a large degree by the oppressors. That is precisely the meaning of oppression." James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1970), p. 117. This statement goes now both ways, because the awareness of oppression from the side of the oppressors also means a crisis on their part related to their own inherited means of communication.

impressively to the power of the Spirit. This crisis, ultimately, may threaten the unity we confess as the universal Church.

In view of this crisis, where is the *locus* of the discussion with Black theology to be found? Witvliet's answer is that the *sitz im leben* of the dialogue is both contextual and ecumenical. The search for a much needed theory of ecumenical action and communication is indeed crucial, if we desire to go beyond the self-destroying dilemmas of polarizing the universal and the particular, the ecumenical and the contextual, the international and the local, the European and the anti-European. On this horizon, Black theology is for me the advocate, or one of the advocates, of a particularity within a global movement, and for a global movement, called the *oikoumene*. In other words, it reflects theologically on a particular history and people as having a paradigmatic character for any history and any people. Paradigm here means a story, a storytelling whose meaning, however, transcends its own particularity.

According to Witvliet, the following two aspects must be kept together:

(1) Contextual theology is a method of theologizing that is aware of the specific historical and cultural contexts in which it is involved, and that senses that it is directed to the expressions and reflections of others;

(2) Ecumenism is a *communication structure* of mutual learning and correction.⁸

In this sense, Black theology would be a paradigm for every theology whatsoever when it is conscious of both its contextual and ecumenical character. In other words, "conciliar fellowship," as Witvliet calls it, "is a structure of communication which cannot and may not be limited

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 97,

to questions of a confessional nature,"⁹ but should be applied today to the intercultural dialogue in which we are engaged. Herein lies for me the ecclesiological significance of Black theology.

I shall hereafter propose a philosophical and theological reflection on these two concepts: contextual and ecumenical.

II. *The Three-fold Nature of Intercultural Dialogue*

Let us reflect for a moment on the very notion of "context", or, more precisely, on inter-contextual or inter-cultural dialogue. True, Black theology is polemic theology—this is an understatement! But, as Karl Barth once said: "Polemic is love." In polemics there is more than a mere and simple denial of the other, more than a theologized Manicheism. For the very fact that I am using language instead of sheer violence is a sign that the polemics in which I am engaged ultimately aims at a recognition from my opponent. I wish to be *heard*. But why? By whom? For what reasons and to what end? Black theology is polemics, but also an appeal. As James Baldwin put it at Uppsala in 1968: "Though I may have to say some rather difficult things here this afternoon, I want to make it understood that in the heart of the absolutely necessary accusation there is contained a plea."¹⁰

But on the side of our own tradition and history, Black theology is, as Moltmann has correctly said, a tremendous "eye-opener." Even more precisely, Witvliet writes: "The paradoxical thing is that the more we succeed in doing justice to Black theology, the more we are thrown back on ourselves"¹¹—and on our own history. We thus enter into a crisis, both personal and collective, which I want now to describe.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

¹⁰ Quoted by Witvliet, p. 89.

¹¹ Witvliet, p. 4. This statement is extremely important to me, because the preoccupation by Europeans with Black theology is not a matter of condescending charity, but primarily a matter of altering one's own consciousness and of internal criticism directed against the obliteration of oppressed people from our own history and our own inherited theological language.

Let me try to explain what I understand as the three-fold nature of intercultural dialogue. This involves three poles: The I (ego), the Thou, and the Third.¹²

The Ego Position

Let us begin with the I or the ego. Here I am indebted to a statement by Jean-Paul Sartre that I especially cherish: "What is essential is not what has been made of people, but what people make of what has been made of them. What has been made of people are structures, compositions of meaning that are studied by the human sciences. What they make of it is history itself, the transcending of structures through a total practice. Philosophy finds itself in between."¹³

And I would say theology too. This statement points to the heart of the matter. On the one side, we all study what has been made of us: structures, history, culture, sex, race, class. On the other side, we are called to reflect on what we study and to *make something else* of what we are told we are, through practice. This is significant to the extent that theology does not work only with content, with abstract meaning *per se*, but with what is made of content through human history. In this regard Black theology is a critical assessment of *what has been made of* Christianity in the Western White culture, but at the same time Black

¹² For this part of my paper I am indebted to Paul Ricoeur's article, "Fondements de l'éthique" in *Cahiers du Centre Protestant de l'Quest* (France: F-79370 Cellessur-Belle, 1983), pp. 31-43, attempting here to apply to the intercultural dialogue that which he develops in terms of the three poles of the ethical concern (I-Thou-Third pole).

¹³ "L'essentiel n'est pas ce qu'on a fait de l'homme, mais ce qu'il fait de ce qu'on a fait de lui. Ce que l'on a fait de l'homme, ce sont les structures, les ensembles signifiants qu'étudient les sciences humaines. Ce qu'il fait, c'est l'histoire elle-même, le dépassement réel de ces structures dans une praxis totalisatrice. La philosophie est la charnière," in "Sartre répond: Entretien avec Bernard Pingaud," in *L'Arc: Sartre aujourd'hui*, XXX (1966) p. 95. It is worthwhile to note that this statement was then directed against structuralist determinism from the point of view of a militant existentialist philosophy.

theology leaves open the question of what its addressees shall make out of what has been made of them and of others.

If at the beginning of a conversation, before anyone has opened his or her mouth, somebody says: "I know in advance what you are going to say because I know you are this or that," he or she prevents any dialogue. For what exactly do "I know" of my partner? The ego, the I who wishes to enter into a true conversation, must first recognize that he or she needs to convert what is supposed to be known and familiar, to renounce the assumption of already knowing; that is, to renounce prejudice. To be free, or more precisely to become free, is the universal call addressed to every culture and person, thus, really to transcend one's own conditioning. What makes a person human is the recognition of the un-known: I cannot foresee what the Other shall do, and shall make out of what has been made of him or her, whether Black or White.

In this connection, I am not sure that James Cone's very early distinction between Blackness as an ethnic component and Blackness as a theological statement, as a transcendent affirmation, has been really understood in America. Everyone is called "to become Black with God."¹⁴ I read these statements against the background of French existentialist philosophy. Blackness and Whiteness are not designations of things that cannot be changed, but they point the readers to be where they ought to be, and to think Christianity anew from the other side of history (or, more accurately, from the other side of the street). Freedom is not a "thing," a result; it is an undertaking, a life-long task (*project* for Sartre) in which I can only believe for myself and for the Other. To a certain degree, one could even say that the

¹⁴ See Cone's *A Black Theology of Liberation* where he writes: "We must become Black with God," p. 124, and other similar statements. For example, "They are no longer White but free," *ibid.*, p. 32. In his *God of the Oppressed*, p. 136, one finds an even more theologically based affirmation: "Christ's Blackness is both literal and symbolic," and [The] "Blackness of Christ, therefore, is not simply a statement about skin color, but rather, the *transcendent affirmation* that God has not ever, no, not ever, left the oppressed alone in struggle," p. 137.

transcending of any conditioning through practice is the threatening aspect of freedom. "I (only) believe in a religion that believes in freedom," as Malcolm X rightly said.¹⁵

There is an Ego that I see or pretend to see, to analyze, and that I imagine. On this side, the Ego is what is familiar and well known; here the I is a mere image. And racism is nourished with images. But what is familiar is *not* known. Thus there is another side to the Ego, the *iconic* side that I don't see, the I as a potential, which is in essence unforeseeable, inscrutable, and invisible. In other words, *the mask is not the person*, for God, according to the New Testament, "shows no partiality," literally: "God accepts no one's mask~ (Acts 10:34, a text often quoted in the Black tradition and one also applied to Jesus' fundamental attitude in Luke 20:21).

Theologically speaking, I wonder whether the biblical root to counter racism is not to be found in the commandment to forbid any image of God: "You shall not make for yourself a graven image" of God. A commandment which has such deep anthropological consequences. This second commandment is based upon the basic biblical insight that there is no such thing as an *essence*, or a *being*, or a *nature* of God. "God is..." This is what we say. But God is never what we say he/she is. (We could think here of Frantz Fanon's famous *Black Skin, White Masks*. This is, however, not to be confused with a correct understanding that God shows a partisanship toward the oppressed.) For God manifests God's self only in the revelation of God's name, and this name is the Liberator. "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery" (Exodus 20:2). In other words, God is totally Other than what has been made of him/her. And in the same manner we are called to regard not the *mask*, not what has been made of us, but our name, what we make out of what has been made of us—of us all. Thus, the ultimate significance of Black theology in America

¹⁵ See *The Autobiography of Malcolm X*, (New York: Grove Press, Inc., 1964).

is that with its statement about Blackness, both literal and symbolic, it has reminded us of the otherness of God. As Witvliet rightly puts it: "Where there is no room for the recognition of barriers between human beings, there is no longer any sense of the alien and unknown character of God's word, and where a sense has been lost of the eschatological and indeed apocalyptic tensions in the world of the Bible, privatization and domestication of Christian faith inevitably comes into being."¹⁶

What permits a true dialogue is the impossibility of instrumentalizing the transcendence of God and thus the freedom of anyone to make something new of his or her own conditioning.

The Position of Thou

But the Ego cannot be content in affirming one's own freedom at the expense of the freedom of others. There is no such thing as an I without a Thou, an Ego without an *Alter Ego*. But this *Alter Ego* is not the extension of my Ego, its mirror, its shadow. The *Alter*, the *Other*, may be a threat, a plea, a negation, a promise, a nightmare or a dream: the *Other remains* the *Other*. Black theology's contribution, I think, is that it has made us realize that the I-Thou relationship, that has been so much talked and written about, is never a symmetrical relationship. It is an a-symmetrical relationship, and it implies unevenness. In listening to the *Other* I realize that the more I am listening to him or her, the less I truly understand what he or she is all about. I enter into a mystery, the very mystery of an encounter, on the level of the *Other's* own opacity or inscrutability. Let me quote here the Black historian of religion, Charles Long:

The opacity of our experience which has been revealed carries

¹⁶ Witvliet, p. 67.

its own internal history and logic. It did not occur yesterday or even the year before; it is our total past; it is our present *and our future*. It was aborning at least since the slave trade, and then, its roots go deeper into Africa itself.¹⁷

Thus the "logic" of such an opacity is, Christologically speaking, not without relationship to what Paul is describing in I Corinthians as the *Logos*, the word or the "logic" of the Cross (I Corinthians 1:18). The language of this opacity still speaks, even if rendered "invisible, or more than that, *because* it is rendered invisible by the dominant forces.

According to Emanuel Levinas, "the reflection on the difference" is not to be conceived in terms of an Hegelian or Marxist dialectic, nor in terms of formal logic. The relationship with the Other is to be seen in terms of a radical dissymmetry. This dissymmetrical relation is what differentiates the relation to the Other from a simple *reciprocal* relation. Reciprocity is not the truth, opacity and distance is.

What I want in my freedom is that your freedom be also. Contrary to what many Christians imagine, so-called love, *agape*, does not bring near that which comes from afar. Love is the recognition, at the end of the struggle, that the Other remains at a distance that can heal us from our predatory instincts. And what destroys love is precisely the illusion by which I am led and misled to believe that the Other is no longer the Other.

Exemplifying this point theologically again in the Decalogue, Emanuel Levinas has shown that in the commandment "You shall not kill", there is to be heard the voice of the second person, of the Other: "Don't kill me." The commandment locates me before the face, the *visage* of the Other. He writes: "Every face (*visage*) is the Sinai from

¹⁷ Charles Long, "Structural Similarities and Dissimilarities in Black and African Theologies," in the *Journal of Religious Thought*, XXXII (Fall-Winter, 1975) p. 21. Quoted by Witvliet, p. 275, note 96.

which comes the voice that forbids murder."¹⁸

The Bible tells us the long story of radical Evil, of the radical refusal to recognize the voice of the second person in the commandment without which I am not a fully human person. Not only God is thus speaking in the Decalogue but also the Other: "don't kill me." A friend of mine, Serge Molla, who is writing a dissertation on Martin Luther King, Jr. in French, told me the story (well known in the Black tradition) that when Cain killed Abel, his face turned pale out of shame for his deed: and this growing paleness represents the origin of the Whiteness of the Euro-American man. For the Jewish-Christian tradition this long history of murder culminates in the figure of the suffering *doulos*, of the Suffering Slave of Isaiah 53 and Philippians 2. The Other as the Slave is constantly dis-figured, de-faced (*de-visage*), unrecognized.

Therefore, the task to become free is, at its origin, derailed by the original evil of the murder of freedom. Black as well as Jewish writers and philosophers have indeed reminded us of the fact that human history, and especially Christian history, is the testimony of the murder of freedom: "The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground" (Genesis 4:10).

The Position of the Third

Thirdly, in an intercultural dialogue, there is something or somebody else, a third person, the non-person. For a true dialogue is never just a conversation between two persons as present. We are always starting within a given human situation. This situation presents a third element. Technically, in Ricoeur and Levinas, the Third is the mediation of the rule of law, but it can also be the situation of both partners in relationship to a third, be it a person or an institution. The

¹⁸ Quoted by Ricoeur, p. 34.

terms to designate such a third element are neutral: a cause, an ideal, a task, a work, values. Even if we dream of a face-to-face dialogue, we cannot disregard the fact that a dialogue never happens in a vacuum, in an institutional and historical void. We can never make of "them" a "we" in our talking, we always imply a Third, be it a person, or a set of persons, or an institution—never directly present, but only through the mediations of history. We never begin completely *de novo*. There is always a situation ethically, politically and socially full of values (authentic or inauthentic) preceding us. We have not created the context within which we talk to each other, and this is probably the limitation of Martin Buber's I-Thou relationship.

To refer again to the example of the Decalogue, there are explicit allusions to facts and situations that are institutional and time-given, and that we all too often disregard. The Decalogue not only speaks about the liberating God or about the Thou, the second person, near or far, but also about the Sabbath, the work, the days, heaven and earth, your son and daughter, your man servant, your maid servant, the alien within your gates, your neighbor's house and, last but not least, your neighbor's wife. Exegetes tell us what these terms meant at that time. But philosophers and theologians ought also to reflect on this third element, this excluded Third (*Tiers exclu*), which is always clouding the I-Thou relationship. While the Third covers the field of history and destiny, it also means the everlasting task of justice. The I and the Thou are different, and the Thou is absolutely Other, but *both* are accountable to the Third, the never ending task for human brotherhood and sisterhood to be realized for all.

Permit me to make here a critique of Black theology, to the extent that this theology, as does every liberation theology, tends to obscure the fact that, whereas we are all different, we are all facing the same task, the same problems and the same agonies with regard to the issue of justice. Justice is not a White or a Black idea, it is a universal task.

The Decalogue has a relevance for all, because the law is the task before us all that awaits obedience, even if it is constantly trespassed and even if it is trespassed by those who proclaim it. We are all different, but are we not the same before God's command? Otherness and sameness are to be dialectically related to each other. We are all other and different, but at the same time we are *equally* directed to the commandment of the law. I refer to *God's* commandment and not, of course, to the "law and order" of human manipulations.

The old Black preachers of past centuries were right when they often quoted this passage of the prophet Malachi in 2:10: "Have we not all one Father? Did not one God create us? Why do we violate the covenant of our forefathers by being faithless to one another?" We hear in this passage the voice of God through the prophet as we recognize ourselves as addressees, whether we are Black or White. But we also hear the call to the covenant, to the broken covenant, *vis-a-vis* the excluded Third—be it the oppressed person, the slave, or "the wife of your youth" (Malachi 2:14). The Third therefore brings to light a universal ethical element, for we are constantly placed before God's command, whether faithful or unfaithful. Faithfulness or unfaithfulness are ethical categories that measure every culture, theology, or race. God is here neither I nor Thou, he/she is a *Witness*. God is a Witness between you and your neighbor as against you on behalf of your neighbor. "Keep watch on your spirit!"

I realize that Black theology is rightly a passionate polemic against the instrumentalization of God's command in the hands of White power. But this does not invalidate the point. What matters in the last analysis is the appeal to God's command against those who manipulate it and who disregard its universality. The slave says to the master: "God is my witness, and not you and what you have made of the Law." But he is appealing to the Law against the master's manipulations. I miss in liberation theology a strong reflection on the Law. For as we

are confronted with the Third, that is, with all the problems of power and powerlessness, of institution, of covenant, we are all placed before the same agonies and shortcomings. Witvliet is right when he asks: "Who can guarantee that the liberation of the poor does not mean the continued oppression of those who get overlooked?"¹⁹ It is easy to deconstruct, but not so easy to re-construct an ethical concern that transcends us all.

Trying now to sum up this first meditation on the three-fold nature of intercultural dialogue, I would say that this "dialogue" is rather a tri-logue between, say, Job, his friends, and the justice of God. In such a tri-logue people do not forever stay at the same position, as if history did not exist. For these positions are erratic blocks, not fixed points. They constantly change and interchange. Such an awareness permits any theology to stay on the move as one discovers new challenges, as for instance the discovery of a Third: the Black woman, being the slave of a slave. One may recall here the biblical narrative about Abraham, Sarah and Hagar, the third person. These positions are not once and for all given, but they may change. History is the constant interplay between the I, the Thou, and the Third.

In this connection it is worthwhile to notice that James Cone, in the Afterword to the French edition of his *God of the Oppressed*,²⁰ quotes precisely Job saying:

I also could speak as you do,
if you were in my place" (Job 16:4)

Or, to use another translation: "If you and I were to change places, I could talk like you."

¹⁹ Witvliet, pp. 89-99.

²⁰ James H. Cone, *La Noireceur De Dieu*, (Geneva: Labor et Fides, 1989) with a Foreword by Henri Mottu, p. 286.

Job is therefore appealing to a God who is both a Witness and an Arbitrator, that is, a Third who does speak on behalf of the neglected person:

For look! My witness is in heaven;
there is One on high ready to answer for me.
My appeal will come before God,
while my eyes turn again and again to him.

If only there were one to arbitrate between man and God,
as between a man and his neighbor! (Job 16:19-21)

III. *Toward the oikoumene to Come*

I realize how paradoxical it seems at first glance to apply the word "ecumenical" to such a particular and contextual theology as Black theology. But recent developments show that this larger perspective is not alien to the preoccupations of Black theologians, especially if one considers James Cone's lecture of August 1977 at the Black Theology Project convocation in Atlanta, "Black Theology and the Black Church: Where Do We Go From Here?" and other statements.²¹ Consider for example, "There will be no freedom for anybody until we are all set free." I am also referring to Witvliet's suggestions in a section of his book entitled: "Ecumenism as a Place of Challenge and Response."²² For the second term used by this author beside "contextual"

²¹ See *Black Theology: A Documentary History*, pp. 350-359. Also, the chapter by Gayraud Wilmore in the same volume: "The New Context of Black Theology in the United States," pp. 602-608.

²² Witvliet, pp. 89-99.

is that the messianic reality of the *oikoumene*²³ has many meanings in Greek: geographical ("the entire inhabited world" as opposed to the desert); cultural ("the Greek world" as opposed to the others—the Barbarians); political ("the Roman Empire"—the Roman Emperor being seen as 'the Benefactor and Savior of the whole *oikoumene*"). In antiquity the term had a marked ideological connotation designating the Greek culture or worldview as "the representative of true humanity."

In the Bible, both in the Greek translation of the Old Testament and in the New Testament, the word *oikoumene* is sometimes used in this Hellenistic connotation implying all-inclusiveness (as for instance in Luke 2:1, in Acts, and in Matthew 24:14). But in other passages, it takes on two new meanings: a polemical/apocalyptic meaning and an eschatological meaning.

In the book of Revelation, the word means "the whole earth," or the whole universe as it is deceived, *seduced* by the political propaganda or ideology of "the kings of the whole earth" (Rev. 16:14). For behind the political scene and in particular behind the Roman Emperor, there is a Seducer named the Dragon, or the Beast or Satan, "the deceiver of the whole world" (Rev 12:9). This is an apocalyptic critique of the Roman so-called *oikoumene* and of any world based on force and violence. Thus, the *oikoumene* we see and know is not the world, because it is a world only for some happy few, and not for all. And especially for those who suffer from it, it is not a world, but chaos, hell. This so-called cosmos is a chaos, because it is only a projection of the dominant few upon the whole. Revelation 13 together with 17 and 18

²³ See the article "Oikoumene," written by Otto Michel in *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*, V, pp. 159-161. See also W.A. Visser't Hooft, "The Word 'Ecumenical': Its History and Use," in *A History of the Ecumenical Movement, 1517-1948*, eds., Ruth Rouse and Stephen C. Neill, (London: SPCK, 1967), pp. 735-740. I think that much work has still to be done on the various meanings of the word, not only in the New Testament, but also in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (particularly in Psalms and in Second Isaiah), as well as in early Christianity.

describes the paradigm of any Empire, Church, or culture that pretends to include and integrate the whole earth, while only representing particular interests and a particular power—the power to name others. The seduction is precisely such a pretension of all-inclusiveness at the expense of the victimized.

The text of Revelations 18:23-24 reads: "For your merchants were the magnates of the earth, and through your sorcery all nations went astray. In that city was found the blood of prophets and of God's people, the blood of all victims of earthly slaughter."

One cannot but think, in this context, of European expansion during the 15th and 16th centuries, of the slave trade that covers historically almost three centuries in a shameful parallelism to the so-called enlightenment philosophy²⁴ and of what is the case today in South Africa in the name of "Christianity," with the complicity of rich nations, including my own. In view of these dreadful realities of the past and of the present, we can only believe that the Bible criticizes from the viewpoint of the victims, the universal pretension of any worldview that constructs an *oikoumene* in its own image. The struggle for ecumenism transcends a mere interconfessional understanding or consensus. It has primarily to do with the question: Who can inhabit this earth and who cannot? Neither *oikoumene*, or the English word "ecumenical," shows this sufficiently—dealing with the

²⁴ See for example the work written by French philosopher Louis Salamolins, *Le Code Noir ou le Calvaire de Canaan* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1987), who has edited the "Black Code" concerning the slaves in the French West Indies during the time of the so-called triangular market, that lasted from 1685 (the same year of the Revocation of the Edict of Nantes, that forbade French Protestantism and occasioned the persecution of the Protestants and their escape from France as refugees) until 1848. But the merit of this book is its critical analysis of the case of the polite obliviation of the Black slaves from the side of most French philosophers of that time (with some exceptions among abolitionists like Condorcet): See the third part, "Le Code Noir a l'ombre des Lumieres" (the Black Code under the shadow of the Enlightenment"), pp. 205-280. A similar work should be done, that does not yet exist to my knowledge, on the lack of response from the side of Christian theology of that time and that would be like: "Le Code Noir a l'ombre de la theologie chretienne" (the Black Code under the shadow of Christian theology)!

possibility or impossibility of dwelling, of inhabiting an abode (*oikeo*, from which comes: *oikos*, house, *oikema*, workshop, *paraoikia*, parish). The criterion for true ecumenism is: How do we help each other to see and recognize in each context the victimized people of the system in which we live and which we nourish? Left alone and isolated from each other we simply do not see anything; we do not see the crucified people far and near, because our own glasses and prejudices prevent us from recognizing people beyond *our* world. This is what I consider to be the prophetic and even apocalyptic (for apocalypse means revelation) contribution of Black Theology.

It is for this biblical and "oikoumenical" perspective that I consider Black theology an incentive to reconsider *the neglected aspects of Church history and theology*. Its highly "situated" character helps us to determine its ecumenical relevance. European theologians and historians have to undertake a new critical reading of their own tradition and history. This is now their task. Black theology is then an appeal to be creative and critical, and its intention cannot be reduced to a simple refusal *a l'americaine* of European theology. There is no such thing as *the* European theology. A much more serious matter is to make creative use in one's own context of the "eye-opener" that Black theology represents.

As far as the eschatological meaning of the *oikoumene* is concerned, it is especially clear from some passages (Hebrews 1:6 and 2:5) that the technical Hebrew term for "the age to come" is recaptured here in terms of space, of a new *space* we do not know: the *oikoumene* to come. In this *oikoumene* to come we will not be alone as one people. One God, one king, one faith, one Church. One people will not be the answer. But many people under a new earth and a new heaven, in which justice shall dwell. No one will be able "to count" the people of this world coming from every nation, of all tribes, peoples, and languages (cf. Rev. 7:9). The New Testament is full of this hope for a

qualitatively different and new space. Black eschatology is not so much a time-oriented eschatology, but rather a space re-orienting eschatology. To be truly "oikoumenical" thus means to enter into the struggle, to allow people of different origins and languages, different colors and cultures, to dwell together on earth and to respect each other. The critical question then arises as to whether my particular nation or Church truly anticipates this *oikoumene* to come, or is an obstacle to it? Racism, as well as sexism and other evils, is basically an obstacle to the coming of the Kingdom. Do we respond to the call: "Your earth shall be called *oikoumene*?" (Isaiah 62:4 LXX.)

In this eschatological *kairos*, every confession and theology, including Black theology, is participating in the larger movement of "conciliar fellowship", that denies an imposed "unity" from only one partner and advocates a new type of unity that I would call excentric unity, or a unity moved off center. Such a unity has now many poles and one cannot speak anymore uncritically of a "center" and a "periphery." And Witvliet is correct when he speaks in this connection of a "peripheral ecumenism." Black theology would be a paradigm to inculturate the Christian faith in a new form and for a given people, and thus to prepare the ground for new inculturations or indigenizations ahead of us, around the world. In any case, it may be the long-term significance of Black Theology that at this juncture of the long history of Christianity, it enables us to pass from a Western dominated to a non-Western Christianity.

If this suggestion is correct, Christianity would become again a non-Western religion, as in an earlier age, and Christians would see themselves again as "a third race", a *tritos genos*, as some intriguing texts of early Christian tradition put it, meaning a third religious and human reality beyond the Jews, the Greeks and the Romans. "*Tertium genus dicimur*," said Tertullian.²⁵ Are we not to prepare the way toward

²⁵ This suggestion is made by Blaser, pp. 294-304, and should be pursued.

a Third World Christianity, non-Western but not necessarily anti-Western? Beyond the necessary but contingent accusation against Western Christianity, this major shift toward a real *oikoumene* is, in my opinion, a promise that we have to affirm with gratitude, critical insight, and confidence. This *oikoumene* to come, that so many Psalms and Second Isaiah in particular refer to, has some similarities with Martin Luther King, Jr.'s eschatological hope for "the beloved community."²⁶ But we cannot know in advance, as far as the present stage of history is concerned, what this coming messianic reality shall look like. And let us not forget, against an easy and false idealization of King, that this great Black leader also said:

The storm is rising against the privileged minority of the earth, from which there is no shelter in isolation or armament. The storm will not abate until a just distribution of the fruits of the earth enables man everywhere to live in dignity and human decency. The American Negro... may be the vanguard of a prolonged struggle that may change the shape of the world, as billions of deprived shake and transform the earth in the quest for life, freedom and justice.²⁷

Conclusion

Let me now sum up in a few theses what I see as being the most important aspects of this discussion.

²⁶ See Witvliet, p. 124, who rightly observes: "Black consciousness—and this is insufficiently recognized—is impossible without a sense of *kairos*. And it was precisely this latter that King was able to express in a way which is unique in modern history."

²⁷ Martin Luther King, Jr., *The Trumpet of Conscience* (New York: Random House, 1968), p. 17, quoted by Vincent Harding, "Recalling the Inconvenient Hero: Reflections on the Last Years of Martin Luther King, Jr." in *Union Seminary Quarterly Review*, XL (Fall 1986) pp. 53-68. This is a special number devoted to Dr. King.

1. First let us recall that the early Church named its first councils "ecumenical." Despite the fact that they were called upon by emperors who wanted them to be "universal," to unite the many interpretations of the gospel in one faith. I contend that the "Ecumenical Creed" implies more than a Eurocentric Christianity. In the third article of the Nicene-Constantinopolitan Creed (381) we find the fully developed mention of "the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life" as he or she "has spoken through prophets." And the last phrase: "We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come" (*kai zoen tou mellontos aionos*) may be interpreted as a radical openness to the *oikoumene* to come that we were just mentioning.

In this context, Black theology is to be placed, in my opinion, within a great century-old underground movement that has reminded, and still does remind, any particular Church or theology of the transcendent power of the Spirit. Black theology is a particular segment of a theology of the third article, of a "pneumatological obligation,"²⁸ not yet fully exemplified and articulated, but so much present in the Black Church. The recalling of the *corporeality of the Spirit* is the unique contribution of the Black Church to the universal Church.

2. I have tried to locate the discussion with Black theology in a three-fold intercultural dialogue between the I, the Thou, and the Third, following the inspiration of phenomenology and existentialist philosophy. However I am aware of the fact that the Creed does not speak of an I, a Thou, or a Third, but refers to a "We!" "We believe in the Holy Spirit." But the question is: Who is this we? For whom is this confession of faith relevant and for whom not? In other words, the contribution of Black theology is that it has rendered radically problematic this *we* and rightly so, in the name of the Spirit "who has

²⁸ Witvliet, p. 218. See also 219-220, where the author comments: "Thus, old insights of the Christian tradition come to life in a very special way in Black experience and one cannot but wonder that generally speaking, the Black theologians have paid little attention to the pneumatological dimension of Black spirituality." I am in full agreement with this comment.

spoken through the prophets.”

Thus, theologically speaking, the transcendence of freedom as a promise that lies upon every human being should finally be referred to the power of *baptism*. “Call my name!” My new name, not the name that this world knows or refuses to know, but my name before God who makes me free and “can make a way out of no way,” as King put it. The Black experience of baptism may represent the most inspiring and much neglected contribution of the Black Church to the universal Church.

Regarding the position of the Thou, Black Christology could be seen as the advocate of an apocalyptic Christology, the Christology of the *Lamb*, so much ignored in the Western tradition.

And finally, the Third would refer to the Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, that haunts every relation as being *in-between*, that is, what ultimately permits the reciprocal learning and correction. Could the *Logos* and the Spirit somewhere relate and listen to each other? This is the question.