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The Situation of Christian Pan Africanism in the U.S. Today

Instead of reading formal papers we thought that the three of us would share some thoughts having to do with our experience with Pan Africanism here in the United States; and then open up the panel for general discussion. I will begin, therefore, with comments and then Dr. James H. Cone and Dr. Jacquelyn Grant will speak.

Probably very few of our overseas visitors are aware of the appropriateness of holding this meeting here in the city of Atlanta. There have been several meetings in the United States dealing with the question of the relationship between African Americans in the United States and people of African descent everywhere in the world. Perhaps the most important of them was held in the late 19th century right here at Gammon Theological Seminary, one of the constituent seminaries of this Interdenominational Theological Center. It was in December of 1895 that Professor John W. Bowen, who was on the faculty at Gammon, led in the discussion of the relationship between African Christians in the United States and those in the homeland of Africa. It was a very important conference; probably the first one in which a full expression of the missionary concerns of Black Americans was brought forth. The 1895 conference had a great influence on Black churches in the United States. One of its major purposes was to encourage Black young men and women to become missionaries to

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Africa. But it also had another interest closely connected to our current interest in this conference and that was the dissemination of accurate information about Black people all over the world in order that Black Americans might be disabused of illusions and distortions about their forebears and brothers and sisters in Africa, in the Caribbean and in other parts of the Black world.

About 18 years ago, also here in Atlanta, another meeting was held, not sponsored by the churches, but by a group of secular Pan Africanists. The Congress of African People was held here in Atlanta in September 1970. This was another expression of the Black Power Movement, of the people who carried on the work of Dr. King into the post-King period. Of course, this 1970 conference was also concerned about the unity of all African people. It was led by Imamu Baraka, a well-known Black nationalist. It had in attendance and participating people like Minister Louis Farakkan and Julian Bond, and even Reverend Jesse Jackson, who at that time was the director of Operation Bread Basket, a program of S.C.L.C.

Now these two meetings, one in the late 19th century and one just 18 years ago, suggest both the interrelationships and the duality of Pan Africanist interest in the United States. One coming out of a secular orientation and the other coming out of a religious orientation, or what Tony Martin has called *Evangelical Pan Africanism*. There is obviously a very close connection between the two because they are intertwined—involved with one another — throughout the history of Black people in the United States. It is difficult to separate these two movements because both express a concern for spiritual, as well as physical unity, among African people. Consciousness of Black identity, Black authenticity, African personality, Negritude — all of those terms that have been a part of historic Pan Africanism, came together in these two movements — one issuing out of the Church and its concern for mission and evangelization, and the other rising out of the political and nationalistic concerns of Black secularists. Maulana Karenga, who has contributed a great deal to the secular

Pan Africanist or non-Christian Pan African orientation, has said that what is needed now is an operational unity between these two perspectives. His point is that while we might disagree about details, we should be able to agree on a general perspective having to do with the unity of Black people all over the world—an *operational* unity that can combine our commitments and our strengths. I fully agree.

Now there is no question but that the seed of 20th century Pan Africanism (that is to say, the consciousness and promotion of a positive connectedness with African and Black people everywhere around the world) was germinated first in the Black church by preachers, by Black theologians, church executives, missionaries and lay people. A classic statement of this type of evangelical or Christian Pan Africanism, antecedent to the modern Pan African movement, is found in the words of Rev. Lott Carey, who went to Liberia in 1820 under the auspices of the American Colonization Society and the Black Baptist church people of Richmond, Virginia.

Lott Carey wrote, "I am an African and in this country, however meritorious my conduct and respectable my character, I cannot receive the credit due either. I wish to move to a country where I could be estimated by my merits, not by my complexion. And I feel bound to labor for my suffering race."

This sentiment expressed by Lott Carey, as he and Rev. Colin Teague prepared to sail off to Liberia, has ebbed and flowed within the Black American community throughout the 300-year history of our religious experience in this country. In other words, there has always been a subtle ambivalence about Africa among African Americans in the States. Active identification and a feeling of closeness with Africa has varied among us from period to period and from place to place. One would have to say, however, and this is the point I wish to emphasize, that most unfortunately, negative images and attitudes about Africa have predominated among us. That doesn't mean that those images have not been challenged. They are being challenged all the time and have consistently been challenged

by our churches. But it should not come as a surprise to us that unflattering images and attitudes about Africa have predominated in this country among our people because white racism has been eminently successful in brainwashing us about the Motherland, and making us feel that we should be ashamed of Black skin, should turn our backs upon the history and culture of our ancestors, should believe that it is more sensible and strategic for us to be identified with the white people of Europe and North America than with Black people anywhere in the world.

This feeling which has deeply penetrated the Black community in the United States is expressed by EruBell Thompson in a book called *Africa, Land of My Fathers*, published in 1954. She wrote, just after she had visited Africa: "Until a few months before, Africa had been the last place on earth I wanted to visit. Until a few years before, my knowledge of the continent, like that of most Americans, both Black and White, was geared to the concepts handed down by Livingstone and Stanley nearly a hundred years ago. Had anyone called me an African I would have been indignant. Only race fanatics flaunted their jungle ancestry or formed back to Africa movements. . . . When I saw barefoot African students in their flowing robes, walking down Congo Boulevard at Congo headquarters, I too, shook my head and murmured, "My people." If there was a skeleton of a chief in my family closet, he was Cherokee—that is a Native American, not Kru. A Blackfoot, not a Yoruba. I was proud of my red and white blood, ashamed of the Black, for I grew up believing that Black was bad — that Black was dirty and poor and wrong. Black was African. I did not want to be an African."

Now I don't know about my North American brothers and sisters, but I'm ashamed of that attitude among our people in this country. It has not been acceptable over the years and is certainly not acceptable today. Yet it is not an uncommon attitude even among the Black intelligentsia, particularly when things are going well in the United States—when Black

people feel most secure and integrated with the white majority of this nation.

Concern about and identification with Africa seems to flare up and become strongest when we are most beleaguered; when we feel that our backs are against the wall, as in the period after the Civil War, or after Reconstruction, when our rights were taken away from us before the turn of the century. During that period we had the out-flaring of a "back to Africa" movement and an interest in emigration among Black Americans. So that ebb and flow of interest in and concern about Africa seems to have an enduring relationship to whatever happens to be the situation of Black people in the United States. Just now I feel that the feeling of African connectedness is at low tide, but I may be wrong as far as the masses of African Americans are concerned. I hope I am.

African connectedness was at a high level a few year ago during the rise of independent Africa because we were proud to see the pictures of Nkrumah, Jomo Kenyatta, and others on the front pages of the white newspapers. We were very proud to see our Black brothers going in and out of the great doors of the United Nations. African consciousness was at high tide in those days. It was at high tide during the period of "Roots", both the book and the movie. Alex Haley drew us back to our origin and many of us became more self-conscious of who we were and where we had come from. Nothing much has changed this African American ambivalence. The ebb and flow of Pan African sentiment continues and I suspect that it is not very high today, despite our increasing interest in what is happening in South Africa. South Africa is still a long way from Long Island or southwest Atlanta.

Yet, and let me conclude with this statement: *Pan African issues and aspirations have never been totally expunged from the consciousness of Black Americans.* Since 1969 Black theology in the United States has sought a wider context for Black religious identity and an international orientation. It is, in fact, with that particular school of theology that I and many

of us here identify ourselves. We believe that it is through the recovery of the meaning of the Christian faith, out of our Black experience in the United States, that we will also recover the strong bond that connects us with Black people everywhere in the world, particularly those who are struggling against racism, colonialism, neo-colonialism, and every form of oppression. I leave the matter there and turn you over to my colleagues for the continuation of this panel discussion. Thank you.