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Black Theology in the United States

I've been asked to say a few informal words about the origin and development of Black Theology; a subject about which I and others, like Gayraud Wilmore and Jacquelyn Grant have written and talked about for more than 20 years. Contemporary Black Theology has two main sources. The first one is the Civil Rights Movement as defined by the life and ministry of Martin Luther King, Jr., and the second source is the Black Power/Black Consciousness Movement defined by the life and ministry of Malcolm X. Black Theology arose as Black theologians and preachers attempted to reconcile Black consciousness and Blackness with the Christian faith. It arose out of the attempt to reconcile what Malcolm X was saying with what Martin King was saying.

Now, let me say a brief word about the background in order to place the rise of Black Theology in the context of the 1960s. Black Theology in the 1960s was a product of the Black Church, whose independence or separation from the white Church began in the latter part of the 18th century. Black Christians then separated themselves from white Christians and began to organize their own churches because they refused to accept racism, segregation, or slavery as consistent with the gospel of Jesus and certainly inconsistent with the meaning of Christian worship. Blacks contended that segregation, racism, and slavery were denials of the gospel for as Paul said, "We are one in Christ Jesus"; and "God is no respecter of persons." Therefore, there must be no separation between Black and

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white, men and women within the context of communal worship and in the society.

In our nation the Methodist and Baptist Churches were the most widely accepted ecclesiastical forms which independent Black churches adopted when they originated. There were also Blacks who remained within the predominantly white churches, but many of them too, as did Blacks who separated themselves, challenged whites to rid the church of racism, segregation and slavery. They too claimed that Christianity and slavery were opposites. Even among the slaves it was recognized that slavery and segregation contradicted the gospel of Jesus. Many of the slaves, therefore, created a secret church, which is commonly known as the "invisible institution." They would steal away, secretly into the woods at night, in order to sing and pray for their liberation from bondage. The Negro or Black spirituals were created by the slaves and expressed their repudiation of the contradiction between slavery and the gospel. Thus, they sang, "Everybody talkin' bout heaven ain't going there!"

Although Blacks recognized the ethical heresy within white Christianity they nevertheless assumed that white theology was basically sound; only white behavior was contrary to the will of God. That was why Black denominations adopted the creeds and the articles of faith of the white churches from which they separated and did not seek substantially to change them. The assumption that the white Church's behavior was heretical, but that its theology was good or sound, was not questioned by most Black Christians until the rise of Black Theology in the 1960s.

Now, no one symbolized the theology in the Black Church tradition more than Martin Luther King, Jr. In word and in action he demonstrated the ethical heresy of the white Church with his rejection of injustice, the injustice of segregation and racism. He called upon the white Church, upon the Church at large, to recognize its greatest moral dilemma, namely racism and segregation in the Church. He referred to white Christians as "unChristian Christians," and whites found it very difficult to listen

to King's analysis of the Christian faith and at the same time remain content with segregation in the church. It should be understood, however, that although Martin King criticized the white Church's ethical behavior with such statements as, "The eleven o'clock hour on Sunday morning is the most segregated hour in the United States," and although King pointed sharply to its ethical heresy, he did not make a similar critique of its theological heresy. Like Black preachers before him, he assumed that white theology was essentially sound. Only the practice of the white Church was heretical.

In time it was the challenge of the Muslim minister, Malcolm X, and the Black Consciousness Movement that made Black preachers and theologians take another look at white theology. Malcolm contended that Christianity was the white man's religion and he called Christianity, as it was taught in both white churches and Black churches, white nationalism. God was white. Malcolm called that white nationalism. He was also critical of white Christians for encouraging Blacks to turn their concerns toward heaven, while whites enslaved them down here on earth. This is the way Malcolm expressed it:

My brothers and sisters, our white slave master's Christian religion has taught us Black people that we will sprout wings when we die and fly into the sky where God will have us a special place called heaven. This is the white man's Christian religion used to brainwash us Black people. We've practiced it. And while we were doing all that, this blue-eyed devil has twisted his Christianity to keep his foot on our backs, to keep our eyes fixed on the pie in the sky, in the heaven hereafter, while he enjoys his heaven right here, on this earth, in this life.

Black theology arose as an attempt to answer Malcolm X, that is, to show that one can, in fact, be both Black in consciousness and also be a Christian; that Christianity, rightly understood and practiced, is more than just pie in the sky.

It is important to note that there are two foci around which Black Theology began to develop, emerging out of Malcolm X's critique of Christianity. One was the focus on its African culture — the turn toward Africa as reflected in the Black Power/Black Consciousness Movement — and the other was the focus on liberation. Black Theology began, therefore, with a focus on culture and a focus on liberation. The liberation focus defined the Christian faith essentially as a religion of human liberation emerging out of the context of the biblical message. This emphasis in Black Theology made it one of the earliest expressions of liberation theology. Thus, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, my second book, published in 1970, and the book *Liberation and Reconciliation: A Black Theology* by J. Deotis Roberts, published in 1971, both focused upon liberation as the central message of the Christian gospel and both sought to answer Malcolm X's allegation that Christianity is nothing more than a religion of pie in the sky.

Secondly, Black theology's focus on culture made it turn toward Africa and thereby seek a dialogue with African Christians along the lines mentioned by Gayraud Wilmore earlier. Therefore, the National Committee of Black Churchmen (NCBC), which emerged as the institutional expression of Black Theology, sent two representatives in 1969 to the meeting of the All Africa Conference of Churches in Abijan, in order to explain what we were doing here and to learn from the Africans. Immediately, other meetings followed in Tanzania, Kenya and Ethiopia in 1971. Consultations were initiated with African theologians. Accordingly, the Society for the Study of Black Religion (SSBR), continuing where NCBC left off, began holding meetings between African theologians and African American theologians, first at Union Seminary in New York, and later at the University of Ghana in Legon. More recently, the dialogue between African and Black American theologians has also emerged in another context, focused primarily, not just on culture, but also on politics, and here, another organization called the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT), organized in Tanzania in August of 1976, has taken up the

discussion. In this new context, Africans, African Americans, Asians and Latin Americans are in dialogue, seeking to develop a liberation perspective in theology that we all can support and embrace.

Meetings along these more recent lines have been held in East Africa in 1976, in West Africa in 1977, in Asia (Sri Lanka) in 1979, in Latin America in 1981, and then back to Asia, in India, in 1982. An EAT-WOT meeting was held in Geneva, Switzerland, in 1983 and in Mexico in 1985. All of these meetings have engaged African, Asian, Latin American, and Black theologians from the United States in an intense effort to understand and articulate the meaning of the Christian faith from the perspective of those who are at the bottom, rather than the top of the ladder of material prosperity in the world.

I will stop here so that my other colleague, Jacquelyn Grant, may say something from her perspective within the context of what Wilmore and I have said concerning the place of this conference in the history and development of African American religion and Black Theology in the United States.