

Black Theology Project Papers in Dialogue With Cubans

Introduction

The documents which follow were selected from a growing collection of scholarly papers, lectures, short talks, poems and devotional pieces shared over the past five years by members of the Black Theology Project of the United States with various groups of Christians in Cuba. The dialogues between African North American and Cuban Christians have recently included partners from other parts of the Caribbean and Latin America, thereby broadening the conversation to encompass perspectives from Jamaica, Central America, and Brazil.

In this issue of the *Journal* we are publishing for the first time a representative group of documents from dialogues held in Cuba in 1986 and in 1988. Most of these selections were presented by members of the BTP delegation and their Cuban dialogue partners at the "*Primera Jornada Teologica de Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.*," held in Havana from June 22-28, 1988. Since 1984 these conversations have been hosted in Cuba by the Baptist Workers and Students Coordinating Committee of Cuba (COEBAC) and by the Ecumenical Council of Churches of Cuba. In 1985 the theological dialogue was augmented and enriched by a group of young adult musicians from Black congregations in the United States who toured churches in Cuba. The following year eleven Cuban church musicians reciprocated at the Black Theology Project annual convocation in Washington, D.C. In addition four Cuban pastors spent a month in research and study experiences in Black churches in the New York City area under the auspices of the Black Theology Project.

Each of the theological dialogues held in Havana and in other cities in Cuba has focused on a different theme suggested by the life and ministry of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the Black theologian and church leader in the United States in whom Protestant Christians in Cuba have shown extraordinary and intense interest. The Black Theology Project, described below, has sought to engage its Cuban partners in an examination of King's work and its implications in light of the situation of African American Christians in the United States today and of Christians in their post-revolutionary situation in contemporary Cuba. The delegations from the United States have included prominent African American theologians, pastors, denominational executives, community activists and

young people from the churches. The Cuban delegations have been similarly varied with the addition of many lay persons from several towns and rural areas, an occasional representative from the Roman Catholic churches, and invited guests from the government and the Communist Party of Cuba.

From the beginning the discussants probed the nature and significance of Black theology in the United States, the theology of liberation in Cuba, their convergences and differences, the problems of Christian mission, women's liberation, and societal transformation in both countries, and the historical connections and commonalities between Afro-Cuban culture and the culture of African Americans in the United States and other parts of the African diaspora. The result has been a deeper understanding and appreciation of each other's history of suffering and struggle, of the challenges of racism, sexism, classism in each place, and the richness of the two cultures so deeply penetrated by the philosophy and religion, aesthetics and spirituality of Africa.

The dialogue continues with a research and study group composed of BTP members, university students and faculty persons traveling to Cuba in January, 1990, to meet with Cuban Christians around topics related to the religions of people of African descent in the Caribbean, with particular emphasis upon the little-known history of the mission work of U.S. Black churches in Cuba. The papers contained in this issue of the *Journal* reflect only a small sampling of the broad, multi-disciplinary and ecumenical interests that have been stimulated by this exchange. In editing them we have attempted to preserve as much as possible the informal, conversational character of the original presentations in dialogue — although in some instances, footnotes have been added — in keeping with the spirit of authentic Black theology to be a theology of the people, of a culture seeking to identify itself, and of a church seeking liberation and reconciliation for all people.

The Black Theology Project

The Black Theology Project (BTP) is an African American ecumenical Christian organization, founded in 1976, for the discovery, development and promotion of African American religious thought and action. It is church-centered and community-related, believing that Black theology derives from the people and their historic struggle through religious institutions, Christian and otherwise, for liberation from slavery, racism, economic exploitation, cultural imperialism, and other forms of the oppression and marginalization that persons of African descent have experienced in this hemisphere. In its reconceptualization of the meaning of Christian faith, the community of the Church, worship and mission, the Black Theology Project seeks to engage persons in study, dialogue, and

action in local congregations, colleges and seminaries, and in religious institutions and agencies with similar purposes in the Third World, particularly the Caribbean, Latin America and Africa.

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