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Black Theology and African Theology

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INTRODUCTION

I AM addressing you as a Christian African. As a Christian, I have had the experience of new life in Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ and his Word, the Bible, come first and foremost in my life. This experience is a categorical imperative for me and other Christians. It is an experience that I would recommend to everyone, and it is possible for anyone to share in this experience.

As an African Christian, I empathize sincerely with all my fellow Africans under any type of bondage, be it spiritual or physical. It is my sincere prayer that the exploited Africans under any regime on our continent will soon find justice and liberation. But my greatest concern is for the three hundred million Africans who have not had the experience of Jesus Christ. It is therefore the responsibility of the 60 million African Christians to share Christ with this vast majority so that they might find true eternal liberation. The main purpose of this paper is to re-emphasize the Christian message and its relevance to contemporary Africa, as opposed to the confusing voices we hear today.

Let me first point out that Black Theology is different from African Theology, though the two concepts are not mutually exclusive.

Black Theology which became evident among the blacks of the United States of America in the 1960s seeks to emphasize black consciousness and thereby discover the dignity of the black man. Black consciousness does not necessarily mean the pigmentation of the skin. Rather, it means an awareness that the particular class of people called black, have been oppressed. 'It is the liberating p. 36 effect of this self-knowledge and awareness that we refer to as Black Consciousness,' writes Nyameko Pityana of Fort Hare University, South Africa.¹ Dr. McVeigh of Nairobi University accurately sums up the concept of Black Theology when he says, 'The primary concern of Black Theology is liberation, and one sees considerable attention devoted to defining the implications of Jesus' Gospel for the downtrodden in the face of entrenched political, social and economic injustice.'²

African Theology lays emphasis on the dignity of the African by playing up African culture and African traditional religions. It does not stress blackness or liberation as such. Some of its proponents definitely point out that African Theology is different from Christian Theology. Dr. J. K. Agbeti of Ghana writes, 'The idea of "African Theology" seems

¹ *Black Theology*, p. 60.

² *Presence*, Vol. V, No. 3, 1972, p. 2.

to have been confused with the idea of “Christian Theology” as it may be expressed by African theologians using African thought forms. Thus it is my intention in this article to show that “African Theology” is distinct from “Christian Theology” as it may be expressed by African theologians using African thought forms.’³

BLACK THEOLOGY

(a) Root Causes of Black Theology

That Black Theology was born in the United States and now is rooted in Southern Africa is no accident. For an ideology seeking to liberate the oppressed, that oppression becomes the root cause. Enslavement of Africans by the whites is probably the worst evil done by one class of people to another. It may be surpassed only by Hitler’s massacre of six million Jews. Until about 20 years ago, American blacks experienced many kinds of humiliation on account of the pigmentation of their skin. Today, 250,000 whites are lording it over the five million African Rhodesians on the false pretext that they are preserving Christian civilization. In apartheid South Africa today, the Soweto black dweller works to provide comfort for the white suburban inhabitants of ultra-modern Johannesburg, but is denied the fruit of his labour. To keep the black man in perpetual [p.37](#) bondage, the racist regime is reported to spend about 5,000 shillings a year for the education of an average white child and about 300 shillings for a black child.⁴ It has been reported that in South Africa 378 million U.S. dollars are spent on the education of four million whites and 1.1 million dollars on 21 million blacks.⁵ Injustice of this type is one of the evils that have given rise to Black Theology.

While not all oppressors of blacks are Christians, there have been white Christians who have been a party to the system of oppression. Some have justified their unchristian practice from the story of [Genesis 9:20-27](#). They erroneously explain that Ham was cursed by his drunken father, Noah, and the curse has now come upon the black people believed to be Ham’s descendants. Black people are looked upon as perpetual slaves to be ‘hewers of wood and drawers of water’. This naïve interpretation overlooks the following facts:

- (i) The curse for the whole of humanity begins in [Genesis 3](#), and is repeated throughout the Word of God ([Romans 3](#) and [5, Ephesians 2:1-13](#)).
- (ii) It was Canaan, and not Ham, who was cursed ([Genesis 9:25](#)). This curse was never repeated anywhere else in the Scriptures.
- (iii) Jesus Christ has taken away any curse upon the believer ([Isaiah 53:6](#)).
- (iv) Who has received a mandate from God to take vengeance on behalf of God? Though the Lord does use human instruments sometimes to correct his children, taking vengeance is his alone ([Romans 12:19](#)).

While I do not agree with the proponents of Black Theology for reasons to be given later, I fully identify myself with their condemnation of injustice. The search for human dignity is a Scriptural principle. Jesus Christ so values human life that he became incarnate. Not one hair from anybody’s head falls to the ground without God’s knowledge and concern ([Matthew 10:30](#)). Thank God not all white people, let alone all white

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Radio South Africa, June 17, 1975.

⁵ *Daily Nation*, Nairobi, Sep. 24, 1975.

Christians, have been guilty of dehumanization. In fact, many white people have faced ridicule and even death for the black man. Therefore we should avoid generalizations. Furthermore, we should judge Christianity by [p. 38](#) what the Founder of it has said in his Word rather than by what professing followers have done. The Bible is God's Word. If all men become liars and unfaithful, God remains faithful ([II Timothy 2:13](#)). Black Theology, though raising the right questions, has been carried away by emotions. The Bible has either been cast aside or stripped of its absolute authority. The humanistic ethical principle that the end justifies the means has become the marching orders of liberation enthusiasts. That is why some theologians go as far as justifying violence on the basis of Christian revelation. A closer look at the nature of Black Theology will show that the system as propounded by many of its exponents is incompatible with Biblical Christianity.

(b) The Nature of Black Theology

1. It is Reactionary

Steve Biko of the University of Natal, South Africa, gives the motif of Black Theology in Hegelian terminology: 'The *thesis* is in fact a strong white racism and therefore, the *antithesis* to this must, *ipso facto*, be a strong solidarity amongst the blacks on whom this white racism seeks to prey. Out of these two situations we can therefore hope to reach some kind of balance—a true humanity where power politics will have no place.'⁶ According to this thesis, all white people, irrespective of their relationship to Jesus Christ, are the oppressors. Biko describes them as 'irresponsible people from Coca Cola and hamburger cultural backgrounds'.⁷ Black people, whether Christians or non-Christians, 'must sit as one big unit, and no fragmentation and distraction from the mainstream of events be allowed'⁸ in opposing the whites. A synthesis, or peaceful co-existence, may then result from this conflict.

This approach may fit Hegelian-Marxist theory, but it is not the spirit of Jesus Christ. Christians as the salt of the earth ([Matthew 5:13](#)) should know no race barrier. An African theologian of the 3rd century, Tertullian, spoke in the vein of New Testament Christianity when he declared, 'Christians are members of the third race.' Just as it is wrong for any Christian to support racial prejudice [p. 39](#) and oppression, so it is wrong for the black Christian to lump all whites into one category and condemn them all. Rather than pitting thesis against antithesis on the basis of race, Christians from belligerent camps should stand as the synthesis, with Jesus Christ as the Head of the newly created body, the Church ([Ephesians 4:15](#)).

2. It is Relativistic or Situational

For the Christian, the Bible is the absolute authority on which to base all theological and ethical formulations. Black Theology, however, has human experience as the basic term of reference. Basil Moore writes, 'Black Theology is a situational theology. And the situation is that of the black man in South Africa.'⁹ Biko, in rejecting absolutes, writes, 'It grapples with existential problems and does not claim to be a theology of absolutes. It

⁶ *Black Theology*, p. 39.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 40.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

⁹ *Black Theology*, p. 5.

seeks to bring back God to the black man and to the truth and reality of his situation.’¹⁰ Says Pityana, ‘Blackness gives a point of reference, an identity and a consciousness.’¹¹ A popular motto found on many lorries in Nigeria is ‘No condition is permanent’. This is an apt description of the human condition. Man comes and goes. Human struggles constantly shift. Empires rise and fall. If a theology is based on human experience, rather than human experience seeking answers from the absolute Word of God, that theology is as good as a sail boat without sails. John Robinson’s situation ethics which allow immorality, provided that love dictates the situation, have been firmly rejected as being out of line with the absolute teaching of Scripture. Bible-believing Christians should reject Black Theology on the same basis. The absolute Word of God must be the measuring rod of the varying, fleeting situations.

3. It is Characterized by Humanism

It is true that salvation history has man as God’s object of love and care. ‘What is man that thou art mindful of him, and the son of man that thou dost care for him? Yet thou hast made him little less than God, and dost crown him with glory and honour’ ([Psalm 8:4, 5](#)). But it is equally true that the Word of God has the final say on man’s nature. The Bible speaks of the dignity of man who is *p. 40* God’s appointed ruler of God’s creation ([Genesis 2:28](#)). The same Word describes man’s distorted, dissipating nature following the fall ([Genesis 3](#) and [Romans 10](#)). Black Theology, on the other hand, sees only man’s dignity. It begins with man. ‘It begins with people—specific people, in a specific situation and with specific problems to face.’¹² A theology that begins with man will end there, missing the One who has spoken ([Hebrews 1:2](#)).

The Bible is called upon to conform to what Black Theology has said about man. Mpunzi states, ‘Black Theology has no room for the traditional Christian pessimistic view of man, the view that we are all by nature overwhelmingly and sinfully selfish.... This pessimism about man is therefore an ally in our own undermining of ourselves.’¹³ Human dignity, in the sense that man is the master of his own fate, is the type of dignity being called for. The logical outcome of humanism is a replacement of God with man.

4. The Omnipotent God is Dethroned as Man is Enthroned

The Gospel is described as Black Power. James Cone of Union Theological Seminary, New York, U.S.A. declares, ‘Black Theology puts black identity in a theological context, showing that Black Power is not only *consistent* with the gospel of Jesus Christ, but that it *is* the gospel of Jesus Christ’.¹⁴

If Black Power, which is described as the secular term for Black Theology,¹⁵ is the Gospel, it is appropriate then to find out what this Gospel has to say about God. Basil Moore has stripped God bare of all absolute attributes derived from the pages of Scripture through centuries of Biblical studies. He argues, ‘Concepts such as omnipotence and omniscience ring fearfully of the immovable, military-backed South African government

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 63.

¹² *Black Theology*, p. 6.

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 137–38.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

and its Special Branch. These, however, are the images learned from Western theology, and their biblical justification is dubious. Black Theology cannot afford to have any truck with these images which lend religious support to a fascist type of authoritarianism. Nor should it lend ear to the pious clap-trap which asserts that man cannot be free, he can only choose whose slave he will be—Christ's or the state's.¹⁶

Moore gives the description of the god of Black Theology, made [p. 41](#) in the image of the oppressed crying for liberation. 'Thus Black Theology needs to explore images of God which are not sickening reflections of the white man's power-mad authoritarianism ... God is no authoritarian king issuing commandments and rewarding or punishing according to our obedience or disobedience. Rather, God is discovered and known in the search for and experience of liberation, which is the wholeness of human life found only in the unity of liberating, life-affirming and dignifying relationships.' Moore continues, 'An appropriate symbol of this understanding of God would be that "God is Freedom"—the freedom which has been revealed in our history, the freedom which we do experience despite all that calls us forward infinitely to new and unexplored depths.'¹⁷

Satan's attempt to usurp God's throne ended in utter failure. Throughout the ages he has also energized man to try to dethrone God. The popular notion of a 'God is dead' theology has been a part of that attempt to 'demythologize' Christian theological language, reducing God to the realm of a created being. This form of idolatry, or rather atheism, is infiltrating the realm of Black Theology. Just because a racist regime has abused power is no reason for us to deprive God, our Creator, of his rightful kingship. The Almighty God, Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, has authoritatively declared, 'I am God and there is no other; I am God, and there is none like me' ([Isaiah 46:9](#)).

The highest dignity we can bring to our fellow Africans is to invite them to bow to the Lordship of Christ and the Father and join all other loyal creatures in singing, 'Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honour and power and might be to our God for ever and ever! Amen' ([Revelation 7:12](#)).

5. It Denies Hell

With God dethroned, man can reconstruct a theology to the delight of the natural man who wants to have his cake and eat it. He wants to live in rebellion to God with impunity. Biko holds that pagan African religions have no hell, so Christianity must be seen in that light. He declares, 'There was no hell in our religion. We believed in the inherent goodness of man—hence we took it for granted that all people at death joined the community of saints and therefore merited our respect. It was the missionaries who confused [p. 42](#) the people with their new religion. They scared our people with stories of hell. They painted their God as a demanding God who wanted worship "or else".'¹⁸ This type of Christianity which allows hell is inimical to the African religions, and is therefore to be rejected according to Black Theology. To reject the fact of hell is to reject New Testament teaching. There are many passages dealing with the subject ([Matthew 5:30](#); [25:46](#); [Luke 16:23](#); [Revelation 1:18](#)). The way out of hell is faith in Jesus Christ here and now, and not a brushing aside of Biblical teaching on the subject.

6. It is One-sided

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 8–9.

¹⁷ *Black Theology*, pp. 9–10.

¹⁸ *Black Theology*, p. 42.

Some advocates hold a view similar to that of the Black Muslims in the U.S.A. Many American Black Muslims teach that black people are the only true human beings. Therefore, paradise is prepared only for the blacks, though a handful of 'human' whites might also be favoured.

Describing another form of Black Theology called Ethiopianist Theology, Dibinga Wa Said of Zaire writes: 'Generally, the idea was and still is that the Black Messiah is at the gate of heaven, and that he is the holder of the keys. Only Black can enter. But under special circumstances, a few *human* whites may also enter depending on the number of seats left in the Kingdom of God, or the New Jerusalem.'¹⁹

The thought of blackness and oppression so occupy the minds of Black theologians that Jesus is limited to the black oppressed only. Basil Moore writes, 'Jesus as a Jew in first-century Israel was one of the poor, the colonized, the oppressed. Through the incarnation God identified himself in Christ with this group of people. Thus a meaningful symbol of God's identification with the oppressed is to say Christ is black.... In fact, at the beginning of his ministry he identifies his mission as being "to bring good news to the poor (he was poor); to proclaim liberty to captives (he too was a captive); and to the blind new sight; to let the oppressed go free (he was a Jew under Roman oppression); to proclaim the Lord's year of favour' ([Luke 4:18](#)). In other words, Jesus was, though oppressed, a liberator of the oppressed. Belonging to the oppressed, Christ is black.'²⁰ p. 43

Mokgethi Motlhabi utters a similar defence for blackness as the exclusive substance of incarnation. He writes, 'In Black Theology it is no longer new to point to the fact that it is the black people who are the oppressed of our day, and thus that it is meaningful to speak of the Christ as the one who is identified with the blacks for their liberation.'²¹

Black Theology, along with other humanistic theological systems such as the Theology of Liberation, is anchored in the liberal understanding of the incarnation and liberation. Time does not allow us to delve into these areas. Suffice it to point out that the incarnation of our Lord is the assumption of humanity in general, and this includes both the rich and the poor, the oppressor and the oppressed, the black and the white. The classical passage on the incarnation ([Philippians 2:5-11](#)) indicates that Jesus Christ became man in general. The form of a servant does not depict only a section of humanity, but it indicates the vicarious suffering of the Servant of Yahweh ([Isaiah 52:13-53:12](#)) on behalf of all members of the human race 'since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God' ([Romans 3:23](#)). No one race therefore has any monopoly on the incarnation of the Son of God. The incarnation has made all men saveable, but it is only when a person puts his trust in the incarnate Christ who died and rose again to reconcile men to God ([1 Corinthians 15:3-4](#)) that he can be saved.

The concept of liberation is a confusing one today. Beginning with the premise that the oppressed are the sole object of Christ's mission, the liberal ecumenicals go on to limit the goal of Christ's mission to social, political and economic liberation. Jesus Christ said, 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord' ([Luke 4:18-19](#)). If this is taken in the narrow sense of Christ coming only for the down-trodden, why did he have any dealings at all with the religious leaders—the Pharisees; the aristocrats—the Sadducees; the wealthy businesswomen—Mary and

¹⁹ *Harvard Theological Review*, LXIV (Oct. 1971), pp. 501-24.

²⁰ *Black Theology*, p. 8.

²¹ *Black Theology*, p. 125.

Martha; the well-to-do fishermen—the sons of Zebedee; the successful civil servants—Matthew and Zacchaeus? Why did God allow his Son to be buried in the tomb of ‘capitalist’ Joseph of Arimathea? If Christ’s mission was for political liberation, why did he not p. 44 organize a gang resistance to the Roman oppressors instead of urging his followers to go the extra mile ([Matthew 5:41](#))?

It is true that ‘in the Greek world *eleutheria* (freedom or liberation) is primarily a political concept’.²² But words do not always have one and the same meaning in all generations. For example, the word ‘let’ at the time the King James version of the Bible was written meant ‘hinder’, but now it means just the opposite, ‘allow’. The word *eleutheria*, freedom, does not have just one meaning all the time. Schlier correctly explains, “More concretely the New Testament uses *eleutheria* for freedom from sin ([Romans 6:18–23](#); [John 8:31–36](#)), from the Law ([Romans 7:3–4](#); [8:21](#)).”²³ He further adds, ‘Freedom from sin and from the Law thus includes essentially freedom from the self-deception of autonomous existence by the disclosure of truth.’²⁴

While New Testament Christianity respects human dignity and calls for justice, liberation in terms of what Christ came to do must be understood as meaning liberation from man’s fundamental dilemma, which is sin. When Christ talked of freedom, the Jewish leaders thought of political freedom. But he made it plain that he meant freedom from sin ([John 8:31–38](#)). Both the oppressed and the oppressor need this message. The liberated person must therefore see his fellow man as equal before God. The heart of Paul’s social ethics is summed up in [Galatians 4:28](#)—‘There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus.’ The unity of believers will provide them a base from which they can launch out into the world full of problems and confusion.

Conclusion

Theology, which is the science of God and his creation, needs to be interpreted in such a way that it becomes meaningful to the listeners. The Bible should address itself to the black man in his plight. It has done so in pointing out both the dignity and depravity of all men. It is the responsibility of the Christian theologian to bring these facts to the knowledge of the public. If Black Theology is p. 45 understood in that sense, then I am all for it. We should scratch where it itches.

Unfortunately, Black Theology as described in this paper usurps the place of God’s revelation. The proponents have set up human experience as the basis for theologizing. Where Biblical concepts are used at all, they are used only to support the preconceived position of the theologian. I therefore see Black Theology as a worse danger than the western liberalism rejected by evangelical Christians. Rather than adhering to Black Theology, I appeal to my Christian brothers, Africans and non-Africans, to search the Scriptures, and stand by Scriptural principles. According to the Scriptures, believers, under any human condition, are already liberated. ‘For freedom Christ has set us free’ ([Galatians 5:1](#)). But our freedom in Christ should challenge us to seek for justice through peaceful means. It is therefore not Black Theology we need, but the application of Christian Theology to the black situation. It is not a black Jesus or black God, but obedience to the omnipotent God of the Bible.

²² *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. II, p. 488.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 496.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 496.

II. AFRICAN THEOLOGY

Time would not permit an exhaustive presentation on this subject. But let me point out the following things.

I see the need of Christian theology addressing itself specifically to the African situation. Such areas as principles of interpretation, polygamy, family life, the spirit world, and communal life should be given serious consideration. African theologians of the first four centuries of Christianity made their vital contribution to the development of theology in the universal Church. Those early African theologians include Origen, Athanasius, Tertullian and Augustine. African theologians today should also make their own contribution to theology for the benefit of the Church universal. If this is our understanding of African Theology, then it is a noble effort worthy of our support.

Unfortunately, many theologians spend their time defending African traditional religions and practices that are incompatible with Biblical teaching. Some recent writers have sought to justify pagan initiation rites. Speaking in support of initiation, Mr. Bongeye Senza Masa of the All Africa Conference of Churches Secretariat concludes: "To summarize what has been said earlier p. 46 in other terms, it may be said that the decision to turn the school into a centre of traditional initiation, where ancestral values are integrated into the modern educational system, might very well constitute a sign of revival for the Church of Christ."²⁵ Many Christians in Chad have laid down their lives for their objection to initiation rites. I have been to Chad and confirmed from many Chadian Christians that these rites are pagan practices. Yet some African Christian leaders are defending the practice. The burning desire to defend African personality is given precedence over Scriptural injunction.

The sources for African Theology are increasingly becoming African traditional religions rather than the Bible as the absolute source. Dr. J. K. Agbeti writes, 'Consequently when we talk about "African Theology" we should mean the interpretation of the pre-Christian and pre-Moslem African people's experience of their God.'²⁶ In describing the source of material for African Theology, Agbeti declares, 'Materials about African religion are being collected and collated regionally. From these regional sources could grow later a religion which could be truly called African Religion. It will be from this source that an 'African Theology' may be developed, a theology which will critically systematize the traditional African experience of God and his relation with man, of Man and his relation with God, of the Spiritual universe, of sin, etc.'²⁷ It seems that Agbeti is advocating a return to African traditional religions rather than expressing Christianity more meaningfully to the African. Other advocates of African Theology do not go as far as Agbeti. Various theologians give their interpretations of what African Theology means. Professor John Mbiti, who has done more original work in this area than other African I know, has said, 'It is all too easy to use the phrase "African Theology"; but to state what that means, or even show its real nature, is an entirely different issue.'²⁸

One thing, however, seems certain concerning most of the advocates of African Theology. Philip Turner sums it up well: 'It does not seem to help much to speak of "African Theology". The term is viewed with suspicion because the interest in traditional p. 47 religion associated with it calls up in the minds of many a return to paganism. The

²⁵ AACC Bulletin, Vol. 8, No. 1, p. 16.

²⁶ *Presence*, Vol. V, No. 3, 1972, p. 6.

²⁷ *Ibid*, p. 7.

²⁸ John S. Mbiti, *New Testament Eschatology in an African Background*, p. 185.

phrase an “African Theology” has about it, therefore, the quality of a slogan of vindication. It refers first to the attempt to find points of similarity between Christian notions and those drawn from the traditional religions of Africa. Secondly, it refers to the hope that a systematic theology expressed in the language and concepts of traditional religion and culture, may one day be written ... The phrase implies in its popular usage an attempt to amalgamate elements of Christian and elements of traditional belief.’²⁹

African Theology seems to be heading for syncretism and universalism. This subject is dealt with elsewhere.³⁰ Suffice it to sound a note of warning that our search for African personality should not lead us to a compromising position. But this should not be a moratorium on further research on African thought patterns. In our effort to express Christianity in the context of the African, the Bible must remain the absolute source. It is God’s Word addressing Africans and everyone else within their cultural background.

Conclusion

The term African Theology has come to mean different things to different people. Furthermore, it has the inherent danger of syncretism. The term therefore is viewed with suspicion. It is more appropriate to talk of Christian Theology and then define whatever context we find it related to, e.g. reflections from Africa; the context of marriage in Africa; Christian Theology and the spirit world in Africa. But there should be a continuing effort to relate Christian Theology to the changing situations in Africa. It is only as the Bible is taken as the absolute Word of God that it can have an authoritative and relevant message for Africa. May the Lord help us all to experience the life of Christ, stand by his sure Word of truth, and proclaim it firmly and unmistakably throughout our continent, so that Africa may hear the voice of him who is saying, ‘Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest’ ([Matthew 11:28](#)). p. 48

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The Gospel in a Hostile Environment

²⁹ *Journal of Religion in Africa*, Vol. IV, pp. 64–65.

³⁰ Byang H. Kato, *Theological Pitfalls in Africa*.