Was Black Theology Another Religion: What Did Black Christians Think?

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Was Black theology, in its infancy, another religion?[1] This question is essential to a Christian or Evangelical engagement with Black theology in the 21st century. The placement of Black theology within or without the boundaries of orthodox Christianity during the late 1960s and early 1970s is telling on the placement of its subsequent development. Incidentally, it would be presumptuous to assume that all Black theologians wanted to be considered Christian. Gayraud Wilmore said black experience might need "a unique religion, closely related to, but not exclusively bound by, the Christian tradition."[2]

This paper will seek to address historically two questions: (1) "Was Black theology, in its infancy, another religion as distinguished from Christianity?" (2) "Was Black theology a prophetic challenge to Christians in America, from within the bounds of Christianity, to actualize biblical Christianity?"[3] Perhaps this historical survey of Black

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[1] This paper was first presented on November 21, 2002, at the Evangelical Theological Society's annual meeting in Toronto, Canada.

[2] James Cone and Gayraud Wilmore, eds., *Black Theology A Documentary History Volume One: 1966-1979*, (Maryknoll: Orbis Press, 1993), 132. This identity issue is not new. In 1971, J. Deotis Roberts highlighted the distinction between the call for Black Power and its attendant religious expressions over against Christianity. He says, "Many blacks who are not Christian are associated with 'the religion of Black Power.' A black theologian who operates from the Christian faith has difficulty being heard in this company, however angry he may be. Vincent Harding is the braintrust of this Black Power religion. James Cone is on the fence between the Christian faith and the religion of Black Power. It will be necessary for Cone to decide presently where he will take his firm stand. The present writer [Roberts] takes his stand within the Christian theological circle." J. Deotis Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1971), 21.

[3] The academic architect of Black theology felt that a legitimate gap or void in theology was being addressed. James Cone says, "The appearance of Black theology on the scene is due to the failure of white religionists to relate the gospel of Jesus to the pain of being black in a white racist society." James H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1970), 23. He finds fault in the north (which ignored black suffering in its theology) and in the south (which justified black suffering

theology's infancy will aid current analysis of this cultural, academic, and religious phenomenon. This paper will seek to engage the early responses of black pastors within black denominations, black clergy within white denominations, and black and white theologians. In order to avoid the hypothetical charge that whites cannot, without prejudice, critique blacks due to their lack of experience with slavery, racism, and segregation[4], this paper will mainly interact with black preachers, black theologians, and African theologians. This type of historical analysis is relevant as one considers the 21st century because James Cone said the second generation of writers, while not merely repeating the first, did build off of the earlier foundation.[5] While there has been expansion[6] and maturation in Black theology, there has been no reorientation or reformation to shift it from its original moorings within or without the bounds of Christianity. Before engaging the above questions, in order to provide vital existential context, this paper will survey three historical realities that contributed to the environment from which Black theology emerged and briefly gauge the pre-Black theology response of black Christians to these circumstances.

This type of historical analysis and critique of Black theology, in the midst of a still racist society (and "Christian" church) must be done with the disclaimer that the racism that provoked the circumstances that created Black theology was, and still is, a legitimate evil to be addressed. Bruce Fields, an evangelical, rightly says, "Black theologians voice insensitivities, inconsistencies, and blatant hypocrisy on the part of the dominant white traditions."[7] Legitimate pain, disappointment, and disillusionment have characterized the African, Afro-Virginian, slave, Negro, N_ _ _ _ _, and Black experience of Christianity in America.

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in its theology). Ibid., 22.

[4] Cone and Wilmore, *Black Theology: 1966-1979*, 112. Also, Cone "will not listen to anybody who refuses to take racism seriously, especially when they themselves have not been victims of it." Ibid., 273. However, John H. Carey rightly notes, "When he [Cone] denies that white theology can criticize or inform black theology, he is reinforcing the exclusivism that is characteristic of all sectarian and cultic groups." John H. Carey, "What Can We Learn From Black Theology?" *Theological Studies* 35 (S 1974): 523.

[5] James Cone and Gayraud Wilmore, eds., *Black Theology: A Documentary History Volume II 1980-1992* (Maryknoll: Orbis Press, 1993), 1-11.

[6] Expansion includes the acceptance, by many in the Black theology community of pluralism, syncretism, radical feminism, anti-supernaturalism, and anti-heterosexism or heterophobia. Black Womanist theology assaults the traditional understandings of suffering and substitutionary atonement.

[7] Bruce L. Fields, *Introducing Black Theology: Three Crucial Questions for the Evangelical Church* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic Press, 2001), 48.

Historical Realities

What was the "problem" Black theology was seeking to address?[8] What pain, despair, or frustration led to the attempt to develop a unique theology that would give expression, dignity, and humanity to the black experience of Christianity in America? At least three historical realities (problems) contributed to the rise of Black theology.

Slavery, Segregation, Etc.

First, blacks in America had the historical memory of chattel slavery and the contemporary experience of segregation and racial prejudice. This had been, and was, a historical reality both inside and outside of the "Christian" church. Particularly revealing of the influence of slavery among Christians were the denominational splits of the 1840s that occurred among Presbyterians, Methodists, and Baptists along sectional lines.[9] Regarding the issue of race, many found Christianity, as practiced by white Americans to be complicit or indifferent to issues of racism, both historically (regarding slavery) and in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement.[10]

Historically, blacks have always seen through the hypocrisy of the racist imposter of Christianity practiced in America.[11] The ability to distinguish between genuine Christianity and white American religiosity was always present with slaves. Slave narratives reveal that early in colonial life illiterate slaves, without being able to read the Bible, recognized the lie of their masters and the deception of the truncated gospel that was preached to them focusing on "servants, obey your masters." As early as the mid-1700s, black Baptists were establishing

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[8] Roger Olson lists Black theology among a number of "problem theologies" that sought to address social, political, and economic problems including theologies developed by blacks, liberationists in South America, and feminists. See *The Story of Christian Theology: Twenty Centuries of Tradition and Reform* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1999), 602-06. These theologies shift the emphasis of salvation from God's problem with man, and replace it with an emphasis on man's problem with man.

[9] Edwin S. Gaustad, *A Documentary History of Religion in America to the Civil War* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1993), 467-502.

[10] The issue of race in Christianity is currently as potent as it was in the 1960s. Nearly thirty years later, major denominations, such as the Southern Baptist Convention, were still seeking to address the issue. "Resolution on Racial Reconciliation on the 150th Anniversary of the Southern Baptist Convention" in Timothy George and Robert Smith, Jr., *A Mighty Long Journey: Reflections on Racial Reconciliation* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 2000), 223-25.

[11] Frederick Douglass, for example, distinguished between "the slaveholding religion of this land" and Christianity proper. He also spoke of the "Christianity of this land" and the "Christianity of Christ." See "Evangelical Flogging" in Jon Butler and Harry S. Stout, eds., *Religion in American History: A Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 222-31.

separate churches in which to worship without the presence of racism. In 1787, Richard Allen founded the Free African Society (which would become the African Methodist Episcopal Church in 1816) after experiencing racism in Philadelphia's Methodist Church. The nineteenth century is filled with revolts by slaves using biblical narratives for their justification and oratorical attacks against racism in society and especially among those professing to be Christians. The early and mid-twentieth century was never void of a prophetic black Christian thinker to shout against the evils of racism.

During the 1780s, a "window of opportunity" quickly shut. The Awakening, with its accompanying emphasis on conversion and vital religion, "pricked the consciences of the churches on the subject of slavery."[12] During the 1780s Baptists were preaching against slavery, Methodists were passing resolutions against slavery, and Presbyterians were finding slavery wanting for theological justification. However, secular culture prevailed over the conviction that briefly surfaced. By the 1960s, nearly two hundred years later, many black Christians did not want the Christian church to miss another opportunity to be genuine in the practice of Christianity.

The pre-Black Power Christian thinkers and clergy were committed "to the ideology of integration [that] led them to think of ethnic and cultural background as incidental to the doing of theology."[13] Their belief in the power of Christianity was not eclipsed by bitterness and they were able to consider Christianity's potential in America. Benjamin Mays said, "The Christian religion . . . is potentially, and at times actually, the most powerful weapon a minority group has to press its claim for equal opportunities for survival."[14] However deep-seated were the problems of racism, Mays did not believe Christian teaching had to be discarded in order to address the evil. In contrast to the thrust of early Black theology, Mays acknowledged that black churches could be just as unchristian as white churches regarding the (racial) universality of the church. Rather than suggest any preferred status, "Mays cautioned Negroes not to think that they were more virtuous than whites simply because they were oppressed."[15]

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[12] H. Richard Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (Cleveland: Mendian Books, 1929), 244. Also see Rhys Isaac, *The Transformation of Virginia 1740-1790* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1982) and Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978).

[13] Mark Chapman, *Christianity on Trial: African-American Religious Thought Before and After Black Power* (Maryknoll: Orbis Press, 1996), 4.

[14] Ibid., 1.

[15] Ibid., 33.

The history of white Christianity's failure (in America) to address, prophetically, the practice of slavery, the attacks on emancipation and reconstruction, and the dehumanizing act of segregation contributed to the environment from which Black Power/theology emerged.

Nation of Islam

Second, Elijah Muhammad and his Nation of Islam (NOI) were issuing stinging critiques of Christianity as the "white man's religion" that was merely used as a tool of oppression and imperialism. Preceding the rise of Black theology, the NOI's chief spokesman was Malcolm X. His rhetoric provoked and challenged black clergy and laymen to reconsider their affiliation with a religion that had historically sanctioned their oppression and the denial of their humanity. In addition to critiquing Christianity as a whole, Muhammad and Malcolm X often critiqued the ineffectiveness of the Black church as an agent of social change in the Black community and the immorality of the Black church's leadership and membership.

Essential Christian truths, such as the Trinity, the virgin birth, and the resurrection, were being scoffed at by Muhammad. Jesus was affirmed as being merely a prophet. In an environment where the NOI is mocking essential Christian doctrines, a Christian response must, by necessity, affirm those essential doctrines. A small voice of response that was not well known was the National Black Evangelical Association, founded in 1963. In response to the dehumanizing segregation and racism experienced in American Christianity, William H. Bentley said, "Before 'Black Power' became the rallying cry it later did, some Black evangelicals among us were thinking seriously in terms of group [Black] consciousness."[16] This group sought to develop a Black evangelical critique of racism and yet maintain a theological system that would not succumb to experientialism. Bentley warned, "In fleeing from the lion we seek to make certain that we do not fall into the arms of the subjective bear."[17]

Often, instead of contending for essential Christian doctrine, Black theology's writers dismissed these doctrines as "secondary," "unimportant," or "petty." By the time of the rise of Black Power/theology, the NOI had been attacking Christianity for nearly thirty years.[18] At the height of his attack, Muhammad boldly claimed that

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[16] Cone and Wilmore, *Black Theology: 1966-1979*, 234.

[17] Ibid., 237.

[18] "The teachings and doctrines of Elijah Muhammad's NOI . . . were specifically developed as a critique of Christianity and its disastrous effect upon 'the so-called Negroes in the wilderness of North America' . . . yet, it is important to note that Elijah Muhammad was not primarily concerned about the distinctive theological claims of

"Rev. King is of no good among black people."[19] Surely, a Black Christian response would defend against such a sustained assault. To the contrary, often the early writings in support of Black theology reflected an embrace of Malcolm X as a comrade rather than a foe ridiculing the faith of the Negro church.[20] Some were shaken by the constant attack and desired to reformulate Christianity.[21] The NOI's assault on the Negro church (and the Negro church's response) is important because Elijah Muhammad's followers may have "prompted the articulation of black liberation theology as much, *if not more*, than the emergence of Black Power in the summer of 1966" (emphasis mine).[22]

Black Power

Third, Stokely Carmichael's 1966 call for "Black Power" signified the emergence of a new socio-political ideology that was frustrated with the integrationist and nonviolent goals of Dr. Martin Luther King and the Negro Church-based Civil Rights Movement. Black Power called for a separatist approach to race relations with blacks demanding their rights and dignity from whites and being willing to take them by "any means necessary," including violence. This examination of Black theology will often make reference to Black Power, the socio-political movement in the 1960s. The references are practically inseparable because many of the proponents of Black theology described it as merely the "religious arm" of the Black Power movement. Cone reflected back on himself as the "theologian of the Black Power movement."[23] Cone said, "Black Power activists . . . welcomed Black theology as an intellectual articulation of the religious dimensions of the black liberation

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orthodox Islam; he was concerned about repudiating Christianity and developing a black religion that could speak directly to the social and psychological needs of poor blacks in the urban ghettos of America." Mark Chapman, *Christianity on Trial*, 42, 57.

[19] Elijah Muhammad, *Message to the Black Man* (Philadelphia: Hakim's Publications, 1965), 242, quoted in Mark Chapman, *Christianity on Trial*, 42.

[20] Cone said, "We did not care whether Black theology met the intellectual criteria for doing theology as defined by the White theologians who had taught us. We were listening to the voice of Malcolm X . . ." Cone and Wilmore, *Black Theology: 1980-1992*, 4.

[21] Mark Chapman, *Christianity on Trial*, 64. Chapman said, "Indeed black theologians would do well to reconsider the theological objections some blacks have to doctrinal Christianity; this might lead to a constructive reinterpretation of Christian theology that addresses the theological concerns of the African-American community."

[22] Mark Chapman, *Christianity on Trial*, 9. Also, according to Chapman, "when the theology of Elijah Muhammad joined forces with the cry of Black Power, the trial of Christianity in the African-American community reached a watershed." Ibid., 65.

[23] James Cone, *Risks of Faith: The Emergence of a Black Theology of Liberation, 1968-1998* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), xxiv. He further says his "turn to blackness was an even deeper conversion-experience than the turn to Jesus." Ibid., xxi.

struggle."[24] These "religious dimensions" of Black Power could not have been Christian, because many Black Power advocates were questioning the very sufficiency of Christianity. According to Chapman, the movement boldly questioned the "integrationist, Civil Rights Movement, and its Christian foundation," by asking, "could one lay claim to Christian faith and also reject nonviolence?"[25] Great cultural pressure was brought to bear in the black community that made "Black Power the litmus test of authentic black leadership." In this atmosphere, young activists "labeled Martin Luther King and other ministers as 'Rev. Sambos'."[26]

In the 1968 book, *Where Do We Go From Here: Chaos or Community?*, Martin Luther King provided valuable insight into the mind-set that led to the adoption of the slogan "Black Power" by members of Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). The weight that should be given to King's insight is revealed in the comment by Vincent Harding that "no discussion of black religion in America today [1968] can ignore the immensely important figure of Martin Luther King."[27] James Cone finds King's significance to American Christianity of long-lasting effect. He says, "after King no theologian or preacher dares to defend racial segregation. He destroyed its moral legitimacy."[28]

King differed with Stokely Carmichael concerning the issues of: (1) the involvement of whites in demonstrations and (2) the commitment to nonviolent protest. These were non-negotiable for King.[29] The disagreement initially threatened to divide King's Southern Christian Leadership Council (SCLC) from SNCC and CORE. However, the

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[24]Cone and Wilmore, *Black Theology: 1980-1992*, 2. Cone further said, "Since it seeks to interpret Black Power religiously, Black theology endeavors to reorder the Christian tradition…and destroy the influence of heretical white American Christianity." Cone, *Black Power and Black Theology*, 131. In sharp contrast, Roberts said, "A Christian theologian is not an interpreter of the religion of Black Power. He, as black theologian, may be the interpreter of Afro-American Christianity. He may be conscious and proud of his heritage. He may be in tune with the meaning of Black Power. But he is attempting to understand the Christian faith in light of his people's experience. His task is not popular. He runs the risk of being misunderstood by black militants and moderates as well as by white radicals and liberals." J. Deotis Roberts, *Liberation and Reconciliation* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1971), 21.

[25] Mark Chapman, *Christianity on Trial*, 74.

[26] Ibid., 75.

[27] Cone and Wilmore, "Religion of Black Power" by Vincent Harding, I: 61.

[28] James Cone, *Risks of Faith*, xvii.

[29] Martin Luther King, *Chaos or Community* (New York: Harper and Row Publishers, 1967), 63. Also Noel Erskine says, "It goes without saying, however, that King would have problems with the concepts *Black Power, Black theology*, and *God is black*" (emphasis his). Noel Erskine, *King Among The Theologians* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1994), xii.

leaders were able to reach a compromise. Although King understood the frustration of those calling for new tactics, he called their tone radically different. He says, "As I listened to all these comments, the words fell on my ears like strange music from a foreign land. My hearing was not attuned to the sound of such bitterness."[30] No secular ideology or theology is developed void of cultural and historical influences; however, King exposed a particular weakness when bitterness is a significant influence. Describing an unavoidable chain of events, he says, "Disappointment produces despair and despair produces bitterness, and . . . the one thing certain about bitterness is its blindness."[31] For King, Black Power's negative values (rooted in bitterness) outweighed its positive aspects, and opened the door for the pursuit of a "nihilistic philosophy."[32]

Essential to this paper is the assertion that the mind-set that led to the call for Black Power is nearly identical to the mind-set that sought the propagation of a unique Black theology.[33] This mind-set did not gain the whole-hearted backing of the Negro church (represented in the thinking of King as well as Joseph H. Jackson[34] and others). These stewards of the Negro church, perhaps, were the keys to it maintaining its grounding in the biblical faith of the colonial and pre-Civil War slaves and the post-Emancipation Negroes.

Responses to Black Power/Theology

Before academic theological responses to Black Power in the late 60s and early 70s, black clergymen, in black and white denominations, began to address the call for Black Power. Some also addressed its consistency or inconsistency with Christianity. The black clergy responded in various ways to the call for Black Power. Some felt the call for equality and dignity was consistent with the gospel that the church preached and the historic role the church had always fulfilled in the black community, and while not willing to totally embrace the call for separatism and violence,

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[30] Martin Luther King, *Chaos or Community*, 26. Earlier Benjamin Mays had "urged Negroes to reject the spirit of hatred and revenge, because they too will be under God's judgement if they seek to oppress others." Mark Chapman, *Christianity on Trial*, 34.

[31] Martin Luther King, *Chaos or Community*, 26.

[32] Ibid., 44.

[33] Note the similarity between King's assessment of Black Power and a West African theologian's assessment of Black theology after spending a year at Union Theological Seminary with Cone and others. Cone and Wilmore, *Black Theology: 1966-1979*, 379-84.

[34] History has often cited Martin Luther King and Joseph Jackson as opponents in their philosophies concerning the role of the church in political protest. However, King and Jackson disagreed over politics within the National Baptist Convention but their responses to Black Power were similar. See Edward Gilbreath, "The Forgotten Founder." *Christianity Today* (March 11, 2002), 66-68.

they at least affirmed Black Power's complaints as legitimate. Others acknowledged the sinfulness of racism and understood the frustration and disappointment associated with the call yet rejected the bitterness, militancy, and separatism of Black Power (and then Black theology) as unchristian and un-American. A final group wholeheartedly embraced the political ideology behind Black Power and sought to radically alter the structure of Christianity, as practiced by blacks, or abandon Christianity as insufficient to address the black call for justice, freedom, humanity, and dignity.[35]

In 1968, Albert Cleage personified the wholehearted acceptance of the call for Black Power and the attempt to theologize it and apply it to the local congregation. He sought to "fuse black nationalism of Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X to an African-American Christian base . . . ."[36] It is worth noting that Cleage's "Christian base" was very accommodating to syncretism. His United Church of Christ congregation would become the Shrine of the Black Madonna and the base of the Black Christian Nationalist movement. Cleage would later even break with mainline clergy that had initially embraced the call for Black Power. He called for a rejection of the New Testament, a rejection of the institutional Black church, and distinguished between a "real Jesus" and a spiritualized Jesus. He criticized the church's "fanatical adherence to the classical doctrine of the atonement . . . [and] insisted that the classical doctrine of the atonement (an emphasis on the salvation of the individual believer by faith in Jesus' sacrifice on the cross) must be discarded altogether . . ."[37] While Cleage's embrace of Black Power was radical[38] it was likewise unique. Very few clergy and churches followed in Cleage's footsteps.

The wholehearted embrace of Black Power had the potential to shift the focus of one's "Christianity" away from the person of Jesus Christ and towards the resolution of the immediate crisis and towards a more existential center. Many of the attributes and teachings of Jesus were marginalized as certain teachings truncated the entire scope of Jesus' teachings.[39] The person of Jesus Christ did not appear to be preeminent

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[35] Vincent Harding noted that there was a "tendency among Black Power advocates to repress any reference to the earlier Afro-American religious expressions…" Cone and Wilmore, *Black Theology: 1966-1979*, 41. While Black theologians didn't reject such language, they did often introduce vague pluralistic language instead of distinct Christian language.

[36] Mark Chapman, *Christianity on Trial*, 95.

[37] Ibid., 92.

[38] Although Wilmore suggests that Cleage merely "may have gone too far." Cone and Wilmore, *Black Theology: A Documentary History Volume I 1966-1979*, 1st Edition (Maryknoll: Orbis Press, 1979), 251.

[39] Bruce L. Fields, *Introducing Black Theology*, 58. Fields avoids any truncation by

in the 1968 statement by the Philadelphia Council of Black Clergy that
stated:

> It is our intention that Black clergy and Black theological students
> commit themselves to the liberation of Black people in the same manner
> that we have committed ourselves to the faith of Jesus Christ . . . For us
> there must be no difficulty in viewing Christ and the other founders of
> the world's great religions as clearly prototypes and examples of
> revolutionary figures . . .[40]

A more moderate and "timid," according to Gayraud Wilmore,[41]
approach was taken by many mainline clergy, both affiliated with black
and white denominations. The 1966 Statement of the National
Committee of Negro Clergy (NCNC), signed by mainline pastors and
even Baptist pastors like New York City's Sandy Ray, affirmed the
legitimacy of Black Power's cry against racism.[42] It also denounced the
racism of America's white churches. However, the document did not
renounce any Christian doctrine nor use the language of a "black God,"
"black Jesus," or separatism. Three years later, a subsequent statement
distinguished "Black theology [as] the product of black *Christian*
experience and reflection" (emphasis mine).[43] The statement does not
cite non-Christian sources as foundational to its project. One should not
assume this "orthodoxy" to be the character of each participant, but the
formal statement carried the tone of Christianity, and exclusively
Christianity.

Speaking as Christians, the NCNC did not shy away from seeking to
convict its white brothers of sin because their theology "sustained the
American slave system and negated the humanity of blacks."[44] Also, due
to the dehumanizing of blacks in America, the statement encouraged the
"black community to affirm itself as part of the kingdom of God."[45]
These key statements of the NCNC legitimated the outrage of blacks due
to racism but crafted their response within the bounds of Christianity.
After Cleage and the NCNC went their separate ways, one may ask
which side now represented Black theology in its church-form.

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acknowledging, "I am not arguing that racism is the only issue that the church of Jesus
Christ needs to confront."

[40] Cone and Wilmore, *Black Theology: 1966-1979,* 1st Edition, 279.
[41] Cone and Wilmore, *Black Theology: 1966-1979*, 6.
[42] Ibid., 19-26.
[43] Ibid., 37.
[44] Ibid., 37.
[45] Ibid., 37. One has to assume whether statement refers to the black community (in
general) or specifically to black Christians.

Other denominational statements were more programmatic in their approach and appeared to affirm the radical approach of Black Power.[46] The statements addressed the policies of white Christians rather than their official theology. As black caucuses emerged in the major denominations,[47] they were able to articulate their protest within the bounds of Christianity. In 1976, black denominations such as Richard Allen's African Methodist Episcopal Church's position paper employed the term "liberation" rather than "Black theology." Also, interestingly, the A.M.E. paper acknowledged the worth and need of non-church organizations like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Urban League, SCLC, CORE, SNCC, and People United to Save Humanity (PUSH). In language of discernment and distinction, they pledged to "make recommendations to the . . . bishops as to which movements would most appropriately correspond with *our* position on liberation . . . and which characterize the *life and teachings* of the AME church" (emphasis mine).[48]

The Negro church's rejection of Black Power and, later, Black theology was personified in the president of the National Baptist Convention, Joseph H. Jackson. After Stokely Carmichael's call for Black Power in the summer of 1966, Jackson denounced Black Power during that year's Chicago meeting of the denomination.[49] Even more politically progressive Baptists, like New York pulpiteer Gardner Taylor, in 1968 denounced Black Power's "excessive rhetoric of violence."[50] Even radically political Baptists, like New York pastor and congressman, Adam Clayton Powell, who coined the term "Black Power" in 1965, said, "Demonstrations and all continuing protest activity must be non-violent."[51] In 1971, after Black theology had church and academic expressions, Jackson rejected James Cone (Black theology's theologian) and Black theology as polarizing and confrontational rather than seeking reconciliation, and failing to acknowledge that "all Negroes aren't full of

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[46] Both the statement of Black Methodists for Church Renewal (1968) and the statement of the Black Catholic Clergy (1968) call for more inclusion of blacks in the programmatic aspects of the church. The timid response of Black Catholics is particularly noteworthy considering Catholicism's propensity towards syncretism as noted by Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion*.

[47] Wilmore cites ten in Cone and Wilmore, *Black Theology: 1966-1979*, note no. 7, 223.

[48] Ibid., 256.

[49] Chapman, *Christianity on Trial*, 74.

[50] Cone and Wilmore, *Black Theology: 1966-1979, 1st Edition*, 265.

[51] Floyd Barbour, *The Black Power Revolt* (Boston: Extending Horizons Books, 1968), 259. For Powell's use of Black Power terminology see Noel Erskine, *King Among The Theologians*, 84.

bitterness and hatred."[52] Therefore, major black Baptists rejected the underlying assumptions and goals of the Black Power/theology project.

This is significant because, historically, Baptists have constituted the largest percentage of black Christians.[53] In 1972, for example, there were roughly 8 million black Baptists compared to 2 million Methodists.[54] If prominent black Baptists had enthusiastically embraced Black Power/theology, in a manner similar to Cleage, black Christianity would have been thrust in a radically different direction. However, when they were confronted with the choice between the call of Stokely Carmichael and Malcolm X, Joseph Jackson, Gardner Taylor, Martin Luther King, and Adam Clayton Powell chose to heed the call of Jesus, the Prince of Peace.

Had the Negro church (which was being challenged to fully evolve into the Black church[55]) not been so steeped in the Bible, one cannot be sure whether the development of a Black theology would have even been necessary. Gayraud Wilmore said any "school of theology" that black people would embrace must have biblical foundations.[56] One can search further to see that many simply offered the idioms of biblical Christianity to masses that were not able to tell the difference. It appears that the masses of blacks that had been raised and lived their lives centered around the Bible-based religion of the Negro church forced the proponents of Black Power to articulate their socio-political ideology in a manner that gave deference to the biblical language and imagery so familiar to many blacks that, up until the mid 1960s, were supportive of Martin Luther King and his non-violent approach to the evil of racism. Despite the 1960s being a time of "secular religion or a religionless church,"[57] the Negro church, for the most part, still held its roots in

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[52] Cone and Wilmore, *Black Theology: 1966-1979*, 220. "What we say against white segregationists by the gospel of Christ we must also say against members of our own race who insist on interpreting the gospel of Christ on a strictly anti-white and pro-black foundation." Ibid., 247. It is appropriate to mention that J. Deotis Roberts suspects that "it is doubtful that Jackson attempted to understand Cone's book", although he does not give reason for this suspicion. Ibid., 117.

[53] Albert Raboteau, *Slave Religion*. Blacks were attracted to the Baptist preaching of conversion, the freedom that local autonomous churches allowed, and the lack of educational requirements for clergy. Baptists were the first to license slaves to preach.

[54] *1972 Yearbook of American Churches* as cited in John H. Carey, "Black Theology: An Appraisal of the Internal and External Issues," *Theological Studies* 33 (D 1972): 687.

[55] Wilmore using C. Eric Lincoln's distinction of the Negro/Black church says, "it is certain that the ghost of the politically irrelevant, culturally obtuse, and religiously fundamentalistic 'Negro' church of the early twentieth century still haunts the leadership of the Black Church today [1979]." Cone and Wilmore, *Black Theology: 1966-1979*, 219. Depending on one's perspective, the "Negro church" was the lifeboat of black Christianity in the redefining and unsettling sixties.

[56] Cone and Wilmore, *Black Theology: 1966-1979*, 155.

[57] Vincent Harding, "The Religion of Black Power" in Cone and Wilmore, *Black*

biblical Christianity even in the face of white "Christian" complicity with their oppression.

There were other religious-related responses to the call for Black Power besides resolutions and position papers being drafted by major denominations. In May 1969, James Forman, affiliated with the SNCC, interrupted the service at the Riverside Church in New York City and presented "The Black Manifesto." He rebuked white Christians and called blacks to illegitimately use power as whites had done for so long. He used the language of "demands" and the idea of "reparations." Finally, in good Malcolm X form, he said, "pressure *by whatever means necessary* should be applied to . . . white churches and Jewish synagogues" (emphasis mine).[58]

The chief theologian and architect of formal and academic Black theology was James H. Cone. Cone provided the most significant theological response to Black Power. "In the summer after Martin Luther King, Jr.'s death . . . [he] introduced the term 'Black theology' into the religious discourse."[59] One must be careful not to dismiss the pain that Cone had experienced. While one may avow or disavow his theological method, it is hard to dispute his critique of white American and "Christian" racism. His foundational works include his 1969 *Black Theology and Black Power*, his 1970 *A Black Theology of Liberation*, and his 1975 *God of the Oppressed*. Other theologians contributed to the early literature of Black theology as they responded in various ways to Cone's foundational works. He would become the lead Black theologian and the mentor of many Ph.D. students that would expand his work.[60] Along with Cone, early writers such as J. Deotis Roberts, Gayraud Wilmore, Vincent Harding, and William R. Jones contributed significantly to the dialogue of Black theology.

Black theology sat upon socio-political foundations rather than *soli deo glori* foundations. The Bible was merely one of six sources for doing Black theology: (1) black experience, (2) black history, (3) black culture, (4) revelation, (5) Scripture, and (6) tradition.[61] Its germination took place in the call for "Black Power" in the spring of 1966 during Civil

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Power: 1966-1979, 41. Christianity was being assaulted from many angles during this period.

[58] Cone and Wilmore, *Black Theology: 1966-1979*, 32.

[59] Larry G. Murphy, J. Gordon Melton, and Gary L. Ward, eds., *Encyclopedia of African American Religions* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1993), s.v. "James Hal Cone."

[60] Cone and others realized the necessity of encouraging additional scholars to enhance their cause. This author has tried to get his own denomination, the Southern Baptist Convention, to realize the necessity of encouraging black scholars in order to enhance the cause of evangelical Christianity among black Baptists.

[61] Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, 53-74.

Rights protest marches in Mississippi. Unlike many other issues that have confronted Christianity, this issue was not born in the inner workings of church disputes. The New Testament gospel-Judaizer issue arose in the church, the early church councils were disputes within the church, the split of the Eastern and the Western church was over an "in the church" dispute, the Protestant Reformation involved a church issue of authority, the 1840s denominational splits over slavery were provoked by polity issues in the church, and the 1920s Modernist controversies concerned hermeneutical issues in the church. However, the call for "Black Power" did not originate in the church, was not mediated in the church, but was a secular, political affair.

In *Black Theology and Black Power*, James Cone did not write a systematic theology. He sought to address the reality of the Black experience in America using language and categories that formal Protestant (what he called "white") theologians did not use. In the course of expounding these categories, he admitted that his work was "written with a definite attitude . . . [an] angry black man, disgusted."[62] The following year *A Black Theology of Liberation* was organized according to traditional theological terms: sources, norms, revelation, God, man, Christ, and eschatology. Finally, in responding to black and white critics, Cone says, "*God of the Oppressed* represents my [his] most developed theological position."[63] Cone's initial thesis calls for an embrace of Black Power and its criticism of racist "Christian" America:

> It is my thesis, however, that Black Power, even in its most radical expression, is not the antithesis of Christianity, nor is it a heretical idea to be tolerated with painful forbearance. It is rather, Christ's central message to twentieth-century America. And unless the empirical denominational church makes a determined effort to recapture the man

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[62] Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 2. Also Stephen R. Prescott notes the experiences that led Cone to such anger. After being swept up in the call for Black Power, Cone "reacted with blinding anger" to the 1967 Detroit race riots. Stephen R. Prescott, "James Hal Cone: Father of Black Theology." In *Here I Stand: Essays in Honor of Dr. Paige Patterson*, eds. Stephen Prescott, N. Allan Moseley, and David Alan Black (Yorba Linda: Davidson Press, 2000), 275. Prescott concludes, "Based on Cone's own testimony, it seems fair to state categorically that Black Theology was born not from the text of Scripture nor from his theological training, but from his deep personal offence at the history of racial injustice in America." Ibid., 276. Carey says, "The sin which Cone and Cleage see rampant in white society so dominates their rage and vision that they cannot interpret sin as a universal human problem which also is applicable to blacks." John H, Carey, "Black Theology: An Appraisal," 697.

[63] Cone, *God of the Oppressed* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1975), ix. Although he says that his earlier works give the adequate attention to the Bible and Christology.

Jesus through a total identification with the suffering poor as expressed in Black Power, that church will become exactly what Christ is not.[64]

Cone conceded that "Black Power . . . [is] not consciously seeking to be Christian"[65] and "many Black Power advocates shun Christianity and the language of love."[66] Cone realized that the status of Black Power was questionable regarding Christianity. In seeking to establish the possible Christian character of Black Power, Cone freely pointed to two areas of possible tension: the nature of the Bible and the appropriateness of violence as a means of liberation.

Now, of course, the Christian church, and its preachers and theologians, ought to have had a prophetic word to speak to the issues of the turbulent sixties. It did not. Silence in the midst of sin and confusion is unacceptable.[67] With such a quiet Christian church, Cone sought to be a voice crying against the evils of segregation and racism (both individual and systemic). The necessity of his proposed unique "Black" theology was, and is, an indictment against broader American Christianity's failure to speak out.

James Cone achieved respectability for Black theology in the academy. His example of theological protest contributed to the boldness of liberation theologians around the world as well as feminist, womanist, and homosexual theologians in the U.S. A survey of the credentials of the second generation of black theologians reveals that Cone has intellectually sired many black scholars in the academic disciplines of theology, ethics, and biblical studies.

Conclusion

In conclusion, one must ask whether Black theology was (and is) a prophetic interpretation of the gospel of Jesus Christ or, as Paul says in book of Galatians, "another gospel." Before Christians can consider the present and future implications of Black theology, one must ask the question, "Since its inception, has Black theology ever been Christian?"[68]

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[64] Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, 1.

[65] Ibid., 60.

[66] Ibid., 47.

[67] R. Albert Mohler states, "Preachers are expected to speak when no one else has any idea what to say." R. Albert Mohler, "Truth-Telling In A Time Of Tragedy" (chapel address, The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, 13 September 2001, manuscript), 1. Also consider Martin Luther King's disappointment with the white church's silence during the Civil Rights Movement as noted in his "Letter from the Birmingham Jail." Clayborne Carson, *The Autobiography of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Warner Books, 1998), 187-204.

[68] If the local church is the locale of Christianity, then the outlook for Black theology, within Christianity, does not seem promising. Scholastic societies are the locale of Black

Again, a historical survey of Black theology's infancy is insightful because Cone's priorities and methodology have been generally accepted by the second generation of "black theologians."[69] This paper lends itself to at least five insights. First, Black theology did not arise within a Christian context but rather a secular socio-political setting. Second, Black theology did not articulate a whole Christian theology but a truncated ideology respectful black folk's religious idioms. Third, Black theology did not respond to the ridicule, by the Nation of Islam, of essential Christian truths as a Christian voice in the Black community would have felt obligated to do. Fourth, Black theology's fruits must be examined. The pastors and churches that embraced it are no longer within the bounds of Christianity but rather pursue Black or African religion that is open to syncretism and pluralism. Fifth, the overwhelming majority of black Christians either rejected Black Power/theology or only "timidly" embraced it. Was Black theology Christian in its origins? It appears not.

Despite Cone's protest in the preface of *God of the Oppressed*, in 1997, nearly twenty years later, Black theology still appeared to be black ideology.[70] Noel Erskine says, "[Cone's] passion was to relate *Black Power* to the Black church" (emphasis mine).[71] If the label "theology" is conceded, it is conceded in the sense that Cone claims it, with references to many sources Christian and non-Christian. Was Black theology Christian in its origins? It appears not.

While Black theology is clearly beyond the bounds of orthodox Christianity, the racist history of Christianity in America suggests that its complaint is an outside voice that needs to be heard by some, black and white.[72] One white theologian states candidly, "Black theology has

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theology. Cone says, "Black theology today [1993] is being defined by seminary and university professors in the context of the Society for the Study of Black Religion (SSBR) and AAR. These are not places where pastors are likely to spend their time. As a result, Black theology and the Black Church have not had a happy time together. Both have suffered a kind of isolation from each other." Cone and Wilmore, *Black Theology: 1980-1992*, 7.

[69] Although others were writing in Black theology's early years, Cone was (and is) the main progenitor of Black theologians, biblical scholars, and ethicists. While acknowledging others, Carey says, "in any mode of analysis Cone is a major figure to be reckoned with." John H. Carey, "What Can We Learn," 519.

[70] Bruce L. Fields suggest Black theology was "a theological response, at least in it early forms, to racism." Bruce L. Fields, *Introducing Black Theology*, 12. Wilmore said Black theology "extrapolated from Black Power a theological referent." Cone and Wilmore, *Black Theology: 1966-1979*, 15. One might ask if a socio-political ideology could provide a basis for Christian theology.

[71] Noel Erskine, *King Among the Theologians*, 93.

[72] Carey suggests several things that the broader Christian community can learn from Black theology. Three of them are "(1) The work of black theologians has clarified for us the importance of the black experience as a distinctive but frequently overlooked

become, in my opinion, not only the rallying point for the black Christian community but the conscience for the white community."[73] Perhaps parts of its critique of American Christianity's lack of ethical obedience regarding race can be considered a "co-belligerent" in the struggle against the evil of racism. Perhaps the orthodox theology of evangelical Christians will lead them to obey the ethical implications of the Bible, after being exposed by one such as James Cone.[74]

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dimension in the American Christian tradition…(2) Black theology has clarified for us how deeply imbedded the white church is in the American political and economic power structure . . . (3) black theology has registered a telling blow in pointing out the scope and pervasiveness of racism in modern society." John H, Carey, "What Can We Learn," 520-22. Carey further states that "Serious engagement with black theology forces one to recognize deep hurts, lingering suspicions, and profound problems of communication between the black and white communities." Ibid., 525.

[73] John H. Carey, "What Can We Learn," 528.

[74] John H. Carey, "Black Theology: An Appraisal," 696. Carey says, "The tragic thing about black criticisms of the white churches is that they are essentially true. White churches have reinforced the culture . . . Many scholars who begin to read black theology to refute its sectarian claims will emerge sobered with how much truth there is in the black charges against the white church."