

The gospel and the liberation of the poor

How can theology be black if the sources used for its explication are derived primarily from the white Western theological tradition?

by [James H. Cone](#)

February 18, 1981

What has the gospel of God to do with the weak and helpless and their struggle for freedom in human society? This question, the most critical issue that has shaped my theological consciousness, first achieved its importance in the particularity of the black religious experience during my early childhood in Bearden, Arkansas. Although the formulation of the question was not always precise, the everyday experience of black suffering, arising from black people's encounter with the sociopolitical structures controlled by whites, created in my consciousness a radical conflict between the claims of faith on the one hand and the reality of the world on the other.

Being Christian in a Racist Society

I remember discussing with my brother Cecil this conflict between the Christian faith and black suffering, and no rational explanation seemed to satisfy either of us. "If God is good," we asked, "and also capable of accomplishing his will, why then do black people suffer so much at the hands of white people? What was the reason for black slavery and our subsequent oppression? What does God plan to do about righting the wrongs inflicted upon our people?" These and similar questions occupied much of our intellectual reflection as we attempted to reconcile the reality of our everyday experience with our faith in Jesus Christ.

The conflict between faith and suffering was exacerbated by the fact that most of the brutality inflicted upon black people was done by white persons who also called themselves Christians. Whites who humiliated blacks during the week went to

church on Sunday and prayed to the God of Moses and of Jesus. Although blacks and whites expressed their faith in their separate worship services in quite different ways, the verbal content of their faith seemed similar. That was why many blacks asked: How could whites be Christian and yet do such horrible things to black people? And why does God permit white people to do evil things in the name of Jesus Christ? During my childhood in Bearden, the exclusion of black people from white churches was the most obscene contradiction that I could imagine.

Viewed from the experience of black people, life in Bearden during the 1940s and early '50s was not easy. In this small town of 800 whites and 400 blacks, I encountered the white American reality that would prove decisive for my theological development. It was not that whites in Bearden were worse than whites in similar towns in Arkansas or other southern states. The opposite is more likely the case. Bearden is important because it happened to be the geographical context in which the ugliness of racism was clearly revealed to me, and I knew that I had to struggle against it. Since the church was so much a part of the whole of black life, I had to ask: What has the gospel of God to do with the extreme limits placed on the black community? Explicitly or implicitly every black Christian had to ask that question. There was no way to avoid it, because the contradiction to which the question pointed was inherent in the attempt to be Christian in a racist society.

The Problem of Evil

My preoccupation with the conflict between faith and suffering deepened when I began my philosophical studies at Shorter and Philander Smith colleges. Professors James and Alice Boyack of Philander Smith made philosophical issues concrete, and I wrote several papers on the problem of evil and suffering. At Shorter and Philander Smith, I developed the self-confidence that I could think—a discovery not encouraged among blacks by most intellectual structures controlled by whites.

Although my studies at these two schools introduced me to the scope and depth of Western thought on the issue of evil, the way in which the problem was defined was quite different from its definition in the black church. The weight of the problem of evil in the black church was not located primarily in terms of God's need to justify himself in view of the presence of suffering in the world. That God is both good and powerful is taken for granted in the black church, and if any inexplicable contradiction emerges, black Christians always appeal to God's mystery, quoting the often repeated lines, "God moves in a mysterious way." They really believe Paul's

saying that "all things work together for good to them that love God" (Rom. 8:28, KJV).

What then is the heart of the contradiction between faith and suffering in the context of black life? The contradiction is found not in God but in white people who claim to be Christian and yet oppose the sociopolitical equality of black people. This contradiction was blatant in the south, but it was found also in other parts of the U.S.

Institutional Racism in the North

When I graduated with a Bachelor of Arts degree from Philander Smith and was accepted at Garrett Theological Seminary in Evanston, Illinois (now Garrett-Evangelical), I was a little naive, for I was sure that things would be different. I had internalized the myth that blacks were treated equally "up north," but that myth was demolished for me in less than one day in Evanston and at Garrett. Although racism at Garrett and in Evanston was not as obvious as in Arkansas, I believe that it was much more vicious, especially in terms of the structural brutality inflicted upon black dignity and self-confidence. I almost did not survive past my first quarter at Garrett, making all C's from professors who told me that I deserved less. This was a common experience for the few blacks allowed to matriculate at Garrett during the late 1950s and early '60s.

Had it not been for the confidence in my self-worth I had received from my mother and father, I am sure that the challenge of Garrett would have defeated me, as so many white institutions continue to defeat black people today. But when I remembered the extreme odds against which my father struggled in Bearden (and he had only a sixth-grade education!), that memory gave me the emotional and intellectual strength to overcome the difficulties at Garrett.

My father was self-employed, cutting logs and billets, because he refused to work at the sawmills in and around Bearden. I once asked him why he chose the uncertainty of self-employment when he could easily get a regular job at a sawmill or some other company. He quickly replied, "My son, a black man cannot be a man and also work for white people." Watching my father meet the challenge of southern racism prepared me for the challenge of northern institutional racism that I encountered at Garrett and later at Northwestern.

Despite Garrett's racism, however, I had some very good teachers there. Without the constant encouragement of William Hordern, Philip Watson and Ed Perry, I am sure that I would not have even applied for the Ph.D. program in systematic theology. They and other professors gave me the intellectual structure in which to relate Christianity and racism, even though the latter was almost never mentioned as a theological problem.

In one class I made the connection between racism and theology in a highly provocative manner, by saying to one of my professors that he was a racist, since he could easily talk about the injustice that Roman Catholics inflicted on Protestants in the 16th century, but failed to say a word against white Christians (Protestants and Catholics) who openly support black suffering in the U.S. today. There was complete silence in the classroom, followed by a sudden outburst of anger from the professor: "That's simply not true! Class dismissed!"

After that event, I realized that Garrett would not be the best context for expressing my deepest feelings about racism, if I expected to receive a Ph.D. degree from that institution. That was why I did not raise the racism issue as a theological problem, and also why I decided to write a dissertation on Karl Barth's anthropology rather than on some issue in the black community. It was not until I left Garrett and Northwestern and returned to Philander Smith to teach religion and philosophy that I began to ask more formally about the relation between faith and suffering as that contradiction is defined in the black community. What did Friedrich Schleiermacher, Adolf Harnack and Karl Barth have to do with young black students who came from the cotton fields of the south, looking to create a new future for their lives? That question was not easy to answer.

Black Power and the Gospel

Philander Smith College and the civil rights movement of the 1960s made a significant impact upon my theological development. Both made me realize that I could not avoid inquiring about the relation between the Christian faith and black people's struggle for freedom. Unfortunately, my formal training in theology did not prepare me for the investigation of this issue. Therefore, I began a disciplined reading program in the history, literature and religion of black people. When I left Philander Smith to teach at Adrian College in Michigan, I even considered returning to graduate school for a Ph.D. in literature at the University of Chicago. It seemed that such writers as Albert Camus, Jean-Paul Sartre, Richard Wright and James

Baldwin could speak much more creatively than theologians about life and suffering. I discussed the possibility of my return to graduate school with Nathan Scott, Jr., who was then teaching theology and literature at the University of Chicago. It was then the summer of 1967, and before I could make the necessary arrangements for my return, 43 blacks were killed in the Detroit riot. Similar events occurred that summer in many other American cities. There was no time for me to return to graduate school. I had to say something now about God and black people's struggle for freedom. But what could I say?

The challenge to say something about God and the black liberation struggle was enhanced when Ronald Goetz (a classmate during my student years at Garrett) invited me in February 1968 to lecture at Elmhurst College, where he was teaching. I accepted his invitation and decided to lecture on the theme of "Christianity and Black Power." I attempted to demonstrate that, contrary to popular opinion, black power is not alien to the gospel. It *is* the gospel of Jesus Christ. I knew that this extreme way of expressing my point would not be accepted by white theologians and preachers who were contending that black power means reverse racism and black violence. The anticipated white rejection of my equation of Christianity and black power encouraged me to write an extended argument in its defense.

By the summer of 1968, I could no longer contain my rage. I was extremely angry with white churches and their theologians who were contending that black power was the sin of black pride and thus the opposite of the gospel. Since white theologians and preachers wrote most of the books in religion and theology, they had a great deal of power in controlling the public meaning of the gospel. During my six years of graduate work at Garrett and Northwestern, not one book written by a black person was used as required reading. Does this not suggest that only whites know what theology and the gospel are? The implication of that question consumed my whole being. I *had* to write *Black Theology and Black Power* in order to set myself free from the bondage of white theology.

The writing of *Black Theology and Black Power* (during the summer of 1968) was a deep emotional experience for me. It was a cleansing experience, because I endeavored to purge myself of any direct dependence upon my white theological mentors. I am not sure how much I succeeded, but I delighted in exposing the blindness created by their own racism. For me, it was a choice between satisfying the theological values of white people's racism and saying a word of encouragement for the black freedom struggle. I was very much aware of the possible ideological

distortion of the gospel in identifying it with black power, for no one can read Barth seriously and not be cognizant of that danger. But I felt that the urgency of the black situation demanded that the risk be taken.

The publication of *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969) put me in contact with an ecumenical group in the National Conference of Black Churchmen (NCBC). Through the influence of C. Eric Lincoln, I also received an invitation to teach theology at Union Theological Seminary in New York.

Union and NCBC became the theological and political contexts for reflecting upon the relation between Christian theology and the black liberation struggle.

Captive of White Concepts?

My first attempt to write a systematic theology, using black liberation as the central motif, was published as *A Black Theology of Liberation* (1970). This second book was even less satisfying to many white theologians than the first one. But during this period, I did not care what whites thought about my work. I was concerned only with speaking the truth of the gospel as disclosed in the black experience of freedom. Since the writing of my first essay on "Christianity and Black Power," it had become very clear to me that the gospel was identical with the liberation of the poor from oppression. That was why I identified the gospel with black power and the white church with the Antichrist. Although I would express each identification a little differently today, I still stand by the theological truth that gave rise to that conviction.

However, I neglected to reflect this conviction in the theological sources I used to define black theology. It appeared that I was more enslaved to white theological concepts than I realized. Charles Long, Gayraud Wilmore and other black colleagues were quick to point to this weakness. How can theology be black if the sources used for its explication are derived primarily from the white Western theological tradition? What is the relation between my definition of black theology and Karl Barth, Paul Tillich and Dietrich Bonhoeffer, all of whom were highly visible in my analysis of black theology? Is there any relation between black liberation and the cultural and theological resources used to analyze its meaning?

My black colleagues in NCBC and the Society for the Study of Black Religion (SSBR) helped me to realize more clearly that theology is not black merely because of its

identification with a general concept of freedom. It is necessary for the language of theology to be derived from the history and culture of black people. The issue is whether black history and culture have anything unique to contribute to the meaning of theology. Must we assume that the meaning of theology as a discipline is limited to the definitions found in white people's reflections? In an attempt to take seriously the criticisms of my black colleagues, I wrote *The Spirituals and the Blues* (1972) and *God of the Oppressed* (1975).

Women's Experience

During the mid-1970s, two realities began to affect my theological consciousness—the women's movement and the Third World. It was impossible to teach at Union Seminary and not be deeply moved by the theological importance of women's experience in theology. The presence of the feminist consciousness among black women at Union and in the black church made it difficult to dismiss feminism as a concern of white women alone. It became very clear to me that black theology could not continue to ignore sexism and still claim to be concerned about the freedom of the oppressed. Women of all cultures have much to teach black men about theology and the human struggle to be free.

As is always the case, it is difficult for people to recognize the significance of a particular form of experience when it does not arise from their own lives. My attempt to recognize the importance of women's experience in theology is found in the classes I teach at Union, and also in a section on "Black Theology and Black Women" in *Black Theology: A Documentary History, 1966-1979*, by Gayraud S. Wilmore and James H. Cone. My earlier books ignored the issue of sexism; I believe now that such an exclusion was and is a gross distortion of the theological meaning of the Christian faith. Like racism, sexism is deeply embedded in the fabric of human cultures, and we must struggle against it if we expect to make this world a more humane place in which to live. Third World and black women have begun to make this point with increasing power and clarity, and we black men had better listen to them or we will be devoured by the revolutions that they are making.

The Impact of the Third World

In addition to the women's movement, the theological and political happenings in Africa, Asia and Latin America have had an enormous impact upon my theological perspective. When I first began to write about black theology, the particularity of

black suffering in the United States was so dominant in my consciousness that I could not easily see beyond it to oppression in other parts of the world. It was not that I was completely unaware of the suffering of Third World peoples. Rather, the existential pain of black people's suffering was so much a part of my reality that I had to explore first its significance before moving to a larger dimension.

The impact of the Third World on my thinking is found in the theological resources used in my classes at Union and also in the Wilmore-Cone book, *Black Theology: A Documentary History* (see Part VI, "Black Theology and Third World Theologies"). From my reading and personal experiences in Africa, Asia and Latin America, I now know that the complexity of human oppression is much greater than I had realized, and it cannot be reduced to North American expressions of white racism.

Under the auspices of NCBC, the World Council of Churches, the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT), and the Korean Christian Church in Japan, I have visited many countries in Africa, Asia and Latin America. It is one thing to read about poverty in the Third World and quite another to see it. I had to ask: What is the relation between the struggles of black people in the U.S. and the struggles of people in the Third World? In my attempt to answer that question, I realized that racism, sexism, classism and imperialism are interrelated and thus cannot be separated.

My dialogues with Third World theologians in EATWOT and my contacts with Koreans in Japan and South Korea have been particularly important in extending my theological perspective to a global context. Since 1976 EATWOT has been sponsoring dialogues among theologians in Asia, Africa and Latin America and oppressed racial minorities in the U.S. Major conferences have been held in Tanzania (August 1976), Ghana (December 1977), Sri Lanka (January 1979) and Brazil (February 1980). Accounts of the first three conferences have been published by Orbis Books under the titles *The Emergent Gospel*, *African Theology en Route* and *Asia's Struggle for Full Humanity*. I have written essays from a black American perspective on Asian, African and Latin American theologies. These dialogues helped me to see more clearly the importance of class oppression and the role of U.S. imperialism in oppressing poor countries.

While my perspective has been enlarged through dialogues with feminist, Third World and other theologians of the poor, I would not say that it has changed radically. I still contend that the gospel is identical with the liberation of poor people from sociopolitical oppression. I have never suggested that blacks were the only poor. Instead I said that if any person attempted to do theology in North America in the 1960s and '70s but failed to speak of God's identity with the black struggle for freedom, he or she was not doing Christian theology. I still stand by that claim but now specifically include men and women in the Third World.

It has also been my contact with the Third World, especially Africa, that has led me to consider socialism as an alternative to monopoly capitalism. So long as the maximization of profit and growth is the chief regulating ideal, the gap between the rich and poor will continue to increase. We must therefore form a social arrangement that is democratic, both economically and politically. No one should control for profit those goods and services needed for human survival.

Unfortunately, most political and economic arrangements that use the terms socialism and democracy as a description of their identity do the opposite of what they claim to do. The absence of a historical model that embodies fully my political and theological imagination makes it difficult to speak meaningfully and concretely about the socialist alternative. What I do believe, to use the words of Gustavo Gutiérrez, is "the non-necessity of the present order." What *is*, is not supposed to be, and we are required by that conviction to project a future social order wherein all can develop to their fullest potential.

The absence of a historical model is no reason to deny the dream. Through dreams we can see what is supposed to be when what *is* blinds us to what *ought to be*. In my dialogues with Third World Christians, I have sought to use the creative aspects of the black Christian eschatology in order to help us to see beyond what is present to the future that is coming. I believe that my theological development will always be related to the historical projects of poor people as they struggle to build a new future not recognizable in the present world order.