
Black Theology for Whites

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My personal access to black theology

In 1967/68 I was invited to spend the academic year as visiting professor at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina. We and our four children lived in a white district, and I taught theology at the white divinity school. The first thing that struck me was the invisibility in white circles of the black majority of the population. Unless one just happened to run across a porter, at Duke University one met only whites. Black people could be seen in the white areas only if they were maids or shop assistants, road-menders or dustmen. They lived in their own black areas or ghettos. But our friend Fred Herzog² was involved in the Civil Rights movement, and he and his wife Kristin took us into the country in order to show us the literally naked misery of the black sharecroppers, but also the crosses of the Ku Klux Klan (highly active among the poor whites) which had been burnt as a warning.

At that time Duke University was somewhat withdrawn from what went on in the world. But that changed abruptly on 4 April 1968. We were sitting with theologians from all over the country in one of the university halls at a 'Theology of Hope Conference'.³ I was just arguing with Van Harvey about the distinction between *Geschichte und Historie*⁴ when Harvey Cox burst into the room crying 'Martin King has been shot'. We immediately broke off the conference, and the participants hurried home, for by the same evening shops and businesses in the American cities were going up in flames. The black population rose with a cry of rage, while the whites tried to protect themselves. Then the unbelievable happened: 400 students sat down in the quadrangle of Duke University and mourned for Martin Luther King for six days and six nights, in rain and heat. At the end of that week of shame and mourning, black students from a college nearby came and danced through the rows of white students and we all sang together: 'We shall overcome.' From that day, the blacks in Durham became

1. From Jürgen Moltmann, *Experiences in Theology: Ways and Forms of Christian Theology*, trans. Margaret Kohl (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 189-216.

2. His first book on the subject was *Liberation Theology. Liberation in the Light of the Fourth Gospel*, New York 1972.

3. F. Herzog (ed.), *The Future of Hope. Theology as Eschatology*, New York 1970, with contributions by Harvey Cox, Langdon Gilkey, Van A. Harvey, John Macquarrie and Jürgen Moltmann.

4. In German *Historie* means history as a scholarly discipline, *Geschichte* the historicity of human existence (trans. note).

In his letter to Philemon, Paul did not call [slavery] fundamentally in question: there are freemen and slaves, but in the Christian congregation they have all been one since their baptism. 'Here there is neither slave nor free...' (Gal. 3:28). Nevertheless, in Christendom, whether this principle applies only before God or in the social world too remained an open question.

more self-confident and the conscience of the whites woke up.

I first met Jim Cone, the creator of 'black theology', at the annual meetings of the American Academy of Religion in 1969, in one of the huge New York hotels. I had talked about hope and poetry under the title 'How can I sing the Lord's song in a strange land?'⁵ He came up to me to say that he was working on a theological interpretation of the black blues and spirituals. We got on at once and became friends. His pioneer book *Black Theology and Black Power* had just appeared that year (1969). We published it at once in German in our series *Gesellschaft und Theologie* ('Society and Theology'). It came out in 1971, Fred Herzog writing the German introduction and a chapter which is still worth reading on 'God: Black or White? Black Theology's Challenge to Christian Faith' (165-85). In 1973 I wrote the forward to the German translation of Cone's book *The Spirituals and the Blues: An Interpretation*. In 1974 I edited a double issue on black theology in the periodical *Evangelische Theologie*, but this proved controversial and brought the periodical no friends.

We had Jim Cone twice in Tübingen, but the political and religious problems of the descendants of the African slaves in the

5. This lecture was a preparation for my little book *Theology of Play*, ET New York 1972 (= *Theology of Joy*, London 1973).

two Americas and the Caribbean make little impact on Germans, even though they are in fact the inner problems of the whole Western world on the downside of the modern history it shares. Without the slavery of the black masses there would have been no investment capital for the build-up of Western industrial society.

During many lecture tours throughout the United States I always enjoyed my time in black universities, such as Howard in Washington, and black seminaries, such as the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta, Georgia. In 1971 *Black Awareness. A Theology of Hope* by Major Jones, was published. In 1974 Deotis J. Roberts wrote *A Black Political Theology*. Later, in Trinidad and Jamaica, I discovered the traces of Marcus Garvey's 'Back to Africa' movement, and came to know something of the dreams of the Rastafarians.

African slavery (1518-1888) and the building of the modern world of the West

Slavery was an institution in most pre-modern societies. Aristotle defended it on the grounds of practical reason. In his letter to Philemon, Paul did not call it fundamentally in question: there are freemen and slaves, but in the Christian congregation they have all been one since their baptism. 'Here there is neither slave nor free...' (Gal. 3:28). Nevertheless, in Christendom, whether this principle applies only before God or in the social world too remained an open question. It was only the democratic movement which grew up during the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution which put an end to slavery as a social institution, since 'all men have been created equal' and are endowed with inalienable human rights. In [the] United States waters the last slave ships were seized in 1880. Brazil was the last country to abolish slavery, in 1888. In the Ottoman Empire the Arab slave trade continued until the First World War.

Serfdom existed in the European countries into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Peasants were sold like other commodities. Press-ganged soldiers were bought and sold by absolutist potentates. Mercenaries from Hessen fought for England in the American War of Independence. In Venice even today one is shown the place where slaves were sold up to 1789. The mass enslavement of Africans must therefore certainly be seen in the social context of its time. At the same time, it falls outside that framework because it made the plantation empires in America possible, and the industrial development of the Western World.

'Discovered' in 1492, in 1495 Hispaniola (Haiti) experienced a rising of the 'Indigenas' against the Spaniards. The Indios were massacred on a massive scale, and those that were left died in the gold mines, or committed suicide. In 1517 Bartholomé de Las Casas, priest, landowner and a former slave-owner, thereupon presented himself to Charles V and accused him of the genocide of these people.⁶ Prompted by pity for the weaker Indios, he made

The slave trade with which the modern Western world was built up was far and away the biggest international trading business in modern times.

the fateful suggestion that black slaves should be imported from Africa, because they were stronger. Charles V agreed. But Las Casas bitterly regretted his proposal later, when he saw the consequences. The famous 'Asiento' was produced, the import licence for the slave-trade in the Spanish colonies, which could then be sold on. Africa had been assigned to the Portuguese by the pope. In this way a European slave-trade developed in which slaves were carried from West Africa to the Spanish and Portuguese colonies in America.⁷ Elmira (1481) was the first slave-trader's fort. From the middle of the sixteenth century almost all the other European countries (Bradenburg-Prussia among them) followed suit, in order to profit from the growing demand for black slaves in America. From 1540 onwards more than 10,000 slaves were transported every year; by the end of the century a total of about 900,000 had been brought into the islands of the West Indies alone. There are no exact figures but those we know are terrible enough: alone between 1575 and 1591 52,000 slaves were shipped from Angola to Brazil; between 1680 and 1700 300,000 were carried on English ships; between 1680 and 1688 the Royal African Company had 249 slave traders under contract, shipped 60,783 slaves and unloaded 46,396. In the seventeenth century about 2,750,000 slaves were sold. But the climax of the slave-trade was only reached at the beginning of the nineteenth century, when the four 'slave crops', sugar, rice, tobacco and cotton, reached the peak of their production in the American plantations. All in all, it is thought that there were over 15 million African slaves who survived, and 30 to 40 million who did not.

The slave trade with which the modern Western world was built up was far and away the biggest international trading business in modern times.⁸ It was part of the world-wide 'triangular commerce': products of the mercantilism that was now beginning were exported to Africa, together with weapons – slaves from Africa to the two Americas and the islands of the West Indies – gold, silver, lead and then above all sugar, rice, tobacco and cotton ('colonial produce', as it was called) to Europe. The merchantmen were never empty. The result was the downfall of West African kingdoms, the 'Balkanization' of the tribal territories, and the cultural decay of the African coastal population. A further consequence was the destruction of the local subsistence economy and the build-up of

Freiburg 1990 (German trans. *Of Dios o el oro en les Indias*, 1989).

7. D.P. Mannix and M.J. Cowley, *Black Cargoes. A History of the Atlantic Slave Trade* New York 1962; E. Galeano, *Open Veins of Latin America*, New York 1962.

8. E. Williams, *Capitalism and Slavery*, Chapel Hill 1944.

6. The standard work here is G. Gutiérrez, *Las Casas. In Search for the Poor in Christ*, trans. R. R. Barr, Maryknoll, NY 1993. See also his *Gott oder das Gold. Der befreiende Weg des Bartolomé de Las Casas*,

colonial plantation empires in America, with the monocultures we have mentioned. And the necessary investment capital was thereby made available for the industrialization of Western Europe which – in the form of Spanish, Portuguese, French, Dutch and British empires – seized power over the world, in the face of India, China and the Ottoman empire.

Although England abolished the slave trade after 1807, it took the American Civil War later in the nineteenth century to put a final end to slavery in the Western world. The economic presupposition was the displacement of the plantation economy by industrial society, which needed ‘a work force’ but not slaves. In the United States, the industrialized North, with its immigrant workers who had voluntarily come to America from Europe, proved superior to the agrarian South, with its non-voluntary slave labour.

On the one side Christians, especially Quakers, fought with mind and spirit, as well as with the methods of civil disobedience, for the abolition of slavery: in 1641 it was forbidden in Massachusetts; in 1652 in Rhode Island; in 1761 in Pennsylvania. But on the other side resistance and revolts by the African slaves themselves also led to the end of slavery. The slaves were by no means so teachable, obedient and docile as white literature depicted them being – *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, for example. The history of black slavery was an endless history of mutinies, rebellions and flight, as well as of active and passive resistance. Famous examples are the Negro revolts on Haiti between 1791 and 1798, under the victorious leadership of Pierre Dominique Toussaint l’Overture, which were only beaten down under Napoleon; the struggles of the Maroons against the English in Jamaica; and Nat Turner’s revolts in Virginia in 1837.⁹ An important source of the power behind these risings lay in the religion of the oppressed, which we find expressed in the spirituals. The biblical stories about Exodus and homecoming, Babylon and Zion, Moses and Elijah, kept alive resistance and the hope for freedom.

Oh Freedom, oh Freedom!
Oh Freedom, I love you.
And before I’ll be a slave,
I’ll be buried in my grave
and go home to my Lord
and be free.¹⁰

Of this appalling slave trade pursued by the Western world, more than 22 million blacks or Afro-Americans are left in the United States, more still in Brazil and in the West Indies. These people are African in origin but live in English, Spanish and

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Portuguese-speaking countries. They were cut off from their roots, in most cases know nothing of their origin, and bear the names of their former slave owners – Little, King, Garvey, Armstrong, Marley. Many of them have the blood of earlier slave-owners in their veins and are not purely black. As Malcolm X deplored, they bear within themselves the violation of their grandmothers. And yet, involuntary though their coming was, they have put a definitive impress on the development and culture of the countries in which they now live, and are true Americans, or Brazilians, and so forth.

The political abolition of slavery by no means put an end to the white racism which went hand in hand with it, serving as its justification. Until the civil rights movement in the years between 1960 and 1970, blacks in the southern states of the USA were subject to legal discrimination, and lived under the strict segregation laws imposed on them by the ‘white supremacy’, which was restored after the Civil War had been lost.

Even today black Americans constitute the mass of the unemployed, the homeless, the sick – and the army. The United States may be a ‘melting pot’ for immigrants (although that is not true either), but black Americans have always been left outside. Today ‘pluralism’ is practiced as a democratic ideology. But black Americans have never shared in this pluralist tolerance, because there can be no pluralism between descendants of the former perpetrators and their victims. The sickness of white racism is a legacy of slavery.

The 400 years of enslavement of the blacks has profoundly infected the souls of the whites with this *disease of racism*, even if today the whites are generally unconscious of it.¹¹ But we only need to be aware of the role played by the colour black in the psychopathological symbolism of white people in order to recognize this disease. The contrast between day and night, light and darkness, shows that in the world of ‘the white man’ black symbolizes wickedness, evil and threat. In America the hangman was a black man. Satan is black, dirt is black, black clothes are a sign of mourning. When people are slandered, their names are ‘blackened’. When we are angry we ‘look black’. Strike-breakers are ‘black-legs’. For

9. W. Styron, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, New York 1966.

10. H. Thurman, *Deep River and the Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death*, Richmond, Va 1975, 33; J.H. Cone, *The Spirituals and the Blues*, New York, 1975, 44. On Martin Luther King’s gravestone in Atlanta is the following inscription:

‘Free at last!
Free at last!
Great God-a-mighty,
Free at last.’

11. F. Fanon, *Schwarze Haut, weiße Masken*, Frankfurt 1985, 132ff.; P. Martin, *Schwarze Teufel, edle Mohren*, Hamburg 1993, 19-27.

people who are white, those who are black symbolize whatever is irrational, compulsive, unclean, uncontrolled and sensual, characteristics which white self-control and the light of white reason are supposed to rise above.

The special Negrophobia of the whites (which has no parallel where people with red or yellow skins are concerned) is a projection of the parts of their own souls they have shut away, and the guilty fear they have suppressed. We project on to those who are black our own suppression of the body, the senses and the drives, a suppression which, ever since the beginning of the modern world, we have laboriously had to learn through self-mastery and self-control – the lesson impressed on modern men and women by the Puritans and the Jesuits. We also project ‘nature’ on to those who are black – after all they are ‘children of nature’, while we have risen to become nature’s ‘lords and possessors’, as Descartes said. Liberation from the disease of racism and especially from Negrophobia therefore cannot be seen as something subsidiary and by the way; it requires a kind of collective psychotherapy for whites, and nothing less than a new cultural revolution. Martin Luther King always acutely diagnosed this sickness in the eyes of the whites.

If we follow the UNESCO definition, which was taken over by the General Assembly of the World Council of Churches in Uppsala in 1968, we understand by racism:

The ethnocentric pride in one’s own racial group, the preference given to the particular characteristics of this group, the conviction that these characteristics are fundamentally biological in kind, negative feelings about other groups, linked with the urge to discriminate against groups belonging to other races and to exclude them from full participation in the life of society.

In its listing of the modes of behaviour which must be called racist, this definition (paraphrased here) is not complete.¹² But the essential point is clear. The characteristics of one’s own ‘race’ are identified with the characteristics of humanity itself. To be human is to be white, and people of different races become non-persons, sub-human, or people of inferior value and inferior capacities. One’s own self-esteem is based on one’s white skin. One’s own race legitimates the right to rule over races that are inferior. In this legitimating function racism becomes a dangerous means of psychological warfare waged by the rulers over the ruled. As ‘second-class citizens’ the people belonging to this dominated group are denied civil rights; as itinerant workers they are kept permanently dependent; homeless, they are open to every police action. The feelings of superiority cherished by the dominating race then produce feelings of inferiority among the races who are dominated. They are systematically made to hate themselves.

In its concrete form, racism always has these two sides: it is both a psychological mechanism of self-righteousness on the one

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hand, and on the other an ideological mechanism for the domination of others. Racism therefore destroys humanity on both sides. The white racist displays superhuman pride in his white ‘race’, and is yet obsessed by an inhuman fear. Those for whom to be human is the same as to be white destroys their own humanity. Because they must continually translate their fear into aggression towards others, they also destroy their community with them. They see in black people only their blackness, not other people like themselves. Racist humiliation of others is at heart deadly self-hatred.

Marcus Mosiah Garvey (1887-1940) and the ‘Back to Africa’ movement

Before we come to the Black theology of James Cone, we shall look at three different ways in which black Americans reacted to their situation after the abolition of slavery. There were three different liberation movements: 1. Back to the liberation offered by Africa; 2. Separation from white supremacy in America; 3. Integration in the ‘American dream’. The name of Marcus Garvey stands for African nationalism, the name of Malcolm X for separation from the American ‘nightmare’, the name of Martin Luther King for integration into a better America. We must give at least brief accounts of these movements in order to make black theology comprehensible.

Marcus Garvey was the charismatic leader of black nationalism between 1919 and 1930.¹³ Although much of his important work was done in the United States (to which he emigrated in 1916), he was born on 17 August 1887 in St Ann, Jamaica. His second name Mosiah (Moses) was given him by his mother: ‘I hope he will be like Moses, and lead his people.’ On his father’s side he was descended from the rebellious Maroons, who had pursued guerilla warfare against the British in the mountains of Jamaica. Even after the abolition of slavery in 1834, the black population in Jamaica could only survive as labourers in the white plantations. Garvey came to know the exploitation of the blacks in Kingston, Costa Rica and Panama. Booker T. Washington’s autobiography *Up from*

13. Amy Jacques-Garvey, *Philosophy and Opinions of Marcus Garvey*, two vols in one, New York 1968; E. David Cronon, *Black Moses. The Story of Marcus Garvey and the Universal Negro Improvement Association*, Madison 1955; T. Witvliet, *The Way of the Black Messiah. The Hermeneutical Challenge of Black Theology as Theology of Liberation*, London 1987.

12. See my article on racism and the right to resistance in *The Experiment Hope*, ET London 1975, 131-46.

Slavery¹⁴ made him ask: 'Where is the black man's Government? Where is his King and his Kingdom? Where is his President, his country, and his ambassador, his army, his navy, his men of big affairs?' In order to answer his questions he founded the UNIA (the Universal Negro Improvement Association) with branches both in Jamaica and in the United States. In 1919 it became the largest mass organization of black Americans. He also founded the newspaper *Negro World*, an African Legion and the shipping line Black Star Line, and called himself the provisional president of Africa.

Most important of all was Garvey's attempt to boost the self-confidence of the poor black population by reminding them of their African home. We are part of the proud African nation and descendants of the Pharaohs, he maintained. Our home is not this country of our white exploiters, but free Africa – 'Ethiopia' as he called it (Ethiopia being then the only African country which had never been subjugated and colonized). Garvey's attempt to raise up the bowed-down black people in America was directed towards the liberation of the African continent. 'Back to Africa' was synonymous with 'Africa for the Africans'. Here Garvey took his inspiration from Herzl's Zionism, which purposed both to make Israel the home of the Jews and to defend the rights of Jews all over the world. The echoes of the stories about Israel's liberations are not only prompted by the love of black people for the Old Testament. The first step on this long road out of American slavery to the freedom of Africa was for Garvey the inner separation from the dominant white world. He stood for 'black segregationism' and hated racial mixing, mixed marriages and mulattoes.

The founding of the black shipping line for the return to Africa proved to be an economic failure. Garvey was not a businessman. In 1925 he was sentenced to five years' imprisonment because of taxation problems, and was deported to Jamaica in 1927. But his great Africa vision found a real point of reference. Turn your eyes to Africa, he proclaimed in Jamaica: when a black king is crowned the day of redemption will be at hand. In 1930 Haile Selassie I, previously Ras Tafari Makonnen, was crowned emperor of Ethiopia. In Jamaica this triggered off the new religious Rastafari movement, in which many people saw the fulfilment of Marcus Garvey's message.

When Fascist Italy under Mussolini attacked Ethiopia in 1936 and Haile Selassie fled to England, Garvey's expectation that the day of redemption was imminent collapsed. He died in 1940 in England. But ever since Jamaica's independence (1962) he has been revered there as a national hero. His attempts to build up an independent black economy failed, but not his thrusts toward a new black self-esteem. The later Black Panther, Black Power, and Black is Beautiful movements were also influenced by him, as was African nationalism in African countries after independence. 'Africa for the Africans – those at home and those in exile' is an enduring demand.

14. Booker T. Washington, *Up from Slavery* (1895), New York 1967.

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The new religious movement of the *Rastafarians* can on the one hand be seen religio-critically as a shift away from the political demand for a return to Africa in the direction of a religious dream world; but on the other it can also be seen as a stabilization of the inner liberation from mental and spiritual oppression, and a preservation of African nationalism.¹⁵ It is at all events one of the most interesting modern forms of expression of the 'religion of the oppressed' (Latarnari). Without laying claim to a judgment of my own, I should like to stress and interpret the following points from the material available to me.

How can slaves and their descendants, living in a foreign land, express their own hopes in the culture, language and religion of their oppressors, and find their own identity? By changing the English language of the rulers into their own Rasta language. The Rastas escaped the English linguistic and cultural conformity imposed on them, and Africanized it by way of linguistic twists and re-interpretations. The Rasta language is called 'I'yaric' and is a sacred language for the initiated. The 'I' has a special importance because it stands for the link with both the divine and the brothers. The 'little I' enters into mystical association with the 'big I' of the divine, and the human being becomes holy. The link with the divine is achieved through meditation, which is stimulated through the 'sacrament', the sacred plant ganja/marihuana. The divine name is JAH, an abbreviated form of the Old Testament YHWH, and goes back to the JAH-God of the Maroons in Jamaica. Jah-man is the man of God and Jah-maica what has been made here by JAH.

The world of white rule in which black people have to exist is 'Babylon', as the apocalyptic language says in encoded form. The Rasta have to separate themselves from this despicable system. So numerous antitheses are developed. Where the churches use incense as the perfume of God, the Rasta community uses ganja. Where the whites have houses of God, for the Rasta the body of

15. For the following account I am indebted to my earlier assistant Carmen Rivuzumwami, who lived for a time in Jamaica and devoted intensive study to Rastafari religion and reggae music. See also J. Owens, *Dread. The Rastafarians of Jamaica*, Kingston, Jamaica 1976, ²1989.

every human being is holy as 'temple of the Spirit'. Whereas in the religion of the whites the Lord 'Jeesaz' reigns, here the 'victorious Lion of Judah' is expected, as redeemer of the black race, his 'chosen people'. Haile Selassie I is this longed-for redeemer, who will bring the oppressed black people to 'Ethiopia', free Africa. Garvey held the Ehtiopian ruler to be a human being, but the Rasta invested him with divine attributes. After his death in 1975, Haile Selassie lived on in the hearts of all 'I-and-I brothers'. The Rasta acknowledge him through their 'dreadlocks' (their lion's manes), their ceremonious, upright walk, and their knitted woolen caps in the Ethiopian colours, red, gold and green. 'Babylon' dictates the working hours of the day, so the Rasta meet at night, the time which is free. Babylon dominates the great cities, so the Rastas prefer to withdraw to the lonely mountains. Whereas white people eat meat, the Rasta are vegetarians. They share with the Jews the exilic situation which they call 'Babylon', following the Christian book of Revelation. They are hence the true Jah-people, who are waiting for their Exodus.

The Rastafarians have become known not least through the reggae music of Bob Marley and Peter Tosh. The three drums which are used carry the rhythm of the earth to heaven. Singing and dancing draw the initiated into the harmony of heaven and earth and therefore bear within themselves the holy and healing power of the Spirit of 'I-and-I'.

Rastafari has been called a messianically millenarian cult: messianic because of its hope for the redeemer Haile Selassie, millenarian because of the expectation of a golden future in 'Ethiopia'. But that is not an adequate description, nor is it sufficient for an understanding. Rastafari represents a turning away by the black Jamaicans from the white culture enforced on them, and from its Christian tradition. The transference of Marcus Garvey's Back to Africa movement into the world of religion, Rastafari's development of its own underground culture, a counter-culture to the culture of the white rulers, the transformation of the dominant language into a counter-language, and the conversion of the dominant religious symbols into a subversive religion: these are unique achievements of this 'religion of the oppressed', which serves to raise up and liberate the descendants of the black slaves. In the language and music of the Rasta, in their way of life and their cults, the home country 'Africa' lives as a utopian world which does not yet exist. 'Ethiopia' is a transferable symbol for 'the promised land' and for 'heaven on earth'. The 'Babylon system' is an expandable symbol for the slavery of body and soul in its old and new forms, a symbol used for thousands of years by the oppressed and persecuted Jews and Christians and their martyrs. The fact that in Garvey's time, and even today, hardly a single black person in Jamaica and the United States wants to return to Africa as it really exists, but that black people can nevertheless present themselves as independent, free human beings in the alien culture which oppresses and humiliates them, gives the utopia 'Ethiopia' its critical justification. 'Free our minds from mental slavery,' as Bob Marley sang.

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Malcolm X (1925-1965) and black separation

Slavery, far more than imprisonment, left profound traces in the souls of those enslaved and their descendants. These traces make themselves felt in the inferiority complex which develops in people humiliated by masters with a superiority complex. I am speaking out of the experience of long years as a prisoner of war, from 1945-1948. One faces a hostility against which one cannot defend oneself. One creeps into the shell of one's own inner life, and reacts outwardly with impassive indifference. One blocks off one's own vital energies and comes to terms with the barbed wire and the forced labour: 'Bent down so low 'til down don't bother you no more', said the black slaves. One accustoms oneself to the chains, so that they no longer chafe; makes oneself unnoticeable so as not to run into difficulties; smiles in order to keep the masters in a good mood. These are the experiences of hostages in kidnapped aircraft as well. The mental and spiritual consequence is self-contempt and the inner temptation to self-destructiveness.

In the former slave state, the fight for legal equality with the whites was only one side of all the black movements. Their other purpose was to raise up the bowed-down souls of the blacks so that they could achieve self-respect through consciousness of their own dignity. That meant nothing less than black self-determination according to their own values, not the values of the white world. 'Rather die standing up than live on one's knees'.

The Black Power movement (its name introduced into the Civil Rights Movement by Stokely Carmichael in 1966) wanted to be the power to say Yes to one's own blackness, and to make the whites either recognize it or accept the conflict.¹⁶ But in order for this to be possible the blacks had to destroy the picture which the white masters had made of them so as to keep them down. They had to find their own image, with which they could raise themselves up. 'The worst crime the white man has committed has been to teach us to hate ourselves,' proclaimed Malcolm X. His leader in the Black Muslim movement, Elijah Muhammad, had ironically complained: 'The Negro wants to be a white man. He processes his hair. Acts like a white man. He wants to integrate with the white man, but he cannot integrate with himself or with his

16. Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Hamilton, *Black Power. The Politics of Liberation in America*, New York 1967.

own mind. The Negro wants to lose his identity, because he does not know his own identity.¹⁷ But the victims cannot be integrated into the society of the perpetrators. That is why the motto of Black Power was: first separation from the dominating white culture and its values, then the discovery of black identity and values, and finally perhaps – one day – a new integration on the basis of mutual recognition, but not ‘on the terms of the white race’.

Consequently it was and remains false to criticize Black Power and black theology as being ‘racism in reverse’ – blacks against whites. What is at stake is something different: ‘Black consciousness is the key to the black man’s emancipation from his distorted self-image’¹⁸ – the image he has made of himself because he was forced to it by whites.

But the problem is that the blacks in the United States have been doubly oppressed, first through racism and secondly through poverty. It is therefore difficult to gather together a ‘black community’ and to motivate it to fight against white racism. The black population is already divided into poor and rich, and the black middle class is not prepared to put at risk the privileges that it has achieved. Martin Luther King therefore first led the March on Washington, but later the March of the Poor as well. He saw the double oppression, but was from birth onwards more on the side of integration. Malcolm X saw it too, but stressed the racist humiliation, and was from birth onwards on the side of separation. Both sides were faced with the question: where to? Separation yes, but where is the land of liberty? Integration yes, but under whose conditions?

Malcolm X was a representative of the poor blacks in the North. Born as Malcolm Little in Omaha, Nebraska, on 15 May 1925, the seventh child of a Baptist assistant preacher who never had a steady congregation, he grew up in Lansing, Michigan. His father was a black Nationalist and an organizer of Marcus Garvey’s UNIA. His mother worked there too. So he grew up with the idea ‘Africa for the Africans’ and with the hope that ‘Africa’s redemption is coming’. The Ku Klux Klan drove his family out of Omaha, a white hate group set their house in Lansing on fire. After the death of their father the children were distributed among different families as ‘state children’ – wards of court. Malcolm’s schooling ended when he was fourteen: ‘I finished the eighth grade in Mason, Michigan. My high school was the black ghetto of Roxbury. My college was the streets of Harlem, and my master’s was taken in prison.’¹⁹

While he was in prison Malcolm got to know the disciplined Black Muslims and in 1958 was converted to Elijah Muhammad’s ‘Nation of Islam’. For them devils were white and God black, and

It was and remains false to criticize Black Power and black theology as being ‘racism in reverse’ – blacks against whites. What is at stake is something different: ‘Black consciousness is the key to the black man’s emancipation from his distorted self-image’ – the image he has made of himself because he was forced to it by whites.

blacks have God’s true religion and culture. This strange Muslim faith gave Malcolm self-respect and self-education while he was in prison. He had overcome the temptation to ‘self-destruct’. He continued to educate himself and after he was released from prison joined Temple Number One in Detroit. The founder of the Black Muslims gave him the name ‘X’, which was intended to symbolize the African surname which he did not know, and thus freed him from the ‘white, blue-eyed devil’ who had given his slave the name ‘Little’. He took Malcolm in like a son, making him No. 2 in the movement, as his personal messenger. This was the radical continuation of the Garvey movement: ‘The solution of the problem is separation, not integration.’

Malcolm X was one of the best and most intelligent speakers in the United States of his time. His personal problem was only that he was not pure black. ‘Malcolm was red because his maternal grandmother was raped by a white man.’ Malcolm hated himself for this: ‘I hate every drop of the rapist’s blood that is in me.’²⁰

In the 1950s and 1960s Malcolm X was the great alternative in the black community to Martin Luther King. In his famous Washington speech in 1963, ‘I have a dream...’, King was casting back to the ‘American dream’ and the declaration of human rights in the American Constitution: ‘All men are created equal.’ But Malcolm summed up the cry of the wretched in the black ghettos: ‘I have a nightmare.’ What the whites call their American dream has always been for the blacks only a nightmare. In order to finally wake up from that nightmare, cried Malcolm, the blacks have to take up the struggle against the ‘white devils’. But the search for self-confidence and identity is hard: we know neither our names, our language, our homeland nor our religion. ‘We are like dry bones in the valley.’ But, Malcolm proclaimed, ‘The great day of separation is at hand’, for God will destroy white America. Only fools want to be ‘integrated’ into a sinking ship. But Malcolm too did not know the place where the blacks would be saved on America’s downfall. His proposals for a territorial separation

17. In the following passage I am drawing on J.H. Cone’s account, *Martin and Malcolm and America: a Dream or a Nightmare*, New York 1991, as well as on *Malcolm X. The Autobiography of Malcolm X as told to Alex Haley*, New York 1973, and on P. Goldmann, *The Death and Life of Malcolm X*, New York 1979. The quotation may be found in J.H. Cone’s book, *Black Theology and Black Power*, New York 1969, 19.

18. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (n. 16), 19.

19. Cone, *Martin and Malcolm and America* (n. 16), 42.

20. *Ibid.*, 56.

were meant as a utopia.²¹ This was what Elijah Muhammad had taught too. Like 'Babylon', America has become subject to God's judgment. 'No one shall escape the doom except those who accept Allah as god, Islam as his only religion, and the Honorable Elijah Muhammad as his Messenger to the twenty-to million ex-slaves in America.'²² This was once again an Exodus story with a white Pharaoh, a black Israel, an Islamic Moses and 'Africa' as the promised land.

After 1960 Malcolm broke with Elijah Muhammad. He wanted to see the Nation of Islam in political action, whereas Elijah Muhammad wanted to keep it as a strictly religious community. Malcolm wanted to intervene politically 'now', but Elijah waited for God to act in the year 1970. In February 1965 Malcolm X was shot in Harlem, as he was addressing a great crowd of people.

For the whites, Malcolm counted as a radical, a black racist, a preacher of hate; for many blacks he was an apostle of the new black self-respect. He led young blacks in the ghettos away from their self-destructiveness through drugs, crime, prison sentences and so forth. As James Cone says, freedom is always first of all one's own perception of one's own self-esteem and dignity. But for the separation which Malcolm X taught, there was no 'promised land': nor were there any 'liberated zones' in society, not even for Indians, to whom the land belonged. And yet this utopia has acted as an inspiration in the criticism of the imposed values of the whites, and in the build-up of black self-confidence.

As Malcolm X shows, the socio-psychological problem of *self-contempt* is a problem from which the descendants of black slaves and victims of white racism have to suffer every day. But it is not a problem of racism alone. It is also a human problem imposed by the capitalist achievement-orientated society.²³ If the sense of one's own value depends solely on achievement and possessions – that is to say, on the market value of human beings – then it is ultimately founded on profound existential anxieties. The person who 'doesn't make it' is a failure, and is forced to retire from the competitive struggle. The achievement-oriented society has to evoke permanent depression among its members in order to goad them on to particular achievements. If people are judged according to their market value, the result is a new justification through works, and a nihilist mood of anxiety. Private and public pastoral care in this society therefore has only one theme for all concerned, irrespective of their race: self-esteem and success. You aren't just nothing. You are someone who can make it. God loves you if you only want it. In capitalist society the gospel is self-acceptance, self-esteem, and self-love. The message 'black is beautiful' reaches only those who have been humiliated by white racism, but not those who have been exploited by the market economy. And yet they can all learn from black theology that human dignity is more

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than the humiliating image of the black man or woman painted by whites, and more too than the market value of a human being. The emancipation of black men and women from racism can become the model for the human emancipation of human beings.

Martin Luther King (1929-1968) and American integration

The blacks in the United States have two souls in their breasts, an African and a American one. W.E.B. DuBois recognized this early on: 'Am I an American or am I a negro? Can I be both?'²⁴ Malcolm X had answered: I am black first of all. My sympathies are black. My affiliation is black. I am not interested in being an American because America was never interested in me. Martin Luther King, in contrast, stood for the full integration of the blacks in American society. His dream of the equality of the blacks, proclaimed in his remarkable speech before the Capitol in Washington on 28 August 1963, was, as he said, 'a dream deeply rooted in the American dream'. We simply want the realization of the American dream, he proclaimed, a dream which is still unfulfilled, a dream about equality of opportunities, rights, property, a dream about a society in which people are judged not according to the colour of their skins but according to their character, a dream about the brotherhood of all, a dream about America as 'land of the free and home of the brave'.²⁵ He therefore claimed, logically and rightly, in the name of the humiliated and poor blacks, the great promises of the American constitution. Because the American dream is still unfulfilled, the liberation and integration of the blacks can still become a part of it.

Martin Luther King felt himself to be American first of all, and then black. Many black people after him have had the same experience: after having looked for their roots in Africa, they

21. Ibid., 110.

22. Ibid., 159.

23. J. Moltmann, 'Freedom in Community between Globalization and Individualism: Market Value and Human Dignity', in *God for a Secular Society*, trans. Margaret Kohl, London and Minneapolis 1999, 153-66.

24. Cone, *Martin and Malcolm* (n.16), 3.

25. In the following passage I am following, as well as J.H. Cone's account: Coretta Scott King, *My Life with Martin Luther King*, New York 1969; D.L. Lewis, *King. A Critical Biography*, New York 1970; and N.L. Erskine, *King among Theologians*, Cleveland, Ohio, 1984.

have discovered there that they are Americans. That is also the conclusion Keith B. Richburg, a journalist on the *Washington Post*, draws from his experiences in Africa, as he records in his book *Out of America. A Black Man Confronts Africa*.²⁶ But what does the ‘American soul’ of the blacks look like? Do they become ‘Americans’ only under the conditions of the white world? Or can this integration lead to a new world of free and equal partners?

Martin Luther King Jr was born in Atlanta, Georgia, on 15 January 1929 as son of the Baptist pastor Martin Luther King Sr. His house is only a few steps from the famous Ebenezer Church, which became the centre for the Civil Rights movement in Atlanta. His father was the son of a poor sharecropper in Georgia, but he had worked himself up and in the end became an influential personality in the black community. This family, this church, and the self-determining will (‘Help yourselves, then you can succeed in the world of the white man too,’ as Booker Washington had said) were essential influences in Martin’s childhood. But it was still the world of legal segregation, with ‘Whites only’ notices in buses, hospitals, parks, shops, restaurants, and so forth. In short, it was the Jim Crow world of the white police and the Ku Klux Klan. It was only in the churches that the blacks could be themselves, and think, talk and sing as they really were. The Christian congregation and the black community belonged closely together.

When he was eighteen, Martin Jr was ordained, and went on to study at Croser Seminary in Chester, Pennsylvania. He too had unpleasant encounters with white racists, but he did not live in the black slums like Malcolm X. He was determined ‘to get on’ and both in the seminary and later at Boston University counted as one of the best students. His later thinking and actions were deeply influenced, first, by Gandhi’s writings and the non-violent protest movement in India; second, by the philosophical personalism of Edgar Brightman; and third, by the Christian theology of Reinhold Niebuhr, Paul Tillich and Henry Nelson Wieman. In Boston he studied Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Mind* (or *Spirit*), and learnt from Hegel’s dialectic that progress can only be made through conflict. His study programme extended to white theology – European theology as far as possible, German theology included; there was no question of a black theology. In Boston he met Coretta Scott. They married in 1953, and Martin accepted a pastorate at the Dexter Avenue Church in Montgomery, Alabama.

It was there that the famous story of Rosa Parks took place. On 1 December 1955, as she travelled home from work, tired, she refused to give up her place in the bus, a place reserved ‘for whites only’. She was arrested, and the long and total boycott of all municipal buses in Montgomery by the blacks began. Martin Luther King was the organizer and leader. This boycott was followed by a massive number of sit-ins and freedom marches, which finally culminated in the great March on Washington in 1963. Law was on the side of the blacks, for as early as 1954 the Supreme Court had declared that the segregation of schools and buses was unconstitutional; but power was in the hands of the whites.

26. New York 1997.

The great themes of King’s public speeches were *justice and love*, in that order. He justified the Montgomery boycott through the right of the blacks to their own rights: ‘The right to protest for rights.’ That right is constitutional and is in conformity with God.

For Martin Luther King, racial discrimination was at first in the forefront, but after 1965 he and the Southern Christian Leadership perceived the close connection between racism, poverty and militarism in American politics. It was not by chance that he was murdered on 4 April 1968 in Memphis, Tennessee, when he and others organized the strike of black trash collectors.

The great themes of King’s public speeches were *justice and love*, in that order. He justified the Montgomery boycott through the right of the blacks to their own rights: ‘The right to protest for rights.’ That right is constitutional and is in conformity with God.²⁷ For King, the question of love entered the discussion only in connection with the mode of the protest: civil disobedience, but in non-violent action. Non-violent action puts the violent in the wrong. Violence destroys the violent inwardly. Non-violence frees them from their self-destructiveness. Violence creates enemies; non-violence can turn enemies into friends. Non-violence has a reconciling power, so only the methods of non-violence can be used for the integration of black and white in a new, just society. But non-violence has nothing to do with the powerlessness of the powerless, for whom nothing is left but to surrender. Non-violence is the royal way of liberating the oppressed and the oppressors from hate and fear. For the person who cannot take this path, self-[defense], if necessary with violence, is better than the surrender into impotence, as Gandhi had already said. Because of this commitment to non-violence, many black people saw in King only ‘a religious Uncle Tom’ and preferred to follow Malcolm X’s morality of self-[defense].

Martin Luther King always directly set the local actions and experiences of the blacks in the southern states of America in a global context. Things began in Montgomery on a December evening with Rosa Parks, but all over the world exploited people were rising against their oppressors. For King, this was a movement for a new world-wide community of people of all races on the basis of justice. He then also met with agreement and support from all over the world, and he soon went on to develop them ‘dream of

27. Quotation in J.H. Cone, *Martin and Malcolm* (n. 16), 62: “If we are wrong, the Constitution of the US is wrong. If we are wrong, God Almighty is wrong...If we are wrong, justice is a lie...”

King's theology derived *contextually* from the suffering of the blacks in the United States of America, but it was *universally* related to the freedom of all men and women. He began with the liberation of the oppressed, but at the same time aimed to liberate the oppressors too.

the better America' into a hope for the whole world, contending that it was impossible to be free in America as long as the peoples of the Third World were not free. For him, freedom was always universal and indivisible.

Through their struggle for their rights the blacks in America were to deliver the whites too from racial fear and racial hatred. They were to redeem the soul of America and create 'a beloved community'. 'The Negro is God's instrument to save the soul of America.'²⁸ So at the beginning of the 1960s King himself became the public spokesman not only of the blacks but of the whites too for 'the dream of our American democracy' – the better, true America.

It was only after 11 August 1965 that he began to have doubts.²⁹ On that day, following a revolt of the blacks in the Watts ghetto of Los Angeles, the police shot thirty-four people and laid the whole quarter waste. The white reaction was more violent than he had expected, and the blacks turned away from his non-violent methods: 'Burn, baby, burn.' That year the Vietnam war took on new brutality, and King threw himself completely into the anti-Vietnam war movement. The face of America changed. It was no longer the dreamland of freedom. It was a country of repression, internally and externally. 'The judgment of God is now on America,' proclaimed King, just as Malcolm X had also done. He felt that he was called to be a prophet for America, but his sermons no longer fostered the official American optimism.

Martin Luther King always said that he was a 'man of God' and a preacher of the gospel, nothing else. But history made of him an eminently *political theologian*. His best sermons were public speeches, and his public speeches were sermons. This made the American public his congregation, and not the American public alone. The reason was that King had his roots in the black congregation which had always been the centre of the black population. There was no separation there between church and society, religion and politics. King had only made this unity country-wide and world-wide. Adam Clayton Powell Jr complained that the white

churches had turned Christianity into a 'churchianity', and in so doing had betrayed the prophetic message about universal freedom and the quality of all.³⁰ For King, the God of the Bible was the God of world history. Experience of God was present in human experience of life and suffering. The cross of Christ was always linked with the cross of Christ's oppressed, black fellow-sufferers. For King, the righteousness and justice of God was divine and human justice at the same time.

King's theology derived *contextually* from the suffering of the blacks in the United States of America, but it was *universally* related to the freedom of all men and women. He began with the liberation of the oppressed, but at the same time aimed to liberate the oppressors too. *In partisan terms* King was on the side of the blacks, but *dialectically* he also wanted to win over the whites. Practically and in concrete terms he acted *locally*, but he thought *globally*. And that can count as a model for every political theology.

James Cone and black theology

There have always been black theologians in the United States. But black theology is a name which James Cone has given to his theological interpretation of the Black Power movement,³¹ and since 1969 it has been generally adopted.³² We shall consider the relevance of black theology for whites by looking at some of its problems.

The name indicates a programme: 1. Liberation from 'white theology', with its choice of topics and its methods drawn from the dominant white culture; 2. to make Christian theology as a whole aware of black theology's own subject, context and *Kairos*, as well as its own community; 3. to develop a theology based on the particular experience of God and life of black men and women, as this is expressed in the sermons, songs and liturgies of the black churches. The term 'black' means the situation of the descendants of the slaves in the dominant white culture of America, since the colour of their skins was used by white racists as a sign of their degradation to the status of 'niggers'. Black theology is therefore not African theology. Over against a theology in the African cultural context, this is the theology of the oppressed in the white cultural context.

Does the gospel about the kingdom of God have any special relevance for the humiliated people deprived of their rights, who are suffering under the burden of the slavery of their forebears?

Neither in the past nor in the present has European theology made the mass enslavement of black people at the beginning of modern times one of its chosen themes.³³ Luther took no notice of the 'discovery' of America, and Schleiermacher was equally unconcerned about the slave-trade, which was at its height in his

28. Ibid., 71.

29. Ibid., 232ff.

30. A. Clayton Powell Jr, *Marching Blacks*, New York 1972.

31. J.H. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power*, New York 1969.

32. G.S. Wilmore and J.H. Cone, *Black Theology. A Documentary History 1966-1979*, Maryknoll, NY 1979, revised ed. 1993.

33. Exceptions are K.P. Blaser, *Wenn Gott Schwarz wäre... Das Problem des Rassismus in Theologie und christlicher Praxis*, Zürich 1972, and 'Warum "Schwarze Theologie"?', *EvTh* 1974/1.

It was only in our generation, in the ecumenical context and in the light of the apartheid regime in South Africa, that a discussion emerged about the impossibility of reconciling Christian existence and racism. But that is *the* theme of black theology, its sole purpose: 'to apply the freeing power of the gospel to black people who are under white oppression'.

time. For Barth, Bultmann and Tillich too, this was not a subject for theology. Consequently it was only in our generation, in the ecumenical context and in the light of the apartheid regime in South Africa, that a discussion emerged about the impossibility of reconciling Christian existence and racism. But that is *the* theme of black theology, its sole purpose: 'to apply the freeing power of the gospel to black people who are under white oppression'.³⁴ Black theology knows no other authority than the misery of the oppressed and is therefore not prepared to maintain any biblical or theological doctrine 'which contradicts the black demand for freedom now'.³⁵ For in the sense defined above, to be black is 'holy' and a symbol for the saving and judging presence of God in history for the sake, and for the benefit, of oppressed men and women. 'Where there is black, there is oppression, but...where there is blackness, there is Christ, who has taken on blackness so that what is evil in men's eyes might become good'.³⁶

In his second book, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, Cone drew on Tillich's concept of symbol to describe concrete blackness in the USA in its universal meaning for all the damned of this earth. He wrote: 'The focus on blackness does not mean that only blacks suffer as victims in a racist society, but that blackness is an ontological symbol and a visible reality which best describes what oppression means in America'.³⁷ If God's liberating presence in history is to be found at the place where people are suffering from the injustice of oppression by other people, then blackness is also 'the most adequate symbol for pointing to the dimensions of divine activity in America'.³⁸

This leads to the theological question: *is God 'black'*? Quite early on, black preachers and poets saw God like this, but it was

Cone who first justified this talk of God theologically: the 'blackness of God' is at the heart of every black theology, for it says that God identifies himself with the oppressed and makes their humiliation his own. Cone points to God's identification with the enslaved people of Israel in their bondage in Egypt, and to the hymn in Philippians 2 which tells how Christ himself took the form of a slave and became 'the Oppressed One', in order to free the enslaved. A moving spiritual tells the same thing:

Were you there when they crucified my Lord
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?
Oh! Sometimes it causes me to tremble, tremble, tremble;
Were you there when they crucified my Lord?

The answer:

I know what he went through
because I have met him in the high place of pain,
And I claim him as my brother.³⁹

For Cone, God the Father identifies himself with oppressed Israel, the Son becomes himself the Oppressed One in order to free the prisoners, the Spirit of this Father and this Son becomes energy in the self-liberation of the oppressed.

But 'God is black' also means: 'We must become black with God.' Bonhoeffer said something similar in his Gestapo cell: 'Only the suffering God can help,' and 'Christians are beside God in his suffering'.⁴⁰ In the history of injustice and violence God takes the part of the oppressed and the poor, in order to redeem all human beings from evil. In this history, to be partisan is the dialectical way to the universality of the kingdom of freedom. For Cone, God cannot be colourless or colourblind, because the human history of violence does not allow him to be neutral or indifferent towards victims and perpetrators. God loves the people at the bottom of the ladder, and puts down the mighty from their seats. The liberal abandonment of talk about God's wrath is false. God's love for the whites can only mean wrath, and that means the destruction of their whiteness and all the privileges which they have associated with it.

It is quite consistent that Cone should develop a *theology for the victims* but not a theology for the perpetrators, or only indirectly. God is the God who creates justice for those who suffer violence, not the God who justifies the sinners. His Christ is the saviour of the sick, the brother of the poor, the liberator of the oppressed. Right down to his death on the cross, he is *the Oppressed One*. The slaves understood the suffering Christ, and knew that he understood them. In this sense Christ is 'the black Messiah' of the humiliated blacks.

That is certainly the picture of the synoptic Jesus of Nazareth

34. Cone, *Black Theology and black Power* (n. 16), 31.

35. *Ibid.*, 120.

36. *Ibid.*, 69.

37. J.H. Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, New York 1970, 29.

38. *Ibid.*, 27.

39. H. Thurman, *The Negro Spiritual*, 27; J.H. Cone, *God of the Oppressed*, New York 1975, new revised edition, New York 1997, 109.

40. D. Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison*, ed. E. Bethge, [fourth] enlarged ed., trans. R.H. Fuller *et al.*, London 1971, letter of 16 July 1944, 361ff.; poem 'Christians and Pagans', 348 f.

rather than the Christ of patristic dogma. But this is not the man Jesus of white, middle-class, liberal theology. This is the assailed, tortured and crucified Son of man and the risen Redeemer of the poor. Here Christ's cross and resurrection acquire paradigmatic significance for the liberation struggle of the blacks. The historical Jesus is the prefigurement of the Christ of the present, and the present Christ is the Christ with, beside and in the blacks who rise up out of their oppression and lethargy. The eschatology of the black spirituals was oriented towards the next world, so that it might give comfort in slavery's vale of tears; but the eschatology of black theology is presentative and aggressive. 'Black Theology has hope for this life.'⁴¹ From the black perspective, Christian hope means participating in the world and making it what it ought to be. Black eschatology 'will not be deceived by images of pearly gates and golden streets' in the heavenly Jerusalem, 'because too many earthly streets are covered in black blood.'⁴²

What follows from the black theology of the victims for the Christian theology on the other side? As the question suggests: it means first of all that 'white' theology must become truly Christian theology. The blacks demand that whites abandon their whiteness as a sufficient form of human existence, and at long last take the risk of creating a new humanity, says Cone, rightly. But without the liberation of the blacks from the misery of white racism the whites will not be liberated from the other side of this misery. Until the 'master-slave' system is ended there can be no truly human community.

Black theology opens up for the theology of the whites the unique chance to free itself from the constitutional blindness of white society, and to become Christian theology. If we listen seriously to the stories of the blacks, if we try to understand black theology, we begin to see ourselves and our own history through the eyes of the people who have suffered and are still suffering under our culture and our church. The person who has incurred guilt can no doubt admit his guilt, but only his victims know what suffering his injustice has caused. So we only become free of our own blindness if we see ourselves through the eyes of our victims and identify with them, because it was with them that the Son of man already identified himself (Matthew 25). White Christians should not, one day, have to ask unsuspectingly, 'Lord, when did we see you *black*?' Christ lies before their door as a black. Black theology makes our own task clear in the struggle against the evils of racism, which oppress both victims and perpetrators, even if in different ways.

But people who are personally involved with black theology are also asking whether to describe the blacks only as victims of the ruling whites does not fixate them on the whites in a way that has negative consequences. Black people in America are more than merely descendants of the black slaves. They have also brought into America their own culture and their own forms of religion. So whenever black people in America remember who they are,

If we listen seriously to the stories of the blacks, if we try to understand black theology, we begin to see ourselves and our own history through the eyes of the people who have suffered and are still suffering under our culture and our church.

this brings to the surface their rich culture, even though in many cases it has been suppressed. Black theology must therefore return to the inner traditions of *black religion*, which have been perceived above all in the black churches.⁴³

Not least, the symbolic term 'black' for the oppressed must not reduce to invisibility the particular misery and particular dignity of black women. Today there is a good *black womanist theology*, which on the one hand limits black theology and on the other develops it further.⁴⁴

41. Cone, *Black Theology and Black Power* (n. 30), 123.

42. *Ibid.*, 127.

43. Wilmore and Cone, *Black Theology. A Documentary History* (n. 31), 1979, 617; J.H. Cone, 'Looking Back, Going Forward: Black Theology as Public Theology', *Criterion*, Winter 1999, 18-27.

44. Delores Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness. The Challenge of Womanist God-Talk*, New York 1994.