Also by James H. Cone

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Risks of Faith

James H. Cone

The Emergence of a Black Theology of Liberation, 1968-1998

Boston Beacon Press
For Gayraud S. Wilmore

My friend and colleague in the black theology movement, who was never afraid to take risks for black people

And for communities of color throughout the world, for whom risks of faith are a daily reality
My purpose is to examine the concept of Black Power and its relationship to Christianity and the Church. Some religionists would consider Black Power the work of the Antichrist. Others would suggest that such a concept should be tolerated as an expression of Christian love to the misguided black brother. It is my thesis, however, that Black Power, even in its most radical expression, is not an 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 Jesus through a total identification with the suffering poor as expressed in Black Power, that Church will become exactly what Christ is not.

That most churches see an irreconcilable conflict between Christianity and Black Power is evidenced not only by the structure of their community (the 11:00 A.M. hour on Sunday is still the most segregated hour of any weekday), but by their typical response to riots: "I deplore the violence but sympathize with the reasons for the violence." What churchmen, laymen, and ministers alike apparently fail to recognize is their contribution to the ghetto-condition through permissive silence—except for a few resolutions which they usually pass once a year or immediately following a riot—and through their cotenancy with a dehumanizing social structure whose existence depends on the enslavement of black people. If the Church is to remain faithful to its Lord, it must make a decisive break with the structure of this society by launching a vehement attack on the evils of racism in all forms. It must become prophetic, demanding a radical change in the interlocking structures of this society.

Of course the Church must realize, in view of the Christian doctrine of man, that this is a dangerous task. But obedience to Christ is always costly. The time has come for the Church to challenge the power structure with
the power of the gospel, knowing that nothing less than immediate and total emancipation of all people is consistent with the message and style of Jesus Christ. The Church cannot afford to deplore the means that oppressed people use to break the chains of slavery because such language not only clouds the issue but also gives comfort and assistance to the oppressor. Therefore, the primary purpose of this essay is to show that embracing Black Power is not only possible but necessary, if the Church wants to remain faithful to the traditions of Christianity as disclosed in the person of Jesus Christ.

**Definition of Black Power**

What does Black Power mean? It means nothing other than full emancipation of black people from white oppression by whatever means black people deem necessary. The methods may include selective buying, boycotting, marching, or even rebellion. Black Power, therefore, means black freedom, black self-determination, wherein black people no longer view themselves as animals devoid of human dignity but as men, human beings with the ability to carve out their own destiny. In short, as Stokely Carmichael would say, Black Power means T.C.B., Take Care of Business—black folk taking care of black folks' business not on the terms of the oppressor, but on those of the oppressed.

Black Power is analogous to Albert Camus's understanding of the rebel. The rebel is the man who says no and yes; he says no to conditions considered intolerable, and yes to that “something within him which 'is worth while . . . ’ and which must be taken into consideration.” He says no to “the humiliating orders of his master,” and by so doing testifies to that something that is placed above everything else, including life itself. To say no means that death is preferable to life, if the latter is devoid of freedom. In the words of the black spiritual, “Before I be a slave I'll be buried in my grave.” This is what Black Power means.

Unfortunately, many well-intentioned persons have insisted that there must be another approach, one that will not cause so much hostility, not to mention rebellion. Therefore, appeal is made to the patience of black people to keep their “cool” and not to get carried away by their feelings. These men argue that if any progress is to be made, it will be through a careful, rational approach to the subject. These people are deeply offended when black people refuse to listen and place such liberals in the same category as the most adamant segregationists. They simply do not see that such reasoned appeals merely support the perpetuation of the ravaging of the black community. Black Power, in this respect, is by nature “irrational,” that is, not denying the role of rational reflection, but insisting that human existence cannot be mechanized or put into neat boxes according to reason. Human reason, though valuable, is not absolute, because moral decisions—those decisions that deal with human dignity—cannot be made by using the abstract methods of science. Human emotions must be reckoned with. Consequently, black people must say no to all do-gooders who insist that they need more time. If such persons really knew oppression—knew it existentially in their guts—they would not be confused or disturbed at black rebellion, but would join black people in their fight for freedom and dignity. It is interesting that most people do understand why Jews can hate Germans. Why can they not also understand why black people, who have been deliberately and systematically murdered by the structure of this society, hate white people? The general failure of Americans to make this connection suggests that the primary difficulty is their inability to see black men as men.

This leads us to another reason why the concept of Black Power is rejected. Some persons would have us believe that advocating Black Power creates too much resentment or hate among black people and this makes significant personal relationship between black and white impossible. It should be obvious that the hate that black people feel toward white people is not due to the creation of the phrase Black Power. Rather it is a result of the deliberate and systematic ordering of society on the basis of racism, making black alienation not only possible but inevitable. For 350 years black people have been enslaved by the tentacles of white power, tentacles that worm their way into the guts of their being and “invade the gray cells of their cortex.” For 350 years they have cried, waited, voted, marched, picketed, and boycotted, but whites still refuse to recognize their humanity. In light of this, attributing black resentment to the creation of Black Power is ridiculous, if not obscene.

Furthermore, while it is true that black people do hate whites, it is misleading to suggest that hatred is essential to the definition of Black Power. Quoting Carmichael's denial of the “black supremacy” charge: “There is no analogy—by any stretch of definition or imagination—between the advocates of Black Power and white racists. . . . The goal of the racists is to keep black people on the bottom, arbitrarily and dictatorially, as they have
done in this country for over three hundred years. The goal of black self-determination and black self-identity—Black Power—is full participation in the decision-making processes affecting the lives of black people.” In hate one desires something that is not his; but the black man’s intention is to claim what is his—freedom. Therefore, it is not the purpose of the black man to repudiate his enslaver’s dignity, but only his right as an enslaver. The rebellion in the cities should not be interpreted as the work of a few blacks who want something for nothing but as an assertion of the dignity of black people. The black man is assuming that there is a common value which is recognizable by all as existing in all people, and he is testifying to that something in his rebellion. He is expressing his solidarity with the human race.

In reality, then, accommodation and protest seem to be the only options open to the black man. For three hundred years he accommodated, thereby giving credence to his own enslavement. Black Power means that he will no longer accommodate; that he will no longer tolerate white excuses for enslavement; that he will no longer be guided by the oppressor’s understanding of justice, liberty, freedom, or the methods to be used in attaining it. He recognizes the difference between theoretical equality and great factual inequalities. He will not sit by and wait for the white man’s love to be extended to his black brother. He will protest, violently if need be, on behalf of absolute and immediate emancipation. Black Power means that black people will cease trying rationally to articulate the political advantages and moral rightness of human freedom, because the dignity of man is a self-evident religious, philosophical, and political truth, without which human community is impossible. When one group breaks the accepted human covenant (i.e., a mutual respect for human freedom), it begins to plant the seeds of rebellion.

Many concerned persons have pointed out the futility of black rebellion by drawing a vast contrast between the present conditions of the black man in the ghetto and other revolutionaries of the past. They say that revolution depends on cohesion, discipline, stability, and the sense of a stake in society. The ghetto, by contrast, is relatively incohesive, unorganized, unstable and numerically too small to be effective. Therefore, rebellion for the black man can only mean extermination.

The analysis is essentially correct. But to point out the futility of rebellion is to miss the point of black rebellion. Black people know that they compose less than 12 percent of the total population and are proportionately weak with respect to economic, political, or military power. The rebellion in the cities is not a conscious organized attempt of black people to take over; it is an attempt to say yes to their own dignity even in death. Therefore, the question is not whether black people are prepared to die—the riots testify to that—but whether whites are prepared to kill them. Unfortunately, it seems that that answer has been given through the riots as well. Yet this willingness of black people to die is not novel but is rather a part of the heritage of Christianity.

Christianity and Black Power

The black intellectual community is becoming increasingly suspicious of Christianity because the oppressor has used it as a means of directing the oppressed away from any concern for present inequalities by emphasizing a heavenly reality beyond time and space. Naturally, as the slave begins to question his existence as a slave, he also questions the religion of the enslaver.

It is, therefore, appropriate to ask, “Is Black Power compatible with the Christian faith, or are we dealing with two radically divergent perspectives?” To answer these questions we need to ask and answer a prior question: “What is Christianity?”

Christianity begins and ends with the Man Jesus—his life, death, and resurrection. He is the essence of Christianity. Schleiermacher was not far wrong when he said that “Christianity is essentially distinguished from other faiths by the fact that everything in it is related to the redemption accomplished by Jesus of Nazareth.” In contrast to many religions, Christianity revolves around a Person, without whom its existence ceases to be. Christ and Christianity belong together; they cannot be separated. Granted, there have been historical disagreements regarding the nature of that connection. The relationship has been conceived as inward or as external and mechanical. But it is impossible to separate Christ from Christianity without robbing it of its uniqueness.

The central importance of Jesus Christ for Christianity is plainest of all when we consider the New Testament picture of Jesus. According to the New Testament, Jesus is the man for others who views his existence as inexplicably tied to other men to the degree that his own Person is inexplicable apart from others. Others, of course, refers to all men, especially the oppressed, the unwanted of society, the sinners. He is God Himself coming
into the very depths of human existence for the sole purpose of destroying
all human tentacles of slavery, thereby freeing man from ungodly principalities and powers that hinder his relationship with God. Jesus himself defines the nature of his ministry in these terms:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me to preach the good news to the poor,
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind,
To set at liberty those who are oppressed,
To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.

(Luke 4:18, 19)

His work is essentially one of liberation. Becoming a slave himself, he opens realities of human existence formerly closed to man. Through an encounter with him, man now knows the full meaning of God’s action in history and man’s place within it.

The Gospel of Mark describes the nature of Jesus’ ministry in this manner: “The time is fulfilled, the Kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe the Gospel” (1:14, 15). On the face of it this message appears not to be too radical to our twentieth-century ears, but this impression stems from our failure existentially to bridge the gap between modern man and biblical man. In reality the message of the Kingdom strikes at the very center of man’s desire to define his own existence in the light of his own interests and activities. It is a message about the ghetto, Vietnam, and all other injustices done in the name of democracy and religion to further the social, political, and economic interests of the oppressor. In Christ, God enters human affairs and takes sides with the oppressed. Their suffering becomes his; their despair, divine despair. Through Christ the poor are offered freedom now to rebel against that which makes them other than human.

It is ironical that America, with its history of injustice to the poor (especially regarding the black man and the Indian) prides itself as a Christian nation (is there really such an animal?). It is even more ironical that officials within the body of the Church have passively or actively participated in injustices. With Jesus, however, the poor were at the heart of his mission: “The last shall be first and the first last” (Matt. 20:16). That is why he was always kind to traitors, adulterers, and sinners and why the Samaritan came out on top in the parable. Speaking of Pharisees (the religiously elite of his day), he said: “Truly I say to you, the tax collectors (traitors) and harlots go into the Kingdom—but not you” (Matt. 21:31). Jesus had little tolerance for the middle- or upper-class religious snob whose attitude attempted to usurp the sovereignty of God and destroy the dignity of the poor. The Kingdom is for the poor and not the rich because the former has nothing to expect from the world while the latter’s entire existence is grounded in his commitment to worldly things. The poor man may expect everything from God while the rich man may expect nothing because of his refusal to free himself from his own pride. It is not that poverty is a precondition for entrance into the Kingdom. But those who recognize their utter dependence on God and wait on him despite the miserable absurdity of life are usually poor, according to our Lord. And the Kingdom which the poor may enter is not merely an eschatological longing for escape to a transcendent reality, nor is it an inward serenity that eases unbearable suffering. Rather it is God encountering man in the very depths of his being-in-the-world and releasing him from all human evils, like racism, which hold him captive. The repentant man knows that even though God’s ultimate Kingdom is in the future, it breaks through even now like a ray of light upon the darkness of the oppressed.

When we make it contemporaneous with our life situation, Jesus’ message is clear enough. The message of Black Power is the message of Christ himself. To be sure, that statement is both politically and religiously dangerous. It is so politically because Black Power threatens the very structure of the American way of life. It is theologically dangerous because it may appear to overlook Barth’s early emphasis on “the infinite qualitative distinction between God and man.” In this regard, we must say that Christ never promised political security, but the opposite; and Karl Barth was mainly concerned with the easy identification of the work of God with the work of the State. But if Luther’s statement “we are Christ to the neighbor” is to be taken seriously, and if we can believe the New Testament witness that proclaims Jesus as resurrected and thus active even now in the midst of human misery, then he must be alive in men who are where the action is. If the gospel is a gospel of liberation for the oppressed, then Jesus is...
The Church and Black Power

What is the Church and its relationship to Christ and Black Power? According to the New Testament, the Church is the laos theou, the “people of God.” It is a community of people who have encountered God’s action in history and thus desire to participate in Christ’s continued work of liberation. As Bonhoeffer puts it, the Church is “Christ existing as community” or Christ’s “presence in history.” This means that the Church’s work and message is nothing other than a continuation of the message and work of Christ. It is, as Barth puts it, “God’s provisional demonstration of his intention for all humanity.”

If the real Church is the laos theou whose primary task is that of being Christ to the world by proclaiming the message of the gospel (kerygma), by rendering services of liberation (diakonia), and by being itself a manifestation of the nature of the new society (koinonia), then the empirical Church has failed on all counts. It certainly has not rendered service of reconciliation to the poor, evidently because it represents the values of a sick society that oppresses the poor. Some present-day theologians, like Hamilton and Altizer, taking their cue from Nietzsche and the present irrelevancy of the Church to modern man, have announced the death of God. It seems, however, that their chief mistake lies in their apparent identification of God’s reality with the signed-up Christians. If we were to identify the work of God with the denominational Church, then, like Altizer, we must “will the death of God with a passion of faith.” Or as Camus would say, taking his cue from Bakunin, “If God did exist, we should have to abolish Him!”

The Church has not only failed to render service to the poor, but also failed miserably at being a visible manifestation of God’s intention for humanity and at proclaiming the message of the gospel to the world. It seems that the Church is not God’s redemptive agent but rather an agent of the old society. It not only fails to create an atmosphere for radical obedience to Christ, but also precludes the possibility of becoming a loyal, devoted servant of God. How else can we explain that some church fellowships are more concerned with nonsmoking principles or temperances than with children who die of rat bites or men who are shot while looting a TV set. Men are dying of hunger, children are maimed from rat bites, women are dying of despair, and churches pass resolutions. While we may have difficulty in locating the source of evil, we know what must be done against evil in order to relieve the suffering of the poor. We know why men riot. Perhaps we cannot prevent riots, but we can fight against conditions that cause them. The Church is placed in question because of its contribution to a structure that produces riots.

Some churchmen may reply: “We do condemn the deplorable conditions which produce urban riots. We do condemn racism and all the evils arising from it.” But to the extent that this is true, the Church, with the exception of a few isolated individuals, voices its condemnation in the style of resolutions that are usually equivocal and almost totally unproductive. If the condemnation was voiced, it was not understood! The Church should speak in a style that avoids abstractions. Its language should be backed up with relevant involvement in the affairs of people who suffer. It must be a grouping whose community life and personal involvement are coherent with its language about the gospel.

The Church does not appear to be a community willing to pay up personally. It is not a community that views every command of Jesus as a call to the cross—death. Rather, it is an institution whose existence depends on the evils that produce the riots in the cities. With this in mind, we must say that when a minister blesses by silence the conditions that produce riots and condemns the rioters, he gives up his credentials as a Christian minister and becomes inhuman. He is an animal, just like those who, backed by an ideology of racism, order the structure of this society on the
basis of white supremacy. We need men who refuse to be animals and are resolved to pay the price, so that all men can be something more than animals.

Whether Black Power advocates are that grouping, we will have to wait and see. But the Church has shown many times that it loves life and is not prepared to die for others. It has not really gone where the action is with a willingness to die for the neighbor, but remains aloof from the sufferings of men. It is a ministry to middle-class America! How else can one explain its snail-like pace toward an inclusive membership? Even though Paul says that Christ “has broken down the dividing walls of hostility” (Eph. 2:14), the Church’s community life reflects racism through and through. It is still possible to be a racist, a black-hater, and at the same time a member of the Church. It is my contention that the Church cannot be the Church of Christ and sponsor or even tolerate racism. The fact that the Church does indeed tolerate or sponsor racism is evidenced by its whiteness.

This leads me to conclude that Christ is operating outside the denominational Church. The real Church of Christ is that grouping that identifies with the suffering of the poor by becoming one with them. While we should be careful in drawing the line, the line must nevertheless be drawn. The Church includes not only the Black Power community but all men who view their humanity as inextricably related to every man. It is that grouping with a demonstrated willingness to die for the prevention of the torture of others, saying with Bonhoeffer, “when Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die.”

Black Spirituals:
A Theological Interpretation

Contrary to popular opinion, the spirituals are not evidence that black people reconciled themselves with human slavery. On the contrary, they are black freedom songs that emphasize black liberation as consistent with divine revelation. For this reason, it is most appropriate for black people to sing them in this “new” age of Black Power. And if some people still regard the spirituals as inconsistent with Black Power and black theology, that is because they have been misguided and the songs misinterpreted. There is little evidence that black slaves accepted their servitude because they believed God willed their slavery. The opposite is the case. The spirituals speak of God’s liberation of black people, his will to set right the oppression of black slaves despite the overwhelming power of white masters.

And if “de God dat lived in Moses’ time is jus de same today,” then that God will vindicate the suffering of the righteous black and punish the unrighteous whites for their wrongdoings.

A large amount of scholarship has been devoted to the music and poetry of the black spiritual, but little has been written about its theology. Apparently most scholars assume that the value of the black spiritual lies in its artistic expression and not its theological content, which could be taken to mean that blacks can “sing and dance good” but cannot think. For example, almost everyone agrees with W. E. B. Du Bois’s contention that “the Negro is primarily an artist” and that his gift of music to America is unsurpassed. But what about the black person as a philosopher and theologian? Is it not possible that the thought of the spiritual is as profound as its music is creative, since without thought art is impossible? In this essay my purpose is to investigate the theological implications of the black spirituals, with special reference to the meaning of God, Jesus Christ, suffering, and eschatology.
Black Theology on Revolution, Violence, and Reconciliation

How is Christianity related to the black revolution in America? The answer to this question is not easy since we live in a white society that emphasizes the seeming discontinuity between “blackness-revolution” and the gospel of Jesus. Black consciousness as expressed in Black Power is by definition revolutionary in white America. If by revolution we mean a sudden, radical, and complete change; or as Jürgen Moltmann puts it: “a transformation in the foundations of a system—whether of economics, of politics, or morality, or of religion.” In America “law and order” means obedience to the law of white people, and “stability” means the continuation of the present in the light of the past—defined and limited by George Washington, Abraham Lincoln, and Richard Nixon. Revolution then means anything that challenges the “sacredness” of the past which is tantamount to usurping the rule of white oppressors. That is why J. Edgar Hoover described the Black Panthers as the most serious internal threat to the American way of life.

But for black people, revolution means that blacks no longer accept the history of white people as the key to their existence in the future. It also means they are prepared to do what is necessary in order to assure that their present and future existence will be defined by black visions of reality. We believe, as Ernst Bloch puts it: “Things can be otherwise. That means: things can also become otherwise: in the direction of evil, which must be avoided, or in the direction of good, which would have to be promoted.” The black revolution involves tension between the actual and the possible, the “white-past” and the “black-future,” and the black community accepting the responsibility of defining the world according to its “open possibilities.”

Moltmann is right: “Truth is revolutionary,” that is, truth involves “discovering that the world can be changed and that nothing has to remain as it has been.” White oppressors cannot share in this future reality as defined by the black revolution. Indeed, we blacks assume that the white position of unauthorized power as expressed in the racist character of every American institution—churches and seminaries not excluded!—renders white oppressors incapable of understanding what black humanity is, and it is thus incumbent upon us as black people to become “revolutionaries for blackness,” rebelling against all who enslave us. With Marcus Garvey, we say: “Any sane man, race or nation that desires freedom must first of all think in terms of blood.”

In contrast to the revolutionary thrust of Black Power, Christianity usually is not thought of as being involved in radical change. It has been identified with the status quo, a condition that encourages oppression and not human liberation. Some black religionists, like Howard Thurman and Albert Cleage, say that the Apostle Paul must bear a heavy responsibility for the theological justification of human oppression. It was Paul who admonished slaves to be obedient to their masters; in Romans 13, he urged all men to be subject to the state. While it is possible to question the use of Paul in this context, especially in view of the radical eschatological vision of first-century Christians and the contrasting differences between the social and political situation of Paul’s time and ours, we cannot deny that later theologies used Paul as a theological justification of economic and political oppression. Indeed, it can be said that when Constantine made Christianity the official religion of the Roman State (replacing the public state sacrifices), the gospel of Jesus became a religious justification of the interests of the state. Theologians began to equate the immoral with the unlawful and slavery with the sins of the slaves. As Augustine put it: Slavery was due to the sinfulness of the slaves. Therefore, like Paul, he admonished “slaves to be subject to their masters . . .” serving them “with a good-heart and a good-will.”

During the Middle Ages, Thomas Aquinas took his cue from Augustine. “Slavery among men is natural,” wrote Aquinas. “The slave, in regard to his master, is an instrument. . . . Between a master and his slave there is a special right of domination.”

The idea that the slave should be obedient to his master and should not seek to change his civil status through revolutionary violence is found throughout the Christian tradition. In Protestant Christianity, this emphasis is found in Martin Luther and his definition of the state as the servant of God. That was why he condemned the Peasants’ revolt, saying that
The same emphasis is found in modern Catholicism. It rarely defended the interests of the oppressed. In 1903 Pope Pius X clarified the Catholic position:

Human society as established by God is made up of unequal elements. . . . Accordingly, it is in conformity with the order of human society as established by God that there be rulers and ruled, employers and employees, learned and ignorant, nobles and plebeians.7

In 1943, in a similar vein, Pope Pius XII advised the Italian workers that

[s]alvation and justice are not to be found in revolution but in evolution through concord. Violence has always achieved only destruction not construction; the kindling of passions, not their pacification; the accumulation of hate and ruin, not the reconciliation of the contending parties. And it has reduced men and parties to the difficult task of rebuilding, after sad experience, on the ruins of discord.8

We may conclude, then, that the essential differences between Protestants and Catholics do not lie in their stand on revolution. Both agree that the state has divine sanction and thus violent revolution must be condemned. And if there are rare exceptions in which violence can be justified, these exceptions do not apply to black people and their liberation struggle in America. In regard to the black revolution, Protestants and Catholics alike stand solidly on their tradition. It seems that the most “radical” comment coming from the white churches is: “We deplore the violence but sympathize with the reasons for the violence”—which is equivalent to saying “Of course we raped your women, dehumanized your men, and ghettoized the minds of your children, and you have a right to be upset, but that is no reason for you to burn our buildings. If you people keep acting like that, we will never give you your freedom.”

Toward Liberation

Christians, unfortunately, are not known for their revolutionary actions. For the most part, the chief exponents of the Christian tradition have been identified primarily with the structures of power and only secondarily with the victims of power. This perhaps explains why white Christians in America tend to think of “love” as an absence of power and “reconciliation” as being indifferent to justice. It certainly accounts for the inauspicious distinction made between violence and force: “The state is invested with force; it is an organism instituted and ordained by God, and remains such even when it is unjust; even its harshest acts are not the same thing as the angry or brutal deed of the individual. The individual surrenders his passions, he commits violence.”9

True, not all Christians have defended this perspective. The Left Wing tradition of the Protestant Reformation and the Quakers’ stand on American slavery are possible exceptions. Prominent examples in our century are Reinhold Niebuhr’s Moral Man and Immoral Society, the Confessing Church in Hitler’s Germany, and particularly the noble example of Dietrich Bonhoeffer. We have already mentioned Jürgen Moltmann, and we could name other European theologians who are participating in the Marxist-Christian dialogue,10 relating theology to revolutionary change. In America, Richard Shaull and Paul Lehmann have been defining the theological task according to the “politics of God,” emphasizing the divine participation in the “messianic movements dedicated to the liberation of man from all that enslaves and dehumanizes him.”11

But these examples are exceptions and not the rule. In America, at least, the Christian tradition is identified with the structures of racism in their oppression of black people. This was the reason for the white church’s compliance with black slavery, its subsequent indifference toward oppression generally, and its failure to respond to the authentic demands of black reparations. No white theologian has taken the oppression of black people as a point of departure for analyzing the meaning of the gospel today. Apparently white theologians see no connection between
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blackness and the gospel of Jesus Christ. Even the so-called white American "theologians of revolution" did not receive their motivation from an identification with Black Americans but from Latin America, Vietnam, and other foreign lands. I do not want to minimize their theological endeavors or question the authenticity of their verbalized identification with the poor, "undeveloped" nations, but I believe, as Sartre puts it: "The only way of helping the enslaved out there is to take sides with those who are here."

What then is the answer to the question, "What relevance has Christian theology to the oppressed blacks of America?" Since whites have ignored this question, it is necessary to look beyond the white Christian tradition to the biblical tradition, investigating the latter in the light of the past and present manifestations of the black struggle for liberation.

Taking seriously the tradition of the Old and New Testaments and the past and present black revolution in America, black theology contends that the content of Christian theology is liberation. This means that theology is a rational and passionate study of the revolutionary activity of God in the world in the light of the historical situation of an oppressed community, relating the forces of liberation to the essence of the gospel, which is Jesus Christ. Theology so defined moves us in the direction of the biblical tradition which focuses on the activity of God in history, liberating people from human bondage. God, according to the Bible, is known by what he does, and what he does is always related to the liberation of the oppressed. This is the meaning of the saying:

You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. Now therefore, if you will obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my own possession among all peoples... (Exod. 19:45a RSV)

Here the Exodus is connected with the covenant, revealing that Israel’s consciousness as the people of God is bound up with her escape from Egyptian slavery. Yahweh is the God of the oppressed and downtrodden and his revelation is made known only through the liberation of the oppressed. The covenant at Sinai, then, is not just a pious experience of God; it is a celebration of the God of liberation whose will is revealed in the freedom of slaves.

The equation of God’s salvation with human liberation is found throughout biblical history, and particularly in God’s incarnate appearance in Jesus Christ. By becoming the Oppressed One, God "made plain by this action that poverty, hunger, and sickness rob people of all dignity and that the Kingdom of God will fill them bodily with riches. The kingdom which Jesus preached and represented through his life is not only the soul’s bliss but shalom for the body as well, peace on earth and liberation of the creature from the past." This is the meaning of his birth in the stable at Bethlehem, his baptism with sinners, and his definition of his ministry for the poor, not the rich. God came to those who had no rights and "he celebrated the eschatological banquet."

His resurrection from the humiliation of the cross can be understood as the revelation of the new creation of God’s righteousness. In view of this, Christians are commissioned to bring... the justice of God and freedom into the world of oppression. With liberation as the essence of the Christian gospel, it becomes impossible to speak of the God of Hebrew history, the God who revealed himself in Jesus Christ, without recognizing that he is the God of and for those who labor and are heavy laden.

The emphasis on liberation not only leads us to the heart of the biblical message, it also enables theology to say something relevant to the black revolution in America. The liberation theme relates Black Power to the Christian gospel, and renders as an untruth the unverbalized white assumption that Christ is white, or that being Christian means that black people ought to turn the other cheek—as if we blacks have no moral right to defend ourselves from the encroachments of white people. To explicate the meaning of God’s activity as revealed in the liberation of the oppressed blacks of America means that the theologian must lose his identity with the white structure and become unqualifiedly identified with the wretched of this land. It means that there can be no authentic Christian talk unless it focuses on the empowerment of the poor—defined and limited by their past, present, and future history. If God is truly the God of the weak and helpless, then we must critically reevaluate the history of theology in America, a theology that owes more to white oppressors than oppressed blacks or Indians. What about Gabriel Prosser, Denmark Vesey, and Nat Turner as theological sources for assessing the contemporary presence of Christ? Could it be that American theologians can best understand their task by studying LeRoi Jones, Malcolm X, or the Black Panthers
rather than merely mouthing the recent rhetoric of German theologians? Hopefully, the rise of black theology will force American religionists to realize that no theology of the Christian gospel is possible that ignores the reality of the divine among black people in this country.

Violence as Curse and as Right

The black revolution involves a total break with the white past, "the over-turning of relationships, the transformation of life, and then a reconstruction." Theologically, this means that black people are prepared to live according to God's eschatological future as defined by the present reality of the black kingdom in the lives of oppressed people struggling for historical liberation. It is this perspective that informs black theology's reflections on the religious significance of the black revolution in America.

Because the black revolution means a radical break with the existing political and social structure and a redefinition of black life along the lines of black liberation, it is to be expected that white Christians and assorted moralists will ask questions about methods and means. Theologically and philosophically, they want to know whether revolutionary violence can be justified as an appropriate means for the attainment of black liberation. If black theology is Christian theology, how does it reconcile violence with Jesus' emphasis on love and reconciliation? Is it not true that violence is a negation of the gospel of Jesus Christ?

These are favorite white questions, and it is significant that they are almost always addressed to the oppressed and almost never to the oppressors. This fact alone provides the clue to the motive behind the questions. White people are not really concerned about violence per se but only when they are the victims. As long as blacks are beaten and shot, they are strangely silent, as if they are unaware of the inhumanity committed against the black community. Why did we not hear from the "nonviolent Christians" when black people were violently enslaved, violently lynched, and violently ghettoized in the name of freedom and democracy? When I hear questions about violence and love coming from the children of slave-masters whose identity with Jesus extends no further than that weekly Sunday service, then I can understand why many black brothers and sisters say that Christianity is the white man's religion, and that it must be destroyed along with white oppressors. What white people fail to realize is that their questions about violence and reconciliation not only are very

naive, but are hypocritical and insulting. When whites ask me, "Are you for violence?" my rejoinder is: "Whose violence? Richard Nixon's or his victims? The Mississippi State Police or the students at Jackson State? The Chicago Police or Fred Hampton? What the hell are you talking about?" If we are going to raise the question of violence, it ought to be placed in its proper perspective.

1) Violence is not only what black people do to white people as victims seek to change the structure of their existence; violence is what white people did when they created a society for white people only, and what they do in order to maintain it. Violence in America did not begin with the Black Power movement or with the Black Panther Party. Contrary to popular opinion, violence has a long history in America. This country was born in violent revolution (remember 1776?), and it has been sustained by the violent extermination of red people and the violent enslavement of black people. This is what Rap Brown had in mind when he said that "violence is American as cherry pie."

White people have a distorted conception of the meaning of violence. They like to think of violence as breaking the laws of their society, but that is a narrow and racist understanding of reality. There is a more deadly form of violence, and it is camouflaged in such slogans as "law and order," "freedom and democracy," and "the American way of life." I am speaking of white collar violence, the violence of Christian murderers and patriot citizens who define right in terms of whiteness and wrong as blackness. These are the people who hire assassins to do their dirty work while they piously congratulate themselves for being "good" and "nonviolent."

I contend, therefore, that the problem of violence is not the problem of a few black revolutionaries but the problem of a whole social structure which outwardly appears to be ordered and respectable but inwardly is "ridden by psychopathic obsessions and delusions"—racism and hate. Violence is embedded in American law, and it is blessed by the keepers of moral sanctity. This is the core of the problem of violence, and it will not be solved by romanticizing American history, pretending that Hiroshima, Nagasaki, and Vietnam are the first American crimes against humanity. If we take seriously the idea of human dignity, then we know that the annihilation of Indians, the enslavement of blacks, and the making of heroes out of slaveholders, like George Washington and Thomas Jefferson, were America's first crimes against humankind. And it does not help the matter at all to attribute black slavery to economic necessity or an accident of his-
tory. America is an unjust society and black people have known that for a long time.

(2) If violence is not just a question for the oppressed but primarily for the oppressors, then it is obvious that the distinction between violence and nonviolence is false and misleading. "The problem of violence and nonviolence is an illusory problem. There is only the question of the justified and unjustified use of force and the question of whether the means are proportionate to the ends," and the only people who can answer that problem are the victims of injustice.

Concretely, ours is a situation in which the only option we have is that of deciding whose violence we will support—the oppressors or the oppressed, whites or blacks. Either we side with oppressed blacks and other unwanted minorities as they try to redefine the meaning of their existence in a dehumanized society, or we take a stand with the American government whose interests have been expressed in police clubs and night sticks, tear gas and machine guns. There is no possibility of neutrality—the moral luxury of being on neither side. Neither the government nor black people will allow that! The government demands support through taxes, the draft, and public allegiance to the American flag. Black people demand that you deny whiteness as an appropriate form of human existence, and that you be willing to take the risk to create a new humanity. With Franz Fanon, we do not believe it wise to leave our destiny to Europeans. "We must invent and we must make discoveries. . . . For Europe, for ourselves, and for humanity . . . we must turn over a new leaf, we must work out new concepts, and try to set afoot a new man."18

(3) If violence versus nonviolence is not the issue but rather the creation of a new humanity, then the critical question for Christians is not whether Jesus committed violence or whether violence is theoretically consistent with love and reconciliation. The question is not what Jesus did, as if his behavior in the first century is the infallible ethical guide for our actions today. We must ask not what he did but what he is doing, and what he did becomes important only insofar as it points to his activity today. To use the Jesus of history as an absolute ethical guide for people today is to become enslaved to the past, foreclosing God's eschatological future and its judgment on the present. It removes the element of risk in ethical decisions and makes people slaves to principles. But the gospel of "Jesus means freedom" (as Ernst Käsemann has put it), and one essential element of that freedom is the existential burden of making decisions about human

liberation without being completely sure what Jesus did or would do. This is the risk of faith.

My difficulty with white theologians is their use of Jesus' so-called nonviolent attitude in the Gospels as the primary evidence that black people ought to be nonviolent today. Not only have Rudolf Bultmann and other form critics demonstrated that there are historical difficulties in the attempt to move behind the kerygmatic preaching of the early church to the real Jesus of Nazareth, but, moreover, the resurrected Christ is not bound by first-century possibilities. Therefore it is possible to conclude that the man from Nazareth was not a revolutionary zealot, and still contend that the risen Christ is involved in the black revolution today. Though the Jesus of yesterday is important for our ethical decisions today, we must be careful where we locate that importance. It is not to be found in following in his steps, slavishly imitating his behavior in Palestine. Rather we must regard his past activity as a pointer to what he is doing now. It is not so much what he did; but his actions were signs of God's eschatological future and his will to liberate all people from slavery and oppression. To be for Jesus means being for the oppressed and unwanted in human society.

As Christians, we are commanded not to follow principles but to discover the will of God in a troubled and dehumanized world. Concretely, we must decide not between good and evil or right and wrong, but between the oppressors and the oppressed, whites and blacks. We must ask and answer the question, "Whose actions are consistent with God's work in history?" Either we believe that God's will is revealed in the status quo of America or in the actions of those who seek to change it.

Accepting the risk of faith and the ethical burden of making decisions about life and death without an infallible guide, black theology contends that God is found among the poor, the wretched, and the sick. "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise [wrote Paul], God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the world, even the things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are . . . " (1 Cor. 1:26f.). That was why God elected Israelite slaves and not Egyptian slavemasters—the weak and the poor in Israel, not the oppressors. As Jesus' earthly life demonstrated, the God of Israel is a God whose will is made known through his identification with the oppressed and whose activity is always identical with those who strive for a liberated freedom.

If this message means anything for our times, it means that God's reve-
Risks of Faith

Negation is found in black liberation. God has chosen what is black in America to shame the whites. In a society where white is equated with good and black is defined as bad, humanity and divinity mean an unqualified identification with blackness. The divine election of the oppressed means that black people are given the power of judgment over the high and mighty whites.

Two Kinds of Reconciliation?

When black theology emphasizes the right of black people to defend themselves against those who seek to destroy them, it never fails that white people then ask, “What about the biblical doctrine of reconciliation?” Whites who ask that question should not be surprised if blacks respond, “Yeah man, what about it?” The difficulty is not with the reconciliation question per se but with the people asking it. Like the question of violence, this question is almost always addressed to blacks by whites, as if we blacks are responsible for the demarcation of community on the basis of color. They who are responsible for the dividing walls of hostility, racism, and hate want to know whether the victims are ready to forgive and forget—without changing the balance of power. They want to know whether we have any hard feelings toward them, whether we still love them, even though we are oppressed and brutalized by them. What can we say to people who insist on oppressing black people but get upset when black people reject them?

Because black liberation is the point of departure of black theology’s analysis of the gospel of Jesus, it cannot accept a view of reconciliation based on white values. The Christian view of reconciliation has nothing to do with black people being nice to white people as if the gospel demands that we ignore their insults and their humiliating presence. It does not mean discussing with whites what it means to be black or going to white gatherings and displaying what whites call an understanding attitude—remaining cool and calm amid racists and bigots.

To understand the Christian view of reconciliation and its relation to black liberation, it is necessary to focus on the Bible. Here reconciliation is connected with divine liberation. According to the Bible, reconciliation is what God does for enslaved people who are unable to break the chains of slavery. To be reconciled is to be set free; it is to have the chains struck off the body and mind so that the creatures of God can be what they are. Reconciliation means that people cannot be human and God cannot be God unless the creatures of God are liberated from that which enslaves and is dehumanizing.

When Paul says, “God was in Christ reconciling the world unto himself,” this is not a sentimental comment on race relations. The reconciling act of God in Christ is centered on the cross, and it reveals the extent that God is willing to go in order to set people free from slavery and oppression. The cross means that the Creator has taken upon himself all human pain and suffering, revealing that God cannot be unless oppression ceases to be. Through the death and resurrection of Christ, God places the oppressed in a new state of humanity, now free to live according to God’s intentions for humanity.

Because God has set us free, we are now commanded to go and be reconciled with our neighbors, and particularly our white neighbors. But this does not mean letting whites define the terms of reconciliation. It means participating in God’s revolutionizing activity in the world, changing the political, economic, and social structures so that distinctions between rich and poor, oppressed and oppressors, are no longer a reality. To be reconciled with white people means destroying their oppressive power, reducing them to the human level and thereby putting them on equal footing with other humans. There can be no reconciliation with masters as long as they are masters, as long as men are in prison. There can be no communication between masters and slaves until masters no longer exist, are no longer present as masters. The Christian task is to rebel against all masters, destroying their pretensions to authority and ridiculing the symbols of power.

However, it must be remembered that oppressors never take kindly to those who question their authority. They do not like “thugs and bums,” people who disregard their power, and they will try to silence them any way they can. But if we believe that our humanity transcends them and is not dependent on their goodwill, then we can fight against them even though it may mean death.