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Black Theology

Michael Brandon McCormack

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Introduction

Black theology began with the radical statements of activist-intellectual clergy and subsequently emerged, as an academic discipline, during the social and political unrest of the late 1960s. Simultaneous with demands for black studies programs within American universities, radical clergy and theologians demanded religious scholarship and practice responsive to the lived experiences of black people in the United States. James H. Cone's *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969), *A Black Theology of Liberation* (1970), and *God of the Oppressed* (1975) were the first major academic works in the field. In them, Cone attempted to reconcile Christian theology and practice with the growing militancy of the burgeoning Black Power movement. As theologians of liberation, working within the North American context of the late 1960s, black theologians began to assert that God was on the side of poor and oppressed blacks. Cone would further assert that God is so thoroughly identified with black people's struggles for liberation from oppression that, in fact, God *is* ontologically black. Along these lines, black theologies of liberation have been preeminently concerned with not only interpreting the various meanings of black religious experience, but also with providing strategies for resisting white supremacist ideologies and practices that undermine the survival and thriving of African American communities. Criticism of the black theology project has been persistent since its inception. Among the most significant critiques of black theology have been those that charged that the field failed to take seriously the distinctiveness of the religious experiences and oppressions of black women. As such, womanist theology has developed as a distinctive trajectory within and beyond black theology proper, seeking to address the "tripartite oppression" of racism, sexism, and classism. As black and womanist theologies have responded to criticism and continued to develop over the past five decades, many new trajectories of thought have emerged. While black (and womanist) theology has been in dialogue with other liberation theologians from the Third World—including African, Asian, and Latin American liberation theologians, and the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT)—since its inception, it has been increasingly attentive to global contexts beyond the United States. Moreover, scholarship engaging sexual politics, environmental issues, global capitalism, as well as religious pluralism has gained increasing traction within black and womanist theologies. Thus, black and womanist theologies continue to develop as vibrant discourses within African American and religious studies.

General Overviews

There are a range of books, articles, and essays that provide a general introduction to the historical emergence of, themes within, and development of black theology as an academic discipline. The majority of these works situate the discipline in terms of the historical moment and sociopolitical context that gave rise to the formal articulation of black theology. Wilmore 2004 is among the earliest accounts of the emergence and concerns of black theology, detailing the tensions between its more ecclesial and "folk" roots and its academic institutionalization. As a pioneering scholar in the discipline, James H. Cone provides a first-hand account of the development of his thinking on a range of issues over time in Cone 1984 and Cone 1999. Hopkins 1999 is a more comprehensive mapping of the discipline, paying attention to various approaches and debates within the field, as well as a treatment of the emergence of womanist theology and the transnational consciousness of black theology. Hayes 1996 offers both a womanist scholar's perspective on the development and significance of the field as well as a much needed account of black Catholic contributions. Evans 2012 represents an attempt to systematize the thought of black theology in relation to Christian doctrines and their sociopolitical and cultural implications.

Black Theology: An International Journal. 2003–.

The premier journal dedicated to black theology. Based in London, the journal carries essay on a range of subjects, by authors throughout the African diaspora. Edited by Anthony G. Reddie.

Cone, James H. *For My People: Black Theology and the Black Church*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1984.

An account of the context and concerns that led to the development of black theology as an academic discipline, with subsequent chapters detailing the significance of black liberation theology for the worship and public witness of black churches.

Cone, James H. *Risks of Faith: The Emergence of a Black Theology of Liberation, 1968–1998*. Boston: Beacon, 1999.

A collection of James Cone's essays spanning from his early thoughts on the relationship of black theology and the Black Power movement to emerging concerns with ecology and environmental injustice. An introductory chapter provides Cone's reflection on the development of his thought over three decades.

Evans, James H. *We Have Been Believers: An African American Systematic Theology*. 2d ed. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012.

Provides a framework for understanding some of the distinctive concerns of black theologians of liberation and attempts to show the coherence of black theology as an authentically Christian and distinctively African American intellectual project. This second edition provides additional essays responding to the enduring impact of the book, originally published twenty years earlier.

Hayes, Diana L. *And Still We Rise: An Introduction to Black Liberation Theology*. New York: Paulist, 1996.

An introduction to black theology, written from the perspective of a Catholic womanist theologian. Attentive to black Roman Catholic and womanist contributions to black theology.

Hopkins, Dwight N. *Introducing Black Theology of Liberation*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1999.

A concise introduction to the development of black theology. Traces the development of black theology from its roots in antebellum slavery to its formal establishment in the academy in the late 1960s. Chapters treat perspectives of first- and second-generation black theologians, as well as the emergence of womanist perspectives and black theology's dialogue with other "Third World liberation theologies."

Wilmore, Gayraud S. "What Is Black Theology?" In *Pragmatic Spirituality: The Christian Faith Through an Africentric Lens*. New York: New York University Press, 2004.

Originally written in 1968 and revised in the late 1970s, this essay offers a definition and defense of black theology in two senses: its formation as an academic discipline, and its formation within black churches. The author also addresses the sometimes-fraught relationship between these two forms of black theology.

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