

Part I

Introduction

I General introduction

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Black theology of liberation interweaves three related experiences. “Theology” signifies the long tradition of the various forms of Christianity beginning with the life of Jesus in, what we today call, northeast Africa or west Asia. “Liberation” designates the specific mission of Jesus the Anointed One on earth; that is to say, liberation of oppressed communities to attain power and wealth. And “black” means the multiple manifestations of black people’s socially constructed world-views, aesthetics, and identities. In brief, black theology of liberation answers the question: how does Jesus’ Gospel of liberation throughout the Christian tradition reveal itself in black culture? Ultimately, arising out of the particularity of the black experience, the goal is to help craft healthy communities and healthy individuals throughout the world.

Rooted in the Christian tradition, following the path of Jesus, and affirming black culture, black theology of liberation derives from both modern and contemporary contexts.

THE MODERN CONTEXT

By “modern context” we mean the historic encounter between European missionaries, merchants, and military, on the one hand, and the indigenous family structures of the darker-skinned communities of the globe (i.e., the greater part of the world), on the other. Bold European explorations made contact with what would later become Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Latin America, and the Pacific Islands. Depicting these diverse regions as qualitatively different, Europe then forged itself into a normative cartography called “Europe.” The modern context solidified many European nation-states while colonizing, removing wealth from, and stifling the cultural growth of the rest of the world.

For example, we can symbolically, if not substantively, specify 1441 as the beginning of, perhaps, the largest displacement, forced migration, and genocide in human history – the European Christian slave trade in

Africa. In 1441, the first group of Africans were taken from the West African coast bound for the Christian land of Portugal. Upon the ship's return to its home port, the Africans were given as trinkets to Prince Henry, sovereign of a Christian country. Portugal, indeed, held the first slave auction in 1444.

Subsequently other Catholic states (such as Spain and France) and Protestant countries (such as England and Holland) joined in the physical hunt for the sale of black skins. Consequently, popes blessed the European slave trade and both Catholic and Protestant clergy accompanied the slave vessels that went forth to do the work of Jesus in Africa.

And then, of course, 1492 expresses the paradigmatic marker of modernity. Precisely in the 1492 rise of European modernity, we see the confluence of Columbus, the European Christian church, and African slavery. Even before the historic voyage of 1492, a papal bull issued in 1455 commended Prince Henry of Portugal "for his devotion and apostolic zeal in spreading the name of Christ." At the same time, this decree gave the Prince "authorization to conquer and possess distant lands and their wealth."¹ Here a pattern was set that was to undergird Columbus' voyage as well as that of every other European slave ship on the way to the west coast of Africa.

Indeed, a brief look at the commission received by Christopher Columbus prior to his first trip reveals the European mindset toward non-European peoples and their lands. On April 30, 1492, Spain's King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella wrote:

For as much as you, Christopher Columbus, are going by our command, with some of our vessels and men, to discover and subdue some Islands and Continent in the ocean, and it is hoped that by God's assistance, some of the said Islands and Continent in the ocean will be discovered and conquered by your means and conduct, therefore it is but just and reasonable, that since you expose yourself to such danger to serve us, you should be rewarded for it.²

In this commissioning, we have the joining of several factors. First, Columbus does not venture forth as a solitary voyager. He is authorized by the state, the highest authority in the civil and political realm. Furthermore, his charge is by definition to discover, conquer, and subdue foreign lands. And very importantly, given this definition and the will of the state represented by Columbus, God would assist the victory of European peoples over non-European populations.

What is the reward offered to Columbus for his labors? Ferdinand and Isabella continue:

Our will is, That you, Christopher Columbus, after discovering and conquering the said Islands and Continent in the said ocean, or any of them, shall be our Admiral of the said Islands and Continent you shall so discover and conquer ... You and your Lieutenants shall conquer and freely decide all causes, civil and criminal ... and that you have power to punish offenders.³

Thus he receives personal titles of nobility and, with "God's assistance," the authority to decide and punish any persons who would disobey his command. With this commission in hand, Columbus set forth on August 3, 1492. He wrote in his journal that the inhabitants of the New World would make good Christians and "good servants" for Spain. When Portugal protested this commission to Columbus, the arbitration of this territorial dispute fell not to an international tribunal of lawyers or heads of state but only to the European Christian church.

On May 4, 1493, Pope Alexander VI issued a papal bull in Spain's favor. In it, the pope first acknowledged Columbus, who "with divine aid and with the utmost diligence sailing in the ocean sea, discovered certain very remote islands and even mainlands." Regarding Ferdinand and Isabella, the pope wrote:

And in order that you may enter upon so great an undertaking with greater readiness and heartiness endowed with the benefit of our apostolic favor, we, of our own accord, not at your instance nor the request of anyone else in your regard, but out of our own sole largess and certain knowledge and out of the fullness of our apostolic power, by the authority of Almighty God conferred upon us in blessed Peter and of the vicarship of Jesus Christ ... should any of said islands have been found by your envoys and captains, give, grant, and assign to you and your heirs and successors ... forever together with all their dominions, cities, camps, places, and villages, and all rights, jurisdiction ... all islands and mainlands found and to be found.⁴

From the European church's perspective, at the dawn of modernity, clearly, conquering and subduing are a corollary to the act of discovering foreign territory and peoples. Moreover, as theological justification, the pope draws on the authority of "Almighty God," the "vicarship of Jesus Christ," the tradition of "apostolic power," and the premier role of Peter. This gets at the heart of the modern context for the subsequent

rise of black theology of liberation. Certain elements of European power (a trinitarian alliance of Christianity, the state, and world discovery) were compelled to ape their God or justify their attempts at economic, cultural, and spiritual domination of the earth's darker-skinned peoples. The impulse is one of normative claims rationally leading to spreading the Cross and culture to black people. This sector of modern European power would tell dark-skinned peoples what they could believe and what they could think about their beliefs.

The papal bull closes with these words:

Let no one therefore infringe, or with rash boldness contravene, this our recommendation, exhortation, requisition, gift, grant, assignment, constitution, deputation, decree, mandate, prohibition, and will. Should anyone presume to attempt this, be it known to him that he will incur the wrath of Almighty God and of the blessed apostles Peter and Paul.⁵

The European Christian slave trade of the fifteenth to nineteenth centuries (that is, from 1441 to 1888, when slavery was abolished in Brazil) in West Africa forever disrupted the balance of material resources in world history. West African (and North American, Brazilian, Jamaican, and Cuban) black labor (through cotton and other commodities) coupled with European Christian appropriation of Africa's raw materials built the British and North American industrial revolutions and facilitated their concomitant technological innovations.⁶ And, in the long view of history, the foundation of North America's superpower emergence was laid by taking the indigenous people's land and eliminating human populations to near extinction.

And after 400 years of legal chattels, it is no accident that the nineteenth-century legal end of European Christian, international slavery was followed by the 1884–85 Berlin Conference. Here, Western European powers (with the American government's knowledge) carved up those African land areas to be colonized by European countries. Before this conference, a map of Africa reflected vast land areas with somewhat fluid boundaries. After Berlin, the African map was redrawn with color-coded countries created and controlled by European nations. By 1902, European powers controlled, at least, 90 percent of the entire continent. While a fruitful harvest of wealth transfer from Africa and other parts of the world to Europe and North America was being reaped, the reverse happened with regard to religions. Because of the consolidation of European modernity's global expansion by the late 1890s, it is no accident that Western powers regarded the nineteenth century as one of the high points of their

Christian missionary activity. With the military and merchants securing the beachhead, missionaries followed closely behind. Sometimes they accompanied the armies and the business sectors. The West took the wealth of the rest and exchanged it for their Cross of Jesus.

Again, Africa fell to immense material and human resources transfer and Christian missionary activity. The development of Western modernity led to the underdevelopment of the continent. And, at the same time, the nineteenth century saw an onslaught of ideological attacks on the natural and God-given humanity of Africans and the global dark-skinned diaspora. The nineteenth-century European creation of the racial theories of the “science of man,” and the disciplines of anthropology, philosophy, and missiology, to name only a few, heralded two plumb-line questions in the theoretical and religious imagination of some major European thinkers.⁷ Are Africans and the darker-skinned global peoples (1) naturally human and (2) created in the Christian God’s image? The first query points to a scientific matter; the second to theology.

The questioning of biological evidence’s particularity and the Genesis narrative’s universality not only hounded the “being-human” status of Africa and its internationalized descendants. We find questioning of the humanity of darker-skinned people throughout the earth. For instance, the 1770 voyage of British explorer, navigator, and cartographer James Cook marked the first European contact with the eastern coast of Australia. He was also the first European to see the Hawaiian people in 1778. Those daring trips brought Europe into close contact with what Cook cited in his diary as people of very dark or black color.⁸ Eventually, Britain colonized the indigenous people of Australia, and US missionaries and entrepreneurs overthrew the internationally recognized kingdom of Hawaii.

And so the questions of whether black people were human since they lacked what Europeans called a civilized culture and whether they were capable of having an authentic religious faith endured throughout modernity, throughout the world. Any group of animals can have a culture, but was it human culture? Any group of people can worship all kinds of things, but was it Christian worship? Could they be black (i.e., remain faithful to their indigenousness) and religious (i.e., as defined by European Christians)?

CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

The contemporary context provides the second major backdrop for the rise of today’s black theology of liberation. Key to this theological

context was the first written statement by black pastors on Jesus, power, and the church. Published in the *New York Times*, this “Black Power” document of July 31, 1966 did not, however, fall from the sky as if by magic. Rather, within the political, cultural, and religious dynamics of the 1950s and 1960s, we encounter direct incentives for the emergence of the July declaration penned by African American clergy. This public statement stands for the exact beginning of the emergence of contemporary black theology of liberation.

The civil rights movement (1955 to late 1960s), known globally because of the Baptist preacher and theologian Martin Luther King, Jr., comes as the first incentive. The Revd. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. combined black slave theology (that God is justice, protest, and freedom), national liberation movements (the initiative of underdeveloped countries toward self-determination), Gandhian nonviolence (thus expressing solidarity with the world’s darker-skinned people), and the lofty ideals of the US Constitution and Declaration of Independence (concerning the rights of modern citizens).

King’s theology and African American church practice were new. They made the fight for freedom the defining objective of Christianity and called upon faith communities to actively change the world, even at the risk of physical harm. Consequently, Americans could not call themselves Christian if they violated the full humanity of other human beings. This was a revolutionary change from the prevailing American Christianity that had promoted, in the main, the ideology of profit and individualism. King’s life was emblematic of the civil rights movement, from the moment of his December 5, 1955, elected leadership of the Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott against legal segregation to his assassination on April 4, 1968 in Memphis, Tennessee. At the end, King interpreted the life of Jesus as liberation of the poor and the oppressed. Demonstrable evidence for this claim exists in his final twin goals: supporting the black working class in Memphis, Tennessee, and organizing a multiracial poor people’s campaign to camp out in Washington, DC, with the explicit purpose of disrupting the national government.

The appearance of Black Power (on June 16, 1966), symbolized as the resurrection of Malcolm X’s thought after his February 1965 murder, constituted the second incentive for the emerging black theology. While the civil rights initiatives linked Christianity with justice and church militancy, the black power movement situated the cultural identity of blackness at the center of any real justice for African Americans. That meant the right of self-identity: the right to name one’s black and African self independent of white control; and the right of

self-determination: to control black communities unhindered by white power. Unlike the civil rights effort's limited terrain, black power swept every region of the country and affected every quarter of the African American community.

A third contemporary incentive for the rise of today's black theology of liberation was the publication of Joseph R. Washington's book *Black Religion* in 1964. Civil rights and black power movements came from the streets. Washington's theoretical argument, in contrast, surrounded itself in the sanctity of the hallowed halls of the academy. Moreover, he was an African American religious leader who emerged out of the black church. This insider argued as follows. Because of segregation, white churches were the authentic inheritors of the Christian tradition from Europe. White religion was genuine because they had faith in Jesus Christ. Linked as they were to the correct tradition with faith in the correct object meant that white believers had the capacity to renew their belief and practice by comparing contemporary living with the tradition and the founder. White theology, therefore, entailed reflecting critically on tradition and faith in Jesus.

Segregation produced the opposite effect for black communities. Outside of authentic white churches, and white Christian tradition, black churches, furthermore, had "belief." Belief meant belief in anything, including justice for the poor. But, for Washington, the Christian word "faith" had a limited and singular meaning – faith in Jesus Christ. If black people did not have authentic churches (as a result of segregation, which meant separation from white worshippers) or an authentic lineage to Christianity through European churches, and they had no faith in Jesus Christ (in contrast to a generic belief in anything), then blacks did not have a theology. Again, theology is critical reflection by a community on their relation to their faith in Jesus as this community exists in an authentic church connected to the European church traditions. Hence, the direct challenge became – no such thing as a black theology existed. Understandably, part of the incentive for the rise of contemporary black theology of liberation, at least on the academic front, was a refutation of Joseph Washington's thesis of denial.

Washington wrote specifically for the 1960s US Christian community. Yet the logic of his argument elevating "true" white and European Christianity and subordinating indigenous folk religions revealed the same negative global attitudes that helped give rise to other black theologies and other forms of progressive theologies from the earth's darker-skinned peoples.

However, the incentives of the civil rights and black power movements outside of the academy and Joseph Washington's book from the academy existed within larger global and historical currents. Black theology, a pioneering liberation theology indigenous to the USA, started in the global context of a shift in world order, particularly after World War II – the second major violent conflict on European soil in the contemporary era. A combination of international and domestic factors came together to provide the backdrop for the origin of black theology in the mid 1960s. Black theology did not descend willy-nilly from the heavens but burst onto the North American domestic scene (and globally) through a combination of local and international influences.

For instance, the post-World War II era positioned the US government and its monopoly corporations as the undisputed champions of capitalism and American-style democracy in the non-communist world. The war's end also had an immediate effect on 1950s black civil rights efforts in the southeastern United States. Black Americans supported this seductive ideology of liberation from fascism and communism. These systems were based on either racial superiority (such as Nazism) or human rights violations (owing to state dominance). If the world's greatest government had stopped Hitler's blitzkriegs and fought to make the world safe for democracy, then surely this same government would soon resurrect its own black citizens from the death of racial apartheid at home.

The rhetoric and worldview championed by North American power structures abroad were taken very seriously by African Americans fighting against white supremacy and voting discrimination at home. But when black soldiers came back home, reality soon set in. Blacks began asking how the US government, which apparently seemed so sympathetic to people millions of miles away, could neglect, if not oppress, its own black citizens – many of whom lived a stone's throw from the White House in Washington, DC. And so an evolving postwar debate about freedom, democracy, and equality helped give rise to the civil rights movement.

Indeed, talk of a better world did help start the African American mass efforts for justice. But so too did the concrete reality of the numbers of black Americans who fought abroad against Nazism and biological supremacy; it made a deep imprint on the historical experience of collective black America. African American GIs returning from tours of duty after World War II and the Korean War had accumulated firsthand knowledge of the world, especially about racial relations. They learned that it was possible for white working-class youth from Mississippi (Ku

Klux Klan country) to live, work, sleep, and play with black working-class youth from backwoods Georgia (post-slavery land).

The two antagonists could reconcile their differences and function as equals in the midst of waging war for a higher cause. All the white eugenics theorists, all the social determinist professors, all the propagandizing politicians, and all the white theologians had been wrong, absolutely wrong. Life experiences proved not racial irreconcilability but rather racial unity grounded in a justice goal. At minimum, war forced a functional unity for co-human survival.

Furthermore, black soldiers abroad felt free for the first time, relative to their home experiences. The only segregation the French sought was to identify and isolate the hated Brown Shirts. Unless instigated by American whites, the word "nigger" did not pass from the lips of white Europeans when they saw a black person in one of Uncle Sam's uniforms. On the contrary, black soldiers felt so liberated while in Europe they even experimented with interracial relationships with French and other white European women. Unlike in small-town Alabama, no cries for lynching were heard.

To be seen by whites in Europe as simply other humans was a revolutionary education for black GIs. The unthinkable – that divine creation, mental endowment, cultural incompatibility, natural antagonism, and human tradition did not prevent black and white equality – had occurred. Discharged from duty, African Americans re-entered civilian life in the United States determined not to let legal segregation prevent them from building a healthy community for their families and for all people.

The domino effect of global decolonization also fanned the flames of black church-led 1950s civil rights initiatives and the 1960s black power challenges. African American communities and churches were well aware of the struggle for self-determination being fought by brown, yellow, and black peoples in the international arena. As early as 1938, for example, numerous black churches rallied to defend Ethiopia from Italy's invasion. India's independence from Great Britain in 1947 conveyed some of the first signs of hope. Mao Zedong's wave of Red Guards successfully moved the People's Republic of China out of the capitalist orbit in 1949. And starting with Ghana's independence ceremonies in 1957 and Nigeria's in 1959, European colonial administrations in Africa gave way to indigenous ruling structures. Also in 1959, just 90 miles from the US mainland, mountain guerrillas began the process of resituating Cuba as an independent nation with a substantial African citizenry.

Restated, World War II so captured the attention and resources of European colonial powers that it gave nations on the global, political, and economic periphery an opportunity to assert themselves as independent actors. Thereafter, the Cold War between the United States and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics further opened the crack of opportunity for newly developing nations to fight for independence and national liberation.

In the 1960s and 1970s, black theology centered the concept of “liberation” within religious and theological dialogue. This language was directly influenced by the national liberation speeches and slogans of Third World nations, both nonaligned and socialist, as they called for national independence against structures of (white) colonial powers (during the 1950s and 1960s). Similarly, black theology was the first religious movement to clearly equate Jesus the Anointed One with the liberation of the oppressed in North America in the struggle against structures of (white) domestic power. It did so because African American theologians were heavily influenced by national liberation fronts that were fighting against (white) colonialists around the world.

In the language of global resistance organizations, *liberation* had an exact meaning that was adopted by black theology into the Christian conversation about protest for equality. An oppressed nation, by the standards of both the United Nations and the former Communist International, had the right to separate from systematic restrictions that victimized its people.

Third World peoples were nations because of unification by a common language, territory, culture, tradition, and (perhaps) racial or ethnic stock. This liberation discourse resonated with black pastors’ understanding of the Old Testament vision of slaves liberated from oppression and Jesus’ New Testament earthly mission to liberate the poor and the oppressed. Drawing on the grammar of international organizing for independence, black theology combined this talk with a Christian framework of Jesus the Ultimate Liberator. Although not all black theologians advocated an absolute separation or independence from America as the final goal, all agreed that blacks had the right to self-identity – for instance, name change, African culture, linguistic style, slave tradition, racial lineage; and the right of self-determination – that is, controlling their political destiny and physical communities.

Two other dynamics helped nurture the civil rights and black power movements and, in turn, the birth of black theology. One was the 1954 US Supreme Court decision that declared separate facilities for blacks and whites as inherently unequal. This *Brown v. Board of Education*

verdict emerged partly from a reassessment of the world theater by the US government and its multinational corporations. To expand post-World War II American hegemony, it was necessary to modify the apparent contradictions between domestic apartheid – violent structures against black people sanctioned by the federal administration – and US rhetoric about America being the land of opportunity. However symbolically intended by some, the Supreme Court decision nevertheless provided a major incentive for African American struggles for citizenship and full humanity.

The last factor was the Marshall Plan. This post-World War II scheme allowed American multinational corporations to penetrate Europe and helped boost the American economy back home. With the domestic economy improving, American citizens became more positive about the future. Like other Americans, blacks experienced rising expectations about their education and standards of living. As a result, the belief that each generation of children would improve beyond the lifestyle of their parents increased tremendously. Global macroeconomic realities suggested national microeconomic expectations. The international payoff of progress for white Americans spurred the impatience of African Americans domestically.

Against this global backdrop, black theology emerged from the work of a group of radical African American pastors and religious educators whose faith challenged them to link Christianity and the black struggle for social transformation. It was an attempt to redeem the soul of, and reorganize, the North American system. Starting in July 1966, black theology rose with close links to the thrusts of the two major movements of the 1950s and 1960s: the goals of racial equality (black power) and real democracy (civil rights).

The ad hoc National Committee of Negro Churchmen, the signatories of the July 31, 1966, black power statement, announced that African Americans had the right to think theologically and that all God-talk inherently advanced notions of racial power. Published in March 1969, James H. Cone's *Black Theology and Black Power* was an inaugural book on liberation theology. Using the lens of the African American experience, he argued that the core message of the Bible paradigmatically expressed by Jesus the Anointed One was liberation of the materially poor. Consequently, ecclesial formations, educational venues, and civic society were called by God to focus on the liberation of the least in society: the broken-hearted, the wounded, working people, the outcast, the marginalized, the oppressed, and those surviving in structural poverty. Based on biblical theological criteria, Cone claimed, white churches

and most African American churches had failed their vocational assignments regarding their faith and their witness. This text offered the first sustained theological argument relating to issues of liberation, racial cultural identity, and a new material kingdom on earth in the interests of society's majority. This pioneering work, along with his subsequent publications, meant that Cone is generally cited, nationally and internationally, as the father of contemporary black theology of liberation.

Since its origins in the 1960s, black theology of liberation has matured into a body of knowledge defined by its own origins, traditions, norms, global indigenous forms, and kindred disciplines. In this sense, black theology takes place wherever darker-skinned peoples in the world reflect on their faith and liberation within their own local contexts. Specifically, throughout the 1960s and 1970s, blacks in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Latin America, and in the United States of America initiated and participated in various social-justice movements. Such movements included different dimensions of protest; however, one commonality was the issue of race or the discrimination suffered by darker-skinned people in various countries. Many churches, ecclesial leaders, and professors began to respond to these social movements and, consequently, began to raise theological questions. For instance, what does the Gospel of Christianity have to say about the changes in the contemporary political and cultural scenery? What is theological about the emergence of once-silenced voices? The first move was to conclude that, in general terms, the theology of former colonizers and former slave masters was insufficient. Thus, the second move: black Christians and theologians created a new way of doing theology from their own perspectives in their own particular countries.

Though many forms of oral and written faith beliefs in Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Latin America, the Pacific Islands, and in the USA preceded the contemporary period of black theology, not until the 1960s do we encounter the *name* "black theology" and the attempt to initiate and maintain such an *academic* discipline. Consequently, as a *self-identified* scholarly endeavor and social movement, an analysis of black theology has to return to the July 31, 1966 *New York Times* manifesto written by an ad hoc group of African American clergy.

This full-page newspaper declaration responded to the moral, cultural, economic, political, and psychological challenges posed by a young black power movement. On June 16, 1966, black youth workers of the American civil rights movement broke with the gradualist integrationist model of race relationships championed by the Revd. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Instead, the youth workers articulated a

new voice of black power and liberation of the poor. They assumed that African Americans as a black people needed to accept their own "racial" history, rely on their own culture, and move toward attaining their own group power. The sharing of power in society, they believed, would best facilitate an ethical relation between different racial groups. Black power advocates, furthermore, perceived intentionally the global connections of their movement by linking their efforts to colonial and postcolonial struggles of African and other peoples of the "Third World." Restated, a similar cultural and political ferment was developing among black peoples in various parts of the world, and the US black consciousness advocates consciously saw themselves as part of this global growth of heretofore left-out voices of dark peoples.

Hence, contemporary black theology of liberation originated with a specific history constituted by peculiar cultural and political contexts confronted by definite social and spiritual challenges. The July 31, 1966 statement set the initial contours of black theology. The article declared that race relations inherently entail theological issues of which groups have and which groups lack power. Specifically, whites in the USA had too much power and little conscience, while blacks had an abundance of conscience and no power. Furthermore, it confronted the assumption that American democracy accented only individual rights, while, in fact, it secured white people's group rights over black Americans' God-given rights as a people.

As we saw above, in 1969, black theology received its first coherent theological book with Cone's *Black Theology and Black Power*. Cone argued that the heart of the Christian message was liberation of the poor, who struggled against concrete structures preventing them from attaining their full humanity. And, pursuing this new liberation theology logic, he claimed that the American black-power movement was actually the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Methodologically, theology arose from and occurred within the black poor communities of the USA and poor black communities throughout the world. At the same time, because of the varied nature of black poor folk's lives, black theology needed to engage various disciplines, such as politics, psychology, culture, language, international analysis, economics, and other social sciences. Thus, the global aspect and the interdisciplinary approach of black theology continued to surface in the foundational documents of the discipline.

Similar factors of structural white racism in the Christian community and lack of culture and economic power in the black community, coupled with a new youth movement, took place in South Africa. In

1970, the South African University Christian Movement established the Black Theology Project. South African black theology was a direct offspring of its own Black Consciousness movement headed by Steve Biko. Theological issues of liberation of the poor as the hub of the Christian discourse, Jesus Christ as liberator, and the black poor as the site of faith and a new humanity permeated South African black theology.

Black theology is an academic discipline, among darker-skinned peoples, which has grown into a global dynamic. In various parts of the world, black Christians or people of faith are developing constructive theological statements regarding their belief in and practice with a God of cultural, political, and individual liberation. They hold in common several factors.

First, they agree that the norm of black theology is a complete and integrative liberation, including the cultural right to self-identity and the political right of self-determination. Both rights flow from a moral imperative. That is to say, Jesus calls us to build healthy human communities and healthy individuals on earth. Second, the starting point is a God of liberation dwelling with and acting on behalf of the poor. More specifically, black theology begins with race, the dark-skinned peoples at the bottom of societies. From this locus of the black poor, one opens up a host of interrelated theological concerns (such as gender, class, land, inheritance, etc.).

Third, methodologically, all forms of black theology concur with the important interplay between issues that arise out of poor black people's lives and the role that theology serves in discerning the depth of prophetic faith in these lives and movements. Therefore, black theology appears on a global stage whenever dark-skinned peoples in their own indigenous countries link societal claims with theological claims. From the local context, each manifestation of black theology links to similar international conversational partners. Fourth, another distinct characteristic is black theology's simultaneous relationship to various publics – the academy, the local church, and civic community focused on religion and justice. Black theology began out of church and community concerns. It then brought to bear the expertise of the academy. Black theology, in this regard, perceives a very broad constituency and audience comprising scholars and intellectuals, as well as ecclesial and civic leaders and lay populations.

Fifth, they agree that the racial category of "black" is both a social and phenotypic creation. True, social contexts define whether one is considered black in a definite country. So, too, does phenotype, in the sense that once race is socially and contextually defined, all who fit a

certain phenotype are then understood as black. It is no accident that wherever black theology arises, the darker-skinned peoples are usually at the bottom of each society, whether one speaks of Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Latin America, the Pacific Islands, Europe, or the USA.

Perhaps on a global human scale, black theology touches the intellectual depths and emotional yearnings of all communities and all individuals, regardless of race or ethnicity, who are concerned about issues related to what it means to live responsibly in today's world. All people are searching and questioning the nature of their faith in today's commodified and consumerist culture – a fast-paced, get-rich-quick, you-can-have-it-now, superficial culture. Although we emerge from unique cultural backgrounds, we all face similar issues: who are we and how are we related to our families, the ecology, and the cosmos? What do we do in relationship to our neighbors? What does the future hold in our turbulent times of pain and struggle, sadness, and joy?

Essentially, black theology grapples deeply and sincerely with the human questions of today. And, with much passion, it searches for definite answers to these challenges, because many of those questions across the world are exacerbated when they pertain to the darker-skinned communities. And so emotional passion, intellectual clarity, and a life-and-death sense that there is something at stake characterize the contributions and longevity of black theology. When all human beings, thirsting for a new way to be human, encounter these questions and answers, and discover that they are addressed with heart and head, they have the opportunity to open themselves to the reality of humane and just living with blacks and with all brown, red, yellow, and white people. In our mutual humanity, based on commitment to the freedom of poor folk, we all thirst for some safe and comforting space where we in our families can open ourselves to intellectual interrogation of our existential feelings. Black theology achieves precisely that: it brings together pain and pleasure, sacred and secular, and heart and head.

In addition, a black theology of liberation reminds everyone continually of the necessity of experiencing a passionate love for people, especially those without voices. To love another is to recognize oneself in the face and life of another. To love someone is to immerse and expose oneself in the context and conversation and culture of another. Love is the ultimate risk of faith – a faith grounded in liberation of all humanity; a faith with a vision for a new heaven and a new earth where each person can achieve the fullest realization of his or her calling as it serves their families and the greater collective human, ecological, and cosmological whole. To have such a love is to have a hope that springs

from living in a balance and harmony found within the human being and in relation to all there is and has been.

Through the ups and downs in the course of human history, what is it that sustains us? Even when it looks as if all the world is going in different, fractured directions, this hope can carry a people through. Faith, hope, and love embody a black theology of liberation. But more than that, they are what continue to keep poor and marginalized folk alive and seeking a better life for themselves, their children, and their grandchildren. Black theology attempts to make intellectual sense of all of this to help bring about a healthy human community for the poor and, indeed, for all the world's humanity.

Notes

- 1 Lamin Sanneh, *West African Christianity* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1983), p. 21.
- 2 H. S. Commager (ed.), *Documents of American History to 1898*, vol. 1 (New York: Appleton-Century-Crofts, 1968), p. 1.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 1.
- 4 *Ibid.*, p. 3.
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 Robert E. Lucas, Jr., *Lectures on Economic Growth* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002); Joseph E Inikori, *Africans and the Industrial Revolution in England* (Cambridge University Press, 2002); Eric Hobsbawm, *The Age of Revolution: Europe 1789–1848* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1962). We should not forget the immense exploitation and innumerable deaths caused by brutal working conditions and child labor in European countries and the USA. In fact, white workers in Europe and North America have a historical commonality of structural victimization as seen in the industrial revolution periods.
- 7 Dwight N. Hopkins, *Being Human: Race, Culture, and Religion* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2005), ch. 4.
- 8 See Cook's diary entry for April 22, 1770, preserved at the National Library of Australia.