

A BLACK THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION

Fiftieth Anniversary Edition

James H. Cone

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Preface to the 1986 Edition

Theology is not universal language about God. Rather, it is human speech informed by historical and theological traditions, and written for particular times and places. Theology is *contextual* language—that is, defined by the human situation that gives birth to it. No one can write theology for all times, places, and persons. Therefore, when one reads a theological textbook, it is important to note the year of its publication, the audience for whom it was written, and the issues the author felt compelled to address.

A Black Theology of Liberation was first published in 1970, and it was written for and to black Christians (and also to whites who had the courage to listen) in an attempt to answer the question that I and others could not ignore, namely, “what has the gospel of Jesus Christ to do with the black struggle for justice in the United States?” This book cannot be understood without a keen knowledge of the civil rights and black power movements of the 1960s and a general comprehension of nearly four hundred years of slavery and segregation in North America, both of which were enacted into law by government and openly defended as ordained of God by most white churches and their theologians.

I can remember clearly when I first sat down to write this text. It was immediately following the publication of my first book, *Black Theology and Black Power* (1969). Although *Black Theology and Black Power* appealed to many black and white radicals who were interested in the theological implications of black power, I knew that most Christians, black and white, especially theologians and preachers, would need a deeper analysis of Christian doctrine, using traditional theological concepts, before taking black theology seriously. When I began to write *A Black Theology of*

Liberation, I was deeply involved in the black struggle for justice and was *still* searching for a perspective on Christian theology that would help African Americans recognize that the gospel of Jesus is not only consistent with their fight for liberation but is its central meaning for twentieth-century America.

I was completely unaware of the beginnings of liberation theology in the Third World, especially in Latin America. Neither did I know much about the theme of liberation in African American history and culture. Unfortunately, my formal theological and historical knowledge was primarily limited to the dominant perspectives of North America and Europe. But, despite these limitations, I was determined to speak a liberating word for and to African American Christians, using the theological resources at my disposal. I did not have time to do the theological and historical research needed to present a “balanced” perspective on the problem of racism in America. Black men, women, and children were being shot and imprisoned for asserting their right to a dignified existence. Others were wasting away in ghettos, dying from filth, rats, and dope, as white and black ministers preached about a blond, blue-eyed Jesus who came to make us all just like him. I *had* to speak a different word, not just as a black person but primarily as a *theologian*. I felt then, as I still do, that if theology had nothing to say about black suffering and resistance, I could not be a theologian. I remembered what Malcolm X had said: “I believe in a religion that believes in freedom. Any time I have to accept a religion that won’t let me fight a battle for my people, I say to hell with that religion.”¹

The passion with which I wrote alienated most whites (and some blacks too). But I felt that I had no other alternative if I was to speak forcefully and truthfully about the reality of black suffering and of God’s empowerment of blacks to resist it. It was not my task to interpret the gospel in a form acceptable to white racists and their sympathizers. Theology is not only rational discourse about ultimate reality; it is also a prophetic word about the righteousness of God that must be spoken in clear, strong, and uncompromising language. Oppressors never like to hear the truth in a socio-political context defined by their lies. That was why *A Black Theology of*

Liberation was often rejected as racism in reverse by many whites, particularly theologians. For example, Father Andrew M. Greeley referred to my perspective on black theology as a “Nazi mentality,” “a theology filled with hatred for white people and the assumption of a moral superiority of black over white.”² White reactions to black theology never disturbed me too much, because Malcolm X had prepared me for them. “With skillful manipulating of the press,” said Malcolm, “they’re able to make the victim look like the criminal and the criminal look like the victim.”³

White theologians wanted me to debate with them about the question of whether “black theology” was real theology, using their criteria to decide the issue. With clever theological sophistication, white theologians defined the discipline of theology in the light of the problem of the unbeliever (i.e., the question of the relationship of faith and reason) and thus unrelated to the problem of slavery and racism. Using a white definition of theology, I knew there was no way I could win the debate. And even if I had managed to give a “good” account of myself, what difference would that have made for the liberation of poor blacks?

The task of explicating the gospel as God’s liberating presence with oppressed blacks was too urgent to be sidetracked into an academic debate with white scholars about the nature of theology. It was clear to me that what was needed was a *fresh start* in theology, a new way of doing it that would arise out of the black struggle for justice and in no way would be dependent upon the approval of white academics in religion. Again I thought of Malcolm: “Don’t let anybody who is oppressing us ever lay the ground rules. Don’t go by their games, don’t play the game by their rules. Let them know now that this is a new game, and we’ve got some new rules. . . .”⁴

I knew that racism was a heresy, and I did not need to have white theologians tell me so. Indeed, the exploitation of persons of color was the central theological problem of our time. “The problem of the twentieth century,” wrote W. E. B. DuBois in 1906, “is the problem of the colorline,—the relation of the darker to the lighter races of [persons] in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea.”⁵ Just as whites had not listened to DuBois, I did not expect white

theologians to take black theology seriously. Racism is a disease that perverts one's moral sensitivity and distorts the intellect. It is found not only in American society and its churches but particularly in the discipline of theology, affecting its nature and purpose. White *racist* theologians are in charge of defining the nature of the gospel and of the discipline responsible for explicating it! How strange! They who are responsible for the evil of racism also want to tell its victims whether bigotry is a legitimate subject matter of systematic theology.

I had no patience with persons (white or black) who expected me to remain "cool" and "calm" as whites played their racist theological games. I felt deeply that the time had come to expose white theology for what it was: a racist, theological justification of the status quo. To understand the content and style of *A Black Theology of Liberation*, one must have empathy for the depth of my anger regarding the presence of racism in theology, with white theologians trying first to deny it and then to justify it. I could barely contain my rage whenever I read their books or found myself in their presence. They were so condescending and arrogant in the way they talked about black theology, always communicating the impression that it was not genuine theology, because it was too emotional and anti-intellectual. Furthermore, it did not deal with the "proper" subject matter of theology—namely, the rational justification of religious belief in a scientific and technological world that has no use for God. I refused to let them intimidate me with their intellectual arrogance, quoting persons and documents of the Western theological tradition—as if knowledge of them were a prerequisite for even calling oneself a theologian. I kept thinking about my mother and father (and all the poor blacks they symbolized in African American history and culture) in order to keep my theological vocation clearly focused and my immediate purpose sharply defined. God did not call me into the ministry (as a theologian of the Christian church) for the purpose of making the gospel intelligible to privileged white intellectuals. Why then should I spend my intellectual energy answering their questions, as if their experience were the only source from which theology derives its questions?

Some of my discussions with white theologians degenerated into shouting matches, because they did not like my “cool” indifference toward the Western theological tradition and my insistence that they must learn something about the black religious tradition in order to be genuine *American* theologians. I must admit that I was often as arrogant toward white theologians as they were toward me. My style of doing theology was influenced more by Malcolm X than by Martin Luther King, Jr. And I am sure that my intemperate behavior prevented some whites, whose intentions were more honorable than my responses suggested, from dialoguing with me. My critical evaluation (deleted from the 1986 edition) of Joseph Hough’s *Black Power and White Protestants* (1968) and of C. Freeman Sleeper’s *Black Power and Christian Responsibility* (1969) is a case in point. But when I thought about the long history of black suffering and the long silence of white theologians in its regard, I could not always control my pen or my tongue. I did not feel that I should in any way be accountable to white theologians or their cultural etiquette. It was not a time to be polite but rather a time to speak the truth with love, courage, and care for the masses of blacks. Again Malcolm expressed what I felt deep within my being:

The time that we’re living in . . . now is not an era where one who is oppressed is looking toward the oppressor to give him some system or form of logic or reason. What is logical to the oppressor isn’t logical to the oppressed. And what is reason to the oppressor isn’t reason to the oppressed. The black people in this country are beginning to realize that what sounds reasonable to those who exploit us doesn’t sound reasonable to us. There just has to be a new system of reason and logic devised by us who are at the bottom, if we want to get some results in this struggle that is called “the Negro revolution.”⁶

Although my view of white theology is generally the same today as it was in 1970, there are several significant shifts in my theological perspective since the publication of this text. Inasmuch as

I have given a full account of my theological development in *My Soul Looks Back* (1982) and *For My People* (1984); it is not necessary for me to repeat it here. However, I do want to mention four themes particularly pertinent for readers of this text: sexism, the exploitation of the Third World, classism, and an inordinate methodological dependence upon the neo-orthodox theology of Karl Barth and other European theologians.

The most glaring limitation of *A Black Theology of Liberation* was my failure to be receptive to the problem of sexism in the black community and society as a whole. I have become so embarrassed by that failure that I could not reissue this volume without making a note of it and without changing the exclusive language of the 1970 edition to inclusive language. I know that this is hardly enough to rectify my failure, because sexism cannot be eliminated (anymore than can racism) simply by changing words. But it is an important symbol of what we must do, because our language is a reflection of the reality we create. Sexism dehumanizes and kills, and it must be fought on every front.

Contrary to what many black men say (especially preachers), sexism is not merely a problem for white women. Rather it is a problem of the human condition. It destroys the family and society, and makes it impossible for persons to create a society defined according to God's intention for humanity. Any black male theologian or preacher who ignores sexism as a central problem in our society and church (as important as racism, because they are interconnected) is just as guilty of distorting the gospel as is a white theologian who does the same with racism. If we black male theologians do not take seriously the need to incorporate into our theology a critique of our sexist practices in the black community, then we have no right to complain when white theologians snub black theology.

Another serious limitation was my failure to incorporate a global analysis of oppression into *A Black Theology of Liberation*. Unlike my moral blindness in relation to sexism, the absence of Third World issues in my perspective was due more to my lack of knowledge and personal exposure. Being so concerned about the problem of racism in the United States and being strongly influenced by the analysis of

it made by the civil rights and black power movements, it was easy for me to overlook Third World problems. I vehemently rejected any suggestion from whites about this weakness, because I did not trust them. How could they be genuinely concerned about the poor of the Third World when they showed little or no concern for poor blacks at home? I quoted one of their philosophers to them: "The only way of helping the enslaved out there is to take sides with those who are here" (Sartre).

At the time of the writing of *A Black Theology of Liberation*, I had not traveled to Asia, Africa, Latin America, or even the Caribbean; and unfortunately I had done little reading about the problems of poverty, colonialism, human rights, and monopoly capitalism. Largely due to my involvement in the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT), I have now visited many Third World countries, meeting many Third World persons and seeing for myself enormous gaps between rich and poor nations. I am convinced that no one should claim to be doing Christian theology today without making the liberation of the Third World from the exploitation of the First World and the Second World a central aspect of its purpose. There is an interconnectedness of all humanity that makes the freedom of one people dependent upon the liberation of all. No one can be free until all are set free. Martin Luther King, Jr., expressed this point persuasively:

We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied to a single garment of destiny. What affects one directly, affects all indirectly. As long as there is poverty in this world, [no one] can be totally healthy. . . . Strangely enough, I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be. You can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be.⁷

The third weakness of *A Black Theology of Liberation* was the absence of a clearly focused economic, class analysis of oppression. This limitation is unquestionably the result of my strong identification with the common tendency in the black community of defining racism as a domestic problem, largely associated with

the exclusion of blacks from the benefits of American capitalism. Racism was primarily identified as social exclusion with disastrous political and economic consequences. I assumed that if blacks were creatively integrated into all aspects of American society, the issue of racism would be essentially solved. This was faulty analysis, because I failed to see that the problem of the human condition involved much more than simply the issue of racism. Anyone who claims to be fighting against the problem of oppression and does not analyze the exploitive role of capitalism is either naive or an agent of the enemies of freedom. I was naive and did not have at my disposal sufficient tools for analyzing the complexity of human oppression. My strong negative reaction to the racism of many white socialists in the United States distorted my vision and prevented me from analyzing racism in relation to capitalism.

An exclusive focus on racial injustice without a comprehensive analysis of its links with corporate capitalism greatly distorts the multidimensional character of oppression and also camouflages the true nature of modern racism. There are black as well as white thieves, and the color of a person's skin does not make wrong right. We are all—blacks and whites, men and women, young and old—sinners, and thus capable of exploiting the poor in order to promote our economic and political interests. No event has demonstrated this truth more clearly than the tragic bombing in Philadelphia (May 1985). It made no difference whether Frank Rizzo (white) or Wilson Goode (black) was the mayor; the dignity and well-being of poor blacks was considered expendable in the killing of eleven persons, including four children. The color of the mayor's skin did not change the immoral character of the act or justify the general silence of civil rights groups about it. The act was murder and ought to be prosecuted as such. We must not allow racial solidarity to distort the truth. Without class analysis, a global understanding of oppression will be distorted and its domestic manifestations seriously misrepresented. There are very few differences between black and white capitalists when viewed in the light of the consequences of their behavior for the poor. When profits are more important than persons, disastrous results follow for the poor of all colors. It does not matter whether blacks or whites do it. This madness must be opposed.

The fourth and last weakness that I wish to comment on was my inordinate methodological dependence upon the neo-orthodox theology of Karl Barth. Many of my critics (black and white) have emphasized this point. It is a legitimate criticism, and I can offer no explanation except to say that neo-orthodoxy was to me what liberal theology was to Martin Luther King, Jr.—the only theological system with which I was intellectually comfortable and which seemed compatible with the centrality of Jesus Christ in the black church community. I knew then as I know now that neo-orthodoxy was inadequate for my purposes, and that most American theologians who claimed that theological identity would vehemently reject my use of Karl Barth to interpret black theology. However, I did not have the time to develop a completely new perspective in doing theology. I had to use what I regarded as the best of my graduate education.

If I were to be writing *A Black Theology of Liberation* today, I would not follow the theological structuring that begins with a methodology based on divine revelation, and then proceeds to explicate the doctrines of God, humanity, Christ, church, world, and eschatology. There is no “abstract” revelation, independent of human experiences, to which theologians can appeal for evidence of what they say about the gospel. God meets us in the human situation, not as an idea or concept that is self-evidently true. God encounters us in the human condition as the liberator of the poor and the weak, empowering them to fight for freedom because they were made for it. Revelation as the word of God, witnessed in scripture and defined by the creeds and dogmas of Western Christianity, is too limiting to serve as an adequate way of doing theology today. Theology, as Latin American liberation theologians have stressed, is the second step, a reflective action taken in response to the first act of a practical commitment in behalf of the poor.

Despite the limitations of *A Black Theology of Liberation*, I decided to publish the 1986 edition without any changes except those related to the elimination of exclusive language and a few adjustments in style. The chief reason for reissuing this text as it appeared in 1970 is its central theme: *liberation*. More than any other text I have written, *A Black Theology of Liberation* represents the new start I tried to make in theology. Alone in Adrian, Michigan,

searching for a constructive way in theology that would empower oppressed blacks, the motif of liberation came to me as I was rereading the scripture in the light of African American history and culture. I had already had glimpses of this theme as a motif for theological construction when writing *Black Theology and Black Power*. However, in that book I was more concerned with problems in society than with developing a new way of doing theology. *A Black Theology of Liberation* represents my initial attempt to construct a new perspective for the discipline of theology, using the Bible and the black struggle for freedom as its chief sources. Liberation emerged as the organizing principle and has remained the central motif of my perspective on the gospel.

I repeat: Theology is always done for particular times and places and addressed to a specific audience. This is true whether theologians acknowledge it or not. Although God is the intended subject of theology, God does not do theology. *Human beings do theology*. The importance of this point cannot be emphasized too strongly, because there are white theologians (as well as others greatly influenced by their definitions of theology) who *still* claim an objectivity regarding their theological discourse, which they consider vastly superior to the subjective, interest-laden procedures of black and other liberation theologians. That there are theologians who make such claims today (even after the successful critiques made by black, feminist, and Third World liberation theologians) continues to baffle me. It is like President Ronald Reagan claiming objectivity in his development of a Third World policy of freedom and democracy in South Africa and Central America. He *cannot* be serious! But he is, and so are white theologians regarding the objective character of their way of doing theology. In *A Black Theology of Liberation*, I tried to uncover the wrongheadedness of the white way of doing theology and then attempted to set Christian theology on the right path of liberation. I believe that it was a message worth saying in 1970 and still an important word to say today.

JAMES H. CONE