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MARK L. CHAPMAN

CHRISTIANITY
ON TRIAL

AFRICAN-AMERICAN
RELIGIOUS THOUGHT
BEFORE AND AFTER
BLACK POWER

The Bishop Henry McNeal Turner/Sojourner Truth Series
in Black Religion, Volume X

CHRISTIANITY ON TRIAL

*African-American Religious Thought
Before and After Black Power*

Mark L. Chapman



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In loving memory of my grandmother
Mary Madeline Chapman

In honor of my parents
the Rev. Dr. William L. and Joyce E. Chapman

and

To my wife
Teri
and
daughter
Quincey

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God has richly blessed me with a loving family and supportive friends! It is no cliché when I acknowledge that without their love and constant encouragement, I would not have completed this project. Numerous professors, friends, relatives, and church members have supported me throughout my studies. While it is not possible to name every individual who encouraged me along the way, I wish to acknowledge those persons who supported me throughout the writing of this book.

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Introduction

Christianity: Source of Black Liberation or Oppression?

The Christian religion as it has functioned in America has been both the friend and the foe of the Negro. Despite the paradoxes and the feebleness with which it is practiced in the American Social Order, it is potentially, and at times actually, the most powerful weapon a minority group has to press its claim for equal opportunities for survival.

—Benjamin E. Mays, 1939

This is the question which individuals and groups who live in our land always under the threat of profound social and psychological displacement face: Why is it that Christianity seems impotent to deal radically, and therefore effectively, with the issues of discrimination and injustice on the basis of race, religion and national origin? Is this impotency due to a betrayal of the genius of the religion, or is it due to a basic weakness in the religion itself? The question is searching, for the dramatic demonstration of the impotency of Christianity in dealing with the issue is underscored by its apparent inability to cope with it within its own fellowship.

—Howard Thurman, 1949

What does the Christian gospel have to say to powerless black men whose existence is threatened daily by the insidious tentacles of white power? Is there a message from Christ to the countless number of blacks whose lives are smothered under white society? . . . Is it possible to strip the gospel as it has been interpreted of its "whiteness," so that its real message will become a live option for radical advocates of black consciousness? Is there any relationship between the work of God and the activity of the ghetto? Must black people be forced to deny their identity in order to embrace the Christian faith? . . . These are hard questions. To answer these questions, however, we need to discuss, first, the gospel of Jesus as it relates to black people.

—James H. Cone, 1969

Christianity and the Struggle to Believe

More than any other issue in the history of African-American religious thought, the meaning of Christianity and its relation to black

oppression has generated ongoing controversy and debate. Indeed, the above quotations by Benjamin Mays, Howard Thurman, and James Cone, three of the most respected interpreters of African-American Christianity in the twentieth century, all reflect the serious theological issues that have been, and still are, debated in black communities across the nation. In fact, no interpretation of black life in America can ignore the manner in which the debate concerning Christianity has affected the social, political, and religious dimensions of the African-American freedom struggle, especially in the civil rights and Black Power movements of the 1950s and 1960s.

Needless to say, black people have never forgotten that they were introduced to Christianity by their enslavers. This historical reality produced in African-Americans a feeling of deep ambivalence and skepticism about the value of Christianity as a source of black liberation. Writing at the height of the Black Power movement, Vincent Harding, Professor of Religion and Social Transformation at Iliff School of Theology in Denver, Colorado, poignantly captured the source of this dilemma in his seminal essay, "Black Power and the American Christ" (1967):

This ambivalence is not new. It was ours from the beginning. For we first met the American Christ on slave ships. We heard his name sung in hymns of praise while we died in our thousands, chained in stinking holds beneath the decks, locked in with terror and disease and sad memories of our families and homes. When we leaped from the decks to be seized by sharks we saw his name carved on the ship's solid sides. When our women were raped in the cabins they must have noticed the great and holy books on the shelves. Our introduction to this Christ was not propitious. And the horrors continued on America's soil. So all through the nation's history many black men have rejected this Christ—indeed the miracle is that so many accepted him.¹

Certainly, it was not easy for black people to embrace a faith that was given to them by their enslavers. Indeed, as Harding suggests, the widespread acceptance of Christianity among African-Americans points to the miracle-working power of a God who resurrected the crucified Jesus and made him alive in the hearts and minds of black slaves and their descendants. Nevertheless, from the time white missionaries told Africans that Christianity compels slaves to "obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling" (Eph 6:5) through the present, the struggle to believe that "God could make a way (freedom) out of no way (slavery)" was often a severe test of faith. To be sure, some slaves rejected Christianity and religion altogether, while others clung to Islam or new

adaptations of traditional African religions. But those who accepted Christianity—despite their oppression at the hands of white “Christian” slave masters—created a distinct expression of the faith that enabled them to maintain their dignity in the midst of a brutal, dehumanizing institution. As Gayraud Wilmore demonstrated in his classic text *Black Religion and Black Radicalism*, a stream of radicalism has flowed through black Christianity inspiring slave revolts, emigration movements, and other forms of resistance.² But whether they have embraced the faith or rejected it, I believe an analysis of African-American religious thought will show that black people have always put Christianity on trial. The basic theological dilemma they have continually addressed is whether Christianity is a source of black liberation or oppression.

Therefore, this book poses the very question black people have asked throughout history: Is Christianity a liberating reality in African-American life or is it an oppressive ideology that hinders black freedom? This is the question African-American religious thinkers have pondered with intensity, especially in the years after World War II. It is no accident that this query about the efficacy of Christianity intensified during the civil rights and Black Power movements of the 1950s and 1960s. As black people’s hope regarding integration soared in the postwar years, so did their belief that Christianity was the force that would help them to realize the beloved community articulated by Martin Luther King, Jr. But the optimism of the 1950s and early 1960s turned to hopelessness and despair as African-Americans in the urban North discovered that the passage of civil rights legislation had no bearing on their economic plight. Still crowded in ghettos with little or no employment opportunities, the militant voices of the discontented began to drown out the hopeful proclamations of Christian integrationists.

As the gap between the promise of democracy and the reality of poverty widened, so did the perception that Christianity could help solve the race problem in America. Increasingly alienated from the institutional structures of white power, young blacks began to feel that violence was the only way to make their voices heard. Significantly, this mounting disillusionment regarding integration was accompanied by harsh critiques of Christianity leveled by the Nation of Islam, Black Power militants, and radical black clergy leaders sensitive to the cries of the masses.

Similarly, black women’s increasing frustration and disappointment over the oppressive sexism of black men and the racism of white feminists were followed by a prophetic womanist theological critique of Christianity. Indeed, male and female indictments of racist and sexist manifestations of Christianity before and after Black Power constitute an important African-American theological tradition that is often overlooked.

Pre- and Post-Black Power Critiques of Christianity

Throughout this study, I refer to “Negro” and “pre-Black Power” theologians interchangeably, as I do with “black” and “post-Black Power” theologians. Because African-Americans before the rise of Black Power most commonly referred to themselves as Negroes (including Benjamin Mays, Howard Thurman, George Kelsey, and Martin Luther King, Jr.) I have used it when describing their views. However, it must be emphasized that my use of the word *Negro* is not intended in a pejorative sense—as Elijah Muhammad, Malcolm X, and Black Power radicals used it to demean leaders they considered “Uncle Toms”—but is rather employed to help illustrate points of discontinuity between pre- and post-Black Power theologians. Similarly, after the emergence of Black Power, African-Americans increasingly referred to themselves as black people. Here, it is important to underscore the point that the term “black theologian” is not primarily a description of the theologian’s ethnic background using language that reflected the community’s new racial consciousness (though it is that); more important, it is a description of a theological perspective, much like “liberal,” “neo-orthodox,” or “feminist” theologian. With this in mind, this book examines the various indictments of Christianity articulated by African-American religious thinkers before and after the Black Power movement. The critiques and interpretations of Christianity found in these two historical periods were greatly influenced by the political ideologies of integration and nationalism. Perhaps the most important religious thinkers in the pre-Black Power period were Benjamin Mays, Howard Thurman, George Kelsey, and Martin L. King, Jr. As educators, preachers, and theologians, their thought epitomizes the best of the integrationist tradition that challenged church and society to “practice what it preached” in the area of race. While these thinkers were proud of their racial heritage, it is important to note that they did not (and indeed could not) think of themselves as *black* theologians. Their approach to religious experience and commitment to the ideology of integration led them to think of ethnic and cultural background as *incidental* to the doing of theology. They believed that all life is interrelated, and so they put forward an interpretation of Christianity that was consistent with integrationist philosophy. Their personal experiences of being *excluded* made them acutely aware of the need to develop inclusive theologies that would transcend the categories of race.

However, alongside the dominant integrationist tradition stood a rich legacy of black nationalism that interpreted Christianity in an entirely different light. Christian black nationalists from Henry McNeal Turner to Albert Cleage emphasized racial particularity and the importance of Africa, while non-Christian black nationalists such as Elijah Muhammad and Malcolm X rejected Christianity altogether as “the

white man's religion."³ These two ideological forces—integration and black nationalism—collided in 1966 when the cry of “Black Power” was heard above the “Freedom Now” slogan of the mainline civil rights movement. This shift in political ideology also caused a shift in religious thought. As young civil rights activists began to embrace the spirit of black nationalism, a new way of interpreting the gospel emerged among progressive ministers and theologians who now sought to interpret Christianity in light of the black community's search for cultural as well as political liberation. Religious thinkers after Black Power made bold theological claims that integrationist scholars would not have made: God and Jesus Christ are black and are present in the spirit of Black Power!

Clearly, there are significant points of tension between the perspectives of Negro and black theologians. Whereas pre-Black Power religious leaders attempted to make Christianity relevant for a generation of young people fighting racial segregation in the South, post-Black Power ministers and theologians in the 1960s and 1970s faced the challenge of making the gospel speak to the frustrations of black youth fighting institutional racism, joblessness, and police brutality in the urban North. In this latter period, African-Americans were more conscious of the fact that racism was supported by deep structural and economic roots; consequently, the younger generation changed its focus from integration and civil rights to a new emphasis on black nationalism and self-determination. If the black church and its theologians could not answer Elijah Muhammad's claim that “Christianity is the white man's religion,” then they wanted no part of it.

Although there are sharp differences in the critique and interpretation of Christianity articulated by pre- and post-Black Power religious thinkers, there is also a strong line of continuity. Interpreters in both periods attacked the racism of the white church and insisted that authentic Christianity had to address the social, political, and economic realities of the African-American community. Moreover, pre- and post-Black Power Christian thinkers issued a prophetic internal critique of the black church when it failed to relate its ministry to the poor and the disinherited. There is, therefore, an important stream of continuity between pre- and post-Black Power Christian thought that demands more scholarly attention. In fact, it can be said that the black theologians of the late 1960s and 1970s “stood on the shoulders” of the Negro theologians of the 1930s, '40s and '50s.⁴

As a student of history and theology, this integral relationship between pre- and post-Black Power religious thinkers intrigued me greatly. During my undergraduate years at Morehouse College in the early 1980s, I read the autobiographies of Benjamin Mays and Howard Thurman (while living in dormitories named in their honor) and attended worship services in the chapel named after the school's most

distinguished alumnus, Martin Luther King, Jr. I was proud to know that many of the leading figures in twentieth century African-American religious thought (Benjamin E. Mays, Howard Thurman, George Kelsey, and Martin Luther King, Jr.) had been students, administrators, and professors at my alma mater; indeed, the several occasions I met and talked with Dr. Mays before his death in 1984 are among my most cherished memories.

Yet, I was also drawn to the more militant writings of James Cone, especially his *Black Theology and Black Power*. Cone's work addressed another part of me that pre-Black Power thinkers did not emphasize: radical black consciousness and skepticism about nonviolence as the *only* Christian means of struggle. My subsequent graduate studies at Union Seminary, therefore, highlighted a subconscious inner tension regarding my appreciation for the work of both pre- and post-Black Power theologians. On the one hand, I had tremendous respect for the accomplishments of Mays, Thurman, and King; I admired their moral and intellectual courage and respected their profound commitment to Jesus' nonviolent ethic. Yet, I also knew I had serious doubts about my ability to participate in civil rights demonstrations without retaliation and hatred. Did this mean that I was not an authentic Christian, inasmuch as Jesus himself taught forgiveness, repudiated violence, and told his disciples to love their enemies?

In this respect, I sympathized with Cone's rage and passionate critique of integration and nonviolence as the *sole* Christian response to white racism. I knew from personal experience (a gang of whites once chased me through the streets of Greenwich Village, New York, with the intention of doing me serious bodily harm) how difficult it is to love the enemy and desire reconciliation with people who seek to destroy you. While I still valued the contributions of Mays, Thurman, and King, I realized that no interpreter of the history of black people in the United States could fail to appreciate the dramatic impact the Black Power movement had on African-American religious thought.

The radical black theology that emerged in the late 1960s and 1970s marked the most exciting outpouring of African-American religious thought in the twentieth century. After the 1969 appearance of Cone's *Black Theology and Black Power*, a steady stream of books and articles sought to reinterpret Christianity in light of the new mood of black consciousness. Drawing on the insights of radical nineteenth-century male figures such as Nat Turner, David Walker, and Henry McNeal Turner, and the more recent leadership of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X, male post-Black Power thinkers emphasized the theological significance of blackness and the need for social, political, and economic liberation from the oppressive structures of white racism. Unfortunately, black male theologians adopted the patriarchal views of secular black nationalists and therefore ignored the problem of sexism

in the black church and community. Consequently, the post-Black Power era also saw the emergence of black female religious scholars who rediscovered the theology and feminist political activism of their radical nineteenth-century foremothers. With the rise of womanist theology in the mid 1980s, Christianity as interpreted by progressive black male preachers and theologians was itself put on trial. With prophetic zeal and compassion, womanist theologians asked how black theology can be a theology of liberation when it ignores and participates in the oppression of black women? Certainly, womanist theology is a prophetic critique of the limitations of both pre- and post-Black Power male theologians.

Bridging the Generation Gap

Given the sharp differences between pre- and post-Black Power theologians, I was initially unable to resolve my inner conflict regarding seemingly opposite traditions that shaped my thinking. Indeed, the outpouring of religious thought after Black Power caused many scholars to neglect the work of Negro theologians and their influence on black theology. Recently, however, there has been a renewed interest in the work of pre-Black Power theologians, especially Howard Thurman.⁵ For example, an important 1989 conference celebrating the fortieth anniversary of Howard Thurman's *Jesus and the Disinherited* and the twentieth anniversary of James Cone's *Black Theology and Black Power* was held at the Benjamin E. Mays Hall of the Howard University School of Divinity in Washington, D.C. (November 8-9, 1989). The theme of the conference was "Black Theology in Retrospect and Prospect: Discontent, Revolt, and New Ferment," and scholars including Luther Smith, Gayraud Wilmore, Delores Williams, and J. Deotis Roberts began to address some of the continuities between pre- and post-Black Power theology.⁶ However, to the best of my knowledge, a comprehensive study has not been done comparing and contrasting African-American religious thought before and after Black Power. The present work seeks to fill that void by examining key figures in both periods who responded to the black community's ongoing debate concerning the value of Christianity as a source of liberation.

In *Christianity on Trial* I argue that despite the important differences between pre- and post-Black Power religious thought, there is a common thread that ties these two generations together. In both periods African-American Christian and non-Christian thinkers exposed the racism of the white church and sought to make black faith a powerful resource in the struggle against oppression. Moreover, the history of both periods shows that the African-American Christian community subjected its faith to serious internal critique. Prophetic theologians and pastors challenged the black church to be true to the liberating

gospel of Jesus, even as they were confronted with the presence of sexism and other weaknesses in their own perspectives. Indeed, the research presented in this study confirms my strong belief that the African-American community *must* continue to critique manifestations of Christianity from inside and outside the church walls if the black institutional church is to be an effective witness to the liberating gospel of Jesus Christ.

Apart from the sharp cultural focus of black theology in the late 1960s and beyond, the difference between it and pre-Black Power religious thought is largely one of emphasis. For pre-Black Power thinkers, the emphasis on the *universality* of the Christian faith was derived from their primary concern about integration and improved race relations; for post-Black Power theologians, the emphasis on the *particularity* of the gospel stemmed from a growing nationalist consciousness that glorified blackness and stressed racial unity. Yet, it is important to note that pre-Black Power theologians' emphasis on the universality of the faith did not mean that they denied the importance of their African heritage, nor did black theologians' emphasis on the theological significance of blackness mean that they rejected the universality of the Christian gospel.

An African-American Tradition of Theological Critique

All five chapters of *Christianity on Trial* seek to illustrate my central thesis that the relevancy of Christianity to the reality of black oppression was intensely scrutinized by the African-American community in the years following World War II. Each chapter highlights a principal thinker whose ideas are representative of a major trend in African-American religious thought: Benjamin Mays, Elijah Muhammad, Albert Cleage, James Cone, and Delores Williams. More than any of their contemporaries, I believe, these theologians epitomize their respective schools of thought and serve to focus our attention on the major theological issues raised at the time. In each chapter I address the historical context that shaped the theological discussion and provide a brief biographical sketch of the featured theologian. Equally important, *Christianity on Trial* seeks to highlight the chorus of other important voices that contributed to the dialogue and helped reinforce the perspective of the major thinker under examination.

Chapter 1 analyzes the Negro theology of race relations that emerged in the years before and after World War II. As Negroes during this period intensified their political struggle for civil rights, religious scholars sharpened their critique of white Christianity and developed a theology of race relations based on the community's desire for integration. The major architect of this theological trend was Benjamin E. Mays, the renowned scholar, ecumenical church leader, and educator. Mays was an instructor at Morehouse during Howard Thurman's stu-