BLACK THEOLOGY & BLACK POWER

TH ANNIVERSARY EDITION

AMES H CONE

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JAMES H. CONE

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Preface to the 1989 Edition

Black Theology and Black Power was a product of the Civil Rights and Black Power movements in America during the 1960s, reflecting both their strengths and weaknesses. As an example of their strengths, this book was my initial attempt to identify *liberation* as the heart of the Christian gospel and *blackness* as the primary mode of God's presence. I wanted to speak on behalf of the voiceless black masses in the name of Jesus whose gospel I believed had been greatly distorted by the preaching and theology of white churches.

Although Martin Luther King, Jr., and other civil rights activists did much to rescue the gospel from the heresy of white churches by demonstrating its life-giving power in the black freedom movement, they did not liberate Christianity from its cultural bondage to white, Euro-American values. Unfortunately, even African-American churches had deviated from their own liberating heritage through an uncritical imitation of the white denominations from which they separated. Thus, it was hard to distinguish between the theologies of white and black churches and the images of God and Jesus they used to express them. African-Americans, it seemed to me at the time, had assumed

that, though whites did not treat them right, there was nothing wrong with whites' thinking about God.

It was the challenging and angry voice of Malcolm X that shook me out of my theological complacency. "Christianity is the white man's religion," he proclaimed, again and again, as he urged African-Americans to adopt a perspective on God that was derived from their own cultural history. He argued:

> Brothers and sisters, the white man has brainwashed us black people to fasten our gaze upon a blond-haired, blue-eyed Jesus! We're worshiping a Jesus that doesn't even *look* like us! Oh, yes! . . . Now just think of this. The blond-haired, blue-eyed white man has taught you and me to worship a *white* Jesus, and to shout and sing and pray to this God that's *his* God, the white man's God. The white man has taught us to shout and sing and pray until we *die*, to wait until *death*, for some dreamy heaven-in-the-hereafter, when we're *dead*, while this white man has his milk and honey in the streets paved with golden dollars here on *this* earth!

Since I was, like many African-American ministers, a devout follower of Martin King, I tried initially to ignore Malcolm's cogent *cultural* critique of the Christianity as it was taught and practiced in black and white churches. I did not want him to disturb the theological certainties that I had learned in graduate school. But with the urban unrest in the cities and the rise of Black Power during the James Meredith March in Mississippi (June 1966), I could no longer ignore Malcolm's devastating criticisms of Christianity, particularly as they were being expressed in the articulate and passionate voices of Stokely Carmichael, Ron Karenga, the Black Panthers, and other young African-American activists. For me, the burning theological question was, how can I reconcile Christianity and Black Power, Martin Luther King, Jr.'s idea of nonviolence and Malcolm X's 'by any means necessary' philosophy? The writing of *Black Theology and Black Power* was the beginning of my search for a resolution of that dilemma.

Considered within the sociopolitical context of the sixties, I still believe that my answer was correct: "Christianity . . . is Black Power." Since theology is *human* speech and *not* God speaking, I recognize today, as I did then, that *all* attempts to speak about ultimate reality are limited by the social history of the speaker. Thus, I would not use exactly the same language today to speak about God that I used twenty years ago. Times have changed and the current situation demands a language appropriate for the problems we now face. But insofar as racism is still found in the churches and in society, theologians and preachers of the Christian gospel must make it unquestionably clear that the God of Moses and of Jesus makes an unqualified solidarity with the victims, empowering them to fight against injustice.

As in 1969, I unfortunately still see today that most white and black churches alike have lost their way, enslaved to their own bureaucracies—with the clergy and staff attending endless meetings and professional theologians reading learned papers to each other, seemingly for the exclusive purpose of advancing their professional careers. In view of the silence of the great majority of white theologians when faced with the realities of slavery and segregation, the white churches' preoccupation with "academic" issues in theology and their avoidance of the issue of justice, especially in the area of race, do not surprise me. What does surprise and sadden me, however, is a similar situation among many African-American churches and their theologians, especially those who claim to speak and act in the name of a black theology of liberation. In view of Sojourner Truth and Fannie Lou Hamer, Martin King and Malcolm X and the tradition of resistance that they and others like them embody, African-American ministers and theologians should know better than lose themselves in their own professional advancement, as their people, especially the youth, are being destroyed by drugs, street gangs, and AIDS. More black youth are in jails and prisons than in colleges and universities. Our community is under siege; something must be done before it is too late. If there is to be

any genuine future for the black church and black theology, we African-American theologians and preachers must develop the courage to speak the truth about ourselves, saying to each other and to our church leaders what we have often said and still say to whites: *Enough is enough! It is time for this mess to stop!* Hopefully, the re-issuing of *Black Theology and Black Power* will contribute to the development of creative self-criticism in both black and white churches.

An example of the weakness of the 1960s black freedom movement, as defined by *Black Theology and Black Power*, was its complete blindness to the problem of sexism, especially in the black church community. When I read my book today, I am embarrassed by its sexist language and patriarchal perspective. There is not even one reference to a woman in the whole book! With black women playing such a dominant role in the African-American liberation struggle, past and present, how could I have been so blind?

The publication of the twentieth-anniversary edition tempted me to rid *Black Theology and Black Power* of its sexist language (as I did in the revised edition of *A Black Theology of Liberation* [Orbis, 1986] and also insert some references to black women. But I decided to let the language remain unchanged as a reminder of how sexist I once was and also that I might be encouraged never to forget it. It is easy to change the language of oppression without changing the sociopolitical situation of its victims. I know existentially what this means from the vantage point of racism. Whites have learned how to use less offensive language, but they have not changed the power relations between blacks and whites in the society. Because of the process of changing their language, combined with the token presence of middle-class African-Americans in their institutions, it is now even more difficult to define the racist behavior of whites.

The same kind of problem is beginning to emerge in regard to sexism. With the recent development of womanist theology, as expressed in the articulate and challenging voices of Delores

Williams, Jackie Grant, Katie Cannon, Renita Weems, Cherl Gilkes, Kelly Brown, and others, even African-American male ministers and theologians are learning how to talk less offensively about women's liberation. Many seem to have forgotten that they once used exclusive language. Amnesia is an enemy of justice. We must never forget what we once were lest we repeat our evil deeds in new forms. I do not want to forget that I was once silent about the oppression of women in the church and the society. Silence gives support to the powers that be. It is my hope that by speaking out against sexism other male African-American preachers and theologians, especially in the historic black churches, will also lift their prophetic voices against this enemy of God in the black church community. So far, too few of us have spoken out in our own denominations.

Black Theology and Black Power is also limited by the Western theological perspective that I was fighting against. After spending six years of studying white theology in graduate school, I knew that the time had come for me to make a decisive break with my theological mentors. But that was easier said than done. I did not know much about my own theological tradition which had given rise to my rebellion. I was struggling to become a *black radical* theologian without much knowledge of the historical development of African-American religion and radicalism. I had studied a little "Negro History" in high school and college, but no text by a black author had been included in my theological curriculum in graduate school. That was one of the things that made me so angry. I had been greatly miseducated in theology, and it showed in the neo-orthodox, Barthian perspective of *Black Theology and Black Power*.

"How can you call what you have written 'black theology,' " African-American theologians pointedly asked me, "when most of the theological sources you use to articulate your position are derived from the white theology you claim to be heretical?" "Your theology," they continued, "is black in name only and not in reality. To be black in the latter sense, you must derive the

sources and the norm from the community in whose name you speak." That criticism was totally unexpected, and it shook me as nothing else had. I had expected my black brothers and sisters to support me in my attacks on white theology. But it seemed to me at the time that they were attacking me instead of our enemies. In time, however, I came to see the great value of their criticism. My effort to correct this cultural weakness in my theological perspective has been an on-going process since the publication of *The Spirituals and the Blues* (1972).

As I began to reflect more deeply upon my own cultural history, tracing it back to the African continent, I began to see the great limitations of Karl Barth's influence upon my Christological perspective. Barth's assertion of the Word of God in opposition to natural theology in the context of Germany during the 1930s may have been useful. But the same theological methodology cannot be applied to the cultural history of African-Americans in the Americas or to Africans and Asians on their continents. Of course, I knew that when I wrote *Black Theology and Black Power*, but my theological training in neo-orthodoxy hindered my ability to articulate this point.

As in 1969, I still regard Jesus Christ today as the chief focus of my perspective on God but not to the exclusion of other religious perspectives. God's reality is not bound by one manifestation of the divine in Jesus but can be found wherever people are being empowered to fight for freedom. Life-giving power for the poor and the oppressed is the primary criterion that we must use to judge the adequacy of our theology, not abstract concepts. As Malcolm X put it: "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."

Another weakness of *Black Theology and Black Power* was my failure to link the African-American struggle for liberation in the United States with similar struggles in the Third World. If I had listened more carefully to Malcolm X and Martin King, I might

have avoided that error. Both made it unquestionably clear, especially in their speeches against the U.S. government's involvement in the Congo and Vietnam, that there can be no freedom for African-Americans from racism in this country unless it is tied to the liberation of Third World nations from U.S. imperialism.

"You can't understand what is going on in Mississippi if you don't understand what is going on in the Congo." Malcolm told a Harlem audience. "They're both the same. The same interests are at stake. The same sides are drawn up, the same schemes are at work in the Congo that are at work in Mississippi." During the last year of his life, Malcolm traveled throughout the Middle East and Africa as he sought to place the black freedom struggle in the United States into an international context. When African-American leaders questioned the value of his international focus, Malcolm said: "The point that I would like to impress upon every Afro-American leader is that there is no kind of action in this country ever going to bear fruit unless that action is tied in with the overall international struggle."

Martin King shared a similar concern. Against the advice of many friends in the civil rights movement, churches, and government, he refused to separate peace and civil rights issues. His condemnation of his government's involvement in the war in Vietnam, referring to "America as the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today," alienated many supporters in both the white and black communities. Martin King contended that the black freedom struggle and the struggle of the Vietnamese for self-determination were tied together because "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere."

My failure to link black liberation theology to the global struggles for freedom contributed to my blindness regarding the problem of classism. Class privilege was (and still is) a dominant reality in the white community of the United States as well as in the African-American community. In fact, the problem of oppression in the world today is defined not exclusively in terms

of race but also in terms of the great economic gap between rich and poor nations and the haves and havenots within them. Again, if I had listened more attentively to Martin King and Malcolm X, I might have seen what I did not see at the time I wrote *Black Theology and Black Power*. Both turned toward economic issues during their later lives. They saw the great limitations of capitalism and, while rejecting the anti-democratic and atheistic principles of the Soviet Union, Martin and Malcolm began to search for the human, democratic side of socialism. What was clear to both of them, and clear to me now, is that we need to develop a struggle for freedom that moves beyond race to include all oppressed peoples of the world. As Malcolm X told a Columbia University audience a few days before his assassination: "It is incorrect to classify the revolt of the Negro as simply a racial conflict of black against white or as a purely American problem. Rather, we are today seeing a global rebellion of the oppressed against the oppressor, the exploited against the exploiter."

Despite its limitations, I hope that *Black Theology and Black Power* will remind all who read it that good theology is not abstract but concrete, not neutral but committed. Why? Because the poor were created for freedom and not for poverty.

James H. Cone
Charles A. Briggs Distinguished Professor
of Systematic Theology
Union Theological Seminary, New York
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Preface

The appearance of this book is made possible by the assistance and encouragement of many people. Although I cannot mention all, I must express my gratitude to those persons who participated directly in the bringing of this work into existence. First of all, I wish to express my gratitude to the faculty of Colgate Rochester Divinity School for the invitation to deliver these lectures as a Theological Fellow, and to the Faculty Development Committee of Adrian College for the summer grant which provided some financial assistance during my writing.

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My wife deserves a special word of thanks for her understanding patience and for meeting the typing deadline for the final draft. She also provided an atmosphere for my writing by being both mother and father to our sons, Michael and Charles, during my extended periods of absence.

Although many persons assisted me in this work, I alone am responsible for the ideas which are set forth.

CONTENTS

Introduction

"Black Power" is an emotionally charged term which can evoke either angry rejection or passionate acceptance. Some critics reject Black Power because to them it means blacks hating whites, while others describe it as the doctrine of Booker T. Washington in contemporary form.[1] But the advocates of Black Power hail it as the only viable option for black people. For these persons Black Power means black people taking the dominant role in determining the black-white relationship in American society.

If, as I believe, Black Power is the most important development in American life in this century, there is a need to begin to analyze it from a theological perspective. In this work an effort is made to investigate the concept of Black Power, placing primary emphasis on its relationship to Christianity, the Church, and contemporary American theology.

I know that some religionists would consider Black Power as the work of the Antichrist. Others would suggest that such a concept should be tolerated as an expression of Christian love to the misguided black brother. It is my thesis, however, that Black Power, even in its most radical expression, is not the antithesis of Christianity, nor is it a heretical idea to be tolerated with painful forbearance. It is, rather, Christ's central message to twentieth-century America. And unless the empirical denominational

church makes a determined effort to recapture the man Jesus through a total identification with the suffering poor as expressed in Black Power, that church will become exactly what Christ is not.

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

This work, then, is written with a definite attitude, the attitude of an angry black man, disgusted with the oppression of black people in America and with the scholarly demand to be "objective" about it. Too many people have died, and too many are on the edge of death. In fairness to my understanding of the truth, I cannot allow myself to engage in a dispassionate, noncommitted debate on the status of the black-white relations in America by assessing the pro and con of Black Power. The scholarly demand for this kind of "objectivity" has come to mean being uninvolved or not taking sides. But as Kenneth B. Clark reminds us, when

> moral issues are at stake, noninvolvement and non-commitment and the exclusion of feeling are neither sophisticated nor objective, but