

**J. DEOTIS ROBERTS**

**LIBERATION  
AND  
RECONCILIATION**

**A  
BLACK  
THEOLOGY**

**REVISED EDITION**

# LIBERATION and RECONCILIATION

A Black Theology

Revised Edition

**J. DEOTIS ROBERTS**

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For  
The late Principal Charles S. Duthie  
New College, University of London  
and Professor William L. Bradley  
Rockefeller Foundation  
friends and mentors

and for  
The late Dean Emeritus Daniel G. Hill  
Howard University School of Religion  
who called me to the theological task.

These by their thought and life  
introduced me to the liberating and  
reconciling dimensions of Christian theology.

## Preface to the First Edition

The present volume is an introduction to soul theology. Soul sums up the black experience, whether religious or secular, better than any other term. Here I have attempted a Christian theological interpretation of the soul religious experience as we understand it, as a Christian and as a theologian whose face is black. Soul theology is Black Theology.

Afro-American is my version of blackness. It includes a positive appreciation for the Euro-American contribution to black culture in this country. Afro-American does not, however, preclude the possibility that we will seek a deeper knowledge and understanding of Africanisms upon our experience. Thus while seeking to apply whatever insights I have gained from a comprehensive exposure to general theological knowledge, I am likewise attempting to correct the omissions regarding the uniqueness of black religious experience in most existent theological programs. In a word, theological knowledge is combined with black religious experience in Christian theological perspective.

In the following pages much will be said about black liberation. We are aware of the gospel of freedom to which Christ as Liberator has called us. But as Christians, black and white, we surely know that separation, however rewarding to set the record straight, cannot be an ultimate Christian goal. Separation must give way to reconciliation. The gospel is a reconciling as well as a liberating gospel, and Christ is at once Liberator and Reconciler. At the same time that black Christians are set free, they are called together with all other Christians to a ministry of reconciliation.

Reconciliation, between blacks and whites, is a two-way street. It depends as much upon what whites will do to make conditions in race relations better as it does upon what blacks will not do. Black-white reconciliation, in Christian terms, cannot be based upon the superordination-subordination pattern of whites over blacks. Whites must now be ready to work with blacks for better racial understanding. Reconciliation must be based upon a oneness in nature and grace between all people upon the principle of equity. Equality belongs to the time of integration.

Reconciliation assumes that blacks must earn the right to be equal—to be accepted into the American mainstream. Equity, on the other hand, belongs to the time of Black Power—black pride, awareness, and self-determination. Equity assumes that all human beings are naturally equal. Human dignity is a birthright. Black Theology affirms this and goes on to root

equity, as the only principle of black-white reconciliation, in the Christian understanding of creation and redemption.

I am grateful to my colleagues in the Department of Religion at Swarthmore College for their assistance and encouragement. Professors Linwood Urban, Patrick Henry, and George Thomas (professor emeritus of Princeton University) were all helpful in their several ways. Mention must also be made of students at Swarthmore who provided a trial run for much of the material written here. Lectures at Swarthmore and Princeton, together with dialogues in the workshop on black religious experience at the 1969 annual session of the Religious Education Association, greatly accelerated progress on the manuscript. Frequent discussion with black colleagues on the theological commission of the National Committee of Black Churchmen has been enlightening. Lecture and dialogue at the first annual session of the Black Ecumenical Commission of Massachusetts contributed much to whatever clarity there may be in these pages.

The staff and consultants of the Westminster Press have been extremely helpful in the development and editing of the text. Mrs. Sylvia Hecht labored long and hard as typist to put the manuscript into acceptable form. I owe to my wife and children a debt that cannot be put into words. While I am grateful to all who assisted me, I hereby assume full responsibility for all the mistakes and shortcomings in the following pages. I will be pleased if the reader will consider the "end" of this book as a "beginning" toward liberation and reconciliation.

## Preface to the 1994 Edition

*Liberation and Reconciliation* was first released in 1971. This was after a considerable period of gestation. Many thoughtful exchanges took place during 1968 and the following years. I will not repeat these influences here. There were many aspects to this development that were personal as well as societal. Happenings in both the church and the academy explain many ideas expressed as well as the passionate manner in which the material was presented. The years between 1968 and 1971 were filled with crises and rapid social change. Much that occurred at that time will not likely be repeated. And yet the impact of events of that period in U.S. race relations remains with us today.

### Some Reasons for This Second Edition

In this new release of my foundational work in Black Theology, I attempt to preserve as much as possible the essential message of the original text. I also attempt to preserve the basic outlook of this work. In some cases it may be necessary to briefly indicate the historic context in order to make more explicit the significance of a particular observation and its meaning. But one of the compelling reasons for releasing this text at this time is the continuance and even the resurgence of white racism. The astute observer will conclude that the more things have changed in U.S. black-white relations the more they have remained the same.

Multicultural developments have emerged to such an extent that matters of human relations are more complicated than ever. Racial tensions have been intensified by a large influence of other nonwhite ethnics from the Southern hemisphere. It is unfortunate that more progress was not made in black-white relations before this more complicated situation developed. The tension is now at an epidemic stage between blacks and Hispanics, blacks and Asians, as well as others. Other nonwhite ethnic peoples are competing with blacks in urban America for limited resources.

Between 1971 and the present, the larger society has placed a moratorium on affirmative action initiatives. Law, custom, and executive actions have slowed the forward movement of progressive blacks. The black underclass has grown and has been overwhelmed by subtle forms of oppression.

Thus circumstances at present are ripe for a repeat of the message of this work, which has gone unheeded and unheard.

The message of Black Theology has not been properly considered on a large scale by black church leadership in the past. Fortunately, several seminary-educated men and women incorporate insights from this program in their ministries. Some scholarly pastors are beginning to interpret its benefits for those without formal theological education. A "second generation" of black as well as womanist theologians are insisting upon the merits of Black Theology in the church and the academy. The demand for available original workers on this subject is greater than ever before. Some pastors, upon reading works in Black Theology, indicate that what they are reading in new works depends largely upon foundational books written during the heyday of Black Theology. For these as well as other reasons, *Liberation and Reconciliation* is being reissued.

### How and Why My Mind Has Changed or Remained the Same

First, there is no reason for a strong reaction to the theological position of Professor James H. Cone. Some critics in the past saw my views as mainly a personal response to the more radical views of Cone.

This criticism of my first systematic statement of Black Theology is not totally accurate. This appears to be so due to some very strong observations made concerning several important points in Cone's earlier books. There were basic disagreements between us and these were stated. In a review of the text, I am somewhat surprised by the extent to which these critical observations were lifted up.

However, the reader would miss the point dwelling upon these differences between Cone and myself. For example, there were forces at work that drove each black theologian forward. We were often in conversation and we often shared in the drafting of common statements. We shared much in the passion for racial justice.

At the outset, it was obvious that my role as a theologian antedated Cone's emergence at the peak of the Black Power movement. As a member of an earlier generation of theologians, I was influenced by the period of race relations impacted by the 1954 school decision, the Civil Rights Movement, and the nonviolent program of Dr. M. L. King, Jr. This long period of hindsight in the racial struggle for justice informed my message.

One has always to consider the autobiography of a theologian. We have different spiritual journeys, and intellectual and personal temperaments. Our experiences are very personal and racism has impacted us differently. Each theologian has a "life-story" that explains very much the direction of his or her theological reflection.

Not only my personal history, but my intellectual pilgrimage has been epistemological—a quest for a reasonable place for a stand. This had taken



me into the history of ideas in the West. But it had also sent me on a global religious quest prior to my encounter with the issues presented by the black religious experience. My encounter with Euro-American religious thought had been deep on both sides of the Atlantic as well as in principal universities and divinity schools across this nation. It would not have been possible, therefore, to be in concert with Cone or merely react to what he had to say.

The text I produced was both a response to key issues raised by Cone and an alternative constructive statement of Black Theology. It is only if the latter purpose of *Liberation and Reconciliation* is taken seriously that one can fully appreciate its complete message.

I will now suggest how experience and reflection since 1971 would be present in a similar project today.

*First*, there is a greater sensitivity to the need to address a larger audience—the masses of poor-oppressed people. The underclass has increased and homelessness has multiplied. The scourge of drugs and wanton violence, so destructive to the young, has escalated out of control. The need to develop an even greater solidarity with the oppressed has become clear.

Black Theology must be a theology “from below.” Black Theology must be addressed to all in a language they can understand. I see the need to simplify the message to reach a wider audience. However, it was necessary to work through the material much as it was first done. Without grappling with issues at the depth level, one is not able to tone it down and make it palatable for those with less formal education. Thus what needs to be done now is a second-order process. The message needs to reach more people.

In a similar vein, it is clear that Black Theology must be closely related to the black church. Its message needs to challenge all Christians, whether in pulpit or pew. Its goal is praxeological. Its purpose is social transformation for making life more human. Black Theology must become a theology of mission and ministry. The future and effectiveness of Black Theology is bound up with the witness of the black church. This fact becomes more and more apparent as we move forward in our history. The healing and protest aspects of the black church’s mission are more and more evident.

*Second*, the balance between *liberation* and *reconciliation* remains essential in our pluralistic society. The multicultural emphasis now in vogue makes the urgency for genuine reconciliation more significant than before. The message of the Kerner report, which spoke of “two societies,” black and white, has now been expanded to include other nonwhite ethnic groups. The so-called ethnic cleansing in Bosnia and the resurgence of antiforeign sentiments in a united Germany remind us of a tragic path we dare not take. Dr. King’s warning, that we either learn to live together as friends or die as fools, is obvious for all thoughtful people.

When reconciliation is elevated to its proper ethical level and Christian understanding, it requires serious attention to liberation from social injus-

tices. It cannot be conceived as mere sentimentality or "cheap grace." Reconciliation requires repentance, forgiveness, and cross-bearing. Thus I would opt for maintaining the balance between liberation and reconciliation. At the same time, I would invite others to seriously rethink the meaning of both terms in light of the new challenges in human relations associated with racial and ethnic tensions in this last decade of the twentieth century.

*Third*, there is the message of Black Theology for the entire human family. As theologies become more contextualized, Black Theology stands out as a powerful message for oppressed people. The location of Black Theology in the heart of the First World, on behalf of a group who experience much of the deprivation of persons in the Third World, makes its impact the more meaningful. Blacks have significant contact with Euro-American culture. But their ancestry is African. Black Theology, as much as Latin American Liberation Theology, has a vital message for the oppressed everywhere. The relation to the South African racial situation is obvious. Through personal encounter and dialogue, I can affirm the impact of Black Theology upon Dalit Theology in India and Minjung Theology in South Korea, to name only two instances. Thus since 1971 I have become more and more aware of the global influence of Black Theology. However, the influence of other theologies among oppressed people enriches and empowers Black Theology as well.

*Fourth*, the use of inclusive language is an obvious change in this text. The sexism in the first edition is offensive to the present writer. Thus this is perhaps the most radical change that has occurred since the earlier attempt to state my position as a theology of the black experience. The language used earlier was presented without the benefit of conversation and writings by feminist and womanist theologians.

While the language is important it does not equal the importance of a new sense of relationship. That is to say, there needs to be a conviction that women are equal partners with men through nature and grace.

As I have worked through the text to clean up the language, I have attempted to rethink the proper manner to assert the equality, partnership, and mutuality between the sexes. Without this latter effort, the use of inclusive language can be useless and meaningless. Without an equal partnership, change of language is useless.

As a black male theologian, perhaps the most significant development has been the emergence of Womanist Theology. Black women, in relation to men and children, share a common context, in which they have been able to share their pain. They have shown much understanding and compassion for black men, who assumed that they had spoken about liberation for all black people a few decades ago. In the meantime, I have sensed a significant growth in the comprehension of the issues raised by these theological reflections of men and women together.

The time has come for criticism to move in two directions and not just

from women to men, but from men to women as well. Thus I am concerned that womanist theologians have not, to my knowledge, devoted as much time to the black family as black male theologians have. This is rather odd in view of the crucial role that black women play in the nurture of all children, male and female. Strong families are so important to our health and survival as a people that Womanist Theologians need to make their important contribution on this front. Most black women I know care a lot about family; it is therefore important that their sisters who are theologians should give some guidance on this subject. It is obvious that a lot of the poverty of black women is due to their assuming responsibilities related to the rearing of children. How then is it possible to deal with “class” oppression of black women without serious attention to family?

This is a large and vital subject, now before us. Unfortunately, many black male pastors have not moved forward against the oppression of women, especially in the church and in ministry. It is the more tragic that their status quo position is sanctioned by a wrongful interpretation of scripture. Male black theologians, however, appear to be very supportive of all women in their bid for equal status with men in church and society. Black male theologians have often taken a lot of heat for their convictions from male ministerial colleagues. In spite of this, we must use whatever influence we have to support the equality and partnership of women. This must be done at the same time that we champion the cause of the young black male, black families, and especially all black youth.

*Fifth*, there is a need for a definitive theology of ministry out of the black church tradition. I believe this can be more effectively done by those who have chosen full-time ministry, even though they have contributed to theological reflection. Persons like Delores Carpenter and James H. Harris are applying the insights of black and womanist theologies for their work as effective pastors. I see their work as the most effective way of validating the message of black men and women theologians. The witness of Ben Chavis, new executive director of the NAACP, demonstrates the significance of black theology in the area of public policy. Delores and Ben are former students of mine. Thus I have grounds for assessing the extent to which Black Theology informs their life and work. The future use of the insights of Black Theology in ministry and the quest for social justice appear promising.

### Contextualizing the Message of Black Theology

It is not necessary to do all the updating of my original text here, since I have done much of this in books, essays, and articles since this book was first released.

In 1974 I published *A Black Political Theology*. The purpose of that work was to make clearer my focus on liberation as a goal. That work also was

more “ethical” in perspective. *Liberation and Reconciliation* was more in the nature of constructive theology.

*Roots of a Black Future* was released in 1980. This was a treatise on the black church and family. This study was on the extended family tradition from Africa to the New World. This interdisciplinary study included much history and social science. But it was grounded in scripture and theology. Its ultimate purpose was to provide a theology for ministry to black families.

*Black Theology Today* saw the light of day in 1983. This was a collection of essays on the development of black theology in my own awareness. But even more so it was a critical evaluation of the works of several colleagues in the field.

In 1987 *Black Theology in Dialogue* appeared as a more global presentation. It argued for the maturity and status of Black Theology worldwide. It consisted of essays and lectures presented in conversations in several parts of the world.

At the present time, I await the release of a new volume that relates Black Theology to the practice of ministry. This anticipated volume focuses upon the “prophetic” message for black churches in their social justice ministries. I am aware of a need for Black Theology to address the healing aspect of the gospel in the witness of the churches as well. It is my conviction that the *holistic* perspective of the gospel of Jesus Christ is native to the black church tradition. Thus a black church theology needs to explicate a holistic message.

This brief summary is limited to books; it does not include articles and essays. The reader is to be reminded that much of my reflection is much broader than the black experience.

This summary of major works that I have produced since releasing *Liberation and Reconciliation* should provide the reader with guidelines for judging the direction the germinal insights of the earlier work have developed in my life and thought.

### How Events Have Created New Perspectives

Here I attempted to look at each chapter and lift up certain matters that might now be viewed differently.

Chapter 1 treats of “theological discourse.” The mood is very passionate in keeping with the challenge before the black community. “Black consciousness” and “black power” dominated the mode of expression. “Black” had a special meaning, which had developed in the late 1960s, during the long hot summer of racial strife.

While the same problems of racism confront us today, the mood is more subdued and the language is less passionate. Many people who never grasped the meaning of “blackness” now see themselves as African-American. Some of us can accept the new title, but it has greater meaning if one

has first understood the significance of the “blackness” content of the earlier period. It had to do with self-esteem and empowerment, without which there can be no real freedom for black people.

Chapter 2 opens up the meaning of the title *Liberation and Reconciliation*. In this chapter an attempt was made to treat the options before the black community and the nation. On the one hand, there were the black nationalists. Some were religious and sought liberation through a separation of the races. Liberation was to be by “whatever means necessary.” This included violence as a means to liberation. On the other hand, there were persons among us who were willing to be “reconciled” with whites based upon their understanding of the gospel as a gospel of “love” only. They were willing to allow whites to teach them what to believe. The often Bible-based gospel knew nothing of justice in the here and now. It was often an individualistic and otherworldly gospel.

The attempt was made to present both liberation and reconciliation as a balance within the gospel message. It seemed to me that both were part of the black church tradition and that the gospel required both outlooks as well. It is likely that a part of my insight harked back to the Civil Rights and nonviolent movements. But I was also very much a part of the new more militant stance of black power. Thus there was an attempt to delve deep in both outlooks and pull them together. I reserved the right to seek my own definitions of both terms. While rejecting integration based upon the inferior-superior formula, I was open to reconciliation between equals. I was open to goodwill, but insisted on structural changes in the social arrangements between blacks and whites. Thus I saw the relation between liberation and reconciliation as dialectical, but not oppositional. The struggle to bring these two poles together has been a challenge ever since. Sincerely raising this issue provided significant options and challenges for the whole black theology/church movement. For the devout believer there is no easy answer.

Chapter 3 delved deeply into our African heritage as well as the African-American past in this country. Observing the manner in which individualism had dealt a divisive wedge between black persons, I lifted up “peoplehood” as an essential outlook for blacks in quest of freedom and justice.

Much of this chapter deals with the “chosen people” paradigm as applied to the destiny of blacks. At that time it was possible to focus on the tension between the races in the U.S.A. Today the issue is not as clear. With the breakup of the U.S.S.R. and the trend toward “ethnic cleansing” in Bosnia, not to mention the rise of multiculturalism in our country, there is a need to give serious attention to what humans have in common to live fulfilled lives in the same country, in the same world. Some similar insights are valuable, but the historical and sociological contexts have changed since the book was first released.

Chapter 4 treats the doctrine of God. My view on God remains the same. It has not been easy to use inclusive language. Some statements may appear

awkward in view of my own struggle with new words and concepts. I do see some enrichment in overcoming the male-only designation of the divine nature. It is here that the reflections of womanist theologians will be most helpful. We black male theologians will need to continue vigorous conversation with womanist theologians and feminist theologians as well.

Chapter 5 is an important statement on human dignity out of the human experience. This emphasis is still needed. However, there seems to be great need for stress on "self-esteem" for the black youth of this present period. We are faced with an epidemic of drugs and violence, and a growing underclass. The recovery of the drive for self-fulfillment of earlier black generations needs to be a priority. The general message of chapter 5 regarding sin and forgiveness stands. However, the presence of the religious right indicates a need to give careful attention to the meaning of liberation in the overcoming of sin and the experience of salvation. We need to be precise in indicating what concerns and actions contribute to social justice. Are the issues of the majority our issues? Roman Catholics and conservative Evangelicals are united against abortion, for example. While seeing the serious nature of the outlook of "abortion on demand," this does not tackle the serious problems caused by systematic racism. More than ever, Black Theology must lead black Christians in their own thinking and living out of the faith.

The issues raised in chapter 6 regarding the black messiah remain crucial. This discussion is related to the discussions going on in third-world theologies on "the images of Jesus." In a way, Black Theology anticipated this development. The subject is still alive among black religious thinkers. For example, Father James Stallings, who founded his own African-American Catholic communion, continues this vital discussion. The discussion has been enriched by the research and reflection of black biblical scholars, women as well as men. The earlier discussion is greatly illuminated by recent reflections and writings. The christological reflections of Professor Jacquelyn Grant are to be noted.

The chapter on hope (chap. 7) is always important to theology. It becomes even more important as the black underclass grows. The balance between the concern for the "here" and "hereafter" presented in the earlier essay should stand. I would still insist that the Christian faith's belief in the resurrection-event empowers our moral endeavors in this life—both personal and social. Many things have happened during the intervening years, which would be used to place this message in context. The moratorium on active programs for the uplift of the poor as well as blacks has made more emphatic the need to relate eschatology to ethics. We know the awful negative effects of the Reagan-Bush years. The promises of President Clinton remain to be kept. The words of Jesus, "thy kingdom come, on earth as it is in heaven," are an appropriate challenge for black Christians—and for all Christians.

Chapter 8 reveals more than any other chapter the historical context of

this book. It was born of the attempt to address the challenge presented by the “by-any-means-necessary” ethic so often advocated at the time. As the recent explosions in Los Angeles and Miami indicate, this outlook is not fully overcome. Racism is not dead; it reappears again and again in various times and places. It presents new challenges each day. How we deal with the consequences of racism remains central to black faith. With this comes the challenge presented by the title of this volume—*Liberation and Reconciliation*.

In this new Introduction I have attempted to update a new generation of readers regarding the message of this early volume in Black Theology. Without opening up the text in a way that would destroy its “classic” flavor, I have made these additional remarks. A select bibliography is being presented to aid those who desire a fuller update. Many of these sources have informed me in the series of volumes I have produced since this book was first released.

It has been by the request of several younger black theologians that this volume has been reissued. I wish to acknowledge the warm reception of this proposal by Robert Ellsberg, Editor-in-Chief of Orbis Books. Without his encouragement and skillful editing, this volume might have remained in oblivion, as far as younger readers are concerned.

I would also like to thank Mirta I. Angleró, faculty secretary at Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary, for her tireless and efficient preparation of this text. It is my fondest desire to make this work available to laity and clergy alike. The message of this book remains alive whenever Christians seek to live by the gospel, which both liberates and reconciles us to God and each other.

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## Theological Discourse in Black

The current concern for writing down a Black Theology provides an opportunity for black theologians to do their own thing. I now have the opportunity to say some things I would have said several years ago. The course of events in race relations, however, has led me to change my mind so suddenly and so radically most recently that it would not have been possible for me to have anticipated the new direction my thought is now taking. I must say, nevertheless, that apart from the development, the hindsight, and common sense of past years of maturation as a general practitioner in the field of theology, the present and future direction of my thought would be different.

Every theologian arrives at his or her stance through years of reflection. There is an autobiography of thought that emerges, however objective and critical one attempts to be. I stand somewhere between the generations—that is, on the boundary between the black militants and the old-fashioned civil rights integrationist—and also between the “by-whatever-means-necessary” ethicists and the view that ends and means are organically one. It is my view that liberation and reconciliation must be considered at the same time and in relation to each other. The all-or-nothing, victory-or-death, approach to race relations appears to be more rhetoric than reality, even to those who hold it. The same may be said concerning the black or white conception of ethics. In the long run, gray is more honest and realistic.

### How Black Is Black Theology?

There is one thing that black theologians do not need to decide; it has been already decided for them. Their face is black in a white racist society. This racism is institutionalized not only in the general society but in the church as well. Black consciousness or awareness is a realistic foundation for our theological task. When blacks move from color blindness to color consciousness, it becomes difficult to avoid the implications of Black Power.