

# A BLACK THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION

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work. What is important is that the oppressed are being liberated. Indeed there may be some advantages in not consciously doing anything for Christ simply because one wants to be a Christian. The truly Christian response to earthly problems is doing what one must do because it is the *human* thing to do. The brother's suffering should not be used as a stepping-stone in Christian piety.

This may be what Jesus had in mind when he told the parable of the last judgment (Matthew 25:31 ff.). Persons are received and rejected according to their ministering to human need. Those who were received were surprised, for they did not view their work as God's own. They were not seeking a reward. They were only doing what they considered the *human* thing to do. That is why they asked, "Lord, when did we see thee hungry and feed thee, or thirsty and give thee drink? And when did we see thee a stranger and welcome thee, or naked and clothe thee? And when did we see thee sick or in prison and visit thee?" Their actions were not meant for the King! But the King will answer, "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the last of these my brethren, you did it to me."

Because the work of God is not a superimposed activity but a part of one's existence as a person, pious frauds are caught in a trap. They are rejected because they failed to see that being good is not a societal trait or an extra activity, but a human activity. They are excluded because they used their neighbor as an enhancement of their own religious piety. Had they known that blacks were Jesus, they would have been prepared to relieve their suffering. But that is just the point: there is no way to know in the abstract who is Jesus and who is not. It is not an intellectual question at all. Knowledge of Jesus Christ comes as one participates in human liberation.

### **Eschatology**

No study in systematic theology is complete without dealing with the question of eschatology. To speak about eschatology is to move in the direction of the future, what has often been called the "last things."

The question about the "not yet" has always been a paramount question and its importance is symbolized in the certainty of death. All living things die; but, as Reinhold Niebuhr has pointed out,

only human beings know of their future end. It is knowledge of future ceasing-to-be that makes humankind different from other creatures.

To anticipate the certainty of nonexistence understandably places us in a state of anxiety. What can we do about death and its relationship to life? If we know that our present existence will be swallowed up by the future reality of nothingness, what can we hope for when our present being no longer is? Is there life after death?

These are tough questions, and any theology that seeks to deal with human existence cannot sidestep them. It can be argued that religion originated in the attempt of humankind to grapple with the problem of death. And the success of any religion in winning adherents may be traced to its ability to give a satisfactory answer to the question of death. What does the black theological perspective have to say about the ultimate hope of blacks and its relationship to their present existence? What does it have to say about death?

Black theology rejects as invalid the attempt of oppressors to escape the question of death. White rulers in society seek to evade the reality of their end by devising recreational hobbies. They play golf, vacation in distant lands, live in all manner of luxury. Instead of facing up to the reality of finite existence and the anxiety that accompanies it, they pretend that their eternality is dependent on their political, social, and economic dominance over the weak and helpless. With their power to control history, the present and future of other human beings, who can deny that they are not the masters of the world's destiny? It is their confidence in their own present strength that renders them incapable of looking the future squarely in the face. Oppressors do not know death because they do not know themselves—their finiteness and future end.

In contrast to the inability of oppressors to deal with death, the oppressed cannot escape their future end, for the visible presence of rulers is a constant reminder that nonexistence may come at any moment. For blacks death is not really a future reality; it is a part of their everyday existence. They see death every time they see whites. The death of men, women, and children at the hands of whites who wheel and deal in the structures of society precludes the possibility of escape from life or death. Blacks, then, are forced to ask, What

is the relationship between the past, present, and future in the context of blackness?

We do not find answers to questions about life and death by reading books. Life-and-death questions are not hypothetical questions, and answers are not found in a theology or philosophy class. The answers to questions about the end come when we face the reality of future nonexistence in the context of existence that is characterized by oppression and liberation. We know what the end is when we face it head-on by refusing, at the risk of death, to tolerate present injustice. The eschatological perspective must be grounded in the historical present, thereby forcing the oppressed community to say no to unjust treatment, because its present humiliation is inconsistent with its promised future.

An eschatological perspective that does not challenge the present order is faulty. If contemplation about the future distorts the present reality of injustice and reconciles the oppressed to unjust treatment committed against them, then it is unchristian and thus has nothing whatsoever to do with the Christ who came to liberate us. It is this that renders white talk about heaven and life after death fruitless for blacks.

We know all about pearly gates, golden streets, and long white robes. We have sung songs about heaven until we were hoarse, but it did not change the present state or ease the pain. To be sure, we may “walk in Jerusalem jus’ like John” and “there may be a great camp meeting in the Promised Land,” but we want to walk in *this* land—“the land of the free and the home of the brave.” We want to know why Harlem cannot become Jerusalem and Chicago the Promised Land? What good are golden crowns, slippers, white robes, or even eternal life, if it means that we have to turn our backs on the pain and suffering of our own children?

Unless the future can become present, thereby forcing blacks to make changes in this world, what significance could eschatology have for those who believe that their self-determination must become a reality *now!* White missionaries have always encouraged blacks to forget about present injustice and look forward to heavenly justice. But black theology says no, insisting that we either put new meaning into Christian hope by relating it to our liberation or drop it altogether.

Perhaps a place to begin looking for this new eschatological

significance is in the theology of Rudolf Bultmann.<sup>4</sup> Taking his clue from the existential orientation of Martin Heidegger, Bultmann has pointed out some interesting things about theological eschatology and its relationship to history. Concentrating his intellectual efforts on articulating an eschatological perspective that was consistent with the achievement of authentic human selfhood as defined by Heidegger's philosophy, Bultmann concluded that the human future cannot be separated from being-in-the-present. He therefore rejected any eschatological viewpoint that centered on cosmological ingredients, or apocalyptic speculations on non-earthly reality. To accept mythology as the key to eschatology is to reject "the complete genuine historicity" of the human being. Eschatology, said Bultmann, must focus on human beings as they exist in their existential situation, in which the meaning of history is located in the present moment of decision.

Contemporary theology is indebted to Bultmann for his contention that eschatology cannot be separated from the present historical moment of the human being. But Bultmann did not take his point far enough. His view failed to take seriously the significance of the liberation of an oppressed community. How is eschatology related to *protest* against injustice and the need for revolutionary change? True, as Bultmann pointed out, one's future cannot be separated from one's present moment of decision. But neither can one's future be separated from the future of one's community, the nation. In the Old Testament, God is conceived not only as a God who acts in history *for me*; God acts in the history of a particular community. And God's action can be for me only insofar as I choose to belong to the community of God. One's selfhood is bound up with the community to which one belongs.

Also, Bultmann failed to point out that the future of God in biblical history cannot be separated from the *oppressed condition* of God's people. Who are they who long for the coming of the Lord and for what purpose? They who wait on the Lord are they who are weak; they are the poor, the helpless, the downtrodden. The powerful have no need for God's future: they are confident that their own strength will prevail. The future of God belongs to the future of the poor, those who are assured that God's present righteousness will not be defeated by those who seek to usurp divine authority. The poor need not worry about the evil of this world; they will see the

glory of Yahweh in their own fight against injustice.

The dimension of futurity as protest against evil, although absent in Bultmann, may be found in the discourse of "hope theology." The "hope theologians" take their cue from Ernst Bloch, who says, "Reality does not have a definite dimension. The world is not fixed." Or again:

"Things can be otherwise." That means: things can also *become* otherwise: in the direction of evil, which must be avoided, or in the direction of good, which would have to be promoted.<sup>6</sup>

Eschatology is related to action and change.

However, it is Jürgen Moltmann, one of the most prominent "hope theologians," who places the Marxist emphasis on action and change in the Christian context. In his book *Theology of Hope*,<sup>7</sup> he says that the chief weakness of tradition thinking on eschatology is that it has been relegated to the end of time, having no relationship to the present. Eschatology has been interpreted as a reward to those who remain obedient. In this view, the resurrection of Christ means that salvation is now completed, finished. This explains why the churches look at the world not as a place to die but to live piously and prudently in preparation for the future. If one thinks that Christ's work is finished, then there is nothing to do but wait for the Second Coming.

But Moltmann's concern is to show that such a view means that one has not really heard the promise of God. To hear God's promise means that the church cannot accept the present reality of things as God's intention for humanity. The future cannot be a perfection of the present. Therefore, "To know God," writes Moltmann, "is to suffer God"—that is, to be called by God into the world, knowing that the present is incongruous with the expected future. "Hence it [revelation] does not give rise to powers of accommodation, but sets loose powers that are critical of being."<sup>8</sup> In order to guard against abstractions, Moltmann continues:

Our hope in the promises of God . . . is not hope in God himself . . . but it hopes that his future faithfulness will bring with it also the fulness of what has been promised. . . .

It does not merely hope personally “in him,” but has also substantial hopes of his lordship, his peace and his righteousness on earth.<sup>9</sup>

Moltmann’s analysis is compatible with the concerns of black theology. Hope must be related to the present, and it must serve as a means of transforming an oppressed community into a liberated—and liberating—community. Black theology does not scorn Christian hope; it affirms it. It believes that, when Christians really believe in the resurrection of Christ and take seriously the promise revealed through him, they cannot be satisfied with the present world as it is. The past reality of the resurrection and the future of God disclosed through it make Christians restless with regard to the imperfections of the present. It is not possible to know what the world can and ought to be and still be content with excuses for the desolation of human beings. Christians must fight against evil, for not to fight, not to do everything they can for their neighbor’s pain, is to deny the resurrection.

Christian eschatology is bound up with the resurrection of Christ. He is the eschatological hope. He is the future of God who stands in judgment upon the world and forces us to give an account of the present. In view of his victory over evil and death, why must human beings suffer and die? Why do we behave as if the present were a fixed reality not susceptible of radical change? As long as we look at the resurrection of Christ and the expected “end,” we cannot reconcile ourselves to the things of the present that contradict his presence. It is this eschatological emphasis that black theology affirms.

We come back to this question again: What about life after death? On the one hand, black theology believes that the emphasis on heaven in black churches was due primarily to white slave masters whose intention was to transfer slaves’ loyalties from earthly reality to heavenly reality. In that way, masters could do what they willed about this world, knowing that their slaves were content with a better life in the next world. The considerable degree to which black slaves affirmed the worldview of masters was due to their inability to change life on earth. But the rise of black power and black theology brings with it a change in the focus of blacks.

We now believe that something *can* be done about this world,

and we have resolved to die rather than deny the reality expressed in black self-determination. With this view, heaven is no longer analyzed the way it used to be. Heaven cannot mean accepting injustice of the present because we know we have a home over yonder. Home is where we have been placed *now*, and to believe in heaven is to refuse to accept hell on earth. This is one dimension of the future that cannot be sacrificed.

But there is another dimension that we must protect despite white corruption of it. Black theology cannot reject the future reality of life after death—grounded in Christ's resurrection— simply because whites have distorted it for their own selfish purposes. That would be like the Black Art Movement, rejecting art because white artists have misused it. What is needed is redefinition in the light of the liberation of the black community.

If God is truly the God of and for the oppressed for the purpose of their liberation, then the future must mean that our fight for freedom has not been for naught. Our journey in the world cannot be a meaningless thrust toward an unrealizable future, but a certainty grounded in the past and present reality of God. To grasp for the future of God is to know that those who die for freedom have not died in vain; they will see the kingdom of God. This is precisely the meaning of our Lord's resurrection, and why we can fight against overwhelming odds. We believe in the future of God, a future that must become present.

Without a meaningful analysis of the future, all is despair. The guns, atomic power, police departments, and every conceivable weapon of destruction are in the hands of the enemy. By these standards, all seems lost.

But there is another way of evaluating history; it involves the kind of perspective that enables blacks to say no in spite of the military power of their oppressors. If we really believe that death is not the last word, then we can fight, risking death for human freedom, knowing that the ultimate destiny of humankind is in the hands of the God who has called us into being. We do not have to worry about death if we know that it has been conquered and that as an enemy it has no efficacy. Christ's death and resurrection have set us free. Therefore it does not matter that whites have all the guns and that, militarily speaking, we have no chance of winning. *There comes a time when a people must protect their own, and for blacks the time is now.*



One last comment. The future is still the future. This means that black theology rejects elaborate speculations about the end. It is just this kind of speculation that led blacks to stake their whole existence on heaven—the scene of the whole company of the faithful with their long white robes. Too much of this talk is not good for the revolution. Black theology believes that the future is God's future, as are the past and present. Our past knowledge and present encounter with God ground our confidence that the future will be both like and unlike the present—like the present in the encounter with God, and unlike it in the fullness of liberation as a reality.