Part I

Introduction

1 General introduction

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Black theology of liberation interweaves three related experiences. "Theology" signifies the long tradition of the various forms of Christianity beginning with the life of Jesus in, what we today call, northeast Africa or west Asia. "Liberation" designates the specific mission of Jesus the Anointed One on earth; that is to say, liberation of oppressed communities to attain power and wealth. And "black" means the multiple manifestations of black people's socially constructed worldviews, aesthetics, and identities. In brief, black theology of liberation answers the question: how does Jesus' Gospel of liberation throughout the Christian tradition reveal itself in black culture? Ultimately, arising out of the particularity of the black experience, the goal is to help craft healthy communities and healthy individuals throughout the world.

Rooted in the Christian tradition, following the path of Jesus, and affirming black culture, black theology of liberation derives from both modern and contemporary contexts.

THE MODERN CONTEXT

By "modern context" we mean the historic encounter between European missionaries, merchants, and military, on the one hand, and the indigenous family structures of the darker-skinned communities of the globe (i.e., the greater part of the world), on the other. Bold European explorations made contact with what would later become Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Latin America, and the Pacific Islands. Depicting these diverse regions as qualitatively different, Europe then forged itself into a normative cartography called "Europe." The modern context solidified many European nation-states while colonizing, removing wealth from, and stifling the cultural growth of the rest of the world.

For example, we can symbolically, if not substantively, specify 1441 as the beginning of, perhaps, the largest displacement, forced migration, and genocide in human history – the European Christian slave trade in

Africa. In 1441, the first group of Africans were taken from the West African coast bound for the Christian land of Portugal. Upon the ship's return to its home port, the Africans were given as trinkets to Prince Henry, sovereign of a Christian country. Portugal, indeed, held the first slave auction in 1444.

Subsequently other Catholic states (such as Spain and France) and Protestant countries (such as England and Holland) joined in the physical hunt for the sale of black skins. Consequently, popes blessed the European slave trade and both Catholic and Protestant clergy accompanied the slave vessels that went forth to do the work of Jesus in Africa.

And then, of course, 1492 expresses the paradigmatic marker of modernity. Precisely in the 1492 rise of European modernity, we see the confluence of Columbus, the European Christian church, and African slavery. Even before the historic voyage of 1492, a papal bull issued in 1455 commended Prince Henry of Portugal "for his devotion and apostolic zeal in spreading the name of Christ." At the same time, this decree gave the Prince "authorization to conquer and possess distant lands and their wealth."[1] Here a pattern was set that was to undergird Columbus' voyage as well as that of every other European slave ship on the way to the west coast of Africa.

Indeed, a brief look at the commission received by Christopher Columbus prior to his first trip reveals the European mindset toward non-European peoples and their lands. On April 30, 1492, Spain's King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella wrote:

> For as much as you, Christopher Columbus, are going by our command, with some of our vessels and men, to discover and subdue some Islands and Continent in the ocean, and it is hoped that by God's assistance, some of the said Islands and Continent in the ocean will be discovered and conquered by your means and conduct, therefore it is but just and reasonable, that since you expose yourself to such danger to serve us, you should be rewarded for it.[2]

In this commissioning, we have the joining of several factors. First, Columbus does not venture forth as a solitary voyager. He is authorized by the state, the highest authority in the civil and political realm. Furthermore, his charge is by definition to discover, conquer, and subdue foreign lands. And very importantly, given this definition and the will of the state represented by Columbus, God would assist the victory of European peoples over non-European populations.

What is the reward offered to Columbus for his labors? Ferdinand and Isabella continue:

> Our will is, That you, Christopher Columbus, after discovering and conquering the said Islands and Continent in the said ocean, or any of them, shall be our Admiral of the said Islands and Continent you shall so discover and conquer … You and your Lieutenants shall conquer and freely decide all causes, civil and criminal … and that you have power to punish offenders.[3]

Thus he receives personal titles of nobility and, with "God's assistance," the authority to decide and punish any persons who would disobey his command. With this commission in hand, Columbus set forth on August 3, 1492. He wrote in his journal that the inhabitants of the New World would make good Christians and "good servants" for Spain. When Portugal protested this commission to Columbus, the arbitration of this territorial dispute fell not to an international tribunal of lawyers or heads of state but only to the European Christian church.

On May 4, 1493, Pope Alexander VI issued a papal bull in Spain's favor. In it, the pope first acknowledged Columbus, who "with divine aid and with the utmost diligence sailing in the ocean sea, discovered certain very remote islands and even mainlands." Regarding Ferdinand and Isabella, the pope wrote:

> And in order that you may enter upon so great an undertaking with greater readiness and heartiness endowed with the benefit of our apostolic favor, we, of our own accord, not at your instance nor the request of anyone else in your regard, but out of our own sole largess and certain knowledge and out of the fullness of our apostolic power, by the authority of Almighty God conferred upon us in blessed Peter and of the vicarship of Jesus Christ … should any of said islands have been found by your envoys and captains, give, grant, and assign to you and your heirs and successors … forever together with all their dominions, cities, camps, places, and villages, and all rights, jurisdiction … all islands and mainlands found and to be found.[4]

From the European church's perspective, at the dawn of modernity, clearly, conquering and subduing are a corollary to the act of discovering foreign territory and peoples. Moreover, as theological justification, the pope draws on the authority of "Almighty God," the "vicarship of Jesus Christ," the tradition of "apostolic power," and the premier role of Peter. This gets at the heart of the modern context for the subsequent

rise of black theology of liberation. Certain elements of European power (a trinitarian alliance of Christianity, the state, and world discovery) were compelled to ape their God or justify their attempts at economic, cultural, and spiritual domination of the earth's darker-skinned peoples. The impulse is one of normative claims rationally leading to spreading the Cross and culture to black people. This sector of modern European power would tell dark-skinned peoples what they could believe and what they could think about their beliefs.

The papal bull closes with these words:

> Let no one therefore infringe, or with rash boldness contravene, this our recommendation, exhortation, requisition, gift, grant, assignment, constitution, deputation, decree, mandate, prohibition, and will. Should anyone presume to attempt this, be it known to him that he will incur the wrath of Almighty God and of the blessed apostles Peter and Paul.[5]

The European Christian slave trade of the fifteenth to nineteenth centuries (that is, from 1441 to 1888, when slavery was abolished in Brazil) in West Africa forever disrupted the balance of material resources in world history. West African (and North American, Brazilian, Jamaican, and Cuban) black labor (through cotton and other commodities) coupled with European Christian appropriation of Africa's raw materials built the British and North American industrial revolutions and facilitated their concomitant technological innovations.[6] And, in the long view of history, the foundation of North America's superpower emergence was laid by taking the indigenous people's land and eliminating human populations to near extinction.

And after 400 years of legal chattels, it is no accident that the nineteenth-century legal end of European Christian, international slavery was followed by the 1884–85 Berlin Conference. Here, Western European powers (with the American government's knowledge) carved up those African land areas to be colonized by European countries. Before this conference, a map of Africa reflected vast land areas with somewhat fluid boundaries. After Berlin, the African map was redrawn with color-coded countries created and controlled by European nations. By 1902, European powers controlled, at least, 90 percent of the entire continent. While a fruitful harvest of wealth transfer from Africa and other parts of the world to Europe and North America was being reaped, the reverse happened with regard to religions. Because of the consolidation of European modernity's global expansion by the late 1890s, it is no accident that Western powers regarded the nineteenth century as one of the high points of their

Christian missionary activity. With the military and merchants securing the beachhead, missionaries followed closely behind. Sometimes they accompanied the armies and the business sectors. The West took the wealth of the rest and exchanged it for their Cross of Jesus.

Again, Africa fell to immense material and human resources transfer and Christian missionary activity. The development of Western modernity led to the underdevelopment of the continent. And, at the same time, the nineteenth century saw an onslaught of ideological attacks on the natural and God-given humanity of Africans and the global dark-skinned diaspora. The nineteenth-century European creation of the racial theories of the "science of man," and the disciplines of anthropology, philosophy, and missiology, to name only a few, heralded two plumb-line questions in the theoretical and religious imagination of some major European thinkers.[7] Are Africans and the darker-skinned global peoples (1) naturally human and (2) created in the Christian God's image? The first query points to a scientific matter; the second to theology.

The questioning of biological evidence's particularity and the Genesis narrative's universality not only hounded the "being-human" status of Africa and its internationalized descendants. We find questioning of the humanity of darker-skinned people throughout the earth. For instance, the 1770 voyage of British explorer, navigator, and cartographer James Cook marked the first European contact with the eastern coast of Australia. He was also the first European to see the Hawaiian people in 1778. Those daring trips brought Europe into close contact with what Cook cited in his diary as people of very dark or black color.[8] Eventually, Britain colonized the indigenous people of Australia, and US missionaries and entrepreneurs overthrew the internationally recognized kingdom of Hawaii.

And so the questions of whether black people were human since they lacked what Europeans called a civilized culture and whether they were capable of having an authentic religious faith endured throughout modernity, throughout the world. Any group of animals can have a culture, but was it human culture? Any group of people can worship all kinds of things, but was it Christian worship? Could they be black (i.e., remain faithful to their indigenousness) and religious (i.e., as defined by European Christians)?

CONTEMPORARY CONTEXT

The contemporary context provides the second major backdrop for the rise of today's black theology of liberation. Key to this theological

context was the first written statement by black pastors on Jesus, power, and the church. Published in the *New York Times*, this "Black Power" document of July 31, 1966 did not, however, fall from the sky as if by magic. Rather, within the political, cultural, and religious dynamics of the 1950s and 1960s, we encounter direct incentives for the emergence of the July declaration penned by African American clergy. This public statement stands for the exact beginning of the emergence of contemporary black theology of liberation.

The civil rights movement (1955 to late 1960s), known globally because of the Baptist preacher and theologian Martin Luther King, Jr., comes as the first incentive. The Revd. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. combined black slave theology (that God is justice, protest, and freedom), national liberation movements (the initiative of underdeveloped countries toward self-determination), Gandhian nonviolence (thus expressing solidarity with the world's darker-skinned people), and the lofty ideals of the US Constitution and Declaration of Independence (concerning the rights of modern citizens).

King's theology and African American church practice were new. They made the fight for freedom the defining objective of Christianity and called upon faith communities to actively change the world, even at the risk of physical harm. Consequently, Americans could not call themselves Christian if they violated the full humanity of other human beings. This was a revolutionary change from the prevailing American Christianity that had promoted, in the main, the ideology of profit and individualism. King's life was emblematic of the civil rights movement, from the moment of his December 5, 1955, elected leadership of the Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott against legal segregation to his assassination on April 4, 1968 in Memphis, Tennessee. At the end, King interpreted the life of Jesus as liberation of the poor and the oppressed. Demonstrable evidence for this claim exists in his final twin goals: supporting the black working class in Memphis, Tennessee, and organizing a multiracial poor people's campaign to camp out in Washington, DC, with the explicit purpose of disrupting the national government.

The appearance of Black Power (on June 16, 1966), symbolized as the resurrection of Malcolm X's thought after his February 1965 murder, constituted the second incentive for the emerging black theology. While the civil rights initiatives linked Christianity with justice and church militancy, the black power movement situated the cultural identity of blackness at the center of any real justice for African Americans. That meant the right of self-identity: the right to name one's black and African self independent of white control; and the right of

self-determination: to control black communities unhindered by white power. Unlike the civil rights effort's limited terrain, black power swept every region of the country and affected every quarter of the African American community.

A third contemporary incentive for the rise of today's black theology of liberation was the publication of Joseph R. Washington's book *Black Religion* in 1964. Civil rights and black power movements came from the streets. Washington's theoretical argument, in contrast, surrounded itself in the sanctity of the hallowed halls of the academy. Moreover, he was an African American religious leader who emerged out of the black church. This insider argued as follows. Because of segregation, white churches were the authentic inheritors of the Christian tradition from Europe. White religion was genuine because they had faith in Jesus Christ. Linked as they were to the correct tradition with faith in the correct object meant that white believers had the capacity to renew their belief and practice by comparing contemporary living with the tradition and the founder. White theology, therefore, entailed reflecting critically on tradition and faith in Jesus.

Segregation produced the opposite effect for black communities. Outside of authentic white churches, and white Christian tradition, black churches, furthermore, had "belief." Belief meant belief in anything, including justice for the poor. But, for Washington, the Christian word "faith" had a limited and singular meaning – faith in Jesus Christ. If black people did not have authentic churches (as a result of segregation, which meant separation from white worshippers) or an authentic lineage to Christianity through European churches, and they had no faith in Jesus Christ (in contrast to a generic belief in anything), then blacks did not have a theology. Again, theology is critical reflection by a community on their relation to their faith in Jesus as this community exists in an authentic church connected to the European church traditions. Hence, the direct challenge became – no such thing as a black theology existed. Understandably, part of the incentive for the rise of contemporary black theology of liberation, at least on the academic front, was a refutation of Joseph Washington's thesis of denial.

Washington wrote specifically for the 1960s US Christian community. Yet the logic of his argument elevating "true" white and European Christianity and subordinating indigenous folk religions revealed the same negative global attitudes that helped give rise to other black theologies and other forms of progressive theologies from the earth's darker-skinned peoples.

However, the incentives of the civil rights and black power movements outside of the academy and Joseph Washington's book from the academy existed within larger global and historical currents. Black theology, a pioneering liberation theology indigenous to the USA, started in the global context of a shift in world order, particularly after World War II – the second major violent conflict on European soil in the contemporary era. A combination of international and domestic factors came together to provide the backdrop for the origin of black theology in the mid 1960s. Black theology did not descend willy-nilly from the heavens but burst onto the North American domestic scene (and globally) through a combination of local and international influences.

For instance, the post-World War II era positioned the US government and its monopoly corporations as the undisputed champions of capitalism and American-style democracy in the non-communist world. The war's end also had an immediate effect on 1950s black civil rights efforts in the southeastern United States. Black Americans supported this seductive ideology of liberation from fascism and communism. These systems were based on either racial superiority (such as Nazism) or human rights violations (owing to state dominance). If the world's greatest government had stopped Hitler's blitzkriegs and fought to make the world safe for democracy, then surely this same government would soon resurrect its own black citizens from the death of racial apartheid at home.

The rhetoric and worldview championed by North American power structures abroad were taken very seriously by African Americans fighting against white supremacy and voting discrimination at home. But when black soldiers came back home, reality soon set in. Blacks began asking how the US government, which apparently seemed so sympathetic to people millions of miles away, could neglect, if not oppress, its own black citizens – many of whom lived a stone's throw from the White House in Washington, DC. And so an evolving postwar debate about freedom, democracy, and equality helped give rise to the civil rights movement.

Indeed, talk of a better world did help start the African American mass efforts for justice. But so too did the concrete reality of the numbers of black Americans who fought abroad against Nazism and biological supremacy; it made a deep imprint on the historical experience of collective black America. African American GIs returning from tours of duty after World War II and the Korean War had accumulated firsthand knowledge of the world, especially about racial relations. They learned that it was possible for white working-class youth from Mississippi (Ku