

Comprehensive Examination #3

Liberation Theology Method:

Black Theology and American Indian Theology

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Some introductory remarks are in order before I address myself to the three questions I have selected for this examination. Regarding terminology, I will use the terms "black" and "African American" interchangeably, and I will do the same with the terms "American Indian" and "Native American." I consider terms like "theology" and "religion" to be heavily loaded with specific cultural presuppositions related to the history of the Judeo-Christian tradition in Western society. I take "theology" to imply a particularly Christian understanding of this category, so that the term "Christian theology" is largely redundant. Though "religion" is not value-free either, I consider it to be less problematic, so that what might be referred to in Christian terms as theology I will describe as religious thought or discourse in other traditions. The terms "Black Theology" and "American Indian Theology" thus refer to specifically Christian thought and discourse, in a self-conscious and intentional sense, though (as we will see) this is not all they refer to.

This examination takes a comparative approach to the study of Black Theology (BT) and American Indian Theology

(AIT) in the U.S.A. While the historical experiences involved have much in common, considering these two expressions of theology is affected by several critical differences. BT is a well-established movement or school of thought that is propagated by black theologians with doctorates in systematic theology who publish articles and books on a regular basis and who engage in debates both among themselves and with mainstream (white) Christianity. AIT is an emerging trend among a very limited number of Native American theologians (only one of whom has an earned doctorate in any theological discipline) who have published only articles (so far) and who engage in little or no internal debate. With these comments in mind, let us proceed.

James Cone, the leading black theologian in the U.S.A., defines the task of theology as the explication of the meaning of the gospel from the perspective of black people who have been oppressed by virtue of their race. Discuss the methodology of American Indian Theology in the light of the methodological choices that James Cone and other black theologians have had to make. Compare and contrast the methodological similarities and differences that distinguish Black Theology (U.S.A.) and American Indian Theology.

James Cone's Black Theology and Black Power marked the methodological break that he and other black theologians made with respect to the dominant theological tradition among white academic Christians. This new understanding of Christian theology emerged simultaneously with, but independent from, the pioneering work of Gustavo Gutierrez and his A Theology of Liberation; while Gutierrez and other Latin American theologians wrote about the meaning of the Christian message in the Latin American context of class oppression, BT sought to understand its meaning in the context of racist white society. Cone's early work was concerned with problems of the context, method, audience, and purpose of theological discourse. He wrote at a time when the Civil Rights movement, the Black Power movement, and the black urban rebellions defined the mood of American society. His work was also a response to Joseph Washington's interpretation of the black religious experience, in an attempt to recover the prophetic, liberating message of what Peter Paris calls the black Christian tradition.

Cone enumerated six sources for BT in his second book, A Black Theology of Liberation: black experience, black culture, black history, revelation, scripture, and tradition. He thus aligned himself with the orthodox roots of the Christian tradition while also placing important emphasis on the other side of the equation, black identity. These sources were elaborated on and expanded upon in later works. Cone's concern with the norm of his system--how these sources are to be utilized and interpreted--is more problematic. He uses terms like "starting point," "point of departure," and "center" to describe several different norms: the black experience, Jesus Christ, and scripture. It would seem that the systematic basis of BT is a problem more complex than merely identifying a concise list of sources and a single, authoritative norm.

In order to understand the methodological choices made by Cone, J. Deotis Roberts and other black theologians, as well as by Native American theologians, I will discuss their work with respect to four specific methodological issues: the nature of theological discourse, theology as contextual, the theme of liberation, and the role of Jesus Christ. I will outline the position of Cone, show how Roberts and others have responded to his pioneering work, and then bring the perspectives of AIT into the dialogue.

Cone made the decision early in his career that he would confront white theologians in language they would

understand while attempting a radical critique of their interpretation of the Christian faith. He thus worked as a systematic theologian, and while Black Theology and Black Power is more prolegomena than theology proper, A Black Theology of Liberation is clearly a systematic work. While Cone established his sympathy for the Black Power perspective, he also drew from the giants of twentieth-century Protestant theology (Karl Barth, Paul Tillich, Reinhold Niebuhr, etc.) to ground his theological arguments. At the same time, he attempted a wide-ranging critique of the racist nature of white Christianity and society, and herein lies some of the tension in his theological methodology. While issuing a social and ideological challenge to white theologians, he ran the risk of compromising his stance by relying on their (ideologically-based) methods and categories.

Cone chose the black experience as the authentic ground for BT, and went on to argue that all theology is contextual. In the context of American society, Cone proposed that race has the importance of a theological category, insofar as religious identity in the U.S.A. is a function of race. In God of the Oppressed Cone discussed this problem at length, arguing for the social, biographical basis of all theology and demonstrating that this human reality is analogous to God's active role in human history. In taking the theme of liberation as the dominant motif in

Christian theology, Cone demonstrated his commitment to a praxis orientation toward the Christian message. Christian faith is not concerned with spiritualized, eschatological possibilities so much as it is with the real struggle of oppressed humanity. Another level of liberation was implied in Cone's work, in that he raised the question of (what Charles Long has called) signification by suggesting that black Christians have the right and the responsibility to formulate their own theological understanding of their faith.

Cone was not far from Albert Cleage's understanding of the Black Messiah when Cone proclaimed that "Christ is black, baby." Cone's early work was thoroughly Christocentric, and he argued that the black religious experience is specifically Christian. Christian identity for Cone is not so much committing oneself to some notion of a personalized, spiritual life as it is recognizing the living presence of Jesus as the black Christ and participating in God's liberating, contextual activity in human history.

Roberts responded to Cone's early work in his Liberation and Reconciliation and A Black Political Theology. He consistently assumed a mediating or moderating position with respect to Cone's perspective, which Roberts believed to be too radical or militant on several points. In contrast to Roberts, other black theologians and scholars

have participated in the debate with even more radical critiques of Cone's theological method.

Roberts shared Cone's commitment to a systematic framework for theological discourse, and the chapter topics for Liberation and Reconciliation and A Black Political Theology demonstrate this. But where Cone's discussion emphasized the kind of rational, formalized style common to white theologians, Roberts' work reads in a more anecdotal, narrative style. He made use of a personal, experiential approach to the theological task that seems to indicate a desire to avoid rigid Western forms of argumentation. Long went beyond both Cone and Roberts and argued that the very categories and discursive style of theology is alien to the black experience and that black theologians should be looking for some alternative form.

Roberts was also concerned that Cone's emphases on contextuality and liberation were extreme and incomplete. Along with the particular, Roberts talked about the universal dimensions of the Christian message, and along with liberation he wanted to include reconciliation. There are obvious tensions inherent to both these dialectical pairs, tensions which become particularly evident when they are taken from an abstract level and applied to real problems like movement strategy (Roberts' confusing attempt to explicate the relationship between liberation and reconciliation is a good example). Both Cone and Roberts

have been challenged on these points by several scholars. Womanists like Jacquelyn Grant have questioned the sexist nature of BT and thereby pointed out that BT as articulated by male black theologians is not contextual (particular) enough. William Jones pointed out the multievidentiality of suffering and the inconsistencies in the ways in which black theologians employ the biblical liberation paradigm. Gayraud Wilmore has issued a broad challenge to the whole project of BT by pointing out that it has failed to speak to the black churches (liberation as signification) or to generate a mass movement (liberation as praxis).

Lastly, Roberts found Cone's Christocentric stance as too extreme and argued that Jesus Christ is the norm but not the limit of revelation. He qualified the concept of the black Christ by suggesting it is merely a "psychocultural resource" in the struggle for liberation. Cecil Cone issued an implied critique of all Christocentric talk when he argued that the only theological point of departure appropriate for the black religious experience is the conversion encounter with the Almighty Sovereign God, a theological tradition of the black churches which grew out of the synthesis of African traditional religion and biblical Christianity.

Native American theologians have addressed many of the concerns of BT, with some similarities and some important differences. Several Native American theologians, including

James West and Bill Baldrige, have pointed out that theology as a systematic discipline is alien to the Native American cultural experience. Most Native American theologians have addressed this problem by opting for an approach to theological discourse that emphasizes the importance of story, both personal/experiential and cultural/traditional. West, Baldrige, and George Tinker all have oriented their theological writing around stories which ground the Native American religious experience. Native American theologians have also issued an implicit critique of white religion by drawing attention to the problem of religious colonialism in Native American communities, colonialism expressed through the lack of autonomy and indigenous leadership in Native American churches.

The contextual nature of theology is evident in the fact that Native American theologians write in relationship to the cultural revival still affecting Native American communities. Where race assumes the status of a theological category in BT, Native American theologians who have been oppressed by virtue of their indigeneity are understandably concerned with the land and their relationship to it. Not just racist society, then, but the land as well become the context for theological discourse. Native American theologians are reluctant to use the term liberation because the Exodus paradigm is problematic, though liberation

concerns are central to their work. But while BT is primarily concerned with liberation as praxis, with signification assuming an important secondary role, AIT reverses this order and emphasizes the priority of finding ways for Native Americans to speak for themselves. Central to this agenda are the realities of religious pluralism and religious oppression in Native American communities. When Native American theologians do talk about theology as critical reflection on praxis, this praxis has first of all to do with establishing a climate of religious unity and freedom for all people in Native American communities.

AIT differs with BT most significantly on the question of its Christocentric focus. For Native American theologians, Jesus Christ is neither the limit nor the norm of revelation, and the conversion experience is not a criteria for religious identity. After centuries of denigration and manipulation by Christian missionaries, Native American theologians have issued a "Nein!" to both Barth and the churches. Creation constitutes the foundation of AIT, a theological position that Tinker argues is also the historic position of the Christian faith. Writing on "creation theology" from a Native American perspective, Tinker analyzes the trinitarian confession of the early church creeds and argues that a theology of creation (first article) is more "Christian" than a theology of redemption (second article). He goes on to demonstrate the connection

between a theology of creation and liberating praxis in society. The proper prioritizing for a Christian ethic is this: the integrity of creation, social justice, peace.

The key to understanding Black Theology is the theological method of correlating texts. Explain this statement and indicate whether you believe this also applies to American Indian Theology. In addition, explain the process whereby specific criteria are evolved to support the method of correlating texts.

Cone refers to the concept of correlating texts in A Black Theology of Liberation, and this methodology is implicit in much of BT. In a chapter on the sources and norms of Christian theology, Cone contrasts the work of Tillich and Barth. Whereas Barth emphasized the role of revelation in what Cone describes as a kerygmatic theology, Tillich stressed the importance of relevance in what Cone calls an apologetic theology. Though Cone does not specifically endorse Tillich's methodology here, it is clear that he believes it to be more valuable for BT, and in the 1986 preface to A Black Theology of Liberation Cone specifically rejects Barth's methodology.

Tillich outlined his "method of correlation" in his seminal work Systematic Theology. The role of the theologian is to acknowledge both the Christian message and the contemporary situation and to place them in dialogue with each other. The situation asks the questions, the message provides the answers, and both questions and answers are formulated in a continuous dialectic of interdependence. Tillich called for "existential analysis" of the situation, so that the theologian might best understand what questions

are actually being asked. Thus the hallmark of Tillich's system is the need for relevance.

Cone developed specific criteria for evaluating the relevance of theological discourse by emphasizing two dimensions of the black experience: the oppressive experience of racist white society and the liberating experience of Jesus Christ in the midst of this struggle. While employing the rudiments of Tillich's system, Cone also departed from it in important ways; these differences are evident in their stated choices of a theological norm. For Tillich, the norm of theology is "the New Being in Jesus as the Christ," while for Cone it is "the manifestation of Jesus as the black Christ who provides the necessary soul for black liberation." Tillich focuses on the existential dimension of a generalized, undefined Christ, while Cone draws attention to the living, particular, and liberating presence of God in history.

Both Tillich and Cone would acknowledge that the bible is just one of several "texts" that must be correlated with the contemporary situation; Christian history and tradition are other important aspects of the problem. Both would also acknowledge, however, that scripture is a central if not primary source for Christian theology. I will now turn to the consideration of several hermeneutical issues raised by a comparative approach to BT and AIT.

Cain Felder has provided a survey of biblical hermeneutics in BT and in the black churches in his Troubling Biblical Waters and in a collection of essays which he edited, Stony the Path We Trod. The various issues he addresses can be considered in two main categories: blacks in the bible (and biblical history) and black use of the bible. Focussing attention on blacks in the bible can be seen as a type of prolegomena to the development of a black hermeneutic, particularly in light of white biblical scholars' marginalization of the black presence. Felder outlines the main issues in this revisionist interpretation of biblical history, with relation to blacks in ancient Egypt and Ethiopia, in the Hebrew scriptures and among the people of Israel, in the Christian scriptures and Palestine, and in the early church. Black use of the bible then develops out of this process, through demonstrating the continuity between biblical history and the black religious experience. As Felder points out, black Christians have been drawn to biblical texts through "experiential sympathy"; they see in the bible their own experience of oppression and liberation. The end goal of black biblical studies is to demonstrate the black connection with, in Felder's words, "the salvation drama of ancient Israel."

Several problems are immediately apparent if we attempt to apply Felder's criteria to the Native American experience. Simply put, Native Americans are completely

absent from the bible and biblical history, and the most obvious place for Native Americans to see their own experience in the bible is not in the Exodus but in the underside of the Exodus. I will examine three specific issues raised by the idea of a Native American biblical hermeneutic.

The work of Gotthold Lessing is relevant in discussing the absence of Native Americans from biblical history. As an Enlightenment thinker writing on the problem of historical particularity and relativity, Lessing argued that there is an "ugly broad ditch" between the time of Christ and today. He asserted that "the accidental truths of history can never be the proof of the necessary truths of reason," that the "scandal of particularity" of Jesus as a first-century Jewish man made any talk of universal revelation problematic. In light of black biblical scholars' effort to recover the black role in salvation history, how does this project relate to the history of the Western hemisphere? Even if one accepts the Bering Strait migration theory, the last migrations took place long before Abram was born. To paraphrase Augustine, what does the Fertile Crescent have to do with Turtle Island? If it is important that blacks (or whites) be recognized as part of the biblical story of salvation history, then it is also significant that Native Americans are unquestionably excluded from that history, and a situation of inherent

inequity exists. The options available for resolving this dilemma are limited. If we preserve biblical salvation history, inequality results. If we preserve the notion that God favors all people equally, then the "salvation history" of the bible must be interpreted as a spiritual, ahistorical reality. If we wish to preserve an equitable, historically active God, we must opt for a completely non-exclusive understanding of revelation and history.

Robert Allen Warrior pointed out the obvious similarities between the Native American and the Canaanite experiences, what I have called "the Canaanite Problem" (after one of the white liberals' favorite pet projects, "the Indian Problem"). Since Native Americans' "experiential sympathy" lies with the Canaanites on the underside of the Exodus, serious questions are raised about the nature of the biblical God with respect to indigenous peoples anywhere. Baldrige responds to this dilemma by pointing to Jesus' encounter with the Canaanite woman (Matthew 15), and suggests that the best option for Native American Christians lies in the hope that just as Jesus was converted by this woman, so can Native Americans convert the God of Jesus to acknowledge their value. Warrior responds to Baldrige that even so, Native Americans are consigned to a second-class role in the kingdom of God, forced to constantly assert their very humanity, and that Warrior prefers to look elsewhere for religious identity. These two

positions seem to be the primary options available in addressing the Canaanite Problem. But Warrior's original insight raises other questions regarding the biblical hermeneutic of BT and other liberation theologies. Juan Segundo described the hermeneutical circle in the following way: a new experience of reality leads to ideological suspicion; applied to the theological superstructure, this suspicion produces a new experience of theology; this in turn leads to exegetical suspicion and a new biblical hermeneutic, which can produce a new experience of reality, and the circle continues. But why have black theologians and virtually all others accepted Israel's telling of salvation history? Where is the exegetical suspicion that Gutierrez and his colleagues say has allowed for a new vision of liberation from oppression? Why does no one acknowledge the (divinely ordained?) genocide of the Canaanites? To paraphrase Black Elk, the sacred hermeneutical circle is broken.

So then, in light of Lessing's ditch and the Bering Strait, in light of the Canaanite Problem, how do Native American theologians engage in a method of correlation that meets the criteria of relevance? The questions raised by the contemporary situation revolve around the land and its importance to survival and freedom. Land is the center for identity; the specificity of the natural environment is inextricably related to the contours of Native American

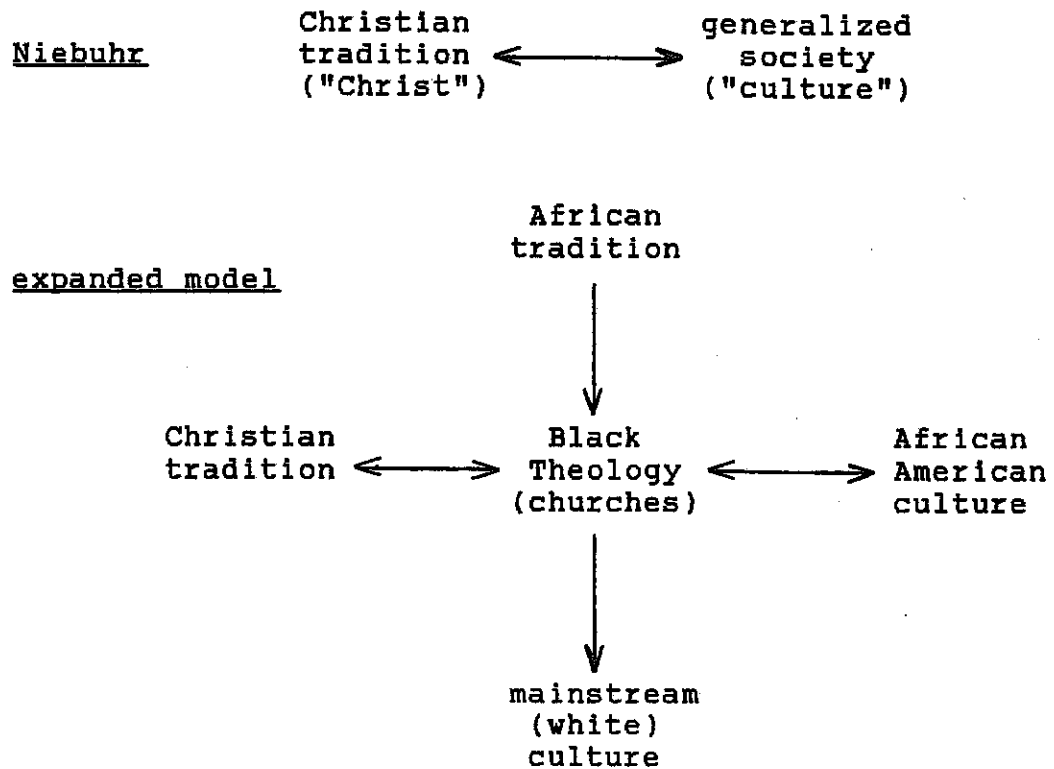
culture. Land is the means of survival for communities that depend on its resources for life and health. Land is the foundation for relationships, and Tinker's approach to the integrity of creation demonstrates how a theology of creation relates to ethics. And land is the source of religious faith, insofar as the sacred character of land brings together stories, medicines, and ceremonies. If land is the question, then it is understandable that Native American theologians emphasize the biblical tradition of God as creator and of humans related to and dependent on creation.

Discuss Black Theology (U.S.A.) and American Indian Theology and their understanding of the relationship between faith and culture, showing how this problem illuminates specific issues that both movements address.*

H. Richard Niebuhr provided the classic formulation of the problem of "Christ and culture." He suggested that the relationship between revelation and reason, between church and state, between religious faith and cultural identity is an enduring problem of Christian history. He argued that Christianity has moved between the poles of Christ and culture, with different groups emphasizing different extremes at different points in history.

In God of the Oppressed Cone referred to Niebuhr's conceptualization as a valuable model, but also pointed out that Niebuhr's understanding of "culture" is over-generalized and over-simplified. American society is best understood as a complex of cultures in conflictual relationship to one another. In light of Cone's critique, it is clear that we need an expanded model for understanding the relationship between faith and culture; I suggest the following:

*I have changed the wording of this question from considering "the relationship between Christ and culture" to "faith and culture" because I believe this phraseology provides a more appropriate conceptual framework, particularly with regard to the perspectives of AIT.



This model could be elaborated further, but this much seems useful in understanding the distinct cultural traditions which black theologians must interact with.

Black theologians interact with African tradition through the appropriation of a contemporary culture which represents a link with the cultural heritage of African Americans. As a community in diaspora, African Americans have a historical identity distinct from the African identity of black people in Africa. Cone and Roberts have voiced their affirmation of the African heritage, but both assert that black religion is specifically Christian and have not incorporated African traditional religions into their theological work. Black theologians' relationship to

contemporary African American culture is more complex, primarily because the black churches have been the primary institutional basis for the survival of African American culture. On the one hand, black theologians are faced with the need to affirm blackness in all its dimensions, in the context of a white racist society which denigrates black people on the basis of race. This effort is evidenced in the debate over "Africanisms" with respect to the nature of the black religious experience. On the other hand, black theologians must address real and pressing problems in the black community--the crisis of the family, the declining influence of the black churches, the question of movement strategy--in a way that is at times prophetic and self-critical. Black theologians' interaction with mainstream culture is largely one of critique, directed at both white religion and white society, as has already been discussed.

Native American theologians also face the faith-and-culture dilemma on three fronts, though with important differences. Native Americans are not a community in diaspora--there is no community "over there" from whom to recover cultural traditions for use "right here." Thus the distinctions between Native American tradition and Native American contemporary culture become blurred, if not nonexistent. Native American theologians who are working to recover their religious heritage face troubling questions of signification, since almost all of the available historical

documents are the product of white scholarship, scholarship which claims objectivity but which has ever worked in the service of an invading colonial culture. The absence of an independent Native American Christian tradition also has important implications for AIT. Tinker makes no effort to interpret the theological perspectives of Native American Christians in colonial missionary churches, but goes directly to Native American traditional religions, both in the literature and in the community. The Native American cultural revival has far-reaching ramifications for AIT as well; what appears to be an increasingly religious definition of Native American identity will mean that the very idea of a Native American Christian faith will become more and more alien to the experience of many Native Americans. Lastly, religious pluralism and multiple religious participation in Native American communities will continue to make it difficult to distinguish a specifically Christian identity among people for whom religious identity is inclusive rather than exclusive.