

Unfortunately not only white seminary professors but some blacks as well have convinced themselves that only the white experience provides the appropriate context for questions and answers concerning things divine. They do not recognize the narrowness of their experience and the particularity of their theological expressions. They like to think of themselves as *universal* people. That is why most seminaries emphasize the need for appropriate *tools* in doing theology, which always means *white* tools, i.e., knowledge of the language and thought of white people. They fail to recognize that other people also have thought about God and have something significant to say about Jesus' presence in the world.

My point is that one's social and historical context decides not only the questions we address to God but also the mode or form of the answers given to the questions. That is the central thesis of this book. And I intend to illustrate it through selected theological themes, with particular reference to the contrasting ways that black and white people think about God.

CHAPTER 2

Speaking the Truth

Speak the truth to the people
Talk sense to the people
Free them with reason
Free them with honesty
Free the people with Love and Courage and Care for their
being. . . .¹

Black theologians are living in a period in which we must investigate anew "the problem of the color-line," as that problem is reflected in the social existence of African peoples. We cannot afford to do theology unrelated to human existence. We cannot be "objective," but must recognize, with Imamu Baraka, that "there is no objective anything"²—least of all theology. Our theology must emerge consciously from an investigation of the socioreligious experience of black people, as that experience is reflected in *black* stories of God's dealings with black people in the struggle of freedom. Tertullian's question, "What . . . has Athens to do with Jerusalem?"³ is not our central question. His concern was to state the primacy of faith in relation to reason on matters of theological discourse. We have another concern and thus must rephrase that question in the light of our cultural history, asking: "What has *Africa* to do with Jerusalem, and what difference does Jesus make for African people oppressed in North America?" As Gerard Bissainthe puts it:

From the despair of our cry,
The heart's intensity,
Out of death and dereliction

In the land of our uprootedness,
We shall one day give birth to our Christ,
A Christ made flesh of our flesh,
Our dark flesh of the black people.⁴

If our theological vocation emerges out of the matrix of that vision, then we will not be limited to Euro-American definitions of theology. The ecstasy of the poet's vision and the concreteness of the historical reality from which the vision is created bestow upon us a new perspective, a *black* perspective that grants free thinking in relation to our cultural history and thus enables us to hear the urgent call to speak the truth. In this context, truth is not an intellectual datum that is entrusted to academic guilds. Truth cannot be separated from the people's struggle and the hopes and dreams that arise from that struggle. Truth is that transcendent reality, disclosed in the people's historical struggle for liberation, which enables them to know that their fight for freedom is not futile. The affirmation of truth means that the freedom hoped for will be realized. Indeed, the freedom hoped for is already partly realized in our present history, because the realization of hope is the very ground of our present struggle. We do not struggle in despair but in hope, not from doubt but from faith, not out of hatred but out of love for ourselves and for humanity. And as black theologians, who have been grasped by the truth, we are accountable to black people.

What does it mean to speak the truth from a black theological perspective, that is, what are the sources and the content of theology? To explore this question we must begin by exploring the theological function of the black experience.

THE BLACK EXPERIENCE AS A SOURCE OF THEOLOGY

There is no truth for and about black people that does not emerge out of the context of their experience. Truth in this sense is black truth, a truth disclosed in the history and culture of black people. This means that there can be no Black Theology which does not take the black experience as a source for its starting point. Black Theology is a theology of and for black people, an examination of their stories, tales, and sayings. It is an investigation of the mind into the raw materials of our pilgrimage, telling the story of "how we got over." For theology to

be black, it must reflect upon what it means to be black. Black Theology must uncover the structures and forms of the black experience, because the categories of interpretation must arise out of the thought forms of the black experience itself.

What are we to make of the moan and the shout and the call to get on board the gospel train? What must we say about the song, the sermon, the prayer, and the feeling of the Spirit when the people gather for worship and praise to the One they say is "a rock in the weary land, a shelter in a mighty storm, and a stronghold in the day of trouble"?⁵

When dealing with the sermon, we must listen to the proclamation of the gospel as disclosed in the black Word. Sometimes the Word is expressed with apocalyptic imagination:

And now I leave dis thought wid you,
Standing out on de eaves of ether
Breathing clouds from out of his nostrils,
Blowing storms from 'tween his lips
I can see!!
Him seize de mighty axe of his proving power
And smite the stubborn-standing space,
And laid it wide open a mighty gash—
Making a place to hold the world
I can see him—
Molding de world out of thought and power
And whirling it out on its eternal track,
Ah hah, my strong armed God!⁶

This sermon makes clear that the Word and its proclamation in the black Church is more than the conceptualization of theological doctrine. The Word is more than *words* about God. God's Word is a poetic happening, an evocation of an indescribable reality in the lives of the people. This is the meaning behind the occasion when a black preacher "who after reading a rather cryptic passage took off his spectacles, closed the Bible with a bang and by way of preface said, 'Brothers and sisters, this morning—I intend to explain the unexplainable—find out the undefinable—ponder over the imponderable—and unscrew the inscrutable.'"⁷ Here the preacher is not only affirming his freedom in relation to the text; he is also making a sharp distinction between the *words* of the text and the

Word disclosed in the text. Black theologians must also make similar distinctions in using the sermon as a source of theology. They must not be bound to white, academic conceptualizations of the Christian gospel. If the gospel means freedom, then the freedom disclosed in that gospel must also be revealed in the event of proclamation. The preaching of the Word must itself be the embodiment of freedom. When freedom is a constituent of the language itself, then that language refuses to be bound to the limitations of categories not indigenous to its being. Possibilities are thus given for the communication of the Word that transcends intellectual concepts. In black preaching, the Word becomes embodied in the rhythm and the emotions of language as the people respond bodily to the Spirit in their midst. The black sermon arises out of the totality of the people's existence—their pain and joy, trouble and ecstasy.⁸

When the Word is spoken as truth and the people feel the presence of truth in the midst of their troublesome situation, they respond to the preached word by ratifying it with resounding "Amen." The "Amen" is the congregation's witness to, and participation in, the proclamation. It is their Yes that lets the preacher know that he or she is on the "right track," affirming that they know the truth about what is preached. At this point the Word of truth transcends conceptual analysis and becomes a liberating event wherein the people are moved to another level of existence, and they are permitted to experience a foretaste of the New Jerusalem. Because the participation of the congregation is so crucial for black preaching, the preacher often asks, "Can I get a witness?" or rhetorically says, "I don't believe you are praying with me!" These expressions are the preacher's appeal to the people to let him or her know whether divine truth is being mediated through the proclamation-event. If the people say "Amen," it is an affirmation that what they hear is a certification of the reality and truthfulness of the proclaimed word. It is the equivalent of "That's right!"

What was said about the freedom inherent in the sermon can also be said about the prayers of black people. Black prayers are not the same as white prayers. In the black perspective white folks prayed like this:

O Lahd, the first thing I want you to understand, is that it is a white man talking to you. This ain't no nigger whooping and hollering for something and then don't know what to do with it after he gets it. This is a white man talking to you, and I want

you to pay some attention. Now, in the first place, Lahd, we would like a little rain. It's been powerful dry around here, and we needs rain mighty bad. But don't come in no storm like you did last year. Come ca'm and gentle and water our crops.

And now another thing, Lahd—don't let these niggers be as sassy this coming year as they have been in the past. That's all, Lahd. Amen.⁹

When blacks prayed, they did not accept the religious outlook of the white master. To be sure, the historical situation of slavery may have forced the black person to worship with and "like" the white master, but in many subtle ways the slave transcended the limitations of servitude and affirmed a religious value system that differed from the master's. In response to a white minister, conducting a revival at a black church, "the brother in black" offered this prayer for "his brother in white."

Oh Lawd, gib him de eye ob de eagle, dat he may spy out sin afar off, weave his hands to the gospel plow, tie his tongue to de limbs ob truth, nail his ear to de South Pole. Bow his head away down between his knees, and his knees way down in some lonesome dark and narrow valley where prayer is much wanted to be made. 'Noint him wid de kerosene oil of salvation and set him on fire.¹⁰

Sometimes black people in their praying were more direct in their rejection of white people's value system. On one occasion, the white preacher, in his sermon to a black congregation, suggested that "in heaven there must be some Jim Crow partition, with the white saints on one side and the black saints on the other. And after the sermon, when one of the black deacons was called on to pray, he got his chance to reply to this white preacher; for like many praying people, the old black man knew how to talk *to* the Lord and talk *at* other people, in the same phrases. . . ." This is what he said:

And, O Lord, we thank thee fer the brother preacher who has spoke to us,—we thank thee for heaven,—we thank thee that we kin all go to heaven,—but as to that partition, O Lord, we thank thee that we'se a shoutin' people—we thank thee that we kin shout so hard in heaven that we will break down that parti-

tion an' spread all over heaven,—an' we thank thee that if the white fokes can't stand it, they can git on out of heaven an' go to elsewhere!¹¹

Here the black theologian should reflect not only upon humor as an artistic expression of black survival but also upon the Word of prayer as disclosed in the affirmation of black identity. God is the Spirit of Jesus that guides and moves the people in their struggle to be what they were created to be. God is their "Captain who never lost a battle." In prayer, sometimes, God is called the "mighty good leader," the "dying-bed maker" and the "soul's emancipator." All these phrases point to God as the living and ever present One who grants freedom for the humiliated and stands in judgment upon oppressors who attempt to destroy black dignity.

In black prayer the soul is laid bare before the Lord. All pretensions of goodness are rejected before what the people call "the throne of grace." It was a form of self-criticism not derived from the value system of white people.

You heard me when I laid at hell's dark door
With no weapon in my hand
And no God in my heart,
And I cried for three long days and nights.
You heard me, Lawd,
And stooped so low
And snatched me from the hell
Of eternal death and damnation.
You cut loose my stammerin' tongue;
You established my feet on the rock of Salvation
And yo' voice was heard in rumblin' judgment.¹²

Here is the affirmation of the gift of divine freedom and dignity in the context of religious worship.

A similar emphasis is found in the song—the spirituals, gospels and other melodious expressions of the people's struggle for freedom.¹³ The function of the song is to sing the truth as it is lived by the people.

Who found me when I was lost?
Who helped me to bear my heavy cross?

Who fixed me up, turned me 'round,
Left my feet on solid ground?
I know it was Jesus!
I know it was the Lord!

Who do you think gave sight to the blind?
Made the lame to walk
And dead men rise?
Who took the fishes and the loaves of bread
And made five hundred so all could be fed?
Oh, Jesus, Oh Lord, Jesus! My Lord!
I know it was Jesus! I know it was the Lord!

As with the sermon and prayer, the spirituals and gospel songs reveal that the truth of black religion is not limited to the literal meaning of the words. Truth is also disclosed in the movement of the language and the passion created when a song is sung in the right pitch and tonal quality. Truth is found in shout, hum, and moan as these expressions move the people closer to the source of their being. The moan, the shout, and the rhythmic bodily responses to prayer, song, and sermon are artistic projections of the pain and joy experienced in the struggle of freedom. It is the ability of black people to express the tragic side of social existence but also their refusal to be imprisoned by its limitations.

In these "churchly expressions," among others, the divine One informs and becomes present in black reality and is best defined in terms of black people's response in body and spirit to that divine source believed to be greater than themselves. If asked the theological question, "Who is God?" one black person might say: "I don't know much about him. All I know is that I was weak and God gave me strength. I was lost and God found me. I was crying and Jesus wiped away the tears from my eyes." Another might proclaim her testimony in this manner: "God is a heart-fixer and a mind-regulator. God is the One who binds the broken heart and eases the pain of the afflicted. Jesus rescued me from the gates of hell and restored my soul to his bosom." The key to the theological affirmation here is not only the verbal assent to the power of God to grant identity and liberation to an oppressed and humiliated people. Equally important is the verbal passion with which these affirmations are asserted and the physical responses they elicit from the community in which the testimony is

given. Some will shout, moan, and cry; others will walk, run, and clap their hands. Then there are those who will keep still, using silence as a sign of the presence of God in their midst. This is part of the matrix of Black Theology and the source out of which truth is given.

However, the black experience as a source of theology is more than the so-called "church experience," more than singing, praying, and preaching about Jesus, God, and the Holy Spirit. The other side of the black experience should not be rigidly defined as "secular," if by that term one means the classical Western distinction between secular and sacred, for it is not antireligious or even nonreligious. This side of the black experience is secular only to the extent that it is earthy and seldom uses God or Jesus as the chief symbols of its hopes and dreams. It is sacred because it is created out of the same historical community as the church experience and thus represents the people's attempt to shape life and to live it according to their dreams and aspirations. Included in these black expressions are animal tales, tales of folk figures, slave seculars, blues, and accounts of personal experiences.

In the animal and folk figure tales, the emphasis is often on the wit and cleverness of the weak in triumph over the strong. The hero of many animal tales is Br'er Rabbit, whose significance is described by J. Mason Brewer.

The role of the rabbit in the tales of the American Negro is similar to that of the hare in African folk narratives—that of the trickster who shrewdly outwits and gains a victory over some physically stronger or more powerful adversary. The animal tales told by Negro slaves with Br'er Rabbit as the hero had a meaning far deeper than mere entertainment. The rabbit actually symbolized the slave himself. Whenever the rabbit succeeded in proving himself smarter than another animal the slave rejoiced secretly, imagining himself smarter than his master.¹⁴

With this perspective on rabbit lore, it is understandable why folktales have been described as "hitting a straight lick with a crooked stick."¹⁵ The slave was "putting one over on the white man, in a subtle, and partially disguised way,"¹⁶ often singing quietly

Got one mind for white folks to see
'Nother for what I know is me;

He don't know, he don't know my mind,
When he see me laughing
Just laughing to keep from crying.

The wry humor of the animal tales is also found in many other stories and sayings, both religious and secular. Humor is an important element in black survival, and it is often related to the theme of freedom. Through humor, black slaves transcended their servitude and affirmed their right to freedom without the risks of revolutionary violence against slave masters. Consider the tale entitled "A Laugh That Meant Freedom," in which Nehemiah's wit and humor was a means of liberating himself from slavery. The day of freedom came when David Wharton, known as the most cruel slave master in southwest Texas, concluded: "I bet I can make the rascal work."

The morning of the first day after his purchase David Wharton walked over to where Nehemiah was standing and said, "Now you are going to work, you understand. You are going to pick four hundred pounds of cofton today."

"Wal Massa, dat's aw right," answered Nehemiah, "but ef Ah meks you laff, won' you lemme off fo' terday?"

"Well," said David Wharton, who had never been known to laugh, "if you make me laugh, I won't only let you off for today, but I'll give you your freedom."

"Ah decla', Boss," said Nehemiah, "yuh sho' is uh good-lookin' man."

"I am sorry I can't say the same thing about you," retorted David Wharton.

"Oh, yes, Boss, yuh could," Nehemiah laughed out, "yuh could, if yuh tole ez big uh lie ez Ah did."

David Wharton could not help laughing at this; he laughed before he thought. Nehemiah got his freedom.¹⁷

A similar theme of freedom is found in tales about the folk hero, High John the Conqueror.¹⁸ He was the "hopebringer," an expression of the slave's desire to transcend the historical limitations of servitude and the attempt to affirm the "otherness" of existence not defined by the auction block and slave codes. High John, though not identical with Jesus Christ in the spirituals, serves a similar function. He

symbolizes the slaves' desire for freedom and the recognition that they are not alone in the world. That was why High John was described as "a whisper, a will to hope, a wish to find something worthy of laughter and song." But the "whisper was put into flesh" and was "sure to be heard when and where the work was the hardest and the lot the most cruel."¹⁹ High John was the slaves' incarnation of hope, that unbeatable reality deep in the souls of the slaves, enabling them to endure the harsh realities of servitude without losing their dignity. "So they pulled the covers up over their souls and kept them from all hurt, harm and danger. . . ."²⁰

Unlike Jesus who came from Nazareth and taught in Galilee, High John the Conqueror came from Africa, "walking on the waves of sound,"²¹ and took flesh in America. Just as Jesus' birth in Bethlehem took place without the Romans and Jewish religious leaders recognizing his significance, so John came without slave masters knowing the meaning of his appearance. The "Messianic secret" so dominant in Mark's portrayal of Jesus is also present in the tales about John. While the slaves knew who he was, the white masters did not perceive that they were not dealing with an ordinary slave. And perhaps the significance of John was best described by Aunt Sutton when she said John meant power,²² the power of the slaves to hold themselves together in struggle.

In the slave seculars and blues is revealed another black expression in song.²³ In contrast to the spirituals and gospels, God is not the subject of these songs. The seculars and blues deal with the concreteness of life's contradictions without reference to a divine reality as a source of strength. What are we to make of this expression of truth?

I'll eat when I'm hungry
An' I' drink when I'se dry;
An' if de whitefolks don't kill me,
I'll live till I die.

The seculars deal with the absurdity of existence without using Jesus Christ as their central focal point. There is hope and transcendence but only as the vision is created from life itself.

The same this-worldly emphasis is found in the blues. "The blues ain't nothin' but a poor man's heart disease." With that affirmation

the singer establishes an existential contact with his audience and blows the blues to the rhythm of life as lived by those who had so little to show for living—nothing except themselves. It is not that they denied God; they simply did not use God as a symbol of victory over suffering and pain. Their theme is endurance and transcendence in the face of despair.

House catch on fire
And ain't no water around,
If your house catch on fire,
Ain't no water around,
Throw yourself out the window,
Let it burn on down.

The blues deal with areas of bodily expression and desire that were only indirectly touched in church music. They deal openly with sex, love, and agony when a man loses his woman.

How long, baby, how long
Has that even' train been gone?
How long? How long? I say, How long?
Standin' at the station watchin' my baby leave town,
Sure am disgusted—for where could she be gone—
For how long? How long? I say, How long?

And when a woman cannot find her man,

The man I'll marry ain't born yet,
An' his mammy's dead.

In the blues, black people sing about the tragic side of life and use the artistic expression of tragedy as the means for transcending it.

Ef you ever been down, you know jes how I feel—
Lak a broken-down engine got no drivin' wheel,
Lak a po' sojer boy lef' on de battle-fiel.

Another important theological source of the black experience is the narratives of slaves and ex-slaves, the personal accounts of black

people's triumph and defeats.²⁴ Here are found many dimensions of the black experience as told by those who lived it in the midst of servitude and oppression. There are slaves who might be described as "religious," and others who are indifferent toward "religion." There are slaves who praise their masters for "kind" treatment; and those who say: "I had much rather starve in England, a free woman than be a slave for the best man that ever breathed upon the American continent."²⁵ This is the stuff of the black experience which makes Black Theology possible and necessary.

More recent black literature is another expression of the black experience. Particularly notable are the poets of the Harlem Renaissance (1920s and 1930s) and their successors. In the midst of the destruction of black dignity, Claude McKay articulated a poetic vision of black people's strivings for freedom.

If we must die, let it not be like hogs,
Hunted and penned in an inglorious spot,
While all around us bark the mad and hungry dogs,
Making their mock at our accursed lot.²⁶

Like many black artists of that period, he recognized that art is never for its own sake but for people's sake. Black art is black people creating values based on their own experience and affirming the willingness to invent new definitions and life-styles commensurate with their struggle to be free. That was why Claude McKay said: "If we must die, O let us nobly die."²⁷

The affirmation of *blackness* as an essential ingredient in the definition of humanity has never been easy in *white* America. But to believe in the *divine* in the context of black suffering can often place a curious burden upon a poet. As Countee Cullen put it:

Yet do I marvel at this curious thing:
To make a poet black and bid him sing!²⁸

What shall a black poet sing? What is the role of the black thinker in a society where black people sing

I wish I knew how it would feel to be free
I wish I could break all the chains holdin' me?²⁹

The artists of the Harlem Renaissance did not exhaust the fullest depths of that question. The black artists of the 1960s and 70s, who were influenced by the new black consciousness as defined in the context of the black power revolution, usually took their cue from Imamu Amiri Baraka:

The Black Artist's role in America is to aid in the destruction of America as he knows it. His role is to report and reflect so precisely the nature of the society, and of himself in that society, that other men will be moved by the exactness of his rendering and, if they are black men, grow strong through this moving, having seen their own strength, and weakness; and if they are white men, tremble, curse, and go mad, because they will be drenched with the filth of their evil.³⁰

To summarize: the folklore of black people centers on the ability of the weak to survive through cunning, trickery, and sheer deception in an environment of the strong and powerful. Br'er Rabbit tricked Br'er Fox into throwing him into the brier-patch and hollered out: "Bred en bawn in a brier-patch, Br'er Fox—bred en bawn in a brier-patch!"³¹ High John the Conquerer outwits the master and another slave survives. This same theme of survival and liberation is found in sermon, prayer, and song—including seculars, spirituals, and blues. On the one hand, there is the theological emphasis that God will liberate the weak from the injustice of the strong:

When Israel was in Egypt's land,
Let my people go;
Oppressed so hard they could not stand,
Let my people go;
Go down Moses, 'way down in Egypt's land.
Tell ole Pharaoh
Let my people go.

On the other hand, transcendence over historical negations was affirmed through the recognition that

De big bee flies high
De little bee makes the honey

De black man raised the cotton,
An' de white man gets de money.

But in both cases, black people expressed the contradictions of existence while affirming the need to live in history without being conquered by it. The whole of black expression, Christian and non-Christian, preacher and poet, deals with the theme of liberation and the transcendence that happens in struggle.

It is the encounter of the truth of black experience that enables black theologians to know that they must speak the truth to the people. To speak the truth to black people is to relate the story of our mothers' and fathers' struggles to our present struggles and thereby create a humane future for our children. We must take the speeches and tales, the blues and the spirituals, the prayers and the sermons of black people and incorporate them into our present existence, relating our parents' strivings to our daily fight to survive in a land defined by George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, and Richard Nixon. Indeed our survival and liberation depend upon our recognition of the truth when it is spoken and lived by the people. If we cannot recognize the truth, then it cannot liberate us from untruth. To know the truth is to appropriate it, for it is not mainly reflection and theory. Truth is divine action entering into our lives and creating the human action of liberation. Truth enables us to dance and live to the rhythm of freedom in our lives as we struggle to be who we are. Therefore, to *speak* the truth we black theologians must set forth the authentic experience of blackness. We must respond to the urgent call of sister Desirée Barnwell:

Will the real black people please stand:
Those fearless in the unconventional,
Moved towards their own blackness,
Prone to influence and set trends,
Schooled in *their* times and folkways,
Dedicated to worthwhile endeavors,
Attentive to meaningful expressions.³²

BLACK EXPERIENCE, SCRIPTURE, AND JESUS CHRIST

The question inevitably arises, What is the relation of the black experience as a source of Black Theology to the Bible, which is

traditionally identified as the source of Christian theology? The connection is this. When black people sing, preach, and tell stories about their struggle, one fact is clear: they are not dealing simply with themselves. They are talking about another reality, "so high you can't get over him, so low you can't get under him, so wide you can't get around him." It is this affirmation of transcendence that prevents Black Theology from being reduced merely to the cultural history of black people. For black people the transcendent reality is none other than Jesus Christ, of whom Scripture speaks. The Bible is the witness to God's self-disclosure in Jesus Christ. Thus the black experience requires that Scripture be a source of Black Theology. For it was Scripture that enabled slaves to affirm a view of God that differed radically from that of the slave masters. The slave masters' intention was to present a "Jesus" who would make the slave obedient and docile. Jesus was supposed to make black people better slaves, that is, faithful servants of white masters. But many blacks rejected that view of Jesus not only because it contradicted their African heritage, but because it contradicted the witness of Scripture. That was why Richard Allen and his companions walked out of St. George Methodist Episcopal Church in 1787 as a prophetic protest against segregated worship.³³ The same was true for Henry Highland Garnet. Through the reading of Scripture he concluded that liberty was a gift from God, and therefore black slaves ought to use any available means that promises success in the attainment of freedom.³⁴ Throughout black history Scripture was used for a definition of God and Jesus that was consistent with the black struggle for liberation. Further examples are found in Henry M. Turner's affirmation that "God is a Negro," Howard Thurman's association of Jesus with the disinherited, and Martin Luther King, Jr.'s, view that political struggle was consistent with the gospel of Jesus.³⁵ Scripture established limits to white people's use of Jesus Christ as a confirmation of black oppression.

The importance of Scripture as the witness to Jesus Christ does not mean that Black Theology can therefore ignore the tradition and history of Western Christianity. It only means that our study of that tradition must be done in the light of the Truth disclosed in Scripture as interpreted by black people. Although we recognize the interrelationship of Scripture and tradition, especially in the early centuries of the Church, yet the full meaning of Scripture is not limited to the

interpretation of it as given in that particular tradition. Indeed Scripture and tradition often contradict each other. As the meaning of Jesus Christ is not to be identified with the *words* of Scripture, so the meaning of Scripture as the witness to the Word is not defined exclusively by Cyprian, Anselm, and Thomas. As theologians, we must interpret the latter in the light of the former.

On the one hand, we must evaluate a given interpreter of Scripture in the light of the *particularity* of his or her history, refusing to use the relativity of our present as the norm for the investigation of the past. We cannot criticize the early Church Fathers for their failure to address the critical questions of our contemporary situation. They are accountable only for dealing with the historical issues in their time as they relate to Jesus' presence among them. On the other hand, there are common elements in human experience that enable us to evaluate past interpreters of the faith. Since oppression of the weak by the powerful is one of those elements, we can put the critical question to Athanasius, Augustine, or Luther: What has the gospel of Jesus, as witnessed in Scripture, to do with the humiliated and the abused? If they failed to ask that question or only made it secondary in their interpretation of the gospel, then it is our task to make clear how their approach to the gospel differs from Scripture. This creates the possibility of distinguishing valid theology from heresy, a matter to be discussed later in this chapter.

Having described the two sources of Black Theology (black experience and Scripture), it is now important to distinguish both sources from their subject or essence, which is Jesus Christ. The subject of theology is that which creates the precise character of theological language, thereby distinguishing it from other ways of speaking. By contrast, the sources of theology are the materials that make possible a valid articulation of theology's subject.

Jesus Christ is the subject of Black Theology because he is the content of the hopes and dreams of black people. He was chosen by our grandparents, who saw in his liberating presence that he had chosen them and thus became the foundation of their struggle for freedom.³⁶ He was their Truth, enabling them to know that white definitions of black humanity were lies. When their way became twisted and senseless, they told Jesus about it. He lifted their burdens and eased their pain, thereby bestowing upon them a vision of freedom that transcended historical limitations. That was why they sang:

Sometimes I hangs my head an' cries,
But Jesus goin' to wipe my weepin' eyes.

Of course, for some people who live in this modern, scientific age with its emphasis on unlimited human possibilities, such a faith sounds simplistic and childish. But that is because their consciousness is defined by masters and rulers who really believe that they know what is best for everybody. However, the victims of such attitudes have only two alternatives: (1) to accept the oppressor's value system and thus be contented with the place set for them by others, or (2) to find a completely new way of looking at reality that enables them to fight against oppression. Many black slaves chose the latter, using Jesus Christ as the basis of their struggle. Through Jesus Christ they could know that they were *people*, even though they were bought and sold like cattle. Jesus Christ was that reality who invaded their history from beyond and bestowed upon them a definition of humanity that could not be destroyed by the whip and the pistol.

The emphasis on Jesus Christ and Scripture as the subject and source of the presence of transcendence in black experience raises the question of the precise relationship between them. Some of my critics have stated the issue in this manner. "On page 32 of *Black Theology and Black Power*, quoting Ron Karenga, you said that 'The fact that I am Black is my ultimate reality.' But then on page 34 of the same book, you wrote that 'Christianity begins and ends with the man Jesus—his life, death and resurrection.' Which do you *really* mean? Blackness or Jesus Christ? You cannot have it both ways."

This is an important matter, and perhaps the place to begin for clarification is to state emphatically that, like Scripture, the black experience is a *source* of the Truth but not the Truth itself. Jesus Christ is the Truth and thus stands in judgment over all statements about truth. But having said that, we must immediately balance it with another statement, without which the first statement falsifies what it intends to affirm. We must state the other side of the paradox emphatically: There is no truth in Jesus Christ independent of the oppressed of the land—their history and culture. And in America, the oppressed are the people of color—black, yellow, red, and brown. Indeed it can be said that to know Jesus is to know him as revealed in the struggle of the oppressed for freedom. Their struggle is Jesus'

struggle, and he is thus revealed in the particularity of their cultural history—their hopes and dreams of freedom.

The difficulty some people have in understanding the relation between Jesus and the black experience in Black Theology is due partly to their inability to appreciate the dialectical character of theological speech, especially when related to the black struggle for liberation. They use a dialectical model when dealing with such things as divinity and humanity in Jesus Christ or justification and sanctification in St. Paul or John Wesley. But there is a failure of nerve when their abstractions about Jesus are applied to the historical present. Jesus Christ is not a proposition, not a theological concept which exists merely in our heads. He is an event of liberation, a happening in the lives of oppressed people struggling for political freedom. Therefore, to know him is to encounter him in the history of the weak and the helpless. That is why it can be rightly said that there can be no knowledge of Jesus independent of the history and culture of the oppressed. It is impossible to interpret the Scripture correctly and thus understand Jesus aright unless the interpretation is done in the light of the consciousness of the oppressed in their struggle for liberation.

A similar convergence occurs when it is asked whether the black experience exists independently of Jesus Christ. If by Jesus Christ is meant the formal preaching and teaching of white missionaries, at a particular point in time, then the answer is an unqualified Yes. As we must say that Jesus' existence in himself is not a product of culture, so the black experience began before black people were introduced to Christianity. However, that is such an obvious historical fact that we need not debate it further. But if by Jesus Christ is meant "the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation, for in him all things were created in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible" (Col. 1:15–16 RSV), then the answer is an unqualified No. In this context, Jesus is not simply a doctrine or even a particular event limited by time. He is the eternal event of liberation in the divine person who makes freedom a constituent of human existence. There is no existence apart from him because he is the ground of existence without whom nothing is. Therefore, where human beings struggle for freedom and refuse to be defined by unauthorized earthly authorities, there Jesus Christ is present among them. His presence is the sustaining and liberating event in the lives of the oppressed that makes possible the continued struggle for freedom.

From the context of the eternal presence of Christ, the Liberator, emerges the interdependence of Jesus and the black experience as expressed in the lives of many black people. This interdependence is expressed so forcefully and concretely that *truly* to speak of the black experience is to speak of Jesus. He is the Word in their lives, and thus to speak of their experience as it is manifested in the joys and sorrows of black life is to speak of the One they say is the Comforter in time of trouble, "the lily of the valley," and "the bright and morning star."

He's King of Kings, and Lord of Lords,
Jesus Christ, the first and the last
No man works like him.

Others have testified that he is a "bridge over troubled waters," the "One who has been better to us than we have been to ourselves." In *God Struck Me Dead*, a collection of conversion experiences and autobiographies of ex-slaves, one called him a "time-God"! "He don't come before time; he don't come after time. He comes just on time."³⁷ And he comes as the preserver of the weak in time of trouble and as the sustaining Spirit of freedom in wretched places. This encounter of Jesus as the Christ of God makes his reality an eternal presence of liberation before and after the slave ships and Middle Passage.

The convergence of Jesus Christ and the black experience is the meaning of the Incarnation. Because God became human in Jesus Christ, God disclosed the divine will to be with humanity in our wretchedness. And because we blacks accept God's presence in Jesus as the true definition of our humanity, blackness and divinity are dialectically bound together as one reality. This is the theological meaning of the paradoxical assertion about the primacy of the black experience and Jesus Christ as witnessed in Scripture.³⁸

This brings us to the issue of heresy, which is an important matter if the Church intends to be clear about its message and its vocation in the world. Heresy here refers to any activity or teaching that contradicts the liberating truth of Jesus Christ. It is an action that denies the Lordship of Christ or a word that refuses to acknowledge his liberating presence in the struggle for freedom. Heresy is the refusal to speak the truth or to live the truth in the light of the One who is the Truth.

The early Church was correct in identifying problems of heresy as a critical theological issue, although it was often itself the heretic. But

every community that is serious about the gospel of Jesus Christ must ask, When does the Church cease to be the Church of Jesus Christ? When do the Church's actions deny the faith that it verbalizes? These questions must be answered for every given situation, if the people of God are to remain relatively clearheaded about the relation between their existence as God's people and Jesus' existence as their Lord. Not every church that claims to be the Church is the Church, because being the Church requires concrete commitments to the One who is the essence of the Church. Not every theology that claims to be Christian is Christian, because the doing of Christian theology requires specific commitments to the One who is the content of that reality to which the word "Christian" points.

The question of heresy must be reopened in our time, *not* for the purpose of witch-hunting, but for the sake of the Church's life. We need to be clear about the subject to which our proclamation points and the relation of our words about that Subject to our *actions* in the world. Here it must be emphasized that we are not simply concerned with our theological conceptualizations of Jesus Christ, although they are included. Theological concepts have meaning only as they are translated into theological praxis, that is, the Church living in the world on the basis of what it proclaims. This means that theology and ethics, though not identical, are closely interrelated: the mission of the Church is defined by its proclamation, and the proclamation is authenticated by the mission. For the sake of the mission of the Church in the world, we must continually ask, What actions deny the Truth disclosed in Jesus Christ? Where should the line be drawn? Can the Church of Jesus Christ be racist and Christian at the same time? Can the Church of Jesus Christ be politically, socially, and economically identified with the structures of oppression and also be a servant of Christ? Can the Church of Jesus Christ fail to make the liberation of the poor the center of its message and work, and still remain faithful to its Lord?

On the level of theory these questions are easy to answer. Yet they are very difficult to answer in the day-to-day life of the Church. This difficulty is increased because we live in a society of many denominations under an ethos of the "freedom" of religion. But difficulties do not make the questions less important. Indeed their importance is grounded in the integrity of our faith and the obedience that is inherent in the reality of Jesus Christ. The answer to the question

of heresy as it relates both to our past and to our present situation begins and ends with the centrality of Jesus Christ as the Liberator of the oppressed. Any interpretation of the gospel in any historical period that fails to see Jesus as the Liberator of the oppressed is heretical. Any view of the gospel that fails to understand the Church as that community whose work and consciousness are defined by the community of the oppressed is not Christian and is thus heretical. Within this context the issue of heresy must be debated.

It is true that identifying the liberation of the oppressed as crucial to the authenticity of the gospel could be interpreted as accidental to my historical situation. I admit readily that the social context of my existence plays an important role in my understanding of the gospel message. However, it would be ridiculous to claim that there is some secret language by which Africans could be persuaded by what I say while non-Africans could never understand it. Clearly there is a basis for speaking across cultural lines, namely, the Bible. Looking at the message of Scripture exegetically, we ask: Does the Bible in fact center upon the proclamation of the liberation of the oppressed? I have shown on other occasions that the message of Scripture is the proclamation and record of God's liberation, and I will speak of this again in later chapters. Indeed it is the encounter of this truth of Scripture that enables us black theologians to know that we must

Speak the Truth to the people
To identify the enemy is to free the mind
Free the mind of the people
Speak to the mind of the people
Speak Truth.³⁹

CHAPTER 3

The Social Context of Theology

The dialectic of theology and its sources pushes us to examine more closely the social context of theological language. Because Christian theology is *human* speech about God, it is always related to historical situations, and thus all of its assertions are culturally limited. H. Richard Niebuhr makes this point forcefully: "Whatever be the case in other human inquiries there is no such thing as disinterestedness in theology, since no one can speak of God or gods at all save as valued beings or as values which cannot be apprehended save by a willing, feeling, responding self."¹ Here Niebuhr rightly connects theology with social existence. Although God, the subject of theology, is eternal, theology itself is, like those who articulate it, limited by history and time. "Though we direct our thought to eternal and transcendent beings, it is not eternal and transcendent; though we regard the universal, the image of the universal in our mind is not a universal image."² It is a finite image, limited by the temporality and particularity of our existence. Theology is not universal language; it is *interested* language and thus is always a reflection of the goals and aspirations of a particular people in a definite social setting.

FEUERBACH, MARX, AND THE SOCIOLOGY OF KNOWLEDGE

The anthropological character of theological speech was asserted with rare philosophical clarity by Ludwig Feuerbach. Reacting against Hegelian idealism, which equated the rational with the real and the real with the rational, Feuerbach proclaimed the concreteness of reality in its social and political manifestations. The clue to the meaning of the real, he insisted, is not found in philosophical abstractions but in

concrete life, its feelings, wants, and needs. The uncovering of truth, therefore, is not identical with the rational investigation of the unfolding of the Absolute Idea, said Feuerbach, but with the analysis of the common experience of humanity. Theology is not what theologians claim it to be, i.e., a reflection upon an eternal being; "theology is anthropology."³ What theologians mistake for God is nothing but the "latent nature" of humanity. Such is the case because

Man cannot get beyond his true nature. He may indeed by means of the imagination conceive individuals of a so-called higher kind, but he can never get loose from his species, his nature. . . . A being's understanding is its sphere of vision. As far as thou seest, so far extends thy nature.⁴

By limiting humanity to its nature, Feuerbach asserted the social and psychological limitations of all human knowledge. Thus the idea of God is humanity itself projected to infinity. Divinity is humanity transcending itself while remaining enclosed within itself.

That which is to man the self-existent, the highest being, to which he can conceive nothing higher—that is to him the Divine Being. How then should he inquire concerning this being, what he is in himself? If God were an object to a bird, he would be a winged being: the bird knows nothing higher, nothing more blissful, than the winged condition. . . . Such as are a man's thought and disposition, such is his God; so much worth as a man has, so much and no more has his God. Consciousness of God is self-consciousness, knowledge of God is self-knowledge.⁵

Whatever may be the theological and philosophical weaknesses of Feuerbach's view of religion,⁶ he nonetheless challenges theologians to take seriously the anthropological undergirdings of their statements. It is difficult to ignore the cogency of Feuerbach's logic in view of the obvious sociological context of human speech. What people think about God cannot be divorced from their place and time in a definite history and culture. While God may exist in some heavenly city beyond time and space, human beings cannot transcend history. They are limited to the specificity of their finite nature. And even when theologians claim to point beyond history because of the

possibility given by the Creator of history, the divine image disclosed in their language is shaped by their place in time. Theology is subjective speech about God, a speech that tells us far more about the hopes and dreams of certain God-talkers than about the Maker and Creator of heaven and earth.

The political and economic implications of Feuerbachian materialism were pressed to radical consequences by Karl Marx. While praising Feuerbach for his critique of Hegelian idealism, Marx contended that Feuerbach failed to pursue his line of criticism to its logical conclusion. Marx agreed with Feuerbach: thinking begins with sense data; perception not conception is the clue to reality. But Marx rejected Feuerbach's stopping at the stage of "contemplative sensuousness," that is, with merely thinking correctly about the world instead of changing it. While Feuerbach remained satisfied with the description of a "correct consciousness about an *existing* fact," Marx insisted that it is necessary to overthrow the "existing state of things."⁷

One of Marx's chief contributions was his disclosure of the ideological character of bourgeois thought, indicating the connection between the "ruling *material* force of society" and the "ruling *intellectual* force." Ideas do not have an independent existence but are from beginning to end a social product. "The ruling ideas," writes Marx, "are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships grasped as ideas."⁸ Here he affirms not only the connection between sensory data and the pursuit of truth, but also the role of economics and politics in the definition of truth. Contrary to Feuerbach, truth is not simply the contemplation of sensuous nature; such a procedure leads to a philosophical abstraction and thus a distortion of the true nature of reality as sensuous *activity*, i.e., as praxis. The task of philosophy is not merely to interpret the world but to change it.⁹ Truth is a question not only of what is but of what ought to be. What *is*, is determined by the existing societal relations of material production, with the ruling class controlling the means of production as well as the intellectual forces which justify the present political arrangements. What *ought to be* is defined by what can be through the revolutionary praxis of the proletarian class, overthrowing unjust societal conditions. Thus the future is introduced into the historical process, wherein thought is shaped by open human possibilities. Truth is not "a question of theory but is a practical question. In practice man must prove the truth,"¹⁰ by destroying the

existing relations of untruth. Feuerbach's mistake was that "he direct[ed] too much attention to nature and too little to politics."¹¹ For if he had recognized the significance of politics as the real clue to the correct understanding of nature, he then would have realized the real import of religious self-alienation. Self-alienation as revealed in religious self-projections is nothing but a reflection of the contradictions in the material world. The ruling class promotes religion because it justifies the present material relations and also because it serves as a sedative for the oppressed, making them remain content with humiliation and suffering. As long as the oppressed believe that their future is found in a heavenly world, they will not focus on the needed revolutionary praxis to change this world. While Feuerbach pointed out the unreality of the heavenly world, he did not show its revolutionary connection with this world. For "once the earthly family is discovered to be the secret of the holy family, the former must then itself be criticized in theory and revolutionized in practice."¹²

The importance of Marx for our purposes is his insistence that thought has no independence from social existence. In view of his convincing assertion that "consciousness can never be anything else than conscious existence,"¹³ theologians must ask, "What is the connection between dominant material relations and the ruling theological ideas in a given society?" And even if they do not accept the rigid causality of so-called orthodox Marxists, theologians will find it hard to avoid the truth that their thinking about things divine is closely intertwined with the "manifestations of actual life."¹⁴ A serious encounter with Marx will make theologians confess their limitations, their inability to say anything about God which is not at the same time a statement about the social context of their own existence. Nor will an appeal to the objectivity of revelation solve the theological dilemma. Although the revelation of God may be universal and eternal, theological talk about that revelation is filtered through human experience, which is limited by social realities. Therefore, not only the questions which theologians ask but the answers given in their discourse about the gospel are limited by their social perceptions and thus largely a reflection of the material conditions of a given society. Theology arises out of life and thus reflects a people's struggle to create meaning in life.

Marx's critique of bourgeois thought influenced the proponents of the sociology of knowledge, of which Karl Mannheim, Werner Stark,

Peter Berger, and Thomas Luckmann are prominent representatives. While most advocates of this sociological discipline¹⁵ move beyond Marx in their insistence that there is a distinction between the "social element in thinking" (sociology of knowledge) and the "political element in thought"¹⁶ (ideology), yet they all agree with Marx's contention that "consciousness . . . is a social product."¹⁷ This does not mean that consciousness is a mechanical duplication of social reality. Marx himself is emphatic in his concern to retain the freedom and spontaneity of thought and the point that ideas influence social structures. As his Thesis 3 puts it: "It is men that change circumstances, and [thus] the educator himself needs educating."¹⁸ The sociologists of knowledge clarify Marx's point by emphasizing the *reciprocity* between ideas and social reality (that is, between subject and object or superstructure and substructure), so that an investigation of the latter cannot fail to provide essential clues into the conceptual universe of the former. This is what Stark means by such phrases as "social a priori," "social determination," and "axiological system." Berger and Luckmann have a similar point in mind with the phrase "the social construction of reality." Ideas do not have an existence separate from life but arise out of a framework of reality constructed by people.

Marx's chief concern was to uncover the ideological distortion of bourgeois thought which he believed could be overcome through the revolutionary praxis of the proletariat. While the proponents of the sociology of knowledge are greatly motivated by Marx's critique of the ideology of the ruling class, yet, unlike Marx, their analysis is primarily *sociological*, not political. Their concern is not only to locate the false thinking of rulers but to show that *all* thinking (including Marxism) is open to error and that *all* thinking is necessarily dependent upon a social a priori, which may or may not lead to false thinking. As Werner Stark says: "We see the broad and deep acres of history through a mental grid . . . through a system of values which is established in our minds *before* we look out on to it—and it is this grid which decides . . . what will fall into our field of perception." Stark illustrates this point by showing how the differences in British and German philosophies are partly traceable to "the great difference of socio-political development in the two countries." While "British philosophy has been predominantly realistic, sober and down-to-earth," "German philosophy has been predominantly . . . metaphysical and divorced from reality." One important reason for these contrasting

approaches is traceable to the appearance of a working democracy early in Britain's history and Germany's tendency to remain "a country of authoritarianism."¹⁹ Of course, Stark points out that such an observation is not all that needs to be said for a comprehensive understanding of the factors responsible for the distinctive characteristics of German and British philosophies; but a careful scrutiny of their sociopolitical histories does illuminate the function of a mental grid as the prerequisite for thinking.

Despite the important differences between their respective disciplines, theologians can learn much from the sociologists of knowledge. The latter, in addition to freshening up Feuerbach's contention that religion is a human projection and going deeper than Marx on the problem of ideology, also demonstrates convincingly the function of a social a priori in all thinking and thus refutes decisively the naïve assumption of many theologians who claim that God-ideas are objective and universal. Theologians must face the relativity of their thought processes: their ideas about God are the reflections of social conditioning; their dreams and visions are derived from this world. For those who are accustomed to speaking *ex cathedra* on matters of faith, this will be a difficult pill to swallow. I do not have the Pope primarily in mind, though he is certainly included. The domestic academic scene affords scores of cases. After Mannheim, Stark, and Berger, whatever may be their differences among themselves or our differences with them, the assumption that theological thinking is objective or universal is ridiculous.

Of course black theologians do not escape the truth of the sociology of knowledge. The difference between Black Theology and white theology does not lie in the absence of a social a priori in the former. Like white theologians, black theologians do theology out of the social matrix of their existence. The dissimilarity between Black Theology and white theology lies at the point of each having different mental grids which account for their different approaches to the gospel. While I believe that the social a priori of Black Theology is closer to the axiological perspective of biblical revelation,²⁰ for the moment the point is simply the inescapable interplay between theology and society—whether white or Black Theology. This means that theology is political language. What people think about God, Jesus Christ, and the Church cannot be separated from their own social and political status in a given society.

WHITE AMERICAN THEOLOGY

The dialectic of theology and social existence is particularly obvious in its white American branch when that theology is related to the people of African descent on the American continent. While some white theologians in the twentieth century have emphasized the relativity of faith in history, they have seldom applied this insight to the problem of the color line.²¹ Because the conceptual framework of their consciousness has been shaped already by white sociopolitical interests, their exposition of the problem of faith and history is limited to defending the intellectual status of religious assertions against erosion by historical criticism. Even a casual look at the contemporary discussion of the problem of faith in the context of the historical-critical method reveals that such problems are unique to oppressors as they seek to reconcile traditional theology with modern scientific thinking about history.

It is not that the problem of faith and history is unimportant. Rather, its importance, as defined by white theologians, is limited to their social interests. Although oppressed blacks are interested in faith as they struggle in history, the shape of the faith-history problem in contemporary U.S. theology did not arise from the social existence of black people. On the contrary, its character was shaped by those who, sharing the consciousness of the Enlightenment, failed to question the consequences of the so-called enlightened view as reflected in the colonization and slavery of that period.

Perhaps it is true to say, as does Van Harvey, that the Enlightenment created a "revolution in the consciousness of Western man";²² but not all people are Western and not all people in the West experienced the Enlightenment in the same way. For black and red peoples in North America, the spirit of the Enlightenment was socially and politically demonic, becoming a pseudo-intellectual basis for their enslavement or extermination.

Through an examination of the contemporary white theological scene, it is clear that the children of the Enlightenment have simply accepted the issues passed on by their grandparents. Although the historical events of the twentieth century have virtually destroyed the nineteenth-century confidence in the goodness of humanity and the inevitable progress of history, twentieth-century white theo-

gians are still secure in their assumption that important theological issues emerge, primarily if not exclusively, out of the white experience. Despite the sit-ins and pray-ins, the civil rights movement and black power, Martin Luther King and Stokely Carmichael, white theologians still continue their business as usual. These theologians fail to realize that such a procedure is just as racist and oppressive against black people as Billy Graham's White House sermons. This is so because the black judgment on this matter is that those who are not for us must be against us.

In this connection, one is reminded of an observation by Karl Marx: "Philosophy [and we could add theology] and the study of the actual world have the same relation to one another as masturbation and sexual love."²³ Since most professional theologians are the descendants of the advantaged class and thus often represent the consciousness of the class, it is difficult not to conclude that their theologies are in fact a bourgeois exercise in intellectual masturbation. Certainly, if one takes seriously the exploitation and suffering of black people in America and Jesus' proclamation that he came "to set at liberty those who are oppressed" (Luke 4:18 RSV), then the absence of the urgency of the gospel of black liberation in modern and contemporary American theology can only confirm Marx's contention that "your very ideas are but the outgrowth of the conditions of your bourgeois production and bourgeois property. . . . [For] the ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class."²⁴

Unfortunately, American theologians from Cotton Mather and Jonathan Edwards to Reinhold Niebuhr and Schubert Ogden, including radicals and conservatives, have interpreted the gospel according to the cultural and political interests of white people. They have rarely attempted to transcend the social interests of their group by seeking an analysis of the gospel in the light of the consciousness of black people struggling for liberation. White theologians, because of their identity with the dominant power structure, are largely boxed within their own cultural history.

During slavery the social limitation of white theology was expressed in three main forms: (1) some white theologians ignored slavery as a theological issue; (2) others justified it; and (3) only a few spoke out against it.

First, it was not uncommon for Anglicans, Presbyterians, Congregationalists, Baptists, Methodists, and other assorted denomi-

national theologians to do theology as if slavery did not exist. For example, Jonathan Edwards, often called America's most outstanding theologian, could preach and write theological treatises on total depravity, unconditional election, limited atonement, irresistible grace, and the perseverance of the saints without the slightest hint of how these issues related to human bondage. He simply defined the gospel in the light of his Calvinistic heritage; and with unusual conceptual skills derived from the Enlightenment, he defended the Reformed faith. If pressed, he perhaps would have expressed his sentiments for the cause of freedom. But what is crucial is that his understanding of the theological task did not consciously or directly involve the political issue of slavery. Many of his contemporaries followed his example.

The second group of theologians represents those who defended the slave institution on theological grounds. Cotton Mather was one of its early spokesmen. He urged white people to teach their slaves "that it is GOD who has caused them to be *Servants*, and that they serve JESUS CHRIST, while they are at Work for their *Masters*." Since Mather owned slaves, it is obvious that that fact alone would influence his theological observations. But he was not unique. Other highly visible spokesmen for "God" defended slavery, including George Whitefield and Thomas Bacon.²⁵

The influence of social realities on theological reflections was particularly obvious in the Methodist and Baptist churches' reaction to the issue of slavery during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Immediately following the Revolutionary War, both churches, responding to the ethos of freedom, took radical positions against slavery. In 1780 at the Baltimore Conference, the Methodists condemned slavery as "contrary to the laws of God, man, and nature, and hurtful to society."²⁶ And four years later, at the Christmas Conference of 1784, they strengthened their position. They "voted to expel all slaveholding members of Methodist societies . . . who would not, within twelve months after due notification, perfect a legal document to manumit all their slaves when they reached certain specific ages. The conference also voted to expel immediately all Methodists who bought (except for the purpose of liberation) or sold slaves."²⁷ Many Baptists took similar action throughout the South.

But by the beginning of the nineteenth century, when cotton became king, the churches allowed the change in social reality to

influence a change in their religious views. The Methodists not only suspended their 1784 rules within six months but in 1816 a General Conference committee reported:

The committee . . . are of opinion that, under the present existing circumstances in relation to slavery, little can be done to abolish a practice so contrary to the principles of moral justice. They are sorry to say that the evil appears to be past remedy. . . . Your committee find that in the South and West the civil authorities render emancipation impracticable, and . . . they are constrained to admit that to bring about such a change in the civil code as would favour the cause of liberty is not in the power of the General Conference.²⁸

Other churches made similar compromising statements, creating not only a place for slaveholders in the churches but providing a context for the adamant defenders of the peculiar institution. Indeed, as late as 1900, Charles Carroll wrote a book entitled *The Negro a Beast*. Although many clergymen condemned it, the attitude of the churches on slavery in particular and black people generally prepared the way for its appearance.

The third group of theologians were those who openly condemned slavery. Persons in this group included John Woolman, Leonard Bacon, William Ellery Channing, and Theodore Weld. The latter achieved national prominence for his fight against slavery. He published his views in two works, *The Bible against Slavery* (1837) and *American Slavery as It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses* (1839). Weld and other white abolitionists should be commended for their courage in taking a stand against the cultural and theological ethos of their time. They are concrete examples that social existence is not mechanical and deterministic. The gospel grants people the freedom to transcend their cultural history and to affirm a dimension of universality common to all peoples.

However, even Weld and most white abolitionists were partly limited by their cultural history, still viewing humanity from a white perspective, usually as defined by the Enlightenment.²⁹ They almost never used the resources of black culture as an approach to the problem of slavery but simply assumed that black freedom would result from the end of legal servitude. This may explain why "the

constitution of the American Anti-Slavery Society failed to mention social equality as an objective" and why its members considered its work completed after the Civil War.³⁰

The attitudes of these three groups are still with us today. The second group is primarily represented in conservative churches and seminaries of the South. It is most dramatically symbolized in Billy Graham and Norman Vincent Peale. Of course, their view of the gospel is not arrived at through an open encounter with the biblical message, but is exclusively determined by the continued social and political dominance of whites over blacks. They are the best examples that religious conservatism and white racism are often two sides of the same reality.

Theological representatives in the third group are quite rare in contemporary theology. To my knowledge, only one white theologian, Frederick Herzog in *Liberation Theology*, has attempted to reorder theological priorities in the light of the oppression of black people. Others like Paul Lehmann, Richard Schaul, and Carl Braaten have been defining the theological task according to "the politics of God," relating theology to the struggle of liberation throughout the world.³¹ The difference between Herzog's way of doing theology and that of the persons just named is the manner in which the former calls into question typical theological options. He not only takes the oppressed and their liberation as his theological point of departure, but he also rejects the process theologies of John Cobb and Schubert Ogden because he does not see how abstract arguments about God relate to the marginal people of the land.³² What difference does it make if one should "prove" a philosophical point, if that point has nothing to do with spreading freedom throughout the land? Whatever else may be said about Herzog's *Liberation Theology*, it is concrete evidence that white theologians do not have to remain enclosed in their little white boxes.

Nevertheless most white theologians who attend learned societies and write books and articles on theology fall in the first group. These theologians believe in rigorous scholarship and disciplined scientific thinking, but this process invariably fails to grapple with the problem of color. They conveniently play down the fact that their very definition of theology is culturally bound and thus belies their claims about universality. Indeed, if we take seriously H. Richard Niebuhr's observation that "theological opinions have their roots in the relationship of the religious life to the cultural and political conditions prevailing

in any group of Christians,"³³ then it is perhaps correct to conclude that the various white theological perspectives which ignore color are nothing but white cultural projections.

Consider the definitions of theology by Harold DeWolf and Paul Tillich. The former says: "Systematic Theology is the critical discipline devoted to discovering, expounding and defending the more important truths implied in the experience of the Christian community."³⁴ The latter says: "Theology, as a function of the Christian Church, must serve the needs of the Church. A theological system is supposed to satisfy two basic needs: the statement of the truth of the Christian message and the interpretation of this truth for every new generation."³⁵ Despite my affinity with the existential orientation of Tillich against DeWolf's rationalism, there is a conspicuous cultural similarity in them. Neither one defines theology as a discipline which speaks for and about the liberation of the oppressed from *political* bondage. May we conclude that this is just a careless oversight and that, like Jonathan Edwards, they would take their stand with the oppressed? Certainly, this is the case, as Tillich's early theological treatises and DeWolf's stand on civil rights demonstrate. It is not my intention to question the integrity of their personal ethics. My concern is with the identity of Christian theology and the influence of culture on a theologian's understanding of the theological task. Because DeWolf and Tillich were not politically threatened in America, they did not include politics in their theological point of departure. In accepting the axiological system of American culture, they were prevented from regarding the political suffering of black people as critical evidence for the shaping of their theological perspectives. I would also contend that they missed the decisive ingredient of the gospel message. For if the essence of the gospel is the liberation of the oppressed from sociopolitical humiliation for a new freedom in Christ Jesus (and I do not see how anyone can read the Scriptures and conclude otherwise), and if Christian theology is an explication of the meaning of that gospel for our time, must not theology itself have liberation as its starting point or run the risk of being at best idle talk and at worst blasphemy?

The same conclusion can be drawn from most other contemporary theologians. Because white theologians live in a society that is racist, the oppression of black people does not occupy an important item on their theological agenda. Again as Karl Marx put it: "It is not

consciousness that determines life, but life that determines consciousness."³⁶ Because white theologians are well fed and speak for a people who control the means of production, the problem of hunger is not a theological issue for them. That is why they spend more time debating the relation between the Jesus of history and the Christ of faith than probing the depths of Jesus' command to feed the poor. It is theologically much more comfortable to write essays and books about the authenticity or non-authenticity of this or that word of Jesus than it is to hear his Word of liberation, calling the humiliated into existence for freedom. To hear Jesus' Word of liberation requires a radical decision, not just about my self-understanding (although that is definitely included, as Rudolf Bultmann clearly demonstrated) but about practice, a decision that defines theology as a weapon in the struggle of the little ones for liberation.

The history of white American theology illustrates the concept of the *social a priori* asserted by Werner Stark and the other sociologists of knowledge whom we discussed earlier. The social environment functions as a "mental grid," deciding what will be considered as relevant data in a given inquiry. For example, because white theologians are not the sons and daughters of black slaves but the descendants of white slave masters, their theological grid automatically excludes from the field of perception the data of Richard Allen, Henry H. Garnet, Nathaniel Paul, David Walker, and Henry M. Turner. This same axiological grid accounts for the absence of the apocalyptic expectations of the spirituals among the so-called "hope theologians"; and the same explanation can be given why the white existentialists do not say anything about absurdity in the blues. Why would we even expect them to say something, since their value system is the reason why so many blacks had to sing

Sometimes I feel like nothin', somethin' th'owed away,
Then I get my guitar and play the blues all day.

Great gawamighty, folks feelin' bad,
Lost everything they ever had.

The mental grid influences not only what books theologians read when doing their research, but also which aspects of personal experience will shape theological style and methodology. Again it is

obvious that because white theologians were not enslaved and lynched and are not ghettoized because of color, they do not think that color is an important point of departure for theological discourse. Color is not *universal* they say, moving on to what they regard as the more important problems of theological scholarship. Universalism is a social product and it remains such even (especially!) when it is legitimated in pious or scholarly language. The only way people can enhance their vision of the universal is to break out of their cultural and political boxes and encounter another reality. They must be challenged to take seriously another value system. That is, instead of studying only Jonathan Edwards, they must also examine the reality of David Walker. Here truth is expanded beyond the limitations of white culture.

BLACK RELIGIOUS THOUGHT

Like white American theology, black thought on Christianity has been influenced by its social context. But unlike white theologians, who spoke to and for the culture of the ruling class, black people's religious ideas were shaped by the cultural and political existence of the victims in North America. Unlike Europeans who immigrated to this land to escape from tyranny, Africans came in chains to serve a nation of tyrants. It was the slave experience that shaped our idea of this land. And this difference in social existence between Europeans and Africans must be recognized, if we are to understand correctly the contrast in the form and content of black and white theology.

What then is the form and content of black religious thought when viewed in the light of black people's social situation? Briefly, *the form of black religious thought is expressed in the style of story and its content is liberation. Black Theology, then, is the story of black people's struggle for liberation in an extreme situation of oppression.* Consequently there is no sharp distinction between thought and practice, worship and theology, because black theological reflections about God occurred in the black struggle of freedom.

White theologians built logical systems; black folks told tales. Whites debated the validity of infant baptism or the issue of predestination and free will; blacks recited biblical stories about God leading the Israelites from Egyptian bondage, Joshua and the battle of Jericho, and the Hebrew children in the fiery furnace. White theologians argued about the general status of religious assertions in

view of the development of science generally and Darwin's *Origin of Species* in particular; blacks were more concerned about their status in American society and its relation to the biblical claim that Jesus came to set the captives free. White thought on the Christian view of salvation was largely "spiritual" and sometimes "rational," but usually separated from the concrete struggle of freedom in this world. Black thought was largely eschatological and never abstract, but usually related to blacks' struggle against earthly oppression.

The difference in the form of black and white religious thought is, on the one hand, *sociological*. Since blacks were slaves and had to work from sun-up to nightfall, they did not have time for the art of philosophical and theological discourse. They, therefore, did not know about the systems of Augustine, Calvin, or Edwards. And if Ernst Bloch is correct in his contention that "need is the mother of thought,"³⁷ then it can be said that black slaves did not *need* to know about Anselm's ontological argument, Descartes's *Cogito, ergo sum*, and Kant's *Ding an sich*. Such were not their philosophical and theological problems as defined by their social reality. Blacks did not ask whether God existed or whether divine existence could be rationally demonstrated. Divine existence was taken for granted, because God was the point of departure of their faith. The divine question which they addressed was whether or not God was with them in their struggle for liberation. Neither did blacks ask about the general status of their personal existence or that of the physical world. The brutal presence of white people did not allow that sort of philosophical skepticism to enter their consciousness. Therefore the classical philosophical debate about the priority of concepts versus things, which motivated Kant and his predecessors' reflective endeavors, did not interest black people. What was "real" was the presence of oppression and the historical need to strive against it. They intuitively perceived that the problem of the auction block and slave drivers would not be solved through philosophical debate. The problem had to be handled at the level of concrete history as that history was defined by the presence of the slave masters. Slaves therefore had to devise a language commensurate with their social situation. That was why they told stories. Through the medium of stories, black slaves created concrete and vivid pictures of their past and present existence, using the historical images of God's dealings with people and thus breaking open a future for the oppressed not known to ordinary historical observation.

The difference between black and white thought is also *theological*. Black people did not devise various philosophical arguments for God's existence, because the God of black experience was not a metaphysical idea. God was the God of history, the Liberator of the oppressed from bondage. Jesus was not an abstract Word of God, but God's Word made flesh who came to set the prisoner free. He was the "Lamb of God" that was born in Bethlehem and was slain on Golgotha's hill. He was also "the Risen Lord" and "the King of Kings." He was their Alpha and Omega, the One who had come to make the first last and the last first.

While white preachers and theologians often defined Jesus Christ as a spiritual Savior, the deliverer of people from sin and guilt, black preachers were unquestionably historical. They viewed God as the Liberator in history. That was why the black Church was involved in the abolitionist movement in the nineteenth century and the civil rights movement in the twentieth. Black preachers reasoned that if God delivered Israel from Pharaoh's army and Daniel from the lion's den, then God will deliver black people from American slavery and oppression. So the content of their thought was liberation and they communicated that message through preaching, singing, and praying, telling their story of how "we shall overcome."

Consider the song about that "Old Ship of Zion" and how "she had landed many a thousand, . . . and will land as many a more. O glory, Hallelu!" They say "she is loaded down with angels," and "King Jesus is the Captain." The presence of Jesus as the Captain was black people's assurance that the ship would "carry [them] all home." The "Old Ship of Zion" was a symbol that their life had meaning despite the condition of servitude. It was their guarantee that their future was in the hands of the One who died on Calvary. That was why they proclaimed: "Glory hallelujah!" It was an affirmation of faith that black slaves would triumph over life's contradictions, because they had met the Captain of that "Old Ship of Zion" and were already on board.

At other times, the salvation story was described as "the gospel train." Blacks described this reality with eschatological and future expectation: "The gospel train is coming." And they also saw it as already realized in their present: "I hear it just at land" and "the car wheels moving and rumbling thro' the land." One can "hear the bell and the whistle" and its "coming round the curve." Of course, this is not a normal train, not one created by white society. This is an

eschatological train, the train of salvation and it will carry the oppressed to glory. If you miss this train "you're left behind." That partly accounts for the urgency of the call to

Get on board, Children,
Get on board, Children,
Get on board, Children,
There's room for many a more.

There is no excuse for not making the existential decision to "Get on board" because

The fare is cheap and all can go,
The rich and the poor are there
No second-class on board the train,
No difference in the fare.

Salvation was not only a train and a ship but also a sweet chariot, swinging low, "coming for to carry me home." It was that "Old time religion" that brought the slaves out of bondage, and "good when you're in trouble." It's that "rock in a weary land" and the "shelter in the time of storm." It was the divine presence in their situation that held their humanity together in the midst of the brokenness of black existence. It was the power to endure in struggle and the patience to remain calm when surrounded by inexplicable evil. That was why black people sang, "Been down in the valley so long, and I ain't got weary yet." They did not give up in despair during slavery and subsequent oppression, because of the presence of the One who controls life and who can overcome its contradictions. This is the theme of black religion, and it was expressed in concrete images derived from their social situation.

The relation between the form and the content of black thought was dialectical. The story was both the medium through which truth was communicated and also a constituent of truth itself. In the telling of a truthful story, the reality of liberation to which the story pointed was also revealed in the actual telling of the story itself. That was why an equal, and often greater, emphasis was placed on the storyteller.

In black churches, the one who preaches the Word is primarily a storyteller. And thus when the black church community invites a

minister as pastor, their chief question is: "Can the Reverend tell the story?" This question refers both to the theme of black religion and also to the act of storytelling itself. It refers to a person's ability to recite God's historical dealings with God's people from Abraham to Jesus, from St. Paul to John on the island of Patmos, and to the preacher's ability to relate these biblical stories to contemporary black stories. The past and present are joined dialectically, creating a black vision of the future.

Black churches usually do not emphasize academic degrees as a criterion for preaching, because they do not associate a learned discourse with storytelling. Indeed many blacks are suspicious of "intellectuals" in the pulpit, because of their identification of that term with white people. Black church people contend that one needs more than "book-learning" in order to tell God's story. One needs to be *converted* to the faith and *called* to the ministry of Jesus Christ. When these two events happen, then one is ready to be used by God as the instrument of his story, of his dealings with his people.

In the black Church, little emphasis is placed on the modern distinction between liberals and fundamentalists as found in white churches. Blacks show little concern about the abstract status of the Bible, whether fallible or infallible. Their concern is with the Scripture as a living reality in the concreteness of their existence. Since the biblical story of God's dealings with people can be told in various ways, the chief concern of the people is not the information included in the preacher's message but, rather, *how* the preacher arranges that information into a story and relates it all to the daily lives of the people. The preacher may begin with Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden or with John on the island of Patmos. The concern is not *where* the preacher begins because the people already know the various scenes in God's drama with God's people. They are concerned with how the preacher takes the bare facts of God's story and weaves them into the structure of their lives, giving a unique touch as a storyteller.

Consider the sermon "Behold the Rib!" The preacher begins by emphasizing the power of God. This is a "High-riding and strong armed God" who "walk[s] acrost his globe creation . . . wid de blue elements for a helmet, . . . and a wall of fire round his feet." "He wakes the sun every morning from its fiery bed wid de breath of his smile and commands de moon wid his eyes." Then the preacher moves to the essence of the story as suggested by the subject:

So God put Adam into a deep sleep
 And took out a bone, ah hah!
 And it is said that it was a rib.
 Behold de rib!
 A bone out of man's side.
 He put de man to sleep and made wo-man,
 And men and women been sleeping together ever since.
 Behold the rib!
 Brothers, if God
 Had taken dat bone out of man's head
 He would have meant for woman to rule, hah
 If he had taken a bone out of his foot,
 He would have meant for us to dominize and rule.
 He could have made her out of back-bone
 And then she would have been behind us.
 But, no, God Almighty, he took de bone out of his side
 So dat places de woman beside us;
 Hah! God knowed his own mind.
 Behold the rib!³⁸

This sermon stresses not only the power of God but the equality of man and woman in God's creation. The rib rather than symbolizing the woman's inferiority actually stands for equal status, the right to be fully human. That is why the preacher placed so much emphasis on the phrase "Behold de rib!" The rib is not a "foot-bone" or a "back-bone," both of which represent inferiority. It is a "side-bone," thereby making woman equal to man.

Sometimes it was difficult to understand the exact verbal point the black preacher was making. But because the power of the story was embedded in the *act* of telling itself, it did not always matter. One could hear the message in the passion and mood which was created by the rising and falling of the voice as the preacher moved in bodily rhythm across the pulpit and in the aisle, describing rapidly the different scenes of God's salvation drama. The message was in the feeling of the Spirit that moved "from heart to heart and from breast to breast" throughout the congregation as the preacher hummed and moaned the story. The truth of the story was dependent upon whether the people received that extra strength to go one more mile in their struggle to survive and whether they received the courage to strive

one more time to right the wrongs in this world. The message was the passion for affirming the truth of their lives, a truth not recognized in the white world. And this "knowledge" was received every time the biblical story was preached as it was meant to be. That was why the people inquired of every minister: "Can the Reverend tell the story?"

The theme of liberation expressed in story form is the essence of black religion. Both content and form were essentially determined by black people's social existence. Because black people were oppressed but not destroyed by it, they intuitively knew that servitude was a denial of their essential worth. They therefore looked for religious and secular themes in their social existence that promised release from the pain of slavery and oppression. It was not simply through an exegetical study of the Bible that blacks decided to center their preaching on the Exodus and not on Paul's letter to Philemon; neither was it through exegesis that they centered their spirituals on the cross and resurrection of Jesus and not on his birth in Bethlehem. In view of their social situation of oppression, black people needed liberating visions so that they would not let historical limitations determine their perception of black being. Therefore when Christianity was taught to them and they began to read the Bible, blacks simply appropriated those biblical stories that met their historical need. That was why some themes are stressed and others are overlooked. The one theme that stood out above all other themes was *liberation*, and that was because of the social conditions of slavery. Such traditional Calvinistic problems as unconditional election and limited atonement did not occur to them. They did not debate religion on an abstract theological level but lived their religion concretely in history.

Like the theme of liberation, the form of black religion in story was chosen for similar sociological reasons. The easiest way for the oppressed to defy conceptual definitions that justify their existence in servitude is to tell stories about another reality where they are accepted as human beings. Story is not only easy to understand and to remember; it is often deceptive to those who stand outside the community where it was created. This is the meaning behind the black comment:

The white man is always trying to know into somebody else's business. All right, I'll set something outside the door of my mind for him to play with and handle. He can read my writing

but he sho' cain't read my mind. I'll put this play toy in his hand, and he will seize it and go away. Then I'll say my say and sing my song.³⁹

What white slave masters would have recognized that the tales of Br'er Rabbit and his triumphs over the stronger animals actually expressed black slaves' conscious hopes and dreams of overcoming the slave masters themselves? Who among the white community would have perceived that in the singing and preaching about "crossing the river Jordan and entering the New Jerusalem" black slaves were sometimes talking about Canada, Africa, and America north of the Mason-Dixon line? White slave masters were no brighter than our contemporary white theologians who can see in black religion only what their axiological presuppositions permit them to see. And that vision usually extends no further than some notion of black "other-worldliness" leading to passivity. But there is something much deeper than that simplistic idea in black religion. Nat Turner's spirit is buried beneath the shouts and the cries. And that spirit will soon rise and claim the eschatological future promised in God's encounter with the community.

It is difficult to express this liberating truth in rational discourse alone; it must be told in story. And when this truth is told as it was meant to be, the oppressed are transformed, taken into another world and given a glimpse of the promised land. And when they leave the church, they often say to one another what the disciples said after having experienced the Risen Lord: "Did not our hearts burn within while he talked to us on the road, while he opened to us the scriptures?" (Luke 24:32).

CHAPTER 4

Biblical Revelation and Social Existence

The social context of theology is not only evident in our language as human beings with certain political and social interests; it is also implied in the nature of divine revelation. Unlike the God of Greek philosophy who is removed from history, the God of the Bible is involved in history, and God's revelation is inseparable from the social and political affairs of Israel. Theology therefore is interested in speech not simply because theologians are creatures of time, but because Yahweh, the God of the Exodus and of Jesus Christ, is the Subject of its discourse. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and of Peter, James, and John is not an eternal idea, and neither is the divine an absolute ethical principle to whom people ought to appeal for knowledge of the Good. Rather, Yahweh is known and worshiped as the One who brought Israel out of Egypt, and who raised Jesus from the dead. God is the political God, the Protector of the poor and the Establisher of the right for those who are oppressed. To know God is to experience the acts of God in the concrete affairs and relationships of people, liberating the weak and the helpless from pain and humiliation. For theologians to speak of this God, they too must become interested in politics and economics, recognizing that there is no truth about Yahweh unless it is the truth of freedom as that event is revealed in the oppressed people's struggle for justice in this world.

THE SOCIAL CONTEXT OF DIVINE REVELATION IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

The Old Testament is a history book. To understand it and the divine revelation to which it witnesses, we must think of the Old

and transforming oppressed slaves into liberated servants. Indeed, if Christ is not *truly* black, then the historical Jesus lied. God did not anoint him "to preach good news to the poor" and neither did God send him "to proclaim release to the captives and recovering the sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed" (Luke 4:18f. RSV). If Christ is not black, the gospel is not good news to the oppressed, and Marx's observation is right: "Religion is the sign of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world . . . the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the opium of the people."²⁴

I realize that my theological limitations and my close identity with the social conditions of black people could blind me to the *truth* of the gospel. And maybe our white theologians are right when they insist that I have overlooked the *universal* significance of Jesus' message. But I contend that there is no universalism that is not particular. Indeed their insistence upon the universal note of the gospel arises out of their own particular political and social interests. As long as they can be sure that the gospel is *for everybody*, ignoring that God liberated a *particular* people from Egypt, came in a particular man called Jesus, and for the particular purpose of liberating the oppressed, then they can continue to talk in theological abstractions, failing to recognize that such talk is not the gospel unless it is related to the concrete freedom of the little ones. My point is that God came, and continues to come, to those who are poor and helpless, for the purpose of setting them free. And since the people of color are his elected poor in America, any interpretation of God that ignores black oppression cannot be Christian theology. The "blackness of Christ," therefore, is not simply a statement about skin color, but rather, the transcendent affirmation that God has not ever, no not ever, left the oppressed alone in struggle. He was with them in Pharaoh's Egypt, is with them in America, Africa and Latin America, and will come in the end of time to consummate fully their human freedom.

CHAPTER 7

The Meaning of Liberation

If Jesus Christ, in his past, present and future, reveals that the God of Scripture and tradition is the God whose will is disclosed in the liberation of oppressed people from bondage, what then is the meaning of liberation? In answering the question we begin by examining the theological presupposition upon which that meaning is based.

JESUS CHRIST AS THE GROUND OF HUMAN LIBERATION

Because human liberation is God's work of salvation in Jesus Christ, its source and meaning cannot be separated from Christology's sources (Scripture, tradition, and social existence) and content (Jesus in his past, present, and future). Jesus Christ, therefore, in his humanity and divinity, is the point of departure for a black theologian's analysis of the meaning of liberation. There is no liberation independent of Jesus' past, present, and future coming. He is the ground of our present freedom to struggle and the source of our hope that the vision disclosed in our historical fight against oppression will be fully realized in God's future. In this sense, liberation is not a human possession but a divine gift of freedom to those who struggle in faith against violence and oppression. Liberation is not an object but the *project* of freedom wherein the oppressed realize that their fight for freedom is a divine right of creation. This is what Anthony Burns, an ex-slave, meant by saying that "God made me a *man*—not a *slave*, and gave me the same right to myself that he gave to the man stole me to himself."¹ A similar point was made by David Walker when he urged black slaves to remember that freedom is not a gift from white slave masters but a natural right of divine creation.

Should tyrants take it into their heads to emancipate any of you, remember that your freedom is your natural right. You are men, as well as they, and instead of returning thanks to them for your freedom, return it to the Holy Ghost, who is your rightful owner. If they do not want to part with your labors, . . . and my word for it, that God Almighty will break their strong band.²

The grounding of liberation in God's act in Jesus Christ is the logical consequence of any Christian theology that takes Scripture seriously as an important source for the doing of theology. According to Scripture, the human freedom to hope for a new heaven and a new earth is grounded in God's freedom. Divine freedom is not merely an affirmation of the self-existence and complete transcendence of God over creaturely existence. It also expresses God's will to be in relation to creatures in the social context of their striving for the fulfillment of humanity. That is, God is free to be for us. This is the meaning of the Exodus and the Incarnation. The biblical God is the God whose salvation is liberation. God is the God of Jesus Christ who calls the helpless and weak into a newly created existence. God not only fights for them but takes their humiliated condition upon the divine Person and thereby breaks open a new future for the poor, different from their past and present miseries. Here is the central meaning of the cross, dramatically revealed in the Markan account of Jesus' cry of dereliction: "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" (15:34). These words show the depth of Jesus' agony and the pain of being abandoned by his Father. But because he was one with divinity and humanity, the pain of the cross was God suffering for and with us so that our humanity can be liberated for freedom in the divine struggle against oppression. This is why Ernst Käsemann says that "Jesus means freedom," and why Moltmann is correct in his contention that "the Christian faith not only believes in freedom but is already freedom itself. It not only hopes for freedom but, rather, is itself the inauguration of a free life on earth."³

When God is revealed in history as freedom for us, he is disclosed as the God of hope. "Christian theology," writes Moltmann, "speaks of history *eschatologically*."⁴ To speak of history eschatologically is to speak of the promise of God's Word of liberation, disclosed in God's future, breaking into our present, and overthrowing the powers of evil that hold people in captivity. This theme is prominent in the

black religious tradition with its claim that Jesus has not left black people alone in suffering. He is not only with them, "buildin' them up where they are torn down and proppin' them up on every leanin' side," but he is also "coming on the clouds of heaven" to take them "home to glory." Black people's faith in Jesus' future coming is the basis of their continued struggle against inexplicable evil in their present existence. They often expressed their faith in testimony. When the burdens of life became difficult and they could not offer a rational explanation of the pain they had to bear, the members of Macedonia could still affirm the meaning they found in black life. It might be expressed in language like this: "Sometimes the way gets difficult, and I don't know what to do. The burden of life gets heavy, and I often feel that I can't go anymore. But I tell you this *one* thing: I *know* that my Lord is coming again, and I want to be ready to put on my shoes, fasten up my robe, and walk around Zion. That's why I can't let a little trouble get me down. I can't quit, because I want to see my Jesus. 'O yes I'm going to eat at the welcome table some of these days, hallelujah!' " The courage and the strength to keep on fighting in this world are based on the hope that "de udder worl' is not like dis."

Black people can fight for freedom and justice, because the One who is their future is also the ground of their struggle for liberation. It does not matter what oppressors say or do or what they try to make us out to be. We know that we have a freedom not made with human hands. It is this faith that defines our person, and thus enables black people to sing when the world says that they have nothing to sing about, to pray when prayer seems useless to theologians and philosophers, and to preach when the world will not listen. For black people's singing, praying, and preaching are not grounded in any human potentiality but in the actuality of God's freedom to be with the oppressed as disclosed in the cross and resurrection of Jesus. Jesus is their freedom, the One they claim will "pick you up when you're fallin' and will come to your rescue when you're in trouble." He is the One who gave our black mothers and fathers in slavery an "old time religion," that moved their consciousness back to the shores of Africa, and thus enabled them to use the resources of their heritage in the struggle for freedom. They could shout and dance to the rhythm of freedom because Jesus is the Lord of all creation who gives the little ones liberating visions in wretched places. That is why black people call him a "Balm in Gilead" who came "to make the wounded whole"

and "to heal the sin-sick soul." With ecstatic praise they proclaim: "Lord, you've been so good to me. You stayed by my side when the world was against me. You are my rose of Sharon and the Prince of Peace," the One who breaks into the people's history, bestowing meaning upon their past, giving them courage to struggle in the present, and the will to hope that one day, "in that great gettin' up mornin'," it will "all be over with, all over this world."

Christ's salvation is liberation; there is no liberation without Christ. Both meanings are inherent in the statement that Jesus Christ is the ground of human liberation. Any statement that divorces salvation from liberation or makes human freedom independent of divine freedom must be rejected. From this starting point we proceed to examine the content of human liberation itself: as relation to God, as relation to self and community, as the practice of freedom in history and hope.

LIBERATION AS FREEDOM TO BE IN RELATION TO GOD

Fellowship with God is the beginning and the end of human liberation. The liberated person is the one who encounters God in faith, that is, in conviction and trust that one's true humanity is actualized in God. This vertical dimension of faith is the essential response to the gospel and is thus the heart of liberation's meaning from the human side. This is why conversion, prayer, and community worship are dominant motifs in black religion—when the people testify that they met Jesus "early one Thursday morning" or "late one Friday evening," they are talking about the importance of the divine-human encounter. Seldom is the actual date, hour, or year very important, although some will claim that it is crucial to know when the Lord touched your soul. But theologically, the reality of conversion points to the vertical dimension of liberation which is often called "communion with God."

The conversion experience in black religion is a radical, transforming encounter with the One the people believe to be the foundation of their existence. One person speaks of this experience as being "hooked in the heart." Another says "God struck me dead," while another testifies that she was "split open from head to foot." In the classic text, *God Struck Me Dead*, edited by Clifton H. Johnson of Fisk University, testimonies to these experiences, have an essential commonality: they speak of a divine-human encounter that meant death to

the old life and liberation to a new form of existence. One person put it this way:

I was fifty-two years old when the Lord freed my soul. . . . I was killed dead and made live again. . . .

During the vision the voice said to me, "Here you must die." I truly died and saw my body. I had a temporal and spiritual body. My spiritual body had six wings on it, and when I was barked at by the hellhounds of the devil I arose and flew away.

Ever since the Lord freed my soul I have been a new man. I trust in him to fight my battles, for he is a captain who has never lost a battle or been confounded with cares.⁵

In a more humorous vein, the same theme of conversion and its liberating effect was expressed by a nineteenth-century preacher who exhorted his converts at the water's edge, awaiting the ceremony of baptism.

My brethren and sistren, hark to my words. 'Tain't 'nuff dat you should have songs of thanksgivin' on yo' lips. 'Tain't ample dat you is shoutin' out hallelujas an' amens till yo' throats is hoarse an' yo' voices break in de middle. No suh! Onlessen you got de spirit of de Lawd pressin' heavy 'pon you an' de ol'-time 'ligion in yo' souls; onlessen you is filled wid happy hopes of de here-after an' fear of ol' Satan; onlessen you feels dat de angels is lookin' down on you wid favor from heaven above an' dat cherubims is singin' sweet praise fo' yo' salvation an' de Pearly Gates is done swung wide open to welcome you ez worthy pilgrims an' de golden harps is tuned fo' you an' yo' wings is waitin' to be fitted onto yo' shoulders; onlessen you has all dese feelin's, you won't get nothin' when you is immersed 'cept wet!⁶

After conversion, many blacks believe that prayer is needed in order to stay on what they call "the Lord's journey." Prayer is being able to communicate with God and to know that God cares for them. Most black prayers begin with an expression of thankfulness to God for having sustained the people in struggle. "Dear Lawd, we come befo' Thee and ask Thee ter stand by us. Thank Thee for ev'rything Thou's did for us." Because black families were brutalized and broken

by slavery and oppression, God became the stabilizing and liberating force in their lives. Thus in prayer, God is often referred to as a "mother for the motherless" and a "father for the fatherless." God becomes everything that the people need in order to sustain their lives with dignity. He is the One that the people can "tell all about their troubles." And in the act of telling one's story to God, fellowship with the divine is established, and thus believers become aware that God has not left them alone. Prayer is experiencing the power of God's presence and knowing that human liberation is based on divine revelation. This vertical sense of personal relationship with the God of Jesus is logically prior to the other components of human liberation. For without the knowledge of God that comes through divine fellowship, the oppressed would not know that what the world says about them is a lie. They would have to believe what they are *made* to believe through police sticks and guns. But if one has a relationship with the Resurrected One, then one can know that one has an identity that cannot be taken away with guns and bullets. This is what black people are affirming when they say: "Take it to the Lord in prayer." Prayer, therefore, is not an escape that leads to passivity. Rather, it is the beginning of the Christian practice of liberation. It is not only an expression of confidence in God's Word to effect a change in their history; it is also the start of their own action, the attempt of black people to take their history in their own hands on the basis of the gift of freedom made possible in and through divine fellowship. "To take one's troubles to the Lord in prayer" is to recognize that the One who said to Moses "I Am Who I Am" (Exod. 3:14 RSV) can cause being to replace nonbeing, merely through the assertion of the Word. Therefore to give one's allegiance to another authority than the divine Word of liberation is to negate divine fellowship. We are thus commanded to give our complete selves to God in prayer for the struggle of freedom. It is on the knowledge of this vertical divine-human relationship that the true struggle of liberation in history is based.

Community worship is also an important expression of the divine-human fellowship. Black worship itself is a liberating event for those who share the experience of the people that bears witness to God's presence in their midst. Through prayer, testimony, song, and sermon the people transcend the limitations of their immediate history and encounter the divine power, thereby creating a moment of ecstasy and joy wherein they recognize that the pain of oppression is not the last word about black life. It is not unusual for the people to get "carried

away" with their feelings, making it difficult for an observer to know what is actually happening. But the meaning of this event, according to the people, is found in their liberating encounter with the divine Spirit. In this encounter, they are set free as children of God. To understand what this means for black people, we need only to remember that they have not known freedom in white America. Therefore, to be told, "You are free, my children" is to create indescribable joy and excitement in the people. They sing because they are free. Black worship is a celebration of freedom. It is a black happening, the time when the people gather together in the name of the One who promised not to leave the little ones alone in trouble. The people shout, moan, and cry as a testimony to the experience of God's liberating presence in their lives. "There is joy on the inside and it wells up so strong that we can't keep still," testifies an ex-slave. "It is fire in the bones. Any time fire touches a man, he will jump."⁷

Human liberation as fellowship with God also must be seen as the very heart of the theological concept of the "image of God," even though this point has often been obscured. In the history of theology, the image of God has frequently been identified with the human capacity to reason. By contrast, theologians since Karl Barth, taking their cue from the Reformation, have recognized the relational character of the image of God. But even Barth did not set forth the political and social implications of the divine-human encounter with sufficient clarity. His concern for the transcendent quality of God's presence obscured the obvious political import of his analysis, even though Barth himself never viewed his theology as separate from his political involvement in the world. It is within this context that the exchange between Barth and Martin Niemöller ought to be understood. According to George Casalis,

Barth said to Niemöller, "You haven't the least idea what theology is all about, and yet how can I complain? For you think and see and do the right things!" To which Niemöller replied, "You can't stop thinking theologically for a moment, and yet how can I complain? For you think and see and do the right things too!"⁸

On the one hand, this exchange illustrates Barth's view that theology is relevant for life. But on the other, it also points out that Barth's exposition of the connection ought to be seen in a perspective in which

theology is the exposition of the meaning of God's liberation. For to affirm that human beings are free only when that freedom is derived from divine revelation has concrete political consequences. If we are created for God, then any other allegiance is a denial of freedom, and we must struggle against those who attempt to enslave us. The image of God is not merely a personal relationship with God, but is also that constituent of humanity which makes all people struggle against captivity. It is the ground of rebellion and revolution among slaves.

The relational character of human liberation as grounded in the human struggle to be free is emphasized in the black spirituals. Black people sang that Jesus

Came down here and talked to me,
Went away and left me free.

They also sang:

You say the Lord has set you free, . . .
Why don't you let yo' neighbor be!

In both lyrics the theme is freedom in this world as an essential constituent of Jesus' redemption. Human fellowship with God is defined as Jesus' work of liberation ("Came down here and *talked* with me, Went away and left me free"). The freedom derived from Jesus' Incarnation is connected with having talked with Jesus. This talking is fellowship with him and thus is the foundation of freedom. It is the basis of the struggle to live in the world according to divine obedience. ("You say the Lord has set you free, Why don't you let yo' neighbor be!"). Liberation is not only a relationship with God but an encounter grounded in the historical struggle to be free. "The Christian faith is freedom in struggle, in contradiction, and in temptation."⁹

LIBERATION AS FREEDOM IN RELATION TO SELF AND THE COMMUNITY OF THE OPPRESSED

To affirm that liberation is an expression of the image of God is to say not only who God is but also who I am and who my people are. Liberation is knowledge of self; it is a vocation to affirm who I am created to be. Furthermore, it is clear from divine revelation as wit-

nessed in Scripture that authentic liberation of self is attainable only in the context of an oppressed community in the struggle of freedom. Because God's freedom for humanity is the divine liberation of the oppressed from bondage, human freedom as response to God's gracious liberation is an act for our sisters and brothers who are oppressed. There can be no freedom for God in isolation from the humiliated and abused. There can be no freedom for God unless the hungry are fed, the sick are healed, and justice is given for the poor. This is the meaning of Bibilov's comment in Bernard Malamud's *The Fixer*: "Keep in mind that the purpose of freedom is to create it for others."¹⁰ How can we claim to be liberated or in the process of liberation in the Christian sense, if the structure and meaning of liberation are not derived from the oppressed community in its struggle of freedom? No one can be truly liberated until *all* are liberated. And until that eschatological event happens, the measure of liberation achievable is limited to the consciousness of freedom as defined by the oppressed and downtrodden in their fight for justice. In an unjust society, freedom for Christ can be found only among those who are in chains.

In the dialectic of freedom and oppression as both are related to political praxis the black theological view of liberation emerges. On the one hand, oppression is the denial of freedom, and therefore the opposite of liberation. But on the other, in an unredeemed social existence no one can be free who is not oppressed, that is, identified with the struggle of the unfree. There is no way to avoid the paradox I have expressed elsewhere: "Freedom is the opposite of oppression, but only the oppressed are truly free."¹¹ We must affirm this paradox because Jesus (in the dialectic of his death and resurrection) has connected his liberation with the struggles of the wretched of the earth. The Christian community, therefore, is that community that freely becomes oppressed, because they know that Jesus himself has defined humanity's liberation in the context of what happens to the little ones. Christians join the cause of the oppressed in the fight for justice not because of some philosophical principle of "the Good" or because of a religious feeling of sympathy for people in prison. Sympathy does not change the structures of injustice. The authentic identity of Christians with the poor is found in the claim which the Jesus-encounter lays upon their own life-style, a claim that connects the word "Christian" with the liberation of the poor. Christians fight not

for humanity in general but for themselves and out of their love for concrete human beings.

This raises the question, Who are the oppressed? What does Black Theology mean by oppression? Is Black Theology saying that only black people are oppressed and, further, that oppression is limited to social, political, and economic reality? What about the obvious oppression of others not of African descent and also the oppression of oppressors themselves which may be described as mental or spiritual oppression? After all, are we not *all* oppressed, especially those who think that their freedom is found in social, political, and economic domination of others?

Although these questions point to an essential truth of the gospel of liberation, they have been used by oppressors for untruth. The untruth of these questions lies in the subjective and often undisclosed intention of the people who ask them. While pretending to be concerned about the universal character of the human condition, oppressors are in fact concerned to justify their own particular status in society. They want to be oppressors and Christians at the same time. Since the oppressed are the only true Christians, oppressors claim to be victims, not for the purpose of being liberated but for their own social interests in retaining a "Christian" identity while being against Jesus Christ. This is what Dietrich Bonhoeffer in another context called "cheap grace."¹² I call it hypocrisy and blasphemy.

While it is true that *all* are oppressed (and especially those who rule over others), *only* those whose existence (and thus consciousness) is defined by the liberation of people from social, political, and economic bondage can understand the dialectic of oppression and freedom in the practice of liberation. Therefore when white theological rulers claim, "We are all oppressed!" they are speaking the truth, although they do not understand the truth. To do so, the truth would have to be reflected in their struggle to free themselves from their culture in order to join the cultural freedom of the poor. Until their consciousness is born anew in the light of black liberation, the truth of the statement is limited to verbal propositions that may be interesting for academicians but of little consequences for the freedom of the poor.

The first task of theology is to recognize that truth is not contained in words. Truth is found in the dynamic of the divine-human encounter in social existence wherein people recognize the connections

between historical struggle and ultimate reality. I do not believe that people can understand the truth of the statement that "all are oppressed" unless their consciousness is defined by that social existence that makes for understanding. In the context of biblical revelation, this means quite clearly the social existence of the poor. When therefore the question is asked, "Are not all oppressed?" one can easily discover the function of the question by unmasking the social interests that the questioner intends to represent. If the person is white and wants to find a justification for the continued existence of white suburban churches that obviously contradict the essence of Jesus' gospel of liberation, then the asking of the question and its implied affirmative answer is nothing but a clever theological trick to blur important *material* distinctions in social existence itself. For it is material reality (social, economic, and political existence with the poor) that makes for the proper understanding of spiritual reality ("all oppressed"). But when the spiritual reality really is made the point of departure of liberation, important material distinctions are lost in clouds of theological rhetoric that not only enhance confusion but contribute to the continued existence of oppression.

By putting physical oppression derived from unjust social structures in the same category with suburban loneliness, the white questioner implies that either one may be the point of departure for an understanding of the gospel of liberation. But that is not true. Of course everyone has problems, but those problems can be understood only from *one* social perspective, namely, the social perspective of the poor in the struggle of freedom. Those whose consciousness is defined by the oppressors cannot understand what liberation is. For the oppressors to understand liberation, they must be liberated from being political oppressors. When the dialectic of change in social existence meets the idea of liberation, liberation's content and form are thus radically changed. What was once merely spoken is now actualized in history, enabling the former oppressors to know that truth is embodied in the historical movement of the liberation and not in theology textbooks.

Because the phrase "all are oppressed" can be understood only from the perspective of the poor, only they are in a position to take seriously the *universal* dimension of the gospel of liberation. This places an awesome responsibility upon them, for when the dialectic of oppression and liberation is seen correctly, the oppressed recognize

that their call is to be God's "Kingdom of priests" to all peoples of the earth. Election involves service, even to the oppressors. This is the significance of Jesus' refusal to define God's Kingdom in terms of the private advantage of anyone, not even himself. When James and John said to him, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory," Jesus replied: "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I drink, or to be baptized with the baptism with which I am baptized?" (Mark 10:35-38 RSV). And to prove that they did not know what they were asking or recognize the connection between election and service, they said, "We are able" (10:39). Although Jesus' reply made clear that a place in God's Kingdom is not a popularity contest given out to special favorites but for those (i.e., the poor) for whom it has already been assigned, the other disciples still became indignant at James and John. At that point Jesus said:

You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many. (Mark 10:42-45 NRSV)

To be a "slave of all" is to recognize that the struggle of liberation is for all. This recognition does not make one submissive to unjust powers, but humble before Jesus Christ who is the Lord of all. His presence in our midst requires that we subordinate our personal interests to the coming liberation for all. Those who see God's coming liberation breaking into the present must live as if the future is already present in their midst. They must bear witness to humanity's liberation by freeing the present from the past and for the future. This means fighting for the inauguration of liberation in our social existence, creating new levels of human relationship in society. The struggle for liberation is the service the people of God render for all, even those who are responsible for the structure of slavery.

The assertion that liberation is for all does not mean that all will regard God's coming realm of freedom as good news. Even some oppressed people, having "made" it in the oppressors' world, will not

always welcome the freedom that the liberation struggle inaugurates. Their mental enslavement to their few crumbs from the master's table often negates their desire to share in the freedom of humanity. Therefore, though oppressed, they do not share the consciousness that arises from the dialectic of oppression and liberation in the political praxis of the people. They thus must be liberated in spite of and against themselves.

It is the same for the oppressors: they never recognize that the struggle of freedom is for all, including themselves. As Ostrovsky, the lawyer in Bernard Malamud's *The Fixer*, says: "In a sick country every step to health is an insult to those who live on its sickness."¹³ As bearers of liberation—of the realm of health in a sick society—the oppressed must therefore fight against the oppressors in order to fight for them. This is what Jesus meant when he said, "the Son of man . . . came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:45 RSV). The service would not be understood and would lead to his death.

To recognize that liberation is for oppressors because it is for all people prevents hate and revenge from destroying the revolutionary struggle. This is one of the essential truths of Franz Fanon's insights on freedom. He saw that the struggle was for all. "For Europe, for ourselves and for humanity, comrades, we must turn over a new leaf, we must work out new concepts, and try to set afoot a new humanity."¹⁴ Like Jesus in his attitude toward the oppressors of the first century, Fanon did not expect Europeans to recognize that Africa's liberation would be for Europe. Only those who are oppressed can see that the true liberation of self is found in the oppressed community in struggle of freedom.

LIBERATION AS THE PROJECT OF FREEDOM IN HISTORY

There is no true liberation independent of the struggle for freedom in history. History is the immanent character of liberation; it is the project of freedom. The immanence of liberation is "visible whenever the emancipation of [people] from the chains of slavery takes place in history."¹⁵ There is no liberation without transformation, that is, without the struggle for freedom in this world. There is no liberation without the commitment of revolutionary action against injustice, slavery, and oppression. Liberation then is not merely a

thought in my head; it is the sociohistorical movement of a people from oppression to freedom—Israelites from Egypt, black people from American slavery. It is the mind and body in motion, responding to the passion and the rhythm of divine revelation, and affirming that no chain shall hold my humanity down. This is what black slaves meant when they sang:

I'm a chile of God wid my soul set free,
For Christ hab bought my liberty.

A similar point is made in Scripture when divine revelation is connected with history, and salvation is defined in political terms. In the Old Testament salvation is grounded in history and is identical with God's righteousness in delivering the oppressed from political bondage. Salvation is a historical event of rescue. It is God delivering the people from their enemies and bestowing upon Israel new possibilities within the historical context of its existence. "This means that humanity's spiritual aims are inseparably connected with the transformation of society."¹⁶

The historical character of liberation as an essential ingredient in salvation is also found in the New Testament. Jesus' message centered on the proclamation of liberation for the poor, and his exorcisms clearly illustrated that he viewed his ministry as an engagement in battle with the powers of evil that hold people in captivity. The healing of the sick, feeding the hungry, and giving sight to the blind mean that Jesus did not regard salvation as an abstract, spiritual idea or a feeling in the heart. Salvation is the granting of physical wholeness in the concreteness of pain and suffering.

Liberation then cannot be separated from the historical struggle of freedom in this world. To be liberated is not simply "a status one has but an action one undertakes as a self-conscious subject."¹⁷ Liberation means:

Mammy, don't you cook no more,
You are free, you are free!

Rooster, don't you crow no more,
You are free, you are free!

Old hen, don't you lay no more eggs,
You are free, you are free.

Any view of liberation that fails to take seriously a people's freedom in history is not biblical and is thus unrelated to the One who has called us into being. That is why black preachers from Richard Allen to Adam Clayton Powell and Martin Luther King, Jr., viewed slavery and oppression as a contradiction of the divine will. While white missionaries and preachers were saying, "The Freedom which Christianity gives is a Freedom from the Bondage of Sin and Satan, and from the Dominion of Men's Lust and Passions and inordinate Desires" but "does not make the least Alteration in Civil property,"¹⁸ black preachers were taking their text from the book of Exodus and its account of Moses leading the Israelites from bondage. They also preached about Joshua and the battle of Jericho and John on the island of Patmos. Each of these biblical stories stressed God's will to make historical freedom a reality in the land of the oppressed.

Liberation as the fight for justice in this world has always been an important ingredient in black religion. Indeed black religion's existence as another reality, completely different from white religion, is partly related to its grounding of black faith in the historical struggle of freedom. Richard Allen, Absalom Jones, and other blacks walked out of St. George Methodist Church in 1787, and by 1816 Allen had become the first bishop in the newly organized African Methodist Episcopal Church. This church, like its sister church (African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church), became an important instrument of the attainment of black freedom during and after slavery. Independent black Baptist churches had a similar function in black life. During slavery black preachers were almost unanimous in pronouncing God's judgment on human servitude and in affirming that God created black people for freedom. According to the preachers, slaves must struggle to realize freedom in history by breaking the chains of slavery. While not all black preachers went as far as Henry Highland Garnet, he nonetheless represented the spirit of the black religious tradition when he identified obedience to God with the struggle against slavery. In an address to slaves, he said:

Your condition does not absolve you from your moral obligation. The diabolical injustice by which your liberties are cloven down, neither God, nor angels, or just men, command you to suffer for a single moment. Therefore, it is your solemn and imperative duty to use every means, both moral, intellectual, and physical, that promises success.¹⁹

The identification of divine justice with civil justice became the central theme of the civil rights movement in the 1950s and 60s. This identification was consistent with black religious tradition and with the Bible. To justify his fight against injustice, Martin Luther King, Jr., referred not only to the Exodus and Jesus Christ but especially to the prophets of the Old Testament. He quoted Amos often: "Let justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream" (5:24 RSV).

The historical character of liberation is also found in the spirituals and the blues. The spirituals stressed freedom from legal slavery, while the blues expressed the quest for freedom from the structures of oppression that emerged after the Civil War. Both the spirituals and the blues are inseparably connected with the social existence of a people trying to find self-expression in a world that placed severe limitations on black people. Liberation thus meant the breaking of the chains that held the people in servitude. This theme is expressed with poetic imagination by the contemporary black poet Mari Evans:

I take my freedom
lest I die
for pride runs through my veins. . . .
For I am he who
dares to say
I shall be Free, or dead
today. . . .²⁰

Liberation is not a theoretical proposition to be debated in a philosophy or theology seminar. It is a historical reality, born in the struggle for freedom in which an oppressed people recognize that they were not created to be seized, bartered, deeded, and auctioned. To understand the question of liberation, we need only hear the words, experience the mood, and encounter the passion of those who have to deal with the dialectic of freedom and oppression in the concreteness of their everyday existence.

Standin' on de corner, weren't doin' no hahm,
Up come a 'liceman an' he grab me by de ahm.
Blow a little whistle an' he ring a little bell
Heah come patrol wagon runnin' like hell.

Judge he call me up an' ast mah name.
Ah tole him fo' sho' Ah weren't to blame.
He wink at 'liceman, 'liceman wink too;
Judge say, "Nigger, you got some work to do!"

Workin' on ol' road bank, shackle boun'.
Long, long time 'fo' six months roll aroun'.
Miserin' fo' my honey, she miserin' fo' me,
But, Lawd, white folks won't let go holdin' me.

In this context, liberation is the opposite of the policeman, the judge, and that system which may be loosely described as "white folks" and in the New Testament is called the principalities and powers. Black people do not need a degree in theology or philosophy to know that something is not right about this world. Karl Marx is helpful in providing a theoretical frame for an articulation of the consciousness of the masses who are victims of economic oppression. But blacks in the United States and some other places believe that the problem of oppression is much more complex than Marx knew. Any analysis that fails to deal with racism, that demon embedded in white folks' being, is inadequate.

Diggin' in de road bank, diggin' in de ditch,
Chain gang's got me, boss got de switch.
All ah want's dese cold iron shackles off mah leg.

Judge say, "Three days!" Ah turn aside.
"And ninety nine more years!" Ah hung mah head
an' cried.

All ah want's dese cold iron shackles off mah leg.

Of course, liberation is more than the recognition that iron shackles are inhuman; it is also the willingness to do what is necessary to break the chains. As Paulo Freire says: "Nor does the discovery by the oppressed that they exist in dialectical relationship with the oppressor . . . in itself constitute liberation. The oppressed can overcome the contradiction in which they are caught only when this perception enlists them in the struggle to free themselves."²¹

Also it is in the historical context of reflection and action that the oppressed recognize that God is struggling with them in the fight for

liberation. This is the meaning of Jesus' lowly birth in Bethlehem, his healing of the sick and demon-possessed, and his death on the cross. God is making plain that God's kingdom is not simply a heavenly reality; it is an earthly reality as well. Human beings were not created to work in somebody else's fields, to pick somebody else's cotton, and to live in ghettos among rats and filth. They were created for liberation—for fellowship with God and the projection of self into the future, grounded in historical possibilities. Liberation is self-determination in history and laying claim to that which rightfully belongs to humanity. As Mari Evans puts it:

I
 am a black woman
 tall as a cypress
 strong
 beyond all definition still
 defying place
 and time
 and circumstance
 assailed
 impervious
 indestructible
 Look
 on me and be
 renewed.²²

And lest this struggle seem only grim and austere, the same poet sings of its present joy.

Who
 can be born black
 and not
 sing
 the wonder of it
 the joy
 the challenge
 Who
 can be born
 black
 and not exult!²³

LIBERATION AS THE PROJECT OF FREEDOM IN HOPE

While the meaning of liberation includes the historical determination of freedom in this world, it is not limited to what is possible in history. There is a transcendent element in the definition of liberation which affirms that the "realm of freedom is always more than the fragments of a free life which we may accomplish in history."²⁴ As the writer of I John puts it, "Beloved, we are God's children now; it does not appear what we shall be, but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, for we shall see him as he is" (3:2). There is included in liberation the "not yet," a vision of a new heaven and a new earth. This simply means that the oppressed have a future not made with human hands but grounded in the liberating promises of God. They have a liberation not bound by their own strivings. In Jesus' death and resurrection, God has freed us to fight against social and political structures while not being determined by them. Black preachers expressed that truth with apocalyptic imagination:

I know the way gets awful dark sometimes; it looks like everything is against us. Sometimes we wake up in the dark hours of midnight, briny tears flowing down our cheeks, crying and not knowing what we are crying about. But because God is our Captain and is on board now, we can sit still and hear the Word of the Lord. Away back before the wind ever blowed or before the earth was made, Our God had us in mind. He looked down through time one morning and saw you and me and ordained from the very beginning that we should be his children. You remember Old John the Revelator who claimed he saw a number that had come through hard trials and great tribulations and who had washed their robes in the blood of the lamb. Oh, brothers! Ain't you glad that you have already been in the dressing room, because it won't be long before we will take the wings of the morning and go where there will be no more sin and sorrow, no more weeping and mourning.²⁵

This sermon makes clear that liberation is also beyond history and not limited to the realities and limitations of this world. God is the sovereign ruler and nothing can thwart God's will to liberate the oppressed.

To persons who would be quick to define this kind of perspective on liberation as an opiate, I would suggest that the analysis of black eschatology as merely compensatory is too superficial and thus reflects the use of intellectual categories not derived from the social existence of black people. Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, and Nat Turner are enough evidence that such language about God and heaven does not always lead to passivity. But when black scholars spend too much time and energy trying to show how "radical" and "revolutionary" black religion was or is, they often fall into the trap of defining the content of these words in the light of Marxism or some other theoretical frame that did not arise from the social existence of black people. While recognizing the possibility of overlap in human experience, I contend that black people's experience of liberation as hope for a new heaven and a new earth represents a new mode of perception, different from the experience of white people. When black people sing, "When the roll is called up yonder, I'll be there," they are referring to more than a metaphysical reality about heaven. For the "roll up yonder" is not about an object but about black subjects who have encountered liberation's future. The people are talking about an experience of freedom that has already broken into their present, and the signs of its presence are reflected in the rhythm and the dance of the people. Rhythm and dance point to the experience of liberation as ecstasy, that is, the ability of the people to step outside of their assigned place and to affirm their right to be other than what is now possible in history. To be able to dance to the rhythm of black life means that the people are moving with a sense of direction and artistry derived from the depths of the "not yet." To be sure, sometimes the people *have* to sing to keep from crying, but the fact that they can sing is an indication of their transcendence over the present and a step into the future.

Liberation as a future event is not simply *other* worldly but is the divine future that breaks into their social existence, bestowing wholeness in the present situation of pain and suffering and enabling black people to know that the existing state of oppression contradicts their real humanity as defined by God's future. Black people sometimes expressed the contradiction between their present slavery and the liberated future in folkloric tales. Consider the tale entitled "Swapping Dreams." The master told Ike: "I dreamed I went to Nigger Heaven last night, and I saw there a lot of garbage, some torn-down houses, a

few old broken down, rotten fences, the muddiest, sloppiest streets I ever saw, and a big bunch of ragged, dirty Negroes walking around." But rather than accept the master's perspective about himself and his community, Ike responded with a comment that was deceptive and full of humor but liberating in its rejection of the present white value system. "Umph, umph, Massa," said Ike, "yah sho' musta et de same t'ing Ah did las' night, 'cause Ah dreamed Ah went up ter de white man's paradise, an' de streets wuz all ob gol' an' silvah, and dey was lots o' milk an' honey dere, an' putty pearly gates, but dey wuzn't uh soul in de whole place."²⁶ With this story, the statement about heaven becomes a revolutionary judgment against the system of oppression. The future becomes a present reality in the slave's consciousness, enabling him or her to struggle against the white system of injustice. Through story, black people created liberated structures of the future wherein they were able to encounter freedom's essence even though they were slaves.

It is important to note that Black Theology, while taking history with utmost seriousness, does not limit liberation to history. When people are bound to history, they are enslaved to what the New Testament calls law and death. If death is the ultimate power and life has no future beyond this world, then the rulers of the state who control the police and the military are indeed our masters. They have our future in their hands and the oppressed can be made to obey laws of injustice. But if the oppressed, while living in history, can nonetheless see beyond it, if they can visualize an eschatological future beyond the history of their humiliation, then "the *sigh* of the oppressed," to use Marx's phrase, can become a cry of revolution against the established order. It is this revolutionary cry that is granted in the resurrection of Jesus. Liberation then is not simply what oppressed people can accomplish alone; it is basically what God has done and will do to accomplish liberation both in and beyond history. Indeed, because we know that death has been conquered, we are set free to fight for liberation in history—knowing that we have a "home over yonder."

"The home over yonder," vividly and artistically described in the black slave songs, is a gift of divine freedom. If this "over-worldliness" in freedom is not taken with utmost seriousness, then there is no way for the oppressed to be sustained in the struggle against injustice. The oppressed will get tired and also become afraid of the risks of freedom. They will say as the Israelites said to Moses when they found

themselves between Pharaoh's army and the sea: "Is it because there are no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, in bringing us out of Egypt?" (Exod. 14:11 RSV). The fear of freedom and the risks contained in the struggle are ever present realities in the fight for liberation. But the transcendence of freedom, granted in Jesus' resurrection, introduces a factor that makes a significant difference. The difference is not that we are taken out of history while living on earth—that would be an opiate. Rather, it is a difference that plants our being firmly in history for struggle, because we know that death is not the goal of history. It was this truth that enabled black slaves to survive humanely in a situation of extreme cruelty. To be sure, they sang about the fear of "sinking down" and the dread of being a "motherless child." They encountered death and expressed the agony of its presence in song:

Soon one mornin', death comes a-creepin' in my room.
O my Lawd, O my Lawd, what shall I do?

Death was not an abstract idea, to be debated in a philosophy seminar. Death was a personal experience of loss who appeared in the black situation of pain as "a little ole man," "tippin' in the room." Sometimes death was pictured as "a chariot swingin' low" and "a train a-blowin' at de station." That is why blacks sing

Before this time another year,
I may be gone;
Out in some lonely graveyard,
O Lord, how long.

But because black slaves believed that death had been conquered in Jesus' resurrection, they transcended death and interpreted freedom from death as a heavenly, eschatological reality.

You needn't mind my dying,
Jesus' goin' to make up my dying bed.

In my room I know,
Somebody is going to cry,
All I ask you to do for me,
Just close my dying eyes.

They could transcend death because they knew about Jesus' past, had encountered his presence, and thus were assured of his future coming. Jesus' future coming was the foundation of their faith, enabling them to express this truth in song: "Where shall I be when the first trumpet soun'; soun' so loud till it woke up de dead?" "One day, one day 'bout twelve o' clock, O this ol' earth goin' to reel an' rock." "O My Lord, what a morning, when the stars begin to fall!" "When the sun refuse to shine, when the moon goes down in blood!" "In dat great getting up morning," "de world will be on fire," and "you'll see de stars a-fallen', de forked lighting, de coffins bursting," and "de righteous marching." "The dumb will talk, the lame will walk, the blind will see, and the deaf will hear."