ington Woodbey, a Baptist minister and one of the few blacks who was a dues-paying member of the Socialist Party. Bishop Turner fought fiercely for justice, refusing to accommodate himself to any form of discrimination in the churches or in society. When the Supreme Court ruled in 1883 that the Civil Rights Act of 1875 was unconstitutional, Turner said that the Constitution was a "dirty rag, a cheat, a libel and ought to be spit upon by every Negro in the land."[12] He was a major opponent to the accommodationist philosophy of Booker T. Washington and urged blacks to emigrate to Africa since they could not get justice in the U.S.

But these exceptions were not enough to change the dominant emphasis of black religious thought as defined by the churches. No persons were more cognizant of this than the few ministers who were seeking to address the social and political problems of the black community. "I get mad and sick," writes Bishop Turner, "when I look at the possibilities God has placed within our reach, and to think we are such block-heads we cannot see and utilize them."[13]

12. Turner, in *Respect Black: The Writings and Speeches of Henry McNeal Turner*, ed. Edwin S. Redkey (Salem, N.H.: Ayer, 1971), p. 63.
13. Turner, in *Respect Black*, p. 122.

Black Religious Thought in American History

Part II: More Recent History

The Civil Rights Movement and Martin Luther King, Jr.

THE WITHDRAWAL OF THE BLACK CHURCH FROM POLITICS CREATED the conditions that gave rise to the civil rights movement: the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) in 1909, the National Urban League (NUL) in 1911, and the Congress for Racial Equality (CORE) in 1942. These national organizations, and similar local and regional groups in many parts of the United States, took up the cause of justice and equality of blacks in the society. They were strongly influenced by ideas and persons in the churches. Civil rights organizations not only internalized the ideas about justice, liberation, hope, love, and suffering that had been preached in the churches; they also used church property to convene their own meetings and usually made appeals for support at church conferences. The close relations between the NAACP and black churches has led some to say that "the black church is the NAACP on its knees."

Due to the deradicalization of the black church, progressive black ministers found it difficult to remain involved in the internal affairs of their denominations. Baptist ministers, because of the autonomy of their local congregations, found it easier than the Methodists did to remain pastors while also being deeply involved in the struggle for black equality in the society. Prominent examples included Adam Clayton Powell and Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., father and son pastors of Abyssinian Baptist Church in New York. Adam Jr. made his entry onto the public stage by leading a four-year nonviolent direct-action campaign, securing some ten thousand jobs for Harlem blacks. In 1944 he was elected to Congress.

Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., embraced that part of the black religious tradition that refused to separate the Christian gospel from the struggle for justice in society. In his influential book *Marching Blacks,* he accused the white churches of turning Christianity into "churchianity," thereby distorting the essential message of the gospel which is "equality" and "brotherhood."

> The great loving heart of God has been embalmed and laid coolly away in the tombs we call churches. Christ of the Manger, the carpenter's bench, and the borrowed tomb has once again been crucified in stained-glass windows.[1]

Other influential thinkers of this period included Howard Thurman and Benjamin E. Mays. Howard Thurman wrote twenty-two books and lectured at more than five hundred institutions. He also served as dean of Rankin Chapel and professor of theology at Howard University, as the dean of Marsh Chapel and minister-at-large of Boston University, and as minister and co-founder of the interdenominational Fellowship Church of San Francisco. His writings and preaching influenced many, and *Life* magazine cited him as one of the twelve "Great Preachers" of this century. Some of his most influential writings include *Deep River* (1945), *The Negro Spiritual Speaks of Life and Death* (1947), *Jesus and the Disinherited* (1949), and *The Search for Common Ground* (1971). Unlike most black ministers concerned about racial justice, liberation, love, suffering, and hope, Thurman did not become a political activist; he took the "inward journey" (the title of one of his books), focusing on a "spiritual quest" for liberation beyond race and ethnic origin. He was able to develop this universalist perspective without ignoring the urgency of the political issues involved in the black struggle for justice.

Benjamin E. Mays, ecumenist and long-time president of Morehouse College, also made an important contribution to black religious thought through his writings and addresses on the black church and racism in America. He was the author (with Joseph W. Nicholson) of *The Negro's Church* (1933), *The Negro's God* (1938), *Seeking to be Christian in Race Relations* (1957), and *Born to Rebel* (1971). He also chaired the National Conference on Religion and Race in 1963. Mays was an example of a black religious thinker who found the black church too limiting as a context for

1. Powell, *Marching Blacks,* rev. ed. (New York: Dial Press, 1973), p. 194.

confronting the great problems of justice, liberation, love, hope, and suffering. Like Thurman and Powell, Mays regarded racism as anti-Christian, an evil that must be eliminated from the churches and the society.

No thinker has made a greater impact upon black religious thought or even upon American society and religion as a whole than Martin Luther King, Jr. The fact that many white theologians can write about American religion and theology with no reference to him reveals both the persistence of racism in the academy and the tendency to limit theology narrowly to the academic discourse of seminary and university professors.

Much has been written about the influence of King's graduate education upon his thinking and practice, especially the writings of George Davis, Henry David Thoreau, Mahatma Gandhi, Edgar S. Brightman, Harold DeWolf, G. W. Hegel, Walter Rauschenbusch, Paul Tillich, and Reinhold Niebuhr. Of course, these religious and philosophical thinkers influenced him greatly, but it is a mistake to assume that they constituted the basis of his life and thought. King was a product of the black church tradition; its faith determined the essence of his theology. He used the intellectual tools of highly recognized thinkers to explain what he believed to the white public and also to affirm the universal character of the gospel. But he did not arrive at his convictions about God by reading white theologians. On the contrary, he derived his religious beliefs from his acceptance of black faith and his application of it to the civil rights struggle.

In moments of crisis, King turned to the God of black faith. From the beginning of his role as the leader of the Montgomery bus boycott to his tragic death in Memphis, King was a public embodiment of the central ideas of black religious thought. The heart of his beliefs revolved around the ideas of love, justice, liberation, hope, and redemptive suffering. The meaning of each is mutually dependent on the others. Though love may be appropriately placed at the center of his thought, he interpreted it in the light of justice for the poor, liberation for all, and the certain hope that God has not left this world in the hands of evil men.

King often used the writings of Tillich, Niebuhr, and other white thinkers to express his own ideas about the interrelations of love and justice. But it was his internalization of their meaning in the black church tradition that helped him to see that "unmerited suffering is redemptive." While those who fight for justice must

be prepared to suffer in the struggle for liberation, they must never inflict suffering on others. That was why King described nonviolence as "the Christian way in race relations" and "the only road to freedom."

To understand King's thinking, it is necessary to understand him in the context of his own religious heritage. His description of himself is revealing:

> I am many things to many people; Civil Rights leader, agitator, trouble-maker and orator, but in the quietness of my heart, I am fundamentally a clergyman, a Baptist preacher. This is my being and my heritage for I am also the son of a Baptist preacher, the grandson of a Baptist preacher and the great-grandson of a Baptist preacher. The Church is my life and I have given my life to the Church.[2]

The decisive impact of the black church heritage upon King can be seen in his ideas about justice, liberation, love, hope, and suffering. He took the democratic tradition of freedom and combined it with the biblical tradition of justice and liberation as found in the book of Exodus and the prophets. Then he integrated both traditions with the New Testament idea of love and suffering as disclosed in Jesus' cross, and from all three, he developed a theology that was effective in challenging all Americans to create the beloved community in which all persons are equal. While it was the Gandhian method of nonviolence that provided the strategy for achieving justice, it was, as King said, "through the Negro church" that "the way of nonviolence became an integral part of our struggle."[3]

As a Christian whose faith was derived from the cross of Jesus, King believed that there could be no true liberation without suffering. Through nonviolent suffering, he contended, blacks would not only liberate themselves from the necessity of bitterness and feeling of inferiority toward whites but would also prick the conscience of whites and liberate them from a feeling of superiority. The mutual liberation of blacks and whites lays the foundation for both to work together toward the creation of an entirely new world.

2. King, "The Un-Christian Christian," *Ebony,* August 1965, p. 77.
3. King, "Letter from Birmingham Jail," in *Why We Can't Wait* (New York: Signet, 1963), p. 87.

In accordance with this theological vision, King initially rejected Black Power because of its connotations of hate; he believed that no beloved community of blacks and whites could be created out of bitterness. He said that he would continue to preach nonviolence even if he became its only advocate.

He took a similar but even more radical position with regard to the war in Vietnam. Because the Civil Rights Act (1964) and the Voting Rights Bill (1965) did not significantly affect the life-chances of the poor, and because of the dismal failure of President Johnson's War on Poverty, King became convinced that his dream of 1963 had been turned into a nightmare. Gradually he began to see the connections between the failure of the war on poverty and the expenditures for the war of Vietnam. In the tradition of the Old Testament prophets and against the advice of many of his closest associates in black and white communities, King stood before a capacity crowd at Riverside Church and condemned America as "the greatest purveyor of violence in the world today."[4] He proclaimed God's judgment against America and insisted that God would break the backbone of U.S. power if the nation did not bring justice to the poor and peace to the world. Vicious criticisms came from blacks and whites in government, civil rights groups, and the nation generally as he proclaimed God's righteous indignation against the three great evils of our time—war, racism, and poverty.

During the severe crises of 1966-68, King turned not to the theologians and philosophers of his graduate education but to his own religious heritage. It was eschatological hope derived from his slave grandparents and mediated through the black church that sustained him in the midst of grief and disappointment. This hope also empowered him to "master [his] fears" of death and to "stand by the best in an evil time." In a sermon he preached at Ebenezer Baptist Church, he said,

> I've decided what I'm going to do; I ain't going to kill nobody . . . in Mississippi . . . and . . . in Viet Nam, and I ain't going to study war no more. And you know what? I don't care who doesn't like what I say about it. I don't care who criticizes me in an editorial; I don't care what white person or Negro criticizes me. I'm going to stick with the best. . . . Every now and then we

4. King, *The Trumpet of Conscience* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), p. 24.

sing about it, if you are right, God will fight your battle. I'm going to stick by the best during these evil times.[5]

It was not easy for King to "stand by the best," because he often stood alone. But he firmly believed that the God of black faith had said to him, "Martin Luther, stand up for righteousness. Stand up for justice. Stand up for truth. And lo, I will be with you, even until the end of the world."[6]

King combined the exodus-liberation and cross-love themes with the message of hope found in the resurrection of Jesus. He derived hope not from the optimism of liberal Protestant theology but from his belief in the righteousness of God as defined by his reading of the Bible through the eyes of his slave forerunners. The result was the most powerful expression in black history of the essential themes of black religious thought from the integrationist viewpoint.

> Centuries ago Jeremiah raised a question, "Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician?" He raised it because he saw the good people suffering so often and the evil people prospering. Centuries later our slave foreparents came along and they too saw the injustices of life and had nothing to look forward to morning after morning, but the rawhide whip of the overseer, long rows of cotton and the sizzling heat, but they did an amazing thing. They looked back across the centuries and they took Jeremiah's question mark and straightened it into an exclamation point. And they could sing, "There is a balm in Gilead to make the wounded whole. There is a balm in Gilead to heal the sinsick soul."[7]

Black Power and Black Theology

From the time of its origin in slavery to the present, black religious thought has been faced with the question of whether to advocate integration into American society or separation from it. The majority of the participants in the black churches and the civil rights movement have promoted integration, and they have

5. King, "Standing by the Best in an Evil Time," unpublished sermon no. 7, King Center Archives.
6. King, "Thou Fool," unpublished sermon no. 14, King Center Archives.
7. King, "Thou Fool."

interpreted justice, liberation, love, suffering, and hope in the light of the goal of creating a society in which blacks and whites can live together in a "beloved community."

While integrationists have emphasized the American side of the double consciousness of African-Americans, there have also been nationalists who rejected any association with the United States and instead have turned toward Africa. Nationalists contend that blacks will never be accepted as equals in a white racist church and society. Black freedom can be achieved only by black people separating themselves from whites—either by returning to Africa or by forcing the government to set aside a separate state within the United States so blacks can build their own society.

The nationalist perspective on the black struggle for freedom is deeply embedded in the history of black religious thought. Its prominent advocates include Bishop Henry McNeal Turner of the AME Church; Marcus Garvey, the founder of the Universal Negro Improvement Association; and Malcolm X of the religion of Islam. Black nationalism is centered on blackness, a repudiation of all of the values of white culture and religion. Proponents reverse the values of the dominant society by attributing to black history and culture what whites have said about theirs. For example, Bishop Turner claimed that "We have as much right biblically and otherwise to believe that God is a Negro . . . as you . . . white people have to believe that God is a fine looking, symmetrical and ornamented white man."[8] Marcus Garvey held a similar view: "If the white man has the idea of a white God, let him worship his God as he desires. . . . We Negroes believe in the God of Ethiopia, the everlasting God—God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Ghost, the One God of all ages."[9]

The most persuasive interpreter of black nationalism during the 1960s was Malcolm X, who proclaimed a challenging critique of King's philosophy of integration, nonviolence, and love. Malcolm X advocated black unity instead of the "beloved community," self-defense in lieu of nonviolence, and self-love in place of turning the other cheek to whites.

Like Turner and Garvey, Malcolm X asserted that God is

8. Turner, in *Respect Black: The Writings and Speeches of Henry McNeal Turner*, ed. Edwin S. Redkey (Salem, N.H.: Ayer, 1971), p. 176.
9. Garvey, in *Philosophy and Opinions of Marcus Garvey*, ed. Amy Jacques-Garvey, Studies in American Negro Life Series (New York: Atheneum, 1969), p. 44.

black; but unlike them he rejected Christianity as the white man's religion. He became a convert initially to Elijah Muhammad's Nation of Islam and later to the world-wide Islamic community. His analysis of Christianity and of American society as white was so persuasive that many blacks followed him into the religion of Islam, and others accepted his criticisms even though they did not become Muslims. Malcolm pushed civil rights activists to the left and caused many black Christians to reevaluate their interpretation of Christianity.

> Brothers and sisters, the white man has brainwashed us black people to fasten our gaze upon a blond-haired, blue-eyed Jesus! We're worshiping a Jesus that doesn't even *look* like us! Now, just think of this. The blond-haired, blue-eyed white man has taught you and me to worship a *white* Jesus, and to shout and sing and pray to this God that's *his* God, the white man's God. The white man has taught us to shout and sing and pray until we *die,* to wait until *death,* for some dreamy heaven-in-the-hereafter, when we're *dead,* while this white man has his milk and honey in the streets paved with golden dollars right here on *this* earth![10]

During the first half of the 1960s, King's interpretation of justice as equality with whites, liberation as integration, and love as nonviolence dominated the thinking of the black religious community. However after the riot in Watts in August 1965, black clergy began to take another look at Malcolm's philosophy, especially his criticisms of Christianity and American society. Malcolm X's contention that America was a nightmare and not a dream began to ring true to many black clergy as they watched their communities go up in flames as young blacks shouted in jubilation, "burn, baby, burn."

It was during the James Meredith "march against fear" in Mississippi in June 1966 (after Malcolm had been assassinated in February 1965) that some black clergy began to openly question King's philosophy of love, integration, and nonviolence. When Stokely Carmichael proclaimed "Black Power," it sounded like the voice of Malcolm X. Though committed to the Christian gospel, black clergy found themselves moving slowly from integration to separation, from Martin Luther King to Malcolm X.

10. Malcolm X, *Autobiography of Malcolm X* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1973), p. 222.

The rise of Black Power created a decisive turning point in black religious thought. Black Power forced black clergy to raise the theological question about the relation between black faith and white religion. Although blacks have always recognized the ethical heresy of white Christians, they have not always extended it to Euro-American theology. With its accent on the cultural heritage of Africa and political liberation "by any means necessary," Black Power shook black clergy out of their theological complacency.

Unable to ignore or reject Black Power, a small group of black clergy, mostly from the North, separated themselves from King's absolute commitment to nonviolence. Neverthless, like King and unlike Black Power advocates, these black clergy were determined to remain within the Christian community. They were faced with the dilemma of how to reconcile Christianity and Black Power, Martin Luther King and Malcolm X.

In their attempt to resolve their dilemma, an ad hoc National Committee of Negro Churchmen (later the National Conference of Black Churchmen—NCBC) published a statement on "Black Power" in the *New York Times,* 31 July 1966. The publication of the "Black Power" statement represented the beginning of a process in which a radical group of black clergy in both black and white denominations made a sharp separation between their understanding of the Christian gospel and the theology of white churches. Addressing the leaders of white America (especially the churches) and the black community, black clergy endorsed the positive elements in Black Power.

In the debate that followed, the clergy of the NCBC became certain that their theological orientation in black history and culture created in them a view of the gospel radically different from that of white Christians. The term "liberation" emerged as the dominant theme in black theology, and justice, love, hope, and suffering were interpreted in the light of its political implications. Black clergy were determined that they would not allow the theology of white racists to separate them from their solidarity with suffering blacks in the urban ghettos. That was why they found Malcolm X more useful than King, even though they were as determined as King not to separate themselves from the latter.

Writings in the general area of black theology began with the public statements of the NCBC, in which blacks attacked racism in the white church as heresy. Also important for the development of black theology was the contribution of Vincent Harding. In his essays "Black Power and the American Christ" (1967) and "The Religion of Black Power" (1968), Harding articulated the religious meaning of Black Power and the challenge it posed for the followers of Martin Luther King.

In 1968, Albert Cleage published a book of sermons with the provocative title *The Black Messiah.* The contents were as controversial as the title. Unlike Bishop Henry Turner and Marcus Garvey, Cleage advocated that Jesus and God were literally black. His theological position became known as "Black Christian Nationalism." He attempted (unsuccessfully) to convince Black Power advocates that they were the church (even though they were not religiously conscious of it), and he tried to make the clergy of NCBC understand that the only true church was the black liberation struggle. Cleage interpreted the ideas of liberation, justice, and love exclusively in terms of the philosophy of black separatism.

Although NCBC and Albert Cleage endorsed Black Power, it was not until 1969 that I wrote the first book on black theology, a work entitled *Black Theology and Black Power.* Less radical than Cleage but somewhat to the left of NCBC, I agreed with both in identifying the gospel of Jesus with God's liberation of the poor and the weak. I defined white theology as heretical and referred to Black Power's message of liberation as the true gospel for twentieth-century America.

In my second book, *A Black Theology of Liberation* (1970), I made the word *liberation* the organizing principle of an emerging black perspective on theology. On the one hand, I was unlike Cleage in that I remained in dialogue with other perspectives on the Christian faith; on the other hand, I was like Cleage in that I interpreted the themes of justice, love, suffering, and hope according to the political liberation of the black poor.

Other black theologians and clergy of NCBC supported me in my definition of Christian theology as a theology of liberation. Shortly after the publication of *Black Theology and Black Power,* the Theological Commission of NCBC assembled a group of black clergy and theologians in Atlanta (June 1969) to write a statement on "Black Theology." They defined it as "a theology of black

liberation," and they also connected it with James Forman's "Black Manifesto" (which had been issued a month earlier at Riverside Church in New York) by endorsing the concept of reparations.

In 1972, two important texts on black theology appeared: J. Deotis Roberts's *Liberation and Reconciliation: A Black Theology* and Major Jones's *Black Awareness: A Theology of Hope.* Both Roberts and Jones supported the concept of black theology as liberation theology, but they felt that my emphasis on liberation was too narrow and my attack on white people was too severe. Roberts balanced the idea of liberation with reconciliation, and Jones balanced my "by any means necessary" with an ethic of nonviolence. Both attempted to develop a black theology that was not dependent on Black Power and thus did not exclude whites from the Christian community in the struggle to build a just society. Roberts and Jones appealed to the life and writings of Martin Luther King for their claims about the gospel and the black struggle of freedom, while I turned to Malcolm X.

No issue affected the development of black theology more than the question of its relation to African history and culture. This issue was introduced in theology in a provocative manner with the publication of Joseph R. Washington's *Black Religion* (1964). He claimed that black religion was a unique, non-Christian folk religion derived from the African heritage and the black struggle for social and political betterment. He also deplored the black separation from Christianity and blamed it on white Christians. While most black theologians spoke against Washington's book, especially his low evaluation of black religion, several agreed with him about the importance of the African heritage in black religious development. Charles Long, Gayraud Wilmore, Cecil Cone, and others went on to offer a related criticism of black liberation theology. Because I and other radical black theologians accented liberation and did not mention the importance of the African heritage of black theology, the critics contended that the liberation theologians needed to recognize and correct their dependence upon the supposedly heretical European theologians. If black theology is to be truly black, it must derive its meaning from the history and culture of the people in whose name it claims to speak. This critique was substantially incorporated into black liberation theology, particularly in my books *The Spirituals and the Blues* (1972), *God of the Oppressed* (1975), and subsequent

writings. I began to turn away from my former use of white theologians to a greater use of slave narratives, sermons, prayers, and songs as the chief sources for the development of the themes of justice, liberation, love, suffering, and hope in black theology.

The most challenging critique of black liberation theologians came from the writings of William R. Jones, who asked the provocative question, "Is God a white racist?" In a book with that question as its title, Jones asked, If God is liberating the black oppressed from bondage, what is the evidence for that claim? Although Jones's analysis posed a serious challenge for all religions of salvation, the way he put the question gave it a special poignancy for blacks. Black theologians could not ignore or belittle it.

Of course there was no answer to Jones's question that would meet the demands of his philosophical structure. But his critique forced black theologians to face head-on the problem of suffering. His questioning made them realize that suffering must be the controlling category of black theology along with liberation, so that black professors could not easily identify liberation with any particular realization in history. Black theologians responded to Jones by focusing more intentionally on the theme of hope as King had earlier. Using Scripture and the black experience, they contended that in the cross of Jesus, God takes the suffering of the victims upon himself, and in the resurrection of Jesus, evil is overcome. The victims can now know that their humanity is not negated by their victimization.

Although black theologians debated among themselves about liberation and reconciliation, African religion and Christianity, liberation and suffering, they agreed that white religion is racist and therefore un-Christian. In black theologians' attack on white religion and in their definition of the gospel as liberation, they moved toward a close solidarity with liberation theologians in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the oppressed in the United States. In the early seventies, the dialogues between black and Third World theologians began—first with Africans, then with Latin Americans, and lastly with Asians. The dialogues with Third World theologians on other continents created a realization of the need for dialogue between blacks and other oppressed minorities in the United States and with an emerging feminist consciousness in all Christian groups.

The dialogues with other liberation theologians has revealed

both the strengths and weaknesses of black theology. For example, Africans pointed out the gaps in the knowledge of American black theologians about African culture; Latin theologians revealed their lack of class analysis; Asian theologians showed the importance of a knowledge of religions other than Christianity; feminist theologians revealed the sexist orientation of black theology; and other minorities in the United States showed the necessity of a coalition in the struggle for justice in the United States and around the globe.

A black feminist theology has already begun to emerge with the work of such persons as Paula Murray, Jackie Grant, Katie Cannon, Delores Williams, and Kelly Brown. It is clear that black theology will develop radically new directions when a fully developed feminist consciousness emerges. It will deepen its analysis of racism and also protect it from the worse aspects of sexism.

The impact of Third World theologians has already pushed black theology in the direction of a consideration of Marxism and socialism. This exploration has taken place in the context of the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT), which held its organizing meeting in Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, in 1976. Since that time meetings have been held in Ghana (1977), Sri Lanka (1979), Brazil (1980), India (1981), and Geneva (1983). Black theologians have also had a positive impact on Third World theologians in accenting the importance of the problem of racism. These dialogues have also established the category of liberation as the heart of the gospel for many Third World theologians here and abroad.

Impact on American Religion

The impact of black religious thought on American religion has been significant. During the slavery era, it challenged the white interpretation of Christianity by creating the "invisible institution" and separatist churches which emphasized God's justice and love as being identical with the liberation of slaves from bondage. When physical liberation seemed impossible, blacks affirmed their humanity by projecting their liberation into God's eschatological future, a time when all wrongs will be righted and evil will be completely exterminated.

From the time of its origin in slavery to its contemporary embodiment in the civil rights and black nationalists movements,

black religious thought has challenged segregation and discrimination in the society and the churches. It has contended that God's justice and love cannot be reconciled with racism. Black Christians not only preached and sang about liberation in the next world but also used their churches as instruments for the establishment of justice in this one. They also created organizations that supported their churches and sometimes went beyond them in the fight for the equality of blacks in the society.

Through the life and thought of Martin Luther King, Jr., and Malcolm X, black religious thought achieved national and international recognition. King is the only American besides George Washington whose birthday is a national holiday, and he was the second black American to receive the Nobel Peace Prize. Both King and Malcolm X laid the foundation that gave birth to black liberation theology which has become widely known and taught in many parts of the world.

The significance of black theology for black religious thought is found at two points. First, black theology identified racism in the white churches as a Christian heresy, in contrast to the previous tendency to limit its critique to the ethical behavior of white Christians. Black theology claimed that the faith of white Christians was defective because of their indifference to and support of racism in their churches and the larger society.

Second, by rejecting white theology as heresy, the proponents of black theology were also forced to create a new theology of the black poor, one that would empower them in their struggle for justice. Black theologians began to reread the Bible in the historical context of the black experience of struggle. From this new hermeneutical vantage point emerged the theological conviction that the God of Moses and the prophets and of Jesus and Paul is none other than the liberator of the poor and the downtrodden. With its articulation of this theological insight, black theology became known not only as the first expression of liberation theology in North America, but more importantly it located the chief meaning of liberation in the cross of Jesus, so as to say with Paul that "God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise, God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong, God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing the things that are" (1 Cor. 1:27-28).

What Is the Church?

MUCH HAS BEEN WRITTEN ABOUT THE CHURCHES DURING THE course of their historical development. Ernst Troeltsch, H. Richard Niebuhr, and Peter Paris have written about the social origin and teaching of the Christian churches.[1] Others, such as Williston Walker, Carter G. Woodson, E. Franklin Frazier, and Sydney Ahlstrom, have concentrated on their institutional history.[2] Systematic and historical theologians such as Karl Barth, Cyril Richardson, Jürgen Moltmann, and Hans Küng have focused their attention on the doctrine of the church, with special interest in its transcendent origin.[3] None of these foci should be isolated from the others, because each is important for the formulation of a meaningful, contemporary definition of the church.

Every generation of Christians should ask: What is it that constitutes our identity and thus empowers us to live it out in the world? To answer this question, we must focus on the institutional and ethical activity that validates our ecclesiological confessions. If we separate the doctrine of the church from its historical embodiment in our congregational life, we will also ignore the

1. See Troeltsch, *The Social Teaching of the Christian Churches,* 2 vols., trans. Olive Wyon (New York: Harper & Row, 1960); Niebuhr, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism* (Cleveland: Meridian Books, 1957); and Paris, *The Social Teaching of the Black Churches* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1985).

2. See Walker, *A History of the Christian Church,* rev. ed. (New York: Scribner's, 1959); Woodson, *History of the Negro Church* (Washington: Associated Publishers, 1921); Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (New York: Schocken Books, 1964); and Alstrom, *A Religious History of American People* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1972).

3. See Barth, *Church Dogmatics,* ed. Geoffrey W. Bromiley and T. F. Torrance, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley, (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1956), 4/1-2; Richardson, *The Church through the Centuries* (New York: Scribner's, 1950); Moltmann, *The Church in the Power of the Spirit* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977); and Küng, *The Church* (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1967).

This essay was presented at a Pastors' Conference on the Church at Emory University (1968) and later rewritten for a conference on Jesus and Justice at Philander Smith College (1985).