

BLACK AMERICAN THEOLOGY

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Ethic III

What Is Black American Theology?

Black American Theology is the theological perspective of Black Americans, who are descended from enslaved Africans that were brought to the United States. Their ancestors mainly came from West, Central, and Southeast Africa and they practiced Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and traditional African religions.¹ They also came from a variety of African people groups, and here are some that are listed in official slave databases²:

WEST AFRICA

Wolof, Bambara, Mandingo, Jola, Fulani, Tuareg, Nard, Canga, Kissi, Temne, Grif, Susu, Mina, Fon, Yoruba, Edo, Ibgo, Ibibio, Akan, and Caracol

CENTRAL AFRICA

Kongo, Ndongo, Mbundu, Ovimbundu, and Lunda

SOUTHEAST AFRICA

Makua, Yao, and Malagasy

***Some slaves also came from the horn of Africa, and some Black Americans have Somali and Ethiopian ancestry.³**

After getting to America enslaved Africans were told four lies by European slave owners. These lies were meant to keep them from fighting back and accept a life of bondage. They were:

- 1. Africa was a dark continent that needed to be “saved”.**
- 2. Slavery and colonialism were God’s way to “saving” African.**
- 3. God owned the souls of Black people, but their masters owned their bodies.**
- 4. Freedom came in heaven after death.**

In response to these lies some enslaved Africans gave in, but others resisted by coming together in secret gatherings. These gatherings were called “Hush Harbors”⁴ where they danced, sang, and prayed together, and they worked as an oppressed community to make sense of the reality of suffering and the reality of God. In short, they created an inter-faith dialog, where they looked at their situation from Muslim, Christian, Jewish, and traditional Africa perspectives. They also looked at it from their different cultural perspectives and discovered four truths that put down the lies of slave owners. These truths were:

- 1. Black people are human beings made in the image and likeness of God.**
- 2. Black people’s natural state is freedom on earth and in heaven.**
- 3. Black people are called by God to resist all oppression.**
- 4. Black people are called by God to speak out against all forms of injustice in the world.**

¹ David D. Daniel III, “Kongolese Christianity in the Americas of the 17th and 18th Centuries”, *Studien zur Außereuropäischen Christentumsgeschichte (Asien, Afrika, Lateinamerika) - Volume 25*, 2014 <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/53025682e4b0b0825b1a4e69/t/5a034472f9619a5d8dce11e3/1510163573035/Daniels%2C+Kongolese+Christianity+in+the+Americas.pdf>

² Ibrahima Seck, *Bouki Fait Gombo*, pg. 1-14-;35-58

³ Nastasia Peteuil, “African Americans Connect With Roots Through DNA,” *Voice of America*, December, 12, 2017 <https://www.voanews.com/a/african-americans-connect-with-roots-through-dna/4160269.html>

⁴ Williams Evans, Freddi. “Hush Harbor: Praying in Secret,” <http://www.freddievans.com/hush-harbor>

From these truths, enslaved Africans created a new kind of religion; a religion that was born in the West but was global South in spirit. Therefore, Black American Theology is not a Western theology, it is a theology of the African Diaspora that speaks to the needs of Black people beyond the United States. It has inspired leaders such as Steve Biko in South Africa and freedom movements among Black people in the Caribbean and South America. It has also influenced freedom movements for non-Black people of color, such as the Poor Christian Liberation Movement of India for people from lower castes.⁵

In summary, Black American Theology is the theological perspective of enslaved Africans and their descendants in the United States.

What is the Goal of Black American Theology?

Unlike Western theologies (e.g., White American and European) which asks, “Why do people suffer?”, Black American Theology asks, “Where is God for suffering people?” It also does not see suffering as something that should not happen; suffering is simply a natural part of life that every person will experience. In many Western theologies God is like an insurance plan for suffering, or a teddy bear to comfort people when bad things happen. But in Black American Theology God is a “co-sufferer”, or someone who suffers with people and knows the pain that they feel.

In the Bible story [in Acts chapter 9] where Saul persecutes the early Church, Jesus appears and says to Him, “Why do you persecute Me?” Jesus is not in heaven waiting to rescue the suffering, He is with the suffering on earth and experiencing their pain. Also, in His life and death Jesus was with humanity, and He experienced the hardships that each person has to go through. These things from Jesus’ life have led Black Americans to look around and see God not with the rich and the powerful, but with the poor and the oppressed.

God was with their ancestors taken from Africa.

God was with their grandparents during Jim Crow.

God was with their parents during the Civil Rights era.

And God is with Black Americans today as they continue seeking justice.

The goal of Black American Theology is to show suffering people that God is with them, and not just as a presence to comfort them as they struggle. God is a co-sufferer who understands their pain, and tells them, “You are more than victims with a troubled existence”. Black American Theology affirms the humanity and dignity of the oppressed and shows the beauty of their lives along with the brokenness.

So for example, many people thought that “Black Lives Matter” was about Black pain, and the fear that Black people have of police brutality. But Black life is more than constant sorrow, it is also filled with constant joys and blessing to be thankful for. Black life is relationships, pride, and victories that have changed the world, and these things give Black Americans a sense of meaning, hope, and love. Furthermore, God knows the joys and blessings of Black life, and celebrates its beauty while bearing its brokenness.

⁵ Sandiswa Lerato Kobe, “Black Liberation Theology: (Is it the) Thing of the Past? A Theological Reflection on Black Students’ Experiences,” *Missionalia Journals*, 2007 <http://www.scielo.org.za/pdf/mission/v46n2/07.pdf>
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In the end, Black American Theology shows that God is with the suffering, and He stands with them as a co-sufferer and co-celebrant. This image of a suffering and celebrating God has encouraged Black Americans for centuries and empowered them to respond to oppression with a bold enjoyment of life and the world. Black American Theology says:

Yes, your skin is seen as negative, but you can love yourself and say “Black is beautiful”!

Yes, your children might be killed, but you can still raise them with hope for the future!

Yes, you face discrimination, but you can start a business and give meaning to others!

Yes, this world is difficult, but you can still have life and boldly enjoy it to the fullest!

Black American Theology gives meaning, hope, and love through a suffering and celebrating God.

What Is Black Liberation Theology?

In the 1960’s Black Americans faced a new set of social problems that their theological perspective was unable to address. There were also critiques coming from the Black Power Movement, which said that a suffering and celebrating God was not enough for modern times.⁶ Black Americans wanted and needed more than to enjoy life; they wanted and needed freedom and equality in the United States. In short, Black American Theology needed to be reformed, and in response a theologian named James Cone gave it a new theme. This theme was liberation for the poor and the oppressed, which the Bible shows as the goal of God through the work of Jesus Christ.⁷

So for example, in the story of the woman caught in adultery [in John chapter 8] Jesus did not just save her from being stoned to death. He went on to liberate her or give her a new life and identity, and He told her, “Go your way and sin no more.” Also, in the story of Moses the prophet, God did not just save the Israelites from Pharaoh. He went on to liberate or take them from Egypt and bring them to a new land [the Promised Land] to live in freedom. From these Bible stories James Cone showed that God’s ultimate goal was liberation, and that this should be the goal for Black American Theology. In other words, God not only shared the joy and pain of Black people, but also their deepest desire. He wanted freedom and equality as much as they did, and this led to the creation of “Black Liberation Theology”.

To be clear Black Liberation Theology did not replace the traditional perspective; instead, it is a branch of Black American Theology that reforms it for modern times. Not all of the Black community agreed with the new theme from James Cone, and many Black religious leaders gave it negative critiques. The biggest problem was that James Cone so identified God with black Americans that he made Jesus Black.⁸ This new Black Christ seemed very exclusive, for He cared for the needs of one oppressed group over the others. Black Liberation Theology needed to be reformed so that it was more inclusive, and in the 1990’s James Cone encouraged liberation theologians to look for a more universal Christ.⁹ He also came to see

⁶ James H. Cone, “Black Theology and the Black Church: Where do we go from here?,” *CrossCurrents* (University of North Carolina Press) Volume 27, Summer 1977, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24458316>

⁷ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, pg. 1-39

⁸ Anthony Carter, *On Being Black and Reformed*, pg. 16

⁹ Cone, *A Black Theology of Liberation*, pg. xv

oppressors as needing liberation, for they were not in right relationship with their fellow human beings.

What led Cone to call for the liberation of oppressors was the example of the enslaved ancestors of Black Americans who often prayed for God to save White slave owners. Slaves were sometimes forbidden to pray for their masters, because it might have made them think that they were somehow superior to them. These prayers were a dangerous and radical act of resistance, and not a sign of weakness or submission to injustice. James Cone realized that a Black Christ was limited, and that God's goal was much more progressive than he had thought. God wanted to liberate all human beings, and this can be seen in the story of Saul who persecuted the early Church. After meeting Jesus, Who identified with the persecuted, Saul was put on a path of healing and freedom. Saul, the persecutor, was a slave to pride and hate, but God desired to liberate or set him free for a life of humility and love.

From the example of enslaved Africans and the stories of those like Saul, James Cone called for a liberation that was universal. He also called for Black American Theology to have a bigger voice that could speak beyond the United States to suffering people around the world. In response, younger Black theologians [Scotty Williams included] presented a Cosmic Christ, which comes from the early theologians of Eastern Christianity (e.g., St. Maximos the Confessor).¹⁰ This Christ has no specific race and aims to set all things free, from the biggest star in the universe to the smallest microbe on earth. This Christ gives the oppressed and oppressors meaning, hope, and love, and calls them to be agents of liberation and healing while boldly enjoying life in this world.

In conclusion, Black theology shows all people that God is with them here on earth. God suffers, celebrates, and identifies with every person, and is working for the liberation of all.

¹⁰ J. Kameron Carter, *Race: A Theological Account*, pg., Postlude on Race and Christology

EXPRESSIONS OF BLACK AMERICAN THEOLOGY

Ethic V

What are the Practical Expressions of Black American Theology?

Unlike the major theologies of the Western Church tradition (e.g., Calvinism and Lutheranism), Black American Theology is not systematic. Instead, it is a practical, and it focuses on orthopraxy or right actions instead of orthodoxy or right belief. Black American Theology focuses on: What is happening? Why is it happening? and What should be done about it? and it approaches all issues of human life with these three questions. It has no time for “philosophical gymnastics”, for it focuses on finding tangible solutions for problems in the here and now.

According to Black American Theology, human suffering is what is happening, and the reason for this suffering is that people (the oppressed and oppressors) lack meaning, hope, and love. Therefore, the solution is to give people meaning, hope, and love, and Black American Theology does so in three practical ways. These ways are:

1. AFFIRMING HUMANITY

Despite many differences, every person has one thing in common, and that is that they are human beings made in the image of God. What causes oppression, and most conflicts in the world, is that people forget or overlook this identity that they share. What gives people meaning is their common humanity, and Black American Theology calls for this to be affirmed.

Many in the Western world go to houses of worship to be holy, but for Black Americans they go to experience their humanity. Throughout the week they are dealing with negative labels from others, but in the worship place they can freely be and enjoy who they are. In their mosques they are not the Black men that people think will rob them. In their synagogues they are not the Black women that people think are exotic. In their Churches they are not the Black boys who might be accused of stealing. And in their temples, they are not the Black girls who might end up excluded. They are simply human beings without the negative labels, and they live this out through clapping, singing, and dancing with enthusiasm.

Quite often it is assumed that Black Americans worship with emotion because of their African heritage, but they do this to affirm their humanity. They clap to feel their hands, sing to hear their voices, and dance to feel their feet. They also affirm the humanity of others, including strangers, with warm gestures such as shaking hands, giving hugs, and touching someone’s shoulder while in praying. These are practical ways of saying, **“It does not matter what is said or thought about you. You are a human being made in the image of God with meaning and value.”**

2. AFFIRMING DESTINY

As was said in the Ethic III, Black American theology is not “victimology” or thinking that the future is nothing but pain and struggle. While acknowledging the brokenness of life, it also acknowledges the beauty of life and tells people that they are more than their problems or mistakes. So for example, Black American houses of worship have a constant spirit of celebration, and making a big deal about small things that are often taken for granted. In mosques there will be announcements about high school

graduations. In synagogues there will be invitations to the opening of a kiosk. In Churches there will be a blessing for people going to college. And in temples there will be a standing ovation for the janitors every week.

The goal of this celebration is to show the blessings and joy of Black life, and that the destiny of Black Americans is more than being oppressed. This celebration is at the heart of the Spirituals or the songs of their ancestors that speak of things getting better. One example is “Hold On” which says:

*Hold on just a little while longer
Pray on just a little while longer
Fight on just a little while longer
Everything will be all right.
Everything will be all right.*

In addition to the Spirituals there is also storytelling, where Elders talk about the past when young people are discouraged in the present. These stories are reminders of the progress that Black Americans have made, and they give the message, **“Yes there is trouble, but there is also blessing and joy. Focus on these things and they will give you hope.”**

This way of finding hope in Black American Theology is modelled after the Apostle Paul, who says in the Bible [Philippians chapter 4] **“Whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or praiseworthy—think about such things.”**

3. AFFIRMING COMMUNITY

Cornel West defines love as a steadfast commitment to the well-being of others, and in Black American Theology this commitment is shown through community. Black American Theology was born from people coming together and caring for one another, and this has remained its cornerstone since the days of American slavery. One tradition from Africa among Black Americans is called “extended kin”, where people informally adopt one another and act as if they are family. During slavery children were often torn from their parents and sold away, and to deal with this Black Americans would informally adopt one another as aunties, uncles, and cousins; those without children would also adopt children torn away from their parents as sons and daughters. This tradition continues today with Black Americans calling each other “Brotha” and “Sista”, and these are not just terms for religious people. Religious and non-religious Black Americans will use these terms for each other, and this gives them a sense of community and kinship in their differences.

Another tradition of community is a practice called “the nod”, where Black Americans will acknowledge and greet each other in public spaces. They will silently nod in passing and give a quick greeting (e.g., “What’s up?”), and this gives the message that, **“You are not alone in this place, so do not be afraid. Somewhere nearby is a person like you who cares about you.”** These traditions of community are practical ways of showing love, and in Black American houses of worship they are seen in hospitality. In mosque people share bean pies on the street after Friday prayers. In synagogues people volunteer to visit homes and offer help. In Churches collections are taken to help members who cannot pay outstanding bills. And in temples there are gifts of blessing for people in the neighborhood.

There are many other practical expressions of Black American Theology, which seeks to solve the problem of meaningless, hopelessness, and lovelessness in the world. Racism comes from of a lack of meaning, hope, and love, and we must find tangible ways to give these things as we face it. Quite often we think that the solution to racism begins with creating a task force that releases a special statement or makes official policies that help disadvantaged people. These things are not wrong and there is a place for them, but the starting point is the basic way that we treat people from day to day.

Without practical and authentic actions that affirm humanity, destiny, and community, our statements and policies against racism, and other divisions, will only be lip service. They will be orthodoxy without orthopraxy, and this is what is seen today in many Christian congregations. They will proudly say that they are against racism and want it to end, but they never get to the work that is needed to do so. In Black American Theology the fight against racism begins with how you welcome visitors, how you celebrate joy and blessings, and how you care for all people beyond good intentions. These basic actions are how a Church gives meaning, hope, and love, and they reveal the presence of God to others and His heart of liberation.

The way we treat people from day to day is what puts us on the path to liberation, and in closing this Ethic I want you to think about what your congregations are doing. Therefore, I invite you to get back into your interview groups, and answer these four questions:

How is my congregation affirming humanity?

How is my congregation affirming destiny?

How is my congregation affirming community?

How can my congregation do these things better?

CLOSING RITUAL

Prayer of Peace

Opening Words

Scripture Reading – Psalm 34:12-15 (NRSV)

¹² Which of you desires life, and covets many days to enjoy good?

¹³ Keep your tongue from evil, and your lips from speaking deceit.

¹⁴ Depart from evil, and do good; seek peace, and pursue it.

¹⁵ The eyes of the LORD are on the righteous, and His ears are open to their cry.

Silent Reflection

Prayer of Peace

COPTIC

Epouro enteti hirini moynan entek hirini semni nan entek hirini kanen novi nan evol. Gorh evol enni gaji enteti eakekleseya ari soft eros enneskem sha-eneh Emmanoel pennoti khen tenmeeti tino khen ep-oo ente peviot nem pi epnevma ethowab. Entefesmo eron tiren entef tovo ennen heet entev talet sho enni sho ni ente nen epsishi nem nen som Ten hoosht emmok o pi ekhrestos nem pekyot en aghathos nem pi epnevma ethowab je akee aksoti emmon. Amen

ENGLISH

O King of peace, grant unto us Your peace. Render unto us Your peace, and forgive us our sins. Scatter the enemies of the Church and build her up that she may not be shaken forever. Emmanuel our God is now in our midst, with the glory of His Father and the Holy Spirit. May He bless us all, may He purify our hearts, and may He heal the sicknesses of our souls and bodies. We worship you, O Christ, with Your Good Father and the Holy Spirit, for You have come and saved us. Amen.

White Roses

As a symbol of peace, each person present is given a white rose to take back to their congregation or community.

Lord's Prayer

Our Father, Who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name; Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For Thine is the Kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Hymn

Dona nobis pacem pacem

Dona nobis pacem

**Translation: Grant us peace.*