I am Black and Beautiful!

The Unstoppable

Black Liberation Theology Waves.

An African Mother: The gentility depicts that of the mother of Jesus who is always presented as white.

A Unit study for High school students

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An Overview

“I am black and beautiful, O daughters of Jerusalem, dark like the tents of Kedar, like the curtains of Solomon.” (Song of Solomon 1:5, New Living Translation 2007). Black theologians contend that the popular translation “I am black but beautiful” is apologetic, misleading and therefore unnecessary, (Bruno Baur, 1992), because “but” compromises the “beautiful” therefore “Black and beautiful” is the acceptable translation.

In presenting the Black Liberation Theology, I would like to ask the fundamental question that is rarely taken seriously, that is: Was Jesus white or “of color?” Before any attempt at the response, one thing is certain: He wasn’t born in the “West”, (meaning Europe or America), a white Jesus in Palestine is out of the question. If he was “of color”, then which one? Much as the “color line” has been historically crucial even in the churches, tracing the skin color of Jesus may as well be a dead end and irrelevant project. But to attempt to determine the color of Jesus, we will have to establish the color of the Jews at his time because even the present day Jews are a mixed of skin complexions due to exile experiences and intermarriages, but once again, it is of no significance.

Throughout history, different races and generations have depicted Jesus and his religious messages differently, and bearing in mind that no religion is completely free from cultural and historical overtones, the gospel message of Christ has been used by some to alienate “others”. This project presents the origins, the historical development and the main tenets of Black Liberation Theology in the context of Negroes and their diaspora experiences. I will break down the definition of Black Liberation Theology into two: firstly, Liberation Theology is an attempt to reinterpret the scriptures through the plight of the oppressed and the poor. Secondly, Black liberation theology is the theology that “seeks to liberate people of color from multiple forms of political, social, economic, and religious subjugation and views Christian theology as a theology of liberation -- "a rational study of the being of God in the world in light of the existential situation of an oppressed community, relating the forces of liberation to the essence of the Gospel, which is Jesus Christ," 1 hence, Black theology is therefore necessarily a liberating theology, otherwise Theology as such remains an abstract, and empty enslaving theologizing. Black Liberation Theology theory essentially focuses on Africans in general and African

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1 James H. Cone "A Black Theology of Liberation." Orbis, 1990 pg. 56-57
Americans in particular. It is concerned with liberation from all forms of bondage and injustices, whether social, racial political, and, or economic.

The earliest waves of Black theological thoughts:

Long Journeys to slave markets were inhumane and brutal

Africans are notoriously religious (Mbitti, 1969). Having been brutally removed from their ancestral homes, religions and gods, Africans never left behind their spirituality. They were stolen from their homes, shipped and sold into the United States as slaves, deprived of their humanity, families, cultures and languages, there was one thing that their slave masters never stole from them – their spirituality.

The Negro had to adopt the religion of his master (by force) with all its contradictions. For instance, they could not understand a “religion of love” which for centuries associated itself with slavery, segregation and lynching. Not to create a spiritual vacuum however, they would accept the white religion, but this would be reshaped and moulded in to a deeply personal way – to deal with the oppression and enslavement realities. If religion was to make meaning, it had to hold an unwavering promise and a living hope of deliverance from the bondage.
How the Negroes expressed the earliest form of Black Liberation theology.

Having come to terms with the brutal diasporic experience, the Negroes had to accept to sing the Lord’s song in a strange land. Because it was illegal to teach them to read and write, the illiterate slaves had to express their faith thorough songs. Randye (2007) observes that “they told stories from Genesis to revelation. They knew about Adam and Eve in the garden, about Moses and the red sea, Moses sang of the Hebrew children, Joshua at the battle of Jericho. They could tell about Mary Joseph, God and the devil. If you stood around, long enough, you would hear a song about a blind man seeing, God troubling the water, Eziekel seeing the wheel, Jesus being crucified and raised from the dead. If slaves couldn’t read the Bible, they would memorize the story they had heard and translate them in to songs”.2

To keep their spirituality alive, the Negroes used songs to communicate with one another, without the knowledge of their masters. This was particularly the case when a slave was planning to escape bondage to seek freedom via under ground railroad. The Negro theology was therefore tailored in the songs, which songs communicated messages of hope and liberation from the bondage. They expressed theologically rich and hope filled songs such as: “Some times I feel like a motherless child”, “steal away”, “swin low, sweet chariot”, Go down Moses”, “He’s got the whole world in his hand”, “Everytime I feel the spirit”, “Let us break bread together on our knees”, “wade in the water”, “Deep River” and “Balm in Gilead”.

Whether the songs were sung in joy or agony is not easy to tell, but wherever the Negro went or was taken, the concept of the supreme being was not lost. These Gospel songs (also called Gospel spirituals were handy as most of them were emotionally packed. Songs such as “Amazing Grace” became the Negro emblem.

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Amazing grace! (how sweet the sound)
That sav’d a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.

’Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears reliev’d;
How precious did that grace appear,
The hour I first believ’d!

Thro’ many dangers, toils and snares,
I have already come;
’Tis grace has brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.

The Lord has promis’d good to me,
His word my hope secures;
He will my shield and portion be,
As long as life endures.

The Negroes kept the gospel message alive whether in the plantation or on the railroad. The songs had their origins in rich Biblical phrases. The songs were poetic and hinged on themes such as liberation and salvation.

**Formal Institution of Black Liberation Theology**

Modern American origins of contemporary black liberation theology can be traced to July 31, 1966, when an ad hoc group of 51 black pastors, calling themselves the National Committee of Negro Churchmen (NCNC), bought a full page ad in the New York Times to publish their "Black Power Statement," which proposed a more aggressive approach to combating racism using the Bible for inspiration.

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The core tenents of Black Liberation Theology is contained in the Gospel of Luke chapter 4, where there is a concise mission (manifestos) of Jesus Christ that clearly states: “The spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has annointed me to preach the good news to the poor; to proclaim the release of captives (slaves); to restore sight to the blind (slave masters); to let the oppressed (Negroe/slaves) go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor and forgiveness”\textsuperscript{5}. According to Mary’s song in Luke 1:4, Jesus is portrayed as a revolutionary through whom God intends to bring down the mighty (whites) and rise up the lowly (Negroes).

Thus, it is only through feeling God’s presence in the world as best depicted through His involvement in the struggle for justice that Black Liberation Theology can be best understood. Black Liberation Theology presents God as a father who is actively involved with his people in the struggle for justice, and He is so intimately connected to the suffering communities so much that He becomes part of that community.

Further, Black Liberation Theology focuses on God’s concern for the poor and the weak, namely the voiceless who are oppressed by the existing structures. Justice for the poor is the very heart of the christian gospel. God is constantly empowering the weak to know that they were not made for slavery, but freedom in the world. Both Martin Luther King and Malcom X contributed in giving the black theology its identity.

Black Liberation Theology stresses that the Negroes were black before embracing christianity. They can not choose between christianity and being black, both are inextricably coalesced. In the white supremacy where black had been defined as negative and evil, Black Liberation Theology reaffirms the black esteem before loving a neighbor and enemy. Black liberation Theology teaches blacks to be bold, unapologetic black christians at the same time. Because white church did not identify with the struggle against slavery, segregation and lynching, Black Liberation Theology is inseperable with justice. The path to heaven is through

\textsuperscript{5} Luke 4:18, Good News Bible, International Version, 1984
feeding the hungry and the homeless, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and the prisoners (these are attributes of the oppressed).

The Gospel is not just about waiting to go to heaven when one dies. It is first of all about what actually happens to us here in this world. And any Gospel worthy of attention has to stand in stern opposition to slavery, segregation and lynching. The gospel ought to be identical with the struggle for peace and justice for all. Exodus plays a very prominent role in the black Liberation Theology, where the enslaved people are delivered from the bondage by Moses.

The Old Testament prophets such as Jeremiah, Amos, Hosea, and Micah with their messages are to be understood as speaking for the poor and the weak, while condemning the nation and religious practices that oppress the poor, thus, “Let justice roll down like water and righteousness ever flowing stream”6. Finally, Jesus was actually crucified because he was a rabble-rouser, who disturbed the conscience of the people by speaking and standing in solidarity with the poor and the oppressed. Black Liberation Theology insists on portraying blacks as subjects and not objects in the history. Finally, the mission of Black Liberation Theology is universal, thus, “In Christ Jesus, there are no slaves or free, male or female, (White or black), we are all one in Him”, (Galatians, 3:28)7.

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Students Activities and exercise:

Jesus , the model for teachers received all the learners without segregation.

In this section, the learning activities shall be broken down into sub-units. Some activities will be carried out on individual basis, while others will be done in groups. The students shall explore group and individual learning opportunities to meet the required goal and answer the essential questions in this Unit. We shall work with the pre-existing groups.

1. **History of Blacks in diaspora (US): Group work.**

   **You are required to do the following:**

   (a) Use the library and the internet to construct the history of slave trade. Specifically, outline the position of religion/the church and the contributions of lay philanthropists towards the abolition of slave trade and slavery. Groups will meet after a week to discuss their findings.

   (b) View the film “500 years later”, in a group. After viewing this film, discuss the mistreatment the Negroes were subjected to. Discuss what should the churches have done in the face of horrors of slave trade? Be sure to point out the main reasons why slave trade and slavery had to be abolished.

2. **Prominent African American leaders.**

   Students will choose at least 2 Prominent African American leaders, one preacher/church leader and the other (a professional) who confronted segregation, injustices and suppression by whites. Students will do a thorough study on the life and activities
of these personalities, including biographical information, their contributions in the history of black folks, their influence and legacies. This will be presented by groups in class. The teacher will prepare a roster and each student/group will know when his/her time is due.

2. A lecture by Black clergy.

On Monday of the last week of the term, we shall have an open lecture by a resource person (Black clergy) from Columbus. Be prepared to attend in person and ask relevant questions. He will give a class lecture on the role of the church/religion in addressing social justice issues, in the context of African American history. The lecture will also address the role of African American churches in supporting education of students of color. Students will also ask relevant questions regarding the voice of the church in modern times, especially regarding the fifth Gospel, i.e. social justice issues. The teacher and the clergy will engage the class in discussing the opportunities and challenges in the education of the minority students.

3. Take home exercise (To be submitted at the end of term).

You will take a field trip to the nearest church-funded school of your choice. You will need to contact the school in advance to secure an appointment with the principal. Endeavor to meet the chaplain as well (or the local church minister with some attachments to the school). Secure permission to visit the school premises to conduct the following:

- The school profile (meet the principal and the local chaplain).
- Get to know some prominent old students of the school.
- What has been the significance/contributions of the church to the development of the school? Are there things that the school does in collaboration with the church(es)?
- Future prospects of the school—based on the school’s past, what plans does it have in place for addressing the education of the minority?

In not more than 3 pages, compile your findings and hand in in hard copy to the instructor. Have a copy for your own reference. On the last class, we shall meet and discuss the findings as a class.
Bibliography


**Audiovisuals**

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K_KF5p57WHE

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-1X5sZ6Q4Fw&feature=related

**Web Resources:**

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_liberation_theology


http://www.utsnyc.edu/page.aspx?pid=353

http://www.christendom-awake.org/pages/ratzinger/liberationtheol.htm

http://www.jesuismafa.com/anglais/accueil.htm

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