Black theology as public discourse

by

Noel Leo Erskine

There are two images that come to mind as I seek to relate Black theology to public discourse. One image is that of recalling my first class in Black theology. The setting was Duke Divinity School in the early 1970's. Then and there a white man with a heavy German accent taught a class on Black theology. It was an uncomfortable experience to see him struggle with the Black religious experience. Frederick Herzog taught this class; there he hammered out his class in "Liberation Theology: A Commentary on the Gospel of John." There were about thirty students in this class, four of us being black but all of us had to struggle with blackness as otherness. The main point Herzog made in this class was the theological problem confronting the twentieth century was heresy, heresy concerning the nature of humanity. Whiteness, he argued had assumed the status of idolatry in church and society and the corrective was to see blackness as the way out exploitation and humiliation.

The other image that comes to mind is that of taking a similar class a year or so later at Union Theological Seminary in New York. This time around the majority of the students were black and the instructor was black. There were about four or five white students in a class of about twenty-five. We were all uncomfortable. The instructor James Cone was passionate and angry, angry that the culture had missed the tragic among us symbolises in the suffering and humiliation experience by Black people in the United States of America. The critical question raised for us was how dare we teach or preach theology without juxtaposing theology and the Black religious experience. It was about this time that the first phase of Black theology blossomed. The National Committee of Black Churchmen in Atlanta, Georgia, June 13, 1969 informed us that "Black theology is a theology of black liberation. It seeks to plumb the black condition in the light of God's revelation in Jesus Christ, so that the black community can see that the gospel is commensurate with the achievement of black humanity. Black theology is a theology of 'blackness'." (See Gayraud S.Wilmore & James Cone eds. "Black Theology: A Documentary History 1966-1971, vol.1. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, p.102) Earlier this committee of clergymen published their Black Power statement in the New York Times July 31, 1966.

We could say that at this point Black theology was primarily a movement taking its energy from the left wing of the Civil Rights Movement. The move from movement to academic discipline began in 1970 when the Society for the Study of Black Religion was formed. This society provided the setting for critical analysis and exposition of Black theology. Another important phase of Black theology's development was the formation of the Black theology project, which had the primary responsibility to relate Black theology to the Third World. There developed conversations with Black theology in South Africa, Latin America and an attempt to take both Feminism and Marxist analysis seriously. The final phase emerged in the mid 1980's with the insistence of several younger black theologians that Black theology needed to be anchored more in black life. The cutting edge of this new phase was the Womanist scholars who insisted that black theology should include an analysis of race, gender, class and sexual orientation. To move from the historical to the theological we must ask concerning the earlier observation by Fred Herzog that the root problem which Black theology sought to address was heresy, heresy concerning the nature of humanity and that Black theology needed to sound the fire alarm that white supremacy was sin against god and humanity.
As we make the turn from history to theology we return to Cone's earlier observation that theology needs to allow the tragic in life to be the point of departure for talk about God and the world. Both Cone and Herzog and the earlier exponents of Black theology suggested that racism warranted a critical term that would serve as leverage for a counter discourse. The term they suggested was ontological blackness. The term had its roots in DuBois's explication of double consciousness at the opening of the twentieth century. DuBois prophesied that the problem of the twentieth century would be the problem of the colour line. During this century colour has played a major role in our life. Often, colour dictates where we go to school, where people live, where we go to church, whose one's friends are and to whom one gets married. But black theologians have sought to transcend race by calling attention to the ontological qualities of blackness and indicate that it is possible for white people to become black and for black people to become white. Here is one of the better attempts: "God's word of reconciliation means that we can only be justified by becoming black. Reconciliation makes us all black. Through this radical change, we become identified totally with the suffering of the black masses.

It is this fact that makes all white churches anti-Christian in their essence. To be Christian is to be one of those whom God has chosen. God has chosen black people. It is to be expected that many white people will ask 'How can I, a white person, become black? My skin is white and there is nothing I can do.' Being black in America has little to do with skin colour. To be black means that your heart, your soul, your mind and body are where the dispossessed are. (See Black Theology & Black Power, p.151) This model has an appeal for me because it allows theology to deal with the double warrants of particularity and universality. The term ontological blackness forces us to take the other seriously, to affirm her difference and at the same time to affirm the particularity of our situation.

But some younger scholars, among them Darlene Hine, Cornel West, Victor Anderson and Dwight Hopkins to name a few, find the metaphor blackness too limiting, too open to alienation. Further, they contend one of the problems with the term ontological blackness is that it presupposes whiteness as an ultimate concern. Two issues are important to state at this point. One is, does talk about blackness honour the particularity of the black person as an individual? Second we must ask, does this term lead us out of a preoccupation with whiteness to explore issues of economics and ethics in the society? What is needed as we enter the twenty first century is new thinking, a new model that will provide handles for Black theology to critique the oppressive establishment (including the church) and articulate a vision of a new quality of life for all of God's children aimed at political renewal and fundamental social change for all who live on the margins of society. The way forward is for Black theology to return to A Theology of the Cross. I speak of returning to the language of the cross because the cross has always been at the heart of Black theology. Two points are worth affirming at this point.

The first is that we are accustomed ever since Martin Luther King, Jnr to speak of the cross as a symbol of redemptive suffering. I believe we see this being played out in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission hearings. The ways in which suffering serves as a source for the healing of the nation. The second emphasis of a theology of the cross is that at the cross God sets right what was wrong. This is what justice means. (The magnificat comes to mind). Luke 4:18-19. The hungry are fed, the naked are clothed and those whose dignity has been stolen receive their dignity as a gift of grace.

Noel Leo Erskine (nerskin@emory.edu) is Associate Professor of Theology and Ethics at Candler School of Theology, Emory University in Atlanta/Georgia (USA).