

## REVELATION AND LIBERATION

The two stubborn facts of African American Christian existence are that God has revealed Godself to the black community and that this revelation is inseparable from the historic struggle of black people for liberation. These facts are not merely the product of an experiential appropriation of the gospel but are themselves reflected in the biblical witness. Both the call of Moses (Exod. 3:1–17) and the missiological declaration of Jesus (Luke 4:16–30), the scriptural touchstones of African American Christianity, reflect the inherent connection between God’s self-disclosure and the manifestation of God’s liberating intentions in the context of a people who suffer under the yoke of oppression. The Hebrew term employed in the Old Testament to refer to God’s liberating and illuminating word is *dabar*. *Dabar*, however, does not mean the disembodied utterance of a distant Deity, but rather refers to the active engagement of God in bringing about what God proclaims.

In the call of Moses God reveals no new knowledge, engenders no new mysticism, but situates God’s appearance in the context of and as a response to the enslavement of Israel. What Moses learns in this encounter is that God has promised to fulfill the covenant relation established with Abraham, Sarah, Isaac, Rebecca, Jacob, and Rachel. The bondage of the people of Israel stands as an affront to the fulfilling of that covenant. Further, God informs Moses that the liberation of the slaves will bring the disfavor of their captors, but that even Pharaoh’s army is no match for the power of God. Thus,

in this encounter we have the backdrop of a prior, covenantal relationship between God and Israel, an immediate confrontation between Moses the chosen messenger and that God, and the pressing, existential situation of the enslavement of Israel.

In the annunciation of Jesus, he draws from the oral prophetic tradition of Israel and situates himself as the anointed one whose mission it is to bring the good news to the poor and oppressed. He tells his listeners that even today the words of the prophet Isaiah are fulfilled. However, the reaction of the hometown folks of Nazareth turns from praise to condemnation when Jesus indicates that the poor and oppressed to whom he is referring are not the calloused, self-righteous, and complacent citizens of Israel, but are those marginalized people of Zarephath, Syria, and Sidon.<sup>1</sup> A similar pattern to that described above is evident here. We have the backdrop of the prophetic, justice-seeking, tradition of Israel, an immediate encounter between Jesus as the fulfillment of that tradition and the community of hearers, and the cries of oppressed peoples whose voices are not heard even in Israel.

There is within African American Christianity a structural similarity to the instances cited above. That is, black Christianity developed against the backdrop of a religious sensibility born of African traditional religions, in direct response to the immediate encounter of African slaves with the Jesus of the Bible, and in the existential situation of oppression and unmerited suffering. The religious sensibility of African slaves prior to (and in spite of the conditions of) their introduction to European American Christianity is evidence that Africans were not pagans or infidels. They were not forgotten by God. African theologians are quick to reply to suggestions that the European missionaries brought God to Africa. Their response is that “we already knew God before the missionaries arrived.”

In spite of the ravages of their kidnapping and the disorientation that they endured, African slaves retained an outlook on their experience that continually reaffirmed their worth as individuals and as a people and affirmed God’s unmistakable presence in the created order. The Jesus whom they encountered as they were exposed to the Bible was a caring and liberating friend who shared their sorrows and burdens. Further, this Jesus was able to bring real change in their personal condition and their collective estate. It was impossible, however, to speak of this Jesus without relating him to the condition of slavery and exploitation. There was no revelatory significance to

the biblical account of Jesus if he could not speak to the real suffering of a voiceless and invisible people.

What this means, theologically speaking, is that to attempt to formulate an understanding of God's revelation apart from an analysis of the unjust structures of social existence does violence to both the significance of that revelation and to the integrity of the liberation struggles carried on by the victims of society. Such a separation would make God's revelation a quaint addition to our knowledge of an ancient religion with no salvific significance for the world in which we live. It would also distort the transcendent dimension of the universal human longing for freedom and justice.

The history of revelation and the history of liberation are the same history.<sup>2</sup> God's self-disclosure is not meant to increase humanity's storehouse of cognitive merchandise or to intensify one's inward feeling of piety, but to demonstrate that God's presence and power are limited by neither geographical boundaries nor political structures. What we learn in the revelatory moment is that God is invested in the struggle of the oppressed for freedom.

## **The Meaning of Revelation**

God's revelation is both dynamic and multidimensional. Its dynamism is evident in that it takes place in history. It is not an abstract, timeless event, but the manifestation of the will of a living God. The revelation of God is permanent, final, and ultimate in the sense that what we know of God is absolutely trustworthy. All of Christianity stands or falls with the promise of God to be faithful to God's word. Therefore, God's allegiance with the enslaved Israelites and Jesus' solidarity with the victims and outcasts of society are permanent in that they are axiomatic assumptions. From this perspective one can say that God has made Godself known to suffering humanity.

But God's revelation is also contingent, partial, and incomplete in the sense that human history is yet unfolding. Unanticipated, novel, and surprising moments await humankind. The open-endedness of our historical experiences and the limitations of our human condition suggest that this is a revelation that we do not possess, but that possesses us. This is the root of the dynamism of the revelatory moment. There are both novelty and continuity, confirmation and surprise in every encounter between God and humanity. Yet Moses's call and Jesus' annunciation are prototypes, or basic paradigms,

through which all our subsequent revelations are judged. Therefore, revelation is dynamic in that while we may not know what God will do in the future, we do know that God's future acts will not contradict God's past acts. We may not know in what garb or visage Christ will appear among us in the future, but we do know that his future identity will not contradict his past identity. In the words of a hymn often sung in African American churches, "We may not know what the future holds, but we do know who holds the future."

The dynamic character of God's revelation is important in understanding the shape of African American Christianity because black Christians have lived face to face with the contingency of their own reality. From the sobering recognition of slave parents that their days with their children could be capriciously cut short by the auction block, to the dis-ease of black middle-class persons whose tenuous ties to a comfortable lifestyle may be suddenly cut by the market forces of an economy over which they have little control, the contingent nature of African American reality is ever-present. Yet the truth of God's promise is not dependent on the human capacity to apprehend its totality, but is finally rooted in the unshakeable Word of God.

God's revelation is dynamic, and it is also multidimensional. Since the seventeenth century, theologians have responded to the Enlightenment claim that religion cannot share the same ontological ground with reason by attempting to demonstrate that revelation is a kind of knowledge. These theologians became so preoccupied with the problems of epistemology that they lost sight of the deeper meaning of God's self-disclosure. Much of this was based on René Descartes' notion that reason precedes existence (*cogito ergo sum*—I think therefore I am), and that knowing (*ordo cognoscenti*) precedes being (*ordo essendi*). What was lost is that God's self-disclosure was the disclosure of a self, not merely a disembodied rational mind, and that Jesus' revelatory declaration in the Gospel of Luke was not the disclosure of some new information but the uncovering of the God's preferential option for the poor and oppressed. Because of this detour in the history of theology, theologians limited their inquiry regarding revelation to two questions, "What is the content of God's revelation?" and "How is that revelation legitimated?"

From the perspective of the poor and people of color, God's revelation involves more than solving abstract epistemological problems. The emergence of the Enlightenment period accompanied the imperialistic expansion

of Europe and the large-scale encounter between Europeans and aboriginal peoples. This encounter, and the exploitation of those peoples that followed, resulted in the demise of the classical homogeneous picture of humanity. In terms of the doctrine of revelation it was now necessary to address two further questions, “To whom is this revelation given?” and “Where does this revelation occur?”

The first question became necessary because of Western Christianity’s confrontation with people designated as “the other,” i.e., people of color and women. The confluence of Christianity and political confrontation meant that one could not speak of God’s revelation without some consideration of the question, “To whom is God revealed?” The ulterior motives of enslaving Africans, exterminating Jews, and rendering women invisible and aboriginal peoples extinct blinded theologians to the importance of this question, and in most cases they merely assumed that, of course, they (as members of so-called civilized European societies) alone were the recipients of God’s revelation.

The second question became necessary because of Western Christianity’s complicity in the territorial conquest of other (i.e., “foreign”) lands. Christianity’s relation to Constantinian expansion in the distant past and the colonial occupation of Africa and Asia in the recent past meant that one could not speak of God’s revelation without considering the question of the locus of revelation. However, the incredible bounty extracted from these lands and their eventual enrichment of the European American churches compromised the integrity of most theologians, and they merely assumed that the locus of God’s revelation was wherever they (as bearers of so-called civilized culture) happened to be. The notions of some people designated as “other” and some places designated as “foreign” meant that those with military and political power in these contexts were tempted to deem themselves as the only chosen receptors of God’s revelation and the ground on which they stood and lived as the only revelatory ground.

God’s revelation is multidimensional for African American Christians because they were the “other” to whom God’s self-disclosure had been presumably denied. However, they knew differently. African American Christians have always resisted ideas of revelation that confined it to pure abstract knowledge. To paraphrase Blaise Pascal, revelation has more to do with the reasons of the heart than with the reasons of the head. Further, African American Christians have consistently resisted the tendency to divorce the

fact of God's revelation from the identity and social location of those to whom it is given. This is why black religious testimonies are full of specific personal and topographical references when speaking of an encounter with God in Christ. African American Christians will often cite the date, time, and place of their conversion/revelation experience as a sign of authenticity. In addition, many will affirm that God called them by name. God's revelation is multidimensional because it is essentially a personal encounter. That revelation concerns whole persons and whole communities in their particularity. It is the loving and gracious giving of Godself to the world.

### **The Meaning of Liberation**

Like the notion of revelation, the idea of liberation is also dynamic and multidimensional. Its dynamism lies in the fact that at any given time the desire for liberation is a response to the concrete historical and existential concerns of the oppressed. The term "liberation," unlike the word "liberty," is employed precisely because it points to the real, visceral character of the human struggle against the principles of evil in the world. The term "liberty" has become associated with laissez-faire economic theory, individualist political theory, normative ethical theory, and uncritical patriotism, to the extent that it has lost any symbolic power for those whose condition is more than theoretical. Liberation, to this point, has the advantage of being associated, for good or for ill, with concrete historical movements.

To speak of liberation as God's work and intention in the world means that one must understand liberation as a permanent, final, and ultimate feature of one's existence. That is, God's will is irresistible, and God's work cannot be thwarted. All Christian hope stands or falls with this conviction. God's liberation of the Israelites under the leadership of Moses and God's liberation of the oppressed through the death and resurrection of Jesus are the cornerstone of Christian hope. This liberation, however, is also partial, fragile, and incomplete, because the drama of the struggle is yet being played out on the stage of history. Although one might know the general theme of the story, and therefore be certain about the outcome, new plot twists and unexpected ironic reversals await humankind. This means that life must be lived, not only for the anticipated reward that awaits one at the end of the earthly journey, but because life itself is a gift from God.

To make liberation only a future reality leads to quietism and leaves the forces of dehumanization in the world unchallenged. More importantly, however, making liberation an eschatological carrot on the end of a stick cheapens life and robs each moment of the sense that it is an instance of the grace of God. The dynamic character of liberation is important for understanding the experience of African Americans because they are a people who know what it means to wrest some small joy out of disappointment, to celebrate life's victories, to endure life's pains, and to sense a measure of triumph in the living of each day. This is why prayers commonly heard in African American churches will offer thanks to God for "last night's lyin' down and this morning's gettin' up; for allowing our golden moments to roll on just a little while longer." This is the experience of a people who understand that liberation is fragile, but precious.

Liberation is also multidimensional. The most common distortion of the notion of liberation is that it is unidimensional. While many people associate the term with movements for political independence or the overthrow of existing governmental structures, there are those who, seeking to coopt the term, speak of liberation as an inward reality, a kind of psychic or spiritual antinomianism. The fact is that liberation in the context of the revelation of God grasps humanity at every level of human existence. Liberation is multidimensional in that it includes the physical, spiritual, and cultural dimensions of human existence.

*Physical liberation* refers to the innate desire of all human beings to enjoy freedom of movement and association and the rights of self-determination. The prominence of the emphasis on physical liberation in African American social thought is understandable in light of the fact that physical bondage was the distinguishing aspect of the existence of Africans in the New World for four hundred years and that complete freedom has not yet come to African Americans as a whole. There are still neighborhoods where black people are not welcomed and where their homes are desecrated. There are still institutions in which limits are placed on their participation and influence. Because African Americans are almost always viewed as "a social group" and almost never as human beings with the same needs and desires as any other human beings, their struggle for liberation appears to concern mainly their physical condition. While this certainly may be the case, there is more to the liberation struggle than one's physical condition.

The human spirit is meant to soar, lifting one to new vistas. Where there is no spirit, there is no life, even though one's biological functions may continue. To be created in the image of God or to be part of God's created order is to possess the spirit. *Spiritual empowerment* is that dimension of the liberation struggle in which African Americans come to understand and reclaim their intrinsic worth as human beings.

Thus it is not accidental that with the political reawakening of African Americans in the 1960s there was also a spiritual reawakening. Black Christians, along with Black Muslims, began to see the revolutionary potential in genuine faith. Old compensatory ideas of religion being "the opiate of the people" were challenged, and the prophetic strand of black Christianity reemerged. This Pentecostal liberation was never a naive assumption or an easy victory. African American Christians understood themselves to be involved in spiritual warfare "against principalities and powers," both inside and outside the black community. However, the connection between the first two dimensions of liberation is evident in the physical language often used to express the spiritual triumph. "I looked at my hands and my hands looked new. I looked at my feet and they did too. . . . I have a new walk and a new talk." Spiritual liberation meant walking in the newness of life, no longer fettered by self-doubt and flagging confidence. It meant freedom from the sin of slavery as well as the slavery of sin.<sup>3</sup>

A third dimension of liberation in the African American experience is cultural. *Cultural liberation* refers to freedom from negative self-images, symbols, and stereotypes. People of African descent have been historically victimized by a color symbolism that has consistently described the favorable qualities of goodness, purity, honesty, and cleanliness with the word "white," while describing the unfavorable qualities of evil, defilement, disreputability, and stain with the word "black." The association of blackness with sin in the Christian context has played a major role in the cultural oppression of people of color. However, the problem goes beyond the mere symbolic associations. Western culture, which has been built on this kind of symbolism, has led to a distorted view of life and themselves on the part of black people. Adjusting to this distortion often meant trying to see oneself as others see one and trying to escape the blackness that is intrinsic to one's being.

Part of the meaning of liberation is a reversal of the color symbolism that has afflicted African Americans, an overturning of the historic association

between blackness and sin, and a revalorization of one's identity. In the 1960s the slogan "black is beautiful" embodied the emerging liberation of black people from the cultural bondage that had for so long held them in its grip. In response to this the bondage, however, African Americans have forged their own distinctive culture in spite of racial oppression and dehumanization. This culture was a product of the interaction between their African past and the demands of their present condition. The sustaining value of this culture is evident in the black "style of life" and "way of being" in the world. It safeguarded the essential conviction that the inherent sense of self-worth and indigenous values could not be destroyed by the experience of oppression.

These three dimensions of liberation must be seen as one piece. Where the liberation movements of black people have failed to realize their potential, that is, where the frailty and incompleteness of human liberation projects are most visible, an imbalance in these dimensions is evident. Where the political dimension dominates, one finds a utilitarian notion of human existence and spiritual poverty. Where the spiritual dimension dominates a kind of private docetism reigns as well as political asceticism. Where the cultural dimension dominates one often encounters a narrow spiritual parochialism as well as political insularity. While at various points in the history of African Americans emphasis on one of these dimensions has been necessary, a full understanding of liberation requires that an appropriate balance among them be sought. In the contemporary world, the reality of racism, sexism, and classism both inside and outside the African American community requires a multidimensional view of liberation. Liberation involves more than what humans alone can accomplish. It is a powerful symbol for the ultimate destiny of humankind.

## **Two Aspects of African American Religion**

In African American Christian faith there is a dynamic interrelation between God's revelation and human liberation. This interrelation is a product of the divinely inspired collective imaginative vision of black people and is most clearly visible in the concrete phenomenon of African American religion. In classical Protestantism the relation between faith and religion has often been misconstrued because of the particular cultural, historical, and social circumstances of European American Christianity. In the sixteenth century,

Martin Luther was appalled by the corrupt religious practices of the established church and sought to define true faith over against mere religion. This was the import of his doctrine of *sola fide*. Likewise, the twentieth-century neo-orthodox theologian Karl Barth, dismayed at the shallow religious practices of bourgeois German society of his time, condemned all human religion as essentially idolatrous and sought to define the concept of a transcendent faith as the essence of Christianity.

When one examines the thought of African American Christians it becomes readily apparent that one cannot (nor should one) radically separate religion and faith. The etymological root of the word “religion” is *ligare*, from which we get the word “ligament.” It means “to hold together.” Religion, then, is a way of holding together the various aspects of the human response to the divine encounter. Faith is embodied in religion. In religion, the faith and practice of the Christian community are united. Thus black religion has two major aspects, obedience to God’s command and the pursuit of God’s truth, the discovery of the verity of God’s word and the structuring of one’s reality in accordance with that word.

A watershed event in the development of contemporary African American theology was the publication of Joseph Washington’s controversial book, *Black Religion*.<sup>4</sup> In this work, Washington presented a thesis on the dysfunctional character of black religion and outlined a surprising proposal for the solution of that dysfunction. In the manner of classical Protestantism he argued that faith and religion are separate entities:

Religion is always a partial expression of some faith. . . . Faith must always be a response to God. Religion may be a response to whatever the individual desires. . . . Religion for the Negro is inherited and changed by the contemporary mood without reference to the theological dimension of faith. . . . Though he is involved in a separated religion he cannot create a separate faith.<sup>5</sup>

Washington’s major concern is that since black religion is so radically different from white religion in America it must necessarily be dysfunctional because it departs from the accepted norm. His conclusion is that black religion is not an expression of true Christianity, but a kind of “folk” religion with the physical condition of black people rather than matters of doctrine and orthodox liturgy as its primary concern:

Born in slavery, weaned in segregation and reared in discrimination, the religion of the Negro folk was chosen to bear the roles of both protest and relief. Thus the uniqueness of black religion is the racial bond which seeks to risk its life for the elusive but ultimate goal of freedom and equality by means of protest and action. It does so through the only avenues to which its members have always been permitted a measure of access, religious convocations in the fields or in houses of worship. . . . [Black] religious institutions exist without any meaningful goals, with the sole exception of providing refuge for the disinherited.<sup>6</sup>

If black religion is not truly Christian, then it follows, according to Washington, that black religious institutions are not actually churches in the classical Protestant sense:

There is no Negro Protestantism, Negro Christianity, or Negro church. . . . Rarely is it admitted that Negro congregations do not constitute churches by any stretch of the theological imagination, but religious congregations. . . . In this perspective, Negro congregations are not churches but religious societies.<sup>7</sup>

If black congregations are not true Christian churches, then it follows that they cannot possess an authentic theology or comprehensive interpretation of the meaning of the Christian gospel:

Negro congregations have been divided on every conceivable issue except that of theology—within the Negro communions virtually no theology has existed. . . . A church without theology, the interpretation of and response to the will of God for the faithful, is a contradiction in terms.<sup>8</sup>

A corollary to Washington's assessment of black religion as merely "folk" religion, black churches as merely "religious congregations," and the dearth of an authentic theology in either is his negative evaluation of the origins and centrality of that most visible manifestation of black religion, the dynamism of black worship. He argues that "the frenzy," or the emotional output, that characterizes much of black worship is essentially the residue of those religious practices taught to slaves by evangelical white preachers and that by abandoning this frenzy black Christians will contribute to their full participation in

European American Christian culture.<sup>9</sup> The final solution for the problems that face the Black Church, according to Washington, is the dissolution of separate black worshipping congregations and their absorption into the white churches. "It is incumbent upon the Negro now to close his houses of worship and enter the white congregations of his choice en masse."<sup>10</sup>

The shortcomings of Washington's analysis have been widely discussed among African American theologians since its appearance. He fails to appreciate the African antecedents of black religion and he engages in a reductionist social analysis of African American religious experience. The problem is not with what Washington observed in the African American religious experience, but that, due to his Eurocentric perspective, he misinterpreted those observations. His uncritical allegiance to the classical Protestant notion of the relation between faith and religion in effect blinded him to the interdependence of faith and practice in black religion.

The first aspect of black religion is its praxiological function in which black religion serves as a guide to behavior for its adherents. This praxiological, ethical, and moral emphasis is clearly visible in the historical accounts of slave religion.<sup>11</sup> For African slaves religion could not be separated from the way in which their world was structured, and their beliefs always related closely to their behavior in that world. For instance, the slave belief in the righteousness of God was directly related to the belief that God would inaugurate a revolution in the conditions of white people and black people. African slaves demonstrated the uniqueness of their religion in the way that they shaped their moral universe. They saw through the hypocrisy of white preachers who lectured them on the wrongness of stealing from the master, and many of them rejected the contradictory ethical norms of white religion by claiming that because they, as slaves, were stolen property, the commandment against stealing did not apply to them.<sup>12</sup> They would not be put into the position of having to condemn themselves as sinners simply because they did not want to starve to death.

Therefore, many slaves constructed their own ethical codes that responded more sympathetically to the physical and spiritual conditions of the slave community. Other slaves took pleasure in exposing the hypocrisy of white slave-holding Christians by devoting themselves to a life of virtue and moral superiority over their masters. They took no small pleasure in reminding their masters that their questionable business dealings and their sexual

improprieties were contrary to God's law. In slave religion the praxiological emphasis of black religion is evident.

The fertile ritual and emotive drama of African American worship are perhaps its most misunderstood aspects. The creative play and imaginative combination of aesthetic elements, singing, chanting, dancing, hand-clapping, and shouts of praise may give the casual observer the impression that African American worship is primarily a cultural performance. In a sense, this impression is accurate. The relationship between the "cultural" and the "religious" is quite intimate in black experience. The poetic quality of black preaching and the secular spirituality of rap music, the bluesy sound of traditional black gospel music and the deeply religious dimension in soul music, lithe bodies dancing on Saturday night and then swaying to the metronomic rhythm of divine inspiration on Sunday, suggest the fundamental inseparability of the cultural and the religious perspectives in black experience. (Thus Paul Tillich was not far from being correct when he asserted that "culture is the form of religion, and religion is the content of culture.")

This is not to say that there are no boundaries between what is acceptable in black churches and what is not. Rather, one must look closely at the roots of the criteria that are used to make such a determination and ask whether they simply reflect the degree to which a given congregation has adopted Protestant evangelical norms, or whether there is a significant theological statement being made. While black worship may be seen as a cultural performance, it is also more than that. However, to make that determination one must partake of the reality to which that symbolic performance points. The noted anthropologist Clifford Geertz speaks directly to this issue:

Of course, all cultural performances are not religious performances, and the line between those that are and artistic, or even political, ones is often not so easy to draw in practice, for, like social forms, symbolic forms can serve multiple purposes. . . . Where for "visitors" religious performances can, in the nature of the case, only be presentations of a particular religious perspective, and thus aesthetically appreciated or scientifically dissected, for participants they are in addition enactments, materializations of it—not only models of what they believe, but also models *for* the believing of it. In these plastic dramas [people] attain their faith as they portray it.<sup>13</sup>

Thus the flaw in Washington's analysis of black religion was his failure to "participate" in the ethos of that religion and thereby assess the points at which the cultural performance became a religious one. That is, he did not engage black religion on its own terms and failed to ask, "What faith is suggested by the unique religious praxis of African American Christians?" An Afrocentric perspective on the phenomenon of black religion looks for the connections between its faith and its practice, its worship and its theology.<sup>14</sup>

The second aspect of black religion is its hermeneutical function in which the search for truth on the part of its adherents is advanced. Passion needs to be balanced by a critical consciousness and every praxis seen in relation to its cognitive complement. It should be noted here that the hermeneutical and praxiological functions of religion are distinct but inseparable. One must begin with the praxiological aspect and then move to the hermeneutical aspect because there is a kind of cognitive value to praxis. What one knows as the truth is very much conditioned by the reality in which one participates. This is especially true in reference to African American religion. The style, aesthetics, and creativity evident in the visible manifestations of black religion are not merely the products of the artistic imagination of black folk; they are also the attempt of the worshippers to envision new ideas, concepts, and cognitive paradigms for the interpretation of the world in which they live.<sup>15</sup> That is, black religion is more than an epiphenomenon; it has an ontological status.<sup>16</sup> Black religion does more than provide space for an alternative mode of existence for people who are downtrodden; it also asks and answers the questions related to "why things are the way they are." A source of the radicalism of historic black religion is precisely this questioning. The spirituals and their counterpart, the blues, often sound a familiar refrain, asking why the humble suffer and the wicked prosper.

Hermeneutics refers to the act of interpretation. Most often this activity is directed toward a written text, but a broader view of human experience recognizes the textuality of that experience and the need to interpret the meaning not only of written texts but also of one's experience and social practices. All religions have a hermeneutical aspect to them, but not all religions are engaged in the same kind of hermeneutical tasks. Susan Sontag in her classic essay "Against Interpretation" describes two kinds of hermeneutical activity:

Thus interpretation is not (as most people assume) an absolute value, a gesture of mind situated in some timeless realm of capabilities. Interpretation must itself be evaluated, within a historical view of human consciousness. In some cultural contexts, interpretation is a liberating act. It is a means of revising, of transvaluing, of escaping the dead past. In other cultural contexts, it is reactionary, impertinent, cowardly, stifling.<sup>17</sup>

A reactionary hermeneutic attempts to “possess” the truth, ignore its own limitations, and protect its own privilege by masking reality rather than letting it come to light. A liberating hermeneutic allows one to be grasped by the truth, in full consciousness of one’s limitations and in deep awe and respect for the reality that is being revealed. While the reactionary hermeneutic is what Sontag calls “the revenge of the intellect upon the world,” the liberating hermeneutic is the submission of the questioning personality to the irruption of God’s truth in a troubled world. The connection between truth and liberation is reflected in Jesus’ words to those who would become his disciples: “You will know the truth and the truth will make you free” (John 8:32).

In its hermeneutical aspect, African American Christianity brings into view the epistemological break between white Christians and black Christians in America. That “break” consists of the fact that though both the black and white churches proclaim to profess Christ, their religious visions of the world are radically different. This was evident in the practice of white preachers exhorting black slaves to “be obedient to your masters,” while slave Christians were simultaneously celebrating the liberating presence of God in their lives. Black religion attempts to help African American Christians to sense the world as God senses it. A second hermeneutical task of black religion is to dismantle the misinterpretations of themselves and the world that undergird American Christianity. That is, black religion is a protest against those portrayals of African Americans as less than human or outside the providential care of God. A third hermeneutical task is for African Americans to promote an authentic and essential knowledge of themselves. Charles Long observes that “every adequate hermeneutic is at heart an essay in self-understanding. It is the effort to understand the self through the mediation of the other.”<sup>18</sup>

Black religion attempts to provide a self-knowledge for African American Christians by helping them to see themselves as God sees them.

The praxiological and hermeneutical aspects of black religion are ideally held in perfect balance. Wherever and whenever black religion becomes distorted and a caricature of itself, the balance between these dimensions is lost. On one side, the devaluation of the hermeneutical aspect can lead to a rampant anti-intellectualism in black religion that not only destroys its critical edge, but abandons its historic radical intellectual tradition. On the other side, a rejection of the praxiological aspect can lead to a dispassionate sterility in black religion that blunts its imaginative and emotive creativity. When the perfect balance is approached black religion succeeds in responding to the needs of both the head and the heart.

### **Narrative and African American Theological Discourse**

African American religion is not a static phenomenon, but is the result of a dynamic interaction of the remembered past, the experienced present, and the anticipated future. It reflects the changeable character of African American experience in the world. Even the form of black religion, then, must suit the variable spiritual, emotional, and physical needs of its adherents. This is why the essence of black religion is expressed in the form of story. By telling the story of African American faith, the past is preserved and kept alive in the collective memory of the community, the enigmas and puzzles of contemporary life are demystified, and the future is suggestively inferred and hinted at. Moreover, a genuine story initiates some kind of transformation in the life of the hearer and requires a response to its truth.<sup>19</sup>

African American theology, simply defined, is the explanation, defense, and critique of the religious practice and interpretation of the black community. This theology must be intimately related to the cultural religious form from which it springs. If the form of black religion is story, then the form of Black Theology must be narrative. The two aspects of black religion, the praxiological and the hermeneutical, can be held together only by a form of discourse that reconciles the two types of human activity—praxis and criticism—that have been separated by Enlightenment thought. Traditional metaphysics is no longer an adequate base for doing theology because it depends on a common vision of “reality as such” and a common notion

of “general human experience.” These assumptions have become suspect in a world where disagreements about “reality” and what constitutes “common human experience” erupt into tribal, racial, and international strife. What one makes of the world cannot be separated from one’s cultural bias, class interests, and political allegiances. Further, traditional metaphysics (with the possible exception of process thought) normally begins with some static notion of reality. Narrative, on the other hand, suggests in a variety of ways an unfolding, historical idea of reality. African American theological narrative is a retelling of the black religious story with an emphasis on intellectual clarity and existential commitment.

What then does it mean to claim that African American theological discourse must take narrative form? How does its narrative structure relate to its function? First, African American theology must be responsive to the contemporary experience of African Americans. It has been observed that “the formal quality of experience through time is inherently narrative.”<sup>20</sup> That is, human beings make sense of their apprehensions of the world around them in relation to the passing of time, the dynamic interplay of the past and future brought together in the decisive tension of the present moment:

Narrative alone can contain the full temporality of experience in a unity of form. . . . Only narrative form can contain the tensions, the surprises, the disappointments and reversals and achievements of actual, temporal experience.<sup>21</sup>

Black religious experience is story-shaped; therefore Black Theology must be experiential narrative.

Second, the African American story is not only contemporary, but is part of a continuous discursive tradition outside of which it cannot be fully understood. Therefore, African American theology must turn again and again to the historical material, both oral and written, that documents the black struggle for freedom. It must continuously dialogue with that “great cloud of witnesses” whose grit and determination have oiled the wheels of the black liberation movement. It must be in conversation with the African American communion of saints whose works and faith continue to edify black Christians. Black Theology must be both a personal testimony and a collective testament; it must be historical narrative.<sup>22</sup>

Third, the black religious story is an attempt to integrate both the inner, personal and the outer, political life of its hearers in the midst of moral chaos. As James Cone notes, “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.”<sup>23</sup> Thus stories about justice serve as refutations of the political immorality that threatens the black community.

The black story also addresses the lives of African Americans at the personal level. It has a crucial role in character formation and the honing of one’s moral judgment. That is, the stories in which one lives, so to speak, do not only reflect what kind of individual one is, but also shape one’s identity and sense of values.<sup>24</sup> Thus black stories about compassion, loyalty and faithfulness provide a sense of integrity that counters the specter of personal moral disintegration. African American theology should reflect this struggle in its own formal dimensions; it must be integrating narrative.

Fourth, stories have the capacity to uncover truth and expose falsehoods when the hearer is willing to enter into the discursive world of the tellers. Stories can both convict and convince, comfort and terrify. (The biblical account of Nathan and David demonstrates how the truth of David’s greed is revealed and how he convicts himself through a story.) Stories allow people of one culture and history to enter, however provisionally, that of another people.

The black religious story is not exclusive in the sense that other people are, by definition, incapable of understanding it. But the truth of the black story will elude anyone who is unwilling to entertain its revelational potential. The black religious story provides opportunities for people to break out of their ideological prisons and to see that the roles of oppressed and oppressor are not the ultimate categories of human existence. Black Theology must contribute to the liberation of people from the false stories that enslave them; it must be critical narrative.

Finally, and perhaps, most importantly, stories are aimed toward the transformation of the hearers. When the black religious story is told among African Americans the truth is revealed:

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.<sup>25</sup>

When the black religious story is engaged by those from other cultures a *metanoia* may occur:

Finally, what may happen is that hearing another story can force us to tell our own story in a different way, transformed to such a degree that we can properly call the experience one of *conversion*.<sup>26</sup>

The transformation of the oppressed and the subsequent conversion of the oppressor through a turn toward the truth is the goal of the black religious story. Black Theology must reflect this teleological dimension of the black story; it must be redemptive narrative.

### **Narrative and Method in African American Theology**

The narrative forms of African American theological discourse are not simply convenient constructs that render the religious infrastructure of black religion accessible and intelligible. Rather, they are inherent to the entire process of “doing” African American theology. That is, the customary components of any discussion of theological method—the sources and norm—should be understood as narrative in character, and the central problematic of theological method—assessing and determining the truth of theological affirmations—should be framed in narrative terms.

The sources of African American theological affirmations are the Bible, the traditions of African American worshipping congregations, African American culture, and the African American worldview. The Bible is the primary document of the Christian faith, because it is a record of God’s revelation to humanity. It is important for African Americans because, in many instances, they were forbidden to read it, even as a distorted version of it was preached to them by slavemasters and white preachers. When possible, slaves taught themselves to read it in the belief that it held the key to their self-understanding. On a few occasions, slaves were allowed to read only the Bible because of the slavemasters’ mistaken conviction that it would promote docility and quietism. It is an important source for African American theology because, in spite of the contradictory nature of their introduction to it,

African American Christians are a biblical people. The Bible is a source of knowledge and inspiration.

The tradition of the Black Church is a response to the suffering of African Americans. It is also an affirmation of the joy and freedom that they have intermittently and provisionally experienced. This tradition is a source of the truth about God in the religious experience of African Americans. It is important to state that it is *a source* of the truth but not the truth itself. Therefore, African American theologians have been both defenders and critics of this tradition. One aspect of this tradition is seen in the prophetic stance of the antebellum Black Church. This was the church that gave rise to revolutionary preachers like Henry Highland Garnet, who urged his compatriots to resist slavery, Nathaniel Paul, who declared that the gospel and slavery are irreconcilable, and Nat Turner, who advocated open violent rebellion against slavery. The African American church in this instance was the base for political and religious resistance, and the Christianity that sustained it was related to social justice in this world.

The postbellum Black Church, however, lost this zeal for freedom. In the disillusionment of the Post-Reconstruction period, many African American ministers sold their prophetic birthright for fleeting material gains and promises of personal comfort. The tradition of the Black Church must be critiqued and defended in relation to God's revealed truth. Further, the tradition is rightly criticized because of its exclusion of black women and their contribution to that tradition. Jarena Lee, Amanda Smith, and Rebecca Jackson were women who were denied access to the pulpits of African American churches despite their undeniable call to ministry. The tradition of the African American churches is most true when it is a liberating tradition rather than an accommodating or constricting tradition, and, as the experience of African American women suggests, it is a source of the truth but not the whole truth of African American religious experience.

African American culture is a source of theological reflection because the results of that reflection have to be expressed culturally. Because theology is a human act it is shaped, in part, by the cultural context of those whose faith and experience it addresses. European American theology has always been expressed in forms and language drawn from European American culture. An example is the "death of God" theology of the 1960s. The symbolic statement of the demise of God expressed a deeply felt loss of meaning, a

diminishing of American hegemony in the world, and anomie among certain segments of the European American theological intelligentsia at the time. At the same time, African American theologians were expressing the awakening prophetic consciousness of the Black Church by declaring that not only is God alive and potent, but that God is black. The cultural context of this theological language was a resurgence of African American cultural nationalism, the independence movements among African nations, and a sense of pride and self-worth. No theology is “acultural” or value-free. African American theology is expressed in the symbols of and reflects the values of African American culture.

In many discussions of theological method, reason is named as a source of theological discourse. In these discussions there is often confusion about what is meant by the term “reason” and about its role in the theological process. For some, reason refers to the whole complex of Western philosophical thought from Plato to Alfred N. Whitehead and beyond. In this instance, the subjects and themes of theology are enhanced or enriched by the contributions of classical philosophy. For others, reason refers to an epistemological style, a way of thinking that fits all of human experience into neatly defined categories; or it is a “normative gaze” in which the thinker objectifies and relativizes the central problems of human existence. In this instance, theologians are supposed to benefit from the style and stance of philosophy.

Reason defined in these two ways is not a primary source for African American theology. The Western philosophical tradition—at least in the way that it is normally perceived—does not reflect the contributions of people of African descent. Reason understood as an uncritical reliance on the categories of formal epistemology or on the “objective” approach to the faith is not particularly useful to African American theology because those categories cannot always adequately explain African American experience, and the “objective” approach, besides being fallacious in and of itself, cannot account for the passionate character of African American theological discourse. This does not mean that African American theology is without coherence and integrity. Rather, it means that African American theology is supported by an African American worldview that defines the parameters and sets the themes of its discourse. It employs the African American imagination to bring together the comfort and challenges of the gospel and the sociopolitical and spiritual needs of black people. If “reason” is a source for

African American theology then its “look” is different for the African American theologian and the European American one.

It is through the norm of theology that its various affirmations are evaluated and assessed. The norm of Christian theological affirmations is the acme of God’s self-revelation in some notion of the identity and mission or the person and work of Jesus Christ. Although a fuller discussion of Christology must await a later chapter, it is imperative at this point to examine the function of this norm in African American theological method.

There are two major misconceptions regarding the theological norm that have limited the effectiveness of modern theology. The first is that theological statements are judged by a transcendent norm that exists somewhere outside of or above the discursive universe in which theological statements are made. An example of this is the theologies of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that “objectively” concluded that the enslavement of Africans was consistent with the will of God. In this instance, the norm is in reality the objectification of the cultural, political, and economic order of slavery. These theologies were the result of a “monological” theological methodology. They tolerated no dissent within their deliberations. They were not so much interested in the discovery of truth as they were in the establishment of theological authority. Authority is here defined as the power or right to give commands and enforce obedience. (The political corollary is the neglect of justice for the security of “law and order.”) While these theologies claimed a kind of authority within the community of slaveholders, they could never claim legitimacy among African slaves.

The second misconception is that theological statements are evaluated and assessed by an immanent norm that is totally circumscribed by the discursive context in which theological statements are made. An example of this is found in various privatistic theologies that seceded from the cultural and political fray by focusing solely on the inner, spiritual life of the believer. These ascetic theologies were the result of the subjectification of the primacy of the individual in the socio-economic order and the primacy of the soul in the religious order of creation. These theologies were also monological in the sense that it was the inner voice speaking to the individual self that was most important. There was no dissent because the truth was whatever was consistent with the deepest desires of the inner self. In this case, theological affirmations were genuinely legitimate because they conformed to rules

and standards arising out of the personal life. However, although they were legitimate, they lacked authority. (The Society of Friends, e.g., George Fox and John Woolman, were able to make legitimate affirmations of the humanity of the slaves because of their belief in the “inner light” given to them by their creator. However, the political and theological implications of their pacifism along with their marginality within American society diminished the authority of their pronouncements.) The point to be made here is that the norm of theology must both authorize and legitimate its affirmations.

In most contemporary theologies method is understood as dialogical. That is, method must relate the situational sources of theology (culture, reason, etc.) to the historical sources (Scripture, tradition, etc.). One can see this method operative in Paul Tillich’s “method of correlation” in which the questions put forth by human existence must be correlated to the answers implied in the Christian message. John McQuarrie suggests that theological methodology is seeking a “rough coherence” between the data of human experience and the traditional sources of Christian faith. Karl Barth claims that it is in the dynamic tension between the situational and historical sources that truth resides. Although the dialogical model of theological method is a significant improvement over the monological model, it fails to avoid a kind of dualism that is foreign to the African American sensibility.

When the sources of theology are grouped into the situational and the historical, what results are two norms, a situational one and a historical one. This occurs because the Bible and tradition are often seen as being of a different order than what we know of God through culture and worldview. Therefore, this normative split has been often contained in the phrase, “The Christ of Faith versus the Jesus of History” or the “universal Christ versus the particular Jesus.” Because one is working with two norms rather than one, the theologian is ultimately forced to choose one as the dominant norm, thus resolving the theological conflict. However, the result is a theology that claims the authority of the Bible and tradition while denying the legitimacy of the situational norm, or a theology that claims the legitimacy of culture and reason, while denying the authority of the historical norm.

In African American theology the sources of theology are not divided into the situational and the historical because they are all the result of the interpretation by the people of faith of the acts of God in their particular situation. Therefore, one cannot simply subject the biblical text to a literary

analysis and the culture to a social scientific analysis. Rather, one must subject the biblical text to a social scientific analysis because it is the result of a certain mode of production and conditioned by specific institutional realities. Likewise, contemporary culture must be subjected to a literary (or hermeneutical) analysis because the culture is a “text” that must be read, deciphered, and decoded. The sources of African American theology—the Bible, the traditions of African American worshipping congregations, African American culture, and the African American worldview—are narrative elements that make up the discourse called theology. They are parts of the story of the Christian faith. Therefore, the primary task in African American theological method is assessing that story. There may be tension but no conflict between these narrative elements because they are not vying to be the arbiter of truth; rather together they tell the truth (rather than depending on symbolic communication as much European American theology has done). Stories grow out of and lead back to participation in concrete experiences and realities. Narratives are the result of and give rise to praxis. Narrative is the form of African American theology because it is wholistic and praxiological. In African American theology the sources of theology are narrative elements, and the norm is found within the narrative itself. In describing “the pragmatics of narrative knowledge” Jean-François Lyotard observes that

Narratives . . . determine criteria of competence and/or illustrate how they are to be applied. They thus define what has the right to be said and done in the culture in question, and since they are themselves a part of that culture, they are legitimated by the simple fact that they do what they do.<sup>27</sup>

The norm that both authorizes and legitimates theological discourse is in the narrative itself. One discovers or has revealed to one the norm (the notion that the acme of God’s self-revelation is the identity and mission or the person and work of Jesus Christ) not solely in the Bible, nor only through culture, but in the telling of one’s own faith stories (affirming their legitimacy) and relating them to the stories of others in terms of the freedom struggle (affirming their authority). African American theology emerges self-consciously out of the interstices of life and thought, faith and praxis, doctrine and culture.<sup>28</sup>